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**Living with contradictions: re-reading the representation of
hybridity in visual art**

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LIVING *with* CONTRADICTIONS:
RE-READING *the*
REPRESENTATION *of* HYBRIDITY
in VISUAL ART

Nina Mangalanayagam

May 2015

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THIS THESIS CONTAINS TWO BLU-RAY
DISCS INSERTED INSIDE THE BACK
COVER.

ABSTRACT

My practice-based PhD investigates how photographic arts can subvert existing visual stereotypes of otherness by exploring how the concept of hybridity undermines black and white notions of identity.

Alongside an autobiographical visual art practice, using my own mixed heritage (Sri Lanka and Denmark/Sweden) I investigate how artists with mixed heritages use their shifting points of identification to explore the dichotomy of black and white notions of identity. Although there are many artists exploring Fanon's idea of seeing oneself as Other through the eyes of an oppressor, it is harder to find artists using their hybrid position to question their own inherited preconceptions of others. By exposing this in my own practice, I add to a re-reading of the representation of hybridity in photography and video arts.

My research includes aspects of postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis and art theory to inform, contextualise and question my own art practice. I place myself in situations within my cultural and familial structure to reflect on my position. Through shifting contexts I expose how I am, as much as anyone else, simultaneously a target and mediator. My artworks reveal inaccurate characterisations of me, the impact of other's views on me, and my process revising my assumptions about others.

My research and practice respond to three areas within postcolonial hybridity: the stereotype, mimicry and the Third Space. Each traces back to Homi Bhabha but is also reflected in current critical debates on identity. Through this work I explore contradictions that arise for people of mixed heritage, opening a space for viewers to reflect on their own narratives and position. Each of us contain different narratives, and sometimes it is through other people's stories that we can deconstruct our own.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that all the material in this thesis is my own work.

INTRODUCTION

This research investigates how photographic arts can subvert existing visual stereotypes of otherness, through the explorations of cross-cultural negotiations of the racial hybrid. I use my own experience and photography practice to explore ideas of belonging, identity and representation.

The main focus of the research is on how other people's perception of me influences, determines or affects my relationship with others. By exploring this in my practice I expose how internal contradictions reflect external cross-cultural complications.

At a time when hybridity is at risk of becoming a new universal language for difference, my research examines how photographic and video artists use hybridity to subvert stereotypes in their practice. The process allows me to contextualise the complexities of hybridity in visual art and to develop new methods problematising the representation of hybridity in photography and video art. To understand these relationships I need to dig into imagined histories, narratives and homelands to make sense of it all.



Figure 0.1.1: My parents in London, shortly after they met. Photographer unknown.

My motivation to undertake this research started with my own background. My mother is Danish and my father is Tamil. I grew up in Sweden and have lived in London since finishing secondary school. As an artist who is mixed race¹, I have become aware that I must provide justifications for using myself in an image. Jean Fisher says “the exoticised artist is marked not as a thinking subject in its own right but as a bearer of pre-determined cultural signs and meanings”.² My dark skin and Asian features connect me to a narrative of the photographed colonised.

I am constantly perceived as different within the Western society that I identify myself with, which extends into my visual art practice. Photography and its involvement in the production of otherness highlighted this for me, and once I started to unravel memories I realised that I had been engrossed in complexities of race since early childhood. My personal experience of otherness and my photographic practice based upon the process of being marked as different, link to the trajectory of postcolonial theory and art practices.

However, my work goes beyond personal experiences of exclusion, since it also involves me taking part in the system. I am not an innocent bystander but rather take part in a process, visually and culturally, which I need to unpack every time I produce something. According to Richard Dyer “how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation”.³ This is the core of my research: it is not only how I am seen that I am analysing, but also how I see myself and others. Which image of myself and others am I sharing and why?

¹ Even though I believe the idea of ‘race’ is a social construct, and find it highly problematic to use the term, I will use it here to describe myself. Hybrid, mixed-race, mixed-parentage, creole, syncret mulatto, are all loaded words. Richard Dyer discusses issues when naming ourselves: the words always seem to fall short and often can get used against us. Dyer says “White people, heterosexuals, the able-bodied, do not generally go around worrying over what to call themselves and have themselves called. Having a word for oneself and one’s group, making a politics of what that word should be, draws attentions to and also reproduces one’s marginality, confirms one’s place outside of power and thus outside of the mechanisms of change. Having a word also contains and fixes an identity.” Richard Dyer, *The matter of images: essays on representation* (2nd edn.; London: Routledge, 1993, 2002), 9.

² Jean Fisher, ‘Some thoughts on ‘contaminations’’, *Third Text*, 9/32 (1995).

³ Richard Dyer, *The matter of images: essays on representation*, 1.

Victor Burgin writes that his earliest memories from films are stereotypical images etched upon his memory. Some of these images can be recalled out of choice, “but mental images derived from films are as likely to occur in the form of involuntary associations, and are often provoked by external events”.⁴ Visual representations are filled with what Bhabha calls “white heroes and black demons [...] as points of ideological and physical identification”.⁵ Western fairy tales and myths containing racial stereotypes fuelled exotic stories that have flourished in my head since childhood. Their imprints still influence my interactions with others.

The reading of images helps me to de-construct my own image — as I appear to others and to myself — and to contextualise where these images fit into contemporary art practices. I use autobiography as a means to question my own ideas of self, based on my own specific background. As a subject, object, producer and author of my practice I aim to visually add to the discourse in postcolonial theory that advocates for new insights into relationships between power structures, language and the Self as both a construction and a mediator within the system.⁶

To conduct this study I have researched relevant aspects of postcolonial theory, philosophy and psychoanalysis focusing on identity, hybridity and otherness to situate and contextualise my practice within an academic context. I have re-visited Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity to analyse how contemporary art practices can be read from this perspective, and to establish how to develop my own practice. Although Bhabha’s writings are based in the climate and framework of the 1980’s and 90’s I find his theories relevant today for their emphasis on the critical space created through hybridity, making us re-examine values and positions in our society.

⁴ Victor Burgin, *The remembered film* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 17.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 76.

⁶ Rasheed Araeen, 'Art and postcolonial society', in Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Zygmunt Bauman, 'The Making and un-Making of Strangers', in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (eds.), *Debating cultural hybridity : multi-cultural identities and the politics of anti-racism* (London: Zed, 1997); Jean Fisher, 'Where here is elsewhere', in Kamal Boullata and Al-Tashkiliyah Binali Al-Shariqah Lil-Funun (eds.), *Belonging and globalisation: critical essays in contemporary art and culture* (London: Saqi, 2008).

Alongside, and in response to, my theoretical research I have created three artworks combining images, text, video and sound, that occupy a space from which to explore complexities of racial hybridity, reflecting my personal experience. I use hybridity as a tool and an on-going process that can help to evaluate identity constructions. With my artworks I aim to create a space where my audience can reflect on their assumptions about themselves and others. By exposing my contradictions I encourage viewers to recognise their own.

Notes on Methodology

My methodology is self-reflexive: my art works and writing are heavily influenced by an autobiographical discourse and my art practice more generally involves placing myself in situations and locations within my cultural and familial structure to reflect on my position.

Methods include postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis and philosophy, alongside analysing artworks. In my practice I use moving and still images, sound and text, in combination. Through my research I have produced three art works – two video installations, *Balancing act* and *We call her Pulle* and one photography project, *A-Z of conflict*. Each artwork uses a different strategy.

My video installations apply a multi-screen strategy, with the intention of disrupting a linear narrative. Voice-overs of autobiographical fragments, in my own voice, lead the experience. The texts for these voice-overs evolved by re-working personal experience and memory. In *Balancing act* this includes other people's stories within my own biography to make it increasingly fictional.⁷ For *We call her Pulle* I used my diaries from two research trips to Sri Lanka.

Balancing Act is a split screen installation where my feet walk the familiar lines on the floor of a sports hall. My starting point was considering the origins of historical mapping and sports rules from Britain and I used the lines on the floor in the sports hall as a metaphor for how nationalities, borders and ethnicities are

⁷ I posted ads looking for mixed-race people who wanted to talk about their experience, and wrote text based on our conversations.

considered static. Two cameras follow my feet from different angles. The cameras disorientate the viewer, at times showing the same movement from two different directions and sometimes intentionally breaking this continuity.

The accompanying sound contains a voice-over and a commissioned piece of music using fragments from the national anthems of Sweden, Denmark, Sri Lanka and Britain.

We call her Pulle is a three screen video installation. The visual material is from my two research trips in 2012 and 2014 to Jaffna, Sri Lanka. I concentrate on my experience returning to the childhood place of my father: my aunt Pulle's house. For most of my life, I had no access to this place due to the civil war and, having only visited once before, my memories and images of it are largely constructed through stories from my father and from the Western society I grew up in. Because of the political situation in Sri Lanka when I went, I was mostly filming and photographing in and around my aunt's house.⁸ For the same reason, I travelled with very limited equipment: a digital SLR, monopod and an on-camera microphone.

In the footage and my writing I am consciously acknowledging my own and the camera's involvement in the process, what Susan Bright calls 'auto-referential'.⁹ My writing comes from diary notes, composed during my time in Sri Lanka and based on my interaction with people around me. The process includes deconstructing my idea of the past while simultaneously attempting to re-construct it from the ruins and traces I find. With distance from the experience, I later critically unpack my images and their visual signifiers as well as my writing, which is informed by my intentions and my unconscious. The reflexivity I gained from this

⁸ I went just after government officials in Sri Lanka were quoted in the media saying they would break the limbs of any foreign journalists or NGO's who said anything negative about their country. I therefore chose to remain relatively unseen with a camera in non-touristic public places.

⁹ Susan Bright, *Auto focus: the self-portrait in contemporary photography* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010).

process significantly influenced chapter three on performativity and posing, as well as the final edit and voice-over of the piece.

We call her Pulle focuses on my relationship to my aunt. Despite not sharing a common language or cultural references, we build a close relationship through our differences. Trying to understand her and the place my father came from I am constantly struck by loss of origin. The stories my father told me do not correspond to the stories I am told now, or to Jaffna after the destruction of war. My aunt's experience can never give me an understanding of my father or my place of origin. The completed artwork aims to contest ideas of origin and the stories we construct about ourselves, and to question assumptions and attitudes that I have brought with me from my background.

Sri Lanka's history with civil war does feature in the video and is an important part in my relationship to my father's homeland and relatives. For safety reasons I do not go into any details about the conflict in my video and the footage has been carefully edited for my aunt to feel comfortable with all that is being said in the video. The presence of war was, however, never far from my mind both when editing and when travelling to Sri Lanka. I continue to follow the conflict in Sri Lanka in detail, but this research has not gone into this PhD. It is part of my background, but it does not fall under the scope of my research.

The three-screen installation was chosen for a variety of reasons; one being to focus on how framing and narratives change depending on where one is looking. This is also highlighted through the editing process and voice-over, which at times comments on my decision-making when filming (such as when Pulle tells me to film something, but I do not) and when I focus on objects that I see as one thing and Pulle sees as something else (like the domestic areas used as bunkers during the war). The three screens have also been useful in creating an immersive experience that largely takes place within one property. The immersion in this place can feel both safe and claustrophobic simultaneously, which I embrace.

Coming from a photography background, this is the first time I have made multi-screen installations and used sound from more than one source. This has been one of my biggest challenges and my filming and editing techniques have

improved rapidly during my time of research. The editing process of *We call her Pulle* has been complex and time consuming, coordinating the screens to work alongside each other as full-image videos. The final piece is 22 minutes long: over 60 minutes of footage split between screens.

In *We call her Pulle* I use video as a photographer: I did not have any fixed plan for a narrative or storyboard before shooting, the meaning being created in the editing process. My eyes as a photographer are looking for meaning in images and between images, and I purposely use juxtaposition to add or disrupt meaning.

My moving image practice was partly a result of a frustration with the still image; its history linked with fixing identities through fixing the image. The fixity of the still image made it feel necessary to add sound, multiple angles and movement. However, towards the end of this research I return to the still image in *A-Z of conflict*. Perhaps because of David Company's statement: that "narrative pose in photography can foreground arrestedness, setting up a space from which to rethink social conventions and stereotypes".¹⁰ Perhaps, as he also points out, the image is actually unstable and unfixed and it is the ideology that places it which contains it. Therefore, the problem does not lie within the still image; it lies within the ideology where it has been used and it needs to challenge this ideology from within its same structures.

One of the starting points for this research was the impossibility of self-portraiture for the 'otherised' artist and my research largely explores what my self-portrait entails. Towards the end of this PhD, the part my practice did not show was my belonging with my white mother. *A-Z of conflict* therefore adds my mother into the picture with me, in conjunction with images that relate to the construction of belonging.

I use autobiography as Paul Jay proposes it: as a form of self-analysis. The practice and writing within this autobiography can never be completely known or

¹⁰ David Company, 'Posing, acting, photography', in David May Green and Joanna Lowry (eds.), *Stillness and time: photography and the moving image* (Brighton: Photoworks / Photoforum, 2006), 106.

seen by the self, but it will add to a discussion on how we “choose or imagine our identities, but those choices are always mediated by culturally conditioned possibilities”.¹¹ This is in line with Huddart, who explains autobiography as a mode within postcolonial theory that maintains a respect to difference and otherness while using self-reflexivity to deconstruct one’s own preconceived ideas.¹² Trinh Minh-ha adds “thinking is not always knowing”.¹³ It can take abrupt turns and twists, but in such a way manages to question over and over again what we take for granted and disturbs “thereby one’s own thinking habits, dissipating what has become familiar and clichéd, and participating in the changing of received values – the transformation (with/out master) of other selves through one’s self”.¹⁴ This research contributes to the discourse of hybridity through opening a space of self-narration of the artist between a white and black parent in the postcolonial West.

Chapter Outline

My contextual review, chapter one, provides an overview of some key theoretical debates around hybridity from cultural studies, postcolonial theory and sociology. Rather than focusing on distinguishing and sorting through various terms relating to hybridity, such as creolisation, syncretism and métissage, I focus on Bhabha’s original concept of hybridity and how his concepts of the stereotype, mimicry and the Third Space can be used to think through artistic practices. The research mainly deals with artists with a heritage from the UK, its former colonies and Scandinavia, because of my own belonging to these places, but I chose to focus my close reading on works because of their relevance to my own strategies in my practice rather than their specific heritage. Therefore I include Adrian Piper’s practice, who deals with

¹¹ Paul Jay, 'Posing: autobiography and the subject of photography', in Kathleen M. Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (eds.), *Autobiography & postmodernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 209.

¹² David Huddart, *Postcolonial theory and autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2008.)

¹³ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Cotton and Iron', in Trinh T. Minh-Ha (ed.), *When the moon waxes red: representation, gender and cultural politics* (Routledge, 1991), 24.

¹⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Cotton and Iron', 21.

very similar issues to my own, although she is from an African-American background.

Chapter two uses Frantz Fanon's *Black skin white masks* to focus on skin colour's role as a signifier of otherness. Using the self-portrait as a mode of enquiry I question if recognition is possible or even desirable from a mixed race perspective. I argue that *Cornered* by Adrian Piper broke down the illusion of binary oppositions of black and white through problematising the decision to be white. However, through a close reading of my own practice I realise that my ambition to 'seek recognition' often means rejecting my otherness, the black construction, due to an underlying desire of wanting to belong to the 'white' category (and convince an audience of my belonging).

Chapter three takes this question further and investigates my position within the footage *We call her Pule*. I use Roland Barthes's writings on his relationship to his self-image to deconstruct my own self-portrait. When placing myself within the frame or as a narrative voice of a film I notice a degree of performance and posing. Following Peggy Phelan's claim that the portrait is already an imitation of an existing image found in previous representations, I argue that in this video portrait both my aunt and I are caught up in imitating visual representations before us as well as acting for each other and the camera: the imagined spectator. I expose the complexity of being split between being for my aunt and an imagined audience simultaneously, and conclude that the Western identification becomes more dominant.

My fourth chapter engages with recent debates and artistic practices that have added the personal narrative of the white coloniser into a postcolonial art discourse. This responds to Richard Dyer's, among others, dissatisfaction of the lack of attention on fictional constructs of white identity in the visual artist. Based on conclusions from previous chapters on my shifting position, I now investigate my relationship to an image of whiteness. Through analysing British artist Lindsay Seers' autobiographical practice that examines postcolonial legacies in her identity construction, I illuminate a postcolonial artistic space that is still in process and filled with complex and diverse individual histories and traumas.

In my writing I reflect on aspects of my practice, where I explore my own position as photographic producer and subject. I employ hybrid practices, emphasising the gaps between words, images and sound, to escape linear narratives and simplifications. Since, as Burgin writes, “the inescapable condition of any history, personal or national, is that the story be “full of holes””.¹⁵ My autobiography within my artworks acknowledges the contradictions that arise when carrying both constructed narratives of coloniser and colonised. I refer to disavowals within me, with contradictions splitting me, and how I fight to overcome them.

¹⁵ Victor Burgin, *In/different spaces: place and memory in visual culture* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1996), 267.



Figure 1.2: *Contradictions, from A-Z of conflict*

1 CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The first person who speaks with me when I am back in Sweden is a Persian man, who addresses me in Persian.

He recognises me from my childhood.

Still he does not know where I am 'really' from and asks.

The second man who speaks with me is a Swedish man who addresses me in English. I can see that he thinks he is being helpful.

In Sweden they always think I am Persian or Middle Eastern.

In England it is always Indian or Pakistani.

1.1 THEORETICAL DEBATES

Hybridity as a Social Construct

What is hybridity? The term hybridity was originally used to describe plants or animals that are the offspring of two different varieties or species, and was also used for mixed-race people during colonial times. Although it has been generally accepted within postcolonial theory that race is a construct made to serve the colonial mission and slavery, many argue that we still live in a racialised society and endure the consequences of it.¹⁶ Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe's *Mixed race, a reader*, offers historical insight into the key texts that have shaped the idea of mixed races or 'hybrid' humans. First and foremost, mixed-race was seen to embody the diminishing of the "supremacy of the 'white race'", which enjoyed its privileged position at the top of the evolutionary ladder in the architecture of 'racial' hierarchy.¹⁷ Now-discarded scientific arguments included Nott and Gliddon's 1854 statement that "mulattoes are the shortest-lived of any class of the human race",¹⁸ and Martin R. Delany's 1879 claim that "mixed race is an abnormal race".¹⁹ Within essentialist constructions of race, those of mixed-race blur the boundaries and clean lines that these 'thinkers' sought to sustain. Consequently, mixed-race people have historically found themselves treated as visual evidence of the longstanding fear of the contamination of culture, race, and purity, and have often become the scapegoats and symbols for a range of negative things to conceal the fiction of

¹⁶ Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Coco Fusco, *Only skin deep: changing visions of the American self*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003); Paul Gilroy, 'A cat in a kipper box or, the confession of a 'second generation immigrant'', in Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla (eds.), *Migrant cartographies: new cultural and literary spaces in post-colonial Europe* (Lanham, Md., Oxford: Lexington, 2005); Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, *Mixed race' studies: a reader* (London: Routledge, 2004); Jill Olumide, *Raiding the gene pool: the social construction of mixed race* (London: Pluto, 2002).

¹⁷ Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, *Mixed race' studies: a reader*, 9.

¹⁸ Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, *Mixed race' studies: a reader*, 42.

¹⁹ Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, *Mixed race' studies: a reader*, 52.

race.²⁰ Sociologist Olumide states that “[m]ixed race is the ideological enemy of pure race as a means of social stratification”.²¹ She argues that the very reason mixed-race people need to be studied is because they exemplify the fact that groups who are labelled differently are as a result treated differently. Therefore, “a person might be both privileged and marginalised in different situations”,²² which is something I have often experienced myself. Being with my Tamil father in Sweden the attitudes towards us were different in comparison to when I was with my mother. Now, as an adult I notice how my position shifts from being included into a ‘black’ category in Europe, whilst I am seen as white in Sri Lanka. And as a mixed artist I have found myself both representing Sri Lankan and Swedish art. These positions both come with their advantages and disadvantages. Teresa Kay Williams takes this further by arguing that “[m]ultiracial people ‘do race’ and get ‘race done to them’”.²³

Hybridity as a Discourse on Race — Rejecting Essentialisms

Hybridity as a discourse on race emerged from discussions within postcolonial theory in the late 1980’s. Postcolonial theory had entered academic institutions in the 1980’s, following Said’s *Orientalism*²⁴ where he discussed the creation of the category of the Eastern Other from a Western gaze.²⁵ Diasporic communities in the West elaborated on these ideas. In Britain this included Paul Gilroy,²⁶ Stuart Hall²⁷

²⁰ Robert JC Young, *Colonial desire: hybridity in theory, culture and race* (London: Routledge, 1995.)

²¹ Jill Olumide, *Raiding the gene pool: the social construction of mixed race*, 2.

²² Jill Olumide, *Raiding the gene pool: the social construction of mixed race*, 7.

²³ Teresa Kay Williams, ‘Race-ing and being raced: the critical interrogation of ‘passing’’, in Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe (ed.), *‘Mixed race’ studies: a reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), 169.

²⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1978]).

²⁵ David Macey, *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory* (London: Penguin, 2000).

²⁶ Paul Gilroy, *There ain’t no black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity : community, culture, difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

and Homi Bhabha,²⁸ who were central in establishing a discourse on racial hybridity. Their ideas in postcolonial theory were in dialogue with Fanon, Sartre, Bakhtin, Derrida, and Gramsci. Bhabha adopted the terminology of hybridity to describe the process of cultural differences coming into contact and creating conflict.

The art and writing that came out of the US and the UK at this time followed an intense period of political struggle for 'Black Power' in the 1960s–70s, meaning self-determination for people of African descent in America. Similar narratives were ongoing in 1980's Britain when many second-generation immigrants demanded to be involved and included in British society, including the art world, as something other than 'outsiders'.²⁹ Jean Fisher has written about how the power dynamics of a leading "hegemonic 'white' elite" in the art world in the UK has shifted since the 1980's, partly due to riots that occurred in response to "poor housing, employment, education and physical abuse".³⁰ The uprisings forced the UK government to respond with financial initiatives, acknowledging racial and cultural inequality. The movement united groups and communities from different histories and ethnicities, but with a similar experience of racism and marginalisation, under the term 'black'.³¹ In order to eradicate stereotypes and inequalities facing black people, minorities in the UK unified by identifying with others that had similar uprooted, colonial histories. Thus, what was called the 'British Black Arts Movement' fought for a common cause across differences.³² Their struggle was for representation on their own terms and it actively critiqued what Hall called the "fetishization, objectification and negative configuration" in representations of marginalised people.³³ Following the creation of the *BLK Art Group* by Eddie

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', in Fanon Frantz (ed.), *Black skin, white masks* (London: Pluto, 1986 [1967]); Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*.

²⁹ Jean Fisher, 'Tales from the dark side: double agency', in Shaheen Merali (ed.), *Blackpop* (London: Saqi, 2004).

³⁰ Jean Fisher, 'Tales from the dark side: double agency', np.

³¹ Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies* (London: Routledge, 1996).

³² Jean Fisher, 'The other story and the past imperfect', *Tate Papers* (Tate: Tate's online research journal, 2009).

³³ Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', 442.

Chambers, Keith Piper, and Donald Rodney, as well as the 1985 exhibition of black and Asian women artists *The Thin Black Line*, curated by Lubaina Himid and held in the corridor of the ICA, by the 1990's there were more exhibition opportunities for black and Asian artists in the UK. This unification led to funding for black-led arts institutions and artists from minority backgrounds who started making work around the negative effects of stereotypical and colonial forms of representation.³⁴

However, this common struggle took precedence over the individualities it contained. As Bhabha describes it, the process unifying under a 'black' banner had mimicked the identification process.³⁵ Through identifying with a mask, in this case the black mask, the black subject was again identifying with the signifier, an image of otherness. Within this regime artist Isaac Julien and theorist Kobena Mercer pointed out two major problems:

First, individual subjectivity is denied because the black subject is positioned as a mouthpiece, a ventriloquist for an entire social category which is seen to be 'typified' by its representative. Acknowledgement of the diversity of black experiences and subject-positions is thereby foreclosed. Thus, secondly, where minority subjects are framed and contained by the monologic terms of 'majority discourse', the fixity of boundary relations between centre and margin, universal and particular, returns the speaking subject to the ideologically appointed place of the stereotype — 'that all black people are the same'.³⁶

Thus, Fisher argues that the increased exposure of non-Western art came with the unpleasant side effect of commodifying difference and maintained "the separation of ethnicised artists from white mainstream art".³⁷ Consequently, many

³⁴ Jean Fisher, 'Tales from the dark side: double agency'; Sarat Maharaj, 'Introduction', in Eddie Chambers, Gilane Tawadros, and Victoria Clarke (eds.), *Annotations 5, Run through the jungle: selected writings* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999).

³⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon', in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (eds.), *Remaking history* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989).

³⁶ Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'De Margin and De Centre', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall : critical dialogues in cultural studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 454.

³⁷ Jean Fisher, 'Tales from the dark side: double agency'.

argued that 'Black Art' was no longer a valid term and that work addressing the colonial past (and present) needed to avoid binary oppositions altogether.³⁸

Hybridity entered the postcolonial discourse as a rejection of binaries and essentialisms. Essays formulating new directions included Hall's *New Ethnicities*, which argued for new strategies of difference to highlight the multitude of diversity within the 'black' category, a rather simplified 'image'. Hall proposed that black politics and art needed to reject sameness altogether and acknowledge differences such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Hall argued that films like *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Territories*, *Passion for remembrance* and *Sammy and Rosie get laid* had already made that shift.³⁹

Hall's and Bhabha's main argument was that identity is never a finished product, but rather something that is always in process, and differences between us constitute what we are and what we experience. Identity is constructed from memory, fantasy, narrative, myth and experience.⁴⁰

Bhabha is arguably one of the most recognised theorists on hybridity.⁴¹ His collection of essays, *The location of culture*, tackles the question of how one lives between categories now that categories no longer function as unifying structures. The work was dealing with fluid identities and the on-going negotiation of historical hybridisations, with no origin to ever be found. He argued for the intervention of the Third Space, an ambivalent space of hybridity. This is not a

³⁸ Rasheed Araeen, 'The Success and the failure of Black Art', *Third Text*, 18/2 (1994); Jean Fisher, *Reverberations: tactics of resistance, forms of agency in trans/cultural practices* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, Department of Design, 2000); Jean Fisher, 'Tales from the dark side: double agency'; Jean Fisher, 'The other story and the past imperfect'; Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities'; Anne Ring Petersen, 'Identity politics, institutional multiculturalism, and the global artworld', *Third Text*, 26/2 (25/4/2013 2012).

³⁹ Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities'.

⁴⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon'; Homi K. Bhabha, 'Third Space', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity : community, culture, difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990a); Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'.

⁴¹ Néstor García Canclini's book *Hybrid cultures* was published around the same time as Bhabha's *Location of culture* and is an equally important contribution to the general theory of hybridity. However, since he specifically concentrates on Latin American hybridity, I have excluded this from my research. Néstor García Canclini, 'Hybridization and the geopolitics of art', in James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim (eds.), *Art and globalization* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

space from two originating points that form a third. It is rather a space in-between multiple constructions that is neither one nor the other, which disrupts and resists the linear progression of western thought.⁴²

However, as words such as hybridity, multiculturalism, and difference have been given many different meanings throughout the decades, some argue the terms themselves have become diluted too much to be useful.⁴³ Nikos Papastergiadis describes hybridity on the one hand as referring to “biological essentialism” and on the other as having been “elevated to promote a form of cultural nomadology”.⁴⁴ Maharaj argues that hybridity runs the risk of taking the place of purity by lumping together differences.⁴⁵ Papastergiadis agrees that the “inclusion of artists and curators from non-Western backgrounds and the incorporation of the concept of hybridity within the dominant institutions of contemporary art is reduced to another sign of appropriation” and in this way it does not offer a space for the discussion of cultural difference.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he still believes that hybridity is an important “part of a force that is attacking traditional and national cultures”.⁴⁷ He argues the resistance to hybridity is based on traditional conceptions of culture as “coordinating symbolic practices that affirmed a coherent identity and differentiated its way of life from that of others”.⁴⁸ For Papastergiadis, hybrid art practice is “a crucial starting point for the urgent task of rebuilding a new kind of universalism”.⁴⁹

⁴² Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*.

⁴³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Changing Definitions', *Third Text*, 14/53 (2000).

⁴⁴ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', *Theory Culture Society Culture*, 22/4 (2005) 39.

⁴⁵ Sarat Maharaj at *A new internationalism symposium* (1994) (InIVA).

⁴⁶ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', 52.

⁴⁷ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', 50.

⁴⁸ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', 49.

⁴⁹ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', 58.

Almost the Same, but not White

I will revisit three aspects of Bhabha's theory of hybridity: the stereotype, mimicry, and the Third Space of disjunctive temporalities. The stereotype is crucial for my initial research position and aim, which is to subvert a stereotype. Mimicry works against the stereotype through exposing its construction. This works on both a conscious and unconscious level, which I return to in chapter three. Finally, Third Space is a fruitful concept through which new artistic strategies and curatorial statements can be read. I am specifically thinking of Bourriaud's, Demos', and Maharaj's recent post-postcolonial statements, which I will return to later in this chapter and in chapter four.

For Bhabha, dependence on fixity is a key feature of colonisation. It is within this system that the stereotype functions as a strategy. In *The Other question* Bhabha argues for a rereading of the stereotype as a "complex ambivalent, physical process of identification".⁵⁰

In many of his texts Bhabha refers back to the theories of internal racism developed by Martiniquan psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who highlighted how colonial cultural identity is informed by Eurocentric stereotypes, making black people see themselves as Others.⁵¹ His first book, *Black skin white masks*, was a study on the alienation and psychological consequences resulting from colonialism, due to the ideological placement of the colonial subject into that of a misfit. Bhabha references Fanon's every-day scenario of a small white girl's reaction to seeing Fanon: she exclaims her fear of him being black and as a consequence Fanon begins to identify with the image she has of him. Fanon's idea has many similarities to Sartre's conception of identity. In *Being and nothingness* Sartre argued that consciousness is empty and the subject has no fixed essence until its identity is imposed onto it by the look of the Other.⁵² Sartre calls this process objectification.

⁵⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other question', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 70.

⁵¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* (London: Pluto, 1986 [1967]).

⁵² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003, [1958]).

He explained that everyone is polarized between two types of being: Being-for-Self and Being-for-Other. We are enslaved by not knowing what our face communicates about us and that we will never be for the Other what we are for ourselves. Thus, to be looked at is to understand oneself from someone else's view. We react to this judgement and develop accordingly. It is in relation and in comparison to other living beings that one can distinguish one's own identity.

Like Fanon, Bhabha references Lacanian psychoanalysis and its view that the Subject is formed through a relationship with the Other.⁵³ This process takes place during what Lacan calls the mirror stage, when the child recognises him/herself in a mirror. This begins a process where the child simultaneously recognises and misrecognises itself as an image and identifies with an image, an imaginary self, a wholeness, which the child strives to become.⁵⁴ Through play, gesture, and mimicry, the child experiences what it is like to become the fictional image and to assume an identity.⁵⁵ This process continues throughout our lives as we strive but continually fail to live up to our ideal image of ourselves. Since, as Karina Eileraas puts it, "humans have no direct access to the self; instead, the mirror image and the gaze of the other necessarily mediate our self-perceptions".⁵⁶

According to Sander L. Gilman, in this process the child loses its sense of being 'it' with the world and develops an anxiety from this sense of loss.⁵⁷ To deal with the loss of control, the child creates mental images of the objects in the world and categorise them into binary oppositions, such as self/other and good/bad. The child creates stereotypes to differentiate the Self from the object, the Other, which Gilman argues is a necessary process for structuring the world. Thus, the Other is a projected antithesis to our projected Self, resonating with Julia Kristeva's assertion

⁵³ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: a selection*, ed. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977).

⁵⁴ David Macey, *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory*.

⁵⁵ Karina Eileraas, *Between image and identity: transnational fantasy, symbolic violence, and feminist misrecognition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 25.

⁵⁶ Karina Eileraas, *Between image and identity: transnational fantasy, symbolic violence, and feminist misrecognition*, 25.

⁵⁷ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and pathology: stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness* (Ithaca, N.Y., London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

that the stranger we fear is always within us, but we project the fear of this inner stranger outwards — onto the Other.⁵⁸

Bhabha argued for a “reading of the stereotype in terms of fetishism [...which functions] to ‘normalize’ the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal”.⁵⁹ He refers to Freud’s concept of disavowal when a little boy realises that a girl does not have a penis, and he has the greatest trauma of his life in thinking he might lose it.⁶⁰ To combat this anxiety he creates a substitute for the missing object in the way of a fetish. I find the comparison best described in Freud’s own words:

Let us suppose the ego of the child finds itself governed by a powerful drive-demand, which it is in the habit of satisfying; suddenly it has a terrifying experience which lets it know that to carry on satisfying the drive would lead to a real and almost intolerable danger. It now has to decide whether to acknowledge the real danger, submit to it, and refrain from satisfying the drive, or to deny reality, convince itself there is nothing to fear, and so hold on to the satisfaction. It is a conflict then between what the drive demands and what reality forbids. But the child does neither thing, or rather it does both simultaneously, which amounts to the same. [...] it rejects reality and refuses any prohibition; on the other hand — and in the very same breath — it acknowledges the danger from reality, turns anxiety about it into a pathological symptom, and attempts subsequently to ward this anxiety off.⁶¹

The two contradictions, according to Freud, will remain and in fact become larger over time. As such, Freud says it splits the ego, which “has its own particular preconditions and disorders”.⁶²

With this in mind, Bhabha writes:

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through

⁵⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to ourselves* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

⁵⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 74.

⁶⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'The splitting of the ego in defence processes', in Adam Phillips (ed.), *The Penguin Freud reader* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1938]).

⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The splitting of the ego in defence processes', 64.

⁶² Sigmund Freud, 'The splitting of the ego in defence processes', 65.

the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.⁶³

The stereotype is for Bhabha an impossible object since it sustains contradictory beliefs at the same time.⁶⁴ The stereotype/fetish conceals repressed content due to disavowal, and as such must be constantly repeated.

Mimicry can have the power to disrupt the stereotype and create ambivalence. Mimicry, for Bhabha, is when the colonised imitates the colonisers language, behaviour, and manners, sometimes in an exaggerated manner. Although the coloniser would to some extent want the colonised to be like him, there is no desire for them to be identical, since the ideologies that justify ruling over the colonised would then be destroyed.⁶⁵ Huddart explains that mimicry for Bhabha is sometimes unconscious, and not an intentional resistance as such; nonetheless, “mimicry performs and exceeds colonial authority”.⁶⁶ Visuality becomes important for the coloniser to set the colonised apart from himself: the colonised being almost the same, but not white.⁶⁷

Dyer and Tessa Perkins have both argued that stereotypes as an ordering process are not necessarily negative in themselves, but become so when used forcefully within ideologies and dominant structures.⁶⁸ Fanon’s hypothesis of the subject’s total identification with the stereotype resonates with Perkins’ argument that “stereotypes are [...] effective in so far as people define themselves in terms of the stereotypes about them; that they are structurally reinforced”.⁶⁹

⁶³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other question', 75.

