

*Bundled Dwelling/Equipajes Inhabitados*

by

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## Abstract

My research uses the intimacy of the kitchen table as a lens through which to explore relations between migration, dwelling and self identity. *Bundled Dwelling/Equipajes Inhabitados* brings objects of domestic life and thought on migration, home and self, together in assemblages derived from performance-based installations that seek to connect and re-connect elements within. In their making (bundling, entangling the kitchen table object/s) and materiality, these assemblages locate the process of making and re-making ‘home’ for me as a migrant, and thereby elicit and re-work personal and socio-cultural conceptions, assumptions and memories about my (and perhaps also other’s) home and self territories. The methodology that I use, which focuses on action around the kitchen table object/s, flows from Gloria Anzaldúa's descriptions of a *mestiza*'s knowing by kneading – “soy un amasamiento” – and the potential of ‘unfolding’ subject-object relations by means of objectivation within domestic spaces. I draw from decolonial theory and post-human inquiry, including Object Oriented Feminism and contemporary studies in migration and material culture. I also model this work after that of artists that engage with domestic life to un-do familiarity, distances or scales in articulating associations that exceed domesticity, like Doris Salcedo, Mona Hatoum and Julieanna Preston.

## **Land Acknowledgment**

Inside my reflections and creative practice discussed in this thesis paper I hope to honor the skills and knowledge exchanged for thousands of years in this land that I am fortunate to be a guest immigrant on. I was gratefully empowered by learning in the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land on which I stand and create. I would like to acknowledge all the first people of the land of Toronto and feel responsible for the awareness and respect of ancestral names, language, laws and decolonial actions.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Scope of Analysis</b> .....	6
<b>Process and Methodology: <i>Entangled</i></b> .....	9
<b>Body of Work</b> .....	14
<b>1. Negotiations, dislocations and replacements</b> .....	14
<b>2. Territories, borders, translations/Process 1</b> .....	18
<i>Objects and translations</i> .....	21
<i>Objects and borders</i> .....	22
<b>3. <i>Objects and memory/Process 2</i></b> .....	24
<i>Part 1</i> .....	25
<i>Part 2</i> .....	27
<b>4. <i>Remain in touch</i></b> .....	29
<b>Theoretical Framework</b> .....	31
<i>Objects and Politics of Knowledge</i> .....	31
<i>Case Study</i> .....	34
<b>Concluding Thoughts</b> .....	37
<i>The Exhibition</i> .....	37
<i>Summary and Findings</i> .....	39
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	42
<b>Appendix A: The no-exhibition documenting material</b> .....	45

## Table of figures

Figure 1. <i>Prototypes</i> . Detail, sketch with reclaimed wood and sewing thread. ....	10
Figure 2. <i>Process 1</i> . Detail, entanglement with OSB pieces. ....	13
Figure 3. <i>Prototypes</i> . Details, (left and right) reclaimed wood and sewing thread, July 2019. ....	14
Figure 4. <i>Prototypes</i> . Detail, reclaimed wood and sewing thread, July 2019. ....	17
Figure 5. <i>Process 1</i> . Assemblage. Desk, OSB panels, washable ink, wheat flour, dried corn flour, cumin, paprika, small wooden prototypes, sewing thread, November 2019. ....	19
Figure 6. <i>Process 1</i> . Details, (left) stained cotton thread with cumin and paprika; (right) dried corn flour on a desk. ....	21
Figure 7. <i>Process 1</i> . Details, OSB panels, (left) entangled small prototypes, (right) reclaimed wood pieces entangled with sewing and cotton thread. ....	23
Figure 8. <i>Process 2</i> . Installation, found objects, cotton thread, December 2019. ....	24
Figure 9. <i>Process 2. Part 1</i> . Performance details. ....	26
Figure 10. <i>Process 2. Part 2</i> . Carboard, reclaimed wood, metal twine, cotton thread, charcoal, wax paper and found strainer. ....	27
Figure 11. <i>Process 2. Part 2</i> . Details, (left) wax paper and charcoal, (right) entangled carboard. ....	29
Figure 12. <i>Remain in touch</i> . Details of the clip, December 2019. ....	30
Figure 13. Exhibition preview. Details, (left and right) installation process, OCAD Experimental Media Room, February 2020. ....	37
Figure 14. Exhibition Preview. Details of the installation-performance video, OCAD Experimental Media Room, February 2020. ....	38
Figure 15. Exhibition Preview. Details of video installation-performance with charcoal, OCAD Experimental Media Room, February 2020. ....	39

## Introduction

This paper compiles my reflections on a series of assemblages to be installed in the TMAC (Toronto Media Arts Center) Main Gallery titled *Bundled Dwelling/Equipajes Inhabitados*. The assemblages can be perceived as traces of experience, and a means of translating the work of thinking/dialoguing *with* them. They focus around the kitchen table to contextualize sensibilities associated with objects that people often collect in mobile situations to construct, make/sustain/re-imagine an inhabitable home. Moreover, I explore the kitchen table as a cluster of objects rather than as an individual object to be able to sense what its “entanglements” (Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity” 810) tell about material affectivity, space dynamics and domestic identities/negotiations. While the work I discuss here is mostly a reflexive inquiry (Alvesson and Sköldböck 263; Gray and Malins 23) and intuitive –based on processes of object-making and performance with different materials, and installations with found objects, plywood, strings or knots– it is all embedded in a dialogical exchange with objects themselves, contemporary critical theory of culture and literary discourses, in order to be able to conclude on broader socio-cultural, political and other potential implications of my findings.

The starting point of this project is found in Gloria Anzaldúa’s poetry and writings within *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and her thinking on domestic objects in the chapter titled “La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness”. Her voice resonates with me thanks to my Latin American and 'mestiza' culture origins. When Anzaldúa writes about objects of food-making, she re-interprets them by immersing us in traditional labour and food ingredients. In doing so, she brings to the fore objects as means of self-knowledge. With this in mind, I seek to explore un-conventional ways of thinking and knowing *via* objects of domestic life; and to re-shape the objects, as a way of reflecting on my/our experiences with them.

I am also inspired by critical theory coursework in the IAMD program, particularly, problematizing cultural assumptions and accessing identity through the knowledge that emerges in the constructions of dwelling(s), intimate spaces and imagined territories. From here, I make connections to decolonial thinking, a turn towards objects in migration studies, and Object Oriented Feminism.

### **Scope of Analysis**

*Bundled Dwelling/Equipajes Inhabitados* is primarily a self-reflective analysis. A dialogical position *with* objects and materials, however, allows for fluidity between an observational perspective and a consideration of objects as facilitators of agency. This complicates material affections beyond the individual or self. This idea came together as a result of several preliminary projects in which I combined print-based work with physical, tangible objects. Over the course of a year, I explored various philosophical discourses on materiality, and worked with traces of typical Latin American food objects, like yerba mate and white flour. All of this then matured into a concern with the making of individual ‘territories’, starting with the kitchen table as a reflection that exposes part of a larger (social, cultural, political) purview.

The kitchen table and its spaces and objects are significant in my Latin American culture insofar as they represent colonial traditions and socio-political structures. I began with very small prototypes that disturbed and complicated a traditional kitchen table’s form, relationships and/or functions. I also established a sort of mirroring effect, of objects within objects, through the fact that I made the prototypes on my own kitchen table or studio desk. My origins and socio-

political tensions therein, constitute an important layer of my experience as an immigrant in North America, and ultimately, of the research questions I chose to answer.

