Geographies of ancestral embodiment

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GEOGRAPHIES OF ANCESTRAL EMBODIMENT

by

Jaz Graf

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Heather R. Parrish
Basked in the sun,
listened to birds,
licked off raindrops,
and only in flight
the leaf saw the tree
and grasped
what it had been.

~Vera Pavlova (translated by Steven Seymour)
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Of course, to my mother, a luminous star in my cosmology, and to my father, who always taught me to gaze out the window.

Finally, thanks to Laos because it’s us to victory!
ABSTRACT

Throughout history, humankind has looked to the natural world for understanding the foundations of life and the essence of existence. Emphasizing states of sedimentary material, as physical and metaphorical reference to the cyclical complexion of life/death, growth/decay, transformation/stasis…I investigate the meaning of familial roots, reimagining humanity’s relationship to earth. The ways in which this connection can be understood are dependent on visual or symbolic representations and through experiential knowledge of sensing physicality and materiality.
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The first person I ever knew was my mother. I knew her in the deepest sense, we were in a symbiotic relationship as I developed within her womb. My mother was 40 years old when she gave birth to me, which is the age that I am now. What does the unborn child learn and take in from its mother? As a fetus, was I sensing, absorbing, somehow innately aware of the body of knowledge that she embodied after four decades?

Interconnectedness is an undercurrent throughout my work, thus it seems logical to consider my very first relational bond in this world (at least in the most rational sense) to my mother. It is the essence of this first relationship which serves as a prototype for all subsequent relationships in one’s life. In order for any relation or interconnection to exist, there must be another, or, an other. The root of its meaning is to relate in some respect, therefore duality and/or multiplicity is an inherent condition of its construction.

In this paper I consider my maternal lineage and its influence in the making of meaning in my work. I emphasize themes regarding hybridity, ritual, and spacial aesthetics which play a crucial role in the understanding of my positionality within national, geo-political, spiritual and contemporary artistic contexts.
I am Eurasian American. I am a mixed media artist. My art and the identities I claim for it and for myself, most often resist any singular designation. “Naming is...the way we image (and imagine) communal history and identity (Lippard 1997).”

The word ‘hybrid’ functions as both noun and adjective. It entails a composition of mixed parts. Hybridity is located at the margins of the intersection of cultures. The nature of its definition is a negotiation, a perpetual reassessment of what it is. When applied to people, it has a loaded history of derogatory connotations, ie: half-breed, mongrel, etc. On the other hand, the concept of hybridity is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweeness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference (Hoogvelt 1997).”

Within the discourse of cultural and postcolonial studies, Homi K. Bhabha elaborates on hybridity and the third space. It is an ‘interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative’ (Bhabha 1994) mode of articulation, a space which engenders new possibility. The third space offers new forms of cultural meaning and production obscuring existing boundaries and questioning established frameworks of culture and identity.

The modern term, ‘cross-cultured person’ (also known as CCK, cross-cultural kid or TCK, third culture kid) includes a vast range of criteria. Ruth E. Van Reken, co-author of Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds poses this (bifurcated) model which includes:

- **Bi/multi-cultural/ and/or bi/multi-racial children** —Children born to parents from at least two cultures or races
• **Children of immigrants** — Children whose parents have made a permanent move to a new country where they were not originally citizens

• **Children of minorities** — Children whose parents are from a racial or ethnic group which is not part of the majority race or ethnicity of the country in which they live.

Benjamin Self has described the CCP phenomena as being “born out of the interconnectedness of modern life.” The impact of being a CCP varies, but most commonly affects a person’s worldview, sense of personal and collective identity, and feelings of belonging or rootlessness. Transnational commerce, having an increasingly mobile lifestyle, and global family living, are becoming the norm. As a result, the formation and maintenance of relationships is challenged. For example, living in a different city every few years, may prove to be difficult in cultivating deep and long-lasting relations. “Virtual” relations, although escalating in number, illustrate less efficacy than face-to-face/in-person relations. The cultural practice of network building is dynamically changing, requiring adaptation in and from multiple directions.

