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From the presence of absence to the absence of presence: Violence and the practical consequences of nostalgia in Guatemala City

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eth**Timo Peeters** 

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Abstract

Nostalgia can provide its protagonists with a powerful counterweight against the force of the now. Building on the creative potential of the imagination, it owes much of its strength to the fact that there are few forces out there that can stop someone from unshackling the past from its contradictions, injustices and ills and projecting these images onto the present. This article revolves around the tension between nostalgic remembrance and individual strategies for navigating security in Guatemala City's context of wild and out-of-control violence. It shows that nostalgia can cause people to fail to recognize risk, just as it can hinder their ability to deal with risk when it is recognized as such. Until now, ethnographers have largely failed to engage with the psychological mechanisms behind nostalgia and, much like nostalgics themselves, have overlooked its practical risks.

Keywords

Nostalgia, violence, Guatemala City, ethnography, Latin America, internal displacement

“I’m living locked up in my house, I don’t go out, because of the same thing, right. The *colonia* is horrible, but here I am going to find my rest, sleep a lot...It’s an austere life, austere like you cannot imagine.” The above words belong to Miguel,¹ a week after he

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returned to Balcón Verde, the same marginalized Guatemala City *colonia* [neighborhood] he fled from 4 years earlier, when alleged gang members extorted him and his family. In his years of absence, Balcón Verde had become almost larger than life in Miguel's mind, the subject of intense missing, of continuous love messages on Facebook, while a wedge grew between Miguel and his family. Miguel's wife María Luisa and their three children had all managed to find a home in their new neighborhood—a safer but more expensive gated community—while Miguel fought an isolated battle in his taxi, often working 15, 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, without making enough money to pay the bills. They were days of loneliness with thoughts wandering off to the world he had lost until all he could hear was the siren song of the past. "Nostalgia is like anesthetics, you don't feel pain but a pleasant sleep," he wrote in one of his Facebook messages, although nostalgia could also overwhelm him in other ways, as he sometimes found himself crying in his car after having passed his old neighborhood. Yet when he returned to Balcón Verde without his wife and children, who were not willing to follow Miguel in what they considered a reckless plan, there were no traces left of the neighborhood of his dreams, just plain old terror. A few weeks later he decided to go back to his family.

It is fair to say that Claudina, another Guatemala City resident, was destined for a life determined by similar forces that caused Miguel's uprooting. She grew up in El Nacimiento, a neighborhood that, like Balcón Verde, descended into mayhem in postwar times when violence in Guatemala gained an increasingly urban and criminal character. Claudina's life, however, took a turn at the age of eighteen after meeting Pedro, who would grow into a successful businessman running motels all over the country. Seven years later the couple were able to move to a fancy part of the city, leaving poverty behind. By then, Claudina and Pedro had two children, and two more would follow. Unfortunately, Claudina's new world of luxury, private schools and even bodyguards proved to be a crystal cage for her. Born poor, with little formal education and associated with the 'dirty' motel business—which catered to people looking for a room for a few hours to be with their lover or a prostitute—she was shunned by the other mothers at her daughters' school and looked down upon in her neighborhood. Within this context—which started to feel even more hostile after Pedro left her in 2010—Claudina, like Miguel, turned into a nostalgic, longing for the life she said she once had and for being the girl she believed she once was.

As isolated as Miguel and Claudina's struggle may have been, their way of processing the hardships they experienced followed a well-trodden path (Saunders-Hastings, 2018). Nostalgia is a force to be reckoned with everywhere, not in the least as a means to deal with modernity's consequences—the type of lifeline that has brought nationalist strongmen all over the world to the seat of power. However, in a place like Guatemala City with, in Miguel's words, "an endless number of dramas," and as such, an endless number of *before* and *afters*, there was another dimension to it. Nostalgia is the 'red zone blues,' as Saunders-Hastings argued in her take on the matter in one of the marginal and gang-stricken areas of Guatemala City, where local nostalgia reached back to a time in which gangs were remembered to be "less violent, predatory, and disruptive of neighborhood life" (2018: 361). Her study speaks to the fact that poverty and marginalization, and the violence they help propel, leave an imprint on the way people relate to, and remember, the

past and make sense of the present and future. But this is not to say that the bent for nostalgia confined itself to the socially marginal. The wild and unpredictable violence in Guatemala City impacted everybody and gave rise to collective paranoia and fear in which even “the free” lived “prison-like” lives (Fontes, 2018: 146), preferring withdrawn lifestyles that, where possible, were sealed by security walls and private guards, but that also tended to reign without these. According to Fontes, this proved to be the perfect caldron for a widespread sense of nostalgia for what came to be seen as “the ordered violence of civil war” (2018: 6)—a frame that turned a blind eye to the atrocities of the civil war and that could only exist because Guatemala City had been spared from its worst violence, even though the city had been a stage for protest and repression throughout the war and at times had been blatantly violent.

Nostalgia, one comes to see, was a factor of importance in everyday life in Guatemala City, all the more because its reach was not limited to the inner world of its protagonists. Nostalgia is “a force that does something,” writes Dames (2010: 272; see also Angé and Berliner, 2015). What this something is, is, of course, up for debate, though there is a trend visible in the way nostalgia is thought about in literature. Long seen as problematic behavior, a physical and psychological malady, it is now increasingly looked at through a positive lens, as a source of meaning, social connectedness and resilience (Luo et al., 2022; Routledge et al., 2011; Sedikides and Wildschut, 2023). This is a development largely driven by psychological research, which is important to mention not only because credit should go to those who deserve it, but also because the experimental research upon which psychologists tend to rest can only do so much when it comes to mimicking everyday life. It therefore remains to be seen how nostalgic truths interact with the outer world (Newman et al., 2020). It is here, I believe, that ethnographers should come into the picture. Yet until this day, they have refrained from fully engaging with the psychological mechanisms that drive nostalgia and, especially, the way these play out in day-to-day life (Angé and Berliner, 2015).