My main research question brings together many of the connections I made starting out:

*In what ways does assembling non-functional prototypes/assemblages of a kitchen table, specifically by manipulating/undoing/disturbing the table and its objects, translate experiences and negotiations of migration and dwelling?*

To respond to the various elements of interest, I broke my research question down into the following sub-questions:

*How do everyday domestic objects in a kitchen table setting make experiences of space and place, specifically ‘making home’, tangible?*

*What do such objects tell us about individual as well as socio-cultural notions of dwelling and care? In turn, what do they tell us about politics of knowledge and unconventional<sup>1</sup> ways of knowing?*

*What is the objects’ role in negotiating individual agency for those who inhabit the kitchen table space, and more broadly, for others represented in this space?*

The research sub-questions focus in on two key aspects. The first sub-question refers to the idea of imagination and fluid re-invention made tangible in the territories of what we call ‘home’. The second and third sub-questions open my/our attention to the material affectivity that a domestic site like the kitchen table tells us about, and interrogate if/how borders, territories and traditional concepts of ‘home’ affect our identity, how we engage with things around us, and

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<sup>1</sup> Non-prevalent ways of generation and propagation of knowledge.



whether action/practices of home-making within this space (sometimes neglected, dismissed) can actually be transformative. All three questions are related to my being a migrant and how this interplays with art- and home-making. My personal experience, inscribed within layers of action when installing the chosen object/s, then, is key to my attempt to answer these questions (a sort of auto-ethnography).

Another important means of answering these questions is using the methodology of telling *with* and *through* the objects I work with. This is inspired by a feminist perspective of working/being with things as immersive engagement (Behar 9; Puig de la Bellacasa 51), as opposed to just prioritizing the observer position. This approach helps me to re-construct my experience in the process. In other words, the results of this project should be understood as a process of doing and thinking in dialogue with the objects collected and explored (and with supporting sources), rather than as a definitive artifact. The results are what I believe Gloria Anzaldúa calls the “inevitable unfolding” (103) which is a way of re-considering our relations with objects from the inside-out, as a continuous process.

In supporting my analysis, I engage with literature that debates our position/s vis-à-vis objects, like Katherine Behar's *Object Oriented Feminism* and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's *Matters of Care*. In particular, I consider the possibility that we are all objects, including “the notion of human objects” (Behar 1). As Behar points out, subject-object relations can reveal politics of knowledge. In considering distances that can be created by disturbing and re-doing objects of domesticity, I also include the views of Sara Ahmed, together with those of other material culture theorists. Specifically, how do we construct ideas of ‘home’ and ‘away’, and how can we re-imagine these relationships? Contemporary practitioners and their work, like Doris Salcedo's analysis of domestic objects as a denunciation of social conflict (3:15-4:04),

Mona Hatoum's installations on the instability of the ground and space that touch the affects of home-objects (60-11-0:46), and Julieanna Preston's research on live art and "building material's liveness" (6), act as useful models for my work. They focus on the importance of site/space-creation as part of a continuous process that mixes reflection, the making of the private and the domestic, and a re-consideration of co-habitation.

The thesis work to be presented in the TMAC (Toronto Media Arts Center) Main Gallery is a multi-part installation that results from disturbing and re-arranging – complicating – original elements. These actions constitute a 're-sensing' as part of the encounter with the public; and at the same time, reveal inner relationships around the kitchen table, both significant and paradoxical. The process that takes place in the installation site is the end, rather than the means, and is meant to be ongoing, to stay 'unfinished', and to be re-charged by the space and people around it during the exhibition.

### **Process and Methodology: *Entangled***

I am a printmaker by vocation. Working with printmaking surfaces, tools, objects and their traces has been such a significant part of my professional and personal life that, at times, I feel I have come to embody and mutate these elements; thinking with them (and with my hands), rather than with my mind. Something similar happens when I cook in my kitchen, particularly on the kitchen table. Cooking is a little like rolling ink onto a printing slab in the way in which it helps me process and understand experience, among other things. For me, these two worlds, the artistic/professional and the domestic, 'speak' to each other and intermingle in many ways. At the same time, the kitchen table and performances that take place around it (e.g. table setting,

serving, eating, sitting) can be perceived as representative of territories, borders and/or colonial traditions, all of which have affected my experiences of migration, home-making and dwelling in recent years. With all of this in mind, I decided to begin my project on the kitchen table, and experiment from its surface rather than from that of a printing slab. By experimenting with the kitchen table itself (as opposed to with printed images of it, for example), I sought to make tangible some of those intimate, embedded layers of myself, and perhaps also of others, in the process. More specifically, I took the kitchen table as a substrate, to re-make and re-imagine ‘home’ and ‘elsewhere’, which implies a re-interpretation of my identity.

One of the critiques that came up during the first stages of the project was regarding the use of ‘assemblages’ or ‘clusters’. More specifically: what do clusters mean in this particular investigation? How do structures made by pressing together, bundling, juxtaposing and overlapping materials and spaces in-between, as well as focusing on objects of domesticity, really relate to the analysis of making place, space, home and negotiations of private/domestic spaces? (Fig. 1).

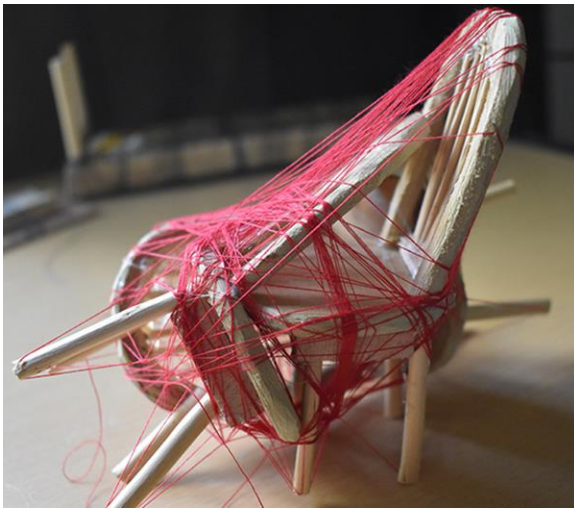


Figure 1. *Prototypes*. Detail, sketch with reclaimed wood and sewing thread.

The terms gathering and clustering – entangling – refer to a method that I understand as a form of participant observation in performance<sup>2</sup>. They facilitate thinking by juxtaposing, re-positioning or overlapping familiar, everyday materials and thereby making them unfamiliar, to activate and re-sense them. The priority with this method is to establish interactions (between objects, object and maker), more so than to obtain an observable artifact. More specifically, I understand this action of bringing objects together in different ways as the material portion of the dialogue between me and those objects. It raises and responds to questions like: which materials/objects allow attachment? What can stand alone and have meaning? How do materials/objects react to my actions with/on/in/between them? And, in doing so, it unearths knowledge, hidden and/or new. With the kitchen table as with other related objects (e.g. cooking ingredients, tools, dishes, cutlery and objects of affectivity and coexistence in the kitchen space), clustering, and more specifically, bundling together, places the emphasis of my reflection on the question of ‘what holds this together?’; the tacit, the forgotten, the difficult to detect/perceive that can be evident by changing material distances, spaces or properties. Dislocating and re-locating familiar objects by clustering, first draws attention to what we already know about the objects or the assumptions that we have about them, and the roles we take on alongside them. These explorations open up the possibility of thinking about what lies in the relationships between the objects/spaces, the shadows or memories that inhabit them and the importance of those objects to individual and collective lives. Re-arranging them then uses the emerging concepts and applies a sort of subversive pressure. Ultimately, entangling allows me to comment

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<sup>2</sup> Lorne Dwight Conquergood speaks about a reimagining of “participant-observation as coperformative witnessing” (149), when discussing Frederick Douglass and Johannes Fabian’s performative ethnography.

on the politics of materiality and how we make inhabitable spaces, and to consider alternative accounts of lives/living things.

