

Censorship, Passion & Identity

by **Courtney
McFarlane**

I want to say something about censorship as it relates to other issues of identity and difference. The debates about censorship rage on. When I hear the word, I hear meanings about self-censorship, social censorship, community censorship. I hear the myriad ways that we as people of colour internalize the oppressive attitudes of our society, our community and stifle the work we produce, we create. I don't first hear about the state-sponsored censorship that most people talk about. Most anti-censorship activists rarely address the issues of censorship that I experience directly.

Censorship is actually not an issue I feel very passionately about. The language used in discussing it is basically outside my experience. In order to participate in a panel discussion on this issue I had to do some basic research. I was somewhat ashamed to admit my ignorance of the Butler decision. I was aware in a peripheral kind of way of the harassment of lesbian and gay bookstores, customs seizures of queer images and other incidents around the city. However I had not personalized the issue. What I knew did not lead to any action or even outrage. I have recently finished four years at the Ontario College of Art, as insulating an educational institution as any other. Perhaps that explains some of my ambivalence about the issues.

As someone with a double consciousness, as a gay man and a Black man, I rec-

ognize that the issue is often framed and defined by people who are relatively privileged by this society. Censorship is often only viewed as the suppression of cultural productions related to sex and sexuality by the state, institutions of the state, and conservative elements of society. This limited definition is something I feel very outside of. Yes, there should be freedom to create, exhibit, distribute work of any nature and I should support that, but I am not passionate in that support or defence. I certainly have difficulties with that narrow definition of censorship. It often does not recognize the other subtle ways in which censorship is practiced: the forms of social censorship that exist even within the queer artistic communities.

We should all fight to defend freedom of expression, but recognize that we aren't equally free to express, create, exhibit, publish, perform, be picked, panned, critiqued, recognized and be paid.... much less be censored. Within a white, supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal, heterosexist society (I might have forgotten something) freedom is distributed unequally. Even though we as lesbian and gay artists have struggles that interconnect, they are not identical. The effect of censorship differs with one's position in society, one's place in the hierarchy. My struggle is about creating a community to support my expression, my cultural productions, to access resources from organizations or communities that don't necessarily see my silence or invisibility as a priority. Institutions continue to

value and privilege the way others represent me rather than the way I choose to represent myself. That defines art and culture in a manner that continues to marginalize my expressions and critiques my works by standards by which I will always be found lacking. I am coming from a space where there often isn't the luxury of time to create when energy is diverted in the fight for access to resources and in developing these communities to support and nurture my work.

That is basically where I am coming from in terms of this issue. So I would like to ask how much of this work that we are so passionately defending is by people of colour? How much of this work speaks to issues that are outside of your experiences? That takes positions with which we disagree? Any movement to combat censorship must recognize social censorship, marketplace censorship and, by extension, personal censorship. Not only censorship that directly affects us and those like ourselves, but the censorship that we participate in. As gay and lesbian activists, as artists, we are censored by the state and society but despite our sexual identity, those of us who are privileged whether it be by race, gender or class, have to acknowledge that privilege. So any struggle against censorship for me has to adequately address not only the state-sponsored censorship, the social censorship, but also the censorship I feel I live and breathe everyday. Unless censorship includes that struggle I will continue to be dispassionate about the anti-censorship movement.

While writing the original version of this article I went to a dub poetry festival in Toronto. Many of the people who support the black artistic productions such as this festival are lesbians and gays. So as we watched the performances that went on well beyond closing time, one of the performers, a well-known dub poet in the city, slipped in the world "lesbian" and within that space we heard it. The word.... yeah we caught it, sort of like dog hearing right, we heard it and thought it was so quick no one else would hear. Talking to a lesbian filmmaker on the way home, she described how this woman up front was saying "Oh yeh nuf respect, me like all that except for the lesbian part." Where I'm coming from within the Black community, lesbians and gays don't exist. The issue of homosexuality is never addressed and often we as Black lesbian and gay artists within these spaces are pressured to remain invisible and silent. In this culturally conscious queer milieu that is predominantly white, we continue to be marginalized and silent. Both of these realities are forms of censorship that I experience, that are real for me. Finally, I recognize that all forms of censorship limit all our struggles and that these links/connections have to be made.

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