Away From Home: A photographic research project exploring the dualities of freedom and dislocation, identity and assimilation, loneliness and belonging in relation to home through the transnational lives of families from Burma

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Tammy Law

APRIL 2018
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AWAY FROM HOME

A photographic research project exploring the dualities of freedom and dislocation, identity and assimilation, loneliness and belonging in relation to home through the transnational lives of families from Burma.

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ABSTRACT

Away From Home is a series of photographic essays 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. 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 comment on feelings of statelessness within the transnational mobility of the people involved. The project consists of two major components: a photobook and accompanying thesis, in relation to other practical projects undertaken as part of this research (such as photographic exhibitions and collaborative platforms) form a narrative 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 in which an engagement in migration is central.

The socioeconomic effects of Burmese migrations on both their homeland and various host countries have been critically addressed in scholarly literature. Moving beyond the well-documented Burmese refugees in Thailand, other studies have examined particular cases of Burmese enclaves throughout Asia: in Japan (Banki 2006a), India (Datta 2003), and Bangladesh (Ullah 2011; Egreteau 2012). However, the significance of diasporic transnational networks must be further elucidated, not only in terms of the political and peacemaking contexts that exist within medical, social and political science research (Bird 2013; Egreteau 2012), but also through other approaches such as creative practice and visual ethnography to deepen investigations into the multifaceted sense of home in transnational communities.

I will draw on cited text based and visual studies (McConnell 2012; Goldberg 2009; Searles 2010; Panchoaga 2011-2014; Pin 2012; Kurtis 2008; Clang 2013) to develop those models in a synthesis that sits in contrast to more traditional methods of academic scholarship. This research project argues that photography can offer new ways to investigate lived experience and can provide nuanced understandings into the unspoken relationships between researcher and participant, refugees and their environments. The complex familial issues and dynamics that arise out of the current diaspora of refugees from Burma has been revealed through a visual-ethnographic research project that utilises a photo-documentary approach like those of photographers Alison Wright (2012) and David Hogsholt (2012) that examine the circumstances of diaspora from Burma, living through transitional sites of relocation, such as refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. The use of documentary photography has been central to translate unspoken inferences to the audience, as a tool for research, not merely a technique to elicit response. Away From Home aims to test what Hurdley (2007) has called, ‘the value and importance of the “crisis of representation” of visual data in academic research’, with the argument...
that visual research methods are a richer means to represent, understand, and more fully encapsulate lived experiences of migration and how difference is lived on the ground.
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KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does documentary photographic practice renegotiate and advance our understandings of the lived experiences of absence and presence of transnational families from Burma?

How can visual research methodologies that act as a bridge between practice-based and text-based cultures engage in experiences of migration that expand our understandings of the dualities between freedom and dislocation, identity and assimilation, loneliness and belonging?
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter One scopes, orientates and situates specific photo essays in context of home and belonging. I discuss the relationship between my family’s migration and the effect of those experiences on my research; how my personal narrative and history gives foundation to and contextualises my self-reflexive photographic practice. *Away From Home* situates my photographic practice in the context of selected visual practitioners who are key to expand on understandings of home and belonging ‘the other’ and the dualities of the refugee experience: between freedom and dislocation, identity and assimilation, loneliness and belonging. Chapter Six is central to discussions around the concept of home. Whereby, Chapters Three and Four explicate how photographs of objects within the home; portraits of those families who inhabit these transnational spaces and projections of past imagery onto environments that are in transition, become poetic references to demonstrate the absence that pervades photography, but also the absence that pervades these family’s experiences of displacement.

The research for this Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) has been conducted by project and consists of two major components:

1. A handmade photobook, *Belonging In Motion*.

These components in relation to other practical projects undertaken as part of this research (such as photographic exhibitions and collaborative platforms) form a narrative that explores and invokes the experiences of presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement, in relation to home, through the everyday experiences of families from Burma.

1.2 CONTRIBUTION & SIGNIFICANCE

The project seeks to offer significant contributions to:

- Existing self reflexive documentary practice that bring new perspectives into how the families involved experience home and belonging through the combination of photographic essays and personal handwriting throughout the photobook that offers tacit knowledge into the constant
shifting, changing or emerging processes shaped by research—the people, environment and conversations in-between.

- Documentary photographic practice that engages with experiences of migration, moving beyond representations of suffering into the realm of affective understanding.
- Material and immaterial environments and objects that help deconstruct, reconstruct and reveal the importance of absence and presence in an investigation of multiple homes and belongings, which intervene in lived experiences of transnational families from Burma.
- Growing practices (and accompanying critical discourse) of visual research methodologies in academic contexts that act as intersections between practice-based and text-based cultures. In particular, the application of visual (photographic) practice in the field of visual ethnography.

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 science and humanities, rather than towards intervening in the wide 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’ (Wells 2015, p.12). My work foregrounds issues and debates that relate to the specificity of photography in relation to migration and serve 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’ (Sandbye 2018, p 268-269).

1.3 VISUAL NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION

Throughout history, visual stories have been used to illuminate, to educate, to recount, to challenge and to engage. Every individual’s life experience is unique and dynamic, particularly for those of us who have journeyed far from our homes to establish new lives in foreign countries. Personal stories offer an important opportunity to enrich the histories of the spaces we inhabit. By emphasising the personal stories of those who make that journey, the photographs that make up Belonging In Motion aim to record significant experiences with increased depth and nuance to better understand what it means to live transnationally. In the context of my research, the documentary photo essay can be acknowledged as a category of visual storytelling. The inception of this method can be attributed to illustrated magazines such as LIFE, which launched in the 1936. LIFE provided compelling, often socially inspired stories that combined photographs with captions or written essays. Several documentary projects across this early period of documentary photography could be read as phenomenological studies of the photographer’s own communities and circumstances. These included
Bill Owens’ study of *Suburbia* (Figure 1a & Figure 1b), in which he lived, and Larry Clark’s study of suburban drug addicts (1971), to name but a few. Others crossed cultural borders and used visual narratives to explore communities and social movements. In 1970, Bruce Davidson, a white man, crossed the boundaries of class, ethnicity and race to photograph African American and Hispanic culture in Harlem with a tripod-mounted view camera. Following this tradition, in 1975, W Eugene and Ailene Smith documented Japanese fisherman and their communities who had been poisoned by mercury dumped by a Japanese corporation. Some of the most powerful visual essays were produced in a non-academic context, though often shared traits of well-informed ethnographic research.

Figure 1a: Bill Owens, *Suburbia* (1973)
The authenticity of the image was thought to provide evidence of the realities of a life lived. László Moholy-Nagy, the photographer and designer, captured the essence of the photo essay during this era: ‘not to make photography an “art”; on the contrary, “the real photographer” had “a great social responsibility”’ (in Grosvenor, I & Hall, A 2012). During a period when the immorality of child labour was hidden from the public, Lewis Hine documented child labour to aid the National Child Labour Committee’s lobbying efforts to end the practice. Photography was not only prohibited, but also posed a serious threat to the child labour industry. After the Second World War, the camera was championed as a tool for social change, used to shed light on injustice, inequality and the sidelined aspects of society. In 1947, the Magnum photography agency was founded by a group of like-minded photographers to bring to the forefront social issues that affected humanity on a global scale.

Sebastião Salgado joined Magnum in 1994, his work exemplified photography as a tool for unveiling injustices through war, disease, famine, poverty and hostile climatic conditions. Initially released in 1999, Salgado’s photographic essay Exodus documented forced mass movement of people around the globe. He photographed the roads they walked, the impermanent camps they built and the overcrowded city slums where they ended up. The work was not just about destitution, it was about ‘the landscape of mass flux; the logistics of limbo’ (Brookman 2016). From the late 1960’s to 1990’s spurred a tradition of visual essays that traced major migratory experiences. Andrew McConnell’s Hidden Lives (2012) approaches this ‘landscape of mass flux’ in a more contemporary context, through
portraits of refugees from Haiti, Pakistan and Congo in their new environments. *Hidden Lives* is comprised of short films, photography and written testimonies. It documents the stories of 40 refugees and refugee families in eight different countries around the world. McConnell frames his subjects in an otherworldly and artificial way, creating vastness between the landscapes they inhabit via the use of light that separates them from their surrounding environments (Figure 2a and 2b).

![Figure 2a: Andrew McConnell, Hidden Lives (2012)](image1)

![Figure 2b: Andrew McConnell, Hidden Lives (2012)](image2)
There is a long lineage of practitioners that have worked within and departed from the framework of social documentary photography (from the Farm Security Administration era through to newer theoretical frameworks and their relationship to human migration where, ‘the spectrum between documentary and art provides photography with a specific opportunity to address difficult subject matter between the personal and the political. Leaving the discussion of “the politics of representation” — so dominant in the 1980s — aside and instead departing from a handful of newer theoretical framings which try to formulate an ethically responsive, activist and transitive form of photographic agency’ (Sandbye 2018, p. 267). My work is situated within these new contexts, as it is concerned with the phenomena of what it feels like to be a refugee; in transition, between presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement, in relation to home, through the everyday experiences of families from Burma.

‘Most photographs disseminated by mainstream media offer a highly circumscribed view of photography’s long and complex relationship to human migration’ (Sheehan 2018, p. 25). In this digital age where the dissemination of images are also transitional and fluid, photographs themselves ‘migrate with their makers, subjects, and viewers...’ (Sheehan 2018, p.25). As photographs continue to shape our understanding of migration and what that might mean to the plethora of families on the move, the visual rhetoric of displacement and upheaval have the potential to enrich our understandings about the world around us. Artist and designer’s Leora Farber and Maarit Mäkelä (2010) reinforce that artists are increasingly integrating research methods into their creative processes in diverse ways, focusing on the production of knowledge as part of, or in relation to, artists’ works. To demonstrate this potential, I review several exemplary documentary works throughout each chapter of this thesis to expose the significance of this form and its contribution to knowledge, as it shifts the focus of photography and migration away from images of diaspora as represented by news and media, rather situating images of mobility in the context of ‘art-documentary’ photography that is ‘a self-reflexive approach concerned.

1.4 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’ (Brah 1996; Levitt & Waters 2002; Blunt 2005; Anderson 2006; Long 2013; Boccagni 2017) and constituted through multiple relationships with people and places (Faist 2000; Blunt 2004; Blunt & Dowling 2006; Bonini 2011; Abumeis 2013). 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.

The experiences of the families discussed in *Away From Home* acknowledge and celebrate the capacity for participants in the research to be ‘actors in their own lives - people with agency and a right to self-determination within their new sociocultural surrounds’ (Taylor in Bird, Cox & Brough 2016, p. 17). Belonging could be seen as something that is situated within the concept of ‘home’, which is described by author of *Refugees, Conflict and the Search for Belonging* Lucy Hovil, as ‘people and places; meeting practical demands and more abstract notions for which people yearn. Home is what makes sense geographically, politically, socially, culturally; both deeply embedded in history, and yet flexible and dynamic’ (Hovil 2016, p. 167).

In Jessica Nancy Bird’s (2013) 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’ (Bird 2013, p. 232). Bird discusses ‘how everyday life in settlement is intricately connected to memories of the past and imaginings of the future… to argue that social imaginaries take settlement beyond a time-limited space of adjustment and into a continual process of reconciling the past with future possibilities of settlement’ (Bird 2013, p. 232). My photo 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 effects their constructions of belonging to place.

In Figure 3, belonging is demonstrated as a personal experience of belongingness within the daily experiences of settlement. Here, the audience is placed in the position of a welcomed guest; the perspective 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 are testament to the sense of belonging within the households of families from Burma. 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. Sustained metaphors of these practical and emotional connections are embedded within images throughout the photobook *Belonging in Motion* to construct a series of complex, composite mental images, sensations or thoughts in the viewer’s mind.
In the title of this thesis, *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’ Moore (2000, p. 211), we may be born in a place and yet be disconnected from it because of displacement at an early age, as was the case for children from Burma who travelled to other countries for resettlement. The concept of home within a transnational context will be further explicated later, throughout discussions in Chapter Six.

### 1.5 PERSONAL HISTORY AND RELEVANCE

Implanted within my memory is my experience of being a child of Chinese migrants, and the bubble of Asian/Australianness within which I live. My travels through Asia—mostly in Japan, China, Malaysia, Thailand and Burma—and the differences between Asia and the West act as catalysts for my interrogation of transnational mobility through my photographic practice. The profound sense of ‘disconnection’ or ‘unhomeliness’ arising from my experience as an Asian Australian grew with me. I knew that our family was different to the majority of families living on the Sunshine Coast during the 1980’s. We grew up with stories of our parents’ uprootedness, particularly the experience of my mother—she moved to the isolated shores of the Sunshine Coast in the 1970s, having left her entire family behind. That period (not that dissimilar to this current point in time) was a turbulent political moment in Australia’s migration politics, and there was tension between my mother and her siblings when they
visited from Hong Kong—they wanted to resettle in Australia, but because of its strict migratory laws at the time, this was not an option. They overstayed their visas and my mother was forced to shelter them, but the authorities were alerted and they were sent back to Hong Kong. I began to observe the deterioration of the relationships between my parents and the families they had left behind, both geographically and metaphorically. As a young child, I was oblivious to the complexity behind that displacement and the emotional, psychological and physical dislocation that occurred within the family. Our lives still and always will remain entangled in these transnational relations, with the majority of my mother’s immediate family living in Hong Kong and Canada.

My story is not unique. Mass movements of people across the globe have been an important feature of world history. Countless families live between a place of home and homelessness, belonging and displacement. The photographic essays that form the sections of the photobook: *Belonging In Motion* engage in these ideas by exploring lived experiences of displacement from the perspectives of transnational family members living abroad. My attitudes towards, and understanding of, migration and diaspora have been influenced by my family’s long history of dispersal to different parts of the world. As anthropologist Lok Siu (2012, p. 144) writes, ‘it has made me more attuned to the messiness, unevenness and meaningfulness of migration’. As a result of these early experiences, I developed some sense of what it means to be displaced, living at home and away from home at the same time and sought to elucidate these experiences through my photographic practice. Artist researcher Lesley Duxbury observes that researchers whose works are shaped by their own experiences ‘bring highly personal aspects to their research activities and accumulated life information may influence the direction of the thinking and in due course shape the intentions and outcomes of the research’ (Duxbury, cited in Grierson et al. 2009, p. 55).

Questions about ‘self’ versus ‘other’ are not a recent development. For several decades, there has been growing concern about identity politics and the politics of representation (Rutten, Dienderen & Soetaert 2013). Artist and academic Leora Farber and Maarit Mäkelä (2010) argue that:

‘Given the plethora of theoretical positions which has been covered regarding the ethics of representing, speaking for, of, and with the other, is a terrain that seems well worn to the point of exhaustion’.

Photographing others raises complex representational issues and so it is important to engage in new or other ways of conceptualising ‘otherness’ through affective photographic elucidations. One message that emerges from viewing the kind of imagery that represents the ‘other’ is that Western society is somehow ‘better’ than other societies, where ‘we gain in moral status, financially and politically, while those we represent, or appropriate, remain where they are’ (Kleinman & Kleinman 1997, p.8). For example, when South African photographer Pieter Hugo photographed itinerant Nigerian entertainers in *The Hyena and Other Men* (Figure 4), questions were raised about exotic voyeurism and exploiting
the ‘other’. Hugo was acutely aware of this question and was scrupulous in the way he went about photographing the ‘Hyena Men’, giving his subjects a textual voice that describes their social invisibility in their own country.

Figure 4: Pieter Hugo, The Hyena and Other Men (2005)

My work sits at the intersection of creative practice and visual ethnography. Reflexivity is embedded within a visual ethnography approach ‘to ensure participants’ stories are not overwhelmed by researchers’ own stories’ (Guest 2016, p. 76). I acknowledge that the stories I tell and the stories that I seek to tell, are always told through and should be understood within a context of personal history. Drawing attention to the influences and personal significance of our stories ensures that ‘both methodological rigour and ethical practice’ (Guest 2016, p. 79) shape and form the research. Though my research is related to my personal background and experiences of migration, working with cultures other than my own makes me acutely aware of integrating the appropriate ethical and methodical
approaches when conducting my research and also during the production of images and research outputs.

1.6 WHY BURMA?

Although this research departs from personal history and experiences, 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 media. *Belonging In Motion* aims to explore 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; these 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 thesis so the relationship between Burma’s history and it’s current significance will be briefly discussed, to offer some context to the research.

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 many ethnic groups. It 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. Millions have fled or been displaced from their homes. ‘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’ (Lemere & West 2011, p. 15).

The United Nations estimates that there are currently 650,000 people who are internally displaced within Burma and at the end of 2016, the total number of forcibly displaced people around the world, reached 65.6 million. The civil war in Burma has been described as 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-government, with very limited results. Resettlement has become a common survival method for many of the ethnic minority groups with large populations now residing in Thailand, Australia and the United States (US). The Myanmar Government estimates that there are 4.25 million Myanmar nationals living abroad. 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—consequently, there is a lack of documentation on these groups’ histories. *Belonging in Motion* revolves
around the ethnic minority group of Karen people from Burma. 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 peace-keeping rather than people’s quotidian lives:

While there are reports that project problems such as political entanglements, human rights violations, drug trafficking, widespread corruption and poverty, and natural disasters a more nuanced picture of the sociocultural dimension of Burma’s ethnic diversity, of the people’s everyday lives, of their agency and limitations is lacking. There is an urgent need to see modern Burma through its people, not just through the country’s problems or political suffering (Chang & Tagliacozzo 2014, p.4).

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’ (Chang & Tagliacozzo 2014, p.4). Their individual lives become buried beneath issues, abuses and statistics. Personal and everyday experience are at the centre of the collected narratives in Nowhere To Be Home, an exemplary model of how personal histories from those living under Burma’s military regime can create a space for those ‘faraway stories’—the experiences of those whose realities seem starkly different from our own—to enter the realm of our awareness through their own voices. The book offers the chance for those stories to be heard in delicate nuance, rather than sweeping generalisations.

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 experiences were dislocated, relocated and displaced along with the family members themselves; considered unimportant during times when survival was the priority. How these relationships between people and places changed through the course of these familial movements were illuminated through ethnographic and photographic approaches presented in the photobook and exhibitions. The photographic narratives that make up Belonging in Motion explore how the effects of geographic displacement manifest within the quotidian reality of transnational lives. The combination of image and handwritten text engage with the everyday lived experiences of families from Burma who are scattered across Thailand, Burma, Australia and the US. The photobook offers an engagement with broader audiences and creates visages that we can all read. The stories encompassed a wide range of intersecting and constantly evolving identities based on the transnational community that stretches across all corners of the world:

Estimations are that a major proportion of displaced people from Burma have resettled in Thailand, Malaysia and China through both legal and irregular channels, whilst others have migrated to countries such as Canada, Australia and America through humanitarian programs’ (Thawnghmung 2008, p. 23).
Interviews conducted with those living inside Burma, as well as those who fled to Thailand, Australia and the US as this combination of ‘host nations’ offered valuable insights into the duality of absence and presence in relation to home through the transnational mobility of families from Burma.

Coming from a background in which migration has grounded my understandings of the people and 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; 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.

1.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have given an overview of the project, contextualising it within the boundaries of personal history and the relevance of visual narratives of migration to a wider, more general audience. The significance of the theory of photography is acknowledged and I have also discussed how the project contributes and advances not only my photographic practice, but also the concept of home and belonging through photographic and ethnographic elucidations. Although there is a long lineage of visual narratives of migration, I examine how personal stories are important to enrich history, particularly through the lens of transnational families from Burma, whose stories are more often than not, displace, buried and forgotten.
PART 1: METHODS

Over the course of this PhD, I have used a multi-method approach that includes audio, video, photography, letter-writing, fieldwork, immersion, informal interviews, forms of participation and collaboration, within the context of photography and ethnography, to investigate a sense of absence and presence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement, in relation to home, through the quotidian experiences of families from Burma. The methodology employed throughout the research firstly draws reference to Burmese scholar and anthropologist Violet Cho and the methodological approaches of her work in relation to Burmese diasporic identity. I then explore how the use of ethnography coupled with photography can be used to uncover the unspoken and further develop understandings of transnational people’s lived experiences, and their experiences through mobility and to develop ‘the photo-documentary engagement with those on the margins (that) has produced distinctly important photographs out of distinctly human relationships’ (Ferrell 2018, p. 177). The work of photo media practitioners James Mollison, William Yang, Doug Spowart and Victoria Cooper is also examined in reference to how they use similar methods within their practice. Participatory and collaborative methods within the exemplary work of Tobias Titz, Jim Lommasson, Patrick Willcoq, Eugenie Dolberg and Jim Goldberg are examined in relation to how these works sit at the intersection between art and ethnography and the strength of this collaboration. Throughout the final sections of this chapter I am particularly interested in how photographs of quite ordinary objects can carry significance by being photographed and how, ‘the stuff of daily life, things we may ordinarily pass by, or keep at the periphery of our vision, through photography are given a visual charge and ‘imaginative possibility’ beyond its everyday function’ (Cotton cited in Burbridge 2016, p. 3).

