A HOME IS A PORTAL

Ludi Leiva
(b. Ľudmila Bešeňovský)

KONSTFACK
University of Arts, Crafts and Design

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Foreword

My name is Ludi Leiva (b. Ľudmila Andrea Bešeňovský). I was born suspended between worlds—the daughter of a Guatemalan mother and Slovak father.

I grew up on the lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) and Dəx̣əw̓əhs (Duwamish) peoples on the Pacific coast of Canada and the United States, and though I was raised thousands of miles from my ancestral homelands, the lives of my predecessors—shaped by civil war, authoritarian regimes, colonialism, and exile—have long permeated my world.

Working across illustration, printmaking, writing, and painting, my current art practice explores ritual, human inner worlds, and diasporic domains of experience, illuminating questions of mental health, marginalized identities, (inherited) memory, healing, and the cultivation of joy and resilience.

Throughout my two-year Master in Visual Communication at Konstfack, I focused on the development of my thesis project *A Home is a Portal*, a collection of illustrated stories documenting a quest for home across disparate geographies, from Stockholm to Bratislava and as far as Guatemala City.

Part illustrated book, part physical installation, the project visualizes how inherited memory and ancestral loss of homeland can transcend space and time, and investigates what a path to healing might look like. Weaving together family lore, natural splendor, synchronicities with strangers, and cultural in-betweenness, the project's introspective
illustrations make tangible a lifelong struggle to set down roots. Drifting between memory, daydreams, and the mundane, the work asks:

*Will rooting in a physical place ever be enough to conjure the feeling of home?*

Seeking to make physical the longing, nostalgia, and groundlessness that typify the lives of many diasporic people, my thesis project explores grief as well as the cultivation of joy and spiritual resilience with the hope of creating a universally relatable narrative that can generate kinship, collective reflection, contemplation, and feelings of empathy in those who engage with it—regardless of cultural background, lived experience, race, or heritage.
Previous work

Prior to coming to Stockholm to study at Konstfack, I had spent years working as a writer in New York City and Los Angeles before beginning my work as an illustrator in 2017. My professional illustration work consisted of a range of commercial projects, from advertising to editorial illustrations for newspapers and magazines. My work in this realm was typically very colorful, used a warm color palette, and was primarily figurative.

While working commercially as an illustrator, I rarely worked alone. I typically collaborated with a team of people—art directors, creative agencies, producers, marketing managers, social media teams, and more—on every project. I generally received feedback during the creative process, even if it was simply a positive reaction to a sketch concept. My work projects varied from creating an illustration for a newspaper article to designing a pair of shoes, to creating illustrations for a commercial rebrand. There was variation to my projects, and the timelines were typically rather short, from a couple of weeks to a maximum of six months.
While my personal illustration and painting practice was, in contrast, independent, the scope of these explorations was also usually limited to one illustration or painting or a small collection of them. What’s more, most of my illustration work was done digitally on an iPad Pro. This is to say: my previous work experience differed quite significantly from the work I undertook at Konstfack. Though I was supported by and received feedback from classmates, tutors, and professors, the development of A Home is a Portal was primarily solitary and self-directed. Not only this, but the scope was considerably larger than what I’d previously worked on: this was the first time I worked on a sequential narrative of this size and length, and for such a long period of time.
The work that I completed after these two years included upwards of 120 pages of illustrations and text almost entirely made up of black and white line drawings made in several different mediums, over 17 meters of textile prints, a 15 square meter installation space, and a multi-sensory exhibition experience.

This contrasting scope, working style, visual language, physicality, and timeline led to a lot of challenges but also a lot of growth as I undertook many things for the first time and deepened my ability to work independently and on self-directed projects. I am proud of the scope and diversity of what I accomplished.
A brief timeline

I applied to Konstfack in December 2020 with a project proposal for a collection of illustrations exploring diaspora, inherited trauma, ritual, and mixed heritage.

When I started school in Fall 2021, I became fixated on another project about bananas—specifically using the fruit as a point of departure through which to explore my maternal lineage from Central America, diasporic identity, post-colonial theory, capitalism, and American imperialism.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, and everything began to shift. As the entire geopolitical arena was shaken up, so was my inspiration for my project. Around the same time, my partner’s mother passed away after a battle with cancer.

Whether on the news or in my own personal life, death and grief became daily themes, and brought into question my conceptions of heritage and legacy, particularly the stories and memories we inherit and pass down through time. Heartbroken about the state of things in Ukraine, I couldn’t help but think about my own ancestors, including my father’s parents who fled Czechoslovakia in the 1940s and were later granted asylum in Canada.

At the time, I was also building relationships with family members in Slovakia I had recently met for the first time. Reflecting on these things, I became more aware than ever of the link between the past and the present.
My grandfather, L’udo, was an author, a playwright, and a teacher. I became fixated on his texts (which I’m unable to read without Google translate as I was never taught Slovak), and even ordered one of his books online from Slovakia.

I spent my days wondering about the things my grandparents experienced while fleeing their homeland, spending years in a refugee camp in the Austrian mountains and eventually taking a ship across the ocean to start over in a foreign land with little more than the clothes on their back. I felt called to take a closer look at the story of my ancestors through these texts, and began thinking that I would like my project to focus on visually communicating and exploring them.

My second project frame was to visually explore my grandfather’s texts documenting his experience fleeing Slovakia and living in exile, and what it felt like for me to interact with them.
I traveled to Slovakia in April and did a significant amount of research there. From this point, I began putting all of my focus onto my Slovak heritage.

In the Spring, we had our “Ornament Matters” course with Svante Helmbæk Tirén, and during a tutoring session I told him all about my ideas and the confusion I was feeling about how to best frame my project, particularly whether I should focus on my Slovak family history or the Guatemalan one. He then asked me a question that became a major turning point in my project and has stayed with me ever since:

“Are you sure the stories have to be separate?”

