

Divya:

A Quarterly Journal of South Asian Women



Diva: A Quarterly Journal of South Asian Women
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ISSUE ON RACISM

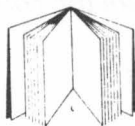
Toronto Small Press Book Fair 1990

presents:

A Symposium:

*What Is Small Press
and
What Can We Do About It?*

Thursday 26 April, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.



and

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publishers. Manuscripts accepted. Door Prizes.

**Both events free
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427 Bloor Street West, Toronto**

The Good

- Diva Editorial Committee and **Rubya Mehdi** (our Denmark representative who joined in when Diva had not even begun publishing) has company. Let us welcome a group of fine South Asian women now representing Diva in different places: **Bhooma Bhayana** (London, Ontario), **Bindu Desai** (Illinois, USA), **Gayatri Murthi** (Kitchner, Ontario), **Jyoti Sanghera** (Vancouver, B.C.) and **Rita Narang** (Rochester, USA).
- Diva now has an office space in a warehouse (donated by Workstation: The Creative Dimension) at **585 Middlefield Rd, Units 27 & 28, Scarborough Ont. M1V 4Y5 Canada**
- We have use of a phone **(416) 298-2661** donated by PREETI GRAPHICS.
- And Diva has its very own desk, a chair, and a filing cabinet.

The Bad

- We are late with the 6th Issue. Reasons, most predictably, are economic.

and

- Diva Editorial Committee is uncomfortable with the term "Women of Colour"/"People of Colour". We would rather be remembered through some other reference rather than the colour of our skin. It smacks of condescension. Or should we start calling Anglo Saxon women as "Non-Coloured Women" or "Women of non-colour?" Need feed back on it.

the Ugly

- Ontario Arts Council did not find Diva eligible for their Periodical's grant.
- We have safely filed that letter of refusal in our section of archives called THE COLLECTIBLES. Talking about racism in writing and publishing? We live it.

Petition to End Police Violence

To: The Solicitor General, Steven Offer & The Premier, David Peterson

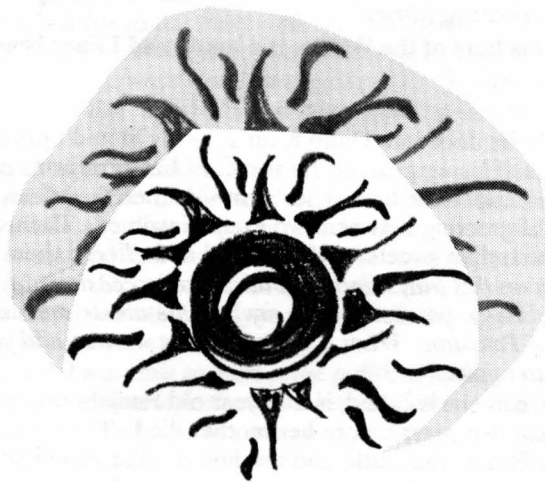
In the last fifteen months we have witnessed the shooting of three Black people by Metro police officers, two of them killed and the most recent, Sophia Cook, now lies in a hospital paralyzed from the waist down. She was unarmed, sitting with her seatbelt buckled, when she was shot by Constable Cameron Durham.

While the Black community has been most visibly affected by police violence in the past year, this is just part of the pattern of racist and police violence in Toronto and across the country against Native peoples, Blacks, other People of Colour, Women, Gays and Lesbians and Working peoples. The recently proposed reforms made by the Solicitor General in no way meet the demands for an independent civilian investigative body called for by the Black and other communities affected by police violence.

We demand that the Province of Ontario set a precedent for its counterparts across the country by immediately establishing an independent civilian investigative body with broad representation, selected by and from the communities affected by racist and other forms of police violence. This body must have the power to investigate, to demand that charges be laid, and to recommend that disciplinary actions be taken against the officers involved.

Please return petitions to the Women's Coalition Against Racism & Police Violence.

Petitions may be mailed to: P.O. Box 248, Station "P", Toronto, Ont. M5S 2S6



Passing Through Whorls of Memory:

by

JYOTI SANGHERA

This paper seeks to explicate some key issues related to the use of oral history as a research method in social science. By asking the question, "Why did you come here to the West" at a subjective level, as well as a host of other questions, an attempt has been made to understand, on the basis of individual socio-histories and narratives, the process whereby racial constructs are conceived,

gain currency and are transmitted in a group of people whose collective memory has not been obliterated of their colonial past.

This paper does not claim to explore all aspects of the process of creation of racial constructs. Neither does it claim to be a comprehensive study on the theme of racial constructs in a colonized people. At best, it can be said to highlight some promising possibilities that are contained in this method, to concretize abstract social science concepts, and thereby enhance understanding of the social world and the lived reality.

An attempt has been made to discuss some key methodological issues raised by oral accounts in this paper and engage in an ongoing discourse on oral history at a more general level. It is argued that at a broader and epistemological level, the value of oral history lies not simply in its ability to present itself as a method. Through its characteristic of providing direct, interactive contact with the people and thereby with those at the grass roots who constitute the silent, invisible, and yet the real agents of history, oral history offers itself as theory of studying social reality, and as a perspective for understanding history.

"It seems like this land of the Whites is a tomb, and I have been ensconced in it".

Dalip Kaur

As I walked through the door into Dalip Kaur's poorly lit and oppressively hot basement, I immediately felt myself being grasped by two frail but firm arms and engulfed in a long, warm embrace. She clasped me first to her right side then the left and the right; this was the traditional manner of greeting between two Punjabi women. Then she walked to a kitchen cabinet, placed some Indian sweets in a little bowl and offered them to me saying, *"sweeten your mouth on this truly happy and auspicious occasion. My heart is brimming with joy for two reasons; today you set foot in my humble abode and second, Miss Bhutto has become the leader of Pakistan. What a victory for the women and youth of the world - it is indeed an occasion to rejoice!"*

Dalip Kaur or Bibijee as she is called, is a 78 year old Punjabi woman from India. She went to school for less than two years before her mother died. Then, she had to take care of her younger sisters, her father, the cattle and the house. She was eight years old at that time. However, Bibijee can read and write Punjabi fluently. Her constant yearning has been to educate herself and acquire knowledge: *"To allow jyoti (jyoti literally means 'light', and she looked at me and laughed as she made the pun) to enlighten the dark recesses and crevices of my mind"*, she says.

She is indeed, a remarkable woman in every way. She uses language like poetry and paints each phrase, each word in colour. An innate philosopher, she drew upon an inexorable fountain of folk wisdom to universalize on the human condition and life. I watched her and heard her in rapt amazement as her hands, her body and face turned into a wondrous canvas as it were, reflecting an incredible and fleeting range of emotions. Her gestures were in perfect harmony with her speech which in turn mirrored even the most complex of thoughts with transparent clarity and luminosity of a crystal. Despite her advanced years and weak constitution, her voice is not only clear and firm but demonstrates a vast range of tenor and inflections.

As she spoke of her days as a little girl and her youth, it was almost as if she was transformed into a lithe and exuberant young woman before my eyes. I was conscious of sitting transfixed in fascinated stupor as she talked, or enacted, or performed, or remembered. None of these terms convey the activity Bibijee engaged in during her interaction with me. Perhaps the phrase that best encapsulates what transpired is the one she herself used when I asked her

to recount and recall her experiences. *"What do you want me to tell you - all that which I felt deep down in my bones; all that which still churns in deep niches and has to be rummaged through and sorted out into a pattern? Is that what you want me to tell you and show you?"*

Yes, indeed she showed me.

Despite her 78 years of hard and gruelling life, Bibijee walks erect and firm, with a no-nonsense air about her. Through the heavy eye glasses, her gaze is direct and unwavering. I had met her a few times previously at women's gatherings or at community events, and had always been struck by the turban she wrapped around her head like a Sikh male, under the diaphanous head cover she wore as part of her Punjabi attire. It gave her a distinguished look as well as drew attention to her. Now when I asked her about it, she pulled her length up and with a solemn look on her face said:

"This turban is a sign of pledge to my Party - the Party in India, which I had the honour of joining in 1938. It sits on my head like a responsibility and is a reminder of my commitment to some political objectives; to always stand on the side of the oppressed, the suffering and the underdogs. I have to honour this turban, this commitment and the Party. That's all", and she relaxed once again.

I was very touched by Bibijee's political fervour, clarity and yearning to see social justice done to all the exploited people of the world. Like a seasoned political organizer and thinker, she would periodically distance herself from her personal problems and pains, her individual experiences and link them up with what was happening within the broader social and political context. Despite her love and affection for her near ones, I was very impressed by her astute and objective analysis of them. Speaking of her daughter, in whose basement she resides, Bibijee once said:

"when she was unmarried, I was able to exert some political influence on her and she showed some social awareness. After marriage she came here to Canada and allowed the four walls of her house to swallow her. Besides then, who was nearer to her, I or her husband? After marriage the woman got yoked on to her man and got busy in the pursuit of sowing and harvesting dollars".

In fact all the experiences Bibijee recounts, while being intensely personal on the one hand, have at once a universal relevance. These are experiences of a woman fighting for personal and collective self determination of her gender in a country which was itself undergoing rapid social change in its bid for political sovereignty from the British.

Her narrative is historically rooted. For instance, to my query about when she and her husband came to Canada, she replied:

"the year Indira Gandhi went into East Pakistan - soon after Bangladesh was formed".

She displayed an invincible faith in "the people" - "The people will rise", "the people will not accept this injustice", "the will of the people shall prevail", "ultimately the people be victorious", "the people have woken up from their slumber" etc., were expressions she used often, and as she articulated them one could see her drawing strength from them. She had a vast repertoire of what "the people" will do, and I realized that her work as a political organizer and women's activist had equipped her with this language. However, her optimism and her faith in the goodness of humanity was truly inspiring. The general ambience about her can be summarized in her own phrase which she uses often and always prefixes with a chuckle:

"There is no need to be despondent, for tomorrow the sun shall shine".

Her only regret, as she ruefully confided to me in one of my latter sessions with her was:

"sometimes I feel so torn inside, and its like all my insides bubble and boil and makes as if to spill out. This body has betrayed me too soon - my flesh has shrivelled and hangs on me like a tattered balloon, but my mind and heart have defied age. Inside me I feel all the vigour and excitement of a young woman - I want to go from house to house talking to our women, as you do. I want to sit with you in your car, maybe even learn to drive it and together with you tell our women not to take all this beating and this racist abuse anymore. But, what shall I do? My body sits down on the pavement by the roadside, while my heart wants to go leaping down the road. Tell me, how do I console my mind, how do I quell the flood in my heart?"

Of all the interviews I did, Bibijee's has been the hardest to translate. I am painfully aware that I have failed to capture so many subtleties and innuendoes. At other places, I have seen nuances slip by or turn into flat plasticky phrases in English out of an inability to translate their spirit. I have scanned Punjabi-English dictionaries and asked friends to help me capture the spirit behind a saying or phrase. In part, my frustration had to do with the total defiance of some of the phrases to render themselves to English language. When forcibly cast into English, they began to look like many of the immigrant Indo-Canadian elderly women I have interviewed here; bereft of spirit and colour.

In part, my anguish arose out of my own limitations and inability to translate Punjabi into English. While I am fluent in both the languages and have a fairly good sense of capturing the underlying meanings, I am not trained as a translator; admittedly some special training and experience must be required. Therefore, Bibijee's narrative, on account of delving into "deep niches" often becomes three times removed. Firstly, some gestures, inflections and subtleties are merely not amenable to any form of verbal language; secondly, something is lost in spirit when the language of the narrator in which experience is wrapped and presented is translated into English; and thirdly, limitations of the oral historian and interviewer as a translator must detract from the narrative.

What follows are vignettes out of Bibijee's life experiences. The theme that emerges when she speaks of the past is her work and experiences as a political worker in organizing women. One grows with her as one watches a woman coming into her own. When she talks of the present and the future, there is some disappointment; a sense of being let down by those who she expected to care for her. There is also loneliness and insecurity arising out of failing health, but she is neither despondent nor depressed.

"Such is life. And all our people who came to Canada, drawn like moths to a flame are now getting their wings singed, but they are helpless; they are hypnotized by the outward beauty of the flame and do not realize that they are being consumed," she retorts wisely, as she tightens the transparent knee-highs she keeps tied to her forearms and wrists to keep her joints from circulating the pain.

I met her on several occasions to hear her entire life-story. Despite several sessions, I do not think I have heard even half of it. Each time I would introduce a theme, and she would settle down with a serious and animated look on her face, to rummage and unravel. As new pieces and information were retrieved, both of us would behold them with fascination; she, at having rediscovered it with my help, and me, at its multi-layered intricacy. Both of us would be singularly pleased at our effort and handiwork, for what emerged was, beyond any doubt in our minds, the work of us both. Once, when we were talking of some intimate details of her personal life, her 90 year old husband awoke from his supposed nap on the couch in the

corner, cocked an eyebrow and said in a loud voice,

"*what is this oot-patahng (untranslatable, but implies 'utter nonsense') you both are spewing out?*"

After a peremptory glance in his direction and a dismissive flick of her wrist, she offered a cursory reply:

"*She is asking me how each organ of my body added its own colour in my life and she is asking me about my mind; at which places and how bacterial-culture was introduced into it so that it set itself tightly and firmly like good, thick yoghurt.*"

This is how the narrative went:

"The world has changed much, and if you ask me, the difference between your times and mine stands out like night and day - so much of a contrast. Today, women have woken up from their sleep and their eyes are wide open, their gaze is clear. In my days, some of us were just awakening from deep slumber and rubbing our sleepy eyes, while others were yawning drowsily. In India, I would say the majority of our sisters were snoring away in those days. You, my little light, are lucky to be born in this epoch. But more than that, you are lucky that your eyes are open, and you can act as a watch-dog with other women so that no one takes your rights away, and no one can sweep the gains your generation of women have made onto the cow dung heap.

