

2010s - some people of
but with stop

result of the world disappearing to rising sea levels and falling wages, of the anxiety of economic shocks and ecological shifts. In the wake of these traumatic events, demagogues and corporate interests swoop in and quickly remake the world in their image.⁷ Once the shock wears off, people come to and look around only to see that everything has changed. These are the breeding grounds for twenty-first-century nostalgia.

The Decade That Time Stopped

Something happened to time in the 2010s. People started experiencing it differently than they used to, so their relationship to it changed. News stories came and went at breakneck speed, but culture and politics seemed to stop completely. It became increasingly difficult to invent a future when so many were already staring down the twin barrels of climate warming and neoliberal austerity, so the entertainment industries of the 2010s stopped trying and gave consumers nostalgia instead. Some thinkers, like Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds, openly criticized popular culture's appropriation of its own past, seeing it as a general failure of capitalism to imagine anything truly new.⁸ And by the dawn of the 2020s, a startling trend had emerged, something far more disturbing: an inability to imagine the present.

Politics and culture today seem static — not merely stuck in the past, but unmoving, frozen, entropic. Nearly every speech or political campaign references a more stable past, and works of popular art sample older styles. Technology, on the other hand, seems to be the only thing moving forward these days. For so many, digital technology is the very evidence that time is passing at all, that we are indeed still living chronologically. Software updates and smartphone models count upwards, each

new iteration marked with a new name and a higher number. Big Tech promises us a future in which digital technology meets our every need. Many wait patiently as the technocrats invest near-endless streams of capital into projects that they believe will change the world, from self-driving cars to neural implants. There appears to be no limit to what Big Tech can do, a feeling that gives people everywhere the rush of futurity.

No one could really organize the events of the 2010s into a narrative, into something that made sense, but during those years many tried. Hanging over the decade was an ambient anxiety to historicize events quickly. The public wanted to know how history would remember this or that event because we yearned for temporality, for a steady order of past, present, and future. But the decade wasn't structured with a beginning, middle, and end. There were instead only punctuated moments, events that rose quickly into the present and fell into the past, repeating against the backdrop of ongoing disasters like global warming and recession.

In the early 1990s, anthropologist Marc Augé identified a trend that was then starting to appear in the West. He called it "the acceleration of history."⁹ Augé attributed this acceleration to "the overabundance of events" to which people everywhere tried to give meaning¹⁰:

What is new is not that the world lacks meaning, or has little meaning, or less than it used to have; it is that we seem to feel an explicit and intense daily need to give it meaning... This need to give a meaning to the present, if not the past, is the price we pay for the overabundance of events...¹¹

The desire to ascribe meaning to every single event only

made understanding the world more difficult. The more we hungered for meaning, the hungrier we got. Ironically, in trying to make perfect sense of the present, we lost the thread of the recent past. A yearning then set in: a yearning for a time outside the “perpetual present,” when history wasn’t “snapping at our heels,” when major events weren’t witnessed and recognized by “large numbers of people” who then must quickly give the final word on them.¹² “We barely have time to reach maturity before our past has become history,” Augé wrote, “before our individual histories belong to history writ large.”¹³

History continued to accelerate into the twenty-first century, and the present came and went with such speed that it became nearly impossible to hold an event long enough to give it meaning before it was flung from our hands and replaced with yet another. One could barely keep up.

By the 2010s, history had reached a volatile speed and was starting to come apart, leading Byung-Chul Han to dismiss the idea of acceleration altogether. “Acceleration in the proper sense of the word presupposes a course which directs the flow,” he wrote. But time, he noted, no longer has “anything to *hold on to* within itself.” It isn’t moving towards anything, isn’t accelerating forward at all, but is instead spinning to pieces.¹⁴

To help orient us, smaller moments, or micro-events, were often made into Events, a mission driven largely by hype. But this mission ended up destabilizing our sense of time even further. Hype told us that *this* album was already a classic, *this* movie was a must-see, *this* was history in the making. These hype trends weren’t novel to the 2010s, of course, but they seemed to affect not just the relatively important moments, but every moment, from the most mundane political snafu to the release of a new film. It was a marketing tactic above all,

a strategy for major corporations to garner attention or sell products by intensifying moments into hotspots of hype. But it also satiated our appetite for temporality in a post-temporal world. The focus on making micro-events into Events, on immediately weaving them into history, meant that the new was already classic and that we were always living in history. Sometimes this trend was criticized, like in 2013, when the mainstream press lambasted Penguin Books’ decision to release Morrissey’s *Autobiography* on its Classics imprint. Or when Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, not even a year into his first term as president.¹⁵ If we couldn’t control the present, then the least we could do was control how the present became the past.

But we soon discovered that controlling history — and the past — isn’t so easy. Desperate for meaning, some looked to leaders who promised to give it to them. These figures blamed the crisis of meaning on various scapegoats, from immigrants to identity politics. They argued that meaning could only be secured by going backwards to a time before history accelerated into a perpetual present and splintered into pieces. These were blatantly nostalgic appeals. Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Jair Bolsonaro all induced nostalgia in the 2010s to scapegoat migrants, leftists, people of color, the poor, LGBTQ+ groups, and the disenfranchised. They knew how firmly the emotion holds attention and how badly their constituents wished to satisfy the hunger for meaning.