(1) A one-page story about the day I received my grandfather’s book in the mail (2) My grandparents’ Certificate for the Purpose of Emigration to Canada (PCIRO) 1948
I spent my summer vacation drawing, writing, and researching but still felt a bit lost about my direction. By the time I came back to school in September 2022, things began to crystallize. I realized that what I wanted wasn’t to tell one singular story, but a collection of them. To embrace the inherent messiness of mixed heritage and the brokenness of memory and tell these stories on my own terms, using my experiences as a prism through which to share them. This is how I arrived at my project in its present form.
(1) Ephemera from Slovakia (2) A building in Bratislava (3) A visual sequence about my experience at an antique shop in Bratislava (4) An old Czechoslovak stamp
Context

A *Home is a Portal* is a culmination of lifelong research, reflection, and embodied experience. I am sure that this project will ultimately be but one of many attempts to explore and make sense of the questions this project seeks to identify and visualize, or it is equally possible that this project will continuously evolve to take on many different shapes and forms. Either way, I see this work as neither the beginning nor the end, but a stop along the way.

Me sketching in Bratislava’s stare mesto (old town) during a research trip in April 2022
A note on the written word

It is important for me to mention my writing background because it played a central role during this educational process. I began working professionally as an illustrator in 2017. Prior to that I had worked as a writer and editor for several years and continued working in this field until 2020 when I finally decided to focus on illustration full time.

Though I had always drawn for myself, my transition to embracing my identity as an illustrator was a gradual one and so writing was, for a long time, one of my primary means of artistic and creative expression. During this time, I published countless media articles, personal and non-fiction essays, as well as edited and directed editorial content as a magazine staff member. In 2018, I was awarded a fellowship with The Lambda Literary Foundation, a New York City-based literary organization whose mission is to nurture, advocate for, and elevate LGBTQIA+ writers. During my fellowship I focused on a work of fiction under the guidance of award-winning Nigerian writer Chinelo Okparanta.

While my writing background certainly has helped me in many ways, it also presented unexpected challenges as I began to approach narrative storytelling visually on a large scale for the first time. The marriage between visual and textual storytelling was a major theme and obstacle for me during this program as I continuously bumped up against the question:

Which is driving this story—the image or the text?
I regularly reviewed my work and began analyzing it in a different way because, for the first time, I was relying on two separate forms of visual communication married into one. This challenge created a lot of internal tension as I constantly questioned things like whether I was relying too heavily on text to describe or clarify an image or image sequence, whether a specific image could stand on its own without text, or, in some moments of frustration, if I should scrap the text altogether.

As you will see in upcoming sections where I go further into depth about materialization, I tried out several different working processes and methods throughout this program in order to try and dig beneath these questions and figure out the best way to communicate the feelings, ideas, and questions underpinning this project.

Ultimately, this working process and the experience as a whole has shifted my perception of myself as both a writer and a visual artist, and I look forward to continuing to interrogate how the image and the written word interact, bolster, and react to one another, and how a new, ‘third space’ is created when the two are combined.

Drawing made during a course with Hanna Heilborn, Winter 2022
Learning to love the questions

I’ve long heard it said that the past belongs in the past. That we should focus on the now and look only to where we are headed. But I have realized over time that the things we leave unacknowledged can haunt us and demand to be seen. Particularly those of us who come from lineages with lost homelands, lost cultures, and gaping holes in our understandings of our families, ancestors, and, by extension, ourselves. How, I wondered, could I find my way forward if I did not first look back? If I did not have the courage to ask the past what it needed to tell me and listen to the response? This is exactly what I intended to do during this two-year Master’s.

I set out to investigate my ancestral history, migration stories, and how these all connected to my own lived experience and life. But at some point along the road of this investigation I realized that this project may not be so much about answering the questions as much as identifying what they were—and documenting the subsequent exploration of them. I realized that I could learn to love the questions alone, to love them enough to sit with them, to let them unfold in their own time, to not try to force them into answers. After all, I might never find the answers, and had to learn to find peace in that.

So, instead of rushing to fill the gaps I found with answers, I decided to allow myself to investigate without an attachment to a fixed final product or destination. I see now that the work I make as part of this project will be part of a larger, ongoing—perhaps even lifelong—investigation. That perhaps I will never be “done” with this work or hold all of the answers in my hands.
I regard this stage of work and research (my Master’s thesis project) as a prototype—a snapshot in time—and I want to contextualize and frame my work as such.

This work in no way represents a final destination, but instead is a stop on the way. Perhaps it is one of many stops. Perhaps the destination, as it were, doesn’t exist, or at least not in the way that I thought it did. I have spent a lot of time learning to love the act of questioning and believe that this practice of accepting unknowing will remain a constant throughout my life and work.

Early concept drawing from 2021
Integrating feedback

I received a lot of feedback from others over the course of this Master’s. One skillset that I had to strengthen while working on this project was how and when to integrate feedback. In other words, how to balance the following of my own artistic intuition with also striving to learn, grow, and integrate outside input to create the most robust work possible. I would like to think this is something I got quite good at.

From the beginning of the program, we were introduced to the “Feedback Session” format. This, essentially, was a critique that was hinged on the idea of the participants giving a reading of the work rooted in their own experience of it. Instead of opinions or advice, participants were asked to simply write what they saw and their interpretation of the work. This way, the person showing their work was able to test whether the work was communicating in the way they had intended. What we later did with this feedback was completely up to us.

Over the course of many feedback sessions, I received pages and pages of readings from classmates, professors, and external critics. I also received significant amounts of feedback from my professors and external tutors during tutoring sessions. The development of my intuition was a crucial part of my education, as I routinely had to re-orient myself after feedback when deciding how to integrate it—or whether I wanted to integrate it at all—and define next steps.
I did, however, develop a practice of testing different suggestions that I received as feedback from others to see if, by doing, it would become clear whether or not that particular methodology, technique, or approach felt relevant or appropriate for my work. These tests included: working in a traditional comic grid format, drawing in large-scale, and working with color, among many others. I will go into more detail on materialization in following sections.

Work shown at a 2022 feedback session: drawings of the valley where my grandfather was from, that was flooded by the Soviet regime to create a dam.
Sources of inspiration & works of note

There were many artists and works that acted as sources of inspiration for me in the development of this project. I don’t have the time to go over all of them in depth, but I will explain some of the most influential, and will also cite a larger amount of them down in the references at the end of this text.

