

Reflection on my Documentary Film: “Mary Ann Shadd Revisited: Echoes from an Old House”

By

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A research essay submitted to Carleton University in fulfillment
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Abstract

This Master's research project comprises a documentary film and this reflection. The film is about a collection of letters to and from African American abolitionist Mary Ann Shadd between 1851 and 1863 – years that she lived in Canada. The letters were left in her house when she returned to the U.S.A. and eventually forgotten. They were accidentally rediscovered in 1974 by the then owners of the house, after it had been torn down, just before the rubble was burned. The letters were accepted by Archives of Ontario for preservation. The premise of my film is that, had the letters been found before the 1960s, they might not have been offered to, or accepted by the Archives. I argue that it was the emergence in the 1960s of ideas about Social History, and the Civil Rights Movement, that led the owners of the letters and the Archives to realize their importance.

Acknowledgements

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I wish to thank Adrian Harewood for taking the time to be the narrator for my film.

As well I would like to thank Teresa Fenton for the original artwork of Mary Ann Shadd, and Jenna Richards for her arrangement and performance of "Steal Away to Jesus."

I would also like to thank my voice actors: Rosalind Seale, Russell Smith, Maddie Stymiest, Greg Smith, John McDowell, and Helen Smith.

I would like to express my appreciation to Michael Ostroff for reviewing my film and providing advice, and to the technical team at the Carleton Media Production Centre for their advice and help.

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Finally, I would like to thank my partner, John McDowell for his many hours of support reviewing, helping with the camera work, and accompanying me on several long drives around Ontario.

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Reflection

My Master's research project, telling the story of Mary Ann Shadd's letters on film, presented challenges for me both as a historian and a filmmaker. Relatively new to both roles, I tried to be diligent in ensuring that my research was thorough and the messages well presented in a film medium. The research was complicated by the fact that the letters had two histories and that these histories lived in what I have come to understand as a complex borderland. The process of making the film also had several challenges. One involved shepherding a wide array of distinct components through this process and staying within tight time constraints. I was conscious of two specific concerns that are of particular importance to public history today: that of cultural appropriation in that I am a white person telling Black history; and wanting to balance my desire to challenge my audience while at the same time keeping them interested, emotionally engaged, and aesthetically pleased. Finally, I have some confessions to make, and hope to convince you that my interpretation of the rules is justified and, indeed, a necessary part of historical narrativity.

The Mary Ann Shadd letters collection, discovered in the torn-down house outside Chatham,¹ had two distinct histories. One was in the context of the writing and saving of the letters, and the other in the context of their rediscovery one hundred years later. So the letters have a nineteenth-century history of their making but also a twentieth-century history of their preservation. But both histories surfaced at times when Black culture was breaking through a barrier of obscurity into the broader public consciousness. The film transits both these timeframes.

¹ "Mary A. Shadd Fonds" (Toronto, Ontario, 1851-1889; collected 1974), Microfilm, F1409, Archives of Ontario, http://ao.minisisinc.com/scripts/mwimain.dll/970/1/1/1081?RECORD&DATABASE=DESCRIPTION_WEB_INT.

Mary Ann Shadd wrote, received, and saved her letters during the 1850s and 1860s, at the time that the Underground Railroad was active and there was large-scale emigration of Blacks from the U.S.A. into what was then called “Canada West” but which most residents still referred to as “Upper Canada.” These activities meant that the presence of a visible Black community in central Canada emerged in the wider, mainly white, Canadian consciousness about the then present and future of the Province. And though the letters were written because of, and about, these nineteenth-century activities and communities, it is unclear whether the letters were saved by Shadd as a matter of habit, or because of their significance in relation to this historic moment.

In the second instance, the letters were rediscovered in 1974, when the Civil Rights Movement was again elevating Black culture within the public consciousness. While their discovery was accidental, the decision to offer the letters to the Archives of Ontario may have been related to these historic events – something I discuss later in this paper. And though Shadd’s saving of her letters in the 1850s and 1860s, and their rediscovery in 1974, both took place in Canada, both also occurred against a backdrop of prominent related activity in the U.S.A. The cross-jurisdictional, bi-national placement of this narrative presented me with both challenges and opportunities.

Over the years of conducting research on Black history in Canada, I struggled with the evolution of the borders and jurisdictions within which I found this narrative operating. There are several complexities. First there is the complication of the geographic name changes, such as Upper Canada to Canada West, and British North America to Canada. But the more historically significant jurisdictional line is the Canada/U.S.A. border and the significant

implications for Black history that this border has meant. I have come to discover more recently that this complicated zone, and the historiography associated with it, has a formally named approach, and that is the “Borderlands” approach.