Depressed and anxious, the public was also fed a diet of nostalgia through mass media, and the well to tap was the late twentieth century — specifically, the decades before 9/11. This led to the birth of the nostalgia industry, a branch of the culture industry that sells nostalgic hokum as escapism. The

nostalgia industry traffics in retro, rebooting old television shows, writing prequels and sequels to bygone films, and turning them into franchises and worlds of their own. And it works in concert with news media conglomerates: the latter stoke anger and hate, and the former provides the nostalgic balm. This emotional feedback loop became a crucial component of the attention economy in the 2010s.

It's important to note that the public is not to blame for its nostalgia today. Many people yearn for stability, and nostalgia is an emotional part of this yearning. It is a human right for people to live without the anxiety of collapse waving slowly over their heads like an axe. But a society built according to volatile market logic precludes any social stability. And so nostalgia has become a kind of magic. Whenever a corporation or a demagogue or an influencer wants to trigger nostalgia, all they have to do is wave the wand. Hanging by a thread, many will beg for the magic.

So far the future is at risk of being destroyed entirely, thanks to pandemics, economic collapse, global white supremacy, biased algorithms, and ecological devastation, each of which knocks the world further out of time's orbit. Few are able to make sense of the violent hail of information. Everywhere, people caught in the gyre of instability yearn for a simpler time and look to imagined vistas of the past as their cynosure. For some, nostalgia serves as protection from oppressive regimes. For others, it facilitates the oppression. It's natural to feel nostalgic once in a while. But if we keep failing to escape the vortex of reactionary nostalgia, then we are in big trouble.

The Politics of Nostalgia

The title of this book doesn't imply that time has been liberated and that our lives are no longer determined by countdowns and deadlines.¹⁶ On the contrary, we are controlled by the clock now more than ever before. It's just more invisible now, and its invisibility is what gives it power over our lives. In our post-Fordist society, there is little demarcation between life and work. Life *is* work. We're expected to always be on the clock, spending time hustling, branding, promoting, and networking. And the more that our lives are spent on the clock, the less real time feels. It seems like the hours have lost their clock simply because we are always racing against the clock, always working to meet its demands. The hours are plastic, the seconds expand and contract — what day is it? How long has it been?

Nostalgia can provide some comfort when the answers to those questions seem out of reach. But nostalgia can also contribute to the feeling of post-temporality. This is a central problem with nostalgic feedback loops: the more we rely on it to ground us, the more adrift we sometimes feel. Is this a good thing for us as a society, to be trapped in one nostalgic cycle after another? And why does there seem to be so much of the emotion circulating today? It's time to take a closer look at who or what is deliberately spreading nostalgia and why.

When you think of nostalgia, you might not immediately think of politics. To many, nostalgia is that wistful feeling you get while reminiscing about the "good old days." Or it's a cultural style, like a new movie shot in black and white, or a comedy series about teens coming of age in an older decade. But nostalgia has shown up in electoral politics before, most notably in the US with the catchphrase "Make America

Great Again,” which was sloganeered on the campaign trail by Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Donald Trump. The problem is that studying nostalgia merely as an embodied emotion or as a cultural style doesn’t give us a full picture of it. To understand it, we have to go beyond discussing whether a television series or a pop song evokes nostalgia and start asking *why* something induces nostalgia and *who* may benefit from it. Analyzing nostalgic trends in culture is part of this agenda, and so is understanding how nostalgia manifests in the body. But this book discusses what happens when an emotion like nostalgia is deliberately shared widely among disparate groups of people, across media and through culture, from the mouths of leaders to the hearts of citizens. Whose interests are supported by shaping and sharing this emotion? Do we need to eliminate it, or just cultivate it better? And what is at stake if we make the wrong choice?

Audre Lorde once wrote, “[O]ur personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action.”¹⁷ Put another way: the personal is always political. *Everything* is political. Everything exists in power dynamics, within exploitative thought processes and supply chains, and our goal as living, feeling people is not to depoliticize things but to understand our acts as political — and our emotions as political as well. We feel things and share those feelings with others. We rely on one another to survive, meet goals, and better the lives of our peers. We’re stitched within larger networks of people and, therefore, within larger networks of power. So there’s no way to extract individuals and pretend they’re outside the realm of politics. As public and private realms merge in the digital age, many are realizing this truth.

That being said, the point of this book isn’t to unmask every nostalgic façade until we arrive at the ugly origin point, to

get back to the “real” by throwing off nostalgia’s disguise. It’s futile to try to extinguish nostalgia completely, because the problem isn’t nostalgia per se, but how it’s used. What stories are told with nostalgia, and who tells them? What do they have to gain? And above all, who do these stories erase? In short: who gets left out of the remake?

Powerful people today aren’t merely engineering nostalgia out of thin air for us to consume. They’re working with the crises of the present moment, many of which they’ve had a hand in influencing, from climate catastrophes to economic crashes. Nostalgia is both an unavoidable emotional reaction to the reckless missions of capitalism and an emotion often induced to justify them.

This means that nostalgia is serious business. We might not be interested in taking it seriously, but others are. Companies are turning to the marketing literature on nostalgia to figure out how to get us to buy things. They know how effective it is to tell nostalgic customers to purchase this car, this house, this cruise trip, by first convincing them they’ve lost something. And political leaders are searching the past for the next historical event to appropriate for their campaigns, coercing the public into feeling nostalgic for the “right” histories, and sometimes convincing us that escaping into an intolerant past is the key to the future. At the same time, we’re going to have to get used to feeling nostalgia in a world racked by constant catastrophe. It’s up to us to decide how we shape and share nostalgia, and the first step is to move past our condescending suspicion of it.¹⁸ The very future depends on it.