"In my days we had to struggle so hard, and we had to make loud noises to wake up other women who were going around yelping like puppies whose eyes never opened. Every time they were kicked, they would yelp but they had no teeth to bite. And we had no watch-dogs, at least not in the beginning. Once the light of knowledge and education has reached your mind and cast its radiant glow, how can women, men be pushed into darkness again? Will they not fight to stay under the light? If electricity reaches a forsaken village and brightens up the poor Chamar's (one of the untouchable castes in India) miserable hovel, will his life not change, will he not see things more clearly?"

Before I came here to Canada 16-17 years ago, I used to hear that women here were very advanced. That they work in offices and ride cars, that they are so independent and free. I said bravo! that's the way it should be. And actually when I first landed here and my gaze fell upon some goris (white women), I was very happy to see them. I liked the way they walked, with long, free strides, open and uninhibited. Not like our women, all wrapped up, hidden and encumbered. Our women don't walk with their frame straight and heads flung in the air. They walk as if they want to shrink into themselves, with fear and doubt.

"But then I saw some not-so-good things about the goris, not all but many goris. They throw their bodies to the breeze but their minds are closed and locked up. They want to let the light touch their bodies so they go around naked, or scantily dressed. Their minds are still covered with layers and layers of shrouds. First the light must touch the mind, then the body will itself grow in stature. It will become beautiful, but not like this. With darkness in your mind your body will only look empty and naked.

"What makes me sad is that our girls here are also following this mindless march like sheep. They have such a glorious opportunity to advance their minds and to educate themselves but before they reach twenty they want to get married. They find some empty-headed nincompoop of a boy who has just been weaned, like themselves, and they want to play 'house house'. Life is not a joke or a game, I tell you. And you get only one chance, never again on this earth will you set foot! Now that I am old I feel this all the more. I feel like holding these

young women and shaking them like we used to shake a mango or jamun tree (a large tree bearing purple coloured fruit with a pit), and see all their foolishness fall away. But they must grow on their own - this old woman has lived enough.

"Life for us was no holiday or basking in the sun by the beach. You have come from India so you know what I am saying. Growing up in the village as young adolescent girls, our struggle was to do away with Ghagra (ankle length skirts of 10 yards of handwoven fabric, worn over Salwars or loose trousers by girls as they reached puberty). That dress was a curse as we could not move freely, could not go anywhere without creating such a swishing and swirling sound. Also, my friends and I had resolved never to veil our faces. Why should we cover our faces and live like moles in a furrow? We had nothing to hide and we were strong Sikh women whom Guru Gobind Singh had enjoined to fight as warriors alongside men for their rights and for justice. I, in particular, was vehemently opposed to these backward practices, for to me they were worse than poison.

"My Tayee (father's older brother's wife) had once narrated to me the incident of her near death on the occasion of her marriage. She got married in the month of June, and you know how intense the heat is in Punjab during that month. In those days it used to be even hotter - it was as if the sun used to descend on the earth during the summer and scorch everything. Well, my Tayee's father must have sent his mind grazing with the cattle to be arranging her marriage in June. She was decked up like a buffalo in 7 yards of a Salwar, 12 yards of thick hand-spun cotton Ghagra, and covered in two Phulkaris (embroidered cotton shawls) of 2 and a half yards each. Naturally she was swooning away under all that weight in the heat, and she was only 12 years old. Looking like an elephant or pregnant buffalo, they put her in a humped bullock-cart which was ordinarily used to carry fodder. Sitting at the front of the cart was my Taya (uncle or father's older brother), but of course he did not have his arms encircling her, like they do here. So when the cart tried to pass through a ditch full of water, it tipped and this humongous bundle of a Tayee rolled out and promptly fell into the water. Now, had she been dressed like a human being she would have been able to pick herself up and reach dry ground, but she got all entangled in those clothes. As the cotton got soaked, it became heavy as lead and began to drag her down. When they dragged her out she was half suffocated and half drowned. Then they peeled her layers off, hand-pulled that drenched mouse out. Somehow, this story made such an impact on me that I vowed never to don any of these senseless attires.

"So at the age of 18, when my father arranged my wedding, I refused to wear a Ghagra or to veil my face. My father went raving and snorting like an incensed bull, but I said to myself: *"let him rave and rant, at the most he will kill you - and he won't do that on this occasion"*. So I went to my in-laws' village sitting unencumbered in a cart. That husband of mine was an idiot I think - his mind had not developed fully. All he did was raise camels, he spent all day with the camels. We never spoke to each other and I slept in my cot in one corner of the room and he mostly slept in the camel shed. I said to myself: *"the fellow is a half-wit, and my father is no father, he is my enemy. He just wanted to get rid of me and packed me off with this loon. But I am not going to stay with this camel-crazed buffoon"*.

"So next day I returned to my father's house and declared that I am never going back. Besides, I missed my cousins and friends and younger sisters. My father just let me be, and I fell back to doing the same chores I did earlier. Then one day I got news that my husband had died of some illness; I suppose God took heed of my misery and moved to release me. But I did not wish him death and I was sorry for him, that miserable soul.

"That fellow's death suddenly made me free and also brought me some wealth. He was the only son of his parents and when he died, I as his widow became the sole inheritor of their family lands. When I learnt this, suddenly a weight lifted off my mind and I felt I was flying with the birds and eagles high up in the skies. Suddenly, I had so many possibilities. I could study, for that is what I most ardently longed for.

"Ever since my mother died, my dream to study got squashed like a beetle. My mother loved me very much and had promised to send me to medical school. But when she died my father said there was to be no more school for me. I must take over all the chores my mother did. To tell you the truth, he was very cruel and ruthless. He felt no pity and compassion for anyone, and ever since I realized that he had become an unrelenting money lender, I hated him. Poor peasants and village folk would come and cry at his feet for mercy; mothers would stand snivelling at our door, and he would show no remorse. His heart had dried up like a sun-baked cow dung cake.

"He left my mother soon after her marriage and did not return for ten years. He just abandoned her without a word. For ten years, and she had no money, nothing. When he left he buried three hundred silver coins in a deep crevice in the wall of the cattle shed and dug a pole to tie the cows in front of it. My mother lived in hunger and poverty with no means, all alone. If she had those coins, her life would have been much easier. When he returned after ten years, the man had the audacity and the nerve to doubt my mother's fidelity. You know, that's how a man's mind works. There is a worm in his own rotten heart and he is doubting her.

"He came to the fringe of the village and sat himself down by the well. Nobody recognized him for he had changed so much in ten years. When some villagers approached at dusk, he made enquiries about my mother, whether she was still in the village, and whether she was still by herself. The scoundrel did not identify himself. On having dispelled his doubts by hearing praises of my mother - what a devout wife she was even though her husband had abandoned her and is probably dead by now - he entered the village.

"My mother, poor soul hid her face in her veil. No, she was not angry with him, she was so happy that her man had returned home. Tears of joy fell from her eyes as she sobbed silently all by herself in a corner. Her veil got soaked in tears. Then my father dug out the money and she just stared uncomprehendingly. No, she bore him no grudge, her heart so simple and forgiving.

"But this is how she was. As for him, when, after she gave birth to a fourth daughter, my father threatened to get himself another wife who would bear him a son, my little heart filled with rage. My mother just hugged all her daughters close, like a hen enfolding all the chicks. But her heart was heavy with pain and she died soon afterwards.

"My father, I believe was not such a cold-hearted man, to begin with. Ever since I remember, he used to be called Mircan by the villagers. You see, our family history in North America is quite old - my father came here in 1902, and came to be known as Mircan (colloquial and distorted for 'American').

"Before he disappeared he was a soldier with the famous Cavalry Guard of the British. Only handsome, strapping men, each above 6 feet height were recruited into this Guard. Now, I don't know what actually happened but the gori wife of his Angrez (British) Commanding Officer raised hell saying someone had entered her room at night and she was sure that it was my father. Thereupon, my father was sentenced to be hanged and the entire village mourned in silence. Then some other soldiers of the Cavalry Guard approached the Sahib

and pleaded with him to pardon my father and not to hang him. The Sahib agreed but my father was barred from any government employment. Within a few days my father disappeared, not to be seen or heard of for the next ten years.

"In those days the Angrez had power over life and death. Each time they passed by the village, the village kids would run out to the streets to see them. The men would bow their heads in 'salaam' (obedience) and not raise them till the officers had passed. They were the rulers and we were their slaves.

"When I became involved in political activity, only then did this fear and myth begin to leave my mind, that these Angrez were like us, absolutely like us. That their physical constitution, everything was ditto, like ours. The freedom fighters would tell this to the people and the people wouldn't believe them. Just as the myth was popular that Chamars (untouchable) were inferior to us because they had one extra pair of ribs, the Angrez were supposed to be physically different and superior. And not just for their white skins.

It was only after I got married a second time that my mind began to bloom with knowledge and I came into contact with freedom fighters. Only then did I learn what was true and what was false.

"Well, I married Hakim Tara Singh on the 25th of May, 1932. I was 21 years old then and had become quite mobile and free due to my "widowhood". What a blessing that was I had a friend in Hakim's village and as I was visiting her, one old village crone injected the idea into my friends' minds. Frankly, I was quite perplexed. Maybe he had this idea already but even the thought of it was totally alien to me. So when it was first suggested, I recoiled. But the woman said to me; "*Bibi, the Hakim is a very respected man and will cherish you like a flower. You will bloom in his courtyard, so why don't you give it a thought?*" I tried to wriggle out by saying I had not spoken about it with my father, but they said; "*what do you want with a father like that? He never cared about your mother and has no care for you. Besides, you are a grown woman now*". So finally I consented.

"But, as we were going to the Gurudwara (Sikh temple for the ceremony) my mind and heart were suffused with consternation and doubts. I was travelling in a cart with some women and when we approached a canal we stopped. It was very hot and I descended to the water to wash my face. Believe me, in those few moments what a storm raged through me. As I bent down by the canal, my mind said, "*jump in and put an end to yourself. What do you want with marriage? Now you are free and your own ruler. If you get married, who knows how your mind and your person will be invaded*". Then I thought, "*what will they say? Nobody forced her - if she was so distressed she could have said 'no' to the marriage*". And then again I thought, "*maybe I won't even drown; maybe they will drag me out and then what a fool I will look*". Anyway, so then I got married.

"The first years of marriage were terrible. I felt like I do here in Canada - ensconced in a tomb. The walls of the house began to close in on me and stifle me. I thought constantly of my friends, of my 'society' in my village back home, and I pined for that freedom and mobility. Here, in my husbands village I had no 'society', no company. Besides, I know the women sniggered behind my back because I had gotten married on my own. I must be that-sort-of-a-woman. They just tittered behind my back and I would get whiff of it. Not that I cared very much, but I felt ensnared.

"Hakimjee was good to me and taught me many things, but it was not the same. Sunshine left my heart and the bounce went out of my step. Within the first year my son was born, and then each two years I had a child. I felt weighed down by children and household chores.

All day I was trapped within the four walls like a mindless cow, going through the routine of the day - unthinkingly, like chewing the cud. I am certain I would have died of suffocation, but then in 1935 the freedom fighters came.

"Four-five freedom fighters, returned after studying in the Soviet Union. They came to our house because Hakimjee had the reputation of being a progressive man, a supporter of the freedom struggle and man of the people. Many people would come to our house and he would give them free medicine, food and a place to stay. As the freedom movement advanced and activity heightened, our house became the stronghold of revolutionaries. Freedom fighters who were on the run, revolutionaries who had a reward on their heads, were welcome in our house. All underground meetings and activities emanated from our place, and soon I became thoroughly involved. I would carry messages, underground material, letters - I would also enlist support for the movement. Our neighbor was a Muslim woman and there was a secret doorway between our houses. Anytime there was danger of a police raid, the men would slip into her house. She would seal her lips tight and the police were reluctant to enter her house as Purdah (veiling and segregation of women's quarters) was observed there. I began to live and breathe freely once again.

"As the freedom fighters and revolutionaries talked and held discussions into the night, my heart would race with excitement. I was welcome to sit with them but there was always a lot of work to be done. However, I had trained my ears so well - I would be at the far end of the courtyard making tea or rotis (pan-roasted bread), and my ears would be tuned to every sound of the men. I would string each word they uttered like a precious bead into a necklace which I wore close to my heart at all times. In time, my beads of knowledge grew, and my necklace grew bigger.

"These men told us of the women in the Soviet Union and we were wonderstruck: *"The women do everything there"*, they told us, *"drive trucks and trains and airplanes. They are doctors, engineers, pilots - everything. There is not a field, a department of the government in which women are not active. The State is fully supportive and does everything to promote women. Do you know that women there bear babies without any pain"*. This was the most astounding of all revelations - painless childbirth. We listened with awe and devoured each word. By then a few other women had joined us. My heart yearned to see that future, to see that world where every one would be free and all women would shed off their pain.

"Around the same time some discord began to develop between Hakimjee and me. He was very active in the Party as was I, but he would be out most of the time on his cycle. Soon he began drinking daily. Also, there was nothing in the house - our income was barely enough to support the five mouths in our family. Now we were bearing the burden of a whole contingent of comrades, their wives and families. What anybody found in the house was consumed, and when came time to feed the children, all tins rang empty.

"As our financial situation worsened, the disharmony and conflict between us grew. We never brought it out in the open though, and sometimes like warring puppies we would also wag our tails together. Occasionally, a close friend would try and sort out things between us and reconcile matters. Then, in 1938, I was given membership to the Party. I will never forget the pride and joy I felt - I thought my heart would not hold all these feelings and surely it would burst.

"Hakimjee was not made a member then, and I think that rankled terribly with him. He never spoke to me about it though. You know, how can the Party trust anyone who allows alcohol to control his mind - anytime a secret could be 'out'. I was reliable, had no such

weaknesses and was a trusted worker.

"Within years then, the work of the Party grew in leaps and bounds. We began to organize women, and in 1950-51 a woman's organization was launched. Most of the active women were either daughters or wives of members but gradually we drew upon women in the colleges. We would load ourselves in horse-carts and paint the towns and villages red, beckoning women to come out and join us.

"Initially, women were scared to speak from the stage, but gradually they lost their shyness and fear, and gave such inspiring speeches. It was my wish to put as many women on the stage as possible. Women demanded equal rights; property rights, right to education, hospitals for women, and sought to raise consciousness on issues like family violence, dowry, veiling.

