A History of the Exhibition *In This Place...*

Meril Rasmussen
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This essay draws heavily on a series of taped interviews conducted in 1998. Thanks to the interviewees:

Henry Bishop (artist, curator at the Black Cultural Center in Dartmouth)

Peter Dykhuis (artist, former director at NSCAD's Anna Leonowens Gallery)

Sylvia Hamilton (filmmaker, founder of the Black Artists Network of NS)

Harold Pearse (artist, curator, teacher, Academic Dean at NSCAD)

Mary Sparling (former curator at the Mount Gallery)

and David Woods (poet, artist, actor, curator and president of BANNS)

There are compelling historical reasons why anti-racism continues to be the primary discourse through which the Halifax art community receives the work of black-identified visual artists.

MSVU curator Ingrid Jenkner
in the
catalogue to Jim Shirley's Feb. 2000
show at the Mount.

During the winter semester of 1998, I worked as an intern at the Anna Leonowens Gallery which is a part of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. I acted as an exhibitions officer for the survey *In This Place... Black Art in Nova Scotia.* Over several months I was able to observe first hand the evolution and delivery of a cultural landmark. *In This Place...* was the first public recognition by an institutional gallery of a community of Black artists in Nova Scotia. The project was a meeting place for many different people, each with their own ideas and concerns. Perhaps a unifying motivation was the awareness of the import and urgency involved in taking this step.

As a student, I listened carefully and asked questions. I was particularly interested in the relationship between the exhibit and the College. Key issues from my perspective were the possibilities and parameters for an institution such as NSCAD to change. This paper is rooted in formal and informal discussions surrounding the project and is extended by research to provide a context and a foundation for *In This Place....* Research methods consisted mainly of visits to various gallery archives, and also of tape-recorded conversations with people closely related to the creation of the exhibition.

My search began slowly to unravel a series of convoluted stories. Each stands on its own, but is also an integral part of the larger fabric that clothes the events of February, 1998. Of fundamental importance are the stories of earlier exhibitions and the people that made them happen, the stories of ideas *from away* or those locally inspired, and the story of the growing aspirations of young Black artists. Historical context, rather than art aesthetics, is the focus of this exploration.

On February 16th, 1998, the opening, in Halifax, of *In This Place...* was a validation of the worth and power of Black artists in Nova Scotia that extended to and was shared by the greater Nova Scotian Black community and its allies. The exhibition had grown with every stage in its development; its final form included 46 artists and over one hundred works of art. For a majority of the artists it was the first showing of their work. Powerful legacies, both individual and collective, were unveiled, forever changing the expectations of Black artists in this province. It was a grand entrance into the spot-lighted arena of the public art gallery.

In This Place... comprised over one hundred works of various media. In descending order of frequency, there were paintings, functional and sculptural ceramic works, handmade prints, quilts, wood carvings, drawings, woven baskets, black and white photographs, mixed-media sculptures, mixed-media paintings, and a life-size basket figure. As the show travelled outside of Halifax to Shelburne, Sydney and New Glasgow, the arrangement of the artwork was tailored to fit each new gallery space and to celebrate home town artists. Nonetheless, each installation was always centered around a five-foot poem mounted in vinyl lettering on a Plexiglas sheet. It was written by one of the curators and hung on a wall behind the original Africville Seaview Church pulpit which, in turn, faced a pew. The layout invoked an immediate sense of spiritual strength, respect and history. Thus, though the exhibit was crowded with artwork, it maintained a central coherence.

The works of art were generally organized into two main sections with various sub-sections. One section included contemporary paintings and collages, ceramic works, prints by artist Jim Shirley, and other works which were impressively old (1880's to 1940's). A folk art section

included paintings and drawings as well as wood carvings, quilts, and baskets.

The show in Halifax was accompanied by several programmed events which included a panel discussion with Black artists, a screening and a critical discussion of Julian Schnabel's film, *Basquiat* (1996), a funding workshop, a young-artists' workshop at NSCAD, and the welcoming of numerous high school tour groups. Local Black musicians and artists were also included in the programming in each locale during the show's provincial tour.

Beyond the immediacy of the visual display of artwork lies a network of persistent, courageous, creative people. *In This Place...* is in many ways the culmination of past exhibits slowly breaking ground and planting ideas.[1] Of the artwork displayed, much had been created decades, even a century earlier in resistance to the dominantly enforced belief that Black culture was not worth celebrating. *In This Place...* continues this movement, within the Black community, towards strength and self-respect. The exhibit redefined the relationship between the Black community and the predominantly white art world. A common space was finally created. Black artists, at once optimistic and skeptical, entered the gallery.

David Woods and Harold Pearse co-curated *In This Place....* Woods is a poet, playwright, painter and cultural organizer. Pearse, an artist and educator, is the Associate Dean of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Woods was born in Trinidad, and Pearse in British Columbia. Both have lived in Nova Scotia for close to thirty years. Woods and Pearse

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[1] A list of relevant shows has been included. See Appendix I.

had worked together previously, in 1989-90, on *Uptown Connections: Artist in the Neighborhood*, a project in Halifax aimed at exposing children to role models in the arts. During *In This Place...,* they shared many responsibilities, though Woods maintained primary control over the exhibition's display.

At least part of the success of *In This Place...* can be credited to David Woods's unorthodox curatorial approach. In the months leading up to the show, Woods toured the province knocking on doors in rural communities, seeking out and collecting Black art. His efforts brought together for the first time the work of Black visual artists from across Nova Scotia. Much of the art had never been shown in a gallery.

Woods's past experience had honed his organizational skills and also gave him insight into the intricacies of Canadian arts funding: "We had an extremely well written proposal but the slides were the magic in the whole thing. It wasn't just that they gave us the money; it's that they were enthusiastic."[2] The show was awarded forty thousand dollars in government grants from the Canada Council, the Nova Scotia Arts Council, and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

The painting *Girl in a Yellow Dress* (1997), by Justine Augustine, was featured on a color poster announcing the exhibit across the province. The poster clearly listed all of the artists' names and was intended as a classroom tool more so than as an advertisement. It is prominently displayed, still, in many offices, reception rooms and, of course, classrooms throughout Nova Scotia.

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[2] All direct quotes, unless otherwise cited, are taken from my own tape-recorded interviews.

Augustine's painting is exemplary of a quality shared by all of the artwork included in *In This Place....* Much of the work depicted the human figure, and invariably, the painted and carved eyes projected a gaze that was either impenetrable or contemplative. In the catalogue for his solo show, *Without Absence*, held at the Multicultural Arts Resource Centre[3] in the fall of 1997, Augustine addresses this very quality: "I have managed to capture in each painting something solemn and cryptic. Something of my own personality." (Augustine, 1997, p.3) The girl in the painting holds her hands shyly, but resolutely behind her back. Her expression almost speaks: *Any offering will be on my own terms.*

David Woods speaks of his intention as curator: "It is hard to talk about the vision of a show because, unlike other shows, we did not start off knowing. We started off with a desire to do something." Though possibly elusive, David Woods had a specific vision for the show. Co-curator Harold Pearse recalls:

> He very much had the sense of a theme for this exhibition which he based on a poem which he had written, which wasn't as clear to me because I thought there was almost enough of a theme that there was this representation of this whole community - but he was trying to refine it even more. And I think it was a good idea.

David Woods values Harold Pearse's sensitivity: "Harold understood what I was striving at and the vision had essentially come from me."

The aspirations Woods brought to *In This Place...* went beyond simply presenting the artwork of Black Nova Scotians. "I was interested in this being reflective of the community, of its truth, of what it is people do." He elaborates: "The vision wasn't necessarily based on the artwork.

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[3] Augustine showed there just prior to the hiring of curator, Pamela Edmonds.

It was just a vision." This is reasonable, considering that when the idea for this exhibition originated the artwork had not yet been collected. In fact, as Pearse suggests above, the initial direction was provided by Woods's muse. "I'd just written this poem that seemed to resonate through my line of thinking."

> *Here in this place -*
> *Blood moves through Black veins -*
> *My blood.*[4]

David Woods' *Abode* (1996) is the source of the show's title. "That poem was given to me and to thou. If you believe in all those mystical things, that's how it came." He emphasizes the poem's importance to the show:

> I think the curatorial vision was established to a large extent by the title and that poem. '*In this place.*': We were really lucky in that the particular choice of words, theme, and orientation of how you look at things, seemed to be almost perfectly matched with what we actually ended up doing.

The poem served not only as an inspirational, but also as a structural device:

> In terms of the curatorial vision, the poem - which we lucked out on - set up the whole show, because in a sense when you read the poem - which talks about place, it talks about historical process, it talks about affirmation, it talks about discovering yourself - the works all seem to find a home in that poem. That elevated the kind of feelings that the show could communicate. It also gave it a natural organization that it could take advantage of. It gave it a structure to organize around - just the themes in the poem itself. So everything seemed very fluent.

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[4] The poem, *Abode* (1996) by David Woods is included in its entirety (See Appendix II.) and is quoted throughout.

The poem helped to guide the evolution of the show. "Without that poem," recalls Woods, "I may not have felt as deeply about a certain way of collecting." Yet the fact that he himself had written the poem is extremely important. The poem was an expression of his presuppositions about the Black Nova Scotian creative ethos. It essentially was his curatorial premise, a written document that he would come back to again and again for guidance.

> [The curatorial vision] was all instinct, that wasn't based on work. That was just based on instinct and my relationship with the words and people. In a sense it may have also influenced how I looked, that I refused to accept the gallery collections.

Woods's search of the permanent collections of Halifax's art galleries did not reveal promising results:

> I did a search: There were two pieces in the art bank, there was one piece at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. There were, like, three names being bandied about as people that painted. So, that was it, in terms of officially known stuff.

Woods says he was prepared for anything:

> I had at least ten - twenty paintings at home. So the worst case scenario was just me putting up my own work... But the best case scenario is probably what we ended up with.

Woods' search from door to door throughout Nova Scotia was a success, uncovering much of the artwork that comprised *In This Place....* Interestingly, Woods had actually done the *grande toure* of Nova Scotia once before. Early on in his career he worked for a short time as a field researcher for a Halifax based sociologist. Though in basic disagreement with the academic's perspective, Woods took the opportunity to learn

about the geography and character of rural Black Nova Scotia. His work with Black History Month, various theatre initiatives, and the Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia (BANNS) had also given him valuable first-hand experience. David Woods stresses the importance of his being an active member of the Black community. "I know the Black community. Just knocking on doors there ain't no big trick to it. You're asking a very basic question. But I know the community."

> *In this place -*
> *Feet are caught and set in chains -*
> *My feet.*

Woods was convinced that his vision of the Black community in Nova Scotia was accurate:

> I'm sure you could have had a million different versions of a Black art exhibition... You could have taken whatever version of what you'd found and claimed that this represented the Black community, but *In This Place...* is probably as close as you could get to the truest representation of Black creativity. And I say that not as a brag; I say that simply because given its dimension from the 1800's till today, given its range and given the type, the different forms, it's probably the truest thing that would ever come out. In terms of a collective exhibition, I don't know how you could do more.

Certainly a wide selection of work is included in the exhibit. However, as is true in all curated shows, subjectivity is not only unavoidable, it is to be sought after. This show is informed by the world view of David Woods. That view, in turn, has a wide set of influences which include Woods's Trinidadian childhood, his experiences as a cultural activist, and his genuine interest in all aspects of Black Nova Scotian culture. The show is successful in part *because* it moves beyond a simple survey.

As to whether the selection of works is comprehensive, Halifax curator Mary Sparling, voices skepticism: "I bet [Woods and Pearse] could turn around and do an exactly similar show and turn up the same amount of stuff again." While Woods undoubtedly struck a responsive chord with the exhibit, curatorial representations of Black creativity in Nova Scotia are only beginning to be explored.

Along roads where I walk
I cannot turn my back -
Every shadow is hostile,

In This Place... received national media attention. Most of the coverage was positive. In many cases, the story told by the press was of a determined curator who surprised even himself with the amount and variety of artwork that he uncovered as he searched from one end of Nova Scotia to the other. It is also a story David Woods tells well. The media portrayals are more or less accurate, though they highlight only one aspect of the complex history of *In This Place....*

Articles which appeared in Halifax's *Chronicle Herald* (9/2/98) and in Toronto's *Globe & Mail* (6/3/98) reveal a reluctance within the media to engage realistically with social change. The positive tone of the articles is on one hand refreshing, yet, on the other hand, the *good news* approach reinforces a debilitating facade constructed by contemporary mainstream media. Stories oftentimes present action with no apparent cause and protest with no practical reason. The people who act as agents of change are effectively isolated from the reader.

