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Screened History: Nostalgia as Defensive Formation

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### Abstract

This paper re-considers the much-lauded transformative potential of nostalgia, and proposes that an adequately psychological engagement with nostalgia is necessary if the critical capacities of this phenomenon are to be adequately assessed. In order to do this, the paper identifies parallels between the concept of nostalgia and a series of psychoanalytic concepts (the imaginary, fetishism, fantasy, affect, screen-memories and retroaction). Such a comparative analysis allows both for a critique of sociological notions of nostalgia and a series of speculations on how nostalgia as a defensive formation may aid rather than overcome types of structured forgetting. The use of psychoanalytic concepts enables us to grasp how nostalgia may operate: 1) in the economy of the ego, 2) in the mode of the fetish, 3) in the service of fantasy, 4) as an affect concealing anxiety, 5) as screen-memory and, 6) as means of reifying past or present rather than attending to relations of causation obtaining between past, present and future. One should thus investigate each of these possible defensive functions within any given instance of nostalgia before proclaiming its transformative potential.

Keywords: Reflective/restorative nostalgia, psychoanalysis, fetish, memory, ego, history.

## Screened History: Nostalgia as Defensive Formation

The Apartheid Archive Project (AAP) is premised on an attempt to retrieve discomfiting historical memories of South Africa's oppressive apartheid past (<http://www.apartheidarchive.org/site/>). In an earlier discussion of the difficulties inherent in such an objective, I noted that resistances to this task – subjective and in some many cases societal – seemed to know no bounds (Hook, 2011a). Of course, given the traumatic quality of such memories for many who suffered under apartheid, the anger and resentment thus occasioned, and of course the guilt and sense of complicity for those who number amongst apartheid's beneficiaries, one can appreciate that such memories do not come easy. In the light of this challenge, and the AAP's warning that what is not remembered of the apartheid past risks being repeated in the post-apartheid present, one might well take hope in any possible cultural *aide memoire* that might assist in this project of retrieval. The current blossoming of nostalgia within South African society – most markedly perhaps in literature and popular culture - may seem then to offer a critical vehicle of considerable interest (see Gevisser (2011) and Medalie (2010) for discussions of the outpouring of nostalgic apartheid-era memoirs and (auto)biographies; see Truscott (2011) for an astute analysis of nostalgia and melancholic self-parody in South African rap music and music festivals).

Then again, despite the prevalence of nostalgia as a popular topic in post-apartheid South Africa – take for example the media interest attracted by the *Narratives, nostalgia and nationhoods* conference held in Johannesburg in July 2011 - one needs ask whether nostalgia is, in effect, the 'right problematic'. I note this not only due to the obvious political reasons – that the bittersweet enjoyment of memories of apartheid seems morally dubious - but due to concerns both clinical and intellectual. In embracing the topic of nostalgia are we unwittingly endorsing a style of memory that amounts to a defensive formation, an *obstruction* rather than

an asset to the project of retrieving recalcitrant (or indeed *traumatic*) memories? This is the crucial question around which my speculative comments in this paper turn. The issue of the types of memory to be prioritized as means of facilitating the working-through of historical trauma in post-apartheid South Africa is of importance to those interested in the resolution of ongoing socio-political conflicts, indeed, in the broad agendas of peace psychology. For if what divides communities is in part a function not only of history, but of partially recollected and/or differently recalled histories, then an exploration of different modalities of memory constitutes a clear socio-political imperative. Such projects of historical retrieval, of different types of remembering, hold out the promise of viewing the past anew, and consolidating a new order based on a joint commitment to confronting and ‘working-through’ a divisive history.

Several qualifications are in order here. Although my objectives here are critical, my concern is not simply to jettison the notion of nostalgia, but to open it up for further reflection from a distinctive *psychoanalytic* vantage-point. My aim is not to dismiss the critical potential of those retrievals of history that ostensibly ‘reflective’ types of nostalgia allow for. It is rather to expand upon certain of the possible underlying psychological operations occurring within nostalgia, and thereby to offer commentary on how the critical propensities of so-called reflective nostalgia might in fact be usefully augmented, or critiqued. Such an exercise will require both a careful attention to how nostalgia is being defined, and to the psychoanalytic concepts – those of the imaginary, fetishism, the affective, the screen-memory and retroaction – that I apply in my critique of this concept.

To stress, from the outset: whilst much of nostalgia might be shown to possess a defensive function, we should nonetheless remain aware of its potentially destabilizing or ‘unselfing’ potential, that is, nostalgia’s prospective ability to unseat prevailing norms and orthodoxies. Like the speech of the patient of psychoanalysis, nostalgia – we might venture –

may present in primarily defensive forms whilst nonetheless providing an instrument to access precisely what is being defended. Making this point ushers in the tricky issue of the distinction between ostensibly individual as opposed to predominantly societal forms of nostalgia. Of course, this is a distinction we may wish to complicate inasmuch as these two categories of reality are necessarily juxtaposed; they are inherently intermeshed, and thus ultimately indivisible.

In what follows my focus will be predominantly on the latter, on socio-political nostalgia (nostalgia within the parameters of popular discourse), with the important caveat that such forms of nostalgia should themselves be seen as subject to the psychological processes that characterize nostalgia's individualized forms. The broader question of the relation between the subjective and the socio-political in (post)apartheid contexts is one I have tackled at some length elsewhere (Hook, 2008). Suffice for now to say that a psychoanalytic perspective needs to appreciate the unique perspective of an individual's own particular engagement with social reality (that is, with what is distinctively nostalgic to them), while emphasizing nevertheless that such engagements remain always mediated by – cut from the cloth of – socio-symbolic reality.

### **In Defence of Nostalgia**

Cognisant of the wealth of literature on nostalgia (Davis, 1977, 1979; Kaplan, 1987; Kleiner, 1977; Smith, 1998; Stauth & Turner, 1988; Tannock, 1995), I will limit my discussion by focussing largely on the distinctions between ostensibly progressive (i.e. potentially transformative) and regressive (or rehabilitative) types of nostalgia, and by highlighting material most pertinent to the post-apartheid context. Clearly, given the perspective I adopt here, I will also attend to those facets of nostalgia of particular pertinence to a psychoanalytic conceptualization.

