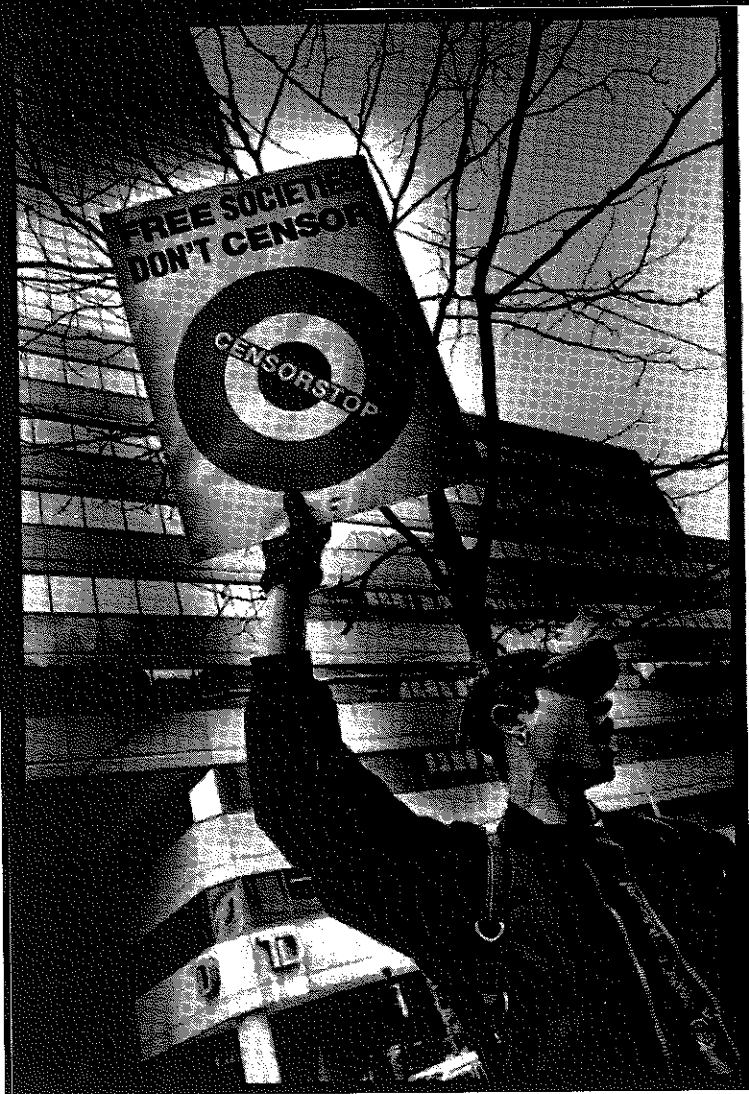


Antidote to Hysteria: an inter



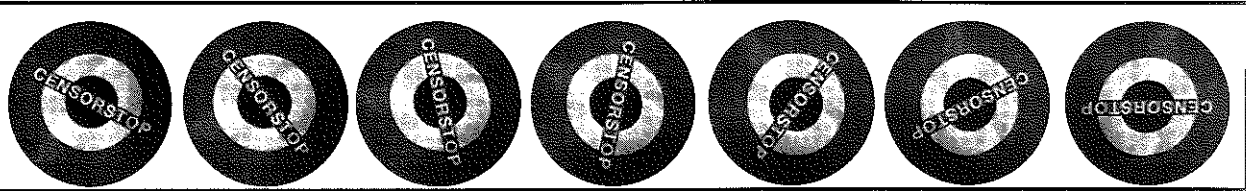
ROB TEIXEIRA “frames” the evidence in the London ‘Pornography’ case.

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 presses have been ablaze 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 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 20 of possessing it. London Police Chief, Julian Fantino, used the media and public meetings to stir up public hysteria over a large “kiddie-porn ring” in London. This spectre 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 demon 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 a moral panic. Such hysteria has, historically, attached itself to “unseemly” sexual practices; witness the regime of social hygiene and the concern over

prostitution and venereal disease at the turn of the century; and more currently, the hysteria surrounding HIV/AIDS and the rhetoric of containment and segregation promulgated by some U.S. public officials. The discourse of a moral panic reduces the specific sexual activity to a singular locus 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 pervasiveness: 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 “borders” 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



view

WITH SHANNON BELL

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 *Ideas*, commenting on the men arrested: "it's an enterprise that's victimizing the most vulnerable of our society, very young, helpless 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 fiasco 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 Couture, and was broadcast on CBC's *Ideas* in October 1994. Gerald Hannon'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.

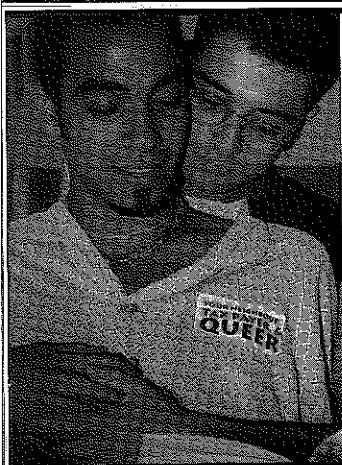
One person who has worked on the campaign to "Repeal the Youth Porn Law" is postmodern feminist, author, and activist, Shannon Bell. She is the author of: *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Indiana, 1994); *Whore Carnival* (Autonomedia, 1995); and with Brenda Cossman, Becki Ross & Lise Gotell, *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 young adult so that you find, that a lot of the people referred to as "children" are actually 15 year old guys.



