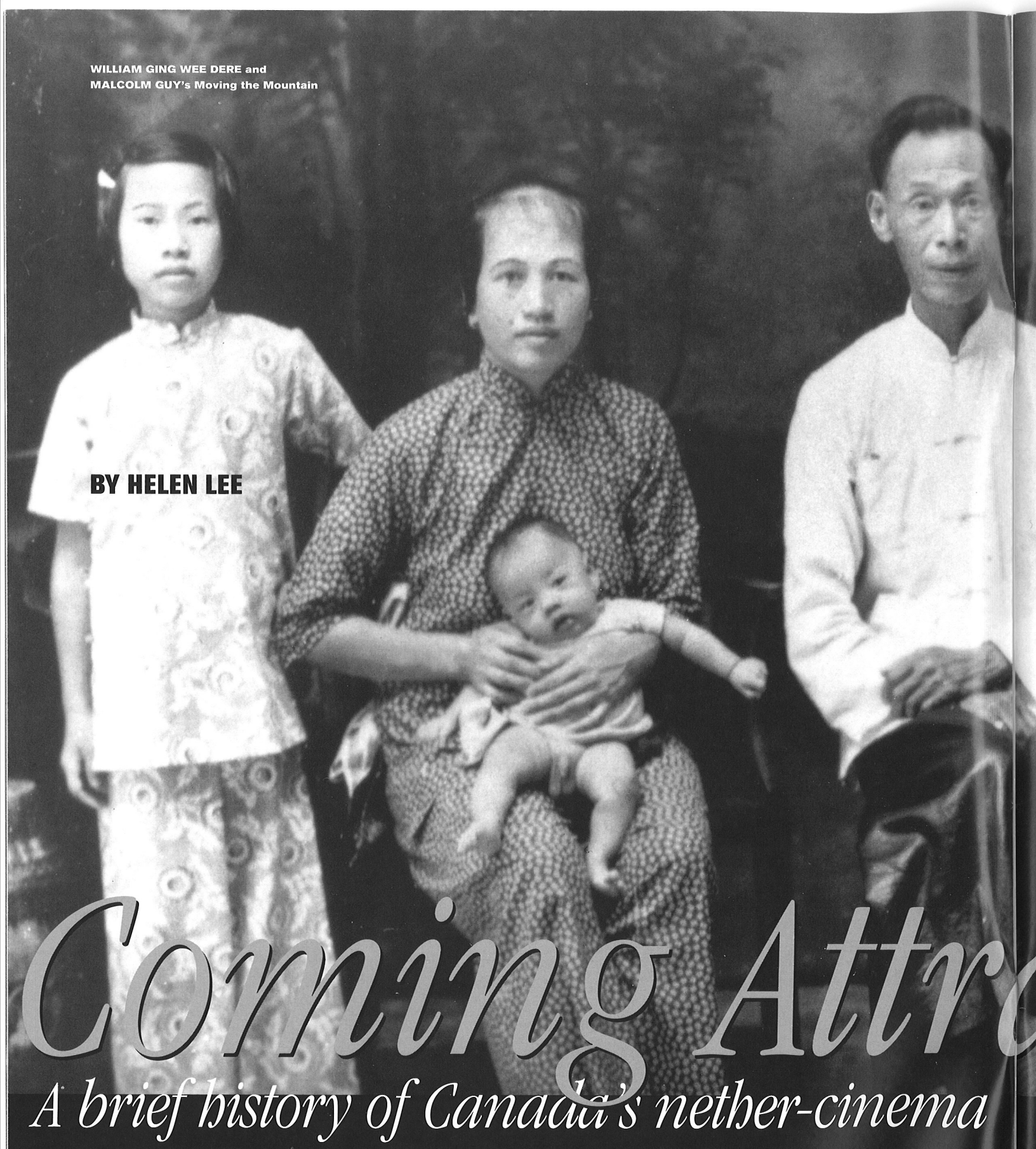


WILLIAM GING WEE DERE and
MALCOLM GUY's Moving the Mountain

BY HELEN LEE

Coming Attra

A brief history of Canada's nether-cinema

IT GOES LIKE THIS: I grab my honey and we go out for dinner. Let's catch a movie at the local multiplex. Eating candy bars and popcorn, we're glued to the unspooling – a love triangle involving a filmmaker, her assistant and a young transvestite – but being a Midi Onodera picture, these heroines are lesbians and one of them is Japanese-Canadian. You've never seen her before, though she does look strangely familar: smart-talking, chain-smoking and sultry, Alex Koyama is a siren with a nose for adventure and a lust for tattoos. Plunge, if you will, into the brave world of New Canadian Cinema. Because it's coming at you.

