

## A CINEMA OF DUTY

### THE FILMS OF JENNIFER HODGE DE SILVA

BY CAMERON BAILEY

Whether or not future histories of black filmmaking in Canada begin with Jennifer Hodge de Silva, they will have to acknowledge her importance. Best known today for her 1983 documentary *Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community*, Hodge de Silva directed a number of films during the 1980s that established the dominant mode in African Canadian film culture. Working exclusively in documentary film, she staked out a set of concerns and a mode of production that might be termed "black liberalism." Her work (and it is only since she died that so heterogeneous a group of films has assumed the shape of a body of work) dealt with a wide range of social concerns: relations be-

tween Toronto police and black immigrant communities in *Home Feeling*; anti-racist education in *Myself, Yourself*; and self-help programs for ex-convicts in *In Support of the Human Spirit*.

Many of de Silva's sponsored films, such as *A Day in the Life of Canada (The Yukon)*, *Neighborhoods – Outremont* and *Neighborhoods – Kensington Market*, explore Canadian cultural geography. Running through these and the "issue" films is a humanist agenda, a concern for social reconstruction. Hodge de Silva's work does address the real nature of racism facing black people in Canada but without anger. While *Home Feeling* and *Myself, Yourself* are critical of some elements of Canadian society, their critique is



Jennifer Hodge de Silva

Photo Credit: Robert Long. Courtesy: Black Film and Video Network

couched entirely in terms of reform rather than revolution.

It is no accident that the vast majority of films produced by African Canadians have been firmly within the documentary genre of social realism and Hodge de Silva's work is exemplary in that regard. In addition, without marginalizing the aesthetic value of this work, it is important that "common" notions in film criticism about the category of the "interesting" not be the first method of approach in evaluating Hodge de Silva's work. Operating entirely outside art cinema's criteria of innovation and experimentation, these films seek neither to shock nor seriously challenge the viewer but to reconfirm certain norms of liberal conscience and national identity. In examining something of Hodge de Silva's history and later the films themselves, I hope to articulate a way of watching her films, primarily for black viewers, that engages with them on levels both within and without their own frames of reference, but never in ignorance of what those frames of reference are, or why they exist. I hope this study will serve as a beginning in rescuing Hodge de Silva from the critical



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neglect (Who is she?) and condescension (Wouldn't analyzing such simple films be *unfair*?) under which her pioneering work has languished.

The first frame that needs to be outlined is Hodge de Silva herself. Product of a unique set of personal circumstances, she emerged from and into very particular and very divergent moments in Canadian history. Born and raised in Montreal, Hodge de Silva grew up in a class – the black Canadian urban bourgeoisie – with barely enough members to qualify as such at the time. Her mother is an accomplished figure who for years sat on the board of directors of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Hodge de Silva attended school in Switzerland and completed her education with a bachelor's degree from York University in Toronto in 1973 and a TV Arts diploma from Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in 1979.

All of this is significant only to the extent that it establishes something of the complex and ambiguous positions from which Hodge de Silva made her films. She possessed both the class entitlement and cultural capital that her parents and education gave her, but she was also a black woman breaking into a film industry that had never been anxious to acknowledge either women or people of color as anything but victims. She came to Toronto in the period when the relaxing of Canada's racist immigration laws began to permit thousands of black West Indian immigrants to settle in the city's suburbs. Many of them wound up in the Jane-Finch neighborhood, just blocks from where Hodge de Silva studied Fine Arts at York University and where she would eventually make *Home Feeling*. That rise of sudden black communities around her, with histories very different from hers, produces another frame of dissonance for Hodge de Silva. So too her mother's status at the CBC and Hodge de Silva's later work at that network and the National Film Board suggest a willingness to work inside Canada's two major image-producing institutions – accepting the limits of their liberal ideologies – even as they attempt to use the power of the institutions to further discussion of pressing political issues.