Historians Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, define Borderlands histories as “the places [that Master American narratives] come unraveled. They are ambiguous and often unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the endpoints of empire are also forks in the road.”² Furthermore, they argue that the “central insight [of Borderlands] history pivoted not only on a succession of state-centred polities but also on other turning points anchored in vast stretches of America where the visions of empires and nations often foundered and the future was far from certain.”³ Historian of Black history in Canada, Karolyn Smardz Frost, describes the Borderlands approach as an examination of

... communities of interest in liminal districts where overlapping economic, environmental, climatic, and other factors mean that people living on opposite sides of a boundary... often have more in common with each other than they do not. Despite differing political affiliations, governance, and legal systems, people in such districts share cultural, familial, business, and other ties distinct from those of their respective countrymen residing elsewhere.⁴

In keeping with this comparative approach, it is interesting to see how an “imaginary,” human-constructed line, such as the Canada/U.S.A. border, could have such a significant impact on the way that history unfolded for thousands of Black refugees. This history was notably affected by the evolving state of the law, both national and state/provincial, on either side of the border,

² Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 1, 2011): 338, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.carleton.ca/stable/41509959>.

³ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁴ Karolyn Smardz Frost, “African American and African Canadian Transnationalism along the Detroit River Borderland: The Example of Madison J. Lightfoot,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 79, doi:10.5406/jamerethnhist.32.2.0078.

resulting in both African Americans and African Canadians deciding to uproot their lives and to move – sometimes escaping – across this border. Until recently, much of the Canadian side of this history has been unknown to the public. Some would say it was intentionally buried.

One aspect of my research on which I spent considerable time concerned the mid-twentieth-century lacuna in the Canadian record of Black history. Dr. Smardz Frost cautioned me on the idea of *intentionality* in the presumed burial of Black history.⁵ The idea of the active *burial* of Black history was something that had surprised me when I first read about it in the work of another historian of Black history in Canada, Afua Cooper. In her book about eighteenth-century Black slavery in Canada, Cooper says:

Canadian history, insofar as its Black history is concerned, is a drama punctuated with disappearing acts. The erasure of Black people and their history in the examples of the Priceville Cemetery and Africville is consistent with the general behaviour of the official chroniclers of the country's past. Black history is treated as a marginal subject. In truth, it has been bulldozed and ploughed over, slavery in particular.⁶

It seems clear from these remarks that, for Cooper, there was, indeed, an intentional burial of Black history in Canada.

My own primary source research supports Dr. Cooper's position regarding the existence of an archival gap in Canadian Black historical documentation, and my research points specifically to the mid twentieth century. This can be seen in the table below summarizing the collection or creation of materials relating to Black history in four key institutions.

⁵ Dr. Smardz Frost participated as an on camera interviewee for the film but I was unable, in the end, to use her interview in the film. Her input was, nevertheless, valuable to me.

⁶ Afua Cooper, *Hanging Of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto: Harper Perennial Canada, 2006), 7.

Table 1 - Institutional Recognition of Black History (by Decade)

| | 1900s | 1910s | 1920s | 1930s | 1940s | 1950s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s | 2010s |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Library & Archives Canada (fonds) | | 2 | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | |
| Archives of Ontario (fonds) | | | | | * | * | * | 1 | | 4 | 4 | 2 |
| Ontario Heritage Trust (plaques) | | | | | | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 8 | 2 |
| Carleton Library (books) | 2 | 2 | | | | | 2 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 14 | 6 |
| Total | 2 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 12 | 15 | 28 | 10 |

* provincial records, such as Ministry of Education school populations, but not explicitly collected for the Black history content.

Sources:

Government of Canada (Ottawa, ON, 1900-2015), Library and Archives Canada, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/lac-bac/search/arch>.

Government of Ontario (Toronto, ON, 1900-2015), Archives of Ontario, http://ao.minisinc.com/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/ARCH_LISTINGS?DIRECTSEARCH.

Beth-Anne Mendes, Ontario Heritage Trust, Personal Correspondence, "RE: Question about Ontario's Heritage Plaques," n.d. Carleton University, "MacOdrum Library Catalogue," Advanced Search, 1900-2015, <http://catalogue.library.carleton.ca/search/X>.