Overall, the project places most of the methodological weight on experience (Barrett 13; Sullivan 88). Working/being with things as opposed to prioritizing observation or “reliance to the eye” (Kelly 25), directs attention to the politics of perception and “how we look at *any* artwork” (von Hantelmann 1). The value of this approach is in creating a “knowledge economy” that makes “it difficult to claim any innocent or outsider position of *observation*” (Puig de la Bellacasa 29).

While the entangling challenges existing positions and distances with things, the practice of making is also an entanglement in itself, as it touches – awakens, unsettles, and then focuses – my reflections on the imaginary *and* physical aspects of bringing bundles into new places and spaces. Moreover, in this practice, materiality and objects have a role in breaking unilateral thinking and allowing a dialogue that takes into account dead spaces, interstices, shadows, negative areas and chance; much like in the process of making home as a migrant. Cotton thread, for instance, has a significant role in this process of successive entanglements. It lends simplicity because: it is a fiber commonly used to bind elements together, we find it all over the world telling histories of crop domestication or manual work, and it is connected to everyday cooking processes (e.g. found in napkins, tablecloths, and cleaning rags, as well as in various methods of cooking). It is naturally embedded in many life circles. Specific to this project, I use cotton thread to sketch and define new, intriguing spaces (Fig. 2). It helps me to discover. And, together with filming, these actions use and fuse my body into the “amasamiento” (kneading); the discovery of dislocation or separation followed new bonds, and forms of dwelling, in action.

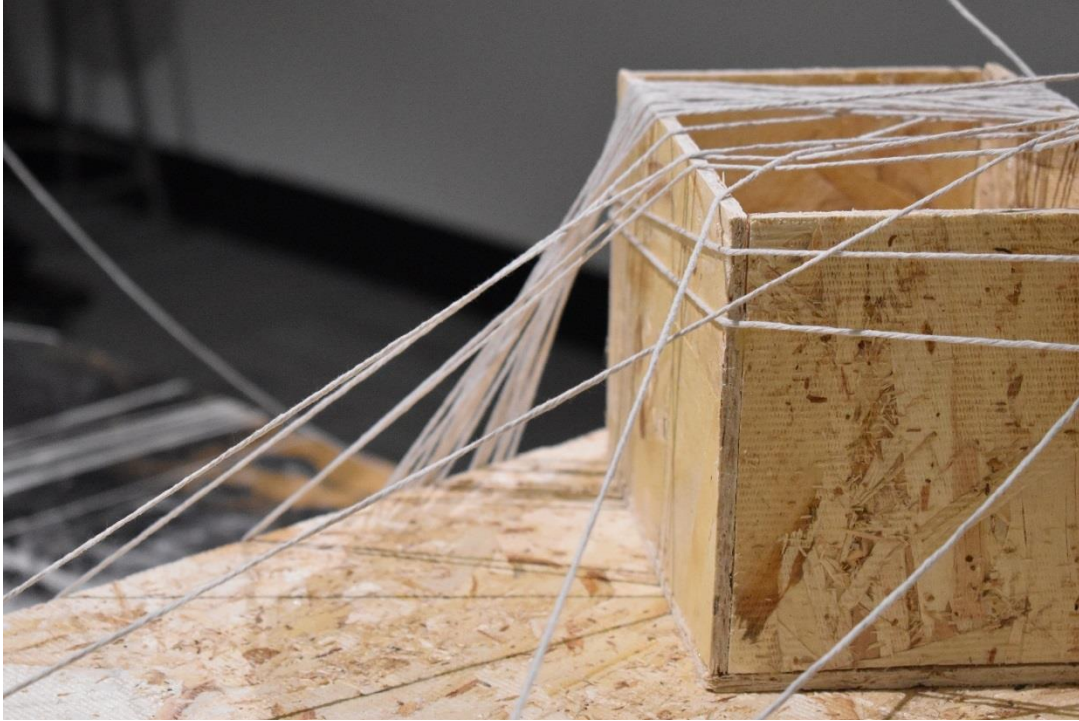


Figure 2. *Process 1*. Detail, entanglement with OSB pieces.

Entangling includes sub-methods, like compiling and presenting found objects, materials and processes as part of the performed work. These sub-methods imply attention to object affectivity (Ahmed, “Happy Objects” 30), as well as to the material dialogue/s that emerge when curating, crafting and sorting tangible elements that opens up the possibility of understanding “matter as not fixed essence” (Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity” 828). Moreover, these sub-methods bring to light transient traces of experience within the installation(s), and at the same time, elicit interpretative yet non-neutral involvement: “the interpretation does not take place in a neutral, apolitical, ideology-free space. Nor is an autonomous, value-free researcher responsible for it” (Alvesson and Sköldberg 12).

## Body of Work

### 1. Negotiations, dislocations and replacements

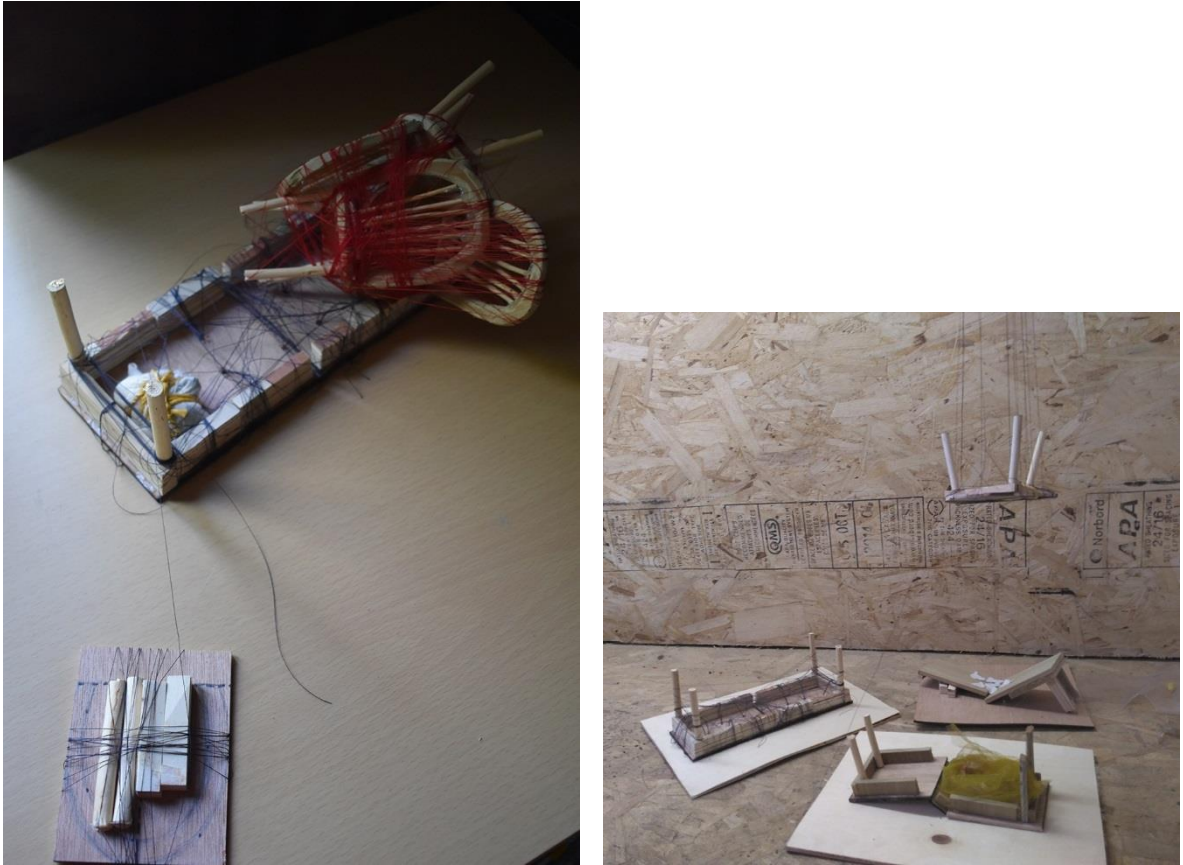


Figure 3. *Prototypes*. Details, (left and right) reclaimed wood and sewing thread, July 2019.