This prospect of nostalgia as critical instrument owes much to Boym's (2001) landmark *The Future of Nostalgia* which poses the distinction between restorative and reflective types of nostalgia. Boym admits of her distinction that these two types "do not explain the nature of longing nor its psychological makeup and unconscious currents" (p. 41). It is precisely this missing psychological dimension that I wish to comment upon in what follows. Boym gathers a variety of perspectives on nostalgia that are worth sampling as a means of introducing the concept. "Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (p. xiii). It is a *sentiment* moreover "of loss and displacement" (p. xiii), an "ache of temporal distance" (p. 44), but also "a romance with one's own fantasy" (p. xiii). Although by no means limited to modernity, nostalgia "inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheaval" (p. xiv). Boym does not deny that nostalgia possesses mechanisms of seduction and manipulation. For her nostalgia entails not just a rhythm of longing, but also "enticements and entrapments" (p.xvi). Importantly also, particular given our concerns with the post-apartheid context, "Outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions" (p. xiv), or we might extrapolate, the advent of socio-political transition.

Boym splits nostalgia as 'longing for a return to home' into two overlapping categories: one weighted towards the objective of such a return, the other more focussed on the vicissitudes of longing itself:

Restorative nostalgia... attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home.

Reflective nostalgia thrives in...the longing itself, and delays the

homecoming...ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of

itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on

the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from

the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt (p. xviii).

“Reflective nostalgia” she continues “explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones” (p. 41). It “cherishes shattered fragments of memory”, it values not so much the lost home as “the emotional resonance of distance” (p. 49). Ironic and inconclusive it remains “aware of the gap between identity and resemblance” (p. 49).

Furthermore:

At best reflective nostalgia can represent an ethical or creative challenge... This typology of nostalgia allows us to distinguish between national memory that is based on a single plot...and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory (p. xviii).

Boym repeatedly makes restorative nostalgia about communal identity and national meta-narratives; as such she grants it a hegemonic character. Reflective nostalgia is permitted the latitude of moving between collective and *individual* frames of reference. Whereas the former often seems blatantly *ideological* in its uses, the latter holds out a marked *ethical* potential. It is perhaps worth emphasizing the point – sometimes blurred in Boym’s discussion – that it is not nostalgia itself which is alternatively progressive or reactionary, but *the uses to which it is put*.

An often neglected point regards Boym’s (2001) distinction is that these are not to be considered mutually-exclusive types, but rather trajectories, tendencies – that often overrun one another – of giving meaning and shape to nostalgia. While Boym does emphasize this fact, her rudimentary typology may be said to under-estimate the difficulties of extracting one type from the other. The possibility of such a permanent juxtaposition poses a degree of ‘undecidability’, the prospect that is to say – a point not conceded by Boym - of ostensibly



regressive nostalgia nonetheless holding out progressive potential, and the related prospect of progressive nostalgia concealing a set of reactionary investments.

Pickering and Keightley's (2006) analysis of the concept of nostalgia makes the case for the critical rejuvenation of an idea they feel has typically been viewed as reactionary, sentimental, even melancholic. They respond to a tendency to view nostalgia as nothing more than a defeatist retreat from the present. There is of course some truth to the view that nostalgia is *about the present* rather than the past (Boym, 2001; Davis, 1979), occasioned as it is by current anxieties, discomforts or perceived losses, hence their gloss of nostalgia as "the composite feeling of loss, lack and longing" (p. 921). The backward glance of nostalgia is thus a means of *mediating the present* and the prospective future. Nonetheless, Pickering and Keightley (2006) argue that nostalgia occurs within multiple registers; it has numerous manifestations, its meaning and significance are diverse; it "should be seen as accommodating progressive, even utopian impulses as well as regressive stances" (p. 919). Their hope is that we might be able to distinguish between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past, and the desire not to return "but recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future" (p. 921). Nostalgia might function then as a compass, a means of direction amidst the uncertainties and predicaments of the *present and future*:

This opens up a positive dimension in nostalgia, one associated with desire for engagement with difference, with aspiration and critique... There are cases where past-fixated melancholic reactions to the present prevail, and other where utopian longings drift free of any actual ontological basis in the present (p. 921).

Pickering and Keightley (2006) stress repeatedly the mutually constitutive interrelations of both such dimensions of nostalgia; it is by virtue of this relation "that the potential for sociological critique arises" (p. 921). Such an emphasis on the complexity of nostalgia and the simultaneity of its regressive and progressive movements is to be welcomed; it warns against

any naïve idealization of the phenomenon, and signals the political ambiguity of nostalgic reminiscence.

### **Apartheid Nostalgia**

David Medalie's discussion of the uses of nostalgia in post-apartheid fiction adds to the above differentiation. What he refers to as 'evolved' nostalgia "recognizes the extent to which the present invests in narratives of the past [along with]...the constructedness of memory" (p. 40). Such a nostalgia draws attention to the partiality of what is recalled; it makes connections, revises memories and construes a growing set of links between past and present. This is an 'intricate nostalgia' that opens up the possibility of "reinvention and the fashioning of new, rather than received, meanings" (p. 42). By contrast, unreflecting forms of nostalgia fail to subject the past to adequate interrogation. The past here is fixed, sealed off "in its unique remoteness"; it becomes thus a static utopia, irretrievably lost, cut off from any meaningful relations with the present.

Of particular interest here is not only Medalie's critique of a given mode of nostalgia - "glib, unambitious and utterly lacking in self-consciousness" (p. 37) - but his indication of how certain formal features might be read as an index of *the failure* of creative uses of the nostalgic impulse. What is in question is how formal devices - the language and narrative impetus of novels in question, the flatness of characters etc. - prove unable to "distance themselves...from the nostalgia" and thus to "provide a persuasive critical scrutiny". This intriguing suggestion of a link between artifices of form and a regressive mode of nostalgia will be important in what follows.

