

Saudade, loss and longing

in Katherine Vaz's short fiction

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ABSTRACT: This article examines markers of loss and longing in Katherine Vaz's short fiction through two short stories from her collections: "My Bones Here Are Waiting for Yours" (*Our Lady of the Artichokes* [2008]), and "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water" (*The Love Life of an Assistant Animator* [2016]), both of which explore how the loss of a child affects its mother. Loss, longing, and temporality are key elements in these stories, opening avenues for thinking about 'saudade' as an expanded sense of dislocation that is by no means culturally exclusive. These elements in Vaz's texts bring a "new tone" to experiences of loss, as memories accompanying the dislocating effects of loss also allow pain to be overcome and revised. From the standpoint of the future, Vaz's characters gain a shifted comprehension of unjust and unavoidable events; amidst the chaos of sadness and dislocation, 'saudade' plays a pivotal role in recasting notions of fate and fatality.

KEYWORDS: Absence-presence; Fate; Memory; Saudade; Temporality.



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In a 2005 interview with Nancy Bunge, Katherine Vaz reveals how the suffering she underwent following a friend's death reshaped her writing on experiences of loss. Looking toward the past, Vaz asserts, "enabled me to realize that the rest of the world was walking around with that kind of pain, too" (Bunge 2005, 236). She adds:

When I lost my friend and felt bereft, I realized that one must have great compassion also for what it would have been like for the mother to have lost her daughter and for anyone to have suffered... a kind of quietness in realizing we never know what's going on with someone else, entirely, even people who are close to us. (Ibid., 237)

Vaz's meditations on life impress on the distinct textures of loss and longing pervading her short fiction.¹ The Portuguese-American author's imagining of a mother's experience upon losing her child, for instance, provides a specific contextual framework for short stories where she hones in on how the loss of a child bears on its mother: "My Bones Here Are Waiting for Yours" and "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water." Loss and temporality are key elements in each of the plots, opening avenues for thinking about narrative uses of *saudade*, that special kind of longing for the presence of bygone people, places, or moments that so many claim to be exclusive to the vocabulary of Portuguese speakers.

Whether originating in experiences of unrequited love or the loss of a child, in several of Vaz's stories, this longing is untangled from the localized constrictions of death and nostalgia and interlaced with the advent of new life. In "Fado," for instance, young narrator Rosa invokes the themes of loss and *saudade* from the

¹ Quoting at length from this passage illuminates Vaz's emotional sensibilities even further: "Even though I was in a lot of pain when my friend died — we were both twenty-six — it enabled me to realize that the rest of the world was walking around with that kind of pain, too... it's not just understanding our individual pain; it's suddenly realizing, 'Oh, wait a minute, if I'm walking around or going to the grocery store or the stationer's and aching with pain at having lost my friend, then who knows what has happened to the clerk or this person or that person?'" (Bunge 2005, 236).

onset: "One morning I could not find Lúcia, my stuffed toy pig. I ran crying next door to Dona Xica Adelinha Costa" (Vaz 1997, 96), Rosa begins. The narrator's yearning for her lost stuffed animal functions as a dramatic intensifier to the story's beginning, emphasizing the loss as a call to action, rather than a hindrance. Heeding this call, Dona Xica promptly buries a statuette of Portuguese patron Saint Anthony with the promise that he will help them find the pig. Later, with Lúcia found, Saint Anthony is still left in his grave another day "to teach him to be faster in finding what was lost" (ibid.). A connection is drawn between what has been inadvertently misplaced and that which is purposefully made absent, as both indicate a sense of loss with the potential for restoration.

Beginning the story with its characters in this state of lack allows Vaz to convey the meaning of the *fados* — Portuguese songs of fate and melancholy — that give the story its title, as her readers become immediately aware of an essential loss. However, *fados* are also imbued with a new freshness and intensity of meaning, because they allow *saudade* to reveal itself "in all its splendor... from a standpoint of hope in the future" (Dias et al. 2016, 108). From this perspective, *saudade* prompts Vaz's characters to move on from disruptions, as early losses and recoveries reflect how states of absence and presence overlap.

