

# NOSTALGIA CRITIQUE<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Nostalgia is a widespread structure of feeling in Western modernity. While critique of nostalgia has tended to be hostile and dismissive, associating the phenomenon with dominant and conservative forces in society, this paper argues that nostalgia is a valuable way of approaching the past, important to all social groups. Acknowledging the diversity of personal needs and political desires to which nostalgia is a response, the critique offered here focusses on the limitations that the nostalgic structure of rhetoric may place on effective historical interpretation and action.

### **Keywords**

nostalgia, popular memory, historical consciousness

In a nostalgic mode...the referent is seen 'as an authentic origin or center from which to disparage the degenerate present'... Textual feminists subvert 'nostalgic rhetoric' by mining the past to discover play rather than place.

(Greene, 1991:305)

Unfortunately, feminist fiction of the sort I have described has passed with the seventies, as white women's fiction has participated in postfeminist retrenchments of the eighties. Lessing, Drabble, and Atwood continue to be concerned with many of the same issues, but they no longer envision the possibility of change.

(Greene, 1991:320)

In 'Feminist fiction and the uses of memory' (1991), in an argument that many of us will find intuitively convincing, Gayle Greene suggests that an opposition may be constructed between a liberating and progressive 'feminist' memory, on the one hand, and a reactionary and regressive nostalgia on the other. Feminist

memory, Greene argues, works to open up, confront, and challenge the voices and institutions of the past, and is therefore central to the projects of the women's movement: nostalgia, which always looks backwards in search of authentic origins and stable meanings, is directly obstructive to these projects. What makes Greene's essay particularly intriguing, then, is that it is itself less an example of the use of critical, playful feminist memory, than it is an example of the use of nostalgia.

Greene sees herself as writing in a period of decline, of 'collective amnesia', and of widespread passivity with respect to the women's movement. She is able to find inspiration by looking back to the feminist fiction of a lost and longed for earlier period—fiction in which (it now seems) the past was put into play, hierarchies were subverted, linguistic, logical, and social codes transgressed. Avoiding any critique or questioning of this literature's asserted aims and effective achievements, Greene is more interested in recuperating the period's activism and sense of possibility. Her rejection of nostalgia in favor of (feminist) memory is thus qualified, to say the least, by the use of her own nostalgia to revive and retrieve the critical playfulness and reflexiveness of that (now lost) feminist memory.

Hostile critiques, such as Greene's, dominate discussions of nostalgia. These critiques associate the phenomenon with dominant and conservative forces in society, and when they are not dismissing nostalgia for its sentimental weaknesses, they are usually attacking it for its distortions and misrepresentations. The inadequacies of such critiques reveal themselves clearly when faced with the actual use and importance of nostalgia in cases such as Greene's own response to a period of stasis and hesitation within the women's movement.

In order to develop more adequate critical discussion of nostalgia, the presence of multiple and different nostalgias among individuals and communities of social groups throughout Western modernity has to be acknowledged. Nostalgia responds to a diversity of personal needs and political desires. Nostalgic narratives may embody any number of different visions, values, and ideals. And, as a cultural resource or strategy, nostalgia may be put to use in a variety of ways. Once such heterogeneity is recognized, critique can then focus on both the openings and the limitations that nostalgia, as a general structure of feeling, may create for effective historical interpretation and action.

### **Problems of nostalgia critique**

Nostalgia, a 'structure of feeling' (in Raymond Williams's sense of the term (Williams, 1977)), invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world. The nostalgic subject turns to the past to find/ construct sources of identity, agency, or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present. The 'positively evaluated' past is approached as a source for something now perceived to be missing; but it need not be thought of as a time of general happiness, peacefulness, stability, or freedom.<sup>2</sup> Invoking the past, the nostalgic subject may be involved in escaping or evading, in critiquing, or in mobilizing to overcome the present experience of loss of identity, lack of agency, or absence of community. Some of the key tropes central to nostalgic rhetoric are the notion of a Golden Age and a subsequent Fall, the story of the Homecoming, and the pastoral.<sup>3</sup>

