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Homeland Insecurity

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Studio Art: Painting

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

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Abstract

Homeland Insecurity is a project born out of a life's worth of marginalization, internalized racism, and forced assimilation. It presents common experiences and emotions that are located between cultures, questioning what it means to inhabit a homeland that exists as a hybrid mental space. As I progress through life, my parents' culture—my heritage—becomes more and more distant, yet like many non-white children of immigrants, I will continue to carry it in my face as a physical reminder of a life I do not know. Influenced by acculturation theory, my work explores this culture that never quite belonged to me to begin with—yet is still mine to lose. Through absence or erasure as visual motifs, I impart a sense of cultural displacement. While the experiences presented are rooted in my own, I attempt to assuage others with homeland insecurities, establishing commonalities throughout this identity.

“Where are you from?” is a question that I and many non-white children of immigrants have been asked repeatedly throughout life, and it is a question that I loathe answering. No matter how many times I have been asked this, I always stumble over my response, unsure of what the best answer would be. With one foot in their inherited cultures and the other in the dominant culture, non-white children of immigrants straddle two worlds delicately, oftentimes sharing more characteristics or experiences with fellow children of immigrants than members belonging solely to either culture. My thesis project locates this hybrid space, exploring an identity that is caught between worlds. Situated in my own cultural identity, my work vocalizes common feelings or experiences of children of immigrants, juxtaposing the loss of one culture with the rejection from the other. As both an artist and a second-generation immigrant, I establish a solidarity amongst children of immigrants by highlighting commonalities in our cross-cultural experiences. While some of the motifs or images that I use may be culturally-specific, the overarching themes woven through my work transcend borders, inviting the viewer to consider what it feels like to occupy a hybrid cultural space marked with both regret and longing.

Growing up in East Tennessee, I wanted more than anything to be white. From a young age, I felt exclusion and ostracization from society long before I could name them. However, despite all my attempts to assimilate, I never managed to integrate wholly into American society, existing instead in a limbo space where I was too American to be Chinese but too Chinese to be American. Until relatively recently, assimilation was theorized linearly; immigrants would arrive and adopt the dominant culture, gradually ascending into mainstream society and transitioning into upwards mobility. While this straight-line assimilation model described early European immigrant groups—such as the Irish or Germans—scholars today recognize that one overarching, linear narrative does not accurately accommodate all assimilation or acculturation experiences, prompting the

introduction of segmented models that account for a hybrid cultural identity achieved often by children of immigrants.

One segmented model theorized by Alejandro Portes, Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and William Haller details different outcomes of acculturation for children of immigrants.

According to them, consonant acculturation results in a cooperative, simultaneous adaptation to the host society between parents and children; selective acculturation involves

incorporating the host culture with “key elements of the parental culture;” and dissonant acculturation occurs when the introduction of the dominant culture’s values and language causes the rejection of the parental culture, resulting in a disruption in familial networks.¹

However, dissonant acculturation is not equivalent to traditional concepts of assimilation, as the child still faces a rejection or ostracization from the dominant culture despite foregoing their heritage. Portes et al. position selective acculturation as the precursor to functional biculturalism, but what about dysfunctional bicultural identities? Can the cultures that we hold find a reconciliation or are they, too, separated by borders within ourselves?

In some cases, the act of migration is what causes a disruption or complete break in family systems, resulting in an isolation from the “ongoing networks of kinship relations in the homeland.”² This isolation can have serious developmental ramifications for children raised in the receiving country that then do not feel a sense of connection to their extended families in the homeland and cannot access their family histories. In *Twice Removed* (fig. 1 & 2), I explore the cultural and familial histories and memories that are lost between generations and borders.

¹ Alejandro Portes, Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and William Haller, “The Adaptation of the Immigrant Second Generation in America: A Theoretical Overview and Recent Evidence,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35, no. 7 (June 17, 2009), 1081.

² Min Zhou, “Growing Up American: The Challenge Confronting Immigrant Children and Children of Immigrants,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23, no. 1 (August 1997), 80-81.



Figure 1 & 2: Amy Chen, *Twice Removed*, 2019, stab-bound book with pronto prints and audio.

