

Away from Home

Transnational Experiences between Freedom and Dislocation, Identity and Assimilation, Loneliness and Belonging

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Abstract

This article revolves around a series of photographic projects that seek to explore and invoke the experiences of presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement in relation to home, through the everyday lives of families from Burma. The photographic works aim to test what Rachel Hurdley has called, “the value and importance of the ‘crisis of representation’ of visual data in academic research”, with the argument that visual research methods can be central to translate unspoken inferences to audiences, as a tool for research to represent, understand, and more fully encapsulate lived experiences of migration and how difference is lived on the ground, rather than merely as a technique to elicit response.

Drawing on the “ordinariness” of interactions across familial divisions, this project combines portraits, images of everyday environments and a layering of projected imagery from the Thai-Burma border onto landscapes of resettled families, to form a narrative that comments on feelings of statelessness within the transnational mobility of the people involved. The article aims to develop new understandings of the multidimensional complexities of being a refugee, both at home and away, and to advance traditions of documentary photographic practice in which an engagement with migration is central.

Every individual’s life experience is unique and dynamic, particularly for those who have journeyed far from their homes to establish new lives in foreign countries. Throughout history, visual stories have been used to illuminate, to educate, to recount, to challenge and to engage. Personal stories offer an important opportunity to enrich the histories of the spaces we inhabit. This article revolves around a series of photographic works that seek to explore and invoke the experiences between presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement, in relation to home, through the everyday lives of families from Burma. The photographic works aim to test what Rachel Hurdley has called, “the value and importance of the ‘crisis of representation’ of visual data in academic research”,^[1] with the argument that visual research methods can be central to translate unspoken inferences to audiences, as a tool for research to represent, understand, and more fully encapsulate lived experiences of migration and how difference is lived on the ground, not merely a technique to elicit response.

Drawing on the “ordinariness” of interactions across familial divisions, the works presented combine portraits, images of everyday environments and involve the use of layering projected imagery from the Thai-Burma border onto landscapes of resettled families, to form narratives that develop new understandings of the multidimensional complexities of being a refugee, both at home and away, and to advance traditions of documentary photographic practice to which an engagement with migration is central. The works presented also contribute to a self-reflexive documentary way of working that brings perspectives into documentary photographic practices that engage in the experience of migration, moving beyond representations of suffering and into the realm of affective understanding.

In developing this work, my interests and contribution are directly concerned with the question of migration and movement as connected to discussions in the social sciences and humanities, rather than towards intervening in the wider bodies of literature in photographic theory or critical reflection on what Liz Wells refers to as “attitudes to photography, its contexts, usages, and critiques of its nature.”^[2]

I have employed a multi-method approach that includes audio, video, photography, letter-writing, fieldwork, immersion, informal interviews and forms of participation, within the context of photography and ethnography. The methodology employed throughout the research firstly draws on Burmese scholar and anthropologist Violet Cho and the methodological approaches of her work in relation to Burmese diasporic identity.^[3] The complex familial issues and dynamics that arise out of the current diaspora of refugees from Burma have been revealed through research projects that utilise a photo-documentary approach, and that examine the circumstances of diaspora from Burma, living through transitional sites of relocation. I aim to investigate how photography can provide nuanced understandings into the unspoken relationships between researcher and participant/s, refugees and their material and immaterial environments that help deconstruct, reconstruct and reveal the importance of multiple homes and belongings.

Why Burma?

Although this research departs from personal histories, it is important that the issues it addresses are not only significant within broader social, cultural and political landscapes, but also current in the sense that there is a relationship to what general audiences consume through present-day news and the media. The research presented here explores the ordinary lives of people in Burma, living against the backdrop of decades of repressive rule. Much of the scholarship surrounding Burma concentrates on the country’s internal problems, which are well studied and should not be overlooked, as they are an important underpinning for this investigation. However, this will not be the focus of this article and so the relationship between Burma’s history and its current significance will only be briefly discussed to offer some context.

Burma has been ruled by a military regime since 1962. The country’s oppressive economic and political policies leave its people in a constant struggle for essentials such as basic healthcare and a living wage. Instability is entrenched by endemic poverty and oppressive rule, with bitter tensions dividing the government and Burma’s population. Burma is an ethnically diverse nation, with over 130 distinct ethnic groups officially recognised by the Burmese government. The issue of ethnic identities is complex and often difficult to discuss, because much early ethnic history is based on oral traditions and consequently there is a lack of documentation on these histories. The research presented revolves around the ethnic minority group of the Karen people.

Burma is a country with a deeply fractured society. Civil war between the government army and armed opposition groups has continued for decades in some border areas. “Military rule in Burma has created a society

marked by fear and distrust, putting home out of reach for both those who are physically displaced outside of Burma and those who remain in Burma.”^[4] Millions have fled abroad or been displaced from their homes and the United Nations estimates that there are currently 650,000 people who are internally displaced within Burma and the Myanmar government estimates that there are 4.25 million Myanmar nationals living abroad.

The civil war in Burma has been described as having generated one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world. Since Burma was granted independence from Britain in 1948, ethnic minority groups have been seeking self-governance, with very limited results. Resettlement has become a common survival method for many of the ethnic minority groups, with large populations now residing in Bangladesh, Thailand, Australia and the United States. The story of the transnational diaspora originating from Burma is important because most of the understandings that we have of the issues these groups encounter revolve around policy or peacekeeping. “There is an urgent need to see modern Burma through its people, not just through the country’s problems or political suffering.”^[5]

With a country like Burma, where news reports emphasise millions of displaced and a conflict that has stretched over decades, it can be hard to connect to the people who face this reality every day. “Even in academia, publications have largely concentrated on the ruling regime or general studies of Burmese society, which tend to centre on social structure and the quotidian understandings of the people in Burma become faceless abstractions.”^[6] Their individual lives become buried beneath issues, abuses and statistics.

