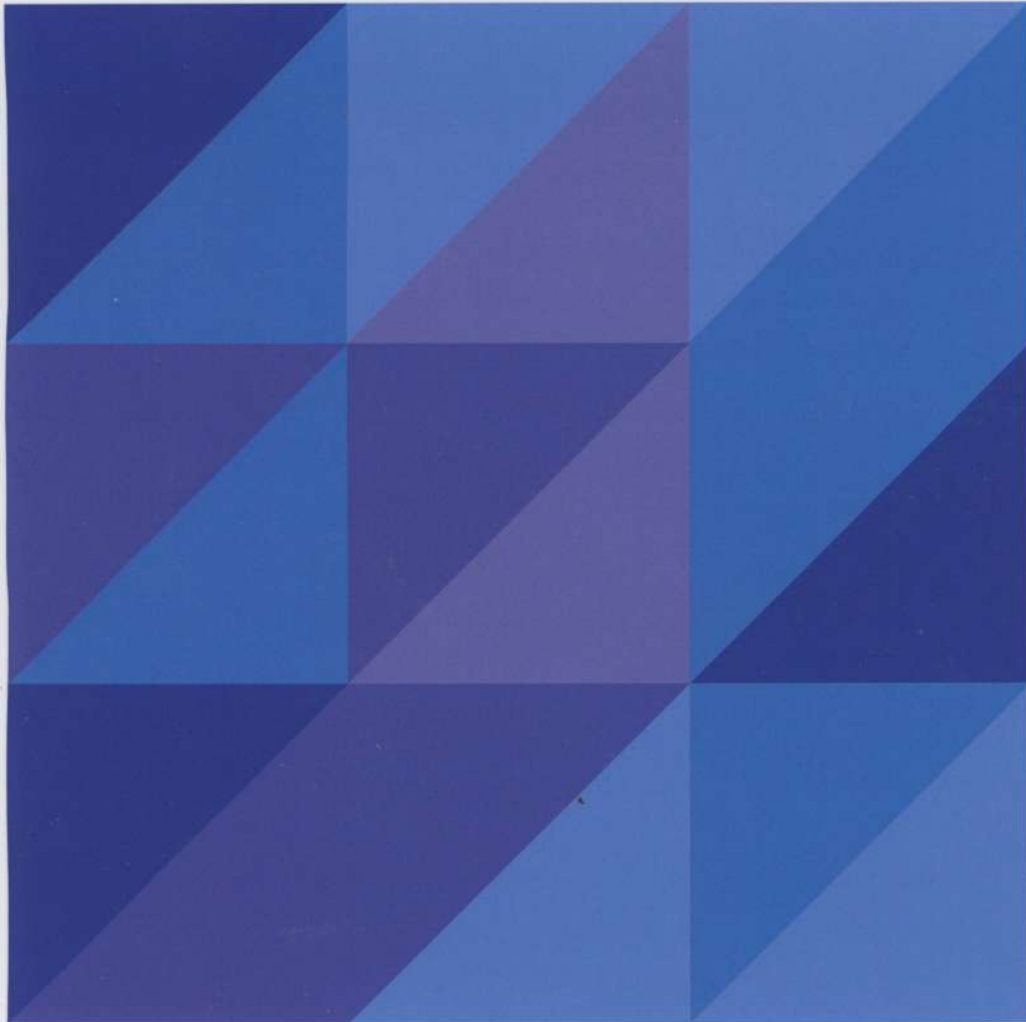


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Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas

Special Issue: Expressions of Asian Caribbeanness

Guest Editors: Andil Gosine, Sean Metzger, and Patricia Mohammed



BRILL

Roundtable



Imaging and Imagining the Chinese Caribbean: *Jeanette Kong, Maria Lau, and Laura Fong Prosper*

Sean Metzger

University of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA

smetzger@tft.ucla.edu

In an attempt to involve more artists' voices in this special issue, the editors of "Expressions of Asian Caribbeanness" invited three women to participate in an online conversation that addressed their experiences as artists who, among other things, navigate Asian Caribbean cultural intersections. Each of the artists has produced a body of work that fits within—but might also extend beyond—our organizing rubric. Based in Toronto, Jeanette Kong is the head of the film company Ms. Chin Productions, whose explicit mission is to document the historical past of the Chinese Jamaican diaspora. Laura Fong Prosper was educated in Panama, Cuba, Germany, and China. Her videos and digital art explore culture and memory primarily through installations and visual essays. Educated in New York, Maria Lau has created an expansive photographic oeuvre that explores space and cultural memory, often through the use of multiple exposures.

