

# *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*

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*Volume 5, Issue 1*

2004

*Article 2*

NOSTALGIA

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## Introduction: Nostalgia

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# Introduction: Nostalgia

**Sean Scanlan**

Nostalgia keeps on returning. The Romantics were nostalgic. The Victorians were, of course, nostalgic. And even those modernist artists and critics, those make-it-new avant-gardists were nostalgic. They were nostalgic for a tradition and an individual talent, they wished for social relations and architectural structures that were as simple as they were during feudalism—they wanted feudalism without the plague and the serfdom. Theirs was nostalgia for a time before power corrupted art, a longing for a time and place that never existed. They wished for antiseptic designs and images that avoided representations of the recent past, yet harkened back to the Greeks. They wanted Athens minus the slavery.

Forward to our own recent past, when cultural critics examined what they saw as postmodern nostalgia's inherent conservatism and its distance from real history, as, for instance, in the case of the heritage industry. Manifestations of nostalgia were critiqued and analyzed along two compatible, nearly parallel, lines: nostalgia abused individual and collective memory and nostalgia problematized the relations between producers and consumers. Either way, nostalgia was simply bad, bad, bad. But nostalgia was not, and is not, simple. It can cross several registers simultaneously. It can be felt culturally or individually, directly or indirectly. Indeed, cultural critics are beginning to understand that nostalgia is always complicated—complicated in what it looks like, how it works, upon whom it works, and even who works on it. The many worthwhile theories and critiques of nostalgia written over the past three decades show the long shadow that nostalgia casts, but postmodernism's negative critique only partially illuminates its various links to memory, history, affect, media, and the marketplace, only partially accounts for

nostalgia's continuing power.

In current work, nostalgia is no longer the programmatic equivalent of bad memory, and the uses and limits of important theories from the 1990s are being reconsidered. Can we continue to consider nostalgia as the symptom/cause of the rifts between historical signifiers and their signifieds (Jameson), or as a social disease (Stewart), or as the abdication of memory (Lasch)? Or is there a new definition for nostalgia? And does it include room for the above theories that so importantly outlined the connection between nostalgia and ideology? One of the goals of this issue is to answer these very questions, but the essays that follow suggest that nostalgia has an uncanny ability to exceed any constraining definition. Nostalgia is a supplementary term in the Derridean sense, but is it a replacement or a substitute for the important terms that inform it: memory or history or forgetting? Paul Ricoeur says that forgetting "remains the disturbing threat that lurks in the background of the phenomenology of memory and the epistemology of history" (412). Like forgetting, nostalgia also has the property of meandering away from the truthful, historical, or the precise, which is why many late twentieth-century critiques describe it as connoting a mistake or an evasion. In current criticism, however, nostalgia as warning, as pejorative marker of certain historical changes, has given way to nostalgia as a more ambivalent, more engaged, critical frame. Now, nostalgia may be a style or design or narrative that serves to comment on how memory works. Rather than an end reaction to yearning, it is understood as a technique for provoking a secondary reaction.

Obsessing about the past is nothing new. What is interesting, though, is that critics themselves are often nostalgically inclined. Linda Hutcheon points out that Jameson's "own rhetoric and position can . . . at times sound strangely nostalgic" because of his repeated yearning for "genuine historicity" and his claim that we have lost the "lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (203). Why do critics fall under the spell of nostalgia? One possible answer is that nobody escapes the long shadow of yearning for a way of thinking. More precisely, Hutcheon answers the question by borrowing Hayden White's term "transideological" to claim that nostalgia "can be made to 'happen' by (and to) anyone of any political persuasion" (199). But there is something else at work here in terms of our critical perspectives of nostalgia. Andreas Huyssen says that "history in a certain canonical form may be delegitimized as far as its core pedagogical and philosophical mission is concerned, but the seduction of the archive and its trove of stories of human achievement and suffering has never been stronger"(5). The phrase "the seduction of the archive" deserves a moment of reflection. Does that which was created by memory seduce us? Of course. How else can something be placed into the archive if not through the procedures of memory? Nostalgia is also part of the seducing nature of what things from the past mean. It occupies the liminal ground between history qua history and the procedures of memory. Put as a question: is archival research a nostalgic seduction? How then do critics read culture in terms of two asymmetrical relations—the relation of history to memory and the relation of analysis to feelings such as nostalgia? We know that studies and theories of nostalgia commonly propose that, somehow, memory and history

