
Canadian-Trinidadian Activism: Navigating Intersectional Identity in Queer Care

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore what Trinidadian Canadian QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour), and allied activism and care can look like in Canada and how this activism is informed by this complex intersectional identity. This paper focuses on three activists: Richard Fung, Anthony Mohammed, and Deb Singh. Richard Fung informs complex art-based activism through his complex identities as Trini, Chinese, Canadian, and as a gay man. Fung presents complex identity informing complex activism, for Fung, this is film-based art that explores the many topics surrounding his identity. Anthony Mohammad and Deb Singh present similar experiences of complex identity as Trinidadians within a South Asian diaspora and identity within Queer communities. For Mohammad navigating his sexuality as a gay man through Caribbean and South Asian communities presents contradicting yet synchronous experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Mohammed exhibits complex activism through his work in varied queer groups intended for Caribbean and South Asians separately. Singh similarly identifies the acceptability of a particular identity; navigating fluid sexuality, binary gender, and monogamy presents a similar thread of contradicting inclusion and exclusion. For Trinidadian-Canadian Queer activists, their complex navigation of intersectional identities informs their community work and artistic expression as activists.

Intersectional identities are at the core of Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (QTBIPOC) activism and care. For many, intersectional identity is complex and can be contradictory. Navigating queer and ethnic communities can mean interpreting parts of the self through conflicting lenses. For Trinidadian-Canadian queer activists, identity must be navigated through queer identity, ethnic

community and cultural background. This paper seeks to explore what Trinidadian Canadian QTBIPOC and allied activism and care can look like in Canada and how this activism is informed by this complex intersectional identity. For Trinidadian-Canadian queer activists, their complex navigation of intersectional identities informs their community work and artistic expression as activists.

This essay begins by providing background for the research as it was conducted through a Research Opportunity Program and supervised by Professor Tara Goldstein and postdoctoral fellow Jenny Salisbury as a Research Opportunity Program. The essay delineates my inspiration from d’bi.young anitafrika and the archival research method using the ArQuives. It introduces the inspirations by d’bi and the methods throughout the ArQuives of Trini/Canadian activists Deb Singh, Anthony Mohammed, and Richard Fung, with an in-depth look at Richard Fung's intersecting identity and how that contributes to his activism.

Trinidadian Canadian QTBIPOC activists present a shared experience of navigating their queer identity through cultural and racial identity. This research was conducted under the supervision of Professor Tara Goldstein, and postdoctoral fellow Jenny Salisbury as part of a Research Opportunity Program (ROP) towards a larger project focused on 60 Years of Queer, Trans, BIPOC (QTBIPOC) Activism and Care. The University of Toronto Research Opportunity Program provides second and third-year Faculty of Arts and Science undergraduate students the opportunity to join an instructor’s research project and earn course credit.¹ The overarching objective of Goldstein and Salisbury’s research program was to conduct archival research on moments of activism and care between the 1970s to 2020s that have challenged heteronormativity and cis-normativity in Canada. This project builds on the work of Bishop Owis, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia and a recent student of Professor Goldstein.² Owis identified the different appearances of activism in differing communities and linked activism and care in QTBIPOC spaces.³ To elaborate, Owis recognized building networks of care and creating chosen families as activism for survival and thrive in these communities.⁴ This ROP project

uses an intersectional lens which examines the intersections of heteronormativity and cis-normativity with other forms of structural discrimination, such as anti-Asian racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism and settler colonialism.

To help the students prepare for their own individual projects, the research team invited guest speaker d’bi.young anitafrika Jamaican-Canadian feminist dub poet and activist to present their teachings in care. d’bi’s instruction on Sacredness and Experience were guiding principles in my research. For d’bi, sacredness is defined by the self for the self; they ask how we define what is sacred to us and how we treat what is sacred to us. Experience means recognizing our individual canvasses of knowledge. d’bi emphasizes communicating experience through a hierarchy of oppression and communicating in a decolonial direction.⁵