A further note of interest in Medalie's analysis of literary nostalgia for apartheid concerns the disingenuous quality evident in some of the material:

Ostensibly [such novels]...disown the very nostalgia which they have sketched so vividly because they feel it is incumbent upon them to do so; but the narrative energy is focused to such an extent upon those elements that constitute the nostalgia that it leaves one in no doubt as to the force of its embrace (p. 37).

This is an astute observation that warns us that even in its most critical moments, the ‘libidinal ambience’ of such animated memories nonetheless enchant us, hold us in their thrall. We might frame this idea psychoanalytically: the factor of critique, of apparent critical distance – even of radical opposition - by no means dissipates the ongoing libidinal investment in what is being scrutinized.

Dlamini’s (2009) *Native Nostalgia* incorporates Boym’s (2001) notions of restorative and reflective nostalgia, utilizing them to question current South African longings for its apartheid past. The text provides a sense of the type of critique that nostalgia – or in this case, personal reminiscence aligned with scholarly reflection – may deliver. The ideal of reflective nostalgia here becomes a type of counter-intuition, a means of unsettling commonplaces and meta-narratives. Dlamini’s use of nostalgia is neither restorative nor palliative; it does not wish for a return, and it inverts rather than affirms political platitudes. One example is the idea, which certainly runs against the grain of prevailing struggle histories, that the world of apartheid “was not simply black and white, with resisters on one hand and oppressors on the other” (p. 56). Apartheid, by contrast, “was a world of moral ambivalence and ambiguity in which some people could be both resisters and collaborators at the same time” (p. 156). Likewise upended is the master narrative of black dispossession that conceals the multiple ethnic, gender and class divisions that run through black communities. Hence Dlamini’s critique of racial nationalists and political entrepreneurs for whom, respectively, “there are no local histories, no differences within black South Africa” (p. 20), no reason not to “take advantage of the valorisation of blackness to enrich themselves” (p. 156).

Dlamini's (2009) critical procedure is one that mobilizes a series of reminiscences that prove discordant in today's South Africa, and that cannot easily be accommodated within prevailing post-apartheid sensibilities. In this respect his use of memory appear to conform to Boym's category of reflective category, achieving as it does not only defamiliarization and a sense of distance, but a "a re-thinking of the relations between past, present and future", an awareness that "the past is not merely that which doesn't exist anymore, but...[something that] might act...by inserting itself into a present sensation" (p. 50).

A fascinating deployment of the notion of nostalgia to the topic of post-apartheid architecture is to be found in Mbembe (2008) who – especially noteworthy for my concerns here – uses the concept in alongside a psychoanalytically-informed notion of *repressed memories*. Focussing on a trend of commercial architecture that attempts to evoke other times and places, Mbembe speaks of "a mode of erasure...accomplished against the duties to memory ritualized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (2008, p. 62). The mode of effacement instantiated by such architecture relies on an escapist art of verisimilitude, as in the case of shopping and entertainment complexes Montecasino, north of Johannesburg, which aims to invoke the atmosphere and feel of a rural Tuscan village. What results is a paradoxical inscription of time: "the built form has to be constructed as an empty placeholder for meanings that have been eroded...rather than remembered" (p. 62). Such buildings manifest as signs of forgetting, of the failure of the city to assimilate the passage of time and the changes brought by it. Hence Mbembe's description of an "architecture of hysteria" that reiterates the "pathological structure and hysteria inherited from the racial city" (p. 62). Switching between an analysis of architectural form and a description of hysteria as psychological condition, Mbembe draws attention to the Freudian postulate that hysterics suffer from repressed memories and fall prey to regressive forgetting. He is concerned here, in short, with the nostalgic attempt to ward off the movement of time:

The architecture of hysteria in contemporary South Africa is the result of a painful, shocking encounter with a radical alterity set loose by the collapse of the [fully segregated] racial city. Faced with the sudden estrangement from the familiar resulting from the collapse of the racial city, this architecture aims to return to the “archaic” as a way of freezing rapid changes in the temporal and political structures of the surrounding world. It is an architecture characterized by the attachment to a lost object that used to provide comfort. A magic mirror and a specular moment, it allows the white subject to hallucinate the presence of what has been irretrievably lost...the hallucination has its origins in a form of white nostalgia” (pp. 62-63).

Several moments within this text are worth emphasizing for the argument I will go on to develop. Nostalgia here is the result of something threatening and debilitating; it results in the attempt to freeze change; it is a mode of erasure operating against an obligation to remember; it entails the role of a type of hallucinatory comfort in the face of something that has been lost.

### **Within the Economy of the Ego**

What is immediately noticeable about the above theorizations is that they bypass the psychological. This is not an incidental feature. Viewing nostalgia as a cultural and historical formation enables one to avoid claims of psychological reductionism, to (quite rightly) view nostalgia as an historical and political phenomenon that is always more than merely personal, individual. That being said, despite the critical leverage that the above ideas afford us, we need remain aware that what makes good sociological sense does not always prove psychologically accurate. That is to say, nostalgia’s proposed efficacy as (sociological)

instrument of critique may be undercut by the psychological functions it continues to serve.

Or, more boldly put: what operates as a progressive trajectory within the field of sociological theory might in fact simultaneously function as a bulwark against psychological change.

This points to a crucial problem with many socio-cultural theorizations: the attempt to elide or minimize the psychical dimension of nostalgia. Nostalgia is, after all, despite the factors of social and political mediation, a mode of *experience*, of *memory*, indeed, of *affect*. To avoid consideration of these necessarily psychological aspects is tantamount to sociological reductionism. It seems important then to juxtapose socio-cultural and psychological approaches to nostalgia, to view political nostalgia – that of a given community or social group in a particular historical political era – as subject to the vicissitudes and functions that characterize nostalgia as a psychical phenomenon. It is crucial then to invoke that which many contemporary valorisations sideline, namely a sense of how nostalgia might function as a psychical operation.