Conclusion

The Right to Nostalgia

A low-pressure system began forming in the Caribbean Sea in mid-October 2020. At first, it didn't look to be very alarming, but it eventually grew into Tropical Depression Twenty-Eight, then into Tropical Storm Zeta. It finally reached its peak as a Category 2 hurricane after roaring through Mexico and Jamaica, where it triggered a deadly landslide. On October 28th, Hurricane Zeta made landfall in Louisiana and traveled quickly upwards, weakening along the way through north Georgia, but with winds strong enough to blow over a tree onto the bedroom of a house where my sister-in-law and her husband were sleeping.

For a while, I couldn't make sense of their death. How could this have happened? It seemed too remote, the possibility of losing them so quickly in such a shocking way. Once they were here, now they're gone — I couldn't wrap my head around it. My wife, Anna, and I were stunned, going through the rote motions of living, lost in a fog, prone to outbursts and collapses. Grieving feels a lot like being a ghost, like I was trapped in a strange loop and couldn't remember anything, or like I had been knocked out of time, stuck in some limbo, forced to labor under the nauseating weight of their loss.

It didn't take very long for nostalgia to set in. Memories would flash at random, things I had long forgotten: beach vacations, quick conversations, the way he talked, the way

she laughed, the last time we saw them. Our first act was to lay the picture frames face down; they unleashed a torrent of nostalgia, completely unbearable. With each passing holiday, we yearned for experiences we'll never have with them — a nostalgia for what could have been, for a life where they didn't die. It felt as if someone had switched the tracks and we were suddenly moving down a different path, watching as the junction receded into the distance, the point at which everything changed growing less and less reachable. But there was no turning back. We were headed into a future neither of us wanted, and we would have done anything to reverse time's flow, to go back to how things were before our world came crashing down around us. But all we have now are memories that flicker between soothing and aching — the gray grief of nostalgia.

If you had told me to stop feeling nostalgic, I wouldn't have known how. I couldn't just suck it up and deal with the loss. We wanted nothing to do with the future, and why should we? What good is a future without them? Of course, we'll go on. We have to go on. But the nostalgia will follow us, soothing and aching in equal measure, for years to come. It is already so bound up with my feelings of grief and sorrow that there's no way I can just excise it. And this is a crucial truth to remember.

Nostalgia is unavoidable in an era when freak hurricanes storm through communities in an exceptionally active, record-breaking hurricane season. It's unavoidable when a novel virus spreads across the world and impacts the vulnerable in countries where leaders care more about corporations than people. It's unavoidable when nation-states wage perpetual war and send off their own citizens to fight and die for abstract ideals. Nostalgia is an unavoidable

*the coming losses are being applied
already*

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reaction to the traumas of the modern world. We don't need some reality check to awaken us from the emotion. What we need is a livable world, one that supports real people when crises happen and that doesn't exacerbate them through selfishness, greed, and the thirst for power. Over the next century, plenty of people are going to experience loss — loss of loved ones, their home, their way of life — and they're going to feel nostalgia, too.

And yet, in a cruel twist, it is our nostalgia that media industries and ruling elites have exploited. There is a lot of money to be made off nostalgia, and there is a surplus of the feeling to go around. It is, after all, a primary emotional response in a society of control. But it has long served as an instrument of control. Remember that the earliest recorded nostalgics were those who lost control at the hands of state violence and industrial discipline: slaves, soldiers, migrants, and factory workers. Nostalgia scared military leaders, so they endeavored to discipline it out of citizen-soldiers. Slave masters believed their chattel couldn't feel it, but after emancipation the narrative changed: Blacks were too nostalgic. It was associated with "[s]avages, men living under the rudest forms of civilization" in the nineteenth century.¹ Positivist psychologists saw the "nostalgic subject as a species of *homo criminalis*," the criminal sick with yearning, and worried about the link between nostalgia and juvenile delinquency in the early twentieth century.² Psychologists after the Second World War saw it as a condition of the lower classes, something an educated person just wouldn't be bothered with.³ For centuries, nostalgic subjects were ridiculed, humiliated, told to work harder, ordered to love their country, buried alive, or thrown behind bars. What was once a normal emotional response had become suspect and remains so to this day.

In the twenty-first century, countless groups of people have lost control of their lives and the time left to live them. Scientists tell us we are running out of time to fight global warming. Lifetimes are halted for the ones suffering from long-term diseases and disabilities, as well as the incarcerated — the ones “doing time.”⁴ Individuals navigating the narrow mazes of a control society are limited in their movements, locked out of certain places because of the color of their skin or their country of origin. Their behaviors are policed: they are told which bathrooms they cannot enter, how much money they can earn, what they can afford to do. They are dragged down by debt, persecuted for their sexual orientation, constrained by the built environment, ordered to work according to a clock with no hours. They are instructed to privatize their health, to seek help only from themselves, and to fear those who don't look like them. Under these regimes of control, I don't see how anyone could live free of nostalgic feelings.

