



Figure 1. Video still from *Myth(s) of Creation*  
by Ming-Yuen S. Ma (US, 1997)

# Tongue Twisters: The Travelogue Videos of Ming-Yuen S. Ma

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Asian diasporic identities exist in a complicated tension with Asian nationalist identity formations, simultaneously affirming and disavowing the nation-state as constitutive of identity. Insofar as Asian nationalist movements (such as Hindu nationalism in India) rely on heteronormative definitions of citizenship, queerness and homosexuality serve to question the very foundations of conservative discourses of Asian identity. Not only is the diaspora “queer as such” (in David Eng’s words),<sup>1</sup> but queer Asians call both Asian American cultural nationalism and diasporic identifications into question.

Video maker Ming-Yuen S. Ma’s recent work has focused on the problematics of translation as a metaphor for homosexuality in the Chinese diaspora. By signifying on cinematic traditions, such as documentary film conventions for translating and authenticating testimony, Ma aligns his critique of cinematic practice with his exploration of diasporic sexuality. For example, in his *Toc Storee* (US, 1992) an interview given in Mandarin is translated into English via subtitles; immediately following this sequence, a Cantonese translation of the same passage is offered on the sound track. In addition to calling attention to the problematics of trans-

lation, the video implicitly challenges the ethnographic underpinning of documentary by asserting that the video serves not to reveal Chinese sexuality to English speakers but to connect Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking diasporic Chinese. In a sense, the use of video in *Toc Storee* serves to replace or revise connections otherwise broken in diaspora.

This article examines the four-part series *Xin Lu: A Travelogue in Four Parts* (1997–2007), which explores Ma's family history as a narrative of dispersion with attendant feelings of loss. By calling attention to the discursive construction of travel (citing a number of writers, popular and academic, on categories such as *tourist* and *exile*), the *Xin Lu* series extends the interrogation of language and translation introduced in Ma's *Toc Storee* and *Slanted Vision* (US, 1995). These videos suggest that language sets up borders that are crossed by the traveler—not just in the sense that one may have to surrender one's mother tongue when one crosses a national border but also insofar as language is an instrument to differentiate, to categorize, and to isolate.

To say that language sets up borders is to acknowledge that we are discussing nation and diaspora as discursive constructs subject to deconstruction by a cinematic text, but it is not to say that borders are immaterial. I take it as axiomatic that nations are interested in controlling bodies and that that control can take the form of gendered classification (read: oppression of women and queers). Furthermore, I would contend that the US nation-state has benefited by pitting feminist and antiracist movements against each other, which is why I would argue that feminism is directly implicated by the discourses that Ma is examining.<sup>2</sup> Examining queer desire in the diaspora goes hand in hand with a feminist critique of nationalism and globalization.

By using video, Ma has indicated his allegiance with an intimate and personal cinematic discourse (as contrasted with the public advocacy of the theatrical documentary). Video has long provided a medium of expression for marginal voices. This is due in no small part to the economics of video, where modest capital outlay is made possible by the technology itself: not only is video equipment relatively inexpensive, it does not require a large crew to operate

(and indeed is often operated by a single person). As a relatively young medium, video was less beholden to established regimes of representation. As Mary Jane Jacob puts it: “Access to video (as to performance, photography and installation art also emerging in the 1970s) allowed women and others—until then marginalized by the mainstream—to have an equal voice. Through these new genres they could proclaim a place for themselves in the art world that could not be achieved through the Western, male-dominated field of painting.”<sup>3</sup> Jacob implies that new voices are drawn toward new media, which is to say that video provided a space for alternatives to mainstream modes of representation, modes that limit the ways in which content can be organized and therefore limit the content itself. Stuart Hall has argued that the discourse of “production values” serves to concentrate representational power in the service of hegemonic perspectives.<sup>4</sup> While conventions meant to convey documentary objectivity function in actuality to obscure representational biases, marginalized video makers have countered those conventions of purported objectivity by elevating subjectivity.

It is along these lines that Rosalind Krauss has famously articulated video as an inherently subjective and indeed intimate medium.<sup>5</sup> Krauss argues that the psychological state of narcissism constitutes the medium itself, due to the centrality of the artist’s body but also as a result of video’s aesthetics of simultaneity—an aesthetics most evident in videos that foreground the interaction of the body with the camera and/or the monitor. Krauss’s emphasis is on video artists who engage in “the feedback coil,” so it is important to note that feedback is not necessarily inherent to video, especially single-channel works (58). By focusing on the relationship of the self as projected object (in Lacanian terms), Krauss has identified a psychological state that requires the artist to engage with history, defined as individual history and also the medium’s history. While the artists that Krauss discusses may be engaged in a critical narcissism, I suggest that artists such as Ma who link history to material contexts (e.g., global circuits of capital that compel and structure migration) are engaged simultaneously in exploring identity and interrogating social structures. Put another way, the estrangement from one’s own body that Lacanian psychoanalysis would

suggest is constitutive of the self is further complicated by bodily discourses that problematize (or even pathologize) the woman, the racial other, the immigrant, and the queer.<sup>6</sup> Ma's videos engage with these discourses even as he shifts focus from the body toward space, from figure to ground.

### **Dispersion and Desire**

Ming-Yuen S. Ma was born in Buffalo, New York, but raised in Hong Kong until 1983. He received his BA from Columbia University in 1990 (he also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1988) and his MFA from California Institute of the Arts in 1994. The first single-channel video listed on his CV is dated 1991: Ma describes *Aura* (US) as a “deconstructed music video featuring Asian drag queens, Chinese and Japanese poetry, and house music.”<sup>7</sup> By 2000, Ma had produced seven tapes and several performance pieces and multichannel video installations and had curated or directed a number of film festivals and exhibitions, including LA Freewaves.

