SEARCHING FOR BETTY CHEN:
REDISCOVERING THE ASIAN AMERICAN FILMMAKERS
OF UCLA IN THE SEVENTIES

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One of the tremendous gifts of recent scholarship on the black filmmakers who arrived at UCLA after the 1965 Watts uprising (a group known today as the L.A. Rebellion) has been the recovery of and new access to the work of African American women filmmakers in the mid- to late seventies, a period when a radical film culture flourished at UCLA. The early short films of Julie Dash, Barbara McCullough, and Alile Sharon Larkin were firmly incorporated into an amplified L.A. Rebellion history. The prehistory of this black cinema rebellion includes the formation of an affirmative-action initiative within the UCLA film school: called the Ethno-Communications Program (1969–73), it brought Asian American, black, Latinx, and Native American students into the film school in significant numbers for the first time. Though short-lived, this program opened the gates for successive waves of black women directors, including Carroll Parrott Blue, Melvonna Ballenger, Jacqueline Frazier, O. Funmilayo Makarah, and eventually Zeinabu irene Davis, to train and bolster a burgeoning black feminist film tradition.

A sizable group of Asian American women predate this group and were active in the film school during those “Ethno” years. These women include Betty Chen, Laura Ho, Marie Kodani, Geraldine Kudaka, Mary Uyematsu Kao, sisters Gail and Carol Yasunaga, and Lilian Wu, along with Asian American musician-activists like June Kuramoto and Nobuko Miyamoto, who contributed original music and performed within early-seventies films by the Asian American students at UCLA. Some of these women were also on the front lines of student activism and antiwar protests, as well as being active in the Asian American movement and Third World liberation organizing off campus.

To understand the activism of these Asian filmmakers as well as the legacy of black filmmakers at UCLA, long-accepted terms such as Clyde Taylor’s “rebellion” or Toni Cade Bambara’s “black insurgents” may need a revision; instead, this early-seventies group of film students of color could more expansively be termed the “multiracial insurgents” as a first step in rethinking this wider group and its role in collectively igniting a “more perfect” media rebellion. Such a category revision is in the spirit, too, of the feminist scholars of the Women Film Pioneers Project and such historically minded Asian and Asian American documentarians as Arthur Dong and S. Louisa Wei, who in the past decade have recovered the life stories and work of Chinese American feature film directors Marion Wong and Esther Eng, respectively. Consider this article’s focus on UCLA filmmakers Betty Chen and Laura Ho, then, as a sort of down payment on future research and thought.

Betty Chen was a teaching assistant for the earliest groups of students who entered the UCLA program. Her name appears in descriptions of the early days of the Ethno-Communications Program written by scholars Renee Tajima-Peña, Chon Noriega, Cynthia Young, and Glen Mimura. Organized by a group of student activists including such figures as Moctesuma Esparza, Danny Kwan, Luis Garza, Marie Kodani, Yasu Osawa, and Richard Wells, the program was supervised by the legendary Elyseo Taylor, the film school’s first African American professor, who had been recruited by the department chair at the time, Colin Young. Supported by graduate students like Chen, Charles Burnett, and David Garcia, the group was originally dubbed the Media Urban Crisis Committee, or MUCC. Some of its first generation of students brazenly declared themselves the “Mother Muccers!”

Even amid the rebellious impulses of this insurgent group, Betty Chen’s early animated short Portraits of a Young Girl (1970) stands apart, delivering a one-two-punch finale so devastating it must have knocked those Muccers out. The film begins with what looks a live-action sketch pad. A black
marker on a blank white canvas sketches the lines of a young girl’s face, then transforms into a swirling series of color portraits—some realistic, some psychedelic, in profile or staring forward, some situated among the stars and moon, others gazing at rolling landscapes. These images dance and stream into one another for just over a minute, when the vivid colors suddenly fade to a smoky gray charcoal image: men wearing gas masks point guns, all in the same direction.

With rapid fades to black, then back again, Chen achieves a strobe effect of gun blasts. One final portrait remains. This time, the young girl’s portrait does not swirl or dance; it is static and accompanied by a descriptive text:

Allison Krause.  
B 1951  
D May 3, 1970  
Kent, Ohio.

