

Communication Design MA
Gray's School of Art

Visualizing the Migrant Experience

Reflective Essay
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FIGURE 1. 'WELCOME' (2019). COLLAGE

Introduction

I was born in Japan to a Mexican family I constantly miss. I have been a migrant most of my life and understand the importance of creating spaces for stories about people in transit. In an effort to offer materiality to the process of constructing identity as a migrant, I illustrate.

With this project, I examine the question: is there such a thing as a universality in the migrant experience? And if so, to what degree does it relate to material culture? In this essay, I will discuss Petersen's concept of the construction of transcultural identities and analyze it through Pechurina's work on migration and material culture. I will explore artist's books as physical spaces and performative objects, and experiment with new definitions of 'place' and 'borders', in regards to the digital. I relocate my practice from deep-mapping my experience as a migrant in a physical medium to a digital space in order to tell "Little Stories of Little Griefs". In a world that grows more fearful of "others", I wish to offer a place to ground stories of people in movement.

The Migrant Experience

“With respect to identities in flux, art can be an instrument of orientation and positioning oneself in the world. Thanks to its ability to negotiate contradictions and encompass double articulations, tensions and complexities, art can chart how identifications may shift continually and dynamically as one navigates across countries and cultures” (Petersen 2017: 142).

In the beginning of the MA, my project was centered around artists' books and the performativity they offer storytelling through their materiality. With an artist's book, “the reader or viewer becomes a protagonist and transforms into an agent or into the entity that, through the act of paging, creates or completes the work. In order to be able to read or view the book, he must page through it and thus open up the book space” (Thurmann-Jajes, 2017). Through this medium, I wanted to explore the migrant experience and posed the question: Is there such a thing as a universality in the migrant experience? If so, how can it be visualized?

As I mentioned in my project proposal, “there is storytelling in the design and conception of the artist book as an object”. Through the manipulation of its elements, such as color and texture of pages, typography, reading directions, languages and format, I wanted to define which act a book should perform to best describe the supposed universality of the migrant experience. I was interested in both the “reciprocity that occurs in the process of making an artist book –the performativity and the content of the book– as well as in the reciprocity that occurs when migrating –the act of leaving and arriving, and the act of assimilating while constructing identity”.

As Anne Ring Petersen argues, “identification evolves as a dynamic, reciprocal process that occurs between viewers, bodies, images and other kinds of visual representations and media. It is therefore rewarding through the self-reflective modes of representation characteristic of modern and contemporary art” (Petersen, 2017: 144). Artist books allow this dynamic through their performativity.

