

Nostalgia—A Polemic

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This article attempts to objectify a cultural polemic between forms of nostalgia in the culture of “late capitalism” (Mandel 1978) or “the end of organized capitalism” (Lash and Urry 1987). Hegemonic and resistant nostalgias, “middle-class” and “working-class” nostalgias, the nostalgia of a “mass culture” and the nostalgia of and for local, nameable places are a three-ring circus of simultaneous images in the arenas of life-style, spectacle, and loss. The angst-ridden modern city is replaced by the delirious surround of consumer capitalism (Jameson 1983). Nostalgia, like the economy it runs with, is everywhere. But it is a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context—it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present.

On one “level” there is no longer any place for *anyone* to stand and nostalgia takes on the generalized function to provide some kind (any kind) of cultural form. In positing a “once was” in relation to a “now” it creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life. Nostalgia is an essential, narrative, function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them (Stewart 1984) in the mode of “things that happened,” that “could happen,” that “threaten to erupt at any moment.” By resurrecting time and place, and a subject *in* time and place, it shatters the surface of an atemporal order and a prefab cultural landscape. To narrate is to place oneself in an event and a scene—to make an interpretive space—and to relate something to someone: to make an interpretive space that is relational and in which meanings have direct social referents.

Nostalgia rises to importance as a cultural practice as culture becomes more and more diffuse, more and more a “structure of feeling” (Williams n.d.), as culture takes on the power of “distance” that comes of displacing speakers—the power to flatten distinctions, to blur genres, to unname the practices of the social world so that they look like nature (Barthes 1957). Culture is more and more unspoken and unnamed. Painted onto the surface of things, it passes us by as a blur of images and we “read” it instantaneously as if it is a photographic image already “written” and framed. As Jameson (1983) has argued, the cultural decentering and fragmentation of our present is experienced as a breakdown in our sense of time. As a result, the present rises before us in the ultravivid mode of fascination—a fascination that is experienced as a loss, an unreality (or what Baudril-

lard [1981] calls “hyperreality”). In a world of loss and unreality, nostalgia rises to importance as “the phantasmal, parodic rehabilitation of all lost frames of reference” (Foster 1985:90).

But it depends on where you stand: from one place in the cultural landscape nostalgia is a schizophrenic exhilaration (Jameson 1983) of a pure present that reads images for their own sake; from an other place it is a pained, watchful desire to frame the cultural present in relation to an “other” world—to make of the present a cultural object that can be seen, appropriated, refused, disrupted or “made something of.” Culture is “seductive” only from the “point of view” of a “self” whose (polemical) cultural practice it is to construct codes of distinction and good taste—a pure aesthetic that is rooted in an ethos of elective distance from the contingency of the natural and social world (see Bourdieu 1984). Here the desire is to purify, reify, and miniaturize the social world and so to make a giant of the individual self (Stewart 1984). Here, individual life narratives dramatize acts of separation—freedom, choice, creativity, imagination, the power to model and plan and act *on* life. From here there is the danger of being drawn in by images that are “larger than life” or have “a life of their own.”

But in an “other” place there are “others” whose practice it is to speak from “closeness” and contingency, to “talk back” to codes with the informality of anticodes and to back talk “distinction” with universalizing ethics of personhood. For these “others” on the “margins” the social world is not reified and fixed but thrown into flux and doubleness. Talk is double-voiced, codes are visible from one mode of attentiveness and quite invisible from another so that they refer, inescapably, to the context of their social use. Here it is recognized that everything “depends”; meaning can only be made and read in a “context” that is not just a “background” for the “text” but its very inspiration—its enabling condition. Here texts are contingent and they are *about* contingency. From here, nostalgia is a painful homesickness that generates desire and not, in itself, “seductive” or debased; it would be said that seduction and debasing are things that *people* do and not things inherent in a cultural form. Like other cultural practices in places like this, nostalgia sets in motion a dialectic of closeness and distantiation; its goal is not the creation of a code based on empty distinctions but the redemption of expressive images and speech. Bourdieu would say this is the “deliberate naïveté” of “popular culture”—a move to refuse the refusal to engage that characterizes the distancing pure aesthetic of “good taste.” But the nostalgia of “others” is not the good natured incredulity of a more natural people; it has its own “sophisticated,” or self-conscious, sense of its cultural constructions. The difference is that the desire is not to act *on* “the world out there” but to act *in* a world that surrounds. So they retain, and continuously redeem, conventional cultural discourses and more and more they are on the one hand romanticized as those who can (still) speak and on the other hand coldly judged and dismissed because they speak “incorrectly” and “inefficiently.”

