



‘Forget, remember!’: Literature and Nostalgia

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'FORGET, REMEMBER!': LITERATURE AND NOSTALGIA

Sam Caleb and Niall Ó Cuileagáin

The literary act is almost inescapably nostalgic. That most cliché of opening lines—'Once upon a time...'—signals the plaintive longing for time past that is emblematic of nostalgia. Indeed, Niklas Salmose and Eric Sandberg use this very cliché as the title of their collection on nostalgia in literature, with Sandberg noting that 'literature is an inherently nostalgic art form, frequently if not exclusively retrospective, frequently if not always imbued with the particular emotional intensity of nostalgia'.¹ Almost every culture's oldest and most repeated stories involve tales of past heroic deeds, and contemporary literary culture, despite its awareness of the potential pitfalls of an overly nostalgic *esprit*, maintains its obsession with the past. In L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), it may indeed be 'a foreign country',² yet it is one that his protagonist Leo Colston cannot help travelling to; while for Max Morden in John Banville's *The Sea* (2005), '[t]he past beats inside [him] like a second heart'.³ The ineluctability of the past drives the nostalgic impulse in literature and, as this issue demonstrates, within other artforms, too.

The late Svetlana Boym's seminal work on nostalgia has had a marked impact on scholarly reappraisals of the subject. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Boym states that: 'Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.'⁴ To look back nostalgically is not to recall the past as it really was, but to elide, distort, and occlude its realities in the light of what has happened since. The imprint nostalgia leaves is that of 'a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life.'⁵

Boym's study of what the Soviet Union had left in the wake of its fall asks what it is to return to the site of what never quite was—the creation of a communist utopia—at a point at which the circumstances that had permitted it to be imagined as realizable

¹ Eric Sandberg, 'The Double Nostalgia of Literature', in *Once Upon a Time: Nostalgia Narratives in Transition*, ed. by Niklas Salmose and Eric Sandberg (Stockholm: Trolltrumma Academia, 2018), pp. 114-126; p. 116.

² L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2002), p. 17.

³ John Banville, *The Sea* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 13.

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiii.

⁵ *Ibid.*

appeared to have ceased to exist. Her trawl of souvenirs, ruins, and exiled existences speaks to how the nostalgic impulse is most strongly felt at times of socio-political rupture. Nostalgia always has an agenda. In its most reactionary guise, it acts as ‘a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheaval.’⁶ Yet, what makes Boym’s interpretation so groundbreaking is that she does not read nostalgia as intrinsically conservative in nature. Rather, nostalgia can and should be mobilized as a force for radical and revolutionary change. In her words, ‘[o]ne is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future.’⁷ The retrospection nostalgia entails can be reversed and made prospective: the ‘unforeseen pasts and future anteriors’ nostalgia recovers ‘can still transform our present.’⁸

Contemporary western culture—and we might emphasize Anglo-American culture—appears at present to be caught in a nostalgic stasis. The two most successful political slogans in recent years have focused on the notion of restoring a prior state of being: taking *back* control, making America great *again*. In such a context it is easy to view nostalgia as a tool of the more regressive aspects of right-wing politics, forever seeking to reaffirm and re-establish power structures which are perceived, however inaccurately, to be in danger of crumbling. Nostalgia might therefore appear to go hand-in-hand with a kind of latent imperialism, but it is important to bear in mind that nostalgia has been harnessed just as much to fight against imperialism as it has been to reimpose it.⁹ The articles in this year’s issue of *Moveable Type* each, in their own way, grapple with the complexities of nostalgia as both a progressive and a regressive force.

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The advent of western modernism and its perceived rejection of tradition can be seen as the beginnings of a deliberate turn against the nostalgic impulse among progressive western thinkers. To look back was to reject the modern world and its destabilizing

⁶ Ibid., p. xiv.

⁷ Ibid., p. 351.

⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Off-Modern* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 39.