CHAPTER 2: TAPOETETHAKOT

As an indigenous ethnic woman conducting research into Burmese diasporic identities, Violet Cho struggled to find a methodology appropriate to herself and the identity of her community. ‘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’ (Cho 2011b, p.197). As Cho could not find an English word to describe an appropriate research methodology, she decided to use a word from the oral traditions of her ethnic group: tapoetethakot. According to Kovach, indigenous epistemology involves “incorporating an indigenous theoretical perspective and using aligned methods (e.g., qualitative interviews, storytelling)”, (2005, p. 22). Kovach uses this way of knowing to develop an indigenous methodology, following these key principles: “(a) experience as a legitimate way of knowing; (b) indigenous methods, such as storytelling, as a legitimate way of sharing knowledge; (c) receptivity and relationship between research and participants as a natural part of the research “methodology”; and (d) collectivity as a way of knowing that assumes reciprocity to the community”, (2005, p. 28). Drawing on other indigenous
research methodologies and ways of knowing, tapoetethakot means informal conversation with people who are close. When applied to research methodology, tapoetethakot is culturally appropriate to people of Burma. The following points provide some insight into the principles of tapoetethakot and how it was applied in my research:

- Respect participants and treat them according to local rules of kinship, as if they are family members. Out of respect, interviews were conducted with community leaders first.
- Meet informally and have conversations rather than formal interviews, sharing food. This also involves reciprocity so the researcher should disclose personal information about herself and her family, and not just to expect to take information. We would meet at locations where we could share personal stories, family histories and experiences with one another such as at home, church, sports fields and parks.
- Be open, direct and upfront about the research and purposes of the project. Consent forms in English, Burmese and Karen were provided to participants and any questions were answered and explained either through myself or a family member, community member or friend who spoke the language.
- Be a community member, involved in and supporting community initiatives. I attended recreational activities like volleyball, weekend classes, induction training for those who were resettling and was invited along to weddings, birthdays, new years celebrations and traditional wrist tying ceremonies.
- Recognise and value people’s experience and experiential knowledge. Being immersed in people’s stories through listening and spending quality time with individuals and families. Taking photographs and teaching photographic skills to those who became interested in photography.
- Recruit research participants through personal and family relations and through community leaders in an informal way. By spending time with the community I was introduced to many participants by word of mouth, through family relatives and friends who would be interested in openly sharing their experiences and stories.

Tapoetethakot stresses the importance of conducting research in ways that respect Karen cultural practices. This concept guided how I built rapport with participants, where I would meet people and with which members it was appropriate for me to interview. As my research was built on the shared interactions, conversations and experiences comprising the social lives of families from Burma in a transnational context across Australia, Burma, Thailand and the US, it was important for me to incorporate these principles into my own methods.

Throughout the research process, I was mindful of how my position as a researcher from another ethnic background and cultural landscape shaped the research and knowledge produced. My
standpoint reflects the views of scholars who acknowledge and are critical of the ‘insider/outsider’ nature of identities and the ways in which they are negotiated during research encounters (Botterill 2015, Samkian, Erickson & Rose 2007). To my mind, this approach is critical, and at the forefront of so many current global, experiences of migration and displacement at the present time; like that of Syrian refugees fleeing abroad or Rohingya refugees of Burma’s North living in temporary camps along the border of Bangladesh, in relation to these ideas of home and belonging—contemporary migrant and refugee experiences are integral to how we understand those lives these experiences are integral to how we understand contemporary migrant and refugee lives. Achieving ethnographic insights into these lives through practice-based projects can be considered significant to the overall methodological development and elucidation of ideas surrounding lived experience.

2.1 INFORMAL INTERVIEWS

Informal interviews conducted using the principles of tapoetethakot led to more intimate and personal conversations with participants to establish shared values, meanings and relationships and develop rapport between people from the communities resettled in Australia and the US. Fetterman (2009, p.41) acknowledges that informal interviews are an important method in an ethnographic study, because they draw out individual perspectives and allow for comparison with other emic accounts, perceptions and meanings. The use of informal interviews is evident in James Mollison’s photographic series Where Children Sleep, where Mollison allows the viewer to learn more about each child through excerpts from informal interviews (Figure 5) in which personal accounts of meanings, practices and experiences of personal space are relayed.
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 the 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”.

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” (Esther Moo).

Through these informal interviews, participants were able to guide the researcher towards topics they found important, rather than answering a list of prescriptive questions. This was an important aspect of
the methodological approach to unveil personal accounts of family histories, experiences and offer a deeper understanding of what it means to uncover the unspoken and further develop understandings of transnational peoples’ lived experiences, and their experiences through mobility.

2.2 FIELD NOTES

During my research, I took detailed field notes and kept a research diary (Figure 6) in which I recorded information from social gatherings, meetings, conversations and events in which I participated. Narratives revealed and uncovered through these conversations also played a key role during my collection of data for Belonging in Motion and acted as catalysts for practical applications within my photographic work. Field notes taken during the interview process reveal and reference experiences and actual events (past and present) that act as linking devices throughout the photographic essays. After becoming familiar with the families through social events—associational meetings, parties, religious services, weddings and other social gatherings—I carried out ethnographic research both ‘here’ (places of resettlement) and ‘there’ (Burma/Thailand/camps). ‘The camp’ in Thailand or ‘The jungle’ in Burma often emerged in participants’ accounts as a place of ‘home’ or ‘belonging’. It was regarded as a dual space of safety, fear, and a place where families hid when they were on the run from the military. Whether or not family members had been left behind, these places were sources of nostalgia and an implicit standard, which participants made sense of values, habits and life experiences in the context of immigration:

“I was a student involved in the uprising. I was 17. I grew up in the city but moved to the jungle. When in the jungle I met 1,000 others. We wanted to fight. In the jungle we have different faces but we are all the same there” (Than Hlaing, 46).

“I have never been in jail, I have never been in the jungle” (Myat Min, 37).

“I don't remember Burma because when I was born people started fleeing to Thailand. Dad had to split with mum on the way to Thailand because only females were allowed the rest of the way through the jungle” (Eh Keay, 19).

“I never been to the city when I lived in Burma. Burmese families live in the city. Karen families live in the jungle” (Lah May Paw).

“In 1997 the Burmese military came again to destroy our village. We stayed in the jungle that year” (Kawsherpaw Hlaing, 30).

“We lived in the jungle for almost 15 years. I never dreamt to buy a house. Now I have a home and three cars” (Saw Morrison).

“I spent 32 years in the Karen Solidarity Organisation. Vipers and cobras caused deaths in the jungle”
(Robert Bazan, 77).

"Me and my son lived in the jungle until 1997 with soldiers" (Ta Ma La, 39).

The jungle became both a text based and visual motif throughout my work: it represented a place of security, but also a place that was somewhat foreboding; a place of real events and a place of dreams and nightmares, where hopes and desires were positioned.

Photography can be considered part of a sensory practice that can open up meaningful ways of ‘dwelling with’ the world and bring with it embodied thinking and reflection. However, the use of the camera does not only contribute to, but also distorts the context of research, the mode of interaction and relationship between the participants. What I chose to photograph carries the theoretical charge of my own interpretation, and so note taking was integral to the layering of information from field experiences. As a researcher, my presence, questioning and participation in the interviews were a partial catalyst for much of the emotion participants displayed. My active listening to their stories of longing and of missing people and places encouraged them to speak in depth and at length about their feelings. I not only viewed, but also commented on, the signs and symbols of imagined transnational family life in the photos and objects on display in participants’ homes. The more intimate and community-based the approach, the more it eased discussions, particularly when they involved the psychological traumas of past and present. Anthropologist and sociologist Loretta Baldassar conducted
a study on the idea of emotions in transnational relationships:

‘Transnational family life characterised by the separation of kin is a topic full of emotion, and relevant (though often overlooked) issue concerning emotional acts in relation to social science research is how feelings are expressed in the context of an ethnographic interview’ (Baldassar 2008, p.251).

As a researcher, I did not simply share in these emotions, but indirectly sought them through my interest and concern, which were fuelled by empathy caused by similar experiences of feelings of longing for people and places. These narratives in *Away From Home* speak strongly to the power and importance of storytelling, and its role in cultivating respect and nuanced understandings that are crucial to knowledge about experiences of presence and absence in relation to home.

### 2.3 DOCUMENTARY PHOTO ESSAYS AND VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Sociologists Venetia Evergeti and Louise Ryan critically reflect on the burgeoning literature on transnational families, highlighting the need to acknowledge the diversity of migrant experiences and use appropriate methods to reflect this diversity. ‘They call for a more nuanced understanding of how migrants organise and deal with family responsibilities and highlight the importance of using ethnographic and qualitative methods that capture both the local and global context of transnational families’ everyday reality’ (Kraler et al. 2011, p. 270). In response to this call for appropriate methods, I used interdisciplinary visual research as a bridge between ‘Two Cultures’ (the practice-based versus text-based) …as the mixing or fluid integration of image and text could not only close the gap between scholarly cultures, but also assist in closing the gap between migratory cultures. This dynamic use of methods seems especially crucial for those living in transnationalism.

For transnational households and communities, home is experienced in different ways, moving across a spectrum from a material, fixed location at one end and emotions, notions and symbolic concepts at the other (Wiles 2008) that can be relocated or transformed. One can also understand home as a complex web of relationships across locations that move beyond territorial boundaries, as conveyed in William Yang's work. In *Lifelines*, Yang recites monologues across images of his family who are scattered around Australia and across the world. Throughout his performative monologue’s we experience migration through the study of his family history in Far North Queensland, to the scenes of his adopted home of Sydney, to his travels around Australian and China (Figure 7).
Belonging in Motion shifts the focus from sensationalised issues of arrival methods and government border protection policy and instead concentrates on personal narratives, and how people with refugee backgrounds feel when their sense of home and belonging is upended. The images engage with the everyday lived experiences of families from Burma who are scattered across Thailand, Burma, Australia and the US. Through ethnographic and photographic elucidations, I attempt to understand how the relationships between people and place are influenced by migration. The study advances existing photo-documentary practices, bringing new perspectives to tacit knowledge by combining lived experience and informal interviews and recognising the constant shifting, changing or emerging processes shaped by research—that is, people, environment, conversations and more. The photographs produced of the families and written recordings of what was said about their experiences of place were significant data in their own right as such artefacts can provide insights into how these families experience displacement.

For some scholars, methodology is a tool through which to achieve research findings, yet for others, including myself, methodology is critically reflected upon as a crucial component in the ways we produce knowledge. The photo and text-based narratives in Belonging In Motion strongly suggest the power and importance of storytelling, and its role in cultivating nuanced understandings that are crucial to offering us privileged insights into human relationships. The project builds on the strong tradition of visual ethnography that supports the idea that ‘photographic images offer an intimate context of interaction between the researcher and the participant that demands a deep listening and, moreover, an emotional visual capacity that engages with all the layers of meaning being conveyed’ (Figueroa 2008, pp. 68–85).

In Doing Visual Ethnography, Sarah Pink refers to ethnography as a process of creating and representing knowledge based on the ethnographers’ experiences (Pink 2007a, p. 15). Documentary
practice mirrors the ethnographic approach in that the photo documenter needs to be a part of the phenomena to be able to photograph it: ‘Immersion in the everyday lives of the participants is necessary for understanding the meaning of actions’ (Shifflett & Haija 2007, p. 30). *Foreigner: Migration into Europe 2015‒2016* is a photobook that addresses the movement of migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East into Europe through individual stories, and exemplifies how immersion in an environment and journey can prompt deeper questioning of ‘how’ and ‘why’. The book’s photographer Daniel Castro Garcia and designer Thomas Saxby were born to Spanish and Mexican parents and felt as though the media was demonising migrants, so decided to visit departure and arrival points, taking several trips across Europe to document the personal experiences of people making the journey to that continent. The book comments on fragility, isolation and a sense of determination and is a thoughtful, reflective and haunting representation of not only what it is to be a refugee, but also what it is to be human. Immersion in a community allows for identification of nuances, the minute and the unspoken, and comprehension of what lies behind the sensationalised. Only in this way can we know what goes on in the lives of the families taking part in the research. Therefore, it is important ‘not to overlook the vast, expressive potential of visual representations that opens up new avenues of scholarly argumentation and of expressing the unspeakable and unquantifiable. Visual representations not only give way to the depicted subject or object, but also tend to embody very revealing aspects of the producer and culture of production’ (Pauwels 2015b, p. 310).

Visual anthropologists, Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz (2005) suggest that photographs are evidence of affect, of how people feel, think and negotiate their worlds; photography and photographs are at the very heart of the anthropological endeavour. ‘Work situated at the intersection of art and ethnography can be manifested by ethnographers who collaborate with artists or by artists, who create projects that bring about ethnographic insights and are the result of ethnographic research’ (Rutten, Dienderen & Soetaert 2013). An interdisciplinary collaboration, *Suturing the City*, a photobook between anthropologist Filip De Boeck and photographer Sammy Baloji is one example of a project situated at the intersection of art and ethnography. Baloji’s photographs place emphasis on De Boeck’s ethnographic narratives that critically speak to our ideas of what a city is, setting boundaries for what can be said about ‘urban-ness’. Baloji visually narrates Kinshasa’s local architecture through images that capture the city’s physical, concrete form, yet show its inhabitants in motion (Figure 8). The images hint at some interesting ideas associated with visibilities, invisibilities, the need to be seen and unseen and the politics of presence. The photobook’s empirical rigour, visual depth and historical situatedness, as well as its ability to weave these together to say something meaningful is undeniable.
In an interview about his project on the Cambodian diaspora, photographer Pete Pin comments on photography’s unique ability to uncover what we do not say: “photography reveals what can be seen and what cannot; the underlying tensions that infiltrate the everyday” (Pin 2012). The use of visual and digital methods in ethnographic practice is now common. Filmmaker Clara Law understands how images operate as a mode of understanding through experience. In her documentary film Letters to Ali (2004), Law demonstrates how the visual (in this case, film) is core to ‘translat(ing) unspoken inferences to the audience’ (Figueroa 2008, pp. 68–85): images of empty, still parks and unpopulated street corners contribute to a poetic exploration of Law’s sense of belonging in Melbourne suburbia. Visual sociologist Luc Pauwels articulates how research can unveil discoveries that engage people and elicit more affective responses: ‘Scholarly work, be it written, visual or numeric is not (just) about describing or reflecting aspects of the outer world, but about making it more revealing, accessible, insightful...’ (Pauwels 2015b, p. 310). My photographic practices employ a visual ethnographic approach because ethnography embodies a richer means of representing, understanding and more fully encapsulating experience.
2.4 IMMERSION

Immersion in the everyday lives of the participants was also ‘necessary for understanding the meaning of actions’ (Hesse- Biber, Nagy & Leavy, 2008). Based on this idea it was integral to become a part of family life and rituals. Routine rituals at the suburban supermarket, in the backyard, the local park, the suburban lounge room—act as backdrops for my photographic documents of quotidian life.

Immersion into the community allows for the identification of the nuances, the minute and the unspoken and to understand what lies behind public perception. Only in this way can we understand the real tensions (good and bad) that are experienced. Participants trust and respect is of the utmost importance in the way that I conduct my research. Prior to photographing, I work very slowly and respectfully in order to build social relationships with the families who take part in the research.

Participants were aware the research was being conducted from the first point of contact. It was important for me to take careful consideration before initiating the photographic approach. Informal interviews were initiated during the first month of spending time with the families involved in the research to allow for a sense of rapport to develop. Most of the conversations would take place over shared meals in domestic spaces, social gatherings at church or in public spaces like shopping centers, all of the locations nominated by the family members themselves. It is pertinent to note that approaches like these that ‘focus on the experiential, the sensory and ways of knowing, being and remembering that cannot necessarily be articulated in words, are linked to a wider emphasis on the concept of ‘knowing’ in anthropology and other ethnographic disciplines’ (Pink 2012, p. 232).

Taking part in formal meetings, social gatherings and family settings were integral to the process of understanding not only the members of the families on a deeper level, but also the objects they keep or discard and the ‘stuff’ that makes up their home. Daniel Miller reinforces the importance of immersion within these familial spaces:

‘To study stuff, we need ourselves to be where stuff is—right there, in the living room, the bathroom, the bedroom and the kitchen. This is where most of the modern life is lived. Families are created in bedrooms, and sometimes divorced there. Memories and aspirations are laid out in photographs and furniture’ (Miller 2010, p. 109).

The interconnectedness between my presence as a photographer and subject also needs to be highlighted. I spend extended periods getting to know the families and individuals involved in the project. Explicitly or implicitly, we all become entangled. This is unavoidable, but it has a large bearing on the ethics of the research: it influences how certain individuals and their biographies end up being captured by me in ways that still privilege some and not others. Many personal accounts can often be disclosed because of the sometimes quite intimate connections that the photographer and subject establish; other accounts have emerged because a particular individual has, over time, become a focus of interest. In either respect, we are bound together in this representation. In Burmese Lives,
Wendy Sadan (in Chang & Tagliacozzo 2014, p. 49) writes: only by listening and asking, can we begin to resolve the conundrum of differentiating the ordinary from the extraordinary, the exceptional from the exemplary and to understand the complex webs within which lives are lived in contemporary Burma. My research observes and immerses me within these spaces to deepen understandings of how geographic displacement manifests within the quotidian reality of transnational lives.

2.5 SENSORIALITY

*Away From Home* uses sensoriality to understand the lived experiences of those from Burma who have been resettled to reinforce what some scholars in the social sciences suggest: that ‘sensoriality, embodiment, co-presence with others and movement are important ways of developing knowledge of the world through our senses’ (Pink 2015). Pink (2012b, p.95) argues that ‘we can know place by being in a place, and by experiencing place through our sensing bodies’. When I travel with the intention of documenting, I develop a stronger sensory awareness through immersion in the patterns, rituals and traditions of those around me. As my work is more concerned with the everyday or the personal experiences of those I meet, ‘sensoriality is fundamental to how I learn about, understand and represent other people’s lives’ (Pink 2015, p. 7). By being immersed in place, observing space walking through environments and ‘listening to rhythms of place’ (Cooper 2012), Doug Spowart and Victoria Cooper seek to evoke the sensoriality of the environment of which they are situated to comment on the narratives between mythology and place (Figure 9). In each home environment I encountered in my research, there was a combination of occurrences that offered me a further understanding: through the rituals of the family, the smells of cooked meals, wandering through the rooms in the home, the backyards and surroundings. Being in the ‘home’ environment allowed me to build sensorial relationships with the domestic spaces of the transnational Burmese diaspora.

In *Belonging in Motion*, the sensory experience of place is exemplified through the use of projected images from refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border or within Burma (that reflect the family’s past) onto resettled homes and within domestic environments. The redefining of space and investigation of the layers that inhabit researcher and participant’s sensory experiences of place are demonstrated in Figure 10. Principles of sensory ethnography were employed ‘because this methodology explicitly acknowledges that emplaced experiences play an important role in the generation of knowledge’ (Pink 2009).
Sensory ethnography continues and departs from existing ethnographic methodologies: ‘from the classic observational approach promoted by Atkinson, Delamont and Housley (2007) through which understanding, knowing and (academic) knowledge are produced’ (Pink 2015). In my research, combining the ‘visual’ and ‘sensory’ allowed me to analyse the collected artefacts (e.g., photographs, recordings, written texts) in a critical way. In *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Pink (2009, p.7) explains how ‘sensoriality is fundamental to how we learn about, understand and represent other people’s lives’.
While ethnographers aim to empathise with, understand, interpret and represent other people’s experiences, imaginations and memories, their sensory and affective qualities are only accessible in limited ways. As Andrew Irving (2007, p. 186) expresses it,

‘The problem facing anthropologists during fieldwork, especially given the centrality of memory, reverie, and imagination to ethnographic practice, is how to bring events from the past into life when there is no independent access to people’s consciousness, memories, or the past’.

In his own collaborative research practice, Irving has invited participants to walk around urban contexts while narrating and photographing their memories of pivotal moments in their lives. This has created a powerful method for learning about other people’s experiences, and a way of communicating them in an almost performative approach. In my practice, photographing and spending time with participants in their domestic spaces allows for a deeper engagement in their social worlds. The invitation of walking through kitchens, gardens, living rooms and surrounding neighbourhoods was key to ‘gaining knowledge’ of personal histories, but also to use ‘sensory data as an alternative to textual representation’ (Nakamura 2013, p. 134) with the potential to open up ideas of how identity and culture intersect and overlap in places, objects and people’s everyday lives.

