Sea Change: Artworks from the Perspective of a Transracial Adoptee

by

Omar Badrin

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University
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In
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Keywords: Transracial adoption, Newfoundland, Identity, Otherness

The intention of this thesis is to answer two questions: a) how does the experience of transracial adoption influence the formation of one's personal and cultural identity? And (b) how can craft traditions, media and techniques be used to create objects that act as visual metaphors for working-through problems of identity?

The technique of crochet I employed allowed me to investigate, construct and represent cultural identity from the point of view of a transracial adoptee who was navigating a position in Newfoundland culture. The assimilating of the local medium is, for me, a way of finding inclusion; however, it is an inclusion that is uncomfortable and never fully established.

These works acknowledge both Newfoundland culture, and the idea of "Otherness". Through this exploration of materials and the appropriation of local methods, I presented a visual form to the difficult position of transracial adoptees, where a "visual voice" was absent.

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Dedicated to my grandmother.

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-Introduction-

Because much of my practice is autobiographical in nature, I began to use details of my life as the starting point for my research. I was born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and adopted at birth by a mixed-race couple (Malay father and Newfoundlander mother). I moved to Newfoundland with my family when I was a month old and remained there until I was an adult. My parents divorced when I was a child, and I soon lost contact with my father; consequently, I also lost any existing ties to Malaysia and its culture. My mother and grandmother, both Newfoundlanders of English decent, raised me. Because I grew up in a white household, I have chosen to use the term "transracial adoptee" rather than "transnational adoptee" throughout this document. The term refers to an individual who was adopted into another race and culture, and serves to highlight the physical racial attributes that differentiated me from those around me.

Growing up in Newfoundland, I felt like both an insider and an outsider at the same time, paradoxically. As an insider, because Newfoundland culture was the only one I had ever known; but as an outsider, because racially I was clearly different from the people around me. I felt a desire to belong to my adoptive culture and rejected my origins, which I had no interest in learning about. These are the circumstances that informed my artistic practice in the past and continue to do so.

My thesis research, as stated above, therefore combined two over-arching topics. The first asked how the experience of transracial adoption influences the formation of one's personal and cultural identity. And the second, how craft traditions such as crochet can be used to create objects that act as visual metaphors for expressing problems of identity. In order to answer these two questions, I took an interdisciplinary approach by gathering data from the social sciences, specifically from the sociological and anthropological fields to aid in contextualizing the underlying themes of identity and Otherness in the thesis.

In the first section, *Methods and Methodology*, I focus on my studio practice and the formal process of my artistic practice. I discuss the various materials and media that were employed in the artworks, along with the additional sculptural method of *tape-casting*, which was used to create the sculptural polyurethane foam works. I will also state my intentions in making these works and discuss the reflexive research methods, which were used to reveal additional information about one's self. I conclude this section by briefly discussing the importance of the installation of the work.

In Section 2, *Literary and Theoretical Framework*, I discuss the interdisciplinary investigation into the social sciences on the topic of transracial adoption. I then turn to the theoretical ideas that pertain to Otherness. In doing so, I make reference to the concepts of identity formation and the Other as found in the writings of Lacan. I explain the role of hybridity, used in my work to evoke a

sense of Otherness. This is informed by Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the Altermodern, especially his views on hybridity and Otherness. Finally I conclude this section with a discussion about the ideas of "void" and "abjectness" in my work.

Throughout these sections, I also refer to the work of other practitioners such as Tracey Moffatt and Nick Cave because of their particular methods of making and their approaches to the theme of identity. I do so in order to contextualize my own work within the landscape of current art practices.

In *Final Remarks*, I discuss my conclusions and future explorations.

-Section 1-

Methods and Methodology

Section 1.1 The Studio

Studio research has always been my first step in investigation, and most of the research carried out for the thesis project was based out of the studio. For this reason, it is important to address the significance of the studio, and how the physical space influenced my approach to the act of making and to the materials I worked with.

The work was produced in two spaces in Toronto, Ontario: the first was my student studio at 205 Richmond Street, and the other my own home. The Richmond studio was not a place in which I felt fully comfortable working, in part because it was a shared space, but also because my practice has always been based out of the home. When I initially began to produce the artwork for my thesis project, I was not willing to change my solitary way of working, not clearly understanding the reasons I felt more at ease working at home than at the Richmond space. As the work progressed, it became clear that the domestic environment created an atmosphere that proved to be more conducive to what I was making and more appropriate to the methods I was employing, such as crochet. That is, the home allowed me to create in a space where I would not be interrupted or distracted by other people. This allowed me to concentrate more on

the making of the artwork. Furthermore, there was a sense of immediacy to living with the work; having it in close proximity made it easily accessible. If I felt the urge to make, I could make. Working from the home allowed me to do this at anytime during the day or night and it is much like the way I witnessed my grandmother and mother in the past picking up their crochet work when they had some free time at home.

Instead, I began to use the Richmond space for the sole purpose of critique. This institutional space provided an environment that was in contrast to the domestic one in which the work was made. The result of using one space for production and the other for critique created a shift in how a viewer would contextualize the artwork. In other words, taking the work out of its original setting allowed for the identity of the work to shift from the domestic to the institutional. Consequently, it also paralleled, for me, the journey of a transracial adoptee from the environment of his origins to his adopted one.

It was important for the home studio space and my practice within it to reflect domesticity, and also the intimacy of the work itself as embodied labor. Curator Sarah Quinton explains that "textile practices are typically labour intensive, fastidious and repetitive; the intimate nature of such handwork creates a deep connection between the artwork and its maker – and ultimately the viewer" (6). I found the sense of intimacy was enhanced in the home because it provided a space for seclusion that I felt was missing in the shared studio. Seclusion was

significant because, alongside the repetitious act of crocheting, it allowed for contemplation and reflection when examining those aspects of transracial adoption that I struggle with, and which I wanted to be reflected in the works.