"Nehru was also actively supporting the demand for property rights for women. I think he must have thought that he has no offspring other than Indira Gandhi, and if this law is not passed his property might be lost, especially as her husband had forsaken her and, maybe even taken another woman.

"As our voice grew louder and resounded through the narrow alleys of the villages, and as we came centre stage in the party, some of the comrades began to burn inside. They would not say anything openly, for they couldn't, but they resented the fact that women had suddenly become so strong. Sometimes they would joke about us and pass snide remarks. I thought them to be very foolish and narrow-minded. How could they be true revolutionaries with such an attitude. Even then I used to feel that change in society would not come so easily. Very few women in the Party were in leadership positions; most of them would do chores like making tea and roti and making arrangements for conferences. But in those days even that was a big step for women who had not seen the light of the day earlier.

"Men-women relations also changed and became more humane as a result of all this activity. But I had to be very strict with the Party girls who were put in my charge. I had such a major responsibility on my head; and then in a bag of mangoes, one or two are always rotten. I remember once, there was a conference in Jullundar city to which I had taken a contingent of women. We learnt that a woman from the Soviet Union had come to attend that conference. All the girls wanted to go to see her especially as they learnt that she had no forearms and offered teacups to comrades by lifting them with her toes. Everybody was agog with excitement but I refused to take them to see her. I discovered that some young men were following two of the girls in my group and I was in no mind to take risks. Suppose something untoward happened, none other but I would be answerable. And what a blemish that would be on the Party!

"No, men and women did not have relationships, but they saw each other at public events, chose each other from a distance - you know how your eyes meet and something passes between you like an unspoken signal. Well signals would pass and that is how young couples chose each other and then the parents were told whereupon they were married off.

"Now you tell me, after living such a life, how did I feel when I came here to this colourless land. Its very clean and the lights are impressive but where is the spirit and the struggle? Or maybe I am too old...? When I was in Punjab, our people from here would return for visits and all the village folks would cluster around them to admire their clothes, their watches, their shoes, their hair cuts. The villagers would try and ape them like monkeys and say, *"what a yokel he was when he left and see how smart and clever he has become?"* People from here go back and show off their wealth; the poor ignorant people in the villages don't know

any better. If not a Sahib himself, at least he is coming from the land of the Sahib. They learn to say 'mom and dad' here and impress those village fools there. The poorer the guy over here, the more he will flaunt his miserable dollars and throw them around in the village over there. So everybody wants to marry off their daughters to this creep - also it is their passport to heaven, they think. Younger girls of gold, like flower petals have been yoked on to brainless beasts. We fought and drove the Angrez out but the minds of our people are still enslaved. If for years you put coconut shells as blinders on the oxen's eyes, he will refuse to open his eyes and see when you take the blinders off. That is the problem with our people. Driven like oxen, they have forgotten to think with their own minds, or else they become monkeys aping everything the Whites do.

"Look at my own flesh and blood. My grandchildren speak no Punjabi. So they are aliens to me. We cannot communicate with each other. Now you are sitting here with this machine and drinking in what I am saying. There must be some worth in my years of experience, but I cannot pass it on to my grandchildren. I cannot tell them what pitfalls to avoid and what plants will give them a rash - all I do is watch them fall and scratch their rashes.

"And people change here - somehow my children are not mine here. Their hearts have hardened and the glint of money has replaced the shine of humanity in their eyes. Hakimjee and I came here to be with our flesh and blood and we are left with our shrivelling flesh and lethargic blood which will stop flowing soon. When I go to the International Women's day march, my heart swells up and fills me with hope. Then I tell myself, *"don't let your heart sink. Even in this White land there is poverty and injustice and struggle. And where people fight, there is hope"*. Right now I do not feel this is my home but who knows, maybe one day when the struggle bears fruit our people can call this land their home.

[Diva sadly was not able to publish the second part of this article because of lack of space. Please see Vol 2, Issue 3 for Part II]

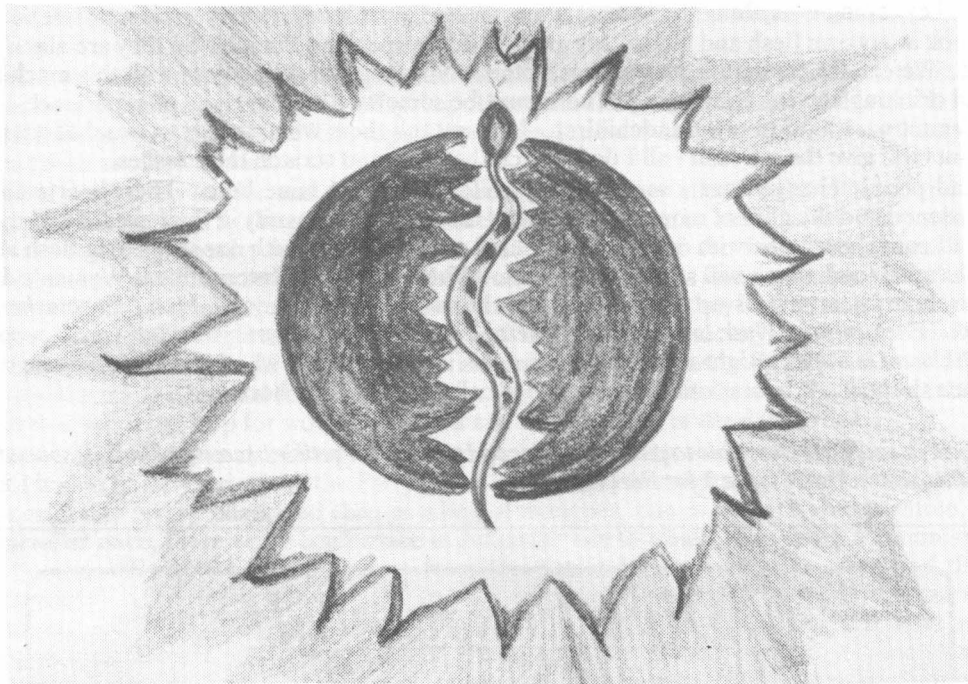
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DISTURBING



THE PEACE

by

MARLENE NOURBESE PHILIPPS

...it is true that the nature of society is to create, among its citizens, an illusion of safety; but it is also absolutely true that the safety is always necessarily an illusion. Artists are here to disturb the peace.

James Baldwin

Disturbing the peace. That was what a small group of writers, artists and supporters were doing outside Roy Thomson Hall on the evening of September 24, 1989. We were 'disturbing the peace' by leafletting the guests as they attended the Gala of the 54th PEN Congress. To describe us as an odd bunch would not have been amiss. We comprised an Anglo-Canadian teenage student doing a project on racism and writing; a South African refugee; an African Canadian employee of the Women's Press; a Chinese Canadian playwright; an Anglo-Canadian adult educator; an Asian Canadian writer; a couple of volunteers from the rape crisis centre; an African Canadian writer and critic; an Anglo-Canadian writer and critic; an Irish Canadian writer; and myself.

Some of us were members of a fledgling group, **Vision 21: Canadian Culture in the 21st Century** (was formed a couple of months earlier around issues of cultural representation, racism and the arts). There were also members of **Multicultural Women Writers of Canada**, a group formed in May, 1989 in response to the failure of the **Writers' Union** to deal with racism and sexism.

The more immediate context to our presence outside Roy Thomson Hall on the evening of September 24, 1989, reaches back some eighteen months to the split of the **Women's Press** over the issue of racism in writing and publishing. The debate generated by these events swirled in the media as well as the writing community for many months only to surface once again at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the **Writers' Union** in May 1989. At this meeting, certain members of the Union brought a motion to set up a task force to look into racism in writing and publishing; the motion failed to carry.

These events are but the high points to a long-standing struggle on the part of many artists and writers across Canada against racism and its manifestations in the practices of cultural representation, and in the structures that manage the various disciplines of arts. The face-off between **The League of Canadian Poets** and **De Dub Poets** was one of the more notorious manifestations of this reality. Before that there was the **Fireweed** issue edited by women of colour which dealt with these issues. There was also Makeda Silvera's address at the **1983 Women and Words** conference which dealt with this issue. Racism in writing and publishing is by no means a new issue here in Canada.

As a poet and writer, my own personal involvement and contribution to this struggle has primarily been as a critic and writer, always attempting, in the words of James Baldwin, to disturb the peace of those invested in maintaining the status quo. The aim of this involvement has always been to articulate the nature of racism in the arts, to reveal the profound injustices that result from the systemic practice of racism, and to push those who try to manage and diffuse the effects of this practice, to respond to the legitimate needs and demands of black Canadian writers and artists in Canada. Based on this involvement, there was, in fact, a certain inevitability to my standing outside Roy Thomson Hall, along with fellow artists and supporters holding signs and giving out leaflets that challenged **PEN Canada** for locking out writers of colour, thereby using up our 5 minutes of Warholian fame. The fundamental purpose to our leafletting campaign was, and always has been to advance the state of the debate concerning racism and the arts here in Canada. Our aim was not to change **PEN Canada** or **PEN International**. We merely used the ethnic and racial composition of the Canadian contingent as a startling yet predictable example of the official face of racism in the arts in Canada. None of the individuals demonstrating outside Roy Thomson

Hall wanted to be invited to participate in the 54th Congress of PEN. What we did want to do, however, was bring to the attention of all PEN delegates, both from Canada and from abroad, the fact that there is a very real problem with racism here in Canada, which in many instances serves to silence black writers and writers of colour. We argued in our leaflet (see text) that such silencing of writers, while not the exact equivalent to imprisonment, was similar enough to warrant the attention of an organization such as PEN and the delegates to the Congress.

There was an unusual lack of pre-publicity about the 54th PEN Congress, and it was only on being sent a schedule by a friend in the week immediately prior to the Congress that I became aware of the ethnic and racial composition of PEN Canada's delegates. This schedule, in fact, did not even list the writers taking part in the Next Generation readings, but merely stated that these readings and panels would be taking place.

Our first response to this schedule was a letter to **NOW Magazine** (21st September) signed by myself, Kass Banning, Cameron Bailey, Winston Smith and Enid Lee, protesting the under representation of writers of colour at the Congress. During that week there was much discussion about whether we should do anything further and if so what the best plan was. Because there was lack of time and bodies, we eventually decided that the best approach was that of leafletting. We designed the leaflet to provide information to delegates about racism in writing and publishing here in Canada. We gave a background to this issue here in Canada: we outlined the official policy of multiculturalism; we gave a brief history of the more recent events relating to these issues; we welcomed the presence of 'Third World' writers in Canada; we supported PEN's work on behalf of imprisoned writers; we pointed out the peculiar form of silencing that takes place in Canada as a consequence of racism; we drew attention to the overwhelmingly white, Anglo Saxon, Protestant (WASP) composition of the Canadian delegates as an example of racism and argued that this was tantamount to the exclusion of black writers and writers of colour. We asked delegates to raise these issues in their panels.

Unaware that there was a reception (courtesy of **Saturday Night**) being held prior to the concert, we arrived at Roy Thomson Hall on the evening of September 24, 1989, only to find that many of the delegates had already entered the Hall, although we had allowed ourselves at least forty-five minutes to leaflet. This information had not been made public. However, we were still able to leaflet a number of guests as they went into the Hall.

Some guests supported us, others quite clearly disapproved of us, and still others stopped to argue with us, challenging us to prove our "allegations". The most common objection we heard was that it was "inappropriate" for us to be there - read impolite, this is Canada eh! That appropriateness had become one of the trappings of democracy was revelation to me that evening. At the end of that stint of leafletting we all felt exhilarated and believed that despite missing many of the delegates, we had accomplished something.

We returned after the concert to leaflet the guests we had missed on their way in and found very much the same responses among the departing guests as there were earlier. Some

guests agreed with our interpretation of the event; others asked for bookstores where they could find the books of writers of colour, and there were those who continued to disapprove of us. One guest even pointed to a typographical error in the leaflet and said that since we couldn't spell we could not be taken seriously.

By about 11 p.m., our already small group had dwindled to about five or six tired but satisfied leafletters. We collected our signs in preparation for leaving when we noticed two people coming through the front doors of Roy Thomson Hall. I approached the couple and, as I had done on many, many occasions that evening, held out a leaflet to the woman who preceded her companion. I do not recall that I even had a chance to say what I had been customarily saying to guests - "Have you had one of these?" The woman's response was swift as it was vicious.

"Fuck off!" she said to me.

That woman was June Callwood, the then incoming President of PEN Canada, I told Ms. Callwood that she ought to be ashamed of herself for saying that and the later in turn replied once again with "fuck off", this time directed at Sheelagh Conway. As she passed the other members of the group (some three or four people) June Callwood once again told us to "fuck off". As President of PEN Canada, June Callwood is head of an organization whose members are sworn to uphold freedom of speech, particularly on the part of writers, the world over.

Contrary to the **Globe and Mail** article (Tuesday, September 26, 1989) no member of our group accosted anyone that evening, including June Callwood. We were a small, low keyed group of people who merely handed out leaflets. Occasionally the odd voice or voices would be raised in a chant to challenging PEN to "do the right thing". Contrary to the **Globe and Mail** editorial of September 27, 1989, (*Penpals*), June Callwood was not tormented by anyone, nor was there a heated altercation. Altercation suggests at least two people engaged in discourse. No one said anything to June Callwood before she abused us. Contrary to the suggestion in the **Globe and Mail** piece by Bronwyn Drainie on September 30, 1989, no one drove June Callwood to obscenities or profanity. June Callwood's attack on us, for that is what it was, was unprovoked and unwarranted.

There was a smaller leafletting at Union Station on Wednesday, September 27, 1989 as the delegates left for the Montreal leg of the Congress. I did not attend on this occasion but Sheelagh Conway did and her report is that she met with great hostility particularly from Betty Friedan, Graeme Gibson and a male Argentinian delegate.

June Callwood said "fuck off" in public and thereby used up her five minutes of Warholian fame. In that her profanity and abuse garnered us more media attention, her response albeit personally distasteful to me, was helpful.