This basic value or function of nostalgia remains unacknowledged in much recent criticism of the phenomenon, criticism which tends to operate under the assumption that nostalgia is pathological, regressive, and delusional. 'The victim of nostalgia', as one critic puts it, 'is worse than a reactionary; he is an incurable sentimentalist' (Lasch, 1984:65).<sup>4</sup> Hostility towards nostalgia is fuelled in particular by the recurrent cooption of nostalgia by conservative, reactionary politics. Nostalgic invocation of English heritage functions on one level as an 'elitist, escapist perspective' that palliates present inequities and sanctifies traditional privileges (Lowenthal, 1989:25). Janice Doane and Devon Hodges have examined the ways in which 'nostalgic writers construct their visions of a golden past to authenticate woman's traditional place and to challenge the outspoken feminist criticisms of it' (1987:3). And James Combs (1993) writes of how Ronald Reagan was able to inspire nostalgic support for the destruction of the welfare state and the construction of a warfare state:

In the former domestic case, the nostalgic model had to be defended against the encroachments of organizational rationality that constitutes state intervention in the province of the personal, and in the latter foreign policy case, the portals of the Town had to be defended against these foreign forces, real or imagined, who would undermine its Edenic grace.

(Combs, 1993:135)

These critiques are both salutary and valid insofar as nostalgia, as a widespread structure of feeling, has inevitably been appropriated and invested in by reactionary politics. In many ways, nostalgia 'can be used for the political purpose of directing behavior into approved roles and politics into approved ends of power' (Combs, 1993:28).

The problem with such critiques is that they risk conflating nostalgia with its presence in, and use by, dominant and conservative groups. One has only to recall that nostalgia characterizes politics of both left and right in order to reject such a conflation: British labour invokes its own inheritance of a 'timeless national tradition' of peasant and worker revolt (Lowenthal, 1989:28); while in the United States, the 'back to nature' and 'back to basics' movements of the 1960s, themselves thoroughly nostalgic, in turn inspire nostalgia among radicals and liberals alike heading into the 1990s (Combs, 1993:135–43). From the 'seventeenth century Diggers to the Land Chartists and the radical labourers of our own time', writes Raymond Williams, 'the happier past was almost desperately insisted upon, but as an impulse to change rather than to ratify the actual inheritance' (1973:43).

Nostalgia approaches the past as a stable source of value and meaning; but this desire for a stable source cannot be conflated with the desire for a stable, traditional, and hierarchized society. Nostalgic individuals may (as is the case with the anti-feminist writers studied by Doane and Hodges), in the face of an unstable present, long to return to a stable past—a past in which everything is held in its 'proper' place, where 'men were men, women were women, and reality was real' (Doane and Hodges, 1987:3). But nostalgic individuals may equally, in the face of a present that seems overly fixed, static, and monolithic, long for a past in which things could be put into play, opened up, moved about, or simply given a little breathing space.<sup>5</sup> The

type of past (open or closed, stable or turbulent, simple or inspired) longed for by the nostalgic subject will depend on her present position in society, on her desires, her fears, and her aspirations.

We need to separate out, in the critique of nostalgia, the critique of the content, author, and audience of a nostalgic narrative—who is nostalgic for what, and in the names of which community—from the critique of the structure of nostalgia itself—the positive evaluation of the past in response to a negatively evaluated present. Contemporary media and political life are saturated by a number of dominant nostalgic narratives (of the Family, of the Nation, of Empire, of the Frontier (see Combs, 1993)) that are deeply alienating to large groups of people: these particular narratives need to be questioned, challenged, and put into place. But there are also other nostalgic narratives which we may wish to view in a positive light, as being progressive or enabling.<sup>6</sup> To understand and evaluate the importance of nostalgia in all of these various narratives, critique needs to move towards an examination of nostalgia as a general structure of feeling, through questions of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>7</sup>

### **The nostalgic structure of feeling**

In his book *Yearning for Yesterday*, sociologist Fred Davis suggests that nostalgia may be seen as ‘the search for continuity amid threats of discontinuity’ (1979:35). Nostalgia responds to the experience of discontinuity—to the sense that agency or identity are somehow blocked or threatened, and that this is so because of a separation from an imaginatively remembered past, homeland, family or community. By returning, in text or vision, to these lost pasts, places, and peoples, the nostalgic author asserts a sense of continuity over and above her sense of separation, and from this continuity may be able to replenish a sense of self, of participation, of empowerment, belonging, righteousness or justification, direction.