⁹ Regarding the latter, see Okaka Opio Dokotum’s chapter ‘Colonial nostalgia’ on contemporary Hollywood’s use of nostalgia to mask the evils of colonialism in *Hollywood and Africa: Recycling the ‘Dark Continent’ Myth from 1908-2020* (Grahamstown: NISC (Pty) Ltd, 2020), pp. 90-126, <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvxcrxs1.11>> [accessed 6 August 2020].

influence, most especially its dismantling of prior societal hierarchies, in favour of safer, known, and more static structures. Such an outlook is apparent in the proclamations of the Italian Futurists who draw a distinction ‘between those docile slaves of tradition and us free moderns who are confident in the radiant splendor of our future’.¹⁰ Modernism’s embrace of novelty is most often summed up in Ezra Pound’s famous commandment to ‘make it new’—while much focus has been paid to the ‘new’ in this declaration, less time has been spent unpacking the ‘it’. This ‘it’ is evidently a reference to the past, to inherited traditions, to the idea of rejuvenating overly familiar, perhaps even staid, aesthetics. Thus, from its very inception, modernism is as preoccupied with the past as it is with the future. Indeed, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that at the moment of its seeming rejection, tradition in fact becomes ‘a constitutive part of modernity’, with the result that modernity succeeds in ‘produc[ing] nostalgia for what has seemingly been lost’ as much as it does enthusiasm for the future.¹¹ This nostalgic impulse is obvious too in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) where he advocates what he calls the ‘historical sense’ which

involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.¹²

For Eliot, this ‘historical sense’ is crucial not only for making one aware of inherited traditions, but also for making the poet ‘acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity’.¹³ This view of tradition is patently Eurocentric—it is very deliberately ‘the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer’ onwards that is relevant to Eliot’s male poet—and indeed Eliot and Pound form two of the pillars of right-leaning modernism, which we might expect to be more susceptible to the nostalgic impulse. However, even those high modernists more associated with the left—or at least less disposed towards outright imperialist visions of literary culture—

¹⁰ Umberto Boccioni et al., ‘Manifesto of the Futurist Painters, 1910’, qtd. in Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 25.

¹¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 156.

¹² T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, *The Egoist*, 6.4 (1919), pp. 54-55; p. 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*

did from time to time dabble in nostalgia. Undoubtedly the most explicit exercise in extended literary nostalgia is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927). Proust's celebration of *la mémoire involontaire*, set off by the dipping of a madeleine into tea, becomes a grand exercise in personal nostalgia, the attempt to search after 'lost time', to return to prior 'home' states. Indeed, Catharine H. Savage describes Proust's gargantuan project as being 'directly inspired by nostalgia'.¹⁴ In the aforementioned 'madeleine moment' in *Swann's Way* (1913), Proust's narrator describes 'the vast structure of recollection' which rises to the mind with the smell and taste of the madeleine, inciting his extended reflection on the past.¹⁵ However, even by the end of the first volume, Proust's narrator realizes the complex and imperfect ability of memory/nostalgia to truly recapture the past:

The reality that I had known no longer existed. [...] The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.¹⁶

In contrast to other stalwarts of modernism, James Joyce is less obviously associated with recourse to the past given his insistence on the contemporary metropolis as the primary setting for his works. Indeed, in his early unpublished novel *Stephen Hero* (1944), Stephen Daedalus proclaims that '[n]o esthetic theory [...] is of any value which investigates with the aid of the lantern of tradition'.¹⁷ Yet, every major work Joyce wrote after this is framed in Irish and European literary tradition, each one a deliberate, often nostalgic, reflection on a time since passed. The date chosen for *Ulysses* (1922), the 16th of June 1904, is deliberately nostalgic, being the date on which Joyce first went out with Nora Barnacle, his lifelong partner.¹⁸ While Joyce broadly rejected a vision of Irish life that sought its meaning in tales of mythological heroes of times past, this is not to say he was not also susceptible to the nostalgic impulse, even

¹⁴ Catharine H. Savage, 'Nostalgia in Alain-Fournier and Proust', *The French Review*, 38.2, (1964), pp. 167-72; p. 167.

