

## Amerasia Journal Virtual Interview: Ann Kaneko on **Overstay**


*Amerasia Journal* has a long history of doing interviews with distinguished writers and intellectuals, with incarcerated political prisoners, and with community activists and artists. We continue this tradition, with the help of cyberspace, in presenting a new feature of the journal: The *Amerasia* Virtual Interview. This interview with filmmaker Ann Kaneko was conducted through email by Russell Leong in the spring (April-May) of 1999. On a yearly basis, *Amerasia* will conduct and publish interviews with artists, writers, intellectuals, activists, and community individuals around current topics and issues.

AJ: You're a woman, a documentary filmmaker, and an Asian American. How do these three conditions influence what you film in the 90s?

AK: Before I answer this, I want to comment on the question because I think it reflects the way that we frame ideas and issues of identity. I know that others have said this before me, but I am an integrated individual and being a woman, a documentary filmmaker and an Asian American are not isolated aspects of who I am. Obviously, being Asian American and a woman have influenced my life experiences, but I get tired of questions that try to define the territory that we, as artists or filmmakers are supposed to represent. Particularly in the United States, it seems like we're busy defining who we are so that we can lay claim to certain experiences. Of course, it's all a matter of how we look at these definitions. I think that we should look at them as broadening terms and not view them as limiting conditions. Often people get caught up in underlining differences and the uniqueness of

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ANN KANEKO is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker. For more information about *Overstay*, please check [www.glo.org/overstay](http://www.glo.org/overstay).



Some of the *Overstay* cast: (left to right) Yamamoto Hiroaki (sound recordist); Ashraf Ali Sheak; Mohammed Mujahid Cheema; M. Nasir Mughalquereshi and Ann Kaneko (filmmaker).

Photograph by Jennifer Jew.



incorporate the Japanese case in this larger framework and set of examples.

AJ: What is the film about?

AK: The film is about foreign undocumented workers in Japan. It is a portrait of individuals from four different countries—Pakistan, Peru, Iran and the Philippines. It tells why they came to Japan and how they have adjusted to its society. It shows them at work and at play, trying to make a new life for themselves despite their vulnerable position without papers.

It is also very much a portrait of modern Japan. Although there is a plethora of images of Japan here in the U.S., I wanted to try to show Japan through their eyes. This is a very different perspective than the one we, as Americans, possess. Coming from developing countries, they are quick to point out individualism and lack of respect for the elderly that many immigrants—the early Japanese included—complained about in this society.

AJ: The film was completed in 1998. Has the situation of illegal immigration in Japan changed since then?

AK: Actually, I have not been back to Japan since I completed the film so I can only gauge the situation by what people tell me who have been there recently. Of course, because of the severe economic crunch that Japan and the rest of Asia has been experiencing since the beginning of 1998, I know that the situation has changed. There is higher general unemployment so there must be much less work for foreigners. Crime has increased and foreigners are among those committing some of those crimes. Precisely because of their vulnerable, undocumented status, I imagine that it must be hard to measure the effects on these people because as the situation worsens, they might be forced to go deeper underground. Possibly, the only real statistics are the numbers of deportations now as opposed to before.

When I called Ashraf and Mujahid recently, they both said that things are much slower and could only be getting worse in Japan. Ashraf said that his company might really fold this time, although over the last few years I know his company has been only barely surviving after a radical downsizing in 1994. Mujahid told me that his hours now are much shorter, and he often leaves at 2:00 or 3:00 pm.

AJ: In making *Overstay*, in particular, can you comment on how being a female documentary filmmaker shaped your subject, access, and results of your documentary (you discuss it in your essay "Crosscultural Filmmaking, Japanese-Style" in *Feminism and Documentary*, edited by Diane Waldman and Janet Walker [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999])—the role of gender, in other words.

AK: Gender played a distinct role in how I interacted with my subjects. Since there were both men and women in my film (all heterosexual), I was able to see how being a woman influenced my relationships with both genders. With the women, I was like a friend or a confidant. For the men, I was a marriage prospect, and I never had so many marriage proposals.

The reputation of American women which preceded me, thanks to Hollywood, and the desirability of my citizenship made me a good catch. This facilitated meeting *gaijin* men,

each of our stories; but, there is no “typical” experience so we might as well quit stating the obvious.

