



University of **HUDDERSFIELD**

University of Huddersfield Repository

Braha, Gentiana

An exploration of displacement within diaspora and the use of memory and film to find cultural identity within cultural hybridity

Original Citation

Braha, Gentiana (2019) An exploration of displacement within diaspora and the use of memory and film to find cultural identity within cultural hybridity. Masters thesis, University of Huddersfield.

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/35012/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

The University of Huddersfield

**An exploration of displacement within diaspora and the use of memory and
film to find cultural identity within cultural hybridity.**

Gentiana Braha

Masters By Research

School of Art, Design and Architecture.

2019

Content

<u>Introduction.....</u>	<u>03</u>
<u>Literature Review.....</u>	<u>05</u>
• <u>Experience of Diaspora and Cultural Hybridity.....</u>	<u>05</u>
• <u>Memory and Trauma.....</u>	<u>07</u>
• <u>Displacement and Cultural Identity.....</u>	<u>09</u>
<u>Methodology.....</u>	<u>11</u>
• <u>Practice and Purpose.....</u>	<u>11</u>
• <u>Memory and Cultural Identity.....</u>	<u>14</u>
• <u>Displacement and Cultural Hybridity.....</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>An Interview with the Documentarian.....</u>	<u>17</u>
<u>Film 1.....</u>	<u>21</u>
<u>Film 2.....</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>Film 3.....</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Tea with a Refugee.....</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Act-Formance.....</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>Conclusion.....</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>Bibliography.....</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>Appendix.....</u>	<u>32</u>

Appendix A

Figure A.5 The viewing of *Veq nje moment*, a film I created for the Act-Formance event.

Appendix B

Figure B.1 Interviewing Alketa Xhafa Mripa at Tate Modern.

Figure B.2 An article by Counterpoints Arts featuring Alketa Xhafa Mripa's installation and images of myself and Bill Nighy on our visit.

Figure B.3 A short film by David Newman featuring an interview in which I took part.

Figure B.4 Voice memo recording of Alketa Xhafa Mripa interview located within the supporting hard drive.

Appendix C

Figure C.1 A series of screen grabs of the dedicated website for my practice.

Figure C.2 Documentation of the video installation

Figure C.3 All visual content film, video archive and photographs located within the hard drive.

In 1999, Kosovo fought a brutal war against their neighbouring country, Serbia, in an attempt to gain independence and free itself from the attempt at ethnic cleansing by Serbian soldiers. The Serbian army massacred thousands of Kosovan Albanian ethnic Muslims to gain the territory they believed was their right. Over a million Kosovans migrated during this time, leaving their homes, relatives and lives behind in search of safety. They had to find temporary refuge in peaceful neighbouring countries, such as Macedonia and Albania, where some lived with volunteer host families; however, many lived in refugee camps along with their fellow natives. For Albanians who had to flee the war, the hardest part was leaving their homes, not knowing if they would ever return.

In recent years, researchers have used different methods to investigate the effects associated with migration and the implications it has on individuals, but also within diaspora communities around the world which share a similar heritage or homeland. Displacement is generally seen as a factor strongly related to refugees and the subsequent generational families who attempt to understand their ancestral roots. This distinction is further exemplified within the literature examined. Hirsch and Miller's (2011) *Rites of Return* illustrates this point clearly by allowing us to better understand the impulses of Jay Prosser on his meditation of complicated family roots and the longing to connect to them. The past has many components and, through memory, we are able to explore a personal and social construction of identity. In addition, it is important to remember that memory is vital to experience; however, it is notoriously known that memory is not as reliable as a definite fact, but, rather, a reconstruction of the truth and more so for traumatic memories as these can be

suppressed. As such, it is important to recognise that using film creates a new way of documenting memory and history.

The relationship between diasporas and displacement goes hand in hand with cultural hybridity; therefore, it is crucial that the following thesis discusses the implications that connect the migrant to their host society and how this has personally impacted their cultural identity. Hall and Du Gay (1996) hold 'Identification as a construction, a process never completed - always "in process". It is not determined in the sense that it can always be "won" or "lost", sustained or abandoned' Their book, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, questions cultural identity and who needs it, a statement that demonstrates the flexibility of identity and the idea that it is always in process, allowing for endless possibilities.

In the 2018 World Cup, Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri, two ethnic Albanians, who were raised in Switzerland, were fined by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) for celebrating scoring against the Serbian national football team. They were using their hands to symbolise the Albanian two-headed eagle, commonly used by ethnic Albanians as a gesture of pride. This was seen as a political move. However, in regard to the research, this shows a great deal of nationalism as, regardless of the fact that they both were raised away from Kosovo, they chose to embrace their cultural roots and were able to express their cultural hybridity even during such a fundamental event.

Literature Review

This section intends to explore various experiences of diaspora and cultural identity, taking a critical approach to examples of migrant displacement and the problematic notion of stable cultural identity which affects migrants around the world.

Experience of Diaspora and Cultural Hybridity

Zhang's (2000) essay, *Identity in Diaspora and Diaspora in Writing: The Poetics of Cultural Transrelation*, published in the Journal Of Intercultural Studies, examines the complexity and uncertainty associated with defining and articulating identity in diaspora and the experience of transversing boundaries of space, time, race, culture, language and history. Zhang's (2000) specific focus is on Asian diaspora literature in Canada, in relation to a large number of Asian migrants who, due to their deep loyalty to the Chinese culture, attempt to keep their identity intact through language and culture while in their adopted society. Zhang (2000) states that migrants 'constantly situate themselves in an awkward mediation between home-ness and homelessness' and attempts to elaborate on the perspective of the diaspora looking at the double relationship between two different cultural homes and origins.

