

Uncovering the Archive: (Auto)biographical Documentaries and the “Moment of
Discovery”

Jess Stewart-Lee

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By: Jess Stewart-Lee

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

_____ Chair
Martin Lefebvre

_____ Examiner
Malini Guha

_____ Examiner
Catherine Russell

_____ Supervisor
May Chew

Approved by _____

Luca Caminati, Graduate Program Director

_____ 2023 _____

Annie Gérin, Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

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With the proliferation of digital archives as fixtures in our daily lives, the study of physical archives and their contents becomes more important than ever. Archives now function as sites for determining historical context and narratives, with formal archival institutions often acting as the foundations for ideas of nation-building. However, I argue that it is the informal archives—whether communal, familial, personal, or otherwise—which should be central to our analysis of physical archives and their place between the pages of history.

These informal archives necessarily question the role of the formal archive in narrativizing dominant histories with one of the key sites of debate occurring within the documentary genre, and specifically documentaries by diasporic filmmakers. In many such films, there is a crucial “moment of discovery,” wherein the found archival object marks the filmmaker as part of an alternative history that troubles the ingrained historical record. This “moment” marks the disruptions that the stories by diasporic people have upon traditions of proliferating alternative histories to counter dominant narratives and storytelling. The works which I will be exploring as examples of this filmic tradition are *Random Acts of Legacy* (2018), *Retour* (2017), and *Shirkers* (2018). All three of these films draw on this “moment of discovery” to build outwards, overlaying new interpretations of history onto these archival objects. I seek to understand what can be learned from these alternative histories.

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None of this would have been possible without the support of my family, especially my parents, who worked to not only understand the topics I wrote about, but give me feedback on them. A thesis is many things, and they made those things make sense, even when I didn't believe it for myself. In turn, I wrote indirectly about both of them, which I hope they can forgive me for as well.

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Though this process has proven to be isolating and difficult at times, it has also given me new opportunities to find connections. Thank you to the ETBC and particularly to Kat and Kate, who listened to me when I was at my lowest and wrote alongside me when I couldn't find the words otherwise.

Finally, I will also say that this thesis happened *in spite of* the global Covid-19 pandemic, which consumed the entirety of my degree and ravaged my personal health in the latter part of this project. It happened *in spite of* the wildfires and climate crises that affected my home and myself over these past two years. If this thesis is, ultimately, a reflection on the histories that have been forgotten, left behind, rendered inert, or fragmented, then I hope these events do not meet the same fate.

Contents

List of Figures.....	vi
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Diaspora.....	4
Archive.....	7
(The Moment of) Discovery.....	11
Chapter Two: Chinese-Looking People.....	17
Introduction.....	17
Historical Context.....	20
The “Moment of Discovery” and “Being Away”.....	23
Touch Without Touch.....	28
On Being Away and Not Coming Back	37
Conclusion.....	40
Chapter Three: This Photo Was Never Sent.....	42
Introduction.....	42
Objects In Motion.....	50
More Than a Photograph.....	53
Leaving (From a Train Station, or Elsewhere).....	59
Conclusion.....	63
Chapter Four: Memories of Things Which No Longer Exist	65
Introduction.....	65
Story Fragments	72
Loss	78
Memory.....	84
Conclusion.....	88
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	90
The Archive.....	91
The Moment.....	93
Bibliography	97

List of Figures

- Figure 1. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Fung family friends with Chinese-identifying pins.
- Figure 2. Still from *Random Acts*, showing a meeting to support the war effort.
- Figure 3. Still from *Random Acts*, showing unnamed Fung relations and the effects of decay on the celluloid film.
- Figure 4. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Silas Fung being filmed by a family friend.
- Figure 5. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Silas and Edythe Fung on their wedding anniversary.
- Figure 6. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Edythe Fung playing the piano.
- Figure 7. Still from *Random Acts*, a few frames after the previous figure, depicting Edythe Fung playing the piano.
- Figure 8. Still from *Retour*, depicting the opening shot of the "house."
- Figure 9. Still from *Retour*, depicting a fragment of the original photograph, of the "barber."
- Figure 10. Still from *Retour*, depicting a fragment of the original photograph, of the boots.
- Figure 11. Still from *Retour*, depicting a fragment of the original photograph, of the two shirts.
- Figure 12. Still from *Retour* showing the central photograph of Huang's grandfather.
- Figure 13. Still from *Shirkers*, depicting the moment of discovery when the lost *Shirkers* (1992) cache was found.
- Figure 14. Still from *Shirkers*, showing the visual style of the original footage.
- Figure 15. Still from *Shirkers*, showing the visual style of the modern footage.
- Figure 16. Still from *Shirkers* showing Philip Cheah as a crossing guard while a trio of girls cross behind him.
- Figure 17. Still from *Shirkers*, depicting the same scene of Cheah filming, but on video from a new angle.
- Figure 18. Still from *Shirkers*, showing an extreme close-up of Pohshon Choy.
- Figure 19. Still from *Shirkers*, showing the Singapore-Malaya Railway.
- Figure 20. A comparison between *Shirkers* (1992) and *Rushmore* (1998).
- Figure 21. A comparison between *Shirkers* (1992) and *Ghost World* (2001).
- Figure 22. An excerpt from M. NourbeSe Philip's and Setaey Adamu Boateng's "Zong! #1".

Chapter One: Introduction

The first time that I recall thinking deeply about archives, I was amidst family. From a box that I did not know existed, an uncle drew forth a bulky, weathered machine and handfuls of tiny white squares. I was told to hold them up to the light, to look through them and see what secrets they held. They were, of course, slides—intended to be used with the projector which my uncle was placing on whatever surface was closest to a patch of empty white wall. I remember us gathering closer, dragging chairs from other rooms to collect in the corner of this one, all for the chance to take in the faces of people who I did not, and would never know.

I remember the apparatus of the projector more than the photographs. This would surely be a disappointment to my mother, as the photos were likely of her as a child, mixed in with images of relatives who I have only seen in those now-forgotten images. Yet, I think that it is worth dwelling on the fact that the thing I recall most is the experience of seeing images, which were only mere smudges without the mediation of the machine, come into focus. Perhaps the takeaway is this: that the archive is far more than the documents, images, and objects which we seek to preserve, but the tangible and intangible mechanisms around it which allow us to see what is otherwise hidden from us.

My aim with this project is to explore the use of archival objects—namely, film and photographs with a few other ephemera thrown in—in (auto)biographical documentaries, with a focus on films by Chinese filmmakers. I have chosen to do this through the investigation of the phenomenon that I am calling the “moment of discovery.” I define this as the instance depicted within these films wherein the physical archive—be it a celluloid film canister or photograph—is found, discovered, or otherwise revealed to the filmmaker. The framing of these “moments” often places them at the beginning of the narrative, the inciting incident to set off the stories that these

filmmakers chose to tell; yet in their framing of these “moments” within the film, the discovery of these archives becomes a catalyst for the larger themes that these filmmakers seek to articulate. By focusing on the moment of discovery and the way that it is mobilized in these films, their accounts of marginalization and history can be better understood.

Each of the films that I am analyzing counters the Western construct of history as a singular linear narrative, by first raising an accepted history or singular controlling narrative and then countering it through alternative forms of history-making that are initiated by the moment of discovery. This idea of history as a materially documented, linear narrative arises from the idea of universal history, or the conceit “that all peoples... can be situated in the narrative of human history on a continuum between a start and an end point” (Bowden 3). The theory of universal history can be connected back to policies such as Manifest Destiny or the Doctrine of Discovery, which I will touch on later in this introduction. Regarding material documentation, not all histories are kept through meticulous record-keeping, with many taking alternate forms inclusive of “oral history and tradition, [which] may have little or no synergy with [Western] archaeological versions of the past” (Smith 284). Through techniques of hapticity, speculation, and polyvocality, the three films that I analyze turn away from this model of Western history-making, and instead posit alternate ways of reconnecting with history as animated by the moment of discovery.

I do not intend to shy away from the fraught nature of this term: “discovery” is weighed down with all the history entangled in *what* is being discovered, and by whom, and how this discovery is made known to others. Furthermore, the very construction of this “moment” within these films is manufactured by the filmmakers, not to mention the countless other named and unnamed collaborators who have worked on the films in question. That is to say: the moment of discovery is not a stable concept and is certainly not without contention. Yet, I believe that this

instability both mirrors the state of archives as both concept and place, and speaks to the nature of how archives are interacted with throughout these films.

My choice to focus on Chinese filmmakers comes specifically from a guiding interest in the historical marginalization that I have both read as often the practice of dominant archives and dealt with personally, which I wanted to parse further through these films. This not to imply some singular shared Chinese trait, but rather to approach the work from a perspective of personal investment. These stories are not my own, but were chosen from a desire to uplift specifically Chinese histories and explore the intricacies of our identities through our own words and personal archives. Each film chosen engages with the personal home archive in a way that is specific to that filmmaker's experiences of historical marginalization, as informed by their first encounter with their archive—the moment of discovery. Through these films and their charting of history, this project seeks to form a more complete picture of how these filmmakers negotiate their identity in relation to the archive, and how that sense of self is reflected in the way that they represent the moment of discovery.

I have broken this project down into three key concepts, delineated by film and filmmakers: hapticity, speculation, and collective memory. The first chapter, an analysis of Ali Kazimi's *Random Acts of Legacy* (2016), is grounded in the physical archive in order to examine the role of haptics in the portrayal of the archival object on screen. The second chapter, a look at history and temporality alongside Pang-Chuan Huang's *Retour* (2017), moves between the object and its treatment, examining what it means for the discovery of the archival object to be merged with a narrative of transnationality and familial obligation. Finally, the third chapter departs from the physical altogether with the theft of the celluloid film footage in Sandi Tan's *Shirkers* (2018) and

examine the role that collective memory and recall play in the revitalization of the lost physical archive.

Before analyzing these films further, I will first lay the groundwork; in the following sections, I define my key terms while introducing a handful of notable theorists who have impacted my understanding of the larger concepts that I will invoke throughout this project. Following that, I will elucidate the moment of discovery and lay out a brief overview of each chapter as they relate to it. It is my hope that, by analyzing the intersections between diaspora, temporality, history, and marginalization, this thesis will show the function of the moment of discovery in highlighting the role of the archive in film.

Diaspora

My understanding of diaspora is heavily informed by the work of Khachig Tölölyan, Lily Cho, and Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, all of whom redefine diaspora studies through their proposed paradigms. The particular intersection of their work lies in the goal of (re)defining diaspora; there is much debate within the pages of their writing on how to do so without needlessly constraining its definition. Doing so risks “[reducing] diasporas and diasporic communities to the status of objects”, replacing the concern of understanding them with the fear of defining them out of existence (Cho 14). Furthermore, it risks losing the understanding of diaspora as “not a function of socio-historical and disciplinary phenomena, but [emerging] from deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated and longings which hang at the edge of possibility” (15). The stakes lie in threading the needle of “[finding] the continuities within these disparate experiences and histories, without losing sight of the specificities of these various and varying communities and movements” (13).

Continuing with Cho, her definition of diaspora centres on arguing “for an understanding of diaspora as first and foremost a subjective condition marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession” (14). She clarifies, “[d]iaspora is related to globalization, transnationalism and postcolonialism, but differentiated from these processes [...] by the subjective conditions of demography and the longings connected to geographical displacement” (14-15). That is, Cho reads the diasporic condition not as an objective set of parameters, but a subjective condition that is shaped by hegemonic structures such as colonialism and globalization.

Sandra So Hee Chi Kim draws on Cho’s definition of diaspora as a subjective condition and expands upon it, arguing “that diaspora as a social phenomenon emerges from such conditions of subjectivity” (338). Kim explains further “that diasporic identities are consolidated and constructed primarily via mechanisms of postmemory [that centre] the inter/transgenerational transmission of memory and the identifications forged within familial space” (340). Postmemory, a term proposed first by Marianne Hirsch, is a kind of memory that “is constructed by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which the second generation grew up” (339). By applying Hirsch’s concept of postmemory to Cho’s definition of diaspora, Kim understands diaspora as an experience, which is produced “in complex relation to the relentless play of history, culture, and power in larger society” (350). Rather than it being solely a subjective condition, Kim interprets diaspora as being an experience, informed by intergenerational memory that shapes an individual’s identity.

In order to proceed, I will invoke a singular working definition of diaspora, that being “a process of collective identification and form of identity, marked by ever-changing differences that chart the shifting boundaries of certain communities hierarchically embedded as enclaves with

porous boundaries within other, larger communities” (Tölölyan 649-650). Here, I specifically cite Tölölyan, as his theorizing on diaspora and its definition predates the other referenced theorists and is cited in each of their works as a direct influence. My reason for choosing this specific definition is its breadth, which still lays out diaspora as a process. In doing so, Tölölyan infuses the concept with a sense of vitality and motion that would otherwise leave the term to stagnation. Furthermore, diaspora as “ever-changing” allows for some manipulation of the term to fit various perspectives, while still holding fast to its core understandings—that diaspora is an identity marker which serves to demarcate one group’s sense of self in relation to other, larger groups. In understanding this, we can better see how it applies to the various films and filmmakers that I will be analyzing in the coming chapters.

While not all the writing that I reference—nor the people in the films that I am analyzing—reference the term, I believe it is necessary to define “diaspora” as it is one of the primary frameworks that I am reading these films through. As well, because diaspora is such a complex term and one which often is used to refer to broader concepts, I wanted to specify how I am using it and the scholars who inform my thinking on this subject. Finally, it is worth noting that, while I read the films in question through the lens of diaspora, I do not wish to impose the label of “diasporic” onto any of the filmmakers or subjects of these films. Rather, I aim to examine how diasporas and transnational movements impact the films and the personal archival documents contained within. Indeed, Tölölyan alludes to this dilemma within academia, writing that:

the territory and populations of the Middle East existed as sociopolitical domains before orientalism, and then Middle Eastern studies, represented and transformed them into disciplinary objects. They continue to exist, but in subtle ways how they think of themselves, how they act, what they are, is altered by the dialectic between self-study and

the disciplinary and area studies emanating from powerful quarters (The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies 655).

I want to be aware of my own academic biases here and analyze these films with an understanding of the impacts that diasporic communities have had on these films, while also ensuring I do not project misplaced identities onto these works in a way which would further dilute the already muddied waters of diasporic subjectivities.

Archive

The very term “archive” brings to mind a plethora of concepts and definitions, including: the institution that is often governmental in nature but not always, the act of keeping something and of preserving it for the future, and the collection of personal or familial photographs and letters stored in various forgotten places in a family home, among others. I aim to elucidate the diverse archival forms that I will be working with throughout this project, and to gesture toward the scholars who have informed my understanding of archive, in an attempt to shape how I view “the archive.” Julie Bacon, in her short essay on defining archive in relation to artistic practice, states:

...what glitters is the poetic-political value of archives, the fact that their aesthetics speak of, and more than that are ineffably bound with, subjecthood: their imagination is a form of agency, their agency colours our dreams, by that I mean our actions. This is true of government records offices or municipal museums and other archival spaces. And this is why, though I emphasize definitions, there is slippage. This is what draws artists into archives, as they introduce, juxtapose, remove things from view; as they alter terms of access, accentuate the spirit of the place, descend into the criteria that define the archive,

its provenance, and so the territory of the archival contract and promise (Archive, Archive, Archive! 52).

I am interested in the embodied point of contact between the artist and the archival object, and what the artist's interpretation of that moment of discovery says about the archive and their relationship to it. This is the first point in my definition of archive: that the root of all of my analyses of it within these films begins at the physical, with the archival object—be it a photograph, celluloid film reel, videotape, or otherwise. Catherine Russell, whose book *Archiveology* specifically deals with the archival object, defines the film archive not only as “a place where films are preserved and stored but...as an ‘image bank’ from which collective memories can be retrieved” (1). She interprets the archive through the work of Walter Benjamin, as a “construction site” in its relationship to memory and what secrets can be yielded from it (13). Through this project, I will draw on the memories contained within the archives in my selected films, examining the “moment of discovery” as the access point to the archive and its secrets.

The next commonality between the archives examined in this project is that they are all home archives. Broadly, Patricia R. Zimmermann defines the home movie as “a subset of the amateur film movement located within individual and/or familial practices of visual recording of intimate events and rituals and intended for private usage and exhibition” (*Mining Home Movies* 8). There are, as with many general definitions, caveats. I would argue that the celluloid archive in *Shirkers* (2018) did not begin as a home movie but could be reclassified as such since its recovery. Nevertheless, even though Zimmermann's definition discusses home movies and not archives specifically, her words apply doubly to my review of archives here. The key takeaway is that none of the archives in my project are the property of formal institutions. This was intentional on my part; I wanted to explore the particular dynamic between filmmakers who interacted with

archival objects that were personal, even autobiographical in nature and, in spite of or perhaps because of this, also forgotten, discarded, or lost before their “discovery” by these filmmakers.

Achille Mbembe, in his essay on the archive as colonial institution, argues that “the archive has neither status nor power without an architectural dimension, [...] that degree of discipline, half-light and austerity that gives the place something of the nature of a temple and a cemetery” (19). With this in mind, I chose to turn to the uncategorized messiness of the home archive, as it exists within the films in question. Outside the bounds of the institution, I sought out interactions between artist and archive that would have otherwise been impossible without the personal connection—archival objects too degraded to be preserved by institutions, family photographs enriched by oral histories passed between generations, and lost films recovered through preservation from beyond the grave.