Saudade can be understood as the distance compounded between the perceived absences and presences of people or things that have been lost, seen as a temporal dispersion, rather than a desire to return to the past. It becomes a point of critical intervention in experiences of loss and longing, because intrusions of the past into the present accentuate the traumas of cognitive dislocation. Creating new, yet historic and memorializing frames, *saudade* communicates temporal memory processes as central symbolic and material sites for the dislocated conscience. Often, these temporal sites emerge out of binaries to define and contain lived experiences. Considering *saudade* through absence and presence, for instance,

grants a persuasive rubric through which to read Vaz's writings on familial loss.

The absence-presence binary bears an interesting congruence with Vaz's understanding of *saudade* as a "yearning so intense for those who are missing, or for vanished times or places, that their absence is the most profound presence in one's life. A state of being, rather than merely a sentiment" (Vaz 1996, prologue). Absence evokes a vital presence, as whatever or whoever has been lost is so powerfully missed that their absence emphasizes relational tensions between literal and metaphorical states of being. Avril Maddrell notes how

[...] absence is not merely a "presence" in and of itself, but rather the absent is evoked, made present, in and through enfolded blendings of the visual, material, haptic, aural, olfactory, emotional-affective and spiritual planes, prompting memories and invoking a literal sense of continued "presence," despite bodily and cognitive absence. (Maddrell 2013, 503)

Attempts to evoke presence through absence reverberate throughout "Fado," for example in Rosa's longing for her boyfriend, Michael. As she falls in love, Rosa actively maintains a production of absence and perceives the mechanisms of its materiality: "Alone at night I could put him back together. I spread my hand out on my chest and thought: Michael's breastbone is now crushed here. I have captured the size of him" (Vaz 1997, 108). Perceptions of reality measure the loss one has suffered and longs to reclaim, as Michael's physical absence is temporally located in a way that grants Rosa with imagined power because she alone can "put him back together" and "capture" him. But Michael is ambivalent and Rosa is vulnerable: "When love no longer recognizes us, we fall into the strangest outbursts and comas" (ibid., 109).

Efforts to materialize the presence of love out of its absence take on heft, with the absence of these inciting bodily responses that reveal the subject's emotional dislocation. As in the Portuguese *fados* that give the story its name, emotions of

loss adhere to the body in performative gestures of the fatalist internalization of what it is like, and how it feels, to deal with *saudade*.

Reconstructing Absence

Apart from, or perhaps due to, the fear that these performances fall short of the mark, the search for expressions of inner life persists in Vaz's short stories where mothers lose their children. This search is especially significant in "My Bones Here Are Waiting for Yours," where the narrator, Mary Smith, follows the discursive codes left behind by her deceased daughter, Delilah, hoping to counter her own metaphorical dislocation. Told in the present but relying on multiple evocations of the past, the story revolves around Mary's search for the whereabouts of her daughter's belongings (her hand and charm bracelet, in particular), lost seventeen years before in the snow. Mary is bereft by the misplacement of Delilah's remains and attempts to locate them by appropriating her daughter's hybrid patterns of communication: Delilah, a synesthete, saw words linger to evoke the presence of colors, shapes, and sentiments to elicit tangible connections between feelings and language.

Delilah's confrontation with the natural laws of language through the ordered chaos of synesthesia evokes an active sense of absence-presence. Delilah assembled tensions present in the discursive frames available to those who dissipate borders through language in life as much as in death. Even though, as Mary remarks, "synesthetes usually have their own codes" (Vaz 2008, 57) — as if these codes were limitations imposed by her daughter, precluding a connection to the world around her — Delilah connected to and "understood everything" (id.) through her curious alternative languages of a deeply universal character, which include the vibration of colors, the sound of tastes, and the inevitability of pain. When

