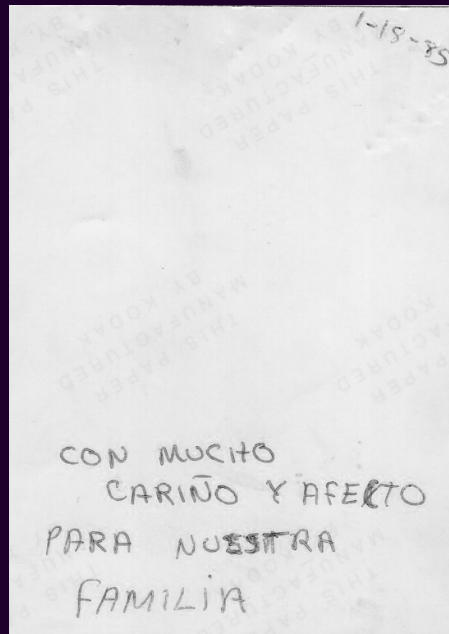


Melissa Medina
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Melissa Medina

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Painting
at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

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para mi mamá
para mi papá
para mi amor
para mi familia
para los que ya se fueron
para los que vendrán
para ustedes

Yo confieso ante Dios Todopoderoso, y ante ustedes hermanos que he pecado mucho de pensamiento, palabra, obra y omisión.

Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa.

Por eso ruego a Santa María siempre Virgen, a los ángeles, a los santos y a ustedes hermanos, que intercedan por mí ante Dios, Nuestro Señor.

Amén.

ABSTRACT

There are moments where I am suddenly hit with a deep sentimental longing for a time that no longer exists, one that has transformed into a deep nostalgia, one that becomes more and more conflicted as time passes. Often thought of as a yearning for a recent past, or homesickness, nostalgia can be difficult to define. Although the concept and emotion associated with nostalgia may seem familiar, the word is in fact complex. Nostalgia, for the immigrant, is an escape from their marginalization; an opportunity to embrace the complexities. Painting then becomes an embrace, a direct connection between the present and the past, between what is still here and what is gone.

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CUANDO RECUERDO

When I was younger my parents and I would visit my grandparents in Mexico pretty often. We would stay in my dad's family home that had been there since his family can remember. It is a home sitting on a plot of land that has been passed down through generations, a place where my family has always lived. I remember my time there very fondly, the smell of my grandmothers kitchen, always active always cooking, the sound of my grandfather working the livestock, pigs, chickens, bulls, cattle, the smell of coffee in the mornings and evenings, the sounds of my grandmothers sewing machine, the feeling of all the different textures hidden within all the clothes and textiles that were stacked on both sides of her work area, the freedom of being able to run around outside without the constant heaviness of my parent's overprotective gaze, the smell of the dirt, the wet dirt after a heavy rain, the sound of my shoes as I ran down the hill, the cold touch of a metal door.

Entering was never a question, there was no knocking, there was no waiting for permission, I simply just entered. The families that lived in our rancho were all connected, not always by blood, not always by marriage; they were connected through circumstance. The circumstance of being born in this place, at this time. The circumstance of not being able to leave but not being able to stay. This connection of circumstance provided a security that no longer exists. The security to be able to just enter, as if this place was also yours, as if this family was also your own, as if you always existed here.

I had a routine, I would start at the top of the hill and work my way down. Next to us lived my tio Rodolfo and his family, across from our house lived my tia Maria and tio Eliazar, halfway down the hill lived my other tio and his family. And if you continued further down the hill towards the entrance to our rancho was a house that I frequented almost every day, where my tia lived, although she wasn't really my tia, at least not by blood. Our rancho is not big, I draw it out frequently, and before the internet and google maps this was the only visual I had of it when I was back in the United States, the one that lived in my memory. There are 18 families, 18 homes that have been there since anyone can remember, constantly changing, constantly growing as the families grew and expanded.

I have a deep sentimental longing for this time, one that has transformed into a deep nostalgia, one that becomes more and more conflicted as time passes. Often thought of as a yearning for a recent past, or homesickness, nostalgia can be difficult to define. Although the concept and emotion associated with nostalgia may seem familiar, the word is in fact complex. Its meaning has undergone multiple connotation changes over the years. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams (1976) says that nostalgia is a word whose meaning has altered as culture has changed; he argues that it is a disputed word that assumes different meanings as it moves from one discourse to another discourse. Geographer and historian David Lowenthal (1985) argues, in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, that nostalgia is the current "catchwork for looking back" and that "it is a way of remembering with the pain removed." In a similar vein historian Michael Kammen (1991) says, "nostalgia, with its wistful memories, is essentially history without guilt". In a special issue of *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* on nostalgia, Sean Scanlan said that nostalgia has, "an uncanny ability to exceed any

constraining definition". Cultural critic Christopher Lasch (1984) criticized nostalgia as "the abdication of memory" and suggested that it was a way of looking at the "past cut off from the present rather than entwined with it". Additionally, Michael Eric Dyson (1996), another cultural critic, suggested that nostalgia "is colored memory. It is romantic remembering. It recreates as much as it reveals".

