Tentative Title: I pointed the lens at myself, I focused it nearby

<mark>**Design Note: This is not the final look of the thesis; this is a draft**
CAPTIONS for Images will be added in the pdf draft</mark>

Contents:

Appendix 1:
<mark>**Oral Folktales: Tales of Darkness and Light translation (Narration over final Movie]INCOMPLETE**</mark>

Abstract:

This thesis is a discussion around my current lens-based practice and its motivations. Proposing a conceptual move, it starts with looking relations, considering the lens as metaphor for looking and being looked at. Descending into my own experience of feeling othered, I extend my analysis beyond the gaze into artist Trinh T, Minh-ha's philosophy of using the lens to "speak not about identity but to speak nearby," near me.

In attempting to speak 'near' my identity with the lens, I first consider my rootlessness and how it frames my being in place, place as a sense of belonging. Then, I consider my indigenous Khasi identity. I first consider being a Khasi person in a sense of a shared feeling. This shared feeling is explored in a 30 days practice around the concept of the Rngiew, an elusive concept within Khasi knowledge. Recognizing my contemporary time as a moment in the wake of histories, I acknowledge the marks of colonial and neo-colonial plunder visible in Khasi land.

Chapter 1: **Addressing a Conceptual Concern: The Figurative Lens**

In claiming my visual arts practice as a lens-based practice, I consider the lens as a technical and conceptual apparatus. The lens—an optical device in the literal sense—is a tool I use to produce visual images. At a conceptual level, I also think of the lens as a metaphor. This figurative lens facilitates looking relations. Looking relations are the "processes of looking" determined by "history, tradition, power hierarchies, and economies" (Kaplan, 1997, p.4). This lens creates relations between the one gazing through the lens, and the one being gazed at. This chapter contemplates this figurative lens and how it frames my lens-based artistic practice.

An Odd Game of Looking
The Don Bosco Center for Indigenous Cultures, also called Don Bosco Museum, is named for its Catholic founders.[1] It is located in Shillong, capital city of Meghalaya, a state of India since 1971.[2] Its purpose is to showcase the diverse cultures of the hill tribes in the Northeastern region of India.[3] One such exhibit is the Missions and Cultures gallery which features a plaque indicating the presence of Italian Catholic missionaries in the region since 1890. It establishes the museum's catalogue, artefacts and documents as supposedly bound by "a mission of bringing harmony to a diverse region" (Baruah, 2020, pg. 8).

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[1] Don Bosco for St. John "Don" Bosco, an Italian Catholic priest, who in 1845 founded the priesthood Society of St. Francis of Sales – the Salesians. (Marsh, 1912)

[2] The hill tribes of Northeast India were semi-autonomous in the British Empire's frontier with French Indochina. In 1948, the hill tribes entered the dominion of India under the Instrument of Accession (IoA). The IoA was signed by clan elders despite popular resistance, merging all hill tribes into the Indian lowland state of Assam. Not accepting the document, secessionist insurgency spread. The 1950s-1990s became a dark, violent period under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). This peaked in 1966 when the Indian army carried out a 5-hour airstrike targeting Aizawl, capital of the Mizo tribe. This remains the only instance of an Indian airstrike on civilian territory. By 1970s, the Republic of India began reforming the hill tribes into federated states with the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act 1971. Christian churches offered neutral forums for peace talks lasting till mid-2000s. Reforming the region is remembered as a time when people accepted the bible and dropped the gun. (Hazarika, 2011). The museum omits this political history.

AFSPA remains in parts of Northeast India. The AFSPA model of handling insurgency with impunity extended to India's Jammu and Kashmir region in 1990.

[3] For the western reader, "Northeastern region" could read as directional marker. Within India, it is a specific post-colonial conundrum and security risk. As political scientist Sanjib Baruah argues, "Northeast India is a postcolonial coinage that took root in the 1970s" during peacekeeping (Baruah, 2020, pg. 18). The Northeast is landlocked, connected to India by a small 22 km land corridor. 98% of the region's border is international. Owing to the region having the largest and most diverse population of Scheduled Tribes (the Indian Constitution's economically, socially, and politically backward tribes), calling it Northeast India is regarded as over-simplification of a complex region.

To illustrate my concept of the figurative lens, I would like to focus on the museum's Land and Peoples Gallery and its sculptural representations of the indigenous hill tribes of North-east India.
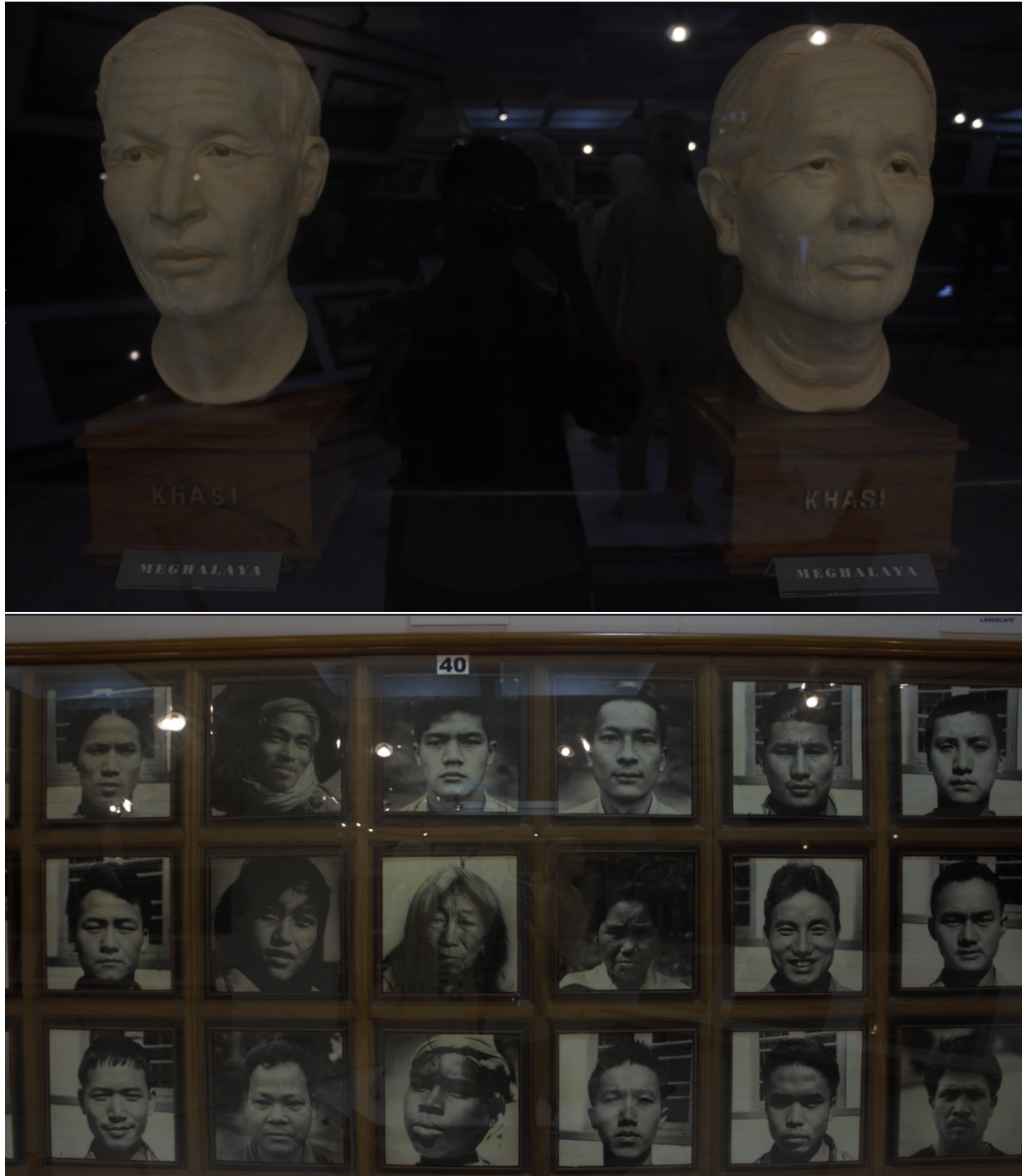
Two platforms center the hallway of the Land and Peoples Gallery. Atop each platform are 6 life-sized plaster sculptures forming a circle with their backs to each other and facing the visitor (Fig. 1). The walls surrounding these models are lined with glass showcases and framed photographs. The glass showcases at eye-level are stacked between large-scale color photographs of landscapes. Behind the glass are a series of plaster busts (Fig.2). The labels read Khasi, Garo, Karbi, Bodo, Hmar, Lushai, Ao Naga, Tangkhul, and so on—every hill tribe of Northeast India represented as a standard, a man then a woman. All their faces bear wrinkles (Fig.3).