her father, Tobias, divorces her mother to be with his girlfriend Rebecca, Delilah's synesthesia makes visible things left unseen because they belong to another time and place: "*Rebecca talks in reds and blacks, came the report, like lions*, and that pleased both Delilah and me to no end, to think of Tobias with someone who spoke with vivid edges" (ibid., 58, italics in original). Delilah bridges gaps between binary worlds (mother/father, sight/sound, absence/presence) and claims a unifying frame, but also claims the right to a particular temporality, to the formation and maintenance of unfixed identities, and to contracts of remembrance and reflection. Delilah's passing before the story's beginning amplifies the potential for evoking these responses from her parents. Narrating the life of her dead daughter provides a particular discursive frame for Mary, who asserts the right of the deceased to be remembered. In this way, synesthetic descriptions become markers of Delilah's absence as they simultaneously indicate absence's reach and ultimately invoke her presence.

Mary's memory of her trip with Delilah to the Capela dos Ossos in Évora, Portugal is one instance in which these markers offer new insight into the workings of absence and grief. The *Capela dos Ossos* is a chapel in which the interior walls are lined and decorated with human skulls and other ossified remains which, personified, call out to the living. From an authorial standpoint, Vaz's narrator emphasizes the significance of this space, as the story's title is a translation of "Nos [sic] Ossos Que Aqui Estamos Pelos Vossos Esperamos," the admonishment inscribed at the entrance of this "Chapel of the Bones." A crucial distinction exists between the original and the translation: whereas Vaz's title centers on individual experiences of grief, mourning, and waiting for the dead — "My bones" —, the Portuguese inscription emphasizes a broader experience — "Nós ossos," meaning "we bones." The use of the plural, personal pronoun "Nós" in the original inscription is interesting because it personifies and activates the presence of bones, which

are naturally inactive.²

In Vaz's text, the dead are allowed to speak, and the living are allowed to hear them: "I can hear the skulls, Momma, because of all the *shh, shh* sounds the living language here makes, they're echoing it, but in gray that opens into whiteness" (2008, 64, italics in original). Utterances of the dead make their way into the world of the living with the same synesthetic sensibilities that permit the absent Delilah to be present. These voices are amplified by the layered meanings encoded in Mary's memory, wherein her consciousness of what is absent intersects with her understanding of the present to produce a renewed vision of reality. Reflecting on the effects of her daughter's absence-presence, Mary muses: "look at how the dead speak, look at how the living cannot speak" (ibid., 66). Such voices emphasize a complex intermeshing of representations, forms, practices, and expressions, with Mary's sense of past landscapes and their effects in the present revealing how those who are absent can be reconstructed within new systems in the present. Mary Smith's evocation of her daughter in this chapel reflects a temporal and spatial turn toward Delilah's continued presence. We can discern this presence at the end of the story, when Mary imagines herself as one of the corpses in the chapel, "holding a replica of her [Delilah's] naked hand, the two of us refusing to break down, bodies without end" (id.), bodies immersed in states of loss and longing yet still "incorruptible" (id.) in their presence.³

² Katherine Vaz transcribes the chapel's original admonishment, which foregoes the grammatically correct accent in "Nós." The original phrase reads: "Nós Ossos Que Aqui Estamos Pelos Vossos Esperamos."

³ Vaz's second novel introduces this idea that the Capela dos Ossos narrativizes absence-presence. One of Mariana Alcoforado's fellow nuns, Sister Dolores, reveals her knowledge of the chapel: "After the monks in residence died, their bones were used to fashion a house of prayer... They said that a person could sourly assume that life was nothing but an accumulation of bones..." (Vaz 2004, 246).