Photographs by David Maltby



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.

RT: Aren't some of them actually older?

SB: Yes 16, or 17. Not 18 because then it's legal. So partly it's got to do with the exchange of money, partly it's got to do with this very strange category they've created of "child" when it really refers to young adult. Also we know that the police were forcing the guys that they photographed off the videos to give statements on their customers in exchange for no sentences, and for getting on victim compensation.

RT: The police are giving these guys money?

SB: Yes, it is legitimate money they could use to get their lives in order; it's a social service program, but there are strings attached. I feel one of the problems is, until Max Allen did the *Ideas Series* on CBC, there wasn't really a forum for these guys to say anything. I think it's important to make distinctions among child pornography, sexual representation of young people, people who are forced into having sex, and young people who are having sex for money. The law is targeting gay men mostly—but that doesn't mean it's any better if it starts targeting heterosexual men and young prostitutes.

RT: Their definition of "child" is a specific problem. We're definitely seeing a subtle shift in categories, where even the age of 21 can be regarded as "child." I'm not talking about a legal definition, but in terms of a general discourse surrounding child welfare agencies and social services where the age is creeping up, maybe not legally but in terms of how we think about it. Social service agencies are becoming more conservative in that regard; I don't know why, maybe it's a reaction against child abuse discourse being more prevalent today?

SB: I'm not sure. One of the things that they tend to do, and it was done at the Meese Commission on pornography in the States in 1985, is the mixing of images. They would use what some people would see as really objectionable pornography mixed in with really banal images. In the London and related newspaper articles they tend to give the impression that they are children, when often these are people who can make their own decisions, so they collapse the categories. I don't know why they do that. I think it gives people the idea that the police and morality squads are really doing something, somehow.

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.

So one of the things we did in terms of attempting to repeal the Youth Pornography Law was make an image which would challenge the prohibition against dressing up. It was one 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, portraying someone 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 clit.

RT: Fantino, remarking on the pictures that they took from the videos they fished out of the river, said, "Pictures don't lie, it's all in 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, when you 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—a joint forces operation involving the London police, Metropolitan Toronto police and the Ontario Provincial Police—so the law is really good for police budgets.

It's a difficult thing to fight because very few people are going to come out and say, "I'm pro child pornography" and to attack the law it's almost like you put yourself in that position. People don't want to do that because they know they are going to be slammed or they have something at stake. Instead, you can talk about things like people are not children when they are 14—depending on the person—some 14 year olds are still children but a lot of 14 year olds aren't. Fifteen, certainly 16, 17 and 18 are not children. Many people 15 to 18 years old are having sex and are capable of making decisions. Now what this law means is that they can't have representations of themselves having sex.

I think the reason that there's been such little visible resistance is because the people who know what it's all about and who would resist are exactly those who are being targeted, such as gay men who are having sex with men who are under 18. Much of the gay community is also a bit worried about their representation in the press as being really pro-intergenera-

tional sex. I think since this came up at the same time that spousal benefits were a big issue, it really managed to splinter the energy of the gay community. You've got the whore community and you've got some aspects of the queer community and you've got a very interesting coalition with the Trotskyites. They've been very active. And then you've got different individuals from various universities who are very active in terms of free speech and things like that.

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 has solidified a coalition and made it more public. You see, the sex trade workers are really busy right now fighting some of the pending sex laws. They are under major duress 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 all this is 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 under this new law between artistic production and sex trade workers? I've 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 Langer has made the connection himself; he's quite good. I think there are more social stigma and more jail sentences for hustlers 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 panics which historically have pivoted primarily around gay men and the spectre of the "pedophile." Examples include a 12-year old shoeshine boy, Emmanuel Jacques, who was found sexually assaulted and murdered on the roof of a Yonge St. body-rub parlour in August 1977. A deplorable crime which also brought deplorable incidents of homophobic furor, such as calls for capital punishment to be reinstated, or more police power, and the elimination of gay people. It was clear that the whole gay community was being implicated. This led to raids on the offices of the *Body Politic*, a Toronto gay liberation newspaper, and a subsequent court battle. During this time as well, there was the Dade County anti-gay rhetoric of Anita Bryant. 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. I think it's a lot stronger this time 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 lines of "getting tough with crime." When you consider that up to half the people in prison are there for drug charges, not major drug charges, you've got a very criminalized society.


When you actually start to break down the word "pedophilia" 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 or sexually touching or molesting someone who is a child, rather than someone who is 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 guys that same age "boys."

RT: I guess I'm surprised that there isn't more vocalization coming from within the gay community.

SB: There's fear. They're scared in the sense that the gay community doesn't want to be targeted as pedophiles, with the meaning that is read into the term "pedophile." They have quite a bit to lose, which is why there are few people speaking up. The people who are speaking up tend to be political activists, but they're keeping fairly quiet too. If you take a look at *Xtra* (Toronto's gay and lesbian bi-weekly) often when they run an article that's supportive of the men and boys in London they tend to get a lot of letters against it.

Sky Gilbert's opening play, *More Divine*, for the new Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (Toronto) was targeted. The play is about Foucault and a number of different things, and one of the things that is included is a reference to man-boy love. Well, immediately the press picked that up and talked about how again, yet again, taxpayers' money was going to support a theatre company that does stuff on "pedophilia." I think this label is used really to terrorize groups, so as a strategy for survival, groups end up softening their support in a way.

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 have to listen to them. But it's a different thing when you've got social services and the cops telling them to say that.



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