This piece alludes to both loss of cultural knowledge due to factors such as ruptured family relationships, as well as to more violent suppressions of information. In an audio recording, I attempt to recount my own family's histories, leaving uncomfortable pauses to represent information that I do not know. The omissions include details such as how many siblings my grandparents had, what happened to my great-grandfather after the Communist Revolution, or how my mother feels about the communist party. Accompanying the audio recording is a book with the same text printed onto it—paired with family photos from this era—but in the places where the audio is silent, the text has been sanded and torn away, leaving only gaps of what might have been. The violence of this gesture represents the more sinister, government-sanctioned suppression of cultural knowledge that occurred in China, pointing to both political and social factors in this loss. The images themselves speak to members in my own recent family history that I cannot access, that I do not recognize. Although only separated by one or two generations and a finite distance, I feel little to no connection to these figures whose blood courses through my veins.

Eroded intergenerational relationships are also explored by French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira in her 2002 three-screen video piece *Mother Tongue* (fig. 3), featuring five minute conversations on separate screens between three generations of women in her family. In each video, the pair of women converse—or attempt to—about their childhoods in their native languages, which differ for all three women. Although her mother is able to converse to the artist in Arabic and the artist is able to converse to her daughter in French, the transmission of information breaks down in the third video, in which the grandmother attempts to speak in Arabic, only to be met with silence and confusion in English. Like in *Twice Removed*, *Mother Tongue* uses heavy silences to emphasize lapses of understanding within her family. Art critic Cherry Smyth writes:

We are granted rare witness to the nervous embarrassment of a diluting and disintegrating bond, which ends in alienated silence. This silence acts as a resonant metaphor for all the moments, everywhere, in which a bond between generations can't be sustained, due to different values, outlooks, clothes, tastes, lifestyles, religious beliefs, cultures, sexualities, geographies and/or deracination. It is the inter-generational estrangement, so subtly and simply lamented here that makes this piece utterly successful and enduring.³



Figure 3: Zineb Sedira, *Mother Tongue*, 2002, three screen installation with headphones, five minutes each.

³ Cherry Smyth, "The Work of Zineb Sedira," LUXONLINE, 2008, [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/zineb_sedira/essay\(printversion\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/zineb_sedira/essay(printversion).html).

In mere fifteen minutes, Sedira demonstrates how, within two generations, family structures can be irreparably damaged and oral histories erased, as the viewer sits through the faltered efforts to communicate and tense silence between matriarch and granddaughter. What should have been a simple exchange of information about afterschool activities instead is a site of discomfort within a matrilineage.

The concept of loss or rejection of heritage is one that I explore with erasure or redaction as recurring visual motifs. In some cases, the motifs serve to remind the viewer of an absence of some fact or memory. By omitting text or image, I emphasize its loss and the loss of whatever function it would have served. I conceal or remove what cannot be accessed, what is out of reach. However, in other places, it appears in a more violent manner. Through cutting, tearing, or sanding, I emphasize the process in which this erasure materializes, representing some type of violence that has occurred and leaving physical evidence as testaments to the act. By reenacting this act through gesture, I reevoke the trauma.

Hayv Kahraman, an Iraqi artist and refugee working in the United States, employs a similar tactic in her paintings. In her latest series *Mnemonic Object* (fig. 5 & 6), she uses the body as a site of memory, regarding the female body as “the physical manifestation of where trauma resides.”⁴ Her paintings are shredded and re-woven together, scarred and fragmented—the original images displaced within the body. In an essay, Kahraman compares the ghostly white figure in her paintings to her assimilated self, pre-reconciliation with the violent healing process of becoming decolonized.⁵ By using the act of dismembering to stand in for memory and displacement, Kahraman represents a mended but wounded diasporic body that acknowledges the process of becoming whole and hybrid.

⁴ Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Hayv Kahraman, and Brooke Lynn McGowan, *Hayv Kahraman: Acts of Reparation*, ed. Melissa Duffes (St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2018), 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.



Figure 4: Hayv Kahraman, *T25 and T26*, 2017, oil on linen. Figure 5: Hayv Kahraman, *Strip 1*, 2017, oil on linen.

