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Introduction: Nostalgia Science Fiction at 2020

It is perhaps just as valid to suggest that we live in nostalgic times as it is to claim that we live in science-fictional times. The latter has been reiterated several times since Jean Baudrillard wrote his “*Simulacra and Science Fiction*” (1981), Donna Haraway suggested that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (149), and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. described sf as “not a genre of literary entertainment, but a mode of awareness” (388)—an argument validated more recently by Veronica Hollinger in her description of sf as less a “narrative genre” and more a “mode of discourse” (139). But perhaps this claim has never been more pertinent than in our times when, to live through an unprecedented global pandemic, we spend most of our days in front of screens and on platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams. At the same time, a nostalgia boom of the 2010s—echoing Andreas Huyssen’s “memory boom” of the 1990s—was already evident in films such as *The Artist* (2011) and television series such as *Mad Men* (2007-2015). Eventually, the trend reached sf, as seen in television series such as *Stranger Things* (2016-), *Black Mirror* episodes such as “San Junipero” (2018), and films such as *Ready Player One* (2018). But in 2020, nostalgia has also acquired a different meaning since we are already reminiscing about our not-so-long-ago, pre-COVID-19 times. As we worked on this project in the midst of the pandemic, we found that sf nostalgia emerged as a major determinant of our current structure of feeling and, in that sense, this special journal issue seems timelier than ever.

The issue seeks to challenge the assumption that nostalgia is essentially about the past and thus out of place within a genre conventionally associated with the future. The perception of sf as a future-oriented genre has itself already been challenged within sf studies, but, more generally, the relationship of both genre and affect to temporality and historicity is now seen as much more complex. Fredric Jameson’s best known description of sf as a genre that persistently registers our inability to imagine our future is a case in point: the genre transforms “our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come” and thus provides “a structurally unique ‘method’ for apprehending the present as history” (“Progress” 153). A similar relationship to temporality may be found in nostalgia: the past reminisced about is not the actual past as it was then experienced but rather as it is “imagined, as idealized through memory and desire” and, in this sense, nostalgia is “less about the past than about the present” (Hutcheon 20). Furthermore, as Svetlana Boym argues in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), nostalgia conjoins different temporal trajectories so that “fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales” (xvi). Boym’s work has been very influential in nostalgia studies and foundational to the work of many

of our contributors. For example, Natalia Tobin highlights that “neither reflective nostalgia nor sf claim to relate to the actual past or the future. Instead, they are concerned with the unrealized, the unpredictable, and the unarticulated” (16). Nostalgia, as Matthias Stephan also affirms in this issue, “is a double bind, both a look back to an idealized past (whether real or imagined) and a hope that the romanticized past will become our future” (110).

This complex relationship to temporality may be seen as indebted to the most defining aspect of nostalgia, its liminality. What defines and distinguishes nostalgia from memory is the combination of apparently contradictory emotions. Nostalgia is a bittersweet memory that is both affectionate towards and mournful about the past—it is no coincidence that the affect has been associated with the Freudian uncanny by various scholars, including Boym herself (76) but also Linda Anderson, who claims that nostalgia “invokes the uncanny effects of time” (71). This uncanny, ambivalent, and apparently contradictory relationship does not limit itself to time and history but also extends to space and place, whether these materialize as home, nation, or the globe. For one thing, an area of inquiry into nostalgia shared among the articles in this issue relates to the concept of home. Traditional understandings of nostalgia suggest that nostalgic reminiscence constructs idealized and even nationalist, reactionary, conservative visions of home and nationhood. Claire Gullander-Drolet’s article, however, questions established ideas of what home (or nationhood) represent as she critiques representations of other countries and ethnicities at the “intersections of sf and the outbreak narrative” (106). Her reading of Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) calls for a reconsideration of our responsibility to the idea of a home and to those who share it with us. Nostalgia can also be redirected to the creation of active networks of safety, mourning, and survivability for a community, a point made by Paula Barba Guerrero in her discussion of Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993). There is certainly a strong sense in the texts examined in this issue that nostalgia can create safe spaces for different communities. These are often represented as creative spaces that generate forms of resistance against forgetting and subvert the past in the face of dominant cultures and regimes, as evidenced by the various case studies in this issue: retrofuturist art that aims to narrate “resilience and ambition” (135) against a troubled history for Palestine and Lebanon in Nat Muller’s article; small acts of resistance that enable survival and deep reflection in a 1950s white America in Tobin’s reading of Jack Womack’s *Elvissey* (1993); or the appropriation of nostalgia by clones in order to remember “rebels and outcasts” (73) in the Japanese television adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), as discussed by Asami Nakamura. Through these acts of resistance, nostalgia becomes a source of hope in several national contexts, rather than being a regression to an idealized past, even if at times it can be a tenuous hope that relies on the imagination.