The end of the exhibit is a wall covered in black and white photographs. A male and a female of each tribe, captured as close-ups on photographic print. The sculptures and photographs are not representations of the same individuals. Some faces smile while some stare. If you spent enough time darting from one end of the exhibit to another, you could try matching one tribe's features on a photo to the features on a sculpture. An odd game of looking

I remember the first time I experienced the Land and Peoples Gallery when it opened in 2008, I was a teenager. My own image has been used in documents that classify my being Khasi.

GOVERNMENT OF MEGHALAYA
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
East Khasi Hills District , Shillong

Book No : 29

SI No: 53609

FORM OF CASTE CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that **Kumari FILEONA ENDOXA DKHAR** daughter of **Shri. BOLINKAR SOHKHLET** and Smti. **AUGUSTINA WILLJOY DKHAR** of village/town* **SAWMER, UPPER SHILLONG** in District **EAST KHASI HILLS** of the State of **Meghalaya** belongs to the **Khasi** Tribe which is recognised as a **Scheduled Tribe**.

Under:

@ The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950

@ The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950

"[As amended by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification) Order 1956, the Bombay Reorganization Act, 1960, the Punjab Reorganization Act, 1966, the State of Himachal Pradesh Act, 1970, the North Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971 and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976]"

Kumari FILEONA ENDOXA DKHAR and/or her family ordinarily reside(s) in village/town* **SAWMER, UPPER SHILLONG** of **EAST KHASI HILLS** District of the State of **Meghalaya**

Signature :

Designation : Additional Deputy Commissioner
(With Seal Of Office)

State: Meghalaya   Additional Deputy Commissioner,
East Khasi Hills,
Shillong.

Place: Shillong

Date : 20 May 2014

* Please delete the words which are not applicable.
@ Please quote specific Presidential Order.
Note:- The term ordinarily reside(s) used here will have the meaning as in Section 20 of the Representation of the Peoples Act, 1950.

Naturally, I was drawn to the Khasi busts (Fig.3). Head-to-shoulder representations of my ethnic category. Face to face, glass in between. Presumably, they embodied me and I them.

The inner monologue went a little like this, "Maybe her nose looks like my grandmother's. Maybe, he has my cheekbones, something like my fathers. He looks familiar. She does too."

This embodying process halted when I saw the black and white photographs. I was looking at a person, not an ethnic approximation like the sculptures. Someone real, someone who had lived, and stood in front of the camera. But I had no access to their names, the date of the photoshoot, not even their tribe or their gender. Stripped from any defining caption, all I could look at was a wall of black and white close-ups. The photos contained an impossibility of knowing, we neither know who looked through the lens (the photographer) nor who was being looked at (the photographed). Filmmaker and theorist Ariella Azoulay compares this use of photography akin to making a verdict where "an excess of information is not processed" (Azoulay, 2019, pg.21). She elaborates that this style of photography, using the camera shutter as a verdict, is an imperial technology. What is not known in these photographs marks what Azoulay calls "undercurrent photographic data" that is forever inaccessible to the spectator. But I was not a spectator, I had tried to embody the busts of my tribe. In its serving of a wall of uncaptioned photos, the museum immediately forced me to trace what was not present in these photographs. Because I had a stake in this engagement, I was entitled to a different looking relationship.

A Loaded Metaphor: The Figurative Lens as a Gaze
The ways of looking, described in relation to the Land and Peoples Gallery, should be linked to the concept of "the gaze." French thinker Michel Foucault argued that the gaze is "a relationship of the subject to the object, concerned with the gathering of information, to inform and create a discourse on its subject matter." (Fox, 1998, p. 415). The Don Bosco Museum controls its visitor, simplifying a region of 50 million people into visual representations, to differentiate, study, document and present. This Museum and its galleries were a commemoration of Christian missionaries documenting, converting, and curating diverse tribal cultures. The gaze that presented the work was one-directional, the tribes were displayed as objects separate from the institutions (here the missionaries and then the museum itself) that came to understand them. This separation of the tribes into objects put on display is a verdict of othering, the act of specifying an "other."

The other is "not a visible object; rather, it is rendered visible through a particular way of seeing" (Vivian, 1999, p.16). The photographs highlight the making visible of these tribes, although within one gaze. Philosopher Edward Said argued that this kind of gaze is often driven by a scientific-colonial perspective. Said called this an "orientalism" that embodies the "other and all related to it as an object for study and scrutiny" (Said, 1978, p 202). Both the museum and its displays are clear-cut examples of othering as a viewing process for the speactator: the gaze it conveys is loaded with simplification and control of the other that is displayed.

Beyond the museum, however, media theorist E. Ann Kaplan considers the photographing and filming lens as a conductor of looking relations. Looking relations are the "processes of looking" determined by "history, tradition, power hierarchies, and economies" (Kaplan, 1997, p.4) It is here that I interject my entanglement with looking relations, to further add to aforementioned literature on the topic.

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Experiencing Othering

I have always found it hard to include people in my photo or video work. At present, I find myself allergic to doing any work that documents real people. Filmmaker Trinh T Minh-ha states, when "you have no desire to fix meaning, it may sometimes lead you to a place of nonsense" (2018). I like my visual work to be veiled to the point of nonsense. I find safety in obscurity because I am afraid of the lens and how it enables looking relations. These formal choices come from the looking relations I've recognized within my life.

As an Indian citizen who does not look Indian enough. As a Khasi person who is "not Khasi enough." As an indigenous person who "doesn't live in her native land." I have experienced an othering limited not only to the caste certificate I carry. Experiencing othering has restructured my relationship to lens-based media because it triggers a sensitivity. Edward Said claims the othering and rationalizing gaze of orientalism has seeped into "every form of academic learning" (Said, 1978, p. 202). My current artistic practice is to be quantified, documented, and presented within the rules of an institution. Piet Zwart Institute within Willem de Kooning Academy within Hogeschool Rotterdam all the way to the bureaucratic dictates of the Dutch Ministry of Education. The academic need to rationalize and understand whatever is seen institutionalizes[4] my figurative lens. Surely, these are manifestations of a regime for looking relations. Given these relations beyond my control, the camera lens as figurative metaphor is a recognition of the terms of my practice.