Above all, there is the simultaneous contradiction of class privilege and political solidarity that *Home Feeling* and *Myself, Yourself* try so hard to resolve. As a Canadian-born, middle-class filmmaker with roots within media institutions, Hodge de Silva could not help but come at the

"issues" her films treat so seriously – police racism, educational racism, prison rights, Native culture – from the outside. In fact, it is the variety of the subjects she treats, as well as how she treats them, that marks her work as textbook liberal documentary practice. It has been the privilege of (white) middle-class filmmakers to create the issue films that speak so forcefully for all the world's oppressed and therefore define the very nature of oppression.

To better understand this history and Hodge de Silva's place in it one need look no further than one of the director's mentors, NFB veteran Terence Macartney-Filgate. A pioneer of the "Candid Eye" cinema verité movement in Canada (he made the classic *Back Breaking Leaf* in 1959), Macartney-Filgate went on to direct in 1978 one of the first substantive films about black history in Canada: *Fields of Endless Day*. Hodge de Silva landed a job working with Macartney-Filgate as an apprentice on the project. An interview with Macartney-Filgate published just prior to *Fields of Endless Day* is instructive for the perspective from which he views his subjects. Claiming a remarkable degree of disinterest, he rejects any hint of political intent in his socially progressive body of films. About *Back Breaking Leaf*, which revealed punishing labor conditions in the tobacco industry, he says:

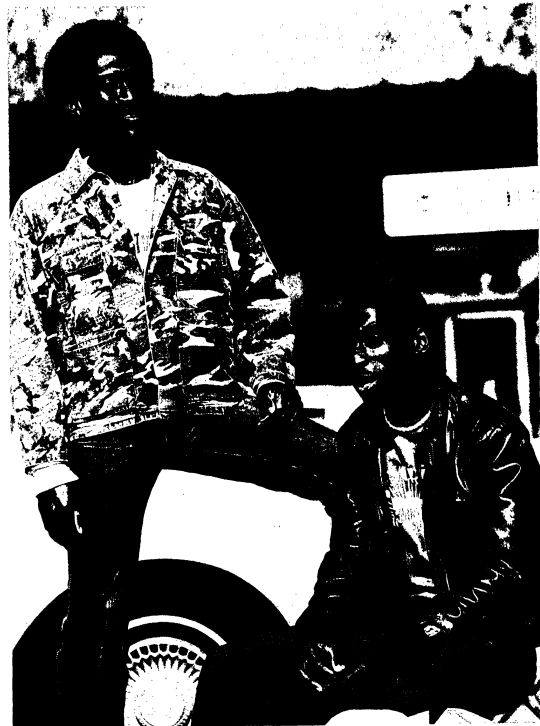
*Actually I loathe rural areas and farms [but] the people interested me... People are the reason I make films, because I don't like to make films particularly about things, or work on idea films...I have political views but they would never influence anything I did in film. This is something I think any artist has to keep apart.*

These were not uncommon views among a certain generation of NFB staff directors. It is without doubt an approach to documentary filmmaking to which Hodge de Silva was exposed at the Board and probably at the CBC as well, an approach which downplayed politics and ideas, even in social-issue films, in favor of the emotional currency of "people."

As reflections of state policy, institutions such as the NFB and the CBC have long been concerned with the nation's social well-being. Long before the capital-L Liberalism of prime ministers Pearson and Trudeau, though certainly on the increase during that era, these two media

institutions constructed their mandates to include the maintenance of national bonds. Acknowledging the varied ethnic make-up of the country and, more importantly, controlling any social eruptions that might occur from that variety, have long been a part of the everyday work of the CBC and NFB. Broadcasting and filmmaking were designed as social cement. Given this and the additional impetus provided by the introduction of multiculturalism as official federal policy in 1971, it made sense that black voices be encouraged within Canada's official media. But how?

It should be obvious that the size, resources and omnipresence of the CBC and NFB within image-culture in Canada results in a breathtaking ability to control even that which takes place outside their gates. It is this element of control which is foregrounded in the interaction between these institutions and black Canadian filmmakers. Take a typical case of a first-time black filmmaker seeking to make a film about some aspect of her community. She is much more likely to receive funding from the Film Board or the federal or provincial office overseeing multiculturalism or



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some other wing of state social engineering than from the “artist-driven” funding of the arts councils, which historically have considered documentary films as not art and all black films as more or less documentary. That funding in turn determines what the resulting film will look and sound like, and, to some degree, what it will say. It is this management of dissent, this ability to channel black voices of protest or affirmation through its corridors that has been the real race-relations success of the National Film Board.

