

New Voices Conference

“Patriotic Drunk”: To be Yellow, Brave, and Disappeared in *Bad Day at Black Rock*

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John Sturges' 1954 Hollywood feature film *Bad Day at Black Rock* is a brave indictment of two kinds of intolerance: racism and McCarthyism. Its racial narrative is unusual. While most Hollywood denunciations of racism construct sympathetic victims who are liberated into freedom and autonomy by a white hero, as in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Sturges' film shows no one being racially oppressed, much less liberated. To be sure, a Japanese American farmer in the remote Southwestern desert town of Black Rock is murdered soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, but this happens four years before the film's "bad day" and is thus never shown. All the characters are white, and the protagonist Macreeedy is an unlikely champion of racial justice, a luckless veteran so badly injured in combat that he has lost the use of an arm.

The absence of Japanese Americans in *Bad Day at Black Rock* acknowledges the historical reality of a policy by which a central government removed and relocated a subject racial community. An absence in a space from which people have been removed can go unnoticed—which is of course what the oppressor wants—or it can be recognized as a site of oppression and thus can provoke political and cultural action. I argue here that Sturges' film, which I approach through Rea Tajiri's 1991 documentary film *History and Memory*, achieves at least a rare recognition of injustice.¹

History and Memory is an experimental film, a quilted reconstruction of Tajiri's mother's memory of wartime relocation and her own construction of the war, set against the dominant narrative of relocation and incarceration. Abé Mark Nornes writes that the film recognizes a clash between a collective memory that passes from generation to generation and a common history that is experienced "primarily through images and other mass representations":

Tajiri examines these images of history and interrogates their seamless perfection, contrasting it [*sic*] with the messy, sliding instability of memory and privileging the latter through her own heterogenous [*sic*] construction. . . . However, *History and Memory* doesn't simply dredge up the old, obvious arguments about the relationships between history and its filmic representation, that images can lie. Part of Tajiri's achievement is that she argues that our conception of history—indeed our very memory—has become deeply dependent upon the image at the expense of those people excluded from the viewfinder.²

Kent A. Ono takes this argument further, suggesting that Japanese Americans' films about the incarceration snare themselves in the very traps of visual culture that they would refute. He expresses a "deep-rooted suspicion of the prominent role that ocularcentrism (the idea that 'what is seen is what is known') plays in the history of primarily Western representations of Orientalism, the West's exoticizing travel narratives and tourism, and the role that cinema has played within that history."³ Japanese American films about incarceration, by opposing Hollywood images in which Japanese Americans are absent, also oppose the image-making process, even as their own investment in visual imagery is a call for alternative representations: "For these films and videos, visibility is evidence of a confirmable past and of its accessibility via the medium of film."⁴ For Tajiri, history is visual and memory oral; and, just as histories can exclude, memories can forget. Histories are also multiple and overlapping, and so Tajiri uses not only visual fictions such as *Bad Day at Black Rock* and *Come See the Paradise* but also "Super 8 reenactments, U.S. government propaganda films, newsreels, Japanese fascist spectacles, home video, 16mm reportage, audio recordings, still photographs, voice-over narration, and super-imposed text."⁵

Early in the documentary Tajiri as narrator identifies four kinds of events: those that take place in front of cameras, so that images of them exist; those that, having taken place before no cameras, are "re-staged" so that images may exist; those for which no images exist except in the minds of witnesses; and those that exist in neither images nor memories but in "the spirits of the dead." As she slowly names the first two kinds, she shows images of Pearl Harbor: American and Japanese films of the bombing that were packaged for newsreels and documentaries, and the fictionalized reconstruction in Hollywood's *From*

Here to Eternity. For the third kind—unfilmed images that exist only in memory—the screen goes blank. As she moves quickly into the fourth—events with no witnesses but ghosts—the blank screen becomes the background for a scrolling text that relates the disappearance, during the war and incarceration, of her family's house. Another title reminds viewers that, as Japanese Americans left their homes for the camps, their cameras were confiscated and prohibited.

At this point Tajiri begins to weave into *History and Memory* images and dialogue from *Bad Day at Black Rock*. In a voiceover, she says, "I began searching for a history," and then provides examples of her search: several images from a home movie filmed secretly in the Topaz camp in Utah by inmate Dave Tatsuno, then home-movie images of a skater, a young woman whom Tatsuno does not know and who appears briefly in Scott Hicks' 1999 Hollywood feature *Snow Falling on Cedars*; and spliced into these images is the first glimpse of Spencer Tracy as Sturges' protagonist Macreedy.⁶ Over the skater's image is Macreedy's voice from *Bad Day at Black Rock* saying that he is looking for a man named Komoko, a Japanese American. Tajiri and Macreedy announce their searches at almost the same time, though Tajiri makes her announcement even as she shows Tatsuno's film of the skater, extracted from a piece of the history she seeks; and even as Tracy, having died in 1967 and appearing in a 1954 film set in 1945, plays a fictional character named Macreedy searching for a fictional Japanese American with an unlikely name.

Already the four kinds of events are losing their distinctnesses. Tajiri cuts back and forth between Tatsuno's skater and Tracy's Macreedy confronting Robert Ryan as Reno Smith. Moments later, over an image of Macreedy leaning before a well to pick wildflowers, Tajiri superimposes the word "Wildflowers;" and then, immediately after Macreedy reminds Smith that wildflowers indicate a grave site, she cuts to a close-up of plants with the title "Wildflowers in Mother's Yard, 1989."

