

# Hyphen

A Short Documentary Film

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“...**Identities** are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in **the process of becoming** rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from” so much as **what we might become**, how we have been represented and how that bears on **how we might represent ourselves.**”

- Stuart Hall <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

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Identity, as Stuart Hall said in the film “The Stuart Hall Project” (2013) by John Akomfrah, “is the ever unfinished conversation”. In this contemporary era where ethnic, national and cultural boundaries are ever more fluid, these issues become increasingly difficult to analyze and define. My attempts to do this in the last few years have inevitably caused me to examine the negotiation of my own heterogeneous identity; I am half Anglo-Canadian and half Armenian-Lebanese but I was raised in the third context of the United Arab Emirates. The concept of feeling constantly “othered” regardless of location is something I have incorporated into my sense of self since I am always straddling the boundaries of cultures and often find myself the reluctant ambassador of hybridity in the monoculture environments I encounter. Especially now as mainstream media

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*(London: Sage, 1996), 4.

sources seem to only perpetuate fear of “the other” (of the Middle East in particular) heightening an exclusionary nationalism which puts a strain on those hybridized identities which have no choice but to exist in the space between nations, ethnicities and cultures. In an effort to increase representation and visibility of the “in between” people and connect my experience to others I began interviewing individuals who were also culturally hybridized. The final iteration of these interviews became a short documentary film titled “Hyphen”, which attempts to represent the perspective of experiencing the world through a fractured/ divided sense of self, how people create a sense of belonging for themselves and ultimately how they try and bridge the gaps of understanding between the divided worlds they embody. In this essay I intend to elaborate on my theoretical and field research leading up to the film, my influences and considerations when forming it and finally evaluate its final impact as a finished product.

# Research

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When approaching the subject of identity construction, the initial and crucial step was locating myself within the historical and sociological context of contemporary notions of hybridized identities in our constantly evolving global landscape. Given my focus, it was important to consider past perceptions of hybrid identities and how they evolved, taking into account the influence of race, gender, culture etc. The liberal definition of globalization was a major starting point, representing a “world-wide interlinking of free markets and cultural institutions, facilitated by advances in communication technologies and deregulated travel”, and acts as context in which modern hybridized identities have formed.<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging the criticisms and fissures of this generalized definition was essential in considering how it affects and forms modern culturally plural identities. Evolving from that basis, I wanted to interrogate the new ways people form communities when belonging remains elusive for the fragmented identity. What is the implication and eventual effects of many detached or “free-floating” identities occurring? What is lost and gained through these culturally plural perspectives? These were the initial questions that informed my exploration through this film.

An important term I have encountered in my research is “Third Culture Kid/Individual” which, as it was originally defined, “is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. [they] frequently build relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any.”<sup>3</sup> The definition of ‘third culture’ was coined in the 1950s by

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<sup>2</sup> T.J Demos, *The Migrant Image: The art and politics of documentary during a global crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: Growing up among Worlds*. (Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009), 13

sociologists Ruth Hill Useem and John Useem<sup>4</sup>, to describe the identities of the children of travellers such as missionaries, diplomats and military personnel. The term has gained new legitimacy through its use by online communities as Third Culture individuals share their sense of displacement and feelings of alienation. This definition has since been expanded to incorporate the increasing number of fragmented identities based on multiple parent cultures and multiple host cultures.

The experiences and backgrounds of Third Culture individuals vary: Sociologists have been studying them as a group of people, though often in the context of a single country (e.g Japanese TCKs)<sup>5</sup> or of a single type of TCK (e.g missionary kids)<sup>6</sup>. The term is problematic as it is both limiting and all encompassing, it could apply to the child of any immigrant anywhere in the world but the implication of a “third” culture often seems inadequate to describe the complex identity of some individuals. There is also little acknowledgement of the legacy of colonialism that is inherent within the origin of the term, as it was initially used to categorize children of missionaries, military personnel and diplomats. Though through their growing presence online and as a community, TCKs of all types represent the formalized attempt of hybridized individuals (admittedly exclusively those who have an online presence) who are searching for community and for that reason I focused on them as another attempt to find subjects.

If I am trying to draw wider conclusions about the direction of formed identity that transcends cultures as they bleed into one another, it’s important to acknowledge the perceived Western bias inherent within the terms I am using. Notions of post-colonialism, postmodernism and globalization fail to encompass all

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 279

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 270

that is implied by Hybridity. What these mean in the context of my project were then linked to cultural identity, but within that are the subjects like politics, ideology, economic progression. One must examine terms like Postmodernism and the origins and implications of it, since there is inherent bias within them. Since I am trying to tackle a new emerging “global identity” in a Postmodern age that is not centred on specific national indicators, it is significant that critics of the concept such as Stuart Hall have stated that it “fails to attend to its own specificity and internal contradictions as a Western discourse that makes universalizing claims”<sup>7</sup> It being a Western concept automatically discounts its global validity, especially when critical thinkers such as Hall describe it as “how the world dreams itself to be American.”<sup>8</sup> Globalization has also been criticized as a new form of imperialism, imposing cultural homogeneity and capitalism posing it as a rival to post-colonial thought.<sup>9</sup>