My film posits that there are several reasons why this mid-twentieth-century gap could have occurred. This was a period before the emergence of academic social history and women's history when the history of ordinary people was not seen as important. Senior Archivist at Ontario Archives, Adam Birrell, points out in my film that it was also a time when ordinary people may have had less of a tendency to offer their papers to the archives, and possibly also less of a tendency to save their papers. As well, historian Adrienne Shadd points out in the film that many people in the Black community were unable to write, and therefore were not able to document their own histories. Certainly, when photography and portraiture first emerged in the mid nineteenth century, the cost of obtaining a photographic portrait would have been a factor working against poor people. Another reason for the gap in the archive could be that other topics were occupying the interest of the public, such as the Great

Depression, World War II, and worries about the spread of Communism.⁷ Birrell points out that archival choices have to be made and archivists have to try to anticipate what will interest future generations.⁸

A further reason for the gap could relate to fear. Might not the Black community hold back their archival contributions for fear that they would not be well-received? Anthropologist and political science professor James C. Scott talks about the power dynamic between those with power versus those without it. He says that this power dynamic leads to the socially-powerless having separate narratives for public and private use: narratives that he refers to as “public” and “hidden transcripts.” This idea is evident when he says “that the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript.”⁹ Do people hold back from offering their archival papers until they feel that they can safely allow this personal material into the public domain, or what Scott calls the “official culture”? Might it also be easier, and less personally emotionally risky, to offer up the archival materials of someone within the community who has already been acknowledged in a positive light, such as Mary Ann Shadd?

However, this reasoning does not explain why Black history appears to have been clearly omitted from the mid-century histories written about Canada, and taught to Canadian students. One example of this omission is a history text used for grade-13 history studies

⁷ I would suggest that an explanation as to why the documentation in the early twentieth century may have risen to public view was due to a lingering Canadian interest in the curtailing of slavery in the U.S.A. after Emancipation, and possibly a macabre interest in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan activity in the late nineteenth century. As well, this documentation may have followed the lives of the aging community of former slaves and their offspring as they negotiated life in freedom in North America during American post-Civil War Reconstruction and the Jim Crow laws of the early twentieth century.

⁸ Allison M. Smith, *Mary Ann Shadd Revisited: Echoes from an Old House*, Prores, Documentary Film, (2015).

⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 5.

published in 1970 that makes virtually no mention of any aspect of Black history in Canada. While the classroom text refers to women's rights, indigenous people, immigrants, refugees and settlers, it makes only one fleeting mention of Black history in a passing reference to "Negro" Loyalists.¹⁰ And while this omission could indeed be accidental, it nevertheless is quite a significant and hurtful flaw. Despite the fact that a debate continues among academics in Canada regarding the intentionality of the burial of Black history in Canada, I believe that my own research justifies my including the reality of this burial in my film, and especially the burial of Black history before the 1960s.

Anthropologist Michel Rolph Trouillot identifies the points in the historical process at which these gaps and omissions occur, saying "[s]ilences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)."¹¹ In the case of Mary Ann Shadd's letters, and my historical narrative, I believe we can see each of these four. First, Shadd's letters entered the historical process when she wrote or received and then saved the letters. Second – and this was the most crucial element of my film – was the moment when the letters were accidentally found in the pile of rubble by Maxine Robbins, were recognized by her and her extended family as important, were submitted to the Archives of Ontario, and were accepted and preserved by this state institution. The third moment occurred when historians Jim Bearden and Linda Jean Butler recognized the

¹⁰ H. H. Herstein, *Challenge and Survival: The History of Canada*, First Edition 2nd Printing edition (Scarborough, Ont: Prentice Hall of Canada Ltd, 1970), 115.

¹¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

significance of the letters and came to the Robbins' house to study them, in preparation for writing their book telling Shadd's story.¹² The fourth and final "retrospective" moment includes my film, although others, such as historian Jane Rhodes, have written about Shadd's letters.¹³ But I like to think that my film and this reflection add to the fourth moment in theorizing the role of the letters and "making *history* in the final instance."

Storytelling, Memory and Appropriation

One aspect of filmmaking that occupied my thoughts consistently through the entire project revolved around my own qualifications, as a white person, to take on a Black history project. Despite having convinced myself on other occasions that this should not be an issue, I continued to have concerns about how others might perceive me and my role in making this Black history film. Anthropologist Shelley Ruth Butler examines the failings of the white curator, cultural anthropologist Jeanne Cannizzo, of the now infamous Toronto exhibit *Into the Heart of Africa*. She argues that a museum exhibit such as this one should have been able to succeed despite the fact that it presented challenging material and used irony, since these methods had been used successfully in other similar exhibits. Butler finds that Cannizzo's failure seemed to stem from the fact that she did not involve the African community, and inserted ironic statements that sounded racist to exhibit visitors. In the end, Cannizzo's racial whiteness was attributed by some very vocal visitors as the cause of the unacceptability of the exhibit.¹⁴

¹² Jim Bearden and Linda Jean Butler, *Shadd: The Life and Times of Mary Shadd Cary* (Toronto, ON: NC Press, 1977).

