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Untitled

Acrylic on canvas

For my final project, I chose to research the complexities and potential downsides of nostalgia, and the role that rosy retrospection plays in our perception of the past. “Selective memory”, a term which came up quite often in my research, heavily inspired my artwork. I was interested in expressing the idea that we tend to only remember certain aspects of our past experiences, and it is difficult for us to see the entire picture. I painted specific memories from my past, all from around the same time period in my life. In each version of myself I tried to capture a different moment or emotion from that period. The red figure is sitting on the bed, staring at her phone and smiling, appearing content. When thinking back on moments in my life, this one being quarantine, this is often the type of memory that first presents itself. Digging deeper into my past though, I am reminded of memories which don’t serve to romanticize the time period quite as much. The figure in yellow is staring solemnly at the window, which is concealed by the drawn curtain, a reminder of the isolation and disconnect that the pandemic caused me. The blue figure is lying face up on her bed, head hanging off the edge, wearing a look of hopelessness. These figures all embody different aspects of a combined experience, and though they are distinctly separate on the canvas, my mind tends to blur the lines a bit more. By allowing them to appear and disappear based on colored lighting, I am forcing my viewers to experience my memories in fragments like I do. There is no color of light that allows the viewer to see all three figures at once.

# Memory or Reality?

## Navigating the Complexities of Nostalgia



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OS49

*Nostalgia, though often discussed as a harmless feeling of sentimentality, can often have harmful effects that are less talked about in popular culture. In this paper, I dive into the complexities and potential downsides of nostalgia, highlighting the role that rosy retrospection plays in our perception of the past. I weave together my personal experience with scientific studies to paint an honest picture of nostalgia's impact on memory and mental health.*

## nos·tal·gia

/nə'stʌljə/

*noun*

a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations.

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There is no feeling I despise more than nostalgia. Though defined simply as “a sentimental or wistful affection for the past,” for me, nostalgia is a gut wrenching, sickening feeling of grief. I spend most of my time living in the past, so much so that I feel I can never fully be present in the moment, filled with a constant dread of time slipping by. I spend my days scrolling through old pictures in my camera roll, obsessing over the snippets of my life that I know I can never get back. The girl smiling back through the screen, frozen in time, seems to mock me. How could she have taken those moments for granted? My childhood, middle school, quarantine, freshman year, last summer, even last week—each phase of life becomes a helpless grieving for the simplicity, ease, and carelessness it once held. I mourn the halls I used to walk

down, the teachers I used to hate. I ache for those August days I spent by my grandparents' pool last summer and the dark bus rides back home five winters ago. For the cherry trees behind my old house and the bright fluorescent light of my zoom screen. For the suffocating smoky scent in the air that one September morning. Conversations with my friends always circle back to the moments we can't get back. Laughing at old memories, retelling inside jokes from years gone by. The present moments of our friendships are so often spent reminiscing on how we used to be. My most addicting trip down memory lane lies in the music I listen to: obsessively creating playlists which act as soundtracks to different seasons of my life. These songs are the closest thing I have to reliving those memories. And though listening to them makes me ache with affliction, it is the only way I know how to cope with the stifling feeling of loss. My memories haunt me, and the thought that I can never have those moments back makes me feel sick to my stomach.

The word "nostalgia" is derived from the Greek roots *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain). Originally, nostalgia was used to describe a medical condition, somewhat akin to what we refer to now as homesickness. The term was coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in 1688 to name the feelings of extreme homesickness and depression felt by many Swiss mercenaries at the time. Besides a longing for home, other symptoms of this illness included insomnia, anorexia, weakness, anxiety, and heart palpitations (That funny feeling: the science behind nostalgia). During the civil war, assistant surgeon general Dr. De Witt C. Peters described nostalgia as, "a species of melancholy, or a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and a continuous longing for home" (Nostalgia and Malingering in the Military During the Civil War).

Though nostalgia was initially recognized as a mental condition, today it is more commonly used to describe an emotional state. This emotion is one of longing or sentimentality

about one's past, typically of a time in life regarded as "good" or "better" than the present. Nostalgia can apply not only to one's personal memories, but to shared experiences of a large group of people. Because of this, it has been heavily commodified and exploited in our capitalist society (Remember When: A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia). If you have ever ran to the theater to see a live action reboot of your favorite childhood Disney movie, then you too have fallen victim to a nostalgic cash grab. Corporations like Disney have found many ways to profit off of people's desperate yearning for the past, which begs the question- why do we, as humans, intentionally seek out this feeling of nostalgia?