This ambivalent relationship to time and space is determined by the underlying politics of nostalgic reminiscing, which is equally permeated by the

uncanny, liminal, and ambivalent sensibilities identified above. The politics of nostalgia have been read equally as backward, reactionary, and conservative and as progressive, subversive, and radical. On the one hand, theorists such as Jameson have claimed that nostalgia alienates the subject from the past, as in the case of what he calls “nostalgia cinema,” whose aesthetic relies on “stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image” at the cost of “‘real’ history” (Postmodernism 19). On the other hand, scholars referenced in this issue, such as Marc Le Sueur, have suggested that nostalgia encourages engagement with social and personal histories in a fundamentally active manner. But these two dominant approaches to the politics of nostalgia are perhaps highlighted more through the major distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia established by Boym—also discussed by Tobin, Nakamura, Muller, and Robbie McAllister. Restorative (also called retrospective) nostalgia relies on an understanding of the past as the actual past, whereas reflective (also called prospective) nostalgia foregrounds its own status as a process that reviews and reinterprets the past in question. Restorative nostalgia depends on a single version of the past and a single-minded determination to recreate that past; but, for Boym, the way to engage productively and creatively with nostalgia is to look not only “backward but sideways” (13). The reified sense of home and nation created by the monolithic historical vision evoked by restorative nostalgia may be counteracted by multiple alternative versions of this past constructed by reflective nostalgia, versions that challenge rigid perceptions of home and place. The transnational perspective evoked across the range of articles in this issue, each focused on different areas of the globe, would seem to testify to this dialectic.

Last but not least, the papers in this issue introduce a final dialectical trend, which may lead to new areas of research in nostalgia studies. On the one hand, there is a trend to explore manifestations of nostalgia that are simulated, immaterial, or disembodied. For example, the peculiar relationship of nostalgia to modern temporality may be a major reason why the term “post-nostalgia” is invoked by contributors such as Barba Guerrero or McAllister, a term following from Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “post-memory.” Hirsch introduces the term in her work on Holocaust survivors in order to refer to “intergenerational acts of transfer” (2) of memories of events one has not directly experienced. Along similar lines, Barba Guerrero refers to the concept of “speculative memory” as “the projection of imaginary memories that are rooted in the actual affective experience of a self or a community into imagined lands” and argues that its aim is “to repair the past, salvage the present and future, and heal trauma” (37). McAllister also identifies a very specific significance of post-memory for Japanese anime, the creation of national belonging:

through its depiction of Atlantis as a lost civilization destroyed by technological imperialism, Nadia’s narrative can be positioned not only among concerns of Japanese national identity, but also with the globalization of the medium of

anime itself and the ways that it has become a site of national and transnational nostalgia. (55)

Nakamura, for her part, relies on a different type of simulated nostalgia in her reading of *Never Let Me Go*, which she describes as a “nostalgic commodity” (67) and which she reads against Arjun Appadurai’s concept of “imagined nostalgia,” “armchair nostalgia,” or “ersatz nostalgia,” terms used to refer to a type of “nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory” (Appadurai 78). These similar concepts may also be identified in contemporary popular culture, in the immense popularity of *Stranger Things* among young people who were not even born in the 1980s. The pervasiveness of this sense of a nostalgia that is simulated and imagined among audiences and scholars, points towards a feature inherent in nostalgia itself: nostalgia is always already post-nostalgia. The distortion of the memory of the original event induced by the bittersweet affect of nostalgia (as opposed to an allegedly more authentic recollection implied by the process of memory) suggests that the event recollected is never the one that was actually experienced.

