

Towards a psychopolitical retheorization of nostalgia in psychology

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Abstract

Whether through divisive injunctions to “Make America Great Again,” or countless anesthetizing spinoffs and remakes, our current epoch appears to be one of uniquely nostalgic sensibility. Across disciplines, there is consensus that nostalgia is heightened in times of stress and change, functioning as a reprieve from an inhospitable present. It follows that our rapidly shifting social, economic, environmental, and geopolitical terrain fosters the ideal conditions for nostalgia to flourish. While its interpretation has vacillated significantly, contemporary psychological research frames nostalgia as a largely positive resource that shores up optimism, purpose, and social connectedness. Yet, if nostalgia can be exploited by politicians to foster resentment and violence, how does this figure with the construal of nostalgia as predominantly positive? Untethering nostalgia from its psychologized status, then, is critical to grasping its key functions. As such, this thesis advances a psychopolitical retheorization that resituates nostalgia in its social, political, and historical context.

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Introduction: Rationale and contemporary significance

Whether through divisive injunctions to “Make America Great Again”, countless reboots, remakes, or legacy sequels of film and television, or the #nostalgiacore that captivated TikTok at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown (2B views since 2020 in Canada alone, according to TikTok Creative Center’s 2023 analytics), it is clear that nostalgia—defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as “a longing to return to an earlier period or condition of life recalled as being better than the present in some way” (n.d.)—plays a consequential role in our cultural sphere. Since the latter 20th century, scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has generated an extensive body of literature on nostalgia (Boym, 2001; Hepper et al., 2012; Wildschut et al., 2006). Across this research, there is generally consensus that nostalgia is exacerbated in times of stress and change, functioning as an escape from an inhospitable present (Batcho, 2013; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). Together, it would appear that our current social, economic, and (geo)political crises—with the escalation of neoreactionary (NRx) movements to a devastating global pandemic—foster the prime conditions for nostalgia to flourish.

Notwithstanding unanimity on this issue and its contemporary relevance, however, nostalgia’s content, triggers, and mechanisms remain unclear (Hepper et al., 2012), doubtless owing to sustained debate over its lack of definitional clarity by psychologists, philosophers, and historians alike. For instance, the noticeable lack of engagement by historians (even in light of the ‘memory boom’ that has gripped the academe since the 1980s; Simine, 2013) can be partly attributed to justifiable trepidation that nostalgia misrepresents and degrades historical record through the false engineering of a ‘synthetic’ past (i.e., ‘the good old days’, wrought with *thinly-veiled* ethnonationalism; Elçi, 2022), or what historian Michael Kammen (1991) refers to as “history without guilt” (p. 688). But as historians—however paradoxically—continue to drag

their heels on this ‘historical emotion’ (Becker, 2019; Gilbert, 2019), research in psychology has increased significantly since the 1990s (Batcho, 2013). Barring a handful of recent studies acknowledging how nostalgic sentiment can be subjugated by politicians to bolster resentment and violence, shifting attention away from wider structural inequalities (Elçi, 2022), psychologists mainly theorize nostalgia as a positive emotion that shores up optimism, self-esteem, social connectedness, and a sense of purpose (Fiorito & Routledge, 2020; Fuentes de Diego & Valiente Ots, 2014).

Contesting its historical framing as a psychological disorder, leading psychologists in this area now exult that “nostalgia has been rehabilitated” (van Tilburg, Igou, & Sedikides, 2013, p. 451) and should be considered a “fundamental human strength” (Sedikides, et al., 2008, p. 307). Given nostalgia’s more ambivalent renderings and interpretations outside of psychology (both in the academe and in public discourse; van Prooijen et al., 2022), this framing may come as a surprise, but it is precisely this point of departure that my project takes as its impetus. The incongruities between psychologists’ engagement with nostalgia and their contemporaries raise important questions about how we envisage and study our subject matter. Thus, this thesis contributes to existing interdisciplinary, *psychopolitical* scholarship about emotions and affect—semantically blurred terms which I will delineate later on—that can adequately attend to their complex functions in everyday life. To do so necessitates not only psychologists resisting their own rigid epistemological “boundary-work” (Gieryn, 1983), but also *non-psychologists* admitting the ways psychological thinking informs theoretical developments about affect and emotions in the humanities (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

This can occur through rejecting the psychological and its historical penchant for biological reductionism wholesale (Hook, 2012), or (mis)appropriating psychological concepts

and language in service of more allegedly sociological pursuits (see Love, 2021 for a fascinating insider critique of this dialectic between queer theory and the social sciences since the 1980s). For instance, the need for remedial scholarship in response to the decontextualization of nostalgia in mainstream psychology is not equivalent to curtailing it to the realm of *mere metaphor* (as many affect theorists have done; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). As theoretical psychologists like Suzanne Kirschner (2019) have stressed, this too is tantamount to a kind of sociocultural reductionism (p. 131). Bearing in mind these knotty entanglements, while at the same time conceding that I will inevitably repeat some of their logics, I turn now to the topic at hand and my approach. The scope of my project focuses on a particular expression of nostalgia that has emerged in the latter 20th century U.S. and Canadian context. Moving beyond binary understandings of nostalgia as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, I am interested what nostalgia is ‘doing’ (i.e., its functions and operations). It is along these lines that I ask: *for whom* is nostalgia a dominant *structure of feeling* (i.e., a concept in social and cultural analysis used to examine how certain patterns of feeling and thinking structure the particular social relations and cultural formations within a particular historical period; Williams, 2022), and *under what* particular social, cultural, and historical circumstances?

To these ends, the structure of my thesis will be as follows: after introducing the select theoretical frameworks that will be germane to my subsequent critique and theoretical reconstruction in Chapters II and III, respectively, Chapter I will provide a brief historiography of nostalgia. The purpose of this overview will be to illustrate nostalgia’s shifting conceptual status over time, as well as some of the factors which contributed to Western psychology’s divergent view of nostalgia. For example, during the late 17th and 18th centuries, nostalgia was mainly managed as a disease stemming from a strong desire to return home, but this

interpretation was dramatically restructured by Western modernity, where identity and home became gradually understood in more abstract terms (Dodman, 2018). If earlier clinical descriptions hinged on the assumption that a loss of physical home was analogous to a loss of self, these were quickly eclipsed by the pressure to feel at home anywhere (O'Sullivan, 2012). Thus, as nostalgia shed its clinical associations, its potent ideological function came into clearer focus (Dodman, 2018). As I will elaborate on later, progress or universalist discourses were a hallmark feature of Western modernity (e.g., Kant's "global cosmopolitanism"), and influenced emerging theories about emotion and affect, physical (i.e., geographic) and abstract (i.e., temporal) constructions of home and belonging, and identity (Batcho, 2013).

In response to the predominant view that nostalgia was suggestive of a 'provincial' mindset, compared to the valued 'cosmopolitan' sensibility, early 20th century American psychologists like G. Stanley Hall (1904) argued that while categorically maladaptive, significant life changes justified nostalgia's (or 'homesickness', a term more readily used term in the literature; Matt, 2007) purpose in the context of 'normal' human development. Barring this, however, nostalgia is virtually absent in the psychological literature until the latter 20th century. This is significant for at least two reasons: 1) in the context of the discipline, this reparative focus on nostalgia's *telos* laid subsequent foundation for the rise of personality and positive psychology (PP) that would grip the 1970s and 1990s (Batcho, 2013), respectively; and 2) it forecast its pivotal reconstruction as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon in the United States (Davis, 1979).

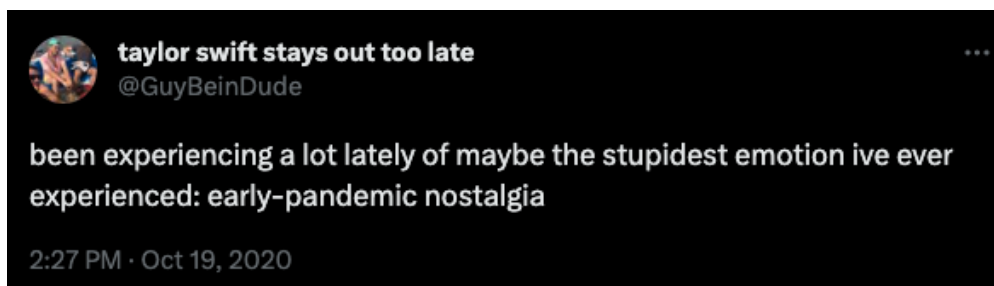
In Chapter II, I will exact a critique of nostalgia as it is framed in mainstream psychological science. Here, I aim to show how the sociohistorical factors identified in Chapter I continue to inform psychologists' approach to affect, including but not limited to nostalgia. In its

unyielding disciplinary pursuit of scientific legitimacy, psychology often neglects social, political, and ideological factors in favour of cognitive and biological (i.e., essentialist or naturalistic) explanations. This has had a number of unintended consequences; for instance, in streamlining invariably complex phenomena for the purposes of easier operationalization, categorization, and experimentation, psychological constructs may fail to reflect that which they aim to represent (Brinkmann, 2005). Furthermore, when the ideological assumptions of psychologists go unchecked under the semblance of being value-neutral or objective, psychological science can sustain dominant governing structures and logics (Sugarman, 2015).

It is along this same line of thinking critical sociologist Nikolas Rose (2017) argues that the production of psychological knowledge often dovetails with neoliberalism (i.e., the application of market logic to everyday life) through the cooptation and recapitulation of complex phenomena into manageable, individualized terms. Prominent critical scholars of affect have charged happiness as a “prized affective state” in neoliberal structures of feeling that underpin Western public life (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021, p. 552). Here, happiness—an otherwise fleeting and subjective emotional state—becomes a precondition of work and a concrete measure of success (De La Fabián & Stecher, 2017) or a tangible object that can be obtained (Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014). While positivity discourses certainly saturate neoliberal configurations of the self in Western corporate culture, psychology is also “... complicit in creating an ideology of neoliberalism that is now accepted as common sense” (Bhatia & Priya, 2018, p. 649).

As Sugarman (2015) illuminates, happiness, optimism, and *psychological wellbeing* (PWB)—i.e., a widely used model of mental wellness assessing factors such as positive affect, self-esteem, self-continuity, social connectedness, and existential meaning (Hepper et al., 2012)—all engender specific processes of *psychologization*, a term used to denote the spread and

misappropriating of psychological knowledge and language outside of the discipline that in turn structure our everyday understanding and experience of ourselves and in relation to others. A key method of influence for the neoliberal project and related processes of psychologization is through affect (Klein & Mills, 2017). As these scholars point out, ‘positive’ affects have become invaluable currency under neoliberal capitalism. While it is unclear whether nostalgia constitutes one such valued affect, there is evidence of nostalgia’s pronounced role in several recent cultural shifts: the rise of Trumpism in 2016 and Brexit (Behler et al., 2021), the notable increase in neoreactionary thought (NRx), as well as during and following COVID-19 lockdown measures (Huang, Chang, & Landau, 2023).