Dr. Farzana Akhter (2017), while researching nostalgia through the protagonists of immigrant literature, argues that, "the nostalgia that afflicts the protagonists of immigrant literature does not spring from any idealized or imagined version of the past, nor is it triggered by personally experienced past". She also argues that the recognition of certain factors, "a degree of social alienation that is exacerbated by cultural, linguistic, economic, and political factors in the United States, factors that are at times orchestrated by - rather than incidental outcomes of - the social majority", moves us away from "thinking of nostalgia as an individualized, internal, isolated emotion, and instead forces us to think of it as a social malaise that hinders immigrants from feeling entirely fulfilled and compels them to seek the refuge of an idealized home". Dr. Akhter (2017) argues that nostalgia and immigrant experience are correlated. She says that "when immigrants leave the familiarity of home and hearth and venture into the unknown with hopes to make a new home, they know quite well that they may never return to the old country," and that "when immigrants come to the new land they are greeted with a host of sentiments ranging from unfamiliarity to hostility. Venturing into a new territory, leaving behind all that is known - home, family, and friends - is understood to be quite traumatizing, but this trauma is further intensified when immigrants are confronted with the hostile milieu of the new country".

Political theorist Steven Clinton (qtd. in Wilson 25) says, "nostalgia goes well beyond recollection and reminiscence". This distinction is further amplified when Janelle L. Wilson (2005) states that while reminiscence and recollection do not involve comparison to the present or a desire to return to the past, nostalgia embodies both of these

characteristics. This leads us to understand the nostalgic's desire to return to the past has correlation to the present condition of life, which in comparison to the past seems unbearable and restricted. For immigrants, the challenges of assimilation along with the hostility of the host hegemonic culture that usually pushes them into marginality, make them nostalgic for the past life. Dr. Akhter (2017) says, "Nostalgia, thus for the immigrant protagonists is not a sentimentality or a colorful memory, it is rather an emotional state of mind, an agent in itself that is triggered by social and personal conditions of dissatisfaction in the present life in the adopted country".

It should also be noted that nostalgia does not rise from mere longing for the past home but rather various complexities mark the nostalgic tendency. Noel Valis (2000) points out that nostalgia is not just a mourning for a lost home and time but has other factors associated with it. Valis says that

...nostalgia as a particular secularized form of cultural mourning intersects inevitably, with other manifestations of the social body, taking on the colorations of class and gender differences, local variations, and aesthetic/affective modes of expression. The perception of loss becomes the paradoxical ground for the space of nostalgia.

Dr. Akhter agrees, that it is indeed the loss - whether it's the loss of a past home, or the loss of power and authority, or the loss of security and serenity - that becomes the nurturing ground for nostalgia. This can lead to a sense of mortality, where nostalgia can be used as a way of coping with the fear of death. However, nostalgia can also become a way of avoiding or denying death, by idealizing the past and ignoring the realities of the present. This can lead to a sense of disconnection from the present and a difficulty in accepting change and loss.



My grandfather Ramon Juarez passed away on March 23, 2015, almost 3 months to the date from when his wife, my grandmother, Ramona passed. This wasn't my first encounter with death, that happened when my other grandfather Jose Medina Gonzalez passed on December 2, 2006. I was 14 then, it happened pretty quickly, one moment he was here visiting the family, the next he was diagnosed with cancer, and in a couple of months he was gone. It was fast, it was sudden, and honestly I was too young to understand what had just happened. But this death, the death of my maternal grandfather was different. We were still grieving my grandmother, but he was already in a hospice facility and it felt like there was no room to breathe before he too passed. It was hard for him, I realize that now, his wife - who he had married when he was 17 and she was 14 - was gone, his children no longer got along, his masculinity was constantly challenged as he depended on his daughters more and more...he was tired. The time after his death was different from anything I had experienced - it was a first for many things: the first time encountering death so closely, the first time confronting my own mortality, the first time I turned to nostalgia for comfort, the first time I realized that there is a limbo that lingers immediately after a person's death that is fueled by nostalgia, the first time I understood that even in death there were still ways in which we would feel othered. When immigrants are pushed into marginality they will, at times, turn to nostalgia for comfort, for security and for reassurance. While my family mourned here in America we imagined what it would be like to mourn in Mexico, in our rancho, with our community, with his community. We wondered if the grieving would be easier if he hadn't been taken from us and placed into a cold refrigerated box while we grieved at home, separated. We struggled to leave him at the end of each day, when the funeral home would kick us out because they wanted to go home but we didn't, because he was there and we weren't. We knew that back home we wouldn't be questioned, we wouldn't be separated, we could take our time.