However, because Callwood is an iconic representation of liberalism in Canada, the media, after the immediate news coverage, rushed to find excuses for her abuse of us. Use of words like 'accost' 'tormentor' and 'heated altercation' by **The Globe and Mail**, and a more recent reference to us as a 'gang' by the **Toronto Sun** are all examples of damage control on behalf of Callwood by the media.

In the more extreme cases such as the **Globe and Mail** editorial and the **Sun** piece, there is also an attempt to discredit us and our arguments about racism in Canada.

The reason for Callwood's response to us, however, is not hard to find. In **Marxism Today** (August 1989) piece on racial turmoil between British Muslims and English people in Bradford, journalist Simon Reynell writes that there is a "fundamental intolerance which ordinarily lurks beneath the surface 'as long as they keep themselves to themselves', (which) erupts whenever a minority culture impinges on the day-to-day life of the majority culture. And that was what June Callwood's "fuck off" was all about. In the media's rush to protect her, however, the legitimate issues concerning racism in Canada have tended to be discredited along with us as individuals.

One of the reasons for our being outside Roy Thomson Hall was to make the delegates aware of the presence of racism in publishing and writing in Canada. Given the reluctance on the part of Canadians to accept the existence of racism in their society, our other reason for being there was to interest the media in what we were doing so that the homegrown issues of racism in Canadian writing and publishing would reach a wider public.

MEDIA COVERAGE

The **Toronto Star** gave the leafletting and demonstration a few lines in its September 25, 1989 issue. It did not mention the event again, nor did it mention the Callwood incident. It did, however, in a later piece (**Toronto Star**, October 2, 1989) refer in very disparaging terms to an interaction between Sheelagh Conway and Betty Friedan, that took place on Wednesday 27, September 1989 at Union Station.

CBC carried the item about the demonstration and Callwood's profanity twice on the morning of Monday September 25, 1989, on its *On the Arts* program. Significantly, in its September 29th 1989 *Morningside* coverage of the events in Toronto, and the *train trio* to Montreal, there was no mention made of the demonstration on Callwood's abuse of the individuals involved in handing out leaflets. When Sheelagh Conway raised this omission with the producer of the show, the later told her that they had made a decision that what we were doing was inconsequential and that we were wasting our time and energy.

The **Village Voice** interviewed us but to date has carried nothing on the Congress. The **Voice** reporter did, however, tell me that the demonstration and leafletting was the most interesting event that had taken place at the Congress.

Neither **Share** nor **Contrast** with whom I spoke took any interest in the issue, nor did they cover the leafletting, or the issue of Callwood's response to us. A member of one of the other ethnic presses attended the Gala, spoke with us and took a photograph; I do not know if this appeared in any newspaper.

Surprisingly, the **Globe and Mail** was the only organ of the media, print or otherwise, mainstream or marginal, that gave the demonstration any reasonable coverage or treated it with the seriousness it warranted (Tuesday, September 26, 1989). Reporters H.J. Kirchoff

and Isabel Vincent must be given credit for this. However, the *Globe* editorial the following day, "*Penpals*", did an impressive job of damage control, excusing Callwood's abuse, euphemistically referred to as an "Anglo-Saxon expletive". Would that Ms. Callwood had been so timorous. The editorial suggested that Callwood was tormented and that there was a heated altercation between her and the leafletters. The unspoken assumption here is that Callwood must have been provoked into behaving as appallingly as she did - that someone else must be at fault.

Now Magazine was helpful in letting us deliver two letters to them after the deadline, but beyond that gave no coverage of any of the events we had been involved in, nor did they in any of their articles deal specifically with the issue of racism which we raised. *Now*, in fact, after commissioning it, rejected the only piece which would have covered these issues - a piece by Winston Smith on the colonialism panel.

TV Ontario, the publicly funded television channel, on its September 9th *Imprint* show featured Graeme Gibson and June Callwood who in discussing this issue suggested that we were witch-hunting; that we were not writers and that we had not done our homework. TV Ontario did not, as it ought to have done, provide us with an opportunity to put forward our position or to rebut the inaccurate statements that were being made.

The media has censored the expression of our views concerning the Canadian delegation to the 54th Congress as well as the events that took place outside Roy Thomson Hall. Whether or not this was intentional is irrelevant. The purpose of this censorship has been to protect the image - I am tempted to say the illusion of Canada as a non-racist, and in the words of Graeme Gibson, the then President of PEN Canada, an "indecently rich third world country". The irony of this is that the explicit mandate of PEN Canada and PEN International is the opposite of censorship wherever it occurs. Clearly, the maintenance of a certain image, which includes the protection of June Callwood, is far more important to the media than the significance of Callwood's abusive and contemptuous response to our very small demonstration against racism. The cumulative result of this approach is, once again, a complete denial of the existence of racism in Canada and a dismissal of the issue.

I am also convinced that in the official reports of this Congress, there will be very little, if any attention devoted to the issues we raised at this event; nor will there be any analysis of June Callwood's response to us and the significance of this in the overall debate on racism. For this reason, it is vital that this account of our involvement in this Congress be recorded publicly.

Aftermath

As representatives of Multicultural Women Writers of Canada and Vision 21 respectively, Sheelagh Conway and I have called upon June Callwood to take responsibility for her actions and to apologise for her swearing at us. We have also called for her to resign her position as President of PEN Canada. In a letter to *The Globe and Mail*, I personally have called for her to apologise to me for her abuse. To date there has been no response from

her. Her silence on this issue speaks more than the cliched volumes.

On the morning of September 26, 1989, the morning on which the first **Globe** piece appeared I received an anonymous phone call from a male caller calling me a nigger. As I have written in a letter to **The Globe and Mail**, I do not and cannot hold June Callwood responsible for this reprehensible type of behaviour. I do, however, believe that when individuals of her stature in this country, take what is, in fact, a dismissive approach to issues of racism, sinking to the level of profanity; when a **Globe** editorial excuses this attitude with euphemistic platitudes and patent inaccuracies, the result is to create a climate in which the more extreme type of behaviour begin to surface.

Callwood has been quoted as saying she was "outraged" (**Globe and Mail** September 26, 1989) that we had "got our facts wrong", and that we hadn't "done our homework". Surely the response in such a situation, from someone in her position as incoming President of PEN, having access to the facts, ought to have been one in which she challenged us and demonstrated how we had gotten our facts wrong. Instead what we got was something very close to the verbal equivalent of the Chinese government to its demonstrators in Tiananmen Square.

Subsequent "corrections" of our "wrong facts" by John Ralston Saul, Secretary to PEN Canada stated that "more than 20 Canadian writers of minority or ethnic background participated" (**The Globe and Mail**, September 28, 1989). These figures have since been adjusted downward to give us the most recent and final "correction" of our facts, (**The Globe and Mail**, October 2, 1989) "At least 5 of the congress's 51 invited Canadian guests were "ethnic" (or as many as 10 or 12, how are these things figured?) This would be entirely risible if it weren't so serious.

The Ontario government now had in place policies which make a distinction between multiculturalism which deals with all ethnic minorities, including white ethnic minorities, and race relations which addresses the issue of race and colour with which the reporter appeared to have so much difficulty. Our leaflet identified 5 or at most 7 writers of colour. The discrepancy arose because there were two names which suggested that the writers were not Anglo-Canadian; we were, however, unsure of the race of the writers. I always understood the phrase writer of colour to have a specific meaning ---- those writers who are not white. While there is also the problem of ethnicity which we raised in passing in our leaflet, our arguments were directed primarily at racism affecting black writers in Canada as exemplified by their under-representation at the Congress. We did, however, address the similarly blatant issue of the lack of representation of Asian and native writers who may be described as writers of colour and, periphally, the under-representation of white ethnic writers. The piece referred to above by H.J. Kirchoff has entirely confused these issues. Nothing in the "corrections" of our facts in any way contradicts what we observed and had noted about the composition of the Canadian delegation to the 54th Congress.

The emphasis laid by many spokespeople for PEN Canada, subsequent to our leafletting, on the presence of writers from developing to our countries which we welcomed, exemplifies, in fact, a particularly pernicious form of Canadian internationalism which promotes Canada as an international do-gooder while, in this instance, practising a racism as virulent as any found in the USA. Neither is this practice restricted to areas of racism. Canada's handling

of the South African situation is symptomatic of this practice: while talking about the need for sanctions against South Africa, Canadian trade with South Africa has increased dramatically. While mouthing platitudes about human rights violations, Canada under the guise of private enterprise (Armex) hosted a major arms fair (Spring 1989) that welcomed many of those very countries (with the exception of Eastern block countries) that Canada condemned for human rights violations. The presence of writers of colour from overseas and from developing countries at the 54th Congress was intended and is now being used as an answer to a critique of Canadian racism practiced against black Canadian writers as well as writers of colour. It is not, nor can it ever be, an acceptable answer.

During the course of the Congress, I had reason to believe that it was being suggested that I had been invited to participate in the Congress and had refused. In a recent conversation with Jayne Cortez, the black, American poet who attended the Congress, I was able to confirm that, in fact, delegates had been told that I had been an invited guest to the congress and had refused to attend. The source of this disinformation is to date unknown to me, but the intent of it is patent: to discredit our position by suggesting (which did, in fact, happen) that I was being irresponsible by remaining outside and attempting to call the Congress into disrepute. I do wish to set the record straight that I have never been asked by any member of PEN Canada to participate in or attend the 54th Annual Congress of PEN. Any information to the contrary was a deliberate attempt by individuals who remain unknown to me to discredit me; to diffuse the valid criticisms which we were levelling against the Canadian organizers of the Congress; and to discount our allegations of racism in writing and publishing in Canada. What is disheartening, but probably not surprising is the fact that an organization like PEN Canada would indulge in this sort of tactics.

We Canadians live in a racist society. Racism permeates the very fabric of this society; the arts, and in this case writing is in no way immune to this particular problem. Like an alcoholic who will not accept that he or she has a drinking problem, Canada cannot be helped until there is acceptance of the problem. The response to our leafletting and demonstration by June Callwood and the media (except for *The Globe and Mail's* initial piece) are all examples of this dissimulation and self-delusion.

There is a vast chasm that presently exists between the rhetoric of politicians who chorus the existence of a multicultural, multiracial society, and the reality for black people in this society. And rhetoric it will remain as long as organizations such as PEN Canada fail to turn that rhetoric into something more substantial. We have come to expect rhetoric from politicians, but the existence of that rhetoric usually means that the politician is responding to a felt need in the society. It behooves organizations to reponed to those needs. Many government agencies, organizations, and departments funded like 54th PEN Congress. One would have thought that ministries like the Ministry of Culture and Communications would have insisted that before obtaining the funding sought, the Canadian delegation reflect the make up of this country. This did not happen, and PEN Canada was able, with the assistance of public funds, to put together a Canadian delegation that was fundamentally non-representative of this country.

As artists our very role is, as Baldwin argues, to disturb the peace. And this is not only, or necessarily, in the political sense. What we were doing on Sunday, September 24, 1989 was, I believe a natural outcome of our lives as artists committed to creating a more equitable world in which the practice of our art can continue; our actions reflected, in fact, a profound

commitment to this country, its future and the future of our children. There are always a number of things that one would, if one could, do differently when one looks back on events such as those in which we took part during the 54th PEN Congress. If only... I could start a number of sentences with these words - if only we had more lead time...; if only we had known of the reception...; if only we got more support from other writers of colour. To dwell too much in that state is unhealthy and dysfunctional. The demonstration was very much a spontaneous chutzpa, years of analysis of the art world, and just plain luck; it could probably never be duplicated. It probably ought not to be.

I was saddened by the fact that more black artists were not there to support us, despite our attempts to solicit help from many sources. I don't think this necessarily reflects a lack of support so much as a mixture of many feelings - fear; a belief that nothing will be changed; and plain, old tiredness. Fear of repercussions is very real and some individuals may want to maintain what little advantage they have gained in this city. Far too many of us have become seduced by the official policy that if we are only polite enough and behave ourselves we will, eventually, be let into the inner circle. Far too many of us are too tired from working in our own ways to increase our dignity; and sometimes the forces arrayed against us do inspire a feeling of helplessness.

I am saddened when I hear that individuals were offended because of a panel discussion on CKLN on the PEN Congress in which I took part, and during which reference was made to the fact that the two writers of colour, Austin Clarke and Jeanette Armstrong, who took part in the main events were token presences. While I personally did not make this reference, no offence was intended. I had always understood that allegations of tokenism reflected on the parties executing it, rather than on the individuals being used in this way. I myself have been used as a token and probably will be again. We cannot control every situation in which we agree to be involved, we can only try to understand it and correct it. I am even more saddened when I hear that because of this discussion individuals did not support us.

I am saddened when I hear that black Canadians in attendance at the 54th PEN Congress let it be known that they did not support what we were doing. I am saddened but I am not surprised.

I am saddened when I hear that black writers from overseas upon hearing that I had been invited to the Congress wondered what I was up to by not bringing the issues up within the Congress. I am saddened when I hear that some of the black writers felt that we hadn't involved them. We, in fact, felt it wasn't fair to them as invited guests to embroil them in disputes in this way.

I am even more saddened at the loss of friendship with women writers over these events; saddened when respect I had for certain black writers disintegrated as I saw them completely swayed by the position of the organizers and refusing even to credit our experience as black people in Canada.

On the more positive side, I have had a few - very few, but each one counted even more for its infrequency - letters and phone calls from people who expressed their support for what we were doing. One anonymous caller, though not a supporter of her, even apologised for June Callwood's appalling behaviour.

While I believe as a close friend recently told me that I had better bid good-bye to any manifestations of largess - not that I had harbored any such delusions - in this country, her

caution is appropriate. I am aware that I have made enemies - the bringer of bad news is never liked. Despite this, however, I do believe that we accomplished what we set out to do. Our intention was to conscientize the larger society to the presence of racism in writing and publishing here in Canada, and to advance the debate on racism in those areas. Already, I have seen changes that are the direct outcome of our work around the 54th PEN Congress. As artists, we must continue to disturb the peace in whatever way we are most comfortable with. For some of us it might mean living the most honest life possible, a difficult thing in today's world; for others in a society that seems so satisfied with mediocrity, it might mean writing as excellently as possible. For still others it might mean becoming more active, if only temporarily. The peace Baldwin refers to often means the status quo, controlled and/or legalized oppression, a self-satisfied smugness so prevalent in Canada. When peace means those things, not to disturb it means to collude in it; The writer has an obligation, I believe, not only to disturb but even to destroy that sort of peace.

