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***NOSTOS: ON RECOLLECTING LOSS AND THE
PHYSICAL MANIFESTATION OF LOSS***

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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In *Nostos*, I use the lens of photographing my two grandmothers, both of whom reside in Shanghai hospices, in conjunction with an extended essay-poem to better understand the different ways my nostalgia manifests and my complex relationship with Shanghai as an individual of diaspora. Through my personal experience with diaspora, having moved at a young age from Wisconsin to Indiana, to Yokohama, Japan, and finally from, Shanghai, China to California, I aim to shed light upon the nuances of a fragmented upbringing in terms of physical location and culture and such displacement and fragmentation's role in changing perceptions of home and identity. As I spent more time residing in Shanghai than any other city in my formative years, and with the majority of my family still there, it provides the most conventional sense of home that I have. That being said, I have little desire to return. My grandmothers are also, in some regards, displaced individuals, not having had the personal choice to take up the hospices as their residence. The space of the Shanghai hospice, as both a time-sensitive space of preemptive grief, given the fragile ages of my grandmothers, as well as timeless, given the conventional sterile, unchanging, convalescent image of a hospice, thus serves as an ideal foundation to examine nostalgia and displacement.

*Nostos*¹ in its entirety is an artist's book. More specifically, it is a photo book interlaced with poetry that sets out to create a sense of fragmentation through content and form. Its narrative is non-linear. The layout of the book is only evident in that there is no methodical structure to its form. The cascading lines of poetry among seemingly haphazardly-placed photographs imbue readers with a sense of vertigo and momentum as well as disorientation.

¹ 35 copies of *Nostos* were printed as 8x10 inch books by the Los Angeles-based Paper Chase Press with a Swiss bind. The Swiss bind appears to be a perfect bound spine from the outside, but when the front cover is opened, it detaches from the bind edge to expose a hand-sewn spine. This quality of exposing how the book is made mirrors how *Nostos* hints at the formation of identity. Additionally, the handmade component to the Swiss bind lends *Nostos*, in book form, a physical sense of the personal and the intimate.

Through the usage of white space, I hope to mirror the confusion and rootlessness that follow displacement. The photographs themselves also fragment the viewer's perception of the whole, with the frame of each photograph cropped close, so that the viewer can only make out a part of a street, a limb of a person. As a result, viewers must find ways to navigate the book's fragments to piece together a cohesive whole as a commentary on displacement. The book's physical presence becomes a vessel that provides for the exploration of displacement as a unique experience, granting memory a distinct space to manifest itself.

As genre-bending hybrids, books that infuse photography and poetry are few in number. The tradition of combining photographs and poetics can be traced to ekphrastic poetry, in which poetry transforms visuals, most often works of art, into the verbal, in the hopes of amplifying or expanding upon the artwork's meaning. The popular emergence of ekphrastic poetry can be dated as far as the nineteenth-century, when the establishment of the museum allowed for poets to access and study works of art (Martiny). Unlike other traditional genres of poetry such as the epic or the villanelle, ekphrastic poetry continues to be a popular form despite its early emergence, indicating that the relationship between the visual and the verbal may never cease to be relevant and generative.

Within art history, the use of written text and image dates back to the medieval times, in which Christian European medieval manuscripts utilized imagery to create layered meaning (Slemmons). Though nineteenth-century Idealist notions of art celebrated unity of style and autonomy, later on, in the early twentieth-century, Dadaists and Surrealists began to consciously transgress the boundaries of genre and the text-image divide by combining appropriated photographs with found text. In doing so, they created alternative dialogues that they felt had

been lacking in mainstream forms of art (Slemmons). Throughout the mid-to-late twentieth-century, photographers continued to explore the relationship between image and text, delving into collage, signposting and advertisement, and diptychs. Having curated an exhibit titled “Conversations: Text and Image” in 2004 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College, Director Rod Slemmons details the potential difficulties that may arise in hybrid text-image works:

The artist has to keep track of four phenomena, not just the apparent two. First the words have accepted coded meanings and contexts that affect what we see in the adjacent images. Second, the words invoke mental images that might also conflict with what we see. Third, images have meanings and contexts that may alter our engagement with adjacent words. Fourth, images can call up words in the mind of the viewer. The coordination of image/word/word/image is not easy, but the more difficult it is, the more possibilities present themselves for qualifying or clarifying the larger world. (Slemmons)

Slemmons argues that despite the potential conflict of meaning generated from both text and image, such potentialities provide a trade-off for a much more comprehensive understanding of concepts through symbiotic image-text relationships. This crucial dialogue between text and image is a fruitful conversation that provides for clarity and depth that extend beyond the singular functions of standalone image or text. Only by complicating meaning through visual-verbal dichotomies can we thus come to portray and understand complexities.