*Xin Lu: A Travelogue in Four Parts* is a series of four single-channel videos with an accompanying website.<sup>8</sup> According to the website, *xin lu* means “paths of one’s heart,” and the first three tapes all deal with the dispersal of Ma’s family. Ma defines his own travels varyingly in terms of migration, tourism, exile, and displacement. *Myth(s) of Creation* (US, 1997) serves as an overview of the series; *Mother/Land* (US, 2000) focuses on Ma’s mother’s departure from Hong Kong in 1997; *Movements East-West* (US, 2003) offers a timeline that mixes world events with Ma’s family history, eschewing voice-over narration in favor of a sound track produced by Ultra Red. *[os]* (US, 2007), the final installment, features memories of childhood told in a series of interviews with queer men of the Hong Kong diaspora, juxtaposing these narratives with sites of popular nostalgia such as Los Angeles’s Roosevelt Hotel, believed to be haunted by the ghost of Hollywood star Montgomery Clift.

Each of the *Xin Lu* videos is preceded with the same title sequence: following the dedication, “for my family,” low-angle color footage of highway overpasses briefly dissolves into black-and-white

footage of the 1990 London march commemorating the massacre at Tiananmen Square; these images are accompanied by a sound track of ocean waves and chirping crickets. After this opening, *Myth(s) of Creation* begins with a list of European place-names presented one at a time as character-generated text: Ma's voice-over tells us that he traveled through Europe with his family in June 1990, a vacation haunted by awareness of the impending return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 and of the Tiananmen massacre of the preceding year. Later in the piece, over vacation footage shot by Ma, his voice-over speaks of his estrangement from his family (forced into close proximity after years of dispersion) and his sense in surveying the "home movies" that the family looks out of place against the European landscape. These sentiments later lead him to realize that his family does not fit in the Chinese landscape either.

After the relatively straightforward opening sequence, the density of the video's sound track will gradually increase as nine overlapping voices recite passages relating to travel generally and the sense of loss it can produce specifically. The quoted authors are a diverse lot, including Francisco X. Alarcón, Walter Benjamin, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Bruce Chatwin, Rey Chow, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Isabelle Eberhardt, Hugo of St. Victor, Dean MacCannell, Rubén Martínez, Hamid Naficy, Edward Said, Ronald Skeldon, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. The most prominent voice, that of a woman who had earlier narrated a myth of the Earth's creation, tells us of unidentified "ancients" who first assigned place-names.

Ma's sense of rootlessness is conveyed through a series of displaced identifications: a visual metaphor of a plant's removal from its pot, black-and-white images of a woman reading and marking photocopies of poetry transcribed from the barracks at Angel Island (this "scholar" standing in for Ma's own process of assembling texts for the sound track),<sup>9</sup> and a story about a chance encounter with a graffiti artist. Ma's voice-over tells us that he began cruising around LA looking for tags, compelled by an imagined affinity with this man "who disperses language over space, someone who created a name in order to permeate our urban landscape." While the agents had divided up the landscape with their naming (and

the assumption of a one-to-one correspondence of place with its name), the tagger is an outsider who lays claim to territory through an act that hegemonic discourse defines as vandalism. These competing narratives of naming and renaming implicate the itinerary of place-names that opened the video: while a number of the European names have been named according to the language of the locals (London, Lyon, Paris), other places are named in translation (Venice, not Venezia). The English name for Venezia marks Ma's family not just as outsiders but specifically as tourists: they journey not to Venezia, but to Venice, the city as constructed for English-speakers. The act of renaming a place reminds us that migration is not random but compelled by the flow of capital; similarly, the tagger's unsanctioned appropriation is understood in terms of capital—as the destruction of property.

If the multiple names we give to places reveal the competing desires that we impose upon space, *Myth(s) of Creation* points out that there is a corresponding multiplicity to the names we give to people who travel across that space: tourist, exile, nomad, sojourner, investor, illegal alien, and so on. Like the list of European place-names, these terms appear as on-screen text, one at a time. The terms are superimposed on freeze-frames of hands throwing signs: for example, “sojourner” accompanies an image of two fingers of the left hand thrust forward in a V into the palm of the right hand. These improvised signs were inspired by gang signs, a subcultural discourse that (like graffiti) is used to demarcate urban territory. Through the practice of throwing signs, gangs and their associates represent their affiliations. Hand signs are thus a vocabulary of inclusion and exclusion, perhaps most dramatically in the practice of false flagging, when members of a gang throw false signs in an attempt to induce rival gang members to represent reciprocally and thereby reveal themselves.

*Myth(s) of Creation* explicitly connects the process of travel and the attendant feelings of exclusion with the construction of territorial borders through signs (linguistic, visual, gestural). These narratives of estrangement and dislocation are cast as acts of spectatorship, since the voice-over narration attaches these insights to the act of reviewing footage. The desire to “permeate” the land-

scape, possibly a desire for inclusion but also implying the desire to assert ownership (to colonize), is also linked to the expression of homosexual desire, for the narrator meets the tagger who inspires feelings of “affiliation” while cruising Griffith Park Boulevard at 4:00 a.m. Ma’s voice-over in *Mother/Land* explicitly connects his identity as an “out queer man” with his departure from Hong Kong, suggesting that homosexual desire finds freer expression in diaspora. The queer desire for the tagger, while potentially touristic (insofar as the tagger is implicitly of a lower class standing than the narrator<sup>10</sup>), is linked to the desire to identify with the surrounding landscape and to acquire a new language; as such, queerness is linked to cultural hybridity and opposed to notions of inherited identity.