A second and related aim of Chapter II will be to examine how the current rendering of nostalgia in psychology not only obscures its clear ideological character, but alternative theorizations that are sensitive to historical contingencies and marginal perspectives. Indeed, there is a rich body of diasporic and mobilities literature focusing on the abiding nexus between nostalgia and physical or geographic displacement (May, 2017; Milligan, 2003; Tinsley, 2020). These perspectives cast into sharp relief extant forms of pathologized nostalgia that psychologists neglect to acknowledge. For instance, the failure to effectively adapt to the demands and preconditions of modernization in Western democratic societies is still unduly weaponized against specific groups along racialized, xenophobic, and gendered dimensions.

Finally, the historical and theoretical scaffolding and critique advanced in the preceding chapters provide a clear basis for the retheorization of nostalgia. To these ends, Chapter III will make the case for a theoretical reconstruction of nostalgia in psychology. For instance, applying Billig's (1995) theory of "banal nationalism", I will argue that an exclusive focus on nostalgia's extreme (e.g., reactionary) expressions elides the consequence of its everyday, 'marginal' expressions (Ngai, 2012). As he maintains, nationalist sentiment gains traction through everyday symbols, habits, and rhetoric. What this implies is a shared ideological substratum irrespective of political or social membership. Thus, superficial divisions along partisan lines (i.e., 'the right' and 'the left') can actually work counterproductively to essentialize or reduce persons and groups as thinking and feeling in predetermined ways (Tinsley, 2020).

In this brief introduction, I have outlined a few of the main conceptual issues which justify the project I undertake here. Next, I will outline the theoretical perspectives that will support my argument for a psychopolitical retheorization of nostalgia in psychology. I will be drawing primarily from *psychology-adjacent* scholarship (e.g., affect studies, feminist psychoanalysis, and critical psychology), owing to their shared view of nostalgia (and psychological constructs more generally) as distributed and socioculturally-constituted, while at the same time grappling with its clear psychical, embodied dimensions (Billig, 1995, 2023; Hook, 2012). This avoids faulty interpretative pitfalls such as: 1) biological perspectives which view affects as merely automatic (i.e., studied through valence, arousal, and intensity), essentialized, and individualized processes (Leys, 2011); 2) cognitive perspectives which purport the primacy of intentional appraisal over embodied sensation and feeling (rather than appreciating their thorough imbrication; Blackman, 2012); and 3), ostensibly rejecting the psychological, while still employing dubious psychological thinking without understanding of its

precise application (Wetherell, 2015). As such, the theories explored herein draw from a rich, interdisciplinary repertoire that proffer generative routes of engagement with nostalgia and other affective phenomena. For instance, I will show how social science researchers studying nostalgia via theoretical and qualitative methods in the cultural and political sphere (in place of the laboratory) offer nascent insights into nostalgia's functions in everyday life.

Theoretical frameworks

For the purposes of critically interrogating the current formulation of nostalgia in psychology in Chapters II and III, several theoretical frameworks will be used. Notable affect theorist Kathleen Stewart (1988) has argued that nostalgia is organized by host of interrelated sociocultural, historical, temporal, and affective coordinates that shift relative to the landscape of the present (p. 227). Accordingly, extricating nostalgia from these contingencies raises significant epistemological, ontological, and ethical quandaries about how psychologists delimit their objects in the service of easier categorization, analysis, and generalizability (Danziger, 1997). Similarly, critical psychologist Thomas Teo (2017) underscores how psychology's history of boundary work to secure legitimacy has counterproductively estranged the discipline from its own subject matter. This is manifest in the oversimplification of mental phenomena through the processes of operationalization, calling into question whether such representations bear sufficient resemblance to their 'real' analogues (Hacking, 1995). As Kirschner (2019) has similarly reinforced, there exists a tendency to minimize or flatten affective experience in psychology, and this problem calls for sustained and extended interdisciplinary work to address the "affective key" of mental life (p. 233). This necessitates renewed and vital engagement with scholarship outside of mainstream psychological research.

Theoretical, topographical, and typological gradations

In her pioneering text *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), the late cultural theorist Svetlana Boym (2001) presents a loose distinction between *restorative* and *reflective* expressions of nostalgia; the former refers to attempts to reconstruct the lost object of nostalgia (e.g., home), whereas the latter resembles the more contemporary understanding of nostalgia as a more abstract longing for different imagined times or places. While these two types are by no means discrete, Boym (2001) makes the distinction to suggest that reminiscence and critical reflective expressions of nostalgia are not necessarily inimical to each other. While nostalgia as an individual or collective practice can function restoratively to engender a yearning for ‘the good old days’, it can also function reflectively to underscore the contradictory logics that maintain these timeworn attachments (Boym, 2001). Indeed, Boym ascribes to restorative nostalgia an ideological character embedded in a sense of nationhood and social memory, while reflective nostalgia oscillates between the collective and individual. It is also worth underscoring that Boym does not attribute to nostalgia an intrinsically progressive or reactionary impulse, while not denying how it can be instrumentalized to different social and political ends. This view is similarly endorsed by sociologists Michael Pickering and Emily Knightley (2006), who argue that nostalgia should be characterized by both progressive, utopian, regressive, and reactionary inclinations, all of which provide guiding insights amid current uncertainties and crises (p. 921).

Taken together, these multifaceted and contradictory dimensions of nostalgia are reframed as strengths that lend themselves especially to sociological critique (Hook, 2012, 2013). This approach will be particularly useful when juxtaposed against the dominant psychological framing of nostalgia, which sees the individual as influencing and shaping their social context rather than as an interplay between the individual and the social sphere (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2019). By resisting the impetus to categorize nostalgia as either ‘positive’ or

‘negative’ (Hook, 2012, 2013), we can begin to attend to salient (e.g., reactionary political discourse) and latent (e.g., nostalgia aesthetics in the media) manifestations of nostalgia. As Boym (2007) remarked, “nostalgia can be a poetic creation, an individual mechanism for survival, a countercultural practice, a poison, or a cure. It is up to us to take responsibility for our nostalgia and not let others prefabricate it for us” (p. 18).

The political aesthetics of nostalgia

Considering that the aesthetic domain is a key route for neoliberal ideology and nostalgic sentiment, several interdisciplinary scholars have turned their attention to media and political aesthetics to trace nostalgia’s (at times subtle) movement and influence (Jameson, 1991; Fisher, 2014). The political and cultural theorist Fredric Jameson (1991) has famously argued that the positive reimagining of nostalgia in the latter 20th century U.S. context is a symptom of postmodernity and signals the consolidation of neoliberal capitalism. Because of this, public engagement with and understanding of the history has become reduced to a series of hollowed out stylizations and genres of ‘pastness’. This is what Jameson (1991) refers to as a “waning of historicity”, wherein “... the draining of creativity and history in the postmodern present leaves only the neural mimicry or imitation of dead styles of the past” (p. 74). These examples function as subversive ruptures which gesture to perceived cultural decline, the consolidation of neoliberalism as a dominant economic regime, and “... lost futures that haunt the capitalist realist present” (Lindsay, 2021, p. 110).

In this vein, Brown (2019) has argued that purportedly novel aesthetic expressions and experiences in the postmodern era simultaneously point to an absence of both stability and the belief in a secure future hitherto promised by the unification of liberal democracy and capitalism. Likewise, Berardi (2011) has argued that since the 70s, we have been living through “the slow

cancellation of the future” (p. 18). Berardi is referring not to the future in a strictly temporal sense, but as:

A psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, reaching a peak after the Second World War. These expectations were shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever progressing development, albeit through different methodologies: the Hegel-Marxist mythology... the bourgeois mythology of linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all-encompassing power of scientific knowledge; and so on... My generation grew up at the peak of this mythological temporalization, and it is very difficult, maybe impossible, to get rid of it, and look at reality without this kind of temporal lens (pp. 18–19).

Berardi appears to gesture at a common experience: while modern culture and digital technologies continue to swell and accelerate at an unrelenting pace, at the same time, there is also a pronounced sense of inertia and stasis. Extending Jameson’s logic, this appears to be in reaction to the restructuring of the capitalist economy into its neoliberal tenor during the postwar period alongside the processes of globalization and technological advancement, which have in turn shaped the gradual marketization and digitization of everyday life.

We can observe this discrepancy in the digital sphere writ large; while the ephemerality of digital phenomena can be buffeting, at the same time, nothing ever properly goes away (Fisher, 2014). Under these conditions, the argument that nostalgia is ‘on the rise’ makes manifest sense. Indeed, scholars like Bauman (2010) go as far as to claim that ours is “... the age of nostalgia” (p. 1), ascribing to nostalgia special status as the dominant affective character of our epoch. However, and as scholars like historian Tobias Becker (2018) have pointed out,

framing nostalgia as universal ‘zeitgeist’ overlooks its salient role and functions over time.

Rather than framing nostalgia as anomalous to our particular historical moment, we can look to different eras in order to put the past, present, future into renewed dialogue.

To demonstrate the necessity of foregrounding nostalgia’s intersecting psychopolitical and aesthetic contours, we might briefly consider three distinct historical examples: Nazism in the 1930s, Thatcherism in the 1980s, and Trumpism in the mid-2010s. By understanding nostalgia as a reoccurring affective pattern throughout history, we can observe clear parallels in how each of these political examples used nostalgia to different social and political ends. Nazism idealized and appropriated motifs from classical antiquity that effectively mythologized itself to justify its own ideology (e.g., Aryan ideal; infrastructure that mirrored the Roman colosseum; Groys, 2010) and subsequent horrific genocide. To similar effect, Thatcherism activated a renewed idealization of the ‘Victorian work ethic’ to augment an emergent neoliberal agenda, exacting austerity measures which resulted in a rapid decline of industry and sweeping poverty (Smith, Wetherell, & Campbell, 2018).

More recently, Trump’s successful 2016 presidential campaign deployed rhetoric (e.g., ‘Make America Great Again’) and symbolism lifted wholesale from Ronald Reagan’s campaign decades earlier, giving rise to a NRx revival that underpins and attempts to legitimize antiblack racism, xenophobia, and antifeminism (Tinsley, 2020). Reactionary and conspiratorial discourses, while in many ways socially disruptive, often work to augment the ideological coherence of social reality through a construction of a false ‘corrupting force’ which can account for systemic issues. Strangleman (2013) argues that this perceived loss of meaning and social cohesion acts as a common precursor to these responses, which in turn spur the methodical cultivation of nationalism. Of the latter, both Brown (1999) and Billig (1995) point out that

nationalism need not necessarily look reactionary; as they argue, political actors across the political spectrum often share a common ideological framework. Such observations signal the importance of examining nostalgia not as something exclusive to NRx thought. Indeed, whether through divisive injunctions like ‘MAGA’ or the countless spinoffs, reboots, and remakes we readily consume for leisure, there is a sense that the purported new on offer feels more like a consolatory return (Fisher, 2014, p. 9).

Nostalgia as a defense mechanism

Another central feature of my project is to grapple with nostalgia’s manifest psychological dimensions without acceding to the same conceptual errors writ large in mainstream psychology. One such way of navigating this follows Hook’s (2012, 2015) interpretation of nostalgia as a *defense formation*. Hook’s psychopolitical theorization is derived from Freud’s (1899/1968c) early work on *screen memories*, which refers to the selection of certain features of the past and the systematized ‘screening out’ or forgetting of others (p. 237). As I stated earlier, Freud’s writings—while not explicitly referencing nostalgia—had a significant influence on its developments in the first half of the 20th century (Batcho, 2013). The psychoanalytic movement more broadly stressed the consequence of psychic conflicts relating to alienation, loss, and attachment on the experience of nostalgia, all of which still figure heavily in modern interpretations of nostalgia outside of psychology.