⁶⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*.

⁶⁵ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶⁶ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 86.

⁶⁷ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*.

⁶⁸ Richard Dyer, *The matter of images: essays on representation*, 12.; T.E Perkins, 'Rethinking stereotypes', in Miche Le Barrett (ed.), *Ideology and cultural production* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 142.

⁶⁹ T.E Perkins, 'Rethinking stereotypes', 155.

Photography — Fixing Stereotypes

The history of photography is bound up with the creation of stereotypical images in a variety of cultural industries to reaffirm and represent coherent collective identities. Perkins writes that stereotypes are usually formed about a group that is presenting a problem for a dominant group: “Consequently most stereotypes do concern oppressed groups (because a dominant group’s position is relatively stable and unproblematic)”.⁷⁰ This process relies on clear boundaries, which are visualised through concentrating on differences in appearance. In this process, skin has become a signifier of difference.

The use of photography as a tool within cultural imperialism has had an impact on the production and reading of the image. Anne Maxwell writes that mass-produced images in the beginning of the 19th century “conveyed the idea of colonized people’s primitiveness to more Europeans than either colonial fiction or travel writing, and did so with greater force and emotional impact”.⁷¹ Europeans in the 19th century were (re-)assured of their privileged ‘civilised’ position through a wide array of influences: social Darwinism, anthropologists’ conviction that human races were on different levels of the evolutionary ladder, photographic techniques for comparing and contrasting bodies, and live displays of colonised people at European Great Exhibitions.⁷² Maxwell states that racist imagery did not only

⁷⁰ T.E Perkins, 'Rethinking stereotypes', 148.

⁷¹ Anne Maxwell, *Colonial photography and exhibitions: representations of the 'native' and the making of European identities* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), ix.

⁷² Blumenbach was among the first to apply characteristics to people based on their surfaces of their bodies in 1859. Darwin added to the anthropologist’s belief that human species were signs of human evolution and the human groups were placed on an evolutionary ladder. The categories of race by scientists like Carl Linnaeus influenced society in the mid-18th century with contributions to taxonomy, the categorisation of botanical and animal species, by arranging them hierarchically within nature. This included dividing the human race into five types according to appearance and behaviour. Count Joseph de Gobineau added to the belief that the human race was divided into subgroups with varying characteristics. As a tool for comparison, photography developed visual methods to contrast bodies. Measuring scales and grids were placed next to or behind photographed subjects to enable them to be measured and compared. Alongside this Francis Galton developed composite photography, with the aim of being able to define racial types. Important for the spread of colonial stereotypes of the colonized were the Great Exhibitions in France and Britain at the end of the 19th century. On such occasions colonised people were put on live display promoting quasi-scientific theories of origins of race. For more information see: Arthur Comte De Gobineau, *The inequality of human races*

damage the people it portrayed but also “supplied Europeans with a new, empowering framework for identity based on racial and cultural essences, the effects of which are still evident today”.⁷⁵ The black visual subject has been positioned within dominant European regimes of representation, and power was then, as now, the main element in our identity creation⁷⁴.

Allan Sekula’s *The body and the archive* made an important contribution to how photography’s uncomfortable history is inextricably wed to the practices of physiognomy and phrenology. Published in 1986, Sekula’s essay was among the first that took on this subject with such scrutiny.⁷⁵ He argues that we must continue to remind ourselves of the relationship between the photographed body and power, since he argues that these practices have not left us yet. Likewise, Julien and Mercer argue “the theory of the stereotype cannot be abandoned as it also needs to be able to explain how and why certain ethnic stereotypes are at times re-circulated, in the British context, in the work of black film and television authors”.⁷⁶

Identification with the visual medium has been deconstructed by Christian Metz and Jaqueline Rose using Lacan’s mirror stage.⁷⁷ Rose wrote that the “mirror stage is [...] the focus for the interdependency of image, identity and identification”.⁷⁸ Thus, identification with images and visual stereotypes is grounded in the moment when the child identifies with an image and with objects around him/her in the world. Metz argues that the identification of the adult spectator with a projected screen in the cinema would be impossible had it not been

(Los Angeles: Noontide Press, 1966, [1915]); Anne Maxwell, *Colonial photography and exhibitions: representations of the 'native' and the making of European identities*; Allan Sekula, 'The body and the archive', *October* (vol 39: The MIT Press, 1986).

⁷⁵ Anne Maxwell, *Colonial photography and exhibitions: representations of the 'native' and the making of European identities*, ix.

⁷⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*; Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'; Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to ourselves*; T.E Perkins, 'Rethinking stereotypes'; Allan Sekula, 'The body and the archive'.

⁷⁵ Allan Sekula, 'The body and the archive'.

⁷⁶ Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'De Margin and De Centre', 458.

⁷⁷ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and cinema: the imaginary signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the field of vision* (London: Verso, 1986).

⁷⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the field of vision*, 173.

for the primary identification with the mirror at an earlier stage. The identification with images and projected objects has been set, and the spectator does not need to be reflected on the screen for him to identify with it. In fact, Metz argues, the spectator identifies with his own perception, his own look, as a primary identification. As such he identifies as an all-perceiving object: the camera, and in absence of the camera, the projector.⁷⁹

1.2 ARTIST RESPONSE

Reappropriation

Constructions and images of otherness that are based on fictionalised fantasies inform subjects of an image of themselves. Dyer emphasises that “the stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype. Yet, for the most part it is *from* stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups”.⁸⁰

In the 1980’s and 1990’s, many artists started questioning how colonial photography had affected the way in which black people see themselves. Among others, American artists Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Glenn Ligon used and referenced images from photography archives and mimicked its mode of image making in their work, highlighting the black body’s representation and preservation in historical archives and visual memories.⁸¹ In doing so they re-read and re-appropriated old tools of oppression, to deconstruct the very strategies used to objectify the black body. As an example Carrie Mae Weems’ piece *From here I saw what happened and I cried*⁸² re-appropriates a collection of photographs of African-

⁷⁹ Christian Metz, 'Identification, mirror', in Christian Metz (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and cinema: the imaginary signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

⁸⁰ Richard Dyer, *The matter of images: essays on representation*, 14.

⁸¹ Lauri Firstenberg, 'Autonomy and the archive in America', in Coco Fusco, Brian Wallis, and Photography International Center Of (eds.), *Only skin deep: changing visions of the American self* (New York: International Center of Photography in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003).

⁸² Carrie Mae Weems, *From here I saw what happened and I cried*, (1995-1996), <<http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html>> (29/09/2013)

American slaves, originally commissioned by Swiss Louis Agassiz in the 1850's.⁸³ Weems places text on top of the images, on the glass of the frame, highlighting the objectification made with these portraits in combination with words.

In the UK, Zarina Bhimji re-visited Galton's composite photography for her portraits of people who are either mixed-race, or in mixed relationships, for the installation *1822-now*.⁸⁴ Her blurred images were achieved through long-exposures, but the effect created a visual reference to Galton. The portraits seem unfixed, ambivalent, and difficult to place. Bhimji's photographs move towards making portraits that are untranslatable, meaning that they do not easily slot into categories of sameness or of difference, but resist categorisation. It is, as Angeline Morrison says, "a freedom from the burden of signification that a racialised society would place on your skin — it is freedom from being read".⁸⁵

Deconstructing Authenticity

Adding to scientific, medical, and anthropological uses of photography, colonial photography was a creation of an "illusion of reality" or authenticity.⁸⁶ Maxwell writes that authenticity has been described as an innovation assigning value to artefacts from non-western backgrounds, but also as a device to camouflage the damage done by colonialism.⁸⁷

Returning to Bhabha's idea that there was no origin to return to, artists have been counteracting ideas of authenticity and origin through exaggerating stereotypical imagery of otherness and identity. One of the most well-known examples is American artist Kara Walker, whose cut out stencils are caricatures of

⁸³ Anne Maxwell, *Colonial photography and exhibitions: representations of the 'native' and the making of European identities*.

⁸⁴ Zarina Bhimji, *1822-now*, (1993), <<http://www.zarinabhimji.com/dspseries/5/1FW.htm>>

⁸⁵ Angeline Morrison, 'Autobiography of an (ex)coloured surface: monochrome and liminality', in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Discrepant abstraction* (London, Cambridge: Institute of International Visual Arts, MIT Press, 2006).

⁸⁶ M. Gidley, *Representing others: white views of indigenous peoples* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press for AmCAS, 1992), 1.

⁸⁷ Anne Maxwell, *Colonial photography and exhibitions: representations of the 'native' and the making of European identities*, 111.

both the coloniser and the colonised.⁸⁸ Walker's artworks use humour and satire to expose the fictional creations of both sides, playing on the stereotypical discourse of colonialism. Bhabha argues that the repetition of stereotypical jokes about oneself can transform the jokes and thereby the stereotype. From an examination of Bhabha's texts, Huddart explains that joking in the shape of mimicry "becomes a form of resistance to colonial discourse".⁸⁹

According to Papastergiadis, society's persistence on authenticity has limited the interpretation of artworks dealing with hybridity.⁹⁰ Artist Yinka Shonibare's practice can be seen as a critical response to the fixation of authenticity in his exploration of the hybrid history of cloth. His installations show the construction of African traditions by imperialism, through the example of imported fabrics from Indonesia, made into garments in factories in England and sold in markets in Africa.⁹¹ He highlights tensions between history and authenticity through the flaws in the authenticity of African-ness. He manages to show both the invention of authenticity, but also how we continue to be informed by certain 'authentic inventions'. Our social environment informs our identity as we incorporate cultural influences from our parents and social milieu and carry these with us in what Freud calls the Über-Ich.⁹² As Burgin says, "there is no identity that is not both mis-en-scène and narrative in personal memory and common history".⁹³ Fisher argues that "cultural identity is often imposed by forces outside the self, and the psychological dimensions of identification are fraught with ambivalence and contradiction".⁹⁴ And it is nearly impossible to know what our identity would have been without the influences and representations from our society.

⁸⁸ Flood, Richard, Fogle, Douglas, and Dewan, Deepali (1997), *No place (like home): Zarina Bhimji, Nick Deocampo, Willie Doherty, Kay Hassan, Kcho, Gary Simmons, Meyer Vaisman, Kara Walker* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center).

⁸⁹ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 58.

⁹⁰ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

⁹¹ Okwui Enwezor, 'Modernity and postcolonial ambivalence', in Nicolas Bourriaud (ed.), *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

⁹² Sigmund Freud, 'An outline of psychoanalysis', in Adam Phillips (ed.), *The Penguin Freud reader* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1940]).

⁹³ Victor Burgin, *In/different spaces: place and memory in visual culture*, 193

⁹⁴ Jean Fisher, 'Where here is elsewhere', 62.

Hybridity and Location

Artists who make hybridity a subject of their work often either address cultural influences due to globalisation or the cultural hybrid's confused identity, resulting from multiple influences. Papastergiadis explains how hybridity can be used by artists to highlight three levels of cultural transformation: as “effects, processes and critical consciousness”.⁹⁵ He finds the third level the most interesting and this is also what I am working towards. This can be linked to early practices of bricolage and displacement, and has more recently developed into practices that highlight hybridity as a tool to understand unequal positions, rather than a metaphor for cultural negotiation.⁹⁶ He uses Isaac Julien's work as a “strong example of the aesthetic and political process of cultural mixture [...which] explores the complex legacies of colonialism by intertwining historical, architectural and linguistic elements into a complex narrative”.⁹⁷ Julien's immersive multiscreen installations often make relationships between locations in the global south and north, such as in his *Fantôme Créole*, which juxtaposes African and Arctic spaces.⁹⁸

Relatedly, Victor Burgin observes how the port cities of Marseille and Algiers are so intertwined in each other's history and culture and what are thought of as ‘other spaces’ are already very hybrid places. They contain pieces of each other and to Burgin their ‘otherness’ is just an illusion.⁹⁹ On a similar note, artist Yto Barrada's *A life full of holes – the Strait Project*¹⁰⁰ comments on the double misrepresentations of both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar, “each considering the other as a site of possibility, exoticism, and the unknown”.¹⁰¹ Her images tell a story

⁹⁵ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and culture*, 117.

⁹⁶ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and culture*, 120.

⁹⁷ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', 44.

⁹⁸ Isaac Julien, *Fantome Créole*, (2005), (16mm, DVD transfer, sound installation)

⁹⁹ Victor Burgin, *In/different spaces: place and memory in visual culture*.

¹⁰⁰ Yto Barrada, *A life full of holes: the strait project*, eds Mark Sealy and Tom O'mara (London: Autograph ABP, 2005).

¹⁰¹ Lisa Le Feuvre, 'Yto Barrada – A Space of Ambivalent Desire', in *Gallery Photographers* (ed.), *Deutsche Borse photography prize 2006 : Robert Adams, Yto Barrada, Phil Collins, Alec Soth* (London: Photographers' Gallery, 2006), 46.

of global economics and personal loss. The 15km stretch of water has killed many people trying to cross from Africa in search of the dream and myth of Europe. Barrada's images tell a story of how when seen from afar, Europe becomes a place of myth and desire from the economic viewpoint of Tangier.¹⁰² This inverts Said's idea of the myth of the East in the imagination of the West to be the mythic notion formed in the East about the West.¹⁰³

Papastergiadis discusses hybridity in terms of migrants becoming agents of social change when entering metropolitan spaces and disrupting foundations of cultural authority. He takes Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta XI* as an example of global art's "common goal of challenging the national myths of place and belonging, a rejection of the binary between purity and mixture"¹⁰⁴. For me Papastergiadis echoes Bhabha's Third Space: "Hybridity thinking is never beyond the classical structures of identity and culture, but the re-negotiations and insertions within and between these identities can transform an understanding of the dynamics of these categories".¹⁰⁵

Hybridity and Loss

Zineb Sedira investigates shifting identities and ideas of origin, and the loss that occurs moving between places and languages. In her video installation *Mother Tongue*,¹⁰⁶ she portrays three women, the artist, her mother, and her daughter, each talking of their childhood in their first languages. Communication between the mother and the daughter breaks down, revealing how quickly language dissolves from one generation to the next.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Lisa Le Feuvre, 'Yto Barrada – A Space of Ambivalent Desire'.

¹⁰³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*.

¹⁰⁴ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', 41.

¹⁰⁵ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture', 61.

¹⁰⁶ Zined Sedira, *Mother Tongue* (2002), (Video)
<<http://www.zinebsedira.com/video/mother-tongue-2002>> (25/02/2012)

¹⁰⁷ Susan Bright, *Auto focus: the self-portrait in contemporary photography*.

Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* layers sound, text, and images from different temporalities to express longing and loss.¹⁰⁸ The distance portrayed in the piece is between herself and her mother and is caused by exile. The images are very intimate, including scenes of Hatoum's mother showering. We hear the sound of the shower and of women talking and laughing. Overlaid on top of the images are fragments in Arabic from Hatoum's mother's letters. A voiceover, in the artist's own voice, translates the letters into English. A multitude of temporalities are used to express the longing and distance experienced when leaving one place for another.

Fiona Tan has a mixed background¹⁰⁹ and also highlights difficulties in losing parts of herself when moving between countries, languages, and customs. She uses photography to explore how the medium triggers our imagination when creating our own biographies.¹¹⁰ In *Countenanced* she investigates photography's power in creating 'types' through the portrait.¹¹¹ She created moving image portraits and managed to highlight the awkward posing that occurs in self-representation. Of her portraits Mark Godfrey wrote that Tan uses old discarded tools, but revisits them critically to re-engage with the world: she "countenanced the archive, the ethnographic subject, and the genre of portraiture".¹¹²

1.3 ART AND GLOBALISATION

Cultural Nomadism

Today's art market and world is different from the one that artists in the 1980's and 90's were responding to. Hardt and Negri have argued that European imperialism has been replaced by what they call Empire. They wrote that while imperialism was

¹⁰⁸ Mona Hatoum, *Measures of distance*, (1988), (Video)
<<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/mona-hatoum-2365>>

¹⁰⁹ Fiona Tan has a Chinese father and Australian mother. She was born in Indonesia, grew up in Australia and now lives in the Netherlands.

¹¹⁰ A. F. Honigman, 'Where do I belong? Fiona Tan explores how individuals find their place in the world', *Art review : international art & style.*, 56/Journal Article (April 2005).

¹¹¹ Fiona Tan, *Countenance*, ed. Mark Godfrey (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2005).

¹¹² in Fiona Tan, *Countenance*, 78.

a system of national territories expanding for world domination, no nation-state can now take centre position and become a world leader.¹¹³ The new condition of Empire, or globalisation, is a collection of multiple forces and cannot be read univocally. The framework of today's art is directed by a global art market, which is paralleled with what Achille Bonito Oliva calls tribalisation.¹¹⁴ While "globalisation threatens identity in that it eliminates any attempt at personalising one's existence", Bonito Oliva argues that tribalisation is a "regressive response" re-embracing nationalisms.¹¹⁵ This corresponds to Hardt and Negri's view of the local position as false because it assumes that globalisation is homogenous whereas what is local is heterogenous. Instead, they argue that the idea of the local maintains that there are natural differences and origins to hold onto, which they criticise.

Hardt and Negri are adamant that the current situation of Empire is better than what preceded it and warn of nostalgic longing for the past. Even though there is exploitation within Empire, sometimes worse than during imperialism,¹¹⁶ they propose that there are ways in which these forces can be re-focused and re-organised to fit new ends.¹¹⁷ They argue that postcolonial and postmodern critique will reach an end because they are still fighting the 'old' enemy, the old system of power, and have failed to realise the new changes. Hardt and Negri claim that in Empire binaries have already been rejected since it thrives on difference; the arguments in postmodernism and postcolonialism have already been dismantled.¹¹⁸ Instead they declare that "[n]omadism and miscegenation appear here as figures of virtue, as the first ethical practices on the terrain of Empire".¹¹⁹

The nomadic that Hardt and Negri return to came out of the fight for non-fixed subjectivities in the 1990's. The idea of the nomad as one free from fixed identities

¹¹³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2000), xiii-xiv.

¹¹⁴ Achille Bonito Oliva, 'The globalisation of art', in Kamal Boullata (ed.), *Belonging and globalisation: critical essays in contemporary art and culture* (London: Saqi, 2008).

¹¹⁵ Achille Bonito Oliva, 'The globalisation of art', 43.

¹¹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 43.

¹¹⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, xv.

¹¹⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 137-38.

¹¹⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 361-62.

and postcolonial burdens and the fight for recognition, “embraces dislocation as a permanent home with lightness and joy”.¹²⁰ Bonito Oliva argues that artists who have not wanted to take on either position of global or tribal have turned to cultural nomadism where they “exercise their right to diaspora, their freedom to wander across the boundaries of various cultures, nations and media forms”.¹²¹ But, as Fisher questions is the West not speaking too easily of “globalisation as the transcendence or dissolution of borders and determinate identities” while still wishing to sustain its secure citizenship and passport.¹²² She writes that the phenomenon of “élite globetrotting flâneurs, belonging everywhere or nowhere”, disregards the personal experience of narratives of exclusion and colonial history.¹²³ I agree with her and Demos who ask how critical the strategy of nomadism is.¹²⁴ Demos can see the nomadic as a useful resistance to the current return to nationalism and ethnicity, but questions whether it cannot too easily be subverted into a role model of transnational capitalism and as such become non-critical.¹²⁵ Nomadism can easily come to disregard the more critical artworks on borders and unequal positions, in favour of the transnational artist that for example Anne Ring Petersen promotes:

artists, who live in one country, work in a second and exhibit in yet another, make questions of location and origin seem obsolete [...] the artists’ cultural identity and ancestry might be of less importance than the questions of how their works are shaped through the material practice of moving and settling, and how movement influences their sense of relatedness.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile', 80.

¹²¹ Achille Bonito Oliva, 'The globalisation of art', 44.

¹²² Jean Fisher, 'Where here is elsewhere', 63.

¹²³ Jean Fisher, 'The other story and the past imperfect', 7.

¹²⁴ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile', 80.

¹²⁵ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile'.

¹²⁶ Anne Ring Petersen, 'Identity politics, institutional multiculturalism, and the global artworld', 203-04.

Demos opposes this viewpoint:

nomadism suggests a contemporary 'primitivism', one that subscribes to a fantasy of freedom from all attachments, but which cruelly operates in a system that denies that freedom to the people from whom it borrows its name.¹²⁷

I agree with Demos and Fisher that to celebrate nomadism at a time when borders are becoming increasingly hard for non-westerners to cross appears self-congratulating, and pays little attention to "the average 'immigrant' — [who] must reinvent belonging, with little expectation of return".¹²⁸

New Curatorial Perspectives

Globalisation has given us a backdrop of art biennales, art fairs, and contemporary art markets no longer necessarily located in the West. Bourriaud writes that this reflects a revolution in contemporary culture where the distinction between centre and margin is no longer plausible.¹²⁹ There have been several attempts to change perspectives in postcolonial art to 'new viewpoints' and strategies, through broad but bold terms in global art festivals or anthologies. Examples include *Farewell to post-colonialism*, the Guangzhou triennial 2008, curated by Maharaj; *Altermodern*, Tate Triennial 2009, curated by Bourriaud; and Demos' *Return to the postcolony*. Each fight from slightly different corners to define the global art space we are in. Whereas curators such as Bourriaud celebrate the global art market, many argue that global art is still managed and judged from the position of the centre and that the margins have had to assimilate themselves to fit into that centre.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile', 83.

¹²⁸ Jean Fisher, 'The other story and the past imperfect', 6.

¹²⁹ Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Notes on globalisation, national identities and the production of signs', in Kamal Boullata and Al-Tashkiliyah Binali Al-Shariqah Lil-Funun (eds.), *Belonging and globalisation: critical essays in contemporary art and culture* (London: Saqi, 2008), 101.

¹³⁰ See for example Partna Mitter's and Saskia Sassen's contributions in James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, *Art and globalization* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

By now there is widespread criticism of institutional multiculturalism, which commodifies, regulates, and manages difference.¹³¹ This includes claims that the artist's biography distracts from the art works, that artists of non-Western backgrounds are ridiculed and primitivised and that folkloric and traditional 'ethnic' art forms have been prioritised and shown rather than contemporary art forms by non-western artists.¹³² Multicultural strategies, according to Petersen, became,

a severe obstacle to 'true' artistic recognition because it perpetuates a hierarchy in which Western artists obtain recognition on the basis of their individual artistic merits whereas non-Western artists are only recognised as representatives of the ethnic community and local culture to which they or their ancestors belong.¹³³

The fixity of cultural diversity can be argued to have replaced the binaries of black and white. The artist and founder of the journal *Third Text*, Rasheed Araeen argues that the postcolonial 'others' who play out the traditional roles of their racial, cultural, political or ethnic otherness are celebrated in the global art market. He criticises artists who do not understand the consequences when involved in what he calls the 'return to authenticity'.¹³⁴ Artists playing on their own authenticity are falling into a set trap from which they are not allowed to evolve. The work that they produce "is not entirely what the artists might have produced had they been free to act historically by taking a radical position in art, or even as an expression of their imagination as free individuals".¹³⁵ Similarly, Olu Oguibe has criticised the exercise in primitivising certain artistic practices to contain them.

¹³¹ Sarat Maharaj, 'Dislocutions', in Jean Fisher (ed.), *Reverberations: tactics of resistance, forms of agency in trans/cultural practices* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, Department of Design, 2000).

¹³² Rasheed Araeen, 'Ethnic minorities, multiculturalism and celebration of the postcolonial other', in Richard Appignanesi (ed.), *Beyond cultural diversity - the case for creativity* (London: Third Text Publications, 2010a); Jean Fisher, 'The other story and the past imperfect'; Olu Oguibe, 'Brief note on internationalism', in Jean Fisher (ed.), *Global visions: towards a new internationalism in the visual arts* (London: Kala Press, 1994).

¹³³ Anne Ring Petersen, 'Identity politics, institutional multiculturalism, and the global artworld', 197.

¹³⁴ Rasheed Araeen, 'Ethnic minorities, multiculturalism and celebration of the postcolonial other'.

¹³⁵ Rasheed Araeen, 'Ethnic minorities, multiculturalism and celebration of the postcolonial other', 59.

Within this there are artists of African descent 'invited by the West' to participate in a deliberate game that others and ridicules them and their practice.¹³⁶

As a rejection of this recent tendency to homogenisation, where multiculturalism has repeated the 'black mask' of a few decades earlier, Maharaj in *Farewell to post-colonialism* argues that the "blanket application" of postcolonialism within academic and cultural institutions was always questionable. He claims "the postcolonial kit — centre/periphery, N/S divisions, migrant/citizen, colonizer/colonized, authentic/derivative, authority/subordination, self/other and the like — was bogged down in new versions of the original deadlock".¹³⁷ Instead of the "over-translation' that globalisation plunges us into", Maharaj proposes "the open-ended force of not knowing — the capacity of translation to produce a shortfall or surplus of meaning and the untranslatable".¹³⁸ He reiterates his earlier arguments that to be translated into another language is a violent act and that we need to resist translation and refuse categories of difference to avoid treatment from that fixed place of difference.¹³⁹ Maharaj argues that the untranslatable gap he is looking for cannot be explored in words, but can be experienced through aural or visual mediums.

Artist Simon Leung writes that contributors to *Farewell to post-colonialism* were asked to "entertain foregoing obsolete framework of 'post-colonialism' in favour of a more affirming subjectivity, open to difference, transcending borders" beyond the nation state.¹⁴⁰ As an artist following global capital and trans-national opportunities, Leung refers to himself as a highly privileged 'guest worker', and uses this experience as material for his practice. But, Leung argues that even though he is critical towards parts of identity politics, he thinks that

¹³⁶ Olu Oguibe, 'Brief note on internationalism'.

¹³⁷ Sarat Maharaj, 'Counter creed: quizzing the Guangzhou Triennial 2008 according to James Joyce's 'Catechetical interrogation'', *Printed project*, /11 (2008) 5.

¹³⁸ Sarat Maharaj, 'Counter creed: quizzing the Guangzhou Triennial 2008 according to James Joyce's 'Catechetical interrogation'', 11.

¹³⁹ Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj, *Modernity and difference* eds Sarah Campbell, Sarat Maharaj, and Gilane Tawadros (Annotations 6; London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001).

¹⁴⁰ Simon Leung, 'Can the squatter speak?', *Printed project*, /11 (2008) 44.

postcolonialism contributed to discussing the different timeframes that post-colonials carry:

If we see ourselves as post-colonial, it is because our access to self-knowledge is not conducted via channels where we get a clear signal of identity, race or the nation as pure forms of being – but rather as categories that have historically been, and continue to be, imbricated in legacies of colonial violence.¹⁴¹

As Stuart Hall reminded us two decades ago, the postcolonial was never a singular discourse, but an umbrella term for ideas from multiple directions as well as the space where the various traumas of colonialism could be discussed.¹⁴² In fact, Hall argued that the very binaries, colonised and coloniser, were never absolutes, and that the postcolonial space allowed for a rereading of the binary colonial encounter. Responding to critics at the time, who, like Maharaj today, were demanding more multiplicity and dispersal, Hall said that “it is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that because essentialism has been deconstructed theoretically [...] it has been displaced politically”.¹⁴³ I agree with Hall’s statement and, even though I embrace Maharaj’s untranslatable space and differentiated conditions, believe that the effects of colonialism are still present and the postcolonial discourse offers a space where this can be addressed.

Like Maharaj, Bourriaud encouraged heterogeneous and heterochronic practices. *Altermodern* takes its root from otherness and asserts that postmodernism is dead. Bourriaud encourages the idea of artists becoming cultural nomads, “in space, in time and among the ‘signs’”,¹⁴⁴ and argues that nomadic artists “transform ideas and signs, transport them from one point to another”.¹⁴⁵ This does not sound too dissimilar from Bhabha’s proposal that hybridity displaces

¹⁴¹ Simon Leung, 'Can the squatter speak?', 46.

¹⁴² Stuart Hall, 'When was the 'post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit.', in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (eds.), *The post-colonial question: common skies, divided horizons* (Routledge Ltd, 1995).

¹⁴³ Stuart Hall, 'When was the 'post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit.', 249.

¹⁴⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 13.

¹⁴⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, 23.

signs through questions that arise through hybridity.¹⁴⁶ As argued by Enwezor in the catalogue for *Altermodern*,¹⁴⁷ are we not seeing a return to some of the debates in postcolonialism? Enwezor¹⁴⁸ and Demos¹⁴⁹ link the ideas in *Altermodern* to artists who have been working on these tensions for some time, such as Shonibare, Julien, Hatoum and Black Audio Film Collective. Demos argues that Black Audio Film Collective in particular went beyond ideas of postcolonial uprooting and were acting “as an oppositional force *against* the postmodern”.¹⁵⁰ In their work they developed techniques of montage, mixed archive video footage, and poetic representations into visual collages, to displace the signs of colonialism, while disrupting the purity of film.¹⁵¹ Demos argues that these artists employed hybrid methods to displace signs and “disrupt the purity of film and language.” For him these works did not conform to multiculturalism’s “politics of ‘recognition’ and ‘authenticity’” with its simplified ideas of difference and identity. Instead, “this work defeats essentialism though formal means, even while it commits to the particularities of ethnicity, race and gender that define the lived circumstances of the subject within a heterogeneous cultural frame”.¹⁵²

Demos favours artists rejecting nomadic romanticism in favour “of exposing the circumstances of those excluded from its privileged realm”.¹⁵³ In his view, artists such as Yto Barrada, the Otolith group, and Steve McQueen, have successfully reinvented documentary strategies to avoid reaffirming the objects of representation as victims.¹⁵⁴ Their methods include self-reflexivity, multiple screens, and physical installations.

¹⁴⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs taken for wonders', 112.

¹⁴⁷ Okwui Enwezor, 'Modernity and postcolonial ambivalence'.

¹⁴⁸ Okwui Enwezor, 'Modernity and postcolonial ambivalence'.

¹⁴⁹ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile', in Nicolas Bourriaud (ed.), *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

¹⁵⁰ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile', 77.

¹⁵¹ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile'. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the jungle: new positions in black cultural studies* (New York, London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁵² Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile', 79.

¹⁵³ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile', 84.

¹⁵⁴ Tj Demos, 'Modernity as exile'.

Demos argues that colonialism never ended, partly because there has been little European conscience in relation to their colonial past, which he explores in his book *The return to the postcolony*.¹⁵⁵ He resonates that the past is still among us as ghostly presence and in haunted memories “that refuse to rest in peace and cannot be situated firmly within representation”.¹⁵⁶ Demos discusses film and photographic practices that deal with questions of haunted memories the postcolonial West is living with. He highlights Western artists who have started to critically investigate the conditions left behind by their parents’ and grandparents’ European colonial history:

This impulse has inspired a kind of “reverse migration” for European artists: to return to the postcolony to seek answers to urgent questions regarding the causes and histories behind the desire of multitudes to travel northward, and to account for the transgenerational haunting for the injustices of the past that continues to inform the present.¹⁵⁷

In these current discussions on globalisation and art, hybridity is once again being addressed, but generally the term often has little to do with Bhabha’s original.¹⁵⁸ It has been argued that the fault of hybridity is that it is blind to unequal relationships,¹⁵⁹ and is an “empty gesture” that does not challenge power.¹⁶⁰ In its defence García Canclini recently argued that hybridity cannot simply be used for easy conciliation; rather, he argues that it is useful to make a difference between hybridity as a condition and as a process. As a process, there is room for it to

¹⁵⁵ Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

¹⁵⁶ Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 8.

¹⁵⁷ Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 10.

¹⁵⁸ For example see the discussion between scholars presented in *Art and globalization*. In this discussion it becomes clear that the meaning of hybridity oscillates between a celebration of mixture, a relationship between local and global or even as a term that is considered to be a new form of racism that return to essentialisms and universalities. James Elkins concludes the discussion that “hybridity is a dusty concept” and has become “a placeholder for various kinds of mixture, coherence, and incoherence, many of them essential for the articulation of contemporary art.” James Elkins, *Hybridity*, eds James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim (Art and globalization; University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 61.

¹⁵⁹ See James Elkins, *Hybridity*.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 216-17.

become developed enough to include the specificities of experience of unequal intercultural conflicts. This reiterates how I understand Bhabha's hybridity: as a disjuncture between positions which can interrupt and question performances in the present, to form new positions.¹⁶¹

1.4 MY RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

As a child, on the days when my father was meant to pick me up, I used to leave the nursery early. I did not want others to realise where I came from.

As a child I only spoke Swedish and refused to speak any other language. But when other children asked me to speak Tamil, without hesitation, I would make up a language. It was based on imitating my father's intonations when on the phone.

Mixed Belongings

My sense of identification is constantly shifting, and this conflict is what I am exploring in my research. The search for identity, as Bhabha and Hall have stated many times, is always incomplete, but yet there is a fantasy of finding it. I use hybridity as a tool to investigate my on-going negotiation between contradictory identifications and to question identity. I understand Bhabha's hybridity not as a mix of two different cultures, but as a process, or a space, where contradictions and identifications are negotiated. It is a neither/nor space. Borrowing words from Demos, I am not interested in creating a unified image of hybridity, or making it into a new essential identity; "instead each artistic project offers its own entrances into distinctive and immensely complex histories and places".¹⁶²

Focusing on mixed heritage artists from an Anglo-colonial or Scandinavian perspective, I research artists using their shifting points of identification to explore the battleground between constructed categories of black and white. Within this I am interested in artists who not only explore Fanon's idea of the Other seeing oneself as Other through the eyes of the oppressor, but also questioning the

¹⁶¹ Bhabha, *Locations of culture*, 7

¹⁶² Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 11.

position of the artist with mixed heritage as someone who must also assess her own stereotypes of others. By exposing this I aim to add to a re-reading of the representation of hybridity in photography and video arts, and map out a space from which my artworks can speak.

Although artist Adrian Piper has an African-American background her work is included into this research, because of the way in which she manages to undo the polarity between black and white racial constructions. In her video installation *Cornered*, she addresses the issue of being mixed-race straight on.¹⁶³ In a monologue she argues for the necessity for her to state that she is black. She points out the awkwardness of being white and black simultaneously, and gives examples of being in situations where white people feel that it is 'safe' to say racist comments about others, since she can 'pass for white'. Piper's work is interesting because she "performs her blackness not simply to demonstrate her dilemma but to reveal to viewers their responsibility for creating it".¹⁶⁴ I return to this work in chapter two.

The approach that I choose is to show the contradiction of on the one hand being a victim of racial stereotyping and on the other performing the same process in order to fulfil one's own desire to belong. This is different from the British/Indian artist Hetain Patel who explores cultural assimilation through imitation. In *To Dance Like your Dad*, Patel imitates his father's movement in a video questioning how much gesture is inherited and taught.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Adrian Piper, *Cornered*, (1988), (Installation) <<http://vimeo.com/10547710>> (04/09/2013)

¹⁶⁴ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 259.

¹⁶⁵ Hetain Patel, *To dance like your dad*, (2009), (Video) <<http://www.hetaipatel.com/projects/to-dance-like-your-dad-2009-2/>> (30/09/2013)



Figure 1.1: Still from *To dance like your dad*. Courtesy of the artist.