The themes initially explored for my theoretical framework were mainly the research done on culture, nationalism and ethnicity and how they interact to form identity; Edward T. Hall’s notions of cultural difference seemed relevant and useful to analyze in the context of this research, which explores the ambiguity and subjective factors that distinguish cultures from one another. It was interesting considering his definitions of “high and low context” cultures within the realm of hybridity and mixing different nationalities into one identity. Low context cultures, such as the U.S or Canada, have populations that have a vast range of experiences and thus have high levels of heterogeneity, meaning they rely more on spoken language for communication. High context cultures are those with very homogenous populations who share similar experiences and information networks

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<sup>7</sup> James Procter, *Stuart Hall*. (Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 2004) 110

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* , 110

<sup>9</sup> Clara A.B Joseph and Janet Wilson “Introduction” in in *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions*, ed. Clara A.B Joseph and Janet Wilson (Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi, 2006.), xv

relying more on unspoken communication.<sup>10</sup> The mixing of these two types of culture into one identity creates an interesting tension and has an impact on the individuals' relationship on their parent cultures as well as any repatriation experiences since high context cultures are less accepting of difference and harder to infiltrate.

From culture I moved to the work produced by Benedict Anderson, who coined the phrase “imagined communities” to describe nationhood and nationalism. His analysis of the idea of belonging as an imagined concept and the tracking of nationalism’s development in human history has helped me sketch out my subject matter and create another idea of “imagined community”; namely the placeless community where there is no single defining marker of belonging because the identities are decentered and fragmented among many community groups and spread around the world.

*“it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet In the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>11</sup>*

His deconstruction of the origins and creation of nationalism allow me to expand on his concept of community as something imagined to a new global level where the connections to one another are even less obvious. His emphasis on increasing secularism (leading people to need some other sense of meaning in mortality and a loss of faith in divinely chosen monarchs) and the growing number of print-languages during the age of enlightenment<sup>12</sup> to structure the modern mode of nation and nationalism, which he proposes is relatively recent in the history of humanity. Questions that arose for me from this research: What happens when nations are amalgamated and the nation ceases to be a defining factor within an

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<sup>10</sup> Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, *Communication between Cultures* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004), 76.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 51

individual? What will the evolution of nationalism be with these growing numbers of fragmented identities?

Stuart Hall addresses the identity issue through the cultural/ethnic/national forces at play in the postmodern era. He articulates the necessity for ‘the other’ within the process of identification, and maps several major sources of de-centering within that process, especially within the last century during the transition into post-colonialism. He argues that existential, historical and political factors have shifted and destabilized established notions of concrete identification. He writes that because of the erosion of “national identities as points of reference, there has simultaneously been a fragmentation and erosion of collective social identity”<sup>13</sup>.

James Proctor, author of the book “Stuart Hall” excavating Hall’s theories and impact on society and politics, elaborates on Halls’ description of the effect of globalization on identity:

*“Hall addresses how globalisation disrupts ‘the relatively “settled” character’ (Hall 1996: 2) of traditional cultures and collectivities structured around ideas of nationality, race, class and gender. The use of the word ‘relatively’ here is significant. Hall is not arguing that we have moved from a time of stable, unified identities to unstable plural ones but, rather, that identities have become increasingly unsettled;”*<sup>14</sup>

His implications seem to note that not only are identities changing, but also *the way we identify* seems to be destabilized. In Akomfrah’s film “The Stuart Hall Project”, Hall speaks of his experience as an ethnically mixed Jamaican moving to Britain and the labels placed on him and how that contradicted his own notion of identity. His view is that identity and the way in which we perceive it is “not a

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities” in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, eds Les Back and John Solomos, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 201

<sup>14</sup> Proctor, *Stuart Hall*, 109

sealed or closed totality”<sup>15</sup>, with notions of ‘the other’ becoming a more abstract and less tenable definer. In this context what happens when one is identified as both insider and ‘other’? Hall speaks of migration and the impact of that on identity in terms of incorporating a new host culture into your own; what if migrating becomes a way of life and there are many host cultures? What is the fate or implied community for these detached, plural, free- floating identities? By drawing attention to Hall’s use of the word “relatively” Proctor impacted my thinking about my project. Rather than showing some sort of monolithic, blanketed shift in how we identify ourselves it felt more honest to explore a few specific examples which refer to a disruption rather than a clean shift.