As the work progressed, the feeling of awkwardness and otherness I felt when I was younger because of the color of my skin and the shape of my eyes began to resurface; these, in turn, were transferred into the making of the objects. During moments of reflection, I did not feel like being around, or sharing those feelings with, others; they were moments of vulnerability and I was not comfortable being exposed during those periods. Instead, I felt that it was a process that needed to be sat through and reflected on in solitude. Although one could argue that craftwork is often thought of as a communal exercise, it is also something that can be done alone and in the privacy of one's home. The privacy of the home studio created a secure space for working through moments of anxiety.

Section 1.2 Materials and Techniques

To fabricate the work, I employed materials that I considered to be cultural signifiers for Newfoundland culture, as well as materials I have had personal experience with through work. I used materials such as industrial fishing twine

and mason's line.[1] With the exception of the industrial fishing twine, which had to be ordered from a marine surplus store in Newfoundland, the materials were relatively easy to obtain, as they could be found in most hardware stores.

The use of these specific industrial materials created a potential opening within my work for a discourse on labour, given that the chosen materials are used primarily in the ambit of physical labour, like construction work and commercial fishing. During the course of art-making, numerous people brought up the themes of labour and gender that are related to my work. While I hope to explore these in the future, they were outside the scope of this project. Instead, I decided to focus on the "identity" of each material and its implications for my work. The mason's line shifts from a tool used to mark or level out surfaces to a yarn used to crochet a mask. By using industrial materials for crochet, they moved into the realm of art, away from the utilitarian sphere. In a parallel manner, the works themselves also travelled from the traditionally functional world of craft to that of art. I decided to explore the idea of novelty or re-designation vs. utility through the use of materials, choosing the above-mentioned twines in place of stereotypical crafting yarns.

The shift in functionality in Newfoundland crafts, from practical to novelty, allowed me to think about the hybrid natures of identity and ethnicity.

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[1] I had previous experience working with mason's line through working numerous years in the construction field before pursuing my graduate studies and was quite familiar with the material because I used it as an everyday material.

My intention in combining different, unrelated methods and materials was to create visual metaphors about transracial adoption. This was in reaction to a lacuna in the field of transracial adoption, where much of the research is limited to social science disciplines (such as sociology and psychology), and the little artistic exploration of it is mostly confined to the field of literature.

I previously spent two months in spring and summer 2014 in Bonavista Peninsula, Newfoundland. While there, I noted that local craftwork heavily supported the tourism industry. Fibre works such as quilts, mittens, hat, rugs, etc. were considered souvenirs, and functioned primarily as signifiers of Newfoundland culture. I wanted to implement a method of making that would be considered a cultural signifier from my adopted culture in the making of my work, while relevant to my personal upbringing. I was first drawn to the craft of net making during the first year of my graduate studies and my primary concentration was learning how to make nets (fig. 1). Although I enjoyed the net-making process and it worked well as a cultural signifier for Newfoundland, it lacked familiarity and a personal connection. It was for this reason that I began to learn and employ crochet in my artwork.

I associate the act of crocheting with Newfoundland, where craft media enjoys a strong tradition and continues to influence the culture. In my own case, it also has personal significance: I grew up watching my grandmother, mother and aunts crochet. This method of making was something passed down from

generation to generation, and it was my mother who taught me. Crochet is different from person to person: there is a specific touch to the materials that is unique to everyone, and is influenced by factors such as the tension used for each stitch. I recall seeing these differences in my grandmother and mother's crocheted works. I also noticed how their work changed over time. For example, my grandmother's early needleworks were small and intricate, however, towards her later years, she was physically unable to do this because she did not have the dexterity in her hands as she did when she was younger.

In his essay "Use and Contemplation", poet and scholar Octavio Paz writes about "the trans-personal nature of craftwork" (21). According to him, it

> is expressed directly and immediately, in sensation: the body is participation. To feel is first of all to be aware of something or someone not ourselves. And above all else: to feel with someone. To be able to feel itself, the body searches for another body. We feel through others. The physical, bodily ties that bind us to others are no less strong than the legal, economic, and religious ties that unite us. The handmade object is a sign that expresses human society in a way all its own: not as work (technology), not as symbol (art, religion), but as a mutually shared physical life. (21)

The deep, personal nature of craft was enhanced for me when I was learning crochet from my mother. The use of crochet in my work became tied to my family; it was not just a random skill I was learning, but a family tradition passed down from generation to generation. Crochet means a great deal to me because the act of doing it reminds me not only of my mother (the one who taught me), but also of my grandmother, who was also a significant person in my upbringing.

It represents a tie to my family members, both living and departed, who shaped and influenced my identity; it is part of who I am.

Section 1.3 The Making

My intention when creating these artworks was to evoke feelings of Otherness, ambiguity and awkwardness. They recall sensations I felt growing up as a transracial adoptee. To get those feelings across in a visual manner, I chose to use a part of the body that I most identify with: the hand. I created hand-like objects because they represent for me a way of making.

These hand-like forms were made through the process of tape-casting. Tape-casting is a simple and crude process of creating forms from utilitarian packaging tape to cast objects (fig. 2). In my thesis work, I wrapped packaging tape around my hands to create the molds. I would then cut the tape from my hands to reveal a negative mold, which I then filled with polyurethane spray foam.

I also used chance as a process, and it was through this means that the qualities of ambiguity and otherness were visually materialized – the irregularities and organic abnormalities that took shape gave the form a sense of Otherness, the artwork resembling a hand but also something else (fig. 3). This use of chance and

the bringing together of unrelated materials enabled the unexpected to happen, resulting in "new insights" and a new method of creating forms.[2]

Similarly, combining the above-mentioned utilitarian materials became a way to represent visually the idea of constructed identity as it pertains to transracial adoption. Piecing together unrelated materials through unrelated methods parallels the process of the transracial adoptee who pieces together fragments of the adopted culture. In doing so the adoptee attempts to carve out a space to occupy. Notably, however, this is never fully realized because outside tensions, such as perceived racial or ethnic background, prevent complete assimilation. In other words, transracial adoptees may feel as if they belong to the adoptive culture, despite the fact that they are not fully accepted by the affirmed members in that community due to genetic physical features.[3]

Section 1.4 The Installation and Creating a Space

When making decisions about the installation of the work I took the position of the "inappropriated artist", (Perron 125) or the artist who creates tension through reinterpretation and displacement in the work. In doing so, I decided to exhibit the work in a gallery setting rather than the domestic setting in which the work was

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[2] In her essay, *Knight's Move: The Idiosyncrasies of Artistic Research*, Kitty Zijlimans states that "whereas analysis starts from the known, experimentalism starts form the unknown, or rather, the other, the unexpected – bringing together elements to create new phenomena and new insights" (in Wesseling 186).

