



**External
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Rajee Paña Jeji Shergill, *mom and her music*
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Rajee Paña Jeji Shergill's work, *mom and her music*, explores the ways in which personal music and memory can work together to dig into issues that refuse easy resolution: diaspora, nostalgia, and loneliness. About 15 minutes in length, Rajee's video is a montage of various episodes from the life of the Paña Jeji Shergill family. The piece consists of layered homemade video/photographic footage from the last 30 years. There is a phone interview conducted with her mother, Rose Paña Jeji Shergill, as well as a collection of original songs recorded by Rose between 2005 and 2008. The songs in concert with the visual montage facilitate a homework journey for the artist.

The particular assemblage of visual and spoken narratives presented in *mom and her music*, is a common trope in the work of numerous diasporic artists, whose experiences are characterized by plurality, hybridity, and heterogeneity. According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse, these songs originate from feelings of alienation and homelessness.ⁱ Situated in places of discomfort, diasporic bodies only have access to archives that are, by their very nature, fragmentary and fugitive – requiring new dialogic formations to open. Born in an immigrant family

to a Filipino mother and a Punjabi father, Rajee is such a diasporic body. The artist, in dialogue with the maternal diasporic subject, cares for feelings of nostalgia and loneliness.

The video opens with a melodic greeting from Rose, who sends her love to her two daughters, Loveleen and Rajee. She gently reminds them, “We are missing you so much, thinking of you all the time.”ⁱⁱ These feelings of longing are further elaborated in the phone interview, when Rose patiently charts her intuitive song-making practice, from her youth spent in the Philippines and then in Florida, where she used music as a way to cope with her daughters’ growing independence, and relocations away from home. Rose wistfully speaks of going to her daughters’ empty rooms to sing their bodies back into presence.

In a similar vein, Rajee uses processes of archival rummaging and collaging to make her own way back to her mother and motherland(s). The video is populated by family gatherings, of rose-coloured parties in the basement of her parent’s Winnipeg home, which are cut by snapshots of an empty bed, a desolate canopied bench, a lonely view of snow falling in residential Montreal. We catch brief glimpses of the young Rose with her friends and family in the Philippines, to be replaced videos of her walking around a Punjabi veranda getting ready for a wedding, and then some decades later, bouncing lightly in the back of a trekking jeep as her daughter takes over control of the camera. Interestingly, Rajee’s use of grainy, and at times blurred, video subtly mimics the tone of her mother’s immigrant accent. This delicate likeness proudly displays both difference and a history of movement. Like her mother, who, despite, not being born with a

Canadian mother-tongue sings music comfortably and with joy, the artist centers the only available archive. She constructs a return that is not only compelling but one that is brought to life through its very complexity and fragmentation. In partnering this visual history with her mother's music, Rajee administers a unique collaboration that does not leave behind the struggles of her own mother, similarly stuck between diaspora and homeland. Music and video, accordingly, operate as two languages through which the women negotiate change and feelings of nostalgia.

At one point, Rajee begins a casual splitting of the screen between archival material and contemporary shots of herself walking towards the camera and at other times, slowly retreating. Dressed in both Western and Indian attire, this act of splitting illustrates a physical separation between the here/now with the there/then, which functions as a warning that the homeward bound body is intimately tied to the effects of diaspora and can never return unscathed. In his discussion of Caribbean cultural identities and the significance of homeward journeys in cultural production, Stuart Hall suggests that there is no simple way of returning home to make sense of our identities and future directions. Rather, these journeys, which are made “necessary for us all,” are “necessarily circular,” and require us to return by alternative routes.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, Jeji Shergill's return to her homeland – located at the meeting place of India and the Philippines – is circuitous because she is detoured by key life moments in diaspora, materialized in her family's historical ephemera and her mother's music and doubly split by her continued participation in the diasporic culture.

mom and her music illuminates that there is never an easy way to return home and nostalgia is not an end in itself. Instead, through Rajee's eyes and Rose's songs, we can learn to see our past uprootings and consequent movements as points of connection between us and others, giving us strength to move into our futures. As Rose utters her hope that she continues to sing and make new songs in the future, the viewer can only wish that for those bound to their particular homeward journeys, the will to return and the courage to accept change never expires.

-Noor Bhangu

ⁱ Jan Nederveen Pieterse. "Globalization as Hybridization." In *Media and Cultural Studies*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, 567-81. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. p. 574.

ⁱⁱ Rajee Paña Jeji Shergill. *Mom and Her Music*. 2016. 0:32, <http://www.xpace.info/exhibition-event/mom-and-her-music/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stuart Hall. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Theorizing Diaspora*, edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, 233-46. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. p. 242.