Burma captured my attention and elicited my deep concern during my time as a volunteer workshop facilitator in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. Family histories and memories were dislocated, relocated and displaced along with the family members themselves and considered unimportant during times when survival was the priority. How these relationships between people and places changed through the course of these familial movements will be illuminated through visual research approaches presented throughout this piece.

In developing this work my interests and contribution are directly concerned with the question of migration and movement as connected to discussions in the social sciences and humanities. My work foregrounds issues and debates that relate to the specificity of photography in relation to migration and serves as an example of the deliberate blurring or fusion between documentary and art, or “new mixtures”, “... works that mix hitherto separated photographic forms and formats: conceptual photography, family photos, cell phone photos, reportage, landscape, portraiture in one work, and which sometimes even mix photographic practices and agents in variations of participatory strategies, thus embracing the whole spectrum of agency and emotion related to various photographic forms and materialities.”^[7]

The photographic narratives that make up this research explore how the effects of geographic displacement manifest within the quotidian reality of transnational lives. An example of this is evident in the combination of image and handwritten text that engage with the everyday lived experiences of those featured in the following projects, who have family members scattered across Thailand, Burma, Australia and the US (Figure 1). The stories encompass a wide range of intersecting and constantly evolving identities based on this transnational community that stretches across all corners of the world.



Figure 1: Tammy Law, *Permission to Belong*, 2019

In combination with the visual research, informal interviews were conducted using the principles of *tapoetethakot* a research methodology coined by indigenous Karen academic Violet Cho meaning “informal conversation with people who are close” which led to more intimate and personal conversations with participants to establish shared values, meanings and relationships and develop rapport. “In order to express ourselves, we have no choice but to break the rules to make the words work for us, or to create new words.”^[8] Drawing on other indigenous research methodologies and ways of knowing, *tapoetethakot*, is culturally appropriate to people of Burma. For first-generation refugee and community youth leader Ku May, connections to “home” are complex since his strong sense of belonging to another place, coupled with feelings of local exclusion, compete with efforts to establish belonging to a new home. These “shifting feelings of belonging” were uncovered in an interview with Ku: “We were one of the first families to arrive in Brisbane. We lived in a hotel and were told not to leave the room. We didn’t even know how to use the seat belts in taxi(s) ... I love my country and I will go back as soon as peace is declared.”^[9]

In another interview, Esther Moo discloses her feelings about “home” as a place of emotional significance, family relations, community and ancestral ties:

50/50... Australia is home... Burma is home. My mum, dad and seven brothers and sisters live together. We are very blessed to be here, we have a lot of opportunities but I miss my country sometimes. I met my parents when I was 10 years old. My grandparents brought me up since I was seven months. Both my grandparents are still in Burma. They want me to come back. After I got citizenship I visited Thailand and Burma four times in the last six years. Both are my country but in Burma there is not much opportunity.^[10]

Through these informal interviews, participants were able to guide me towards topics they found important, rather than answering a list of prescriptive questions. This was an integral part of the methodological approach: to unveil personal accounts of family histories, memories and offer a deeper understanding of what it means to uncover the unspoken and further develop understandings of transnational peoples’ lived experiences, informed by their mobility such as those revealed in Figure 2.

I learnt everything like when we first arrived we didn't know how to cook or used the stove.

We didn't know how to catch the train or the bus.

We didn't know how to use the money.

When we came here we felt lost. I felt lost. We were lost.

Australia is a freedom country.

I can live without worry.

I can help my family.

I can benefit other people.

If I don't come here I can't pay for my mums treatment it costs around \$100,000 Australia dollars because she is not Thai.

No Thai ID or Burma ID.

So the government won't help her.

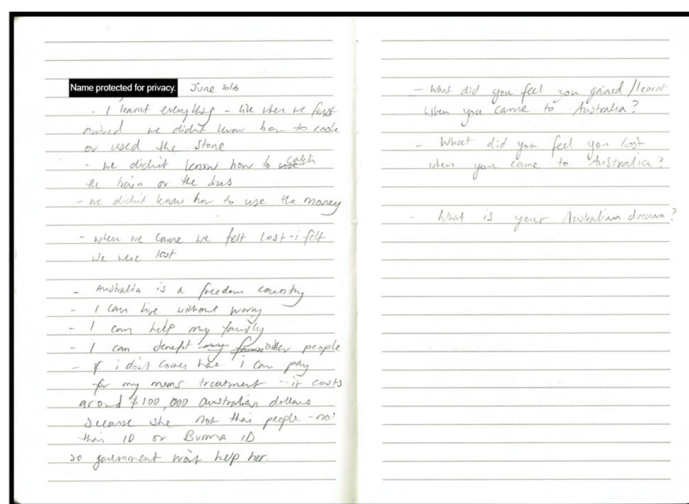


Figure 2: Interview with LMP, Queensland, Australia, June 2016

Coming from a background where migration has grounded my understandings of the world around me, I am deeply engaged in stories of home, identity and belonging, especially during this current global climate of dislocation that we live in and this fragile constellation of belonging. While this project makes specific reference to the transnational diaspora from Burma, themes of identity, home, belonging and family are common to us all.

Home and Belonging

Home and belonging are important themes throughout our everyday lives. “Home” has always been difficult to define it has numerous meanings with differing levels of abstraction. It is both “lived” and “imagined”^[11] and constituted through multiple relationships with people and places.^[12] The desire to feel part of a group or community in the context of a nation, one’s ethnicity, social standing or locality is intrinsic to human identity. Yet issues relating to home and belonging have become increasingly politicised, entangled and problematic in the context of mobility, globalisation and border security. Questions around where we belong, who we are, how we are represented and who has the right to determine these choices continue to be contested in relevant ways. Through the generated discourse I seek to address these issues visually, within the context of the transnational community from Burma.