For me, the lens is an appendage for controlling and dictating meaning. This is how I engage with the lens and my lens-based work, with absolute care for the looking relations it produces. Because it is inescapable, I will now elaborate on what I think my figurative lens is.

My Gaze: The Figurative Lens as Multiple 'I's'

Coming back to the Don Bosco Museum, its controlled meaning was determined by its agenda. Still, as I looked at the objects and images of the museum, I embarked on a subjective experience. When I looked at the representations of my ethnicity, I was also indirectly looking at myself being looked at. In that room, I was a living specimen of one of the tribes. Yet I was not behind a glass wall or pinned onto a platform. My relation to Khasi identity is built on my own narrative. Despite the racial features I shared with those busts, my identity as a Khasi person is itself opaque to me. My last name "Dkhar" translates to "foreigner" and indicates assimilation. Coming from a matrilineal tribe, this means that a maternal ancestor bore a child with a male foreigner (sadly, I do not know if this was done by force). I can only trace my family as far back as my maternal great-grandmother and my paternal grandmother. I was also born outside of Khasi territory into a Christian-convert family schooled in Hindi and English. Most of my friends are non-Khasi. Yet, I am Khasi in the Indian census, I can speak Khasi, and according to

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Institutionalizes is my interpretation of what Fred Moten calls the "professionalization" of the university. He indicts the University as a capitalistic state apparatus bound on taking away the real truths of knowledge, that of questioning conquest, empire and its social by-products. In dissecting professions, the University rolls our numerous choices for its subjects, choice at the cost of recognizing struggle, institutionalizing the social individual in a prison, living life for profit. (Moten, Harney. 2013)

the cheekbones and nose of the busts, I "look" Khasi. If I took a black and white photograph of myself, tacked it among the other faces of the exhibit, I too would disappear behind the museum's gaze. All these multiple meanings behind my identity would disappear. These multiple meanings, multiple I's are what I argue as my gaze, my gazing back at this figurative lens.

By 'multiple-I's,' I mean a specific looking process established by Trinh T Minh Ha. As Trinh undertook ethnographic filmmaking in rural Senegal with her documentary, *Reassemblage* (1982), she began her practice of anti-ethnography by asserting her philosophy of "multiple I's." The film is a montage of rural Senegalese life. Scenes omit narration and diegetic sound. Mid-way, Trinh's voice wonders, "What is the film about? My friends ask." She then narrates tangential statements about herself, her friends, the camera, semiotics, and so on. She asserts that this process is meant to not "speak about but to speak nearby" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 201) Her speaking nearby is a process of verbal reflections. She deliberately refuses to make a movie that is about controlling what is seen, she confuses the viewer. This process asserts her philosophy of moving the figurative lens towards "the notion of multiple "I's" confronting "'multiple I's' in the Other." (Trinh 1989, p 146) Trinh's work views the multiplicities of herself and the subjects of her gaze, all as multiple I's.

Trinh ultimately asserts that any work on identity should, at best, try to always speak nearby. Trinh is not concerned with giving the viewer access to a film-viewing that speaks about rural Senegal. Trinh's voice speaks nearby to reject stringent relations of looking. This brings me to my artistic practice. My figurative lens comes from the multiple I's that I am. In handling my identity as a subject for my practice, I know that this lens depicts what is **nearby, near myself.** And that is much closer to the truth of my practice than assertions of a looking regime that claims to "speak about" my identity.

Ch 2: Speaking Near Me, Multiplicity in Rootlessness

Previously, I highlighted two motivations of my practice. First, a consideration of the figurative lens of looking relations. Second, embodying multiplicities to dismantle regimes of looking. In this chapter I expand on these ideas while considering my own belonging in place and how that comes across in the formal abstraction in my work.

Rootlessness and Multiple I's

In her book *Woman, Native, Other*, artist Trinh T Minh-ha defines looking through the camera lens as "the notion of multiple "I's" confronting "'multiple I's' in the other."(1989,p.146) I find my multiple I's in my identity. To speak near[5] my identity, I began making my first project in Piet Zwart Institute. I first address the notion of rootlessness.

Rootlessness is "a feeling of not having a home to return to"(*rootlessness*, Cambridge).Within this definition, home makes concrete the idea of being bound to a place. For me, home has been a difficult place to define. I've called several places home. I've never lived in a single geographical coordinate for more than 5 years. In my gait, my opinions, my accent, my being, I feel these places have left an imprint on me. There are many homes I desire to return to. In this multiplicity of emotion, my rootlessness is linked to a sense of place.

Humanist geographer Yi Fu Tuan argues for place as "a sensation of belonging" (Tuan, 1977, p.5,). He states, "at one extreme a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth" (p. 149). As a sense of belonging, indeed, an armchair and the earth can both generate place. For Tuan, it is this immense scalability that marks the complexity of human belonging. But place is not always emotion, it is often a definite grid point on planet earth. Historian Thongchai Winichakul defines this grid allocation of place an abstraction that "generates an administered space" (1994, p.110). Place is not just an emotion but also an abstract idea mapped onto physical space. Below, I address the confrontation of my rootlessness with the definite concept of place.

Building a Lens Apparatus in Mathijs van Oosterhoudt's Thematic Workshop

Given my rootlessness, relocating to a new geographical location often means addressing how to belong to this new place. This begins by orienting myself to the surrounding neighborhood on the Google Maps App. I locate the post-office, train station, supermarket, second-hand store, furniture store, café, bike repair, bike lane, park, bakery, etc. In this context, a satellite lens hovers above the earth, surveilling my location. I also think of my phone-scanning retina as a lens apparatus. At a microscopic pixel level, the phone screen scaled down a macro-level neighborhood and my eyes simulated the satellite. Meditating on this scaling of place, I built two camera apparatuses for Mathijs van Oosterhoudt's Thematic Workshop: A Focal Camera. I replicated my technological experience of reorienting to a new place by building two lens apparatuses: a macro camera and a micro camera.

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[5] To speak near instead of speaking about is my attempt to trace and acknowledge that identity forms my visual art in practice, without putting it up as object to be displayed. To speak about identity would, to push the ideation, mean an immediate relegation of what it is I "identify" as into the subject of my art practice. But it is not so. Because I am talking about multiplicity, identity is an elusive ghost that haunts my motivations, yet it is not captured directly, subverting simplification of meaning as nonsense.
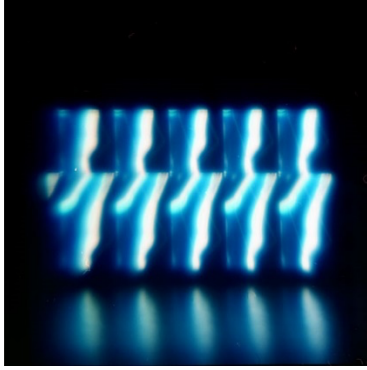
I used the two cameras to capture composited screenshots of random locations from Google Map's Earth feature (Fig.1).

The cameras documented these screenshots from my phone screen. The micro camera captured pixels (Fig.2).

The macro camera captured the screen at a focus distance of 1 foot (Fig.3), the recommended safe distance for viewing one's smartphone.