Two Mirages

Postmodern culture is a wave we ride in the disorganizing and all pervasive economy of late capitalism. Awash in a sea of faces, we look back nostalgically

to the shore in a sudden memory of a ground already lost. Once, where there was a time and a place for everything, there was also a time and a place for nostalgia. But now, threatened with a deadening pluralism that makes us all just an "other" among others (Ricoeur 1965), in which difference erases into an utter indifference (Foster 1983), and where the self is a pastiche of styles glued to a surface, nostalgia becomes the very lighthouse waving us back to shore—the one point on the landscape that gives hope of direction.

Across the dry expanse of water two mirages appear on the shore. The first is a grand hotel, representing the public space of a grandiose economy and state. It is a spectacle of riches—gold staircases, revolving elevators, waterfalls cascading down the walls around the guests. The guests are lunching in the grand hall amid hanging plants, afternoon candlelight, and classical music. Those who cannot afford to stay the night come as spectators and as customers for the nostalgia "shoppes" in the mall that ring the concourse overlooking the waterfall and the diners below. The diners in the grand concourse see themselves mirrored in the eyes of the spectators looking down/in on them from the outside and imagine themselves important, glamorous, somehow "above it all." For the (mere) shopper in the mall (more temporary even than an overnight guest) there is an exact replica of a '50s diner where overpriced burgers and malts are served to the strains of Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee; perhaps here the experience of sitting is not so much the glamorous experience of being watched by an envious gaze but the doubled possibilities of "losing oneself" in the scene of a total (fantasy) world and/or of framing the illusion with the social sarcasm of Bakhtin's carnivalesque laughter.

Finally, in the grand hotel there is a "museum" of "modern life-styles," like the new museum in Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in Detroit or the futuristic scenic worlds at Disneyworld's Epcot Center. The museum is arranged by rooms, each a total world in itself—a '60s living room, a '30s kitchen, Archie Bunker's chair before the TV, father and son in the driveway shining the '52 Chevy, bride and bridesmaids in the bedroom dressing for the wedding. Visitors to the museum might imagine themselves in each scene or life-style (as a '50s father," a "working class bigot," a "bride" in a time when love worked out and when love was for life); they might take pleasure in choosing the (life) style they like best. They might read the scenes symbolically—a reading that refers to the self through the "content" of the image (what does it mean to me?). Or they might read the scenes in the mode of a carnivalesque laughter that degrades potentially weighted cultural forms (weighted with what—the "sacred"? the "oppressive"?) into spectacles, making them empty objects before the festive gaze of the crowd which notices not naturalized absolute "meanings" but the play of forms, the traces of interpretive strategies to "make something of" life.

Now the rooms of the grand hotel (where the people stay) are ordinary and small. Next to the mall they seem claustrophobic and frighteningly empty. This is "home." As Raymond Williams dramatizes it, we create enclosed rooms,

above all rooms . . . in which life is centered but inside which people wait for the knock on the door, the letter or the message, the shout from the street, to know what

will happen to them. . . . (We are) at home, in our own lives, but needing to watch what is happening, as we say, "out there": not there in a particular street or a specific community but in a complex and otherwise unfocused and unfocusable national and international life. . . . Yet our lives are still here, still substantially here, with the people we know, in our own rooms, in the similar rooms of our friends and neighbors, and they too are watching: not only for public events, or for distraction, but from a need for images, for representations, of what living is now like, for this kind of person and that, in this kind of situation and place and that. [n.d.:14]

In the suburbs we might walk down the street at night peering into lighted interiors as we pass. In the city the action is on the street in eccentric encounters. In the hotel we might notice the other people staying on our hall through glimpses in the elevator, sounds overheard, the hours of coming and going. We notice with the fascination of a search for our own "identities." What is it like to "live with the life-style" of a banker? Or of a mother? "The character of the self is already widely offered to be appropriated in one or another of these dramatized forms: producer or consumer, married or single, member or exile or vagrant" (Williams n.d.:18).