This trio is linked through the ways they use images to reflect and construct the past. Psychic and material mnemonic elements archive a variety of Asian Caribbean experiences and fantasies, even if each artist finds a unique form of expression through her specific camera and its attendant processes of production. Nevertheless, we might also say that each artist also offers a different way of articulating her subjectivity in relation to what passes before the photographic apparatus. Such a statement may remind readers of Roland Barthes' writing on the stadium and the punctum in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. The former term describes what is apparent to all viewers in

an image, information that photographs provide at a glance. By contrast, the punctum describes a detail that attracts an individual spectator's gaze, one that pricks or otherwise wounds the observer. The delineation of different orders of meaning for any individual viewer is one useful structure for thinking about how these artists express Asian Caribbeanness. What aesthetic styles and devices mark Asia or the Caribbean? More specifically, what might signify as Chinese, Panamanian, Jamaican, or Cuban? How does each artist frame one or more overlaps among these terms? How does each image elicit a personal history? What is the relationship of a photographic image to documentary understood broadly as a kind of archive?

The editors selected these women in part because they express different directions within a particular generation of artists who claim Chinese and Caribbean descent. What might be the effects of such claims? Is there value in thinking about this trio as a group, despite their very specific relations to individual islands and their current residence in various locations around the world? We did not seek definitive answers to these questions but instead asked for responses that might further an ongoing dialogue about the meanings of Asian Caribbeanness.

Sean Metzger: Given our issue's title—"Expressions of Asian Caribbeanness"—could you talk about how you see your artistic practice addressing, expanding, contradicting, and/ or exploding that theme?

Laura Fong Prosper: Growing up in a subculture within the great pluricultural-ity of Panama, I was always affected and influenced more by the "Asianness" of my family than the "Caribbeanness" of the country where we lived. I never really considered myself Panamanian or Caribbean or Latin American. Obviously, this "Asianness" was filtered by my environment, but at that time I was not aware of these environmental elements because I thought that my reality—as Panamanian with a Chinese heritage—was the only one that existed. I grew up surrounded by Chinese symbolisms which, despite the fact that they were very familiar, did not actually mean much to me. Although we celebrated each family gathering around a Lazy Susan with a Chinese banquet or a delicious Sunday dim sum, my grandfather never spoke Cantonese to us; neither my father nor I ever learned it. Even so, I always considered myself more Chinese than Latin, and this perception always made it very difficult for me to connect and identify with the rest of Panamanian society.

However, when I travelled to China in 2012, my identity collapsed. The cultural shock was so intense that I finally came to terms with my Latin heritage, because there I finally realized that I am not Chinese. I managed to reconcile



FIGURE 1 Laura Fong Prosper, video still from video installation *Gên*, 2014, HD video, 30 × 18.75 in (76.2 × 47.6 cm).

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

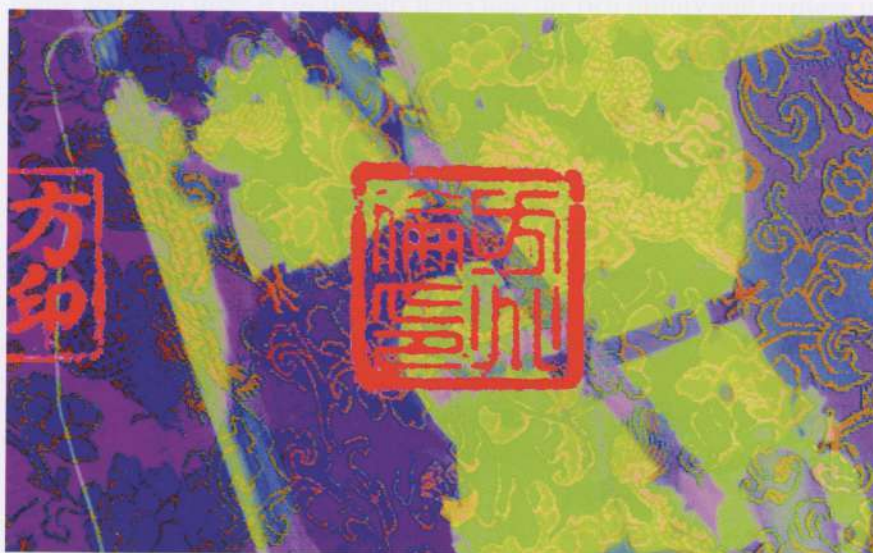


FIGURE 2 Laura Fong Prosper, video still from film *Where He Was Born*, 2018, HD video, 30 × 18.75 in (76.2 × 47.6 cm).

