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ABSTRACT

This article discusses three films made about the Sir George Williams Affair: *Crisis at Sir George* (1998), *An(other) Antilles* (2013) and the widely distributed National Film Board film *Ninth Floor* (2016). It comprises a critique of the latter, arguing that *Ninth Floor*'s impact is to undermine political protest, denying the significance of the events both at the time and in the history of Black activism in Canada.

KEYWORDS: Sir George Williams University, *Crisis at Sir George* (1998), *An(other) Antilles* (2013), *Ninth Floor* (2016)

RÉSUMÉ

L'article traite de trois films qui portent sur l'affaire Sir George Williams : *Crisis at Sir George* (1998), *An(other) Antilles* (2013) et *Ninth Floor* (2016), ce dernier distribué à grande échelle par l'Office national du film. Critique de *Ninth Floor*, l'auteure soutient que, en niant l'importance des événements, tant à l'époque que dans l'histoire du militantisme noir au Canada, ce film a pour effet d'affaiblir la contestation politique.

MOTS-CLÉS : Université Sir George Williams, *Crisis at Sir George* (1998), *An(other) Antilles* (2013), *Ninth Floor* (2016)



M sent me a photograph by Daguerre. It is of the first human being to be photographed. Someone is cleaning the shoes of someone. All descriptions of the photograph claim that the first human being to be photographed is the figure having his shoes cleaned. I see first the figure cleaning the shoes as the photograph's subject. Secondly, the event of the shoe-cleaning. From this immediately I saw the state of the world.

Dionne Brand (2018)

The writing of history is a political act, deliberate or not.

James W. St. G. Walker (1997)

To *Ninth Floor*, the feature length 2015 National Film Board (NFB) documentary on the 1969 student protest at Sir George Williams University in Montreal, a quite universal response was what Katherine McKittrick calls “surprise”:¹ most audiences and reviewers wondered why they knew nothing of the event. Yet at the time, the Sir George Williams Affair received international attention, at least when it culminated in the destruction of the university’s computer centre. Caribbean historians record the impact of the affair on political events in Trinidad, where protests supporting the students, some of whom came from there, morphed into more extensive unrest, but in Canada, the largest student protest in its history, and the most materially consequential, seems, from the reviews, to have fallen from view.

“*History as it is understood* enters a political discourse, it becomes a participant in a power dialectic and it influences power relationships,” James W. St. G. Walker (1997) reminds us. Three documentaries have been made of the Sir George Williams affair. Their narratives differ significantly, as do their messages, both intended and unintended. Even their varying venues of dissemination speak to message and impact. *Ninth Floor* (Shum 2016) is widely promoted by the NFB and streams on their website; *Crisis at Sir George* (Morel 1998) is very difficult to obtain; and *An(other) Antilles* (Ralston 2013) is, at this point, not publicly available.² As this article will show, contrasting the three films makes obvious *Ninth Floor*’s shortcomings. However, given its wide distribution and popularity, *Ninth Floor* is becoming the official story. It is important, then, to understand what version of history is being written. This article asks what is at stake in how each documentary interprets and makes meaning of the events at Sir George, and at stake for whom? It argues that *Ninth Floor*’s representation of the story diminishes and blunts the historical importance of the events at Sir George Williams University and undermines their radical import.

Briefly, what is usually called the Sir George Williams Affair began in the fall of 1967 when a group of students from the Caribbean observed that biology professor Perry Anderson was consistently giving them lower grades than he gave others in their class. In the second term of the course, the students took their complaint to the department, which agreed to look into it and produce a report, which they would be given. On their return in September, they found that the department had exonerated Anderson and that all copies of the report had disappeared in the mail, a provocative factor that *Ninth Floor* does not report. Emboldened by the tenor of the times, and locally by two galvanizing conferences in Montreal, the October Congress of Black Writers, and the November conference against the war in Vietnam, as well as by a Quebec student strike against conditions in the newly instituted junior colleges (Mills 2010, 27), the Black students became even more dissatisfied with administrative inattention to the matter. In December, a group of students confronted the principal, demanding a hearing to which they would be invited; the administration agreed under duress. However, student dissatisfaction with the initial composition of the committee, and a leaked alarmist letter by the new acting principal suggesting the students would become violent escalated

tension. The students went public, appealing to the Sir George Williams student body for support, gaining many allies, but also drawing racist opposition. It was the second session of the controversial hearing committee, on January 29, 1968, that resulted in the occupation of the computer centre.