2.6 PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATION

Participatory photography, photo-elicitation and what has been referred to as ‘photovoice’ are also methods that have been used in a cultural studies context to reveal personal narratives of connectedness, or lack thereof. Global Refugees: Exile, Displacement and Belonging is a study conducted from 1999–2001 by artist Bea Tobolewska about a Bosnian community living in the East Midlands (having fled war and ethnic cleansing) in the UK. Tobolewska developed an electronic web resource as an outcome of the participatory action research activities to form a base for a social network within interspersed communities. The key aims of the regional network involved:

- Enhancing the lives of recent arrivals in the East Midlands.
- High-quality interdisciplinary research and the production of artworks.
- Facilitation of communication.
- A contribution to public awareness of the issues facing new arrivals.

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’ (Robinson 2011, p. 118). An example of participatory photographic research that aims to better understand the experiences of exile and displacement is evident in sociologist, Su-Anne
Oh’s program for children living in boarding houses in Maesot, Thailand (Figure 11). This participatory research and arts-based work explores the social role of the arts in social change processes. The respondent imagery represented the everyday activities of the children in the boarding houses. Similar to Oh’s program, during my time 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. My project aimed to elucidate youth’s understanding and experiences 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. There were some interesting insights into their daily experiences (Figure 12a & 12b). However, it was unfortunate that the timeframe was restricted as I was only able volunteer in the camp for three months and I felt as though the students were unable to engage in the cyclical process of refinement where they could reshoot images to improve the sequence and create a more affective response through their imagery.

Figure 11: Su-Anne Oh, Thai–Burma border (2012)
Figure 12a: S’Poe Wah, Thai–Burma border (2012)

Figure 12b: S’Poe Wah, Thai–Burma border (2012)
A more successful example of the incorporation of these participatory, arts-based approaches is *The Right to Be Heard*, by photographer Tobias Titz, which aims to give voice to participants through personally handwritten responses which articulate the experiences of the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum (Figure 13). By giving these people a voice in the process, this representation personalises the issues they faced and challenges people’s perceptions of the treatment of Aboriginal people during that period. Participatory projects also challenge traditional aesthetics and practices by offering the viewer a chance to experience the world through the eyes of a different individual or group directly involved in the issues being raised. The purpose of inviting participation for the photographic series featured in *Belonging In Motion* was to give the subject some degree of control and ownership and to offer unique and personal perceptions about the experiences of those living through transnational situations. The written responses in Figure 14 were points of entry to new knowledge of, and insights into, deeper understanding of what it is to live through mobility. The responses provided invaluable insights for further practical applications.

![Image of Tobias Titz, Charlie Coppin, from the series *The Right To Be Heard* (2007)](image)

Figure 13: Tobias Titz, Charlie Coppin, from the series *The Right To Be Heard* (2007)
Similarly, in his series *What We Carried: Fragments from the Cradle of Civilisation*, Jim Lommasson depicts the treasured objects that Iraqi and Syrian refugees living in Portland brought with them from their home countries. Photographed against uniformly white backgrounds, the objects include old photographs of loved ones and a domino set that reminded its owner of happier times in Baghdad. Lommasson gives his subjects a platform to speak directly about their experiences and memories by inscribing each photograph with contextualising information (Figure 15). The digitisation of photography has fostered new ways of thinking about photography and in some ways, forced audiences to turn back to more traditional, tactile means of understanding. Our daily experiences, our friendships and familial ties, affinities and affections are currently mediated by technology to a huge degree. Without the use of handwriting, Lommasson’s vernacular approach to photographing these objects would be less engaging. However, this combination of the banal and everyday object, alongside the handwritten description, offers a sense of familiarity and a connectedness that we very rarely encounter, which transports us into a more affective realm – a felt space, rather than an observed one.
Journeying Through Home was a participatory project held in the second year of my candidature to not only question the expectations we have of documentary photography but also to 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 program to help them piece together their own narratives of lived experience, through photography from their own 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. From there, I established an informal workshop where we wandered through their chosen environments which consisted of both public and private space, like Brisbane city, botanical parklands, their homes and backyards (Figure 16a). This was also an effort 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 participants could have the freedom to express themselves.
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’ (Hannes & Parylo 2014, p. 257). Oral and written consent was given before any participation in this project and those who chose to remain anonymous were guaranteed anonymity. Over the last three years, I have met with participants for basic photographic training in technical as well as storytelling skills, photographing on location according to participants’ personally chosen themes of ‘peace and resilience’ (Figure 16b).
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 (Figure 17). ‘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’ (Pink 2012, p. 82). 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’ (Delanty 2010, p. 135) 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’ (Cho 2011b, p. 195).
In the case of Burma, there is a strong engagement taking place 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 feed is a fragment of the bigger picture of transnational lives, but at times reveals the ‘extraordinariness of supposedly ordinary lives’ (Chang & Tagliacozzo 2014, p. 32). The primary aim of the Journeying From Home 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. Participatory approaches go beyond visual representations and can unveil how people construct and interpret their experiences. Patrick Willocq’s photographic series was made with children in Lebanon and Tanzania, and was a campaign commissioned by the charity Save the Children to engage the public in the
children’s personal stories about their hopes and fears. It was an important for Willocq and the children to personally engage in creating the sets and acting out their stories (Figure 18). In instances where people have experienced conflict and trauma, there is some concern about their vulnerability and how the research may affect them. A significant feature of Willocq’s work that appeals to what I endeavour to achieve, is that participation and empowerment are the basis of his approach and rationale.

Another example of a participatory photo project is Eugenie Dolberg’s *Open Shutters Iraq* (Figure 19). Dolberg devised this in response to her frustration with the dominance of military and government sources in media coverage of the Iraq War, along with the difficulty of working there as a journalist. She was concerned about the effects of the allied occupation of Iraq on everyday life from the perspective of Iraqi women. To invite participation hands over some control and ownership of the narrative and helps establish understanding and trust between the researcher and participating individuals. Participation invites the viewer to engage at a deeper, more personal, emotive or memorable level while also empowering and giving voice to subjects. However, it should be noted that there is nothing intrinsic to these approaches that in any way guarantees their authenticity or accuracy any more than that of conventional research or documentary photography. We are, as ever, reliant on the honesty, authenticity and ethics of the researcher, photographer or facilitator. Not only do we have to acknowledge the presence of the participant, but also that of the artist or researcher facilitator, who is less visible, but whose influence is undoubtedly felt.
What is obvious in Dolberg’s work is the question of how citizens create and articulate their social spaces within the context of repressive rule. Social media seemed an ideal space where people living in transition could participate within the broader international arts community. *Fragile Constellations* was therefore conceived to not only build on this 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 (Figure 20). Only 10 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 2009 the first Yangon Photo Festival (YPF) was held and a couple of years later, 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 is 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 with 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 sort of stakeholder-driven network like *Fragile Constellations* can act as a platform to give the power to citizens to disseminate their everyday experiences from within their own communities.

![Fragile Constellations](https://www.fragileconstellations.com)

Figure 20: Collaborative platform, *Fragile Constellations*, 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 YPF community who 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 experiences through the collaborative lens of locally emerging photographers and artists within Myanmar, as well as local artists in Australia. The network has been launched across multiple platforms, including Instagram, Facebook and a website, where artists have been invited to collaborate on a series of photographs on the concept of ‘home’ and belonging’. The concept is open to interpretation and the photographers are not restricted by their current place of residence. The Australian photographers visually respond with an exploration of similar themes and feelings that their collaborators photos provoke in them. This new media space enables 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' (Pink 2012, p. 250). 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. The images produced in these projects can offer a deeper understanding of the experiences of conflict and displacement. Given the distances of time and geography, a sense of shared presence can be constructed virtually. Through these collaborative works, I hope the visual inquiries made through this network will expand arts, cultural and cross-border exchanges between Australia and Burma. Collaboration works in synergy with my research intentions. I believe that audiences should interpret, deconstruct, question and analyse what is being offered to them as knowledge, but also what they intuitively gather from their own understandings.

2.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the types of methods and methodological approaches I employed throughout the PhD. The significance of the use of informal conversations, interviews and field notes was explained. As a move beyond oral and text based methods, visual methods such as documentary photo essays and visual ethnography were used to reveal the unseen and unspoken to more fully encapsulate experience. I discuss methods of immersion, emplacement and sensory approaches allow for a deeper engagement into the social worlds of the families involved. The importance of participatory and collaborative ways to engage participants’ trust was also reviewed and the power relationship between researcher and participant was considered. The conversation around how these methods could further elucidate experiences of absence and presence in relation to ideas of home and belonging was presented in relation to press freedom and the relationship citizens of Burma have with the Internet and social media.
PART 2: PROJECT STAGES

The major components of this research include photographic exhibition, collaborative and participatory projects and a photobook – all of which accompany the thesis 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.

CHAPTER 3: THE EXHIBITIONS

This chapter discusses how the photographs throughout the various exhibitions held during the PhD were assembled as a set of questions surrounding the idea of absence and presence in relation to home. Our task as photographers is to create meaning. To do this, we need to create a context within which our images can be seen and, more importantly, interpreted and understood. The gallery context functions as this kind of space, where editing and sequencing with intention and image choices are fundamental to converting tacit understandings into affective understandings to the audience (Figure 21). Douglas Holleley (2009) states in his introduction to the book Photo-Editing and Presentation:

‘It is only when images begin to accumulate and are contextualized within a narrative, series or sequence that their message becomes accessible and intelligible’ (Holleley 2009, p.1).

Figure 21: Process of editing, sequencing and refining (2017)
Editing, sequencing and scaling are fundamental to converting the tacit understanding gained infield into an affective understanding to the audience. Like poetry, it is not the descriptive narrative alone that is the knowing but also the felt experience lived by the audience that defies words but underpins their understanding of the lived experiences of the families documented. Images collected in this form described by Holleley occur in the context of the exhibition and the book. The moment one image is placed next to another the meaning of each is modified. It was my intention to share these ‘untold’ narratives with different types of audiences.

3.1 BURMA UNTOLD

After meeting with families on my field trips in Burma, it became evident that their personal stories and experiences were quite isolated and misrepresented by media sources. I began to delve further into issues of censorship in Burma, which began in 1964. Only recently, two journalists who work for international news agency Reuters were accused of violating the Official Secrets Act, a law dating back to the British colonial period, after investigating the existence of a mass grave in Northern Rakhine State, where a military campaign caused over 600,000 members of Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh in September 2017. The stories of the families participating in my research were presented in a group exhibition *Burma Untold*, in Melbourne, Australia, that I curated in response to what I felt was an underreported and marginalised set of experiences that are significant to our understanding of what it means to live in this current position of global mobility (Figure 22a).

One of the aims of the group exhibition was to foreground the work of some of the artists who have engaged with the past and present situations of those living in Burma. Black-and-white photographs from Gaye Paterson’s personal archives of Burma in the 1970s and 1980s offered context to Yusuke Takagi’s portraits of political prisoners (Figure 22b) and Dario Pignatelli’s photojournalistic approach to documenting child labour workers on the Thai–Burma border. *Burma Untold* was held at the end of my first year of candidature, and acted as an initial inquiry into the family histories and stories that were unveiled through informal interviews as a part of my field trips to various sites in Burma, Thailand, US and Australia, that propelled the research towards questions of how transnational sites of relocation were significant to the concepts of belonging, home and (im)permanence through transnational mobility.

The intention behind the curation of *Burma Untold* was to inform local audiences in Australia about the situation that families from Burma were living through. The exhibition fostered possibilities for visitors to encounter the people in the images as interconnected individuals, and to encourage engagement and interaction with differences in ways that acknowledge everyday transnational experiences. *Burma
Untold was installed in a conversational way, with all four series taking the audience on a journey through the historical, political, personal and sensational stories of Burma.

![Burma Untold exhibition](image1.jpg)

Figure 22a: Tammy Law, *A Karen State*, from *Burma Untold* @ fortyfivedownstairs (May 2014)

![Portraits of Political Prisoners](image2.jpg)

Figure 22b: Yusuke Takagi, *Portraits of Political Prisoners*, from *Burma Untold* @ fortyfivedownstairs (May 2014)

My series *A Karen Story* focuses on the Karen ethnic minority group, featuring imagery from inside Burma, through refugee camps and into landscapes of resettlement. Two images from the series employ a dreamlike approach to challenge preconceptions of Burma that audience members may have brought with them. On reflection, the images presented in *Burma Untold* offered broader historical and political contexts—but for the sequencing to immerse the audience in the dualities of transnational experience, further refinement was required. This offered the perfect opportunity to recognise that an
object or a series of forms, when sequenced intentionally, can yield a broader context with suggestive powers that can direct the viewer into a specific and known feeling, state or place within themselves. *Burma Untold* was not only a grouping of images to develop visual modes of representation as merely illustrative, but also the first attempt to make a case for further developing this avenue of scholarly enquiry and communication. Far from being a simple and unchallenged or widely acknowledged scientific practice, the ‘visual essay’ could be considered one of the more multimodal and sophisticated forms of visual anthropology and sociology (Figures 23a and 23b). In exemplars of this form, different constitutive and expressive modes of representation are neither removed from the end product nor reduced to merely illustrative or ornamental function.

Figure 23a: Tammy Law A Karen State, from *Burma Untold* @ fortyfivedownstairs (May 2014)
Selected works from *Burma Untold* were shown concurrently in the modern Burmese restaurant Burma Lane in Melbourne’s Little Collins Street. It was an important part of the process to raise awareness and also financial support for family members ‘left behind’ through the network of patrons dining at Burma Lane (Figure 24).
Visual research projects not only make explicit the aesthetic dimensions of this work, but also ‘link design issues directly to both analysis and audience’ (Stanczak 2007, p. 25). The major strength of this scholarly form resides in the synergy of the distinct forms of expression that are combined—images, words, layout and design—that culminate in an informed statement to produce new understanding and meanings.

3.2 AWAY FROM HOME

Due to the nature of the work that I create, where there is the intention of some kind of social engagement, I have constantly grappled with the idea of the exhibition as a space where representations of those who participate in its composition are purely observable representation. It is important for the images in the series Away From Home to become more touchable and immersive, to offer the viewer an authorial agency. Simryn Gill’s installation Inland (Figure 25) exemplifies this tactile presentation of images in a gallery context which involved the informal piling up of small prints, where visitors are encouraged to engage with the images: to shuffle around, order, hold, touch and rearrange them. As Simryn explains, ‘I wanted to get away from the idea that when an artist puts something up, it is loaded with meaning … it is still an open discussion’ (Brickell 2013, p. 6). The curator of Gill’s show also suggested that this engagement literally immerses us into the world that Gill seeks to present, breaking down the barrier between spectator and artwork and merging the narratives embedded into
the images with our own personal histories. This intimate engagement with the domestic interiors of *Inland* links to the sensory elements of home that are to be touched.

Figure 25: Simryn Gill, *Inland* (2009)

A variety of contemporary social theorists suggest that the times we live in are characterised by mobility. I thought about how I could draw attention to movement, time and memory through the gallery space. Having used projections as a device to draw on this constant negotiation of absence and presence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and unbelonging - I became interested in how I could immerse the gallery audience in these feelings of duality. The projections bring together notions of place and space that test these possibilities. For Jonathan Htoo, who grew up between the Thai–Burma border and Australia, home is also a dreamlike place to strive towards. The aim of the video in the second gallery space was to invite visitors into a private space—real and imagined—to experience some sense of isolation, reflections on the self and dreaming of belonging (Figure 26a). The text accompanying *Jono Htoo* is a reflection on personal histories, written 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. Anthropologist Nigel Rapport notes that “Home” brings together memory and longing... however, with it comes distortion’ (cited in D’Costa 2016). As D’Costa states,

‘The illusionary 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’ (D’Costa 2016, p. 5).
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 a video made for my exhibition *Away From Home* titled *Jono Htoo* (2017), Jono’s ghostly figure transitions slowly through the frame, drawing reference 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 Jonathan, who meanders in between physical and metaphorical spaces (Figure 26b). The use of layering projections within a moving video works as a way to activate and further fracture the act of remembering.

Figure 26a: Tammy Law, *Jono Htoo* installation view, Maud Gallery, Brisbane (2017). Video accessible at https://vimeo.com/252462743
‘Feeling as if you belong is about feeling unified with place, culture, shared history and language over time’ (Cutcher 2015, p226). These elements are not mutually exclusive, but the more of these connections are shared, the more an individual will feel integrated. Photographer John Clang’s works comment on the predicament of being separated from his family as a New York-based Singaporean. In a documentary, he states, ‘I’m very much living in Singapore mentally, New York is like being a stranger in a new place’ (Clang 2013). The fascination with time and space and how we negotiate human existence within the two dimensions becomes a recurring theme in Clang’s most recent body of work, Being Together (Figure 27), where families are dismembered through space and time, but can be remembered and made whole again through the use of a third space, a photographic site where he’s able to reassemble them within what we might refer to as a family portrait.
Visual research projects by documentary photographers, according to Stanczak (2007, p. 49), ‘give much more attention than social researchers usually due to issues of editing, layout, and visual representation’. Jonas Bendiksen’s exhibition *The Places We Live* comprised life-sized installations that experimented with scale by recreating the living rooms of 20 families from the slums of Jakarta, Mumbai, Nairobi and Caracas. By taking a photograph of each of the four walls of a room inside people’s homes and using the resulting large-format prints to build 3D, life-size replicas of those rooms, Bendiksen created a virtual experience of visiting the families (Figure 28). Instead of recreating the physical walls of my participants’ homes, I recreated that sense of presence and material space with the almost life-sized scale of some of the images (Figure 29), enabling the viewer to access the environments within the image on a more immersive level. The consideration of presentation (in terms of scale, size and layout) was significant to attaining an emotional response from the audience.

Figure 28: Jonas Bendiksen, *The Places We Live Installation* (2010)
Exploring different voices and platforms in terms of editing and scale was significant to the experimentation with the materiality and intimacy of the gallery context. The photobook was something I found very difficult to replicate in the gallery setting. Initially, the photobook was used as a narrative within the larger, physical space of the gallery (Figure 30). 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. The book was printed in quite a large scale to sit within the gallery space at fortyfivedownstairs. It was important for me to place an emphasis on audience engagement. The installation of the photobook here was intended to deepen understandings of what political scientist Andy Knight (2002, p. 15) describes as ‘feelings of alienation and exclusion in the host country’, focusing on feelings and 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. This intimacy, or lack of intimacy, was something I was interested in examining before reproducing the photobook, for an audience outside the gallery space.
The title of the exhibition *Away From Home* can be taken to mean that here and elsewhere can potentially occur simultaneously. Home can be wherever and whenever we want it to be, real and imagined. In Laura El-Tantawy’s exhibition at SeenFifteen, the surface of the photographic image is unstable—printed on translucent gauze—and with each photograph split in two. These layered barriers suggest that home might be a place to be fortified within. The physical gaps and walls provide an entry point, luring the viewer and inviting them to enter another space. Already there is the expectation of moving across time and space, backwards and forwards, elusive and evocative (Figure 31).
The experience of 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. However, this random access to content may offer a spatial interaction with the work that can provide a rich experience. fortyfivedownstairs in Melbourne employed soft, ambient light that highlighted each image to allow the viewer space to contemplate the stories within each individual image. The images facing the entrance space were crucial in communicating and establishing—at the simplest level—the concept of home (Figure 32a). The gallery context was important 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 (Figure 32b).
Figure 32a: Away From Home @ Maud Gallery, Brisbane (August/September 2017)

Figure 32b: Away From Home @ Maud Gallery, Brisbane (August/September 2017)
The absence of didactics throughout the gallery space forced audience members to carefully consider the selected writings featured in both gallery rooms (Figure 33). 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?

![Image](image.png)

Figure 33: Away From Home @ Maud Gallery, Brisbane (August/September 2017)

The exhibition also 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 context to how my work could further engage with broader audiences and within a more immersive context.

3.3 YANGON PHOTO FESTIVAL

The 2018 YPF screening took place in the center of the city at Maha Bandula Park in Yangon, Myanmar that 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 amongst an audience made up of predominantly local members (Figure 34). The YPF platform was key to gauge audience responses from both within the wider community who participated in the project, as well as 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 a place of self-reflection. The work contributes to the ongoing conversations both amongst the community inside Burma and also outside the community of whom 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 34: *Away From Home @ Maha Bandula Park, Yangon, Myanmar, 2018*

3.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter traverses the stages in which the PhD projects took place. I discuss the photographic exhibitions that were held to encourage engagement in ways that acknowledge everyday transnational experiences. I examine how the exhibitions acted as a stage where my photographs could be seen, interpreted and understood in order to create meaning and offer new knowledge to broader audiences within communities who participants were connected to, as well as beyond.
CHAPTER 4: THE PHOTOBOOK

This chapter examines the significance of the photobook within visual media and literacy, its place in my photographic practice and its potential to offer the experiences of absence and presence on a more intimate level.

