



WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

"The media serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity...their choices, emphases, and omissions can often be understood best and sometimes with striking clarity and insight, by analysing them in such terms."

Herman and Chomsky

The media's coverage of high profile events such as the recent arrest for murder of two young African Canadian men, Adrian Kinkead and Rohan Ranger, often starkly illuminates their role as efficient and indispensable conduits of the "special interests dominat(ing) the state," particularly as they pertain to racial issues. Analysing their coverage of less spectacular events, however, can at times prove more useful in seeing how "choices, emphases and omissions" are made in furtherance of what Teun A. van Dijk describes as the "moral mission" of the "predominantly white institutions and business corporations" which constitute the mass media - namely pleading the cause of the "white Western group."

Two articles which appeared in *The Toronto Star* last Fall present such an opportunity for analysis. These articles

appeared on November 22, 1995 and December 2, 1995 by Peter Goddard and Andre Alexis respectively. They concerned an ongoing dispute between myself and the radio station CFRB 1010 arising out of a broadcast by Michael Coren on September 7, 1995.

During this broadcast Michael Coren first recounts a story he read about a Pakistani woman who had killed her young child and removed its eyes and kidneys for sale. This was proof, he states, that Canada was a far better place to live than the Third World. He expresses surprise that the woman was not in Canada as a refugee, heading up an organization like the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. The present head of this organization is herself a South Asian woman. Coren then expresses strong objections to my being awarded the 1995 Toronto Arts Award in Writing and Publishing. He makes inaccurate comments about my activities, about the award, as well as racist and disrespectful comments about my clothing and my appearance. In a word his objections were scurrilous, racist and sexist and constituted an attack on me as an African Canadian woman.

In his November 22, 1995 article Peter Goddard repeats Coren's unsavoury comments about my clothing. He does not report, however, that Coren specifically linked his demeaning remarks about my clothing to my race and ethnicity. Neither does he mention that Coren sets up an us/them paradigm: them being people like myself who have come to this country. Immigrants like Coren himself. Except that I am Black. After repeating, virtually verbatim, Coren's comments about me, Goddard then describes me as "every bit as outspoken as Coren."

As evidence of my outspokenness Mr. Goddard cites three examples:

1. "The usually controlled author June Callwood swore at her." The implication here is that I had to have done something to cause the "usually controlled June Callwood" to swear at me. What I did is never specified. This is how Joey Slinger describes this same "usually controlled"

June Callwood in an April 4, 1993 Toronto Star article: "Indignation has always been the gas in Callwood's tank." This was his attempt to explain why June Callwood swore at me. I am tempted to say, will the real June Callwood please stand up. Which of these descriptions is true? The fact is I offered June Callwood a leaflet in response to which she swore at me. But why let the facts get in the way of a good story?

2. "In 1990, Philip bluntly criticized the *Into the Heart of Darkness* show at the Royal Ontario Museum." Goddard's Freudian slip was clearly showing: the name of this exhibit was *Into the Heart of Africa*, but hell Africa, darkness - it's all the same isn't it? This statement is untrue and once again Goddard fails to identify the specifics of this "blunt criticism."

3. "Two years ago, she urged school boards not to send children to *Show Boat*..." Once again this statement is untrue and, as in the previous examples, the specifics are missing. Which school boards? Where? In Toronto? Across Ontario? And how did I urge this? And the *coup de grace*:

4. One of my "writer friends disagrees with the way (I do) things." The identity of this **alleged** writer friend is withheld; the specifics of **how** I do things missing. "Few properties of news," van Dijk writes, "are as revealing about the practices of news-making as quotations. They show not only with whom reporters have been talking, who have special access to the media, which news actors are found important and credible enough to be actually quoted, who are allowed to give their own opinions, but also how the journalist evaluates quoted opinions."

What is ironic here is that while the **alleged** writer friend was "important and credible enough" to talk to I was not. On Tuesday November 21, 1995 Goddard called my home and left a message on my answering machine to the effect that he had been speaking with one Ayanna Black (the mysterious **alleged** writer friend perhaps?), that he had heard about the Coren matter and would I give him a call. He

also understood, he stated, that there was a transcript which he would "love to see." **At no time** did Goddard indicate that he was writing a piece or that he was seeking my views on the matter. On November 22, 1995, before I had an opportunity to return his call Goddard's article appeared in *The Toronto Star*. Given that the Coren broadcast had occurred some three months earlier, urgency was certainly not a factor in the publication of this article.

What is striking about Goddard's piece is how it works on the basis of omission. Beginning with **the** most egregious omission mentioned above: the details of Coren's racist statements. Indeed, as Van Dijk writes: "it is sometimes more important to specify what is **not** said by the text than what is actually expressed. In many respects, media texts are ideological icebergs, of which only the tip is visible to the reader."

By implication and innuendo Goddard manages to convey to the reader that there is something amiss in what I have done and that this somehow justifies Coren's attack. And since we are, according to Goddard at least, both "outspoken" our mutual outspokenness cancels each other out.

