

Always Elsewhere: On Longing and Palermo

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In July of 2013, mother, father, brother, and I were on the *traghetto* which crosses regularly from Reggio Calabria on Italy's peninsula to Messina, a Sicilian port city situated where (as my father used to say) the tip of the soccer ball almost meets the boot. Over the past couple of days we'd driven down the Reggio Calabria *autostrada* from Rome, swerved our rented Fiat 500 around sharp ridges along the thin ribbon of highway, which overlooked stomach-dropping heights to the coastline that runs along southern Italy's edge.

Born in 1947, my father migrated to Australia from a Sicilian village in 1965 in search of better opportunities. My mother was born in 1957, the third in a line of well-travelled, university-educated women in privileged Sicilian and Piedmontese families. She came to Australia at the age of 28 seeking only a two-month adventure and escape from a European winter. Instead, she met my father and decided to settle in Australia. I make this point to emphasise that while my mother is often assumed to be a migrant, her experience and perception was more aligned with that of the mobile expatriate. She would become an Australian citizen in 1997, with my younger brother and me in attendance at the citizenship ceremony. My parents lived in Sydney until they moved to the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales in 1993 when I was aged three. My mother enlisted my brother and me as Italian citizens at birth. The ever-present background of Italy in my life, facilitated by travel and the fact that the majority of my extended family still resided there, perhaps exacerbated the duality of my cultural experience. Perhaps only now, at 25, am I reconciling my concept of past homes to delineate a potential future.

As the *traghetto* inched closer to Messina my brother and I peeled our noses off the floor-to-ceiling glass of the passenger area and bounded down to the base of the boat. We clung onto the rusty railing as we inched closer and closer to the island where our parents were born. Our car was docked down here, along with 50 other passenger's vehicles and the air stank of fish and petrol. From here it would be a two-and-a-half hour drive along Sicily's coastline to my mother's home city of Palermo.

Weeks before on the train to Italy, I'd relished the vision of my visit. Nobody would stumble over my name or comment that I looked exotic. I would order wine with every meal, smoking cigarettes in cafes without the worry of upsetting fellow diners. I'd float on my back over the gentle ripples of the Tyrrhenian sea. I'd finally speak my mother tongue to people who were not my mother and I would walk down cobblestone streets with history at my heels and in my veins, humbling reminders of the thousands of years of my ancestors before me, stalwart barricades to any notions that I might be out of place here. I'd be *home*.

But what exactly did I mean by home? In one sense I knew what I was looking for, and in another I had no idea, but I'd know when I found it. This preoccupation with the imagined home is not unique in literary nonfiction. In *Sidewalks*, a collection of psychogeographical lyric essays by South African-born, Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli, she states that despite her childhood in South Africa, she never questioned her identity as Mexican. So much so that, in her essay 'Manifesto a Velo', in which Luiselli expounds upon the melancholia that pervaded her youth, she recounts a period in her childhood in which she dug a deep hole in her backyard, convinced

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that it might lead her to Mexico City.¹ In ‘Parallax’, an essay in which Andre Aciman meditates on the way in which a city embodies the self, he recalls his childhood conviction that he would one day ‘return’ to Paris. While ‘not a single ounce of [him] is French’, he describes as his lifelong ‘soul home, [his] imaginary home.’² In ‘That’s You: An Interview – Of Sorts – With Thomas Wild’, German-American writer Brittani Sonnenberg returns to her birthplace of Hamburg hoping for a feeling of uncannily belonging and a unified sense of self, stating that: ‘it’s what I crave more than anything: to finally be some decided nationality. To receive a nod that is not a raised eyebrow.’³ What manifests is the suggestion that perhaps these quests for an idealised home have more to do with the search for an alternate self, the unity of a self, for a sense of belonging that isn’t provisional, for an identity that is uncontested. Of the three, Luiselli is the only one to permanently ‘return’ to Mexico City: Aciman finds that he prefers Paris at a nostalgic remove from New York, and Sonnenberg settles in Berlin, where, as she notes the cacophony of language on the subway and the bullet-holed buildings: ‘You too can be broken here, it seemed to say, and take your time to heal with the rest of us.’⁴ In these cases, the concept of home is used as allegory – as if in reaching these promised lands, some insufficiency within the self will be fulfilled.