*The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* by Meera Atkinson is a work that examines trauma as it is conveyed, explored, and discussed in literature, primarily prose and poetry. I read this book over the summer of 2022, and had pages and pages of notes. I’m grateful I was able to read this book before I started actively working on the materialization of my project in earnest because it contextualized for me a lot of aspects of transgenerational trauma* that I knew I wanted to discuss explicitly or at least implicitly meditate on in my work. I want to briefly go over some of these as I think they are important to consider when discussing this project.

Some takeaways were the importance

*Atkinson uses this term rather than intergenerational or multigenerational as these “might suggest traumatic transmissions as limited to a specific family lineage,” which in her view, is not possible because the “compartmentalization of trauma is impossible”*
of testimony and witnessing and the challenging of the concept of “remembering” as most people are not aware of trauma passed down to them and that “a lack of consciousness of a traumatic legacy does not prevent it from being carried out from one generation to another.” Other pearls of wisdom included the reminder of the ubiquitous, utter unknowability at the heart of our closest relationships and the pain that surrounds that when looking back and trying to understand the inner landscapes of some of the people closest to us—our family, our kin, or other loved ones.

Perhaps the most central takeaway for me was the validation that traumatic memory is unreliable and often has a dreamlike quality.* These reflections gave me further permission to embrace fragmented and nonlinear storytelling as, according to Atkinson, “nonlinear and recursive narrative epitomizes the nature of traumatic memory and the way in which it returns to haunt survivors.”**

Atkinson also explored the ways in which graphic memory was perhaps the most fruitful of literary dramas in terms of trauma testimony because of the “direct access to nonverbal and highly effective embodiment and materiality of trauma subjectivity emotion and experience,” citing graphic novels such as Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home.

* Atkinson writes: “the writing cannot and should not hope to tell the truth exactly. It would be more apt to say it does some work in undoing lies.”

** Not just this, but Atkinson often used language like “haunting” and “phantoms” in reference to trauma and the way it lives on irrespective of time and space.
whose content, “Bechdel insists, is essentially her engaging in ‘extremely involuted introspection’ around that one event.”

I also was fascinated to learn of Teresa Brennan, whose work draws on cultural theory and science to explore possible modes of traumatic transmission that include sensory, hormonal, and in-utero transmission. I also learned that she is particularly interested in olfactory transmission, something that felt very resonant to me as I knew from the very beginning of this project that I wanted to have a sensory, primarily olfactory component in the final installation (more on this later).

Other works of note that were inspiring and helpful in the development of my project include:

- Belonging by Nora Krug for its creative memoir structure and reconstruction of family myth and memory.
- You & a Bike & a Road by Eleanor Davis for its raw messy style of internal narrative and self discovery.
- Remember us to life by Johanna Rubin Dranger for its fearless and incisive look at family history and trauma.
- firebugs by Nino Bulling for its dreamy, simplistic black lines and thoughtful depictions of humans and nature.
- Homesick by Catrina Davies for reflections on home as physical place, memory, natural and internal landscape.
- Homo Line by Edith Hammar which I go more into depth about in later sections.
I’ve been working with several different methods in order to explore different ways of arriving at visual outcomes. The first method was to use a grid as a storytelling tool for the first time, which I did at my teacher Emma Rendel’s suggestion. In spring 2022, I challenged myself to fill one grid per day for two weeks without any prior planning. Typically, this was a 3x3 grid but I also alternated the grid layouts.

One-page grid experiment from Spring 2022
(1-2) One-page grid experiments from Spring 2022 (3) A later iteration of Image 2
My takeaways from this were that a more “traditional” comic format does not suit my intentions for this project. I decided I would utilize certain aspects of comic storytelling (grids, speech bubbles, etc) only if and when it will support the story, but I would not adhere to that as a standard format.

I realized that I was interested in slower storytelling, with an image serving as a sort of portal into a moment and feeling. For these reasons, I identified much more with the picture book than the comic format, and I do not identify with the term comic in relation to my project.

The second method I used was to let different mediums dictate the production of imagery and storytelling. Among the mediums I worked with were charcoal, liquid charcoal, and brush pens. I also did a substantial amount of digital drawings.

An experiment in liquid charcoal from Autumn 2022
I discovered different levels of enjoyment and satisfaction of expression from each medium. Because every medium influenced my working methods and offered a different life to the image, I decided to move forward with a combination of mediums which were overlapped and alternated throughout different parts of the book, depending on which best supported the intended feeling and intention of that particular section.
Experiments in brush pen (on paper), Autumn 2022
Under the guidance of my external tutor Ann-Marie Tung-Hermelin, I transitioned to a different working method for some time. I began working on a written outline as the structural basis of the story. Once I had that, I used it to storyboard and sketch. This helped me to develop an understanding of the storytelling methods and gestaltning I wanted to use in the project. Once I started to have a skeleton of the project in text, it gave me a lot more freedom to experiment visually within the rough parameters that I had laid out.

Do my heritage and culture reside somewhere within me, and will they survive when everyone else is gone? Can I salvage this knowledge and, perhaps one day, pass it on? Will I ever manage to find home on my own terms?

And, if so, how?
I also spent some time working at different scales, and worked at Atelje 5, a studio at Konstfack, to create large charcoal drawings.

This experience gave me permission to explore a more embodied way of creating work—at a larger scale than I was previously doing—and also made me think differently about image making in relation to this project. It was a fruitful week and marked the beginning of an increased period of production.
A big shift during this project was my use (or lack thereof) of color. As I touched on earlier, my previous work used a lot of vibrant color and I almost never worked in black and white. Though I entertained using riso to introduce color there was something about working without it that made me expand my style, expression, and working methods. It allowed me to focus more on composition and learn how to express moods, light, and texture without color. So, I ultimately decided to keep it in black and white.
I started experimenting a lot more with printmaking as a method during the second half of this program. I created images—both analog and digital—and worked in photoshop to create different rasters and spot channels that would allow for both screen printing and risograph printing.