Elissa Barnard's feature article in *the Chronicle Herald* begins with a scenario in which the simplicity of the genesis of the show is overstated: "Until poet and painter David Woods hopped into his car looking for a

black artistic tradition in Nova Scotia, he didn't believe one existed." She is quoting indirectly from Woods and his sophisticated use of irony and double-meaning are largely lost in the mediated translation from conversation to print. What may have begun as a subtle reference to the personal implications of the systematic exclusion of Black creative expression from collective memory, instead can be interpreted, indeed, as a journalistic disclaimer: *If he didn't even know about it, how were we supposed to have known.*

Both *the Chronicle Herald* and *the Globe & Mail* articles stress that the artwork was not recognized as valuable even within the Black community. Kevin Cox's article in *the Globe & Mail* begins: "When Sydney steel worker Evelyn Braithwaite fashioned a group of musicians from beer-bottle caps and plywood in his workshop, he probably wasn't even thinking about art." (Cox, *G&M*, 6/3/98) Cox attributes the observation to Woods: "Mr. Braithwaite was typical of many black artists who never considered what they did worthy of being displayed in a gallery." Yet, it is unclear whether Cox intends to point out the artist's awareness of class and race boundaries or instead is simply suggesting that the artist is naive.

In *the Chronicle Herald*, Barnard also notes Woods's observation: "Mr. Woods found that a lot of artwork had been not considered valuable and that 'daddy's' folk-art sculptures would be put in the basement, sold, lost or stolen after he died." (Barnard, *CH*, 9/2/98) Barnard reinforces the image of the curator salvaging artwork from the unappreciative by telling of a story of Mary Sparling, former director of Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery discovering Ruth Johnson, for the 1989 exhibit, *Africville: A Spirit That Lives On*. Johnson's hand-printed greeting cards

were also included in *In This Place....* With the words of Ruth Johnson, Barnard quotes:

> 'She came running in and said, 'Is this your work? Have you got any more?' 'Oh,' I said, 'I don't think so, but let me look in the dining room drawer.' I found an envelope full of them.' (*CH*, 9/2/98)

It is interesting to note that at the official opening of *In This Place...*, Woods tells a similar story about the collecting habits of another Black artist, Audrey Dear Hesson. What comes through in Woods's telling is the playfully understated demeanor of an artist who had carefully preserved her own work despite decades without public recognition.

Racial barriers were only tentatively explored by the mainstream media. In contrast to her opening image, Elissa Barnard later states: "Mr. Woods had long dreamed of this exhibit, but had trouble piquing interest among the galleries." (*CH*, 9/2/98) She quotes David Woods: "You're working with an assumption there is no black art." It is the case of a debilitating *Catch 22*: "Never seeing black art in a gallery and having no intention of going commercial kept the artists cut off from the mainstream art world." (Barnard, *CH*, 9/2/98)

The Globe & Mail takes a stronger tone. Cox paraphrases David Woods:

> Generally, he said, Nova Scotia galleries have been indifferent to black artists - if their talent was immediately apparent, it wasn't worth seeking out and developing. (*G&M,* 6/3/98)

Thus, Cox goes so far as to note the calculated indifference present in Nova Scotia.

However, on one particular theme the *Globe* article subtly lapses into fantasy. Cox circumscribes the genesis of the project in a suggestion by Harold Pearse. Initially inspired by a local showing of the work of Harlem Renaissance artist, Romare Bearden, Woods launched his own somewhat disappointing call for submissions. "Then Harold Pearse, academic dean for the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, suggested presenting the show at the college's Anna Leonowens Gallery. This left Mr. Woods with a huge space and little with which to fill it." (Cox, *G&M*, 6/3/98) What follows is a glowing review of how Woods made the most out of the opportunity that Pearse provided. However, in reality, Gallery II of the Anna Leonowens, at 16 m by 10.5 m, is not 'huge.' The space would have easily been filled by the half-dozen respondents to the initial call. In fact, as it happened the gallery was filled beyond capacity. Many felt a larger space, perhaps at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, would have been more appropriate. Cox's suggestion that the show was inspired by the vast emptiness of the white-walled gallery acts as a powerful visual device but is in reality, a fiction.

Three other important articles appeared outside of the mainstream in *the Coast* (19/2/98), VANS' *Visual Arts News* (Spring 1998), and most recently, in *Mix* magazine (vol.24.1, Summer 1998). David Redwood's short feature in *the Coast* tells a more grounded story than the dailies did. He recognizes that the show marks "a new opening on Nova Scotia's cultural landscape." (Redwood, 1998, p.8) Redwood's article focuses on the artists as agents in defining their own standards. Redwood quotes the curator:

> 'It sets up some visual references,' says Woods. 'The community has only been taught to see itself in certain ways - usually negative political images. You now have a panoply of visual images created by your own rather than imposed.' (Redwood, 1998, p.8)

The article concludes with Redwood's observation about artist Crystal Clements: "Like Hesson and Borden and all the artists in the exhibition, she's setting her own standard." (Redwood, 1998, p.9) Redwood sees accurately that the power of *In This Place...* is a power emanating from within.

Writer, Pamela Edmonds is herself a Black artist and curator. She was involved with the initial planning of the show and her article in *Visual Arts News* is powerfully written. "Though the presence of the Black community is strong and invariable in this province, it is a community whose myriad voices continue to be marginalised. The active, historic presence of African-Nova Scotian art making in the province has been even less articulated - until now." (Edmonds, 1998, p.7) Her tone is in sharp contrast to either of the newspaper articles.

The only article to date to engage critically with the artwork and curatorship of *In This Place...* is George Elliott Clarke's review in the national art magazine, *Mix*. Clarke is a prominent intellectual and poet of *Africadian* origin: "Given the random fashion in which this treasure trove has been assembled, it lacks any sense of period or even geographic consistency." (Clarke, 1998, p.43) He does not pull his punches: "Of course, this approach is preferable to the imposition of any monolithic 'theory' of Africadian expression, but *some* curatorial perspective would have been welcome." (Clarke, 1998, p.43) This is despite the central role that the curator's own poem and paintings played in the show. While

Clarke praises some aspects of the artwork and curatorship the general tone of the article is one of dissatisfaction:

> [I]f Canadians are the globe's forgotten people, then African Nova Scotians - or Africadians, to use my neologism - are such even more so. York University professor Frances Henry even calls them 'Forgotten Canadians'; thus, they are doubly damned. The idea that they should possess a tradition of visual art should strike intelligent readers as grandly preposterous. (Clarke, 1998, p.40)

While he is likely employing irony, verging on sarcasm, the harshness of his tone prevails. The article's conclusion is equally severe: "So, what does it mean to be a provincial? *In This Place...* is a vital, if unconscious, meditation on the question." (Clarke, 1998, p.43)

Clarke points to the existence of a generation gap:

> Generally, the works of the post-1960 generation reflect an imbibing of explicit black nationalism and *Roots*-consciousness that would have struck older Africadians as provocative, alien, and unnecessary. (Clarke, 1998, p.41)

While his observation may be true historically of mainland Nova Scotia, Clarke overlooks the substantial support given to Marcus Garvey during his two pre-1960 visits to Cape Breton.[5]

Interestingly, many of Clarke's other criticisms are of who and what is missing. While on one hand this suggests that a broader show could have been more successful, on the other hand he undermines the very same self-defining quality of the show that was celebrated by others.

Clarke tempers the self-exploratory nature of the show with a hint of cynicism. The message he takes from the show is perhaps willfully uninspiring:

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[5] According to David Woods and Alexander Fraser in an untaped conversation.

> [*In This Place...*] suggests that the marginal location is one where eclecticism and a wild indulgence of colour are the norm. But it is also a place - given the many works here that reverently depict black people and pointedly dodge abstraction - where one can see and know oneself. (Clarke, 1998, p.43)

Clarke points out, and then halfheartedly embraces what he sees as a tension in the exhibition between provincialism and eclecticism. Given Clarke's prominent reputation as a champion of Africadian culture it is probably safe to assume a degree of irony in his temperate tone. If viewed in this manner, Clarke's most poignant criticism becomes evident: *In This Place...* fails to present an accurate, inspired, and insightful depiction of Africadian art.

> *Knives appear everywhere,*
> *And even my house is filled*
> *with enemies.*

In his interview, Harold Pearse mentioned another who was unhappy with the show, but for different reasons:

> The only negative response I heard about the show came from a senior member of the art community who saw it as pretty tame. And he said it was sad because he didn't think it was very good art and he thought it wasn't angry enough.

Pearse acknowledges the perspective but is obviously skeptical of it. Contributing artist, Henry Bishop dismisses the idea entirely: "The exhibit cuts down a lot of stereotypical views of types of art that Black people delve in." Bishop is also a curator and director at the Black Cultural Centre. "I didn't see anything that I considered shoddy or unprofessional work in the exhibit. To me, it gives the strength of delivery that's part

and parcel of the people who do it." He speaks generally about artwork in the show:

> It demands acceptance. That's what it demands. It is more than just a piece of artwork. It's a creation. It's a masterpiece. It's something that's yours and it's meant to be revered and respected.

Henry Bishop, however, in his next breath acknowledges the perceptions of the dominant white culture: "We've now reached a milestone in some kind of credibility." Mary Sparling, too, centers on the white community when she says: "It was a show from the Black community in the white community." Their statements imply that the intended audience was white. This is a perspective David Woods consistently resisted. In a panel discussion David Woods spoke out strongly about the autonomy of the show. Peter Dykhuis, panel chair, recalls:

> What I found fascinating, going back to what David had to say, it's: They don't care. They don't care if the white community likes or dislikes it. Mostly what was important was validating among their own immediate community that they do exist and that they have this cultural presence. So it is a two sided. On the happy warm fuzzy feeling, it is that they are part of the dominant white culture, in a sense, 'cause that is still who runs the cultural community. But that was again why I was kind of mesmerized by David just simply saying like it is: 'We don't care. Got lucky with this venue, that's fine. Could have been somewhere else, which would have been fine, too.'[6]

The self-defining, self-affirming theme in the show was accentuated by Woods's persistent and slightly exaggerated statements of autonomy.

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[6] Crystal Clements, Audrey Dear Hesson, Sylvia Hamilton, and Jim Shirley also took part in the panel.

In fact, the self possessed tone of the exhibit may have been what helped to set people at ease. Overwhelmingly, the response to the show was favorable. Woods reports:

> One of the things you certainly realize when you read the comment book is that it had something for everybody to pique their interest... You saw that in terms of the reactions to different things. It seemed to be a show that had a lot of appeal across all kinds of boundaries; age and stage and everything. It seemed to be something-there-for-everybody. And some idea of spirituality that a lot of people commented on.

Harold also speaks of the positive feedback he received concerning the show. "It was such a varied show, the responses were varied. I think the largest reaction had to do with the volume and the diversity and that was amazing to most people." It was a show that made people feel good.

Coincidentally, while the Black artists' show was still on tour, a national curatorial symposium was held in Halifax. Peter Dykhuis attended. He recalls a comment made by organizer Robin Metcalfe during the discussions: "Robin stated that *In This Place...* is the type of show that hopefully is done once." The implication was that, though an important step, the Black artists's community should not be satisfied with surveys. Other shows expressing different and diverse perspectives are needed.

Sylvia Hamilton is a filmmaker and a past president of BANNS. She speaks of the show as significant for the artists, the community and the institution:

> That most fundamental aspect of doing art is getting it to the audience, getting it out there so that the public can engage with it... The location of the show, in the gallery, helps to make this link, because it is a public venue, it helps to make a

> link between the artists that create the work, the community that might come to see it, and the institution that is actually putting the money in to support the existence of the gallery.

The gallery is a vital meeting place and has great potential for instigating social change.

Harold Pearse speaks about the significance of *In This Place...* from the perspective of the mainstream art community:

> In terms of the white institutions I think of the mark that it has made... It has shown that there is a tradition of Black art that most people - I'm talking about knowledgeable people in the arts community: curators, gallery directors - had no idea it was out there. A number of them, us, had thought that there must be more than we were aware of but this really made it clear, and I think it was beyond anybody's expectation.

Henry Bishop adds a much needed perspective: "Important, I think, is the fact that artists of color, or African descent, are not unusual. They are not unique in the sense that they've existed forever." Peter Dykhuis, as well, recognizes this fact:

> When I say that there is a certain coming out that's happening here, ultimately it is in the white curatorial community. That's where the coming out is. And I agree, if there is any cynical take on that, it's: They've always been there. But their conversations have been amongst themselves, have been within their own communities. It's like there is a certain sampling now, there is a certain visibility to a different community.

