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Abstract:

With this piece, we were asked to center our research around a guiding question that related space/place to a topic one was a stakeholder in. Knowing this, I chose to join conversation surrounding refugee experiences. In context of other works of the same study, I see my piece more as a recentering. I aim to reframe dialogue surrounding these struggles in ways that are more humanizing, more sympathetic, and more relatable. Through translating these relevant conversations into a more universal, visual form of communication, I then hope to transcend language barriers that make conversations like these less accessible.



Homing cropped view



Homing full view

Reflecting on *Homing*

Beginning this exploration of space and place, I was inspired first by excerpts from Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. Broadly in this work, Ahmed seeks to discover the "orientation" within "sexual orientation"—relating it to the way our bodies orient themselves in relation to the space around them. In response to questioning what happens when bodies must move within "spaces they were not intended to inhabit," she answers that "it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend to their shape. Having arrived, such bodies in turn might acquire new shapes" (Ahmed 62). By describing the body in this way, she connects the physical body to the physical space it exists in. She implies that bodies are molded in specific ways and that new spaces can create newly-shapen bodies. Taking these ideas from Ahmed into my reading of Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, I evaluated the way Yang spoke of her family's forced relocation in an entirely different way. I found similarities between Yang's family's discomfort and lifestyle changes with Ahmed's ideas around reshaping bodies.

This shift in perspective—that came from viewing Yang through the lens of Ahmed—inspired me to reevaluate the way I frame my own experiences. Being descendants of refugees of the same war as Yang, I believed that we would be alike in many ways. But as I really started to dive into it, I began to see that most of our similarities lied underneath our differences. Starting with my childhood, I remember how I gradually started piecing my family history together. How, just as I began to grasp that, I had to similarly piece together how that ancestry altered my reality in ways my peers would never experience. My family's different from my neighbors'. Those differences mean something in this world. Being young and unable to fully grasp the weight of those differences myself, I began to pick up on the ways my parents

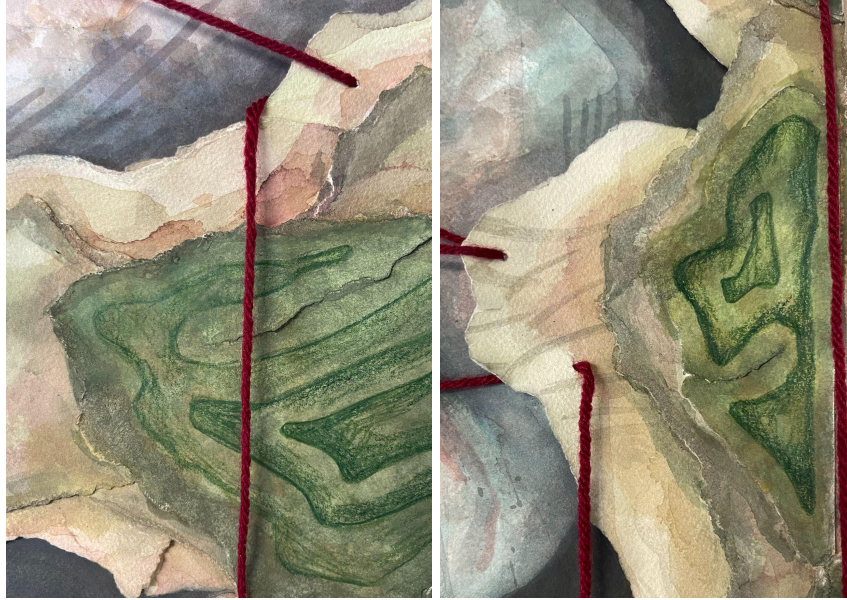
navigated these topics. My father—born and raised back there—seemed to love Vietnam. He would blast the music, sing the songs, and attend the festivals. But, my mom—born, but not raised—was the opposite. She wouldn't say a thing while he would talk about our family history for hours. He would leave for months to go visit the homeland while she would just berate him for it through the phone. They were different. Their experiences were different. The spaces they inhabited, the spaces before—that set precedent for how they move in the spaces they continued to inhabit—were all different.

When I was younger, I would wonder what made my dad leave so much. But, as I grew older, I came to understand him. I often find myself yearning for a homeland I've never even known. I wonder to myself: What am I missing? I was always immersed in Vietnamese culture growing up, but as I got older and my parents got busier, I began losing these parts of myself. Where does that place me? What shape does that leave my body? Living with the understanding that you do not possess the qualities the people and the culture reflect around you is already alienating. But, coming into an understanding that you are also gradually losing the connection to the only other place in the world where you and your family are orientated is even more alienating. After all this, what still has me yearning for a place in my family's old homeland?