Ma’s conception of queer diasporic identity has much in common with Aihwa Ong’s “flexible citizenship.”<sup>11</sup> For Ong, “astronauts” emerge at a specific moment in history, one structured by the 1997 handover specifically and the globalization of the economy generally. In Hong Kong slang, astronauts (*tai hong yan* in Cantonese) are diasporic Chinese connected by multiple metaphorical umbilical cords to Hong Kong (where the family firm may be based), San Francisco (at the firm’s branch office), and Vancouver, BC (where the children may be attending school), to take a hypothetical example. Their participation in transnational circuits of capital means they do not have roots in any one place. In the event of political discrimination in Hong Kong, family members have a potential escape route to the US or Canada. Thus, while many astronauts contribute to China’s entry into the world economy, mistrust of China’s human rights violations (and perhaps also appreciation of the individuality and/or independence that are part and parcel of the astronaut’s life) structures the complex disidentification from China that Ong labels “flexible citizenship.”<sup>12</sup>

When contemplating the possibility that transnationalism can create new identity formations, it is important to remember that globalization may blur national boundaries but it does not eliminate them, and in fact globalization depends on nationalism. For example, Hollywood would not produce films in Canada and New Zealand if it were not for differences in labor laws, local regu-



lations, government support for the arts, and the relative strength of different currencies. Transnationalism thus depends on the selective permeability of borders: capital flows, but people may not. Seen in this light, Ong's astronauts are a privileged elite—the laboring class does not have access to flexible citizenship. This is what Pheng Cheah means when he notes that “[the] postnational solidarities generated by South-North migration and the cosmopolitan consciousness emerging in global cities is largely the consciousness of transnational upward class mobility, especially that of the new technocratic professional class that manages and benefits from the global production system of flexible capitalism.”<sup>13</sup> Ma would be the first to acknowledge that he and his family are fortunate indeed to be in a position to confront identity confusion. After all, to be labeled an exile implies a certain status; while Ma notes the overlap of terms like *exile* and *migrant*, it is fair to say that there is very little overlap between *exile* and *refugee*.

While Ong's focus on citizenship (literal and metaphoric)<sup>14</sup> draws attention to the Chinese government's economic and political policies as a locus of disidentification, other critics have focused on queer sexuality as a force that problematizes nationalistic identification in the diaspora.<sup>15</sup> While governments may not officially disavow queerness (except insofar as policies and laws evince heteronormativity, of course), the cultural nationalist impulse is often implicitly opposed to homosexuality. Since cultural nationalism typically assumes racial homogeneity and therefore depends on the biological reproduction of its citizens, essentialist identity formations are invested in the (re)productivity of the heterosexual family.<sup>16</sup>

In this context, the dispersion of family members across diaspora is often perceived as promoting individuality over adherence to familial mores and obligations, and simultaneously (perhaps consequently) permitting the expression of queer sexuality. But while this construction is wholly consistent with the logic of cultural nationalism (in which the heteronormative family is associated with the nation), it obscures a number of complex and contradictory impulses. First, the assumption that queerness can only be expressed in diaspora is produced in large part as a function of Eurocentrism and othering, constructing the West as the protec-

tor of human rights and free expression. While many homosexuals living in the US and other Western countries might dispute the notion that their civil rights are protected, it is also true that Western conceptions of homosexuality serve to construct non-Western queers as “‘premodern’ or unliberated.”<sup>17</sup> For example, Martin Manalansan has argued that the concept of the closet assumes that queer subcultures that are not organized around the public performance of queerness are backward.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the construction of the queer diaspora may obscure the intense nostalgia for home that often leads migrants to construct themselves as exiles and to evince a conservative (not to say reactionary) conception of homeland.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, queer diasporic Chinese may express feelings of nostalgia for homeland and family without desiring to surrender their individuality and sexual identities. It is precisely this ambivalence that Ma’s *Xin Lu* project investigates. Before examining the ways this ambivalence is articulated in the second tape of the *Xin Lu* series, I want to turn to Ma’s earlier videos, which contrast interviews with queer Chinese American men with Ma’s own experimental techniques. The experiences narrated by these men clearly contradict the Eurocentric assumptions outlined in the above paragraph, and to the extent that *Toc Storee* and *Slanted Vision* give priority to the interview form, they decenter Ma’s own subjectivity (i.e., that which is foregrounded in the *Xin Lu* project). However, none of Ma’s videos draws a strict line between documentary and essayistic impulses; rather, each negotiates that line in its own way. Furthermore, Ma’s interest in language and translation structures all of these pieces, and the critique of cinematic convention that animates the earlier pieces should caution us not to assume that the interviews are presented to us in an unmediated form.

### **Translation and Commodification**

Trinh T. Minh-ha’s theoretical writings and cinematic praxis are a powerful influence on Ma’s work, and Trinh’s influence is particularly evident in Ma’s earlier videos. Specifically, Trinh’s interrogation of conventions of the interview in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (US, 1989) is wittily extended by Ma’s *Toc Storee* and *Slanted*

*Vision*.<sup>20</sup> One of the themes of *Surname Viet* is the commodification of cultural practices in the diaspora, continuing a critique of multiculturalism developed in Trinh's *Woman, Native, Other*.<sup>21</sup> Multicultural consumption involves translation, the adaptation of Asian traditions for diasporic contexts, and it is the paradox of translation that it simultaneously arrests and distorts tradition. (Hence the "tongue twisters" that I allude to in my title.)