Some of the articles, however, do raise a note of caution regarding this aspect of nostalgia. While it can help generate affective responses, such a return can lead to a fetishizing of the aesthetic past, as exemplified in the Japanese anime television series *Nadia* (1990-1991), or can prove detrimental to marginalized groups, as in the case of the television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017-). Jenny Wolmark points to nostalgia’s inherent ambivalence, as it can “never be wholly about the past” while it also has to “serve the needs of the present and has the potential to influence the imagining of any number of possible futures” (162). The complex negotiations with the past undertaken by the wide range of texts discussed in this issue are indicative of an “open-ended” notion of the past and future (Wolmark 162). Science fiction’s stories of the future reinscribe ways of narrating a sense of longing for home, creatively generating a sense of hope and belonging through the reclamation of history.

A complementary trend, however, is adopted by a number of papers, such as those by Tobin, Barba Guerrero, Gullander-Drolet, and María José Gámez Fuentes with Rebeca Maseda García, who specifically highlight the significance of reading nostalgia not as a disembodied affect but with regard to its repercussions for gendered, racialized, and classed identities and communities. Boym’s association of nostalgia less with the “objective” time of industrial capitalism and more with the “subjective” temporality of trauma and affect imbues it with “a potential to subvert historiography,” as Barba Guerrero puts it, “and [to] activate cultural legacies” of communities (40), such as that of African Americans in the case of her reading of *Parable of the Sower*. History’s pattern of abuse is reviewed, and contested pasts and unrealized histories are reclaimed through the reflective, subversive, and critical dimensions of nostalgia. The importance of embodiment is even more pertinent in Claire Gullander-Drolet’s reading of *Severance*, whose protagonist is a both Chinese and American character, and her argument that “the novel

presents this double-bind of nostalgia as a universal” but “it is the diasporic subject—for whom ‘home’ is always a necessarily troubled concept—who is particularly well-positioned to unpack these urgent questions” (95) regarding identity and belonging.

Special Issue Overview. In our opening article, Natalia Tobin explores the ways in which *Elvissey* employs sf tropes such as time travel, alternative history, and parallel universes in order to “investigate the elusive and polyvalent character of nostalgia” (9). The novel is read as “an odyssey outside of time and history to the ground zero of contemporary cultural nostalgia, the 1950s, driven by a personal and public longing for the imaginary home of white America” (12). For *Womack*, hope is found “in small acts of resistance, survival, and reflection” (24) that are indicative of a reflective nostalgia. The novel expresses the ability of “the creative and speculative dimensions of sf and nostalgia” (24) to investigate the complexities of “history, politics, and identity, particularly concerning race” (24) and offers a “hopeful way of both thinking about our future selves and of reclaiming an unrealized history” (24).

The following article by Paula Barba Guerrero reads *Parable of the Sower* to explore how Butler’s fictions suggest “parallels between the past and the future to forewarn of the dangers of systemic abuse” when faced with “historical trauma and social injustice” (29). Nostalgia is appropriated by the main character Lauren, as well as by other survivors in order to evoke a new shared sense of home, family, and community. This evocation generates an “active mobility” (40) to seek out a new community and a safe home. Nostalgic networks and communities find ways to mourn and heal together while also being on the move. The presence of mourning and trauma in the novel is matched by “a utopian desire for a hopeful future that provides multiple, contradictory readings to the concept of nostalgia” (42).

The third paper, by Robbie McAllister, explores the ways in which the steampunk television series *Nadia* fetishizes referents to the Victorian period and assesses the means through which contemporary genres such as the scientific romance and the imperial adventure relate to Japan’s own place within a globalized context. As a steampunk text, *Nadia*’s representations of technology are indebted to an “anachronistic invention point of both alternative pasts and futures” (48). Steampunk is discussed as “a source of retrofuturistic nostalgia” (46) and Jules Verne’s work, a source for the series, is seen as having had “a profound impact upon Japan’s own proliferation of retrofuturistic media” (47). At the same time, the series evokes a nostalgic mood that does not remain romantic and uncritical but also follows a trend in anime to portray industrialization as a traumatic process in its invocation of imagery from atomic, postwar, Japanese sf.