Late in the documentary Tajiri juxtaposes history and memory, history and fiction, racism and resistance in a curious collapsing of different kinds of events. An image that appears throughout the film—a young woman kneels in sand as water from an unseen source streams down before her, sometimes into her cupped hands, sometimes into a canteen she holds—intercuts with scenes from *Bad Day at Black Rock*, with Macreedy seeing the well and Doc Velie (Walter Brennan) saying that Komoko had dug down deep to draw water. Before Velie finishes speaking, Tajiri shows a photographic image of the water tower at the Poston camp in Arizona, where her mother was imprisoned. Tajiri as narrator says, "That was a thing about the Japanese. They took barren land and brought water to it. The irony is they did it again in Poston. They brought water to the land and made things grow." As she finishes, she shows the young woman splashing her hands and filling her canteen.

The most curious collapsing of the kinds of events is signaled in a scene that follows a remembrance of—or, for Tajiri's mother, a failure to remember—the Japanese American journey by train from the temporary camp to the

permanent camp at Poston. Tajiri says the trip reminds her of Sturges' film. She layers four texts: the opening images of *Bad Day at Black Rock*, showing a Streamliner locomotive chuffing through the desert toward Black Rock; then the opening credits, naming the movie and its stars Tracy, Ryan, Brennan, Lee Marvin, Ernest Borgnine, Anne Francis, Dean Jagger; then her mother in voiceover saying, "I don't know how we got there;" and then her own titles, superimposed on her mother's voice, Sturges' images, and even Sturges' opening credits, to say that the trip to Poston was by train.

What happens to history and memory when different kinds of events—and different ways of representing those kinds of events—are so collapsed? One critic writes, "The story of the Japanese American experience during World War II begs for images,"⁷ but he implies an essentialist notion that any images reconstructed by Tajiri will be reliable just because she is an "insider," and he ignores the documentary's own distrust of images. Another critic groups Tajiri with other Japanese American women whose films on the incarceration concern "daily life and personal history" and "stray far from considerations of nationality, Americanism, and public identity,"⁸ an interpretation that ignores not only Tajiri's quarrel with official public histories but also her search for new histories that are both personal and public. I suggest that Tajiri, in collapsing the histories she challenges and the histories she discovers, erodes the distinction between private and public. Glen Masato Mimura notes "a profound reversal" at the end of *History and Memory*, as Tajiri says that sometimes a mental picture of a story "will return without the story," which explains the images of the water on the hands and in the canteen, a mystery whose solution at the end of her journey to Poston provides at least formal closure to her search.⁹ Yet Tajiri refuses to identify this as a fifth kind of event, one that exists only in borrowed or suggested images, for this kind of event would obliterate differences between private and public memory and history. Moreover, the image, being borrowed or suggested, can be traced to a source; and yet it is not the source but rather the image itself and the tracing that give closure. Mimura believes that, for Tajiri, "history (or more precisely, historical violence) repeats itself not in the form of decisive, apocalyptic events so much as in the often undetectable return of the repressed in the routine patterns of daily life."¹⁰ To say this, however, is to risk reducing the mother's experience to Tajiri's own, even though Tajiri surmounts the legacy of repression at least long enough to make a journey and unravel events—and to do so within a medium whose image-making function transforms even the most private stories into public events. Tajiri may say at the end, "I could forgive my mother her loss of memory and could make this image for her," but the image in its documentary function exists not only for her mother but for an audience.

Ono writes that Tajiri, for all her skill in challenging visual representations, fails to produce "a spectatorship that addresses the transnational, historically dialogic, and genealogical imaginary—while remaining critical of the context of Western ocularcentrism that in many ways overdetermines the possible visual

resources available to people of color."¹¹ Yet perhaps Tajiri's achievement is her challenge to what Paula Rabinowitz calls the impossibility of the filmmaker's task. Rabinowitz describes Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* as a project in "constructing evidence where no documents exist," so that it "reimagines the relationship of viewer to film, and of history to documentary."¹² But Lanzmann has undertaken "an impossible task," says Rabinowitz, for the victims of Hitler's Final Solution "cannot testify. The men and few women who speak can only tell what *they* saw—a broken picture told in a broken language."¹³

Japanese American filmmakers try to build a presence from an absence, a history from a memory, but succeed most in producing "re/membering spectators, who now have a memory of trauma and can see themselves as members of a history and community *created by cinema*."¹⁴ To be "created" by the very technology that has been used to exclude them is to risk an unwitting complicity in the exclusion of others who remain entirely absent, "uncreated." Ono writes that lived reality exceeds representations of it "even as it cannot be understood outside of them (that is, beyond signification and narrative);" and so films "maintain a certain level of anxiety over cinematic production that is effected through the spectator."¹⁵ Especially when filmmakers are themselves, like Tajiri, from marginalized communities, both the process and the product are politically unstable.