Mediating Past and Present

Vaz writes about longing in a way that preserves memories of the deceased. In “Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water,” for instance, Isabel Gomez turns to the appropriation and revision of memories to materialize the continued presence of her daughter, Mary. Hit by a bus at the age of five, “Mary lived only the years she would never have remembered, so I invite her in to revise what I think I know” (Vaz 2017, 21–2). The act of invitation suggests a cognitive desire to reappraise “the past we are foolish to think never alters” (ibid., 20). Because memories of the past are fixed, they emerge as cognitive constants where the dead can always be located, and Mary Gomez’s life is mobilized by her mother’s narration. The same is true for “My Bones Here are Waiting for Yours,” as Delilah continues to be conjured by her mother. Whether through memories, newspaper articles, television interviews, paintings, or photography exhibits, Isabel Gomez and Mary Smith invite their daughters to move in the world of the living; perhaps one of the most Gothic elements of Vaz’s writing, reminiscent of devotions paid to specters of deceased family members throughout the nineteenth century.⁴

In “Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water,” however, Isabel’s daughter is not so much invited but allowed to take up space: “Why does it persist, this invented memory of Mary wearing a mortarboard and graduation gown, this perpetual finding her on some verge? It seems to grow out of Mary in her water wings in the backyard pool” (Vaz 2017, 20). Memory becomes contagion, promising an expanding future that can never come to fruition. Mary Gomez carries and depends on her mother’s cognitive dispersions: she is projected multiple times into memories, taking on the “rebellion” (ibid., 13) of her name, refusing to be linear and “plainspoken” (id.).

⁴ See, for instance: Straub 2015, 156-72; Green-Lewis 2017; Warner 2006.

This is perhaps where Isabel's *saudade* for her daughter is felt most clearly, as her yearning for the absent Mary becomes an encroaching presence in her life and disrupts cognitive narratives of her current and past realities. Tensions arise within this state of in-between, subsuming the powerful effects of dislocation.

There also exists a unifying potential here, as memories of Mary become points of mediation between past, present, and future, with this range being indicative of the broad scope that practices of meaning-making hold for the bereaved. Soon, Isabel realizes that not only have her memories of Mary become affected by the tragedy of loss, but so have those of her father:

She insists that my father is not shouting, "Here we go!" but "Hold on, hold on!" The past changes, thanks to her: I'm clutching my father's *guayabera* shirt until I feel skin because I must hold on, and I'm holding on, danger spilling past me, holding on to my father and my daughter not yet born... (ibid., 22; italics in original)

Holding on to the past — holding on to Mary — is, for Isabel, an exercise in the dynamics of memory. It gives the subjective narrator a way to return to the past, remember the immediate present, and imagine a future, even when it is not her own. Far from static, the past changes, mobilizing connections between fragmented memories and current experiences.

Change, as a narrative dynamic, also serves to elucidate the misplaced hope for a concrete reality or meaningful resolution to the circumstances surrounding Mary's death. This dynamic pervades throughout "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water" and becomes apparent through Isabel and Henry's perceptions of the effects of Mary's death side-by-side. For Isabel, "letting go of Mary, the death of her, brought [Henry] sooner to the start of [the memory loss that accompanies Alzheimer's]" (ibid., 31). For Henry, life becomes about "you and me," Isabel and him, "and the world packed up in white, ready to be stored away" (id.). Isabel perceives

this rendering of reality as “a discernable divide” (id.) between her husband, herself, and the memories that sustain the presence of Mary. This is how she “will lose him” just as she once lost her daughter (ibid., 32). Henry sees it differently; Isabel is “always talking about what Mary did,” whereas he wants to “remember who she was” (ibid., 33). Isabel is an unreliable narrator, and thus Mary, manifesting through the absence-presence binary, belongs to a symbolic space, where memory calls the realities of death and perceived truths into question.

These spaces are haunted by the ghosts of past structures of meaning. As they evoke and are evoked by social and personal hauntings, specters interrogate why they have been summoned to haunt in the first place. Avery Gordon conceives that textual and cognitive hauntings are active and powerful forces influencing the external world. Gordon theorizes that, when ghosts emerge through acts of remembrance, they act as social figures through which we can come to terms and evolve from past tragedies (Gordon 2008, 183). Ghosts also underline the complexities and contradictions of the absence-presence binary: something thought to be lost or absent is made to appear once more, revealing the continuous struggle between the forces that produce temporal encounters.