Although clearly led by the Black students, the group that occupied the centre was racially diverse, and peaceable, determined to keep the centre safe and clean. After almost two weeks of occupation, the administration met with them and negotiated a settlement, and all but about a hundred students went home, unaware that two other signatures were required to confirm the deal. When, after a long wait, the students learned that the settlement would not be approved, the infamous events of February 11 ensued: computer cards were tossed out the window, an unruly crowd, both supportive and opposed, gathered below. Police, followed by the Riot Squad, forcibly removed the students, a fire was set, and the computers were destroyed.³ These facts are evident in all three of the documentaries. However, what frames the story, where it might be said to begin, how the behaviour of both students and administration are evaluated, and what meaning might be derived from the events—these differ widely.⁴

In 1999, for its series *Turning Points of History*, the History Channel aired the documentary *Crisis at Sir George* by Renee Morel. According to *Montreal Gazette* reporter Mike Boone (1999), the topic of Sir George was suggested by Norm Bohlen, History TV's vice president of programming when the staff at Connections Productions, where Renee Morel was working, were considering doing an episode on student protest in the 1960s. A Concordia student during the 1980s, Morel was particularly intrigued because she had heard nothing of the event.⁵ The frame and concern of *Crisis at Sir George*, then, is the general phenomenon of student protest, which at that point was widespread and encompassed anti-war issues in North America and England and leftist struggles in Paris that ended in a general strike, as well as civil rights struggles in the US. *Ninth Floor* understands the central issue to be racism; its concern, however, is the personal cost of struggle. *An(other) Antilles* asks, in essence, how is liberation won.

All three documentaries make extensive use of archival footage, often the same footage, but at times edited or narrated differently. Since comparison is possible, how footage is described or interpreted also reveals each film's unique agenda⁶. As well, all three films interview participants; however, only one of the original complainants, Rodney John, and the Sir George Williams/Concordia faculty member Clarence Bayne are common to all three, and the scope of their comments differs in each film.

The opening minutes of each film immediately underline their differences. Already dubbed a "turning point of history" by the series' standard opening trailer, *Crisis at Sir George* begins with contemporary footage, in colour, of the students and Hall Building, site of the events to follow, and then rapid cuts of black-and-white

television footage of protest: first, three of student protests labelled as “against authority” and “around the world”; then cuts of Martin Luther King Jr. and another of a civil rights march; finally, anti-Vietnam war protests, and then the declaration that “the violence seems foreign to Canadians,” spoken over a full-colour image of the Canadian flag. That is to say, the film frames what follows as Canada’s introduction to the tenor of the times.

Ninth Floor, in comparison, opens not on events but on technologies of surveillance: a dial phone, a tape recorder, and three vintage 1960s television screens. On the centre screen, “we” view archival footage: a Black student speaker explaining “two types of racism,” a Black faculty member opining that the administration was utterly unprepared, the white dean of arts acknowledging that racist attitudes are everywhere so likely in the university, but he awaits evidence. The left- and right-hand screens show footage of an empty room, at that point puzzling. The title and credits follow: circling smoke from a cigarette and white cards falling, the latter interspersed with archival footage of computer cards tossed from the computer centre, then the mob on the street, someone setting fire to a police car, police outside the computer centre, and so on; that is, footage of the most violent and chaotic moments of the events of February 11, 1969, through which we are guided by narration summarizing the events.

An(other) Antilles opens with text on a black background succinctly outlining the same events but, in the fourth of four screens, reports the infamous cry from some of the crowd outside the building: “Let the niggers burn.” The montage of archival footage that follows resembles that introduced in the opening of *Crisis at Sir George*, but is silent, accompanied only by music.

