

# 1 Remaking Home Movies

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After I left Trinidad in 1971 to go to school, my mother would send me care packages. In typical Caribbean style, they were seldom mailed but rather entrusted to relatives or family friends. At one point in the 1980s I received such a parcel in Toronto that, instead of the usual guava jelly and Julie mangoes, consisted of a plastic bag containing two dozen reels of 8mm film. In an enclosed note, my mother explained that she had placed the film in an old iron safe—one of several ancient appliances she just couldn't bring herself to discard—that sat in the back of our house. In time, bees had colonized the safe and sealed the lock with wax. After many years, Mom had finally managed to pry it open. Did I want these pictures, she asked?

Alone one night, I ran the film through a Super 8 viewer borrowed from a filmmaker friend. The screen was tiny. The images were almost abstract. Yet each luminous frame opened a successive drawer in an archive of memories. From my present-day life in a gay, leftist commune in downtown Toronto, I was sucked back into the '60s to a Chinese Catholic home in suburban Port of Spain. Even more unsettling than the time travel was the fact that the images on the screen did not sync up with the recollections in my head. I could identify most of the settings and events, and I recognized the actors as my family and myself, but these films contradicted everything I remembered of the tone and texture of my childhood.

These images led me to question the selectiveness of both my own memory and the camera's version of my childhood. I became interested in probing the social and historical processes that helped mold these slanted visions, and I began to ponder how both the pictures and the apparatus of home movies functioned within my family. Over a period of twelve years, I have returned to these questions and to the footage that triggered them. From the original home movies I have produced three single-channel videotapes: *The Way to*

*My Father's Village* (1988), *My Mother's Place* (1990), and *Sea in the Blood* (2000). In differing ways, each of these pieces maps a relationship among the personal, the familial, and the social within a transcultural context. There is a symbiotic relationship between the home movies as illustrations of ideas, and the ideas provoked by viewing and deconstructing the home movies. Like this essay, they are as much reconstructions as excavations of the past.

## **The Movies**

As a child I remember sending off little yellow envelopes of film for processing and receiving them again in the post weeks later. On the Sunday night after the reels returned from America, the family would gather in the open upstairs porch that served as our living room. Sometimes even my father, who normally spent Sunday nights at the family farm, would stay in the city to attend. My mother would perch the projector on a stool, and I would turn off the buzzing fluorescent ring that was the sun to an inverted savanna of grazing moths and predatory geckos. (I was terrorized by those darting lizards, sure that one would lose its grip and drop on my head as I watched TV.) Once the light was off, the insects would disperse to the nearest street lamp, and the geckos retreated to their lair behind the faded Chinese embroidery that hung above the couch. Mom would turn on the Bell and Howell, and the glamorous beam would shoot across the balmy night.

The screenings elicited a great deal of laughter drawn from a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure at seeing ourselves in a medium reserved for Hollywood movie stars. Sometimes there was disappointment: the reels were double exposed, so that a jet appeared to taxi on the skirt of a wedding dress, or crowds of dancing Carnival revelers seemed to shimmy across a family picnic at the beach. Less often, the cap had been absent-mindedly left on and there was no image at all.

Eight-millimeter film was not available for purchase or processing in Trinidad; both had to be done in the United States. This made movie-making an expensive hobby. Little wonder, then, that special occasions predominate in the films: weddings; departures and returning visits by my siblings studying abroad; Carnival; a royal visit to mark Trinidad and Tobago's independence from Britain in 1962; Christmas and other holidays; and a series of trips abroad.

My mother says that the camera and projector were purchased as a distraction for my second sister, Nan, who suffered from beta thalassemia major, a hereditary blood disease with a poor prognosis. A brother, Ian, had

died from the same disease the year before I was born. The Bell and Howell Perpetua Electric Eye camera and the Bell and Howell 8mm automatic threading projector were bought in North America and sent home by my eldest brother, who was a student in Canada. No one in my family remembers exactly what year that was, but the span of the camera's use is suggested by the ages of the children, by the fashions, and by the dateable events and absences in the footage. At the beginning there are shots of my second brother at the airport, leaving for Ireland in 1961. That there are a few sequences featuring his friends in Trinidad, undoubtedly shot by him, suggests that the camera arrived shortly before he went away. At the later end, there are no images of my elder sister's wedding in 1966, and thus I suspect the filming stopped well before that.

