Nostalgia

Sanctuary of Meaning

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Preface to the 2014 Digital Edition of *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*

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Preface

Nostalgia has gotten a bad rap. Those who seem to live in the past often face criticism from others. Many pundits and scholars associate nostalgia with reactionary thought. But, have we been too quick to dismiss the experience of nostalgia? While nostalgia can, on occasion, be dysfunctional for an individual (e.g., keeping one from facing the present and doing what is needed for proper functioning in the here and now), it is also possible that nostalgia can be quite beneficial. Placing oneself—in the past, present, and projecting into the future—is vital to each of us. The experience and expression of nostalgia need not be merely an escape, nor does the past need to be viewed as static. Individuals decide—in the present—how to recall the past and, in this process, imbue the past with meaning, which has evolved over time and is relevant in the present.

In writing this book, I intend to explore the concept (and experience) of nostalgia. This work brings together research I have carried out over the past several years. I wish to place this body of research in a framework, make meaning of it, and share it with you, the reader. I challenge you to think about your own experience of nostalgia and how it may (or may not) fit with the ideas presented here. Further, take note of the numerous examples of nostalgia that abound in the media, in the popular culture, and among your friends and relatives. How is this nostalgia expressed? What purposes are being served—both individually and collectively? The hypothesized relationship between nostalgia and identity that sociologist Fred Davis put forth in his 1979 book, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, finds support in studies I have conducted. My book is based upon empirical data which, through analysis and interpretation, serves to ground and to revise Davis's crucial work on identity negotiations in and through time. The beginning chapters of the book will summarize his—and others'—previous work, setting the

stage for a discussion of my research, which expands the study of nostalgia.

Much has been written on the topic of nostalgia, as it is the kind of concept and experience that invites poetic and theoretical treatment. My work blends the theory and the research with notions and conclusions that are empirically based. Yet it is difficult to reach conclusions which can be stated in definite, absolute, certain terms. Nostalgia is an intriguing topic of study, but not necessarily an easy one. As Svetlana Boym (2001) says, "[n]ostalgia remains unsystematic and unsynthesizable; it seduces rather than convinces."[1] In dealing with the topic of nostalgia, there is a degree of caution and hesitancy; a feeling almost of wanting to tread gently and refrain from overgeneralizing, overinterpreting, or in some way defiling the experience of nostalgia. The physician, Elihu Howland (1962) has noted:

> Some poets, authors, artists and musicians have mastered the skill of preserving and communicating the feeling of nostalgia without violating it. We should learn from them; and, until we do, perhaps remain silent.[2]

I take this advice to heart in the way in which I treat the study of nostalgia.

The research on which this book is based suggests that the act of recollection and reminiscence, and the experience of nostalgia can ground a person. In these postmodern times, when so many threats and obstacles to constructing and maintaining a coherent, consistent self abound, the acts of remembering, recalling, reminiscing, and the corollary emotional experience of nostalgia may facilitate the kind of coherence, consistency, and sense of identity that each of us so desperately needs. What is life if not a constant search for meaning and understanding, especially understanding ourselves and our place in the social world? This search, this self-discovery, entails much confusion and even desperation at times. But it is in the search that we find meaning. Individually and collectively, the past is remembered and, in this act of recall, it is often *re*-created. My position is that whether nostalgic claims about previous times are objectively true or accurate is not as important as *why* and *how* those nostalgic claims emerge. What meaning is being constructed in the retelling? What purpose is being served—individually, collectively, politically, economically?

This book is about how nostalgia contributes to the meaning that each of us constructs and maintains about our own identity. It brings to bear many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

As Boym (2001) says, "[t]he study of nostalgia does not belong to any specific discipline."[3] As a social psychologist, the perspective from which I approach these questions is found in the theoretical orientation known as symbolic interactionism, a perspective concerned with how individuals create and sustain meaning. Symbolic interactionists emphasize symbol use, human interaction, and reflexivity. Given my substantive interests in identity, memory, nostalgia, and meaning, symbolic interactionism offers a valuable framework for studying the relationship between nostalgia and identity. Referring to nostalgia as a "sanctuary of meaning" derives from my interest in and focus on *meaning* as a central concept in attempting to understand human behavior.

Part I of the book, "Parade of Concepts," will examine relevant concepts such as nostalgia, memory, and identity. The first chapter explores the changing meanings of the term "nostalgia." It may surprise readers that, in its original sense, nostalgia was a diagnosable disease. This, of course, is not the meaning we associate with the word today. Understanding nostalgia requires a critical look at memory, and the second chapter presents a discussion of how to approach memory sociologically and, in so doing, the terms "collective memory" and "collected memories" are discussed. Two objectives in chapter 3, the topic of which is "identity," are to present identity as both static and dynamic and to convincingly suggest that it is relevant and meaningful to speak of identity as having continuity. These first three chapters will introduce key concepts and help to build a lexicon that will serve us well in exploring the meanings and uses of nostalgia, especially as demonstrated in the research studies which are featured in parts II and III of the book.

Part II, "*Re*-Collecting the Past," presents findings from studies I have conducted which demonstrate the uses or functions of nostalgia for individuals. When asked to recall or remember a period of time in their past, what do individuals remember and why? How are these perceptions and recollections connected to the present and, in particular, to one's past, present, and anticipated future identity? The 1950s have been greatly romanticized and mythologized in our popular culture. Chapter 4 features recollections of that decade by individuals who came of age then, while chapter 5 explores the phenomenon of young adults expressing nostalgia for this decade that they are too young to have experienced. Research conducted with members of Generation X indicates a great deal of nostalgia for both the 1950s and the 1960s; I explore how and why this nostalgia is so prevalent among members of the post–Baby Boom generations.

Part III, "The Meaning of Things," features research which explores the relationship between nostalgia and identity by examining the meaning attributed to objects. Guiding questions include: What significance and meaning do objects have for individuals? How might objects we select to collect and/or display in our homes connect to identity and/or to the past? Interviews with antique collectors and cultural sojourners (in chapter 6) provide rich data with which to address such questions. The cultural and individual significance of the VW Bug is the focus of chapter 7. Baby Boomers share colorful stories of past Volkswagen experiences.

An appendix describes, in greater detail, the research methods employed for the studies which comprise parts II and III of the book. I encourage the reader to take a look at the appendix *before* reading the middle chapters of the book, as it explains the theoretical and methodological approaches that guided my analysis.

Finally, in part IV, possible applications of reminiscence and nostalgia are discussed, and the argument of the book is reiterated. The book ends, I hope, in an open-ended way. That is to say, there is no assertion that the final word on the relationship between nostalgia and identity has been written. My own thoughts on the matter are dynamic. I wish to be open to further research—my own as well as that of others'.

The thread pulling the chapters together is the theme of how nostalgia affects identity. To suggest that nostalgia is a "sanctuary of meaning" is to make a value judgment (something we social scientists are not supposed to do). While I certainly recognize that nostalgia may in fact debilitate or disenable identity and be dysfunctional for individuals, research in various disciplines quite consistently demonstrates the positive or beneficial uses of nostalgia. This phrase, "sanctuary of meaning," comes from Roger Aden (1995), who focuses on the role of nostalgic communication in escaping from "contemporary conditions that are perceived to be inhospitable." This escape, then, provides individuals with a "secure place of resistance."[4] The way in which nostalgia is *used*, both individually and hegemonically, will be explored in this book.

The word "sanctuary" is a feel-good word to me. "Meaning" is what life is all about. Nostalgia, in its ability to facilitate continuity of identity, can help to provide a sanctuary of meaning—a place where one feels she knows herself; where identity has safe harbor. As Zohar and Marshall (1994) say, "[p]eople cannot live for long without meaning, nor can they suffer forever a system that denies them identity."[5] Experiencing and expressing nostalgia may help to restore both meaning and identity.

My university awarded me a sabbatical to work on this book. During the sabbatical year, I returned to my graduate alma mater, Western Michigan University. My former department was gracious in giving me "Visiting Scholar" status. It seemed very appropriate to return to that place to write about nostalgia. I genuinely enjoyed being a student. The personal, social, and intellectual growth I experienced was incredible; the student years constituted a very exciting time in my life. Lasting friendships formed during those years. In many ways, that place felt like a sanctuary. When plagued by insecurities and doubts about my professional identity, I reflect back to the college setting—a setting in which I experienced success and encouragement. A sanctuary, of course, can be an actual physical place, or it can also be a state of mind often produced by a place or a person that makes us feel grounded, accepted, and affirmed.

Walking around campus, seven years after having been a graduate student there, I was struck by both the familiar and the unfamiliar, the sameness and the differentness. Walking from the sociology building to the student center, I was ever aware of my memories of walking there with fellow graduate students and professors, sitting down and having lunch together and then getting back to work; i.e., course work, writing, teaching. But I was also aware of the different position I now occupy— a tenured professor. I am no longer surrounded by the cadre of graduate students that formed our cohort; members of that group are geographically spread out. Now a new group of young, eager, motivated students grace the halls of the building. There were many new faculty members in the department, and some of my former professors have retired. I don't *feel* that different from the person I was when I was there before, but to what extent am I really the same person? Nothing is static. The physical changes on campus produced a bit of an alienated feeling. Buildings had been erected; various services were now located in different offices across campus. This was disconcerting, but it was to be expected. The old adage, "you can't go home again," comes to mind. We *can* go home again, but what we must realize is that both the person and the home have undergone some changes. The question becomes: even with the passage of time and changes that have occurred, has a thread been woven that connects one to a former self and/or a geographical place from the past? The stage is set to delve into the rich, ambiguous, complex subject of *nostalgia*.

Acknowledgments

me to go to college. In their life and work, they have demonstrated commitment, dedication, and a strong work ethic. These values proved to be essential in my pursuit of professional goals. In the process of making my way in the (still sometimes foreign) terrain of academe, the humility taught me by my family is not forgotten. Also not forgotten is where I came from—a small town, where I grew up with a terrific older brother and a loving extended family all around us. Yes, I remember, and I do so with a great deal of nostalgia.

Part I
Parade of Concepts

In the first part of this book, I provide a conceptual/theoretical framework. The three concepts which are most relevant in exploring the relationship between nostalgia and identity and in making sense of research I have conducted are nostalgia, memory, and identity. In chapter 1, I consider the concept of nostalgia, tracing its roots as a diagnosable disease and exploring its myriad meanings today. Responding to the basic question: "What is nostalgia?" is not the simple, straightforward task it might seem—even for those of us who have made it a major topic of study. The term eludes easy definition and categorization. Indeed, this is part of the appeal of the word; unlike so much of what sociologists study, nostalgia cannot be easily operationalized and measured. Attempting to grasp the meaning and experience of nostalgia requires an open and inductive approach. Nostalgia will not fit neatly into a specific category and, furthermore, the experience is difficult to generalize.

Chapter 1 might best be viewed as a beginning look at the possible meanings and uses of nostalgia. Though not stated formally, a number of working hypotheses are presented:

- Nostalgia is an intra-personal expression of self which subjectively provides one with a sense of continuity.
- Nostalgia is an interpersonal form of conversational play, serving the purpose of bonding.
- Nostalgia is a form of ideologizing or mystifying the past.
- Nostalgia can be used as a cultural commodity derived from the experience of a particular age-cohort and transformed into a market segment.

None of these working hypotheses are mutually exclusive, but they identify a variety of analytical levels at which nostalgia can be understood. In the work presented here, I explore the question of the meanings and uses of nostalgia, giving special attention and focus to the relationship between nostalgia and identity.

In chapter 2, I approach the concept of memory sociologically, suggesting that although we think of memory as an individual domain, it is very much connected to the collective. The term "collective memory" especially captures this characteristic of memory. Collective memory, however, never paints a whole and accurate picture of the past. Another term, "collected memories," must be considered as well, as these memories are those which are not included in the collective memory.

In chapter 3, I discuss the term, "identity." Much has been written about this concept. I suggest that, like the self, identity is both dynamic and static; it is socially constructed but also highly personal. I also consider the postmodern challenge to identity and suggest that the self can withstand it and persevere.

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"Nostalgia":
A Consideration of the Concept

> The special place accorded the "beauteous" past of nostalgia in feeling
> and action is further attested to by the fact that, in English at least, there
> exists no antonym for it, no word to describe feelings of rejection or
> revulsion toward one's past or some segment thereof.
>
> —Fred Davis[1]

NOSTALGIA AS PATHOLOGY TURNED EMOTION

THE TERM "NOSTALGIA" TYPICALLY CONJURES UP IMAGES OF A PREVIOUS time when life was "good." Nostalgia originally referred to a medical condition. Swiss physician Johannes Hofer coined the term in the late seventeenth century, referring to the extreme homesickness that Swiss mercenaries experienced. Symptoms of nostalgia, according to Hofer, included persistent thoughts about home, melancholy, insomnia, anorexia, weakness, anxiety, lack of breath, and palpitations of the heart (McCann 1940).[2] In 1863, Dr. De Witt C. Peters defined nostalgia this way: "a species of melancholy, or a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and a continuous longing for home."[3] Patients suffering nostalgia included those for whom their departure from home was forced (e.g., soldiers, slaves) and also those who had freely chosen to leave home (e.g., students). Nostalgia comes from the Greek word *nostos*, meaning "return home," and *algia*, meaning pain or longing. Hence, nostalgia literally means "homesickness."

Hofer identified the brain as the seat of the disease, claiming that nerve fibers that store impressions of one's native land are in constant motion. Patients suffering from this disease obsessively dwell on images of home. Nostalgia, according to Hofer, was a disorder of the imagina-

tion. Those suffering from it fantasized about home, leaving no psychological space for thoughts about the present world.

 This definition of nostalgia as a disease prevailed until the late nineteenth century.[4] Nostalgia during this time was de-medicalized. When doctors professed the disappearance of nostalgia, they attributed it largely to technological progress—in particular, advances in communication networks and transportation. Nostalgia has moved from a pathology to an emotion of wistful longing for the past. Today nostalgia is regarded as an emotion. "So easily and 'naturally' does the word come to our tongues nowadays," writes sociologist Fred Davis (1979), "that it is much more likely to be classed with such familiar emotions as love, jealousy, and fear than with such 'conditions' as melancholia, obsessive compulsion, or claustrophobia."[5] While one's nostalgic memories may connote a pleasant or good time in the past, the fact that the individual is removed from that ideal situation can trigger sadness and a sense of loss. 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 or she longs for, neither the individual 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. Even if one could go back in time, the life experiences and subsequent changes in the self would make the nostalgic recollection inapplicable. But, perhaps the experience of nostalgia need not be so hopeless. Writing about her travels, Jan Morris (2002) suggests that homesickness is "the most delicious form of nostalgia." She claims that this is because it can be gratified: "We cannot return to the past, but we can go home again."[6] This raises the issue of whether nostalgia, as it is experienced today, relates more to *place* or to *time*. My position differs from Morris. I believe there is a shift from longing for a particular place to longing for a particular time. As Boym (2001) states:

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.[7]

Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon (2000) comments on this latter point: "[t]ime, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible. Nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact."[8] Andrew Wernick

(1997) notes that by the end of the nineteenth century nostalgia was not only a term referring to homesickness, but was also being extended from place to time, "as in nostalgia for youth, as if time and place were interchangeable, and time itself a succession of irrecoverable homes."[9] The meaning of nostalgia, then, moved increasingly towards the temporal pole, characterized by simultaneous regret at the passing of time and "sentimental over-valuation" of that time. The time longed for, says Wernick, "might be individual, but it also might be collective and historical. Indeed, it might never have been present at all. Hence the term's further extension as a mildly contemptuous descriptor for golden age myths of all kinds."[10] The past, then, is turned into mythology. Some scholars might suggest that myths are always more appealing than utopias.

Mills and Coleman (1994) define nostalgia as "the bittersweet recall of emotional past events. Nostalgia is a type of autobiographical memory."[11] Nostalgia requires a supply of memories. My analysis (and experience) of nostalgia is such that I find this to be a term that embodies ambiguity and contradiction. Theologian and philosopher Ralph Harper (1966) alludes to the inherent contradictions in nostalgia:

> Nostalgia combines bitterness and sweetness, the lost and the found, the far and the near, the new and the familiar, absence and presence. The past which is over and gone, from which we have been or are being removed, by some magic becomes present again for a short while. But its realness seems even more familiar, because renewed, than it ever was, more enchanting and more lovely.[12]

This bitter sweetness makes nostalgia an unwieldy concept. That the nostalgia we experience is often for a past that did not exist (at least not exactly the way our nostalgic vision would suggest) also adds to the difficulty of grabbing onto and grasping the meaning of this term. Nostalgia is "between the head and the heart";[13] it is both cerebral and visceral. The head knows that what is being fondly recalled *wasn't really* that way, but the heart finds comfort in the feeling. Nostalgia realigns cognition and emotion to produce comfort and security. Elihu Howland (1962) observes that nostalgia is "a confusing emotion, full of paradoxes. It is painful and yet in the pain there may be a peculiar sweetness defying description."[14] He continues:

> Nostalgia can encompass a wide spectrum between almost pure grief and this pervasive wistfulness. When we examine the meaning of the word "wistful," we find the same puzzling combination of eagerness, expec-

tancy and mournfulness. Their union seems somehow to be an essential part not only of beauty but of life itself.[15]

The emotions of love and nostalgia have been compared. As McCann (1940) notes, in 1869 Widal pointed out that the longings in homesickness were "very much like those of an unhappy lover. Little by little they take on the propositions of a real passion, sometimes causing the victim to seek solitude in order to concentrate more fully upon his cherished memories of home."[16] Furthermore, Harper (1966) states that: "love and nostalgia cannot be separated . . . In both love and nostalgia a wave of presence swirls around with a wave of loss ."[17]

It makes sense that being nostalgic is similar to being in love; in particular, to the feeling state experienced after a love relationship ends. That which is presently unattainable is not only valuable, but idealized. The individual realizes that what is being remembered *was* attainable in the past. In spite of all of the popular and high cultural texts which provide a lexicon for expressing and describing the experience of love, the individual experiencing this emotion is apt to find it difficult to truly capture in words. The case is similar with nostalgia. Howland (1962) states:

> Nostalgia is universal and ubiquitous, yet unique. We have all encountered it, but not necessarily in the same setting, and each of us feels grasped by it in a special way that he alone can know, so that the experiences of no two of us are probably quite the same.[18]

Stuart Tannock (1995) describes the nostalgic structure of feeling.[19] He notes that nostalgia works as a periodizing emotion: "that was then, and this is now." He identifies three key ideas: a prelapsarian world (such as "the Golden Age"), a lapse (such as a separation or fall), and a postlapsarian world (this is the present and it is felt, in some way, to be "lacking, deficient, or oppressive.)" Tannock explains:

> The "lapse" or "cut" need not be imagined as a vertical chop slicing across a continuous line of time, but may just as often be thought of as a horizontal separation, as the running into the ground of the past by the present. That is, the prelapsarian world may be felt, at times, to run very close to the surface of the postlapsarian world: *but there is always and everywhere, for nostalgia to logically exist, a positing of discontinuity. A critical reading of the nostalgic structure of rhetoric should focus, then, on the construction of a prelapsarian world, but also on the continuity asserted, and the discontinuity posited, between a prelapsarian past and a postlapsarian present.* (emphasis added)[20]

Nostalgia as Distinct
from Other, Related Terms

How is nostalgia distinguished from related terms such as "reminiscing" or "sentimentality"? Reminiscing refers to recollecting, recalling, remembering the past. Reminisces need not focus only on pleasant memories of bygone times. Reminiscing, therefore, connotes a broader, more general phenomenon than nostalgia. Furthermore, reminiscing calls upon the cerebral—it suggests an intellectual exercise. "Sentimental" conjures up the image of a teary-eyed individual touched by a current experience that strikes an emotional chord or the remembrance of a past experience. I consider myself a sentimental person, which is to say that I am greatly affected by emotion; feeling is powerful. Nostalgia, however, is more complicated than these other terms.

Davis notes that words such as history, remembrance, recollection, reminiscence, revivification, and recall are all words that "denote the mental state of a sentient being looking back in time." And yet, he suggests, "however they may differ among themselves (and of course they do), none conveys quite the same feeling tone as does 'nostalgia'." He continues: "merely to remember the places of our youth is not the same as to feel nostalgic over them; nor does even active reminiscence—however happy, benign, or tortured its content—necessarily capture the subjective state we associate with nostalgic feeling."[21]

In my view, nostalgia connotes emotion, thought, and, in some sense, behavior. Nostalgia extends beyond sentimentality. While the latter more likely indicates a fleeting feeling, the experience of nostalgia affects one's emotional state in a profound manner. Expressing and experiencing nostalgia require active reconstruction of the past—active selection of what to remember and how to remember it. While this activity occurs more subconsciously than consciously, it occurs nevertheless. Add the component of longing, and we see that nostalgia involves a whole host of cognitions and emotions. Political theorist Steve Chilton (2002) suggests that "nostalgia goes well beyond recollection and reminiscence," as the latter are "less actively creative." While recollection and reminiscence require the "selection and ordering of facts," this is less marked than with nostalgia, which is "more actively (even if unconsciously) myth-making."[22] Nostalgia demands an emotional valence. Reminiscence and recollection do not involve comparison to the present or a desire to return to the past, while nostalgia embodies both of these characteristics.

Interestingly, while it might seem that a major appeal of the past is its fixedness (i.e., the past as something that is stable and certain) the use of the past is such that we *re*-construct it. As G. H. Mead (1863–1931) had said, the past is never left as the past. Indeed, the past is as uncertain as the future.[23] The way in which we use the past, then, and the way in which nostalgia is exercised or expressed, suggests inherent contradictions and ambivalence. We see further indication of such properties of nostalgia when we consider the question: does the "nostalgiac" *truly* long to go back in time? Instead, I think it is more a longing to recapture a mood or spirit of a previous time. Or, perhaps, to rediscover a former self (a self that seemed more like the "true self," for instance). Hence, nostalgic reverie as a phenomenological experience. Perhaps we "nostalagize" for those things which symbolize what we wish for. In philosophical terms, nostalgia may enable one to discover (or think about) one's sense of the "Good" or the "Right." As Chilton (1997) suggests, "nostalgia could be very valuable in helping us figure out what people want—their positive goals—apart from the conflicts and hostility."[24] Nostalgia may be an attempt to find some higher meaning in our existence. When experiencing nostalgia, we might feel that we are getting close to something fundamental, "good," a foundation, or a purpose. It seems to me that nostalgia can be viewed as a picture of our meaning. There is something strongly transcendent to it—looking for more, looking for a purpose. What we are nostalgic for reveals what we value, what we deem worthwhile and important. Through our nostalgia, we are recreating happy memories, pursuing happiness in the past. We may face constraints in the present, but in the past there are no constraints. Political scientist Kimberly Smith (2000) advises that:

> [W]e should recognize that remembering positive aspects of the past does not necessarily indicate a desire to return there. Remembering the past should instead be seen as a way to express valid desires and concerns about the present—in particular, about its relationship (or lack of relationship) to the past.[25]

Nostalgia is more than merely living in the past or passively recalling a static past. According to Naughton and Vlasic (1998), "the nostalgia phenomenon is not simply about America reliving a Golden Age. It is about reinterpreting it. We may look back through rose colored glasses, but few want to live in the past for the sake of authenticity."[26] Similarly, Lowenthal (1985b) states that "[f]ew admirers of the past would actu-

ally choose to return to it—nostalgia expresses longings for times that are safely, rather than sadly, beyond recall."[27]

Smith (2000) suggests that nostalgia is "a particular way of ordering and interpreting the various ideas, feelings, and associations we experience when thinking of the past"; the exercise of nostalgia, from her perspective, is actually the adopting of a particular attitude toward the memories that are recalled. She does not consider nostalgic longing as truly expressing one's desire to return to the past. Consider her analogy:

> To attempt to return to the past of nostalgic longing would be to misunderstand the nature and significance of the emotion, as though one responded to feelings of love by trying to capture and imprison the loved one, to possess her in entirely the wrong way.[28]

Reflecting on the quote that is presented at the beginning of this chapter, it is quite significant that there is no known antonym for nostalgia. Thus, if we are recalling events from the past which are troubling and which we have no desire to return to, what word or phrase captures this activity? Chilton (2002) notes that "there surely must be a negative-oriented phenomenon corresponding to the positive-oriented nostalgia."[29] He suggests that we tell "cautionary tales" or "object lessons"; i.e., stories which say that this is something *not* to do. In this context, we could also consider "dystopia," referring to an hypothetical, imaginary place or state of total misery. Although dystopia refers to the future, we may feel this way about something in the past. But we do not seem to have a lexicon to describe this experience.