Where did it come from? It's impossible not to think of the past history of films by Aboriginal, Latin American, Asian Canadian and African Canadian



ractions

filmmakers as some kind of latent, shadow economy, far from the pulse stream of Canadian cinema. Or as a magical disappearing act – now you see it, now you don't. Given our national lament that homegrown films do not get the play they should (three percent of domestic screen time is the national average), where is the vanishing point for the Other Canadian Cinema? Forget a level playing field. Where are our uniforms?

Until the late 80s, typical forms of funding have not been accessed in any significant numbers by First Nations filmmakers and POCs (people of colour, the preferred term of late, but horribly inadequate; by default, I use it here). Hindsight may be 20/20, but how are we to account for this dismal state of affairs? Dismal because of the lack of accountability of a film industry that is

largely subsidized with taxpayer dollars. To put it straight, while my immigrant parents have been paying taxes for the last 25 years, where is the cinema they can call their own?

It is important to situate these questions within our welfare-state economy, since state-directed cinema has been our inheritance. Do we get what we deserve if we haven't asked for better? Our commonwealth culture, shared by other nations such as India and Australia, has produced a cinema history that has been wholly shaped by institutions, agencies, commissions and crown corporations (India's Bollywood notwithstanding).

Canada has essentially a three-studio system: the National Film Board; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; and Telefilm Canada plus provincial film agencies. All of them, in some form or another, are mandated to support Canadian culture that reflects the realities of Canadian society. But what exactly comprises Canadian-ness is now undergoing a period of contestation, with buzzwords like race, gender and sexual orientation providing the lynchpins. Not surprisingly, recent films produced outside these institutions have provided a more challenging and pluralistic picture. Many pictures.

Where does the history of this new picture-making start? The irony isn't lost (on those who account for such things) that the first films produced in Canada by non-white anglo/francophones were those by William Greaves, an African American, during his tenure at the NFB. From the late 1950s through the mid-60s, Greaves worked on more than 80 NFB productions and directed four films of his own.

The period during the 60s and 70s is extremely spotty and under-documented. One strain of film sponsorship that continues up to the present involves non-white, non-Canadians making films here and abroad under UN-type directives such as cross-cultural exchanges and training internships for Third World filmmakers. Under the NFB's auspices, some of these films by non-Canadians are set here, such as Anand Patwardhan's *A Time to Rise* (1981), co-directed with Jim Monro, a documentary on the formation of the Canadian Farmworkers Union which focusses on Chinese and East Indian farmworkers in B.C. Others, such as Deepa Dhanraj's *Something Like a War* (1991), a Channel 4 documentary about multinational corporate involvement in India's sterilization programs, accessed NFB post-production support.

The reality of making films in this country is that somewhere, sometime in your movie-making life, no matter who you are, you'll be encountering the NFB. This is even more likely for Quebec-based filmmakers, given the plant's location in Montreal.

How has this powerful institution interacted historically with Aboriginal people? And what kinds of films have been produced? In the late 60s and early 70s, in the political milieu of the American Indian Movement in the U.S., and related land claims and self-government struggles here in Canada, Native people entered the NFB for the first time. Like Willie Dunn, *The Ballad of Crowfoot* (1968), or Alanis Obomsawin, *Christmas at Moose Factory* (1971), they entered as songwriters and storytellers. Their films functioned as historical correctives, documents of Indian and Inuit ways of life, and outlets for Aboriginal points of view. All of them were documentaries. But of this first generation, which also includes Michael Mitchell, *These Are My People* (1969), Les Rose, *Van's Camp* (1974) and Mosha Michael, *The Hunters* (1977), only Montreal-based Obomsawin emerged as a bonafide filmmaker who stayed on as an NFB staff director and built a significant body of work within the institution.

After her first film, Obomsawin's next projects, *Mother of Many Children* and *Amisk*, weren't made until 1977 (arguably her film career didn't take off until the 80s). The prevailing NFB attitudes of the time, inherited from founder John Grierson's ideals of nation-building and social engineering programs, were distinctly neo-colonial and operated along anthropological models. Native people were hired as cultural informants, insiders who could stamp a project with legitimacy. Sometimes they were paired with established directors (like Donald Brittain in Rose's case), and acted as sociologists or historians first and filmmakers second.

One can pick through the NFB catalogue to discover other isolated cases from this era, Duke Redbird's comic strip, about a young Native boy who leaves the reserve for the big city, was made into an animated film called *Charley Squash Goes to Town* in 1969. Oddities such as Kim In Tae's animated short, *Korean Alphabet* (1967), crop up here too (the Korean immigrant community at the time was negligible). Animator Kaj Pindal made a series of non-ethnic children's films in the 60s, while Ishu Patel's animated shorts from the 70s were primarily concerned with adolescent health and sexuality.