The simple answer is: because it feels good. Nostalgic feelings are caused by chemical reactions in the brain, and similarly to emotions such as joy, they trigger the release of serotonin and dopamine. According to researcher Cristina de Balanzo, "Nostalgic experiences activate several regions of the brain, particularly the prefrontal cortex, limbic, paralimbic and midbrain areas". She also says that studies have proven that listening to nostalgic music triggers more brain activity in the inferior frontal gyrus, substantia nigra, cerebellum and insula than music that is not nostalgic (The Science Behind Nostalgia). These areas in the brain are responsible for self-reflection, autobiographical memory, emotional regulation, and reward. According to an fMRI brain scan study, nostalgia is essentially "co produced" by the reward and memory systems, located in the hippocampus and the ventral striatum. Because of this, nostalgia has the effect of making us feel happy (Patterns of Brain Activity Associated with Nostalgia: a social-cognitive neuroscience perspective). In many cases, engaging in nostalgic experiences can actually be beneficial to one's mental well-being. A study published in April 2021 found that when subjected to experimentally induced nostalgia, there was increased self-esteem, social connectedness, and overall meaning in life for the participants (Nostalgia, Reflection, Brooding:

Psychological benefits and autobiographical memory functions). Other studies have supported this claim, suggesting that nostalgia can sometimes help put feelings of isolation or loneliness at bay. But though nostalgia can be beneficial for some people, this is often not the case for people suffering from mental illness.

In 2012, the European Journal of Social Psychology conducted a study to try to better understand the effects of nostalgia on habitual worriers. The study involved 203 participants, half of whom were asked to complete a visual imagery task to induce nostalgia, and the other half were asked to describe an everyday mundane task. Mood was assessed in all participants using Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (a scale used to measure mood) both before and after the visual imagery. In accordance with the previously mentioned studies, this study found that nostalgia increased positive mood for everyone. However, the study also found that people who had scored higher on the Habit Index of Negative Thinking exam experienced increases in both anxiety and depression after the visual imagery, compared to the habitual worriers in the control group. This contradiction proposes that the current state of extreme anxiety in habitual worriers, when compared to a seemingly carefree past, can cause further rumination and distress. Essentially, individuals with a strong habit of worrying are more likely to be distressed by feelings of nostalgia than they are to benefit from them. Instead, the study suggests, mindfulness and time spent in the present could be more beneficial for habitual worriers (*When Bittersweet Turns Sour: Adverse Effects of Nostalgia on Habitual Worriers*).

Another study, published in 2020, produced similar results. This study challenged previous notions about nostalgia's positive impact, suggesting instead that nostalgia's effect depends heavily on the context that triggers it. The study, involving 504 participants over 14 days, found that nostalgia produced a greater negative effect on well-being when it

was produced on days where people already felt lonely, and that loneliness produced a greater negative effect on well-being when it was felt on already nostalgic days. In these cases, nostalgia did not alleviate, but rather intensified negative feelings associated with loneliness (The Negative Interactive Effects of Nostalgia and Loneliness).

Together, these studies show a pattern of how nostalgia can, in some cases, worsen mental well-being. This effect is often more casually described as “nostalgic depression”. Though it is not an official mental health disorder, nostalgic depression refers to feelings of sadness, regret, and anxiety that are triggered by nostalgic memories. Common symptoms of nostalgic depression are similar to those of depression, including feelings of sadness, social isolation, loss of interest in activities, and feelings of hopelessness and pessimism. As previously mentioned in the 2012 study, the discrepancy between current feelings of anxiety and past feelings of joy is perhaps the biggest contributor to nostalgic depression. This feeling of loss can be further heightened if one has truly lost something, such as the death of a loved one, or moving to a new place. According to professor of psychology Krystine Batcho, “If someone feels disconnected to their past, that can trigger nostalgic yearning for one’s previous life along with depression that stems from the realization or belief that what has been lost cannot be regained” (Nostalgic Depression: Symptoms and How to Cope).

