Antidote Hysteria: an interview

ROB TEIXEIRA "frames" the evidence in the London 'Pornography case.

London, Ontario has been the setting for a police and media-sponsored moral panic involving a series of arrests of teenage hustlers and gay men. Local presss have been abuzz with inflammatory articlesouting the so-called depraved practices of gay men who allegedly hunt down boys in order to have their way with them. By March 1995 there had been 45 gay men arrested and 371 charges brought down. Half of these charges involved the solicitation of sexual services of a person under 18—teen prostitution. There was one charge of making child pornography and 30 of possessing it. London Police Chief, Julian Fantino, used the media and public meetings to stir up public hysteria over a large "kidnapping ring" in London. This sordid practice was used to justify the creation of a province-wide investigation authorized by the Solicitor-General, under the name Project Guardian. By October 1995 there were over 60 arrests by Project Guardian in London and Toronto. Fantino has repeatedly engaged the puerile demeans of "pedophilia" in order to disqualify his detractors' opinions. It is of course a tactic of intimidation and an effort to silence dissent.

This kind of hyperbolic rhetoric is symptomatic of moral panic. Such hysteria is, historically, attached itself to "unseemly" sexual practices. Witness the regime of social hygiene and the concern over the rhetoric of containment and segregation promulgated by some U.S. public officials. The discourse of moral panic reduces the specific sexual activity to a singular focus in the social nexus, whereby unusual powers of causality are then attributed to it. The fallout from such collective paranoia is an exaggeration of sexual peril, attributing acute malignancy to specific sexual behaviour and in addition assigning them an exaggerated perniciousness: undesirable sexual acts are "everywhere" and have unusual powers to "corrupt" and subjugate others. Moral panic can be seen as a crisis of identity of the dominant group. When identities are based on insecurities, there is a marked propensity to guard jealously "boundaries" of identity.

A moral panic is concerned about advancing a specific set of clearly defined values—values which seem threatened by a set of projections of moral danger. In the first place, a sexual scandal is attractive both to the media and to the public. The readiness to exploit these issues betrays our deep cultural insecurities about sexuality in the West. Historically, it has been sexuality and drugs that have primarily galvanized "moral agents" who then provided the authoritative concepts designed to polarize sentiment into two camps: the "morally good" whose universalizing values are then bolstered by crucial institutions, like the family, state, judiciary, and police; and the "morally repugnant" whose actions and values are seen to have no "redeeming social value" and conflict with the dominant mode. Consequently those marginalized find themselves with little or no institutional support and thus little power in which to legitimize alternative or oppositional social values.

When sexuality is connected to youth then the underlying fears of the "corruption of youth" and of destroying the country's future take on particular force. These are the words of London Police Chief, Julian Fantino, heard on radio, commerce, TV and the even arrested. "It's an enterprise that's victimizing the most vulnerable of our society, very young, helpless children, and turning them into a life of crime." The fear is that these "children" have been forever "broken" and that the whole social fabric will unravel.

Most conspicuous in the London faisceau is the systematic silencing of the voices of the youth involved. If their voices are invoked at all, it is always by way of interpretation through social welfare agencies and the police, which invariably name them as passive victims of unscrupulous adults. Important realities which contextualize their lives are left out—abusive and dysfunctional families, poverty, survival, prostitution, and queer youth sexuality.

The complex and contradictory ways in which young gay men who are faced with a myriad of social barriers negotiate and experience their sexuality in a homophobic world is rarely part of the discourse surrounding this case.

Max Allen, a CBC radio producer, aired one of the first critical shows on this case, entitled, "The Trials of London." It was researched in part by a young gay journalist, Joseph Cudore, and was broadcast on CBC's ideas in October 1994. Gerald Hamilton's Globe & Mail article, "The Kiddie-Porn Ring that wasn't!" (March 11, 1995) and John Greyson's television documentary, "After the Bath," all contributed to presenting a much needed forum for the perspectives of the youth and men. Their efforts, along with those of other journalists, artists and activists, continue to challenge the official reports of the media and police. They have provided a counter-discourse to a powerful ideology perpetuated by police and most media.