Thanks to the generous support of Anna Olsson, our print technician, I attended a 3-week screenprinting course which greatly increased my comfort level in the screenprinting workshop. Additionally, I met with Anna—as well as my external tutor Hanna Stenman—several times to discuss book layouts, printing, and to do risograph experiments with different parts of the book. This led to a lot of unexpected outcomes, especially when I tried textile screen printing for the first time. I introduced color a few times, but something didn’t feel right about it, which further confirmed my impulse to keep the work in black and white.

(1) One- and two-color risograph experiments, Spring 2023
(2) Screen printing experiments on textile, Spring 2023
(3) One- and two-color risograph experiments, Spring 2023
While experimenting with color and printmaking, I did my best to integrate every experience as a learning lesson instead of a bad outcome, and each experiment slightly shifted my perception of what the project could be, as well as what the potential elements of the exhibition installation might be.

Another obstacle was the decision between type and handwriting for the text in the book. At one point I considered creating a typeface from my handwriting, but I am not a typeface designer, and I recognized the significant time it takes to create one. I received mixed feedback about a prototype of the typeface. Most were in favor, saying it gave the work a human element, but some said it made the work feel playful and childlike, which was not something I was looking to communicate. Ultimately, I decided this wasn’t something I wanted to spend too much time on as it wasn’t the focal point of this project, and I chose to work with my own handwriting.

(1) My handwriting (2) A handwriting typeface prototype
The Museum of Imagined Heirlooms

In addition to the book, I created an accompanying artifact collection, *The Museum of Imagined Heirlooms*. The objects continue the exploration of the project’s themes, bringing tangibility by collecting and presenting found objects as imagined artifacts of significance tied to family migration patterns.

For as long as I can remember, there has always been a part of me that longed for some physical proof of the incredible lives of my ancestors. I was been raised on stories of their hardships, their triumphs, their resilience, but I had come into contact with so few things from their lives and had so many unanswered questions.

For instance, I knew my grandfather had buried a camera along with other valuables somewhere in Slovakia before he fled (he thought he’d be back to collect them), but I’ll never know what he took photographs of, what photography meant to him.

Unlike many of my friends, who inherited watches or jewelry, home decor, cooking utensils, or other everyday items passed down through generations, I (mostly due to migration) have never had access to family relics other than a small collection of photographs. Part of me has always wondered how access to tangible items from these past lives lived might give me a fuller picture of who my ancestors were—and by extension, who I am.
From Top Left: (1-2) Photographs of a sculpture-in-process at a ceramic studio in Stockholm

(3) Photo of my grandfather, Ludo, working on a sculpture

(4) A screenshot from an iPhone note reflecting on my lack of family heirlooms or archival artifacts

(5) A photograph of my paternal grandparents, Ludo and Ludmila, in front of a train they took from their refugee camp in Wörgl, Austria to Italy. After this photograph was taken, they boarded a ship bound for the East Coast of Canada, and then a train to the prairies in the center of the country, to start a new chapter of their lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. 1948.

(2) A photograph of Jesús and Teresa, my maternal grandparents, in Guatemala City, Guatemala. Date unknown.
At first, I explored the idea of creating my own sculptures and spent time experimenting with ceramics (outside of school) as I was very interested in the embodied practice of re-materializing history with my hands.

I realized early on that creating objects in this way wasn’t going to be easy—I learned that there was a systemic lack of access to the workshops at Konstfack (at least for my department). While other departments, such as Fine Art, received more unrestricted access, when I attempted to contact workshop technicians or other teachers to gain access, such as the film development lab, I was denied. Some of my classmates ended up with better luck, but workshop access was more related to unofficial connections and social capital than anything else, which made me feel uncertain about its viability.

This lack of access combined with the short timeline led me to press pause on my ideas of creating heirlooms with my own hands, but it also had a silver lining: it made me think more creatively about materialization.

After speaking with my professor, Sara Teleman, about these challenges, we began to conceptualize different ways of representing these imagined heirlooms that didn’t require the use of workshops at school outside of our department.

Sara encouraged me to embrace the objects’ inherent lack of factuality—although they were all based on oral history and intended to be as close to the truth as possible, the reality was they were, in fact, imagined heirlooms, and it was okay to lean into that fact.
She lent me the book *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry* by Leanne Shapton*, which proved to be very instrumental in re-shifting my approach to the museum.

Several months earlier, while in Slovakia, I bought several items from antique shops around the country. These items included sheet music, a camera from the 1940s, old post cards, among other things. I bought them without any intention to ever display them, thinking they’d serve as more of an inspirational toolbox for me during the creation of this work. But as time went on, I realized some of these, in fact, could be the heirlooms shown in the museum (I later also decided to create museum catalog excerpts of these artifacts to act as section dividers in the book).

There was something indescribably magic about sourcing these imagined heirlooms over the course of several months after I embraced this new concept. I began searching—at every flea market or second-hand store that I went to—for some sort of feeling based entirely on stories I’d heard of my

* The book is structured and formatted as an auction catalog that is entirely invented. The lots up for auction are what remain of the relationship between two fictional people. The couple’s personal effects weave together a story of a love that once but no longer was.
ancestors or of themes in the book. It became like a live-action treasure hunt and along the way I experienced synchronicities that left me wondering whether someone in another realm knew what I was doing (more about this in “On Synchronicity”).

When I first came up with the idea for the museum, it was a spontaneous almost intuitive impulse. Growing up I would often ask my mother about things she used to own, or things from my ancestors’ lives. She would shrug and say they didn’t exist anymore (or sometimes she would chide and ask: “What? Was I supposed to keep all of these things in case I one day had a child who was interested in looking at them?” Fair). This part of the project allowed me to begin exploring questions of inheritance and imagine what I might have wanted these things to be—and mean—to me.
Being OK with not “making sense”

My thesis project started as a compulsion to put my swirling thoughts, memories, dreams, and experiences down on paper, to try to make some sense of it all. But all along there has been a fear that this story (and, in fact, the story of my family itself) was too confusing, too much to process, and that those who were outside of my reality and lived experiences might not “get it.” Towards the beginning, I became somewhat obsessed with the concept of making sense and lost my way for a while as I tried to create something that was clear-cut and understandable.