With this in mind, I will try to contribute to the study of nostalgia in this article by seeking to understand its everyday workings and consequences through assessing its psychological workings. I will do so on the basis of the cases of Miguel and Claudina, whose lives I followed closely during 8 months of ethnographic research in Guatemala City, spreading over two periods (May to September 2016 and February to June 2017). Their cases will show that the importance of studying the interaction on a more practical level between, on the one hand, nostalgic truths and their projections onto the present and, on the other hand, reality—“that which exists or has happened” (Fassin, 2014: 41; see also Saunders-Hastings, 2018)—only increases when everyday life finds itself on a tightrope, like in Guatemala City, where violent death is a daily risk, especially for those who fail to see reality for what it is. This being one of the outcomes here, I should stress that this is by no means to be read as a denial of the power of nostalgia—and of the imagination upon which it rests—but much more as a reminder that ethnographic inquiry into nostalgic truths should also be concerned with their practical consequences in everyday life.

Below I will start with some notes on my methods and case selection, after which I will describe the transformation violence has undergone in Guatemala (and Guatemala City) in recent decades, setting out the context in which Miguel and Claudina’s nostalgia

elicited. This will be followed by a brief explanation of the function of nostalgia in their lives and the psychology behind it, which will give us an idea of the form of consolation that was sought beneath the surface of time—and, following this, the lure of nostalgia. I will then shift to the practical risks that emanate from nostalgic thinking in the violent context of Guatemala City.

Methods and cases

In this article, I draw on my PhD research, in which I explored how people in Guatemala City from different social classes gave shape and meaning to their lives amid high levels of violence and structural violence (Peeters, 2021). I chose to centralize my research around five narratives that each revolved around one person or a small group of related people and their network. The protagonists of these narratives all belonged to a different level of the metropolis' hierarchical spectrum, ranging from the extremely poor—a group of street people—to the upper segment of society, represented by Claudina and her family. To understand the social microcosms of these people, and the way they were embedded in history, culture and political-economic structures, I tried to live their lives with them as much as possible. This included observation, having long 'interview-like' talks and small chitchats, just as it included meeting their families and friends and visiting places with them they frequented. In the case of Miguel, I also studied his online behavior and the diaries he had given me for inspection. Further, I kept in touch with most of my main respondents between the fieldwork periods. With some I also stayed in contact after my fieldwork, as with Miguel, who had become a friend during my time in Guatemala City. This, in practice, meant that we regularly left voice messages on each other's WhatsApp with updates on our lives.

In the end, the five narratives provided the lens through which I drew up more general considerations regarding how people in Guatemala City dealt with the forces that oppressed them, and tried to come to some form of normalcy in their shadows. That I felt the confidence to do so also resided in my ability to draw from a wide range of other cases and experiences outside the five central cases. Contacts at organizations working in low-income areas, for example, brought me to many other crime-stricken places besides those I visited with Miguel or Claudina. Meanwhile, I myself resided in an upper-middle-class world in Zone 10,² one of the more exclusive areas of the city. This way, I could profit from the network of my landlady Ester and other acquaintances and friends.

In my quest for as good a representation of society in Guatemala City as possible with only a handful of cases, I chose economic capital as something to fall back on, using a scale by the [Inter-American Development Bank \(2019\)](#), which divided the Guatemalan population into an extremely poor, a poor, a vulnerable, a middle and an upper segment.³ I did so in the knowledge that this would be a difficult task no matter the number of cases, given the many variables that have been attributed to class over time and the uncertainties surrounding definitions and delineations of class identities—class, in the words of Appiah, is “the four-color-map problem of the social sciences” (2019: 194).

Miguel and Claudina represented different classes in my research, but at the same time had things in common: they both came from poor backgrounds, had little education and were *ladino* (nonindigenous).⁴ Miguel's family was one of the many in Guatemala City that struggled to make ends meet on a daily basis and represented the poor in my selection of cases. A 53-year-old⁵ taxi driver for one of the major companies in Guatemala City, I met Miguel about a year and a half after he fled from Balcón Verde, when he picked me up after I had visited a friend. At that moment, he rented a small apartment in El Dorado, a large, walled middle-class neighborhood that, like Balcón Verde, was situated in Guatemala City's most populous area Zone 18.⁶ Here he lived with his wife María Luisa (age 51), daughters Rosa (age 23) and Yolanda (age 16), and son Daniel (age 28). And while this place provided the safety they longed for, the high costs involved with living there placed a severe strain on Miguel and his family.

Claudina lived together with her five children—Leonel (age 32, whom she had at the age of 16 before she met Pedro), Gérman (age 25), Isabel (age 22), Cristina (age 18) and Anabél (age 12)—two bodyguards and two maids in a mansion in the elite walled neighborhood of Vista Alegre. It seemed a postcard picture of success, yet, as already mentioned, she was not the most typical 'rich' individual to be found in Guatemala City. I first came into contact with her through Ester, whose daughter Elena was one of the best friends of Claudina's daughter Isabel. They had been in the same class at one of Guatemala City's most elitist schools, which meant that Ester and Claudina's paths had sometimes crossed, albeit reluctantly. Ester made no secret of the fact that she and other mothers at school had always kept Claudina out of their 'group' because of her poor background and her work in the motel business.