Next to the grand hotel is another mirage—a country cottage encircled with gables and gingerbread icing and a long porch filled with swings and rocking chairs—a filled and embodied interiority unlike the empty little rooms of the hotel. But the cottage has enormous, postmodern windows—walls of glass—and the inside is one large room of spacious light. The kitchen is of European design. Depending on the class of the property owners, the decor may be sparse and "natural" looking with a smattering of classical styles and austere looking wooden pitchforks captured at an auction and carried off to hang, at a strange angle, on the brick wall beside the fireplace. Or, more likely, the place is filled with the popular nostalgic "country" decor. The walls are covered with country print wallpaper, quilted country scenes, baskets, and miniaturized collections of ducks and cows. The walls are covered as if to shore them up against the flooding force of the sea, creating enclosure against the "real" world—that dream world afloat somewhere "out there."

As Susan Stewart (1984) argues, miniatures and collections exaggerate interiority—the space and time of the individual perceiving subject. But in the process they also exaggerate the enclosure of "style" so that these interiors are not just sanctuaries but also prisons, like the standardized rooms in the grand hotel. Or they are timeless tableaux, like the rooms in the museum of life-styles—each "moment" meant as a monument against instability, randomness, and vulgarity (Stewart 1984) but also crushed under the weight of a visual code that has been given the power to capture particular times, places, identities, and ways of life in a single silent image and without a moment's notice. Meaning hemorrhages out at the rate of a flood, leaving in its wake a cultural landscape littered with signs.

In the wake of a flood, we are "tourists" whose constituting practice it is to read things *as* signs (Culler 1981). Lovers kissing on the street in Paris (or on the street in Chelsea, Michigan) is a sign of a timeless "romantic Paris." A decaying farmhouse surrounded by rusting tractors in the midwestern wheat fields is a sign

of the plight of “the small farmer” and “the country’s” failure to respond to that plight. The grand hotel displays signs of life-styles and pasts collected in the shape of characteristic, or “typical,” objects. The country cottage is the sign of a life-style read “as if” from the inside yet only through the imitation of what are already stereotypic representations of a self and a past. We are tourists who *know* we are tourists, or “post-tourists” (Urry 1987). We know that

the glossy brochure is a piece of pop culture, that the “authentic” local entertainment is as socially contrived as is the “ethnic bar” and that the quaint “fishing village” preserved in aspic could not survive without the income from tourism. [Urry 1987:7]

The “post-tourist” knows that

he is not a time traveler when he (sic) goes somewhere historic, not a noble savage when he stays on a tropical beach; not an invisible observer when he visits a native compound. Resolutely “realistic” he cannot evade his condition of outsider. [Feifer, as quoted in Urry 1987:7]

The (magical, ahistorical, asocial) “realism” of a distanced outsider locks into place on the “other side” of the room/mind from the naïve nostalgia of a “participant” in seductive fantasy worlds so that the two become a nauseating oscillation like the red and white stripes of a beach ball tossed into the ocean and slowly but continuously turning as it rides the waves. For the “post-tourist” there is no need to leave the living room to have a tourist experience—to view named scenes through a frame (Urry 1987). On the other hand there is an exhilaration with travel and commerce—a heroization of change and transience for their own sake, modeled as “progress” but experienced as the dizziness of hypertension.

Cultural production is driven back inside the mind. We cannot look out on the world as a referent. All we can do is to trace our own images of the world as we have inscribed them on the walls—as stuffed ducks and quilted barns. To the extent that the world is experienced as a succession of completed material substances—the full maturity of the process of mystifying social relations as things—we lose access to the sight of historical forces and cultural constructions (Jameson 1983). Worse, culture itself becomes reified and fetishistic so that we both play with it in gleeful, cynical abandon and stand in dread of its power to seduce consciousness and empty life.

