

Threads Entwined, Stories Unfolded, Futures Imagined

By
Kajill Kaur Aujla

BFA Honours, University of Calgary, 2019

A Thesis Support Paper Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Emily Carr University of Art + Design



© Kajill Aujla, 2021

*To my Grandparents and Parents...For without your
sacrifices, knowledge, perseverance and determination,
I would not be
here.*

Table of Contents

List of Figures	4
Land Acknowledgement	5
Personal Acknowledgements	6
Abstract	8
Sowing the Seeds	9
The Racial Imaginary	10
Cultural Grounding & Storytelling	14
Questions.....	16
Positionality: Roots of Reflexivity	18
Alternate Archives: Bringing Together Pieces Once Removed	21
53	21
Everything Grew but Here Stayed the Same	28
Hands that Make come from the Body that Listens	34
Dialogues & Situated Knowledges	37
Writers & Artists	37
To Dwell...Pause	51
Works Cited	56
Works Consulted	58

List of Figures

Figure 1. Kajill Aujla, *Untitled*, 2020, multi-textile quilt. Detail shot.

Figure 2. Kajill Aujla, *53*, 2020, multi-textile fabric installation.

Figure 3. Kajill Aujla, *53*, 2020, multi-textile installation. Detail shot.

Figure 4. Kajill Aujla, *Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same*, 2020, multi-textile fabric installation.

Figure 5. Kajill Aujla, *Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same*, 2020, multi-textile fabric installation.

Figure 6. Rajni Perera, *Traveller*, 2019, mixed media on paper

Figure 7. Rajni Perera, *Traveller*, 2019, mixed media on paper

Figure 8. Eric N. Mack, *Untitled (set drape)*, 2019, Assorted fabrics, scarves, pins, cotton, polyester plaid, rope, metal hanging rod

Figure 9. *Acclimate*, Kajill Aujla, 2021, Multi-textile fabric installation, saree's, digital photographs, dimensions variable. Photograph taken by Michael Love, 2021.

Land Acknowledgement

The place we call “home” can be filled with comfort, contradictions, and challenges. There is a sacred understanding that where we grow is connected to the land upon which we occupy – whether it is part of our ancestry or not. This thesis was developed on the Indigenous territories of both British Columbia and Alberta, Canada. This is where I begin in naming the place I call “home.”

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather in Vancouver, British Columbia is the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlíl̓wətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

I was born in the City of Calgary and here I acknowledge the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) and the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Siksika, the Piikani, the Kainai, the Tsuut’ina and the Stoney Nakoda First Nations, including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations. The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

My ancestral home is that of Punjab, India. A place I often call home with the knowledge that I was born outside the land of rolling fields and five rivers. It is the place where my family departed yet never left in spirit.

Within these “homes,” I am humbled and aware of the history and wisdom given to the creation of this thesis. The name “home” takes space in every part of this work.

Personal Acknowledgements

My journey within this Master's program has been one full of self-growth and realization. There is no denying that it felt like an uphill battle most of the time—from moving to a new home, to then moving back home because of the pandemic. Oddly, it feels as though it went by in no time. In reflecting on the past two years, I am reminded of how fragile time is and how sacred our experiences are in building who we are. I certainly could not have done what I did in this program without the help and support of those who were around me and saw me through it...

To my supervisor, Christine Howard-Sandoval, thank you for your unbounded kindness and support throughout this journey of learning and creativity. The work that ensued from my time in this program along with my personal growth would not have been realized if it was not for your guidance, honest feedback and genuine care in knowledge-sharing. I would also like to thank Dr. Sue Shon—you showed me what it means to be vehemently dedicated to your craft; you opened doors to understanding Critical Race Theory in ways that have been foundational in my work and beyond. It was a privilege to be a part of your classes; they were a safe space for me. And, to Steven Lam, thank you for your generosity and support through this program and for believing in the work that I do.

To my parents, Jarnail and Shinder, you are the reason I am able to dream, endlessly. Thank you for always supporting me in all aspects of my life. The values you have instilled in me run deep and guide me through any and all of life's challenges. You are my core. To my sisters, Sonia, Jessie, Melveera, and Salina—you are the best older

sisters anyone could ask for. I am the woman I am today because of you all. My partner, Jasdeep, thank you for your constant support and excitement throughout this journey. To my Nani, Mohinder Kaur, and my Dadi, Parkash Kaur, your resilience and strength is unfathomable to me. Without your stories, love, and presence, we would all be lost. And, finally, to my Kam Masi, and Sati Mama, you are a force unlike any other. You made B.C. a home filled with love, warmth and laughter; I truly would not have survived without you here.

I would also like to humbly acknowledge that this research and subsequent creative work was supported through funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in the form of Canada Graduate Scholarship-Master's: Joseph Armand Bombardier Award.

Abstract

Threads Entwined, Stories Unfolded, Futures Imagined is a thesis project which begins to unravel narratives of becoming, personhood and the radicality of imagination that Punjabi Sikh women, in my life, have cultivated. I bring forward and explore these themes in my work as an artist. Through artistic exploration of a scrap fabric collection of traditional, cultural garments that goes back decades in my family, I bring together modes of being and becoming. Navigating forms of braiding, tying, knotting, as well as sewing and reconstructing, these fabrics serve as the groundwork in approaching the complexities, resilience and strength these women carry in their limitlessness. The recognition of our being here in what we know to be “Canada” is weighted by stories of struggle, displacement and adaptation. This thesis project is geared toward paving space for our voices to be amplified, our experiences shared and reckoned with through celebration.

Sublime are The Imaginative Forces Within Us.

Sowing the Seeds

As people do, even when they migrate under extreme duress, they bring with them their spiritual beliefs and their language - not solely the trauma of being separated from their sources - which exist in an odd, at times inequitable, balance within the third culture. These ways of being mitigate the stressors of being othered in the third culture and support a connectedness to indigeneity.

These beliefs reference times and worlds so ancient and so magnificent that we rationalize them as impossible. Curiously, belief when coupled with the passage of time yields realms of possibility that require only patience and intention to be cultivated.

- Negarra A. Kudumu

The Racial Imaginary and Other-Dimensional Spaces

Working with scrap material has allowed me to exercise my imagination in ways I have never done before. Being presented with something that has little to no use in terms of practical functionality, I was pushed into the realm of imagining potential possibilities of transformation with the scrap fabrics I had. Imagination has always been of great fascination to me, as it has the ability to transport us to different worlds unlike our realities: imagination can manifest our dreams. In my work, imagination functions as a force used against conforming to and unconsciously upholding harmful systems of oppression. Under this light, imagination is also used as a portal for creating maps of joy, memory, and celebration. I think back to a project (figure 1) I made in collaboration with my mother. We took a box of scrap fabrics that were cut away from countless garments, collected over years and years, cut strips from those fabrics and stitched them together. We created a quilt of sorts. When we looked at the completed piece, my mother was reminded of all the places she had travelled and moved to—the gifts, memories, joy, and heartaches that came with those places. For me, I was able to imagine those places and the experiences they brought to my mother. This moment of remembering then turned into intimate conversations about the past and about my future.



Figure 1. *Untitled*, 2020, multi-textile quilt. Detail shot.

