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Fear and Nostalgia in Immigration

Daniel A. Matthews
CUNY Hunter College

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Fear and Nostalgia in Immigration

by

Daniel Alexander Matthews

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of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Hunter College
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Thesis Sponsor:

December 12, 2016
Date

Paul Ramirez Jonas
Signature

December 12, 2016
Date

Nari Ward
Signature of Second Reader
Dedication-

I’d like to dedicate this to my family who supported me even when they didn’t know what I was doing and to my love, Jessica, you have been by my side since I began this journey many years ago. Your support and push over the years has given me the strength to achieve success I never thought possible. Will you continue to be by my side...?
Acknowledgements

Paul, you have been a great mentor over the years and made me think above and beyond my imagination. You made me think about my work not only of what it is but what it could be. Nari, thank you for your thoughtfulness and inspiring conversations. Both you and Paul made this process exciting and hopeful. I would also like to thank Juan Sanchez, Jeff Mongrain, Reiner Leist, Lisa Corinne Davis, Daniel Bozhkov, Andrew Mockler, Lynn Sullivan, Shawn Powell and Malik Gaines and the folks in the art department office. You all work hard for us and I want to thank you for all things you do to help us achieve our dreams.

Special thanks to all the folks who helped me with my Thesis. I appreciate your advice and helping hand. Cheers.
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The word “nostalgia”, like many words did not originate from ancient Greek or Latin in fact it was coined by a Swiss student Johannes Hofer in 1688 in his medical dissertation as a way to describe an ailment which was, and is consider a type of social emotion. Hofer created the word “nostalgia” from two Greek roots, the first being, notos meaning “return home” and the second, algia meaning “longing”. So perhaps we can surmise that the meaning of nostalgia is the longing to return home. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. A fantasy of returning home or perhaps a fantasy of returning to a different time, a time of childhood.

After the first 6 (six) months living in the United States it had become apparent that visiting the place I once called “home” would be a fantasy, a fantasy I have had to indulge for many years. As it turned out, I have what Hofer might refer to as a severe case of the maladies. As the years passed I began to understand and appreciate my plight. Nevertheless, every Summer that comes I am reminded of my childhood experiences. On Summer nights I cull memories of times when I was young and I would look up at the night sky and see the countless twinkling stars arranged in a way that resembles sand dashed across a black background with hints of glitter here and there. I remember moon-lit evenings that illuminated the streets, the horse-drawn carts and mini buses bursting with passengers. When it rained the tin roofs would create a cacophony of hallow echoing thuds that spitted overhead. All seeming to work together to put me to sleep. The fruit trees tall as the stilt houses never lacking in abundance often jotted out from backyards. Abandoned

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lots on the banks of trenches which snake along the never ending cane fields. The bugs, some with names some without some plain as day and some, an assault on the senses often caused by colorful patterns, mysterious shapes, an uncivilized smell or just a myth. The most fascinating part of my childhood would have been following the army of ants. They would rob an entire tree of all its leaves by working together in two lanes one heading up the tree and the other heading down. Even when you disturb the lanes they seem to fall into a new path always on the move, always working.²

I have decided to put forth this paper as an archive of ideas and concepts that have greatly influenced me throughout the years. This collection of thoughts and memories have always been with me and will continue to be a part of my toolbox. Some of the works I have created in the past consist of architectural models of houses, miniature landscapes, performances and installations as seen in fig. 1. These works were often my recollection of what was left of a memory. The miniature models and landscapes predicated upon fragmented memories and dreams that tried to fill the gaps. These past works were also considered experiments however as I spend more time with my work I now consider them a type of rehearsal. In some ways all my works are in flux. They never have an end point. The materials I choose to use have this aspect. They are often selected because they have had a life before I use them.

² I later learned that the army of ants were called Cutter Ants.
I have always been interested in working with ‘memories’. Recently the focus of my work focuses on the *immigrant experience.* The need to explore this specific issue comes from a relentless pursue of thoughts about my value system. As a way to connect to my audience I use theatrical language in the work. This provides the audience with an experience that they can connect with and perhaps exchange discourse. The objects in the

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3 The need to explore this specific issue comes from a relentless pursue of thoughts about my value system.
installations are treated as players on a set. They have a role to play and an expression or emotion to convey to the audience. One particular installation I created utilizes an orange water cooler with the Home Depot logo on the front filled with strawberry cool-aid. On the side of the cooler are cups where the participants would help themselves to the cool-aid. The cooler was placed on top of a found chipped white-paint circular table about 3 (three) feet tall, the legs of the table were embellished with tiny metal lions’ claw foot. The table with the cooler was placed on one side of a platform that had been blocked by walls. It was arranged in a specific way so that the viewers could only access the cooler if they walked atop the platform constructed for the project. The dimension of the platform was based on a specific room and raised 4 (four) inches off the ground so as to give a slight simulation of height. The platform was made from wood stripped from shipping pallets

Fig. 2 Matthews, Daniel. Water-cooler in room, 2015. Mixed-media, 15’x10’.

