In Canada the condition of African Canadians has not yet reached the desperate levels of the United States, but there are troubling similarities. The Stephan Lewis report (1982) reveals that anti-black racism in all aspects of life in Ontario is a virulent, hardy plant. Despite this reality, however, many would have us believe that Show Boat should be seen as a beacon mark of how far we have come. Show Boat is a beacon mark but of how the more things change, the more they remain the same. That Gertrude Drabinsky can write in The Toronto Star (June 2, 1980) that he intends to continue with the production of Show Boat over the legal outcry of African Canadians, tells us how far we have come. That The Toronto Star, one of the sponsors of Show Boat, can, with impunity, tell African Canadians that they should "join people like former lieutenant-governor Lincoln Alexander in fighting the more tangible injustices that many blacks must confront every day," tells us how far we have come. That the (Dis)United Way and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), when faced with a choice between offending hundreds of rich white men, or Black people, decide that they would much rather offend Black people, tells us how far we have come. Was there ever any doubt as to who would win in that choice, if choice there ever was? The bottom line is the dollar: the motive profit, as it was during the slave trade. The same motive that makes a mockery of the (Dis)United Way that has, for the last two years, insisted that organizations receiving grants from it demonstrate that they do anti-racist work, and yet, at the expense of Black people, itself continues on in a damaging exercise that pays for entertainment. This has all the overtones of Romans throwing Christians to the lions while they party. It was, in fact, the very organizations that had engaged in anti-racist work who were most vocal in calling for the (Dis)United Way to disengage itself from its support of Show Boat.

That Show Boat is being mounted here in Toronto and at this particular time is not a coincidence. We are presently living in very crisis-ridden times. Both national and provincial economies are contracting in the post-Free Trade environment of Canada and the world-wide depression. Jobs are being lost at a record rate with no prospect of replacement. No longer can Canadians, or North Americans for that matter, relax and expect that life will improve exponentially for them — as it always has.

The small gains made over the last few years by Blacks and other peoples of colour, women and gays, albeit in the context of a capitalism in world-wide crisis, has galvanized enormous opposition, the expression of which stems from the racial hatred of the neo-McCains to that of the self-proclaimed foes of political correctness. This rhetoric is to be found in the pages of the Heritage Front newspaper, as well as The Globe and Mail, on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), as well as on CFRB.

We are witnessing an enormous backlash to the small gains made by those groups which mainstream society has traditionally rejected; there has been a upsurge in racism and anti-Semitism; we have read of gays being killed, of Jewish cemeteries desecrated, we have seen the police beat Rodney King in Los Angeles and we continue to read of Blacks being killed by police here in Canada. In the continued attacks, sexual and otherwise, against women, it is business as usual.

There has, however, been no let up in the demands by Blacks and groups which society has traditionally oppressed. All continue to challenge racism, sexism, chauvinism, and all the other systemic practices which limit the full potential of individuals and groups. In addition to making demands to change the material and social reality, these emancipatory and liberation movements also demand changes in their representations, since they understand only too well that their representations are closely tied to their traditional roles in society. The unrelenting of one inevitably leads to the unraveling of the other. The women's movement, for instance, is not only about employment equity and better child care, but also about how the media represses women. What Blacks and African Canadians are opposing in the production of Show Boat are the historically stereotypical images that sanctify the inequality and exploitation of their lives. And one of the most traditionally effective ways of sanctification is through the mechanism of "harmless" entertainment.

The unrelenting of the stereotypes image is always discomfiting for the mainstream, and so the dominant culture fights back. It fights back by resisting social changes such as employment equity; it fights back by raising the spectre of political correctness and so trivializing the very real pains of people struggling to redefine themselves; it fights back by bringing to the fore and rearticulating the very stereotypes that have been used to manage groups like Blacks; it fights back by saying these representations are "historically accurate" and therefore true. It fights back by trying to convert the library struggle of African Canadians for some control over the representation of their lives, and their history into a Black-Jewish controversy. It fights back by attempting to isolate and deem the struggles of various individuals involved in the struggle. And as in earlier times it fights back by drugging culture into its service. Culture is the mechanism by which a society equalizes, balances itself, diffuses anxiety, building and re-building its self-image. It is central to every society — determining the way we marry, eat, worship and dance. It is the mechanism through which a society refirms itself through image and representation, and when a society perceives itself under threat — as white society presently does, culture's role is to ensure this anxiety and to encourage, in the populace in general, a feeling of well-being, that God is in his heavens and everything is in its place — the river continues to flow as it always did. In Magic, Science and Religion, the anthropologist

Blaming the Negro...gives the white a stronger sense of identity, or rather it provides an identity which is seriously threatened with pathological dissolution. It is by blaming the Negro that the white men try to hold himself together. The Negro is the unresolvable position of being used for everything, even for the white man's psychological security.