My family’s last return to Sicily occurred when I was eleven. My recollection of this trip is dreamlike, blurred – brief scenes blare from a tiny projector in my mind: eating pizzas at a restaurant with my cousins, petting the family of cats which congregated at my aunt and uncle’s home, waking up in the middle of the night to find my mother and aunt still up at the kitchen table, smoking and gossiping in hushed whispers, strolling to the piazza for warm mozzarella *panini*. I wondered how accurate these scenes of my mind were, whether Palermo would be recognisable. In philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s exploration of the phenomenology of place, *The Poetics of Space*, first published in French in 1958, he proposes that memory is a combination of recollection, imagination and perception. The images of our past are created ‘through co-operation between real and unreal’, a mixture of ‘our own personal history and an indefinite pre-history.’⁵ Memories of childhood often retain the qualities of dreams, consisting of images, sensations and feelings. The dreamy quality of these brief memories is no different to the rest of the recollections in my childhood catalogue, though I suppose my experience of Sicily at eleven was more pure than anything I could experience now – without expectation, I was all absorption. Or, more accurately, with my disgruntlement that we wouldn’t be seeing the Leaning Tower of Pisa, my expectations were shot. Now, I am much more conscious of the fleeting nature of time and memory, and I find myself scrambling to both recall past memories and store new ones. Just as my memory isn’t linear, my feelings during these trips were constantly at odds with one another. On the one hand I finally feel that certainty people must feel when they’re aware that the ground their standing on holds some kind of inherited depth. On the other, I feel the same friction I feel when I’m in Australia – I don’t understand why certain things have to be certain ways, I find myself disgruntled by traits and customs which don’t come naturally to me. My mother likes to say that in Australia I’m Italian and in Italy I’m invariably Australian, that

¹Valeria Luiselli, *Sidewalks* (New York: Coffee House Press, 2014) 31-8.

²Andre Aciman, *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere* (New York: Picador, 2011) 185.

³Brittani Sonnenberg, ‘That’s You – An Interview – of Sorts – with Thomas Wild’, *SAND: Berlin’s English Literary Journal* 8 (2013) 99.

⁴Sonnenberg, 101.

⁵Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (London: The Orion Press, 1964) 58-9.

this is a construct contributed to by both myself and others. I've never liked her saying this because it invariably renders me foreign, no matter where I am.

If you squint, Sicily's landscape could fool you for parts of Australia. Rugged, red mountains emerge from the coast like broken teeth. However, from the tops of these mountains sprout medieval villages, the height so extreme that they look like miniatures. Shivers of awe overcame me and it all felt simultaneously familiar and alien, but I questioned whether my uncanny propensity for this island was innate or just willed. Can memory ingrain itself through DNA? Was I truly experiencing a thrilling psychosomatic return to an ancestral homeland, or was the familiarity I felt simply due to similarities between landscapes? In his collection of essays, *False Papers* (2000), US-based writer André Aciman, explores displacement and longing for lost homelands, particularly in relation to his exile from his birthplace of Egypt. In 'Alexandria: Capital of Memory', Aciman describes the Portuguese word: *retornados*, whose meaning relates to the descendants of Portuguese settlers in colonised Africa returning to their homeland in Europe. Aciman writes that invariably they return to Africa as tourists, vacillating between estrangement and familiarity in both their former home and their ancestral one, 'not knowing ... why this city that feels like home and which they can almost touch at every bend of the street can be as foreign as those places they've never seen before but studied in travel books.'⁶ The concept of *retornados* encapsulates the dichotomous sensation of returning to a place that feels both familiar and foreign.

My relationship with Australia has always been complex. Like an adoptive parent, I, like so many others, can claim no blood-ties to my birthplace. Growing up in regional NSW, I counted a total of two cousins on my father's side who resided in Sydney, while the rest of my family was scattered over the US and Europe. At school I was reminded daily that I was not from here, that I was new, that my 'Australian' title was a lucky courtesy granted rather than a birth-rite. Driving along that scenic Sicilian coastline, I felt both an overwhelming sense of returning to a previous home, and an intangible longing. I knew that entering Sicily marked the beginning of the end of the trip, and I already missed it. Could I even be nostalgic for a life I had never, could never experience, especially considering that had my father not migrated to Australia at 18 and had my mother not acted on a compulsion to travel here 18 years later, they never would have met, and I never would have been born? Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.'⁷ This suggests that the loss which defines nostalgia is as much predicated on sensorial imagination than actuality.

Where had this inherent nostalgia originated? Joan Didion examines her own inclination for nostalgia in the 1968 essay 'Notes from a Native Daughter', detailing her childhood ties to her family city of Sacramento, California. In it, she explores a childhood on the cusp of the city's renewal into a cosmopolitan urban centre. She describes life as lazy, microcosmic, and nostalgic for a remembered golden age of gold rushes and pioneering. I grew up hearing stories of my maternal family's grandeur, a long line of ancient fortune which was lost due to circumstances in WWII and my estranged grandfather's numerous vices. His children, my mother included, subsequently scattered across continents, leaving us descendants with only anecdotes and relics of a more fruitful time in our genealogy. The underlying aphorism of my childhood: that the golden age was long gone, buried in family mausoleums and enclaves in Palermo and Alimena, the latter being a town which once bore my mother's surname on street signs and official buildings. I remember a distinct longing to return to this fabled time as a child fascinated with

⁶André Aciman, *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000) 8.

⁷Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia & its Discontents', *The Hedgehog Review* 9.2 (2007) 7.

her grandmother's stories. Returns to Palermo were spent in the homes of family and old friends who'd been more fortunate and whose sprawling apartments and elegant beach houses gave me a taste of what had once been. While I realise the situations are worlds apart – Didion's ancestral home of Sacramento, my upbringing in ahistorical surrounds – there is still the essence of wistful reminiscence for a golden age permeating both accounts. How does this manifest itself? Didion argues that 'such a view of history casts a certain melancholia over those who participate in it; my own childhood was suffused with the conviction that we had long outlived our finest hour.'⁸ This suggests that a childhood saturated by an irretrievable past encourages a tendency for longing.