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

my two worlds, which are many, actually—I am also of Afro-Caribbean, Indigenous, and Spanish descent. All these factors contribute to my identity and my perception of who I really am. I just needed to go to China to understand that fact and be proud of it.

I think my work reflects “Asian Caribbeanness” in terms of its visual aesthetics. I like to use a lot of saturated colour. I think that’s my Caribbean heritage: the blue of the deep sea, the green jungle, the intense sun at noon. Aesthetically I like to reflect Asian symbolism within a tropical context, strongly inspired by the nature of my country, Panama. And that is how I mix the two worlds through which I have focused my work.

Maria Lau: Asian Caribbeanness for me is directly linked to my Cuban Chinese heritage. Employing multidisciplinary, photo-based storytelling allows me to reference history, memory, and personal narrative to explore that self-identification. The photo series that depicts Chinatown in Havana explores the Chinese community that once lived there and the remnants that were left by the time I was photographing it. From there I continually explored what I thought it was to be Cuban Chinese in contemporary times, our multiple layers included in the framework by creating in-camera multiple exposures. The artwork is a basis for exploring Asian Caribbeanness, where one story becomes



FIGURE 3 Maria Lau, *Kwong Wah Po*, 2009, digital chromogenic colour print, 16 × 24 in (40.6 × 61 cm).

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



FIGURE 4 Maria Lau, *Tai Pai*, 2003, digital chromogenic colour print, 20 × 30 in (50.8 × 76.2 cm).

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

many, and from there it continually flows into the rich history and heritage of the Chinese diaspora.

Jeanette Kong: In terms of my artistic practice and the ways in which it relates to the theme of “Expressions of Asian Caribbeanness,” it was my desire to open a window into a community where there had been little previous visual representation. With *The Chiney Shop*, I wanted to present a nuanced and authentic view of the relationship between local Jamaicans and the “Chiney shop” owners. I wanted to show another side that was not usually portrayed in mainstream media, one that was reflective of my recollection of my parents’ relationship with their customers. I would hope that my work expands the discourse of the role of the Chinese shopkeeper in Jamaican society and allows for a relationship in which contention only plays a part. I also wanted to challenge the pervasive view that the Chinese did not contribute to Jamaican society. In showing the ways that they did, the otherness with which they’re viewed perhaps diminishes

I also wanted to name culturally who the Chinese in Jamaica were at the time. Before the 1980s, the Chinese in Jamaica were predominantly from the same cultural group known as Hakka. I grew up in a prototypical Hakka family. My grandfather went to Jamaica in the early 1920s, and my father was

born there. My creative imagination is firmly rooted in Jamaica and more expansively in the Caribbean. My cultural identity in terms of my Asianness is mostly Hakka. At the time I grew up in Jamaica, the Chinese community was probably 99 percent Hakka. Both my parents were brought up in small Hakka villages in Guangdong. However, after we moved to Toronto, my Chinese identity expanded because of the Cantonese, Fukien, and Toisan influences of my Chinese Canadian friends. My sense of Caribbeanness also broadened in Canada because of my close relationships with Trinidadian and Guyanese friends. The moniker "Asian Caribbean" is apt in describing my work, but it does not wholly encompass it.

In *Half: The Story of a Chinese-Jamaican Son*, I wanted to explore the notion of identity for biracial children in China in the 1930s. In my view, this practice of sending children to China is an expression of Asian Caribbeanness, even though this practice extended to other overseas Chinese communities. In many respects, these mixed-race children were greatly valued and were sent to China to be educated, but the treatment they received in China varied greatly.

I think *Finding Samuel Lowe* is fascinating from the standpoint of expressing visual representations of Asian and black people as family. Though this is the case for the Caribbean where there is a lot of cultural mixing, it is powerful to see it on screen. I have witnessed how much it deeply resonates with some people to see themselves reflected on a large screen.

The three films are intended to give voice to lived Asian Caribbean experiences that were rarely documented at the time they were made.

SM: What draws you to documentary (broadly understood) and how do you conceptualize and/or use that form?

LFP: I do not consider myself a documentary filmmaker in the pure sense of the word. I consider myself a video artist who uses the mechanisms of documentary filmmaking to make her projects. I like to create visually interesting video shorts: mostly in the documentary form without rehearsal, mostly exterior shooting without extra lighting, mostly without actors, often without a defined script. I call myself a "collector of images." At the time of recording I do not know exactly what I am going to do, but, in the editing process (as the video editor that I am), I really like to experiment with the material and achieve surprises that in the end probably enter the final product without my having previously considered them. I'm creating randomly through trial and error, play and experimentation.