My mother says she stopped filming because by then all the children had grown up and gone away; there was nothing left to shoot. Nan and I were in fact still at home, but for a woman who had given birth to eight children and lived in a large, extended family for much of her life, the house must have been as good as empty. My mother kept the projector, which now sits in its original box in the basement of her suburban Toronto home. She told me that she sold the camera when she left Trinidad, but on a visit during the writing of this essay I found the camera waiting for me, wrapped in an old plastic bag sitting on a bed. She discovered it when cleaning out a closet.

Though it is now hard to picture my mother with a movie camera—at ninety-one, she is intimidated by the controls of a VCR and refuses to touch an ATM—it was she who shot the movies. My older siblings took occasional turns behind the lens, but I don't remember my father ever handling the camera or projector. Although both amateur still photography and 8mm moviemaking are linked to the leisure-time activities of the working dad, my father saw his role strictly as that of breadwinner and had no time for hobbies of any sort.

As Patricia Holland notes in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, "From the earliest days advertisements for cameras have shown women behind the lens. This is, no doubt, a device to indicate how simple it is to take a snap; nevertheless it demonstrates a form of photography in which women are urged to participate."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, each of the Bell and Howell manuals that came with my family's camera and projector opens with an image of a woman displaying the equipment. Whereas the technical aura of moviemaking might place this activity in the masculine sphere, its domestic role of producing family opens it to the arena of the feminine. As Holland remarks, it is mothers who generally maintain the family album and are "the historians, the guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the

family archive.”<sup>2</sup> It was left to my mother to constitute the family. It was she who took charge of our education and who wrote to us after we left home as teenagers. It was she who oversaw the treatment for my siblings’ illnesses, taking Ian to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and Nan to Saint Bartholomew’s in London.

In *Reel Families*, Patricia R. Zimmermann describes how in the 1950s increasingly accessible home movie equipment interfaced with the rising discourse of the nuclear family and the expansion and commodification of leisure time: “Corporations targeted a substantial amount of this leisure-goods marketing at the suburban nuclear family. A pervasive and somewhat idealized popular ideology, this advertising construct of the family grafted intimacy and togetherness to consumerism.”<sup>3</sup> The illustrations in the Electric Eye’s user manual reveals this aspect of the camera’s appeal. Instructions on how to frame a shot depict three couples at a stately swimming pool. The section on indoor and outdoor film shows a mother with a toddler in a bedroom and a heterosexual couple playing tennis. The effects of different lenses are demonstrated by photographs of two children running through a field of flowers. In close-up shots, the hands at the controls are both male and female, but all the faces, whether drawn or photographed, are white and not yet middle-aged. The nuclear family as a unit of consumption did not begin with the lifestyle marketing of the home movie camera, however, and Don Slater traces similar links between “the development of domestic photography and the structuring of the domestic”: “What is so striking is not that the family is so conventional in photographic marketing, but that photographic marketing portrayed the same family as every other key consumer-product publicity. Your family photographed, the advertising promised, would be the ideal advertised family, the site of modern consumption and domesticity. Simply and reliably, the snapshot camera would reproduce the right family.”<sup>4</sup>

These images of a “right family” were precisely what unsettled me when I first reencountered my family’s home movies as an adult. They contradicted what I remembered. I was the last of eight births, and by the time I was born my parents had risen from shopkeepers in humble circumstances to relative affluence. Yet our family culture was rooted in poverty, and in my mother’s eyes there was no greater virtue than thrift. She was a dedicated recycler before recycling became fashionable. Nothing was thrown away, especially food. She sewed clothes from poultry feedbags until the neighbor who tutored me after school made fun of my shorts by calling, “Chicky, chicky.” After that, I refused to wear them. The family in the movies is different: no chicken-feed shorts, no leftovers. If they are not at the beach,

they are dressed up in Sunday best. My family usually ate in the kitchen, but the only meals in the movies are Christmas dinners in the dining room.