‘While the history of photography is a well-established canon, much less critical attention has been directed at the phenomenon of the photobook’ (Parr & Badger 2014, p. 5). Over the years, photobooks have helped establish the idea that a sequence of images represents a narrative in its own right. ‘If a photobook can be understood as a book of photographs, which may or may not contain text, and which has been created with considerations to structure and narrative, layout and design’ (Parr and Badger, 2004, p. 7), the photobook of the twenty first century could be seen as having evolved from photographically illustrated books of the nineteenth century, popular magazines of the early half of the twentieth century, and monographs of photographs produced for exhibitions throughout the twentieth century. ‘The photobook was critical to photography’s progression and illustrated magazines in the 1940’s advocated for photography’s ability to represent complex issues which played a key role in the subsequent popularity and commercial viability of the extended book-length photo-essays’ (Magilow, 2012, p. 62). Today, photobooks are crucial for circulating photography across borders. Publishing photobooks is an insistence on the physical, in response to the ephemeral nature of the Internet.

4.1 MATERIAL AND TACTILE

In 1974, Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama presented an exhibition called Printing Show in Tokyo. A photocopier sat in the centre of the room reproducing images Moriyama had photographed in New York, which he then made into ad-hoc photobooks (Figure 35). His show wanted to draw attention to the photobook as 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—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.
The photobook can shift the individual photograph’s meaning into something more elaborate and provides photographers and artists with ‘an opportunity to combine photographs and tease out a more complex meaning’ (Parr & Badger 2014, p.16), which is evident in the work of Walker Evans, Ed Ruscha and the Bechers. There is a strong historical connection between the role of the photobook and the publications that featured photojournalistic photography and documentary photography.

The photobook not only has a deeper connection with the broader publication and dissemination of documentary photography, but also offers documentary photographers a chance to take risks and experiment with narrative structures, textures and materials that expands on the tradition of the photobook as an advocate for photography as a medium of art. The design and structure of a photobook should enhance the work within it. For example, the materials: paper stocks used to produce a photobook can affect how the viewer relates to the images. This is the case in Robert Franks’ exhibition *Robert Frank: Books and Films 1947–2016*, where the catalogue was produced on newsprint to in reference to the disposable format reminiscent of daily news (Figure 36).
The *Belonging In Motion* photobook initially took the form of two separate editions: *Belonging In Motion* (2016) investigated the stories from a more traditional approach of documentary storytelling, suggesting the emotional value of domestic objects contributed to the physicality of the home experience (Blunt & Dowling 2006; De Maar 2011a; Miller 2010), whereas *Away From Home* incorporated the experiences from a more emotional and psychological landscape of a ‘half home’ as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience: ‘migration and estrangement as a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience’ (Johnston & Longhurst 2012, p. 328) (Figure 37a & 37b).
‘To understand the narrative of the image—and consequently the narrative of a photobook—it was necessary to understand firstly, the surface of the image—which is to include the materiality of the photograph and the informational elements of the image, and secondly, the cultural and social constructions in an image’ (Doody 2017, p. 19). Consider Figure 38, the image is of a child past an American flag hanging on the side of a house; the flag could be understood to symbolise identity. The photograph taken in the US depicts a young boy running across his front lawn to the front door, which sports an American flag. There is shallow depth of field between the foreground, with the softness of the green lawn (the lawn references the jungle, and the manicured nature of the lawn draws reference to the potential status and wealth of the occupants), and the background home, which acts as a social and cultural signifier for modern suburban life. In the context of the transitory situation of families from Burma, these symbols represent the families’ desire to embrace their new surroundings and the reality of their situation.
Throughout the process of making my photobook various ‘dummies’ or drafts were made for review of the various elements that make up the book (Figure 39). 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 sequencing, to allow for the assessment of potential disjuncture’s in the narrative. Alan Loney in *The Printing of a Masterpiece* describes this approach as a design procedure that he calls, ‘from the outside in’ which ‘means imagining the outer appearance, materials and even some of the design of the cover, the binding, first’ (Loney 2008, pp. 40-1).
As Parr highlights, ‘photobooks speak of a tactile engagement with images beyond the visual, for which there is no equivalent in the gallery space’ (De Bello et al 2012, p. 10). More than prints, the photobook is available for the public to hold, leaf through, buy, take home and collect. The first edition of *Belonging In Motion* facilitated a more intimate negotiation of viewing, as the book was smaller and the pages laid out back to back in a style that is more straightforward for the viewer to navigate. The relations between the image sequences throughout the text are as important as the arrangement of images when considering the storytelling qualities of the photobook. The first edition of *Away From Home* was a concertina (Figure 40), 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 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. However, the intimate engagement of touching and viewing the book left more to be desired as the pages became difficult to handle. The concertina effect was not used to its full potential, because the photographs
work best as standalone images, giving the viewer space to be immersed in the minute details throughout each one.

Figure 40: Tammy Law, *Away From Home* photobook, Concertina edition (2016)

Photobooks offer a way of engaging with photography that is completely distinct from the experience of looking at work via a digital platform. Renowned photobook publisher Michael Mack (British Journal of Photography 2016) reflects on the use of the Internet for digital publishing and suggests that the permanence of ink is one of the driving forces in the revitalisation of paper publishing. There is a timeless pleasure in owning and collecting physical versions of books, which the digital realm will never eclipse—they are very different platforms aimed at different audiences. Reinforcing this notion of the tactile and material following the popularisation of ‘immaterial’ electronic publications (such as e-books and online platforms), Anouk Kruithof’s *Happy Birthday to You* (2011) contains flaps that must be lifted to discover certain strands of the story (Figure 41). Inserting objects, letters and other documents into the book is an effort to heighten the multisensory narrative experience.
Similarly, *Por Por*, a photobook made in memory of my grandmother, draws on multisensory engagement with the reader. The cover itself was embossed with the image of incense to establish the tactile engagement with the pages from the onset. Physical objects were placed inside the pages of the book so viewers could engage on a deeper level with cultural artefacts - like the tiny replica of the Chinese wish pendant inscribed with my grandmother’s name. *Por Por* was made as a cathartic expression and offers insight into my personal relationships with family members, and their relationships with one another (Figure 42). Objects, including photos, letters, cards and memorabilia are important largely because of their tangibility— they can be touched and held, and therefore take the physical place of a longed-for person or location.

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’ (Doring 2006, p. 73). The language of
the family album is personal, and of course speaks most powerfully to those whose lives are caught within it. However, many of the families that took part in this research project had very few photographs as many 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. The objects (mostly family photographs) like Figure 43 acted as ‘fractured narratives of frozen moments, tied together by personal recollection’ (Wright 2014). 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 and reflect on what could have been.

Figure 43: Tammy Law, Before We Left (2017)

For photographer Seba Kurtis and his family, the shoebox represents their history and its survival embodies their own, directly referencing the family's collective past. The shoebox is the closest thing he has to a family album as his family lost almost everything during the political and economic unrest in Argentina in the 1980s and then all over again after the second wave of Argentina's financial turmoil. Kurtis and his family sought work abroad, becoming illegal immigrants in Spain. Old prints and a roll of home movie film, though badly water damaged, retain significance for Kurtis and his family, the last traces of a life, a time and a place left behind. The physical effects of the water damage leave a mark on their history and memory: ‘the traces of other pictures, emulsion, colours … photos that we never will see again, but they leave a mark’ (Kurtis 2010).
The family album is the vernacular photographic archive in its most familiar form. Produced for private viewing, it is a repository of both personal and historical information, a distillation of identity and heritage’ (Wright 2014). Given the technologies available, there are arguably new ways to rebuild these repositories of personal narrative and identity. As a consequence of their absence and separation, transnational family members long to be with each other. The photobook creates that sense of shared presence, constructed through tactility.

*Beyond Here Is Nothing* is a conceptual photobook meditating on home as a place of belonging, a tranquil state of mind and a perpetual possibility that artist Laura El-Tantawy is journeying to reach. Her personal experience growing up in contrasting cultures acts as the window to an intimate and emotive visual exploration of the feeling of rootlessness and the constant search for belonging in unfamiliar places is told through the material and construction of the book in combination with the images themselves. As an Egyptian living in London, El-Tantawy’s definition of ‘home’ is particularly fluid. Having grown up between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the US, and having experienced the turmoil of the protests in Cairo in 2011, this book is a personal contemplation on identity, home and the desire to belong. *Beyond Here Is Nothing* is a small and precious, almost sculptural object comprising three interwoven volumes that open in three directions, presenting four images at a time in interchanging juxtapositions. Handling it is like trying to get to the very bottom of it. ‘I feel like if I dig my hand deep into my soul, I will find nothing’, El-Tantawy writes in one of the diary-form fragments in the book (El-Tantawy 2017) (Figure 44).

Figure 44: Laura El-Tantaw, *Beyond Here Is Nothing* (2017)

My decision to combine the separate editions became clearer, as the images from both engaged in the same dualities of presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement. Though the visual languages may have felt disparate, I combined the images so the
resulting book offers multiple and possible storylines to explore how displacement can manifest in the material nature of the work (Figure 45). *Belonging In Motion* moves beyond the visual experience and into a tactile engagement that photographic prints in an exhibition can often lack. Its images can be subtle and poetic, and also quite literal and repetitive in terms of layout to generate a sense of order. Burma is a country with a deeply fractured society so this fracturing of experience is at the centre of the construction of both the images and physical spreads in *Belonging In Motion*.

![Figure 45: Tammy Law, Belonging in Motion photobook (2018)](image)

### 4.2 SEQUENCE AND MOTIFS

Alec Soth documents everyday subjects through metaphors and complex inferences via the arrangement and lighting of the person or object he is photographing (Figure 46a). For three years, Soth made a series of road trips from Minnesota to Louisiana, taking large-format colour photographs of people, landscapes and interiors along the Mississippi River searching for what photographer Robert Frank refers to as, “photographs that don't have an end or a beginning. They're a piece of the middle” (quoted in Dawidoff 2015, p. 42). Published as *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, the book’s 46 images
convey a narrative about America not unlike the personal documentary images captured in Robert Frank’s classic, *The Americans*. Soth says:

“In the early development of my work, I knew how to take pictures, but the struggle was how to organise pictures. Eventually, I started this thing called From Here to There, which was one picture leading to the next so that it was like a sort of game I was playing photographically, where the detail of one photograph actually provides the link for the subject matter of the next image” (Soth 2002).

Soth is interested in sequencing his photographs so it appears that we are discovering what is new to him—choices of moments at ordinary locations bring attention to the mundane or everyday, and to the ways that lines, shapes, colours and textures, as well as subject matter, combine to convey mood and meaning. He chooses scenes that offer many possible stories (Figure 46b).

In *The Photobook: A History*, photo historian and critic Gerry Badger reinforces the understanding that photographic meaning and narrative are presented through both the informational and social/cultural context of the image: ‘when we talk about narrative in a photobook context, we are frequently talking more about sequencing, the act of placing images in a certain order in the book’ (Parr & Badger 2014, p.18). Badger (2014) uses musical analogies such as leitmotif, and how these repeated metaphors and symbols in the sequential arrangement of images in a photobook emphasise key themes throughout the text. In *Belonging In Motion*, the use of recurring motifs or symbols such as the ‘jungle’ tie together particular sections of the book—for instance, Figure 47a and 47b, which feature at the beginning and end of the book. A good example of the use of motif is evident in Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, where
the artist uses the American flag as a visual motif throughout the book to draw attention to it as a derogatory symbol of how the American identity is passed on from generation to generation (Figure 48a and 48b). These images aim to constitute those ‘marginal spaces, and ephemeral intersections of people and places’ (Ferrell 2018, p. 176).

Figure 47a: Tammy Law, Mae Sot Border (2017)
Figure 47b: Tammy Law, *Bordering Karen State* (2015)

Figure 48a: *Robert Frank*, *Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey*, (1955)
Neither For Me Honey Nor the Honey Bee is a photobook by Alison Barnes that spans the terrains of personal geographies, exploring home as it is depicted through encounters, collections and details (Figure 49a & 49b). Barnes’ photobook is made up of its own fragments, strung together to create a portrait of intimacy and space. The viewer is welcome to pursue their own narratives in these prints, which shift in the way in which the viewer chooses to collect and sequence the images throughout each section of the book. In comparison to the constraints of space and time in an exhibition, the photobook offers a permanent form where the work can be accessed at any time. The visual/spatial relationship between the text and images allows a variety of visual concerns to coexist in the same space. *Neither For Me Honey Nor the Honey Bee* allows the reader to be led by a pre-determined path, offering the viewer a particular curation but at the same time can be approached in a sequence that suits their desired way of reading. The viewer is invited to connect with the images in a particular way – the narrative may be presented as linear, cyclical and more often than not, based on a rhythm that is predetermined.

Barnes prompts her viewers to conjure their own personal geographies and to consider how significant our experiences are to the value of place where home can be appreciated as a research window into the ways people perceive and understand their close social environment, and interact with it accordingly:
‘...because people inscribe it with meaning, possess and occupy it, derive social status and identity from it, space is understood as having symbolic value, hence is turned into an emotionally meaningful place’ (Boccagni 2017, p. 11).

Many of these images were made in Barnes’ various homes, both current and past, but in a sense, all of the book’s images are about ‘space and landscape that can be imagined as ‘simultanetities of ongoing, unfinished stories’ (Massey 2006, p. 40). Sometimes, Barnes’ home is a tent in the woods or a trailer on a friend’s plot of land. Specificity is not so important to her, since she is most interested in making photographs that speak more about the landscape of identity and personal experience.

Figure 49a: Alison Barnes, *Neither For Me Nor The Honey Bee* (2012)
Some sequences can reveal certain discoveries through particular environments or scenes that are presented. Reoccurring motifs or groupings of motifs can enhance the reading through the connections that are made through the use of repeated objects and materials that are photographed. We can discern similarities and contrasts through the ‘categorising or classification of different phenomena, objects and mental constructs’ (Van Dijck 2008, p. 60). The photobook can create a ‘third space’ where photographs become ‘shared as both objects and as experiences-establishing ephemeral connections’ (Van Dijck 2008, p. 60).

4.3 MOBILITY IN PHOTOBOOKS

At a time when migration has become such a pressing political issue, the book gives a fascinating 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. Dinu Li’s photobook The Mother of All Journeys documents the journey of his 80-year-old mother, who moved from Southern China to Manchester in
the 1970s. Many of Li’s images use empty rooms and spaces in a poetic manner, revealing presences that once filled the absence. This is a deliberate reconstruction of his personal history and functions as a reflection on the relationship between photography, time, distance and memory. As if we are paging through their family album, we are drawn into his mother’s life story as he retraces her steps from China to Hong Kong to England. A mix of present and past, Li combines family photos, his mother’s recollections and images of the places they revisit as they are today (Figure 50). Weathered old family photos, reproduced in their original sizes, juxtaposed against the super-saturated colours of the rooms of her past, decayed with time, keep the reader in a limbo somewhere between then and now. Li’s images talk about the duality between what is personal and universal. The photograph is not just about our own experiences, but others’ as well.

Figure 50: Dinu Li, The Mother of All Journeys (2007)

Jonas Bendiksen’s The Places We Live is a document of everyday life in the slums of Nairobi, Mumbai, Jakarta and Caracas. The book opens with the statement: ‘In 2008 when for the first time more people were living in cities than in rural areas. And one third were living in slums’ (Bendiksen 2008). These are areas that are marginal, that are non-places, unseen, unnoticed. I am interested in the way that Bendiksen visualises these spaces of domesticity. It is also important to note how the pages of the book fold out to create a sense of multiplicity, a reflection on how we might feel when walking through the neverending houses that make up these slums (Figure 51). The layering of images within the photobook is similar to a layout device I employed for Belonging In Motion, where pages intersect and fold out from one to another.
This landscape of intimacy and personal experience is significantly juxtaposed against what we have witnessed as the ‘refugee crisis’ over the past few years. Typically, news sources associate refugees with the persisting conflict in Syria, with media coverage undermining conflicts happening elsewhere in other countries. Ongoing political commentary concerning whether countries should tighten or loosen their immigration policy on refugees casts a shadow over the refugees themselves. They become statistics and the human factor is erased. *Foreigner* is presented in the more intimate context of the photobook that demands us to see the refugee crisis through the faces and stories of the people journeying across borders. The book is collaboration between Thomas Saxby and Daniel Castro Garcia and moves between portraiture, close-hand observation and a quiet kind of reportage. Castro Garcia created *Foreigner* in response to the imagery used in the media to discuss the issue of migration, which they felt was sensationalist and was not giving people the time and consideration they deserved: ‘When journalism and public discourse move into the sphere of inflammatory language and misinformation, so often the real victims are forgotten’ (John Radcliffe Studio 2016). Castro Garcia approaches the subject from a more relatable perspective, using medium format portrait photography as a means of meeting people face to face.

The book design reflects the narratives within: the cover is burgundy-coloured to resemble a European passport, but with the word ‘Foreigner’ printed in gold (Figure 52). Inside, the outline of maps trace journeys across borders, points of entry that become holding zones. The book comments on fragility, isolation and a sense of determination, concepts upon which my book expands. It is a thoughtful, reflective and haunting representation of not only what it is to be a refugee, but what it is to be human. The photography featured in my book is of a more intimate and personal nature—it lacks the kind of distance suggested in the portraits of *Foreigner*, and its physical size and scale reinforce the suggestion of familiarity. *Foreigner* comes wrapped in a material that draws reference to the ‘space blankets’ that are given to refugees when they land on coastlines to shield them from cold temperatures and help maintain their body warmth. The book comes in a neat package and is laid out methodically, the book as an object itself is orderly, almost militant. My book is more disruptive in its layout and viewer engagement – there are pages that are removable, that intentionally disrupt the physicality of the book as an object – to draw on the dislocation that family members from Burma experience on their journey through ‘homelands’.
Belonging In Motion develops new understandings of the multidimensional complexities of being a refugee, both home and away, and expands on established traditions of documentary photographic practice to incorporate the multiplicity of these experiences. Initially, a major exhibition of the photographic works and supporting exegesis was to form the final submission. However, an exhibition does not offer the same opportunities for progressive revelation as a book, and so the Belonging In Motion photobook forms the final submission.

International migration has invariably to do with the detachment from one’s past house, the search for a different house in the present, and possibly the hope for a better one in the future. Transnational objects embody the internalised presence of the absent and longed-for people and places. 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 53 shows the handmade box in which the book sits; the identities 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 is reiterated through this 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.
Domestic spaces appear intermittently throughout the book – how do these seemingly ordinary spaces immerse the viewer or disengage the viewer from the images that come before and after? To me these spaces act as reflective moments that refer to the ‘in-betweeness’ of the people in the book, as well as the experience of being lost or in flux that the viewer takes on. Histories past and present intermingle in book form to present something new and to communicate experiences to further understandings of what it means to live through transition.

Switching between inside and outside, Figure 54a shows that the rhythm of the book hinges on metaphorical, material and visual closeness and detachment. In *Belonging In Motion*, these spaces act as mirrors to the photographers’ personal histories. The pages are displaced, with the option of (mis)matching double-page spreads to recreate or renegotiate ideas of home. There is nothing tangible, nothing to connect with. 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.

Fence lines, timber on the façade of homes, patterns on flyscreens and traditional clothing act as unifying thematic devices throughout the photobook (Figure 54b). The viewer’s response expected from these pairings hinges on their reaction to colour, line, shape, pattern: the forms and immediate and almost visceral response to particular images used across layouts such as poster sized lift outs (Figure 54b). With collaboration and placement, rather than displacement, at the forefront of my
research, the photobook will be distributed among ‘left behind’ family members residing in camps on the Thai–Burma border as well as in Burma. The books will act as a keepsake for families to connect with their loved ones or others living through similar situations. The journey of the book itself may also be one of mobility.

Figure 54a: Tammy Law, *Belonging In Motion* photobook (2018)
The value inherent in telling and remembering is significant to the photobook 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. *Belonging in Motion* also seeks to present that what may seem beyond our comprehension is worth listening to with the hope of gaining small but important insights into the human condition—such reflection is vital to our ability to promote the progressive and lasting change that is yet to be seen. 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—but 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 experiences of life far way 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’ (Kofman 2004, p. 249). The photobook offers a solution that investigates the multifaceted transnational experience between presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement in a mobile way.
4.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I situate the photobook within my practice and explain how it offers a more intimate context for people to engage with personal stories of presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement in relation to home. I discuss the photobook as a material and tactile object and how that engages viewers on a multisensory level. I also examine how the sequencing of images can offer multiple stories within the book and how motifs can be significant in offering the audience some direction throughout the narrative. Finally, I draw on the mobile nature of photobooks and how this was significant to the reasoning behind why it was I decided on the photobook as a final output.
PART 3: SITUATING PRACTICE

In order to contextualise and position my photographic practice, Chapter Five examines migration as represented throughout the longstanding tradition of social documentary photography projects. The development of new narratives concerning mobility through visual storytelling is also investigated to situate my work within more contemporary documentary photographic practice and approaches.