Laubscher (2011) highlights the fact that nostalgia occurs “within the economy of the ego”, suggesting thus that it is a process that falls within the parameters of the dominance of the ego. As such a phenomenon of the ego, nostalgia remains a fundamentally *imaginary* activity that idealizes the past and that remains necessarily linked to the operation of fantasy. We should stress here that the Lacanian notion of the imaginary points to those psychological operations that buttress and substantiate an ego’s sense of itself, either through a succession of images with which identification occurs, or via types of (mis)recognition that engender effects of understanding, completion and wholeness. In less overtly psychoanalytic terms, one might simply say that nostalgia seems typically to *support* an identity – be it of the single subject or a broader community - and those narrative forms that work to sustain it. One should note here that there is always a defensive and narcissistic quality to such imaginary, ego-serving operations: the priority of securing a likeable self-image invariably trumps the possibility of

hearing anything that would prove disruptive. If nostalgia – as individual or group phenomenon - is predominantly an imaginary (or ego) function, then it remains a defensive formation, underscored by a fundamentally conservative impulse to resist any change to its regime of idealising self-understandings. Inasmuch as nostalgia remains a mode of protection, an assurance, a *comfort* to an ego, then it cannot adequately aid us in the ‘unselfing’ – to cite Wicomb’s (2011) term – which is such a crucial part of unsettling how one is psychologically-located relative to one’s own social and cultural history.

A brief tour of the psychological literature provides ample evidence of how nostalgia functions to assuage, support and substantiate an ego. For Sedikides, Wildschut and Baden (2004), nostalgia is not to be understood via the conceptualizations of 19<sup>th</sup> Century psychiatry as form of melancholia; variant of depression; “immigrant psychosis”; or as intense unhappiness or suffering. Their reference to the *New Oxford English Dictionary* definition (“a sentimental longing... for the past... for a period or place with happy personal associations” (1998, p. 1266) enables them to situate nostalgia as a “positive experience... a predominantly positive, self-relevant emotion... [with] an affective structure [that] fulfils crucial functions” (p. 202). So, while for many authors there is a recognition of sadness and psychological pain within nostalgia (Davis, 1979; Hertz, 1990; Holbrook, 1993) - for after all, the nostalgic is confronted with the realization that their desired past is forever gone - this bitterness is often typified as fleeting (Peters, 1985), as offset by types of pleasure or enjoyment of past experiences (Chaplin, 2000; Gabriel, 1993).

Davis’s (1979) account acknowledges the bittersweet and ambivalent qualities of nostalgia, whilst nonetheless calling attention to the positive tone of the evoked past. Sedikides et al. (2004) are thus not without precedent in thinking of nostalgia as a disproportionately positive emotion which maintains a therapeutic potential to soothe the self from existential pangs. One of nostalgia’s existential functions, they claim, is precisely to

substantiate identity, whether through reduction of uncertainty or the facilitation of identity attainment (Cavanaugh, 1989). For some, nostalgia protects identity (Kleiner, 1977), and should be viewed as an “ego ideal”, or as a mechanism for coping with loss of self-esteem and restoring self-worth (Kaplan, 1987). An effective self-affirmation tool (Steele, 1988), nostalgia’s recourse to an idealized past enables one to deal with a difficult future to strengthen and support identity (Gabriel, 1993). A stronger sense of selfhood is attained, “an increasingly unified self, by putting together pieces of past lives through nostalgia” (Sedikides et al., 2004).

Of course one need not agree with the above literature – geared as it is precisely towards the goal of ego-affirmation that a Lacanian approach would oppose - to grasp the point being made. Despite the ethical, reflective or ‘evolved’ potential of nostalgia asserted by the sociological literature, such critical gains are always shadowed by what in psychoanalytic terms is the very opposite of a transformative impulse: an ego-substantiating means of affirming, supporting and strengthening an identity. While this may seem of less than immediate political importance, one should bear in mind that such functions of ‘ego-conservation’ are not simply psychological. They are emblematic of imaginary operations which pertain as much to the maintenance of a given society’s self-image - its defensive narcissism in respect of its repressed histories, its inability to confront or recall difficult or self-compromising truths – as that of an individual ego.

### **Memory in the Mode of the Fetish**

The first psychoanalytic concept that I wish to introduce by way of my reconsideration of nostalgia is fetishism. Gevisser (2010) offers a telling remark in this respect. Nelson Mandela, he claims, made a political fetish out of his autobiography. This astute comment provides a telling example of what I would call fetishistic nostalgia, that is, a loving relation to a version



of the past which is often recalled and that takes on both a cherished status and a protective function. Mandela's story of his long moral struggle against apartheid took on a hegemonic dominance in the era just before and after the demise of apartheid. Subject to the claim that it sidelined other struggle histories, the text runs the risk of reducing the complexity of this historical period to a triumph of one man's moral will. Moodley (2008) for example contends that "the ANC [African National Congress] has rewritten the whole struggle", insisting that the Black Consciousness Movement "has been written out of the struggle" (p. 274). Gibson (2011) makes a related point: "the narrative of a South Africa miracle, personalized by Mandela's story – is almost a marketing gimmick for the benefit of the media" (p. 192). The 'feel good' factor of Mandela's text, the unity it tacitly imposes on a series of discontinuous – indeed fractious and opposed – anti-apartheid struggles, along with the moral resolution of reconciliation that made its account of political change palatable to whites in particular, all of these qualities speak of its fetishistic appeal. Tirelessly repeated, such a fetishistic history makes a type of ('new South African') identity possible, it protects one against some or other 'castration' and it generates a degree of pleasure each time it is instantiated.

Žižek offers a distillation of the role of a fetish, which he claims, "is the embodiment of the lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth" (p. 296). Differently put: the fetish is that isolated feature or activity that enables the disavowal of a threatening reality. Recourse to the traditional anthropological usage of the term proves helpful here: the fetish is that magical object revered by a given society because it creates a sense of order and control in a frightening world whilst holding a given belief-structure in place. More than just this, the fetish permits for an identity to be maintained; it functions to manage anxiety; and, not infrequently, to induce a type of love. *Long Walk to Freedom* and its political role in post-apartheid South Africa thus proves exemplary: a selective vision of the past is elevated above

less comforting rival histories and done in such a way that keeps a series of deep political anxieties at bay.