The first half of Trinh's *Surname Viet* offers reenactments of interviews originally conducted in Vietnamese and then translated into French for publication. Trinh translated four of the interviews into English (twice-removed from the original Vietnamese) and cast Vietnamese immigrants (with varying degrees of English fluency) to perform the parts, filming them in a highly stylized manner (facing away from the camera, walking out of frame, sitting still while the camera isolates her hands in a close-up). Ma's videos also foreground the problematics of translation and the formal conventions of framing that serve to assert or undercut the authority of documentary interviewees, with Ma's subjects participating in the playful deconstruction of documentary testimony. While Trinh is clearly critiquing conventions and interrogating the nature and function of translation, Ma goes beyond Trinh's practice by queering documentary practice. By focusing on the relationship of gender to nationalism (e.g., examining nationalist discourse that casts the nation as a husband to whom women should pledge their devotion), Trinh paves the way for Ma's queer diasporic critique of nationalist discourse.<sup>22</sup>

*Toc Storee* weaves Chinese- and English-language poetry on the subject of male love with interviews with gay Chinese diasporic men in the US. Much of the poetry is written in archaic Chinese and was probably meant to be read in Mandarin; however, Ma reads the poetry in Cantonese and withholds an English translation: in Ma's words, "it's twice removed,"<sup>23</sup> suggesting the effort involved in reconstructing a Chinese homosexual tradition while resisting the impulse to unproblematically assert a connection between the poetry and contemporary Asian Americans. And indeed the video problematizes the spectator's relation to the contemporary Asian

American men as well: the interviews are conducted variously in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese; subtitles are not consistently provided. Speech is continually estranged from the talking heads: some of the interviews are step-printed; we may see footage of one person speaking, but hear the voice of another; a sync-sound interview conducted in Mandarin with English subtitles ends with a jump cut following which the interviewee's voice is withheld, while the sound track provides a Cantonese translation of the sequence we saw moments before. Instead of working to increase the comprehensibility of the interviews, Ma's video reminds us not to trust a filmmaker's translations.<sup>24</sup> Ma also signifies on the practice of subtitling accented English when he takes an excerpt from a book by Britt Hinsch and renders it in a phonetic transcription of accented English: "Wader dan turnling to da xamos ofu antiquity to undarstan Chinesie homozezualeetee an pofide justification of self-worth an modows ofu beehaver, day louw lok to New York and San Francisco for xampo to emulate. Lot onlee is da native homozezuoo tradition unlow n amung quitiks ofu homozezualeetee, but eet has awsoo fertsolee disappeared among homozezuos demsells."<sup>25</sup> Ma's aim is of course to establish Chinese and other Asian homosexual traditions—albeit problematically; like Richard Fung, Ma takes care not to assume a correspondence between Imperial China and the contemporary diaspora.<sup>26</sup> Ma's performative mistranslation of Hinsch's text serves to critique the condescending claim that contemporary Chinese homosexuals emulate Westerners.<sup>27</sup>

*Slanted Vision* was completed in 1995 and features segments made in collaboration with Justin Chin, Quentin Lee, Han Ong, and others. Each of the tape's three sections focuses on the relationship between vision and desire of and for Asian men. Part 1, "Pornography," discusses Asian men's reasons for acting in and consuming gay male pornography, with an interlude about straight women viewing gay male pornography featuring a voice-over written and performed by Laura U. Marks;<sup>28</sup> part 2, "Documentary," features Asian men talking about their sexual practices (fig. 2); and part 3, "Culinary: The Cooking Show," presents a safe-sex demonstration in the guise of a parody of *Yan Can Cook* (1982).



Figure 2. Video still from *Slanted Vision* by Ming-Yuen S. Ma (US, 1995)

Ma again employs a variety of strategies to call attention to documentary conventions regarding interviews and the selection of authoritative interview subjects. For the most part, the interviews feature sync-sound—that is, image and sound were recorded at the same time—but rarely do we see moving lips. In the “Documentary” section, most of the interviews are presented as canted-angle, extreme close-ups of eyes in black-and-white. Various interviews throughout the film obscure the view of the speaker’s face; while this serves to preserve a measure of anonymity for the interviewees, Ma also implies that the anonymity and the authority of a speaker are linked. When a speaker’s face is hidden, the video may be constructing the speaker as an authoritative inside source, or conversely the video may be implying that the speaker does not stand behind his words. Finally, in partially withholding visual cues such as age, gender, and race (cues which may, in some cases, be deduced from the speaker’s voice), the video notes that documentary cinema has tended to privilege white male adult speakers. These different commentaries are activated to greater or lesser

degrees by various strategies, including: a black oval added in post-production, a blue oval cut-out held by the interviewer in a parody of the postproduction oval; a black bar engraved with the words “Invisible Asian” held over the speaker’s lips; and speakers who fan themselves with the oval in lieu of hiding behind it.

It is the third section, “The Cooking Show,” that pulls the video’s diverse strands together in a sideways critique of media practices that commodify race. On the back cover of the *Slanted Vision* case, this section is described as “a multiple re-staging of the popular US television cooking show, *Yan Can Cook*, in which this ‘family-viewing’ program is turned into a hilariously perverse safer sex demonstration seasoned with some serious kung-fu moves.” A cucumber is used to demonstrate the correct way to put on a condom; later, phallic vegetables are campily shoved into the body cavity of a raw chicken while an Asian man with a condom hat chops up the sheathed cucumber. At intervals, the *Yan Can Cook* audience applauds, emphasizing the role that the desiring spectator plays in commodifying race. The ingredients for the recipe (“Chicken Fuk Yew”) combine safe sex with Chinese cuisine, and in one case—“Rice vinegar laced with pearl cream”—refer simultaneously to a slang term for semen and a skin-care product hawked on television by Nancy Kwan in the early 1990s. The narration that introduces the show lays bare the ways in which cuisine is sexualized, sex is consumed, and voyeuristic orientalist discourses shape both: “Welcome to today’s culturally specific Safer Sex Workshop. According to our research, Asians primarily relate to their culture through food, so we’ve designed our demonstration as a cooking show in order to reach our target audience. Our gorgeous, exotic cooking instructor . . . and her passive, accommodating assistant . . . will demonstrate to you, the audience, a few of those secret Oriental safer-sex techniques—conceived through ancient wisdom, perfected by generations of practice.” The statement that “Asians primarily relate to their culture through food” can be read as a misstatement revealing Western perceptions of diasporic Asians, as an accurate statement revealing the contempt of “real” Asians for diasporic Asians, or as a metaphorical admission that the desires of Asian Americans reflect (in part) the internalization of oriental-

