

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”

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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

key text for exploring those vagaries. This documentary attempts to account for two puzzling phenomena—Tajiri's own memory of events she could never have witnessed and her mother's inability to remember events she lived through—the events of her own internment. Feng claims that Tajiri's use of *Bad Day at Black Rock* relies on a productive tension between the Hollywood feature's cinematic style and Tajiri's low-budget and avant-garde sensibilities. According to Feng, it is only through a Bakhtinian understanding of the layering of discourse—the polyvocality of any text—that Tajiri is able to represent herself as identifying with Macreeedy and working to discover painful truths that local communities would rather forget. Tajiri's work, in this sense, is that of the historian by other means, recovering histories that have been swept away through the insistent interrogation of painful and partially blocked imagistic memories. Finally, David Eng focuses on the racial castration of the Asian American male in the transition from alien peril to model minority. While this critical perspective might seem the furthest from the overt issues Streamas deals with, I will argue that, in the end, it helps to illuminate the construction of white masculinity that lies at the heart of *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Streamas encourages us to confront the overlapping gaps, absences, and contradictions that produce the "Bad Day" itself, tracing the transformations that occurred as the short story became a treatment and a script, then a film and only after that, a source for images and characters that Rea Tajiri could use to articulate the contradictory conjunctions of "history" and "memory." This work helps us better contextualize the film and therefore, points us toward a more comprehensive understanding of its participation in the ongoing racialization of American masculinity.²

Streamas's analysis of the overlapping texts of *History and Memory* and *Bad Day at Black Rock* or "Bad Day at Hondo/a" is motivated by an analytical insight that puts the present absence of Japanese Americans at the center of the state's power to inter, to incarcerate, to remove, or, ultimately, to annihilate them. That link represents a chain of moral equivalence that gives force to Streamas's analysis. In the layers of textual and contextual readings that stitch together Tajiri's memories of her mother's canteen, her mother's inability to remember her trip to Poston, Komoko's ability to find water beneath Smith's Black Rock desert and the trainshots that open and close the movie, the murder of Komoko becomes equivalent to Tajiri's mother's internment—both are unexplained removals that linger in memory but have been erased from history. And Tajiri finds herself identifying with Macreeedy, the man who wants to return memory and lost honor to a Japanese American family, both of them being investigators whose job it is to uncover the fate of the removed community.

That sounds like a relatively straight-forward task. Bring the absent fate back into present consciousness, remove the stigma of invisibility, and insist on the recognition of past injustices. Indeed, the strategy of nation-building that depends upon the erasure of Asian Americans is not a recent development. It is not simply a response to World War II. As many scholars and activists have

commented, the famous 1869 photograph of the “Golden Spike” ceremony excluded any members of the large Chinese labor force that had been instrumental in the construction of the trans-continental railroad. Jack Tchen has documented the existence of an Asian America before Chinatown and the troubled dialectic of visibility and invisibility that resulted in widely distributed stereotypes of Asian male passivity and sneakiness, weakness and cruelty.³ Should not the task then be to combat stereotypes with the visual evidence of singularity, of complexity and humanity?

That is Macreeedy’s task in *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Macreeedy carries the medal of honor that Komoko’s son won by sacrificing himself to save Macreeedy during World War II. The medal confirms the valor, the strength, the masculinity of Komoko’s son, and thereby affirms the legitimacy of the Japanese American family’s claim to American soil. The medal itself is only revealed near the end of the movie, when it is given to the good whites who have redeemed Black Rock from the corrupt and overtly racist whites. This act, the granting of the medal to the white townspeople, underscores the problem with strategies of visibility. Komoko’s son’s medal goes to the people of Black Rock, because the act of earning the medal is a reconfirmation of the legitimacy of the nation and the history that constructs the United States as a liberal nation. As Macreeedy says at the end of the film, the fate of Black Rock depends on its people. The people left in town are the “good” white people, those who did not want to kill Komoko, but who were only forced into complying with and covering up his murder. When Macreeedy gives Joe Komoko’s medal to these people, Joe’s sacrifice becomes an act that redeems Black Rock itself. Joe’s singular act of bravery as a Japanese American confirms the dominance of whiteness.

But the task of redeeming whiteness is not Tajiri’s and it is not Streamas’s. As Streamas says, Tajiri challenges visual “technologies that inadequately express absence and too often inadequately critique mainstream constructions of presence.” Her montage and her four-part categorization of historical events allow her to problematize the presentation of visual evidence as the proof of history. But if the evidence presented before our eyes cannot be sufficient to carry historical argument, what can? If it is true that Tajiri’s “achievement” has been to show 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,” is it not incumbent upon us to increase the range of the viewfinder?

Perhaps not. For, as David Eng puts it, “invisibility and visibility work in historical tandem to configure and reconfigure the Asian immigrant as the phantasmatic screen on which the nation projects its shifting anxieties of coherence and stability.”⁴ In the end, *Bad Day at Black Rock* is precisely about the shifting anxieties of white American masculinities, the ethical and properly masculine relationship to others located as such within national boundaries and local communities, and the awesome responsibility of power.