Globalization was another key term in my contextual research and interpreting it in many ways including its criticisms and its relation to post colonialism was necessary. What I am interested in is the hybridity within identity as a result of globalization; but the definition of globalization is one that still raises some issues. Shaobo Xie mediated on the topic of Globalization, asking the titular question “Is the World Decentered?”, the term “decentered” here used in the context of having no fixed power center in a global context. Xie states that globalization is mere a guise for consumer capitalism which counts on diversity and difference (in terms of creating “practices of customizing commodities to suit local preferences and tastes”<sup>16</sup>) to eventually gain homogenization through the imposition of Western culture and capital everywhere else in the world. In the essay “Is the World Decentred?”, Xie argues that in fact it is not, since America still acts as a center for imperial power as owner of 244 of the 500 biggest companies in the world<sup>17</sup>, the popularization and dissemination of American media in countries globally and it’s military agenda which still has an active presence on

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<sup>15</sup> Hall, “Old and New Identities”, 201

<sup>16</sup> Shaobo Xie, “Is the World Decentred?” in *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions*, ed. Clara A.B Joseph and Janet Wilson (. New York: Rodopi, 2006), 66

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 58

many far reaches of the globe. After acknowledging that there are diasporic and trans/post national communities in the postmodern era which result from this global era, Xie postulates:

*“..if critics like Fredric Jameson and Wim Wenders are correct in arguing that capitalism in its global stage colonizes nature and the unconscious or the human psyche, then should we not say that even those mobile diasporic, transnational communities risk living with cancelled or emasculated differences?”<sup>18</sup>*

Examining this goes back to the problems with the terms “postmodern” and “globalization” as inherently Western ideas that discount the agency of the rest of the globe. Especially for my project I conducted interviews in mostly Western countries so this bias is even more pronounced. Xie writes that “postcolonialism” is a way to counter globalization and neocolonialism since it attempts to “deconstruct the West as the normative centre of the world, to move beyond West-centred historicism, beyond imperial binary structures of self/Other”<sup>19</sup> and acts as an acknowledgement that the imperial legacy of colonialism is still an issue in this global age and not a thing of the past as perhaps the term “globalization” would imply.

Hybridity within globalization has been criticized by scholars such as Marwan M. Kraidy, author of the paper “Hybridity in Cultural Globalization”, who acknowledge that some maintain that its’ ambiguity and pervasiveness render it “theoretically useless”, and emanate from privileged, educated, diasporic individuals who “have the cultural and economic resources that allow them to spend time and effort theorizing”<sup>20</sup>. The fluidity of boundaries within hybridity posed some difficulties in focusing the film and the privilege inherent within this endeavour merits consideration. Does western imperialism manifest itself in any

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 66-67

<sup>19</sup> Xie, “Decentred?” 65

<sup>20</sup> Marwan M. Kraidy, “Hyrbidity in Cultural Globalization,” *Communication Theory* 12 (3) (2002): 316-339, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00272.x>, 7

way on individuals who embody cultural plurality? How do they feel about their locative positions in the Western world? Are hybrids born of a global era destined to be subsumed and discounted in what is perceived by some as the growing global imposition of Western culture? These are all questions that may not be answered directly in my project but definitely informed the process and have fuelled the need to examine how cultural identity is changing.

# Documentary Relevance

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I knew identity construction and transnational hybridity were something I wished to explore and felt film was the ideal avenue for this endeavour. I knew my subject matter was ambiguous and steeped in cultural nuance and I wanted the freedom to explore that visually. Exploring this topic in non-fiction film seemed more appropriate than creating a narrative fictional depiction; it was my sincere desire to showcase different voices and opinions as they exist in the world and fictionalizing them in anyway seemed to somehow detract from their legitimacy. The subject matter also felt too amorphous and ambiguous to try and portray it in anyway other than an excavation of real experience.

Arguably this film is my own attempt to create a community for myself out of the differences shared with others who also have a divided sense of self. However all my life I have found myself connecting with those who are on the margins because of their hybridity, perceived social deviance (in context with their culture) and their general difference to their surroundings. Within Canada, especially Toronto, that issue seems much less pronounced because of the unique multicultural landscape it has to offer its inhabitants, therefore everyone has several cultures that make up their identity. However, I know from spending time in several countries on several continents that this is the exception rather than the rule; most people live in a mono-cultural environment that does not welcome or promote diversity.

Stuart Hall has pointed out that within globalization there have been contradictory effects; there has been a lot of cultural fragmentation but also in response to this many countries have returned to the defensive position of

exclusionary nationalism.<sup>21</sup> In my project, I explored the conflict of these two opposing results within the sphere of people's identities and belonging. This seemed more and more relevant to my project as the last two years have progressed; fear of the other has manifested itself fiercely in our media in various ways in the recent past. The influx of Syrian refugees, the rise of Donald Trump, the recent Brexit referendum ... all have prompted polarizing opinions on this notion of exclusivity, and ultimately in my opinion, identity. Heightening the idea that in order to define yourself you must find an "other" to repel from.

The works I have seen previously on this subject have varied in effectiveness for me and I often found them quite limiting. Especially in work that surrounds the subject of Third Culture Individuals, they seem to retread the same ground and fail to expand on previously established problems. The amateur films I have seen on that subject ("*Where's Home?*" by Aiden Bautista and "*Les Passengers: A TCK story*" by Aga Magdolen) seemed quite one dimensional and almost self-congratulatory. They do not really examine the inherent privilege of having a transnational/culturally plural lifestyle and background, often focusing on the negative aspects of alienation and never having a "home". They sometimes touch on creating a new global community, but often fail to connect their experiences to the future or to the current surroundings.