This connection is alluded to in Jaimie Baron’s book, *The Archive Effect*, where she argues that “archives and the indexical traces they preserve often escape the control of the archons as well as the historians and filmmakers who use them [and thusly] these traces mean subversively more than we might intend or wish – or subversively less” (4). I believe that this excess lends itself to the filmmakers’ use of the moment of discovery as this “moment” is used, as I will elaborate in both the next section and in each chapter, to reveal more about the filmmakers’ relationship to the archival objects than in clarifying the truth of the archive itself, if it exists at all. Within these films, the archive is defined by how it is referenced, manipulated, represented, and obscured. Thus, this thesis aims to engage with the filmmakers’ treatment and representation of their respective archives in order to parse what it means to them and what role it plays within the film.

Indeed, for me, the interpretation of the archive is the most exciting part of what can be done with these materials, especially in the case of my project, where the materials are of personal

value to the filmmakers. In her book *The Black Prairie Archives*, Karina Vernon reframes archives as challenging “traditional colonial conceptions of the prairies as a stable and boundaried territory by ‘diasporizing’ it [and inscribing] the prairies as a movable and contingent set of social relations, not a fixed territory whose boundaries might be imagined as identical with those of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba” (*The Black Prairie Archives* 8). She defines her archive in numerous ways, but perhaps most notably as “a device for remembering and perceiving, from a bibliographic point of view, the networks of exchange that have developed between black prairie people and diasporized black communities both within and beyond the prairies, but also, crucially, with Indigenous peoples, and South Asian, Chinese, and European diasporas” (8). By interpreting the archive as a space for charting identity—and, specifically in her book, charting Blackness—in all its complexity, I drew on her method as an alternate path to studying archives, allowing for the possibility of engaging with ideas of personal identity and diaspora.

Vernon’s method, of pushing back against traditional conceits of what comprises an archive, invites an approach that centres the counter-archive. In his introduction to the second issue of *Incite!*, Brett Kashmere defines the term “counter-archive” with thorough specificity, explaining,

the “counter-archive” represents an incomplete and unstable repository, an entity to be contested and expanded through clandestine acts, a space of impermanence and play. Taken as an action, the term entails mischief and imagination, challenging the record of official history. Employed as an artistic strategy it pushes our archival impulse into new territories, encouraging critique and material alteration/fabrication, and emboldening anarchivism. To counter-archive is to counter-act, to rewrite, to animate over. Consider it

a take-and-give thing... a negotiation. Against the un-Commons (Cache Rules Everything Around Me).

While I will continue to reference the archive throughout this introduction and thesis, many personal and marginalized archives may be understood as counter-archival in their use and the histories that they reference. Though I do not explicitly read any of the archives throughout this thesis as counter-archival, I deal specifically with the alternate histories that these archives re/present to audiences, and thus want to leave space for counter-archival interpretations, even if I do not explore them to their full potential within the bounds of this project.

I understand the archive not solely through one scholar or particular field of study, but through a linkage of thoughts. The archives referenced in this thesis are not derived from institutions, nor are they formal documentations of historical events. Instead, they were produced by amateur hands and intended initially for a narrow, known audience. Beyond this, the filmmakers have reinterpreted these archival objects in ways that question their original intents. Throughout my project, I embrace this treatment of the archive through the artist's lens and seek to uncover how these interpretations are mobilized through the moment of discovery.

(The Moment of) Discovery

Background

The moment of discovery is a narrative device used by these filmmakers to construct a personalized concept of "archive" that speaks to larger themes of marginalization, race, and history. The individual filmmakers' construction of these "moments" reveals how they understand archives through their invocation of the archive as a means of interrogating identity and nationhood. But discovery as a concept is, at best, fraught with entangled histories of global

colonialism and the concurrent erasure of Indigenous and racialized histories. As such, and because my work explicitly seeks to analyze and engage with marginalized and obfuscated histories, I want to work through my definition of the “moment of discovery” with an understanding of the colonial violence at its core, and carry that intent throughout the entirety of this project rather than simply addressing it here.

The idea of discovery, as I am critically examining here, inherits the baggage of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery. This is not one singular document, but instead a concept derived from three papal bulls, or public decrees issued by a Catholic pope. These three bulls, in total, “[declared] war against all non-Christians throughout the world, and specifically [sanctioned and promoted] the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian nations and their territories” (Newcomb, *Five Hundred Years of Injustice* 18). Within Canada, it has been invoked throughout legal cases involving Indigenous land rights, though rarely involving Indigenous parties specifically (*Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* 2).

In 2022, the Pope’s visit to Canada brought with it calls for him to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery and revoke the bulls, in a show of reconciliation or as a first step to challenge entrenched, racist laws within Canada which sought to “attempt the ‘exclusive power to extinguish’ Indigenous rights on an ongoing basis” (*Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* 2). Here, I will briefly add that I specify the Doctrine’s impact in Canada because of my own occupation here and this project’s creation within its presumed colonial boundaries. This is not to narrow the scope of the Doctrine’s impact on global Indigenous nations or communities, but rather to situate this particular project in relation to its colonial context. On March 30th, 2023, a statement from the Dicastries for Culture and Education as well as Integral Human Development was released, which “[repudiated] those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of

indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political ‘doctrine of discovery’” (“Joint Statement of the Dicastries”). While noteworthy as the result of a long-awaited call for reconciliation from Indigenous leaders and experts, there is much debate over the statement itself and what it means for the campaign for Indigenous reconciliation globally, going forward. For our purposes here, the repudiation on the part of the Church is recognized but does not erase the resonances of the Doctrine of Discovery across centuries and into the present.

My goal here is to both acknowledge the history behind the term that I will be using, as well as recognize the roots which feed such institutions as archives. Though the ones that I will be studying throughout this project are informal home archives rather than state institutions, the archive, in a conceptual sense, is not unbiased nor, as a formal state institution, has it historically been a place of decolonial justice and Indigenous sovereignty. To “discover” an object, document, or memory within the archive, it must have been deemed important enough to retain in the first place, let alone whether it can be “discovered” at all. To “discover” something—an object, a location, a species, a culture—is to presume a form of ownership over that entity, a mastery that comes merely from identifying it as novel to its “discoverer.” While the narratives that I will be exploring deal with marginalization and obscured histories nearly lost to time, the fact of their recording denotes an access to materials, places of safekeeping or means of restoration, and thus, an “archival impulse.” Many stories do not receive the same amount of care. With this understanding, in studying the home archives of these Chinese filmmakers, I hope to examine one aspect of how marginalization and the archive may come together, and how those stories are told when certain voices are given the space to do so.

The Moment

I want to clarify what constitutes the moment of discovery itself. While I have already defined it as a narrative device used by these (auto)biographical documentary filmmakers that relates to their conceptions of identity, race, and history, I will further break down its specifics and why I chose this concept as an analytic lens throughout these films.

In particular, one of the key reasons that I chose these films was the filmmakers' choice to position the moment of discovery as central to the plot of their films. The deployment of this device within each film as a crucial narrative point positions the moment of discovery as a catalyst for larger arguments within the film over the nature of the archive, history, race, and identity. As a device, it is often presented within the films as a scene narrated in voiceover that describes the events of the filmmaker finding, seeking out, or encountering their archive in a way that relates back to the plot. These scenes may be represented through voiceover narration overlaying recreations of the "act of discovery," as in *Shirkers* and *Random Acts of Legacy*. The key elements are the attention paid to these moments, and the subsequent role these moments play within the larger context of the film. The moment of discovery becomes emblematic of the wider arguments that each film makes, acting as both a narrative entry into the story and a means through which the filmmaker can argue their film's viewpoint.

In Chapter One, I examine the moment of discovery in Ali Kazimi's *Random Acts of Legacy* (2016), a film about the discovered and restored home movie footage of the Fungs, a first-generation Chinese-American family, shot by their patriarch Silas Fung. Fung's movies span the early decades of the 1900s and document the everyday existence of the Chinese diaspora in Chicago, in an archival trove that would have otherwise been lost had Kazimi not acquired and restored it. The "moment" itself comes early in the film, almost at the beginning, as Kazimi

introduces the film in voiceover overlaid atop footage of the celluloid restoration as he explains how he acquired the Fung archive and his journey to see it restored. The exposition ends with a glimpse at some of the footage, heavily marred and often so degraded that the image is almost entirely lost.

I argue in this chapter that this “moment” is rooted in the haptics of the image and the diasporic concept of *being away*, or Laura U. Marks’ “being that is away from itself” (The Skin of Film 132). In beginning with the haptic archival encounter, I chose specifically to start my analyses from the point of the physical, tangible archival object before moving to the less tangible forms of archive. Here, the moment of discovery reveals the relationship that Kazimi has with the historical materials, and his recovery of them becomes an examination of obscured histories, both in their erasure from mainstream history and the literal loss of photographic images.

Chapter Two dwells on the narrative of the image and its place within a family history. Pang-Chuan Huang’s *Retour* (2017) traces the history of Huang’s grandfather through a series of photographs, which are woven throughout the filmmaker’s own journey across continents from his current home in France to Taiwan. Here, our moment of discovery comes nearly at the end of the film, in a revelation that the fragments of an image which we have been studying are, instead, parts of a whole which was uncovered by Huang in his family’s basement. That the discovery comes so late in the film concomitant with the revelation of the photo itself leads us to an analysis of the archive’s relationship to temporality and memory; I argue that Huang’s use of the moment of discovery draws viewers into the photo’s narrative and uses that experience to speculate on the historical potential contained within. By presenting his lone photograph as a larger archive imbued with embodied memories of his grandfather’s past, Huang uses the moment of discovery to parse his personal relationship to his own family history.

Finally, Chapter Three begins with the physical before turning explicitly away from it, in an exploration of collective memory and what constitutes an archive. In Sandi Tan's *Shirkers* (2018), the celluloid film that Tan made as a teenager, also named *Shirkers*, is stolen by her mentor Georges Cardona—only to be rediscovered decades later in the basement of his widow's house, whole yet missing its soundtrack. The film explores a polyvocal history of the original film's production and afterlife, incomplete though it may be, and in doing so critiques singular, accepted historical narratives in favour of a multiplicity of voices. In the moment of discovery, when Tan finds the missing celluloid film preserved perfectly albeit without its soundtrack, *Shirkers* poses a question of loss, to be answered by the shifting historicity of her friends' collective memory and an archive which cannot be captured solely in the physical—if only because parts of it no longer exist.

Between these three delineated “moments,” I want to chart not only the shape of the moment of discovery across all forms of archive contained in these films, but also why it is worth documenting and analyzing. The moment of discovery within the three films becomes a catalyst for the larger questions that each filmmaker asks, of themselves and those woven into the fabric of their stories. By exploring the nature of this moment and these discoveries, I hope to uncover the importance of its use within such films by diasporic Chinese filmmakers.

Chapter Two: Chinese-Looking People

Introduction

Degraded film flickers, filling the screen before transitioning into rows of modern homes. Amateur footage follows a group of young Chinese adults volleying a tennis ball back and forth, only somewhat obscured by the scars of marred¹ film. These same obfuscations begin to extend further, creeping across images and eventually subsuming them, only to bloom and fade like a crescendo across the surface of the screen.

These are the sequences that introduce Ali Kazimi's *Random Acts of Legacy* (2016); they are fragments of home movies shot by Silas Fung, a Chinese commercial artist and amateur filmmaker whose hobbyist films date back to the 1920s. *Random Acts* offers a macro portrait of America from the early to mid twentieth century, with a specific focus on the Chinese-American community in Chicago and how they were viewed throughout the decades, amidst the shadow of the Chinese Exclusion Act and into the Second World War. Kazimi does this through a study of one man—Silas Fung—and his contribution to his community, through his found home movies as a document of his experiences as a young adult growing older, putting down roots in America with his family, and navigating ongoing global events. As the film follows Fung's life, Kazimi intersperses the degraded celluloid movies with interviews featuring Fung's family members, as

¹ As an aside, I have not landed upon words that I am contented with to refer to the marks and evidence of age which obscure the images on these films. I have used words such as “tarnish” or “mar,” but I am not entirely convinced of their intent, because I am not sold on the idea that the loss that they represent is wholly negative. I think that the loss of these images in clear detail, as films to be pored over as historical objects, is a true loss, but I also view the marked versions of them, obscured and occasionally entirely lost to the effects of vinegarsyndrome and decay, as opportunities to consider the filmic object and ultimately, the project of film history and concurrent histories of racialized peoples. So, I will continue to use different words to refer to these marks and their effects, in the hopes that some of these words are able to, at least, allude to the breadth of consideration I have put towards these “tarnishes.”

well as experts in Chinese-American history in order to construct a portrait of Chinese-American life in that era, through the Chinese community of Chicago's own words and visuals.

With its heavy usage of archival film materials, *Random Acts* also revolves around Kazimi's own relationship to the Fung archive as an Asian immigrant filmmaker himself—one who works heavily on topics of film and history, with a particular focus on marginalized and misunderstood histories of people of colour. Kazimi himself is not Chinese, but self-identifies as South Asian; I've chosen to define my research through the lens of specifically Chinese filmmakers so as frame my own perspective and retain the specificity that a term as broad as "Asian" cannot encompass. That being said, I do not wish to erase or elide Kazimi's identity—rather, I want to hold his identity in relation to Fung's own and allow each to coexist in a way that reveals the similarities between the two without obfuscating the differences. In particular, there is more to be said, beyond the scope of this project, about Kazimi's role in the restoration of the Fung archive and the connections that he feels between his identity as an immigrant and Fung's own. Though Kazimi both narrates the film and acts as interviewer, he never appears on screen, instead overlaying his voice with reels of deteriorated footage of the Fung family—brief slices of their life glimpsed between the crackling decay that sweeps across the screen, the faces muddled by damage from alchemical ageing.

Such corrupted images may be understood as haptic in the sense that Laura U. Marks proposes, when she writes of images that "resolve into figuration only gradually, if at all [...and which] offer such a proliferation of figures that the viewer perceives the texture as much as the objects imaged" (*The Skin of the Film* 162-163). Fung's films depict a historically marginalized archive of such images, discovered by Kazimi in a chain of events that unfold at the start of the

film, and which comprise the “moment of discovery” that is central to this chapter’s examination of *Random Acts*.

As outlined in my introduction, I am defining the moment of discovery, simply, as the on-screen depiction of finding an archival object by the filmmaker, and how they portray that event in the film. Here, the moment in question is defined by the creation of the haptic image and the multitudinous points of contact between filmic object and filmmaker. It occurs at the beginning of the film, as Kazimi describes the experience of handling the materials while examining the condition that they are in, overlaid atop footage of the celluloid being analyzed and restored. He then explains how professional labs refused to handle the materials, leaving him to retain them for years on end as they continued to age, before eventually finding a retired engineer to restore them. Finally, we cut to the newly-digitized footage, now heavily degraded but viewable for the first time in decades. This moment of discovery is significant because it preserves a hapticity in the filmic archive, presenting the marked images as points of contact where both Kazimi and Fung negotiate ideas of diaspora, intimacy, and memory as mediated through the lens of the camera.

To understand the nature of hapticity in relation to this moment of discovery, this chapter will first engage the relationship between Kazimi and Fung through their encounters with material archives, before examining Drew Leder’s concept of *being away* through Marks’ use of it. Marks uses this term to gesture toward a wider form of “intercultural” cinema that critiques the privileging of vision, and specifically how “ethnographic photography and film have objectified non-Western cultures and made a spectacle of them” (*The Skin of the Film* 133). Following this reading, I expand on the alluded-to concept of haptic imagery and how it relates to *Random Acts*’ archive, while also introducing the “haptic look”—or, touch without touch. The following section briefly grounds Marks’ argument on diasporic loss and *being away* in images drawn from *Random Acts*.

To reiterate, I am defining diaspora through Khachig Tölölyan, as “a process of collective identification and form of identity, marked by ever-changing differences that chart the shifting boundaries of certain communities hierarchically embedded as enclaves with porous boundaries within other, larger communities” (649-650). Ultimately, the final section argues that the hapticity of these photographs is rooted in a diasporic intimacy, which moves beyond Western-centric visuality after its reanimation from Kazimi’s discovery as an act of preservation (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* 114-115).

After the flickering of film fades out, Kazimi introduces himself into the narrative through his pursuit and preservation of this very footage. Kazimi explains that he bid on these pieces in an online auction against another buyer, a representative of the Chinese-American Museum of Chicago who was seeking out the films on behalf of the family². Upon acquiring the films, Kazimi details his first contact with the Fung archive and the discovery that the reels had already fallen victim to vinegar syndrome, a term used by archival workers to refer to the smell of degraded acetate film caused by improper storage. This archival footage is what makes up the majority of the visuals throughout *Random Acts*.

Historical Context

It is worth dwelling for a moment longer on the history of this footage. I will expand on Silas Fung’s work and films throughout this chapter, but specifically want to underscore the importance of these images at this point. In his book, *Filming History From Below*, Efrén Cuevas addresses

² In the film *Andrea Stamm*, a board member for the Chinese-American Museum of Chicago, explains that she encountered some celluloid reels on an auction site, when the seller reached out to her and asked if she would be interested in purchasing them. After consulting with Irena Lum—Silas’ daughter—who said that the celluloid had been lost by the family, she entered a bidding war for the pieces and won. Later, she attempted to purchase more films from the same collection by the same seller, but lost out to Kazimi. These films comprise the collection seen in *Random Acts of Legacy*.

how “any family archive could be understood as a patchwork that acquires meaning in the most immediate interpretation of the family circle it belongs to, but that also acquires a broader, historiographical value when it is used by a historian/filmmaker to construct a microhistorical narrative” (68). His interpretation is informed by the work of Alf Lüdtke, who studies “the history of everyday life” and applies it on a wider scale to larger social frameworks (68). In this particular quote, Cuevas is explaining how family archives are increasingly used by historians to understand historical context for global events within their fields. Though not a historian, by choosing this specific family and these images to preserve, Kazimi elucidates a historical narrative that otherwise may have been lost to neglect without the resources that he pursued, in order to restore them to their partial state as seen in *Random Acts*.