Suffice to say that before the 80s, without the NFB, non-white filmmakers producing their work in Canada would have gotten nowhere fast. But where exactly did they go? How can the vision of any one institution, especially one bound with a social conscience driven by white guilt and an impulse for reform (not truly transformative change), not be limited? At the same time, one institution must not bear the sole burden for change. As publicly funded institutions designed to serve all Canadians, all three institutions – NFB, CBC, Telefilm – have miles to go to be fair, accessible and accountable.

What exactly comprises Canadian-ness is now undergoing a period of contestation, with buzzwords like race, gender and sexual orientation providing the lynchpins

As this article does not examine television, its scope precludes the careers of mainstream broadcast personalities such as Adrienne Clarkson, David Suzuki and other (non-white) CBC lifers. However, it is important to note Jennifer Hodge de Silva, who emerged as a major Black Canadian filmmaker in the 70s, and continued to work with major institutions, including the CBC, until her premature death in 1989. Her NFB documentary, *Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community* (1983), crystallized the hostile relationship between police enforcement and the mainly Caribbean immigrants in the Jane-Finch housing projects in Toronto. *Home Feeling* was one of the first NFB-sponsored documentaries that balanced the expository, talking-head house style with a more subjective, personalized account. (A year later, Obomsawin's *Incident at Restigouche* [1984], fully vocalizes this nascent politics of resistance in what will

CLAIRE PRIETO and SYLVIA HAMILTON's Black Mother, Black Daughter

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAGE 4, PRODUCTIONS MULTI-MONDE; PAGE 7, NFB



likely be remembered as the precursor to *Kahnesetake* [1993].)

In the 80s, Claire Prieto, often in partnership with Roger McTair, emerged as one of Hodge's likely inheritors in the project of documenting Black Canadian life. Community-based accessibility characterizes documentaries such as the jointly-made, independently produced *Home to Buxton* (1987), and NFB projects like Prieto's *Older, Stronger, Wiser* (1989), which initiated Studio D's Black women series "Women at the Well."

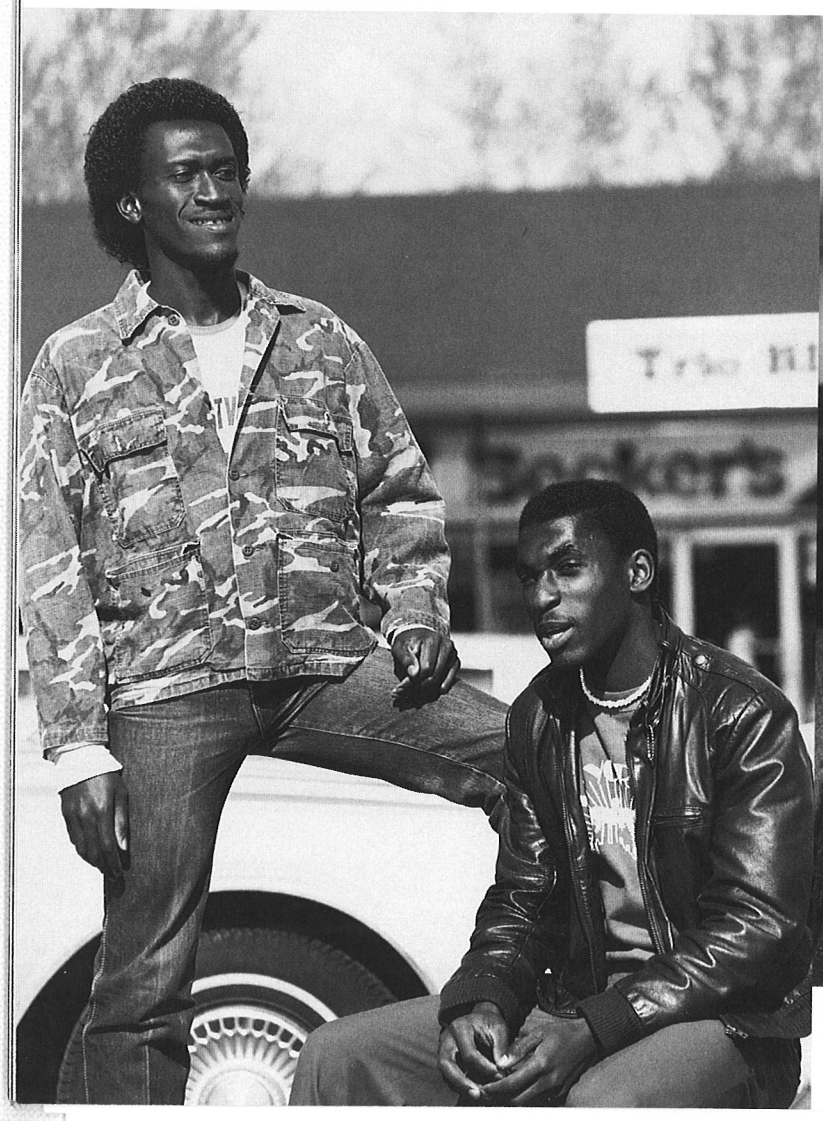
Author Dionne Brand, who served as the associate director on Prieto's films, later made *Sisters in the Struggle* (1991), co-directed with Ginny Stikeman, and then *Long Time Comin'* (1993), which continued the series. Added to this crop is *Black Mother, Black Daughter* (1989), co-directed by Prieto and Sylvia Hamilton, a Nova Scotia-based filmmaker. Toronto's Christene Browne, *Them That's Not* (1993), has also emerged with a body of documentaries on Black women's experience.

