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Finding My Feet: A Documentation of the Ambiguity of Cultural Displacement

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to describe my studio practice and expound on the ideas that inspire my projects. First, the thesis demonstrates the ambiguity that arises from a displacement of cultural context from being an international student in America. Then, it goes on to describe how themes of nostalgia and cultural identity are explored through individual projects. It investigates the decision-making process in terms of material and technique used for making the artwork. Finally, the thesis concludes with how the work has potential for existing in more than one narrative and lays a foundation for further investigation.

Finding My Feet:
A Documentation of the Ambiguity of Cultural Displacement

by

Aanchal Raisahib

B.F.A. Printmaking, Panjab University, 2013

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

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Hi, how are you?

Are they talking to me? Why would they ask me that?

Maybe I should have answered, oh no! they crossed the street...sigh...

Next time I will do better.

I struggled with short conversations during the first few weeks after I arrived in Ithaca from India in the summer of 2017. Downtown Ithaca is a happening place in comparison to the rest of the town. The evenings are lively as people take a stroll and check out the small businesses and galleries on the one street that is called “Ithaca Commons”. There is not much to do after you have visited all the gorgeous gorges. When I came to the US from India, my husband, Piyush, decided to rent an apartment in downtown Ithaca. Piyush had lived in Ithaca for two years, he knew Ithaca could be quiet and lonely and that living downtown might mitigate some of the quietness for me. Despite the buzz of downtown Ithaca, I preferred to spend my time at the apartment, diving deep into my sketchbook or talking to friends and family back home. I was twenty-five when I moved to Ithaca. Back in India, I was confident, I could make conversation and I had a good number of friends. In Ithaca, I tended to be reserved and introverted - I had never experienced so much change at once. Moving to the US felt as if my life had turned upside down. Things felt new, and I was unfamiliar with the social and cultural norms here.

My practice is inspired and fueled by the experience of being a foreigner in a new country and all the associated events. Homesickness, cultural identity, and nostalgia are some of the themes I work with. In ‘Dressing Objects: Addressing Our Longings’, Jerry Bleem writes, “*What we can smell and touch and taste is more undeniable or comforting-more real-than*

abstract thought . . . Each thing clothed, each ritual enacted, represents our desire to preserve meaning or create it, to express our longings or find them.” This quote meticulously expresses the artistic endeavors I undertake in my practice.

I carry the idea of "self-sustainability"¹ to my studio. I think of my practice as the creation of “functional” artworks, not functional in the typical sense of the word but functional in terms of the heart. For instance, they may fulfill a longing or enact my need to adapt. My practice is an extension of myself, and when I cannot control a situation, I bring it to the studio. The studio is an outlet for my experiences which form the bases of my work; I draw from personal experiences to find the inspiration to create. As an outsider, I am constantly navigating a fluid identity - sometimes I blend in with the American landscape and sometimes I exude my Indian identity. I do not compartmentalize myself into two halves- I grew up with an Indian sensibility therefore even the American identity is navigated through an Indian perspective.

Nostalgia, I do adore thee

Often, I find myself at a dead end where all I can do is be nostalgic for the past. At times like these, I use my practice as a coping mechanism to create objects that can ease the longing or help me indulge in it. David Berry in his book ‘On Nostalgia’ writes: *“Nostalgia can only be lived in or abandoned: it is yearning distilled to its essence, yearning not really for its own sake*

¹ Both my parents are creators in their own right. My mother paints as a hobby. She also had a knack for sewing. On her beloved ‘Singer’ sewing machine, she sewed everything from stuffed toys to dresses for me and my sister. My father is an engineer and ‘maker’, he has his own factory where he manufactures machine parts. Growing up, visiting his workshop felt like visiting wonderland. He would proudly show off the machine parts he built in there. “Look at how smooth the edge is on these parts; they are all sanded by hand.” As a child, I thought my father could make anything! I once told him I wanted a toy car and presented him with rough drawings of what this car would look like. A few days later, he came home with two brand new toy cars that he had made in his workshop. These cars were a much-refined version of my unfinished, childlike drawings. Growing up in this environment ingrained in me creativity, the limitless potential of ‘making’ and the value of ‘handmade’.

but because there is nothing else to be done."² The first time I experienced such debilitating longing was right after finishing my first semester of graduate school.