The loss of a sense of time and place reorients people to a more literalizing attention to words—an attention to sound, appearance, voice, and accent (Jameson 1983) on the romantic side of the room and an obsession with efficiency, succinctness and categorical definitions on the realistic side. This “culture” is not a realm of collective discourses to mediate between us “in here” and the world “out there” but more a kind of tension on the surface of the water that both keeps us afloat and binds us to the surface. We see it as it is when we see it not as a symbolic system but as structures of feeling that have the quality of a wake that comes after a movement. There is no clear “inside” or “outside” anymore, no private and public spheres of life. We build public space as fantasy environments

to roam around in—malls, theme parks, every town modeled as a postmodern village of the imagination. History is spatialized and space itself is a rationalized, universalized surface. “Historical societies” appropriate, preserve, rearrange, collect, and reproduce “history” as a symbolic enclosure embodied in handsome, well-kept buildings—a “history” exempted from the ravages, and freedoms, of history. Local, named places dissolve and “the country” becomes just an urban space with more room. There is no one in charge, no one to blame; social hierarchies are diffusely, perniciously encoded in a semiotics of everyday life. The self becomes a pure screen for networks of influence, and social categories that seemed familiar, if not “natural,” ten years ago have become uncertain and elusive. We are “baby boomers” searching for a place and a past in Norman Rockwell’s paintings and Walt Disney’s main street and carried along on the wave of Wall Street.

If, in the modern age, the world became a picture and the person who pictured it became a unified subject through that representational act of mastery (Foster 1985:66), then in the postmodern age the form of hegemony lies in the power to master signs of styles and periods, the ability to read/construct “codes of distinction”—a reading that is still, most importantly, “from a distance.” By now systems and rules are already inscribed in the objects arranged on the cultural landscape; order and power do not have to be imposed, or authored, but are already embodied in the very order of objects as they are presented (Fisher 1975:594). They are “taken” in the mode not of a “producer”/participant but of a consumer/observer. The continuing effort of “the individual” to “transcend” culture and contingency, to act *on* the world, continues to produce forms of cultural oppression—the overcoding of life, the appropriation of the self as life-style, and that peculiar vulnerability to culture as a seductive and demanding pure code stripped of signifying contexts, authors, and readers that comes to prominence when the interpretive subject is displaced and social locales obscured. It is not just power relations that are unnamed, made invisible, turned to the stone and apocalyptic power of “nature,” but even “history,” “society,” and “the person” are infused with a petrified drama.

From here, resistance takes the form of making further inscriptions on the landscape of encoded things—inlays on the existing inscriptions—in an effort to fragment the enclosing, already finished order and reopen cultural forms to history. So, for instance, on the tip of Long Island’s North Shore, a town called Orient has recently become a “new land” for “yuppies” from the city. They have built country dream houses in the nostalgic image of a remembered *feeling* of childhood. A picturesque square overlooking the bay has been pieced together with a collection of 18th- and 19th-century schoolhouses, inns, and white steepled churches that have been moved to the location from nearby sites or from their primitivist origin—New England itself. They are museums open to the public and each has a formal historical society sign in front that narrates some fragment of its history—“George Washington slept here on (some date) during (such and such a campaign)” or “from 1810 to 1860 the ‘Oyster Bays’ schoolhouse housed the children of slaves brought over as part of the great silk trade.” During the summer

the square is the exhilarating scene for “18th-century days” when townspeople dress in 18th-century replica costumes and collectively enact “a day in the marketplace” (in the morning) and a “battle with muskets” (in the afternoon).

But the (recently named) “locals” (who, ironically, are now leaving town because they can no longer afford the property), either ignore the effort to create “the look” and leave their snow plows and old trucks in the yard or, in a more contentious mode, they deliberately inscribe their disruptive, fragmenting signs on top of the look or in its midst. As in the case of the man whose body shop, he was told, needed painting. The message came, over and over again, in the looks of the passersby and finally in so many words. So one night in the dark, he painted it and in the morning people strolling down Main Street to pick up the *New York Times* and a bagel at “the village store” came upon the body shop graffitied from top to bottom in multiple, day-glo colors. The “locals,” then, use the strategy of the inner city against the urban “country” dwellers, importing the form of graffiti that, as Foster has argued, resists both erasure and recuperation by the hegemonic coding because it is already in itself a written form. An empty play of signs, a code without a message, its “meaning” can only be understood by placing the form (scribbled, obscene words, out of place and transgressing ordinary frames) in the context of its production—the social and cultural conflict in the town (and of the times), the expression of a voice denied expression. Since it is “criminal” (ugly, antisocial) the graffiti is not easily redeemed by the code but remains a transgression and turns an enclosed, already finished space into spaces of response (Foster 1983:48–50). It remains a social expression (here, in the form of a “crude” joke) and cannot be reduced to a style. The “locals” are nostalgic for the (actual) place the way it was “before,” before it became picture perfect, so it is satisfying to *them* to mark the place with a scar signifying (crude) “reality” and the *loss* of perfection. The graffitied body shop is read as an allegory—a ruin that has no immediate, symbolic significance captured in its very “look” but requires an interpreter to read meaning into it (Wolin 1982). And in this way the place is reconstituted for the “locals” as a place filled with significant ruins and emptied spots; more and more ruins become visible as the allegorical practice is taken up and eventually becomes the defining characteristic of the local culture. Or at least there is this possibility.