In Jessica Nancy Bird’s research into the Karen diaspora in Brisbane, Australia, she “explores the ways in which people simultaneously live ‘here, there and elsewhere’ through enduring linkages and exchanges in borderless spaces.”^[13] Bird discusses “how everyday life in settlement is intricately connected to memories of the past and imaginings of the future...”^[14] My photographic essays are an exploration into how past and future are reconciled within the multiplicities that resettled families from Burma demonstrate through experiences of inclusion and exclusion and how this affects their constructions of belonging to place.

In Figure 3, belonging is demonstrated as a personal sense of belongingness within the daily experiences of settlement. Here the audience is placed in the position of a welcomed guest; the perspective of looking through the mesh of the food cover suggests a sense of sharing, offering and providing through the softness of the layers behind which the viewer is placed. As belonging can be articulated through maintaining important practical and emotional connections to food, language, people, places and spirituality, the practice of offering and providing food to guests, community and family members is testament to the sense of belonging within the households of families from Burma.



Figure 3: Tammy Law, from the photobook *Permission to Belong*, 2019

Sustained metaphors of these practical and emotional connections are embedded within images throughout the photobook *Permission to Belong* to construct a series of complex, composite mental images, sensations or thoughts in the viewer’s mind. Rice is a powerful symbol of the quotidian and reinforces the centrality of food as both a staple and social mechanism that is significant to the identity and culture of families from Burma and a

daily reminder of what it means to be in a new social space (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Tammy Law, from the photobook *Permission to Belong*, 2019

In the context of this project, *Home* refers to the bonds of shared history and memory as well as of language and family, and to the shared performance of cultural practices rooted in time and space. *Away* refers to the spaces between the familiar and the foreign, “insideness” and “outsideness”, an inclusion and exclusion, as “our concept of home gains meaning through taking journeys away”.^[15] As was the case for children from Burma who travelled to other countries for resettlement, readers may have been born in a place, disconnected from it and reconnected to that place at a later stage in life.

Participatory Projects: The Crisis of Representation

So far, I have spoken of the use of a multi-method approach that includes audio, video, photography, letter-writing, fieldwork, immersion, informal interviews. I will now move into the discussion of several participatory projects that investigate a sense of absence and presence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement, in relation to home. Participatory and collaborative methods will be examined in relation to how these works sit at the intersection between art and ethnography and the strength of this collaboration.

Facilitating Participation in Mae La Refugee Camp

Subject participation has been an alternative approach to the traditional form of documentary photographic practice. “It is both a general move away from modernist photographic practice and its tendency to accept the evidentiary nature of the medium, and a direct response to the critical issues related to the indexicality of the medium that were (and in many ways still are) being debated by theorists and critics.”^[16]

Volunteering as a photographic workshop facilitator in the Mae La refugee camp on the Thai Burma border, I became invested in how the practice of photography could have the potential to facilitate ownership of the experiences of the students I was teaching. I aimed to elucidate young people’s understanding of their lives in refugee camps through their own photographs. Eight students took part, with many seeing it as an outlet to express their experiences of daily life inside the camps. The students photographed their daily situations (Figures

5a and 5b) and used this imagery as a way to personally express what it meant to them to live in the camp. With this participatory project I wanted to challenge traditional aesthetics and practices by offering the viewer a chance to see the world through the eyes of a different individual or group directly involved in the issues being raised.



Figure 5a: *S'Poe Wah*, Thai Burma border, 2012



Figure 5b: *S'Poe Wah*, Thai Burma border, 2012

The intention behind inviting participation was to offer the communities some degree of control and ownership of living through these situations. Similarly, the use of participation was used to elicit written responses (see Figure 6a). Letters are to be understood as points of entry to new knowledge of, and insights into deeper understandings of what it is to live through mobility (see Figures 6b and 6c). The responses also provided invaluable insights for further practical applications.

