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History, Memory, and the Politics of Programming: The Video Work of Richard Fung

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Richard Fung, a Toronto-based video artist and cultural critic, was born in Trinidad in 1954, and attended school in Ireland before immigrating to Canada to study at the University of Toronto. Richard Fung has taught at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and has been a visiting professor in the Department of Media Study at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He is currently the coordinator of the Centre for Media and Culture in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Richard Fung is a member of the editorial boards of Fuse Magazine and Amerasia Journal, and is on the board of directors of Caribbean Contemporary Arts in Trinidad. He is a programmer with the Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival. Richard Fung has published widely on aspects of culture and identity and his essay 'Looking for my penis: the eroticised Asian in gay porn video' has frequently been anthologized. He is currently completing, in association with Monika Kin Gagnon of Concordia University, a book-length manuscript dealing with culture and art for Artexite publishers.

His video works have been screened in numerous venues, including New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Toronto International Film Festival, the British Film Institute, and the Semana de Cine Experimental in Madrid. His tapes are concerned with personal and national histories and identities, and issues of pedagogy. His video The way to my father's village (1988), and the companion piece, My mother's place (1990), explore family history within the context of the little-known experiences of the Chinese in the Caribbean. His latest work, Sea in the blood (2000), mixes family memories, especially those of his sister who died of a rare inherited blood disorder, with his lover's struggle with AIDS. His work is archived in various locations, including London's Institute of Contemporary Art, the Getty Gallery in Los Angeles, Chicago's Art Institute, the Experimental Television Center, New York, and Video Data Bank, Chicago.

The discussion below took place at the University of Queensland, Ipswich campus, on December 5, 2001 following Richard Fung's attendance at the conference "Transforming Cultures/Shifting Boundaries: Asian Diasporas and Identities in Australia and Beyond" held at the University of Queensland.

Can you tell me something about your current project?

Richard Fung: Perhaps I can start to answer that by telling you a little bit about the genesis of the project. In the late 1980s Trinidad was one of the few Caribbean countries that actually outlawed lesbian sex. (Gay male sex or sodomy had been on the books since the Victorian laws, as it had all over the colonies). At much the same time, in the early nineties, the Canadian Government began to accept gay and lesbian refugee cases for the first time and I was asked to write an affidavit in support of one of these cases. I realised as I was writing the affidavit that pressure was on me to construct Trinidad in a very particular way as a kind of barbaric, third world country where people would be killed or whatever, for being gay. Of course, the truth to these things is much more complicated and both homophobia and homosexual practice span both countries, but it was interesting how both Trinidad and Canada in each case was using sexuality as a way to demarcate the nation.

I situate the project against that background. It deals with the intersection of nationalism and sexuality, looking at Trinidad and Canada. It will be a cluster of short pieces which together map out the issues I've just sketched. I want to circulate the entire work- the composite- as a feature-length, single-channel video streamed on a web site in which the viewers can interactively curate their own program based on this content.

I wanted to use cyberspace to produce something that could function in non-national space. I also want to use the Internet for very practical reasons as a venue for video art. There are not many places where people might see video art. In addition, the net allows for private viewing of the private nature of both the sexuality and the politics in my video project.

That said, questions of access to, and use of, computers loom large in a country like Trinidad. What I find on my visits to Trinidad is that little communities gather around the relatively few computers and in this way the computer becomes a site for discussion of the work.
Your work draws heavily on, though disrupts, modes of documentary. Are you conscious of working against the documentary tradition?

I don't see documentary as one fixed thing. My work is definitely non-fiction, but I'm not tied to a unified documentary practice. Video art and documentary do, though, intersect in practices of using text on screen, though the use of text is more prevalent in video art than documentary. Text on screen is in certain ways at present a defining characteristic of video.

*My mother's place* reminds me of Rea Tajiri's *History and memory* (1991). Both your film and Tajiri's deal with memory and history and incorporate text on screen. Tajiri writes over a blank screen to draw attention to that which is omitted from history. Your film relies on what are often ironically worded titles to subtly destabilise the claim of an image to adequately represent history.