The cross-cultural or hybrid identity remains critical of any essentialist positions. “All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity (Rutherford 1990).” Thus, its character of inherent alterity, yet normalcy, amplify the cross-cultural hybrid’s transgressive power.
Navigating the liminalities of identity is an ongoing process which manifests itself in the social and artistic languages I employ. My mixed cultural upbringing has helped me to see things from multiple perspectives. This involves the act of self-positioning in order to understand relational structures. One way I address this in my work is by exploring themes which draw on specific traditions.

In order for contemporary practices to transform ancient traditions to manifest a living art, a translation must take place. According to Walter Benjamin’s *Theory of Translation*, the context of a work of art, is always different and cannot be recreated. The work is transient and is not situated within a specific time. The *afterlife* is the act of translation of its original. “The afterlife of thoughts and things is nothing less than a critical intervention into the affirmation of the values attributed to continuity, convergence, progress and assimilation, in the invention of tradition (Bhabha 2016).” Therefore, to translate a tradition is to reconstitute its role and recreate its value, anew.

Buddhism is the official religion of the Thai nation-state with over 90% of the population as followers. Buddhist symbols and rituals define and perpetuate the values of Thai society. Regardless if one is informed about the source of the symbolism or not, it affects conscious awareness of the symbols’ shared meaning.

In recent years, with the passing of my grandmother, aunt and uncle in Thailand, I have learned of my family’s traditions regarding funereal rituals. All family members had Buddhist ceremonies lasting for several days with monks chanting at the local temple, and loved ones coming to make offerings and pay their respects to the family. The deceased’s bodies were cremated by monks, their ashes were given to family members to be released along the river.
Buddhism has been a way of life for centuries in Thailand, woven into the day to day. However, Thailand’s economic advances over recent decades, has led to a shift away from the sacred. The role of the monk, which was of great importance and influence, is increasingly losing relevance in modernized times. Temples, which were once central to village life, functioning as community centers and meeting spaces are seemingly becoming less frequented. The number of Thai men becoming monks continues to dwindle. The traditional activity of ordination as a monk, commonly regarded as a male rite of passage, is in decline.

On a recent trip to Thailand, I lived for two months in Chiang Mai, learning the language and familiarizing myself with the flourishing arts scene. I was there for Asahna Bucha Day วันอาสาฬหบูชา and Kao Phan Sa วันเข้าพรรษา. These Thai holidays fall on the full moon of the eighth lunar month before rainy season. It marks the annual three-month rains retreat for monastics. Offerings of special foods are given to monks because monsoon rains make it harder for them to take alms daily. Candles are popular as well, enabling them to read scripture during power outages.

I made my first offering to a monk at Wat Phan On. It is a small quiet temple with a peaceful atmosphere and a lovely golden chedi. I chose my sangkataan – a basket containing everyday items like soap, toothpaste, and balms to donate to the monks. I kneeled down and had a short conversation in Thai with a monk that had lived there for 21 years. He sprinkled aromatic water over my head while chanting blessings. It was a very moving experience. When I walked out onto the street, it felt as though all strangers had smiling faces and everything moved in slow motion.

The following morning, I awoke at 5:30am to do a dak bat offering at a temple near my apartment in the old city. Many people were dressed in beautiful bright colored silks and
carrying bags of food and rice to feed the monks for the special holiday. I sat down beside two women in front of a monk while they showed me what to do. I poured water from a decorative container into a silver bowl while meditating as the monk chanted blessings. Then the water in the bowl is poured outside onto the earth. By participating in these rituals, I felt more integrated in everyday Thai society and closer to understanding my family’s customs.