izing discourses. That this multivalent statement is presented via an established television genre, the cooking show, suggests that it is not Asian vision that is “slanted,” but that the supposed transparency of media conventions serves instead to obscure the ways that individual testimonies are mobilized in service of an overarching ideological discourse. This is not to say that the overarching discourse is unified, but that it is the function of mass media texts to grapple with ideological contradictions and that media conventions serve to present those contradictions in such a way that they can be superficially resolved.

Ma’s critique of television convention focuses on textual characteristics (such as genre) and does not extend to a sustained engagement with mainstream television as an apparatus. It may be useful to situate Ma’s practice in relation to David Joselit’s analysis of video art in relation to broadcast television: “Instead of drawing a strict distinction between commercial practices of video (television) and supposedly noncommercial ones (art and activism), [Joselit] chart[s] their differential capitalization.”<sup>29</sup> Joselit offers striking comparisons of multichannel video installations with broadcast television control booths—both involve banks of TV monitors—to call attention to the ways that broadcast television makes us spectators of ourselves.<sup>30</sup> Like Krauss, Joselit privileges feedback; that is, installations that include cameras and live feeds such as Peter Campus’s *cir*.<sup>31</sup> Ma’s works are conceived primarily as single-channel works (the *Xin Lu* website offers three options for viewing, none of them involving multichannel setup), and while we might understand the *Xin Lu Video Bus Tour* as an installation, it is only site-specific if we conceive the bus’s route through LA as a site. Instead of highlighting the temporality of television (as Joselit argues Campus, Bruce Naumann, and others do) and the space of projection, Ma thematizes space as subject. The *Xin Lu Video Bus Tour* makes use of a tour bus’s video monitors to run the four videos in sequence, interspersed with Ma’s discussion of sites around Los Angeles.<sup>32</sup> By compelling viewers to engage with the videos over a five-hour stretch, the tour may produce a sense of fatigue and sensory confusion comparable (if not precisely analogous) to

the experience of migration—these effects are not produced by the videos themselves.<sup>33</sup> Joselit brings out the political dimensions of the apparatus itself, while Ma's videos are more content-oriented even when they comment on television convention. Put simply, Ma's works have established boundaries (they are structured as essays with beginnings and ends), while the installations that Joselit discusses are engaged in the present tense.

### Community and Discontinuity

I now want to return to the *Xin Lu* series with the context of Ma's critique of media conventions in mind. *Mother/Land* deploys a number of Ma's established techniques to explore the ways that diasporic movement is impelled by queer desire, while *[os]* concludes the series by interrogating the impulse to revisit the past. This contradictory movement away and back, into the diaspora but tethered to homeland, is figured by Ma as a radical disconnect between the image track and the sound track. Like Fung's videos, *The Way to My Father's Village* (Canada, 1988) and *My Mother's Place* (Canada, 1990),<sup>34</sup> Ma's videos engage in two distinct but related strategies: in one mode, the image track is composed of archival footage (typically home movies), and the accompanying audio track attempts to articulate an insider's subtext; in the other mode, the camera wanders through a contemporary landscape as a voice-over speaks about events that happened elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> In Ma's videos, the voice-over often relates a queer memory of Hong Kong while the image track features contemporary footage of the UK or US, offering a radical disjunction between an intimate, private story and a neutral, public landscape. This may be Ma's ironic commentary on the logic of visibility implicit in the trope of the closet, a logic that we have already established (following Manalansan and Gopinath) may not be operative in non-Western cultures.

While *Myth(s) of Creation* focused on Ma's experience of dislocation, *Mother/Land* creates space for Ma's mother to articulate her perspective on Ma's journey as well as her own. In contrast with



*Myth(s)*, then, *Mother/Land* relies heavily on interviews, recalling a number of the strategies employed in *Toc Storee* (e.g., one lengthy section of Cantonese conversation is not subtitled), but while Ma is present on the sound track as an interlocutor (asking his mother to talk about her decision to migrate to London), Ma refrains from appearing on camera for virtually all of the piece. As in *Myth(s)*, Ma deploys a number of surrogate figures, although in this case they may not stand in for Ma so much as attempt to call forth relationships that he cannot otherwise enact. For example, midway through the video Ma intercuts black-and-white footage of a family of three sitting for a portrait in a sparsely furnished studio. These images are not explained, but function in counterpoint to home movies of Ma and his mother (deployed in the first half of the video). The pictured family stands in for Ma's desire to reunite his family, or perhaps signals the function that the act of photography has in constructing myths of family unity. That this family is an inexact surrogate is signaled by its departure from conventional expectations: the two parents are both women, and they are an interracial couple,<sup>36</sup> signaling the ways that migration creates new family structures and further connecting queerness to diaspora.

