

Wadiyah Mohammad

Professor Stephen Maine

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Translating Ecotones

During the course of this senior project, I considered various directions and forms it would take on. Starting out as a PC walking simulator, then an animated short film, a video art piece and finally an art book, I also contemplated its possibilities in narrative, concept and medium. The final outcome combines all these different ideas into a single website. On this website, the user can explore the ten web pages entangled into each other by looking for each link to the next page. As the user goes through each page, they unravel a narrative and are met with gifs, drawings, and animations. *Translating Ecotones* (2020) describes the experiences of persons who are multi-racial, immigrants or born to them, and my own personal experience as an Asian-American.

Video and animation has long been integrated into my practice as I am drawn to the ways the moving image allows impermanence. Impermanence is a prevalent theme throughout *Translating Ecotones*, the hand-drawn animations and gifs illustrate this. The potential to transform and never be stagnant is parallel to the physicality of moving from place to place. This inspired the use of the word “translating” in the title. Within each page of the website it contains moving images which are either found, manipulated or original. While sketching my gifs and artwork for this website, I aimed to make them seem capable of movement, or preparing for action. Like the deer on page 3 (fig.) or the clothing hanging dry in front of a home on the first page (fig). Original images created for this project include: the entrance on page 1, an iteration of the mimosa pudica plant

on page 2, the deer on page 3, the running deer on page 5, the lighthouse on page 6, and the fading deer on page 7. Each image takes on a different symbol. They were first drawn on paper, scanned into a computer, then re-drawn digitally with a Wacom Tablet in Adobe Photoshop and Autodesk Sketchbook.

Many net artists use gifs in their artwork, like Lorna Mills, Anthony Antonellis, and Faith Holland, to name a few. The moving image has always been a part of the world wide web—from advertisements to YouTube, to starting up a computer, to using a cursor to open and close windows. There is an animation for everything. On social media platforms and mobile phone texting apps, gifs have become a widely used form of communication. Whether to communicate distress, happiness, excitement, discomfort, there is a gif for it. Similar to the use of emojis, but more specific and less translation needed.

I consider my use of the found gifs as vernacular, similar to the way photos are used in vernacular photography. Vernacular photography is “an umbrella term used to distinguish fine art photographs from those made by non-artists for a huge range of purposes, including commercial, scientific, forensic, governmental, and personal. Snapshots capturing everyday life and subjects are a major form of vernacular photography” (MoMa). An entire library of accessible gifs inhabit the internet. One can Google them, find millions on Tumblr, and new gifs are added to this library everyday by some individual. A gif’s common purpose can vary from informative, comedic, performative or expressing admiration for film. Some gifs can be difficult to trace its origins and time it was made. By using found gifs instead of entirely using imagery I

made, my own relationship with the narrative becomes more subverted, maintaining that this experience can be universal.

Gif has become its own visual language. It appears repetitively in *Translating Ecotones* as it has a direct and historic relationship with the internet. All the found gifs were edited in Adobe Photoshop to allow me to change colors, edit out frames, and speed up the gif or slow it down. Before exporting them out of Photoshop, a technique called dithering was applied. Dither is an intentionally applied form of noise used to randomize quantization error. It is used to lessen the amount of colors in an image, translating colors and simplifying them. For instance, it can convert a grayscale image into a black and white image, while determining the space between each pixel. Initially it was used more often during the world wide web's beginning because it allowed a webpage to load faster and to host more images on one page. A more direct relationship is hinted between these images on my website and the internet.

Much of the imagery is also very organic—a waterfall, butterflies fluttering away, plant matter, etc. I was enamored by the way artist Peter Burr used dither to create “dirtscraper” (2019), as he played into the contrast between organic forms and the digital computer space. Besides the digital processing definition of dither, it can also mean “to act nervously or indecisively,” or to “tremble” (Merriam-Webster). And other than its visual aesthetic and texture, the dual definition plays into why the ecotone is a central theme. Its duality is seen in the images of dithering grass, running deer, and waves of water that move inorganically.

Deer, bodies of water, architectural symbols, the monarch butterfly. The first animal which appears, besides the monarch butterfly web cursor, is the deer. Deer are normally associated with gentleness, a soft and timid demeanor, and sometimes a nuisance to suburban backyards. Although their habitat is often associated with forests, many deer are also considered an ecotone species—living in transitional areas between forests and thickets and prairie and savanna. In ecotones, the two adjacent ecological communities meet and integrate in species and landscapes. The word ecotone was coined from a combination of ecology plus -tone, from the Greek tonos or tension—in other words, a place where ecologies are in tension.

