

well as white intellectual and artistic New Yorkers, provided a locus of interchange and opportunity for many, Larsen among them.

Within this world, Larsen created a new persona for herself. Claiming white Danish ancestry, and, on occasion, childhood years and university study in Denmark (none of which Davis could confirm), Larsen's various accounts of her ancestry provided her unique status within the community into which her husband was born. Her voracious reading, as well as her desire for a genteel profession, led her to turn from nursing to library work (in 1922 she gained certification from the New York Public Library School). By the mid 1920s, like others in her circle, she responded to the demand for African American creative production, and set out to fashion herself as a writer.

The Larsen who emerges from Davis's pages engages in constant self-creation. Her emotional marginality and spiritual malaise remain private; her public persona, even in letters to friends, comprises a sharp intelligence, studied sophistication and driving ambition. Yet clearly she never acquired emotional security or peace of soul that her art demanded of her. Her vision, in many respects, far exceeded that of her contemporaries, but her letters reveal little articulation of the immense complexity of issues that her fiction addresses.

The world Larsen had constructed for herself began to dissolve toward the end of the 1920s. In 1928, she discovered her husband was having an affair, which continued during the year she spent in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Upon her return she joined Imes at Fisk University, where he was then teaching, but the marriage was beyond redemption, and Larsen deteriorated under the strain. Aside from a short story for which she was charged with plagiarism (and later exonerated), none of her writing subsequent to *Passing* was ever completed, and by all accounts it was far inferior to her earlier work. Although she returned to New York after her divorce, the circle she

depended on had scattered, and she had few friends. In 1937, she dramatically severed ties with most of them by creating the fiction of a journey. However, she remained in New York, working at Gouverneur Hospital until her death in 1964.

The most remarkable aspect of Davis's stunning achievement is her profound, though never explicitly stated, reading of Larsen's project of self-creation as signifying the difficult emergence of African American women into modernity. Davis's deeply feminist reading of social history, her sympathetic understanding of one woman's determination to make herself, and her complex interpretation of the meaning of that endeavour, constitute a exemplary—and beautifully written—exercise in feminist biography. *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* illuminates not only the life and work of an African American novelist of great importance, but also the world through which she made her way in such anguish.

THE VIENNA TRIBUNAL: WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

Gerry Rogers. Augusta Productions and the National Film Board of Canada (video, 1994, 48 minutes, 13 seconds).

by *Barbara Evans*

Driven by the success of confessional television and by the new small-format video technologies which allow personal narratives to be told with an immediacy—and bargain-basement cheapness—never before possible, mainstream broadcasters are suddenly hungry for “disclosure” material: pieces in which subjects disclose, on camera, experiences of rape, incest, or homosexual encounters, for exam-

ple, experiences offered up for consumption/entertainment to an audience hungry for material still deemed to be “shocking”. It is doubtful whether what these broadcasters have in mind, however, are the very public disclosures of torture and violence contained in *The Vienna Tribunal*. For these disclosures are not presented for vicarious entertainment or diversion. Rather they are intended to provide analysis of the global social and political context in which they exist and to provoke political awareness and action.

The Vienna Tribunal covers events at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, held in June 1993, when representatives of governments from around the world gathered in Vienna to reassess the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. At the same time, thousands of human rights activists converged on the conference to put pressure on governments to bring issues of women's rights onto the international agenda. As one of the spokeswomen in the video, a tribunal judge from Costa Rica, says, their objective was to “continue fighting until violence against women is considered a violation of fundamental human rights.” Her words are echoed by women representatives from around the world as they relate deeply personal experiences of persecution and violence in this often harrowing yet ultimately inspiring video production. Relegated to the lower floor of the conference hall, while the “official” UN conference convened upstairs, women prepared their stark, disturbing testimonies of violation and abuse.

The Vienna Tribunal shows women from country after country relating stories drawn both from their own and other women's experience. Their narratives dissolve into one another, creating a global portrait of abuse suffered under their various religions, military regimes and governments. In a striking image, a line of national flags fades into a line of women's T-shirts, blowing in the breeze, im-

printed with messages condemning violence against women. A Chinese woman from the Netherlands gives testimony on behalf of a Polish woman; a Sudanese woman testifies for a Gambian woman.