I love Rea's work. Interestingly, I use the term 'history and memory' to name one of the sections in The way to my father's village (which forms a pair with *My mother's place*), which was produced before Rea's *History and memory*. I like the way in which the text on the screen in Rea's work conjures up a particular kind of imagination and feeling concerning the life of her grandparents and her parents in the US. It's a very haunting film.

I use text in various ways. Sometimes I deploy it against the grain of the image, in ways which disrupt the image. In *Sea in the blood* I use text to say things I couldn't for various reasons bring myself to say in voice-over. In The way to my father's village I used text on the screen and voice-over narration to suggest conflicting memories. For me an outstanding use of voice over occurs in Trinh Minh-ha's *Naked spaces* which uses three voices with different accents: an African-American accent, a light South African accent, and her own voice, speaking in English. The voices contradict each other but also sit side by side in their commonality of interest.

*Dirty laundry* includes dramatic enactment and archival footage in a way which mixes documentary with avant-gardist techniques. Within these various registers it seemed to me that you privileged enactment as the repository of history and knowledge.

There's a kind of proto-drama or quasi-drama through re-enactment that holds the whole thing together but within that I use talking head interview and archival footage. The drama's not convincing as drama, and the interviews have other things going on behind them. I wanted to create the sense that you are never on solid ground—no one approach can contain the truth.

I'm interested in archival footage in various ways. Karen Ishizuka, senior curator of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles has, with her husband, Bob Nakamura, produced a work entirely from footage from the Japanese internment camps in the Second World War. Most of this footage had rarely been seen. The piece is done with a very gentle hand. Karen is currently co-editing a book on the use of home footage. Her co-editor is Patricia Zimmerman who, as you know, has written the definitive text to date on home footage, *Reel families*. I have an article in the forthcoming book.

In some of your work you use talking heads to capture memories, but you don't rely on the technique in an exhaustive was as in, say, Connie Fields' *The life and times of Rosie the riveter* (1980).

It's funny that you should mention *Rosie the riveter*. I used to work as a distributor at Canada's largest distributor of documentary film. We distributed *Rosie* and *Union maids* and other American films. I am interested in working with and working out of certain conditions, particularly American documentary and in some ways Canadian documentary—although Canadian documentary still sits in the shadow of the Canadian National Film Board. However, there are certain conventions used in documentary that shock me. For example when someone starts to cry the filmmaker zooms in. I was aware of such a practice when I was doing My mother's place, which is probably the closest of my work to the terms that you're describing, and I tried to work against the grain of such practices.

Foucault argued that there are two "modes of production of truth: procedures of confession and scientific discursivity", and you have written that your work is tied up with this observation. The confessional is a striking aspect of your work. How do you situate the scientific in your work?

God, it's scary to be quoted! I used the Foucault quote in relation to *Steam clean*, I think. I was considering the history of sexuality and social control through the act of confession and looking at the place of science in the sexuality of the West as opposed to an *ars erotica* of an Asian or oriental mode of sexuality. I'm interested in playing with the notion of confession because, as you know, confession is so much a part of the everyday ritual of American television. But to produce a piece that is in some ways confessional is a tricky thing to do because you are in a sense playing with and playing into the codes of popular television. One of the things that I like to do when producing work of this type is to foreground for the audience the fact that the Richard (in quotation marks) on the screen isn't me. Even if you're working with autobiographical material, you're still shaping it and the person at the centre of the work is in fact a character that one shapes. I'm not creating lies, but I am shaping the material to read in particular ways.
My interest in a scientific mode of discourse stems in part from my academic background. I went to art school and then I studied cinema studies and then did a masters degree in sociology, and so there's a way in which the social sciences have informed my academic studies. Anthropology, sociology and history and the questions they raise about knowledge production interest me very much and remain central preoccupations of my work.

Will you continue to explore questions of history and memory in your work?

The trajectory of my work is complicated. I started with a work which is a relatively straightforward documentary on gay and lesbian Asian identities. Then I did an experimental work on pornography. Other work is advocacy based, and I have done autobiographical works. My work is one long script, though I do go back occasionally to some topics.

Would you revisit some of the questions that occupied you when you worked on porn?