The kitchen table as a gathering space often mediates close relationships and social lives in the private domain. Because of this quality, it can have an important role in the work of creating and re-thinking a habitable place. Its presence alone brings to mind individual and socio-cultural ideas about family, tradition (oppressive and otherwise), gender roles and domestic labour, well beyond its physical, static, neutral form. In brief, the kitchen table seems, on first glance, like something so simple, and yet has the potential for such complexity. Starting

out, my idea was to evolve from that simplicity to complexity, and explore/challenge the kitchen table lore. So, I began with a series of small prototypes (Fig. 3), which evolved into an organic clustering process.

Prototyping, defined as “representations of a design made before final artifacts exist” (Buchenau and Suri 424), allowed me to bring together the various ideas that I was curious about in my preliminary work. This meant not only what I already ‘knew’ about the kitchen table and related space/objects, but also my experiences and meditations on fragmentation, loss and replacement of material life in the process of moving into new places. Re-imagining and re-making ‘home’ are physically present in the small parts of chairs, tables and spaces around them; pieces that approach the real structure but at the same time evoke shapes that are transformed, and thereby bring structural connections together with the imagined, remembered or absent. Beyond what is present in the photographed clusters, when working with the small pieces of wood, the smell of the reclaimed material and its textures tied in haptic perception of current and past experiences. For example, I sensed the shape of my current kitchen table, where I often worked with these prototypes, but also remembered others that I have had in the past and that were left behind elsewhere, and yet others that are forever lost in memories, like my grandmother’s kitchen table (a melamine surface with shiny colors from the 50s). The simple structures I worked with mixed and mingled with internalized socio-cultural traditions and rituals (e.g. fulfilling gendered roles/expectations of a woman/mother/wife or serving overt patriarchal privileges) to translate what the kitchen table means to me, and perhaps also others. In addition, prototyping changed my perspective of the kitchen table as I know it, to one that is closer, more intimate, and that makes it touchable, graspable – approachable – and with multi-temporal



details. I also perceive/d a broken linearity of memory, a rudimentary structure, in which idealization and nostalgia play a role.

Dossa and Golubovic propose that “a material approach to reimagining home in the diaspora involves a negotiation between loss and replacement, that is, between lost items of memory and accumulated items of daily use” (178). In my case, the kitchen table helps me to contextualize my existence and negotiate a feeling of familiarity in unfamiliar settings, in the process of re-constructing a home away from home. Moreover, manipulating diffused parts of objects of everyday life, and re-imagining the absent and “inconsequential” (172), allow me to question the significance of ‘home’: a house; a thing or structure we call a ‘kitchen table’; and the bundles of objects (physical and beyond) that we bring along as migrants.

In my/our negotiations of replacement, there is an inevitable work, a labour, that includes un-doing and re-doing the familiar. Doris Salcedo’s turned tables, which were part of her installations titled “Plegaria Muda” (Silent Prayer) are an important influence for me in this line of thought. Regarding these tables, she said: “this is fighting oblivion” (Salcedo 4:49). Different from mine, her work with tables started by linking the topic of disappearances/kidnappings in Latin America. However, what I take as inspiration is the idea of a sort of translation that occurs in the presence of a particular object. The fact of presenting the object in a particular way (i.e. turned) brings to mind other ‘presences’ that had not been thought of before. In Salcedo’s case, the process of remembering constitutes a form of radical protest (note she repeated the turned tables as an accounting of the number of disappearances). In my case, in turning tables, I re-place and re-locate interruptions, lack of belongings, re-considerations of familiar and traditional ways of doing, all of which result from, and interrogate the position, distances, and shapes of what is ‘home’ during a process of migration.

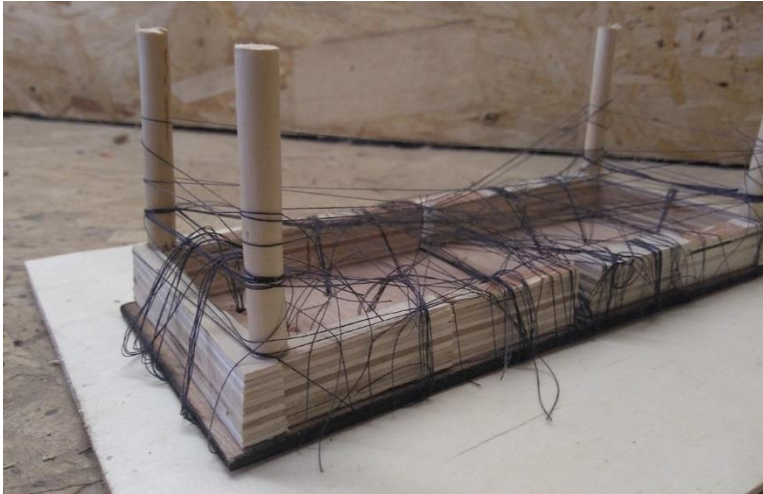


Figure 4. *Prototypes*. Detail, reclaimed wood and sewing thread, July 2019.

As I continued to think with the tiny tables made of little pieces of scrap wood, I stitched their surfaces (Fig. 4) together with chairs or pieces of chairs using fine thread. I did this until the objects were symbiotically stuck together, clustered on/with one another. Here, I thought in terms of the permeability that Sara Ahmed mentions in her article titled “Home and away: narratives of migration and estrangement”. She refers to a haptic sensing of a sort of permeable skin along the boundaries of what we perceive to be ‘home’. She says:

...being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*. To some extent we can think of the lived experience of being at home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home. The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well. Here, movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such. That is, movement away

is always affective: it affects how 'homely' one might feel and fail to feel ("Home and Away" 341).

## 2. Territories, borders, translations/Process 1

From the work on dislocation, replacement and negotiation above, another assembly/cluster emerged. I called this *Process 1* because it is a new step in the re-construction of what I call 'home'. In this process, I was inspired by Anzaldúa's idea of an "inevitable unfolding" (103) as an ongoing action/reflection that re-configures the self, and at the same time, a way of building on Ahmed's (and my) thoughts on the permeable, skin-like boundaries of 'self' and 'home'.

Anzaldúa also mentions that the "inevitable unfolding" happens as "morphogenesis" (103). She states: "soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading. She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, softens...she grinds the corn, then grinds again". She thereby highlights the multiple actions with hands and objects, as well as the process of self-knowledge, as ever-evolving, ongoing.

