

Nostalgia in an Age of Misinformation: Threats and Possibilities for Democratic Education

Brad Rowe and Vik Joshi

Monmouth College and Teachers College, Columbia University

“Nostalgia threatens us most the instant it is sure it’s not nostalgia at all, but truth.”

—David Berry, *On Nostalgia*¹

A song comes on the radio—“a long, long time ago, I can still remember how that music used to make me smile.”² The lyrics, the melody, the beat call us to reminisce of a “simpler time” when we listened to music by the turn of a dial, not pressing a screen. What is this allure of a simpler past? Nostalgia—as a deeply felt sense of longing for the past—can be a powerful affective experience. Any range of stimuli can rekindle a memory, closely followed by a desire to return to the “better days.” Nostalgia begins with the absence of something that once was and is no more. Still, we *remember*.

For most of us, this is probably where our thinking about nostalgia ends—we may not consider nostalgia as political or cultural, let alone educational. While much has been written about nostalgia across scholarly genres and disciplines, it is not an emotion that philosophers of education have addressed in any systematic or sustained way.³ In this paper, as we think through the relationship between nostalgia and education, one question in particular caught our eye from this year’s call for papers: “What ideas of democracy—and democratic education—are necessary in this socio-political time?” Scholars in education are demonstrating that our socio-political time is characterized, in part, by misinformation and radicalization.⁴ In this paper, we focus on the role of nostalgia as a vital motivating process that both increases the efficacy of misinformation and erodes the values and processes characteristic of democratic education. To begin, we situate our exploration of nostalgia within the contemporary American political narrative of *Make America Great Again*. Following this, we discuss various conceptions of nostalgia in order to clarify our use of two key forms of nostalgia—restorative and reflective—as they relate to misinformation, ex-

amining how fundamental looking back is for the future. We will conclude with reflections on the importance of nostalgia as a tool to understand narratives of misinformation and the deleterious effects on democratic education that emerge from neglecting a close study of nostalgia.

A RETURN TO WHEN AMERICA WAS “GREAT”

Before delving into the socio-political context that offers a foundation to explore the threats of nostalgia, we ground this context by recognizing that the rise of new media, with an emphasis on visual representation, has shaped how nostalgia is evoked through digital communication.⁵ For example, in providing a critical analysis of idyllic representations of 1950s education in visual culture, Stacy Otto deems the myths reinforced through imagery of the mid-20th century classroom as “the perfect embodiment of nostalgia because it longs for a past that never was—and never will be—yet continues to be re-inscribed upon America’s collective conscious.”⁶ The visual representations of a non-existent, idealized past glorify, Otto asserts, “an unjust, segregated way of educating society, and homogenize, glamorize, and make standard an era ingrained with a deep fear of difference.”⁷ Practices fundamental to the health of a democratic public, such as communication and deliberation, have before withstood forms of nostalgia that have sought a past that never was; however, the crucial difference in today’s socio-political moment is the means by which these authoritarian forces, supported by addictive forms of audio-visual media consumption, can harness the power of nostalgia for undemocratic ends.⁸

With this in mind, it is clear that what has become fundamental to contemporary right-wing populism is a dangerous form of nostalgia that underlies the ideology and discourse of the “Make America Great Again” movement (MAGA). The political right has turned arguably one of the most effective campaign slogans of contemporary U.S. electoral politics into an influential coalition and movement built on a nostalgia of restoration—an effort to restore society to an era when America was “great.” This era of “greatness” is typically thought of as the post-World War II 1940s, up to about 1960, with the “greatest of the great” being the romanticized decade of the 1950s.⁹ In its 2021 American Values Survey, the Public Religion Research Institute found that,

when asking “has American culture changed for better or for worse since the 1950s?” seven out of ten Republicans responded that “American culture and way of life have changed for the worse.”¹⁰ But were the 1950s “great”? Many do not think so, quickly pointing out the sexism, racism, and xenophobia of the era that MAGA desires to turn back the clock to during which anyone not male, white, and middle- to upper-class was either relegated to the margins of public life or worse, the victims of socially-sanctioned death. Such a return, for many, is fundamentally regressive and abhorrent because it invokes an erasing of progress in civil rights that have occurred post-1950s.

In her book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Stephanie Coontz dismantles myths about America’s romanticized past. Coontz writes “It is easy to understand why many people harbor nostalgia for the 1950s. Job security—at least for white men—was far greater than it has been for the past forty years. Decent housing was much more affordable for a single-earner family. Unlike in recent decades, real wages were rising for the bottom 70 percent of the population as well as for the top earners, and income inequality was falling.”¹¹ With high corporate and wealth tax rates, coupled with historic union membership rates, the 1950s was a time of impressive economic progress. But, as Coontz points out, these selected facts conceal the whole truth.

