

Beyond the Narrative: Addressing Race and Erasure in Queer Experimental Film Collections

A Guide for Postsecondary Education

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



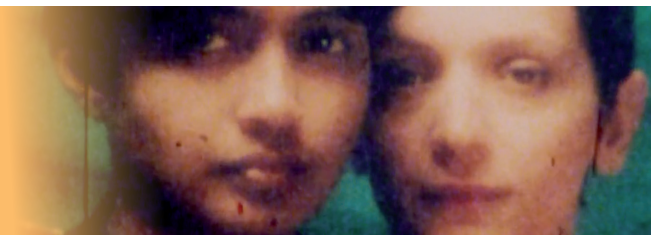


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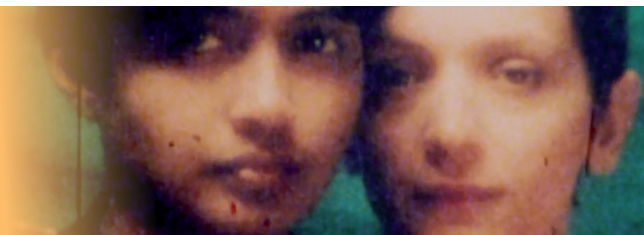
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Preserving and Mobilizing Canadian LGBTQ2+ Films
from 1970 - 2000 in the CFMDC Collection Educational Series

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Recommended Study Levels Undergraduate Students, Graduate Students

Subject Areas Film Studies; Media Studies; Sexuality Studies; Black Studies

Themes Black Identity; Queer Sexuality; Embodiment; Naming/Unnaming;
Archive/Counter-Archive

About the Collection

This selection of short films, curated by Mahlet Cuff, 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 LGBTQ2+ 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Many queer works in the collection from this period exist solely on celluloid or in outdated video formats.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 LGBTQ2+ 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 LGBTQ2+ community historicizes themselves in the era of digital technology and retroviral drugs? What do these films reveal about LGBTQ2+ histories that extends beyond the narrative of HIV/AIDS memorialization or queer confessional films? How were women filmmakers in Canada representing LGBTQ2+ identities on-screen during this period? What do these films reveal about LGBTQ2+ 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, LGBTQ2+ and immigrant communities, and to fostering a community and network dedicated to creating best practices and cultural policies (counterarchive.ca).

About the Guide

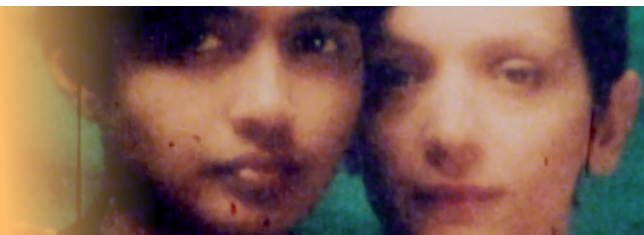
This guide introduces a selection of films and videos curated by Mahlet Cuff. It includes a curatorial essay by Cuff, a list of 5 films and videos suggested for classroom viewing, synopses, and discussion questions oriented toward a range of thematic areas. We recommend previewing the works before you screen them for your students and reading the contextualizing information provided in this guide.

Please note that *Two/Doh* by Michelle Mohabeer contains explicit sexual content. We recommend informing your students that this content is part of the film before you watch it with them.

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 Mahlet Cuff

Mahlet Cuff is an arts cultural worker based in Treaty 1 Territory in so-called Winnipeg, Manitoba. Their curatorial practice focuses on satirical humor as a tool of resistance, the reimagining of Black queer diasporic futures, and archival practices. She has curated work for Window Winnipeg, Take Home BIPOC arts house, Winnipeg Underground Film Festival, Winnipeg Film Group, the8fest, Vancouver Queer Film Festival, Black Flash Expanded and VTape. Cuff is also a part of the curatorial team that is Patterns Collective.



Curated Films and Videos for Classroom Viewing

Five short films and videos were curated by Mahlet Cuff for classroom screening.

Total run time: 30 minutes

Two/Doh (Michelle Mohabeer, 1990)

Length: 8 minutes

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: *Two/Doh* is an evocative poetic pastiche exploring the public and private spaces of desire, and its intersection with the cultural and erotic connections between two women of different origins: Persian/Armenian and South Asian/Sri Lankan.



