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EYES

FABULATING ABYA YALA

By Margarita V. Beltran

There is a wound that runs through the center of the earth, a wound that echoes in my mind, in my bones, in the history of the occupied lands of Abya Yala, a generational wound that breathes and hurts, a wound that I intend to give space to, not to close, a wound that perhaps deserves to be open forever, to remind us of that time when Europe ended the world 500 years ago.

We are in the year 502 according to the indigenous people of the Yucatan peninsula. The calendar is demarcated in a before and after the colonization of the Spanish crown, an invasion that implied an apocalypse for the indigenous societies of the territories of Abya Yala (called as America by the settler colonizers) and that implied a cultural and social genocide of the cultures that lived in those territories where the population diminished by 90% and the death toll may have reached around 70 million native inhabitants out of 80 million.

That is why indigenous peoples consider themselves living in a post-apocalyptic world, as well as the communities from the black african diaspora or the Jewish holocaust. Their practices of caring and survivorship are rooted in the resistance of their culture, ones that are in compass with nature and collectivity. The wisdom of post-apocalyptic societies is timely and relevant for the moment of crisis we face in the western world. The effects of the Western neoliberal economy are devastating, the decrease in natural resources on the planet, the accelerated loss of biodiversity, the rise of extreme right ideologies, and the climate crisis among others, worries much when considering that the solutions proposed by the western apparatus are given in the framework of a system of structural racism where only the countries of the global North have any chance of survival.

According to Yannick Giovanni Marshall, academic and scholar of African Studies, "If there is to be any future, which means a future of humanity, a future of species continuing and not always under the threat of nazism, of climate catastrophe, of nuclear war, facism, etc. If there is a future worth living, it would be a future that is non western. The west has proven that it is incapable, even after colonialism, even after the holocaust, it has not divorced itself from the things that brought about white supremacy and the logic of people being worthy of destruction everywhere. And so, if we want to live in a world where people aren't just assumed to be disposable, we can not live in a world that is led by the west because that has been a central tenet of western power. That the colonized people, the colonized countries, colonize thoughts can be thrown away and supplanted with a non diverse western unilinear way of thinking. Colonized poverty, colonized subjugation, benefits the west, and so it is not so much that they have accidentally forced us into subjugation, itis written into the logic of Western world supremacy for there to be colonized subjugation and the removal of profits, of materials, raw materials and intellectual materials, from the colonized world into the coffers of the west. There needs to be

an alternative to Western world hegemony and that in the wake of Western dominance all sorts of life can exist just not by being in the stranglehold of capitalism and colonialism anymore. You would have new forms of life, but it might look like indigenous voices that are not relegated to museums and history books might actually say something about what new forms of social relationships can exist. Black people who are not targeted and put on the lower rungs of white supremacies racial hierarchies, our black radical thought may actually say something about a way forward, rather than it being something to be studied in the margins. The world would look like a world that does not have an addiction to the destruction of marginalized and colonized people. Obviously if society is worthwhile, society would involve the protection of people historically targeted. And so a future, if there is supposed to be a future that is not of destruction and the third wave or fourth wave of nazism then it is a future that is non western"

This worldview is what I am interested in observing in detail and contextualizing in the now, to review our present from the critical lens of decolonial theory and the world in crisis in which we find ourselves as a Western society. It is necessary to look at the west with the eyes of the tiger, to expose in order to criticize it and make visible its unviability as a cultural and epistemic promise of a future world.

We must give way to other philosophical and cultural experiences outside the western world, spaces demarcated by a lifestyle that does not threaten life, nature and humanity. As author and scholar Kiera Brant-Birioukov puts it, "a turn to Indigenous knowledge and practices of innovation in education is promising. Despite the perceived irrelevance of Indigenous knowledge in our modern, fast-paced world, Indigenous knowledge has proven to be responsive to crises, grief, and renewal. Indigenous cultures, languages, governance, and teachings have survived—not despite colonization but due to complex and responsive knowledge systems that dared to innovate in the face of colonization. There are many lessons to be learned."