Horror stories of women's heads and breasts being used as military trophies are related. Women from Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia raise their voices against the brutalities of war. A middle-aged woman from South Korea tells how she was raped by soldiers as a young woman during the Korean War, destroying her in body and soul. Rape, the women say, must be treated as torture; violations against women during war must be treated as war crimes. Stories of incest and domestic violence, of female genital mutilation, they say, must be taken out of the private sphere and be seen as socio-political problems.

Religious persecution of women is vividly and horrifyingly described. An Algerian woman describes the Islamic law which prescribes the "correct" size of rock that should be used to stone an "adulterous" woman, neither too large to kill her immediately, nor too small to inflict no harm, but of a size that will cause a slow and painful death. These injustices and violations have, as one woman says, produced "a silent anger that is so loud that if it were let out would shatter the world."

But the move to place women's human rights into the sphere of human rights in general, is not unproblematic. As a representative of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development puts it, the move to legitimate women's rights issues by bringing them into the "mainstream" of human rights may be interpreted by some as an acknowledgement of the failure of feminism to demarginalize these issues. In the end, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution calling for full integration of women's rights into the work of all human rights bodies and, in 1994, appointed a special rapporteur on violence against women.

On the surface, the structure of *The Vienna Tribunal* seems simple. Little narration is used. Where it occurs it exists merely to add details about the conference and its outcome. In addition to relating their personal experiences, the women themselves provide the analytic thread running through the video, drawn from the meticulous research they have done in preparing their testimonies. This "talking head" approach, so frequently maligned by critics, can be used to powerful effect by feminist filmmakers, as this video demonstrates, providing the opportunity for women to speak their own stories, with a minimum of intervention. What *The Vienna Tribunal* does is to take the women's stories out of the realm of the private and personal and place them in a global, politicized context. The video, available from the National Film Board, will be a valuable resource for all those working around issues of women's human rights.

SPEAKING OUT AGAINST VIOLENCE

The National Film Board of Canada.

by Susan Nosov

For the first time, the National Film Board of Canada is offering a collection of videos for women in a series format: *Speaking Out Against Violence*. This collection of recent productions is divided into three themes—*Ending Silence / Survivors' Truths* followed by *Children's Voices* and *Challenging the System: Voices from the Personal to the Political*. This series has been compiled to present an anti-oppression model against violence that makes the connections between physical, sexual, economic, ritual, psychological and racist violence as it is experienced in the lives of women and children.

The interwoven theme of *Speaking Out Against Violence* is the abuse of power and privilege by individuals,

groups and institutions and its impact on women and children from diverse cultures, races and class positions. Central to all are the personal testimonies from the experts: the survivors of abuse and oppression. Throughout the films it is their united voices that name the violence, articulate its systemic nature and suggest strategies for survival, healing and change.

In reviewing this package many titles stand out: In *Where Angels Dare* four women and two men speak eloquently and honestly of painful childhood abuse, their subsequent journeys through hell and the turning points that set them on the road to well-being. One of the elementary truths this film exposes is the capacity for those who have lived through violence to emerge as teachers who can assist us in examining the nature of violence and questioning the stereotypes and conventions we place on our so-called "victims."

The impact of racist acts by adolescent youths against a Native woman and her child are examined in *For Angela ...* This emotionally charged drama in which the lead role is played by *North of 60's* Tina Keeper, is based on a true story. The premise of the film is simple: racism is violence. The accompanying guide helps to explore the cultural, linguistic and media-inspired biases to which we are all subject in learning and unlearning racist behaviour.

Them That's Not: Single Mothers and the Welfare System takes a critical look at Canada's welfare system through the eyes of single women and single mothers, and examines why they and others are joining together to fight for social change. The message here, as in all of the titles in the collection, is the vital importance of empowerment and self-determination in naming and surviving oppression and abuse. Brenda Thompson, a welfare mom and social rights advocate from Nova Scotia who dared to take the government to court perhaps says it best: "We are the ones who can change the welfare system, people who are most oppressed—Native