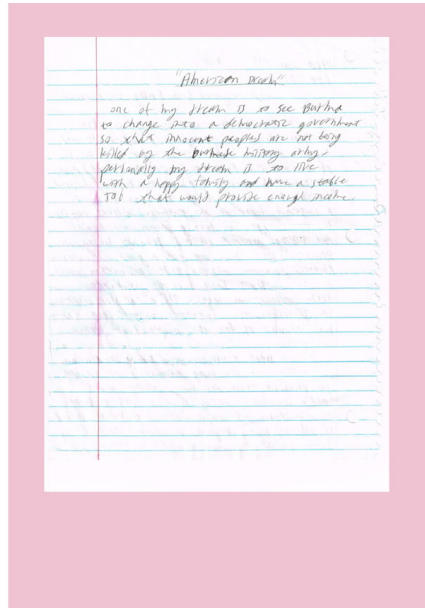


Figure 6a: Tammy Law, American Dream, 2017

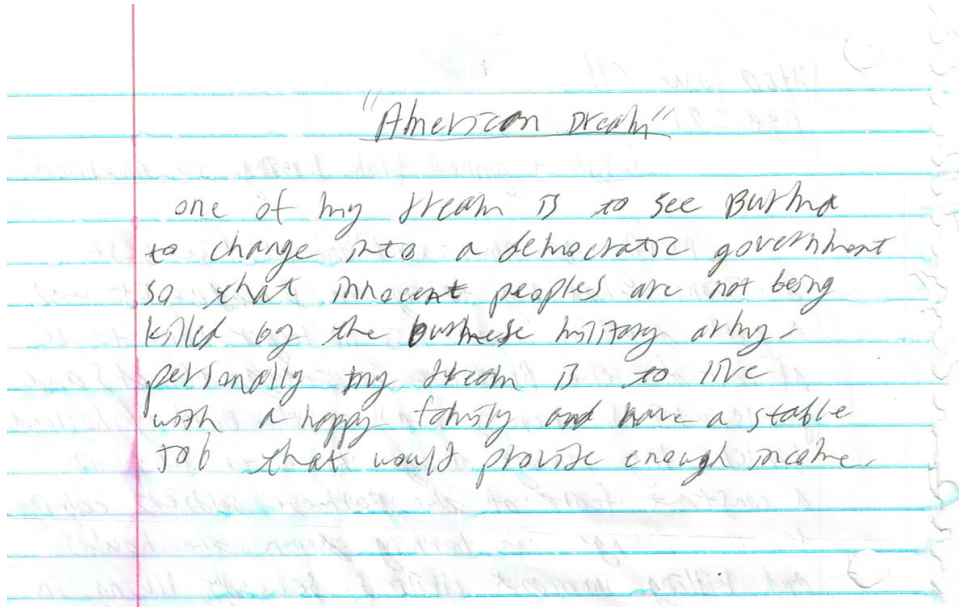


Figure 6b: Tammy Law, American Dream I, 2017

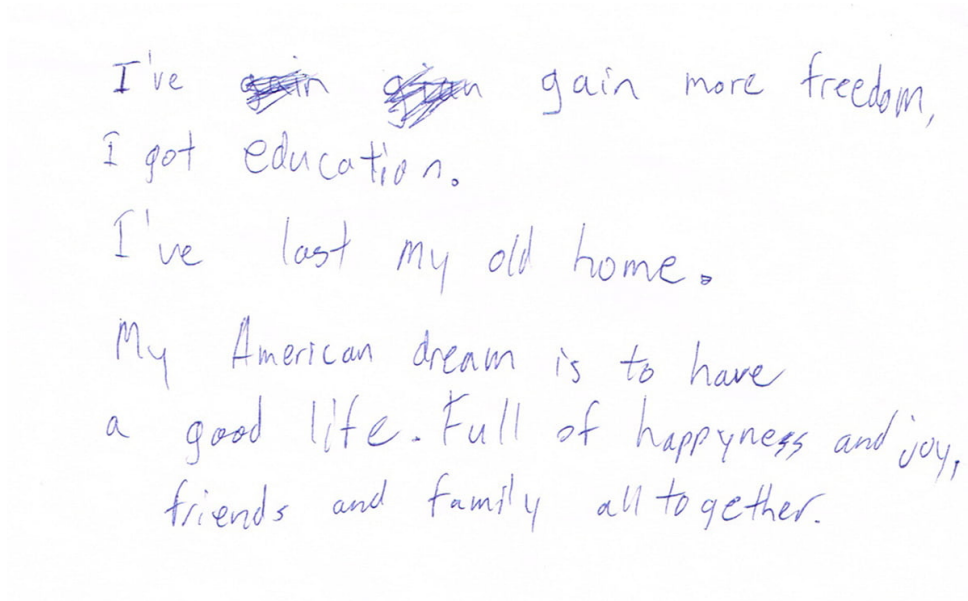


Figure 6c: Tammy Law, *American Dream II*, 2017

Journeying through Home

Journeying through Home was a participatory project held in the second year of my doctoral research, the aim of which was not only to question the expectations we have of documentary photography but also facilitate the dissemination of personal experiences of young refugee women in Brisbane. I invited five participants to take part in an ongoing mentorship and workshop programme to help them piece together their own narratives of lived experience, through photography from their perspectives as refugees living in Brisbane. This was one way that seemed appropriate, not only because it enabled participants to socially disseminate their personal narratives, but also because it effectively addressed the power imbalance between researcher and participant.

An informal workshop was established in which we wandered through participants' chosen environments, which consisted of both public and private space, such as Brisbane city, botanical parklands, their homes and backyards (Figure 7). This was also an attempt to enable the participants to feel more comfortable with sharing and articulating their thoughts, feelings and desires to a broader audience and offer a space where they could have the freedom to express themselves.



Figure 7: Tammy Law, *photographic workshop*, 2015

There were ethical issues that were considered, “as research participants may be inadequately trained in judging the potential ethical risks involved in collecting images and disseminating them for research purposes, and taking pictures may be considered intrusive or damaging to participants and the community at large.”^[17] Oral and written consent was given before any participation in this project and those who chose to remain anonymous were guaranteed anonymity. Since 2015, I met with participants for basic photographic training in technical as well as storytelling skills, photographing on location according to participants’ personally chosen themes revolving around “peace and resilience” (Figure 8).

