

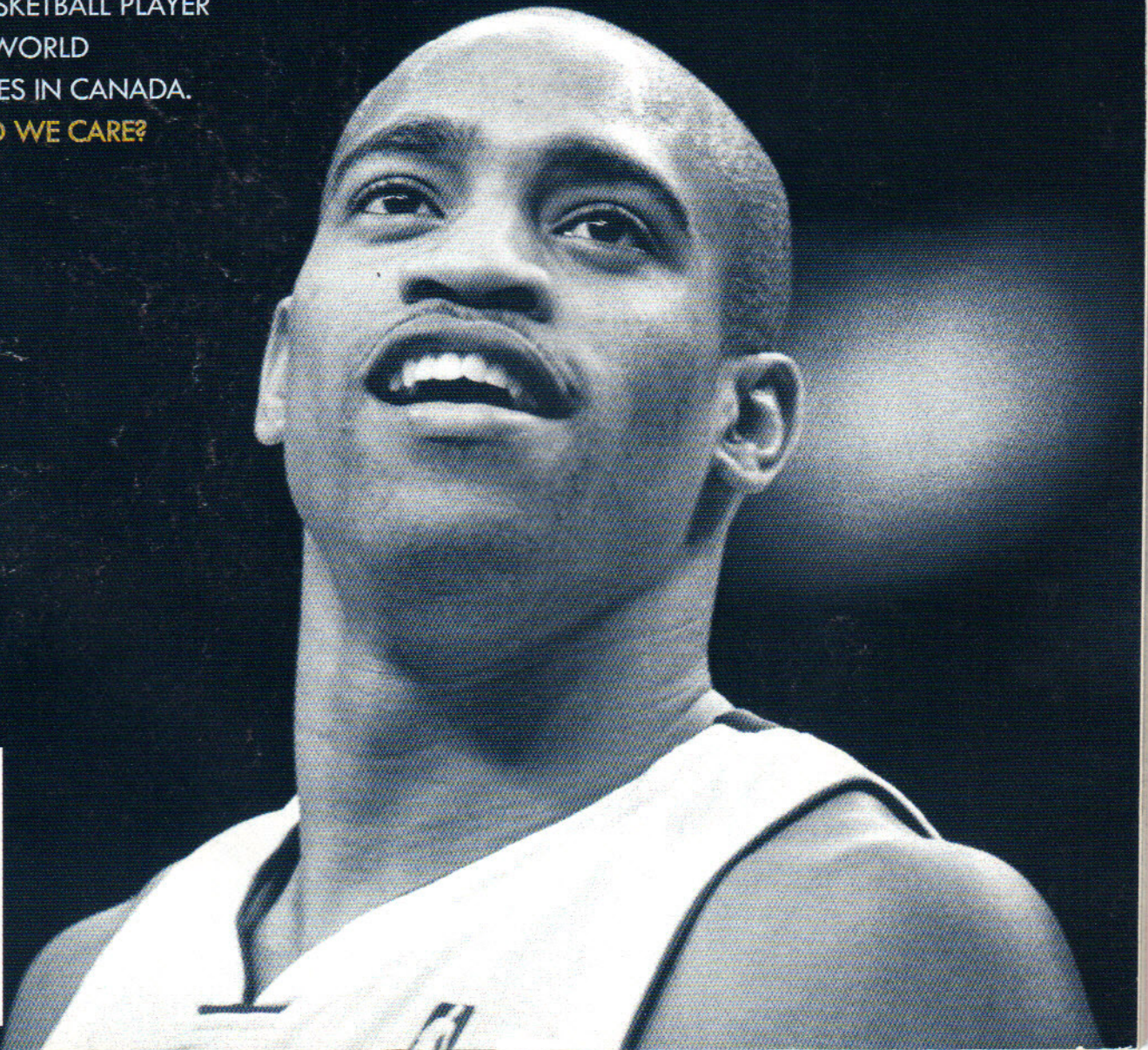
Ottawa's New Ruling Class | Vandal Art | Jane Jacobs

MARCH 2000

SATURDAY NIGHT

15 ways of looking at Vince Carter

THE MOST POPULAR
BASKETBALL PLAYER
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SHOULD WE CARE?