4 A desired flavor in my youth, the Strawberry was seen as American.
that were found on the streets of New York City. The platform was placed at a diagonal within the space as a way to contrast the architecture of a room while its dimensions would hint at it. It also negated the sense of a stage or a type of theatrical setting. Overhead fluorescent lights were made dim with a flicker here and there as to simulate a type of electrical surge. Viewers were invited to help themselves to the strawberry cool-aid and walk atop the platform. The purpose behind this installation was to create an uncanny environment where the viewer would be entitled to a dual experience: one of a place that could exist in the past and the other could be of the present.

This project came about as I was trying to remember a specific moment when I was young sitting in a room drinking cool-aid and looking through the floorboards from a second story stilt house. I was trying to remember the moments of what it was like before I had immigrated to the United States. Whether they were significant or not it did not matter. It just had to be a memory. Most of my memories have evaporated and continue to do so. I am only left with fragments conjured from an array of mis-en-scenes that are no longer recognizable. The realities of the past have become scenarios that only exist in what Pierre Huyghe calls the third memory. As Yinka Shonibare puts it “...you’re taking your audience to a nonexistent space and telling them that it does exist.”

5 As a coping mechanism I began a series of work where I would try to remember specific moments that stood out and try to figure out why those moments were more important than others. There were moments when I would remember a specific detail but had the wrong time or atmosphere all together.

6 The key to Huyghe’s project is the degree to which Wojtowicz’s memory of the robbery has merged with his memory of the film. The “first memory”, here, was Wojtowicz’s direct perception, his immediate storage of events he lived through without the influence of the media, the trial, or the fading of time; given the live telecasts of the robbery – a spectacular rarity in 1972 – this
Currently, the issue that concerns my work is immigration. I have asked myself why this issue, why is this so important that it deserves me spending time exploring it. Perhaps the simplest answer is that I find myself in the midst of it: I am an illegal immigrant. I carry all the baggage that comes with that identity, some of which I have not yet discovered. Yet, I have to acknowledge that it took a long time to grasp those five words. I still do not fully understand what they mean or even how to approach them in conversation even after reading books like The Orientalist by Tom Reiss, or watching films like Ali: Fear Eats the Soul by Werner Rainer Fassbender or spending hours pondering them. In the geopolitical world it is an important issue, and it has especially been the topic of debate in the United States 2016 presidential election in which Hillary Clinton (D) and Donald Trump (R) have approached the issue from different positions. The issue of immigration does not only reside within the United States; lately, it has also become a topic in Europe with the surge of peoples from Africa and the Middle East crossing into western countries.

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memory may have lasted only an instant. The “second memory”, then, is the public record that is Dog Day Afternoon, endlessly reproducible and possessing the unquestionable, closed truth of a film, but having only a frayed connection to its subject. The “third memory” is what Huyghe shows us on-screen: the complex interaction of media and memory that causes Wojtowicz to occasionally make verbal slips like “in the real movie…”

7 I’ve never had the opportunity to say this or make it official. I’ve dealt with it silently over the last decade and a half. It feels terrifying and liberating at the same time.

8 I say different positions but honestly I do not know if it is true (edit: I know it’s true.) The election has passed and Donald Trump won the electoral college but not the popular vote. His rhetoric has caused widespread panic amongst the immigrant population especially illegal immigrants. I’ve learned that Politicians will say anything if they think it will get them elected. In the case of Donald Trump, he uses the dead cat theory. (Not Schrödinger’s Cat)

9 Many immigrants especially refugees and illegal immigrants have perished on their journey to a better life. Much of the recent migration from Africa and the Middle East is due to conflict in the region that has caused a great number of civilian casualties.
As I explore ideas of immigration through my work I have realized that having a cultural duality is not a curse. In fact, it gave me the license to be objective and allowed me to have a different point of view of society. I did not have the restrictions of being tied down to a specific place or even a specific cultural identity. This is perhaps best written by Tom Finkelpearl in his essay, Fresh Eyes of the Alienated Insider, he suggests that “…biculturalism can certainly provide a head start in seeing both sides of the fence.”¹⁰ This idea Finkelpearl writes about, of being able to see and understand two cultures, one from my past and the second from my present has been a great help in deciphering identity issues within my work.¹¹

Both immigration and identity issues travel similar paths and often they intersect with each other.¹² In the case of immigrants, these identity issues are particularly burdensome and complicated and often result in many people putting ignoring it thinking that it is not important.¹³ The other part of biculturalism is the lack of connection to the land, and a closeness that must be sacrificed in order to see both sides of the fence. After speaking to a friend of mine (with whom I share similar experiences and values) about