A comprehensive historical account of the mid-20th century points to the repression of women in public and domestic spheres, the unceasing exploitation of immigrants, legally-sanctioned racial segregation, and systemic poverty without food stamps and housing programs.¹² In the introduction to her updated 2016 edition, Coontz writes that what has not changed since the original edition was the “tendency for many Americans to view present-day family and gender relations through the foggy lens of nostalgia for a mostly mythical past.”¹³ While an impressive work, *The Way We Never Were* is primarily concerned with putting into check this wistfulness by way of articulating the historical realities of our past, but the book does not attend to the complexities of nostalgia. As such, Coontz’s analysis ought to be supplemented with an analysis that takes account of the meanings of nostalgia—for Coontz nostalgia is a “trait,” as she refers to it, that is synonymous with “selective memory” of an

“ideal image.”¹⁴ It is clear that Coontz’s treatment of nostalgia equates it with a particular form of nostalgia—what has in recent decades been discussed as “restorative nostalgia.” This, however, is an incomplete picture of the many facets of nostalgia and, as our next section will make clear, understanding the various conceptions of nostalgia is critical to understand the threats available to narratives, like MAGA, that misinform a democratic public and catalyze pathways to radicalization.

NOSTALGIA: REFLECTION OR RESTORATION?

The term *nostalgia* was coined in the late 17th century by Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer. Deriving from Greek *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain, ache, or despair), the term was used to refer to the homesickness—thought of as a literal illness at the time—experienced by Swiss soldiers missing home on the battlefield. Today, research on nostalgia spans disciplinary areas, with the bulk of this work being done by psychologists who study nostalgia as an individual emotion, a form of identity formation and meaning-making that is also related to sociality and group identification.¹⁵ Additionally, cultural studies scholars have analyzed the psychologists’ research and have subsequently applied their analyses to our current political and cultural moment. In this paper, we draw from both approaches.

In their study, “Making America Great Again? National Nostalgia’s Effect on Outgroup Perceptions,” Anna Behler, et al. report their findings on the role of nostalgia in both its personal and collective, or national, forms. National nostalgia is a subcategory of collective nostalgia, which is “nostalgia felt for events shared with one’s ingroup” and “can be experienced in a variety of social settings, including organizations, school classes (for example, class of 2021), cities, and nations.”¹⁶ Unlike personal nostalgia, one does not have to directly experience the time or era longed for; one simply needs access to the “collective memory” of the group or nation. Personal nostalgia, on the other hand, is typically contained to memories and longings within one’s own previous life events or places. Personal nostalgia, however, does not always remain a private internal feeling without some degree of sociality. Distinguishing personal from national nostalgia, Behler et al. write:

The content of [personal] nostalgic memories is predominantly social, including recollections of close others, important social events, or tangible objects reminiscent of loved ones . . . evoking and making more salient one's symbolic connections with others. . . . Personal nostalgia, which is associated with continuity of personal identity and evokes strong feelings of social connectedness, also has downstream implications for reducing anxiety and hostility toward outgroup members. In contrast, feeling national nostalgia is associated with self-categorizing at the group level, evoking one's national identity.¹⁷

The delineation between personal and national nostalgia becomes clear in the researchers' findings: national nostalgia "is associated with increased prejudice as well as support for the populist messaging of Donald Trump" as well as increased perceived racial threat among White respondents, while, by contrast, personal nostalgia was unrelated to support for Trump or perceived racial threat.¹⁸ In their study, Behler found that national nostalgia is linked with prejudiced attitudes for perceived "outsiders," but the same cannot be said about personal nostalgia. Whereas national nostalgics are more likely to feel anxious and threatened by the demographic shifts, for instance, more racially diverse American society, personal nostalgia is "actually associated indirectly with lower anti-Black prejudice via decreased racial threat sensitivity."¹⁹ This study helps illustrate the two distinct forms of belonging created by personal and national nostalgia. Triggered by moments of loneliness or exclusion in one's life, "personal nostalgia enhances feelings of belonging by evoking memories of positive intrapersonal experiences," while, by contrast, national nostalgia enhances feelings of belonging by "evoking positive thoughts about the 'good old days' when one's group was perceived to be higher in status or less threatened by outgroups."²⁰ National nostalgia does not require any direct access to the imagined past for the affective power of nostalgia itself to take root; however, personal nostalgia does draw upon memories in which a person locates themselves in a space, time, and community that they *lived* in.