[3] As sociologist Richard Jenkins states, the "other" is the one who verifies another group in the formation of its identity (15).

made.[4] This was because the "white cube", a space free of any particular cultural context, is where the work could speak for itself.

Because I was perceived as an outsider in Newfoundland, I felt the need for acceptance and belonging into my adopted culture. Admittedly, this is a feeling that still resonates with me today. However, through further exploration and reflection during the thesis project, I reached a point where I felt that I needed to create a space of my own or, better yet, to *claim* a space of my own regardless of whether I was accepted or not. The installation of the crocheted masks work helps to convey this idea. When entering the gallery one would view an arrangement of masks hanging off the wall, a group of multicolored neon forms that resemble hanging skins.[5] These pieces form a kind of "Greek chorus", or resonating commentary, demanding no real three-dimensional occupation of space in the gallery, being almost part of the wall yet standing out from it. My intention in installing these works in this fashion was to emphasize for the viewer their state of submission to the action, an archive of thoughts and feelings on being Other.

This arrangement was much different than the second grouping of crocheted masks, which were installed hanging from the gallery ceiling. Unlike

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[4] OCAD University Graduate Gallery, 205 Richmond Street West, Toronto, Ontario.

[5] Jean-PierreWarnier states, "the skin provides many such basic experiences; it covers the body, its protects it, it sustains the muscles, it registers information, it is an organ of sensori-motor and of libidinal stimulation […] additionally the skin is provided with openings through which the inside and the outside communicate and through which things, substances, informations, and emotions enter or leave the body and the psyche" (187-88).

the former, these masks occupied the physical space of the gallery. They were meant to claim or command the physical space and to be seen. Here the viewer would have been able to distinguish what these objects were: masks. The placement of the masks was prominent**,** evoking confidence in the form in contradistinction to the submissive posture of the first set of masks. At play is an allegory – the experience of a transracial adoptee is reflected in both groupings of masks. While at one point I did not feel confident enough to claim a space for myself, more recently I have become open to embracing Otherness and to exploring a space in acceptance of it.

Section 1.5 Reflexive Research

Contemplation was an act of reflexive research that occurred throughout the process of crocheting.[6] Crochet is a way of making, which allowed for the repetition of the same stitch (fig. 4) over and over again. It has enabled me through the act of contemplation to "view [my]self in relation to the self and Others" (Schechner 40). I was able to reflect on past experiences, like feeling out of place because of my racial differences, while simultaneously creating work. This way of working influenced the manner in which the work was made, that is,

[6] Refer to Gergen and Gergen in their discussion on reflexive research methods. In particular, their claim that, "creative ideas…are not subject to empirical norm…[there should be] less concentration on the collection and processing of data and more on interpretation and reflection" (qtd. in Alvesson and Sköldberg 241).

in an improvised way with no two masks being alike. The works are physical representations of thoughts and feelings expressed through crocheting.

Formally, I did not have an idea of how each piece would look in the end. When I first began these artworks, I decided to stay within the framework of a general overall shape, that of being mask-like. However, the artworks were not planned out; there were no preliminary sketches of what the final piece would look like, nor did they follow a detailed pattern. Choices such as colors, number of stiches, and final shape were guided by intuition and were influenced by the (re)surfacing of feelings from memories of growing up. I aligned this process much like the way artist Tracey Moffatt approaches her works in her practice.

Moffatt's work is based in autobiography, but also addresses universal themes such as gender, narratives and power struggles. Moffatt is noted as saying that in each of the pieces that she creates, she depicts the mood that she felt during the making of that piece (Summerhayes 21). What also drew me to her work was her personal background as an aboriginal Australian adopted by white foster parents when she was a child (18). An example of this is the film titled *Night Cries – A Rural Tragedy* in which Moffatt focused on the relationship between her and her dying adopted mother and the internal struggles that a racially different adoptee encounters partly due to the adopter and adoptee relationship (Morris par.1). In aligning myself with other practitioners, such as Moffatt, my aim is to add to the dialogue of the adoptee.

Contemplation during art making is not just a fortunate accident; rather it must be seen as a natural parallel process. In *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher*, Janneke Wesseling points out that, "the exceptional thing about research in and through art is that practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand. The one cannot exist without the other, in the same way action and thought are inextricably linked in artistic practice" (2). I agree with Wesseling when she notes, "the function of works of art is to generate meaning or to give direction to the quest for meaning. The work of art is the materialization of thinking; thinking is rendered visible in the work of art. In the work of art, that which is actually absent (the invisible 'reason', reasoning) is made present" (11-12). The artworks that I produced are much in line with Wesseling's thoughts, which is that art is the materialization of one's thoughts and actions. The artworks that I produced were objects stemming from feelings of awkwardness and alienation as a member of a visual minority growing up in Newfoundland.

-Section 2-

Literary and Theoretical Framework

Section 2.1 Transdisciplinary Investigations into the Identity of the Transracial Adoptee

As previously mentioned, it is primarily the social sciences that have dealt with the issue of transracial adoption and identity. For this reason, it was important to take a transdisciplinary approach when researching this topic, one that required me to move away from an exclusively artistic and art-theoretical approach. Historian and art critic Hal Foster has observed that art and anthropology have formed ties thanks to an expanding diversity in society (in Wesseling 119) that has to be accounted for and represented. The field of study on identity is vast and complex, thanks to the countless, unique experiences of individuals, who nonetheless share important similarities. By looking at the social sciences, I was able to examine and compare my experiences as a transracial adoptee with those of other individuals who shared similar experiences.

