

perceived contradictions of Canadian modernity. Tying all this together was a fairly sophisticated critique of the social and economic condition of the artist in modern society.

What happened to this broader cultural critique which infused the arts in the period just before the 1950s? Easy answers to this question are not readily available but some possible lines of enquiry have been suggested by Serge Guilbeault in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, his compelling study of the historical development of non-figurative abstraction in the United States. Guilbeault argues that the American artistic turn to abstract expressionism was built upon a personal artistic response to the collapse of more radical political and cultural artistic alternatives following the initiation of the Cold War, the failure of American socialism in the post-war era, and the consolidation of American international capitalist hegemony. Abstract expressionism in its intellectual foregrounding of individual expression in the work of art signified not only the pacification of a more radical artistic praxis, but also the evolution of a personalized conception of art which displayed a considerable affinity with the post-war program of American liberalism.

Was a similar process underway in Canada? If so, this would have important implications for the way in which we understand the rise of abstraction in Canadian artistic history. It would, in fact, seriously alter the narrative being presented in *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada*. In this sense, the story which could be told might not be a story of triumph. Instead, the real plot of our narrative might become the reconstitution of liberalism and the concomitant displacement of radical projects in the decades before 1950. The story of triumph could be in this way complicated by a recognition that in the course of the development of modern art in Canada as much was lost as was gained.

That Serge Guilbeault's narrative tells us something of the development of modern art in modern American society is, of course, no guarantee that the same thing, or even a similar thing, happened in Canada. That *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* does not demonstrate that the political history of modern Canadian art bore strong similarities to the political history of American abstract expressionism should not obscure the impres-

sive nature of this presentation. *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada* is a fine exhibition. Canadian cultural historians should take it as a cue to begin a more concerted examination of the political and philosophical history of modern art in Canada.

Andrew Nurse
Queen's University

Cathy Schwichtenberg, ed., *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press 1993).

In the spirit of the subject, let's start with the surface. The cover is eye-catchingly garish: ugly colours, silly type, awkward lay out, and a picture of Madonna that has been colourized (this seems more appropriate than "tinted"). The back has eight blurbs, three from academics with the usual claims ("Important," "radicalized," "truly contributes to a number of ongoing discussions"), and five from media sources, all commenting not on the contents (there's no indication they've actually read them) but rather on the potential controversy it might stir up. Like Madonna herself, this book will take notoriety if it can't have respect.

Not that it isn't desperately seeking respect. Its thirteen essays are marshalled into roughly equal sections dealing with race, gay issues, feminism and "the political economy of postmodernism," an organization that, like the book's pretentious subtitle, makes implicit promises that it doesn't fulfill. Neither of the first two sections really delivers: of the three papers in the section entitled "Reading race and Madonna's audiences," only two actually deal with race, and one of these is an analysis of college students' responses to questions about race in Madonna's videos. In the gay section, only two of the essays deal substantially with gay issues, and neither, curiously, are written by a gay man (which is surely one of the "subcultural identities" most persistently associated with Madonna's career).

The two "audience analysis" pieces that open the book make for a miserable introduction. The first performs a kind of wild psychoanalysis on critics of Madonna, who are ridiculously labelled "Madonna haters." Any-

one with any criticism of Madonna is assumed to be sexually repressed, fanatically religious, misogynist or feminist (feminists, especially of the “white” variety, come in for a surprising amount of abuse in this book). Here is a typical piece of analysis: “Madonna’s carnivalesque transgressions of gender and sexuality, the source of much pleasure for her fans, are extremely disturbing to her haters, and often this hate is focused on the body and expressed in a discourse about the body.” (24)

This banal, reductive and self-righteous sort of analysis is unfortunately more the rule than the exception in the essays that make up this volume: the following piece on the college students presumes to categorize their relation to race on the basis of their responses to four videos. On a Hispanic woman who thought that the quarrel between Madonna and her Hispanic lover in *Borderline* was pretty much typical of heterosexuals everywhere: “We believe this reading pattern reflects a Pollyanna identity position.” (47) Surely there are more appropriate ways of assessing someone’s racial awareness.

The only essay (in this section) to critically address race in Madonna’s texts is Ronald B. Scott’s reading of *Like a Prayer* as an affirmation of the cultural role of the black church. In order to make this argument, Scott is forced into making the questionable claims that Madonna is part of a tradition of black divas: (“The fact that Madonna, unlike the divas before her, is a white female is irrelevant” [62]), and that there is nothing sexual happening in the video. Like many of the articles that try to claim Madonna unreservedly for a particular politics, Scott’s essay is more ingenious than persuasive. Too often the texts in question cannot bear the weight of the argument. This is not to suggest that Madonna’s texts are inappropriate for study, but rather that the analyses here are too often modelled on the close readings of literary studies, which avoid the crucial and more interesting questions of production and circulation.

These questions are taken up in a limited way in the gay section. Cindy Patton addresses Madonna’s appropriation of voguing from the gay Harlem balls, while asking whether dance can act as a site of memory for subcultures. This is certainly an interesting question, but after much theoretical wandering and

questionable pronouncements (“the work from *Express Yourself* to *Vogue* is unrelentingly Brechtian in concept” [101]), Patton gets no closer to an answer. Lisa Henderson answers the question of Madonna’s appropriations from gay culture more pointedly, and without Patton’s strained theoretical apparatus: “Many gay people will recognize the originators, but most others in the audience will not, and Madonna has not gone out of her way to credit (or remunerate) her sources.” (123) Henderson lays out the problematics of the queer relation to Madonna clearly: while she’s certainly exploiting queerness, at least she’s not exploiting homophobia, and while her texts aren’t unavowedly queer, at least they’re available for queer readings.