For Kahraman, the Othered body as a vessel to remember the homeland is an important concept. Non-white individuals carry physical reminders of their ancestral homelands with them in their faces, but for many children of immigrants, their inherited cultures might as well be wisps of smoke—present but elusive reminders of something that can never be fully grasped. Cuban-American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat asserts that while second-generation immigrants have some connection to their heritages, their relationships to their inherited cultures are significantly weaker than that of the first generation’s because their cultural connections are traditionally mediated through their parents’ experiences instead of formed through direct experience.⁶ Additionally, for the first generation, their image of their country of origin is frozen temporally from the moment they left; their mental homelands—and the ideas of the homeland that they impart onto the next generation—are

⁶ Gustavo Pérez Firmat, “Introduction: The Desi Chain,” in *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban American Way* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 5.

idealistic, imagined spaces that do not necessarily reflect the culture present-day.⁷ Certainly, for myself, my mental conception of China and Chinese culture is almost entirely framed and filtered by what my parents have passed onto me because my first-person encounters with the country and culture are so limited.

In my work *On the Outside Looking In* (fig. 6 & 7), I reflect this dynamic through a two-layered cut canvas painting. The design in the top layer—which references marks or modes of representation found in traditional Chinese paintings—shows changes in scenery with birds dispersed throughout the image. The top layer mediates the desaturated bottom image, which can only be viewed through the cut out areas. In some cut-outs, empty bird nests are printed partially obscured—just out of reach—reinforcing the subtle metaphor of immigrants as birds that have left the nest. The viewer can catch glimpses of the bottom layer, but they cannot see the whole image; they are only able to access it through the designated entry points, but they can still understand that there is much of the image that is inaccessible. While concentrated peering and physical movement can allow the viewer to glimpse more of what lies beneath, the entirety of the image can never be revealed, mirroring the relationships second-generation immigrants have to their inherited cultures.

⁷ Pérez Firmat, “Introduction: The Desi Chain,” 8-10.



Figure 6 & 7: Amy Chen, *On the Outside Looking In*, 2019, paint, ink, and screen prints on canvas.

The quality of the parent-child relationship is incredibly important for second-generation immigrants' cultural identities. Returning to the segmented acculturation model presented by Portes et al., strong family support is a determining factor in how a child adapts and acculturates.⁸ For many, parents act as the primary—and sometimes only—linkage to the homeland and inherited culture. However, in recent years, studies show that “second-generation immigrants are more likely to lose their first language than remain bilingual” due to strong assimilative pressures starting from an early age; poor mastery of the first language—especially with monolingual parents that cannot speak English functionally—can result in loss of familial communication and support and can lead to a rupture in the relationship altogether.⁹ In much of my work, I use my waning Chinese language ability to

⁸ Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller, “The Adaptation,” 1079.

⁹ Claudio O. Toppelberg and Brian A. Collins, “Language, Culture, and Adaptation in Immigrant Children,” *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 19, no. 4 (October 2010), 700-704.

speak about the growing distance between myself and my parents' culture. Similar to circumstances presented by Zineb Sedira and numerous second-generation immigrant narratives, my first language has become foreign to my tongue. In accordance with Toppelberg and Collins' research, due to assimilative pressures from the dominant culture, I struggle now as an adult to read simple sentences written in a language I once spoke fluently.

The inability to read my mother's text messages is the basis for my scroll installation *Lost Texts* (fig. 8 & 9). For this piece, I isolated the Chinese characters that I could not read in my conversations with my mother, leaving blanks in the places of characters that I knew. The words emerge from the paper as bursts of ghostly imprints connotating absence. Even those who can understand them individually gain little meaning from the text as a whole, but through the seemingly random scattering of characters, the viewer can gain a sense of what attempting to read Chinese is like for me. Additionally, the gradual trickling away of pigment throughout each scroll corresponds with the loss of language. In my installation, I arranged the two scrolls opposite each other with a seemingly inverse relationship, never touching. Where one arches up, the other deflates, diminishing; this dynamic corresponds with the two languages that I speak and the kinship ties that are intrinsically attached to them.



Figure 8 & 9: Amy Chen, *Lost Texts*, 2017, ink and transparent oil pastel on rice paper, wire.

