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## Nostalgia's Violence

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*This essay considers some of the ways in which nostalgia figures in contemporary social theory as well as addresses the post/modern character of nostalgia. It does so with the aim of exploring the question of colonial and imperial violence at the heart of nostalgia.*

In different ways, repetition and imitation engage the question of historicity as well as that of representation, which are both at the core of Fredric Jameson's understanding of postmodernity (1988).<sup>1</sup> When considering historicity and representation in relation to contemporary cultural formations, the pervasiveness of nostalgia is noteworthy. Contemporary scholarship on nostalgia, and we have indeed witnessed a growing scholarly interest in nostalgia in the last decades (Boym 2001; Naqvi 2007; Bonnet 2010), situates nostalgia as a distinctly modern phenomenon. Or in Natali's terms, "an idea dependent on a way of worlding that is distinctive to modernity" (Natali 10). This modern quality of nostalgia can be approached in various ways; it can be considered in terms of time and as a particular relation to the past. Nostalgia is a disease of the modern age, Svetlana Boym argues, precisely because it is the result of a new understanding of time and space tied up with the formation of modernity. More precisely, it is dependent on a modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time (Boym 10-13). Nostalgia can also be approached as an affect. It breeds, as Alistair Bonnet argues, on a particular kind of alienation engendered by modernity (Bonnet).<sup>2</sup> In this essay I briefly consider some ways in which nostalgia figures in contemporary social theory as well as address the modern character of nostalgia in order to explore the question of violence at the heart of nostalgia.

Arguably the most well-known account linking nostalgia to contemporary culture, or more accurately to postmodernism, is Jameson's seminal discussion of the cultural logic of late capitalism (1984). Jameson is interested in understanding the changing nature of capitalism, and, more precisely, in mapping out how transformations in capitalist modes of production relate to new forms of cultural production. He understands postmodernism as late capitalism's "cultural logic," or "the inner truth" of a newly emerging social order of late capitalism. Nostalgia, both as an affect and a relation to the past, emerges as a topic in Jameson's thought at the intersection of his concerns with historicity, the politics of representation and processes of commodification. Postmodern consumer societies, Jameson argues, might be "incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience" and hence unable of focusing on the present ("Consumer Society" 20). At the same time, they also seem condemned to live in a perpetual present, as they are marked by a loss of the capacity to retain their past ("Consumer Society" 28). This contorted relation to the present is not so much paradoxical as it is symptomatic for the disappearance of a sense of history in postmodern society. Jameson's understanding of nostalgia speaks of the way in which our cultural predicament is characterised by a kind of historical amnesia, which in turn transforms the very understanding of

what is “present.” Such a condition, he believes, is “an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history” (“Consumer Society” 20). This fragmentation of time into perpetual presents is affiliated with a second feature of postmodern culture, the transformation of reality into images. Cultural production has been driven back inside the mind, and fails to “look directly out of its eyes at the real world” (20). Thus the culture of late capitalism becomes analogous to the play of mental images on the walls of Plato’s cave (20); a play Baudrillard understands as simulation, in which a sign is not exchanged for meaning but for another sign. As a result, in post-1968 culture and society meaning is replaced with fascination, the implosion of meaning, and nostalgia. Or in Baudrillard’s words, “[w]hen the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (6).

Jameson’s account of this “terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself” ties nostalgia to commodification, or the transformation of time and images into commodities as they pass through the market (“Consumer Society 20). Along the way, the past is reinvented and captured within modern terms, which results in historical amnesia marked by a nostalgic sense of loss. Jameson leaves no shred of doubt about the fact that the nostalgic inclination of the cultural logic of our times is a “terrible indictment,” as it boils down to the failure of the new, and hence implies a kind of imprisonment in the past, which effectively dooms us to pastiche. If history is founded on nostalgia, Jameson suggests, it ignores the movement it is making forward. Nostalgia forces postmodernism to incessantly look backwards.