To be able to imagine and dream of alternate histories and futures is to be able to imagine our existence as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour as free and righteous. In the context of this paper, I use The Racial Imaginary—a term I came across by authors Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*—as a space of liberation and freedom from White supremacist systems that engulf our everyday, real-world realities. And yet, it is not a place where race, along with its complex histories, is abandoned. It is necessary to make this distinction when I speak to The Racial Imaginary for there are also harmful ways in which this space can and has been enacted on in terms of the erasure of history, race and culture. Rankine and Loffreda articulate that,

It is not only white writers who make a prize of transcendence, of course. Many writers [and creatives] of all backgrounds see the imagination as ahistorical, as a generative place where race doesn't and shouldn't enter, a space for bodies to transcend the legislative, the economic – transcend the stuff that doesn't lend itself much poetry. In this view the imagination is postracial, a posthistorical, and postpolitical utopia. (16)

In my work, I am adding my own perspectives of The Racial Imaginary into the “collective transcripts” (14) that Loffreda and Rankine have brought together—a perspective that renders the beauty and poetry in embracing ourselves as we are. My vision of this space and the art that comes from it is saturated with reckoning with our identity, history, and race in a way that is celebratory and joyful. Specifically, I seek ways to access the space of Other-Dimensional existence that is beyond our physical

world with a focus on how I, as a Punjabi Sikh woman, can fabricate this space of existence, or entry point to it, for those in my own community. What I call Other-Dimensional space is a space that breaks free of harmful confinement that has been perpetuated through oppressive cultural “traditions”¹ and expectations that we are subjected to as Punjabi Sikh women in our now-world. In this space of Other-Dimensionality, The Racial Imaginary is anchored in reimagining the social construct of race and ethnicity—it is a direct response and resistance to hegemonic systems. I see this space and way of existence as a spiritual and healing possibility to be further realized and harnessed in my art practice. Seeing and understanding the possibility of this Other-Dimension and the imagination of what this space could be, is what keeps us pushing forward, pushing for change, pushing for better: the thundering resilience that continues in all of us.

¹ I use quotations here to signify a critical questioning towards what constitutes certain traditions to be carried forward to future generations. There seems to be much confusion and tension within the Punjabi community when it comes to certain “traditions” such as those that are aligned with harmful patriarchy within family structures (e.g., expectations that in cis-hetero marriages, the woman is to move in with the husband’s family and put herself and her family second to the husband and his family—the concept of patrilocality). I argue that the word and concept of “tradition” in this case is confused with what should be referred to as harmful norms.

Cultural Grounding

With each part and fragment of my works there is a story that is entwined within the threads that hold it together—a story of experience and becoming. As I began to work with the scrap fabrics I came across, a world of storytelling began to unravel. From the intimate stories my Nani² shared with me about how she learned to sew and the jobs she had to the ones my mother shared with me about life as a newlywed and moving thousands of miles away from her family, every piece crafted in my work carries a story, a deep significance to my being. Storytelling has been an integral part of understanding my familial history and the strength of the women that have come before me. I have a deep fascination and admiration for the stories of growing up, navigating new “homes,” cultural experiences and the spiritual knowledge that my mother, and my grandmothers have shared with me. I am in constant awe over how much strength they all have and I hope and dream to harness even a fraction of that same strength and resilience in the face of any and all change and adversity. When it comes to how I hold these stories and bring them into my research and art practice, it is also my responsibility to think deeply about the potential harm that could come from the spaces in which I bring these stories of being and becoming. This is where I can draw from Indigenous methodologies and understandings of cultural grounding in research. As author Margaret Kovach explains:

For Indigenous research, cultural grounding is best defined within the context of a person’s life and relationship with culture. As with non-Indigenous researchers,

² Punjabi word for maternal grandmother

its significance may depend upon their life context and how they engage with culture. This commentary defines cultural grounding as the way that culture nourishes the researcher's spirit during the inquiry, and how it nourishes the research itself. There are levels of cultural involvement within research. Some customs are shared openly, others privately. This needs to be respected. (114-115)

The idea of cultural grounding is to understand more deeply, by way of practice, the ways in which I navigate academia with the personal, familial archive I work so closely with. As a fourth-born daughter to immigrant parents, I have experienced the anxiety that comes with trying to fit in and being accepted. I lost touch with my native language, Punjabi, in my childhood and this carried well into adulthood. English was and continues to be the primary language I use to communicate with my parents, despite English being their second language. In recent years, I have come to realize how out of touch I feel with my own culture, language and identity as a Punjabi Sikh woman. To even claim my identity as a Punjabi Sikh woman has come with its hesitations in the past. This journey and practice of cultural grounding in my work is a way for me to connect to my heritage in ways I have not before. I am constantly reflecting on the question: how am I engaging with my culture through the transference of these stories and experiences of my mother and grandmothers? Reflexivity through the process of listening and understanding was and continues to be crucial for me in many aspects of understanding my own being. Keeping in mind the importance of cultural grounding throughout my time in the MFA program, I was able to stay present with my work while

actively reflecting on the stories that started me on this journey. This process of reflecting and staying present with the works allowed me to reckon with my womanhood and Punjabi Sikh identity and not solely serve a purpose of researching for academic reasons.

Questions

The work I create in my art practice begins with reflecting on an array of questions pertaining to identity, personhood, being and imagination. These questions, although they may not be explicitly about the physical making of art, all work to inform the way that I think through my creative process. In other words, I use the research questions that I craft as a portal to enter the dimensions of artistic expression. It is not until the work begins to come together that I am able to weave back through the art to understand the questions more deeply themselves. The questions root the meaning of my work and the stake of these questions reflect a deep curiosity in my real, lived experiences. I am not intending to minimize the importance of well-formulated, foundational inquiries into my art practice itself, but rather, I am recognizing that my experiences, and those of the women in my family, can never solely be encapsulated in art. Through this ongoing reflexive journey in my art practice, questions have come and gone, both in relation to my creative practice and outside of it. The overarching inquiries that have guided my way through this journey and have framed my path of artistic exploration are the following questions:

In what ways do intergenerational storytelling and a sharing of familial narratives inform my sense of and claim to personhood? And how is that expressed in my work?

In what ways does thinking through imagination and creating alternative pasts/futures allow us to celebrate and further realize our own selves and the communities we are a part of beyond the dimensions we currently live in? How does this create space for personal and collective healing?

How do we make sense of the feeling of displacement across generations (immigrants, third culture peoples—as in 1st generation born and raised in what we know as Canada)? How is this realized through a creative lens and practice? What informs what?

Each of these questions stays present in my mind through the stories that are shared with me. More specifically, when I enter modes of making, I come back to these questions as overarching guides to assist in delving deeper into the threads of each story and the experiences that characterise them.