Toppelberg and Collins name this phenomenon as subtractive bilingualism, stating that the acquisition of second languages often “comes at the cost of the [first language] when children are submersed in a majority language with limited support and exposure to their home language.”¹⁰ This process reflects a greater internal crisis common to some children of immigrants who feel positioned between two cultures with opposing demands. Chen et al. describe this self-location as a symptom of having low bicultural identity integration; individuals belonging to this group tend to view their identities as incompatible or difficult to integrate with each other.¹¹ This conflictual relationship is suggested to be what causes individuals to feel culturally displaced or without a psychological homeland.¹² In the beginning of this paper, I discussed not knowing how to answer the question locating where I am from. Perhaps the lack of a clear-cut psychological homeland indicates a belonging to a hybrid space that embraces this ambiguity of placement.

In his 2018 installation *Bridging Home*, Do Ho Suh captures that feeling by precariously balancing a traditional Hanok-style Korean house modeled after his childhood home on a footbridge in London. Appearing to have been plucked from one life and dropped into another, the installation speaks to a displacement and collision of two disparate worlds, the joining of the two creating a tertiary hybrid space. The traditional and worn facade of the structure contrasts sharply with the contemporary architecture of London, creating both a visual disruption and a physical one for city-goers to navigate. By angling the structure, Suh emphasizes an instability, referencing the internal cultural conflict that arises from migration and existing with that tension.

¹⁰ Toppelberg and Collins, "Language, Culture, and Adaptation," 700–701.

¹¹ Sylvia Xiaohua Chen, Verónica Benet-Martínez, and Michael Harris Bond, “Bicultural Identity, Bilingualism, and Psychological Adjustment in Multicultural Societies: Immigration-Based and Globalization-Based Acculturation,” *Journal of Personality* 76, no. 4 (August 2008), 806-807.

¹² *Ibid.*, 829.

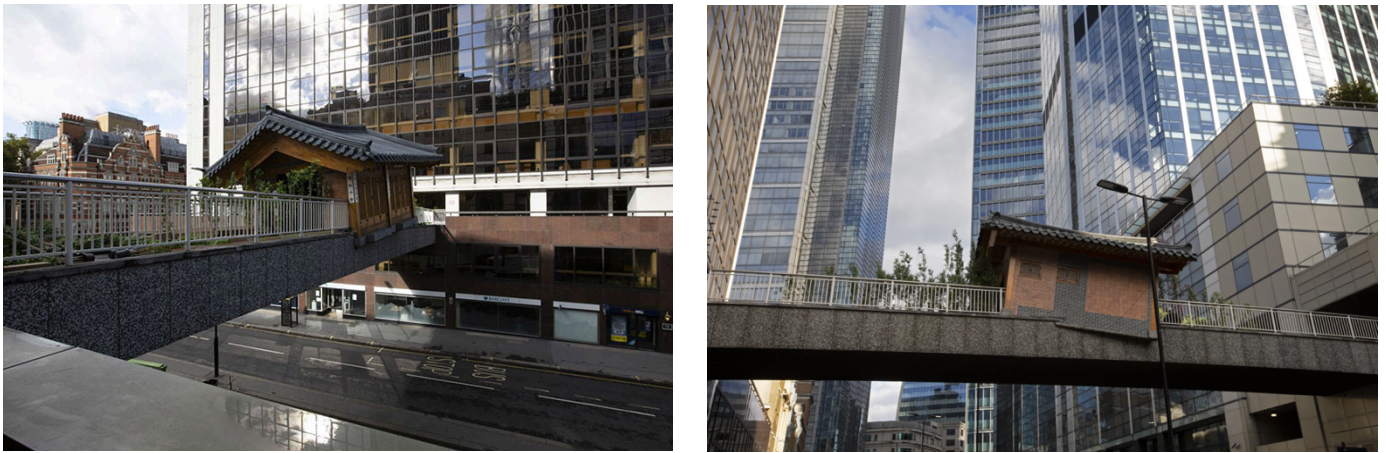


Figure 10 & 11: Do Ho Suh, *Bridging Home*, 2018, steel structural frame with sub timber frame, plywood, painted finish.