Colonization and photography

"Indigenous research embraces culturally *specific discourses that root research methodologies in the ILK, cultural practices, worldviews, values, and practices of often formerly colonized societies, whose knowledge has been excluded from discourses related to knowledge production*"

The historic and ideological reason for visibility is fundamental to understanding the discipline of photography and the photographic practice as an exercise of power; where the individual who takes the photo, the photographer, has historically possessed power over the subject (often objectified) in front of the camera. The photographer holds the power to look at them, to name them, to blaspheme them and to contain them in an image. It is also known that this power has been kept in a very particular circle of subjects: white cisgender European-American western men. Whom, through their lenses, have perpetuated a one-sided, stereotypical, sometimes racist, sometimes sexist, sometimes dehumanizing view of their subjects. In the context of the photography industry, the ideological paradigm of visibility remains in place and can be tracked ideologically, technologically, economically making it a systemic problem that needs to be denounced and rioted.

What is the ideological problem?

The gaze built on photography was based on the modern project of the colonization of Abya Yala. Visualization was made as a technological weapon to control and exercise power, as Nicolas Mirzoeff mentions "Visuality's first domains were the slave plantation, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign. This sovereign surveillance was reinforced by violent punishment but sustained a modern division of labor. Visualizing was next the hallmark of the modern general from the late eighteenth-century onward, as the battlefield became too extensive and complex for any one person to physically see. Working on information supplied by subalterns—the new lowest-ranked officer class created for this purpose—and his own ideas and images, the general in modern warfare, as practiced and theorized by Karl von Clausewitz, was responsible for visualizing the battlefield. At this moment, in 1840, visibility was named as such in English by the historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) to refer to what he called the tradition of heroic leadership, which visualizes history to sustain autocratic authority." Visuality gave modernity the capacity to impose, control and colonize territories, peoples and epistemologies by claiming the right to look "The ancient Greek historian Herodotus tells us that the Scythians of antiquity blinded their slaves. As the Scythians were horse-riding nomads, modern historians have concluded that this practice was designed to prevent the slaves from escaping. It cannot but also suggest that slavery is the removal of the right to look. The blinding makes a person a slave and removes the possibility of regaining

the status of a free person. While chattel slavery did not physically blind the enslaved, its legal authority now policed even their imagination, knowing that their labor required looking. For example, in the British colony of Jamaica the enslaved were forbidden even to "imagine the death of any white Person. In the North American context, "reckless eyeballing," a simple looking at a white person, especially a white woman or person in authority, was forbidden to those classified as "colored" under Jim Crow. Such looking was held to be both violent and sexualized in and of itself, a further intensification of the policing of visibility. As late as 1951, a farmer named Matt Ingram was convicted of the assault of a white woman in North Carolina because she had not liked the way he looked at her from a distance of sixty-five feet.30

This monitoring of the look has been retained in the U.S. prison system so that, for example, detainees in the Abu Ghraib phase of the war in Iraq (2003-4) were forcefully told, "Don't eyeball me" Such connotations of the visual and the right to look are still on place in current times in which practices of othering, orientalism, extractivism and appropriation are still taking place in photographic practices in the academia, in the news media outlets, museums and all spaces where photography is produced and shown in the western world.

What is the technological problem?

With the creation of diverse technological advances came the problematic racial bias built into photography, as scholar Sara Lewis explains "Photography is not just a system of calibrating light, but a technology of subjective decisions. Light skin became the chemical baseline for film technology, fulfilling the needs of its target dominant market. For example, developing color-film technology initially required what was called a Shirley card. When you sent off your film to get developed, lab technicians would use the image of a white woman with brown hair named Shirley as the measuring stick against which they calibrated the colors. Quality control meant ensuring that Shirley's face looked good...it took complaints from corporate furniture and chocolate manufacturers in the 1960s and 1970s for Kodak to start to fix color photography's bias, meaning that technology wasn't and isn't accessible for people of color even today. Researchers such as Joy Buolamwini of the MIT Media Lab have been advocating to correct the algorithmic bias that exists in digital imaging technology. You see it whenever dark skin is invisible to facial recognition software. The same technology that misrecognizes individuals is also used in services for loan decisions and job interview searches. Yet, algorithmic bias is the end stage of a longstanding problem" Therefore expanding photography and creating hybrid spaces for learning possess a challenge as AI or VR technology comes with a series of problems as they have been built upon biased parameters, leaving people of color, women and disabled people with a disadvantage that can play a role in how technology identifies, denies or approaches such communities.