A question to pose is: Can there be a "negative nostalgia"? My position is that, since nostalgia involves longing and, as Harper has stated, both presence and loss, there cannot be a so-called negative nostalgia. And yet, one may recall negative events from the past and experience nostalgia. That is to say, a negative stimulus could actually trigger nostalgic feeling. A clear example of this phenomenon is demonstrated in oral historian Studs Terkel's (1970) book, *Hard Times*, in which he interviews individuals who experienced the Great Depression and who actually had fond memories of life during that time. In spite of how difficult life was, many individuals reflected nostalgically on families and communities pulling together; a sense of community seemed to override negative memories.[30] This is not to suggest that there is longing for the Depression; rather, there is longing for values of family and community which, compared to the present, may seem healthier and more intact.

We can consider trends in other parts of the world which also represent this phenomenon of nostalgia for times which, objectively, were *not* "the good old days." In recent years, nostalgia for the cultural revolution in China has been expressed via television commercials and memorabilia. Nostalgia for that time may seem puzzling. During the revolution (from 1966 to 1976), professionals and students were forced to leave the cities to labor on agricultural collectives. Under the leadership of Mao, individualism was highly suspect. Individuals' lives and careers were wrecked during this time of political struggle. As Leslie Chang (2003) notes,

> China's revolutionary past was not cool. The masses who labored on agricultural collectives had bad haircuts and wore cheap cotton clothing. . . . No one ate out, and no one danced. . . . But now some companies are launching ad campaigns that invest with cool or tinge with nostalgia the turbulent decade of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath.[31]

The music television channel, "Channel V," began airing commercials that feature images and slogans from the cultural revolution. In this way, communist nostalgia has been turned into a capitalist marketing device. How can we explain this unlikely phenomenon? Chang (2003) reports that, while the commercials recall a repressive past, "companies feel that the images can take on new meaning in a modern context." Further, Chang identifies a number of factors behind nostalgia as a potent mainstream sell:

> In an age of rapid economic, social and technological change, there is deep longing among many people for the perceived simpler times of decades past. And thanks to China's efficient propaganda machine, references to the old songs and slogans are guaranteed universal recognition.[32]

Along with the catchy commercials, Mao memorabilia is available and popular, as evidenced by Mao books, badges, cigarette lighters, and yo-yos. The appeal of such items most likely stems from nationalistic pride and, as a response to modernization in China, longing for a past that was more simple and certain, and less materialistic and commercially driven.

We can look to Germany for another striking example of nostalgia that might seem surprising. A current trend among East Germans is to revive the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). This trend, "ostalgie" (a combination of the German words for "east" and "nostalgia"), is marked by advertising and television programs, as well as prod-

ucts which harken back to the Communist era. Bach (2002) notes that everyday items from the GDR are making a comeback:

> These goods consist especially of foodstuffs (e.g., chocolate, beer, mustard) and household products such as the beloved dishwashing detergent Spee. Some of these items are available in GDR speciality shops, others in ordinary grocery stores displaying the sign "we sell East products," and most can be found on the Internet.[33]

The key explanation for this nostalgia is the reality which faced East Germans following reunification. The East Germans occupied a subordinate status; unemployment was high, wages were low, and social anomie prevailed. East Germans did not feel accepted by the West Germans. Visions of reunification bringing about a hopeful and harmonious future did not materialize. The past, then, gets romanticized.

Nostalgia as Leisure

In spite of the promises of how technology was supposed to shorten the workweek and free up our time, many of us find that we have less and less time for leisure pursuits. Nostalgia, however, constitutes a form of leisure that need not necessarily take much time or require many resources. Pickering (1997) notes:

> My meditations on nostalgia suggest that it is a leisure activity. It seems to have something in common with Wordsworth's idea of poetry as "recollection in tranquility," needing both distraction from immediate concerns and deliberate recollection for its manifestation.[34]

During such busy, hectic times, the exercise of nostalgia might function as forced down time—a means of escape and/or relaxation.

Cameron and Gatewood (1994) review social-psychological explanations for the nostalgia craze in contemporary America, including nostalgia as a slowing mechanism; i.e., "a psychological adaptation to circumstances of rapid culture change during which individuals fear becoming obsolete." They also suggest that nostalgia is a psychological luxury of the affluent, leisure class. Following their line of thinking, nostalgia requires time and resources: "Rummaging through the minutiae of the past, real or imagined, is a narcissistic pastime for those with too much leisure time."[35] Whether nostalgia is more characteristic among members of the middle and upper classes than among members of the lower or working

classes is an empirical question. Various expressions of nostalgia demand differing resources. Nostalgia, as expressed by extensive travel and perhaps the collecting of antiques, will indeed require resources; nostalgia, as expressed by personal reverie or the sharing of the "good old days" in a circle of friends, will not.

    Nostalgia as leisure can also be understood as a production process. Consider how appeals to nostalgia are made within popular culture as a marketing strategy, inviting consumer participation. Restaurants as well as sports bars display old artifacts and memorabilia on the walls; movies are remade; television programs that feature reunions of casts from old shows are produced; and advertising campaigns conjure up images from the past to authenticate the item and attract consumers' attention. As Boym (2001) notes, "[p]opular culture made in Hollywood, the vessel for national myths that America exports abroad, both induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer."[36] Nostalgia is prepackaged and sold as a commodity. It would be easy therefore to dismiss nostalgia as false consciousness, as something provided by the dominant groups in society which individuals consume uncritically. I am not inclined to do this, however. We need not view individuals as so passive. While dominant culture may provide nostalgic resources, consumers choose which resources they will attend to and also how they use them. The individual can be an active agent in creating meanings and uses of the available popular culture. I suggest that nostalgia can be resistant to outside manipulation, for nostalgia has to strike a chord somewhere. There is an interplay between what is available culturally and the individual's own biography, memory, and emotions. Subsequent chapters will revisit this issue.

Types of Nostalgia

    Nostalgia is both a cultural phenomenon and a personally subjective experience. While it began—conceptually and experientially—as solely a private phenomenon centered on one's longing for home, it has become, due in large part no doubt, to commercialization and the realization that nostalgia sells, a more public experience. Consider Davis's (1979) distinction between collective and private nostalgia, where collective nostalgia refers to:

  [T]hat condition in which the symbolic objects are of a highly public, widely shared and familiar character, i.e., those symbolic resources from the past which can under proper conditions trigger off wave upon wave

of nostalgic feeling in millions of persons at the same time. [For example, the national flag].

As a contrast, *private* nostalgia refers to:

> [T]hose symbolic images and allusions from the past which by virtue of their resource in a particular person's biography tend to be more idiosyncratic, individuated, and particularistic in their reference; e.g., the memory of a parent's smile.[37]

Nostalgia thus operates in both a public and private domain. The cultural wave of nostalgia certainly reflects the collective nostalgia that Davis wrote about. Collective nostalgia can serve the purpose of forging a national identity, expressing patriotism. It also might reflect selective remembering and selective forgetting that occur at the collective level. Nostalgia oozes out of our popular culture. Even those of us who have not experienced a particular decade (e.g., the fabulous 1950s or the turbulent 1960s), may find ourselves looking back to those eras with a fondness; we fool ourselves into thinking that events of those times affect our own personal biography in a very direct way. Previous times can indeed affect our personal biography, but in an indirect manner. The public culture contains powerful symbols of the past. These cultural symbols become more personal, as we, unavoidably, construct our identities from that which is available to us culturally.

Davis thus makes a distinction between private and collective nostalgia. What other types of nostalgia might exist? Boym (2001) identifies restorative and reflective nostalgia, although she does not speak of them as kinds of nostalgia, but rather, tendencies; i.e., "ways of giving shape and meaning to longing."[38] Restorative nostalgia is characterized by an emphasis on the lost home and the desire to "patch up the memory gaps." Those who experience restorative nostalgia do not think of themselves as nostalgic. Rather, they believe that they are pursuing truth:

> This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories.[39]

Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, dwells in the longing and loss. Boym explains that the "focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time."[40] The distinction is succinctly expressed this way: "Re-

storative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory."[41]

Another form that nostalgia can take is what Tom Vanderbilt (1994) calls "displaced nostalgia."[42] This refers to nostalgia for times which were not known to us firsthand. Davis had posed the question of whether one can feel nostalgia for something he had not experienced. My own research suggests that this is indeed possible, and "displaced nostalgia" captures that experience. A later chapter will explore this phenomenon.

NOSTALGIA AS LONGING FOR HOME—BUT WHAT IS "HOME"?

Following the original definition of nostalgia as extreme homesickness, we should pose the question: What is home? Is true home always one's childhood home? Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) state: "Few English words are filled with the emotional meaning of the word 'home.' It brings to mind one's childhood, the roots of one's being, the security of a private enclave where one can be free and in control of one's life."[43] Yet, "home" could very well need a redefinition. McCann (1940) offered the following possible meanings of "home":

> 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.[44]

With respect to this latter conception of home, McCann points out that cases of homesickness are even reported among those for whom "home-life was hard and cruel, and whose homes were characterized by hardships and poverty. Apparently, it matters little whether the person is from the palatial residential section or the slum areas." In contemplating the meaning and significance of home, this speaks volumes.

In a paper on the rhetoric of nostalgia, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi and I (1999) ascertained the meaning of the nostalgic reminiscences of a sample of Romanian individuals who had lost their homes in the 1950s when the Communist Party invoked the policy of destroying private lodgings.[45] Interviews with twenty-two individuals who either experienced the 1950s as adults whose homes were then demolished or confiscated, or who have vivid memories from the stories their parents or

grandparents used to tell them about those days of turmoil, demonstrated nostalgia for that time. Many of the informants were protagonists of tragic incidents, such as literally facing the demolition of their own house, or being evicted with hardly any notice and moved into shabby apartments, which they more often than not were forced to share with perfect strangers. Informants were asked to tell the story of their house: how it looked, what particular details they remembered most intensely about it, how they had acquired the house and finally, under what circumstance they lost the house, by demolition or confiscation. The narrative recollections retain a general flavor of impressive accuracy: all twenty-two informants described their homes in incredible detail. Why did they express nostalgia? We explained their nostalgic reminiscence as a way of evaluating a present that is in stark contrast with the past—that is, the period prior to the demolitions. The informants appeared to use nostalgic recollections as a way to cultivate a sense of personal identity, in this particular case associated with the property of which they had been deprived.

In this postmodern, multicultural time, "home" has become a problematic concept. Each of us, it seems, lives simultaneously in many social spheres. We have become a very mobile people; indeed, moving on the average of thirteen times in a lifetime. This, inevitably, makes it more difficult to define "home," to establish a "home." What does it mean to "feel at home"? I like how Svetlana Boym (2001) describes this experience:

> To feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn't depend on an actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we had time and didn't know the temptation of nostalgia.[46]

Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (1996) captures well the challenge that a conception of home has for diasporic peoples. He writes:

> Diasporic subjectivity is . . . necessarily double: acknowledging the imperatives of an earlier "elsewhere" in an active and critical relationship with the cultural politics of one's present home, all within the figurality of a reciprocal displacement. "Home" then becomes a mode of interpretive in-betweenness as a form of accountability to more than one location.[47]

And, further, he notes that, "given the alienated spatiality of the diaspora, one can both belong and not belong to either one of two worlds at

the same time."[48] The special situation faced by those who are between cultures is addressed more fully in chapter 6.

Certainly, nostalgia is more than homesickness. Nostalgia may refer to the desire for a time that is subjective (e.g., "remember when I felt secure, confident?") or it may refer to a physical place ("remember the house in which we grew up?" or, "remember the college campus where we were students?").

NOSTALGIA AS FACILITATING THE CONTINUITY OF IDENTITY

According to Aden (1995), "nostalgia indicates individuals' desire to regain some control over their lives in an uncertain time." Aden views nostalgic communication as a means of temporal escape. He stresses the need for facilitating the continuity of identity; nostalgic communication serves in this capacity. Aden states:

> Nostalgic communication provides individuals with a means of symbolically escaping cultural conditions that they find depressing and/or disorienting. Using communication to move through time allows individuals to situate themselves in a *sanctuary of meaning*, a place where they feel safe from oppressive cultural conditions. (emphasis added)[49]

Similarly, Davis (1979) suggests that "nostalgia is one of the means—or better, one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses—we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities."[50] It is the work of Davis that best corresponds and relates to the work I have been doing. In his book, *Yearning For Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, he suggests that the primary purpose of nostalgia is the continuity of identity. He writes:

> How, then, does nostalgia play into the continuing quest for personal identity, the attempt to salvage a self from the chaos of raw, unmediated experience? In the clash of continuities and discontinuities with which life confronts us, nostalgia clearly attends more to the pleas for continuity, to the comforts of sameness and to the consolations of piety.[51]

How does nostalgia facilitate continuity of identity? According to Davis this is accomplished through "cultivating appreciative stances toward former selves, screening from memory the unpleasant and shameful," and, finally, "rediscovering and . . . rehabilitating marginal, fugitive, and

eccentric facets of earlier selves."[52] He says that "[p]ermeating all these dimensions . . . is its powerful benchmarking potential—its capacity to locate in memory an earlier version of self with which to measure . . . some current condition of the self."[53] For nostalgia to restore identity, the individual engages in selective memory and actively reconstructs former selves, while reconceptualizing and perhaps reevaluating both past and present selves. Thus, memory, the actual recall of the past, *and* nostalgia, the emotional component of remembering and longing, are instrumental in one's quest to know who one is.

Herein lies my key interest and question of study: What is the relationship between nostalgia and identity? Much of my work, like the work of Davis, suggests that nostalgia helps to facilitate continuity of identity. In subsequent chapters, data will be presented which will enable us to address the uses of nostalgia.

The phrase "continuity of identity" may imply that identity is static. However, this is not the claim made here. Rather, we create and recreate our identity throughout the life course. Even in our iterations, though, there are probably some elements of identity that remain quite consistent across time. Nostalgic recollection gives us the opportunity to observe and juxtapose past and present identity. What are the changes in identity over time? Do images of former selves indicate ideals that we feel we should try to recapture? Those images can guide us in our ongoing construction of identity.

Psychiatrist Elihu Howland (1962) tells of a man in therapy who had been criticized by his wife for being too wrapped up in the past. The patient liked to occasionally revisit the home that he had lived in when he was a child:

> He would go at night, and alone, partly because of the feeling of romantic mystery it gave him and partly because he thought it was a little too personal to share with another. He would walk down the path through the woods to the house and stand there. Though he was not conscious of praying, he compared it once to going into a church for a short period of silent communion. He would not stay there very long because that would have somehow contaminated the experience. . . . He did not know who the present owners were, nor did it matter to him. But whenever he saw lights in the windows he was pleased since it meant someone was using the house and enjoying it.[54]

This man did not necessarily long for childhood; rather, his experience was such that he had a feeling of sadness and wholeness, of "a natural

continuity between past and present, not reducing him to a helpless child but reminding him of a calm strength from the old days that had never left him."[55] Howland wonders if this kind of experience captures both the confusion and the secret of nostalgia:

> [T]hat we are struggling to hold fast to that which cannot be held, but which also once known, can never be lost. We seek blindly for something which has remained with us all the time, though not perhaps in the way that we expected. There is suffering here, but also strength and healing.[56]

SUMMING UP

Defining nostalgia today requires going above and beyond the original definition. Nostalgia is an emotion of longing for a past—admittedly, the longing may be for a past that did not necessarily exist (we do engage in selective memory). Nostalgia may be experienced collectively, in the sense that nostalgia occurs when we are with others who shared the event(s) being recalled. In this way, nostalgia might be used as conversational play and as a strategy for bonding. Nostalgia is also experienced collectively in the sense that one's nostalgia is often *for* the collective—the characteristics and activities of a group or institution in which the individual was a participant. Nostalgia might guide behavior and influence psychological processes (e.g., regarding self-esteem—we might say, "if I could do that back then, I must be a competent person"). Harper (1966) describes nostalgia as natural:

> Nostalgia is the natural way in adversity that man has to feel his own permanence and stability, and through himself the delight in reality as a whole. It is artificial, but it is not contrived. It is second-hand, but is nonetheless persuasive. It is far too common to all kinds of people in all kinds of stations and situations to dismiss as unimportant.[57]

And consider this from Howland (1962):

> Nostalgia is worth our serious attention. . . . Because it is not merely a vapid yearning for a dead past but a vital emotion central to all human life and though it can be our undoing, it can at times be our salvation.[58]

Nostalgia may padlock the path between then and now. Or, nostalgia may give us a key to the gate connecting the lessons of the past and the needs of the present. If American culture is awash in nostalgia, then per-

haps the concept deserves (demands) more attention. This ambiguous term eschews simple definition or categorization. The meaning(s) of the term also causes us to question ideas or notions that we have perhaps not thought about critically and to entertain thoughts that lay "outside of the box." For instance, we might suggest that nostalgia is a longing for a utopia, projected backwards in time. We think of "utopia" as referring to an imaginary perfect place or condition in the *future*, yet it does seem to fit with the conceptions of nostalgia presented here. Howland (1962) poses the question: "But, while nostalgia frequently points to the past, may it not sometimes point to the future, too?" He responds to his question in this way: "It seems to me that occasionally it may include a longing for something we have not yet really known, but only dreamed about."[59] Hence, nostalgia is a mystical, magical phenomenon. Boym (2001) suggests that nostalgia has "a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future."[60] She further teases out the meaning or direction of nostalgia in saying: "Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space."[61]

Understanding nostalgia requires that we examine memory. Nostalgia is clearly contingent upon memory. In the next chapter, I provide an overview of a very sociological conception of memory; namely, what is meant by *collective memory* and *collected memories*. It was the juxtaposition of these terms in my 1995 study of people's recollections of the 1950s that initially led me to the study of nostalgia.

2

Memory: From a Sociological Perspective

> The past that is present in any site is built up from memory, the
> fundamental medium of ethnohistory. In modernist ethnography,
> collective and individual memory in its multiple traces and expressions is
> indeed the crucible for the local self-recognition of an identity. While this
> significance of memory as the linking medium and process relating history
> and identity formation is well recognized by contemporary ethnographers,
> analytic and methodological thinking about it is as yet very undeveloped.
>
> —George Marcus[1]

> In my view, nostalgia remains an intermediary between collective and
> individual memory. Collective memory can be seen as a playground,
> not a graveyard of multiple individual recollections. The turn, or rather
> return, to the study of collective memory in contemporary critical
> thought, both in the social sciences and the humanities, is in itself a
> recovery of a certain framework of scholarly references that has been
> debated for two decades and now appears to have been virtually
> forgotten. Collective memory is a messy, unsystematic concept that
> nevertheless allows one to describe the phenomenology of human
> experience. The study of collective memory defies disciplinary
> boundaries and invites us to look at artistic as well as scholarly works.
>
> —Svetlana Boym[2]

MEMORY: PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

NOSTALGIA IS INTIMATELY CONNECTED TO SELECTIVE MEMORY. JEAN
Starobinski (1966) notes that nostalgia is "related to the *work* of memory" (emphasis added).[3] Jonathan Steinwand (1997) suggests that nostalgia summons the imagination to supplement memory. He writes: "the imagination is encouraged to gloss over forgetfulness in order to fashion a more aesthetically complete and satisfying recollection of what is longed for."[4] This can be done at both the individual and collective level.

And, at both levels, memory often imbues the past with more stability than occurred in actuality.

Memory has traditionally been studied by psychologists, whose historical interest has been on the mental processes involved in remembering words, names, or events. Memory is typically viewed as an intrapersonal process. Psychologists argue that "memory is wholly and internally personal,"[5] that it is "located in the individual as a private psychic or physiological phenomenon extending at most to the family."[6] There has been recent interest, among scholars from a variety of disciplines, in "collective memory"—especially a focus on how this concept connects memory and history as well as memory and identity.

Sociologists interested in the influence of the social world on individual memory find the concept of collective memory highly relevant. The suggestion is that it is impossible to regard the individual and his or her society as strictly separate. Lowenthal (1985a), in his discussion of why people revise the past, suggests that we conform the past "to our self-images and aspirations. Rendered grand or homely, magnified or tarnished, history is continually altered in our private interests or on behalf of our community or country."[7] Hence, memory is *both* a micro and a macro process.

The complex relationship between individual (or personal) memory and collective memory is explained by Holocaust scholar Arno Mayer (1993) this way: "Personal remembrances are singular to individuals at the same time that they intersect with the impersonal memories of the larger group to which every individual necessarily belongs."[8] Here, collective memory seems to envelop individual memory.

Franco Ferrarotti (1990) states that memory is "not simply an individual question." Memory has a base in and a link with the community:

> It involves the group, the collective unconscious, a stream of consciousness which links everything and travels in the interior of everyone at variable speeds and with its own images without, thus, exclusively belonging to anyone.[9]

In considering the "collective" or "community" aspect of memory, Ferrarotti describes it as a complex process that involves the individual and the context surrounding the individual: "The complexity of memory and its operations essentially derive from the fact that in reality memory is two things, corporeity and consciousness."[10]

In their discussion of the means by which social memory is produced, Richard Johnson and Graham Dawson (1982) paint a similar picture of

memory as both private and public. They identify public representations and private memory as the primary ways in which social memory is produced. With regard to private memory, however, they note that this, too, may be collective and shared:

> Private memories cannot, in concrete studies, be readily unscrambled from the effects of dominant historical discourses. It is often these that supply the very terms by which a private history is thought through.[11]

This view of memory advances a conception of remembering and forgetting as types of social action, dissolving the binary opposition between history and memory. Questions about the past, then, can take the following form:

> Instead of looking at the past and asking the traditional historian's question of what really happened, we can ask, what do various groups, societies, and peoples think happened? What versions of the past have they constructed and what meanings have they articulated to those constructions? Why do they—and we—remember some things and not others? What goes into the social construction of a past? And . . . how are social memories struggled over, how are they used, and what effects do they have in the present?[12]

Bommes and Wright (1982) view memory as both social and historic. Their argument is that memory exists "in the world rather than in people's heads"[13]. Its basis is not only in "conversations, cultural forms, personal relations, [and] the structure and appearance of places," but also, they say, "in relation to ideologies which work to establish a consensus view of both the past and forms of personal experience which are significant and memorable."[14] A poignant example of the latter is revisionist history; in particular, claims that the Holocaust never happened.

"Collective memory" is in academic vogue these days. There are various approaches to the concept. I begin with the originator of the concept, Maurice Halbwachs.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS SOCIAL FACT

Even if we haven't directly experienced an event from the past, we may have a collective memory of the event. That is to say, because each of us experiences group membership (e.g., based on such categories as family, age, social class, political ideology, etc.), we are endowed with memories which supercede our immediate, individual experience.

