



Mike MacDonald, *Fireplace* 1993

BY Robyn Gillam

# book REVIEW

Diana Augaitis, Lorne Falk, Sylvie Gilbert and Mary Anne Moser, eds., *Questions of Community: Artists Audiences Coalitions*. Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts, 1995.

**“The central point to coalition politics is the concept of local or community control. In cultural terms, this politics would argue for community-based cultural production where people have local control of cultural resources. Given the incursions of information as currency through free trade agreements, a living culture that has any relevance to people’s lives could go the way of the forests and the east coast fishery real fast.”**

Carol Conde  
and Karl Beveridge,  
“Some Thoughts on Art  
and the Labour Movement”

This is a beautiful little book with its board covers, cloth spine and endpapers of handmade Japanese paper. As I open it and leaf through the tastefully composed semi-glossy pages with wide margins and carefully considered assemblages of picture and text, I reflect that it is indeed an artistic work, both in the sense that it is the work of artists, and that it represents by its form a pre-industrial, “artisanal” form of production where things are made “by hand.” But do not be too sure.

Anyone expecting a tasteful stroll through the “olde crafte” world of the artist will be disappointed and uncomfortable as the editors and authors of this collection seek to confront the post-industrial society in which they find themselves, as well as question directly the sources of funding that have sustained them in a subsistence state for the last forty years.

*Questions of Community* grew out of *Community*, a ten week residency programme in visual arts at the Banff Centre. It consisted of four programmes in visual arts (photography, ceramics, studio and gallery) and four community groups. These groups were Pauktuutit, representatives of the pan-Arctic Inuit Women’s Association; Second Decade: AIDSCommunityTelevision, a group of artists producing public service announcements about AIDS and HIV; Mekarn, artists exploring language and culture; and A New Generation, An Old Culture, consisting mainly of Japanese ceramic artists. Other artists in residence included M. Nourbese Philip, Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge, Chris Creighton-Kelly and Dot Tuer.

In the opening essay in the collection, “Parables of Community and Culture for a New World (Order),” Dot Tuer examines the possibilities for the existence and survival of community in the “New World Order” of universal penury and servitude to post-industrial capitalism. Tuer begins with a dictionary definition of community, which she proceeds to deconstruct with reference to how settler societies in North America have used the idea of community, first, to justify the destruction of Native societies in the name of Christianity and, second, to undermine the surviving groups in order to promote Christian values. Tuer concludes that community, a flawed and tainted term, is nevertheless appropriate to describe a North American landscape that is spiritually damaged.

The *Community* project was financed through the usual channels such as government grants and contributions from a few private foundations; also some of the

groups invited to participate were artificially constituted for the event. The contradictions inherent in this kind of situation are explored by Chris Creighton-Kelly in "Bleeding the Memory Membrane: Arts Activism and Cultural Institutions." This incisive, disturbing piece, one of the strongest in the collection, explores the situation of a former arts activist working for government granting bodies; he anguishes over how the notion of community is stretched in trying to accommodate his own former artistic community as well as his colleagues at the office.

Using Stuart Hall's theory of audiences/communities as either adversarial towards or accepting of political/cultural hegemony, Creighton-Kelly tries to unpack these tensions and to suggest solutions to the impasse. He concludes that artists are best served by cautiously and continuously negotiating their position with arts councils and funding bodies. He also tries to make sense of his own position as a former arts activist working within a government agency by suggesting that people who work within the system must facilitate the process of negotiation and force it to change.

Another major theoretical essay in this volume is "Who's Listening? Artists, Audiences & Language," by M. Nourbese Philip, reprinted from her collection, *Frontiers* (1992). Nourbese Philip examines the possibility of broadening the audience for diasporic Black culture in Canada without compromising artists' messages and/or titillating a white, mainstream audience. Philip also stresses the need for negotiation that takes the form of alliances among various communities to create different, more aware audiences. Take for example, the Black-Feminist-Lesbian nexus; merging different sites of oppression enables a sharing of feelings and experiences that have a common base, an act that Philip sees as essential to any connection between artist and audience. The performativity of Black art forms such as Dub has influenced conventional literary forms such as poetry and made possible their embrace by the commercialized, multimedia market place. In the end, however, Philip admits the difficulty of being allowed a place to stand in the white literary landscape. Also addressing race is Aruna Srivastava's "The Labour of Anti-Racism," which takes the form of a letter

to one of the editors. Srivastava takes as her starting point Patricia Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: The Diary of a Law Professor*, to assert that a non-racist sensibility is formed by working hard, by crossing boundaries, by being prepared to feel uncomfortable and by taking personal risks. Srivastava maps out the road to this conclusion through the personal rather than the theoretical.