As we know by now, Miguel and Claudina were by no means the only nostalgics in Guatemala City. My research, however, also shows that not everybody is equally receptive to becoming one. I had the feeling that the street people were too busy surviving, living in the moment, to let their actions be informed by nostalgic remembrance, if even there were thoughts of such kind. The protagonists of my two other cases had pasts that, in a way, were too troubled for nostalgia to play a big role in their lives, which was no different for the street people, although it needs to be stressed that this does not always stop nostalgia. That one's nostalgia is not always for everybody also became clear in Miguel and Claudina's personal lives. The two youngest children of Claudina had never lived in an impoverished area and the other three had left it at a young age, which meant that they had little reason to be nostalgic for the type of life that could be found there. In Miguel's case, it became clear that each family member had fled from a different reality the day they left Balcón Verde behind. María Luisa and the children were already marked and bruised by violent events prior to the extortion to an extent that the latter became a blessing in disguise. They therefore found it difficult to relate to Miguel's nostalgia. But this could not be said of his friends from Balcón Verde who, like him, had left the neighborhood because of the violence. In their stories, I often heard a similar longing for the old neighborhood and their old lives, even though few were willing to return. That I choose to focus on Miguel and Claudina here is because I have followed their lives over an extended period of time, and I believe that it takes such a microcosmic approach to reveal the everyday workings and consequences of nostalgia.

Peace between quotation marks

The Guatemala City I encountered during my fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 was a deeply insecure place, still recovering from a civil war (1960–1996) largely driven by military authoritarian forces in which over two hundred thousand (mostly Mayan) people had been killed. The peace that followed upon this, however—and many of my respondents had felt the need to emphasize this—was one “between quotation marks,” as violence continued under civilian rule with murder statistics, at times, surpassing civil war levels, while at the same assuming different styles and manifestations. Violence ‘neoliberalized,’ as argued by Fischer and Benson in reference to the “outsourcing of what the state once took to be its exclusive function, that is, the exercise of coercive force” (2006: 93), or ‘democratized’, in the words of [Kruijt and Koonings \(1999\)](#); see also [Rodgers, 2006](#)), as it transferred into the hands of a growing number of actors, for a growing number of reasons.

Moreover, postwar violence concentrated mostly in urban areas. The metropolitan area of Guatemala City, which housed an estimated 3.4 million people—or 20% of the total Guatemalan population—was responsible for around 40% of the homicides at a national level, leading to a homicide rate (62.7 in 2016 and 63.3 in 2017, compared to respectively 33 and 31.8 nationally⁷) that tended to be only surpassed by departments that held high strategic value for drug trafficking such as Escuintla, Chiquimula and Zacapa. And within Guatemala City, marginal neighborhoods like Balcón Verde and El Nacimiento took the brunt of this deadly trend, many of them turning into gang territory after years of state neglect. In postwar Guatemala City, gangs had taken on an increasingly predatory stance towards the local communities they claimed to protect and represented the extreme violence that beset the city perhaps as no other phenomenon. But they also epitomized the brutal deprivation experienced by the poor in the city, who, if we follow the [Instituto Nacional De Estadística \(2015\)](#), constituted 38.7% of the population (5.4% in extreme poverty, 33.3% in poverty).

Within this context, Miguel’s case was far from an exception. Violence—and extortion in particular—had many people on the run ([Escamilla García, 2021](#); [Walker and Vazquez del Mercado, 2021](#)) and, as it seemed, also within Guatemala City, although this group was hardly visible: people left in anonymity to pop up somewhere else in anonymity. It was the go-to way of doing it, as residents of crime-prone neighborhoods often suspected the police of collaborating with local criminal groups, while there were no laws in place in Guatemala that protected the internally displaced ([Escamilla García, 2021](#)). This, combined with the fact that literature was almost solely focused on international migration, meant it was impossible to put a number on forced displacement within Guatemala City. The situation in Balcón Verde, a neighborhood of about six thousand residents, however, presented a bleak prospect of what that number might look like. Miguel and his friends all estimated that about half of the old residents had left because of the violence, believing most of them had stayed within Guatemala City. Miguel already knew eight other families from Balcón Verde that had also taken refuge in El Dorado.

Miguel’s story sheds light on the hardships people encountered in trying to carve out a new life for themselves in such circumstances, while it also speaks to the more general truth that violence and social suffering tend to be at their most alarming in places marked

by poverty and vulnerability. Compared to this, Claudina's case seemed more of a rarity, as she managed to climb up Guatemala's notoriously slippery social ladder. Yet one only had to look beneath the veneer of affluence and privilege to see that the exclusion and powerlessness she experienced were equally exemplary for the type of class-defined worlds that thrived in Guatemala City, as her rags-to-riches background turned her into an upper-middle-class exception that laid bare the mores of the city's elite.

Functions and psychology of nostalgia

It is fair to say that Miguel and Claudina did not feel "at home" (Weil, 1952: 72) in their lives, unable to firmly root in their place in the world and their sense of the self. In this context, nostalgia—perhaps first and foremost—gave them a sense of belonging, representing "a yearning for a different time" (Boym, 2001: XV) while taking the shape of the longing for a place. It was a distortion seen more often, which seemed hard to separate from the fact that people often identify themselves along spatial lines in the face of uncertainty; a tendency, as psychologist Laing writes, that perhaps "goes some way to account for the frequently pre-eminent importance to the person of being *seen*" (1965: 109, emphasis in original). In the cases of both Miguel and Claudina, this spatialization of nostalgia was helped by the clear break they had experienced from one place to another, which had then come to contrast.