Lewis Coser observes that for Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), "the most important figure of the second generation of Durkheimians in the interwar years" (Halbwachs 1992),[15] the past is kept alive via membership in various social groups; collective memory arises from our inclusion in these groups. Memories that individuals have, then, are not actually individual, but reside outside the consciousness of the individual in the group. Following Halbwachs, Ferrarotti (1990) makes an important sociological point when he says:

> Memory is never a purely individual gift. Memory connects us along the chain of the generations through language, usages and customs, with both collective history and the history of those without history. Halbwachs's example is notably revealing: When I go to London I see at the same time the London my eyes bring me and the London of Dickens. In other words, there is no memory that is not also an inter- and contextual reconstruction.[16]

It follows, then, as Coser (Halbwachs 1992) contends, "that there are as many collective memories as there are groups and institutions in a society."[17] Lowenthal (1985a), much like Halbwachs, argues that, "unlike dreams, which are wholly private, memories are continually supplemented by those of others."[18] Mayer (1993), too, seems to echo Halbwachs, suggesting that, unlike history, memory "originates and develops within a distinct group, to which it remains confined."[19] Mayer's focus is less on the mythic notion of a truly individual, personal memory, than on the way memory is used for present purposes:

> To be sure, individuals have remembrances that are direct, literal, and tangible—like those my maternal grandmother relayed to me about her infernal life in Theresienstadt. But even such distinctly personal recollections, in addition to being shared, are swayed, not to say adulterated, by the present, which conditions the way they are articulated.[20]

This is consistent with Halbwachs's conceptualization. The focus on the social organization of shared memory is exactly what Durkheim implicates as a social fact. That is to say, memory (as well as other types of behavior, thinking, and feeling) is external to the individual and exercises coercive power over him.[21] Such a focus lends itself to a static view of social life, as it locates memories in the group and thus denies the possibility of human agency in making and recalling memories. This is a rather limited approach to the concept. Let us consider other perspectives.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS IDEOLOGY

Like Halbwachs, neo-Marxists approach collective memory from a macro perspective. But, rather than viewing social structure as a social fact, as Halbwachs does, neo-Marxists view the social structure as reified. A major focus is on a dominant or hegemonic ideology, for it is dominant ideology that makes possible the reification of social life. Neo-Marxists' conception of dominant ideology encapsulates the notion of collective memory. From this perspective, the collective memory is used as a vehicle for maintaining the status quo. Michael Billig (1990) suggests that ideology constitutes what is collectively remembered and forgotten. Memory is a part of ideology.[22] David Porreca's (1994) discussion of a "critical approach" to social memory suggests that such an approach views collective remembering and forgetting as enmeshed in shifting relations of power. Thus, "social memories and lapses of memory are seen as continually being constructed and reconstructed as material circumstances and interests change."[23]

Collective memory, then, is a tool deliberately used for class or group purposes. Mayer (1993) says this: "Memory is certainly very much in fashion these days. . . . Surely this rage for memory is neither politically innocent nor historically fortuitous."[24] His prime example is the memory of the Judeocide, which he feels "is angled and mediated to aid and abet the fugitive present as it encroaches on the uncertain future." He identifies, as the purpose of heralding a collective memory, the readjustment of the past for use in "arguments over policies for today and tomorrow;" indeed, "to deny or minimize the instrumental aspects of collective or social memory is to misconceive it."[25]

Michael Billig (1990), as part of a larger project involving an examination of the way in which ordinary people talk about the Royal family, interviewed members of a British family on the topic of the monarchy. In his analysis, Billig illustrates the relevance of ideology to ordinary discourse: "As people talk about royalty, they are talking, directly or indirectly, about the nature of society and family, privilege and equality, morality and duty, and so on."[26] It follows from Billig's study that the concept of "collective memory" is not distinct from ideology.

In today's multicultural America, the concept of dominant American ideology may be problematic in a practical sense. Can a dominant ideology prevail in a culture characterized by the value of individualism, a free-market economy, and consumerism as an expression of self and identity? Postmodernists observe the death of grand narrative and dom-

inant ideology. Their claim is that the symbolic universe is occupied by a number of competing ideologies, each struggling to gain acceptance and adherence. From this perspective, it is more accurate to describe the cultural terrain as marked by numerous, collective memor*ies* in contemporary American society. As sociologist Herbert Gans (1974) states,

> America is culturally pluralist, made up of a number of subcultures which coexist around a common core—"American culture"—even though that core is so vague and so limited both in content and adherents that no one has ever succeeded in delineating it satisfactorily.[27]

While it is the case that, in multicultural America, there is a multiplicity of ideologies, I do not believe that we can deny the continued existence of a dominant ideology. This does not mean that other ideologies are completely overshadowed. Rather, there is an interplay—a dialogue—between and among them. Ideology is a contested terrain. While Raymond Williams grants that, "in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant," he also observes that this is not a static system. He recognizes alternative meanings, values, opinions, attitudes, and senses of the world as being "accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture" (Higgins 2001).[28] Similarly, Antonio Gramsci would stress that human agency is valid and alive. (Bocock 1986)[29]

A discussion of ideology (and, by extension, nostalgia) demands consideration of the role of the mass media in shaping individual and cultural memories. Because the mass media are inescapable promulgators of dominant ideology, their role in the collective memory is significant. As Lowenthal (1985a) points out, the technologically advanced media of today make the past readily and easily accessible, as well as compelling: "Movies and snapshots plunge us into a vivid past—or bring that past directly into the present—seemingly without mediation."[30] The media create (to a degree) *what* we remember, but also, the contemporary forms of the media make more possible the abolishing of the past.

Moreover, the great societal and global changes that characterize recent decades increase dependance on the media. As Michael Cole (1990) says

> [H]istorical events occur with such rapidity on such a mass scale that they cannot be adequately assimilated into everyday experience. . . . individuals have no direct experience of the events affecting them, learning about them only through the selective screen of centrally controlled media.[31]

George Lipsitz (1990) considers the influence that the mass media in general (and popular culture in particular) have upon collective memory. He suggests that historical memory is in crisis "in this age of electronic media and its focus on the present."[32] Yet, Lipsitz also points out that electronic media "make collective memory a crucial constituent of individual and group identity in the modern world."[33] His position is not wholly pessimistic. . . .

> This capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, *but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present.* (emphasis added)[34]

Lipsitz looks at popular culture texts as providing a sense of shared memory and a sense of identity. Popular music, for example, is "the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or the last word."[35] He views popular culture as dialogic. That is to say, our engagement with popular culture texts places us as participants in a conversation with historical forces. In this way, people's memories may resist being shaped or manipulated by the dominant group. This perspective is consistent with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (e.g., the work of Raymond Williams and John Fiske among others), which views individuals as active in their selection and use of popular culture, rather than as passive dupes. Sociologist Ann Swidler's (1986) conception of culture as a "tool kit" is relevant here. The tool kit is comprised of "symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems."[36] Thus, individuals and groups draw upon what is available in the tool kit to address problems or issues. Regarding the contents of the tool kit as "texts" open to interpretation, cultural studies scholars conceptualize the relationship between the individual and dominant ideology as dialectical and dynamic. In Aden's (1995) discussion of "polyvalence," he writes of the cultural studies' articulation model, which espouses the belief that "texts are polyvalent, or their messages can be read or evaluated as both hegemonic and empowering."[37] Let us recall my previous citing of Aden's work regarding nostalgic communication as a means of providing escape from inhospitable conditions. He suggests that this escape enables individuals to establish a "secure place of resistance."[38] Aden explains, though, that the resistance is ultimately insufficient because the escape is temporary and thus insecure.

Following the line of thinking that conceptualizes collective memory as ideology, nostalgia can be seen as collective memory and used in a similar way. It would seem that nostalgia is especially likely to exist when a society is under pressure, providing a framework for people to think about what is going wrong and what should be done about it. In this instance, nostalgia is ideological to the degree that images of the past are appealing (albeit distorted) and individuals buy into past visions without a great deal of critical appraisal. Rather than deal with reality today, we can retreat to a comfortable past that never existed or that belonged to someone else. As DaSilva and Faught (1982) suggest, due to its appeal to an "undifferentiated emotion generated by an unreal, synthetic, universal image of the past, [nostalgia] becomes, ironically, an historical defense of the status quo."[39] Nostalgic conceptions of the past contribute to a tacit acceptance of the status quo (including, for example, unmarked privileges associated with whiteness, masculinity, bourgeois backgrounds, and heterosexuality). In this way, we see how nostalgia can be reinforced by hegemonic leadership and can facilitate making and re-making meaning, which serves the interests of the dominant group in society. As Raymond Williams notes, with his concept of "selective tradition," the present interprets the past, and, in this process, certain meanings of the past are chosen for emphasis while other meanings are excluded. Likewise, meanings may be reinterpreted in such a way as to support other elements within the dominant culture (Higgins 2001).[40]

Some of those theorizing collective memory from this more critical stance view nostalgia as an ideological template, even as false consciousness. Nostalgia is political—"the site of conflict over what is valuable and what our goals should be" (Chilton 2002).[41] Political scientist Kimberly Smith (2000) notes that nostalgia "figures prominently in struggles over the creation of collective memory." She explains that this is because it is a key concept in the political conflict over modernity—an important weapon in the debate over whose memories count and what kinds of desires and harms are politically relevant."[42] She goes on to suggest that skillful politicians can evoke nostalgia for whatever time period suits their purposes—conservatives may harken back to the 1950s, while radicals may cultivate nostalgia for the 1960s. Nostalgia is often dismissed as reactionary; indeed, it is viewed as dangerous to the degree that the past is misrepresented and distorted. To quote Tannock (1995):

> Hostile critiques . . . dominate discussions of nostalgia. These critiques associate the phenomenon with dominant and conservative forces in soci-

ety, and when they are not dismissing nostalgia for its sentimental weak-
nesses, they are usually attacking it for its distortions and misrepresenta-
tions.[43]

Yet, nostalgia can actually facilitate critical engagement with history,
with the past. Ostovich (2002) explains:

> [N]ostalgia arises from an awareness of distance between the past and
> the present, an awareness that something has been "shattered" and is in
> danger of being lost. And it is this shattering that creates the distance
> necessary for criticism. . . . Living among the debris of the past, the nos-
> talgic's challenge is to construct a world and an identity out of this
> debris.[44]

It is important to note that, while the nostalgic individual may wish to
return to a stable past, it is also possible that, in the face of a present that
seems overly static and monolithic, the individual may, as Tannock
(1995) suggests, "long for a past in which things could be put into play,
opened up, moved about, or simply given a little breathing space." He
continues: "The type of past (open or closed, stable or turbulent, simple
or inspired) longed for by the nostalgic subject will depend on her pre-
sent position in society, on her desires, her fears, and her aspirations."[45]

In turning to George Herbert Mead, I present the theoretical per-
spective which, I feel, is most appropriate and useful in dealing with the
topic of memory from an interpretive sociological standpoint.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS SITUATIONAL

Viewing collective memory as situational brings us to a microsocio-
logical perspective on memory. Central to this view is how individuals,
interacting with one another, actually use the past. This is social philoso-
pher George Herbert Mead's view of the past which, in some ways,
bridges Halbwachs's positivistic approach and the more critical neo-
Marxian approach. Mead does not treat social life or memory as a social
fact, and neither does he view collective memory as necessarily related to
dominant ideology. Rather, he carves out an intermediary approach be-
tween personality and social structure; he focuses on social *situations*.
Furthermore, Mead is ever the pragmatist. He thus asks a very prag-
matic question: How do people *use* the past?

Mead (1929) begins by locating the *present* as "the locus of reality."
Yet, he holds that the present implies both "a past and a future." His mi-

crosociological view of collective memory emphasizes the way in which reconstructions of the past are used in interaction for various purposes in creating meaning and maintaining continuity. According to Mead, the past is not necessarily left *as* "past," for individuals carry their pasts around with them. "They are in great part thought constructs of what the present by its nature involves, into which very slight material of memory imagery is fitted."[46] Mead's symbolic interactionism, then, not only proposes that individuals create and recreate present reality through an interactional process, but also that the past is recreated in the same manner, according to the given situational demands/purposes. Just as we negotiate meaning concerning the here and now, we also negotiate the meaning of the past. As Pickering (1997) notes, "[t]he personal past, no matter how often rehearsed, is never stable."[47]

Following the work of Mead, Patrick Baert (1992) identifies three different ways in which an individual can use the past. First, "past-as-sequence" refers to a descriptive use of the past. Here, the past is viewed as a sequence of particular events. Second, "past-as-categorised" refers to the assigned meaning or value of past events. It is "a re-assessment of the categories for which the past events belong and which values (e.g., positive versus negative, reasonable versus unreasonable) one should attribute to them."[48] Third, "past-as-order" refers to reconstructing the past. This use of the past goes beyond mere descriptive sequencing of events to why and how particular events occur together. To use Baert's own example, if an individual were to say that someone's past accounts for his or her deviant behavior, then one is using the past here "not merely as a sequence of phenomena, but also as an answer to a why-question concerning past, present and future conduct."[49]

Thus, Baert's interpretation of Mead takes us beyond the basic notion that individuals use the past for present purposes, for Baert describes types (levels) of the use value of the past. Also relevant is Baert's distinction among various views of the past. An "eternal permutational world view" derives from positivism and conceives of reality as immutable: "the real is fixed and unchangeable, and the temporal flux is nothing more than an imperfect reflection of an eternal world of forms."[50] What he calls a "closed historical world view" is a deterministic view, which holds us in bondage to either the past or the future. This perspective visualizes past, present, and future as mechanistically determining each other. Baert favors an "open historical view," which is consistent with themes running through Mead's *Philosophy of the Present*. Both the future and the past, then, are regarded as open-ended.

Sociologist Peter Berger's (1963) conception of memory is consistent with Mead's. He uses the term "selective perception," arguing that we selectively attend not just to certain *present* stimuli, but also to experiences from the past: "in any situation . . . we notice only those things that are important for our immediate purposes . . . the past is malleable and flexible, constantly changing as our recollection reinterprets and re-explains what has happened."[51] Again, Lowenthal (1985a) is relevant:

> Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, *selective reconstructions* based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize, and classify the world around us. (emphasis added)[52]

As Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) recognizes, "[p]art of what makes it possible for people to keep pushing forward is the selection of what gets remembered and revealed."[53] Ferrarotti (1990) asks difficult, penetrating questions about this selection process:

> Man is a remembering animal, but memory is selective. What to remember? To forget? And why? . . . Memory recalls the crucial moments on which the person is built, the experiences deeply experienced by the person, more exactly, by the personality of the person.[54]
> . . . .
> Memory filters and selects. How? On the basis of what criteria? And how can life already lived, experienced, and empirically worn through be recalled to consciousness? Be truly reactivated? We are speaking of an effective human experience. It is not a story, nor a *mythos*. It is life really lived.[55]

I endorse Berger and Luckmann's (1966) dialectical vision: Each person is born into an existing social system. But each person also can influence and act upon this system.[56] Such a view would suggest that a collective memory (or memories) resides within the social structure, but people may edit this collective memory differently. And, indeed, people may even choose a "new" collective memory altogether. Following Mead, I find it most meaningful to identify particular "use-values" of the past (and, by extension, use-values of nostalgia).

In the interest of demonstrating how memory is *used* and *constructed*, (and thus setting the stage for presenting my research on how nostalgia is used), consider some relevant studies in this area, beginning with the work of Barry Schwartz. In "The Reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln,"

Schwartz (1990) presents a picture of the nineteenth-century image of Lincoln and then shows how this image was reconstructed in the first two decades of the twentieth century. From depictions of Lincoln in the popular media, Schwartz notes that different personal qualities are emphasized, depending upon the ideological and emotional issues of the time. For example, the image of Lincoln as a common man was consistent with the turn of the century, when such symbols of commonness and simplicity could be considered "a restatement of democracy's rediscovery . . . making it known to the people in a concrete way."[57]

Schwartz did a similar study a year later, focusing on another of America's heroes. Drawing on essays and commentaries in popular magazines, newspaper articles, and literature, Schwartz (1991) compares images of George Washington before and after the Civil War.[58] Two images appeared: the common Washington who affirmed democratic values and the genteel Washington. Schwartz's findings led to the conclusion that both the retention and the construction of the past are rooted in the present.

Barry Schwartz, Yael Zerubavel, and Bernice Barnett (1986) conducted a study of the 1927 commemoration of the battle of Masada, which occurred in 73 AD. A poem written by Yitzhak Lamdan in 1927, "Masada," constituted their "text" for study. There was great reception of the poem, explained by these authors thus: the poem helped Jews better understand the present. In this sense, Mead's notion of "the use value of pasts" is demonstrated. In this poem, Lamdan described his own feelings and, in so doing, described the "feelings and reactions of the community at large."[59] The poem is inspirational. The battle of Masada was unsuccessful for the Jewish people, but Lamdan, through his poem, offers hope. He calls for a break from the past. Masada, though a dead end, can be symbolic of a new beginning, reassurance for the future. Schwartz et al. put forth a theory of historical selectivity which bridges the gap between history as an objective fact and history as completely malleable according to present conditions.

James Young (1990), in his discussion of *Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-Bvurah* (Day of Holocaust and Heroism), points to similar uses of the past via this commemorative day. The events and rituals surrounding this day are reminders of the heroic fighters. Young says:

> In fact, after being twinned with heroism for so many years, the *Shoah* itself no longer signifies defeat in the eyes of many of the young soldiers, but actually emerges as an era of heroism, or triumph over passivity.[60]

This day of remembrance highlights, as the primary use of the past, the unification of a nation. "For the very act of commemoration provides a common experience for a population otherwise divided by innumerably disparate lives."[61]

It is in this context that Young introduces the term "collected memories," as opposed to Halbwachs's "collective memory." Young identifies a danger in "a day that creates a single meaning in such memory."[62] It is a myth that there exists a single memory. The reality, he says, is that memories vary from person to person. It is the act of a commemorative ceremony that produces the sense that there exists a shared past. Reliance only on *collective* memory can be said to suffocate realities characterized by difference, discontinuity, and heterogeneity, while an appreciation for *collected* memories invites discordant voices to be heard.

A study conducted by Middleton and Edwards (1990) demonstrates the importance of the communicational setting (or "discursive frame") on remembering. A group of undergraduate students were asked to recall together something that they had all recently experienced: watching the movie *E.T.* This group of students attempted to reconstruct the narrative order of events in the movie. But, in addition, at the end of their session, they "spontaneously carried on reminiscing about what had obviously been a pleasant and interesting experience," as they referred to different points in the movie so as to recall what were, for them, "particularly poignant, or significant 'bits.'"[63] Hence, communicational setting is shown to be important in determining what is remembered. The authors suggest that their finding goes beyond this study. They stress the need to study versions of events in their social, conversational context.

Social historian John Bodnar (1989) conducted oral interviews with people who formerly worked at the Studebaker Corporation plant in South Bend, Indiana. He describes the individuals' memory during the prewar WWII period as hegemonic. Though, in reality, the company and union exercised repressive, tight control, that repression was submerged because "it had been suppressed in the past and because the overall era seemed to produce a more orderly world than the one that followed."[64] Memories of the Studebaker project were "tied intimately to structures of power."[65] Institutions, then, could be seen as operating at a personal level, influencing people's memories.

Yet, after World War II, "[w]hen the interests of powerful institutions were at odds and when workers were less certain of where to direct their loyalties, memories revealed a place that was in greater disorder."[66]

"Other stories" were revealed by subjects. For example, some intervie-wees recalled the post-World War II era as a time of dissatisfaction in the plant, as manifested by people coming to work drunk, "doggin it on the job," being disobedient. Memories of the plant in the 1950s were less consistent with the needs of dominant institutions because those institu-tions were "unable to exert the same amount of influence over con-sciousness."[67] Bodnar's results, then, indicate that dominant, collective memory becomes individualized in times when the dominant institutions have relatively unequivocal authority. However, perhaps more genuine, authentic, accurate personal memories, are possible (or likely) during less consensual times. These are the collected memories which do not fit neatly with the collective memory.

David Blight (1989), in an article focusing on Frederick Douglass's attempt to keep alive the meaning of the Civil War, demonstrates that historical memory is "the prize in a struggle between rival versions of the past."[68] Douglass's desire was to keep the Civil War in people's memory of emancipation; indeed, he wanted emancipation to have a mythic qual-ity. Blight's article gives credence to the neo-Marxian (or critical) ap-proach to memory. According to Blight, Douglass came to realize that "[t]he historical memory of any transforming or controversial event emerges from cultural and political competition, from the choice to con-front the past and to debate and manipulate its meaning."[69] The use value of the past is recognized: "Douglass . . . understood that winning battles over policy or justice in the present often required an effective use of the past."[70]

There is a growing body of research on the ways in which objects, or iconography, create—or better, maintain—collective memories. For in-stance, Radley (1990) focuses on how people engage with the material world. He points to collective remembering via museums when he says, "people do not remember a series of personal events which touched their own lives but enjoy a sense of the past through the understanding of a history which other people appear to have created."[71] Radley identifies different kinds of objects which are made specifically so that they help us remember; e.g., tombstones, plaques, flags. In addition to evoking our memories, objects can sustain myths and ideologies, thus maintaining people's collective memory of the past. Another study which exemplifies this is sociologists' Stanford Gregory, Jr. and Jerry Lewis's (1988) study of the building of the memorial at Kent State University. They consider monument and memorial building as an especially dramatic form of sym-bolic expression—an expression which represents aspects of collective

history. Such monuments serve to build consensus and social solidarity in a community. The social aspect of building an appropriate physical artifact as a memorial involves linking past community events with the present, and thereby "establishing meaning for the collective memory, and thus enhancing community moral unity."[72]

As Mead suggested, the past is as uncertain as the present. We decide, in our interactions with others, and as per the needs of the present, how we will recreate the past. In the following chapters I present my own research through this interpretive lens, seeking to understand the meanings that individuals have of past events in their life and responses they have to the collective memory of particular time periods. Given my interest in and focus on individuals' actual constructions and reconstructions of the past, it is most useful and valuable to employ this interpretive approach. Subsequent chapters will describe these and related studies and demonstrate how the act of recollection and the experience of nostalgia relate to identity.

3
Continuity of Identity:
Putting the Self Back Together Again

[I]nteractionist scholars have revealed why a comprehensive
analysis of the self must go beyond consideration of how people
present and realize situated identities. To provide a more complete
understanding of the dynamics of selfhood, social psychologists must
also consider the *experience of self*, particularly the experience of a
biographical self that gives elements of coherence and continuity
to a person's everyday presentations of self.

—Kent Sandstrom, Daniel Martin, and Gary Fine[1]

INTRODUCTION: SELF/IDENTITY

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT SELF AND IDENTITY.[2] THE TWO MAIN
issues I wish to explore here are, first, whether in these postmodern
times, faced with threats to establishing a coherent identity, human be-
ings construct identities that can be said to have continuity over time
and, second, how the self might be seen more accurately as both struc-
ture and process—that is, how the self is simultaneously *both* static and
dynamic.

Sociologists view the self as developed from the outside in, which is to
say that we internalize social processes which, in turn, form the self. G. H.
Mead considered the self a gift from society to the individual. We can
view society and the individual as two sides to the same coin. Sociolo-
gists Gubrium and Holstein (2000) describe it thus:

> From the start, the self unfolds in and through social life, never separate
> from it. If a personal self exists, it is not a distinct private entity so much
> as it is a concoction of traits, roles, standpoints, and behaviors that indi-
> viduals articulate and present through social interaction. [3]

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The necessity of the collective—of the social—in the construction of identity is noted by Holland et al., (1998) who write: "[T]he cultural figurings of selves, identities, and the figured worlds that constitute the horizon of their meaning against which they operate, are collective products."[4] These scholars note that the "space of authoring, of self-fashioning, remains a social and cultural space, no matter how intimately held it may become."[5] Symbolic interactionists view identities as improvised; individuals use the cultural resources at hand in fashioning selves.

Mead distinguished the "elementary" and "complete" self, the former connoting a situational self—a self that is heavily influenced by the situation in which one finds herself. For example, the self we present at a party is, in some degree, different from how we present the self at work. The complete self, in Mead's conceptualization, is the self which is stable across situations (Mead 1934). The claim of self-stability is called into question by many scholars working in the areas of social psychology and cultural studies, influenced by the implications of postmodernist thinking. Postmodernism rejects major tenets of modernity, such as a belief in one, stable truth; a reliance upon generalizations; and a view that coherence is natural. As a contrast, the postmodernist would posit multiple perspectives, not truth; situated accounts rather than generalizations; and the self as decentered—i.e., the self as fragmented, not having a coherent or fixed essence. From the postmodernist perspective, then, the notion of identity as having coherence and continuity is challenged.