The subjects of migration suffer a range of implications in their transition into cultural hybridity, from social interaction and linguistic barriers to cultural impulses. 'Many early diasporans, "bent by cultural impulse", attempted to set up an enclave culture in their adopted society and to build up cultural walls around their communities' (Zhang, 2000). Through building cultural communes, Chinese diaspora are able to preserve the autonomy of their self-identity. Zhang (2000) describes 'Charlie Jang

who continued to write in his native language despite residing in his new society expressing deep loyalty to Chinese traditions like many more early Diasporas who display an intense desire to keep distinct Chinese cultures and values in Canada.’ This embodies a comfort blanket, the migrants stick to what they are familiar with as a safety precaution, something which is naturally to be expected when exposed to a whole new world. Many Issues arise in such cases, leading to life-changing consequences. People outside of the diaspora communities can often gain a generalised stereotype of these communities. This can result in fewer opportunities being available due to linguistic barriers; the individuals will become close-minded out of fear of the new, leading them to be inevitably exposed to new experiences for which they have potentially not prepared themselves. This form of self-segregation can cause potential issues in future generations as they will be building their reality on a homeland they have potentially never experienced, they risk living in the vision of their ancestors; however, while attempting to uphold their culture, the younger generations are seen to also be able to embrace the cultures of the societies around them, integrating within new communities as they are concerned with articulating their identities across the borders of different cultures. This is a more modernised approach, wherein new cultural hybridity can be seen.

Durrant and Lord (2007) explore a collection of essays which reflect the two-way movement between culture, identity and subjects in an aesthetic process, stating that the ‘Essays collected here also draw attention to those who are caught, even frozen, in transition, between lives and countries, unable to lay claim to citizenship’ (Durrant & Lord, 2007). For example, Ihab Saloul’s essay on the displacement of Palestinians who lost their lives in an attempt to move between states when their window to freedom was circumscribed.

Memory and Trauma

In many ways, memory attempts to create a narrative of both time and space.

Trauma theory has relevance in producing a migratory aesthetic, but, as discussed by Durrant and Lord (2007), not all migration is traumatic; however in relation to this research there is an obligation to explore the emotions involved in the diasporic journey. Pedro Matta, a survivor of torture in Villa Grimaldi, (an infamous torture centre in Chile) was accompanied by Diana Taylor who recorded a powerful performance of memory within *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* by Hirsch and Miller (2011). However, the authenticity of Matta's effect is questionable due to the willingness to revisit the location where extreme traumatic events took place. There is a strong relationship between the visitor and the place which, in turn, activates memory. In this instance, the importance of transmitting historical information through the victim's eyes and showing survival is extremely crucial to avoid history repeating itself.

The legacies of the past are notably a powerful guidance for the migrant. Hirsch and Miller (2011) explore how, through parent to child, the generational stories, images, artefacts and understandings shape identity. This, in turn, leaves an allure for the second and third generations, risking appropriation and over-identification steered by an overwhelming desire and need to belong which accompanies the feeling of displacement. Furthermore, the returning son or daughter is seeking connection, whether it is physical or cultural: 'They wish to see, touch, and hear that familial house, that street corner, the sounds of the language that the child often does not speak or perhaps never did' (Hirsch & Miller, 2011). This can be dependent on

translation and acts of imagination. Jay Prosser is a prime example of a generational family longing to connect to his complicated ancestral roots. Prosser wrote his mother's memoir by reconnecting her memory to that of her father through music. Music evokes a sensory experience to the conscious mind, making it a key tool for evoking nostalgia. Most effectively, Prosser uses a cassette recorded in the 1970s of his grandfather's voice to connect to his memory, as he states that singing is what he remembers of him. This accessibility to the material overrides the spaces of geographical separation and allows an insight into many cultural aspects, such as linguistics. The unmistakable longing to recapture lost time allows Prosser to immerse himself into the ideology of his cultural identity through these multicultural musical archives. As a result, the post-memorial aesthetic allows for historical meaning.

The use of music in Turkish-German diasporic cinema has been explored within *Border Visions: Identity and Diaspora in Film* (Kazecki, Ritzenhoff, & Miller, 2013). It touches upon the notion that diaspora is often assumed to suffer nostalgia, a longing for "home", loss and displacement. In the same way that taste and smell are able to generate sensory information, music also has this ability. Prosser uses music as an accessible material which allows the nostalgic process to thrive (Hirsch & Miller, 2011). Music is regarded as a universal language, but is also an important relation to cultural identity.

Displacement and Cultural Identity

The advantage of Ihab Saloul's essay, "*Exilic Narrativity*": *Invisibility of Palestinian Home Exile* (Durrant & Lord, 2007) is a prospective observation of the journey taken by the Palestinian exiles across multiple geopolitical communities and cultures, in search of an escape from poverty and in pursuit of refuge.

Saloul's essay is important for the purposes of this writing, not only because of similarities in displacement, but, more importantly, the study highlights cultural identity to that of diaspora history through cinematic experience. The object of analysis within the essay is a Palestinian cinematic narrative, the film: *Al Makhdu'un* (The Dupes, Saleh, 1972). A cinematic narrative holds a strong capability through its various devices and is proficient in supporting history, data and displacement. This is not confined to the diaspora's memory, the cinematic narrative is capable of pointing out the exilic experience which is no longer something that just happens to someone else. The writing signifies place disorder similarly to that previously discussed by Zhang in expressing struggles and the breaking of cultural barriers. Space, time, race, culture, language and history are all recurring topics which impact strongly throughout this literature.

The diasporic cinema shows characteristics of displacement and almost definitely crosses borders of interculturalism. The cinematic traditions of homeland and host land draw out the diasporic experience in which character and aesthetic take the main focus. 'Diaspora is primarily identified with pain and trauma: displacement, landlessness, alienation, and the loss of homeland, of the sense of security, and of power' (Kazecki et al., 2013) and, regardless of the association of pain and trauma, it is also commonly associated with the longing for a homeland and the desire to return

to the original homeland in hope of eliminating the feeling of being homesick and nostalgic.