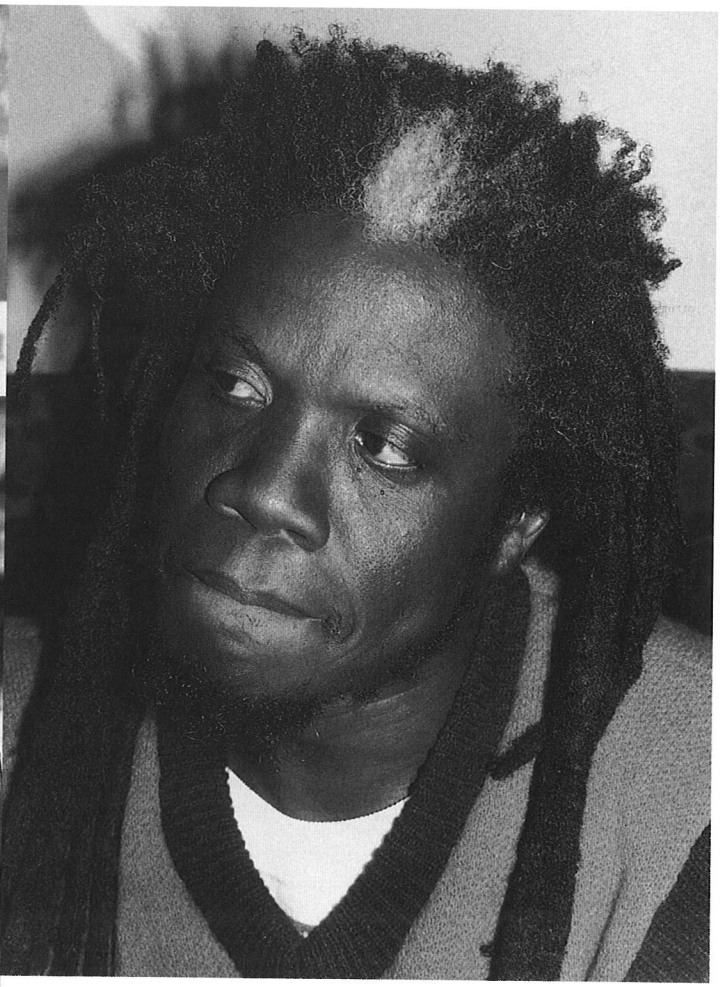
How to account for this trend in films by Black women, produced by Studio D in the last few years when there were none before? And why only documentaries, not dramas? Like Native filmmakers, Black directors in Canada have been compelled by different forces to document, not fictionalize, their lives. These films show sure evidence of how institutions and bureaucratic decisions (and the cultural assumptions behind them) can so drastically shape the kinds of films that are produced in a given era, even as more Black women are being admitted through their doors.

Throughout the 80s and 90s, the changing face of the NFB also included more Aboriginal women filmmakers such as Catherine Martin (the only Atlantic-based Native filmmaker in the country) who recently produced *Kwa' Nu' Te': Micmac and Maliseet Artists* (1991), and Vancouver-based Métis filmmaker Loretta Todd, whose *The Learning Path* (1991) shows promise for more drama-based work. Yukon-born Carol Geddes made her mark with *Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief* (1986), a compelling portrait of Native women leadership. In 1991, Geddes became the head of the newly created Studio One, NFB's Edmonton-based Aboriginal Studio. Now led by screenwriter/producer/director Michael Doxtater, Studio One has numerous projects from around the country coming through its Edmonton base of operations.