Decolonization as epistemic answer

Only within recent decades, with the inclusion of photographers, editors and gallery owners of color and/or from the global south, the debate of the paradigm of visibility has been possible. The intrinsic practices of the photographic discipline require a decolonization process that urgently needs space in German academia. Especially considering that alternatives and counter histories of the world have existed since decades ago but haven't had any space or very marginal spaces in the German scenario and thus require visibilization as examples of good practices in photography. The proposal: Topia as learning space
The learning object: A PHOTOGRAPH

The project decolonizing eyes is a proposal for the creation of an educational hybrid platform in topia (<https://topia.io/clay>), an online space fabulated as a counter proposal where indigenous and decolonial knowledge are at the center of learning methods in the photography field. We will combine the use of different technological tools that through Augmented reality, virtual reality and the interactive platform allow us to think around the object photography through different layers and to contextualize, critique and propose counter histories.

What can we learn from pictures that haven't been made? How can photography build a bridge between different communities? How can photography help decolonization processes? How can photography teach us to reflect in our own biases and our gaze to the world?, How can photography propose counter gazes?, How can photography help us position ourselves and understand our privileges and struggles?, How can we become allies through photography?, How can BiPOC students find a voice through photography?

The educational proposal aims to challenge students to deconstruct the normalized violence embedded in the photography industry and academia and to propose other forms of engagement with photographic practice, to engage in hybrid spaces for critical thinking, self reflection and anti-racism training for students that are eager to critique their own bias, stereotipations, to problematized their practices in order to create allyship and sustainable practices within the photographic field.

Careful and conscious of technology, a project of this realm needs to be critical and thoughtful about how to use technology and what purpose does it serve to mobilize digital tools in a context of global warming and tragedies and apocalypse. do not decontextualized or dematerialized but moreover serve as a link in between imagination of possible futures and the reality we live in, understanding that there are several different realities we live, the decolonial space is also meant to be a space for error where students reflect on their own biases and mistakes. What would this space look like?

The fabulation "decolonizing eyes" looks like as a collective community garden based

on the projects of urban gardens that exist in many cities today. The garden serves as a metaphor for cultivating discussions, questions and exercises together and harvesting knowledge and reflections from participants.

Aesthetically, the fabulation allows for the integration of cultures of the global majority, including aesthetics consolidated as cultural practices from the global south. Music, dance, photo exercises and research tools will be integrated into the Fabulation.

There is a lobby or reception in the entrance point of the fabulation that will allow readers, users and collaborators to get familiar with the space and introduce them to the different tools accessible to them.

The fabulation space can be accessed by stages in which certain spaces remain private and it depends on the progress of the students in their decolonization practice, whether they are ready to access more exercises or resources or spaces in the world.

What are the tools to be used?

Topia platform

The fabulation in the topia platform will be the main tool of the project where I will create a garden of learning exercises, resources, and ambiances through the photographic object. Students will have the possibility to add their processes into the platform and readers will have the possibility to play and interact with the different audio visual tools and VR tools inserted in the fabulation.

Learning Exercises

A series of exercises that can be developed by students with the aim to build critical thinking skills to decolonize and position themselves. Every class a new text will bring the possibility to tackle a problem through an exercise.

Online collaborative research

During the course of the project students will have access and will work as collaborators of the research platform are.na where the readings for the class will be accessible to them as well as references, images, comments and other resources. <https://www.are.na/margarita-v-beltran/decolonize-photography-bauhaus-class-2022> as a collaborative platform students will be asked to actively comment and add resources to the platform that can be useful for their collective and individual processes.

Lecturers

A series of invited lecturers that will present their projects with students in the class and which presentations will be recorded and embedded in the topia platform to then serve as an educational tool for future students using the topia space.



Information



VIEW MAP

www.museum.gov.sg
MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE
200, NORTH BRIDGE ROAD
SINGAPORE 178872

Write a short text and record an audio answering the following questions: what is your name, your gender, your ethnicity, your social class, your family status, your educational background. For each category, create a picture that describes it focusing on the advantages or disadvantages of the experience. Think and write: What did it mean to grow up in my social class? Have I ever thought about my ethnicity before? Do I get questioned about my ethnicity often? Is my gender well represented in the photography industry? Are the majority of established photographers in my country sharing my same educational background?