What does it imply then, to understand nostalgia as part of the post/modern condition? Boym (2001) seeks to tease this out, as she argues that nostalgia shares symptoms with melancholia and hypochondria, yet its cultural and historic specificity prevents its conflation with these conditions. The modern birth of nostalgia can be traced to the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who coined the term in a dissertation published in 1688 in which he examines a painful and disabling yearning to return home.<sup>3</sup> Hofer had tried out other terms to describe this condition, such as *nostomania* and *philopatridomania*, but settled on a combination of the Greek *nostos* (homecoming, returning home, that figures in many Homeric writings and notably *The Odyssey*), and *algos*, a painful condition. Thus nostalgia came into this world as a medical disorder or condition, and more specifically to capture a conglomeration of symptoms including, according to Hofer, “despondency, melancholia, lability of emotion, including profound bouts of weeping, anorexia, and a general ‘wasting away’, and, not infrequently, attempts at suicide” (qtd. in Davis 1-2). In 1761, the course of the disease was described by the French physician Philippe Pinel as commencing with “a sad, melancholic appearance, a bemused look... an indifference toward everything” and proceeding to “the near impossibility of getting out of bed, and obstinate silence, the rejection of food and drink, emaciation, marasmus and death” (qtd. in Bonnet 5). The earliest English use of the term is found in 1770 and derives from Joseph Banks, botanist on James Cook’s *Endeavour*. Most of the crew, Banks wrote in his diary, is “now pretty far gone in the longing for home which the Physicians have done so far as to esteem a disease under the name of Nostalgia” (qtd. in Bonnet 5). It is striking that Hofer considered that a properly scientific term was lacking to identify what he insisted was a medical condition, and thus he

believed that it was appropriate to introduce a neologism. As Fred Davis points out, other terms were available at the time – the German *Heimweh*, the English *homesickness* and the French *mal du pays* – but seemingly Hofer (and others physicians in his wake) deemed those terms insufficient (2). If homesickness was an old, familiar sentiment, nostalgia was a new and disabling condition and indicated that something new was entering the world: a new way of feeling, or, a new way of thinking about an old feeling, as Natali puts it. As nostalgia was demedicalised and demilitarised, the semantic connection to homesickness began to weaken and nostalgia was not necessarily understood as literal homesickness, but rather as a more general yearning for the past (Davis). Hence a significant shift occurred in the object of longing, a shift from place to time. Nostalgia came to refer to the sentimentalisation of the past, to common-place feelings of loss, yearning and attachment (Bonnett).

Nostalgia's birth story draws attention to a dimension that appears at the heart of this modern affect, yet often in a disavowed manner: the question of violence. We can argue that violence plays an important role in the genealogy of nostalgia as a sentiment, or, as Nauman Naqvi puts it, the authority of nostalgia relies on a remarkably violent set of epistemological and institutional histories (3). Nostalgia's entry into the world was a forceful one, as it was part of the business of medical categorisation. Moreover, the medical practice Hofer and others after him engaged in was a specific one, i.e. within the military. When writing on nostalgia, Hofer was examining the conditions of Swiss mercenaries fighting far from their native lands in the legions of European despots. The military context seems all but incidental: several authors have considered the military expeditions at the birth of modern warfare, and more generally the processes of destruction inherent in modernity's formation, as constitutive of a modern sense of nostalgia (see e.g. Rosaldo 1989 or Naqvi 2007).

This context of warfare, moreover, is qualified in terms of colonialism and imperialism. Renato Rosaldo's account of "imperialist nostalgia" helps us to explore this point. In an interrogation of cultural productions ranging from films produced in the West about the colonial era to the practices of anthropology and ethnography, Rosaldo argues that agents of colonialism often display nostalgia for colonised cultures as they were "traditionally," that is when they first encountered them (107). This is a peculiar yearning, he stresses, as these agents long for the very forms of life they have intentionally altered or destroyed. Thus nostalgia involves mourning the passing of what one has transformed, and is often found in conditions of imperialism (108). The trope of the "vanishing savage" is pervasive in modern culture as well as in anthropology as a discipline; it is indeed part of what renders *les tropiques* so *tristes*. A longing for "pastoral pasts" accompanies the very act of destruction which colonisation implies (115). Thus "imperialist nostalgia" revolves around the following paradox: a person kills somebody and then mourns his or her victim (108). Imperialist nostalgia, Rosaldo argues, belongs to the *mission civilisatrice*: "imperialist nostalgia occurs alongside a peculiar sense of mission, the white man's burden, where civilised nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones" (108). In this vein we might even ask whether imperialist nostalgia also contains a longing *for* violence, the violence of the "savage other," which is invoked again and again, to be contained by civilisation? In any case, nostalgic longing animates a representational economy in which supposedly static premodern societies become a stable reference point for Western civilised

society. The yearning for such stable worlds, Rosaldo suggests, is produced by modernisation, and subsequently these stable worlds are projected on to the past, on to “other” cultures, or on to the conflation of both.<sup>4</sup> Somewhere along the way “authenticity” is born.

