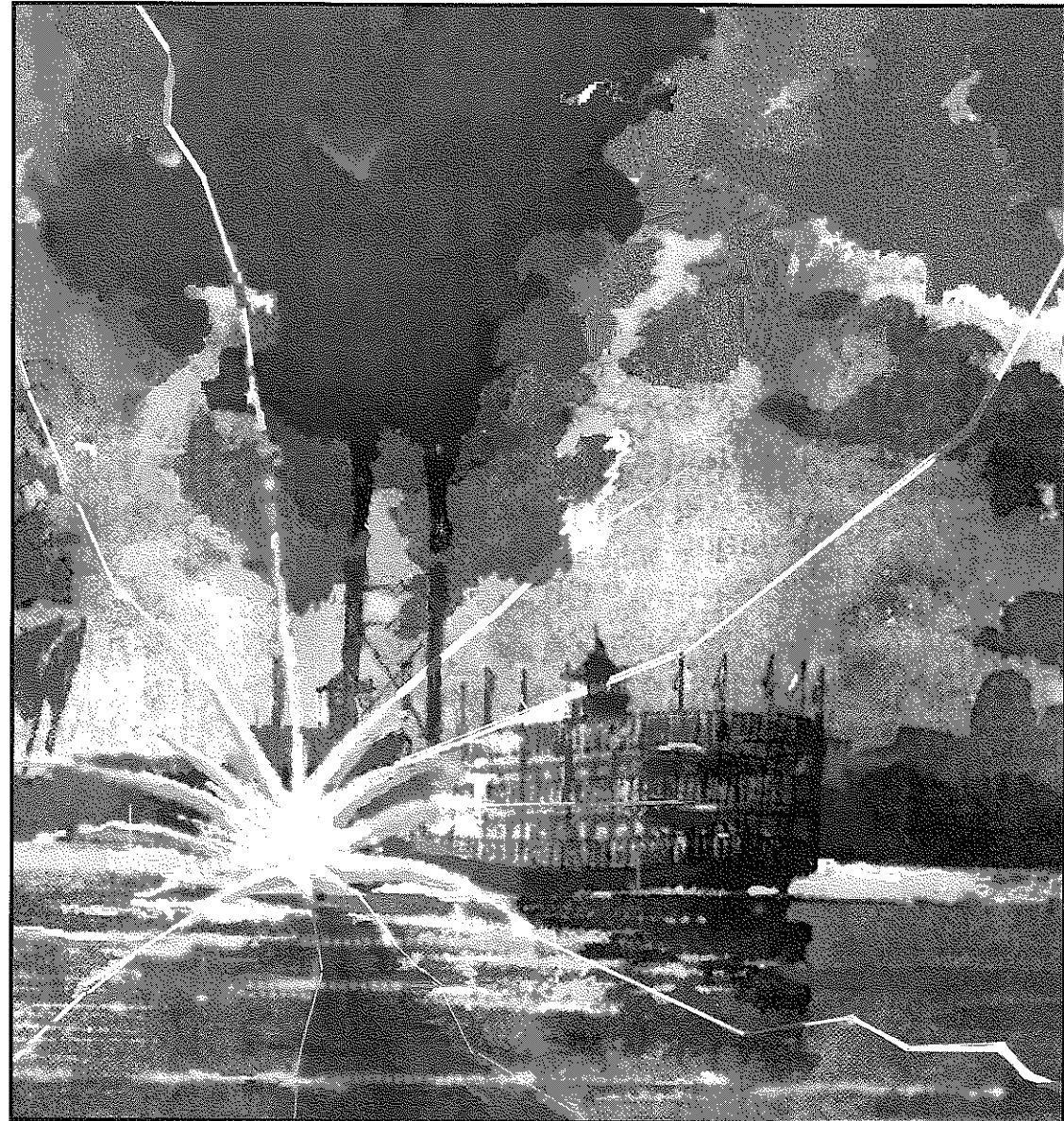


# THAT WAS THEN



Roger Babcock

# THIS IS NOW

M. NOURBESE PHILIP

Blaming the Negro...gives the white a stronger sense of identity, or rather it pro-  
tects an identity which is seriously threat-  
ened with pathological dissolution. It is by  
blaming the Negro that the white man tries  
to hold himself together. The Negro is in the

unenviable position of being used for every-  
thing, even for the white man's psychologi-  
cal security.