Positioning through images



I'm Mégane. It feels weird introducing myself as non-binary to people that I don't know yet. Feels weird that it is, after my name, the first thing that I have to disclose. But I can't play pretend, so I choose to take the bet you could learn something from me being out. The first picture is a self-portrait I took two years ago, as I started to explore my gender identity with new glasses on. Femininity has always felt like some kind of masquerade, a comfort zone I can't fully leave, up until this day. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy it in many ways. But I struggle too. I often feel unseen, misunderstood and misread. Femmeness gives me privileges but leaves me feeling invisible. Becoming visible is scary. Talking about gender to non-queer strangers is scary, but I guess I'm taking the leap.



I am a white person but most of my family does experience racism. My mother was born in Vietnam, from a french father and a vietnamese mother. Most of my grandmother's family migrated to Europe during the war in the 60's. I never get asked about my ethnicity, though people do comment on it when they find out about my asian roots. Racism almost never impacted me directly but witnessing what it did to close ones forced me to deal with the subject. The second picture suggests a smooth surface, smooth patterns, a smooth path overall. My ethnicity is something I never had to think about much. I do have white privilege but my family's story brings some knots to the whole picture.



I am a single parent, which means my daily life basically revolves and articulates itself around care work. It is a hard job as we all know. It takes up a lot of time and resources. I don't get much support from my family since they all live in France, but I am working towards building a strong support system thanks to my lovely friends and other loved ones. Building community and care networks gives me life, this is where I get most of my energy from. This third picture feels heavy to me. It shows my child struggling. I feel very helpless seeing it, very lonely. I often think my shoulders aren't strong enough to carry the full weight of another human being, but we're getting there step by step.

pictures and text by

Mégane Degas



I would say I come from a lower middle-class. My parents both studied. Though they both struggled with unemployment, I never doubted the fact that there was enough there for them to provide for me and my brother. As we moved out, my mother paid our rents. We could study. We never had to worry about not eating enough, not having enough. I used to think we struggled, and we kind of did in a way, but I've come to realize we were very privileged in that area too. This last picture suggests some kind of net on the floor. A safety net, or a network, growing as I walk through life.

MAYBE GEOFFREY IS A BAD GUY TOO



"We often assume machines are neutral, but they aren't. My research uncovered large gender and racial bias in AI systems sold by tech giants like IBM, Microsoft, and Amazon. Given the task of guessing the gender of a face, all companies performed substantially better on male faces than female faces."