Therefore, I began with familiar intersections of identity. I began with an interest in immigrant queer activism. As the child of a Trinidadian immigrant, I felt curious about how this identity may influence an intersection of QTBIPOC and allied activism in Canada. My research was gathered through the ArQuives. The ArQuives, located on Isabella Street in Toronto, formerly the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, is the largest independent LGBTQ2+ Archives in the world. It was founded in 1973 as part of the Canadian Gay Liberation Movement and has since been the only LGBTQ2+ Archives in Canada with a national scope. Initial searches into the ArQuives brought me to Suhail Abualsameed and a newcomer program for Queer Muslims.⁶ and El-Farouk Khaki for the queer liberation Theory Project⁷. Each of these activists and their work is undoubtedly impactful; however, I did not feel connected to their stories. Since there are certainly differences between each activist's

¹ “Research Opportunities Program,” 2023. Faculty of Arts & Science. <https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/academics/research-opportunities/research-opportunities-program>.

² Owis, Bishop. “Out at School: Imagining a Slow Ethic of Care in Research-Based Theater.” 2023. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 29(2), pp. 323–331.

³ Ibid., 323-331.

⁴ Ibid., 323-331.

⁵ anitafrika, d’bi.young. “Creating New Decolonial Frameworks,” 2022. NEW299. University of Toronto.

⁶ Abualsameed, Suhail. “Suhail Abualsameed discusses Salaam, a SOY Newcomer Program for Queer Muslims,” Interview by Nancy Nicol, The ArQuives Digital Exhibitions. <https://digital Exhibitions.arquives.ca/items/show/645>.

⁷ Khaki, El-Farouk. “Interview with El-Farouk Khaki for the Queer Liberation Theory Project,” Interview by Nick Mulé and Queer Ontario, The ArQuives Digital Exhibitions. <https://digital Exhibitions.arquives.ca/items/show/1127>.

experiences and my own, it is crucial that in the care of this project, I attempt to understand the activists I research as best I can. d'bi.young anitafrika inspired me to boldly pursue Trinidadian immigrant activism and care through her emphasis on experience and sacredness.⁸ For transparency, my father is an Anglo-Canadian, my mother is an Indo-Caribbean immigrant from Trinidad, and I was born in Canada. I realized through d'bi's inquiry with respect to how we treat what is sacred to us⁹, that I hold this part of my identity sacred to myself, and thus I will approach this part of my activist identity with a sacred respect. This is a place in which I felt empowered to approach this research; hence I decided to focus on Trini QTBIPOC and allied activism. My research seeks to explore what Trini QTBIPOC and allied activism and care can look like in Canada and how this activism is informed by this complex intersectional identity.

I began with preliminary research into three activists via the ArQuives: Deb Singh, Anthony Mohammed, and Richard Fung. Deb Singh is a queer, polyamorous, cisgender, Canadian-born Indo-Caribbean, working-class parent.¹⁰ She is an activist and counsellor at the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape.¹¹ Anthony Mohammed is an AIDS activist, equity worker and Indo-Caribbean LGBTQ leader. He was born in 1967 in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, and in 1969 his family relocated to Toronto.¹² In high school, Mohammed took up his activism with strength, and he attended Camp Kandalore,

an anti-racist and equity camp where he met counsellors and gay activists Tim McCaskell and Richard Fung.¹³ Richard Fung is a video-oriented artist and writer; he was born in Trinidad in 1954 and came to Toronto via Ireland in 1973.

Richard Fung's work as an activist is that of an artist. His work encompasses films which have been broadcast in Canada, the United States, and Trinidad and Tobago.¹⁴ Fung has published numerous essays and received awards in both Canada and the United States.¹⁵ He is currently a professor in the Faculty of Art at OCAD University. My exploration of his work focuses on the mid-1990s to early 2000s, where I find Fung's political engagement and work particularly, as he says, "grounded in [his] contradictory experience as gay, Chinese, Trinidadian, Canadian, a video maker, middle-class, and so on."¹⁶

In the early 2000s, after receiving a research-creation grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to study the relationship between nationalism and homophobia in Canada and Trinidad and Tobago, Fung attended a solo exhibition by Trinidadian visual artist Christopher Cozier.¹⁷ Here he was "accosted" by the word "bullers" "written on an old-fashioned, stand-up blackboard that formed part of an installation."¹⁸ Buller is a derogatory word for gay men which references anal sex and, specifically, sodomy. Fung informs us that "buller" is sharp and poisonous and that in his youth, he lived in "terror that the word would be shot

⁸ anitafrika, d'bi.young. "Creating New Decolonial Frameworks," 2022. NEW299. University of Toronto.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Brown, Elspeth. LGBTQ Oral History Digital Colaboratory, Prof. Elspeth Brown, PI 2021. The ArQuives Canada's LGBTQ2S+ Archives Pussy Palace Oral History Project Fonds, F0205, Series31.