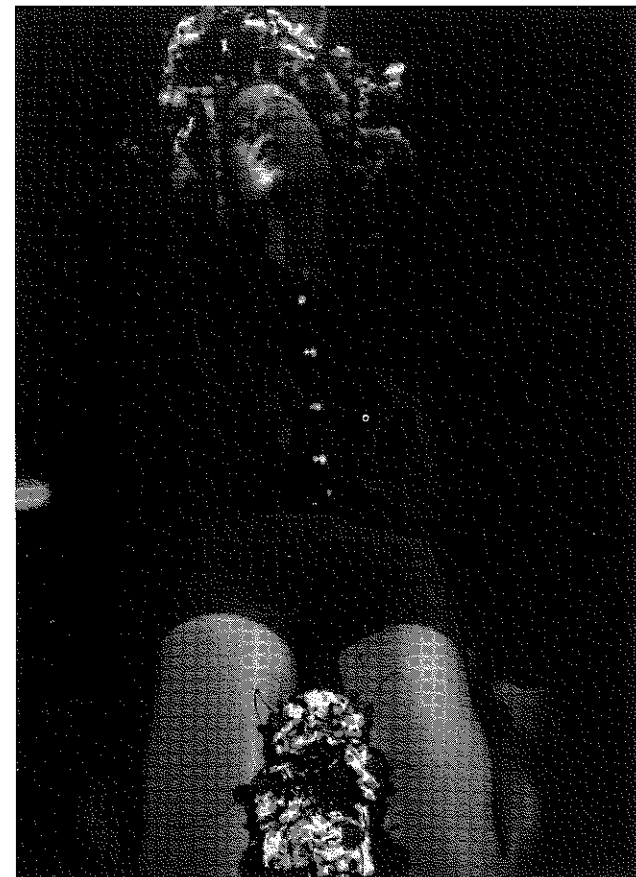
The pieces in this volume that document personal experiences were written at different times from varying perspectives, but there runs through them a theme that, like an iron braid, binds them together into a narrative, or if you will, a novel. The novel has a plot, and it has characters such as those who make up Minquon Panchayat, the Calgary chapter of a coalition of Native Artists and Artists of Colour formed at the

The theme of racism and community is also taken up by Pauktuutit who tell the story of their persistence through creativity in the face of cultural genocide. Ruby Arngna'naaq describes how the women in her group are conceptualized by settler society as artists having an unusual aptitude, although in her culture producing art, which is to say, making things, is a normal everyday occurrence. Rhoda Karetak, speaking in Inuktitut, tells of the erasure of community through technology, relocation and education/indoctrination. Her speech is recorded in a bilingual text.

In "Wataboshi means wool cap, a plant gone to seed," Bruce Kanabara chronicles a different search for the idea of community. The artists who were part of A New Generation, An Old Culture were either *sansai* (third generation) Japanese Canadians

**"The demand of Queer activism to be recognized and not just tolerated is an important model for community politics as a whole."**