He has more recently presented a TED talk on his practice where he discusses the imitation of popular culture and the ironies of cultural assumptions.¹⁶⁶ His performance *American boy*, mimics a range of mostly American films and comics to create a single narrative.¹⁶⁷ His work shows us that identity is a construction based on imitation and that his construction is more influenced by popular culture, rather than his ethnic belonging.¹⁶⁸ However, it does not analyse critically the system that might be perpetuated through his imitation of it.



¹⁶⁶ Hetain Patel, *American Boy*, (2014), (Performance) <<http://www.sadlerswells.com/whats-on/2014/Hetain-Patel-American-Boy/>> (21/05/2014); *Hetain Patel - Who am I? Think again* (2013) (Video streaming www.ted.com, 06/2013).

¹⁶⁷ Hetain Patel, *American Boy*

¹⁶⁸ He talks about his use of mimicry of popular culture and of his father in his TED talk. *Hetain Patel - Who am I? Think again*.

Figure 1.2: Still from Hetain Patel, *American Boy*, Photographer: Pari Naderi. Courtesy of the artist.

My practice is also different from the practice by British/Japanese artist Simon Fujiwara, who makes up various fictions to fit his background and plays with an audience who wants to 'fix' him into a stable identity that they can understand. He refuses this fixity through constantly changing the narrative of his background, exaggerating stereotypes until they become unbelievable or creating archaeological remnants that change the course of history.¹⁶⁹ In the video *Artist's Book Club: Hakuruberry Fuin No Monogatari*, Fujiwara manages to satirise how both the cultural 'Other' and the 'Westerner' perform assigned roles.¹⁷⁰ He plays an exaggerated version of himself as a gay Japanese artist and is interviewed by a white man who is intrigued by Fujiwara's alternately factual and fictional story about his Japanese youth, while awkwardly trying to remain politically correct. In this piece Fujiwara exaggerates the exoticisation of him as Japanese, and at the same time the white western man can be seen as acting as his split self. I eagerly await each new project that Fujiwara makes and celebrate its inclusion into a discourse of hybridity, but in relation to my own practice it does not especially problematise the position of whiteness.

I find Harold Offeh's work *Haroldinho* more similar to what I am doing, although his intentions were originally different.¹⁷¹ In the piece we see Offeh dancing the basic samba steps to samba music coming from a portable CD-player next to him, with a background of popular tourist locations in Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁶⁹ See especially *The frozen city* in Simon Fujiwara, Miguel Amado, and Martin Clark, *Simon Fujiwara: since 1982* (London: Tate publishing) and Simon Fujiwara, *Artist's Book Club: Hakuruberry Fuin No Monogatari*.

¹⁷⁰ Simon Fujiwara, *Artist's Book Club: Hakuruberry Fuin No Monogatari* (2010), (Video Installation).

¹⁷¹ Harold Offeh, 'Haroldinho', <<http://haroldoffeh.com/Haroldinho>>, accessed 12/03/2015 2015.



Figure 1.3: Installation of *Haroldinho* at Gimpel Fils. Courtesy of the artist.

Offeh is dressed in blue overalls with homemade decorations, a common uniform for Brazil's labourers — the upkeepers of Brazilian society — which is seldom seen together with the decorations intended for carnival — the outward image and identity of Brazil.¹⁷² Through combining the various elements of Brazilian identity, seen from an outsider's point of view, the tourist locations, the samba and the carnival in contrast to the invisible labour, Offeh comments on how and from what we construct national identities. But Offeh's work also includes himself into the critique. During his residency in Rio de Janeiro, he was often thought to be Brazilian because of his dark skin colour.¹⁷³ Performing his role as a tourist in Brazil he shows how he mimics the national image of the country, but in so doing he participates in maintaining it.¹⁷⁴ In fact as we see in the video people and tourists join him in his dance and photograph him as a souvenir. As Kim Dhillon writes, Offeh's practice is influenced by history and popular culture, while being a product and critique of it at the same time.¹⁷⁵ He exposes himself as an actor and a product simultaneously of the society and system of representation that he criticises.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Harold Offeh, *Haroldinho*.

¹⁷³ Kim Dhillon, 'Harold Offeh', (Lux online: Lux, 2005).

¹⁷⁴ Filippo Maggia, *In our world – new photography in Britain*.

¹⁷⁵ Kim Dhillon, 'Harold Offeh'.

¹⁷⁶ Filippo Maggia, *In our world – new photography in Britain* (Milano: Skira, 2008).

My immediate reaction to *Haroldinho* was to contemplate what I participate in as a tourist in different places, in particular Sri Lanka. Whereas my Tamil cousins would feel nervous in the south of Sri Lanka because of its traditional Sinhala nationalist stronghold, I enjoy its yoga retreats or fried fish on the beach. Our different relationships to the place are marked by our different histories with it and influence how we continue to use it and how we see our position within it.

In a recent email conversation with the Swedish artist Linda Shamma Östrand, she discussed a similar conflict on which her work in progress is grounded. In her work she shares the conflicting perspectives between her now deceased Palestinian father's position, and her Swedish relatively passive relationship to the Israel/Palestine conflict. This forthcoming video sounds like it will fit into the space I am trying to map out.

Shamma Östrand's previous practice on hybridity includes extensive research into the link between hybridity and biology. As examples she has crossed animal species with each other to create new formations of hybrid animals. In one case she cross-fertilised two different types of frogs to create a new hybrid species: *Oophaga vicentei* × *Oophaga pumilio*.¹⁷⁷ She exhibited this together with a booklet on the process and personal accounts of having grown up mixed in Sweden.



¹⁷⁷ Linda Shamma Östrand, *Oophaga vicentei* × *Oophaga pumilio*, (2009-2010), (Animal) <<http://www.shamma.se/work3.php>> (02/03/2015).

Figure 1.4: Linda Shamma Östrand, *Oophaga vicentei* × *Oophaga pumilio*. Courtesy of the artist.

In another piece, *Moose in post-formulated state*,¹⁷⁸ she made a large public sculpture of a ‘kamälg’: a cross between an elk and a camel; each animal related to her parents’ backgrounds.



Figure 1.5: Linda Shamma Östrand, *Moose in post-formulated state*. Courtesy of the artist.

These configurations are reminiscent of Peter Mason’s text on imagined hybrid animal creatures drawn in the 16th century. Mason described those composite creatures, which were brought together into one figure, as something that cannot be categorised, something that cannot be referred to anything else but itself and thereby “defy description”.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Linda Shamma Östrand, *Moose in post-formulated state* (*Älg i postformulerat tillstånd*), (2009), (Public sculpture) <<http://www.shamma.se/work5.php>> (02/03/2015).

¹⁷⁹ Peter Mason, ‘The song of the sloth’, in Jean Fisher (ed.), *Reverberations : tactics of resistance, forms of agency in trans/cultural practices* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, Department of Design, 2000), 29.

There is something subversive about this process of hybridisation. It produces new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting the very terms of the system itself, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it. Just as carnival and transgression may include a revolutionary vector, so the hybrid maybe possess an oppositional force, resisting the attempts of a taxonomic logos to impose order by reducing otherness to familiarity.¹⁸⁰

Mason writes that “binary logic requires homogeneity in terms of reference, but the heterogeneity of the hybrid bypasses those terms” and plays with classification as a game.¹⁸¹ Shamma Östrand clearly uses this playfulness in her work on hybridity.

Although Lindsay Seers is a white, British artist, she was born and grew up in Mauritius. She uses autobiographical elements of her life in her art and constantly re-edits her life as a fact/fiction documentary, overlaid with historical accounts.¹⁸² In two of her recent works, *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*,¹⁸³ and *Nowhere less now* she returns to Britain’s former colonial locations — Mauritius and Zanzibar. The first piece explores her inability to speak until the age of eight years old when growing up in Mauritius, and how she developed a photographic memory instead. The second piece focuses on her great-great-uncle George with different coloured eyes, who served in the British navy in Zanzibar. In both pieces she questions personal and official histories’ relationship to the photographic image and archive.¹⁸⁴ As a white ‘Western’ artist taking on postcolonial concerns, Seers work corresponds to the ideas Demos proposes in the *Return to the postcolony*, as well as those by Petersen, who argues that politics of difference have perpetuated binary thinking

¹⁸⁰ Peter Mason, 'The song of the sloth', 26.

¹⁸¹ Peter Mason, 'The song of the sloth', 29.

¹⁸² Ole Hagen, 'Lindsay Seers, travelling beyond reason', in Nicolas Bourriaud (ed.), *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).

¹⁸³ Lindsay Seers, *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, (2009), (Installation) <http://www.lindsayseers.info/work_node/288>.

¹⁸⁴ Lindsay Seers, *Nowhere less now*, (2012), <http://www.lindsayseers.info/exhibition_node/345> (30/09/2013).

and have left “no space for the recognition of Western ‘difference.’”¹⁸⁵ Thus, it would seem there is a shift with practices from ‘Western’ artists entering into this postcolonial discourse.

Richard Dyer has also argued that much less attention has been given to the fictional construct of white identity than to non-white identity in the visual arts, but he comes at it from a different direction. Black is “always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything,” thus, stereotypes for whiteness are not as pronounced.¹⁸⁶ He argues that white people need to learn to see their white construction. Artists who explore ideas of western identity often do so in contrast with the identity of the Other. For example, the Swedish artist Johanna Rytel’s video *To Think Things You Don’t Want To* exposes a white woman’s overtly racist thoughts mixed with an intense erotic desire for a black man.¹⁸⁷ Rytel’s work shifts the assumption, as John Bowles has commented that art about race “matters to blacks but not to whites”.¹⁸⁸ As such it is interesting, but it keeps binaries of black and white. Seers’ practice, on the other hand adds ‘Western’ identity and history into a space of postcolonial trauma and explores how identities are intertwined in colonial history. As Burgin alerts us, “ideologies are not simply undone”.¹⁸⁹

Seers inclusion into the postcolonial art discourse helps me to develop my own practice to not fall back on binaries of who was the colonier and who was the colonised, but to expose the contradictions arising in both. I analyse how her work exposes her entanglement with uncomfortable colonial histories, and how this corresponds with my own practice.

¹⁸⁵ Anne Ring Petersen, 'Identity politics, institutional multiculturalism, and the global artworld', 201.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Dyer, *The matter of images: essays on representation*, 127.

¹⁸⁷ Johanna Rytel, *To think things you don't want to* (2005), (Video) <<http://www.joannarytel.com/video.html>> (15/12/2011).

¹⁸⁸ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*, 12.

¹⁸⁹ Victor Burgin, *In/different spaces: place and memory in visual culture*, 189.

I use autobiography and self-portraiture in still and moving images as modes of enquiry to explore problems of recognition. My desire for identification within visual art itself is fraught with contradiction. While I want to *recognise* myself and be *recognised* on the specific individual terms that I demand, I do not want to be placed and categorised or take part in creating an essential identity for people of mixed race origin. I do not want to contribute to essentialising hybridity, which Maharaj fears happens when differences are lumped together under one term.¹⁹⁰ I am interested in the hybridity thinking that Papastergiadis proposes, which is “driven by the dual desire of connections and separation”.¹⁹¹ In my artwork and in my writing I use my own experience as an artist who is mixed-race to deconstruct my own attitudes, in an effort to understand the complexity of hybridity and race. I bring to the surface the processes of recognition and misrecognition that take place simultaneously within all of us. While *identity* is what Stuart Hall calls an arbitrary closure, a temporary fiction or a full stop, *identification* is a never-ending process. Identity has its margins, its others and its lack, which are established through ideology and what Judith Butler calls normative regulation. Through the disavowal of certain identifications, conflicts arise when demands and desires in our unconscious contradict these norms.¹⁹² In the following chapter I examine ways in which the disjuncture of shifting identifications are explored in Adrian Piper’s *Cornered* and in my own practice.

¹⁹⁰ Sarat Maharaj at *A new internationalism symposium*.

¹⁹¹ Papastergiadis, Nikos (2012), *Cosmopolitanism and culture* (Cambridge: Polity), 133.

¹⁹² For a fuller discussion on this see Stuart Hall, 'Who needs 'identity'?', in Jessica Evans, Paul Du Gay, and Peter Redman (eds.), *Identity: a reader* (London: SAGE in association with The Open University, 2000 [1996]).



Figure 1.6: *Colour from A-Z of conflict*

2 SKIN AS A MARKER OF BELONGING

In the third year of my photography degree we had the freedom of making anything we wanted as our final body of work. The vastness of ideas was both terrifying and exhilarating. Having been pre-occupied with the construction of other people's identities I now experimented with myself.

In one of the first tutorials my teacher told me:

“If you are to use yourself in your photographs you have to understand what your image represents.”

In response to my confused look she clarified:

“A) Woman, B) Asian.”

2.1 INTRODUCTION

There is a conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth, whatever that might be.

Homi Bhabha¹⁹³

This chapter deals with the problem: how does the photographic image construct racialised identity? I will argue that a critical response to this problem involves interrogating a complex struggle at work in the eye of the beholder: a contest between various forms of recognition and misrecognition. No one is recognised on the terms that they demand. On the contrary, our desire to be recognised on our own terms is often thwarted by essentialist notions of sexual and racial identity. Arguably the world of reproducible images not only mirrors forms of essentialist identity at work in society but in addition it produces them, and organises them according to value systems. How, then, is a critique of racialised subjects that stands forth from contemporary photographic practices to be carried out? My argument proceeds in three stages.

Firstly, I take my bearings from the most famous theory of recognition in post-colonial theory: Franz Fanon proposes that black identity stands in need of white recognition. He assumes that racialised subjects strive to identify with an image of whiteness. He also makes a distinction between the Negress and the mulatto: “The first has only one possibility and concern: to turn white. The second wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back.”¹⁹⁴

Secondly, having established Fanon’s position I examine the installation *Cornered* by Adrian Piper. She uses her own body and the visual image to deconstruct the racialised subject. As a woman, who would fit Fanon’s description of a fair skinned mulatto, she takes the opposite view and consciously chooses to identify as black. As a theorist and an artist she is significant because of the fact that she proposes that no one is unquestionably white.

¹⁹³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Articulating the archaic', 123.

¹⁹⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 38.

Finally, I will analyse my own artistic practice, which introduces ideas of inhabiting contradictory identification simultaneously. Whereas Piper undoes the polarisations of binaries, it does not become clear in her practice how she imagines a future where binaries are no longer in place. She does not leave this space open, but rather closes it down, by choosing identification with a black mask. In my practice I open the space of not belonging to one or the other. I embrace Bhabha's expression of being neither/nor, and focus on Fanon's concluding remarks in *Black skin white masks*: "the Negro is not. Any more than the white man".¹⁹⁵ This points towards an openness, which does not fight for individual recognition but for, in Fanon's words, an "attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself".¹⁹⁶

Thinking Through Photography

For most of my life I did not understand that I needed to identify my racial identity publicly; and that if I did not I would be inevitably mistaken for white.

Adrian Piper¹⁹⁷

Photography made me aware of my own visibility. It has also allowed me to dig into what my appearance, my image, signifies. Images give me clues to how others see me. Visual representation and photography in particular, has been a major tool in processes of identification and recognition to such an extent that artist and writer Coco Fusco argues that "photography *produced* race as a visualizable fact".¹⁹⁸ She writes "as the most pervasive technology of visualization, photography has served as the primary guarantor of race as a visual indicator of invisible differences".¹⁹⁹ Fusco points out that this is not reserved for scientific photography, colonial archives and documentary, but all forms of photography have been utilised in this

¹⁹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 180.

¹⁹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 181.

¹⁹⁷ Adrian Piper, *Out of order, out of sight/ Volume I, Selected writings in meta-art, 1968-1992* (Cambridge, Mass ; London: MIT Press, 1996), 19.

¹⁹⁸ Coco Fusco, *Only skin deep: changing visions of the American self*, 16.

¹⁹⁹ Coco Fusco, *Only skin deep: changing visions of the American self*, 47.

way including high and low art and popular culture. Race was, and still is, she argues, a signifying system that has emerged out of a history of slavery and colonisation.²⁰⁰ Equally, Sekula argues that modern photography was in fact born out of the early scientific illustrations and “came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*, to define both the *generalized look* — the typology — and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology”.²⁰¹ My Asian features and brown skin refer me not only to ‘Oriental’ tales, and mythologies of the East from the late 19th century, as in Said’s writings,²⁰² but also to modern photography that still uses race as a signifier. Therefore, my identity is not a neutral thing in the sense of something that I can observe independently of my cultural context. On the contrary, my identity is mediated by the photographic image. To understand how others read me as an image I need to understand the relationship my identity has with photography.

Understanding how one is read as an image leads me to a set of questions: How can this image be changed? Why continue to use photographic representation to change it? In other words, how is a critique of the racialised photographic image to be carried out? For me literature has been able to provide more nuanced images of transcultural relationships so far and I am driven by a desire to extend this complexity to the photographic genre.²⁰³ As photographs were used forcefully in the process of creating race, it could be argued that it takes longer to deconstruct race through the same medium.

However, following Saul Newman’s argument in *Derrida’s deconstruction of authority*, deconstruction needs to take place from within the same place it is critiquing, with its own terms “with the intention of making these texts question themselves, forcing them to take account of their own contradictions, and exposing

²⁰⁰ Coco Fusco, *Only skin deep: changing visions of the American self*.

²⁰¹ Allan Sekula, 'The body and the archive', 7. Sekula’s essay offers a detailed overview of the relationship between photography’s uncomfortable history within eugenics, phrenology and physiognomy and how this affects the photographic image.

²⁰² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*.

²⁰³ Examples include Nella Larsen, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Richard Wright, Doris Lessing, Michael Ondaatje writing in English, and Katarina Taikon, Jonas Hassen M Khemiri, Marjaneh Bakthari writing with a Swedish background.

the antagonisms they have ignored or repressed”.²⁰⁴ In a similar line of argument Craig Owens’ essays collected in *Beyond recognition* support the need to use the photographic medium to transgress the current situation.²⁰⁵ He wrote, “every photograph of the Other is a visual reduction of the Other”.²⁰⁶ There is no point in simply opposing dominant representations with a counter representation. This would be to say that there in fact exists a “true” representation as opposed to a “false” one.²⁰⁷ However, also referring back to Derrida, Owen warns that representation cannot be condemned altogether, since many voices have been excluded and denied representation. Instead, he wrote, “what we must learn, then, is how to conceive difference without opposition”.²⁰⁸ He argued that it is perhaps through self-representation rather than representing others: “how to speak to, rather than for or about, others — that the possibility of a global culture resides”.²⁰⁹ In addition, Martin Jay concludes in *Downcast eyes*, that antiocularcentric discourses²¹⁰ often fail to recognise the pleasure of looking, the “lust of the eyes”.²¹¹ In contrast to demonising ‘the eye’ he encourages “the multiplication of a thousand

²⁰⁴ Saul Newman, 'Derrida's deconstruction of authority', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol 27 /no 3 (2001) 2.

²⁰⁵ I use ‘transgress’ from Derrida’s concepts of inversion, subversion and transgression. Newman writes that Derrida does not aim for an inversion of the binaries, since this would only perpetuate the essentialist identity of binaries. “Inversion in this way leaves intact the hierarchical, authoritarian structure of the binary division.” Derrida is also sceptical to the idea of subversion — overthrowing the hierarchical structure all together — “rather than inverting its terms”. “Derrida believes that subversion and inversion both culminate in the same thing — the reinvention of authority, in different guises.” Thus, “to avoid the lure of authority one must go beyond both the anarchic desire to destroy hierarchy, and the mere reversal of terms. Rather, as Derrida suggests, if one wants to avoid this trap the hierarchical structure itself must be transformed, transgressed. Political action must invoke a rethinking of revolution and authority in a way that traces a path between these two terms, so that it does not merely reinvent the place of power.” Saul Newman, 'Derrida's deconstruction of authority', 4-5.

²⁰⁶ Craig Owens, 'Improper names', in Scott S Bryson et al. (eds.), *Beyond recognition: representation, power, and culture* (Berkeley ; Oxford: University of California Press, 1992c), 290.

²⁰⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other question', 262.

²⁰⁸ Craig Owens, 'The discourse of Others: Feminists and postmodernism', 171.

²⁰⁹ Craig Owens, 'Global issues', 326.

²¹⁰ Jay examines the denigration of vision and lists through Breton, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Barthes and Lyotard as examples.

²¹¹ Martin Jay, *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 590.

eyes”.²¹² Thus, photography needs to be questioned from within photography, and specifically within portraiture and representation, rather than from a place external to it. These arguments all confirm a continued use of photography, and in particular portraiture, in order to critique visibility and representation.

2.2 FANON AND RECOGNITION

Identifying with an Image of Whiteness

Fanon and Sartre argued that to be recognised is essential for identity, and our recognition is dependent on being seen by the Other.²¹³ Inspired by Hegel, Fanon wrote:

man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him[...]It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend.²¹⁴

Fanon’s thinking has many similarities with Sartre’s ideas in *Being and nothingness*, that he thinks humans were conditioned to live with humans, whose gaze objectifies them.²¹⁵ Sartre argued that it is in the process of objectifying the Other that we realise we are becoming an object for the Other, who is another subject.²¹⁶ Fanon argued that Sartre’s speculations on the Other could not be translated into the relationship the black man has to the white man, since the white man is also his master, whether real or imaginary.²¹⁷ Fanon writes,

there is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of

²¹² Martin Jay, *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*, 591.

²¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* ; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*.

²¹⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 168-69.

²¹⁵ David Macey, *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory*.

²¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*, 180-81.

²¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* see footnote p106.

their thought, the equal value of their intellect [...] For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white.²¹⁸

The black man for Fanon has already lost his subjectivity and freedom since he has been taken over by a feeling of non-existence, with no black past or future to turn to and with no inclusion into the white man's world.²¹⁹

Fanon explains that the black man's relationship to his self-image in the colonial society is pre-determined by a white gaze. In a close reading of the chapter *The negro and psychopathology* François Vergès argues that one can read *Black skin white masks* as Fanon's own disavowal of his own creole history and family and his wish for an imagined "postcolonial past untainted by whites".²²⁰ Vergès writes "Fanon posits a point of stasis. The Negro looks in the mirror and sees a white. Taking off the mask, he is supposed to see himself. There is no third term, no language that mediates desire and subjectivization".²²¹ I have memories of myself standing in front of the bathroom as a young girl in Sweden figuring out who I could be. If I was not recognised as Swedish, this must mean that I was something else, but I could not see myself from that direction. I tried to see which image I could fit into. Covering my hair in a towel I would contemplate whether I fitted better as a Muslim woman or a nun. The solution would often be that I combed my wet hair straight and imagined what an Indian princess would look like, and tried to imitate an image I had never seen. This scenario has now become an image in itself — I see the girl, as Freud describes screen memories, from the outside.²²² Strangely though, even though I know this girl is myself, in my memory she looks more Asian than I remember ever looking. Her hair is black, almost blue, and hangs straight long on her back. My hair was brown. An example of what Marc Guillaume calls internal exoticism: "I am caught in my own role and observe myself as an alterity; I

²¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 3-4.

²¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 101-07.

²²⁰ François Vergès, 'Creole Skin, black mask: Fanon and disavowal', *Critical Inquiry* (JSTOR, 23: The university of Chicago press, 1997), 594.

²²¹ François Vergès, 'Creole Skin, black mask: Fanon and disavowal', 591.

²²² Sigmund Freud, 'Screen memories', in Adam Phillips (ed.), *The Penguin Freud reader* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1899]).

create this distance inside myself".²²³ As Fanon, I had a desire that if I could see what image others saw when looking at me, I would understand who I was underneath my mask. Arguably, this is a process that now continues with my photography.

My grandmother used to find me head down in her large Hans Christian Andersen book, engrossed in *The ugly duckling*.²²⁴ The grey duckling around the yellow ducklings, the misfit that eventually turns into a swan. As fairy-tales provide some of the first representations for children, Amelia Jones writes that artworks have been central for the construction of the European and the American subject.²²⁵ And as Edward Said famously reminds us, the construction of stereotypes of others stabilises the superior position of the West as much as fixes the Other.²²⁶ The work of art is crucial in this process and in particular photographic practices that long paraded as a medium of truth and objectivity.

²²³ Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume, *Radical alterity*, trans. Ames Hodges (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008 [1994]).

²²⁴ H. C. Andersen, *The ugly duckling, and other stories. [With illustrations.]* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1909).

²²⁵ Amelia Jones, *Seeing differently : a history and theory identification and the visual arts* ([1st ed.]. edn.; Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

²²⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*.



Figure 2.1: *Vellakari*, from *A-Z of conflict*

2.3 ADRIAN PIPER

When looking for artworks that approach some of the dilemmas of being from a mixed-race background I did not find many. Arguably, this could be because there are still anxieties related to racial and sexual contamination, that originated in narratives of purity and anxieties of interracial mixing, in contemporary debates on national belonging.²²⁷ Karina Eileraas writes that by the late 1800's there was widespread fear of mixing with people from different races; "Polygenesis, or tropical degeneration theory, predicted the dangers of white exposure to the tropical climate of Asia and Africa, which were believed to stunt European moral and intellectual growth."²²⁸

One of the few artists I have found who explicitly discusses the experience of falling between racial categories is Adrian Piper. She writes about her experience of being excluded from both black and white categories and her autobiographical artworks often treat this subject.²²⁹ At the time of making this work Piper identified as African-American, and her family history on both sides share this identification.²³⁰ However, her skin is very light and she is often 'passed as white', which she problematises in her installation *Cornered*.²³¹ This work was made in the US in the late 1980's, at a time when identity politics had entered the art world. *Cornered* references general themes from that time, which I will elaborate on further in this chapter, but, she also did something different for her time, which is why I would argue that her work still holds currency to be debated today. More than undoing visibility as a means of knowing identity, and de-stabilising binary

²²⁷ Karina Eileraas, *Between image and identity: transnational fantasy, symbolic violence, and feminist misrecognition*.

²²⁸ Karina Eileraas, *Between image and identity: transnational fantasy, symbolic violence, and feminist misrecognition*, 105.

²²⁹ She specifically writes about it in Adrian Piper, 'Passing for White, Passing for Black', *Transition*, 58.

²³⁰ Adrian Piper no longer identifies as African-American and recently officially retired from being black. On her website she advises references to her to state "The artist formerly known as African-American". Adrian Piper, 'News September 2012', <http://adrianpiper.com/news_sep_2012.shtml>.

²³¹ Adrian Piper, *Cornered*.

oppositions of white and black, her piece specifically calls attention to whiteness and white as a problematic identity. Piper uses performance in her practice to embody a persona, to whom the audience is positioned in relation to. Throughout her performance she articulates that to identify as white is a choice and not a natural given. In contrast, she decides to declare herself black. Through this position she engages her audience to react on their feelings towards her, and positions herself as the object they would project their aggression towards. I will demonstrate how she does this, and why this is important to my continued discussion on hybridity.

Cornered

In a corner of a room in a gallery stands a small TV. In front of it are a few chairs and a table, which looks like it has been turned over in anger. In its current state it serves as a shield for the TV. There are two birth certificates hanging on the wall. They are both for the same person. One labels the new-born as white, the other as Octoroon.²³² The birth certificates belong to Piper's father, to whom Piper dedicates the work. On the TV a woman, Piper, appears. We can only see her shoulders, neck, head and her hands — clasped in front of her. She is sitting at a table. She looks straight at us. Confronting us even before she utters a word. She wears a blue cardigan and pearls. Her skin is not white or black, it is somewhere in between. It is difficult to place her. Her silence makes us concentrate on her face and her features. Then she speaks. "I am black", she says. This statement is followed by a 16-minute monologue arguing the necessity for her to state this fact.

²³² A term for a person that has one-eighth black ancestry, therefore usually fair-skinned and with a historical implication of skin-privilege among other blacks.



Figure 2.2: Adrian Piper, *Cornered*, MCA Chicago Installation. Courtesy of APRAF.

In *Cornered* Piper asks her audience how they feel when she chooses to identify as black rather than white. Her skin is fair and she explains that she sometimes ‘passes’ for white. To choose black rather than white becomes a political statement, since she is choosing to identify with the position that is less favourably perceived. If there was equality, Piper argues, to declare oneself as black would not become an issue and would not make her audience feel uncomfortable. Fusco writes “if equality has been achieved, then what does race mean? If race is still meaningful, does that mean that racism has not been eliminated?”²³³

Like many black artists at the time, Piper uses her own body in her work. Cherise Smith writes

the body is the container of identifications, the screen on which identity is projected, the mechanism through which identity is acted out, and the object that

²³³ Coco Fusco, *Only skin deep: changing visions of the American self*, 16.

experiences identity. [... Artists'] use of their own bodies emphasizes the facts that the body is the site on which identity and identification are based and is the medium through which it is experienced.²³⁴

However, whereas many artists at the time were commenting on how the black body had been degraded in photographic and archival representation, Piper was emphasising that the body in itself had become a medium of representation. She used herself to expose definitions of race that she was compared to in the everyday. In *Art since 1900* Piper is placed in the same category as Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems as they “resist and redraw racial stereotypes” whereas artists such as Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare and Fani-Kayode Rotimi “exaggerate them to the point of critical explosion”, what Kobena Mercer calls “the stereotypical grotesque”.²³⁵ Foster argues that “Weems is more inclined than Piper to question objective claims of truth value” and that Simpson is not “as confrontational as Piper”.²³⁶ Simpson is also noted for her concentration “on the use of photography as evidence, especially in the construction of pseudo-objective typologies of black identities”.²³⁷ Focusing on the treatment of the black body, Weems, Simpson, Shonibare and others made inventions of stereotypes visible. This was a key point for Bhabha in his essay on the stereotype, where he encouraged attention to modes and processes of representation rather than focusing on whether representations were positive or negative.²³⁸ These artists’ work make visible the structures behind the creation of stereotypes, in order to disrupt their continued repetition and effectiveness.

²³⁴ Cherise Smith, *Enacting others: politics of identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2011), 18.

²³⁵ Hal Foster, *Art since 1900 : modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 641.

²³⁶ Hal Foster, *Art since 1900 : modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, 640.

²³⁷ Hal Foster, *Art since 1900 : modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, 640.

²³⁸ See Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other question'.



Figure 2.3: Adrian Piper, close up from *Cornered*. Courtesy of APRAF.

In *Cornered* Piper resists categories, as Foster argues, but rather than doing so to critique representation of the black body, I believe she uses her own body to problematise the assumed desire of black subjects wanting to become white. Instead she highlights issues that arise for her when she is being passed for white. As such she challenges Fanon's argument that the highest form of recognition for the mulatto woman would be to pass for white. Piper discusses how the perception of her changes depending on how she appears as an image in the everyday. She says she is regarded differently depending on if she is seen as black or white and thereby treated differently depending on how she is perceived. As an example she explains that she is often present when white people make racist remarks about black people, thinking there are none present. Similarly, sociologist Suki Ali writes about her experience being passed as white and becoming privy to racism held by people around her. She questions whether people 'forget' that she is mixed-race or thinks that she is 'white enough' to make derogative comments about 'others'.²³⁹ These shifting perceived identities allow Piper to explore her position in situations like these. In the piece Piper's persona verbalises that to be passed as white puts her in an uncomfortable position. She therefore decides to declare herself as black — the only position available to her in a society with binary structures.

²³⁹ Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices*.

John Bowles writes that Piper “performs her blackness not simply to demonstrate her dilemma but to reveal to viewers their responsibility for creating it”.²⁴⁰ Fanon claims that Europe has a racist structure and that everyone within this structure is responsible for creating it.²⁴¹ He reminds us “the feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority”. Through Sartre, he writes: “the Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew [...] It is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew”.²⁴² Piper actively brings her audience into her dilemma. She addresses people who don’t think race concern them:

It’s our problem if you feel that I am making an unnecessary fuss about my racial identity. If you don’t see why I have to announce it this way. Well, if you feel like my letting people know I am not white is making an unnecessary fuss, you must feel that the right and proper course of action for me to take is to pass for white. Now, this kind of thinking pre-supposes a belief that it is inherently better to be identified as white. It bespeaks an inability to imagine or recognise the intrinsic value of being black.

Adrian Piper, *Cornered*²⁴³

Kobena Mercer points out the construction of difference has been “reduced to the perception of *visible differences* whose social meaning is taken to be obvious, immediate and intelligible to the naked eye”.²⁴⁴ Stereotypes of otherness rely on clear boundaries, visualised through concentrating on visual differences. Richard Dyer writes

The role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what in reality is fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁰ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*, 259.

²⁴¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*.

²⁴² Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 69.

²⁴³ Adrian Piper, *Cornered*.

²⁴⁴ Kobena Mercer, 'Busy in the ruins of wretched phantasia', in G Tawadros (ed.), *Changing states : contemporary art and ideas in an era of globalism* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2004), 164.

²⁴⁵ Richard Dyer, *The matter of images: essays on representation*, 16.

However, as Bhabha argues, because stereotypes are based on ambivalence they can never be completely fixed, but always need to be repeated in order for them to be successful. Piper uses her skin to contradict the signification of skin used to fix stereotypes, since even though she appears white, she says she identifies as black. Drawing attention to how her own visual appearance does not correspond to the image of her identification and background she exposes how black and white are both essential constructions that are filled with hybridity.²⁴⁶ Thereby Piper resists and refuses to belong neatly into an either/or image. *Cornered* can be seen to, in Bhabha's words, mock the "spirit of mask and image".²⁴⁷ Piper exemplifies how Bhabha's theory of cultural confusion can be used as political subversion. This is done through showing how she, "the depersonalized, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally difficult to place. The demand of authority cannot unify its message nor simply identify its subjects".²⁴⁸

Piper unwraps ambivalences related with stereotypical knowledge and presents her audience with two problems. Firstly, she critiques the ontology of identity. She shows how skin/colour is crucial when placing people in categories, not only in images, but also in our everyday life. As Edward Ball argues, the spectacle and simulacra of ethnicity does not only take place in visual culture, but in our everyday *encounter* with an assumed otherness.²⁴⁹ It is thereby still, in Bhabha's words, "a problem for the attempted closure within discourse".²⁵⁰ Piper alerts her audience to the thin imagined boundary between black and white categories, since she can be situated in both of them and equally into neither. She draws attention to the danger of accepting ones classification, and identifying with an image, white or black. Thus, agreeing with Bhabha:

²⁴⁶ Lola Young, 'Hybridity's discontents: rereading science and 'race'', in A. Brah and Annie E. Coombes (eds.), *Hybridity and its discontents : politics, science, culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²⁴⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Interrogating identity', 62.

²⁴⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Interrogating identity', 62.

²⁴⁹ Edward Ball, 'Constructing ethnicity', in Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen (eds.), *Visual display : culture beyond appearances* (10; Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1995).

²⁵⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other question', 81.