Exposure (Michelle Mohabeer, 1996)

Length: 5 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.



No You Cyant Touch It! (Rhizome Syndrigast Coelacanth Flourishing, 2001)

Length: 3 minutes

Genre: Experimental, Documentary

Synopsis: Shot in black-and-white and sepia tones, *No You Cyant Touch It!* incorporates an understanding of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality as it deals with Black women's favourite obsession - hair - from an interesting perspective.

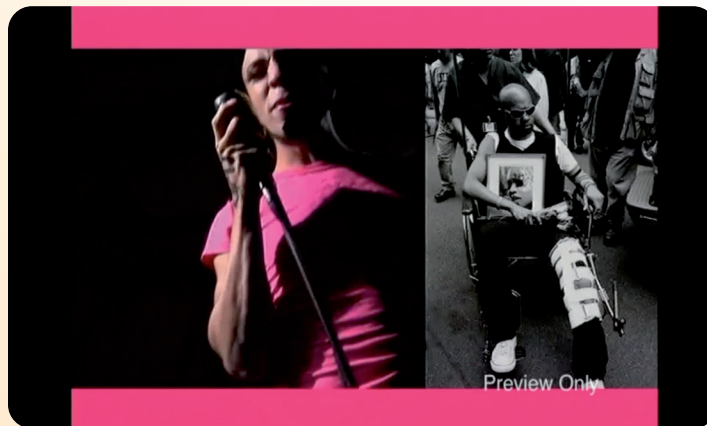


***The Batty Boys Revenge* (Alison Duke, 2009)**

Length: 3.35 minutes

Genre: Experimental, Music Video

Synopsis: Recording artist Troy Jackson calls for sassy, irreverent voices to join a chorus of queers, who demand justice and equality for all.



***Wash Day* (Kourtney Jackson, 2021)**

Length: 9.52 minutes

Genre: Experimental, Documentary

Synopsis: As they get ready for the day, three young Black women discuss the public perception of their Blackness in relation to their cultivation of a strong sense of self. *Wash Day* is an intimate exploration into how private, domestic acts such as washing your hair or putting on makeup become a significant re-acquaintance with the body, before and after navigating the politics of one's outwardly appearance.



Addressing Race and Erasure in Experimental Film Collections: Curatorial Essay by Mahlet Cuff

**Sometimes naming a thing,
giving it a name or discovering its name
helps one to begin to understand it.**

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

**The history of colonization, imperialism
is a demand for reparation for transformation.
In resistance, the exploited, the oppressed,
work to expose the false reality
- to reclaim and recover ourselves.**

bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist,
Thinking Black*

As someone who is located in the Canadian prairies, I have experienced firsthand the difficulties of finding documentation of LGBTQ2+ racialized people there; as a film curator, adding the layer of experimental film creates another challenge. Therefore, when browsing the CFMDC collection of LGBTQ2+ Canadian films from the 1970s to the 2000s that was activated and digitized in partnership with Archive/Counter-Archive, I expected to see more works by Black and racialized artists because of Toronto's status as a hub for Black and racialized queer artists. This was not the case, however, and it became clear to me that these kinds of narratives are only now being included in the archive.

The archive is simultaneously a place that can hold truths as well as a space of erasure. On the one hand, gatekeeping practices have historically prevented a variety of stories from being preserved and told—specifically stories by people of colour, LGBTQ2+ people, and women. On the other hand, the way

the material is often labelled (or not labelled) and classified in the archive also contributes to this ongoing erasure. In the case of film collections, naming plays into the ways that a film is found, viewed, and shared. Oftentimes, these labels, especially as they relate to identity, are inaccurate or outdated—therefore hindering their presence in the archive. A key tool in accessing audiovisual material about marginalized folks, then, is thinking outside of the box. In addition, the question of how such films become accessible to the public must be at the forefront of conversations when confronting absences in film collections and archives. They must not be swept under the rug but activated, digitized, and screened.