are separate categories of thought—the former a system of retrieval, the latter a discourse on retrieval—and that nostalgia is the sorry cousin of various ways of retrieving a memory. But the essays in this collection continue to press against this over-simplified way of differentiating complex phenomena.

This issue of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* shows that nostalgia may be as important in criticism as it is in the social sphere. The following essays share a suspicion of previous conceptualizations of nostalgia and of certain theoretical heuristics in cultural studies. They also share an attention to cultural reactions, to not just the objects of nostalgia, but to the history of nostalgia as well. They note that nostalgia can be for many things, such as an earlier stage of life, a landscape, a sound, or a narrative, and that nostalgia can be of many different kinds. From the yearning for home in *The Odyssey* to Johannes Hofer's 1688 *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia* to the present, nostalgia has been connected to notions of loss and cure. In these essays, however, the sufferer of nostalgia need no longer have lost anything. He or she may merely yearn for a past style or be affected by a retro song. Not home, but national or even global marketing is the inciting cause.

In the following essays history, film, popular music, African-American, Russian, and American Indian literature become entry points into examinations that reappropriate all the terms and histories of nostalgia at our disposal. We open with Marcos Piason Natali's "History and the Politics of Nostalgia." By charting a path through Kant, Hegel, and primarily Marx, Natali follows the transformation of nostalgia "as it became a term employed to charge attachment to and affect for the past with being both politically reprehensible and empirically untenable." Kant's belief that humanity was "unmistakably progressing" and Hegel's notion of humanity's "impulse of perfectibility" were ideas that were considered unfavorable, even radical, to those in power, to those who wanted power relations to remain stable. Marx also believed that the world was moving toward a more just society and that to continue to do so, the past must be left behind: "Let the dead bury the dead." But Marx was responding to two ideas: the failed 1848 revolution, which proved that the past cannot be repeated, and the notion that what was wrong with the present was that there were too many old ideas infecting present and future possibilities for social justice. These strands, says Natali, show that "it is only after historiography becomes the dominant means of approaching the past that nostalgia may be faulted for its inaccuracy." Against this historical framework, Natali then notes Freud's work on nostalgia, melancholia, and forgetting, in which he argues that melancholics (and nostalgics) suffer from the irreparable gulf between past and present. Natali believes that between these two views of the past lies a new conceptual territory that refuses to reduce the study of the past to either blind faithfulness or teleological dismissal.

Amelia DeFalco's "A Double-Edged Longing: Nostalgia, Melodrama, and Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven*" examines what it means for a current film to draw from the 1950s genre of the melodramatic "woman's weepie." According to DeFalco, Haynes's film intertextually relies on Douglas Sirk's 1950s films (especially his 1955 film *All That Heaven Allows*), which privilege mimesis of representation—the domestic sphere—and downplay external reality. Indeed, the visual becomes hyper-

visual in that “aesthetic and narrative referentiality produces a particularized text, one that unabashedly longs for past styles and invests in the careful reproduction of aesthetic surfaces.” Rather than using past styles in order to conjure a simple nostalgia for a filmic type, Haynes “confronts the ‘danger’ of nostalgia head-on, acknowledging and exploiting the confusion of actual and imaginary lost objects to create a purely cinematic revisit of the past that calls these categories [melodrama and nostalgia] into question.” The hypervisual nature of this technique emphasizes the problems of the simulacral and the historical past. By torquing the image of home via unreal color saturation and spotless sets, Haynes shows the impossibility of locating an actual home—one that is not mere imitation. DeFalco counters Jameson’s pathologized nostalgia and Hutcheon’s “debilitating nostalgia,” because both “dismiss the possibility of a productive nostalgia.” Haynes’s stylized representations help raise the question of how melodrama’s emphasis on feeling over thinking changes the oppositional pairing of new forms/old ideas to old forms/new ideas. The re-use of outdated filmmaking modes and the excessive emotional display in *Far From Heaven* force viewers into an “intellectualized spectatorship” that seems to deny any priority of emotional affectation. Particularly compelling is DeFalco’s conclusion that Haynes’s film raises social issues, such as racism and homophobia, to the level of textual device. In this way, both artificial representation and the construction of socio-historic issues point to probing questions: what does the real past look like? And what behavior is natural when emotional pain is inflicted?