However, Didion's nostalgia for Sacramento's lost age is supplanted by the fact that she is still able to pronounce the Californian city her home. I still wonder whether my nostalgia is something innate, or purely a mental construction, grasping for roots which reached deeper than the circumstances of my birth. In Edward Said's essay 'Reflections on Exile', he quotes Simone Weil when discussing the dilemma of the exile, which always makes me think of the generational migrant experience as it pertains to the issue of belonging: 'To be rooted ... is perhaps the most important and least recognised need for the human soul.'⁹ Growing up, my sole connections to my own history were through stories and family photo albums. Through the photos of my mother's youth I saw a different world, entirely unconnected to my own, while my father scarcely spoke about his childhood. But our home was filled with talismans of my genealogy: Northern Italian furniture, Sicilian paintings, Arabic silver work, a century-old antique clock hanging in the foyer, and glass cabinets filled with blown-glass figurines and gold skeleton leaves. For me, the past was entirely locked up in unknown landscapes. How to reconcile these images with the present reality? My brother and I were the lone 'ethnics', or bilingual kids, at our primary school, and our tenuous links to the culture around us were regularly noted both by our peers on the playground and by teachers in class. My home life and culture was presumed mysterious and definitely backward.

Rosemary Malangoly George states that home's 'importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few.'¹⁰ Concepts of home rely on exclusion in order to establish cultural values and borders and I found myself exiled in the social sphere. Said's definition of exile is perhaps the most extreme and prevalent: one who has been pushed out of his or her 'true home'. Exiles lead wretched existences, relegated to alien status, pining for a place they can never return to, forced out of their native lands by war, famine and politics.¹¹ While I can't call myself exile in this sense, there are many variants to its connotative meaning. Penrod, in her paper on Hélène Cixous's 'My Algeriance', cites Susan Rubin Suleiman's universal definition of the term 'exile' as 'a state of being "not home" (or of being "everywhere at home," the flip side of the same coin), which means ... at a distance from one's own native tongue'.¹² What is my native tongue? The Australian English of my birth country? The Italian of Sicily's colonisers? Or a dialect which neither I nor my mother speak?

Could I feel exiled even though I was born in Australia? While not a political exile, I use this term to denote the ethereal sensation of exclusion when one feels alien in one's birthplace and home. While I don't pretend to carry the trauma of the political exile, 'exilic' was how it *felt*

⁸Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem – Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968) 172.

⁹Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile & Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 146 .

¹⁰Amanda Mullen, 'Neither Here Nor There: Redirecting the Homeward Gaze in Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, In *a Glass House, & Where She Has Gone*', *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 36.2 (2004)31-32.

¹¹Mullen 137.

¹²Lynn Penrod, 'Algeriance, Exile, & Hélène Cixous', *College Literature* 30.1 (2003) 136.

during those moments throughout my childhood where I was reminded that my links to Australia were tenuous, when other children in school and the occasional adult in the street would direct my mother and me to ‘go back to our own country’. While both cosmopolitan and regional Australia have evolved, especially with the proliferation of ethnic culinary and fashion culture, I believe this concept of multiculturalism is problematised when it comes to concepts of ownership and degrees of ‘whiteness’ to denote class. Perhaps the best example is how my brother and I were referred to by others: in primary school, a teacher pointed out in class that I likely had an arranged marriage awaiting me back home in ‘the village’. On each of our high school graduations, the school principal didn’t bother attempting to pronounce our last name, his silence garnering a chorus of laughter. Instead, nicknames included ‘The Mexican’ and ‘FOB’. These memories are difficult to navigate, and I am aware that what were throwaway moments for the others involved have become significant markers of my childhood that I wish I could forget.

Even indulging in nostalgia for an idealised homeland, or attempting to justify feelings of exclusion from a birth country may invite the perception that one is ‘ungrateful’. In poet Danijela Kambaskovic’s essay ‘Breaching the Social Contract’, she writes of the complexities of writing under the dual weights of migrant trauma and traditional immigrant narratives. She asks how it is possible to write of this trauma with ‘the awareness that one has moved into a much “better” society and ought to be “grateful.”’ The result of expressing these conflicted feelings may result in an audience who is ‘baffled, even confronted, by the uneasy conjunction of praise and criticism of their own society, which may make the migrant writer seem negative and ungrateful.’¹³ The implication that one should be grateful or else ‘return to their own country’ not only implies that one has a ‘true’ country to go back to, but it re-emphasises degrees of legitimacy, where the real ‘owners’ are demarcated by the freedom to frame their own narrative. Daniel Francis states that ‘in an age of anxiety, it is not surprising to find nostalgia flourishing.’¹⁴ When I had been told to return to where I came from in the past, resentment and the pain of unbelonging was transplanted into the idea that this was a possibility. As I grew older, I reasoned that there was no reason to participate in the constant struggle for legitimacy. I could transfer my idea of home to a faraway homeland, where my belonging was not provisional. My ache could be perceived as a longing for something more legitimate, uncontested, concrete. Perhaps it was in confrontation with the physical embodiment of this fantasy in Palermo that I realised all home could be was just that: a fantasy, fragile as a card house. Could this nostalgia be symptomatic of the struggle with an imposed narrative which is no longer relevant? In the essay, ‘A poetics of (un)becoming hybridity’, Adam Aitken posits that rather than privileging the host country or the homeland, the space of the ‘in-between’ should be regarded as active rather than absent. He goes on to argue that cultural hybridity is a mode of subjectivity in flux rather than stasis, stating that ‘hybridity is more than identity: it is a poetics of Being with no dominant template.’¹⁵