A film I found extremely powerful and effective in terms of representation the blending and hybridization of identities is "*The Stuart Hall Project*" (2013) by John Akomfrah which explored the life of critical thinker and founder of cultural studies Stuart Hall and his life experiences of migration, cultural confusion and adaptation into the changing social landscape of Britain in the mid to late twentieth century. It used Hall as a vessel to explore other issues such as ethnicity, migration, and a global perspective on identity. It was this which helped me move

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<sup>21</sup> Procter, *Stuart Hall*, 111

away from the Third Culture Kid definition, and focus more on hybrid identities specifically people who have several parent cultures and are biracial/bi-cultural in some way because it creates an inherent identity conflict rather than having (for example) a white American who has travelled and lived around the world. The politics of those two experiences are different and having someone who has a more complex ethnic identity coupled with transnational context for me represents more where the world is headed.

The short documentary named *“Between: Living in the Hyphen”* by Anne Marie Nakagawa produced by the NFB in 2005 mirrors my film in some very clear ways. I watched it after compiling most of my visual and metaphorical concepts and the film has many different incarnations of the same ideas including the use of the Hyphen as a titular and narrative device. *“Between”* talks specifically about Canadian identity and interviews at least 6 different people who have ethnically mixed backgrounds who have felt at odds with the society at large (mostly meaning white Anglo-Canadian culture). It also uses public spaces, crosswalks and alley ways to illustrate this ‘in-betweenness’ visually throughout the film which also is a huge component of my film. The interviews themselves yielded many similar themes: having your identity questioned, having other identities projected upon you, feeling constantly othered, adapting to whoever surrounds you.

The main difference however seems to be the scope of my film in comparison to *“Between”*; Nakagawa focuses on exclusively Canadian identities which include other ethnicities within them and how they are at odds with the mostly white mono-cultural environment the individuals find themselves in. My film starts with mixed Canadian identities and branches out into transnational hybridized identities. I don’t have as strict of a definition as Nakagawa does in terms of what she defines “hyphenated” to be... my interviews included Immigrants and first generation Canadians as well as ethnically mixed Canadians. I

felt it was important to acknowledge the wider definition of hybridity. My film opens with my off-camera voice asking the question “How do you respond to the question where are you from?” and a series of people react and then answer the question. These introductory Canadian subjects had many similar answers to the transnational subjects and I feel like drawing that wider definition points not only to the global sphere of decentered identities but also the many iterations they can take on. The fact that Nakagawa’s film was made ten years ago seems quite pertinent to me, as it definitely reflects the concerns and state of hybridized cultural identities at the time. I know I have attempted to capture a very specific and fleeting moment in time; transnationality and hybridity are well on the way to being normalized (especially in environments such as Toronto) but it has not reached that status yet on a global scale. I feel eventually this will be non-issue since the population will be increasingly heterogeneous and the idea of being constantly “othered” will be much less pronounced.

Another film that had relevant themes and also influenced me tremendously as I was forming the structure of my film was “*The Pearl Button*” by Particio Guzmán. His deconstruction and excavation of Chilean identity was extremely moving and effective. There were so many themes at play in the film: Chilean relationship with nature, colonialism, lost native identity, brutal political repression, existential reflections... and he managed to interweave them all so beautifully with his own pensive, self- reflexive narration. I was having a real problem with conceiving how to link my characters and ideas together until I saw the film and saw the gravity and grace Guzman used to carry the thoughts and narratives through. It was this film combined with the experience of creating a short autobiographical film I completed for the spring production class in first year convinced me to include my own voice and story to carry the film forward.

# Methodology

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My approach has been both ethnographic and auto-ethnographic in some respect since my research originates with the experiences of my family and myself. From this I have conducted research in other examples of multicultural/transnational families and link their experiences to my own and through this process mapped common themes, which constitute an ethnographic study (albeit of a transient and unstable population). They are located in different countries and cities around the world, mostly in North America and Europe with the addition of one interview done in the United Arab Emirates.

Travelling and gathering perspectives from around the world using ethnographic principles was my main form of gathering initial data; I attempted to utilize participant observation and captured life as it was candidly lived. The filmed material (particularly instances when interacting with their locative environments) was used to accompany their interviews when possible. When writing my interview questions I tried a phenomenological approach in an attempt to capture their lived experience as authentically as possible. For example, I asked each subject to describe their experience of moving countries rather than “Was it difficult moving?” This approach seemed extremely relevant since my experiences mirror theirs in many ways and I wanted to avoid projecting my own biases onto their answers. It also worked well because my methodology was very subjective and was aimed at obtaining personal accounts; therefore analyzing their experiences through a phenomenological lens was helpful in this context. “The researcher of the subjective is able to capture the nuances, contradictions and

emotional value of the data, which is essential for this very ambiguous subject matter bound within the personal and identity<sup>22</sup>.”