<https://collections.arquives.ca/en/permalink/descriptions49549>

¹¹ Brown, LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory.

¹² Mohammed, Anthony. Interview by Nancy Nicol, September 1st, 2004. The ArQuives Canada's LGBTQ2S+ Archives Nancy Nicol Fonds, F0051, Series 3, File F0051-03-576, Item F0051-03-576-071.

¹³ Mohammed, Interview by Nicol.

¹⁴ Fung, Richard. "Biography: Richard Fung," 2021. Richard Fung.ca. <http://richardfung.ca/index.php/about/biographycv/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fung, Richard. "Dirty Dozen: An Interview with Richard Fung by Helen Lee," Interview by Helen Lee, 2002. Originally published in: Like Mangoes in July ed. Helen Lee and Kerri Sakamoto, 2002. <http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php/interviews/dirty-dozen-2002/>

¹⁷ Fung, Richard. "Uncomfortable: The Art of Christopher Cozier (2005)," 2005. Originally published in *Public 31*, 2005. <http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php/articles/uncomfortable-t-e-art-of-christopher-cozier-2005/>

¹⁸ Fung, "Uncomfortable," publication.

[his] way."¹⁹ I admit that I cannot share his experience as a gay Asian man, but as a Trinidadian, I recognize the sharp pain and fear of the cutting language.

Cozier used “buller” in a listing of attributes to describe “them” separate from “us”.²⁰ Cozier further listed “them” as white people, rich people, people from big countries, and all of the above.²¹ While “us” was described as people who must pray, people who must work hard, people who must learn to love their “culture” and who must always respect their leaders.²² I want to note that Cozier made the decision to place culture in quotation marks. I can theorize this as a reference to the colonial implemented culture rather than the blend of found and shared culture among the people. This piece was a social commentary on the Trini nationalist project ongoing during this time. Fung claims he was drawn to this piece because it was a critique of homophobia in building the xenophobic nationalist project from an artist he knew not to be gay.²³

Fung created his documentary “Uncomfortable: The Art of Christopher Cozier (2005)” and an accompanying essay of the same title. In his essay, Fung prefaces that he did not plan to make a documentary surrounding an artist and that explication by an artist does not further enlighten him beyond the artist’s art.²⁴ In the film, in addition to speaking on his blackboard installation, Cozier talks about the cultural aspects of Trinidad and their influence on his art. He discusses decorated fences to keep people in and out, and he speaks on native trees in front of historically colonial buildings such as banks and government buildings. He speaks on what he sees as the three roles for men on the island, as intellectuals, workers, and incarcerated, and on

the influence of the 1962 independence and subsequent 1970s revolts. Cozier also argues that inherent to living on an island is looking out and knowing “there is a world out there”²⁵.

Fung clarifies that Cozier’s cultural critique originates from his “specific ethnic and geographical location, that of a middle class, “brown” person from Port of Spain.”²⁶ This critique is imperative as the island’s largest ethnic group has roots in India, yet the political sphere is predominantly an African-Creole space. Moreover, the small number of filmic images representing the nation means “the stakes” for the voices of the country are high.²⁷ I would like to note that in his clarification, Fung does not discuss the identity of Chinese Trininis; he does not include his own identity as a Trini.

Beyond his work on Christopher Cozier, Fung’s work of this time also explores the masculine and sexual identity of Chinese men in North America. In 1995, Fung cited Barbara Ehrenreich, an American author and political activist who claims homosexuality is seen as “the ultimate escapism from the male role of breadwinner.”²⁸ Fung elaborates that the age of AIDs has expanded the irresponsible image of gay men to frame self-destructive behaviour and uncontrollable appetites for sex.²⁹ He furthers this perception towards Chinese gay men in North America, recalling the influx of Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s as miners and railroad builders.³⁰ These immigrants largely consisted of single men; the few women included were listed as either married women, girls, or prostitutes, and not granted identity beyond their connection to men.³¹

¹⁹ Fung, “Uncomfortable”, publication.