In Amanda Mullen’s essay on Italian-Canadian writer Nino Ricci’s trilogy, she argues that his fiction expresses a nostalgic desire for origins in Canada. Despite his Canadian birth, Ricci writes of feeling foreign in his own country, stating that,

When I started school ... a lot of what we did suddenly began to seem not so normal. ... It was as if I, too, had set out on a ship and arrived in another country where people did things differently, so that suddenly everything about my own little domain, the closed,

¹³Danijela Kambaskovic, ‘Breaching the Social Contract,’ *Southerly* 76.1 (2013) 101.

¹⁴Mullen 29.

¹⁵Adam Aitken, ‘A Poetics of (un)becoming hybridity’, *Southerly* 76.1 (2013) 127.

autonomous world I'd been raised in until them, seemed makeshift and shabby and low. This, then, perhaps, was my true passage to Canada, out of the innocence and sameness into difference.¹⁶

However, just as Ricci realises his alienation in his birth country, neither can he claim Italy as his 'true home'. Like most second-generation children, Ricci's experience of Italy is secondhand, made up of memories passed down through oral history, songs, photos and relics which inspire imagination rather than recollection, conjuring an unknown mythic past. Judging Ricci's and my experiences, the second-generation child faces the dual frictions of incomplete homes: born in a separate country to their parents and growing up in a different culture, inheriting both traits of the parent culture and the adoptive one. The child is cognisant of a rupture in their heritage and must learn to navigate each culture, fully belonging to neither. Sonnenberg adds that this knowledge can cause a desperate hunger to belong, as 'sometimes the ache of un-belonging feels like a stitch I've had in my side for as long as I can remember, and it would be nice to walk around without it.'¹⁷

Arrival into Palermo was an immersion in alienation. Although it was only a year ago, I'm not sure whether the haze which blankets our arrival into Palermo is a product of shock or rampant pollution by the perpetual frenzied gridlock of automobiles which defines the city's motorways. What I remember is grime-stained buildings soaking in the dusk (I'm not sure whether this is a fault of memory, but it is sunset during my entire recollection of that day), around which cars, Vespas, and motorbikes wound and swerved. If there were any lanes, they were purely for decoration as motorists squeezed into the slightest gap in traffic, resting one hand on car horns, the other alternating between manoeuvring cigarettes, gesturing wildly out the window, and steering. Never had I felt more Australian as in the midst of that chaos, fingers crossed against collision, wondering why these lunatics couldn't just follow a few simple rules. I suppose this moment had been foreshadowed years earlier when my uncle came to visit my family, and who, rejecting the concept of the roundabout, drove straight over it. Internally I was somersaulting, turning the idea over in my mind that I'd been deluding myself into thinking I could ever have a direct lineage to this place, fearing that I'd lost all remaining vestiges of cultural ties. At that moment, being jerked and swung around the backseat of the little Fiat with the bleat of car horns and directives to *vaffanculo* surrounding me, I was overcome with a state of empty loss and abandonment which I can only describe as exile. This was the city I'd been waiting for, but my initial encounter was nothing like the welcome I'd imagined and it felt like a betrayal. In her essay, 'The Geography of Melancholy', Tara Isabella Burton explores the melancholy that pervades writing of the city. Literature that penetrates the urban space so often embodies 'the experience of longing, of nostalgia, of alienation, and of loss. For such writers, the city is not merely setting but allegory: a physical embodiment of the irrepeatability of experience and the inevitability of decay.'¹⁸ The city landscape is underwritten with the personal histories of an entire population, both past and present, and in its inescapable yet intangible history, we are forced to confront our own myths. Like the bygone relics in the family home, ruins are reminders of an idealised past glory that escapes tangibility. In returning to Palermo following a decade-long absence, the objects that had populated my childhood home – the Murano blown-glass, the imposing grandfather clock, the seventeenth-century furniture, the gilt-framed artwork,

¹⁶Mullen 32-3.

¹⁷Brittani Sonnenberg, 'Home as a Verb: Writers on Choosing to Live Overseas', *The Millions* (accessed 17 June 2014) <http://www.themillions.com/2014/06/home-as-a-verb-writers-on-choosing-to-live-overseas.html>.

¹⁸Tara Isabella Burton, 'The Geography of Melancholy,' *The American Reader* 2014 (accessed 25 August 2015) <http://theamericanreader.com/the-geography-of-melancholy/>.

the silver tea service – revealed themselves not as portals to an alternate life, but as tools of projected myth-making.

