

From prehistory to modern day, language has defined and distinguished one group of people from another. According to the Bible, God created multiple languages and scattered them throughout the world so that no one would be able to understand one another.¹ Whatever happened to the people that knew more than one language?

My thesis project is a culmination of my inner struggles being raised within a bicultural and bilingual household. It is a reflection of the various emotional and conflicting cultural expectations that I have experienced over the course of the year and my life. Growing up biracial, my life has consisted of my need to feel that I “belonged” somewhere, whether it be via ethnicity, physical appearance, or sheer geographical location. Linda Martin Alcoff writes that “in cultures defined by racialized identities, infected with the illusion of purity, and divided by racial hierarchies, mixed white/nonwhite person face an irresolvable status ambiguity” (Alcoff, 2005).

My installation is based on a sense of duality, two drastically different cultures, my see-sawing streams of consciousness from one language to another, and my desire to visually represent my confusion and frustrations. One question that has arisen is, “Does my work pertain to a cultural or national

¹ “And the LORD said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.” (Genesis 11:6-8)

identity?” Although I feel that this is a question that has yet to be answered, I also feel that in creating this project, I have created my own national identity which combines America and Japan.

The title of my installation, *2-Bi*, is a play on language. It can be read as “Two-Bi,” or in Japanese, “Ni-Bi” (2 is *Ni* in Japanese and bi can be read as *bai* [phonetic Japanese spelling] which means “twice”). Ni-bai means “times two” or “two times.” In English, bi is understood as two. Considering my thesis and my project revolve around the idea of “duality,” I thought that the title would be appropriate for the installation. In doing this, the title mirrors and reflects on the larger project.

Over the course of the year, my inspirations and influences have changed. Some days I am inspired by a particular emotional or mental state, while on others I am easily influenced by the change in weather or my interactions with certain people. Inspirations for this installation project include my own personal experiences with being bilingual as well as Japanese pop-culture. Artists like Ann Hamilton, Jenny Holzer and Mount Holyoke alum Ayumi Horie also inspire my work. I want to make a bold statement about being bilingual, while also making it known that I am influenced by a bicultural environment. I was inspired by Ann Hamilton’s recurring usage of text and sound which then became elements that I wanted to use in my installation.

I believe that installations can be powerful when multiple senses are stimulated and engaged simultaneously. For example, in Jenny Holzer's work, her creative and provocative "truisms" inspired me to look for text that I had a strong emotional connection with. At the same time, I wanted to use text that the audience would be able to identify as being meaningful and significant in whatever context that they chose. Holzer's use of light projections was also inspirational in my creative process. Her utilization of modern technology makes her thought-provoking words powerful. This was something that I wanted to draw upon in my own work.

My phone conversation with Ayumi Horie (MHC class of '91) was a pivotal point in my development and conceptual process. While researching her work, I noticed parallels in both of our lives. Also half Japanese, she grew up in a small town in Maine. In her biography, she recalls how it was unusual to see anybody half Japanese. I could relate to this recollection because my mother was born and raised in a small town in Maine. When my mother and I visited our relatives in the summer, I noticed the lack of Asian, much less half Japanese people in a state where the population is predominantly French Canadian and Anglo Saxon. Ayumi's statement that "this biracial and bicultural duality has continued to inform my identity and my work" was one that I immediately identified with and realized that I wanted to pursue in my own way. Despite warnings that my subject matter seemed more appropriate for graduate students, I

decided to rise up to the challenge as best as I could. Because the subject matter represented my whole life thus far, I felt that it would be only appropriate for me to continue with it.

I can recall countless times when people would discuss how fortunate and blessed I was to be bilingual. While this can be true at times, this so-called blessing can also be a curse. How does one find her place in the world when she is often told that she is not “Japanese enough” or not “American enough?” I find that some people get uncomfortable when you are neither one thing nor another. The “in-betweenness” scares some people and changes their view of you. While I do feel fortunate to be able to speak two languages, I also feel that there is a bigger issue of conflicting cultures that intrudes upon my everyday life and well-being. I often feel that there is a double-standard when you are raised with parents from different cultural backgrounds. One thing is expected of me from one parent while the totally opposite is expected of me from the other parent. This eventually takes an emotional toll on me. In my installation, I am conveying that burden.

My thesis installation has subtle humorous and mischievous undertones. First of all, the large text on the walls is from a popular Japanese song. Growing up, “Hate Tell a Lie” by Tomomi Kahara was, and still is, one of the few Japanese songs that I could sing perfectly in karaoke. I never realized how sad and angry the actual lyrics were until I started working on this project. The angst-ridden

words were perfect for my project. I find it humorous that I used a Japanese pop song to portray a serious issue of identity crisis and a sense of belonging. This can be seen as an attempt to make light of a heavy ongoing situation. As for being mischievous, I decided to play with and flip the orientation of the wall texts. Typically, Japanese text reads vertically from right to left and English reads horizontally from left to right. I decided to use the Japanese format for my English text and use the English format for my Japanese text. Since I was raised seeing both orientations and languages, the flipping of the text does not faze me. But since the average American is not use to seeing English text written in a vertical format, I hope that the audience's initial reaction will be one of confusion and intrigue.