The measure of the lenses was in line with my inner desire to place myself in Kralingen, Rotterdam. Yi Fu Tuan states that space, place, and home are anthropocentric and subjective measurements of "direction, location and distance" (1977, p. 44). Under this context, the two camera-macro and micro- apparatuses were replicating measurements of a subjective experience of place.

In experiencing a new geographical spot: Kralingen, Rotterdam, I attempted to synchronize a lens-based art practice. My rootlessness was not only a perspective from which I understood the concept of place, it also generated two distinct measurements of lenses. The images, composited abstractions of the original surveilled image, also subvert place as a representation of defined grid. I elaborate on this below.

Maps as Abstractions

Formally, using maps as an abstraction is familiar to me. The map of India was one of the first abstract drawings I ever made. Me and my classmates would trace the country's borders with a pencil through a perforated plastic stencil (Fig. 4).
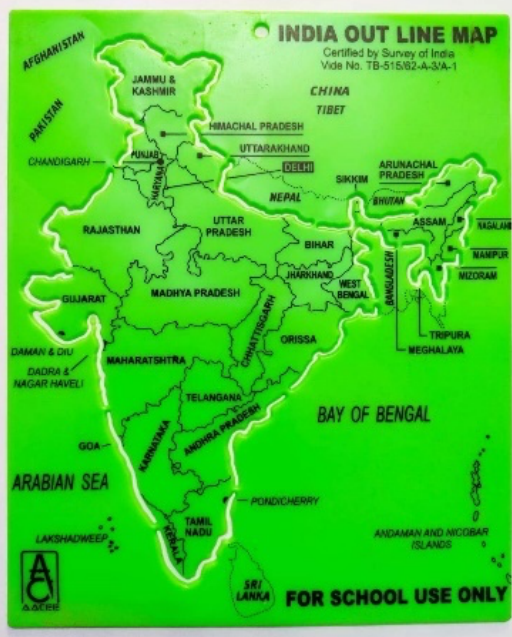

We were mapping a country in a classroom, the nation as an abstracted shape. Thai Historian Thongchai Winichakul considers these abstractions residues of colonial knowledge. He indicts

modern cartography's colonial origins and states, "A map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent. It became a real instrument to concretize imperial projections on the earth's surface. (Thongchai, 1994, p.110).

An example of administrative abstraction as a map is how empires would "color their colonies in the own imperial dye," how British Imperial colonies were pink-red blobs on the globe. (Anderson, 1983, p.175)(Fig.5)

A composite, abstract map as a model for a representation can also be found in a collage by US Geological Survey & NASA(Fig.6) It is a composite of many numbered photos placed on a chart, which render a map of the moon's surface. This was done 2 years before the moon landing.
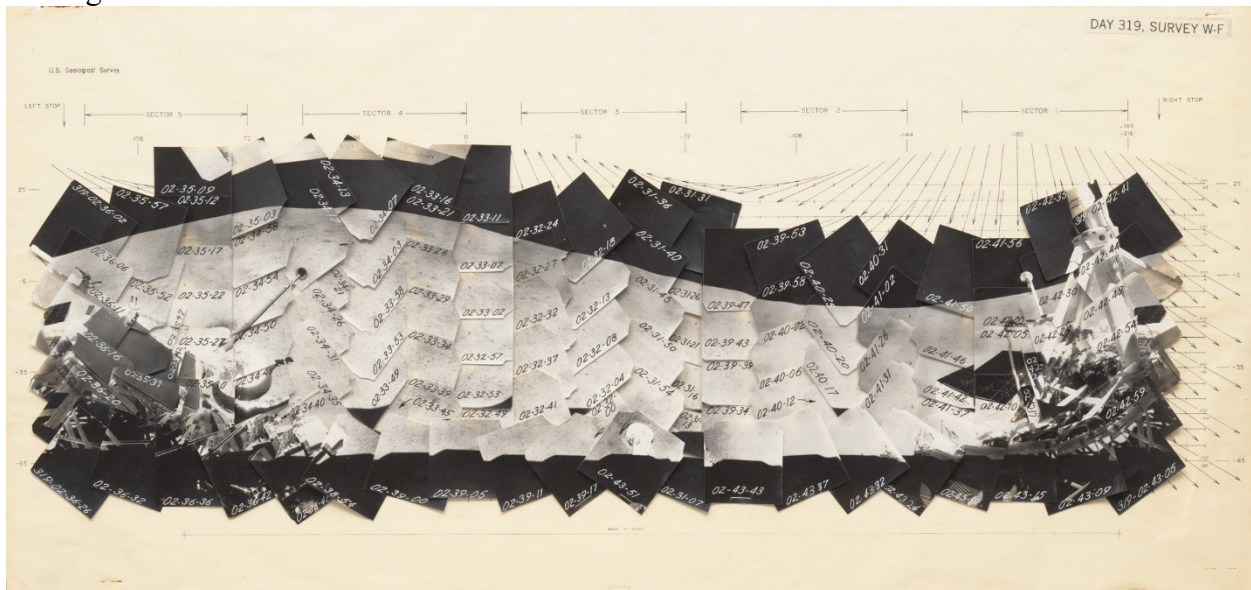
Aerial maps like this composite below (Fig.7) by photographer Edward Steichen were war-time abstractions. Steichen served in World War 1 as head of the Photographic Section of the American Expeditionary Forces from 1917 to 1919. Steichen's aerial photographs were "instrumental in adapting [aerial] photography for intelligence purposes, and implementing surveillance programs that would have a lasting impact on modern warfare."(Quoted in Padley, 2014) Presciently, Steichen considered surveillance as the potential of "what could be expected from photography."(Quoted in Padley, 2014) Steichen's images explicitly imply surveillance.


However, my images and composites negate a surveilling authority with the subjective pretext of belonging.

Un-Mapping through Abstraction
The camera apparatuses that captured the composites came from questions of place in my own life. I was not looking at these maps to dominate a territory, I was trying to assimilate and belong. Injecting subjectivity is my subversion of satellite and mapped images.