Positionality: Roots of Reflexivity

Identity has been and continues to be an integral part and entry point into my art research practice. My process of making is centered on and around the intergenerational storytelling that happens within my own family. My family's roots are in Punjab, India and I identify as a first-generation Punjabi Canadian woman. Before entering this program, my research focused on how identity is understood as I took a broader approach into investigating South Asian Canadian identity. Delving into my personal inquiry and negotiation of identity and the way it is understood as a South Asian (Punjabi) Canadian woman, I further refined and geared my research towards naming it as a Punjabi Canadian identity. Because I continue to work closely with familial and ancestral narrative, I found it appropriate to make this distinction in my research as "South Asian" covers a huge population of differing identities. Furthermore, the question of what "Canadian" identity encompasses and how Canada appears as a legible nation-state is foundational to this discourse on positionality. This is about understanding and reckoning with the fact that my family and I are uninvited guests on this land which should be wholly recognized as Indigenous land and to a greater extent, acknowledged as territory of the vast number of nations that were here well before the time of colonization and immigration.

The positionality in my research and creative efforts start with the basis that I am a cis-gender woman of South Asian descent. I see positionality as being fluid and evolving—always having the potential to shift and mold differently at any stage of my practice and life. My connectedness to my Punjabi heritage and culture stems from the

storytelling that my mother, father, and grandparents have raised me with. It is an ongoing discovery and a growing relationship that continues to mold the way I see myself, my works, and my research, as well as decolonizing methods in all aspects of my life. In choosing to work within the realm of textiles³, and specifically those that are tied to Punjabi or South Asian culture more broadly, I am physicalizing an aspect of the relationship to my heritage and identity through storytelling by way of creative expression.

In the current moment of my practice, I identify as a Punjabi Sikh woman living in what we know to be Canada. My practice and my identity are deeply intertwined—it is how I am embodied in my work; it informs the way the work interacts with its surroundings and viewers. In the added dimension of spirituality and faith (Sikhism), I am acknowledging another intersection of my own identity that has been informed by my upbringing and close family. This part of my identity makes its way into my work as a guiding presence. My mother and grandmothers are very spiritual people and all life lessons they have taught me have always had a basis in Sikhi and what it means to be a Sikh woman. My family history and the familial narratives that surround me are a grounding part of my identity. As I continue my research into storytelling between generations, and the spirituality that connects all these points together, there is space to add my own perspectives and learning. This is where I strive to understand the vast possibilities of imagination. Within the radical possibility of imagination, or what I refer to as the Other-Dimension, is a place of creating worlds where we unboundedly celebrate all that our beings are and hold without the harms and traumas of colonization,

³ More on this under the section titled 'Alternate Archives: Bringing Together Pieces Once Removed'

oppression, and marginalization that have forcibly walked hand-in-hand with Punjabi Sikh women's identity in time and space today.

When it comes to art-making within the archive of scrap materials, my positionality informs my approach and understanding of the fabrics. As I begin to make, I am reminded that the materials have come from our bodies in the sense that they are pieces that were once connected to garments that myself, my grandmothers, mother, sisters and aunts would wear. There are an array of different fabric pieces, materials, patterns, and colours that reflect the different facets and intersections of our identities. When they are brought together, they form their own identity and story and this becomes an access terminal for viewers to engage with my positionality as an artist.

Alternate Archives: Bringing Together Pieces Once Removed

Adaas na ho. Tu mere kol ayein-aa, mein bohath kush hain.

(Don't be sad. You've come to be with me, I am so happy)

Conversations with Nani, 2019

53

53—a number that sits between my Nani and me. A number of years. A number of moments. A number that bridges us together, between generations.

53 (2020) takes form as a multi-textile installation piece in which different layers of fabrics, pockets and braided material are suspended by single threads floating in space. When installed, 53 traverses a space of eight feet across and two feet in length and depth. Each suspended part in 53 takes on a unique form, with differing combinations of fragments layered in each piece. No single fragment is alike. Installing this work in its entirety allowed me to create a piece that manipulated how the viewer moved through the space. Hanging each individual piece from the ceiling allowed me to envision a type of solar system or formal relationality, where each hung part determined the next while still holding its own unique form and individuality. The thin, white threads that weaved through every article of fabric visually and structurally bound the pieces together into a single ecosystem which allowed the pieces to be suspended in time and space.

53 was the first piece I made using the vast archive of scrap or remnant fabrics cut-out and left behind from all the suits⁴ that were sewn for my Nani by my Masi⁵. The scraps were an entry point to considering the narratives of my grandmother. The fabrics have moved from functionality, in terms of a fabric made into a garment which is meant to protect and cover our bodies, to now being cut out, left behind, almost forgotten. I started making 53 by investigating the scrap fabrics that were collected over time for reasons unknown. The project began through experimenting with the sewing machine and different threads, patterns and shapes. As I continued to engage with these fabrics, I understood them as emblems of joy, celebration, history and story—this continues today and stays present anytime I begin to craft with them. Ann Cvetkovich, author and Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Carleton University, addresses the archive in her writing and proposes the need to construct a different archive that is necessary for us to tackle and understand feelings such as depression resulting from the long-standing effects of racism and colonization (25). My approach to working with the remnant fabrics from my grandmother's suits is an act of constructing and examining my own matriarchal archive and the larger implications of cultural norms and expectations within the Punjabi Sikh community. Although racism and colonization are not explicitly discussed by my grandmother, it is from the stories of migration, opportunity, work, labour and survival that these connections arise. Through the process and labour of

⁴ My family refers to our traditional garments as suits which comprise of a kameez (long top) and pajami (pants). There are many different styles of suits all with different names, this word is used as a generalization.

⁵ Punjabi word for “mother’s sister”

making these 53 pieces, I came to understand a part of my Nani's experiences and her nostalgia of a different time but also the sadness that such nostalgia brought up.

Prior to starting this piece, I did not know how to operate a sewing machine, how to thread one, or sew any sort of garment so I initially sought the help of my Masi to get started. I began practicing with the fabric scraps I had. I refer to them as scraps not to insinuate that they are useless or items to be thrown away, but to exert agency in how I interact with, see, name and then transform them. By referring to them as scraps, and yet insisting on their radical imaginative and transformative power, I hope to evoke readers to reconstruct their imagining of what that term means. I would layer the scraps, fold them and then stitch very straightforward lines through the fabrics, sometimes following an edge, sometimes not. I was thinking through ways I could layer these remnant fabrics with other materials that I sourced from a local Punjabi fabric store. I was also thinking through different ways in which I could insert myself within this piece, along with my Nani and the fabrics that were left behind from her suits. The particular store from which I sourced my chosen fabrics from is also the only store my Nani will shop at for her own fabrics. Most of the fabrics I sourced from this store came from a bin that was placed in the corner, at the back of the store. In this bin were discarded fabrics that were unsuitable for sewing garments, as they either were mismeasured, end-of-the-roll fabrics or simply did not measure enough to be usable. This is where the ideas around and within 53 began to formulate.

I would take the fabrics that I had bought and cut them into different shapes and sizes. I began to layer the scraps from my Nani's suits with these newly cut textiles from

my own fabrics. This process was a way for me to imagine how the textiles connected my Nani and I. When mapping out each fragment and determining how it would attach or weave into the next fabric, my childhood memories of staying with my Nani and the trips we would take as a family to my grandparent's farm in B.C. were activated. As I felt more familiar with the sewing machine, I would follow some of the thread patterns that were on the scraps and carry them into the new pieces as I layered them together – as histories lead to the present and then the future. Through the process of layering and sewing these scraps together, my Nani would periodically come into the kitchen where I had set up shop and she would sit, curiously, asking what I was trying to do. She didn't understand the conceptual intention of just putting random pieces of cloth together and sewing them. She insisted that I made something functional, something real—her instruction introduced the pocket into my work.