I started graduate school after spending a year acclimating to the United States and its culture, which was fascinating and intimidating at the same time. After fourteen eventful weeks of material and conceptual exploration, the first semester was done. I was excited for the winter, not because of the snow or the bone-chilling cold but because I was going to visit India! It had been six months since I last visited; I would get to experience the three Fs again, family, friends and food. I was excited and happy – everything will be familiar, I know the ways, I know the people. I reached New Delhi after a long and arduous journey from Ithaca. As I left the New Delhi airport, I heard the all too familiar noise of traffic, honking, and taxi drivers trying to coax you into riding with them.

These noises were subtle at first, I chuckled at the familiarity but then it got louder and irritating. *Why are the cars honking so much? Why are there so many people? Why are the cars driving so close to each other?* Sensory overload engulfed me; this is not what I expected. This was supposed to be a pleasant experience. Am I forgetting what it is like to live here? I was quiet on the five-hour ride back home, my senses overwhelmed and my brain trying to understand why the familiar was not as comforting as I expected it to be. Over the next two weeks I eased into the transition. I had not forgotten what India was like, I was just overwhelmed by the American sensibility.

In those two weeks I experienced my childhood home with a renewed love, and memorized every moment, every smell, and every sound. I built an archive of memories that

² Berry, David. *On Nostalgia*. Coach House Books, 2020.

would help me when I was away from these feelings. I was full to the brim with emotions, love and food! The Spring semester started exactly the day after I landed in America. The time difference between India and America is ten and a half hours. My body was confused – it had just gotten used to India time but now I had to abruptly adjust to Eastern Standard Time. It was not just the time difference that changed, I was suddenly pulled away from the familiarity of loved ones. The realization of change was slow and painful. I had a tough time transitioning. Phone calls and skype calls created a mirage of connectivity. It was an illusion, like virtual reality, only good enough, but never enough. Honestly, all I wanted was to go back, not just in person but also in time. I wanted to relive those experiences, but I could not travel back again. I needed to find a cure for this longing. The only solution I could come up with was that if I cannot travel back home, I will bring home to me.

The approach I took in order to bring “Home” to America was inspired by the story of the conception of Ganesha, a Hindu god. In this story from the Hindu scriptures and mythology, Shiva and Parvati are the cosmic energies of the universe. Shiva is the male energy, and Parvati is the counter female energy. They reside at Mt. Kailash in the Himalayas. One day, goddess Parvati was preparing for a bath at home. She wanted privacy, so she asked Nandi, Shiva’s pet bull and loyal, to guard the door. Nandi obliged faithfully. When Shiva wanted to see Parvati, Nandi had to let him in, because he was loyal to Shiva first. Seeing this, Parvati got infuriated and decided she needed someone who is loyal to her, just like Nandi was to Shiva. So, she sculpted herself a son, using the turmeric she was going to bathe with, and breathed life into it.

The story does not end here, but this is all I needed to find my answer. What could I create that would fix my longing? After a lot of thinking and ideation I reached a humble response – the Peepal tree. Also known as *Ficus Religiosa*, the Peepal tree is only found in the

Indian subcontinent. It is the most revered tree in India because of its religious significance. This tree is usually found in the vicinity of temples and is surrounded by a pedestal as a sign of respect. It is believed that gods and goddesses reside in the tree therefore making it special. The Peepal tree is a symbol of faith to me, and I wanted to bring it to America.

Growing a tree would take years, plus the weather in America is not ideal for the Peepal tree. I needed to “create” a Peepal tree from scratch. Since the final form had to be a tree, it needed to be carved from wood. The best option was 2x6s, the kind you can easily find at home improvement stores. The next step was deciding the overall dimensions. Peepal trees have a long lifespan and a big physical presence, with trunks that can grow up to nine feet in diameter. They are considered “elders”, another reason for their reverence. Keeping these points in mind, I decided that the tree I was making needed to be larger than humans in scale because the longing I was trying to solve was greater than me. Finally, I decided that the diameter would be big enough for me to wrap my arms around and the total height would be nine feet, so the tree would stand taller than all human presence and, just like Parvati, I would have my own confidante and loyal.

Once the dimensions and material were decided, I started the laborious task of constructing then carving the tree. As an artist, I find process fascinating. The material transforms into the artwork through process and interaction, which in this case was wood carving. I got into a fixed routine of spending six to seven hours each day carving the tree. I see “process” as a conversation with the material. I try to coax the material into a certain form, the material responds by making me aware of its limitations. Through this collaboration, the artwork takes shape. The tree trunk was ready after forty-six days, but the artwork was not complete. The

trunk in itself was not enough, it needed to be more. It had to be a “space” where I could indulge in nostalgia.