P.E.N. Canada Locks Out Writers of Colour

IN-VISIBLE INK: CANADA

1. Canada is a multiracial, multiethnic society. Multiculturalism is the official policy of the government of Canada, Ontario and Metropolitan Toronto.
2. At its lowest common denominator multiculturalism means the equal access of all ethnic, cultural and racial groups to the resources that the Canadian society has to offer.
3. Contrary to the policy of multiculturalism there is a dominant culture in Canada which is white, middle class and Anglo-Saxon. Racism, in fact, permeates all aspects of Canadian life including, writing and publishing.

WRITING AND PUBLISHING IN CANADA

1. African, Asian and Native Canadian writers are consistently underfunded by Arts Councils; publishers are reluctant to Publish their works, and when published their works are often ignored by reviewers.
2. Some Native Canadian writers have also expressed concern about the use of their myths, legends and tales by white writers, while their own work remains unpublished.
3. The Writers' Union of Canada is an organization which purports to represent most of the writers in Canada today. Its role is to represent writers and advocate on their behalf. Membership of the Union is almost entirely white.
4. In May 1989 at the Annual General Meeting of the Writers' Union, the Union refused to look at the issue of racism in Canadian publishing and writing.
5. In September 1988 the Union censored the resignation statement of a female member relating to the presence of sexism within the Union membership by disallowing publication of this statement in the Union newsletter.
6. A significant number of the Canadian organizers of PEN Canada are also members of the Writers Union.

The 54th PEN CONGRESS

1. Fifty one Canadians are scheduled to take part in the 54th PEN Congress at Harbourfront, Toronto. Only seven of these participants are Asian, African or Native Canadian. There is also a marked dearth of Canadians from ethnic backgrounds which are not English.
2. The Overwhelming majority of the white Canadian participants reflect what is, in fact, the dominant culture of Canada - white, middle class, and Anglo-Saxon.
3. These latter writers all appear in events for which an admission fee is charged; with the exception of one black and one native writer all other Canadian writers of colour have been scheduled to participate in panels or readings described as Next Generation, events all of which are free.
4. In the two years PEN Canada has had to organize this event, its organizers have made no attempt to involve writers of colour. There have, for instance, been no membership drives among such writers, the result of which is the overwhelmingly white membership of PEN Canada, which is in turn reflected in Canada's representation at the 54th Congress.
5. While the numerical representation of women at the congress is an accurate reflection of Canadian society, this representation is overwhelmingly white, middle class and Anglophone.

FREEDOM AND POWER

While the presence of writers from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America is a welcome one, when these writers leave, African, Asian and Native Canadian writers continue to face the implacable face of racism in writing and publishing here in Canada.

While we appreciate our relative freedoms here in the West, freedoms which, are at best, limited, we also wish to point out that freedom and power can be effectively and efficiently curtailed without the physical imprisonment of a writer. If the so-called freedom of the market place works to silence you as a black or native writer, so that what you have to say never reaches your audience, then your freedom and power as a writer is, in fact thwarted. The writer is imprisoned - albeit metaphorically. The Canadian composition of this 54th Congress is a telling example of the silencing of the writer of colour. These writers who love and work and struggle in Canada have been made invisible by this conference. Not only is the representation of African, Asian and Native Canadian writers or moderators appallingly and unacceptably low, but the corralling of the majority of the visible Canadian writers into Next Generation events is a form of cultural apartheid. In this respect PEN Canada has, replicated the first world/third world or North/South polarity. We deplore this fact; we deplore the fact that this conference was funded by various levels of government whose policies specifically espouse, and at times even attempt to foster a multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic society. The 54th Congress of PEN is a travesty of these policies; it makes a mockery of any commitment to eradicate racism or classism in this society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We urge delegates to keep these facts about Canada in mind as they debate the plight of writers in other countries. While it is important to consider the case of writers who are physically imprisoned, it is also important to think of writers of colour in Western democracies such as Canada who often face racism in their daily and writing lives. These writers often live a 'Third World' reality in the affluent Western democracies. There is often, in fact, a direct link between the power structure that supports the privileged position of white writers in countries like Canada, the circumstances of their writers of colour, and the existence of regimes which imprison writers in other countries. Since the issues raised above relate directly to your commitment as PEN members to "oppose any forms of suppression of freedom of expression", we urge you to raise these issues whenever you can at your panels and readings.

Vision 21 - Canadian Culture in the 21st Century Multicultural Women Writers of Canada

The Komagata Maru Incident

Particularly relevant to contemporary debates on Canadian immigration policies, Sharon Pollock's play **The Komagata Maru Incident** is a powerful fact-based drama set in the seedy dock-side districts of Vancouver in 1914. A Japanese ship sails into the Burrard Inlet carrying British subjects from India who seek their legal right to settle in Canada. The months that follow are a nightmare of deprivation for its 376 passengers who are refused entry by racist officials. Government authorities and the media manage to instigate groundswell of hysteria against the "Brown Peril". **The Komagata Maru Incident** is a dramatic depiction of this appalling event through a kaleidoscope of scenes tracing the explosive prejudices of early Vancouver. Based on parliamentary speeches, newspaper accounts and other historical sources, the play provides a rare insight into a shameful and hidden chapter in Canadian history.

The Komagata Maru Incident has been performed by many groups across Canada, including by Le Groupe Culturel Montreal Serai whose members have travelled to Vancouver to perform it again.

Our poet Nilambri Ghai (Divya Vol. 1, Issue 2) acted in the play - and this time a Sikh woman was portrayed by a Sikh woman.

Le Groupe Cultural Montreal Serai

Formed three years ago, **Montreal Serai** is a theatre group with a commitment to the creation of contemporary and innovative theatre. Based in Montreal, the group through plays, music, and a monthly magazine called "Serai", has been attempting to portray the socio-cultural and political realities of Canada.

Besides **The Komagata Maru Incident**, the group has performed three other plays: **Some Dogs**, **On the Double**, and **Baba Jaques Dass and Turmoil** at the Cote-des-Neiges Cemetery, all of which were written by one of its members, Rana Bose.

In Visible Colours

by

Rita Gill



'In Visible Colours' was a unique film festival held in Vancouver, B.C. in November, 1989. Here is a report on it.

Two outstanding films from Asia shone out recently at the *In Visible Colours Festival*. Both films dealt with how Asian women struggle against the social expectations of women in Asian cultures and with the bureaucratic systems of these societies.

Created by a group called Media Storm, **From the Burning Embers** explores the ritual of Sati in India: the ceremony of burning the widow at the cremation of her husband. A documentary, **Burning Embers** depicts the attitudes of people who have practiced the ritual for thousands of years: to turn from this cherished tradition would be heresy to them.

Burning Embers is based on the death of Roop Kanwar, an 18-year-old woman who was publicly - and - recently burned on her husband's funeral pyre. The film examines the silent stand the government has taken: one woman declares the government is not interested in protecting women's lives because it does not want to offend those fundamentalist movements who openly advocate Sati, for fear of losing their votes.

The film has many insights into the attitudes of this male-dominated society, and shows the revival of the Sati ritual. There are growing numbers of people within fundamentalist movements, and they strongly resist the new laws restricting the practice of Sati. Government officials remark that if there are any loopholes in the new Sati Prevention Act, it will be amended. In this Act, a crucial paragraph states there will be no protection offered for the women who refuse to sacrifice themselves in the practice of Sati. As one feminist points out in the film, this is a big loophole. The film shows a staged satire scene in which the chanting of men: "A woman is worthless, she eats for free, she lives in your house for free," is interspersed with scenes of women working in the fields, feeding babies, performing chores. From the **Burning Embers**, does not provide us with any explanation for women's apparent support of Sati. There is a scene in which women are chanting to the widow to sacrifice herself and, clearly, there are a lot of women in India who do support the burnings.

This oppression of women by one another stems from the hierarchical structure of power within Indian society. At the top, we have the men with power over women. Next, we have the older women, the mother-in-law who may use her power over the bride within the extended family unit. From this hierarchy grows the division among women.

From the **Burning Embers** is an enlightening video which shows the injustices towards women, by men and women and by fundamentalist and governmental organizations in India.

Women's Story

Women's Story tells a story inspired by a letter its director received from her friend living in rural China. Award-winning director Peng Xiaolian shows the oppression of women in China created by the social expectations: in particular, the pressure to bear male rather than female children. In one central scene, a woman is found in a back lane hiding from the police because she is pregnant with a third child. According to state laws, a rural family is only allowed two children, and hers have been girls. This woman is desperate for a son, so she can return to her husband's family and end her banishment.

The Chinese government judged this scene to be a threat to their birth control policies, and **Women's Story** was banned in China.

Here, we see the oppression of women through forced marriages and the exile of women who fail to birth sons. In the opening scene, Jeng is forced into an arranged marriage, but she soon runs away from her husband and joins two other women on their journey to the city from their destitute village. We not only see the physical journey, but also the inner journey of their souls to a new understanding of and support for each other.

In the big city, these women enjoy the new freedoms not offered to them in the countryside - fashionable clothes and other pleasures. But their ultimate discovery is in the strength and support they find in each other and the notion that they could lead their own lives and ultimately control their own destinies.

[Courtesy Kinesis, Vancouver BC]

SOME FILMS FROM SOUTH ASIA

India

From the Burning Embers

Media Storm: 36 min, 1988, 3/4" video

Media Storm is a group of five women ex-members of the Jamia Millia Islamia. Their first work, IN SECULAR INDIA, which deals with the Muslim Women's Bill, has been refused certification by the censorship board in India.

FROM THE BURNING EMBERS is their second work and it too has fuelled a certain amount of controversy. Based on the death of Roop Kanwar, an eighteen year-old bride who was publicly burned on her husband's funeral pyre in Rajasthan, this work clearly lays the blame on the fundamentalist groups who openly advocate Sati, and on the government officials' whose silent acquiescence culminated in Roop Kanwar's death. A truly moving work that encapsulates the range of views and interpretations underlying this gruesome storm.

Gangubai Hangal

Vijay Mulay: 20 min, 1987, 35mm

GANGUBAI HANGAL at 75 is considered a living legend, and has captivated audiences all over the world with her powerful voice and her command of classical Indian music. But this status has not been acquired easily, and the film documents the difficulties of becoming and being an artist for women in India today. Interviews interspersed with brief musical passages make this work a vibrant portrait of a woman and a musician.

Gift of Love

Meera Dewan: 20 min, 1989, 3/4" video

An internationally acclaimed documentary and the winner of numerous awards, GIFT OF LOVE is a shocking revelation about dowry deaths in India. The documentary took almost a year to film and includes interviews with two women whose lives were endangered by their husbands and in-laws. Director Meera Dewan succeeds in bringing out layers of reality behind this seemingly widespread practice.

Awards: Special Jury Award, International Film Festival, India, 1983. Prix du Public, 7th International Festival de Films de Femmes, France. 4 Awards at the 27th International Documentary Film Festival, Oberhausen, West Germany, including Film Critics' Choice. FRIPRESU Award.

India Cabarett

Mira Nair: 60 min, 1986, 16mm

Dealing with the life of an Indian cabaret dancer, this film poignantly captures the contradictory values placed on women. Driven by economic necessities, Renka the street-smart dancer is aware of her exploitation but remains optimistic about transcending the

stigma attached to her occupation and attaining her goals in life. A touching film which examines the double standards prevalent in patriarchal societies. INDIA CABARET intimates the concerns that director Mira Nair later pursued in the award winning film, SALAAM BOMBAY!

The Sacrifice of Babulal Bhuiya (Babulal Bhuiya Ki Qurbani)

Manjira Datta: 63 min, 1988, 16mm

In 1981, BABULAL BHUIYA was assassinated by the Central Industrial Security Force. His crime: trying to better the conditions of the inhabitants of Mailagora, a small city located in one of the richest and most industrialized sectors of India. Mailagora literally means "place of filth". The inhabitants of this dirty, poverty stricken area make their living by recycling the waste from coal factories and the nuclear station nearby.

Voices from Baliapal

Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit: 43 min, 1987, VHS video

In 1984, the government of India announced its plans to build a missile testing range in Baliapal, an area which contained a population of over 70,000. VOICES OF BALIAPAL traces the mobilization of protest against this highly autocratic and bureaucratic action. It vividly shows how protesters formed a human carpet to block the coming of government personnel and equipment. Traditional forms of communication such as the use of conches and thalis to alert the residents were revived in this large-scale protest.

What has Happened to this City? - Kya Hua iss Shahar Ko?

Deepa Dhanraj: 97 min, 1986, 16mm

Communal riots within India have attracted considerable attention from national and international media. This film poignantly captures the complexity of one particular riot in the city of Hyderabad. Corruption, rivalry and intrigue characterize the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim factions within the city. The end result is a riot that tears apart the city and leaves an indelible mark on its inhabitants.

Pakistan

Who Will Cast the First Stone

Sabiha Sumar: 58 min, 1988, 3/4" Video

Canadian Premier

WHO WILL CAST THE FIRST STONE is a searching documentary made in secrecy that focuses on the harsh laws imposed by the military regime in Pakistan on those who commit adultery and fornication. The film follows the case of one couple accused of this crime and combines it with the multitude of voices of women inside and outside of prison who are the victims of these laws

Struggle for Place and Voice

by

• May Yee

[Diva prints this article in solidarity with the struggle of Chinese Canadian women].

The history of the legislated and systemic racism that the Chinese in Canada have experienced is almost completely ignored by our history books and classes, so that few Canadians, even Asian Canadians, know about the devastating Chinese Exclusion Act (1923-1947) and Head Tax (1885-1923). Even less have Chinese Canadian *women* been given any place in recorded history: "Voices of Chinese Canadian Women" is an oral history book project created by the Chinese Canadian National Council Women's Issues Committee to give Chinese women their rightful voice and place in Canadian history. Next year this book will be published by the Women's Press, with life stories chosen from over 130 interviews conducted across Canada.