Crucial also, the fetish allows us to affirm that something is *not* the case; such is the role of fetishistic disavowal in psychoanalytic theory. Take for example the love that white South Africa has for Mandela. Not only a focus of libidinal investment and an icon that mitigates against anxieties of political transformation, Mandela, as loved-object provides the proof of a ‘not’, in this respect proof of the fact that we are not racist. A further aspect of the fetish comes into view here: the fetish – particularly the case in fetishised historical monuments and forms of remembrance – becomes in effect a license to forget, a type of structured forgetting (Hook, 2011b). This chimes with Mbembe’s (2008) earlier account of nostalgia as a mode of erasure operating against the obligation to remember. Returning to our example: white investment in Mandela’s ‘walk to freedom’ could be said to be proportionate to white amnesia regards complicity in apartheid. Obviously such fetishism would need allow for multiple elaborations; different constituencies and generations may fetishize Mandela in varying ways (Mandela as grandfatherly and forgiving figure for some; radical protagonist of the armed struggle for others; saintly leader and Messiah for yet others).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, bearing in mind the earlier point about how personal forms of nostalgia remain cut from the cloth of the social, one can appreciate that such a latitude in particular fetishizations of Mandela may nonetheless add up to a type of national, indeed, political, fetishization. We might ask then of any instance of nostalgia: what does it enable one to disavow, to forget? What identification does such a reminiscence allow one to assert? What ideological world-view is thus maintained? Similarly: what threat is domesticated, what is effectively disproved by virtue of such a remembering?

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this point to Leswin Laubscher.

Clearly, not all instances of nostalgia are fetishistic. I have tried to emphasize above that nostalgia need not be seen as constitutively defensive; neither need it be seen as inescapably fetishistic. Inasmuch as formations of nostalgia exist within the domain of ego however, supporting and extending its idealized self-representations, then these (defensive, fetishistic) tendencies remain a possibility even if they are not inherent aspects of nostalgic reminiscence. Having made this qualification, it is important nevertheless to stress that the notion of fetishistic nostalgia remains an important analytical tool. It enables us to highlight a distinctive operation occurring within nostalgia – a type of identity-preservation – and, more directly yet, it allows us to pin-point many of the ideological functions of the nostalgia in question (disavowal of the present, facilitation of a type of structured forgetting). This argument points us to a critical imperative: to focus not merely on the content *but on the psychical and political functions* of nostalgia. 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.

Fetishistic nostalgia, that is to say, runs counter to the effects of ‘evolved’ or reflective types. More than just this, the preservative operation of such fetishistic uses of memory is enough to topple potentially explorative and ethical uses of nostalgia into less challenging and disruptive forms, into affirmations of the ideological status quo. This is not to insist that fetishism – and by extrapolation fetishistic nostalgia – is always politically reactionary. The above example would testify to this: not all fetishistic investments in Mandela and the struggle narrative of *Long Walk to Freedom* are politically suspect. Few political movements – left or right – could dispense with all fetishistic recollections of the past. Although not necessarily reactionary, fetishistic nostalgia is necessarily *conservative*; it represents a reverence towards a protective object, a desperate clinging onto an image or token of a ‘safer before’. Such a thorough fantasmatic grounding in the past - which, importantly, protects

against difference and reads the present always in terms of an idealized former time - remains aversive to change.

### **In Service of Fantasy**

Reference to nostalgia's role as fetish against change throws into perspective the *fantasmatic* nature of much nostalgic reminiscence. This quality is openly admitted by Boym in her description of nostalgia as "a romance with one's own fantasy" (2001, p. xiii). Lacan deploys an illuminating metaphor in this respect, conceiving the fantasy scene as a frozen frame in a film that brings the sequence of images to a halt just prior to the moment of castration. If nostalgia entails such a 'stop-frame memory' – an I idea I elaborate further below – then it seems necessarily to act against an order of destabilizing recognition. There is a further implication to be drawn here. If nostalgia, like fantasy, is conditioned by a certain impossibility, should we not then view it as a fantasmatic formation in the technical sense of an *imaginary figuration* that attempts to remedy an impasse, to make good on a lack? This would fit with Mbembe's (2008) account of white fetishism as a mode of hallucinatory comfort in the face of threatening change. If this is the case, then from a psychoanalytic perspective, we need to take nostalgia seriously. Nostalgia in fact might be said to possess a diagnostic function: it contains within it an implicit diagnosis of current social ills, along with a potent 'imaginary of loss'. The latter would serve as an indication both of certain prospective melancholic attachments, and – perhaps surprisingly - of a particular set of fears that strike to the very heart of a given community's constitutive identifications.

The parallel between fantasy and nostalgia also points to a problem. Clinically speaking, fantasy is what must be traversed, worked-through, dissipated. True enough, it needs to be present within the analysis, elicited, drawn out, explored; such an objective can be viewed as a precondition of a psychoanalytic cure. Then again, it makes no clinical sense to

remain enthralled with the fantasy; such a path can only lead to a shoring-up of the imaginary, an consolidation of self-comforting images. Although it anchors and frames our perspective upon reality, fantasy harbours illusions; it screens out discomforting knowledge; it entails its own rewards, its own types of enjoyment, and – at least in this sense – typically feeds complacency, resignation, mitigating against any change that would upset a given libidinal economy. Fantasy in and of itself – as is I would argue is the case with nostalgia - maintains no inherently progressive potential. It is what we do with fantasy or nostalgia that counts, how their comforting images, their selective reminiscences of the past may be connected to a broader strata of related but less readily accessed memories and associations. Inasmuch nostalgia operates to support and extend fantasy – we might offer the notion of fantasmatic nostalgia here – then we would do well not to celebrate its transformative potential without first investigating the defensive functions to which it may be put.

### **The Lie of Affect**

The topic of anxiety, introduced above, leads us into a discussion of nostalgic affect. It also provides a way of extending the idea of nostalgia as protective device. Given that anxiety is so often associated with loss in psychoanalysis theory, and that nostalgic reminiscence is premised precisely on an experience of a lost past, then we might claim that anxiety is a characteristic affect of nostalgia. This may seem unconvincing, particularly if we take as given the oft-cited ‘bittersweet’ quality as the predominant affect of nostalgia. We need look beyond the surface here: the fact that not all nostalgia is obviously anxiety-provoking need not impede our argument. We might adopt a hypothetical line here: the ‘sweetness’ of nostalgia – as in the fetish – perhaps has more to do with what *it has enabled one to avoid*, what is screened, than with the obvious content of what has been recalled. The bitterness – or

its associated negativity - of affect may be a more reliable indicator here than the apparent sweetness.