¹³ Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Shelley Ruth Butler, *Contested Representations: Revisiting Into the Heart of Africa* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 8–9, 89–91, 105–8, 110–2.

This raises the question: would Cannizzo have been a good fit, automatically, then, if she had been an African Canadian? What if she had been a white South African? To say that she did not qualify because she was not Black is unfounded. By that logic, for someone to qualify to curate an exhibit, she or he would need to be precisely like the people represented in that exhibit, as well as be a qualified curator. To curate *Into the Heart of Africa*, he or she would need to have been a Black South African who lived through the late-nineteenth-century colonial period, and also a cultural anthropologist with training as a curator for late-twentieth-century audiences. Since the time constraints alone of this set of requirements make finding such a person impossible, our expectations must be moderated. A qualified curator would ideally meet some, but not all of these requirements.

Despite my logic attempting to eliminate race as a qualifying factor, in Toronto the community nevertheless believed that race was a factor in the case of the Cannizzo exhibit. Accordingly, I felt it was important that my film involve as much as possible, Black participants. To that end, I chose African Canadians for four out of five of my on-camera interviews, my narrator, and my Mary Ann Shadd voice actor. I also sent my Concept Proposal to all of the interviewees so that they could comment on my ideas.

Butler also discusses Cannizzo's interpretations of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's notion of "culture as text." Butler describes Cannizzo's desire to not treat the past as necessarily "idealized...pastoral and harmonious" but rather to consider "intellectual and ethical issues" and "potentially 'subversive'" methods.¹⁵ It seems that Cannizzo wanted to problematize exhibits in the same way that Geertz suggested problematizing culture as text.

¹⁵ Ibid., 23–4.

While this approach might be something that could be interesting in academia, it might be less well tolerated by the general public. And while I agree that historians should strive to present some level of intellectual challenge to their publics, we also walk the fine line between challenging the visitor and talking over their heads. The danger lies in boring (and thus losing) the visitor with either too much or too little of this challenge. For the purposes of my film, I chose to start and end with the classic story of Mary Ann Shadd's life, and to deepen the analysis by discussing the place of Shadd's letters in the historiography of archival collection.

This film project also had many logistical challenges. For one thing, it had a lot of disconnected parts, and keeping them all moving forward was a bit of a juggling act. Secondly, many of these disconnected parts were, in fact, people and each had his or her own interests, worries and busy schedule. Working within each person's needs, while keeping people excited about the project was a constant consideration.

Both of these project management challenges had to be set aside, however, when I wanted to get into the historical-theoretical considerations of the project. I did not want technical issues to overtake the real messages – the ones that make people think - and that require a different *hat* to be worn, with a different skill set and a different perspective. The project management focus is on pushing ahead, while the research focus is on slowing the progress down and stopping to mull ideas over and think reflexively.

On top of both the project management and the research, there was yet another hat to wear: that of the artist. I wanted this film to be beautiful and stirring. I wanted it to bring tears to the viewer's eyes – the big lump in the throat – and to make the viewer feel an emotional tug. This was a considerable challenge given the subject of the archival gap.

Finally – and I have left this until the last – I want, to reveal the visual deceptions I took in making the film. First, there is the deception concerning the house. The old house. The new house. The bulldozed house. Not one is the real house. There are no images (yet to be found) of Mary Ann Shadd’s actual house. Second, there are the people in front of the old house. None of these people is Shadd and they are probably not even her relatives. Third, there is the drawing of Shadd. Through this film, she gets a new face, which may live on in the audience’s mind forever. And while the drawing is based on her younger photograph and used a photograph of her father and sister for influences, the drawing is no more than an interpretation of the way she may have looked in her forties. Professor of history and film Robert A. Rosenstone says of the historical documentary, “it sometimes uses images that are proximate rather than literal realities (a landscape today for the way it looked at some time in the past, generic images of soldiers for specific images), occasionally dramatizes scenes, and regularly structures material into the conventions of drama.”¹⁶ Therefore, we can conclude that the level of deception in my film is, in fact, understood to be a part of the genre.