In his old neighborhood, Miguel had been loved and respected by many; widely appreciated for his benevolence, always quick with a laugh or a helping hand, and a key player in one of Balcón Verde's strongest football teams. And his children, he said, were "idols," who at some point had come to overshadow him on the football field. His son was even considered among the best players of the *colonia*. He had also been surrounded by his mother and sisters there. This had given way to what he deemed a "terrible solitude" in his taxi, where days could pass without really talking to anyone. And unlike his wife and children, Miguel had not found a home in El Dorado yet. He complained that he did not know anyone there and that no one knew him, being always on the road. At the same time, he realized that spending more time there would not necessarily change this: people in gated communities tend to withdraw within their neighborhood as well. It was easily forgotten that this had also been the case in Balcón Verde, where life had increasingly become about shielding off potentially harmful information about oneself after extortionists had started targeting regular residents.

Claudina's move to a wealthier area of the city more than 20 years ago had been voluntary. Still, she kept stressing to me that she lived in the world of her children, full of arrogant people valuing others for their level of education and the weight of their last name. In Vista Alegre, she told me she found herself at the bottom of the hierarchical spectrum:

"There's competition here. [...] That man has more than me, or I have more than him: I will compete with him. If he has more bodyguards: 'Wow, that man has money.' 'This Mr. Palacios? Oh, he's a great man, you have to respect him. Doña Claudina... But who is Claudina? Claudina who? Who? Who? What does she have? Who is she?' Because if I have a business, if I have money: 'ah yes, of course, Doña Claudina, the lady.' But if they see 'aaah, she has a motel, who cares what it is.'"

Her world was the one of El Nacimiento in Guatemala City's Zone 12, the poor *colonia* of her youth situated about 10 km from Vista Alegre, where she said she had spent her years of "youth, happiness, hope, dreams."

Second, nostalgia offered Miguel and Claudina a way to engage with others. Indeed, as identity is negotiated in dialogue with others, it is in collective memory that nostalgia hid its true strength as a counterweight to the force of the now (Boym, 2001). After his departure from Balcón Verde, Miguel's get-togethers with his old friends were rare, but whenever he did meet one of them, conversations quickly spiraled into reminiscing and telling tall tales. It was Miguel at his best, where his oft-repeated words "to remember is to re-live" rang true more than ever. Further, he tried to keep his old world alive by writing about it on Facebook, drawing other people into the remembrance of times and events they experienced together. Meanwhile, Claudina's visits to poor neighborhoods in Guatemala City and the adjacent municipality of Mixco brought her to the few acquaintances she had. She also regularly took her children to places of poverty to show them the world she had been born into, and still identified with, and to make them aware of their fortunate positions.

At the same time, it was not only rapprochement Miguel and Claudina sought through nostalgic recollection. Claudina was looked down upon because of her poor background. In response, she emphasized the same differentness that others used against her. This way of dealing with stigma, which Goffman (1990) classified as 'militancy', helped her reclaim a sense of control over her life, turning an imposed restriction into a product of choice or preference (see also Jackson, 1998). A stigmatized individual, Goffman reminds us, is like any other person in the sense that he or she is "trained first of all in others' views of persons like himself [or herself]" (1990: 160). Meanwhile, for Miguel, it was not just Balcón Verde and everything it represented he was missing. He often felt he was the only one carrying the weight of what he believed should have been a shared struggle, keeping the motor of the family running. And, even worse, that he was not appreciated for what he was doing. Miguel's messages to Balcón Verde were as much love letters to his old neighborhood as they were messages to his wife and children:

"[To tell them] that I am not doing well, that I am suffering because of their indifference, because of their apathy, because of what I am saying holds no value whatsoever to them. Or perhaps it does, but they don't act upon it. It's like a relief, right, to put it out there, palpable, that I am feeling sad, and that pain and deception overwhelm me. And that everything piles up."

Within this context, the lure of going back to his old neighborhood and to his mother, whom he kept visiting after his forced departure from Balcón Verde, became particularly strong when he felt most abandoned by his family. "You withdraw into yourself in your world of pain and neglect, or absence. Sometimes, the absence can be so profound, that one starts to think radically, right," Miguel explained to me his drastic plan.

Third, it is important to note that the kind of nostalgia Miguel and Claudina experienced had a particular twist: both were unwilling to accept that the life they longed for no longer existed. It did exist according to them and was projected onto specific places within

reach, needing no time travel or long perilous journeys to a different part of the world—as with refugees in strange countries—but only a twenty-minute drive. Hope was almost literally just around the corner. It was therefore relatively easy for Miguel to make the decision to go back to Balcón Verde, although in a city where wild violence, huge social cleavages and a state's 'averted gaze' (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) help breed more of the same, places in proximity can easily come to feel out of reach. Meanwhile, Miguel wasn't the only one playing with the thought of returning to a place of the past. Claudina, too, said that she would not mind moving back to a marginal area of the capital (or its surroundings), in a passage that showed her feeling of belonging to the neighborhoods of her youth as well as her physical proximity to these places:

"It is more cheerful...the world of, what shall I say, a *colonia* like El Nacimiento. Here [Vista Alegre] for example, if I want to go for an ice-cream, I have to go to Paiz [a supermarket]. In the *colonias*, as we call them, if I want to eat my ice-cream, I go to a store close by... 'let's go, let's walk together,' and we're going, you understand me. But I don't know, this isn't my world. My life is Zone 12, my *barrio*, my *colonia*. This is my children's because they have grown up in this. This world is theirs. What is sure is that it wouldn't affect me if you tell me 'look, let's go live in Mixco [a place she associates with poverty] and rent a place there.' That would be just fine because that is my environment."