Our first week in Palermo marked the differences in what I hadn't seen the first time around. Growing up, I had imagined my veins to be power-lines stretched taut across oceans. In Palermo, my intrinsic desire was to experience the city that had lain dormant within me unfurl out from my chest like a flower in bloom. One of my clearest memories of Palermo from our previous trip had been the beach at Mondello. As I'd recalled, the strip of sand was white and infinite, the rippling sea an impossible shade of translucent azure and warm as a bath. A brightly-coloured rainbow of cabana huts lined the beach. However, twelve years later I was shocked with the insufficiency of my recollection. How had I not seen that the sand was made up of cigarette butts or the plastic bags rolling over the lazy waves? My memory of the beach had been a silent film, but now hawkers shilled beach balls, beaded jewellery, beers, clothing, and buttered corn on the cob. A beachside bar blasted club beats. In the *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard points out the inescapable tendency of recollection and imagination to coalesce in nostalgic memory: 'Have facts really the *value* that memory gives them? Distant memory only recalls them by giving them a value, a halo, of happiness. But let this value be effaced, and the facts cease to exist. Did they ever exist?'¹⁹ Within these confrontations with flawed memory lies the sinking realisation that our past selves are lost. The sense of nostalgia that had pervaded me directly before and during our stay was of a different nature from the one that I had felt for years in Australia. I suspected that what I was mourning for was my idealised fantasy of the city. Before, I was free to cherish my memories, whereas now my image of Palermo was inevitably being torn apart and infiltrated by reality. Everything was double as I compared it with my memory, so that now my memory of Mondello plays like a suffused image as 'the past interferes and contaminates the present, while the present looks back and distorts the past'.²⁰

Of course, my surprise at fantasy breeding disappointment was naive. In 'That's You', Sonnenberg footnotes Wild's responses with her own in order to analyse her youth as a self-proclaimed 'Third Culture Kid'. She describes this disaffection when visiting her first home in Hamburg after a lifetime of romanticising: 'A simple whitewashed building by a river, and that was all. There was little to see, and still less to feel. ... All my life I'd announced Hamburg as my birthplace, my original.'²¹ However, I was still upset by the changes of the beach, regardless of whether they were simply markers of time or reality confronting imagination. I was overwhelmed with longing for the Mondello of my memory and suspicious that something had changed. Aciman suggests that this distrust of change exposes a fear of rootlessness. He describes this feeling as if one has 'docked ... a few minutes ahead or a few minutes behind Earth time, any change [a reminder] of how imperfectly I've connected to it. ... In the disappearance of small things, I read the tokens of my own dislocation, of my own transiency.'²² My discomfort could be read as a reaction to this reminder that my sense of belonging, like my memory, was frail, imagined. In the introduction to *Imagined States*, Del Giudice and Porter argue that the human mind constructs and imagines geographical place in order to situate itself within the world. They state that 'imagined states are both constructed and within the symbolic order'.²³ The function of my nostalgia for an idealised Palermo, in the construction of my cultural identity, can therefore be seen as largely symbolic. In order to reconcile the exiles

¹⁹Bachelard 58.

²⁰Aciman, *Alibis* 190.

²¹Sonnenberg 99.

²²Aciman, *False Papers* 39.

²³Luisa Del Giudice and Gerald Porter, *Imagined States: Nationalism, Utopia, and Longing in Oral Cultures* (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2001) 2.

and dualities of my identity within the accepted framework of cultural selfhood, I had constructed a version of my mother's city as my home town. Would it have been any different, had she been from any other city?

This feeling was temporary however. The drive to my Zia's home in the mountain region of Monreale wound up a serpentine stretch of road, motorcyclists and other motorists speeding down past us, household trash heaps dotting the rocky escarpment at intervals. Houses here were literally built into the hillside, jutting out over the cliff. From her balcony we were afforded a panoramic view of the entire valley, from its two mountain boundaries out to the sea. Every morning I would stand out there and envision the citrus groves that the Arabs had planted centuries earlier which had once blossomed out over the valley, earning the city the nickname of *la conca d'oro* (the golden shell). Palermo is a sprawling labyrinth of a city, and is difficult to describe in any singular manner. To assume it as typical of an Italian city would be a mistake. The Sicilian capital boasts a history of over 2,500 years, and due to its strategic location in the Mediterranean, has been a constant site of conquest by empires. Its frenetic patchwork of architecture, ruins, cuisine, and language, is evidence of a culture which is a vestigial testimonial to its numerous occupations by powers such as the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Saracen Arabs, the Normans, the French and the Spanish Bourbons.²⁴ From its Moorish domes to its Baroque palaces to its loud and steamy food markets lining the greasy, smoggy streets; this city is untameable. Its recent history has been no less tumultuous – a history which lives on in *palazzi* still pockmarked by shell casings from WWII, rampant poverty and crime and the plague of bureaucracy, direct results of both abuse by the mainland and Mafia corruption. It's a city still living in the aftermath of its Golden Age, in no way familiar with gentrification. I'd been well-versed in this history growing up, and as I gazed out over this urban wilderness I wondered at how my dreamy mother had ever traversed it.