CHAPTER 5: NEGOTIATING SUFFERING THROUGH DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

Early documentary photography focused on industry and urban settings, and photographers often used photography as a tool for social reform—for example, Lewis Hine’s images helped pass the Child Labour Law in America. Social documentary photography is associated with groups such as the Farm Security Administration, which documented migrant farming families and the effects of the Great Depression on the American people in the early 20th century (by practitioners such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Gordon Parks). After the Second World War, the camera became a tool for social change; in 1947, a group of photographers founded the Magnum photography agency to draw attention to pressing global issues, with a particular focus on migration. Sebastião Salgado joined Magnum in 1994, and his 1999 photo essay *Exodus* captured people’s forced mass movement around the world.

Some photo essays within this tradition reflect what some have coined the ‘fly on the wall’ approach, derived from a particular style of documentary filmmaking where events are seen as candid. Alison Wright’s photo-documentary series about the transnational living experiences of Burmese refugees living in Thailand is an example of this aesthetic. Wright combines candid moments with portraits (both staged and caught) and environmental landscapes. There is a feeling of surveillance, a sense of distance between subject and viewer, which can be undesirable when trying to create an affective and emotional response in the audience. The body language of the woman holding a child in Figure 21, in combination with the use of a wide-angle viewpoint, represents a typical style that photojournalists use to present refugees. This convention of visual language is often coupled with the idea of reportage or news/press photography where the audience can quite easily gather information about a particular event or situation. This is a language that I initially used when I photographed in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. It was a way of photographing that I was very comfortable using, however the approach for this particular body of work felt too literal, rather than emotive or evocative of the complex stories I learnt in the camps. Figure 55 is telling of the kinds of images that I was initially making. This way of photographing is a catalyst for further investigation and spurs on a deeper reflection into the way in which I should think and reflect on the visual approaches that I employ. My initial visual explorations depicted the more physical aspects of dwelling in a refugee context (Figure 56). I was
interested in spaces where families were being ‘temporarily’ held and the effect these places had on the idea of home for these communities. These images acted as catalysts for exploring the stories and experiences of these people beyond the confines of the camps and into places of resettlement.

Figure 55: Alison Wright, Burmese Refugees (2012)

Figure 56: Tammy Law Eh Htu Hta IDP Camp 2015
During global conflicts, photojournalists have produced a multitude of images that depict human-rights violations. These images could also be likened to the representation of suffering, which generates publicity by helping people relate to a cause and mobilise funds. However, beneath the surface of this approach lie many ethical questions: Does the photojournalist, as a voyeur, contribute to the subject’s suffering? Arthur and Joan Kleinman analyse Kevin Carter’s image (Figure 57) as a poignant example of why questions of ethics arise when trying to understand the work of photojournalists: How did Carter allow the vulture to come so close without doing something to protect the child? What did he do after the picture was taken? Was it in some sense posed? Carter’s image can be viewed as an exemplar—a quintessential representation of how the aesthetic and the ethical come into play when photojournalists capture moments of suffering, and the backlash to that action. This photograph has become a symbol of famine, and is used as such throughout the world (Marinovich & Silva 2000, p. 151). ‘The picture had caused a sensation because it was not only published in *The New York Times* but was also being used in posters for raising funds for aid organisations’ (Marinovich & Silva 2000, p. 151). These ethical questions also play a large part throughout my photographic practice. In 2013, the earlier years of my research, I visited one of the less resource-healthy refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, Tham Hin camp. In Figure 58 I remember questioning what I could do to help this child. Would his family struggle to put food on the table? Would they have access to clean water when summer was at its peak? There is an almost uncanny resemblance of the positioning of the boy in Carter’s image and my own which makes me question if I ever did enough.

Figure 57: Kevin Carter, *The New York Times* (26 March 1993)
Like Carter’s photograph, the images produced by Arturo Rodriguez and Javier Bauluz are influential ones that move beyond comfortable interpretations of migration. They are unsettling because they compel us to look at a harsh reality that we might rather ignore. They maintain the divide between ‘us’, who travel for leisure, and ‘them’, for whom travel is a means to an end. The overcrowded boat is a common visual representation of threatening immigration to the West. The image of the overcrowded vessel (Figure 59) suggests that there are many of ‘them’ trying to come ‘here’. Visual representations of threatening immigrants coming in boats provide a supplement to, or illustration of, the idea of ‘floods’ of immigrants, which forms part of the media coverage in which immigrants or minorities tend to be exclusively associated with negative topics and problems: immigration as invasion, abuse of identity papers, unemployment, violence, crime, drugs, illegality, cultural deviance, religious intolerance and so on (Van Dijk 2008, p. 62, cited in Gilligan & Marley 2010). This use of imagery that is shocking is a place where initially images may lie, however, throughout the process of reading about these experiences, talking to the families and learning about how they came to arrive at these camps, I considered the need for a more emotive and evocative approach to tell the story.
In Europe in recent years, the image of African migrants washed up on beaches in the continents south has become a recurring visual representation of immigrants as victims. Arturo Rodriguez’s photographs of holidaymakers and exhausted African migrants taken on a beach in the Spanish Gran Canaria are visually arresting examples of images that draw attention to the migrants’ vulnerability (Figure 60). They highlight the contrast between relatively affluent Westerners, interrupted in their leisure activities, and relatively poorer Africans who undertake perilous journeys driven by desperate desires for a better life. Part of the drama of these images is in the way that two worlds, normally kept separate, collide in the same frame. The visual representations of African migrants as threats or victims seem to be examples of what Susan Sontag refers to as the hunt for more dramatic images:

Conscripted as part of journalism, images were expected to arrest attention, startle, surprise ... The hunt for more dramatic ... images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value (Susan Sontag in Gilligan & Marley 2010).
Depictions of immigrants as victims may counter the idea of immigrants as a threat, but they do so by robbing immigrants of their agency, showing them as defined by what is done to them rather than by their own actions. Suffering, ‘though at a distance’ (1999), as French sociologist Luc Boltanski tellingly expresses it, is becoming a large part of global media culture. This representation of globalised suffering is troubling because experience is being used as a commodity, being remade, thinned out and distorted. Photographer, David Hogsholt visited Burma regularly for almost a decade, focusing his stories on social issues and human rights, including the situation of HIV victims and the military’s ongoing war against the Kachin (Figure 61a & 61b). Although these stories are significant to our understanding of the internal conflict within Myanmar, one consequence of the political and economic appropriation of these images is that the viewer becomes desensitised. Essays in the vein of Hogsholt’s Kachin War sit within those traditions of shocking people into action. Such images tend to present immigrants’ experiences as radically different to those of the rest of society. However, this does not mean that appropriations of suffering are not valid. ‘Such an assertion would undermine any attempt to respond to human misery and would be much more destructive and would paralyse social action’ (Kleinman & Kleinman 1997).
There are several layers of sadness and longing in many of Jim Goldberg's images, a suffering of one kind or another seem to suffuse his portraits. Many of the young women he encounters have been trafficked and sold into prostitution. One has written ‘I am a whore’ above her portrait; her expressionless face contests the force behind her statement (Figure 62). Goldberg is renowned for coupling his portraits with handwritten, reflective testimonies from the subjects themselves. The resulting combination of image and text conjures a sense of authenticity and, reveals some extent of the photographic process. Goldberg uses Polaroids, photographs, video stills, found images and handwritten texts to create fragmented narratives that disrupt the conventions of documentary photography. His documentary storytelling often takes form of a kind of collaboration, and through this, addresses problematic issues that dog contemporary documentary photography, which includes
representing the immigrant as spectacle and desensitising the viewer through the volume of images of suffering.

Figure 62: Jim Goldberg, *Open See* (2009)

Through documentary practice that is self-reflective, I intend for my photographs to inspire action, to push thinking and to move an audience emotionally without taking away the dignity of the people involved. Many visual projects that focus on issues of migration, conflict and refuge do their utmost to allow their subjects to maintain their humanity but, interestingly, Sam Ivin’s defaced portraits of asylum seekers forces us to examine torn and ruined faces, devoid of the obvious points of emotional contact. He draws attention to a sense of pain and disorientation through contestation: ‘Belonging is not a straightforward process for resettled refugees from Burma, who live in a situation where attachment, roots and rootedness, politics, commitment and memberships are all contested’ (Bird, Cox & Brough, p. 17). *Lingering Ghosts* is a photobook of interrogation that asks one of the pertinent questions that my photographic essays also ask: What does it mean to be an asylum seeker? Ivin engages with the materiality of the actual image by scratching out the eyes of his subjects to induce a sense of foreboding, discomfort and alienation (Figure 63). The process of disfiguring the images was done manually by applying sand paper and a Stanley knife indiscriminately to the prints. The aggressive
defacement of these faces is jarring at first, but Ivin’s intentions are to highlight the multisensory nature of suffering. Ivin’s images draw attention to how the potential of interference of the tactile nature of the image can draw attention to the broader contexts of ‘the other’. As photographers with the privilege of access into certain communities that could potentially be victimised or mistreated, we must be aware of our responsibilities to create images of human suffering to identify human needs and craft humane responses as, ‘…humanising the level at which interventions are organised means focusing our planning and evaluation on the interpersonal space of suffering—the local, ethnographic context of action’ (Kleinman & Kleinman 1997).

Figure 63: Sam Ivin, Lingering Ghosts (2016)

The work of photographer Seba Kurtis also engages with issues of forced migration by using the sea to interact with the chemistry of the film he was using (Figure 64a & 64b). His photo series Drowned tells the story of African and Mexican refugees hoping to reach Europe via the Canary Islands through images that survive the exposure to the ocean water: often mutilated, blurry, washed out – expanding on and confronting the viewers with the human aspect of illegal migration:

“I felt a strong impulse to ‘drown’ my boxes of film in the sea because at the time nobody was talking about the many thousands of illegal migrants from Africa who had died crossing the water” (Seba Kurtis in Montrone 2017).
Like Kurtis' photographs, I'm interested in interweaving complex stories of migration with processes that develop and contextualise greater social issues. For example, in 2013, while on an artist’s residency with Pole Image Haute-Normandie, Kurtis was told of an incident where migrants had tried to smuggle their way into the UK in the back of a lorry tanker carrying a consignment of talcum powder. He found pictures from CCTV footage showing four Afghan stowaways attempting to evade capture in Milton Keynes after fleeing in a cloud of white powder. “It suddenly occurred to me that talcum has more value than human life” (Seba Kurtis in Montrone 2017) and so began Talcum, a work that attempts to convey the extent to which asylum seekers are dehumanised by surveillance, detection and confinement. Kurtis photographs the talcum, oversaturating the colours and then printing the picture onto glass. The glass panes are pressed against each other so the minerals obstruct the subject's face (Figure 65a & 65b). This layering of processes that is at the forefront of Kurtis' work has informed the way in which I think about the complexities of experience from the perspectives of people living through migratory experiences. Figure 66 is an example of an earlier photographic experiment that I conducted using images from the Thai-Burma border, overlayed in combination with images from resettled environments. These initial experiments offered the desired effect to the beginnings of layering experiences through visual means, however the imagery did not speak to the experience of migration or displacement and remained unrefined.
Figure 65a: Seba Kurtis, from the series 
*Talcum*, courtesy Christophe Guye Galerie 2017

Figure 65b: Seba Kurtis, from the series 
*Talcum*, courtesy Christophe Guye Galerie 2017

Figure 66: Tammy Law *Overlay Experiment Burma/Australia* 2015
The layering of imagery became integral catalysts in advancing how my photographic practice approached the idea of migration and, coupled with that broader concept, the representation of suffering, displacement and vulnerability. These practitioners informed the way I approached the narratives of the families from Burma who had navigated complex routes of trauma, instability, loss, but also who had desires of safety, comfort and freedom – these collisions of experience.

5.1 NEGOTIATING ‘THEM’ & ‘US’

The prominent issues at the forefront of our most recent Australian federal election were policies concerning immigration, refugees and asylum seekers. For decades, the default response to refugee crises has been to set up detention centres, camps or settlements and coerce refugees into them. Camps, it was argued, were best suited to meeting the social, economic and political realities in which refugees live. There is a plethora of creative works that takes the same approach to these experiences; where people are seen as a number, in approaches that draw on the notion of ‘them’ versus ‘us’. Exit Syria is a documentary that diverts from this tradition to offer an intimate picture of life in Jordan’s Za’atari refugee camp, which is currently home to an estimated 80,000 Syrian refugees. Journalist and director Sherine Salama, cameraman Nikolas Lachajczak and fixer Jinan Al Nakshabandi spent three weeks in Za’atari in 2013, where they delivered daily online video diaries that gave users access to the camp. Exit Syria explores the nature of the refugee camp as a dwelling that further entrenches the ‘them and us’ mentality (Figure 67).

The traditional image of life in tented, sprawling camps no longer tells the full refugee story. Andrew McConnell’s *Hidden Lives* approaches the idea of displacement by juxtaposing refugees from Haiti, Pakistan and Congo in new urban environments. He frames his subjects in an intensely artificial way and uses light to separate them from their surrounding environment, exploring the psychological disconnection refugees undergo in urban contexts. His portraits are taken at night, using the city as a backdrop and metaphor by isolating the subject as a tiny figure, seemingly dwarfed by the urban jungle. McConnell emphasises the scale of the challenge that many refugees in urban environments face. The lack of light also plays on the fact that many of the cities that are home to the people featured really are very dark and intimidating—even dangerous—places at night:

“I photographed refugees at night to use the darkness as a metaphor for their current situation. I want to suggest that we live with refugees around us in our cities but we don’t notice them, they seem hidden to us” (McConnell 2013).

This approach risks dehumanising the people McConnell is trying to depict. The cityscapes can, and in some cases do, visually diminish the subjects. However, these staged, considered scenes—collaborations, not fleeting, grabbed moments are telling of ‘the approaches developed throughout the photo-documentary tradition (that) bring that dynamics of dislocation, immediacy, uncertainty and engagement directly into the lens of the camera (Ferrell, 2018, p. 178). These powerful, stylised portraits were influential to my approach of using the resettled landscapes of homes as a stage for the viewer to feel the disorientation of being a stranger, a refugee, in an unknown place.

Beauty is not often something one might associate with refugee camps, yet the images in Harley Weir’s photobook *Homes* have a sense of beauty about them (Figure 68a & 68b). Harley Weir’s images express both a homeliness and homelessness. What is implied throughout Weir’s images:

‘Is the fact that a key component of marginalisation is the limitation on movement and one way to mitigate against refugees (and migrants) being left on the margins is to ensure that they have the ability to move from the margins to a place of inclusion’ (Hovil 2016, p. 196).

Weir’s temporary shelters made out of tents, churches and shacks concentrates on the structures people build and inhabit. Similarities can be identified in Weir’s use of colour in her portrayal of the refugee home and the tones of the landscape in my images that reference landscape photography in an unconventional way. Her images reach towards a universalism of home as a symbol of what unites us.
Homes is also a potent document of the refugee crisis, photographed during, before and after the camp was demolished; the book is now an invaluable record of what the jungle was like as a landscape and a place to live.

“I found it just as powerful not to show people’s faces. I feel you can see them in their homes, in the beauty and ingenuity they put into them. When I arrived I was shocked, everyone had told me that it was the dirtiest camp they had ever seen, and actually, it wasn’t. I’m not saying it was a paradise, but I felt there was something lacking in the reportage images, that were often desaturated, distant depictions of war torn souls throwing stones and hurling abuse at police and each other, it all seemed very one sided. There is a deep sadness to the place but there is also a positivity that is rarely shown. I saw people getting on with things with an incredible tenderness and splendour. Beauty for me is integral when describing human nature and I wanted to show that in some form, to see the person rather than the situation” (Weir cited in Petty 2016).

The places between borders, the no-man’s-lands, can also be places of belonging. These, I have discovered, are where many individuals from Burma who now live in resettled countries feel they belong. Those who cross many borders, of language, culture and place, know such spaces well. The homeland for these individuals is the in-between, the liminal; but mostly, it is a transitional space. Figure 69 explores this liminality as a notion of transitional belonging, of constant movement where multiple belongings (as both possessions and connections) can coexist. In this way, one possesses a portfolio of belongings (rather than identities) that one is able to deploy, depending on the circumstance. Belonging therefore becomes understood as embodied and situational, liminal and transitional, contingent upon time, moment and place. These in-between spaces can be described as
states of liminal belonging. Throughout *Away From Home*, such ideas have been conceptualised through the photograph as mediator between absence and presence, material and immaterial.

Borders are most often envisaged as a physical zone or barrier in between. However, in recent years, they have become difficult to define and increasingly blurred in our consciousness, especially for those of us who have never experienced war. Rasmus Degnbol’s pictures of European borders from above reinforce the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis facing Europe as multitudes of refugees arrived at its borders in 2015 (Figure 70). As fenced, barbed wire and armed militant border guards became the new standard, Degnbol decided to photograph these ‘new’ European borders with technology developed by the military: drones. Degnbol’s work often balances on the edge of what is technologically possible.
As my understandings of the experiences of living ‘in between’ grew, I began to incorporate new tools to tell these stories in ways that my photographic practice had not utilised in the past. It was my intention to move the photographs beyond the culture of shock and develop representations of the refugee camp and ‘border’ areas as sites where ideas of home are negotiated. Degnbol’s project, *Europe’s New Borders*, offers a sense of scale of the dehumanisation of the border crisis unfolding in Europe. The literal use of border areas becomes a recurring space for his enquiries to take place. Like Degnbol, the sites which I chose to focus my visual research on became, not only the physical boundaries between countries, but also the physical confines of newly settled homes and barriers such as fence lines around those homes (Figure 71).
Moving beyond a focus on borders as physical boundaries between states, a large body of scholarship draws upon the border as a conceptual and methodological framework, approaching borders in terms of everyday practices through which people and places are defined, ‘othered’ and regulated (Migdal 2004; Brambilla, Laine & Bocchi 2015; Boesen & Schnuer 2016). In a study of women from the Shan minority who live on the border between Burma and Thailand, (Laungaramsri in Wilkins 2017, p. 5) argues that the border ‘represents a liminal zone which allows for the construction and possibility of the imagined homeland’ that the state has denied them. While the border thus remains an ambivalent and not necessarily empowering site, it opens up the possibility of negotiating social norms and enabling new understandings of home as a site of transition.

The concept of the border as an in-between space of identity has been particularly influential in feminist and post-colonial studies. The photographs of Francisco Mata Rosas establishes the borderland as a geographical and metaphorical zone of transition between cultures within which multiple perspectives can be understood and diverse forms of oppression resisted. ‘This is where dreams are rebounded’, reads a marker at the last limit of Mexico. Rosas images show us a multiple border, complex and constantly reinvented by the people who cross it in spite of the risk (Figure 72a). In *The Line*, she jumps from one visual language to another and from colour to black and white, but her portraits and images of found objects and traces of human presence along the border still manage to
maintain a narrative through its vernacular approach (Figure 72b). The lives of migrant and deported Mexicans beside the border wall with the US are featured as the last of the communities to withstand forced removals from the US. Their stories are ones of survival, with social, political, economic and environmental degradation, left behind from production and consumption chains.

Figure 72a: Francisco Mata Rosas, The Line (2016)

Figure 72b: Francisco Mata Rosas, The Line (2016)
Visual artist Kevin Chin’s series was made in the context of the global migrant crisis, the resurgence of political parties such as One Nation and Reclaim Australia, the US election of Trump and continuing debate around nationalism, belonging and alienation:

“Issues central to my art practice, of who belongs and who is an outsider, are topical in the current US political landscape” (Chin 2017, Art and Australia).

He takes potent iconography—temporary shelter structures, children in queues and long-distance crossings—and restages them through his own lived experience. In this way, he creates new images that bridge our shared experience, exploring universal themes of journey, transition and sanctuary. Structurally, the work is grounded in a series of strong lines, from the poles holding up the canopy to the head stones, but the weight of the lines become smothered and melt away into a hazy river that travels alongside the young children. ‘But invisible lines — the trajectory of the subjects’ gazes — enhance these strong compositional lines further. The two girls look away from us, the viewer. This device of activating the work through the direction of the gaze, engenders a dynamic sense of intrigue, as though the image is but a very small piece of a much more involved scenario. These invisible lines also serve to create a sense of three-dimensionality to the work, fabricating a sense of immersion and suggesting the picture continues beyond the bounds of its edges. This is what makes Chin’s work so captivating and engaging’ (Bayside Arts & Cultural Centre 2016). Chin uses vivid colour, blending photography and drawing. His paintwork merges the everyday with the otherworldly, shaping borderless new territories (Figure 73).

