



***Beyond the Narrative:
Asynchronicity and Fragmentation
in Canadian Queer Experimental Film
(1990-2000)***

A Guide for Postsecondary Education

**CFMDC – Archive/Counter-Archive
Educational Guide**



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Recommended Study Levels Undergraduate Students, Graduate Students

Subject Areas Film Studies; Media Studies; Sexuality Studies; Asian-Canadian Studies

Themes Experimental Film; Queer Film; Asian-Canadian Diaspora;
Decolonizing Filmmaking

About the Collection

This selection of short films, curated by Chris Chong Chan Fui, is taken from the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre's (CFMDC) Case Study conducted in partnership with Archive/Counter-Archive (A/CA) entitled **Beyond the Narrative: Preserving and Mobilizing Canadian LGBT2Q+ Films from 1970 - 2000 in the CFMDC Collection.**

Many queer works in the collection from this period exist solely on celluloid or in outdated video formats. These formats reflect the influx of affordable technology that became available to queer artists—beginning with more economical film equipment, and then to a greater extent, in the 1980s and 1990s, with video technology. The rapid obsolescence of these formats in the early 2000s, however, has made this era of CFMDC's LGBT2Q+ collection elusive to scholars, programmers, and the public.

Through the Case Study, over 100 titles were digitized from their original format, with the assistance of A/CA partnership organizations and CFMDC's in-house technical services. The Case Study materials raise important questions, such as: How do these films open up the ways in which the LGBT2Q+ community historicizes themselves in the era of digital technology and retroviral drugs? What do these films reveal about LGBT2Q+ histories that extends beyond the narrative of HIV/AIDS memorialization or queer confessional films? How were women filmmakers in Canada representing LGBT2Q+ identities on-screen during this period? What do these films reveal about LGBT2Q+ resistance?



About CFMDC

Established in 1967, CFMDC is a not-for-profit, non-commercial media arts distributor that specializes in independent, artist-made work on film and video, including works from historically underrepresented communities. CFMDC advocates for a holistic understanding of production, distribution, and exhibition that prioritizes artist rights, accessibility, and the creation of new audiences through education and critical thinking. CFMDC has one of the most important collections of artist-made moving image on film in Canada.

About Archive/Counter-Archive

Archive/Counter-Archive (A/CA): Activating Canada's Moving Image Heritage is a seven-year research creation project led by Janine Marchessault and funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant. Comprising four universities, numerous community partners, memory institutions, and policy advocates, the project is dedicated to activating and remediating audiovisual heritage created by Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), Black communities and People of Colour, women, LGBT2Q+ and immigrant communities, and to fostering a community and network dedicated to creating best practices and cultural policies (counterarchive.ca).

About the Guide

This guide introduces a selection of queer experimental films and videos curated by Chris Chong Chan Fui. It includes a curatorial essay written by Chong, a list of 4 works suggested for classroom viewing, synopses, and discussion questions oriented toward a range of thematic areas.

We recommend previewing the works before you screen them for your students and reading the contextualizing information provided in this guide.

Please note that *Coconut, Cane, and Cutlass* contains explicit sexual content.

As part of the project, Archive/Counter-Archive has produced a number of educational guides. All A/CA guides are available digitally and for free at counterarchive.ca

About Chris Chong Chan Fui

Artist and filmmaker **Chris Chong Chan Fui** works with varying materials and moving images in an installation format that interconnects fields such as architecture, science, sports, and economics. Chong has exhibited his works at the Hirschhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Palais de Tokyo, EYE Film Institute Netherlands, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art, and the Gwangju Biennale. His films have also premiered at the Cannes' Directors' Fortnight, Vienna, BFI London, and Toronto's Wavelengths. Chong is a Smithsonian Institute fellow (National Museum of Natural History), a Ford Foundation fellow, and most recently, he was awarded the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Arts Fellowship, Italy. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the School for the Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University.





Curated Films and Videos for Classroom Viewing

Four short films were curated by Chris Chong Chan Fui for classroom screening.

Total run time: 57 minutes





Exposure (Michelle Mohabeer, 1990)

Length: 8 minutes

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: *Exposure* is an experimental documentary that explores issues of race, sexuality, and cultural identity. A dialogue between two lesbians of colour (Japanese-Canadian and Afro-Caribbean women) is intercut with photographs, texts, paintings and voice-over.



Leftovers (Janine Fung, 1994)

Length: 8 minutes

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: In *Leftovers*, Janine Fung's wild narration about misunderstandings in her traditional Chinese family plays over sometimes dizzying moving images of family dinner and her mother carving turkey.



Coconut / Cane & Cutlass

(Michelle Mohabeer, 1994)

Length: 30 minutes

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* is a mythic/poetic rumination on exile, displacement, and nationhood from the perspective of an Indo-Caribbean lesbian who migrated to Canada twenty years ago. The autobiographical and the historical co-mingle to produce a film that has an episodic structure layered with optically printed imagery, front-screen projection, re-created archival images, oral narratives/histories, a spirit dance, and theatrically stylized dramatic scenes.



