

What's Reasonable?

BY NIKKI SHAFFEULLAH

“No one can find themselves in that society.”

Quebec Premier Pauline Marois, quoted above in the *Montreal Gazette* (“Charter”), is referring to England. She seems to believe that when demographically plural societies have intentional multicultural policy and strive for cultural plurality, everyone loses. Marois and her Parti Québécois government proposed the Quebec Charter of Values (now Bill 60) purportedly in an effort to defend the Québécois values of secularism and neutrality in public sector spaces, and, evidently, to enshrine in law the supremacy of the French colonial parts of Quebec’s history over all others. Marois is seeking to legislate the answers to Quebec’s ongoing debates on “reasonable accommodation.”

“Reasonable accommodation”: the term used in discussing the rights of minority groups when their practices come into conflict with those of the dominant culture. Perhaps this term itself is the starting point for many of our discursive problems. Reasonable accommodation sounds to me like a room in a three-star hotel located a short commute to downtown, not the lens through which the majority decides how minorities can and will live. “Accommodation” assumes a vertical relationship, in which someone in charge will attempt to make space for someone who needs it. “Accommodation” does not invite dialogue; it is a concession, or at best a service offered by those in power. The Charter has reminded us in no uncertain terms who in Quebec *accommodates* and who needs *accommodating*.

Indeed, neither citizenry, immigration status, nor social contribution necessarily guarantees

your right to be recognized as a veritable, Charter-sanctioned Quebecer. Marois’ brand of reasonable accommodation is clear: be they hardworking allophone newcomers, bilingual Quebec-born hijabis, or turban- or kippa-wearing men whose families have called *la belle province* home for generations, these apparent threats to French colonial culture are mere guests at Hotel Quebec—and it seems that even full assimilation would not be enough to settle the bill. Take Djemila Benhabib, for example, the daughter of Algerian and Greek Cypriot parents who was the Parti Québécois candidate for Trois-Rivieres in last year’s election. Her Arabic name proved more important than her outspoken views against Islam and multiculturalism, separatist politics, and pro-secularism activism (which was fervent enough to win her the *Prix international de la Laïcité*). Instead, her ethnicity, immigrant status, and perceived cultural identity became hot topics during her ultimately unsuccessful candidacy.¹

Assimilation shouldn’t be the minimum requirement for one to be *accommodated*, and accommodation itself seems too paltry a framework. When groups of people who aren’t infringing on the rights of others are able to practice their religion and live their cultures, it shouldn’t be thought of as “reasonable accommodation”—these are basic human rights, and Marois and her most probably unconstitutional Charter are in violation.

A lot about this Charter of Values disturbs me, but what’s most unsettling is seeing the PQ’s complete unwillingness to listen to those whom they are, from some rhetorical angles, claiming to help. The Charter attempts to dictate what constitutes acceptable performance

of “Quebec-ness,” which affects several groups; but what Marois is doing, really, is capitalizing politically on popular fear of the headscarf. Proponents of the Charter are mainly targeting Muslim women, although they are happy to rationalize the logic in ways that also erase other visible religious minorities: as Charles Taylor told the *Toronto Star*, “[T]he Jews and the Sikhs are collateral damage” (Siddiqui). The PQ, like many before them, are perverting the language of gender equality toward xenophobic ends: the Charter seeks to ensure equality between women and men and its defenders see the headscarf as a concrete, culturally specific manifestation of gender oppression. Marois has said of the Charter, “We’re moving forward in the name of all the women, all the men, who chose Quebec for our culture, for our freedom, and for our diversity” (Richler). Yet the PQ takes no interest in the sea of voices where Muslim women and others assert their opposition. Among many other examples, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Montreal in protest last September at a massive anti-Charter demonstration organized by the Quebec Coalition Against Islamophobia (Valiante). And countless articles have been written, such as Fariha Naqni-Mohamed’s in the *Huffington Post*, which echoes the sentiments of many other (Muslim, female) Quebecers: “My province. My hijab and my choice.” While Marois and the PQ are happy to speak for those they claim to help, they refuse to listen to them.

Is this just business as usual in Canadian politics right now, where the co-option of marginalized voices, the silencing of dissent, and the playing out of double standards abound? In the west, British Columbia and Alberta premiers Christy Clark and Alison Redford approach an agreement that would allow both provinces to sign onto the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines project, despite the dozens of implicated First Nations who have organized according to Indigenous laws and declared that they will not allow their territories to be party to the project.² In Toronto, a municipal scandal unfolds as the infamous alleged “crack[-smoking] video” brings Rob Ford (once again) under scrutiny—and Ford is still able to

defend himself publicly, because (as writer and activist Harsha Walia recently pointed out on Twitter) while “all the Black and Brown folks in the ... crack photo/video are either dead or in jail,” its protagonist remains out, about, and mayor of Canada’s largest city. Over in Ottawa, the senate expense scandal continues to unfold and no one, least of all Stephen Harper, can begin to accept responsibility.