The remaining articles, most of which address in some way the intersections of postmodernism and feminism, are somewhat divided. The fans of postmodernism (e.g. Schwichtenberg, E. Ann Kaplan) produce sophisticated readings of texts that emphasize Madonna’s ever-changing moods, generally invoking Baudrillard at some point. (Again, Henderson provides the voice of reason on Madonna’s continual self-invention: it keeps the marketing options open.) The emancipatory narratives that these critics generate are generally dependant, however, both on the reader “getting” the irony (upon which the argument generally hangs) and on a modernist conception of the artist, which anchors the correct reading of the text in the intentions of the artist (the image of Madonna chained to a bed is not retrograde because she chained herself to the bed). The critics of postmodernism (e.g. Roseann Mandziuk, Susan Bordo) point out that Madonna’s emancipatory narratives are not available to everyone (or indeed, very many at all), and that as a feminist hero, Madonna is compromised at best (at least as compromised as “postmodern feminism”).

The best contribution to the volume falls into the latter group. Susan Bordo looks at the culture of body alteration, which, like Madonna herself, draws upon a discourse of freedom, self-determination and choice (not to mention a somewhat cheerful narcissism). What Bordo points out is that these alterations (to body parts, eye colour, hair colour and texture) almost always follow a normalizing, racist trajectory, rather than the “playful self-

invention" celebrated by postmodernists. She critiques the simplistic conceptions of power held by such pop culture theorists as John Fiske, who claim that those who are dominated by cultural meanings, rather than productively rereading them, are simply "cultural dopes." Bordo argues instead that "'the power of being different' . . . is won through ongoing political *struggle* rather than through an act of creative interpretation." (280) This ultimately acts as something of a critique of many of the articles in *The Madonna Connection*: behind many of the bravura readings is more than a little wishful thinking. Ingenious readings of Madonna's texts ultimately do nothing more than mimic and perpetuate Madonna's self-advertisement and questionable politics. What is needed, and what this book for the most part lacks, are more analyses like Bordo's that situate Madonna's texts in larger cultural discourses, that interrogate the conditions of their production and circulation rather than reading them as compromised allegories of emancipation.

Jim Ellis
York University

Sakae Ōsugi, *The Autobiography of Ōsugi Sakae*, trans. by Byron K. Marshall (Berkeley: University of California Press 1992).

In autobiographies of great men and women who served time in prison, one expects to find serious questioning of self, the society that robbed the subjects of their freedom and, more likely than not, something absolute that some of them might call God. Socrates in *Clito*, Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*, and Martin Luther King in *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* immediately come to mind. One is disappointed, however, if one reads with the same expectation *The Autobiography* of Sakae Ōsugi, the Japanese anarchist who was not only imprisoned many times but was murdered in 1923, along with his wife and a young nephew, by prewar Japan's overzealous military police.

The fault lies mostly in the way that Ōsugi's "autobiography" was born. He wrote many essays based on his life, including the ones collected in Byron Marshall's English

translation considered here. Of those, he published six specifically as *Jijoden* (Autobiography) in serial and left others with miscellaneous titles to be collected and published posthumously by various editors who called their selections Ōsugi's autobiographies. The essay entitled "Gokuchuki" [Prison notes], for example, which became Chapter 7 of Marshall's translation, was a part of Ōsugi's posthumous "autobiography" of 1930, which Marshall used, but was treated as a separate entity in the postwar edition of his completed works (Masamichi Ōsawa *et al.*, eds., *Ōsugi Sakae zenshu* [Complete works of Sakae Ōsugi], V. 13: Tokyo 1965).

In other words, Ōsugi's autobiography is, to a large extent, what his editors make of his writings regardless of whether or not the author entitled them as such. Unfortunately, so long as the editors focus on his works intended for publication, readers are never truly invited to the depth of his soul but are greeted instead with light-hearted banter and bravado. The text Marshall used belongs to this class of editing. Thus the English translation, for no fault of the translator, fails to uncover the man who was apparently too shy and convoluted, with a serious speech impediment at that, not to weave a thick veil of self-defense. Besides, for a man placed under constant police surveillance, too much public bearing of his soul was dangerous both for himself and his comrades. Readers who wish to creep behind Ōsugi's public persona must look elsewhere, such as his personal letters from prison.

For those who are indifferent to anyone's soul search *de profundis*, *The Autobiography of Ōsugi Sakae*, offers a rich social history of pre-war Japan. *Life in a garrison town* where Ōsugi grew up comprised the domestic backdrop of Japan's militarism. When men were soldiering, women and children lived precariously, haunted nightly by ghosts and fox spirits. Sadistic discipline at cadet schools is well known but interesting to hear from Ōsugi as the possible reason why a rebel like him was born. Homosexual pursuit of young cadets by older ones is not surprising at an all-male institution cut off from the outside world and female companionship. In this regard, Ōsugi found prisons to resemble cadet schools. A rare glimpse at the Meiji Emperor's person is priceless. Ōsugi's father, who was a decorated army officer, fell from his horse on the palace