Carving Time

Watching Joynt and Singh's The *Nest* Amidst the Labours of Women's Love and Survival

BY REBECCA YOSHIZAWA
Kwantlan Polytechnic University

Quite honestly, I am sure I missed something important. I watched *The Nest* (2025, dir. Chase Joynt and Julietta Singh) in bits of moments I had between—and sometimes at the same time as I was undertaking—the innumerable tasks of labour and love that comprise women's work. My kids' school had requested that all the children bring in a carved pumpkin for Halloween, so as I carved the spooky face my son had sketched upon the orange gourd in sharpie marker, I pondered the first 11 minutes of the documentary I had at that point been able to watch. I found a little peace and feeling of forgiveness in reflecting on the scene where Singh's daughter Isadora interviews Singh—the film's co-director, co-writer, narrator, and central figure—about her fears and feelings toward Singh's aging mother, Christine. This loving, intergenerational "sharing of authority" (see for instance Frisch) between mother and child, whom Singh describes elsewhere as "magical" (*Unthinking Mastery* xi) is emblematic of connections between kin depicted throughout the documentary. I have to believe that my shortcomings in being able to dedicate all my energies to the film would be forgiven by its creators, knowing that one of its many theses is that women's contributions are underacknowledged and undervalued historically and contemporarily, not only due to sexism but also to its intersections with racism, classism, colonialism, and ablism. Patriarchy relies upon it: it is easy to add more work to work that is made invisible. As a woman, I am very, very busy. My fragmented viewing was magnitudes smaller than, but still an example of, women's strategies for surviving, providing, and thriving amidst the oppressive social structures that we learn about in the documentary. And my piecemeal viewing practice paired nicely with the film's praxis of weaving stories from collected fragments and producing, as it were, *a*

Fig. 1 | Promotional Poster for NFB's *The Nest*, 2025

nest: a complex home made from bits and bobs and from which we grow, depart, and return.

The press kit describes that "at the end of her mother's life, decolonial writer Julietta Singh returns to say goodbye to her childhood home," a Victorian mansion in Winnipeg affectionately nicknamed "the nest." In the film, Christine invites us to explore the home's structure as a metaphor for its history: "in stripping off each room, a piece at a time, I was able to dig out a little bit more Canadian history and trace it back." Learning about her childhood home through the reflections of her mother, Singh "began to wonder who else had been here, a question that drove [her] toward... unexpected connections" of the home's former inhabitants and their ties to local, Canadian, and transnational histories. Where men's stories emerged with little effort, women's stories required ghost hunting of their absent-presences. Singh found "140 years of forgotten matriarchs and political histories she never knew." We learn from the film that Metis, Deaf, Japanese, South Asian, and Indigenous women's political histories are tied to the house.

For instance, "there in the margins of the archive was Annie Bannatyne... [who had] built my mother's home" in the 19th century. Annie Bannatyne was a prominent Red River Metis woman whose philanthropic works included establishing the Winnipeg General Hospital, but she is also known for publicly "horsewhipping" a politician who'd had a racist and derogatory letter published nationally in newspapers. We meet her living kin who described how knowledge of her was hidden from them, and the emotions and realizations they experienced in discovering her more fully in archives, photographs, and even paintings.

Consistent with the themes of haunting and nest-building, the documentary takes a nonlinear approach to historical recounting, weaving the ephemeral stories of the past that often persist in mere traces with reflections of current experiences by Singh, her family members, and members of diverse communities whose stories can be tied to the weft of the house. Historical media, such as old films or radio broadcasts, are incorporated with imagery of historical documents alongside re-enactments combining historically accurate clothes and culturally diverse imagery and symbols, such as taiko drumming and disco dancing. The documentary thereby produces a number of conjurings: subaltern stories and unexpected connections, or what Singh describes as the "transtemporal, trans-maternal, and transcultural political bonds that arise through shared space" (*On anti-colonial homemaking,* abstract).

That's as far as I got into the second stretch of watching I managed to carve time for.

Between a day of grievance meetings, member chats, and research for my work in the Kwantlen Faculty Association (the labour union representing faculty at Kwantlen Polytechnic University where I am an instructor of Sociology), I watched yet more bits of the documentary. Although forgiving of such watching habits, the film pushed me still to examine my own intersecting privileges as a viewer. For instance, I was confronted with my able-bodied privilege when Deidre Hase, a teacher at the Manitoba School for the Deaf, was signing in ASL a story about deaf education which was not audibly dubbed. My attention to the visuals of the film was therefore forced, and it gave me many gifts; I loved seeing the choreography of hand and face. I loved hearing the whoosh of breath from the mouth of another ASL speaker, Joanna Hawkins, when she reflected on learning about Mary Ettie McDermid, the first deaf teacher in western Canada (*Schools in Western Canada* 140) who is tied to the home because in the early 20th century, a fire at the Manitoba School for the Deaf resulted in the house becoming a makeshift boarding school for the pupils. The whooshes of breath added beautifully—and ironically—to the soundscapes of the documentary and they speak: deaf people are not silent. Hase reflected on children who grow up in hearing families and never interact with the deaf community only to come to the school and learn ASL for the first time—a language which had been banned in 1880 at the Milan Conference (*1880: The Milan Conference*), and a ban which Mary would have defied. "As soon as they find that language, they change," said Hase. A black and white film watched by Isadora, projected upon the inside of the home's garage door, silently echoed: "As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs." Indeed, we learn that the school pupils made a printing press in the house to publish their school newspaper, *The Silent Echo.*