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¹¹ Although at times I feel like I’m being pulled in opposite directions. However, at the same time it gives me tourist goggles. It is difficult to think of society today as anything less than bicultural because everyone is from somewhere else.
¹² Finkelpearl
¹³ When I speak of ‘given’ identities I am talking about the one we come to accept as our own through filling out government forms, bank account information, surveys and census, and through trying to answer the question “Where are you from? Originally!” All these banal activities feed into the larger question of our identity.
bicuclarism and the connection to neighborhood. I am reminded of my lack of connection to my own neighborhood in Queens. A neighborhood I have lived in for more than half of my life. As I delve further into the post immigrant experience, I realized that I was living in a place that can be best described as limbo, or a place somewhere in the middle, one that prevented me from forming a close connection to my community. Homi Bhabha writes in *Border Lives: the Art of the Present* that “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.” As I thought about the in-between space I could not help but think about my origins. I could not remember the last thought I had when leaving the place in which I was born or even a complete memory of the place I once to called “home”. All I have are fragments from my formative years that seem to agglutinate into one blob that comes and goes.

The work I am presenting, a culmination of long nights and conversations paired with my struggle to figure out where I belong and in some cases when. These ideas take the shape of my thesis work, not only in the aesthetic presentation but also in rhetoric it

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14 I have lived in Ridgewood Queens which is on the border of Queens and Brooklyn. I lived in Ridgewood for 10 years and prior to that the adjacent neighborhood of Bushwick Brooklyn for 5 years. Throughout my time in these two neighborhoods I have not grown accustomed to any part of the neighborhoods. Perhaps it is due to their constant flux.
15 This lack of connection was not always the case. In my situation it comes from being an Illegal Immigrant. You cannot return from whence you came and you are not accepted into the folds of society.
generates. The presentation consists of 10 (ten) wooden shelving units over 7 (seven) feet tall, 4 (four) feet wide and 16 (sixteen) inches deep made from reclaimed lumber. In the units are blackboard shelves previously used in several writing workshops with snippets of memories from strangers remembering moments from their childhood scribbled with chalk. A secondary experiential memory concerning issues of immigration is juxtaposed alongside workshop, on top of, or simply placed in a spot that is non-associative to the childhood memory. On top of the blackboard shelves are casts of suitcases allowed to fragmented. The shelves are arranged in a maze format. They are in no particular order except for the space in between each unit. There are gaps large enough for an individual to meander their way through but in some areas small enough to cause concern.

**Conclusion**

As I sit and begin to write this, the day after my 30\textsuperscript{th} birthday and the day before the 1\textsuperscript{st} day of my final semester at Hunter College I wondered to myself, what is the point of all of this? We leave our homes, family and friends in search of a better life. Hoping that one day we will find it. Unlike the character Santiago from The Alchemist, we do not seek adventure or treasure beyond our imagination. We seek only to survive. Only to prosper. At this point in history our only mechanism of survival is to leave our place of birth and embrace the globalized world. I thought of my ancestors who were traditionally non-migrating people from the *Chota Nagpur Plateau* in India.\textsuperscript{17} They uprooted their lives after

\textsuperscript{17} I spent many years researching my history and tracing the path of Indian indentured servants. It was while writing this paper that I remembered a word my grandmother used “Chota” that pushed me into this rabbit hole.
having lived in small villages for centuries and sailing across the globe as indentured laborers for the British Empire. Many were given the promise that they would one day return home, they never did.¹⁸ Although our birthplace offers us comfort of familiarity and oneness it does not foster our growth and understanding of differences. As immigrants we live in the in-between space trying to hold true our past identity and embracing a new one. We often find ourselves in this conflict, however it is only through nostalgia that we are able to embrace both.
Works Cited


List of Works in Exhibition

*Fragmented suitcases on shelves*, Hydrocal and Reclaimed Wood, variable dimension. 2016


*Childhood memory and Immigration memory phone messages*, Speakers and wires, variable dimension. 2016
Images of Works Exhibited

Installation 1

*Fragmented suitcases on shelves,* Hydrocal and Reclaimed Wood, variable dimension. 2016

1st view of installation

2nd view of installation
3rd view of installation

Detail view of Installation
Installation 2 (Writing Workshop)

Every year we would sleep church on Sunday and plant Christmas trees on my back formed together as a family.

When I was a little girl my mom had custody of us and moved away to go to college. One day she told me over the phone that she was sending me a big green leaf in the mail. I waited for days, and when it got home I happened to wander only to find that it had turned brown and brittle. As it broke riding home from school, poking the sagging bubbles of the car’s roof interior.

Despite when I couldn’t find notice the French consulate for my APGT to get a visa because the people on the street announced the consulates E5 AVE. Neighbors.

Memory and nostalgia are fickle, I constantly leave my impression of origin. I remember the smell of green and rain in the atmosphere of the local places and the quietness or sorrow of a warm, deep breath of air that was so pure, I learned, and drawn by the being my lights of N.Y.C, seen like fragments of my mind.

I’m going back to the motherland (Vietnam) for the first time soon. I’m scared of what I’ll find.
Installation 3 (Sound)

*Childhood memory and Immigration memory phone messages*, Speakers and wires, variable dimension. 2016