The pocket became a point in which she could find some understanding and connection in what I was doing—a transference and teaching of a skill between us. She would take the fabric pieces, carefully line up the edges and instruct me on how to sew them together. There was a sense of pride and happiness from her after showing me how to do one, and then another, and then another. The pocket became a site of two apparent things: 1) Safekeeping in both the sense of building a skill that reflects the value of labour within capitalistic systems and a place where we keep things protected, and 2) A container where things, feelings, and emotions can be carried, or even forgotten. I continued making the pockets and then began trying different forms of 'layering' the fabrics. I would cut long strips and braid those together or tie knots with

them. Every time my Nani would slowly tread into the kitchen, I switched from the random stitching and layering back to the pocket. Each pocket created in *53* connects back to my Nani's presence in a way, both physically and mentally. In all, I created 53 intimately small, multi-textile pieces through layering and stitching, knotting, or braiding. *53* dwells in air, space and time. It is in no rush and will always be present just as our histories and stories will always be there, here, everywhere. It can also be configured, in the sense that each piece's placement can be rearranged, which speaks to the fluidity and ongoing-ness of identity construction. I appreciate this particular element of the work in its entirety. *53*'s wholeness depends on each individual fragment being present, yet each fragment can be moved to a different formation in space where it can find another relation to the next fragment. The dynamic configurability of *53* functions like the stories my Nani shared with me and how these stories, no matter the span of time that traverses them, connect me to her. The possibilities and imagination of these reconfigurations in space are limitless.

53 is special for me. It was a way to bond with my Nani in a manner beyond words or physical connection.



Figure 2. Kajill Aujla. 53, 2020, multi-textile fabric installation.



Figure 3. Kajill Aujla. 53, 2020, multi-textile installation. Detail shot.

Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same

*you broke the ocean in
half to be here.
only to meet nothing that wants you.
-immigrant*

Nayyirah Waheed

Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same, was set up in the backyard of my family's home—a place I have known my whole life. Through this piece, I explore the concept of heirlooms, the memories associated with them and a personal, family archive of ornate fabrics, sarees, and other textiles. Specifically, I consider how these have been carried throughout the years as maps of memory. Networks of distinct materials, designs, colours, embroidery, patterning and texture all intersect to transport us to the Other-Dimension. It is here where we are engrossed in memory and the joy of remembering.

Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same challenges the notion of cultural adaptation and displacement through the meticulous arrangement of fabrics suspended above blanketing snow. The process of this project was to feel through the space of my family's backyard. I was working with the scrap fabrics I had brought back with me from B.C. while also exploring some of my mother's sarees that were gifted to her when she was a newlywed. Similar to 53 and working with my Nani and her scrap fabrics, I now had the opportunity to work with my mother and the suits and other scrap fabrics she held onto over the years. I used various techniques and approaches when crafting this piece. I braided the sarees, tied other fabrics together and draped others across

different structures found in the backyard. A yellow rope that I found in our backyard became one of the central elements in the work for suspending and holding the textiles up, much like a clothes line. I envisioned this piece harmonizing with the backyard and all its structures from the trees to the fences so that they were not seen as disparate, but rather in conversation with each other, supporting each other.

Growing up, my mother always took great pride in dressing myself and my sisters up, whether it was for an occasion or just for fun at home. She would gently comb and braid our hair in different styles from French braids, double-braids, single braids to a style called *karella*⁶ in Punjabi. My sisters and I were told that braids kept our hair strong and kempt. My memories of having my mother, grandmothers, aunts and sisters braid my hair are saturated with feelings of love and safety. The form of the braid, as seen in this work, protects, preserves, and cares for all that it holds – the stories within the folds, wrinkles, and threads of the fabrics. The braid embodies a vessel of strength and resiliency. It supports and carries itself in different forms and shapes as each strand is layered into the next. The attentiveness that goes into the braid and the action of the braiding is a reflection of the same care and resiliency the women in my family carry with them throughout all aspects of their lives. The braid connects us back to the body as it bridges our physical form to the plains of radical imagination.

The backyard of our family home is a place of retreat. Each year, at the break of spring, the garden is revitalized by the hands of my mother and father with herbs,

⁶ This braid is done with two braids on either side of the head with a ribbon weaved through. The braids are then looped back up to the starting point at the head and are finished with a bow, tied with the ribbon. This style is a common style for young school girls to wear in India. My mother's hair was worn in *karella* when she attended grade school in Punjab, India.

vegetables, fruits, and flowers. I feel the spirit of farming⁷ that runs deep in our roots find solace in the soil here. When winter engulfs our backyard, the site of retreat is paused. The garden wilts and where green grass once was, cold, white snow masks over. The process of thinking through site and place echoes the process of adaptation. I am actively thinking through adaptation in this work because the process and necessity of adapting is something that immigrants, migrants, and refugees all come to experience when it comes to shifting geographic regions. When I am engaging with family history and narrative, the act of adaptation is continually present. Adaptation does not always feel like a choice; I have learned this through experience and the countless stories that have been shared with me from family members, particularly my parents' account of moving to Canada. I find myself in flux with this notion of adaptation. I am actively dwelling in the space of negotiating what adaptation means for me and at what points do we push against forced or expected adaptation.

With this work I am also reflecting on my own process of adapting – from moving away from the place I have known as home my entire life, to then facing a pandemic and moving back home to finish my studies. When I was accepted into the Master of Fine Arts program at Emily Carr University of Art+Design, I was overjoyed, but I knew that embarking on this journey would bring change. The biggest step was moving away from home, and adjusting to living with my Nani, just her and me. Naturally, I was nervous to meet new people and be starting a new program in a city that was unfamiliar to me. I had my intentions set on painting when entering the program because it was

⁷ My family comes from a lineage of farmers in Punjab, India. All my grandparents, and their grandparents, were farmers in Punjab. We carry pride in this and the spirit of farmers stays close to our heart despite being displaced from the lands in which we grew.

what I was most comfortable with. I was holding on to painting as a comfort from my past, something familiar, and using it as a bridge to the present. Katie Logan, Professor of Focused Inquiry at Virginia Commonwealth University and author of “Re-membering Displacement: Miral al-Tahawy’s *Brooklyn Heights* and the Politics of Memory” articulates this sentiment of bridging past to present as a “remembering practice” (619). Logan expands that, “a remembering practice is the means through which an individual brings her past to bear on the present, the way she connects old and new spaces, and the way she interacts with others in the present through the past” (619). This “remembering practice” finds itself in every part of this journey, up to this piece and beyond. It is through the feelings of displacement and then adapting that I was able to take the steps to shift my practice from painting to textiles, much like how this project, and the scraps moved between cities, adapted to their placement and generated new narratives while also being in dialogue with the past from which they came and associated memories.

Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same revitalizes a space at a time in which it feels uninhabitable. It evokes the possibility of imagining our existence in a place that has time and time again required us to adapt. This piece is the bold reminder that we are *here*.