I was taken aback by the extent to which the movies cast our first-generation, middle-class Chinese Trinidadian family living on the outskirts of the empire according to the template of suburban America. Not long before I was born, my parents moved from urban Port of Spain to a new residential area. With the house and its suburban lawns, and the recurring image of our petal-pink and white Dodge Kingway imported from the United States a decade earlier, many of the sequences might have been shot in Southern California. And that may have been the desired effect, to reproduce our family in the image of *Good Housekeeping*, the American magazine to which my mother subscribed for many years. This magazine was one transmission route for a whole body of knowledge about how to produce a nuclear family, and for my mother it was also a guide on how to be a housewife. This was the word my mother used to describe herself on official forms, even though she worked at the shop six days a week. When she was triggered by an article in *Good Housekeeping*, I first overheard her wonder aloud about my possible homosexuality.

But my mother was not a passive receiver for pedagogical disseminations in gender and family relations; they were part of the package in upward mobility my parents sought for themselves. And in that colonial context, moving up in society meant becoming more like people “away,” especially people in America. Trinidad had been a British colony from the end of the eighteenth century, but during World War II, two American military bases were opened. In the ‘60s my mother’s cousin worked at a leper colony on a small island between Trinidad and Venezuela. To visit her we had to catch a government launch, which involved crossing the base at Chaguaramas. Inside the guarded gates, the landscape changed. The narrow, potholed road widened, flanked by broad shoulders of neatly mowed lawns. The buildings were different, too: large, airy hangars and low bungalows with screened-in porches. Trinidadians prefer insecticides over wire screens, which are deemed to be both hot and expensive.

The Americans made an impact outside the base as well. Lord Invader’s wartime calypso, “Rum and Coca-Cola,” a plagiarized version of which was made into an international hit song by the Andrews Sisters,<sup>5</sup> laments the military’s affront to Trinidadian hetero-masculinity:

Rum and Coca-Cola,  
Go down to Point Cumana,—  
Both mother and daughter,—  
Working for the Yankee dollar.

The U.S. presence in Trinidad promoted a cultural reorientation away from Britain and toward American values and products, especially for those people with the means to indulge in the new consumerism. Both the ownership of the movie camera and the images it produced reflect this process. My parents, siblings, and I played out the role of the middle-class nuclear family for the camera. But as a gadget clearly imported from America and on top of that associated with the glamour of moviemaking, the camera itself was a prop in the performance of status and class mobility.

## The Videos

In the late '70s, I was introduced on the job as a community television producer to documentary production. Unless I was an on-air reporter, I was taught to erase my presence from the screen and to edit out the questions I asked in interviews. My image and voice were distracting and unnecessary, I was told. But as I mastered these conventions, I began to be bothered by the erasure of the production context. So when I directed my first independent documentary, I reacted against those rules and opened the tape with a shot of the crew and myself reflected in a large mirror. Subsequent tapes were increasingly self-referential until I had moved clearly into the territory of autobiography.

*The Way to My Father's Village* was the first of three pieces dealing with family history, produced over a twelve-year period. The tape traces my relationship to my father and to China, his birthplace. When I began the research, I had never been to China. But even halfway across the globe from Trinidad, this distant land nevertheless seemed to circumscribe my life. It was the code my parents used to police my siblings' and my behavior, with some activities deemed appropriate for Chinese children, others not. It was also the criterion against which I was judged outside the home. When in high school I failed yet another math test, my frustrated teacher declaimed, "But you're Chinese!"

*The Way to My Father's Village* was precipitated by my father's death. The tape is composed of five discrete but interlocking sections, the first four representing different routes through which children of immigrants come to know about the land of their ancestors: documents and official history, memory, oral accounts, and travel. Each section draws on a different approach to documentary form. The last, minimally dramatized, section illustrates the cultural ruptures of the diasporic condition. China was to be the key to unlocking the enigma of my father. But at the end of the journey no singular truth emerges, only veils of mediation.