Nostalgia functions as the search for continuity. Davis’s suggestion provides a useful starting point for conceptualizing nostalgia, but it needs to be taken a step further: for discontinuity, far from being simply experienced by the nostalgic subject, and far from being simply the engendering condition of nostalgia, is also and always at the same time a discontinuity posited by the nostalgic subject. ‘Nostalgia’, as Doane and Hodges emphasize, ‘is not just a sentiment but also a rhetorical practice’ (1987:3); and the positing of discontinuity is as central to this rhetorical practice as any assertion of continuity.

Nostalgia works, in other words, as a periodizing emotion: that was then, and this is now. In the rhetoric of nostalgia, one invariably finds three key ideas: first, that of a prelapsarian world (the Golden Age, the childhood Home, the Country); second, that of a ‘lapse’ (a cut, a Catastrophe, a separation or sundering, the Fall); and third, that of the present, postlapsarian world (a world felt in some way to be lacking, deficient, or oppressive). The ‘lapse’ or ‘cut’ need not be imagined as a vertical chop slicing across a continuous line of time, but may just as often be thought of as a horizontal separation, as the running into the ground of the past by the present. That is, the prelapsarian world may be felt, at times, to run very close to the surface of the postlapsarian world: but there is always and everywhere, for nostalgia to logically exist, a positing of discontinuity. A critical reading of the nostalgic structure of

rhetoric should focus, then, on the construction of a prelapsarian world, but also on the continuity asserted, and the discontinuity posited, between a prelapsarian past and a postlapsarian present.

### **The nostalgic past**

To read, value, and critique the nostalgic production of a prelapsarian world is a relatively straightforward matter. In turning to the past to find sources of, or even spaces for, agency, identity, or community, the nostalgic author will inevitably gloss over contradictory or negative components that compromise the sense of possibility found in such spaces and in such sources. In our reading—a reading which may well be undertaken by the nostalgic subject himself—we may wish to preserve the sense of source found in the nostalgic narrative. We may consider the extent to which the nostalgic text is taken to be prescriptive for an historical future, as opposed to being descriptive of an historical past. And we may also recognize the way in which the search for possibility has enabled the nostalgic author to read the past in new and productive ways, or has facilitated the recuperation of previously overlooked historical materials and practices. But our necessary critique will center essentially on what has been edited out of the nostalgic text—on the conflicts of interest and differences of position that are occluded, on the social groups and relations that are cut out of the picture, on the hidden values that may, intentionally or not, be in the process of being legitimated.

### **Continuity**

Reading and evaluating the nostalgic text, however, in terms of the continuity it asserts between pre- and post-lapsarian worlds becomes more difficult, and much more ambiguous. To what degree is the continuity asserted by the nostalgic vision one of retreat, and to what degree is it a continuity of retrieval? Are the sources of identity, community, agency which are found/constructed by the nostalgic vision in the past posited as being located irretrievably in that past, as being accessible only as objects of a private and insular reflection and retrospect? Or are such sources retrievable as resources, as supports for community and identity-building projects in the present? Does the nostalgic text provide a relief from, or a resource for confronting the sources of the anxieties, fears, and frustrations to which nostalgia is a response?

The ever-present danger in locating sources of community, identity, and agency in the past, as nostalgia does, lies in the underlying suggestion that such sources are not available in the present. What may start out, in the nostalgic response, as a form of incipient social protest—despair over the unhappiness, poverty, cruelty, alienation of the present—is repeatedly undercut by a mounting indifference or self-isolation from contemporary struggles; critique is replaced by retrospect, by a private ‘withdrawal into “nature”, into the “Eden” of the heart, and into a lonely, resigned, and contemplative love of men’ (Williams, 1973:140). When the present, with all of its suffering and protest against suffering—political unrest, social turmoil, moral crisis—is ‘mediated by reference to a lost condition which is better than both [suffering and protest] and which can place both’, then, as Raymond Williams points out:

The real step that has been taken is withdrawal from any full response to an existing society. Value is in the past, as a general retrospective condition, and is in the present only as a particular and private sensibility, the individual moral action.

(Williams, 1973:140)

In the sometimes desperate quest for community and continuity by the nostalgic subject, living community and historical continuity may paradoxically be given up for lost, as the nostalgic turns to the 'finally negative images of an empty nature and the tribal past...where the single observer, at least, could feel a direct flow of knowledge' (Williams, 1973:211).