In the existing sparse accounts of Chinese Canadian history, we only hear about Chinese Canadian *men*, who toiled to build Canada's national railway, then settled in lonely "bachelor" communities here. Chinese Canadian women are, at most, noted for their absence -- but *women did come*. And Chinese women's presence was vital in building and maintaining an over-a-century old community in Canada, in the face of tremendous isolation, hardship and decades of legislated racism.

In 1885, right after the last spike was driven in the railway, the Canadian government forced all Chinese immigrants to pay a \$50 Head Tax upon entry. Chinese Canadians were the only group that have ever been subject to such a tax. By 1903 the Head Tax was \$500, more than two years wages for Chinese workers. Many of the men who came to Canada to work had married in China, but the Head Tax and racism here prevented all but the wealthy and ingenious from bringing over their wives.

"It cost my father \$1500 in Head Taxes to bring my mother, my brother, and nephew over. My father had opened the first Chinese restaurant in Windsor. He was very frugal. He allowed himself only one cigar a week, so that he could bring his family over. Mama came in 1918. They kept her, like everyone else from China, in quarantine for a month in

Vancouver. She said that it was just like being in jail for a month. It was pretty lonely and very hard because they didn't understand the language".

[an Ontario Woman Born 1919]

"During the hard years of 1911, 1912, they were already starting to push people to go to China. There was a lot of unrest. The Head Tax went higher and higher. That's when a lot of Chinese sent their wives and children back to China because they felt unwanted".

In 1923 the Canadian government slammed shut the doors on all Chinese immigration. The 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed until 1947. In those difficult and lonely years of Exclusion, it was the too few women who did much to keep the dwindling Chinese Canadian community together.

"It was always a steady routine of work, work, work, for my mother. She'd have a child in her arms or on her back, because there were eight of us. She had to help with the laundry, the farm work, to cook, and maintain us".

[b. 1908, B.C.]

Because of the racist immigration laws, in the 1920's and 1930's Chinese women made up as little as 6% of the Chinese Canadian community. Only into the 1970's did the sex ratio achieve balance.

"The wives were not allowed to come to Canada to be with their husbands until after 1947. So there were very few Chinese Canadian children".

(B.C. Chinese language teacher, b. 1902)

The racist immigration policies were not the only institutionalized racism experienced by the Chinese. In certain areas there were segregated schools.

"In Nanaimo B.C. we couldn't go to a regular school because we were not white. We had to go to a segregated school for the 'Others'. There were six classes in one room, for Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and 'Others'.

[b. 1918, B.C.]

There were also laws prohibiting Chinese from buying property in certain areas, from having white women working in Chinese restaurants, and from entering certain occupations and professions.

"After I finished normal school (teachers' training), I went back to work in a fruit store for \$12 a week. In those days in Canada they discriminated against us Chinese. They don't give us a chance to teach here. I got my teacher's diploma, but they wouldn't give me a licence in British Columbia. So I went back to Hong Kong to try and get a teaching job".

[b. 1902 China, immigrated 1910]

The Chinese were not the only group subject to racist immigration policies, but they were the only ones who were forced to pay a head tax and were directly legislated to exclude immigration. In general, Asian immigration policies in Canada have been discriminatory. Immigrants from India were subject earlier this century to discriminatory Canadian immigration laws requiring them to possess at least \$200 upon entering Canada and to meet a "continuous passage" stipulation. The appalling (but again not widely known) Komagata Maru incident tried to challenge these racist laws, but the shipload of Sikhs was inhumanely refused landing at Vancouver.

The human costs of racist immigration policies on individuals and our communities as a whole have been devastating. Most of the older generation Chinese women here in Canada today had to wait decades, bringing up children alone in war-torn China, unable to join their husbands in Canada until into the 1950s and 1960s, after some racist immigration laws were changed.

"A very important part of our history was the appeal for the change of the immigration laws after World War II. It was a long battle to get the change for family reunion. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947, a fairer law to allow family reunion wasn't established until 1957, after 10 years of lobbying. I was the only woman on the "Committee for the Change of the Chinese Immigration Policies". They felt the success of our meeting with Diefenbaker came from having a woman there. It's natural to have your family together -- how dare they keep our families separated?!"

[Jean Lumb, Toronto]

Within our community there are so many women's stories of separation, hardship and endurance. Stories of the shock of coming to a strange country to join a husband one hasn't seen for decades -- or in the case of new "picture brides" -- one has never seen at all. Stories of the isolation of not knowing the language or culture.

"I came to Canada in 1957 as a bride. Who knew that after coming here you'd be in front of a wok all day, in front of a pile of clothes all day -- to make just a few dollars to send home to China? You know, the old-timers, our lives were as monotonous as could be. There was not such thing as a day off for us; we really worked 365 days. We never went anywhere. The weather was cold. The whole day, I stayed at home: upstairs was our living quarters and downstairs was the restaurant. That was all. It's depressing to talk about these things.

I still feel imprisoned here, even now. What's so good about it here? We've lost our traditions and customs. But you can't do anything -- your family is here".

[b. 1937 China, immigrated 1957]

Until very recently, most Chinese immigration to Canada fit into the category of reunification of families long separated by discriminatory immigration policies. This is even with all the rhetoric of "open door" policies, and talk of "waves" of "large-scale" Asian immigration. In the 1970's we saw a disturbing increase again in anti-Asian immigration. In the 1979's we saw a disturbing increase again in anti-Asian immigration sentiments and violence, in response particularly to South Asian immigrants. Then in the 1980's we have

been seeing a backlash against refugees, particularly aimed at Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, as well as earlier reaction to the "boat people" from Vietnam. Now, in the last few years we have also seen the growing climate of anti-Asian immigration in the backlash to Hong Kong, particularly entrepreneurial, immigration.

Canadian government immigration policy is behind this new "wave" of Asian immigration. This time it is clearly discriminatory on the basis of class, where quarter or half million dollar investments can buy immigrant status, a greedy attempt to attract capital fleeing from Hong Kong. There is no government accountability for the racist backlash that has resulted, nor for how this is affecting and dividing the Chinese Canadian community here in Canada, particularly in Vancouver and Toronto. In fact, we should look on this entrepreneurial immigration policy as a kind of new exorbitant Head Tax.

The Chinese community in Canada has been organizing for the past five years a campaign seeking redress from the Canadian government, for the devastating effects of over six decades of legislated racism in the Chinese Exclusion Act and Head Tax. The Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC), with its 27 chapters, is asking for an apology from the Canadian government, and a symbolic sum in financial compensation, consisting of at least the \$23 million unjustly collected in Head Tax. (With interest and inflation, that government revenue taken from 81,000 Chinese Canadians adds up today to about \$1 billion!)

Many widows have been going to CCNC, clutching their dead husband's Head Tax certificate. These women are asking for help to find some form of justice, for the suffering they and their loved ones have endured, for which the Head Tax certificate is only a paper symbol of their inexpressible pain and anger.

Financial compensation is not the only issue (no amount of money could actually compensate for the suffering and costs incurred by so many decades of institutionalized racism, exclusion and separation of families). What is crucial is acknowledgement and public education, because even Chinese Canadian children like other non-white children, grow up here not knowing our grandparents had to pay such a high price in many ways to live in Canada, not knowing that we have a history here, a place and voice our communities are still struggling for.

In our communities, we must act to help heal the wounds -- so our children will never have to suffer such injustice or the pain of not knowing our own history. We must learn our own and each other's histories. We must make the links between the racism and anti-Asian immigration backlash we are experiencing now, with the history of racism, the land and lives stolen from Native peoples and racist immigration policies, this country was built on. We must make the links between our various communities and struggles, especially recognizing the rights of the First Nations. And in our struggle, together find strength, and claim our place and voice.

[All quotes are taken from the "Voices of Chinese Canadian Women Book Project]

[To obtain more information about the Chinese Exclusion Act and Head Tax, and a redress support package; or for more information about the "Voices of Chinese Canadian Women" book project, please write to: CCNC National office, 386 Bathurst St., Toronto, M5T 2S6, or call the office at (416) 868-1777].

Looking at the Tree and Not the Forest

by
DOMENECA DILEO

[This paper on Canadian immigration policies prior to World War I: The Italian Experience was prepared for York University, Toronto: 1986]

It is said that the history of Canada is the history of immigration. Aside from our native peoples, we are all immigrants. This notion has led to our present concept of Canada as a tolerant multicultural nation, a mosaic, where all groups live in harmony, learning from each other. Behind this rhetoric, however, is a history of racism, sexism and oppression of the working class. Our history of immigration, in many ways, acted as a means by which much of this oppression was enacted and maintained. The focus of this essay is the Italian immigration experience prior to World War I. But to put this experience in context, I will examine the role the Canadian state has played with regard to its immigration policy prior to World War I. Then I will attempt to engage in an examination of the formation of the social relations of class, race and gender by analyzing the Italian immigrant experience during the period. And finally I will touch on how the state and capital reacted to early attempts at resistance by the Italian community.

It is necessary to begin by defining some pertinent terms. I will be using specific definitions for the terms "state" and "social relations" in accordance with the needs of this essay. According to Leo Panitch, the "state" is,

*"...a complex of institutions, including the government, but also including the bureaucracy (embodied in the civil service, as well as in public corporations, the central bank, regulatory commissions etc.), the military, the judiciary, representative assemblies..."*¹

Also included in the "state" *in the Canadian context* are the provincial and municipal governments, bureaucracies and legislatures. Furthermore, the state must, "*fulfill two basic and often mutually contradictory functions: accumulation and legitimization*".² Thus, the state must try to maintain or create the contradictions in which profit-making capital accumulation is possible, while at the same time, achieving the greatest degree of social

harmony possible. It is within Panitch's conceptualization of state and its function in capitalism that my examination of immigration policy and the Italian experience will take place.

Social relations are the concrete practices of legitimization and accumulation within a mode of production. Dorothy Smith, in her article, "Women, Class and Family," says that,

"The very separation, the very privatization of women's work in the home and how it is mediated by private property is a feature of the social relations of a definite mode of production." 3

Although Smith, in this example, is discussing women's work, her point is relevant for this essay. The methodology of social formation in terms of analyzing social relation, that is, trying to understand the connections between economic, political and social forces in order to gain a better historical perspective, goes well beyond factual historical recounting. It is within this framework that I will discuss the Italian male/female immigrant experience in pre-World War I Canada.

Let us begin by looking at the state as the organizer of social relations including gender and class, and in particular the role of immigration. Any examination of the history of immigration must begin with the actions of the federal government. It is the Canadian government that has the authority to determine who should be admitted and deported, when and under what conditions.

Historically, three major factors have underlined Canadian immigration policy: *"the desire to populate Canada with British people, the need to heed international pressures, and the demands of the labour market"*. 4 While these three factors may at first appear neutral, they, in fact, are not. Since international pressures did not become an important issue for the Canadian state until after World War II, it is the other factors that concern this examination.

British and American people were viewed as the preferable people to populate Canada because, theoretically, they would assimilate more easily, given their knowledge of the English language and Anglo-American culture. This view was reflected in immigration policy which, in 1910, established race as an official grounds for exclusion. The act stated that,

"The government could: prohibit for a stated period, or permanently, the landing in Canada...of immigrants belonging to any race unsuitable to the climate or requirements of Canada". 5

Here Canadian immigration policy reflected not only the racist attitudes of the Canadian state, but also of the economic and ideological system of the British Empire of which the Canadian state was a proud part.

The supremacy of white people was a commonplace assumption made popular by Social Darwinist theories in the early 1900's. These racist theories provided the justification for England's practice of colonization and the expansion of its Empire. The white man saw

himself as a "civilizing" force with a role to bring into Christian society the "uncivilized" peoples outside of Europe. While notions of "civilization" and "Empire" provided the justification for the colonial systems, economics provided the real force, and civilization was traded for exploitation which brought great wealth to Britain and other European powers. However, the formal official policy of immigration in Canada was also determined by the need to attract agricultural workers to settle the west. The federal government tried to attract people by offering 160 acres of free land upon settlement in the west. But the population did not increase significantly between 1867 and 1896. Thus Canada turned to immigration from Eastern Europe and China.

Unsuccessful attempts to increase Canada's population from traditional sources in Britain, generated two movements of people to Canada, the Mennonites (Germans) and the Chinese. 6

Eastern Europeans were seen as acceptable compared to southern Europeans because they were more "advanced" than the southerners. Donald Avery states that:

"A distinction was made, however, between southern Europeans and central Europeans; the later group, it was widely believed, was superior in a racial sense, as well as, having preferable cultural qualities which were derived from their agrarian way of life". 7

Finally, Canadian immigration policy did open its doors to southern Europeans when it was determined that they could be used as cheap labour source that could aid in the accumulation of wealth.

The first wave of Italian immigrants were Southern Italian peasants, "contadini". After the "little Italies" were established throughout North America, and the railroads were built, Italians who chose to settle in Canada were constantly being judged and appropriated in the labour force based on the common stereotype of "inferiority" and, as such, as people capable only of labour intensive work such as construction.

The notion of "desirable immigrants" embedded in the immigration policy, validated the stereotypical and racist or ethnicist common sense assumptions that people had about non-British immigrants. For Italians, specifically, males were seen as criminals, undesirable, maffiasos, and females as passive, obedient slaves to their husbands and children. For example, the Canadian government attempted to legitimize people's racist attitudes toward the southerners by introducing a literacy test in 1917. There was, however no contradiction with populating Canada with British people were concerned. Assumption being that Canada belonged to White Anglo-Saxons and not to the aliens.