Figure 4. Kajill Aujla, *Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same*, 2020, multi-textile fabric installation.



Figure 5. Kajill Aujla, *Everything Grew, but Here Stayed the Same*, 2020, multi-textile fabric installation.

The Hands that Create come from the Body that Listens

Storywork educates and heals the heart, mind, body, and spirit, weaving new synergies of transformational change through deep interrelation understanding of story, people and space.

- Jo-Ann Archibald

The process of storytelling and true-listening are where I find the roots of my research methodology. Connecting more deeply with my cultural heritage, roots and family history allow me to engage in the act of true-listening with family members as they tell me stories of their upbringing, immigration, and experiences with Punjabi culture and rooted traditions. I define true-listening as the unaltered, uninterrupted act of providing space, encouraged by curiosity, to those whom are sharing their intimate experience and knowledge through oral storytelling. Through this process of listening, engaging and being reflexive with these stories, particularly those from my mother and grandmothers, I find inspiration in entering the dimensions of creativity with my art practice. It is then through the process of making and creating that I further find and build connections between my own understandings of familial history, narrative and the experiences and knowledge of the women in my family. This happens through the investigation of the archive of materials that have accumulated over time and space. I refer to the scraps as a part of an archive in that they are primary sources of my family history—left in their state, yet connected to the garments from which they came, like a map of memory and history. Under this light, “the archive is simultaneously the outcome of historical process and the very condition for the production of historical knowledge”

(Dirks 40) as it pertains to the scraps and the garments from which they were cut.

Through remembering where these fabrics were sourced, and the memories associated with them, the textiles are immersed in dialogue when brought together and my hand becomes a guide to understanding.

My work turns to Indigenous methodologies of storywork and storytelling as a method of decolonizing my research and as a way to connect to my own familial history here in so-called-Canada (Kovach 112). It is important to recognize that storytelling and oral histories have a deep-rooted significance within Indigenous cultures. The history of Indigenous storywork is expansive as it extends thousands and thousands of years and there are respected protocols around storytelling namely, who is a storyteller and who is a story-listener (Archibald 2).

For my own research into familial history, the approach to storytelling includes oral accounts of personal experiences, stories and teaching of the ten Gurus of Sikhism⁸, and knowledge-sharing through stories of certain cultural practices. The personal experiences that are shared to me are specific to my family members and our familial narratives of being and becoming. The teachings, stories and knowledge-sharing of the tenants of Sikhi and cultural practices are expansive across Punjabi Sikhs as a community with some differences between specific approaches and adopting of cultural practices. To understand the significance of storytelling across different

⁸ Sikhi or Sikhism is one of the six most widely practiced religions across the world. The Punjabi word *Sikh* means 'student.' E-course, *Sikhism Through its Scriptures*, offered through HarvardX learning platform, articulates: "Despite this diversity and differences in practice in different cultural contexts, most Sikhs accept the authority of the ten Sikh Gurus; the Sikh scripture Guru Granth Sahib; and the *Panth* as the political body of the Sikhs as a people (Harpreet Singh)."

cultures, where it comes from and how we learn from it, is to elevate its rich history and reverence throughout the generations.

This way of processing my research is pertinent to applying an anti-racist lens in both learning and creating as it is based in amplifying stories of otherwise marginalized communities. As told to me by my elders, our community has pushed for space so that these stories may exist. With the art-making that ensues from the story-work, I build upon my own understandings and narratives of self and personhood. My creative works become the ground of exploration and reflexivity in understanding how the various experiences of women before me have come together to form the fabric of our being. It is in this way we move forward in imagining futures.

Dialogues & Situated Knowledges

Writers & Artists

In this section, I outline three chosen sources that have provided me contextual ground work for thinking through conceptual themes within my practice and draw out these connections. In contextualizing my research and further situating it in conversations that I see pertinent for its growth and articulation, I find myself looking at an array of texts and writing. These include, but are not limited to, poetry, Indigenous methodologies and story-work, and exhibition essays. Investigating and unpacking each piece of writing allows me to approach my own work with new theoretical lenses that allow me to forge important connections and contexts. It is important for me to read and engage with diverse voices and modes of creativity in writing, as it molds my understanding of my artistic practice and the writing that comes from it. Connecting with other artists and writers builds a strong, spanning network of dialogue in which my creative pieces are linked to and supported in research, practice, and process. My practice is not self-sustainable; by this, I mean that the artists and writers I place my research in conversation with greatly help ground this work, much like how I am grounded by the women who have come before me and the family which supports me.

Rupi Kaur, a poet of South Asian descent, demonstrates the eloquent narrative qualities of poetry to readers throughout her book *Milk and Honey* (2015); her poems have been a voice for so many women to relate to. She describes each chapter as serving a purpose and pouring into the next like that of “a journey of the most bitter moments in life [that] find sweetness” (Kaur 215). I have chosen to narrow in on a

specific poem by Kaur in further articulating the connection and perspective shift I have undertaken in my work. Five lines, flowing into one another, warmed by one another on an otherwise cold, blank page, the poem reads:

our backs
tell stories
no books have
the spine to
carry

– *women of colour* (Kaur 174)

The connections between poetry and visual art lies in the dynamics of storytelling, and the ways in which stories can be translated, received and understood through these similar, but different, modalities. Similar to poetry and the annotations that each reader can insert with their own understandings of the words, visual art requires a similar level of reading between the lines. It is this point that I become drawn to the different approaches of creativity in speaking to women's stories and experiences, especially on the topics of healing, plight and joy. The message does not need to be lengthy in order for it to be understood. Taking this notion into the art of creating in the visual realm, I have been cautious in giving away too much. By this, I mean creating too many access portals into the work itself where the stories and narratives have the potential to become

threatened or harmed by the viewer's gaze or similarly the gallery's institutional walls.⁹

There is deep consideration that goes into each element's presence or lack thereof and it is often up to the audience to find ways of understanding this or to fill in the blanks.

This becomes a point of heavy consideration in my own approach to making and sharing. As we see here with Kaur's poem, without spilling into personal accounts or experiences, she leaves us with a notion that is fortified and strong in its essence and message.

My artistic practice is deeply entwined with the storytelling and oral histories of my own familial ancestry; the words of this poem are echoed in my experiences and knowledge of the stories and ways of being of the women in my family. While Kaur uses words to bridge these experiences, I am using a vast array of textiles to weave together personal and collective narratives. The poem not only serves as a reminder that women's stories are so much greater than these pages, and in my case the white walls of a gallery, could ever contain, but also that there is a profound responsibility in how we speak to and of these narratives. We, as self-identified women of colour readers and viewers, realize the depth, the resiliency, the hurt, the pain, and most of all the strength of the women we remember in these accounts.