The present is no utopia, and the future isn't shaping up to be one either. Nostalgia provides a nice escape from it all, a necessary break from the anxiety of the Anthropocene, but it can also inspire social change in ways other emotions cannot. At this point it's clear that if we continue looking down our nose at nostalgia, then we aren't much better than the positivists who once thought nostalgia needed to be cured for a person to be a contributing member of society. But if we hide away in nostalgia's warmth forever, then we risk losing the present to capitalism, which just might eliminate the future for all of us.

people behaving like

market

GRAFTON TANNER

Disappearing Acts

“Disappearance,” Franco Berardi notes, “is the mark of nostalgia.”⁵ Media theorist Michael Dwyer wrote the same sentiment in reverse: nostalgia is an affective response to things “lacking in our current conditions,” often felt when something we thought was relatively stable, or someone we believed would be by our side forever, suddenly vanishes.⁶ Disappeared things once existed and presumably still do somewhere, although we can't be sure, but they aren't commonly encountered in the present anymore. They reside in the past, when we were younger, and our only access to them is through nostalgia.⁷

The dread of disappearance is a daily subjective experience for many living in neoliberal states. Fearing job loss, pushed to compete, and taught only to help ourselves, we must learn to live with constant change and the terror of disappearance. We await the next shock to the system — recession, pandemic, austerity, or worse — and witness as entire industries and lives are obliterated. Anxiety and depression rates surge, as more and more people experience social erosion. Those who do not save for disasters perish; those not entrepreneurial, admonished. When humans are taught to behave like markets, the upshot is a precarious life: volatile, uncertain, contingent, and stressed.

Information loss is a natural occurrence, and it's especially prevalent, and dreadful, in a society obsessed with eliminating unknowns. But sometimes, disappearance is artificially induced to serve certain interests. Ideas that challenge ruling ideologies, especially the ones that resist capital, are erased. Memories of radical events are written out of history, consigning non-normative knowledge to the margins, very often deleting them from the official account altogether. If they do survive, traces of these

events hunker underground, or they hide beneath the cover of normativity, passing as “appropriate” but occasionally winking from behind the veil at those who also know. If they are eradicated, stamped out of the cultural script, radical memories will always return as ghosts, terribly inconvenient reminders of an alternative future that was foreclosed by capitalism.⁸

In order for neoliberal capitalism to exist, certain things must disappear, and often. Once-stable jobs disappear. Healthcare disappears. Automation erases careers from the workforce. Marginalized populations disappear from sight. Species vanish. Older social realities, memories of ideological alternatives before the End of History, ideas that challenge market logic — these too must disappear for neoliberalism to reign at last supreme. Those ideas not legible through neoliberalism’s grid are tossed away, and marketing campaigns are launched to induce social forgetting, to consign the messy truths of history to oblivion. And the ones who seek to resist neoliberalism’s shock therapy, as Naomi Klein calls it, are also routinely disappeared.

By the mid-1970s, Augusto Pinochet was forcefully disappearing thousands of political opponents in Chile. Animated by American free-market ideology, Chile began a neoliberal conversion in the 1970s, and anyone who opposed it was punished. Some were thrown from helicopters into the ocean; others simply vanished. Decades later, the United States would wage its own regime of disappearance. Conducting “extraordinary rendition” in the wake of 9/11, CIA agents abducted so-called enemy combatants, transported them to makeshift prisons, and tortured them for information about global terror cells. Forty of these combatants remain at Guantanamo Bay, a concentration camp operated by the

US. The prisoners kept there are “ghost detainees”: neither dead nor alive, liminal, in between the cogs of a ruthless penal machine beholden to no one. Their flickering presence/absence haunts the American imaginary.

The disappeared often leave behind families and loved ones, who go on searching for them, driven by a restless nostalgia. The families of Chile’s disappeared are the subjects of the 2010 documentary *Nostalgia for the Light*, which explores the history of the Atacama Desert in Chile, where astronomers flock from all over to observe a nearly cloudless sky, and where Pinochet buried the remains of the disappeared in mass graves. Families search the ground for their loved ones, decades after their forced disappearance, while scientists point their telescopes at the sky. Violeta Berríos is one of the interviewees in the film; her partner, Mario, was disappeared by Pinochet’s secret police in October 1973. Roaming the desert in search of his remains, she remarks, “I wish the telescopes didn’t just look into the sky, but could also see through the earth, so that we could find them.”⁹ Berríos is also featured in Paula Allen’s book *Flowers in the Desert: The Search for Chile’s Disappeared*. Aching with nostalgia, she imagines meeting Mario again: “I would say, ‘How are you? I am so happy you are alive. I still love you.’”¹⁰

Theories emerge to explain disappearances, and sometimes these theories are proposed by the very ones who did the disappearing act. “They say they unearthed them, put them in bags and threw them into the sea,” Berríos says in *Nostalgia for the Light*, referring to the bodies of the disappeared that were supposedly buried in the desert. “Did they really throw them into the sea? At this point in my life, I’m seventy, I find it hard to believe what I’m told. They taught me not to believe.” Berríos’ refusal to accept what she’s told might sound like a refusal to face reality, which so many claim is obscured by the

oft-maligned emotion of nostalgia. But official statements are occasionally written to bury the evidence of state violence, and nostalgia can empower the ones left behind to dig it up. Sometimes, what looks to be an unyielding nostalgia for a past that never existed is just a skepticism to accept as gospel official statements explaining questionable disappearances.¹¹

Marked by longing, nostalgia can hurt. Conjuring the memories of the disappeared into the present is a painful process because, as Amy tells Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts."¹² It can be a discomfiting experience to face the fact that the past is both dream and nightmare, but we mustn't forget this. The subjective feeling of nostalgia isn't negative only. Nostalgia can empower the present to envision a just future by looking back to those moments when collective action stood up to gross abuses of power. It doesn't only have to be about "getting back there," in restoring what's been lost, but in learning from, and yearning for, those who came before.

