Domaine public

Un projet de commande d'œuvres par SAW Video

Public Domain A video commissioning project by SAW Video

Age 20 DIAGNOSTIC SORTIE Dégénés. men-: 15-5-98 tale hisie pulm.

Finding a story for *Public Domain* was not the problem. Even while reading the call for submissions, I knew my *Public Domain* movie would reveal the story of my greatgreat-aunt Kate Tubridy—an Irish immigrant from County Claire who lived in a Montreal insane asylum from the time she was twenty until her death in 1898, ten years later. The creative challenge lay in bringing this story alive on screen. I pondered this for many months before travelling from Victoria to Library and Archives Canada (LAC) in Ottawa. How was I going to bring a life from beyond the pale, lost in the darkness of history, and make it visible again? From the beginning, my unclear quest blurrily mirrored my subject.

The first moving-image machine, the zoopraxiscope (aka The Wheel of Life), was patented in the United States in 1867—the year of Kate's birth and exactly a century before mine. It was, of course, also the year of Canada's Confederation, whose centennial Expo '67 celebrated. The oldest movie in LAC's holdings was made in 1890, the same year of the great fire at the Saint-Jean-de-Dieu Insane Asylum in the East End of Montreal where Kate was an inmate. By then, she had been institutionalised for two years. The fire destroyed nearly all of her medical records. While I was able to look

at her admittance information and the record of her death, the actual day-to-day interactions with her doctors remain a mystery, as does the exact cause of her committal. A type-written index card from the Saint-Jean-de-Dieu archives indicates her diagnosis upon entry was "mental degeneration." Such a broad, vague diagnosis was generally used to describe older inmates with dementia. Giving this diagnosis to a young woman was highly unusual, and likely reflected a tendency to use psychiatric commitment as a form of social control—a way of prescribing acceptable behaviour according to "normal" race, class, and gender expectations.

Cinema has been described by some as a kind of colonising machine. Joyce Nelson's history of the National Film Board of Canada, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend* (1988), revisits Canada's first cinematic mythmaker— John Grierson—and asks how the hand of imperialism may have influenced the crafting of our earliest nationalist images. Nelson uncovers the long shadows of empire all over our homegrown screens. I similarly found that my job trolling the oldest holdings at LAC was an exercise in following and decoding such colonialist traces. Not surprisingly, the first film in the LAC collection captures the regal erection

of a statue of an English nobleman amongst a gathering of top-hatted gentry in Quebec City in 1890.

So perhaps not by accident, all the films I re-purposed for Beyond the Pale reflect or refract a colonising lens. Indeed, many lengthier dramatic titles in LAC's early collection of moving images aren't even Canadian at all—they're copies of films like The Colleen Bawn, which recounts an Irish folk story, and was shot entirely in the Republic of Ireland in 1911. A Woman's Way: Romance in the North Woods (1908) was at least shot in Canada. Featuring a randy French Canadian lumberjack, it was a first for Canadian content and domestic production, although the renowned American filmmaker D. W. Griffith directed it.

The most striking screen gem I found while combing the archives was undoubtedly *The End of the Road* (1919). While the film seemed distinctly Canadian, it was actually produced in the United States. Copies made their way to Canada and were eventually translated into French. It ultimately became a key tool in a successful national public education campaign, organised by the National Council for Combating Venereal Disease, which ran from sometime during WWI until 1932. In 1917, twenty-six percent of patients at the Montreal General Hospital were infected with syphilis. *The End of the Road* is a remarkable, albeit melodramatic film, but I'm most fascinated by what I now call its "one great mystery." The film's female protagonists visit an asylum

toward the movie's climax. There, they see the ravages of syphilis first hand. A number of the women in the asylum have locomotor ataxia and granulomic deformities caused by syphilis.

When I first screened a copy of *The End of the Road*, I was overjoyed to find images from 1919 depicting a women's asylum. Given the dominance of Royal visits, political pomp, and parades in the LAC catalogue, I didn't expect the archive to hold footage that would bring my story alive. I certainly didn't expect to find such rich footage, corresponding so closely with Kate's living conditions of just a few decades earlier.