DURANES DE ENMEDIO

Duranes de Enmedio is a rancho situated in the municipality of Valle de Santiago in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. The closest town to Duranes de Enmedio is Pueblo Nuevo which was “founded” in the year 1540 around the same time that the closest city Irapuato was “founded” on February 15, 1547, when the Spanish Emperor Charles V granted the charter of foundation of the Marian city of Irapuato under the name of the “Congregation of San Marcos de Irapuato”. I include the word founded noted inside quotation marks because these ranchos, towns, and cities were not founded but merely taken. Before the Spanish colonization of these areas, they belonged to the prehispanic, indigenous communities, like the Chichimecas and Purépechas. A “rancho” can be defined as a, “Vivienda humilde hecha con materiales de desecho o de mala calidad que carece de las condiciones mínimas de habitabilidad y que es característica de zonas suburbanas no urbanizadas” or translated to english, “Humble housing made of scrap or poor quality materials that lacks the minimum conditions of habitability and is characteristic of undeveloped suburban areas”. According to the Mexican government’s economic structure analysis of our rancho there are 18 standing structures, 6 of those homes have sanitary amenities, 17 are connected to public utilities and 15 have electricity. Of those 18 structures 0 own a computer, 11 have a washer, and 15 have a television.

In our rancho my great grandmother, Maria Jesus Hernandez, was one of the few practicing midwives. She would ride her horse from rancho to rancho helping women through delivery using techniques that were taught to her by her mother. Our rancho, and others, surrounded a pueblo, Pueblo Nuevo, that at that time did not have a proper hospital, and what little healthcare they did have most could not afford. Healthcare was knowledge that was passed down from generation to generation. My grandmother, her daughter, did not go on to become a midwife. She did go on to become one of our community’s best seamstresses, utilizing and perfecting techniques that were taught to her by her mother. During my stays, my grandmother would have me help her, a small studio assistant with small hands capable of maneuvering small utensils and small stitches. She would instruct me to rip seams while she pieced garments together on her sewing machine that was a gift from my grandfather. She would have me embroider patterns she had drawn out with chalk, and sometimes allow me to get creative with the colors and stitches. For her, this was a job, something she had always done to sustain their life in Mexico. But for me it felt like so much more. There was a connection to materiality that I had not experienced before. I think about this connection a lot in my practice—not only the connection with material, but the connection with memory.

How are memory and nostalgia accessed? Where is the line blurred between memory and nostalgia? In my memory I think about the iron doors that were very prominent in our family home in Mexico. The big blue gate that protected our home from outsiders, the matching blue iron doors that led into the kitchen and living room, and the red iron doors that led into the bedrooms. This house, with these doors, are where my memories live, where they intertwine with nostalgia and become tangled. This house, that no longer exists, with doors that no longer lead anywhere, offers feelings that are no longer obtainable.





THE ARCHIVE

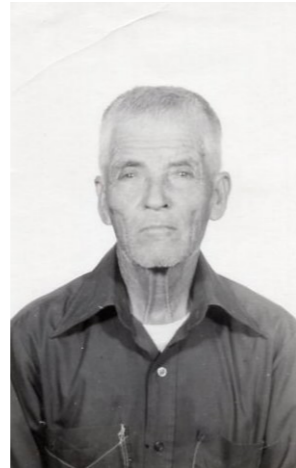
During the winter break of my first year in graduate school, I went back home to Houston to visit my parents and family. During this time I became interested in going through my mom's photo albums. At the time I was not quite sure what I was looking for, at times it felt like I was aimlessly searching for a feeling that no longer existed. A feeling of reassurance that all of the "progress" was worth it. As I sat at the dinner table, night after night, my mom began to join me in my search. During these nights of searching and looking, we began to have conversations. Conversations about life back home in Mexico, the transition to life in the United States, the feeling of not belonging, the feeling of loneliness, the need to progress and make a better life for the family, the need to survive. These conversations started to show me that our family's journey from Mexico to the United States was much more complicated than I was initially told as a child. A lot of underlying suffering and loneliness was never mentioned or talked about. There is the rejection of failure of any kind: failing meant that all of the suffering and loneliness was for nothing, for no one.

bell hooks (1998) says, in *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life*, "...it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black life to the visual, to art making, make photography central". hooks then goes on to say, "When we concentrate on photography, then, we make it possible to see the walls of photographs in black homes as a critical intervention, a disruption of white control over black images". bell hooks goes on to explain that, "the walls of images in Southern black homes were sites of resistance...these walls were a space where, in the midst of segregations, the hardship of apartheid could be countered". She continues, "The camera was the central instrument by which blacks could disprove representations of us created by white folks. The degrading images of blackness that emerged from racist white imagination and that were circulated widely in the dominant culture (on salt shakers, cookie jars, pancake boxes) could be countered by "true-to-life" images. When the psychohistory of a people is marked by on-


going loss, when entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, documentation can become an obsession".