²⁰ Fung, Richard. “Uncomfortable: The Art of Christopher Cozier (2005),” 2005. Documentary by Richard Fung. The AQuives Canada’s LGBTQ2S+ Archives Richard Fung Fonds, F0134, Series 12, File F0134-12-001.

²¹ Fung, “Uncomfortable”, documentary.

²² Ibid.

²³ Fung, “Uncomfortable”, publication.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Fung, “Uncomfortable”, documentary.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Fung, Richard. “Burdens of Representation, Burdens of Responsibility,” 1995. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (Eds.), *Constructing Masculinity*, pp. 291-298, New York: Routledge

²⁹ Fung, “Burdens,” 291-298.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

In Victoria, British Columbia, reinforced by the 1884 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration head tax which rose from \$10.00 to \$500.00 in 20 years, and the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act, which was only lifted after WW2, Chinese communities were commonly referred to as "bachelor societies" without the presence of women or families.³² Fung finds the "anxious suppression of the possibility of sexual relations between [these] men."³³ most significant. Fung states that the word "bachelor" is commonly used as a euphemism for homosexual men, even though this usage presumes heterosexuality³⁴. Simultaneously, the label infantilizes Chinese men into non-men, yet "endows them with the sexual threat of men devoid of socially sanctioned sexual release," meaning men seeking prostitution and displaying predatory sexuality.³⁵ The contemporary North American Chinese man is still perceived along this spectrum of "asexual wimpiness and a degenerate, sexual depravity," continually producing an unstable masculinity³⁶. Fung explores the narratives of Chinese male masculinity and sexual identity as it was formed in North America. He finds two possible avenues of "wimpiness" or "depravity" and none which encompass a gay Chinese male identity.

Richard Fung's 1996 film "Dirty Laundry" elaborates on the gay Chinese male identity. Fung's film opens with the concept of not speaking Chinese languages when you are Chinese, and although he does not explicitly state it, I would note that this is something Fung personally experiences as a Trini Chinese Canadian. Fung continues his exploration of Chinese migration, emphasizing the heavy segregation between men and women in these mining and worker communities, and he informs the viewer that queer male relationships were not uncommon.³⁷ These relationships may have engaged in sexual pleasure or non-sexual bed sharing; regardless, heavy companionship and

affection amongst men in these societies were prevalent.³⁸ The film also features Sky Lee, a Canadian artist and novelist who spoke on the misplacement of Chinese culture for the descendants of these migrants, as the migrants initially attempted to dampen their culture.³⁹ Sky Lee also explains her own experience coming out to her Chinese Canadian mother, whose concerns for her rose from what Sky Lee called a "circumstantial location."⁴⁰ Sky Lee's mother was concerned that without a husband, her daughter might not be taken care of; Lee connects this to the identity of Chinese women in Canada being connected to their status in proximity to a man.⁴¹

Richard Fung's activism as a Trini Chinese Canadian gay man rests on his artistry and representation. He explores the multi-facets of his identity and sustains a thread of complex belonging and isolation. In his 1980 essay, "Asians Gay and Proud" Fung states that "non-white gays and lesbians face a double-edged sword." He says they experience cultural schizophrenia, that the racism of general society filters into the gay community while the sexism and homophobia of "ethnic" communities creates a constant isolation⁴². His work between the mid-90s to early 2000s explores this dichotomy. He represents his Trini culture while recognizing sharp homophobia in his work with Cozier, and while combating racism and xenophobia faced by his identity as a Chinese Canadian, he corrects narratives to include further parts of his identity as a gay man.

I have conducted preliminary research into Anthony Mohammed via his 2004 interview with Nancy Nichol, a professor in the Visual Arts Department at York University. Mohammed, as a Trini QTBIPOC activist, speaks on a

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fung, "Dirty Laundry."