How viewers enter the film is critical to how they then understand the events to follow. *Crisis* immediately connects events to the worldwide political ferment that marked the 1960s, that ferment contextualizing how the Sir George protest developed and unfolded. Even before the title appears, clips of struggle are interspersed with Professor Malcolm Foster’s astonishment at what was occurring, student participant Robert Hubsher’s realization that “someone was going to get hurt” and complainant Rodney John’s appalled recollection that students who had shared his classes were in the streets shouting “Let the Niggers Burn!” Student protest, a violent reality, and vicious racism are threaded through the narrative that ensues.

Essentially talking heads and news clips, *Crisis* is rich in detail and information, some of which does not appear in *Ninth Floor*, including, for example, that white students hurled racial insults at the first aborted hearing; that there was a departmental investigation, not a hearing, in May, which produced a report, all copies of which were “lost” in the mail; that supporting white students occupied the faculty club; that the students had gathered fire axes, which were confiscated by the police; and that the local Black community fed the students. It is fair to say, I think, that the documentary supports the charge of racism made by the Black students and that

while not accusing the administration of bad faith, neither does it support them. *Crisis at Sir George* concludes in summary: “When students took on the administration [over images of a lecture hall filled with students]”; “when Black activism sought to expose white racism [over an image of students throwing the computer cards out the computer centre windows]”; and passion overtook reason [over images of the police entering the computer centre and being fire hosed by the students]”.

An(other) Antilles, similar in length, is quite differently structured. The film opens with a silent montage of archival footage, one that uniquely includes, and concludes with, a somewhat charred, abandoned sign that reads, “Liberated Territory.” The film is then punctuated by four poems, written for the film by Ian Kamau and spoken by him, that introduce each section: “We Arrived”; “Young Gifted & Black”; “(This is) Liberated Territory”; and “New Eyes.” The speakers throughout are Professor Clarence Bayne, complainant Rodney John, and protest participants student LeRoy Butcher and community member Dorothy Wills. David Austin theorizes their narratives. Like *Crisis at Sir George*, *An(other) Antilles* begins by situating the events at Sir George in broader events. For filmmaker Imara Ajani Rolston, the story begins with the gradual change in Canadian immigration policy, the removal of racial and cultural barriers, and the resultant increase in postwar Caribbean immigration to Canada. The first section focuses on immigrant dreams, the culture shock of immigration, encounters with racism, and the formation of Caribbean community in Montreal.

The film’s second section turns to intellectual life and political consciousness, focusing on a series of conferences about Caribbean issues, and later the Black writers and anti-Vietnam conferences of the fall of 1968. The ideology of Black Power emerges, in this film, quite differently than it does in either *Crisis* or *Ninth Floor*. In *Antilles*, Rodney John opines that the events at Sir George probably would not have occurred if it were not for the development of Black consciousness in the period, but where in the other films the perspectives on that consciousness include white alarm, and to varying degrees concern about or disavowals of Black Power, and its influence on events, in this film, all the speakers affirm that it shaped their experience. Clarence Bayne specifically explains that the administration had no understanding of the philosophical and ideological beliefs animating the students’ protest. Part 3 turns to the events in the occupation of the computer centre: “(This is) Liberated Territory.” In this film, we learn from Rodney John that he and the other five complainants were present at the negotiations that apparently settled the dispute, and that he cautioned the students, most of whom went home feeling they had won, that “we’ve been here before.” Unlike *Ninth Floor*, *An(Other) Antilles* does not speculate on who set the fire, but like *Ninth Floor*, it does speak of the brutality with which police dealt with the small group of students that they removed from the centre. Particularly through the accounts of Dorothy Wills, *An(other) Antilles* recalls how community members organized to feed and otherwise support the students; how after the event women were dismissed from their domestic work;

and also how the community rallied around the arrested students. Unique to this film are two clips of a student Town Hall on February 26, 1969. They feature Clarence Bayne's passionate insistence that a people's humanity was more important than property, and a powerful statement by an unidentified Black student from the United States who denounced Canada's hypocrisy regarding race, and insisted that at stake was a Canadian problem, not a West Indian problem.