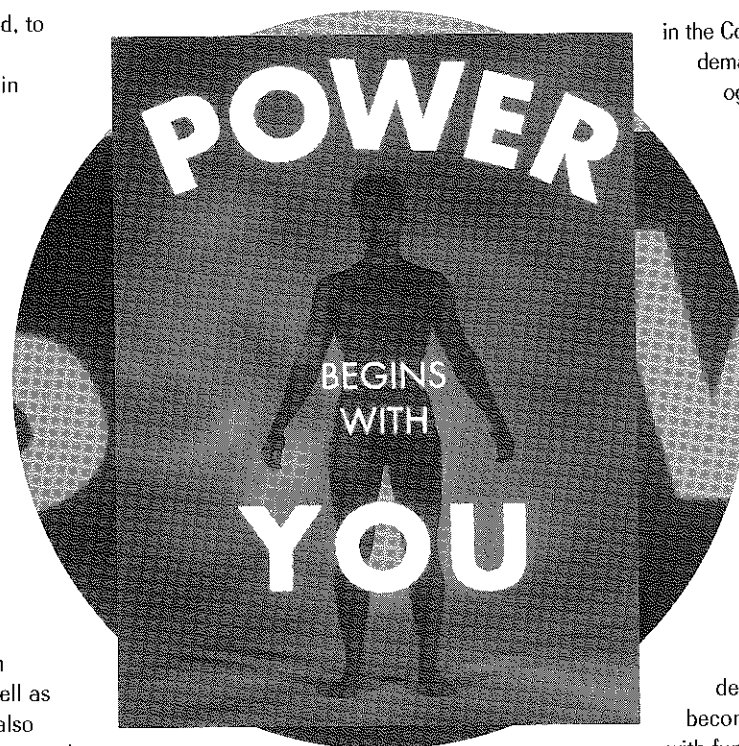
1994 Meeting of ANPAAC, just before that unfortunate organization imploded, partly, if not wholly, under the weight of the concerns that the Coalition was formed to address. Although not part of the Community Project, Minquon Panchayat resided at the Centre in 1994 and engaged in what it termed a guerrilla campaign designed to show that racism was inherent in Banff as an institution. The success of the campaign is demonstrated by the uproar that it generated at the Centre and by its documentation in a series of anonymous computer postings that make up its contribution to this volume. Srivastava fears that they may appear too anarchic to be recognized as an effective coalition, but recalls them "with love" and in relation to her own struggles in this area. Minquon Panchayat sums up its position with a quotation from Trinh Minh-ha, "If your coalition is comfortable, it's not wide enough."



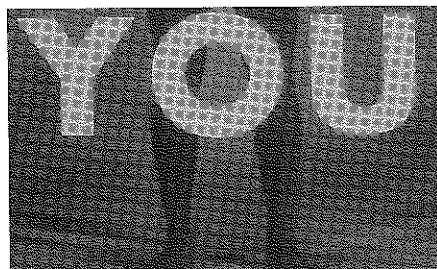
or artists who had left Japan and, to some degree, its culture behind them. What they decided to do in their residency in Banff was to establish links with the local Japanese community, which, due to outside pressures, kept a low profile. Overcoming barriers of distrust and even of language (the *sensei* were exclusively anglophone), the group was able to set up joint activities and projects (a kiln firing and photographic documentation of the community) as part of the exhibition. Kanabara's piece takes the form of a diary in which he defends the idea of community as based on socializing and friendship as well as organized political action. He also tackles the problem of how artists working within a western avant-garde framework can communicate with the more traditional members of their own community.

This problem was also faced by Henry Tsang when he and Lorraine Chan set up *Self Not Whole*, an exhibition at the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver. Tsang realized that open communication was essential in trying to address an audience that, although connected by ethnicity, was separated from the artists by cultural and language barriers. The traditionalist and populist sentiments of the people who ran the centre meant that one particular installation had to be changed and that a special effort had to be made to reach an audience that could not read the English texts. The negotiations of these difficulties encouraged Tsang and filmmaker Karin Lee to embark on an even more ambitious project, *Racy Sexy*, a multimedia arts project focussing on AIDS education and sexuality that targets young people from different cultural backgrounds. This project was situated in different community centres in the Vancouver area, but shopping malls, which should have been an ideal venue for this kind of work, refused to display the exhibit's material on the grounds that it promoted homosexuality.