However, one of the problems that arose through this approach is that the selection of the subjects to be included in the final film was difficult to predict going into it, depending solely on the range of people I had access to. Some individuals' participation was through my own personal connections but I also wanted to venture outside my circle of acquaintances for a broader range of experiences. Finding these unknown subjects was more challenging, especially when approaching them online, as I was forced to; this made establishing trust or gaining access more difficult. After finding subjects who were willing to participate, the next obstacle was getting to their location physically with the resources available to me. During the interview process, especially with those interviewees I was unfamiliar with, I was worried it would be difficult to push them to articulate their sense of identity since this topic is so steeped in ambiguity to begin with. A mixture of chance and my own roots in the Middle East resulted in my three main characters have some ethnic or locative ties to the region, which I think it is important to acknowledge this with regards to the scope of the film.

To attempt to mitigate these issues I used the interviews of hyphenated individuals from Toronto who responded to an online posting for the film calling for subjects who identified with having a hyphenated identity. I wanted their response to the question “where are you from?” to begin the piece, encapsulating and setting up the primary tension within the film. Their somewhat ambiguous/hesitant answers and varied backgrounds bookend the piece, and while admittedly placing it in a primarily Canadian context, it was meant to also point to the larger global ambiguity of national identity and be symptomatic of the changing way in which we have to define ourselves. This element of the film

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<sup>22</sup> May Friedman and Silvia Schulterman, eds. *Growing up Transnational : Identity and Kinship in a Global Era*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

really added a lot to not only the structure of the film but also broadened my scope in terms of what I defined as hyphenated. I was initially only focused on transnational, hybridized individuals who had a similar background to mine in terms of multiple parent/host cultures. However, the people who responded to the posting surprised me and really represented the spectrum of hybridity that is possible. It included immigrants, first generation Canadians as well as ethnically mixed Canadians that had been here for generations. In my attempt to initially narrow my scope to a more manageable and smaller group of people I had inadvertently excluded the amount of overlap all of these group shared; feelings of alienation, adaptation and plurality were common with everyone I interviewed despite having such varying and different experiences. The majority of the portrait subjects identify primarily or partially as Canadian but their experiences and sentiments managed to be both similar and extremely different to the other main subjects in the piece and to each other.

The ethical considerations I took into account primarily involved sensitivity towards the subjects who are participating and acknowledging the responsibility of having their personal perspectives/stories in my care and representing them authentically. I am both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in this scenario since I may have similar life perspectives as them because of our shared trait of a decentered identity. However, their backgrounds by nature (ethnic/national/cultural) are completely different to mine, thus rendering me an outsider to their specific culture they have created within themselves. Any angst or painful memories linked to a sense of alienation or some incident within their own families I wanted to handle delicately and cultural specificity would need to be recognized. The influence of Trinh T Minh-Ha’s practice of ‘speaking nearby’ greatly informed my methodology, since I still play the part of ‘outsider’ to some extent, especially those I have not shared experiences with previously. Being self-reflexive about my

own involvement in the piece and not trying to represent the truth ‘directly<sup>23</sup> has been my approach to ethical and honest, though extremely subjective, representation.

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<sup>23</sup> Trinh T. Minh Ha and Nancy Chen, “Speaking Nearby,” in *Visualizing Theory* ed. Lucien Taylor (Routledge, 1994), 327

# Content and Criticisms

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The title “Hyphen” has several connotations: literal, conceptual and ultimately, visual, within the film. It has been an important idea to hold onto as I formed my final product in the vast ambiguity this subject matter presents. The hyphen as a tool of punctuation serves to create a new word out of two existing words. Yet it exists in the in-between space between the words, also separating them, acting as both a bridge and a barrier. The people I interviewed in a way mirror this idea of a hyphen because they are the physical manifestation keeping the separate cultural/ethnic/national identities together, forming an altogether new one with which to navigate the world. They are a symbol of connection between them but also can never fully connect with any of them because of their “in-between” nature; they will always be slightly outside of them. The hyphen as a visual trope reoccurs throughout the film, either literally or symbolically through visual references.

The use of different visual motifs such as the hyphen was to aid the structure of the film and organize it into chapter-like segments addressing different themes or characters. Filmmaker Marlon Riggs used different motifs throughout his semi-autobiographical film “Tongues Untied”, most notably the stylized poetry readings and performative elements. There were many themes represented in his film: racism, homophobia, violence, stigma and identity construction and validation. I attempted a similar idea with my visual motifs, adding stylistic abstract elements to what otherwise could have been a standard self-shot autobiographical journey of the filmmaker, (such as the films of Rob McElwee). Like Riggs I attempted a more poetic, stylized approach to tackle identity construction, specifically in my case the different factors that culturally

plural people internalize during this process. One of the visual motifs I used was that of my drawn portrait slowly coming to fruition as the film progresses to allude to identity as an ongoing process rather than a constant state (*Figure 1*). My narrative was meant to break the film into three different parts: an introductory section focusing on perceptions of others, the middle focusing on internal contradictions and navigation of those. The final chapter addressed the efforts of the subjects to connect others with the perspectives they have garnered and the film ends an emphasis of empathy and acceptance of others.