¹⁵ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 513.

¹⁷ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (London: Granada, 1977), p. 189.

¹⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. by Hans Walter Gabler et al. (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

on national questions. His final work, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), is as much a compendium of world history, and most especially of Irish history, as it is a linguistic *tour de force*.¹⁹ Terry Eagleton refers to what he calls the ‘terrible twins’ of ‘[a]mnesia and nostalgia, the inability to remember and the incapacity to do anything else’, and it is this battle which Joyce appears to be acutely aware of in his writing.²⁰ Towards the end of the *Wake*, such a battle between these impulses manifests itself in ALP’s closing monologue:

What has gone? How it ends?
Begin to forget it. It will remember itself from every sides, with
all gestures, in each our word. Today’s truth, tomorrow’s trend.
Forget, remember!²¹

Locked in this battle between the embrace and rejection of memory and nostalgia, Joyce instead offers another solution, a glance both backward and forward, an equal engagement with worlds ‘past, or passing, or to come’, to quote W. B. Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’.²²

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Both Joyce and Yeats are writing within the context of a decolonizing Ireland, and this fact necessarily complicates their brand of modernism and its use and engagement with nostalgia. One way we might consider a turn in nostalgia’s role in literature after modernism is by approaching it through those writers who have since reckoned with the aftermath of colonialism and slavery. James Clifford notes that decolonizing societies ‘have always been both backward and forward looking. Loyalty to a traditional past is, in practice, a way ahead, a distinct path in the present’.²³ If nostalgia

¹⁹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

²⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture*, qtd. in Oona Frawley, *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), p. 157.

²¹ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 614.19-22. It is also significant that ALP’s final commandment to the reader of the *Wake* is to remember her: ‘mememormee!’ (p. 628.14). References to *Finnegans Wake* follow the conventions of the *James Joyce Quarterly* by citing page and line numbers.

²² W. B. Yeats, ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 95.

²³ James Clifford, ‘Traditional Futures’, in *Questions of Tradition*, ed. by Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 152-68; p. 156.

in imperial or dominant cultures is often a way to reject change in the modern world, for writers in (post)colonial settings, nostalgia for a pre-imperial past provides a potential way to bring about such change.²⁴ Nostalgia thus can be as much about rewriting and reappropriating the past as it is about reviving a cultural corpse. Edward Said emphasizes the key question as follows: ‘how does a culture seeking to become independent of imperialism imagine its own past?’²⁵ Frantz Fanon also touches on the native’s need to engage with their ancestral past following the colonialist’s presence:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.²⁶

If the nostalgic impulse in literature asks us what it is to remember, it also poses what it is to forget. The process of looking back in order to recuperate voices lost to the past always carries with it the risk that it ‘distorts, disfigures and destroys’ that which an author seeks to represent. One might even go so far as to say that nostalgia is an inevitable by-product of colonialism, a form of homesickness felt by those whose homes have been twisted beyond all recognition.

George Lamming, writing on the experience of West Indian emigrants in the England of the 1950s, speaks of being ‘made to feel a sense of exile by our inadequacy and our irrelevance of function in a society whose past we can’t alter, and whose future is always beyond us.’²⁷ What does it constitute, then, to feel compelled to engage with or reimagine a past in which one’s place within it has so often been marginalized, diminished, or wilfully forgotten? Or, to repurpose Toni Morrison’s conception of the process of reading and writing, to broach ‘entering what one is estranged from’?²⁸ *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Lamming’s uneasy reminiscences of his childhood in Barbados, asks what it means to adopt a nostalgic tone for a place in which even those who call it home have ‘something nomadic about them, intransit passengers all

²⁴ Indeed, Frank O’Connor’s influential study of the Irish literary tradition emphasizes this nostalgic impulse in its very title: *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

²⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 258.

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, qtd. in Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 286.