I began my investigations by reviewing the body of scholarly literature on transracial adoption, and have identified some of the primary disciplines that deal with the matter such as sociology, anthropology and race studies. In order to integrate these disciplines into my own work, I identified some of the common

issues related to race, culture and identity that the studies share. Doing so allowed me to contextualize my own experience. For example, I am frequently asked why Malay culture is omitted from my work, and I struggle to explain that because I did not grow up with the culture's influence; I feel no connection to it. Also, as a child, my racial features, my only real inheritance from my Malaysian background, were often the source of ridicule, something that separated me from the group of people to whom I felt I truly belonged and did not want to be excluded from.[7] The article, "Intercountry, transracial adoption and ethnic identity: A Korean Example", by Nam Soon Huh and William J. Reid, reveals that this is not uncommon: "most adoptees have little ethnic identity or interest in exploring their own cultural heritage. They have been found to identify themselves more with their adoptive parents' ethnic group than with their own" (76). In addition, ethnicity is often troublesome for transracial adoptees:

> In one study, the majority of children were described by their parents as being apathetic, embarrassed, or confused about their racial background and heritage. Benson et al. reported that Asian adolescents sometimes felt ashamed or embarrassed about their racial background. These mixed findings highlight the tensions faced by transracially adopted children in reconciling their cultures of origin with present cultural realities (ibid.).

This point is illustrated through my soft sculptural crochet pieces. The crochet works are over exaggerated forms derived from a simplistic mask shape. The mask is a way to conceal one's identity, to hide or disguise or it. However,

[7] It could also be interpreted as a feeling of abandonment on the part of the culture of origin.

because of the way the masks are manufactured in this case, their function is subverted. The overly large stitches and gaps between them would not protect, but would instead reveal one's identity. The exposure and the scale of these mask-like forms convey the vulnerability and awkwardness that is felt when one is ashamed of a particular physical trait. According to psychoanalyst Hanna Segal, "projective identification is the result of the projection of parts of the self into an object. It may result in the object being perceived as having acquired the characteristics of the projected part of the self but it can also result in the self becoming identified with the object of its projection" (Jerng, *Claiming* 98).

It was through this research that the complexities of cultural terms such as ethnicity and race were revealed to me, and it became apparent they could not be so easily defined. In *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging,* Mark C. Jerng writes, "'race consciousness' here is neither a product of nature nor nurture; it is product of overlapping and conflicting projections that cannot be reconciled. However, the immediate temptation is to provide a stable ground for the figure of race" (115). He goes on to explain, "adoption provides a model whereby one's race is not one's own at all. Instead, race is enacted relationally through processes of projection and introjection that threaten and stabilize the conditions of individuation and the boundaries between persons" (121). Ethnicity is not inherited simply because one was born in a particular place. It is realized through everyday actions and interactions within one's actual

community. They are the actions that one carries out rather than being birthed into.

In *Rethinking Ethnicity*, Richard Jenkins provides a useful way of looking at the subject:

- Ethnicity is a matter of cultural differentiation – identification always involves a dialectical interplay between similarity and difference.
- Ethnicity is centrally a matter of shared meanings – what we conventionally call 'culture' – but is also produced and reproduced during interaction.
- Ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging than the way of life of which it is an aspect, or the situations in which it is produced and reproduced.
- Ethnicity, as an identification, is collective and individual, externalized in social interaction and the categorization of others, and internalized in personal self-identification (14).

These aspects of ethnicity, which provide a critical framework for understanding self-perception and self-identification, are often neglected. In the case of transracial adoptees, a sort of taxonomy placed on an individual by others– frequently based on their visible perceptions of said individual's race and the subsequent assumptions that arise from these perceptions–is emphasized instead.

When visible signs are put aside, and ethnicity is identified through the shared actions in which individuals participate, then there is allowance for acceptance into the larger group by others. In the article "Ritualizing the Routine: Collective Identity Affirmation"**,** Joseph C. Hermanowicz and Harriet P. Morgan write that "groups affirm their identities through practices that 'ritualize' the routines of their communal life" and "in order for groups to know themselves and

others, they must 'announce' their identities. They do this by engaging in social practices that highlight their symbolic place in the world" (198).

Section 2.2 Otherness

I will begin this section with two definitions of the Other that I found useful as a point of entry into my theoretical research. The first is from the Oxford English Dictionary:

> 9a. Chiefly Philos. Usu. with the. Freq. with capital initial. That which is the counterpart or converse of something specified or implied; (*spec. in structuralist and post-structuralist critical and psychoanalytic thought) that which is not the self or subject; that which lies outside or is excluded from the group with which one identifies oneself*; (in Lacanian thought) the unconscious, the symbolic order. Now usually opposed to self. (emphasis mine)

The second, from the Merriam Webster Dictionary, reads:

> 3b often capitalized : one considered by members of a dominant group as alien, exotic, threatening, or inferior (as because of different racial, sexual, or cultural characteristics).

I used both the second and the Lacanian definitions of the Other to look at my own work.[8] In this section I will discuss the former, and then move on to the latter in the following section.