In his unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism*, Mark Fisher wrote, "The past has to be continually re-narrated, and the political point of reactionary narratives is to suppress the potentials which still await, ready to be re-awakened, in older moments."¹³ Nostalgia, too, can be a re-awakening. It has the emotional power to conjure up the potentials of the past that are constantly being paved over by capital. The past is a kind of battleground, where the fight over memory is waged. One of our nostalgic goals should be to return to the front and listen to the ghosts who roam the graying battlefield where the smoke still hangs in the air. To open up the radical potentials of the past from those cruel enough to suppress them is "less an act of remembering than of *unforgetting*," as Fisher wrote.¹⁴

It might seem backwards to talk of nostalgia in this way.

Progressive politics have always been about looking to the future, envisioning a better society than what's in the present, moving forward, and sparking change. It seems like nostalgia has no place in progressivism. But we live in a time in which the future is uncertain. It feels like we aren't in control of creating the future ourselves, that the future is being decided for us by tech companies, which, every year, is increasingly looking more dystopian. The past, on the other hand, seems so much more stable. That doesn't mean it was, but we can take elements from the past and put them to use in the present — and perhaps, as a result, work towards a more habitable future.

The Roots of Radical Nostalgia

"Throughout the last century nostalgia was cast as the antithesis of radicalism," Alastair Bonnett writes in *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*.¹⁵ "Until recently one could say almost anything about nostalgia, as long as it was damning, and few would object."¹⁶ This has been the ruling opinion for quite some time, but as I've demonstrated in this book, it's time to question it.

What's worse, Bonnett asks, nostalgia or the messages of neoliberal capitalism "that extol the future and warn of the dangers of stasis, the failure to change"?¹⁷ This future-facing rhetoric circulates through Western society today, "[f]rom boardrooms to classrooms," and it's emphatically promoted by major multinationals, from weapons manufacturers to Big Tech.¹⁸ With so many misty-eyed CEOs worshipping growth and progress, nostalgia by comparison can seem "less sentimental than looking to the future" and, at times, less destructive.¹⁹ After all, it was the early European dream of a

progressive evolution from the “static and moribund societies of Asia and Africa” that midwifed colonial empire.²⁰

Bonnett points out that “within the modern, ostensibly anti-nostalgic, left there exists a profound sense of loss” and “that such yearnings are not a cancerous or alien intrusion but integral to the radical imagination.”²¹ In fact, he argues that radicalism and nostalgia are more intertwined than we may think:

The word “radical” derives from the Latin for root (*radix*). Used as a political term, radicalism refers to the desire to grasp and pull up the roots of an existing political arrangement, usually with the hope that an equally deeply planted but very different alternative can be nurtured in its place. Yet radicalism has another, very different, relationship to roots. In this version radicalism grows from roots: it emerges from authentic social experience; it is the voice from below, the cry of the people against an uprooted elite. This narrative identifies the enemies of radicalism with those who seek to dig away at memory, to grub up organic identities and reduce communities to malleable individuals without ties of loyalty or attachment.²²

We have a right to our roots, which nurture us and keep us grounded. However, capitalism tears up these roots and then tells the rootless that staying put will hinder their ability to compete for a job. That is, unless your mobility frightens the ones who want a closed system of movement, a gated community into which outsiders aren't allowed. The Anglo nationalism of the West, stoked by Brexit in the UK and the Department of Homeland Security in the US, orders migrants

to stay put and suffer the uprooting of climate collapse and free trade precarity.

It is this general skepticism of roots and home that helps to popularize the condescending treatment of nostalgia. And rightfully so: violent imperial campaigns have been waged in the name of the homeland. But this doesn't mean we should shun the idea of home altogether, as philosopher Barbara Cassin has suggested. “When, then, are we ever at home?” she asks, answering that we are, in fact, “never at home.”²³ “Rather than cultivating roots,” she advises us to “cultivate the elsewhere.”²⁴ This doesn't seem possible. Can't we cultivate both? Is it really possible, or even preferable, to claim we can never go home? Is it really a good thing to discourage people from planting roots? Doesn't that notion play into the hands of entrepreneurialism, which eggs people on to move where the jobs are, develop a “side hustle” after work hours, and climb their way up the business ladder? After all, “being footloose and flexible is a corporate ideal,” as Alastair Bonnett points out.²⁵

Forms of radical nostalgia, or something quite like it, have shown up throughout recent history. Several creative movements of the twentieth century embraced radical nostalgia: the anachronistic avant-garde, the transgressive surrealists, the primal Dadaists.²⁶ These movements sought to challenge the “technocentric and exclusionary landscapes of modernity” by drawing on the ordinary and the primitive.²⁷ Peter Glazer references several “music-driven commemorations of the Spanish Civil War” as examples of radical nostalgia that “reinfus[e] lost histories with credibility, substance, and emotional resonance.”²⁸ And during the Native American removals and forced assimilation programs

of the nineteenth century, the Ghost Dance of Paiute leader Wovoka and its Lakota interpretation were a kind of radical yearning for the day when "life would be free of disease and colonialism, and correct relations among human and nonhuman worlds would be restored."²⁹ In *Our History Is the Future*, an account of Indigenous resistance, Nick Estes explains that the Ghost Dance wasn't "escapist, but rather part of a growing anticolonial theory and movement... a utopian dream that briefly suspended the nightmare of the 'wretched present' by folding the remembered experience of a precolonial freedom into an anti-colonial future."³⁰

Although we might associate nostalgia with conservatism, radical nostalgia has rarely been supported by the right. Glazer's book on radical nostalgia reveals the strategies some on the right have employed to rewrite the history of the Spanish Civil War. For example, in February 2001, a plaque honoring several New Hampshire men who traveled to Spain in the late 1930s to fight against Francisco Franco and the Nationalists was displayed in the statehouse for about two hours, before a local right-leaning newspaper accused the memorial of celebrating communist sympathizers.³¹ Threatening the status quo of a market-driven, neocolonial present, radical nostalgia is often at loggerheads with those who fear what it might unearth.