This program of short films by racialized queer artists from the CFMDC Case Study, therefore, foregrounds the concepts of naming, truth(s), and embodiment in relation to absence in that collection. These films, indeed, tell us much about what it means to tell and to recover the truth (or truths), about the importance of naming in the face of erasure, and about being in one's body when this body is marked as "Other." Although these reflections take the viewers beyond the archive, the ideas developed in these films apply to the archive, too. Through this collection of experimental and documentary film and video, truth, naming, and embodiment take the form of protest, intimate conversations, interviews, POV, and poetry.

Although films by queer racialized people in the CFMDC collection remediated by A/CA are scarce, artist Michelle Mohabeer was a pioneer in making films about the lives of queer racialized people in the 1990s, using the medium of experimental film to share important conversations about kinship and sexuality. This selection of films builds and expands on Mohabeer's work and legacy by going beyond the parameters of the original Case Study to include films made after 2000, precisely because of the absences in the archive, as well as to highlight the continuities between Mohabeer's work and that of others that came after.

Michelle Mohabeer's *Exposure* (1990) holds space for a Black woman and an Asian woman to be in conversation with one another about what it means to be true to their lesbian sexuality. A quote by Audre Lorde sets the tone of the film: "Kujichagulia - self determination, the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others." Both subjects in the film have struggled with self-determination; yet, as they exchange stories about their experiences as racialized lesbian women, they find solidarity in their similarities while honouring each other's differences. The title, therefore, "Exposure," is crucial to the context: being honest about who they are is crucial to self-liberation. The film also asks important questions about what it means to be Black, Asian, and a lesbian. Ultimately, Mohabeer tells us, there might not be one answer but innumerable truths.



Two/Doh, also by Michelle Mohabeer (1996), is filled with repetitive slow drumming beats that set the sonic backdrop for intimate moments between two lovers. The explicit queerness that is displayed throughout the film, held together between the two characters, feels candid. The lovers are being their genuine selves; they are not trying to hide, cover up, or minimize their want for one another. Their desire is truthful, as they are showing the audience the tenderness and reciprocal care that they are able to generate: hands touching, feeling one another, feeding one another.

As these private moments are brought into the public sphere, the film simultaneously asks the viewers to think about the lines between private and public, while reflecting on who is allowed to openly be in proximity to their loved ones in amorous/romantic ways. Mohabeer further plays with conceptions of private and public by showing scenes of a queer protest. Queer people are shown in community, expressing similar tenderness but also communicating the feelings of joy, freedom, and solace that emerge when being with—and being seen by—one another in public. Although made 30 years ago, both of Mohabeer's works are timely, and the conversations in these films are still relevant. These films are also making space for future voices to further depict the lived experiences of racialized women and queer people.



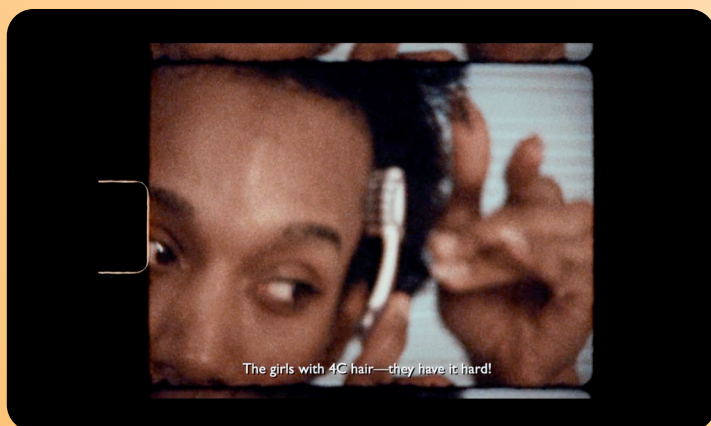
Wash Day by Kourtney Jackson (2021) explores three Black women's relationship to their hair, to their body, to their community, and to themselves. All three of them—Eve, Kyera, and Magda—are highly aware of what it means to be in their bodies. Like Mohabeer's *Two/Doh*, Jackson shares intimate moments with the viewer through the stories of these three Black women. They know how Black women's bodies can be censored, shamed, oversexualized, and recontextualized. All can name the uncomfortable feelings that they have about their experiences of being seen. For instance, Eve, who is the first to appear on screen, acknowledges that she may not

be happy in her body, but asserts that she will be one day. In saying so, she is, in a way, reassuring her future self. The reminder that the present state is not permanent allows her to give herself space and to have as much grace as possible— grace being a concept that is not often afforded to Black women, and one that Jackson is also able to provide to each of the women she is filming. Jackson, indeed, is able to be in dialogue with each of the women in a way that feels safe, kind and consensual, as her relationship to her subjects is not extractive but reciprocal.