If cultural hegemonies and resistances are interpretive practices based in social uses rather than fixed contents of ideas, then a similarly alternate, allegorical reading is also possible through other, less obviously contentious forms of nostalgia. The “country decor” in the cottage, for instance, is not meant to *reproduce* country life “as it really was” but to *produce* a world made out of signs: the living room is made “whole,” and a “worldview” expressed, through subtle distinctions in tints, nuance, and type; each “country” object refers with careful discrimination to its place within the system of signs of “country” things; every year the “country style” changes subtly so that things have to be added and removed. The (interpretive) practice of the decoration calls attention to the status of these “country” objects as signs and the point is not just to “decorate” in itself but to signify the production, or at least the possibility, of meaning.

What *kind* of meaning is another question. A “country” living room may signify subtle class distinctions or it may ignore, obscure, or attempt to transcend them in favor of more universalizing sensibilities of vulnerability and popular cultural efforts to create places. It may create the home as a total environment—a coded milieu embodying the enclosure of imaginary worlds. Or it may open private and imaginary space to history and the body. Clearly there is every sign of symbolic enclosure and the attempt to miniaturize contingency. But there are also signs of lost (and so hoped for) meanings. It depends on where you stand.

There may be a redemptive nostalgia in a distinction between the (active) production of “country crafts” and their (mere) consumption of their (passive) reproduction as empty styles. But it is certainly not the ideology itself that makes the difference but the social situations to which it attaches. The practice of making “traditional” country objects through the learned techniques of stenciling, tin-smithing, applique, quilting, refinishing, etc. will only enclose the self in a self-conscious image and wrap “the folk” and “history” in a primitivist cloak if the interpretive practice is one of reading action and events and products as symbolic examples or manifestations of an already fixed (symbolized) structure or time. This is interpretation that claims to have no situation. Then there is an “other” discourse of craft production that speaks specifically to situation; it constructs arts and crafts as “something to do” instead of, or while, watching television or “listening” to it; then it is meant as something to break the dulling pattern of “doing nothing” in the evening but not with the intention to withdraw from life as popularly lived in the present but rather to produce active ways of being in it. From there, there may be an exchange of the objects between family and friends that produces a network of living rooms marked by markedly produced objects. For the producers/exchangers each place where their objects are placed is added to the world of personally and culturally significant places. Again, there is a potential allegorical reading of the objects for those who made and exchanged them. My mother makes and paints wooden tulips that sit on windowsills; she gives them to all of her sisters, her daughters, her daughters-in-law, her friends, *my* friends if she meets them. As she says, she gives them to all of her women friends, and they all put them in their windows; there are these wooden tulips in (sometimes unexpected) windows all over the country.

Even consumption is a production—a production of class, privilege, the power to model reality, or a production of relationships or the carnivalesque, spectacle atmosphere of the country auction where the objects are laid out for collective display and their value marked as a social construction in a fast bid between characters. The scenes of consumption (malls, flea markets, auctions, nostalgia shoppes, K marts) frame either social situations or signs of (self) distinction.