²⁷ George Lamming, ‘The Occasion for Speaking’, in *Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960); repr. in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 14-18; p. 14.

²⁸ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 4.

moving within the limits of a given land.’²⁹ Lamming’s text recalls a Barbados under colonial rule in which ‘the flow of history’ is alternately ‘undisturbed by any difference’ and ‘our lives—meaning our fears and their corresponding ideals—seemed to escape down an imaginary drain that was our future.’³⁰ The amnesic quality of Lamming’s wavering prose draws into question what occurs to the retrospective gaze when it encounters blockages, aporias, and obstructions, and whether the colonial subject is able to project their heritage into a vision of a more auspicious future with any confidence. As one remembered school lesson has it, emancipation from slavery is presented not as a momentous change but a means to obliterate its wrongs and cast them benignly: ‘No one there was ever a slave, the teacher said. It was in another part of the world that those things happened. Not in Little England.’³¹ When the past is looked back on it is presented nostalgically, in line with a white colonial ideology intent on misconstruing history in order to placate colonial subjects and absolve colonists of blame. Such blinkered narratives lead the children of the class to prefer to leave the past uninspected:

They would forget all about it since it happened too long ago. Moreover, they weren’t told anything about that. [...] It was too far back for anyone to worry about teaching it as history. That’s really why it wasn’t taught. It was too far back. History had to begin somewhere, but not so far back. And nobody knew where this slavery business took place. The teacher simply said, not here, somewhere else. Probably it never happened at all. [...] The whistle was blown. Silence, silence! It came up like a ghost and soon faded again.³²

Derek Walcott writes more forcibly on the difficulties encountered when postcolonial subjects attempt to escape from the imposition and perpetuation of colonial ideologies. In his 1974 essay ‘The Muse of History’, Walcott argues that postcolonial literature and history are inextricably bound:

the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction. In time every event becomes an

²⁹ George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (London: Longman, 1970), p. 242.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25, p. 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

exertion of memory and is thus subject to invention. The farther the facts, the more history petrifies into myth.³³

From any narrative act can be inferred its deliberate omissions, its supplanting of alternative pasts with crudely simplified, inherently fictitious accounts of cause and effect. For Walcott, ‘amnesia is the true history of the New World.’³⁴ Such a debilitating inheritance traps its writers into taking on either the expiatory mode of ‘oceanic nostalgia’ or a register of ‘phonetic pain, the groan of suffering, the curse of revenge’ that derives from the ‘admirable wish to honor the degraded ancestor’, yet risks ‘incoherence.’³⁵

Is there a way to reconcile these divergent modes of engagement with fraught and conflicted colonial pasts? Walcott concludes his polemic by giving ‘the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juices’.³⁶ To look on the past neither solely with fondness nor with totemic recrimination may provide a means to overcome this impasse, no matter how unpleasant this process may turn out to be. Approaching postcolonial conditions through nostalgia, as Dennis Walder posits, can allow writers to ‘admit [...] the past into the present in a fragmentary, nuanced, and elusive way’, and flag ‘the importance of remembering the radical evil of apartheid, [...] slavery and genocide’ that mark (and mar) ‘the long histories of empire and colonisation, as a part of our contingent sense of who we are in the present.’³⁷

What happens to the nostalgic impulse when its search for places to conceive of as home is confronted by the uncompromising reality that such places have been perpetually distanced, displaced, and altered beyond recognition—or, at worst, razed and obliterated? On his own impulse to look back on and write his life, Said writes:

³³ Derek Walcott, ‘The Muse of History’, in Orde Coombes, *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean* (New York: Doubleday, 1974); repr. in Ashcroft et al., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, pp. 329-332; p. 329.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

³⁷ Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p. 16, p. 19.