Gordon's theories bridge with Maddrell's observations, conceiving death not as a finality but as an ongoing process where memorial practices of the bereaved provide insights into developing attachments. Whether through actions or other objects, acts of “continuing bonds” evoke and perpetuate the memory of and relationship with an absent loved one (Maddrell 2013, 506). These acts summon a “sense of relationship” with the dead that surpasses the circumscriptions of class, kin, religion, and gender at the same time as it revises memorialization (ibid., 508). The materiality of emotional processes feeds memories of the deceased while generating attachments.

Material Cognitions

In the case of “Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water,” these attachments are felt cognitively, with Mary’s resurgences in Isabel’s present and the imagined future, as well as their potential disruptions of reality and its narrative, functioning as forms of grievance. However, in the case of “My Bones Here Are Waiting for Yours,” processes of longing and remembrance depend on the object relationships established between the mother, Mary Smith, and her daughter, Delilah.

Maternal longing condenses into one object: her friend Lydia’s exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where “Every year like clockwork” she adds a picture of Mary standing “by the Devils Postpile where [Delilah] lay buried under snow until the patrol found her body” (Vaz 2008, 53). In the same turquoise suit and heels she was wearing at the time of her daughter’s death, Mary stands, year after year, “a smudge, reddish and blue-green” (id.), contrasting against the whiteness of the landscape as Lydia takes her photograph. The discrepancy in color differentiates the presence of the living from the absence of the dead. But it also suggests an accord between life and death, as both are shown to belong to the desolating snow. Equally important is the exhibit’s title, “My Bones Join Yours in the Snow” (ibid., 54), which adds another comparative layer to Vaz’s text. Diverging from the waiting indicated by the Portuguese sanctuary from which Vaz borrows her story’s title, Mary Smith’s surrogate work advances her union to her daughter. The disparity between the active “join” and the passive “are waiting” highlights Mary’s reaching out to a temporal adjoining with Delilah. Mary’s remembrance of her daughter is tied to the weight of artistic creation.

Lydia’s photographs partially stem from Mary’s search for a manifestation of her internal turmoil, something that might throw her pain into relief by dislodging the parts of herself that were distorted by Delilah’s death. But they also emerge

from a conscious desire to capture and gain possession of the totalizing effects of her grief. As Susan Sontag notes:

The photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace (not a construction made out of disparate photographic traces), cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude. (2003, 46)

These photographs intend to show death, or at the very least the aftermath of death, in a way that creates and preserves a temporal frame where Mary and her audience can attend to experiences of longing. Mary highlights how the exhibit serves as a permanent reminder of death's dislocating effects:

I'm pleased that my body has become a map of my world. We cannot change our past fate, but we can intensify it. People are quiet and grateful as they gaze at the wall. They see that they are not alone with their secret fear that time does the opposite of healing. (Vaz 2008, 54)

The aesthetic representation of Delilah's death and Mary's mourning acknowledges the inevitable realities of loss through what Terence Heng calls a "visual static-ness," meaning the freezing of a particular moment in a way that mimics the deathly quality of immobility (2018, 223). Photographs reveal the internal praxis of the body, as it is rendered to the overwhelming effects of fate, making apparent the suspended nature of subjectivity. Mary's photographs also protect her audience from the inevitability of this same dislocation, by making these effects visible because here, these influences occur at someone else's expense and in someone else's image.

Longing becomes a mode of temporal connection because it allows Mary to grieve memories of Delilah, both personal and imagined. The imagined memories expressed in Mary's photographs become a lens through which to

