

A Place You Leave

Artists' Statement

We view our homes with a notion of permanence that makes us feel secure. A home is a place to raise our children and grow old and its four walls are supposed to constitute a haven from the harsh realities of the world. We build our nations and construct our borders along this concept of permanence too, when, truthfully, no border is a constant in nature. The refugees and exiled immigrants forced to leave home all across the world illuminate the dissonance we live in.

Produced by a group of CMU first-year students, *A Place You Leave* is a ten-minute documentary highlighting the transience of home through the lens of immigration and exile. The film was developed as part of the first-year Grand Challenge Seminar, *In Transit: Exile, Migration, and Culture*, taught by Prof. Kenya Dworkin, Reem Alghazzi and Stephen Brockmann. The assignment associated with the film challenged students to create a 5-10 minute documentary with [City of Asylum](#) fellows, a unique organization in Pittsburgh that provides protection for artists in exile. In line with the work being done in class throughout the semester, this final project asked that students venture out into the real world and learn more about the worldwide refugee crisis, firsthand.

The film follows the experiences of Anouar Rahmani, an Algerian writer and political activist, and his forced exile from Algeria and immigration to the U.S. A staunch defender of LGBTQ rights, Rahmani was notably the first to publicly speak out in support of same-sex marriage in Algeria. He has written four novels in Arabic and is developing his fifth in English as an Artist Protection Fund Fellow at Pittsburgh's City of Asylum and CMU's Modern Languages Department.

During our interview with Rahmani, we were lucky enough to listen to his story over the course of nearly two hours. It was immediately clear that Anouar possessed an inherent skill with words, and not just on the page — while speaking with him, we were struck by his thoughtful eloquence and sharp intuition about the world around him. In the documentary, he discusses his personal journey of exile and immigration, moving from Algeria to Paris to New York to Pittsburgh all in the span of two days. He divulges the wisdom he has learned during his time in America as well as the traumas he has carried in order to reach this point. We sat in shock as Rahmani described some of the psychological effects he suffered, realizing how sheltered most people in America are from the hardships of exile. Suddenly, with no nation to call home, Rahmani realized that “home is a place you leave...It begins when you leave the mother's womb and continues all your life.” We learn that the truth about home is that you can never truly appreciate it until you detach from it.

The film reveals Rahmani's disillusionment with the so-called American dream, yet it also explores his adjustment to Pittsburgh and the tenderness he's discovered towards the people here. The creation of the play *I'm Sorry, I Don't Understand*, in collaboration with Olena Boryshpolets, another artist at City of Asylum, fueled his development of community. The play

touches on isolation, anger, barriers, and the delicacy of the immigrant experience. Most importantly, the play is spoken in a variety of languages — including the writers' native Algerian and Ukrainian, as well as Arabic, French, and Navajo — but exclusively not in English. Rahmani and Boryshpolets intentionally wanted to put the audience through “punishment”; or in other words, lingual isolation so familiar to immigrants and refugees.

The documentary is interwoven with cuts of the play, which to our surprise was Rahmani's first time acting in a professional setting. In particular, we selected cuts of his monologue, in which he cries out for his mother, symbolized through a clarinet. Although he laments the loss of home, Rahmani chronicles a developing love for where he is now. Even though he has left his home in Algeria, he has also built a new one here in Pittsburgh. “It's the people I'd thank,” Rahmani says in the film — his fellow City of Asylum residents, his peers and students at CMU, and even, to our delight, us students who were interviewing him.

As we finished the interview and packed up our equipment, we each expressed to Rahmani our thanks for letting us learn so much from him. Even though we were the ones attempting to educate others, we walked away with the most insight. Although there are still so many valuable pieces of Rahmani's story left to be shared, *A Place you Leave* is a good first step into the wider complexities of immigration, exile, and displacement.

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