I realised then that I was gazing down at a city not only rich in European history, but my own history. I imagined my teenaged mother, traipsing around the city, clutching the hands of old lovers and friends. Her entire life before me was contained within the boundaries of these mountains, and if I could just squint hard enough, it was all here: a living shrine. Here I was grasping again in the very city I'd been yearning after – geography seemingly insufficient in curing my nostalgia. So what was I so nostalgic for? The term 'nostalgia', coined in the late seventeenth century by Swiss scholar Johannes Hofer, derives from the Greek *nosto*, meaning 'return to the native land', and *algos*, meaning pain. Up until the early twentieth century, 'nostalgia' was interchangeable with 'homesickness'. However in her paper 'You Can't Go Home Again', tracing the history of homesickness and nostalgia in the US, Susan Matt marks a shift in the meaning of nostalgia. In the twentieth century, nostalgia went from being a curable emotion to a more permanent state of mind which Matt describes as, 'a bittersweet yearning for a lost time'.²⁵ While 'homesickness' assumes that there is a home to go back to, the longing unique to nostalgia is in search of that which is unattainable – lost times, places, loves. What is behind our predisposition to these emotional states? While it could simply be an innate dislike of change, Matt proposes that nostalgia suggests a yearning for a past self rather than a place as we attempt 'to establish continuity with past selves. Longings for lost places, peoples, and times represent a desire to bridge past experience and present conditions.'²⁶

²⁴'Palermo', *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* (2014) <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/439625/Palermo>.

²⁵Susan Matt, 'You Can't Go Home Again: Homesickness & Nostalgia in U.S. History', *The Journal of American History* 94.2 (2007) 470.

²⁶Matt 470-1.

Over the next few weeks we made numerous meandering trips through the city. Hot steam billowed from store fronts and street grates, the ancient buildings were dirty, scuffed black and grey. On childhood visits, I'd be reminded that jewellery went unworn in the streets, and could be retrieved from pockets only at the door of our destination, while in restaurants handbags and valuables were to be planted firmly between one's thighs. Sly hands tearing the gold hoops from women's earlobes and yanking pearl strands from exposed necks were the bogeymen of my Sicilian summers. Men crouched in boxes bleating, 'Please give, I have no legs' haunted every street corner. The unbridled grit of this metropolis was both thrilling and confronting. Like Didion in 'Native Daughter', who had mixed feelings of returning home on a comfortable flight as it suggested she could not have borne the trip by wagon as her forebears had done, I had the sinking suspicion that regardless of the blood my father made so much of I was all talk: I had neither the tools nor the stomach to brave this city on my own, if I so chose. However, there was a certain borrowed sense of familiarity that came over me. Now I thought: here was where my mother lived her entire life before me.

On one of our excursions, we came upon an elegant patisserie displaying sandwiches, pastas, and sweets behind gold-rimmed glass counters. My mother, in both awe and excitement exclaimed over how little had changed since she and her school friends had whiled away days here. I scanned the white leather booths lining the walls and imagined she and her friends inhabiting that one, in the corner on the left under the window. Through smoke smog they laughed, riotous, one hand spilled coffee and another mopped it up. I longed to travel back in time 40 years. Aciman writes that this preoccupation with perceiving place through the lens of nostalgia reveals a deep-seated displacement of identity within the perceiver. This is because, 'place, in this very peculiar context, means something only if it is tied to its own displacement. ... Everything becomes a mirror image of itself and of something else. ... I am, for all I know, a hall of mirrors.'²⁷

Winding down narrow streets hedged by Sicilian Baroque *palazzi*, I wondered what happened to my teenaged mother, and I heard the echo of Cixous's questioning in my mind: 'And how many coffins have taken the place of a body for you during how many years of your existence? In how many frozen bodies has your soul shrivelled up?'²⁸ If I craned my neck into alleys, turned a squinted gaze over awnings I saw these hauntings: one combed hip-length hair in beat-up blue jeans, another's head was shaved, donning the monkish robes which had been bridesmaid dress at a sister's wedding. I had the uncanny sense that rather than imagining, I was *remembering* a past that in reality I had at best experienced secondhand. I imagined her driving that fabled car of hers with the Flintstone-esque hole in the driver's floor or strolling down streets, holding the hands of ex-lovers, protesting in parks. Hunks of my family history emerged around every street corner and block like ancient ruins. In her old high school and the crumbling bars my mother frequented I saw coliseums. In my search of this lost figure who I knew so well and yet could never know, I desired a suspension of time in my surroundings. If I could, I would ask my mother to make a map of her youth, to take me to each and every cafe and bar and school and park, to every exact spot on the beach where she sunbathed, the exact table in the exact restaurant on every date she went on, where I would eat the exact meal she'd ordered. Aciman suggests that place preserves the past, and that it is possible to delve into this petrified history, like the remains of Troy. He states that 'cities ... do not simply have to watch themselves go but strive to remember, because in the wish to remember lies the wish to restore, to stay alive, to

²⁷Aciman, *False Papers* 138.

