WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II

EDITED BY KALIA BROOKS, CHERYL FINLEY, ELLYN TOSCANO AND DEBORAH WILLIS

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31. Instants

Fragments of a Return

Hande Gurses

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.[1]

This is the memorable opening sentence of Edward Said's 1995 essay "Reflections on Exile" in which he addresses the layered complexities and connections between exilic subjectivity and expression. The opening sentence succinctly and tactfully compiles the knotty tensions that exile has presented for me. Prior to becoming a personal experience, displacement for me has mostly consisted of literary and critical tropes that are indeed very "compelling to think about". When, in 2013, I completed my dissertation titled "Fictional Displacements", little had I known what prophecies the title had in store, foreshadowing my own, not so fictional, displacement. Three years later, in 2016, I left my home country and started a new life in exile, leaving behind not only my family and friends, but also identities that made me who I am. I now had to reconfigure a new self with the fragments of who I once was.

In my new life in exile, questions prevailed over answers: "Why did you leave?" "What if you never see your family again?" "Will you ever be able to go back home?" "Do you think things will improve?" Unable to provide answers, I lived the profound uncertainty of exile in solitude. Exile's appeal as a matter of scholarly enquiry was now juxtaposed with a bitter and debilitating sense of sorrow. In the struggle to survive, adapt, and reinvent myself perpetually, I was unable to reconcile my

1 Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile", in *Reflections on Exile, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 173–86 (p. 173).

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personal experience with the scholarly narratives of exile. Reflecting critically on exile while living it became an impossible task until the day when returning back home became a possibility.

Ironically, the borders that were closed to me during my time in exile opened when a pandemic prevailed across the globe, causing travel disruptions for many. As I was getting ready to reunite with my family and friends, the world was condemned to self-isolation, border closures, social distancing, and video conferencing applications. Under the circumstances dictated by the pandemic, exile stopped being the exception and became the norm. As I was anxiously planning for my trip, which would take place under unprecedented circumstances, I decided to venture into the creative expressions of what a return would mean. While the conditions of my return were far from what I had imagined, the possibility of return allowed me to find my voice and agency. To fight the invisibility and silence of the years spent in exile, I wanted to create a tangible object that would testify to this experience. Rather than merely documenting my return, I wanted to create an object, a material testimony of my experience to concretize the concealed yet painful impact of years spent in exile.

Fragments of Selves

The constrained spatiality of exile, combined with an uncertain future, results in an experience of spatiotemporal continuum that is mostly static. The possibility of return, from the moment of its inception, marks an abrupt moment of fissure and disrupts this steady setting by introducing the hope of reconciliation for the disjointed selves. Following a period of exilic solitude, the promise of a return home highlights the potential for a reunion with those fragmented identities. In an attempt to facilitate this reunion with the identities I had left behind, I decided to resort to a creative project, which would allow me to combine my scholarly voice with my personal experience, and words with images. I opted for a photo-journal that chronicles my return with instant photographs that are accompanied by short hand-written notes. I wrote one entry per day alongside one photograph, starting from the day of my departure from Vancouver on my way to Istanbul.

I wanted a medium that would be able to capture and represent the actual circumstances of my return without leaving room for any

subsequent editing. I wished to use a medium that would allow me to retain a proximity to the lived experience, with all its imperfections and ephemerality. Instead of making my notes on a computer, I opted for a notebook with handwritten notes and I used adhesive tape to secure the photographs on the pages of the notebook. The hand-written notes allowed me to trace my mood, the physical circumstances in which I was writing, and the tools that were available to me. Since the pages of the notebook are open to the elements during the moment of writing, they contain visible stains or creases, a crossed-out word, or an illegible mark. They reflect the instances when I had limited time to write my daily note, or when I had to stop because I had lost my train of thought. There are instances where I start writing in Turkish, forgetting that I was supposed to make my notes in English, showing how, as my body accustomed to being home, my mind also made linguistic adjustments. Unlike a digital document, a hand-written notebook does not allow for an editorial process and, as such, I am entirely dependent on the immediacy of the moment of writing. Unable to make changes to my entries, I have to content myself with the length, quality, and accuracy of my narrative for each day.

