


Bitter/Sweet

Looking Back, Looking Forward, Collapsing Time

by Beth Grabowski

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 **ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES** often complains about students who use imagery from the 40's and 50's saying that they cannot possibly have a longing for something that they have not experienced. "I grew up in the '50's," he says. "They have no idea!" The implication, of course is that the student in question is somehow bereft of noteworthy lived experience and has been reduced to pilfering a history that does not belong to him. The perceived lack of authenticity is the transgression.

Can we be nostalgic for something that we have never experienced? The accusation of a false nostalgia might ring true given a current common understanding of the concept.

The term nostalgia originated in the 17th century and was first described as a disease. It referred to the pain felt by someone who, longing to return home, fears never to see it again. A medical concept, nostalgia was described as an extreme homesickness that manifest itself as a physical ailment. Physicians pinpointed physical displacement as the root cause and considered the affliction to be common and curable, requiring "opium, leeches, (or) a journey to the Swiss Alps"ⁱ to relieve its symptoms.

The term has evolved from this notion of an ailment and has migrated from its medical origin to exist in a sphere of poetry and politics. In contemporary contexts, nostalgia is a word that conjures paradoxical and layered associations. Typically, nostalgia is regarded as innocent and pleasant reminiscence; the poetry of longing for a simpler and sweeter time and circumstance from one's past. But it is also often considered a pejorative term, referencing an indulgent, retrograde attitude that idealizes the past and stands counter to progression.

Svetlana Boym, in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* challenges this limited reading and contends that nostalgia is "not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, an historical emotion." Boym suggests that there is a global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. She further asserts that

*"...nostalgia is not 'antimodern'; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: doubles and mirror images of one another. Nostalgia is not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of time and space that makes the division into 'local' and 'universal' possible."*ⁱⁱ

Boym rejects the dismissive understanding of nostalgia as essentially "history without guilt." She asserts that nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow

humans, yet “the moment we try to replace longing for belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As a reaction against a modernist agenda of “progress,” nostalgia intimates a suspicion of an ever-improving future. Skeptical, reflective and voyeuristic, it illuminates the space of longing. In this case, nostalgia is a voyeuristic act, illuminating a liminal space between skepticism and a longing for certitude in the face of an uncertain future. A contemporary nostalgia is not homesickness, per se – it is more located in a desire for experience that is inaccessible by time, place, or condition.

It is this more complicated nostalgia that I explore in my work. An intentional manipulation of images toward strangeness embodies both desire and ambivalence of familial, and especially maternal, space. Transformations brought on through process both creates a sense of past while denying the betrayal of time, suggesting another proposition that contains facets of truth, fantasy, desire, pride and regret. Mediating between past, present and future, significance is called in to question.

The problem of nostalgia is one of collapsing time and the tendency to distill a romanticized notion of identity at the expense of the inconvenient details of reality. But what of that supposed truth? Does there exist a moral imperative to distinguish between what happened and what merely might have happened? Ultimately the factual truth of any recollection is beside the point; it is displaced by another truth contained in the emotional residue. These are the stories that form identity. Unfixed and ambiguous messages are not necessarily an embrace of chaos, but become the poetry of wonder and possibility.

Reflecting on my work over the years, I notice that this nostalgic positioning emerged first when I became a mother. When my children were born in the early 1990’s, my status as mother became amplified as a defining identity. Most of the time the label was willingly embraced but in the act of negotiating my newly changed status, I resented that it was frequently laden with cultural expectation and marginalization. Particularly annoying to my intellectual and feminist self was the sentimental concept of “maternal instinct.” Certainly this construct had been reexamined as a complex system grounded in political, cultural and social realities. But the theory had a difficult time finding its way entirely to the lived experience.