Such ideological barriers were made explicit by the activities of *Second Decade*



which created public service announcements about AIDS education for television. Although none of their ads was sexually explicit, their lack of judgmental fear-mongering and of heterosexual bias condemned them to the art gallery. Even more explicit hostility greeted the artists' coalition, *Average Good Looks*, when they put up a billboard in Winnipeg targeting homophobia. The virulence of the messages to the group's 1-800 number left them in fear for their personal safety and the poster was vandalized by the Ku Klux Klan. These events led to the formation of Queer Culture Canada (QCC) which organized interventions into mainstream events like the multicultural Folkarama festival and the historical Festival du Voyageur (retooled as Festival du Voyeur). Like Minquon Panchayat's guerrilla art at Banff such activities challenge established notions of what community is. The activist politics of *Second Decade* and *Average Good Looks* continually push the boundaries of taste and comfort and refuse the instinct for compromise and harmony recognized as so constricting by some groups



in the Community residence. The demand of Queer activism to be recognized and not just tolerated is an important model for community politics as a whole.

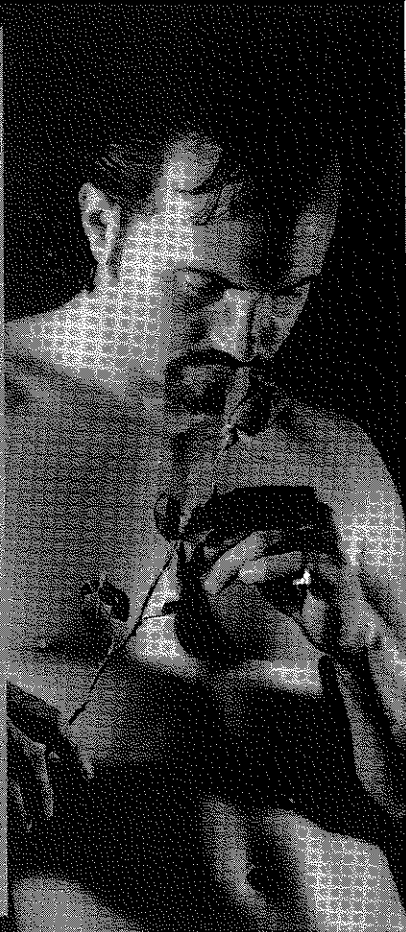
A fundamental problem with this collection is highlighted by Chris Creighton-Kelly's pivotal essay. While for the last forty years, much cultural activity in Canada has been government-sponsored in one way or another, one of the effects of the New World Order described by Tuer is the imminent disappearance of this source of funding.

The kinds of negotiation between artists and bureaucrats described by Kelly may soon become a thing of the past, along with funding for institutions like the Banff centre and community centres and institutions of the kind described above. As we have seen the market-driven and ideologically inflexible commercial media are not willing to give scope to artists with messages that challenge normative notions of morality or ideology.

In an era of increasing corporate influence over culture and social life, "community" is sometimes an abused term. As noted in the contribution by Karl Beveridge and Carole Conde, pulp and paper industries might allow workers to participate in staged-managed community consultations, but they make sure that their voices are strategically drowned out.

What we see in these essays is a shift from theory to personal experience, as exemplified in the inset coloured decal (above). This decal depicts a recognizably male, but at the same time, rather androgynous figure that is partly in shadow but illuminated from the side and from behind by many colours. This figure, which seems to symbolize a juxtaposition of race, sexuality and gender, is labeled "Power Begins With You." The editors remind us that all coalitions and communities are made up of particular people and invite us to take part and to act for change, starting with the display of the decal, a small piece of artistic activism.

**OUT  
THERE**  
STORIES OF  
PRIVATE  
DESIRES  
HORROR  
AND THE  
AFTERLIFE  
PERRY  
BRASS



**B/I  
List**

**fiction**

**Perry Brass, *Out There: Stories of Private Desires, Horror, and the After-Life.* Bronx, New York: Belhue Press, 1994.**

