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Where is the Frame in this Picture?
***Lest We Forget* and the Conjugal Problem of History**

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This paper is part of a larger collaborative project by the above co-authors, Sheena Wilson, (PhD Candidate in Comparative Literature and Film/Media Studies, University of Alberta) and William Anselmi (Professor, Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Alberta).

We have been observing the media-spectacle catalyzed by September 11, 2001 as it relates to our areas of research; specifically, we have monitored the way that the government reactions – legislative and military – have been presented as innovations in policy created to protect the Western World (in this paper we refer mainly to the United States and Canada), while the reality is that this type of governmental abuse of power is an uncelebrated part of national histories. September 11, 2001 merely created the fear necessary for these two North American governments to justify their manipulation of policy, such that the civil rights of its citizens have been nullified. William Anselmi has been writing theoretically on minority discourses within the multicultural Canadian context, and on the historical abuse of power by the dominant discourse, since the 1980s. Sheena Wilson is writing her doctoral thesis on Japanese Canadian literary and cinematic texts that represent the Japanese Canadian internment of the Second World War. While she has been working on this topic since well before September 11, 2001, 9/11 and the government legislation that it has produced have revived the relevance of the historical civil rights abuses of the Second World War internment. Aware of the correlation between the two events, we were very excited in the spring of 2004 to find the following promotional write-up for the 2003 experimental documentary film *Lest we Forget*:

December 7, 1941. The bombing of Pearl Harbor thrusts America into World War II. In the name of national security, all people of Japanese origin are proclaimed “enemy aliens” and interned for the duration of the war.

September 11, 2001. A new chapter in national security begins as America suffers another terrible tragedy. This time, a new alien arises: Arabs, South Asians and Muslims.

With a critical eye, *Lest We Forget* explores a lesson that America seems determined to learn twice. Violating civil liberties, alienating their own citizens, vilifying the visible minority, America is bent on homeland security but does this once again cross the line to unlawful treatment of innocent individuals? The film blends a chronology of voices speaking about the severity of wartime racism in the U.S. and Canada. Award-winning director Jason DaSilva carefully reaches out to the communities most affected, giving many individuals the opportunity to share their profoundly disturbing stories. (*Lest We Forget*)

Thrilled to have found a filmmaker who was drawing attention to the dangerous parallels that we had also identified between media and government reaction during the Second World War era and the post-September 11th era, we ordered the film from the Vancouver distribution company, Moving Images. However, when the film arrived and we watched it; the contents were disturbing, and together we began to deconstruct the dangerous post-modern narrative of the film.

More disturbing was that the dangerously suggestive narrative of the film had been fairly well received at film festivals. Jason DaSilva, a Canadian filmmaker living in New York, directed the 2003 documentary *Lest We Forget*. This film premiered at the 2003 IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam) in the Silver Wolf Competition for best short documentary¹. The film *Lest We Forget* focuses on historical parallels between the detainment of numerous Muslim North Americans, compared to the historical internment of Japanese North Americans during the Second World War. It also demonstrates how destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York is used to create a sense of national identity based on hegemony and the way political power is exercised through the media to bring the collectivity together under an authoritarian regime. In this new post-September 11th paradigm, negative stereotypes characterize American and Canadian citizens and residents with affiliations to Middle Eastern countries, whether the association is made via religious, political/national, and/or linguistic affiliation, or mistaken religion, nationality and/or language. The film points out that in some cases, physical resemblance is enough to attract suspicion or attack. *Lest We Forget* calls the procedures of the American government, racial profiling. These are all useful and productive positions.

However, the film has a number of failings. *Lest we Forget* disregards national borders, moving fluidly between Canada and the United States at different junctures in the narration, despite the highly complex legislations of the two countries, which are comparable but not identical, specifically in their methods of implementation. The lack of clear division between the two countries in providing information on their varying domestic and foreign policies is one of the fundamental failings of this film. This directorial choice, to avoid discussion of national borders and legislation, results in an oversimplification of numerous complex issues. In the film, Canada and America become one place. The histories of the Japanese Canadian and Japanese American internment experiences are combined; Roy Tsuji is Albertan and Yuri Kochiyama is American. Canada and American are also combined in the contemporary, except when DaSilva chooses to present Canada as a land that upholds civil rights, in a way that the USA does not. He does this by calling attention to the travel warning Canada issues for the States, when reports of the Maher Arar case and other incidents of detainment and deportation at the Canada-America border became public.