Two words in particular resonated with me from the Merriam-Webster definition: "alien" and "inferior". Both are feelings that I experienced at some

[8] In her essay, "Otherness", Tamise Van Pelt distinguishes between the idea of Other as laid out by Lacan (i.e. as a "gap between Subject and Ego"), and "contemporary constructions of the 'Other' as a person, particularly a person who is marginal or subversive in some way" (par. 2).

point during my upbringing in Newfoundland, and which tend to recur in the literature on transracial adoption. My own sense of Otherness has racial origins. Growing up in Newfoundland, my physical features were distinct and singled me out from my peers. As a child, I was frequently teased for being Asian and identified by my "slanted" eyes. I have memories of going places with my mother and noticing people staring at us. I would ask myself: Why are they staring? What is wrong with us? What is wrong with me that draws attention? I was constantly made aware that I was different, in spite of the fact that I identified as a Newfoundlander, spoke like one, and was raised in the same culture. I was like everybody around me in all but physical appearance. And yet this was enough to distinguish me from the group. Literary theorist Terry Goldie writes that "presumably the first instance in which one human perceived another as Other in racial terms came when the first recognized the second as different in colour, facial features, language" (235), which seems likely, given that racial differences are quickly apparent to the eye, and allow for immediate distinction, unlike cultural differences, that require one to get to know the Other.

The result was that I became insecure about my physical appearance and, eventually, about myself. Awkwardness is a feeling that accompanies me to this day. In this case I was *the Other*, and I yearned for acceptance to what I will discuss in the next section as the Lacanian *Other*.

Section 2.3 The Self and The Other

To further round out my thesis project, I began to research Jacques Lacan's views on the Self and Other. His ideas served as a point of departure to aid in understanding identity formation, and I wondered how these ideas could be applied to transracial adoption.

If one were to follow Lacanian thought on the formation of the Self, the process begins in infancy when a child assumes fragments of images of the first person they see (75). At this point the child as a subject is not whole and does not recognize itself as complete. When the child does become aware of itself as a subject, around 6 to 18 months (ibid. 75-6), it results in a desire to search out those fragmented images that were instilled previous to when it became a subject. My adoptive mother began to take care of me a few days after I was born. Her image would have been my first interaction of fragmented images that would have been instilled in me. Those fragmented images of her, as Lacan would point out, would result in a void that would always linger and exist as something unfulfilled, which I would later as a child associate with the physical feature of looking "white".

Lacan would refer to this as the "ideal I", and when recognized by the child, s/he begins a constant search to fulfill this desire which is situated prior to exposure to social determination (76). The ideal I as stated by Lacan, is the formation of the ego before being influenced by the outside social environment

and is totally dependent on the individual (ibid.). Although my family did not point out differences in my physical features–the color of my skin, the texture of my hair and the shape of my eyes– or viewed them as factors that set me apart from them, I was aware of them. It was when I began to interact with individuals outside of my immediate family, who pointed out my physical features, that I started to feel insecure and self-conscious about my differences.

Upon reflection, I would say this is where the beginning of my artistic practice began. To clarify, as stated earlier I have always identified within the immediate context of my family e.g. mother, grandmother, and sister: my physical appearance was not an issue to them and they never made me feel like I was different. That being said, outside of this network, I felt insecure about my physical appearance because others told me I was different. If I refer back to Lacan and how one formulates one's self-identity with the first person they see (e.g. my white mother), I would have identified myself with being white, or searching to fulfill the idea of "whiteness". As a child, although I knew that I was of Malay origins, I still did feel at times that I wanted to be "white" like my immediate family. I began to associate "whiteness" with my cultural identity, which I now know is not correct. However, other Newfoundlanders would remind me that I was different, which resulted in the desire to fit in to this larger group.

During this thesis project, I began to question why I felt I needed to belong to the Other (from my point of view), the white Newfoundland, and

moreover what this desire to belong was really about. The work that I made used a traditional craft method of crochet to visually express the desire to be a part of my adoptive culture but it also represented another desire: to be recognized by other members of that culture as being a part of it. Reading Lacan's thoughts on desire posed a plausible perspective on why I may have felt that way. Lacan believes that wanting to belong begins with the desire to please the outsider or the Other (690). I have never thought about the desire of the Other, or whether the desire of the Other is static or in a constant state of change, much like one's identity is constantly shifting over time. However, if the desire of the Other is constantly changing, the desire of the individual would never be fulfilled because of the constant state of flux. Consequently, I would never be able to satisfy the Other's desire.

Section 2.4 Hybridity and Interaction

In my practice, I have made the conscious choice to extend traditional craft-making techniques, while retaining enough to make them identifiable. To make typical Newfoundland crochet pieces would not have conveyed the sense of the "cultural Other" that I wanted. On the contrary, it would have implied that my relationship with my identity as a Newfoundlander is comfortable and unproblematic. Instead, I chose to make hybrid pieces. My interest in hybridity came about when I began to accept that I would never fully fit into my adopted

culture. I felt that I could view the loss of my cultural identity as a personal tragedy or as a catalyst for creating something new.

Taking what I regard as cultural signifiers and methods from my adopted culture, and combining them with makeshift casting methods, resulted in the hybridization of materials and techniques that created objects that I felt reflected the Otherness I discussed above. In order to imbue the works with this sense, I decided to use the craft technique of crochet to create non-utilitarian forms like the exaggerated masks (fig. 5). Likewise, I used tape-casting to produce pieces out of polyurethane foam that served as a sculptural material instead of a utilitarian material that would be used around the home to fill in gaps. One could argue that both the materials and techniques employed had been subverted from their own original "identities" or uses, to "Other" identities or uses. I felt that the hybridization of these materials and methods gave the work an ambiguous quality: there was something familiar about the pieces, and yet different from what would be expected of their original uses.

According to the philosopher Jerrold Levinson,

> hybrid status is primarily a *historical* thing […] An art form is a hybrid one in virtue of its development and origin, in virtue of its emergence out of a field of previously existing artistic activities and concerns, two or more of which it in some sense combines. […] *hybrid art forms are art forms arising from the actual combination or interpenetration of earlier art forms*. (6)

Moreover, Levinson notes that a true hybrid "must be understood in terms of and in light of their components" (ibid.). In other words, the combination of forms cannot be an accident, or irrelevant to an understanding of the work; they must be "brought into interaction" (7). A number of my works bring together craft and sculpture through the combination of crochet and hardened pieces of polyurethane spray foam (fig. 6). As previously mentioned, I represent my adopted culture, i.e. Newfoundland culture, through the use of crochet, which is part of the province's craft heritage and history. However, the physical shape of the abstract foam pieces also alludes to Newfoundland. There is a chthonic, or primordial, quality to them: they are ambiguous, shapeless and organic looking. In this sense, they look like the debris and flotsam one commonly finds washed ashore on the province's coasts.