This is not to say that, to borrow Audre Lorde's pronouncement, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"¹⁶ for oppositional filmmakers use the camera to forge new tools. Even so, the first job of these new tools is to establish their difference from the old tools of the master narrative, and the dialectic of difference raises the problems of audience and ocularcentrism that Ono identifies. Moreover, the new tools must undo the marginalizations wrought by the master's tools—but, in doing so, they center themselves even as their new narrative, their alternative and public history, memorializes their marginalization. In other words, Tajiri centers herself only at the expense of reconstructing Japanese Americans' absence; and, as long as she remains alternatively and provisionally centered, her narrative must continue to remind her audience—whoever may be in her audience—of that absence. Yet perhaps Jun Xing, praising Tajiri for articulating "a new historical consciousness," rightly stresses the process of remembering histories through a "collective memory."¹⁷ The making of the new tools, even more than the new but still problematic representations those tools make, may lead the way to a kind of event that will satisfy Tajiri's search: an event that is inclusive and fluid and omniscient, dependent on neither images nor repressed memories nor ghosts nor even borrowing and yet enhanced by any or all of them. The ideal history, both private and public, is one whose only absence is absence itself.

Short of the ideal, Tajiri seems to suggest that a collapsing of all available histories may provide the best history she can hope for. *Bad Day at Black Rock*, a Hollywood fiction aimed at a wide audience, is thus a perfect text to match

against, and collapse into, the narrative of her search. What matters when the telegraph operator tells Macreeedy “I never seen Komoko in my life—honest” is not his truthfulness but his plausibility. Absence is everywhere in Sturges’ film, more important than even the death that causes it. Sturges seems to say that, even in a remote and desolate place such as Black Rock, to render a people absent is the surest way to write them out of history. Appropriately, Tajiri observes that it is not only Komoko’s body that fails to appear: “Not even a picture” remains. And it is not only Komoko himself who is absent. For eventually Macreeedy reveals that he has come to Black Rock to confer on Komoko a medal earned by his son Joe, who died trying to save Macreeedy’s life on a battlefield in Italy. The whole Komoko family is absent. Tajiri says, “Komoko’s disappearance from Black Rock was like our disappearance from history,” as water splashes into the woman’s hands; and she says, “His absence is his presence. . . . Somehow I could identify with this search, the search for an ever absent image”—now water fills the canteen—and a desire to create an image where there are so few.”

History and Memory may be remarkable for two achievements. It recognizes that a provisional public history may be extracted from a collapsing of narratives, which Tajiri signifies with the layering of texts atop the opening images of *Bad Day at Black Rock*. And it recognizes the possibility, even in cinema, of presence in absence while maintaining what Ono calls “a continuous anxiety about the legitimacy of presence.”¹⁸

Philip French lists *Bad Day at Black Rock* among “Post-Westerns,” Hollywood films concerned with “the way in which the characters are influenced by, or are victims of, the cowboy cult; they intensify and play on the audience’s feelings about, and knowledge of, Western movies.”¹⁹ Characters complicit in Komoko’s disappearance invoke a privileged status for cowboys, as when the hotel’s desk clerk tells Macreeedy that the rooms are reserved for cowboys and ranch hands, “for their every wish and comfort,” and when a sinister Hector David (Lee Marvin) repeats to Macreeedy that the rooms are reserved for “us cowboys,” for “our every wish and comfort” when cowboys are in town, “and I’m in town as any fool can see.” Macreeedy is confronted by Reno Smith, who controls the town through intimidation and fear, and who says, “Somebody’s always looking for something in this part of the West. To the historian, it’s the ‘Old West.’ To the book writer, it’s the ‘Wild West.’ To the businessman, it’s the ‘undeveloped West.’ They say we’re all poor and backward, and I guess we are. We don’t even have enough water. But to us, this place is *our* West. And I wish they’d leave us alone.”

Like Tajiri, Macreeedy is searching for a history. Recent studies such as Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation* claim that wartime combat films such as *Bataan* built their appeal on the model of Hollywood Westerns. Ironies accumulate. The frontier imperative that justified the movement westward across

the North American continent that relocated and vanquished indigenous peoples was later invoked to justify imperial movement into the Philippines; and yet the film *Bataan* invokes the same frontier imperative, now embracing Filipino soldiers as fellow frontiersmen or cowboys, to construct new Western heroes trying to rout the new "savages," the Japanese; and then, barely more than a decade later, John Sturges constructs in *Bad Day at Black Rock* a disabled white man who travels *east* from Los Angeles to confront cowboys with the consequences not only of their xenophobia and racism but also of their possessiveness and even their patriotism. This is not the standard white liberal narrative of a brave white man saving the day for an embattled community of color so that he may win the heart of a beautiful woman of color—which is to say, it is not like the Alan Parker film *Come See the Paradise*, which in *History and Memory* is scorned and mocked by Tajiri's nephew.²⁰ Nor is it even like *Snow Falling on Cedars*, in which the white hero's reward is not a beautiful woman of color but the grateful abjection of Japanese Americans. Unlike Dennis Quaid and Ethan Hawke, the stars of those movies, Tracy is no young man. A biographer writes that "Tracy aged more quickly than most actors," and by the filming of *Bad Day at Black Rock* "he was mostly playing father, or elder statesman roles."²¹ Besides, his character Macreedy is disabled, as his left arm hangs lifeless, the consequence of a war injury. (In *Snow Falling on Cedars* Ishmael Chambers loses an arm in battle, but in the film version the disability is insignificant even as symbol or irony.) Moreover, he cannot save Japanese Americans if none exist in the world of Black Rock. Despite its name, Black Rock is a white place, all color having been long eradicated. So the struggle exists among white men, and Macreedy, though ultimately a force of justice, is neither a passionate radical nor even a liberal do-gooder.²² In fact, late in the film he confesses that, before being roused to action by the town's murderous secrecy, he had been "washed up," planning to leave the country to get away, "to get lost."