A similar but alternate read of Suh's installation could arise from Pérez Firmat's conception of biculturation; he describes a tense balance between two cultural identities in which it becomes difficult to determine which is dominant and which is subordinate. However, he illustrates this equilibrium with precariousness, stating that eventually, one will gain dominance.¹³ This perceived struggle between cultures and inevitability of assimilation is explored in my hand-bound book *Even in America* (fig. 12 & 13). In it, I respond to a poem by Dominican-American writer Hattie Gossett that represents the dual-sided cultural pressures children of immigrants face. Gossett pairs lines from the dominant culture and the ethnic community that parallel each other, such as "this is america / stop talking that jibberish" with "even in america / speak your mother tongue."¹⁴ Printed on mylar, the text is able to be seen but not read through the back of each sheet, subverting the viewer's expectations of legibility when reading from left to right. The transparency of the mylar allows the viewer to see pro-assimilation rhetoric juxtaposed side-by-side with pro-ethnic retention rhetoric; this reflects the simultaneous and constant tensions felt by children of immigrants from both the dominant culture and their ethnic communities. The book format creates a sequential order,

¹³ Pérez Firmat, "Introduction: The Desi Chain," 6.

¹⁴ Hattie Gossett, "Speak English Only / Keep Your Mother Tongue Alive," in *The Immigrant Suite: Hey Xenophobe! Who You Calling a Foreigner?*, Seven Stories Press 1st ed (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007).

creating a sense of time and movement within the experience of viewing the work. Cultural symbols printed on the first pages repeat throughout the book, disappearing gradually with each page. The fading imagery is a nod to Pérez Firmat's posited eventual imbalance while recognizing that for a majority of second-generation immigrants, the culture of the dominant society tends to have a greater influence over time.

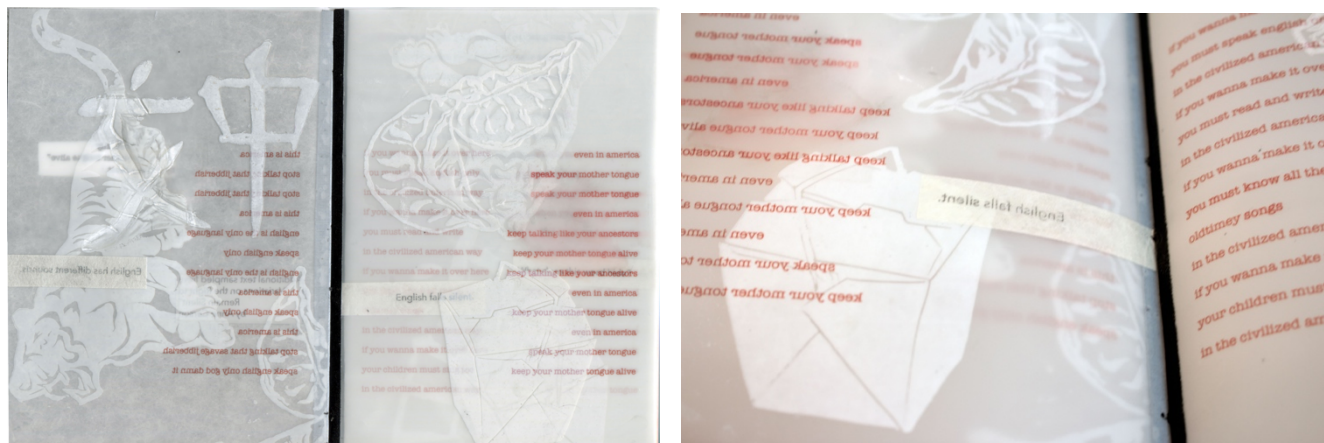


Figure 12 & 13: Amy Chen, *Even in America*, 2019, saddle-stitch mylar book with linocuts and rice paper inserts.

Throughout my work is the feeling of cultural displacement or cultural discordance within oneself. My practice is marked with nostalgia for a life that I have never known and, through these musings, seeks to define a hybrid site of belonging. The feelings of longing and cultural insecurity are ones that are commonly expressed in narratives from children of immigrants of all cultures. By centering the shared experience of belonging to two (or more!) cultures but feeling incomplete in either, I forge a solidarity that transcends specificity of circumstances or backgrounds. While I do not claim to speak for anyone but myself—to generalize the experience of biculturalism as homogenous would be reductive—through the vulnerable act of disclosing my homeland insecurities, I hope to validate those who hold the same sentiments. Perhaps I can never find the correct response as to where I am from, but my work instead answers the unspoken question “What have you experienced?”, seeking out those who can understand this plight all the same.

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