There’s nothing either reasonable or accommodating about politicians making their own rules. And being spoken for is frustrating. Conversations about who is typically allowed to speak, who tends to be spoken for, and if/when/and how to speak for others are common among critically minded artists and thinkers, often occurring right here in *alt. theatre*. Many of our contributors to this issue explore the tensions between speaking, speaking for, and listening.

In Christine Comeau’s interview with playwright Suzanne Lebeau, “Breaking the Chain of Violence,” the two talk about the burning need Lebeau felt to write about the murdered women factory workers of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, which ultimately resulted in her play *Chaine de montage*. They discuss the politics of someone from the global North writing about real events and experiences from the global South: How can this be done in ways that are accountable to both the Southern voices the North seldom hears, and to the Northern playwright’s artistic project? Lebeau shares: “I couldn’t be one of the women who disappear. What I could do is bear witness and take hold of the story with the tools of my craft, which is to write” (14). Through writing, Lebeau seeks to bear witness, listen, and share.

In “Learning from Our Mistakes: Building Relationships through the Arts with First Nations Communities,” two Vancouver theatre artists discuss listening and power-sharing. Rosemary Georgeson, a First Nations woman, and Savannah Walling, a “mostly Anglo immigrant from the US,” reflect on their cross-cultural collaborations. Georgeson notes that although First Nations cultural traditions continued underground after being systematically shut down by the

Canadian government from the 1880s to 1951, their “voices are only coming fully back into the public now” (17). They each offer insights on how non-First Nations and First Nations artists can work together on arts projects in ways that make space for and give voice to implicated communities.

Nina Pariser’s dispatch article, “Storytelling at the Human Library,” offers an account of a unique community project in Montreal that is designed to provide often unheard voices with a venue to speak for themselves. In the Human Library, “people *themselves* are the books” and members of the public are invited to ‘check out’ participants for half-hour conversations” (32). The “books” come from marginalized communities or unusual life paths, and at the Human Library “readers” have the chance to communicate directly with the horse’s mouth, certainly interrogating their own presumptions in the process. The Human Library offers a designated space where people from different walks of life can engage in consensual discussion—speaking and listening—and gain insight on others’ real, lived experiences.

Throughout its fifteen-year history, *alt.theatre* has striven to give voice to the margins, and this is in no small part thanks to the thoughtful, dedicated approach Denis Salter has taken to his role as associate editor. With this issue, Denis leaves the post, but as he remains a member of our editorial board, he will surely continue to be an integral part of *alt.’s* development. And now, on behalf of everyone at *alt.theatre* and Teesri Duniya Theatre, I’d like to welcome our new associate editors, Dalbir Singh and Dirk Gindt, who each bring a breadth of skills and experience to our team. Dalbir is an editor, educator, playwright, and academic. He’s the editor of *World without Walls: Being Human, Being Tamil* (TSAR, 2010) and will be editing *Post-Colonial Theatre and South Asian Canadian Theatre: Six Plays*, two anthologies from Playwright’s Canada Press. His publications have been included in such journals and anthologies as *Red Light*, *She Speaks*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, and *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre*. He is currently a PhD candidate in Theatre and South Asian Studies at the University

of Toronto. Dirk has a PhD in Theatre Studies from Stockholm University and is an artist-in-residence at Concordia University’s Theatre Department. His research interests concentrate on post-war and contemporary queer theatre and performance, with a particular focus on HIV/AIDS in Canada and Sweden. His research on Tennessee Williams has been published in *Theatre Research in Canada*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, *Nordic Theatre Studies*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, and *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, in addition to several book chapters, and he is co-editor of *Fashion: An Interdisciplinary Reflection* (Stockholm, 2009). Welcome Dalbir and Dirk!

Our new editorial team looks forward to *alt.’s* near future, including a special theme issue planned for 2014: “(Dis)ability, Diversity, and Performance,” as well as other exciting work forthcoming in regular issues. We invite submissions on an ongoing basis, typically in the form of feature articles, interviews, dispatch pieces, and book reviews, but of course, new and different ideas are welcome—that’s only reasonable.

NOTES

- 1 For more on the debates surrounding Benhabib’s campaign, see Panetta and Blatchford.
- 2 Visit savethefraser.ca to read the Save the Fraser Declaration, which defends Indigenous lands from the Endbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines project.

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