Think about the contested terrain of the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. A purely nostalgic perspective would regard King as Santa Claus: the patient exemplar of nonviolence and the political foil to Malcolm X. For many white liberals and conservatives, he represents how protestors should behave — not chanting in the streets but elocuting from the pulpit. Of course, this is a grave misreading of historical truth. A radically nostalgic perspective knows better than to be duped

by such revisionism. Radical nostalgia yearns for the fierce pacifism of King, his anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and anti-capitalism. Those committed to remaking King into Santa Claus will likely call such yearning a misrepresentation. But the idea that nostalgia misrepresents the past often comes from its power to tell a different story than what is written in history books. Radical nostalgia misrepresents King insofar as it advances a narrative that challenges the official record of his memory, promoted by centrist elites.³²

Official history is often decided for us. It's codified in textbooks, museums, monuments, and popular culture. And anyone who threatens official history is often named a conspirator. The ones who use nostalgia to buttress power will denounce every monkey wrench thrown into their nostalgia-fueled time machines as a conspiracy. They will charge those of us who cultivate nostalgia towards more prosocial ends with impeding the mission to revive the good old days. This is a defining characteristic of what Svetlana Boym called restorative nostalgia: the belief in a secret cabal working resolutely to destroy the homeland. A more radical nostalgia is not driven by this belief.³³ It knows that no conspiracies are needed to explain what has happened to the world under disaster capitalism.³⁴

Outside the Straight and Narrow

Just as we should rethink the idea of home, we must also rethink time. Time doesn't flow forward to an inevitable endpoint. It's constantly being folded, wadded up, torn, and bent, as Michel Serres pointed out. There is certainly a danger to time's uncanny ability to smuggle into the present the retrograde ideologies of the past, but others have recognized

the potential of jettisoning the clock, a process that begins by interrogating “time and its influence in ordering life.”³⁵ Rethinking the standard trajectory of time — clock time, lifetimes — will prime us to feel new shades of nostalgia.

The standard, linear conception of time is pivotal in producing what feminist scholar Alison Kafer calls compulsory nostalgia. Compulsory nostalgia is driven by the “cultural expectation” that one must yearn for a “before” version of oneself in order to be “permitted to exist as part of a desired present or a desirable future.”³⁶ Kafer’s examples of compulsory nostalgia are the questions disabled people are often asked: “Wouldn’t you rather be cured? Wouldn’t you like to be as you were before? Wouldn’t you prefer to be nondisabled?”³⁷ Forcing disabled people to yearn for a nondisabled self, imagined or not, splits them into before and after selves, when they really occupy “both the before and the after at once.”³⁸

Compulsory nostalgia traps disabled people in what she refers to as “curative time,” where they wait for the day to be cured and restored to their former selves, thus also curing the nostalgia. But Kafer argues for “crip time” instead, a reorientation to time that “bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.”³⁹ Crip time doesn’t forget about the future (there *must* be a future, a livable future) but it “imagin[es] different futures and temporalities [that] might help us see, and do, the present differently.”⁴⁰ To the ableist majority, disability is often seen as a failure, something that must be cured for the future to realize itself, so that there won’t be disability anymore.⁴¹ Instead, we must reconsider the very idea of failure in the present by acknowledging “the crip pasts behind us or the crip presents surrounding us,” because “these

very pasts and presents are what make articulating a critical crip futurity so essential.”⁴²

Crip time, Kafer points out, is also queer time: bent, odd, not “straight time,” which flows in a linear direction through past, present, and future.⁴³ Straight time is “foundational in the production of normalcy.”⁴⁴ People are supposed to follow certain paths, meet certain goals in a specific order, and clearly demarcate past from present from future. You go to school, get a job, marry, bear and raise children, retire, and die. Queer cultures, on the other hand, have long lived according to “strange temporalities,” as Jack Halberstam has argued.⁴⁵ These are queer times.⁴⁶ Time feels very much out of joint — a queer experience indeed, as is feeling nostalgia. A Union soldier in the Civil War, choking up with nostalgia when Union bands would play “Home, Sweet Home,” said it best: “I don’t like to hear it for it makes me feel queer.”⁴⁷ Union armies ultimately banned its performance. There would be no queer feelings, no falling out of straight time, but only an order from the top brass to march straight forward into the blazing, deafening cannonade of the future.

