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APRIL 2010 • Issue 186 • AMERICA'S AIDS

Crowning Achievement

Miss America 2010

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Her Reign of AIDS Education

Seropositive Sisterhood

Artist Hima B. Documents
the Lives of Women to
Energize Social Change

plus

Chicago House's
Evany Turk

Louise Hay

Reflects on Her Role
in the Self-Help
Movement in the
Early Days of AIDS

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April 2010



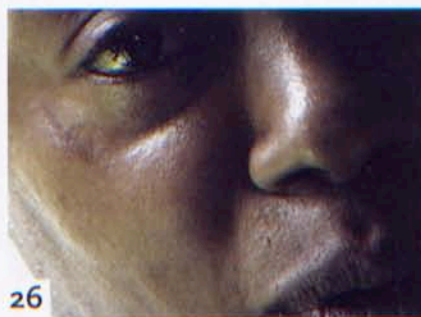
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Action!

HIMA B. CREATES FILMS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by Diane Goettel

Hima B. is many things: a writer who works in the genres of fiction and nonfiction, an independent documentarian, an experimental filmmaker. Although she is many things, her work focuses on a few key issues. In particular, the work of Hima B. grapples with the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect. At the center of that intersection she studies the impact of these issues on LGBTQ people, especially women and girls.

One of the hallmarks of Hima B.'s work is the experimental ways in which she tells stories. In so doing, she both tests the boundaries of the forms in which she works and challenges her audiences to stretch their understanding to allow for a more dimensional awareness of the social issues that she covers. By presenting these challenges, she creates the opportunity for social change.

The driving force for Hima B.'s

work is social change. And a catalyst topic that she uses to present the opportunity for social change is HIV/AIDS. As

an artist who creates work focused on individuals who have become invisible or marginalized due to their identities and



JANICE PHOTO BY LANINE TOOTE, WANDA PHOTO, COURTESY HIV SISTERS

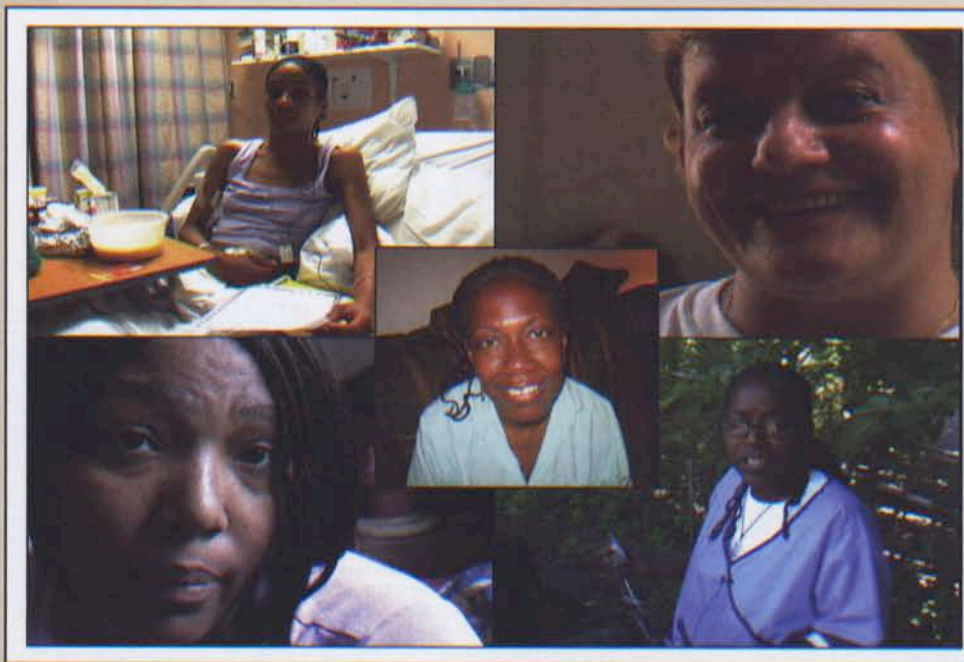


Behind the scenes of *HIV Sisters*:

Opposite page: (from left to right) Andre, Janice, and Hima

Above: (from left to right) Sadan, Wanda, and Hima

Bottom: *And I Do Survive's* Michelle Lopez



the paradigms surrounding their identities, her work on HIV/AIDS is particularly powerful.

In her film *And I Do Survive*, Hima B. follows Michelle Lopez, a Trinidadian lesbian who is denied citizenship because she is HIV-positive. In the documentary, Michelle discusses her experiences as an incest survivor, what it has meant to be a single mother to an HIV-positive daughter, her mission to become an American citizen, and the ways that her status has affected her relationship with her partner.

