

University of North Carolina Asheville  
Journal of Undergraduate Research  
Asheville, North Carolina  
Spring 2026

# Mourning the “In-Between”: Confronting and Reclaiming Biracial Identity Through Contemporary Painting

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## Abstract

*Mourning the “In-Between”* is a body of work that grapples with the experience of Asian biracial identities through contemporary painting. As a second-generation immigrant who grew up in rural South, Joy Tilley navigates the pressure to fit in with Eurocentric societal expectations and beauty standards by incorporating both Eastern and Western elements within their work. These paintings embody a visual protest, emphasizing the experience of the “other” and how cultural knowledge can act as a foundation for a balanced sense of self. Traditional Indian art aesthetics are used by Tilley as an influence in their modern painting technique, with the use of gouache, embroidery, ink, and oil painting, which further symbolize the attempt to reimagine the hybridization of cultures. The collective tension of lost cultural memory, the struggle to belong in dominant white environments,

and the unattainable expectations of beauty remain in the BIPOC community. This research speaks to her journey of self-belonging and longs for the amplification of marginalized voices through creative platforms.

## Introduction

The body of work, *Mourning the "In-Between"* explores the complexities of biracial, immigrant, and diasporic identities through paintings that merge Eastern and Western elements like traditional clothing, religious iconography, and textiles. More specifically, the reclamation of lost cultural memory manifests through a contemporary approach to portraiture, creating spaces where Indian and Southern American iconography can coexist and incorporate symbolic animal motifs from traditional miniature painting. While generating this body of work, Tilley engages in an active critique and acknowledgment of the constant pressure to assimilate to Eurocentric beauty standards as a second-generation immigrant. By layering elements from the West and the East, a cultivated space is created in which paintings serve as a visual protest of personal and collective memory. Through this approach, this act of resistance assesses the societal expectations of belonging in a Western world and the cultural experience of belonging to the 'in-between'. Through a practice of painting, how can the merging of Indian and Southern American cultural symbols serve as a visual protest to amplify biracial and immigrant voices and challenge the notion of beauty commonly defined by the white gaze?

## Biracial Existence and the Resistance to Assimilation

The intersection of two worlds or cultures constructs an internal struggle of belonging within biracial and immigrant identities, controlled and influenced by a system that perceives whiteness as socially superior. Identity is determined not only by personal beliefs and DNA, but also by external factors such as upbringing, social sphere, environment, and others' reactions to one's physical existence. For example, according to a study by Singh and Rahal, "Biracial Asian individuals had lower ERI [ethnic-racial identity] search and affirmation than monoracial Asian individuals, and higher ERI search and affirmation were related to lower depressive symptoms in biracial, but not monoracial, Asian individuals."<sup>1</sup> Biracial Asians experienced a higher rate of depression and anxiety symptoms due to the combination of their experiences with racial discrimination and lost cultural knowledge. As a result, the pressure of dominant white culture defines the

worthiness and legitimacy of biracial identity by confining outside identities to believe that the correct approach to living is the Western way. It harms the internal mind by uplifting one ethnicity while erasing or ignoring the other.

Within the context of biracial immigrant identities, fashion is not only a means of enhancing an individual's appearance but also acts as a cultural and political language. In Vanita Reddy's book titled *Fashion Diaspora*, she analyzes Shailja Patel's one-woman show *Migritude*, in which a suitcase full of her mother's sarees metaphorically represents individuals affected by immigration, colonialism, and diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Reddy claims that the sari is not merely a symbol of womanhood or brown femininity but also an object that represents experiences, history, and defiance within its folds. In contrast, she rejects the idea of "material production of commodities" which was initially formulated by Karl Marx.<sup>2</sup> Building on this, she draws on Louis Althusser's view that the production of material objects is akin to a religious ritual, in which thought and physical form coexist. Indo-chic fashion exists not only for its beauty, but as a way to examine generational ties and feminine resentment to material, and "consider both as politically enabling diasporic affects."<sup>2</sup> In Patel's performance, she shows that rage and sentimentality coexist within internal conflicts, and repurposes her repressed emotions into a political protest of theatre art. Fashion and performance art not only contribute to beauty but can also serve as social resistance to the assimilation of Eurocentric beauty standards.