Ma's own sexual identity is explicitly referenced in the video, in his voice-over narration, and also in a letter written by Ma's mother, in which she notes that his activism and his orientation may limit his ability to secure a steady income. But if this letter problematizes the notion that the West is more tolerant of homosexuality than Hong Kong, subtextual cues suggest that leaving Hong Kong has a queer dimension for Ma's mother as well. Ma's mother has selected London rather than Australia or North America in part because "Hin Cheung has stayed here for several summers . . . she likes England best." The nature of Hin Cheung's relationship to Ma's mother is never clarified, but we are told that Hin Cheung and Ma's mother live together in London while Ma's father has elected to remain in Hong Kong. According to the promotional copy on the video's case, "While the home movies present images of a typical Chinese middle class upbringing, circa 1967-74, a deliberately created lesbian subtext in the video points to other familial relations that are missing from the home movies."

By employing a blurb to call attention to a subtext in the video, Ma points to the larger apparatus of marketing that shapes the meaning of cinematic texts. Referring to this subtext as “deliberately created” serves to call the veracity of this lesbian relationship into question while also emphasizing Ma’s role in shaping what is apparently documentary footage. The blurb makes explicit what the video does not, suggesting a split between the discretion of Ma as son and documentarian and the candor of Ma as artist and self-promoter. With *Mother/Land*, Ma manages to extend the thematics of diasporic ambivalence beyond the boundaries of the video as such, calling into question the spectator’s tendency to read the video as an autobiographical essay (if not equating artist and video outright).

The concluding video in the *Xin Lu* series, *[os]*, connects the autobiographical impulse of the series with the wider, extra-familial perspective of *Toc Storee* and *Slanted Vision*. If the *Xin Lu* series is centered on the search for a community to compensate for familial dislocation, then *[os]* focuses attention on how communal experiences can be commodified and thereby located in a specific moment in time. While *Mother/Land* had employed national anthems—melodies that aspire to timelessness—*[os]* features a sound track of pop songs from 1930s Shanghai, music that evokes a specific time and place, a “scene.” Recorded at Bricktop’s, the Hollywood nightclub hosted by performance artist Vaginal Davis as a tribute to 1920s and 1930s nightlife, the music’s ability to conjure up China’s cosmopolitan past is problematized by its mobilization in twenty-first-century Los Angeles. The songs do not merely call forth 1930s Shanghai: they commemorate the effort to evoke that period, drawn as they are from that most tenuous of imagined communities, a nightclub hosted by a performance artist. Davis and Ma are presumably after similar goals—not just to evoke the past but to comment on our desire to reexperience the past. Davis’s club and Ma’s video serve to celebrate and interrogate the lure of nostalgia.

The video’s title sequence breaks the word *nostalgia* into its root components (*nostos*, meaning home, and *algia*, from *algos*, pain). The title of the video thus refers to the letters that were

obscured when the word *nostalgia* was coined: [os]. The use of brackets marks the letters as a component that needs to be restored to convey the concept's meaning. The two letters and two punctuation marks thus serve to investigate the roots of *nostalgia*, deftly articulating presence and absence (the very qualities that render homesickness bittersweet), positioning the video as both nostalgic and meta-nostalgic, as simultaneously indulgent and critical.

Ma focuses attention not just on the bittersweet indulgence of homesickness but on the ways that act of indulgence serves to separate one's adulthood from childhood. That is to say, rather than seeing one's life as a gradual evolution, the act of nostalgia serves to demarcate the past from the present, elevating certain moments as watersheds that mark the precise instant of lost innocence. For example, one man speaks of time spent in a hospital bed, gazing out the window at the lights shining out of apartment buildings: each light represents a family, and the adult narrates the moment when the child realizes that the world is larger than his own family. The speaker does more than merely express desire for a prelapsarian childhood—he describes the moment when innocence was lost. This story, told (like the other interviews) as the tenth anniversary of the 1997 Hong Kong handover loomed, juxtaposes three different moments when Hong Kong was lost: at the end of childhood innocence, at the moment of departure, and in 1997 (when Hong Kong's political identity shifted). Ma's video suggests that nostalgic reminiscence does not merely recall the past but serves to construct a narrative in which the past is irretrievable: the act of narrativizing the past serves to draw a veil over Hong Kong even as it mystifies that moment of veiling by offering up a number of incompatible moments of loss.

None of the interviewees appear on-screen in [os]; at first, Ma sets the spoken narratives against long takes of a city street at dusk, an off-center perspective of a chain-link fence and a kiosk, and a neon motel sign. As the video progresses, these traces of LA's past are displaced by seemingly covertly gathered footage of hallways and public spaces in the Roosevelt Hotel; these sequences are themselves displaced by distorted, dreamlike images of a ghostly

figure in the hotel, a masculine shadow that we see playing a bugle and talking on the phone—the video’s depiction of the ghost of Montgomery Clift. The ghost story increasingly takes over *[os]’s* sound track, until the final third or so of the piece marks the return of the interviews, albeit accompanied by increasingly rough imagery (much of it step-printed and processed) such as a hand-held shot exploring Angel Island (where California-bound Chinese immigrants were detained before being allowed entry to the US) and grainy footage of bamboo scaffolding covering a temple in Hong Kong.