The Canadian state legitimized the British as first class citizens. For the white Canadian capitalist, and his American and British counterparts, the government offered a free hand. The law gave the right to individuals to set-up their own businesses as they saw fit. It encouraged investment in the building of the railway through loans and tax benefits. In order for capitalists to invest they needed to be assured that a cheap labour force was available according to the changes of the economic cycle. H.C. Pentland states that under capitalism:

"... the employer is confident that workers will be available whenever he wants them; so he feels free to hire them on a short term basis, and to dismiss them whenever there is a monetary advantage in doing so." 8

More specifically, in the early 1900's the building of the railroad was essential in the making and expansion of Canada as a political and economic nation. Italians and Chinese played an important role by providing cheap unskilled labour. The railroad capitalists supported an open door immigration policy because they would have access to a large labour supply and thus minimize costs based on supply and demand. They favoured the Italians and Chinese because they "ask for no light-handed work... they are obedient and industrious". 9 As much as the state had the official goal to populate Canada with British subjects, the capitalists did not want this. In 1897, Welsh workers in a construction camp organized a demonstration demanding better working conditions. The capitalists' attitude towards British workers was as follows:

"...It would be a huge mistake to send out any more of these men from Wales, Scotland or England... it is only prejudicial to the cause of immigration to import men who come here expecting to get high wages, a feather bed and a bathtub". 10

Also the cheap unskilled labour that the capitalists required in their investments in the expansion of Canada was not provided by the British immigration during the period between 1901 and 1911: "*few of these British immigrants were in the category of unskilled labour - only 15.6% as compared to 51.5% for the European immigrants...*" 11

In order to assist capital development, the Canadian government supported short-term unskilled contract labour to fulfill the needs of the labour market. Contract labour offered a way to bring into Canada cheap labour while maintaining control over those forces which were not the product of British "civilization". The nature of contract labour was that it was not permanent, and thus, these "aliens" seemed less fearful to British Canadians because their status was carefully controlled by the state. By having different types of immigration status the state could have the control to modify the influx to the need of the capitalist, as well as using the "undesireables" as scapegoats during hard times.

The case of Antonio Cordasco provides an example of this practice. When Italian entrepreneurs were also trying to capitalize on contract labour the issue became not exploitation of workers but rather one of race. This was the outcome when the government wanted to investigate the practices of Cordasco. The issue in the press was presented as a conflict in the Italian community, with Cordasco trying to undermine the Italian establishment or "prominent". 12

As we have seen, the Canadian state used immigration policy in its functions to provide capital with a cheap labour force and as a tool of social control through a number of measures such as exclusionary laws, literacy tests and the creation of temporary immigration statuses. I will now turn to the social relations practiced by the Italian men and women during the early 1900's and how this experience was used by the state to manage society.

Italian immigration was dominated by southern Italian peasants.

They came either as settlers or male contract labourers, and sojourners. Unlike the male

contract workers, Italian settlers usually came as a family unit, hoping for a better future in Canada. During the early 1900's, Italy was experiencing high unemployment and famine. The family unit was based on a patriarchal structure, that is, one where the man is the primary income earner, and the woman is responsible for the domestic realm and the rearing of the children.

The common form of employment for Italian men, as stated by John E. Zucchi in his article on Italians in Ontario before World War I, was in three categories: in the building of the transcontinental railroad through the province; in mining and labour for Northern Ontario's mining boom; and in the service trades; fruit retailing, street construction in growing towns and cities. 13 By this account, we can see that Italians were relegated to specific jobs within the labour market that were labour intensive, while the British were concentrated in semi-skilled jobs. This division of labour was also justified by racist assumptions about Italians as inferior to the British.

The type of work that Italian men provided the Canadian economy which was not considered valuable, and hence justified low wages and hazardous working conditions. As a result, in order to supplement the family income, Italian women would also participate in the labour force doing factory work, especially in the garment industry where women received even lower wages than their male counterparts. Women's work was not considered as a primary income either by a patriarchal economy or family organization where the man was perceived to be the breadwinner. Women contributed economically to the family in related ways. Another means by which women could make an income was by turning parts of the home into boarding units primarily occupied by migrant Italian single males. Producing some of the essentials of living was also an important aspect of women's work at home. They would engage in planting vegetables, making homemade salami, bread, and other foods in order to reduce the cost of living.

The second form of Italian immigration was the male contract labourer, the sojourner. This particular form of immigration is gender-specific: under a patriarchal family structure, the man is perceived to have more mobility, because of his limited responsibility to the domestic realm and to child-rearing. Contract labour was organized through an employment agency, usually headed by Italian entrepreneurs called "padroni". The padroni would act as middle-men between the industrialist and peasant male, the contadino. The conditions of exchange between the labour of the contadino and the wages and living arrangements provided by the industrialist varied. Contract labour was seasonal. For example, they were hired to do construction on the railroads. After the contract expired, they either had to return to Italy, or remain in the cities usually boarding with an Italian family or looking for other work.

The Italian labour force was also divided along lines of class as well as race. Thus we can see, in the immigrant Italian experience, the process described by Dorothy Smith, whereby social relations are mediated by the mode of production they operate in.

In addition to what has thus far been discussed, the state and immigration policy, and capitalism and the labour supply, as well as their effect on social relations, it is also important to note that social formations are not stagnant, and that social relations are constantly in transition. Here we should turn to Marx for discussion of the inherent crisis of the capitalist mode of production, related to the falling rate of profit, introducing a shortfall

in accumulation.¹⁴ For example, this process is most obvious in capitalism's stages of expansion and recession. As stated above, the state must also try and maintain social harmony without fundamentally harming the capitalist mode of production. I will now look at how the Italians were appropriated by the state and the capitalists to maintain social harmony, justified by racist common sense assumptions.

By muting direct class contradictions, and promoting conflicts within the working class, capital and state can thereby divide and rule, and weaken the community as a whole. For example, this becomes evident from the pattern of Italian participation in the process of social transformation. This often involved action by workers to secure their rights. Some of the methods used were union organization and negotiations, work slow downs and strikes. The state was able to use its immigration legislation during times of upheaval when workers were demanding their rights. Immigrants could be brought in and used as scabs to replace workers who were on strike. In 1901, for example, the maintenance employees of the C.P.R. went on strike. The Canadian government amended its Alien Labour Act so that C.P.R. was able to bring in Italians to undermine the workers' demands. Avery notes that "the C.P.R. was allowed to import four or five hundred pauperized Italians from the United States in contravention of the Alien Labour Law".¹⁵

This kind of action was successful because of the conditions of contract labour. For example, if a person had to travel a long way and go through the lengthy process of applying for a work permit, when he arrives to his destination to work, his choices are limited given that usually migrant labourers had starving families dependent on the money back home. Does he support other workers and go on strike with them, thus improving the long term conditions of the working class, or does he take care of his immediate needs and responsibilities? Thus contract labour was used in undermining working class solidarity.

Moreover, when Italian workers went on strike, other immigrants were brought in to undermine their bargaining power. In 1907, a year after Italian workers had made moderate gains in wages, the C.P.R. waited until the new season arrived, and excluded the Italians and Greeks from working at the freight sheds. They were replaced by British workers. When the British workers arrived, the company announced they were going to lower their wages. As a result the British workers went on strike and the Italians and Greeks were brought back in. Pucci rightly observes that "*the division of the working class along ethnic lines was cultivated and exploited by management*".¹⁶

Common sense stereotypical, ethnicist attitudes about Italians resulted in the disharmony and lack of unity amongst the working class as a whole, and thus strengthened the bargaining power of the capitalist. The way this divide-and-conquer practice was manifested, was through the notion that the preferred citizens were British, whereas, non-British immigrants, while also citizens, were seen as the "other", even by his/her fellow workers, thus offering a sop to the sense of status of the British workers. The ethnicist assumptions about Italians made them "aliens", even though they shared a common experience with the working class British. This can be shown by the assumptions made in 1907 in an editorial about Italians going on strike:

"To strike for more pay is the legitimate prerogative of any man or body of men. But for a community of British citizens to have to submit to the insult and armed defiance from a disorganized horde of ignorant and low-down mongrel swash bucklers and peanut vendors is making a demand upon national pride which has no excuse". ¹⁷

This examination of Italian immigration before World War One has shown the way in which Canadian state used racist and ethnicist immigration policy against Italians and other "non-desireables" to exploit, exclude, control through contract labour and other social manipulation in servicing accumulations, and crushing their attempts to build resistance. Much of this action was done in the name of the good of the "nation" and economy, and perpetuated by encouraging racism. And yet, Italians and others continued to come and have continued to take part in the social transformation of Canada. Thus, in order to understand the history of this process and where the Italian community is at now, we need to engage in an analysis of the political, social and economic realities of Italian women and men at particular points in time and the factors that have contributed to their social transformation. In addition, the Italian community does not exist as a separate entity, but in relation to all the other communities that make up Canadian society, so we need also to understand the dynamics of those relationships. An analysis of class, race and gender issues and their relationship to each other is essential in understanding what is behind all the happy rhetoric about the Canadian mosaic.

ENDNOTES

1. Leo Panitch, *THE CANADIAN STATE: POLITICAL ECONOMY & POLITICAL POWER*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 8.
2. *IBID.*
3. Dorothy Smith, "Women, Class & Family", *SOCIALIST REGISTER*, Summer 1983, p. 6.
4. Law Union, *THE IMMIGRANTS HANDBOOK*, (Montreal): Black Rose Books, 1981), p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
6. Donald Avery, "Canadian Immigration Policy & the 'Foreign' Navy, 1896-1914", *CHA HISTORICAL PAPERS* 1972, (class handout) p. 41.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
12. Bruno Raminex & Michele Del Bolzo, "The Italians of Montreal: From Sojourning to Settlement, 1900-1921", in *LITTLE ITALIES IN NORTH AMERICA* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981), p. 14.
13. John E. Zucchi, "Mining, Railway Building and Street Construction: Italians in Ontario before World War One", in *POLYPHONY*, Vol. 7 No. 2, Fall/Winter 1985, p. 8.
14. Robert C. Tucker, *THE MARX-ENGELS READERS, PART II. THE CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp. 203-443.

15. Avery, p. 42.
16. Antonio Pucci, "At the forefront of Militancy: Italians in Canada at the Turn of the Century", POLYPHONY, Vol. 7 No. 2, Fall/Winter 1985 p. 38.
17. Quoted in Pucci, p. 38.

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QUESTIONNAIRE ON RACISM IN WRITING & PUBLISHING

The COMMITTEE ON RACISM IN WRITING & PUBLISHING is a group of writers: Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Daniel David Moses, Judith Merril, Susan Crean, Libby Scheier, Barbara Carey, Dionne Brand and Marguerite Audersen. We have organized to deal with the issue of racism in writing and publishing, a concern which The Writers' Union of Canada and other writers' organizations have refused to address. We are conducting a study on racism in writing and publishing and would be grateful if you could answer all or some of the following questions. Responses analyzed in aggregate only. Anonymity guaranteed.

1. Your age: _____ 2. Sex: _____
3. What is your racial affiliation, please specify? _____
(i.e. Native Ojibway or Ojibway/Cree or Ojibway Metis)
Native? _____ Black? _____ Asian? _____ Caucasian? _____
4. Membership in writers' associations, please indicate: _____
5. Percentage of income from writing: _____
6. Occupation other than writing: _____
7. What do you write: non-fiction fiction poetry
 children's literature magazine articles
drama: stage screen radio.
8. Within the last 5 years, have you submitted any manuscript to be published or produced?
How many? _____ How many times per manuscript? _____
9. How much of your work was accepted and published or produced? _____
10. How much of your work was rejected? _____
What were the reasons given? _____
11. Within the past 5 years, if you have not submitted work, why not? _____

12. Within the past 5 years, how often have you applied for a grant? _____
13. How many times were you successful? _____ With which agencies? _____
14. Did you get the exact amount that you requested? _____ Less than?
15. If you have not applied for grants, why not? _____

16. Are you ineligible for grants, if so, why? _____

17. Have your publications or productions been adequately reviewed? _____
Are you satisfied with the review process? _____

18. Do you write from your racial or cultural background? Yes No
Why? _____

Why not? _____

19. Do you think you have been discriminated against because you write from
your cultural background?
By editors? Yes No
How? _____

By publishers? Yes No
How? _____

By producers? Yes No
How? _____

By grant agencies? Yes No
How? _____

20. If you have other comments please feel free to note them. _____

Please return this questionnaire to:

*AD HOC COMMITTEE
ON RACISM
204 - 9 St. Joseph Street
Toronto, Ontario
M4Y 1J9*

21. Name and Address (if you wish): _____

COLD TILE

by

SUSAN M. BEAVER



I met a man who took my voice.

I was in City Hall when I first met him. I was waiting for a friend, whose job apart from title and salary, is to talk to Natives. We were sitting in Copperfield's and she once said to me, "Walk east, where no one wants to go and listen. Watch."

Look.

I was sitting on a wooden bench that separated a polished marble floor from stone walls. A pillar reaching the roof (about 50 feet up) held a sign with an arrow that said "JUDGES CHAMBERS".

I sat waiting, brushing bits of lint from my slacks, flicking hair from my eyes. He walked up to me. He smiled and sat down next to me (the bench was crowded with people sitting, some lying). I noticed his jacket; it looked worn and comfortable in its brown warmth.

"Are you waiting for someone?" he asked.

"A friend," I replied, unsure of him.

"Your're not up before anyone?"

Shocked, I said, "No."

"It's just part of my job," he said and smiled again. "I thought you might want to see Millie Dumont, the court worker."

For an instant I was puzzled, then replied, "As it happens I'm meeting her for lunch."

"Ah! She's a nice lady. Easy to talk to. She's not been here long, but I was glad to see the programme move here. It's good to see the Natives concerned about their own people."

I jerked when I looked at him.

"You know" he said staring off, "I don't know if it's that they can't work or won't work but they've got time on their hands and so they're out drinking and then they end up here - where I see them."

My eyes opened wide. My teeth parted but my lips would not move. I looked as deep and as hard as I could into this man's blue eyes. He looked back, without malice, without guilt. He just looked back.

"Do you know what other sorts of programmes they have?"

I raged. I screamed. Inside.

I could scarcely hear him. I wanted to speak. My eyes moved from corner to shoe to wall as I searched for words. My rage was in throat. I couldn't swallow it and it wouldn't break free. I felt pain in my jaw and realised my teeth were clenched. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak.

