# Fractured Roots: Doris Salcedo's Elegy for the Displaced

To me as a Chinese, the concept of 根 (gēn)-- root-- holds the weight of ancestral lineage, cultural continuity, and the need to belong. Doris Salcedo, although coming from a distant continent and culture from me, articulates a same ache of displacement through her installation of *Uprooted*.

Born from Colombia's decades of armed conflict, work grapples with what happens when the ground beneath us fractures -- geographically, politically, existentially. In *Uprooted*, her installation of 804 lifeless trees twisted into an uninhabitable house, she visualizes the paradox of migration: the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of putting down roots.

Salcedo's practice emerges from Colombia's fractured history. Born in Bogotá in 1958, she witnessed the aftermath of the 1985 siege of the Palace of Justice, where state forces slaughtered hundreds to retake the building from M-19 guerrillas. Rather than narrate violence directly, her early works like La Casa Viuda (1990s) fused household objects-- doors, beds, wardrobes--with bone fragments and hair, transforming domestic spaces into memorials for the disappeared. These interventions, as art historian Mieke Bal notes, "speak through absence, where the unspeakable becomes tactile" (Bal, 2001). Salcedo's installations reject heroic monuments; they are counter-histories carved from private loss.

In Uprooted, Salcedo lifts her voice beyond the specific trauma of Colombia, drawing attention to displacement as an ubiquitous issue. The work's skeletal architecture -- a collapsing house of dead trees – mirrors the double trauma of displacement: the loss of origin and the exclusion from refuge. Curator Carlos Basualdo describes it as "permanent

impermanence, where geography becomes border" (2022). Salcedo's critique extends to environmental exploitation, linking capitalism's deforestation to the forced migration of Global South communities. "We're all losing our home," she states, collapsing distinctions between ecological and human crises.

This resonates with Valeria Luiselli's documentation of child migrants in *Tell Me How It Ends.* When Luiselli observes that border systems reduce human lives to "legal synonyms" (Luiselli, 43), she echoes Salcedo's material language: both expose how bureaucracy erases individuality. Uprooted trees, stripped of bark and tangled in steel supports, embody this dehumanization--once pulsating ecosystems reduced to skeletal barriers.

For viewers unmoored by migration, the work asks uncomfortable questions. How does one mourn roots severed by necessity? As an international student from across the Pacific Ocean, I feel this tension in the gap between Nanjing's humid familiarity and the United States' bureaucratic chill. Salcedo's dead trees reject nostalgic fantasies of "return"; their twisted forms suggest roots are not fixed anchors but scar tissue -- proof of survival, not belonging.

Salcedo's ethical defiance lies in her refusal to resolve contradictions. "My work exists in a state of despair," she admits (Sharjah Biennial interview, 2022). Emma Lazarus's words, The New Colossus, engraved on the Statue of Liberty haunted me as I saw Salcedo's installation. Those trees--dead, exposed, impossible to enter--felt brutally honest compared to America's golden door mythology.

This contrasting visualization has become increasingly relevant several years after her first presentation, where the government of the once land of the free now subsides under the lead of a xenophobic. Tariffs rise like walls, visa restrictions tighten like nooses, and markets where immigrant communities once gathered face extinction. In this climate, Salcedo's lifeless trees become prophetic--not just documenting past displacements but warning of futures under construction. What strikes me most about Uprooted is how it

refuses false comfort; it demands we acknowledge the violence of borders while honoring what persists despite them.

And so I return, mentally, to *Uprooted*, in those moments when headlines destabilize my legal status or when the unspoken question—*where is home, really*—resurfaces with the weight of both nostalgia and fatigue. In its refusal to resolve, to console, to pretend, Salcedo's work becomes, if not a home, then a dwelling place for grief that does not dissipate. Here, art functions as anchor, not through comfort, but through truth.

## Bibliography


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