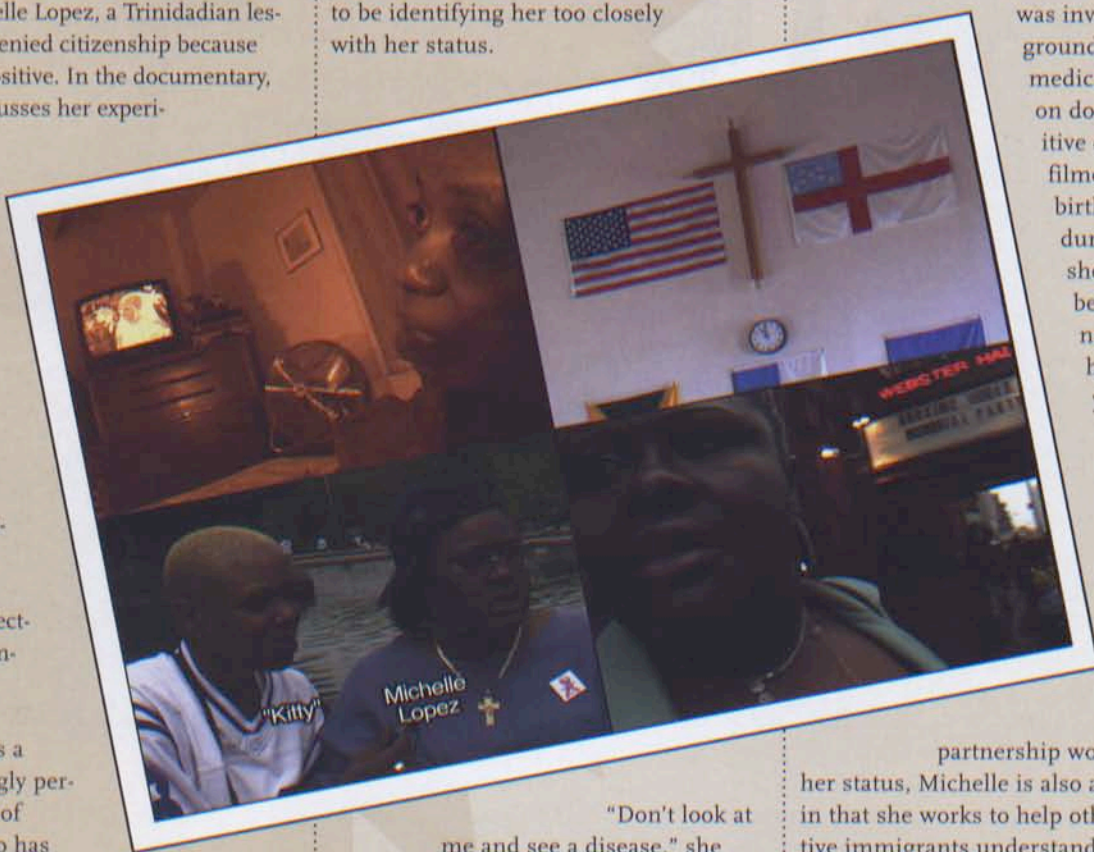
Michelle is a heartbreakingly perfect example of someone who has endured incredible difficulty and abuse because of her position at the intersec-

tion of the issues at the heart of Hima B.'s work. She is also a true inspiration. She recounts calling off her engagement years earlier because her partner seemed to be identifying her too closely with her status.

reports that Raven, who is still a preteen when the documentary is filmed, is responsible for managing her own medication. Raven, who was involved in groundbreaking medical research on dosages for positive children, is filmed during a birthday party during which she looks and behaves like a normal, healthy, happy young girl.

In addition to having raised a well-adjusted child and finding a way to make her

partnership work despite her status, Michelle is also an inspiration in that she works to help other HIV-positive immigrants understand and navigate the hurdles that they must face if they choose to seek American citizenship. As the film concludes it points toward two



"Don't look at me and see a disease," she says in the documentary. "I am not a disease." Michelle also talks about her daughter, Raven, with great pride. She



very needed forms of social change: acceptance of immigrants despite their status and legal marriage for same-sex partners.

In our interview for *A&U*, Hima B. explained to me that she is “trying to develop different perspectives of HIV and AIDS through different people. The topic of HIV is so important that you can’t do one project and think that you are telling the whole story with all of the perspectives.”

Her short film “How Do You Tell Somebody That You’re HIV+?”, which is an excerpt from a larger project called *HIV Sisters*, is about an HIV-positive woman who is trying to figure out how to tell her daughter and her daughter’s father about her status. Much unlike Michelle Lopez from *And I Do Survive*, who represents a woman who is very proactive in terms of her status, the protagonist in this film is largely fearful and secretive. Although both her child and her child’s father are negative, she put them both at risk of becoming infected. Being honest about her status requires being honest about this fact as well.

This short film is mostly shot in the woman’s bedroom as she sits cradling a gray cat in her arms, the walls around her decorated with images of Disney princesses, talking about how she hopes to some day find a loving partner and

getting married. “Maybe I don’t want to accept the fact that I’ve been HIV-positive for eleven years and still don’t have someone to love me,” she says. The situation seems hopeless. The hopelessness, as Hima B. frames it, is bound up in the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS and how this stigma makes it quite difficult for many people to be honest about their status, even to those people who are closest to them, to those people to whom it matters the most.

HIV Sisters, which is still under development, involves creative works, peer-to-peer education, and an interactive Web site. The purpose of the project is to, in Hima B.’s own words, “help reveal how women are infected and impacted by this disease.”

Hima B.’s work is all about social change, and since the filming of *And I Do Survive* one important change has taken place that surely pleased Michelle Lopez: President Barack Obama lifted the ban that kept HIV-positive immigrants from entering the country. While discussing the lifting of this ban, which had been in place for twenty-two years, Hima B. said, “HIV can’t be dealt with by buffering the borders, but by helping people.”

We still have a long way to go to deal with some of the huge and incredibly complex issues that Hima B. tackles in her work. However, we can find hope in

HIV Sisters

Opposite page, left: (clockwise from top left) Aleisha, Janice (inset), Kryssy, Jai, and Haneefa

This page: (clockwise from top left) Ms. M, Gina (inset), Anna, Cynt, and Wanda

the fact that at least some things seem to be changing for the better.

You can find out more about these projects and Hima B. by logging on to her Web sites: www.HimaB.com and www.HIVSisters.org.

Diane Goettel is executive editor of Black Lawrence Press. She lives in Hong Kong.