‘Diasporans could be compared to stranded “migratory birds” they are strangers from elsewhere who, without a sense of belonging, never feel at home’ (Zhang, 2000).

This statement attempts to defy a unifying narrative which can easily be disputed due to its problematic pretence. It can be argued that an individual can fit into this notion even living in their homeland, as the sense of belonging is defined by the individual; people choose to migrate, even in stable societies, to pursue the desire of “finding themselves”. This commonly links to relocation, as these individuals believe relocation will allow them to have a fresh start from a life that may not fulfil them. ‘More than an invitation to forget, the expression “the past is past” is a way to build a stronger future by still using the past’ (Gemignani, 2011), focusing on the importance of using past experience to develop a stronger future. This research into the mental health of refugees post-migration gives an overwhelming insight into the diasporic journey through memory. There is a commonality in the subjects of this text who allow themselves to focus on a future with hope, encouraging themselves and fellow refugees to do the same as, by embracing their traumatic experience, they are able, in turn, to allow themselves to recreate and own their narrative, which wasn’t previously possible. This statement cannot be generalised; however, within the proposed text there is clear evidence that the subjects cope with their tainted past through the prospect of a new fair future.

Methodology

In order to understand the transition process of migration and the cultural hybridity, a qualitative methodology was adopted for this study, as it was deemed the most appropriate method for studying the effect of displacement associated with migration. The research design involved critical engagement with the literature, which, in turn, allows engagement with my artistic practice. The literature (Zhang, 2000) has highlighted the experience of transversing boundaries and language, culture and identity are clearly demonstrated as being key to the issues that arise with the subject at hand.

People in their natural environment, the homeland, follow everyday routine, but, once taken away from the comfort of home, the individual begins to rely on memory in order to maintain their cultural identity.

Practice and Purpose

The Home Video, a pre-recorded video cassette for home viewing, is the fundamental artefact in which my practice began its structural journey. My father, Naim Braha, created and documented a rich collection of home movies throughout the years. I now reminisce about the days in which a camera was constantly following me around. I tend to compare this to the reality TV that is shown on TV

today. He enjoyed filming the everyday and this, in turn, has created a raw and unfiltered body within the material.

Throughout the years, my practice has developed dramatically due to the accessibility to an archive of video material. Not unlike Prosser's longing to belong (Hirsch & Miller, 2011), this has allowed the legacies of the past to shape the cultural identity of the work. Photography and the moving image have allowed me to develop personal understanding and insight into my ancestral roots. The central focus of this methodology has allowed me to understand multicultural perspectives towards cultural hybridity, caused by the migratory journey within my own personal narrative and that of other diasporas. I have been able to implement this into a visual representation which forms my practice.

Loss is a component of personal growth; my father lost his father at a very young age. This resulted in him not being able to preserve many memories of him. I believe the longing to know about the father figure he was deprived of made an impact on his intention of holding on to moments that are often taken for granted or seen as unnecessary. The approach taken was to document what the heart desires in order to reevaluate in the present. As mentioned by Kazecki, Ritzenhoff, and Miller (2013) the diasporic experience is drawn into focus when pain and trauma are involved, commonly associated with longing for the homeland, and can equally be matched with the longing to be with someone. In this case, for someone who would have typically been in his life to guide him through emotional experience. It is important for me to express the emotion and journey my family have undergone through love and loss, this has allowed for a new cultural identity to be represented within the work.

The editing process within my practice was crucial to the cultural aesthetic and authenticity of the work. It becomes unique and open to interpretation. Douglas Gordon was featured in a documentary created by the BBC, (Designing Video Installations with Douglas Gordon, 2013) in which he states, 'If you have a certain sense of yourself you can allow that to dissipate to other people, you can become someone else and they can become you.'. The bond to my own personal experience resonates within the work created; I have been able to open up a conversation for the viewer to interoperate this in whichever way they feel appropriate.

The 'oda', which is a traditional room found in Albania, a gathering space or a traditional institution, is a cultural heritage asset in Kosovo. This space is exclusively dedicated to elderly men to discuss important family, community or national issues. I have been known to use the 'oda' as part of my installation set up in previous years. Using legacies from my ancestral roots shapes the identification of the installation, allowing the viewer to interpret through the aesthetics.

The cultural hybridity of my personal journey coming from Kosovo to England is confronted within my practice. The accessibility of our lives in England is visually represented, as we are able to live here in peace without fear. Yet the memories of the past of living in Kosovo during the 1999 conflict resonate through the juxtaposition of flashbacks to the homeland and the lives we previously lived. This allows the viewer to be exposed to a new cultural experience and the visual loops from within my film will reflect the journey and cultural inheritance that was undertaken, allowing for a new perspective similar to the characteristics of *Al Makhdu'un* (Saleh, 1972) as discussed in Saloul's essay (Durrant & Lord, 2007)

where flashbacks to the previous lives are shown while the Palestinians are on a journey to find refuge in a new society.

In the 1960s and 1970s, tape recording particularly benefited artists who engaged with identity politics, as discussed by Elwes (2015) in her book, *Installation and the moving image*. The artists were able to undergo a programme of self-scrutiny when drawing on autobiographical material, allowing an intersection of problematic issues which were able to be manipulated into a video installation. This process is still envisioned by artists today. The performativity position occupied by the video installation allows for appropriated nostalgia and a shared familiarity. This, in turn, foregrounds the ways in which visual practices can draw upon the human need to identify and understand in an ever-changing, fragmented, digitised era.