What did Betty Chen just do? The unspeakable horror of the Kent State University student massacre—where four students, including the nineteen-year-old Krause, were killed by the Ohio National Guard—was delivered, in silence, in one hundred seconds or less. Who the hell was this masked animator? What portrait of a young Asian American woman as radical filmmaker was Chen beginning to sketch out for herself here?

A Filmmaker Wrapped in an Enigma: Betty Yao Jung Chen

The extant published writings about the Ethno-Communications Program contain little more about Betty Chen than her name; sometimes, in fact, her name is misspelled and listed as Betty Chin. Deep digging into the Visual Communications (VC) archive, the UCLA film and television archive, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences library, however, yields the evidence that Chen is both everywhere and nowhere.

In addition to her Portraits of a Young Girl, UCLA holds a second student film of Chen’s, Rainbow Car Wash (1976), a fanciful tribute to Busby Berkeley, where she appears briefly as a dancing “effervescent hibiscus.” On the IMDb website, though, typical of its treatment of early short films, Chen has
only one credit listed: another short, titled *Marguerite* (1971). This film was written by the Oscar-winning screenwriter Nancy Dowd, yet there is no reference to the film in Dowd’s papers at the Academy library. Dowd was a classmate of Chen’s at UCLA. So was Judith Dancoff, whose spectacularly funky documentary *Judy Chicago and the California Girls* (1971) lists Betty Chen first in the enumeration of her all-female production crew. Eddie Wong, cofounder of Visual Communications, thanks Chen in the credits of his early VC classic, *Wong Sinsaang* (1971). Sylvia Morales, who considered Chen a friend, thanks her in the credits for *Chicana* (1979). The credits of Jeff Furumura’s student film, *I Don’t Think I Said Much* (1973), read as follows: “A Film by Jeff Furumura with help by Betty Chen . . . .” Chen also recorded the voice-over narration for Mary Uyematsu Kao’s student documentary on the women of the Asian American Movement.10 And a near-decade later, she contributed extraordinary illustrations to Bob Miyamoto’s animated film *Gaman . . . To Endure* (1982), which includes original music by Nobuko Miyamoto arranged by June Kuramoto.

A recently constructed timeline of student activism and the origins of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA marks the winter of 1969 as the date that Chen, together with Bob Nakamura, Eddie Wong, and Duane Kubo (three of the four founding members of Visual Communications), started a photo archival project for the Japanese American Research Project (JARP), which is described as the “beginning of Visual Communications.”11 In a recent effort to once again sort and arrange the staggering photo archive in anticipation of VC’s fiftieth anniversary, Eddie Wong made a discovery: two additional portraits of the young Betty Chen.12

In one, she is working with Bob Nakamura and Wong in the original VC offices on Jefferson Boulevard (already sorting photos, from the looks of it); in a second shot, Betty is shooting footage of a Filipino American senior center, with Wong and Kubo assisting.

Conversations and correspondence with many of Chen’s collaborators and friends yielded variations on several themes. Betty Chen was “so tall and so talented,” they remembered, and cited her nicknames: “Big Betty . . . Bad-Ass Betty.” Betty was “our teacher . . . such an inspiration. . . . What an artist!” But other memories are more ominous: Betty “had to go back to Florida to take care of parents”; Betty had “mental-health issues” and was “possibly bipolar.” And finally, trailing off: “She doesn’t even write us back. . . .”

What an artist! And yet, this portrait of a young Betty Chen ends here, as lines of inquiry ended with a chill: her last known address is a town in Florida that, according to fellow student and UCLA AASC staffer Mary Uyematsu Kao recalls, is not too far from Eatonville, the hometown of Zora Neale Hurston. Beloved and well-known now, Hurston lived her final Florida years in obscurity and was buried in an unmarked grave.13

**A Riddle Revealed: Laura Ho’s *Sleepwalker***

In 1990, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Visual Communications, archivist Abraham Ferrer curated a screening of six student films by Asian Americans who had been part of the Ethno-Communications program: “Asian American Ethnos: A Twentieth Anniversary Retrospective.”14 No film of Betty Chen’s was included. Along with a crowd of five documentaries by Asian American men produced in 1970–73, there was one narrative short by an Asian American woman: *Sleepwalker* by Laura Ho (1971), made in 16mm in black and white.15

Ho’s dialogueless film follows several days in the life of a typist (played by Suzi Wong, sister of VC’s Eddie Wong). She waits for a city bus, she arrives at her workplace, she types all day, she rubs her sore hands, she waits for the bus to return home—and, repeat. One day, she decides to skip the bus to work and take a long, lonely walk instead. She trembles at a barking dog. She looks longingly through a chain-link fence at a young girl bouncing a ball in an empty schoolyard. She dares to join this girl and play.