Bad Day is clearly a western in its plot structure and set of characters, that classic genre that deals primarily with the function of white masculinity in the construction of white American community. A stranger rides into a town that is being threatened by a corrupt power. The stranger figures out the cause of the corruption, faces the threat down and defeats it against overwhelming odds only by virtue of his superior masculine attributes—his bravery, his intelligence, his honesty, and his fighting skills. Then after the honor of the town has been restored, the stranger rides away. And like many westerns, the town is white and the threat of corrupt power is a response to, if not an immediate effect of, practices of racialization.

As a western, concerned with the gendered and racialized core of the threatened community, *Bad Day at Black Rock* presents two distinct practices of racialization. First, the film impresses upon us the absence of the Japanese American male and the even more spectral process through which he seems to have reproduced. In this way, the film denies the historical presence of this figure and refuses to engage with any specificity that an actual body might conjure up. Apparently, Komoko was an excellent farmer who knew the land well. He could dig a well and find water in the most barren of places. This characterization evokes not only the issues of Japanese American internment, but also of Native American removal. Although he has had a son, he has no family currently living with him. To that extent, of course, he is more like the Chinese immigrants of the nineteenth century, those men who came to labor but planned more often to return. The visual stereotype that manages and fixes racial difference in this case does not even need to be seen to be evoked. In fact, the very vagueness of Komoko's racialized identity better enables the film's construction of the white nation as the second process of racialization can then take place against this blank screen.

Indeed, Komoko becomes the screen against which whiteness is constructed. The ultimate conflict in the film is between two forms of white masculinity, both of which are defined in relation to the absent Komoko. Smith and his cronies see Komoko as an outsider who functions best as either a dupe (Smith thinks he has leased worthless land to him) or as the racialized marker of the limits of their community, the appropriate object for their violent "patriotic drunk" rage. Like so many others, this community of white masculinity is constructed out of violent acts against others. Once Komoko has been killed, Smith has no racial inferiors to dominate. But Komoko's absent presence is enough to confirm Smith's dominance of the town. The specter of the murdered outsider haunts the sidewalks and the interiors of Black Rock. It remains, if not visible, then certainly sensible, as the present evidence of Smith's power. Smith uses that absent presence to dominate the weaker white men of the town. The telegraph operator, the medical doctor, the sheriff and the hotel manager, who also controls the town's telephones—white collar, service sector professionals—are all weak men who disagree with Smith's dominance of the town, but who cannot muster up the will to challenge him.

Macreeedy, on the other hand, enacts a different whiteness, based on an assimilationist relationship to racialized others. Macreeedy owes his life to Joe Komoko. He acknowledges that debt through his efforts to return the medal to Joe's father. This is a whiteness that recognizes the value of Asian Americans, but which is no less supported by their violent sacrifice. In Macreeedy's eyes, Joe Komoko was a model minority, a man who had proven his Americanness and his masculinity through his sacrifice on the battlefield in Italy. Macreeedy enters Black Rock ignorant of the crime the town has committed. Once he discovers it, all he tries to do is leave. The town's past is of no intrinsic interest for Macreeedy. It is only when Smith and his cronies attack Macreeedy that he is forced to fight back. Of course, he defeats the bad guys with only one good arm. And this violent display of dominance, of the masculine virtues of superior fighting skills, inspires the good white men of Black Rock to rise up against the corrupt power that had infected their town. They rise up against Smith's thugs and defeat them pretty easily—off camera, of course.

By identifying with Macreeedy, Tajiri displaces the violent masculinity that holds together the white community, but she does not seem to escape the assimilationist paradigm that allows for good Asian Americans or good Latinos or good Blacks to join the white American community. Assimilationist models cannot escape the ghostly presence of the simultaneous dependence on and denial of racialized labor that preceded assimilation.

In her article that closes the recent collection, *The Futures of American Studies*, Dana Nelson argues that narratives of the nation and arguments about the coherence of the United States are haunted by a kind of "constitutionalism" that urges the resolution of conflict and the elimination of contradiction as a necessary condition for national identity. Liberal articulations of the nation have not escaped this desire to locate a fundamental similarity that somehow might unite us all. Nelson suggests that it might be time to abandon this search for the same, to root out our dependence on constitutionalism, and to articulate new models of the nation, and indeed, transnational or international participation in the human community, that recognizes the fundamental inescapability of conflict and contradiction in the practices of democracy. John Streamas's work helps us to see the multiple layers of imagistic contradiction that constitutes Asian America. A more profound engagement of American studies with Asian American studies, and indeed with ethnic studies in all of its varieties, be it comparative ethnic studies, or more ethnic specific forms, or even with its long standing partners in agon, African American studies and women's studies, can only help our field to abandon our ongoing dependence on constitutionalism. If we can cast off the powerful American desire to violently impose our divinely intuited right way of thinking, perhaps American studies can identify a way to live in a world truly constituted by difference and in so doing, combat the pernicious Americanism that is in the process of destroying the world today.⁵

Notes

1. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

2. See Caroline Chung Simpson, *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945-1960* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Peter Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American film and Video* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

3. John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

4. Eng, *Racial Castration*, 110.

5. Dana Nelson, "ConsterNation," in Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman, eds., *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). See also the compelling new work by Y. O. Ming, *The Expansive Politics of Microglobalization* (Grozny: La Ramie University Press, 2003).