On its surface, then, Sturges' film is a story of a secret murder and one man's stumbling into an investigation of it. This is why the film "works admirably as a thriller," according to French, and why its "film noirish qualities" recommend it as a "who-dun-it mystery," according to Tim Dirks.²³ And yet on the same surface the film looks like a Western, not only for its setting and for some characters' wardrobes but also because these characters invoke cowboys and the West. It is in this relationship to the West where French discovers its very purpose:

The clear purpose of the film is to locate in the all-American figure of the cowboy some less attractive native traits: patriotism masking xenophobia, ignorance masquerading as intuitive common-sense, mindless aggression concealed beneath virility, arrogance disguised as style. In addition, they can't even fight fair. . . .²⁴

Significantly, the cowboys' dirtiest fighting is not onscreen in their intimidations of Macreedy but in the past, in the absence-making that Macreedy finally uncovers, the murder of Komoko. While intimidation is the business of Hector and Coley Trimble (Ernest Borgnine), the men Macreedy calls Smith's "apes," the killing of Komoko and the attempted killing of Macreedy are the work of Smith himself.

In a curious juxtaposition, Macreedy elicits the truth of the murder from Doc Velie and the hotel desk clerk. But this happens only after he tells them about the medal for Komoko's son's bravery in battle. In confessing, the young clerk explains that, on the day after Pearl Harbor, he and Smith and the "apes" started drinking in the morning and became "patriotic drunk." Smith "didn't like Japs anyway," and he was upset because he had just tried to enlist in the military and had been denied for failing the physical examination. His contempt for Japanese—and Japanese Americans too, as he recognizes no distinction—is already established, in an argument with Macreedy at the gas station. Macreedy asks, "What makes *you* mad, Mr. Smith? The Japanese make you mad, don't they?" to which Smith responds, "After that sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, Bataan . . ." and Macreedy says, "Komoko made you mad." Obviously Macreedy is aiming at the distinction that, just as obviously, Smith refuses to honor: "It's the same thing. Loyal Japanese Americans, that's a laugh. They're all mad dogs. What about Corregidor, the death march?" Macreedy asks, "What did Komoko have to do with Corregidor?" and Smith says, "He was a Jap, wasn't he?" His logic is clear: if all "Japs" are mad dogs, and if Komoko was a "Jap," then Komoko deserved to be handled as a mad dog. "Look, Mr. Macreedy," he says, "there's a law in this county about shootin' dogs. But when I see a mad dog, I don't wait for him to bite me."²⁵

The scene establishes more than Smith's murderous racism. For only when he tells Macreedy, "I swear, you're beginning to make me mad," does he expand his answer to the first question about what makes him mad: the full answer is Japanese, Japanese Americans, and inquiring outsiders such as Macreedy. Says Macreedy, "All strangers" madden Smith, and this is when Smith explains that he is maddened by strangers searching for something in the West, strangers such as writers, historians, and businessmen. There is of course a distinction here too that he fails to recognize, an understanding that the writers and businessmen seek to compete with him in exploiting the West for profit whereas Komoko had merely sought to establish a home and Macreedy has sought only to find Komoko. Impatient with Smith's spreading of blame, Macreedy returns to the immediate topic: "What happened to Komoko?"

But while Reno Smith is the classic racist who reduces "strangers" to animals in order to justify his murderous action, the explanation "patriotic drunk" applies to him differently from the way it applies to the other men involved in the murder and cover-up. For he is a demagogue who, when "mad," burns with a rage that he can ascribe to patriotism. He defends his beloved West against "strangers."

But his accomplices—Pete the hotel clerk, Sam the bar owner, and the ranch hands Hector and Coley—are weak and passionless men whose loyalty is to the promise of a moment's thrill. Pete tells Macreeedy they "wanted to go out to scare the Jap a little and have a little fun"²⁶—an accurate account of the gang's motives, perhaps, but not of Smith's. For Smith, "patriotic drunk" means a murderous rage in the name of patriotism, while for the men it means patriotism as a cheap excuse for drunken fun. In the bar after defending himself against Coley's assault with surprising right-armed martial arts moves, Macreeedy announces that Smith cannot even assume the loyalty of his accomplices, as eventually they will realize that he is "playin' 'em for a sap," and surely "one of 'em's gonna crack." Significantly, though, the film ascribes no honor to loyalty and patriotism. Nor does it try falsely to "humanize" Smith by giving him any "endearing" qualities. Without embellishment, Reno Smith utters racist claims that, only a decade before the film was made, were culturally approved; and so he is believably human even without any positive charms. To be "patriotic drunk" is thus to be either weak and brutal or racist and murderous.

The *Greatest Films* Web site, which carries the review of *Bad Day at Black Rock* written by Tim Dirks also carries images of two promotional posters. Both posters announce the film's credits, flash pictures of some stars, and boast of the use of CinemaScope. They also carry, near the title, a curious phrase: "Just the Way It Happened!" For a film based on actual events and actual persons, such an advertising slogan would be unremarkable. For *Bad Day at Black Rock*, the slogan provokes a question: what is the "it" that happened? If the advertisers mean by "it" the murder of Komoko, then viewers learn no more details than the clerk provides in his sketchy account. If they mean Macreeedy's investigation and resolution, then they stamp Sturges' fiction with the authenticity of history. In either case, the slogan carries an aura of history, hinting at the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans. One of the story's ironies is of course that Komoko never lived long enough to be incarcerated.²⁷ In fact, the film's only direct reference to the camps is Smith's lie to Macreeedy in claiming that Komoko went to a "relocation center." The claim would seem true except that Macreeedy says that he has already investigated—presumably through the government, though he names no sources—and found no indication that Komoko had been removed. It would seem true also because relocation, no less than murder, would explain Komoko's absence.