IDENTITY IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY

In contemporary theory, identity is viewed as rather fragile, or at least quite malleable. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) provides us with an image of "the saturated self," by which he means a self that is continually bombarded with social stimuli. The saturated self is a fragmented self and its relationships are "incoherent and disconnected."[6] Technological advances in communication and transportation have the effect of bombarding us with social stimulation. The saturated self is the postmodern self. That is to say, selves in the postmodern era are capable of fluidity; opportunities exist for making and remaking the self. Communication technologies, in particular, have contributed to this phenomenon. With e-mail, cell phones, and faxes, individuals can be connected ("virtually," anyway) with many people. Each encounter may require a different presentation of self. Gergen suggests that the concept of an authentic self is untenable:

Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold.[7]

This line of thinking certainly makes problematic the idea of a stable or enduring identity. We can try out various identities, not committing to any. Gergen here writes of continuous construction and reconstruction of selves—"a world where anything goes that can be negotiated."[8] Rhetortician Andreea Deciu Ritivoi (2002) notes that the postmodern individual has been depicted as a "grab bag of fragmented identities, a collage shaped by others' conceptions and beliefs, a product of discourse, of power, or technology."[9] If, as sociologists contend, we construct our self based on what is culturally available, then perhaps, when faced with so many choices, individuals are overwhelmed and any semblance of unity and authenticity is felt to be lost.

 Gubrium and Holstein (1995) do not buy into the pessimistic predictions for self in the postmodern era. Their sociology of everyday life approach locates self-construction in the ordinary experiences of individuals:

While postmodernist images of the self can render it both empty (lacking in substance) and overly saturated (phrenetically suffused with meaning), empirically we can still watch people methodically construct viable and well-ordered selves using what is ordinarily available.[10]

Individuals use meaningful resources which are locally available in constructing who they are. Gubrium and Holstein (1995) emphasize the significance of biographical particulars in self construction and maintenance. They write:

In contrast to the fleeting, polysemic differences of postmodern consciousness, selves are regularly clarified, defined, or evaluated in ordinary personal and interpersonal comparisons. Judgments are not arbitrary but made systematically in the sense that self-understandings and conjectures are matched with available biographical particulars as bodies of evidence.[11]

These sociologists emphasize that lives are "narratively constructed" and made "coherent and meaningful" through the "biographical work" that "links experience into circumstantially compelling life courses"—a process which is "locally informed and organized."[12] We see here the rele-

vance of drawing upon the past and remembering former selves in the ongoing process of identity construction. Sandstrom et al. (2003) also emphasize the relevance of past, present, and future in constructing an enduring self:

> [W]hen we act toward ourselves and others in a given situation, we are affected by our memories of the past, including our memories of the roles we have performed, the statuses we have achieved, the relationships we have negotiated, and the successes and failures we have experienced. We are also influenced by our thoughts of the future, including our thoughts of who we might become in the next situation or even several years from now. When we fashion acts and identities in a particular situation, then, we do so as people who have lives that extend beyond that situation — lives that include pasts and futures, as well as goals and responsibilities other than those we are currently enacting.[13]

Similarly, Holland et. al (1998) note that identities are created "from the cultural resources at hand."[14] For this reason, individuals (and groups) are "caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or some-how impinge upon them." These authors suggest that identities are "hard-won standpoints . . . vulnerable to change" that "make at least a modicum of self-direction possible."[15] Further, the concept of "practiced identities," highlights a sociology of everyday life approach which views identities as actively constructed. Several contexts of activity are involved in constructing practiced identities. Holland et al. (1998) identify four such contexts: "the figured world," which refers to thinking, speaking, gesturing, and cultural exchange; "positionality," which refers to entitlement to social and material resources and thus is linked to power, status, and rank; "the space of authoring" (which involves identifying social discourses and practices to craft a response to the world); and "making worlds," which refers to activities that bring about new figured worlds. A consideration of these contexts and the way in which identities are constructed indicates the importance of the collective in fashioning the self. Also evident is that the space of authoring the self is "more often than not, a contested space, a space of struggle."[16]

We would expect that the more stable the environment, the more probable is one's identity to have stability, permanence, continuity. Yet, writing decades ago, sociologist Anselm Strauss (1959) made a case for stable identity even amidst environmental changes:

> Even in a milieu marked by rapid social change, men seize opportunities
> for forestalling and minimizing personal change; they appear to establish,
> with at least partial success, islands of stability.[17]

The notion of "islands of stability" seems appealing and comforting, given that, as Gubrium and Holstein (2000) observe, "[t]imes are tough for the personal self. . . . Postmodern life provides one identity option after another, implicating a dizzying array of possibilities for the self."[18] But, really, what postmodern society presents is the *option* to create and recreate identities. Yes, one could indeed try out different identities and fail to have any sense of a unified, authentic self. But how many of us would really choose that? We also have the choice to construct our self in a way that is meaningful and allows for continuity. Postmodern society might make this project more challenging, but it does not negate identity as something meaningful and coherent. Deciu Ritivoi (2002) echos this view when she says that, "despite what some radical postmodern theories of subjectivity tell us, many people value inner harmony and prefer not to live as a collection of disjointed fragments."[19] The following statements from Gubrium and Holstein (2000) are also consistent with this approach. They write: "While some view contemporary life as saturating the self, it also can be seen as providing countless options for what we could be, markedly expanding our potential for self-expression."[20] And, further, they suggest that "[o]ur ability to choose between options—indeed, to use some options in order to resist others, or to construct new ones—can be as liberating as it is overwhelming and debilitating."[21] Today there is a greater supply of possibilities for who and what we might be. Identity is not threatened, but rather potentially enriched under such circumstances.

One need only look to the burgeoning self-help industry for an illustration of the possibilities for self construction and reconstruction that postmodern society presents. Embedded in the proliferation of materials which instruct us in our efforts to change the self, is a view that the self is not static, but dynamic. This view stresses we can become a different person than we are, if we so desire. Certainly, the popularity of self-help literature reflects the awareness that, in this day and age of myriad choices, we can actively select out a self which best suits us. Paradoxically, though, the message in most of the self-help literature is this: search inside and uncover the authentic "you" and work on being true to that person, nurturing the qualities you deem as positive and discarding those aspects which are unseemly. Even in an industry which *both* be-

moans and celebrates the fractious and segmented nature of self, an emphasis on the authentic self prevails.

The desire for authenticity stems from a process of fragmentation and a feeling of distance or loss. We seek the authentic because we want to regain something lost; we wish to make our own existence more credible. In his writings on postcoloniality and identity, Radhakrishnan (1996) notes that the question of authenticity "has to do not just with identity but with a certain attitude to identity. In other words, authentic identity is a matter of choice, relevance, and a feeling of rightness."[22]

Authenticity shares with nostalgia the probability that it may be much like an idyllic past—i.e., something unattainable. Yet, real or imagined, the quest for authenticity is ubiquitous. Many proponents of identity politics encourage a reclaiming of authentic identity among members of groups which have historically been stigmatized and oppressed (e.g., women, people of color, homosexuals). While the dominant culture presents negative scripts for various groups in society, members of those groups need not accept the given scripts. Rather, individuals and groups can transform their identities and, in so doing, build solidarity and raise consciousness. This mission of those who would classify their work or approach as "identity politics" demonstrates a commitment to the view of identity as something which is anchored and "true," as opposed to something transient, false, and distorted by ideology.

Yet, recent perspectives in poststructural and cultural studies focus less on a striving for coherence in identity construction and more on embracing a conceptualization of identity as fluid and shifting. Given the intersections among gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, identity is best viewed as fluid and based upon multiple standpoints. Following this line of thinking, the emphasis in identity politics on reclaiming identity serves to reinforce dependence on the dominant Other, given that it is in opposition to the dominant Other that these identity claims are made. Poststructuralists acknowledge the multiple determinations of gender, class, race, sexuality, and nationality, noting that we need to be wary of monolithic conceptualizations promulgated by hegemonic forces in society. Radhakrishnan (1996) succinctly states that, for poststructuralists, " 'discontinuity' is the empowering principle."[23]

Certainly, the poststructuralist perspective does much to break down the binary oppositions so significant to the dominant structure (e.g., self–other, mainstream–special interests, us–them, etc.). The conception of the self put forth in these recent approaches shares much in common with symbolic interactionist thought. Yet, they go a bit too far. Symbolic

interactionism, which has its roots in pragmatism, considers the self a practical matter. The important question becomes: Does this self "work"? That is to say, does it enable me to successfully adapt to a given situation, aligning my actions with others such that my conduct makes sense and is appropriate? Meanings are negotiated interpersonally; identities are constructed through our connections with others. This is not to suggest that self construction and maintenance necessarily proceed without difficulty. As scholars working within these related schools of thought point out, our multiple identities in the postmodern era can result in contradictions and complexities that call for ever more reflexivity and negotiations of meaning. The "work" of self construction or identity formation takes place in the everyday experiences of the individual. It involves memory of past selves, awareness of the present self, and anticipation of future selves. But, this work is not wholly an individual endeavor. Our connection to and relationships with others (individuals, groups, institutions) shape the "project" of the self. And this project is ongoing.

IDENTITY AS BOTH STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

George Herbert Mead identified the self as comprised of two aspects: the "I," which is the creative, spontaneous part of the self, and the "Me," which incorporates the Generalized Other (i.e., the perspective of the community), allowing for internal social control. He saw both of these aspects as necessary in society at large; the "Me" is important because we need to have shared ideas and goals forming a basis of common understanding for society to continue, but the "I" is also important because there must be a source of new ideas to keep society growing and alive.[24] To say that identity is both structure and process is to acknowledge these two aspects of the self and to suggest, as Mead did, that self and society are two sides of the same coin. As Gubrium and Holstein (2000) state, "the self emanates from the interplay among institutional demands, restraints, and resources, on the one hand, and biographically informed, self-constituting social actions, on the other."[25]

Alberto Melucci (1995) asserts that identity implies the notion of unity; the mutual recognition between two actors. He says that the notion of identity always refers to these three features: "the continuity of a subject over and beyond variations in time and its adaptations to the environment; the delimitation of this subject with respect to others; and the ability to recognize and to be recognized."[26] As Melucci acknowl-

edges, the notion of "a certain stability and permanence over time seems to contrast with the dynamic idea of a process. There is no doubt that at any given moment social actors try to delimit and stabilize a definition of themselves. So do the observers."[27] Indeed, as Deciu Ritivoi (2002) notes, "we belong to communities whose other members need to know who we are, and to know that they can count on us remaining more or less *the same*."[28] We crave sameness over time for our own sanity, and important people in our life demand it as well. Identity endures; this is how and why we can speak of "continuity of identity" in a meaningful way. Melucci (1995) says, ". . . identity entails an ability to perceive duration, an ability that enables actors to establish a relationship between past and future and to tie action to its effects."[29]

Perhaps drawing upon certain terms can aid us in viewing identity both as durable and as something in process. The term, "self-concept," for example, may provide durability (much like Mead's notion of the "Me"). Sociologist Kathy Charmaz (2001) notes that one's experience of self in process can undergo change more readily than one's self-concept.[30] The self-concept is a structure that includes one's beliefs and attributes; in short, it contains one's fundamental notions of who she is. The self-concept, then, enables us to see identity as durable, while also acknowledging that, in day-to-day living, one's *experience* of "Who am I?" is continually being configured. Weiss and Bass (2002), writing about meaning and purpose in later life, note that "we remain throughout our lives recognizably ourselves in the categories we use for understanding and in our assumptions about ourselves and others."[31] These authors assert that a core self does exist: "Even though the situations of our lives change, our personalities, although they may be modified as we adapt to new situations, have at their core a continuous self."[32]

Deciu Ritivoi (2002) argues that identity has continuity while also claiming that we are "never the same persons we were yesterday. We constantly lose a part of who we are, by having to commit to memory the person we used to be."[33] She reconciles these two contradictory views by arguing that identity is a narrative. If identity is a life story, then there must be a place for both structure and process. Narrative scenarios face us, and it is by drawing upon facets of the self that are stable that we are able to make sense of the story in which we are the protagonists. Deciu Ritivoi writes: "The constant gap between yesterday and today is what constitutes the self, by inviting recollection and reflection that can offer a structure to account for both 'now' and 'then'."[34] Anselm Strauss (1959) instructs that "students of identity

should think in historical, as well as autobiographical, terms."[35] He holds that the individual thinks about and makes sense of her life by symbolically ordering the "multitudinous and disorderly crowd of past acts."[36] He elaborates:

> If your interpretations are convincing to yourself, if you trust your terminology, then there is some kind of continuous meaning assigned to your life as-a-whole. Different motives may be seen to have driven you at different periods, but the overriding purpose of your life may yet seem to retain a certain unity and coherence.[37]

Past acts may not necessarily fit together, but the framework one uses to make sense of one's life reconciles the discordant acts, relating them in a meaningful way to both former and current self. Thus, when past "purposes and dedications" are viewed as part of a "larger temporal design," a person's life may be "understood, explained, and managed." If discordant acts or events from the past seem important, then they are woven into the personal narrative.[38] Similarly, Ira Silver (1996) suggests that "identity formation is, for both men and women, a continuous narrative process."[39] And it is the individual's "biographical work" that makes possible the assembling of a life story which is consistent, such that the past "reasonably leads up to the present to form a lifeline" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).[40]

Summing Up

My view of self and identity is one embodying both change and stability, sameness and differentness, the static and the dynamic. I propose to reconcile these contradictory views by assessing the biographical and narrative uses of nostalgia. Clearly, the relationship between nostalgia and identity that Davis originally put forth, and that I am exploring in this book (i.e., whether nostalgia facilitates the continuity of identity), requires that identity be seen as something that does (or can) endure. Do obstacles to constructing and maintaining an enduring identity lead individuals to call up memories and actively engage in reminiscence and nostalgia? To what degree are such strategies successful in maintaining a self over time? Nostalgia may facilitate *continuity of identity,* allowing people, through narrative and sometimes vicarious experience, to "place" themselves in time and space, yielding a sense of themselves as time travelers. Deciu Ritivoi (2002) puts it well when she says that nostalgia can be seen as "an effort to discover meaning in one's life, to understand one-

self better by making comparisons between the past and the present, and thus integrating experiences into a larger schema of meaning."[41] Further, she considers the past a safety net, "which gives us a sense of grounding, and at the same time a way of embarking confidently on future experiments or adventures."[42]

Through research studies presented in the next part of this book, I provide an empirical test of the proposed relationship between nostalgia and identity.

Part II
Re-Collecting the Past

It is important to note that when I began research on "the '50s," I was not testing hypotheses about memories or nostalgia. My research was qualitative and inductive in nature. When I wrote my dissertation on people's recollections of the 1950s, nostalgia was not a guiding concept. That seems intriguing and odd now, after I have returned to that body of work and in fact realize that nostalgia is both directly and indirectly relevant. In chapter 4, differing recollections of white and African American individuals who came of age in the 1950s invite the juxtaposition of the terms, "collective memory" and "collected memories." Further, the (perhaps surprising) finding of nostalgia for that time expressed by the African American informants is explored.

Chapter 5 features the results of a study that involved asking young adults the following hypothetical question: "If you could step into a time machine, and press any year to go to, forward or backward in time, what year would you pick and why?" The majority of respondents chose to go back in time, and the two most popular decades represented were the 1950s and the 1960s. The members of Generation X seem to express nostalgia for life during those decades. This is a significant finding given that we think of American society as being forward-looking and progress-oriented. We also see here the possibility of expressing nostalgia for a past one has not actually experienced. Among this group of respondents, too, we can identify possible uses of nostalgia. In this context, it appears that the nostalgia is an attempt to forge a lacking generational or collective identity.

4
Recollections of the 1950s

We must recover the stories of those whom official memory has
excluded: the marginal, the underground, the residents of the attics
and the basements. These stories correct official memory. Finally,
we must realize that no single memory of anything is sufficient, any
more than any single method for the study of memory is adequate.
Even to begin to represent the past, we must create a collage of
recollections, which overlap and collide with each other.

—Catharine R. Stimpson[1]

DURING MY OWN LIFETIME (I WAS BORN IN 1968), THE DECADE OF THE
1950s has been mythologized and romanticized in American popular
culture more than any other previous decade. Representations of life
during that time have drawn me to the study of people's recollections of
living in the 1950s as well as to consider how people who were not even
alive during that time think of it. The 1950s have a special attraction to
me because this was the decade during which my parents came of age
(my mother graduated from high school in 1956 and my father in 1957).
I grew up watching "Happy Days," a 1970s situation comedy set in the
1950s. As a child, I looked upon that time very favorably; yes, even nos-
talgically, although I did not know those times firsthand.

My doctoral dissertation was a study of individuals' memories of the
1950s.[2] I will share here some of the more important findings, with re-
gard to nostalgia and identity. Employing a snowball sample, I inter-
viewed thirty-three individuals who shared with me their recollections of
coming of age in the 1950s. My eagerness to hear individuals' stories was
welcomed—and rewarded—by my informants. Some of my informants
seemed almost to "adopt" me for an hour or two, sharing their recollec-
tions energetically and enthusiastically, often making comparisons of
their coming of age in the 1950s to mine in the 1980s. The majority of my

informants were teenagers/young adults in the 1950s. Those people whom I interviewed were not specifically selected because of special attributes or because they were well known. Rather, they were "ordinary" individuals who, like all of us, have insights to offer. My sample included 12 men and 21 women. Of the participants, 28 were white and five African American; 24 were married (9 men, 15 women); 7 were divorced (1 man, 6 women); and two were single (both men). Fourteen informants had occupations that the sociologist would label professional; six had skilled jobs; another six had semi-skilled jobs; and seven worked (or had retired from) unskilled occupations. The majority of my informants (26) were living in Michigan during the 1950s; however, three participants grew up in California, one in Virginia, one in Louisiana, one in Indiana, and one spent part of the decade in Mississippi before moving to Michigan.

The major focus in my study was on "the other side" of the 1950s—the fear of the bomb, the Red Scare, racism. Indeed, one of the significant findings was the differential recollections of white and African American informants. Illustrative quotes showed that the majority of white informants remembered the 1950s as a time of racial harmony, while the five African Americans in my sample remembered the segregation, exclusion, and difficulty growing up black in that decade. I will share excerpts of such quotes. Also significant to note, though, is the nature and degree of nostalgia that was expressed among my African American informants. After sharing quotes which demonstrate the differential recollections of whites and African Americans, I will return to the interview data and explore this interesting phenomenon: the juxtaposition of remembering the pain and difficulty associated with being black in the 1950s with pleasant nostalgia for that time. If even members of a minority who were terribly discriminated against can express nostalgia for the 1950s, then there is something significant here to explore and to consider.

DIFFERING RECOLLECTIONS BASED ON RACE

The majority of my white informants remember the '50s as a time of relative racial harmony. Many of these respondents could cite as least one specific instance of a black being treated especially well or having done real well. For example, Roy Stevens, an assistant professor, says,

> Most people were accepted. There weren't any black people in power, but they were allowed free movement in the city [Battle Creek, MI]; I mean it wasn't sit in the back of the bus or anything like that from in the South. I

don't think the civil rights movement did much for those people because it was already integrated.

Larry Fields, a school administrator, offers this commentary:

> If you were poor, you were poor; if you were black, you were black. There weren't a lot of black people fighting for equality. We lived next door to a black family, and it was no problem. We got along well. There just didn't seem to be the issues.

He also recalls that "one of the more popular cops in town was a black cop." There was also a popular restaurant/night club that was run by "a black fella."

There seemed to be a general acceptance of "the way things were." It sounds as if racial harmony was the result of whites and African Americans leading separate, albeit unequal, lives.

Rachel Anderson, a cosmetologist, explains:

> It was like the blacks kept to themselves and we kept to ourselves. They had their own way of living and we had our own way of living. I don't really think that anyone felt that the whites were better than the blacks. I don't remember there being any tension. I think our Homecoming king was a black person—and a very nice black person. They all seemed to be very thoughtful and kind.

Marge Scott, a legal secretary who grew up in the Detroit area, put it succinctly: "they were on their side of town; we were on our side." Shannon Norton, a realtor, says that there were no racial problems in her high school: "Friday night after a game, we didn't go to a black person's home—didn't party together." Donna Wood, who grew up in the South, says that she only now is finding out what happened in the South: "I did not grow up with that feeling of prejudice. I didn't know that was an issue." She knew that her black friend went to an all-black school instead of her school, but "that was just the way it was."

White informants' comments on the issue of race relations consisted, primarily, of the perception that there were no serious problems; there was an acceptance of the way things were. This perspective is perhaps best understood as "dysconscious racism," Joyce King's (1997) term for a form of racism that "tacitly accepts dominant white norms and privileges." She clarifies:

> It is not the *absence* of consciousness but an *impaired* consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race as compared to, for example, critical

consciousness. Uncritical ways of thinking about racial inequity accept certain culturally sanctioned assumptions, myths, and beliefs that justify the social and economic advantages white people have as a result of subordinating others.[3]

The African Americans I talked with obviously painted a different picture of what it was like to grow up in the 1950s. When I asked Tony Robinson, a clinical psychologist, what first comes to mind when he thinks of the '50s, he said:

> 1954—I was seven years old and I remember the decision of the Supreme Court, *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education.* I wasn't sophisticated enough to know the details of it, but I knew how my family talked about it. It was also about that time that I began to have my first experiences of being called a "nigger."

Robinson grew up in Michigan City, Indiana, and he says that most of the black people in that town lived in a section which was called "the patch." He remembers that "in the mayor's office, there was a map of the city, and there was this black patch."

Brian Marcus grew up in Mississippi. He says that schools were very segregated. He remembers walking to school—about two and a half miles one way: "I remember seeing the white kids ride past us because they got picked up by school buses. They all went to school up town. Only the black kids went to school in the rural areas." He recounts an instance which really demonstrated to him that blacks could be arbitrarily beaten and killed:

> One of my memories was this guy we knew was dumped across the road from our house from a police car one night. He had been in a fight up town and had gotten his throat slit with a knife, and rather than the policemen taking him to the doctor, they just dropped him off on the side of the road. If we hadn't found him, he probably would have bled to death. If the police had dropped someone off like that, you weren't supposed to take him to the doctor.

Marcus remembers that his mother was constantly telling him that, if he were walking or hitchhiking, to never take rides from white people: "If I was walking down the road and saw a car load of white people making noises, I was to take off running to the woods because it was dangerous." He says that getting arrested was probably one of the worst things that could ever happen to a black person. "You feared white

people, but the white people you feared most were the police, because of so many horror stories—people getting beat in jail, killed, people going to jail and nobody ever hearing about them again." Marcus had this to say about segregation:

> Segregation never made sense to me, and I always thought it was something that was stupid. I thought it was fundamentally incorrect and, as far as I could see, fundamentally illegal. I never could figure out how it was that people could get away with it. No adequate explanations for these kinds of contradictions. You just realized that you had to live with them, but there was always a real sense that something was wrong. But it didn't appear that white people cared that much that something was wrong.

Regarding the *Brown vs. Board* decision, he said, "people finally decided they were going to start paying attention to what was going on between blacks and whites in the South."

 Because Marcus moved from Mississippi to Michigan in the '50s, I asked him about the degree of segregation in the North:

> Of course [there was segregation] but we didn't think about it. Like the school dances—the white end and the black end. I remember occasionally we would get some courage and go down to the white end and ask some white girl to dance. But we always thought white people danced funny, so we couldn't figure out how we was going to do it; like how do you get in rhythm with 'em?

