



Spring 5-1-2023

In Our Glory: A Memory Exhibition

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Recommended Citation

Moeller, D. (2023). In Our Glory: A Memory Exhibition. *In Our Glory: A Memory Exhibition* Retrieved from <https://poetcommons.whittier.edu/scholars/27>

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In Our Glory: A Memory Exhibition

WSP Senior Symposia

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Sponsors: Dr. Kate Palmer Albers , Professor Scott Creley

Standing before this snapshot, I come closer to the cold, distant, dark man who is my father, closer than I can ever come in real life. Not always able to love him there, I am sure I can love this version of him, the snapshot. I gave it a title: “in his glory.”
- bell hooks, 1995

I. Concept

When Susan Sontag wrote in 1977, “to collect photographs is to collect the world,” she could not have predicted how ubiquitous photography would become (Sontag 1977). Not only are we exposed to thousands of photographs each day, but we likely take dozens of them ourselves. In our photo-saturated world it is easy to take these candid images for granted, yet within them lies deep truths.

In Our Glory is an audio-visual installation that seeks to unravel these truths. It is based on interviews with individuals asked to describe a photograph of themselves, with one caveat: they are not allowed to see the photograph during the interview, and must rely solely on their memory. Taking a cue from Salman Rushdie’s claim that the “broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed,” *In Our Glory* revels in the ephemeral (Rushdie 1992). It is not so much an exhibition of images, as it is an exhibition of memories.

This iteration of *In Our Glory* focuses on the memories of migrant students, among them international students temporarily living in the United States, immigrant students permanently living in the United States, and those whose experiences cannot be so easily defined. A Romanian woman in a homophobic town finds community in her local theatre, a Jewish-Israeli traveler spends Hannakuh with strangers in Australia, and a daughter of Estonian-American immigrants connects with her heritage through Soviet cartoons.

These individual experiences are recontextualized as collective ones, and an overarching theme emerges: the resilience of identity.

II. Creative Process

In Our Glory was inspired by Hollis Frampton's 1971 film (*nostalgia*)¹, in which a narrator describes a series of Frampton's photographs as they burn on a hot plate. As each image turns to ash and is replaced with the next, the narration falls out of sync and the audience must recall the previous image in their mind. (*nostalgia*) provided a kind of superstructure under which *In Our Glory* developed, as I reimagined the film's autobiographical concept as a sociological one.

While the individuals interviewed and the stories they shared were unique, the overall interview process was the same. Each submitted three-to-five pictures of themselves they believe represents their experience in a home country that is not the United States. On the day of the interview I chose the image that was most striking to me. I began by asking them to describe the picture to the best of their memory. This was followed by questions that appeal to the five senses: *What does this picture smell like? How does it sound? Do you remember what you were wearing?* I then asked questions about what is not in the photograph: *Who is taking the picture? Who else is out of frame? What was the occasion?* Finally, I asked questions about the interviewee's relationship to the home country overall. Ultimately, I was trying to create what memory scholar Marianne Hirsch calls an "imagetext," a written or spoken description that breathes life into an image (Hirsch 1997).

I was compelled to show the photographs on screens, as opposed to physical copies, because I thought the immateriality of film better evoked the ephemerality of memory. Like a documentary filmmaker, condensed and restructured the audio so that a narrative could be

¹ For more on Hollis Frampton and his work, visit: <https://harvardfilmarchive.org/collections/hollis-frampton-collection>

gathered. Music and sound effects were used to further immerse the listener into the moment the speaker is describing.

Initial plans envisioned the audience entering a dark space with the images largely projected on every wall, but this changed after a trip to UC Berkeley. A student exhibition featured an Isaiah Acosta & Lora Mathis piece titled, *Forgiveness*, in which the viewer sits in a burned church pew and watches grainy VHS footage of the artists' childhood homes on a rather small TV². Having to lean forward in the seat in order to get a good look at the screen was a very intimate experience. Moreover, sitting down and having a one-on-one with a single screen better replicated the interview process.

The piece changed again when I was accepted into the Santa Fe Springs Art Festival, which is hosted annually by the Clarke Estate. It is not a conventional gallery space, but a mansion in 1920s art deco style. My piece was exhibited in a conference room, with a staircase and tight corridor leading up to it. There were also several windows from which natural light could pour in. With this space in mind, I divided the piece into two acts: "Papers, Please" and "Imaginary Homeland."

Act One, "Papers, Please" represents the process of entering the United States. Hidden speakers are placed throughout the staircase and corridor leading to the conference room. From them the audience is beckoned by an audio-collage of voices listing the documents they needed when entering the United States. Upon stepping into the conference room, they are met with Act Two, "Imaginary Homelands," where a series of screens display each video. The aim is to juxtapose the cold, objectifying experience of immigration and travel bureaucracy with the intimate experiences of home.

² For more on this project visit: <http://www.loramathis.com/new-page-3>

Works Cited

- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family frames: photography, narrative, and postmemory*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. 1997
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Abstract/Overview

In Our Glory is an audio-visual installation based on interviews with individuals asked to describe a photograph of themselves, with one caveat: they are not allowed to see the photograph during the interview, and must rely solely on their memory. This iteration of *In Our Glory* focuses on the memories of migrant students, among them international students temporarily living in the United States, immigrant students permanently living in the United States, and those whose experiences cannot be so easily defined. A Romanian woman in a homophobic town finds community in her local theatre, a Jewish-Israeli traveler spends Hannakuh with strangers in Australia, and a daughter of Estonian-American immigrants connects with her heritage through Soviet cartoons. These individual experiences are recontextualized as collective ones, and an overarching theme emerges: the resilience of identity.

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Feel free to reach out to Dayquan Moeller at moellerdayquan@gmail.com for more information.

Thank you.