The story of this absence may be situated somewhere between the third and fourth kinds of events that Tajiri identifies: no images exist, and the only witnesses want to banish their memory of it. Yet Tajiri says that Komoko's absence is his presence. Certainly his absence becomes, when Macreeedy arrives in Black Rock, an almost palpable object in every scene, a ghost standing over the shoulder of Smith. Appropriately, Sturges creates several ghostly images of his living characters, as their diaphanous reflections in the hotel's front window are passed through by characters in the street.

Tajiri's fourth kind of event is the event for which no images or memories exist except in the "spirits of the dead." Apart from the wildflowers on Komoko's grave signifying a death, a pall grips the townspeople who did not participate in the murder but who submit to Smith's prejudices. This may not be exactly "the way it happened" to Japanese Americans in 1941 and 1942, but it is close enough. For it was not only racist demagogues but even respected figures such as Walter Lippmann and Edward R. Murrow who supported incarceration, and, except for a few oppositional voices from the margins, the nation meekly submitted, preferring to attend to the war effort.²⁸ But Sturges shows "it" happening just this way in late 1945—after the war. This is not a fatalistic acceptance of prejudice as eternal; for, after all, Macreedy eventually outwits and defeats Smith, and the cowboys go to jail. The film is more likely a reminder of the need for vigilance and justice.

And it may have another purpose: Dirks writes that, among its other accomplishments, *Bad Day at Black Rock* is a "powerful, allegorical indictment of the Hollywood blacklist, created during the climate of suspicion and fear of the 1950s McCarthy era."²⁹ David Wheeler agrees, writing that it is viewed "as a thinly-veiled attack on McCarthy's Hollywood blacklisting."³⁰ Parallels between Japanese Americans and persecuted Hollywood leftists break down for many reasons, of which I will cite one: anti-Asian racism assumes inescapable biological differences whose biggest perceived threat in the private sphere—the threat of mixing, diluting the superior stock—can best be managed in the public sphere, by forced segregation, whereas McCarthyism assumes the Communist menace exists mainly in the public sphere and is best managed by public exposure and humiliation. But the parallel between Smith and McCarthy is assured in the idea of "patriotic drunk." Philip French suggests that *Bad Day at Black Rock*, because it directly ascribes the incarceration of Japanese Americans to racism, "could never have been made at the time it was set in,"³¹ but it *was* of course made in the time of McCarthyism. This only implies, however, that anti-Japanese racism, being more pervasive than McCarthyism and thus more indefinitely controversial, needed more time and distance before it could be confronted "just the way it happened."

Thus the film's awareness of racism dictates that Joe Komoko's medal—which could have been the film's shining centerpiece—has little significance except as a plot device by which Macreedy is brought to Black Rock. Sturges shows it only passing from Macreedy's hand to Doc Velie's. Assimilationist Japanese Americans boast of public ceremonies in which Harry Truman himself bestowed medals on nisei soldiers, acknowledging their triumph over both Axis troops abroad and racial prejudice at home. For farmer Komoko, even if he were alive, there would be no gaudy ceremony. His son's medal would be conferred not by a dignitary but by an aging and disabled man describing himself as washed up and planning—significantly—to leave the country. Macreedy finally resorts to violence to defeat Smith—and this solution of a very masculine,

martial confrontation is surely the greatest flaw in the film—but the shame and impotence that pervade Black Rock as he departs offer no indication that Sturges is constructing a model of white masculine heroism. In the closing images, power inheres not in Maccreedy or in a medal that is likely to be shelved and forgotten but in the Streamliner as it leaves town.³²

The film is based on a short story by Howard Breslin, which observers seem to agree was greatly improved by Sturges and screenwriter Millard Kaufman. Producer Dore Schary thought Breslin’s story was “terrible,” and Spencer Tracy said to him, “How dare you give me this kind of shit.”³³ Unlike the movie, whose story is contained within twenty-four hours, the short story stretches across three days. Breslin’s Maccreedy comes *from* the East: Chicago rather than Los Angeles. He is a former police officer who in Italy met—but was not saved by—the younger Japanese American. The ranchers who torched Komoko’s house are all equally involved, and though Breslin strongly implies a racist motive, he is more concerned with advancing a needless irony: that Lancey Horn, the cowboy who shot at the Japanese farmer, actually liked the man and aimed to miss, and *did* miss, though the farmer died of a heart attack that Horn would not disclose for fear of losing his place in the Black Rock cowboys’ social world, a place so important to him that he would not reveal the truth to his partner Liz, who abandoned him. In the end no one is punished. Maccreedy lectures the cowboys with a condescending evangelism: “Now, listen,” he begins, then says, “I came here to find Old Man Kamotka.” Breslin gives the farmer a far more un-Japanese name than Sturges and Kaufman devise. “You know what happened to him. So do I—now.”³⁴ Breslin creates a hush in the crowded room so that Maccreedy may conclude:

This is why I came. There was a kid named Jimmy Kamotka. He left here years ago. He never wrote his father. The old man couldn’t read. I met Jimmy in the Army. In Italy. He asked me to look in here. . . . Jimmy Kamotka was killed in Italy. I think maybe this town should know that. And remember it. I’m not a cop any more, and you’re all safe enough. But just remember what I told you.³⁵

Here Breslin’s politics differs from Sturges’. In a discussion of Japanese American films about the incarceration, Glen Masato Mimura labels as “revisionist” those works that, like Loni Ding’s *The Color of Honor*, try to broaden mainstream history with the stories of nisei who served in the American military.³⁶ But these narratives depend on irony to induce shame in viewers who had either known nothing about nisei military service or assumed that the government had acted reasonably in imprisoning Japanese Americans. At the end of his short story, Howard Breslin depends on this same irony to induce shame in the cowboys of Black Rock. The problem in this tactic is that the irony assumes an assimilationist

politics that says that nisei rose above the prejudices of mainstream America to prove not only their courage but also their loyalty to the principles of that same mainstream America. Put more crudely, the argument says that nisei soldiers outwhited whites, so obviously their incarceration was wrong. But the argument makes no room for immigrant issei, who remained ineligible for citizenship, and for all others who did not assert their loyalty in the military; and, along with accommodationists such as the Japanese American Citizens League, it condemns the draft resisters and others who opposed federal authorities. By implication, then, Breslin's Old Man Kamotka, unable to prove his loyalty, can only be mourned—but not avenged—through the sacrifice of his son Jimmy, who could and did prove *his* loyalty. In Sturges' film, while it is true that Pete the hotel clerk is moved to confession only after hearing that young Joe Komoko sacrificed his life to save Macreeedy, the focus remains on the death of the elder Komoko and on the guilt of Smith's racist murder and the cowboys' racist thrill-seeking.

Sturges and Kaufman even changed Breslin's title. The short story is "Bad Time at Honda"—or "Bad Day at Hondo," according to Spencer Tracy's biographer Bill Davidson.³⁷ The differences are revealing. Davidson's biography offers no scholarly analysis, but it is also not a gossipy "tell-all" meant to scandalize Tracy. Many sources are friends of both Davidson and Tracy. I note this only to assign credibility to Davidson's anecdote of the film's change of title. Screenwriter Kaufman was still assuming the title *Bad Day at Hondo* when suddenly a John Wayne movie appeared, called *Hondo*:

Such coincidental flaps can cause weeks of delays at a studio, while everyone tries to think of a new title. In this case Kaufman was out in Arizona, with Arthur Loew Jr, looking for locations for another picture, when they stopped for gas at one of the bleakest places either of them had ever seen. It was not even a "wide place in the road," just a gas station and a post office. Kaufman looked at the identifying sign on the post office. The name was Black Rock, Arizona. Kaufman rushed to the phone and called the studio. "I've got the title for the Tracy picture," he said.³⁸

But in 1989, two years after Davidson's biography appeared, Penguin published an anthology, *No, But I've Seen the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made into Film*, edited by David Wheeler, who is, according to the publisher's note, a librarian and an archivist. In it Breslin's piece is "Bad Time at Honda," and throughout the story the town's name is invoked several times by characters and the omniscient narrator. In fact, Macreeedy's last line is a snarling invocation of the name: "Macreeedy looked the crowd over with his calm gaze. Then he spoke, and the word crackled like an insult: 'Honda!'"³⁹ Rather than establishing a definitive title, I claim the appropriateness of both titles: to the extent that Philip

French is correct in arguing that the story’s purpose is to unmask the “native traits” of cowboys, then “Hondo”—the name of a swaggering John Wayne Western—is appropriate, but for a story about anti-Japanese racism, then “Honda”—the name of the manufacturer of Japanese automobiles and motorcycles that would become a popular object of “Japan-bashing” in the early 1990s—is equally appropriate.

The film seems much less indeterminate than Breslin’s title. Especially at the end, with the death of Smith and the arrest of the cowboys, closure seems to be achieved. But absence remains. There is even a new absence, as Liz Wirth (Anne Francis), the film’s only woman, is killed by Smith. Macreeedy rightly perceives her as much stronger and smarter than her brother Pete, and certainly she confidently manages the town’s garage and gas station. But she is also loyal to Smith. Her brother and Doc Velie scheme to get Macreeedy out of town, but she thwarts them by driving Macreeedy into Smith’s trap. Curiously, she dresses well for the drive, trading her jeans and shirt for a sporty blue outfit that is easily the brightest, most colorful garment in the film—and which makes her an easy target just as she realizes the correctness of Macreeedy’s charge that Smith would return none of the loyalty he extorted from the town. With her death, Black Rock’s population includes neither women nor persons of color: it is, effectively, sterile and colorless. When at the end Macreeedy prepares to board the Streamliner out of Black Rock and Doc Velie asks him to give Joe Komoko’s medal to the town, he hesitates. Velie then invokes an image from war: “Maybe we need it. It would give us something to build on. This town’s wrecked, just as though it was bombed out.”⁴⁰ Denied an opportunity to fight Japanese in the Pacific, Smith has waged war in his hometown, and his war is not only as racialized as the Pacific war, but it is also, with the murder of Liz Wirth, gendered. And yet, though he exterminates his enemies, he loses. Black Rock is “bombed out.” Cowboys are leaving his beloved West for jail. Velie says, “Maybe it can come back,” and Macreeedy says, “Some towns do and some towns don’t. It depends on the people.” He relents and gives Velie the medal, but he leaves with no conviction that Black Rock will be among those towns that come back. More than ever, it is a place of absences. Tajiri says in *History and Memory* that Komoko’s absence is his presence, but she speaks from the perspective of someone seeking a history, someone like Macreeedy. But Macreeedy has found his history and must now leave. The residents of Black Rock, having sought nothing, have nothing. At the gas station, Smith says, “I believe a man is as big as what he’s seeking.” What Macreeedy seeks—and finds—cannot keep in Black Rock. History relocates.