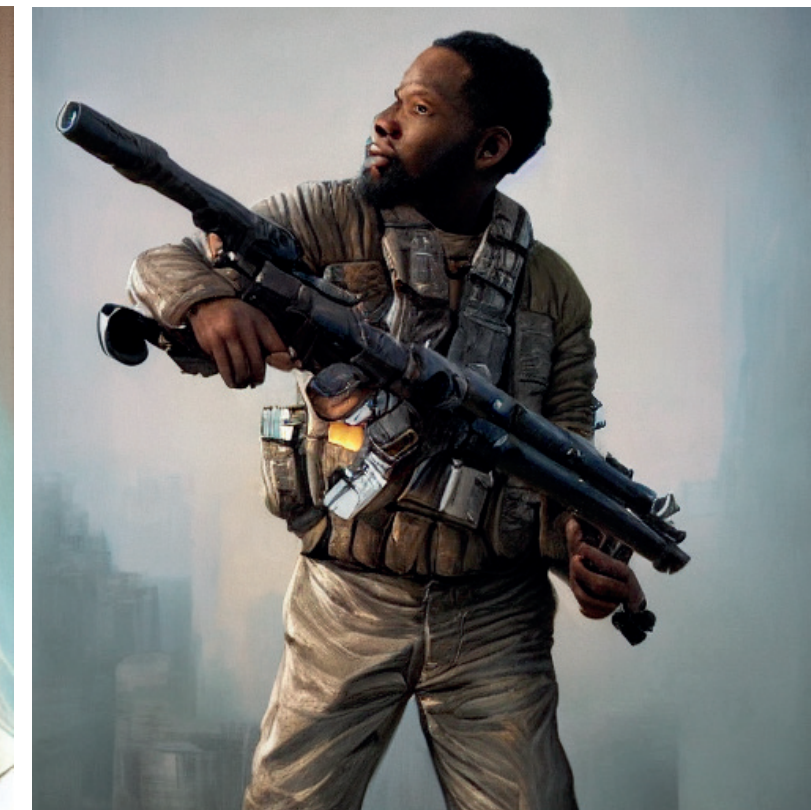
Joy Buolamwini



prompts by Megane Degas



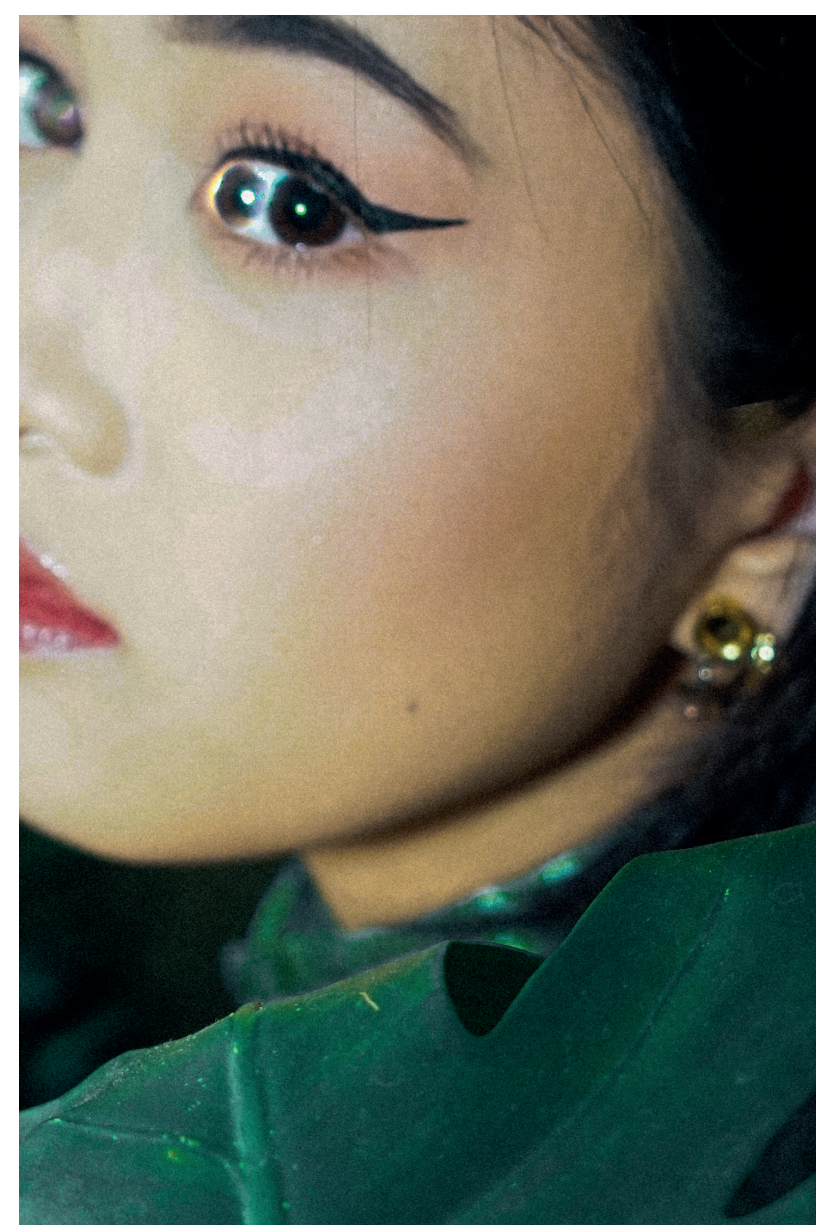
emma-could-be-the-bad-guy-as-well-



deshawn-is-not-a-criminal-cinematic-4k-epic-steven-spielberg-movie-still-sharp-focus-