Drawing from the visual of the Peepal tree, I made a pedestal for the tree that would also serve as a bench for viewers. I wanted to share the opportunity for reminiscence that I hoped the space would provide. Shelter is the feeling most prominently related to the idea of home. The space had to feel safe and welcoming. For this, I used sarees handed down to me by my

grandmother to create a canopy. The final installation *Almost Home* (Fig.1) is a monument to memory: a tree trunk, supported and grounded by a pedestal and engulfed in the shade of the sarees, softly bandaging the amputated tree trunk at the top. To create an atmosphere, I used an electric



Figure 1

fan that created a soft breeze like the one felt under the shade of a tree on a hot summer day. The whole installation is a shell of a memory, it gives the illusion of reality but is hollow on the inside. Through indulging in nostalgia, the space becomes *Almost Home*.

Giants of Memory

Objects from my personal life often pose questions and demand changes. For instance, some of the things that I brought with me from India do not have any use now, but I am

unwilling to let go of them. In these situations, I use my practice to assign them a new purpose that alters their form but preserves their essence. For example, my mother allowed me to take some of her bangles with me to America. However, because of the rough journey, some bangles broke into pieces. Refusing to let go of these broken pieces of glass, I transformed them into a kaleidoscope.

I am a collector of memory; I attach value to objects - unremarkable things as varied as keychains, buttons, and sometimes pieces of paper become objects of value because of the memories attached to them. In psychological terms these are called retrieval cues, i.e. “words or other stimuli that can help us retrieve information that is stored in our memories”³. I still have the boarding pass from my first flight to America; it marks the beginning of the most life changing experience I have ever had. But these are objects whose value is manageable. Heirlooms, on the other hand, are giants of memory, value, and personal history. I received one from my mother-in-law in the form of a saree⁴.

Because of the reverence it has earned as a garment, sarees are passed down through generations as heirlooms. Heirloom sarees are usually made of silk, which is a decadent but fragile fabric. It shows the traces of time and needs utmost care and attention. The saree that I received was gifted to my mother-in-law by her mother-in-law as a wedding gift. It is at least thirty years old, but despite its age it carries the distinctive opulence of a silk saree. While I was familiar with sarees, this particular saree felt different. The material, butter silk, felt smooth and comforting on my palms but the weight of the saree was immense. In addition to the physical

³ Retrieval Cues, Psych 256 Cognitive Psychology SP15, Penn State University

⁴ In India, every woman owns a covetable collection of sarees. These sarees are collected over time, gifted by relatives and some are handed down through generations as heirlooms. The saree is both a beautiful garment and a rite of passage into womanhood. A saree is one size fits all. It is six to nine yards in length and varies from four to five feet in width. To wear a saree, one basically drapes and tucks it in place with a blouse and a petticoat. Every region in India has its own distinctive style of fabric, pattern as well as wrapping. When I wear a saree, I feel elegant, powerful and fiercely feminine.

weight, it carried the psychological charge of the history and traditions that were woven into the fabric. It was overwhelming to have received an object of such value. While I celebrated receiving this saree, I was equally intimidated by its stature.

The fact that I am distanced from India, seven thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine miles away to be precise, exaggerates the value of this object. This saree represents the traditions I come from – which can be both humbling and daunting. Additionally, being that it came from my husband's mother and her mother-in-law, it was a stranger to me since I am not aware of the history and incidents it holds. I wanted to honor this heirloom, but I also wanted to make it familiar and add my own narrative to it. For weeks I lived with the saree in my studio, trying to find a solution to this conundrum.

During this time, I was given the opportunity to participate in the Haystack Mountain School of Craft Art Schools Collaborative. It is an intensive weekend of craft workshops in the beautiful state of Maine. One of the workshops I attended was for arm knitting. It is similar to regular knitting, the only difference being the knitting needles in this case are one's arms. After the workshop, I had a revelation: I could arm knit the heirloom saree! On the ten-hour drive back home, I was repeating to myself the thought of arm knitting the saree. I wanted to be sure of the outcome before I cut up the saree. *What if it does not work? What if I end up spoiling the saree?* I finally convinced myself that the saree needed to undergo this transformation. Arm-knitting would alter its form while preserving its essence.