While the framework distinguishing between collective (national) and

personal nostalgia is helpful in understanding the emotional thrust of the MAGA narrative, as well as its implications on social connectedness, we now turn to another account of nostalgia that focuses on its *function*. By examining this form, we find that the radicalizing potential of nostalgic narratives, like MAGA, is made clearer. Svetlana Boym, in her oft-cited *The Future of Nostalgia*, offers the notion of “restorative nostalgia”—a form of nostalgia that “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps.”²¹ Based on an illusionary, absolutist concept of truth, this form of yearning upholds the truth of the past as a singular “snapshot” wherein history is reduced to an ideal freeze-frame. This frame of reference is tapped to reinforce national identity through a conspiratorial worldview, “a Manichaeian battle of good and evil and the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy.”²² Nostalgics in this restorative vein, as Boym points out, do not think of themselves as nostalgic; rather, they are engaging in an attempt to bring us back the “truth and tradition” of an idealized past, energizing a longing for a return to the homeland. When former President Trump told his supporters that “we will start winning again” or that “we will take our country back to make it great again,” he was, and continues to, appeal to restorative nostalgia that is both collective and nationalistic.

Since this restorative nostalgia, characterized by yearning for a return to the 1950s, has been central to the MAGA narrative, it is unsurprising that those located on the left are eager to dismiss nostalgia as it appears in a political or public context. We can readily imagine any progressive asking: Why would I want to return to a time of widespread misogyny, racism, and xenophobia? But it is this dismissal of nostalgia that, we argue, reveals that it is only a rejection of the nationalistic, restorative form of nostalgia. As Boym offers, there is another way to think about nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia does not bind longing with national identity and rejects absolutist claims of truth and tradition. Minding the flaws, fractures, and injustices of the past, this form of nostalgia is more ambivalent in its longing and calls into question the very idea that there is a collective, national identity to restore or a singular version of truth to reinstitute.²³ The word “reflective” itself signals the role of the person’s agency in looking back to specific moments in one’s life-history without a restorative function

compelling this reflection. In other words, for the reflective nostalgic, there is no “great again.” Instead of uncritically dismissing nostalgia, educators can rethink it to emphasize that “longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another,” Boym writes, “as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection.”²⁴ It is this preservation of reflective critical thinking, as a vital practice for democratic education, that is lost if the threats of nostalgia are met with disengagement rather than engagement.

MISINFORMATION, NOSTALGIA, AND THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

To understand the harmful and radicalizing use of nostalgia, we want to first introduce a novel model of radicalization, developed by Amra Sabic-El-Rayess, that illustrates a sequential pathway of radicalization from grievance to violent expression.²⁵ The Educational Displacement and Replacement model, which includes a ten-step sequence that outlines a pathway of radicalization, begins with *educational displacement*.²⁶ This process displaces students from formal institutions of schooling in which experiences of invisibility cause isolation, alienation, and a gradual disconnection from one’s peers, educators, and the school as a whole. Educational displacement results in a lack of belonging, prompting such students to seek *alternative places of belonging* outside formal schooling environments. It is this pursuit of another place of belonging that radicalizing recruiters exploit.²⁷

When educationally displaced students, in search of an alternative place of belonging, find their way online, they are met with narratives of hate that offer explanations for the cause of their educational displacement. Compared to classroom environments in which content is often delivered through textbooks and the occasional video, radicalizing recruiters, or “mentors,” deliver multi-modal content that emphasizes both the frequency with which they reach out to such youth and take advantage of the “serialization” of several platforms—subscribing to YouTube channels, becoming followers on Instagram, or migrating to breakaway echo-chambers such as Parler.²⁸ With this steady stream of content moving towards educationally displaced youth, the narrative of hate is delivered in an episodic, engaging, and easily digestible manner for anyone who is not

only willing to listen but also is wishing to be seen, recognized, and have a voice.

With this context established, we can now turn to the MAGA narrative and its use of nostalgia to radicalize into yearning for a past that never was. In just under a decade, the “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan morphed into the MAGA script of hate: a movement that poses a grave threat to American democracy. Whether it’s Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, lies and propaganda about fair and free elections being stolen, or the conspiracy theories fueling calls for violent armed conflict, beliefs in “the truth and tradition” of a collectivistic, nationalistic nostalgia present a significant obstacle to democratic values and practices. For example, on January 6, 2021, the dangers of a political movement built on an “essential truth”—this truth of course was *The Big Lie*, manufactured and propagated by Trump and his MAGA adherents—materialized in an assault on the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to violently overturn a democratic election. Political violence was stirred, in part, by a genuine belief in a lie. Central to the lies that fuel ideological conflict are the online platforms and algorithms that hinder citizens’ abilities to access information that might challenge their point of view and allow them to interpret, sift, and weigh information and ideas. The left also has its issues with existing in an echo chamber, but maintaining the environment where lies can grow and fester is central to the MAGA movement and the preservation of its narratives of hate and authoritarianism.