*Figure 1: Sketching motif, representing the ongoing going process of identity construction*

In correlation with the interviews transient, interstitial spaces; roads, crosswalks and tunnels spaces in each city were used as visual glue for all the characters; they act as location/character transitions but also as a metaphor for hybridity. While implying a journey of some kind, they are also an extension of the hyphen as a metaphor, connecting and providing access between two different spaces. They appear when the subjects reflect on their embodiment of the hyphen to create an extension of the allegory the title represents, and signal the shift to a different subject. The idea was to simultaneously contrast the differences and

highlight the similarities of each location and way of life.

The films of Chris Marker impacted my idea for the visual concept, with essay films such as “Sans Soleil” influencing how I wished my audience to experience the film. While Marker’s films are much more experimental, existential and abstract than mine, the way he creates meaning through the combination of his written narration and often disparate montages was a tactic I borrowed. Film critic Chris Darke said of “Sans Soleil”:

“Nothing here fixes word and image in illustrative lockstep; it’s in the space between them that Sans Soleil makes room for the spectator to drift, dream and think – to inimitable effect.”<sup>24</sup>

While my visuals were always connected to what was being said, I gravitated toward the idea of creating a reflective space for the viewer by the way I paired image and sound together. For each subject there were certain sections that were self-reflections of each individual’s identity (e.g thoughts on their race, how they are perceived by others, their construction of self) where I wanted the images to be more abstract to shift the emphasis more to what was being said. For the accompanying images to these sections I blurred and overlapped portraits of the individual speaking which are constantly moving in and out of focus, accompanied by a moving road underneath. This was to extricate oneself from being too closely reliant on the image, since my film is ultimately about reflections, perception and self-examination. Like “Sans Soleil” there is no straightforward narrative to follow; so I had to impose one in how I sequenced the different thoughts of the subjects and illustrate them in a way that invites the audience to also reflect. The layering over a moving road was an attempt to add a subtext of the effect of place on identity and imply a journey of trying to adjust and adapt to each locative setting. The essay film structure also was my best route in a practical sense; I had hours

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<sup>24</sup> Chris Darke and Andrew Tracey, "The Essay Film," *Sights and Sounds Magazine*, August 5, 2015, , accessed June 2016, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/essay-film>.

and hours of interviews and not much (due to time and logistical constraints while filming) observational footage to create a more vérité style.

Jean Rouché's films also had an impact in terms of the film's structure and tone. In his film "La Chronique de l'Été", Rouché begins with interviews of people from the street, asking them if they are "happy", a trope I mimic with the introduction and ending of my Canadian subjects all answering the same questions. The film then meanders from character to character, each with very different or even opposing perspectives, including himself the filmmaker as a character to add a wonderful self-reflexivity to the film. The multi-character structure of "La Chronique de l'Été" helped me to see how I could weave my subjects together cohesively. The self-reflexivity of the filmmaker was something I found not only engaging but also ethically responsible; seeing the inner workings of how the film was made and for what purpose holds the filmmaker more immediately accountable for the allusions they make.

Certain elements of Third Cinema influenced my editing process and the different themes my film excavated. Third cinema attempts to decolonize culture and provide a counter narrative by giving voice to those who had not previously been heard in First or Second Cinema<sup>25</sup>. My film is also trying to establish a counter-narrative of sorts, one that opposes the media representation of "the other" whether it be in the context of the news or other forms of media representation. The demonizing of "the other" is the mainstream media is symptomatic of the defensive, exclusionary nationalism identified by Stuart Hall as a consequence of globalization.<sup>26</sup>

Alia is the character who touches more specifically on this idea of representation when speaking of the context of her photography. She said she was

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<sup>25</sup> Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," *Documentary Is Never Neutral* | Towards a Third Cinema by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, , accessed June 13, 2016, <http://documentaryisneverneutral.com/words/camagun.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Procter, *Stuart Hall*, 111

urged by her European supervisors to focus on the Arab part of her identity because of it being suitably “interesting” to them, commodifying and objectifying her as “other”. I really wanted to show the level of self-awareness in the process of “othering” regardless of how subtle or well intentioned. Western representations of other cultures have often been problematic and the practice continues when even well intentioned encouragement of cultural expression can become orientalist and regressive. Alia’s experience is a small and subtle example of this and in my film, only the tip of the iceberg of this theme is represented, though I felt it important to include.

