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More than a briefcase of pills

Oxford MMXXIV

**More than a briefcase of pills—
a meditation on exile nostalgia, postmemory and
transgenerational memory care**

NB This essay contains references to mental breakdown

More than a briefcase of pills is an essay by Sonia Boué for the installation *Look Well After Yourself* comprising sculpture, photographs, archive material and online elements, including photographs, films and a radio broadcast. The essay is presented in short sections and includes a brief biography of the artist's father, José María García Lora.

Look Well After Yourself was commissioned by the John Hansard Gallery as part of the collaborative exhibition *Las Gemelas, Arrival (a lexicon of unmaking)* October 2024 — January 2025. The title recalls a phrase Boué's father used whenever they parted. For Boué, it holds meaning beyond words, and her father's syntax is loaded with the emotional landscape of exile. As a child, Boué's family lived in political exile in England due to the Spanish Civil War. Accordingly, her relationship with the Basque child refugee archives, which has inspired this work, is familial and presents her with an emotionally entangled heritage.

“Nostos, Martha, returning home. Algos, pain. Nostalgia is the suffering caused by our unappeased yearning to return. Whether or not, he said, the home we long for ever existed.”

Meg Mason, *Sorrow and Bliss*, 2020

“Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever.”

Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, *Granta* 13, 1984

Preface

Conversations with my collaborator Ashokkumar Mistry have greatly contributed to *Look Well After Yourself*. In particular, the question of nostalgia, has, at times, been central to our discussions. *Look Well After Yourself* must also be viewed through the lens of inherited transgenerational trauma, termed postmemory by Marianne Hirsch ¹. I have a close relationship with the subject of this exhibition — The Basque child refugee archives, which are held at The University of Southampton's Special Collections. A preexisting body of postmemory work also sits in an archive on my website ². Thus, *Look Well After Yourself* represents a continuity of interest and engagement with the experience of Spanish exile in England. Creative responses to postmemory experiences have been termed transgenerational memory care by Professor Monica Jato ³. Such memory care acts — in which we honour and seek to ameliorate the history of our forebears — also require care for our audiences and a significant measure of self-care. Writing about this work is, in itself, an act of care.

The backcloth for *Look Well After Yourself* is the experience of displacement both geographical and psychological: what it means to be in exile (the state of being barred from one's native country).

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Cara Levey, formerly of the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at University College Cork, Ireland. Cara's sensitive reading of my work elucidated '*the open-endedness and enduring legacy of displacement*'⁴ and exile as a psychological state which can endure beyond one's freedom to return to the homeland.

Sonia Boué, 13 September 2024

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Rethinking nostalgia

We often conceive of nostalgia as cosy and self-indulgent. A certain brand of nostalgia is highly marketable, thereby diluting nostalgia and robbing it of substance. Exile nostalgia, as I will call it, requires a deeper (and more nuanced) understanding. Nostalgia comes into focus as psychological pain relating to an *unappeasable* yearning to return. Yet, as Nour Salman has written about exile, *'Nostalgic memory then, in its various forms, brings about solace'*³. Exile nostalgia is Janus-like and seemingly paradoxical — a psychic pathway paved with both pain (*algos*) *and* the comforts of imaginary return. Having struggled against it, I now view nostalgia as central to this work.

For my solo work, I have drawn on the colours and textures of my childhood and the eras of my parents and grandparents. This collaborative exhibition called for something different, and I decided to adopt a more contemporary aesthetic. It felt important to look forward. Ashokkumar and I have wanted to bring the history of the Basque children into the present and have chosen a palette of bright modern colours. Indeed, throughout the wider exhibition, archival photographs have been colourised and brought to life, and the colourful wool and fabrics can be enjoyed at almost any level.

In choosing the aesthetic for this work there has also been a certain psychological defensiveness on my part: a desire to distance myself from traumatic memories. *Look Well after Yourself* taught me to embrace nostalgia, and think beyond rose-tinted spectacles and value judgements inherent in some dictionary definitions. For example, ‘excessive sentimentality’ which seems pejorative and somewhat dismissive.

Working with the dead

Transgenerational memory care work means working with the dead — often with our loved ones. My postmemory archive is, therefore, brimming with emotion. Could *this* be viewed as excessively sentimental? I confess to also seeking to put it behind me, at times — not wanting to ‘drown in a well of sentiment’ or get ‘stuck in the past’. *Look Well After Yourself* reminds me that memory care enacts healing in the present — art mediates, and grief knows no excess.

I will dwell on the past, repeat myself and embrace my homesickness for a place belonging to another century. I’ll return (inexorably) to places which exist only in my imagination and live with a compulsion to heal wounds that are not, strictly speaking, my own. They are the wounds (barely spoken) of my father and my grandparents and great-grandmother, who were all Spanish exiles. The Franco regime sought to silence and erase the exiles from public memory, yet there were pockets of resistance — as I learned when I made my BBC Radio 4 Programme *The Art of Now: Return to Catalonia* (2018). For my family, fragments of oral testimony passed on by my mother are all that remain. Shards of regret for conversations lost prick like psychic splinters.