A question that remains is how violent places like Balcón Verde and El Nacimiento could grow into beacons of hope, havens so safe that even returning became an option. The answer to this revolves around the crucial fact that, compared to the many tormentors the present tends to hold in a place like Guatemala City, there are few forces out there that could stop someone from beautifying the past. Representing the kind of essentialism that often holds sway among beleaguered individuals (Young, 1999), nostalgic remembrance typically involves representations of the past unshackled from their contradictions, injustices and ills. At the same time, it can be as fluid as the present it tries to swallow, as recollections of particular pasts may adapt to life's shifting concerns and therefore differ over time (Lankauskas, 2015). "Nostalgia," Margalit argues, "takes a free ride on memory" (2011: 80; see also DaSilva and Faught, 1982; Pickering and Keightley, 2006; Boym, 2001). Miguel himself put it more beautifully, although they were words that belonged to the German romantic Jean Paul: "The memory is the only paradise from which they cannot expel you, moments, music and persons."⁸ He could have also quoted Proust: "The true paradises are paradises we have lost."⁹

This allowed Balcón Verde and El Nacimiento to become paradises in retrospect. They provided Miguel and Claudina a seeming way out of real life, although one based on a confusion between the "imaginary," beautified home and the "actual home" (Boym, 2001: XVI). After all, Balcón Verde and El Nacimiento were in no way the poor but cohesive neighborhoods they seemed to have once been but had developed into petri dishes for crime and violence where residents had the feeling that nobody was to be trusted. The fact that Claudina was aware of this, or so it seemed, did not stop her from accrediting contemporary El Nacimiento the qualities that had made the place of her youth a seemingly cheerful place. The El Nacimiento of her youth still existed, she said, because

she wanted it to exist: “You make your own happy world, you make your own sad world, you make your own criminal world if you want it to be criminal: you make your own world as you want it to be.” On other moments, however, she admitted that she would “die from a nervous breakdown”—fearing for her own life and, especially, that of her children—would she be living in a marginal neighborhood.

Claudina’s case testifies to the fact that nostalgic recollection often competes with opposing narratives of loss and rupture (Lankauskas, 2015; Scanlan, 2004) without this competition ever being settled for good. This happens through a complex interplay between ‘knowing’ and what Moodie (2010) calls “unknowing,” with which she means “converting something largely known, if not acknowledged, into something circumstantially *unknown*, masquerading as a condition of *not being known*, so that it can be replaced” (2010: 173, emphasis in original). Moodie, writing about postwar El Salvador, reserves the term for the process behind the denial in crime narratives of the structural conditions that produce crime (and criminals), but its relevance is broader. Miguel too sometimes *unknew* what he knew. Before returning to Balcón Verde, he was constantly reminded of the danger still present in the neighborhood through what he called “messages of death,” which were often violent and extortion-related deaths, telling him, as he once said it himself, “that nothing has changed, for if I was still dreaming of returning. So much evil. Each death is another reason for not going back, or even visiting, or whatever.” Yet still he went back expecting to find something of his old world there.

Practical consequences of nostalgia

As has become evident, nostalgia may serve as a psychological refuge that tells you who you are, *that* you are and that things lost (worlds, selves, hopes) may still be within reach. That nostalgic remembrance can do all this—and provide a counterweight against the force of the now—is due to its turn to the imagination and its creative potential. We could stop our inquiry into nostalgic remembrance here if we were to follow the popular belief that due to this power of the imagination, ethnographers should not be overly concerned with the extent to which nostalgic reminisces and other ‘meaningful truths’ diverge from what is real. Saunders-Hastings, for example, follows French anthropologist Fassin when she argues that as an ethnographer it is not her task to determine whether or not an account of neighborhood life is real, but instead to “uncover the truth of what...[people] are trying to communicate about barrio life” (2018: 367; see also Fassin, 2014). Fontes makes a similar point in his book on Guatemalan gang violence, stating that “the point...is *not* to label the ways people make sense of violence and insecurity as either true or false, accurate or mistaken. The point is that in this never-ending search for certainty, truth and falsehood matter far less than how the meanings made of the maras [gangs] induce individuals, communities, and institutions to act in certain ways” (2018: 13-14, emphasis in original).

To be sure, the viewpoint these authors represent is of critical importance when assessing coping mechanisms for violence and other oppressive social forces. When faced with situations that overwhelm and curb their freedom, people in Guatemala City and elsewhere tend to engage in a continuous rethinking and reconstruction of reality in an

attempt to come to a *modus vivendi* between what is imposed on them and what they choose to do. “Choosing,” ‘existential’ anthropologist Jackson writes, “or *imagining* that we choose, our lives, is such an imperative aspect of our humanity that even in the face of absolute loss of freedom we will often act as though the situation were still in our hands, that our actions might make a difference, that it is possible to think our way free of the chains that bind us” (1998: 30, emphasis in original). It is a response also present within play theory, and particularly mastery play (as described by for instance Freud), and part of what Hobsbawm (1995) calls people’s “knack for life”. The old adage “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 571), this is to say, is as relevant today as it was almost a century ago when it was first written down and seems only to gain importance in situations of duress and distress.