Perhaps it was my own apprehension of my own capacity to be the “good mother”, I looked to the models of the women in my family to provide a map to my own agency. A pivotal book project from 1996, entitled *Countenance*, played this out this desire for maternal strategy. The project was in response to an invitation to create a work that was a collaboration between generations. My mom was excited by the project - she drove 5 hours to my house with a carload of boxes full of family archive materials. As we pored over the photos in search of images, we noticed that each of us tended to smile in a kind of reserved way, with our mouths closed. We noted the same countenance in images of my grandmother and great grandmother as well. As we looked through the boxes of photos, my mom told stories of the strong women in our family; stories that my young daughter was hearing for the first time. At one point, my mom casually announced that she had brought something that might be of interest to me. She showed me a tin box. In it were various papers and my great grandfather’s wallet. In the wallet was a \$50 confederate note, a single spectacle lens and his first wife’s suicide note. This was a bit of concealed family lore I had never before heard. The plan for the book changed in that moment.

Countenance was a multi-generational exploration of familial identity. The story of romance and tragedy contained in my great grandfather's tin box framed a new understanding of the individuals and dynamics in my family. The book takes images of 5 generations of women, a mother and daughter paired on each 2-page spread. The text is printed on silk tissue, which is collaged over the image of each woman and girl leaving the mouth. The text is in two parts, short passages written by me played off of excerpts from the suicide note. The words on the final page perhaps speak most to my own desire to shape an uncertain future:

My own daughter has inherited the smile. Through the generations, it has been an expression of forbearance, of reserve, of determination, of uncertainty, of tenacity, of commitment, of shyness. I will tell her stories of strength.

"Do you know how often I have said to you I love you? I say it now, the last words I ever speak or write. I love you, I love you."

The experience of perusing the family archives for the *Countenance* project had a lasting impression. I have remained fascinated at the power of storytelling as a means of identity formation. What fascinates me about any family story is the continual rehearsal^{iv} of the story from the contemporary moment. The story exists as a shared, collective account as various points of view fill in, contradict and expand the continuing details of the drama. Not only does the listener gain a sense of birthright but also the agency attained by the teller is profound. We mark our path through our lives by collecting stories and other fetishized markers of our lived experience. The stories that I tell my children echo the stories that were told to me. Our family stories affirm my children's own agency as a legacy of their family before. As Joan Didion said, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."^v

The importance and meaning of the story changes as the needs and roles of both the teller and the listener change over time. The inherent dynamics of the relationship of the individuals involved in the exchange provide the story with a life of its own. The embellishments, the added layers and the emphasis of certain particulars create new meanings within familiar frameworks.

Residuum

As Sara Ruddick pointed out in her essay *Talking About Mothers*^{vi}, barriers still exist in the very language that we use to describe maternal experience. She says, "It is hard to speak about mothering. Overwhelmed with greeting card sentimentality, we have no realistic language in which to capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work."

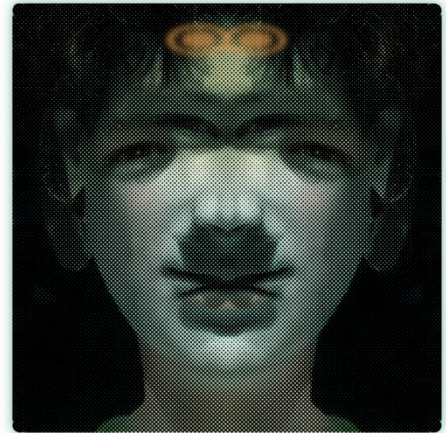
The moment of becoming a mother exactly contains this binary emotion. Affection that is virtually indescribable is wrapped in the presentiment of loss. My series entitled *Residuum* explores this bittersweet duality. The images that comprise the *Residuum* series utilize the detritus of the child's play with the image of the quintessential Mother, the Virgin Mary. The sad Madonna has always fascinated me. The stories told in my Catholic



upbringing has certainly accounted for Mary's expression; her certain knowledge of her son's imminent and predestined sacrifice. I think the sadness is also perhaps regret for the lost childhood itself, her own sacrifice to exist as a caretaker, but not someone who engages the life of her son. The appropriated depictions of the Madonna and Child dyad is covered with the shapes of an empty sticker page; a residue of fleeting childhood.