And so, I started this project with a leading question: How does the physical separation from home impact the refugee and their continued lineage as they attempt to resettle? In my attempt to pinpoint the individual concepts within this question, I found the term 'refugee' to be very broad. Taking a look at Nasia Anam's "Encampment as Colonization: Theorizing the Representations of Refugee Spaces," I realized that the experiences of present day refugees she described were very different to that of my Vietnam War era family. She notes how, unique to the struggle of the twenty-first century refugee, the "minoritization and excision is compounded by

the interruption of the very possibility of movement” (Anam). In exposing the variation time creates in these refugees’ experiences, she leads one to question how political stances—often those of “first world countries” like America—dictate these experiences. These countries decide who they allow to cross their borders. If the act of taking in these refugees does not align with their current political values and motivations, the refugee is left indefinitely in transitory space. Given this new context, I did notice that much of my research did skew towards experiences that align most with that of Vietnam War refugees as it relates most to the experiences of my family. Although this difference in experience can be alienating in parts of my piece, I feel like dialogue with those of varying experiences is beneficial nonetheless.

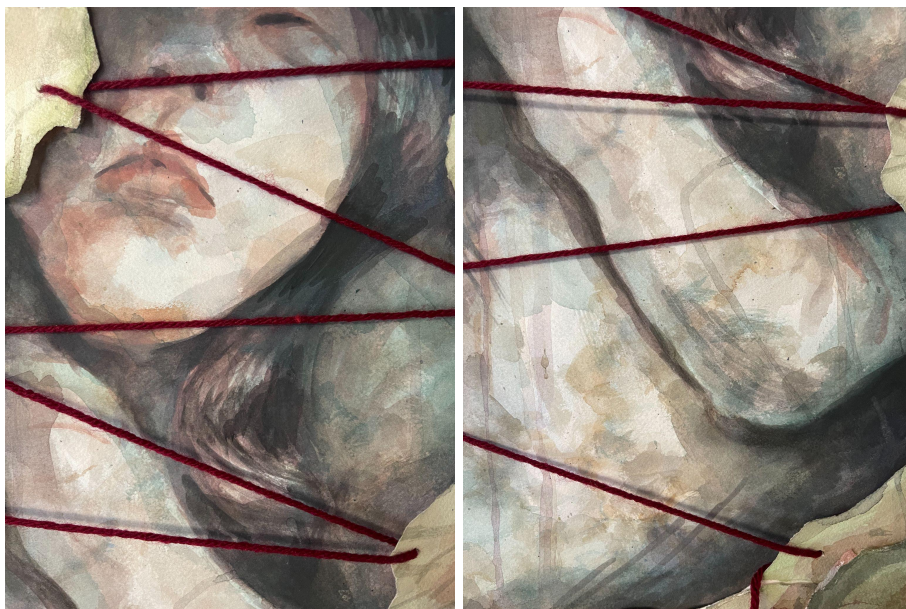
So, moving towards the creation of my actual project, I chose to paint as my main body of text for a couple of reasons. I wanted something that could lean into the more emotional facets of my research and, more importantly, be accessible to my intended audience. I came to painting naturally as it is obviously expressive and its visual nature is inherently more accessible to any non-English-speaking members of my audience than any written medium could be. In choosing this, I understood that I had to find some way to represent my research on my paper. So, after some brainstorming, I found I had the best results when connecting the two through visual motifs and symbolism. This manifested in my painting’s three main visual components—the land, the water, and the yarn.



Close ups of “The Land”

Backing up the conceptualization of the land, I drew from Kao Kalia Yang’s family memoir. Common in Yang’s memoir was the theme of significant loss. As she details her father’s experience leaving the mountain his father was buried in, she writes, “that if he closes his eyes, he can see that imprint of the mountain on his lids” (Yang 12). In this, we are reminded of the significance of place and its connection back to the body. In their forced departure from their homelands, these refugees lose so much more than just the land. They lose their ability to inhabit the same grounds as their ancestors—their family. This physical separation from their roots takes a toll on their bodies. Just as space itself can leave imprints on those who inhabit it, the loss of space—especially ones so significant—can leave scars just as well. As they move to reconstruct their lives in new lands, this loss of culture continues. As Yang describes, “She saw how the children, born in America, lived life like Americans. She saw the diminishing memories of her mother and father on the hard road to remembering the strings of words and the new food in America” (Yang 4). Reading this through the perspective of Ahmed, we can see the ways that the molds of the body influence their experiences. In the parents, whose bodies are already molded

around their homeland, readjustment is laborious. They must lose the molds of their past in order to move on with life in this new future. On the other hand, the children's bodies are fresh. Born in America, they find it easier to fit in with the Americans. However, still being children of refugees, the past still lives within their bodies. Even though it is easier to mold their shapes, even Yang notes that they can only go as far as living "like Americans." With this all in mind, I began creating the land by collaging together three distinct layers of paper with varying degrees of color. The closer the sheet was to the bottom of the page, the more faded the color was. This process of washing out came to signify the loss that comes with leaving one's homeland. Meanwhile, the process of layering the vibrant colors on the top sheets came to represent the new land and culture they must now readjust their bodies to.