examine herself amid feelings of otherness and displacement. Maddrell situates similar scenarios along the continuing-bonds model, which centers on needs of the bereaved and argues that continued interactions with the deceased are necessary for self-reflexive states (2013, 508). Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler also acknowledge the benefits of continued relations, but frame it through the powers of cognitive hauntings, in which a loved one has passed but visions of their existence remain. In their estimation, continued presences are beneficial because they “can provide motivation to do whatever it takes to get the vision out [one’s] mind and get [them] back into the world” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005, 76); art therapy, in particular, gives physical form to these visions by forcing them to “move from mind to canvas” (id.). Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s ideas conjure a dual image of the continuing-bonds model. On the one hand, visions of the dead allow the beloved soul of the deceased to linger in the world of the living, in a way enabling the externalization of feelings and sensations beyond explanation. On the other hand, these “hauntings” are valuable insofar as they continue to aid the dislocated subject in their grieving process. Whether or not they are conceived as physical realities by the bereaved, the presences of deceased loved ones serve to consolidate the myriad of sensations arising in between the real, external world of loss and the cognitive, inner world of longing.

Lydia’s photographs act as “art therapy” that allows mother and daughter to remain in contact. The exhibit manifests Delilah’s closeness, as Mary Smith credits her daughter with the corporeal aesthetics of the art she poses in, chiming that “my girl keeps me thin; I know that every year I must fit into that suit” (Vaz 2008, 53). Mary wishes to perfect these aesthetic connections to her daughter because the suffering depicted in her photographs is minute in comparison to reality. Artistic creation extends and revises Mary’s suffering to reflect a different, perhaps more forgiving and softer, view of loss. Mary Smith’s revisions of Delilah’s death build

a bridge to a new self. The end of the story shows that Lydia's artistic designs change, as Mary trades in her "turquoise business suit" (id.) for an "aqua shift" (ibid., 66) and exchanges the setting of Devils Postpile, which constrains her "like ice picks" (ibid., 53) for the "boundless" (ibid., 66) Empire State Building in New York. No longer standing in "startling" (id.) contrast to the sublimity of the snow, Mary is placed "as a smudge against this manmade tower" (id.), showing how she now blends her "sorrow" (id.) with other structural facets of her life. The evocation of specters gratifies, rather than frustrates, feelings of loss and longing. As Heng argues, in projecting specific moments of emotional and physical presence, photographs capture the intangible emotional/affective aspects of the absence/presence dynamic: "instead of photographs showing simply traces of absence, they can actively evoke absence by showing practices of presence" (2021, 221). In other words, what is physically absent but spiritually present inverts to generate a new social memory and lived identity.

"Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water" sees objects that relate to the dead as open wounds at work in the process of healing. When contemplating the painting that gives the story its title, in which "the water is giving its tones to the bird, and the bird has lent its color to the water" (Vaz 2017, 22), Isabel muses on how her daughter's death 'lends' itself to other parts of her life: "The dead body of a little girl is not a painting. It is not beautiful. And loss of memory can be a physical fact, death strolling in, grinning and taking its time" (ibid., 32). The painting, like Mary, embodies Isabel's "prediction of a new, hybrid rule" (ibid., 22); as an object, it is attached to Mary's actions in the past, but as a symbol, it is attached to the family, to its memories, and to what is perceived to be lost or retrievable.

Music also represents the fatalist internalization of what it is like and how it feels to deal with death and loss. In "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water," the culturally symbolic universe of Portuguese *fado* evokes the re-visitation of

memories, absent or lost people, the making of wishes, the voicing of complaints, and the whisperings of desire endemic to the human experience. Thematically, *fado* can revise past identities and turn them over to the future (Dias et al., 2016, 107). Perhaps this valence amplifies this music for Isabel, who feels that Portuguese singer Misia's songs of fate carry a profound capacity for pain and restoration. Isabel reminisces upon the feelings evoked by her daughter's fatal bus crash:

I would like to substitute the feel of crashing with sounds of sad beauty. I download songs by the Portuguese fado singer Misia [sic]. Fados are traditional songs of fate, mournful; Misia [sic] has a Louise Brooks haircut and full lips and is said to bring a new tone to this music of the past. (Vaz 2017, 25)

Bringing a "new tone" to memories of loss is a thematic imperative throughout the story. Detailed acts and objects, such as Mary's painting of the blue flamingo, engage with disarticulated grief to evoke memories that allow the dead to speak in the world of the living, with these voices giving way to futures of transformation. Isabel's memories serve as reminders of the pain accompanying the dislocating effects of loss at the same time as we grasp that this pain can be revised.