The final images had been further abstracted, abstract in that these "images were independent from directly visually referencing" (Arnheim, 1969) the original composites. The abstractions themselves were remnants of a process. Put together they depict a fragmented shift from a satellite shot to a pixel to a futuristic screen-like projection (Fig.8).
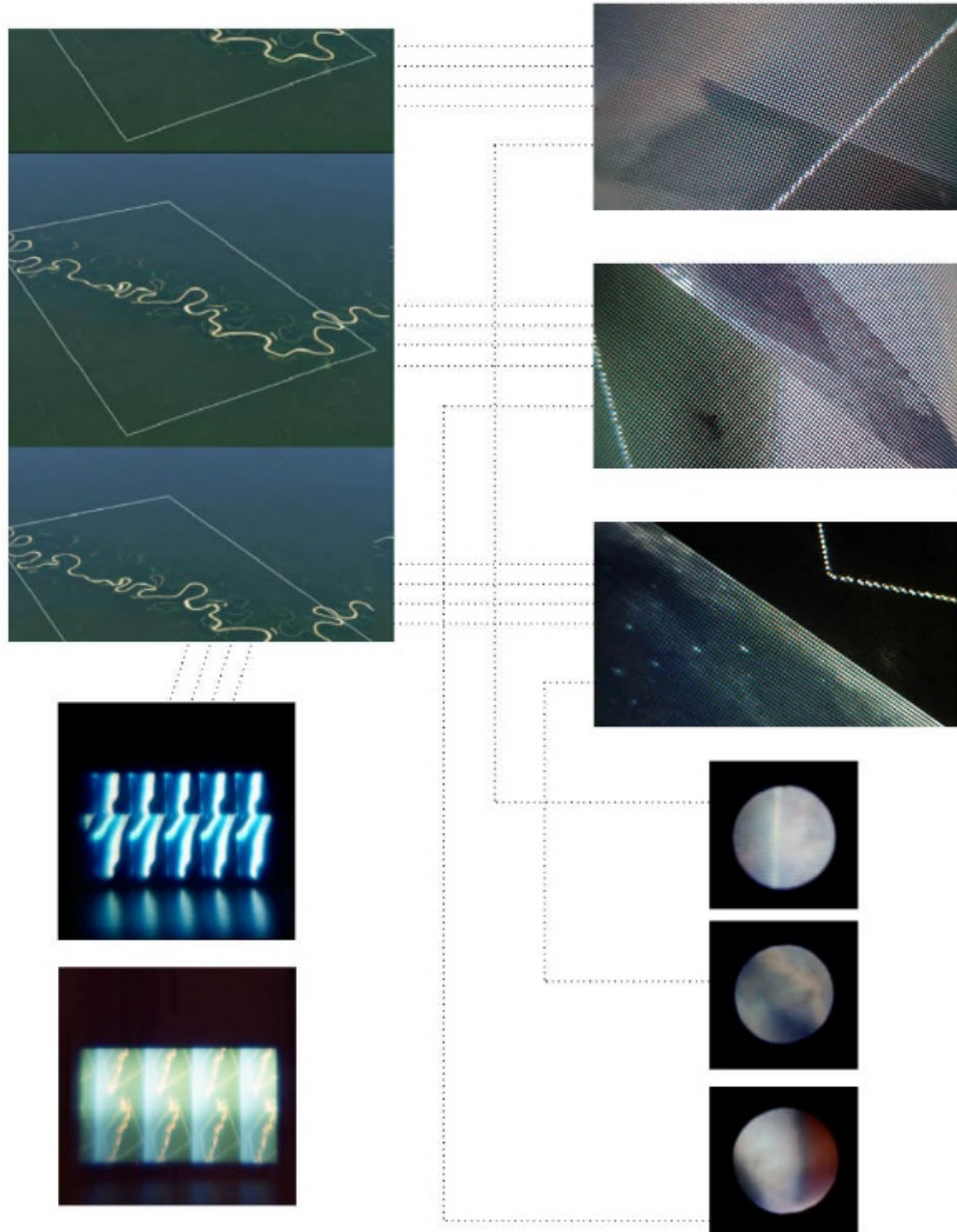
The images resulted from confronting the concept of place. But they were also not only markers of belonging, they also associated with the problem of mapped space. Mona Hatoum's Routes II(Fig 9 and Fig.10) also subverts the problem of the map.

Hatoum draws colored lines onto photocopies of maps taken from airline brochures. Her gouache-lines cover flight routes, crisscrossing and intersecting into abstract designs.
She challenges the notion of maps as political boundaries and considers these abstractions "routes for the rootless." (Quoted in Duguid, 2006) Hatoum was born in Lebanon to Palestinian parents. In 1975, while she was in London, the Lebanese Civil War broke out and she could no longer return home. Since then, she has considered herself a nomadic artist. She thinks of rootlessness as a challenge against identity as "something that is fixed and easily definable." (Quoted in Duguid, 2006) Rootlessness as multiplicity.

Like Hatoum's abstractions, my abstractions build on existing image as an act of subversion. For Hatoum it is travel brochures, for me it is satellite images. Like Hatoum, I use abstractions to subvert place from its definite meaning. Like Hatoum, I consider the subjective experience of place as a marker of identity in its indefinite quality. Like Hatoum, I use abstractions to meditate on subjective concepts of place and belonging. Like Hatoum, my subjective concept of rootlessness meditates on the multiplicity of belonging.

Re-acknowledging Rootlessness
It is important to note that my rootlessness is a complicit position. Marxist geographer David Harvey wrote of "time-space compression as a capitalistic experience" and "longing for coherence of place and community is the sign of the geographical fragmentation and spatial disruption of our times." (Massey, 1994, p.147) Yes, I feel like I don't have a place to call home, but I am not an ahistorical human. As much as my ethnic identity is entangled with colonialism, my rootless subjectivity is also tied to capitalism. Right now, my Dutch student visa is more lucrative than an asylum seeker's immigration route. I am on the educated and privileged side of rootlessness. From this position, I want to assert that my rootlessness is not a means of nostalgia for identity. Trinh T Minh-ha asserts that any work on identity should, at best, try to always speak nearby. In the next chapter I delve into my practice as speaking near my indigenous identity.

Ch 3: Speaking Near Identity

Rootlessness is having an inner compass and not knowing where true inner north is. For me, there are different norths. To quote Trinh T Minh Ha, rootlessness is often a state of being "elsewhere within here." (2010, p.12) Beyond location (the here and there), cultural geographer Doreen Massey considers ethnicity as an "obvious axis" that "deeply implicates the ways we experience space and place" (Massey, 1994, p. 164). My Khasi ethnicity has been an elusive bureaucratic identity. This chapter revolves around the multiplicity of being Khasi, being indigenous.

On Remembering

My Khasi identity is buried beneath my Christian residential education, my western university life, and the marker as foreigner in my last name-Dkhar. It is buried as much as it has been erased by assimilation, conversion, economic mobility, and globalization. Black Studies scholar Christina Sharpe points to contemporary society as being "in the wake," (2016, p.14) a time of grieving for a lot of violent histories. Particularly, she responds to black women academics and writers entering the academic archive trying to find aspects of their history and being unable to do so. I identify with this. A search for "Khasi" in the British Museum Collections results: "Matrilineal…hill dwelling agriculturalists of Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram"(Khasi | British Museum, no date) This description tied identifying being Khasi with being from a specific place. Being indigenous often means being of the land, a paradox against my rootlessness. In the Don Bosco busts, the encounter slipped into a simplicity of embodiment. In feeling that those busts represented something innately Khasi within me, I fell for the museum's ideology.

Building on Sharpe, historian Beshouy Botros asserts that being in the wake should point to new cultural narratives beyond colonial archives. Narratives that make "the case for oral histories, stories, cosmology and music as material" (Botros, 2020). Before I incorporate how I use cosmology and oral tradition in my own art practice, as a means to speak "nearby," I would like to introduce a small colonial anecdote.

Repair and Remembering: A colonial anecdote.