*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander.*  
Thomas Merton

In Canada the condition of African Canadians has not yet reached the desperate levels of the United States, but there are troubling similarities. The Stephen Lewis report (1992) reveals that anti-Black racism in all aspects of life in Ontario is a vigorous, hardy plant. Despite this reality, however, many would have us believe that *Show Boat* should be seen as a bench mark of how far we have come. *Show Boat* is a bench mark but of how the more things change, the more they remain the same. That Garth Drabinsky can write in *The Toronto Star* (June 2, 1993) that he intends to continue with the production of *Show Boat* over the loud 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 cabals 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 distasteful exercise that passes 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 strenuous opposition, the expression of which stretches from the racist rhetoric of the neo-Nazis 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 excluded: there has been an 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 sexism, racism, classism, 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 representation is closely tied to their traditional roles in society. The unravelling of one inevitably leads to the unravelling 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 represent 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 unravelling of the stereotypical image is always discomforting 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 trivialising the very real pain 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 liberatory 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 smear the reputation of various individuals involved in the struggle. And as in earlier times it fights back by drafting culture into its service.

Culture is the mechanism by which a society equalizes, balances itself, diffuses anxiety, building and rebuilding 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 reaffirms itself through image and representation, and when a society perceives itself under threat - as white society presently does, culture's role is to assuage this anxiety and to encourage, in the populace in general, a feeling of well-being, that God is in his heaven and everything is in its place - the river continues to flow as it always did. In *Magic, Science and Religion*, the anthropologist,



Bronislaw Malinowski writes:

Anxiety in society may spring from diverse roots such as rational economic uncertainty; irrational economic uncertainty; a realistic fear of death; or a pseudo-realistic fear of magically induced illness. To meet and deal with these, society provides the means through which ritual beliefs, ritual activities, art, drama, or even daily work can operate in such a way as to relieve chronic anxiety arising from the individual's own view about his inadequacy, or lack of status, or even his own belief that his Ego is threatened by conditions around...Art is a cultural product and its execution is an experience which at once integrates the personality and unites the individual with society and its traditional values. (my emphasis)

As part of the cultural product of American society, the musical *Show Boat* functions to demean Blacks; it also functions to make whites "feel good about themselves." And as Toni Morrison argues, we need to combine the study of the impact of racism on its victims with "a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behaviour of masters."

Historically and right up to the present time in the United States, race, and in particular Blackness, has been a significant marker of many types of activities: sexuality; danger — the Black rapist or criminal; hipness or cool; as well as popular culture in general. But more than anything else, as Morrison and, in another way, Baldwin have argued, Blacks and Blackness have become the marker against which every group of immigrants has assessed its Americanness — depending on their distance from the Black underclass.

There is, therefore, every reason why cultural works which manipulate race and the racial tensions between Blacks and whites in the United States have a lasting seduction. When Joseph Swain 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 messages around race.

*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 riots, 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 and 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.

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 underscore this message — her disappearing acts which further the 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.

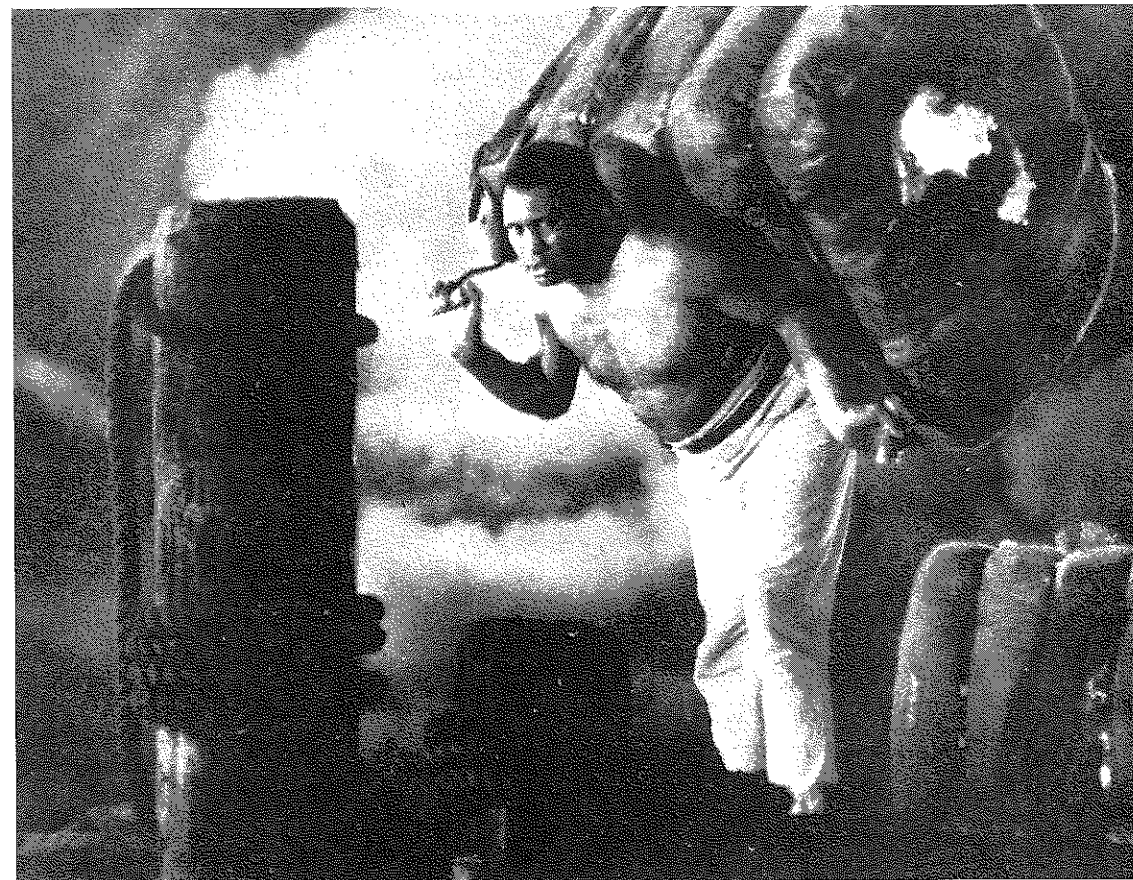
Yet another message is that Blacks are essentially servants whose role is to be resigned to their lot in life. Why? Just because. Just as the river is always there, so is black resignation and acceptance.