Memory and Cultural Identity

The link between memory and history allows us to perceive personal stories within a wider context of experience, which is shared with other related people. 'The past strongly contributes to the formation of identity from a psychological, social, cultural and, in the case of refugees, legal perspective' (Gemignani, 2011). Within *The Past if Past: The Use of Memories and Self-Healing Narratives in Refugees from the Former Yugoslavia* (Gemignani, 2011) it outlines how the past is important in order to establish cultural identity. By using recollected memory to form my practice, I've

been able to engage with the nostalgic experience. I believe this is a crucial and therapeutic process in order to visualise different aspects of life and, as much as I believe it is fine to discuss the past, people should allow themselves to really embrace ageing and moving forward.

As discussed by Gemignani (2011), the concept of home evolves into a symbolic analogy for the nostalgic feelings and memories of what used to be: for a land that exists only in narrations; the feeling of home is an internal one through shared experience. Like that of my home videos, they are inserted in order to create a feeling of home but “home” itself does not exist, it is an idea, the reality is, in fact, memory and personal experience.

Displacement and Cultural Hybridity

The history of diasporas is commonly linked to the feeling of displacement; in an attempt to understand how my family have adapted to the society we live in, I have explored diaspora and the cultural hybridity which inevitably comes with it. ‘ Timothy Brennan has argued that the fascination with the “hybrid” cultures of diasporic communities tends to obscure the fact that very often these people themselves do not want to be diasporic’ (Baronian, Besser, & Jansen, 2007). For many, to be diasporic is not a choice and, for these people, the feeling of displacement is overwhelming, they have a disconnect to things that are familiar. In order to cope with these feelings of displacement, many attempt to reconnect to their homeland, similar to my father by watching his home videos or within Hirsch and Miller (2011) where Jay Prosser listens to his grandfather’s recordings.

Something which stood out to me when analysing my video archive was the wedding video of my relatives. Wedding videos are objects of cultural analysis; they range from all categories of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and age. 'Wedding videos are not created for public exhibition' (Westgeest, 2016) they are created for remembering and reminiscing as the marriage progresses. This relates to that of the diaspora attempting to connect to their past; they are able to see how their cultural identity was represented previously and, through the impact of life, how it has formed. Another key discussion within integrating cultures is the development of future generations, as previously discussed by Zhang (2000) in *Identity in Diaspora and Diaspora in Writing: The Poetics of Cultural Transrelation* where he says that the younger generations of diaspora communities are cultural border-crossers; they are able to relocate themselves into new society and cultures as they are concerned with articulating a new identity, which fits into the different cultures they inherit. Hirsch and Miller (2011) also look into the over-identification of second and third generations and how they are driven by desire and need to relate to earlier generations, but also to articulate to the present.

An Interview with the Documentarian

Throughout my childhood, it was made clear how important culture was; due to the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 we now have family living all over the world in their own diaspora narrative. Every summer has been spent visiting the homeland and reuniting with these relatives and, as such, I have been able to see them integrating into their new society and the impact this has on their cultural identity. Now more than ever, I see the importance of interviewing my father, and this part of the essay will give a better understanding into why he documented our life for so long and why this was crucial to forming his cultural identity.

Exile has played an important role in my father's journey to cultural identity; his own family's banishment from their country of origin has allowed him to appreciate the importance of his documentation of his life in order for him to better understand the now in which he has been forced to live. 'In the process, viewers are challenged to re-remember a past in which they appear different from themselves, or from what they thought they were, and so they recover a sense of themselves as sites of difference—hence sites of possible transformation' (Khouri, 2010). This statement allows for a better understanding of the importance of memory and its complexities rather than romanticising it with the notion that you are able to see the past through film and just remember exactly how the history was. Yet the reality is just as important, by creating a collection of videos my father has allowed for the conversation to be reopened, he has passed this down to myself and I am able to interpret these into my artistic practice, thereby allowing me to connect to the heritage of my past.

My father states the importance of knowing about the history from which we come, knowing the journey which has led our family to where we are today, seeing how we have been raised and acknowledging the major changes in our cultural identities which have accrued into our transition as British citizens in the mediation of dual nationality. We would have to adapt to the new society, which made him fear that his children would forget their home, the language of their ancestors and the cultural identity that he currently possesses. He is a proud man in regard to how his children have integrated their multicultural identity into their everyday lives.

Through photography and film, he believed we could maintain our familial tie to our homeland and cultural identity in order to not neglect the past and who we once were. This platform allowed for us to familiarise ourselves with relatives who are now not with us, as previously discussed by Hirsch and Miller (2011) and the journey of familiarising Prosser with his ancestral roots through his examination of recordings of his grandfather by which we have come to understand that a post-memorial aesthetic of reattachment is able to create a new way of historical meaning into intergenerational transmission, allowing legacies of the past to transmit through parent to child. In 2012, my father lost his mother and using the archive of video he is able to revisit his past in order to feel closer to her through these artefacts that have shaped his understanding. There is, however, risk of appropriation due to his desire and need to be close to someone he loved. 'The transpersonal emphasizes the links that connect an individual not only backward in time vertically through earlier generations but also in a horizontal, present tense of affinities' (Hirsch & Miller, 2011). This idea of connecting through time is seen in my father's ideologies in that he wants to preserve a sense of his mother in order to remember her. But,

over time, memory changes and experiences shift accordingly, so our memories are reduced and compromised. For the viewer of these videos, it is more important for them to be able to preserve the past so as to be able to familiarise themselves with a loved one's voice and be able to see a visual representation of them for comfort and familiarity.

‘The archive has become fluid and memory is realised as a performative process that can be revisited and updated to incorporate new events and to reflect changing preferences for what is included in narratives of the personal past’ (Cross & Peck, 2010). In this regard, I am reminded when my father says we are not able to recreate the memories of our past, but, through archiving these memories, we are able to preserve a time which is lost and are able to reflect on it; this representation of the past is just as important as the past itself.