STRATA

In a sense, both the cultural hybrid and the Buddhist monk fall outside the prevailing status quo. Let us consider the transgressive power of the hybrid identity and the Buddhist monks’ position within the context of social order. How do their positions operate within social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital? How does it contribute to the construction of nation and civil society? With a rapidly developing notion of global progress and exceedingly vast networked system, the economic configuration seems engaged in perpetual negotiation. There is an earlier existing vision of progress, intersecting with new sets of global and political arrangements. The question lies not only in how their positions operate within a social order but moves towards new iterative movements of influence.
The strata of Thai society are evident in daily life. It is built into the speech with certain language particles, it is determined by the height of one’s hands or head when greeting with a *wai*. Although Thailand is ruled by a constitutional monarchy, in terms of social stature, the position of the monk is of the highest level, above even that of the Thai King and Royal Family.

The Southeast Asian monastic line is believed to trace directly from the Buddha, as the first monks were his disciples. In other words, monks are a living connection to the Buddha. (Hall 2014) The robe that they wear is a sign of the power that they carry. It is said that the Buddha recommended that the robe design to be cut in the pattern of the Magadha rice paddy fields (Figure 1). For not only were they immensely beautiful, but so integral to life. Thus, these robes have historical foundations tied to the land.

Figure 1. Thai rice paddy fields and Buddhist robe design.

In the last few decades, the use of the sacred cloth has been a way to protect and preserve natural resources. Ordaining trees, a practice unique to Thailand, has saved forests from being logged in various areas of the country. "It's an ancient solution to a modern problem," says
SanitsudaEkachai,aBangkokPostcolumnist. This approach of wrapping sacred cloth around
trees started when a Thammayut monk walked into the forest to meditate and found that much of
the surrounding forest had disappeared. Local villagers in small communities have been known
to do it as well, working together as active participants in the development of their cultural
heritage in the name of a sustainable livelihood.

There is also a rising number of bhikkunis, women who are ordaining as monks. Strict
Buddhist doctrine forbids women from being ordained in Thailand. There are about 270 female
monks across Thailand and they were all ordained abroad… In contrast to more than 250,000
male monks (Tanakasempipat 2019). Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, Thailand’s first woman monk,
traveled to Sri Lanka in 2001 to be ordained. She has established an all-women monastery in
Nakhon Pathom which remains unrecognized.

These examples of extraordinary ordinations are not new, however the rise in national
and global attention is indicative of the current moment. These examples highlight themes of
inclusivity and ecology in connection with the safeguarding of Thailand’s cultural heritage.
While many Thai people may find the practice of ordaining women and trees to fall out of step
within Buddhist custom, these activities encourage the participation of communities, contributing
important variations in the strata of an evolving tradition.

THE CLOTH AS SUBTEXT

The Thai kozo plant fibers I use to make paper are representations of Thai civilization
and its living heritage. The use of Thai kozo in my practice has deepened my sense of connection
to ancestral homelands. The smell of cooking the fiber for hours on end, gives me comfort. I
strangely love the sessions of pounding the kozo with wooden mallets. The satisfaction of having
my entire body involved with the process became ritual-like and therapeutic. It was a way to simply be a body, to work with my hands and with natural materials.

The making of the handmade paper in *Of the Same Root* (Figure 3) and *Alluvial Age* (Figure 2) entailed collecting used Thai monk robes from various sources (see Appendix). The first two were mailed from my cousin, Anocha who requested them from the temple she attends regularly in Ohio. One robe was bright orange, signifying the Theraveda sect and the other robe a yellow/brown of the Thammayut order. Theraveda monks are sometimes referred to as “city monks,” and Thammayut as “forest monks.”

The process of turning the sacred cloth into paper involved cutting the robe, which was larger than a Queen-sized bedsheets, into 1”x1” squares. Each robe took approximately 3 – 4 hours to cut into bits and to remove all the seams. Luckily, I had the assistance of my mother, father and partner in the cutting of the first two robes which kick-started the project. This made it all the more meaningful.

Next, the fabric squares were soaked in water and added incrementally into a Reina beater. Churning through a trough of water, it is repeatedly put through a cylindrical masher. Over the course of hours, it is turned into a pulp. A cellulose fiber was added in order for the cloth pulp to form into strong and stable substrates. The main bonding agent I used was Thai kozo, a bast fiber, and at other times, abaca, flax or cotton.