A fourth lesson for whites is that we are there as 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 underscores an attitude that goes right back to the early development of racial stereotypes (mentioned in Part I, *Showing Grit, Showboating North of The 44th 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 Black lives — the power of life and death as manifest 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 views of those opposing *Show Boat*. However, anyone who has taken the time and trouble to understand Black history in the Afrospora, (I use the word Afrospora, in place of diaspora) knows that the history is essentially one of resistance, beginning even before the slave ships had left the coast of West Africa.

Uprisings on board were a frequent occurrence. Twelve years after the first slaves landed in Haiti in 1502, there was a slave rebellion and in 1801, under the leadership of a former slave, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Africans defeated Napoleon's army and sent shock waves around Europe and the New World. In 1804 Haiti became the second independent country in the Western Hemisphere. Revolts took place with distressing and alarming regularity for slave owners in North and South America and the Caribbean. Independent maroon communities established themselves in Jamaica, Dominica, Brazil and Surinam and waged war with European powers.

Resistance took the form of "escape, revolt, theft, destruction of crops and machinery." (Bonnie Bartold, *Black Time: Fiction of Africa*) Africans' resistance to



Paul Robeson in *Show Boat*; courtesy of Slow Fade To Black.

slavery and their commitment to freedom is documented time and time again, primarily in the documents of their former masters, which undoubtedly means there was even more resistance than has been documented: "hundreds of slaves sued for their freedom, ran away from their masters, assaulted, robbed, poisoned and murdered whites, burned their masters' dwellings, and committed suicide" (Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro were published in Washington, D.C. 1926-27).

Given this history, and given what is happening in society today, why does white society want to be lulled into a false sense of security? It took the burning of a city by those who felt they had nothing to

lose to achieve some sort of half-baked justice in Los Angeles. It took the Yonge Street uprising to bring some attention to the concerns of young people, Black and white, in Toronto. What will it take to make those with the privilege of race, skin colour, class and gender — rich white men — realize what is at stake here? Furthermore, why is the message, of 'happy singing darkies' being given to whites at this time? Paul Robeson changed the words of 'Ol' Man River' — he sang of fighting and being thrown in jail for "showing a little grit." He understood only too clearly what the producers of this show will not understand.

Whites must ask themselves the following question: "Why are they being served up

entertainment whose function is to assuage their deep seated and often unacknowledged anxieties about race and class, and to encourage belief that everything is in its place and the 'Ol' Man River' of racism runs as usual?" Nothing and no one is in their place any longer. We need only look around and wonder who is being fooled here. Certainly not Black people. Most of us know the message we are supposed to take from the artefacts like *Into the Heart of Africa* and *Show Boat*. Do whites? And so Nero fiddles while Rome burns.

The ROM exhibit, *Show Boat*, the resurrecting of films like "Gone with the Wind," "Huck Finn," all these cultural products are an integral part of a society in crisis, a society



trying to deal with Blacks out of their assigned place. *Show Boat* is intended to make whites feel good about themselves: those who are lulled by this must bear some responsibility for the outcome of this disastrous exercise in insensitivity and racism, because the wave of change, the heartfelt and deep urge to live lives of dignity, will not die. It may go underground, but it will not go away.

My arguments linking the production of certain works, like *Show Boat*, to the state of society is further supported by looking at when this particular show boat has set sail.