What seems forgotten here, however, is that the ability to read cues from the present—and to take reality for what it is—is the bedrock of navigating security, at least on an individual level. This becomes even more the case in places of wild violence like Guatemala City; Levi is right when he writes that “in life we are faced with facts, and facts are persistent, pitiless judges” (1993: 311). Nostalgia—and here it may lead to unforeseen, even dangerous situations—may interfere with the ability to read reality. If we are to take nostalgia as a coping mechanism for the dangers, uncertainties and anxieties of everyday life—which we should—these risks need to be acknowledged, to start with, and explored.

Miguel’s case indicates the need for this. As much as nostalgia developed into a safe haven for him, it was one with risks of its own, as it left him unguarded towards the dangers he chose not to see. After the extortion, he kept trying to revive his old life in ways that many others in his position would have considered too risky. It was a few days before Mother’s Day when he had taken a day off to go to his mother, knowing that his work did not allow him to visit her on the day itself. But when it turned out his mother was unavailable that day, he decided to rest instead. Miguel was home alone, when Gustavo, an old friend from Balcón Verde, called him to have a few beers together, and because he was alone—“with nobody to talk to”—he told him to stop by. They had a couple of drinks and when María Luisa came home, she had made them some food after which she went to bed. It was then, however, that the conversation took an unpleasant turn, as Gustavo told him he had become friends with Santiago, a known killer from the local gang who had been away from Balcón Verde for some time but, according to Gustavo, had recently returned to the neighborhood.

Miguel’s thoughts had started to wander off the moment Gustavo mentioned his friendship with Santiago. “Right now I’m thinking, why did I bring him to my house?” he told me a few days later. “Because when he came in, he said to me, Miguel, *puta* [damn], this is one hell of a place you have arranged here for yourself.” He feared for history to repeat itself. I asked him if he had informed María Luisa of what had happened. He had not:

“If I would have told her, she would have said I am an idiot. So it’s better not to say anything, right. It is what she said herself, she doesn’t want to talk to anyone from the old *colonia*. She doesn’t want to know anything about anybody. She has a lot of fear, right. So perhaps I am a bit naïve or stupid because I don’t understand that people who talk to you like that want to hurt you, right.”

With Santiago back in the neighborhood, Miguel thought it was best to stop visiting his mother for a while. The following days, he posted sad messages on Facebook. "It is a very nostalgic melody," referring to a Los Diabolitos song he attached to his words, "but my sadness of separating from you will be an eternal one. I should laugh, it is impossible, you are not here." It was followed by another message: "My *colonia*.....so close....so far away." What Miguel did not know during our conversation, or I for that matter, was that the threat Santiago represented had already receded in a cruel twist of faith. Two days before I spoke to him about his meeting with Gustavo, residents of a neighborhood close to Balcón Verde had beaten to death two assassins who were held responsible for a multiple homicide there. Like many Guatemalans, I had seen videos of the brutal event as they were all over the internet. It was only after a week, however, that his daughter Yolanda told him that Santiago was among the ones lynched. It ended a week of despair, albeit with a somewhat bitter taste. "It is what the people in power want, that we kill each other," Miguel explained his ambivalence. Still, he had taken it as good news.

More than a year after this happened (and 4 years after his forced departure from Balcón Verde), Miguel took the radical decision to move back to his old neighborhood, blinded by the light of a beautified past and disillusioned with the way his family treated him—a decision in which Santiago's death had also been factored. It meant breaking with his family only to find out that there was nothing left of the remembered *colonia* and to later return to his family after a period of family infighting, emotional austerity and being locked up in his house. It was a move that glossed over the threat that had made him leave Balcón Verde in the first place. In Miguel's case, '*the presence of absence*', the life with the loss of his old life (and his old neighborhood), had turned into an '*absence of presence*', the rejection of his new life and the belief that the only way forward was the way back, without adequately appreciating the risks that went accompanied with it. Fortunately, it ended without him paying the highest price for it.

It is important to note here that this absence of presence may not only manifest itself through a person's diminished ability to recognize danger but also through a diminished ability to navigate security within 'recognized' situations of danger. Nostalgia, in other words, tends to not only confuse the imaginary home with the actual one, as [Boym \(2001\)](#) notes, but very often also the imaginary self with the actual self. This became clear in the case of Claudina, who had left the poor part of town more than 20 years earlier. It was safe to say that in her years of absence, she had become more accustomed to the amenities associated with her new economic situation than she was willing to admit. Moreover, our visit to a crime-ridden neighborhood in the city—where we visited Marta, the mother of one of her former maids, who was taking us for a stroll towards a small, hill-shaped park situated a few blocks from her home—seemed to show that time had robbed her of the street smartness necessary to stay out of trouble in such a place, insofar as this is possible.

The whole trip had seemed like a scene out of a movie to me, with two contrasting characters (as is often the case in movies). On the one hand, there was Marta, a poor and somewhat shabbily dressed lady with an enigmatic look in her eyes, whose caution seemed to verge on paranoia. On the way to the park, she kept crossing from one side of the road to the other to prevent us from passing at too close of a distance little groups of youngsters she said belonged to the local *mara* [gang]. Once in the park, she alternated

from whispering, while putting her hand in front of her mouth to conceal her words, to uttering small talk with a loud voice, to show our surroundings we were no threat of any kind, in the meantime identifying prostitutes, pushers and *banderas* (spies for the *mara*) among the few people present in the park. Things felt even more bizarre inside the church where she, again, started whispering to me, this time while gazing to the front as if we were not talking at all, as she told me about the witchcraft practices she deployed to protect people targeted by extortionists. We left the church the moment a middle-aged man sat down a few rows in front of us, who, according to Marta, headed the drug business in the neighborhood.