Luther Parker, who grew up in Louisiana, recalled:

> As a boy, I could not go to the public library. I could not try on a shirt in any store down town. I had to estimate. I couldn't try on shoes; if I put my foot in a shoe, I had to buy it. Now, you can't tell me that doesn't do something to a person's self-esteem.

He recalls efforts in the '50s, albeit isolated, at desegregation:

> You read about them, and you wondered about them. There were never any protests or assemblies or militant stance taken in our schools. Anybody who did so was so severely punished until you just didn't want to risk that. I can remember coming out of New Orleans, and the police would stop you if they could see that you were black. They would stop me and ask, "Whose car is this?" They'd push us around.

Resistance to integration was, he says, the worst thing about the '50s: "It was very hurtful to find out that so many people resisted our very being.

It puts a distrust inside you that's not easily washed away." Parker did acknowledge that there was a comfort in segregation—"a comfort in being with people whom you feel comfortable with." However, "it taught you that you were inferior, and if you didn't accept it, you were punished."

Emma Brooks, a librarian, grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She says that the segregation seemed worse here than in the South, because "down South it was open, and here it was under the surface." She laments the narrow range of jobs available to blacks. They rarely worked in positions where they were seen by the public. Rather, they could work in factories, or stock shelves in stores after business hours, etc. Supposedly, there was no segregation in the restaurants in Kalamazoo, but "it was there." She remembers going to lunch with a friend at a restaurant on the north end of town: "We sat there until we finally realized we wouldn't be served. You could walk in and buy something and then walk out, but you couldn't sit down and eat. And rather than open the counter up, they just closed the counter."

Lynette Cole, a typist clerk who grew up in the North, recalls that, in 1959, she and her baby went to the South for the first time (to spend time with her mother-in-law). While they were there, the baby got sick. Cole recounts her experience of seeking medical treatment:

> We went to the doctor. It was a nice office, but at that time, the blacks and whites were separated, and we went in the back door of this office, which was filthy. They had windows where you could look over in the white part. It was clean and plush. But they didn't even clean this little place. It scared me to death. I'd never seen anything like that. There was a sign over the door, "Blacks Enter Here." And the other door, "Whites Only."

Cole wouldn't let the doctor see her child. She figured that "if they can do this to you, he's not gonna care whether my baby is sick or not." She also remembers seeing "the little white kids in the other part, up on their knees, looking over and laughing at you, and the whites were snubbing their noses."

In the course of our interview, Cole made a powerful comment to me: "Here you are, sitting here talking to me, but back then, there's no way you would ever talk to me, because I would be beneath you."

The majority of my informants, then—in particular, the white individuals—remembered race relations in the 1950s as nonproblematic. These individuals who did not experience the discrimination remembered the 1950s as a time of "separate, but equal." But, for those who

wore "colored" skin, things looked very different. African Americans' recollections are highly personalized and selective on this issue. This finding resonates with work in the area of critical white studies, which examines white privilege. As Grover (1997) notes, white people do not need to think about their race: "White is transparent. That's the point of being the dominant race. Sure, the whiteness is there, but you never think of it."[4] Similarly, Flagg (1997) observes that "the white person has an everyday option not to think of herself in racial terms at all."[5] Blacks, on the other hand, are ever aware of their race. Jones (1997) describes the problematic of race as "structured by historical narratives that transform our picture of experience. Racism understands the problem in terms of moral opposites: in good/bad and like/dislike distinctions."[6] Although we are living in "a world of multiple identities, of hybridity, of decentredness and fragmentation" (Dyer 2002),[7] we have not yet "reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant."[8] Scholars working in the area of critical white studies emphasize that it is essential that we study whiteness, to "see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put it in its place and end its rule."[9]

A key theme in the interview data was an expressed nostalgia for the 1950s. An important observation to make is that, while African American informants certainly had indelible memories of the effects of Jim Crow in the 1950s, they did indeed express nostalgia for this decade. White informants were most nostalgic for the fun they had in the '50s (e.g., drag racing, drive-in movies, school activities), whereas African Americans were more apt to express nostalgia for the institution of the family, the close-knit communities, the role of the church, and segregated entertainment. I will share quotes from my African American informants which express their longing for some of these aspects of the 1950s, and then I will offer an interpretation. I literally let my informants speak for themselves—quoting them at length to avoid too much researcher intervention.

NOSTALGIA FOR FAMILY

Lynette Cole says, "I came from a poor family; we didn't have a lot. But what we had was quality—quality time. I come from a large family—11. We did a lot together." She says of her father: "My dad was a very family man. He believed in men being men, and women being

women. He didn't believe in fighting." During the interview, I asked her if she grew up in an extended family. She responded: "It was just our family, but when you come from a big family, you always have a lot of kids in and out. I have a lot of foster sisters and brothers—we called them 'foster.' They were always there, and they adopted my parents as their parents."

One of the questions that I asked all of my informants was: "What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of 'the 1950s'?" The following was Lynette's response:

> My family. I had all my children except two in the '50s. Marriage and family. I was very fortunate. I have a wonderful husband; he was also a good provider. We always got along. We never have argued. He's always worked and brought his money home. And I just take my hat off. People don't understand the word "a man"—you know, what a man really is. I think a man is one who is going to be there for his family, he's going to bring that paycheck home, and make sure his family have before he decides to go out and squander his money. I've always taught my children that the one thing you'll always have in life is each other. You have to learn to get along. You don't have time for a lot of bad thoughts. A lot of things going on in the world and things people are doing, it just blows my mind, because I don't have time for such stuff; [my concern is with] what's good for my family, what's healthy.

When I asked Emma Brooks the first thing that comes to her mind when she thinks of "the '50s," she also mentioned quality family time:

> It was a carefree time, it was a time of early marriage, babies. It was a time of finding pleasure in the very simple things—for example, taking kids to the library, the fire station, the park, for a walk. It was a time of endless health and exuberance! I see young mothers now with two or three kids, and they look drained, and I think if you don't have energy now, when are you going to get it? People had time to make homemade chicken soup. People had time to hear, people had time to listen, people had time to care.

Tony Robinson, who grew up in an extended family, expresses:

> I loved the neighborhood we lived in. We cared about each other. If you have an intact family, a powerful family, multiple generations so that there is character everywhere, that acts as a serious buffer. I never felt threatened at all. That's maybe why I'm so cocky now. I was raised by five generations, and I feel like I could do anything.

Brian Marcus also grew up in an extended family. "At the beginning of the '50s, I was living in Mississippi. So those memories are the memories of starting school, living on a rural family farm and being surrounded by uncles, aunts, cousins." Brian's grandmother was the matriarch of the family and he had to spend a lot of time taking care of her. His recollections of the relationship he had with his grandmother are quite interesting:

> My grandmother couldn't walk and she was a very big woman. She was also at times somewhat authoritarian with me. I was a pretty high-strung kid, and I wasn't always a real obedient kid. I sometimes liked to do stuff just to irritate people. I would do that with my grandmother, and she would always talk about beating me, but she couldn't move. I would tell her she can't beat me, and I would stand just outside her reach. I would chide her. That meant that when my mother would get home, I was going to get this horrendous beating for disrespecting my grandmother. . . . My grandmother used to snore—loud—and I was always afraid that she would choke herself. I always worried that I would be the one who would be in the house when she'd choke herself, and so it was hard for me to sleep because I was worried.

The kinds of strong kinship bonds and kin-structured networks that my informants talk about are reflective of the extended family form which is said to characterize African American families. This family pattern is believed to have been instrumental in the survival of African American families during slavery. Hudgins (1992) notes that "[i]t is also quite likely that the slave experience expanded the concept of extended family to include biologically nonrelated individuals."[10]

NOSTALGIA FOR COMMUNITY

Informants recall their neighborhoods and communities as being close-knit. The importance of a healthy, intact community is demonstrated in their recollections. Consider my dialogue with Tony Robinson:

> For several of us—a little gang of guys—we just loved to go hang out. I got into a lot of trouble when I was very young—not legally, I was never prosecuted, but I got in a lot of trouble because of where I lived. There was a lot of opportunity for that. At the same time I got into a lot of trouble, there was still a community, so what that means is that when the young little hooligans would do something even though parents or family

members weren't around, other people would provide sanctions for that. [Q: And you listened to those people?] You had to. Because they felt free to advise you in a variety of ways—shame was something that I didn't want. [Q: Do you think there's a lack of that community now?] Sure there is. That's part of the disintegration that's taken place. When you go to nuclear families and the whole notion that the family is a self-contained unit, you don't borrow tools or a cup of sugar. [Back then] You didn't have home entertainment centers. That eliminates the need for conversation. [Today] You don't know your neighbors, so you don't want them doing any corrective things for your children. It's all real orderly chaos. [Q: And yet, you seem to have a lot of hope that we can change . . .] This is the natural order of things. We're going to get that community atmosphere back; you make your own community. If your family teaches you to be independent, then you have a myriad of choices out there.

Emma Brooks says that "when I was growing up, I didn't give any adult any back talk. Neighbors had the option to hit us. Same with my kids. The children were raised by the whole neighborhood. I'm glad I'm not raising children now." She remembers there being more of a neighborhood concern for children:

There were no concerns about leaving children, because neighbors would watch them. I had no qualms whatsoever about leaving my door unlocked; now, I go home and the first thing I do is lock my door. There were neighborhood businesses—you knew the people who ran the business; it was nothing to call the store and tell them that I am sending so and so down for a gallon of milk—put it on the bill.

The type of community described here is also characteristic of an extended family structure. Among the features of this family form is the "extension of kinship terminology to elders throughout the community" (Foster 1983).[11]

In *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*, Elijah Anderson (1990) discusses the role of "old heads" in the traditional black community. Anderson describes an old head as "a man of stable means who was strongly committed to family life, to church, and, more important, to passing on his philosophy, developed through his own rewarding experience with work, to young boys he found worthy."[12] My informants seem to be alluding to the presence and importance of "old heads" as they recall what life was like in their neighborhoods in the 1950s. Today, however, the traditional old head is not as credible. As Anderson notes, this is largely due to the "glaring lack of access to meaningful employ-

ment in the regular economy, resulting in more and more unemployed, and demoralized black young people."[13]

NOSTALGIA FOR THE CHURCH

Other recollections that these individuals shared with me revolve around the role of the church—religion—in the 1950s. Emma Brooks remembers that:

> Back in the '40s and '50s, black kids were raised with a positive framework. It was internalized that you can do, you can achieve. This was reinforced in church, in the family, in the neighborhood. And in church children were allowed to go forth and express themselves. Now, when I see so many black children that are lost, I don't know how much that has carried over to what it was then. It might still be in the churches, but there are so many black kids that are not even in church, so they're not getting that positiveness; I hope they are getting it from their teachers at school, otherwise there are problems.

Concern is expressed here for today's black youth. There is uncertainty over the extent to which churches are fulfilling their various religious and social functions. Research suggests that the black church continues to perform vital functions for African Americans. Caldwell et al. (1992) define the black church as "essentially a family-oriented, family enhancement institution. It supports family values, family stability, family loyalty, and effective family functioning. It celebrates the family."[14] Indeed, narratives shared by my informants do suggest the interrelationship and interdependence of the institutions of family, church, and community.

Brashears and Roberts (1996) note that the church has "performed many functions throughout African American history besides religious ones."[15] Furthermore, they state that the church is "central to the experience of being Black in the United States. It has provided leadership in the fight against racism and discrimination, and most African Americans indicate that the church has helped the overall condition of Blacks in the United States."[16] Similarly, Hudgins (1992) notes that churches have been important to "identity formation and institution building in the African American community," and have had a "long tradition of providing child daycare services, emergency food, and limited amounts of emergency financial assistance."[17] Furthermore, Hudgins comments on

the African American religious experience as "a bastion of steadfast optimism against an onslaught of economic, social, and personal oppression . . . It has been a means of surviving the worst of times and a pathway to creating better times."[18]

The following recollection shared by Brian Marcus demonstrates the way in which religious experience is not strictly contained within the confines of the church, but instead permeates other aspects of life:

> Working in the fields with adults was a fascinating experience; there's some sense of community among people working in the field; all kinds of conversations going on from flirtations between men and women to what I call instantaneous church meetings—people would start singing gospel songs; sometimes people would get, as they say, "happy"—start shouting in the cotton fields. Other times it would be more secular in that people would start singing blues pieces, and you would get into more the kind of barroom talk as opposed to church talk. But it's hard to say, they both may occur on the same day. I didn't think about it that much as a kid, but we were poor—practically everybody out in this field were poor. And they would talk about how they were blessed. I was always struck—and this is probably more with hindsight than at the time—about the simple things that people felt were blessings, like being able to get up in the morning, being able to walk, that they had sound vision and sound mind, that they were healthy, that they had a roof over their heads, a place to sleep in. It always seemed to me pretty basic. But I guess in looking at the fragileness, the economic situation of all of us, those were pretty powerful blessings. Not everybody had them.

Marcus here is recalling the intermingling of the sacred and the secular.

NOSTALGIA FOR SEGREGATED ENTERTAINMENT

Another area which demonstrates the fragmentation of the black community is entertainment. Luther Parker remembers the great jazz of the 1950s. "We had one of the best bands in the land. One of the things we really got a kick out of was going down to the state capital, taking down the sign that had 'nigger alley' on it." He recalls other occasions when he and his friends would "challenge" the segregation:

> We went to cafes and bus stations and changed the 'colored seating' and 'white seating' signs. At that time we couldn't go to the drive-in theaters,

because we were black. But many of the students were Creole, and they looked white. So we would take the back seat in the car out, and we dark boys would get in the trunk and put the seat up and once we got into the drive-in movie, we'd watch it. We had fun avoiding the police. But it was scary; it was really a matter of life and death.

Brian Marcus remembers that "on Halloween we would steal apples from orchards and put them on people's porches. They wouldn't know they would be there." But the biggest entertainment, he said, was going to the movies. "Every Friday, Saturday, and sometimes Sunday you went to the movies." He also recalls the weekend dances. "The girls used to have their little, white bobby sox; we'd be listening to Elvis; we'd have the dance in the gym. The black kids would be at one end of the gym and the white kids at the other. It would be a real big thing if a white kid and a black kid danced together." Marcus laughed as he recounted these memories.

Other recollections shared by informants centered on school and church activities. There seemed to be a romanticizing of the activities they did for fun—activities that were often separate from white kids. The entertainment they remember brought their family and friends together.

As one would expect, the way in which these recollections are discussed by my informants is such that a contrast is drawn between then and now. These important social institutions were, according to my informants, stable and healthy in the 1950s. Anderson (1990) describes the black community of the past this way: "blacks of various social classes lived side by side in [segregation] . . . They shared racially separate neighborhood institutions, including churches, schools, barber shops, and even liquor stores and taverns."[19] The reality today, though, is that there is an outflow of middle- and upper-income people from such communities. As Anderson notes, the young educated blacks "gravitate to suburbia or to trendy areas of the city. As they move into leadership positions in the wider society, they leave the poorer, uneducated blacks without tangible role models or instructive agents of social control."[20] William Julius Wilson (1996) notes that as the population in black communities drops, "basic neighborhood institutions are more difficult to maintain."[21] Furthermore, "the means of formal and informal social control in the neighborhood become weaker. Levels of crime and street violence increase as a result, leading to further deterioration of the neighborhood."[22]

THE USES
OF NOSTALGIA

We might ask if nostalgia is justifiable. That is, were the '50s as good as they seem to be presented through popular culture? As Todd Gitlin (1987) has said, the '50s were re-written by the 1960s.[23] We certainly engage in selective memory about the past. As Lowenthal (1985) says, "[m]emories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, *selective reconstructions* based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize, and classify the world around us" (emphasis added).[24] Often, it seems that people are apt to block out unpleasant memories and hold onto positive ones. Interestingly, though, my African American informants shared both the pleasant and the unpleasant memories of the '50s.

Stephanie Coontz (1992) notes that,

> In retrospect, the 1950s seem a time of innocence and consensus. Gang warfare among youths did not lead to drive-by shootings; the crack epidemic had not yet hit; discipline problems in the schools were minor; no "secular humanist" movement opposed the 1954 addition of the words *under* God to the Pledge of Allegiance; and 90 percent of all school levies were approved by voters.[25]

Yet, it is Coontz's main point, in her book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, that much of what we associate with the "Fabulous '50s" (with regard to "family," in particular) is mythical.

Even if the '50s were not really like "Happy Days" for everyone, it is true that the '50s tend to be remembered as a good time for the country. My informants—both white and African American—recall the '50s as being a safer time. Even though times were tough for African Americans in the '50s, they are nostalgic for community/family/religious ties of that time. In other words, it is too general to say "nostalgia is reactionary," or "nostalgia isn't justified because the pictures of the past are not accurate." It is more complicated than that. If, according to postmodernists, people feel uncentered in a world so uncertain, then nostalgia may give people a sense of control over their own destiny.

Emma Brooks, who drew a stark contrast between the '50s and the '90s—especially with respect to family and neighborhood life—said that the '50s "was a more moral time."

She explains:

People thought about others. There was trust. The '50s were a safer time. We had choir practice Wednesday nights, and at 9:00 p.m. it was dark; it was not even thought about if two girls walked together. No thought was given to someone accosting you. Even if men met you, they would step aside for a woman to pass by. Even with the racial riots in the late '50s and in the '60s, I would say that it was still a safer time than the '90s are because of the crime and the drugs and the lack of respect for authority.

Wilson (1996) identifies depopulation in black communities as a major factor contributing to that feeling of not being safe. This decline in population density, he says, makes it "even more difficult to sustain or develop a sense of community. The feeling of safety in numbers is completely lacking in such neighborhoods."[26]

Paul Starobin (1996) comments on the phenomenon of nostalgia among African Americans. He writes, "[t]he black community is awash in nostalgia, as exemplified by the popularity of Louis Farrakhan, whose talks repeatedly invoke the days of his childhood in Boston's segregated Roxbury, when blacks patronized their own businesses and ran their own schools."[27] Starobin notes that Gerald Early, Director of the African and Afro-American Studies Department at Washington University in St. Louis, is "no fan of the past-was-better trend, and he's particularly dismayed to hear blacks praise the days of pre-integration America."[28] Early attributes blacks' nostalgia to avoidance of the problems of the black community. Furthermore, there's no Martin Luther King, Jr. to give vision.

The stories, the recollections that my informants shared with me, are reflective of the oral tradition that has characterized African American communities. Their eagerness to share their personal narratives which, in some ways, reflect folklore themes, also might reflect a means of coping with changes in their personal lives over time. Informants' nostalgia, mingled with their unpleasant memories of life in the '50s, expresses an ambivalence. Nostalgic ambivalence might also characterize the culture at large. We usher in new technologies, attempting to be on the cutting edge at the same time that we try to hold onto a more secure, more simple past.

Is nostalgia simply an avoidance strategy? An example of "false consciousness"? It is fair to suggest that it may work in that capacity. However, it seems that we need to probe deeper to discover why nostalgia is so "popular." That is to say, what are the uses of nostalgia?

NOSTALGIA AS FACILITATING
CONTINUITY OF IDENTITY

Just as Fred Davis (1979) has suggested, it appears that, in the responses of my informants, there is a tendency for individuals to rediscover former selves and to make sense of their present while reconstructing their past. Tony Robinson had attributed his self-confidence to the strong, supportive, extended family that he grew up in during the '50s. Lynette Cole made links between the way she was brought up and the way she brought up her own children. She also used her recollections of the '50s to offer commentary on the present state of society:

> Growing up, we didn't have toys and games. We made up our own entertainment. We used feed bags to make curtains, clothes. I think there's two things that the country has forgotten: "waste not, want not," and "you spare the rod, you spoil the child." These are the two things that people have forgotten in this day and age.

In the interview data, we see support for Chilton's (1997) idea that, in philosophical terms, nostalgia may be one means of discovering (or thinking about) one's sense of the "Good" or the "Right" and that nostalgia could be very valuable in helping us figure out individuals' positive goals.[29] The values that the African American informants emphasize include strong family, community, and church. What we value certainly reflects (and shapes) our identity; our sense of self. Nostalgia for the "Good" or the "Right," then, tells us something about who we are.

As discussed in Chapter 3, postmodern society presents its members with the problem of identity formation and authenticity. Contemporary American society is characterized by fragmentation, confusion, and lack of continuity. I suggest that behind individuals' and groups' nostalgia is a search for meaning. As Huyssen (1995) says,

> In an age of an unlimited proliferation of images, discourses, simulacra, the search for the real itself has become utopian, and this search is fundamentally invested in a desire for temporality. In that sense, then the obsessions with memory and history, as we witness them in contemporary literature and art, are not regressive or simply escapist. In cultural politics today, they occupy a utopian position vis-a-vis a chic and cynical postmodern nihilism on the one hand and a neo-conservative world view on the other that desires what cannot be had: stable histories, a stable canon, a stable reality.[30]

The expression of nostalgia may very well represent the search for authenticity in an age where "nothing ever really ends, loses its appeal, or goes out of fashion for very long; things, people, and experiences are quickly recommodified and resold" (Erickson 1995).[31] At both the individual and societal levels, authenticity is important in sustaining meaning and continuity.

Naturally, all of the informants in this study switched back and forth in time as they shared recollections. Each individual's recollection of the '50s is, of course, a complicated matter. History, life events, and personal memories all combine to produce particular remembrances. In responding to interview questions, informants inevitably compared their perceptions and memories of life in the 1950s with life in the present. It was common for informants to contrast their coming of age years with their own children's coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s. They often did so with nostalgia for times they perceived as better for children. Marge Scott said this about life in the '90s: "It's frightening sometimes; you don't know when you're out and about if the next face that you see will be a friendly one or if it will be someone who, for whatever reason, will take exception to you." Shannon Norton said: "There is a climate of violence in the schools today that really bothers me." For many of my informants, they remember going to school as fun. For example, Joni Wells recollects:

> I think of my fifties years—junior high and high school—as really, one of the best times of my life. I have tried to tell my kids that, and they say, "Oooh Mom!" But it was not like you got up in the morning and didn't want to go school. We had a good time in school.

Some of the responses to questions I posed about events in the 1950s (such as the Korean Conflict, race relations, the atomic bomb, and McCarthyism) illustrate a juxtaposition of past and present—that is, an accounting for past behavior and an acknowledgment of how the past and present are connected. Some informants seemed ashamed for not having been more knowledgeable about and active regarding some of the crucial issues of the times. For example, Matt Lawson, a peace activist who at the time of our interview had recently retired as a campus minister, laments his lack of activism in the 1950s but, in retrospect, understands it:

> I never took a Saturday and went to Detroit, I never took any time and stood along side of and did things, because it just did not enter as legiti-

mate within the life of my social set. There were some people who were speaking about it, nationally; some people were, thank God, on top of it and aware—quiet sort of voices that were speaking out—but never got to where I was living in the southwest side of Grand Rapids [MI].

Questions posed about the 1950s triggered recollections, nostalgia, and commentary on both the past and the present. Informants appeared to make sense of their selves—both former and current selves—in sharing memories and perceptions.

NOSTALGIA AS A WAY OF ACHIEVING PRESENCE

Harper (1966) suggests that nostalgia is "the soul's natural way of fighting sickness or despair. And if one understands what is required of one, the effect of nostalgia should be a progress toward presence."[32] He asserts that sometimes survival demands that we look back:

> To turn back permits us to recognize something permanent and independent, which endures without us but without which we can barely endure. In days of heady crisis for civilizations as well as for individuals, when men feel cut off from a future that has promised adventure and advancement, they can survive, at least for a time, as long as they have a past to return to.[33]

Indeed, nostalgia can "place" us in time and space. We can better understand who and where we are presently by looking at who and where we have been. It is not necessarily the case that nostalgia is a form of escape or flight. Again, consider Harper's (1966) idea that "[t]he homesick man . . . looks to the past not because he does not want the future, but because he wants a true presence."[34] Nostalgia need not be viewed, then, as some sort of cop-out. It is the exercise of nostalgia that can allow for the true experience of the present, as well as planning for the future. Harper suggests:

> The more anonymous life becomes, the more disquieted a man becomes, the more frequently will homesickness fall upon him, unless he has surrendered to the many demands to depersonalize himself. Homesickness or nostalgia is an involuntary conscience, a moral conscience positive rather than prohibitory.[35]

In the increasingly impersonal, bureaucratized society that we inhabit, nostalgia may serve very important functions for the individual.