In his journal "The Kuki-Lushai Clans" (1912) Colonel of the Indian Empire J. Shakespear highlights his adventures in the Lushai Hills of Northeast India. He writes of an encounter with a Lushai tribesperson who presents him with a map. The map -, Shakespear calls it a sketch- is written in English. Instead of showing a map (Fig. 11) of the landscape, the map is of the routes of the departed soul. It does not depict topography, mapping geographical space, but cosmography, mapping the journey of the soul within his traditional worldview. .
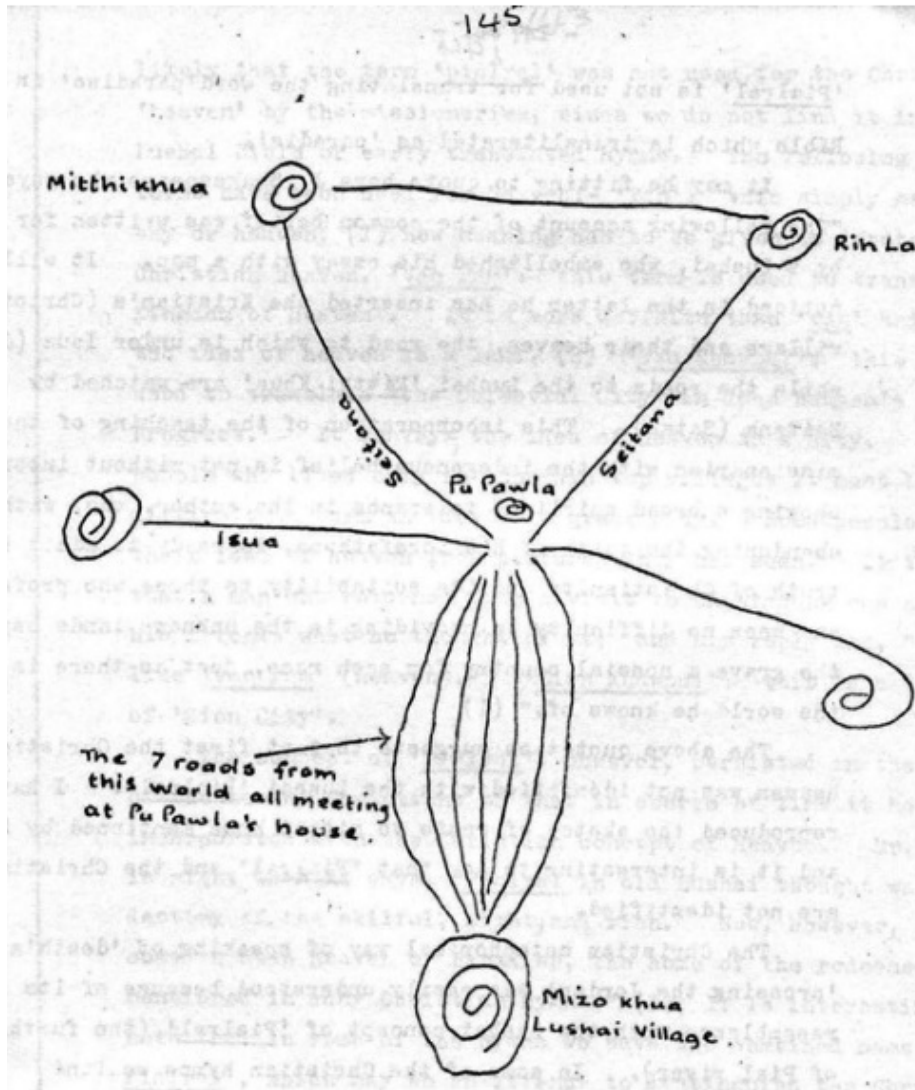
In the image, the soul is a spiral that leaves the village and has 7 roads (drawn-lines) as options to arrive at furious deity Pu Pawla's house. Pu Pawla then leads to four different lines that end at separate spirals. According to traditional Lushai belief, Pu Pawla decides on the journey of the soul. A notorious figure, Seitana then accompanies the lines of the soul to the mithikua, a pre-colonial name for dead people's afterlife village. Another figure, Isua, guides the soul to an unnamed spot. This map serves as an index for colonial assimilation and the resilience of precolonial myth.

In "Picturing a Region" Lushai historian David Vumlallian Zou (2019, p. 99) elaborates on the disruptive impact "secular cartographic culture had on old cosmologies" of sacred places. He calls this map a hybrid sketch attempted by the Lushai chief to boast his map-making skills to a colonial officer. Seitana (Satan) and Isua(Jesus) are assimilated but the presence of mi-thi-khua shows a sustained belief in pre-colonial mythology. Zou highlights the arbitrary nature of the 7 roads, hinting at the Empire's project of fourteen routes along the Lushai Hills as possible

inspiration. Shakepear does not mention the map-makers name but remarks that he "showed a broad spirit of tolerance' in accommodating Christian teaching 'without abandoning the faith of his forefathers' (Shakespear, 1912, p. 63) This mapping represented a different way of seeing place. The Lushai mapmaker had remixed topography with his tribe's belief system. Despite conversion and colonization, residues of myth and cosmology still signify the indigenous sacred manifested as spiral lines. In this map, the scribbles and lines showed signs of retaining a tradition, an archive of myth in drawing. As he drew these routes of the soul, he was sewing new knowledge of cartography into old knowledge. It can be argued that the lines blended in a modern knowledge with pre-colonial knowing.

Artist Kader Attia's practice revolves around the philosophy of repair as "an aesthetics produced by colonized cultures" ('Injury and Repair: Kader Attia', 2018). A sample work from Attia's repair archive, a collection of works that point to this notion of repair, is a necklace (Fig.1) from the Berber nations of north-west Africa. The necklace, an ornate antique blend of amber, coral and silver tagemout, can seem unassuming. Except for the welded colonial silver franc coin. The necklace, for Attia, represents an aesthetic of repair. Attia recognizes the cultural resistance inherent in a colonized culture reappropriating itself as an act of repair. The necklace is no longer just reappropriated ethnic berber antique trinket, instead it points to a historical engagement with colonialism very directly, entangled, and interlocked.

Much like Attia's necklace, the Lushai map-sketch shows the process of resistance. The hybrid sketch articulates repair on a topographic and spiritual sense. It blends an idea of cartography, brough in by colonialism, but retains the soul (literally) of a mythology passed on to the tribe. The colonial anecdote within the journal of a colonial officer of all places, points to the resilience of a memory.

As most indigenous cultures who have faced centuries of colonial and neo-colonial plunder, identifying with my indigenous identity is my recognition of its resilience. Going back to Trinh's philosophy of speaking near rather than about identity, there are cultural things retained within me. Passed on through grandparents and parents, despite never having learnt indigenous history in school, I know of the names of forest dwelling spirits, rituals, rivers, and fairies. Going back to

Trinh's philosophy of speaking near rather than about identity, I articulate my attempt at reappropriating my Khasi identity. My Khasi identity as connected not to place but to the memory, the resilience of myth and stories.

In her essay "Choosing the Margin," bell hooks iterates "a struggle of memory against forgetting." (1991, p. 148). She evokes the memory of the marginalized, here black folk, as a desire to uphold resilience. hooks asserts the need for remembering to exist away from a nostalgic sense of identity which faults into the line of reactionary and politicized nostalgia. But especially because of colonial and neocolonial plunder, memory itself cannot be negated for it is something that has resisted erasure and survived. To struggle against forgetting is the struggle of the oppressed memory to find place and space despite negation. Taking Trinh T Minh Ha as inspiration I began to generate an artistic practice near my identity as a rootless and indigenous person. Taking bell hooks as inspiration, I mean identity not as politicized reactionary nostalgia but as an identity that desires to use its lost pasts to "illuminate and transform the present." Going back to the museum from Chapter 1, hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze also frames my first project about my indigenous identity: 30 Days of Rngiew. In the museum, the othering of the gaze captured the engagement with the faces. In my first project, I used my face to stare directly at the camera, in a video exchange that was elusive to the spectator in both its contained meaning and method. The oppositional gaze, for hooks, is about courageously looking back after having been looked at and dissected for so long. In staring at the camera, I declared my gaze in my practice for the first time. I elaborate on this project below.

