




# THE PLACES WE CALL HOME

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**Where we love is home -  
home that our feet may leave,  
but not our hearts.**

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, SR.

## INTRODUCTION

As soon as I sat down across the table from the young woman with short reddish-brown hair and piercing eyes, I could sense her nervousness. I was meeting with Mona, an acquaintance from a past class, to interview her for my senior thesis project. I greeted her and re-introduced myself before setting a small audio recorder on the table. Seeing her eye the recorder with apprehension, I reminded to her that she could say as much or as little as she wanted, and she was free to turn the recorder off or leave if she wanted to. I smiled and said that I was just hoping to have a conversation with her about the idea of "home".

She nodded and gave a nervous laugh. After a bit of small talk, I began my interview. "Could you tell me your name and where you were born?" I asked. She responded immediately with a quick, "My name is Mona, and I was born in Santiago, Chile." I continued to ask her simple questions, like when she moved to the U.S., how she liked Michigan, and what her time growing up in Santiago was like. As the interview went on, she relaxed a bit and became more talkative. I got to the question "Could you describe a fond memory you have of home for me?"

At this question, her face broke into a smile and the last of her nerves seemed to melt away.

"I grew up in a very tiny house, where I could see the Andes Mountains right next to my room. I would wake up and I would open my windows, and there would be the Andes!" Mona's voice grew warm and excited as she talked of her home. "So, in the morning, that's the first thing you see: the sun coming through the Andes. It's so beautiful and it's so warm, even in winter. Now, I close my eyes and I see all these mountains." As she said these words, she closed her eyes briefly, as if to demonstrate for me.

"It's something that is just..." Her voice paused as her eyes opened and darted around the small conference room, seeming to search for the words to convey the gravity of the moment she was trying to describe. "...Magnificent. Too beautiful. There's nothing like it. It was a very small humble home, but that view... That view was priceless."

Mona was one of many individuals I interviewed for my thesis project. For my Integrative Project, I created a series of three hand-painted animations depicting the homes of immigrants and multi-ethnic individuals. These animations are paired with audio of interviewee's experiences of migrating or being displaced, and their memories of a distant home. The aim of my thesis project is to genuinely portray the beautiful narratives of these global souls and explore what defines a place as a "home" and "homeland".





## BACKGROUND

I was born and raised in Michigan, my father's homeland, but have spent a portion of every year since I was born in Tokyo, Japan, my mother's homeland. My mother introduced me to her culture, her home, while I remained immersed in my father's homeland in America. Growing up in these two distinctly different places I was confronted with the intricacies and complications of "belonging". I feel very strongly that my home is not one of these places or the other, but rather both. The level of attachment I have to these places are deep enough that when I am in one country, I miss the people, places and events happening in the other. The longing for home is a natural sensation that occurs any time one is displaced, however, the longer one remains displaced, the more this feeling seems to intensify. As a multicultural individual, I felt compelled to capture what makes a place "home". My project is an attempt at capturing the feeling of longing immigrants and multi-ethnic individuals have for their homelands.

## CURRENT CONTEXT

In the United States and across the globe, immigration has become an increasingly discussed topic. From controversial Presidential Executive Orders regarding Travel and Immigration to an urgent refugee crisis, the subject peppers virtually every newspaper, website and media outlet (Thrush, 2017). The social issues are not new, but they are being brought to the forefront of public attention due to recent events.

All tensions aside, simply moving to a foreign country with no knowledge of the language and customs, no network, and no guarantee of employment or security can be intimidating and isolating.

Discussion of this topic provides an opportunity for those who have never experienced this feeling of displacement to reflect on their own memories of home, encouraging viewers to empathize with people who do feel homesick or displaced. My hope is that the animations also comfort individuals who have experienced relocation, and remind them that they are not the alone in sometimes feeling out of place.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The longing for home has been a universal source of inspiration for innumerable artists, musicians, writers, poets, and historians since the earliest records of history. Intellectuals of every generation and background have contributed their thoughts to the topic of "home", from Basho to Mother Teresa to T.S. Eliot to Emily Dickinson to Michael Buble. Though the homes these artists describe have changed and are likely long gone, their experiences are preserved, frozen in time, holding memories of the past in their work.

Many voices have contributed throughout history, yet the conversation about home is ongoing. It is important to note that globalization has rapidly changed the way people view home, with a dramatic increase in cross-continental movement in current times. With a new ease of travel and migration created by technological advances in transportation and communication, people are making connections with multitudes of places. We, as citizens of a complex and connected global society, are creating intercultural identities for ourselves. These connections are a positive outcome of globalization; however, it can raise questions concerning identity, belonging and loyalty.