This echoes Tinsley’s (2020) recent work on “imperial nostalgia”, where she has remarked: “To understand what drives a society toward its professed future, we should ask what it imagines that it has lost” (p. 2328). Importantly, whereas mainstream psychological approaches are developed upon the idea of “... linear, progressive, non-repeatable time” (Gilbert, 2019, p. 295), the psychoanalytic orientation is generally “... based on nonlinear

conceptualizations of temporality where past, present, and future are simultaneously active” (Conceicao, 2017, p. 94), which is useful for the purposes of my current project. As Hook (2012) remarks, “... it is precisely at the moment that the ego-comforts and protections of nostalgia are dissipated, at the point when nostalgia becomes less sweet, more troubling, more anxious—that nostalgia becomes useful” (p. 238).

Nostalgia as a cruel attachment

The late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant takes a similar position in their landmark text *Cruel Optimism* (2011), where they politicize objects of desire and our attachments to them in order to connect these to broader formations of social and political stagnation and injustice. Because our objects are so closely linked with our personal ontologies, they are necessarily ‘optimistic’, and thus difficult to disentangle ourselves from (Berlant, 2011). On Berlant’s view, these desires are endemic to neoliberal capitalism, so becoming aware of them is a requisite step to generating new ways forms of sociality. While holding strong to these attachments may appear easier than divesting from them, they persuasively illustrate how these individual decisions spillover into the broader national imaginary, such that there is a general sense of inertia and anxiety in the face of rising social and political crises. We are, as Berlant claims, clinging to the vestiges of a good life that we cannot restore nor leave behind. Acknowledging rather than ignoring these vital discrepancies is central to interrogating their neoliberal and capitalist ideological underpinnings.

These are what Berlant (2011) terms “cruel attachments”, and they are those social and psychopolitical commitments that—despite recognizing their futility or the harm they may do—recursively orientate us towards certain objects and not others (see also Ahmed, 2006). As they write, “an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to

fulfilling the very wants that people bring to it: but its life organising status can trump interfering with the damage it provokes” (Berlant, 2011, p. 227). Applying this concept to nostalgia, its contradictory affective character begins to make more sense, particularly with respect to how it appears driven in equal parts by a prospective desire for the future and familiar safety or comfort of an imagined or remembered past. As Reyna et al. (2022) have suggested in their recent work on “racial nostalgia”, promises to “Make America Great Again” imply that something has been lost—and this loss can be both concrete and symbolic—like “the American dream” (pp. 81–82). While theorists outside of psychology incorporate these psychopolitical considerations into their own theorizations about nostalgia and affective phenomena (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), few psychologists engage with these discursive formations (to their detriment, as I will argue).

Neoliberalism and psychology

Sugarman (2015) argues that the neoliberal project increasingly constitutes the basis of mainstream psychological science, by distilling the subject from their social and material context, advancing an entrepreneurial understanding of the self as an ongoing project, and stressing techniques of affect regulation. Through the confluence of these processes, psychology reproduces and reinforces the influence and authority of neoliberalism through the production of psychological knowledge (Rose, 2017). Of course, this says nothing of the actual intention of psychologists themselves, only how such research inevitably interacts with its ideological context in ways that psychologists cannot anticipate and fail to attend to. For instance, nostalgia’s gradual depoliticization and advancement as an individual, psychological resource (Fiorito & Routledge, 2020)—which of course seems preferable to the alternative, pathologized rendering—inadvertently aligns paradigmatically with neoliberal cooptation, a trend that has been similarly observed with happiness and mindfulness discourses (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021).

On my view, the central problematic at work here is that, rather than recognizing the faulty political and economic frameworks maintaining this deleterious cycle, psychologists offer a rehabilitated construct like nostalgia as an additive, individualized solution (van Tilburg, Igou, & Sedikides, 2013). This can be further observed in the latest experimental studies on nostalgia which highlight this psychological construct as both an individual motivator and tool for self-regulation (Areni, 2019, 2022). Notably, while the notion of nostalgia as potentially ‘therapeutic’ circulates through these discourses, studies on its benefits have not been conducted in any ‘clinical’ populations, encompassing the broader *therapeutic ethos* of neoliberal subjectivity (Foster, 2016). In sum, this is not to disparage wholesale findings that suggest nostalgia as having individual benefits in specific contexts, only that operationalizing it in this way elides the contradictory discursive economies that have shaped it over time (Dodman, 2018).

Nostalgia as a human kind

When words come into being, they are taken up and reinterpreted by those who use them. To be *taken up* is to have an impact that necessarily shapes and is shaped by experience (Brinkmann, 2005). This logic has been taken up extensively by the late philosopher Ian Hacking (1995) and later elaborated by psychologist Svend Brinkmann (2005) in the context of psychology. On their view, nostalgia is a *human kind*, which refers to a socially constituted, mutable concept rendered intelligible only within a particular set of social, cultural, and historical circumstances. This is distinct from a *natural kind*, or that which has essential, observable properties that exist regardless of our experience. Both Hacking (1995) and Brinkmann (2005) maintain that social scientists make a categorical error in misconstruing the former for the latter. Moreover, if human kinds are best understood through the process of *looping effects* (Hacking, 1995)—i.e., reconstituted through the reflexive interplay between the

professional and public—their conceptual status is always subject to change. In the context of nostalgia, this is to say that while affective phenomena may exist prior to their emergence as a psychological construct, “... an emotion exists only beyond that point at which it attains a linguistic status” (Dodman, 2018, p. 81).

Thus, when considering nostalgia’s newfangled status as a positive emotion, individualized coping tool, or psychological resource, we must resituate this version in its particular social and historical conditions. By tracing nostalgia as fluid and contingent rather than static and universal, historian William M. Reddy (2001) illustrates how and under what particular social, cultural, and ideological conditions affective phenomena have emerged and reoccurred over time. Drawing from Hacking’s initial formulation, critical psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012) calls these *affective-discursive looping effects*, in reference to “the rhetoric and narratives of unfairness, loss and infringement [that] create and intensify the emotion. Bile rises and this then reinforce the rhetorical and narrative trajectory. It goes round and round” (p. 7). While affective phenomena may be biologically and cognitively instantiated, we must also recognize how they have been shaped as such by particular historical and social contexts and circumstances (Wetherell, 2012).

Conclusion

While nostalgia may indeed prop up the individual or social imaginary, we must take care to investigate how the defensive functions underpin its ostensible benefits (Areni et al., 2022; Hook, 2012). This involves critically interrogating how affectively motivated attachments to and identifications with fantasies of ‘the good life’, values like justice, social and legal understandings of the *nation–state*, belonging, and citizenship structure the national imaginary regardless of repressive or liberatory motivation (Brown, 2019). Moving beyond analyses of

affect specific to political membership, we can better trace the ideological constellations of influence linking seemingly disparate publics. By identifying these underpinning contradictory logics, we can begin to grapple with our ‘sociohistorical amnesia’ and move towards more accountable sociohistorical consciousness—one that exemplifies the ways collective histories inform our current, individual modes of being and how traces of the past create the contours of present life, constraining possible futures. As I will demonstrate in Chapter III, these psychopolitical dimensions of nostalgia (i.e., focusing on discontinuity and conflict) aid us in exploring how nostalgia works to augment normative social and ideological regimes.

With this theoretical scaffolding in tow, I will now provide a selective review of the historiography on nostalgia culminating in the 20th century U.S. and Canadian context. This review is, of course, not exhaustive, as it would be unfeasible to encompass all interpretations of nostalgia across peoples, literatures, and geographies. Indeed, the scope of this project is a particular, Westernized expression of nostalgia that has elaborated since the latter 20th century. The purpose of this review will be to examine how nostalgia has been differently constructed, embodied, and sustained across different sociohistorical contexts.

Chapter I: A brief historiography of a ‘universal’ emotion

A portmanteau of the Greek words *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (pain), *nostalgia* intimates a long semantic lineage (Dodman, 2018). However, while framed as ostensibly *primordial* in its lexical likeness to affective precursors like melancholia, *saudade*, *maladie du pays*, or *ennui*, Dodman (2018) has convincingly argued that nostalgia is a recent historical construct. The word only emerged in 1688, coined by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer (1688) in reference to a cerebral disease caused by “... excessive vibration of the animal spirits through those fibers of the middle brain in which impressed traces of ideas of the Fatherland still cling” (Wildschut, Sedikides, & Routledge, 2008, p. 20). As his initial etiology indicates, the term was used to denote a particular expression of homesickness observed in Swiss mercenaries stationed abroad (Batcho, 2013). As well, Hofer believed nostalgia was caused by disequilibrium of the animal spirits—i.e., the historical analog to the modern nerve impulse—the result of which made his patients unresponsive to other stimuli (Fuentenebro & Valiente, 2014). What distinguished nostalgia from antecedents like melancholia or *ennui*, which were similarly characterized by anxiety, depression, amnesia, and hallucinations, was its orientation towards a specific, *lost* object (Wildschut, Sedikides, & Routledge, 2008).

In this sense, nostalgia is more closely akin to the German word, *heimweh*, referring to the moral pain resulting from forced separation from family and social environment (Fuentenebro & Valiente, 2014). Because Hofer had exclusively observed nostalgia in soldiers abroad, he had also presumed that nostalgia was endemic to the Swiss (Wildschut et al., 2008). Of course, the ‘maladie du Swiss’ was quickly discredited as nostalgia was increasingly diagnosed in persons irrespective of military position or nationality. As awareness of nostalgia spread via medical texts and patient narratives throughout Europe and to a lesser extent, the U.S.

and Canada (where the term homesickness was primarily used until the late nineteenth century; Matt, 2007), its imprecise etiology lent itself to a swath of dissimilar interpretations (Batcho, 2013). Furthermore, these were doubtless influenced by 18th century Enlightenment thought, where theorizations of nostalgia began to intersect with developments in the study of memory (Fuentenebro & Valiente, 2014). The French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, for instance, argued that nostalgia was situated in the faculty of imagination, which was separate from memory. In effect, he reasoned that the severity one experienced nostalgia was relative to the intensity or vividness of the imagination (O’Sullivan, 2012).

Relatedly, this promulgated the idea that imagination—and by extension, nostalgia—were erratic and unreliable, in comparison to the veracity attributed to memory proper. Contrary to Condillac, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued against the idea that imagination and memory were separate faculties. In *Dictionnaire de Musique* (1764), he cited cases where soldiers were overcome by nostalgia from singing idiomatic melodies, arguing that these responses were derived not from imaginative distortions, but from a network of associated memories (Batcho, 2013). Nevertheless, the idea that nostalgia had a distortive role in rational judgement persisted into the 18th and even began to take on explicit classed dimensions. In *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1783), for instance, German philosopher Immanuel Kant identified agrarian workers from bucolic regions as especially predisposed to nostalgia, made manifest in their inability to *adapt* to processes of modernization (O’Sullivan, 2012). Given that Kant believed in a predestined, global cosmopolitanism—i.e., the mature conclusion of historical progress (Kleingeld, 2011)—it is apparent how such underpinning values worked in clear favour of particular social groups.