There is also the question of the closed doors of the avant-garde. The network of art school and university film education, film co-ops, alternative exhibition venues and art magazines that has supported Canada’s independent and experimental film movements since the 1960s has been a notoriously sealed circuit. An accusation of racism would no doubt be abhorrent to these small institutions, but the visible and persistent whiteness of the shifting power elites within these groups says all that one needs to. The white “avant-garde” has long operated under a set of assumptions that excludes most political filmmaking by black filmmakers. As Tom Waugh notes in a discussion of the committed documentary, the criteria of bourgeois aesthetics – “durability, abstraction, ambiguity, individualism, uniqueness, formal complexity, deconstructed or redistributed signifiers, novelty and so on” – generally do not apply to documentaries designed to motivate social change. “How then,” he asks, “do we talk about films whose aesthetics consist in political use-value?” Pose that question to the keepers of the avant-garde and the answer surely is “We don’t.” Still, one must continue to ask, how can a movement that claims to challenge accepted perceptions of the world and of art proceed without acknowledging that those accepted perceptions are and have long been bound to sexist and racist ideologies as well? How has the avant-garde been able to continue this long without challenging the race and gender constructs of the image system it rejects and still call itself an avant-garde?

One of the unnoticed aspects of the emergence of black filmmakers in Canada during the 1980s was their work in sponsored filmmaking. These documentaries, usually made for public-service organizations or government branches, not only provided experience and decent remuneration to the filmmakers, but worked in a kind of shadow-economy to the output of the Film Board. Hodge

de Silva made *Home Feeling* (and a little-known film on potato farming in Prince Edward Island) for the NFB, *Myself, Yourself* for the Toronto Board of Education, and *In Support of the Human Spirit* for the John Howard Society. Fellow black film pioneer Claire Prieto has also made sponsored films. While Hodge de Silva’s films vary widely in subject, style and conditions of production, each does come with an agenda, a clear, often explicit perspective on the people and events depicted that it wants to transmit to the viewer. It is this propaganda-for-social-change method that allows her to switch easily from “independent” state-funded filmmaking to sponsored filmmaking. It is also this method that she inherits from John Grierson.

In his classic manifesto “A Film Policy for Canada” (written in 1944 after his policy had already been implemented, as a way of *explaining* it to the nation), Grierson articulated his plan to redesign the Canadian film industry as “a public utility.” Written in the breathless prose characteristic of his wartime propaganda films, Grierson outlines his now infamous conclusion that, given Hollywood’s expertise at feature filmmaking, Canada should “specialize” in nation-building documentaries:

*In Canada today we may not make many feature story films, but every year we make hundreds of short films which describe the life of the nation... They progressively cover the whole field of civic interest: what Canadians need to know and think about if they are going to do their best by Canada and by themselves.*

And as always Grierson was frighteningly prescient in determining exactly what Canadians needed to know and think about.

There are films, too, of Canadian achievements in painting and craftsmanship, of Canadian folk songs, of the contributions of the various race groups to Canadian culture. The instrument by which this plan is being executed is called the National Film Board. Already the bland, leveling sweep of multiculturalism was in place, as an *effect* of the NFB. As Joyce Nelson notes in her critique of the Grierson myth, part of the Film Board’s wartime nation building (i.e. propaganda) concentrated on defusing ethnic and regional differences in Canada. This was accomplished not by ignoring them, but by surveying them

benignly, in films like *Peoples of Canada*, from the flattening perspective of the white Anglo-Canadian. Difference was acknowledged at a surface level, only to submit eventually to the higher authority of nation.