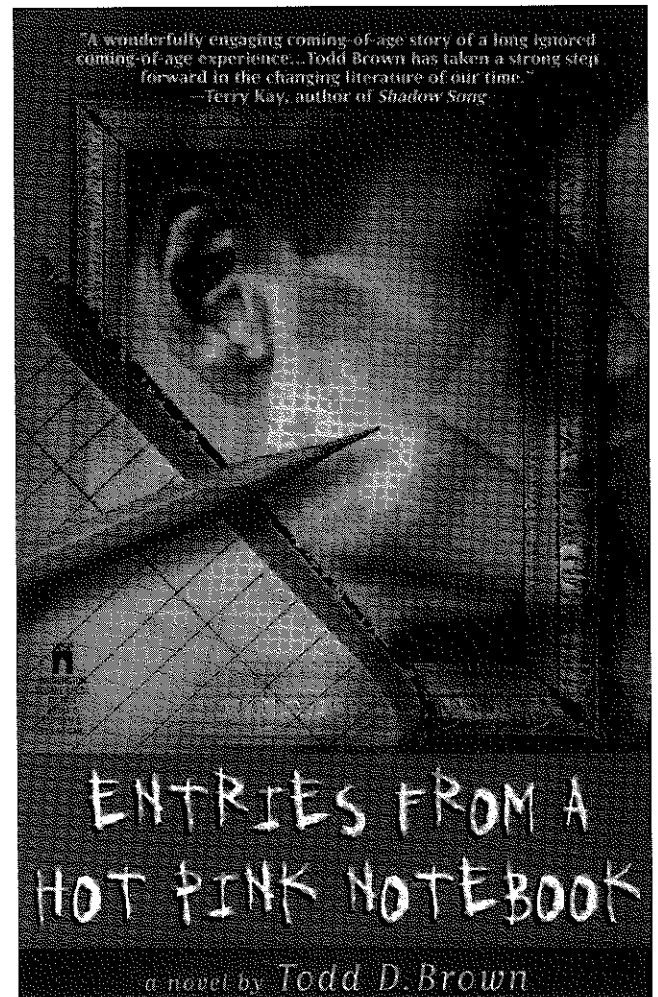
Brassy Perry Brass: "He had smoked Gaulois in Paris and kief in Paul Bowles' Tangier casbahs. He had been an *enfant terrible* in New York's shark-infested advertising world. Finally... he discovered gay liberation." And wrote poetry, essays, science fiction and short stories, some of which are collected in *Out There*. Brass sounds like a guy in a hurry. His stories read like he writes in a hurry — but the love, mystery, violence and fantasy in *Out There* are not restricted in a "one note" way. "Alligator Men," for instance, has Rob, a typical New Yorker, rebuffed by his boyfriend while Rob is on business in Orlando. He tries to hustle a bartender at his hotel, is drugged by the guy who then sells him to a couple of guys who in turn sell him to some four-toed swamp people. All in a few pages — and a long way from *Remembrance of Things Past*. For a while Rob misses things past (the *Times*, urban times). The four-toed present, though, gets to be quite alluring. Sort of. Wild eh? The other stories, a little less rushed, are only slightly less compelling. They are as the *San Francisco Bay Times* said of another of Brass's works, "a shot of adrenaline to the creative centers of the brain."

/S.F.

**Todd D. Brown, *Entries From a Hot Pink Notebook.* N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1995.**

High school crushes, dysfunctional parents, sports 'n homework 'n proms: just another in a long line of "life sucks/life's cool" novels about growing up. What's different, of course, is that Ben likes boys. Todd D. Brown does for young, males what Rita Mae Brown does for young females — gives 'em models other than the asexual ergo heteronormative pair of Chip Hilton and Nancy Drew. Written in a lukewarm pink style in a hot pink notebook, *Entries*, possibly because it records few "entries," may be what some liberal parents should give their kids if the latter wanna read pulp instead of watch *Pulp Fiction*. Done as a diary covering Ben's first year of high school *Entries* provides an easy read. The author bio reveals that Brown studied at NYU Film School and "developed a special interest in...screenwriting." *Entries*, indeed, would be right for Hollywood if that film city weren't pushing Damme family values. Ben and Aaron playing with each other's penis: with petroleum jelly on the camera lens and Andre Previn as background music, you'd be — as it were — eating out of the director's hand.

/S.F.



