

# The Heart of Africa Revisited

*Curator Jeanne Cannizzio emerges after a long silence to discuss the controversial exhibit, and few are satisfied.*

by Naomi Klein  
 Canadian University Press

TORONTO—After almost two years of silence, Jeanne Cannizzio, curator of the controversial "Into The Heart of Africa" exhibit, has publicly defended her position.

In an article for an American anthropology journal published this summer, Cannizzio defended her exhibit — which displayed African artifacts brought to Canada by missionaries at the Royal Ontario Museum — against allegations that it promoted a racist and imperialist view of Africa.

According to Cannizzio, "Into the heart of Africa" did just the opposite.

"Quite the opposite was likely to be true," she wrote. "for the illustration exposed a rather brutal historical reality and made it clear that imperial advance was not some sort of adventure story but resulted in death and destruction."

However, critics of both Cannizzio's exhibit and her silence during the debate are angry that her article did not recognize their criticisms.

"The article is one-sided from the maker as opposed to the viewer who would have had a totally different perspective," said Ras Rico, a spokesperson for The Coalition for the Truth About Africa.

Debate has raged over how the story of Africa's colonial past should be told and who has the right to tell it ever since the ROM announced plans to use their African artifacts in an exhibit about Canada's missionary past.

The exhibit, scheduled to go on to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa and to Vancouver, was cancelled after its Toronto run.

The coalition's grievances ranged from the museum's lack of consultation with the community to fears that its ironic missionary perspective — which used language such as "primitive", "savage" and "dark continent" — would promote racist attitudes in the city, particularly among young children.

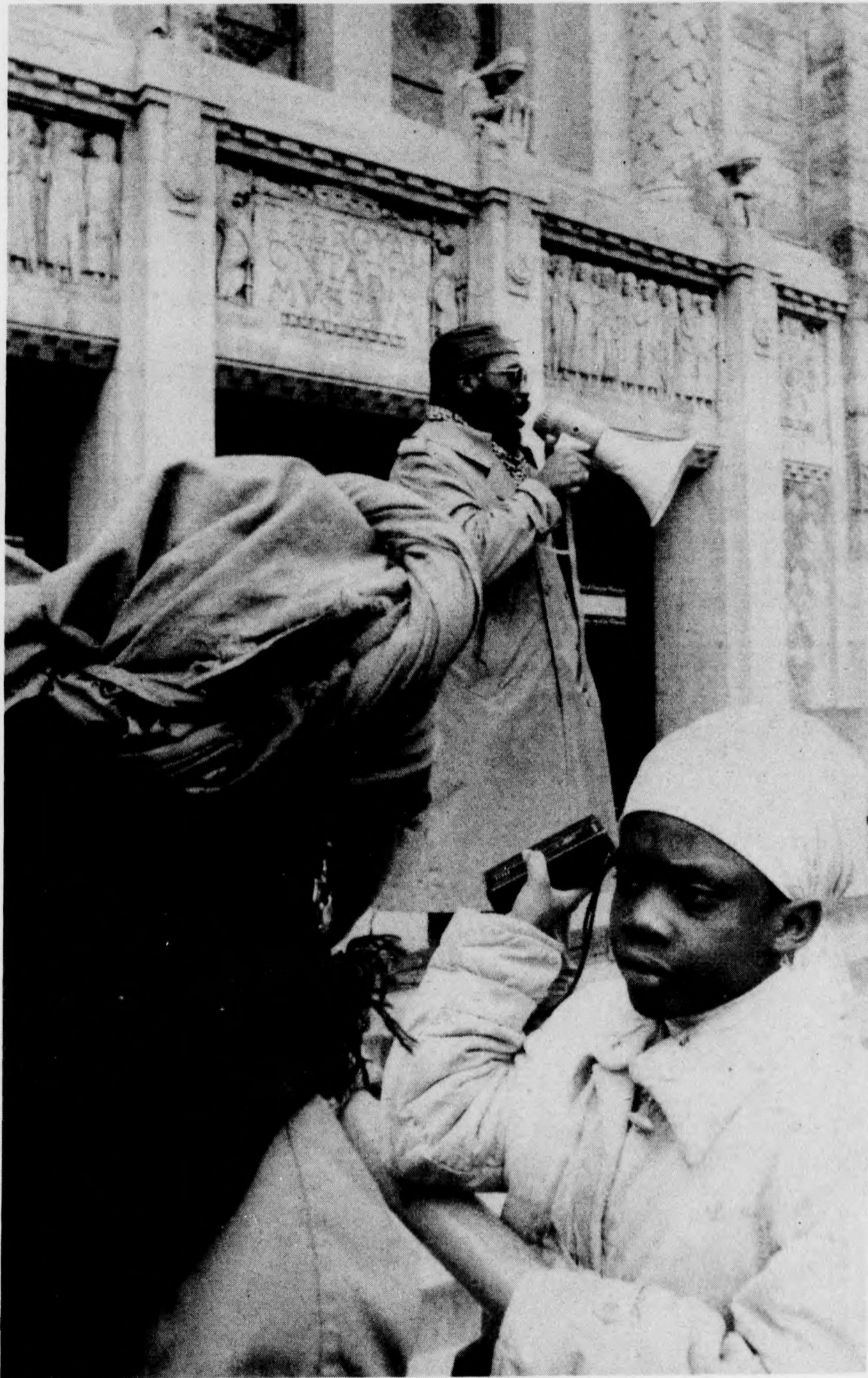
In her article, Cannizzio defends her use of language as a technique used to depict the racist mindset of the missionaries.