Without dismissing the importance of affect, we should bear in mind the Lacanian warning never to trust what would seem most obvious about a given affect. 'Anxiety is the only affect that does not lie' Lacan (1962-1963) famously insists. Freud, Lacan's (1962-1963) cautioning to analysts is that emotions are continually subject to displacements, to substitutions of object, to evasions. As omnipresent as affect is, it is, in and of itself, not a form of truth. The affective intensity of nostalgia – its good feeling – may thus be an important marker to be aware of, but not necessarily one of its truthfulness. That is to say, we often take the affective ambience of memory, or the clarity, certainty of particular events to be indexes of their truth-value. Here, following Freud, we should take such qualities seriously, but as indicators that something has fallen out of the picture and needs to be restored.

What drives restorative nostalgia, says Boym, "is not the sentiment of distance and longing", it is rather "the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and...[question] restored tradition" (2001, pp. 44-45). Nostalgia here becomes a protection against such anxieties of history. We may add then to the list of critical questions apropos the uses and function of nostalgia. How does anxiety factor into the particular use of nostalgia we are concerned with? What is the particular anxiety the nostalgia seeks to mediate? Kammen asserts that "Nostalgia...is essentially history without the guilt" (1991, p.688). Accepting this idea means that we should ask also: how might guilt be operating behind the scenes of the particular instantiation of nostalgia we are witnessing?

A broader critique begins to emerge here. If nostalgia is an outcome, an effect, a symptom, then we need look beyond the apparent *contents* and *feelings* of nostalgia to its *causative conditions*, to *the role* of such symptomatic contents. The valorization of nostalgia's imaginary properties limits us to *descriptive* as opposed to properly *analytical* readings.

Preoccupations with imaginary features blinds us to the underlying psychical or political functions of the nostalgia, it prevents us from plotting the dynamic role of nostalgia, its part in a broader libidinal economy.

### **Screen-memory Nostalgia**

Early on in his career, Freud's attentions were drawn to type of memory that stalled clinical work. These were typically childhood memories, often very vivid, that appeared to latch onto a trivial facet of experience. While their broader meaning seemed uncertain, such memories would repeatedly surface, remaining cut off from a broader associative network. Such 'screen-memories were for Freud a compromise between the pressure exerted by troubling past experiences that could not easily be retrieved, and the need to keep such memories at bay. They were – indeed, *are* - like static snapshots whose formal exaggerations and triviality alert us to the fact that something has been excised. The idea that a dialectical relationship exists between memory and forgetting of course bears a distinguished philosophical lineage. For Heidegger (1927), memory is possible only on the basis of forgetting; for Ricoeur (2004) forgetting is itself a species of memory. Screen-memories are something of a case in point: they are the trace – an index - of what has been cut out, forgotten, *repressed*.

Part of what is so interesting about screen-memories is the amplification of formal features they present. Screen-memories entail a type of stasis: one scene within an associative train has been accentuated, made 'extra-memorable', a particular feature has been exaggerated so as to lock out a less acceptable memory or implication. They are over-compensations by means of *form* for what cannot be retrieved. A similar logic holds in fetishism, where there is likewise a 'hyper-cathexis' (of the fetish object/activity) working to the ends of defense. In the screen-memory the cathexis is realized in embellishments of form. Hence the idea that in clinical psychoanalysis we often need to *read form above content*. Attention to formal

features of the memory – unusual clarity or detail; inability to move forward or backward in an associative sequence; repetitions, doublings; saturations of colour, etc. – proves crucial, for such features provide clues to what has been ‘extracted’.

This returns us to Medalie’s (2010) assertion that formal features may indicate the failure of memory to transcend unreflecting types of nostalgia. An attention to form likewise allows us to approach in a new light Maier’s (1995) comment that nostalgia is to memory as kitsch is to art. That is to say – ignoring the potential here for a problematic high art versus low popular culture seemingly implied - exaggerations (indeed, *over-compensations*) of form are signs that bolder associative work needs be done. More effort is required, in short, to connect past and present, to move from defensive to less readily-yielded forms of memory. Different strategies of recollection are required here, from free-associative attempts to reconfigure the past, to joint attempts at narrative memory-work, a topic I have addressed elsewhere (Hook, 2011a). Indeed, given that a trace of the repressed exists in the form of the screen-memory, then nostalgic reminiscences are useful, even though they will need to be connected to more expansive types of memory, their more tangential qualities explored. If, as Freud insists, a ‘footprint’ of the associated repressed memory remains within a screen-memory, then this memory needs to be taken apart, approached from multiple different deconstructive perspectives such that an exercise of speculative reconstruction might take place.

### ***Apartheid Nachträglichkeit***

One of the problems implied by many conceptualizations of nostalgia is that they often rely upon a clear-cut differentiation between past and present. Boym (2001) observes that the “romantic nostalgic” “insisted on the otherness of his object of nostalgia from...present life and kept it at a safe distance” (p. 13). Furthermore: “Nostalgia...is dependent on the modern



conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time” (p. 13). Distinctions between evolved and restorative nostalgia often turn on precisely this point: critically-enabling types of nostalgia are those which succeed in effective juxtapositions of past and present; restorative forms treat past and present as mutually-exclusive. True enough, the nostalgic overlaying of past and present can, as in Dlamini’s (2009) analysis, succeed in upsetting a series of hegemonic social norms and political commonplaces. However, despite the efficacy of such juxtapositions, one cannot but suspect that we are dealing with temporary alignments of past and present that quickly revert back into a demarcated sense of ‘then’ as opposed to ‘now’.