**Figure 1.** D. Ross Cameron, *Migritude* Performance by Shailja Patel, 2006.

To further examine this hierarchy, In the book *Idolatry and the Colonial Idea of India* written by Swagato Ganguly, a quote from Jacques Derrida states,

"The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality."<sup>3</sup>

Europeans deemed the worship of Greek statues socially acceptable, where perceived images or practices produced from an outside culture were considered too abstract to be regarded as an actual thought. Derrida explores how Europeans separate their ways of thinking from communities whose ideas were seen as "theirs" and not a collective "ours."

Derrida critiques how French philosophy defines "ideology," a doctrine of one's beliefs, as separate and superior to "idolatry," the ritual of worshipping idols.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the practice of worshipping idols religiously in India was interpreted as mere images that focused more on materiality and were seen as superstitious.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Europeans interpreted their own sculptures of Greco-Roman gods as expressions of philosophy and art and therefore regarded them as ideas.

The interpretation of Indian ritual practices in a colonial context is seen as inferior to their own, reflecting the saree's embodiment in Patel's performance. Rather than diluting the sarees as just a cultural indicator, she debunks its subservient value determined by white spaces, claiming that the material holds cultural knowledge, resistance, and collective memory. Similarly, *Mourning the "In-Between"* becomes a living material and a visual protest that reframes belonging, preserves her cultural memory, and redefines what is superior. By incorporating Western and Eastern elements into artwork through Indo-Mauritian fashion, Hindu iconography, Indian textiles, and Southern motifs, a dialogue is initiated between personal experience and diasporic histories within a broader context. As a result, brown bodies within prominent white spaces become visual metaphors for assimilation and estrangement from a lost cultural memory and ask who is granted the privilege of existing freely in these spaces.

## Existence of Cultural Memory and the Resistance to Assimilation

Frank Wesley reconciles Western and Eastern art histories by creating Christian artwork that draws on the aesthetics of Indian miniature painting. Wesley creates works that reflect the style of Indian miniature paintings depicting Christian stories. He

challenges the history of Eurocentric religious art during the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods, when artworks served as Western paragons.<sup>4</sup> Throughout these art periods, there is a recurring depiction of anatomically perfect, devoted men, while women are soft, elegant, and beautiful.

For instance, as discussed in Ruth Burn's senior thesis, *Reading Race In Western Christian Visual Culture*, she discusses Tiziano Vecellio, commonly known as Titian's piece, *Madonna with Saints and Members of the Pesaro Family*. Jesus and Mary are painted in a lighter shade compared to those surrounding them to display their holiness:

"The dark prisoner is the furthest away from the Virgin and Child, who ignore him. Here, a line is drawn between 'saved' and 'unsaved' that is effectively manifested through skin colour as a sign of racial difference. Whiteness, purity and salvation compress themselves onto the figures of the Virgin and Child banishing darkness, embodied by the Turkish prisoner, to the outreaches of the picture."<sup>5</sup>

This illustrates that during the Renaissance, painting masters like Titian reinforced Eurocentric visual aesthetics, crafting spiritual figures through a white, idealized lens, claiming their characteristics as holy while reinforcing the idea that darker complexions are unholy and left behind.