Nostomantic

Fast forward to the end of the first decade of this 21st century. Sounds almost futuristic. A kind of liminal nostalgia functions in my series entitled *Nostomantic*. The images begin with photographs of my children. I operate in the contemporaneous moment, indulging my sentimentality by working with images of the ones I adore. Yet the photographic moment also contains the seeds of history, sprouting almost instantaneously to become past and loss. The intentional deconstruction of these images embody both desire and ambivalence of the maternal space. The transformation brought on by doubling and layering denies the betrayal of time, suggesting another proposition that contains facets of truth, desire, pride and regret. My daughter becomes both an impish sprite and a gorilla-faced beast. An image of my adolescent man-child transforms in to a sweet alien creature with a strange aura of wisdom. In the space of making these images, I contemplate these weird reflections and wonder if the characters that have emerged retain any resemblance to their real-world counterparts.



As my children move from adolescence in to adulthood, this reflection contains my wish for their happiness and safety, while simultaneously existing as means of coping with the shattered illusion of my ability to protect them in any direct way. The "replay" becomes a search for evidence that I have adequately fulfilled the role of "mother."

And now

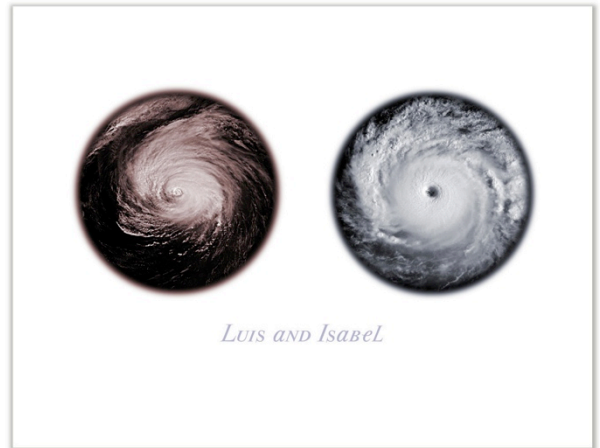
Over the past year or so, I have been at a cross-roads with my work. I remain interested in the idea of a problematic nostalgia. I have broadened my thinking to include an essential critique of the political agendas that determine our day-to-day lived experience as part of its definition. I am moving away from the specific source material of my family photographs to a broader cultural observation of the things and images that contain this sense of longing, or possibly hope. I am less interested in the narrative implications of these elements, but the affective residue. The glimpses of elements become agents of seduction. I seek to examine the malleability of sensory knowledge through layering and juxtaposition, relationships formed between abstraction and representation, image and text, the simple and the complex, and ultimately the viewer and the viewed.

Rather than a sentimental nostalgia, I find currency in a nostalgia that is borne more of an apprehension of an uncertain future rather than a desire for a past. In either case, though, I am interested in the fact that the desire for the "other than here or now" is in fact itself a fantasy. I think this is a particular phenomena of contemporary life which reflects a forboding feeling that puts our capacity for self-

determination at risk. Forces that are beyond our individual control buffet us around, but in a paradoxical twist also unite us. It might be true that such forces have always been there, but a sense of individual insignificance is amplified in the contemporary technological world. I think contemporary nostalgia is in some part a desire for a more contained and controllable sense of the world.

My initial forays in this direction included a project utilizing hundreds of postcards, both sent to me and gathered from travels and thrift stores. I have systematically painted out the landscape, leaving only fragments of sky. The sky (and landscape) is understandable as is the postcard-object. Together they suggest connection (the postcard), universality (the continuous sky) and loss or absence of our specificity (the blanked out landscape).

As I continued to think about this universality, I began collecting images of what I call "extreme weather events." The public consciousness of the threat of global warming and the much publicised natural disasters of recent years has undoubtedly influenced my fascination with images of hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes and storms. I have been thinking about these events as the "threat from the outside." A trope from science fiction, such a threat stands as the uncontrollable catalyst forcing a consciousness of our interdependence and even moral obligation.



Another Border Crossing is a print that plays with the strange tradition of anthropomizing tropical storms by naming them. Perhaps when tragedy has a name, we can hold out the possibility of negotiating a deal to protect ourselves. But hurricanes do not honor any kind of logic contained in political boundaries. Hurricanes Luis and Isabel delightfully offered layers of metaphor that echo our political discourse. Strangely gendered and sensual, they defied all immigration law in their relentless path across the border.