According to Dykhuis, a major exhibition of Black artists in the public galleries in Halifax was long over due:

> I think it is important that it was simply finally done, complete with its brilliant moments and its rough edges. That it was

> finally done. That you finally have to just do it, and that's the most important thing.

Harold Pearse is optimistic about the potential effect of the success of *In This Place...* on the other galleries: "I think now, in a way, it has sort of given permission for the other galleries to do it." Pearse's suggestion is that the show redefined a previously accepted social boundary.

Sylvia Hamilton is positive as well but slightly more skeptical: "I'm really interested in whether these institutions begin to undergo any of this kind of critical analysis of who's there, who's not there and what are they doing about it."

Henry Bishop speaks of an ongoing struggle:

> The community has been overlooked in terms of its artistic component, and this being the first of its kind at NSCAD is indicative of that. It shows that we've had to withstand a lot of neglect, and its been long overdue, yet the artists have been here, doing what they have to do to be recognized, however somewhat isolated in that process.

> *And so schools have been separated,*
> *And communities have been bulldozed,*
> *And churches have turned me away,*
> *Even love has been separated -*
> *And my gifts are allowed to fail.*

One of the more memorable shows of recent years included the work of the Black American artist Carrie Mae Weems. *No Laughing Matter,* in 1992, was a group show imported to Dalhousie University Art Gallery from Independent Curators Inc. in New York. Dalhousie Art Gallery director Mern O'Brian explains: "I.C.I. is a very well known, highly prestigious group of people who tour exhibitions..." The show made all too evident the distance between the Black community and the arts community in Halifax.

The curatorial premise of *No Laughing Matter* was an exploration of the use of humour and irony by artists making socially engaged works. As the show and ensuing controversy illustrates, irony, complete with its misunderstandings and its unforeseen resonances, has the disconcerting power to reveal the many layers of perception.

The work of Carrie Mae Weems attracted all the attention in Halifax. Mern O'Brian points out that Weems, in fact, overshadowed the work of the more prominent, multiracial collective, Guerilla Girls. Harold Pearse recalls the art of Carrie Mae Weems:

> For one thing, it was these images of - I can't think of a specific one because they all seem to jumble together - but there were these images that were equating Black people to gorillas, monkeys, that sort of thing and using real abusive language. (See Appendix III.)

Weems included six pieces from her series, *Ain't Jokin'* (1987). Five of the six coupled racist humour with photographs chosen specifically to make evident the horror underlying the age-old-and-oft-dismissed jokes.

A strategy familiar to every Q&A style joke is employed by several of the *Ain't Jokin'* pieces. They entice the viewer to slide a panel sideways in order to uncover the answer to an ominous question, thus cleverly entrapping the viewer into complicity. In the catalogue to *No Laughing Matter*, curator Nina Felshin describes the entrapment aspect of the work: "Weems intends for this work to make us feel uncomfortable, as though, as she puts it, our integrity were being called into question, 'if only to be sure we have any at all.'" (Felshin, 1991, p.39)

David Woods recalls the show. He understood Weems's intentions:

> She confronts the whole psychology of racism by confronting people with their own racism. So there were a number of pieces, like they'd have a picture of a Black man and a gorilla and they'd say things like 'Which one's smarter?' The whole idea being that what you are thinking - since everybody knows the answers to these things - it challenges you. It is sort of like, 'Well, why do you actually know the answer to this?' So that's her methodology.

The turmoil that followed the opening of the show was unprecedented in Halifax. Mern O'Brian recalls:

> I guess I was surprised at how quickly the news about the exhibition spread within the community. It made me realize that when there's an issue related to anything provocative in the community that we have a very effective system for getting the news out. I was really surprised at how many people suddenly became really interested in the exhibition. And they became very interested in the exhibition because they heard that Dalhousie University was exhibiting racist art... We had people from the religious community, we had the police, we had members of the Black community, members of many different communities come in to see the show because they had heard that.

Harold Pearse was an observer. He recalls the uncomfortable situation of the gallery staff:

> I think, they were really shocked and surprised at the negative response, because this was really anti-racist material; the show was anti-racist. But the people in the Halifax community felt it was handled very insensitively.

O'Brian believes that much of the controversy, especially in the initial stages, was rooted in misconceptions on the side of the public:

> I think that people created their own scenario without having seen the work. That was the most common problem in the beginning. You know how rumors start and finish. To say that we are exhibiting work by Carrie Mae Weems a Black,

> American artist who employs racist jokes in her work was translated over a period of time to: Dalhousie Art Gallery is exhibiting racist art.

Simple miscommunication, though often a factor in disputes, does not account for all of the responses to *No Laughing Matter*. Perhaps the misunderstandings were more profound. Many people, even after viewing the work and discussing the issues at length, remained hostile to the exhibition.

The most dramatic protest came from a group of Black students at Dalhousie who staged a sit-in inside the gallery. O'Brian recalls:

> The sit-in was probably four days. We made sure that as long as the members of the public could see the show, could move around and see the exhibition, that as many people as they wanted could come. We set up chairs and benches. We also dry-mounted and put on the wall, their letter of protest - to me, to the gallery - so that the members of the public could read the case that they were making.

Throughout, the gallery pursued an extensive educational campaign. Again, O'Brian remembers:

> What we did was we made sure that every single body of work in the exhibition was carefully contextualised, that any information related to the artists and what they were trying to achieve in this body of work was included in a didactic panel on the wall. We made sure that the huge title panel, which I.C.I. included with the show was front and centre so you had to read that introductory panel before you could really see the rest of the show. We put a sign on the front door warning people that the exhibition contained provocative material that dealt with issues related to racism, homophobia, sexism, corporate irresponsibility, et cetera, et cetera, and that the artists often used irony in the course of dealing with these issues in their work, and that we had hoped that the members of the public would take and accept the work in the way in

> which it was presented. In addition to that there was a member of our staff that was always available, floating around in the gallery. We trained our front desk attendants to deal with members of the public to make sure that they read the exhibition catalogue, that they understood what the focus of the exhibition was all about.

Mern O'Brian says the experience was educational. "I think everyone learned a lot. The exhibition is like a lot of the exhibitions we do at the gallery in that they are teaching tools. They teach people about contemporary issues."

Mern O'Brian describes the conflict surrounding the sit-in primarily in terms of censorship versus freedom of speech:

> We really stood our ground. We said, "We are not going to take this art down because you find it offensive." ...One of the essential tenants of the university is freedom of expression... if it is not protected within a university environment there is no hope for society.

Accordingly, extra lectures, panel discussions and information were added as the conflict escalated. Curator Nina Felshin came from New York and Carrie Mae Weems was ready to come from California.

> I spoke with her on the phone during the exhibition because there were students here who I thought would benefit from talking with her. The students refused to speak to her. I called her three times in California where she works. The students who were here as part of the sit-in refused to speak to her, which was too bad... I actually got her to agree to fly out from California to speak to them, because I felt that as a white woman that I needed someone - and the only person it could be, of course, the artist - to talk to them about the issues that she raised in her work and to make them see better than they were how important the work really is.

Though sensitive to the racial subtleties, Mern O'Brian suggests that a similar controversy could have arisen as easily with any of a number of different communities:

> It's important that you see it as a body of work, that the exhibition dealt with many different issues and that any one of those artists could have been criticized by a different community.

Harold Pearse, in contrast, sees direct connections between the events surrounding the show and the particular racial situation in Halifax. He felt that the community was unprepared for such an intense encounter:

> There was just no preparation. The groundwork wasn't there in terms of people's exposure to an awareness of well - Dalhousie Art Gallery, art galleries, in particular avante garde, postmodern art. And then this very in-your-face approach to racism. I think it created this bad feeling, almost like the gallery was taking advantage of and exploiting the plight. And also because it dealt with issues of racism head on and without preparation, I think there was a sense - from what I heard and read - within the Black community that this was breaking down any progress that had been made in the Halifax community up to that point.

The slow building of trust between the University art gallery and the Black community had not yet matured enough for the gallery to presume upon it, as it mistakenly tried to.

Pearse reveals a largely overlooked understanding of the conflict. He suggests that many Black viewers understood the intended irony but took offense at the place whence it came. "I think most people could see the satirical intent. But it was just too much when there wasn't any attention given to Black artists for so long." Perhaps *No Laughing Matter*

should be reconsidered in the context given by Nina Felshin. She was not writing specifically of Halifax when she described the important role of the gallery in informing the viewer of Weems's work:

> The environment in which one views an artwork can also influence one's ability to perceive an incongruity and interpret its meaning. More specifically, the rarefied atmosphere of the art context - museums, commercial galleries and other art-world venues - can enhance our recognition of irony. Carrie Mae Weems's series, *Ain't Jokin',* provides a good example of this phenomenon. By removing her material from its original context and inserting it into an art environment, Weems alerts us to the possible existence of irony and thus helps guide our interpretation. (Felshin, 1991, p.10)

Weems's work intentionally called into question the integrity of the audience. Ironically, however, when the same question was inevitably reflected back onto the Gallery, a deep-seated distrust of the art context, on the part of many in the Black community in Halifax, was revealed.

> *Because in this place -*
> *My colour has been made to matter*
> *When it should not,*

Importantly, the challenge to Dalhousie's Art Gallery did not go unanswered. Several Black artists did come to the Gallery's aid. Poet Maxine Tynes was at that time associated with Dalhousie's Board of Governors. Graciously, Tynes - as well as Henry Bishop, musician Delvina Bernard and several others - lectured, participated on panels, and acted informally as liaisons on the Gallery's behalf.

David Woods took part in the discussion at that time. He was not so quick to let the Gallery off the hook. He expresses doubt about the sincerity of the Gallery's interest in Black art:

> They had never thought about it - they just had a bunch of reactions because they had a black gorilla next to a Black man and so they started talking about being interested in the Black community because that's the only thing they could say.

Woods chose not to speak on behalf of the University:

> The gallery had gone to extreme lengths to do a bunch of weird things like hire security and make these stupid overtures to the Black community to prove to us that they weren't racist... They were going back to afraid-somebody-might-hit-em, basically, dressed up. Then they made these long overtures to have Maxine Tynes declare that it was O.K. and then they tried to get me.

Instead, he made a suggestion to the gallery:

> I wrote in the comment book saying, you know, instead of all these superficial things that you're saying, if you really want to do something why don't you try to have an exhibition on [Nova Scotian] Black art.

The gallery responded. "That was my beginning," recalls Woods. However, that incarnation of *Black Art in Nova Scotia* did not get beyond the initial stages. According to Woods, a proposal for funding was made to the Canada Council but was rejected. Woods claims that the Dalhousie Art Gallery lost interest after *No Laughing Matter* came down, and the controversy had passed.

Yet, a look at Dalhousie Art Gallery's recent history contradicts Woods's assertion. Following *No Laughing Matter* in 1992, and after an hiatus of a decade and a half since their last solo exhibit by a local Black artist, Jim Shirley, in 1975, Dalhousie has exhibited several shows of local Black artists. Mern O'Brian suggests that Woods was simply impatient. "These projects take a long time to come to fruition."

In 1975, seventeen years prior to *No Laughing Matter*, Jim Shirley had shown his work at Dalhousie. The Gallery had also had two different exhibitions of African art: *Masks without Masquerades* (1974) and *Visual Variations* (1988). Mern O'Brian reviews Dalhousie's exhibitions record:

> One of the things that it is important to keep in mind is that Dalhousie Art Gallery has exhibited, probably more than any other gallery in this province, the work of Black artists. We exhibited as you know the James Shirley exhibition in 1975, we exhibited video work by Buseje Bailey and Donna James [1993], we exhibited an exhibition of Henry Bishop's work [1996], we've exhibited in group shows other work by Black artists.

David Woods offers his perspective:

> There have been no Black art exhibitions. There has never really been any attempt to do really anything with Black art by the white institutions. People pay lip service to things when different things come up, but there's never been any real commitment, because all of them could put commitment in place very easily: Get a grant, hire someone, whatever. But none of them have ever done it.

Sylvia Hamilton more fairly articulates the problem endemic in most of Halifax's galleries, and made evident by *No Laughing Matter*:

> If you only have these sporadic things now and again, and then there is no on going relationship with the various sectors of the community, so they have no history of involvement with you, they don't quite know how you operate, how you function, how you make decisions, and the whole issue of public education of what art shows are about, there is a whole missing piece there.