From ekphrasis and art history, we can trace the divergence onwards into contemporary hybrid books like *Nostos*, most of which were produced as collaborations between photographers and poets. Yet, unlike with ekphrastic poetry and other earlier books or artworks, with such hybrid forms of books neither photography nor poetry is the predecessor to the other; instead, they entangle and arise simultaneously in a complementary relationship. In the instance of *Plan B*, published in 2009, with poems by Paul Muldoon and photographs by Norman McBeath,

Muldoon notes that his poems were not created in response to McBeath's photographs or vice versa, stating that: "this combination of poems and photographs was curated neither by Norman McBeath nor me but by the poems and photographs themselves" (Muldoon and McBeath, 7). Muldoon and McBeath's creation, thus, reflects that the relationship between the visual and verbal is not necessarily direct, but is, instead, formed organically in an oblique manner.

In other contemporary examples, photography and poetry are placed side by side through an act of curation to create new linkages and derive new meanings. *T Magazine* by *The New York Times* has a series titled "A Picture and a Poem," in which both the art editors and the poetry editors make pairings from works they find complementary, and as a result, re-contextualize each artwork and poem, drawing these separate pieces into new conversations. Unlike with ekphrastic poetry, in both *Plan B* and the "A Picture and a Poem" series, the poems and photographs are not created with the visual or verbal counterpart in mind, but utilize the relationship to elevate one another as two distinct entities intertwined in conversation.

Similarly, the photographs and poetry in *Nostos* were generated with years in between, and neither was created with the other in mind; this indirect relationship between the two thus contributes to the disjointedness a viewer may feel as he or she attempts to make connections between the visual and the verbal. *Nostos* integrates the two separate elements visually so that the consideration of text or of image is not seen as a literal counterpart to the other. For instance, on pages six and seven, the diagonal slant of the lines of text follows that of the windows in the photograph on page seven. This treatment of text in a visual manner highlights the similarities between image and text, thus hinting at the heightened derived meaning that comes with combining the two. In allowing for form to follow content, *Nostos's* layout visually embodies the

conversation that unravels between image and text in addition to furthering the existing use of image-text relationships in the art and media spheres. Yet unlike other hybrid image-text books, both the photography and poetry present in *Nostos* are generated by myself rather than in collaboration between two individuals, and more importantly, by two different selves of different times. The period between the conception of the essay-poem and photographs allows for a distinct transformation in nostalgia and perception over time.

Crucial to the understanding of *Nostos* are the attempts to define nostalgia. Milan Kundera defines nostalgia in *Ignorance* as such: “The Greek word for “Return” is nostos. *Algos* means “suffering” So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return” (Kundera). For Marcel Proust, the places we have known “were only a thin slice among contiguous impressions which formed our life at that time” (Proust, 444). The premise of both Kundera’s and Proust’s definitions of nostalgia is loss. However, contrary to Kundera, Proust stresses impressions of places over places themselves, ultimately signifying that what matters is not necessarily the actual homecoming as much as the conjured narrative of home in relation to time. Rather than a physical return, the return that Proust’s nostalgic steers through is the mental mapping of home (444).

In depicting Shanghai, I present a combination of photographs and poetry in *Nostos* that are not intended to reflect a sentimental or objective portrayal of the city; the photographs of my grandmothers are not family photographs meant to capture memories. In fact, none of the photographs have any faces in them, eliminating whatever emotion may be present in facial expressions and focusing in on the corporeality of bodies. The physicality of body parts indicates that while one may be physically present at “home,” one’s mental sense of presence

may not be rooted in the same way the physical is. In order to avoid sentimentality, *Nostos* relies on evoking tensions within my grandmother's bodies, the hospice, and the city that are not necessarily favorable, from highlighting the fragility of the elderly body and the repeated motif of the setting sun and dwindling light. These visual cues connote an urgency in lack of time and loss of hope, indicating that "a modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once" (Boym, 50). This new consideration of home suggests that nostalgia in *Nostos* reflects the modern condition of the displaced: no longer yearning for one's original home as much as yearning to find the lost sense of feeling at home (25).

