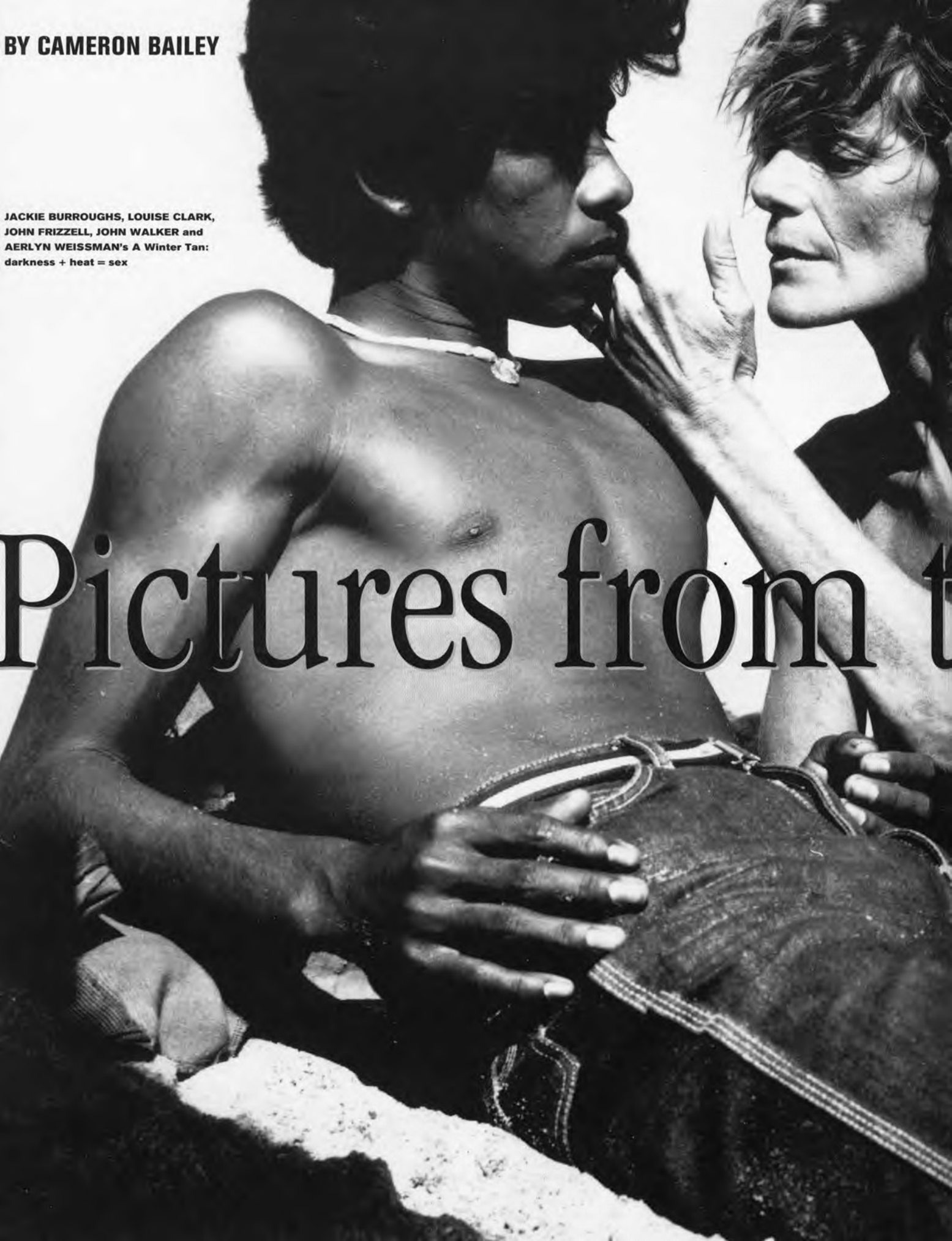



BY CAMERON BAILEY

JACKIE BURROUGHS, LOUISE CLARK,  
JOHN FRIZZELL, JOHN WALKER and  
AERLYN WEISSMAN's A Winter Tan:  
darkness + heat = sex

# Pictures from t





Since film was first exposed in Canada, white filmmakers and dark subjects have been locked in a killing embrace. Ethnography colonized the Canadian imagination with pictures of quaint savages. Wartime newsreels race-baited the Japanese and justified the Internment. Social-issue documentaries and TV programs continue to bludgeon immigrant cultures into controlled acceptability. Racist or naive, hilarious or violent, there's a whole back catalogue of images to chronicle how this country made its centre white and its margins obedient. This thread within Canadian film history marks another victory for the nation's silent self-affirmation. One of this country's mightiest achievements has been quietly to terrorize aboriginal people and people of colour as it loudly proclaims its own victim status – colonized doubly by European history and American movies.