In Frank Wesley's painting titled *Mary Magdalene Washing Jesus's Feet*, Mary is depicted with almond eyes, painted with blue wavy hair, almost evoking the feeling of water, her elegant hands caressing Jesus's feet. Indian jewelry hangs gently across her neck, and the flesh of Jesus's feet reflects the blue background, and the woman's tears gently fall onto his soles.<sup>4</sup> Wesley was commissioned by the Indian National Christian Council in 1947 to create religious artwork that included the representation of Indian people in a Christian story. Christianity is not a native religion in India, so his work speaks to the colonial impact and the history of Christian missionaries in India.<sup>4</sup> Wesley's work represents colonial dominance in India, but is reframed in the reinterpretation of what it means to be and who can be of the Christian faith.



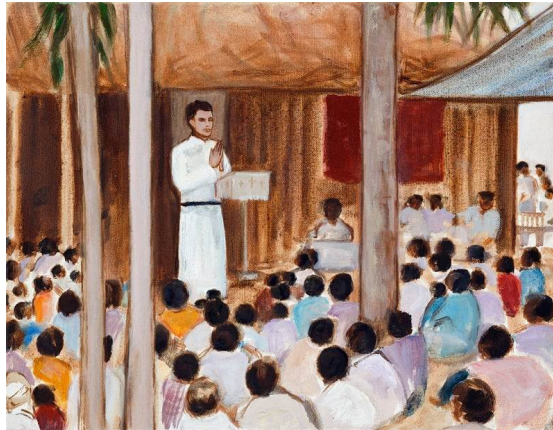
**Figure 2.** Titan, *Madonna with Saints and Members of the Pesaro Family*, 1519-26.



**Figure 3.** Frank Wesley, *Mary Magdalene Washing Feet of Jesus*, 1945.

Matthew Krishanu is a Bengali painter who uses his work to combat the common misconception that individuals of Eurocentric descent belong in sacred spaces, speaking to the long history of black and brown bodies being excluded from many religious art movements, including the Renaissance period.<sup>6</sup> Krishanu paints from the same unknown place between identities, as in the previously discussed biracial artwork, blending Christian motifs with Indian subjects. In 2024, in his series *Holy Family* (Camden Art Centre, London), Krishanu creates works that validate these identities in predominantly white, religious spaces, reintroducing and reinterpreting Western religious imagery in a postcolonial and diasporic context.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, in his painting, *Four Nuns*, he critiques how fashion choices often determine one's spiritual identity in society.<sup>6</sup> It depicts four Bangladeshi nuns, painted expressionistically, with large brushstrokes that create

visible forms.<sup>6</sup> This work challenges the Renaissance and Baroque ideals and asks who is present in these environments, who is considered holy, and who is categorized as the “other.”



**Figure 4.** Matthew Krishanu, *Mission*, 2013.



**Figure 5.** Joy Tilley, *Whose Feet Would Jesus Wash?*, 2025.

Krishanu uses a white priest preaching to a congregation of brown followers in his piece *Mission*, representative of his white father. Through this depiction of one single white religious leader, he flips the narrative of “otherness” that he experienced as a Bengali Christian.<sup>6</sup> Growing up with a Bengali mother and a white father who was a priest, he was always surrounded by religious art that lacked brown representation, so he began to reinterpret his childhood during adulthood, bringing to light how he observed religion, race, and authority in his adolescence.<sup>7</sup> His artwork discusses power in the colonial era, Christian art, and social environments while critiquing how whiteness and divinity are commonly intertwined and negatively reflected onto brown bodies.<sup>6</sup> Throughout Krishanu’s

work, he creates a platform for brown figures to embody the superior, to remain emphasized and recognized.

Correspondingly, within the work *Whose Feet Would Jesus Wash?*, Tilley uses Wesley and Krishanu’s work as inspiration for an unknown space where brown bodies can exist in a Christian, European context. The orange complexion of the woman's figure to the left draws more attention to the viewer, with a halo placed upon her head emphasizing her importance to the environment and deeming her as holy. Joy Tilley asks, historically, who has had the privilege to be represented in religious spaces, and what happens when brown, biracial, and immigrant bodies exist in those sacred spaces?