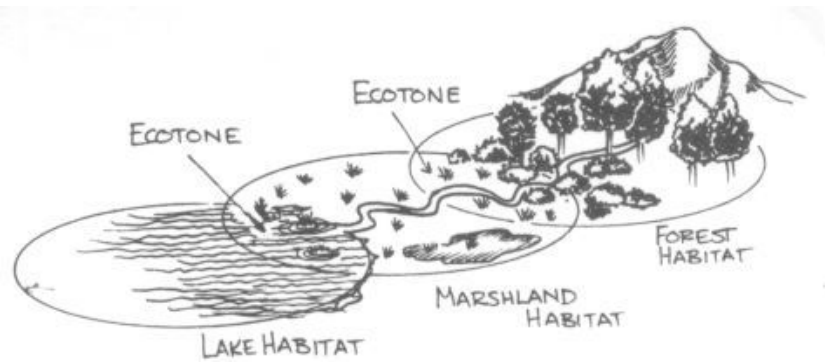


Fig. 1 Ecotone

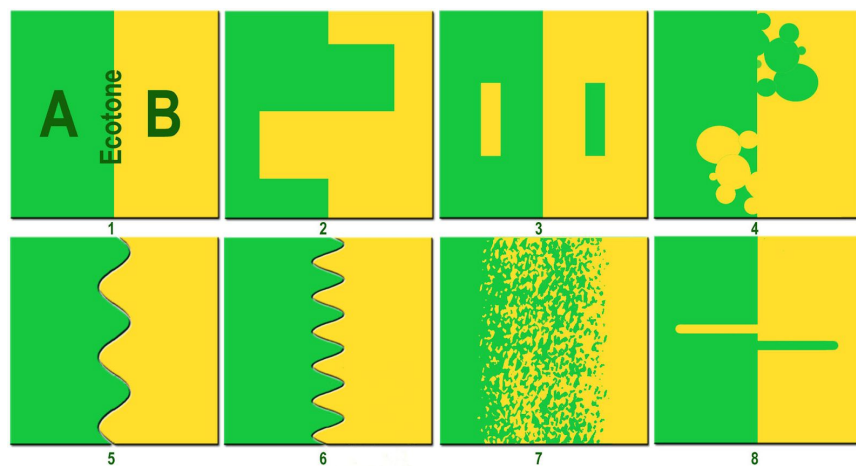


Fig. 2 Varying patterns of an ecotone, similar to dither

Seeing Sara Maggenheimer's *Art and Theft* at the New Museum in 2018 and her use of the deer in her video inspired me. A young deer's awkward interactions with the human world, found in places it does not belong to, places unfamiliar. Uncanny comes to mind when people post videos of deer crashing into windows and that themselves in a hair salon (YouTube).