Throughout the film, Kazimi frames the historical importance of these images in terms of their ability to capture an intimate, personal view of life within a Chinese-American household in the early to mid 20th century in Chicago. With the historical context in the film provided by Dr. Henry Yu, a history professor at the University of British Columbia who was interviewed in the film, the Fung archive can be read as a portrait of idealized Chinese-American images, especially in the wake of yellow peril sentiment stoked by exclusionary laws across North America and, later, anti-Japanese racism during wartime (*Random Acts of Legacy*). Kazimi specifically notes the highly staged and constructed moments that Fung captures in his movies, while Fung’s daughter, Irena Lum, recalls how seemingly candid moments depicted were entirely staged, lit, and planned by her father. While the Fung archive was, undoubtedly, a series of home movies, the level of production that Fung put into creating them speaks to his desire for a specific vision of his own life in the transitional role of patriarch within an immigrant Chinese family at the turn of the century. Throughout the film, Kazimi reflects on the relationship between Silas and his wife

Edythe, describing how Edythe went on to become the breadwinner in the family and how this may have strained their relationship. With this in mind, Kazimi's extensive references to how Silas would seek to control every aspect of his home movies speaks to a specific vision that Silas may have had, regarding how to portray his family and his own self-imposed role in documenting them.

To continue the historical context, yellow peril refers to the racist fear of the so-called Asian—primarily East Asian, namely from Japan and China—conquest of the “white” nations of Canada and America, which primarily spread after the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 (Kurashige 91). The American Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is named as a locus for anti-Asian racism in this era, echoed later in Canada's Chinese Immigration Act of 1885. Both acts followed the completion of cross-country railroad construction projects, which relied heavily on Chinese labourers, and in part were instituted to bar further Chinese migration after the need for cheap Chinese labour declined (35). Kazimi references this era of anti-Asian racism in relation to Fung's family history; his father Fung Chak was a converted Baptist preacher who was brought over to America in order to convert other Chinese immigrants. Silas grew up amidst this wave of anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism, in an era when widespread representations of Chinese people were defined by racist imagery and yellow peril fears (Gates 22; Marchetti 2-3; Mayer 121). His brother went on to become a cartoonist who was often profiled in newspapers for his work, and Silas carefully constructed his home movies, staging them for the perfect representation of his and his family's life amidst the backdrop of racial turmoil and discrimination.

I titled this chapter “Chinese-looking People” in reference to Lum's statement to Kazimi when he asked about interviewing her: *“You had better come and talk to me soon. No one else is going to know who those Chinese-looking people are.”* Her joke, on the lack of historical narratives and images of Chinese people, speaks to the overarching sense of marginality that is carried

through the film. In both Kazimi's impulse to preserve these specific images, and Fung's desire to document his life, we can find a fascination with experiencing the everyday life of Chinese people and communities in this era. With this in mind, I argue that the Fung archive can be read as countering the prejudiced anti-Chinese imagery and sentiment of the era—not necessarily as an express political act, but in Fung's depiction of his own everyday experiences that reveal his assimilationist desires. Kazimi dwells on Fung's depiction of his children's birthday parties, while Chuimei Ho, past president of the board for the Chinese-American Museum of Chicago, notes how they never had birthday cake in China and Lum recalls how her younger brother forgot Chinese after being held back in school for not knowing English. In positioning the Fung archive not as a neutral reflection of the Chinese-American community in Chicago at the time, but as a document of one man's experiences and his desire to craft an image of himself and his family in America, the home movies retain their identity as historically important through the portrayal of both one man's aspirational Chinese-American life and his everyday existence, in contrast to widespread anti-Chinese imagery and propaganda of that era.

The "Moment of Discovery" and "Being Away"

In *Random Acts*, Kazimi suggests that touch is integral to his work, citing the importance of physical touch as a mode of encountering these fragments of history. He speaks on the delicacy innate to our contemporary media formats,

after over half a century of being used for home movies, film—the object and the medium—has disappeared from our homes. I was able to find, hold, touch, and look at moving images filmed over seventy years ago. And although we have all become obsessive documentarians and collectors, the vast majority of our day-to-day digital photos and home

movies are more ephemeral than ever. These digital recordings exist a mere keystroke away from erasure, all from catastrophic data failure (*Random Acts of Legacy*).

The narrativized moment of discovery for Kazimi is seeing and coming into contact with these images, not only as historical objects, but as film that has been preserved just before it was entirely lost. In noting the act of touch in connection to his work as a documentarian, Kazimi also links himself to Fung through his reference to “obsessive documentarians and collectors.” *Random Acts* focuses heavily on the home movie archive of Silas Fung, but Fung’s passion was equally split between his love for home movies and his collection of Chicago 1933 World’s Fair memorabilia—displayed as a miniature exhibition he titled *Worldsfairama*—which contained over 2000 artifacts. He famously ran tours of his *Worldsfairama* which were notable enough to be written about in local newspapers, aspiring to recreate the experience of being at *A Century of Progress* through the pieces of the fair that he had collected.

The experiences that both filmmakers sought to cultivate were specifically mediated by objects. Yet, if touch is the catalyst for the experience of discovering these archives, then how can that be communicated to outside parties - the viewers, the patrons of Fung’s *Worldsfairama*, the family members who watch the playback of their memories? How can the importance of the materiality of these archival objects be articulated in relation to the moment of discovery? If this archive begins at the material and is rooted in touch, then that connection must be explored. In the case of *Random Acts*, we can see that connection in the hapticity of the images.

Before expanding on the hapticity of the *Random Acts* archive, I will delve deeper into the relationship between these two filmmakers and the haptic’s roots in the moment of discovery through the example provided by Fung’s own exhibition. To clarify, my intent is to examine the relationship between both filmmakers and the archives that they held dear. Fung’s collection

“[contained] the best collection of Century of Progress memorabilia known to exist” (More than fair collection 51), and was kept in the basement of a friend which, as the collection grew, became a permanent exhibit that was opened to the public and, on special occasions, specifically to the officials who had been involved with the event. Fung’s fascination began when he was commissioned to work on the Chinese Pavilion at the Fair, after which he would go on to attend daily. Eventually, after the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Fair, Fung turned over his collection to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. As of right now much of the collection is in storage, though there remains a small, permanent exhibit where several pieces can still be found.

For the foremost collector of memorabilia from the Fair to be a Chinese immigrant speaks to ideas of diasporic desire that Kazimi emphasizes throughout *Random Acts*. Kazimi suffuses the film with analyses of what it was like to be a Chinese immigrant in Chicago at the time; images of the lone Chinese child in a mass of white children and families populate the film, but Kazimi goes deeper and examines the Fungs’ presentation and comportment as they lived through wartime. A



Figure 1. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Fung family friends with Chinese-identifying pins.

heavily scarred fragment shows two Fung family friends adorned with badges identifying them as Chinese [see fig. 1], in an effort to avoid victimization as hate crimes rose against Japanese Americans. Later a series of film fragments rolls, depicting a meeting between Chinese community members dubbed a “meeting for motivating national spirit,” which speaks to Fung’s nationalism and that of the wider community in the midst of the war³ [see fig. 2].



Figure 2. Still from *Random Acts*, showing a meeting to support the war effort.

Kazimi dwells on Fung’s relationship to America through this sequence, further examining the latter’s prejudices against and erasure of the adjacent Black and Mexican communities in Chicago. These are contrasted against the intimacy of Fung’s footage of Chinese people, shown in close-ups with shared friendly smiles, as well as his comparable renderings of white-centered events and gatherings depicted instead at a distance and often just as crowds. Kazimi explains that

³ Because of the nature of these archival materials, we can’t know what the impulse was behind Fung’s documentation of these nationalistic events. Later in the film, Lum recalls that her parents bought bonds from the Bank of Shanghai to support the war effort, which lends credence to the show of genuine support that Silas and Edythe display in these scenes. However, I believe it is less important to parse what is “genuine” or a survival tactic, and instead turn to interpreting what the documentation of these events means within this film and wider Chinese-American history.

even with this proximity, we never see Black people in his footage. Lum expands on this observation, describing the anti-Black racism from the Chinese community who would turn away Black patrons from their restaurants. This moment provides a brief opportunity for Kazimi to critique his own heavy usage of Fung's films; by recognizing the lack of Black and Mexican people throughout Fung's footage, in spite of their communities' physical proximity to the Chinese community in that era, Kazimi can address the gaps in the story that Fung has captured and make apparent the perspective that we are learning these histories through.

This allusion to what is left out of Fung's films doubly reflects a critique of what is centred—Kazimi's narration is overlaid atop footage of Chinese citizens walking in a parade, waving American flags. Paired with Fung's fascination with American culture and progress through his obsession with the Chicago World's Fair, as well as the meta understanding of his obsession with film technology and the absence of other people and communities of colour in his films, we can read into his home movies an aspirational Americanness, if not an aspiration toward whiteness. In these moments, there is an identifiable tension between his own Chineseness and his aspiration toward a certain form of Americanness, which is strained by the Second World War and anti-Japanese sentiment that spilled over into widespread anti-Asian fear.

In these sequences, we can see that Kazimi's framing of Fung's life underscores the impetus to fit in, and his inevitable inability to do so. This urge plays out on a lesser scale through his collection of World's Fair memorabilia and subsequent collation of it into the Worldsfairama. Even when constructing a shrine to the spectacle of Americana, there is a disconnect between the diasporic object and subject. Lum speaks to her own experiences with her mother cooking chop suey to feed the white guests of Silas' Worldsfairama, and Kazimi treasures film reels that are ruined by disfigured faces and obscured bodies that move across yellow-stained backdrops. The

very nature of these archives demands an incongruence between the dominant host culture and the marginalized identity of the filmmaker, so as to shape the diasporic disconnect that is embedded within.

This fascination with archival objects that Fung and Kazimi share is driven by the impulse to hold tangible, material archives—they are driven by an interest in the objects as they represent their particular interests. The embedded belief is that “by calling upon a sense knowledge that cannot be reproduced, namely touch, [the diasporic subject] can make [historical objects and monuments] communicate their history” (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* 71). To discover an object is not merely to hold it, yet touch is crucial to Kazimi’s connection to Fung’s work and provides an alternative to Western forms of sense memory. Fung and Kazimi’s archival impulses are specifically driven by the desire to hold history, to have a tangible connection to certain ideas (i.e. American identity, lost history, and diasporic identity) through objects that represent those concepts. The project that Fung set forth to accomplish was the recreation of a distinctly American point in memory through his archive of objects; Kazimi’s exploration of haptic images allows for *Random Acts* to do the same.

Touch Without Touch

To parse how this relationship between hapticity and diasporic visibility functions, we may turn to Laura U. Marks and her work on haptics. Marks references Drew Leder in her analysis of vision and visibility, citing “‘the absent body’ [that] makes overt use of the Latin root of absence, which means not a void but ‘being-away,’ a being that is away from itself” (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* 132). She invokes his work as a basis for an alternative to the visual-centric focus of Western culture, proposing that new technologies allow us “the luxury, and perhaps the necessity, to explore

other sorts of visuality as we have not before” (133). I hope to continue this inquiry by mobilizing Marks’ work through Leder’s *being away*. This distinction between oneself and the body can be reframed through the diasporic sensation of existing within the competing lenses of the dominant host culture and one’s minoritized personal identity. Marks interprets haptic visuality as incorporating this sense of difference, that “[t]he giving-over to the other that characterizes haptic visuality is an elastic, dynamic movement [...and] one of mutual embodiment, [which is] dynamic rather than destructive” (193). That is to say, the experience of being away from yourself.

In Marks’ introduction to the topic of intercultural cinema, she argues that it is a far more communal and culturally resonant cinema than the poles of avant-garde and commercial film (*The Skin of the Film* xiii). She notes that “[intercultural cinema] stresses the social character of embodied experience: the body is a source not just of individual but of cultural memory”, which lies at the crux of *being away* and its hapticity (xiii). I will note here that Marks uses the term “intercultural,” whereas I use diasporic; her choice of the term is intentional, as it “means that a work is not the property of any single culture, but mediates in at least two directions [and allows for] a relation between cultures [that] makes room for a variety of ‘hosts,’ destinations, and sites of power” (*The Skin of the Film* 6-7). I choose instead to use “diasporic,” as the critique Marks raises against other terms is that they may unduly centre the “host” as “the hegemonic, white, Euro-American culture” (7). Given that this is the specific historical narrative that I am critiquing in this and my other chapters, I wished to remain consistent in my phrasing and use a term that invokes a specific form of marginalization.

In discussing “the longing of exiled Egyptians for a past life”, Marks argues that “the decaying image makes the viewer reflect on how much of perception is generated by memory and longing, rather than engagement with a crisply available visual object” (*The Skin of the Film* 156).

This theorization of haptics, as that which guides the viewer to fill out the image with their own sense of yearning that moves beyond the purely visual image, allows for the diasporic self in *Random Acts* to be rooted in the missing or lost image. The images in question are those inscribed with carefully penned words in English, marred by age and vinegar syndrome, or simply forgotten in a dusty box on a shelf in one basement of many. The articulation of identity and self throughout the film hinges on the multiplicity of images that remain fractured and stained.

In the context of my analysis of haptic images, such artifacts cannot be distanced from the physical objects we hold, which have been touched and restored in haptic dimensions that move beyond the image. I allude here to the moment of discovery in *Random Acts*, wherein Kazimi takes time to dwell on his depictions of a restorative touch—the act of bringing these degraded images back to life through processes of film preservation. The contact depicted in the moment of discovery shows a figure going through the process of preserving the footage and transforming it from loss to a new and haptic form. As the footage is transformed into its new state of being, Kazimi narrates the process of preservation, dwelling on its fragile and tenuous state as faceless hands attempt to save it. In doing so, the moment of discovery is tied to the act of preservation, especially with these images being preserved on the brink of total degradation and complete loss.

In their analysis of photographic materiality, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart argue that “it is not merely the image *qua* image that is the site of meaning, but that its material and presentational forms and the uses to which they are put are central to the function of a photograph as a socially salient object” (Edwards and Hart 2). The marked images that Kazimi reveals in his discovery are made significant through the literal haptic dimension of processing and restoring ruined film, the results of which are seen throughout the rest of the movie. To speak of film—specifically Fung’s films—as being “marked” is not an overstatement. The images that fill

Random Acts' hour-long runtime are almost all blemished in some way that disfigures or makes strange images that should be identifiable. Such inscribed images are emblematic of Marks' concept of haptics, which she defines as "[inviting] the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well"



Figure 3. Still from *Random Acts*, showing unnamed Fung relations and the effects of decay on the celluloid film.

(*The Skin of the Film 2*). In her wider argument toward haptic visuality, Marks describes “the eyes themselves [functioning] like organs of touch” (162). To Marks, the haptic look is a way of embodied seeing, which “tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, [and that it does this] not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture [and] is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze” (162). Here, Marks describes going beyond a visibility-first encounter with the image, in order to not necessarily interpret, but rather seek out impressions or alternate sensations from the image. In doing so, the viewer rejects the Eurocentric focus on visibility and sight, trading it for more affective forms of engagement with the image.

In drawing on one form of haptic imagery that Marks describes, the decayed stills [see fig. 3] from Fung's home movies "compel a viewer to move close, yet they also multiply points of visual contact all over the screen" (*The Skin of the Film* 174). That is, the decay of the image is a loss of information, yet it allows for a "shifting from one form of sense-perception to another" (192). By understanding these scars dually as signs of an incomplete or partial image as well as indicators of its hapticity, we can explore the notion of absence or *being away* through what it adds to archival objects, rather than solely what has been taken away by time and decay.

To Marks, the haptic image is a desirous one, and seeks out a look that will try to uncover it. Invoking her Deleuzian references, they are images which "are so 'thin' and unclipped that the viewer must bring [their] resources of memory and imagination to complete them" (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* 163). Marks' theory on the haptic image is rooted in the belief "that cinema is able to evoke the particularly hard-to-represent memories of people who move between cultures, by pointing beyond the limits of sight and sound"—that is to say, cinema can refuse Western modes of looking through the haptic image (129). Arguing that "cinema is perceived by a whole body" through the sense memory that it can raise in audiences, Marks describes the haptic image as one that centres texture and touch, whether through a lingering depiction of touch in the film or a "[privileging of] the material presence of the image" over other senses (148; 163). Marks argues that "thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole", and that the haptic image can be used to critique Western modes of visual-centric cinema and instead centre other senses that speak to filmmakers' or audiences' cultural identity more closely (163). With this understanding, we can turn to a close analysis of *Random Acts*' footage and how it builds diasporic intimacy through its hapticity.

A Photographic Touch

Though much of the film comprises haptic images, I will take a moment here to dwell on a few exemplary stills from the latter half of the film, in order to ground Marks' argument further. In the



Figure 4. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Silas Fung being filmed by a family friend.

following images, we see ample evidence of such degradation. The clearest points in these stills are the borders, the perforations punched into either side of the celluloid reel, which create the effect of viewing raw, unedited footage as it is projected. The images of the two subjects are near-indecipherable, blotted out by oblong stains and light spillage [see fig. 4], with only the film's context to explain their relationship to each other and the camera operator, an unknown friend of the couple.