The home movies are used in the second section of the tape, entitled "History and Memory." They are edited into a montage with video close-ups—breaking open a tropical sugar apple, goldfish swimming in an aquarium—and intertitles that variously repeat, shift, and contradict the voiceover narration describing memories of my father. The similarity and/or dissonance between the written and spoken texts are meant to conjure the uncertainties of remembrance. The home movies are suggestive of nostalgia by their subject matter (children playing at the beach), by the way they are processed (slow motion), and by the visual quality of the celluloid itself (deteriorated footage). In the digital age, the cracked emulsion and spots of pure color, blurry and vibrant all at once, point not only to something that is physically old, but also to an outmoded technology.

As opposed to *The Way's* psychic and physical journeys retracing routes of diaspora to the distant fatherland, *My Mother's Place* takes as its starting point my third-generation Chinese Trinidadian mother's rootedness in the Caribbean. The tape unfolds in a series of back-and-forth glances between my mother's images and stories and my own, and between colonial and postcolonial subject positions, not as discrete points of view, but as a kind of dialectical double vision. Like *The Way*, the tape is organized into sections. But here they are not so strictly delineated; the three movements are differentiated one from another mainly by an emphasis in subject matter. In the first, my mother tells of her family history: she was born in Trinidad in 1909, the granddaughter of indentured laborers from southeast China. The second section features tales from old-time Trinidad such as the night-flying, bloodsucking, witchlike *soucouyant*, and the indigenous Warahun traders arriving in dugout canoes from the South American mainland. The final movement homes in on the social and political. Through stories of everyday life, it lays out the process of coming to know one's allotted place in the social hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexuality in colonial and postcolonial Trinidad.

The family footage is concentrated in the final segment of *My Mother's Place*. Unlike *The Way to My Father's Village*, in which the home movies are inserted principally to illustrate and create an ambience, the 8mm films in this tape serve as evidence and as objects of interrogation. Home movies do not speak for themselves. By the use of juxtaposition, slowing down the images, and adding onscreen captions and voiceover narration, my aim was to get beyond the surface of the images, to denaturalize them and foreground the embedded ideology. In one segment, for example, my sister Nan and I are seen running in and out of a tent made from an old blanket tied to a fence. In the background and to the side an old woman is standing. This is Vio, the

African Chinese woman who took care of us. The spatial relations of the subjects to one another and to the camera reveal geographies of power that are brought to the viewer's attention through text and narration: "The camera focuses on the children and their fun. *She* stands in the background, at the edge of the frame. The apron makes her invisible. It tells the viewer that she is not part of the story they should be concerned with. In a culture in which children are taught to be polite to their elders, I called her by her first name—Vio, short for Violet . . . and no one ever thought it was strange."

Notwithstanding the precarious position of domestic workers in that postslavery society, and especially of women of Vio's generation, my memory of Vio was not of a passive victim. Out of Vio's earshot, my mother often pointed to Vio's Chinese genealogy, saying that she was related to friends of our family. Vio, on the other hand, found pride in telling us children about her African ancestor who had bought his freedom and rose above his station.

After almost a decade of other projects following *My Mother's Place*, I returned to family history and home movies in *Sea in the Blood*. The name derives from the literal translation of thalassemia, a genetic disease that runs in my family. The sea refers to the Mediterranean, as the disease was first identified among Italians and Greeks; when Nan was first examined by British hematologists in 1962, it was still little known that Asians could be affected. *Sea in the Blood* was to be a meditation on race, sexuality, and disease, juxtaposing Nan's illness and eventual death from thalassemia with my longtime partner Tim's life with HIV/AIDS. It was in fact the enormous artistic and intellectual response to the early characterization of AIDS as a gay and a Haitian disease that inspired me to consider the discursive aspects of thalassemia and its relationship to social identity. And it was Douglas Crimp's essay "Mourning and Militancy" that gave me permission to examine the personal and emotional stakes as well as the political dimensions of AIDS.<sup>6</sup> As in *The Way to My Father's Village* and *My Mother's Place*, autobiography was to be an alibi to explore larger political and social issues. It did not turn out that way. The core of the tape is psychological and emotional, enabled by a context in which the accumulated body of "multicultural" film and video released me from a burden of representation. I no longer felt I had to declare or explicate gay, Caribbean, or Asian identities and their intersection.