The concluding section of *An(other) Antilles* underlines the legacy of the Sir George Williams Affair in the Black community of Montreal and beyond: a new consciousness and refusal of invisibility, an insistence on taking up space in Canada, in claiming Canada, in Clarence Bayne's formulation, not as "dem folks' country" but rather as theirs, and so insisting on the right to demand change. Rodney John admits that they were naïve, but that it was their naïveté that made it possible for them to act. "While not recognizing how difficult the task was, we proceeded on the task," he says; the disappointment some felt with the result is the limitation. That conundrum is what he calls "the yin and yang of social change." Canadian-born filmmaker Imara Ajani Rolston, whose parents immigrated from Barbados in the late 1960s, describes *An(other) Antilles* "as a love poem to his life and people who raised me" (Rolston 2019). Traced through Ian Kamau's poetry, the impact of the film is, indeed, the chronicle of an awakening with "new eyes" to the realities of Canadian racism and the power of collaborative struggle.

Ninth Floor is the most elaborate of the three films. Written and directed by Mina Shum, an accomplished dramatic filmmaker with only a short documentary to her credit, the project fulfilled a long-time ambition of NFB producer Selwyn Jacob, whose biography is similar to many of the participants in the Sir George Williams Affair: from Trinidad, he arrived in 1968, but went to the University of Alberta, and so watched events from afar. Neither Shum nor Jacob had viewed the two earlier films (Selwyn 2018). *Ninth Floor*'s take on events, then, is original. One third longer than the other two films, it goes far beyond the talking heads and archival footage that comprises the earlier efforts. While, with some important omissions, its version of events matches those in the earlier films, it is in how it defines its scope, how it situates the events' context, and in its mis-en-scène that its version of history becomes problematic.

As described briefly above, *Ninth Floor* immediately frames events through technologies of surveillance, a motif that persists throughout the whole film and to which I will return. As in the other films, interviews ground the narrative; this film features a much larger cast of characters, including Rodney John and Clarence Bayne; complainant Terrence Ballantyne; participants Bukka Rennie, Senator Anne Cools, Hugo Ford, Valerie Belgrave, and Lynne Murray; Nantali Indongo, daughter of complainant Kennedy Frederick; Jewish participant Robert Hubsher; Perry Anderson's lawyer, Noel Lyon; and Anderson's son, Duff, among others. The first third of the film deploys both personal recollection and archival footage for its

account of events. Expo 67 stands in for the propaganda and deception of Canada's welcome to the world, in contrast to the racism encountered by the Caribbean students, the contradiction visually reprised in the film's later use of Moshe Safdie's iconic Habitat 67 but in a snowy winter as a setting for Rodney John's walks. Leaving Trinidad is dramatized: Bukka Rennie and Valerie Belgrave are seen in an apparent reenactment of departure. Rennie and Ballantyne give accounts of their motives for coming, and the shock of arrival, particularly their shock at the racism they encountered.

Individual stories, then, structure the account and move it forward. How and why people got involved, their personal recollection of their experience of the events (for Nantali Indongo, the impact on her life of her father's involvement and subsequent mental instability), and ultimately how their participation affected their lives are the film's interest. Not until thirty minutes into the film does the narration acknowledge the context of the times. It does so by means of an approximately one-minute segment that includes clips of civil rights and anti-Vietnam War marches and demonstrations; over them is the voice of Senator Cools, who calls the Sixties a "powerful period, and for many young people like myself a disruptive one. It took me a long time to recover," she says, as her first interview comes to screen. Although not all the participants would share her perspective, it is her perspective that provides the film with its rhetoric and its message. That is to say, finally, the most powerful theme of the film is the cost of protest to the individuals who engage in it. Incomplete or disrupted education, disappointment, broken marriages, mental instability, marked the participants' later lives. Where *An(other)Antilles* reports improved community solidarity and resolve as an impact, *Ninth Floor* focuses on the impact of the events on individuals. Only one scene in the film (other than archival footage) depicts the participants as a group. In it, late in the film, in a scene without context, several of the Caribbean participants, and a young Caribbean Concordia student who is also interviewed during the film, assemble in a movie theatre in Trinidad. They do not greet each other or speak; in fact, a sense of isolation is palpable. It is unclear what the sequence is intended to signify.