This gesture is also mirrored in the photographs: I opted for an instant camera to take them, which granted an immediate tangibility to the experience as well as an emphasis on the present moment since, as with the hand-written notes, I am unable to edit or re-take a photograph. Printed photographs constitute one of the most valued objects for a displaced person since they are objects that are easy to travel with, yet still provide a material connection, operating as memorabilia. While for most people printed photographs are presented and exhibited in frames in specific locations in their homes, for a displaced person printed photographs are deprived of frames so that they can easily be placed inside a book or a wallet, allowing them to be carried easily in unforeseen travel conditions. The photographs that I took with the instant camera are instantaneously printed and as such create a tangible object that does not rely on the agency of others. These photographs are not as versatile as their digital counterparts, since after a few minutes the colors fully settle into a final version regardless of the imperfections of the light or the angle. Similar to the experience of exile, these instant photographs force one to contend with the circumstances of the present moment, eradicating the nostalgic significance of the past and the

hopeful potential of the future. For instance, the moment I was trying to capture a banana cake, my personal childhood favorite, the lens of the camera focused on the table and the resulting image only shows the cake partially. The countertop of my parents' kitchen and the plate dominate the photograph and I have to contend with the peripheral appearance that the banana cake makes. While I may have not captured a perfect representation of the cake, I do have an image that shows the fleeting pleasure I did get from the cake, as well as other elements that make surprising appearances.

Fig. 1 *Hande Gurses* (2020), Goztepe, Istanbul.

The limitation of one photograph per day also forced me to be more creative and spontaneous in the capturing of moments. Rather than waiting for a perfect moment or the most interesting scene to capture, I took pictures of random and mundane settings without worrying about their aesthetic or emotional significance. Images of the view from my parents' apartment or the shopping cart that they use for groceries fill the pages of my notebook, accompanied by notes on the menu for different meals, the stores that I visited, or how annoyed I was with a friend. While I strived to create a critically relevant narrative, the more mundane details dominate the overall narrative. This gravitation towards

the mundane indicates how, for the exilic subject, the taste of a simple home-cooked meal, the familiar urban noises, going to the supermarket, or not having to spell their names when making an appointment are not part of the routine. These are all fragments of extraordinary moments that are cherished and are worthy of documentation.

Coda

The final result of my photo-journaling project is drastically different from what I set out to achieve. I envisioned creating a personal visual and written archive of my return home in the hopes that it would allow me to put together all the shattered pieces of my lost identities. I was hoping to overcome the perpetual state of ambivalence and loss caused by exile and to reunite with a sense of belonging at home. Now, as I look back to my notes and images from the summer of 2020, all I can see is a ghostly presence of who I once was.

Since the completion of this project my sense of belonging took another blow as my father became ill. His presence in this project is very much like the essence of the photographs: ghostly.

Fig. 2 *Hande Gurses* (2020), Goztepe, Istanbul.

The spectral appearance of his hand holding an ice-cream cone foreshadows his gradual decay, lingering between life and death. Very much like the photographs that exist in a ghostly space between life and death, my father's presence appears as a liminal space between presence and absence. Since "death is the *eidos* of photograph"[2] the images I captured, despite their aesthetic imperfections, reflect this inherent absence to come. While I was trying to put together pieces of myself that I had lost in my migration, this project taught me the impossibility of such a reconciliatory move. In each gesture to capture and mark my presence, there lies the haunting threat of eternal absence. As my father lingers in between presence and absence, I cherish the summer we had together knowing that "what the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."[3] My return home may not have granted me what I had lost in exile, but it did give me fragments of the most beautiful summer.

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Said, Edward W., *Reflections on Exile, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 15.
3 Ibid., p. 4.