In *Bad Day at Black Rock* Joe Komoko is killed offstage, in the war; Smith becomes “patriotic drunk” and kills the elder Komoko, also offstage, and no Japanese Americans remain. But the matter cannot end there. For, without enemies, Smith has no racial inferiors over whose flaws he can exercise power.

If he continues, in their absence, to remind Black Rock of their inferiority, then the town will see only an absence in the place of his enemies and will question his moral authority. The appearance of an outsider seeking his enemies, or seeking their history, challenges his authority as much as he imagined it to be challenged by the presence of his enemies. Now he must find a way to remove the intrusive outsider, and the next outsider, and the next, without losing the support of his town. The logic of removal is absolute. It is also, finally—after peoples are removed—self-destroying. If Smith had been patient, had not plunged into a “patriotic drunk,” the federal government would have removed Komoko to a concentration camp—would, that is, have created an absence without killing.

Notes

1. *Bad Day at Black Rock*, directed by John Sturges and written by Millard Kaufman (MGM, 1954); *History and Memory*, directed and written by Rea Tajiri (Ghost Pictures, 1991). Unless otherwise indicated, these are the sources of all quotations from the films.

2. Abé Mark Nornes, “Our Presence Is Our Absence: History and Memory,” *Asian America: Journal of Culture and the Arts* 2 (1993), 169.

3. Kent A. Ono, “Re/membering Spectators: Meditations on Japanese American Cinema,” in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 136.

4. Ono, “Re/membering Spectators,” 137.

5. Nornes, “Our Presence Is Our Absence,” 167. That the overlapping and collapsing of multiple perspectives is not unique to Tajiri, that it is even practiced by other Japanese Americans, is immediately clear in the series of photographs *American Concentration Camps*, begun in 1990 by Masumi Hayashi. Significantly, Hayashi, born in the Gila River camp in the last weeks of its existence, had been photographing “damaged places,” including several sites with heavy concentrations of toxic waste, such as Love Canal, and abandoned prisons, such as Alcatraz and the Cincinnati Workhouse, according to Jasmine A. Alinder, in “Out of Site: Photographic Representation of Japanese American Internment” (dissertation, University of Michigan, 1999), 201, 203. Hayashi has photographed what *DoubleTake* magazine calls “the rubble and ruins that remain” of the ten concentration camps in the United States as well as camps in Canada [“Single Frames: Photo Collage by Masumi Hayashi,” *DoubleTake* 3.4 (1997), 98]; and her method—the panoramic photo collage—produces images that are atomized, writes Alinder (202, 203), into constituent blocks even as they insist on a comprehensive, sweeping perspective:

In *Manzanar Relocation Camp, Monument*, a panorama consisting of about sixty-five separate photographs, for example, the center is dominated by the Ireito monument and the band of Sierra Nevada mountains in the distant background. As the eye travels from the center line up to the top of the image or down to the bottom, the image’s coherent center gives way to disorder—clouds are discontinuous and the pavement in front of the monument is fractured. Within the work, however, each row and column of photographs is arranged along straight lines so that the seams between images create a kind of organizing grid. Space is both disjointed or highly organized in different sections of the same image, and it is this tension between chaos and order that gives the images their visual power.

In exhibitions, Hayashi not only displays her photographs but also adds the texts of documents related to Japanese Americans’ stories, and she plays a continuous audio recording of her interviews with former inmates. If the link between her layering and collapsing of histories and Tajiri’s were not apparent, then she announces it in the title of her recent lecture and gallery showing at Millersville University in Pennsylvania: “History and Memory.” [Masumi Hayashi, “History and Memory: The Japanese American Internment Camps,” lecture and exhibit, Ganser Gallery, Ganser Library (Millersville University, Millersville, Pennsylvania), 12 April 2000 (lecture); 10 April 2000 to 12 May 2000 (exhibit).] Hayashi’s photographs of the camps may be seen at this Web site: *Masumi Hayashi Photography: American Concentration Camps: Gallery* <http://www.csuohio.edu/art_photos/gallery.html>.

6. *Topaz 1942-1945*, home movies by Dave M. Tatsuno (videocassette, Topaz Museum, 1996); *Snow Falling on Cedars*, directed by Scott Hicks (Universal Studios, 1999).

7. Abé Mark Nornes, program notes, in *Media Wars Then and Now* (Yamagata City, Japan: Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, 1991), 287.

8. Glen Masato Mimura, "Antidote for Collective Amnesia? Rea Tajiri's Germinal Image," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 150, 151.

9. *Ibid.*, 157.

10. *Ibid.*, 158-59.

11. Ono, "Re/membering Spectators," 144.

12. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994), 28.