Oddly, the scene in the movie theatre in Trinidad feeds directly into archival tape of several interviews with Perry Anderson, who speaks of the damage to his career, and an interview with his son in the present, who suggests his father probably was "culturally biased," as were many. Clearly, a gesture to telling Anderson's side of the story, it is followed by Clarence Bayne explaining how though one might not be a vicious racist, we are all capable of entertaining a self-protective bias, an attitude that we must control if society is to function successfully. In the next sequence, Nantali Indongo, also in an interview, wonders whether much has changed given the racism she and her family still encounter. Next, over a visual sequence of an unkept playground in Trinidad, Rodney John admits that the protests failed spectacularly, that his marriage ended, and that his sons remain somewhat estranged as a result of his absence. John adds, however, that he cannot apologize because he

could have acted no differently. We are then returned to Duff Anderson, filmed in a well-maintained Montreal playground, recalling his parents' breakup when he was about four. Finally, Hugo Ford is filmed *in situ*, caring for his bees; a philosophical mind, on his land, and later in an interview space, he meditates on the continuity of life, and how self-understanding removes fear. The film concludes with Nantali Indongo's group *Nomadic Massive* singing "Redemption Song" in an empty club, with Rodney John looking on, and then a series of striking portraits of some of the main actors, who look at the viewers gravely, after which Indongo is filmed leaving the club on a snowy afternoon.

The striking cinematography in *Ninth Floor*, both in Montreal and in Trinidad, contributes to what I consider the film's problematic message. For example, Montreal outdoor scenes are always in winter, surely signifying the coldness of life in a racist society. Inside Montreal footage takes place in the subway; stone-faced figures view each other across otherwise empty platforms, or through a subway window. The Trinidad we see is warm; however, oddly, the various figures always are similarly alone. Early in the film, we saw Bukka Rennie and Valerie Belgrave leaving Trinidad, and what we see of place and housing is quite poor and ramshackle. The Trinidad setting that concludes is similar. Only Hugo Ford tending his bees seems "at home" anywhere. How then does the film lead us to understand Black citizenship, especially because it does not explore the ways in which the Montreal community supported the students? Where then is the Black body at home?

Whether Perry Anderson was racist, as the students' written complaint charged, or even whether he graded Caribbean students differently, is never determined, although we are told in the written epilogue to *Ninth Floor* that he was exonerated. *Crisis at Sir George* includes information about his later successful teaching career at Concordia; *An(other) Antilles* does not discuss the matter, except in relation to the administration's handling of events.

What is clear is that *Ninth Floor*, in the way it concludes, takes the audience—and so the issue—outside of Canada; it emphasizes the Caribbean-ness of the participants, thus making the experience appear important to individual participants, most of whom are no longer connected to the country. This removal is in striking contrast to the other two films: *Crisis at Sir George* situates events firmly within Canadian history and explores their significance for that history; and *An(other) Antilles* finds the most significance in the impact of events on the Black community and, especially through the clips from the February 26, 2019 Town Hall and the comments of Clarence Bayne, calls the nation to account. Moreover, Trinidad in *Ninth Floor* has no politics, again in striking contrast to the other films, especially *Crisis at Sir George*, which contains significant footage of the political protest that comprised Trinidadian reaction to events in Montreal and that expanded into a protest in part against Canadian imperialism, signified by the presence of several Canadian banks.

The most important and problematic aspect of *Ninth Floor's* *mis en scene* is its fascination with surveillance. The film's producer, Selwyn Jacob, speaks of Mina Shum's love of spy movies, and how the surveillance theme reflects the paranoia of the time (Lewis 2015), and the motif certainly dictates how the film unfolds. The actual presence of surveillance is documented in *Ninth Floor*, which contains archival footage of William Hart, an American who acted as *agent provocateur* for the RCMP and another, in the computer centre, is mentioned. Staged is the recurring presence of a car, parked on the street or following a participant. How scenes are framed also implies surveillance; for example, in Trinidad, where a figure is viewed through small spaces. The *mis en scène* of all the interviews insists on surveillance. Often filmed obliquely, or partially viewed through a television, or heard on tape, or a tape recorder that is seen running, the viewers' encounter with the participants is always at least partially framed with the oblique quality that the surveillance creates. Completing this sense of surveillance is the location in which all of the interviews occur. The setting looks like an abandoned factory, clearly dry and somewhat clean, but unfurnished. The interviewee sits alone on a chair and speaks. While not a police interview room, the space suggests marginality, if not criminality, underscored by the virtually continual presence of the paraphernalia of surveillance. But it also does suggest an interrogation room or torture—the evidence there only in the empty room and on the body—if one chooses to or is positioned to see it.