From the narration, we know that they were celebrating an anniversary, and we watch the way the couple sways close to the camera in familiarity with its operator. We watch Edythe—Silas Fung’s wife—squeeze her husband’s shoulders [see fig. 5], drawing closer to him as the image fades into degraded stills and blurred film grain. Using Marks’ understanding of haptics as “[discouraging] the viewer from distinguishing objects and [encouraging] a relationship to the screen as a whole”, we are drawn to these depictions of touch and proximity, depicted as they are in conjunction with the knowledge that these people are family and friends (The Skin of the Film 172). Our connection to these images begins at its degraded surface but is ultimately located in the



Figure 5. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Silas and Edythe Fung on their wedding anniversary.

emotion that these images draw out of us and our own desires to find ourselves within them.

Footage of such intimacy—between a Chinese couple of this era being shot by a Chinese filmmaker—is rare, and while Marks’ work dwells on portraits of mothers filmed by their daughters through a psychoanalytic lens, I propose to instead study the footage of the two Fungs and their friends through a lens of idleness (Video Haptics and Erotics 343). Antithetical to both

the figure of Edythe as the renowned businesswoman, as well as wider stereotypes of Chinese model minorities and their work ethic, we are instead treated to a gauzy intimacy between friends.

Tina M. Campt writes specifically on the documentation of everyday racialized intimacy, with a focus on archival family photographs of diasporic Africans. Her work examines the hapticity of these objects, particularly focusing on what the images telegraph to us as outsiders. She describes family photography as “actively [materializing] both race and diasporic relations through gendered and class- specific enactments that at once contest and affirm national belonging” (*Image Matters* 48). In her book, Campt analyzes the family photographs of Hans Hauck, a biracial Black German man who lived under the Nazi regime and whose family photos from this era Campt discovered later, after his death. In writing about Hauck, she reads his photographs through multiple registers—both that of the family photograph and its historical context, explaining that “[t]hese photos generate a sense of proximity, intimacy, and relation that evoke familiarity and connection, yet they do so in ways that always place other things ‘under erasure’”—the ‘other things’ in question here being Hauck’s ethnicity (46). We experience Fung’s films in the context of Kazimi’s discovery and through the lens of history, with their novelty in depicting the everyday existence of early twentieth century Chinese-Americans, but it is worthwhile to consider them as they were made; the one in question is also a simple document of a moment in time between friends, celebrating a life event.

Campt reads touch and intimacy in her photographic archive through a haptics of embrace, which speaks to “the multiple forms of embrace these photos image, and through the haptics of what those physical embraces represent: inclusion, acceptance, and protection at a time when the opposite was expected to be the case” (*Image Matters* 100). Mobilizing this term in relation to the footage of Edythe and Silas, we can read instead an embrace as an enclosure, a tightening around

one's community. Throughout *Random Acts*, Fung's relatives reference the racism they encountered and the pushback that the Fung family faced when they bought a home in a previously all-white neighbourhood. The closeness of the kinship shown in these sequences can be read as both a comfort and a form of security, reflecting the tightknit community that Silas and Edythe built around them. The underside of this reading is who is excluded from these images; any sign of other marginalized peoples is omitted, especially that of Black and Mexican people, who we know through Lum's recollections were often ostracized by the Chinese community. Fung's footage grants us insight into the forms of intimacy that he shared with those around him, positioning any readings of race or marginalization on the periphery in favour of reading his own life as normal, amidst a macro historical context that would see stories like his marginalized. The hapticity of these images lies in the multiplicity of ways that they counteract Western modes of viewing, "[inviting] a kind of vision that spreads out over the surface of the image instead of penetrating into depth" (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* 137). What is important to the hapticity of *Random Acts*' images is both their content and the histories that they depict, as well as the reasoning for their damage—the evidence of corrosion subsequent to the restoration process that has overtly altered these images. That is to say, they are not haptic solely because of the medium, but because of their embedded history and Kazimi's intervention and subsequent restoration. The act of discovery and subsequent preservation has irrevocably changed both their form and how we understand them as images.

On Being Away and Not Coming Back

Marks, in her article “Loving a Disappearing Image,” does not speak to the wholly lost image, but rather to one which is degraded. Though an incomplete summary, Marks reiterates her views on the haptic image as a mode of identification,

an image that is grainy, indistinct, or dispersed over the surface of the screen invites a haptic look, or a look that uses the eye like an organ of touch. This is how ‘love’ works into this sort of identification. A tactile look does not rely on a separation between looker and object as a more optical or cognitive look does. Such touch-like vision is not conceived of as an assault [...] so much as a closing of the distance between viewer and image. Because it does not rely on the recognition of figures, haptic looking permits identification with (among other things) loss, in the decay and partialness of the image. This sort of look, then, is not just about death, but about loving a living but non-coherent subject, an image that contains the memory of a more complete self (Loving a Disappearing Image 104-105).

Marks’ reading of the haptic image as one wherein loss is made literal, or loss is reflected in the image itself, allows for an alternate articulation of absence and *being away*. Thus, *being away* can be understood through Marks’ conceptualisation of decay, in order to read absence not as pure loss, but rather as constructive of an alternate form of image which is haptic in both its visuality

and in its modes of interaction. I will expand on this idea of loss and the archive further in chapter three, but for now will turn to *Random Acts*' treatment of it.



Figure 6. Still from *Random Acts*, showing Edythe Fung playing the piano.



Figure 7. Still from *Random Acts*, a few frames after the previous figure, depicting Edythe Fung playing the piano.

The above images [see figs. 6 and 7], depicting Edythe Fung playing piano, are heavily obscured. They appear as if shot through gauze, a hazy and distant memory which threatens to disappear before our very eyes. That Edythe appears to us only in silhouette—we never see her

more clearly than in the first frame—only adds to the sensation of grasping at an image that we are in the process of forgetting. The wear upon the images constructs a haptic connection between the viewer and the object; the image is obscured yet still made valuable by its uniqueness as a historical object, exemplifying the everyday existence of a Chinese woman living in the wake of the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act. In the words of Marks, they are images which “we do not recognize or cannot remember [and thus cry] out to have a memory assigned to [them]” (*The Skin of the Film* 50). The tenuous nature of these images’ existence can be understood as diasporic through Marks’ hapticity. The same stains which deform the images also represent the moment of their preservation, a reminder of the restorative touch which saved them from total loss.

To reiterate, the moment of discovery comes at the beginning of the film, with Kazimi’s experience of finding these reels overlaid atop a re-creation of the act of restoration. To frame *Random Acts* through this moment and reiterate its importance by ruminating on these haptic images is to dwell on the histories almost lost with them. Tina Campt, writing on the found photographs of Black Germans during World War II, addressed the lost histories contained within their materialities, noting,

The texture and tactility of their original materiality is still visible in hints of graininess and the signs of wear that haunt those who view them by invoking the presence of countless other images and stories for which they stand in by default. For how many other photos like these are or were there that we will never see? (*Image Matters* 30)

The subjects of Fung’s footage, much like the images themselves, are almost entirely lost to us; yet through the intimacy revealed in the haptic images of their daily lives, we are made to miss them, be moved by them, reimagine them, and even touch them in tandem with our own lost histories.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the idea of the haptic image through the moment of discovery as an act of preservation. The importance of the moment of discovery upon the rest of the film was shown through the hapticity of the images—a visual representation of the filmmaker’s restorative touch upon discovering these film reels and the re-emergence of this family history. Through the use of Laura U. Marks’ interpretation of Drew Leder’s *being away*, the hapticity of the image can be read as diasporic in its resistance to Western notions of looking, paired with the historical significance of these specific images as they emerged in this moment in American history. Throughout the film, Kazimi and Lum allude to the pervasiveness of Fung’s filmmaking throughout the family’s everyday lives, addressing how he would often stage scenes and orchestrate shots to suit his desires. That is to say, there is no promise of naturalism within the footage or Kazimi’s presentation of it; rather, our insights are granted through Fung’s lens as he negotiates his own relationship to his community and identity alongside Kazimi.

While the questions raised by *Random Acts* have a relatable and recognizable familiarity—the loss of racialized histories, the lack of care for their preservation, the obfuscation of marginalized-yet-significant historical figures—I do not wish to erase the individuality of this particular history and these particular people. Efrén Cuevas explores this negotiation in his writing on Israeli and Palestinian home movies and their depiction of war, examining “the tension between macro- and microhistorical scales of observation” (Cuevas 178). Cuevas specifically refers to the macrohistory of major wartime events, while I refer here to the more esoteric importance of the footage in evidencing alternate histories that counteract presumed historical narratives, while simultaneously recognizing this footage as salvaged microhistorical evidence of a Chinese family’s life from day to day. The moment of discovery in this film is represented as Kazimi’s

successful attempt to repair a family archive that would otherwise have been lost. By examining the hapticity of these images and thus, their many-layered importance, we can reveal the archive's role within *Random Acts* as a device to articulate marginalized histories which run counter to dominant understandings of the everyday.

Chapter Three: This Photo Was Never Sent

Introduction

We open on an image of a house. Blurry and overlaid with sepia-toned abrasions that make the viewer's fingers itch to wipe down the screen, the house frustratingly does not move, nor does it grow any clearer. Instead, it disappears. In lieu of an explanation, Pang-Chuan Huang begins the documentary short, *Retour* (2017), at a train station in his town of Tourcoing, France with a series of comparatively contemporary stills. The sound of year-end hubbub fills out the scene as the other passengers begin their journeys home for the winter holidays; Huang, too, is leaving home, with the train as his mode of transport.

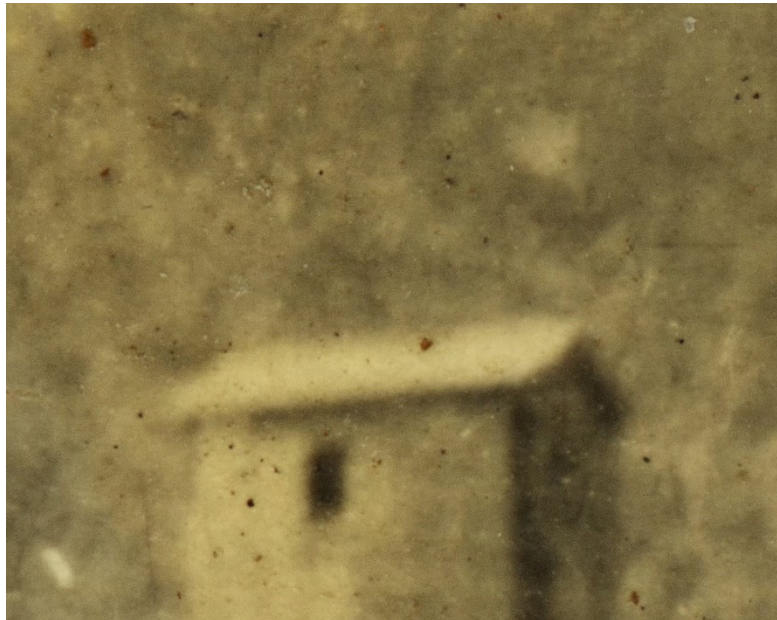


Figure 8. Still from *Retour*, depicting the opening shot of the "house."

The house in question [see fig. 8] is revealed later to be a fragment of a larger photograph, depicting an unnamed train depot and Huang's grandfather as a young man. The film follows a loosely-structured narration, alternating between descriptions of Huang's own international journey eastward from Tourcoing to Taiwan, and the life of a mysterious "lui" or "him" who, we

learn, is Huang's grandfather. Huang's travels are documented through a series of still photographs that he has taken throughout his journey, which slowly animate to flow together in a semblance of motion. In contrast, his grandfather's story is also represented by a series of "photographs," which are revealed to be fragments of the original photo, presented as if they were distinct archival objects. It is only at the end of the film, during the moment of discovery, that we learn of the photograph's origins, revealing Huang's nameless grandfather standing at the train station where he first found work, long before he was forced to flee his mother's home during the Sino-Japanese War first, and later, the entire familiar mainland during the Chinese Civil War⁴.

Retour is Huang's journey to "return to this photo, the first image that I've found of my family." The short, composed of a series of photographs captured on a film camera—a Canon Demi EE17, specifically—follows Huang's journey from France to Xiamen, on the edge of the Chinese mainland, where he is unable to go further because "there is no more railway" (Huang). He narrates his journey in a quiet, contemplative voiceover, recalling brushes with racism and his fellow travelers as they all journey back to their separate homes in the new year, together. The film is dreamlike as he slips nightly into reflections on his grandfather's journey, depicted through fades into the fragmented "photographs" that represent moments in his grandfather's life, and omits historical details in favour of its loose structure, giving little to no descriptions of nations, cities, or landmarks. Instead, Huang often muses on how his grandfather must have felt throughout these moments in time. These are intentional choices on Huang's part, representing the inability to perfectly recreate history; just as the photograph at the centre of his film is ultimately a single image rather than a comprehensive and detailed archive of his grandfather's life, so too is his

⁴ I used these specific names for these historical events because they are how the filmmaker refers to them in interviews. Notably, the Sino-Japanese War is also referenced in *Random Acts* (2016), when Silas Fung attends a meeting to raise money for the Chinese war effort abroad, referring to it then by its Chinese name, the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression.

grandfather's story retold as a series of impressions and sensations, a dreamy imagining rather than a list of firm dates and specific locations.

The multitude of images captured within Huang's singular archival photograph alludes to the way that his grandfather's history was passed on to him, through the stories of family members and Huang's own interpretation of his grandfather's experiences. The details that comprise the photograph and his grandfather's story are vague, in much the same way as a story being passed down between generations is partially invented and built from fragments of other people's recollections. Huang portrays his grandfather's journey as "dreams" while he sleeps during his own transcontinental travels, further fragmenting the narrative and interpreting it as pieces that cannot necessarily be verified, because that history has been otherwise lost.

As I noted earlier, the photograph that is so central to the film's structure and history is revealed to us in incremental pieces throughout its duration, in dream sequences that alternate with Huang's own travels. First, we are shown what seems to be the house that introduces the film—later shown as part of a larger industrial structure—followed by a ghostly white blur that is revealed to be a man set against the larger industrial structure as its backdrop [see fig. 9]. Next, we see shoes and low-cuffed pants [see fig. 10], and the double collars of two shirts layered atop one another and worn by a faceless man [see fig. 11]. Eventually, during the moment of discovery at the end of the film, a slow pan traces the full photograph to reveal each of the individual frames composing the entirety of this image.

Huang's structuring of his story, through the fractional elements that make up this lone photograph, allows for the multitude of stories encapsulated within such family archives to be made literal. By dwelling on the unknown figure, barely noticed in the background of his grandfather's photograph, not only are we able to closely analyze the image and come to know it

as Huang does, but we are given access to the same questions about the family histories embedded within. As Huang weaves a story about the mysterious “lui” whom we are told spent half his paycheque on haircuts by a barber dressed in white, we are entreated to see Huang’s grandfather and his history writ within the larger photograph.



Figure 11. Still from *Retour*, depicting a fragment of the original photograph, of the “barber.”



Figure 11. Still from *Retour*, depicting a fragment of the original photograph, of the boots.



Figure 11. Still from *Retour*, depicting a fragment of the original photograph, of the two shirts.

We know from interviews with Huang that his grandfather endured two wars, losing his home and his brother in the process before eventually settling into an uneasy vigil as he awaited his brother's return for forty years, until he and his family were once more reunited. During the Sino-Japanese war, he had been separated from his brother at a port. The precise details offered are vague, but in the end, Huang's grandfather remained in Taiwan while his brother and the rest of his family ended up in China. It is only in the last minutes of the film, over a slow zoom out to reveal the full photograph, that Huang muses on how he discovered the photo in his childhood home within a dusty box of journals and diaries atop a bookshelf.

This moment, which I identify as the moment of discovery, comes at the end of the film. Specifically, it involves the slow gestural movement of the camera as it pans across the image, moving between each distinct "photograph" before pulling back to reveal the whole. It is revealed that each of the individual archival "photographs" that Huang had used to tell his grandfather's story were actually cropped fragments of a larger real archival photograph. Instead of a series depicting moments from his grandfather's life, there was only one lone image of him standing outside a train depot.

The initial sequence of revealing the photographs takes about a minute and is rendered silent, except for the crash of waves upon the shores of Xiamen, where Huang's journey eventually ends. When his narration begins once more, Huang reintroduces his grandfather as "lui," going on to explain the history behind the taking of the photo and how, though it was intended to be sent to his family, it did not arrive for forty years. Huang muses on what his grandfather could have been thinking while taking the photo, and what he may have believed—that "the boat" would return for him, that his brother was still alive, that his family would receive the photograph at all. Finally, over the full image of the photograph, Huang explains how he discovered the photo in a box with

his grandfather's letters and diaries, hidden away in Huang's family home. This moment of discovery, of Huang uncovering the photo in a disregarded box, occurs concurrently with Huang's revelation that the photograph is not a multitude of images, but a single archival object. This chapter argues that by representing the moment of discovery as the reconciling of the archive into a singular photograph rather than the imagined archival images that have already been introduced, *Retour* reinterprets the archive as a speculative space. In order to do so, Huang mobilizes the connective metaphor of the train to represent the affective movement of the archive.