I also like to work with another type of documentation—archival images, either moving or still. I intervene digitally and take them out of their analogue

and historical contexts, appropriating them with my style in a contemporary artistic practice.

ML: Initially documentary is a visual record for me, a way to record history and those visual remembrances in the context of larger narratives. It's the starting point that I feel is truthful to the person or thing I am depicting. I love using archival documents, photography, oral history, and cultural references to conceptualize a narrative and create something new, a fresh perspective that speaks to the past and the present.

JK: I'm drawn to documentaries because of the depth of storytelling and the notion of bearing witness to someone else's experience. For me, the documentary form is inextricably intertwined with truth-telling. Of course, there are different perspectives, but what's presented should strive for a standard. I also believe that the craft of documentary can make any niche subject into a



FIGURE 5 Jeanette Kong with her parents Keith Kong and Yook Moy Kong, Kingston, Jamaica.

PROVIDED BY ©THE ESTATE OF KEITH I. KONG FROM *THE CHINESE SHOP* (©MS. CHIN PRODUCTIONS), 2011.



FIGURE 6 Jeanette Kong, photograph of Keith Kong and Yook Moy Kong, Kingston, Jamaica, circa 1958.

PROVIDED BY ©THE ESTATE OF KEITH I. KONG FROM *THE CHINEY SHOP* (©MS. CHIN PRODUCTIONS), 2011.⁴

universal story. I like the notion that people are interviewed, and they tell their own stories. There is a directness to seeing faces and expressions. I want to tell stories that haven't been told before from people you don't usually see on camera. Visual representation is very empowering, and it matters.

I always come back to two metaphors when I describe how I make films. First, they are puzzles. Once production stops and I have the footage, it's like piecing together a 3D puzzle. I ponder and see what fits. It's a very organic process, but I start with a plan. The second metaphor I often use is that it's like giving birth. There is a gestation period and I often have doubts about whether I have it in me to give birth to another.

SM: What kinds of documentary do you see as an influence? In what ways do you think your work might be in dialogue with other documentarians from the Caribbean like Rigoberto López or Richard Fung or even artists like Sybil Atteck, if we think of her work for the Botanical Society, and Albert Chong, if we think of portraiture as a kind of documentation in addition to whatever else it might be?

LFP: The biggest influences in my work are Chris Marker's visual essays—and his uses of asynchronous image, sound, and text—and Pipilotti Rist's visual

installations and her aesthetics of colour. From the examples mentioned above, the artist to whom I feel most related is Albert Chong, specifically his series *Color Still Lifes*, *Monochromatic Still Lifes*, and *Inscribed Copper Matted Photographs*. Although his medium is not necessarily the moving image, I feel a great connection with his work because we both intervene in images of our family archive, thus mixing the past and the present of our own history. Our stories are also very similar because of our Chinese and Afro-Caribbean roots.

ML: Caribbean artists have a shared history and culture, and our art is often a reflection of that. Coming from a history background, I found that my documentary practice was more influenced by personal research or academic studies on a particular subject. It was not necessarily as influenced by other artists as it was by life itself—people, stories, and shared experiences. I then take that research and create narratives in multiple forms to illustrate various perspectives, often of the same subject or moment in time.

JK: I watch documentaries broadly and admire many films made by individual filmmakers. In terms of influences, I take a cross-disciplinary approach. I am a great admirer of these women writers and, at some point, read their works voraciously: Canadian writer Alice Munro, Jamaican writer Olive Senior, Chinese biographer Han Suyin, and American theorist bell hooks. For me, the commonality in their work is the revelatory way in which they present the details of their respective worlds.

I do see my work as being on a continuum with the history of the Chinese Jamaicans recorded by Lee Tom Yin, who published two invaluable volumes, *The Chinese in Jamaica* in 1957 and 1963, respectively; Patrick (Lee Tom Yin's son) and Loraine Lee who documented families in *Chinese Jamaican Worldwide: One Family* and famed Jamaican photographer Ray Chen who compiled, contributed to, and edited *The Shopkeepers*. I believe that our individual stories will make up a collective history.

SM: How and to what extent does your art help viewers see relationships between gender, sexuality, and migration? Are there specific challenges that you face as women working in the specific form (media) and on the issues that each of you has chosen?