Unlike Third Cinema however, my representations are of subjects, including myself, that have a substantial amount of privilege. They are all well-educated, all quite young, all with enough means to follow their passion whether it is comedy, photography or film-making. The disenfranchised are not represented, and if anything are present in their notable absence from the film. The relationship between cultural hybridity and privilege is something I wished to expand more on, since that is the partial reason I disregarded “Third Culture” as a term in my end product was because of its lack of self-awareness as a legacy of colonial and imperial power structures. However, within the time-frame of the film it felt like expanding that widely would ultimately distract from the focus of the narrative. My attempt to mitigate this somewhat was having certain thoughts included such as Omar stating that he felt it was a privilege rather than a hindrance to be culturally plural. Also including myself was intended to add some sort of accountability, I am showing an experience I understand, and though it is privileged it is not a single voice, but a growing trend and shared experience for many.

The form my project has taken is a conversational essay style film weaving several narratives together. Between the bookends of the Canadian identity portraits there are three main narratives of people with culturally hybridized

identities with different professions in different cities around the world, with my narration interweaving through them, prompting the subsequent themes the other subjects elaborate on. Alia is a freelance photographer who is half Syrian and half American and has grown up in Abu Dhabi, in the U.A.E, which is also where she was interviewed. I interviewed Omar in London, who is an Irish - (white) Sudanese stand-up comedian and educator who grew up in Saudi Arabia but currently lives in Egypt. I also interviewed Lama, a Sudanese-Egyptian entrepreneur who was raised in both New Zealand and the U.A.E and currently lives in Montreal. They all have similar sentiments when it comes to the feeling of being constantly othered and having to seemingly justify their existence to people they meet, though their approaches to dealing with their hybridity and their individual outlooks have different nuances. They all give a summary of their identities, the conflicts arisen by them and will finish with examples of transcendence and trying to fill in the gaps of cultural understanding in different ways through connection.

My own part of the film was an excavation of my own identity, which was the backbone of the piece, with my self-reflexivity peaking at the end where you see footage of me interviewing the other Canadian subjects and highlighting my desire to represent the people who live “in between” (*Figure 2*). The tension in the autobiographical element of the film is revealed halfway through where my narration delves into the phenomenon called “Spitak Jard”; an Armenian phrase meaning “second/white genocide” which describes the phenomenon of Armenians in diaspora being absorbed culturally into whatever their host culture is and losing their language and cultural identity. My mother being Anglo-Canadian, I am a physical manifestation of this idea, especially since my spoken Armenian is not very strong. My name and appearance is very traditionally Armenian and so when faced with people from the diasporic Armenian communities around the world (I have encountered them in the UAE, Lebanon, England and Canada) I feel initially welcomed and but ultimately rejected or at odds with the mono-cultural

environment which has been created.

This tension within myself is an example Edward T. Halls' concepts of a high and low culture mixing and coming in conflict in some way. Though a large portion of the global Armenian population are diasporic communities in dozens of countries around the world and have adapted to these host cultures, they remain a high context culture to me because of “[a history of] oppression which [has] resulted in ... excessive individuality to prevent assimilation into ruling cultures.”<sup>27</sup> There have been several times where I have been ostracized or shamed for “not being Armenian enough” and this shame has intensified as I have gotten older; I see it as a main element of searching to solidify my identity in some way. I am only one generation removed from the genocide and researching it and being informed was too painful until relatively recently. I was very unsure whether to use myself as a narrator initially for this reason as I wanted to focus on my main subjects and try get them to be my voice in a way. However, I realized this tension in my own identity really fuelled my need to find like- minded people and create a community for myself in a certain sense, eventually allowing myself to guide the narrative and expose my own reasons for wanting connection.



*Figure 2: Autobiographical segment*

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<sup>27</sup> Selina L. Mangassarian, "100 Years of Trauma: The Armenian Genocide and Intergenerational Cultural Trauma," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 25, no. 4 (2016): , doi:10.1080/10926771.2015.1121191.

My original idea was to have hand-drawn sketches for each main subject to parallel mine to extend the construction of identity metaphor, but due to practicalities of time and inconsistency with the sketches I decided to just make it solely a trope for my narration. In a similar vein however I wanted to introduce something similar for Alia, Omar and Lama to imply the same constant shifting nature of identity. The eventual solution was the overlaying of their images with varying opacity and blur over the visuals of the moving roads in their respective cities(*Figure*). Each time this visual trope appears it is when the subjects are speaking about conflicts or the ambiguity of their individual identity construction.



*Figure 3: Subjects overlayed over moving roads (Omar)*

Alia details the multiple worlds she has to navigate and the ways in which she achieves this and the conflicts that being half Syrian and half American bring up. She describes the nuance of Arab identities and representation, culminating with her description of her final photo project she did at university based on the incident where an Iraqi journalist threw a shoe at Bush in protest. Her series of unmarked soldiers wielding and throwing shoes (instead of using their weapons) was trying to communicate the idea of your voice of discontent being used as a weapon. Using shoes to voice discontent is culturally an Arab idea; shoes being

thrown at statues of un-favoured despots, people taking their shoes off to put on the face of leaders they are protesting, even a mother throwing a shoe at a child that is misbehaving. The soles of shoes are considered unclean and therefore offensive and insulting. Bush having a shoe thrown at him was one of the first memorable international exhibitions of this practice, and while in some ways he could have thrown anything and that would have displayed the same sentiment, the idea of the shoes is culturally rooted in the Middle East. Alia speaks of trying and ultimately failing to transcend cultural boundaries through her art to translate this idea of voicing discontent. She deemed it a failure because many of her European cohorts did not understand the piece and in the end she was trying to translate a culturally specific idea into a universality. I could not include the specifics of her final piece in the film because of time constraints, but to me it greatly informed greatly the rest of her interview. The dynamics of representation within her project were very interesting to me and even if she did not “succeed” in the way she wanted, she was in her own way trying to bridge gaps in cultural understanding.