These hybrid objects become something other than craft or sculpture; they become a metaphor for the construction or shaping of a cultural identity that is Other, a *sea change* of sorts.[9] Artist Lacey Jane Roberts writes that "hybridity can be a tremendous asset and breakthrough, if elements in a piece are so thoroughly confused that the elements can no longer be defined as one category or another. The tactic of disidentification can come into play to reinforce hybridity as a concept that breaks down stereotypes rather than reinforces them" (257). Néstor

[9] From Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made: / Those are pearls that were his eyes: / Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea change /Into something rich and strange." - Shakespeare I.2. 396-401. Thank you to Ian Carr-Harris for observation and reference.

García Canclini, a leading cultural studies scholar, makes a similar observation: "For many artists, recognizing cultural hybridization, and working experimentally with it, serves to deconstruct the perceptions of the social and the language that represent it" (246). In my case, the works use a visual language to challenge Newfoundland's sociocultural stereotypes.

When viewing hybridity through a sociological lens, one could find a possible space where the transracial adoptee would feel comfortable, this coming from embodying racial ambiguity. Although there are commonalities or shared experience among transracial adoptees each experience is still very unique and different. As a result, one must be open to using their differences as a general common trait that will enable others to be included through difference. Sociologist, Gina M. Samuels writes, "Embodying racial ambiguity, however, adds a layer of visual difference that can racialize and extend adopted people's feelings of alienation beyond their families into other key reference group experiences" (83). As mentioned earlier, my artwork had taken a shift from creating objects that, conceptually, would make me feel like I belonged to my adopted culture, to that of creating a space where I felt that it was my own and for others who may have felt different.

Section 2.5 Otherness and Hybridity as Found in the Altermodern

Finally, I have also chosen to understand Otherness through the lens of Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the Altermodern. In particular, I have focused my attention on Bourriaud's metaphor of *archipelago* and his discussion of *the viator*.

To summarize briefly, the Altermodern, according to Bourriaud, begins with the end of the postmodern period. However, Bourriaud feels that we have yet to leave modernity entirely. In place of Postmodern or non-modern period, he proposes an "Other", or alter, modern. Like Postmodernism, Altermodern rejects Modernism's claims of universality and grand narratives, which are often Eurocentric and teleological, and see the history of humanity as linear and working toward a common goal based on western values. Unlike Postmodernism, however, Altermodern does not get overly caught up in what Bourriaud refers to as "a neurotic preoccupation with origins" (2). Instead, the Altermodern finds a balance between the two.

To demonstrate this, Bourriaud uses the metaphor of the archipelago: "An archipelago is an example of the relationship between the one and the many. It is an abstract entity; its unity proceeds from a decision without which nothing would be signified save a scattering of islands united by no common name" (ibid.). From the many, we can take what is common and shared, or the one. This is in contrast to the former approach of modernism, which tried to impose universals on smaller particulars.

Bourriaud's view of global cultures as an archipelago encourages the artist to assume the position of the nomad or *flâneur*. However, instead of limiting his exploration to the city or land, the artist can extend his wanderings to different times, places and cultures (3). The idea of the artist as a viator–as Bourriaud also refers to him–who dabbles in various spheres, shares commonalities with the artist as a maker of hybrid forms. The entire world is his to explore for the purpose of "generating creativeness and deriving knowledge" (ibid). Viewing my thesis research in this light, one could argue that nomadism was a methodology employed during the making of my work. As mentioned earlier, I employ traditional craftwork to signify a link to my adoptive culture. However, I first began to learn how to make fishing nets, not from traditional Newfoundland fisherman or artisans, but rather from instructions provided from various online websites.[10] I was able to learn this craft, having no prior experience, through multiple sources from around the globe. I learned this rural Newfoundland tradition not in that particular region but in the urban environment of my Toronto home.

Nevertheless, I did not view this as a substitute for experience and knowledge gained first-hand. For example, during a month-long artist's residency on the Bonavista Peninsula in Newfoundland, I was able to learn the craft of

[10] Sources from the internet such as, *Netmaking Fisheries Circle* http://www.fisheriescircle.com/files/Fiskericirklen/Fagboger/PDFer/Fishing%20gears/Fishing%20gears%20kap-3.pdf and *Netmaking-The Basic Knot in CloseUp* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW6VlflNbTU.

crocheting and net making from locals in the community.[11] This experience of learning a technique through personal interaction was obviously quite different than learning through virtual instruction. As a cultural nomad, my craft navigations took me from urban centre to rural outport, and from cyberspace to having a tradition passed down to me in person. In his discussion on hybridization, García Canclini concludes "today all cultures are border cultures. All the arts develop in relation to other arts: handicrafts migrate from the countryside to the city […]; thus cultures lose the exclusive relation with their territory, but they gain in communication and knowledge" (261).

This viatorization of art functions not only through an artist's physical movements through space and time, but also through the formal approach to materials. Each of the materials I employ had their own stories: they come from different places and fields. Placed together, they become physical representations of my own experiences. As mentioned earlier, the fishing twine I associate with rural traditions that are common in my adopted Newfoundland culture. In a similar fashion, the mason's line that I used in conjunction with the twine was an object familiar to me from long use: it was a tool that I had experience with due to the numerous years I spent working with it in construction. Finally, as mentioned above, the polyurethane spray foam is used to represent abstract ideas such as

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[11] 2 Rooms Artist Residency was located in the rural community of Duntara, Newfoundland. More information can be found at http://www.2roomscontemporaryartprojects.com/artistresidency.html

ambiguity and Otherness; however, as a material used for insulating the home, it also relates to domesticity and construction.