Through superimposition of the two faces, the viewer experiences the feeling that this girl is a version of the woman. The girl easily looks into the camera, but the woman avoids any direct gaze. The two play catch, bouncing this ball and flinging their arms high in the sky, smiles wide . . . until the ball bounces into the street and the young girl chases after it.
There is a crash, the protagonist’s face tightens, and there is no sign of the young girl.

The typist moves on, walking through a park, weaving through trees, and there is a strange superimposition again, this time not of the young girl’s face, but of something that looks like limbs or arms. The arms formerly raised high to play in the ball court now float like ghosts among the trees. The typist moves on again, now to a windy field of grass. The wind pushes her and she leans into it tenderly, almost erotically, resting in its embrace. She floats her own arms out to the side to ride this wind.

Here, Ho superimposes shots of a seagull (whose “caw, caw” has been heard off and on among other amplified nature squawks and squeals) matched as closely to the typist’s flying body as her face had been earlier matched to the young girl’s. There is a sense that these camera moves and floating superimpositions fulfill the lonely typist’s profound hunger to connect. In a final surreal moment, the typist is seen lying on a bed of grass, combing her fingers through its blades. Then, abruptly, the typist is back at the bus stop. Has this all been a dream? Or is this a new workday, made more bearable by the prior day off? Fade to the end title card: *Sleepwalker*.

On first viewing—especially after so many documentaries on concentration camps, drug addiction, the racism faced by Japanese gardeners and Chinese laundry men—it is hard to make sense of Ho’s film. It may have a very mild anticapitalist critique, with its sparse city soundscape, squealing bus breaks, and rapid-fire typewriter keys, and a protagonist typing for her life, machine-like, with no interactions with any other employees. Seen later in pain at a bus stop, massaging her aching hands, she is in contrast to a white “boss” who exits the building with pep in his step and a stack of typed papers surely made possible by the labor of this miserable woman of color. Like so many films of the Vietnam War era, *Sleepwalker* certainly conveys an overwhelming sense of alienation and discontent.

Filmmaker Ho (now Laura Ho Fineman) had not seen *Sleepwalker* in a very long time. After attending Ferrer’s 1990 VC screening, Ho was “just shocked at how . . . wounded it seemed.” Her initial reaction was: “Whoa, something’s really wrong with the person who made this movie.”
Struggling to respond to her film decades after its completion, she recounted the story of an arrest in 1969: “I don’t know if Eddie [Wong] told you, but we were all arrested.”

Ho was an activist and one of the founders of the legendary Asian American movement paper, Gidra. She was also a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organizer and a member of the Asian Radical Movement (ARM), along with Eddie and Suzi Wong. An ARM “sit-in” in support of an unjustly fired African American food worker led to nineteen arrests and charges of felony kidnapping and conspiracy to kidnap.17 “They later dropped it down,” Ho explains. “It was a very difficult time for people. It changed everybody.”

There is a further revelation. Asked whether the arrests might have been linked to Sleepwalker and her own reaction to the wounded person in the film, Ho reveals a history: “Part of the terms of my probation were not to associate with anybody. . . [with] those people that I essentially got in trouble with and not to be political . . . for five years. So, I just kind of hibernated and kept to myself.” After a few years of dead-end jobs, including writing copy for a department store and working for the IRS (until they found out she had an arrest record), she went back to school and made Sleepwalker as her “Project 2.” Suddenly the film’s place alongside the more overtly political projects of Ho’s UCLA cohort made perfect sense, and given this context, Sleepwalker—as a meditation on the aftermath of political organizing—could also take its place alongside many contemporary fiction and non-fiction films about women-of-color organizers.18

Laura Ho, like so many women in film school in the seventies, was discouraged from learning to use a camera, which she very much wanted to do. Yet her camerawork on Sleepwalker was so strong that her instructor at the time, J. P. Carson, offered to help her get work as a cinematographer; unfortunately, he died in a car accident soon afterward.