David Sigler’s “‘Funky Days Are Back Again’: Reading Seventies Nostalgia in Late-Nineties Rock Music” is a close reading of popular music—the lyrics, sounds, videos, and cover art that attend the music. Casting off the nets of reductive readings based on symptomatic psychoanalysis and commodification, Sigler proposes that critics “learn to let the desire of the commodity speak and to recognize its uncanny effects.” One problem that seems to remain in nostalgia studies is that theorists tend to compartmentalize cultural nostalgia when it seems to evade simple typologies. For example, Sigler notes that categories such as Fred Davis’s “orders of nostalgia,” Jameson’s nostalgia “mood” and “mode,” and Svetlana Boym’s “reflective” and “restorative” nostalgia are all helpful, but they are limiting when it comes to pop music. The reason for this is that the core tension at work in certain songs by Wilco, U2, Neil Young, Cornershop, The Tragically Hip, and Beck is a desire to participate in and resist postmodern nostalgia simultaneously. These artists engage in nostalgia knowingly and play with the concepts of millennial change and lost objects of desire in a way that goes beyond the notion of detached historical signifiers. Sigler says that it would be wrong to “decry the nostalgic pop culture commodity as insincere simply because it flattens out history,” for these songs are not trying to be history. These songs are ambivalent and uncanny. They exceed the lost time and place of the Seventies and show that the mechanics of nostalgia must also exceed the discourse of commodity. Just as nostalgia is being remade or even renewed in pop music, so too must the ways in which critics of nostalgia examine lost or rediscovered objects of desire.

The next three essays by Maureen McKnight, Natalie Friedman, and Jennifer

Ladino examine the relations between trauma, assimilation, and nostalgia through literary examples. In "'Scarcely in the Twilight of Liberty': Empathic Unsettlement in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*," McKnight uses Boym's concept of restorative and reflective nostalgia in order to examine nostalgia's management of the dislocation so palpable in post-Civil War culture, especially African-American culture. The post-Civil War era saw the mutually enforcing ideologies of nationalism, industrialism, and white supremacy encourage a sort of historical amnesia, especially in the South. This historical amnesia informed the romantic Lost Cause ideology that emerged in the 1880s, and through personal memories, civic monuments, and restorative nostalgic literature, it was made more concrete. McKnight argues that Chesnutt works through the trauma of the Civil War, its causes, and its aftermath in a way that challenges both the Lost Cause mythology and readers' racialized, amnesiac memories. The storyteller in *The Conjure Woman* is Julius McAdoo, a former slave and expert rhetor who simultaneously is able to entertain, titillate, and disturb. Julius elicits different responses from his interlocutors, John and Annie, and their responses raise questions about the role of the reader in terms of critical nostalgia and sympathy. Dominic LaCapra calls this sort of barrier to harmony in an account of an extreme event "empathic unsettlement," and in Chesnutt's handling of the frame narration the ideal reader is given a glimpse of the "intensely human inner life of slavery." McKnight's insightful reading of the stories in *The Conjure Woman* points to new ways of situating the problematic relationship between conjuring (as fantasy, as parable, and as storytelling) and reflective nostalgia. This reflective nostalgia rewrites traumas of race by bringing the present-past to bear on the future of racialized memories in a way that is both reparative and critically engaged.