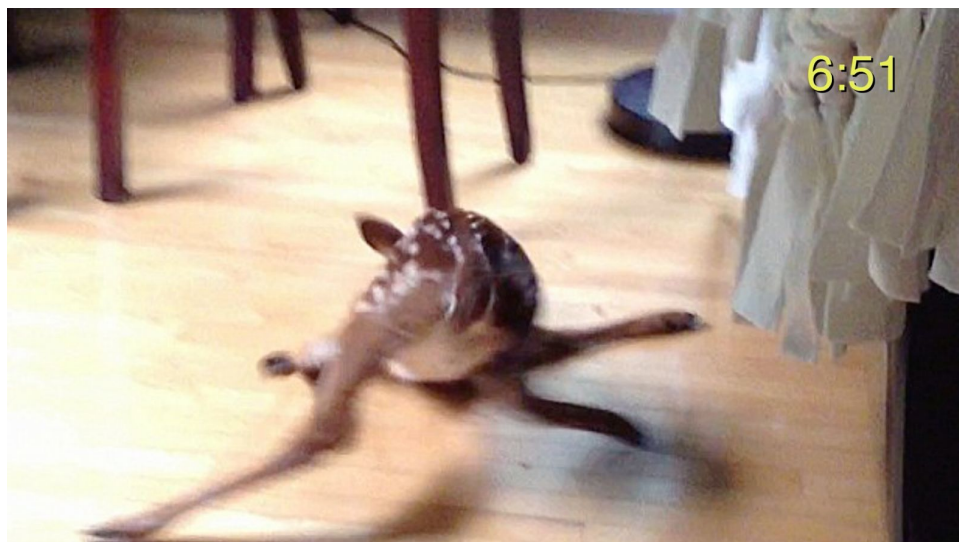


Fig. 3 *Art and Theft*. Sara Maggenheimer. Video

Moving from place to place as a young child influenced and informed this project. Born to Southeast Asian immigrants in the US, my upbringing was unique but not rare. The two definitions of translation apply to this website: moving from one location to another and transformation. Translation starts when the hand-drawn illustrations are converted into digital drawings. It is seen in the images which begin as stills but moves once a cursor hovers over it. Translation and movement are synonymous to each other. The deer is a surrogate for a person who experiences loss of culture and/or immigration. One who feels as though they belong in a grey area, as they are not sure what to make of

their various cultural backgrounds or homes. During the second half of the website, grey and black and white tones are more prevalent. This is because when the monarch butterfly leaves page four and follows the deer across different bodies of water, they end up at the Montauk Lighthouse. Although a great portion of my life dealt with moving from one home to another, I was born on Long Island, New York and have lived there the longest. The most stark contrast between living here and Malaysia was the color difference. Colors of the Southeast Asian atmosphere felt vibrant, warm, inviting. Bright pink and red flowers grew out from the sides of roads, tall palm and banana trees alike stood tall in the sky, mixing bright greens into the sky. Desaturated tones were the first thing I noticed when returning to New York.

Translating Ecotones was coded with HTML, CSS, and JQuery. During the course of this project, although I pondered the many different outcomes, this website has further solidified my technical skills in coding in conjunction with drawing. Many times I have found it difficult to combine my interest in coding and drawing, but through an “image-adventure” I was able to do so. In my work, past, present, and future, I am always trying to find gray areas where my interdisciplinary interests meet.