Through positive memories of the past, he is able to find comfort, and reminisce about what once was; he is also able to pass his legacy down through the generations, which is important for his own cultural identity and development. Through film, he explains that it has also allowed him to find a release from his feelings of displacement within the new society.

Back then, being able to record cost a lot of money, you had to have access to a camera, buy tape and also be cautious of what you wanted to record due to the limited storage, you then had to have the film developed. In today's day and age, people use their phones daily and, without intention, we are all archiving our lives since it has become so accessible, collecting photographs, storing them away and maybe one day looking back at them to reminisce. As Cross and Peck (2010) note,

'new technologies and photography can benefit communities who have found it difficult to maintain familial ties and maintain cultural identity.' New technologies are allowing the everyday person to document whenever and whatever they like. With the rise of social media upon us, we can see this has become easily accessible and, along with the internet, this has created a huge platform for so many people, artists, musicians and people living their day-to-day lives. We now have Instagram, YouTube and Facebook and famous people out there are making a living from creating videos and posting them to social media. These platforms are allowing everyone to document aspects of their cultural identity and project it into the world. Previously the information that was projected into the world was that from successful platforms through television; however, now it has become accessible to the average person who is able to share their everyday life to a vast number of people, whereas, this was previously documented through home video, which was a more personal process.

Film1: Journey, Film 2: Dance, Film 3: Memory

Film 1: Journey

My film-making process derives from a compulsive need to collect information and my desire to connect to my ancestral roots. I was made aware from a very young age that my father has a passion for documenting through film by recording our everyday lives. Cross and Peck's (2010) assertion that 'New technologies and photography can benefit communities who have found it difficult to maintain familial ties and maintain cultural identity' rings true with my father's intentions once new technologies became available and, to this day, the use of new technology has played a vital role in maintaining cultural identity as an important factor to control his feeling of displacement.

Travelling has been a key element of my life experiences, a geographical and spatial movement allowing the changes within my culture to articulate the outcome of my visual practice. Every day we interact with new people from different backgrounds and we subconsciously learn from our surroundings in order to fit into the society in which we live. It is necessary to sit back and reflect on the journeys and experiences which have led to our development and growth, linking all the crucial moments to expose the common connection through cultural hybridity.

The ability to edit the video archives into short clips allowed me to recreate my own archive of a significant moment. This process has allowed me to correlate thematically when creating a new film; *Film 1* documents a journey, ranging through

30 years of documentation and history, showing the contrasting situations allowing cultural identity to form. A timeline is visible through the sharp and stitched clips as the quality and characteristics of each year are exposed through items of clothing, time stamps and even the quality of the film itself. This, in turn, showcases a clear view of where my family began, leading to the present and continuing growth into British culture as seen today. I feel that, through the projection of the films, the characteristics within the imagery help identify a clear bond between the notion of cultural identity and how the embrace of displacement lives within the timeline which is presented.

Film 2: Dance

Through the language of dance, many people are able to express themselves. Cultural dance particularly interests me and, through the making of *Film 2*, I was able to articulate the feeling of pride and connection this has to my own cultural identity. Traditional folk dances of the Albanian people span to over 5,000 variations, many of which are discussed in the book, *Vallëzimi Popullor Shqiptar* (Bogdani, 1997). Over the years, I have come to learn the importance of the way we celebrate and how we celebrate through our traditions, especially through dance, and this has been passed down by older generations. Both my father and uncle were in a “shoqëri”, a dance society which travels to different places to showcase their group's skills in the traditional dances.

The use of Albanian traditional dances is often found within my father's collection of home videos as it is seen as a form of expression which creates a strong cultural

bond within the Albanian community. The traditional dances flood back many memories for me; as a young child, I remember many being centred around family and the Valle, a popular dance which is traditionally performed at weddings in which multiple people hold hands, would be initiated, everyone would then proceed to dance around the room to the rhythm of the traditional music. I always wanted to join in, but I felt displaced as I hadn't grown up in Kosovo, so I was not able to react in the way someone would have growing up in their homeland. For my father, the videos of dancing are a memory, but, for me, they are an experience that I am not familiar with and seeing this experience in film and experiencing it in real life in comparison is overwhelming. This is one of the more crucial moments from where the drive for preservation and the creation of my films derives, I am expressing the importance of a shared experience, how this can bring people together and allow us to educate spectators.

This particular film shows the unity my family have; the celebration is important, it's a form of empowerment, which, in turn, projects the culture we represent. The ideas of shared celebration are common throughout all cultures. I believe it is very important for each individual to express themselves in whichever way they desire to represent their roots if we have an opportunity to educate one another. In this instance, we use dance to show our pride as Albanians, and, in turn, the viewer's parallel creates a common connection.

Film 3: Memories

Film 3 observes the significance of memory in the diaspora. The human brain is extraordinary, it can hold an unlimited database of information which is connected to life experience, our brain can change particular memories and they become a close representation to the reality of that significant event: 'Memory attempts to narrativise the disjunctions of both time and space' (Durrant & Lord, 2007). My father's documentation of my childhood allows me to find a representation of myself and my cultural identity in the past.

Memories associated around major life events are stored as "flashbulb memories" which seem clear and uncomplicated when you comprehend them; however, the periphery disappears. For the younger generational diaspora, they rely on a projection of culture from their parents and attempt to find their cultural identity through it. This knowledge emphasises the importance of having home videos as documentation in order to articulate the perspective of our shared memories.

Tea with a Refugee

I was invited to the Tate London by Alketa Xhafa Mripa, an artist and activist, to be part of the *Who Are We?* project and to see her *Refugees Welcome*, a mobile installation in which a lift truck has been revamped with soft furnishings to recreate a British living room, a pot of tea waiting for the public so they are able to sit down with the artist to tell their stories of displacement and a neon sign of "Hope" in the heart of a union jack spread across the back of the space. The public is able to enter the installation in order to share their stories and reflections on their welcome to Britain.