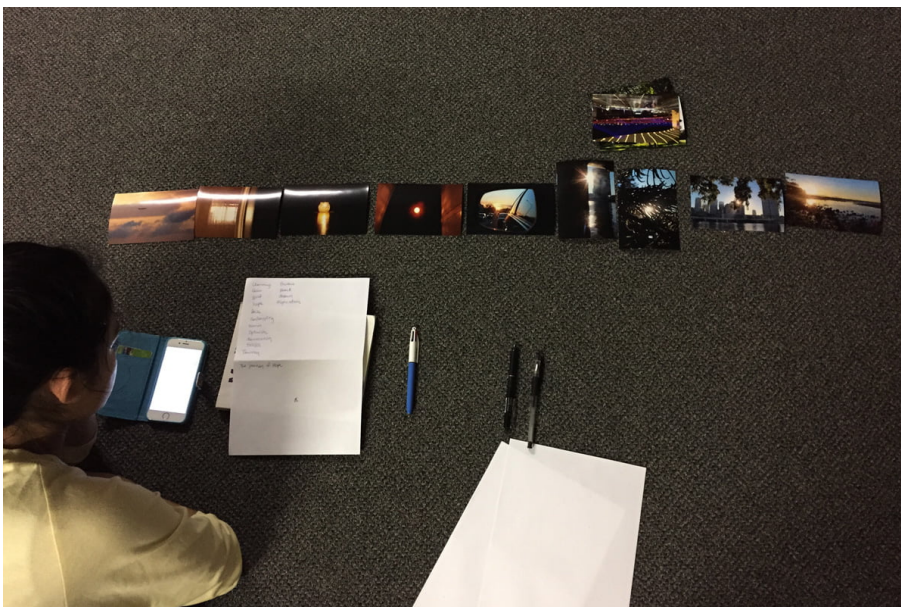


Figure 8: Tammy Law, *Sequencing in a photographic workshop*, 2016

After a year of meetings and lengthy discussions over how the participants wanted others to engage with the images, a consensus was reached. The *Journeying through Hope* Instagram feed was established as an open source for visual expressions about family, home, impermanence and permanence (Figures 9a and 9b). “These social networks play multiple roles in circulating and shaping images in determinate ways; the technology

contributes significantly to how the visual object is created, manipulated and shared.”^[18] Instagram was chosen as the platform that would be most easily accessible to create further dialogue and understanding between transnational diaspora from Burma as “belonging today is participation in communication more than anything else, and the multiple forms of communication are mirrored in the plurality of discourses of belonging”^[19] and ‘diasporic media can be a powerful agent of the community they represent and they can create powerful images of self-representation for the group.’^[20]

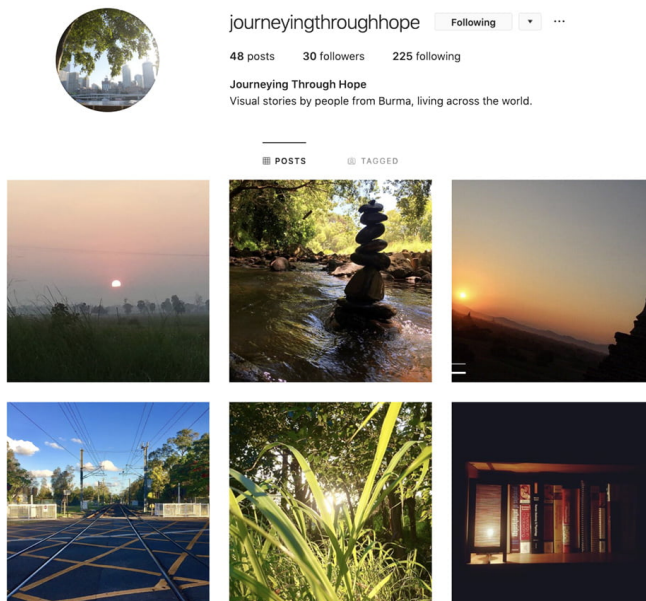


Figure 9a: collaborative Instagram project, accessible @journeyingthroughhope, 2015–present



Figure 9b: collaborative Instagram project, accessible @journeyingthroughhope, 2015–present

In the case of Burma, there is a strong engagement that manifests itself across social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and instant messaging services that offer families a way to construct a fragile kind of belonging through mobility. What is expressed in the *Journeying through Hope* project is a fragment of the bigger picture of transnational lives, but at times reveals the “extraordinariness of supposedly ordinary lives”.^[21]

Here, one of the participants expresses her view on resilience in a written statement she titled *The Journey of Resilience*:

Life is a journey, full of challenges and every individual journey is unique. At times, it feels like being trapped in a long ditch where there is no way out. But when I see a beam of light coming through; I know I still have hope. Hope to get back up, hope to see more of that light and hope to get closer to that light. Striving for that light may be difficult, scary or impossible. However, once I looked beyond the impossibility, I find the possibility. My previous experience dealing with my obstacle was not easy but once I overcome it, it strengthens me and I know I can do it again. It may take numerous attempts to get back up on track but the possibility is that the light can lead me to the way out. Optimistic thinking is a key to endure the challenges along the journey.^[22]

The primary aim of the *Journeying through Hope* project was to initiate an awareness of the broader understandings of what it means to be a refugee through empowering community members to share their experiences publicly.

Fragile Constellations

Only last year, two journalists who work for international news agency Reuters were accused of violating the Official Secrets Act in Burma, a law dating back to the British colonial period, after investigating the existence of a mass grave in Northern Rakhine State. According to news reports, a military campaign caused over 600,000 members of Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh in September 2017. The question needed to be asked: how is it possible for artists to create and articulate their political and social environments within the context of censorship and repressive rule?

In 2017 *Fragile Constellations* was conceived in order to establish a collaborative online network as part of an Australian Council of the Arts Grant I received. The network was launched via Instagram and via a website where artists from Australia and Burma produced images to expand on cross-culture and cross-border exchanges and to share moments of their daily life outside of their communities. The aim of the project was not only to build on an ongoing negotiation of connectedness, but also to expand on arts, cultural and cross-border exchanges between emerging and professional photographers living in Burma, during a period of transition but still under an oppressive military regime, a way of connecting distant places where people living in transition can participate within the broader international arts community (Figure 10).

Only ten years ago there was strict censorship of local media in Myanmar. The Internet has played a critical role in helping news organisations report on the violence against civilians, subverting the government's effort to present a sanitised version of events and due to growing Internet access in Yangon and other major cities, news and media outlets have flourished in more recent times. In 2014 the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law abolished censorship and allowed newspapers to become editorially independent from the state. These changes represented significant progress towards Myanmar's press serving as a platform for democratic evolution. On 8 November 2015, Burma held its first openly contested national election in 25 years. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won, which lifted sanctions on news reporting in Myanmar. As the media gained freedom, they also dealt with two major shifts: the first, from mainstream media to social networks, as Facebook became the principal media platform in Myanmar. The second shift was from a text-based world to a visual one, with images becoming the most significant and immediate language in Burma in the last decade. It is

within this unprecedented moment in Burma's political history that nuanced and independent documentary work has been essential to fully contextualise important issues surrounding the everyday experience of what it means to belong as a citizen of Burma. A stakeholder-driven network like *Fragile Constellations* can act as a platform to give the power to citizens to disseminate their everyday life from within their own communities.