Hayv Kahraman is a first-generation Iraqi immigrant who paints stylized figures with bold features against large negative spaces, existing against or around plants. Her body of work, *She has no name*, created in 2024 in Pilar Carrias, London, consists of figures actively resisting Eurocentric beauty standards, displayed without pupils, with prominent bushy dark eyebrows, and twisted bodies with protruding stomachs.<sup>8</sup> The artist leaves the subjects without pupils, representing the extreme measures immigrants take to go unnoticed, such as physically removing fingerprints to erase one’s identity from a system that reduces humans to data.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 6.** Hayv Kahraman, *Palm Climbers*, 2024.

To expand beyond religious imagery, this collection of work draws on her Islamic and European backgrounds by comparing Linnaean taxonomy. This scientific system classifies and names (in Latin) plants and animals, emphasizing the loss of local memory when using European naming conventions.<sup>9</sup> Kahraman relates to these “exotic specimens,” or living organisms within these systems, because she was displaced from her native land,

Baghdad, to Sweden at the age of eleven.<sup>9</sup> She paints the plants in a marbled, abstract way, changing the Arabic or Kurdish names of botanicals to Latin names.<sup>9</sup> This body of work criticizes how colonialism tends to control and determine diverse communities and their ways of life, asserting that its standards or scientific procedures are superior to those of others.

## Contemporary Painting Process

Turning to the studio process, Tilley begins with researching subjects and topics such as Hindu deities, pre- and postcolonial effects on Indian communities, Mauritian history, and drawing from childhood and present-day photographs. This research supports the intended reflection of the brown existence in white environments, and the pressure to assimilate into Southern American culture while incorporating elements of Indian fashion and motifs. Traditional Indian textiles and block printing are analyzed to emphasize cultural lineage and the imperative to recover lost cultural memory. Digital and traditional sketching aid her in refining compositions, color palettes, and correcting the anatomical appearance of subjects. The painting process consists of building the canvas, preparing the surface with gesso, and lightly sketching the composition. To begin, Tilley blocks in larger color shapes with gouache or oil paint, renders details, and lastly uses oil paint to achieve the desired saturation and dark contrast that gouache does not achieve. In response to student-led critiques, she revises and executes the final state of the artwork.

Beyond the creative process, the intricate detailing and flat patterning and textiles are achieved by applying lines of various paint shades, with the occasional application of gold leaf to allude to Indian heritage. This style, combined with Western portraiture, represents Tilley's biracial identity and her active efforts to maintain a balance between the two cultures. Some figures are rendered with patterned skin inspired by Indian block-printing that serves as a contrasting element against white figures. In some paintings, the oriental designs can be found in the background, evoking the feeling of biracial people's common experience of being pressured to assimilate. Tilley depicts a Hindu goddess, Saraswati, ascending down the sky on a swan, holding a bitten apple, a scripture verse, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Tilley paints the Hindi figures to appear elegant, peaceful, and harmonious, rather than in the historical depictions that keep them "exotic" and inferior. By combining gouache, oil painting, and embroidery, the materials speak to her hybrid identity.

## Breaking Down the Hidden Meaning of Motifs and Color Choice

*Mourning the In-between* focuses on personal experience, with colors blending the figure into the space, suggesting that many biracial people are more affected by their social surroundings than monoracial individuals. Tilley explores the domestic sphere of the biracial experience by painting childhood photographs not only to normalize remaining one of two brown bodies in a White, Southern, Mormon family, but also to recognize the automatic social alienation one must feel growing up in such an environment.

More specifically, Western and Indian motifs coexist harmoniously to symbolize the creator's efforts to come to terms with the full scope of their identity: cowboy boots, the horizon of local mountain landscapes of Low Gap from their hometown in North Carolina, miniature-style folk animals, salwars paired with an American-style blouse, and floating sarees within the paintings all contribute to mending two worlds. This work is created on a large scale to confront the viewer on a more intimate level, drawing inspiration from Western portraiture.