But nostalgia does not necessarily entail retreat; it can equally function as retrieval. Thus Williams contrasts the above withdrawals into individual subjectivity with the movements out into community that one may find in the work of a writer such as Grassic Gibbon. The decisive difference here, writes Williams, is that:

The spiritual feeling for land and for labour, the 'pagan' emphasis which is always latent in the imagery of the earth...is made available and is stressed in the new struggles: through the General Strike, in the period of *Cloud Howe*, to the time of the hunger marches in the period of *Grey Granite*. Even the legends sustain the transition, for their spiritual emphasis makes it possible to reject a Church that has openly sided with property and oppression. More historically and more convincingly, the radical independence of the small farmers, the craftsmen and the labourers is seen as transitional to the militancy of the industrial workers. The shape of a whole history is then decisively changed.

(Williams, 1973:270)

This return to the past to read a historical continuity of struggle, identity, and community, this determination to comb the past for every sense of possibility and destiny it might contain—digging around central structures to find the breathing-spaces of the margins, spinning up old sources into tales of gargantuan epic—is a resource and strategy central to the struggles of all subaltern cultural and social groups. Nostalgia here works to retrieve the past for support in building the future.

Retreat and retrieval should not, however, be regarded unequivocally as constituting the negative and positive poles of possibility of the nostalgic response. Retrieval, for one, can be put to use by reactionary and revolutionary, dominant and subordinate groups alike. And the possibility of retreat, of a 'time-out', can be critical for the survival of shattered selves, hopes, communities, and confidences—a time-out without which some individuals, or some communities, might never even get to the stage where it becomes possible to respond effectively to the sources of present hurts. Furthermore, retreat and retrieval are never entirely separate, there being an element of each in every nostalgic vision—the possibility of a second world invoked by nostalgia produces, after all, at one and the same time, both a deferral of, and an alternative to, the first, everyday world of the present.

This ambivalence is worth keeping in mind when considering the many ways in which nostalgia has been institutionalized in Western societies. The spaces (time-outs) within our social systems that have been set aside for nostalgia—holidays and

weekends to return to the family and home, suburban gardens to recreate personal pastoral visions, not to mention the endless stream of media-produced substitutes for happy families, rosy pasts, and closeknit communities—may seem to work only to reinforce social roles and structures, diffusing discontent with sentiment. Fred Davis suggests that nostalgia functions in modern society as an ‘outlet’ or ‘safety valve’ (1979:110). Nostalgia, by sanctioning soothing and utopian images of the past, lets people adapt both to rapid social change and to changes in individual life histories—changes, in the latter case, that may well lead into social roles and positions (of adolescence, adulthood, old age) in which individual agency, sense of identity, and participation in community are severely restricted. Davis’s analysis, insofar as it refers to institutionalized spaces for nostalgia, has to be taken seriously; but, if the nostalgic retreat always comprises both critique and alternative, then these officially sanctioned spaces may well, at certain points in history, provide sites, materials, and inspiration for meaningful social change.

### Discontinuity

The third ‘production’ or ‘movement’ of nostalgia which must be considered by critique is the positing of discontinuity. One does not, of course, need to deny that nostalgia is a response to the experience of real and abrupt discontinuities; rather, one wants to raise the question of how these discontinuities are interpreted, of how they are given meaning in the structure of nostalgic rhetoric. Some of the problems here revolve around the question of where the ‘cut’ comes down, of how a discontinuity is placed between past and present. By placing certain voices, places, or cultural institutions in a receding past—voices of the country in pastoral literature, voices of indigenous peoples in pastoral ethnography (Williams, 1973; Clifford, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989)—one assumes that these voices have no place in the present, that they are transient, doomed to extinction, salvageable only in the nostalgic pen of poet and ethnographer. The common idea of a lost rural world’, writes Williams, by no means a harmless abstraction, can create fundamental misunderstandings with potentially disastrous consequences:

It [the idea of a lost rural world] is in direct contradiction to any effective shape of our future, in which work on the land will have to become more rather than less important and central. It is one of the most striking deformations of industrial capitalism that one of our most central and urgent and necessary activities should have been so placed, in space or in time or in both, that it can be plausibly associated only with the past or with distant lands.

(Williams, 1973:300)

Similarly, by placing indigenous voices and cultural institutions in an ethnographic past, the ethnographer denies the fact that these voices represent alternative cultural futures, futures which are struggling to find a place within the structures and movements of the contemporary world system.

