

Lost in the Struggle: State Media Narratives and Marginalized Communities

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Abstract

Phong Nguyen a.k.a. Chuckie Akenz is one of three interviewees in the Canadian Broadcast Corporation production *Lost in the Struggle* (2006). The 50-minute made-for-television documentary attempts to address why young men in Toronto's Jane and Finch neighborhood are involved in criminal activity. This short paper explores the connections between the documentary's narrative and aesthetic construction with the politics of the documentary's representation of race and ethnicity. Given that the Canadian government mandates the promotion of multiculturalism as a government responsibility, and since the CBC is a state entity, I believe it important to consider how this documentary manifests biases in regards to addressing systemic social issues. Specifically, I argue that this documentary avoids complicated discussions of race and ethnicity and instead depicts the city space itself as a reason for violence and poverty. Finally, this paper raises the concern about the co-optation of narrative and aesthetic by the CBC. I believe that in an effort to present authenticity in the documentary, the CBC re-appropriates marginalized voices while also discrediting the legitimate importance of grassroots movements.

The Canadian Broadcast Corporation is a state owned media company. Established in 1936, radio broadcast was the CBC's primary focus. It was not until 1952 that the CBC launched their television broadcast division of which today operates dozens of original programming. In the 1970s, the Canadian government initiated efforts to acknowledge the growing cultural diversity that was forming in Canada. With increasing immigration rates, the country's unique bicultural history of French and

English was put under considerable stress. The federal Government of Canada began to increase spending on programs that promoted multiculturalism initially in the context of preserving French Canadian culture. As immigration continued to rise, in 1982 these mandates were written into Canada's Constitution through the Canada Act of 1982. Six years later, in the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism, the government acknowledged the growing ethnic diversity that was quickly changing the nation. However, the act provided rather vague goals about how multiculturalism would actually be promoted. Yet, today, many Canadians cite multiculturalism as one of the primary defining features of Canadian society.

The *Fifth Estate* is the CBC's newsmagazine program and considered to be one of Canada's foremost current affairs program. On October 4, 2006, the *Fifth Estate* aired *Lost in the Struggle*. The investigative team gave video cameras to two young aspiring filmmakers; Paul Nguyen and Mark Simms with instructions to follow the daily lives of three youths living in the Jane and Finch area, a region that is considered by many to be one of Toronto's if not Canada's most violent neighborhoods. Nguyen and Simms follow a Jamaican-Canadian named Andrew Burnett who goes by the name Burnz, a Bangladeshi-Canadian named Albi Aziz who goes by the name Freshy and a Vietnamese-Canadian named Phong Nguyen who goes by the name Chuckie Akenz.¹ These three young men share their struggles with unemployment, drugs and the police. The documentary's methodological approach includes talking-head interviews, subjects talking directly to the camera, and voiceover narration. The documentary takes place in a variety of spaces in the Jane and Finch neighborhood including public parks, apartments and houses, schools, unemployment offices and on the streets.

Fifth Estate reporter Gillian Findlay opens and closes the documentary on-camera and provides the authoritative narrative voice throughout the film. Findlay, who is a white woman, appears at strategic moments over the course of the doc, reminding the viewer that the images and sounds are authentic because they were shot by people from area. Findlay opens the documentary by posing two questions. She asks, "How is it that so many young men in certain Canadian neighborhoods get involved in crime and why is once they do, it's so difficult for them to get out? By the end of the documentary neither of these questions are answered. Instead, the documentary present three young men as being already in a life of crime with no investigation as to what got them there. Furthermore, no explanation is genuinely offered as to what makes getting out of their situations so difficult. While at moments the documentary does mention a failing education system and offers glancing critiques of insufficient social services programs, the documentary instead avoids these complex issues and

opts to sensationalize drug deals, guns and gang violence.

In the opening scene of the documentary, the legitimacy of Findlay's embedded journalistic approach is constructed early. She stands on the side of the road, at night, and supposedly in the Jane and Finch neighborhood.² Findlay tells the viewer, "Our cameras [have] unprecedented access to their lives...what you're about to see is remarkable." Findlay's introduction does *not* specifically acknowledge that much of the footage shot for the documentary came from Nguyen and Simms. This is revealed only at the end of the documentary; a crucial fact withheld in order to not only heighten the shock and awe of the footage but also to give the impression that the CBC had exclusive access. While Nguyen and Simms are both credited as associate producer, it is unlikely they had any meaningful influence over the way the documentary was ultimately constructed.³ Findlay does admit at the end of the documentary that over 120 tapes were shot by Nguyen and Simms and all of the tapes were handed over to the CBC for editing. This supposed democratic approach to giving cameras to Nguyen and Simms suggests to the audience that the CBC is concerned with objectivity and providing a voice to the oppressed.⁴