The vulnerability depicted in this video allows the filmmaker to unveil stories that are otherwise unseeable for those who do not have these lived experiences. From intimate moments of being with them each in the shower, deciding what outfits to wear, and doing their routine of hair and makeup, Jackson is able to get a glimpse of how each of them live in and through their hair wholeheartedly. Although the film focuses on the topic of hair and embodiment, it also reveals much about class, beauty standards, gender, and the ways in which white supremacist capitalist patriarchal societies do not allow Black women to be their complete selves. Eve, Kyera, and Magda, therefore, are reclaiming parts of themselves that have been denied.

Further on the topic of hair in this curated selection is *No You Can't Touch It!* by Rhizome Syndrigast Coelacanth Flourishing (2001). The title of the film is one that is genuine to the feelings that Flourishing is describing throughout the film, and the ways in which they interact with the world. There is a carefreeness that Flourishing has in relationship with their own hair, as shown through scenes of them on their bed, blow drying her hair. They, too, reclaim their hair as their own, without censoring parts of themselves, as the camera allows them to be angry, intimate, vulnerable, as they find a sense of self within their hair.

Flourishing is not the only one who is angry. The rage present throughout *The Batty Boys Revenge* (2009) presciently captures how homophobia and racism are intertwined. The gestures of the singer, in particular, replicate the violence that many Black queer people experience, while the lyrics powerfully convey the realities of living as Black and queer. Duke's film is also a reminder of how important it is to question who has the privilege to speak out and who does not—thus echoing Mohabeer's earlier work. The film explores the consequences of being critical of larger institutions such as religion and the implications it has on queer people in everyday life.



The girls with 4C hair—they have it hard!

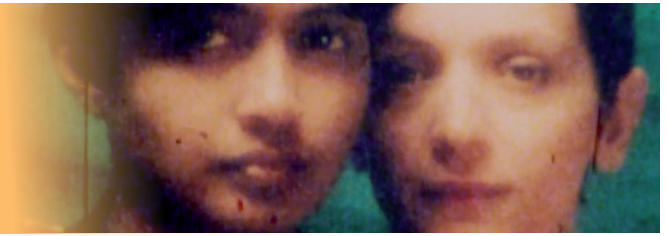


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Yet, again, despite attempts to erase Black queer people, Duke's film energetically suggests that they must continue to fight and be true to themselves. Each of these films makes an important contribution to the archive by re-dressing some of the absence and erasure of racialized queer bodies and experiences. Mohabeer's works transcend time and continue to suggest that subjects of sexuality and race can be the focus point of experimental filmmaking. Duke and Flourishing express the rage that comes with erasure and in turn create pieces that become counter-archives, while Jackson works as a portal to understand the absences in the collection.

SHEDDING OUR BLOOD
IN THE NAME OF GOD
IS NO LONGER AN OPTION...

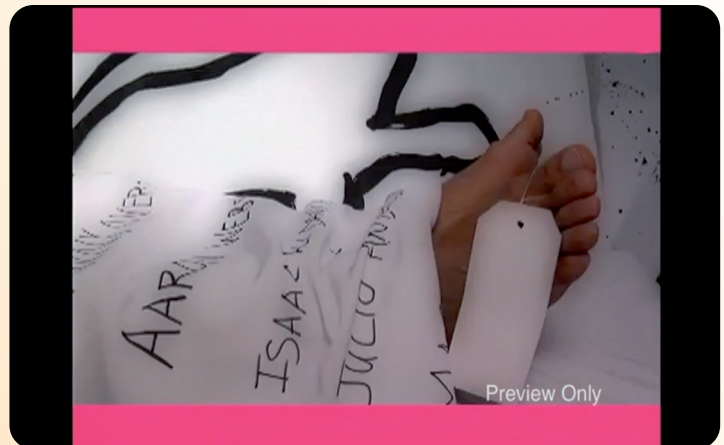
Discussion Questions

1. As Cuff suggests with reference to the opening quote in *Exposure*, this collection of films is oriented toward self-determination. And yet, this self-determination is made in the intimate moments of talking politics in a living-room, touching and nourishing a lover, and washing one's body and hair, for example.