To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion of these years.³⁸

If nostalgia is a longing for a return to ‘a home that no longer or has never existed’, then the condition of the postcolonial exile makes palpable the ambiguities, uncertainties, and disorientations latent in the sentiment. Similarly, Saidiya Hartman poignantly asks what it means to be impelled to return to a natal land that never was. In *Lose Your Mother* (2007), her memoir of a journey she made to Ghana to trace the traumatic history of the Atlantic slave route, she interrogates the nostalgic impulse:

What place in the world could sate four hundred years of yearning for a home? Was it foolish to long for a territory in which you could risk imagining a future that didn’t replicate the defeats of the present?³⁹

Jack Halberstam has compellingly read Hartman’s text as suggesting that a writer’s confrontation with postcolonial trauma ‘requires a certain amount of forgetting, repressing, moving on’ or risks psychological damage and scarring.⁴⁰ Halberstam, however, diminishes the appeal Hartman makes to recuperating out of the tortured, forgotten pasts of slavery narratives which could be restorative to Black senses of selfhood (whether African-American, African, or Afro-Caribbean):

[M]ust the story of the defeated always be a story of defeat? Is it too late to imagine that their lives might be redeemed or to fashion an antidote to oblivion? Is it too late to believe their struggles cast a shadow into a future in which they might finally win?⁴¹

The nostalgic impulse infuses Hartman’s text, but it is one that does not try to misrepresent the past, unravel its knotty contradictions, or absolve guilt or blame. It

³⁸ Edward Said, *Out of Place* (New York: Vintage, 1999), p. 217.

³⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 33. We would like to thank Chinelo Ezenwa for bringing to our attention this text and its importance to reappraisals of nostalgia in a submission that, due to COVID-19, we were unfortunately unable to publish.

⁴⁰ Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC., and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 86.

⁴¹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 192.

asks us instead to critically inspect that longing to connect with a past, even though the passage of time and the erasure of certain histories in favour of others has made that impossible. However flawed or misplaced the nostalgic impulse may be, it may itself reveal to us ways to conceive of a future less unjust, less beholden to the narratives of those who have claimed to be history's victors.

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The brief outline of nostalgia that we have sketched above attests to the complexity with which it has been utilized by non-dominant cultures. The articles contained within this issue of *Moveable Type* each tackle nostalgia with oppressed, repressed, or subcultural voices in mind.

In '*I and the Village: Nostalgia for a Homeland in Yiddish Art and Literature*', MC Koch examines how nostalgia has been utilized as part of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern European Jewish experience. Koch's primary focus is Marc Chagall's 1911 painting *I and the Village*, which, Koch argues, nostalgically depicts the artist's childhood in the *shtetl*—the Yiddish term for a Jewish village—and a way of life that was quickly waning. Koch expands this study of Chagall to investigate how his use of nostalgia ties in with traditional Judaic attitudes towards remembrance as well as offering a compelling reading of Walter Benjamin's adaptation of these traditions in his writing. Koch sees the use of nostalgia as a way of 'coping with modernity' (31) and exemplifying 'the paradox of the twentieth-century Jewish experience as an historical process; that is, the dissolution of and longing for a traditional way of life, and the transfiguration of this life into the modern age' (18).

Leila Aouadi also examines Jewish experience—though that in the Middle East, rather than Europe—through the lens of nostalgia in 'Remembering the Lost Eden in Marina Benjamin's *Last Days in Babylon: The Story of the Jews of Baghdad*'. In this article she focuses on Marina Benjamin's account of her return to her ancestral home of Baghdad and the plight of the few remaining Jews there. Benjamin's journey to Iraq unfolds in the aftermath of the invasion of 2003 and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. Aouadi shows how nostalgia permeates the narrative, most especially through the author's focus on the life and memories of her grandmother against a backdrop of intense suffering and destruction. Aouadi argues that a 'Proustian vein [...] undergirds the narrative' (38), while 'the act of narrating/witnessing is transformed into an act of

preservation in the face of erasure' (53). In the face of such personal and collective devastation, Aouadi succinctly notes that '[t]o remember is oftentimes to survive' (52).