Section 2.6 Recognizing the Other Side: Void

I associate the void with feelings of emptiness, loss, and un-fulfillment, all of which have resonated with many of viewers who have seen my work. However, this was not apparent to me while I was creating the work, perhaps because I was focused on emphasizing Otherness and ambiguity. Nevertheless, I thought it was valuable for me to address the void and how it functions in my work and in the experience of a transracial adoptee.

I acknowledged the idea of the void when I presented my initial thesis proposal at the graduate thesis colloquium and recognized it as my lack of interest in my ethnic roots. While this is still true, I have realized that it is rooted in something deeper. For me, as a transracial adoptee, the void represents a loss: the loss of my biological parents, of an ethnic culture, an un-fulfilled desire for acceptance into an adopted culture, and the emptiness that comes from not fully belonging. This void was not always there while I was working; however, it was something that surfaced subconsciously throughout the art-making process and was revealed through the objects I created.

Some of the mask-like forms are installed in such a way that the void is explicit. They are three-dimensional objects, yet have no core or support material

to create the form; they encapsulate nothing. Hanging, they have the potential to entrap; but large spaces between the stitches also allow for things to slip through. I regard it much like the way one choses what to identify with and what not to identify with. These forms reflect something that is lost, or maybe something that had never been attained.

I have a strong connection with my adopted mother. This has made me not want to see the racial difference between us, because it is a reminder that I am different from her. My mother will never share the same racial experiences as myself and vise versa. I know that at times this has troubled her, specifically when she would witness moments where my racial features were an issue for others. It tormented me that I did not look like her; it was painful from her perspective, too, because she never wished for me to be being singled out and hurt because of my racial inheritance.

Section 2.7 Abjectness

I associate the void with abjectness, with a very unpleasant state of mind. The artwork that I produced for my thesis is imbued with this quality. When I was younger, I felt at times that I was disfigured because the shape of my eyes was different from everyone else's. It was something that I disliked about myself, and which I represented through the polyurethane foam hands (fig. 7). These are objects that are not particularly pleasant to look at; however, they represent

personal insecurities about my physical appearance. They are grotesque and have an unnerving quality. Together, they resemble the sea scum that is often washed up on the shore, a stark contrast to the stereotypical beauty of the natural environment.

In *Power of Horror An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva views the abject as that which is often not recognized, lies outside of one's desire, and often evokes terror and is ominous; "it is something rejected from which one does not part [...]" (4). The abject is linked with frameworks that exclude, deny and cast away (6). I believe that the abject manifests itself in my work through my obsessive desire to belong to my adopted culture, resulting in the casting off of my ethnic Malaysian culture and the ethnicity that I often felt ashamed of when I was growing up. The abject is my ethnicity.

However, Kristeva states that the abject could allow for one to start fresh after the recognition of the impossible (8). I identify the impossible as the satisfaction of my desire to belong. I recently came to the conclusion that it will never come about. The result, as mentioned earlier, was the need to find or create a space for myself. Kristeva would define the person who feels like this as a *deject*, or one who "places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself) and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing" (ibid.).

This is the space that I am trying to find comfort in. I find Kristeva's questioning, "where am I?" rather than, "who am I?" more conducive for exploration. In other words, having accepted that my desire to belong will never be fulfilled and that I will never feel entirely comfortable in my adopted culture, I prefer to embrace the time and space in which I am currently situated. Instead of focusing on the past and on issues that I have no control over, I hope to start becoming more comfortable with the qualities of the *deject*, of straying and separating oneself from what they have desired, as I feel it will open a larger space for others to identify with me. I believe that inhabiting the persona of the *deject* gives way to another territory, one that can be shared with others who relate to the persona of the *deject*. This territory excludes specific ideas such as transracial adoption and becomes more inclusive to a general acceptance based on differences.

Section 2.8 Influences for Future Directions

Going forward I plan to further explore ideas on hybridity and I have begun to familiarize myself with the work of artist Nick Cave, who utilizes hybridity as a methodology to create Otherness in his practice. Cave is a sculptor and performance artist whose work explores the issue of racial identity, and is influenced by Haitian, Moroccan and Indian textiles (Gkiouzelis par. 4). His pieces fluctuate between functional and non-functional, between the moments

when the costumes are used in a performance, and when they are displayed as objects. While Cave borrows from a variety of cultures, none of them take precedence over the others. As such, one is hard-pressed to identify a particular culture in the works; instead, these have been described as “otherworldly” (Dixon par.1), having no direct connection to any *specific* culture. Nevertheless, his work *Soundsuits* does possess a certain “ethnic” feel, and alludes to an unknown culture. This is what I find dynamic and fascinating about Cave’s practice: the ambiguous quality of culture, and the un-identifiability and inclusiveness of his work, qualities that I wish to further pursue in my own practice.

-Section 3-

Final Remarks

A question that surfaced during the thesis research was whether I could become closer culturally to my adopted culture if I used materials and methods that were associated with Newfoundland culture? To quickly restate, this was not achieved and brought me no closer to my adopted culture; the back and forth feeling of belonging still lingers.[12] Nevertheless, on a personal level I felt closer to my adopted family through the passing down from generation to generation of a traditional form. There is a feeling of closeness and familiarity in having possessed a tradition that was taught to you by a loved one. It is something intangible and intimate that I am able to keep with me no matter where I am located in Bourriaud's archipelago. It is something that I do not have to pack or carry, it is something that is part of me.

The purpose of this exploration was to shed light on my own experience as a transracial adoptee. The research that went into the work, along with the methodologies, materials and artworks are all meant to function as visual metaphors that take traditional methods of making and hybridize them with others

[12] Through a sociological lens the feeling of acceptance into an adoptive culture is often fleeting. The sensation that one identifies with a culture often comes and goes, as there is a constant state of back and forth between belonging and not. One can feel like they belong, but the feeling of not fitting in can recur and resurface throughout one's life as explained by Jenkins, who has stated that "ethnicity, in particular, is best thought of as an ongoing process of ethnic identification" (15).

to subvert preconceived notions of culture and identity. Works such as *Poisoned with This* and *What a Sin* (fig. 8 and 9), mark a shift where I come to an acceptance of my current position, my occupation of the space of the *deject*. These pieces express an aggressiveness that is distinct from previous work but also signifies a sense of confidence and of taking ownership of the space. It is the direction that I see my practice moving towards in the future.