Still, my loved ones appear to me in ghostly form, and I think of them as my creative collaborators — and in my mind, we heal together with each postmemory work. The locations we shared, our memory sites, live on in my imagination. I conjure them for guidance and inspiration. For our living family, this work frees us from complex grief, and we can celebrate our dead, not as victims but as survivors.

Postmemory as a compulsion

Look Well After Yourself includes two photographs in which my father appears. They capture but a moment. Only what came after and before can make sense of a compulsion to create one hundred pom-pom sculptures (*to my complete satisfaction*). I have been a hard taskmistress, and so these little forms have not been easy to make — having been worked and reworked, over and over, in a series of inexorable returns. I couldn't stop, and I can't stop now. This is surprising and extraordinary to live with. It speaks both to a haunting and a practice in which my hands have taken over. There is even a compulsion to write about my compulsion and to provide glimpses of the after and the before.



A postmemory awakening

The facts were overwhelming — a tide of the unthinkable. In 2013, I began to absorb the facts on, of all things, inheriting my grandmother's handbag. I took to my bed when I learned about the camps — the men and women separated and their heads shaved: a prelude to the Jewish Holocaust. I had to lie down and spend some time reading *Homage to Catalonia* — the mere tip of the iceberg.

You see, I hadn't known. I didn't know. It hadn't registered, although, of course, I knew. A paradox when trauma lurks unspoken — part of me knew but not in ways I could grasp. Let's say, I both did and didn't know. Rather, I was on the cusp of knowing — and then quite shattered that I didn't know in time. Not in time to hug my father. There was to be no reckoning with this history in his lifetime.

My father had been unwell

Exile nostalgia makes sense of my father's malady. A state complicated by the treatments and stigmas of the time, a noxious cocktail by which he got by. Yes, my father had been unwell, but as a child, I couldn't have told you that. It would be a long time before it could be mentioned or understood. By which, I mean that it is one thing to talk of being unwell and another to absorb the full nature of it, the panorama, so to speak (where a life hangs in the balance).

My father was also able to work and never complained about his health. My mother later revealed that he would drive himself to and from electric shock treatments. This feels quietly heroic, and he *was* quiet in ways that made him seem unusually gentle. Perhaps he felt crushed by life, but maybe he was just gentle. I think he was. He was also not like other fathers I knew. His hands sometimes shook, and he carried a briefcase full of pills. Yet, *I* was the 'freak' who thought she must surely have been adopted. *I* was a tearaway and nothing like him. He was often serious and withdrawn but also extremely loving. My father radiated warmth.

When I noticed the briefcase, I asked questions, but the answers failed to land, sliding off tearaway me. Yes, yes, my father had been unwell. My father was also brilliant, literary, humorous and extremely kind. He *was* a survivor. For all my rebelliousness, I knew that he loved me, and I loved him, but our lives held something tragic. I learned to carry this feeling — and it weighed more than a briefcase of pills.

A posthumous conversation

When my father died suddenly in 1989, I took to grief so very badly. Then, decades passed before I discovered that his beloved portable Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter had brought him both solace *and* despair. His ambitions were snatched by circumstance, and yet he was a writer through and through. Writing was, perhaps, his way of stopping time and returning to an imaginary homeland. The world marches cruelly forward, yet the mind wanders back, seeking corners of solace, justice and repair.

Subdued in life, my father was so vivid on paper. Writing is a zone uncanny and unworldly, from which the dead speak and conversations can be rekindled with a little imagination. His plays became my harbour where hope lingered, and it wasn't too late for us to join forces and reckon with the past. This became my practice — a game of call and response, including performance, intertextual playwriting, film and installation.

Postmemory ‘archivo’

A compulsion to heal (the personal *and* collective) took hold. I made works relating to the Spanish Civil War from 2013 until the pandemic hit, and I mothballed my postmemories in an archive — ‘un archivo’. As the world stopped, I focused on the present, but *Look Well after Yourself* signals a return. Postmemory comes with a sense of duty in which memory feels owed, and it is.

The Basque child refugee archive

When I cast my eyes over photographs of the Basque children in England I feel a visceral tug that is familiar. Postmemory sucks me into its vortex again. I feel I know the children and can hear their voices. I'm transported back in time. My father's image and that of his closest friend Pepe Estruch also appear in the archive. The remarkable Pepe who saved my father (many times) and who, for a decade, cared for Basque children in Surrey. Pepe — my father's brother throughout his long exile.