My professors, tutors, friends, and family encouraged me to let go of this idea—“You shouldn’t try to make sense to everyone, you can’t anyway”—but the desire was stubborn and deep-rooted and so I spent a lot of time creating work that was scaffolded by things that I thought would help it to make more sense—too much text, over-explanation, sped up pacing, or drawing in a style that didn’t feel authentic to me and the story I wanted to tell (like a comic grid).

When I read Edith Hammar’s book, Homo Line, I felt I was floating. I was literally on a plane somewhere above the Atlantic Ocean at the time, but it was also the book’s dreamlike quality and slow pacing (illustrations that unapologetically took up an entire page or spread) that made me feel like I was drifting, melting into the metaphorical, the metaphysical. I read the book cover to
cover twice during that eight hour flight, and something shifted in me as I did. This is to say: *Homo Line* gave me the permission I had been longing for—to make work not to be palatable to or make sense to anyone who picks it up but as a means of exploring the embodied, somatic, experiential potential of storytelling. Not only this, but to embrace the impulse I had had from the start of making large, slow, immersive drawings instead of chopping them up into micro moments and movements.

I wrote in my journal at some point before encountering Edith’s work (sometime during the spring of 2022) that I wanted each drawing, each page in the book, to feel like a portal into another world. After reading Edith’s work, it became clear to me not only that this style of visual storytelling was possible, but that it was similar in many ways to what I myself had been trying to do.

Acting upon this feeling of inspiration and clarity, I reached out to Edith in early 2023 asking if they would be interested in reading my work. We began a correspondence and they eventually became one of my external tutors, supporting me and the creation of this work throughout the winter and spring of 2023.

Edith encouraged me to work with surrealistic and slow storytelling, with dream sequences, and to embrace the absurd. Through our discussions, I realized that, as a visual storyteller, I had to constantly strive to find the balance between saying too much and not saying enough—that is to say, to find the right amount of text and dialogue that
allowed the reader to insert themselves into the story and be lost in the visuals with the text acting as a guide of sorts. It helped me to think of text as a trail signpost, the kind that is occasionally tacked onto a tree in the middle of dense forest to let you know you haven’t lost your way and are still on a trail somewhere. It didn’t need to be imposing and constant, like a fence or other physical boundary that lines a path to make sure you stay on and don’t wander. I don’t know if this visual reference will make sense to anyone else, but it made sense to me.

My other external tutor, Hanna Stenman, also encouraged me to explore including imagery that allows the reader to get lost in a way that feels right for them. I realized that this was something I had been trying to do all along, and was actually a large part of my own inner resistance to a more linear grid format that chopped stories up into hundreds or thousands of micro moments. I wanted my work to feel dreamlike, I wanted readers to pause and consider if what they were looking at was a dream or reality—whether in the present moment or a memory—and not be rushed along.

Moa Matthis told me once: “You can always rely on the fact that viewers will come to the work and try to create order and meaning, to make sense of what is being presented and shown.” Sara Teleman told me something similar in a tutoring session: “Trust your reader—we see so much work that is fragmented and can still perceive it.” I carried these sentiments with me and was, I think, able to internalize that I not only could but should leave room for readers’ interpretation, rumination, and reflection.
Drawing from Autumn 2022
Mellanförskap & working from the margins*

I cannot discuss the work I undertook during this program without touching upon my identity, my positionality, and how that impacted the work.

Since before I began this program, I knew that I wanted to orient this work around my lived experiences and identity. Growing up as a mixed-race, mixed-culture person, I have long made art that somehow touches upon identity, diaspora, and culture. Topics like memory, inherited trauma, queerness, nostalgia, (de)colonialism, and cultural and racial identity remain at the forefront of my mind, and are part of a lens that I brought with me to Konstfack.

For as long as I remember, I’ve resented the question “where are you from?” To most people, this question is answerable by a simple phrase, or even a single word—the name of the city they were born and raised in or the country where they’ve always lived. For such people, these answers don’t require much thought. They are standard. But not for me. I’ve faced this and other questions about my background with regularity throughout my life (varying in intensity depending on place and context) and it continues to stir something inside of me, a feeling that’s difficult to describe. Growing up in Canada and the US, my parents did their best to build up a community around my younger sister and me, but truth is: we grew up culturally isolated and far from our ancestral homelands.

* Reference to Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center by bell hooks
“Ni de aquí, ni de allá” is a common phrase in the Latino diaspora that means “neither from here, nor there.” It’s the phrase that has come closest to explaining how I’ve spent much of my life feeling.

When I first learned the Swedish word “mellanförskap” it was enlightening. Meaning “in-betweenship,” there is no word I know in the English or Spanish language (at least not that is used in the same idiomatic way) that so perfectly captures the feeling of perpetual “un-belonging,” of in-between, of neither here nor there—feelings I have experienced all of my life.

Mellanförskap became one of the guiding words for the development of this work, one that I kept coming back to, especially as I learned to navigate my new identity as an immigrant in Sweden. After all, I worked on this project while adjusting to an unfamiliar country, living as an incongruent person in a culture that in many ways is opposite to mine.

I channeled all of these primal feelings of un-belonging, of strangeness, of unfamiliarity, into the development of this work, and did my best to sit with the heavy discomfort of the subject matter while also searching for levity, hope, and joy in what I set out to do.
On synchronicity

I was hesitant to include a section on this, but after encouragement from Moa Matthis and some of my classmates—and at the risk of sounding “woo woo”—I felt it important to document.

There have been many moments throughout my work on this project that have given me pause—that literally made me stop and wonder. Moments where I encountered strangers related to my work, small happenstances, or special synchronicities that gave me permission to dream a little.

For example, once while I was visiting Gothenburg, I wandered into Myrorna (a second-hand boutique) with the intention of finding an object for the Museum of Imagined Heirlooms that I could pretend was a “real” artifact from my family lineage. I had no idea what I was looking for—could it be a pair of old shoes that my grandmother wore on the boat from Europe to North America? My great-grandfather’s ashtray? I didn’t know; I was completely open.