Taken together, these perspectives dovetail with a broader shift towards Western modernity in their promotion of a distinctively imperial expansionist sensibility (Tannock, 1995). Indeed, while once theorized and managed sympathetically as a disease prompted by a desire for and attachment to home, nostalgia conflicted with the modern ethos, where spatial notions of identity and home became increasingly understood in abstract and temporal terms (Dodman, 2018). Where earlier clinical accounts of nostalgia held that a loss of physical home equated to a loss of self, this was superseded by an impetus to feel at home anywhere (O’Sullivan, 2012). Here too, developments in the study of medicine and the body increasingly shifted, such that the study of mental phenomena like memory gradually fell under the diagnostic authority of the “psy-disciplines” (McAvoy, 2014). For example, following Rousseau’s initial musings, the French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot (1897) argued that memory should not be framed as a rational counterpoint to imagination, but rather, as intrinsically emotional, capricious, and prone to error (Dodman, 2018). Furthermore, in *The Psychology of Emotions* (1897), Ribot argued that because of its distinctive interaction with memory and emotion, nostalgia likely played an important role in identity formation and psychological continuity across time (Fuentenebro & Valiente, 2014; Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015).

These interests also extended to the broader sociocultural sphere; for instance, the Romanticism movement stimulated a reactionary upsurge in nostalgia among literary circles, where ideas about subjectivity, identity, and memory were fostered and elaborated. These novelists and poets often extricated medical terms from the clinical lexicon, reformulating them through literary devices like metaphor. Circulating through the work of esteemed French novelists like Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) and Marcel Proust (1871–1922), nostalgia presented a sensory gateway through which simple and idyllic memories and their related

pleasures could be accessed again. The ‘Proust effect’, for instance, refers to a passage from *Swann’s Way* (1913) in which the narrator is transported via the sensory experience of eating a traditional madeleine biscuit soaked in an aromatic lime blossom tea. In a sudden and involuntary sensorial rush, he is returned to (or *brings forth*, if you like) an ostensibly *lost* memory from his childhood in Combray, a fragment of the forgotten past charmed into conscious experience in the dazzling richness of the present. Indeed, this idea that the inaccessible past could be retrieved, and by extension, knowledge of *the self*, was made all the more enticing to novelists and publics reacting to the disruptive effects of rapid sociocultural change. As O’Sullivan (2012) has argued, this host of existential and phenomenological considerations were spurred through a hunger for meaning resulting, rather predictably, in an idealization of ‘premodern’ living and tradition.

Moreover, for those writing about ‘the mind’ at the end of the 1920s and 30s, the influence of Freudian thought was inescapable. While Freud generally held more pessimistic views than writers like Proust, he did espouse similar ideas about the significance of formative development, symbolism, and the possibility of retrieving and analyzing memories from the personal past in ways that could inform the present (Surprenant, 2013). A central method Proust integrated from Freud was *free association*, a technique manifest in Proust’s emphasis on unfettering present experience from the constraints of time and space; indeed, this allowed him to write and think about memory in innovative and creative ways. Indeed, the psychoanalytic tenor of Proust (1913) is most palpable in the following excerpt: “The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation of which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling” (p. 60).

For analysts, symbolism facilitated the experience of nostalgia beyond a specific object or spatial location (Kaplan, 1987). In effect, nostalgia was considered a deeply pleasurable idealization made bitter only due to the awareness that one could not reexperience the original object (e.g., a desire for the distant preoedipal mother; a lost childhood). Analysts emphasized that clinical nostalgia, a variant of depression, was likely a psychological defense emerging from conflicts in early emotional development (Batcho, 2013). This emphasis on ‘early development’ would figure heavily in subsequent interpretations of nostalgia by early experimental psychologists. It was around this time in the United States that the concepts ‘nostalgia’ and ‘homesickness’, although previously considered interchangeable, became increasingly more discrete. Prior to the 20th century, this distinction had been merely superficial (Anderson, 2010)—nostalgia was considered medical jargon used to refer to instances of homesickness (p. 470). As Matt (2007) explains, whereas homesickness “... carried in it the temptation to try to return home” (p. 492), and thus problematic, nostalgia was considered “... less disruptive, offering a way to establish connections with the past that did not seriously undermine the present” (p. 492). This semantic drift is significant for at least two reasons: it led to the emergence of nostalgia as a purely temporal phenomenon; and it transformed the experience of homesickness from socially acceptable to maladaptive behaviour (McCann, 1941).

This was of particular interest to American experimental psychologists steeped in prevailing evolutionary and developmental frameworks for understanding behaviour. Given that this sensibility viewed mobility, adaptability, and competition as valuable social goods, psychologists approached homesickness as a mental condition that *could* and *should* be overcome. To these ends, psychologists developed new criteria upon which diagnoses of homesickness could be considered either temporary (i.e., normal and situational) or pathological

(i.e., atypical and enduring) (McCann, 1941). For instance, experimental psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1904) studied homesickness in children and young adolescents, arguing that homesickness, when occurring outside of the parameters of ‘normal’ development, was indicative of underlying mental deficiency and even antisocial tendency (Batcho, 2013). Hall sought to overcome homesickness through early preventative methods and a form of behaviour modification (Matt, 2007). Correspondingly, contemporaries like experimental psychologist L.W. Kline (1898) framed homesickness as a ‘personality trait’ suggestive of a ‘provincial’ mindset, contrasting this against the valued cosmopolitanism of the “migratory impulse” (Kline, 1898, pp. 76). This reprise is reminiscent of Kant’s theorization a century earlier, made particularly obvious when Kline refers to the nostalgic as “... provincial, plodding, and timid” (p. 80). In *Principles of Adolescent Psychology* (1935), the psychologist Edmund S. Conklin argued that homesickness was indicative of immaturity, maladjustment, and weakness, while those immune were “... the most social, the most educated and the most intelligent persons” (Matt, 2007, p. 494).

To mitigate against this condition, he advanced early training in independence and structured separation between parent and child (e.g., summer camp). This emphasis on homesickness in children and adolescents resulted in further inattention to symptomology in adults (Hall, 1904). While literature on homesickness endured into the 1960s, focusing on its adverse psychological consequences for adolescents transitioning into university (van Tilburg et al., 1996) and newcomer populations arriving in the United States (the pathological vestiges of which will be discussed later in relation to the racial and xenophobic dimensions of nostalgia research; Wildschut, Sedikides, Alowidy, 2018; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022), research on nostalgia was comparatively scarce, often sequestered to marketing research on consumer

preferences. This uptick in consumer research was spurred by the confluence of forces like the consumer industry, mass immigration, and urbanization.

While newcomers yearned for the goods that reminded them of home, white settlers who had been long situated in the U.S. were reacting to a rapidly diversifying cultural sphere and a perceived 'loss of culture' (Matt, 2007). It is no surprise then that by the 1970s, the heritage industry was booming: museums, historic sites, rustic architecture revival, souvenirs, and memorabilia all worked to simulate a connection to a past that could be experienced as timeless and permanent (Lowenthal, 1996). These novelties worked to assuage feelings of dislocation experienced by both newcomers and settlers alike as they navigated the effects of growing sociocultural heterogeneity (Davis, 1979). Together, this rapid cultural and technological provided fecund grounds for the development of nostalgia as we know it today.

Particularly among cognitive and social psychologists, there was a growing sense that nostalgia must serve some teleological purpose (Batcho, 2013). With little unanimity (i.e., applied liberally as an emotional state and personality trait; Barrett et al., 2010), psychologists began to view the role of nostalgia in everyday emotion and memory processes as an opening to integrate previous insights from empirical and psychoanalytic work, applying these to contemporary notions of personality and identity formation and maintenance (Cavanaugh, 1989). Within this new interpretive framework, nostalgia became considered a fundamental part of human nature, "... a sentimental longing or affection for the past" (Baldwin, Biernat, & Landau, 2015, p. 128) arising in response to stress or rapid change (Davis, 1979; Wilson, 2005). Furthermore, this period marked what would be termed "the Long 1980s" (i.e., from the late 70s to early 90s), wherein "... an emerging set of practices and ideas became dominant across these overlapping arenas" (Hassler-Forest, 2020, p. 179). Harvey's (1990) refers to this particular

historical confluence of neoliberal policies and neoconservative rhetoric as “flexible accumulation” (p. 147), reinforcing a particular white, ‘middle-class’ normative identity. This identity would figure heavily in subsequent elaborations of U.S. and Canadian nostalgia.

Conclusion

In the above historical review, I have illustrated how nostalgia found its initial linguistic expression, and how this in turn affected the meaning and experience of nostalgia. Whereas nostalgia was expressed more openly in the 18th and 19th centuries—lending itself to easier scientific analysis—modern society valued the suppression and overcoming of nostalgia and the related category of homesickness; juxtaposing these different interpretations provides useful insights into how people navigated their particular set of sociohistorical and cultural circumstances. The same can be said for particular geographic differences within similar historical periods. Prior to the 19th century, nostalgia for place-based attachment was viewed more sympathetically in European countries in comparison to the U.S., given cultural differences with respect to beliefs regarding liberty, progress, and developing nationhood. In short: being nostalgic was simply ‘unamerican’ (Matt, 2007). Nevertheless, renewed interest in nostalgia was spurred by the coalescing forces of technological advancement, mass immigration, and the rise of consumer culture (Davis, 1979). In summary, notwithstanding evidence of its historical vacillation, the demand for conceptual clarity in tandem with distinctly ideological forces influenced the progressive naturalization of nostalgia in psychology and among its publics. Additionally, given its historically indiscriminate application as sentiment, mood, state, and trait, psychologists began to develop methods for the empirical investigation of nostalgia at the *individual-level*.

I now turn to an assessment of the current psychological literature on nostalgia, with particular attention to the link between neoliberalism and mainstream psychology, and how this connection has in turn shaped mainstream psychology's handling of affective phenomena (Dimitriadou et al., 2019; Behler et al., 2021). While I have intimated at the growing influence of neoliberal capitalism on nostalgia as it began to solidify as an ideology in the latter 20th century, still unexplained is how psychology as a discipline and neoliberal capitalism have reinforced one another. After outlining the major contributions by contemporary psychologists (Batcho, 2013; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018; FioRito & Routledge, 2020), Chapter II will explain how the push by prominent psychologists in the field to understand nostalgia as a desirable emotional state and individual coping tool elides its disputed conceptual history, particularly with respect to its contemporary political functions. By tracing its contemporary political development alongside the psychological research, I intend to further expose this nexus. If understood within this framework, nostalgia begins to function as a mechanism for the expansion of neoliberal logics and subjectivities, as expressed most manifestly in areas of PP, rigid individualism, and aesthetic culture. As I have illustrated, nostalgia has evolved through a dynamic interplay of medical, scientific, referential, and connotative interpretations. This begs the conceptual question of why current psychological research frames nostalgia as something that can be predominantly qualified as positive (Newman et al., 2019).