The Basement Girl

(Midi Onodera, 2000)

Length: 11 minutes

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: Abandoned by her lover, a young woman finds comfort and safety in her basement apartment. Mundane routines, a diet of junk food, and the warmth of the television insulate her from the pain and betrayal of her ill-fated relationship. *The Basement Girl* breaks new cinematic territory by employing multiple formats from traditional 16 mm film to toy cameras including a modified Nintendo Game Boy digital camera and the Intel Mattel computer microscope.



Asynchronicity and Fragmentation in Canadian Queer Experimental Film (1990-2000): Curatorial Essay by Chris Chong Chan Fui

“We will create a rhythm that is uniquely ours - proud, powerful and gay” (Makeda Silvera in *Exposure* by Michelle Mohabeer).

Experimentation requires risk, and risk means entering a space that is unknown. When experimentation involves the medium of film and video, artists often embark on a personal exploration of the unknown through audiovisual interventions. Specifically, artists who are “culturally dissonant” from the mainstream tend to create and mobilize—often out of necessity—a specific set of techniques which helps them reflect upon how they feel about, cope with, and overcome everyday discrimination and violence. Cultural dissonance describes the feelings of alienation and disassociation that arise when one’s identity is marked by gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and/or class differences. When marked as “Other,” one’s lived experience, then, becomes a daily series of dissonant interactions, which can be translated in the act of recording, editing, and exhibiting experimental film. Cultural dissonance can therefore lead experimental filmmakers to explore techniques such as asynchronicity and fragmentation, both of which are showcased through this program of films by Michelle Mohabeer, Janine Fung, and Midi Onodera.

In *Exposure* (1990) by Michelle Mohabeer, the filmmaker speaks potently to the difficulty of accessing one’s own history as a former colonial subject. Those who have experienced or are experiencing cultural dissonance, Mohabeer tells us, must cobble together the pieces left behind. The documentary begins with three phrases spoken by three queer racialized voices: “I was born... I was born... I was born...” Although the words spoken are from a present time, the images are from a different

era, as each phrase is paired with the speakers’ black and white baby pictures from decades past. As the voice and imagery diverge from and re-emerge into one another and take the viewer in and out of linear time, Mohabeer reflects on how queer and racialized filmmakers facing cultural dissonance can express their own out-of-sync histories. Furthermore, the space between the two timeframes allows the filmmaker to speak to the gaps—both historical and identity-related—the Japanese and Afro-Caribbean women centered in the film each experience.



As Mohabeer demonstrates, both history and memory can be difficult to articulate within a linear timeline. In *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* (1994), Mohabeer opens the film with a quote by cultural theorist Edward Said which speaks to exile as an “unhealable rift between a human being and a native place.” This rift is experienced, too, by those who face cultural dissonance, as removing—or exiling—parts of histories and memories which results in becoming out of sync. Yet, being out of sync becomes an opportunity for filmic experimentation. In one of the opening scenes of *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*, two naked women embrace and kiss in the present, while a moving image of a wooden barb-wired shack, possibly re-staged from the past, is rear-projected behind them. Floating the past as a backdrop to the lovers’ present becomes a poetic, asynchronous telling of the cultural allusions that haunt today’s queer intimacies.



In the film, Mohabeer asserts: “the eternal quest for selfhood, identity, and a sense of belonging are but vein attempts to sooth all that is dislocated and dispossessed within our psyche.” The film further visualizes and verbalizes two different timelines of the artist’s dissonance with their own ancestries. The voiceover states, “I alone today am alive. I remember.” The words spoken in the present are paired with historical images of labourers in sugar cane plantations—one of them being the artist’s grandmother. The film thus experiments and engages in the artist’s emotional expression from two different time periods simultaneously. Asynchronicity becomes the only tool to solidify the emotions of those trying to come to terms with their own out-of-sync histories as well as their ongoing separation from heteronormativity and whiteness.

Alongside asynchronicity, fragmentation can also be used to express cultural dissonance. As opposed to the concept of “roots,” used as a metaphor for connectivity to one’s own cultural history (Hayes, 2016), fragmentation breaks the flow of the narrative and the format of the medium to express experiences of cultural dissonance. Fragmentation, in particular, interrupts the notion of roots that link one cultural experience to another; if roots form in a connected fashion, fragmentations are sporadic, disruptive, and random, formed upon unknown grounds and languages. Historical amnesia, erasure, and inaccessibility to one’s past, for instance, contribute to this fragmentation. Instead of looking for the missing pieces, however, it is possible to embrace fragmentation and mobilize it as a tool of experimentation.

