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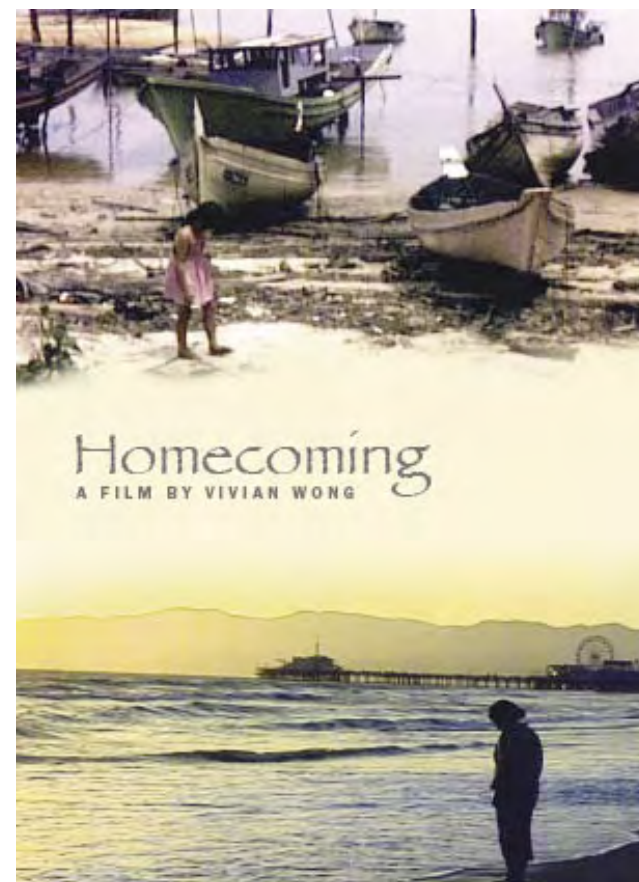
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JOURNEYS TO AND FRO

Recalling and Writing "Home(s)" in Diasporic Imaginaries

The house is open to the public, and I took a tour one hot day in July 2008. The tour was conducted in English by a young Malay woman dressed in traditional Malaysian dress, fully covered in a long gown and headscarf, in keeping with the Muslim customs of modesty. The tour group consisted of three college-age women from Scotland who were on summer holiday and me, a second-generation Malaysian Chinese American woman visiting her Malaysian Chinese relatives.

The three-room house was a time capsule. Objects in it used to represent Malaysian home-life from a different era were like talismans that triggered memories from my childhood in America. The experience transported me to another time and place far in the past. I simultaneously recalled and relived my past associations with each item as the tour guide demonstrated and described them



to us in the living space. A simple wooden toy brought me back to the family room of my own home in Maryland, where I sat on the carpet playing a game similar to jacks with my grandmother, who migrated from Malaysia when I was eight years old.

I share this episode from my summer travels as a point of entry—the doorway—into the memories that flickered until they illuminated the outlines of my dissertation work. How I came to embody this moment and the memories it invoked is tied to journeys—ones simultaneously, and indivisibly, physical and immaterial, emotional and intellectual, personal and communal. These journeys join my family and I as they also link us to the diverse Asian, Chinese, and Malaysian immigrant communities nationally, internationally, and transnationally. They are the movements to locate “home(s)” in those diasporas through travel: migration and immigration. And they are the processes that displace and replace “home” in multiple spaces, where “home” is reimagined in the continuing dynamics of dislocation and location.

My dissertation project examines the kinds of personal archives produced by Asian immigrant and Asian American women, reconceiving them as itinerant acts that reproduce, represent, and reimagine “home” in Asian diasporas. The redistribution of the archive and remapping of record production onto “the migrant” (Asian immigrant and Asian American women) and her peregrina-

tions challenges traditional professional theories of “the archives” as administrative and national projects of governing bodies and bureaucratic and cultural institutions. Instead, personal record-making and -keeping become a purposefully individual practice, and in turn “the archive” is (re) made and (re)conceived as “a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities.”³ “Home” is simultaneously a physical place, as well as imagined and actualized spaces of collective identities, sentimental belongings, and communities of solidarities.

Asian American historian Gary Okihiro writes that “geographies are neither predetermined nor fixed; spaces ... [they] are freighted with the significances that we ascribe to them” and there can be multiple homes.⁴ For the itinerant female figure, home is both a place and process: It is simultaneously fixed and always becoming. It is one’s homeland, but also an adopted country. It is tied to nationalism, but also remixed with naturalization and citizenship. Then there are the places one chooses to call home: self-selected, constructed spaces shaped by individual will—itinerant acts that bind us to home places, collecting “memories of ‘home’” to re/form the “archive of home.”

The personal archive (re)positioned in Asian diasporas and the imaginaries of diasporic in-

3. Arun Appadurai, “Archives as aspiration,” *Information is Alive*. Ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2 Publishing/NAI Publishers, 2003), 34.

4. Gary Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

dividuals is an intimate space—simultaneously material and immaterial, imagined and created—for Asian im/migrants to form a different sense of belonging that is deliberate and enabling for themselves within their communities. The im/migrant women in these (diasporic) communities collect, create, maintain, preserve, and distribute their historical and cultural narratives in records that capture their hybrid transnational identities and multinational experiences as they want them remembered and transmitted to the successive generations of their descendants.

Seven years ago, I made a film that changed my life. I was getting my M.F.A. in Directing at UCLA when my grandmother passed away. It was not until then that I thought to make any kind of film about my family. I was caught up telling other kinds of stories, writing screenplays and raising money to make them into movies. But there is a saying in filmmaking: the story finds you, you don’t find the story. My grandmother’s story found me as I was in pre-production for a different film.

Making a film is very much a leap of faith—like so much in life—and where there is a will there is a way. One works from passion and through inspiration, trusting the process. So I jumped, diving into my grandmother’s things: old photos, family albums, and the personal effects she brought to America from Malaysia. I hoped these objects would “speak” to me, which they did, and

that a story would emerge, which one did. As I turned the pages of old photo albums, images leaped out at me: my grandmother as a young woman dressed in a *nyonya kebaya*;⁵ my grandmother, older, wearing the same outfit in America; and longhouses built off the river where my grandmother lived as a girl that no longer exist.

I rediscovered the Super 8 footage of me as a child playing on the beach in Malaysia, which together with other personal materials became the creative inspiration as well as the visual anchor of the film. From those home movies and contemporary videos of myself, I wove my grandmother's story together with my own life and connected my family's immigrant experiences in Malaysia and America. I literally experienced firsthand the power of visual images to hold and transfer history and memory and make meaning out of life. Moreover, I came to believe more than ever in the value and significance of one's personal archives to validate one's identity and existence, as well as its importance as part of a larger "diasporic archive" to document and preserve the histories of individuals, groups, and communities usually absent in traditional, institutional archives. This notion of belonging via archives of our own creation unexpectedly brought me back to school later in life for an unanticipated intellectual journey. But personally, and probably more importantly, the film was a way for me to come "home," creating a narrative

5. Traditional Malaysian Chinese dress.



Vivian L. Wong is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA. Her research interests include the documentation, collection, preservation, and dissemination of historical and cultural records in Asian American communities and archival formations in the Asian diaspora. She is also an award-winning filmmaker. Her work has screened internationally in film festivals, academic conferences, and on PBS.