Exiles

The “local” “Appalachians” (or “white trash”) in Raleigh County, West Virginia, where the “local” economy of coal has collapsed and the unemploy-

ment in the area is total and final, live in the ruins and fragments of the old coal camps. Like the “locals” on Long Island, they resist the loss of a cultural home by continuously reinscribing places on a place whose meaning is emptying out. By inscribing the ruined and trashed landscape with allegorical ruins that embody the history of the place, that history, painful as it is, surrounds, overwhelms, becomes a living world to act *in* rather than a world of fixed objects and contents to act *on*. They are nostalgic not as tourists taking in framed scenes from a maintained and exercised distance but as exiles in their own homeland, painfully holding on to closeness in a world that has already deserted them. They live in the fragments and ruins of company camps that are now emptying, again, as they have before, in mass migrations set off by a wave of total unemployment that sweeps through the region like an act of God. The local landscape has been ravaged by history—strip-mined, deforested, the old family farms left to rot in the move down the hillsides into the company camps, and now even the camps fallen to ruin. But people roam from ruin to ruin reading out the absences they embody, reading out how “things have got down anymore,” dwelling in the mournful desire they represent. People have “places” where they go and sit and stare at a ruin; as Benjamin argued, melancholy searches the past for an adequate object on which to stare itself out. In the camps, the cultural “ideal” is to “git out and go,” to notice everything that happens and to dramatize it in a story (to “make something of things”), to “remember” people and events. It is a process of piling things up around the self until there is no border between inside and outside, no distance; from there it is necessary to “get things out” to get out and go—a bursting—and then they begin to pile things up again.

I am told that those wild roses ramble around the chimney in “the old Graham place” field *because* the house is gone, and the Graham family is gone and the ideal “used to” of the family farms is also gone. The vacancy of a lot in Rhodell “remembers” the fire that burned Johnny Millsap to death while he cried out for help (then follows the always graphic story of the cries and the flames and the lasting effect on those who were there at the time but could do nothing but watch). An exposed electrical wire in the hills above Amigo Mines #2 remembers that in 1980 Buddy Hall, a nine-year-old boy, was electrocuted on it. They point to the wire and dwell in the image of the boy hanging from it. “An when hit finally dropped im it had blowed his heel plum off. Blowed a hole right through his heel, tuk the meat out of it, buddy. They said there was the meat on the ground next to his foot.”

It is a nostalgia of being inescapably haunted by the images they dwell in. A responsibility to remember what happens, especially those things that “try” to erase someone. (In a narrative culture, overstuffed with possible events and filled with the contingency that anything could happen, something is always “trying to happen.”) “You can’t forgit people and these things that have happened. If you forgit, that’s when you’re really crazy.” For them, having a culture is a matter of people leaving their mark on the place and, in turn, the place and its history leaves “marks” on the people, even as bodily scars. The interiors of the houses, like the hills outside, are crowded with signs remembering the past. Rooms are filled to

overflowing with “whatnots” and walls are covered every inch with nostalgic pictures of the dead and souvenirs of lost moments. Their yards are overflowing with junked, broken, or decaying objects that they are constantly “foolin with”; they dis-member and re-member things, leaving them undeniably marked at every suture as a human construction. The continuity in life comes in always piecing together what is always falling apart. Their “high art” is a *bricolage*. The men take apart trucks and recombine them, marveling at the juxtapositions of parts and memorializing events and encounters in the stories that surround every scratch and dent. Women piece together quilts from scraps of clothing, and in every scrap a memory and so a story.

They live in the bodily realization of knowing one life and also another life that displaces the first. Theirs is at each moment a double vision—two cultures differentiated through a lived experience of loss (Said 1984). And the two worlds, nostalgically, narratively, juxtaposed, constitute their mode of representation. Not a “traditional” mode, but the thoroughly postmodern mode of the exile.

Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one’s native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.

They regard experiences *as if* they were about to disappear. What is it that anchors them in reality? What would you save of them? What could you give up? . . . only someone whose homeland is “sweet” but whose circumstances make it impossible to recapture that sweetness can answer those questions. (Such a person would also find it impossible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma.) [Said 1984:55; emphasis in original]

The search for a past and a place leads them to reconstitute their lives in narrative form, a story designed to reassemble a broken history into a new whole. The world created there is a world unnatural and unreal; it resembles fiction or dream. They create an extreme subjectivism, an insatiable will to meaning (Said 1984) yet “meanings” are frozen as empty, allegorical signs on the landscape of loss and abject contingency. Everything is “just talk” and “talk” is an essential, valorized necessity. The culture becomes double-voiced, dialogic; it rejects that “realism” that is a mimetic approach to the representation of social reality. Instead, people develop as eccentric characters whose action is noted in story, not fact. For them, language is already distinct from “reality”; there is no chance for an illusion that what is said could be a simple mapping of what is. Nor is there any chance for taking some distance on life. They see themselves doubly—as they construct themselves in the local talk (and this is itself already masked and metaphoric) and as they are imaged by the distanced surround of “America” (whether nostalgically, as our “contemporary ancestors” or, in the ideology of “progress” and the “need to be realistic,” as buffoons—holdovers from the 19th century living in a backwater of the country).