It wasn't even him. It was the stone walls and marble floors.

"There's my case. see you 'round," he said, smiling, and walked away.

I sat staring. I don't know at what. I stood up and walked to a door marked LADIES. a woman inside was drying her hands in front of a garbage can. My body shook and my muscles twitched.

"Are you okay?"

I realised she was talking to me. I nodded and turned away. She left.

I leaned against cold, hard tile and stared at the opposite wall. My knees bent and I sank to the dirty black and white floor. My tears came and I couldn't stop them. I looked down at my brown arm and said, "I am here."

I am here

[Courtesy: Whetstone Magazine]

Six Little Sparrows

by

BERNADETTE DYER



It was a spring morning that I first saw them. It was the sort of morning that sunbeams slanted into windows creating unforgettable images, and it was just such a morning that they arrived babbling happily while hanging on to their mother's side. The children, laughing at the sunshine, eyes filled with a certain honesty and adoration.

They wore bright colours: reds, blues and lime greens. Everyone else paled in comparison, and I sat in drabness in a library of dark dusty books that cried out for a drop of sunshine to lend voice to their true majesty. For me it seemed that theirs were the only colours added to my day.

They must have been from Pakistan originally, for the cut of their clothes was definitely Eastern. It's funny, but now that I think of it, one could almost fathom the lands of the East in their pale gray-green eyes. All the children had inherited the mother's classic beauty. Her face was a picture of serenity though a certain softness betrayed her youth.

While sitting at my charge out desk, I had a good view of them and I'd watch as their little feet carried them across the grass, never straying far from the watchful eye of the mother.

There was a mystical bonding here I thought. It was hard to keep one's eyes off them, though library work was most demanding. The family perhaps had no garden or sun porch, so they used the parkette beside the library as such and they were never loud or destructive. The children's voices tinkled like small bells, while their brown heads bobbed in the wind and the sun herself seemed to enjoy catching light in their hair. And what colours she found there! It was surprising, reds, burnt auburn, browns, and blacks.

It had become quite a diversion to watch the "six little sparrows," (as I had began to call them) setting up residence outside the window, and the mother keeping her vigil. On grey days they still came, all wearing sweaters much too small or much too thin. But they still wore sunshine-warm smiles on their faces. It was as though they had a pact with nature to chase away the rain. Nonetheless, the rains came. "The sparrows" never came on rainy days. Theirs was a ritual one could easily get accustomed to. They arrived in the morning, and left in the evening. One was suddenly aware of a certain stillness after they left, for the music of their high pitched chirping no longer drifted through the window.

There was a day when the youngest of them, "the baby," climbed through the open library window. She was right on top of the book shelves, as the top of the shelves were in line with the window sill. She sat quite prettily in her salmon coloured silks not even aware of the danger. The mother drew her remaining "sparrows" to her person and quickly made her way into the library.

I knew almost by instinct that it was the first time that any of them had been inside such a strange building. I was immediately reminded of a caged bird as the bright eyes of the children peered into every nook and cranny while expressing delight at the brightly coloured books. But through it all, I also sensed fear, for they must have felt that we might have kept them there using the enticement of the books as a sort of bait. The mother tenderly gathered her baby into the softness of her silken robes, and at the same time motioned to the others to stay close to her. They didn't speak a word of English, but they needed no language to express the love between them. It was as if a golden light followed them.

The eldest of the children was a boy of around nine years old. He was the only one who looked us in the eye and smiled. His smile brought back some light to our dark room and his bright eyes expressed such a longing that we somehow knew that if any of them were to come back, it would be him. And, when he turned away with the rest of them on his sandaled feet, we felt cheated of that smile.

Many days passed, and I found myself anticipating the arrival of "my sparrows". I heard their high pitched cries as I carried out routine tasks, which took on a certain dullness in contrast to the joy and light of that beautiful family.

The oldest boy, bolder now, had started to peer in at the windows. The lure of the books became an incessant call and his smile now held a hint of sadness. Was he no longer satisfied with running and playing in the grass?

Spring changed to summer, and they still came. Now they shared their meager lunches with the birds. The mother's sweetness seemed to attract these gentle creatures for they fearlessly ate from her bare hands. The children too had the same sweetness, and the sunlight danced with the sound of their happy voices.

What a summer that was! The summer of my sparrows. It was the summer of one family spreading love beyond itself. I can still sometimes see them in my mind as though they were still there. But since the mother mostly kept her back to the window, I did not realize that

amidst the love and laughter, sadness had crept into her gray-green eyes. If only I had known what was to come, then perhaps I might have been prepared, but alas I was not.

One day, when the fall finally came, a class from the local school came to the library. I was delighted to see that the eldest "little sparrow" was in that class. He still spoke no English, but his eager eyes embraced every book and he turned pages with such a reverence that it made my heart want to burst with joy. He was allowed only two books, but I let him have four, for such was the new found delight of this child. Though it was fall, I noticed his feet were still sandaled. His bright eyes still teased sunbeams to play in his hair, but I could almost feel the shiver in his bones.

It was late fall before I realized that I had missed the daily visits of the sparrows. It was much too cold for sitting outdoors in summer clothes. I longed to hear the bell-like laughter and to see sunbeams play upon their golden cheeks. But it was not to be. (Yet, they still dance in my memory as though it were today). Though I searched for them, they were nowhere to be found. I still feel that year must have been the coldest winter of all, for they had taken the sun with them.

Winter was quite long and the loveliness of them slipped to the back of my memory. But then came spring. Once again I heard the chirping of little voices as bell-like sounds filled the air. Gazing up to the window I expected to see "my sparrows" back, just the way it had always been. But they were not there! I felt an urgency to find them. Leaving my desk, I made my way outside.

It was the sort of day that sunshine slanted into windows creating unforgettable images. The crocus was up and small green things pushed themselves up out of the soil. Then, there in front of me was the most amazing sight! A sparrow and her six little sparrows were resting by the window. Their high happy cries could be heard above the passing traffic.

At the sound of my approach the mother sparrow turned her gray-green eyes towards the sky - and in a moment she and her six little sparrows were on the wind and their silhouettes etched against the blue sky.

Years later, by a roundabout route, I was told that the family was forced to return to Pakistan unexpectedly. But somehow I knew that they had said goodbye, and that wherever they are the "six little sparrows" are safe with their mother, and the memory of them safe with me.

END

My Heart Still Belongs To Me

by

TWO FEATHERS

Listen to the sound of my heart beat like thunder.
Again, you have thrown most of my defences asunder.
I take a journey into your deep-blue eyes,
whilst trillions of stars dance across the sky.
Softly, you whisper your confession of love for me.
I am possessed by an ever-increasing elemental feeling of
endearment for thee.
But is it really love I am experiencing? I cannot yet agree.
Forgive my trespasses- I think my heart still belongs to me.

Red In The Inside, White On The Outside

by

Doreen Falling-Doll Silversmith

Red in the inside,
White on the outside.
Still dignified in this slight state of aberration,
Wanting nothing more than partial assimilation.
Head held high, armed with a solid entity,
I carry with me - my proud, red identity.
So strong is my spirit,
No one can break it.

Wasted Potential

The sea of "red faces" flowed in steady streams,
to the city that promised to fulfill their dreams.
Work hard all day, play all night
till they see the morning light.
Repetition compulsion all over again,
dream your dreams so pretty cause the night will bring pain.
Drunk again! Drugged on skid row!
Who really can see tomorrow?
Dazed and confused in their thoughts,
over and over, more often than not.
What might have been,
Could have been!

Journey Through My Soul

My tired eyes are denied insight into you.
It is my soul that sees you are suffering too.
I've known sorrows and a wounded heart,
and now I see that your dreamworld has fallen apart.
Come, take my strong hand and try to be bold.
We will journey through the streets of my soul.

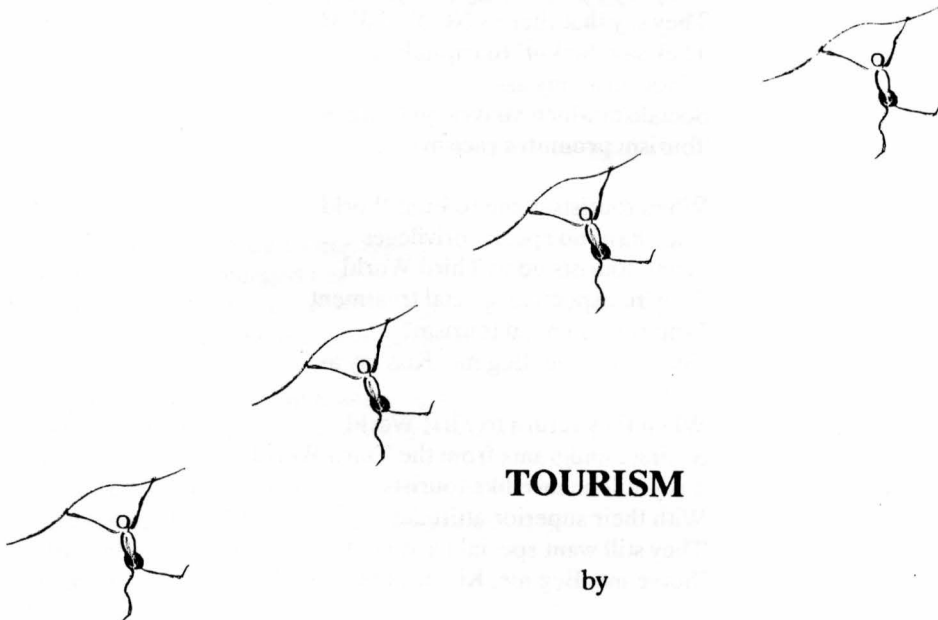
Responsibility In A Cold Society

I lay down in some grass near a stream.
It was as peaceful as a dream.
A gentle breeze caressed me,
and I watched a twig float so freely.

What is your destiny? I asked.
No reply at all, it just passed.
I stood up in solitude against the dark night,
and I watched the twig float swiftly out of sight.

Something warm was running in my eyes,
and I too, floated away in disguise.
Somehow I knew I didn't want to be invisible,
and for that, I am responsible!

The following two poems were written for NESIS by two of its members to be sung to music. NESIS is a women's band based in Toronto.



TOURISM

by

LORNA PHILIPS

The Countries of the Third World
The Countries of the Poor World
They say they need Tourism
They say they need Whatism
They say they need Tourism
They say they **want** tourism
The monies of the First World
Those capitalistic countries
Strangers invading their space
Strangers promoting disgrace
"You say you need tourism?
Then Serve me, Beg me, Kiss my ass"

In a socialistic society
They say that all is equal
They say that there's NO RACISM
They say "fuck-it" to capitalism
"Socialism my ass".
Socialism which strives on tourism
Tourism promotes racism

When tourists come to First World
They have no special privileges
When tourists go to Third World
They're expecting special treatment
"You say you need tourism?
Then serve me, Beg me, Kiss my ass"

When they return to First World
Seeing immigrants from the Third World
They still behave like tourists
With their superior attitudes
They still want special treatment
"Serve me, Beg me, Kiss my ass"

Our legislature says different
It says that all is equal
It says that there's race relation
It says there's multiculturalism
Bullshit
You cannot legislate Harmony
Because....Harmony comes from Within

Home Safe Home Free

by

LALITI TAMU

Lately it seems I want to stay home
keep the phone plugged out
keep the blinds drawn and order out
even have someone come pick up my dirty laundry

Because in my home I'm home safe, home free
safe from racist remarks written graffiti style
on city walls
I'm free from homophobic people
who tell me I'm sick and use verbal abuse and
physical threats hoping I will
go away.

But am I ever really safe even at home? Sometimes I get up
late at night to check windows and doors I know I've already
locked but still feel the need to go through the process
again.

HOME SAFE, HOME FREE

Not with my social insurance number my OHIP number
in their computers
giving easy access to my
name age phone number don't they know
I pay extra to have them unlisted?
so much for privacy

HOME SAFE, HOME FREE

On that piece of land that was willed to Me as the only
living grandchild of GERTINA MATILDA THOMAS I was planning
to save a little money no particular amount since I can get
7 Jamaican dollars for 1 Canadian this was a good plan
until I came out
you see there is no culture for lesbians
in the parish of Trewlany.

HOME SAFE, HOME FREE

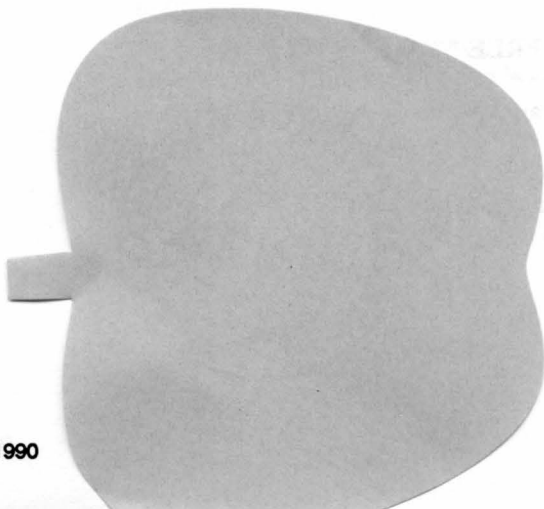
where is safe? what is free?
I just need a space where I can walk barefoot if I want to
a space where I can smoke a doobie if I have one
hold her if I feel to

HOME SAFE, HOME FREE

at a place where I can kiss her slowly and feel at ease
picking the fuzz from our favourite blanket out her afro

HOME SAFE, HOME FREE

where is safe? what is free?
living in this tenement on dixon rd.
on this land of no milk and little honey
struggling to feel home safe and home free.



Cover

Mitthila Painting

Mitthila painting is the traditional art form of women from the area of Madhubani, North Bihar, India.

These paintings were originally done only on the walls of houses and usually depicted scenes from the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, today some are on such themes as environmental pollution and women's position in society. The paintings are all done by hand and vary with the artist so that each one is unique.

The original artist, Shiva Kashyap, revived this exclusive art form of women in a number of Bihari villages as a consciousness raising activity.