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Fung, Richard. "Asians: Gay & Proud," 1980. *The Asianadian* v. 2. N 3 Winter 1979-80, p.30

<http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php?/articles/asians-gay-and-proud/>

similar thread of this "double-edged sword"⁴³. Mohammed was born in Trinidad but grew up in the west end of Toronto.⁴⁴ In high school, he began his activism and community role in earnest, joining ZAMI, which is generally known as a black queer group in Toronto but was intended for Black people and West Indians; most members were Afro-Caribbean.⁴⁵ While Mohammed is Indo-Caribbean, he acknowledged that this organization was a community he felt connected to and could navigate the types of homophobia he experienced in Caribbean communities.⁴⁶ Mohammed also joined KHUSH, a South Asian gay and (to a lesser extent) lesbian organization.⁴⁷ Through both organizations, Mohammed states he found all of his needs met, but there was nothing which met him as a whole person.⁴⁸ Mohammed further speaks on the differing identities to which he belongs and how he feels received. For example, as a teenager, when called racial slurs, he felt support from his parents and community in rectifying this behaviour. However, when he was called homophobic slurs, he felt alone and could not seek support.⁴⁹ Mohammed also touches on cultural pride and homophobia, which occur simultaneously for him. While discussing Reggae and Dancehall lyrics, which encourage hatred for LGBTQ2S+ communities, Mohammed explains the contrast of his feelings, on the one hand, he is proud of the Caribbean culture which is taking hold in Canada's Caribana culture, but on the other hand, he says that "just because it's cultural doesn't make it right"⁵⁰. Mohammed continues the thread found in Fung's work of navigating a queer identity through cultural and racial identity. Mohammed, in his search for the queer community, struggled to locate a community which encompassed himself entirely and experienced conflict in cultural pride and sharp homophobia.

Deb Singh has similar experiences in navigating

conflicting identities. To note, I have engaged with Deb Singh's Pussy Palace Oral History Project Interview as a member of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. I would highlight her navigation of identity, beginning with her journey through her identities as bisexual, pansexual, and omnisexual to identifying herself as a queer woman.⁵¹ Singh also states that she has been in open relationships her whole life yet has found it far easier to discuss queerness than to discuss her poly identity. Furthermore, Singh is of Indo-Carib identity, yet often finds herself placed in a South Asian diaspora. As a first-generation Canadian, she feels a "mix up of three different spaces"⁵². Singh also reflects on her religious identity. She was raised Catholic and went to an all-girls Catholic school in her youth, yet she says she "can feel Hinduism and Islam in [her] blood."⁵³ Part of the South Asian diaspora and Indo-Carib identity is the amalgamation of religious identity which Singh recognizes.

The Pussy Palace was a lesbian bathhouse in Toronto which was raided in September of 2000. It was a safe space for queer women and non-binary folk. Deb Singh was part of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee and on the subcommittee that organized Sugar Shack events, a BI-POC-led bathhouse series for BIPOC queers. In her interview, Singh speaks about the "eroticization of certain bodies" and the importance of safe spaces or Sugar Shack events intended for racialized women and non-binary folk.⁵⁴ These events were exclusively based on self-identification, meaning that racialization was not dictated by the external judgement of appearance. Singh notes the difficulty in maintaining and sustaining racialized safe spaces within the queer spaces, desiring inclusion with the importance that racialized women and non-binary folk need a space within the space.⁵⁵ Singh navigates identity as a

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mohammed, Interview by Nicol.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Singh, Deb. Interview part of LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory, Prof. Elspeth Brown, PI, 2021. The ArQuives Canada's LGBTQ2S+ Archives Pussy Palace Oral History Project Fonds, F0205, Series 31.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

queer, polyamorous and racialized woman. As a South Asian diasporic Trinidadian born in Canada, she experiences an amalgamation of religious identities and feels the "mix up" of these three identities.⁵⁶

My research on the identity of Trinidadian immigrant QTBIPOC and allied activism and care excludes Afro-Caribbean and Anglo-Caribbean identities, excludes trans experiences, and is generally male-dominant. However, it is apparent Trini QTBIPOC and allied activism and care are certainly varied. It includes visual artistry, representation, taking roles in spaces which may conflict with other parts of identity, involvement in rape crisis and assistance, and other methods not explored in my research. It also appears that this intersectional identity requires complex navigation, which aligns with complex activism, such as visual artistry expanding many topics surrounding identities of sexuality, gender, race, and culture. The complex identity of Trinidadian QTBIPOC appears to inform complex activism and complex navigation.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

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