

**TRANSLATING *HIRAETH*, PERFORMING
ADOPTION:**

ART AS MEDIATION AND FORM OF
CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Performance Studies as a site of resistance bridges the gap between theory and practice. As an ‘inter-discipline’, Performance Studies occupies an ideal borderline location from which to stress the crucial mediatory power of creative production, as well as providing a critical space for interrogating the *liminal* subject positioning of adoption as framed under Western legislation. This autoethnographic performance into adoption (re)stor(y)ing is an arts-based inquiry generated through my praxis and the ‘particular’ life experience of excavating the silences and social norms within a ‘closed’, cross-cultural, adoption. As a form of knowledge production, this experiential process of meaning-making is integral to my arts-practice and research. This body of work challenges the limitations of linear thesis writing and the more traditional tenets of legitimate academic inquiry, as espoused by Enlightenment thinking. In this project, I draw together issues of agency and (il)legitimacy within adoption as an institutionalised social practice, with issues of performative and (il)legitimate modes of knowledge production within academic hierarchies of literacy. Following a hermeneutic spiral, a mediated body of research is substantially represented through the multimedia Installation, *Translating Hiraeth* (pronounced ‘hirr-eye-th’). Employing a fragmented narrative structure and a form of ‘critical nostalgia’, *Translating Hiraeth* examines this in-between space called ‘adoption’. Juxtaposed with the (re)stor(y)ing project, which makes visible the contingent, embodied processes of understanding over time, is a broad socio-political overview of adoption. Here, I take into account political and legislative change leading to recent paradigm shifts in adoption thinking including new international agreements and the effects of globalisation. These changes open up the past within an ever-changing present. The creative project offers an emotional and performative site exposing the dialogic nature of translating the ‘self’ across families, cultures, places and pasts, whilst also questioning contemporary notions of identity and (be)longing. It is my intention that *Translating Hiraeth Performing Adoption* enacts autoethnographic praxis as a generative force of expression, as social commentary and means of cultural production.

Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Translating <i>Hiraeth</i>, performing adoption	7
Finding a Form	8
1. Opening the Text	12
2. Autoethnographic Performance as Epistemological Practice	24
3. Adoption: A social institution on the move	98
4. Performing Adoption, translating the self: Art as a form of mediation	156
5. Point of Departure	199
Addendum: Interactions Reflections Innovations	206
Appendix	245
Bibliography	251

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Translating *Hiraeth*, performing adoption

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The past-present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.¹

¹ Bhabha, H., K (1994). The Location of Culture. London and New York, Routledge. P. 7.

Finding a Form

Before negotiating the introductory chapter to this written dissertation, or dipping into ‘Point of Departure’, the final chapter, I would like to invite the reader to experience the creative component of this project.

*Translating Hiraeth*² (pronounced ‘hirr-eye-th’) is a multi-screen, ‘narrative Installation’, presented on four DVDs. As a heteroglossic collage, the piece interrogates the complexities of ‘closed adoption’ over time. This work negotiates the layered, yet fragmented story of tracing and reconnecting with my birthmother in Llanelli, South Wales and then my birthfather’s family in North Wales – a family who are ‘Welsh speakers’, members of Plaid Cymru, and who for generations have worked on the Penhryn slate quarries near Bethesda.³

This project extends my honours work, *Loss Adoption and Desire*, and has continued the hermeneutic process of meaning making whereby a mediated ‘body’ of research is represented here in the form of a forty five minute multimedia production piece.⁴ This work is augmented by the accompanying written dissertation. As a narrative piece, the Installation is resistant to ‘closure’

² According to ‘Antiquae Linguae Britannicae Thesaurus’, Welsh-English Dictionary, edited by Thomas Richards in 1753, ‘hiraeth’ means, an earnest desire or longing, the grief one takes after parting with friends, the eager desire wherewith we desire or expect any thing. In ‘Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru’ (University of Wales Dictionary) published in 1979, ‘hiraeth’ means grief or sadness after the lost or departed, longing, yearning, nostalgia, wistfulness, homesickness, earnest desire, *for what might have been*. The additional translation in italics was provided by Professor John Frodsham, in 2003.