**1927:** stage premiere — the romantic racialism typing Blacks as exotic pets and highly sexualized people has gained some prominence, but scholars like Franz Boas are mounting a challenge to the theories of inherited racial characteristics;

**1929:** silent film — this is the year in which 'Black' Friday occurs and the US stock market collapses;

**1932:** the Great Depression has begun;

**1936:** Universal film — the depression continues;

**1947:** Broadway production — World War II has ended and Blacks are returning from the war with increased demands; they have fought for America and they want something in return; women too have had a taste of independence but the return of the 'fighting men' will drive them back to the home 'front';

**1951:** MGM film — the civil rights movement has got underway;

**1954:** an opera — this is the year of the landmark decision, *Brown vs the Board of Education* which ended segregation in education in the USA;

**1966:** a stage production at the Lincoln Center in Washington — this is the year following the assassination of Malcolm X;

**1983:** a Broadway production and an opera in Houston — by 1983 the economy of the US has begun to go into a tailspin; inflation is on the rise. In fact between 1980 and 1990 there has only been a 2% wage gain for workers in North America.

The pattern that results from this analysis may be purely coincidental; if it is it is, coincidence with a capital C. My intent in drawing links between the production of this "revered classic" and wider crises within US society is not to suggest that there is some sort of free floating conspiracy of impresarios who are consciously looking at society and making artistic decisions based on what is happening there. I am suggesting a far more complex and nuanced set of factors that are at work, and if we understand that culture is at its most effective when it appears to be harmless and organic - merely happening - then we understand how *Show Boat* has become an invisible but crucially important part of the fabric of a white supremacist society. Producers and

impresarios, like Ferber and Kern were, are a part of society; they feel the tensions and crises as members of the cultural fabric and unconsciously work to "integrate the personality and unite the individual...with society and its traditional values."

The result of this sort of analysis shows what happens when, as Morrison argues, we "avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served." We begin to ask other questions which yield fruitful answers. Because when whites are creating images of Blacks and other subjected groups they are, in fact, creating images of themselves.

The various groups — I am tempted to say cabals - that form part of the network of power in Canada, have decided that Black pain has a price — that it comes cheap; they are also telling us that they are anxious, worried and concerned.

The affront at the heart of *Show Boat*, beginning with the book with its negative and one-dimensional images; the colossal and deliberate omission of the Black experience, of the pain of a people traumatized for four centuries of genocide and exploitation; the anger at seeing our music appropriated and turned to the profit of the very people who oppressed us; all that is still very alive today — the 'Ol' Man River of racism continues to run through the history of these productions, and is very much a part of this production. It is part of the overwhelming need of white Americans and white Canadians to convince themselves of our inferiority — that our demands don't represent a challenge to them, their privilege and their superiority.

The attempt on the part of *Livent*, Garth Drabinsky's company, to use *Show Boat* as a teaching tool to educate Canadians about racism, would be laughable if the stakes weren't so high — namely the education of children who are targeted in this enterprise. These educational packages are nothing but an attempt to justify and rationalize the exercise of power in bringing a racist show to Toronto. The best example and lesson in racism that exists is what has transpired to date in this city around the production of *Show Boat*.

While education is crucial around issues of race, in highly charged situations like these it can have limited impact as was borne out by what happened at Stratford on some occasions when *Merchant of Venice* played there some years ago: some members of the audience threw pennies at Shylock.

Furthermore, the involvement of a noted right-wing personality like William F. Buckley, who has openly expressed contempt for Blacks, and continued to do so when interviewed in Toronto recently, does not bode well for any 'educational process' undertaken by the producers of *Show Boat*.

*M. Nourbese Philip is a poet and a writer living in Toronto. Her most recent book, Showing Grit: Showboating North Of The 44th Parallel, is excerpted here.*



Julie Dash, director of *Daughters of the Dust*

## Black Studies, Cultural Studies PERFORMATIVE ACTS

Manthia Diawara

One 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, *elabore*, used by Antonio Gramsci to stretch and test the limits of Marxism, captures the sense of critical attitude I have in mind here. Elaboration has become, within cultural studies, a means to make use of some of the approaches and methodologies of poststructuralism while being critical of it as an institutionalized discipline.

Cultural studies often delineates ways of life by elaborating them quite literally, embarrassing and baffling previous theoretical understanding of those 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, positionality, and specificity. Through the "literal reading of event," cultural studies explicates the material bases and implications of world views we assume, and analyzes 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 1960s and 1970s researchers at the Birmingham Centre were mainly interested in the British working class and 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 Levi-Strauss, and the Frankfurt School. In contrast, in the 1980s black filmmakers, artists, photographers and writers were decomposing 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 and against ethnic absolutism in Britain, the construction of a hegemonic blackness by black Americans, and