Hamilton was the president of the Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia at the time of the controversy. She attributes the positive change at

Dalhousie Art Gallery to the protests: "The Gallery began to look at its own representation."

Mern O'Brian describes the changes made to the Gallery set-up after the controversy surrounding *No Laughing Matter*:

> We now have a confirmed appointment on our Art Gallery advisory committee that there should always be a member of the Black community... We also hired one of the protesters... We have always since had at least one Black student as a student assistant in the gallery... It was clear that we needed to widen our student representation and include members of the Black community... Certainly those are really concrete positive changes that we made.

Mern O'Brian reflects on *No Laughing Matter* after six years:

> Racism, I don't care how you deal with it, is ugly. And so is homophobia, and so is sexism. It's ugly. And again, by not having the exhibition would we be better off? I don't think so. I think the exhibition brought forward a lot of issues that had to be dealt with. And the exhibition like a lot of contemporary art makes people think long and hard about contemporary issues as they relate to themselves, or to society, or to the world as a whole.

Harold Pearse muses that had the order of the events been reversed, the adversarial tone of the event may have been avoided. He thinks the timing of *No Laughing Matter* had a significant influence on how it was received in Halifax. Had the show come after *In This Place...* as well as the more recent *Sister Visions*[7] show of contemporary Nova Scotian Black women artists, the work of Carrie Mae Weems may have met with a warmer reception:

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[7] *Sister Visions: Contemporary Black Voices* was held at the MARC gallery June 10-22, 1998. Artists shown were Bronwen Trim, Kim Cain, Pamela Edmonds, Crystal Clements, Mary Lekea-Ogaa, Suli Williams, and Myah Downey.

> I think now there would be more of a context for it and especially now after we have this exhibit of the Black women... Rebecca [Fisk] deals with those same kinds of issues that Carrie Weems did but it's more in the vernacular of the Nova Scotia experience. Bring that show back now and have it through the lenses of - now you can say hey, there's a good half-a-dozen contemporary Black women artists in Nova Scotia who deal with this issue, and hey, maybe here's one of their precursors and American counterparts.

Mern O'Brian is not convinced. She sees Carrie Mae Weems as an artist wielding exceptional intensity:

> I don't think it matters whether you bring in Carrie Mae Weems now, in ten years, five years ago, her work is very hard hitting. I think it will always have an effect on the viewership, on people, gallery visitors. It's very difficult work, given the amount of racism that still exists in the world... It's always wonderful for people to see provocative contemporary plays or exhibitions and so on, but I still think that Carrie Mae Weems' work, it really strikes the solar plexus, and I think it always will.

> *My lips and nose are the source of ridicule*
> *When they should not,*
> *Even the quality of my hair stirs hatred -*
> *When it should not.*

The circumstances surrounding Jim Shirley's 1975 show are interesting to examine. James R. Shirley was the first known Black artist to have a solo show in a public gallery in Nova Scotia. Shirley was a printmaker, born in the South Bronx, New York in 1944. He attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City as a youth, and eventually studied architecture and graphic design at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He also studied at the New School for Social Research and at City College-New York.

He moved to Nova Scotia in 1972. He spent his first few years in relative isolation in rural, eastern Cape Breton. He gradually became involved with the more active urban culture, and eventually moved to Halifax in 1976. He had several solo shows, first at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery in 1975, then later at Memorial University Art Gallery in St. Johns, Newfoundland and finally, in 1977 at the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery. He also had a show that toured throughout rural Nova Scotia. He left the Maritimes in 1979.

Jim Shirley's shows at first glance seem anomalous, but, in fact, they were not. They were a manifestation, in the visual arts, of the broader movement towards *Black Power* that swept Nova Scotia in the early seventies. (See Hinds, 1969.) Stokeley Carmichael's overnight stay in Halifax on October 17, 1968 had precipitated a major mobilization of Black activists in Nova Scotia. The longstanding Black United Front was formed amidst this political momentum.

Jim Shirley edited BUF's monthly newspaper, *Grasp*, for five months in 1974-75. Henry Bishop, freshly out of NSCAD, worked with Shirley at that time. Bishop remembers him as an energetic presence: "The assertiveness that he expressed was good for my soul, good for others' souls, not so good for others, or some people." That assertiveness is at the core of *Black Power*. Bishop recalls Shirley's concern for the Black community:

> He saw that it was undermined; he saw that there was neglected and substandard treatment so he wanted to rid that crutch, and say look, you don't have to feel second class or inferior. You are just as good and maybe better, in some cases. So don't settle for less; settle for the best. I took that from what he did. It made me stronger.

Bishop also recalls the *Black Cultural Expo* at the Halifax Armouries held by the Black United Front in 1974. The event received international guests such as Rev. Ralph Abernathy, who had been closely associated with Martin Luther King Jr. Activists from the Caribbean and from various countries in Africa were also in attendance. During the week long event Black Nova Scotian visual art was showcased. Bishop recalls that Jim Shirley and Harold Cromwell were among those included in the exhibit.

The movement met with mixed feelings by the larger Halifax community. The *Expo* was not awarded government funding: "There was complacency," recalls Bishop. "There was passiveness. I think people were afraid of the type of aggression - not negative but positive - and the forthrightness of a Jim Shirley."

In his essay for the Dalhousie exhibit, *Winter-Visions*, Shirley chose to present himself directly: "I am Black." (Shirley, 1975, p.1) His short espousal is written with the positive aggression described by Henry Bishop. "A few of us are trying to create societies based on our collective spirit. Much of my life has been dedicated to this ideal." (Shirley, 1975, p.1)

Shirley was critical of Nova Scotia in his essay. "There is much creativity, vitality and brilliance here which seems to be suppressed by an indifferent and negative political system." (Shirley, 1975, p.2) He compares the experiences of Blacks in Nova Scotia to those he remembers from New York. He alludes to the recent razing of Africville: "The monuments of our lives were constantly being crushed, moved or altered to the point where we had no monuments other than ourselves." (Shirley, 1975, p.1)

Jim Shirley traveled to Halifax from Rankin Inlet, NWT as a guest to the official opening of *In This Place....* David Woods introduced him at the opening ceremony, telling the story of how he tracked down Shirley in the Northwest Territories and invited him to return to Halifax for the exhibition. Shirley had not been back since his departure in 1979. Woods speaks about the significance of Shirley's inclusion in the show:

> Well, I worked all on instinct with this show because I had no other references and to me, when you're looking for who was doing a complex interpretation of the Black experience in Nova Scotia, there is only one prior to the eighties and it was him, to me. And when I say complex I mean that was the man who was providing a psychological complex image-making on the Black experience here. So there was no other. There were other people who had drawn something or might have done a good job of painting somebody, but the interpretation of people - he was the only one. Anything about the Black experience that tried to represent it in its truest form would have to be hinged on his involvement... The show had to have a Jim Shirley. It had to be anchored.

Shirley's monoprints played a prominent role in the installation of *In This Place....* He was given a section all his own and was often displayed beside the pulpit and the poem:

> He was probably the one that we had the most works of. I'm not saying it was the only significant work in there, but you pull that out - a certain thing is now absent with the painted images. I knew about *Nigger on Salmon River Road* but the other pieces are really the ones that, yeah, this gives us dimension that we didn't have.

By anchoring the show with Jim Shirley, Woods re-enforced an important connection with the somewhat distant momentum of the *Black Power*

movement. To make that link, Woods had to bypass an entire era of quieter evolution.

> *(And when I say this*
> *No one listens,*
> *And when I scream from its pain -*
> *No one hears.)*

Mary Sparling was the curator at the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery at the time of Shirley's show. She and Shirley were friends and their association perhaps explains the mistaken impression that Shirley's pioneering show was at the Mount, rather than Dalhousie. Mary Sparling says she was not aware at the time that Shirley was breaking ground: "I never quite looked at it that way." She saw his work in a different context: "There was a great openness then, partly because there were so many Americans that had come." She describes the manner in which she viewed Shirley: "It was as an artist and he happened to be Black."

Nigger on Salmon River Road (no date) is a small 13" x 15" monoprint that was purchased by the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in 1977. It had already been shown as part of Shirley's *Winter-Visions* show at Dalhousie. It was added to the Mount's permanent collection. "He was obviously a wonderful artist," recalls Sparling. "And we showed his work in other shows, and that wonderful one that we bought from him, *Nigger on Salmon River Road*. That's a marvelous piece." In a limited sense, the legacy of Jim Shirley in Nova Scotia was continued by the lonely print, *Nigger on Salmon River Road*. The print was used at least three times over the subsequent two decades.

In 1979, the year of Shirley's departure, several of his prints were included in *Survival Atlantic Style*, a show curated by Barry Lord. The show, which originated at the Mount and toured nationally, focused on the topic of unemployment, from Lord's characteristically Marxist perspective.

> *But I will lift up my hands,*
> *(Because my hands they do not love*
> *But I love them still)*

Interestingly, Barry Lord is the author of a book, *The History of Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art* , published out of Toronto, in 1974. The book predates Shirley's first Canadian show and Lord, thus, could not include him. However, Lord does make reference to a painting by Group of Seven artist, Lawren Harris, entitled *Black Court, Halifax* (1921) (See Appendix IV.). Harris was in Nova Scotia on a trip to sketch the coal mines of Cape Breton. However, mines and miners were not all that he sketched: "In Halifax on this same trip Harris painted the homes of another group of oppressed people, the large minority of black Canadians in that city." (Lord, 1974, p.141) Lord describes the painting:

> The black children playing on the steps appear constricted by the sombre rectilinear shapes of the wooden structures around them. The sky behind the buildings echoes this severity in its overhanging clouds, and even the water glimpsed between the houses has a greenish hue. An unpainted board fence on the right closes off the court, and completes the picture of a people hemmed in by poverty. (Lord, 1974, p.142)

Lord's bias is in favour of a *people's* art tied to the struggles of the working class. Though he sees potential in Harris's choice of subject, Lord argues that the painting falls short: "Obviously Harris's paintings of social subjects... depict the plight of the poor but do not show the ongoing fight

of the blacks or the miners to change their conditions and defeat their oppressors." (Lord, 1974, p.142)

Though it took twenty years, Lawren Harris eventually did join the struggle, but on behalf of his own. In 1941, he was one of the key figures involved in the formation of the FCA. "The formation of the Federation of Canadian Artists in 1941 was an important step in gaining public support for artists and their activities..." (Gelber, 1986, p.22) In 1944 the FCA took part in a civil rights-style *March on Ottawa* in which they, a full 13 years ahead of their time, called for the formation of a national, arms-length, government funding agency for the arts. (Gelber, 1986, p.22)

In his book, Lord also discusses a painting by another Canadian artist, Claude Breeze. *Sunday Afternoon: From an Old American Photograph* (1965) is a painted reproduction of, as Lord describes...

> a photograph taken in the U.S. south during the 1920s, showing two lynched blacks hanging from a tree, which was being used as a poster by the U.S. Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC). (Lord, 1974, p.224)

In the forty-four years since the Harris painting, Lord notices a small change:

> Although the primary emphasis of Breeze's painting is still on plight rather than fight, this man's head, at the same angle as the hanged man's but expressing determination rather than submission, at least suggests contemporary black Americans' courageous struggle. (Lord, 1974, p.225)

Even staunch nationalist Barry Lord forgets to look to his own country's eastern coast. One begins to understand the frustration that leads George Elliott Clarke to conclude that Black Canadians are 'twice forgotten and doubly damned.'

Lord also comes in for criticism. With the benefit of seventeen years of hindsight, Robin Metcalfe discusses Lord's show in the context of the retrospective *Necessity: The MSVU Collection, 1973-1994*. While the *Necessity* exhibition is largely a celebration, Metcalfe maintains a sober tone when he discusses the art:

> Presenting artists as representatives of specific communities, as Lord did in *Survival Atlantic Style*, reflects a reductive tendency within community-based exhibitions, one that may ghettoize artists and reproduce naive identity politics. (Metcalfe, 1996, p.9)

By presenting Shirley as representative of a type, Lord does not necessarily allow space for his articulated complexity of spirit. Metcalfe's criticism of Lord is not unqualified:

> Nevertheless, groups and individuals have often constructed and claimed identities strategically as a means to social and cultural empowerment. (Metcalfe, 1996, p.9)

This is true of Jim Shirley, whose ponderings on economics and race are quoted in Lord's catalogue. "Black people, I believe, are especially endowed with an elegant mannerism that both contains and defines them." (quoted by Lord, 1979) Shirley gives his own introduction in the show's catalogue. Yet, even so, the process becomes, as Metcalfe writes, 'reductive' when the richness of Shirley's work is lessened by its context.