²⁸Hélène Cixous, *Coming To Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 28.

continue to be.²⁹ Maybe then I could see her, and see me in her, I could truly submerge into this city. I don't know whether this compulsion is born from nostalgia, or the desire to belong, to embody history, to travel back in time, or to know my mother better. In the afterword to *Alibis*, Aciman argues that these states of displacement reveal more than just a predisposition for nostalgia. Rather, they speak to a duality within the self, as 'it is a fundamental misalignment between who we are, might have been, could still be, can't accept we've become, or may never be.'³⁰ Perhaps it was that in searching for my mother's lost self, I sought to uncover my own.

Initially, I thought it was my mother's past which bared the agency, begging to be uncovered, but was it my own history that I sought to preserve? Was I the 'being who does not want to melt away, and who, ever in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to "suspend" its flight'?³¹ Maybe it's that I thought the unearthing of my mother's ghost would legitimise my being here. And isn't that what we mean when we talk about belonging – legitimacy? In his essay 'On Not Going Home', when James Wood discusses Said's exile to analyse his feeling of homelessness, he acknowledges that while his own desire for home is privileged, it is not uncommon. He states that 'the desire to return, after so long away, is gladly irrational, and is perhaps premised on the loss of the original home. ... Home swells as a sentiment because it has disappeared as an achievable reality.'³² While conscious of the fact that my life undoubtedly hinges on the geography of my birth, the irrational sense that I'd somehow been cheated out of the opportunity to know my heritage by living within it gnawed at me. Perhaps I also suspected that to have been born in an uncontested home would, in some way, have been a relief. Arguably, there is a greater pressure on migrants and their children to succeed in the new country – automatically there is more at stake in order to atone for the sacrifice that has been made to provide a better life. In order to illustrate the irrational desire to be at home, Wood quotes the heroine in Russian writer's Sergei Dovlatov's book *A Foreign Woman*. When deciding to return to Russia from New York, the writer appears in the narrative and attempts to dissuade her: 'You've just forgotten what life is like there, he says: "The rudeness, the lies." She replies: "If people are rude in Moscow, at least it's in Russian."'”³³

It seemed to me that my fruitless grasping for an irretrievable past played in the shadow cast by my longing for Palermo. What was Palermo? Origin, roots, legitimacy, relief: coming home. These tarp-bottomed balconies of *palazzi*, and buildings reduced to rubble, were manifestations of a past I could never really know. They seemed like clues to my own history. Confrontation with its effects only proved history's total annihilation, and yet I had never been closer. The evidence was there, and yet the more real the once-mythic past became the more I realised how lost it was. Aciman argues that confrontations with an unknown past remind the individual of their own homelessness: 'because of this mnemonic parallax, of this shadow partner distorting everything, we're reminded of how we are torn in two. Torn from our past, from a home, from ourselves.'³⁴

In Palermo, history's effects were inescapable. Time concertinaed in the tiny bars doing business out of dilapidated buildings, their disintegration caused by either Allied bombings or plain old ageing. My cousins and I drank home-made spirits while sitting at a table with *Coca Cola* emblazoned across it in a cobblestone piazza filled with other tiny haphazard bars and

²⁹Aciman, *False Papers* 119-20.

³⁰Aciman, *Alibis* 189.

³¹Bachelard 8.

³²James Wood, 'On Not Going Home', *London Review of Books* 36.4 (2014): 3-8 (accessed 21 July 2014) <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n04/james-wood/on-not-going-home>

³³Wood 2014.

³⁴Aciman, *Alibis* 191.

watching pale Irish university students stumble and slur. The blown-out second stories of these buildings were like crumbling dioramas. Some still contained dusty greyed furniture – a couch facing a busted old television, the remains of a Formica table amongst three overturned chairs. Others were canvas to elaborate murals. As Aciman observes that he cannot truly appreciate a street parade in Brooklyn without reflecting on Portofino, I can't imagine the gritty streets of inner city Palermo without my mother's ghost trailing up ahead.³⁵ Without these imagined memories, this city would not come alive for me – to be within the present, I had to enter into a perceived past. However, was this nostalgia for my mother's lost youth distorting my experience? Aciman proposes that the idea of solely perceiving the present moment is impossible, as 'we exist on so many tenses ... we are constantly shifting like tectonic plates between one tense and another, which is why I think we have a hard time living.'³⁶ We are constantly perceiving the present through the veil of remembrance and speculation.