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15 ways of looking at VINCE CARTER

6. As Torontonien. BY PAMELA SWANIGAN

We try not to think about Vince Carter much in Vancouver. He reminds us of Toronto, which is never pleasant, and he reminds us of the NBA, which is even worse. A hundred years of serving as central Canada's favourite banana republic and thirty of watching our hockey team play rubes to the Maple Leafs has nothing on this quotidian torture we call Vancouver Grizzlie fandom, this interminable march of losing box scores across our retinas, all the while with the echo in our ears of the Raptors ha-ha-ing across the distance. It's so relentless. It's so unfair. It's so televised.

We have our own little geographic explanation for the Canucks: no ice. Too warm in general. A hockey player's talent melts if kept above freezing level during the playing season. But the problem with the Grizzlies is more serious: no black people. Think about it. You separate out a dozen or so young black American men, send them to a small, semi-rural city where no semblance of their culture exists (not even the visual camouflage of a large West Indian community, as Toronto has) – and they're going to be happy about it? They're going to want to go there? They're going to play up to their potential? You'd have to be headless to think so. Exile, isolation, and conspicuousness aren't exactly three of the black American's favourite things. During the Vietnam draft era, the black people who came here sent word back to their communities in the States that it would be better to go underground in a large city, perhaps even get sent to Vietnam, than to come to Canada, where every day was a crucible of alienation and self-consciousness. Of course, it's a touchy subject, American race relations being what they are, so nobody talks about it, including Vancouverites. We've been unwittingly engulfed in that wonderful capacity for denial and avoidance that Americans developed when they founded their country on a libertarian philosophy and a slave economy, on an exaltation of free-market capitalism and an abundance of unpaid labour. I daresay the disinclination to discuss it is exactly what the league was banking on when they were honing their plans for world domination, or global expansion, or whatever they call it.

They probably figured, and rightly, that it would never

occur to Vancouverites to think of their dozy little postcard of a town as a purgatory. They knew that they have so thoroughly sanitized and merchandised the players that the rest of the NBA demographic – otherwise known as the world population – no longer thinks of the players as human beings who respond to their surroundings and circumstances like anyone else. And as for the players themselves – well, league officials could count on their keeping quiet, under the ever-present threat of

being banished from the league, as happened to Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Craig Hodges, and other players who have spoken out on racial issues. The players here have kept quiet (for the most part), but that doesn't mean they don't think of it. In fact, it was probably the first thing they thought of after they'd stopped looking around for the dogsleds.

Back in 1995, when the Griz were trying out their first candidate for the position of The One (i.e., the Neo-Michael Jordan), in the form of the talented and personable Ed O'Bannon, I asked him if he would be lonely so far away from the black American community. His media-friendly demeanour instantly dissolved into an intent confidentiality. "Yeah," he said eagerly, "where are all the black people? I've been here since

ten this morning and I haven't seen one." When he learned that there basically weren't any – or none that you'd notice, anyway – a kind of suppressed horror crossed his face, and it took him a minute to get his affable persona back. His expression in that moment foretold the fate of the franchise. The Steve Francis refusal. The Othella Harrington outburst. The ongoing subversions and under-achievements, the subterranean murmur of requests for transfers. The sense that playing for the Vancouver Grizzlies was a punishment, that only psychologically transcendent players like Shareef Abdur-Rahim would be able to achieve more than half of what they might achieve elsewhere. And so, accordingly, a virtual guarantee that even in the unlikely event that a player of Vince Carter's calibre agreed to play for Vancouver, he would quickly cease to be a player of Vince Carter's calibre. Thus it has all unfolded, and there's really not much we can do about it. Except try not to think about Vince Carter much.