Other Edmonton-based directors include Dene filmmaker and Dreamspeakers conference co-organizer Raymond Yakeleya (*The Last Mooseskin Boat* [1982]), as well as Wil Campbell and Gil Cardinal, who collaborated on the widely seen *The Spirit Within* (1990), a documentary about Native prison inmates and Indian spirituality. Cardinal's earlier *Foster Child* (1987), a film documenting his own obsessive

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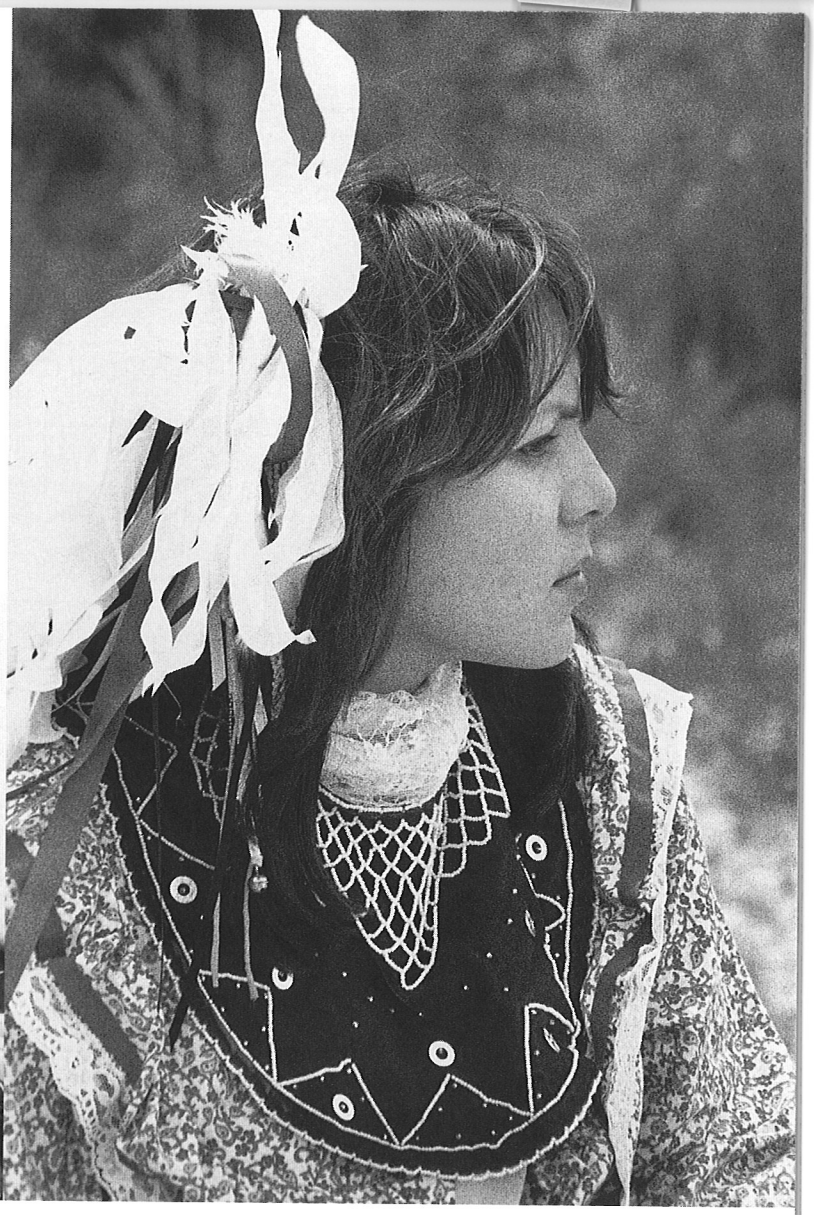


PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, NFB; RIGHT, WELL FRAMED PRODUCTIONS

search for his birth mother and family, and his Native roots, is particularly notable for its personal, almost narcissistic, investigative style. The only other NFB film to hold such deeply subjective qualities is Obomsawin's *Richard Cardinal: Cry From a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986), based on the strength of Richard Cardinal's writing and the excruciating sensitivity of his observations in this posthumous film. Supported by NFB's technical and creative resources, the work of these second-generation NFB Native filmmakers is characterized by its cultural authority and consistently high level of film craft.

left to right: JENNIFER HODGE DE SILVA and ROGER MCTAIR's Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community; LILLIAN ALLEN and GIOVANNI SAMPOGNA's Blakk Wi Blak...k...k; LORETTA TODD's The Learning Path; SHELLEY NIRO and ANNA GRONAU's It Starts with a Whisper





PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, BY SIMA KHORRAMI; RIGHT, CFMDC

With the start-up of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) in 1980, most Inuit makers were trained, and worked in video and television, including the heralded Zacharias Kunuk, *Qaggiq* (1989), whose ongoing collaboration with Norman Cohen has deservedly won them the 1994 Bell Canada Video Award.

David Poisey's documentary, *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* (1991), co-directed with non-Inuit William Hansen, provides a good introduction to IBC's formation and operations (but with strange exclusions, such as not talking about how deeply white administrators are involved, and not even mentioning Inuit independents such as Kunuk and his exemplary work!).