A significant question to pose is: Are we becoming further alienated from ourselves through consumer-created nostalgia, or are we becoming more aware of our present and of how our past and present are related? Actually, both of these possibilities may be occurring together. Clearly, the relationship that individuals have with what is available culturally (e.g., artifacts and ideologies) is complex and sometimes contradictory. Though it is possible (and, in fact, likely) that their actual recollections have been affected by popular culture portrayals of the past as well as life experiences over time, my informants demonstrated reflexivity in sharing their recollections. They recalled *both* positive and negative experiences. They acknowledged when their recollection was shaped more by their current position and standpoint and less by actual personal remembrances. They continually made links from the past to the present. Recall that, in the course of our interview, Lynette Cole said to me: "Here you are, sitting here talking with me, but back then, there's no way you would ever talk to me, because I would be beneath you." She made this poignant statement when she was recalling her experiences of visiting relatives in the segregated South. Emma Brooks made the comment that she would not want to be raising children in the '90s. Luther Parker recalled finding a comfort in segregation: "There's a comfort in being with people whom you feel comfortable with." But he also stated that "it taught you that you were inferior and that you must accept it." Further, he commented that those feelings of inferiority linger. The resistance to integration "puts a distrust inside you that's not easily washed away." Informants appeared to be very attuned to their present and their past and to the connection between *now* and *then*.

Nostalgia as a Means of Recreating a Sense of Community

The founders of the field of sociology were concerned with the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, or from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, or from a traditional worldview to one based on rationality. The language today has changed: from modern to postmodern. Starobin (1996) notes that, historically, nostalgia has "coincided with periods of cultural and economic transition." He sees today's "wrenching shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy" as having a "parallel in the nineteenth-century shift from an agricultural to a manufacturing economy."[36] He notes that "populist leaders, including William Jennings

Bryan, [had] warned that the triumph of factory over farm endangered the very soul of America."

Some sociologists and laypersons bemoan the loss of "community." Yet, is community really gone? Lost? Perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that the basis and the form of community have changed—or are in the process of changing. As Wellman, Carrington, and Hall (1988) say, "[c]ommunity, like love, is where you find it." Their study of community ties in East York (in Toronto) demonstrated that, though there may not be public signs of community, sociable relations do exist. East Yorkers were finding community in ties; i.e., "informal links of companionship and aid between individuals," rather than in public places.[37]

The exercise of nostalgia seems to offer both private and public displays of community, for an individual recollecting his or her past is really a private act. Yet, identifying oneself as having been a member of a society where collective entities such as religion, family, and the neighborhood or community were integral is a more public display of community. Indeed, it is very significant to note that, though American culture has been focused on psychology (e.g., as manifested not only in the long tradition of valuing rugged individualism, but also in the more recent wave of self-help books designed to boost self-esteem and to show one how to "work on" oneself), my informants' nostalgia is for the *collective*. It is the strength of family relations, church membership, and neighborhood ties that is being recalled. Interestingly, then, the exercise of nostalgia may be a way of recreating a sense of community and constructing a sense of collective hope. It is clear that personal identity is very strongly linked to the community that is being remembered. Informants' nostalgia for a time when certain institutions and relationships were strong seems to express faith in the possibility of realizing that kind of strength again in the present and future.[38]

My research suggests that nostalgia is not a sickness. What my informants are nostalgic for is healthy family values! And they aren't just waxing nostalgic about values; they want these values perpetuated in the present and the future. This research enabled individuals to construct narratives which hint at a shared past—a past, that is, which was shared with other people who held similar values. A key theme in the interview data is the recollection that everyone was going with the same program (e.g., exercising discipline for all of the kids in the neighborhood). That African American informants were most nostalgic about family, community, church, and segregated entertainment is significant. It would seem that, in general, many whites took it for granted that family, community,

and church were intact and stable. In a closed society, African Americans did not necessarily have the luxury of taking any institution for granted.

The nostalgia expressed by these informants is nostalgia that is linked to the group—not nostalgia that is self-contained. Nostalgia in this context, then, is best characterized as collective rather than individualistic. The informants' personal identity is largely shaped by the group; i.e., family, neighborhood, religion, community. During these interviews, there really was a sense that the nostalgia being expressed was a sanctuary. Meaning systems within intact and supportive families, close-knit neighborhoods, active and protective churches, and entertainment help the individual to know who she is and how she is connected to others.

5
A Case of Displaced Nostalgia:
Young Adults Look Back

What impels us to tamper with history? And what do we add to or substitute for what we inherit? We feel more at home with our past, whether manufactured or inherited, when we have put our own stamp on it . . . in order to link their own lives intimately with events of wider significance. . . . people "remember" having been present at historic events they were nowhere near.

—David Lowenthal[1]

BOOMER NOSTALGIA

CURRENT TELEVISION COMMERCIALS AND PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS, AS well as clothing fashion and movies feature many images and themes associated with "the Fifties" and "the Sixties." As Baby Boomers age, there appear to be more and more allusions and references to the time when they were coming of age. Marketers know what they are doing—Baby Boomers constitute a large segment of the population and, as a generation, they have unprecedented purchasing power. Naughton and Vlasic (1998) note that consumers "can't seem to get enough of these airbrushed memories." They elaborate:

> Middle-aged boomers obsessed with their youth and movin' down the highway toward retirement clamor for retro roadsters such as the Porsche Boxster. Walt Disney Co. developed an entire town, Celebration, Fla., on the notion that Americans are pining for the look and feel of 1940s neighborhoods. Baseball fans step back in time by piling into Cleveland's Jacobs Field and Oriole Park at Camden Yards—new ballparks designed to look like they've been around since the turn of the century. Meanwhile, kids have reclaimed mom and dad's bell bottoms

and platform shoes and brought back Diane Von Furstenberg's wrap dress.[2]

   Boomer nostalgia points to—and perhaps fosters—a collective, generational identity. The Baby Boomers, as a generation that had a number of defining events (such as the Vietnam War; the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Jr., and Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Women's Movement; the Civil Rights Movement), can be said to have a distinct generational identity. Members of this generation have many cultural resources to draw from in maintaining a sense of collective identity. Boomers came of age during a time of major social, political, and world events. Given their impressionable age, members of this generation surely were affected by these events. And, of course, American society at large was affected by these tumultuous times. The 1960s are viewed as a time when innocence was lost and trust severely threatened. On the other hand, the situation is quite different for the generation which followed the Boomers, Generation X. This generation has been said to lack defining life events which would shape a generation and facilitate collective identity. In this chapter, I report on a study which sociologist Jerry Markle and I did in the mid-1990s, which demonstrates what Tom Vanderbilt calls "displaced nostalgia"; i.e., individuals expressing nostalgia for times not even known to them firsthand.[3] First, however, I provide a framework from which to approach the topic of generations.

Generations

   While there are those who suggest that Generation X is not different from previous generations, I assert that, in light of the social, economic, political, and environmental forces that have shaped this particular cohort, Generation X is, indeed, distinct in many ways from the generations that have preceded it. Certainly, the life-cycle stages of adolescence and becoming a young adult are similar, but a socio-historical perspective considers the bigger picture—what was going on in the society as these young people matured and became adults? Sociologist Karl Mannheim's work in this area supports the assertion that Generation X can be considered a distinct generation. As Conway (1997) notes, Mannheim saw generations as having a social location that uniquely identifies them. "The social location of a generation arises from shared experiences."[4]

Let us consider trends over the past century that have produced a distinct youth culture. It is significant to note that adolescence as a stage in the life cycle became institutionalized between 1900 and 1930. During this period, reformers were concerned about how children were spending their leisure time. Children moved from working in dangerous, dirty factories to going to public schools and actually having a childhood. Social historian Philippe Ariès has shown that, prior to the eighteenth century, childhood was not a separate stage in the life cycle. On the basis of his study of family portraits, Ariès suggests that children were like little adults (Shorter 1977).[5] (We should note, though, that this observation of Ariès's probably applies most directly to upper-class children whose parents could afford to dress them this way.)

The 1920s saw the beginning of a youth culture. This youth culture broke from its parents' generation by how its members set fashions, oriented themselves toward their peers, and innovated social practices in dance, hairstyles, language, and social mores. The sweeping technological and social changes, such as the automobile, movies, and radio, revolutionized this generation of young people. The automobile enabled them to go to movies and public dances—separate from adults. The image of the short-skirted, bobbed-hair flapper smoking a cigarette and wildly dancing to jazz music has become synonymous with youth of the 1920s (Wilson 2000).[6] With the Great Depression in the 1930s and World War II in the 1940s, young people's leisure-time pursuits were eclipsed. Many adolescents quit school to look for work during the Depression. Boys were expected to take full-time or part-time jobs to help out their families, while girls became more involved in domestic duties.

It was the decade of the 1950s that especially saw the reemergence of American youth culture. A new round of moral panic during this time was caused by the rise of rock and roll, the growth of television, and the popularity of comic books. These phenomena brought public attention to the multiple media outlets for popular culture. Our country's economic prosperity during the 1950s enabled adolescents to acquire some financial independence from their parents. They constructed a subculture centered on automobiles, retail stores, drive-in theaters, and fast-food restaurants. The role of mass media was especially significant, as the media commercialized youth culture, values, goals, behavior, and dress styles, thus further segregating youth from adults (Wilson 2000).[7]

These '50s kids are, of course, the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) who we hear so much about because they came of age in the tumultuous '60s. But what about the cohort that came after the Boom-

ers? That subsequent generation is my focus. What trends over the past thirty-five years have shaped this generation?

When we think of Generation X, we still might think of kids, but the truth of the matter is that Generation Xers have come of age. Born between 1965 and 1981, the members of this generation are now well into their twenties and thirties. Raines and Bradford (1992) provide a picture of the Xers:

> [They are] without doubt the most commercially exploited generation in our history. They are richer, better fed, better dressed, more indulged, more confused about who they are, more cynical, and less committed to anything than any generation has ever been.[8]

These authors quote a 19-year-old woman, Rebecca Winke, of Madison, Wisconsin, who calls her generation the "lurking generation"; i.e., "'we're waiting in the shadows, quietly figuring out our plan.'" According to Raines and Bradford, the plan will not be the "long-term, work-until-you-drop-or-retire plan of their grandparents [and parents], and it won't be the materialistic, BMW-in-the-driveway plan of the yuppies."[9] (The yuppies, of course, are those Boomers characterized as upwardly mobile individuals who engage in conspicuous consumption.)

This generation lacks a defining life event; hence, the name, "X." Growing up in the shadow of the Baby Boomers, who had many significant defining social and political events, the Xers have, in some way, suffered a generational identity crisis. A sense of doom or pessimism clings to this generation. The youthful hope, idealism, political engagement, excitement, and interest that we might expect to see among people in their twenties is, to some extent, lacking.

Baby Boomers Neil Howe and Bill Strauss call this generation "13ers." This is because it is "the 13th American generation since the peers of Benjamin Franklin and Sam Adams . . . and also, obviously, because it conjures up a little bit of the hard luck and ill timing of their life cycle" (quoted in Piccoli, 1991).[10]

Generation Xers came of age during the rise of dual-career families, effective birth control, the threat of AIDS, increasing national debt, and increasing awareness of the deterioration of the environment. Forty percent of Gen Xers are kids of divorce. Yet, rather than evoking sympathy, members of Generation X have become a symbol of a society in decline. They are labeled slackers, whiners; the image is of a tuned-out individual, dressed in grunge, not doing a whole lot. Perhaps rather than assuming that Xers are irresponsible, immature, apathetic young adults,

we should consider how socio-historical conditions have shaped and affected them (Wilson 1998).[11]

A distinct characteristic of Generation X is the crashing of the American dream. Hellenbrand (1998) suggests that many members of this generation do not have the typical luxury of participating in the standard features of the American dream; i.e., "that the future will be better, that they will own a house, that relationships will solidify into 'marriage' or some socially recognized form, that a career will materialize." Furthermore, Hellenbrand notes that, unlike previous times in this nation's past when the American dream was eclipsed for the country as a whole (e.g., during the 1930s), the contemporary situation presents a paradox:

> It is a land of bounty (for some of the old perhaps) and a land of deprivation and deferral for the Xers and the young. . . . it is one of the few moments in our history when it has been easier for the elders to "pursue happiness" than for the young. (quoted in Wilson 1998)[12]

With the costs of higher education rising, the hours spent at meaningless jobs increasing, and the likelihood of actually finding a job in one's field decreasing, it seems that Generation Xers are indeed experiencing the crashing of the American Dream.[13] Raines and Bradford (1992) note that, for Gen Xers, "the American Dream is now incredibly difficult to achieve."[14] Although, as Milan Kovacovic (1998) suggests, this might actually be positive—even refreshing. After all, the American Dream has been such a burden, and certainly an example of false consciousness. We might, by necessity, see a shift towards less consumption and a change in expectations. Some of the goals and values that were espoused by revolutionaries in the '60s (e.g., antimaterialism and anticonsumerism) may be reborn and realized by the Xer generation and its successors.[15] Similarly, Todd Hahn and David Verhaagen (1998) observe: "It appears that there is a considerable backlash against the American ethos of consumerism and a sense that the most real and lasting things may not be found by material gain and growth."[16]

ORTEGA ON THE PAST

In *The Revolt of the Masses*, José Ortega y Gasset described a game played in the nineteenth-century "literary salons." Cultured ladies and domesticated poets would ask one another the question: "In which age would you have chosen to live?" Respondents would "wander in imagi-

nation through the highways and byways of history in search of a time in which they might most happily pitch their tents."[17] Ortega interpreted this by suggesting that nineteenth century individuals, though living in a time of plentitude, still felt linked to the past; "[t]heir gaze was turned backward, they looked to a past now being fulfilled in themselves."[18] He identified the nineteenth century as a time that "saw itself as the culmination of the past."[19]

Ortega then queried what a twentieth-century individual would say in response to such a question. He asserted that there would not be a looking back to the past; rather, there would be disdain for the past because it would be viewed as "a restricted space, a narrow redoubt wherein [one] could not breathe."[20] With such a view, the twentieth-century individual would instead look to the present and the future and thereby fail to ground him or herself to the past in any way. Ortega said that "the man of the present believes that his own life is more of a life than all former lives in the past."[21] The past, then, is rejected, ignored, deemed unworthy and unrespectful. In the mid-1990s, sociologist Jerry Markle and I reformulated Ortega's question and asked 225 traditional college students (i.e., 18–24 years of age), at two different universities in the Midwest, this hypothetical question: "If you could step into a time machine and press any year to go to—forward or backward in time—what year would you pick, and why?" Though not an exact corollary to the question Ortega alluded to, our hypothetical question opens the door for an exploration of time preferences among these individuals.

We might predict that people in this age range are directed toward the future, confident about the possibilities, and thus likely to select going forward in time. However, of the 225 students who responded to the time machine question, only 51 chose the future, while 170 (i.e., 76 percent) chose sometime in the past. The years chosen show that the most popular decades among these students are the 1960s and the 1950s. Students' reasons for choosing the 1960s and the 1950s reflect how these particular decades have been mythologized and romanticized in American culture. The power of popular culture manifests itself. Many responses allude to the music or fashion associated with these decades.

Back to the '50s

The 1950s appeal to these individuals because of the association of that decade with a time of innocence, simplicity, stability. One student

chose the 1950s because:

> Life seemed so fun; I like the music from that time and the style of dress, with the poodle skirts and letter sweaters; everything just seemed so uncomplicated.

Another chose 1953 for the following reasons:

> Everything seemed perfect and innocent in the '50s. The Cleavers were living the perfect life. The music of that decade was about bikinis and love—innocent things. Now music is harsh and its topic is murder, drugs—sad and depressing things. Music tells a lot about how life is. Great 'till around the '80s.

These students perceive the 1950s as simple and as a contrast to the stressful present. Consider the thoughts of this eighteen- year-old female:

> Sometime in the late '50s. I guess because everything seemed so simple back then. Everyone had so much fun by doing such simple things. I think it would be so much fun to dress in poodle skirts and bobby socks and to do all those fun dances that you always see on the movies.

Another young woman said:

> 1955 is the year I pick. Our country was prosperous and jobs were ample. Families were strong. Citizens had a solid belief in our country since World War II. Technology was making everyone's lives a little simpler and easier. Our country wasn't overwrought with violence and drugs.

The students, naturally, compare the present with their image of the 1950s. Their responses hint at the problems faced by Generation Xers coming of age in an apparently uncertain time. For example, a twenty-four year-old female had this to say:

> If I could pick a year, I would say it would have to be 1959. I just feel that in that time society didn't have so many of the problems that we do today. It just seems that around this time, people's values and morals were in the right place, whereas today there are so many problems with unwanted pregnancies, disease, crime, etc. The only thing I disagree with is the fact that people and society tried to hide so many things, such as today's problems, like I mentioned above.

Yet another said:

I would go back to the '50s. Life seemed so much simpler then. People in our age group weren't faced with all of the pressure and problems we have now. There were some disadvantages, for instance, many females didn't have the opportunity to continue their education much past high school. But I feel life was less stressful and less complicated then. You could go out on a date and not be so concerned with whether or not you would be raped, you could walk down the street alone at night. I would like to be able to go back.

We find, then, that among this group of college students the 1950s are a preferred time in which to live because that decade seems to offer a more safe, relaxed, stress-free life. Was life in the 1950s really this way? Our popular culture has provided a very monolithic, mythical picture of that time. While images of the intact family, economic prosperity, and solid values characterize the way that the 1950s are often depicted, if we consider concerns of that time, we find that there was—even then— this looking back to the past as a "better time." A perusal of popular magazines from 1957, for example, demonstrates this nostalgia. Articles in magazines confronted issues such as concern over the country's morality and a nostalgic longing for the more simple times of yesteryear. In its June 1957 issue, *Better Homes and Gardens* had a series entitled "Sex As It Was Meant to Be." An article in the July issue, "Youth and 'The Natural Urge,' " addressed the "moral muddle" of the times and the harmful implications for our youth. Love scenes in movies were criticized in the article. A quote is given from a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore regarding the influence of movies: " 'I have noticed that when a girl is kissed she closes her eyes. . . . I guess I imitated this from the movies because I see it in almost every show I go to.' "[22] How intriguing that kissing scenes were viewed as taboo. Sex scenes in movies today are quite explicit. Certainly, what is considered taboo changes over time.

An editorial in the June 3, 1957 issue of *Life* asks: "What's the matter with America?"[23] The answer given, in part, is the pressure for conformity promulgated by mass media and a loss of traditional roots. This pressure for conformity was triggered, in part, by McCarthyism and the Red Scare—the fear of communists and the fear of being associated with them. The June edition of *Reader's Digest* (1957) includes an article entitled "Tune in on Quiet," which is reminiscent of the good ole days and critical of the "present" time when "we are drowned in decibels." Doesn't the following sound familiar—"Children today protest that they can't do their homework without the accompaniment of jazz [substitute rock, rap, etc. in the present] from their personal sets. If you visit friends,

you're more likely to get TV gunfire than talk."[24] Concern is expressed: "there's danger in always living in a world where you can't hear yourself think." After all, "silence . . . is part of the world as God made it."[25]

In addition to the subject matter of such articles, the covers of these magazines should not be overlooked. Indeed, as reflectors of the times, magazine covers are indispensable, for "[t]here is quite probably no better mirror of the public taste than magazine covers" (Lynes 1983).[26] Consider, for example, covers of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Norman Rockwell, who has been called America's most popular artist, had a unique talent for giving ordinary events a transcendent quality. "His preoccupations have been America's preoccupations . . . In many ways, his pictures take us home again" (PBS Broadcast 1987).[27] The covers of *The Saturday Evening Post* are recognizable to Americans in any era. But Norman Rockwell's images do not portray the then contemporary 1950s as much as they portray the past. So what we, as a culture, wax nostalgic for in the 1950s was perhaps (at least in part) that decade's nostalgia for a previous time.

YEARNING FOR THE 1960S

The other time period most frequently chosen by the student respondents was the 1960s. This decade is favored largely because it is perceived as a more open time; a time of real social change; a time of great music; in short, a meaningful time. The following responses emphasize the freedom and openness associated with the 1960s. A twenty-one year-old female chose 1969 because

> In my eyes it was a great year of incredible times. Plus it was also Woodstock. This was a time where it was acceptable to be lost and confused and not have an understanding of where tomorrow is going. We can't do that today.

A twenty-two-year-old male chose 1968 because

> It was a very "free" point in history. Although I never lived in that time, the stories I've listened to I would like to be in that time zone to experience. The only problem is that I would have been possibly drafted. But to live in a time where there seemed to be more of a free environment would be my choice to live.

Another respondent chose 1968 for these reasons:

This was a year of important events in U.S. history. The Vietnam War was in progress and many new ideas were coming in to play. Hippies and flower children spoke of free love and peace on earth.

Consider this student's reasons for choosing the '60s:

I think the '60s would be a cool decade to live in. This was the time when people started expressing themselves more, even if how they did so wasn't socially acceptable.

A twenty-year-old male said:

I would go back to 1969. I would go to Woodstock, and see Elvis open in Las Vegas. Then I'd probably go to San Francisco and hang out as a hippie.

Another respondent commented on the '60s:

I would love to live then because attitudes were changing, becoming much more liberal and open. The music then was revolutionary.

Again, the voice of Generation X cries out. These individuals seem to long for the freedom and space to be lost and confused, to question life, and to express themselves. They apparently see such freedom lacking in the present, but their notions of the 1960s are such that this decade represents a time when it was okay to drift, to be confused, to question one's purpose.

The following set of responses speak to the social activism associated with the 1960s. A twenty-two-year-old female said:

I would go back to 1969 because that was the beginning of an era when young people's views and opinions started to have a voice in politics. I feel that was a very strong time for the twenty-something generation as compared to today.

Another student chose 1968:

With everything that was happening in the world it seemed interesting. I would've been the first with helping in the protests against the war in Vietnam.

The following respondent's comments are telling:

I'd love to go back to the sixties because that was when people actually opened their eyes to how screwed up the government really was and still

is. There was love in the air, lots of good drugs and the Grateful Dead had just begun. Also, there was no AIDS and everybody was having sex. Finally, I would've spent three days at the Woodstock Mud Pit because that would've been the most exciting moment of my life.

Consider this student's comparison of the '60s with present times:

I would have loved to have been a part of the Civil Rights Movement. It seems to me that the people who fought for their rights in that era were passionate, dedicated, and more in touch with humanity. Not much active protest goes on these days, or at least nothing that is comparable to the '60s. I feel like I missed out on a chance to voice my opinion and truly affect social change.

REINVENTING THE PAST

The 1950s, a decade of perceived innocence and fun, clearly appeal to this sample of young adults. Yet, among this same group of students, the 1960s are also chosen, largely because they represent an exciting time in which to live. The two most popular years are 1968 and 1969— two of the most tumultuous years in contemporary American history. The preference for these two decades which, incidentally, are typically contrasted with each other, may suggest two distinct themes characteristic of Generation X: the longing for a time when life was more simple and easy as opposed to today's high-paced lifestyle filled with fears about violence, crime, and STDs, but also the longing for a time when individuals— namely, young people—could make a difference in society. While the 1950s appear to be viewed by respondents as a fun time, this is also a decade which has been portrayed as rather dull. The nostalgia for both the complacent '50s and the "happening" '60s may simply reflect the desire to have everything; i.e., the stability *and* the mayhem.

