

THE DISPLACED VIEW

MIDI ONODERA

52 min., 1988

DEC, Toronto

TWO LIES

PAM TOM

25 min., 1989

Women Make Movies, New York

FAMILY GATHERING

LISE YASUI

30 min., 1988

New Day Films

by Haruko Okano

I am a *Sansei* (third generation) Japanese Canadian. The Japanese/Chinese films *The Displaced View*, *Two Lies* and *Family Gathering* speak of much of what I have had to deal with: the loss of language and culture, the sense of shame, fear and low self-esteem. My own child-

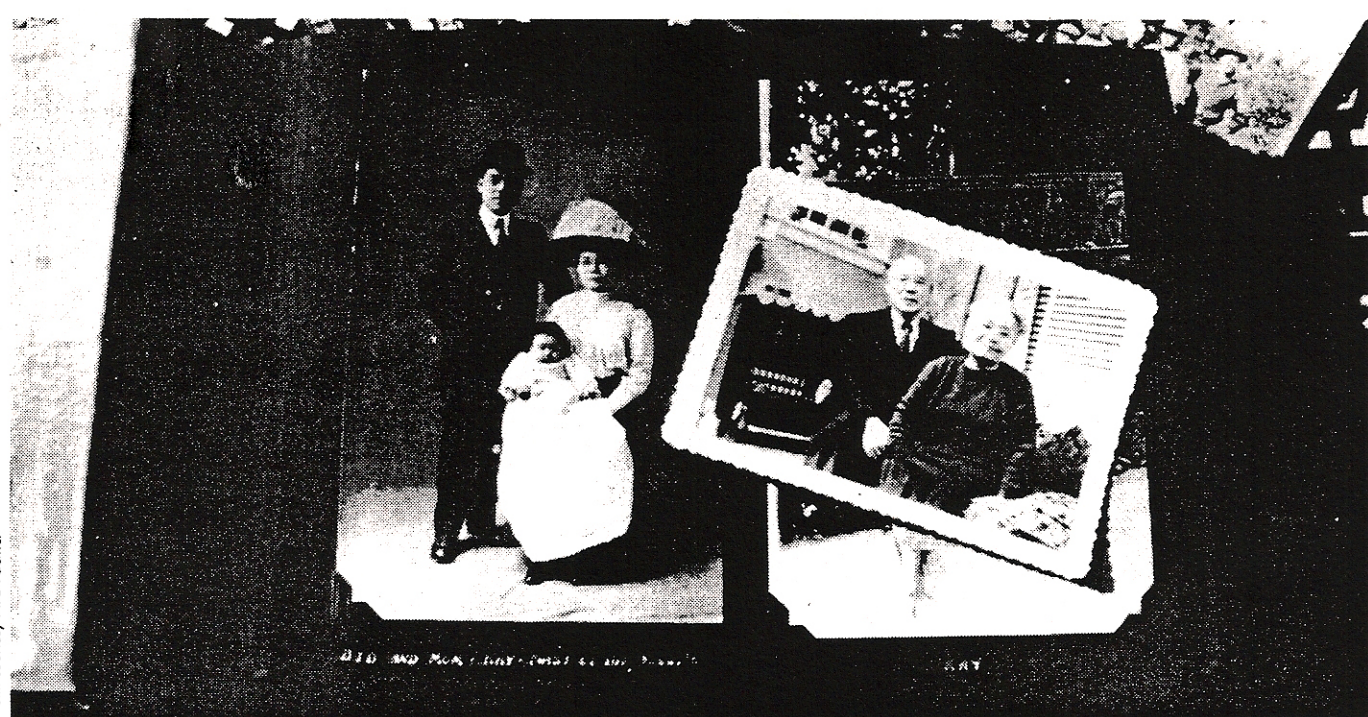
hood experience was similar to that portrayed in Pam Tom's film *Two Lies*. By age nine, I had already been made aware that my physical differences were unacceptable. I started to save part of my 50-cent allowance towards an eye operation. I remember being too embarrassed to tell anyone about wanting the operation, but I felt it was better to have the operation than to be excluded for being unacceptably different. Over the years, I have come to understand that my response was a reaction to racism, created by my need to be accepted, especially by white males. The message was that it was the slant of my eyes, the colour of my skin and my hair that blocked my way to becoming one of them.

Even at that early age, I understood, on some level, that the "white male" symbolized acceptance into the dominant culture. The planned eye operation was my effort to become a "Suzy Wong"—the acceptably exotic and appealing Anglicized Asian female. Even now, in my mid 40s, I still feel uncomfortable when I see a photo of myself that emphasizes the slant of my eyes.

I wasn't aware of the internment and evacuation of my people until I was in my early 30s. My family never spoke of it. I remember as a child, hearing the family talking about going to Japan for a "vac-



Still from *The Displaced View* by Midi Onodera.



Still from *Family Gathering* by Lise Yasui.

tion." Now I realize that they may have been discussing forced repatriation to Japan. When I asked my aunt about internment her reply was, "It was good for us. Look, we are better off than we ever were." That seems to be a typical *Issei* and *Nisei* response. It may have been too much for them emotionally to deal with.

As in the films *The Displaced View* and *Family Gathering*, I too am trying to understand the attitude couched in the *Issei* and *Nisei* expression "*Shigata ga nai*" because it expresses so much of the way they seem to approach that part of our history. I am amazed by the lack of anger or bitterness on the part of the first two generations. It stands in contrast to my own anger, and, in trying to come to terms with the differences in our attitudes and approaches to the injustices we have suffered in in this country, I am frustrated. One might believe that they were protecting us by not sharing their feelings with us or telling us what was happening. Perhaps this was appropriate when we were children, but it remained that way even when we were old enough to understand, and needed to understand.

Because of the oppressive nature of racism I lost my first language and my first culture, both important to my iden-

tity and self-esteem. The pressure of racism was internalized in my family structure, and in myself—there remained no safe place free from its effects.

Through the films of Onodera and Yasui I can see the gentle, persistent strength of the elders, and also the hostility they had to endure in order to stay in this country. The fact that not all of them could go on, even after the apparent post-war changes, is tragically brought home by the suicide of Yasui's grandfather. That it took her father 28 years to be able to tell her about her grandfather's death indicates that their generation is still dealing with the internment in much the same way—with silence.

In seeing familiar faces among the drummers in *The Displaced View*, I felt my first surge of genuine pride in the fact that I am a Japanese Canadian. *Family Gathering* shattered an old myth that I was raised on. That myth was, "If you just try harder, work harder, be nicer and do all the right things better, you will be accepted into society with respect as a valued, contributing member."

In the film, the racist people in the grandfather's small community wiped out all he had been and all he had done to enhance their town. They reduced him in

their hearts and minds to a traitor—something he had never even considered. There was nothing he could say or do to change that belief. How does one grapple with such a sentence passed on you despite your innocence? Much of what he believed about his new country had been crushed.

Canada and the U.S.A. broke trust with us, especially the *Issei*—they shattered a dream to show us the illusion of democracy. As a member of a visible minority, I am proud that these works show Japanese Canadians with all their strengths, as humans who have survived despite the odds. It is exciting and inspiring to see Onodera and Yasui go back into their own histories in an effort to understand themselves and their families.

It validates what I have felt a need to do for years. I can't speak the language of my elders and I don't understand their customs or attitudes. I have been assimilated by the dominant culture enough to have become a stranger in my own family but not enough to blend in with white society. Like these women, I am trying to find the link between myself and the older generations. I am trying to answer my own questions about who I am and what shaped me. ■