30 Days of Rngiew
Rngiew is a core part of Khasi social consciousness (Syiem, 2011, p. 7). It is not translatable and the closest term in English has been severely debated, some call it consciousness, some energy or auro, some call it vitality of the soul or what remains when viewing the belongings of the dead when they are no more. At core, it is an elusive concept to explain or translate. It escapes meaning, freeing it from the dissecting gaze of scientific learning. I began to think about it more concretely when my mother, amid COVID-19's agency-deficient isolation, told me to solidify my "rngiew." I initially did not take it as legitimate spirituality. It was an encrypted way of telling me to be strong, to deal. But the cynic in me asked, "whatever does she mean?" The project itself began with this question. So, I began online where I could find a range of Khasi friends, acquaintances, and strangers.

"Asking for a friend how does one go about solidifying rngiew?"
Lapdiang had sent a message, "Lets talk!"…

And then the exchange began. From September 20, 2020 to October 19, 2020, I participated in a daily video messaging exchange with Lapdiang Syiem, a Khasi performance artist. Every day, we sent each other 5 second videos and became barometers of each other's rngiew. When taking rngiew as judgement, the person being judged can have a solid, *eh*, rngiew or a soft, *jem*, rngiew. A solid rngiew can mean you emit, manifest, or invite good fortune. The opposite, a soft rngiew, can mean you emit, manifest, or invite misfortune. Lapdiang's video clip would arrive as a message on my phone and I would respond in Khasi with an audio recording, "I think your rngiew is solid today." She would do the same. Parallel to the exchange, I wrote a record of my day. I used the processing development environment and annotated my recollections with code.

This code compiled as geometric abstractions.
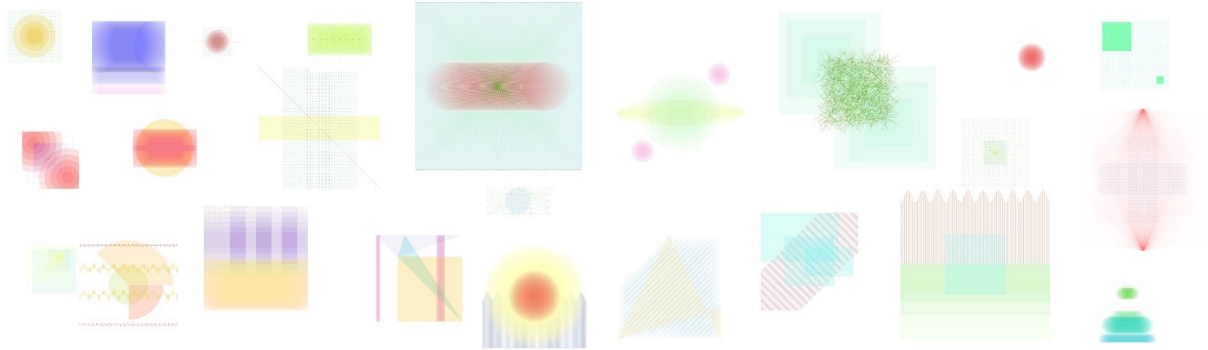
[2 pages with images from practice]

```
size(1000, 1000);
background(255);
noStroke();

fill(#8AD832, 30);
for (int x = 500; x<= width-500; x+=20) {
  circle(x, 50, 200);
}
// topmost layer horizontal tube made of circles
// when you dump piles of glass bottles by the ocean
// the waves sand them into green glass pebbles

fill(#50D832, 30);
for (int x = 400; x<= width-400; x+=20) {
  circle(x, 150, 200);
}
// second layer
// rockstacking, we and our ancestors did this too
// stack one rock on top of another, balancing
// non-utilitarian discipline

fill(#32D860, 30);
for (int x = 300; x<= width-300; x+=40) {
  circle(x, 550, 200);
}
// third layer
// rockstacking
// stack one day after another
// one rock of solid rngiew on top of one rock with soft rngiew

fill(#32D8B8, 30);
for (int x = 200; x<= width-200; x+=20) {
  circle(x, 700, 300);
}
// fourth layer
// the rules of the natural world allow rockstacking
// the rules of the ancestral world allow rngiew judging

fill(#32C9D8, 30);
for (int x = 100; x<= width-100; x+=20) {
  circle(x, 950, 200);
}
// fifth layer
// a pile of rock, a bunch of footage
// which ocean do I go to
// to sand this media into glass pebbles, transparent and beautiful

save("October19_2020.png");
```
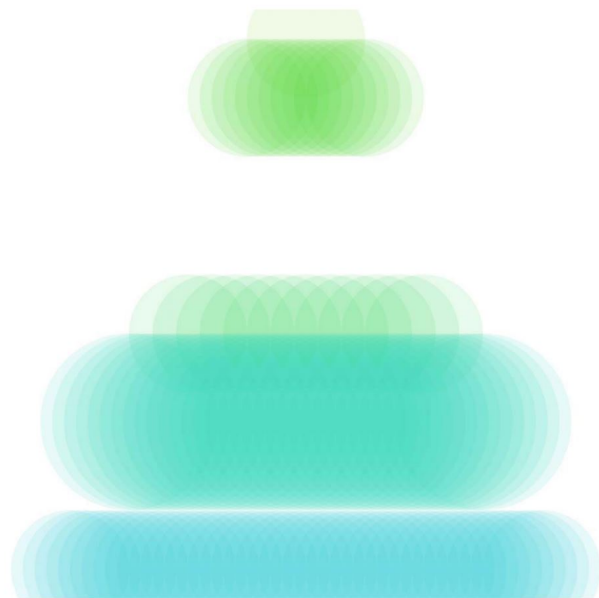
This practice was my first attempt at engaging directly with indigenous knowledge. The concept of rngiew is very early on taught to a child. A shadow, *sy-rngiew*, is told to be the accompanying friend in your life. A child is taught, *all you have is you and your shadow, keep it strong*. Rngiew is understood as an extension of shadow, *syrngiew,* and I never really questioned why this was the most difficult thing to translate. Until I began this project. In presenting the project's concept as entirely elusive I retain the mystique entrenched in inheriting something untranslatable into a foreign language. The rngiew is what bound me to being indigenous in the spiritual sense. But there were clear markers within the process that engaged with formal decisions. I elaborate on them below:

Internet Exchange as Aesthetic

Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics finds art in social relations an antithesis to "the disembodiment of the Internet" (Bishop, 2012, p. 437). Lev Manovlich, builds on this argument by considering the internet itself as enabler of relational aesthetics. As opposed to the one-way flow of a film or book, the internet allows for exchanges, between sender and receiver. Manovlich ponders on "communication between users becoming the subject of an aesthetic" (2001, p. 163) He also debates if this exchange "needs to assume representation or object form in order to be recognized as art." COVID19 enclosed all social relations to the internet. In the daily need for video presentation of one's face for work and study, it became a more freeing decision to put the lens on my face for an exchange that wasn't rooted in routine but ritual. Rngiew itself is relational. While it is not translatable to a non-Khasi person, Lapdiang and I understood the fundamentals of what a soft or solid rngiew would mean. I was trying to build space for this indigenous weird knowledge into technology, the internet.