A present and future orientation (supposedly) characterizes the American's sense of time. José Ortega y Gasset lamented the dissociation between past and present, viewing it as characteristic of a lack of respect for the past. He associates this with barbarism, writing that, in the last third of the nineteenth century, a retrogression toward barbarism began; i.e., "toward the ingenuousness and primitivism of those who have no past, or have forgotten it."[28]

Social scientist Ernest van den Haag (in Rosenberg and White 1971) links this country's rejection of the past with people's immigrant back-

grounds, the melting-pot nature of the school system, and the rapid rate of change which "makes the experience of the old seem old-fashioned and diminishes their authority."[29] David Blight (1989) holds the dominant American value of individualism responsible: "The overweening force of individualism in an expanding country had ever made Americans a future-oriented people, a culture unburdened with memory and tradition."[30]

Sociologist Peter Berger (1963) offers at least a partial explanation. He alludes to the geographical and social mobility that characterize American life. He writes: "People on the move physically are frequently people who are also on the move in their self-understanding."[31] And, further, with respect to social mobility, "we change our worldviews (and thus our interpretations and reinterpretations of our biography) as we move from one social world to another."[32]

If ours is a culture characterized as valuing progress and adopting a future-oriented perspective, how, then, can our findings be interpreted and understood? Lowenthal (1985a) identifies several reasons why people are attracted to the past: the past as familiar, thus making one comfortable;[33] as giving the present meaning and purpose; as enhancing communal and national identity;[34] as enriching and lengthening life's reach by "linking us with events and people prior to ourselves . . . to evoke the past makes it over as our own";[35] as escape—to "alleviate contemporary stress."[36]

But what mechanisms are at work in American culture that motivate young people (with their whole adult lives ahead of them) to idealize that which was never known to them firsthand? Certainly, the popular culture and, more generally, mass media, operate in such a way as to present the past (in some instances) as familiar and appealing. As Lowenthal (1985a) notes:

> [N]ostalgia attaches to times beyond our ken no less than to things we have experienced; few who flock to Bogart films, listen to Glenn Miller music, or throw 1960s parties are old enough to recall them.[37]

Thus, nostalgia for bygone times does not require having actually experienced those times. The dominant ideology, via the mass media, creates and sustains nostalgia. Who, among us, can look at a Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover and not feel something akin to nostalgia? Many of the responses of the participants demonstrate the way in which material culture embodies nostalgia. For instance, among those choosing

the 1950s, it was common to mention poodle skirts or letter sweaters. Certain components of material culture operate as significant symbols in that they evoke nostalgia not only among those who have actual recollections of the symbol, but also among those who have not directly experienced use of the symbol. Furthermore, Boomer nostalgia is widely accessible to Gen Xers—to the extent that they may even find it difficult to arrive at their own popular culture. Where can Gen Xers find their niche in a culture that is so awash in Baby Boomer nostalgia? My Gen X (and now Gen Y or "Millennial") college students have expressed the need to establish their own popular culture—their own place in society—but have had difficulty doing so in the shadow of the Baby Boomers. The Boomer nostalgia (as exemplified by classic rock radio stations, the return of the VW Bug, the popularity of '60s clothing styles, etc.) is ubiquitous.

The students' perceptions of the '60s reflect the depiction of that decade projected in the media. Conveniently missing in contemporary depictions of the 1960s are the conflict, danger, and fear. Looked at in this way, these young adults may view the '60s as not all that different from the '50s. Despite the objective differences between the two decades, respondents' perceptions are of the '60s as comfortable and assuring (like the '50s), but also open and exciting. Thus, the '60s appear to offer the best of both worlds. Raymond Gozzi, Jr., in his article, "The Generation X and Boomers Metaphors" (1995), makes the observation that his students (Generation Xers) romanticize the "fun of the '60s: protests, sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll."[38] But Gozzi, who experienced these "fun" times, has a different recollection:

> [Those anti-war] demonstrations were not fun. They were serious and some were extremely dangerous—you couldn't tell what the police forces would do nor could you count on demonstrators to act reasonably. At the anti-war demonstrations I attended, I always made sure I knew the way to the nearest exit.[39]

The students' nostalgia reflects their feeling of displacement. The Xers may not feel that they have a very bright future. Faced with the burden of paying the Baby Boomers' social security (as well as competing with them for scarce jobs), coming of age in the time of AIDS and other STDs, and having had various pejorative names attached to themselves, which only point to their plight, it is understandable why they may wish to retreat to what they perceive as more simple and free times.

As a member of Generation X, I identify with many of the respondents' comments. We have grown up in the shadow of the Baby Boomers. In spite of how things "really" were during the '60s, popular portrayals of the 1960s make that time look much more meaningful and exciting than "our" decade, the 1980s. In the '60s, the young generation *did* something—stood for something—and society had to listen and respond. The Gen Xers, on the other hand, hardly have a distinct identity nor are they believed to have an active social and political agenda. The Boomers had the Beatles, free love, and "Laugh In," while we had MTV, safe sex, and "Beavis and Butthead." It's no wonder we listen to "their" music and romanticize "their" decade.

Nostalgia provides a haven or an oasis for people—an explanation consistent with the notion that the plight of Generation Xers triggers their nostalgia for earlier times. If this is a generation with an identity crisis (as the label "X" implies), then might nostalgia for the past be an attempt to compensate for the lack of identity and to forge a collective identity?

Nostalgia is, of course, created in the present, and thus the displaced nostalgia (as well as the myriad other examples of nostalgia that abound) can be viewed as a commentary on life in the present. Starobin (1996) notes that, in the 1994 Roper Starch survey, the "good ole days" were preferred over the present by all age groups, women as well as men, Democrats and Republicans, single people and married people, and blue-collar and professional workers.[40] The decades which are apparently most longed for are the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Starobin makes sense of this by pointing out that nostalgia has, historically, coincided with periods of cultural and economic transition. Our move from an industrial to postindustrial economy has a parallel in the shift from an agriculturally based economy to one centered on manufacturing in the nineteenth century.

Gozzi (1993) suggests that "the Nineties" are an empty metaphor. He identifies the media stereotypes of past decades—the Sixties as "the love generation, the Beatles, the anti-war protests, long hair, marijuana and LSD, blue jeans, Civil Rights, Black Power, urban riots, and moonwalks";[41] the Fifties as a period of conformity; the Seventies as the "Me Decade"; and then the "Go-Go Years of the Deregulated Eighties . . . where the rich got richer and the poor got poorer and the middle class got squeezed."[42] We do associate these previous decades with such images. But what catchy metaphors characterize the post-1980s? Technology has created the tyranny of the urgent. Is it any wonder that cer-

tain decades of the past—given the way in which they are portrayed in the popular culture—are attractive, appealing, and likely to trigger nostalgic feelings? Naughton and Vlasic (1998) note that the executive director of a New York-based brand consultancy, John K. Grace, believes that "American culture in the late '90s lacks distinction, so young and old alike are clinging to the sights and sounds of the past until something better comes along."[43] Grace is quoted as saying: 'There are no cultural hooks for youth to grab on to today, so they find comfort in what was'.[44]

The nostalgia evident here is not nostalgia for *place*, but rather, nostalgia for *time*. I have suggested, in previous chapters, that nostalgia for place has given way to nostalgia for time. When the Baby Boomers became young adults, there were mythic places they were supposed to go as a rite of passage. For example, think of the 1960s folk classic, "California Dreaming," written by John Phillips, cofounder of the group, the Mamas and the Papas. Richard Aquila, history professor and popular culture expert at Ball State University, identifies this song as plugging into the California scene at the height of folk music. He also notes that the song "taps into one of the greatest images of American culture—the mythic West. It is a positive song, just like all songs of the Mamas and the Papas."[45] For the generations succeeding the Boomers there does not appear to be a mythic place, a destination, that young people dream about and that fills them with wonder. Young people are not making pilgrimages to particular places to gather together, experience sociability, and discover who they are. Rather than focusing on mythical places, they appear to construct fantasies about mythical times.

RECENT DECADES—
NOSTALGIA IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

According to Davis (1979), the 1970s constituted a decade characterized by nostalgia. Davis contends that nostalgia is apt to be prevalent in times when people's identity is threatened. He identified the 1970s as such a time: "Clearly, if one can speak of a collective identity crisis, of a period of radical discontinuity in a people's sense of who and what they are, the late sixties and early seventies in America come as close to that condition as can be imagined."[46] In other words, the tumultuous '60s were too much for people to deal with, thus, a looking back to the past provided an oasis following an uncertain time.

J. Ronald Oakley (1986) notes that the nostalgia of the 1970s was, specifically, a nostalgia for the 1950s, a "natural yearning after the troubled sixties to return to a happier, simpler time, especially for the young, who had grown up in an age that robbed them of a carefree, optimistic youth."[47] Oakley echoes Davis when he says:

> As so often happens after periods of change and strife, people sought escape from the present by turning back to a golden age, yearning for a time they never had or, for the older generation, for a time they once had had, but now had lost.[48]

Thus, immediately following the 1960s, nostalgia was expressed for times preceding that decade. But, over time, the 1960s has, in turn, become a time period that is rather glamorized.

And what about the 1980s? Now here was a nostalgic decade! Recall that this was the decade that featured the popular movie series, *Back to the Future,* in which time travel allows Michael J. Fox to go back to the 1950s. Interestingly, the 1980s have been likened to the 1950s. A complacency of sorts seemed to characterize both decades.

It seems that the present times are even more nostalgic than these previous decades, although such a claim is difficult to substantiate. As Davis points out, "[i]t would, of course, be difficult to establish objectively that the present era is any more nostalgic than previous ones, but the sense that it is so is as widespread as it is strong."[49] Over the past several years, our culture has especially been characterized by the sentiment of nostalgia. Starobin (1996) supports this claim in his assertion that "[a]lthough backwaters of nostalgia have always existed in America as in every society, yearnings for the past are more intense and more widespread than they were two decades ago."[50] If nostalgia is likely during times which threaten identity, then nostalgia during these postmodern times is not surprising. But what else is at work here? Certainly, technology is such that previous times and a multitude of places and images can be brought to us with a click of the mouse. Thus, the past becomes readily available. Also, as we become ever more aware of the deterioration of the environment, the threat of war, and the pace at which societal changes are occurring, the past may look especially appealing — a stable base during uncertain times.

That individuals who came of age during the 1950s express nostalgia for that time (as discussed in chapter 4) is not a surprising finding. Nostalgia for youth may be a constant in human nature. But for individuals

who did not experience life in the 1950s to express nostalgia for this decade is significant and unexpected. Harper (1966) had suggested that "[w]e cannot long for something we do not know; we know only what is in some way already experienced."[51] Yet, a myth can become a reality; mythology is perceived as real. We must draw upon the power of popular culture and of stories told from one generation to another, as well as the significance of the quest for identity, to make sense of the findings reported in this chapter. In this sense, it is less important to dwell on the fact that these young adults' images of the 1950s and the 1960s are romanticized and incomplete, and more important to consider *why* these decades should be so appealing to members of Generation X. One use of nostalgia in this case is the attempt to forge an identity where one apparently is lacking. On the other hand, members of Generation X have been quick to dismiss and dismantle the argument that their generation is one which lacks a distinctive identity. Much of what has been attributed to this generation is viewed, by Xers themselves, as propaganda projected upon the generation by their age superiors and by the media, hungry for an angle to market products to this diverse generation. If we apply sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's idea of the "looking-glass self" to a generation, though, it is possible that members of Generation X begin to view themselves in the way that they perceive others view them.[52] We might pose the questions: Do Gen Xers cave in to the descriptions others have given them? Are the processes of individual and generational identity any different for members of Generation X than for members of previous generations? Is there a genuine search for a distinctive identity among members of this generation, or is this all a media creation? I assert that it is dialectical. That is to say, the media have, to some extent, *created* "Generation X" and what is supposed to characterize the generation. But, these successors of the Baby Boomers do indeed have characteristics that distinguish them as a separate, unique generation. These two realities combine and affect individuals. One such effect appears to be the experience of displaced nostalgia.

Part III

The Meaning of Things

Objects do not have inherent meaning in themselves. It is we who give them meaning. The chapters in part III feature studies of the meaning and significance with which individuals imbue objects and how this phenomenon relates to both nostalgia and identity.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the meaning of objects in individuals' homes. This chapter combines two separate studies, both of which feature the relationship between objects and identity. The relevance of nostalgia is clear. In a study that I conducted with Carmen Latterell, a mathematics professor, we collected data on why people collect antiques. Carmen is a collector herself. Her hobby and my interest in nostalgia made for an intriguing study. The meaning that antiques have for individuals who collect them demonstrates a powerful connection to the past—both actual memories of a past that has been experienced and an imagined one.

The second study featured in this chapter also focuses on objects that people have in their homes. Following the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton on the meaning of objects in people's homes, I have a special interest in the meaning of objects in the homes of sojourners; i.e., people for whom the United States is not the home country. It would seem that, among sojourners, those objects that they choose to have or display in their homes would likely be connected to their homeland and thus also to both nostalgia and identity. Working with my honors student, Nitika Malik, who is from India, we have conducted interviews with sojourners. Emerging from the interview data are possible uses of objects with respect to nostalgia and identity.

With students in my "Nostalgia in Contemporary Society" class (summer of 2002), I studied individuals' recollections of Volkswagens—in particular, the VW Bug. This cultural icon appears to have special meaning for Baby Boomers. Among the individuals we interviewed, many stories were shared; the stories hang together in the sense that they were often a portrait of whom these people were when they owned a VW. These VW stories are the subject of Chapter 7.

6
Objects in the Home

[H]ousehold objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects
as well as *shapes* the pattern of the owner's self.
— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton[1]

Imagine how "meaning" can coalesce in the tactility of a cryptic
object. How representation occurs as a kind of re-presenting that
stimulates and provokes rather than provides the closure of
information, explanation, or code decoded. How people search for
a profundity lurking in appearances. How they find excesses that
encode not "a meaning" per se but the very surplus of
meaningfulness vibrating in a remembered cultural landscape
filled with contingency and accident, dread and depression,
trauma and loss, and all those dreams of escape and return.
— Kathleen Stewart (in Feld and Basso, editors)[2]

CONVERSATIONS WITH ANTIQUE COLLECTORS

PEOPLE ARE COLLECTORS. MY FRIEND, CARMEN LATTERELL, HAS OVER
100 pressing irons from different eras and different countries. Some of
us also collect items on a smaller scale, but sometimes for very personally
meaningful reasons. The current popularity of collecting antiques is
demonstrated by the large number of antique clubs, publications (in the
form of newsletters, books, and magazines), auctions, and television
shows that are devoted to collecting. There are over 100 collecting clubs.
Some clubs are formed for collecting specific items, such as fountain
pens, war memorabilia, butter molds, coffee grinders, PEZ dispensers,
fast food toys, canes, marbles, and black memorabilia. Other clubs spe-
cialize in general items, such as kitchen collectibles and country store
collectibles. Still others specialize in certain geographic areas such as
Japan or China. Every major bookstore has a section on antiques. Actu-

ally, there is a market itself for rare books on antiques. Carmen paid $400 for a rare book on irons. Antique auctions are advertised on mailing lists and in the newsletter, *Antique Trader*. There are about 35,000 auctioneers in the United States, and about 7,500 make their living doing this full-time. In places like New York City, there are literally hundreds of auction houses running full time. A television program devoted to collecting, entitled *Antiques Roadshow*, airs weekly on PBS.

 Clearly, there is a cultural fascination with artifacts from an earlier era. Holbrook (1993) notes the current craze for memorabilia at flea markets and swap meets, the idolization of past heroes and heroines, and the popularity of fads and fashions from earlier times; e.g., hula hoops, fins, and Beatlemania.[3] As Ito (1993) says, "[t]he enduring nature of artifacts is important in their functioning as symbols of the past."[4] Antiques obviously trigger nostalgia. Of course the objects themselves do not possess nostalgia; rather, the individual imbues the objects with meaning such that nostalgia is evoked. Hutcheon (2000) puts it nicely when she says that, to call something nostalgic is

> [L]ess a *description* of the ENTITY ITSELF than an *attribution* of a quality of RESPONSE . . . [N]ostalgia is not something you "perceive" in an object; it is what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. . . . it is the element of response—of active participation, both intellectual and affective—that makes for the power.[5]

Historical objects, such as antiques, may possess an "aura." Barthel (1996) puts it thus:

> Certain categories of goods with historical associations are frequently invested with meaning or blessed with an aura far beyond their superficial qualities or social purposes. This aura is not intrinsic to the object, but extrinsic, located in the relationships people form with goods that they, individually and collectively, consider special.[6]

Fredric Jameson's (1969–70) commentary on the work of Walter Benjamin includes consideration of Benjamin's notion of aura as the equivalent, in the modern world, of what "anthropologists call the 'sacred' in primitive societies; it is in the world of things what 'mystery' is in the world of human events, what 'charisma' is in the world of human beings." The connection to antiques is especially clear in Jameson's observation that, in a secularized universe, it is "perhaps easier to locate at the moment of its disappearance, the cause of which is in general techni-

cal invention, the replacement of human perception with those substitutes for and mechanical extensions of perception which are machines."[7] In other words, aura is more difficult to experience or achieve given all of our technical advances. Benjamin had considered the objects of aura as representing a kind of utopia; as Jameson says, "a utopian present, not shorn of the past but having absorbed it, a kind of plenitude of existence in the world of things, if only for the briefest instant."[8]

One's home can itself be considered a sacred place. As Rowles and Ravdal (2002) note, "[h]ome acquires special meaning not only as a result of special events that transpired within its walls but also as a living museum of the occupants' lives where treasured artifacts and identity-defining personal possessions are stored and displayed."[9] This notion of a "living museum" fits very well the expressions and experiences of antique collectors.

Collecting antiques is a behavior—an activity—that brings us into the realm of material culture and the psychological meaning that individuals impute on particular cultural objects. In 1996, Carmen and I set out to explore reasons for antique collecting. That is, what are individuals' vocabularies of motives for collecting? What symbolic meaning do cultural objects have for collectors? How might collecting be linked to sociability? What does the great popularity of collecting reflect about contemporary American society?

We asked over 100 antique collectors the following question: "Why do you collect antiques?" This straightforward, open-ended question gave total freedom to respondents in terms of how they might respond. We located these collectors first through Carmen's membership in the Midwest Sad Iron Collectors Club. At the time we did the study, this club had 340 members across the United States and 26 members from other countries. The purpose of the club is to serve as a bulletin board for the exchange of information about antique pressing irons. Club members come from all walks of life, having in common a love for antique irons. The average age of these collectors was sixty-two, and most were married couples. Second, data were collected through a membership in an e-mail club of Depression glass collectors. This is a paid membership, the purpose of which is the exchange of information on antique glassware. Members are restricted to the United States and Canada. The average collector was male and in his forties. And, finally, we asked the same question at antique shows and auctions during the summer of 1996. It should be noted that there are differing definitions of antiques. There are those who say that an object must be 100 years old or older to

be considered an antique. Others suggest that the object must be valued as an antique by some organization. Thus, there is not necessarily consensus on what constitutes antique status. And, as for "collectors," a collector is here defined as anyone who has three or more of a particular object.

The data suggest that three main factors precipitate the collecting of antiques: the association of given antiques with significant others, the association of antiques with childhood, and the association of antiques with an earlier historical period. Also emerging from our data were comments and stories which point toward collecting as constituting a subculture.

REASONS PEOPLE COLLECT ANTIQUES

Significant Others

Both the decision to be a collector and the decision about what objects, in particular, to collect are often connected to important people in one's life. Among respondents in our sample, parents and grandparents were the significant others who were most often alluded to when individuals described why they collect. The activity of collecting antiques may be passed from generation to generation. If one's parents were collectors, then one may also take collecting up as a hobby. At auctions, it appears that multiple generations are represented. One gets the feeling that grandparents and parents are socializing the children and young adults into this activity. Collecting is one way to maintain family traditions. As Shaw and Chase (1989) note, "traditions are represented as the means by which our own lives are connected with the past."[10] Collecting antiques, then, is a means of facilitating family continuity.

Often, collecting is a way to feel close to loved ones who have passed away. For example, one respondent commented on "wanting to have bowls like grandmother had." Beginning to collect certain antiques after the death of a parent may serve as a means of feeling closer to the loved one who has passed on. At antique shows, you often hear people saying, "Oh, my mother had one of these." In this context, collecting is also sometimes an attempt to restore the loved one's past collection. Collecting can take on almost a spiritual dimension.

Collecting antiques is linked to the most important relationships that we have in life. Material objects trigger memories, emotions, and connections to people and places in our lives. The objects that people collect

thus often say something about who they are— their identity. Indeed, when someone close to us dies, our own self-identity is altered—we had defined our self in relation to this person. This poses a very serious problem of continuity of identity. Collecting may be a means of dealing with this problem. Certainly, having objects which bring to mind important people in our lives will trigger memories of these people. Material culture can be a powerful mnemonic tool. In fact, perhaps at a subconscious level, people collect certain antiques to ensure that they do not forget the past. We can imagine family gatherings where conversation turns to particular objects in the household which bring to mind family members who have moved away or passed on; the presence of those objects is apt to trigger reminiscences and stories and, yes, nostalgia. Rowles and Ravdal (2002) emphasize that "place meaning" is "intimately bound up with autobiography."[11] They elaborate:

> [T]he environment(s) one inhabits remain as a testament to one's life. The selective and repeated mental reconstruction and maintenance of these places in consciousness, a habit of the mind, provides a sense of reinforcement of the self. Developing meaning through place is not a passive process. Most individuals play an active role in creating the places of their lives.[12]

Childhood: A More Simple Time

Collecting antiques is often linked to memories of childhood. We are a culture that romanticizes childhood. As our lives and our society get more complex, we sometimes wish we could retreat to those years when our biggest worries were things that we would laugh about today. Our senses can take us right back to our youthful years—whether we are smelling a flower that reminds us of where we grew up, watching a movie with a storyline that hits home, listening to a song that was popular during our adolescence, or looking at and touching material objects that connect us to years gone by.

Sometimes, what adults collect are objects they wish they would have had when they were young. In this way, they might be making up for a lack from their past. This is the case in some individuals' toy collections. If certain toys or other objects were not affordable for the family when one was young, the adult collector with the means to purchase such items may do so. Some motives for collecting suggest that collecting helps individuals recreate a past that they did not experience. In this way, collecting antiques helps make up for something missing from one's past.

Collecting appears to be a way to remind people of a more simple time; more simple because one was younger, but also more simple because the time was less technological. Ito (1993) writes:

> Handmade quilts and hand-crafted cabinets, as opposed to factory/machine-made, remind us of a less technologically advanced time now associated with rural life. It is in contrast with urban life which is surrounded by technology and manufactured goods.[13]

The fascination with objects from the past is evidenced not only among actual collectors, but consumers in general. There is a trend of marketing products by appealing to their longevity, their having been around for a long time and therefore the expectation that these products are dependable. The consumer is expected to have greater faith in the product if it is from a company which has been making this product for many years. Connected with this, too, is the desire to have goods which are "authentic." Cathy Madison (1997) writes about researcher Paul Ray, who identified "cultural creatives" as those who crave authenticity, as manifested in the following ways:

> As home buyers, cultural creatives eschew status-conscious curb appeal for authentic styling, whether it's Moderne or Victorian. They want a house that fits the natural landscape and is part of an established neighborhood, because they place a high value on community. Inside their homes, they rebel against anything plastic, imitation, or throwaway. They prefer handmade objects to mechanically perfect ones.[14]

And, of course, what is really being craved here is an authentic self; an identity with meaning and continuity. To what extent do the objects we choose to have in our homes connect to this deeper desire—and need—for authenticity? We must also ask: Is the particular object, in fact, *authentic*? And what makes it so? If the object is indeed an antique—i.e., an everyday object from the historical past—then the object itself is authentic. But we might also ask if our desire (or felt need) for these objects is genuine or commercially produced. We must keep in mind that purchasing antiques is a consumeristic act. The antique is a commodity which has value—sentimental value, but also an economic and an exchange value.