But, of course, being Asian American and a woman have influenced what I am interested in artistically. Growing up, I experienced an intense feeling of not fitting in. This has shaped who I am more than anything else. I grew up in a predominantly African-American urban community and then moved to a suburban white community. I was the youngest in my family and my siblings had all left home so I was forced to be on my own. I never lived in a community where I was part of the “majority,” and I think I owe my fluidity in being able to move between people of different racial, cultural, class, and sexual orientation to these early experiences. Curious about the marginalized and the “in-between,” I am committed to exploring these borders in my films and helping others to understand and see the connections between different communities. I think that it is important to bring different communities together—to make them see that we are all in this together and that if we want to make the world a more tolerable place, then we are going to have to work together. We can’t draw borders around ourselves. And I don’t mean this in that quasi-sincere, multicultural, politically correct way either.

I think we need to be able to see that the race question, although important, is not the only issue. There are economic and political forces that shape our society, and we need to be able to confront these issues in how they shape divisions between communities.

I love moments when people from different worlds meet. I am fascinated by the eclectic intersection of people and ideas and what occurs at these junctures. Do people cling to identities or does culture hybridize? What about Japanese salsa lovers or an African-American who is the bonsai association president? Especially, as the world shrinks and immigration and economic globalization blur the lines between countries, people whose contact was limited before are now being forced to become bedfellows. Diaspora communities sprout up throughout the world. How do communities assimilate? How do people incorporate each others’ culture and language into their own? Within the United States, there is an active dialogue about identity and race, but what about these

issues beyond national borders? What are some of the ironic results? Transnationalism, immigration, and the influence that those elements have over language, culture and power are interesting to me. I think it’s important to emphasize that what we do in our everyday lives are connected to economic powers and all of the other “isms.”

I am also interested in looking at these issues in a complex, layered fashion. Because our lives are complicated and fast, I think there is a general trend to break things down, compartmentalize and oversimplify. At the work place, jobs have become extremely specialized, and the overwhelming amount of information that is available to us tends to make us want to break things down more and more so that we see fewer of the connections and relationships between ideas. Many films do this, too, as we are inundated by information. However, we need to keep looking at things at a macro level.

**AJ:** What compelled you to film *Overstay*?

**AK:** My impulse for making *Overstay* stemmed from two things: I lived in Japan for over three years from 1986 to 1990, and at that time, there still were not many foreign workers in Japan. When I visited Japan during the summer of 1991, I was struck by the increased number of foreign faces that I noticed. I also heard languages on the train that I had not heard before. Many of these new visitors were highlighted on the news, and I wondered what the experiences of these new immigrants were. Having experienced difficulties living in Japan as a *gaijin*, I was curious about how these people, who had little vested interest in Japan, experienced their new home. I also found it ironic that Japan, which had sent its own citizens abroad (among them my grandparents who immigrated to the U.S.) only 100 years ago, had now become a host to others who perceived it as the new “Asian Promised Land.”

Also with so much discussion regarding immigration in this society, I wanted to try to bring a fresh look at the same problem. I hope that by showing many of these same issues in a different context, my American audience can begin to shed some of their biases and prejudices and see the universality of the issues surrounding immigration. Particularly because of the far-reaching nature of these issues, I hope to

but it complicated the filmmaking process, to say the least. What in my mind was research for my film, i.e., innocent conversations with them, were for them, sexual advances. It did not take me long to realize that I was being misunderstood, and that because of the peculiarities of the circumstances of my subjects, I would probably have similar experience with whatever male subjects I chose. A friend suggested wearing a fake wedding band to ward off some of the would-be suitors, but I decided that I could not lie to people from whom I expected the truth.

Although I was up front that I was not interested in them as they hoped, I realize that the possibility of a potential relationship seemed to have a great deal of power over them. It was obvious that they would volunteer information in hopes of getting my approval. Thus my gender did contribute to making me more privileged. No matter how strongly I tried to avoid manipulating them, I have to acknowledge that I was taking advantage of the power I as a woman had over them in order to make them participate in my film. I do not explicitly portray these dynamics, but Nasir and Mujahid, two Pakistani subjects, candidly express their expectations of "girls everywhere" in Japan. Clearly, this is one of their primary concerns so I open up the film for speculation about how they view me.