With the influx of people migrating across borders to make new homes for themselves, an area of study, called transnational migration, has recently emerged. Transnational migration is defined as "a process of movement and settlement across international borders in which individuals maintain or build multiple networks of connection to their country of origin while at the same time settling in a new country" (Fouon & Glick-Schiller, 2001, p. 60). Transnational migration includes maintaining relationships with multiple cultures, locations, and people as one moves around the globe. Where we belong cannot be as easily classified as it has been in the past. The definition of home becomes multi-faceted, with concrete categorization becoming nearly impossible.

In one cross-sectional survey of immigrants conducted by Public Agenda in partnership with Carnegie Corporation of New York, conducted in 2009, the increase in immigrants attempting to maintain relationships with their country of origin is apparent. The study surveyed male and female participants of diverse age, race, religion education and employment who had moved to the U.S. from South Asia, East Asia, Middle East, Central and South America, Mexico and Other Countries.

This study reported an increase in communication via phone and skype and an increased interest among immigrants of going back to live in their birth country someday, when compared with a nearly identical study was conducted in 2002. "About one-quarter of our sample was made up of more recent immigrants, those who arrived since 2001. On the whole, their ties to the United States aren't as strong. For example: One-third say they will go back to live in their birth country someday. Three in ten (32 percent) say it is likely that their children will one day want to live in their birth country (compared with 18 percent of those here before 2001). More than twice as many (66 percent compared with 29 percent) telephone home at least once a week," (Bittle et al. 2009). These responses across cultures indicate a global shift in how we think about home. It is easier to stay in contact with the people we leave when moving, making it harder to move on or ignore feelings of displacement.

Writer and public speaker Pico Iyer discusses how communities are becoming increasingly global in his book *The Global Soul*. Iyer examines how this new era of migration has created complications relating to identity, belonging and home that were not prevalent before. Iyer describes an encounter with one transnational individual he meets who has migrated from India to America.

Though this immigrant is impressed with his new residence, he is also grappling with the new complexity of his sense of home. Iyer says, "When I asked him if he felt at home in the adopted city whose praises he was singing, his voice turned soft and gathered feeling. 'Where you spend your childhood, sir, you can never forget that place. I am here, sir, and I like it here. But' - and I could hear the ache - 'I love my India.'" (Iyer, 2001, p. 22). The man is feeling the effects of his uprooting, simultaneously harboring two homes in his heart.

Iyer continues to expand upon this idea of occupying two spaces emotionally, if not physically. He makes a distinction between migration of old and contemporary migration. Iyer mentions another individual who grew up in a British colony, who was "torn between the home he carried in his blood and the one he had on paper; colonials were all condemned to living with two faces. Yet in the modern world, which I take to be an international empire, the sense of home is not just divided, but scattered across the planet, and in the absence of any center at all, people find themselves at sea." (Iyer, 2001, p. 18).

In this passage, he is describing the connection between homeland and where we migrate to. Iyer's words are exceedingly relevant today in the United States, where people from all backgrounds come to live, attempting to be whole in a new place while simultaneously longing for home. My animations strive to represent the duality the individual must endure as a result of migration. As Iyer suggests, the phenomenon of feeling torn between places is not new; however, the traditional boundaries defining "home" are changing and becoming more muddled. Relatedly, contemporary artists are taking the timeworn concept of home and approaching it in innovative ways, diving deep into modern complexities.





Photograph of anthology, *Only An Inch Away*, created by Parisa Ghaderi in 2014

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Among these contemporary artists is Parisa Ghaderi, a visual artist whose work investigates questions about home and belonging. Ghaderi has lived and studied in both Iran and the U.S., splitting her time between the two. Her work delves into at the mixed feelings that come with diaspora in modern society. In her anthology, *Only An Inch Away*, Ghaderi examines how migration has affected her own identity and relationships. The anthology is a collection of photographs, research, reflections and poetry, beautifully designed in a hardbound book. The stark white pages are sparse, containing only a small illustration or short block of text; the result is a soft and approachable page. Yet the words themselves are sharp and indicate an ongoing struggle to find balance between two geographically and emotionally distanced places. Strikingly nuanced prose paired with subtle imagery made *Only An Inch Away* a significant inspiration for the content of my thesis project.

About her work, she says "My experience of living in Iran and the U.S. has revealed an in-between state about distance; I never fully arrived and never fully left. In my work, I am dealing with emotional and physical distance, compounded loss, and the opacity of language," (Ghaderi, 2014). Her relationship with home and the resulting work she creates are products of an individual being torn between two place. The themes and ideas present in her project *Only An Inch Away* are related to themes present in mine; however I sought to focus my project more on the specific memories of others, rather than drawing from personal experience.