There does not need to be a literal loss involved to evoke this feeling, in fact, usually nostalgic depression is directed towards *feelings* of the past; intangible ideas of “what once was”. In her paper, *Remember When: A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia*, psychologist Janelle L Wilson argues that nostalgia is not so much a longing to literally go back in time, but rather, “a longing to recapture a mood or spirit of a previous time. Or, perhaps, to rediscover a former self.” She writes that describing nostalgia as “a longing for home” can often be

over-simplified into simply a place or time, when in reality the term “home” can have many more meanings. “Home may mean the people of the neighborhood, community, town, state, or country. When in another town one may be very happy to meet a person who is a total stranger if that person is from his home town. ... Home may mean one's close friends, or one's neighbors. ... Home may mean the way in which things are done, the characteristic patterns of behavior, the customs, the attitudes, the beliefs, and the mode of living” (Remember When: A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia).

This longing for an indefinite “home” is one I am all too familiar with. As someone who frequently experiences symptoms of nostalgic depression, I find myself yearning for a past that is not necessarily defined by space and time, but by emotion. My memories seem to only focus on times when I felt happier or more carefree. This vague idea of what exactly it is that I miss is what makes it feel so out of reach; so impossible. This can make me feel hopeless and pessimistic about the future, which then fuels my depression even further. As someone who already suffers from anxiety and depression in my day to day life, the feeling that *things will never be the same again* can make me feel trapped. One quote in particular from Dr Janelle Wilson encompasses this feeling of pure helplessness for me:

“If nostalgia is a sickness, there is no cure. If it is a problem, there is no solution. Even when one returns to a place he longs for, neither he nor the place is the same as the nostalgic recollection. If one is nostalgic for a particular “time,” there is no way of going back. And, even if one could go back in time, the life experiences and subsequent changes in the self would make the nostalgic recollection inapplicable” (Remember When: A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia).

Though in my mind, the past is an unattainable, infinitely better place, at times I am



forced to confront the fact that this is not necessarily true. Past journal entries, photos, and even testimony from close family members often contradict the carefully constructed memories that my mind supplies. I often find that in reality, certain times in my life that I look back on with yearning were not as glamorous or perfect as I have made them out to be. Periods of my life when I was struggling with terrible anxiety, when I was isolating myself, when I was the most depressed I have ever been, are repainted to seem favorable. Not only does my nostalgic brain pick and choose *which* memories to remember, it chooses *how* to remember them as well.

This romanticization of past times is a psychological phenomenon called “rosy retrospection”. This phenomenon was first proposed and studied by a group of psychologists in 1995, who hypothesized that people's perceptions of events are more positive both before and after the event than during it. This hypothesis was tested using three different studies, which all tested people's perceptions of trips before, during, and after they occurred. These three trips were a European trip, a Thanksgiving vacation, and a 3-week bicycle trip in California. The results of all three of these studies aligned with the proposed hypothesis. People’s anticipation of events, as well as their recollection of those events, are considerably more positive than how they actually felt during the experience. This effect, a combination of rosy propection and rosy retrospection, was deemed “the rosy view”. The study suggests that people selectively recall and reconstruct events afterwards to align with their initial expectations. Other factors which may contribute to the rosy view are distraction, disappointment, and changes in self during the event itself (Temporal Adjustments in the Evaluation of Events). Other scientists have also suggested that rosy retrospection occurs when we have stored a certain memory, but not its associated emotions. This is what causes us to view the past as better and less painful than it actually was.

Rosy retrospection is a cognitive bias, meaning it is essentially a “mental shortcut” that

our brains use to simplify information. Though cognitive biases are not inherently bad, it is important for people to be aware of when they are subconsciously using them, especially as it pertains to their mental health (The Trap of Rosy Retrospection Bias). Though nostalgia and rosy retrospection can bring comfort and support to some people, they can cause great harm as well. In times when I was already struggling with my mental health, it often felt tempting to find solace in the unattainable quality of the past. For myself, and many others with depression, this became an unhealthy coping habit to deal with my feelings of hopelessness. My rosy view of the past only validated my fears that things were constantly getting worse and that there was no hope in my future. Through researching this topic, I have felt comforted by the fact that I am not alone in my struggles with nostalgia. My research has inspired me to try taking a more objective view of my past, and to remember that my memories are not always what they seem like at face value. Though this paper focuses mainly on the potential downsides of nostalgia, it was written through the lens of my own perspective and experience. It is important to recognize that everyone experiences emotions differently, and no one feeling can be classified as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Instead, our focus should look inwards, and as individuals we must always be striving to understand ourselves better.

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