13. *Ibid.*, 32. Since racial oppression generally takes the form of erasure, relocation, forced absence, then the question Paula Rabinowitz applies to *Shoah*—"What is the place of visual and audio records in an event whose purpose was to erase all evidence of its occurrence?" (28)—may be applied, albeit on a reduced scale, to *History and Memory*.

14. Ono, "Re/membering Spectators," 144. Emphasis added.

15. *Ibid.*, 144.

16. Audre Lord, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981), 98.

17. Jun Xing, "Imagery, Counter Memory, and the Re-visioning of Asian American History: Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory for Akiko and Takashige*," in *A Gathering of Voices on the Asian American Experience*, ed. Annette White-Parks et al. (Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin: Highsmith, 1994), 98.

18. Ono, "Re/membering Spectators," 144.

19. Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 140.

20. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993); *Come See the Paradise*, directed by Alan Parker (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1991).

21. Bill Davidson, *Spencer Tracy: Tragic Idol* (New York: Dutton, 1987), 112.

22. Ironically, though, Macreeedy is called by Smith a "do-gooder"—because of his disability. Agitating among his accomplices so that one of them might be inspired to act against Macreeedy, Smith says, "I know these maimed guys. Their minds get twisted. They put on hair-shirts and act like martyrs. All of 'em are do-gooders, freaks, troublemakers."

23. Tim Dirks, review of *Bad Day at Black Rock*, in *Greatest Films* (accessed 9 January 2001 at <<http://www.filmsite.org/badd.html>>).

24. French, *Westerns*, 142.

25. Quoted in Dirks, review, 8.

26. *Ibid.*, 13.

27. Perhaps the only flaw in the film's tight plot is a historical oversight. If Komoko's son Joe had been in the army before Pearl Harbor, he would probably have been dismissed; Dillon Myer, head of the civilian agency that managed the camps, writes in his memoir that the War Department declared that nisei "were not acceptable in the army." [Dillon S. Myer, *Uprooted Americans: The Japanese Americans and the War Relocation Authority During World War II* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1971), 144.] If he had not been in the military before Pearl Harbor, Joe Komoko would have been sent to a camp. Either way, he would have known enough about his father's fate to tell Macreeedy later in the war. And residents of Black Rock would probably have known of his existence.

28. Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 200-01.

29. Dirks, review, 1.

30. David Wheeler, introduction to "Bad Time at Honda," by Howard Breslin, in *No, But I Saw the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made into Film*, ed. David Wheeler (New York: Penguin, 1989), 16.

31. French, *Westerns*, 141.

32. This paragraph owes its existence to Barry Shank, who argues that the medal affirms an assimilated and masculine validity—in effect, a new presence—and that Joe Komoko's bravery redeems the people of Black Rock. He also argues that, in a masculine liberalism, *Bad Day at Black Rock* re-racializes the social order. Obviously I disagree.

33. Quoted in Davidson, *Spencer Tracy*, 114.

34. Howard Breslin, "Bad Time at Honda," in *No, But I Saw the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made into Film*, ed. David Wheeler (New York: Penguin, 1989), 30.

35. *Ibid.*, 30.

36. Mimura, "Anecdote for Collective Amnesia?," 150-51.

37. The Media Services Film and Video Catalog of Carleton College lists the original title as "Bad Time at Honda" and says that the story was originally published in 1946 in the *American*

Magazine. The 1954 novelization of the film agrees. [Media Services Film and Video Catalog, Carleton College, accessed 13 March 2001 at <<http://www.carleton.edu/cgi-bin/media/search/B>>; Michael Niall (pseudonym of Howard Breslin), *Bad Day at Black Rock* (New York: Fawcett, 1954).] But both Tim Dirks and the Internet Movie Database list the original title as “Bad Day at Hondo.” As I say later, however, I am more interested in the plausibility of various versions.

38. Davidson, *Spencer Tracy*, 115.

39. Breslin, “Bad Time at Honda,” 30.

40. Quoted in Dirks, review, 13.

Comments on “Patriotic Drunk”

Barry Shank

John Streamas’s work builds upon important recent work in American studies that addresses the question of the absent presence of Asian Americans in our history. Both absent and present, both visible and invisible, both citizen and alien, the Asian American is now recognized as a pivotal figure in the racialized hierarchy of American society, complexifying the black/white binary upon which much of our history of race relations has been built. Lisa Lowe’s intervention of the mid-1990s brought this contradiction into view. The nineteenth-century dependence on Asian labor led to Asian exclusion, as the definition of the United States as a white nation was partially consolidated on the backs of Asian labor. And the erasure of that history from the public memory has enabled the fantasy of the United States as a liberal nation that welcomes the model minority—particularly those post-1965 immigrants whom Vijay Prashad has identified as compromised partners in the ongoing project of white supremacy.¹

Streamas’s paper leads through a compelling and multilayered analysis of the absent presence of Japanese American internment during World War II mirrored through the absent presence of the murdered farmer Komoko in John Sturges’s film, *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Scholars such as Caroline Chung Simpson, Peter Feng, and David Eng have produced provocative critiques of the reliance on the visual in the historical recovery of Japanese American internment, and I am happy to see that John points us towards some very interesting methodological possibilities for continuing this vitally important project. Much of this recent work turns on the distinction that Streamas reminds us of early in his paper, that between memory and history. Like Simpson, Streamas wants us to recognize the shifting vagaries of both history and memory. Like Peter Feng, Streamas sees Rea Tajiri’s documentary *History and Memory* as a