As aspiring independent filmmakers, both Nguyen and Simms maintain an aesthetic style and narrative form native to their background and experiences. As amateur filmmakers, their use of consumer-grade video cameras, limited access to audio equipment and lighting, in addition to smaller filming crews, make for a particularly characterized aesthetic. The CBC's mainstream television format co-opts this rough/grainy aesthetic of Nguyen and Simms and repackages it by intercutting it with Findlay's interviews and narration. Ultimately, *Lost in the Struggle* follows a familiar journalistic flow that is predictable and accommodates commercial breaks.

In a scene that takes place in Burnz's family's apartment, Findlay sits at a table with Burnz's mother as they discuss Burnz's childhood. While the scene itself acknowledges Findlay's proximity to the subject by inserting her into Burnz's domestic space, the camera shooting techniques employed in this scene manufacture authenticity. It would be typical of the traditional documentary aesthetic to film Burnz's mother and Findlay in a shot-reverse-shot fashion. However, the editors instead maintain a seamless pan from Findlay to Burnz's mother. This uninterrupted shot creates a sense of continuity and intimacy with the subject by not breaking up the scene spatially or temporally. This works to reinforce Findlay's supposed access to the interviewees. This aesthetic maneuver repeats numerous times throughout the documentary when Findlay interviews Burnz, Freshy and Chuckie. In addition to this, while the documentary tries to embed Findlay in the Jane and Finch space, Findlay

only appears in what are essentially safe spaces. She appears in a school, an apartment and a coffee shop.⁵ These scenes all take place during the day, while the rest of the documentary's footage, shot by Nguyen and Simms, tend to take place in the more dangerous and uncontrolled locations; alleyways, apartment stairwells and parking lots.

The documentary's appeal to authenticity is also constructed through text on screen that appears upon returning from each commercial break. Most television networks offer disclaimers before returning from commercial breaks warning viewers of graphic or potentially offensive material. This is sometimes the network's discretion but with *Lost in the Struggle*, these disclaimers appear directly on the documentary footage.⁶ The disclaimer warns viewers of the graphic nature of the program but appears within the diegetic space as way to heighten intrigue while also asserting the authenticity of the reporting.

The tagline for the documentary on the CBC websites reads, "The journey of three young men through one of Canada's toughest neighborhoods" (CBC News: the fifth estate - *Lost in the Struggle*, 2011) and makes no specific reference to the races of any of the three young men. The documentary does not discuss the fact that Burnz, Freshy and Chuckie are the sons of immigrant parents. This omission elides the opportunity to engage in serious discussions of racialized poverty, the formation of ethnic enclaves in suburban Toronto or racism in the workplace and school. The documentary's disavowal of race and ethnicity mimics the project of Canadian multiculturalism. That is to say, both attempt to represent diversity, but do so superficially. In both cases, these projects manage and contain diversity within acceptable limits.

Chuckie's mother, a Vietnamese Canadian immigrant and refugee, makes a brief screen appearance and is in fact identified by Findlay as a "Boat Person" but her history and the details about her refugee experiences remain un-discussed.⁷ Chuckie's refugee ties are crucial in understanding factors which may have led to the family residing in the Jane and Finch area and thus would have an important bearing on Chuckie's plight. However, the documentary avoids this investigation and opts to portray Chuckie as he is; a violent gangster toting guns and running drugs. This omission of race on both the CBC website and for the most part in the film is indicative of a neoliberal tendency to ignore race all together as a way of implicitly suggesting that race somehow does not matter. However, ignoring questions of race and ethnicity, histories of immigration, issues of labor and class segregation, the documentary's producers are able to offer an alternative explanation. Ultimately, the documentary argues that the Jane and Finch space itself appears to be the culprit for

claiming the lives of these young men.