Alketa was very welcoming and introduced me to her volunteers and David Newman, who was documenting the event, I was asked to take part in a video response interview which allowed me to share my personal experiences as a refugee.

Alketa, who is also originally from Kosovo, drew on memories of her own welcome to the UK in creating the installation, which symbolises the question of 'are refugees welcome?' and opens a platform for people to discuss this very important question. I was able to sit with the Alketa inside her installation and conduct an interview, allowing me to have an insight into her practice. I began my interview by expressing how inspirational it was for me as a practitioner and a fellow Albanian to see her work succeed to the degree it has today, allowing there to be a debate in order to visualise the problems which face refugees in this day and age.

She explained that her inspiration came one day when she was travelling from Calais to Dover and how she had witnessed refugees attempt to cross the border while hiding underneath trucks; this is not something new, but a common occurrence of the desperation of refugees seeking safety. Alketa then wanted to capture this in the best way she knew, through conceptual art, she wanted the truck to be an artwork within itself to open up the topic at hand in an unnatural way. This, in turn, represents the welcome with which refugees are currently met within our society and many societies around the world, having to go to extreme measures to pursue refuge. A voice for the voiceless, she wanted to let people know that we can hear them in spite of the way other people have treated them in the past and present.

I wanted to know how her experiences related to the stories that she had heard in her installation. When we are comfortable in our own homes, some people choose to ignore the struggles of the world, and she explained how important it is to recognise that other people need help and that we should be there to help them in their time of

need. Giving someone a helping hand will encourage that person to pass that forward and open opportunities and potential, which, in the long run, benefits England.

Remembering when Kosovans came to England in 1999, how Britain was much more welcoming, helped them be safe and gave them a home. We've seen a shift due to the changes in society, life is not as kind to refugee in many countries, so we have to try and help by offering them safety. The media have played a big part in the portrayal of refugees, which has affected the mind-set of the public over the years. Alketa explained how propaganda and the way religion is portrayed in a one-sided manner has affected the way people react; they have become reluctant as they are now afraid. This is a very sad outcome as England has become safe home to many refugees through the years and she expressed how grateful she is because it has brought out the best in her, something which relates to my personal experience along with many more in our situation.

This interview was influential to my practice, enabling me to articulate the importance of allowing the public to experience my practice, opening up a conversation of cultural identity and the journeys that have to be undertaken for them to form.

Act-Formance.

It was vital for me to explore my methods in different environments, such as a platform event which I had the opportunity to organise in Huddersfield. Act-Formance gave artists a chance to present their work or performance in a space where they could gain feedback from the viewer in real time. This also gave me the chance to showcase my work to a new audience and gave an insight into how others interpreted the home videos of my family and heritage. The turnout for the event was more than I had estimated, consisting of different cultural and professional backgrounds. I was able to collect feedback and an insight into the effects of my video installations, which enriched my film-making process further into my research. This method made me better understand the viewer's perspective and, following this, I have been able to create installations focusing on the viewer's needs.

Conclusion

In this investigation, the aim was to assess how diaspora communities use memory and film to find cultural identity within cultural hybridity. Research into other practitioners and researchers in the field of diaspora and migrant studies has enabled me to identify how the use of film is a key tool for migrant communities to identify with a cultural identity.

The research carried out within my own practice has enabled me to understand how there are many different ways of people being able to find and see themselves

represented as a refugee, while at the same time identifying their cultural heritage. The investigation of using film as a way to connect with memories from the homeland has shown to be a powerful tool. My own involvement has shown that the experience of viewing the film is different depending on the viewer. My father's experience of the film emits a powerful emotion, as he uses the film as a way of being close to his past. For him, the content of the videos serve as a memory, whereas my experiences of the films are a sense of a cultural identity that I have not been fully immersed in from a young age. This finding has shown that the different generations in a diaspora community feel differently about cultural memories. One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that migrants do tend to segregate themselves within their culture, as loss and memory are the most powerful feelings that a refugee can have and it is apparent that people from outside of these communities are not always able to relate. This can be a common misconception of diaspora communities and is one of the reasons why they can be disconnected from new experiences around them. This has suggested that older generations of diaspora are usually the ones who find it harder to integrate.

The second major finding was that second generations of diaspora who may have been born away from the homeland or who had migrated at a very early age find it easier to establish themselves within the new communities. The study has shown that these generations are "stuck" within two cultures. The use of film is a way of older generations to help their children identify with where they originally came from. This is evident with my own practice as my interpretation of the film is different to that of my father's and even more so in the experiences of my younger siblings.

As I have gotten older, I have been able to understand more about why my parents are so intent on making sure we are able to identify with the people in our culture and homeland. Older generations do not want the younger generations to forget about their homeland. I have found that this is because of the strong emotions relating to memory and loss.

Jay Prosser created a memoir of his grandfather for his mother using music, another form of sensory tool. The memoir was created. The reason why this piece of research is important is because it deals with the subject of loss. Kazeckiet al.'s (2013) findings of the diasporic experience suggest that the focus is also heightened around the topic of pain and trauma, which are common factors in a generalised study of loss. Taken together, these findings confirm that of my own, the films in my practice are important because they represent the loss felt by my family. It is important that diaspora communities hold onto their cultural heritage.

Bibliography

act-formance. (2017). act-formance. Retrieved from
<https://actformance.wixsite.com/act-formance>

Alketa Xhafa Mripa: *Refugees Welcome. Who Are We? Project*. Retrieved
from <https://www.whoareweproject.com/alketa-xhafa-mripa-refugees-welcome/>

Baronian, M., Besser, S., & Jansen, Y. (2007). *Diaspora and memory*. Amsterdam:
Rodopi.