George Lukacs coined this loss of belonging as "transcendental homelessness" in *The Theory of the Novel*. The homelessness he traces stems from a "nostalgia that feels itself and its desires to be the only true reality" (Lukacs, 70). Instead of seeing one's home as reality, those afflicted with nostalgia find reality only in their recreations and mental renditions of home. Thus, for Lukacs, just as for Boym, it is also not the home itself that we yearn for, but the essence of home, as it is the essence of home, not the physical home, that contains all of our fabricated dreams and poignant emotions. This loss of a transcendental home drives the perpetual search for a place of belonging—a search that he sees as the fundamental purpose of life, and the foundation for the structure of the novel. In the same way that Lukacs' novel is structured, *Nostos* is conceived in a state of my personal transcendental homelessness, as a book that seeks to revisit Shanghai as home, only to discover that despite its former status as a place of residence, Shanghai may no longer be a place of belonging.

In tracing the roots of nostalgia, we inevitably find ourselves examining a specific kind of nostalgia caused by exile and displacement. In "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said states:

“Much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule... Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, emigres, refugees” (Ferguson et al.). Said unites the nostalgic under a modern culture, in which displacement is no longer uncommon. Situating *Nostos* within the larger context of a 20th Century nostalgia requires the understanding of a theoretical global condition of displacement, of a yearning for a time that cannot be recovered. The exile of many individuals of diaspora during the 20th Century, from the Cold War prior to the fall of Communism to post World War II exoduses of large bodies of people (i.e. Cubans, Palestinians, Jews, Istrians), gave way to a proliferation of artwork regarding both estrangement and ache for home.

In the instance of more contemporary examples that bear the residual impacts of 20th Century displacement and global, rather than national, identities, Palistinean-American artist Emily Jacir produced a text-and-photo piece titled “Where We Come From” (2001-3), in which she posed the question to Palestinians both in Palestine and in exile since the 1948 Exodus: “If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?” She fulfilled their wishes through the access she had with an American passport, documenting each fulfillment of a wish with a photograph. Of the twelve Palestinians she chose to represent in her work, one man asked Jacir to visit, hug, and kiss his mother, and another girl requested Jacir to go to Haifa to play soccer with the first Palestinian boy she saw. While the synthesized use of text and photo, as well as the interaction with individuals and communities, reflects formal similarities to *Nostos*, the content in the piece further contributes to the dialogue revolving around the longing associated with an inability to return and an imagined homecoming. Jacir simulates the imagined homecomings of several Palestinians, ultimately creating a commentary on the

manifestation of nostalgia incurred by a loss of access to remembrances of home, whether they are embodied in family or young boys on the street.

Perhaps most central to locating the parameters of nostalgia within its historical context of displacement is *The Future of Nostalgia*, in which Svetlana Boym sets out to identify a new aesthetic—the study of nostalgia. In doing so, she maps the beginnings of nostalgia and examines specific imagined homelands of displaced individuals and collectives who “mediate between the local and the universal” (Boym, 12). She makes a Manichean distinction between two facets of nostalgia: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia; she portrays the former as immutable and the latter as productive. While restorative nostalgia seeks to literally reconstruct the lost homeland through perceived nationalist truths, reflective nostalgia makes no attempt to be truthful, delaying the physical homecoming to dwell in a prolonged state of longing and fragmentation, sometimes as a mechanism of survival (xviii).

Nostos is a product of reflective nostalgia, indicating that the realities we choose to remember and mentally map out are not necessarily accurate nor truthful. The essay-poem that weaves throughout *Nostos* is placeless, in that the only identified physical space throughout the poem is the earth itself. There is no mention of Shanghai, of any city, as a place, nor is there enough visual information in the photographs to indicate exactly which city is being portrayed. Instead of locating a physical place as the root of nostalgia, the photographs and poetry revolve heavily around figurative depictions of time as an entity not anchored to any particular place. In the instance of the essay-poem, the passing of time is marked by the “blueness of veins / not present yesterday,” “temples / that had long lost their gleam,” or by the “outlines of / rings left on tabletops.” Each metaphor relishes the slowness of the passage of time, dwelling upon remnants

of time passed, while each photograph grants extended time to second-long moments often overlooked—the shuffling of elderly feet, a moped whipping past. It is this changing perception of time that embodies the prolonged state of longing that Boym identifies as unique to reflective nostalgia.