The placing of a cut between pre- and post-lapsarian worlds may also work in the opposite direction, by legitimating all that went before the ‘fatal fall’. Williams, for

example, shows how, in a pattern that has repeated itself for the last four hundred or so years of British history, the greed and ruthlessness of the latest batch of new landowners has given rise to a longing for the previous, traditional rural order. Attacking this 'deep and persistent illusion' that confers a sense of greater innocence on older and established proprietors, Williams points out that:

Very few titles to property could bear humane investigation, in the long process of conquest, theft, political intrigue, courtiership, extortion, and the power of money.... The 'ancient stocks' to which we are sentimentally referred, are ordinarily only those families who had been pressing and exploiting their neighbours rather longer.  
(Williams, 1973:50)

The 'new men' are often only intensifying, and not themselves changing in any fundamental way, a system of land control that has been long established and long developing.

This brings up one of the most problematic limitations to historical understanding and action that the rhetoric of nostalgia may create. The nostalgic structure of *Golden Age and Fall* contains the implicit assumption that decline to the present is caused by forces external to a previously stable and utopian system; the nostalgic subject or author, after all, returns to the past to find sources of identity and community, not sources of alienation and oppression. Decline, naturally, must come after, from elsewhere, from the 'cut' or the Catastrophe. The nostalgic structure of feeling may thus mystify or displace the extent to which decline—that is, the changes that are interpreted as decline—is caused by pressures and forces internal to the past, utopian world itself.

The isolation of parliamentary enclosures as the main cause of landlessness and poverty in late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century England, and the rhetorical opposition of communal pre-enclosure and alienated post-enclosure villages, provides a classic example of such a displacement. While enormous losses and changes unquestionably took place during the period of parliamentary enclosures, Williams points out that this was no break-up of an 'organic' or 'natural' society, but was rather the intensification of an 'economic system of landlord, tenant, and labourer, which had been extending its hold since the sixteenth century' (1973:107). Processes internal to a developing agrarian capitalism—land improvements, changes in methods of production, and concentration of landholding—had, over a long period of time, been creating both vastly increased levels of productivity, as well as widespread unemployment and displacements of populations. By isolating enclosure from this complex of change as a single main cause, or by seeing enclosure as a fundamental turning-point, one mystifies the larger structures and forces involved (Williams, 1973:96–107).

This displacement, or mystification, that the rhetoric of nostalgia may cause in transferring origin of change from a prelapsarian world to an external and intrusive 'cut', leads back, of course, to critique of how the image of a prelapsarian world is constructed by nostalgia. Likewise, reading the continuities asserted and the discontinuities posited by nostalgia—what gets placed in the past and what gets brought into the present—is in some sense the reading of two sides of the same coin. For in the end, the productions and movements of nostalgia work together to form a



single structure of rhetoric, and in many cases, we will find it difficult to separate constructions from assertions from positions. But by artificially separating out some of the issues and dynamics involved in the rhetoric of nostalgia, one can hope to arrive at a critique that moves beyond the simple division of the subject into good and bad nostalgias, or worse, the outright dismissal of the phenomenon as a reactionary and sentimental illusion.

Nostalgia should unquestionably be challenged and critiqued for the distortions, misunderstandings, and limitations it may place on effective historical interpretation and action; but, in the modern West at least, nostalgia should equally be recognized as a valid way of constructing and approaching the past—recognized, that is, as a general structure of feeling, present in, and important to individuals and communities of all social groups.

### Reading: a two-world condition

Critique finds its rationale in the extent to which it aids, clarifies, or directs interpretation and action: it is appropriate, therefore, to conclude with the reading of a particular nostalgic text. To this end, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984) presents a relevant example, not least for the fact that the 'two world condition' of carnival and officialdom through which Bakhtin reads Rabelais may serve as a parallel for the 'two world condition' of prelapsarian past and postlapsarian present through which we must read Bakhtin.

A classic example of a nostalgic text, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* presents a lost world of popular carnival, a world of utopian hope, freedom, and laughter that directly confronts and subverts the hierarchies and ideologies of Renaissance officialdom. Almost from the start of Bakhtin's commentary, however, this laughing and delirious world is precipitated into an inevitable process of decline: carnival spirit is transformed into 'mere holiday mood' (1984:33); popular laughter disintegrates, leaving only today's 'genres of reduced laughter-humour, irony, sarcasm' (1984:120). In the traditions we have inherited from this lost era, there 'slumbers' only 'a vague memory of past carnival liberties and carnival truth' (1984:28).