One person who has worked on the campaign to "Rapeal the Youth Porn Law" is postmodern feminist, author, and activist, Shannon Bell. She is the author of: Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body (Indiana, 1994), Whore Carnival (Autonamedia, 1995), and with Brenda Cossman, Becki Ross & Lise Getell, Bad Attitude's: Feminism, Pornography and the Butler Decision (forthcoming, 1996).

ROB TEIXEIRA: Can you comment generally on what's been happening in London, in terms of how the "Child Pornography" law is set up and who it's targeting.

SHANNON BELL: It's targeting intergenerational sex, it's collapsing the categories of child, youth and adult so that you find, that a lot of the people referred to as "children" are actually 15 year old guys.

Photographs by David Maitby
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WITH SHANNON BELL

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London, Ontario has been the setting for a police and media sponsored moral panic involving a series of arrests of teenage hustlers and gay men. Local press have been abuzz with inflammatory articles outlining the so-called depraved practices of gay men who allegedly hunt down boys in order to have their way with them. By March 1995 there had been 43 gay men arrested and 571 charges brought down. Half of these charges involved the solicitation of sexual services of a person under 18—teen prostitution. There was one charge of making child pornography and 20 of possessing it. London Police Chief, Julian Fantino, used the media and public meetings to stir up public hysteria over a large “kidnap-porn ring” in London. This spectacle was used to justify the creation of a province-wide investigation authorized by the Solicitor-General, under the name Project Guardian. By October 1995 there were over 60 arrests by Project Guardian in London and Toronto. Fantino has repeatedly engaged the pernicious demeanour of ‘pedophile’ in order to disguise his detractors’ opinions. It is of course a tactic of intimidation and an effort to silence dissent.

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When sexuality is connected to youth then the underlying fears of the “corruption of youth” and of destroying the future take on particular force. These are the words of London Police Chief, Julian Fantino, heard on ideas, concerning the men arrested: “It’s an enterprise that’s victimizing the most vulnerable of our society, very young, helples children, and turning them to a life of crime.” The fear is that these “children” have been forever “broken” and that the whole social fabric will unravel.

Most conspicuous in the London cases is the systematic silencing of the voices of the youth involved. If their voices are evoked at all, it is always by way of interpretation through social welfare agencies and the police, which inevitably frame them as passive victims of uncivilized adults. Important realities which contextualize their lives are left out—abusive and dysfunctional families, poverty, survival prostitution, and queer youth sexuality.

The complex and contradictory ways in which young gay men who are faced with a myriad of social barriers, negotiate and experience their sexuality in a homonormative world is rarely part of the discourse surrounding this case.

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One person who has worked on the campaign to “Repeal the Youth Porn Law” is postmodern feminist, author, and activist, Shannon Bell. She is the author of: Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body (Indiana, 1994), Whore Carnival (Autonema, 1999), and with Brenda Cassman, Becki Ross & Lise Gotell, Bad Attitude’s Feminism, Pornography and the Butler Decision (forthcoming, 1996).

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Photographs by David Moffat
So one of the things we did in terms of attempting to repeall the Youth Pornography Law was to make an image which would challenge the prohibition against dressing up as a child, and exchange of the least contentious images that i have ever done. I mean, it's considered child pornography if you are, for instance, my age, which is 39. Anyone who is a child, so we used the codes of the teddy and t-shirt and came up with this shot of me holding a teddy in front of me with my finger on my clist.

RT: Fantino, remarking on the pictures that they took from the video they fished out of the river, said, "Pictures don't lie, it's all there," which is, of course, a very literal reading.

SB: Pictures tell many different stories. For example, if you actually have never seen representation of anal intercourse or sex between two men, you may see it, especially when you are socialized to be heterosexual, chances are you may find it offensive, and that's part of the whole thing. Similarly, we are all socialized to accept sexual representation between persons of similar ages.

RT: The so-called Child Porn Law seems set up in a way which makes it very difficult to criticize and challenge. You have very emotionally charged and sensational issues to confront. What kind of strategy can we use to fight it?

SB: It was rushed through the last days of the Conservative government, we all know that. The police benefited from this new law in terms of Project Guardian— that is, joint operations involving the London police, Metropolitan Toronto police and the Ontario Provincial Police—so the law is really good for police budgets.