Underlying these narratives is what we call a *transposal* of restorative nostalgia in the name of reflective nostalgia. What does this mean? Let’s consider the forms of nostalgia we have presented thus far. Reflective nostalgia pertains to moments of yearning or longing that are not tied to a national identity and reject absolutist claims of truth and tradition. To reflect, as we did at the beginning of this paper, the longing for music to be played on the radio does not require a restoration of the time and place when those practices were a reality. Further, the absence that is perceived by a reflective nostalgic may be momentary or fleeting, suggestive of the ephemerality of the retrospective pull of reflective nostalgia. The reflective nostalgic, steeped in the desire for a simpler time, is not the optimal vehicle for a narrative of hate. Restorative nostalgia,

by contrast, is premised on an absolutist claim of truth and tradition that demands the collective to restore a lost picture of home, consciously erasing and neglecting the violence, harm, and discrimination faced by many in the “good old days.” There is no critical question: “For whom were those the good old days?” Radicalizing recruiters target educationally displaced youth precisely to control the informational environment and narrative to preclude such critical questions from being asked. To do this, they immediately listen and validate the grievances, whether perceived or real, of educationally displaced youth and supply a convenient explanation that (a) offers the student a sense of clarity in trying to understand their own grievance; (b) helps the student feel a sense of belonging that was lost; and (c) gives the student a chance to join a new community under certain conditions. It is this last aim of the radicalizing recruiter where nostalgia, as a vehicle for spreading misinformation, enters.

Narratives of hate, like the MAGA narrative, explain the loss of this imagined utopian homeland due to the actions of groups that are outside of the in-group. In the case of contemporary American politics, MAGA projects blame on immigrants and racial minorities as groups who do not wish to return to the idyllic representation of the 1950s. They cannot misinform educationally displaced youth by simply *telling* them this. Therefore, the “pitch” of the radicalizing recruiter involves “scaling up” a youth’s personal grievance to a collective grievance. With regards to nostalgia, this involves the transposal of personal nostalgia to a nationalistic restorative nostalgia. By projecting blame on certain groups for a youth’s personal grievance, this opens the door to merge the motivating goals of the collective movement with an educationally displaced youth seeking an alternative place of belonging. The transposal from reflective to restorative nostalgia both expands the community of MAGA and offers this idealized homeland as the place for radicalized youth to both find their place and make this reality great *again*.

CONCLUSION

We have set out to provide an analysis that, while examining various meanings and manifestations of nostalgia, provides an interpretation of nostalgia to better understand how longing for a mythologized past can motivate and inform

political radicalization. In his discussion on the role of memory and memoir writing in education, Bryan Warnick asks if nostalgia has “moral weight.”²⁹ It should be clear by now that we believe it does, as we have attempted to develop the lines of inquiry concerning the intersection of education and nostalgia to include ideological and political implications for our current time, mainly in the way that restorative nostalgia has not only distorted national memory but how it has been weaponized by the political right to radicalize portions of the public and function as a growing threat to the project of American democracy. While it is far too reductionistic to suggest that nostalgia is the main threat to democracy, it is, in our view, obvious that restorative nostalgia is an underlying current shaping an increasingly radicalizing ideology that essentializes the past with wildly misleading claims about the way things were while also fashioning dangerous, authoritarian proposals for the way things ought to be.

Education is not *the* single answer to the problem of nostalgia as a vehicle for radicalization; however, to preserve the health of democracies and democratic education, it is important to extend this examination of nostalgia to educational spaces beyond the classroom, such as museums, where collective identities and their relationship to a country’s story is articulated.³⁰ Further, the entanglement of democracies, like America, with histories of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia requires a rigorous engagement with pedagogical approaches that treat nostalgia in both its restorative and reflective forms.³¹ Gone are the simpler days where we leave nostalgia to the films, music, and literature that people—young and old—experienced. In the misinformation age, the study of nostalgia in classrooms and by philosophers of education has the potential to support our critical resistance to narratives of hate, so long as we do not confuse the restorative for the reflective.

REFERENCES

- 1 David Berry, *On Nostalgia* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2020), 97.
- 2 Don McLean, “American Pie,” recorded May 1971, *American Pie*, United Artists Records.