I want to spark the public's interest and curiosity by allowing them a glimpse into the frustrating and complex mind of a bilingual individual. At the same time I want them to see how harmoniously unconscious I am of the idea of "two." I want to display the multiple streams of my consciousness flowing from one wall to the other. Each wall represents a language and culture. The interlocking structure of languages in the middle represents an interweaving medium of the two. Upon viewing the installation, one can see the interchangeability of my thoughts as they travel randomly from one language to the next. There is no thought involved in my linguistic journey between English and Japanese. Both languages are "programmed" into my brain which allows me

to identify each language as its own. For example, a window is a window. A *mado* (Japanese word for window) is a *mado*. It does not register in my head that a window is a *mado* and vice versa. The languages are separate and seen as having their own entity and persona.

While each wall text appears to be distinctly “Japanese” and distinctly “English,” I have added a linguistic twist that can only be recognized by a Japanese speaker. For the Japanese text I used a version of Japanese (*katakana*) that is strictly reserved for writing foreign words. When read, the phonetic Japanese approximates English. To an American person with no Japanese background the word “フレンズ” means nothing. To a Japanese speaker, the word would read as “Foo-Re-N-Zoo” which phonetically translates to the English word “friends.” I used this throughout the Japanese text as I phonetically translated the English text using *katakana*!.

My technical processes resemble an element of my subject matter, duality. The material is intentionally minimal and simple. In each aspect of the installation, there is the idea of “two;” Japanese and English, wood and words, ribbon and my stream of consciousness, transparent tape and my view on life, and audio versus light projection. The colors are basic and standard; black, white, and beige. Despite my love of bright colors, I made the conscious decision to strictly limit the palette in order to avoid any possible color associations with my work.

My developmental and creative process took a year to realize. After numerous failed attempts at conveying my frustrations, I came to the conclusion that the overriding theme was quite simple: language. Language can be both a barrier and a bridge. In order to show this concept, I use my streams of consciousness to bridge both of the languages, while at the same time creating a dialogue between the ribbons and wood. By interlacing the ribbons within the wooden structure, an interruption of my streams of consciousness is created, which can be seen as a barrier. The juxtaposition of the sharp and angular edges of the wooden panels creates an esthetic contrast with the free-flowing fluidity of the ribbon and tape. The written text on the ribbon and tape are the result of a thirty minute session of unconscious writing. When read, the viewer may see a sentence about muffins but then the next sentence will pertain to life's stresses.

There is no rhyme or reason to my streams of consciousness, and my aim was to visualize to the viewer how easily my mind switches from English to Japanese and back to English again. The bold and heavy English wall text also contrasts with the quick and sinuous Japanese text. The alignment of the boards are strategically placed to show initial separation that "fuses" together as both languages weave in and out to create an orderly yet disorderly confusion. The straight-laced regimentation of the mounted boards mirrors my ingrained Japanese habits of perfection, discipline, and organization.

On a purely sensory level, light projections engage a different visual experience than bold text. The two light projections project the English alphabet and the Japanese alphabet, the foundations of the two languages. I knew it would be appropriate to have the basic component of a language displayed within close proximity to a larger and in-depth linguistic visual conversation. The subtle humor can be identified again. Audio recordings of my voice speaking in both English and Japanese create an all-encompassing sensory environment within the space. The off-recording of the English perplexes viewers and invites them to listen closer in order to figure out what is being said. Visual engagement versus audio engagement invites the viewer to spend more time analyzing the installation. The tensions created throughout the work resemble the inner turmoil experienced in my life.

Upon analyzing and critiquing my work, I noticed that there might be some questions about the layout. As discussed earlier, the layout is meant to represent the bilingual brain. I am aware that the fusion of the two languages may cause some visual confusion but that is tension that I want to utilize and embrace. The different types of wood create subtle color contrasts which then create a sense of depth within the structure. The undulating ribbon and tape add contrast to the stiff wooden boards. The weaving of the ribbons within the centralized wooden structure was something that I struggled with but ultimately decided to keep. Upon viewing the installation, I realize that the light projections are not as

bold as I had expected them to be. While attempting to camouflage the sound box on the floor, I struggled with the fact that it might be a distraction to the viewer. Despite this concern, I knew that I had to be flexible and accommodating with the space and the problems that the technical aspects of my installation might provide. Knowing all of the potential possibilities for various layouts of my installation, I feel that this is just the first step towards fully understanding and embracing my own bicultural background.

Conflicting identities often lead to confusion and frustration. While being outwardly beneficial to most people, there is an inner turmoil that is hidden from public view. This installation is meant to show the viewer my personal turmoil. Being aware that this theme will recur in my future work, I hope that with each piece I create, I come closer to accepting and discovering how I fit into the world around me, while at the same time learning where to find a happy medium between the two cultures.

Bibliography

Alcoff, Linda Martin. "On Being Mixed." Visible Identities. Oxford UP, 2005.
265.

Ayumi Horie. 12 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.ayumihorie.com>>.