A still frame from short animation, *Wild Life*, created by Tilby/Forbis in 2011

Another artistic influence on my project was dynamic animating and illustrating duo Tilby/Forbis. Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis have been creating together since 1999 when they co-directed *When the Day Breaks*, an internationally acclaimed short animation (Tilby and Forbis, 1999). Their whimsical illustration style produces endearing characters and surreal scenery. Specifically, their hand-painted animation *Wild Life*, from 2011, acted as a stylistic influence on my thesis project. Each frame of *Wild Life* was painted with gouache, an opaque version of watercolor paints, and the texture of the gouache paint is visible in every scene. The use of gouache makes the human hand evident and creates animations that feel palpable and familiar. Tilby/Forbis' animation employs a flickering rotoscope technique while mine does not, but the implementation of watercolor achieves similar aesthetic results.

## PROCESS & METHODOLOGY

My process began with several broad questions related to the concept of "home". I was interested in what universal themes regarding "home" are present across cultures, regardless of where an individual is from. Where is home for the migrant, the traveler, the individual who feels split between two places? Is it the locations? Is it family and the bonds formed within the home? How do notions of home change when people migrate to a new place or are displaced? I entered the ideation process with these questions in mind.

I was then faced with the challenge of determining the medium that would be best suited for exploring this subject. I wanted to combine the illustration, design, and animation skills I had acquired and knowledge I had accumulated over my undergraduate career into a comprehensive project. I also knew I wanted my project to be narrative and relatable; I came to the decision that creating an animation would best portray the ideas I had. The medium of animation is unique; it allows the creator an ample amount of control over how the piece is viewed. By making certain scenes stay for a longer time than others, the animator can choose pacing, unlike books and other forms I had considered. I was drawn to the combination of animation and sound; together, they create tangible, sensory, and immersive scenes.

## STORYBOARDING

Once I had decided on animation as the form, I began the storyboarding process. My original approach to making a project about "home" was to create a fictional narrative animation about a character who longs for the home she no longer lives in. As I was storyboarding, however, I realized this form may not be the best way to address this subject. Although this animation may have been evocative in some ways, the fictional characters and their interactions felt artificial and contrived.



A gouache sketch from an early storyboard about a girl who is missing her home



A still frame from an early animation test that inspired the paper cut style used in my final animations

At this point in the project, I returned to what inspired the project in the first place: the feeling of missing a home you once had and feeling torn between multiple locations. My own experiences with home prompted me to focus on this topic, however I did not want the project to be a personal narrative. I wanted the breadth and diversity that comes with many different perspectives.

## INTERVIEWS

I began having conversations with people I knew that grew up in different countries, talking to them about the homes they left behind. During these initial conversations, I was immediately compelled by their words and the specificity of their memories. It became clear that the authentic and poignant details that made each home so special couldn't be generalized. I began conducting formal interviews with family members, friends, acquaintances and strangers to learn about how others perceive "home". During these interviews, I recorded audio of people talking about the places they grew up, places they feel connected to, and what makes these locations feel like home or not feel like home. Their voices conveyed emotions, their accents alluded to their past, and their words painted an image of a home once loved in and lived in. With each interview, a new facet of how we perceive home was revealed.

From these, I narrowed in on three people that I felt represented a diverse range. Mona, a woman who moved recently from Chile; Noah, a man whose family lives in Syria; and Atsumi, who migrated twenty years ago from Japan. Each person is from a different country, but is living in the United States currently. All the interviewees I talked to have two places they feel tied to, and they don't consider one more their home than the other.

Their homes are scattered across the globe, but I chose to ask these individuals the same set of questions. I asked questions such as: What location(s) do you call home? Can you describe one of these places? Can you describe a memory you have of this place? Can you describe what an average day looked like? How do you define home?

These questions revealed incredibly diverse and beautiful responses; some interviewees described sensory details related to sight, some remembered the smells or foods, some focused on sounds they heard, and others still talked about what they felt. They described experiences that were fundamentally different, but I began noticing overlaps and similarities between stories; universal themes of home & belonging started to emerge.

Nearly every person I talked to answered the last question almost identically. When I asked, "How do you define home?", all responded in some way that home is not necessarily always a place; it can be a person, family, a feeling of comfort. As Noah said in his interview, "home is where I feel accepted, where I am understood."

From the forty-five minute audio interviews, I selected clips where the interviewee was remembering and describing the home they no longer reside in. I then sketched their homes based on photos they provided and had them point out aspects that they felt were particularly important, then painted and animated them to bring the moment to life and preserve the home how he or she described it.





A still frame from *The Places We Call Home: Mona*

## ANIMATION STYLE

Throughout the interview process, I continued making small animation tests to figure out the style of animation I wanted to do. These animation studies focused on experimentation of visual language rather than content, ranging from paper craft, watercolor, stop-motion, and digital rotoscoping. From these tests, I decided that painted animation was most fitting for the narratives I was collecting. By using watercolor and gouache to paint the homes, the animation becomes more personal & tactile and less artificial & digital. Much like Tilby and Forbis' animations, the watercolor alludes to the human hand, making an otherwise digital animation feel tangible.