I read Huang's photograph and his choice to portray his journey through an animation of individual photographic stills as speculation. What if his grandfather had not been forcibly separated from his family? What if there was no "return" journey to be made? What photographs could have been taken instead? By instead creating multiple "photographs" of his grandfather's life from a single image, Huang is able to build a tenuous connection to his family history that would otherwise be left incomplete.

Retour tasks the audience with experiencing the grandfather's journey before learning the whole story, thus infusing movement and duration into the image through Huang's structuring of the moment of discovery. Contained within a single photograph is an entire speculated archive of images, each imbued with a different memory from Huang's family history. By representing this single remaining photograph as comprising a multitude of images and histories, Huang not only gestures toward the absence of family photographs, but also the messy, complicated, non-linear nature of piecing together a history through family stories. In accepting his lack of a photographic archive beyond the single image, Huang turns instead to constructing new narratives captured within the archival object and bringing them to life.

Furthermore, by breaking the image down into elements, Huang allows for a close analysis and deeper appreciation of his central photograph, forcing the audience to linger with it and direct our gazes towards aspects that might otherwise have been missed or passed over. He does much the same in his narration, discussing the stations that he moves between rather than the train ride itself, while also dwelling on his personal musings, and even narrating the experience of watching a passenger be removed from the train as he accuses the guards of racism. When telling his grandfather's story, Huang's focus lies in the margins in every sense of the word, and by both dwelling on the multitude of images captured within this single photograph and drawing on family histories, he allows the notion of "archive" to move into the space of diasporic speculation, or a speculative assessment of his own history through the lens of his and his grandfather's migrations.

When I speak of diasporic speculation, I draw on the long history of speculative writing in academia. I borrow my definition for speculation and speculative thought from Nina Williams' and Thomas Keating's recent anthology, *Speculative Geographies*, which understands the potential for speculation to "expand, complicate, and invent abstractions that modify the possibilities of what thought might become" (2). While Huang's speculation turns inward towards his own history, I argue that if speculation "reconfigures the empirical beyond what seems given in an immediate experience", then the act of proposing possible pasts for his own family history allows Huang to move beyond "the bounds of the contemporary regimes of knowledge production" (2). That is, by speculating on affect and emotionality within his own family history through an imagined archive, Huang is able to draw further connections between his grandfather and his own personal history.

To reiterate, the moment of discovery here is not solely the act of finding the archival object—in this case, a photograph—but rather, the necessary understanding and incorporation of

its history and the embedded memory into the photo, as a meditation on what constitutes an archive when you are left with only a single photograph. Through his experimental filmic style that animates still photographs during his travel sequences, paired with his dreamlike narration that dwells on affective moments in his and his grandfather's travels, Huang rejects dominant modes of storytelling and history-making and instead chooses to position himself at the margins. By framing his story through the lens of migration and movement, Huang can turn away from the dominant cultural desire for documented proof of history and tangible evidence, and instead speculate on his own family history by blending his narrative with that of his grandfather's—all through the continuous metaphor of the train.

This chapter explores this moment of discovery through the concept of “animating the archive,” or the convergence of motion and archival theory. In the first section, we begin with an analysis of the relationship between train travel as both a mode of transit and a metaphor in Huang's film, as it is understood through the writing of Lynne Kirby. Not only is the train used to link Huang's story with that of his grandfather, but Kirby elucidates its relationship to cinema and “moving pictures” and reflects on its status as a symbol for forward motion and progress. I then transition into Tina Campt's work on photographs in the following section—specifically her references to photography and its animating ability, or the way in which memory is animated by the photograph through affective registers (*Image Matters* 13). Next, I invoke Campt's framework of close analysis in my examination of the archival photograph at the centre of Huang's film in order to parse the affective registers that it contains. Using this analysis in the final section, I break down the “animating” abilities of this pivotal image and what that means in relation to the archive and moment of discovery.

Objects In Motion

In *Retour*, the reveal of the photograph is drawn out, its details uncovered piecemeal until the very end. The moment of discovery at the end of *Retour*, when we finally zoom out from the individual fragments of the photograph to reveal the whole, refuses to be pinned down as a singular event. Instead, it allows for the “discovery” to be fused with the concomitant journeys by train that this archival object is associated with.

The associations between trains and concepts of motion and cinematic temporality are manifold, and have been theorized on countless times, beginning with Marx’s proposal of time-space compression (Grundrisse 524), and extending into and beyond the work of such film theorists as Lynne Kirby in her book, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*. Though Kirby’s work deals specifically with the train’s relationship to silent cinema, I want to draw on her writing and its concise explanation of this connection as well as, for the purposes of this chapter, its bearing on Huang’s use of the train as a pivotal symbol in his films. In doing this, I do not intend to divorce the weight of relationship between the silent era films and their distinctive relationship to the train, nor to imply a connection between Huang’s films and silent film. Rather, I aim to place *Retour* within a wider historical framework of films that play on the relationship between train travel and temporality, as well as define what this contextualization means for *Retour*’s use of the train as a metaphor, specifically as it pertains to Huang’s connection to his grandfather’s archive.

Here, it is also important to draw attention to the role of the train in the exertion of the Doctrine of Discovery in North America, whether explicitly or implicitly. Throughout her study of the railroad’s connection to American cinema, Kirby discusses how the interconnectedness of land by train travel is inseparable from histories of oppression and the diasporic movements of

racialized peoples. The history of train travel in America is the history of “the Chinese who helped build the railroad, the Native Americans victimized by the railroad's progress, or African Americans enlisted as porters to smooth the journeys of white passengers and spectators” (Parallel Tracks 10). The train became the defining transit system of the era and in doing so, further reified it “as a potent symbol of Manifest Destiny”, a distinctly North American articulation of discovery (28). This is not stated to comment directly on Huang’s films, which are French in origin, but rather to contextualize the role of the train within Kirby’s wider arguments, as well as understand both its role in empire, and its symbolic and material effects on marginalized peoples in North America, even as it is mobilized in these films for the purposes of familial and historical reconnection and reclamation.

In broad strokes, Kirby notes that cinema and trains share several basic elements, namely that,

like film's illusion of movement, the experience of the railroad is based on a fundamental paradox: simultaneous motion and stillness. In both cases, passengers sit still as they rush through space and time, whether physically and visually, as on the train, or merely visually, as in the cinema. The train would then be cinema's mirror image in the sequential unfolding of a chain of essentially still images and the rapid shifts of point of view that the train and cinema experiences entail (Parallel Tracks 2).

This connection between motion and arrest plays out in *Retour* as well, as the film negotiates its relationship to temporality through its transition from still images to an animated approximation of motion, designed to mirror the format of silent films. Indeed, that is a key part of *Retour*'s visual thesis: Huang has compiled his film through a series of stills, yet over the course of the film, the stills begin to animate seamlessly, resembling at first a choppy in-betweenness before culminating

in traditionally-shot film footage of the ocean that separates Huang from Taiwan, his “homeland.” The train thus becomes a symbol within the film for the distance of history, representing both the constant forward movement of time and progress, as well as the arresting stillness of incompleteness—whether through Huang’s inability to finish his journey, the missing details in the story of his grandfather, or the lack of a robust archive to tell his family history. Indeed, the train binds Huang and his grandfather through both his travels and the photograph, while also keeping them apart with Huang’s inability to reach his destination. As Kirby indicates, the train as symbol was often fraught, both “given the role of integration and linkage” and, especially in French cinema, regarded as “tragic, making victims of modernity” (Parallel Tracks 10; 11). In *Retour*, we see echoes of these roles, and can trace the paradoxical tension of connection and distance through the film in order to better interpret Huang’s relationship to the archive.

In relation to this idea of embedded temporality within the image—the idea that an entire history can be captured within a single archival object—Kirby also addresses how “[t]he railroad provided the paradigm of a radically new time consciousness, [and how] it is the railroads that gave rise to, indeed mandated, standard time the world over” (Parallel Tracks 50). *Retour* references this shift in perception resulting from widespread train travel directly, with Huang recalling in narration that “up to [the moment that his grandfather left home by train], he had at least been able to go home by foot, as he had done in the past” (edited for grammar). If we consider this observation from Huang in relation to the moment of discovery, we can better analyze the interactions between photographs and film as a continuation of the dichotomy between stillness and motion. The train becomes a symbol for movement through time, both forwards and back, animating the archival photograph through Huang’s travels alongside his grandfather’s history.

More Than a Photograph

In the introduction to her book *Image Matters*, Tina M. Campt writes about how seeing an 8mm film of her mother changed how she perceived their old family photographs. Comparing the two, she addresses how her “mother’s animated image returned [her] to some of the rhythms [she] could not see as a child in her presence and had lost sight of in her absence as an adult” (Campt 13). Campt continues, the “linkage and belonging that family evokes constitute a crucial sensibility that registers in these images at multiple sensory and affective levels” (13); this sense is mobilized by the moment she saw her mother animated and alive in ways that Campt had forgotten in adulthood.

I want to underscore this idea by relating it back to Huang’s act of revealing his grandfather’s photograph incrementally throughout the film. In doing so, he revealed the stories already extant within his oral family archive. The moment of discovery is drawn out through the film, both alluded to and revisited in dreams, all in the service of revealing “the rhythms and affects” within the photograph (Campt 13). Campt argues that these “rhythms and affects I experienced in watching the home movie of my mother are equally present in the still image”, and that querying what moves them is an “attempt to catalogue both a sensibility and a range of sensory affects they display and evoke in others” (13). That is to say, seeking out an animating force within the archive is an act of identifying and analyzing its affective elements.

Campt defines this sensation “as the sticky residue of memory and history that makes us cling to certain photographs and that *affectively* affixes them to us and to our memories” (14-15). I draw on her work for this—the interest that she has in parsing how kinship and historical connection can be read through photographs. If Huang’s means of emotionally connecting back to his grandfather is through a train ride that is meant to bring him back to his homeland—an ultimately unsuccessful journey—then the animating force becomes the train itself. Within the

film, it becomes a machine that not only hearkens back to the cinematic with its paradoxical stillness and motion (Kirby 2), but also becomes the animating affective force within the photograph, representing Huang's journey back through time and into his family history. The train moves Huang—literally, throughout his journey; emotionally, in his travels back to his and his grandfather's homeland; and affectively, in the way that he invokes motion in *Retour* as a means of understanding the archive.

In order to read kinship within photographs, Campt examines affective photographs in *Image Matters* through a triplicate of frameworks: family and (af)filiation, seriality and circulation, and sensate photographic registers (13). While I do not wish to wholly replicate her framework, which is constructed around the particularity of two African diasporic communities, I want to employ its analytical tools to parse the singular photograph at the heart of *Retour*. Specifically, I want to do this in order to draw out the minutiae of affect embedded within Huang's archival object. Campt uses these frameworks to question “what the practice of making images did for black sitters as individuals and in communities, and...what it allowed them to do and say about themselves” (14). Huang's project with his photograph is to construct a narrative that would otherwise be lost—one which is informed by the stories passed down to him about his grandfather as much as it is by the photographic artifact itself. In using Campt's frameworks to closely analyze this photo, I hope to engage with it further, in a way that better allows us to animate its history and parse what it is communicating to us as an archival object.

In her discussion on the affective sensibilities of family photographs—in particular, portraits intended to be passed on to family members elsewhere—Campt raises the concept of motion, arguing,

photographs “move us.” They move us to affect and to be affected; they move us by shifting us from one intense experiential state to another. They can arrest us in ways that diminish our capacity to respond, and they provoke us in ways that augment our capacity to engage. They are objects that engender experiences of intensity that we can often only identify, locate, excavate, and order after the fact. If affect is “what makes feelings feel,” then photographs are objects that catalyze affect and make affect register (Image Matters 16).

Campt’s approach to affect is significant. Specifically, she draws on Brian Massumi’s and Eric Shouse’s definitions of affect, summarizing it as “prepersonal or nonconscious” and “the excess of what registers in and through photographs beyond the visual, [inclusive of] the formal patterns and attributes these images...sought to reproduce” (Image Matters 16). Affect, as I understand it through the photograph, is the way that the archival object “moves” its viewer, or the embodied response to the archival object that one has even before their emotional reaction. In *Retour*, the photograph’s ability to move Huang and, in turn, the viewer allows for it to be experienced in multiple registers, as a singular archival object as well as a document containing the fullness of Huang’s grandfather’s reconstructed history. Reading the photograph as affective allows Huang to build out a speculative history that is based on the embodied sensations that he experienced when discovering the photograph, and also grants the audience the chance to connect with this history on a personal level. Rather than reading Huang’s family history and his grandfather’s experiences through dates and the locations that he moved between, the affective nature of this photo instead introduces history through the lens of the individual and the embodied sensations of his lived experiences.

It is through this dynamism of the still image and its ability to affect and move its viewers that I wish to frame my own analysis of this central photograph [see fig. 12]. To begin, the

photograph shown in *Retour* is framed slightly askew. It is an amateur snapshot, which is easily gleaned from where it is being taken—in the yard of a train depot. Huang’s grandfather stands somewhat awkwardly, slightly hunched and holding what might be a newspaper, or a document of some kind. His hair is gelled flawlessly back, and his clothes are clean, but functional. Still, there remain implications of his labouring—the collars which overlap and reveal that he is wearing two shirts and his boots, which betray signs of harder conditions, seemingly muddied as they are at the base. He does not smile, but he faces the camera head on while standing beside the train tracks, which lead back toward tall, distant structures. Indeed, the train tracks and the structure that they lead to mirror the man, towering in a way that matches his own upright posture.



Figure 12. Still from *Retour* showing the central photograph of Huang’s grandfather.

I will begin with Camppt's first of three frameworks, that of family and (af)filiation, which refers to the way that filiation is documented through photographs, or how kinship is rendered within the photograph (43). I argue that this photograph, though it shows Huang's grandfather alone, can be read through this framework of family and affiliation in the subject's own presentation of himself for his family. We know from Huang's voiceover narration that this photo was taken during a lunch break by a friend of Huang's grandfather, with the intent that it would be sent home to his family. We also know, from Huang's narration, that it never arrived. Yet such tragedy is not writ within the contents of the image; rather, his lack of smile and the particularity of the photograph's framing take on an almost utilitarian feel. Instead of being a memento of his time working away from home, the photograph becomes a reassurance not only of his continued employment, but of his pride in the work that he is doing. The intended message relayed is Huang's grandfather's desire to be seen as successful according to his family's presumed metrics: that he is alive, healthy, and employed.

I will omit the second framework of seriality and circulation, but mention it as a means of addressing where Camppt and my analyses diverge. She examines a plentiful archive of historic photographs of the Dyche Collection, a series of portraits taken at the Dyche Photography Studio of diasporic and migrant postwar West Indians in Britain. While these portraits may be grouped under specific collections that belong to distinct diasporic movements, I am examining a singular piece of a larger archive that may or may not have contained any other photographs. Huang explains that he discovered this photo in a box among his grandfather's other belongings but reveals little other information about the remaining contents aside from the existence of letters and diaries and the dusty state of their receptacle. Because of this, we are left with this sole photograph

and the dreamlike stories which have been passed down between generations and moulded by Huang's own interpretation.

In contrast, the third framework of Camp's, that of sensate photographic registers or haptics, is a return to the familiar. Here, she seeks to analyze "objects that 'move' us both through our physical contact with them and through the affective investments with which we imbue them" (43). Presented with minimal, if any, edits to its appearance, the photograph is yellowed with age. A darker stain creeps in from the upper right-hand corner, and visible creases extend out from past the edge of the image. Most notable are the worn edges of the photograph, slightly rounded at the corners, and the distinctive fingerprint, wide enough to be a thumbprint but close enough to the edge that it does not obscure the man's face. Such haptic evidence implies a close connection to the object—visible proof that it has been held or handled in a way that discards techniques of preservation in favour of being closer to the figure in focus. Indeed, our knowledge that the photo was not given to its intended recipients for over forty years further imbues this mark with questions. Was it the grandfather's own touch tucking this photo into an envelope that would not be delivered, or even the grip of a hand decades later, as his family gathered close to learn about his storied past? Perhaps it was the discovery by Huang later still, as he took in this lost photo "found" once more?

Such gestures as the ones imbued in and on this photograph—the grandfather's grip on his work contract as he takes a minute away from his lunch to pose for a photograph, the press of a thumb hard enough to mar the surface of this photo—speak to the multitude of motions captured in time. Beyond minute gestures, however, the train tracks allude to transnational movement, or the history embedded within the photograph of the grandfather's forced migrations between Taiwan and mainland China. Without the 8mm films that Camp had access to in order to see her

mother in a new light, Huang instead animates his grandfather's history through his own train ride, inscribing it upon the surface of the photograph in dreams as he travels back to Taiwan. It is this animation of history as it is encapsulated in a singular object that I will examine next.

Leaving (From a Train Station, or Elsewhere)

The animation of the photograph—both the literal camera movement and figurative motion through the immersion of these archival documents in key moments of history—is mobilized through the symbol of the train. Functioning as a narrative guide that leads Huang and his grandfather through their journeys, the train also literally moves Huang's series of photographic stills in the gentle rocking motion that he recounts, a comforting sway that is depicted through the series of photos throughout the film.

It is this key idea, of the animation of this photograph, which I want to culminate with. If we understand the moment of discovery to be the finding of a family history captured within the archival object, then I wish to “animate” this archive by examining it through its motion. Namely, I am examining the relationship that Huang foregrounds between movement in his grandfather's story and the symbolism of the train journey. It is crucial to reiterate here that archives are not static either, and the animation of them becomes a means of creating new moments of encounter, specifically with photographs such as the one central to *Retour*. That is to say, mobilizing personal archival photographs in new ways—how Huang presented his grandfather's photo as a slow discovery—allows for an alternative experience of history which centres, here, speculative interpretations of familial storytelling and marginalized, diasporic histories that may otherwise be lost or forgotten with time.