Chapter II: A critical appraisal of nostalgia in psychology

Psychology now claims dominion not only over our depression, but over our optimism too. (Howell, 2015, p. 20)

As a brief recapitulation of Chapter I, the transition from the 20th to the 21st century saw the gradual extrication of nostalgia from its earlier pathological connotations (Dodman, 2018). Chapter II will focus on the U.S. context with respect to the development of psychology as a discipline, its related subject matter, and its interlocking ideological commitments. While nostalgia itself did not garner ample attention from 20th century U.S. psychologists, intersecting concepts like homesickness provide useful coordinates for ascertaining what psychologists were thinking about their phenomena (Matt, 2007). Furthermore, Chapter I detailed how prevailing evolutionary and developmental paradigms framed homesickness as indicative of an underlying mental deficiency but situated this transitory experience within the parameters of normal adult development (e.g., transition from youth to adulthood). Identifying the adaptive purpose behind personality traits and behaviours had the twofold benefit of solidifying psychology as an indispensable discipline, in addition to defanging historically thorny concepts like homesickness (and nostalgia) of their more ambiguous, unruly dimensions (O'Sullivan, 2012).

By establishing the normative boundaries of personality, temperament, and behaviour, this afforded psychologists the authority to deem those who did not meet their standards as a potential threat to national security (Matt, 2007). As I have already intimated, U.S. psychologists and their publics were operating along a common governing substratum (i.e., ideological values, motivations, and commitments) that in turn shaped their theorizations about and interpretations of psychological phenomena. For instance, by situating nostalgia and homesickness within a standard window of normal development, these concepts became markers not of underlying

mental deficiency or deviancy, but of fealty and patriotism (Batcho, 2013, p. 169). Indeed, this novel conviction that nostalgia strengthened social institutions and unified social groups undoubtedly contributed to its further shift from merely conventional to desirable affective phenomenon (Davis, 1979).

Correspondingly, advancements in 1960s cognitive psychology and subsequent personality psychology in the 1970s underscored the interconnected and dynamic exigencies of cognition and affect in the context of individual differences, and how these differences factor into complex behaviours and identity processes over time (Batcho, 2013). While distinct as a movement, the work during this period bore a clear intellectual lineage to early experimental and psychoanalytic work made manifest in cognitive psychologists' concerted efforts to identify the mediating role of nostalgia on processes of memory and personality development (Batcho, 2013, p. 170). Additionally, in response to persistent frustrations over its indiscriminate application as sentiment, mood, state, and personality trait, psychologists developed methods for investigating nostalgia at the individual-level (Barrett et al., 2010). This formulation of nostalgia as a cognitive–emotional experience bolstered the sustained idea that nostalgia is a fundamental means of developing and maintaining personal identity and relationships over time (Juhl et al., 2010). This early work provided the vital scaffolding for the rise of PP at the end of the 1990s, a movement that remains consequential for nostalgia as a modern psychological construct.

First advanced by former APA President Martin Seligman in 1998, PP endeavours to promote PWB and happiness—often used interchangeably in the literature (Nyabul & Situma, 2014)—through “... a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). However noble

in pursuit, positive psychologists like Seligman have been charged with promulgating neoliberal individualism under the guise of “triumphant positivity” and pursuit of ‘the good life’ (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021, p. 563). Tracing this connection between positivity discourses and neoliberal cultural formations, Ahmed (2010, 2014) argues that injunctions to be positive function to depoliticize and flatten emotional life through the advancement of distinct “feelings rules” (Hochschild, 1983) or “positions” (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021, p. 553). As I have mentioned, a main contention in current theorizations of nostalgia is the tendency to reduce it to something that is primarily positive and serves a positive and productive function. Alongside the description of PP that I have just provided, it is clear that the recent push to incorporate nostalgia into a growing toolkit of psychological constructs aimed at enhancing individual wellbeing warrants close examination.

I will now turn my attention to contemporary psychological research, illustrating how these early framings figure in current theorizations, as well as their social and political ramifications. For instance, a central problematic in current theorizations of nostalgia is the tendency to pretzel this phenomenon into something that is positive and productive, which minimizes its reactionary function in the political and cultural sphere. By contrast, reducing nostalgia to something inherently negative is also unhelpful, as this overlooks its potential critical mobilizations. Instead, we might appreciate nostalgia as a more ambivalent phenomenon that, when carefully considered, can provide valuable insights into the social, ideological, and historical conditions in which we are irrevocably entrenched. To these ends, I am critiquing nostalgia as an individualized coping tool and as a positive, universal emotion. By juxtaposing these contours of my critique, I aim to tease out the contradictions that emerge, and how these incongruities fold into a wider problematic advanced by neoliberal ideology.

Measuring nostalgia

Regarding the purported benefits of nostalgia in relation to positive affect and PWB, Newman et al. (2020) have pointed out a number of ecological validity concerns. In their review of the recent empirical research, they argue that the most widely used measure of nostalgia, the *Southampton Nostalgia Scale* (SNS; Barrett et al., 2010; Routledge et al., 2008), is conceptually limited and overwhelmingly positive in valence. Indeed, the SNS scale endeavours to assess nostalgia as an individual trait using seven items, all of which contain the word “nostalgia” and are nearly indistinguishable in content. For instance, Item 1 asks “How valuable is nostalgia for you?”, while Item 2 analogously probes “How important is it for you to bring to mind nostalgic experiences?” (Barrett et al., 2010; Routledge et al., 2008). This, McCrae (2015) explains, confounds our ability accurately measure or qualify trait variance. Moreover, these items are hardly reflective of nostalgia’s markedly “mixed” affective signature (Hepper et al., 2012, p. 114). Similarly, Newman et al. (2020) observed that “published scales assessing nostalgia have either measured the construct in highly specific contexts, have asked participants questions that rely on extensive recall, or have included aspects that do not pertain to the experience per se” (p. 327). Taken together, these considerations intimate that existing psychological research lacks substantive insight about everyday nostalgia.

Another important consideration to note is the sample pool psychologists primarily draw from; across the literature, the vast majority of study participants are undergraduate students situated in the U.S. and in the United Kingdom (U.K.) (Newman et al., 2020). Without adequate representation in terms of age demographic and social location, this raises further questions on the applicability of psychologists’ findings (Azar, 2010). Although psychologists admit this as a study limitation, nostalgia is nonetheless framed as a “... universal, and highly social emotional

experience” (Fiorito & Routledge, 2020, p. 1133) that is “predominantly positive” (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008, p. 304). Contrastingly, Newman and colleagues (2020) maintain that in everyday life, the relationship between nostalgia and PWB is likely less positive than what present experimental findings denote. If nostalgia is indeed “... part of the fabric of everyday life”, as Hepper et al. (2012) suggest, it would behoove psychologists to expand their empirical, methodological, and theoretical repertoires.

In sum, while nostalgia is depicted as an emotion in and outside of the academe (Shaver, et al., 1987), it also involves a blend of cognitive (e.g., triggers and referents) and motivational (e.g., longing) processes (Batcho, 2013; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023) anchored in particular social, cultural, geographic, and historical contingencies. By discounting these nuanced exigencies in favour of a narrow, Westernized understanding of nostalgia, psychologists inadvertently naturalize the ideological conditions they are situated in. This is what sociologists Wimmer and Schiller (2003) refer to as “methodological nationalism”, whereby social scientists assume that their own countries are the natural units for comparative studies. This in turn equates society with the nation-state, conflating national interests with the goals of social science. In short, methodological nationalism reflects and reinforces the identification that many scholars maintain with their own nation-states (p. 576).

Applying this framework to the two central mechanisms of nostalgia purported by psychologists in the literature—i.e., its regulatory, restorative, and palliative function and its self-oriented, existential, and social function (Newman et al., 2019, p. 326)—we can link each of these mechanisms to corresponding Western ideological tenets. This interplay constitutes an *affective–discursive repertoire* composed of “... ideas, arguments, characters and figures of speech” that, when taken together, “... offer a distinctive construction of the group, argument or

phenomenon” (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021, p. 552). These considerations raise important questions about the multitude of psychological gains—e.g., increased optimism, a sense of purpose, and social connectedness (Batcho, 2013; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018; FioRito & Routledge, 2020)—reported by psychologists.

While mainstream psychology waxes lyrical on nostalgia’s comprehensive application and psychological benefits (Kelley et al., 2022), at the same time, this positive reframing distracts from other theoretical developments in the social sciences and humanities; the rise of antidemocratic politics in the West have laid bare how nostalgia can be exploited by politicians to bolster resentment and violence, shifting attention away from broader structural inequalities (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022; Elçi, 2022). This complicates the existing notion that nostalgia is a predominantly positive, prosocial emotion. As I touched on earlier in Chapter I, this trend is not limited to reactionary movements; through careful examination of its contents, mechanisms, and conditions, these scholars argue that nostalgia is as a core feature of sentimental culture in the West, a sensibility characterized by positivity (e.g., uplifting, comforting, ‘feel good’) discourses as an antidote to social, economic, and geopolitical crises (Gill & Orgad, 2022). Through social media exhortations to ‘stay positive’, focus on ‘self-care’, and reflect on the ‘good old days’, sentimentalism functions as an additive and individualized solution, diverting attention away from ongoing systemic inequities.

While psychologists like Hepper and colleagues (2012) note that, “it is crucial to examine further whether prototypical nostalgia and its functions emerge in the same way across multiple cultures”, and that it is not clear whether “group-relevance and communal significance feature more prominently in Eastern, collectivistic samples” (p. 116). This statement alone raises two important points: 1) that these authors appear more intent on validating their “nostalgia

prototype” than grappling with its sociohistorical contingencies (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022); and 2) that by identifying instances of nostalgia irrespective of cultural and geographic location (and thus natural and universal), psychology’s version of nostalgia is legitimized through the notion that it is outside of ideology and thus beyond critique (Daston, 2001; Dodman, 2018). Addressing these recurring themes, I will now turn to a discussion of some of the critical research that has emerged in response to this, in addition to specific examples that perpetuate these problems. This section highlights two areas of research: 1) in light of increased attention to the importance of scaling up intersectionality and antiracism, a small cluster of social and political psychologists have redirected their attention to how nationalist nostalgia appears to be galvanized through a threatened sense of group identity and alienation of the white, settler, conservative demographic; and 2) a growing body of research has focused on the enduring link between nostalgia and forced geographic displacement (e.g., refugee crises; slavery). Taken together, these alternative renderings illuminate enduring processes of pathologization that psychologists claim to have dismantled.

Nostalgia and the rise of western antidemocratic politics

Declaring nostalgia’s unequivocal link to reactionary discourses, a select group of psychologists situated in the U.S. and Canada have turned their attention to the connection between the rise of populism, collective nostalgia, and the conservative right (Dimitriadou et al., 2019; Behler et al., 2021). In this vein, Billig (2023) has recently argued that “... it is often assumed that psychological globalization produces tolerant, cosmopolitan outlooks, which deglobalization is now replacing with intolerance and narrow nationalism” (p. 163). This aligns with Kinnvall and Kisić Merino’s (2023) recent claim that social movements identify with and organize themselves around specific affects. To use another example of this form of emotional

governance in action, psychologist Octavia Calder-Dawe et al. (2021) have examined how “... positivity discourse may... reaffirm profoundly unequal patterns of emotional practice and regulation” (p. 551). Focusing on its gendered and cultural dimensions such as mothering and other traditionally ‘feminized’ practices, these authors underscore the injurious consequences of positivity practices, where the impetus to “individualize and responsabilize” (p. 566) augments inequitable patterns of affective practice and regulation.