Another failing of *Lest We Forget* is that it undermines the grave injustices of the Second World War and the present by using ideology masked as aesthetics to present the issues rather than a critical presentation of historical facts. Posing as a post-modern film, in other words by burying its politics under aesthetic play and manipulation, it undoes its own argument. The end result is that the film creates a historical collage of similar yet chronologically disparate events, paralleling or rather melding the events, without first contextualizing them or explaining how the events of the Second World War might have been handled otherwise. Providing no critical analysis of the events of the Second World War, the film establishes no historical foundation on which to present potential solutions for the contemporary detainees, their families, and anyone opposed to current constitutional abuses. Sixty years of critical and legal analysis on Japanese Canadian and American internment is omitted from the narration.

The film presupposes a critical understanding of history and historical injustices. The film

offers no critical historical context about the repressive policies imposed on Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans that eventually lead to internment and deportation during and directly after the Second World War. The anti-historicism of the film facilitates the affirmation of the viewer's pre-conceived ideas. That is to say that if a viewer believes, before watching the film, that Japanese Canadians or Japanese Americans were a threat to the national security of their respective countries, they are able to maintain that view. The film does not challenge the superficial or stereotypical understanding of events; rather, it ends up reaffirming them in a mirror-like effect.

Also, this film presents no position on the internment or detainment of Arab Americans. It addresses none of the complex issues about what a country is to do when there is the possibility of a threat from within and without. As aesthetic performance rather than expository documentary, *Lest we Forget* presents all potential political and social quandaries as absolutes: Canada is a nation that protects civil rights. It puts out a public warning to its citizens to avoid travel to the US. However, Canada is also presented as the location of human rights abuses; for example, the film highlights that misguided citizens burnt down a Hindu temple after September 11th thinking that its worshippers were somehow affiliated with Arab terrorists. Canada also interned the Japanese Canadian community during the war. Therefore, Canada's status is unclear. Which is it? Is Canada a country of ideal moral standing or one that flouts constitutional rights at its convenience? The film provides no critical evaluation of events, contemporary or historical. It merely collages the testimonials of "victims," as an aesthetic exercise. Another absolute configuration presented by this film – and we would like to note, the mainstream American media – is the idea that since 9/11 the American government has been forced to create legislation like the Patriot Act, in order to ensure the freedom of all.

Within this same media paradigm, September 11th becomes the moment when American transitions. The film claims that human rights violations of the kind it is reporting – the detainment of Arabs in America – has never happened in the history of the United States of America. Before 9/11, America was the land of milk and honey, the home of the American Dream and a country where there was justice for all. However, as DaSilva presents this absolute paradigm (not a critical reading of events, but a reflection of the mainstream media) he uses the example Pearl Harbour and the internment of Japanese Americans to point out the repetition of history. These are just a few examples of the narrative absolutes in *Lest we Forget*, absolutes that in certain instances contradict one another, and create narrative paradoxes that leave the viewer confused and unable to draw informed conclusions or recognize potential solutions to the polemics of multicultural citizenship. These narrative paradigms create confusion, and confusion thereby becomes a part of the aesthetic of the film.

Finally, because the film does not reiterate the specific historical injustices of the Second World War internment, the presentation of historical photos and details becomes an aesthetic collage of events that neutralizes the political controversy. In so doing, the film consistently contradicts itself and the absolutism of the narration; it succeeds only in creating confusion and passivity of the everyday life, as opposed to activism.

The film presents testimonials from Second World War internment survivors about how "Enemy Aliens" were identified and eventually incarcerated. It associates those witness accounts with the testimonies of contemporary Muslim families that have been the target of negative government attention and/or detainment. In one instance, Japanese Americans are equated with the Second World War Jewish framing in Europe. In this paradigm, the concentration camp is equated with the internment camp and the internment camp is equated with detainment centres. Jewish Europeans, Japanese North Americans, and Muslim North Americans are essentialised as

victim. An emotive glazing becomes the materiality of the documentary, not political and social injustice enacted either by governments blatantly infringing on people's human rights, as is the case in the USA, or by circumventing legislation in place to protect human rights, as is the case for Canada.² And finally, as authoritative discourse, this documentary undermines itself by presenting its own performance as evidence of narrative credibility, rather than going to sources outside the spectacle to provide proof.