The instant I walked through the glass sliding doors at the entrance I spotted out of the corner of my eye two beautiful porcelain mugs with red and green flowers on them, on sale at the front of the store. At first I walked by them—after all, cute things for my apartment was not the priority—but something made me turn back and take a closer look. I decided they were too lovely not to buy (besides, they were on sale for 9 SEK each), so I picked
them up. I carried them around while looking for these other mystery items I’d hoped to find, but I came up empty-handed. I decided to buy just the mugs and be on my way.

While standing in line for the checkout, I examined the mugs more closely. I spotted the text on the bottom of the them: “Czechoslovakia.”

I’ll never know what these two antique Czechoslovak porcelain mugs were doing so far from their place of origin, or what it was that compelled me to pick them up that day, but something about the experience stirred something deep inside of me and made me smile. It felt like a wink from the universe that I was on the right track.

The antique Czechoslovak mugs I found and purchased in Gothenburg, Spring 2023
I had many other similar moments in the many months of work on this project. In the early spring of 2022, I befriended a stranger at an Ethiopian restaurant in Södermalm. I mentioned to him that I had a research trip planned to Slovakia and he told me he had a friend, Kaja, who lived there and put us in touch. I reached out to Kaja when I arrived in Bratislava in April 2022 and we met for a drink. I told her all about my project and what I knew about my grandparents. It turns out our grandfathers were from neighboring villages in the Tatry foothills. Not only this but she worked in the Slovak cultural world and gave me several leads to pursue while I was visiting, including the advice to visit the Slovak National Library where I ended up being able to access two giant boxes filled with archival material related to my grandfather (like original manuscripts and decades-worth of old letters of his—correspondence with other Slovak artists and cultural figures). We, too, ended up becoming friends and she proved to be an invaluable resource during the development of this project. She actually ended up moving to Sweden with her partner shortly afterwards and my partner and I went and stayed with them on Gotland over a long weekend during which she taught me to cook a traditional Slovak dish (bryndzové halušky, or sheep’s cheese dumplings) and shared stories of Slovak Christmas traditions.

One evening, in the dead of Swedish winter, I attended a “Drink & Draw” event at a bar in Gamla Stan. I was drawing and began chatting with a man who was sitting directly across the table from me. At that time, I was inking some drawings I had made of Bratislava (including a drawing of the day Kaja and I spent together).
I was inking the buildings of an area of the city called Petržalka and after a while, the man mentioned he was Slovak. I told him that I was actually working on drawings of Slovakia for my Master’s thesis project and turned my sketchbook towards him as proof. He pointed to the center of the page: “I grew up right there,” he said, his finger resting in the middle of the half-inked Petržalka. He proceeded to tell me stories of what it was like to grow up there and all I could do was sit there, speechless. What were the odds? (This chance encounter actually ended up becoming a few pages in the book).

In March 2023, I was accumulating artifacts to show at a feedback session. Rifling through a box of random items I had purchased while in Slovakia a year prior, I found sheet music I had bought at an antique shop in Bratislava because I liked the illustration on the front of it. I asked my partner (who studied music) if the sheet music could possibly have been for an accordion (the instrument my grandmother played). He took a look at the music and said that, yes, it very well could be. Elated at the possibility that this could be a semi-factual artifact in The Museum of Imagined Heirlooms, I began writing a text that assigned invented meaning to the piece of music: that this was the sheet music for my grandmother’s favorite song at the time that she took with her when she fled.

After I had written the text, I decided to Google the song to see if I could find anything about it online. Within moments, I found the song (“Prečo sa ma nikto neopýta?”) on Youtube, and clicked the link, eager to listen. It was a
HE POINTS TO A CLUSTER OF BUILDINGS

I GREW UP RIGHT HERE
deeply melancholy tango in which an accordion prominently featured. I couldn’t believe it! Not only this, but the song was released in 1945—the very same year my grandparents fled Slovakia. I closed my eyes and listened to the music, goosebumps radiating down my arms and legs.

Once in a seminar, Moa said that when we are very focused on something—like a certain topic or project—the world begins to “resonate with meaning.” That is to say, synchronicities like the ones I mention above take on a deeper significance than, perhaps, they would in another context. Nevertheless, these small synchronistic moments (of which there were many) lent a touch of magic, of mystery, of spiritualism, to this research and this work, and I am deeply grateful that they showed up in the way they did.
Making the conceptual physical: preparing for the Spring Exhibition

“The degree project is not the exhibition,” my professor Sara Teleman told me during an individual tutoring session in April 2023. At the time, I was feeling a bit lost about how to show my work in the spring exhibition. I was extremely hesitant to show a book that was not finished—I wanted to control how and when it was viewed—so for several weeks I told myself I would show only illustration prints and not the book in-progress. I also was feeling more interested in the installation portion of the exhibition than I was to show the book itself. But Sara and my tutor Hanna encouraged me to exhibit at least parts of my sequential storytelling in the space as it was an opportunity to get feedback from readers and use that to reflect on next steps with this project. So I decided to print portions of the book.

I quickly realized that I needed to prioritize what needed doing before the exhibition and that I couldn’t do absolutely everything myself. This relinquishing of control was (as it always is) a challenge for me, someone who tends towards perfectionism and whose anxiety is quelled by doing things on my own so I can ensure their quality. But, pressed for time and needing to focus on textile printing, book binding, and setting up the physical installation, I decided to outsource the printing of the book.

Upon the recommendation of my tutor, Hanna Stenman, I
reached out to Botkyrka Offset and hired them to do the printing of my book—ten copies in total. I ordered it unbound and uncut as I planned to do the book binding myself. Preparing the book in InDesign (something that is not in my area of expertise) was a challenge and a learning experience and I was humbled by how long it took.

Picking up the pages from the printers, I embarked on a crash course in book-binding, thanks to my classmate Maija Nürnberg Puriņš, who taught me. I learned how to wax a linen thread, make a guide for punching holes, and how meditative sewing thread through paper can be. My books were section bound with a French link stitch and, over the
course of preparing them, I learned that I love book binding. I was very happy in my decision to do my own binding even though it meant an additional two or three days of work, and intend to continue binding publications in the future.