But other revelations surface, such as Ann Neekitjuk Hanson's docu-drama on wife abuse, *A Summer in the Life of Louisa* (which never received distribution in the south). However, the audience for Poisey's film is clearly non-Inuit.

Poisey's film, as well as Todd's and other films directed by Aboriginal filmmakers, were commissioned by Tamarack Productions in an NFB co-production for a five-part series entitled *As Long as The Rivers Flow* (1991) about, ironically, Aboriginal self-government issues. However well-made (and the series is excellent), structural aspects of white-managed creative control with Toronto-based Tamarack (which is owned by Peter Raymont and James Cullingham) cannot be erased. Money is power and few Aboriginal producers have *directly* accessed this kind of substantial funding.

Throughout the 70s and 80s, filmmakers originally from Latin America, and specifically Chilean exiles, started to make films, initially at the NFB and later, independently. Films range from Jorge Fajardo's *Steel Blues* (1976), a verité-styled docu-drama that drags like the protagonist's own workday, to Marilu Mallet's excursion into her own life, *Unfinished Diary* (1986). Mallet's film questions the cultural and linguistic consequences of political exile but, as a white Latina, with little regard for class or racial barriers experienced by Latinos of mestizo or indigenous background.

As in the United States, filmmakers of Latin American background have responded differently, with some aligning themselves within a discourse of race, and others adopting other national or ethnic lines of identification.

Luis Garcia's *Under the Table* (1984), co-directed with Tony Venturi, explores the nexus of racism and language barriers experienced by illegal immigrants in Canada. Similar themes are also shared by other Chilean-Canadian filmmakers such as Leuten Rojas, *Canadian Experience* (1979), and Montreal-based Leopoldo Gutierrez, *It's Not the Same in English* (1985).

For Asian Canadian filmmakers, little headway was made at the NFB until the early 90s. Animators such as Katherine Li, *Sabina* (1991), and English Anima-

tion Studio staffer Michael Fukushima, who made the affecting *Minoru* (1993), a *sansei* (third-generation) Japanese-Canadian exploration of his family's WWII internment, have had recent starts at the Board. Through Studio D, Michelle Wong produced her first film, *Return Home* (1993), a lacklustre, but obviously personal account of the rediscovery of her cultural roots through her Prairie-based Chinese-Canadian family.

Perhaps this institutional indifference instilled a different mindset for Asian Canadians who weren't as compelled toward a realist documentary practice, but rather a strikingly experimental approach to their work. In 1975, Keith Lock, a third-generation Chinese-Canadian, made an experimental feature, *Everything Everywhere Again Alive*, which critic/filmmaker Bruce Elder later commended as "one of the best Canadian films of the 1970s." Lock then made Canada's first POC drama, *A Brighter Moon* (1986). However, his most famous work, as Michael Snow's cinematographer throughout the 70s, remains invisible, as it is uncredited.

It wasn't until the 80s that other Asian Canadian filmmakers would come along. Both Midi Onodera, *Parallax: Ten Cents a Dance* (1986) and *The Displaced View* (1988), and Fumiko Kiyooka, *Clouds* (1985), emerged with important, ambitious work with enough self-identity to call itself a community of filmmaking. In the past few years, they have all turned to feature filmmaking. Lock's *Small Pleasures* (1993), is the first Asian Canadian feature drama ever produced; Onodera's *Sadness of the Moon* is due to be released later this year; Kiyooka's *Says* (1992) is the only experimental feature.

In the late 80s and early 90s, independent production by POC and Native filmmakers has been a virtual growth industry. Taking on the fundraising themselves, they've sought no-strings-attached arts council grants, issue and education-oriented funds, television presales, community resources and equity-based programs (funds administered by Canadian Heritage, Multiculturalism, the Racial Equity Fund from LIFT, and New Initiatives in Film administered by the NFB's Studio D), and others. Piece by piece, films are getting made, often on a shoestring.

Notably, women of colour in Toronto have played an active role, with filmmakers such as Francesca Duran, *Tales from My Childhood* (1991), Michelle Mohabeer, *Exposure* (1990), Brenda Lem, *Open Letter* (1993), Glace Lawrence, *D-E-S-I-R-E* (1989), Métis film/videomaker Marjorie Beaucage, *Bingo* (1992), and others. Much of this work is strikingly personal in character, reformulating feminist documentary to add narrative and experimental elements toward a distinctly hybrid and innovative style of film practice. Artists such as dub poet Lillian Allen are also crossing disciplines with her recent *Blakk Wi Blak...k...k* (1993), co-directed with Giovanni Sampogna.