Figure 73: Kevin Chin, Sheltered (2017)
Marieke Van Der Velden uses rich, warm tones throughout her portraits of refugees living in the Netherlands to draw attention to the personal, rather than to faceless statistics (Figure 74a & 74b). These women could be your sister or your cousin, a relative waiting for years—some more than a decade—to hear whether they will be granted residence permits. Photographed in different asylum seeker centres across the country, Van Der Velden employs a combination of high contrast and shadow play to create a sense of the unknown, reflections of moments in between and moments of uncertainty. The way in which Van Der Velden lights her subjects is in stark contrast to the way in which I have approached my portraits in terms of lighting, composition and potentially relationship. In Figure 75 the abandoned trolley, style of clothing combined with an almost deadpan use of light, draws attention to the more subtle details scattered throughout the image – the way in which we hold ourselves in front of the camera, when there is nothing between you and I is telling of the vulnerability being expressed here. There is an almost disarming quality in the way in which you can stare and they can stare back at you. There are no shadows to hide within and the environments are more public and open to intervention in, in comparison to the spaces where Van Der Velden has photographed The Immigrants.

Figure 74a: Marieke Van Der Velden, The Immigrants (2006)  Figure 74b: Marieke Van Der Velden, The Immigrants (2006)
‘Learning the languages of others in our societies, and being able to partake of that otherness is vital to a dynamic and productive society. Some of these languages are visual, literary, poetic, theatrical and musical. Storytelling and mythologies, especially shared stories, bind people to culture’ (Cutcher 2015, p. 230).

Through sharing these stories, we connect to each other’s places, languages, experiences and histories. My initial attempts at representation led me to reflect on the conceptualisation of migration and the potential of mobility as an alternative way of conceptualising the issue. Mobility thus became my conceptual framework through which I could approach the issue of visually representing migration. Rather than try to represent immigrants, I sought to represent mobility. This shift enabled me to bridge the divide between immigrants and the ‘host’ society by presenting both immigrants and the ‘host’ society as sharing the experience of being on the move. The images presented throughout Away From Home direct attention to movement instead of the static borders that allow for division into the categories of ‘host’ and immigrant. The intention is to disrupt existing narratives around migration as the photographs erase the distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’. Movement is presented as ordinary and everyday, rather than something alien and peculiar.

The people in my portraits are photographed outside their homes, churches, in the environments where I meet them. I am interested in the way they choose to express themselves, their choice of clothing, the gaze towards or away from the camera, the way they hold themselves – these elements became a testimony to the relationship between photographer and participant. Alejandro Cartagena’s portraits reference their subjects’ lifestyles and surroundings, their status in society and his own perceptions about these people and himself (Figure 76). Cartagena is trying to come to terms with how
he sees and depicts people from backgrounds similar to his own. Like Cartagena, I need to be conscious of my position as photographer and reflect on this and how it affects those being photographed, as well as how I choose to photograph and represent the identities of others.

![Image](figure76.jpg)

Figure 76: Alejandro Cartagena, *Between Borders* (2005–2012)

In the photographs I create within resettled or liminal spaces where families in transition reside, I am acutely aware of the difference between the family members and myself and the potential of that representation in my images. I am also acutely aware of the things we have in common. While there are reports on Burma that project its political entanglements, human-rights violations, drug trafficking, widespread corruption and poverty and natural disasters, a more nuanced picture of the sociocultural dimension of the people’s everyday lives, of their agency and limitations through transnational ties, is lacking. Even in academia, publications have largely concentrated on Burma’s ruling regime or general studies of Burmese society, centring on social structure and everyday understandings of Burma’s people, who thus become faceless abstractions. There is an urgent necessity to see modern Burma through its people’s experiences, not just through the country’s problems or political suffering. The study of migrants’ experience, entering homes and making sense of the home experience on the move and its determinants through multisensory approaches is invaluable in ‘de-fetishising’ the meaning of belonging through otherness (Fortier 2001; Taylor 2015).

Leslie Searles’ photographs of Haitian refugees living in Brazil deepen our understanding of what political scientist Andy Knight (2002, p. 15) describes as ‘feelings of alienation and exclusion in the host country’, dealing with feelings and ideas of difference or strangeness, boundaries and community. Searles combines ‘photojournalistic’ visual conventions with a more evocative and poetic use of
storytelling to depict the narrative of those who were denied entrance to Brazil, having left Haiti after an earthquake struck their country in 2010; many were detained at the border for months (Figure 77a & 77b). The ominous tones in Searles’ photo essay invoke references to literature that explores ‘the ambivalence of home, framing it as a site of security and vulnerability as well as a shifting set of emotions that can be experienced in multiple places’ (Brickell 2016, p.157). The evocative moments within Searles representation of those pictured is what I have hoped to encapsulate throughout some of the ‘lived in’, domestic spaces that are featured in earlier photo essays that eventually fed into the photobook Belonging In Motion (Figure 78).

Figure 77a: Leslie Searles, The Third Frontier (2010)

Figure 77b: Leslie Searles, The Third Frontier (2010)
Similar to the use of the spider web or the materials concealing or acting as a barrier in _The Third Frontier_, reflections, windows and doorways act as entry points into multiple belongings throughout the photographic images in my photobook. The frames or ‘borders’ like those in Figure 79 create tensions and separation within the image that draw attention to the transition these people face. The deliberate use of the doorway, combined with the deep contrast between light and shade, inside and outside, create a border between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The positioning of the Thai flag further reinforces the questioning of belonging, identity and the curtain that is draped across the window on the right, acts as another barrier through which the viewer must move through to gather deeper understanding into transitional belonging.
Away From Home aims to shine light on the fact that around half of the world’s refugees actually live in urban environments—suburbs and cities—rather than the tented desert camps more commonly used to illustrate stories about displaced people. Numerous contemporary social theorists suggest that the times in which we live are characterised by mobility. Mobility scholar John Urry’s new mobilities paradigm focusing on the experience and affect of mobility through the acknowledgment that the world is ‘on the move’ via the movement and flow of objects, people and goods between and through places. The way in which we move through time and space and our relationship to other mobilities prompted me to question how this experience could be understood and transformed through a visual practice, and prompted me to encounter new strategies and methodologies for visualising mobility (Urry 2007, p. 18).

Cultural theorist Mieke Bal has coined the term ‘migratory aesthetics’, positing that ‘it is, an abstraction or generalization from the experience of migration, but rather as a space of experimentation in itself—one where an aesthetic is conceived and shaped through the various manifestations of contemporary, migratory experiences’ (Bal 2007a, 2007b). I thought about how I could draw attention to this constructedness of movement, time and memory through still imagery, which is how the idea of projections onto environments and places of resettlement was conceived. These ‘mobility’ perspectives imply that movement is not only experienced by migrants, but also part of the human condition in
today's world. The projections bring together notions of place and space that test the possibilities and complexities of home in the context of mobility (Figure 80).

Figure 80: Tammy Law, Placement/Displacement from the series Away From Home (2016)

The link between exclusion and restrictions on people’s movement lies at the heart of many of the problems and challenges articulated by those interviewed for this research. Movement is often one of the key coping strategies for people caught up in situations where their environment compels them to seek safety and livelihoods elsewhere. Yet mobility (forced or otherwise), rather than being seen as an innovative strategy, is perceived as a challenge to state sovereignty and, therefore, leads to those who move being labelled ‘illegal’ and pushed to the margins (Hovil 2016, p.196). Of course, people are moving all the time—and globally, movement is only on the increase. But national and regional structures go to great lengths to repel people from being allowed to carry their sense of belonging with them as they move—and where people do manage to cross borders, they are asked to shed their identity in order to be included in a new place. There is a significance in more versatile and open visual approaches to belonging that take into account not only multiple forms of belonging, but also identities that move and that are transient. Some of the housing arrangements of those I photographed (Figure 81) seemed to bear signs of an expected transiency. Under these conditions, ‘transforming an anonymous house into a meaningful home’ (Bartoloni 2016, p. 26) was far from easy.
Drawing on these transitional experiences of belonging, documentary photographic practices can illuminate a wide range of issues relating to migration, the economy, politics, religion, identity and culture. ‘Both positive and negative representations of immigration tend to focus on the exceptional and the dramatic’ (Van Dijk, cited in Gilligan & Marley 2010, p. 7). Having considered some of the problems with the representation of migrants, Away From Home aims to represent people living through transition as people rather than as a category, and to explore the everyday stories of people living through these circumstances. The intention is to represent both the complexity and the largely everyday nature of contemporary migration through developed and unexpected modes of documentary photographic practice.

5.2 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I situate my photographic practice in relation to series of photographic works that I have placed within two categories of visual representation. The first category examines photography that negotiates representations of suffering and the second investigates photography that negotiates representations of ‘the other’ within the context of migration. I also discuss how my work has advanced or built on these categories.
CHAPTER 6: HOME AS A SITE OF MULTIPLE BELONGINGS AND (UN)BELONGINGS

This chapter starts to dissect ideas of home and belonging and considers it in its multiplicity through the work of artists and photographers such as Alia Bilgrami, Sue Saxon and Anne Zahalka, Harley Weir, Jorge Pachoaga, Pete Pin, John Clang and Liu Jie. In transnationalism and migration studies, the home is regarded as a mobile structure not necessarily bound to one location (Ahmed et al. 2003). This chapter draws upon the growing body of literature that examines the relationships between and surrounding home, and how they are interconnected in migration studies (Blunt & Dowling 2006; Boccagni 2017), making particular reference to how the practice of photography can bring to the forefront, multiple sites of transnational belonging and unbelonging.

Research into belonging has flourished over the past decade. However, the numerous inquiries into diverse areas, while growing, lack cohesive definitions and terminology that can be applied across platforms,

‘As home and belonging are based on ‘perception, unique to the individual and centres on value (and) respect…. It is the formative experiences in our ‘homelands’ that ensure how we move in the world and interact with others. The process of belonging is a journey of impermanent moments and interactions that rely on the culture in which we grow up and in which we are first socialised, providing that the environment remains stable’ (Cutcher 2015, p. 221).

Building on Cutcher’s idea of home being unique to individual perceptions, home (in the title of this thesis) can refer 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” and inclusion and exclusion. We may be born in a place and yet be disconnected from it because of displacement at an early age, as was the case for children from Burma who travelled to countries for resettlement.

6.1 MOVING FROM BURMA

People who flee conflict are a dominant story of our time. At the end of 2016, the total number of forcibly displaced people reached 65.6 million worldwide. The Myanmar Government estimate that there are 4.25 million Myanmar nationals living abroad and in Burma alone there are currently over a million people who have either been forcibly removed from their homes by the military or have fled areas of conflict to keep their families safe. While this project makes specific reference to the transnational diaspora from Burma, themes of home and mobility are common to us all. Over the past 20 years, a proliferation of diasporic communities has come from Burma. Burmese exiles, migrants or
refugees have chosen—or been forced—to head for different places of exile, and have established contrasting relationships with their host countries and homeland. The multiple interactions that occur across international borders are significant for our understanding of the transformations of Burma’s diasporic population. Their history of immigration is one of alienation and its consequences: broken homes, interruptions of a familiar life, and separation from known surroundings, becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong. This well-established history of movement and the current state of internal conflict within different states in Burma (i.e. military forcing Rohingya to flee across into Bangladesh or the military fighting the Kachin Independence Army for natural resources) are significant to why Burma and its diaspora have become sites for my investigations.

Research that addresses the settlement experiences of people from Burma in the diaspora is limited but a significant element of refugee resettlement is situated in belonging research. A few notable studies include social scientist Susan Banki’s (2006) investigation into a community of people from Burma resettled in Tokyo that focused on the effect of Japan’s state policy on resettled people with refugee backgrounds. In 2007, a group of six public health graduates at the University of North Carolina conducted an Action-Oriented Community Diagnosis on the small, growing community of people from Burma in North Carolina that aimed to assess the ways in which they were settling in two suburbs, and how their settlement process could improve. More recently, Jessica Bird (2016) investigated the transnationalism and the identity of Karen people from Burma living in Brisbane, Australia in relation to government policy. Though this research is integral to broaden our understanding of legal, educational and resettlement issues in refugee studies, photographic elucidations can offer new perspectives to tacit knowledge through people, environment and conversations.

People’s links to their original homes are as diverse as their journeys to resettle in other countries. Some Burmese refugees were born in Burma, and lived for many decades as exiles in the Burmese jungle or in Thai refugee camps before resettling elsewhere. Others were born in refugee camps, never knowing their ethnic homeland but having nostalgic ties to it through their parents’ and grandparents’ collective memories. Others moved to other countries at a very young age, never knowing the camps or Burma, yet forging belonging to their ‘homeland’ and those camps, particularly through family left behind. Therefore, these multiple sites that are identifiable as home are littered throughout my representation of ‘home’ throughout my photographic research, contributing to belonging research, including home villages, places of asylum within Burma but also outside, Thai refugee camps and countries of resettlement such as Australia. The research surrounding belonging is complicated and multilayered, just as the process of feeling at home in a place of resettlement is neither simplistic nor linear, which is characterised by a layering throughout not only the compositions in my photographic work, as well as the use of projected images from one environment to another. This is evident in Louise Whelan’s photographic exhibition African/Australians, which blends objects from
contemporary Australian culture with the face, customs and celebrations of migrant communities in Australia (Figure 82). Whelan’s documentary photographic practice is based on the experiences she encounters through the cultural environment of the people in her images.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 82: Louise Whelan, *African/Australians* (2013)

The experience of growing up between two very separate cultural environments and being displaced due to external, sometimes uncontrollable factors, like those that Burmese refugees have experienced may be difficult to resolve because of the complicated and often case-by-case situations of the refugee experience. Some people in Burma are literally on the run: their homes have been burnt and their villages mined, and because they are afraid to go back, they have become mobile, constantly moving to find a place of security and safety. Some have not left Burma, but can still be thought of as part of the diaspora because they have been forced away from their homes. Some will find their way to a camp for internally displaced persons and eventually cross the border into another country and enter a refugee camp. Many of the families I encountered in the camps were stuck in limbo, either waiting for the UNHCR to approve safe passage and resettlement or searching for a place of refuge and safety. Throughout my five years of travel to and from the camps and border areas, I saw some people become migrant workers and a small number secure scholarships in neighbouring countries, driven there by a combination of economic want and political oppression, while others gained asylum status in other countries. The largest communities of Burmese people with refugee backgrounds have been resettled in the USA and Australia, which is where this research was conducted. Using these two ‘host nations’ enables insights into the multiple senses of belonging.
6.2 RELOCATING HOME THROUGH PROJECTIONS

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. The images featured in this chapter draw on the idea that home is not bound by space, but rather, constantly in negotiation across multiple sites. In addition, this chapter focuses on the role these images play in expanding on documentary photographic practice and its relationship with the concept of in-betweenness and otherness through transnational lives. 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. This chapter will also examine how the renegotiation of family can occur across shared experiences of impermanence through digital and visual spaces.

In 2006, the first 30 families from Burma arrived in Queensland. One family was settled into government housing, while another was placed in a motel and given a bag of rice, a frozen chicken and some spices and herbs to feed a family of seven.

“We didn’t have any idea about Australia. We wanted to come to any country who wants us to come. We lived with a new culture. The first person we met was our caseworker who was Sudanese. We had never met African people before. We arrived with the first 30 families in 2006” (Kawsherpaaw, Queensland).

“When we arrived we lived in a hotel in Wooloowin. We were told not to leave the room.” (Kugay Htoo May, Queensland).

At the time, no caseworkers were able to speak their language, so the families were dependent on telephone interpreters. Many expressed the feeling they thought they were leaving their country for a better life, but in Australia, were again held in temporary housing under circumstances that felt no more secure or homely than those they had fled. Away From Home engages in the lived experiences of displacement from the perspectives of families from Burma whose experiences fall between the dualities of permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement. Families can represent a geographically dispersed social group. Through transnational mobility, they create kinship networks, which exist across space (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007, p.121).

Photographer John Clang’s work further explores how family units negotiate absence and presence through virtual spaces and new technologies. Clang creates a sense of mobility in his portraits by photographing digital projections of Skype calls with his family into the physical space in which another family member resides. Clang configures his family in a manner that suggests communication technologies can compensate for absence or dislocation between family members, as there is no obvious tension shown through the separation of space. How we visually negotiate fractured identities
within two dimensions becomes a recurring question throughout Clang’s works (Figure 83). In a documentary about Clang’s series *Being Together*, his self-reflections expose his own dissonance of living away from home. The in-betweeness of two given traditions opens up a space of “thirdness”, which reveals ‘a doublessness of belonging and not belonging’, regardless of where we are located in the world (D’Costa 2016, p. 205).

Clang (Invisible Photographer Asia 2011) is attracted to the concept of difference and dissonance through the mundane and the commonplace:

“I always profess an affinity for subject matters closely related to my daily life. My images are a poetic reflection of myself in response to the nuanced changes in my environment”.

Similar to Clang, I am curious about the effects of everyday experiences on the families involved. *Away From Home* sits within and across a disciplinary context of photographic practice that acknowledges the ‘immaterial and the sensory nature of human experience’ (Pink 2007a, p. 35), which is significant to conceptualising migration as mobility. The use of projections throughout the photo series *Away From Home* highlights the significance of spatial concepts of homes as multiple sites of belonging, both as lived experience and imagination, and refer to the ongoing negotiation of uprootedness across time and place. Within this framework, I reflect on how communities maintain a sense of identity through their adopted homelands by looking backwards and forwards simultaneously. When photographing
images for photo essay *Away From Home*, I used photographs that I had taken at refugee camps on the Thai–Burma border, as well as images from within Burma. These images were then projected into the resettled spaces of refugees living away from their families across Burma, Australia and the US. In many instances, I would deliberately include references to the technology being used in the photograph as a way to challenge constructed versus documented spaces and their validity. In Figure 84, the ‘pause’ symbol from the projector is centred in the frame to draw attention to the difference between the construction of the image and what is understood to be the documented image.

Figure 84: Tammy Law, *Borderline* from the series *Away From Home* (2016)

The intention in the figure above is to introduce two children between the present, material space of the resettled fence line in Australia and, simultaneously, the past, imagined space of the refugee camp, their original home. They climb across the past space of the Thai–Burma border while imagining their present in Australia. Their situation is at once one of hope and periphery, which sets the conditions of imagining what the future may hold for them in terms of ‘home’. They are in the state of living and dying, between the adopted home and the ancestral home, not privileging one over the other, but rather accepting a state of being where the imagination of home becomes borderless and multiple. Time of day was integral to the production of these images, as it was important to create a sense of dreaminess and illusion in combination with the physical spaces as they were lived in. The layering of
projected images allowed me to offer a somewhat distorted reality, similarly to how we might see in dreams. It can also function as a source of multiplicity. The spatially ambiguous landscape in the photograph presents, here and elsewhere at the same time. They have negotiated this home(lessness) as being between places and experience multiple senses of home in that they are engaged in the here and there of navigating their hyphenated identities and commitments to both their past and present worlds.

The visual language that I have used throughout this series is borrowed from Gregory Crewdson’s photographs of America, belonging to a cultural lineage that stretches from Edward Hopper to David Lynch via Alfred Hitchcock (Figure 85). Crewdson creates elaborate scenarios on location that intervene in the moments between ease and tension, dreams and nightmares. Some of the images in Away From Home use twilight to explore those moments, between real landscapes and imagined ones. Like Crewdson’s images, the setting becomes a backdrop or a landscape of psychology. Figure 86 layers those ideas of home, homeland, place and time with the projected image of Karen State that explores the border area, layered over the temporary rental home for this family in Queensland, Australia.

Figure 85: Gregory Crewdson, Untitled (from the series Beneath the Roses, 2004)
Collaborative artists Doug Spowart and Victoria Cooper’s Place Projections also draw on the context and the consequences of having a constantly changing relationship with the landscape. Reflecting on their personal experiences of the outback, Spowart and Cooper’s projections are site-specific works of Australian landscapes that are more experimental in nature. These images are born from workshops where they take participants to photograph suburban landscapes at night using a technique called ‘painting-with-light’ where they use long exposures to paint the landscape with the available, ambient, night-light (Figure 87):

“For many years we have created images of place by combining projected images with electronic flash light painting on outdoor subjects and buildings. These projections or light sculptures are constructed from individual exposures to make a composite photograph. The final image or series of images presents the viewer with a visual story that is drawn from our exploration of, and empathy with, each place” (Spowart & Cooper 2013, wotwedid).

Although aesthetically cohesive, the series lacks a strong conceptual framework, so consequently, the images could be seen as experimental and become technical pieces of process and methodology, rather than a statement or question that sits within larger social contexts. Nonetheless, the use of projection influenced some of the practical decisions I made when I was experimenting with photographing projected images of past onto present. Questions of where I placed the projected image
within the frame and what proportion of the images should interact with the existing spaces were important considerations throughout this stage of the project.