On the other hand, there was the heavily perfumed and neatly dressed Claudina, who had made it seem as if fear was a stranger to her in what seemed an attempt to show that she was still the same poor girl she once was. It was something that did not show during the visit. What else to make from the fact that she ostentatiously pulled out a hundred quetzal bill (about 14 dollars¹⁰) to pay for a cheap drink—"as if she was saying: 'rob me!'," as Marta later would say? She also boasted with a firm voice that she was not afraid of anyone, "not even for death," after the anxious-looking Marta told us that we were being watched. It was only because I sat right next to Marta that I heard her murmur: "Yeah, but you don't have to live here."

Claudina's fearlessness, as Marta seemed to imply, appeared a bit out of place, even rude perhaps. But it was also potentially dangerous, I began to see as our visit proceeded and, especially, in its aftermath. First, when we left the park, a large, black SUV came slowly driving in our direction to then stop right next to us in what seemed to be a warning, as the car almost became an animate object itself, a threatening one, giving no clue who or what was behind the polarized windows—according to Marta, there were crooked cops in the car who came to the neighborhood to distribute drugs to the pushers. A day later, Marta was visited by a local crime figure who asked her who "that gringo" was she was seen with and what he had been doing in the neighborhood. If this wasn't enough to remind us of the risks Claudina and I—and Marta above all—had exposed ourselves to, 3 days after our visit a news article appeared about a "chain of homicides" that had occurred in Marta's neighborhood. Seven people had been killed in the surroundings of the park in a period of 20 days, the last two—two transgenders gunned down by two men on a motorcycle—only hours after we had left, in a spot just around the corner from where Marta lived. The violent streak, the article mentioned, was thought to be the result of fighting over control of the illicit activities in the neighborhood, signaling a possible power shift or more regular fighting between gangs.

The news article not only put Marta's fear in a different light but also Claudina's self-proclaimed street-smartness. Her years of living in a fancy part of the city, and the penchant for nostalgia that had developed in this period, had robbed her of the experience, knowledge and also sense of reality necessary to deal with the difficulties and dangers of everyday life in the violent contexts of Guatemala City's marginalized neighborhoods. Or so it seemed. Basically, she was a 'rich woman' in any poor neighborhood she visited, which came with obvious risks. Claudina, this is to say, had experienced the kind of social mobility that burned bridges. As a result, there would never be a safe way back for her.

Competing truths

As has become clear, Miguel and Claudina's 'absence of presence' signaled a "turn to inwardness" (Jackson, 2013: 219) and a diminished ability to read reality, and as such can be a risky state of being in a place like Guatemala City. At the same time, we have established that nostalgic truths tend to compete with other often contrasting narratives. This means that the absence of presence we are talking about here is never absolute.

Take Miguel's return to Balcón Verde, which was a perilous one, but once there he quickly adjusted to the withdrawn lifestyle so dominant in the neighborhood that, as residents liked to state, was about "*ver, oír y callar*," to see, hear and remain silent—although in practice, it increasingly appeared to be about preventing yourself from seeing and hearing, and, to add to this, from being seen and heard in the first place. Similarly, his choice to reunite with his family after a few weeks of being locked up in his house seemed to be based on a less nostalgic depiction of the neighborhood. Miguel's short stay in Balcón Verde had become what Boym so aptly describes as a "second exile, [being] claustrophobic rather than liberating" (1996: 529).

Claudina, in turn—clearly aware that horrible things happened in Guatemala City's marginalized neighborhoods, and therefore of the limited deployability of nostalgic narratives, yet dependent on visits to these places in multiple ways—sought the support of other absolute truths when visiting her poor acquaintances. During our ride back from our visit to Marta, she reiterated her bold claim that she was not afraid of anyone to then tell me that "If you're not doing anything wrong, nothing bad will come your way. If you're doing bad things, bad things will happen to you." At the same time, she did not apply this karmic logic to the problems in her own life. For example, she had a hard time dealing with the continued control her ex-partner Pedro managed to exert over her life, which she felt she did not deserve. In addition, there had also been moments in which Claudina dismissed the risks of visiting dangerous areas by stressing that one's turn to die can come up at any time, everywhere—so why not visit dangerous areas? It was a logic that stressed a complete lack of agency and was therefore at odds with the sense of complete agency celebrated by karmic thinking.

The neighborhoods of Claudina's past, one comes to see, were in the present many contrasting and competing things at the same time: 'cheerful' neighborhoods where her old life could still be found; dangerous neighborhoods where she would die from a nervous breakdown would she be living there; violent neighborhoods where bad things—say, being murdered—only happened to bad people; and violent neighborhoods that needed no extra precautions because death could catch you everywhere—and there will have been more. Her visiting these places and the way she acted there were reflections of the competition between these different truths.

Similarly, Miguel seemed well aware that Balcón Verde was a dangerous place sending out continuous 'messages of death,' but these messages shifted to the background when he felt most isolated and when the need to believe his old neighborhood still existed was greatest. If his return to his old neighborhood was a victory for nostalgia, his withdrawn attitude there and the reunion with his wife and children were victories for what appeared to be more realistic evaluations of life in Balcón Verde. And in the period that followed

this reunion, he became more complimentary toward his family, while his Facebook posts became more positive in tone. It seemed that his short stay in Balcón Verde had presented him with a reality check that helped push the story of the extortion to the background a bit. Yet in a city where violent winds can rise at any moment and catch people off guard, it was too soon to tell whether it would remain there or come back with a vengeance someday.