I'm not that interested in porn at the moment, which is not to say that I won't be in the future. In my early work there was a sense of presenting or explicating marginalised or minoritised experiences and identities and I don't really feel the need to explicate anything any more. Those identities often inform my work but the need to explain is gone. *Sea in the blood* doesn't explain anything about AIDS and it doesn't explain anything about being Chinese in the Caribbean.

Can you tell me something of the other works in your catalogue, *Fighting chance*, *Out of the blue*, and *School fag* for example?

*Fighting chance* was a safer sex pedagogical project. I had been involved in gay activism for a long time and it struck me that much of the education material that was geared towards the gay community so called, didn't include Asian voices, and I'm talking in particular about audio-visual material. The material that was scheduled for Asian communities, defined as such, didn't include queer people. The result was an absence of gay Asian images of people with HIV. That absence translated to the fact that some people couldn't see themselves with the disease, which had implications in terms of practicing safer sex. I knew that when I came to do something on this issue, that I actually had to feature people on camera who were HIV positive and who looked Asian. In doing that I also tried to undermine certain kinds of assumptions, for instance the tape starts with a person who is Eurasian, and who thus embodies certain identities. I also started with the question of mourning and then moved towards militancy. I wanted to start with the logic that AIDS equals death, get that out of the way, and then move on to militant responses. Because it was an early piece I was doing relatively straightforward things- similar to certain approaches Stuart Marshall had done in *Bright eyes* [5]. - and so, for example, most of the interviews are conducted outdoors rather than inside. The idea was to escape the logic of the sick group. I found that since the piece demanded that I include gay men who are out with their HIV status meant that I was dealing with people who were relatively privileged in some way. They are together emotionally; they have worked things through. They are predominantly north American born or come from relatively privileged backgrounds, and they are all have post-secondary education. They're all middle-class, they are articulate. The film gains from their perspectives, but at the same time it lacks a range of experiences, a problem I was conscious of as the work progressed but I knew that I couldn't employ actors. To have actors would have sort of defeated the purpose of having to do the piece.

On the surface *Out of the blue* was another straightforward piece. It involved a young black Canadian man, Julian, whom I had known since he was a child. The incident that is the basis of the work became one of the very public examples of police racism in Toronto. In *Out of the blue* Julian talks about what had gone on in his life, and how the fact that what happened came out of the blue: he had gone to church and the next thing he was arrested on a charge of stealing something from a place where he hadn't been. What struck me when I was looking at the case on television, or reading about it in the papers, was that such reports didn't really represent his story. I wanted to create a space in which his story could be heard. I also used a realistic documentary surface to interrupt people's assumptions both about blackness and about being Canadian. I did a couple of things. One of them is that the piece starts with an idyllic and iconic Canadian landscape which includes a little fishing boat. To have a black subject in the iconic Canadian landscape was very important to me because black people are seen as living in the inner cities. Julian actually comes from a middle class family, which has a cottage on a lake. I didn't make up the opening scene and it was one of the ways in which I tried to unsettle people's assumptions about their own subjectivity as well as his. I was also very interested in his mother who, again, exceeded traditional representations of black women and mothers. His mother was dressed for the interview in Afrocentric clothes- a dress with an African print and a head tie. She is a born-again Christian, or a very evangelical Christian and she is relatively militant around questions of race and social activism. She also has a black belt in karate, which is how I knew the family. I've been doing martial arts for the past twenty years and Julian had been the best student in our school. All of these things were contained by a kind of traditional discourse. I like these things that are excessive and which go against the grain. The piece was widely screened on television in Canada.

*School fag*, the third work you asked me about, was in some ways a reaction to my experience of making *Dirty laundry*. *Dirty laundry* was produced at the Banff Centre with a large international crew. I was miles away from my home base. It was an expensive project and there was a certain lack of control in terms of what I wanted because I was working in another institution. After that experience I felt that I wanted to get
my hands dirty again and to go small. So I bought the X-100 Sony digital camera and used this to shoot what is essentially a performance piece of a young man, Shawn Fowler, who recounts his career in schooling from kindergarten to high school. He describes himself as a "queenie little faggot" and tells of fighting with his sister over who's going to wear the Wonder Woman costume and who's going to wear the Hulk costume. The piece is very funny, but it's also poignant because Shawn talks about the transition from being referred to as gay lord, which is a primary school epithet, to being called a fag and having stuff scrawled on his high school locker. I've worked a lot in the past in the school system and my partner works in the school system and I wanted this piece to circulate in that domain.