If we follow Goddard's argument it goes something like this: being "outspoken" gives others the right to make racist, sexist statements about you. Or put another way, if someone makes racist statements over the largest private radio station in Canada, the gravity, import and impact of those statements are cancelled out if the person about whom the statements are made is perceived to be "outspoken." The fact that much of my non-fiction writing has been devoted to challenging racism in cultural practices, and the fact that Coren made an inaccurate and vituperatively racist broadcast about me on September 7, 1995 are seen to be equal. Could it be, however, that for Goddard merely writing critically at all on the subject of racism has the effect of transforming one into a being "every bit as outspoken" and, therefore, worthy of attack?

What the *The Toronto Star*, ably represented by Goddard, has done is protect Coren and make him out to be virtually harmless. A not-so-bad guy after all. This is, in fact, the reverse of what the media do in reporting of crime by people of colour, and particularly African people. Theirs is a "powerful role..." writes van Dijk "in the

reproduction of racism in Western societies." And herein lies the link between an issue that appears far removed from the arena of criminal activity - culture and the arts - and what can only be described as media overkill concerning the recent arrest of Adrian Kinkead and Rohan Ranger.

On October 20, 1995 Coren made certain on-air "retractions" concerning his September 7, 1995 broadcast. Goddard refers to the transcript of this broadcast in his article. Coren prefaces his retractions with the following words: "**I have since had communication from Miss Philip through her solicitors** that she considers a number of the statements that I made during my broadcast to be untrue." Coren was forced to make a "retraction" on October 20, 1995 as a consequence of him being served with a Notice under the **Libel and Slander Act**. Under Goddard's pen Coren's "retractions" mutate into his "attempting to defuse Philip's own charges somewhat." What charges? Not only does Goddard fail to describe accurately the context and nature of Coren's "retractions," but he misconstrues my defense of Coren's inaccurate statements as "charges." The result? The gravity of the situation - that only under threat of legal action did Coren correct egregious inaccuracies - is minimised. And, finally, by using the word "charges," Goddard suggests and implies that this is a situation in which there are charges and counter-charges between Coren and myself. Goddard also fails to tell his readers that Coren, **having had an opportunity to do so**, did not retract **any** of his demeaning and racist comments. The upshot of all this is that Coren's image is further protected.

The single most disturbing and problematic aspect of Peter Goddard's article, however, is that three of the four examples which he cites as proof of my "outspokenness" are the very same examples which Michael Coren used to base his scurrilous, racist attack on me: the PEN incident involving June Callwood; the **Into the Heart of Africa** exhibit and the Livent production of **Show Boat**. The very examples that Coren on October 20, 1995 was forced to "retract" because they were inaccurate and untrue. Indeed, Goddard refers to Coren's admission of "certain factual errors" on air, but he himself then proceeds to use these very examples to make equally untrue statements about my

involvement in these very incidents.

Not content to let things be, however, *The Toronto Star* published yet another article on December 2, 1995: "Larger Audience, Greater Responsibility." By a "brother" no less - one Andre Alexis. In the ninth paragraph of the piece, Andre Alexis writes that I "demonstrated against" the **Into the Heart of Africa** exhibit. As in the case of Goddard his Freudian slip was also showing - he identifies the exhibit as **Out of Africa!** Don't these journalists ever do research? But Alexis probably has his own reasons for wanting **Out of Africa**. Further, since he knows nothing about my activities, I must assume he bases his statement that I demonstrated against the exhibit on Coren's statement. The same statement that Coren was forced to retract on October 20, 1995. But then neither truth nor accuracy is of concern to Alexis.

Like Goddard he is far too concerned with indulging, if not defending, Coren's actions. He too repeats, in even greater detail, Coren's demeaning and racist remarks. Next he writes that my writing is not "hateful in the way neo-Nazi propaganda is hateful." What a relief! Then he dismisses Coren's racist attack as "so much schoolyard racism. It's not thuggery so much as the baiting of the thug's enemy by one of his puny hangers-on." Who is the thug? And who the enemy? Am I the one who is being bated and, therefore, the thug's enemy? And is Coren the "puny hanger-on"? Really! Albeit with a "potentially great" audience! Alexis does not explain how or when "schoolyard racism" (and, therefore, according to him dismissible) matures and becomes racism which should be taken more seriously. Contrary to what he implies the schoolyard is not the harmless place he believes it to be. It borders on the platitudinous and trite to say that children eventually grow into adults, and a child who is allowed to express racism in the school yard without being corrected will grow into an adult who does the same. This appears to have escaped Alexis.

However, while Alexis dismisses Coren's comments as "so much schoolyard racism" he does admit to being worried by the size of his audience. But if it is merely "schoolyard racism" why is he worried? Logic and Alexis, however, appear to be complete strangers.