In his essay on animation and photography, Tom Gunning collapses the differences between the two into “their creation of the pulse of an instant through the discontinuity of the machine” (Animating the Instant 38). To Gunning, the animated image becomes “a continuity of movement borne of the discontinuity of individual frames”—that is to say, animation is the motion formed between individual images (39). Thus, imbuing archival objects such as Huang’s photograph with affective sensations that “move” us, or bringing them to life through the narratives that we construct around them, is an act of animating the archive. The literal act of animation, of running a series of still images together to make them appear as if they are in motion, also makes up much of the footage of Huang’s train ride across Europe and Asia.

To reiterate, motion is experienced throughout the film as 1) the literal movement through space, in Huang’s transcontinental travels and his grandfather’s migration, 2) the animation of still images into a “moving picture” during his train journey, and 3) the affective sensations of connecting to the archival image that Huang dwells on through the fragmented views of the individual “photographs” that make up the one. Indeed, even the moment of discovery literally animates the image; when we are finally introduced to the moment of discovery, it unfolds through Huang’s own narration as the camera moves across the surface of the photograph, as if to map its course through time. That is to say, the photograph is literally animated as we retrace the points in history which have been revealed to us incrementally—the house, the barber, the shoes, and the collars. The moment of discovery makes literal the animation of the archive—the act of infusing the archive with affect in order to bring it to life—as we read a series of images into this singular photograph.

Throughout the film, Huang muses on the world that surrounds him, both in his own travels and his grandfather’s history. He dwells on why the conductor of his train continuously runs the

horn, wondering if it is because of their joy at returning home for the holidays, before posing questions that his grandfather may have asked himself upon learning that war had broke out once again. These moments represent the speculative nature that Huang imbues within his archive; by pairing them with imagined photographs, he constructs entire narratives and feelings around a history that is represented solely by a single, archival object.

The single photo does not speak to the pain that his grandfather felt as he was forced to walk home through the snow in too-small shoes—a memory that Huang retells, which may or may not be evidenced—but by constructing from the photograph a cropped image of his grandfather's boots, Huang is able to draw a sense of history and meaning from the image that would otherwise have been lost. Indeed, even the scratches that mark the photograph's surface, made even more visible by the zoomed-in perspective, reveal the photograph's age, the sense of stories encapsulated within it that can be reproduced through Huang's speculative connections to this object. By granting his grandfather—and his grandfather's photo—an embodied feeling of movement across time, his sole archival photograph can become a storied archive of affective moments in a longer family history.

Retour ends on the shores between Xiamen and Taiwan, looking out over a grey seascape which separates Huang—and, by extension, the audience—from the island. He explains in narration that he “can't go further, because there is no more railway,” but that “on the other side of the sea is [his] homeland.” Indeed, neither journey is granted an ending; the grandfather's story concludes with Huang's narration explaining that a reunion was had forty years belated, though it is not documented within the image or otherwise. The railway ends, the train stops, and the story concludes. In the same way that his single photograph becomes representative of a larger, missing archive of photos through Huang's rendering of it as composed of several images, Huang's journey

is rendered incomplete as he loses the connection that bound him to his grandfather's story. All that remains is his archive of one.

Yet, on the topic of archives, Achille Mbembe writes that “[t]he act of dying, inasmuch as it entails the dislocation of the physical body, never attacks totally, nor equally successfully, all the properties of the deceased (in either the figurative or the literal sense) [and there] will always remain traces of the deceased, elements that testify that a life did exist, that deeds were enacted, and struggles engaged in or evaded” (The Power of the Archive and its Limits 22). For Huang, the traces that remain are the ephemeral stories and speculative feelings, which he chooses to depict through his singular archival object. Thus, Huang’s discovery was also an act of *re-animation*; by inscribing history into the archival photograph through its fragmentation via editing, he granted new life and purpose to the image. The act of re-animation thus becomes a means of enacting memory, especially through Huang’s choice to reveal the archive over the course of his film, rather than all at once.

The speculative archive of photographs that Huang has built are each presented as dreams throughout his train ride, moments of slippage between his own personal history and family memory. Through the connective tissue of the train, as it carried Huang back to his homeland and provided his grandfather employment and stability, Huang’s moment of discovery binds his grandfather’s story to his own. Through this moment, he weaves this narrative into it his own embodied experience of migration. By drawing together the analyses of motion and archives which we have already seen into the concept of “animating the archive,” we can understand that, for Huang, the act of discovery is a journey, one that begins with the simple motion of opening a box.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that the moment of discovery, as portrayed by Huang, rendered his archive of one as a multitude, speculated upon in lieu of an actual archive of his grandfather's life. In presenting the archive in this way, *Retour* rejects dominant cultural desires for a documented, tangible history, and instead invokes stories and narratives that “move” us to understand the feeling of history. By first examining the role of the train in its symbolism as a technology of “progress,” this chapter instead understands it to be positioned as both advancing Huang towards his goals and keeping him from his ultimate “return.” From there, we turned to an analysis of the photograph itself, following the sense of movement that the train invokes to an examination of how photographs “move” us. By analyzing the central photograph in *Retour*, this chapter gleaned that its affective nature stems from the points of contact and kinship that had been imbued into the photo. Finally, this chapter argued that Huang's speculative reading of his grandfather's photograph animated the imagined archive that he had built by reading affective memories into it through a mix of family stories and his own parsing of the image. By interpreting his grandfather's photograph through an affective, speculative lens, Huang constructed a history that could have existed—but is confined only to a single object. His discovery becomes an acknowledgement of the histories that he cannot know, but still desires to incorporate into his own understanding of his family history.

In rendering his archive of one as composed of a multitude of histories, Huang acknowledges the lack of visual history that he possesses, and yet builds from it a speculative possibility for what his family archive could have been. In doing so, he gestures to other marginalized histories that have been lost, were never able to be kept, or exist in other forms, while also incorporating alternative forms of history-making and recall that reject the desire for totalizing

histories and hard facts. Instead, much of the history that makes up *Retour* draws on oral family histories passed down from relatives to him, and when paired with his own shifting, unclear narration, we are left without tangible proof of much of his family history. Even the depiction of his grandfather's story is framed as if it was a dream.

The moment of discovery, rendered in *Retour* as a reveal of "lui's" identity and of the singular photograph comprising the multitude of images seen earlier, speaks to the lost archives of marginalized, diasporic histories. Huang elides much in his narration and retelling of his grandfather's past, imbuing it with a dreamlike sense of drifting from one vignette to another—yet we can also read his elisions as a lack of knowledge. There is, simply put, no way to know if the multitude of images within the one photograph existed, in one form or another. The lack of these objects is indicative of a larger marginalization of such histories that Huang can only fill through the nebulous stories that his family has told—and even then, he is left without the full picture.

Chapter Four: Memories of Things Which No Longer Exist

Introduction

The realization that we have been watching a ghost comes about halfway into *Shirkers* (2018), in a culmination of several hints scattered throughout the film. Indeed, this slow processing is rather the point—to obfuscate what the viewer knows and simultaneously indicate the existence of elements that are out of place and out of time. To be haunted by the archive is not a novel proposition, but director Sandi Tan does not seek out novelty. Instead, *Shirkers* posits the existence of ghosts.

Shirkers is a film about a haunting. Tan’s easy slippage across time revels in nostalgia and the complex miasma of teenage emotions that do not fade with time. *Shirkers* recounts the process leading up to and the filming of a movie—the original *Shirkers* (1992)⁵, which was stolen in full by its mysterious director and Tan’s mentor, Georges Cardona. Tan weaves through *Shirkers*’ (1992) history expertly, through interviews with friends and collaborators interwoven with golden-hued 16mm celluloid that we recognize as Tan’s lost *Shirkers* (1992) footage. It is only about halfway through the film that we learn that this footage was rediscovered within the basement of Cardona’s widow, missing the entirety of the soundtrack. In *Shirkers*, I argue that the archive in question not only comprises the film canisters once lost, but also the collective memory of the events, places, and people by those involved with the production of the original film.

By structuring *Shirkers* to prolong the revelation of the original film’s theft, the moment of discovery becomes an incomplete, unfinished thing—a ghost. When I reference ghosts, I am

⁵ I will, when referencing the lost *Shirkers* film, add the date to delineate between the twin titles. Otherwise, I will be referencing Tan’s 2018 documentary.

referring to the lingering presence of histories left unresolved, be it through the passing of a person, stories that have been lost or marginalized, or otherwise. Several authors that I will reference throughout this chapter refer to “ghosts,” with differing definitions of what they entail. For my purposes here, a “ghost” is an unresolved, lingering history that cannot yet be put to rest.

Shirkers begins with an introduction to Tan’s life growing up in 1980s and 1990s Singapore and her desire to push back against its stringent laws and regulations, as well as its cultural conservatism. She references the ban on chewing gum in public specifically, showing footage later in the film of one friend, Jasmine Ng, defiantly chewing gum on camera. She describes herself as a “weirdo,” growing up primarily under the care of her grandparents and the weight of expectation that her family placed upon her. Her “way out” was through Ng’s family and her own love of film; throughout the introduction, Tan draws connections between her childhood fascination with Western independent and alternative media and her own creative pursuits.

In this same introduction, we also meet several of the central characters in *Shirkers*: Tan’s childhood friends Jasmine Ng, Sophie Siddiqi, and Philip Cheah. Ng, her childhood enemy-turned-best-friend, is a complex figure, often shown in the film pushing back against Tan’s narratives and reframing her perspective, usually putting Tan in a harsher light. Cheah is framed as a kind of “older brother” figure, with his position at the local film magazine *Big O Magazine* leading to him introducing Tan and Ng to much of the Western alternative media that shaped their perspectives and views. Tan describes moving beyond *Big O* with Ng and creating their own zine, to “catalogue everything that angered us, that made us laugh”—a prototypical form of counterculture that pushed back against what they viewed as the dominant perspective. Siddiqi is a later addition to their friend group, who Tan met through her film class with Cardona and someone framed as the more “stable” member of their cohort.

Much of the first half of the film details the filming of *Shirkers* (1992), allowing us a glimpse into the process of filming a movie, rigorous though its production was. The original film is pitched as a road movie through a city that took only 45 minutes to drive through. It revolved around the character of “S,” a sixteen-year-old serial killer—played by Tan—who traveled across Singapore picking up stray characters whose lives she claimed along her travels. With its hazy framing, S moved from scene-to-scene, eventually revealing the events of the film to possibly be a dream. It was and remains an ambitious project, one which had never been attempted before in Singapore, according to Tan. After the film was shot, Tan and her friends split and relocated to various other continents and countries for school, only to slowly realize over the course of several months that Cardona had absconded with the celluloid reels in their absence.

Twenty years pass while Tan grapples creatively and personally with the loss of *Shirkers* (1992), until 2011, when she receives an email from Cardona’s ex-wife and widow, telling her that not only is he dead, but that *Shirkers* (1992) is whole and sitting in his basement. This revelation from the widow leads to the scene of discovery, as a faceless person is shown onscreen entering the basement and revealing the celluloid in its cases. In voiceover narration, Tan explains how the widow sent her boxes of celluloid and paraphernalia from the filming, describing her experience receiving the preserved film and learning, upon a brief investigation of its contents, that its soundtrack has been stolen, in one last theft by Cardona.

This scene in particular is the moment of discovery within the film. Depicted through grainy black and white footage of an unidentified woman—intended either to be Tan or the widow, and likely staged as a re-enactment—searching through an underground basement [see fig. 13], the visual revelation exchanges one mystery—what happened to *Shirkers* (1992)—for another: Why had Cardona stolen the original *Shirkers*, only to preserve it for decades?

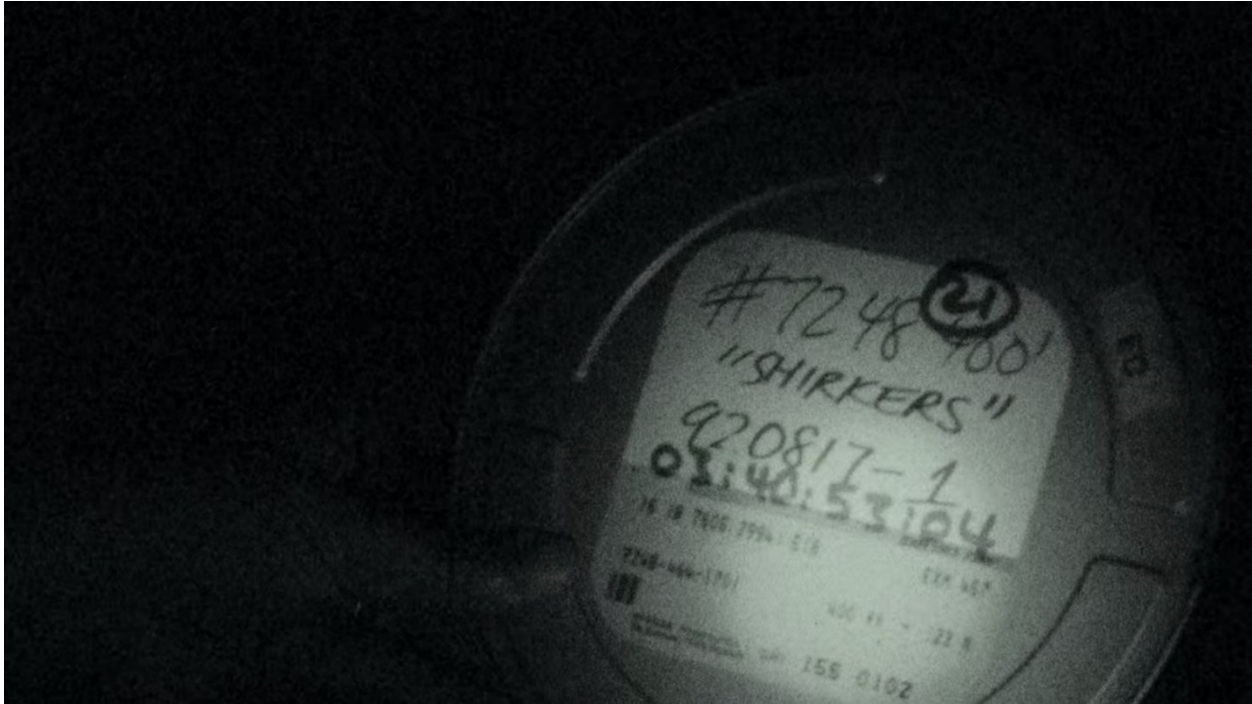


Figure 13. Still from *Shirkers*, depicting the moment of discovery when the lost *Shirkers* (1992) cache was found.

I argue that this moment in the basement requires examination, both for its crucial role in the discovery and how its revelation within the film is paired with a sense of incompleteness, even once the original film was found. Furthermore, the moment in question marks the point in which the archive is exchanged: the reliance on the physical archive is traded for a pursuit of the immaterial memory archive, and, prompted by the widow's initial discovery, Tan's own parsing of the archival contents turns to a consideration of how recollection and a multiplicity of histories might elucidate the physical remainders of the archive, which have otherwise been lost. Tan's choice, to tell Cardona's story through the people who both knew him best and were most wronged by him, constructs a narrative of his life that is innately fraught and nonlinear. To a degree, this is mirrored in her own representation of the history of *Shirkers* (1992)—her inclusion of Ng's often contrasting perspectives and the perspectives of the numerous other actors and crew members on Cardona's command over the set produces a more complex understanding of the original film, which connects their recollections with the discovered celluloid. By expressing the history of

Shirkers through a blend of collective memory and recovered archival footage, the film decentralizes the idea of a singular historical narrative in favour of a multiplicity of histories which do not necessarily align with Tan's recollection.

Tan spends the remainder of the film trying to piece together Cardona's life in his absence, seeking out old colleagues, students, and family of his who all reflect on his strangeness and, more importantly, the ways in which he stole from them. Ultimately there are no answers to be found and Tan's story is left incomplete, but not abandoned. Yet, the divergent histories and multiplicity of narratives revolve around Cardona's commanding figure, pointing to him as the point of contention between Tan and the rest of the crew. After his death, and upon her pursuit of new answers beyond the partially recovered archive, Tan instead turns to a mode of collective storytelling that rejects the singular dominating figure, and in turn places her own singular narration into question as well.

My goal in this chapter is to culminate my analysis of the moment of discovery as it pertains to the archives from each of the three films. We have examined the haptic experience of the archive in *Random Acts of Legacy*, as well as the archival object as vehicle for the historical in *Retour*. In this chapter, we will move between object and recollection in our examination of how an archive can exist beyond the physical objects which would otherwise mark its place in the historical record. With *Shirkers*, the archive in question is twofold: the physical archive, which is reclaimed in the moment of discovery partway through the film, and the collective memory archive or immaterial archive, which is mined throughout the film as supplemental to the physical archive. I have spent a considerable part of the first and second chapters on the physical archive and, while it is still crucial to this chapter, I want to draw out the progression of archival thought within this project to a possible conclusion, transitioning us from the physical archive into the immaterial memory

archive. For this task, I will draw on both the archival theory of Jenny Sharpe in her book *Immaterial Archives* and Mark Fisher's theory of hauntology in much of his writing, but particularly *Ghosts of My Life*. I also draw on the work of Avery Gordon, whose sociological perspective on hauntology and ghosts supplements how this chapter will interrogate the role of Cardona as a kind of "spectre" that hangs over the history of *Shirkers*. While the Fisher and Gordon do not deal with archives, I want to bridge the space between physical archive and memory archive through Fisher's concept of loss, and how material losses can be recuperated through memory and multitudinous histories, or the recollection of a historical event through a collection of voices, rather than one singular perspective.