While the positive aspects of nostalgia are demonstrated in the above two articles, in "This can't be the scene": Nostalgia and Representations of Mod in *Quadrophenia* and *Absolute Beginners*', Jamie Zabel delineates the potential pitfalls of an overly nostalgic critical perspective. Zabel examines the critical commentary around The Who's 1973 album *Quadrophenia*, an album that specifically deals with Mod subculture, and Colin MacInnes' 1959 novel, *Absolute Beginners*, which Zabel describes as depicting a 'pre-Mod' subculture. Zabel sees both works as demonstrating Mod/pre-Mod's 'ultimate failure as a subculture', arguing against the dominant critical appraisal (57). Zabel argues that the nostalgia of The Who's critics, along with MacInnes' own generational nostalgia, ultimately 'distorts the past, making positive qualities stand out and negative ones fade into the background' (67).

The review section of this issue covers our theme across a broad range of the latest critical and creative writing, from nostalgia during the English Reformation to Ben Lerner's tackling of present political crises through the lens of the past in *The Topeka School* (2019).

This issue of *Moveable Type* was compiled over 2019-20 and, like all other endeavours over the past number of months, has also felt some of the effects of COVID-19. Some excellent submissions which we had planned to publish had to be ultimately withdrawn by the authors due to the pandemic. To those whom we worked with at various points and who experienced personal loss and illness as a result of COVID-19, we would like to express our sincere condolences and sympathy.

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Ultimately, nostalgia only takes one so far. Just as in these disorienting times of COVID-19, a recognition that past ways of living are no longer relevant, and indeed are irretrievable, begins to set in.⁴² Nostalgia can only do so much before one

⁴² A number of think-pieces have already begun to appear discussing nostalgia and the COVID-19 pandemic, with some viewing it as a positive coping mechanism during lockdown. See, for example, Matt Johnson, 'The Psychology of Nostalgia During COVID-19', *Psychology Today*, 26 May 2020, <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/mind-brain-and-value/202005/the-psychology-nostalgia-during-covid-19>> [accessed 7 August 2020] and Nicole Johnson, 'The surprising way nostalgia can help us cope with the pandemic', *National Geographic*, 21 July 2020, <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/07/surprising-role-of-nostalgia-during->

reconciles oneself to—borrowing perhaps 2020’s most hackneyed phrase—‘the new normal’. Our reflection on the past, especially during times of great change, can, however, encourage us to take an active part in the creation of this ‘new normal’. As the worldwide protests over the brutal murder of George Floyd have shown, this change need not just be spiritual or theoretical. Homesickness can be as much about recognizing the sickness at the heart of one’s home as it is about lamenting the loss of a prior state.

The past remains a foreign country, and when we travel there, we do so only as a tourist passing through, unable to truly inhabit it as we once did. As the sociologist Fred Davis writes in *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (1979), ‘[w]hatever in our present situation evokes it, nostalgia uses the past—falsely, accurately, or [...] in specially reconstructed ways—but it is not the product thereof’.⁴³ Nostalgia therefore remains a step removed from the reality of the past and is always more a reflection of and a response to our present states than our past ones. It can alter how we conceive of our past, and in turn our present, but it never entirely recovers the past. It remains, as Proust notes, ‘fugitive’, time lost being lost forever, no matter how much one might dwell on it.

[coronavirus-pandemic/](#) [accessed 7 August 2020]. In addition, nostalgia for a locked-down existence has become another recurring theme following the easing of initial restrictions in many countries. See, for example, Caren Chesler, ‘Covid-19 put me and my family in lockdown. I’m feeling weirdly nostalgic now that it’s lifted’, *The Washington Post*, 26 July 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/covid-19-put-me-and-my-family-in-lockdown-im-feeling-weirdly-nostalgic-now-that-its-lifted/2020/07/24/bb07d068-c156-11ea-9fdd-b7ac6b051dc8_story.html> [accessed 7 August 2020].

⁴³ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 10-11.

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