This too allies with the decolonizing framework advanced by critical psychologists Bhatia and Priya (2018), who underscore the tensions brought about by the influence of psychologization in non-Western cultures. Through this work, they argue how “psychology is, wittingly or unwittingly, complicit in advancing the neoliberal discourse of self in... organizations, economic policies of the state, and social life” (Bhatia & Priya, 2018, p. 663). Indeed, as Kinvall & Kisić Merino (2023) similarly reinforce, “... emotional governance can be traced to the increased secularization and commodification of social life experienced during the expansion of neoliberal globalization” (p. 234). As several important critical scholars of affect have pointed out, nostalgia specifically is heavily implicated in current reactionary politics, where sentimental rhetoric is strategically leveraged to advance and sustain racist and xenophobic agendas (Berlant, 2011; Calder-Dawe et al., 2021).

For example, political theorist Wendy Brown (1999) has examined sentimentality in the United States through the practice of ‘walling’ (i.e., erecting physical boundaries between and within nations). As Brown argues, while walls themselves are notoriously ineffective controlling the flow of persons across borders, this is central discourse promulgated by western nations, which suggests that such discourses and practices work to assuage the affective pulse of the national imaginary, rather than as an effective consolidation of state power. This example

highlights the clear psychopolitical dimensions of affect and its consequential influence. Without contextualizing nostalgia this way, we risk imposing further discriminatory logics that operate in the service of dominant societies and related processes of coloniality (i.e., what counts as ‘knowledge’; Schwarz, 2018, p. 534).

Indeed, sentimentalism in the political sphere appears to endorse societal unification through a moralistic posturing that not only fail to address existing structural disparities but actively contributes to them. This interplay between psychology, neoliberal capitalism, and its publics is important to underscore, as it contributes to knowledge about how people and social groups organize and understand themselves. Notably, this is not a unidirectional relationship, wherein psychologists boast complete governing authority on affect; rather, political actors and publics actively shape and are shaped by psychological knowledge. Crucially, this reinforces the imperative for psychologists to produce epistemologically responsible and ethical research. As Teo (2010) contends, “because interpretations of data emerge from an academic context and thus are presented as knowledge, they are defined as *epistemologically violent* actions” (p. 295). Thus, in mistakenly advancing nostalgia as a universal tool with a swath of psychological benefits, this has the upshot of obscuring sociohistorical realities to palpably deleterious effect.

Example I: Nostalgia and forced displacement

Intent on testing nostalgia’s functional boundaries, Wildschut, Sedikides, and Alowidy (2019) conducted a recent study on the psychological functions of *hanin* (the Arabic term for nostalgia) among Syrian refugees in Saudi Arabia who have been forcibly displaced in the ongoing civil war since 2011. Participants were asked to recall a nostalgic event, where nostalgia was defined as “... a sentimental longing for one’s past or as feeling sentimental for a fond and valued memory from one’s personal past” (Wildschut et al., 2019, p. 1371). Participants were

subsequently administered two tests; the *Event Reflection Task* (ERT; Sedikides et al., 2015), which measures self-reported current affect along two planes of affective experience (i.e., valence and activation), and the *Resilience Scale* (RS; Wagnild & Young, 1993).

Contrary to previous findings, nostalgia decreased optimism among participants in this study. Cushioning these results in their discussion, Wildschut et al. (2019) maintain that these results ignore the moderating role and importance of “dispositional resilience” (p. 1368). When incorporated into their analyses, they remark how “... high-resilience refugees enjoyed most of nostalgia’s benefits and suffered none of the costs incurred by those who lacked resilience” (p. 1377). Even among “low-resilience refugees”, they argue, the “... negative effects in the future-oriented domain were compensated by positive effects on the existential functions of self-continuity and meaning in life” (p. 1377). Accordingly, “... nostalgia could have a critical therapeutic function even for low-resilience individuals” (p. 1377).

What is perhaps even more startling about this interpretation is the further elaboration at the end of the paper, where the authors cite nostalgia's manifest role in “... facilitating refugees’ successful adjustment to their host culture” (Wildschut et al., 2019, p. 1379). This is understood against the classical backdrop of *acculturation* (Berry, 1980), which notoriously adopts a “one size fits all” approach (Rudmin, 2003) that treats all migrants equally irrespective of type (e.g., refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants), origin, and ethnicity (i.e., values, beliefs, customs). Additionally, Schwartz et al. (2010) explain that psychological approaches often translate these acculturation logics into individualized terms like “acculturation strategies” (Berry, 1980; Phinney, 2003), which elide demographic and contextual considerations that delimit individual choice (p. 237).

These aforementioned logics are markedly at work in the article by Wildschut et al. (2019), where successful cultural integration functions as a key indicator of PWB and adaptation (p. 1379). Furthermore, a central moderating factor employed in this study was the concept of “psychological resilience”, a wildly popular buzzword with roots in early PP. Psychological resilience can be broadly defined as “the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event ... to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning, as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions” (Bonanno, 2004, pp. 20–21). Similarly, the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (2022) defines resilience as “... the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands” (n.d.).

Owing to the decontextualizing predisposition in Western psychology, concepts like psychological resilience can reproduce power imbalances and discrimination (Schwarz, 2018, p. 529). This mainly occurs through process of “commodification”, where certain subjective states become valued and sought after goods in neoliberal culture (Binkley, 2013; Rose & Lentzos, 2017; Timimi, 2017). Another important consideration to note in the study by Wildschut et al. (2019) is that these inferences are based upon an experimentally evoked measurement of nostalgia as a current state and in relation to a specific, personal memory (p. 1379). By neglecting acculturation factors in the dominant culture (e.g., goals, attitudes, and behaviours directed at migrant populations)—what Geschke et al., (2010) argue are the best indicators of acculturation goals (p. 489)—this engenders the prime neoliberal conditions for a decontextualized, individualized rendering of nostalgia.

Example II: Nostalgia and the COVID-19 pandemic

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wildschut and Sedikides (2023) conducted a review of the emergent body of randomized intervention studies of nostalgia, "... with the ultimate goal of harnessing nostalgia for psychological wellbeing" (p. 80). Most notable of these was the intervention conducted by Zhou et al. (2022) in the context of the pandemic. In light of the palpable "wave of nostalgia" that gripped mainstream cultural discourses (p. 811), the authors hypothesized that: 1) nostalgic induction would reduce loneliness and 2) that nostalgia would mitigate against the adverse influence of loneliness on the "global construct" wellbeing (formed by indicators such as positive and negative affect [PA and NA, respectively] and happiness, Zhou et al., 2022, p. 807). In addition to correlational data extracted from three cultures (i.e., China, the U.S., and Canada) via MTurk, nostalgia was measured through the ERT (Sedikides et al., 2015), the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), and the presence or absence of a "nostalgia-induction booster" (i.e., wherein participants are asked to recall the nostalgic event one to two days following the initial questionnaire).

Across three studies that engaged participants in China, the U.K., and the U.S., it is notable that nostalgia had a significant and direct impact on PA and happiness only for Western participants; this implies that the global constructs psychologists' claim to have at their disposal may actually be measuring something highly specific. As I touched on in earlier discussions of PP and its influence on this subject matter, terms like happiness, optimism, and resilience—while advanced as 'universal'—are sociohistorically contingent (Klein & Mills, 2017). Furthermore, framing the pursuit of happiness as a global objective and index of success represents a new developmental paradigm with clear links to neoliberal governmentality (p. 1998). Considering the Zhou et al. (2021) study with the previous work by Wildschut et al. (2019), we can observe

two important parallels: 1) nostalgia's limited application in diverse populations; and 2) the gradual assimilation of nostalgia into neoliberal and PP discursive repertoires.



The first two strips from KC Green's comic *Gunshow*

This is made more troubling when we consider that, although neoliberal ideology increasingly structures PWB, neoliberalism is linked to poorer collective wellbeing (Card & Hepburn, 2022). Indeed, such observations underscore the urgency of developing alternative methods that accurately reflect the theoretical principles and mechanisms underpinning nostalgia (and other phenomena) in *real-world* settings (Wildschut & Sedikides, 2023). Before we approach this matter, however, I would like to conclude Chapter II by discussing the ways pathological or maladaptive forms of nostalgia continue to circulate in the literature. In light of the positive reframing of many affect phenomena since the rise of PP in the last two decades, these vestiges can be difficult to detect particularly when channeled through the interpretive prism of positivity.

A note on nostalgia's symptoms and their systemic underpinnings

While the western modernity narrative supports that nostalgia plays a crucial role in psychological continuity and nationhood, there exists a rich body of diasporic and mobilities literature that interrogate these virtues (Tinsley, 2020). For instance, social science scholars in

the field of migration studies like Milligan (2003) have underscored the abiding nexus between nostalgia and geographic displacement (Milligan, 2003), casting into sharp relief how nostalgia does not always work in the service of positivity. In their musings on nostalgia and immigration, clinician Alexander Zinchenko (2011) writes that in the migrant's life-world, nostalgia can be disruptive and malignant (p. 85). As he explains:

The severity of the symptoms corresponds to my observations in working with immigrants and refugees. I found myself surprised and bewildered to see patients, reportedly without prior psychiatric history, presenting with unexplainable diffuse worries and fears, feeling disoriented and depressed, complaining of nightmares, fatigue, and worsening of their physical health (Zinchenko, 2011, p. 86).

Examining this passage through the lens of neoliberalism, we can observe how depending on social location, nostalgia can be differently positioned as an obstacle to PWB. In effect, certain behaviours become unjustly problematized by virtue of how nostalgia is defined in the western context. Psychologists promulgate these problems via additive, individualized solutions (i.e., the problem is the individual, not the underpinning system) instead of acknowledging the systemic factors that reproduce and sustain unfair and injurious social relations (Davidson, 2016).

Lijtmaer (2022) likewise argues that because immigration and exile can be experienced as social traumas, nostalgia can be an affirming linking affect that mitigates against geographic, linguistic, and cultural dislocation (p. 305). From the perspective of mainstream psychologists like Sedikides et al. (2009), such practices are only beneficial insofar as they bolster the path to acculturation in the host country. Indeed, although Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2018) cite high anxiety levels in migrants as a result of nostalgia, they similarly reinforce that what produces these adverse mental health consequences for migrants are systemic prejudice and discrimination.

Taken together, these systemic factors—in addition to more nuanced, intersectional framings of nostalgia—are rendered invisible through a neoliberal, psychologized lexis (e.g., resilience, autonomy, environmental mastery as key markers of PWB; Ryff, 1989; Ryff et al., 2007).