The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an “image” of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image.²⁵¹

Secondly, Piper critiques the value attached to the construction of whiteness. Stuart Hall wrote that even though we can agree that identities are fictional and constructed this does not mean that they are not built on ‘real’ histories, which are not “simply ‘journeys of the mind’”.²⁵² By showing how she is passed as white Piper opens up a space for her audience to reflect on the positioning and thereby the value of whiteness. She argues against the assumed neutrality of whiteness and instead points to its position of power in society. She does so by pointing to issues of the purity of whiteness and the fact that most Americans are probably ‘tainted’ by ‘black blood’, but would not want to admit it.

In this process Piper goes beyond re-claiming the image of black skin, freeing black skin of signification of otherness. The effect of the work is to make whiteness visible to those that inhabit it and to problematise the idea of accepting to become white. In her performance Piper refuses to take part in being passed for white and as such deviates from Fanon: in one day the “mulatto went from the class of slaves to that of masters [...] She had been recognised through her overcompensating behaviour. She was no longer the woman who wanted to be white; she was white”.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', xxix.

²⁵² Stuart Hall, 'Minimal selves', in Lisa Ed Appignanesi (ed.), *Identity: the real me* (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 45.

²⁵³ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 41. It is worth noting that as early as in the 1920's Nella Larsen was writing short stories on the complex psychic relations of passing and its effects on the self, one's relationship with others (black and white) and on one's relationship to personal history. The stories *Quicksand* and *Passing* are set in the US and in Denmark. Larsen was herself a mix between a Danish mother and a black West Indian father, who died early in her life. The stories give space to issues of passing from multiple directions and show the characters grappling with conflicting demands of both sexual and racial desires. Nella Larsen and Deborah E. McDowell, *Quicksand & Passing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989).

White as Choice

Piper's practice can be regarded as didactic and confrontational. She wants to involve her audience in her process and "attempts not only to say something clearly and without circumlocution but to say it directly to that particular viewer".²⁵⁴ It is therefore not strange if the viewer feels attacked or to a lesser extent provoked. Piper wants her work to lead viewers to reflect on their own impulses to racism relative to a target she embodies. She wants the audience "to come away from [the work] with an understanding that their reactions to racism are ultimately political choices over which they have control".²⁵⁵

Piper's persona in *Cornered* highlights that her declaration of skin colour is not just *her* problem, but *our* problem and we need to deal with it together, black and white. Nevertheless, her work has been criticised for being caught in the dialectic of white/black, me/not-me, aggressor/victim and artist/audience, thus relying on the very binaries that she aims to critique.²⁵⁶ Danielle Knafo has argued that:

Piper tries to collapse the difference between self and other by putting herself in our place and us in hers. She repeatedly informs us that we are like her. Taking her up on her own logical argument, then she is also like us. She too is inclined to prejudice, racism, xenophobia and, yes, being white.²⁵⁷

But, Knafo questions if Piper realises her own position as a mediator within the system. In her defence Bowles says Piper uses existing binary oppositions to expose their use in society.²⁵⁸ Piper is likely to be constantly thrown in between those two positions, with no middle ground existing in public imagination. As an example, Piper's lighter skin has meant that critics and also the black community contest her blackness. In a written response to a performance/lecture by Piper, Barbara Barr

²⁵⁴ Adrian Piper, *Out of order, out of sight/ Volume I, Selected writings in meta-art, 1968-1992*, xxxi-xxxii.

²⁵⁵ Adrian Piper, *Out of order, out of sight/ Volume I, Selected writings in meta-art, 1968-1992*, 234.

²⁵⁶ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*; Amelia Jones, *Seeing differently : a history and theory identification and the visual arts*.

²⁵⁷ Danielle Knafo, *In her own image : women's self-representation in twentieth-century art*, 136.

²⁵⁸ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*.

accused her of “being a white woman whose assertion of blackness is “nonsense” and a desperate claim to certain advantages.²⁵⁹ In other circumstances, Bowles writes, “art historians and critics frequently characterize Piper as an angry black woman”.²⁶⁰ Piper argues that she is trying to highlight the absurdity of claiming belonging to one group or another. I would argue that Piper is aware of being a mediator within the system, and uses her position in her performance to expose conflicts one faces if agreeing to being passed as white.

Several theorists to date have argued that a problem in the analysis of race and mixed race is that white as a category has not been analysed as an ethnic category in itself.²⁶¹ Sociologist Suki Ali writes “racialisation is an active process that currently rests in the hands of the most powerful in society. The ‘naturalness’ of whiteness as both ‘race’ and ethnicity is still hegemonic, despite the impact of ‘black culture’”.²⁶² Dyer wrote that the “property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power”.²⁶³ Bowles writes of Piper’s relationship to whiteness:

to identify as “white” is to risk declaring who I think I am and who I am certain I am not. Piper argues in *Cornered*, to claim whiteness is to claim privilege by insisting upon and naturalizing a racialized distinction, whether or not there are any other racialized to which I might lay moral claim. However, it is also clear that to refuse to acknowledge whiteness is tantamount to claiming it, as if I believe I have somehow transcended race.²⁶⁴

Piper argues that nobody is unquestionably white. According to the ‘one drop rule’, the American classification system categorising anyone with any known black

²⁵⁹ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*, 260.

²⁶⁰ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*, 1-2.

²⁶¹ Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices*, 14; Jill Olumide, *Raiding the gene pool: the social construction of mixed race*.

²⁶² Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices*, 180.

²⁶³ Richard Dyer, *The matter of images: essays on representation*, 127.

²⁶⁴ John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*, 13.

ancestry as black, the majority of white Americans would in fact be black.²⁶⁵ In light of this, Piper encourages her audience to research their own family history and if there is any African ancestry they should, according to the classification system, classify as themselves as black.²⁶⁶ Piper asks if the audience would, and if they won't, why not?

*But remember, now when you have this information about your black ancestry, whatever you do counts as a choice. So, which choice will you make?*²⁶⁷

Thus, Piper does not only highlight that whiteness is a construction. She argues that it is a choice over which one has control. Once we have seen what this construction is, why choose whiteness?

Fanon's argument that the black man wanted "to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*"²⁶⁸ is because the collective unconscious of Europe is fuelled by blackness as "darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation; and on the other side, the bright look of innocence the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light".²⁶⁹ Therefore, Fanon argued, both black and white people living in this culture aim for whiteness. Since white is linked with all positive associations in a Western society, it is assumed that if one can pass for white one would.

In Fanon's conclusion of *Black Skin White Masks* he wrote "the disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved. The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man".²⁷⁰ By confusing the categories of white and black, Piper draws attention to that binaries were never

²⁶⁵ A Phoenix and C Owen, 'From miscegenation to hybridity: mixed relationships and mixed parentage in profile', in A. Brah and Annie E. Coombes (eds.), *Hybridity and its discontents : politics, science, culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²⁶⁶ Piper's proposition enlightens a repressed history and memory of slavery, which specifically shadows American history of race. Hal Foster makes a distinction between how the racist ideologies in the States and Britain are marked by slavery on the one hand and colonialism on the other. The term black is broader in the UK than the US. Hal Foster, *Art since 1900 : modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*.

²⁶⁷ Adrian Piper, *Cornered*.

²⁶⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 45.

²⁶⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 146.

²⁷⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 180.

as clear-cut as Fanon puts it. Hall reminds us that binary constructions of coloniser/colonised were always just that, constructions, and that the clear lines that divided them were never that simple. Hall asserted that “a certain nostalgia runs through some of these arguments for a return to a clear-cut politics of binary oppositions, where clear ‘lines can be drawn in the sand’ between goodies and baddies”.²⁷¹ Ali agrees:

What is at stake is a recognition of the politics of ‘race’ (and gender of course) that is based on boundaries, purity, and exclusion, and the need to come from out of the borderlands into a place of security. There are no such certainties that do not involve loss and erasure.²⁷²

Piper shows that, in Hall’s words, there is no “absolute return to a pure set of uncontaminated origins”.²⁷³ Angeline Morrison writes that since Piper shares the colour of the white majority the “‘joke’ that the mixed subject is able to play on white society is that she contains exactly that which white society would attempt to deny her — whiteness itself”.²⁷⁴

Passing

Piper’s methods explore ideas of what it is like to be in-between classifications and to disrupt ideas of purity. Although the history of mixed-race follows that of general colonisation and race theory, it has the added dimension of being entwined in a history threatening ideas of history, purity and origin.²⁷⁵

I embody the racist’s nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation, the reminder that segregation has never been a fully functional concept, the sexual desire penetrates social and racial barriers, and reproduces itself. [...] I represent the

²⁷¹ Stuart Hall, 'When was the 'post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit.', 244.

²⁷² Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices*, 89.

²⁷³ Stuart Hall, 'When was the 'post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit.', 244.

²⁷⁴ Angeline Morrison, 'Autobiography of an (ex)coloured surface: monochrome and liminality', 139.

²⁷⁵ Robert JC Young, *Colonial desire: hybridity in theory, culture and race*.

loathsome possibility that all of you are “tainted” by black ancestry. If someone can look and sound like me and still be black, who is safely white?²⁷⁶

Central to the theory of mixed is to be able to pass for white. Morrison writes,

although passing for black does occur the more usual definition would involve a mixed-race subject (or a fair-skinned black subject) attempting to live undetected ‘as’ white in their particular society. Passing is shot through with connotations of tragedy, negativity, ‘inauthenticity’, and of letting the side down for personal gain.²⁷⁷

Olumide writes that passing is based on an idea of hiding ones ‘true identity’ in order to pass for something else, assuming there is such a thing as pure identity.²⁷⁸

Piper has in the past stated that she identifies as African-American,²⁷⁹ but she has also discussed her sense of entitlement identifying as an upper-middle class, white heterosexual male.²⁸⁰ From my personal experience I find resonance in these contradictions, which expose the multiple identifications one is faced with.

Piper and Ali emphasise that the issue is not what someone can pass as, but what *others pass* one as.²⁸¹ In research by Olumide, on the social experience of being mixed-race, she found that her interviewees said that when they are pigeonholed their own beliefs are denied and other personal experiences undermined.²⁸² Piper is not trying to place herself into a category, but to resist the very category others place her in.

Similarly, I experience being passed by others and expose this process in my art works.²⁸³ I cannot choose to pass. I am not white. And my skin is too light for me to

²⁷⁶ Adrian Piper quoted in John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: race, gender, and embodiment*, 258.

²⁷⁷ Angelina Morrison, 'Autobiography of an (ex)coloured surface: monochrome and liminality', 138.

²⁷⁸ Jill Olumide, *Raiding the gene pool: the social construction of mixed race*, 10.

²⁷⁹ Amelia Jones, *Seeing differently : a history and theory identification and the visual arts*.

²⁸⁰ Adrian Piper, *Out of order, out of sight/ Volume I , Selected writings in meta-art, 1968-1992*, xxxiv.

²⁸¹ Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices*.

²⁸² Jill Olumide, *Raiding the gene pool: the social construction of mixed race*, 10.

²⁸³ Especially in *Balancing Act*.

look Tamil. This draws my attention to others' need to place me into existing racial constructions, essential categories of purity. Morrison writes that

In terms of psychic structure mixed-race people are multiple in the sense of their potentially shifting racial identities. Such a structure is incomprehensible to a system whose judgements are binary. In cases where a subject's optical surface visibly confounds the structure's foundational binary, the system is doubly destabilised [...] In a system that demands that somebody be clearly either black or white or Asian, for example, stories that feature the nature of multiple subjectivity seldom get told.²⁸⁴

Amelia Jones writes that Piper chooses the opposite of the category she is defined as.²⁸⁵ But I argue that she is demonstrating the impossibility of fitting into either. She shows us the difficulty of being in between, of having to choose, or having others to choose for her because of her visual image. Phoenix and Owen write that, "bipolar constructions of black and white have been responsible for notions that people can be "between two cultures" or "neither one colour or the other"".²⁸⁶ In Britain and the USA, due to the polarisation of black and white, children from mixed parentage have been included in the 'black' category. However, people with a black and white parent are often separate from both black and white people in society and have been given names such as 'half-caste', 'mixed-race', 'bi-racial', 'mulatto' and 'métis'.

*You may believe that anyone who can pass for white has no moral right to call themselves black because they haven't suffered the way visibly black Americans have.*²⁸⁷

Adrian Piper, *Cornered*

Piper says that if someone thinks that 'light-skinned blacks' do not suffer then one has nothing to lose by declaring oneself as black. This can be read as a personal

²⁸⁴ Angeline Morrison, 'Autobiography of an (ex)coloured surface: monochrome and liminality', 139.

²⁸⁵ Amelia Jones, *Seeing differently : a history and theory identification and the visual arts*.

²⁸⁶ A Phoenix and C Owen, 'From miscegenation to hybridity: mixed relationships and mixed parentage in profile', 73.

²⁸⁷ Adrian Piper, *Cornered*.

reflection on her background, having been treated as ‘different’ from both white and black communities. In recent research by Ali she found that mixed race children faced the same kind of insults as other black children, but on top of this they were also discriminated against by other black and South Asian children.²⁸⁸ The experience that Piper highlights speaks of an exclusion from any available category, a denial to belong to both an African ancestry and a white American majority.

I was once offered a residency for artists with Indian diasporic backgrounds. It was during my MA when people constantly compared their own success with their contemporaries. After telling a colleague of my offer she said “I will also paint myself black”.

2.4 MY PRACTICE

Inbetween

Piper made important advances undoing the binaries of black and white categories in American society, one that has similarities with the European society that I live in now. By determining the position she could occupy within her society she managed to create an ambivalent space, blurring the boundary of the binaries she was set between.

This leads to the question of what positions I can occupy within my society. As with Piper my practice is less about the confusion due to having a mixed background and more about how this position exposes the difficulties people face when I cannot be placed into fixed categories. Although theories of race have moved beyond essentialisms, the social reality is different. Phoenix and Owen claim that arguments about complications in identity for children of mixed parentage “focus on to the problems of identity from the children produced from mixed unions” rather than the structural racism they are exposed to, thus, emphasising

²⁸⁸ Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices*, 152.

being mixed as something problematic in itself.²⁸⁹ For me, being mixed is not a problem in itself, but in the binary society that I live I am still experiencing essential stereotypes being placed on my ‘image’ and I am still influenced by people’s presumed ideas about me.

I agree with Piper’s strategy to make binary constructions and assumptions hypervisible before they can be made invisible. But my critique of Piper’s practice would be that she doesn’t imagine a future where binaries are no longer in place, as Fisher and Demos propose. Amelia Jones write that younger artists such as Glenn Ligon “born after the 1960’s explore and articulate identification in more complex and ambiguous terms”.²⁹⁰ Glenn Ligon responded to Piper’s *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981) with a photographic diptych *Self-portrait Exaggerating my Black Features / Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features* (1998), in which he successfully managed to highlight the mixing of both in one and the same person.²⁹¹



Figure 2.4: Adrian Piper, *Self-Portrait Exaggerating Negroid Features*. Courtesy of APRAF. Glenn Ligon, *Self-Portrait Exaggerating my Black Features* and *Self-Portrait Exaggerating my white features*. Courtesy of Thomas Dane Gallery

²⁸⁹ A Phoenix and C Owen, 'From miscegenation to hybridity: mixed relationships and mixed parentage in profile', 78.

²⁹⁰ Amelia Jones, *Seeing differently : a history and theory identification and the visual arts*, 12.

²⁹¹ Amelia Jones, *Seeing differently : a history and theory identification and the visual arts*, 11.

Piper says “The question should not be whether any individual is racist; that we all are to some extent should be a given. The question should be, rather, how we handle it once it appears.”²⁹² However, in *Cornered* she does not reflect any responsibility or guilt for being a part of the same society that she is critiquing. In her performances she often takes the position of the target. If her viewers are experiencing various guilt, defence and xenophobia mechanisms that she refers to she does not demonstrate that she can identify with them.

In my artworks I expose the vulnerabilities of a person who is seen as an Other but who also makes assumptions based on her Western context. As such I expose the battle in between positions of identification. I work with the assumption that if I expect viewers to understand my position I must demonstrate that I share their position too. My strategy is less direct than Piper’s. I do not want my audience to feel antagonised. I would like my viewer to have time to identify with a character and grasp an understanding of the situation before I disrupt the scene and expose one’s own role and mistakes with the scenario.

My practice not only highlights situations when I have felt victimised, but also when I have perpetuated this process myself. Whether this is in spite of, or due to, the racism that I myself have experienced is not clear. My position can sometimes seem offensive since I might speculate on things that aren’t politically correct, making the audience find me unlikeable and be less inclined to associate themselves with someone like my character. However, this strategy is used to make evident how multiple sides live alongside each other within me, how they are negotiated and what implications they might have on our wider societies and ourselves.

Lacuna

I started to think about issues of internal racism in my Masters while making my previous work *Lacuna* (2009). In it, similar to *Cornered*, I encourage the viewer to focus on my visual appearance, my visibility, by not showing more than my head

²⁹² Adrian Piper, *Out of order, out of sight/ Volume I , Selected writings in meta-art, 1968-1992*, 25.

and shoulders. My head moves from side to side; I am trying to perfect a movement. I call it an 'Indian head nod'. The piece is silent, but at the bottom of the screen are subtitles from recollections of my dealings with otherness. I expose examples of how I deal with a part of my own family where cultural misunderstandings are frequent. In them I am hinting at my own inability to reconcile with difference.



Figure 2.5: Still from *Lacuna*

In *Lacuna* I explore Bhabha's concept of being "almost the same but not white",²⁹³ but I turn it around. Rather than trying to fit into the Western national collective that I grew up with I am trying to fit into an image of me. Based on my appearance I am most often read as Indian. In Sweden I am also occasionally taken for Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian, probably because a majority of non-white immigrants in Sweden are from those countries. I am constantly failing to do the head nodding

²⁹³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 89.

movement in front of the viewer and am thereby failing to do the very gesture and behaviour that I am associated with. The failure not to be able to perfect the body language associated with my appearance disrupts an idea of authenticity. The learnt rather than natural body language becomes apparent. The 'unconscious' gestures revealed taught. It shows a rupture in my own family coherence where the gesture and body language passed on to family members has been disconnected. I have mimicked the dominant body language in the society I grew up in, rather than my father's.

The subtitled text in *Lacuna* contains subtle examples of identities being constructed through the interaction with others. Throughout the video my comments are written from the point of view of a European observing 'others'. But, in the last fragment my own difference becomes apparent. In a similar event to Fanon's example of an every-day scenario with a small white girl reacting in fear to his blackness, my appearance signifies my difference:

*When I was little we used to
cross over to Denmark by bus.
Generally we were not stopped to show our passports.
But when my father came with us
the whole bus was always stopped
and all the passengers had
to show their nationality.
I knew it had to do with my father since when
I was with my mother we were never stopped.
Always relating these controls
with the foreignness of my father,
I was surprised several years later
when the bus was stopped in his absence.
It took me some time to understand
that this time the foreigner was me.
(Lacuna, 2009)*

Without doubt these reactions to my image have also informed me of what image I 'should' identify with.

Breaking Lines

In the video *Balancing Act* (2012) I return to the idea of how comments from others, external interference, have informed my self-image. This is a split screen installation where my feet walk the familiar lines on the floor of a sports hall. The accompanying audio contains my voice narrating incidents when others have reminded me of how I appear as an 'image', together with a commissioned piece of music using fragments from the national anthems of Sweden, Denmark, Sri Lanka and Britain, the conflicting national allegiances of my background. The music only offers hints of recognition, creating an ambiguous sound where the origin of any song is nowhere to be found.



Figure 2.6: Stills from *Balancing Act*

Balancing Act creates a disorientating experience, questioning the rigidity and arbitrariness of systems we take for granted, the maps and borders, how these may be negotiated and how we might fall in between. The piece uses the rigidity of sport lines to link origins of historical mapping and sports rules from Britain to the rigid ideas people still draw on when defining others. The lines become a metaphor for how nationalities, borders and ethnicities are taken for granted, even though their invention was often arbitrary. As Paul Gilroy states, although essentialism has been contested for over 20 years “all across Europe, national identity, belonging, and the imperilled integrity of national states are being articulated with the language and symbols of absolute ethnicity and racialized difference”.²⁹⁴ This was written almost ten years ago, but the same conflict is very much on-going now in the discussions surrounding general elections both in my homeland Sweden and in the UK during the time of this thesis.

²⁹⁴ Paul Gilroy, 'A cat in a kipper box or, the confession of a 'second generation immigrant'', 79.

Balancing Act was inspired by Roland Barthes' unpacking of myths, and by Anderson's and Bhabha's account of nations and nationalities as imagined constructions.²⁹⁵ I was reminded of the Danish invasion of Britain, around the same time as the part of Sweden I am from (Skåne) belonged to Denmark. Consequently, the Anglicization of imperial rule that followed was already 'tainted' by Vikings. Thus, Scandinavian and Tamil hybridity had taken place long before my parents met.

My feet are followed by two cameras from different angles as they move, following the lines, but also moving across, shifting games. They embody an experience of being in between, negotiating edges of borders. As the viewer is only ever seeing this fragment of the body, the totality of the body has to be imagined. As I understand from Jacqueline Rose's interpretation of Lacan's *Imaginary*, one's own fragmented body as a whole unity is always an illusion and fiction of totality.²⁹⁶ The meaning of the object (in this case me) in the reflection or mirror image (in this case the video image) is only situated through the symbolic order and through the Other, for Lacan through language, law and society (in this case through language directed at me from others, which I am re-telling in the video). The real is the relationship between these, when things do not correspond and the fiction becomes apparent.

The voice over starts describing an image of a woman (the narrator) walking a dog by a lake. While walking she focuses her attention on the people she meets and which image she imagines they have of her: "*The friendly young woman who smiles as a hello? Or the dark stranger with a wry smile as unpredictable as the dog I am leading?*" Her uncertainty to which one they see makes her overcompensate her behaviour. She forces herself to smile, so she will not be seen as a threatening

²⁹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, eds Annette Lavers and Sian Reynolds (London: Vintage, 2009 [1972]); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006); Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁹⁶ Jacqueline Rose, 'The Imaginary', in Jacqueline Rose (ed.), *Sexuality in the field of vision* (London, New York: Verso, 2005).

stranger. The narrator continues telling the viewer anecdotes from her life.²⁹⁷ Fragments from the everyday, when people unknowingly place her into categories, in combination with an encounter with an analyst, build a picture of an individual battling with contradictory identifications.

The Imagined Gaze

In the encounter with strangers the narrator imagines what image they see of her. The contradictory demands, depending on her encounters, means that her identification is constantly shifting. Rose writes that

the demand of the subject is in each case directed outwards to an external object, and it is the relationship of this demand to the place of the object it claims that becomes the basis for identification.²⁹⁸

Lacan stresses the importance of language (the Other) in the relationship with the other and one's self-image.²⁹⁹ Stijn Vanheule explains that images are constructed through "representations and meanings people construct by using words, rather than the impressions the visual system processes; language determines the mental representations people discern and the relations they have with others".³⁰⁰ Consequently, the repetition of comments I receive have etched themselves onto my memory and led me to create images of myself. In my perception this image often reflects an otherness back to me, imagined or actual. I interpret the gaze directed at me as a force that strips me from a part of my background. Rose clarifies:

the ideal ego would therefore be a projected image with which the subject identifies, and comparable to the imaginary captation of the mirror-phase; the ego ideal would be a secondary introjection whereby the image returns to the subject

²⁹⁷ Although most of the fragments are collected from my own memories, there are also other people's stories re-told to me, which I use to make the text more fictional and less specifically about me.

²⁹⁸ Jacqueline Rose, 'The Imaginary', 183.

²⁹⁹ Stijn Vanheule, 'Lacan's construction and deconstruction of the double-mirror device', *Frontiers in Psychology* (13/09/2011 edn., 2, 2011).

³⁰⁰ Stijn Vanheule, 'Lacan's construction and deconstruction of the double-mirror device', 3.

invested with those new properties which, after the 'admonitions of others' and the 'awakening of his own critical judgement' are necessary for the subject to be able to retain its narcissism while shifting its 'perspective'.³⁰¹

This means that the subject changes itself depending on which images are reflected back from the other. The difficulty in the relationship between the subject and the gaze is that "the image the subject can actually convey, and the perspective from which the other reacts, never correspond to the gaze the subject relates to at the level of fantasy".³⁰² However, the subject is dependent on the gaze, since the gratification of the scopic drive is to *be seen*.³⁰³ To not be seen, or to have ones ideal ego shattered by not being seen as one wishes, creates a fear of castration. Rose writes that the "moment of castration is that in which the Other reveals itself as exponent of desire or false witness, and it represents the final collapse of the Other as a guarantor of certitude".³⁰⁴

Balancing Act conveys the reflection of my self-image, as discerned in people's interaction with me. It also exposes part of my own idealised self-image: my frustration of being assumed different, of wanting to belong with the society that I grew up in. In the beginning of the narrative I contain my anger, so as not to be seen as aggressive, re-affirming the stereotypes I already imagine others have of me. But, at the end of *Balancing Act I*, the narrator, let the dog run. I walk rapidly off the lines, implying I no longer aim to place myself neatly onto the lines that I have been assigned.

Through my process of making *Balancing Act*, Piper's work became important. She reminded me that the desire for whiteness is a rejection of difference and an affirmation that whiteness is somehow superior to blackness. Whiteness is another fictional construction, but one that has been idealised and made more influential to the darker one I am read as. Through Piper's advice I finally attempt to break my

³⁰¹ Jacqueline Rose, 'The Imaginary', 177.

³⁰² Stijn Vanheule, 'Lacan's construction and deconstruction of the double-mirror device', 7.

³⁰³ Stijn Vanheule, 'Lacan's construction and deconstruction of the double-mirror device'.

³⁰⁴ Jacqueline Rose, 'The Imaginary', 188.

repetition and start understanding what it means to *not* be. I stop aligning myself with an already constructed identity.

Balancing Act creates a space for me to occupy that lies somewhere in between my shifting identifications. This space is full of uncertainty. It is a space in which it becomes possible to think about hybridity that does not hold onto binaries, but where one is constantly tied down by others' reliance on stereotypes and fixed identities. It is not about aligning oneself to one image or another, but about the shifting that takes place when others apply their imagination to my being.

Presenting my shifting position I invite the audience to share in the dissonance between my perceived identity and other's perception of my identity. It highlights that all identities are constructions created somewhere in the gap between the seer and the seen. For Bhabha it is in the space in between contradictions that questions of identity need to be addressed.³⁰⁵ The space of hybridity opens up positions where contradictions coexist and can disrupt fixed ideas of identity. The mirror-image described by Lacan is an attempt by the subject to overcome the anxiety from being made up from fragments, the lack of consistency.³⁰⁶ Lacan's split subject is created in the "fiction of self-representation — the subject sees itself as a whole only by being placed elsewhere".³⁰⁷ The unified picture in the mirror, the image of the self, hides the reality that "the subject is no one".³⁰⁸ This brings us back to Fanon: "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man".³⁰⁹

Conclusion

The history of photography has made my features, and in particular my skin colour, impossible for me to make a self-portrait without the viewer considering my gender or ethnic origin. In order to challenge this perception I have analysed and responded to how I am perceived as an 'image' in the everyday and how I have

³⁰⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Third Space'.

³⁰⁶ Stijn Vanheule, 'Lacan's construction and deconstruction of the double-mirror device'.

³⁰⁷ Jacqueline Rose, 'The Imaginary', 183.

³⁰⁸ Lacan, 1988, quoted in Stijn Vanheule, 'Lacan's construction and deconstruction of the double-mirror device', 4.

³⁰⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 180.

internalised an imagined gaze. My practice and writing is in dialogue with Adrian Piper's practice thirty years earlier that managed to visualise the gap between binary polarisations. Piper's persona in *Cornered* refused a belonging with whiteness and in contrast chose the less advantaged black position, since those were the only positions available to her in a binary society. My practice takes a different approach, showing I do not fall back onto binaries but am reminded of them from other people's perception of me. On the one hand, I highlight that essentialism lingers in a postcolonial society; on the other, I open a space to think about the value positions between the constructions of black and white, a hybrid space from which we can evolve.

Having explored my position as other within a western society in this chapter and through *Balancing Act*, in the next chapter I consider the inverse situation: in Sri Lanka I am regarded as other, but white. This underpins my video work, leading me to critically analyse the performativity within it.

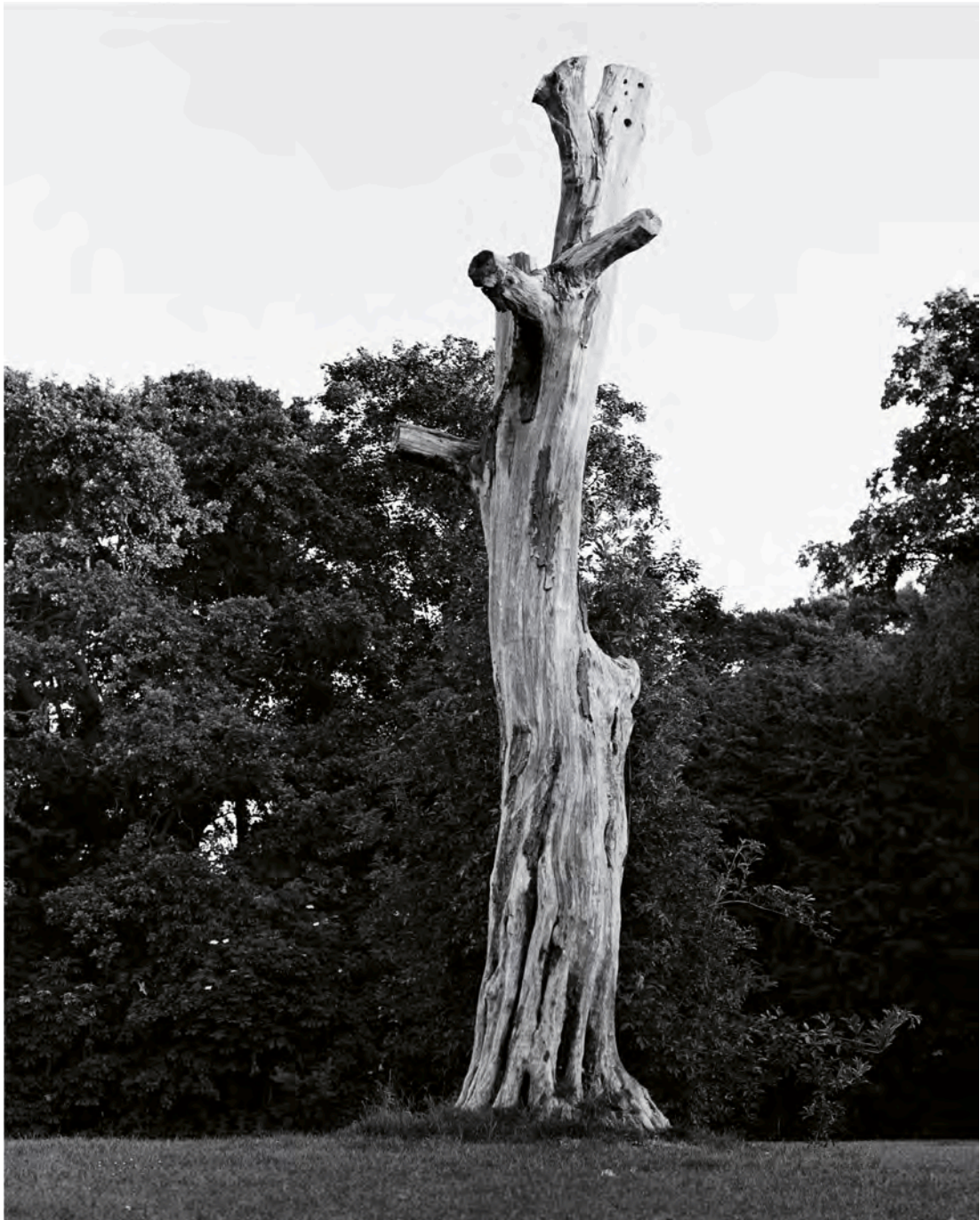


Figure 2.7: *Identification from A-Z of conflict*

3 PERFORMATIVITY AND POSING

26/4/2012

Calista's older sister slept on Pulle's floor in Colombo. She told me she ran for her life once and shared the floor of the room in the university with 25 people. They burnt her house containing everything she owned. I asked about the photos. She didn't say much. But she mentioned the fridge they had three times.

When I asked how she had slept the night before she said "you have to learn to live in all conditions". She slept on the floor where I had seen cockroaches earlier. I slept in a bed upstairs with a special cooling machine, under a mosquito net. I had been concerned about the bed bugs I saw when I woke up. I was worried they would travel home with me in my sheets. Now I felt bad. And how strange it was that I, the younger woman, was given the bed before a couple in their sixties. A spoilt guest of honour. My auntie would not have had it any other way.

The night before I had spent 18 000 rupees per night in a hotel. An amount I could never tell them. They thought maybe I spent 6000 rupees and thought that was super-expensive. They could easily find out exactly what I paid online. Yet, they don't.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Thus far I have outlined the theory and art practices that deal with notions of postcolonial hybridity before moving on to think in more detail about aspects of recognition and the experience of being in between binaries. I concentrated on the dominant theorist of recognition used in postcolonial theory, Frantz Fanon in relationship to the practice by the artist Adrian Piper. My reading of Piper's work *Cornered* argues for her *choice* to identify as black, despite having the option of 'becoming' white because of her fair skin. I have argued that in doing so she not only chooses the side of the oppressed but also forcefully contends that being white is a choice, rather than a predetermined fact. I continued to analyse how I might use this to question my own practice by including my own problematic choices and actions into the equation; I argue that my practice not only presents the hybrid artist as a victim to others' prejudices, but also how those prejudices are repeated through my own actions as a mediator within a discourse.

This chapter will look carefully at my self-portrait in *We call her Pulle* to analyse reflexively which gestures and actions I repeat in front of a camera. The footage is shot in the birthplace of my father, a small village in the north of Sri Lanka, during two trips. Although my intention when making this work was to focus on the relationship between my father's sister Pulle and myself, I notice through looking closely at my footage, how I try to perform a certain image of myself in front of the camera. Through the following analysis of particular moments of footage, I contemplate whether the image I am projecting is intended for a Western audience more than for Pulle. I examine the conflict and perhaps the impossibility of wanting to belong to contrasting places simultaneously. Whilst in the video one can observe that I adapt somewhat into my aunt's environment to fit the place that my father came from, there also seems to be a disrupting force that prevents this through me not being able to disregard the camera, my imagined Western spectator, and an underlying desire to fit into the Western (white) society that I grew up in.

I argue through analysing my gestures in the video that our self-portraits always reveal more than was intended and that it is complex for me to understand my true intentions for making this work. However, through self-reflection in combination with theory on performativity, mimicry and autobiographical filmmaking, I contemplate for whom I am making this work and for what purpose. What arises amongst the questions that I conclude with is that one of my narratives is often more dominant: it is my Western background.

3.2 POSING FOR THE CAMERA

I watch her through the camera as she sweeps the front yard. Her body slightly hunched. Her head bent down. With small strokes she pushes the leaves aside. The sand creates dust just below her head. Her sari touches the ground as she moves along. There is a structure, a system, in her movements. Her feet are bare and dance lightly around the broom. Her steps are small and her feet move one at a time. The broom is leading the way. The sound is rhythmic, even. She collects the leaves and anything else on the ground into neat piles at the edge of the concrete. She stops, looks at me. Looks onto the garden. Places one hand on her back.