**William Gass, *The Tunnel*. New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.**

On his reason for writing Gass once commented, "I want to rise so high that when I shit I won't miss anybody." Spleen oozes out of *The Tunnel* the way waste spills out of a sewer after a storm. Bile and metaphor — and metaphors about bile: these are the major components of a work twenty years in the making.

Gass, once the feature writer about fiction and theory of fiction for *The New York Review of Books*, produces metaphors as blithely as he breathes. Disappointment is written elegantly and innovatively: "I felt the smile I'd penciled in above my chin fade like the line beneath the last rub of an eraser." If as homeostatic process breathing is effortless, it is laboured when the world is engaged. Only the narrator's farts are expelled happily: "As if my buttocks did my breathing!"

Otherwise, Gass's wily protagonist, also named Willie, a.k.a. the eminent Professor Kohler, carps at length about everything and everyone: colleagues, family, students (with the exception of those who have affairs with him). Wishing, as Gass wrote on another occasion, for another cunt from which he'd come, Willie (Kohler) decants rage, most mercilessly, onto his alcoholic mother. Nonetheless, he saves some vituperative performances for a wife whose breasts are sagging in consonance with the belly bulging over Willie's wee weenie.

This personal history, featuring "my life in a chair," takes place, for the most part, alongside the Wabash River in Indiana. It gains a greater resonance, though, from Kohler's employment as a professor of history — area of specialization, Nazi Germany. This allows Gass to weave together history and History, tunnels winding under both, contrarily promising both escape and destabilization.

Kohler's static odyssey is situated, the references are loaded if unspecific, at Purdue University, where Gass taught and I studied. With his disdain for "new criticism" (the transparent reading of texts) and his excessive, bravura prose, Gass, twenty-five years ago, helped shape my aesthetic. He was the one who defined metafiction (fiction which articulates theory of fiction) and made it easy for many of us to move towards a deconstructive or postmodern engagement with literature. If hyperthyroid *Gravity's Rainbow* is pomo's and metafiction's apogee, then hyperthyroid *The Tunnel* is its death knell. The pyrotechnics of Gass's novel are the stuff of an earlier *academic* revolution against modernist meanings. Now, the prose that is prominent in tunnels is the graffiti in subways, the codes of other (sub-)cultures.

It shouldn't be forgotten, though, that Gass's flamboyance and insight were part of, as the historian Kohler might have it, the avant-garde's (continual) putsch. /S.F.