What is the condition of queer film in Canada at the moment?

Well, everything is always in flux. There has been a huge transition in queer film and video over the last decade. Once there was a lot of experimental and documentary work. Much of what now comes out of the 'Independent American sector' is meant to function as an entry point to a career in Hollywood. Many of the films become almost generic - many feature a group of friends, and there's a bar scene, and so on. There's a lack of creativity in that kind of film, but such films can have a valid place. The feature film has a kind of power in terms of how it is seen to be entertaining and in terms of the larger audience it can attract. Within the festival context, not just the queer film festivals, attention seems always to be directed at the feature film as opposed to 'smaller' work. For example, the international section of the Toronto Film Festival brings together work that the programmers have seen at Cannes and Berlin and elsewhere. Attention at that venue is always focused on the very high profile feature films. There's something about the form of a feature film - the arrangement of plot points, the cadences, that becomes very predictable unless it is in the hands of someone outstanding.

As you point out, the programming practices of film festivals play a central role in the circulation of queer film.

Yes, but in ways which bring their own set of problems. For example, the Toronto International Film Festival has survived a number of cutbacks in arts funding by choosing to go big. It has attracted large advertisers such as Absolute vodka. The difficulty in that move, one that accompanies the sponsorship and glamour and mass audiences, is that smaller works such as those produced by gay male cinema are further marginalised. I've heard that complaint across the festivals and I've experienced the effects of this situation. Long-established festivals such as the San Francisco Film Festival attract large numbers of European buyers. Such festivals function as gatekeepers for the circulation of work. This process occurs in the New York, Toronto, Montreal, and Chicago festivals, which are all about the same size, but it is most pronounced in the larger San Francisco festival. The tendency to mainstream the festival with large sponsorship and post-screening parties at glamorous venues creates an expensive environment that is out of reach of many of the artists attempting to screen their work. This is the main problem with the move to the 'mainstream'.

What impact have the financial cutbacks you mentioned had on the arts in Ontario?

A relatively right wing government in the province has seriously affected arts funding over the past three years. Cutbacks have killed the Ontario Film Development Corporation which actually funded a lot of independent feature films. In its first term the conservative government cut the Ontario Arts Council by forty percent and has continued to cut it. People have shifted to seeking grants from the Canada Council yet it too has reduced available funds, which has impacted on film and video production and the funding of galleries and festivals and arts journals. For instance, the magazine *Fuse* which I've been involved with, has been a catalyst in terms of culture, politics, media, and art in Canada, but it has suffered.

This chill has led to decisions as to whether you want to go big with feature film production, or small with other forms of production. There was a point where many people thought they had to do a feature film. The cuts coincided with the re-birth of the DIY movement and a rediscovery of Super 8 and home format video, this time by people who weren't in the arts funding system, such as young people who had never had a grant. A great deal of work came out of that movement. There's a very good Super 8 filmmaker in Toronto called John Porter who has perfected the form. However for many people who are using it as a form by default there seems to be a point at which they say the same things over and over again. As a result, the use of Super 8 has waned.

Visual culture needs to be vibrant.

**Video work by Richard Fung:**

*Orientations* (1984)

*Chinese characters* (1986)

*The way to my father's village* (1988)

*Safe place*, co-directed with Peter Steven (1989)

*My mother's place* (1990)
Fighting chance (1990)
Steam clean/Vapeurs sans peur (1990)
Out of the blue (1991)
Dirty laundry (1996)
School fag, co-directed with Tim McCaskell (2000)
Sea in the blood (2000)

[2] Moving memories (1993) uses home movies from the 1920s and 1930s to tell the story of Japanese immigration to the US.
[5] Stuart Marshall's Bright eyes (1986) deals with the memories of lesbians and gays who lived under the Nazi regime.