Regional Realism, in 1982, included *Nigger on Salmon River Road*, this time in order to show the variety of Nova Scotian realism. In a list of questions, curator Mary Sparling asks: "Is it the time of the alienated black on a Cape Breton road by New York-born, black artist Jim Shirley?" She concludes: "Many of the works, as strong formally as in subject matter, invite multiple readings." (Sparling, 1982, p.4-5)

Necessity: The MSVU Collection, 1973 - 1994 illustrates the ways in which the Mount gallery effectively pushed for social change; quiet efforts were made by Mary Sparling and the University which should not be dismissed. Director Ingrid Jenkner asserts that "the Gallery has used its limited resources to strengthen the position of marginalized artists and non-traditional practices within the region." (Jenkner, 1996, p.9) Curator Robin Metcalfe elaborates:

> Many of the works in the Permanent Collection are conventional in their approach to media, and conservative in their communications strategies. Their radical potential derives from the cultural range of the artists and media represented, the social critiques that they propose, and the implications of exhibiting them in an art gallery... (Metcalfe, 1996, p.5)

Interestingly, some of the work in *In This Place...* can also be described in these same terms.

The Mount was instrumental in giving many artists and ideas access to the *official* culture of Nova Scotia's institutional galleries. For instance, Donna James, in 1987-88, served as exhibitions officer at the Mount, as, in fact, did Mern O'Brian several years earlier. As well, the Mount was an early supporter of the craft community, which has often been several steps ahead of the *fine art* community in matters of race. Robin Metcalfe notes: "Edith Clayton's baskets were among the earliest works collected from the local African-Canadian community." (Metcalfe,1996, p.7) Clayton, in fact, regularly took part in local and national craft fairs and exhibitions.

Mary Sparling had strong ideas about the potential role of the art gallery: "It's a publicly funded space and therefore it should be seen as a

forum for people, where their work and their ideas can come." Sparling defines her role, as gallery director within that system:

> A public space like an art gallery has a public responsibility: everyone should have the same access. Provide them with what you know, and what limits you have to work within -- very often they will expand those limits, which is all to the good -- then get out of the way and let them do it. (Sparling, quoted by Metcalfe, 1996, p.9)

Sparling's work with the Black community eventually culminated with *Africville: A Spirit that Lives On,* in 1989. The show was a tremendous success. It traveled nationally to ten different cities over two years. Mary Sparling contends: "For the people of Africville it was a validation of themselves as a community."

David Woods comments: "[The MSVU Gallery] did the Africville show for their particular reasons. It has nothing to do with what we were doing in *In This Place....*" He deliberately chooses to distance himself from the Africville show. Woods is skeptical of the degree of real Black Nova Scotian creative input into the Africville show:

> There were very few Black people involved in that anyway. I don't think that anybody that was working on that show was Black, in terms of on the creative side of it. The curator was white the photographers were white, the designers were white. It was a Black subject. The vision of that show didn't come from the Black community. The subject matter was the Black community, but it had nothing to do with the Black community, in terms of a creative vision of even how to portray Africville. It was basically a museum getting a grant to do its thing.

Contrasting opinions exist but the import of his words makes manifest a larger concern: A desire for unfettered Black curatorial control.

And my feet will whirl and dance,
(Because my feet they do not love
But I love them still)

The beginnings of the *Africville* show can be traced back to an earlier show in 1983, the first collaboration between the MSVU Art Gallery and the Black community.[8] *The Past in Focus*, an exhibit of turn-of-the-century photographs from the Halifax studio of William Notman, toured nationally. As an unusual component, the photographs were paired with local content at each location. At home in Halifax, Mary Sparling recalls how the Black community was called upon to counter Notman's photos:

> I was teaching a museum studies course at the Mount and one of the people who had taken it was Henry Bishop, who was a graduate of the Art College, and he had just been taken on as the curator for the then-not-built Black Cultural Centre, and I called him and I said, 'What do you think?...' And he said sure and he took it to the [Black Cultural] Society and they were keen... So that was the beginning of a continuing relationship with the Black community.

The photographs from the Black community grew into their own exhibit called *A Black Community Album*. Sparling speaks confidently about that show:

> It was very successful, hugely successful. For one thing it gave the Black Cultural Centre a basis for their collection of historic photography of the Black community. It was all paid for by this grant that we got. And we just turned that collection over to them completely when it was over. And some of them are still hanging there in frames that were paid for by public money.

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[8] Harold Pearse assisted with the exhibit as an advisor and funding liaison. He cites the experience as a personal eye-opener. Pearse went on to take part in the Africville exhibit.

On *Africville*, Sparling worked again with the same model: Community involvement through committees and advisors. "I really like to work with committees that are very representative of what we're trying to get at." Her first step was to consult Henry Bishop:

> He told us who to be in touch with and so we worked with Mrs. Johnson who had a huge collection of memorabilia, and Irvine Carvery who was the president of the Africville Genealogy Society, and Bridglal Pachai.

Years later, Sparling's successor at the Mount, Ingrid Jenkner wrote: "Mary's vision, and her penchant for consultation and collaboration, added a specifically cultural dimension to the public role of Mount Saint Vincent University." (Jenkner, 1996, p.2)

Sparling worked with a broad Advisory Committee and a smaller Steering Committee, both of which consisted of many people prominent in the Black Community. Sparling recalls the process: "We met, and we met, and we met... I know they felt that they were thoroughly involved in the whole thing."

Henry Bishop, indeed, traces a "natural progression" in the relationship between the Black community and the Mount.

> Africville became a story that had to be told from the community's point of view. The Mount was pivotal in that, because it had a relationship with Africville residents for the years it had existed. The women of Africville worked in hand with the Mount's Sisters of Charity. It was just an outgrowth of the relationships over the years. It manifested into an exhibition.

Shelagh Mackenzie, though, is credited with the original idea. In the "Acknowledgements" section of the catalogue Mary Sparling expresses gratitude to Mackenzie "for the initial idea which grew out of our working

together on the exhibition *A Black Community Album.*" (Sparling, 1989, p.2) Mackenzie's work culminated in her 1991 NFB film, *Remember Africville.*

Henry Bishop presents a contrasting analysis: "It came from the community." Indeed, since 1984, the community-based Africville Genealogy Society had been organizing an annual Africville Reunion, celebrating the memory of Africville. Bishop describes the role of the Mount as secondary: "I think they became in tune with what the Black Cultural Center was doing through the *Community Album.*" Whatever the origin, it is clear to most that the show was a successful collaboration.

David Woods has a second criticism to voice, not unrelated to his first: "The *Africville* show is not an art exhibition. It is a sociological look at a community." The show concentrated on uncovering and presenting information along with photographs and a few cultural artifacts in museum-like fashion. Sparling describes: "One of the important things... was the decision to hire a theatre designer to design a set for the *Africville* exhibit, so it was just like a little village." At the time, recalls Sparling, the museum-like style of the show was discussed:

> We were criticized because it was seen as something that should be done in the museum. In fact, I still have the article that Robin Metcalfe wrote for Arts Atlantic, and one phrase in it was: "I don't know what it's doing in an art gallery."

Yet even as a museum show, cultural artifacts from Africville were purportedly scarce: "Things like quilts, hooked rugs - all of which were done there - were used up and certainly we couldn't find anything at that time," remembers Sparling. The notable inclusion, in terms of the visual

creativity of a Black Nova Scotian, was the work of Ruth Brown Johnson. In 1949 she had made postcard-size linocuts of Africville.

The origin of those prints can be traced back to adult education classes in art, held in Africville during the late forties. The program was organized by Dr. Rev. William P. Oliver, through the Department of Education with the assistance of the Nova Scotia College of Art:

> These classes, which helped to rekindle community spirit and provided members of the class with printmaking skills, were held in the church basement of Cobequid Road Baptist Church. (Sparling, 1991, inside cover)

Ruth Brown took part as a student. Interestingly, Audrey Dear, a student at NSCAD at the time, taught some of these classes. It is possible that Audrey Dear may have instructed Ruth Brown either in printmaking or in another art. Though Audrey Dear Hesson's contributions had yet to be rediscovered, Ruth Brown Johnson was celebrated in the *Africville* exhibition at the Mount:

> We made a lot of that. Wherever we could, we showed whatever there was available to us. And we made as extensive a search as we could at the time, and quite haphazardly came across these prints that she had done.

Ruth Johnson was awarded a Doctorate of Humane Letters (*honoris causa*) from the Mount in 1991.

Despite the criticisms highlighted by Woods, *Africville: A Spirit that Lives On* remains a positive experience in the memories of many Nova Scotians. Sparling's willingness to open the gallery and reach across barriers is admirable. Sparling recalls the aftermath of the *Africville* show: "I got a lot of letters from galleries across the country, to that effect, that we were doing what all galleries should be doing."

In *Necessity,* Robin Metcalfe describes Mary Sparling's hands-on approach:

> Sparling cites three practical maxims that have guided her work at the Mount: 'Whatever you do, you're always wrong' (i.e. you can't please everyone, so don't try); 'If something is worth doing, it's worth doing badly' (don't let fastidiousness stand in your way); and 'Hire experts.'" (Metcalfe, 1996, p.9)

But Sparling, like Woods, also speaks about the importance of direction from within the community:

> If something is going to happen that is going to continue, it's got to come out of their own community 'cause there's a lot of things that started because of the *Africville* exhibit, but it takes a lot of time for a community to throw up enough leaders with a commitment to go forward and also to have a particular expertise.

> *And my voice will sing out in church,*
> *Because still I must rise.*

Sylvia Hamilton was on the Advisory Committee of the *Africville* show. She makes an important point concerning the frequency of shows involving Black Nova Scotians:

> I think that the difficulty is when these things are so spread out over time, and... there are not other comparable initiatives happening to extend and expand some of the benefits that happen as a result of those kinds of shows.

Even the shows at the Mount were spread out over the course of a decade.

The Painted Sounds of Romare Bearden was shown at the Mount in the summer of 1997. This exhibit undoubtedly gave *In This Place...* a spiritual boost in its early stages. David Woods describes the role the Bearden exhibit played in his creative process:

> My personal journey was I was scheduled to do a show at the Dartmouth Heritage Museum when they told me that they wouldn't be opened. I said, "Ah, what a relief - didn't want to do a show anyway." ...When I saw the Romare Bearden exhibition, it was sort of like the final piece where I basically said, "Now, the time has come. Let's go find out what's out there." So I decided instead of putting on my own exhibition, I'd go after trying to do an exhibition on Black art in Nova Scotia.

Woods describes a force that propelled the exhibit from that point forward:

> The show happened because right after the *Romare Bearden* I left the gallery, went home, wrote a proposal, met with Harold the next week, and said let's create a structure to make sure this happens in February. That's why the show happened... It went from an idea to a way of achieving it.

Woods takes credit for starting the project, but he also notes that his was not an original idea:

> It is not an original idea to say let's have a Black art show. If you are a Black artist it is sort of natural thing for you to want. But in terms of why this particular show happened it had a lot to do with the fact that I took the thing by the reins.

The Painted Sounds of Romare Bearden provoked a different response than did *No Laughing Matter*. Sylvia Hamilton compares:

> Again, here's work by an African-American artist, but mesh that with what is happening locally, so there was a whole series of things that happened along with that show to engage the community.

It is worth noting, the 1992 folk art exhibit by Weymouth Falls elder, Ralph Cromwell has not received the attention it deserves. *A Lifetime of Making: Ralph and Ada Cromwell* was orchestrated by George Elliott Clarke and exhibited by Mary Sparling at the MSVU Art Gallery.

However, Ralph Cromwell did not get included in the survey show *In This Place... Black Art in Nova Scotia*. In Woods's opening night speech in Halifax, Ralph Cromwell was but an anecdote. His work was not available because it had been sold, almost in its entirety, to an entrepreneuring American art dealer, in 1990. Allegedly, the transaction involved a mere $200.[9] Mary Sparling recalls:

> Mr. Cromwell was just wonderful. And it was a very hard one to put together because there was a collector in the States who was buying up all his work, and we finally ran him down because we wanted some of the work for the exhibit, and he was very evasive.

Sparling believes that the dealer sold some of Cromwell's work to the Museum of Civilization in Quebec City: "They have quite a collection of Canadian folk art, and they've got a lot of his work there." The show at the Mount consisted mainly of a large bicycle-boat and a few remaining small folk-objects.