My affective territory was bound to the kitchen table prior to migration, since in my Latin American culture, objects of cooking and eating are embodied<sup>3</sup> in socio-cultural thinking. But through migration, the kitchen table became a more charged space for me than it had been in the past. I found new constraints on space and material possessions, and also new pressures/tensions acting on relationships, kinship and identifications, all of which affected my ability to

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<sup>3</sup> These terms are used in the way Diana Taylor states: "why this insistence on the body? Because it is impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied" (86).

work/create/live, and more broadly, my sense of security/stability and belonging. For the installation that I called *Process 1*, I mixed this perspective with Anzaldúa’s active “morphogenesis” concept and created a series of entanglements around the kitchen table that I ‘dialogued’ with as an artist and immigrant.



Figure 5. *Process 1*. Assemblage. Desk, OSB panels, washable ink, wheat flour, dried corn flour, cumin, paprika, small wooden prototypes, sewing thread, November 2019.

The objects I collected for self-reflection are a desk, OSB<sup>4</sup> boards, cotton thread, washable ink, wheat flour, dried corn flour balls, cumin, paprika, small wooden prototypes and sewing thread (Fig. 5).

Why these objects? The objects that I selected are not archival objects or objects that represent memories of migration, they are objects found at hand in my current home-studio

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<sup>4</sup> Oriented Strand Board (OSB) “is composed of wood strands bonded under heat and pressure with waterproof glues. It is produced with the strands in the surface layers aligned in the direction of the long axis of the panel and with the strands in the inner layer either cross-aligned or randomly oriented” (Natural Resources Canada).

space. Through the action of bundling or inserting them into the assemblage, I combined using my physical body and thinking (including personal, cultural and social experience) to understand how/if these objects affect me within new socio-cultural constructions.

The choice to entangle the objects using simple cotton thread speaks again of an approachable dialogue with those objects, something tentative, a work in progress; and ultimately, creates flexible connections that facilitate thinking through the repeated act of bringing them together.

The found objects are tied and tightened together in juxtaposition to form an extended surface, a sort of mutation between a table surface and the surfaces of other materials. I bundled some areas and elements more than others to explore conventions and disruptions of those materials' properties. The physical effort of entangling elements allows me to think of mutual resistances between the objects and I (which appear often in the context of art-making). Interacting with their materiality connected my body to the objects and showed me the ways in which they can be bound or unbound, and what sort of knowledge I can unpack from these bundles.

Below, I summarize some of my findings from *Process 1*.

### *Objects and translations*

Explorations of the concept of “estrangement” (Ahmed, “Home and Away” 341) are key to this assemblage, specifically, the re-configuration of objects away from their typical contexts. The objects are re-configured insofar as they are used in ways different from what is usual. For example, they are carried by other objects, like the paprika or cumin absorbed into the cotton fibers or the dough balls on the desk (Fig. 6, left and right).



Figure 6. *Process I*. Details, (left) stained cotton thread with cumin and paprika; (right) dried corn flour on a desk.

The objects, which we often use in food or cooking, appear together on similar surfaces, maintaining their haptic qualities (e.g. texture and smell; spices on fibers or dough balls on a desk) but dislocating, in one way or another, our experience of them. While their material relationship and proximity extend our familiarity with them, their use is disorienting.

Julieanna Preston sheds some light on how one might react to feelings of disorientation vis-à-vis materiality. She describes such experiences as: “grapples with or struggles to overcome the strangeness, where one might apply one’s own values to make sense of the strangeness and in the process overlook the other’s difference” (7). In my case, objects and structures that I knew helped me to re-think disorientation, a condition that re-inscribes meaning. Similar to what happens when we translate language, working/thinking with the objects in *Process I* brought back to life those experiences.

### *Objects and borders*

My interest on swapping functions brought my attention to the limits, boundaries, walls and surfaces we place tables on/against for work, nourishment, or in re-location. In particular, ever since immigrating to North America, I have found the use of OSB boards in the construction of homes (e.g. walls, roofs and flooring) intriguing. These boards seem like such a precarious surface to build entire buildings with, and yet, it is paired with other building practices and techniques (unknown to me prior to immigrating), to build perfectly usable spaces. These were the sorts of thoughts and questions that came up for me through the immigration experience inspired by newfound physical objects. These objects affected my imaginary of transforming space and making a domestic space here. Looking at local building practices also brought/brings up questions about local economies and functionalities, and how these permeate into the very surface of my kitchen table. I entangled all of this in the form of an extended OSB board table surface (Fig. 7, left and right).



Figure 7. *Process 1*. Details, OSB panels, (left) entangled small prototypes, (right) reclaimed wood pieces entangled with sewing and cotton thread.

I came with the assumption that brick and mortar are required to build a house; and the expectation (an idea about a politics of materiality) to place a kitchen table against walls in order to manifest stability, permanence and security. With these questions in mind, I tightened the OSB boards together to highlight the various physical characteristics of this material, beyond its practical use in interior walls of homes. Their extended surface has an impact well beyond walls, onto my (and others') kitchen table. The boards also hold and signal local values of consumption, including the very need for this material as walls or shelter. In a similar vein, field



studies of home culture have shown that identity can be transformed in contact with different systems of commodities related to home construction and arrangement (Reimer and Leslie 189). And, yet, other work supports the idea that borders or walls can encase and manifest the imaginary metaphorically (Steiner and Veel 2).

### 3. *Objects and memory/Process 2*



Figure 8. *Process 2*. Installation, found objects, cotton thread, December 2019.

For this installation that I call *Process 2*, I worked in two parts: Part 1 (Fig. 8 and 9) uses a real kitchen table and Part 2 (Fig. 10) is a group of objects that have been manually crafted.

*Part 1*

The bundling action in this part of the installation is around my actual kitchen table from recent years, which has a particular trajectory to this location. I aimed to recount this trajectory, this story, as I worked to bundle it.

When I moved to Northern Ontario, after immigrating to Canada, this kitchen table was one of the first objects I purchased. I bought it together with a set of chairs to accommodate my family (all of those who came along with me on this journey). Today, this table works as a sister surface for my artistic work in my home studio. In the kitchen, it has been replaced by a larger one, in part, because my circumstances have changed, both in my mind and in my life, but also because a larger surface came to be required for growing social gatherings. Perhaps the tradition from my Latin culture of having a long, extended table as a ‘good thing’, also played a role in this change. But the older table, a hardy and sturdy one, facilitated my landing in my first home in Canada. For a while, when the tables were switched out, the older one sat turned against a wall, however, I did not get rid of it. That surface had been inhabited by me for so long that I felt a symbiotic sort of attachment to it. Now, this same table says much about my private life, almost as if it was all written on its surface. Not only this, but it also entangles and holds other stories, like that of the furniture market where I bought it in the ‘Soo’ (Sault Ste. Marie). Also, the table is made in Thailand. This hints to a particular type of location, individuals, and materials that created it, and by the same token, it speaks to the very reasons why foreign workers like me land in the Algoma region of Northern Ontario. (In 2000, several industries in the region required the work of foreign professionals to re-awaken and re-structure them. This is why I moved there.) In brief, the Thailand-made wooden table found in a small market in Sault Ste. Marie talks of the global economies that first made and then weakened these industries, the

inequalities that push and pull people across borders, and (more specific to my case) the story of Argentina's 2001 recession and continued socio-political oscillations in recent decades.

*Part 1* was a meditation of my body with that of my old table – as I bundled the table, I felt bundled by it, too – which I think connects to the idea of “mutual constitutions of the subject and the object” (Wang). For me, this refers to the possibility of subject and object being intertwined with each other and with their intimate stories, and, at the same time, telling us of other stories, other lives, made tangible, almost touchable on the objects' surface.