*Sea in the Blood* is built around two trips. The first was in 1962, when I was eight years old and taken out of school in Trinidad to accompany Nan to London. It was my first time away from the West Indies and my first taste of winter. The second trip was in 1977, when after college graduation in Toronto I joined Tim in an overland journey across Europe to Asia. This journey signified my independence from my family, and it sealed Tim's and



my relationship. However, Nan died the day before our return to Canada. This skeletal storyline is fleshed out with segments on the nature of thalassemia, the ubiquity of death in my family, and the politics of medicine. The tape is a visual pastiche of travel slides, medical instructional media, social documentary photography, original videography that includes underwater imagery, and home movie footage. There is a richly layered sound design, but no sync sound images.

In keeping with a turn away from a theoretical and toward a psychologically driven narrative about love and loss, the home movies in *Sea in the Blood* provide occasions for commemoration rather than distancing. In *My Mother's Place*, the treatment of the family footage is at times confrontational, with onscreen text contradicting the apparent meaning of the images: "This shows more about my family's desires than how we really lived," states one subtitle over an image of my mother and me walking in front of a mansion, in fact the prime minister's residence. But the decade that separates the two tapes saw the blossoming of digital technology and a widespread cynicism about the truth of images. The kind of self-reflexive strategies I employed in *My Mother's Place* have as a consequence lost some of their political and aesthetic edge.

I replayed the London footage for my mother and surviving sister and audiotaped their reactions to seeing their images after almost forty years. My older sister, who had already left Trinidad when we acquired the camera, did not remember the existence of the footage, and it took some time before she recognized the events depicted. I overlaid this audio interview onto the first images of home movies that appear in the tape, underscoring the psychic leap into the past. In another sequence, I lifted a voice-of-God narration from a 1979 educational slide show on thalassemia and illustrated it with footage of the family playing in the snow, tags superimposed on each member indicating their medical status. The slide show also appears in what is perhaps the tape's most pointed image, in which a profile drawing illustrating the facial features common to children with thalassemia is digitally melded with a slow-motion home movie image of Nan looking directly into the camera. Meanwhile, the narrator of the slide show relates that "[a] tendency to a slanted shape of the eyes and a yellowish brown pigmentation of the skin lead to the descriptive term 'mongoloid' to describe these features; however, 'thalassemia facies' may be an even more appropriate term for such characteristic changes."<sup>7</sup> This sequence was an attempt to draw out the tensions between the caring aspects of medicine and its connections to regimes of social control. More specifically, it was a response to the depersonalized photographs of children used to illustrate the medical literature on thalassemia.



**Figure 1** From *Sea in the Blood*, by Richard Fung, 2000.  
Courtesy of Vtape.

The home movies show the mutual dependency between Nan and me as children, and they perhaps account for my later need to separate. Most of the footage is taken from the 1962 trip to London. A physician there was Nan's last hope, and she spent three weeks in the hospital undergoing a splenectomy. Yet there are no signs of illness or hospitals and no hint of anxiety in any of these shots of snowball fights and tourist sights. In developing an aesthetic strategy for *Sea in the Blood*, I used these absences—the mendacity of the image, in fact—as a guide, communicating through what is not said, what is not seen. In addition to reflecting something of Nan's and my family's approach to fatal illness, it worked against the bog of sentimentality in which this subject matter could easily become mired. I wanted to engage the emotions, but not to deaden the intellect.