Through the 1960s and '70s individual filmmakers at the NFB may have progressed beyond Grierson's vision of the Board as a cog (or perhaps a driveshaft) in the social machine, but the energy of the organization itself remained, and I believe remains today, constant. When Hodge de Silva entered in the '70s, it still functioned, though in a less direct fashion, as an instrument of state policy. It is this pedagogical imperative which turns up as Hodge de Silva's propaganda-for-social-change, a style which, given its origins in Grierson's policies, can serve independent documentary or sponsored film equally well.

So do Hodge de Silva's films participate in soliciting Grierson's civic resolve? Absolutely. But does that make them as totalitarian as Grierson's methods often were? No.

A distinction, however fine, must be made between resolve in the service of consolidating national unity and resolve in the service of dismantling, or even questioning, an oppressive status quo that may in fact stem from the construction of "national unity." This may be allowing Hodge de Silva's films more than they intend, but it seems clear they cannot be fit easily within what Grierson meant by nation-building.

Kobena Mercer's theorizing around the limits of documentary realism is useful in shedding more light on Hodge de Silva's work. Mercer categorizes the documentary realist aesthetic as following four filmic values: "transparency, immediacy, authority and authenticity." When articulated from a black perspective, a film made with these values is meant to "correct" racist and stereotypical images. "It renders present that which is absent in the dominant discourse." However, the "race-relations narrative," a system that can be engaged by either documentary or dramatic realist filmmakers, is ultimately a dead end:



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*Within the logic of its narrative patterns, blacks tend to be depicted either as the source and cause of social problems - threatening to disrupt the social equilibrium - or as the passive bearers of social problems - victimised into angst-ridden submission or dependency. In either case, such stories encode versions of reality that confirm the ideological precept that "race" constitutes a "problem" per se.*

This is a trap into which Hodge de Silva's "race" films fall quite cleanly, though the story doesn't end there. By nature of her training and institutional base, her films about people of color were in a way bound to be race-relations efforts. Brian Winston, outlining what he calls "the victim tradition" in documentary practice, finds its roots in a combination of Robert Flaherty's romantic style and privileging of the individual and Grierson's "social concern and propaganda". But Hodge de Silva's films display a kind of frisson in this area, an oscillation between the hierarchy of filmmaker over subject of the victim-model, and a movement towards the subject, a movement actually towards identification that pushes it beyond that pattern. Particularly in *Home Feeling* there is the beginning of a new black subjectivity that surpasses the race relations notion of black as source or victim of problems. True, the problems are most definitely there, but the trajectory of the film is not *only* one of victimhood and problem-creation.

That surplus effect in *Home Feeling* may stem from what Julia Lesage, one of documentary realism's defenders, points out are the different ways in which the form can be used by members of a marginalized group:

*Realist feminist documentaries represent a use of, yet a shift in, the aesthetics of cinema vérité, due to the feminist filmmakers' close identification with their subjects, participation in the women's movement, and sense of the films' intended effect.*

It may be this tentative identification with its subjects, which, given the conditions of production for the film and Hodge de Silva's own very different history, must not be an easy one, that gives the film its power. Lesage later notes that:

*If many feminist filmmakers have deliberately used a traditional "realist" documentary struc-*

*ture, it is because they see making these films as an urgent public act and wish to enter the 16mm circuit of educational films, especially through libraries, schools, churches, unions and YWCAs, to bring a feminist analysis to many women it might otherwise never reach.*

Tom Waugh also stresses the importance of audience to the success of and indeed the construction of the "committed documentary", even defining that term as "films made by activists speaking to specific publics to bring about specific political goals." If Hodge de Silva is indeed speaking to specific publics to attain specific political goals in *Home Feeling*, *Myself, Yourself* and other films then there is some further potential for the films. Those publics, constituted at their broadest as people of color living in Canada, subjects constructed within racism stand outside of false, power-effacing notions of a "general audience" under which the NFB is usually compelled to operate.