The theme of surveillance creates an implicit narrative of its own that is complex. Who is doing the surveilling? Dangerous, or criminal in whose eyes? In placing the viewer in the position of the one who surveils, the film turns the viewer not into detective, or even a voyeur, but rather into the eyes of the state on whose behalf the surveillance is being performed. The implication is inescapable. "The writing of history is a political act, deliberate or not," James Walker reminds us. Film is the same. Seeing the film in this perspective then gives meaning to the choices made by the filmmaker, intended or not. Principally, the interest in individuals, in their sense of failure and loss, and the pain with which they recall their behaviour ("young and foolish," Robert Hubsher calls his younger self) takes on new meaning. The message is what the state requires: the cost of protest is simply too high, and the results too small. Thus, a major, critical moment in Canadian history and in Black Canadian history can safely be recalled. Like the participants, "we," the viewers, are mature; the passion of youth is behind us.

The true legacy of the Sir George Williams Affair as it appears in *Ninth Floor* may emerge best, then, from resistant viewing, from noticing, as Dionne Brand writes in Verso 40.6 of *The Blue Clerk*, who is the subject; who is without subjectivity or ancillary to someone else's subjectivity. One must notice Black courage and community, and white student collaboration, in the name of social justice, and in the face of a white administration's arrogance. It is these elements that *An(other) Antilles* foregrounds, and that are evident in *Crisis at Sir George* as well. It is the history that *Ninth Floor* resurrects, and then seeks to control, and so the film is particularly

troubling in the current time of Black Lives Matter. The principal legacy of Sir George is that of Black resistance in Canada, a legacy and a history that demand and deserve a far more fulsome accounting.



Notes on the Contributor

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Notes

1. In her chapter devoted to Canada in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick writes: “By surprise I mean the outcome of wonder: an unexpected or astonishing event, circumstance, person, or thing; the emotion caused by this; astonishment, shock, or amazement.... because [events] take place in Canada, a nation that has and is still defining its history as Euro-white, or nonblack. These surprises include but are not limited to: black in/and Canada, black women in Canada, black resistances (to biological determinism, to racism, to sexism, to Canada and New France), eighteenth-century black “feminism,” slavery in Canada, Canada as a site of permanent black residency. These people, place, events, and activities are not “Canada,” are not supposed to be Canada, and contradict Canada; they are surprises, unexpected and concealed (91–92).
2. Courtesy of the filmmaker Imara Ajani Rolston, *An(other) Antilles* can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/153301216#t=NANs>. The password is Montreal1969. *Crisis at Sir George*, made for the History Channel, seems to be held at only two libraries, Queens University and York University.
3. This brief summary is garnered from the three documentaries, and well as from [Austin \(2013\)](#) and [Mills \(2010\)](#).
4. It must also be noted that while *Crisis at Sir George* and *Ninth Floor* had substantial budgets, *An(other) Antilles* was made on an Arts grant for \$15,000.

5. Concordia University was formed in 1974, a merger of Sir George Williams University and Loyola College.
6. Most striking is *Ninth Floor*'s repeat insertion of two clips, one of students in the computer centre celebrating, and also cleaning up, when they believe a settlement is reached. The clips actually occur earlier in the news coverage of the event (CBC Digital Archive, n.d.), which concerns the early moments of takeover, and the ongoing attempt to keep the centre orderly and clean. The repeat of the two clips is significant because the mood was, according to several participants, quite different by the time a settlement was reported, and the repeat of the cleanup suggests that occupation was, until then, disorderly.

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