So through my film Shadd gets a new face. And as it turns out, she gets a new house too. Indeed, she gets three new houses. But I’m comforted to think that historical documentary filmmaking, as a method of history telling, is not alone in the use of creative interpretation to make a point. In fact, written historical narrative is as subject to this sort of manipulation as filmmaking. Filmmaker’s manipulations are visual. Writers’ manipulations lie in the selection, emphasis or omission of examples, or words. But a filmmaker might also shape the narrative in the writing of the script, in the selection of archival letters, or the selection of

¹⁶ Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/film on History* (Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson, 2006), 80.

interview clips – although I submit that I did not do this – at least not consciously. Rosenstone notes that the public tends to be aware that dramatic historical film may be historically untrustworthy, but that this same public tends to mistakenly trust in the accuracy of the historical documentary film. But he cautions that “[e]ven if wholly made from actuality footage or other traces of the world, it is never a neutral ‘history lesson’, but a cunning work that must be as carefully interpreted by the viewer as the dramatic film.”¹⁷

The issue of creative representations and truths, and of fiction and reality, go beyond filmmaking, though, to the telling of history in any format. In 1987 historical theorist Hayden White said that, as historians, we prove that a proposed historical reality is true by constructing a narrative that demonstrates the feasibility of our proposal. He argues that what we claim to be “true” can be proven to be connected to what is considered “reality” by demonstrating that the proposed reality seems to make sense and therefore seems to be true. And this demonstration of proof is done by offering a narrative story - in my case as a film - that shows how a proposed reality appears reasonable, and therefore must (or at least could) be true.¹⁸

Making this film presented me with significant challenges and also offered a chance to reach a wider audience than a traditional Master’s thesis would do. The prospect of a broader audience raised multiple concerns: that the film be historically accurate, technically well executed, and visually impressive. But this particular film had the added complexity of my being white and telling a part of Black history. It also added the complication of examining an archival lacuna whose origins are not well understood and are still debated within academia.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80–1.

¹⁸ Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 5–6.

Despite these concerns I offer my best efforts within this challenging and fraught academic and cultural environment.

These are the final words of my Master's degree, and possibly the final academic words I will write. Nevertheless I want to give most of my final words to Australian historian and anthropologist Greg Denning. He said that in historical performance we add to the total thought but we also, in effect, plagiarize:

We tell our stories, but there is never any closure to them. There is always another sentence to be added to the conversation that we have joined. There is always another slant on the story that we have just told. We live by our creativity and originality. That's our pledge: "This work is mine." But we couldn't, if we tried, plumb the depths of our own intellectual and cultural plagiarism. Plato, Jesus Christ, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and so many others are in our minds somewhere.¹⁹

I do not think that I am in danger of plagiarizing Jesus, since I am not aware of anything remaining that he actually wrote himself. But if Denning is right about the rest, maybe these will not, after all, be my final sentences. To paraphrase his words, there is always another film interpretation to be added to the conversation that I have joined.

¹⁹ Greg Denning, "Performing on the Beaches of the Mind: An Essay," *History and Theory* 41, no. 1 (February 2002): 6, http://resolver.scholarsportal.info/resolve/00182656/v41i0001/1_potbotmae.xml.

Appendix A – Ethics Approval Form



Carleton University Research Office
Research Ethics Board
1325 Dunton Tower
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6 Canada
Tel: 613-520-2517
ethics@carleton.ca

Ethics Clearance Form – New Clearance

This is to certify that the Carleton University Research Ethics Board has examined the application for ethical clearance. The REB found the research project to meet appropriate ethical standards as outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human, 2nd edition*, and the *Carleton University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research*.

Date of Clearance: August 20, 2014

Researcher: Allison M. Smith (Student Research: Master's Student)

Department: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences\History (Department of)

University: Carleton University

Research Supervisor (if applicable): Prof. James D Miller and John C. Walsh (Research Supervisor)

Project Number: 101657

Alternate File Number (if applicable):

Project Title: Historical documentary film about the letters of Mary Ann Shadd Cray

Clearance Expires: May 31, 2015

All researchers are governed by the following conditions:

Annual Status Report: You are required to submit an Annual Status Report to either renew clearance or close the file. Failure to submit the Annual Status Report will result in the immediate suspension of the project. Funded projects will have accounts suspended until the report is submitted and approved.

Changes to the project: Any changes to the project must be submitted to the Carleton University Research Ethics Board for approval. All changes must be approved prior to the continuance of the research.

Adverse events: Should a participant suffer adversely from their participation in the project you are required to report the matter to the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. You must submit a written record of the event and indicate what steps you have taken to resolve the situation.

Suspension or termination of clearance: Failure to conduct the research in accordance with the principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 2nd edition* and the *Carleton University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research* may result in the suspension or termination of the research project.



Andy Adler
Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board



Louise Heslop
Vice-Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board

Appendix B – Attached Disk Containing Documentary Film

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