However, it is important to remember that in noting the importance of the realist style in black Canadian filmmaking, and even in rehabilitating a corner of it as acceptable under certain conditions, we cannot limit ourselves to a version of Lesage's strategic realism. That implies a choice, something that, given all that's been outlined above, black filmmakers have generally not had. The institutions within which Hodge de Silva and others made films brooked no other style but realist. These filmmakers were not schooled in various styles of avant-garde or hybrid documentary, never having been welcome in the art schools or critical journals where it was taken for granted. So by the time they were making films they were able to rationalize the "frivolity" of such methods for dealing with black subjects, because - to return to Lesage - political urgency meant realism, but not as a choice, as an almost transparent fact of life.

But if the choice of realism was transparent, how see-through is the method itself as Hodge de Silva practised it? On the surface *Myself, Yourself*, *Home Feeling*, and *In Support of the Human Spirit* articulate an explicitly liberal agenda where the just and the unjust are clearly drawn categories, and empathy and understanding hold the power to solve most problems. Formally, the films appear seamlessly constructed, hard to look behind. Though Hodge de Silva's

“personality” can be found in what she chose to make films about, the films themselves resist the search for a subjective voice, a personal point of view. Of course, given the institutional origins of most of her work, notions of authorship must take a different tack. Hodge de Silva never worked in an independent film milieu that permitted (or required) reconstructing one’s psyche as the point of articulation within the film text. This apparent absence of a psychological center reinforces the films’ transparency.

*Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community* is the most fully realized of Hodge de Silva’s films, both in terms of its success as a liberal, realist documentary, and in terms of its subtle adumbrations to that genre. Compared to similar black British documentaries about police-black community relations (Milton Bryan’s *The People’s Account* or Menelik Shabazz’s *Blood Ah Go Run*, for example), there is very little direct critique of the police in *Home Feeling*. At its most pointed, the narration track notes that “As part of their routine patrol, police walk the corridors of Ontario Housing buildings just as they do the public’s sidewalks.” This is as angry as the film’s overt voice gets. Nor are images of demonstrations, riots, looting or police beatings presented

as evidence of crisis, again unlike the British work. Instead, *Home Feeling* prefers to indict police officers and administrations with a strategic use of their own words, and to counter racist image-making by constituting the police – rather than black youth – as an unspoken, everpresent threat throughout.

The film begins with sound rather than image. As the National Film Board logo occupies the screen, a police radio crackles on the soundtrack (this juxtaposition may turn out to be Hodge de Silva’s most subversive act). The first actual shot of the film is of a police cruiser patrolling the Jane-Finch neighborhood. The sound of the police radio continues, soon complemented by reggae music. In these first few moments the film establishes its two primary textual domains – the police and the West Indian community, and brings an important extra-textual domain into play – the NFB, as represented by its body-eye logo. The only element common to these three fields, as sound, or image, or both, is the police. The film maintains this insistence on police omnipresence through constant shots of police cars and officers patrolling the area.

So while the film makes no explicit statements against



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the Metropolitan Toronto Police force, its tone is unmistakable enough that a film catalogue produced by the NFB for school teachers suggests that, "The teacher may wish to supplement the anti-police material in the film with more analytical articles on how police think and work, and how minority youths relate to poverty, unemployment and discrimination."

On its release, the film encountered open hostility from the Toronto police who made efforts to block its public screening and broadcast.

Midway through *Home Feeling*, one of the women in a community discussion group notes that the police presence in the area "has a very startling psychological effect on you." This is a clue to *Home Feeling*'s second strategy. In addition to constructing the police as silent threat, the film also constructs black characters as subjects with psychology. Through the way the interviews were conducted and edited, these Jane-Finch residents are afforded a psychological complexity that goes beyond treating the black subject as an individuated victim of, and respondent to, oppression. This takes the comic form, in one case, of following a laid-off bricklayer's assistant who wants to be an interior decorator as he looks for assistance at an employment office.