In the series *Subterranea*, Sarah Oxenham employs a method of photography that deconstructs time and space. Like the previous artists, her photographs employ photographic projections and painting with light that suggest disruption and change through actual and imagined spaces. In contrast to the lack of conceptual development in *Place Projections*, Oxenham creates performative interactions with the unused and hidden parts of houses to comment on our disconnection and connection within personal and structural, temporary and permanent spaces we inhabit (Figure 88).
For many, home is a reflection of the self, a place made up of personal histories and memories: ‘the houses and gardens of previous generations unconsciously direct our footsteps and are the landscapes of our imagination, as well as the cultural environment to which we adapt’ (Miller 2010, p. 145). Augusta Wood uses photographs from the past to describe a cumulative history in the present, through the combination of old and newly authored images. For her, rooms become extensions of one's personality and home is a place where possessions are gathered, memories held and lives recorded through belongings. Wood memorialises her grandparents' former home by projecting family snapshots in layers onto the walls of the now-vacant family home. In Figure 89, an empty room of Wood’s grandparents’ home becomes confused with the images she projects onto them, to suggest the accumulation of memory and experience. These haunting photographs provide an interesting comparison to my own, which play with perspective and colour to enhance the ever-changing state of both the physical and psychological state of families living through migration, allowing belonging to be understood as dynamic, multiple and uneven. Departing from Wood, I project images taken within Burma and project them into current places of settlement to explore what Barthes refers to, ‘as a reminder of the worlds inconstant and ever changing state’ (Barthes 1981, 2000, p. 85) (Figure 90). Like Oxenham I engage with the physical structure of houses to invoke past and present experiences ‘where the spatial and temporal dislocation of migration occurs: where the “past” becomes associated
with a home that (can be) impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present (Ahmed 1999, p. 343).

Figure 89: Augusta Wood, *Whether It Happened or Not* (2013)

Figure 90: Tammy Law, *Temporary in Victoria* from the series *Away From Home* (2016)
The use of projections in my work is an inquiry into how images can foreground narratives that transcend time and space. In the photo series *Recollected Memorier*, the photomontage work of Jackson Patterson explores themes of family, land and Western migration (Figure 91). Patterson speaks of the predicament of telling stories, which traversed a number of years. He dealt with this by physically reconstructing the images to pay tribute to stories his grandmother told him a young boy:

“Personal histories and variations of stories led me to creating these images. The stories were rooted in the land, so it was important for me to tell the story not only of the people, but also the land” (Patterson in *Journal of New and New Media Photography* 2012).

![Figure 91: Jackson Patterson, Red Barn (2013)](image)

The photographic works throughout my photobook expand on the traditions of photographic practice that aim to catalyse questions about visual stories we consume as real. There is a plethora of academic writing, which suggests that photographs are not really a record but a created reality. This is evident in Japanese photographer Miyako Ishiuchi’s series *Mother’s (200-2005)* where she focuses on the traces we leave behind both as individuals and societies. The way she has photographed the scars
on her mother’s body, evoke experiences and memories of post-war Japan as the scars she become portraits that emerge in the absence of the subject (Figure 92).

“I cannot stop [taking photographs of scars] because they are so much like a photograph… They are visible events, recorded in the past. Both the scars and the photographs are the manifestation of sorrow for the many things which cannot be retrieved” – Miyako Ishiuchi

This sentiment is reinforced through Pink’s research in *Doing Visual Ethnography* where she argues:

‘Photographs, videos and other images produced in material or imagined form as part of the research process do not necessarily take on the status of being knowledge about the research question or findings in themselves, but rather can be understood as routes to knowledge and tools through which we can encounter and imagine other people’s worlds’ (Pink 2007a, p. 38).

Figure 92: Ishiuchi Miyako, *Untitled from the series Mother’s* (2000-2005)

Through the projected layers of imagery in *Belonging In Motion*, 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. There is a kind of new reality presented, that embraces imagined landscapes, layering imagery across time and place, memory and experience, home and away. It became apparent through my research that there were different stages of experiencing ‘home’ and that each stage was, to some extent, disappearing and so the projected images featured in my
research emerge from the idea of community that is not bound by space, layering place and time to communicate that feeling of statelessness.

6.3 HOME AS A CONTESTED SPACE

Nations are ethnically diverse and often contested spaces, and therefore always contain frictions between sameness and difference, unity and diversity. The tensions between the ‘nation’ and those outside it are evident in the work of Canadian-born Pakistani artist Alia Bilgrami, where the overwhelming theme is displacement, whether physical, emotional or spiritual. She illustrates the feelings of displacement she endured from being born in Canada and shuffled between the cities of Karachi and Islamabad (Figure 93). Impermanence as a consequence of displacement and replacement underpins Bilgrami’s work. The experiences of those within Burma and those who now reside abroad imply a tension and simultaneously a harmony, between being ‘home’ and ‘away’, themes that are constructed throughout the sequence of the photobook Belonging In Motion (Figure 94). Each section of the photobook can be ‘displaced’ and ‘replaced’ and read in ways that draw on the dualities of engages in the experiences that exist between the dualities of presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement.

Figure 93: Alia Bilgrami, Diorama Desire (2014–2015)
Artist and collaborators, Sue Saxon and Anne Zahalka use photographs to make reference to ‘the intangible memories, stories and places of their parents’ homelands, and the desire to locate personal dimensions of the migrants’ physical and psychological journeys within broader discourses of 20th-century transnational migration. ‘The images on each of the 20 handkerchiefs are framed by two words embroidered in opposite corners to lyrically juxtapose the complex, often dialectical facets of the migrant experience: home/homeless, possess/dispossessed, place/displace, arrive/survive. The work hints at the vast geographical, cultural and emotional distance negotiated by generations of migrants who travelled from Europe to the Antipodes’ (Tao 2016, p. 334-335). ‘While the artists consider how migration has shaped their lives in Displaced Persons, they also encourage the viewer to reflect on historical ironies and contemporary ideologies of nationhood, citizenship and cross-cultural belonging’ (Tao 2016, p. 338) (Figure 95).

Artists such as Anne Zahalka share with anthropologists a concern for the ‘politics of representation’ (Schneider & Wright 2006, p. 19). Drawing on Joseph Kosuth’s characterisation of the artist as an engaged anthropologist, philosophy and art lecturer Frank Maet (2016) argues that today, we can consider these artists as artists–anthropologists who express and study how cultural imagination is affected by globalisation. Because they cut across divisions between different cultural expressions of art, their works can be explored as ‘balancing acts’ respecting different cultural influences. Zahalka unites the material and emotional memory to embody the complexities of the migrant experience across cultures and generations. She explores ideas of nation, identity and the critical subversion of cultural stereotypes, while Sue Saxon is concerned with discourses of materiality, power and otherness. In their collaborative work Displaced Persons, Saxon and Zahalka traverse the
documentary by using layers of material culture—family photographs, historical documents, postcards, maps, fragments of embroidery—screen-printed onto fabric to examine the shared history of their parents’ displacement from Europe after the Second World War (Figure 95).

Like Saxon and Zahalka, *Away From Home* draws on relationships between materiality and lived experience to illuminate personal testimonies within larger narratives of forced migration.


The transnational home should not be reduced to a house or physical dwelling, but instead considered as a valuable lens, research venue and subject for migration studies as it has been argued that in an era of intensifying global movement, ‘home is increasingly a spatial phenomenon, a notion that is particularly relevant to mobile global diasporas’ (Pries 1999; Landolt & Wei Da 2005; Valentine 2007). In *Away From Home*, home can be thought of as a metaphorical space for experiences of freedom and protection, ‘provisioning a sense of place and belonging in an increasingly alienating world’ (Moore 2000) for people living mobile lives. Geographers have highlighted the ways in which home may be a site of conflict and insecurity rather than a place of refuge, for migrants and other marginalised groups (Brickell 2012). However, in the following excerpt during an ethnographic interview, Lah May Paw expresses a sense of comfort and gratitude to her new home in Australia:

"Australia is my freedom country. I can live without worry in my home. I can help my family. If I don’t come here I can’t pay for my mum’s treatment because she is not a Thai person; she does not have Thai ID or
Burma ID so the government won’t help her” (Lah May Paw).

Wherever it is located, home has been represented as offering complete familiarity and comfort, a place that we either leave and long for or move towards for ontological security. This assumption has been questioned (Ahmed 2000; Brah 1996; Herbert 2012; King & Christou 2011; Wiles 2008), as feelings of comfort and estrangement can be experienced concurrently within the same location, or in relation to the same location and events through different imaginings and memories. The diasporic pursuit of home can involve

‘Physically or symbolically (re)constituting places which provide some kind of ontological security … ‘home’ (is) … continually reprocessed … constituted by the desire for a ‘home’, rather than surfacing from an already constituted home … home is never fully achieved, never fully arrived-at, even when we are in it’ (Fortier 2003, pp. 115–131).

Many critics oppose the ‘home as the epitome of the idea of individual freedom, a place liberated from fear and anxiety’ (Brickell 2012, p. 225). The lived realities of home are particularly evident in feminist analyses that emphasise the domestic not as an individual and homogenously experienced unit of harmony, but as a potential site of struggle and conflict (Valentine 2007; Hjorth & Lim 2012). Feelings of solidarity, safety and protection are often achieved by severe acts of exclusion and regulation, which are in turn oppressive (Schroder in Brickell 2012, p. 226). The symbolic use of home to enlist a sense of belonging, rootedness, memory and nostalgia has thus been complicated by the role of negative and ambivalent feelings to home. *Away From Home* expands on the critical voice of John Berger, who claims that ‘the themes of home, movement and stories are closely interrelated’ (Berger cited in Chang 2006, p.54):

‘In the face of the magnitude of human migration in contemporary times, he perceptively state that home should not be seen as a thing or a dwelling; in reality people often live in movement and it is that which opens up untold stories’ (Berger, cited in Chang 2006, p. 54).

The way in which I have positioned the person in Figure 96, the almost prison-like structure they’re walking towards and the signage that reads ‘do not enter’, reinforces the ‘ways in which home (can be understood as) disappointing, aggravating, neglectful, confining and how the notion of home (especially for those living through movement) can contradict as much as it inspires and comforts us’ (Moore 2000, p. 213).
Simryn Gill’s artistic practice foregrounds material cultures that endorse moments of intersection between her own personal, lived histories and world histories as informed by her life stories and the places in the world where she has lived, worked and feels a sense of belonging (Figure 97). Gill was born in Singapore, is of Indian descent, grew up in Malaysia and currently lives in Australia. In Gill’s photographic series *Dalam*, ‘the home emerges as an ambiguous and incomplete referent of both nationalism and self’ (Brickell 2013, p. 530). Similar to Gill, my images focus on material possessions, often void of people, but act as a lens revealing the daily practices that identify the home as a shared yet personalised expression of collective dwelling (Figure 98). The pairing of the Australian flag, alongside a poster of the Karen revolutionary hero and cult figure Saw Ba U Gyi in Figure 98 suggests that ‘the home is used to objectify aspirations towards assimilation or a chance to reconstruct one’s ethnicity and to create an imagined environment that achieves integration, or stands for some future state’ (Miller 2010, p. 77). A new sense of identity is reinforced through this ‘imagined environment’ where these cultural and political identities have the chance to co-exist.
Artist and educator Bia Gayotto questions how a sense of place can be imagined, experienced, contested and represented through video installation works in *Somewhere in Between*. As a bicultural person from Brazil who lives and works in the US, she contemplates the relationship between place, identity and culture. Gayotto creates two-screen video installations that juxtapose cityscapes, buildings
and domestic settings with moving portraits of people performing simple, everyday tasks. The sequence of scenes creates fleeting and serendipitous encounters between and among people and environments (Figure 99).

Figure 99: Bia Gayotto, Somewhere in Between: Silicon Valley (2012)

Jorge Panchoaga’s photographic works in La Casa Grande (The Big House) offer a close look at the everyday life of the Cauca indigenous people from Columbia where a large number of armed conflicts and forced displacements occur. The series maintains a relationship with the sociocultural problems of identity, memory, language and cultural change caused by conflict and humans’ relationships with their everyday and intimate environments. By the time Panchoaga ventured into the region, indigenous groups had mounted a successful campaign to reclaim the lands they had lost decades earlier. Their efforts led him to understand how they regarded the concept of home itself: “A house is not just four walls”, he said. “It’s the mountains, rivers, animals and plants” (Panchoaga cited in Gonzalez 2015).

From soft-focus portraits to dramatic night-time landscapes and camera obscura images where he brings the trees and mountains into people’s homes (Figure 100a, 100b), Panchoaga raises questions about the social and political forces that propel migration and loss through the use of geographical markings across the faces of his portraits (Figure 100a).

At times, there are advantages to not belonging, or appearing to not belong. An individual may not be interested in or motivated to seek validation from the dominant culture because they can move through the new world as a ‘citizen’, rather than as a ‘patriot’. This is not because they are content to be rootless, but because they want to be free, a liberating factor when there is often an overwhelming sense of repression in the process of renegotiating belonging. Panchoaga’s camera obscura images bring the outside world in to suggest that belongings and states in which refugees and migrants exist are dynamic. Similar to these works, the images where I have projected images of ‘here’ and ‘there’ (Figure 101) highlight that experience of displacement as transitional and in flux or in motion. Both Panchoaga and the images of my own argue that ‘place and belonging are intricately entwined’ (Schultz, cited in Cutcher 2015) and, in any construct of transition, place and displacement are fundamental. The ways in which our images are constructed offer slightly different metaphorical
approaches to the idea of displace, where on one hand, Panchoaga’s camera obscura images bring the outside inward and in contrast the interiors are brought out into a more ‘public’ space. The decision to show the physical structure of the home throughout my project was not only, to offer a point of reference to the audience that drew reference to place and geographical location, but also, to offer a platform for an imaginary space the audience could place themselves within, whether this be a space of repression or liberation, dislocation or relocation and also so that new narratives could take place within these recreated spaces of resettlement.

Figure 100a: Jorge Panchoaga, La Casa Grande (2011–2014)
Figure 100b: Jorge Panchoaga, *La Casa Grande* (2011–2014)

Figure 101: Tammy Law, *Temporary Impermanence* from the series *Away From Home* (2015)
Throughout the *Away From Home* photo essays, there is a recurring motif of windows and doors that act as barriers and boundaries with the potential to be crossed or transgressed, referencing the permeability of the divide between inside and outside, public and private, home and away (Figure 102a and 102b). Progressively, the sense of belonging is fractured, bonded and contested through visualised home environments, defying the notion that these people belong to a static homogenous community. The warmth and empathy expressed in the ambient light in some of the images is sometimes interrupted by uncertainty of movement and melancholic tones to draw attention to the disorder within transnational households, a reflection of the physical and psychological spaces the subjects inhabit.

Figure 102a: Tammy Law, *Inside Out* from the photobook *Belonging in Motion* (2018)

Figure 102b: Tammy Law, *Buffalo New York*, from the photobook *Belonging in Motion* (2018)
‘A migrant’s sense of self is profoundly disoriented by their new surroundings’ (Hammerton & Thomson 2005, p.133), and it has been noted that ‘a personal predicament of unbelonging arises when individuals and groups are uprooted from their formative attachments’ (Ferguson et al. 1990, p. 8).

Literary theorist Edward Said (1999) helps contextualise the dissonance of living in two worlds simultaneously. His experience of growing up between worlds, as a Christian and a Palestinian, and ultimately an outsider, reflects the sense of fracture and estrangement expressed in Figure 69a, where photographer Pete Pin documents the disorientation of Cambodian refugees in places where large numbers of them have been resettled in the US (such as Philadelphia, Long Beach and the Bronx). As Cambodians look to strike a balance between adopting American customs and holding fast to values from home, they face the same struggles as many immigrant groups. Pin reiterates this sentiment in an interview: ‘I am culturally displaced and exist in this vacuum of identity where I don’t know what it means to be either fully American or Cambodian’ (Pin 2012). Pin documents the wedding of Molly Sopouk and Todd Prom in the Bronx, New York. The image addresses the struggle to maintain a cultural identity; the physical and cultural spaces inhabited by refugees and immigrants are both evident (Figure 103a). What is striking about this picture is the boundary or distance between the wedding couple and others, outlined by the rug where they are seated. A fractured sense of belonging is revealed throughout Pin’s series, often through the use of juxtaposition. The severed physical and cultural space of the diaspora community is realised in an invisible divide that Pin reinforces through dualistic and contrasting compositions, with viewers easily able to imagine the line that could be drawn down the centre of the image (Figure 103b). It was French philosopher Roland Barthes who originally recognised the existence of margins separating people. His studies demonstrate how the feelings of margins can be articulated through photography and how margins and borders can be actual, symbolic, visible or unseen (Cohen 1997).
Pin’s use of line and perspective are far more dynamic than the quietness of my own, perhaps this is because of the personal reference to his family trauma (Figure 104). There is a direct reference to news photography of the past, particularly in the use of distance between subject and photographer, throughout Cambodian Diaspora. Pin was born in a refugee camp after the Cambodian genocide, and in the mid-1980s, he immigrated to California as a refugee. His work is testament to the way he feels like an outsider in his own community:

“My parents idealised America. Growing up, I was only spoken to in English, and never picked up Khmer, the Cambodian language. I have always felt alienated from my Cambodian identity growing up” (Pin 2012).
This sentiment of cultural displacement and alienation has informed my practice and is reminiscent of the histories that have been expressed through the transnational families from Burma. This sense of displacement and replacement is an experience not only shared by someone like me, as an Australian-born Chinese growing up on the Sunshine Coast, but also by many of us who have journeyed between cultures, languages and places across different worlds. In recent years, there has been a tighter focus on the embodied way in which people actively engage with the world (Baubock & Faist 2010; Bird, Cox & Brough 2016; Edwards 2012; Feyder 2012; Khoo & Lo 2008; Pink 2015). In many cases, the emphasis is on how people feel ‘at home’, how people create a sense of familiarity and how they move around places and spaces. The ways in which migrants inhabit their houses abroad (possibly making them resemble ‘home’) are a major marker of the shifting boundaries and references of their belonging. Their simultaneous engagement with different housing settings ‘here’ and ‘there’ also reveals the complexity and ambivalence of home as a place, a set of intimate relationships and a central node in broader networks of relationships (Baldasser, Baldock & Wilding 2007; Carling 2014; Edwards 2012; Faria 2014; Tsolidis 2014). Figure 104 draws on Jean Wu and Jayanthi Mistry’s reinforcement of home as a site of navigation ‘across cultures as a multidimensional and dynamic process rather than as (a) static’ one (Mistry & Wu 2010, p. 12). The ominous shadow creates a tension and almost ominous divide, referencing anthropologist Wen-Chin Chang’s (2006) discourse about home, time and place amidst mobility, the ‘ongoing negotiation of their inner self with the external world across time and place’ (Chang 2006, p. 49).

6.4 CONCLUSION
Building on the previous chapter where I situate my work within the context of other visual practitioners, this chapter situates my work in relation to practitioners and theorists who examine home as a site of multiple belongings. The discussions are centred on transnational families who have moved from Burma/Myanmar and explain how projections were used to relocate a sense of belonging and home within the practice of photographing the families involved. I also delve into how the home can be a contested space where certain frictions or tensions are present. This reflection of disorientation, belonging or (un)belonging within multiple spaces, has informed the way I approach the multiplicity of home within my practice. This is an experience that is significant to not only those who have journeyed between cultures, languages and places across different worlds, but also within the broader discourse that informs the outcomes of practice based research that engages with these multiplicities.
CHAPTER 7: THE MATERIAL HOME—PHOTOGRAPHY AS ABSENCE AND PRESENCE

This chapter examines the experiences of absence and presence through the relationship between photography and materiality, delving deeper into the material nature of objects within domestic space. In the seminal text *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, French philosopher Roland Barthes observes that ‘every photograph is a certificate of presence’ (Barthes 1981, 2000, p. 85). Barthes is struck by the connection between absented forms of photographic representation and the presence of reality: ‘what the photograph produces to infinity has occurred only once; the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially’ (Volpe 2009, p. 16). According to Barthes, the represented forms refer to someone or something real, but that no longer exists, except in the photograph - the photograph is a kind of presence that exists through absence.

7.1 ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN THE EVERYDAY

A key aspect of what and how we remember is defined through the medium of photography, and calls to mind Barthes’ (1981, 2000) notion of the ‘punctum’ in *Camera Lucida* when he suggests that a photo can represent an event or person that is irrevocably lost, something that can never be regained. The image thus contains a punctum: an evocative quality that directly touches the viewer. Visual artist Nigel Shafran finds the ‘punctum’ in the everyday environments he selects to photograph. His images are a poetic response to traces of human presence (Figure 105a). In Shafran’s photographic series *Dad’s Office*, he invites investigation, initiated by the positioning of office furniture, papers and supplies in his father’s home office environment. Capturing the intimacies in his own home life (washing up, cluttered rooms, boxes piled on top of boxes, gunge at the back of the sink, etc.), Shafran’s work is about ‘preserving identity and quietly recording a process of change slowly unfolding through the ‘world inside’; a psychological as well as physical change, bound by a certain conscious effort and purpose: to impose, to create some kind of independence, form and meaning in the everyday (Chandler 2004).