I re-frame. Re-focus. I try to guess the direction she will move in. I think of the dancers earlier in the day, stomping their bell-jewelled feet into the floor on stage. I think of the manoeuvring of the feet, the gestures of the feet. I zoom in on the feet. Re-focus. It is a daily exercise for her. It looks like a familiar routine. I wonder if she is sweeping for my visit. But I doubt it. In Sweden she swept my mum's front yard of autumn leaves when they came to visit.



Figure 3.1: Stills from *We call her Pulle*

I look up from my camera. She has stopped again. She looks tired. Looking at her feet I have failed to notice. Thinking she would not accept, I ask if I should take over. I assume she doesn't want me to sweep as a guest. I am wrong. She walks over to me, hands me the broom and I hand her the camera. She sits down, holds the camera and relaxes. I sweep.

Moving in front the camera I become aware of my gestures, my body's movements. Worried about looking out of place and incompetent, I make up a strategy. I don't mimic hers since I don't want to seem like I never sweep. My imitation resists becoming identical to my aunt's movements, as if I am trying to be different from her through not repeating her actions too accurately. In contrast to her small steps and contained posture my steps are large and the broom is held far away from my body. I turn my back towards the camera. To avoid the constant gaze of the lens, I face the dog, a dog I don't particularly like, but which I don't want to be seen disliking. The dog watches me, becoming another spectator in which I reflect upon myself. I move in front of him, to the edges of the camera's reach. I am aware of the framing and consciously move within it to avoid the image becoming boring. I am aware of the dog following me with his gaze. Without looking at him I try to keep his attention, for the image.



Figure 3.2: Stills from *We call her Pulle*

I occasionally glance back at Pulle, wondering if I am doing it right, and seeing if she is still holding the camera steady. She looks like she is thinking about something completely different, still holding the camera, dutifully, but with no particular interest of what is happening on the screen. She looks like my father when he was driving. He would, deep in his own thoughts, mutter 'hrm, funny' for no apparent reason. Never sharing the thoughts going through his head.

My arm quickly feels the strain from the sweeping and I make an effort not to show it. I reflect on my own laziness, sitting for far too long not taking over from a woman twice my age. It took me too long to empathise with the effort of the task.

The Self-Portrait

Later looking at the footage I see my performance. I can feel it. It makes me feel inauthentic and fake. Borrowing Roland Barthes' words "I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know I am posing".³¹⁰ I pose for my aunt, myself and for the camera, and for my expected audience. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes reflected on the experience of being photographed: "[i]n front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art".³¹¹ He wrote "everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image".³¹² Barthes wrote that the relatively new experience of seeing oneself in a photograph was the advent of seeing oneself as other. The desire to transform oneself into a suitable image comes from the desire to see oneself through the other.

However, the tradition of self-portraiture emerged long before the photograph. Laura Rascaroli writes that the self-portrait as we know it in Europe stems back to the 16th century, which saw the rise of both the literary autobiography and the painted self-portrait. She writes: "all self-portraits are deeply concerned with the relationship and negotiation between the portrayed self and the original self".³¹³ The issues that come into play in this division include

³¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography* (London: Vintage, 2000, 1981), 11.

³¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 13.

³¹² Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 10.

³¹³ Laura Rascaroli, 'The self-portrait film: Michealangelo's last gaze', in Alisa Lebow (ed.), *Cinema of me : the self and subjectivity in first person documentary* (London: Wallflower Press, 2012), 64.

the contrast between the idea body and the natural body; the double and divided self; the mirror image and the processes of recognition and misrecognition; the name and the signature; the act of revealing and the act of concealing.³¹⁴

The process involves a doubling, a split self. The artist is watching him/herself from the outside. Therefore, recognising oneself in a photograph, from the outside, is always a failure and full of distortions.

For Barthes it was a deeply disturbing experience to have his portrait taken. He argued that it was his “*political* right to be a subject” that needs protecting, in contrast to becoming an object, an image”.³¹⁵ Paul Jay argues that this difficulty arises from the impossibility of projecting ones’ ideal self-image onto an actual photographic image.³¹⁶ As Barthes writes:

“Myself” never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and “myself” which is light, divided, dispersed [...] if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!³¹⁷

Craig Owens wrote about the experience of being photographed in terms of freezing oneself into a still image in front of the camera, posing in anticipation, “not in order to assist the photographer, but in some sense resist him, to protect myself from his immobilizing gaze”.³¹⁸ He writes that posing is a form of mimicry. We use a mask as a shield to protect ourselves. “Thus, mimicry entails a certain splitting of the subject: the entire body detaches itself from itself, becomes a picture, a semblance”.³¹⁹ David Company follows up on this by saying that even though the subject does not pose, the camera poses the subject: “hence the anxiety we might have about being photographed, being posed by the camera without first being able to com-pose ourselves”.³²⁰ Barthes writes that he does not know how to

³¹⁴ Laura Rascaroli, 'The self-portrait film: Michealangelo's last gaze', 64.

³¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 15.

³¹⁶ Paul Jay, 'Posing: autobiography and the subject of photography', 195.

³¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 12.

³¹⁸ Craig Owens, 'Posing', 211.

³¹⁹ Craig Owens, 'Posing', 212.

³²⁰ David Company, 'Posing, acting, photography', 107.

compose himself into the image he wants to project; “[w]hat I want to have captured is a delicate moral texture and not a mimicry [...] I don’t know how to work upon my skin from within”.³²¹ So, being photographed always involves a loss of control over our ideal image.

“To recognize oneself in a portrait (and in a mirror) one imitates the image one imagines the other sees” Peggy Phelan writes.³²² She argues that “all portrait photography is fundamentally performative” based on an imitation of an already existing image, found in other representations, in the mirror or in imagination.³²³ We perform and repeat our portrait in front of the camera. Working with video rather than the still image in *We call her Pulle*, I can observe how I compose myself into becoming an image, an object. In Fiona Tan’s *Countenance* the audience are able to see how people self-present themselves in a video, thinking they are having their photographic portraits taken and strike a pose for the camera.³²⁴ This act reveals both the desire of the person to be seen in a certain way, Barthes’ desire to change his skin from within, and also how this image that we present is mimicking the mode of image making itself. The camera has taught us how to pose.

Since one will never know what the other sees this experience is filled with ambivalence. Phelan writes that,

Unable to reverse her own gaze (the eyes obstinately look only *outside* the self), the subject is forced to detour through the other to see herself. In order to get the other to reflect her, she has to look for/at the other. (She sees herself through looking at the other.) And that other is forever looking for/at himself through looking at her. (trying to hold that gaze, each looker makes herself into the image she believes the other wants to see.)³²⁵

We are caught in a tension between the desire to have our ideal image confirmed by others, and at the same time wanting to protect this ideal image from being shattered through the gaze of others.

³²¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 11.

³²² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993), 36.

³²³ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : Politics of Performance*, 35.

³²⁴ Fiona Tan, *Countenance*.

³²⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : Politics of Performance*, 23.

If I, like Barthes, protect my subjectivity by not being in the photograph and avoiding becoming an object, why should I continue taking photographs of others? Is it because it is easier to frame ones own place through the difference of others, than to risk having ones own image made unstable?

Through watching my own movements and gestures in detail in *We call her Pulle*, I can see that I am performing in front of the camera. In the section pictured below, when Pulle teaches me Tamil from my Sri Lankan guidebook, I notice that my voice is a higher pitch than normal when I am confused about the Tamil language; I sit facing the camera instead of my aunt and I am correcting my too tight t-shirt so that it will not reveal my stomach. I also notice, as can be seen below, how I make an effort to not look into the camera, acknowledging its presence, but I sometimes fail and look into the lens for a split second. I notice I am trying to influence how I will be seen.



Figure 3.3: Stills from *We call her Pulle*

Laura Rascaroli writes that video can be seen as an ideal site for today's audio-visual self-portrait.³²⁶ She writes on first person subjective essay film, which *We call her Pulle* shares some visual language and strategic elements with even though it is very different to her examples from established film directors.³²⁷ Rascaroli writes that as an immediate medium, video mirrors back an image to the filmmaker and makes experimentation easier than cinema would have done before it. She writes that the visual self-portrait is a dialogue, an exchange of gazes and is dependent on the spectator standing before it. The strangeness of both the literary and the visual self-portrait is that the spectator is not only looking at the artist but is given access to observe the artist *through* the artist's eyes.³²⁸ The author, who is involved in both self-scrutiny and self-construction, directs the gaze. Rascaroli calls this a "diaristic gesture": "[t]he reader or spectator is let into the privacy of the addresser's dialogue with his or her Self; he/she is invited to set up a paradoxical identification with the author as addresser".³²⁹

I would add that filmic autobiography adds a level of self-scrutiny through the slippages that occur and become noticeable on the screen. The gestures and performances that the maker is able to pick up on when watching herself perform would possibly remain invisible to her otherwise. In my self-reflection of *We call her Pulle* the camera becomes absolutely essential for me as a maker to recognise some of the difficulties that arise when trying to create a unity between observer and observed. The final installation's goal is not to produce a unified self, but to show how the self is an ongoing fabrication of acts, memories and cultural myths. The focus of the installation becomes less on creating a factually real account of my biography and more on the performance of subjectivity: the performance by the

³²⁶ Laura Rascaroli, 'The self-portrait film: Michealangelo's last gaze', 59.

³²⁷ The films that Rascaroli uses as examples of the genre include intended self-portraits by famous filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Agnes Varda, Jonas Mekas and Chantal Akerman. My work does not fit into these examples, since she discusses established artists who look back at themselves and their lives self-reflectively to make a self-portrait. However, the theory can still be applied to my methodology.

³²⁸ Cecilia Sayad, *Performing authorship*.

³²⁹ Laura Rascaroli, 'The self-portrait film: Michealangelo's last gaze', 60.

filmmaker to self-present in front of the camera.³³⁰ Rascaroli argues that performance lies at the core of non-fiction films, not only in films that purposefully use re-enactment and staged re-presentations but in any other presentation of a subject.³³¹ The subject is always to some degree performing the self to the camera,³³² which can thereafter be used for self-analysis.

Hence, Rascaroli writes, via Stella Bruzzi (who drew attention to the impossibility of authenticity in documentary representation) that all documentaries are performative, and that the performative and performance are especially important to the essay film. Cecilia Sayad agrees, arguing that the essay film can expose “the author’s constant negotiation with the notion of a subject that may or may not be manifestable, reachable, expressible” to the author outside of the filmmaking.³³³

Against the complaints often directed at artists who make autobiographical work, such as it being narcissistic or egotistic, filmmaker Di Tella responds that autobiographical film including one’s own family exposes intimacies of experience and is a kind of public offering.³³⁴ Writing about his experience of making an autobiographical film he argues that to tell a story of our own life can make someone else reflect on their own. His film *Fotografías* takes place in India and discusses identity as a constant construction, always in process.³³⁵ Similar to my relationship to Sri Lanka, Di Tella’s mother was Indian, but he had almost no other relationship to the place, but in appearance. He compares his experience in India with those of his friend and colleague filmmaker, who had gone there before him. Whereas the friend had written of his experience as a permanent alienation, of not

³³⁰ Laura Rascaroli, 'Performance and negotiation: Jean-Luc Godard plays Jean-Luc Godard', 84.

³³¹ Laura Rascaroli, 'Introduction', 17.

³³² Laura Rascaroli, 'Performance and negotiation: Jean-Luc Godard plays Jean-Luc Godard', 85.

³³³ Cecilia Sayad, *Performing authorship*, 34-35.

³³⁴ Andrés Di Tella, 'The curious incident of the dog in the nighttime ', in Alisa Lebow (ed.), *Cinema of me : the self and subjectivity in first person documentary* (London: Wallflower Press, 2012).

³³⁵ Andrés Di Tella, *Fotografías*, (2007), (Documentary film) <<https://vimeo.com/81175564>>

understanding the exoticism, Di Tella writes that although he can identify a strangeness of India, “if those travellers came upon me, I would also be ‘the other’”. The uncomfortable feeling that all these texts give me is that they are talking about ‘the other’ but they are talking about me.”³³⁶

Di Tella’s description of his experience in India has many similarities to my own trip to Sri Lanka. He recalls having had no clue what to film and everything he had imagined or assumed was different. For him, as for myself, things shifted during our trips to India and Sri Lanka that changed our identities. In contrast to his friend, parts of what had been an alien territory for Di Tella were no longer so alien and rather fitted into his own identity.

However, what he found when returning with this footage was that the difficulties and complexities he had experienced were not in the material. He had the feeling that everything was always happening outside of the frame. As with me, many things I found valuable from my trip are not in my footage. Pulle and I behaved differently in front of the camera. The action that happens in front of a camera is never the reality as it would have been had the camera, or the filmmaker, not been there.³³⁷ In addition Pulle’s and my interaction often took place late at night, after all chores had been done, when it was impossible for the camera to record. These quiet times instead allowed me to reflect on my day and keep a detailed diary. The notes record what the camera cannot, and become important in the editing process. Di Tella speaks of the difficulty of trying to capture something that cannot be said in simple words or images. Those are the moments that can be brought into the editing process and that give narrative to the film, in my case through the voiceover.

Fotografias and *We call her Pulle* use the self-reflective voice and one’s own bodily presence to speak of the process of making sense of a fragmented narrative and idea of self, which is always in process of becoming. The value of personal, subjective filmmaking does not lie in relaying a clear biographical narrative or the

³³⁶ Andrés Di Tella, ‘The curious incident of the dog in the nighttime’, 35.

³³⁷ See Sayad’s writing on anthropological filmmaker Jean Rouch in Cecilia Sayad, *Performing authorship*, 73.

filmmaker's inner life, but in conveying some of the tensions between the inside and outside, what Sayad argues "is central to performance's highlighting of exteriority, of the gestural and of the mask".³³⁸ Di Tella writes that there is an element of fiction in creating the autobiographical persona, but this fiction cannot be entirely controlled by the author. The construct created "will inevitably talk about who you are".³³⁹ The construct will confess to more than what the maker might want to reveal.

Although *We call her Pulle* does not expose much to the viewer about mine, my aunt's or my father's life stories, it creates an account of not understanding, of the struggle to add meaning in the gaps and of the complexities of difference. It reveals things about myself that I did not intend. It reveals to me aspects of my behaviour that I am able to analyse from watching it. It will also reveal aspects of myself that I have no access to and that my audience will make sense of through various interpretations. Some of my slippages will be visible to others and invisible to me, some possibly only visible to myself. In this way the film always exposes more than it intends. The spectator has the final word.

The Portrait of the Other

Seeing ourselves in an image we have a different relationship to it in comparison to images of others. As an example both Carol Mavor and Shawn Michelle Smith pointed out in *Photography degree zero* the contrast between how Barthes read images of others, often racial others, and how he reads the image of himself or his mother.³⁴⁰ They argue that Barthes' relationship to images of black people in *Camera lucida* is fraught with racial ambivalence. The image of Barthes' mother (which the book mostly focuses on) was too painful for him to publish in the book. He explains his decision by arguing that it would only interest the reader in terms of *studium*, those details that anyone can read from the image such as the period

³³⁸ Cecilia Sayad, *Performing authorship*, 146.

³³⁹ Andrés Di Tella, 'The curious incident of the dog in the nighttime', 36.

³⁴⁰ Geoffrey Batchen (ed.), *Photography degree zero : reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera lucida* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2009).

and clothes. But, Barthes writes, the reader would have “no wound” to the image and it would therefore only be perceived as an “ordinary” photograph.³⁴¹ The ‘wound’ that Barthes describes becomes another word to describe what he has named *punctum*. Elsewhere in the book he describes *punctum* as a “sting, speck, cut, little hole [...] that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me)”.³⁴²

If we read *Camera lucida* as a self-portrait, Barthes is offering a written portrait of himself that reveals more than the author understands about himself. As with the filmic self-portrait the writer of a book or maker of an artwork, controls the work to a certain extent, but once it is released into the world everyone will read it differently and interpret it from their own position. Slippages happen between words or images, the decision of what is included or excluded, the choice of subject matter or the decision to speak about one thing when really one means the opposite: in psychoanalytic language slips of the tongue or slips of the pen.³⁴³ It is within these slips that parts of our unconscious are revealed. These are not obvious to ourselves, but can be used by an analyst in a therapeutic session or used by people when interpreting an autobiographically revealing book, such as *Camera lucida*, or watching an artwork, such as *We call her Pulle*.

In Smith and Mavor’s interpretation of *Camera lucida* they contemplate that it exposes Barthes’ problems with race. As mentioned, the process of objectification of a subject in front the camera troubled Barthes. Yet he published many portraits of others and for example described a portrait of the slave William Casby with the following words: “the essence of slavery is here laid bare: the mask is the meaning, in so far as it is absolutely pure”.³⁴⁴ Smith and Mavor argue that in Barthes’ descriptions of images there is an underlying ambivalent relationship to race. For me the issue of Barthes’ problem with race is less important here than the idea that the self-portrait, written or photographed, always exposes more than intended and the meaning-making is left to the reader or viewer. Through Barthes explanations

³⁴¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 73.

³⁴² Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 27.

³⁴³ Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: a beginner's guide* 59.

³⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 34.

and personal anecdotes the reader is able to find out more about him than he probably intended.

Mavor finds in Barthes's reading of a family portrait by Van der Zee that this is where "we first learn to see *punctum*, which is a pierce, a wound, a puncture, a hole. *Punctum* is a shadow of sorts. It is a dark place".³⁴⁵ One can draw a relation between Barthes' *punctum* and Lacan's *objet petit a*, which Mavor does.³⁴⁶ The *objet petit a* is for Lacan the underlying cause behind desire — the Phallus. It is repressed in our unconscious, but guides our conscious desires, and is often the opposite of what we think we desire. It is an unstable force that is based on fantasy of what the Other desires.³⁴⁷ But we can never know what the Other desires, which is why the *objet petit a* is a fantasy. Consequently, the origins of both *objet petit a* and the wound, the *punctum*, are difficult to trace. In Barthes's case, Mavor tries this by thinking through Barthes's queer sexuality, his relationship to race and his identification with his unmarried aunt. The process that Barthes exposes to his reader when he tries to break down the *punctum* and the *studium* in *Camera lucida* opens his 'wound' to be read and analysed by others.³⁴⁸ Similarly, my installation *We call her Pulle* can expose viewers and myself to the 'wound' I have in relationship to my image, and it will expose more to my spectator than I have access to.

Comparing the footage of Pulle to the footage of myself sweeping on adjacent screens, I see the figures differently. When I inspect my own movements I find them calculated, planned and performed. I am not 'just sweeping'. Yet, when I look at the footage of Pulle I view a movement that seems in tune with the task, engrossed in it, that habitually conducts the gestures. Even though Pulle and I are

³⁴⁵ Carol Mavor, 'Black and blue', in Geoffrey Batchen (ed.), *Photography degree zero : reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera lucida* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2009), 227.

³⁴⁶ Carol Mavor, *Reading boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press ; Chesham, 2007), 13.

³⁴⁷ Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: a beginner's guide* 128-45.

³⁴⁸ Barthes' 'wounded' relationship to race has also recently been discussed in the film *Vita Nova* by Vincent Meessen and the analyses by TJ Demos of this film. Demos writes that Barthes' "writings [...] disavow the complicities and responsibilities that were closer to home", highlighting how his family history was closely entangled with a colonial economy. TJ Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 68.

doing the same task the movements are different. I think I look out of place, while I assume that Pulle is used to it. Because I notice my own awkwardness sweeping in front of the camera, but cannot see Pulle's, I make assumptions that in comparison to her I am inauthentic. But why do I assume this? By assuming this am I not simultaneously saying that I think that Pulle's movements are 'natural', 'real', 'authentic' and that she is unaware of the camera, in contrast to my posing?

Marcia Pointon has written that since it is deeply unreliable to use faces as signs of identity, the surroundings in a portrait become more important. However, she argues that identities are assumed to belong to certain places because of a Western discourse of naming and mythologizing.³⁴⁹ Furthermore she says that photography's focus on physiognomy has made the surface of the face into a space/place that a person inhabits. When I look at video footage of my partner in Sri Lanka, his white skin makes him stand out from the background, even though he is the only person filmed. Yet, when I look at the footage of myself, with my darker skin, the environment might not look out of place to a viewer who does not know me. Thus the difference that I perceive when looking at the two screens of Pulle and myself might not be experienced by an audience. The audience might simply watch two non-white women sweeping the same floor, in the same place, on two different screens.

Behind the camera I am often silent. I observe until I am not noticed any more. Until people forget to act. But do they? My own awareness of my body and movement in front of the camera, reminds me of Pulle's awareness too. In my footage from Sri Lanka I notice that I am not the only person who adapts my behaviour in front of the camera; Pulle also tries to influence what I film. She tells me to photograph the boy who climbs up the coconut tree to get the sap from which to make toddy. She tells me to photograph the two women whom she has invited to come around especially to grind the red rice into flour. And she wakes up early to make me dosa for breakfast, even though most mornings she would have cornflakes or a white plain bun. Neighbours help her project. I cannot tell if it is out of the

³⁴⁹ Marcia R. Pointon, *Portrayal and the search for identity* (London: Reaktion, 2013), 66.

ordinary, but every day in Sri Lanka someone brings me something new to try from the neighbourhood. They bring me fresh fish, string hoppers for dinner, milk hoppers for breakfast, sweets or nuts or cakes that have taken weeks to prepare. Some of it I film, but most of it I do not use in my final edit. The footage of the women grinding the rice seems too exotic for me and references an idea that I have of anthropological filmmaking. Maybe it is precisely this image that Pulle tries to replicate, because she assumes this is what I, and a western audience, want to see.

On occasion Pulle also cooks outside, over the fire. She has a gas cooker in the kitchen, but says that their food taste nicer being cooked on the fire and she wants me to taste the difference. Looking at the footage of the steel pot on the fire makes me think of how certain things can be focused on to represent a backward-ness, a primitiveness in comparison to Western knowledge. The filmed pot on the fire easily becomes a metonym for underdevelopment (lack of gas, electricity, modernity), when in fact Pulle uses it on special occasions for its superior taste.

Examining my footage now makes me consider what it means that I am refusing to add elements to my video that my aunt would like to add. As the filmmaker and the editor I remain the one with power to decide what goes into my film and what stays out. Even though Pulle influences parts of this image, it will not be the image that she would have chosen to project. The filmmaking becomes the production rather than the re-production of the real. A re-production of the real is always impossible, since we can never know what the 'real' might have looked like without the camera. Pulle and I are both re-enacting parts of our identity to each other but also to the camera. These parts are a complicated mix of images — of how we want to present ourselves to each other, to the camera, to an expected audience and to ourselves. Noticing the performativity from us both makes me realise how difficult it is to go beyond our performative acts and resist the desire to project our ideal image. How do we break the habitual knowing that we have incorporated?

3.3 MIMICRY AND DIFFERENCE

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler famously argued that gender is constituted from a repeated set of acts, what she calls performativity:

performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.³⁵⁰

In *Genre trouble: (The) Butler did it* Jon McKenzie writes that Butler's most important contribution has been that she argued that performativity is not only marginal, transgressive, or resistant, but is also a dominant and punitive form of power. "Subjects do not expressively perform their genders; rather, gendered subjectivity is itself constituted through compulsory performances of social norms."³⁵¹ For Butler the question is not whether we repeat, but how we go on to repeat. This is what becomes so difficult when trying to go beyond these repetitions. McKenzie writes that Butler is often misread and misinterpreted, where her theory of performativity is seen as purely transgressive or resistant, and the proposition that performativity shapes normativity and power is often forgotten. Performativity for Butler is not performance but rather the repetition of norms.

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body.³⁵²

In the preface to *Gender trouble* in 1999 Butler wonders what happens when this theory is transposed to issues of race. She argues that many scholars have concentrated on whether race is constructed in the same way as gender, rather than analysing how the multiplicity of constructions work as a background and through one another. They also contradict each other. I notice how much footage I have from Sri Lanka of Pulle and myself cooking, dressing up or cleaning; activities that I

³⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1990]), xv.

³⁵¹ Jon Mckenzie, 'Genre trouble: (The) Butler did it', in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds.), *The ends of performance* (New York ; London: New York University Press, 1998), 221.

³⁵² Judith Butler, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*, xv.

read as stereotypically female. These activities would normally not be dominant in my practice, because I would avoid reinforcing a certain gender role in my work. However, in Sri Lanka, when faced with an everyday that was mostly consumed with these tasks, I found myself concentrating on them. With the lack of language it became easier to rely on, and participate in, stereotypical gender tasks.

One could argue that I participate to assimilate and that my aunt wants to influence me to make me fit in. She changes my clothes, tells me how to cut vegetables the way she does and laughs at me when I do things differently. It reminds me of Bhabha's theory on mimicry in the colonial discourse. In *Of mimicry and Man* Bhabha analysed the dual relationship between the British coloniser and the colonised, with the example of the relationship between the English coloniser and the Anglicized, Indian mimic man.³⁵³ The desire for the subordinate colonised man to become dependent on British rule led people like Charles Grant and James Mills to write suggestions for how to reform Indian manners into English manners, using Christianity, the English language and education as forms of social control.³⁵⁴ This desire became the base for mimicry to become "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge".³⁵⁵

But mimicry for Bhabha in the context of the colonial discourse represented "an *ironic* compromise".³⁵⁶ The tension between the colonisers' demand for identity and the ongoing historical changes happening in British society made mimicry a sign "of a double articulation".³⁵⁷ Although the colonisers desired to reform the colonised to become like them there was never a desire for them to become identical. This would disrupt the ideology that justified a colonial discourse.³⁵⁸ Thus,

³⁵³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man'.

³⁵⁴ Charles Grant, *Mr. Grant's observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to morals; and on the means of improving it* ([London], 1813).

³⁵⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 85.

³⁵⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 86.

³⁵⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 86.

³⁵⁸ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 59.

Bhabha writes that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite”.³⁵⁹

Bhabha showed that mimicry was a tool for the coloniser to teach the colonised to behave, but one that backfired on them. Once the colonised behaved like the coloniser there was not much else (but skin colour) to set them apart. This created ambivalence in the British coloniser, exposing that to be a ‘civilised’ British man was nothing more than taught behaviour. There was no essential being behind his actions. It was in the repetition of the same behaviour that these acts could be questioned. Mimicry often became an exaggerated copying of language and manners and as such managed to mock the coloniser.³⁶⁰

The result, what Bhabha calls “the ambivalence of mimicry”, does “not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but it becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence”.³⁶¹ He continues: “the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority”.³⁶² Behaving like the white British man, sometimes ironically, displaced white authority. What mimicry brings to light is the splitting of identity. Bhabha writes “under cover of the camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing and history”.³⁶³ When the manners of the colonised became too similar to the coloniser’s, or even more British than the British, the colonisers’ ambivalence led to fixed ideas or stereotypes of the colonised to set them apart from the colonisers.

Pulle’s attempt to make me assimilate through copying them worked very well at times. At one point in the library in Jaffna, wearing the clothes Pulle had bought me, a young man walked past me twice. The second time he turned around and said

³⁵⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 86.

³⁶⁰ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 57.

³⁶¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 86.

³⁶² Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 88.

³⁶³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man', 91.

‘At first I thought you were Sri Lankan, but now I realise that you are not.’ It was something in my movements that had betrayed me.

Pulle bought me clothes and jewellery on both occasions in Sri Lanka. Other relatives did the same. Although I appreciated the generous gestures, I also felt very uncomfortable with the situation. To not wear my own clothes felt like giving up parts of how I perceive myself, and how I wish to be perceived by others. On reflection I understand that part of this uncomfortable feeling comes from growing up wishing to avoid looking more different than I already did in Sweden; a rejection of anything that was ‘different’ to Swedish or European.

When I was an adolescent in the 1990’s there was a new shop in Sweden. It was called Indiska, and they sold clothes and homeware made in India. Friends dressed up in bangles, silver bells around their feet and decorated their bedroom walls with fabric. Their blonde hair was plaited into dread locks and their clothes were colourful and floaty. I didn’t partake. To dress myself more ethnic was unthinkable.

Coco Fusco critiques ways that cultural appropriation is dealt with in the west and argues that it is a political act. Looking at examples through history she shows that cultural appropriation and crossing boundaries and borders are not a choice for anyone. What is more fundamentally at stake than freedom,” she argues “is power – the power to choose, the power to determine value, and the right of the more powerful to consume without guilt”.³⁶⁴ She writes:

while it is true that no culture is fixed and that exchange among cultures has taken place throughout history, not to recognize historical imbalances and their influence is *the* strategical evasion that enables the already empowered to naturalize their advantage.³⁶⁵

The desire for mimicry is a two-way process. As I say in my voice over, when Pulle and her husband came to Sweden we bought clothes for them too:

³⁶⁴ Coco Fusco, 'Who's doin' the twist? Notes toward a politica of appropriation', in Coco Fusco (ed.), *English is broken here : notes on cultural fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), 68.

³⁶⁵ Coco Fusco, 'Who's doin' the twist? Notes toward a politica of appropriation', 71.

Pulle proudly tells me that now one can get anything in Jaffna. She buys me clothes and gold. I refuse some, but I worry I insult her.

She tells me not to go to people's houses in my old clothes.

We did the same thing when they arrived in Sweden looking like bank robbers in bomber jackets and balaclavas. Someone in a Sri Lankan shop had told them this was appropriate clothing for Sweden. The next day we bought new clothes for them.

(from *We call her Pulle*)

This was both to make them, as well as us, fit in. I remember sitting on a bus with them in Sweden after picking them up from the train station. I did not sit next to them, but in front of them. I could feel the looks from the other passengers on the bus, both on them and on me. In a similar way my relatives probably feel like I make them stand out unnecessarily through stubbornly wearing my own clothes. When boarding for a 10 hour bus journey from Colombo to Jaffna at 5am, my uncle asked me if I did not have a nice dress or at least a nice blouse to wear. I told him that I had a dress but not to travel in. For travelling I wore my khaki trousers and a t-shirt. He tried to convince me that it was good to arrive nicely, to be proud and to be beautiful. I was annoyed the rest of the trip, but also felt a sting of guilt and humiliation, knowing that I would embarrass him when arriving.

On both of these occasions my family in Sri Lanka, as well as my family in Sweden (including myself) struggled with the complexities of difference. Perhaps we try to make the other similar to us because we do not understand or completely accept the other's difference. In Sri Lanka my family took no photographs of me until they had dressed me in a sari and hung gold jewellery on me. At that time my aunt and uncles, my father's brothers, got their cameras out and arranged formal group shots for me to be photographed together with them. I do not find this surprising. As Pointon writes "commissions for portraits and commissions for dress both originate in an imagined image of the self and therefore both practices belong to the domain of projection, [...] portraits and clothing are complimentary agents in fictionalizing ideal bodies".³⁶⁶ As Shonibare so successfully demonstrated in his

³⁶⁶ Marcia R. Pointon, *Portrayal and the search for identity*, 128.

practice, the relationship between dress and identity is hugely complicated and filled with historical and contextual meanings.³⁶⁷

In the process of my relatives dressing me in a sari I do not believe they were simply rejecting my difference. I think they were also giving me permission to take on these cultural attributes as my own. This generosity goes beyond the coloniser in Bhabha's theory, who never intended for the colonised to take on the British attributes as their own, but to remain an imitation of their 'master'. Alfred J. López wrote that the "effect of the colonial sham on the individual level is a subject who simultaneously identifies with the white ideal and is radically alienated from it".³⁶⁸ This, Lopez takes as the essence of what Bhabha means with being almost the same, but not white; however perfect the mimicry becomes, to be included into whiteness is never fully attained. However, turning this around to what I see as a genuine invitation from my aunt to belong in Sri Lanka as a Tamil puzzles me. Here, I see an invitation to belong, albeit on the condition that I assimilate, in stark contrast to my experience in Sweden and Europe, where my belonging is always questioned.

I found this invitation difficult to accept, and I experience a resistance against it. But even though I resisted something shifted in me. As Bhabha argues, when cultures meet, something changes within both parties. It is impossible to return to the moment before being influenced by each other.³⁶⁹

In Sri Lanka I observe clear residues from Dutch, Portuguese and British colonial times in the lives of my relatives. Apart from the British administrative and educational system, my family are strong believers in Catholicism, which reminds me of the Portuguese influence and at 3 o'clock every day my aunt will prepare tea to have with Sri Lankan 'short eats' and sponge cake from the bakery. This makes me think of an historic idea of Englishness that contrasts with my experience of everyday life in London. Cultures adapt and change. Equally something has shifted in me through my encounter with Sri Lanka. On my second trip to Sri Lanka I was

³⁶⁷ *Yinka Shonibare* (2004) (Illuminations) Video/DVD.

³⁶⁸ Alfred J. Lopez, 'Introduction: whiteness after empire', in Alfred J. Lopez (ed.), *Postcolonial whiteness : a critical reader on race and empire* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2005), 18-19.

³⁶⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Interrogating identity', 58.

already more relaxed with being dressed by others and I imagine that even my body language had changed slightly.

Bhabha's theory on mimicry in the colonial discourse shares some similarities to Butler's theory on the performative. They both argue that the performative (in Butler's case) and mimicry (in Bhabha's) do not conceal an original identity. There is no essential self or origin to be found. They both argue that working within imitation and repetition can help to disrupt ideologies and essentialisms. Since we cannot stop repeating our acts Butler argues that one needs to displace the normative through its own repetition, through imitation. She writes that this can partly be done through parody, although parody in itself is not subversive and although some forms can be troubling to the discourse others are easily appropriated into the normative. Butler concludes *Gender trouble* by arguing that in order to change and displace norms, one needs to work from within practices of repetition rather than arguing from an imaginary point outside of constructed identities, which for Butler is impossible. Hall and Butler argued that everyone lives within a discourse and to think that we can step outside of this is impossible, but we can question and trouble the foundations on which discourses rely. For Butler, imitations displace the original and thereby mock the assumed idea of originality in the first place. "As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself."³⁷⁰ The original is revealed as a copy, which resonates with Bhabha's claim that there was never an origin in the first place, only an endless line of repetition, hybridity and mimicry. There is no essential self to be found in narratives of origin.

We call her Pulle questions norms through three methods. Firstly, I question my own origin and undo fixed images from my own history. This is done partly by indicating that the things my father told me do not correspond with what others tell me now, partly by highlighting that I cannot know the place I have arrived at since Pulle changes it for me. For example, I say in the video how Pulle has bought new glasses and cutlery for my visit, since she assumes I do not want to eat with my

³⁷⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*, 189.

hands. Secondly, I expose that there are differences between my aunt and myself that we cannot understand about each other. Most evident is the lack of a common language and difficulties in communicating. But on a more complex level we do things differently, sometimes because of cultural differences or traditions but more often our differences are based in our different experiences in life. My relatives have lived through war and I have not. And neither did my father. The war has changed many things, down to the detail of what women in Jaffna sleep in. Where my first assumption was often to think of this as cultural difference, I later realised that customs have formed out of necessity and thereafter become habits.³⁷¹ Thirdly, and most complex, is that my presence in the video with Pulle points to an uncertainty as to which place I occupy. It is clear to an audience that I am not white, although the children in Jaffna call me white. But, from my behaviour in the video, I think it is also clear that I am not Tamil. As much as the children there could not figure me out, I do not fit comfortably into an existing type for a Western art work.