Rosaldo’s account puts violence at heart of nostalgia: it is precisely the conditions of imperialism, and the destruction of livelihoods of the colonised, that unleash the sentiment of nostalgia. Violence, we could argue, might indeed be constitutive of nostalgia, as it is innate to abrupt transformations of livelihoods, which in turn give rise to nostalgic longings. Yet while such longing emerges from violence and destruction, a disavowal of violence occurs at the heart of nostalgia, notably through its characteristic mode of innocence. Nostalgia breathes an air of innocence, not in the least through its pacification of the past. And the relatively benign character of most nostalgia facilitates imperialist nostalgia’s capacity to transform the responsible neo/colonial agent into an innocent bystander (Rosaldo 108). This innocence stems from the ways in which the agency of change is located in the passing of time rather than in the nostalgic subject, who is positioned as a mere bystander to change. As a result, Rosaldo argues, the nostalgia mode makes racial domination appear innocent and pure (107).

This innocence is never far from guilt. Paul Gilroy’s analysis of postcolonial melancholia is particularly useful in thinking their interaction. Colonial histories remain marginal and largely unacknowledged, Gilroy writes, while they continue to shape political life in Europe, surfacing only in the service of nostalgia and melancholia (2). Focusing on the UK, yet claiming relevance for other countries of Western Europe, Gilroy shows that since the Second World War, the British nation has been dominated by an inability to face, let alone actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige (90). Once the empire’s history became a source of discomfort, shame and perplexity, Gilroy argues, that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten. This failure to face and to mourn is what Gilroy calls “postimperial melancholia” in order to simultaneously underline this syndrome’s links with the past - postimperial melancholia builds on earlier patterns of imperial melancholy from which it makes a decisive break - as well as its pathological character (90).

While Gilroy writes more consistently of melancholia rather than nostalgia, Bonnett points out, and I believe rightly so, that the two terms largely overlap in his account and do much of the same work in this book (Bonnett 125). Yet it is the nostalgic nature of British culture, rather than its melancholia, which Gilroy engages and challenges. His understanding of melancholia is “adapted to Britain’s postcolonial conditions” (98), and takes distance from its Freudian sources in discussions of narcissism, group psychology, and bereavement. More specifically, Gilroy relies on the German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich and their interpretation of social, psychological and political behaviour in postwar West Germany, which sought to account for the German people’s melancholic reactions to Hitler’s death as well as the postwar demand of facing and working through the larger evil of which their love for him had been part. Faced with a sudden and radical loss of its moral legitimacy, the German nation warded off a collective process of mourning for what they had

loved and lost by means of a depressed reaction that inhibited any capacity for responsible reconstructive practice (Gilroy 98). Such a reconstructive practice, which would enable a country to comprehend its own history, is blocked by a sentiment of guilt, the Mitscherlichs suggested. This guilt entertains a fantasy of omnipotence, and melancholic reactions are subsequently prompted by “the loss of a fantasy of omnipotence” (Gilroy 99). The affiliation between nostalgia’s innocence and guilt, we could then argue, lies in supported fantasies of omnipotence.

Nostalgia, in sum, involves an intricate process of mystification of societal transformation. In this vein, we might consider nostalgia in terms of a Marxist understanding of fetishisation, as it obscures the conditions of production of the social. Most notably, it obscures the violence involved in this production. This violence, moreover, is overdetermined by the question of colonial relations and violence. I would therefore like to conclude with arguing in favour of re-centering discussions of nostalgia in the constitutive neo/colonial dimension of formation of post/modernity. This not only adds another layer of insight into nostalgia, but might also help to account for its importance in contemporary culture.

## Notes

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1. This essay draws from a research project I embarked upon as a visiting fellow at the Program of Critical Theory at UC Berkeley, sponsored by an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship, in the Autumn of 2011.
2. Nostalgia's affiliation with modernity is well-established, yet its relation to the modern remains deeply ambiguous. While born out of a modern world, and hence modern in its character, its sentimentalised yearning for a place or past long (or perhaps not so long) gone became systematically attributed to modernity's "others," i.e. to those groups inside and outside of Europe, that were considered "incompletely modernized," and were to "cling" to an older world as it was destroyed by a newer one. In political terms, and particularly from a left-wing vantage point, nostalgia rather consistently signals bad politics (Natali; Bonnett). As Bonnett argues in his investigation of a genealogy of repressed nostalgia within left-wing radicalism, nostalgia became situated as the antithesis of radicalism: emotions of yearning and loss were portrayed as embarrassing defects on the bright body of a movement associated with the celebration of the new and the youthful, and with its eyes directed to the future.
3. *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia*, first published in 1688 in Latin, and translated into English by Carolyn Anspach in 1934, in the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*.
4. Such forms of longing are closely related to secular notions of progress (Rosaldo 108), as we might argue that an evolutionary and linear understanding of progress produces them. Moreover, in contemporary conditions in Western Europe the secular itself has become the object of such longing, to the extent that we could speak of "secular nostalgia" (Bracke).

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