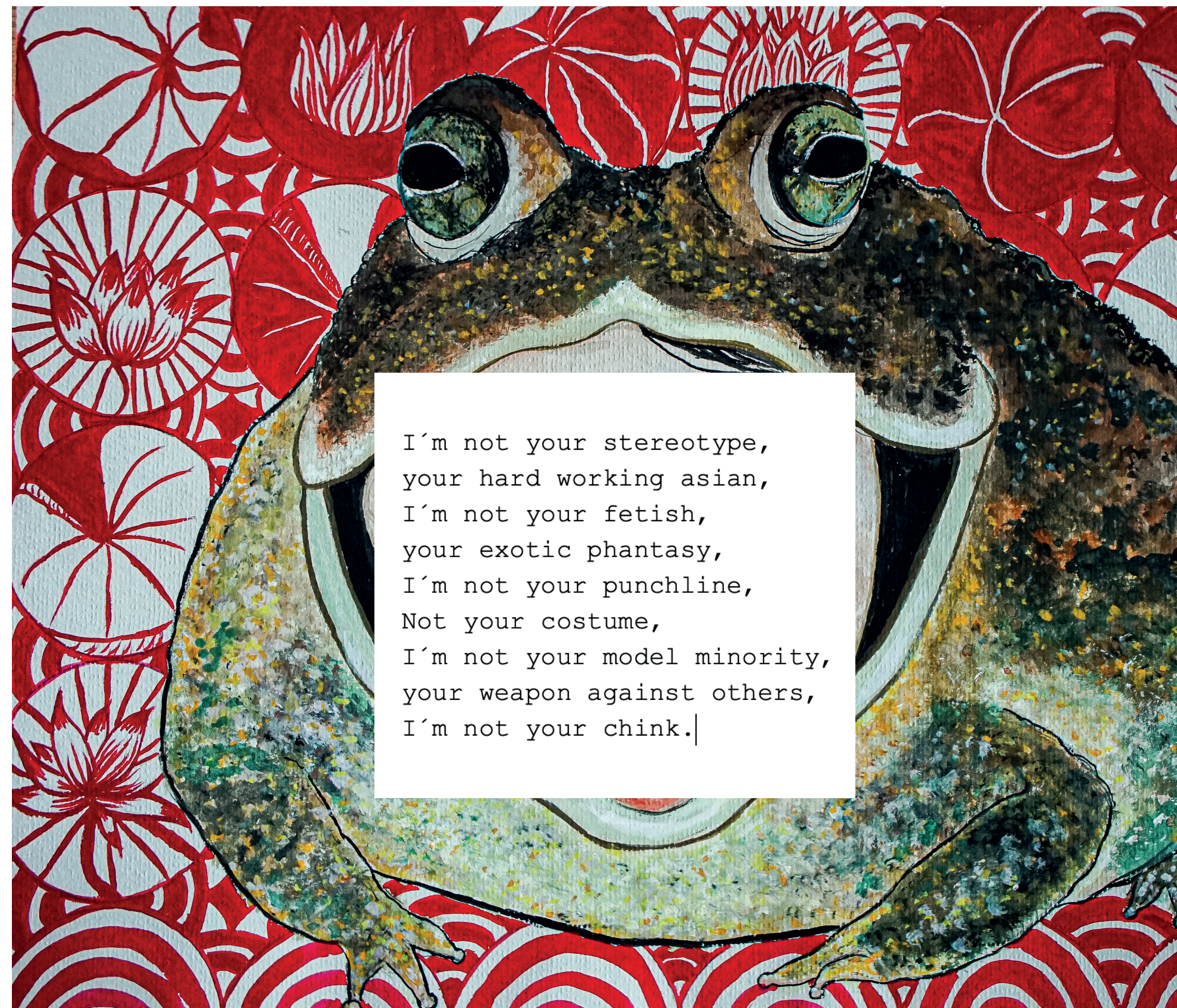
jermaine-doesnt-have-to-be-the-bad-guy-



(Go, to come back home) When was the last time you saw your family back in Vietnam? Are you able to speak with your parents in your language? Do you feel like your personality is shaped by your racial identification? What does it mean for young Asians to live in a diaspora?