15/4/2012

In the market: "Madame Madame, lime, crab, brinjal."

Jaci laughed at how everyone wanted my attention. They want me to shop. In the street everyone watches me. In the bakery everyone peeks out. They look me up and down. Down and up.

Jaci says it is because they cannot figure me out. My mix and my hair. Half white, half black. Like me.

3.4 THE IMAGINED SPECTATOR

Phelan argues that while there has been plenty of research and writing on the gaze, there has not been sufficient focus on the need for the reciprocal gaze.³⁷² The desire to see comes from wanting to be seen. She writes "The eyes look out; one always needs the eye of the other to recognize (and name) oneself."³⁷³ Stuart Hall wrote

³⁷¹ In the video I specifically give an example of Pulle sleeping in a 'homedress' rather than a nightie, since she always had to be prepared to run.

³⁷² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : Politics of Performance*, 18.

³⁷³ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : Politics of Performance*, 15.

about this in terms of *identification*; how individuals have “a *lack* of wholeness which is ‘filled’ from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*”.³⁷⁴ We make ourselves the image we imagine the other would like to see, and we need the other to project and become ourselves. Since self-identity is in constant process and forever shifting, Phelan writes, it “needs to be continually reproduced and reassured precisely because it fails to secure belief”.³⁷⁵ The image/mirror is used as a tool in this process.

From watching my Self in the footage from Sri Lanka I start reflecting on which ‘eye of the other’ this Self performs in front of. I first assume that this ‘other’ is my aunt. I am making myself the image I would like her to see. But when I look closer and notice that I am posing for the camera I detect a shift. The camera is not a neutral observer. It is an extension of who we imagine will be our future audience. As deconstructed by Jacqueline Rose and Christian Metz the relationship between subject and camera is informed by the imagined position of the camera. Rose explains that “the relationship between the observer and the camera/mirror/screen/microscope” in Lacan’s words, stresses ‘virtuality’ rather than objectivity.³⁷⁶ She argues that the camera and the image are subjective constructs “which inhabit the domain in which the subject lives, that is the domain of language”.³⁷⁷ My imagined audience is a virtual audience, whose desires I imagine. I perform according to an imagined gaze, an Other, based on what I imagine the Other desires. I can never know who my spectators are or what they desire.

The image that I am consciously wanting to project in my video might be contradicting my behaviour in the footage. It might reveal simultaneous opposing drives; Freud’s split ego.³⁷⁸ I am split between being for my aunt and being for the camera, my imagined audience. Jessica Benjamin writes that in psychoanalytic terms

³⁷⁴ Stuart Hall quoted in Laura Rascaroli, 'Introduction'.

³⁷⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : Politics of Performance*, 4-5.

³⁷⁶ Jacqueline Rose, 'The Imaginary', 168.

³⁷⁷ Jacqueline Rose, 'The Imaginary', 169.

³⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'The splitting of the ego in defence processes', in Adam Phillips (ed.), *The Penguin Freud reader* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1938]).

wholeness can only exist by maintaining contradiction, but this is not easy. In the process of splitting, the two sides are represented as opposite and distinct tendencies, so that they are available to the subject only as alternatives. The subject can play only one side at a time, projecting the opposite side onto the other.³⁷⁹

Splitting is not as simple as alternating between two projections of ideal selves. Freud explains that splitting does not mean that two sides are represented equally. It has to do with an ambivalence that arises when a drive is prohibited to be continually satisfied due to an apparent danger related to this satisfaction, disavowal. However, the danger is not completely repressed, but continues to appear in a shape of the symptom. As such the subject is caught in a “to-ing and fro-ing between denial and acknowledgement”.³⁸⁰

We call her Palle offers an image of my self that I do not necessarily have access to. There are many things this piece exposes about me that I do not know and cannot control, but I am beginning to access some of them through analysing my footage. One is that my identification with my imagined audience becomes more dominant than with my Tamil aunt when faced with both demands simultaneously. Subsequently, I am reminded when looking at my footage that even though I tell myself one thing, my drive-demand is pushing me in another direction. For now the drive and desire to belong with my Western imagined spectator remains more dominant.

I expect that the spectator will not see the posing that I can see in the footage of myself. It makes me feel uncomfortable. As Barthes wrote “what society makes of my photograph, what it reads there, I do not know”.³⁸¹ This realisation makes me understand why it was impossible for Barthes to re-produce the image of his mother in *Camera lucida* since it would never translate the same experience to the reader, who would have “no wound” in relationship to it.³⁸² In contrast to Barthes I do not

³⁷⁹ Jessica Benjamin, *The bonds of love: psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 63.

³⁸⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'The splitting of the ego in defence processes', 67.

³⁸¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 14.

³⁸² Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*, 73.

withdraw the image. I decide that the possible mis(taken) identity is necessary, maybe even crucial for what I am doing.

Conclusion

While writing this chapter I have re-edited *We call her Pulle* several times. Mainly, my voice over has changed address: it has been a letter to my mother, explaining this place to her from a position between her and my father; a letter to my father, as an accusation blaming him for some of the choices he made; and a voice directed at Pulle, as a dialogue with her. The latter lasted for some time, but I finally removed it in haste since it felt disingenuous. This is not the conversation Pulle and I would have had. This is a dialogue with a viewer, my imagined Western audience. So, the address had to change once again. Now it is more general. It doesn't have a 'you' address, but in my mind it is directed at a Western audience.

Analysing the relationship I have to my own self-image on screen and its relationship to my aunt has made me re-interpret both my own actions and those of Pulle in my footage. This reveals complex relationships within one family that speak of complex social normative structures from a range of cultures that are difficult to escape and resist. I read the image through my own self-awareness and self-reflection, which enables me to write about it as a maker, rather than as someone outside of the making with no 'wound' to the image.

Through making and watching this work complicated questions have arisen for me. Could it be that in this footage I am using my aunt's unfamiliar and different environment, including her, to frame my own identity as different from hers and possibly reconfirm my own belonging with a western imagined audience? Am I exaggerating my own European-ness in order to not 'slip back' as Fanon calls it when discussing the mulatto? Am I speaking to my aunt in a patronising voice as Fanon had observed physicians, policemen, employers doing to men of colour, and who saw nothing wrong with it because they had "never stopped to think"?³⁸³ Does this come from a longstanding fear to be seen as other by the Western society that I

³⁸³ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 20.

have identified with? Am I repeating the stereotypical discourse that I am critiquing?

How does one know which desires one is trying to please? As someone who grew up with brown skin against a white background, I distinguished very early between the different attitudes to my mother and father based on their skin colour. To be like my father was to be different, and that difference was not judged, valued and treated in the same way as my mother. As a child, did I unconsciously try to resist that difference for myself and distance myself from it? Did I distance myself from my own father? And is this now being repeated with his relatives in his absence? If so, how do I know if my unconscious is still fighting for precisely the same old goal: to find belonging with whiteness.

Going to the bank with pappa was frustrating as a child. The bank man would often say something to him, but would very quickly turn to me and have the conversation via my Swedish accent and me. I was only 6 at the time and watched my father's humiliation as I took over his bank errands although he was fully capable in his accented Swedish.

This project and chapter open more questions than they resolve. I am finishing the edit of my installation, knowing that it will never be a finished product and that I will never find closure in it. Trinh T. Minh-Ha honours works-in-progress which recognises that a perfect closure is impossible to realise. She argues that,

the notion of a finished work, versus that of an uncompleted work requiring finishing, loses its pertinence. What needs to be reconsidered are these widely adopted and imposed forms of closure whose main function is simply to wrap up a product and facilitate consumption.³⁸⁴

Similarly, Rascaroli uses the voice-over of Godard as an example of a filmmaker using his own voice to pose questions and leave the answering and meaning-making to the spectator. She foregrounds that the author of a work does not necessarily have answers to their own questions.

³⁸⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Cotton and Iron', 16.

This chapter, as well as my installation *We call her Pulle*, ends with a number of unresolved issues that I have tried to highlight such as what does my footage tell me of my aunt, myself and my quest for answers about my father? I do not, nor *can* I, give answers to these questions. There are too many unconscious desires and demands that I do not understand about myself. However, by highlighting them I hope to give rise to reflection, both in the audience and myself, which can be taken further into future art works.

One of the prevailing themes that keep appearing in my work is that my self is not simply made up from a mix of cultures, backgrounds and heritages. One of the discourses is dominant, and that is a Western discourse. I argue that this is not only from having grown up in the West, but that I comes from an overarching global power structure that remains since colonial times. In chapter four I will deconstruct this in more detail, through recent art practices deconstructing Western identities to confront what Tj Demos calls the “specters of colonialism”.³⁸⁵ Through doing so I contextualise how my practice can add to this discourse and untangle some of the complexities that come with aligning oneself with a constructed Western identity.

³⁸⁵ Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*; Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*.



Figure 3.4: *Knowledge, from A-Z of conflict*



Figure 3.5: *Alterity from A-Z of conflict*

4 EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY

My mother is classified as white, she has white skin and used to have blonde hair (now white) and her parents were also considered white. They all came from Denmark, and as far as I am aware any known ancestry was Danish.

When my mother married my father she took his surname, Mangalanayagam. She worked as a nurse and often changed jobs. At one point she went for a job interview and the interviewer asked her where her surname was from. When she replied Sri Lanka, the interviewer exclaimed, "Oh, I thought you looked Indian!" Perplexed about the comment, she cannot remember if she ever corrected the interviewer.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity is [...] separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity.³⁸⁶ Homi Bhabha

This thesis started with a question that developed for me when I wanted to take self-portraits during my under-graduate studies. It dawned on me that it was nearly impossible for me, as a mixed-‘race’ artist, to take a self-portrait that did not fall into pre-existing stereotypes of otherness or of hybridity as a dual identity. In chapter two I problematised polarities of black and white, and through Piper demonstrated the negative connotations of being perceived as other than purely white. In chapter three I showed how this gaze is internalised and how one acts according to an imagined gaze; for me in *We call her Pülle*, the gaze of an imagined Western spectator. In this final chapter I ask what it means to be in between positions in this society. Which place do I occupy? It is clear from experience that I am ‘seen’ as other because of my skin/colour in the West. What is less clear is whether I am also seen as part of this society. My goal within this work is to create a space from which to speak. In that space it is crucial for me that constructions have value and meaning; in my case the value placed on white and black constructions. Therefore, to examine questions of race and hybridity we need to look at whiteness as well, we need to examine the white construction. As a mixed-race artist, who has previously focused on issues of blackness, I am now bringing in the notion of whiteness.

While it seemed like my aunt would happily include me as one of hers, albeit if I corrected my *difference*, I do not feel that Western society treats me like this. I have lived all my life in the West and have behaved ‘as a Westerner’, but I have never unquestionably belonged. I am demanding the right to exist in an image with my white mother without engendering a state of conflict or confusion.

³⁸⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The commitment to theory’, 34.

I examine this engendered state by looking at Richard Dyer's and others' deconstruction of whiteness, and through the practice by artist Lindsay Seers, a white British artist who grew up in the colonies, to explore how it helps to open up a space for a more nuanced reading of works on hybridity.³⁸⁷

4.2 LOSS OF CERTAINTY

Losing one's sense of identity is difficult. During my trip to Sri Lanka I knew that I would change, that I would not return to Europe as the same person. On my trip I wanted to confirm certain things about my father and by extension myself, but I only realised this on my return. I had memories, histories and family dramas and conflicts to verify. However, almost nothing was confirmed, and more often than not it would be contradicted by more than one source. For example, according to my father his family were angry with him for marrying my mother and thereby foregoing the option of a pre-arranged marriage. This was why we had little contact with them while I was growing up. However, my father's cousin tells me that it was my father who cut off contact since he could not help his cousins move to the UK. And when I asked my aunt why she never sent us a birthday card, or anything else, she says that the war prevented all normal behaviour. One thing is certain: memories are fragile. Parents choose which recollections to pass onto their children, which images to keep alive. I travelled to Sri Lanka with an imagined image of the place, which blurred increasingly, and more so as I departed. As I say in the video *"the memory my father gave me doesn't make sense anymore [...] my ever changing memory of him."*

My father passed away a few years ago. I knew before I went to Sri Lanka that I would not be able to verify anything with him. I have to create my own images, both of him and of my past. The frightening part is that I will continue living without him and continue changing. This change, and in particular my involvement with Pulle and Sri Lanka, makes the past (which he occupied) feel very far away. The image my father belonged to is changing, and I am changing with it. Through this

³⁸⁷ Some of my text sources are from a US perspective where whiteness studies have been a larger area of study, but many of them are equally relevant from a European perspective.

process I am leaving a sense of certainty behind, and with that a sense of identity. This happens all the time, to all of us, but the process is slightly different when having lost someone. My father will not change with me. We will not adapt to each other and he will not know the person I become. I am leaving him behind; this is a necessary part of mourning. It is a frightening process, letting go of ancestral tales, personal histories and much loved people, a father who was solid and real. How do we traverse the unknown? How can we? As Fanon said, we must, or we will continue living with a colonial unconscious forever. But my feelings are torn, holding onto a sense of certainty, while trying to let go.

Identification with Whiteness

I cycled around the village before sunset. Every single person without exception turned his or her head. Some said 'Hello', others 'Good morning'. A couple shouted 'Madame' and a few said 'I love you' or 'will you marry me?' A boy followed me on a motorbike until I stopped by Mannan and said he was my uncle. I think the boy got a telling off. And then he disappeared. He tried to come up with some excuse, but Mannan didn't believe him. I wonder if Mannan is a scary man. They say he is.

During my two trips to Sri Lanka I was mostly approached as a Westerner. At times this could feel frustrating; I was travelling to my father's birthplace, but because I do not speak Tamil, I could not convince anyone that I was in fact Tamil. When walking down the street children and adults shouted 'Vellakari! Vellakari!' It means 'white woman'. I have never before experienced being called white.

So what does it mean that I am also seen to belong to a Western category when viewed from another direction? The construction of whiteness needs to be deconstructed.

Since the 1990's there have been some strong voices demanding that the Western/white construction is taken into consideration when discussing race and postcolonial identity. Arguably the best-known example in the UK is Richard Dyer. In 1997 he published the book *White*, which showed how the construction of

whiteness has been visualised and stabilised through film, TV and art. Dyer calls for the category of whiteness to be deconstructed since:

whiteness has been enormously, often terrifyingly effective in unifying coalitions of disparate groups of people. It has generally been much more successful than class in uniting people across national cultural differences and against their best interests.³⁸⁸

Nonetheless, Lopéz argues in *Postcolonial whiteness* that while there have been attempts to deconstruct whiteness it is still largely unexamined as a category.³⁸⁹ Partly this is due to how whiteness has been excluded from the scrutiny applied to other categories. Dyer writes that while the West has been positive to research a supposed genealogy of their race and ancestry, they have been much less inclined to be included in biological research on skulls, bodies and facial features. These were carried out on the non-white in order to fix and control them, while the little research undertaken on white people was done to establish the norm rather than a type to investigate. Perhaps it is this resistance to be considered as a category and scrutinised as any other raced body which still keeps the white category as something elusive that transcends the body — what Dyer has called a spirit of kind.³⁹⁰ He writes that black people were portrayed to be lazy, slack and unable to resist desires of the body, while the white man was imagined to be in control over both his own and other people's bodies.³⁹¹

The writer Toni Morrison argues that for white people to act as if they are relieved from questions of race in a racialised world assumes that to be white is universal while to be non-white requires explanation. Blackness and issues of race are caught up in issues of whiteness. Black people have been represented with a fixity that helped to ground the uncertainty of whiteness, and Dyer writes “at the level of representation, whites remain, for all their transcending superiority,

³⁸⁸ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 19.

³⁸⁹ Alfred J. Lopez, 'Introduction: whiteness after empire', 2.

³⁹⁰ Richard Dyer, *White*, 23.

³⁹¹ Richard Dyer, *White*, 23.

dependent on non-whites for their sense of self”.³⁹² Morrison demonstrates this in *Playing in the dark*, a founding text in whiteness studies in America, which focused on how the canon of American literature positions the American writer as if unaffected by race to an imagined white reader, while creating black characters to reflect white characters. She argues that to understand the construction of whiteness “we need studies that analyze the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters”.³⁹³ Morrison argues that we need to turn to the dreamer rather than the dream when analysing race. Rather than analysing the role of the other in Western construction of difference, we need to turn the gaze back on ourselves as Western constructs. To “avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served”.³⁹⁴ A few years ago Rasheed Araeen echoed these concerns in a discussion on art and globalisation:

if Eurocentricity of the prevailing art history is the problem, this problem affects not only what is located away from the metropolises, but, more importantly, what has happened within its own modernity, particularly in its postwar period. How can one deal with this problem when those who are concerned with this problem are looking away from where the problem lies?³⁹⁵

The need for absolute distinction between white and black resulted in exaggerations of blackness, so as to make sharp differences between what became the two binaries.³⁹⁶ Dyer writes about how non-white people became associated with the dirt that the body expels, and how in racist language they are often told that they smell or eat smelly food.³⁹⁷ White on the other hand has signified purity

³⁹² Richard Dyer, *White*, 24.

³⁹³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination* (Cambridge, Ma. ; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 52-53.

³⁹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination*, 38.

³⁹⁵ Rasheed Araeen, 'Letter on globalization', in James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim (eds.), *Art and globalization* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 140.

³⁹⁶ Richard Dyer, *White*.

³⁹⁷ Richard Dyer, *White*, 78.

and cleanliness with countless advertisements advising women, both white and black, to become whiter.³⁹⁸ This whiteness has been exaggerated in films and advertisements where white, blonde women have been made to look even whiter and more artificially blonde.

I remember the boys in my class shouting at me when I was seven: ‘have you dipped your head in the toilet bowl or what!?’ I thought I didn’t care much at the time. But the memory stuck, and the comparison of my skin colour to faeces clearly came from somewhere. My skin colour and difference was not only compared to the paler version of my classmates. It already had a negative value, as dirt, it was an abject appearance to them. This gradually became my value judgement of my skin colour, and later of my heritage. Now, years later, I have learned that my experience was not isolated. In *Internal racism* M Fakhry Davids writes that the comparison between faeces and dark skin colour is commonplace in literature on psychoanalytic discussions of racism.³⁹⁹ As a brown subject, growing up in a society where whiteness was valued higher than brownness, I internalised the racism I experienced and turned it outwards. Although on the one hand I identified as a victim, an Other, I also identified with the ideal body in my society – the white body. As a result I turned away from my own perceived difference and strived for a belonging with the white society I grew up in. I developed Fanon’s white mask. In chapter two I argued that to affiliate oneself with whiteness is a complicit act, perpetuating a hierarchy of value judgements attached to race. But I must include myself in this guilty category.

Whiteness is not a unified construction. It is a cluster of demands, desires and ambivalences, which I will never be able to fully make out, any more than I can decipher my own unconscious. According to Freud, repressed drives that reside in our unconscious are not removed or destroyed but prevented from becoming conscious.⁴⁰⁰ This does not mean that these desires are inactive, and at times their

³⁹⁸ Richard Dyer, *White*, 78.

³⁹⁹ M. Fakhry Davids, *Internal racism : a psychoanalytic approach to race and difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 175.

⁴⁰⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 49.

actions will reach our consciousness. He argued that to analyse parts from our unconscious we need to translate them into our consciousness. In psychoanalysis this happens through analysis and by overcoming certain resistances – those which caused the repression in the first place. This is a long and difficult procedure, particularly as “some of these latent processes have characteristics and peculiarities that appear alien, even incredible, to us, and stand in complete contrast to the known attributes of consciousness”.⁴⁰¹ Using my own hybrid specificity and personal experience with whiteness, and artworks dealing with whiteness within the postcolonial, I unravel some of the ambivalences that are present in the Western social unconscious, and by default in mine. After all, Freud argued that it is easier to understand “the very same acts in other people that we refuse to acknowledge in our own psyche”.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious*, 54.

⁴⁰² Sigmund Freud, *The Unconscious*, 53.



Figure 4.1: *Fable*, from *A-Z of conflict*



Figure 4.2: *You (mum)*, from *A-Z of conflict*



Figure 4.3: *Heritage, from A-Z of conflict*

Melancholia for a Lost Past

Sara Ahmed claims there is nostalgia for whiteness in Britain.⁴⁰³ Perhaps this nostalgia is in fact a desire for community and belonging, a desire for an imagined past. Perhaps it is the loss of certainty that is destabilising former identities. Kobena Mercer writes that we need and desire communities, but they are always more imagined than actually achieved.⁴⁰⁴ Community means invoking an ideal that we constantly strive for. Mercer argues that most of us do not have a community but “it is the lack of it that makes it valued, it is the loss of it that makes it desired, it is the envisioning of it that makes it real”.⁴⁰⁵ But what is often forgotten and downplayed, he argues, is the interdependency of self and other, of belonging and difference. Communities, and especially nationalities, are imagined through exclusionary fantasies of the other. The representations that help to form communities, rather than reflect them, come in artistic interventions such as the flags and national anthems that Benedict Anderson discusses,⁴⁰⁶ but also through artworks and symbols that help to shape a ‘them and us’.⁴⁰⁷ That is why national anthems, as I discovered when analysing them for *Balancing act*, often have lyrics about national loyalty to the point of death. Creative inventions help define what and who the Other is, which help to shape a certainty of a Self for a group of people.

Returning to an example mentioned in chapter two, I grew up reading the tale of the ugly duckling by Hans Christian Andersen. I also remember reading a story of a spotty rabbit growing up with white rabbits. He ran away and found a bunch of spotty rabbits somewhere else, but in that group there was a lonely white rabbit. In both groups the ‘different’ rabbit was hidden away from grandmothers and grandfathers, who were thought to become upset about their difference. The rabbits

⁴⁰³ Sara Ahmed, 'Melancholic migrants', in Sara Ahmed (ed.), *The promise of happiness* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010), 121.

⁴⁰⁴ Kobena Mercer, 'Imagine all the people', in Papastergiadis Nikos (ed.), *Annotations 1 Mixed belongings and unspecified destinations* (London: Institute of international visual arts, 1996).

⁴⁰⁵ Kobena Mercer, 'Imagine all the people', 20.

⁴⁰⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*.

⁴⁰⁷ Kobena Mercer, 'Imagine all the people'.

found belonging with each other and everyone lived happily ever after. The story assumes that belonging is found in physical likeness of others. Both rabbits are treated as different in both situations, and their difference is read negatively. And even though the storyline does not support bullying and exclusion of difference, it does show an understanding of that position. As if it is inevitable. It assumes that the problem of accepting difference lies with an older generation, suggesting that there had been purity before contamination.

Both Paul Gilroy and Sarah Ahmed have used Freud's text on *Mourning and melancholia* to reflect upon British people and Britain's migrants respectively mourning their lost cultures. Ahmed describes that while mourning is the healthy process of letting go of a lost object, melancholia is the inability to do so. The loss is most often talked about in terms of a death of a loved one, but Freud also includes the loss of an ideal or a fatherland within the same category.⁴⁰⁸ To be able to mourn, the lost object has to be considered dead twice: the real death, and the second death, which is the declaration of the death. Without this declaration the mourning process cannot start. Freud wrote that when a subject is mourning the world becomes empty and pointless, and all attention is directed at the memory of the lost object. In melancholia this emptiness is directed towards the ego. As a result of the lost object, of which the subject cannot let go, the subject will feel a loss of self-esteem and reduced sense of self.

Melancholia is full of ambivalence and conflict, where the subject is struggling to release itself from the object, while simultaneously maintaining it. Freud explains that these ambivalences cannot be made sense of in the conscious mind and are consequently repressed into the unconscious.⁴⁰⁹

Gilroy argues that Britain is deeply melancholic about its loss of empire and superior identity.⁴¹⁰ He demonstrates in *There ain't no black in the Union Jack* that

⁴⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', in Adam Philips (ed.), *The Penguin Freud reader* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1917]).

⁴⁰⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', 323.

⁴¹⁰ Paul Gilroy, *There ain't no black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation*; Paul Gilroy, *After empire : melancholia or convivial culture?* (London: London : Routledge, 2004).

Britain is struggling to come to terms with a violent past through creating opposing narratives of them being tolerant and anti-racist.⁴¹¹ He argues that there has been no final admittance that the empire is dead. Tj Demos is on a similar line in his recent book *Return to the postcolony*. Here he looks at artists travelling to postcolonial Africa to make sense of European repressed histories of violence and inequality that return to haunt the European consciousness. Demos writes “given the fact that there is no firm separation from, or clear European conscience in relation to, the colonial past, in many ways, that colonial era never actually ended”.⁴¹² Instead he believes that “the colonial past still haunts us because it is a past that has not really past”.⁴¹³ He argues that if Europe continues to disavow the negative effects of colonialism, the present inequalities and racism will continue to be ignored. Demos concentrates on the history of Europeans creating slaves and monsters elsewhere, and how the repressed come back as a haunting reminder. He argues that the artists he focuses on⁴¹⁴ serve as “a crucial antidote to a pervasive amnesia, insofar as they help to conjure the spirits that hover around the negations of historical consciousness”.⁴¹⁵ These artists are, according to Demos, successful in showing the postcolony as an entanglement of different histories and presences and how this connects to current financial, environmental and cultural issues. In this work the past is not used for viewers to simply contemplate, but as the material that will lead on to the future. To be able to take a leap from the past to the future, via the present, Demos argues that artists can help us to imagine how we can live more justly, or as Lopéz puts it “to disrupt the production of the text of whiteness precisely by asking the questions that it has eluded for so long”.⁴¹⁶

Returning to Gilroy and British melancholia, could asking new questions and bringing repressed histories to the surface help letting the lost object go? Freud’s

⁴¹¹ Paul Gilroy, *There ain't no black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation*.

⁴¹² Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 8.

⁴¹³ Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 12.

⁴¹⁴ Demos writes about the work by Sven Augustijinen, Vincent Meessen, Zarina Bhimji, Renzo Marten and Pieter Hugo.

⁴¹⁵ Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 158.

⁴¹⁶ Alfred J. Lopez, 'Introduction: whiteness after empire', 24.

concept of melancholia helps us to understand how ambivalences repressed during colonialism once again rose to the surface at the end of the empire. The migrants arriving to Europe are reminders of a lost empire, but also of the violent past that made that empire. The mixed-race subject can be seen as an uncanny reminder of the mixing taking place during imperial times, and after. It shows that empire was never as clear-cut as it was presented to be.

Ahmed also used Freud's concept of melancholia but argued that migrants in Britain are considered melancholic, because they are seen to be grieving lost cultures and countries that they are encouraged to let go.⁴¹⁷ Ahmed argues that migrants are seen as melancholic because their object has been declared dead by others, but they have not been able to give up on the object. What arises from this example is a question of value. It is assumed that the country that the migrants have arrived at is superior to the one they have left. Therefore, they are expected to let go of their past.

This presumption comes from a system in which European particularism has become a universal dominant, as Ernesto Laclau has argued.⁴¹⁸ Within this system, Maharaj has reasoned, others might be tolerated at a price if they give up their past belongings and embrace all that is Western. To justify its cause "outsiders' are constructed around a sense of their 'disturbing, backward difference' — as memories of underdevelopment".⁴¹⁹ Ahmed argues "the melancholics are thus the ones who must be redirected, or turned around".⁴²⁰ This exposes an attitude and ideology that maintains its own privilege in relation to other cultures. One that is unable to see the value of others as equal to their own. And one that does not see the need for oneself to change, but sees the need for others to change to become more like them.

⁴¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, 'Melancholic migrants'.

⁴¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau, 'Universalism, particularism, and the question of indentity', *October*, 61/Summer 1992 (1992) 88.

⁴¹⁹ Sarat Maharaj, 'Dislocutions', 33.

⁴²⁰ Sara Ahmed, 'Melancholic migrants', 139.



Figure 4.4: *Interweaved*, from *A-Z of conflict*

4.3 LINDSAY SEERS

Lindsay Seers is a British artist, born in Mauritius. By drawing upon her own, sometimes incredible, biography overlaid with historical accounts in relation to the colonial encounter, Seers traces her own personal history and involvement in the colonial space. She makes likely and unlikely connections and weaves both credible and incredible stories.

Her practice combines physical installations with sound and different image sources, leading to a multi-sensory viewing experience. For each installation a structure is built, suited for that particular filmic experience, avoiding a neutral space and instead embracing the various sensory relationships the viewers might have to the space and thereby also the film projections. The camera, the act of photography, and the use of the image as evidence of events are recurring themes in her work. I will focus on three aspects of her installation *Nowhere less now*: the first is her strategy for bringing the ghosts back to Europe, second is her returning fascination with heterochromia – to be born with two different coloured eyes, the third is our future relationship to photography.

Nowhere Less Now

Nowhere less now is a site-specific installation with a narrative told through a two-channel video. The piece is based on Seers finding a family photograph of her great-great-uncle, George Edwards, taken whilst he was serving with the British navy in Zanzibar. The discovery takes Seers to Africa's East coast and she makes likely and un-likely relationships between George, herself, the other people in the picture and with the tin church in Kilburn where the exhibition took place. The installation continues Seers' investigation into the relationship between photography, history, the archive and how we remember.⁴²¹

⁴²¹ Lindsay Seers, *Nowhere less now*



Figure 4.5: Lindsay Seers, *Nowhere less now*. Courtesy of the artist.

To view *Nowhere less now* one had to book a timed slot to see the exhibition in Kilburn, and was let in with a small group of viewers through a back door of a tin church.⁴²² Once in, the audience were given cordless headphones and instructions of how to experience the work — where to sit, where to walk out — and told to look around inside the church when the video had finished. The audience was led into a structure, which from the inside looked like a boat that had been turned upside down, and sat down on steps. At the front there were two round screens ready for projections, one concave, the other convex. When the projection started voices played through the headphones. At first it was easy to follow a woman's clear voice, but soon there were other voices and sound filling the space making it increasingly difficult to listen to one narrative.

The stories and voices combined in the narrative take their starting point in Seers' search for George Edwards, who was born with two different coloured eyes, one blue and one brown. When travelling to Zanzibar Seers meets another George, a dark-skinned African man whose own great-great-grandfather, also named

⁴²² A video of the installation can be seen at Artangel, 'Lindsay Seers: Nowhere less now, Documentation video', <http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2012/nowhere_less_now/video/nlnvideo>, accessed 27/02/2015 2015.

George, was a freed slave on the same ship as George Edwards. Finally, a third George contacts Seers from the future, where no still images are allowed, but he has a box of them containing the same images Seers has of her great-great-uncle. To avoid confusion I will refer to them as ‘George Edwards’ for Seers’ great-great-uncle, ‘Zanzibar-George’ and ‘future-George’.

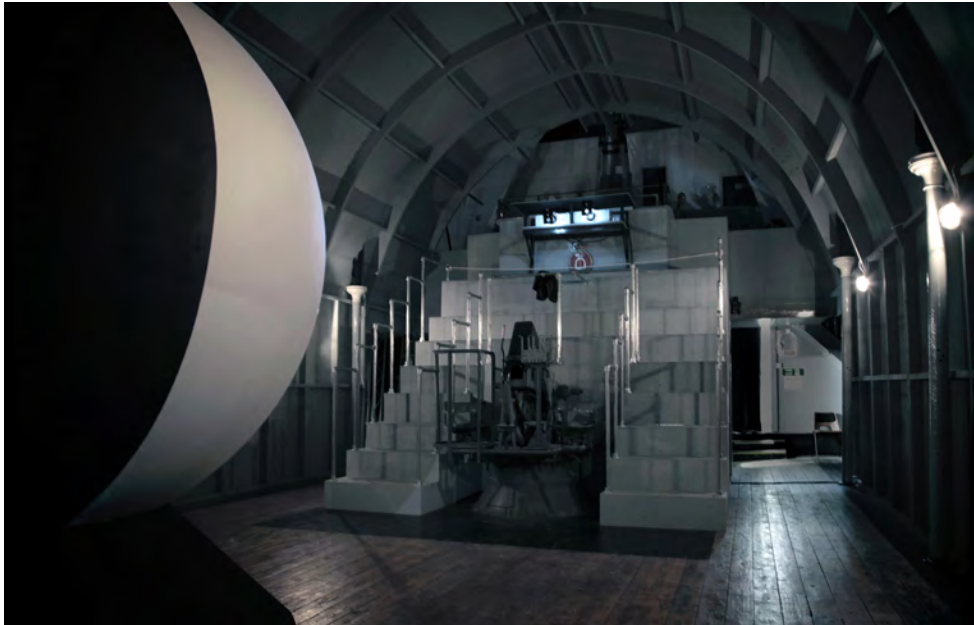


Figure 4.6 Installation of Lindsay Seers, *Nowhere less now*. Courtesy of the artist.

The visual work mixes images from the archive representing the past with cgi animation from the future, but keeps returning to an image of the present. Seers includes recently filmed re-enactments from the same church viewers are sitting in, as well as the construction being built. She also shows an identical tin-church in Africa. This brings the work closer to home and to a history that not only happened somewhere else, in Africa, but which simultaneously took place in Europe, and grounds the viewing experience in the West rather than in the former colonies. This, as Stuart Hall wrote of the postcolonial, “obliges us to re-read the binaries as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries for ever”.⁴²³ Seers does what Demos is propagating in *Return to the postcolony*; she disturbs representation and the stability of the “visual, temporal

⁴²³ Stuart Hall, 'When was the 'post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit.', 247.

and spatial logic” through aesthetic means.⁴²⁴ The artists Demos writes about predominantly travel to Africa to come face-to-face with ghosts that haunt their histories. Seers also travels to Africa to meet the ghosts of her own past and to retrace her own history. But she manages to bring the ghosts back to Europe, and shows us that the haunted histories reside here, in Europe. Seers returns the gaze onto Europe, and in particular Britain to trace what ghosts haunt us here.

In mixing different temporalities Seers manages to make the audience feel that the past is not necessarily in the past but is still being played out in the present and will possibly be repeated in the future. Ole Hagen, Seers’ close collaborator, writes of her work that she refers to the past and the present, but also a virtual future where the “immediate past is constantly reconfigured from a virtual future”.⁴²⁵ Her meanderings of the past based on what we know of it now (mainly through images), and what we will know of it in the future, open history as a configuration of different possibilities. This helps to disrupt the idea of time as belonging to a certain period that has a beginning and an end. She is trying to show what Bhabha writes is the problem of signification in the present, that “something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory”.⁴²⁶ Seers’ fragments and associations between images conflate the here and elsewhere and the now and then.

Bhabha writes that the first instances of cultural difference that emerged in the colonial text came side by side with discourses of civility and Western modernity. “Thus”, he argues, “the political and theoretical genealogy of modernity lies not only in the origins of the *idea* of civility, but in this history of the colonial moment”.⁴²⁷ Hence, Hall argued, rather than building essentialist narratives of the past of either binary position, narratives could be drawn through fragments of

⁴²⁴ Tj Demos, *Return to the postcolony: Specters of colonialism in contemporary art*, 9.