Figure 10: *Fragile Constellations*, accessible at www.fragileconstellations.com, 2018

Photographers taking part in *Fragile Constellations* were approached through Yangon-based photography not-for-profit gallery and educational art space Myanmar Deitta, the Yangon Photography Festival (YPF) community, which is responsible for educating some of the leading photographers from Burma and the Thuma Collective, a photography collective established by seven local female photographers from Myanmar. The aim of *Fragile Constellations* is to foster further understandings of everyday life through the collaborative lens of locally emerging photographers and artists within Myanmar, as well as local artists in Australia.

The network was launched across multiple platforms, including Instagram, Facebook and a website, where artists were invited to collaborate on a series of photographs on the concept of “home” and “belonging”. Through photography and video, the collaborative works of Lyndal Irons, Teza Soe, Conor Ashleigh, Rita Khin, Julia Scott Green, Mayco Naing, Stephen Dupont, Sai Htin Linn Htet, George Voulgaropoulos, Tin Htet Paing, Joe Ruckli, Khin Zarchi Latt, Liss Fenwick and Shwe Wutt Hmon explore themes of home and belonging in an ever-increasing state of mobility. The experiences and stories of each collaborator offer ways in which we can begin to negotiate more nuanced experiences of the world around us.

These new media spaces enable transnational communities to intervene in, learn about and be challenged by experiences from the perspective of photographers from Burma as it has been suggested that, “visual representations not only give way to the depicted subject or object, but tend to embody very revealing aspects about the producer and culture of production.”^[23] Photographs are cultural artefacts that are meaningful in the context in which they are created. An everyday object such as a pair of sandals can elicit a narrative that is intertwined with fear, pain, displacement and settlement. These participatory and collaborative projects do not just seek to represent the objects, scenes, places, people and activities in their everyday lives, but to display them as portals into a person’s emotional and cognitive universe.

Exhibiting and the Viewing Process

A variety of contemporary social theorists suggest that the times we live in are characterised by mobility. The title of the exhibition *Away from Home* can be taken to mean that here and elsewhere can occur simultaneously. Home can be wherever and whenever we want it to be, real and imagined. I thought about how I could draw attention to movement, time and memory through the gallery space. Maud Gallery in Brisbane employed cooler, commercial lighting that highlighted the gallery context as an important space for the works to be shown to a broader, more general viewing audience so that people engaged with and started dialogues about Burma or with people from Burma in their own communities and neighbourhoods (Figures 11a and 11b).



Figure 11a: *Away from Home* @ Maud Gallery, Brisbane, August/September 2017



Figure 11b: *Away from Home* @ Maud Gallery, Brisbane, August/September 2017

Viewing the work as an exhibition is very public. Unlike what could be an intimate encounter with photographs in a book, the exhibition space has been described as a context where there is little unfolding of the viewing

process. The intimidation of a gallery space is something I am acutely aware of as a photographer who makes work that is intended for a broad and diverse audience. Exploring different voices and platforms in terms of editing and scale is significant to the experimentation with the materiality and intimacy of the gallery context.

The absence of instructional material throughout the gallery space forced audience members to carefully consider the selected writings featured in both gallery rooms (Figure 12). The dialogue presented in the letters throughout the first room as you enter the gallery space were written in response to the following questions:

What did you feel you gained when you moved to another country?

What do you feel you lost when you moved to another country?

What are your dreams?



Figure 12: *Away From Home* @ Maud Gallery, Brisbane, August/September 2017

Using projections as a device to immerse the audience in this constant negotiation of absence and presence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and unbelonging evoked these feelings of duality. The projections brought together notions of place and space that test these possibilities. For Jonathan Htoo, a project participant who grew up between the Thai Burma border and Australia, the idea of home was perceived as a dreamlike place to strive towards. The aim of the video installation *Jono Htoo* (2017) was to invite visitors into a private space real and imagined to give them some sense of isolation and reflections on the self and a personal dreaming of belonging (Figure 13a).

The text accompanying the video installation is a reflection on personal histories, written by Jonathan in an honest and almost confessional tone that pulls the imagery in the video into focus. While the home is presented here as a site of refuge, a place of safety and intimacy, it is simultaneously a space of loneliness and longing (Figure 13b). Anthropologist Nigel Rapport notes “The illusory plays a prominent part in the diasporic construction of homeland because, as time passes, the place of origin remains stagnant in the memory of the migrant while in reality it has evolved.”^[24]

While migrants' life trajectories are segmented between distant localities, like Burma and Australia, housing arrangements and (re)constructions of home are emerging windows on their attitudes and expectations towards receiving and sending societies. In the video, the protagonist's ghostly figure transitions slowly through the frame, tracing references to the continual renegotiation and reconstruction of the experiences throughout his life as a young refugee. He recalls distinct moments of gunfire in the night and early morning aerial raids on nearby villages during the time his family fled military soldiers in the jungles of Burma. Sections of the imagery throughout the video are perceived to be moving in and out of focus, lingering on the form of the protagonist, who meanders in between physical and metaphorical spaces. The use of layering projections within a video activates and further fractures the act of remembering (Figure 13c).



Figure 13a: Tammy Law, *Jono Htoo* installation view, Maud Gallery, Brisbane, 2017.

My Journey from Burma to Australia. 18.4.17.