I would pour each batch of wet pulp onto pellon, forming long narrow strips. Once completely dry, the sheets are peeled away. Over time, I added to the paper pulp, inclusions such as mint leaves from Pa’s garden from my childhood home, Hudson river sediment, my house plant cuttings and remnants of my prints on cotton rag paper, etc. This act of incorporation is the
conscious blending of my everyday life, markers of specific places I inhabit, to merge meaningful symbolic residuum with the sacred material.

The ritualistic pouring of pulp, the constant sound of water dripping, reminds me of the ceremonial Piti Gruad Naam or Thai Water Pouring Ceremony which I learned in Chiang Mai. It is a dedication of merits to dead relatives. One will pour water from one receptacle into a bowl as a monk chants the Yatha prayer. After the blessing, one will pour the water outside onto soil or the roots of a tree. Water is the medium of communication to transmit merits, and the earth is the witness. This form of ancient ancestral worship of Brahman origin has been adopted into Thai Buddhist beliefs. During certain moments of my papermaking sessions I played these chants while meditating.

The accumulation of layers of paper became markers of time. The transitions in coloration indicate the multiple robes that were used to build up an earthen base. Like the layers of strata which form by the deposition of sediment from river currants, these paper layers and their gaps represent intervals of mortal and geologic time. This became a sort of language both material and immaterial in communicating concepts of ancestral embodiment of/in the land, a reiterative enunciation of an inherited interconnection.
Figure 2. *at my feet for ages*, 2019, Installation view of *A Place to Rest One’s Palms* (left) and *Alluvial Age* (right).

Figure 3. *Of the Same Root*, 2019, Handmade paper, clay, bone ash, turmeric, safflower powder, 19 x 8 x 3 feet, Dimensions variable. (Handmade paper of used Thai monk robes, Thai kozo, abaca, flax, remnants of prints, dried mint leaves from Pa’s garden, Hudson estuary sediment.)
A POSTSCRIPT REVIEW

The title itself offers clues to the themes of my Master of Fine Arts final exhibition, *at my feet for ages* (Figure 4). It bears all lowercase letters as a seemingly humble or modest gesture. Additionally, it suggests a hint of defiance, abandoning the conventions of English grammar, yet is consistent with Thai characters which make no distinction between cases. *Feet* - an awareness of one’s body, a unit of measure. *At my feet* - a relational position of this body with the ground it stands on. *Ages* - an indication of the passing of time, of stages, perhaps growth. *My* - alluding to something personal, the *m* is a sound one makes when thinking, the *y*, a letter with a long tale. Two Unalome characters frame the text like bookends. This symbol represents the path that we each take in life; it is a mark of transcendence. *At my feet for ages*, seems to refer to a memory, a history which is a whole thing onto itself, yet entirely fragmentary. The entrance of the show is marked with blood-colored vinyl text set amidst a few fissures on the concrete floor. It is an invitation and a request to the viewer to be mindful of this very step - across or over a threshold. The rusty umbers and deep blue weather-beaten edges contrast the black and white hard-edged rectangles punctuating the organic flow of pieces.

The exhibition features a pair of photographically etched copper plates which include frames within a frame, alluding to a lineage. They are replications of pages from an old family photo album. The reflective surface confronts the beholder with their own image superimposed upon familial figures. For aren’t we always thinking about ourselves when we look at photos of our family? It is aptly titled, *Seeing in Reverse*, not only as the orientation in which one see’s their own reflection, or as a direction of looking towards the past, but
as a backwards matrix to be printed from. *May 1968* is stamped on the photo’s border. I recognize the fountain in the background, there’s my mother in Central Park. Was this her first year in New York City after immigrating from Bangkok, Thailand? I’m not sure she had met my father yet, so who took the picture? Was that even the correct date? The copper plate on the left bears a darker patina of richer oxidation streaks from which minimal facial features emerge at certain angles. Most of these family members have passed away.