This poem continues to ring true in nodding to the plight of women of colour, yet the simplicity echoes the grace and unrelenting determination that they carry with them through their lives and hardships. Poetry allows one to fill in the spaces between the lines and the surrounding blankness on the page with our own narrative. It is this

⁹ Further articulation of this sentiment seen in annotation for Margaret Kovach's "Situating Self, Culture, and Purpose in Indigenous Inquiry". *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Context*.

striking quality from this piece of writing that I have found gravitational for its creativity, straightforwardness, and power. The notion of ‘less is more’ announces itself and it is realized that the relationship and order of words build to empower one another. Through enjambment, Kaur demonstrates the wholeness this poem emulates while still letting the words such as “stories” and “backs” mirror each other on separate lines. The wholeness of our beings as women and the beautiful complexities of our individual selves is emphasized in this poem by the order of the lines and words chosen. I take this approach when working through materials and viewing them as objects that can work to inform the next—a relational quality that supersedes quantity or levels of production. In working from the archive of scrap materials that have accumulated over the years, there are poems within those fabrics, untold. It is with the meticulous pairing and stitching that those stories feed into one another. I see it as a networking of narrative—one piece informs the next and they become immersed in a dialogue that unravels as the pieces come together. Under this light of creation and process, Kaur’s poem sticks with me. Listening to and reflecting on all the stories of becoming and being the women in my family have shared with me keeps me grounded in my research around familial narratives and creative output.



The sixth chapter, “Situating Self, Culture and Purpose,” of Margaret Kovach’s book *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Context* (2009)

speaks poignantly about how the self is located in research. Kovach applies and articulates her knowledge around the frameworks in which Indigenous methodologies come to function within her own research inquiries and, a step further, how this operates (or not) within academia and the institution. I chose to turn my focus to this chapter of Kovach's book for how it has informed and taught me the ways in which I may apply a decolonizing lens to my own research methods – this point is of importance for several reasons but I will narrow in on two. The first being the urgency to not concede to the inherently colonial systems that have informed what academia is and how it functions today. Secondly, in working intimately with ancestral narratives and familial history, there is a risk of harming those teachings and knowledges when brought into the institution. In other words, interrogating the purposes for doing this learning and connecting inside the university is imperative. As Sara Ahmed's "A Phenomenology of Whiteness" also reminds us,

We can also consider 'institutions' as orientation devices, which take the shape of 'what' resides within them. After all, institutions provide collective or public spaces. When we describe institutions as 'being' white (institutional whiteness), we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces (157).

Recognizing that most institutions hold this inherent whiteness at their core, I work to be deliberate and cautious with the stories and experiences I bring into that space to protect against harm.

Centering Indigenous research methodologies and praxis as a way of decolonizing research within the institution is crucial to my practice. Kovach articulates the notion of purpose and approach in research by writing, “Keeping one’s location front and centre is a way that individuals can consciously assert from where their strength comes, and ensure that their integrity will not become compromised by the trials of academic research” (112). In attempts to further understand my own identity as an individual who was born and raised here in so-called-Canada, to immigrant parents, centering Indigenous methodologies in my practice is a way to acknowledge how my family and I are uninvited guests here. Our being here on this land does not go without recognizing that this is stolen, forcibly occupied land by settlers (Kovach 110). What we know as Canada has a vast and deep-rooted history of Indigenous nations and communities whose spirit extends thousands of years before the horrors of colonialism came to Turtle Island and continue in fierce resiliency today. Through my exploration of family history as a way to connect to self and personhood, Indigenous methodologies and frameworks in researching and understanding continually keep me grounded in this work.

Engaging in learning and knowledge sharing between generations within my family as a way to enter the realm of creativity and narrative expression is a process of intimacy. There is so much to this work that extends far beyond the validation that the academy could ever offer me or the experiences of the women from which these stories breathe life. It is through learning about Indigenous methodologies that I have come to this realization: If the purpose does not center back to you and your community, there is

a real possibility of exposure to harm and further colonization of the stories we share (Kovach 115). As a woman of colour, I find that an important part of continually applying a decolonizing lens in research, and particularly that which is tied to creative expression, is always connecting back to the self to nourish, empower and heal our beings and community.



The act of relating myself through my art to others is a form of meditation in that it serves as a loop to connect more deeply with the self. It is through exploring different avenues of understanding my craft that I am able to find community with others working in parallel themes. This connectedness has the potential to build invisible networks and communities that stretch across generations and borders. In the following paragraphs I articulate how two artists have influenced my artistic practice and research. The first is Rajni Perera, whose work I became infatuated by when coming across it in 2018. Engaging with her art through photographs and the writing I found on it has been the strongest point of inspiration for my artistic endeavours and visioning. The second artist, Eric N. Mack, I came across later into my time in the MFA program. His work resonated with me in how I have been approaching textiles and I have drawn a lot of imagination from his methods of installation. There have been and continue to be many influential artists that I find my work and practice are in conversation with. I chose to focus on

these two to draw out understandings of how they have been important inspirations to my research and practice.

Rajni Perera is based in Toronto, Ontario. Born in Sri Lanka, Perera identifies as a member of the South Asian diaspora here in what we know as Canada. Her work embraces, embodies, and speaks to themes related to race, immigration and third culture people. Her approach and views on identity politics in visual art are unique and pulled me further into questioning and formulating what I have termed the Other-Dimensional space. In an interview with *The Public House of Art* titled “Empowering the Diaspora through Art” (2016) she says, “Diasporic citizens are the future citizens.” This sentiment further fueled my own research inquiry of how do we, as diasporic persons of colour, negotiate feelings of displacement across generations and how is this further realized within the context of art? While Perera provides a powerful perspective on the implications of futurity in our current conditions, I extend her inquiries by focusing on possibilities and alternate futures that can flourish without being strictly anchored to the now-conditions of our richly cultured communities within the South Asian diaspora.

<https://www.patelbrown.com/rajniperera>

Figure 6. *Traveller*, 2019, Rajni Perera, mixed media on paper

<https://www.patelbrown.com/rajniperera>

Figure 7. *Traveller*, 2019, Rajni Perera, mixed media on paper

These two mixed media pieces are both titled *Traveller* (Figure 4 & 5) and were made for the exhibition by the same name, which was first shown last year at the Patel Brown Gallery in Toronto. In an essay written on the exhibition by Negarra A. Kudumu, Perera is quoted saying, “I am interested in the story of who is alive after we burn the

world” (1). It is this statement that becomes the driving inquiry behind the creation of Perera’s pieces. As a viewer and artist, upon seeing this work I was immediately infatuated with the vibrancy of colour, layering of patterns and adornment that the bodies in these pieces carry. I promptly made a connection between this work and the archive of scrap fabrics that I have been working closely with. The thought that these bodies are being protected by layers and layers of garments in order to move through a fiery world and into the next, as its future citizens, sparked an interest in imaginative spaces and prodded me to think of the vast possibilities of functionality the scraps have to offer. I trace back to the concept of the pocket as a vessel. It was this idea where I began thinking more deeply about what it means to attempt to fabricate Other-Dimensional spaces and to imagine within these spaces. As I continue to investigate the materiality and patterning of fabrics through the narratives of familial history, I am actively finding ways to imagine textiles as vessels to carry forward, into the future; I believe the repurposing of the remnant fabrics is one way of doing this.

The ways in which Perera has embellished the layers, patterns and colours in her work parallel the installation and sculptural pieces I have been creating as I approach them from a painterly perspective. The vibrancy of colour that is brought into the two-dimensional plain of the surfaces she works on echoes the ornate patterning that adorns the scrap material that I have become close with. Much like the figures in Perera’s paintings, each piece carries a story, while simultaneously speaking to a different time, marked by distinctive patterns and designs. The scrap fabrics hold

histories of their own as they reflect a particular resiliency—they are bold, confident and bright and it is that brightness that illuminates the way into the future.