But things only got queerer. The rise of capitalism knocked time out of time, causing competing nostalgias to jockey for the final word on the past. Normative elites have tried to drain nostalgia of its queer potential, but nostalgia has always been a little queer, as Nishant Shahani points out in his book *Queer Retrosexualities*. Shahani admits that the past for queer folks is “traumatic... [and] marked by shame, exile, and persecution.”⁴⁸ But it is also a shared past, rife with what he sees as “reparative possibilities... for queer thinking.”⁴⁹ Gilad Padva agrees, writing that nostalgia has the potential to “glorif[y] yesterday’s successes, victories, struggles, braveness,

and devotedness and... stimulate reconsideration of the past *and* the future."⁵⁰ It can be "subversive" for those who are locked "out of the straight and narrow" and a survival tactic for communities under assault.⁵¹

Shahani admits that relying on nostalgia in these subversive, reparative ways is a "controversial notion, since it can easily slip into a pathologizing narrative of internalized oppression of minority groups."⁵² But as Dan Vena points out, some folks can't help but feel nostalgia for what might have been, but wasn't. He writes about his own childhood, when he was assigned female at birth, and his love of Superman comics, which to many adults at the time just looked like he was going through a tomboy phase. But Vena's nostalgia isn't the paradigmatic kind that "align[s] nostalgia with a linear trajectory of time that moves ever forward, thus abandoning the possibility of return," but rather a yearning for the freedom of childhood, when he could "momentarily forget or dismiss the inevitable experience of womanhood." He notes that this yearning still makes him painfully aware that, as a trans man, he never got to experience a "socially sanctioned boyhood." He goes on:

... the nostalgic experience is one that is literally written onto my body; carved into each surgical scar is my understanding of home, of a body that can legitimize my gender. However, during my ongoing transition, I have also realized that I will never acquire the cis body I long for. In a sense, the nostalgic experience becomes my own personal kryptonite. It wounds, just as it harms Superman, through the realization that we have been deprived of something incredibly meaningful. For me it is my home body; for Superman it is his home planet. I (as well as other trans folks) and Superman are both

thus held to the mercy of time and memory, haunted by a specter of a past we could (never) have had.⁵³

It's a sentiment shared by many who transition later in life, who mourn lost childhoods and even lost adulthoods. Journalist Katelyn Burns has written about her yearning for "the everyday experiences of girlhood" that she missed, including her high school prom. "What is meant to be a cultural hallmark of American adolescence became a panic-attack-inducing ordeal for a closeted trans girl like me," she writes. "The chance to have experienced prom as my true self — as Katelyn — is now long gone."⁵⁴ Thomas Page McBee points out that the grief felt by some trans people, the "grief of a childhood that never was," often conjures up nostalgic fantasies of a childhood "full of love and light that could have been." But, he notes, facing this grief of a past that wasn't is crucially important, because it orients us towards the future. "In an ideal world, that's what we would do with our pasts — sublimate them into better futures," he writes.⁵⁵

The dominant understanding of time as linear can convince us that history is long gone, that progress happens for us all, that we all move forward into who we want to be, and that disgusting ideologies shouldn't be around anymore. ("This is the twenty-first century, after all!" they say.) And linear time exacerbates the ache of nostalgia. If time moves in a straight line, then there is no going back, so the nostalgia just festers. The more reactionary strains of nostalgia rely on this pastness of the past. But many of us know the past isn't really that far away. It continues to burst into the present. In fact, we carry the past, even the darker chapters, with us in the present, so it isn't totally gone forever. This means we can consult the past to chart a path to those better futures Thomas Page McBee

writes about. But if we believe the past is really far away, then we'll yearn hopelessly for it, reaching across the gulf of time for something we feel is gone forever.

Yet not every dark chapter of the past gets closed for good. Marginalized populations know this well. They continue to be subject to the past's intolerances, determined by past data, and coerced by old prejudices, which percolate into the present, as Serres noted. Are we really to believe that the "good old days" hearkened back to by demagogues is that far away? For so many, those days of intolerance never went away. Reactionary leaders love to induce nostalgia for the homeland in order to justify atrocious acts and garner support for them. In the process, some of their supporters believe they're inching their way back to the golden years of exploitation, when, in fact, the exploitation never stopped. It merely took new shapes.

All histories are written from a perspective, and very often that perspective privileges the victors. Victors of history have to perpetuate the straight and narrow understanding of time in order to justify progress and bury their crimes against humanity in the desert of the past. But victors above all know that time isn't linear, because they can fold it on itself whenever they want to bring back the jingoistic ideologies everyone thought had died.

A Present That Can Breed Futures

After moving to Montana in the 1850s, Frank Linderman developed a relationship with Plenty Coups, the last chief of the Crow Nation, who agreed to tell Linderman his life story. But there was one part of his life Plenty Coups refused to elaborate. "I can think back and tell you much more of war and horse-stealing," he told Linderman. "But when the

buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." Plenty Coups said no more to Linderman about the disappearance of the buffalo beyond this final word: "Besides... you know that part of my life as well as I do. You saw what happened to us when the buffalo went away."⁵⁶

In his book on radical hope, Jonathan Lear states that Plenty Coups was a "witness to the breakdown of happenings," and not just "an old chief nostalgic for a bygone past."⁵⁷ But wasn't he also nostalgic? Plenty Coups "live[d] through a collapse of civilization" and "may thus help us to better understand one of life's remoter but significant possibilities" — that is, the end of one's world.⁵⁸ One would likely feel nostalgic bearing witness to such a cataclysm. Did that not also fuel Plenty Coups' radical hope?

If "[r]ebellion requires an emotional intelligence," as Chris Hedges writes, then let us not forget about the emotion of nostalgia.⁵⁹ It is obviously a powerful emotion, or else corporations wouldn't have commodified it. But nostalgia doesn't always have to support dangerous ideologies. One can buoy hope with nostalgia — radical hope even in the face of the breakdown of happenings, even when we know the cards are stacked against us. We must think beyond the simple idea that nostalgia is an essentially reactionary emotion, that we can live without it. Only the truly privileged, the ones who have never endured loss, can say they've never felt nostalgic.