I was born in between two country so my mum named me "Kaw Hser Paw". It means flower on the border. My Village was located in south of Burma which not far from Thai border. It was beautiful village which surrounded by mountains and streams. I couldn't remember anything what happened to my Village since I was too small. But I could remember only the word that my mum told me "my daughter! we can never return to our home again because our Village was burn down already by the Burmese army. As a child I was very upset to leave my home and fled to Thailand. We lived in Thailand two year as Refugee. In 1992, when I was seven of age my mum told me that we had to return to Burma and rebuild our village again in different part of South Burma. I was very happy to move to a new village. The village was called Jerker. It was very peaceful place and only 10 families lived there. We were protected by Karen army. This village was a threat for from Thai border so we had to walk by foot for 4 or 5 hours to get the food. I never thought I would had to leave my home town again. In 1997 early January, we were informed that we got to leave our village immediately because the Burmese soldiers were on their way to attack us. Unluckily, All the Thai border were closed. So we were unable to enter to Thailand. We had to run around in the jungle for the entire year. In order to survive we always had to be ready for run and we had to move to another place to another every two or three day. It was very hard for me when there were no hope and no future. I was praying everynight to overcome this hardship. In 1998, we were sent to Refugee camp in Thailand called Ban Don Yang Refugee camp. Refugee camp was better than living in the jungle but it wasn't safe either when we weren't allowed to go outside.

Figure 13b: Jono Htoo's written reflection, 2017



Figure 13c: Tammy Law, *Jono Htoo* installation view, Maud Gallery, Brisbane, 2017

Video accessible at <https://vimeo.com/252462743>

The exhibition provided a rich, unique source of accounts of how people relate to unfamiliar worlds. The formal, conceptual, aesthetic and experiential, together with knowledge, limitations, risk and doubt, all played pivotal roles in developing these exhibitions and in offering a context to how my work could further engage with broader audiences and within a space where audience members had the choice to immerse themselves in personal histories of participants' stories.

Yangon Photo Festival

The 2018 YPF screening took place in the center of the city at Maha Bandula Park in Yangon, Myanmar, and included visual stories featured by local Burmese photographers and international photographers. *Away from Home* was one of the featured series that was projected onto a large screen among an audience made up of predominantly local members (Figure 14). The YPF platform was key to gauge audience responses from within the wider community that participated in the project, and beyond. The presentation of the work in this platform also fostered opportunities for local communities to engage with not only one another's personal histories, but also offered a place of self-reflection, like in Jono Htoo's written excerpts. The work contributes to the ongoing conversations among the community inside Burma as well as outside the community that this work seeks to represent. During a time of increasing movement across borders it is important for people to engage with these complex and often overwhelming narratives of mobility within their own country that push for critical thinking.



Figure 14: *Away from Home* @ Maha Bandula Park, Yangon, Myanmar, 2018

Permission to Belong *Photobook*

The tactile nature of my research, the photobook, was a component that I found very difficult to present to audiences in the gallery setting. Initially, the photobook was used to communicate the narrative at a large scale (measuring over four metres) to sit within the gallery space at fortyfivedownstairs in Melbourne (Figure 15). The installation of the photobook here was intended to deepen understandings of what political scientist Andy Knight) describes as “feelings of alienation and exclusion in the host country”, focusing on ideas of difference, strangeness and boundaries. Because of its size people felt uneasy touching the book or taking it off the shelf to view it.^[25] This intimacy (or lack of intimacy) was something I was interested in exploring before reproducing the photobook, for an audience beyond the gallery space.



Figure 15: Tammy Law, *Belonging In Motion* photobook, fortyfivedownstairs, Melbourne, March/April 2017

Today, photobooks are crucial for circulating photography across borders and publishing them is an insistence

on the physical, in response to the ephemeral nature of the Internet. The photobook is an object that offers tactile gratification: placed in a book, photographs no longer simply represent a world out there, a distant referent rendered permanently visible by being photographed, yet remaining untouchable, but become part of an object available to our sense of touch. They are no longer windows through which we can see our cultural others or our fellow citizens, cities we may or may not have visited, famous works of art and sights no longer available, but objects of an opaque materiality that lead us to a multisensory experience. They are more influential, as they can be shared around and circulated across countries, books themselves becoming migratory and mobile.

Permission to Belong initially took the form of two separate editions: *Belonging in Motion* (2016) (Figure 16a) investigating the stories from a more traditional approach of documentary storytelling, suggesting the emotional value of domestic objects contributed to the physicality of the sense of home,^[26] and *Away from Home*, exploring experiences from a more emotional and psychological landscape of a “half home”, as place of origin and as a sensory world of everyday life (Figure 16b).



Figure 16a: Tammy Law, *Belonging in Motion* photobook, first edition, 2016



Figure 16b: Tammy Law, *Away from Home* photobook, first edition, 2016

Throughout the process of making the photobook various “dummies” or drafts were made for review of the various elements that make up the narrative of the book (Figure 17). The dummies assisted in the process of reflection; what needed to change and where, the cover, case, sequence and materials within all required further refinement at particular stages of the editing process. Cutting, folding, pasting and sewing also became integral to this process of reflection, and in turn development of the sequence, to allow for the assessment of potential disjuncture’s in the narrative.



Figure 17: Tammy Law, *photobook dummies*, 2018

As Martin Parr highlights, “photobooks speak of a tactile engagement with images beyond the visual, for which there is no equivalent in the gallery space.”^[27] More than prints, the photobook is available for the public to hold, leaf through, buy, take home and collect. The first edition of *Away from Home* was a concertina (Figure 18), with images flowing directly from one to the other, so when the page is turned the spatial interlude between pictures is created by the viewer. The opposing blank page functions like taking a breath, offering viewers time to reflect. The strength of this effect is to create a photographic time and space separate from those that appear in the images. To understand the narrative of the image and, consequently, the narrative of a photobook it is first necessary to understand the surface of the image, which includes the materiality of the photograph and its informational elements and, secondly, the cultural and social constructions in an image.



