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Vivian Lee  
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COLUMNS | HERE IS A SONG

## On the Nature of Legacies and Joanna Newsom's "Sapokanikan"

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## On the Nature of Legacies and Joanna Newsom's "Sapokanikan"

Who will remember me when I am gone? Will my stories exist beyond my life? And what about the things we already forgot?

*This is Here is A Song, a column by Vivian Lee on music and culture.*

As someone who is very interested in inheritance—of trauma, ideas, stories, language—I am also constantly thinking about legacy. As a writer, the act of remembering, as well as concealing, is always in the forefront of my mind. Who will remember me when I am gone? Will my stories exist beyond my life? And what about the things we already forgot?

Every now and then, I am saddened to know that there are no old historical records, photos, or artifacts dating beyond my grandparents (great-grandparents on my maternal side). Every time I see a commercial about finding one's family tree or tracing a family heritage, I feel a pang of loss because I know whatever photos exist, I have already seen them all.

Everything else has been lost in migration, destroyed by governments, by fires both accidental and not. Whatever stories my mom tells me are the only ones I know about my family's history and legacy. I have never been able to look at albums and literally picture where I come from, to wonder where I get some of my personality or quirks or physical traits.

Sometimes I call my maternal grandma, but we don't talk about the past, even though the past feels like it is always around us.

"I went fishing yesterday," she starts. "Loh Dow looked down on me."

She fishes next to the hill where my maternal grandpa is buried. In Hong Kong, space is limited so cemeteries are stacked on steep hills with winding staircases. Hong Kong is also very lush and my grandpa is interred in a peaceful enclave overlooking the water.

It is hard to think about the future because I am always looking back into the past. I am hoping the past will tell me things I don't yet know. But I write because I want to remember for me, for all of us.

I write about the things I want to keep forever because if writing is creating a legacy, don't I want to make it sound better than it is?

*I fell, I tried to do well but I won't be*

*Will you tell the one that I loved to remember and hold me*

The song "Sapokanikan" is the second song off of Joanna Newsom's 2015 album *Divers*. It is also a song I refer to when I meditate on the futile attempt at creating my own legacy. In the first line, Joanna sings over piano, "The cause is Ozymandian."

It makes me think of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," a poem exploring legacy and how even the greatest men and the empires they have founded are not permanent, and that, with time, its histories will fade into obscurity.

If the cause for many of my creative endeavors is probably Ozymandian, why do I keep trying?

*A hundred years from now; may look and despair*

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Vivian Lee



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*And see with wonder*

*The tributes we have left to rust in the park*

The name Ozymandias also makes me think of stolen history: It is the Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II, whose bust was “acquired” by the British Museum, the initial inspiration for Shelley’s poem.

So much of history has been stolen, taken away, rewritten. After college, I went with my family to China, to visit my dad’s ancestral homeland in what is now known as Nanjing, although there wasn’t much home to see: It had been destroyed, seized, paved over by the government decades ago during the Communist takeover. My great-grandparents had to leave their homeland and everything they have kept and create a new life. My grandparents moved to Hong Kong and had to do the same. In moving to America, my parents had to begin again. What is homeland if it is constantly changing?

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## If the cause for many of my creative endeavors is probably Ozymandian, why do I keep trying?

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There is so much I can not bring with me into the present. So without truly knowing my own family’s history, I am rewriting it as we speak. I am not sure if legacies can be pure if I already know how I want to shape it.

\*

Joanna Newsom came onto the music scene in the early 2000s, harp at the ready. She sings in soprano, which means she sings at a high register, with shades of folk. People have called her and her music an “acquired taste,” but I like to consider “something we have to protect at all costs.”

Another thing I love about Joanna’s music is her way of telling a story in her songs. I gravitate towards them because with each listen, it reveals just one more note in the story; in the history she is sharing.

*The snow falls above me*

*The renderer renders:*

*The event is in the hand of God*

One of my mentors once told me that once your writing is out there, you have to cultivate a sense of zen, detachment. However people will react to it is informed by their own histories. Maybe the best I can do with the work that I have is to be as honest as I can. I must believe that my point of view as a woman, a child of immigrants, a person of color, should be heard, or at least resonate with people.

It is a struggle to believe this because I have been told for so long that it isn’t. Writing for the sake of creating a legacy, then, will only backfire.

\*

The word “Sapokanikan” was the name of one of several Lenape villages archeologists discovered on the island of Manhattan prior to European colonization. In the music video for her song, we watch Joanna sing in a post-snow New York day and night.

She sings while looking at the camera and we follow her as she walks through the East Village, through Washington Square Park, through Greenwich Village—through lands that were once someone else’s, through ancestral burials.

The history of my family’s migration is tinged with blood in so many ways, at the hands of the conquerors who have since reshaped the story. The land we had, too, was taken away and now I am on someone else’s land.

*The land lone and levelled*

*By some unrecorded and powerful hand*

What is the responsibility of the writer when all we want is to give power to its stories?

In the video, Joanna sings the song with a hop, a twirl. She’s masking the sorrow of so much history that it makes it actually disconcerting to me, as a viewer. The song is jaunty, “ragtimey,” as Joanna described in [an NPR interview](#), and she smiles as she sings about histories taken over by those who have power, literally paved for a park.

Would someone who was not white and wealthy be able to condense this sorrow in this way? How would this particular history of New York be sung or composed by someone else, someone who has to actually contend with this legacy?

Since so much of my family’s history is gone and what I rely on now are sporadic mentions in my family’s WhatsApp—like learning that my paternal grandfather, who passed away when my father was twelve, was a lawyer; or that my maternal grandfather’s first burial only had a lease of ten years—I start building a lore over the foundation of what I already know.

Perhaps it is not a legacy I seek, but a gentle reconsideration, a rebuilding.

\*

When you're young, you're not really thinking about the future, but when you're old, you're not really thinking about the past.

I have seen Joanna Newsom perform live as many times as she has toured and at the most recent show, she was playing the last of a several-night residency in New York. She had no new music to promote but she still played to a rapturous full house. What captured me was how open she was on how motherhood has changed her career.

In between songs, she shared that for the first year after her daughter was born, she didn't even touch her harp once. She apologized for being rusty and mentioned the difficulties of being on the road now. She did not say this as a regret for being a mother, but as a tender moment on what her story, her path has become.

# I must believe that my point of view as a woman, a child of immigrants, a person of color, should be heard.



*So we all raise a standard*

*To which the wise and honest soul may repair*

At the end of the music video, the camera stays in one spot as we watch Joanna cross the street and walk off frame. We do not know where she is heading anymore. We are not accompanying her on her journey.

How can my work, my story, my journey go forth if all I am worried about is what has already happened?

In listening to "Sapokanikan," I ultimately come to the conclusion that what I am really looking to do is to build a path forward. Legacy, for all of its future-seeing, is actually a look back. It is time to move ahead, with or without the eyes of an audience.



**Vivian Lee**

Vivian Lee is a book editor and writer based in New York. Her work can be found in The Los Angeles Times, Eater, The Rumpus, and more. Follow her on Twitter @vivianwlee or on the internet at vivianwlee.com.

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