The goal, ultimately, was to create a "visual voice" that was uniquely mine, within what I see as an artistically understudied area. At the same time, even though the work is idiosyncratic, it shares commonalities with the experiences of other transracial adoptees, other islands of the same archipelago. In this sense, I feel the project has successfully achieved my goal. Moreover, it has provided me with fertile soil for further exploration on hybridization in the future.

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-Appendix A: Images of Work-

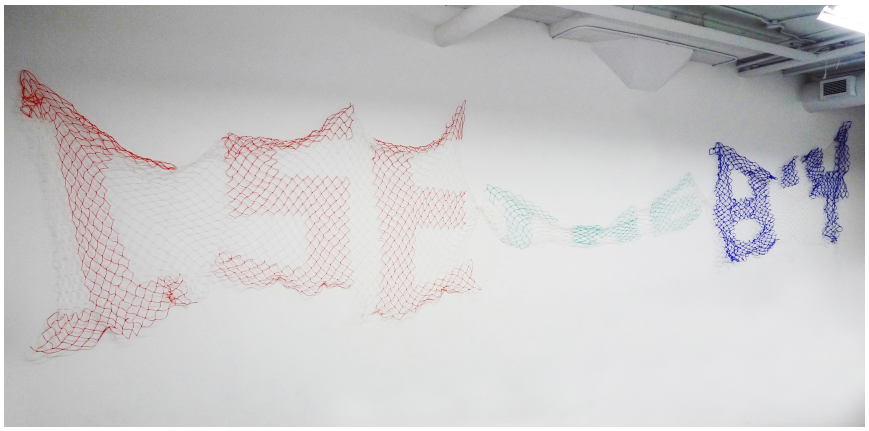

Figure 1 OCADU Critique Space,
I'se the B'y, 2014
Nylon industrial fishing line
Approximately 65" x 324" x ¼"

Figure 2,
Example of tape-cast, 2015
Packaging tape

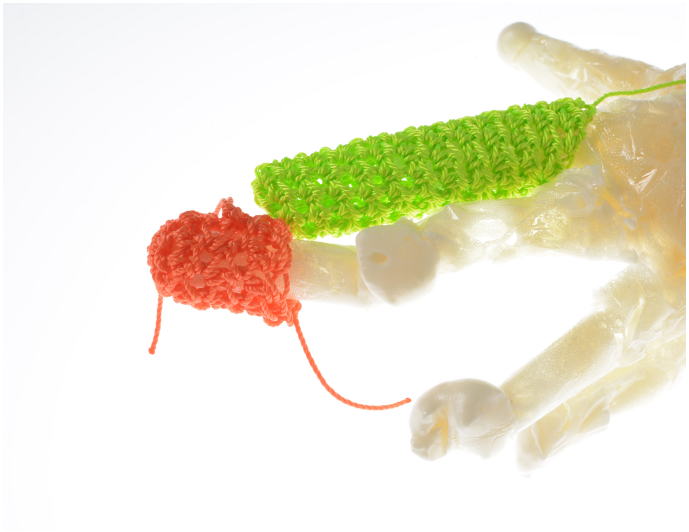

Figure 3
Hand form detail, 2014
Polyurethane spray foam and nylon Mason's line

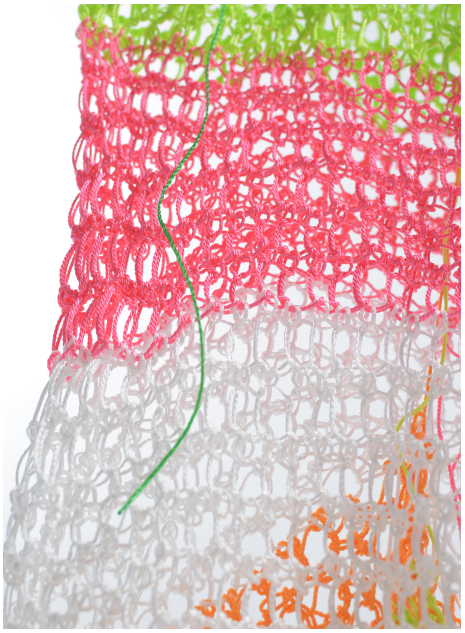

Figure 4
Crochet detail, 2014
Nylon industrial fishing line and Mason's line

Figure 5
Skin (black and florescent pink), 2014
Nylon industrial fishing line and Mason's line
32" x 22" x 2"

Figure 6
Foam hand example, 2014
Polyurethane spray foam and nylon Mason's line

Figure 7 OCAD University Graduate Gallery
Flotsam, 2015
Polyurethane spray foam and nylon Mason's line
Variable dimensions

Figure 8 OCAD University Graduate Gallery
Poisoned with This, 2015
Nylon industrial fishing line and Mason's line
69" x 80" x 17"

Figure 9 OCAD University Graduate Gallery
What A Sin, 2015
Nylon industrial fishing line and Mason's line
Approximately 15" x 11" x 1" each

Figure 10
Come From Away (C.F.P.), 2014
Mason's line
31" x 18" x 18"

Figure 11
Skin (florescent pink and green), 2014
Mason's line
85" x 17" x 2"

Figure 12
Makes Strange I, 2014
Nylon industrial fishing line and Mason's line
60" x 18" x 18"

Figure 13 OCAD University Graduate Gallery
I Dies At He, 2015
Nylon industrial fishing line and Mason's line
80" x 18" x 15"

Figure 14 OCAD University Graduate Gallery
Sea Change, 2015
Nylon industrial fishing line and Mason's line
Installation view

Figure 15 OCAD University Graduate Gallery
Sea Change, 2015
Nylon industrial fishing line, Mason's line and Polyurethane Spray Foam
Installation view