RT: And you're finding a split in attitudes around what's happening. Young people love the new laws, and sex workers and sex trade workers have noticed in terms of media coverage, even in the alternative press, an exclusion around the plight of sex trade workers and their clients.

SB: Yes, that is something that has been overlooked. Eli Langier has made the connection himself, he's quite good. I think there are more social stigma and more juridical issues that affect those young people and their clients than for artists. In London the ones that ended up taking it were the clients. But I know also that Eli has suffered a lot, his work was confiscated.

RT: The Child Porn Law is situated within a context of moral panic which has historically pivoted around gay men and the spectre of the "pedophile." Examples include a 12-year-old shoe shine boy, Emmanuelle, Jackson, a transsexual suspect, and the "taxpayers' movement" on the roof of the Yonge St. body-curtain parlor in August 1977. A depraved crime which also brought depraved incidents of homophobic farrago, such as calls for capital punishment being implicated. This led to raids on the officers of the Body Politic, a Toronto gay liberation newspaper, and a subsequent court battle. During this time as well, there was the Davey County anti-gay historic of Arnie Snyder. Here we are in 1995-96 and this is happening again. Why?

SB: Yes, it keeps resurfacing as moral panic. And it also resurfaces at a time when conservative forces have regrouped. This is because you've got "family values" being really strong in terms of governmental policy with the so-called Republican revolution. As well, there is a real move toward criminalization, a real move now toward putting more people in prison, stronger laws and harsher sentences along the line of "getting tough with crime." When you add to that the fact that people in prison are there for drug charges, not major drug charges, you've got a very strong social policy.

RT: In terms of coalition activity around this whole issue, how has the Child Porn Law created new coalitions between such groups as the gay community and sex trade workers?

SB: I think that coalition was already there. The people attending some of the demos were pretty much the same people. I think it solidified a coalition and made it more visible. The sex trade workers are really busy right now fighting some of the pending sex laws. They are under major stress as well and they don't really have any sort of coherent policy set out right now on the so-called Child Porn Law. Also, most of what they have to say is geared toward the young guys that are working and not toward their clients, and it's the clients who are really taking the shit on this. Partly this is all tied up with the issue of intergenerational sex and the exchange of money for sex.

RT: Are you finding a split in attitudes around what's happening? Young people love the new laws, and sex workers and sex trade workers have noticed in terms of media coverage, even in the alternative press, an exclusion around the plight of sex trade workers and their clients.

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RT: A lot stronger this time around, you think? When you actually start to break down the word "pedophile" you start to uncover the reality of what is going on. When you read something that says "pedophile," unless you're aware you actually think they're talking about somebody who is having sex with someone who is sexually or someone touching or molesting someone who is a child, maybe it is a teenage girl or a teenage boy, or a teenage man or woman. And one of the clever things Max Allen does on Ideas is when he talks about how a London cop had forced sex with a young woman who was seventeen, he calls her a "girl." Max then talks about how ridiculous that sounds. As women we fought very hard not to be called girls, even at seventeen. Max brought attention to how ridiculous it sounds to call her a "girl." It is just as ridiculous calling gay people that same "boys."
RT: Aren't some of them actually older?
SB: Yes, 16 or 17. Not 18 because then it's legal. So part of it is that they are legal. Another part of it is because the exchange of images that we have ever done. It is, I mean, considered child pornography if you are, for instance, my age, which is 39. If you are an adult person who is older than 20 and you really屈 to be a child, so we used the codes of the teddy and T-shirt and came up with this shot of me holding a teddy in front of me with my fingernail on it.
RT: Fantino, remarking on the pictures that they took from the video they fished out of the river said, "Pictures don't lie, it's all there," which is, of course, a very literal reading.
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RT: In order to justify police budgets as well, it seems.
SB: Yes, to justify police budgets. Also, it's much easier to target people in the streets rather than in their homes which is where a lot of abuse actually takes place.
RT: It's really important to make distinctions, if people tell you that at 15, 16, 17 or any age for that matter, they are being abused, then I think you really should listen to them. But it's a different thing when you've got social services and the cops telling you to say that.