When I speak of history in reference to Sharpe and Fisher, I draw on their respective contexts and definitions. Fisher's hauntology is deeply predicated on temporality, and he often refers to hauntology as "out-of-joint" time and symptomatic of late-stage capitalism (*Ghosts of My Life* 121; *What is Hauntology?* 18; *The Metaphysics of Crackle* 47). Conversely, Sharpe's theory of history is rooted in the colonial archive's articulation of the human, as she pivots away from traditional modes of history-making and turns instead to "transactions, exchanges, and conversations, both real and imagined, between history writing and the creative arts" (*Immaterial Archives* 4). Her interest lies in poetry, specifically a book of poems by M. NourbeSe Philip, which "mutilates a document that is silent about slave lives in order to release the violent potential of their irretrievable remains" (20). *Zong! As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* is an examination of the archive as a space for revisionist storytelling and its capacity to do so; specifically, Sharpe examines form in *Zong!* and how it "conveys only the ghostly echoes of lost lives, but, in doing so, it makes an archival record speak the humanity about which it is silent" (21). Of note here is Philip's manipulation of the archive to reveal the otherwise obscured voices

within, and more so to give onomatopoeic sound to the people caught between the lines of these documents. These “ghostly echoes of lost lives” are mobilized to contrast the violent bureaucracy of colonial documentation that contains them, instead allowing for a historical narrative that incorporates “the violent potential of their irretrievable remains” (20). Drawing a connection back to Tan, we can see that it is specifically because of the partial loss of the material archive that a more collective and polyvocal history is able to be recounted. Without its fragmentation, Tan would not have pursued its story and sought out the other cast and crew for their perspectives, nor would the victims of Cardona have had their stories told. In the tragic loss of the material archive, a new immaterial one was able to emerge.

In order to explore how the archive functions within the film, I want to 1) examine the ways in which *Shirkers* invokes its own spectral traces of the original film by closely analyzing the usage of the original 1992 film. I do this in order to understand how the archive functions as a vehicle for articulating alternate modes of history-making, specifically the dominant Western cultural mode of telling history as a singular, authoritatively defined narrative, shown in *Shirkers* through the figure of Georges Cardona. From there, I will 2) investigate the enactment of loss in *Shirkers*, as both an extension of the concept of “incompleteness” and as a vehicle for analyzing memory. Finally, I want to 3) end on the ways in which memory acts as a binding agent between the fragmented pieces of history that exist as physical remnants scattered throughout the film. That is to say, collective memory in a communal, polyphonic sense of the term is invoked as an alternate form of archiving, a way of refusing the idea of a dominant, singular history—the kind that would see the original *Shirkers* erased. Through these arguments and observations, I concretize my reading of the moment of discovery as a guiding framework through which to interpret archival-based documentaries and explore its potential in building and restoring alternate modes of history

formation. The moment of discovery is represented in the film as a catalyst for Tan to turn towards a more polyvocal recounting of history that moves beyond Cardona and the material archive. Through the encounters with the archive shared by Tan and the widow, the moment of discovery becomes a shared moment of alternate perspectives, bound by the death of Cardona.

Story Fragments

The spectral, haunting nature of the original celluloid archive that is *Shirkers* (1992) lingers throughout the film. We see glimpses of it often and become familiar with its aesthetics and style. Notably, it differentiates from the 2018 documentary footage in its visible film grain, hue—often warm-toned as it was shot in late sunny afternoon, with bright colours from the 16mm celluloid—and noticeably handheld shots [see fig. 14]. While the 2018 footage can be easily parsed as documentary [see fig. 15]—characters are often centred or framed as talking heads, excepting any establishing shots—the 1992 *Shirkers* footage is expansive in its framing, often using birds-eye or



Figure 14. Still from *Shirkers*, showing the visual style of the original footage.



Figure 15. Still from *Shirkers*, showing the visual style of the modern footage.

creative pans to showcase the landscape as much as the characters, and invoking surreal and absurdist imagery.

In understanding how *Shirkers* articulates a politics of alternate history-making, we must examine the way that it treats its own archive and examine how the film is revealed to audiences in moments when histories, narratives, and perspectives diverge. I will examine two sequences, one from about halfway through the film before the moment of discovery occurs, and one from towards the end, when Tan is musing on the loss of Singaporean landmarks that make up the backdrop of *Shirkers* (1992).

The first sequence [see fig. 16] begins with a scene from *Shirkers* (1992)—we can tell because of the warm hues and fuzzy texture of the 16mm filmstock. From up high, we see a crossing guard in a yellow raincoat and red cap hold up a bright red stop sign, arresting a red car as a trio of schoolgirls crosses the road. We don't see their faces, only glimpse their white shoes and navy skirts as they cross the upper right corner of the screen. The street appears wet with recent

rainfall, and as the girls cross the road, the man follows behind, stepping into the bottom right corner of the screen and out of frame. Over the hazy, golden scene, Tan’s voiceover from the present day comes through as she recalls, “All I was left with was these fuzzy memories of being on the set and just waiting.”



Figure 16. Still from *Shirkers* showing Philip Cheah as a crossing guard while a trio of girls cross behind him.

This shot, simplistic in its action but thick with metaphor in the context of Cardona’s theft and the trio of women who he stole from, is followed then by a cut to behind-the-scenes footage. It is of worse quality but taken from the same angle—only zoomed out slightly further. We can see the actresses waiting at their marks “off-camera,” as well as the assistant director as he holds up the slate before the scene begins. Most importantly however, we see Cardona, holding what appears to be a walkie-talkie as he waves the director of photography away from the shot and moves off-screen. There is a cut to a ground level view of the scene, and a slow zoom in on the crossing guard’s face as he looks directly into camera, then a cut to Siddiqi as she speaks to the actors and lines them up accordingly. Each of these are clearly overhead shots taken from a distance, looking down upon the scene below.

Finally, we cut back to Cardona, who is behind the camera and speaking again into his radio as they begin to roll. We see the initial scene play out once more, this time in video and from that same zoomed-out perspective, catching the crossing guard moving into place, a crew member standing just out-of-frame, and the line of actresses as they follow their cues [see fig. 17]. Within the shot however, we are looking out through glass—possibly a window, to keep the rain at bay. In the reflection, we see the camera operator, though it is difficult to make out details. Tan’s voiceover cuts across the scene as it plays a second time, concluding that “Georges took everything.” The car, stopped briefly by the crossing guard, starts up once more, and the shot fades to white, then black.



Figure 17. Still from *Shirkers*, depicting the same scene of Cheah filming, but on video from a new angle.

The second sequence comes much later, and caps off a montage that contrasts moments in *Shirkers* (1992) and what the landscapes look like now, decades later. We start on an extreme close-up of a woman crying [see fig. 18]. She is a character from the 1992 film, played by actress Pohshon Choy. She is slightly out of focus, but we know from early references that, within the film narrative, her daughter has just been taken away from her. She cries with quivering

movements, and just as she comes into focus, the camera pans away from her and downwards. In slow, handheld movements, we see the focus shift to the verdant forest below. There is a slight sense of motion and a train cuts through the treetops, jettisoning us forward and out, overlooking the distant, hazy horizon. The shot fades from *Shirkers*' (1992) warm tones into verdant greenery, now at eye-level, as an intertitle overlaid across the panning shot reads, "Singapore-Malaya Railway 1932-2011" [see fig. 19]. We know from context that *Shirkers*' footage was rediscovered by Tan in 2011, and that knowledge lies heavy as we stare at the fenced-off, dilapidated white and red terminal which blends into its surrounding greenery. With this transition, we are reminded of the other histories captured within this found celluloid, of lost structures and spaces separate from the overarching story, but still captured within the found *Shirkers* (1992) footage.



Figure 18. Still from *Shirkers*, showing an extreme close-up of Pohshon Choy.



Figure 19. Still from *Shirkers*, showing the Singapore-Malaya Railway.

In both of these scenes, we see how the stories of the two *Shirkers* are intertwined—or perhaps it is more accurate to say, we can see how *Shirkers* is weighed down with memories that are both captured on camera and merely alluded to. The footage from the original film is used to imbue the scene with the interpersonal histories contained within *Shirkers* (1992), as well as to allow the viewer to experience landscapes that no longer exist.

That the second sequence reveals a now-defunct tram through a scene that is overlaid with grief and loss, from a film which was never quite made real, creates an alternate way of viewing history and space that is distinct. In the limbo of examining the lost-and-found footage, which reveals locations that are no longer extant, *Shirkers* reinforces the understanding that its existence came from a specific time and specific place that cannot be recreated. The loss that is imbued into its discovery—of being stolen for decades only to be found because of Cardona’s death—is echoed in the film’s themes and the spaces it moves through. *Shirkers* imbues the altered landscape with its own history, binding the two together through a shared sense of loss. If we consider *Shirkers* to

be a composition of histories that move beyond any single, dominant narrative, then the focus on these elements of Singapore that no longer exist serve to both reinforce that theme and reflect the way that loss can prompt new stories. Indeed, the takeaway can be that history lingers, but that it does not need to define the present; though Cardona's eye helped shape the footage that composed the original *Shirkers*, it was also the work of countless crew members who returned to lend their voices to construct new, alternative modes of remembering it.

With these scenes, we are able to better understand the treatment of archives within *Shirkers* on a practical basis, and to see the ways in which these polyvocal histories play out through a negotiation with the discovered archive. We are also given insight into how loss is rendered within both of these sequences, as well as the other fragments of *Shirkers* (1992) throughout the film. I argue that these two sequences are not exceptional, but emblematic of the general visual and narrative treatment of *Shirkers* (1992) throughout the film. Even more so, the fragmented rendering of these sequences—as brief moments which are left incomplete and unfinished—brings into question the moment of discovery itself. We are left questioning this notion of incompleteness, seeking out answers as to what has been left unsaid. In order to engage with this further, I turn to Mark Fisher and his theorization on loss in the following section. By engaging with his work, we can begin to bridge the film's use of archival material and its emphasis on the memory archive as containing a plurality of voices beyond Tan's own, to discover what has been left out of the histories that we see onscreen.

Loss

Though stemming from the work of Jacques Derrida and by extension Marx, there is a multitude of definitions for hauntology which exist within the fields of sociology, literary studies,

musicology, psychology, and beyond. It is because of this abundance of voices on the topic that I wish to delineate my own interpretation of the term, which I will be using in relation to *Shirkers*. I will build on this topic further in later sections, but it is notable that throughout the film Tan ensures that the audience is aware of the lineage and progression of ideas and concepts that appear in both her work and the creative works around her; in an effort to do the same, I will be tracing my own understanding of hauntology from the roots which have fed it.

In his seminal work, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Mark Fisher writes through his conceptualization of hauntology as informed by the work of his peer Simon Reynolds and inspired by the initial writing on the topic by Jacques Derrida. Though not the originator of the term, Fisher is nonetheless credited with popularizing hauntology as a mode of thinking, primarily through his blog *k-punk*. Though global in his perspective, Fisher is particular in his locale, and primarily references British artists whose contexts are hyper-specific in their subject matter.

Fisher's locus of thought lies in the failure of late capitalism and its reverberations throughout British music, with a focus on electronic, rock, and the slippage between genres which hauntology lends itself so well to. Throughout numerous writings by him, Fisher makes clear that “[at] a time of political reaction and restoration, when cultural innovation has stalled and even gone backwards [...] one function of hauntology is to keep insisting that there are futures beyond postmodernity's terminal time [and that, when] the present has given up on the future, we must listen for the relics of the future in the unactivated potentials of the past” (The Metaphysics of Crackle 53). Hauntology can also be recovered from the effects of “crackle” in notable songs that Fisher analyzes, and he often references the ways in which temporality factors into the hauntological nature of a song. Fisher's argument blends nonlinear temporality with the tension

between the physical and intangible, arguing that “[crackle] makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint; it won’t allow us to fall into the illusion of presence. [...] We aren’t only made aware that the sounds we are hearing are recorded, we are also made conscious of the playback systems we use to access the recordings” (*Ghosts of My Life* 28-29). If crackle is Fisher’s medium for surfing time, perhaps the sequences of *Shirkers* (1992) that fill out the film act in a similar way—constantly gesturing towards a past that is not wholly remembered, and a future that did not come to be. In the same way that we are not permitted the full presence of sound with crackle, the nebulous pasts and lost futures of *Shirkers* (1992) are rendered inert. That is, what is lost is not only the film, but the timelines which Tan can now only theorize about, as she performs a kind of speculative history. In a shift away from *Ghosts of My Life*’s cold outlook on late capitalism in contemporary times, the film posits that, in the face of loss—whether that is the loss of a film or the loss of a life—we can instead turn to the restorative space of collective memory and archive.

It is necessary here to bring us back to hauntology’s basis, as a study of ghosts. We have seen already how the film treats its archive as a means of invoking a multiplicity of unresolved histories, by either alluding to alternate futures and emotional pasts or literally revealing other perspectives on the past. Now, we turn to *Shirkers*’ relationship to loss. I argue that *Shirkers* turns away from death, and pivots instead around loss. That is, *Shirkers* invokes ideas of and references to death, but never allows any of its subjects to figuratively “die.” By instead trading in the language of loss while simultaneously remaking time as disjointed and nonlinear, *Shirkers* renders death not as final, but as a liminal space of unrest. Like the 1992 film, it is left incomplete.

Specifically, it does this through intercutting the film’s linear storyline with sequences from the lost *Shirkers* (1992), as well as through withholding the moment of discovery until late in the

film—even then, the film is left incomplete and unfinished. Tan’s treatment of time, not as linear, but as predicated on points from her past that go on to inspire later ideas, creates a new perspective on the moment of discovery. This slippage of time, which occurs throughout *Shirkers* but notably in Tan’s marking of time through the formation of key ideas, is one way in which the rendering of loss is made uneasy. If time is nonlinear, then perhaps what is lost can yet be found. After Tan reveals that *Shirkers* (1992) has been lost—or rather, stolen by Cardona—she muses on how even after it’s gone, she still feels as though it is calling to her.

Another theorist on hauntology is Avery Gordon, who similarly does not deal with archives, but rather focuses on the understanding of hauntology from a sociological perspective as “neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import” (Ghostly Matters 7). Her work focuses on the sociological reality of how systems of power and abuse linger, and how to engage with them in ways that do not obfuscate or shroud the “ghosts,” but instead reckon with them (23). In a lengthy but evocative quote, she elaborates on the topic:

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against

our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition (Gordon 8).

I draw on Gordon here to elucidate how Cardona and his theft of the original *Shirkers* becomes instead the historical narrative form that Tan pushes back against in her use of the collective memory archive. After the initial reveal that *Shirkers* has been stolen, the figure of Cardona lingers over the film – we hear his voice on cassette tapes that he has sent Tan, and she describes her attempts to “exorcise” him from her past through writing *The Black Isle*, which Tan describes in narration as the “story of a young woman with extraordinary powers who falls under the influence of a charismatic but sinister man.” What follows is Tan’s reckoning, not necessarily with Cardona himself, but rather with the spectre of control that he wielded over both *Shirkers* and her.

In turning away from the physical archive and exchanging it for collective memory, Tan is able to instead reframe the film and its history not through Cardona’s direction, but the collective work and recall of the rest of those involved in the project. Though the scales differ—Gordon’s hauntology is working on a large, societal scale while Tan is parsing her own narrow interpersonal relationships—this concept of the figure of Cardona lingers around *Shirkers*, to the point where his abuses are raised by several of the crew members, who recall those interactions with stunning clarity. It is only after the moment of discovery, when the physical archive is left partially recovered, that Tan takes an alternative approach to constructing the history of both Cardona and the afterlife of *Shirkers* itself.

In the limbo before Tan’s moment of discovery, she speaks to her conviction in *Shirkers*’ continued existence through “distress signals” that she saw in the brief visual resonances from other films throughout the decades following its theft. These “distress signals” are reflections of elements from *Shirkers* that are echoed in later films. Tan specifically mentions such films as

Rushmore (1998) [see fig. 20] and *Ghost World* (2001) [see fig. 21], both of which have shots that mirror ones from *Shirkers* (1992). I mention this not to imply plagiarism or a wider conspiracy, but rather to invoke the lingering sense of lost history that the missing *Shirkers* leaves in its wake.



Figure 20. A comparison between *Shirkers* (1992) and *Rushmore* (1998), showing the respective characters peering into a fish tank.



Figure 21. A comparison between *Shirkers* (1992) and *Ghost World* (2001).

Indeed, this sense of loss-without-finality that *Shirkers* plays with extends to Cardona's death as well. I do not want to speak lightly of the man's actual death, but instead specify my analysis to the film's treatment of it. Tan learns of Cardona's death—by cardiac failure, according to the close-up on a death certificate revealed in the film—directly prior to the moment of discovery itself and goes on to seek out answers as to who Cardona was.

Specifically, her pursuit takes her to Los Angeles, where she meets with a small cast of characters who become relevant to her search: Cardona's widow, his collaborator Grace Dane Mazur, and his protegee, Stephen Tyler. Each reveals a sliver of their experience with Cardona

and, notably, the ways in which he stole from them. With the widow, it was her inheritance for his various creative projects; with Mazur, her time and writing ability for a screenplay of his; and with Tyler, his horror film's negatives, none of which were ever recovered. Indeed, along this journey, Tan finds little else but further mysteries, and each new person she speaks to relays a different history that Cardona fed them about his own life. In short, the experience of Cardona's death within the film is not one of finality, or even joy at the discovery of their lost film, but rather one of further unresolved questions in Tan's life.