⁴²⁵ Ole Hagen, 'Lindsay Seers, travelling beyond reason', 194.

⁴²⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', 36.

⁴²⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', 32.

memories and experiences. This could be explored through the transculturations, ambivalences and hybridity that have always existed in the colonial moment.⁴²⁸



Figure 4.7: Installation of Lindsay Seers, *Nowhere less now*. Courtesy of the artist

Before leaving the exhibition visitors were encouraged to stay and look at some of the paraphernalia in the church. As it is a sea cadet church, many things from the video reoccurred in the space and it was difficult to figure out what had been placed there by Seers and what had been appropriated from the space and incorporated into the film to fit her narrative. The church itself is made out as a ship and feels like an unlikely architecture of a church, which made it challenging to tell where the permanent interior ended the installation started.⁴²⁹ When exiting, each viewer was given a book written by Ole Hagen, which was part of the installation.⁴³⁰ The book is written from the different perspectives of each of the characters represented in the installation.

⁴²⁸ Stuart Hall, 'When was the 'post-colonial'? Thinking at the limit.'

⁴²⁹ To see images of the church go to 'The tin tabernacle Kilburn', <<http://tintabernaclekilburn.org.uk/>>, accessed 27/02/2015 2015.

⁴³⁰ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now* (London: Artangel, 2012).

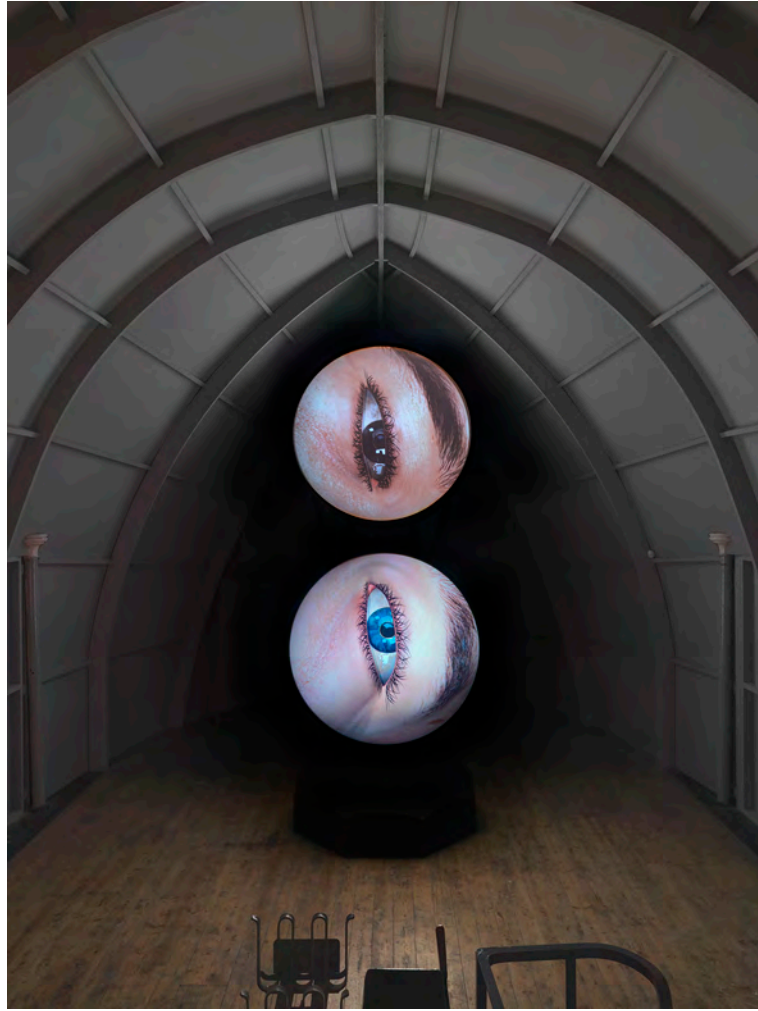


Figure 4.8: Installation of Lindsay Seers, *Nowhere less now*. Photographer: Marcus Leith. Courtesy of Matt's gallery.

Intertwined Identities

As mentioned, Seers is white and British but was born and grew up in Mauritius so had an early relationship to an elsewhere of Britain. According to the text in the book, after returning from Mauritius Seers' family were all in different ways drawn to, and left for, Africa. Part of her trip to Zanzibar was to find what this irresistible pull of Africa was.⁴³¹ In the piece she contemplates "perhaps, if I find out who George Edwards was, and what his future manifestations are, I will know my own place in time".⁴³²

⁴³¹ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*.

⁴³² Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 18.

Seers initially found George Edwards fascinating because of his multiple coloured eyes. Heterochromia is a reoccurring theme in Seers' work, and is crucial to my argument about her work fitting into a discourse of hybridity. She describes heterochromia as a condition that results from an unborn twin, an unborn sibling enveloped by the living person; the trace of the twin can be seen in one of the eyes. "The genetic material from [...George Edward's] unborn twin could have caused the defect".⁴³³ John Mullarkey wrote of Seers' installation:

for something to be visible, something else must be invisible.[...] In George's eyes we see the left-overs of violent attention. In his heterochromia is the residue of a suppressed other, a virtual twin actually incorporated, but still showing through, seen through the pigment of one iris.⁴³⁴

In order for one twin to survive the other had to die, which can be read as a metaphor for the colonial psyche. In the exhibition book it says "our existence can mean the non-existence of something else".⁴³⁵ So, possibly Seers is coming to terms with her own existence on behalf of an other. This analysis runs parallel with Sartre, who wrote in the preface to Fanon's *The wretched of the earth* "there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters".⁴³⁶ It could be argued that the construction and existence of a white western identity could only grow on the condition that other differences were erased. Lopèz writes that

One can and should however, strive to show both how whiteness does not essentially, irrevocably come with the kinds of privileges that it now enjoys, and how the privileges of being white have always come at the expense of those who are not.⁴³⁷

⁴³³ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 22.

⁴³⁴ John Mullarkey, 'Democratic visions', <http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2012/nowhere_less_now/essay_john_mullarkey/democratic_visions>, accessed 27/02/2015 2015.

⁴³⁵ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 73.

⁴³⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', in Frantz Fanon (ed.), *The wretched of the earth* (London, New York, Camberwell, Toronto, New Delhi, Auckland, Rosebank Penguin Books, 2001 [1963]), 22.

⁴³⁷ Alfred J. Lopez, 'Introduction: whiteness after empire', 13.

One of those privileges was the idea of freedom. As Mullarkey points out, “the concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom — if it did not in fact create it — like slavery.”⁴³⁸

However, the multiple coloured eyes can also be seen to be an acknowledgement of difference, and individuals living with difference. Reviewer Alison Green considers it “a metaphor for a fundamental heterogeneity of identity”.⁴³⁹ The biological trace of the missing twin is a reminder of a doubling within the person; a doubling that hints at dual or multiple identifications.

Seers’ doubling arguably comes from her double identification as a child on the one hand to Britain of her ancestors and language and to Mauritius, her birth home. Looking back at her earlier piece, *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, she there returned to Mauritius with her mother, to investigate her early years. Since, she cannot remember many details of her childhood, she uses photographs to help her illustrate.⁴⁴⁰ In the piece she explored her inability to speak until the age of eight in Mauritius, and how she developed a photographic memory instead.

It was this inability to speak that stuck in my mind, as it did for Green, as a metaphor to “some things as being unspeakable and unrepresentable”.⁴⁴¹ To think about the inability to speak as something unrepresentable brings to mind both the writing by Jacques Rancière’s on the unrepresentable,⁴⁴² and Bhabha’s on language. Bhabha writes that language is crucial for the imagination of nationality.⁴⁴³ It is part of a force that continues a homogeneous national discourse. He writes, through Anderson, that language is a process of signification. As such there is a separation between language and reality. The meaning is made through language, but this meaning is already pre-mediated by society before us:.

⁴³⁸ John Mullarkey, 'Democratic visions',

⁴³⁹ Alison Green, 'Having the last word', *Source magazine*, Summer/79 (2014) 36.

⁴⁴⁰ Michael Newman, 'Lindsay Seers' *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*', <http://www.lindsayseers.info/sites/seers-dev.dev.freewayprojects.com/files/publications/lindsay_seers_extramission_6_black_maria_by_michael_newman.pdf>, accessed 04/03/2015 2015.

⁴⁴¹ Alison Green, 'Having the last word', 35.

⁴⁴² Jacques Ranciere, *The future of the image* (London: Verso, 2007).

⁴⁴³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Dissemination'.

language is always a form of visual epistemology, the miming of a pre-given reality: knowing is implicated in the confrontational polarity of subject and object, Self and Other.⁴⁴⁴

In Seers' case I wonder what might happen when a child growing up in the colony finds the visual and verbal epistemologies contrasting? If images do not correspond with the language provided does one take precedence over the other? Perhaps Seers' relationship and experience of growing up in the colony rather than in the UK did not merge with the signification available in the English language. Seers' early associations of pleasure — the smells, sounds, and people of Mauritius — possibly did not correspond with a colonial language that negated these pleasures. Bhabha explains the relationship to language and nationality as split. In the construction of a national discourse a society will perform a “forgetting to remember” necessary for imagining the nation not as it *was* but as *could* be. But as with any disavowal the repression is still present in the unconscious.⁴⁴⁵

For me Seers' speechlessness symbolises the splitting of the coloniser in the colonial discourse. The colonisers did not return from the colonies uninfluenced by them. Bhabha maintained that it is impossible to meet other cultures without being influenced, without doubting something in your own. The colonisers were split in their desires, their humanity and their beliefs. Morrison points out that racism does not only affect the victim, but also the perpetrator, albeit in a very different way, and she argues that this part has been severely under-analysed.⁴⁴⁶ Of course it is valuable to examine what effect racism has had on the once colonised subjects, but she argues “equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behaviour of masters”.⁴⁴⁷

In the preface to *Playing in the dark*, Morrison recalls an autobiographical book she read on Marie Cardinal's dealings with personal madness. This sprung out of a complicated tear inside her resulting from being a white French child born in

⁴⁴⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Freedom's basis in the indeterminate', *October*, 61/Summer 1992 (1992) 53.

⁴⁴⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Dissemination', 161.

⁴⁴⁶ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination*, 11.

⁴⁴⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination*, 12.

Algeria and her witnessing Algeria's destruction by France.⁴⁴⁸ The trauma of this double identification led to her madness. The body carries earlier histories. The ones we are unable to speak about still reside in our unconscious. Rancière calls it "silent speech", which is an imprint of marks, of meaning, on the bodies that speaks more truthfully than any speech coming from a mouth but also a silence that is an "obstinate silence".⁴⁴⁹

Split identity and doublings are reoccurring in Seers' practice. As well as using the metaphor of the unborn twin in *Nowhere less now*, Seers also plays with ideas of doubles occurring in multiple times and places. In both sound and text the various Georges that Seers come across are mixed together. It becomes a confusing experience, one where identities become fluid and entangled in each other's histories. Seers exposes some the boundaries of identities and questions clear, linear narratives.

Her experience mirrors my own unconscious awareness of not belonging in the country that I grew up in, but from another direction. I was seen as the dark colonised in the West. Seers was the white coloniser in the colony. The available communities or identities available for us did not fit. Instead, our identifications were thrown from one to the other, and our practices are now looking to resolve these conflicts of our past. The contradictions and disidentifications we live with highlight the impossibility of any fixed binary position.

The Position of Whiteness After Empire

To Seers' relief she finds that *her* "uncle was not the one who had enslaved Zanzibar-George's great-great-grandfather, although that doesn't absolve the British in Africa".⁴⁵⁰ As with most details in Seers' work we don't know if this is true, or if this is a history that Seers chooses to compose from the images and fragments that she finds. Indeed we don't even know if Seers had a great-great-uncle called George. We do know that someone's uncle did enslave and colonise others. Where

⁴⁴⁸ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination*.

⁴⁴⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The future of the image*, 13.

⁴⁵⁰ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 88.

are the stories from those people now? How does one react to finding out the history that one's grandparents and parents participated in? My grandmother, who distributed magazines from the resistance movement when Denmark became occupied by Nazi-Germany, used to shake her head in disbelief when people claimed to not have known what was going on in Germany. She said it was impossible by that point not to know what was going on. Whichever side we choose to identify with, don't we choose to remember a history that suits us in the present?

*“What happens to whiteness after empire? What happens to whiteness, in other words, after it loses its colonial privileges?”*⁴⁵¹ López asks. He wants to address the struggle of whiteness coming to terms with itself as a postcolonial subject that have had to come through a transformation from oppressor to living-with others. But how is this done? Although we share a collective unconscious, we also have our own specific experience in this world. This is why I find the personal engagement with the colonial history in art practices important since it connects oneself to a discourse without trying to escape the difficulties that might arise from it.

⁴⁵¹ Alfred J. Lopez, 'Introduction: whiteness after empire', 4.



Figure 4.9: Jason Diaketé. Photograph by Henrik Montgomery/TT.

Recently in Sweden a musician, Jason Diaketé, with a white mother and a black father stood up to receive an award. There had been racist comments about him receiving the prize, which reminded him of racist incidents throughout his life. In his speech he held his Swedish passport in front of him, pointing out that it is the only passport he has and it is from the country in which he was born. He also declared his love of Sweden, while almost crying. He argued afterwards that he did this as a reaction against xenophobic comments such as ‘going back to where he came from’, and as a protest against the recent surge of support for Sweden’s nationalist party, *Sverige demokraterna*.

The speech had much media attention and soon afterwards there was an anti-racist campaign supporting Jason, through the making of a video with famous musicians holding up their Swedish passports while saying “I am Jason”.⁴⁵² Jason was honoured by the gesture, but elsewhere there was criticism. Not only at the fact that it was made in a nationalistic spirit, using Sweden and Swedish nationality as

⁴⁵² This was before “I am Charlie Hebdo”, which has arguably changed the connotation of this statement.

symbols for belonging, but also because of the fact that most of those people *were not* Jason.⁴⁵³ Those who were white would never have their Swedish nationality questioned. In the discussion that followed on TV-sofas and in newspapers Swedish people were defending their right to have an opinion, to take part and not to be questioned. On the one hand, I am positive towards Swedish people standing with Jason to show their disgust at a racist system. However, I am not convinced that all the white middle class supporters fully understood that their situation is fundamentally different from Jason's, and that some of them even benefit from that very same system. In this vein, some argued that to support the cause they should have stated: "I am *not* Jason" acknowledging their privileged white position in a white society.



Figure 4.10: Stills from video supporting Jag är Jason. Image credit Natalija Sako/SVT.

This example deals with the complexity of identity versus identification. Identities are not simply asserted; they are also given. As Stuart Hall wrote "every text has a 'before-text', every identity has its pre-identities".⁴⁵⁴ They are

⁴⁵³ For the full details on this argument Rebecka Ljung, 'Özz Nûjen: "Någonting är galet"', (updated 13/12/2013) <<http://www.svt.se/nyheter/regionalt/abc/ozz-nujen-nagonting-ar-galet-1>>, accessed 06/03/2013 2015; Natalija Sako, "Jag är Jason" debatten fortsätter', (updated 20/12/2013) <<http://www.svt.se/kultur/jag-ar-jason>>, accessed 06/03/2015 2015; Elisabet Åberg, 'Här hyllar de Timbuktus tal i ny video', (updated 16/12/2013) <<http://www.svt.se/kultur/musikbranschen-hyllar-timbuktus-tal-i-video>>, accessed 06/03/2015.

⁴⁵⁴ Stuart Hall et al., *Modernity and difference* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001).

constructed within normative discourses.⁴⁵⁵ As such they take on values within this discourse and historical specificity. Identification is more complex to understand since it includes contradictions. While *identities* disavow, leave out and exclude in order to homogenise a unity, one can still hold contradictory *identifications* simultaneously. Thus, the value judgement attached to identities does not necessarily line up with our identifications.

Rancière discusses the response to a similar example in France in 1961 when Algerians were beaten and thrown into the Seine by French police. He calls the political response to the event “an impossible identification”.⁴⁵⁶ He and his political companions at the time could not *identify* with the Algerian victims but neither could they with the police. As such what they could do was to

question our identification with the “French people” in whose name they had been murdered. That is to say we could act as political subjects in the interval or the gap between two identities, neither of which we could assume.⁴⁵⁷

Therefore, Rancière argues that a subject is someone who *disidentifies* with, and denies any identity given by an other in order to be in between names. Rather than being constrained to either one or the other, they inhabit an “uncomfortable position” of neither/nor that leads to a “new politics of the in-between”.⁴⁵⁸ My argument about the ‘I am Jason’ debate is that I am not convinced that Jason’s white supporters recognised that their national identity is positioned differently to his, because of the colour of his skin. They still live in a society where his skin is not seen as Swedish, whereas theirs is. That is a question of value that still lingers in a postcolonial society.

Lindsay Seers dismantles her own whiteness and its position in society, showing that one does not need to have dark skin to discuss, and be affected by, postcolonial issues. In her work she disentangles her own perceived relationship

⁴⁵⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Who needs 'identity'?', 17.

⁴⁵⁶ Jacques Ranciere, 'Politics, identification, and subjectivization ', *October*, 61/Summer 1992 (1992) 61.

⁴⁵⁷ Jacques Ranciere, 'Politics, identification, and subjectivization ', 61.

⁴⁵⁸ Jacques Ranciere, 'Politics, identification, and subjectivization ', 63.

with whiteness and her mixed identification with it. Her work questions narratives of colonial whiteness, by confusing and adding layers of complexity to past histories, within her family and a wider British history with colonialism. Rather than trying to unravel a universal story line, she engages with the specificities of experience of the coloniser rather than the colonised. In 1992 Cornel West expressed his disappointment in how discussions of identity “always begin by talking about the victims. [...] As if whiteness is not as fundamentally structured within the discourse of race as blackness is.”⁴⁵⁹ Seers includes her own biography into this discourse and reflects on her own identification from within a colonial history, opening up new angles and spaces from which to speak of the various traumas of colonialism. As such she reveals her own ambivalence related to the cultural boundaries of nationality and belonging. In Bhabha’s words she turns “the boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority is negotiated”.⁴⁶⁰

Rancière argues that by making unlikely combinations in artworks new configurations of what can be thought and seen are made.⁴⁶¹ Through combining heterogeneous elements and things that seem to be incompatible art works can create clashes that reveal “a strangeness in the familiar, in order to reveal a different order of measurements that is only uncovered by the violence of conflict”.⁴⁶² Thereby, art can create a slight shift in perspective, which enables a viewer to ‘see’ what one previously could not see, because it could not be understood. This can have a disrupting effect.

⁴⁵⁹ Cornel West, 'A matter of life and death', *October*, 61/Summer 1992 (1992) 22.

⁴⁶⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *Introduction: narrating the nation*, ed. Nation And Narration (Nation and narration; London: Routledge, 1990), 4.

⁴⁶¹ Jacques Ranciere, *The future of the image*, 91.

⁴⁶² Jacques Ranciere, *The future of the image*, 57.

The unconscious affect, which not only penetrates the mind but literally opens it, is the stranger in the house, always forgotten, and whose mind must even forget this forgetting in order to be able to pose as master of itself.⁴⁶³

Artworks can bring to the surface some of the hidden repressions that are rejected when forming our sense of identity, nationality and belonging. To make something thinkable through art, to open new perspectives, involves re-addressing what is already known, already repressed in order to maintain a stable identity.

Seers helps to bring the repressed ambivalence of the coloniser to the surface by using her own biography to question historical narratives. She makes connections between things, people and places in the here and now and with those of the past, that make us look at things differently, and from multiple directions simultaneously. For me, this viewpoint becomes important when thinking about how one goes about uncovering repressions that exist in the unconscious of the coloniser and of whiteness. Not to, as Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julian write, “‘correct’ the omissions of the past within the western avant-garde” but to question white ethnicity and its centred position: to disrupt a continued central position of whiteness.⁴⁶⁴ Lopèz writes that whiteness is a signifier of the “colonial unconscious” and that there are various postcolonial whitenesses struggling to come into being, but which must reconcile themselves with the colonial past to truly exist.⁴⁶⁵ I am suggesting that this is partly done by turning our gaze on how whiteness is maintained and performed in the present, which is what Seers’ practice begins to do.

Seers work exposes her own memory from the colonial encounter and as such responds to Demos’ idea that the past is still among us as ghostly presence and haunted memories “that refuse to rest in peace”. Or as Victor Burgin puts it: “ideologies are not simply undone”.⁴⁶⁶ In a tentative way Seers approaches the subject of whiteness and the European construction through her own identity. Her practice helps to question whiteness from within to avoid a narrative of whiteness

⁴⁶³ Jacques Ranciere, *The future of the image*, 131.

⁴⁶⁴ Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'De Margin and De Centre', 455.

⁴⁶⁵ Alfred J. Lopez, 'Introduction: whiteness after empire', 6.

⁴⁶⁶ Victor Burgin, *In/different spaces: place and memory in visual culture*, 189.

untouched by the other. Through doing this she helps to disturb narratives of purity and linear progress and opens them up for discussion and re-interpretation.

Bhabha reasoned in the introduction to *The location of culture* that “the Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity”.⁴⁶⁷ Twenty years later this includes voices from within. Seers opens certain uncomfortable histories in her own family album to be scrutinised and reflected upon by herself and her audience. Hopefully, these gestures will help others to seek out their ghosts too.

My critique of *Nowhere less now* would be that the treatment of the different Georges in the work is slightly flawed. The character of Zanzibar-George is too reductive in comparison to the character of Seers herself. When Zanzibar-George tells the viewers, in a first-person address, of his impressions of Seers coming to Africa and of his findings about his enslaved great-great-grandfather some of his reflections seem simplified. For example, compare how the introduction of Seers starts in the book in comparison to Zanzibar-George’s.

Seers: “I embarked on a new journey in my ongoing voyage to discover the depths of my family line and its entanglements in the world history of discoveries and confrontations. It is impossible for me even to start a narrative journey unless the virtual potential of what could have been or what will be materialises in the same dimension as myself.”⁴⁶⁸

Zanzibar-George: “My name is George. I’m happy with my name. I was named after my great great grandfather, and I think he must have been a strong man. I have a good life. I don’t think much about the past, but I like to think that my great great grandfather approves of me and keeps an eye on me from wherever he is now.”⁴⁶⁹

While Seers is portrayed as a questioning individual, curious of her own position within history, Zanzibar-George does not contemplate much. He is happy

⁴⁶⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 6.

⁴⁶⁸ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 10.

⁴⁶⁹ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 29.

about his name, even though it erased his great-great-grandfather's real name and thereby his own possibility to be able to discover the family line Seers examines. (The name George was given to the great-great-grandfather since the British could not pronounce his African name.) Also, Zanzibar-George seems confused and bemused by what Seers is doing. For example, in a section where Seers restages a sacrifice dressed in an outfit imitating one from a photograph by George Edwards's wife Georgina, Zanzibar-George writes:

I asked if she thought that the ritual had done what she wanted it to do. She told me that she was a twin too, but also that she thinks many things and people in the world can be twinned in some way. I am not quite sure what she meant. She said she needed to do something to connect with her dead relatives but also to understand their link with Africa.⁴⁷⁰

In my opinion, the piece would have benefited from Zanzibar-George being more three dimensional in his portrait. It would have been interesting if he had questioned Seers' investigation in a more demanding and contrasting way. This would have helped to further de-centralise the positions of whiteness in comparison to the colony.

4.4 LOSS OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Nowhere less now offers a bricolage of relationships between image, word and sound and combines images of the past and present simultaneously so that the viewers can reflect on what an imagined future might be. Rancière writes:

The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible.⁴⁷¹

Looking into the world that Seers imagines for the future, future-George tells us of a world where the fixed image is forbidden, both as a photograph and as a

⁴⁷⁰ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 79.

⁴⁷¹ Jacques Rancière, *The emancipated spectator*, 103.

mirror.⁴⁷² Part of this ban is to hinder the ability to fix a person through an image; to hinder fixing an identity based on an image, including racial identities. Future-George reflects in the book:

These days you rarely see a face that is this monoethnic, it's so tied up with identity tyrannies of old that reigned prior to global unity and natural genetic mix. But now I was suddenly looking at a very brief morphlog of a pale face, the closest I had ever been to seeing a photo or a mirror-image of my own, original face. I remembered the faces of different shades in my photographs. The face that stared back at me was definitely one of the odd, pale shades.⁴⁷³

This suggests a future where everyone is hybrid and mixed, and all histories of particular ethnicities forgotten and hidden, which resounds of Sarat Maharaj's feared blandness of hybridity. He argues that xenophobia and xenophilia are two sides of the same coin, which through the logic of sameness are both effectively aiming for a diversity that can be managed and overseen into a "celebration of diversity"⁴⁷⁴



Figure 4.11: Installation of Lindsay Seers, *Nowhere less now*. Photographer: Marcus Leith. Courtesy of Matt's gallery.

⁴⁷² Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 96.

⁴⁷³ Ole Hagen, *nowhere less now*, 96.

⁴⁷⁴ Sarat Maharaj, 'Dislocutions', 34.

Future-George uses his box of illegal photographs to try and shape a historical narrative, an identity understood through ancestral connection. This box becomes very important to him and to his existence. As mentioned, the box contains the same photographs that Seers herself uses to work out her history. Future-George comes to represent a certain position in the present. I struggle to understand what this means to Seers' future. As a member of the audience I feel sympathetic to future-George holding on to his right to personal memory, history and to some extent genealogy and I see the law forbidding these images as evil. I want him to succeed in keeping his images and figure things out. However, I also doubt myself and wonder what future-George might mean to the future ahead of him. Will the limitation of images in this future world once again distort history and create an obsession around the photograph as a source of evidence? But, with histories erased, what will these images become evidence of? Without language and history attached to them could the images become released from their fixity and take on new meanings? Could they signify something different? For me this returns to Bhabha's suggestion of a Third Space, a hybrid world, where absolute origins have been lost, but where we need reminders of how we got there differently — why there are differences and how some were erased as others became more dominant.

Future-George's relationship to his images can be thought of in two ways. Firstly it can be a reminder that histories of domination and difference cannot be repressed if we are to move on beyond the present. Rather than using the images to return to an imagined origin they are a reminder of what pre-identities came before our identities. Seers shows how our relationship to images changes depending on our experience.⁴⁷⁵ Her relationship to the still images of her great-great-uncle George Edwards will irrevocably change from her travels and re-enactments in Zanzibar. Future-George's experience of the box of images he holds will also change as he accumulates more and more information about their history. My experience of the image of my father is different now when I know the people and

⁴⁷⁵ *ArtReview close encounters: the Jarman award* (2010) (Video, 22/07/2010).

places that might have surrounded him in Sri Lanka. An image is never only a fixed moment in time. It continues to change with us as we experience the world.

Secondly, future-George's attachment to these photos could be seen as a desire to hold onto a certain image of identity: a certain point of stability, based in a specific history told from a Western point of view. Future-George's conviction that these images will have something to do with his own history, and his search for the meaning behind them, could be seen as a struggle holding onto a certain wish, a dream of a clear genealogy that will tell him about himself. He is struggling with a lost history, a forgotten identity: a stable, certain identity, born in the past, which might ground him in the now, with the image as evidence of this identity.

In the section on melancholia I argued that the lost object could be thought of as a lost identity or nationality. In my interpretation of future-George, the lost object can also be understood as the photograph. Rancière describes images as speaking and being silent at the same time.⁴⁷⁶ He uses Barthes' *studium* and *punctum* to explain this. The two different experiences that Barthes has in relation to the photograph Rancière sees as a "double poetics of the image", meaning the image is simultaneously two things: "the legible testimony of a history written on faces or objects and pure blocs of visibility, impervious to any narrativization, any intersection of meaning".⁴⁷⁷ But he concludes that Barthes's schema is too simplified and writes that "what the simple contrasts between the image and the visual, or the *punctum* and the *studium*, propose is the mourning for a certain phase of this intertwinement — that of semiology as critical thinking about images".⁴⁷⁸

In *The pencil of history*, John Tagg writes about photography's role as a testimony of history.⁴⁷⁹ History and photography were two inventions of the same century. During postmodern times we have witnessed the crumbling of both. The dismantling of photography as evidence has in turn questioned the evidence in

⁴⁷⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The future of the image*, 13.

⁴⁷⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The future of the image*, 11.

⁴⁷⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The future of the image*, 18.

⁴⁷⁹ John Tagg, 'The pencil of history: photography, history, archive', in John Tagg (ed.), *The disciplinary frame : photographic truths and the capture of meaning* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

history. In equating the photograph to a lost object future-George symbolises the part that refuses to let this object go. He is mourning a certain relationship to the image and as a member of the audience I am mourning with him. We struggle to let go of the photograph as evidence, as a trace to some certainty of who we are and who we think we were. Because of its former relationship confirming our identity, history and stability, we struggle to let the photograph as evidence go. By refusing to let it go we inhibit the ability to see what it can become instead.

Seers work is in line with Bhabha's arguing that subjects are divided and in constant process, and "caught in conflicting interests and identities" in a world where "antagonistic images are always produced side by side and in competition with each other".⁴⁸⁰ Messages from one bloc to the other give conflicting messages and aims and the counter-hegemonic message becomes more and more difficult to fix. Bhabha asks:

How do we avoid the mixing or overlap of images, the split-screen, the failure to synchronize sound and image? Perhaps we need to change the ocular language of the image in order to talk of the social and political identifications or representations of a people.⁴⁸¹

For me the multiple screens of *Nowhere less now* question the language of the image, tied up with Western identity. Seers' work does not show hybridity as a mix of cultures but rather as neither/nor: it occupies the space between multiple positions. Thus, entering a Third Space, which for Bhabha has the power to intervene and make "the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process" exposing culture as a forever "expanding code" and "destroys this mirror of representation".⁴⁸²

4.5 A - Z OF CONFLICT

In *A-Z of conflict* I return to the photograph. Photography's entwined relationship with history, science and discourses related to control made it an uncomfortable

⁴⁸⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', 29.

⁴⁸¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', 30.

⁴⁸² Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', 37.

medium for me. But yet, I feel an urge to create photographs. I use the medium to think. It allows me the eerie feeling of what it is like to be seen by others. It allows me time to think about what others see that I do not.

I mention in *Balancing Act* that my mother was often questioned about the heritage of her children when my sister and I were children, but this does not happen with her grandchildren, who are the same colour as her. People who see my sister, who looks more like my mother than I do, are often surprised about their likeness. As if it would be inevitable that we would look more like my father because of our skin and hair colour. So, in *A-Z of conflict* I include my mother into the still image with myself. I was curious to see what this image disturbs; why there is a conflict about us both occupying the same frame. What does my image disturb in the genealogy of whiteness?



Figure 4.12: Negotiation, from *A-Z of conflict*

Family and Identification

To not be 'allowed' to belong to either of the groups that your parents belong to is problematic. In a society that has placed black and white into binary opposites, to identify as either of these for someone with a mixed background is complicated. If a child identifies as black, for example, this can have complications in the relationship to the white parent.⁴⁸³ To put one identification against another is always difficult, but I would argue even more so when a child is putting her parents into two opposite racial categories that she feels obliged to choose between.

Fanon wrote that the family structure is the foundation for the structure of the state. The child learns how to behave with authority, within this structure and translates it to other state authority.⁴⁸⁴ However, Fanon says, the experience of the Negro⁴⁸⁵ child is different from the white child. While he is normal within his own family structure he becomes abnormal in his meeting with the white world. Fanon claims that as long as the little black boy stays with black people, his course will be very similar to the little white boy. It is in the meeting with Europe that he becomes inferior, or in fact is made inferior. This meeting often takes place through reading magazines, comic books and sagas that he finds identification with the little white boy, as explorer and missionary, who is threatened by anything evil, symbolized by Negroes or Indians.⁴⁸⁶ The boy in the Antilles identifies himself with the white man, the white truth and the "white man's attitude",⁴⁸⁷ rather than identifying with being a black man, and makes a distinction between himself and the African. It is not until he arrives in Europe that he realises that the white man sees him as black as the black African. In the meeting with Europe the black boy's aim becomes to be white and civilised and he rejects his own family, which he identifies with the image

⁴⁸³ Suki Ali, *Mixed-race, post-race: gender, new ethnicities, and cultural practices*, 89.

⁴⁸⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*.

⁴⁸⁵ I only use this word where Fanon uses it in *Black skin white masks*. When discussing Fanon's idea I will continue to use this word, since he makes a difference between the Negro and the mulatto. Fanon uses the Negro to discuss the particular experience of the Black African outside of Africa. In the British context Black is often used to include a variety of minority backgrounds including mixed.

⁴⁸⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 113.

⁴⁸⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 114.

of savagery attributed to them.⁴⁸⁸ But, how might this situation differ for the child growing up with one black parent and one white?

As is commonplace in Antilles, Fanon's own parents came from different backgrounds, with a mother from a mixed French background and a father who descended from slaves.⁴⁸⁹ Tessa Perkins stresses how certain attributions are valued differently in different groups. As do I, Fanon had multiple values in his background influencing his identity. They have to do with class, gender and race within a mixed-background family. For example what effect (if any) does the following scenario have:

My father moves from Sri Lanka, from what seems to be a high-caste family in an ex-colonised, third-world country with a strong patriarchal society. He moves to England, 'the mother land', for what is perceived to be a superior education. However, he is not accepted into this society or even into some houses. He meets my mother, a white Western woman from a working-class background, but from a country with progressive women's rights, Sweden. My father advises her on how to get an education. She qualifies as a nurse and thereafter supports my father financially to study.

Invisible to my father was that my mother shared some of his anxieties of not fitting in, having been an economic emigrant after the second world war in a still-hostile Europe. In one of the first homes of my grandparents in Sweden the neighbour came to greet them by knocking on their door and said "Hello and welcome to the neighbourhood. Just to let you know we don't like bloody Danes around here."

This picture does not necessarily have to be complicated, but can also be fraught with distress. The man, who has internalised the different roles of men and women and clear class distinctions, is all of a sudden made aware that with the colour of his skin this becomes irrelevant. Or maybe he, like Fanon, thought that by being loved by a white woman he would be recognised as white and not black, since

⁴⁸⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 114-15.

⁴⁸⁹ Sardar, Ziauddin (1986 [1967]), 'Foreword to the 2008 edition', in Frantz Fanon (ed.), *Black skin, white masks* (London: Pluto), vii.

by loving him she shows that he is “worthy of white love”.⁴⁹⁰ And maybe my mother found it a relief to have met a man to whom she is not necessarily subordinate to. It is difficult to know how different identifications played out in the relationship of my parents. There are many more factors than colour at play. Here I am contemplating what identifications are at stake, and what it might be like to be me, a daughter of this relationship.

Freud’s *Family romances* asserts that small events in a child’s life can make them find their own parents dissatisfactory and start wishing for other adults to replace them.⁴⁹¹ In my case from a young age I noticed that my father was constantly treated differently in comparison to my mother. I was also treated differently depending on who I was with. In Freud’s process the child does not simply exchange the father for another one, but recreates a fantasy of him in another. It exalts the real father, by constructing him out of memories from childhood when he seemed like the greatest.