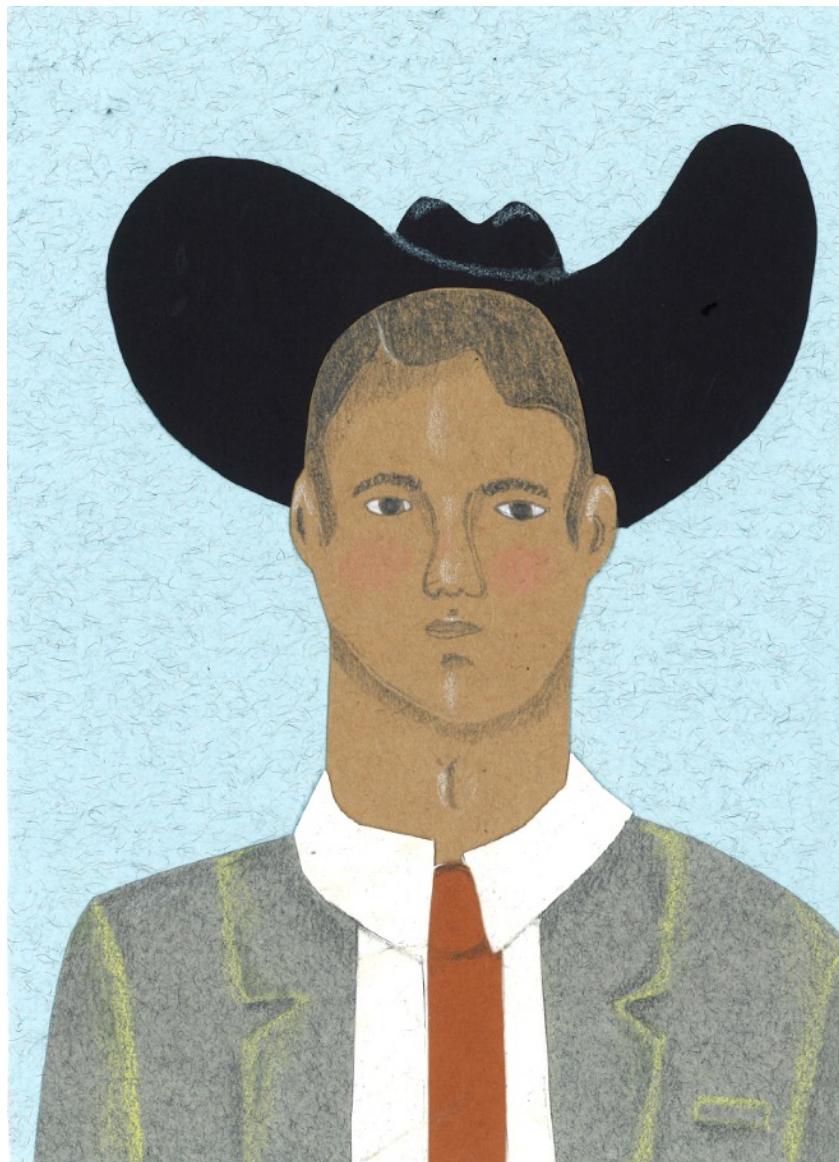


FIGURE 2. 'ERIC FABIÁN' (2019). COLLAGE

In order to explore the notion of universality in the migrant experience, I conducted interviews with members of the migrant community in Aberdeen to discuss the concept of belonging, material culture, and general experiences. I first proposed that the universality could be found in the migrants' relationships with objects: not in the objects themselves, but in the act of bringing these object with them, leaving them behind, and choosing which ones to display or reproduce. Material culture seemed like a general, common ground, and it would have been convenient because it would have

paralleled the materiality of a book. The book offers a physical place to ground stories for migrants and simultaneously references the physicality of the objects with which migrants construct their identity and sense of belonging. As Pechurina argues:

“[...] the reconstruction of a sense of home(lands) in migrant communities occurs through the materiality of things, which often helps to transform a ‘house’ into a ‘home’ in a new country and affects the broader relationships with the host society and culture. [...] Ultimately, a migrant home can be defined as a composition of ‘variable meanings’ that reflect the relationships and activities associated with home in its different stages. In this sense, ‘home is therefore tied to memory, to relationships, and to events’” (Smart 2007: 163; Pechurina, 2015: 30).

However, after I interviewed Xiao and Eric, I quickly realized how different both experiences and their relationships with objects were in terms of construction of identity. On the one hand, Eric talked about the black cowboy hat he always wears:

When I came here, I decided to bring my hat. ‘If I don’t bring it with me, it will get lost, it will get burnt, it will rot’. I was wearing it when I brought it. Since then, I haven’t taken it off. In Mexico, because I was riding a bike, I wore it for the sun. It became a custom. Here, people look at me and they get excited.

Xiao, on the other hand, talked about how, as part of a traditional Mexican dance company, he doesn’t rely on objects to host memories:

What I possess, what I always carry with me, are my experiences, my knowledge and my ability to adapt. That’s what I carry wherever I go. I learnt that it is very easy to lose things when you travel. I don’t have the need to have a thing to remember or feel. All of that is in my memories. I don’t pour that into an object. Maybe that’s why I’m not religious. I don’t need to forget the dances I know to

learn something new. Eventually, I will lose it, as I forget, but it will not be selective.

I made a collage for a poster with these interviews in mind, particularly about another thing that Eric said about how he feels he is a bird with roots. I thought of the first image someone arriving to Aberdeen would like to see and explored this idea. Before this project, the research for my practice had been focused mainly on language based methods, such as interviews and literary research. However, at this point of the process and taking into account Dr. Jon Pengelly's seminar on research methods, I transitioned to more visual, exploratory ones. I sketched and arrived to the image of a bird with human feet for roots, and a flying Eric wearing a black, cowboy hat, arriving to the harbor, flying up Market Street (Figure 1 and 2).

Through the interviews, I realized that even in the general aspects of migrants' relationships with objects, there were considerable singularities. Notions of agency became relevant in the diversity of migrant experiences. Privilege had to be taken into account in their representations, which is why I decided to make the narrative more personal, but not necessarily autobiographical.

Visual artist Shirin Neshat talked about boundaries and truthfulness in her work and said: "I make work that relates directly to my own personal life that I have felt the pain. [...] You can't fake the anxiety of being an immigrant, for example, or political injustice or anxiety of different kinds. [...] And when you're personal, people believe you because there's a lot of transparency, there's a lot of emotion." I felt more comfortable focusing the project on my particular experience, rather than generalizing other people's, in addition to having found pretty early on that my approach to the representation of migrants' experiences through the concept of universality was reductive and potentially problematic. I recognize that I have been privileged in that most times I have had agency in the act of leaving, but after Dr. Jen Clarke's seminar on feminisms for a post humanist world, I also concluded that creating a space in the narrative for my experience is, indeed, relevant.