In addition, smaller-scale works adhere to the traditions of traditional Indian miniature painting. To create diversity in surface choice across the body of work, most paintings are executed on stretched canvas (in Western painting techniques). Comparatively, other works are made on watercolor paper to reflect their Indian heritage. Gouache is used as the base in most of the paintings to draw parallels to similar matte aesthetic as seen in Indian miniatures and Christian frescoes. Color is an essential element in each painting because they evoke connections to land and cultural identity, with vermilion red and gold leaf evoking traditional miniature painting. The blue paint alludes to Tilley's connection to her Mauritian heritage and its surrounding shores, and the displacement from her Dad's homeland.



**Figure 7.** Joy Tilley, *I'm Just Like You, Mom, Right?*, 2025-26



**Figure 8.** Joy Tilley, *I Wear My Roots Like a Medal*, 2025

Miniature-inspired animals, as seen in the painting, *I'm Just Like You, Mom, Right?* serve as a symbol of emotion and characteristics of the subjects. Some are jumping off the page, while others remain hidden, representing the simultaneous internal need for cultural knowledge and the external pressure of repressing heritage to please others.

Therefore, this process represents and contemplates the natural dichotomy of biracial identity across the categories of Western and Eastern, spiritual and domestic, and internal and external belonging. She draws on their internal memory and longing for cultural knowledge to piece together an account of identity formation through elements of traditional Indian art practices (e.g., block printing, gold leaf, saree fabric), thereby enabling critical, metaphorical, and aesthetic translation. Intentionally painting this way becomes a form of meditation and ritual for exploring lost cultural heritage through the pressures of assimilation. Each thought of carefully placing Indian items that don't typically belong within dominated white spaces becomes a protest to the system's intention to erase. This ritual serves as an act of resistance and reclamation by conveying a personal narrative while challenging viewers to recognize biracial identities that are often left unseen, oversimplified, and unacknowledged.

## Conclusion and Reflection

Therefore, by combining Eastern and Western motifs, one can discover the lingering empowerment that blossoms from hybrid visual language and its effort to interpret the complex experience of biracial and diasporic identities. This research has strengthened my understanding of the concept and its aesthetic elements. By analyzing work from diverse artists, such as Frank Wesley, Matthew Krishanu, and Hayv Kahraman, this paper acknowledges artists who are often left unrecognized in the art world. Through Tilley's deep engagement of this work, has allowed the cultivation of a more secure identity from a biracial perspective and conducting personal research to reconstruct her cultural knowledge and heritage that was absent during adolescence.

Looking forward, this project has allowed new ideas to generate for Tilley that go beyond her personal story and current art process. Interests include further experimenting with mixed media and seeking a deeper understanding of miniature painting through classes or workshops. In the future, she hopes to travel to Mauritius to gain insight into Indo-Mauritian folk tales and oral stories, to create more informed paintings. Broadening the personal experience of this work to create a platform for more diverse voices in the art world, Tilley is interested in creating artwork based on interviews with people who identify as immigrants, biracial, or displaced.

## Acknowledgments

To begin, I would like to express my gratitude to Suzanne Dittenber for her efforts to support me during this project by advising me on how to develop my skills in painting and maintain a strong concept within my paintings. Dittenber's encouragement throughout this process allowed me to gain confidence in creating art and becoming immersed in research that explores such a personal experience of my life. Additionally, I would also like to thank my Senior Exhibition I and II mentors Megan Wolfe, Brent Skidmore, Carrie, and Eric Tomberlin for mentoring me with the academic support I needed to complete my exhibition. Furthermore, I extend my appreciation to the entire Art and Art History department for creating a welcoming environment and accessible studio space during my undergraduate studies. Beyond academic support, my heart goes out to my older sister, Celeste Tilley, as she made the biracial experience less lonely in childhood and adulthood. With her presence in my life, I learned to celebrate and explore this part of ourselves, rather than dismissing it.

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