If it is the case that talk of nostalgia often presupposes a linear and clearly differentiated conception of time, then a psychoanalytic perspective on *non-linear* psychical time might prove a viable ally in understanding relations of historical causality and agency. Psychical time, the temporality of the unconscious, does not, according to Freud, abide by a division of historical eras. As he repeatedly insists: the primary process logic of the unconscious has no respect for sequential, chronological time; the wishes and fantasies of infancy are as fresh in the unconscious as the lingering traces of the previous day. This non-linear conception of time means not only that we appreciate the simultaneity of past and present, but that we understand the role of retroaction.

The important notion of ‘deferred action’ - Freud’s (1950) idea *nachträglichkeit* – draws attention to the ‘after the fact’ impact of earlier events upon the present and the future. As early as 1895 Freud was concerned with the implanting of a pathogenic effect: something ‘traumatic’ (typically of a sexual nature) occurs, yet it is not realized as such at the time. The seed that has been planted will only flower later - its germination reliant upon a subsequent event. This theorization is dependent upon an evident discontinuity between two events; for Freud this will be the onset of adult sexual life, in the socio-historical realm this may be supplied by historical rupture. It pays here to stress the factor of contingency: in both

psychical and historical time we live within a condition of suspension, as if a pause-button had been pressed at various earlier (pre)‘traumatic’ experiences, with the effect that their full impact will only (if at all) be realized once re-activated by later developments.

The ambiguities of Freud’s (1950) notion are multiple, particularly so in cases of concatenated or ‘overrunning’ histories such as that of the post-apartheid era. There is, firstly, the idea that the true significance of a past event will only be realized in a subsequent future, once retroactively triggered. Neither static nor consolidated then, the fragmentary residues of lingering histories themselves constitute latent modes of the present. What this ensures – a second important point - is the virtual quality of the present which, underscored by an as of yet indefinite past, remains itself precarious, open to further re-articulation. To speak of apartheid *nachträglichkeit* means then that this history has not as yet been fully resolved, that it underlies the present, conditioning what it – and its prospective futures – have *not as yet become*. We need add to this, thirdly, the prospect of the movement from the future to the past, the retroactive ‘determination’ of *what has been* by *what is to come*. This aspect of deferred action means that we are caught within the anxious possibility that the re-visioning of our past will necessarily change what ‘we will have been’.

The pertinence of the psychoanalytic notion of retroactive causality to the post-apartheid context seems immediately evident. One might contend that the simultaneity of two eras – as signified by the ambiguous contraction ‘(post)apartheid’ – provides us with a case in point of historical *nachträglichkeit*, the sobering possibility, that is to say, of ‘the post-apartheid’ being viewed as apartheid’s deferred action.

It helps here to provide a brief example of retroactive temporality, so as to emphasize the different analytical perspective opened up by the notion of deferred action. Barnard’s (2004) analysis of the satirical *Bittercomix* comic strips of South African artist Anton Kannemeyer cites the example of a typical work, “Blacks”, a nine-panel page rendered in the

clear line style of Hergé's Tintin images. A self-reflexive statement on the role of comics in conducting racist culture, the strip in question follows on from an earlier narrative, in which a young boy, Themba, is made by his parents to return a stack of Tintin comics to his white friend Daniel, because of their racist content. The sequence of panels in "Blacks" includes Kannemeyer himself, who opts, by way of response to this situation to quote a whole series of racially derogatory or loaded terms from the Afrikaans dictionary (*Handwoordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal*). An exercise in the type of pastiche that *Bitterkomix* so excels in, the resulting comic strip combines mock dictionary definitions for a whole series of apartheid era designations - "hottentot", "woolly head", "golliwog", "Boss", "Madam", etc. - with a naïve, 1940's style of comic book illustration.

The resultant effect of disjunction is in part formal: Kannemeyer's borrowings from earlier visual styles and verbal vernaculars turns past historical forms jarringly against their former horizons of meaning. Such an exercise in re-contextualization also of course relies on a double temporality. By retrieving once accepted apartheid terms - effectively authorized, moreover, in the formal register of dictionary definitions - into a public post-apartheid context, where such terms must be viewed as objectionable, Kannemeyer is making apparent the epistemic violence that had always been a part of apartheid culture. Crucial to the deferred action effect of his work - presumably more vividly present for those who knew or experienced apartheid - are two key considerations. The realization, firstly, that so much of what had been considered unobjectionable and normal within the sensibilities of apartheid (the language of 'Boss' and 'Madam'), indeed, even innocent, appropriate for children (as in the case of Hergé's Tintin), was thoroughly laced with racism. This is what makes the bluntness of Kannemeyer's depiction, the undisguised quotation of apartheid terms and stereotypes, so forceful. Of course, the racist imaginary rendered in such child-friendly terms is far from over. The discomfiting charge of the imagery - our second consideration - has

much to do with the fact that such apartheid thinking still lingers. These images would be far less provocative, far less offensive - or so it would seem - if this past were not still with us.

We have a case then of what is latent, unresolved in the past, indeed, *repressed*, being uncomfortably re-activated in the present.

This is not, clearly enough, a case of nostalgia (except perhaps of the most perverse kind); a different type of historical juxtaposition is at work. One potential difference between the two concerns repression: nostalgia, as ego-function, seems typically to flow through the censorship of repression so as to deliver a palatable (even if bittersweet) memories. It is worth observing, as in this case, that effects of *nachträglichkeit* - inasmuch as such relations of causation are consciously realized - typically entail precisely *a coming undone of repression*. This seems integral to the notion of deferred action: there is a realignment of sorts, an epistemic shift, a break in memory – something tantamount to a repression - that separates two or more periods. This helps isolate a key difference between the affective experiences of nostalgia and deferred action. (We need of course bear in mind that as a theory of paradoxical temporal causation, *nachträglichkeit* may remain unconscious, not experienced as affect at all). Whereas nostalgia remains closer to an ego-consolidating spectrum of affects (as noted in the psychological literature cited above), deferred action is closer to that of anxiety. Freud's (1950) reference to trauma in respect of *nachträglichkeit* is here instructive – instances of deferred action are typically destabilizing – and hence potentially 'unselfing' – inasmuch they involve an effective unmaking of one time (be it past/present/future) by another.