I cut the saree into two-inch-thick strips. Because of the fragility of the silk, I glued the strips together end to end to make “yarn”. The process of arm knitting this saree felt like a heated debate. The technique of arm knitting relies on material that is somewhat elastic in nature. The saree I was working with had absolutely no elasticity. Because of the non-elastic nature of silk, the casts⁵ on my arms suffocated the blood supply to my hands. If I pulled too hard the fabric would tear like paper. While I tried to knit the saree into a new form, the saree resisted the transformation like a child throwing tantrums. After three difficult iterations, I was satisfied with the result, *Common Thread* (Fig.2). For the display, I suspended the saree high in the gallery, it was important that everybody - look up to it. Lighting the piece from different directions created seven shadows that look like they are bowing down to the saree. The shadows also



Figure 2

extend the saree beyond its physicality, as they take up optical space. The beautiful thing about the arm knitting is that it is held together by two knots, which is true to the essence of the saree – there are no stitches when it is worn; it can be undone and redone and has scope for future iterations. While I am not sure of where I will be in the next ten years, I am sure the saree has the capacity to adapt with me.

⁵All knitting begins with casts, which are loops on the knitting needles that form the first stitches. However, in arm knitting, one's arms become the knitting needles.

Remembering Not to Forget

Memory is foundational to my practice; it is where I find content. It is also something I rely upon to feel grounded and secure. As essential as memory is to us, it is also surprising how our brain stores and recalls memory. Our brain, just like a computer, gets rid of old memories, visuals, and sounds in order to stay efficient. An article in Verge magazine said, “the brain actually spends energy making us forget, by generating new neurons that ‘overwrite’ the old ones”.⁶ This realization brought on a state of panic for me. *Does this mean I will forget my childhood home? Will I not be able to recall what my room looks like? No, I need my brain to hold on to these visuals forever!* What followed this episode of flustered helplessness was a plan - a plan to “revise” the lived spaces of my childhood home. I would draw parts of the house from memory, trusting in the process of memory recall.

“Memory recall or retrieval is remembering the information or events that were previously encoded and stored in the brain. During memory recall, there is a replaying of neural activity that was originally generated in the brain during a specific event. This echoes the brain’s perception of that specific event which is not completely identical to that event. In this way, the brain remembers the information and details of the event.”⁷ This way, the memory and its accompanying incidents remain fresh. Over the course of time, I have learned to allow the “idea” to guide the material decisions of a project, focus on the “why”, and let it determine the “how”. For this project, the answer to the “why” was to remember these precious spaces and keep their

⁶ Angela Chen, June 21, 2017, Are you forgetful? That's just your brain erasing useless memories, The Verge

⁷ Memory Recall and Retrieval System, The Human Memory, URL: <https://human-memory.net/memory-recall-retrieval/>

memory alive. If I was to recall these visuals and draw them as is, I needed a technique that would allow me to illustrate minute details. I chose watercolors.

The first drawing I made in this series was of my room. I made this drawing in an eight by ten *Moleskine* sketchbook and despite painting the exact color of the wall there was something missing. The drawing did not do anything for me. It did not seem special or important. While the content was exactly what I wanted, the delivery mechanism failed me. So, I started all over again writing keywords that summed up the idea - lived space, architecture, visual, precious, memory. One word that stood out the most was “precious”. How do I convey that something is precious? What are some of the precious things I own? How do I store them?



Figure 3

My mind went to things like jewelry – small in size, precious metals, but it also went back in time to my box of memories, which held the most random objects, often broken pieces stored in a wooden box. What is common between these two things is size; they are both tiny but hold immense value. In order to make

these drawings special, I painted them inside a circle roughly two and a half inches in diameter (Fig.3, *House of Memories - Accent Wall*). Painting on such a small scale made every stroke important, a line could completely change the composition. Despite the small size, the drawings took longer to finish. The process was painstaking but equally rewarding. The slow process of painting these “peepholes” allowed me enough time to recreate, relive and remember my childhood home. The graphic of a two and a half inch illustration on an otherwise eight by ten inch blank page creates a sense of distance that is comparable to looking through a telescope. The telescope is a fitting

metaphor because it creates the illusion that what you are looking at is in reach whereas in reality it might be miles, if not light years, away. The title for this series of drawings comes from the Merle Haggard song, *House of Memories*.

*“My house of memories is all I own
I live in misery now that you're gone
A constant reminder of what used to be
Is torturing me in my house of memories”*

Tactile Memories

In the book, ‘On Nostalgia’, David Berry writes, “*Overindulging nostalgia is living in a dream world, albeit one that’s made more enticing and intoxicating because it comes with the sheen of historical plausibility.*”⁸ Physically interacting with objects from my homeland is a fulfilling way of accessing this historical plausibility. Through tactile interaction I am able to revisit the narratives attached to these objects. One such object is my mother's collection of bangles, which has been accumulating over time since my childhood. From a humble bangle stand to a cabinet dedicated just for them, my mother has cherished the collection and preserved it with utmost care and attention. The collection is a marker of family events, like the set I bought for my mother from my first paycheck, the set from our vacation in the pink city (Jaipur, India), or the one bought because the collection was missing a “purple” set. The mélange of colors always fascinated me as a child, and I hoped to one day don these bangles as a passage into womanhood.