What I realise now is that the ghost I was chasing wasn't of my mother at all, but my own dispersed self. Aciman states that:

it is not cities that beckon us, nor is it even the time spent in those cities that we long for; rather it is the imagined, un-lived life we've projected onto these cities that summons us and exerts its strong pull. The city itself is just a costume, a screen wall, or, as the painter Claude Monet said, an empty envelope. What counts and what never dies is the remembrance of the imagined life we'd once hoped to live.³⁷

This girl-ghost was a phantom limb, my imagined life, the what-if in my endless ponderings, comparisons and daydreams that are the throughline of my consciousness. I tried to implant myself in these images, made mental lists of the differences and similarities between this imagined self and the 'I' I'd been dealt. I guess what I was really asking myself was whether I could cut it, whether growing up here would have resulted in a self which was either more or less true. Rather than physically manifest an imagined home, geography had not released me from my home within memory and imagination. Aciman uses the metaphor of home to delineate the vacillation between memory and anticipation, stating that 'there are essentially two hypothetical homes, neither of which is the real home, but because the real inhabited space has literally become the street between them.'³⁸ My perception was refracted between points: on the one hand I was looking as my eleven-year-old self, on the other as my young mother, another as my potential self had we returned, another as my present self storing memories and information for future returns. I realise now I was inventing entire histories, memories, associations, not for my mother but for an unrealised self. Maybe this is a self that has always been within me (along with all the others), and my longing for Palermo is actually a longing for it. Haven't I been doing this my whole life? Comparing, wondering, dreaming.

For me, the place that best captures Palermo's varied culture and history is the *Duomo di Monreale*. Built during the Norman occupation of Sicily, the cathedral itself is a splendour, combining Eastern Rite and Roman Catholic arrangement and featuring Italian and Eastern architecture. The inner-walls are plastered with intricate Byzantine mosaics. Confronted by this meld of culture, I reflected that place and home are never settled. A few years ago, I'd have much rather identified as an island unto myself, but now the sites of my genealogical history seem to be rumbling within me: Palermo's writing and rewriting of itself and by others, its

³⁵Aciman, *Alibis* 192.

³⁶Iris Moulton, 'Hamburger, Succulent, Grapes, Ketchup: An Interview with André Aciman', *Gigantic* (accessed 7 February 2014) <http://thegiganticmag.com/magazine/articleDetail.php?p=articleDetail&id=194>.

³⁷Aciman, *Alibis* 194.

³⁸Aciman, *Alibis* 197.

accumulation of cultures and contradictions. Palermo is an enjambment in every sense, overrun with feral cats, dirty, and crumbling yet also boasting some of the world's most beautiful conserved architecture, landscape and food. Asian-Canadian writer Madeleine Thien writes how home is a site of constant flux, a concept which is negotiated and renegotiated in continuation. She states that she

think[s] of home as a verb, something we keep re-creating. A person who has lived on the same streets for 80 years can also come to moment when the streets don't feel like home; and a person who has suddenly arrived in another place might feel suddenly, inexplicably at home. This open-endedness is in keeping with the human condition. Human beings have ... always kept pushing into unfamiliar territory.³⁹

In spite of all my romanticising, there was never any fantasy in my mind of permanently returning home. Other cities called me, Berlin, New York, cities where everyone is from somewhere else, and has the desire to start fresh, unencumbered by history or ethnicity or birth rites. Which I realise is telling of a subconscious need not to uncover a home, but a sense of belonging in the void between two homes. It was enough that Palermo was a place to call origin. The absent presence of a certain homeland manifested itself into an attachment for the conjuring of this imagined homeland. Aciman uses the French moralist term *renversement continuel* to delineate the ongoing palintropic traffic of nostalgia. Nostalgia lives not in place, but in the loop of traffic between two places, therefore: 'displacement, as an abstract concept, becomes the tangible home.'⁴⁰ Rather than in place, home lies in the longing for place itself.

Our escape route was an overnight naval ship from the Gulf of Palermo to Naples. Once on board, we deposited our luggage in our cabins and went out to the top of the ship, where many other passengers braved the wind and engine fumes to get their last glimpses of Palermo. Seeing the city from this vantage point, the valley was majestic, resting amidst its crown of mountain range. As the ship moved further away, I asked myself: What is a past? What is a home? Can I really claim any more connection to my ancestors and their land than DNA and chance? Is it possible that at heart I have no homeland, that by nature I am alien rather than native? I reason that I belong here as much as I belong anywhere. Perhaps as Aciman suggests, that the constant here isn't place, but me – with place and identity used constantly as metaphors for one another, 'I am two points caught in different spots.'⁴¹ What is our connection to our bloodlines: do they truly reside, dormant within us, or is ancestry mere myth we pass down through generation in order to insert our lone lives into some larger narrative? When visiting the family mausoleum at age eleven, I stood amongst stone boxes, my breathing hollow amidst all that marble and I asked myself whether my remains would find their way back here among my ancestors. Is the homeland of my mind mere figment of an innate propensity towards nostalgia? Boym states that 'the nostalgic is never a native, but rather a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal.'⁴² Have my nostalgic tendencies germinated from a sense of dispossession? If 'the site of nostalgia is nostalgia itself',⁴³ then the true home of the nostalgic is the act of longing for home. And it is true that I never felt more at home than when I was sailing away from Palermo, pining after it. My mother and I watched Palermo, smog-hazy in its shell, become smaller and smaller as dusk set in and hot smoke billowed from the ship's ducts. The sun finally

³⁹Sonnenberg, 'Home as a Verb' 2014.

⁴⁰Aciman, *False Papers* 139-40.

⁴¹Aciman, *False Papers* 138.

⁴²Boym 12.

⁴³Aciman, *False Papers* 142.

began to sink while the electric orange sky gave way to blue. We watched until Palermo disappeared from view, remembering and imagining.

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