Figure 18: Tammy Law, *Away from Home* photobook, concertina edition, 2016

The photobook creates that sense of shared presence, constructed through tactility. Susan Sontag explains that through snapshots, “each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself a portable kit of images that bears

witness to its connectedness.”^[28] Many of the families that took part in the research project had very few photographs, as many had fled through the jungles of Burma with very little in possession. Transnational objects offered to me for collection included printed photographs that were dear to them. Family photographs like the one in Figure 19 acted as “fractured narratives of frozen moments, tied together by personal recollection.”^[29] The images throughout the book *Belonging in Motion* act as a place of memory and reflection, a space of familiarity that even strangers can place themselves.



Figure 19: Tammy Law, *Before We Left*, 2017

Permission to Belong moves beyond the visual and into a tactile engagement that photographic prints in an exhibition often lack. Its images are subtle and poetic and reflect on the fracturing of experience at the centre of Burma as a country, as well as the narratives within. At a time when migration has become such a pressing political issue, the book gives insight into why people would want to leave the safety of an environment they know and travel halfway across the world to a foreign land and an alien culture.

At its simplest, migration entails leaving home the latter understood as a household, house or local community with no guarantee of finding it again (even less, to find it as it used to be). As such, people in transition feel “half home” and ambivalent about their sense of belonging wherever they are, even when they return to the nation of origin. Figure 20 shows the handmade box in which the book sits; the photographs of the individuals to whom the UNHCR visa document belongs have been severed and displaced, made anonymous to the viewer. A literal absence and displacement reiterated through the detachment of imagery from the information presented in the document. As we delve beyond the visuals, the official stamp of the Australian embassy and keywords such as *arrive*, *indefinitely* and *entry* become more evident.



Figure 20: Tammy Law *Permission to Belong* photobook, 2019

Domestic spaces appear intermittently throughout the book; how do these seemingly ordinary spaces immerse the viewer or alternatively disengage them from the images that come before and after? To me these spaces act as reflective moments that refer to the “in-betweenness” of the people in the book, as well as the sense of being lost or in flux that the viewer takes on. Histories past and present intermingle to present something new and communicate experiences to further understandings of what it means to live through transition.

Switching between inside and outside, Figure 21 shows the rhythm of the book and how it hinges on the metaphorical, material, visual closeness and detachment. These spaces act as mirrors to the photographers’ personal histories. The pages are inserted in such a way that it is possible that mismatching double-page spreads emerge that allow the recreation and renegotiation of ideas of home. There is nothing tangible and in a world that is becoming more and more fragmented, the notion of home becomes both elusive and illusive. For many, this is an age of dislocation.



Figure 21: Tammy Law, *Permission to Belong* photobook, 2019

Video accessible at <https://vimeo.com/303999145>

The value inherent in telling and remembering is significant to the photobook as form. Burma's socio-political landscape is constantly changing, but this photobook offers a constant, physical and tangible object and platform for documenting these mobile stories. The book also seeks to present that what may seem beyond our comprehension as worth listening to, with the hope of gaining small but important insights into the human condition. Issues relating to cultural identity and belonging are increasingly politicised, complex and problematic in the context of globalisation. Questions surrounding where we belong, who we are and who has the right to determine these choices continue to be compelling and relevant. However, answers that might once have been given in a straightforward manner are now more difficult to pin down as a consequence of greater mobility and multiple places of location. For migrants, leading a life far away and across nations, the photobook can become a vital tool to help inform our understandings of "how families are negotiated, renegotiated, adapted across space and through time", as it offers a solution that investigates the multifaceted transnational experience in a mobile way.^[30]

Conclusion

This article foregrounds issues and conversations around what Hurdley has called, "the value and importance of the 'crisis of representation' of visual data in academic research", with the argument that visual research methods can be central to translate unspoken inferences to audiences, as a tool for research to represent, understand, and more fully encapsulate lived experiences of migration and how difference is lived on the ground, not merely a technique to elicit response.^[31] Situated between the spaces of art and documentary, my photographic practice is key to elucidating understandings of "the other" and the dualities of the refugee life: between freedom and dislocation, identity and assimilation, loneliness and belonging, through the everyday experiences of families from Burma.

Furthering perspectives of tacit knowledge by recognising the constant shifting, changing or emerging processes shaped by research the people, environment and conversations the photographic works provide insight into how these families experience belonging and displacement, permanence and impermanence, which help us negotiate and understand the world within which they inhabit.

People fleeing conflict is a dominant story of our time. People's links to their original homes are as diverse as their journeys to resettle in other countries. In Australia, current government policy is shaped around border protection concerns and the idea that asylum seekers are "breaking the rules". New ways of telling this story of mobility are evolving, drawing on the idea that home is not bound by space, but rather is constantly under negotiation across multiple sites. As a result of migration, family spaces and structures undergo manifold transformations, and so the question of how families are recreated is important, as families are diverse, complex and fluid.

I reflect on how communities maintain a sense of identity through their adopted homelands by looking backwards and forwards simultaneously. These works contribute to the growing practice (and accompanying critical discourse) of visual research methodologies in academic contexts that act as a bridge between practice-based and text-based cultures, in particular, the application of visual (photographic) practices in the field of visual ethnography. I am interested in the idea that what has been photographed potentially creates a new space of belonging though fluid and in flux created through the act of photography. A new kind of reality is presented that embraces imagined landscapes, layering imagery across time and place, memory and experience, home and

away and engaging in the reality of migration that move beyond representations of suffering and highlight the significance in gaining small but important insights into what difference feels like when lived on the ground. While this project makes specific reference to the transnational diaspora from Burma, themes of home and mobility are common to us all.

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