So while America has performed a rigorous re-examination of its own movies to tease out their racial narratives – crude ones in *Birth of a Nation*, subtler ones in *Star Wars* – nothing of the sort has happened in Canada. Why not? Perhaps because our images seem innocuous by comparison. Well, we can't buy that anymore.

In light of Canada's long history of

racialized cinema, and especially the recent surge in feature films made by white filmmakers about people of colour, audiences, critics and other filmmakers need to begin the counter-surge.

In doing so we need to be aware of the June Callwood Effect. The former PEN Canada president has been charged with racism on three separate occasions by three separate groups of people, stemming from her work as a writer and social activist in three separate organizations. And yet, time after time, well-placed white colleagues continue to come to Callwood's defense and denounce the charges as ridiculous.

Why? Because she is a liberal with a track record of caring. She can't possibly be racist. Well, those people need to wake up to what the rest of us know: when it comes to Canadian culture, liberals are in a better position to propagate racism than anybody else.

# the White Tribe

And there's a lot at stake for white liberals in the new, post-multiculturalist landscape; there's a lot of power and privilege to be lost.

The race films conceived by Canada's white tribes can be grouped under four rough headings: travel documents, local anxiety, foreignness within and ethnic drag. The first category begins with the ribbons of unstructured footage shot by Canadian missionaries, tourists and government workers in parts of the world once called exotic. Much of it now rests in the National Archives, under titles like *A Trip to the Far East* or *Congo Drummers*. Anyone looking for evidence of imperialism, Canadian-style, need only explore these films; they're the celluloid equivalent of the Royal Ontario Museum's famed *Into The Heart of Africa* exhibit.

As Canada's documentary tradition developed, the same mechanisms that allowed for these early films paved the way for more "serious" filmmaking. In the 60s, Beryl Fox travelled to Vietnam (*Mills of the Gods*) and the segregated U.S. (*One More River*) to create issue-based portraits of foreign places for Canadian consumption. It's worth noting that Fox's films accomplished two common Canadian functions: interpreting American behaviour and reinforcing the idea that racist state violence is a foreign phenomenon.

Fox's heirs are many, in both documentary and fiction films. Nettie Wild's *A Rustling of Leaves: Inside the Philippine Revolution* plays out the familiar narrative of the white Canadian amidst Third World tumult, a theme treated as epic in Phillip Borsos's *Bethune*, comic in Lulu Keating's *The Midday Sun*, lament in Sturla Gunnarsson's *Diplomatic Immunity* and interior monologue in Darrell Wasyk's *Mustard Bath*.

It's when the travel genre includes the element of desire that Canadian cinema gets really interesting. *Mustard Bath* features a lagoon seduction scene that compares well with Hollywood jungle movies. Nicholas Campbell's Peter Tosh biopic *Stepping Razor-Red X* is marked by a plain yearning for the mysteries of Rastafari. The signature text on this subject is *A Winter Tan*, directed by

Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark, John Frizzell, John Walker and Aerlyn Weissman. Burroughs's Maryse Holder is driven to distraction by Mexico's cocktail of heat, race and unknowability: it's pure sex.

At home, white Canadian race cinema has taken on two challenges: addressing the white-Native conflict that structures this nation, and addressing the fallout from multiculturalism. The white-Native face-off produced a legacy of

Nations cultures is marked in our movies by a simultaneous will and inability to read the other, then the encounter with Black and Asian cultures is marked by a will and inability to assimilate them. The narratives of these films invariably present a social issue to be solved: teen pregnancy and Black male irresponsibility in John N. Smith's *Sitting In Limbo*, refugee shock in Smith's *Welcome To Canada*, nanny subjectivity in Glen Salzman and



above, VIC SARIN's *Cold Comfort*: raging whiteout; right, JOHN M. SMITH's *Sitting in Limbo*: policing the crisis

filmed anthropology: many National Film Board filmmakers made their careers in the salvage industry, "preserving" Native culture in ethnographic films. As a side-effect, an infrastructure was created that kept Aboriginal people from making their own films.