Like all nostalgic visions of the past, Bakhtin's utopian celebration of carnival ignores its contradictory and negative aspects. Carnival was licensed and sanctioned by the very authorities that, according to Bakhtin, it was supposed to have opposed, and cannot therefore be treated simply as an unmediated popular challenge to hegemony. Carnival, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) point out, 'often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who "don't belong"' (19). The fair, which Bakhtin sees as being 'necessarily opposed' to official culture, 'itself played a crucial part in the formation and transformation of local socio-economic relations and the State' (Stallybrass and White, 1986:35). And, in contradiction of Bakhtin's narrative of decline, in which the 'traditional' fair gradually disappears, there was instead a 'massive explosion of new fairs' in nineteenth-century Europe (Stallybrass and White, 1986:34).

To critique Bakhtin's nostalgic vision, however, is not to reject it; his focus on carnival as a mode of understanding or as a cultural analytic remains today widely

accepted as a tool of considerable use for humanistic studies across the board. Indeed, one might argue that Bakhtin's very success in introducing carnival to contemporary cultural and literary study is inseparable from his nostalgic (utopian, lyrical) impulse. Bakhtin's nostalgia, whatever its distortions of history may be, has achieved the concrete result of opening up a space in the historical record, of recuperating a set of practices and discourses, within which we can now read formerly illegible activities and potentialities of resistance.<sup>8</sup> To acknowledge and fully understand the nature of this achievement, to avoid facile rejections or full-scale endorsements of Bakhtin's arguments, we must be able to read, value, and critique *Rabelais and His World* through the structuring two-world condition within which it was written. We must be able to read *Rabelais and His World* as a nostalgic text.

### Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Shirley Brice Heath for her suggestions and comments on this paper.
- 2 One may, for example, be nostalgic for a sense of comradeship experienced during wartime, a sense of community experienced in a state of poverty or oppression, a sense of purpose and self experienced during a time in jail.
- 3 While such tropes have been present throughout European history—the pastoral, the Golden Age, and the Fall begin with the Garden of Eden, and the return home receives its paradigmatic telling in Homer's *Odyssey*—nostalgia becomes a widespread, general structure of feeling only with the massive dislocations of peoples in the modern period. It is the distinctly modern sense of a radical separation of past from present, of people from place, and of person from people that nostalgia functions to mediate, as it spins out its endless tales of return.
- 4 For other hostile critiques of nostalgia, see Stewart (1984); Doane and Hodges (1987); Brown (1989); Greene (1991); Combs (1993). Assumptions of the pathological nature of nostalgia stem from the term's origins; the word was coined in 1688 as a medical diagnosis of the extreme homesickness suffered by Swiss mercenary soldiers fighting abroad. Nostalgia was considered in Europe to be a potentially fatal condition through to the middle of the nineteenth century; see Starobinski (1966) and Zwingmann (1959) for discussion of the early history of the concept of nostalgia.
- 5 Examples include Gayle Green's nostalgia for the feminist writing of the 1970s (Greene, 1991), as seen above, and Mikhail Bakhtin's nostalgic evocation of carnival in *Rabelais and His World* (1984), to be discussed below. I do not wish to suggest that longing for a stable and traditional past is inherently reactionary, or that longing for a dynamic and open past is always progressive; the terms could easily be reversed.
- 6 Due to the negative connotations of nostalgia, nostalgic narratives viewed as progressive or enabling tend not to be called nostalgic; they may be considered as examples of popular memory or historical consciousness instead. The notion of a 'critical' or 'revisionary' nostalgia has been around for some time (see Jameson, 1969; Clifford, 1986; Upton, 1986). Alice Reckley has written of the importance of nostalgia in the recent Mexican novel (Reckley, 1985), and Ramon Saldivar has

spoken of the critical nostalgia of Americo Paredes's early poetry (Western Humanities Conference, Stanford University, 16 October 1993).

- 7 My analysis of nostalgia in the following pages draws on a reading of Raymond Williams's discussion of the pastoral in *The Country and the City* (1973).
- 8 Bakhtin's work also functions as an interpretation of its historical present: many interpreters now accept that *Rabelais and His World*, written during the 1930s and 1940s, functions on one level as an anti-Stalinist allegory. By returning (nostalgically) to Rabelais and the Renaissance, Bakhtin opens a space for coded political critique of Stalinist authoritarianism.

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