The End of the Road was written by a woman, a sociologist named Katherine Bement Davis. It stars Winnipeg-born Claire Adams and was shot at the scenic Rockefeller Estate in Pocantico Hills, New York. The US Army produced it, but there is no mention of the location of the asylum sequence. The longer I worked with the images, though, the more my directorial eye began to spot stylistic peculiarities in how the extras looked and behaved. I began to wonder, was this a real asylum? Were these women actual patients suffering from syphilis? Were their wounds real? After researching this obscure, orphaned film as much as possible, I now believe they were real patients. You can screen the sequence on my Vimeo site and decide for yourself.²

And so, the many tendrils of colonisation fused in my experimental biography, Beyond the Pale—an idiom that is itself fully descended from Britain's imperial past. The Pale was the boundary of Dublin set out by the Statute of Kilkenny in 1366. It was part of the British Dominion, and those outside of it—the native Irish—were considered barbaric and degenerate. So I discovered that my greatgreat-Aunt was both literally and figuratively beyond the pale. When I screened and re-screened The End of the Road, I saw kindred spirits in the unknown and unrecognised, damaged women of the asylum. At that time, wayward women, prostitutes, fallen women and insane women were seen as inconsequential, their privacy wasn't an issue of concern to anyone, and they had lost any vestige of cultural privilege they may have had prior to being committed. This was undoubtedly the case with my great-great-aunt Kate. In the end, I couldn't use all the footage I'd thought I would. I felt morally conflicted about it. I edited and cropped it, trying in vain to safeguard the women and their privacy.

Images of Expo '67's American Pavilion feature prominently in *Beyond the Pale*. What's the connection? I was born in 1967 in Montreal. Expo was all the rage. Oddly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the American Pavilion—a geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller—became a key icon of that year's World's Fair. I remember when the exterior shell of the Pavilion burned in 1976. I was nine. I still recall the fiery image on the cover of the *Montreal Gazette*. All that remained was its eerily beautiful frame, which has been

re-purposed into an environmental museum called the Biosphere. I recently learned that, during WWII, a POW camp was located on this site. Italians, Austrians, Germans, and a host of other Europeans¹ were all interned there, the future site of one of Canada's biggest parties. Empire and colonisation, enemy and native, citizen and degenerate, inmate and neighbour: all of them reflecting each other, casting their shadows beyond the pale.

- 1 See Wendy Oberlander, Nothing To Be Written Here, 1995, 47mins, Video Out Distribution.
- http://www.vimeo.com/user1941862

Beyond the Pale MAUREEN BRADLEY 16:00

How do you recreate an un-documented past? How do you define a life?

My mother spent many years immersed in genealogical research, but I never took much interest because I was troubled by the way official history often reduces a person's life to a few cursory lines in musty old books. But then she found something that grabbed my attention—an outlaw ancestor with a mysterious past.

Beyond the Pale imagines the life and death of my great-great-aunt Kate Tubridy. We never knew she existed until my mom found her death certificate from the Saint-Jean-de-Dieu Insane Asylum in Longue-Pointe, Quebec, near Montreal. She was born in County Clare, Ireland, in the 1860s and died at Longue-Pointe in the late 1890s. What happened in between?

Using films and photos from the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, I posit a number of possible fictions—probable paths that Kate might have taken before living out the final third of her life in the asylum. At the time of printing, I still have not been able to track down the missing judicial records that explain her committal. So I'm left to invent the rest.

The archival research process became an invisible character in this video, as I began to dig deeper and deeper into histories that had previously never caught my imagination. After perusing the film holdings at Library and Archives Canada, I picked up the clues in this cold case and found new hints about Kate's life and death in various Quebec archives. While surveying the oldest films in the LAC collection, I was particularly curious about the depiction of women in pre-Hollywood moving images. I sought out unusual representations of women to animate the different paths my protagonist might have followed.

Using a social-constructionist lens, Beyond the Pale suggests that identity and experience are always in process—we weave stories and fictions to make sense of unstable terrain: memory, history, and truth.

Teacher, curator and artist, Maureen Bradley has produced thirty-two short films and videos that have screened at festivals and galleries around the globe. Retrospectives of Maureen's work have been programmed in Ottawa, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver, and two of her tapes screened at MOMA (New York). She works in multiple styles and forms, including drama, documentary, experimental, and online. Bradley attended the Women in the Director's Chair Workshop at The Banff Centre for the Arts in 2002. She is the president of CineVic Society of Independent Filmmakers and has been involved in artist-run culture in Canada for almost twenty years through Image et Nation, Out On Screen, Video In Studios, Saskatchewan Filmpool, and IMAA.