Cross, K., & Peck, J. (2010). Editorial: Special Issue on Photography, Archive and
Memory. *Photographies*, 3(2), 127-138. doi: 10.1080/17540763.2010.499631

Dixon, S., & Smith, B. (2015). *Digital performance*. Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT
Press.

Durrant, S., & Lord, C. (2007). *Essays in migratory aesthetics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Elwes, C. (2015). *Installation and the moving image*. New York: Columbia University
Press.

Gentiana Braha. (2017). Gentiana Braha. Retrieved from
<http://gentianabrahaart.wixsite.com/gentianabraha>

Gemignani, M. (2011). The Past if Past: The Use of Memories and Self-Healing Narratives in Refugees from the Former Yugoslavia. *Journal Of Refugee Studies*, 24(1), 132-156. doi: 10.1093/jrs/feq050

Hall, S., & Du Gay, P. (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Hillebrand, C. (2015) Shota. Retrieved from <https://www.albanian-folklore.com/dances/articles/shota.html>

Hirsch, M., & Miller, N. (2011). *Rites of return*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kazecki, J., Ritzenhoff, K., & Miller, C. (2013). *Border visions*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Khoury, M. (2010). Memory and the Reconciliation of Diasporas: Cinematic Trace of Arab National Identity in the Film Forget Baghdad. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 30(1), 85-91. Duke University Press.

Saleh, T. (Director). (1992). *Al Makhdu'un* (The Dupes) [Film]. Arab political cinema.

Vice (2013 Jan 15). *Designing Video Installations with Douglas Gordon*. (Video file). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3mm-LNkmXU>

Westgeest, H. (2016). *Video art theory: a comparative approach*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Zhang, B. (2000). Identity in Diaspora and Diaspora in Writing: The poetics of cultural transrelation. *Journal Of Intercultural Studies*, 21(2), 125-142. doi: 10.1080/713678940

Appendix A



Figure A.1 The viewing of *Veq nje moment*, a film I created for the Act-Formance event.

Appendix B



Figure B.1 Interviewing Alketa Xhafa Mripa at Tate Modern .

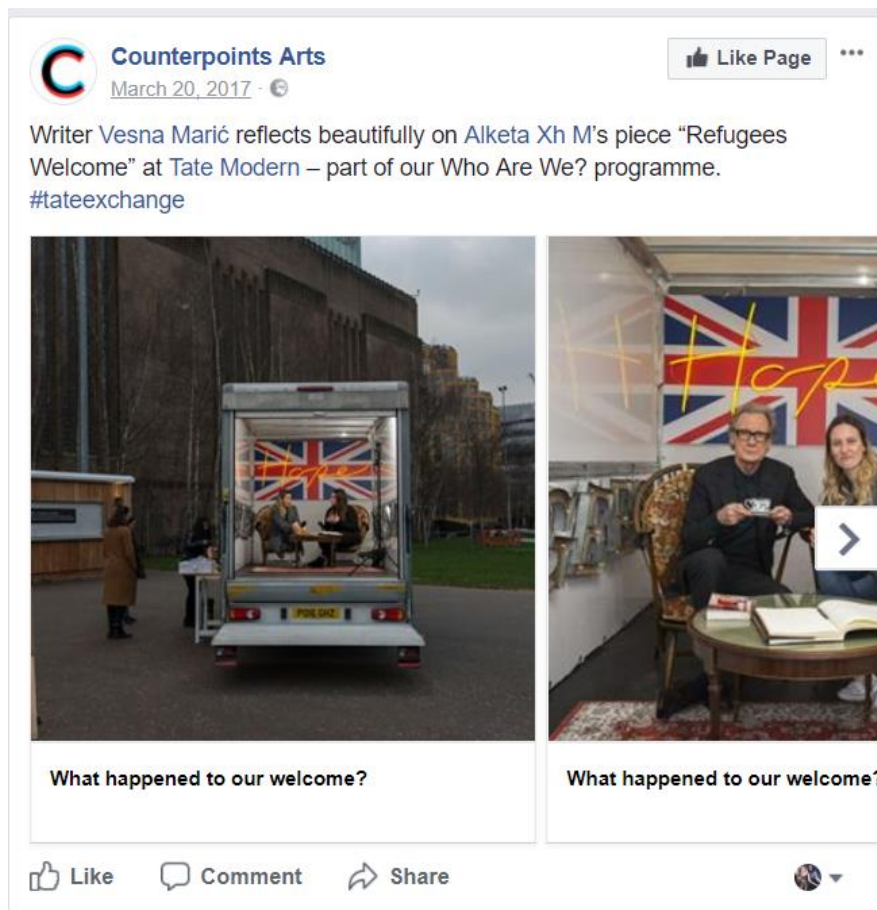


Figure B.2 An article by Counterpoints Arts featuring Alketa Xhafa Mripa's installation and images of myself and Bill Nighy on our visit.