We are now in a better position to draw conclusions regards how the concepts of nostalgia and *nachträglichkeit* compare as modes of historical reflection. Although in a nostalgic experience the past may be summoned, brought forcibly into the present, a nostalgic sensibility is arguably less than concerned with *the relations of causation* obtaining between these two points. The underlying clinical objective behind the notion of deferred action, on

the other hand, concerns precisely the attempt to better understand the complex relations of psychological causality that connect past, present and future, each of – to stress the point - *remains simultaneously active*. Taking such a non-linear approach to history seriously means not only that we remain aware of how the apartheid past will continue to be subject to multiple re-writings. It means that today's post-apartheid era is still effectively under-defined, subject to revision. It likewise means that the post-apartheid future necessarily holds the promise of traumatic re-incursions of inadequately processed or 'ungrieved' events the significance of which have yet to be realized.

Such an approach seem the very opposite of nostalgic returns to the past which are, as we are often told, *anchored in the present*. The time of *nachträglichkeit* is, to cite Birksted-Breen (2003), a 'reverberation time', never easily partitioned into historical divisions. Rather than affirming the status of the present or indulging in brief comparative reflections, this approach to temporality subverts a sense of the 'here and now', making apparent that there is no 'pure present'. The notion of *nachträglichkeit* may hence be read against that of nostalgia. Whereas the latter may be accused of presentism, of remaining forever stuck in an idealized past, the critical sensibilities of *nachträglichkeit* undercut and destabilize such divisions, emphasising patterns of temporal reverberation and repetition that makes such historical localizations untenable.

Let me conclude this section with three brief assertions. Firstly, the sensibilities of nostalgia cannot, in my view, adequately accommodate the paradoxical relations of causality existing between past, present and future that can be grasped via an appreciation of *nachträglichkeit*. Secondly, the ego-affirming qualities of nostalgia appear, most typically, to leave repression undisturbed. An awareness of retroactive causality is, by contrast, more anxiety-provoking and destabilizing, drawing attention as it does to the psychological simultaneity of past, present and future, and to various epistemic breaks – repressions – characterizing that

history. Thirdly, an awareness of deferred action seems crucial in understanding the temporality of transitional societies, such as that of post-apartheid South Africa, where adjoining historical eras are often less discrete and more mutually-determining than we like to think.

### **Contrapuntal Resistances**

In what has gone above I have attempted not only to introduce the topic of nostalgia and its 'reflective' and 'restorative' uses, but to explore certain of the *psychical* dimensions of nostalgia often neglected in the sociological literature. As a vehicle of critical memory practice at the service of historical retrieval, nostalgia no doubt has its uses. I have noted its prospective use as diagnostic instrument; its value in de-familiarizations of the present and in critical juxtapositions of past and present. I have also questioned whether attempts to utilize the 'reflective' nostalgia have not under-estimated nostalgia's role as *defensive formation*. A series of psychoanalytic concepts has proved useful here, enabling us to grasp how nostalgia may operate 1) in the economy of the ego, 2) in the mode of the fetish, 3) in the service of fantasy, 4) as an affect concealing anxiety, 5) as screen-memory and, 6) as means of reifying the present which fails to explore the (often retroactive) causative relations obtaining between past, present and future.

Nostalgia, it then follows, is often, but not solely, a protective device – a way of screening history – that preserves select elements of the past while enabling a structured forgetting of others. A means of strengthening and comforting an ego (be it of individual or group), nostalgia often appears conservative in its ends, aversive to change. If the above arguments are to be credited, nostalgia is, furthermore, adept at neutralizing anxiety and in obscuring (retroactive) patterns of causation that defy the demarcations of past, present and future entailed by linear conceptions of history. What follows is a cautioning: we should

investigate each of these possible functions within any given instance of nostalgia before proclaiming its transformative potential. I hope by now the pertinence of this critique to the field of peace psychology is evident. If, to follow Freud's (1914) still pertinent maxim, what we cannot recall we are bound to repeat, then, especially in post-conflict societies, we need remain vigilant regards the lures of those defensive forms of memory which help us to forget.

Notwithstanding the above conclusions, we may nevertheless ask, as I intimated from the very outset: might some forms of nostalgia not work against such defenses of memory? In closing I would like to consider very briefly the beginning of an answer to such a question, and do so by looking beyond the realm of psychoanalytic theory to a very different critical instrument, Edward Said's (2003) notion of the contrapuntal. Said borrows this term from music composition as a way of making sense of the conflicted experience of life as an exile. The moment of the contrapuntal is one of layered experience; of overlapping territories and powerful contrasts; of friction and discordance. This experience is often painful and destabilizing; previous experiences are juxtaposed against present conditions in such a way that neither gains ascendance. The temptation for resolution is kept at bay; there is no transcending harmony able to bridge the gap between past and present. Dissonance itself becomes here a means of critical realization. Said's description bears striking parallels with our own. The contrapuntal moment, unlike the nostalgic, does not succumb to the defenses, the comforts, the neutralizations of an ego-enhancing narrative. It is this factor - that of 'unselfing' - the ability to upset rather than affirm the consolation of such ego-affirming narratives that talk on nostalgia typically lacks.

Said's account of exile, at the same time undeniably of nostalgia and yet hopelessly at odds with much of the literature on the topic, calls to mind the distinction Tacchi (2003) makes in respect of American as opposed to Greek notions of nostalgia. Whereas the former takes nostalgia to be a trivializing form of romantic sentimentality, the Greek

conceptualization emphasizes ongoing pain, an inability to adapt, the persistence of longing and desire for transformation. As Pickering and Keightley (2006) emphasize, the American view forecloses the possibility of the past ushering in a transformative role in the present; the more visceral Greek conception “evokes a range of bodily experiences to negotiate the past and...allows the past a transactional role in the present” (p. 934). It is perhaps through the adaptation of the Greek notion into the American, through the anesthetization of nostalgia’s qualities of pain and disturbance in favour of ego-enhancing aspects, that much of the critical potential of the notion has gone amiss. We might put it this way: 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 - exactly when the American notion reverts to the Greek - that nostalgia becomes useful to us.

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