As migrants in the city, and now in the hills too, more and more, they have lived out schizophrenic images of themselves. But through the proliferation of inscriptions—both with objects and forms of “talk”—they still have the last

word. What is more, their interpretation is, of necessity, a meta-interpretation; to recover a history that is either misrepresented or rendered invisible, they have to uncover the codes that covered it. As Said put it, “Only to those who are excluded from the social nexus comes the idea of raising a question about the limits of human nature because they need a human that includes them” (1984:53).

The first thing they do is to fragment the illusions of style and codes of respectability that characterize hegemonic “American” nostalgia. So Sissy “back talked” old man Henson when he tried to keep people from walking on his lawn. It was bad enough he already had a brick house (which is read as an imitation of the style of the rich and urban) but he went too far in trying to keep people off his lawn.

Why, I'll tell you what.
 If I had to live in a place,
 where I had to have me a patch of grass like at
 and couldn't nobody git up on it.
 Well what good is it *for*?
 I'd just get me a cement truck—one a them *big* ones.
 And ah'd cover me th whole thang over with that cement.
 That way people could park their cars on it if they wanted to,
 I don't care.
 Buddy I'd turn it into a parkin lot fore I'd git high and mighty
 over some old patch a weeds.
 I tell you what, buddy,
 now when you git to where you got to watch your grass for
 fear somebody'll come and git up *on* it,
 Buddy that's when thangs is *really* got down.

Then nostalgic talk—the work of re-memembering things—begins with a litany of mournful, embodied complaints of how thangs is got down, how “anymore” people treat each other like dogs and the old people have to eat out of cans of dog food, how no one visits like they used to, and people don't talk like they used to, and there ain't nothin here and nothin to do, don't nobody care about nobody but their own self, the mines is shet down and the young people is havin to leave—well, there ain't nothin here *for* em, you cain't *blame* em, and the rich people and the powerful people are a gloatin over the desperate pain of the poor and helpless, and the people leave for work and they are shunned and they won't give em water to drank nor a place to lie down, and comes a storm and blows away everythang they *had* in the *world*, and they had to come on back *home*, and their houses are gone, and they had to go to live with their mommie and daddy, and they live all piled up and fussin like cats and dogs in heat, and in the cities, buddy, they have people a dyin on the sidewalks and people walk right *over them*—“I said *they* walk right on *top* a *them* people, buddy.”

By this time, in listening, I would be depressed. But for them the next sentence after the litany is cheerful, countering any realist reading of a hell on earth with a “satisfied” conclusion that “thangs'll git back up. Bound to.” An “irrationally” utopian voice directly contradicts, or fragments, any simple nostalgia

for a “dying culture” (as seen, enclosed, from a distance) or the “realistic” assimilationist claim to the necessity for change and adjustment. For them, there is no inevitability of “progress”; there is, rather “this place” and its allegorical history read into its ruins.

In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay . . . the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting. [Benjamin 1977:177, 179]

It is among these ruins, and behind them, that the storytellers stand. This is the “place” from which they speak. In this frame there is no other place to go “in this world,” no future of assimilation into America, no need for an abstract notion of progress that would only distract attention from the present (filled with a past) that is being replaced. There is only the finality of this way of life that began in this place and ends here. It is a place that includes an other place—a nowhere utopia that is impregnable, cannot be appropriated, because it is a nowhere—an “outside” that provides the frame to see cultural forms as productions and history as human-made despite the postmodern or late capitalist fragmentations of social life (Said 1984).

Once the melancholic litany of how “things is got down” sets the frame for a story of history, they enter the spoken place of desire. They say “Well. I b’lieve thangs is gonna git back up, don’t you? B’lieve the mines is a gonna come back and the people will git to go back to work” or they say “But you know, I love these people round here, ain’t no better people in the world” or they say “But you know this is home to me and I wouldn’t never want to leave it.” Talk moves into the hallucinatory, contentious, parodic, dialogic voice of storying what happened on the way to the post office this morning. Or what Miss Lavender said when Bobby Johnson found her hauling 50-pound sacks of pig feed up the railroad tracks because her neighbor, playing out their long feud, had driven pilings into her access road to prevent her using her truck and then skipped away singing. Miss Lavender will use witchcraft against him because, as an older black woman, that is among her cultural tools.