### **Movies within Movies**

Television arrived in Trinidad and Tobago with independence in 1962. This technology symbolized a new era and an opening of connections to a wider world. The programming, starting at a single hour a day, nevertheless betrayed the country's neocolonial status: almost all the shows were from Britain or the United States. My family's home movies span the years of the introduction of television, a time when there was little recording of public, much less private, Trinidadian life in moving images. This economy of scarcity amplifies the significance of the family films as historical documents.

They provide a record of middle-class urban life in a Chinese merchant family. But my mother also shot at public events, and the body of film includes the Independence Day celebrations of Trinidad and Tobago in 1962 as well as footage of Carnival in the early '60s. Trinidad is home to one of the three important pre-Lenten Carnivals in the Americas. Newspapers and other photographs capture the costumes of that decade, but my mother's films of Carnival Monday's *J'ouvert* and Carnival Tuesday's "pretty mas" record the movements of the dancing: the "chip" of the daybreak celebrants, the "wine" and display of the costumed performers, both differ from the way that Carnival dancing has evolved today.

In their recording of private lives and private perspectives on the public, home movies are invaluable documents of everyday lived experience. My family's films reveal much about the time and the society in which they were made. Nevertheless, my family's desire to inscribe themselves into the conventions of the technology, and all that this was associated with, means that the films are not always what they seem; their familiarity can be deceptive.

Because 8mm movie technology was widely available in the United States and Canada, home movies strike a note of identification with a large cross-section of North Americans. Home movie footage, actual or simulated, is therefore used in independent and commercial contemporary media to evoke midcentury nuclear family life, particularly in the suburbs. It suggests the commonplace, the ordinary. But in Third World countries, home movies were accessible only to the relatively privileged, and the footage draws attention to social difference rather than commonality. Its use therefore undermines, or at least provides a counterpoint to, the inclination to conflate the "I" of the Third World autobiographical film or videomaker with the "I" of the nation, to extend Henry Louis Gates's formulation about identity and race in African American autobiographical writing.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the essay film *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* (1992) by Haitian-born director Raoul Peck, footage of Peck's childhood in Zaire—whether he is seen dancing the twist or riding a bike with a group of black and white children in a visibly upscale neighborhood—visualizes his complex relationship to Africa as both a diasporic African and a privileged foreigner whose father was an agricultural expert. I believe my family-based videotapes perform similar acrobatics of affiliation and demarcation: my family is and is not Chinese, Trinidadian, Canadian. In this task, the home movies are crucial. Their specificity ruffles neat categories. Yet as a videomaker reworking these films into my own counterhegemonic projects, I have had to manipulate their context and their surface to reveal these meanings. Otherwise they would be easily consumed as nostalgic, quaint, or exotic.

I am unsure which came first, my interest in unofficial histories or my rescreening of the home movies in the mid-'80s. In any case, my rediscovery of the family films has led me to tackle some of the ways in which large historical events and movements reverberate in the everyday lives of ordinary people far away from the metropolitan countries and great urban centers. In *My Mother's Place*, my mother talks about her ability as a child to recite the names of all the bays of the British coastline. As a pupil in a British colony, useful knowledge was about the center, not the periphery where one lived. History occurred somewhere else. As she ponders her education, my mother begins to question its validity: "When you think about it, it didn't make sense," she laughs. While never escaping hegemonic knowledge, my family's home movies cut a chink in the one-way (neo)colonial mirror. They allow another history to surface. For a brief instant, they allow the forever-outsider, the spectator, to be seen and to recognize herself.

## Notes

1. Patricia Holland, "History, Memory and the Family Album," in Jo Spence and Patricia Holland, eds., *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (London: Virago, 1991), 7.

2. Holland, "History, Memory and the Family Album," 9.

3. Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 114.

4. Don Slater, "Consuming Kodak," in Spence and Holland, 49.

5. For an account of this famous plagiarism lawsuit, see Louis Nizer, *My Life in Court* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961).

6. Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1990), 233-45.

7. "Thalassemia Slide Show," presentation at Michener Institute for Health Sciences, Canada, 1979.

8. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Writing 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes," in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *"Race" Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 11.