Cocentratess of a Guilty Bystander, Thomas Merton
Our history and our culture, this message implies, are unimportant and it does not matter if we hurt deeply because of what this show means to us. This is the first message of Show Boat, that we are there for the interests of whites — in this case to make them money. The second message is that whites need not concern themselves with us — and this appears to be borne out by how the media and other institutions have succeeded in treating us so far. Julie’s actions in Show Boat itself undermine this message — her disappearing acts which further plot and the white characters; her desire to hurt herself to benefit a white person. This is the message that audiences will take away, that after we have served our purpose — as ciphers — we will disappear.

Yet another message is that blacks are essentially servants whose role is to be resigned to their lot in life. Why? Just because. Just as the river is always there, so is black resignation and acceptance.

A fourth lesson for whites is that we are there as an ethnic flavour, as markers of entertainment and pleasure; that they need not concern themselves with the real and root cause of injustices blacks face in Canadian society. This message undermines an attitude that goes right back to the early development of racial stereotypes (as mentioned in Part 1, Show Boat, Bookboating North of the 46th Parallel in which blacks are seen as permanently different with no attempt made to see the link between their present position and the exploitation of white society. White society does have tremendous power in relation to blacks — the power of life and death as manifested often in police shootings. With respect to the present issue of Show Boat this power — of the media, for instance — is demonstrated daily in the almost complete exclusion of the view of the imposing Show Boat. However, anyone who has taken the time to truly understand that black is the most powerful.

There is, therefore, every reason why cultural works which manipulate race and the racist tensions between blacks and whites in the United States have a lasting seduction. When Joseph Swing wrote that “the influence of Show Boat was perhaps subliminal and subconscious” he was referring to its technical and musical innovations. This subliminality and subconsciousness, I suggest, go deeper than just the techniques, to the deep muscle around the bone. Show Boat is not intended for black people; it never was. Its intended audience has always been a white one. One year after the Yonge street shoot, what are some of the messages that Show Boat is bringing to white audiences in Toronto?

The first message is linked to blacks not being the intended audience and that is that blacks are ciphers, having no meaning except in so far as they embellish and further the interests of whites; our only function in Show Boat, in all its incarnations, has been to further the interests of whites — within and without the story.
Black Studies, Cultural Studies
PERFORMANCE

Manthia Diawara

Q uote of the most important, and appealing, aspects of cultural studies is its critical, or even polemical, attitude toward every form of theoretical orthodoxy. The term, as it is used by Antonio Gramsci to sketch and test the limits of Marxism, captures the sense of critical attitude I have in mind here. Elaboration has begun, within cultural studies, to make use of some of the approaches and methodologies of poststructuralism while being critical of it in an institutionalized discipline.

Cultural studies often delineates ways of life by elaborating them quite literally, embarrassingly and bafflingly theoretical underestimating of some forms of life. This ethnographic approach has helped cultural studies ground some of its key concepts in material conditions, for example, uneven development, cultural articulation, postcoloniality, and specificity. Through the "literal reading of event," cultural studies explicates the material bases and implications of world views we assume, and analyses identity politics as moments of difference and rupture in the hegemonic status quo described by the discourses of Marxism or psychoanalysis.

I want to follow the evolution of the practice of elaboration from its development by early practitioners at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, through its use by London-based black artists and writers to its deployment in the United States, particularly in departments of black studies and in feminist studies. I would like to distinguish what I call the London-based Black British cultural studies from the tradition derived from work at the Birmingham Centre. In the 1980s and 1990s researchers at the Birmingham Centre were mainly interested in the British working class. In an attempt to constitute a unique and alternative British Marxist theory around that subject, they were concerned to generate a British Marxism that would challenge the theoretical work of Louis Althusser, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the Frankfurt School. In contrast, in the 1980s black filmmakers, artists, photographers and writers were deconstructing and restructuring the terms of Britishness using race as the modality through which to read class. Black British cultural studies took as its main subject the elaboration of Black Britishness over against the national absolutism in Britain, the construction of a hegemonic blackness by black Americans, and