The anxious encounter between Aboriginal people and whites (whether inside the films as characters or outside as the controlling authorial presence) continues in documentaries like Barry Greenwald's *Between Two Worlds* and Nettie Wild's *Blockade*, and in a minor explosion of dramatic features: Bruce Pittman's *Where The Spirit Lives*, Richard Bugajski's *Clearcut*, Paul Cowan's *Justice Denied* and of course Bruce Beresford's *Black Robe* (somebody should write a book on the colonial impulse in Beresford's work). This year will also see the release of Bruce McDonald's *Dance Me Outside*.

If the white encounter with First

Rebecca Yates' *Milk and Honey*.

Canadian filmmakers of colour also use the assimilation narrative. What's different with the white-made efforts is the degree of anxiety that skitters through the films. What if these problems can't be resolved? What if they've been misread altogether?

In television, broadcasters offer a complementary strategy, the salve of entertainment. From the CBC's Black singing and dancing shows of 25 years ago (one hosted by jazz artist Jodie Drake; one featuring Caribbean immigrants in Vancouver) to aboriginal storylines in *The Beachcombers* and *North of 60*, Canadian tv attempts to address these same issues in a format that demands both closure and audience pleasure.

It's important to include the prime-time success of American programs like *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* in this category. When CBC and

CTV broadcast bourgeois African American sitcoms all across Canada, they're doing more than making money. They're establishing a framework for Black lives in Canada.

The link between the travel films and the local anxiety genre comes in the form of movies that betray both a fear of and an attraction to the process of foreignness coming to Canada. As with any taxonomy, individual examples can slide among categories. So *Milk and Honey*

example is the NFB wartime documentary *Masks of Nippon*. Narrated by Lorne Greene and overflowing with yellow peril paranoia, *Masks of Nippon* is Canada's *Birth of a Nation*: It's a brilliantly constructed example of our chosen cinematic form, the nation-building documentary. It speaks to a watershed moment in the country's history — the war against Japan and the subsequent internment of Japanese Canadians. It is profoundly racist. And it worked.

*My Death*, madly rural in Vic Sarin's *Cold Comfort*, or coolly urban in Atom Egoyan's *Next of Kin* and *Family Viewing*, the white characters in these films perform whiteness. They signify as white (or more specifically as WASP), participating in racialized dramas in a way that might ultimately prove truer to how Canadians are responding to a changed nation.

All of the films mentioned above (and there are many more) and all of the cate-



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displays both a local anxiety (what should be done here and now about Third World nannies in Canada?) and a concern about the foreignness that they bring (disruptive sexuality, criminality).

Giles Walker's *90 Days* is a straight-up foreign-within story, about a white man and his Korean picture bride, a character brought to Canada and at once racialized, sexualized and infantilized. Other responses: the charming, childlike Hong Kong immigrants-to-be in Celine Baril's *The Ant and the Volcano*, the impenetrable Filipino world in Patricia Gruben's *Deep Sleep*, and a clever inverse in Harvey Crossland's *The Burning Season*, where an Indo-Canadian returns to her roots to reveal better the foreign values that lurk there.

Recent Canadian films may lightly engage with the swirl of desire and fear that so often greets difference, but there's a more virulent history behind these new movies. The best known

Ethnic drag, the last category, is like gender drag: the potential for play, transgression and insult is all there in a gesture. While there are instances where a whole film is structured by this kind of masquerade (Jan Marie Martell's *Bowl of Bone*, Giles Walker's *Ordinary Magic*), it's more common that films will include moments where white characters immerse themselves in the shallow waters of surface racial signs — Jane-Finch hip-hop in Julian Grant's *Bust A Move*, Delta blues in Bruce McDonald's *Highway 61*, jazz in Richard Rose's *Giant Steps*. In Québécois film one finds more and more Black characters who signify stark, unreachable difference: the jazz musician in Andre Forcier's *Une Histoire Inventée*, the mysterious seductress in Léa Pool's *Mouvements du Désir*.

Equally interesting is the brand of ethnic drag that foregrounds Canadian whiteness. Quirkily suburban in Bill Robertson's *The Events Leading Up To*

gories invented to assess them are part of a larger movement in Canada. We know that the United Nations has dubbed Toronto the most multicultural city in the world. We know that Vancouver is struggling with its future identity as a new world Asian city. We know that the philosophical ramifications of Aboriginal land claims have yet to hit Canada as a whole. But we don't know the whole story.

Despite the rapid growth in films by Aboriginal filmmakers and filmmakers of colour, the cinema made by white Canadians remains the dominant cinema. The messages sent through these films, as backward and ill-worded as they often are, nevertheless tell us something: there's a war on ●

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