With so many suitors, it was important for me to feel "safe." I originally chose three Pakistani men living together because they also lived with a Brazilian woman when I met them. Since they lived with a woman, it made the environment "safer" for me, and I thought their living arrangements were unique to their experience in Japan. I avoided being with any of them alone so as not to mislead them. However, I never imagined that they could all get the wrong impression.

Yet, I also believe that because of isolation and limited contact with women, my subjects in Japan were more likely to share things with me as they would have done with their sisters or mothers and not just with their prospective girlfriends. One of the men in my film had broken up with his Japanese girlfriend, and he told me very frankly that there were certain subjects that were easier to talk about with women than with men. He couldn't see himself having the same conversations with his male friends that he had with

me. Certainly, I will never know whether this was just a ploy to gain my sympathy or whether he was, indeed, being sincere. But I would like to give him the benefit of the doubt. Obviously, nothing was ever very clear-cut, and continuously hearing so many personal stories, I felt like I was living a soap opera.

With the women, I did not have these complications; I was just a friend. Sally was isolated by her peers and her clients, so she really had no one to turn to. Unless she became intimate with one of her clients, it is highly unlikely that any of them would be very sympathetic or expect her to play anything but the part of the stereotypic, flirtatious, subservient Filipina woman she was hired to be. As I mentioned earlier, the other Filipina women did not empathize with her distaste for the work, and even her cousin, a former hostess, was not sympathetic. Consequently, even though I do not speak Tagalog, and her English and Japanese are not great, I sensed that she was able to confide in me more than anyone else in Japan.

**AJ:** Some may view the film as not being "Asian American." Do you agree? How should Asian Americans be looking at *Overstay*? How does it relate, or not, to their lives and to their histories?

**AK:** Sometimes I wonder what "Asian American" means. Other Asian Americans have said to me that they forget that I am Japanese American or Asian American. What does that mean? I feel like I am as Asian American as the next person. I even learned how to speak Japanese. But maybe that's what precisely makes me different because most Sansei don't know how to speak Japanese. Maybe it's because my work tends to focus more on global, transnational issues rather than Asian American communities in the United States. But I think that everything is connected, and my experience as an Asian American is precisely what informs my work about other communities abroad. People forget that Asian immigration to the United States is a function of larger economic and political conditions that directly shape the lives of individual immigrants. Hence, sub-cultures are created which are identified as "Asian American," facing the challenges of assimilation, discrimination, generational differences, etc.

As the dedication at the beginning of the film states, one of my personal interests in making the film was to find a connection between the experiences of my grandparents who emigrated from the Japan to the United States over eighty years ago and the experiences of immigrants to the very country which has now become a host to immigrants. I find it fascinating that within the span of a century, Japan has been transformed from a country that sends its citizens abroad to a country that is in desperate need of labor, attracting foreign migrant workers.

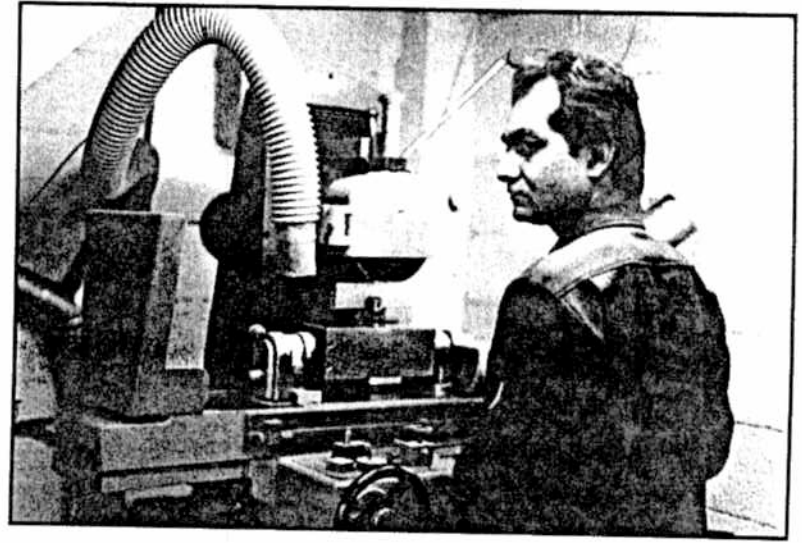
I also found that although times have changed, and there are many more modern amenities like telephones and airplanes that make the experience very different in the 90s, essentially the motivations for leaving one's home for a new life abroad remain constant. Consequently, many aspects of immigration in 1890 and 1990 are the same. Forms of exploitation are the same. Language and cultural barriers are the same. And having to work hard for low wages is the same. I only met one of my grandparents, but I imagine that they probably had many things in common with the people in my film.