Arjun Appadurai offers one way of understanding migration and its relation/s to objects, things or commodities in re-conceptualizing our relations with objects (3). Another framing concept that comes from social studies on migration is the idea of understanding not only the objects themselves and the politics of things, but also that there are no constants in the assumptions we make about ‘home’ (Ahmed et al. 8) and what their objects tell us about the structures or dynamics therein. Still, we must pay attention to the physical and representative forms of ‘home’. Those elements highlight the home-making that leads to becoming, which is never-ending and continuously influenced by host spaces and communities (Vilar Rosales 521).

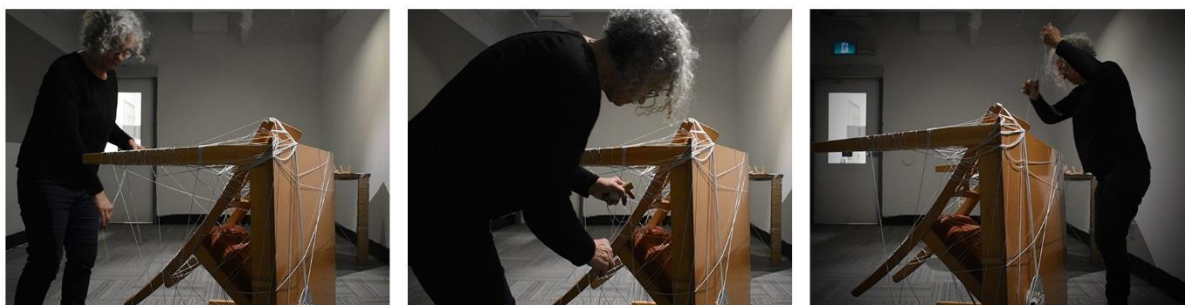


Figure 9. *Process 2, Part 1*. Performance details.

Coming back to my performance, bundling up my old kitchen table, allowed me to re-think my experience of migration from my current standpoint (Fig. 9). The bundling action

unearths part of the story of constructing a manageable domestic and professional space; a labour of transforming a space inhabited by the out-of-place and unfamiliar into something familiar, my kitchen, which now well-known, allows for intimate relationships and social interaction to flourish.

### *Part 2*



Figure 10. *Process 2, Part 2*. Carboard, reclaimed wood, metal twine, cotton thread, charcoal, wax paper and found strainer.

In *Part 2* of the installation I re-created objects using crafting processes, charcoal, wax paper, metal twine, and cardboard, to make connections to what I call ‘diffused invocations of home’ (Fig. 10). The contrast in Parts 1 and 2 is between making on something real (*Part 1*, bundling my actual kitchen table), and crafting from (the less tangible) memory and senses of touch and smell (*Part 2*).

I began *Part 2* by stacking together small pieces of cardboard. I acquired this cardboard in the form of cases for other objects, usually used to protect them for transportation. I collect this type of material for domestic use or for potential use in my studio (e.g. binding, making cribs or protecting supplies). Its color and texture have a kind of neutrality that makes me think of it as

having a permanent provisory state. Perhaps the cardboard's state is similar to the permanent provisory condition that we can be in as part of the process of finding and establishing our place, wherever we are; bringing, transporting, stacking, overflowing.

Based on these musings which connect space and journeys within, I sought to make a table from cardboard, a material that invites in feelings about 'provisory' versus 'established', and via its physicality, perhaps gives these feelings a bit more sense. The table is held together with cotton thread and supported by cardboard legs, to give some permanence to this rather impermanent structure, in a kind of nesting process. In turn, this nesting brings up something opposite to Mona Hatoum's ideas when she speaks of the familiar transformed into unfamiliar. In her *Terra Infirma* exhibition, she made transformations perceived as "uncanny". In regard to this work, she explains that certain kinds of trauma can make one feel like domestic things are threatening. She used the size and distances around the human body, and the haptic qualities within objects, to make the familiar unfamiliar (Hatoum 3:02-4:02). Taking these thoughts into account, but undoing them, I shaped and used unfamiliar materials at hand to create familiarity, closeness, symbiosis – nesting – with them.

The objects on the table, like the crafted charcoal in metal twine 'dishes' and wax paper printed with spoons, the charcoal and the pieces of table prototypes (Fig. 11, left and right), are diffused invocations of home that relate to the permanence of memory. All tell of a contradiction between what is permanent and impermanent.

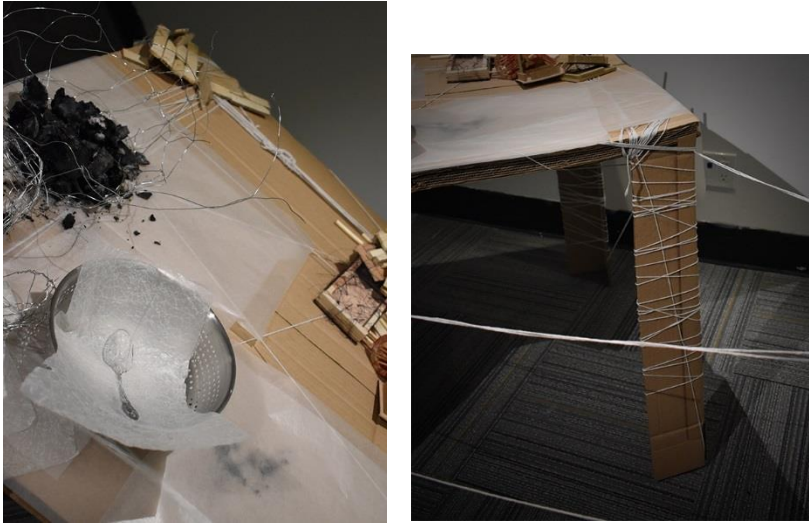


Figure 11. *Process 2, Part 2*. Details, (left) wax paper and charcoal, (right) entangled cardboard.

#### **4. *Remain in touch***

In yet another form of entanglement, I also filmed a few video clips of the labour – the folding and unfolding, and pulling and kneading, as a way of discovering layers of the self (Fig. 12) – that inspires this research project and its approach.

Unsettling the kitchen table object/s to allow thinking through them requires an important commitment to, and responsibility for: not only the problematization of human relations with non-human objects, but also a questioning of how and why “objectivation” is at play in spaces of labour, patriarchy and/or colonial structures (Behar 8). The latter questions extend also into connections with material culture and migration.

Moreover, Puig de la Bellacasa brings to light “necessary yet mostly dismissed labors of everyday maintenance of life, and ethico-political commitment to neglected things” (66) by dislocating subject-object experiences to reveal affections in the labour done in and around

objects at hand. She thereby cultivates “a speculative commitment to living worlds” (67), that I believe can be extended into a form of knowledge-creation.

The film work is bundled or grouped with the entire project of *Bundled Dwelling/Equipajes Inhabitados*. In it, I, as the performer, make dough balls (a common starting point for many Latin American stuffed dishes), and my action intermingles with informal talking and kitchen noises in the background. The workspace blends together with hands, voices and objects, creating a perception of blurred motion that challenges the physical limits of the kitchen, and at the same time, remains in touch with extended, trespassing intersections of race, colonial conditions and familiar structures. All is transformed just through the action of making food.



Figure 12. *Remain in touch*. Details of the clip, December 2019.

## Theoretical Framework

The experiential work that constitutes this research project is based on, supported by and in dialogue with relevant theory and other artistic practices. Some of the thoughts contribute to my methods, while others work in parallel, as references to help me understand my process and findings. Here, I will review the theoretical paths that connect my interpretative work and the practice of entanglement when thinking about our relationship with things.