The video ends with collaborator Lisa Asagi’s confession about her encounter with the ghost in the Roosevelt Hotel. After asserting her affinity for the transient space of hotel rooms, she notes that she could not dispel the feeling of discomfort in this particular hotel. “I never felt alone, the entire night . . . I knew he was here,” she observes, suggesting that this presence initially disturbed her until she ultimately took comfort in it. At the end of her narrative, while the credits continue to roll, the sounds of Bricktop’s fade in again. The video ends with ambiguous and ambivalent encounters with the past, encounters (or imagined encounters) located in spaces (the hotel, the nightclub) where people connect (if they connect) for fleeting moments. Indeed, we can regard the video itself as a text that we encounter as a vicarious experience of community building: viewers may experience nostalgic introspection, or empathy with uprooted friends, or imagine kinship with Ma and his collaborators. In all of these cases, the experience of nostalgia is mediated by Ma’s text, and insofar as nostalgia is already a mediation, Ma is both enabling and undercutting the experience of homesickness. If texts are by definition mediations, Ma’s *Xin Lu* series illuminates cinematic conventions as mechanisms that serve to obfuscate mediation; that is, Ma calls attention to conventions that only function properly when they are received as if they were transparent.

Ma’s critique of cinematic conventions works to prevent his videos from being read as autobiography or as uncritical ethnography. While *Xin Lu* centers on Ma’s specific experience of dis-

location, it also describes dislocation as a discursive construction. I spoke of what is “lost in translation,” meaning that concepts cannot be conveyed with precision: by “lost,” I mean that some meanings do not make the journey while other, unintended meanings accrue in transit. Translation, like diaspora, is a liminal space and therefore a space of possibility; if national identities presuppose heteronormativity, then diaspora becomes a place where queerness can emerge and function to transform the boundaries around nations. This is not to say that diaspora is utopian space: in *Xin Lu*, diaspora is permeated with a sense of loss. The same could be said of language (in a poststructuralist sense): as a system of sliding signifiers, language exists to evoke absences. Ming-Yuen S. Ma’s videos thus call attention to translation as a mediation of a mediation.

### Notes

Portions of this article were presented at the 2002 conference of the Association for Asian American Studies (Salt Lake City, Utah, 25 April) as “Queering Cinematic Convention in the Diaspora.” Eve Oishi provided useful feedback as the article took shape, Emily S. Davis offered important advice on a later draft, and Lalitha Gopalan shepherded the essay to publication.

1. David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 18.
2. I am thinking of the articulation of (what would come to be known as) intersectionality in *This Bridge Called My Back* in particular, in which a number of women of color were at pains to show not only that feminist discourse of the 1970s was dominated by white concerns but that mainstream feminism tended to articulate racism as a problem subordinated to gender. In a cross-cultural context, Uma Narayan (in chap. 3 of *Dislocating Cultures*) extends Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous statement that colonial intervention is justified as “white men saving brown women from brown men” through her comparison of discourses about so-called dowry murder in India vis-à-vis domestic violence in the US. Leti Volpp deconstructs discourses that characterize Third World cultures as inherently oppressive to women. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa,

- eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1984); Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Leti Volpp, "Feminism versus Multiculturalism," *Columbia Law Review* 101 (June 2001): 1181–218.
3. Mary Jane Jacob, ed., *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1991), 6, quoted in JoAnn Hanley, *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970–75* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993), 10. Martha Gever has repeatedly engaged with video's relation to feminism. "The Feminism Factor" examines a number of pieces that engage with identity and the nation, and it also includes citations to Gever's earlier engagements with the gendered themes in video. Martha Gever, "The Feminism Factor: Video and Its Relation to Feminism," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990), 226–41.
  4. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 129–30.
  5. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (1976): 50–64.
  6. Hall and Fifer's *Illuminating Video* includes several essays that engage with Krauss's influential formulation. Maureen Turim's "The Cultural Logic of Video" (331–42) draws a distinction between "the mirror property of video [and] narcissism as such" (337). Christine Tamblyn's "Significant Others: Social Documentary as Personal Portraiture in Women's Video of the 1980s" (405–17) qualifies Krauss's argument and notes developments "that have altered the video apparatus itself" (406–7).
  7. Ming-Yuen S. Ma, *Aura*, Work: Videos, [pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/work/aura.html](http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/work/aura.html) (accessed 5 November 2011).
  8. Ming-Yuen S. Ma, *Xin Lu*, Work, [pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/work/work.html](http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/work/work.html) (accessed 5 November 2011).

9. The photocopies the woman reads are drawn from Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, eds., *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991). In *Mother/Land*, another Asian woman (Alice Hom) is also presented in black and white from behind a similar desk, but this time she is also heard on the sound track. Through an edit, Ma makes an on-screen appearance (rare for *Xin Lu* but not in other videos), finishing a sentence begun by Hom. *Myth(s) of Creation* does not make as explicit a connection, but the similarity of the mise-en-scène suggests a continuity between the two pieces, supporting my assertion that the “scholar” in *Myth(s)* is Ma’s stand-in.
  
10. While this encounter may have been mutual, the voice-over narration informs us that “I picked him up. . . . We went back to my house,” suggesting that the narrator is the initiator and possibly implying a class disparity between the two men. Canadian video maker Richard Fung, in a published conversation with Ma, notes that while the racial dynamics of gay sex in North America have typically cast young Asian men as “bottoms,” many Asian men in North America may be foreign students with more economic capital than their partners, so the notion of sexual tourism is situated in relation to class and racial differences in complex ways, to say nothing of the distinction between strict sexual tourism (travel to another culture to encounter culturally or racially othered sex partners) and the expression of desire for cultural/racial others in other contexts. (Fung’s classic essay, “Looking for My Penis,” is at pains not to equate top/bottom dynamics to discourses of dominance and subservience.) My point is not to evaluate Ma’s sexual politics but simply to draw attention to the ways that Ma’s video figures sexual desire as it intersects with desires for belonging and identification (with landscape). Richard Fung and Ming-Yuen S. Ma, “A Conversation about Women, Gay Men, and AIDS,” *Corpus* 4, no. 1 (2006): 64–71.
  
11. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

12. I borrow the concept of disidentification from José Esteban Muñoz. I argue in the introductory chapter of *Identities in Motion* that Asian American cinema is characterized by a profound ambivalence toward cinematic convention, a troubled identification that echoes Muñoz's conception of "identities-in-difference." José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 6; Peter X Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
13. Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 11.
14. "Citizenship is considered here as an effect of state instrumentality, a productive discursive power, and as social practice." Aihwa Ong, "On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora," *positions* 1, no. 3 (1993): 747.
15. Eng, *Racial Castration*; Gayatri Gopinath, "Funny Boys and Girls: Notes on a Queer South Asian Planet," in *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996), 119–27; and Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion," *positions* 5, no. 2 (1997): 467–89.
16. I discuss these issues with relation to *The Wedding Banquet* (dir. Ang Lee, Taiwan/US, 1993) and *Fire* (dir. Deepa Mehta, Canada/India, 1996) in chapter 7 of Feng, *Identities in Motion*.
17. Martin F. Manalansan IV, "In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 486.
18. Gayatri Gopinath has extended this argument in her analysis of the South Asian diaspora; she contends that the female homosocial space of the Hindu joint family permits the expression of queer desire. Gayatri Gopinath, "On Fire," in *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter X Feng (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 293–98.



19. As Ma puts it (in the text from the blurb for *Myth(s) of Creation*), “While post-modern theorists postulate a de-territorialized nomadic subjectivity, recent immigrants stubbornly hold on to their ideas of nationality.” Ming-Yuen S. Ma, *Myth(s) of Creation*, Work, [pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/work/myths.html](http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/work/myths.html) (accessed 14 December 2011).
20. I discuss *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* at length in chapter 8 of Feng, *Identities in Motion*.
21. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
22. Trinh’s feminist approach is clearly evident in the fourth chapter of *Woman, Native, Other*, “Grandma’s Story,” wherein Trinh contrasts Western modes of storytelling that “leave the mind at rest” (142; Trinh quotes E. P. Snow) with non-Western modes that evade tidy conclusions. Trinh also problematizes the binary opposition of Western/literate/male and non-Western/oral/female.
23. Ming-Yuen S. Ma, in discussion with the author, 24 April 1998.
24. The second half of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* gives voice to the Vietnamese American women who reenact the interviews, so Trinh’s film structurally separates diasporic voices from the Vietnamese testimonials (even as she uses the English language to call attention to the fact of migration). Ma’s videos emphasize translation as a process, which also serves to call attention to the blurred boundaries of nation and diaspora.
25. “Rather than turning to the examples of antiquity to understand Chinese homosexuality and provide justifications of self-worth and models of behavior, they now look to New York and San Francisco for examples to emulate. Not only is the native homosexual tradition unknown among critics of homosexuality, but it has also virtually disappeared among homosexuals themselves.” Britt Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
26. See especially Richard Fung’s video, *Dirty Laundry* (Canada, 1996).
27. Zhou Xiaojing, “Denaturalizing Identities, Decolonizing Desire: Videos by Richard Fung and Ming-Yuen S. Ma,” *Jouvert: A Journal*

- of *Postcolonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (2000), [english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v4i3/zhou.htm](http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v4i3/zhou.htm).
28. Laura U. Marks's narration appears in slightly different form in her essay, "Straight Women, Gay Porn, and the Scene of Erotic Looking," *Jump Cut* 40 (1995): 127–36.
  29. David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), xii.
  30. See Joselit's discussion of Frank Gillette and Ira Scheider's *Wipe Cycle* (*Feedback*, 92–93) and Michael Asher's "no title" (*Feedback*, 30–33).
  31. Joselit discusses Campus's piece in *Feedback*, 156–57; Krauss discusses Campus's *mem* and *dor* ("Video," 61–63). Margaret Morse's contribution to Hall and Fifer's *Illuminating Video* ("Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, and the Space-in-Between," 153–67) anticipates many of Joselit's arguments about the spatial and temporal dimensions of installations, in the interests of a poetics of video more than a manifesto for political engagement through video.
  32. "[The] proliferation of screens paradoxically makes public spectatorship a particular kind of private experience in which each viewer is provided with a personal sight line distinct from that of his or her companions." Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 122.
  33. An account of the tour during the 2008 Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival is archived online. Brian Hu, "Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival 2008: Xin Lu Video Bus Tour," *Asia Pacific Arts*, [asiaarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=92160](http://asiaarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=92160) (accessed 6 November 2011).
  34. Ma notes the connections between his own *Mother/Land* and Fung's *My Mother's Place* in a published conversation between the two artists (Fung and Ma, "Conversation"); he also acknowledges an "anxiety of influence" toward Fung in his contribution to Fung's festschrift. Ming-Yuen S. Ma, "Untitled," in *Like Mangoes in July: The Work of Richard Fung*, ed. Helen Lee and Kerri Sakamoto (Toronto: Insomniac, 2002), 60–61. Note that Ma's piece takes the form of a letter in which Ma compares his own work to Fung's, a strategy Ma also employs in "Untitled (Dear Ma Liuming)," *X-tra* 9, no. 2 (2007): 36–39.

35. I discuss examples of both modes in my contribution to Fung's festschrift. Peter X Feng, "Getting Lost on *The Way to My Father's Village*," in Lee and Sakamoto, *Like Mangoes in July*, 30–39.
36. They are in fact filmmaker Cheryl Dunye and scholar and filmmaker Alexandra Juhasz.

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Figure 3. Still of performance by Amitis Motevalli, from *Xin Lu Video Bus Tour—Los Angeles* by Ming-Yuen S. Ma (3–4 May 2008)