“Traveller Persists,” an exhibition essay written by Negarra A. Kudumu, is a profound account articulating the intricacies of Rajni Perera’s solo exhibition *Traveller* which debuted at the Patel Gallery in September 2019. In this essay, Kudumu speaks to Perera’s unbounded creations in contemplating third culture people’s existence in a post-world landscape. The reality of climate change in our now-world and the detriments that it poses towards any real, tangible future is what foregrounds *Traveller* and subsequently, Kudumu’s articulation around this exhibition. The focal points of looking towards imagined futures that escape the unknown of our current reality are what have drawn me in to thinking about Other-Dimensional spaces. Perera’s *Traveller* series has been the pivotal mark for my creative thinking beyond the familial narratives that I have been invested in for much of my artistic career thus far.

Perera’s exhibition pushed the boundaries of what imagined futures have potential to look like for those of us that are placed within a third culture¹⁰. In my own investigation, starting with the storytelling and oral histories of the women from my family, I was initially engaged with interrogating the sense of displacement that is felt within the third culture that we are subjected to here in so-called-Canada. At a particularly poignant part of their essay, Kudumu writes,

There is a historical, spiritual, and environmental context within which *Traveller* exists and pushes forward. As people do, even when they migrate under extreme

¹⁰ Third culture people refer to persons who are children of immigrant parents and are 1st generation, born and raised in what we know to be Canada. Third culture as a concept nods to the feelings of being displaced from one’s native language, land, and culture due to a number of factors.

duress, they bring with them their spiritual beliefs and their language - not solely the trauma of being separated from their sources - which exist in an odd, at times inequitable, balance within the third culture. These ways of being mitigate the stressors of being othered in the third culture and support a connectedness to indigeneity (2).

Traveller becomes a mirror for those whose histories are tied with tales of migration. It caused a shift in my thinking from narrowing in on the feelings of displacement as solely being disconnected from ancestral lands, to peeling back the layers of other histories, knowledges, and resiliencies that are present within the stories of migration (Kudumu 2). The notion of migration—to be moving, in the sense that Kudumu speaks to—is to also be in a constant realm of displacement in that we, as women of the third culture, are not ever fixed in place. The concept of not being fixed in place is the metaphorical vessel in which *Traveller* continues to move forward into future worlds. This also paves the way for radical imagination in formulating new worlds and dimensions for the existence of women of colour, as it pertains to my own research.

Traveller and Kudumu's articulation of this exhibition illuminated a necessary shift for thinking through The Racial Imaginary and the possibilities that come from the creations, both visually and metaphorically, of this realm. Going back to Loffreda and Rankine's writing on The Racial Imaginary, Perera, too, is embracing imagination as an uninhibited potential for imagining futures of third culture people (15). "The scene of race taking up residence in the creative act," (17) is the direct indication of a Racial Imaginary. Thinking of Other-Dimensional spaces is, in itself, an embodiment of that

same space. The dialogue between the different access points to this space, for example *Traveller* and my own works, create a network of endless possibilities for imagining. Under a similar light, Rupri Kaur's poetics and the void spaces between the lines and spaces on the pages provide areas where we can insert ourselves and our narratives as self-identified women of colour. My practice aims to continue this dialogue, negotiation, and possibilities of transference between this world and the next.

In my research on contemporary textile art, I became particularly drawn to Eric N. Mack's practice. I am drawn to the painterly perspective and approach to textile, sculptural and installation work that Mack exhibits in his pieces. He describes himself as a painter but, not in the 'traditional' way we may think of painting in terms of stretched canvas and acrylic or oil paints. In his biography located on the Simon Lee Gallery webpage it says, "His use of colour, form and material as elements in a compositional lexicon as well as the stained or dyed fabrics which are his principal medium, declare the origin of his practice in the investigation of painting in an expanded field, while the way his compositions occupy and transform space are evidence of their sculptural nature." The phrase that I am keen on focusing on here is "transform space."

<https://www.simonleegallery.com/artists/eric-n-mack/>

Figure 8. *Untitled (set drape)*, Erin N. Mack, 2019, Assorted fabrics, scarves, pins, cotton, polyester plaid, rope, metal hanging rod

Where I draw the connection between my own approach and that of Mack's is in his claim to be investigating painting through a medium that is traditionally not associated with what we generally understand as painting along with his manipulation of

the scrap material. When I began working with textiles, I was entering that archive from, with and guided by the experience of painting. I began my time within the MFA program geared towards painting and I still feel close to that medium; however, I am now seeing those painterly qualities are being realized in how I pair certain patterns, colours and also how these pieces fold or knot into one another. Just as paint can blend colours or be textured, the proximity and ability in which painting can manifest itself in textile work becomes realized. In observing this piece by Mack (Figure 6), we can see the different considerations taking place here. From the specific pairing of fabrics to the array of textiles and objects he has included, all of these elements amalgamate together in a way to signify and challenge the process of what painting is.

Of course, the underpinnings of my work and research are different from Mack's; however, I find I can relate to the way Mack's painterly approach to textile work requires its own levels of unbounded imagination. In an interview with Mack through "PIN-UP Magazine", his work is described as creating a "private universe" where investigating colour, textiles, found objects, memories and Black popular culture, to name a few, all find a way to cohere and inform the next. There are layers of connection within the fabric sculptures he paints and it is this particular notion of imagining through the pieces themselves that I connect my practice to. I have learned through referencing Mack's work that the poetics of working with textiles in a painterly way transcends the precursory limits or boundaries that may be placed on that medium in its traditional context. It is an imaginative approach to painting that involves the intricacies of installation which, in my mind, speak to alternate perspectives—Other-Dimensions.

I find crucial meaning in community, connection and dialogue in the art world. I firmly believe in expansive possibilities of learning through different modes of creating that are presented by the vast array of artists working within similar and even unfamiliar themes. In a way, the networks we find ourselves in as artists carry even greater potential to conceptualize other-worlds and imaginative spaces. Engaging with other artists and writers opens up ways to imagine that feel indescribable at times, but this is the beauty of connection and influence that I have come to deeply appreciate in every crevasse of my art, research and thinking.

To Dwell...Pause

*The very **act** of writing then, conjuring/coming to ‘see’, what has yet to be recorded in history is to bring into consciousness what only the body knows to be true. The body – that site which houses the intuitive, the unspoken, the viscera of our being. – this is the revolutionary promise of “theory in flesh;” for it is both the **expression** of evolving political consciousness and the **creator** of consciousness, itself. Seldom recorded and hardly honoured, our theory **incarnate** provides the most reliable roadmap to liberation.*

- Cherrie Moraga



Figure 9. *Acclimate*, Kajill Aujla, 2021, Multi-textile fabric installation, saree's, digital photographs, dimensions variable. Photograph taken by Michael Love, 2021.