In "Nostalgia, Nationhood, and the New Immigrant Narrative: Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* and the Post-Soviet Experience," Friedman examines a trend in recent post-Soviet novels, in which the classical literary trope of immigrant assimilation is reversed. In the new immigrant novel assimilation is countered through nostalgia for a former homeland, where pleasure comes from remembering or reminiscing. Boym identifies the pre-perestroika immigrant experience as old-fashioned exile without return. But with the removal of the Iron Curtain, new immigrants are free to travel back and forth, and this ability to return is at the heart of the new immigrant experience of melancholy memorializing captured in Shteyngart's novel. *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* examines an odd sort of nostalgia that impels Vladimir, the Russian immigrant, to a complex, liminal expatriate position—he is neither at home nor quite banished. Friedman suggests that what is new in this sort of nostalgic experience is that Vladimir feels connected to nationalist brainwashing. Friedman situates Shteyngart's novel between Boym's homeless nostalgia, in which one's place of residence and place of origin are polarized, and Jameson's stylistic nostalgia, in which the fictional city of Prava is a simulacrum of a European city. For Friedman, neither Shteyngart nor his fictional double can cure themselves of nostalgia through the pressure to assimilate. Identity is continually changed, not replaced. The new immigrant novel shows that nostalgia may turn the immigrant toward a lost past and ironically (once nostalgia is

indulged) may drive the immigrant toward the “next level of achievement or dissatisfaction,” because there is no necessary relationship between memories of the past and present desires. There are, however, changed relationships in the era of permeable borders and globalism.

Using the concept of counter-nostalgia, Ladino shows that assimilation for American Indians was (and is) just as complexly linked to the problem of home or homeland and the desire for a better life as are Russian assimilation problems. But in the case of Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical stories, the key question is what is the cost of western civilization on the identity of a non-westerner? While new Russian immigrant novels focus on shifting global borders, Ladino’s “Longing for Wonderland: Nostalgia for Nature in Post-Frontier America” shows that American Indians focus on the borders of nature and civilization, of self and other. Methodologically, the effort is to avoid filing Zitkala-Ša’s literary nostalgia as either conservative or progressive by using a blend of Boym’s restorative and reflective nostalgia and Andreea Deciu Ritivoi’s concept of “the breach” to build her concept of counter-nostalgia. Counter-nostalgia “depends upon a tactical reappropriation” of the totalizing metanarratives of “official” nostalgia; it revises and blurs both official history and readers’ emotions. In order to prove the close association of official and counter-nostalgia, Ladino first establishes how the National Park Service came to represent a national and thus official nostalgia for nature. Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* inverts this official narrative, humanizes American Indians, and questions the “presumed benefits of assimilating to white American culture.” Critics often comment on Zitkala-Ša’s nostalgia as an effect of trying to deal with the loss of her natural home while in the homogenizing Carlisle School, but Ladino argues that nostalgia is the mechanism through which her “stories achieve their counter-hegemonic effects.” The chapter “The Big Red Apple” exemplifies counter-nostalgia by rewriting the Garden of Eden origin story and reversing Turner’s frontier narrative. Instead of moving from East to West, Zitkala-Ša travels from West to East—the land of abundance. In her exile, she drifts into perpetual homesickness that aligns “readers with the story’s political critique.” White civilization’s version of freedom becomes inverted to represent just the opposite: assimilation captures and snuffs out an individual’s sense of “wild freedom.”

The essays in this collection exhibit a move toward what cultural studies does best: it helps us to question the relationships between, among, and inside cultures. A nostalgic image may be eidetic or it may be blurry. Its objects or catalysts can be ineffable, forever lost, maddeningly not there, or uncannily never-was. Nostalgia is often secondary or epiphenomenal, yet it can also be Proustian and epiphanic, generative and creative. Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” contains his vision of the angel of history—based on Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus”—in which the angel’s face is “turned toward the past,” while a storm from Paradise “irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned” (257-258). Benjamin is right to call this storm progress, but he does not describe what the angel might be feeling while looking toward the past. The angel of history, these essays suggest, is nostalgic.

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