Temporal Encounters

The triangulation between loss, longing, and memory exists in a temporal space where they complement one another in the grieving process. As in the absence-presence model, these testimonies of hybridity work alongside the overcoming of facile binaries. This includes the rejection of normative temporal frames and how these regulate the deliberations over absolute or potential losses. We can discern how the potential of loss can be more disquieting than its actualization in many of

Vaz's stories, but I would like to briefly return to "Fado." The story's narrator, Rosa, attends to longing in a way that arouses as much dread as desire, seeing how her father's loss consigns her to a sustained history of memorialization:

I would sit on the porch awhile holding my father's hand. It was the first time I already missed someone I still had, and my first lesson that true joy creates not memory but physical particles. My Lodi mornings hid embers in me that will float upward when I die, to burrow in someone else, because they have nothing to do with dust. (Vaz 1997, 99)

In this passage, loss and longing are positioned according to their disruptive, yet renewing, potentials. Worth noting is Rosa's acknowledgment of the "physical particles" that will continue to permeate after her death, as it speaks to how the inevitabilities of loss and longing can dismantle polarities between inner and outer, past, present, and future worlds. Rosa indicates how longing can unsettle considerations of time and individuality, but also of life and death, allowing us to conceptualize loss as something that occurs in the interplay between absence and presence.

Memories of the dead dominate and intrude upon ongoing processes of identity formation in these stories. "My Bones Here Are Waiting for Yours" illustrates these intrusions, as visions and utterances of the dead replace that which is metaphysically absent through real and imagined settings that speak to the permanent, albeit fluid and changing, needs of the present and the future. For example, musing upon the effect gathered by Lydia's photographs, Mary Smith states:

How active the dead really are. They don't so much fling memories at us, or warnings to seize the time; they set contests in motion, actions born of excitement, and how beside myself I am to be informed that when I am dead I will still want to know what happens next. (Vaz 2008, 55)

Grappling with memories of the dead works alongside cognitive experiences of dispersal, as lingering imprints of events that transpired in the past result in new, and often unexpected, spatial, temporal, and spiritual effects. Because they work on spiritual as well as material planes, these disjunctions require the bereaved to make sense of their new memory spaces. For Mary, understanding how her own death is imminent provides a unifying solution for the temporal dispersals in her head. Memory becomes the medium through which experiences of loss can construct renewed cognitive spaces.

These spaces will continue to exist, so long as the bereaved keep acknowledging the presence of the absent, which raises the question: how do these spaces come into fruition when memory processes are interrupted or otherwise obstructed? Psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok distinguish introjection and incorporation by linking the former to normative processes of mourning and the latter to melancholia, or the refusal to mourn. On the one hand, introjection defines the inclusion of the mourned object by the bereaved in a process that “expands the self.” On the other hand, with incorporation, a reorganization of the self is avoided, as the bereaved often refuses to acknowledge and deal with the mourned object: “[the] foreign body [is] preserved as foreign but by the same token excluded from the self that thenceforth deals not with the other, but only with itself” (Abraham and Torok 1994, 4). We may perceive processes of incorporation as displacements if we see these exclusions as inquiries over losses that cannot always be articulated.

Engaging with potential inquiries concerning collective experiences of displacement underscores Henry's disjointed memory in “Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water.” Whereas Isabel grieves their daughter by reworking the past into the lived experience of the present, her husband refuses the memorialization of their child: he misremembers or forgets moments shared as a family in what Isabel

perceives as a frustrating act of “willful erasure, an attempt to acquit himself of [Mary]” (Vaz 2017, 27). Isabel mourns Henry’s remembrance of their daughter until she realizes that “he is not forgetting Mary to avoid pain; he is entering the pain that is famous for not stopping” (ibid., 31). Showing the signs of early-onset Alzheimer’s, Henry’s cognitive processes are disrupted to their core, and the loss of Mary catalyzes this responsive dispersal of the self.