Formal boundaries are becoming increasingly fluid in other ways as documentary filmmakers Daisy Lee, *Morning Zoo* (1989), Andrew Davis, *Good Hair Pretty Hair Curly Hair* (1991), and Harrison Liu, *Strange Dialogue* (1990), are turning to drama for their next projects. Even in short fiction, variety is key, with works ranging from a straight family drama like Mehra Meh's *Saeed* (1991), co-directed with Marc LaFoy, to more visually experimental narratives like Kwoi Gin's *Dark Sun, Bright Shade* (1993). Still, issue-based documentary and drama prevail, with community-directed dramas such as Alfons Adetuyi's *Survivors* (1992), co-produced by Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, and Rose Gutierrez's *Tama Ba? Tama Na!* (1993), co-directed with Gabriella Micallef, embodying this particular vein of filmmaking. Shelley Niro's *It Starts With a Whisper* (1993), co-directed with Anna Gronau, is more whimsical in that regard. The latter two present new models of cross-cultural collaboration in film.

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In other large cities such as Vancouver and Montreal, the infrastructure for support is not as well-developed as in Toronto. Although, surprisingly, features have been made, including William Ging Wee Dere's *Moving the Mountain* (1993), co-directed with Malcolm Guy, and two little-seen features by Concordia-trained Hunt Ho.

Still, POCs haven't begun to penetrate the industry, or work consistently as independents as they should, given the growing demographics in Montreal. Someone like Alanis Obomsawin (whose films are produced out of NFB's Studio C), is a singular figure and still remains an anomaly in the French language-dominated production environment of Montreal. And where are the Haitian and Vietnamese-born francophone filmmakers?

In Vancouver, the Asian Canadian presence is particularly strong. Independents, invariably aided by CineWorks and the NFB Pacific Centre, have made a range of personal, often quirky films exploring cultural identity and racism. These filmmakers include Sook-Yin Lee, *Escapades of One Particular Mr. Noodle* (1990), Jeneva Shaw, *Native Daughter* (1992), Troy Suzuki, *For Anyone Returning to Earth After Being Away* (1991), Mina Shum, *Me, Mom and Mona* (1993), Yun Lam Li, *Chaos* (1993).

Emerging Black filmmaker Selina Williams, *Colour Corrected* (1993), and others currently in film school should diversify the indie scene. The exceptional work of Ann Marie Fleming, *New Shoes* (1990), widely shown under the rubric of avant-garde or feminist film, has become more culturally based with recent explorations of her own mixed Asian identity.

But imagine working out there in the wilderness, where your television set provides your sense of community and you're the sole POC making films in town. Filmmakers such as Albertan Linda Ohama, *The Last Harvest* (1993), Fredericton-based Errol Williams, *Driftwood* (1989), Ray Ramayya, *Jenny* (1987), who lives 300 miles north of Saskatoon, Edmonton-based Selwyn Jacob, *Saint From North Battleford* (1990), and Winnipeger Winston Moxam, *The Barbecue* (1994), all manage to work in regional isolation.

Interestingly, they've all made films about pioneers: Japanese-Canadians who re-settled as farm labourers in the Prairies; Canada's first Black hockey player; a Native singer who dreams of stardom in the city; a young Black woman who visits her white boyfriend's family for the first time; the first Black

Canadian football player in the NFL – they could all be describing themselves.

Regionalism touches all levels of Canada's film culture. Given Toronto's lead in independent work by POCs, how has the industry responded to them? While acclaimed cinematographers Rene Ohashi and Vic Sarin have been working for years in Toronto, we had to wait until 1991 to see major features released by Srinivas Krishna and Deepa Mehta (though most of us missed the boat on Sarin's own first feature, *Cold Comfort* [1989], with an all-white cast headed by Maury Chaykin). *Masala* and *Sam & Me* marked a new era for Canadian cinema. Finger-snapping smart, irreverent (and in the case of *Masala*, even bawdy), these films introduced a crazy-quilt landscape of characters never before seen on our national screens.