The copper echoes the colors of the handmade paper strata running along the gallery’s East/West wall. Once again, the gaze settles toward the earth, perhaps the body squats to take a closer look at the materials embedded within the layers of paper.

Hues of the striae begin with a similar color to match the silver-gray concrete floor, moving upwards into a warm sand, an intense golden ocher, then giving way to red-orange tones like iron-rich soil. It mimics diagrams depicting the planetary core. Strands of unbeaten Thai kozo are scrawled across several pages, as a calligraphic riparian text.

A large textile-inspired wall piece hangs from handmade rope. It too, has pages of stacked, longitudinal strips. It is composed of thin, tissue-like paper which is cyanotype-printed with traditional Thai woven patterns. This particular image was made from photographs of my grandmother’s long silk skirt, the one thing that was passed onto me.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Figure 5. Seeing in Reverse (detail), 2019, Framed Photogravure Copperplate, 2 pieces, Each 20 x16 in.*
It is important to consider the silk of this skirt or *pa-nung* in this context. Most of these woven silk textiles come from Isaan, Thailand’s north-east region which is covered in rice paddy fields. It’s where my grandmother grew up, in her mother’s old teak wood house. Traditionally, women farmers would grow mulberry trees to feed silkworms. During the off-season, they would harvest and spin the silk strands, incorporate natural dyes and weave highly intricate silk textiles on a hand-operated loom. In many Southeast Asian cultures, weaving on the loom is a metaphor for sexual intercourse and procreation, therefore, monks are forbidden to touch these fabrics. Interestingly, these types of book structures are modeled after ancient palm leaf manuscripts which were typically made only by monks.
MY SECOND SELF IS BLUE / BLUE CHEMISTRY

My attraction to cyanotype developed primarily as a way to describe flora, as in the traditions of Anna Atkins and her botanical prints. As I progressed with this medium, building up transparent matrices with liquid clay, folding and incising them, layering them with cartographic vocabulary to describe the deposition of sediment, the subterranean rivers, deltas and alluvial fans became a language of natural architecture. In this way, I employ the cyanotype most closely to the method it has become most known for, as the blueprint. I use it not only to underscore the language of the building world, but as a method of reproduction, documenting erosion and degradation. Both subtractive and additive marks indicate human intrusion and management of the land (Figure 10). The use of satellite imagery or the virtual gaze is an extension of how one knows the world which defines one’s perception of an actual place. The tension between these modalities in works such as *Mother Water, Original Translation* (Figure 11), *Between What Was* and *Trophic Avulsions*, emphasize the relational friction between nature and culture.

In *A Place to Rest One’s Palms* (Figure 7), Grandmother’s silk *pa-nung* (Figure 6) is replicated as cyanotype prints, the top half as negative and bottom half as positive images. The patterning mimics things found in nature. The main body of the skirt is decorated with a traditional sacred lotus pattern, its heart-shaped leaves and diamond buds move rhythmically across the iridescent silk. At the skirt’s hem are a thick band of architectural *stupas*. I found this design to be quite interesting and inquired with Thai relatives and friends about its possible symbolism. It was agreed that these were not the *stupas* of temples/monasteries, because these sacred structures would be unacceptable for women to wear on the lower part of the body.
The further I investigated the possibilities, I have come to believe that the designs are inspired by Mount Meru (also referred to as Sumeru), Buddhist cosmology’s sacred center of the universe. Multiple representations of this mountain persist throughout Southeast Asia. The most prevalent style in Thailand are from the Rattanakosin era marking the beginning of the Chakri dynasty which continues today (Figure 8).

Due to the lotus motif and water’s edge leading up to the Mount Meru-inspired stupas - I extrapolate two plausible interpretations. The pattern could depict a Thai sala or pavillion, a gazebo-like structure used to take rest from sun and rain. Or alternatively, and I lean more toward this possibility, is that it portrays a ho-trai or Buddhist scripture library.
These wooden stilted constructions are often perched in the middle of a rectangular lotus pond. The primary function of the pond was to deter ants, termites and vermin from destroying the sacred manuscripts.