The specific choice to display *Nostos* as a physical, tangible book as opposed to as a digital book functions first as a commentary on the way in which objects navigate the world around them and how such objects are received. At the heart of anthropological exchange theory is the notion that objects are a “universal cultural phenomenon,” and that “their existence is a concomitant of the existence of transactions that involve the exchange of things” (Appadurai, 68). It is this centrality of exchange that highlights that objects are dependent upon human ownership and possession, and ultimately, upon the interactive nature of humans. When an object is digitized, it relinquishes its claims to be the physical act of cultural exchange and, instead, risks being exchanged and consumed infinitely through the public digital sphere, diminishing the very intimacy from which the project stems. Digital consumption is indirect and impersonal, as viewers do not personally receive the object from the maker’s hands. While *Nostos* may fit into the larger discourse of global and theoretical nostalgia, the intimacy of the project as a personal narrative of diaspora and a physical object of loss requires that it be consumed on a personal level as well.

This brings us to the question of the large-scale reproduction that the internet propagates through widespread dissemination. For Walter Benjamin, art reproductions are situated within

the larger scope of a technological era when exact reproductions² are easily created, and just as easily consumed. He emphasizes the importance of the “aura” or essence of an artwork by comparing “original” artwork and reproductions:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be...This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership...The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. (Benjamin, 218)

Benjamin’s statement reflects that, for him, the original presence and existence embedded within a work of art is just as important, if not more so, than its initial aesthetic appearance. He thus stresses the significance of the context of a work of art, especially the way in which it navigates both “time and space.” Just as Appadurai emphasizes the importance of the act of an object’s physical exchange, Benjamin asserts that through use over time, an object acquires its lived history, a history that is inseparable from the understanding and value of the object. The physicality and history of the object grant it a tangible fluidity and physical mobility to change over time—both of which are crucial to its ability to communicate with various peoples of varying times and spaces.

While Benjamin’s use of the term “authentic” is used in the limited context of a value system that prizes rarity, the consideration of “authenticity” in regards to *Nostos* will be better understood as the notion that the form of the book allows for the photographs to appear as if they are the original photographs as taken. The tangibility of the book and photographs lends *Nostos* the quality of immediacy and use value over time. With the artist or previous owner in mind, the

² “Reproductions” in the context of *Nostos* will be understood as reproduction through copies of the book circulating the internet (be it new hyperlinks or downloads generated from the internet) as opposed to the production of multiple copies of the physical book. Despite the fact that there is, in fact, more than one original copy of *Nostos*, these different copies will be printed at the same time, by the same printer, and thus still have equal ability to bear evidence in changes in ownership and the passing of time.

receiver views the book while considering its connection to the past owner, thus allowing for the receiver to frame his or her perceptions of the book rather than merely projecting his or her assumptions upon the book. On the other hand, the digital consumption of the book is viewed through a screen, which eliminates its lineage or trajectory in navigating the world from person to person, removing the potentiality for intertextual conversations and residual layers of meaning embedded by owners past. As a result, the digital form of the book is more prone to consumption without context. The aforementioned intimacy of personal nostalgia is only mirrored in the act of the transition of possession. Through the indexicality of the book, we are able to establish relationships with the past just as *Nostos* creates a dialogue with past homelands. If *Nostos* were to only be accessible via the internet, the presence of indexicality would not be accessible to readers. Moreover, media presented digitally has a sense of ephemerality that is ultimately not conducive to creating or maintaining an “aura.” The book would be bound to lack a sense of immediacy and physicality as it would not only fail to occupy physical space, but also would not be translate its historical indexicality and the imprint of the artist and past readers. From Benjamin’s perspective, the book as a digital reproduction cannot garner an adequate sense of being-there-ness, and thus does not have an “aura” and cannot warrant a consideration of the object as one of tangible mourning and loss.