Aftermaths and the Work Ahead

Ho went on to work as a television news editor and became one of the first Asian American women (along with fellow UCLA filmmaker Gail Yasunaga) to join the editor’s guild.

One of their fellow UCLA classmates, Geraldine Kudaka, also pursued cinematography and found work as a camera assistant as early as 1970; able to join the union in 1975, she ultimately set up Third World and women’s training programs through the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET).19 Kudaka and Marie Kodani (who ended up working for years as a publicist for 20th Century-Fox) both did camerawork for Lilian Wu’s thesis film, In Transit (1977), a documentary on a century of Chinese American history in California. Three Asian Ethno women on one crew!

Other than that credit, however, there is little archival evidence of collaboration between the Asian American women filmmakers of UCLA at that time. Laura Ho recalls that her boyfriend, now husband, Lee Fineeman helped her crew and run some sound for Sleepwalker, but otherwise she did all of the shooting and editing herself. “I don’t think I ever spoke to any of the [other] Asian women in film school,” she confesses. “It was an incredibly competitive situation, and I didn’t know them.”20

Lilian Wu recalls a warm friendship with Kodani and even found an old Polaroid of the two of them together on campus with classmate Rita Keshena (who earned an MA in film studies at UCLA and later became a chief justice of her Menominee tribal court). Still, Wu admitted to being somewhat timid around the more political women.21 Ironically, even Mary Uyematsu Kao, who seems incredibly political in correspondence and conversation (and in the Gidra and Visual Communications photographic archive), suggested that Kudaka “scared the hell” out of her. She never got to know Ho because, “I was deathly afraid of her ’cause she was so heavy.”22

Gail Yasunaga, who probably has one of the most successful commercial editing careers of the Ethno graduates, initially mentioned a sense of regret for not doing more explicitly activist work.23 But her extensive IMDb page shows that she has edited many important Asian American documentaries, including works by fellow UCLA alums Bob Nakamura and John Esaki, as well as Renee Cho’s wonderful treasure, Jazz Is My Native Language: A Portrait of Toshiko Akiyoshi (1983), not to mention editing works by social-justice-oriented African American filmmakers like

Lilian Wu, Rita Keshena, and Marie Kodani (man unknown). Courtesy of Lilian Wu
Orlando Bagwell and Danny Glover. Like Betty Chen’s important early collaborations with white women writers and directors (Dowd, Dancoff), Yasunaga has had long-term collaborations with UCLA classmates such as director Lynn Hamrick, with whom she recently completed Hiro’s Table (2018), a feature documentary about sushi chef Hiroji Obayashi. And I have to hope that there are in fact many more early student works by Chen, Ho, Kudaka, Kodani, Wu, Uyematsu, and Yasunaga (and those whose names we don’t yet know), in basements, garages, closets, waiting to be recovered and restored and exhibited to blow this generation’s minds.

Finally, though, there is one telling title on the list of films that Yasunaga edited that hits a nerve. Considering the degrees of invisibility that remain for her generation of pioneering Asian American women media makers, there is considerable irony in the title of the film she edited for Rosanna Arquette in 2002: Searching for Debra Winger. If one seed could be planted by this brief meditation on lost and found histories, let it be this: may HBO, Netflix, or Amazon soon commission a new documentary: Searching for Betty Chen.

Notes

1. These discoveries were made possible in 2012, thanks to the “L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema” project by Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, which included an academic symposium at UCLA, a touring exhibition of new prints of many of the films, an anthology of scholarly essays on the work, and, most recently, a three-DVD collection of shorts and student films by the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers.