FIGURE 3. “MEMORIAL BENCHES” (2020). INK AND ACRYLIC ON KRAFT PAPER, DIGITAL PATTERN.

With this in mind, I started a blog where I compiled different stories and illustrations concerning my personal experience as a migrant, in which I explore various aspects of life it affects, as well as my relationship with objects and its relevance in the process of making home and belonging. I reflect on issues concerning language, the culture surrounding death (Figure 3), landscape, food, grief, feminism, displacement, mythology and the juxtaposition of these. As I wrote entries for the blog, I was also processing my own experience in Aberdeen, and it was really helpful to organize my thoughts and find which objects were important to my identity.

Dr. Jon Pengelly's seminar on deep-mapping informed this practice in that I found different figurative places to map in a space that doesn't physically exist. This idea of non-physical places, fueled various parallels between the virtual quality of the internet and the in-between places that migrants inhabit: places between the geographical and the cultural.

The blog has been an effective way to keep track of my creative process and research, and to resolve issues concerning the mobility of objects significant to a migrant's identity. Pechurina argues that "the idea of the multiple meanings of home possessions can be effectively used to understand these variations in the ways they recreate the feeling of being at home and sense of belonging to it" (Pechurina, 2015: 96). When it is not possible to physically carry these possessions, the digital becomes imperative in the process of belonging.

With the pandemic, the digital quality of the blog has made it easier for me to adapt the way I will present my work, as well. Although the materiality that working with paper added to storytelling was something I was very interested in, the performative quality of storytelling may not necessarily be lost. In many ways, the online space offers new and different possibilities in creating spaces for storytelling, which I explore with animated gifs, for example.

The blog has also enabled a process of redefining materiality and performativity by broadening the definition of a place, and in this process, broadening the borders of said places. It has also evidenced the non-physical aspects that a migration entails in terms of it not being a strictly geographical process of physical movement, but rather a composition of various resignifications. "Feelings' and 'practices' that individuals develop for their possessions are considered to be equally important dimensions of the home as 'place', 'space', and 'physical environment'" (Smart 2007: 162; Pechurina 2015: 30).

In my personal experience as a migrant, I found that a recurring theme in my 'feelings' and 'practices' was the need to give a place to the grief I was experiencing due to the death of my father. This process was complicated by the general loss of a home, family, community, and rituals in the process of migrating. About the importance of rituals surrounding death in Mexican identity, Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, wrote:

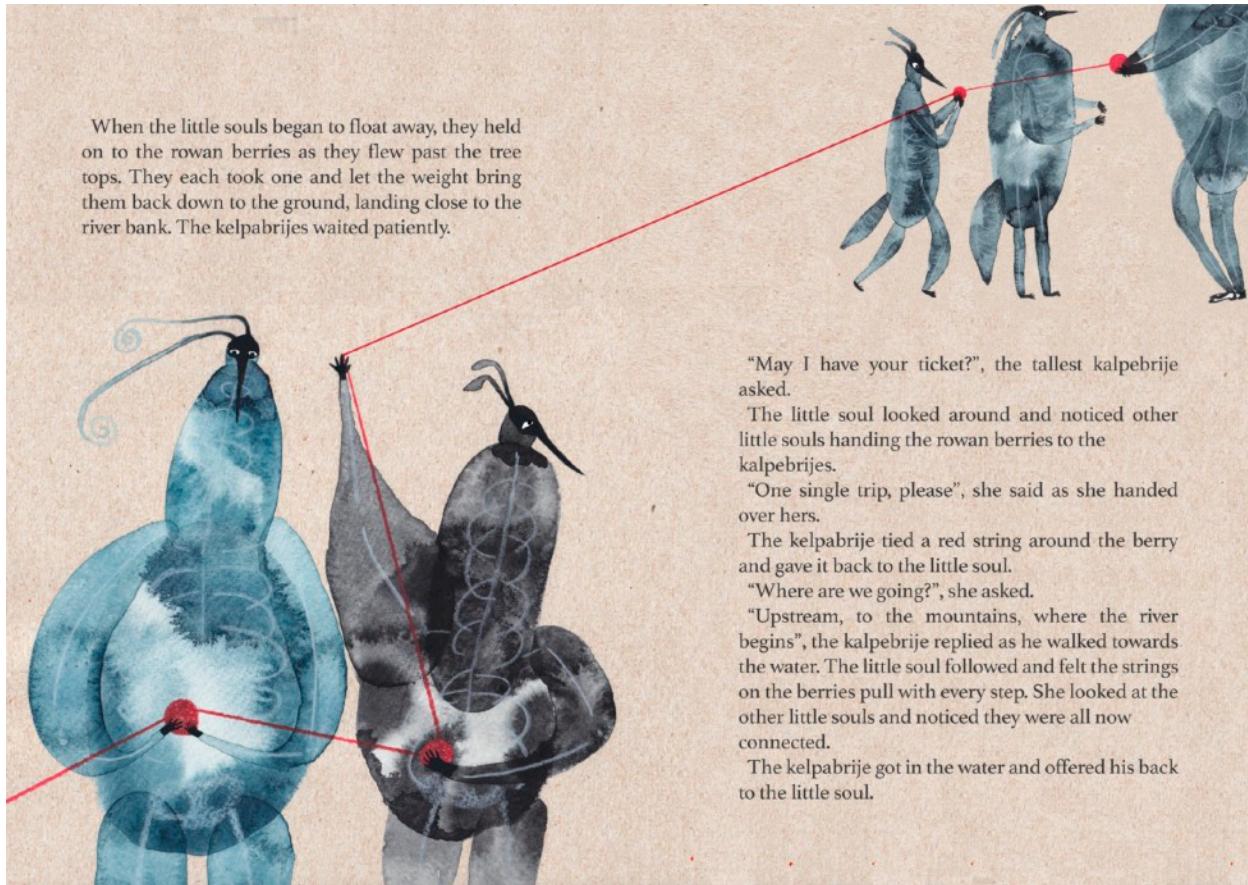


FIGURE 4. 'KELPABRIJES' (2020). INK AND DIGITAL RETOUCH.

"The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away." (Paz, 1961: 57)

These issues of grief and loss became the common thread connecting the different stories I wrote and illustrated (Figure 4) in the blog, in different measures, but in continuous sentiment. Mexican-Chilean artist, Antonia González Alarcón, "explores the relationship between memory and empathy [and] maps individual subjectivities that surround a specific concept of the collective imaginary [in] embroidered textile pieces, with which people can interact with and read by touch" (Figure 5; González Alarcón 2019: artistic declaration).



FIGURE 5. ANTONIA GONZÁLEZ ALARCÓN, 'THE RIGHT TO WALK' (2019). EMBROIDERY ON COTTON, 110 X 90CM.

Similarly, I explored the relationship between objects and identity, and mapped my subjectivities in regards to different aspects of the migrant experience. However, I did so in a digital place and the specific concept of the collective imaginary that surrounded these stories was grief. I will present them in a digital format with which people will be able to interact, so as to not lose the performativity of an artist book.

Thurmann-Jajes refers to Mexican conceptual artist, Ulises Carrión, and how, for him, “the artist’s book represents a series of spaces or rooms. Each of these spaces perceived at a different moment. Each page is different, and every word exists as an element of a structure. In the new art, every book requires a different reading” (Carrión, 1975; Thurmann-Jajes, 2017). Perhaps a digital space can also provide these “rooms and spaces”, like a home does, and host the compilation of illustrated texts I have produced so far. Maybe, with the curation of this space, a text or image can still perform virtually.

Universality as an approach was indeed reductive, but with these “Little Stories of Little Griefs”, I hope people will be able to find a little bit of comfort in knowing that grief becomes little when shared.

Conclusion

In this essay, I discussed material culture as a supposed common ground in the migrant experience. Through interviews, I evidenced the potential problems with universality as an approach to these shared experiences, and transitioned to a more personal narrative, which exposed grief as a common thread in the stories I produced.

Notions of “physicality” and “place” were redefined through the switch from the physical medium of collage and ink illustration to a digital platform, a blog. With this redefinition, came questions regarding the non-physical processes that migrations entail. Migrants stop inhabiting a geographical space in the act of leaving and, in the process, the creation of new and dynamic spaces is necessary.

I contextualized my practice within the work of Chilean-Mexican textile artist Antonia González Alarcón, and found similarities in the approach of “mapping individual subjectivities that surround a specific concept of the collective imaginary”. In my case, the specific concept being grief and the mapping being in regards to my experience as a migrant.

This has impacted my critical framework in that the universality I supposed existed in the migrant experience became a more subtle, common ground of shared griefs, which are not only related to physical objects themselves but also to the process of relocating the resignification of rituals associated with those objects. The digital quality of the blog facilitates access and makes room for new ways of telling stories, while simultaneously paralleling the broadening of the sense of physicality in borders and places. Through this kind of virtual storytelling, it has become possible to create new places to belong.

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- Figure 4. 'Kelpabrijes' (2020). Ink and digital retouch.
- Figure 5. Antonia González Alarcón, 'The Right to Walk' (2019). Embroidery on cotton, 110 x 90cm.