This is something corporations and leaders have long known. Disney and Facebook know just how nostalgic people can be, as do politicians running for elected office. They aren't interested in beating the nostalgia out of us. They know the emotion is quite good at collecting votes, attracting clicks, gathering data, and selling products. They're willing to

accommodate our nostalgia, even fanning its flames of longing so that we'll consume and click. They know that repatriation, a full return home, won't cure anyone's nostalgia. So they keep the public in a low-level nostalgic state — just enough to hold our attention, but not so much as to distress us. However, it's clear that in the twenty-first century, maximizing nostalgic feelings around the clock to direct the public's attention isn't healthy for the public. It merely makes our justified nostalgic feelings in the aftermath of traumatic events even worse. And it puts us in a steady state of anxiety, fearing that something else — our nation, our loved ones, our way of life — will disappear or change. No one can readily live day to day in a heightened state of nostalgia without wanting some kind of relief, be it a turn to the future or a return to the past.

We shouldn't reject nostalgia outright, but we should be aware when our emotions are being manipulated to benefit some faceless corporation, or a demagogue. We can uncover certain truths about the past to counter the blatant nostalgic appeals of strongmen and plutocrats, but this is a much different exercise than trying to eliminate nostalgia forever. No one can engineer nostalgia out of existence by giving everyone a reality check. Like any emotion, nostalgia is appropriate in some contexts and dangerous in others. We're always consuming a past that isn't completely our own, that isn't a perfect representation of what really happened and that may never fully satisfy us. The question is: which pasts are we consuming? And who benefits from the consumption?

Right now, across the world, there are nostalgic quests underway to protect the homelands of industrialized countries. Particularly in the West, ideological divides are widening as leaders hold firmly to the belief that the Anglo homeland is at risk of falling to bands of outsiders. And yet this brand

of nostalgic nationalism will do nothing but barricade the borders of the West into one long detention center, while the Global North fracks its way to extinction, disembedding the poor across the world from their homes. Confronting these nostalgic vigilantes at their barbed-wire checkpoints requires the firm belief that, as climate justice collective The Wretched of the Earth declares, "Migration is a right and not something you are forced to do because your home is inhospitable."⁶⁰ Just as we should be free to move, we also have a right to settle where we are without the fear of forced displacement. Acknowledging this starts by ending the fortification of homelands with fencing and border walls and giving attention instead to the roots, which must be nurtured in the name of climate justice, not dug up.⁶¹

And we also have a right to our nostalgia. Capitalism shouldn't be in the business of manipulating emotions, forcing us to feel compulsory nostalgia, to yearn for the "right" pasts. Racial justice requires fighting for the right to our memories, which are constantly at risk of revision by the Lost Cause nostalgia concretized in statues and memorials everywhere. But there can be no racial justice until the long night of militarism ends. The West, and the US in particular, has mobilized every resource in the name of one goal: to replace global peace relations with defense measures and regime changes. The rhetoric of homeland security justifies the military presence in countries across the world as a preemptive strategy to protect the homeland, but this is merely smoke and mirrors. Military occupation in the twenty-first century is a tactic to expand the fossil fuel, defense, and surveillance industries. As a result, the US has become a perma-war culture, and the wars are waged at home and in countries around the world. Anytime a society calls on its citizens to make the patriotic pledge and

support the cause for war, even when they don't take up arms themselves, even when they are asked to defend the homeland from their living room, that society will buckle under the weight of nostalgia.

Our strategy against these reactionary strains of nostalgia shouldn't be to embrace any future offered to us, no questions asked. The people, not the power, must be in charge of imagining futures alternative to the ones promised by Big Tech. The movements against Big Tech are fueled partly by a nostalgia for a time — imagined or otherwise — when people weren't understood best through data. There is something in humans that is irreducible to data, variables, and parameters, even though worshippers of technology like to think otherwise. Technocrats are fascinated by the supposed purity of numbers, which informs their models and predictions, but in reality, no one can predict the future. Only those circling within the closed loop of computational thinking can believe in such a myth. Data alone cannot open up the same possibilities that our emotions can, but data *does* perpetuate the reign of capitalism, which survives by reducing everything to numbers in order to determine and predict what will sell.

"The idea that society can be divided between tear-streaked reactionaries besotted with the past and flint-eyed radicals staring into the future, has run its time," Alastair Bonnett tells us.⁶² Indeed, we must be "Janus-faced," just like nostalgia itself.⁶³ To go forward into a future that isn't determined by wealth or algorithm, we need to ache for the past now and then.

Milan Kundera claimed that we will never come to terms with being human until we understand this truth about memory: "a reality no longer is what it was when it was; it cannot be reconstructed."⁶⁴ But a reality can be yearned for.

The past is teeming with lost realities, some of which may be helpful in working towards a present that can "breed futures," as Audre Lorde wrote.⁶⁵ After all, the future will arrive whether or not we can predict it, and without a collective, egalitarian vision, someone far more powerful may usher it in for us. If we're already looking back, we owe it to the future to scan beyond the horizon, to search the remote regions of the past where the visionaries huddled in the margins, whispering dreams of a better world, drawing plans to make it happen. Deep in those hidden spaces is where you'll find the future.