In another instance, we see an unemployed waitress search fruitlessly for work, and hear her speak of how much she missed her children before they came up from the West Indies to join her. Again Hodge de Silva takes the scene beyond one of anonymous victimhood by including the woman's confession of depression after her children arrived and hardly knew her, and her subsequent treatment in group therapy. This small moment explores psychological vulnerability as a personal reaction to economic and social conditions in a way that both race relations documentaries and West Indian communities are usually unwilling to do. The waitress' narrative within the film also marks the subtle integration of a black nationalist agenda within a liberal one. She moves from unemployment, to rejection by white corporate business (McDonald's and Burger King), to rejection by a white-owned small business, and finally to employment in a black-owned business, the Kensington Patty Palace. The point is made, but never stressed. All of this is to point out that the black subjects in *Home Feeling* never remain at the level of mute symbols standing for

either victimhood or resistance. Hodge de Silva is careful to elicit and include material that represents the contradictions and full complexity of the lives she chose to film.

In attempting to situate Hodge de Silva within a number of very difficult circumstances of production and reception, it's important to remember her successes, though small, were highly significant. Hodge de Silva was not an independent filmmaker in any sense of the term. Hers was in fact a dependent cinema, with nearly every film she made *directly* governed by the money that funded it. In a way she follows in a tradition of new world black artists who, at the beginning of a movement, find themselves under the wing of white liberal patrons, and sometimes employ certain white liberal forms and concerns, but whose work still results in something extra, something beyond the external forces that shaped it. This is the history of the Harlem Renaissance, and it may be the destiny of any black cultural movement created within a white power structure.

However, judged by the standards of what critics call the committed documentary, Hodge de Silva comes up lacking. Tom Waugh lists the elements of that genre as 1) ideological principle, "a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation," 2) "activism, or intervention in the process of change itself," and 3) a "subject-centred" practice that fully involves the people engaged in these struggles. All of these elements are open to much debate, but for the purposes of Hodge de Silva's work, the last category proves most interesting.

It's ironic that Hodge de Silva, a Canadian-born black filmmaker, chose to focus the only film she made specifically about black people on West Indian-born blacks, while Claire Prieto, a West Indian-born black filmmaker, has made films predominantly about established black Canadian communities. This is a direct function of the realist documentary genre which, necessarily, as British critic Jim Pine notes, constructs its subject as Other. But as mentioned above, *Home Feeling* demonstrates a tentative moving toward the film's subjects that provides a surplus effect beyond the filmmaker-self/subject-other dynamic common to conventional realist documentaries.

In line with the workings of realist, social-issue documentary, most of Hodge de Silva's work constructs an ideal audience that is sympathetic to the film's subject but



not directly involved – liberal outsiders reflective of the filmmaker's own relation to the material. Again without claiming too much for their powers of subversion, I would suggest that *Myself, Yourself* and *Home Feeling* problematize that unified ideal audience somewhat. Though these films also use naturalized, "transparent" codes of cinematic address, and appeal to "common sense" notions of injustice, both attempt to speak to outsider and insider simultaneously. The subjects in *Myself, Yourself* provide strong figures of identification for viewers who have had similar experiences of racism at the same time as they stand as objects for sympathy for those who have not.

At this point it becomes important not to allow a discussion of the alternative readings these films may encourage in various audiences degenerate into the positing of a monolithic black audience capable of uniformly deciphering Hodge de Silva's secret codes. Particularly in Canada and other "new world" sites, the concept of a black community united in a common cultural background and worldview is impossible to maintain. As Stuart Hall writes, one must admit "the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories, and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature."

In the realm of film form, differences in "cultural capital" also determine how a "black" audience will be constructed. Those educated to assimilate and enjoy documentary realist cinema will read *Myself, Yourself* or *Home Feeling* far differently than those educated to hold this style in high suspicion, or even derision.

One can only speculate about the films Jennifer Hodge de Silva might have made. She died of cancer in 1989. One planned project was a feature film called *No Crystal Stair*. What can profitably be accomplished is a more thorough consideration of the films she did complete, a consideration that moves beyond mere joy that they exist at all. Moreover, Hodge de Silva deserves to be rescued from those who would blithely celebrate the "truth" and "authenticity" of her films and leave untouched any examination of how they actually work. Too often black artists are taken for mere recorders of the experience of "their people,"

with no power or ability to shape experience within the language of their chosen medium. The cinema of duty has form as well as content. We can only understand it by exploring the complexities of both.

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