All "evidence" in the film is recreated. There are docu-drama re-creations of the arrest of several individuals. There are testimonials, and even the inscription found on the Statue of Liberty is not photographed and shown as it is displayed in the tangible world; rather, the message is retyped and shown as an over-imposed title in the film. As Guy Debord says of this kind of practice in his book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*:

In some cases, with issues that threaten to become controversial, another pseudo-critique can be created; and between the two opinions which will thus be put forward – both outside the impoverished conventions of the spectacle – unsophisticated judgement can oscillate indefinitely, while discussion around them can be renewed whenever necessary. (75-76)

In the case of DaSilva, we have a filmmaker whose critical abilities fall short of the informative while attaining the zenith of a mediocre "spectacle."

The aforementioned factors combined, *Lest we Forget* is a performance of documentation/documentary that raises political issues, but as a post-modern narrative presents no resolution. What we are left with are platitudes about racial profiling being bad. This leaves analysis about the rectification of inappropriate government actions up to a hesitant viewer inundated by an ambiguous collage of historical events that themselves become indistinguishable due to the blurring of time and place. This post-modern documentary, therefore, produces more confusion than conclusion while seemingly performing political activism. What we intend by postmodernism is an absolutist conceptual framework – of American derivation – that has done more damage to critical thinking than most people realize. Simply put, postmodernism embraced each and every analytical category that modernity brought with it, discarded what was critical (terms such as: Hegelian dialectics, reification, hegemony, alienation, etc.), gave life to neutralizing systems such as political correctness, advocated the end of ideology while confirming a superior ideology behind it - that of the End of History - by qualifying the legitimacy of the meaningless, and in so doing, in the brief space of about a quarter century, removed the political from the everyday life and substituted it with "reality participation." *Lest we Forget* functions effectively as state-sponsored activism,³ expending the energy of activists and viewers to no end – or no action. *Lest We Forget* is a post-modern spectacle of activism that undermines its own agenda, and fails as an experiment because of the incongruities strewn throughout the narrative. Perpetuating the narrative of marginalization by which the centre/dominant-discourse defines itself, the government criticism in this film has no greater impact on the audience than does reality TV programming or the self-sustaining twenty-four hour a day live media coverage that becomes pure entertainment under the guise of allowing for simultaneous (*à la McLuhan*) participation in real events around the globe.

In conclusion, we take the greatest issue with Jason DaSilva's recuperation of the Japanese Canadian and the Japanese American identity as Other and "Enemy Alien" not once, but twice: once through the inept representation of their historical experience, and for a second time by identifying Japanese North Americans as contemporary Other through his inappropriate identification of Pearl

Harbour with the Japanese in North America and the association made between the attacks on Pearl Harbour and the World Trade Centre. *Lest we Forget* as aesthetic collage contains a multitude of dangerous messages out of their historical context.

As Sheena Wilson argues in her thesis, the narration of the Japanese Canadian identity is being constantly recuperated by the dominant discourse depending on the political climate of the era. Pre-Second World War, racist BC politicians won elections on platforms of fear and the problem of the Yellow Peril. During the war, media messages about the imminent threat presented by "Enemy Aliens" allowed for the internment of the Japanese Canadian community. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Japanese Canadian community had worked hard and become one of the most highly educated and economically prosperous cultural groups, they were recuperated by the multicultural narrative of the country that labelled them a model minority. It is important to remain vigilant about the ways that the Japanese Canadian or Japanese American identity might now be recuperated by media discourse.

Endnotes

¹ *Lest We Forget* did not win, and the Silver Wolf Prize (2003) was awarded to Erik Gandidi for his film *Surplus – terrorized into being consumers*.

² The reference is the Maher Arar case in Canada, in which a Canadian citizen, who had dual citizenship with Canada and Syria, was deported to Syria when crossing the American-Canadian border. Originally, the Canadian government denied any involvement in his deportation, publicly condemning the actions of the United States. In 2004, evidence suggests that the Canadian government may have condoned American deportation of specific citizens based on information its intelligence agencies had collected, but never disclosed to the victims of deportation. "Prime Minister Paul Martin has been embarrassed into calling a judicial inquiry into the role Canadian spy agencies played in the case of Maher Arar, the Canadian deported to Syria from the U.S. to be tortured as an alleged Al Qaeda supporter" (Walkom F.03). ³ The sponsors of this film are as follows: NFB (National Film Board of Canada FAP grant), Funding Exchange (The Peace and Racial Justice Fund through the Funding Exchange), Funding Exchange (The Paul Robeson Fund through the Funding Exchange), Jerome Foundation, Canada Council for the Arts/Conseil des Arts du Canada.

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