A last iteration, or transformation, of the scrap fabrics in my time in the MFA program took shape in my installation piece titled *Acclimate* for the thesis exhibition show in March 2021. I continued within the theme of adaptation from my previous work *Everything Grew but, Here Stayed the Same*, 2020, as this installation, being back in Vancouver, on campus, felt like a final pause in a full-circle journey for my time within the program. A network of fabrics was placed on one wall while holding a dialogue with the parallel wall on which photographs from my previous backyard installation were placed (see figure 9). The sarees and fabrics, tied and braided together, were being adapted once more—this time to the white walls in which they were placed upon or surrounded by. The vibrancy of the textiles and architectural size of the saree’s unapologetically claimed their rightful space and attention in this setting. In deep reflection and conversation about this work and the art that had led me to this point, I have come to realize a certain push and pull between legibility and ineligibility. How the fabrics and saree’s come to function together and within the spaces in which they are placed reflect complexities that may not seem tangible to all who interact with the work. This is where I go back to reflecting on my intention with the art I make, who it is for, and how it may portal us to different dimensions of understanding. I was fortunate to have my mother come in person to see *Acclimate*. She stood in a sort of excited disbelief, absorbing the work in its entirety. As we walked through the space together, I could not help but feel moved at my mother’s presence there in that moment, with these garments and fabrics—there was a certain wholeness that was evoked in that moment as our bodies swayed and weaved through the braided saree’s that lined the middle of

the space. Our bodies connected to the fabrics as we parsed through memories associated with each, a truly beautiful moment I feel so fortunate to have experienced with the woman who I admire most.

I always hope to find ways to better reach my community and family with the art I create and I realize that this process will always be in motion. Although the archive of scrap fabrics I have been working with is finite, there are countless stories to be told and uncovered that extend beyond the scope of this program. I see this as a beautiful reflection of the limitlessness of our beings as Punjabi Sikh women. Understanding the vast modalities of making and the connectedness that my hands have with the research that comes from my work is what excites me about the futurity of my practice. In continuing this journey, I am reminded that finding your community is crucial. For me it is also connecting with other Punjabi Sikh artists and immersing myself in conversations about our research and practices. I can say, the uncertainty of the future is no longer something that daunts me, but rather excites me and I acknowledge that shift is due to my appreciation of the expansive possibilities of what imagination can wield.



This journey began with a bag full of scrap fabrics that had no telling as to why they were saved. I like to think that those fabrics were saved for me, as if my stumbling across them was divine timing. Scrap fabrics with stories untold have now been illuminated. They have sparked memories that were on the margins of our minds, near

forgetting. The fabrics brought out stories of sadness, of joy, of remembrance and of celebration. We celebrate our beings, as Punjabi Sikh women, and we take pride in the culture that adorns us. Through the exploration of the archive of scrap fabrics, I have taken course to find ways in which my creative practice can piece together my mother's, grandmother's and my own personal narratives of existence. What does this existence look like? How does it feel? To use the word 'existence' in this matter is to focus on the culmination of events that have literally led to these women, including myself, to righteously *exist* within a society, a world that has kept us pushed to the margins. Resilience has been a gravitational point I find myself constantly coming back to when thinking about familial history. However, I have come to understand that resilience is a double-edged sword. Resilience is revered, of course, but it is equally important to realize where resilience comes from, why it is needed and particularly so for People of Colour. My parents, and grandparents are not super human, they are *human* and I write that whole heartedly and respectfully. They should not have had to face the obstacles of adversity, racism, classism, or toxic capitalistic systems when coming to Canada, but they did and continue to endure them. They are always trying to see the good in the bad and they have been strong in pushing forward past many hardships and for that they are resilient. I am a direct product of that resiliency. They had to be resilient in order to survive and build better lives for us, the next generation. What also comes from that is a degree of inter-generational trauma. I am also a product of this. Having the opportunity and access to higher education is a privilege I am afforded because of my parent's and grandparent's resilience. I am filled with gratitude to be able to write this and create the

art I do. With that I ask you, as a reader, to pause and dwell in imagining better and more equitable futures for us all, where we do not *have* to be resilient just in order to survive.

Familial narrative and storytelling will continue to be a propelling force in understanding how culture, history, experience, and the space of The Racial Imaginary are cogs in a network of knowledge, all working together and informing one another. I am here, a being whose existence has been crafted by the threads from the stories of women before me. The story will continue through our physical and imagined world(s) with every pause, reflection and question. I am choosing to dwell in this time, in this space, in this story. Urgency is a fallacy that aligns itself with discontent. To dwell is to savour and I choose to savour the moments that have led me here.

The journey of the work continues, perhaps too, in dimensions beyond us.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness" *Feminist Theory*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2007, pp. 149-156. <http://fty.sagepub.com/content/8/2/149>. Accessed 4 March 2021.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. *Ethnography and the Archive*, edited by Brian Keith Axel, Duke University Press, 2002.
- Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Andrew McMeel Publishing, 2014.
- Kovach, Margaret. "Situating Self, Culture, and Purpose in Indigenous Inquiry". *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Context*. University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp. 109-120.
- Kudumu, Negarra A., "Traveller Persists". Exhibition Essay for *Traveller*, solo exhibition of artist Rajni Perera. Toronto: Patel Gallery. September 19, 2019..
- Logan, Katie. "Re-membering Displacement: Miral al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights* and the Politics of Memory." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2018, pp. 617-639. <https://doi.org/10.1086/695301>. Accessed 6 March 2021.
- Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Fourth edition. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015.
- Patel Brown Gallery*. Patel Brown Gallery, Artists, Toronto, ON. <https://www.patelbrown.com/rajniperera>. Accessed 10 October 2020.
- Rankine, Claudia, et al. *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*. Albany, Fence Books, 2015.
- Simon Lee Gallery*. Simon Lee Gallery, Artists, New York <https://www.simonleegallery.com/artists/eric-n-mack/> . Accessed 13 October 2020.
- Singh, Harpreet. *Sikhism Through its Scriptures*. HarvardX, edX, Apr. 2020. <https://learning.edx.org/course/course-v1:HarvardX+HDS3221.7x+2T2019/home>. Accessed 20 April 2020.

Sultan, Mahfuz. "Interview: Eric N. Mack The New York Artist Who Paints with Fabrics."
PIN-UP Magazine, Spring-Summer 2019,
<https://pinupmagazine.org/articles/interview-artist-eric-n-mack-by-mahfuz-sultan>,
Accessed 29 March 2021.

Works Consulted

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Duke University Press, 2012.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Chapter 1: The Homeland." *Borderlands/La Frontera*. 4th ed., San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012, pp.23-35.

Aujla, Angela. "Others in their Own Land: Second Generation South Asian Women, Racism, and the Persistence of Colonial Discourse." *Canadian Woman Studies*, 20(2), 2000.

Bell, Derrick. "The Space Traders." *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. Basic Books, 1992, pp. 197-242.

Blackwood, Sarah. *The Portrait's Subject: Inventing Inner Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-99

Delgado, Richard, and Stefancic, Jean., editors. *Critical Race Theory*. New York University Press, 2001.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Word for World is Forest*, Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1972.

Matsuda, Mari J. "Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 1987, pp. 323-400.

Robinson, Cedric J. "Chapter 9: Historiography and the Black Radical Tradition." *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, pp. 185-203.