Within the film, these compounding losses are unsettling and tragic, and as I alluded to earlier, they lead to Tan's pursuit of other figures in her and Cardona's lives who could potentially answer her plethora of questions. Yet there is no single answer that anyone holds, and each new memory prompts new questions along with it. Rather than one single narrative that explains either Cardona or the theft of *Shirkers* (1992), we are met only with memories, and scattered ones at that. Simon Reynolds, a contemporary of Fisher whom the latter references in his own work, writes that hauntology "is all about memory's power (to linger, pop up unbidden, prey on your mind) and memory's fragility (destined to become distorted, to fade, then finally disappear)" (Retromania 335). In understanding this, I want to turn to how the invocation of a collective archive, particularly after the loss of the physical one, relies on memory to propose alternate histories which counter dominant cultural narratives.

Memory

In her book, *Immaterial Archives*, Jenny Sharpe seeks to relay history through diasporic African modes of storytelling, inclusive of poetry, visual art, and more (6). I wanted to invoke her work specifically because of her use of the term "immaterial," which "refers to the intangible quality of

affects, dreams, spirits, and visions that art and literature introduce into material archives” (3). As I am writing about the shift away from physical archives and into memory, I wanted to work with theory that dealt with this understanding of archival intangibility.

This tension between the archival impulse to retain physical documents and the desire to move beyond dominant cultural modes of documentation runs throughout Sharpe’s book. She notes that “the desire to tell stories represents the need to give a body, a materiality so to speak, to the lives that appear as the smallest of fragments within official records” (*Immaterial Archives* 8), even as some “scholars also caution against addressing the problem of archival absences with an ever-expanding inventory of sources” (8-9), citing critiques which understand such impulses to be furthering “sub-alternity” and dwelling too little on the lived experiences of enslaved people. I reference these critiques to give insight into Sharpe’s context, as well as to contextualize my own work as it draws from her theory.

Sharpe specifically addresses the visuality of NourbeSe Philip’s poetry, and the way its “fragmentation of an archival record destabilizes [the archive’s] meaning [through its] ‘affective memory’ that elicits more visceral responses to the past” (*Immaterial Archives* 14). The poems in question are constructed through taking legal documents concerning the *Zong* and redacting them to create visual, shifting poems that evoke “affective memories” from the resulting stuttering phrases and words [see fig. 22]. On the topic of Philip’s subversion of legal documents Sharpe posits that “by calling *Gregson v. Gilbert* the tombstone of the drowned Africans, she moves archival records from their museum sepulcher to the Atlantic Ocean containing the remains of the lives that might have been” (26). It is this concept, though vastly different to my own project, that I am drawn to: the act of reasserting where the archive is located, and the positioning of it through one’s own art. Specifically, Philips uses the silent documents of American slavery to locate the

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Figure 22. An excerpt from Philip, M. NourbeSe and Setaey Adamu Boateng. "Zong! #1." *Zong!: As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 23 September 2008.

embodied lives and experiences of enslaved peoples who were otherwise obscured by these historical records. She locates the archive through shifting the historical perspective to centre the murdered and enslaved victims, turning the focus away from the documents and their violent colonial perspectives, and instead towards the people. To ground this in relation to *Shirkers*, I am inspired by Sharpe's engagement with Philip's methodology to think about how Tan locates the archive beyond Cardona and the material objects, instead finding it in the collective memory of those involved in the film. Tan turns away from a framing of history which allows for a singular dominant narrative, and instead positions the archive within a space of communal memory.

Through its narrative framing, *Shirkers* posits a multiplicity of histories, whether regarding Cardona's background or Tan's own recollection of the filmmaking experience contrasted against that of her friends'. Throughout the film, we encounter Ng's pushback against Tan's views on what happened over the course of their shared past. This often serves to reframe Tan as being too demanding and singularly focused, colouring Tan's more rosy recollection of the filmmaking process. Other past crew members raise memories that Tan was not present for, such as Siddiqi's

recollection of Cardona sending her away before closing a business deal that she had arranged, or their composer Ben Harrison's experience being unduly threatened by Cardona before he took the film's original score from Harrison. As these experiences unfold throughout the film, we uncover more of the mystery regarding the film's theft and are made to second guess Tan's perspective in favour of a messy, complicated mix of personalities and perspectives. Indeed, this framing of Tan as disagreeable, uptight, and single-minded is why the turn to a collective memory is so crucial; by turning away from Cardona's control and dominance over the production and how it would be remembered—or, in this case, that it would be forgotten through his theft—Tan questions her own control over the film and thus, her position as narrator. Her role as translator for the history of the original *Shirkers* is questioned not only by various members of the crew, but by her own critique of Cardona as he rewrote his history. Though the matter is not resolved by her use of outside voices, we are able to recognize the existence of a multiplicity of histories and reflect on the varied approaches to *Shirkers'* (1992) story that each interviewee takes.

Shirkers refuses to align to a set temporality, instead invoking footage from the original film even after we have learned that it was lost. In this way, it primes us to look beyond the singular dominant history, even if that narrative is being directed by Tan herself. Instead, coupled as it is with the loss of the film and the nature of incompleteness that is bound to the recovery of *Shirkers* (1992)—found, but silenced—the film proposes not that we must “make its ghosts reside within the house of archives” (Sharpe 28), but instead dwell in the space of incompleteness and understand said space to be an alternative form of history-making, which is in direct contrast to the linear dominant cultural expectation of narrative history. Rather than seeking a history which is intended to be recorded and housed, Sharpe argues that

The idea of a memory that is tidal—appearing to be stationary but always shifting—unsettles the presumed stability of an archival memory suggested through the fixity and solidity of its temple-like building or an empirical memory that resuscitates a material past through artifacts and historical re-creations (Immaterial Archives 39).

While the loss of *Shirkers* (1992)—both in terms of its theft for the two interim decades and its missing soundtrack—is undoubtedly a loss of culture and a missing piece of Singaporean alternative media history, the film does not seek to recreate the original, nor to piece it together in a way which mirrors what it was originally. Rather, it creates a new object and project entirely, one that turns away from institutional conceptions of archive and dominant cultural impositions of history, and instead pursues that which is unwritten.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by proposing that *Shirkers* is a ghost story. Like a ghost story, *Shirkers* examines the nature of loss and history, both in its treatment of the celluloid footage that lies at the heart of its narrative and in the pursuit of answers within Cardona's past. Yet *Shirkers* finds its answers not solely within Cardona's records, but in the immateriality of recollections shared between those involved in the project decades past.

By both framing the moment of discovery as incomplete and fragmenting the archive of celluloid throughout the film, *Shirkers* posits a failure of singular or authoritative understandings of history and history-making. Tan actively engages with a version of *Shirkers* that was dominated and eventually stolen by Cardona, in order to then turn to the immaterial as a space for reckoning with that history. In doing so, Tan's film proposes a mode of representation for documenting non-traditional media by centering overlapping stories which may not agree, nor fill in the entirety of

what has been lost to time. With Tan's usage of methods that resist narrowing history to a single, linear narrative, the ghosts that linger throughout *Shirkers* and other such histories are not erased, but instead mobilized as some of many interwoven histories.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

I began this thesis with the premise that the moment of discovery was a framing device, used by the filmmakers in this study to interrogate accepted histories and propose their own alternate modes of history-making through the “outsider” perspective offered by the personal home archive. The moment of discovery is made notable through several factors, namely: 1) its recurrence throughout these and countless other autobiographical documentaries that centre marginalized perspectives; 2) its centrality within the overarching narrative of these films; and 3) its construction as a singular instance in the film, on the part of the filmmaker, in order to tell a specific narrative. I’ll note here, as well, that the choice to frame this thesis and these films through the lens of the moment of discovery is also a “construction” on my part—but, I hope, one that has proven constructive.

To put it simply, the moment of discovery is one tool that documentary filmmakers use in order to tell their stories. Yet, throughout this project, I have explored how the moment of discovery is used to represent and interpret the personal home archive, acting as a catalyst for these filmmakers to represent modes of history-making that run counter to the linear, singular forms of history. It is not the sole tool for doing so, nor is it the “correct” framing device—rather, it usefully centres the filmmaker and their story in ways that place them outside of accepted histories, allowing them the freedom to explore alternate formations of history that question any singular, static narrative.

One of the initial questions that I posed in the introduction and throughout this project was on how forms of marginalization and archives come together. I’ll reiterate that my intent has never been to pigeonhole these films into specific categories or individual lenses, but rather to read marginalization in its broad definition, inclusive of stories that exist outside of formal archives as

much as these filmmakers' identities. That is, much of my project has been to examine how these filmmakers used the archive to explore their own perspective, as prompted by the moment of discovery, in order to comment on larger issues of exclusion from the dominant historical record. I want to first reflect on how these films have done this, before turning to the implications behind the moment of discovery and why it matters, and finish with a brief return to the physical archive through its ending.

The Archive

In arguing that the moment of discovery is a framing device used in these films to counter accepted Western forms of history-making, I will first reflect on how it did this in the three films that this thesis has examined, revisiting the moment of discovery's usage in conjunction with the archive. In doing so, I want to both summarize the findings from each chapter, as well as reiterate on the relationship between both the moment of discovery as a filmic device and the archive as its subject, before moving on in the next section to why this relationship matters.

To begin, *Random Acts of Legacy's* archive in Chapter One was discovered by Ali Kazimi, both in the initial retelling of his bid for it in an online auction, and as it was depicted in the film as the film reels were unspooled and revealed to be damaged and decaying. Yet the materiality and hapticity of the archive, especially in its initial discovery as an object preserved and revealed to us through touch, became an intermediary in Kazimi's negotiation of diasporic memory and history. Specifically, Kazimi's relationship to film as a material object through which to access the past collided with Silas Fung's collections, both of home movies and World's Fair memorabilia. Laura U. Marks' reading of "*being away*" allowed for the Fung archive to be interpreted as a distillation of the archival impulse, seeking to document not only the moment in history, but the sense of

diasporic loss and longing that is embedded in the cinematic textures and hapticity of these photographs. In understanding Kazimi's and Fung's articulation of archive through Marks' haptics, we turned next to an investigation of memory.

In Chapter Two, our focus was on *Retour*'s archive of one—or, perhaps, a multitude of histories contained in one photograph. Huang's moment of discovery and, indeed, the full image itself, is kept from us until the end of the film. Instead of the complete view, pieces of the photograph are interspersed throughout *Retour*, infiltrating Huang's dreams and guiding his journey back "home." By representing the moment of discovery through a series of imagined archival objects, *Retour*'s archive is thus rendered as a speculative space, animated by the affective metaphor of the train to connect Huang's journey back to his grandfather's. *Retour* speaks to larger issues, but never loses sight of its personal archive as a piece of a larger familial history; Huang's loose references to historical events and dreamlike narration are an extension of the shifting nature of how he learned these stories, from countless retellings by family members throughout the years. By invoking Tina M. Campt's analytical frameworks for reading affect in archival photographs, I sought to connect the way these speculative images "moved" Huang and the audience back to the moment of discovery and the archive. In using experimental forms, Huang foregrounded his own speculative mode of storytelling; instead of centering a linear form of recalling history, he drew on sensations, everyday minutiae, and modes of travel that echo across time.

Finally, Chapter Three brought us to a divergent point with *Shirkers*' dual archives of materiality and memory. Tan's loss of the material filmic objects, and their incomplete retrieval years later, leave room for the propagation of ghost stories and ideations on what happened and what could have been. Spectral speculations on the past and future lend themselves to an archive of collective memory, intangible but shared across continents and time. *Shirkers* rejects the

centrality of a preeminent historical authority, critiquing even Tan's own desire for control over her past and the stories she tells in favour of portraying a history that is rich with a multiplicity of recollections. The duality of archives portrayed in the film is marked by the moment of discovery, which comes about halfway through the film with Tan finding the now-mute *Shirkers* (1992) and choosing to instead interrogate its history by way of Cardona's shady past. It is only at this point, when the celluloid archive is (re)discovered, that Tan turns to the collective memory archive in pursuit of a history that moves beyond Cardona and his theft. Drawing on Jenny Sharpe's *Immaterial Archives* and its work in countering hegemonic history-making, the chapter argued that *Shirkers'* moment of discovery is not confined only to the investigation of the archive. Rather, accepting the absence of the original film's soundtrack raises the question of how to grieve, especially when the past cannot be consigned to the past.

The Moment

In understanding how the moment of discovery presents alternative forms of history-making by centering marginalized perspectives, we can turn to the ultimate question of what this means to us, as archival and film scholars. This project has sought to examine the moment of discovery as a filmic device in order to ultimately analyze how its relationship to the archive allows filmmakers to present outsider histories through their own perspectives. Within these films, it has been used to examine the nearly-lost archival object, speculate on family histories that would otherwise have been lost or forgotten, and construct new archives from collective memory. Thus, I want to linger for a moment longer on the potential within the moment of discovery.

To take up the archive once more, the moment of discovery specifically invokes the personal archival object as a key aspect of its framing. The moment of discovery draws attention

to minoritized archives that many, including the filmmakers themselves, may disregard; by nature, the “moment” is an instance wherein the filmmaker uncovers a lost archive, somewhere beyond the institutional walls of formal archives. In doing so, it draws attention to personal home archives, which “constitute a valuable source for a history from below, since they focus on the lives, cycles, and rites of ordinary ‘anonymous’ families, outside of the official records of public events that are the general concern of traditional archives” (Cuevas 66). As this project has shown, these archives offer valuable counternarratives and counter-histories, revealing the minutiae of everyday families that can grant historians and communities insights into histories that may otherwise be lost or flattened by the historical record.

Furthermore, the constructed nature of the “moment” allows us to better understand the filmmaker and what they prioritize. In each of the films discussed, the way the “moment” is depicted maps onto the overarching themes of the films and conceits behind what the filmmaker wants to convey. For example, in *Random Acts*, the “moment” is depicted as a careful act of restoration to these fragmented and decaying celluloid strips. Later, Kazimi’s restoration of these home movies is shown to not only be rooted in his impulse to preserve history, but also his desire to retain the material archival objects—to, in his words from the film, “find, hold, touch, and look at moving images filmed over seventy years ago [in an era when] the vast majority of our day-to-day digital photos and home movies are more ephemeral than ever.” Kazimi’s impulse was to preserve the material archive out of a sense of duty to the object itself, in an age where such forms of preserving history are rendered defunct by many home collectors through digitization and other forms of digital preservation. Such insights into the documentarian’s process and intent through the construction of these “moments” can only aid our work in film analysis and theory. By analyzing the moment of discovery, we can potentially better understand the filmmaker’s own

perspective on the archive and their relationship to it, through their portrayal of the moment of discovery.

Finally, the moment of discovery is used to connect to audiences in a way that personalizes these stories. *Retour* specifically sought to draw the audience into its historical narrative, rendering the act of discovery as an intimate and embodied exploration of one family's history. Indeed, even the final reveal that there was no robust archive of photos speaks to the lack of personal archives that many families may face. Whether due to simple derelict of the archives they already have, external factors—forced migration, a lack of resources, alternate forms of recounting history—or otherwise, not all families have archives of photographs and movies. Yet, the moment of discovery, as a catalyzing act that propelled each of these films, shows us that even the pursuit of a deeper history may reveal entire lost stories that could otherwise have been forgotten. That is to say, if the goal is to encourage the interest in and study of marginalized archives, then rendering on film the act of discovering one's family archive and the subsequent hidden histories that it contains can be a simple encouragement for audiences to critically reflect on their own personal histories. It is clear that these “moments” allow audiences to better understand the ways that individual narratives tie into larger histories, as well as encouraging them to reflect further on how racialized histories that have been nearly forgotten, damaged, or lost can continue to resonate decades later.

This thesis has sought to understand the personal home archive as a means of telling stories that counter the central or singular historical record and uplift marginalized perspectives often obfuscated or erased from history. This is due in no small part to the lack of preservation access that many of these histories face. Without inclusion in the formal record, these archives face losses due to the lack of resources. Of course, such issues are and have always been tackled in various

ways—through community archives, institutional outreach, and archival preservation training among others. Members of such community-based participatory archives often donated objects with strong connections to loved ones, community spaces, and memories of that community, seeking an affective connection to their community archive; a kind of ending in itself (Roeschley and Kim 28; 38).

One commonality between these three archives has been their precarity—regarding the way they are housed, the uncertainty of their future, and their vulnerable materiality. If the degradation of the materiality of personal archives is inevitable and part of the process that all stories must undergo with time, then that cannot prevent their narratives from being told and mobilized to counter dominant modes of thought. For them to exist is for them to matter, even if their actual matter is crumbling and stained by time. If discovery is the catalyst for telling stories of outsider cultural narratives, then perhaps we may turn to its endings—the moment when an archive is considered irretrievable by its carer, whether due to the archive’s material form, its perceived loss, or otherwise—as an opportunity to explore the same.

Thus, the archival ending is steeped in nostalgia, grief, and loss—as well as healing. If we acknowledge that the discovery of an archive—constructed though that moment is by the filmmaker—prompts an impulse to retain the object, to document its history, and explore one’s relationship to it, then perhaps its ending can be a chance for reflection. These endings need not be a cessation of the stories captured within an archive, but rather an acknowledgement of their place in the vaster, polyphonous whole.

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