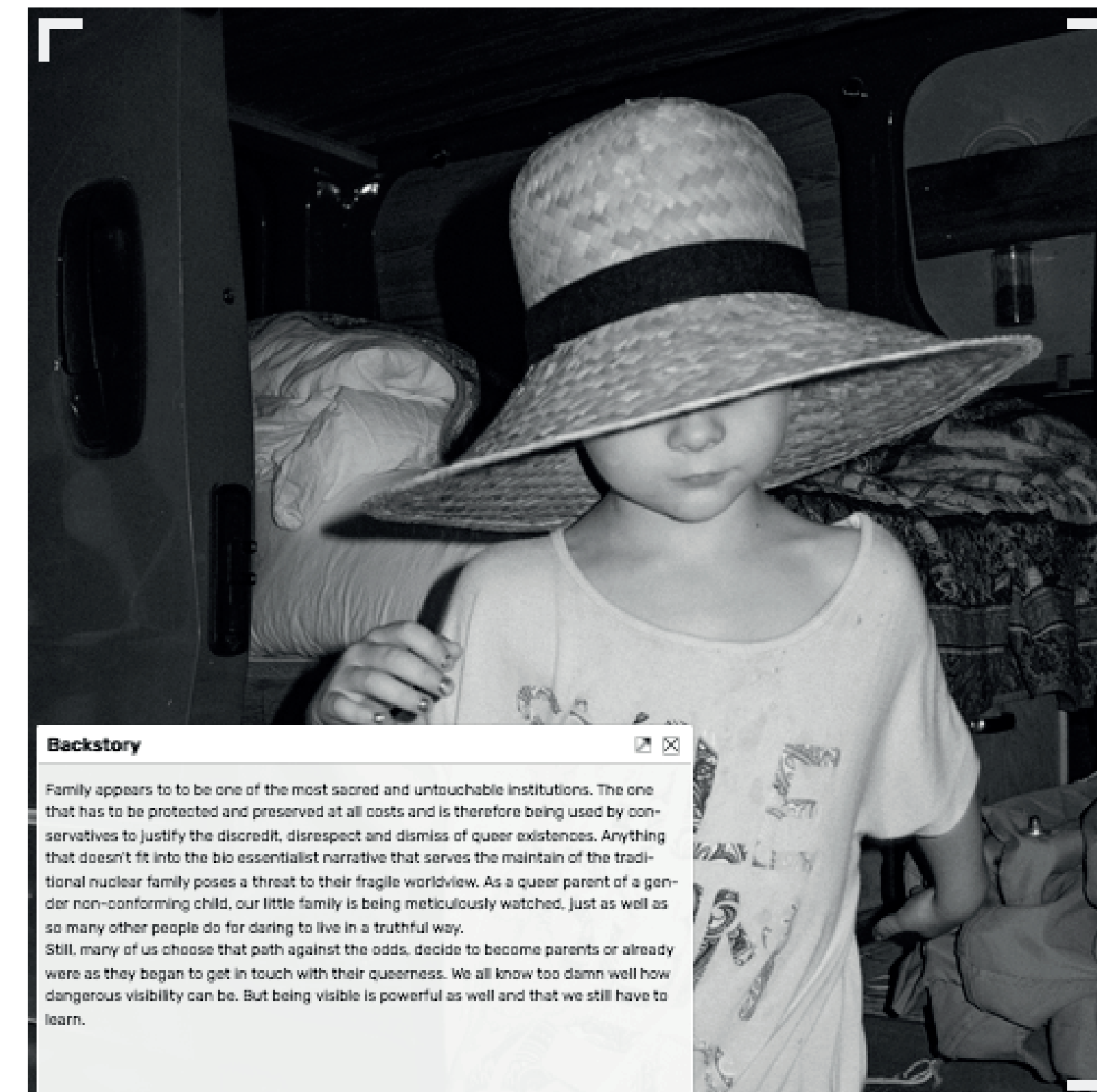


final project pictures by Luisa Pham



I'm not your stereotype,
 your hard working asian,
 I'm not your fetish,
 your exotic phantasy,
 I'm not your punchline,
 Not your costume,
 I'm not your model minority,
 your weapon against others,
 I'm not your chink.

Adding context to images and increasing authorship



This exercise aims to increase authorship and credibility in social media. The exercise will be developed with the organization <https://fourcornersproject.org/en/>. Select in between 3-5 pictures from a photo story you had well developed. Follow the guidelines of the four corners project to add context, content and information to the pictures



Fabulating an online space for hybrid
learning

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