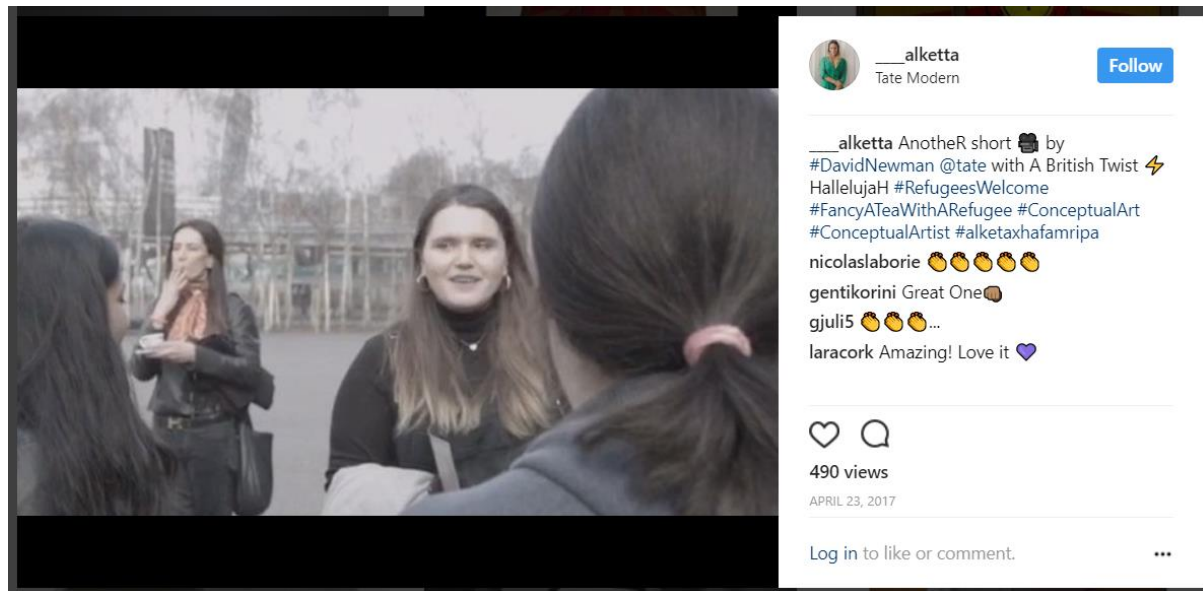


Figure B.3 A short film by David Newman featuring an interview in which I took part.

Figure B.4 Voice memo recording of Alketa Xhafa Mripa interview located within the supporting hard drive.

Appendix C

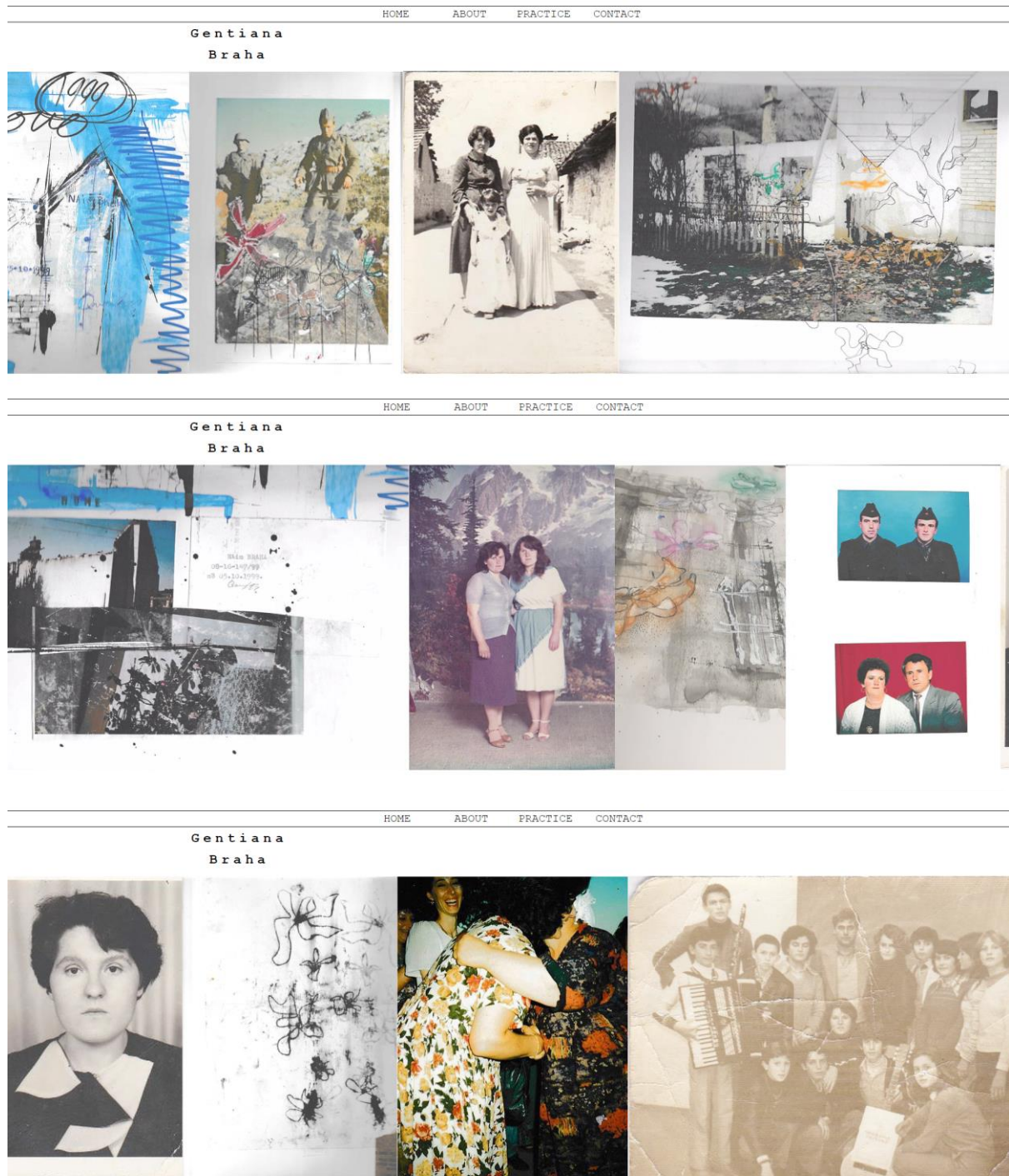


Figure C.1 A series of screen grabs of the dedicated website for my practice.



Figure C.2 Documentation of the video installation