Beyond the exchange and “aura” of the book, on a conceptual level, the physical form’s purpose is to obtain true permanence in the physical manifestation of loss, a loss which occurs through nostalgic processes of cultural displacement and fragmentation in addition to preemptive mourning. Loss inherently represents concepts of exponential degradation: the loss of memory, the nonexistence of home, the loss of family members and loved ones (those whom represent a

conventionally crucial aspect of home). While loss is most often perceived as an absence, *Nostos* paradoxically manifests loss in an object that retains a presence. My personal experience in physically holding the book for the first time was by no means comparable to viewing it digitally as a finished PDF. The printed book is imbued with a sense of finality and officiality that creates a reality from *Nostos*' conjured return to home, thus obfuscating what is and is not the "real" home. The physicality of the book proves to be the most evident indicator of presence, of a space specifically designed to explore questions of memory and loss. Furthermore, in choosing to display seven copies in Kallick Gallery and painting one shelf the same shade of pink as the book's cover, I highlight the visibility of the books. As a result, the books visually convey a sense of proliferation, even excessiveness—ensuring that a sense of presence is fully established. Ultimately, through *Nostos*, loss achieves a state of physical permanence that would otherwise be unattainable.

In studies of nostalgia and melancholy alike, theorists and psychologists detail the generative, almost manic, process of transforming loss into object. The physical book form of *Nostos*, in its existence, references the generative process of converting absence into presence. In Freudian melancholia, loss is inherently subconscious and does not possess direct links to the outside world. For individuals afflicted with melancholia, "the manic subject plainly demonstrates his liberation from the object which was the cause of his suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man for new object-cathexes" (Freud, 255). In this instance, the liberation or separation from "home," from Shanghai, is replaced by the book, an object-cathexis³ that both embodies and examines the cause of suffering. More specifically, in *The Melancholy of Race*,

³ Object-cathexis, in psychoanalysis, is defined as the process of investment of emotional energy in an object.

Anne Anling Chen further elaborates upon the relationship between the lost and the object produced from loss, observing that “this apparently abnormal way of digesting loss seems to occupy an inversely primary role in physical formation” in viewing what Freud calls “the constitution of the human ego” (Cheng, 8). The object becomes a lens to view oneself, revealing the critical role that loss and the digestion of loss play in the formation of identity and self-perception.

From Freud’s object-cathexis comes Jacques Lacan’s notion of “the mirror stage,” in which he suggests that the ego first comes into existence when an infant has the ability to recognize his or herself through a reflective surface. Only through an external image of wholeness is the infant able to form self-perceptions and the ego. Prior to the recognition of corporeally-whole-self in the mirror, the infant retroactively regards him or herself and the world as fragmented—*le corps morcélé* (Lacan). *Nostos*, as an object-cathexis created in seeking wholeness, can also be theoretically viewed as a Lacanian mirror, in which fragmentation incurred by loss is realized as an inextricable part of one’s identity and one’s lack of wholeness. Thus, only in creating *Nostos* by transforming loss into object, can I come to view myself and the role of fragmentation and Shanghai in the formation of myself.

Above all else, the comprehension of self over time through object-cathexis requires an active and fluid rather than static self. As a result, the past, as necessary to the formation of self, cannot be considered immutable. It must be seen as an element in constant interaction with the present. In “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” Stuart Hall states:

Cultural identity...is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists...Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the

different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, 212-3)

Hall references identity as a fluid representation of historical roots rather than a stagnant fixture with definitive origins in a continuous and linear history. Time, in the conventional sense, is binding, restricting historical identity from fluctuating. Instead of presenting time or loss in a linear manner, *Nostos*' postmodern and fragmented representation of time retells, not recovers, the lost past, and in doing so, forms an identity that illustrates Hall's concept of "becoming" through self-positioning. The nuances of how one selectively chooses to retell the past and how nostalgia subsequently manifests itself, then, are indicative of how one chooses to position oneself in response to loss. Rather than trying to recover Shanghai or relive time spent in the city, *Nostos* transforms loss to construct a psychological return to Shanghai by what Hall refers to as "another route," a route which establishes what historical roots have become within the context of the new world of the identity at present (Hall, 711).

As a final note, this recreation of loss as a psychological return is a gap that I have deliberately placed into *Nostos*, conveyed through the obscured origins of the photographs and poetry and a lack of conventional narrative presented to the viewer. In revealing the origins behind the psychological return in this paper and in exposing the specific choices made to evoke disorientation, I generate yet another kind of loss for the paper's reader: one that diminishes the ability to experience the sense of fragmentation and displacement that *Nostos* initially constructs for the unknowing viewer.

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