3 See, for example, Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), Peter Fritzsche, “Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exiles, and Modernity,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 1587-1618, Grafton Tanner, *The Hours Have Lost Their Clock: The Politics of Nostalgia* (London: Repeater Books, 2021), and Dennis Walder, “Writing, Representation, and Postcolonial Nostalgia,” *Textual Practice* 23 (2009): 935-946, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360903361709>; With this said, there is a small body of work by educational scholars to note here. See, for example, David Halpin, “Dancing with Eyes Wide Open: On the Role of Nostalgia in Education,” *London Review of Education* 14, no. 3 (2016): 31-40, Kate Rousmaniere, “Nostalgia and Educational History: An American Image,” *Paedagogica Historica*, 53, no. 6 (2017): 697-706, Barbara Shircliffe, “‘We Got the Best of That World’: A Case for the Study of Nostalgia in the Oral History of School Segregation,” *Oral History Review* 28, no. 2 (2001): 59-84, SunInn Yun, “At Home and not at Home in the National Museum: On Nostalgia and Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2021): 363-372, and Michalinos Zembylas, “Reclaiming Nostalgia in Educational Politics and Practice: Counter-memory, Aporetic Mourning, and Critical Pedagogy,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32, no. 5 (2011): 641-655.

4 Amra Sabic-El-Rayess, “How do people radicalize?” *International Journal of Educational Development* 87 (2021): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102499>

5 Katherine Nieymeyer, “Media Studies and Nostalgia: Media Philosophy and Nostalgizing in Times of Crisis,” in *Intimations of Nostalgia: Multidisciplinary Explorations of an Enduring Emotion*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobson (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), 151-170. <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781529214765.003.0008>

6 Stacy Otto, “Nostalgic for What? The Epidemic of Images of the Mid-20th Century Classroom in American Media Culture and What it Means,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26, no. 4 (2005): 464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300500319738>

7 Otto, “Nostalgic for What?” 462.

8 Yalin Sun and Yan Zhang, “A Review of Theories and Models Applied in Studies of Social Media Addiction and Implications for Future Research,” *Addictive Behaviors* 114 (2021): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2020.106699>

9 Marta Dassù and Edoardo Campanella, *Anglo Nostalgia: The Politics of Emotion in a Fractured West* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019), 19.

10 “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey,” Public Religion Research Institute, November 1, 2021, <https://www.prrri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>. From the same survey, a majority of Democrats (over 60%) believe American culture and way of life have changed for the better.

11 Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), xxiii.

12 Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 31-32.

13 Coontz, xiv.

14 Coontz, xiv.

15 See, for example, Tim Wildschut, et al., “Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91, no. 5 (2006): 975-993, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.5.975>; Anna Maria Behler, et al., “Making America Great Again? National Nostalgia’s Effect on Outgroup Perceptions,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.555667>; and W.Y. Cheung, et al., Anticipated Nostalgia: Looking Forward to Looking Back, *Cognitive Emotion* 34 (2020): 511-525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2019.1649247>

16 Behler, et al., “Making America Great Again?” 2.

17 Behler, et al., 2-3.

18 Behler, et al., 10.

19 Behler, et al., 11.

20 Behler, et al., 12.

21 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

22 Boym, 43.

23 Boym, 49-50.

24 Boym, 50.

25 For the purposes of this paper, we are using the following definition of radicalization: The process by which an individual embraces ideologically motivated violence in service of a political goal. This has been drawn from

the National Institute of Justice. See, Alison G. Smith, “Risk Factors and Indicators Associated with Radicalization in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us” (paper presented at the Annual Needs, Risk, and Threat Assessment Meeting, Washington, DC, 2021).

26 Sabic-El-Rayess, “How do People Radicalize?” 4.

27 It is important to note the educational displacement, based on Sabic-El-Rayess’s model, can occur beyond classroom or schooling environments. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on educational displacement in formal institutions of learning as it directly affects the prospects and goals of a democratic education.

28 Vik Joshi and Amra Sabic-El-Rayess, “Witnessing the Pathways of Misinformation, Hate, and Radicalization: A Pedagogic Response,” in *Education in the Age of Misinformation*, eds. Lana Parker and Kristy Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2023), forthcoming. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25871-8_6

29 Bryan Warnick, Review of *Educated* by Tara Westover, *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 27, no. 2 (2020): 188-195. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074048ar>

30 SunInn Yun, “At Home and not at Home in the National Museum: On Nostalgia and Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2021): 363-372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1785867>

31 Kathy Hytten and Kurt Stenhagen, “Democratic Theory’s Evasion of Race,” *Educational Theory* 71, no. 2 (2021): 177-202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12472>