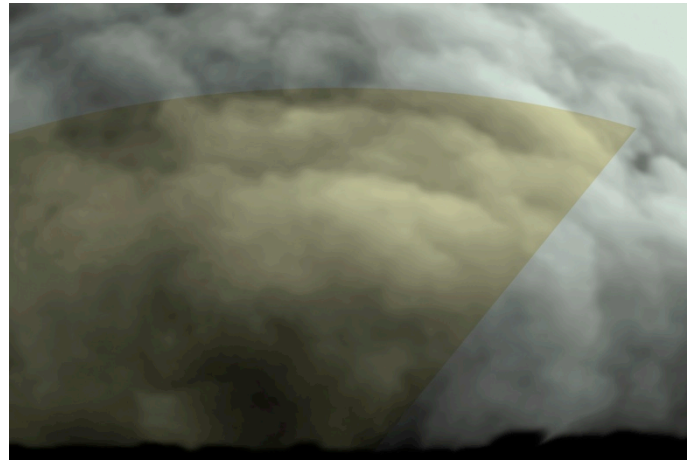


I have collectively titled my most recent works *Prevailing Assumptions of a Common Fate*. The first of these works were digital sketches for an installation. The one that I ultimately realized as an installation used an image of lightning, etched in to a glass oval. The image of lightning of course, functions metaphorically - it is a powerful force, and to all except perhaps meteorologists, an unpredictable occurrence. It suggests a storm, but also has a profound beauty. In this iteration of the image, the destructive power is minimized, as it is neatly contained in the oval of the glass and the projected image (our common fate.) The projection takes over an expanse of wall, its enlarged presence mirroring the tendency to magnify our ideas and any variety of narratives (hopes, fears, grievances, slights, pleasures) that we use to construct our sense of identity and purpose. My intention was to quiet down the destructiveness associated with such an image, encouraging a sense of (desire for?) coherency. Of course that

coherency is elusive; any coherency that we experience in the world we bring to it. Unity is not inherent in nature, but is a net-like a grid we cast over nature when there is something we want- validation, an understanding, a solution. In this piece, the stability is denied as the image can change dramatically depending on the light used to cast the shadow and any ambient light in the room.

I find it fascinating that Boym's historical emotion existing as a vicarious longing is strangely enabled by our technological age. I continue to collect images of large, intangible events. It is important to me that these images belong to a public consciousness. We sit at our computers, find things and imagine ourselves to experience. In this recent work, I redact information that provides specificity, leaving ominous clouds that stand metaphorically as our collective burden.

While the relationship to my older work is perhaps not immediately obvious, I think there is a common thread. For me, there is an acquiescence to (perhaps insistence on) a notion of complexity, resisting a reducible, formulaic answer/definition/path, despite our deep desire to do so. I like to think of the nostalgic impulse as Svetlana Boym describes it as "not always retrospective; (but)... prospective as well. ... (N)ostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory."^{vii}



Nostalgia holds out hope for a return – or at least reclamation of agency – perhaps as we can only understand in hindsight. As long as the possibility of experience -however remote- exists, then the understanding of our collective responsibility becomes tangible.

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ⁱ Svetlana Boym, *Nostalgia and its Discontents*, The Hedgehog Review / Summer 0 7, p 11

ⁱⁱ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* : Basic Books, 2002, introduction

ⁱⁱⁱ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* : Basic Books, 2002, introduction

^{iv} Engel, Susan *Context is Everything; The Nature of Memory*, Freeman Press, 1999.

Engel discusses the idea of "rehearsal", the repeated retelling of a story in a public context as a mechanism for solidifying certain shared memories. She contrasts this with the fleeting and fragmented memories that are not cemented through a performative retelling.

^v Didion, Joan, essay: *On Keeping a Notebook*, from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008

^{vi} Moyra Davey, ed *Mother Reader; Essential Writings on Motherhood*, Sara Ruddick, *Talking About Mothers*, Seven Stories Press, 2001, pp 187- 197

^{vii} Svetlana Boym, *Nostalgia and its Discontents*, The Hedgehog Review / Summer 0 7, p 8