Janine Fung’s *Leftovers* (1994), a portrayal of a Chinese family unit with multiple cultural and intergenerational influences, is rife with fragmentation. In particular, the film fragments its visual and audio construction to reflect the family’s reaction to the narrator’s lesbian friend, Carol. In one scene, the protagonist’s voiceover states that her mother approaches her, waving a knife that was used to slice the turkey, but the image does not appear until the end of the film. By misaligning or fragmenting this image away from the corresponding voiceover, Fung avoids the explanatory approach of conventional narrative films. Instead, the image of the narrator’s threatening mother is used at the end of the film during a rendition of the song “Smoke Gets in your Eyes” performed by opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa. The fragmentation of this image from its logical voiceover disrupts the flow of the main storyline and becomes a way for the filmmaker to allude to yet another layer of the story: the cloud of antagonism and homophobia within the narrator’s family circle. In essence, *Leftovers* utilizes narrative fragmentation to create a dissonance in the storyline that mirrors the dissonance within the narrator’s own lived experience.



This fragmentation technique is further mobilized in Midi Onodera's *The Basement Girl* (2000), in which the filmmaker thoughtfully uses the breaking of a consistent format to echo the experience of the protagonist, "the basement girl," who is going through a painful breakup. Onodera sends the viewer into a netherworld of anime, film, and television textural motifs, as multiple shows and films are injected into the narrative—quick cuts jarring the flow of the timeline, flipping joyful television anthems into abrupt static interludes. Fragmentation, here, takes the shape of picture-in-picture, animation within live action, digital manipulations on filmic emulsions, and a multitude of filters and effects which play with linearity. This results in an anxious and aggressive edit of found and recorded footage painted with pixels and colorations.

The act of fragmenting media in this way not only distorts direct representations of the subject or subject matter, but in doing so, Onodera also conjures the emotions experienced by her protagonist. For instance, Onodera relates the experience of the basement girl to the death of Princess Diana and the life she left behind. A scene depicting scrambled eggs mirrors the film's scramble of random snippets of medias and formats, but also the protagonist's life falling apart. *Basement Girl* also references Mary Tyler Moore and speaks of a woman re-invented. But what does this re-invention look like? Again, the window of experimentation is open for both the artist and

the viewer to experience together. "She inhabited a different dimension between time and space," says the voiceover as the normalized feminine Moore promenades along the lakeshore, trying to find happiness and to be more than herself, more than what society has planned for her.



After their separation, or
rather after she was dumped,



Although the basement girl is white, Onodera still manages to speak to the idea of racial dissonance through her film. *The Basement Girl*, indeed, evokes the idea of cultural separation as footage of a white couple eating sushi appears on screen around the 8-minute mark. The fried egg analogy mentioned earlier further parallels the filmmaker's relationship to the White world—perfectly separated from its



Yellow-skinned core, a dissonance of cultures best scrambled. Embracing this fragmentation offers the filmmaker another plane of storytelling between archival clips and formats that reflect a cultural separation of race and sexuality all in a single egg.

In all four of the films within this program, cultural dissonance is expressed through the use of experimental techniques. Within Mohabeer's *Exposure* (1990) and *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* (1994), the technique of temporal misalignments in the form of asynchronous visual and audio clips conjure the past and present simultaneously to explore issues of identity and belonging. The technique of fragmentation, as seen through Fung's *Leftovers* (1994) and Onodera's *The Basement Girl* (2000), takes apart the narrative storyline or uses various textures and formats to express another layer of understanding for the audience. The lived experiences of filmmakers, such as Mohabeer, Fung, and Onodera, who identify as queer and/or culturally dissonant, therefore, have been translated into specific AV techniques as a necessary means for storytelling.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider how asynchronicity is used by the filmmakers in this program.

- a) How do they play with time, whether in the asynchronicity between narration and image or between past and present?
- b) How does this asynchronicity function as a metaphor for or expression of exile, migration, racialization, and displacement?

2. In addition to asynchronicity, which plays with time, the films in this program also play with space through the use of movement. For example, both Fung and Mohabeer use a repetitive panning motion, in the first instance of the family dinner table and in the second of the food market. Mohabeer also deploys dance, the movement of bodies in *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass*.

- a) What is the effect of this movement on the viewer?
- b) What does it suggest about the experience of cultural dissonance that Chong describes?



3. As Chong suggests, the use of fragmentation in these films enables the filmmakers to reconstruct personal memories and collective histories while also saying something about the ruptures to those histories. Mohabeer describes being “pulled in different directions”, suggesting that memory and history are no longer linear, if they ever have been.

- a) How do these films depict fragmentation?
- b) How does this fragmentation communicate a particular experience of history, lineage, and legacy?

4. Tess Takahashi discusses “the proliferation of queer experimental documentary films and videos...which explores and complicates racial, sexual, and gendered identity” that took place in the mid-1980s and 1990s in Canada (Takahashi 2019).

- a) Based on your viewing of this program, how do you understand the way that alternative and experimental modes of production have been important to marginalized filmmakers in North America?



References and Further Reading

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Guide Credits

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Chloë Brushwood Rose is a Professor of Education at York University in Toronto. Her research explores the intersection of media, art, and pedagogy.

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