### *Objects and Politics of Knowledge*

One of the important theoretical influences comes from the question of *how* we look at things. In this line of inquiry there is a ‘turn’ to objects, based partly on a critique of the centrality of human perspective and observation only. It posits clustering, assembling and gathering objects, and co-existing with them while maintaining a critical perspective, as having the potential for knowledge-creation and re-creation (invocation, negotiation, replacement). Co-creation and mutual construction *with* things affect our experience and perception of the world around us, and in turn, the making and re-making of our place and space. Aligned with this perspective, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s ideas on “matters of care” discusses Bruno Latour's notion of “matters of concern” (Puig de la Bellacasa 31-42) and add the concept of “sociomaterial assemblages” of “things human and non-human” (28) in the context of knowledge economies. She also adds another important layer, a “terrain of divergence” (48). She proposes introducing the idea of “care” into science and critical inquiry, to truly “involve” (18) or entangle the human with the material – in “buildings, habits and machines” (42) – and thus further unsettling distance/s between subjects and objects in the production of knowledge. She states:

...positioning for care emerges as an oppositional practice that both creates trouble in the democratic assembly of articulate concerns as well as generates



possibility: it reminds us of exclusions and suffering and fosters alternative affective involvements with the becomings of science and technology (18).

Still, she reminds us:

...the notion of care is also marked by gender and race politics; it brings to mind particular labors associated with feminized work and its ethical complexities. Because of these charged meanings, if ‘matters of concern’ can function as a generic notion for the politics of things (i.e., everything can be potentially thought as matter of concern), ‘matters of care’ might not. This is not to say that feminist thought should claim a particular ownership around the notion of care but that care is not a neutral notion, nor is a feminist reading of it (43).

From considering “matters of care” emerge “mediations of agency and materiality no longer...as mastered or directed by humans/social subjects but as co-enacted” (31). These parallel the (often neglected) negotiations with/within inhabited objects of domesticity that I explored and sought to make more tangible/understandable in this project, through interaction, dislocations and relocations. I find the perspective of “care” useful because it is not only interdisciplinary but also integrative; bringing together objects/material culture, subjects and critical/political possibility. This is what helped me understand that ‘behind’ the assemblage of things we might see in/on/with the kitchen table, there are connections that extend to how we experience/make ourselves, and perhaps most importantly, our agency. Here, I refer to a form of agency that includes artifacts and spaces in “discursive acts” (Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity” 822) but is also a means of disrupting, subverting and re-configuring for the actor/s.

On a more personal level, considering “care” allows me to play a leading role in this work, and at the same time, challenges me to consider what I bring (physically, emotionally, professionally, politically) via the action/s of gathering and clustering, into the art production process and into the artistic site. In other words, this path of thinking helped me to re-contextualize making and how I/the artist approach artistic work.

Katherine Behar’s perspective of objects from the inside-out, or subjects being an object “from the outset” is also useful in understanding objects/materiality and the politics therein. Questioning the theoretical turn to objects, she aligns with Object Oriented Feminism, and reorients feminist subjects as feminist objects, to re-think co-existence. She explains that:

...reorienting from feminist subjects to feminist objects puts critiques of utilitarianism, instrumentalization, and objectification in no uncertain terms. People are not treated ‘like’ objects when they are objects as such from the outset. By extending the concept of objectification and its ethical critique to the world of things, object oriented thinking stands to evolve feminist and postcolonial practices to reconsider how the very processes of objectification work (Behar 8).

For me, all of this implies that our individual and collective struggles of exclusion versus belonging (related to race, patriarchy, colonialism), can perhaps be viewed more tangibly, more practically, simply by changing pre-determined positions, locations and perspectives. And specifically in terms of the kitchen table and domestic objects, Behar lends to my thinking the re-consideration of what things are, how they are and our engagements with them.

I have also referred to Sara Ahmed’s work in thinking about constructions of ‘doing with’ materials, and the question of whether domesticity can act as an extension of individual selves

and identities. With regard to migration challenges and the binary of ‘here’ and ‘there’, she suggests that “movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such” (Ahmed, “Home and Away” 341). This problematizes the dynamics of making our spaces. As she explains it, “home and migration cannot be adequately theorized outside of the specialized relations of power” (Ahmed et al. 6). And, as I understand it, home can be extended to mean the very objects of domestic life. Like Puig de la Bellacasa and Behar, Ahmed also highlights our interactions and the co-construction of our selves (Ahmed, “Home and Away” 341) through our sensing of objects, things and spaces.

### *Case Study*

This research was originally inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's Latin American, feminist poetry and writings, and more specifically, by the way she overlays decolonial thinking onto art-making. My clustering approach was also specifically inspired by her. In her case, she brings objects and materials of domestic life together with words, in *written*, clustered assemblages. Her writings, often in Spanish code-switching<sup>5</sup>, include indigenous socio-cultural concepts and colonial representations (100), gender-based and queer struggles (105-07), perspectives on Western thinking (101), and border thinking at the US-Mexico frontier : “The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains” (109). I am primarily interested in how she interprets home, gender and traditional/un-traditional modes of belonging. She re-considers ideas of “home” (111) as intermingled with affections of domestic life and border life, and representative of assumptions regarding Latino-culture within American culture (based on her roots as Chicana), feminism and queer experience/culture. Further, she reclaims objects and

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<sup>5</sup> Anzaldúa refers the code in Chapter 7: “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” in *Borderlands: the new mestiza = la frontera*.

labour behind/with them as a means of self-knowledge. For instance, she writes: “lavando, y remojando...despojando el pellejo. Moliendo, mixteando, amansando...She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, softens. ... she grinds the corn, then grinds again” (103), giving voice and life/selves to the excluded. In turn, this challenges real and imagined borders, through thinking and doing (both in what the writing says, but also in the act of writing). She also states:

...the work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images of her work how duality is transcended (102).

We are the rolling pin, *el maíz y el agua,*

*la masa harina. Somos el amasijo.*

*Somos lo molido en el metate* (103).

Her description of the *mestiza*'s connection to corn, as “tightly wrapped in the husks of her own culture” (103) grabbed my attention the most. In fact, this sentence evoked a visceral type of knowing in my own body; of the possibility of engaging with/attending to common everyday food-making and other domestic work, as a way of speaking about self/identity. This perspective is significant to my research, on one hand, because it takes into account the impact of Spanish colonization and complex layers of race, gender and social pressures that are part of her (and my) cultural background; and on the other hand, because it helps bring to light a form of knowledge that is hidden, ignored and/or not typically considered in perceptions of the *mestiza*'s (and my) body. Moreover, when she speaks of the “inevitable unfolding”, Anzaldúa also provides a way (both imaginary and practical) of un-doing many wrapped up socio-cultural layers. This “inevitable unfolding” idea is therefore very important to my methods and practice

throughout the project. I extend the idea by incorporating other layers/processes of dis-placement and re-placement, to further stimulate reflection more closely related to migration.

Karen Barad does something similar in her writings when she brings together Anzaldúa's ways of knowing with other “diffracting” concepts in the article “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart”. She writes: “there is no absolute outside; the outside is always already inside. In/determinacy is the surprise, the interruption, by the stranger (within) re-turning unannounced” (“Diffracting Diffraction” 178). Barad adds to my thinking the idea of blurred boundaries between inside and outside, particularly in relation to objects we consider to be ‘mundane’, of everyday homemaking. In my own work, I sought to explore this inside-outside relationship, and in a way, ‘re-turn’ inside, to see if this might generate new, unexpected ways of thinking and being. I consider entanglements with objects of domesticity a way of accessing the inside from the outside and vice versa; a constant motion, formation and transformation, that cuts across our history, lives and identities.