The Jane and Finch area has been the subject of great discussion in terms of how to deal with the drugs and crime which the city and national media outlets continue to report on.⁸ The area's problems of gangs, drugs and violence have been addressed in a myriad of ways. Some lobbying groups have argued for the creation of more public facilities like basketball courts, playgrounds and community centers. While certainly these concerned groups have good intentions for the area, the social good of these projects remain to be seen. My concerns regarding these development projects are twofold. Firstly, the introduction of these spaces work to manage and control the youth populations in Jane and Finch by limiting recreation and social interaction to designated and controlled spaces. Instead of youth congregation on residential streets, which is feared by law enforcement, youths are encouraged to 'play' in designated areas. These areas impose physical boundaries, maintain operating hours and are likely to be under surveillance. This surveillance takes not only the form of electronic surveillance as is the case with closed circuit video cameras but the management of colored bodies into recreational compartments has a panoptical effect in that law enforcement's access to individuals becomes more efficient. Ironically, this control of space and colored bodies has a counter-intuitive effect of increasing gang violence as space or turf in essence becomes limited to designated areas.

Surveillance seems to be theme that operates in the lives of many Vietnamese Canadian youths. According to author Tan Phan, in his essay, *Life in School: Narratives of Resiliency among Vietnamese-Canadian Youths*, Phan reports that "[Vietnamese immigrants] told stories of being harassed, watched in school by the teachers, and monitored by the police while on the street or shopping in stores" (Phan. 2003: 562). One of Phan's respondents, a Vietnamese father, raises the issue of surveillance saying that he passed on feeling of paranoia to his children. The respondent tells Phan that during the Vietnam War, "You didn't know when we would be bombed.... Instinctually, when we heard it [the airplanes] then we quickly ran, hiding under the buildings, holes, bridges..." (Phan. 2003: 562). Phan continues, "[parents] taught their children the same survival tactics, but in a new environment... Vietnamese youths were learning how to read a complicated cultural road map and had no idea where the minefields were located."

Some of the scenes shot by Nguyen and Simms mimic a surveillance-like aesthetic. An example of this is a scene where Chuckie and his associates physically assault Freshy in an apartment complex courtyard at night. The scene which is uninterrupted by narration or cuts, appears grainy due to the scene's low-light conditions. In the

context of the footage's appropriation by the state, these scenes can be read as a form of surveillance. The surveillance in this context, as in the case of the public parks, is a voluntary form of surveillance. The surveyed are supported and encouraged to enact their own self-surveillance.

Despite the documentary's attempts at manufacturing authenticity, beyond the co-optation of footage and despite the documentary's reluctance to engage systemic issues, there are moments in the documentary *Chuckie* exhibits an active sense of agency and resolve to produce his own narrative. In a scene that appears to take place in Burnz's bedroom, *Chuckie* films Burnz lying on the bed.⁹ It is unclear whether *Chuckie* was temporarily given the video camera by Nguyen or Simms or whether this footage was from *Chuckie*'s personal video collection. Regardless, *Chuckie*'s unexpected role as filmmaker, behind the camera, creates a rather interesting reversal of perspective. As he films Burnz, *Chuckie* provides his own improvised voiceover dialogue. Mimicking the voice of a Hollywood trailer narrator, *Chuckie* offers a 30 second diversion from documentary's subject matter. He later takes the camera again in an unemployment office.¹⁰ *Chuckie* steals attention by playing with puppets in the office while narrating his own performance. While it can be assumed that the *Fifth Estate* editors likely used this moment as a comedic relief, the scene holds subversive potential. Author Nana Enstad, investigating the political subjectivities of women's labor at the turn of the 20th century in America writes, "when subordinate groups are denied a public voice, they maintain resistant subjectivities through "hidden transcripts," cultural practices and knowledge that are not visible to those in power" (Enstad, 1999:121). This possibly subversive act is a "creative use of limited resources" (Enstad, 1999:118) that we may read as an act of agency. *Chuckie*'s performance exercises both his subjectivity as a consumer and producer while simultaneously commanding the audience's attention and offering a glimpse into vibrant and energetic performer he is.

Chuckie's rap music is only briefly mentioned in the documentary. Although his music has not found mainstream success, he has attracted a following in the Jane and Finch area. Many of *Chuckie*'s song lyrics pertain to trouble with law enforcement, racism and the difficulties of living in the Jane and Finch neighborhood. However, despite this potentially rich site for critical analysis (and reporting), *Lost in the Struggle* does not give serious consideration to *Chuckie*'s voice as a rapper. The establishment often overlooks rap and hip hop as a viable site of history or narrative because it does not fit easily within the framework of what is considered to be formal knowledge production. Rap and Hip Hop's unconventional rhyming scheme

and organization structure along with complex and layered wordplay and cultural references makes it a difficult medium for mainstream producers to comprehend. The same lack of understanding may explain why *Lost in the Struggle* also fails to acknowledge that Nguyen and Simm run a website called www.jane-finch.com.