Conclusion

In this article, I have looked at nostalgia through a functional lens. Such a focus is not without risk as it may help to obscure the fact that nostalgia, almost by definition, gives evidence of relative deprivation over time as it highlights loss, a “regret for what time has brought” (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 920), meaning that it is at best bittersweet. In Miguel’s case, nostalgia invaded him sometimes, without him wanting it. It could bring him to tears out of nowhere. Such remembrance was going back to a beloved place while realizing it did not exist anymore. The following words of the poet Darwish (2011), himself exiled from Palestine as a young boy, could have been written by Miguel or Claudina. “To long,” he writes, “means not to find joy in anything here, except shyly. If I were there, you say, if I were there, my laughter would be heartier and my speech clearer” (2011: 23).

At the same time, the stories of Miguel and Claudina give evidence of the power that can emanate from nostalgic remembrance as a counterweight against the force of the now. It offered them a sense of belonging and psychological refuge in volatile times, while it also gave them direction in a more practical way. It helped organize their social lives and daily routines, working its way into decisions over what places to visit and which people to meet. This was only strengthened by the fact that the beautification upon which their nostalgia was built did not restrict itself to a bygone past but was projected onto specific places in the present. Dependent as it is on the creative potential of the imagination, nostalgia is part of the arsenal through which people try to govern their own life, or imagine themselves doing so, in the face of limited or absent agency. As such, it is both a ‘product’ of the structures of power and history that constrain people’s lives and of the fact these same people “are active agents of their own history, rather than passive victims” (Bourgois, 2003: 17). This also means that there is always a potential disillusionment looming behind nostalgia’s promise. Boym may be right when she argues that, as “a romance with one’s own fantasy[,] nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship” (2001: XIII). It seemed, however, that both Miguel and Claudina were aware of this, at least to a certain extent, as their nostalgia took shape in the twilight zone between knowing and not knowing. In this context, acting upon their nostalgia became mainly a question of how close the imagined could be approached without it bursting apart.

This took on an added dimension as the places central to their nostalgia were within easy reach, which invited experimentation but also set limits to their nostalgia. Miguel certainly pushed it too far with his return to Balcón Verde, although this could also be viewed from another angle: it may have been exactly what he needed as it helped him to restore the bond with his family and become more accepting of the loss he had suffered. In

any case, there had also been more practical risks to returning to Balcón Verde with nostalgia in the driver's seat, because it led to a certain neglect of the dangers involved. Miguel's return to Balcón Verde, this is to say, could have ended badly and, meaningful as they were, this also goes for Claudina's visits to crime-ridden areas—and for our own visit to Marta's neighborhood. But again, there is another side to the story. In a context where fear of crime was almost “psychosis-like” (Coy and Pöhler, 2002: 356), I could not help feeling that there was also something refreshing to the fact that Miguel and Claudina pushed through where other Guatemala City residents stopped. Nostalgia gave them wings and clipped feathers at the same time.

This should not be read as an attempt to make a value judgment of Miguel and Claudina's nostalgia. Instead, what I have tried to show is that reality must not be lost sight of when we take nostalgia as a coping mechanism for the versatility of dangers, uncertainties and anxieties people in Guatemala City, and elsewhere, tend to live with on a daily basis. Ethnography, with its emphasis on ‘being there’ (Geertz, 1988), is the method par excellence to lay bare the tension between the promises of nostalgic remembrance and the pressing realities of everyday life, also on a more practical level. When this is left in the shadows, students of nostalgia run the risk of romanticizing nostalgia in the same way nostalgics tend to romanticize the past.

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Notes

1. To guarantee my respondents' anonymity and safety, I have chosen to use pseudonyms in the text regarding their names and neighborhoods.
2. Guatemala City is divided into twenty-two zones.
3. Within this scale, the extremely poor in 2017 had a per-capita daily income under \$3.1.; the poor between \$3.1. and \$5; the vulnerable between \$5 and \$12.4.; the middle segment between \$12.4 and \$62; and the upper segment above \$62.
4. From the late nineteenth century onwards, it has become increasingly common in Guatemala to divide the population into indigenous (often denoted by the derogatory term Indian) and nonindigenous, for which the term ladino is used (Martínez Peláez, 2011).

5. As on 11 May 2016, the first day of my fieldwork. This is also the calculation point for the other cases where I mention age.
6. Zone 18 is home to more than three hundred thousand people (Dudley, 2017).
7. The homicide rates of the Guatemala City metropolitan area are derived from Grupo De Apoyo Mutuo (2017, 2018). I have calculated the national homicide rates (per 100,000 inhabitants) by dividing the homicide numbers as given by the National Institute of Forensic Science of Guatemala (Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses, INACIF)—5459 in 2016; 5384 in 2017—by the number of inhabitants in Guatemala as estimated by the National Statistics Institute of Guatemala (Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Guatemala, INE)—16,548,168 in 2016; 16,924,190 in 2017. The result has been multiplied by 100,000.
8. Original quote: “Die Erinnerung ist das einzige Paradies, woraus wir nicht vertrieben werden können“ (Jean Paul, 1793 in Haubrichs, 1997: 3).
9. Original quote: “[...] les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus“ (Proust, 1954: 177).
10. The average Guatemalan Quetzal (GTQ) to US Dollar (USD) exchange rate for 2017, when Claudina and I visited Marta's neighborhood, was 0.1360 USD.

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