Conclusion

When nostalgia is (re)contextualized, it is made apparent that it exists not only at the level of the individual, but also across a dynamic spectrum of social practices, interactions, and entities. One drawback I have raised throughout the preceding chapters is that mainstream psychological science, in confusing its subject matter for natural kinds, approaches phenomena as if it can be disentangled from its sociohistorical context (Brinkmann, 2005). Moving on to Chapter III, I will advance my own retheorization of nostalgia that attends to the psychopolitical and aesthetic contours yet to be addressed in the literature. In effect, I aim to retheorize nostalgia from a psychopolitical perspective, or a dynamic affective field of conflict and (re)articulation (Hook 2012). As Behler et al. (2021) writes on the consequence of such an approach:

Prior research has theorized that symbolic threats (rather than realistic threats) may be more psychologically influential on voter support for right-wing populist ideology, as concerns about immigration and intergroup relations tend to emphasize the importance of preserving cultural homogeneity... Understanding the source and salience of perceived economic and cultural threats could help inform interventions to assuage anxiety, thus reducing prejudice toward outgroups... further work in this area should include individuals who identify with other racial groups beyond White or Black and should also be expanded to look at different identities such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigrant status, social class, education level, and nation of origin (pp. 12–13).

If we continue to treat psychology and nostalgia as *apolitical* and *individualistic*, this privileges dominant social structures which contribute to sustained unequal power relations (i.e., ethnocentric and neoliberal), precluding new routes of social change that require the dismantling and transformation of these regulatory state apparatuses (Schwarz, 2018, p. 538). This is made particularly challenging when certain ways of feeling and being are promoted as prosocial and desirable (Bhatia & Priya, 2018). By delineating examples of nostalgia's various functions, I have aimed to demonstrate how the individualized and positive rendering of nostalgia as a universal emotion omits more its collective and politicized dimensions (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022). With that said, I will now turn to my theoretical reconstruction of nostalgia with particular attention to its psychopolitical character.

Chapter III: The case for a psychopolitical retheorization of nostalgia

Drawing primarily from intersecting scholarship in affect and psychoanalytic theory, I retheorize nostalgia in the following ways: 1) nostalgia involves a psychic identification with and investment in (or a cruel attachment to) any number of desired objects (e.g., people, places, aesthetics, ideas, identities, and so forth); 2) this identification, investment, or attachment is characterized by discontinuity and conflict; 3) nostalgia is not pathological, but rather, an actively repeated, ritualized affective practice (re)enacted through various political, cultural, and aesthetic channels; and 4), if nostalgia is indeed a practice, this means that it can be interrupted and restructured, allowing for more generative attachments to flourish. By acknowledging these dimensions of nostalgia, we can better appreciate how interdisciplinary approaches are imperative to grasping its culturally embedded and socially reproduced articulations and functions. Grasping nostalgia as a dynamic, paradoxical field of conflict and (re)articulation (Hook, 2012) is to say that while nostalgia may appear to have a perceptible structure—i.e., shared features or manifestations—its everyday functions are constituted by a disorganized assemblage of embodied, relational, and ideological features.

Studying nostalgia in the naturalistic settings is doubtless challenging, and has resulted in the experimental methods that, while correctly admitting the consequence of nostalgia, are unable to capture its more nuanced psychopolitical circulations and functions. Furthermore, when psychologists' draw superficial distinctions between individualized and collective forms of nostalgia, this elides their invariable enmeshment in everyday life. Indeed, when psychologists cite participants' disconnectedness, lack of purpose, boredom and social burnout—are these not all symptomatic of broader neoliberal capitalism? Thus, the growing endorsement of nostalgia as

a universal positive emotion elide signals a worrying disconnect between psychology and the ideological context in which it is rooted.

(Re)framing conflict and discontinuity: A psychoanalytic approach to sociality

While mainstream psychologists conceptualize nostalgia as a predominantly positive coping tool, a psychoanalytic approach demonstrates how this can be easily reframed as a defense mechanism. This is where the utility of the psychoanalytic perspective becomes most instructive: in affirming and protecting identity, nostalgia can undercut sociality. This is certainly not to suggest some kind of false binary—that nostalgia appears positive but is actually negative, and so forth—only that little attention is given to its holistically (and as we have seen, historically) ambivalent characteristics. This perspective underscores not simply the importance of the psychological, but the imaginary and fantasy operations of nostalgia that situate it within its ideological context (Berlant, 2011). This approach is unique in its emphasis not simply on nostalgia as a modality of memory or remembering (i.e., cognitive), but as a mode of fantasy that structures the collective imaginary. As Hook (2012) writes, “it is all too often the case that the captivating content and emotional gratifications of nostalgia mitigates against a developed analysis of the ideological uses to which it is being put” (p. 232). Furthermore, fantasies of a unified nation devoid of contradiction necessitate an exclusionary undercurrent that can hardly be considered intersectional no less utopian. As Kinnvall and Kisić Merino (2023) elucidate:

From a psychoanalytical perspective, the focus has been on multiple ways of attachments and unconscious ties related to the formation of self and others, especially as manifest in fantasy and subjective relationships. Meanwhile, postcolonial and feminist perspectives have focused on how such fantasies are intrinsically linked to gendered and postcolonial power structures (p. 232).

A notable example of one such power structure is the Western modernity narrative; both colonialism and capitalism underpin its triumphant mythos, wherein European civilization usurps and liberates ‘pre-modern’ peoples and from their antiquated practices via linear, universal narratives of progress—a hallmark of Enlightenment thinking. In this way, the violence of our imperial legacy is often distorted, tempered, and justified through the lens of modernity precisely because it is the ideological precursor to modern society in the West (Tinsley, 2020, p. 2334).

As Tinsley (2020) writes, “... notions of modernity were the product of, as well as the impetus for, European colonialism” (p. 2335), and this twofold process has produced innumerable hybridized social identities nested upon its hierarchical, temporal, and linear trajectory. While nostalgia may appear inimical to modernity—given its celebration of progress from the temporal vantage point of the present—nostalgic reminiscence for a bygone era aligns with modernity in its penchant for “imagined timespace” devoid of clear spatiotemporal coordinates (p. 2336). This is why Sweeney (2019) argues that nostalgia is “neither essentially time nor place directed”, but “... is simply change-directed” (p. 184), or what Crowell (1999) refers terms *aeonic* (i.e., outside of time). This dynamic interplay between European modernity and nostalgia, as O’Sullivan argues (2012), mapped notions of home, belonging, and identity onto the colonial empire, which continue to inform *post-imperial* societies for want of an imagined national identity and common purpose. This too is exacerbated through ongoing processes of globalization, which ethnonationalism frames as a loss of identity. Other common and related myths, like those of decline (i.e., social, cultural, or moral decay), promulgate narratives about certain social groups as robbed of their individualism and values at the expense of collectivism (Smith, 1999, p. 67). During times of perceived social instability and uncertainty, there is a tendency for progressive thinking to lose momentum (doubtless spurred by political

actors seizing widespread vulnerability) in favour of tired (but familiar) traditionalist ideologies. Indeed, some may feel like the past, distorted by abstract notions of time and space, would be preferable to the comparatively visceral experience of the immediate present.

While one can of course identify to an extent with such trepidations, at the same time, nostalgia for ‘the good old days’ is wrought with ethnonationalism and xenophobic resonances succinctly framed by Elçi (2022) as “... a whitewashed past, a glorious era that *everyone* can rally around” (p. 15). Correspondingly, Elgenius and Rydgren (2022) have observed how such discourses are weaponized by political actors in order to pit different social groups against each other. For instance, both Brexit and Trump’s presidential campaigns in 2016 advanced the normative archetype of the “white, working class” as a homogenous community suffering disproportionate hardship at the hands of migrants and “liberal elites” (p. 1234). Borrowing from Berlant, historian Robert Eaglestone (2018) figures this as a prime example of “cruel nostalgia” (p. 92), wherein appeals to nostalgia act as a central (and not to mention widely accepted) binding agent for ethnonationalism, populism, and resentment politics.

As Stauth and Turner (1988) have elucidated in a similar vein, nostalgia props up assertions of moral decline, loss of social cohesion, simplicity, and authenticity through its glorification of an imagined golden era (pp. 30–32). In this interpretative framework, “... past–present, ideal–reality, purity–decay, coherence–uncertainty, and us–them” are juxtaposed as inimical to each other, engendering a simplified causal field in times of heightened stress and perceived threat (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022, p. 1236). Thus, nostalgia—although steeped in the language of the past—does not tell us much about it per se; rather, it conveys insights about the present through close examination of what we *project onto* the past. From a psychoanalytic vantage point, this constitutes a rejection of linearity and continuity by attending to the endlessly

mutable and dynamic ways people suture themselves into *mutually-determining* affective constellations of past, present, and future. Additionally, it demands that we acknowledge the active presence of the past, the underdefined character of the present, and influence of these apprehensions on the future. As well, that all are subject to nostalgic revisionism in defense of the self and at the expense of the collective (that is, if we opt to deny or attempt to level these conflicts with resolute sentimentalism).

Dominant affective identifications, investments, and attachments

This perspective illuminates earlier discussions of nostalgia's existential function in the context of TMT and ontological (in)security. While psychologists discuss ontological security as a desirable and potentially attainable mental state, Hook (2012, 2013) maintains that ontological security is situated in the fantasy domain—that is, a desire that can never be fulfilled. While it may be the case that nostalgia is characteristically thought of or experienced as “bittersweet” (Batcho, 2013), one could also argue that this ‘sweetness’ may arise on account of what nostalgia can circumvent—that is, feelings of anxiety. In his original formulation of screen memories, Freud (1899/1968c) intimates that while reminiscence can be registered as ‘positive’, this says nothing of its ultimate ‘truth-value’ (Hook, 2012, p. 233). On this reading, nostalgia can work to assuage existential anxieties inducing in the face of ongoing historical and epistemic ruptures. As Hook (2012) argues, “... the valorization of nostalgia's imaginary properties limits us to descriptive as opposed to properly analytical readings. Preoccupations with imaginary features blind us to the underlying psychological or political functions of nostalgia (p. 233).

This shares resonances with Bauman's (2010) claim that restorative nostalgia increasingly anchors a social sphere steeped in ‘liquid modernity’—i.e., unceasing mobility and change across areas of identity and society—assuaging widespread insecurities, anxieties, and

fears. As Bargetz (2021) similarly maintains, affective governance via the intersecting forces of neoliberalism and capitalism interact to consolidate state power by providing its citizenry with “... distinctive objects of fear [that] can thus help limit a complex and complicated field of causalities” (p. 24). These *dominant reactive affects* can be observed in the political and cultural sphere. For instance, “... while misery dominated capitalism in the 19th century and boredom shaped Fordism, the dominant affective structure of neoliberal capitalism is anxiety (Bargetz, 2021, p. 20). This extends earlier work by the late sociologist Stuart Hall (1979, 1985, 1988), who examined the link between reactionary affect and authoritarian populism in the 1970s.

While some social psychologists have turned their attention to the weaponization of emotions on ‘the right’—popularized by Trumpism—Bargetz (2021) highlights the need to investigate not just ‘extreme’ manifestations, but “... the very conditions of possibility that make such a politics of fear so successful in this historical present” (p. 21). In effect, this implies the existence of a dominant, underpinning set of discourses and social practices that we all engage with to some extent, albeit to different ends and intentions. For instance, practices of western democratic societies are grounded by shared governing principles and values like liberty and sovereignty, which in turn organize social relations. As Kabgani and Clarke (2016) pithily remark, both the left and right are culpable in “... providing a suitably grand identity by fantasizing its loss” (p. 169). This sentiment buttresses both Bargetz (2021) and Hook’s (2012) claims regarding the link between seemingly disparate affects and their operations. In other words, while the affective qualities of nostalgia and anxiety can feel separate, the positive feelings associated with nostalgia may in fact belie underpinning anxieties. Furthermore, and as a number of critical scholars in the field of affect have suggested (Ahmed, 2014; Brown, 2019; Billig, 2023), articulating these commonalities—upon which vastly different social and political

orientations are structured—is the first step to confronting and dismantling these overarching power structures.