Research on various forms of visual culture has been particularly important in work on material cultures within the home. Daniel Miller’s theory of things is based on things as being intangible and unclear, invisible and unremarked upon, a state they usually achieve by being familiar and taken for granted, as is evident in Shafran’s ‘domestic totems’ (Cotton 2014). Miller’s theory implies that much of what makes us what we are exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us. The kitchen dishes in Shafran’s series *Washing Up* create a totem of domesticity. With an understated viewpoint and use of ambient light, he transforms everyday scenes into poetic observations about the ways we conduct our lives through our unconscious acts of ordering, stacking and displaying objects (Figure 105b). Shafran resists constructing the scenes, as his is a
process of staying attuned to the possibilities of everyday subjects as a means of exploring our ways of life. Through photographs, we can come to understand not what is present, but what is missing. There is evidence of absence through what is seen in an image.

Figure 105a: Nigel Shafran, Dad’s Office (1997-1999)

Figure 105b: Nigel Shafran, Washing Up (1997-1999)
Like Shafran’s work, Figure 106 from my photobook explores how people leave traces of their lives, through the random, unconsidered placing of things. The forms people build arise in the context of their daily activities and, here demonstrated, is the way in which, spatiality, immateriality and practice intertwine. Absence is therefore, not just viewed in the objects and scenes represented, but exists within a broader discourse. I am attracted to Shafran’s work because of the way he plays with ideas of memory and loss, creating unique visual landscapes of the people portrayed through the objects they have left around. I think of photographs as evidence of both what is and what is not. The homes and spaces within my photographs are just as reflective of the people who are presented. Figure 106 draws on Barthes’ idea that what is no longer, but definitely what has been, is evident in the everyday spaces of transnational families. The shadows along the edge of the sink and consequently the frame create a vignette of absence, however within that absence is a felt or suggested presence of restriction or an underlying tension that could at any moment be broken. The grains of rice in the sink are a potent reminder of the everyday and the domestic space, how we are all the same.

![Figure 106: Tammy Law, *Sinking*, Toowoomba, Australia (2016)*](image)

Everyday environments are integral to knowing and understanding how difference is lived on the ground, allowing viewers to reflect on relationships within the material to gain a deeper understanding about the people in the images:
‘Across a range of disciplines and contexts, recent research has focused on the symbolic and material importance of the home in shaping and reproducing the ideologies, everyday practices and material cultures of diasporic resettlement’ (Blunt 2005, p. 505).

I present the domestic environments of the families I photograph in a way that enables the viewer to become a stakeholder in these people’s lives by immersing themselves in their spaces and the materiality of their environments and consequently, offer testimony to their stories. The enduring traditions of dislocation are signified in the placement of the towel that hangs on the window frame in Figure 107, which draws attention to the residents’ struggle to create a sense of permanence in their lives. The portrait of Jesus allows the viewer to draw reference to the strength in the faith of this family.

Figure 107: Tammy Law, Settling Unsettling, Oakland (2016)

In Thinking through Material Culture, archaeologist Carl Knappett draws on disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology and history to propose that the best way to understand the role of everyday objects is to ‘find ourselves inscribed “in” the object... (Knappett 2005, p. 169). If we consider Knappett’s theory in relation to Edmund Clark’s photographs in his series Control Order House where he documents a house where a man suspected of terrorist-related activity had been placed under a Control Order (Figure 108a & 108b). Throughout these images Clark is concerned with “how photographers make work about unseen experiences” (Clark in British Journal of Photography
2017). Though the subject never physically appears in the images he is present through the ‘traces of his absence’ (Clark 2011, p 293). There are possessions littered throughout the spaces, but no human form. What the viewers see are ‘objects and spaces that are testimony and history: to a government responding to the chaos of a terror threat from within; to the faceless control of an oppressive regime; to justified measures to protect us from them; to the quasi punishment and mental abuse of a man held without charge’ (Clark 2011, p. 293). These images ‘move the conversation on photography beyond photography’s capacity and ability as a literal index, into the realm of the subjective and emotional ability the photograph demonstrates as a legitimate social agent for what is and could be’ (Romanek 2015, p. 271).

Figure 108a: Edmund Clark, from the series Control Order House (2015)
In Liu Jie’s photographs, the idea of inscribing ourselves in the material becomes more literal through the reuniting of family members photographically: parents at a construction site or sausage factory stand beside towering portraits of their children back home, that create a visual contrast—a collision of rural and urban. ‘The most obvious material interventions between the private and the public are perhaps windows, windowsills, doors, and their decoration that takes place at the “boundary,” referring to the inside and outside of the home simultaneously (Garvey 2005; Dohmen 2004). We can draw reference to Clark’s (2015) exploration of ‘how an unseen materiality of the “internal” sphere also builds relationships with the outside’ between the window in Figure 108a & 108b that acts as a barrier that situates us within the present and Liu’s use of the square as a window that bridges the familial separation of a family member—a mother, father, son or daughter—uprooted from their home because of economic migration (Figure 109).
Photography is ‘a medium where distance and absence are inherent properties’ (Lum 2017, p. 111), however the banal, mundane or everyday structures, spaces and environments need deeper consideration when investigating how the objects and materials we possess and surround ourselves with, can offer great insights into who we are. What not is seen and the dynamics between materials within the everyday can be integral to understanding histories, memories and present experiences.

7.2 OBJECTS OF MIGRATION

The deployment of cultural objects in the spaces of home, which indigenous migrants construct if/once they manage to reach new countries of settlement, are significant material cultural artifacts employed in migrant efforts to fashion home as an indigenous place (Barenboim 2018). Geographer, Divya Tolia-Kelly examines artefacts in the homes of Asian women in the UK. She traces religious and cultural artefacts, seeing them as ‘echoes of other textures of landscapes, narratives and social histories and argues that they help situate diasporic groups in relation to their national identity’ (Tolia-Kelly 2003, pp.
326–327). Drawing on interviews, tours of the home and discussions about especially significant objects, Tolia-Kelly shows that geographies of home extend far beyond the household, charting routes and connections between the past and the present and across diasporic space. Marrigje de Maar reinforces this idea through the photographs of cultural artefacts within home interiors that form a kind of portrait of identity. De Maar is concerned with culture's link with the past as is evident in her most recent series, *Home Made*. She chooses Japan as her place of investigation—far removed from her own Dutch culture, to reinforce the concept of home as a place that we all migrate to and from on a daily basis via an amalgamation of rituals performed through practices in everyday living spaces or rooms (Figure 110).

Figure 110: Marrigje de Maar, *Aomori – Video Room* (2006)

The creation of communal relations is evident in *A Migrant’s Tale* by Tanya Houghton where the photographed objects explore the biographies from what used to be home, and the need to reconstitute them abroad. The objects themselves become mobile through transnational migrations as people living through movement ‘take networks of home with them, and find opportunities for dwelling on the move. Networks of objects become mobile networks of home’ (Hui 2015, p. 542). Migrant
homes are therefore not just about consistent network relations, but also about how networks change, adapt and vary over time and space. In this way, like things themselves, networks of people and materiality’s are enacted, contingent, assembled and disassembled (Gregson et al. 2010). The visual collection of objects here are significant ideas of home and nostalgia, from the perspective of the migrant families involved, that is told through the language of food (Figure 111a & 111b).

Moving allows for a kind of critical realignment of people with their possessions. The process of moving also allows people to construct their personal biography as represented in memories of associated objects, the sense a family might have of itself. Certain relationships with other people are discarded along with the objects that memorialised them, while others come to the fore and are used prominently to decorate a new home. For example, Figure 112 where the Karen flag sits beside the beckoning lucky cat charm, bordered by a holographic image of a cat bought from the local discount store. Though these objects may seem absurd or out of place, they bring to the forefront the ‘owner’s attachment to the physical environment (she) inhabits as (she) brings personal possessions to the home that express her identity’ (Helle 2010, p. 58). The cat resembles luck and the Karen flag her ethnic identity – the Karen being a group who have been persecuted in Myanmar.
Home is a concept that consists of complex social and spatial politics. However, only conditions such as those generated by international migration bring it to the fore as a unique source of attachments, desires, needs and dilemmas. Migration entails both an annihilation of one’s previous domestic spaces and a range of attempts to recover them. As is true for countless people from Burma, having survived forced displacement and relocation as well as ongoing assimilation pressures, homes take on additional dimensions of meaning that are guided by varying theoretical frameworks. One of these is the idea of home that ‘builds on difference and similarity, the duality of cultural identity’ (Hadjiyanni & Helle 2010), this premise draws energy from both material and immaterial dimensions and the fact that when it comes to supporting cultural traditions and fostering temporal connections between dislocated pasts, present and future residential environments are the sites of many cultural practices that forge social memory (Joyce & Gillespie 2000). Examples include activities such as gathering with friends and family to share stories from the past, practising religious customs and traditions and decorating using colours, textures, and objects that create a preferred aesthetic (Hadjiyanni & Helle 2010).

There is a particular aesthetic, as well as the way in which people embody these spaces that is consistently evident throughout the homes of resettled families from Burma in both the refugee camps and within resettled domestic spaces, as shown in Figure 113a and 113b. Links to residents left behind or a person’s original home are as diverse as their journeys to resettled countries, and because of this, communal and shared spaces can become vital factors that facilitate inclusion. For Karen families, the
floor is the preferred space for communal gatherings. Community meetings, prayer, sharing food and watching Ellen DeGeneres on daytime television, the floor is a space that contributes to creating a collective sense of togetherness both ‘home’ and ‘away’.

Through tactile and visual engagements with objects in diasporic spaces, there is an instilled sense of connecting, in several aspects. Practices such as the decorating of houses; the use and design of the
spaces within the home; the mobile materials collected through travel and the placement of images within the home, can be understood as central to families living through transition.

7.3 PLACING PHOTOGRAPHS IN TRANSNATIONAL SPACE

Visual sociologist Patricia Prieto-Blanco examines the placement of photography within domestic space. She has conducted empirical investigations into Spanish-Irish family homes, with the question: how do transnational families use photographs? Her studies show that families use photography to generate spaces of (inter)action to create realms of experience by both mediating presences and bestowing spaces with meaning. She suggests that ‘the interaction with photographs across these spaces contribute to creating family histories, bonds of affection, and ultimately intimacy, in spite of distances apart’ (Prieto-Blanco 2016, p.11). The ties between photographs and family histories are explored through De Maar’s image of Palaga’s Bed, where the photographs displayed on the wall ‘form a presence from which subsequent generations can understand their family histories’ (Lum 2017, p. 111) (Figure 114).

These fluid and dynamic ‘spaces of interaction’ between photographs in transnational family homes is evident throughout the domestic spaces of the families I photographed. Here, photographs within diasporic spaces do not merely represent themselves in their homes in the form of a static relationship
as, people do not just move homes, sometimes they move countries. Images of loved ones, certificates, medallions and religious relics are pasted onto the walls as testament to pieces of shared identity (Figure 115a & 115b). In Figure 81a the relationship between the schooling achievements and photographs that are scattered along the wall reflect present relationships and moments of pride, rather than memories far from here. The placement of the flag in relation to the religious proverbs and photographs of family members bridge certain relationships between geographies and chronologies.

Placing photographs as objects in an assemblage of other objects and spaces is integral to the work surrounding photographs and our relations with them (Figure 115a). The process of ‘placing’ (the placing of photographs appropriately into wider assemblages) is well demonstrated in Figure 115b where the placing of the photograph becomes a statement of its social importance and efficacy, because it carries a sense of the placing within social relations.

Figure 115a: Tammy Law, Scattered, Victoria, Australia 2016.
Sometimes people will wish to stand witness, sometimes, after a lapse of time, people may feel the need to recollect, to bring out memories or mementoes that make possible a present–past, ‘but sometimes it may be important to simply acknowledge the silent places, the spaces of absence’ (Ballard in Tilley et. al 2006 p. 310). Particularly central to my argument is that a photograph is a moment, positive or negative, mundane or sensational, that someone has lived through—it is their presence and, simultaneously, their absence. Migrants’ everyday life is a privileged terrain from which to make sense of home. It brings to the fore a range of emotions, practices and living arrangements that mirror the need to recreate home anew, dynamically, rather than regarding it as a static and a full-fledged identification with one particular dwelling place. At the same time, migrants’ life experience can be investigated to assess how far the home experience relies on a specific place, is potentially transferrable elsewhere and draws on interpersonal relationships as much as material settings. Photographs are objects whose social efficacy is premised on their shifting roles and meanings as they are projected into different spaces to do different things. On one register, presence is embedded in the photograph. It is traced into the very materiality of photographs, into their chemistry and, now, their algorithms.

7.4 CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter I have discussed how absence and presence is inherent to photography and how the materiality of objects within the home can become poetic references to daily experience when
reinforced through photography. I have also demonstrated how the relationship between the placements of photographs of family members in home spaces can contain forms of transnational bonds and activate further understandings of displaced experiences. The photography of spaces, everyday objects and activities constantly in flux and in transition are integral to the broader discourse around absence within which my practice sits, as they demonstrate the way in which, spatiality, immateriality and practice intertwine.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

I began this thesis and practice-based project exploring the following research questions:

How does documentary photographic practice renegotiate and advance our understandings of the lived experiences of absence and presence of transnational families from Burma?

How can visual research methodologies that act as a bridge between practice-based and text-based cultures engage in experiences of migration that expand our understandings of the dualities between freedom and dislocation, identity and assimilation, loneliness and belonging?

Throughout the thesis I have responded to these questions through the development of specific photo essays that are contextualised within the boundaries of personal history to advance general traditions that reoccur within self-reflective documentary photographic practice about the multidimensional complexities of being a refugee. Away From Home situates my photographic practice in the context of other visual practitioners and theorists to advance understandings of ‘the other’ and the multiplicities of home, through its contribution 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, to reveal the unseen and unspoken and deeper encapsulate experience. Throughout this research project photographs of objects within the home; portraits of those families who inhabit these transnational spaces and projections of past imagery onto environments that are in transition, become poetic references to demonstrate the absence that pervades photography, but also the absence that pervades these family’s experiences of displacement.

When placed in relation to the other components of this project, the photobook offers a more intimate context for people to engage with personal stories of presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, belonging and displacement in relation to home. The mobile nature of the photobook is therefore significant to the decision behind the photobook Belonging in Motion as the central outcome of this project, which seeks to make an original contribution in the following ways:

- Bringing new perspectives to tacit knowledge by recognising the constant shifting, changing or emerging processes shaped by research—the people, environment and conversations. The photographs of material artifacts in domestic spaces provide insights into how these families experience belonging and displacement, permanence and impermanence, which help us negotiate and understand the world within which they inhabit. The images also deconstruct, reconstruct and reveal the importance of absence and presence in an investigation of multiple homes and belongings, which intervene in lived experiences of transnational families from Burma. I have argued for the material and immaterial significance of domestic environments and objects and how, when dispersed or displaced by migration, these spaces take on a
greater significance and meaning in the construction and identification of home and belonging. I have attempted this by using my photographic practice to explore the sense of disconnection or unhomeliness arising from the experiences of refugees from Burma.

- Contributing 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) practice in the field of visual ethnography. Engaging in experiences of migration that move beyond representations of suffering and highlights the significance in gaining small but important insights into what difference feels like when lived on the ground.

In relation to the practical components of this project, this thesis foregrounds issues and conversations between photography and the school of social science and humanities relating to the concept of home through visual interpretations of phenomena surrounding the refugee experience. 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 experience: between freedom and dislocation, identity and assimilation, loneliness and belonging, through the everyday experiences of families from Burma.
APPENDICES

Burma Untold, 2014.
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Away From Home, fortyfivedownstairs Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, March/April 2017.
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Away From Home, Maud Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, August/September 2017.
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Away From Home, Maud Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, August/September 2017.
Example of Interview Questions.

When did you arrive in Australia.

Where is home?

Do you have family in other countries?

What were your first impressions of Australia?

Is there a country that you feel you are most at home?

What was your journey like to Australia?

Was support offered when you arrived?

How did you find work?

Was there an existing community when you arrived?

Were you mistreated or have you been mistreated – socially, work…

How have you changed?

How has life changed?

Did you have a vision of what the country would be like? Or did you have a vision for the future?

Or dreams?

What was familiar and what was unfamiliar?

How have your traditions, religion, politics belief changed?
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 catch the train or the bus.

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.

Interview with LMP, Queensland, Australia, June 2016.
I have four sisters and one brother.

19 years old now. Turning 11 when I arrived in Brisbane.

Some of mums family are still in Burma. I've just met ¾ of them. They live in a village. We lived in Tham Hin refugee camp.

I came when I was in Grade 4. Most of my friends are Australian. Just me and my sisters were Karen.

I wanted to go back even as a refugee. Here we don't have a car.

Now I will go back but not stay.

There were less than 10 families when we arrived.

Interview with EK, Queensland, Australia, November 2016.
Interview with RB, Minnesota, New York State, USA, 2011.

[Came to America in] August 2000 – [Arrived in] Minnesota. 107 rocket + 75 carried – [son killed in a] mortar blast – plan [to go to] 3rd country. [We lived in] Kanchanaburi – [There was] no international support. Houses and churches [would be burnt]. [Soldiers] would rape our daughters. 4 + 5 man teams can manage a line of 100. It was exciting first time we heard guns – boring here! [I watch the] military channel here. We hate war. I hate war. We have to fight. In 1989 a mortar hit my shoulder. 1 year recovery. Psalm 23 + 27 + 91 are my bullet proof. The monks they love you. They gave me a bullet proof on my back [speaking about tattoos]. Ever God dies. Soldier dies once. There are many soldiers here but they have family, children. Like the American civil war the red Indians didn’t want to fight. [They wanted to be] free. No discrimination. Not happy. My people are not free. Karen American. [Now I work] nightshift. 8 hours. $10 per hour. My wrists are swollen. 63 years old. Interpreter good income. “Pu” means grandfather. I get credit from my people.
My idea of home?

If I was a bird I would fly back to Burma to die.

Wife can’t work because of arthritis and tumours.

I was involved in the 1988 student protests. I was in the student army.

Met my wife in the village while I was a soldier.

Villagers there were treated less than slaves.

I work two jobs. Manager in warehouse that makes wires and cook and kitchen hand in a Chinese restaurant.
Example of Interview Questions.

What have you gained by moving here?

What have you lost by moving here?

The American Dream is...
Good thing: friends, better school, cool things.

Bad thing: Miss, aunt, uncle, grandpa, and grandma.

Dream: To be an Engineer.
"Aung San Suu Kyi"

one of my dreams is to see Burma change into a democratic government so that innocent peoples are not being killed by the Burmese military army. Personally, my dream is to live with a happy family and have a stable job that would provide enough income.
My name is [Name protected for privacy].

I don't know what I am going to be in the future. Maybe helping orphans if I can. I came here when I was 3.

I have been here for 7 years and came here from Thailand.

I am in 4th grade going into 5th.

Now I am turning 8.

My birthday is 8/29/10.

I have gained lots of knowledge and I have lost some friends.
1. Gain more opportunity, have more freedom if I can't compare life in the Refugee camp.

2. Sometimes I felt lost because of the language.
   my dream is to have my own business and live with my family.

Name protected for privacy.

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We always had to fear the Burmese soldiers would attack us in the camp and we feared the Thai authorities would put us in jail if they caught us at outside of the camp. We were traumatized.

I received some education when I was in the camp and finished year 10 in 2004. After grade 10, I had nothing to do because there were no higher education available for my future. I spent over nine year in the camp.

In 2005, I got an opportunity to resettle in Australia. It was very exciting to come here and start a new chapter of my life. It wasn’t easier than I thought to start a new life in a different environment and adopt another culture. Language barrier was my first challenge. For my entire life, I spent on in the jungle and refugee camp so I didn’t know what the city life was like. I was struggling to learn new language, don’t know how to catch public transport. No knowledge of using electricity and never seen a tall building before. We didn’t know how to access the service that available for us. For extra support therefore, we faced a lot of difficulties. After two years of living here, my English was a lot improved so I would able to help my parents and other friends.

In 2009, the 31st of January. I got an Australian citizen. It was a special day for me that never be forgotten. I’m so proud to be a citizen here because in my life, I was never recognized by any country before. I used to be a stateless that now I belong to Australia. I have been in Australia ten years and I was able to go back to my previous camp in Thailand three times already.

Written Statement, 2016.
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