When I was in Japan, I was involved with a Peruvian guy who gave me an insider's perspective. When he was relating local gossip, he would tell me about so-and-so who had a Japanese wife/girlfriend and kids who also had another set back in Peru. Then he would say how early Issei in Peru also often had two sets of families. They might have come to Peru with the intention of going back to Japan, but after years went by, they would find a Peruvian wife. He suggested that people get lonely just like they did before so they also end up in the same kinds of situations.

AJ: What's the potential of documentary filmmaking nowadays for Asian American film or videomakers? What's the social, artistic, or financial pay-off?

AK: I think that all filmmakers—Asian American or otherwise—have a great deal of potential in influencing people's awareness and consciousness. Film and video are the media of this generation and consequently have the capability of reaching many people. Yet the financial aspect of the equation often affects the means of production, which in turn, often affects what is produced and how it is distributed. Conse-

Ashraf Ali Sheak at work. Photograph by Ann Kaneko, 1995.



quently, it is questionable how much effect smaller, independent films really have. But obviously, I wouldn't be making films if I didn't believe that someone would watch them. Yet aside from the potential of distributing the finished film or video, I also believe that the process of filmmaking is extremely empowering. Especially as someone who spends so much time and energy making films, the process is very important, and it has to be engaging and enriching for one to remain committed. Consequently, people documenting and telling their own stories are challenged to make commitments and take chances that they would not ordinarily. And they learn and grow from the process. This is an important potential of filmmaking, especially with greater accessibility to the means of production.

As far as the pay-off is concerned, it's hard to say. I just attended the IDFA, a large international documentary film festival in Amsterdam and am undergoing a kind of crisis in terms of my work as a filmmaker. Even in the documentary realm, it's a meat market, and films are viewed as "product." One may have labored three, four years on a film, and for the audience, it's over after an hour and a half. The audience is given license to hack it to bits, commend it or be indifferent—which is the worst fate of all. Of course, they should be allowed to have their opinion, but it is very difficult to maintain one's enthusiasm, passion and commitment to a project without feeling discouraged at times. After de-

voting so much time, energy and money into a project, how does one justify such consumption? What are the rewards?

Recently, when I showed the film to a group of immigration scholars in Sussex, England, a Tunisian man who had been a guest worker in Italy for twenty years, came up to me and told me how moved he was by the film. Although about Japan, he completely related to the experiences of the people in the film and really appreciated that the people were allowed to speak for themselves. It was very gratifying to be able to make those kinds of global connections through the film. Again, when I was in Colorado Springs showing the film, the coordinator of the screening's daughter had just returned from Japan. She had married a Peruvian "overstay-er," and he had just arrived in the United States to begin a new immigrant life in the U.S. She was moved to tears because it was obvious that she was still living the story in the film.

Consequently, just as the film was about making contacts with individuals and hearing their stories, the most gratifying part of showing the film is hearing the stories of audience members and how the film might resonate with their lives. But as far as material gain, I have yet to see any payoff, and it is sometimes hard to maintain one's commitment to making films, living such a shoe-string lifestyle.

AJ: What kind of documentaries do you think need to be made in terms of Asian Americans or in terms of other groups? What and why?

AK: When I first began making films, I thought that if I made documentaries, if nothing else, there would be value in the project as a "document" or a "record" of something or someone. Of course, now I realize that there is little distinction between fiction and non-fiction, but still I think this impulse is important.

I think all of these issues are related to how one sees oneself as an artist. Does one have responsibility to the society at large? one's community? or only to oneself? And how does one define one's community? I can't judge what films Asian Americans should or shouldn't be making except that they should be telling many different stories in many different ways. They should tell what they think is important and funny. And they should enjoy doing it, too.