When exploring possible reasons for the controversy, Cannizzio hypothesizes on the protestors' inability to understand the ironic technique of putting words in quotation or using warnings about "paternalism" before the slide show.

Another line of analysis which seems to have gained wider acceptance is that the exhibition was beyond the ability of some protestors to understand.

"This may have been true of some of those upset by the exhibition; the use of the quotation marks in the text is often raised as an example," she wrote.

But according to Rico, Cannizzio failed to respond to the Coalition's real complaint about language. He explained that the protestors were able to understand Cannizzio's ironic techniques, but felt they were not



**"[Cannizzio] has been very disrespectful of a whole community of people, even though in her own community...she has been proven wrong."**

appropriate for the ROM's audience.

"Probably Jeanne Cannizzio saw it that way (ironically) but there are several levels of viewing an exhibit, through several age groups, young children, high school kids, and adults, mostly older, all came in large excursions," he said.

"Do you expect an eight year old child to get the cynicism and the satire that she purports to put out?"

The protestors are not alone in their criticism. George MacDonald,

executive director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, cited the use of text as one reason for his museum's decision to cancel the exhibit.

"One of the problems we found somewhat difficult is the fact that, if you are relying on text to modify the impact of images, if you are dealing with children you have to realize the fact that the children are not reading the text messages," MacDonald said in an interview on CBC radio last September.

In another attempt to refute the allegations of racism, Cannizzio claims The Coalition For the Truth About Africa represented only a minority of Toronto's African Canadian community. She cited a study done by two members of the Black Business and Professional Association to support the argument.

"Four months after it opened, a group of some 25 protestors held a demonstration in front of the museum... few of these 20 groups appear to be fully constituted and

broadly representative organizations," she wrote.

But Rico said that Cannizzio's comment is indicative of the museum's attempt to divide the African Canadian Community around this issue.

"Even after being charged by the police, the coalition, instead of decreasing in numbers, increased in numbers from 38 members to 55 member groups which now include teachers and professors from across Canada.

"Jeanne Cannizzio and the ROM continue to pit different parts of the African community against itself to their own goals — in this case, a rationale for the exhibit "Into the heart of Africa," Rico said.

According to Rico, Cannizzio misunderstood the purpose of the protests, which were to assert a presence outside the exhibit and pass out information on the Coalition's concerns — not to generate a large or disruptive crowd.

"We always tried to keep the demonstrations down in size, the important thing was to make sure that we passed out information."

But in her article Cannizzio also attacks the information handed out by the protestors. She claimed that one pamphlet's demand that the ROM recognize contributions Africans have made to Western culture proves that the protestors would not have been satisfied with anything short of a celebration of African culture.

"...if their pamphlets and other materials are examined, it becomes clear that the demonstrators rejected the exhibition because they rejected the basic anthropological and museology tenets which underlay it."

Cannizzio argued that "celebration" was not her exhibit's intent. Rather, she said its role was to take a critical look at Canada and the ROM's history of exploitation of Africans in missionary pursuits and the appropriation of African culture and African artifacts.

"These people (Canadian Missionaries) returned home bearing souvenirs and trophies of their victories on spiritual and temporal battlefields. Those objects eventually ended up in the museum."

Cannizzio's article argued that her exhibit was as much a commentary on how the artifacts came to be on display as it was on the pieces themselves.

"Unfortunately the reflexivity in the exhibition was unacceptable to the protestors, although much appreciated by one visitor who wrote to me of his delight in 'the lovely self critical (stance) indicting the ROM's past complicity with the early 20th century culture of British homogeneity.'"

Macdonald does not dispute that the exhibit fulfilled its critical and ironic intent but rather questions the intent itself.

"Curatorially the exhibition is very well crafted and well researched. It's the point of view we were objecting to, not the scholar-