Close ups of "The Water"

Creating the space in between the land, I took ideas from Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Wesley and Wong's "Donut Time Refugee Place-Making in 24/7 Afterwar," and Antoniak's "Taking Root in Floating Cities—Space, Environment, and Immigrant Identity in Kerri Sakamoto's Floating City." Through these

resources, I came to the understanding that the way the refugee exists is different to other, non-refugees. They exist in-between cultures and as Anzaldua puts it in the context of *la mestiza*, this struggle results in “a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (Anzaldua 78). Recontextualizing this to aid my understanding of the refugee specifically, I theorized that perhaps in their case it’s more of inner struggle between who they were in their homeland and who they are as they assimilate to their new country. This fragmented being is reflected similarly in Wesley and Wong’s examination of Cambodian-owned donut shop Duffin’s. They write that “Duffin’s is temporally and spatially “disjointed” from the rest of Vancouver” (Wesley and Wong). As many times space exists as a reflection of its inhabitants, this outside of space and time experience may connect back to the split experience of the refugee. This narrative is supported by Avtar Brah as she writes that “feelings of displacement and dislocation are particularly strong among first generation immigrants, as they are forced to assimilate and learn how to function in new economic, political, social, and cultural, realities” (qtd in Antoniak). Combining these sources, we can begin to understand how trauma is reproduced as they move within their new homeland. As we’ve established, bodies carry the memories of their past. The difference between who they were in their homeland and who they must now be causes a rift in their identity. This feeling—this disjointment—replicates itself in their spaces. The spaces they create for themselves may not feel like home because they do not feel at home. And as space influences the body, this ensures that this disjointment continues to cycle through their lifetime. Without feeling at home, they continue to live in this transitory space and place. They await feelings of home in a similar way to the way they awaited their own arrival into this new country. Understanding that the refugee exists in this inbetween guided my choice to position the space in

between the land to be both body and water. It is to represent the physical transitory space they inhabit in their journey to their new home and their continual existence as a transitory being.



Close ups of “The Yarn”

In my decision to use the yarn, I grounded most of its application in its ability to tie things together. Looking back at Anzaldua’s *mestiza*, she writes about how in response to cultural contradictions, “Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (Anzaldua 79). Applying this to the refugee, I find that they go through a similar process. They stitch themselves back together and find a way to exist in between cultures. They create spaces for themselves—spaces where they can exist more comfortably and express themselves freely. With this in mind, I found the yarn’s domestic connotations fitting. As Canafe writes in “To feel at home abroad or no place like home: meanings of displacement in refugee studies,” home can be “a psychological space of safety and retreat from a receiving society that is largely hostile due to xenophobic trends and anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments.” As many of these safe spaces are rooted in the home, as Canafe points out, the home becomes crucial in the reproduction of culture. With this sense of safety, they can work to reestablish their

sense of belonging and sense of self. In the home—through the domestic—they are able to find grounding in foreign land. Continuing into the process of stitching, I came to the decision to let the ends of the yarn hang down from the piece. I found this imagery to be reminiscent of blood dripping as, in the beginning, I chose to stitch with red yarn. Although not intentional, this calls upon blood's associations with family and violence alike. Blood relation ties the refugee back to their homeland, their family, and their continued lineage. Simultaneously, blood recalls the violence that many have had to endure—both physically and mentally—to even be where they are now in the first place.

Reflecting on *Homing* as a whole project, I find that the process was very enlightening. Navigating these experiences through these different lenses allowed me to process feelings that I couldn't quite name on my own. *Homing* as the title is an expression of my own continuous desire to find home in this land. I turn home into action. It expresses my continual want to find grounding, to find place, to find comfort, to find connection. In this, I hope that my piece creates a kind of safe space—akin to that of a home—that will similarly remediate some of the rifts that come with this kind of history. On a larger scale, I hope to connect with fellow refugees and children of refugees through this project in order to promote a better understanding of ourselves and our ancestors. Pinpointing this disconnect we feel, I hope to be working towards the creation of spaces that better cater the orientations of our bodies. Simultaneously, I hope that through this dialogue, descendants of refugees are able to find a newfound appreciation for their family's endurance in the same way that I did through my research process.

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