When it came to the physical installation space, I began sketching the initial drawings of my exhibition idea sometime in February, but I actually had long had a concept in mind about how I wanted it to feel. I knew I wanted to show my illustrations in large format and on textile (something my tutor, Edith, also encouraged me to do) I knew I wanted to display some of the physical artifacts from the museum. And I knew I wanted to have a scent component in collaboration with my friend Aleksandra (Ola) Pawlowksa, a Polish olfactory artist.

Though I hadn’t previously worked with textile printing before, I wanted the material I worked with to reflect the themes in the book, namely the dreamlike quality of the drawings and the storytelling, as well as the presence of the past and of memory in the current moment, and that these things are alive irrespective of time and space. I wanted the textiles to flow and move as people walked past and take on a life of their own in the exhibition space.

In March, I was assigned a very large, central area of Vita Havet to exhibit my work. When I first got this space assignment, I was nervous—how was I going to fill all of that space? I realized that I would likely need to print more illustrations than I had initially planned—instead of five or six I would probably end up needing double as many.
I had hoped to silkscreen print my illustrations, but ran into practical problems right away. The largest frame at school was only 70x120cm and I wanted my prints to be larger than that. I contacted a few commercial printers and also looked across Europe for screen printing services, but most of the printing services at the format I wanted were done through sublimation printing. I took some time to reflect on what I wanted, and then I realized that I had access to a sublimation printer at school and that I could print up to 110cm in width with unlimited length with it. So this is the direction I headed.

My first sublimation test print, March, 2023
My classmate, Yueming Li, was also doing sublimation printing for her own exhibition so I contacted her and we did some printing experiments together in the workshop. Her help, guidance, and encouragement were invaluable at the time because I was feeling quite uncertain about the best printing method. After a successful test print of one of my illustrations, I decided to go ahead and print the rest of my prints in this way. I spent roughly a two week period buying materials, cutting fabric, printing—and reprinting when things inevitably didn’t go as planned. I really enjoyed sublimation printing, and have a new appreciation for printing on textile.

I initially planned to hang my prints in a random, organic assortment and display three white plinths with items from *The Museum of Imagined Heirlooms*. But due to logistical constraints, including access to material, and an initial lack of clarity around exact dimension specifications, I decided to instead build a frame that would control the spacing of the illustrations. This ended up being a better plan as I hadn’t initially planned to display the book in the space, and realized in April that I needed to create an environment in which people could also read comfortably. By using a wooden frame, I constructed a “room” of sorts inside of Vita Havet that would create a quiet container for those engaging with the book, wherein they were also surrounded by walls of imagery from the book. I also decided to print on chiffon (the material must be synthetic to use the sublimation printer) because I wanted a high level of transparency so they would feel like they were blurring the boundaries between what was around them in the same way memories blur the boundary between physical and dream worlds.
I had twelve illustrations total, measuring 110cm by 140cm, so I built a frame that was 4.9M by 4.9M to accommodate all of the prints as well as spacing for people to enter the space.

(1) My M1 helpers carrying the finished frame to Havet.

(2) My frame on the floor of Vita Havet while I was staining it to better match the table I got for the exhibition.
Prior to the exhibition installation, I also worked together with Aleksandra (Ola) to develop two scent profiles that would complement the visual work. I have long known that scent is the sense most closely tied to memory and wanted to explore this more in my artistic practice. I saw this exhibition as a perfect opportunity to do so.

Specifically, I wanted to create scents that mirrored memory/dream sequences in the book so that the reader could have a more intensified sensory experience. I landed on creating one scent based on the “Petržalka” dream sequence, with notes of parsley, and earthy, floral herbs, as well as one for the memory of my hike in the mountain forests near where I grew up—the “Grousewoods”—with cedar, cypress, pine, among other scents. Ola and I spent one day testing and putting the scent notes together.
The set up of the exhibition went well overall, though there were some challenges that mostly came from translating my expectations based on abstract understandings of space and physics, and what happened when these drawings were brought into the physical realm.

I was also grateful to receive scholarships from Beata Brummers Stiftelse and Ulla Fröberg-Cramérs Stiftelse totaling 8,000 SEK, which helped me to cover a lot of my printing and building costs. Overall, everything went smoothly, and I felt confident and grateful seeing the installation come together in preparation for the opening.
Externalizing the internal: exhibition, feedback & thesis defense

Opening the doors to the exhibition was, in almost all ways, a perfect culmination of years of work. Showing something that had been so personal and private for so long was frightening and surreal at first, but it was incredible.

I received many comments from people, both in person, by email, and on social media. They told me how much my work affected them, or that my story felt like their story and they felt seen by my work, like the foreign students from KTH who sat huddled in my room and later messaged me saying how moved they were and how much they wanted to buy the final published book. I cried with and hugged strangers after they told me a specific page or moment from the book reminded them of their own longing for a home out of reach.

My finished exhibition installation
My exhibition space on the day of the vernissage
(1) Part of The Museum of Imagined Heirlooms installation

(2) The book and part of the scent installation inside the exhibition space
I also received the feedback that the room provided a feeling of calm, a space for reflection amidst a busy, crowded exhibition. I noticed many people sitting there for a long time, flipping through the pages of the book, which made me feel very happy as this was exactly what I had hoped for when I designed the space. I couldn’t have asked for a better gift than to be received in this way by people who I didn’t know, while sharing this project for the first time.

At the same time, during my thesis defense I was left feeling that, while appreciated, some of my work and intentions were not fully understood by my opponent, Sofia Olsson. The feedback I received—made up, in large part, of notes, suggestions (such as that I should have included more dialogue, action, or drama), and questions about the ending—gave me the impression that the work was in some ways misread.

As discussed in previous sections, the lack of dialogue in my project was a creative decision as this work was meant to be an internal, introspective, meditative dialogue with the past, with my ancestors, and with myself more than with those around me. My intended lack of a neatly tied-up ending speaks to the perpetuity of these feelings and the desire to find peace with the fact that (as touched on earlier) many of these questions will never be answered.

It was also interesting to see how the tone of the feedback I received from a book editor differed from what classmates received from opponents who were fellow practitioners. Many of my classmates’ work was also read by people with shared experiences, identities, and positionalities (such as
immigrants from the same continent or country of origin, people of a shared racial background or diaspora, or with shared family war traumas), and this also made me see how such differences in identity and in experience could easily lead to misunderstanding. Still, though I was in some ways disappointed, I was also prepared and welcomed the opportunity to discuss and defend my project’s intentions.