2. This original Ethno-Communications Program, which was housed in the film department and conceived to respond to the “urban crises” of the 1960s that were impacting African American, Asian American, Chicano, and American Indian communities, was always multiracial in its design and implementation. This program is distinct from the current UCLA Center for EthnoCommunications, revamped by Robert Nakamura in 1996 and housed within the Asian American Studies Center. Nakamura was a graduate student in the original Ethno-Communications Program. The curriculum changes fought for in the film school—such as the creation of courses like “Film and Social Change” and “Third World Cinema,” which were first taught by Elyseo Taylor and later by Teshome Gabriel, and are still taught today in the film department at UCLA—were the result of multiracial organizing and activism. Perhaps the history of this original program will now be added to the current EthnoCommunications webpage.


5. Noriega, Shot in America, 104–5. Noriega lists Burnett and Garcia as the graduate student instructors, but in my interviews with Robert Nakamura, Eddie Wong, and Duane Kubo, all of them mentioned that Betty Chen was their T.A.

6. The date in Chen’s film is written as May 3, although the Kent State shootings occurred on May 4, 1970.

7. The print held at UCLA’s film archive is not labeled with a date, but considering the multiple and nationwide campus strikes in the spring of 1970 to protest the U.S. invasion of Cambodia—from UCLA to Kent State, where Allison Krause was one of four students massacred by National Guardsmen—the urgency and electricity of the short suggests it was most likely made in 1970.

8. In her film credits, she always included her full name: Betty Yao Jung Chen.

9. Thank you to Maya Montañez Smukler at the UCLA Film and Television Archive for notifying me that Chen’s Rainbow Car Wash was included in the “40 Years of UCLA Student Filmmaking” fall 2019 series at the archive, curated by Smukler with Jan-Christopher Horak.

10. Kao remembers that sections of her “best footage” were cut out of the film by another filmmaker, and that “he added black leader” and never reassembled the footage so it could be screened again. When asked what her film dealt with, she told me: “My film was about how the [m]ovement and Asian women getting involved in the movement was breaking the stereotype of us as being the exotic, docile, and passive sex dolls, breaking with feudal traditions of our Asian cultures as well as defying the stereotype boxes that American society put us in. So I focused on lots of photos of women who were involved in the movement.” Mary Uyematsu Kao, personal communication to the author, June 27, 2017.


12. Thanks to Eddie Wong for looking for these photos and sharing them with me.

13. Kao’s foreboding mention of Eatonville brought to mind Alice Walker’s search for Hurston. Betty Chen may have dropped out of communication with many friends and former collaborators, but as far as anyone knows she is alive and living in Florida. See Alice Walker, “Searching for Zora,” Ms., March 1975. On January 7, 2014, Hurston became the Google doodle of the day.

On my very first visit to the VC offices in the Little Tokyo section of downtown Los Angeles, Ferrer shared with me a DVD of this program (which includes work by Robert Nakamura, Eddie Wong, Danny Kwan, Brian Maeda, Jeff Furumura, and Laura Ho).

Laura Ho Fineman, personal communication to the author, August 12, 2016.

Eddie Wong describes both the formation of ARM and the sit-in that led to these arrests in an oral history project conducted by the Asian American Study Center at UCLA called “Collective Memories: Founders of Asian American Studies and the Asian American Movement in Southern California,” July 21, 2018, www.aasc.ucla.edu/aasc50/cm_eddiewong.aspx.

Tanya Hamilton’s feature film Night Catches Us (2010) was the first to come to mind, but on the documentary side there are so many—from Grace Lee’s American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs (2013) and Damani Baker’s House on Coco Road (2016), about his activist mother, Fannie Haughton, to Christina D King and Elizabeth Castle’s documentary on Lakota activist Madonna Thunder Hawk, Warrior Women (2018).

See the chapter on Kudaka in Alexis Krasilovsky’s Women Behind the Camera: Conversations with Camerawomen (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

Laura Ho Fineman, letter to the author, November 3, 2019.


Mary Uyematsu Kao, personal communication to the author, June 27, 2017. See also a classic photo from the women’s issue of Gidra, January 1971, where Kao is seated in the center of a group of Asian American women giving the photographer (credited as Mike Murase) her middle-finger salute. Eddie Wong also shared with me a photo of Kao in the center of an early-seventies rally for the Van Troi Anti-Imperialist Youth Brigade, her camera swinging from her neck, her fist raised in the air.

Gail Yasunaga, personal communication to the author, August 10, 2019.