It is a wonder to experience the pains and comforts of nostalgia. What I encounter in the archive are family ties and sentiments that stir and feel alive within me. Without my bidding, Pepe joined me as I fussed over my pom-poms as though they were the children (los niños). I marvelled at Pepe's dedication to the niños and held fast to my promise to make one hundred pom-poms. Was this grand delusion or high art, I often asked myself, knee-deep in wool, with Pepe at my side? Of course, this is a false distinction. Imagination knows no borders. If only geography could be the same.

José María García Lora — A brief biography

José María García Lora was born 1920 in Madrid. His friends called him José Marí or Lora. He received his education in the progressive pedagogy Libre de Enseñanza which encompassed the Residencia de Estudiantes, where Federico García Lorca, Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel were students. As a pupil of the Instituto Escuela (IE) in Madrid, he took part in school plays and saw one of Lorca's productions in 1935. When the Civil War broke out in 1936, the IE and the Residencia de Estudiantes were abruptly closed. Lora was on a school trip in England at the time and returned to Madrid to find that the gates were locked and his friends had vanished.

In 1938, he volunteered and was given a political commission to become a war reporter with the republican army. He saw action at the battle of the Ebro and sustained a minor gunshot wound. By February 1939 Franco's victory appeared certain. Lora was among over 450,000 Spanish Republicans who fled across the border into French territory. They were held in camps on beaches, where they lacked provisions and shelter until aid arrived. At first, the conditions were unsanitary and many didn't survive disease and starvation. Republican soldiers dug hollows in the sand to sleep in and shared one blanket between two.

At a camp in Le Barcarès, Lora developed a friendship which was to last for life. Pepe Estruch was born in 1916 and studied at the Residencia de Estudiantes, becoming involved in student theatrical activities which included Lorca's touring company *La Barraca*. As conditions in the camps improved and the Red Cross, Quakers and various comités provided communications and hopes of rescue, Estruch and Lora dreamed of creating their own touring theatre company in exile. Rescue came in the form of a Quaker called Alec Wainman, who had volunteered as an ambulance driver and also acted as a war photographer in Spain. Alec arranged for Estruch and Lora to travel to England, and look after a group of Basque children.

This was the beginning of Lora's lifelong exile from Spain due to his political commission. Gradually, he made a new life in Birmingham, picking up his studies and becoming an academic at the University. He also harboured ambitions to be a great playwright inspired by his education and the dreams he shared with Estruch in the camp. Sadly, his ambitions were to become entangled with the traumas of war and the ongoing strains of exile, and this took a toll on his mental health.

Lora's dramaturgy has been treated and reconsidered by Dr. Helena Buffery ⁷ and his plays can be understood as examples of Spanish exile theatre which continue to exist in a "zone of translation" ⁸.

During his lifetime, his play *Whirlwind (El Vendaval)* was performed and warmly received in Birmingham (1956) and Toulouse (1959). The *Captive Land (Tierra Cautiva)* was also performed in Birmingham (1960), but English audiences were bewildered by it and the play received a review which Lora found devastating. *Tierra Cautiva* was later published in Mexico (1962), a locus for Spanish culture in exile. As his dramaturgy faltered in England and Franco's long and violent regime drew on, Lora experienced a series of severe mental breakdowns. Treatment included multiple courses of electric shocks and the highly addictive antidepressants of the times.

On the orders of his psychiatrist, Lora had given up writing plays by 1968. He took solace in early retirement but was never reconciled to his exile. He resumed writing in the form of a memoir but died suddenly on holiday in Madrid in 1989. His ashes were scattered, according to his wishes, in the Parque del Buen Retiro, where he loved to play as a child before the Civil War.

Notes

1. Marianne Hirsch, *Connective Arts of Postmemory*, *Analecta Política* | Vol. 9 | No. 16 | enero-junio 2019
2. <https://www.soniaboue.co.uk/copy-of-postmemory-archive>
3. <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/memoryastransgenerationalcare/2023/08/22/the-memory-care-team/>
4. pp 22-33, *Valijas militantes, Activist Suitcases and Memories of Exile across the Spanish-Speaking World*, Chapter 1, Cara Levey, *Memory, Mobility, and Material Culture*, Edited By Chiara Giuliani, Kate Hodgson 2022, Routledge
5. <https://sajjeling.com/2014/06/04/exile-nostalgia-and-edward-said/>
6. I am, of course, painting a picture of my father as I remember him. My mother remembers him as a gregarious young man.
7. Buffery, H. (2008). *Performing the Captive Land: Devised performance based on Tierra Cautiva by Jose Garcia Lora, exploring the recoverability of Republican exile theatre.* Performance
8. BUFFERY, HELENA. “UNA DRAMATURGIA ‘EN-TRADUCCIÓN’: EL TEATRO DE JOSÉ GARCÍA LORA.” *Anales de La Literatura Española Contemporánea*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2012, pp. 397–419. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23237373>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2024.