In her article, Asami Nakamura identifies not only an “affirmative function” (64) but also a sense of ambiguity in the nostalgia of *Never Let Me Go*. Although the novel may be read as a “nostalgia-inducing commodity” (64), its main effect is to present “a philosophy of reclaiming and repurposing

what has been given through remembrance” (64). For Nakamura, the “importance of *Never Let Me Go* as an affective cartography of hope is paramount since it points to somewhere between despair and submission” (64). Kathy’s detailed account of her past enacts a “retrospective idealization of Hailsham” (64) which may be seen as counterintuitive because this idealization involves a deeply unethical system reliant on the oppression of clones.

The television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the focus of the next article by María Gámez Fuentes and Rebeca Maseda García, who identify a “nostalgic recovery of Atwood’s dystopia” (82) that provides a unique opportunity to acknowledge the legacy of previous feminisms. The show “succeeds in returning some topics dismissed by popular, neoliberal feminism (and postfeminism) to the feminist agenda, such as rape culture, domestic violence, and war on women” (90). The authors’ analysis suggests, however, that the show’s nostalgia “articulates a conservative recuperation of old feminist debates centered on the female subject” (93) and focuses on essentialist elements within feminism, as well as the female body, at the expense of other victims of oppression and patriarchy. While the show has been “a stimulating catalyst” in the fight against the advances of “retrograde attitudes and policies in current times” (93), it ultimately “defies any monolithic understanding of nostalgia” (93) with regard to gender. The article’s examination of the series suggests ways of thinking critically about recent nostalgic returns in sf film and television.

In Claire Gullander-Drolet’s article on *Severance*, the novel’s nostalgic engagement with the 1980s is read as foregrounding the ongoing fascination with and anxiety about China’s economic growth within a climate permeated by fears of Chinese expansionism. The dual identity of the main character, Candace, both Chinese and American, enables a reexamination of nostalgia understood as a longing for home since she is never fully at home in any culture. In this way, Candace is offered “a unique vantage point from which to view nostalgia’s dually sustaining and damaging properties” (95). The novel challenges the reader to rethink what the concept of home might mean and what constitutes responsibility to “this home and the others who inhabit it” in an “increasingly globalized and interconnected world” (106).

Matthias Stephan then explores how George Turner’s *The Sea and Summer* (1987) may be read as a nostalgic narrative that encourages “an affective attachment to the climate disaster” (109). The use of sf tropes such as that of the alternative timeline invites the reader to “think nostalgically about their own era, and even to anticipate its loss” (109). Fictions such as this may be used to make the realities of climate change more present to contemporary readers. The combination of elements of the Gothic with evocations of nostalgia may mobilize profound alteration or profound transformation in the reader’s sensibilities towards climate change, since this combination is seen as providing “a model for climate sf narratives to have the potential to produce meaningful change” (110).

Finally, Nat Muller’s discussion explores the ways that Larissa Sansour’s *A Space Exodus* (2009) and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s *The*

Lebanese Rocket Society (2012) place space travel in “an imaginary and nostalgic sf context that evokes possibilities for the future but also reclaims a lost and contested past” (125). Nostalgia and retrofuturism are seen as operating in this work as “a foil to discourses of nationalism and modernity” (125). *A Space Exodus* is a film that expands Palestinian national dreams but also displaces Palestinians both spatially and temporally. The Lebanese Rocket Society is read as a text nostalgic for a time of national unity and pan-Arab modernity clothed in the upbeat tempo of the film. The future-oriented narrative cannot materialize because it is hampered by the failures of the past: “the shiny promise of the future lies a reality that is messy and painful, and that for now, to echo Boym, can be accessed only sideways” (125).

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