In contrast with his wife, who uses memories of their daughter to draw connections between the scattered components of the self, Henry reveals how the sadness of the past can give way to dispersals that preclude reinvigoration. It is worth raising the possibility that her own longing distorts Isabel’s perceptions of her husband’s grief — a longing not just for the renewed memory of her daughter but also for a reality in which Mary’s death does not preclude her from coming to “greet [her parents] with her wild imaginings” once more (ibid., 34). Memory and imagination, reality and narrative are each rendered dispersed and perplexing as they refer to the rhetorical and symbolic tracings of the story. In interrogating the validity of memory and loss as links to narrative mobility, these dispersals question the role nostalgic recollections play into life following death.

This questioning pivots toward the self-reflexive qualities of Vaz’s narratives, which get to the core of these disconnections. “Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water,” for instance, places self-reflexive ruminations at the forefront of the text. In fact, the title alludes to Mary’s painting of a “blue flamingo [that] is looking at its reflection in a red pool. The water is giving its tones to the bird, and the bird has lent its color to the water” (ibid., 22). The painting itself is tinged with the need for self-contemplation: the blue flamingo must gaze upon its reflection in the red water in order to see its authentic, true self — a red bird — reflected in return. At the same time, the painting calls this “truth” into question by presenting the blue flamingo’s self-reflexive process, its singularity speaking to a crisis of emancipation from the

binds of purported authenticity.

Isabel undergoes a similar self-reflexive process not long after the death of her daughter; deliberating upon the authenticity of her identity, she begins to interrogate her place and actions in the world: "Where am I, what's here? Where is my daughter, so that I can talk to her? Not about this. About our need to watch out for each other, since I'm given to bolting, too" (ibid., 19). Isabel's sustained interrogation of her presence in addition to Mary's creates a doubling and division of the self, as the mother sees her feelings of disarray and dislocation reflected in her daughter's absence. Mirrored in Mary, Isabel's identity threatens to crack, split open, and disperse itself throughout a world turned dark and empty without her daughter. Isabel's inability to let go of the symbiotic ties between mother and daughter generates an effect of dislocation and a rejection of the world around her. Still, the evocation of memories restores a semblance of Mary's presence and allows Isabel to locate a sense of self once more. Following this self-reflexive process of *saudade*, in which her memories are renewed and reattached to her identity, Isabel realizes "they are only now returning to me, people orbiting around objects — streets, strata, names, all of which should matter to a teacher of geography" (ibid., 23).

Conclusion

Saudade awakens in terms of its self-reflexive allowances: evoking the forces of pain, loss, and memory, it draws our attention to the recourse of the past to deal with one's experiences and identities. *Saudade* explains how the various elements of longing can be conceived to produce authentic, meaningful, not just imagined, realities. As Onésimo Teotónio Almeida takes up, such cognitive reflections are integral to processes of identity formation and reformation, for, "the mind works

to establish links, to construct a narrative through which each individual connects the most intimate creations of both the mind and the heart" (Almeida 2017, 13, my own translation). This is how modalized *saudade* allows Vaz's characters to reflect upon their memories and create fantasies that, at times, mitigate the disruptive effects of loss.

Reaching out toward the past is one way Vaz's characters deal with these effects, as memories of people and things believed to have been left in certain temporal frames return and become transposed onto others, mutating into new presences. And visitations from the past are anything but extraneous — the act of return allows for sculpting a new identity, wherein one can recognize, discern, and project themselves into a new or uncertain future. As mothers who have lost their children, Mary and Isabel are attuned and open to the effects of *saudade*, which is not so much a desire to return to the halcyon days of a particular past but a dispersal that creates a more eligible, even if barely endurable, picture of the world. This negotiation characterizes much of Vaz's fiction, for she often writes characters perched on the threshold of self-recognition but nearly always standing firmly under the gambrel of loss and longing.

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