SPACIAL AESTHETICS / REPRESENTATION

The operation of decoding symbols woven into a precious textile is similar to an experience of interpreting a map or satellite image. The activity of looking requires imagination. How time and space were to be represented became standardized in the early 19th century. The development of an established cartographic language became necessary in the understanding of spacial representations, as the visual vocabulary became a conjugation of the actual experience of the land. Bruno Latour refers to this as “a view from nowhere.”

In *Original Translation* (Figure 11), the viewer is positioned with a God’s-eye view of Thailand’s Chao Phraya river basin. At the approximate size of a single bed, the artwork performs as a type of miniature, challenging the viewer with an understanding of scale. The relationship between the self and the imagined operate in a sort of affective dissonance. There is something strangely utopic and dystopic about this vantage point. On the one hand, it allows a super-human perspective of a vast expanse. The cartographic plates seem to levitate. Yet its material composition of clear coverings, dust and cinders have a perceptual presence but an expressive absence. The ashes appear in an unsettled state, simultaneously defying authoritative definition and seeking its own ambivalent justification. The work’s stark character presents a chilling encounter with a past and future at once. A river, most often the symbol of life, is marked here as void, scar, hereafter.
It could be argued that my work could be seen as acts of sacrilege. The fact that I, a lay woman, am making my own version of the palm leaf manuscript, imbuing it with powers of the sacred feminine; touching the venerated cloth of monks and beating it down to a pulp; transforming it into my own concoctions laced with sediment from a heavily polluted river, discarded artwork, and ashes. This could be debated. However, the intention remains clear that it is tradition which my work pays homage to. Sacred and lesser known practices become part of the language of (matri)lineage, books as repositories of knowledge, the material as metaphysical vehicle.

To re imagine the ancient manuscript’s format, a monk’s sacred cloth, a grandmother’s handwoven silk dress, is an effort to preserve their heritage, both conceptually and materially. For if these practices are not recognized in the present, they are bound to disappear.
Like the *Signatures* (Figure 9) strewn about the gallery floor positioned closest to the point of entry and egress, they, like us, are represented as bone and skin, each unique, yet disembodied expressions of an imagined totality. Held together in the language of the abstract and the figural, they reverberate themes of familial longing and belonging.

The intersections and positioning of contradictory aspects in my work allows me to develop a discursive practice advocating for expansive discourse. Meandering between the subterranean and the architectural, the ‘eastern’ sacred and ‘western’ sublime, individuality and multiplicity, materiality and transcendence, my work operates within and across this in-between state. Whether speaking the language of cultural authority or conceptual authenticity, my work continues to translate meaning in the ever elusive act of conjugating being and alterity.
Figure 10. *Mother Water*, 2018, Laser-Etched Acrylic, Cyanotype, Porcelain Dust, 15 panels, Each 14 x 11 in.

Figure 11. *Original Translation*, 2019, Laser-etched Acrylic, Ash, Porcelain Dust, 15 panels, Each 14 x 11 in. Features the Chao Phraya River in Thailand.
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   [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Vc6nEgZOos8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Vc6nEgZOos8)


APPENDIX

My work making paper from sacred cloth is an ongoing project which aims to set in motion, a contemporary discourse around transnational relations, intergenerational memory, diasporic studies, and cultural preservation in its approach to bond and to bridge cross-culturally and across disciplines. I would like to thank the contributors involved with making this practice of interconnection a collective exercise. I extend deep gratitude to all that participated towards this project. I very much look forward to expanding its reach.

◊ Anocha Ratchina who collected robes from Wat Paknam, Buddhist Mediation Temple, 4545 Fishburg Rd, Huber Heights, OH 45424.

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◊ Wat Dallas, 2144 Rosebud Dr., Irving, TX 75060, many thanks to all of the lovely grandma’s that fed me their delicious spicy homemade dishes.