Alexis accuses me of writing "as if Canada were a monolithic, racist culture; as if there were a "white Canada" made up solely of people who would take comfort in Coren's words." To do other than let my writing speak for itself is to pander to a gross and deliberate misreading of my work which borders on the absurd and reveals either profound malice or an abysmal lack of comprehension of issues I have written about. (This is not the first time either that Alexis has misread and misquoted my work.) The dedication page of my collection of essays *Frontiers* reads: "For Canada, in the effort of becoming a space of true true be/longing." The introductory essay to that work ends with the following words:

Whichever direction we take, it behooves us to remember that "our opponents are our co-creators, for they have something to give which we have not." This is the challenge facing all Canadians - African, Asian, European and Native - finding out what we can offer and accept from each other. It is the only way we will transform this place from a stranger place to one of true be/longing.

Alexis' omissions are as significant as Goddard's: like the latter he does not mention that it was Coren who in his broadcast set up the paradigm of the "monolithic" us and them. Goddard describes me as being as "outspoken" as Coren; Alexis as being as "ignoble" and my words as "racist." Evidence of this? A quotation from a review of mine of Neil Bissoondath's *Selling Illusions*. (See *Border/Lines* 36) The lengthy paragraph from which Alexis culls his quote attempts to grapple honestly with the complex ten-

sions that beset African/Asian relations wherever the two groups live side by side.

"Every bit as racist as Coren's broadcast and just as slipshod" is how Alexis chooses to categorise this effort. Note the similarity, however, between his tactics and Goddard's. Writing on the effect of racism and identifying racism in cultural practices makes you as "outspoken" as someone who makes racist attacks on others. Attempting to look seriously at the racial dynamics between Africans and Asians makes your words "as racist" as those of an individual who in one and the same broadcast describes South Asian women as being child murderers and an African woman as being dirty, unclean and dishonest! Such is the power of the media.

Having argued that what I had written was "every bit as racist as Coren's broadcast," Alexis concedes that "the pronouncements [mine and Coren's]...don't have equal weight...they can't really be compared." Why is he comparing them then? And if they can't be compared how does my statement become "every bit as racist"? Isn't that a comparison? In his madly illogical way, however, Alexis then rushes to suggest that somehow **because** Coren has a wider audience than I do, he should have a "greater sense of responsibility." In other words, because I write in small "academic, leftist magazine(s)" (Yeah for *Border/Lines*!) I should have a lower level of responsibility! It's an argument so fundamentally flawed - both morally and logically - as to leave me speechless. Surely, whatever the size of one's audience, a writer must bear responsibility for her words once she publishes them. And surely the size of one's audience ought not to be the determining factor in how one assesses the moral content of one's writing. According to Alexis' type of reasoning a neo-Nazi writer advocating race hatred who has a small audience, such as a classroom, or who writes in an obscure magazine or journal should be held to a lower standard of responsibility by virtue of the size of his audience.

Alexis' article may **appear** to be more critical of Coren than Goddard's; it serves the same purpose however: to exculpate Coren of responsibility for his words.

These articles serve a larger agenda - that of pleading the cause of symbolic elites: "Those groups...who directly address

public opinion and debate, such as leading editors, TV program directors, columnists, writers, textbook authors and scholars in the fields of the humanities and social sciences," whose job, according to van Dijk, is to reproduce consensus and racism.

Essentially these articles make it far easier for individuals like Coren to continue to do the work they do so well: under the guise of reporting or critiquing his broadcast they provide fundamental support for his activities. Both Goddard and Alexis were far more concerned with showing how much like Coren I am, rather than presenting the facts. In both instances the pattern is the same: to play down what Coren said, while at the same time saying that he did do something, because only then can they say that I am just like him.

The opinions of Peter Goddard and Andre Alexis that I am as "outspoken," "ignoble" and "racist" as Michael Coren lead to the inexorable conclusion that Michael Coren is justified in attacking me as an African Canadian woman in the venomously racist way he did. No amount of pusillanimous pussyfooting by Alexis changes that. Both these articles are tantamount to saying that I deserved to be attacked by Michael Coren: that is both their text and sub-text. They reveal an attitude which in other contexts is disturbingly familiar - that, for instance, women through their actions invite attack either through wearing revealing clothing, or being seductive or even being sex workers. The overwhelming message of both these pieces is that what Coren did was not that unacceptable after all, and, further, that I somehow encouraged and deserved what I got.

My non-fiction work addresses issues of racism and culture in Canada; it is engaged in the struggle to make Canada a society in which Africans, Asians and First Nations people feel a sense of belonging. This work has, almost exclusively, been published in small progressive magazines and by alternative presses. Michael Coren's views, opinions and writings - primarily conservative and right wing - have been embraced by the powerful organs of the mainstream media. Such is the power of the media, that I am represented as being as powerful as he is. But then again the white man's burden has always been a heavy one and many - the Goddard's, the Alexis', Black and white alike - are drafted into its service.