## Concluding Thoughts

### *The Exhibition*

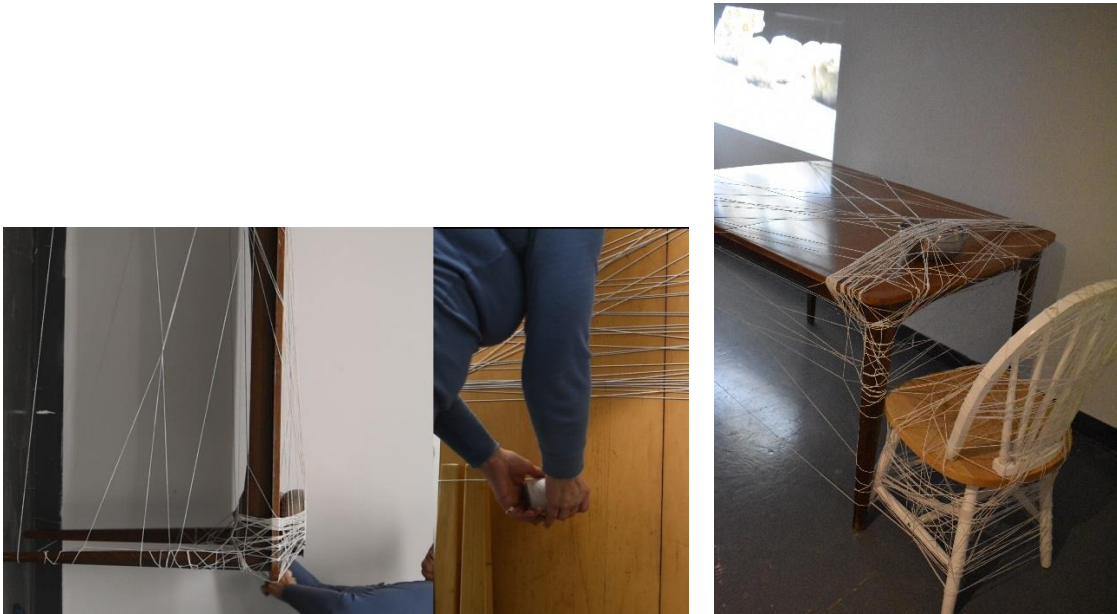


Figure 13. Exhibition preview. Details, (left and right) installation process, OCAD Experimental Media Room, February 2020.

The exhibition of this project should be considered part of the translations mentioned in the main research question. It was a challenge to address the relevance of temporality implicit in the scenes created. The entanglement approach was used because it can be associated with an ongoing speculative process which brings objects and concepts that seem to be separate/dissipate together tentatively. The exhibition, like the spaces we inhabit, hosts the ‘baggage’ – bundles – of familiarity, identity, culture, we carry around as we build and re-build our selves, and which are often closer together, and to us, than they appear (Fig. 13).

The exhibition in the TMAC space will include fragmented but connected bundles of charcoal (Fig. 14 and 15), tables and dis-located/diffused kitchen tables presented together with a series of short films showing kneading on my kitchen counter. This exhibition, like the rest of

this reflective-interpretive project, will seek to elicit open intercommunication based on curiosity in an immersive scene in which the senses can expand around the tangible and visible that is momentarily anchored.



Figure 14. Exhibition Preview. Details of the installation-performance video, OCAD Experimental Media Room, February 2020.



Figure 15. Exhibition Preview. Details of video installation-performance with charcoal, OCAD Experimental Media Room, February 2020.

Even though the purpose of this analysis is not to find a particular answer, the process reveals conceptions of dwelling and migration; exploring, more so than determining, how the two, and experiences therein, are engulfed in one another. It also reveals how pieces of my history and culture are layered within my body, and places and objects of affect around me, as the spaces that host, shelter and nurture my self-expression.

### *Summary and Findings*

I started this analysis working with the following question:

***In what ways does installing non-functional prototypes/assemblages of the kitchen table, specifically by manipulating/undoing/disturbing the table and its objects, translate the experiences and negotiations of migration and dwelling?***

Formulating this question led me to explore ideas and concepts that are typically dominated by the social sciences, from an artistic and personal perspective. The choice of assembling – bonding, bundling and/or binding – objects is inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s idea of knowing by ‘kneading’ or by doing/making; or, action as a pathway for thinking that is



beyond domestic surroundings. I began with simple and familiar elements – small pieces of wood, string, flour, etc. and looked for ways of subverting convention as a form of sense-making. Because this work draws primarily on personal experience, my body’s interaction with the chosen objects is key to the findings, not only in the “integral” (von Hantelmann 1) crafting periods, but also as vehicle and momentum for iterations of the work across time.

The original research sub-questions expand these concluding thoughts.

*How do every day domestic objects in a kitchen table setting make experiences of space and place, specifically 'making home', tangible?*

In reflecting with my domestic objects, some present, some absent, some disturbed, one of the responses that arises is surprising and paradoxical. Beyond the immediate tangible qualities of dishes, food and surfaces, objects of work and sharing, imply a sort of contingency. They mix the sense-able with a grasping for the intangible – memories, absences, experiences of un-belonging, out-of-place, displacement. It is that grasping for the intangible, and more specifically, *what* we grasp for in homemaking, that is perhaps most telling of what ‘home’ means to us. That grasping for the intangible, is as much a part of inhabiting and creating spaces, as the spaces themselves and the objects therein. This leads me back to my second sub-question.

*What do such objects tell us about knowledge politics and unconventional ways of knowing?*

Dislocating, fragmenting and re-bonding/binding/bundling the kitchen table and associated objects made way for understanding that “without the things – material culture – we could neither be ourselves nor know ourselves” (Tilley 61). More specifically, this re-making

process allowed me to view the kitchen table as an extended ‘surface’ of the self and of the world of things, and to see the potential of subverting conventions, exchanging perspectives/points of view. By doing so, we can change who divides, includes or excludes objects (and individuals), and how. What is my position in entangling these objects and broader ‘entanglements’ therein? What does it mean that within this entangling I found a connection to Anzaldúa and the *mestiza* experience? What does that connection say about my experience of migration (and by the same token, dwelling and ‘home’)? Perhaps the connection flows from shared histories of oppression, and simultaneously, experiences of empowerment, within domesticity.

*What is their role in negotiating individual agency for those who inhabit the kitchen table space, and more broadly, for those represented in this space?*

Ultimately, a re-consideration of the domestic context, highlights existing antagonisms, conflict, territorial interpretations, and at the same time, alternative relations and strategies that expand our capacity to *be/act* within such spaces. Far from a simple portrayal of the domestic as neutral and insular, the re-creating/ed kitchen table space can be perceived as complex process of permeation of exterior influences into the interior world and vice versa, which constitutes the everchanging generation of new approaches for life and sharing lives. As an artist interested in spaces and means of co-existence, this is an important finding for me. Among many things, it brings together realms of work and life, and in doing so, charges each with new potency and meaning that I will continue to explore.

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**Appendix A: The no-exhibition documenting material**

The exhibition proposed in this research paper was affected by the measurements taken by OCAD University and the City of Toronto due to the COVID 19 outbreak. Additional photo material documenting a preview of this exhibition that includes images taken on February 2020 at the OCADU Experimental Media Room are available in the OCADU Digital Repository.

These images are: *Bundled Dwelling/ Equipajes Inhabitados*, exhibition preview, 2020, Preview\_1.pdf, Preview\_2.pdf and Preview\_3.pdf.