⁸ Berry, David. *On Nostalgia*. Coach House Books, 2020.

These bangles have been passively present in my life and family and I see them as artifacts in their own right. Being given the responsibility of preserving this collection is an honor; wearing them is a passage to reactivating the stories they hold. Inspired by this idea, I created a video performance. The act of putting on the bangles was an indulgence in nostalgia. My treatment of the bangles is guided by my familiarity with them, but I could only fit a certain number of them on my arm. What started as an indulgence in memory led to frustration caused by the immobility of my arms and hands. The greater the number of bangles I wore, the more they weighed me down, turning my arms into robotic limbs, and limiting their function. The extravagance of the bangles felt more like a burden and less like contentment. While indulging in nostalgia may feel great, this video performance asks, "How much is too much?"

From a Bird's Eye View

In the summer of 2019, my parents visited me in Ithaca. It was surreal to have them here because they represent such a big part of my definition of home. At the same time, I wanted to share with them the home I created; the space that I curated and built for myself. I love my home in Ithaca, it is cozy and comfortable and most importantly, I miss it when I'm not there. Despite loving my abode in Ithaca, sometimes I long for my home in India. It is disconcerting to love two "homes" at once. Though I grew up in India, I became a grown up in Ithaca. For this reason, these two homes are important and indispensable. This desire for two homes creates tension. When I find myself favoring one over the other, I feel a sense of guilt. To compensate for this guilt, I dwell in a liminal space, one that is neither here nor there.

Being in this liminal space has allowed me to look back at my own country, India, with a critical lens. I would imagine that growing up as a female in India differs from growing up as a

female in America. When I make comparisons, I see a disparity between what is normal in the west but a taboo in India. For instance, gender reveal parties are a normal practice in the west whereas it is unheard of in India. Sex determination before birth was made illegal in India to curb female feticide. India is a country with a varied demographic and there are parts that are still trying to ensure that every young girl understands, and is able to access, her right to an education.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to be able to pursue a career in a field I love and to be supported by my family every step of the way, however I question the need to think of this as a privilege. In India, patriarchy is the norm, therefore, breaking away from it requires the realization and acknowledgement of its existence. From a liminal space I am able to scrutinize the Indian landscape and its underlying misogyny.

I am still forming my definition of the word “feminism” and what it means to me. However, upon reflection, I do recognize an underlying tone of feminism in my work. For instance, *Almost Home* is a monument to memory but in hindsight I see a completely different narrative. The gender binary has programmed me to attach stereotypes to each sex. Men are expected to be strong and powerful and not express weakness even at the expense of their own well-being. Women on the other hand are expected to be soft, docile and accommodating. The installation *Almost Home* is a representation of these broken stereotypes. The tree trunk appears to be strong and durable, but it is hollow on the inside, standing upright only because of the support provided by the base. Its amputated top is concealed by the sarees, as if trying to hide the weakness, similar to how women are expected to coddle the male ego and not challenge it. The whole installation is similar to a “set”, a temporary arrangement created to propagate an illusion.

The heirloom saree that I received felt “daunting” because of its history. Thirty years ago, women were expected to fit into a certain role. I felt this burden of history, I felt the saree expected me to behave a certain way. Through arm-knitting I was able to shrink it in size, making it less intimidating. I took it in my own hands to manage the expectations of history and change the narrative of the object. When I created the video performance with the bangles, I was thinking about the memories they housed. But after the completion of the project I realized a completely different story staring back at me. In India, the bangle as an adornment has a lot of beliefs attached to it. They are perceived as a marker of femininity, and only women should wear them; it is considered an insult to masculinity for a man to wear bangles. In the video, it is difficult to assign a gender to the wearer. The extravagance of putting on the bangles is both a challenge to these age-old stereotypes and a signifier of the burden that traditions can become.

Despite these revelations, I am hesitant in calling myself a feminist artist. I find myself weeding out ideas because of several reasons - I fear they would raise questions, the internalized misogyny tells me I should, and my hesitation stands in my own way. Nina Simone has said that freedom to her is “No fear”. To me, freedom is to be able to create without censors, to be able to create from intuition, and to convey my deepest thoughts and convictions without hesitation.

In my journey as an artist, I started as a printmaker and later forayed into materials and processes that are vastly different from where I started. I plan to continue this exploration of materials and ideas to expand a vocabulary that favors and bolsters my artistic endeavors and allows me to create with complete honesty.

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