Code and Weaving

The choice to use code also came from the desire to blend something Khasi with something technological. In her exhibit, Pattern:Code, artist Ahree Lee uses weavings to draw a connection to code, algorithms and the implicit feminist history behind both weaving and coding.

She states that coding and weaving are both "binary systems." Weaving textile occurs by interlocking threads, so "you can only ever see a warp or a weft thread on the surface, which is essentially a zero or a one" ('Ahree Lee | WCCW', 2019). Referencing this link between coding and weaving, I tried to reactivate the relationship between Khasi weaving and storytelling.

Within Khasi mythology, weaving embodies telling a story, in both abstract sense and metaphor. With the coming of Welsh and Scottish missionaries, women began weaving gingham plaid-like patterns into their cotton and silk looms. The designs are often an abstraction of "myriad stories hidden in the colors and designs—tales about human creation, magical deities and kindred forest spirits" (*Folklore, myths and handloom*, 2017).

(Fig 2. *Weaving Freedom in Meghalaya - Worldview Impact Foundation*, 2016)
To an extent, I thought I was doing a weaving of my own, through code.

Spiritual Abstractions
The geometric shapes generated by code in 30 days of Rngiew are representation of an exchange in the mystical dimension. It was an attempt to gauge rngiew, something unseen but felt and perceived at a spiritual plane. Perhaps, it could be argued then that these images aren't abstractions but spiritual manifestations. Within the western painting canon, many female artists have used geometric abstractions to express their spirituality.

In 1920, artist and mystic Hilma af Klint began a series of small works with a circle that would begin as half black and half white, what she called the "starting picture-the world as balanced duality, dark and light, physical and material" (*Why Hilma af Klint's Occult Spirituality Makes Her the Perfect Artist for Our Technologically Disrupted Time*, 2018). These works came after a long history of Klint's connections with occultism. Born in 1862, Klint began attending seances as a teenager to communicate with her deceased younger sister. While in the Swedish academy, she joined a group of women known as The Five who would make automatic drawings during seances and trances.

Emma Kunz, a Swiss naturopath and healer was not a practicing artist. In the 1930s, well into her 40s she began using geometric abstractions to heal her patients. She would use a divine pendulum in a technique called radiesthesia. As the pendulum etched lines with pencil and crayon onto a page, she would direct it and "pose a question-personal to political- finding the answer within the lines" (*Emma Kunz: art in the spiritual realm*, no date). Kunz would then heal her patients after the drawing.
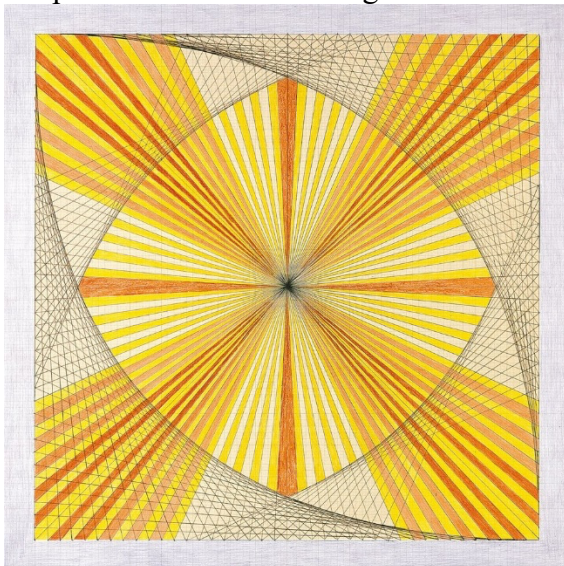
Another woman, Agnes Pelton, member of the transcendental Painting group (1938-1941) believed in mixing mathematics and native American traditions, "to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual"(*Emma Kunz: art in the spiritual realm*, no date).

All three women, especially Klint, have been considered pioneers of geometric abstraction. Yet as art critic Ben Davis recognizes, their occultism is often taken for granted. He considers this a contemporary reducing of spiritualism into "conspiracy and "kitsch" spiritual aesthetics, fortune tellers and crystal healers and chart readings and all of that" (*Why Hilma af Klint's Occult Spirituality Makes Her the Perfect Artist for Our Technologically Disrupted Time*, 2018) Davis, however, finds it significant to recognize the history within which these women found themselves, the age of industrial streamlining modernity. He makes the case for their spirituality as an attempt not only to reconcile with science (geometry) but also meditating on the lack of spiritual meaning in modernity. Coming back to my own experience of the early days of Covid-19, it was difficult to extrapolate meaning as everything became dictated by control and fear. The exchange allowed a mixing of my daily life, reflections, and practice. It also allowed me to engage with indigenous Khasi knowledge from so far away. In the next chapter, I go back to Meghalaya, home to many Khasi clans including my own.

Conclusion:

Logline to final film:

Being indigenous often means being "of the land." On a journey back to her native land, Fileona wonders if she is really indigenous. She looks at the land, Meghalaya, as a site of mythological memory and identity, but it bears marks of injury through centuries of colonial and neo-colonial plunder. Fileona is the outsider, she has been away for a long time. She reads the poetic oral myths of the land, what she finds warmer and homelike. This is juxtaposed against the sites and sounds of contemporary resource extraction, coal and uranium and sand.

Being of the land and what is nearby:

On the train from the airport to the hills, endless empty trucks on the highway, illegal highway truck stop. At parents' home, dead of night, endless squeaking as trucks roll down the steep, one after the other, carrying coal, sand and uranium. Morning, woken up to the smell of burning forest. What is being indigenous? Being of the land. The land? a source of resources and raw materials. Indigenous life? Living on the edge of the land.

Indigenous scholar Eva Marie Garoutte highlights how contemporary inquiry relegates exploration of the irrational kind into the realm of faith and belief, rather than the realm of scholarship and knowledge. In response to this ideology, she coined the term indigenous radicalism. Radical Indigenism is confidence in raising indigenous philosophies as points of knowledge. I invoke Garroute in acknowledging the need to rearticulate an innate knowledge passed on. For the hill that is sacred and the hill that is stripped, are both bound to tribal philosophies of the Khasis.

My camera stares at the land, stripped or preserved or burnt. My voice narrates oral sayings from the past. Indigenous radicalism. To recall sayings of the past. To hopefully remember that the land, the earth, all of it, is bigger than just me.

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Fig. 4 (First Click Plastic India Map Stencil (19 cm x 15.5 cm x 0.5 cm Green) 1 Piece: Amazon.in: Home & Kitchen)

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Fig. 5 Walter Crane, Map of the British Empire in 1886, Giclee Print

Fig. 6 US Geological Survey & NASA, Surveyor III. Surface of the Moon, Day 319, W-F. 1967

Fig. 7 Edward Steichen, Plate 23 from Untitled album, February 10, 1919, Gelatin Silver Print

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Fig. 9, 10 Mona Hatoum, Routes II, 2002, Colored ink and gouache on five maps, 90.2 x 106.7 x 2.5 cm

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Fig. 1 Ahree Lee, Ada, 2019, Cotton, linen, and wool on canvas

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Fig 5 Agnes Pelton, Departure, 1952. Oil on canvas, 24×18 in. Collection of Mike Stoller and Corky Hale Stoller. Photograph by Paul Salveson.

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