When considered from this perspective, George Elliott Clarke's essay in the exhibit's catalogue takes on an almost tragic dimension:

> Ralph and Ada Cromwell's making, like that of so many other Africadians, has been little known and seldom celebrated. Secreted amid pines, apple blossoms, and wild roses, their work has been hidden like their people's history. Yet, they have adorned their isolation with art which is also craft....(Clarke, *Keeping Faith*, p.1)

Oddly, Clarke makes only indirect mention of the American dealer, stating only that Ralph Cromwell's work is "now receiving international attention."(Clarke, *Keeping Faith*, p.1) It is unclear whether cynicism enters into his tone.

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[9] Amount based on my recollection of Woods's speech.

And maybe this oppression
Has made me stronger,

The commodification of Black culture was engaged by *In This Place...* through a curatorial installation. *Fifteen 'coloured women'* (1998) by Sylvia 'Sis' Bowden was actually a collaboration between Bowden and David Woods. Harold Pearse explains:

> Maybe since I never got to meet the woman who made them, I pretty much saw that as David's piece because it was his curatorial presentation. It was a statement - and it was a statement that he was making - the way he grouped those and framed them, stacked them and hung them.

The assemblage, as included in the show, contained fifteen small ceramic casts of seated Black women in identical pink dresses and with exaggerated smiles, consciously reminiscent of the *Aunt Jemima* image promulgated in early American advertising. They were displayed in three rows on a wooden rack, each doll with a $2.50 price tag tied around the neck. Woods feels the piece was an important inclusion: "I thought it had a tremendous amount to say, actually... from a different kind of angle than just straight." He describes his inspiration:

> The point was I saw something in this woman's work. The selling of Black images by a Black woman to basically whites. Little stereotyped little critters, you know. And I thought that was intriguing. It was intriguing when you walk down to her store, you know, it's like yeah, alright. [laughter] So how do you get that idea across. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn't. I don't know.

In his review in *Mix*, George Elliott Clarke interprets the work: "The piece challenges us to humanize and politicize the image of Aunt Jemima" (Clarke, 1998, p.43) Woods's apparent uncertainty as to the piece's

success is actually a delicate phrasing of the complex and varied responses the piece provoked on opening night:

> We put it up. Everybody tried to buy the shit. [laughter] "Hey, are those things for sale?" It was the biggest question on opening night. "I'd like one." "They're only two-fifty!"

Woods recognizes that the responses, in one sense, testify to the truth of the piece's original statement. Black and white visitors indiscriminately and sincerely wished to purchase the figurines:

> It was always intended as irony but it became double irony when people actually didn't even get the irony. A lot of people got the irony but there was a whole bunch of people that just saw two-fifty on a price tag and figured they had two-fifty in their pockets and that was it for them. In fact, I got so tired of being asked I took the 'for sale' sign down. And then people said, "Ahw, does that mean they're all sold out." I mean, opening night that was the biggest question I got.

Fifteen 'coloured women' is yet another example of how irony can exist on many levels. Beyond the irony involved in the gesture to sell the figures, and the double irony of people being more than willing to buy, there exists still other dimensions of irony. Irony depends on position and in most cases gravitates upwards, towards elitism. Though it includes an element of disdain, invariably the implied meaning changes depending on one's presuppositions.

Sylvia Bowden is described in the show's bio information as a housewife and a mother of eleven. It is unclear to what extent she is aware of the contradictions inherent in her work. Woods sees them: "I just thought it was a very important point being expressed by this woman's real life." Yet irony is not limited to the elite. The sophistication

of colloquial language has often been overlooked, and perhaps the greatest irony is seen only by those at the butt of the joke.

> *And maybe the presence of my enemies*
> *Has made me stronger in my own will,*

Several months before *In This Place...*, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia had a show that also involved historical Black caricatures. *Folk Art Banks* (1997) was a small display from a private collection of automated coin-storage banks. These banks, like some lawn ornaments, depicted caricatures of Black children fishing or playing. Coins deposited would trigger the automated mechanisms and provoke an entertaining gesture. The gallery did not see a need to editorialize, contextualise, or qualify. The display stood on its own as finely crafted, small metal sculpture and, as is inevitably the case, interpretation was left to the eye of the beholder. That show went by largely unnoticed. Yet the contrast between *Folk Art Banks* and *Fifteen 'coloured women'* sheds light on the discussion of an appropriate location for *In This Place...*.

Mary Sparling voices a commonly held sentiment when she speaks of the location of *In This Place...*:

> The exhibit, Black Art in Nova Scotia, was an absolute triumph. It was at the right time, and there was the right support structure, and I think it happened in the right place, too. Because NSCAD is an art making place, and so it played a real role in validation.

Spiritually this may be true, but Peter Dykhuis, as director of Anna Leonowens, speaks practically:

> This is beyond our mandate as a gallery, to a certain extent, and it's beyond our capabilities. You wouldn't believe the

> twelve hour days I've put in just doing accounting. Twelve hours of accounting.

Dykhuis explains how he inadvertently found himself in such a position:

> This project, that started out ostensibly for 15 artists and just here, suddenly became 45 artists and a tour of like three galleries around the province, you know what a monster, not a monster, a big... - monster is probably not a bad word - a happy monster, what a happy monster this show became.

From an administrative point of view *In This Place...* was not in the right place.

Dykhuis notes: "This show, or a show, like this has been simmering for years and years and years." He thinks one of the factors contributing to the long gestation period may have been that there was simply no right place. Woods more or less agrees: "I think where it was, it was. I think that's a larger question for where it should be."

The obvious location for such a broad show is the AGNS. Woods recalls some of the feedback he received: "At the openings, it wasn't just, 'Oh, this is wonderful.' There were people who were actually saying these things. 'How come the AGNS hasn't done something like this?'"

Harold Pearse perceives some of the pressures felt by many galleries. He says the show was viewed as too risky:

> Risky because they would have to either hire a curator, or use their own curator. There would be a lot riding on it. Their risk of failure would have been too high, so it would be reluctant for anybody to take it. Also I think there would be a tendency for - and there is a tendency - for professional institutional curators to, if they were to undertake an exhibition, they would have a thesis. They bring a view point to it so there is a lot more riding on it than what we were able to do.

Harold Pearse offers further reasons why the show did not happen at the AGNS:

> I think, for example the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia has a much bigger and more onerous mandate. It would have been very difficult - even though some would say, 'Oh, that's where it should have been - it would have been very difficult, with so little groundwork being done before, for them to have started. It was much more exploratory.

David Woods speaks frankly about the barriers surrounding Nova Scotia's major art gallery:

> They don't think about Black art; they have no infrastructure. There is an elitism, there's a lack of access, there's all kinds of things. There's a high-browness - it doesn't mean that you can't break it down. It doesn't mean that you can't break it down. Once you have something, once you believe in yourself you just go, 'Hey, we've attracted over 5000 people coming to this show.' ...You still have to go and sit down and talk to [the AGNS]; you still have to go through the process to get them to be right.

He would like to see the AGNS redo a version of *In This Place...*:

> What I am saying is this particular show would be an opportunity for them to do a lot of things in one breath.... But as to whether they will that has more to do with whether the Black artists push for it 'cause it ain't natural for them, they are to caught up in their own.

Woods's activism informs this last remark.

Perhaps the most important element in the success of the show is the degree of curatorial autonomy offered at the Anna Leonowens in order to allow NSCAD students the freedom to experiment and gain experience in a gallery context. However, David Woods, at least on paper,

was not given full curatorial control. It was shared with Harold Pearse. Woods says this was his own choice:

> I insisted that he be co-curator. So it didn't come from him. I basically told him that and part of it was function, the other part is that we can get along in a room. I've worked with him before and I knew I could get along with him, and we could share some different ideas... The second thing is, he understood how to facilitate a process without impeding it and he allowed me my freedom. Some other funky gallery could have come in and said, 'Who are you?' ...and [messed] up the whole thing. So, I give him all the praises.

Reminiscent of a sentiment expressed by Mary Sparling, Harold Pearse describes the role he fulfilled in the partnership: "I certainly saw my role less as a curator, with a particular thesis, and more of a facilitator - someone who would allow an exhibition to happen."

Dykhuis speaks of the usefulness of the relationship: "In some ways that was just sort of a structural device. It was a way to bring the entire project into this gallery and give it, kind of, a sense of purpose and direction." It is also important, as Dykhuis points out, to recognize the real contributions that Harold Pearse made to the curatorial process: "I think of Harold as being David's bouncing board, in a sense. They talked about things and they made the selection of the work."

Speaking from a wealth of experience, Mary Sparling agrees with the decision to include Harold Pearse as co-curator:

> There certainly had to be somebody who knew the institution, the art gallery, at least NSCAD. I don't know how the choice was made but the two of them worked. It was obviously a great mix. And something like that, if there hasn't been a long history of involvement, it's always good to have somebody from inside to work with.

Pearse does not shy away from stating the racial subtext to his relationship with David Woods:

> In simplest terms our roles were the white guy rooted in the mainstream - meaning white - art community and the art institution and he was the Black guy rooted in the Black community - on all sorts of levels, both in terms of his knowledge of the history and his knowledge of the people and working with people. Our idea was that we could, by working together, bring these things together.

David Woods also speaks of the relationship in terms of race. He is careful to stress that the relationship also went deeper:

> It is certainly strategic to have *the doctor* versus just David Woods. He knows that I'm not necessarily known in the curatorial field, so, yeah, it's advantageous. So, yeah there was function but it wasn't based on just him being functional. It wasn't like, "Hey, let me go get a white man so I can use his name for a grant." I transcended that but it was quite with the consciousness.

Mary Sparling believes respect is a key ingredient: "They respected each other." She says this with full knowledge of the complexities inherent in cross-racial collaboration.

At the grand opening in Halifax, an awkward second passed as David Woods referred to Dr. Harold Pearse as Santa Claus. Pearse says that he did not take offense to Woods's opening night remarks:

> It was something that we kind of joked about, and I'm not sure which of us started this, but we amongst ourselves - myself, Peter, and David - I know Peter and I would say this, well, to each other and David: 'What this exhibition is it's about two white guys providing a white box for the Black artist.' That was maybe as direct as we could get. I guess the relationship worked because we respected each other and we could joke.

Though he obviously respects Pearse, Woods's tone is unconcerned:

> I'm much more about empowering people than I am about whether all this stuff matters. It is more important to know that I empowered a whole bunch of artists, than it is to me to play edict games with all these high falutes.

Humour is an important tool in broaching topics uncomfortable and debilitating like guilt. Harold Pearse says he tries to keep the feeling of guilt in check:

> I certainly was sensitive to the perception of paternalism, but I guess it was because I thought the whole point of this was to get beyond, and not get bogged down or even feel guilty about what happened or didn't happen in the past. I mean, here we are now, and it's about time.

Mary Sparling sympathizes. She tells an anecdote about an incident which took place in the early 70's at a national museum conference involving her friend, First Nations artist, Peter Christmas. They had worked together extensively at the Nova Scotia Museum and were both invited to take part in a roundtable discussion on Native issues: "He trashed us. He gave the usual rhetoric about, you know, shut out from - didn't say a word about the Nova Scotia... [laughter]" Sparling continues her story...

> Well, anyway, that evening there was a reception and Peter Christmas and I, and a couple of other people were standing on the steps of one of the - it was a grand stairway. And Peter was on the step above me and I said, "What did you do that for, Peter?" And he - I forget what he said - but he was smoking a cigar and he blew the smoke in my face. [pause] So I poured my drink down his neck. We've been the best of friends ever since.

She reconciles the situation with a recognition that that the gesture was not meant as a personal affront. She recalls his response, on the stairway at the reception:

> He was absolutely astonished. And I just think he knew that I was acting out of the same spirit that he was bringing to this social occasion, which was also in a way a political occasion.

Sparling's story has another resonance with the events surrounding *In This Place....* During a panel discussion at the Anna Leonowens, David Woods spoke out strongly against systematic exclusion and institutional racism. In that instance it was Peter Dykhuis who showed a degree of magnanimity by not taking the criticisms personally.

Sylvia Hamilton, surprisingly, is not overly concerned when people make accusations of paternalism: "I would not want to presume people's motives." Furthermore, she suggests that even if paternalism is present, action is still better than inaction:

> Sometimes things that might happen in a paternalistic fashion may well get turned around and may well then get taken on and extended much much further than the people initially might have intended.