I have had one fight in my whole life.

I was seven and a girl in my class said my father did not have a proper education because he did not have a Swedish qualification. I pulled the blonde hair out of this girl’s head.

I did not yet know what education or qualification was.

And neither did she.

When I did a public lecture about my research recently I was asked the question: “Why are you seeking to communicate with white people?” I was baffled by the question and my reply was “because my mother is white”. I have never been able to stand completely on the other side of whiteness. I have never felt completely comfortable identifying with an image of blackness in contrast to the majority. My involvement within the system is an important aspect in my work, and I argue that my position, being thrown in between one and the other allows me to open a space from where this can be reflected on.

⁴⁹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks* 45.

⁴⁹¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Family romances’, in Adam Phillips (ed.), *The Penguin Freud reader* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1909]).

After focusing much of my artwork on my relationship with blackness, my interrogation of whiteness includes the image of my mother. *A-Z of conflict* reflects on belonging. It reflects on the complexity that arises being a mixed-race subject, who is clearly part of whiteness, and yet there is still a conflict appearing in an image together with my white mother. This project brings together still lives, portraits and nature into a metaphorical mix aimed to highlight the entanglement of narratives, myths, control and hybridity. It is opening more questions for me in relationship to ideas of contamination and how belonging is attained through the separation of things. As an artist who is mixed race I was curious to understand if my image disturbs an image of whiteness. Is it that my visible skin colour is a reminder of the mixing that took place, and continues to take place, since colonial times? Is it a reminder that there is no origin, no certainty of belonging, to rely on, and there never was?

I leave these questions open in line with Minh-Ha who argues that what needs to be unpacked are the forms of simplifying, packaging and wrapping up that keep masters with their narratives. Rather, she encourages that “one leaves the realms of the known, and takes oneself there where no one does expect, is not expected to be”.⁴⁹² Minh-ha has argued for practices to avoid speaking *about* something, but rather speaking *to* it. To speak about something, she argues, would be to partake in a binary system of maintaining a distance between oneself and the subject on which “territorialized knowledge depends”.⁴⁹³ But to speak to something opens up for a debate of not knowing but being brave enough to dare see where the research will lead, including the disavowals that might emerge. Through an open-ended practice, which continues to raise and scrutinise my own involvement in postcolonial histories I aim to work towards Minh-ha’s exploration of the infinitely layered “I”.⁴⁹⁴ To package these layers into a totality maintains binaries and fixed categories, rather than following Minh-ha’s argument and open up a debate on not knowing.

⁴⁹² Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Cotton and Iron', 26.

⁴⁹³ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Cotton and Iron', 12.

⁴⁹⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Difference: "a special third world women issue"', in Trinh T. Minh-Ha (ed.), *Woman, native, other : writing postcoloniality and feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana



Figure 4.13: *Progress from A-Z of conflict*

University Press, 1989), 94.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have put forward an example of undoing the identity of the former coloniser in contemporary art. Lindsay Seers' practice manages to open a space to think about the role of the coloniser without falling back on what we know, but to emphasise what we do *not* know and how we choose to interpret and deal with that *not* knowing.

Seers' practice becomes important for me to think about my own affiliation with not only my father's history of once being colonised but also of my mother's of once being the coloniser. Of course, as I have argued, this line was never so clear-cut and issues of class, gender and education were also large factors of their respective narratives as well as my mother's Danish immigrant status in Sweden.

As shown in chapter two, my artwork *Balancing Act* ends with me metaphorically walking off lines of fixity. I refuse to accept the rules that have been put in place and instead I embrace a freedom of not knowing; an embrace of uncertainty. This is difficult, as demonstrated in *We call her Pulle* and chapter three. It means resisting certain conscious and unconscious desires to belong. It means resisting creating linear narratives for oneself and rejecting given names in an act of disidentification. It means embracing being neither/nor.

Lindsay Seers opens up her history to the unknown. She uses fragments, mostly photographs, not to puzzle together a simple and linear narrative of her biography, but to open up for possibilities of what might have been and what might be because of it. Her work does not make excuses for colonial behaviour or try to find a scapegoat that does not include her. It uses colonial history and her own colonial background to think through the global relationships between people and places in the past, in the present and in the future.

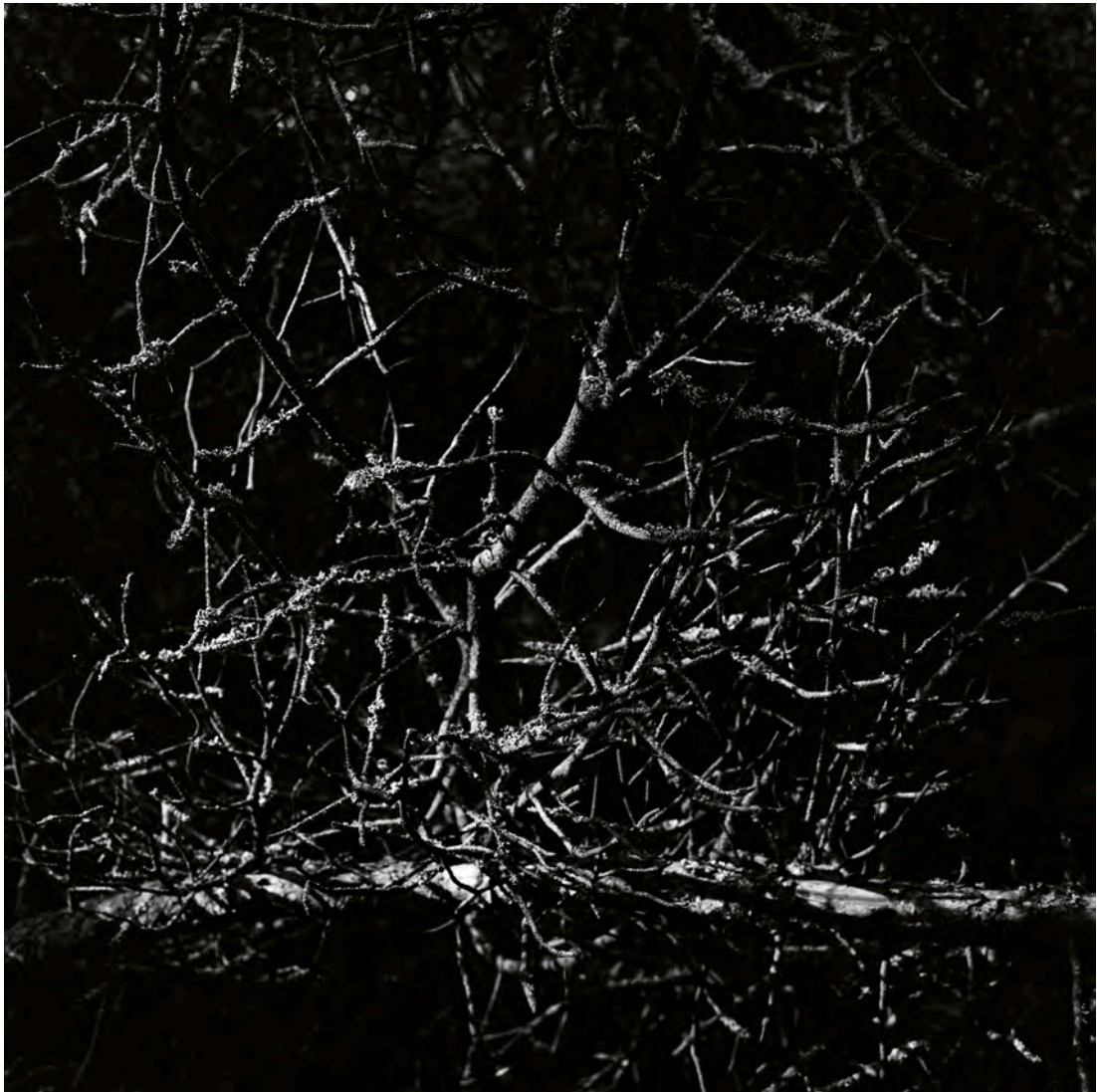


Figure 4.14: *Opacity*, from *A-Z of conflict*

5 CONCLUSION

Shortly before my father passed away my mother and I took him in the car over the bridge to Denmark. We had a nice day in an art gallery by the sea, looked at big houses in the countryside and had a Danish lunch. Approaching the bridge on our way back into Sweden, going through customs we were waved over to stop. We were the only car on the road. I was driving. My father was sitting next to me in the front seat. My mother was sitting behind me. I rolled down the window for the policeman to talk to us. He looked at me, looked at my father and lastly looked at my mother in the back seat. In Swedish, he asked her where we had been, where we were going, what our nationality was. It was an awkward conversation between my mother behind me and the policeman in front of me. My father sat silent, looking down into his lap, until we were allowed to carry on. I was furious, but knew I would upset my father if I made a scene. For the remaining car journey I wondered what these interactions had done to the relationship of my parents.

5.1 LIVING WITH CONTRADICTIONS

To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity: 'I am looking for the join...I want to join...I want to join'.⁴⁹⁵ Homi Bhabha

How do I conclude something that in many ways may never be resolved? Burgin writes that some memories demand to remain untold since telling them would be "to misrepresent, to transform, to diminish" them.⁴⁹⁶ This is always the risk when trying to represent something personal. In my writing and practice I have refracted memories, reflections and experiences from my position. There are many ways in which these could have been seen differently from another position. As with any self-portrait this text will expose more about me than I will know. But it also reveals things about myself as an artist that I will attempt to take further in my artistic process. This is not necessarily easy. As Bhabha says: "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present".⁴⁹⁷

With my practice I am attempting at a contribution that begins to understand the process of identification and what it means to live with contradictions. I do this through my own specific experience against the background of theory. As I have argued this query is unlikely to be resolved since there are things that we can never fully know, that which is repressed in our social and personal unconscious. I have highlighted the complexity of contradictory identifications of the 'mixed-race' subject in a society that positions some racial identities/constructions/fantasies with higher value than others. My personalised experience comes from competing narratives derived from those around me, as well as from a colonial legacy. Within such a system, my research questions whether identification with the *other*, the dark-skinned foreigner, becomes repressed in favour of the desire to belong with

⁴⁹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture*, 18.

⁴⁹⁶ Victor Burgin, *The remembered film*, 16.

⁴⁹⁷ Bhabha, Homi K. (1986 [1967]), 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', in Fanon Frantz (ed.), *Black skin, white masks* (London: Pluto), xxxv

the more powerful Western construction. I have demonstrated some of these complexities in my art works to expose the ambivalent relationship I have to my Tamil-Danish-Swedish heritage.

My writing and practice oscillate between a desire for certainty and a resistance against it, opening up a space of a neither/nor position. I draw conclusions from some of the key authors I have used that point to a similar direction, but through different strategies. Butler and Rancière write that *disidentification* can be employed as a strategy of survival in response to global power systems that continue to employ racial, sexual and national subjugation.⁴⁹⁸ Muñoz calls it “tactical misrecognition”,⁴⁹⁹ Maharaj the *untranslatable*. Phelan argues that it is *understanding* itself that needs to be challenged; that only through seeing the impossibility of understanding and accepting this failure can new relations emerge: “the widespread belief in the possibility of understanding has committed us, however unwittingly, to a concomitant narrative of betrayal, disappointment and rage”.⁵⁰⁰

These positions can all fall within Bhabha’s Third Space, which he argues has the power to intervene in meanings and representations of culture and instead show the ever-changing formations of cultures. In this space hybridity does not exist as a mix of cultures; an either/or position, but rather as Bhabha puts it; “neither the one nor the other”.⁵⁰¹ He reminds us that “it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture”.⁵⁰² My artworks open a space where contradictions can be brought together, from which values and positions can be questioned and evaluated.

⁴⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*, xi; Jacques Ranciere, 'Politics, identification, and subjectivization'.

⁴⁹⁹ Jose Esteban Muñoz, 'The autoethnographic performance', in *Disidentifications : queers of color and the performance of politics* (Minneapolis ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 79.

⁵⁰⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked : Politics of Performance*.

⁵⁰¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', 30.

⁵⁰² Homi K. Bhabha, 'The commitment to theory', 37.

The core of this research has been how photographic and video arts can subvert existing visual stereotypes of otherness, through the explorations of cross-cultural negotiations of the mixed-race artist. I have been concerned not only with my own image and how I am approached because of it, but also how other people's perception of me influences my relationship with my own self-image and others; what I perpetuate when representing others. There is no single clear answer to my question, but I have illustrated the complexity of stereotypes and exposed some of my own contradictory desires. A key issue that I am working towards in my practice is to show how I am not only a victim of a certain system, but I also perpetrate this system. My shifting position means that I am advantaged and disadvantaged in different locations and situations. These positions are determined by their position in relation to the centrality of the West. I have attempted to expose my shifting identifications to contribute to problematising essential binaries and to reflect on the complexity of race, especially on the complex positioning of whiteness within society and within my own identification.

The danger of my position as an artist lies in, as Papastergiadis writes, when the artist from the margin becomes fetishized as an other and is given the power "to translate back, in potent forms, the relationship between centre and periphery".⁵⁰³ I find this problematic and feel that I am often placed in this situation. Whereas I am seldom asked to speak for Sweden or the Western culture that I have grown up in, I am more often asked to speak for Sri Lanka and Tamils. I am included in shows that are specifically south Asian or deal with otherness, but am rarely included in shows that question the status quo of the West.⁵⁰⁴ That I become a ventriloquist for otherness to translate back to the centre is problematic since I am speaking with a similar voice, language and value structure as that centre. Thus, the translation is fraught. What I can speak about is the complexity of race that leads to

⁵⁰³ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'The limits of cultural translation', in Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (eds.), *Over here : international perspectives on art and culture* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT, 2004), 342.

⁵⁰⁴ Examples include a recent group show promoting Sri Lankan art, which highlighted my Tamil heritage. I was also part of a show in London promoting South Asian graduates after my Masters. And in the beginning of my PhD I showed at Iniva as part of a group show called *Entanglement – the ambivalence of identity*, focusing on artists with mixed heritage

my shifting positions in the West and of my ambivalence in relationship to my Tamil background. My role of translation could be to reflect how shifting positions manifest themselves in my life, rather than translating any other culture back to the west.

The concept of hybridity is crucial for me because of my shifting position. I do not consider hybridity a term for a specific category, but a space where differences and contradictions co-exist and make us reflect upon them. It is a space where a process takes place and values from various fixed positions are played out. It is the ambivalence of hybridity that creates a space for a critical discourse about which positions we choose and which positions are available to whom.

Through my research I have examined how the self is perceived by the gaze of others, how one constitutes oneself based on the imagined gaze and the underlying forces behind these. In chapter two I argued through Fanon that recognition is essential for our sense of self. But the construction of blackness as an antithesis to the ideal image of whiteness has inhibited the possibility for recognition between the binary constructions of black and white. Piper continued this argument in *Cornered*, demonstrating that white and black associations matter precisely because they are valued differently in a Western society. Since one is seen as negative, the other is preferable. She validated this by exposing that there is a conflict identifying with blackness in a Western society that assumes that if one could pass for white, one would. Even though most people in America have some black ancestry they would still classify themselves as white and not black. Would this still be the case if the two constructions had equal value?

In my practice I show how skin is still a marker of difference and that I am treated differently because of the colour of my skin. But I also show that positioning of identities go beyond skin colour and include gestures, movements and thinking habits. The central, and dominant, position of whiteness, in opposition to its other constructions, became evident in my piece *We call her Palle*, which I critically analysed in chapter three. Through a detailed reading of my encounter with a different culture, which I have an affiliation with through my father, I highlight the

process of difference that my aunt and I go through in our relationship with each other. Although there were difficulties understanding each other, I also felt that I was accepted into their culture more readily than I have experienced in the Western society where I have grown up.

The making and analysis of this work make me confront my own preconceived ideas from the West. Arguing that the camera takes the role of an imagined spectator, an imagined gaze, I witnessed my own torn position between identifying with my Tamil aunt and with my imagined Western spectator. I explored the complexity of contradictory demands simultaneously and the difficulty of ignoring and resisting fixed ideas from ones society when representing oneself and others.

In chapter four I used the work by Lindsay Seers to demonstrate how hybridity is used convincingly from the position of the former coloniser, to complicate fixed narratives further. Seers' inclusion into this research extends many people's viewpoint that whiteness needs to be deconstructed for postcolonial identities to face the haunting ghosts lurking in its unconscious. I argued that Seers' practice destabilises the former coloniser's position in the colonies as well as at home. From her position she questions the normative from within the system she also participates in. Bhabha writes that "claims to identity must never be nominative or normative".⁵⁰⁵ He argues that the postcolonial history of slavery, the "'voyage out' of the colonialist civilizing mission" and the migration into Europe has left us with a transnational and translational space from where embedded myths are made unstable.⁵⁰⁶ "The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes one increasingly aware of the construction of culture, the invention of tradition, the retroactive nature of social affiliation and psychic identification."⁵⁰⁷ It is the non-normative, as Butler also argues, that questions stable categories. Through publicly questioning, examining and re-evaluating her personal family album Seers opens up her own history to be re-interpreted from multiple directions.

⁵⁰⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Freedom's basis in the indeterminate', 55.

⁵⁰⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Freedom's basis in the indeterminate', 55.

⁵⁰⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Freedom's basis in the indeterminate', 47.

Many say Bhabha's Third Space, hybrid space, is utopian and ignores political standpoints.⁵⁰⁸ But for me this Third Space is a space where contradictions can be worked through. It opens up a space to contemplate what we repress in order to remain stable, certain. It is not a 'real' space but it is a virtual space for contradictory meanings created in between photographer, photographed and viewer. It is a space where these contradictions and conflicts can be addressed, a space where viewers can disseminate their own identifications without having to take side of being one or the other category, a space where I as an artist, in-between black and white constructions, can concentrate on hybridity as a process between identifications rather than a category or another construction. It opens up a space for discussion.

In my two completed video installations I have resolved what I intended, that is to open up a hybrid space into which I introduce the complexity of contradictions that I experience. Images, sound and words are juxtaposed to create gaps in meanings and I leave both the works open ended. In *Balancing Act* I walk off the lines to escape the contained space I feel that I have been assigned. In *We call her Pulle* I conclude that I know less about my father's background trying to verify it and newer images are simply replacing older ones, without any resolution.

The multiple screens and different sound sources allow for a reading of the work somewhere in between images and the sound, creating a Third Space of its own. It creates an uncomfortable position for the viewer to identify with shifting identifications. Through employing a hybrid practice, where multiple creative practices are used in combination, I extend Sarat Maharaj's suggestion that the untranslatable can only occur in the visual or the aural: I propose the untranslatable can occur in-between art practices; in the dissonance of words, image, gesture and sound.⁵⁰⁹

A-Z of conflict includes my mother into the frame with me and returns to the still image. I address the confrontation that arises when attempting to find

⁵⁰⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*.

⁵⁰⁹ Sarat Maharaj at *A new internationalism symposium* (1994) (InIVA).

belonging within a Western society, with my white mother. What does it mean that my mother and I create a contradiction when sharing the same frame? Partly what I am a reminder of is what Piper argued in *Cornered* – that nobody is unquestionably white.

I find my identity in being *other* in Western society, just as I identify with what can be thought of as Western. But these are not binary oppositions and many other identifications play large parts in my identity, as they do in all of us. Apart from gender and class, as I described, my mother was also an immigrant as a child and she also at times identifies with being *other*. Just because she is white does not mean she is the coloniser.

I could not have approached the subject of race and hybridity without being personally involved with it. It has coloured my whole life. Even though I am excluded from a Western discourse I have inherited many of its value judgements and perpetuate some of them in my artworks. My otherness is wrapped up in my belonging with whiteness.

In my artworks I have attempted to show how the complexity of race manifests itself in the everyday. The specificity of experience in conjunction with aspects of theory adds to a hybrid art space that is still in process. Here, hybridity is used as a tool to re-evaluate positions and continue to question normative identities. It highlights internal and external contradictions to illustrate how binaries are experienced and can be de-stabilised. It promotes ambiguity over a desire for certainty. Thus, the in-between space allows for questions of power relationships to be explored and for contemplation of how we can leave spaces of certainty, stability and knowledge and venture into the unknown, into uncertainty. To begin to understand what it means to be living with contradictions.

Afterword

My father was the only black man in my family in Sweden. My sister and I inherited some of his colour. Now she has children that have white skin with a golden touch. I am myself soon to give birth to a child that will most probably look white. In an on-going battle I am arguing for the child to keep my surname, as a trace of my father's difference within the family. It did not take many generations for my father's skin colour to become invisible in the genealogy of whiteness.



Figure 5.1: *Mixed*, from *A-Z of conflict*

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APPENDIX A – EXHIBITION IMAGES

Installation images from VIVA exhibition



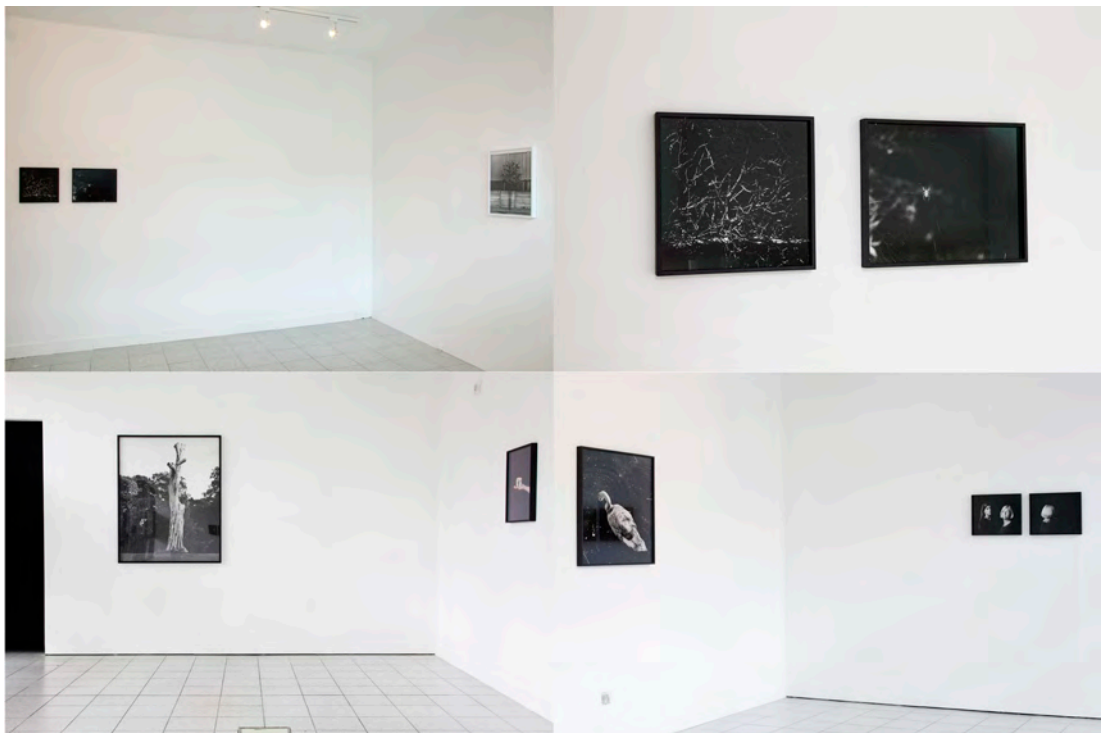
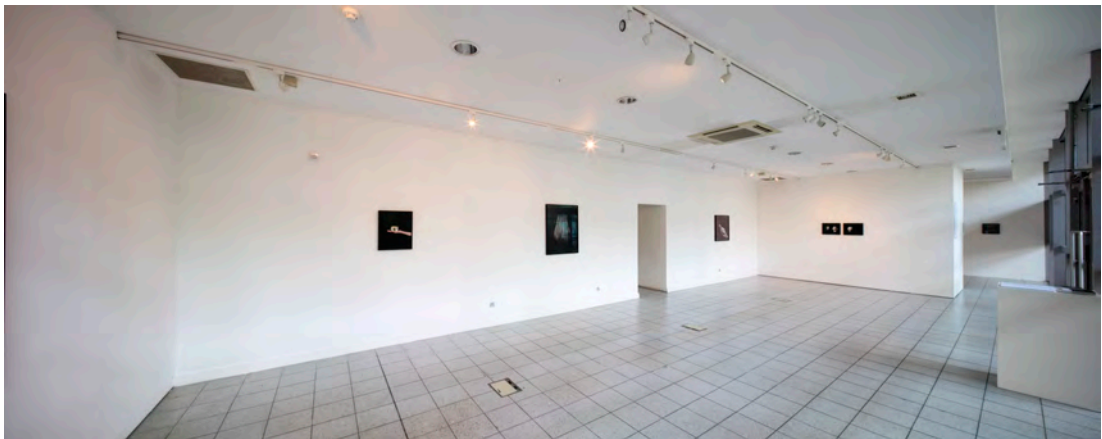
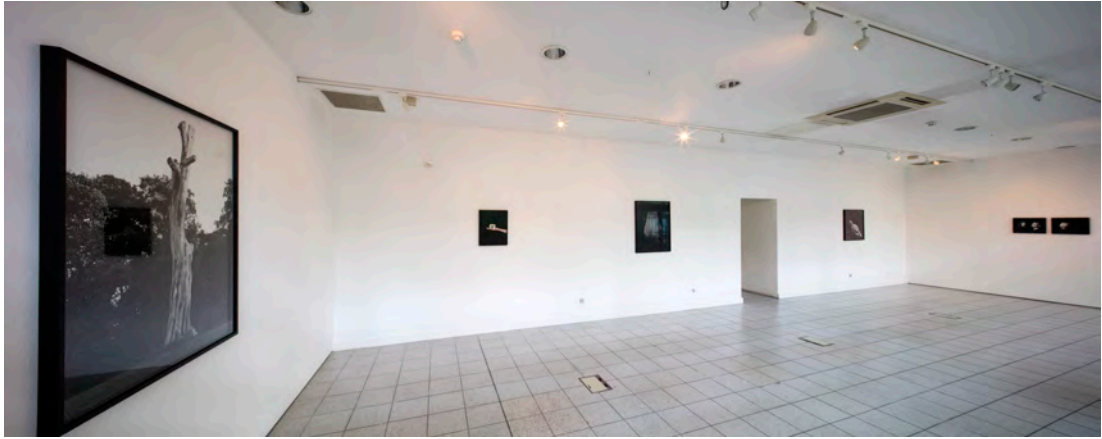


Figure 5.2 Installation images from Gallery West Project Space, Westminster University 2015. From top *Balancing act*, *We call her Pulle*, *A-Z of conflict*.

APPENDIX B – VOICE-OVERS

Voice-over for Balancing Act

I'm walking the dog. She's not my dog. She is a mix of a bulldog and a mastiff. Looks scarier than she is. She has studs in her collar. I meet people along the path. It is a very narrow path. Surrounded by forest and a still lake.

People avoid walking close to us. Me and the dog. I wonder what goes through their heads. Which stranger am I to them? The friendly young woman who smiles as a hello or the dark stranger with a wry smile as unpredictable as the dog I am leading? I smile. I concentrate more at smiling than the view, the exercise or to contemplate life. I'm smiling – reassuring the strangers that I am like them. Do they see me? Who do they see? Who am I looking at? A mass of suspicious people or individuals who greet me as they would greet any other?

She says it's in my head. It's not their problem it's mine. It's in my head.

Why make myself more special than I am?

Gör dig inte märkvärdig Nina.

Don't make a fuss. Why make a fuss.

He was three years old when he became shy of me and hid behind his mother's leg. Just like my cousin had hidden so many times before when my Dad came to play. His grandmother laughed friendly and explained that he was just scared of me because I was so dark.

Don't say anything. Just smile. Don't be the foreigner who ruins the birthday party. Then he will always be scared of me. Just smile. Smile, smile, smile. Play the role they've given you.

The analyst says it is in my head. You cannot change them, only yourself.

In the shop I was the only girl. As a result I would be placed at the counter. The boss thought that maybe the customers wouldn't notice the mistakes we would have made. He was right. Like the woman who walked away with her negatives chopped in half, who was more concerned with me not throwing my future away standing in a shop. 'There is a business college just across the road', she said. 'You should get yourself an education'. I tried to look at myself with her eyes. Who was I? And who was she? Who was this woman, who thought I had no one else to turn to, no one around me who knew what education meant?

Another customer asked me out on a date. He whispered. I asked him why. He said so that my father would not hear and glanced back at my Indian boss.

'He is not my father', I said. 'Oh, I thought you were a family business', he said looking back at the Bangladeshi printer, Pakistani mini-boss and my friend Henok from Ethiopia.

She says it is in my head. My head.

My mother's grandchild is white. It is a relief since nobody asks any questions. She is white, child is white. No questions asked.

It was different with us. In the shop, playground or just walking down the street. 'Where is the father from? What does he work with? What does she work with?' Now, no questions are asked. She is white, child is white.

It's in my head. My head.

He didn't marry me. We moved to England with him. Children and all. When his mother found out I was half-caste she refused. He followed his mother's advice.

She says I have internalised it. It is in my head. Maybe people don't say what I think they say.

We were on a bus after school. Giggling away about something. She said: Imagine kissing a black man – how cool would that be? I got annoyed. No, she continued, but imagine. Black skin this close, she demonstrated. I continued to be annoyed. I ruined the mood for everyone.

We listened to a radio station from Malmö. I said I became nostalgic listening to the accent associated with foreign Swedes. He smirked and exclaimed: How many foreign Swedes do you know? Wanting now to belong to the group I so long rejected I felt exposed and expelled. Two, I said. I lied.

I said I was nervous my children would become white with him. He said I was racist against him. Maybe I was.

Someone once said that if you put a needle lightly against the skin, the skin will eventually break.

Anger. Control the anger. Smile smile smile.

Don't misbehave. It will make your father look bad. He has fought to be where he is. Don't make him look bad.

This person doesn't know, doesn't know that his comment isn't the first.

Control control control. Follow the rules. The rules they created. The ones that don't mean it. Re-write the rules. It is not for me it is for them.

After all, it is all in my head. I cannot change you. I can only change myself. I try to change the rules of the game.

You won't change. You don't notice the change.

Change is difficult. There is so much else going on around you. Life is busy and changes enough as it is.

Why be difficult?

Don't be difficult.

Why can't some things not just remain the same and we can have a good time?

Concentrate on the good. Not on the bad. Isn't it great you got this far? Isn't it?

How can I change your rules?

The dog escapes the leash. I let her run. I see the fear in your eyes, but I let her run. I suppress the urge running after her, controlling her, to make you feel at ease. I let her run.

Voice-over for We call her Pulle

Do you remember the red sand? my mother said. I don't remember much from my first trip to Sri Lanka, but I wrote in my diary that life would never become the same again.

When I arrive my aunt, Pulle, buys clothes for me. Skirt and blouse and I leave with my dress in the bag.

In the last two years I have been here twice. Spending my days watching Pulle through the camera. The camera records the inconsistencies. Pulle also changes.

How do I build an image of this place? An image that goes beyond the images that I grew up with - in atlases, geography books, travel magazines.

My uncle has offered that I can stay with him in his new modern house. I use their new toilet and shower. It is the first time anyone has used it. They still use the sink and toilet in the garden. The bathroom is for me and the other foreigners. They have AC in the guest room. But I stay with Pulle.

She reminds me of my father. Everyone thinks it is funny that I call her Pulle, since it means little sister. But I am just imitating what he called her.

Pulle says I look like my mother. In Sweden everyone always thought I looked like my father.

Someone told me Pulle has bought cutlery and new glasses for my visit for 30000 rupees. I want to eat with my hands. (My father never liked it when I did.)

She speaks about my grandmother. My father hardly mentioned her.

Pulle bought a cap for me as protection from the sun. The shopkeeper laughed and said I looked like a soldier. Like a tiger. I bought sunglasses for her, but she doesn't wear them. She says they make her look like she wants to be a foreigner.

Vellakari, vellakari they shout when I walk around. White woman.

My father never told me much of this place and what he told me doesn't make sense any more.

There are no pictures of him in the photo album.

I find traces of him in Pulle's gestures. In the way she twitches her head, flicks her wrist and in her giggles. In the mimicry of family.

I wonder if she sees him in me too.

I ask her if she's ever seen a whale. I read about them in my guide book. She doesn't know what a whale is. I try to draw one, but fail. She can't guess. She can't draw but tries. I try to imitate one, but fail. She asks if I've seen one in the market. I say no. After about 30 minutes we call a relative who speaks English, and translates. Pulle says she hasn't seen one but they sell them in the market. Then we sit in silence again.

Pulle doesn't seem to mind the camera. But I wonder if she forgets that there is sound on it. I want to know what she says, but I am scared to translate it.

I am reading of the Manalkadu desert in the guide book. Sand dunes blown onshore from southern India. Some 15 meters high in places it says. I remember my parents having that in common, that they used to play in sanddunes during their summer holidays. Him in Jaffna, her in Denmark. Pulle's relationship to the sanddunes is different. She tells me how she brought sand from Manalkadu to make sand bags to put on top of the wooden kitchen table. The table became a bunker and the sandbags prevented the bullets from going through.

The bathroom became another bunker, because of its reinforced ceiling. And the area underneath the stove.

To return to the house my father remembered was always impossible.

The memory my father gave me doesn't fit any more. My ever-changing memory of him.

Pulle proudly tells me that now one can get anything in Jaffna. She buys me clothes and gold. I refuse some, but I worry I insult her. She tells me not to go to people's houses in my old clothes.

We did the same thing when they arrived in Sweden looking like bank robbers in bomber jackets and balaclavas. Someone in a Sri Lankan shop had told them that this was appropriate clothing for Sweden. The next day we bought new clothes for them.

I film Pulle hanging washing at the back of the house, where the hospital used to be. She looks at my screen and laughs. She tells me to photograph the banana flower in the tree, the man climbing up the coconut tree and the woman grinding the rice. I say I will but I don't.

There used to be an ice cream factory and a school in the front yard. There is only one chair left and the blackboard is still hanging on the wall.

It is late and I am going to bed, I put on my Primark pyjamas, which I intend to throw away when I leave. Pulle has ironed them to get rid of the ants. She asks me why I sleep in them. I am tired and don't want to explain how and why I do certain things. I get annoyed and want to go into my bedroom and take a sip of gin from the bottle I have

hidden in a paper bag. (To kill the germs. I know if Palle finds it she will think that I am an alcoholic!)

I shrug and instead of answering I turn the question around. "Why do you sleep in your home dress? You don't change. That's not very hygienic is it?" Palle thinks for a moment, but not long. "In the war," she says "we were always prepared to run. If we had to run the middle of the night, we did not want to run in our nightgowns. So that's why. Now we are just used to it. It's become a habit."

Back in Britain Jaffna is once again distant. I contacted Palle on her Facebook on her birthday, but that is it. Phone calls seem futile when not sharing languages. I am once again creating an image of this place. New images, replacing older ones. I struggle to understand whose image emerges.