For instance, pronouncements of liberal moralism in the Canadian context—particularly when juxtaposed against the social and political climate of the United States (i.e., our choice scapegoat)—occlude the ways we are complicit in cultural supremacy. Speaking of Canada in a 2015 interview with the *New York Times*, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was quoted saying: “there is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada... [Canada is]... the first post-national state”. Triumphant claims regarding the ostensible ascendancy of liberal democracy are particularly harmful, as they sustain the fantasy of Canadian exceptionalism (e.g., Canada as a ‘cultural mosaic’), all while contentious issues around notions of citizenship, nation, and belonging persist. Moreover, in denying that Canada is susceptible to such ideological forces, this can actually incite a nationalistic impulse (Teo, 2023, p. 202). This impulse can be folded into the notion of dominant reactive affects discussed earlier, wherein ontological insecurity can be activated through anxiety and fear (Kinnvall & Merino, 2023, p. 230). Indeed, by recognizing that nostalgia constitutes a dominant structure of feeling in western democratic societies, we can also identify the ways nostalgia can function as a vehicle of supremacy, regulating social and cultural parameters of legibility (e.g., traditional formulations of nation and belonging). While a number of social and political psychologists in recent years have begun to examine the important links between nostalgia and reactionary movements (e.g., nationalism, conservatism, populism), relatively commonplace expressions of nostalgia (e.g., in the aesthetic domain)—which Billig (1995) contends underpins political extremism—go overlooked. By illuminating these *affective-aesthetic* contours in connection with the psychopolitical dimensions I have just described, the

next section will demonstrate how nostalgia's political and aesthetic interlocking reinforce its potent ideological influence.

Nostalgia, or, the cultural logic of aesthetic capitalism

As the late philosopher Mark Fisher (2014) wrote, “the intensity and precariousness of late capitalist work culture leaves people in a state where they are simultaneously exhausted and overstimulated... desperately short of time, energy and attention, we demand quick fixes... retro offers the quick and easy promise of a minimal variation on an already familiar satisfaction” (pp. 14–15). It is in this spirit that Niemeyer and Siebert (2023) have recently emphasized that the “... the relation between nostalgia and media is imbricated” (p. 1). These sentiments echo Jameson's (1992) initial theorization of the *nostalgia mode*, where he argues that the recurrence of aesthetic styles and formulas from the past (re)emerge as a result of discontent with the present and anxieties regarding the future. In paying close attention to how the nostalgic circulates via distortion and idealization of the past in the aesthetic domain specifically, we can better appreciate how nostalgia can “... channel our perception, model our affects, and create, perpetuate, and permute specific relations between subjects and objects” (Sielke, 2019, p. 7).

In this way, nostalgia aesthetics operate as either a tool to shore up political objectives (exemplified in ongoing spectacle of the political, particularly among neoconservative assemblages), or as a numbing respite from an increasingly inhospitable world. Although the latter example of ‘passive’ consumption may not initially appear political or cause for concern, it is nevertheless symptomatic of broader systemic issues we have discussed (e.g., anxieties about the present and future, burnout, a crisis of the social imaginary). From the overtly political to resurgent stylized modes of the past, popular culture appears situated on a crux of repetition and recurrence (Laks, 2022). The direct link between nostalgia and the consumer industry is clear, as

is the stultifying pastiche and repetition of the nostalgia mode (Jameson, 1991). To use a topical example, the Netflix hit *Stranger Things* (2016) has been critiqued for its adulation of suburban consumerism, traditional gender roles, and ‘liberty’ through mass consumption (Griffith, 2022). Given the show’s purpose—i.e., leisure, enjoyment, entertainment—these underpinning values go unchecked and outside of explicit critique, appearing generally uncontroversial.

Furthermore, while *Stranger Things* may meet its quota for racial representation, the inclusion of characters from diverse social locations and brief forays into critical discourse ultimately function as requisite virtue signalling that distracts from an underpinning romanticization of white, Middle America. So, in the same way neoliberal capitalism thrives by incorporating the critiques railed against it, *Stranger Things* absorbs its contradictions by envisaging contemporary values in the context of the past. History is retold through hypermediated aesthetic tropes, and a systematic, linear trajectory aimed at reaching the widest mainstream audience. In effect, historical context functions to merely place a given scene in its fictional landscape and is often framed as a closed narrative event (Hassler-Forest, 2020). Importantly, these influences do not occur in isolation from the political, just as personal and collective distinctions between nostalgia belie their sociosubjective indivisibility. Together, these interlocking political and aesthetic forms of nostalgia cultivate a national imaginary vulnerable to psychic distortion and cooptation.

Accordingly, these aesthetic correlates certainly warrant inclusion in a psychopolitical theorization of nostalgia. As I have mentioned, although some critical scholars in the field of affect have addressed this interplay (Wetherell, 2012), nostalgia is often framed in terms of metaphor at the expense of its psychopolitical character. This, of course, neglects nostalgia’s critical function as a defense mechanism in response to existential threat. This is palpable in

recent findings by Areni et al. (2022); in their content analysis of YouTube comments on TV commercials from the '60s, '70s, and '80s, these psychologists found that a perceived loss of status or existential threat acted as an underlying motivator for accessing dimensions of the past. Spurred by the research constraints of the pandemic, social media has become a key site of analysis to examine communication patterns and processes.

During the pandemic, nostalgia figured as a key aesthetic style across social media networks, reviving interest in the historically profound and interwoven relations between media technologies and nostalgia (p. 3). In a recent textual and interpretive analysis of internet data conducted by Areni and colleagues (2022), these authors argue that such analyses offer a rich account of everyday nostalgia in online communities and discourses. Because nostalgia comprises a number of functions and expressions in the social sphere, it is clear that no one methodology is *most* appropriate. At the same time, we can also appreciate why soliciting participants through self-reported questionnaires to study nostalgia's ordinary circulation is unfeasible. Research methods that are sensitive to the *affective–discursive* dimensions of nostalgia, on the other hand, offer routes of naturalistic observation through the analysis of social relations (rather than individualistic situations simulated by psychologists). As Billig (2023) reinforces in his work on how to study nationalism in the everyday:

If psychologists recognize the historical and methodological entanglements of nationalism and globalization, then they must do more than increasing the number of methodologies that they use. They must also develop a critical, historical awareness (Teo, 2018). So much psychology is ahistorical, as psychologists seek to construct universal theories that are designed to stand outside history... positivist psychology is only interested in producing decontextualized and ahistorical knowledge. Neither nationalism

nor globalization, let alone their historical entanglement, can be understood as universal, ahistorical processes (p. 187).

Psychological scholarship studying nostalgia has relied too heavily on laboratory experiments and methods that fail to capture nostalgia's important functions in everyday life. While such work doubtless affords us insight into the significance of nostalgia and some of its embodied contours, it does not provide insight into the more nuanced psychopolitical operations. As I have gestured to above, the methodical extraction of affect from its sociohistorical and cultural context has obstructed psychologists' ability to effectively attend to the vital affective coordinates of ongoing and accelerating social and political problems. The example outlined above offers a practical circuit of engagement for psychologists.

Conclusion

Drawing from select affect and psychoanalytic scholarship, I have endeavoured to lay the groundwork for a retheorization of nostalgia which fully embraces its psychopolitical basis. To these ends, I have argued how nostalgia is constituted by psychic identifications with and attachments to objects that, when critically interrogated, are marked by sociohistorical discontinuity and conflict. Furthermore, nostalgia is an actively repeated, internalized affective practice (re)enacted through various political, cultural, and aesthetic channels. This not only troubles the notion of nostalgia as a bounded psychological phenomenon but provides paths for disrupting restorative expressions of nostalgia in favour of generative attachments that benefit and animate the collective social imaginary. This approach aligns itself with burgeoning critical scholarship on the consequence of affect under increasingly precarious conditions. Throughout, I have examined for whom nostalgia appears to be a dominant structure of feeling, and under what social, cultural, material, and historical circumstances.

As I have emphasized, cutting across binary understandings of nostalgia as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ is critical to properly examine what nostalgia is doing in these particularized contexts. On my reading, this can be likened to illusory, binary divisions based on political membership. Both of these purported dichotomies (and false ones, at that) operate counterproductively to naturalize persons and psychological constructs as behaving in predetermined ways, thus precluding the examination of the underpinning structural forces that shape and regulate social relations and cultural formations within particular historical periods. To these ends, the historiographical backdrop, theoretical scaffolding, and critique advanced herein have provided a clear basis for a psychopolitical retheorization of nostalgia in psychology.

As I elucidated in Chapter I, admitting that nostalgia is not unique to the current moment opens up channels with the past can inform how we approach nostalgia today. Informed by this historiographical work, the theoretical frameworks I have introduced provide an alternative and generative interpretative prism through which nostalgia can best be studied. As I demonstrated in Chapter II, the current interpretation in mainstream psychological science vacates nostalgia of its critical articulations and mobilizations to *epistemologically violent* ends (Teo, 2010). Thus, the practical and ethical aim of this psychopolitical retheorization is to offer critical entry points for psychologists to study nostalgia outside of the laboratory in order to better capture nostalgia's complex operations in everyday life. Given broad consensus across the literature that nostalgic sentiment increases in response to disruptive personal and societal change, our combined geopolitical tensions, economic recessions, and health crises constitute the justification and consequence of my current project.

In summary, this thesis has argued for a psychopolitical nostalgia; one that is not simply reduced to an individual experience anchored to the past, but an affective expression of a broader sociohistorical consciousness. Considering these issues alongside the mainstream psychological approach—which argues that nostalgia serves the purpose of connecting different temporal moments to enhance purpose, social connectedness, and self-continuity across time (Sedikides et al., 2015)—the parallels are quite striking. Indeed, a major drawback that I have raised throughout this project is that mainstream psychological science, in confusing its subject matter (i.e., human kinds) for natural kinds, approach phenomena as if it can be disentangled from its sociohistorical context (Brinkmann, 2005; Daston, 1992). If we approach phenomena with the goal of broad generalization and applicability, we invariably neglect the neoliberal cultural formations that underpin their development and interpretation in the first place. This is

particularly challenging with regard to phenomena that are promoted as prosocial and thus more desirable (e.g., positivity, happiness). As Bhatia and Priya (2018) convincingly maintain through their work on the injurious permeation of neoliberal ideology on non-western cultures, this advances a viscid form of affective power that shores up new forms of coloniality.

As it stands, prevailing epistemological paradigms in psychology that are intended to guide and interpret can paradoxically work to constrain and limit through an overreliance on tired frameworks. This reproduces prescriptive categories that, at worst, progressively bear no likeness to the phenomena they intend to represent. We can observe this in mainstream psychological science, where flattened out, “theoretically empty” concepts function as locums for real phenomena (González Rey, 2017, p. 503). Considering this propensity in the context of nostalgia, we can grasp the necessity of a dynamic interpretive repertoire that can keep pace with this and other emergent forms of emotional governance.

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