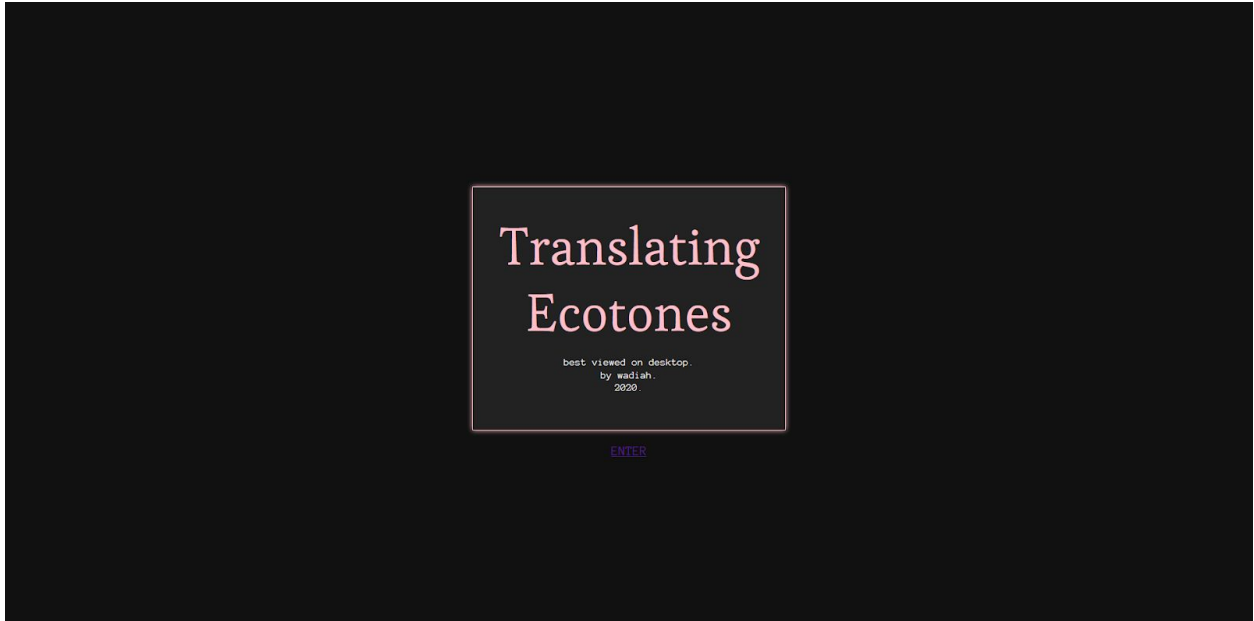


Fig. 4 Translating Ecotones. Landing Page. 2020



Fig. 6 Translating Ecotones. Page 1. 2020

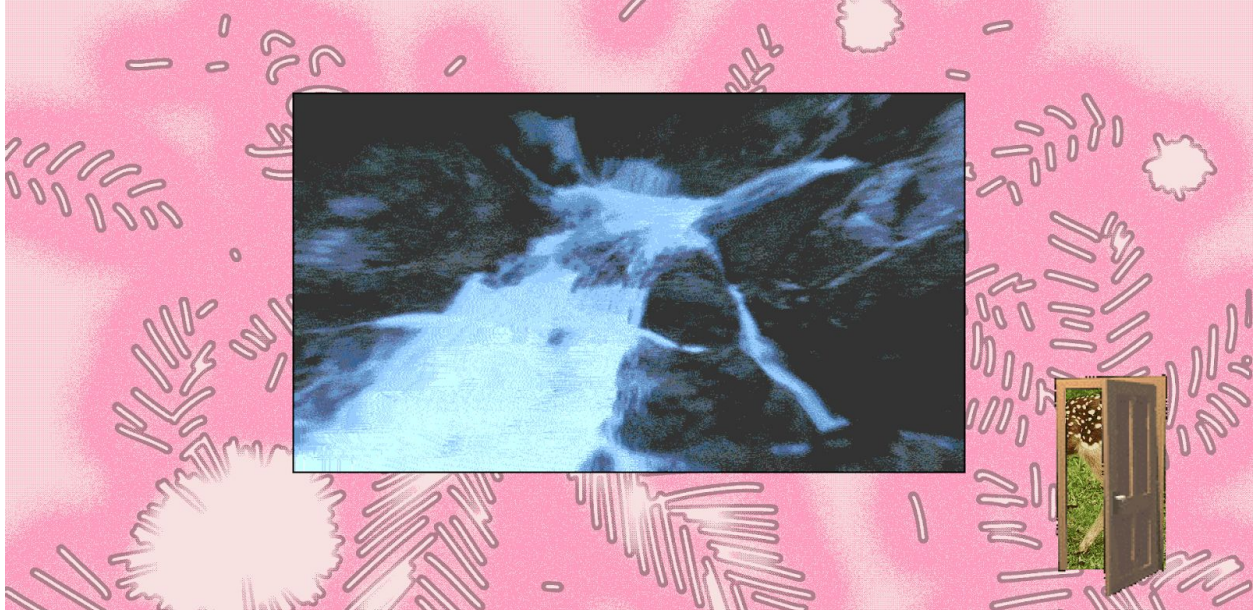


Fig. 7 Translating Ecotones (Around The Water). Page 2. 2020



Fig. 8 Translating Ecotones (Where There Is Light). Page 3. 2020

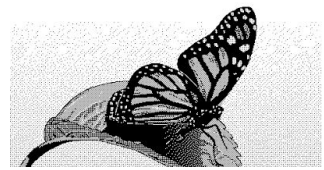


Fig. 9 Translating Ecotones (Keep Following The Monarch). Page 4. 2020



Fig. 10 Translating Ecotones (Deer Is Here Too). Page 5. 2020



Fig. 11 Translating Ecotones (Light). Page 6. 2020





Fig. 12 Translating Ecotones (This Way). Page 7. 2020



Fig. 13 Translating Ecotones (This Way). Page 8. 2020

Bibliography

Dither Definition <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dither>

Lorna Mills <https://ellephant.org/artists/lorna-mills/>

Anthony Antonellis <https://anthonyantonellis.com/>

Faith Holland http://www.faithholland.com/portfolio_page/visual-orgasms/

MoMa - Vernacular Photography <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/181>

Ecotone

Sara Magenheimer - Art & Theft <http://saramagenheimer.com/art-and-theft-video/>

Deer crashing into Long Island Salon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVP3Zbv-5Kg>