The documentary addresses connections of kin *contra* traditional patrilineal and racist norms. Naturally, and in spite of my divided attentions, my curiosity drew to Singh in the days I spent consuming the film in crumbs. As I drove one of my sons in the pouring rain to get his soccer team pictures taken, and the other to his climbing lesson, paying attention to the road more than my thoughts of Singh, I wondered (with a bit of shame and guilt as to the norms of whiteness that prompted my question)... With her elderly mother Christine seemingly a white woman, why does Singh have a South Asian last name? In the documentary, we hear Singh's mother, a self-described activist, speak of a post-Vietnam War political impulse that influenced her choice to marry an Indian man. "Was it romantic or was it political?... Politics emerges in everything we do if we are going to be honest with ourselves," she said. I found my own connections and emotions in this notion and was thus invited into the nest Singh and Joynt build with the film. As explored in images of kimonos and tea ceremony, the house served as the Japanese consulate after the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. My family by marriage, from whom I get my own "unexpected" (Japanese) last name as a white woman, experienced this internment. They were dispossessed of their farms and forcibly relocated to unheated, single room cabins in the interior of British Columbia, where eggs froze overnight inside the kitchen cabinets during winter. The voice of my husband's late great-aunt Irene Tsuyuki[1] telling how she survived reverberates in my

1 See a film (2008) featuring her: "*Ohanashi*: The Story of Our Elders, Irene Tsuyuki," available at https://movingimages.ca/products/ohanashi-story-our-elders-irene-tsuyuki?srsltid=AfmBOoqF4pD1Zse9OyDw7apRdoO9jW4CGQKJUAyyYJrhVWNYkrq-gw2U

mind when I try to imagine what it could have been like, safe in my family's history that is devoid of that particular violence. In the film, a survivor of internment relates how the subsequent generations of Japanese-Canadians worked hard to acquire the languages and knowledges necessary to describe what happened as unjust and to push for acknowledgement, apology, and redress from the Canadian government, thus caring for their elderly kin and their departed ancestors.

At the beginning, the documentary directs us: "the task at hand is to fully embody the erasures of colonial history." Reviews (Heeney; Woodend) rightly praise the decolonial themes; less central to commentaries are the successes borne from the film's feminist praxis. Singh narrates, "home is as much a place as it is an ongoing challenge." The film intervenes in the aligned dualisms of men/women and public/private which figure "the home" a place where important and political things do not happen and where women happily reside to blissfully, naturally, quietly serve as mothers and caregivers. "We find," as Singh narrates, "lost ancestors… in our private spheres." Singh and Joynt shake the metaphorical brooms of the house of all kinds of dust, wrestling profound historical ghosts out of hiding to tell their stories. Near the end of the film, Singh describes the "heroics of everyday life" associated with home, which I find are particularly maternal and feminine acts of love and survival.

The Nest, just in the same ways that it invited Singh into the lives of many other women, historical and contemporary, it also invited me into the works of Singh. Near the beginning of the documentary, Christine described the home in a manner that locates its present life: "The house was structurally solid, it had beautiful interior spaces, and in fact the way I like to describe it in a nutshell, it was dying in a sarcophagus of modern applications which were all fossil fuel-based." Immediately, nasty visions of plastics and tars came to my mind—and thus grief for present ecological, environmental, and climate disasters—as well as my own research, which addresses paleontology as a means of knowing, sometimes begrudgingly, about the contemporary planetary dangers we face. As I sifted around Google Scholar to read works by Singh in preparing to write this review, I realized she has authored a book, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements,* which I had bought as part of my research into paleontology and climate crisis. Making the connection in my own house to my own books felt like the film's methodology was coming to life in my hands! Yet, I quickly turned to feel shame because I realized I hadn't yet had time to read *Unthinking Mastery*—I mean, digging through the disorganized mess that is my bookshelf, I found the book *still wrapped in cellophane*. How embarrassing—but also felt the sting of my own flawed assumptions that a writer of works relevant to my Big Paleontology Research Project wouldn't also be the same person making a feminist, decolonial, and artful documentary about Indigenous, racialized, and disabled women in Canadian history. However, I found Singh's work again forgiving yet nurturing; in *Unthinking Mastery*, she writes, "in failing to master, in confronting our own desires for mastery where we least expect or recognize these desires, we become vulnerable to other possibilities for living, for being together in common, for *feeling* injustice and refusing it without the need to engage it through forms of conquest" (21). Singh and Joynt's film succeeds in gently pushing us as viewers out of the nest and into new connections, feelings, and insights about race, colonialism, disability, aging, gender, motherhood, kinship, and home. Women haunt. Women linger. And women persist, we learn. Even if only in fragments. ■

WORKS CITED

1880: The Milan Conference. Deaf History Europe, <https://deaf-history.eu/index.php/component/zoo/item/1880>

Frisch, Michael. "Commentary: Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process." *The Oral History Review* 30.1 (2003): 111-113.

Heeney, Alex. "HotDocs Review: Chase Joynt and Julietta Singh's The Nest." *Seventh Row*, June 2025. <https://seventh-row.com/2025/06/05/hotdocs-review-chase-joynt-julietta-singh-the-nest/>

Schools in Western Canada. Deaf Culture Centre, < https://deafculturecentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/deafheritage-canada/1_Chapter_6.pdf>

Singh, Julietta. "On Anticolonial Homemaking." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 25.3 (2024): 199-208.

Singh, Julietta. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Duke University Press, 2017.

The Nest. Directed by Chase Joynt and Julietta Singh, National Film Board, 2025. <https://collection.nfb.ca/film/the-nest>

Woodend, Dorothy. "Can you go Home Again? At the Queer Film Fest, 'The Nest' Uncovers Layers of History in a Family Home." *The Tyee*, September 2025. <https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2025/09/12/Can-You-Go-Home-Again/>