This experience was a reminder of how important it is to, nonetheless, share these types of stories—stories told from the margins; stories that are told with the intention of healing; stories told in fragments typical of diasporic people and children of immigrants; stories that some are still quick to label unclear or confusing, particularly those whose lives have not been touched by generational or migration trauma. This experience reaffirmed for me the belief that these stories deserve to be told in a way that feels authentic and true to our lived experiences, despite their potential of being misunderstood or misinterpreted by those outside of these experiences.

Interestingly, my thesis defense experience also connected back to my initial fears of my work being misunderstood, which I touched upon earlier in the section “Being OK with not ‘making sense.’” I was told by teachers and tutors alike to trust in the reader, to give them credit for reading between the lines and filling gaps, but perhaps the more important lesson here was to trust in the right reader.

Thankfully, after months of reflecting on the potential for my work not to make sense to everyone, I felt prepared to face this experience with discernment and confidence.
I was also reminded of the importance of making work for myself and for people like me. When asked earlier in the year for whom I was making this work, my answer was always: *for myself, my family, and for people like us*. Though visual communication is meant, as the name suggests, to communicate, this does not mean that it must communicate the same message to every person, nor should the aspiration to communicate with everyone cloud the intention to create in the first place.

I recently heard an interview with Zoe-Lister Jones, a writer, producer, director, and actor who was in conversation about the creative process and philosophical inquiry. The quote that stuck out to me and has stayed in my mind was this:

"*For anyone in any creative pursuit, making something with an audience in mind, to me, is always sort of the death knell. Make something that you want to make. What is the story you want to tell? That's what you put out into the world. Because when you start to be product oriented over process oriented, it can get you into some trouble.*"
Me standing in front of two illustration prints in my exhibition space
By the end of the exhibition, I had received an overwhelming outpouring of positive, validating, and generative feedback. I was invited to exhibit parts of the project nationally and internationally—including at Körsbärsgården Konsthall on Gotland (they choose one Konstfack graduating student each Spring), at Kulturhuset’s Bibliotek, at Östbergag Kulturhus, at a New York Latin American Art Triennial exhibition, and at the Somali National Museum in Mogadishu, among others. I received a Konstfacks Stiftelse scholarship and positive reviews, including from C-Print art journal, who wrote in their write-up Notes on the MA Exhibition 2023 of Konstfack:

“Two aerial textile ‘pavilions’ set a clear mark. Ludi Leiva's (Visual Communication) choice to present her illustrated narrations around navigating the notion of ‘home’ whilst in cultural in-betweenness, in this way feels fresh for the discipline and symbolically apt to confine a ‘room’ of her own inside the pavilion. Ludi Leiva's had great success as an illustrator, appearing with her work in prestigious magazines and publications, so is clearly one to watch in this realm.”

Like many things in life, the complicated tension of feeling both understood and misunderstood made this a very human and holistic experience. Teasing apart how I feel about my work being read and interpreted from what I want and have been led by intuition to create was one of the most challenging parts of this whole exercise.
Sharing work is always partly exhilarating and frightening, because by sharing it and placing it outside of yourself, it becomes something else, something not entirely belonging to you. The work becomes a shared domain that can be read in ways that you did not intend or anticipate. But that is part of what it is to make art and creative work, and part of what makes this work both challenging and fulfilling.
Closing thoughts

This Master’s represented a gift to myself: of time and space to explore, experiment, and grow. To deepen my artistic practice and practical knowledge while meditating on, connecting with, and honoring my cultures, the stories of my ancestors, and building kinship with anyone who found meaning and recognition in the work I created. I can only hope my ancestors would be proud of this work.

Along the way, I learned more than I could have anticipated at the start of these two years. And while the practical learnings—including printmaking, book binding, sequential storytelling, and a deepened understanding of visual meaning-making—will continue to serve me, I especially treasure what I learned about myself, my voice, my potential, and how that will continue to shape how I move forward from this place as both an artist and a person.

I feel encouraged to continue exploring the potential of visual storytelling, and am interested in experimenting more with the picture book format as a way to begin some of these conversations. Right now, I am left with a stronger desire to pursue exhibiting work in physical space than I am with working on visual narratives for the publishing sphere. The power of art in physical and public space is something that, to me, is deeply rewarding as I get to have conversations and interactions with people in real-time. I look forward to the six exhibitions I have lined up for this summer and fall, and the many more that I hope to have in
coming months and years. I can only imagine the growth and learnings they hold for me.

When it comes to publishing the book, I intend to take a break from writing and working actively on it for the summer and early fall. I will return to it, but I want to first spend some time reflecting on the learnings from this program as well as my intentions for publishing as I do not lose sight of them. I want to eventually find a publisher who is right for this book, who understands me, where I am coming from, and believes in my story. I do not want to sign a deal with the first publishing house that gives me an offer. I intend to wait for the right opportunity to present itself.

As I touched upon in previous sections, A Home is a Portal is the beginning of a long—probably life-long—journey of exploration and healing through artistic practice. I am sure now that this project is but one of many attempts to explore and make sense of enormous questions of identity and belonging, and I look forward to that journey.

Towards the beginning of this program, I placed a lot of value on making sense. But I know now that we cannot fully control how the things we create are received or interpreted. We cannot guarantee that all who come into contact with our work will read it as we wished they would, particularly those of us with marginalized identities who share our stories—our truths—with the world. But we can keep creating for ourselves and for our communities regardless, while also understanding that it is sometimes worth not making sense to some if it means
reaching and positively impacting those for whom the work was intended. We can find solace in the fact that the work will touch those it is meant for and that its creation and subsequent sharing may well have impacts reaching far beyond ourselves, our own perceptions, and even our wildest expectations. After all, even if our work is not fully understood by some, it still represents an opportunity for dialogue, learning, and, hopefully, increased empathy and connection.

In the face of all of these truths—when given the choice to create or not—I will continue choosing to create.
In gratitude

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References