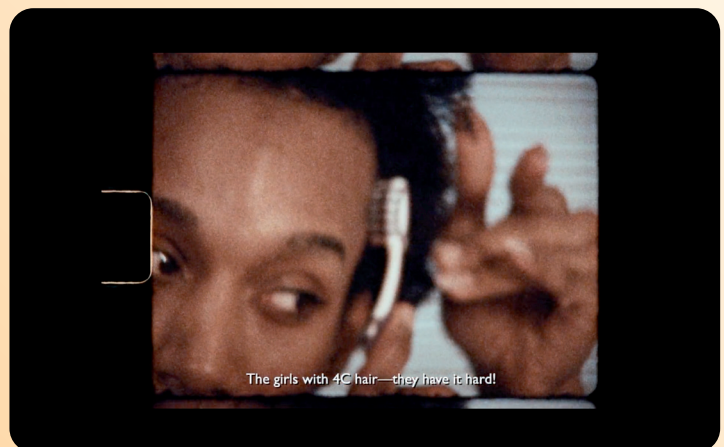
- What does this collection of films suggest about the relationship between moments of vulnerability and connection and the wider struggle for self-determination?
- How does intimacy become the grounds for self-determination and identity formation?
- What do these films suggest about the relationship between intimacy and politics?

2. Several of the films in this collection celebrate embodiment and more specifically experiences of embodied beauty and adornment. The beauty of a lover's body in *Two/Doh*, the beauty and rituals of adornment in *Wash Day*, and the pageantry of *Batty Boys Revenge*, for example.

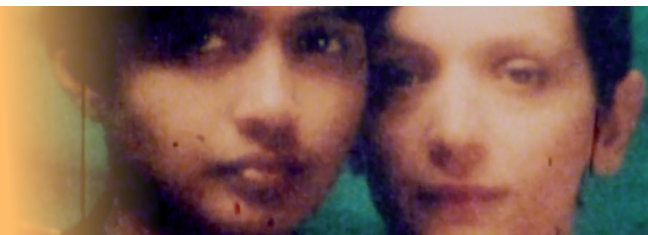
- What does this collection suggest about the relationship between celebrating and adorning the body and political resistance?
- How are embodiment and adornment critical responses to erasure and exclusion?



3. In what ways does the process of naming simultaneously provide visibility and invisibility?



4. Think about the relationship between naming and the archive, and its related exclusions. Why do these exclusions exist? Who else might be excluded? Refer to the readings by Thompson and Drabinsky.



Further Reading

Castro, Jasmyn R. 2019. "Black Home Movies: Time to Represent." In *Screening Race in Nontheatrical film*, edited by Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Drabinski, Emily. 2013. "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction." *The Library Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (April): 94-111.

Mohabeer, Michelle Angela. 2023. "Re-Framing and Fracturing Caribbean-Canadian Diasporas through a Self-Reflexive Lens: Identity and Aesthetics in Coconut/Cane & Cutlass and Blu in You." *Journal for the Study of Indentureship and its Legacies* 3, no. 1: 37-58.

Mohabeer, Michelle, and Amar Wahab. 2022. "Queer Coolie-Tudes: 'A Living Archive, an Oblique Poetics' A Conversation with Filmmaker and Lecturer, Dr. Michelle Mohabeer." *Journal for the Study of Indentureship and its Legacies* 2, no. 1: 125-150.

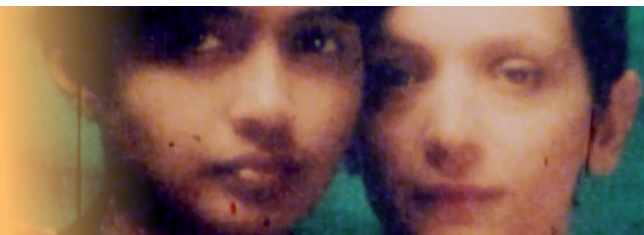
Thompson, Cheryl. 2018. "SEARCHING FOR BLACK VOICES IN CANADA'S ARCHIVES: The Invisibility of a 'Visible' Minority." *Public Journal* 29, no. 57: 88-95.

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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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