## non-fiction

**David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1996.**

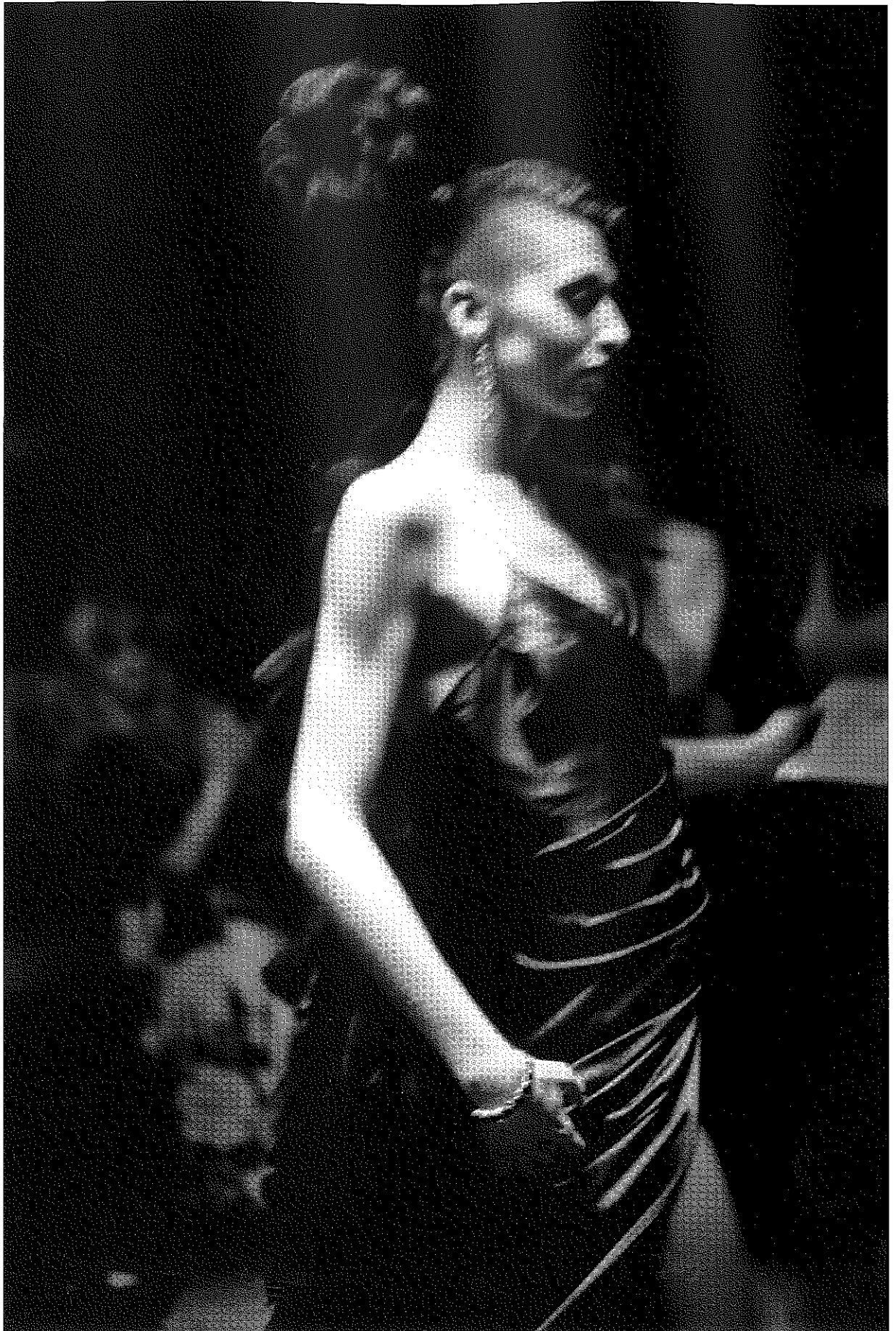
This one should sell like hotcakes. First, there's Stuart on the cover, nattily dressed in a still from Isaac Julien's *The Attendant*, exhorting the reader on in his sartorial splendour. Second, this collection doesn't disappoint: made up of articles by Hall and many of the people he has worked closely with over the years, this book tracks the brief history of cultural studies through Hall's work and demonstrates the dynamic interplay of Hall's sometimes path-breaking work with the important contributions made by others who have pushed Hall to revise and develop his own ideas. This volume takes off from the well-known special issue of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (1986), vol. 10 no. 3, edited by Chen, but pushes the envelope far beyond those modest beginnings. /M.H.

**Neil Larsen, *Reading North by South: On Latin American Literature, Culture and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.**

When Northern intellectuals of European descent turn en masse to postcolonialism, is it a "fad," a shift of perspective which allows the humanities to regenerate themselves, or is it a serious engagement with other literatures and, more importantly, other social, historical, cultural and theoretical matrices? Both an intellectual autobiography and an important critique of literary and cultural politics, Larsen's *Reading North by South* is an antidote to prevalent "readings" of the South by Northern intellectuals. Larsen asserts that "much of what the North reads and writes of the South. . . continues to derive its authority from [the] wellspring of colonial 'common sense.'" Commenting on the reception of the Latin American literary "boom" in particular, Larsen argues that Northern intellectuals were willing "to recognize the legitimacy of southern texts but only insofar as this did not require the reader to question the legitimacy. . . of the high modernist canon itself." Whether Larsen has succeeded in avoiding this trap, or whether he has simply provided a legitimating narrative for his own romp through Latin American perspectives on literature, postmodernism and cultural studies is a question left to the reader. /M.H.

**Reviews by Stanley Fogel and Michael Hoehsmann**

B/L List



**NAN GOLDIN**

Marlene modeling in the Beauty Parade, Boston, 1972