Omar is half White-Sudanese and half Irish and raised in the Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and was finishing his dissertation in England on how comedy affects education before flying back to Egypt. He is often not perceived as either of his parent nationalities because of his American accent (cultivated in an American international school) and his very white appearance, which is contrary to most people’s image of Sudanese people. This unusual mix of cultures is the inspiration for much of his stand-up which he performs in both Arabic and English in different locations globally. He tries to connect people through humour by pre-emptively othering himself onstage and pointing out the cultural contradictions within his identity. His main message of connection is what drew me to him as a subject and his ability to point out the way people try and alienate others and isolate themselves in the comforting blanket of nationalism.

Lama represented a vital perspective of hybridity; she is mostly Sudanese and a quarter Egyptian ethnically but she was born in the UAE and raised in New Zealand. Her insights I think were crucial to offering an essential transnational perspective; Alia and Omar could both potentially “pass” physically as white (due to their parentage and skin tone) while Lama does not have that option. She talks about considering moving to the States and eventually deciding against it because of the immediate projection of an African American identity on to her, which made her uncomfortable since that was not her lived experience. The colour of her skin dictates how she is perceived in different regions around the world and she talks about “choosing who you want to be.” This is a necessary perspective that the other main participants (including myself) could not speak to and it touches on a huge element of transnational/hybrid experience.

When looking at my film critically, there are several issues I would address. As previously mentioned, the lack of focus on the privilege of the subjects, and the privilege inherent within the endeavour itself, was something I wish I had dealt with more. My film also becomes quite idealistic towards the end, maybe glossing over any problems or contradictions within the worldview of the subjects and therefore of film. The film ends on this idealized note in attempts to point towards and be optimistic about the future and what plurality has to offer. I worry however that the emphasis on this optimism is excessive and could result in undermining the message, making it almost sanctimonious.

The ethnic backgrounds of the introductory Canadian subjects (*Figure 3*) were purposely omitted to imply that it doesn't matter their ethnic makeup since it was the feelings and experiences they expressed, which often mirror each other, that were important to communicate and focus on. I do however wish I had more interviewees to show the true range of diversity possible within Canadian identities, since I feel that having six people cannot possibly be representative. The small number of subjects in my opening and closing sequences undermines

the attempted implication of the broader change in identity on a wider scale. Ultimately I would always fail at representing the true spectrum of hybridity since the subject matter is so wide and ever expanding, but I feel like I succeeded in at least prompting some reflection on the topic and was able to scratch the surface on this shift in identification.



*Figure 3: Canadian subjects featured at beginning and end of film*

# Conclusion

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Trying to create a narrative out of a subject matter as amorphous and ambiguous as identity or hybridity was very challenging, but documentary as a form seemed to offer a manageable way to navigate it. It allowed enough room for me to experiment with telling a story that was not necessarily linear or self-contained and had so many possible points of entry. I could not create something strictly observational and in line with direct cinema, because of the subject matter and how ideas-based my film was. There was no action to speak of, it was difficult to show my subjects demonstrating their hybridity physically and for a time during the creation process I found this quite limiting. However, documentary offered many other alternative methods to present a form of reality... by borrowing techniques used by the filmmakers such as Minh-Ha, Riggs, Marker and Rouche I was able to still create something that felt representative. The response was wonderful and unexpected in terms of the many different ways people could connect with the film. Many identified with the main characters of the film and their plurality, others told me they gravitated towards the stories of the parents of the main characters and their journey to creating this hybridized world for themselves. Others told me that simply the message of “carving out space for yourself when there isn’t already a space made for you” was something they related to.

The point of my project was never to have any concrete answers to the questions I raise in this paper, since some we can never know. What “Hyphen” was ultimately trying to achieve was prompting thought and reflection on these topics through a new lens. If you are not “other” perhaps it can give you perspective of that experience; if you are “other” then hopefully it can make you

feel less alone. It ultimately is a call for the hybridized, between people to use their multiple perspectives constructively and connectively. What is taken away from the experience of “Hyphen” is that “finding oneself” will never be a single exercise or something that can be conveyed in a 20 minute film. Identity is not a fixed thing for anyone; it constantly changes and expands to become more complex. But now the way we identify is also becoming much more complex and that process will be different in another 10 years time. It remains to be seen if the polarizing of identity and ideology on a global scale will continue and what effect that will have on the growing amount of inhabitants of the hyphen itself.

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