## CREATIVE WORK

I created a series of three short form animations paired with audio recorded in interviews. Each animation is one minute and a half long and focuses on a single individual and the memories of a home they have outside of the U.S. The interviewee describes the place they left and a moment they felt at home. Together, the total video time is four minutes and fifteen seconds with titles, transitions, and credits.

The animation starts with a world map to give the viewer context; we then zoom in on a city's location on the map. Here, we are introduced to the individual and where he or she grew up. The animation then zooms in to show a watercolor illustration of house they lived in, as described by the individual. Finally, we enter the house to reveal visual representation of a memory about the home. This last fragment of the animation is painted in pastel colors with loose and playful brushwork to allude to the fact that this part of the animation is a memory from the past, described in colorful detail to me by the interviewee.



Gallery Installation of *The Places We Call Home*, 2017, 4 minutes 15 seconds, Digital Animation

## GALLERY INSTALLATION

Throughout this visual journey, there is audio narration by the subject. In her segment, Mona describes the breathtaking view that was visible out her bedroom window of the Andes mountains. Atsumi talks of coming home every day to her parents working in the barbershop they lived above. Noah details running around his apartment complex with his cousins at dinner time, smelling the food and deciding which family they would be eating with that night. I chose small excerpts from the interview that I felt encapsulated the intense feeling of nostalgia one feels for a past home.

After all three animations play, the final scene fades to a white screen which is held for a few seconds, with no audio except soft background music. The choice to include several moments of white screen at the end was an intentional choice to provide the viewer time to digest the story and contemplate.

Within the gallery space, my animation played on a 42-inch TV monitor on a loop. A pair of over the ear headphones were attached to the monitor to create an immersive and private auditory and visual experience. Providing headphones eliminated distracting background noise, allowing the viewer to spend a moment alone with the stories. It was important to me to have only one pair because it creates a solitary experience to listen and reflect upon the narratives. The headphones requires active participation of the viewer to enter and exit the animation, and creates an intimate moment with someone else's memory.





A viewer interacts with the world map mural by writing her home and pinning it to the corresponding geographic location

Alongside the screen playing the animation, I created an interactive element based on feedback from peers who watched my animations. Many said that the animations brought memories of their own homes to the forefront of their minds and they wanted to contribute to project; One viewer voiced that she would like to “quietly respond” to the piece.

Driven by this feedback, I created a three-foot by two-foot wall mural to accompany the screen in the gallery space. It depicts a watercolored map of the world, the same one that is shown in the title sequence of the animation. Beneath the map on a small white shelf, I placed a container of pushpins, thin slips of paper, and some pens. I then put a placard next to the container to guide the visitors to interact with the map.

The placard reads:

What places do you call home?

Is home where you grew up, where you live currently, or simply a place you feel connected to?

Write the place you call home on a slip of paper and pin it to the map above!

You are welcome to put up more than one pin if you feel you have more than one home.

The map provides an opportunity for viewers to think about their own definitions of home, and the locations that are important to them. I put the world map up completely blank except for one pin in Tokyo, Japan: my own home beyond U.S. borders. Within one hour of opening night of the Thesis Exhibition, the map was crammed with pins, denoting homes in Cameroon, Taiwan, Australia, England, Canada, Germany and every place in between. The map became an ever-growing acknowledgement to the diverse backgrounds we all come from.





## CONCLUSION

My goal for this work was to serve as a reminder to the viewers of places and individuals in their own lives that have impacted them, and who and what they hold dear. *The Places We Call Home* illuminated collective values across cultures about home and reminded me of my own values in the process. By creating these animations, I have introduced viewers to experiences they may not have personally had, and in doing so, hopefully facilitated understanding and acceptance. I look forward to continuing *The Places We Call Home* in the future, talking to more people who grew up in different cultures, with different ideas, practicing different customs and adding their stories to the mix.

I began the project with the idea that my home was specific places I felt connected to, thinking of my particularly strong attachment to my grandparents' home in Tokyo. Though I remain attached to this place, my thesis project has shaped how I now think of home; It forced me to consider the reasons behind why I felt attached to the location. Through conversations with people of diverse upbringings, my definition of home has changed immeasurably over the past year, and will likely be ever-changing moving forward. It became clear to me that home is not always made up of just a location. For the modern multicultural individual, home is a conglomeration of places, people, and emotions. Home is family, friends, community, belonging, acceptance, memories, nostalgia, and experiences.

The reality of migration is that the physical homes we leave change hands, become unrecognizable, and are sometimes even destroyed; yet these circumstances do not affect the moments that stay with us, those snippets of joy or wonder or comfort or belonging that occurred within the homes. Those moments live past their physical counterparts. Regardless of distance and time, the memories of the places we call homes remain.

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