She chooses to reframe the discussion of paternalism, focusing instead on the need for institutional change:

> Whenever you get hooked into discussions of intent and motive, you never get to: And what the hell do we do about this? And why has it happened? And what are the structures that need to be changed? What are the attitudes of the people inside that have to undergo some radical transformation?

Hamilton cites her experience working with the Human Rights Commission as the source for her conviction. She prefers to look at practice and results rather than intent:

> Over the years these galleries may not have 'intended' to exclude artists of African descent, or whatever. Well that doesn't make any difference whether they intended to or not. What makes a difference is the fact that people have been excluded and what the hell do you do about it.

Peter Dykhuis acted as administrator and bookkeeper for *In This Place....* Despite the fact that he recognized a need to get involved, he expresses discomfort with the power accompanying his position:

> Meet the new boss same as the old boss. Nothing's really changed. It is still senior white administrators running the thing. I hope that changes.

Buseje Bailey is an artist who has pushed for that change. Born in Jamaica, she earned her MFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in 1992, and her BFA at York University. She also has a communications diploma in publishing from Centennial College. In recent years she has had exhibitions at Dalhousie, Eye Level and the Anna Leonowens, as well as in Ontario and internationally.

Bailey describes her frustration with the intellectual parameters set by institutions:

> 'Colonial liberal educational' institutions have educated us, but do we 'others' have identities and opportunities beyond this education? Has this education freed us from being 'other'? The traditional literary discourse does not provide us a way out of the preconceived notions of who or what we 'others' can become. The institutions define the construction of us, and we are educated by these institutions. (Bailey, 1992, p.1-2)

If one recognizes that the university acts as a sanctuary for the *construction* of knowledge, it is possible that Harold Pearse addresses similar issues when he states: "My interest is very much the College's relationship to the outside community with a particular interest in the so-called marginalised community."

Bailey continues:

> Our voices and objections have largely been ignored in the past and the present. But the world is in flux, and the place I am practicing from is in motion. The old forms of existence have worn out and new forms have not yet been proven. Some people are struggling to maintain the old, while others are struggling to create the new. (Bailey, 1992, p.2)

Henry Bishop sat on the jury at NSCAD when Bailey received her masters degree. He speaks of her highly:

> She was dynamic, no doubt about that. Very politically aware. Had a lot of energy to fight oppression and power to the people expressions. She was a person to reckon with. I admired her strength and her character.

Bishop thinks that Bailey contributed to the momentum behind *In This Place...*:

> I think she was probably one of the individuals that initiated the process.... *In This Place...* was just a culmination of a lot of work over the years. It didn't happen a year ago. It is four or five years in the preparation stage. Just getting people psyched up, educated about it, sure that it would happen.

> *Or maybe just wanting to know and touch the beauty of my soul -*
> *I became increasingly beautiful in this world*

In the years following Bailey's presence at NSCAD, an organization of international and Canadian students of colour was formed. The group

was called MOSAIC, and their efforts culminated, in the fall of 1993, with a seventeen-person show at the Anna Leonowens Galleries II & III. Many of those artists were also included, five years later, in *In This Place....* It is important to note that their exhibit was actually only one of eight goals outlined by MOSAIC.[10] The group's aspirations included, among other things, curriculum expansion, a resource centre and links with like-minded groups at other universities. These goals, however, were cut short when organizer, Letti Beals was dismissed from her administrative position at NSCAD.

As a faculty member and an administrator at NSCAD, Pearse has had ample time to observe the school's temperament:

> Both the positive and the negative of how things function here is they rely more on individual interests, especially in terms of the gallery, than on a gallery mandate. The College itself could try to articulate a particular mission in that regard but then again it always comes down to the individuals and it is probably more effective if it comes out of the individuals.

Pearse says he was pleasantly surprised by the relationship that developed between the NSCAD Alumni Association and the College's first Black graduate, Audrey Dear Hesson:

> What I thought was so neat was the way that the graduating students this year, through the alumni, had adopted Audrey Hesson, and just within a couple of months here she was giving the graduation address. I mean, that was amazing. That wasn't anything that I even thought about. Or it wasn't anything that the administration mandated. It was a sense in the community that, "Hey, here is a really fine person and wouldn't it be great if she spoke."

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[10] A copy of MOSAIC's statement of goals has been included. See Appendix V.

The NSCAD Alumni Association has the potential to be an important catalyst for change. In fact, it was the Alumni Association at Dalhousie University, which in the 70's started the Transition Year Program, dedicated to easing the transition of Black and Mi'kmaq students into the University.

Sylvia Hamilton is watching NSCAD carefully: "I'm really interested in whether these institutions begin to undergo any of this kind of critical analysis of who's there, who's not there and what are they doing about it." She thinks the process is an important one:

> It is that process that has been long in coming, not because people have not advocated for change - out of the Black community or whatever the particular community that might be excluded - I think a lot of the time it's because of the reluctance and the entrenchment of attitudes and practices within places, that do not allow for that kind of critical dialogue.

Hamilton does not fail to see irony, even when it occurs outside of the context of the gallery:

> It's ironic, it's very ironic because colleges often - art colleges and such, and the same with the universities - are to be the places where there is critical thought, intellectual thought, that engagement with ideas, that whole process.

She agrees with Harold Pearse that important initiatives must come from individuals: "After all, institutions are made up of individuals. Somebody makes decisions somewhere, or doesn't make them." But she also recognizes a need for change at all levels:

> Sometimes when they are confronted with these issues of exclusion and absence and representation, it becomes very difficult, because what then happens is people's individual

> personal attitudes are then called into question. I think that whole personal self-reflection and review of your own attitudes becomes a very difficult thing for people to deal with.

She has observed some important changes over the years involving many of Halifax's universities. She thinks NSCAD is lagging behind:

> It has been very evident in all this that NSCAD has not had a strong history of very direct involvement with African-Nova Scotian artists and probably can still count on two hands, possibly, the number of artists who would be African-Nova Scotians... who would have graduated from the college.

She says potential allies exist within the college:

> There have been discussions with people at the College over a number of years, both formally and informally, about the need for the College to make connections and to look at itself, in terms of who the students are.

She views *In This Place...* as a first step:

> I think that the fact that Harold Pearse co-curated the show was important. It's significant for a senior person at the College to participate and to acknowledge that this work is there and that it has been there and needs to be recognized and displayed. And it's a first step. It's not saying that everything is fine nor that this show should be the last. But I think it's perhaps a beginning of a recognition that this work is there.

> *So that here in this place -*
> *Even amidst oppression,*

Henry Bishop is optimistic about the recent changes: "I think the whole idea of inclusiveness, understanding and respect has now been solidified." Sylvia Hamilton is more cautious. She speaks of the need for more Black representation within the institutions:

> If there had been a gallery director at one of these places that was of African descent, we may well have seen a lot more shows earlier on, and more consistently, and not just shows by artists of African descent but but a real multiplicity and diversity of voices or artists being shown.

She says she understands how race has been made an obstacle between the two groups:

> Often people in the broader white community have made assumptions about what exists in the African Nova Scotian community. And so if I'm a gallery curator and I don't know anybody - first of all I don't really know anybody who's Black, I don't have any connections in that community. I've read some of the history and I get these conclusions about, "There's no real culture here." I don't see artists coming through my gallery, whatever. I'm going to conclude probably that they ain't out there.

David Woods agrees with her analysis:

> It is very important that this very dramatic thing happened starting off as a Black vision of itself. Because when you don't start off with your own vision of yourself people take cues from whatever is presented. I can show you the first Black history book written on Black Nova Scotians, written by a guy named Robin Wiggs. It's filled with all kinds of lies that everybody repeats. Because that's what they see in the library.

Hamilton always allows for the possibility of individual reformation but, realistically, places more faith in representation:

> There has to be, on the part of that individual some kind of mental movement that forces some of these questions to be asked. If that doesn't exist, and if there aren't people of African decent in those positions of authority and power - the art's out there, but the artists themselves aren't curating.

David Woods is doubtful that even a well intentioned white curator would have met with much success, in trying to curate a survey of Black art:

> A white curator, without knowledge of the Black community, couldn't do *In This Place....* Firstly because they wouldn't go much further than about five names because that's the only five names they would probably get. They'd go to the Art Gallery - they'd find the two paintings there, they'd get the Art College students and that's probably all. The Black community wouldn't respond to them because they wouldn't even know how to look. Secondly, the interpretation of the Black experience would come from them thinking that there wasn't a whole whack of stuff out there in the first place. They would start off with that assumption, or working knowledge, and not redefine how you see art.

Mary Sparling for the most part agrees. "It has to come out of the community itself, finally." Mern O'Brian says she welcomes the change: "When you get Black Canadian people doing things like curating shows it is a great bonus."

Pamela Edmonds is probably the most active Black curator in Halifax but the list is longer. As well as David Woods and Henry Bishop, Donna James and Buseje Bailey both have experience curating, but they are both currently living out-of-province.

David Woods thinks the AGNS should take advantage of the recent emergence of a community of Black visual artists. He thinks that the emergence of Black curators could make the whole process easier:

> The presence of [Pamela Edmonds] means in their world it is easy because now they have someone, if they decide to do something, whose going to go up there and charge.
>
> *When both they and I look -*

Woods and Edmonds work together as members of the Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia. Though the organization had been in existence since 1992 under the leadership of Sylvia Hamilton, it was practically

defunct in the summer of 1997 when Edmonds, Woods and a handful of other artists decided to restart the group. Harold Pearse, recalling the organization during the early stages of the development of *In This Place...*, describes it as "nebulous."

Peter Dykhuis is optimistic about the group: "Ultimately I'd always wanted this entire project to be run by BANNS." It is obvious that he sees strong potential:

> I hope BANNS gets revitalized by this whole thing. I hope that twenty years from now some archivist might find Anna Leonowens' name attached to it; that's nice. But ultimately I hope that BANNS is completely affiliated with this thing and that they are doing it for themselves. That's what I want.
>
> *My soul will still be housed in an abode of beauty,*
> *And its riches will still...be mine.*

David Woods jokes about his future in art: "My career is over. I've done my art act. I can retire." Between a car accident in mid-project and the incredibly demanding hours required to hold the project together it is safe to say that, for David Woods, the process was all-consuming:

> Why I was climaxing to this show was really to do what this show did: Open up a bunch of doors. And I say, I can't even imagine opening up more doors than what this one did. So my motivation is kind of like ceased. [laughter] On one level it has. The sort of trying to be a ground breaker thing - it's over, man. I'm ground-broke. And that's even, like I said, a hundred times better because I didn't ground-broke, the work ground-broke. I don't even need to be burdened with that no more. I don't feel the same thing, so yeah, I'll paint more leisurely now.

Woods muses on the changes in Nova Scotia resulting from the exhibition:

> The knowledge is certainly over, that the Black community can create a popular, high-quality show that matters, cause, yeah, they have. And whenever you read about anything, that's over. The attitude of complete ignoring by galleries is over; they can still continue it but someone will bust the bubble because someone will say, well, what about that, or how come....

David Woods though says he is primarily concerned with the artists. He feels the show was good for the artists:

> It did its work: it opened doors and it introduced people and it puts the future back in their hands and not in somebody else's. If any achievement for me, it's that we have actually made people think about art who are creating art and that, for me, is the significant thing. So now we will see if these inspired people - the next thing they produce becomes extremely significant because they now have an understanding of what a gallery needs, what access to... or being on tour - all those things which were totally foreign to them. Half of them are now eligible to apply for a grant which they weren't before this. It becomes very important how they take the art idea, and now when they create the next piece, do they abandon that larger goal. It becomes very significant what happens next, more so than right now.

He is optimistic:

> Almost all the artists embraced the show and let it nurture them. And there is at least four or five of them who you definitely know it will affect them in their work and their ambitions and so that'd be neat, you know.

Harold Pearse voices a similar sentiment about Audrey Dear Hesson:

> What will be interesting is if she starts making art again. Because it seems like there was this period at the College and maybe shortly thereafter - she did teach for a few years after - and then she got married and had a family and then her creativity went in other ways. It would be interesting to see if....

Mary Sparling says she was particularly taken with the *Basket Man* (1998) by Clara Gough.

> ...and I talked to her afterwards, and she wants to make one - it's her father, who is the basket man, because he was bringing in the ash for making the baskets. And she wants to make one of her mother.

Sparling knows Gough's mother, Edith Clayton, as "the great basket maker of the Preston community."

