

# Book Reviews

## "... BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?" STORIES OF IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION IN CANADA

Hazelle Palmer, ed. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1997.

BY LISA MARSHALL

Hazelle Palmer's book, "*... but where are you really from?*" is a timeless question to many who feel and are marginalized in their daily contact with an ignorant and naive world. I can't remember in how many different contexts I have heard it said and in so many different ways—where are you from? As if to say certainly you are a new arrival to this fair land called Canada. The immediate marking of territory into mine and mine that I cautiously share—always an outsider asking permission to play.

This is a collection of thoughts by women of colour on their forced battle to fit into the supposedly welcoming Canadian mosaic. It brings together known and less known writers (for example, Ayanna Black, Susan Lee and Althea Samuels) to express their views on this question and more specifically on their identity formulation. It speaks to dilemmas of being part of a melting pot or part of a mosaic. Do we give up some of our mannerisms, practices and beliefs because others brand or imply that they are not truly the Canadian way? What makes straight hair and an Italian tailored suit more Canadian

than dreads or braids and an African printed dress? Simply, the reactions and assumptions they bring. We must be militant, non-conformist, revolutionary... what about just being who we want to be and what if we *are* militant about our convictions? Does this society not make one defensive, based on the images and conclusions drawn about "those" hyphenated Canadians (African-Canadians, Japanese-Canadians, Chinese-Canadians)? Is it not right to cherish what makes us who we are?

This book is about looking inward to define oneself irrespective of the reaction received. It is about questioning what we think we need to do and what we do to fit in. It is about projecting a body and soulful image of self that is self-gratifying first and foremost. It is about women of colour who speak something besides the queen's English. It is a book about finding a home within us and within our Canadian communities that challenges the representations of media, advertising, educational conformity, employment constraints and above all individuals and their hierarchy of Canadian-ness. It is about questioning the projected picture-perfect image of being respectful of difference. The society in which we live is told to be tolerant and non-judgmental—this is quite a shortfall from being respectful. "*... but where are you really from?*" brings together the thoughts and experiences of women in the Canadian diaspora, highlighting the issues that concretize expressions of culture and tensions of difference that make up Canada.

The power struggle continues to name ourselves *vs.* others naming us....

## MA-KA: DIASPORIC JUKS: CONTEMPORARY WRITINGS BY QUEERS OF AFRICAN DESCENT

Debbie Douglas, Courtney McFarlane, Makeda Silvera and Douglas Stewart, eds. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1998.

BY MEGAN BUTCHER

There are two immutable facts about literary collections: the quality of writing will be uneven and everyone will have at least one argument with the selected pieces. *Ma-ka: Diasporic Juks*, of course, is no exception; however, overall the pieces chosen are well-written and interesting. They represent a variety of different experiences, viewpoints, and styles; they provoke thought, are touching, or amusing. Whether you like a selection or not, agree with it or not, each section has something to offer on the subject of the identity that is at the core of this collection.

Besides setting the parameters of the collection, the four part introduction defines and redefines the meaning of the title. *Ma-ka*, a thorny plant, can *juk* you, prick you into remembrance, watchfulness, vitality. It can work as a sort of cultural role model: determining a varied set of experiences as political acts, calling for pride in experience and self. As Douglas says in the introduction, "we are committed to being visible, to the disrupting of the status quo, to speaking out, and to working to provide others with the opportunity to do the same." And others do here.