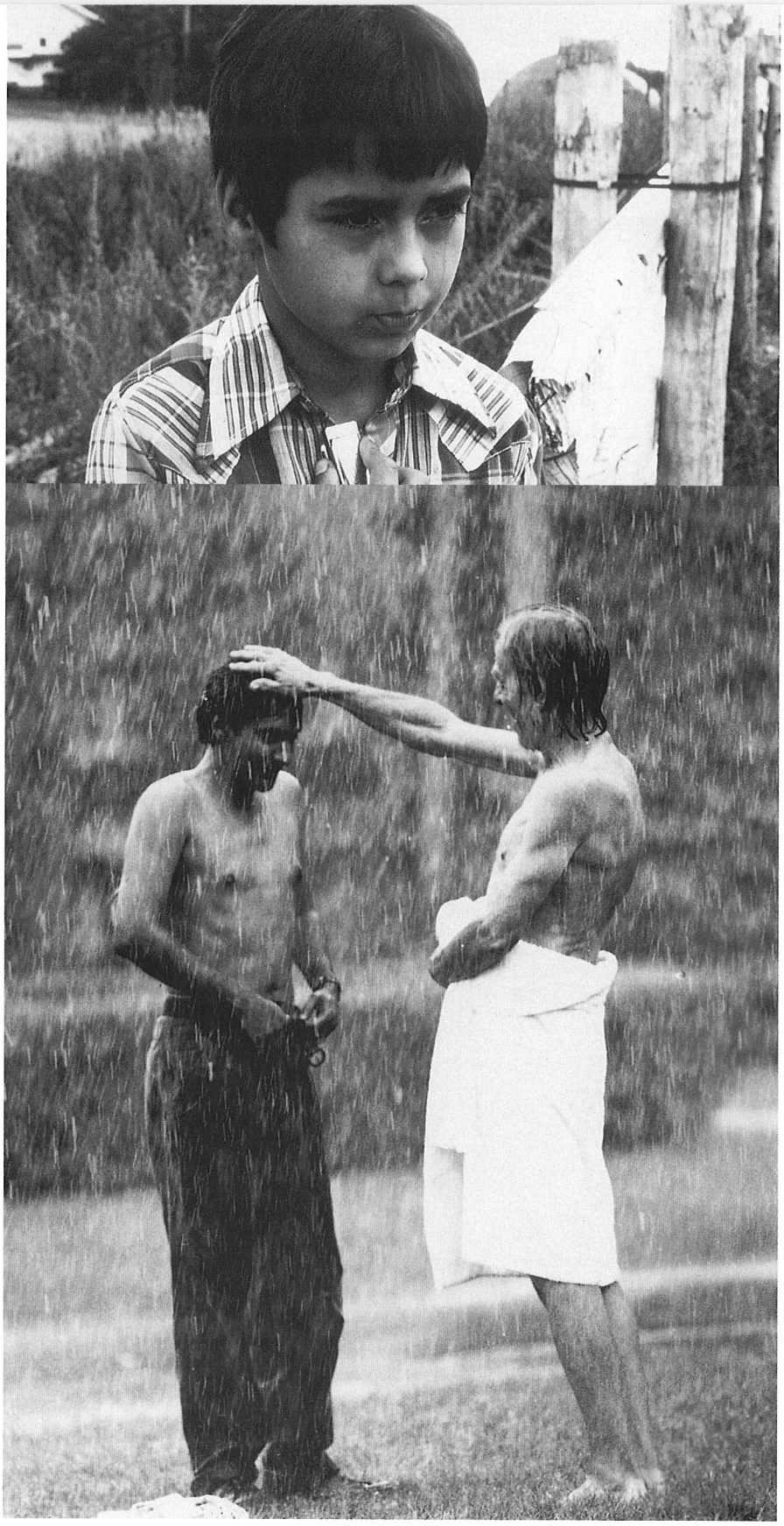
Since 1990, Toronto's centre of feature film power (or at least potential) is literally the Centre. But significantly, none of those who've benefited most from the Canadian Film Centre have been women of colour. Notwithstanding the Centre's Summer/Fall Lab initiatives, all the POCs who've completed the full-length resident program have been men. Sugith Varughese, *Kumar and Mr. Jones* (1990), Clement Virgo, *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul* (1993), and Stephen Williams, *A Variation on the Key 2 Life* (1993), have each made their short film calling cards through the Centre's Resident Program, not through the ranks of independent filmmaking (Mehra Meh is currently finishing his year as a producer resident there). Institutionally, men of colour have been professionally developed towards feature films (especially with the popular explosion of New Black Cinema in the U.S., industry expectations for a Canadian version of Spike Lee are particularly strong and problematic).

If Obomsawin's *Kanehsetake* is a watershed film, 1994 marks yet another turning point. Numerous anticipated shorts, and the latest cycle of industry-sanctioned features, such as Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*, Stephen Williams' *Soul Survivor*, and Clement Virgo's *Rude* (formerly *Rude Boy*) are set to go before the cameras. Midi Onodera's renegade feature, *Sadness of the Moon*, is also due for release this year.

Even if this nether-cinema has been defined by short films, there is yet another raft of features waiting like handmaidens to break through the torturous process of development, or rather, over-development. What to do when all the green-lighters in the country are white? Revolt or write?

Change comes slow, I know, but we're losing patience waiting for a cinema to refashion itself from a land of victims and losers into a nation of avengers, shamans, rebel leaders, and myth-exploding storytellers •

Helen Lee is a Korean-Canadian filmmaker and writer who's riding out the hyphen. Films include Sally's Beauty Spot (1990) and My Niagara (1992).



top, ALANIS OBOMSAWIN's Richard Cardinal; bottom, DEEPA MEHTA's Sam & Me

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP, NFB; BOTTOM, BY GEORGE KRAYCHYK