³ On August 5, 1925 at Pwllheli, Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru (the National Party of Wales) was founded. This was a coming together of Byddin Ymreolwyr Cymru (the Army of Welsh Home Rulers) and Y Mudiad Cymreig (The Welsh Movement) which centred on the Welsh language and literary revival. For further reading see, Davis, J. (1993). *A History of Wales*. London, Penguin Books. p.547.

⁴ The written component of my Honours thesis, *Loss Adoption and Desire*, has been included with this submission, on a CD, for reference purposes.

and raises further questions about the broader processes of inquiry concerning notions of family, identity, place and (be)longing.

Translating Hiraeth is ‘open’, yet a timed event. Track 1 is a looped Pathe News clip edited in slow motion, without sound, and shown on a monitor positioned to the front right of the space. This archival footage acts as a repetitive, contextual key. Recorded in 1948, this piece of ‘film’ promotes the work of the British National Adoption Society, the organization through which I was adopted.⁵

The three large projections, shown on tracks 2, 3 and 4, move fragments of story rhythmically back and forth, and around the space. The image resonance fades in and out between screens inviting those within the space to physically turn their bodies as they engage with the work. It is important to me that in a phenomenological sense, both the space and story are felt across degrees of transition. The sound track is integral to the work. Four speakers provide quadraphonic sound and a slow sub-sonic pulse created by plucking an African hand piano adds a low, vibrational, physical element within the Installation space which can be felt through the body. Repetition of the 23rd Psalm, in Welsh, weaves underneath the narrative.

Stories take time. The duration and pace of the work is relative to this reflexive process. Through Installation, I want to conflate the idea of experiencing a particular physical space/place, with the more empathetic notion of identification when we metaphorically enter the emotional spaces of particular stories. As a ‘visitor’ positioned within a work, we too are always also in translation. Stories invoke memory and invite personal reflection, but the meanings within each reading can never be fixed. Through the work, I use the notion of *hiraeth* as a

⁵ I was adopted through the Knightsbridge branch of the National Adoption Society in London in 1952. When researching at the British Film Institute for archival footage on Llanelli, in South Wales, I serendipitously found a record of this piece of film.

form of ‘critical nostalgia’ - as a way of (re)membering forward.⁶ Here, *translation* can be seen as a proximal act of recovery, from within an always transient present.

Installation of Translating Hiraeth

I have included the exhibition format of *Translating Hiraeth* on the four separate DVDs for those readers who would like to experience the full Installation as originally intended. DVD 1, the looped Pathe News clip, is shown on a monitor to the right of the centre screen. Tracks 2, 3 and 4 are played on three separate DVD players, and started simultaneously. Track 2 should be projected centre front, and tracks 3 and 4 to either side respectively. DVD 2 carries the sound track. After a 30 second period of darkness, the sound track begins. This is followed by a slowly emerging image on the centre screen. The imagery on tracks 3 and 4 is gradually incorporated into the piece. For the purpose of this submission, I have also included a composite edit on one track, as a single DVD. This is a format produced specifically for projection in lecture situations, or where technology is limited. In this scenario DVD 1, the Pathe News clip, is shown on a smaller monitor to the right of the main projection. I have also included an additional four track ‘window’ edit on a single DVD to show how, in the full Installation, a change in resonance between the three main screens moves the story around the space. The continuous Pathe loop is the fourth window shown below.

Full Technical Requirements

- 3 x data projectors
- 3 x identical DVD players. (This is so that they can be started simultaneously)
- 3 x large screens or white walls. (Preferably, one on each side wall and one to the front of room, which is track 2)

⁶ I expand on this term in Chapter 4.

- 1 x large TV monitor on stand, or small screen (at corner right front) for track 1.
- 1 x DVD player for Pathe loop (in slow motion and without sound).
- 4 x speakers (Sound is in double stereo)
- 1 x sub woofer with own amp
- 1 x amp
- 1 x small mixer