Late capitalism and postmodernism are not predetermined forms; they are grotesques—unfinished forms, developing “out of control,” disrupting encasing boundaries of “explanation.” Economy and culture merge in one mode of representation that desituates us from any place from which to speak while seducing us with the tourist’s nostalgia for style and enclosure. These are the cultural meanings of “taking distance.” But at the same time, this system that is also an anti-system, this mode of representation that is both unspeakably coherent and utterly incoherent, also turns back on itself, undermining its own forms of realism and parodying its own faith in forms. Then the truly “reactionary” nostalgia is to imagine a life in the positivist “realism” that protects the beast from parody.

There is another form of realism—a social realism that depends on cultural access to the forces of change. Lukacs (1963) defined it as a literary mode in which characters are portrayed as part of a narrative that places them within the

entire historical dynamics of their society—a historical reality revealed as a process in concrete individual experience, mediated by particular groups, institutions, classes, and so on. It is the loss of *this* realism that reduces culture to a flattened juxtaposition of disparate images. Without it the project that fascinates us is not history or possibility but the conflation of internal fantasy and external object. And it is this loss that Appalachians and other “local” cultures nostalgically resist when they re-encode their landscape, and their bodies, with a tortured past still lived, ironically, parodically, religiously, in their very postmodern present. A present based not on “fact” or “solid ground” but on a faith in human fictions that drives them to continuously dis-member and re-member the model of what it is to be “human” in order that it can include them and their lives as they now know them. Postmodern modes of representation—story, fragmentation, montage, juxtaposition—are necessary, not because they are aesthetically, stylistically “right” for a moment frozen in history but because built into their surfaces are the layers of history as they have been frozen there and the ruins of contemporary social relations as they lay in waste. A sense of history and collective reality may need to be built up through a montage of carefully juxtaposed nonlinear images if we are to suggest anything of its “totality.” Historical and social redemption would be a work of allegory and *bricolage*—a piecing together of encompassing stories without recourse to the ideological notions of interiority and transcendence (see Foster 1985:75–85 and Haraway 1983).

So when Appalachians send the young people off as migrants to “the city” with the words “there ain’t nothin here for em, thangs is got down” they are not mouthing a pragmatic ideology of the need to assimilate, but reproducing their own nostalgic genre of speech and the ideal world it constructs—an “other world” set apart from the city yet thoroughly in the citied world of the present. In their religious discourse, they are “in” the world but not “of” it. In the litany of loss they are reproducing a narrative speech—the power to construct worlds and the power to “talk back” to an overcoded order that depends on unnamings and distanced speechlessness. They are sending the young people off with the weight of the place behind them, piling the place up around them, almost as if to propel them out with the excess of feeling and meaning that builds until it threatens to burst the boundaries of “this world.”

Those “left behind” in the hills will follow the young people’s “progress” (which is usually a drifting back and forth from the city to the hills via heartbreak and windstorms). They follow this “progress” in dramatic story that poses the migrant as a martyr, though utterly human and moved by “foolishness” and “just talk” as much as by heroism and transcendent ideals, as much adrift in the sea and lost on the crossroads as they are captains of their own consciousness. The storytellers are “making something of” what is happening to them as a people, and so maintaining the place for the young people to come back to. The story is not assimilationist but revivalistic. And the “migrants,” the exiles, drifting back and forth, coming close from desire and moving distant from necessity and “confusion,” are allegorical references to the final desire/fear of leaving “this world” and to the melancholy of a desire that has to continuously fill in “this world”—a world that is always emptying itself out.

Those still “at home” in the hills follow the migrants’ progress bodily, like the course of a disease, like the “spells” of “the dizzy” and “the nerves” that now inflict everyone, “every body.” News of the migrants passes through the camps instantly and continuously, like a wave, and like the “fallin down spells” that now, on some days, pass through whole camps and counties in a wave that washes over the place but leaves people talking amidst the rubble.

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