Throughout the conversations I had with my mom, and later my aunt, I was faced with a dilemma: how to represent someone that I had never seen before, someone that I had no idea what they looked like. Whenever I try to trace back my family's ancestry, the branches stop with my great-grandparents. On my mom's side there were my grandmother Ramona's parents—Carmen Arredondo and Jesús Jasso—and my grandfather Ramon's parents—Teodoro Juárez and Aurelia González. Of these four great-grandparents, we only know exactly what two of them looked like.


Two photos exist, one of Carmen Arredondo and one of Jesús Jasso. The photos appear to be for some form of government documentation. They are posed almost like passport photos, both with similar lighting conditions and printed in a size that would indicate they would be stapled to some form of documentation. There were no known photographs of my other two great-grandparents—Teodoro Juárez and Aurelia González. My only image of them was made up of descriptions that accompanied stories told about them. These ghost images made me uncomfortable. They made me long for more. Traces of history with no face, no certainty, no reassurance.






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 **SEP**

SE EXTIENDE EL PRESENTE CERTIFICADO EN
VALLE DE SANTIAGO

ENTIDAD GUANAJUATO

A LOS TREINTA DIAS DEL MES DE
JUNIO DE MIL NOVECIENTOS
OCHENTA Y UNO

VICTORIO GARCIA TINOCO
NOMBRE Y FIRMA

FOLIO 111005707 **A 1957759**

Ver reverso



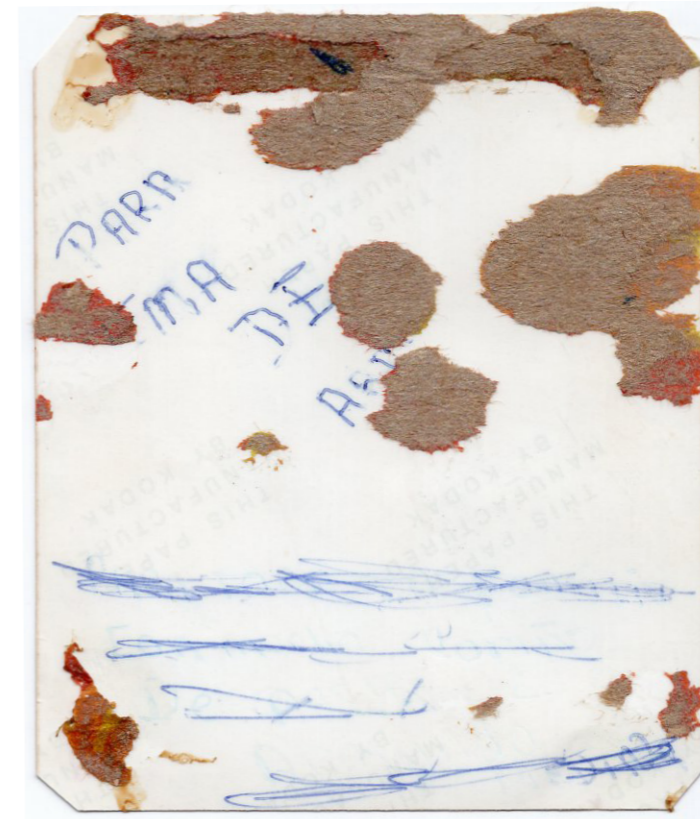
EL NORTE

Dr. Ahkter argues that

...the literary representations of immigrants capture key aspects of the immigrant experience in the new land, such as often not only being ridiculed for their way of life, language, and even their appearance, but also being ostracized and forced to live in their own enclaves...they are pushed to liminality and are barred from active participation in the socio-economic and political arenas...their prevailing dissatisfied and disconnected condition in the adopted land is responsible for their homesickness and nostalgia (2017).

Dr. Ahkter's claim that immigrants' nostalgia germinates from their present condition can be backed by the work of Fred Davis (1979) who, in *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, asserts that nostalgia's sources always "reside in the present, regardless of how much the ensuing nostalgic experience may draw its sustenance from our memory of the past". Nostalgia, for the immigrant, is an escape from their marginalization; an opportunity to embrace the complexities. Painting then becomes an embrace, a direct connection between the present and the past, between what is still here and what is gone. Sourcing from my archive, composed of photographs and documents, I confront the neverending nostalgia that surrounds me, my life and my practice. The archive feels incomplete, there are moments that are missing, gaps in time and memory. The holders of this archive and that history are gone, the ones that hold that archive now try their best to remain accurate, remain true. As a holder, and protector, of this archive I try to remain true, to them, and to me. I fill in the gaps with my truth, with my memories that ring so similar to theirs.







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