Sparling thinks that with the recently formed Nova Scotia Arts Council, Black artists will now have a better chance at receiving funding. "So many people are now put on juries so that's a wonderful connecting force for what is done and what somebody might do."

Beyond the scope of this essay, many other aspects of the history of Black art in Nova Scotia invite further discussion. Gil Hancock's work with the Louisbourg Museum, as well as the emergence of the Birchtown museum is one. Another is the craft community and the often progressive role it played in the acceptance and promotion of artists, in particular Edith Clayton. Also of interest is the interrelated development of music, literature and visual art as exemplified by Jim Shirley's book illustrations published in Fredrick Ward's *Room full of balloons* (1981) and, later, by the multidiciplinary abilities of such artists as Henry Bishop, David Woods, and Ken Pinto. As well, a discussion of the relationship between the parallel galleries and Black artists could augment this essay and provide further insight into the configuration and racial accessibility of the broader set of galleries in Nova Scotia. The stories are many; much more must be written to fill this gaping hole in Nova Scotia's art history.

Black artists in Nova Scotia have a right to be cynical. Change is slow in coming. In 1947, a reporter for the *Halifax Chronicle* summarized the impressions of visiting Black American artist Selma Burke: "Racial discrimination though not showing so much on the surface was still prevalent in Canada. And it was particularly bad in Halifax." (*HC*, 15/9/47) Burke, a contemporary of Romare Bearden's and a prominent sculptor, was refused service by a segregated Halifax restaurant. She traveled with a white sociologist, Mrs. A. F. Wilson who was researching a paper for presentation at New York University: "Present Day Canadian Colonies of Descendants of American Slaves." With the absence of a local, popular discussion of race, discrimination is left to fester until, as in the case of *No Laughing Matter,* it finally explodes.

The history of art institutions and Black artists in Nova Scotia has involved struggles and frustrations. What this essay attempts to make evident is that real change happens, despite obstacles that exist. The history of Black artists in Nova Scotia, from Jim Shirley to Carrie Mae Weems to Buseje Bailey, is the history of people who understood the power in their own hands.

A central question posed in this essay is: Can an institution change? and if so, how? If the answer is yes, then it is through the humanity and vision of individuals combined with the successful entrenchment, within the system, of each hard fought for gain. It seems that direct, organized resistance and active struggle is being rediscovered as effective and necessary. Barriers come down because people demand that they come down, and apply the pressure needed to ensure they come down, and stay down. The art gallery can be a public forum, a focal point for the

institution, the public, and the artist. The potential of this forum in Nova Scotia is greatly enhanced by the presence of Black artists.

Appendix I

Chronology of Relevant Shows and Events

1968

Black United Front founded.

1974

Masks without Masquerades. Dalhousie Art Gallery, Feb 6 - March 2.
Part of a Canadian Association of African Studies Conference 34 rare examples of African masks.

Black Cultural Expo '74. Halifax Armories. March. (details unknown)
Included an art exhibit w/ Jim Shirley, Harold Cromwell, and others.

1975

Winter-Visions: prints by james shirley. Dalhousie Art Gallery. (exact dates unknown)

1977

Connections: the works of James R. Shirley. MSVU Art Gallery.
March 11 - April 3, 1977.

1979

Survival Atlantic Style: Works by 16 artists from the Atlantic Provinces.
MSVU Art Gallery, June 21 - July 29.
Included work by Jim Shirley.

1982

Regional Realism: Works from the Permanent collection of Mount Saint Vincent University. July 16 - Aug. 8; Provincial tour, '83 - '84.
Included print by Jim Shirley, among 35 artists.

1983

The Past in Focus: A Community Album Before 1930. MSVU Art Gal.
Collaboration w/ Black Cultural Center; part of *Fixed in Time* series.

Black Cultural Center founded.

1984

Eight Men in a Big House: Black and White Photographs by Donna M. A. James. Anna Leonowens Gallery III. May 22-26.

1988

Mother & Child: A History of Mothering. MSVU Art Gallery. March 4 - April 3.

Included Sylvia Hamilton, with her mother, Dr. Marie & daughter, Shani.

Ain't I a Woman? Photographs by Donna M. A. James. upstairs, MSVU Art Gallery.

May 14 - June 5.

Juxtaposes her photos of Black women with newspaper ad fantasies.

Visual Variations: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection. Dalhousie Art Gallery, Sept 8 - Oct 15.

Part of the African Worlds Program: "over 60 domestic and ceremonial objects such as combs, pipes, fly-whisks, fertility figures, masks and headdresses created by the peoples of West Africa."

1989

Ex Ex Ex. MSVU Art Gallery. Feb 24 - March 26.

The work of 15 Ex-exhibition officers (staff) at the Mount, '73 - '88, including Donna James ('87-'88), as well as Mern O'Brian.

Africville: A Spirit that Lives On. MSVU Art Gallery, Oct 20 - Nov 19.

National tour '90 - '92. Collaboration w/ Black Cultural Centre, the Africville Genealogy Society, NFB, and the Atlantic Centre.

1992

No Laughing Matter. Dalhousie Art Gallery, March 6th - April 19th.

Included works of Black US artist Carrie Mae Weems & Guerilla Girls. Organized by Independent Curators Inc., New York.

Body Politics. Buseje Bailey. Anna Leonowens Gallery II. March 24-28.

A Lifetime of Making: Ralph and Ada Cromwell. MSVU Art Gallery, Aug 20 - Sept 27.

1993

Regards with Reverence. Jan Crick. Anna Leonowens. Jan.12-16.

Tradition and Desire: Recent Video by Buseje Bailey and Donna James. Dal Art Gallery,
March 5 - April 11.
videos prod. at CFAT and at Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta 1992 summer workshop *Race and the Body Politic*

Good Stories Well Told: Video Art For Young Audiences. Dal Art Gallery,
June 4 - July 31.
Video art for kids, includes Black artists org. by I.C.I., NY.

Pathway: Landscape Photography. Rebecca S. Fisk. Anna Leonowens, Gallery III.
Sept. 28 - Oct. 6.

Jan Crick included in show at Mary E. Black Gallery. (details unresearched)

1994

Making Contact Across Art Forms: an exhibition by Buseje Bailey. Eye Level Gallery,
Feb 12 - March 21.

Good Impressions, MSVU Art Gallery. (details unresearched)
Included print by Jim Shirley.

MOSAIC: A group exhibition by students of color. Anna Leonowens, Gallery II & III.
Nov. 14-19.

1995

Facades: A joint exhibition by Derril Robinson and Andrea Arbour. Anna Leonowens Gallery. July 25-29.

Jan Crick included in a show at AGNS. (details unresearched)

1996

Henry Bishop: Book Illustrations. alcove, Dal Art Gallery Jan 12 - Feb 25.

Necessity: The MSVU Collection, 1973-94. MSVU Art Gallery Feb 17 - March 24.
Guest curated by Robin Metcalfe. Included print by Jim Shirley.

Harold Cromwell drawings on diplay in Folk Art Gallery, AGNS. (details unresearched)

1997

Folk Art Banks. AGNS, Sept 14 - Nov 17.

The Painted Sounds of Romare Bearden. MSVU Art Gal. Aug 30 - Sept 28.
org. by the U.S. Info. Service & circ. by the Can. Heritage Dept.

Justine Augustine shows at the Khyber. (details unresearched)

Without Absence: Paintings by Justine Augustine. Multicultural Arts Resource Centre.
Sept 4 - 20.

1998

In This Place... Black Art in Nova Scotia. Anna Leonowens Gallery II. Feb 17 - 28.

Sister Visions: Contemporary Black Voices. MARC. June 10 - 22.
Eight women, five of which were in *In This Place...*

Abode (1996) by David Woods Appendix II

Here in this place-
Blood moves through Black veins-
My blood.

In this place-
Feet are caught and set in chains-
My feet.

Along roads where I walk
I cannot turn my back-
Every shadow is hostile,
Knives appear everywhere,
And even my house is filled
with enemies.

And schools have been separated,
And communities have been bulldozed,
And churches have turned me away,
Even love has been separated-
And my gifts have been aloud to fail.

Because in this place-
My colour has been made to matter
When it should not,
My lips and nose are the source of ridicule
When they should not.
Even the quality of my hair stirs hatred-
When it should not.

(And when I say this
No one listens,
And when I scream from its pain-
No one hears.)

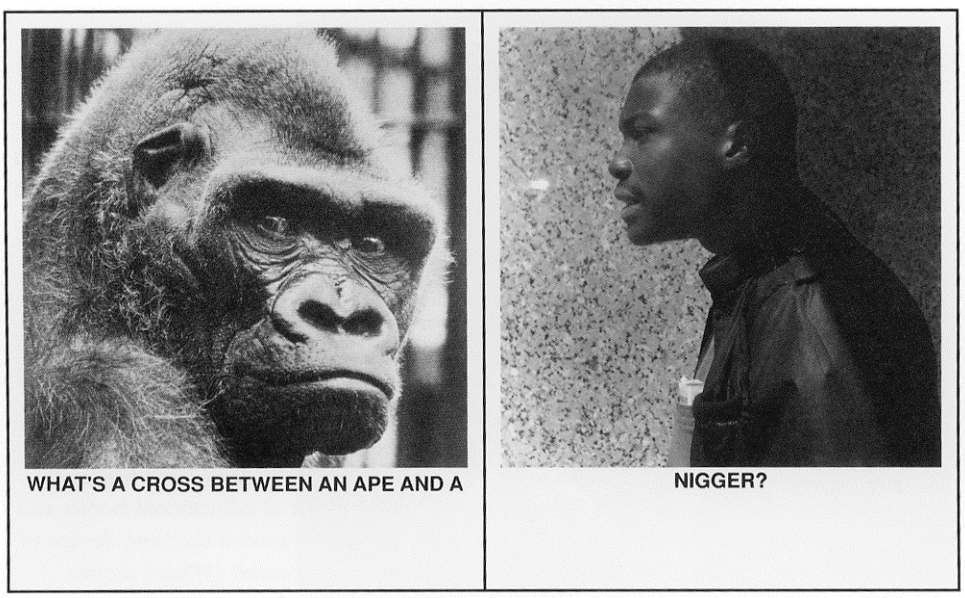
But I will lift up my hands,
(Because my hands they do not love
But I love them still)
And my feet will whirl and dance,

(Because my feet they do not love
But I love them still)
And my voice will sing out in church,
Because still I must rise.

And maybe this oppression
Has made me stronger,
And maybe the presence of my enemies
Has made me stronger in my own will,
Or maybe just wanting to know and touch the beauty of my soul-
I become increasingly beautiful in this world.

So that here in this place-
Even amidst oppression,
When both they and I look-
My soul will still be housed in an abode of beauty,
And its riches will still be mine.

Appendix III



Carrie Mae Weems
What's a cross between an ape and a nigger?
1987-88
Silver print
20 3/4 x 24 3/4 inches framed (each)

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Appendix IV

Lawren Harris
Black Court, Halifax
1921
oil on canvas
97.1 x 112cm"
National Gallery of Canada
(www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=2473)

Appendix V

,ROUP IDENTITY:

This group is a combination of Canadian and International students of Native, African, Carribean, Asian, East Indian and South American descent/origin.

Caution : Avoid a separation in the group between

1. International vs. Canadian
2. Native vs. African vs. Caribbean vs. Asian vs. East Indian vs. South American

Note: Once the foundation of the group is established, we will welcome all students. Services will be offered to all students if possible and needed.

GOALS:

1. An Art History proposal to expand the existing program and provide a counterbalance of International/Cultural courses to the European courses. Inorder, to enrich the student's knowledge and awareness.
   Eventually, branching out to each department's studio course content to address these concerns.
   Academic alternatives for students with English as a Second Language. Possibly, an ESL course within the school.

2. Services from Student Affairs and SUNSCAD:
   Administrative advisor for the group, either faculty and/or administrative staff, to fill position of International/cultural student body advisor.
   Access to a photocopying machine.

3. Establishing a Resource Center:
   A file cabinet for articles and information relevant to our group, i.e. books, videos, and slides.

4. Setting up a booth during registration to assist new or old students in answering their concerns about the college.

5. Provide the school with a counterbalance of International/Cultural Visiting Artists and Lecturers to the North American/ European Visiting Artists and Lecturers.

6. Meet and discuss with other International/Cultural groups from different post-secondary institutions. Using the guidelines, agendas, resources and literary material from these groups as a reference for MOSAIC. Thus, we can establish a solid ground for our group's involvement in everyday functions at the college.

7. Plan a group exhibition.

8. Reaching out to the community, i.e. working with young people.

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