In 2004, Paul Nguyen founded a community website for artists and residents of the Jane and Finch neighborhood.¹¹ The site, which is primarily a place for users to upload their own content, offers a space for the community to produce and control their own representation. Nguyen's website's main goal is to "[give] local residents a voice to be heard" (Jane-Finch.com, 2011). Many of the hundreds of videos on the website are music videos while others are expositional videos by youths in the area sharing their thoughts and ideas about issues that concern them. Again, this would have been a very interesting site for inclusion in the documentary, however, it was also omitted by the CBC. The CBC's apprehension of including these grassroots voices in the documentary is in keeping with Henry Jenkins' writings on the nature of online/digital media productions. Jenkins writes, "Media consumers want to become media producers, while media producers want to maintain their traditional dominance over media content" (Jenkins, 2011). Jane-Finch.com does not fit easily within traditional modes of narrative and story. While TV documentaries stand alone, are not easily revisited, and fit into a standard run time, websites on the other hand are non-linear, dynamic, boundless and in the case of www.jane-finch.com, are not governed by economic interests. The open-source and fair use guidelines that shape the internet are additional aspects that make it difficult for entities like the CBC to incorporate into their organizational model.

Lost in the Struggle does not investigate the causes of the three young men's transgressions into crime. Instead the documentary only offers the space of Jane and Finch as the principle contributing factor for their lives of crime. Even if this was the producers' intentions, where is the discussion about gentrification, failed government project housing and lack of funding to suburban public schools? By offsetting the causes and placing blame primarily on a space or place, I argue that real concerns of racialized poverty, poor administrative systems, poor schooling systems and lack of critical services to immigrant and refugee families is what really gets *Lost in the Struggle*.

The Canadian government's policies on multiculturalism, to quote Shanti Fernando, are "[policies] with no enforcement or jurisdiction or concrete goals" (Fernando, 2007). Instead, government initiated and funded projects like Asian heritage month and Chinese New Year celebrations, to name a few, "...[may] be even more damaging in

terms of advocacy because “by embracing and managing multiculturalism [the state] has, in effect, co-opted political space available to minority groups for mobilization or resistance along ethnic and racial lines” (Fernando, 2007). This cooptation is central to *Lost in the Struggle*.

In *Respectably Queer*, Jane Ward writes about diversity culture specifically in the case of Queer Culture. She believes that Queerness faces co-optation by both corporations and popular culture to the point where Queerness has lost its power. Ward believes that in keeping with Queer theory, diversity in general should remain unusual and defiant as a way to resist dominant hegemonic power structure. She writes that society only seems to embrace diversity when it is “predicable, profitable, rational, or respectable, and yet...differences [are suppressed] when they are unpredictable, unprofessional, messy, or defiant” (Ward, 2008). The former kind of diversity is clearly illustrated in *Lost in the Struggle*, as the documentary neatly packages and contains the troubling lives of three young men. The documentary constructs and contains a region’s social/economical problems within a geographic space while neatly wrapping up life narratives into an exploitive documentary that refuses to address the difficult questions.

As a state media organization, the CBC perpetuates hegemonic modes of storytelling and knowledge production. With *Lost in the Struggle*, we see the various ways in which marginalized narratives may be co-opted, repackaged and even silenced. It is critical that these voices find a way to self-express their stories and at the same time maintain control over their mainstream exposure as well.

References

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Appendix

1



Vietnamese-Canadian Phong Nguyen a.k.a. Chuckie Akenz.



Bangladeshi-Canadian Albi Aziz a.k.a. Freshy.



Jamaican-Canadian Andrew Burnett a.k.a. Burnz.

2



Gillian Findlay, host of *Lost in the Struggle*.

- 3 In the hierarchy of producers; Executive, Assistant and Line Producers are typically more involved in a production.
 4 Instead, I would argue, this ploy is illustrative of a deeply rooted systemic racism that Shanti Fernando may explain as “keeping...racism alive in a democratic structure that should theoretically, reject it” (Fernando, 2007: 5).



Findlay appears in safe spaces: a school, an apartment and a coffee shop.



A disclaimer appearing within the diegetic space.



Chuckie's mom, a 'boat person'.

- 8 The Jane and Finch neighborhood is a racially diverse area with a population representing 80 ethno-cultural groups and 112 different languages.



Chuckie films Burns.

10



Chuckie plays with puppets at an unemployment office.

11



A screenshot of the Jane-Finch.com website.