LFP: My work deals with migration and the processes of exile and adaptation in new continents, from the search for my roots in China to the difference of cultural codes between Latin America and Europe, specifically Germany, where I've lived for the past ten years. In my work I do not necessarily focus

on gender issues, but in my experience it was much easier for me to record images on the streets alone and without fear in China than in Panama, not only because of issues of harassment but because my life would be in danger if I brought expensive equipment to public places. In Panama, I would have to ask someone of the opposite sex to come and “protect me,” so to speak. That’s the way we women are so disadvantaged in Latin America. In Germany, the situation is better but not much. I am very impressed by the safety I felt in China when I was alone with my camera. This is something that I applaud and wish that was the case in the whole world. We still have so much to do as a global society on issues of representation of women and gender equity.

ML: My artwork speaks to anyone of a diasporic background, who understands journeys, family, and migration. There is a longing for a homeland, a people, a culture, a spirit that you identify with and is intrinsically inside of you. Migration takes us to many places on the globe, but our identity and culture come with us.

JK: With *Half* and *Finding Samuel Lowe*, we see that there were romantic relationships between Chinese men and local Jamaican women. In the Caribbean, Chinese men are viewed as rich and virile, whereas in the US they are stereotyped as meek and powerless. My films acknowledge that these relationships existed in the 1920s and 1930s, although we tend to think of mixed-race relationships as a modern concept. Migration brought more than economic wealth and job creation; it brought cultural melding.

Jeanette Kong

is a documentary filmmaker based in Toronto, Canada. Her films explore the intersection of culture and identity between Hakkas and Afro-Jamaicans. An award-winning director, she produced and directed *The Chiney Shop*, *Half: The Story of a Chinese-Jamaican Son*, and *Finding Samuel Lowe: From Harlem to China*. Her films have screened at many international film festivals including Reelworld Film Festival in Toronto, Beijing Caribbean Film Festival, New Narratives Film Festival in Taiwan, and Trinidad & Tobago Film Festival. She has an MA in Media Production and taught English at the School of Design at Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai.

Maria Lau

uses multidisciplinary photography-based storytelling in her photographic series and installations, referencing history, memory, and dream states while employing both traditional and digital photo techniques. She explores themes of culture, family, oral history, and shared cultural experiences based on her research into her family’s Cuban

Chinese heritage. Her work employs multi-exposure photography, including the use of infrared photographic film, to realize intensified colours, black-and-white photography, collage, installation, and text. Lau studied Latin American history and photography at the City University of New York and the International Center for Photography NY.

Laura Fong Prosper

is a Panamanian audiovisual artist based in Berlin. Her video installations and visual essays address issues of cultural belonging, longing, ancestry, and exile. Through her use of different process-based techniques, she moderates a dialogue between media, time, and stories. Working with archival material and passionate for photography, she blends analogue and digital technologies and formats, bringing glitch, colour, and superimposition to her observational, documentarian shooting style. She holds a degree in film editing from the International School of Film and TV of San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba (EICTV) and an MFA in Media Art from the Bauhaus University Weimar in Germany. She is also a film editor and vj. www.laurafongprosper.com.

Across Guyana, clusters of colourful, hand-painted Hindu prayer flags (jagat) moored on tall bamboo poles staked in the ground are a constant sight in private home shrines, town yards, temples, public squares, and near boiling of water to indicate that a Hindu prayer ceremony (puja) has been performed. In their ubiquity, these spiritual flags flaunt the pride of Hinduism as the nation's second most practiced religion. As objects, they serve as a welcoming reminder of how Hinduism in Guyana, a former British colony, is inextricably linked to the colonial desire for the cheap labour of Indian bodies, and why it evolved as a dominant spiritual practice. From the plantation as the early twentieth century, a system of indentured servitude replaced the enslavement of African peoples with Indian and Chinese labour. Between 1845 and 1857, over five hundred ships crossed the Indian Ocean (Hindi for "dark waters"), depositing more than a quarter million men and women from India in Guyana's Atlantic coast. Over the last eight decades as Indians laboured on British-owned sugar plantations and rice fields, they made and ceremonies they practised and privately treasured served as a literal gesture to protect them from the violence and hunger that came with their new identities as indentured labourers. These flags were also staked to honour the Hindu god Hanuman, a symbol of strength and energy, to mark the faith of Indian descendants, and to celebrate one's Hindu heritage.

Michael Law, Minor Deyane, and Bernadette Persaud, three contemporary Guyanese artists of Chinese, African, and Indian heritage, respectively