Nostalgia for Earlier Historical Periods

Some collectors associate antiques with a period of time that is somehow "better" than the present. Respondents express the view that the

past was a better time in which to live—more simple, more safe. Interestingly, collectors most often refer to a time that they themselves never knew firsthand. Individuals who collect antiques often talk about themselves as if they were time travelers, reaching back to earlier times and circumstances that would perhaps otherwise be lost and forgotten. There is a tendency for collectors to acknowledge the hardships of previous generations and, through their antiquing, to show honor and respect for those who lived during those challenging times. As one collector said: "So much was hand made. It shows the effort, work concept, desire to succeed. All of this makes me yearn for a time different from computers." This particular individual collects things that are carved in wood and stone, and also coffee grinders which, he says, "indicate a willingness to go to great lengths to care for simple things in life."

Collectors describe their antique collection as something that helps them to relax, enables them to pretend they lived in a different time, and allows them to appreciate the way in which things were made in the past. Interestingly, collectors often do not use the collected objects in the way they were originally intended to be used. As Ito (1993) notes:

> [O]bjects are often cut off from their original functions. For example, "painted edge" breadboards in the farmhouse kitchen are used as serving platters. More than simply a creative reuse of things, they provide a feeling of "country" by adding a rustic accent at the table.[15]

There seem to be two main goals among these individuals: The goal of not letting the past be forgotten—indeed, of honoring the past by keeping it alive via their collecting—for, with the collecting of antiques comes the association with the particular object's use and function in an earlier time. Objects themselves, it seems, have a certain kind of magic; that is to say, objects can take us back and tell us a story. Another related goal seems to be that of "pretend." There is a desire to imagine living in a different era—one not known to us firsthand. Thus, we find, among these respondents, a similar phenomenon as that found among the members of Generation X, as discussed in chapter 5. People of all ages, it seems, may experience displaced nostalgia. This kind of nostalgia especially calls upon (and speaks to the power of) popular culture images of previous times. It also demands some amount of fantasy. Nostalgia for a time that we did not ourselves experience is largely a product of our imagination. The nostalgic visions may be fiction. Yet, this does not seem to make them less significant or powerful. Antique collectors can use their hobby

to, as Barthel says, "reject the march of progress by recalling another period of their own choosing."[16] She illustrates:

> The apartment of one New York decorator and dealer is totally devoted to a perfect collection of 1930s furniture and accessories. There is not a wrong note, no visible television or microwave. For London's New Georgians, the perfect time is the eighteenth century. Their historic collections and decorations represent a form of control over the immediate environment, a control rarely available in the outside world.[17]

Collecting antiques can also inspire interest in history. Author Sarah Ban Breathnach (1995) says that she adores antiquing, and speculates that this is perhaps because "I have learned more about life—how to live it, how to change it for the better, and how to cherish it—in antique shops than anywhere else." She continues: "Above all, the powerful and pleasurable pull of the past has awakened my passion for social history. Among the artifacts of days gone by, I have discovered that history is really your story and my story. Stories that heal our souls." She recalls a previous summer when she purchased a trunk full of Victorian women's and children's magazines in a Maine antique shop:

> These magazines, full of the pleasures of "rainy-day occupations" and family pastimes for "cozy home-circle evenings," became my passports to the past. Little did I realize at the time that my personal time machine would take me back to the future, altering the trajectory of my career and life in wondrous ways. I became fascinated with the Victorian era, researching nineteenth-century domestic life in depth, which led to a newspaper column, workshops, and the writing of two books.[18]

The link between the present and the past is clear here. Breathnach is making sense of the trajectory of her career by considering the impact of this attraction to the past.

Community of Collectors

Although most antique collectors certainly believe that they have an investment in their antiques and surely have experienced the rush associated with getting a really good deal, our sample of collectors do not indicate that this is the primary reason for their collecting. In the numerous responses we received, not a single response mentioned investment. Much of what collectors shared with us hinted at the joy of owning the antique itself, as well as the fun of going in search of an-

tiques. Collecting was defined as a hobby—a challenging hobby. Collecting can be viewed as competitive in the sense that people are looking for the rare. Individuals remarked that they wanted something that no one else has.

While collecting can be somewhat competitive, the overwhelming theme that comes through is sociability and a sense of community. There appears to be a collecting subculture. Collectors report feeling like a member in a big family. Collectors get to know other collectors; though they may live far away, they keep in contact because of their love of antiques. At an auction, once bidding starts, people will actually start encouraging the bid: "Oh, come on, don't lose it now, I know you want it." Such statements come from members of the crowd who have nothing to gain by seeing pieces going higher. At an auction in Aitken, MN, a twenty-nine-year-old man bought an antique toy horse bike for $1200. The crowd just went wild—congratulating him and shaking his hand. People were thrilled that such a wonderful piece went to someone so young.

Another aspect of collecting that points toward collectors as forming a subculture is the special roles given to certain individuals. For example, antique collectors often have people who are referred to as "pickers." These are people in other parts of the world who look for antiques for others. This extends the antique buyers' range. Collectors tell their pickers what to buy should the pickers come across it. Sometimes the picker is paid, and sometimes not.

In a time when so many lament the loss of community, we can look to the antiquing subculture for a healthy and hopeful example of community as alive and well! Collectors often exchange names and numbers and keep in touch. Indeed, they will likely see one another again at stores or auctions. Collectors often call each other up, go to one another's home, travel together. When collectors travel to various cities to attend auctions, they often stay with fellow collectors, though they may not really know each other that well. The shared act of collecting is a binding agent. It should be noted, however, that the popularity of eBay in recent years affects the nature and form of this community. Much antique collecting can be done without even leaving one's home. The community that may be formed through attendance at auctions, or browsing in stores, may to some extent be replaced by community formed via e-mail and the Internet. The more traditional collecting community, though, is not likely to be eclipsed. People may fear eBay scams. And, furthermore, "virtual reality" simply may not be enough for individuals who want the true and

sensory experience of this hobby—the touch of the object, the creaks of the floor of the antique shop, the smell of the old objects, and so on.

The reasons that people give for collecting represent nostalgia—nostalgia for individuals' own personal past, but also, nostalgia for a better, more simple time. And behind this nostalgia is a search for meaning. Collecting appears to serve the following function of nostalgia: "by sanctioning soothing and utopian images of the past, [nostalgia] lets people adapt both to rapid social change and to changes in individual life histories" (Tannock 1995).[19]

It is a basic sociological maxim to state that objects do not have inherent meaning but that, rather, it is we who give them meaning. In the case of antiques, this is especially obvious and, really, quite a complicated matter. The meanings that antiques have for individuals may revolve around significant others, childhood memories, or nostalgia for a period of time which somehow seems inviting. The meanings attached to collecting demonstrate nonlinear life patterns. Barthel (1996) notes that "[m]ost of us are born to one period and time and live our lives with others locked in a forward march."[20] Time—in a real sense—may only move forward, but collectors have the power to defy this movement through their link to the past. Shaw and Chase (1989) delineate three conditions of nostalgia: a linear sense of time, some sense that the present is deficient, and the availability of objects, buildings, and images from the past. Antique collectors are, in a sense, reacting against the Western notion of time as linear. Some of the reasons given for collecting suggest that they find the present deficient. And the availability of objects from the past facilitates their hobby of collecting. As Shaw and Chase note, Western societies preserve the objects of nostalgia:

> From the time-worn but durable products of architecture to the humble tools of a now dead trade, from the industrial landscape itself to the ephemeral newspaper or admission ticket, almost all objects are at least capable of being appropriated nostalgically. They become talismans that link us concretely with the past.[21]

Indeed, "talismans" captures well the meaning and significance that antiques carry for these collectors.

Some respondents directly commented on the link between their antiques and their identity. As one collector shared: "To be without our special treasures would be like losing a part of us. I could leave the house we live in as long as I have the special things we have collected over the years." This woman referred to her collecting as an obsession. Her

words are testimony to the important relationship between objects and identity. Barthel (1996) notes that, "[i]f antiques inspire love, collections become obsessions."[22] It is common for antique collectors to describe themselves as obsessed. Barthel comments on the impact that collecting can have upon the self: "The collector . . . perfects a social self, as the collection becomes both prop and stage. But the collector also escapes the self through immersion in the collection."[23] Antique collections, then, may be drawn upon in one's presentation of self, but they also enable the collector to escape the self—indeed, to escape the present time.

OBJECTS, HOME, AND NOSTALGIA: CONVERSATIONS WITH SOJOURNERS

In their book, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton explore the relationship between people and things. Their data were obtained by interviewing over 300 people living in the Chicago metropolitan area in 1977. Respondents were asked to identify special objects in their home. As the researchers note, the word "special" was used to mean "significant, meaningful, highly valued, useful . . . It is less precise than these other words and thus imposes on the respondent the task of defining what constitutes the meaning of an object."[24] After having identified the special objects, the respondent was then asked why they were special, what it would mean for the individual to be without them, where the objects were kept, and how and when they were acquired. The researchers nicely describe their method:

> What follows . . . is neither a purely theoretical analysis nor the outline of a factual report; instead, it is a combination of both—an exploratory effort—in which insights are gleaned from data and new empirical analyses are presented to bolster emerging hypotheses. Hence, the conclusions will often remain heuristic rather than definitive. On the other hand, the flexibility of such a method will provide us with a greater variety of leads than could a more conventional one.[25]

This way of combining theory and method matches my own approach.

The most highly significant object among respondents in the study conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton was pictures: "People pay particular attention to pictures in their home because in doing so they relive memorable occasions and pleasing relationships."[26] Pictures arouse emotions like no other object. Csikszentmihalyi and

Rochberg-Halton note that, with respect to this ability, no other type of objects surpass pictures; "they are perhaps equaled only by the stereos mentioned by the youngest generation."[27]

Following this line of inquiry, I set out to explore the meaning of objects in the homes of sojourners; i.e., those who are between cultures/countries. Recall that the original meaning of the term nostalgia is homesickness. The questions posed here are: How do individuals who are not currently living in their homeland, experience and deal with homesickness? What is the symbolic significance of the objects they have in their home? What is the relationship between these objects and identity? These questions have guided me in the interviews and casual conversations with sojourners through which the data were collected. Conversations with my friend and colleague, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, while she was in Bucharest (herself a sojourner caught between Romania and the U.S.), further convinced me of the relevance of this area of study. Our joint interest in nostalgia and identity has resulted in quite different books, but with a very similar theme. In her book, *Yesterday's Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity* (2002), she focuses on immigrants' cultural adjustments and how the experience of nostalgia both complicates and smooths these adjustments.

MEMORIES AND PERCEPTIONS OF HOME

Along with the assistance of an honors student, sojourner Nitika Malik, I have explored the meaning and significance of objects in homes of a convenience sample of sojourners. The informants, many of whom were students, had relocated from Romania, China, Moldova, Bulgaria, Japan, Indonesia, England, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and India. Nitika, who is from India, notes that we tend to treat our memories as representations of our private selves. The qualities and meanings we ascribe to objects can transport us out of our present surroundings and into our past. Nitika elaborates:

> The short span in which we re-live those experiences leaves us with something—a lesson learnt, a brimful of *asha* [adapted from Hindi language, meaning "hope"], a deja vu and somehow helps maintain and preserve our individual notion of identity.[28]

Of course, the objects we surround ourselves with may bring to mind a prior time or event which we *re*-define in the present. Like Nitika says:

The tangible objects that we identify with remain unchanged, but somewhere in our subconscious, we unknowingly made a preference for how we choose to remember it. It is this selective version of our memory that shapes our identity.[29]

Temporally and geographically removed from a place, we idealize and romanticize that place. The memories we have—indeed, the nostalgic feelings we experience—are likely to deviate from what *really happened* or how things *really were*. The meaning and memory of events from our past are often negotiated with others. Our own memories, as well as theirs, are thus likely to be distorted. The past we remember is thus perhaps not really the past we experienced. The important questions become: Why do I remember it this way? How do these recollections shape who I am? Davis had identified three successive orders of nostalgia. First order, or "simple nostalgia," refers to "that subjective state which harbors the largely unexamined belief that THINGS WERE BETTER (MORE BEAUTIFUL) (HEALTHIER) (HAPPIER) (MORE CIVILIZED) (MORE EXCITING) *THEN* THAN *NOW*."[30] With second order, or "reflexive nostalgia," the individual questions the truth, accuracy, completeness, or representativeness of the nostalgic claim:

> Was it really that way? If I were transported back to that time would things look to me as I now imagine they were then? Am I forgetting the bad and unpleasant things that occurred, and is this why it now seems to me to have been such a happy time?[31]

And third order, or "interpreted nostalgia," involves the individual seeking to objectify the nostalgia he feels:

> He directs at it *analytically oriented* questions concerning its sources, typical character, significance, and psychological purpose. Why am I feeling nostalgic? What may this mean for my past, for my now? Is it that I am likely to feel nostalgia at certain times and places and not at others? If so, when and where? What uses does nostalgia serve for me? For others? For the times in which we live?[32]

The second- and third-order types of nostalgia can enable us to really examine the role and function of nostalgia in one's life.

Sojourners may be a group of people who are especially apt to experience all three orders of nostalgia. When they first leave their native land, they may find that they have first-order nostalgia. Upon returning to their homeland, it is not quite as they had remembered it. This, then,

catapults them into questioning and examining their nostalgic feelings. Eva Hoffman (1990), who moved from her home in Poland to Canada with her family as an adolescent in 1959, writes:

> The house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them. Nostalgia—that most lyrical of feelings—crystallizes around these images like amber. Arrested within it, the house, the past, is clear, vivid, made more beautiful by the medium in which it is held and by its stillness.[33]

Svetlana Boym (2001) identifies as the "danger of nostalgia" that it "tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill."[34] Radhakrishnan (1996) poses the following questions:

> To what extent does the "old country" function as a framework and regulate our transplanted identities within the diaspora? Should the old country be revered as a pregiven absolute, or is it all right to invent the old country itself in response to our contemporary location? . . . These questions emphasize the reality that when people move, identities, perspectives, and definitions change.[35]

Some of the informants in this study note that, upon returning to their homeland, they feel like a visitor. As one Japanese informant notes, "when I went there [Japan], I felt like a visitor, visiting, not going back home. I didn't feel that I belong there like before." In this way, the sojourner is apt to feel marginal—both in the U.S. and in her country of origin. This feeling of being between worlds, between cultures, is a typical characteristic among sojourners.

Objects in the Home

Regarding the role of objects in the sojourner's home, (at least) a couple of different possibilities exist. First, an individual may actively try to avoid nostalgia. For example, a person might purposely avoid having objects in her home that trigger memories and feelings of homesickness. As one student from England related, photographs trigger his memories, leaving him homesick. Thus, he does not have very many photographs of his family and friends from England on display. He states: "sometimes I find myself purposely looking away from the pictures." What is also re-

vealed in these conversations with sojourners is a "reluctant memory"—one eschewing memories of home because of feelings of guilt for being better off than family and friends back home. A Romanian informant, for example, told me that when he thinks of home he feels "total disappointment with the state in which the Romanian society is in" and "guilty for not being as miserable as they are." The other strategy for managing feeling is to purposely have objects in one's home that help in coping with the nostalgia—to remember who you are, where you are from. Both of these possibilities were evident in what informants shared. In this way, objects are used in the emotion work of the individual. For the individuals who choose not to have objects from their homeland around them, this conscious choice is a way to help suppress the feeling of homesickness or loneliness, while those who do choose to have objects from home in their immediate surroundings are using those objects to evoke memories of home and perhaps feelings of security and connection.

An exilic informant, a twenty-year-old woman from Indonesia, talks about how her life and the lives of numerous friends like her—uprooted—has become a composite of shifting sites and short-term bonds. She indicated that every time she looked at the token her mother had given to her, it reminded her of how *"wrong"* things had become:

> In my first year here away from home, I found out that my mother had passed away. She had been ailing for a while but I did not know that things were that bad. Maybe it was not communicated enough to me. Well, so anyways, I could not go home as it was in the middle of the fall semester, there was a lot going on in school and I could not take off for my mother's funeral. That was the toughest semester for me. . . . even now when I think about it, I'm teary-eyed. That really saddened me. I thought to myself, "What am I here for when my mother is dying there?" Well anyway, I did not go home that fall, but I could not wait to go home during the Christmas break. . . . [A]nd when the moment came for me to go, I had a queasy stomach. . . . I would not find my mother there. . . . I felt empty! So every time I look at our family photographs, I feel a strange coldness inside. As I think back to the time I was first leaving my country, my mother gave me a gold chain that had been in our family for generations. . . . I always used to wear it, but when I came back to school here, after my mother's death, I just took the chain off—I can't wear it anymore—too many things changed at home since she died, they were just wrong! I wish I had no memories of my mother. . . . because this distance made it so hard. Now when I think back about the time I have spent here, that fall semester is so far away in my mind and so dark. . . .

Some of the informants had decided to deal with their memories by locking them away. Over the period of time these sojourners have been away from their homeland, their memories have been invented and *re*invented over and over again. During Nitika's interview with a twenty-four-year-old male informant from Kenya, he said that he had not been home in the five years that he has been living in the United States. He indicated that memories of home and family are in a corner of his mind:

> That's a place I don't visit too often, maybe when I'm around my old friends or cousins from home. Life is way too busy here to keep the past with you. For me, it's locked up in a corner of my mind and it's just easier like that. An occasional visit is enough. I don't really carry "things" from the past—that's just too much baggage.

For sojourners, the tensions between personal versions of history, nostalgia, and psychological exile are difficult to resolve. Individuals search for origins or memories, but are often left with a sense of sadness. Yet, with its ability to cement the fissures of hybrid selfhood, nostalgia can become its own cure. The sojourner can embrace the intrinsic diversity of an identity which is endlessly bifurcated (Wagner 2001).[36]

Other informants seek refuge in particular objects. Rather than triggering homesickness, the objects appear to help one to better cope with the homesickness. A seventeen-year-old woman from Sri Lanka shares the following tale:

> When I first moved to the U.S., I rented out a small room and I had two roommates who were cousins—they had known each other for a long time and usually did things together. There were times when I felt pretty left out, so I would just go to my room, wear some native clothes and talk out loud with myself to myself. . . . like I was in a dialogue with my friend/family or whomever I wished to be with . . . That was so convenient. . . . I could just block the rest of the world out. My other roommates were American, and we had nothing in common, they wanted to drink all night and would skip classes. That was something I could not afford to do, so there was really no one in my house that I could have a decent conversation with. Sometimes I wished I were staying with people from my own culture, my country, at least then we would have had something in common. My room meant everything to me—I could play my own music, talk my language (with myself) and be the person I was . . . with my imagined company.

We see here an immersing of the self in what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community"; i.e., "a potent and effective sense of com-

monality, of membership in a . . . social body that exists despite the absence of direct or even indirect social intercourse among its members" (Holland et al. 1998).[37] Wagner (2001) notes that the endorsement of a multicultural identity often is an outcome of intense negotiations between the xenophobic self and the assimilative self.[38] This informant is using music, imaginary conversations, and dreams to feel connected to home and to remember who she is. It is clear that being in a foreign country is a threat to meaning systems that had been intact. As Eva Hoffman says of the city her family moved to from Cracow: "Vancouver will never be the place I most love, for it was here that I fell out of *the net of meaning* into the weightlessness of chaos" (emphasis added).[39] Hoffman speaks of longing for "the comfort that comes from being *cradled by continuity*" (emphasis added).[40] Surely, immigrating to a new country disrupts the continuity. The significance of objects in addressing this disruption and in creating the imagined community is clear. Holland et al. (1998) state: "The sense of abstract community is acquired and maintained through the use of common cultural artifacts that have acquired indexical value."[41]

Individuals may attempt to recreate a particular (familiar) environment, or at least keep alive a certain sense or feeling that connotes "home." A young woman from Indonesia says:

> My parents passed away a long time back, but I still have my mother's good dishes and linen. . . . [E]very family get together we have, we use those dishes and the linen. . . . talk about the times when we were growing up. Every time we use those dishes, I remember those dinners that we shared when I was home. . . . those times. What's most fascinating is that we all have our own versions of those times, we all remember the same time differently and it took me a while to realize that for each one of us, that's the truth, it's our own truth!

An informant from Romania describes the house that she and her husband recently purchased in the United States:

> We have just bought a house which reminds me somewhat of my grandparents' house, not because of any concrete similarities, but rather because it has a large back yard and a vegetable garden and is not in the city. The objects that are most special to me in this house are memorabilia from my parents' house and things that my husband and I bought when we were engaged or soon after getting married. To be without some of these objects would cause me serious sadness.

MAKING SENSE OF THE
CATEGORIES OF RESPONSES

Repressing—or at least not inviting—thoughts of home and one's distance from it is a way of avoiding the feeling of homesickness. For these individuals, the objects in their environment may have little to do with their homeland, their past. This conscious decision impacts identity. For these individuals continuity of identity might be threatened by holding too tightly to the past. A longitudinal study would reveal if, perhaps when these individuals have been here for a number of years, and have assimilated to the new culture to the extent that they feel comfortable, they then choose to feature objects in their homes which connect to the native land.

For those individuals who choose to have objects in their home which remind them of their native country, the connection between the role of the objects and identity is more clear and also consistent with my original notion—that the objects would help to facilitate continuity of identity by keeping the individual connected to home and the past while in a foreign land. Sociologist Ira Silver (1996), who studied the role that objects play in how college students construct their identities, suggests that "people undergoing role transitions may invest objects with meanings that produce changes or maintain continuities in their identities."[42] He proposes that individuals shape their identities through objects. In this way, one can maintain a subjective sense of her "biography being continuous, coherent, and unique."[43] Sojourners are certainly going through major role transitions, and it makes sense that objects would be a major factor in dealing with or smoothing those transitions. Another passage from Silver clarifies the relationship between objects and the continuity of identity:

> A greater recognition of the importance of objects in the construction of new biographical scripts during role transitions helps to explain the paradoxical finding that identity is both stable over long periods of time and situationally variable. People undergoing role transitions must devise ways to retain continuous identities because such periods involve profound changes in both their physical and social landscapes.[44]

Interesting dimensions of the relationship between nostalgia, objects, and identity are emerging in these conversations with sojourners. These data reveal nostalgia as having both negative and positive attributes. One can look back and dismiss experience, or look back and yearn long-

ingly. Both types of memories can be bittersweet, filled with emotional overtones. These sojourners appear to be creating private nostalgic spaces where they can reconfigure the inner landscape, and, in so doing, have a sense of self through time and across geographical locations (Wagner 2001).[45]

Among both groups of respondents—the antique collectors and the sojourners—we find that the objects individuals select to place in their homes are not meaningless, coincidental, or haphazard. Rather, conscious choices are made, and these choices reflect one's identity, connection to the past, and connection to others.

7
The VW Bug:
Collecting Stories

Quoting one of the respondents, a woman who had owned three Volkswagens, and who indicated that she has nostalgia for this type of vehicle: "I think that the nostalgia part for me is, one, they were so simple; it was like a simpler time of life. It was a time of life when transportation didn't have to be glamourous."

["At the time, do you think you felt that, though, or only now when you look back?"]

Well, I've always liked simplicity. I'm the one who had a wringer washing machine up until last year. I've liked things that are fixable. I mean, if something went wrong with those, you just pushed them to the side of the road and got someone to fix them easily for you. They were transportation. They were likable. They were odd; I mean, they're odd-shaped. But it was that kind of joyful connection with simplicity.

—Le Ane Rutherford[1]

THE VW BEETLE, ALSO CALLED "THE LOVE BUG" OR "SLUG BUG," WAS originally designed in the 1930s. Hitler wanted a car made that looked like a beetle. Nazi officials used these VW Beetles. In the 1960s, the car took on a whole new meaning in the United States. It became symbolic of the Hippie Movement—love and peace. In 1998, the "new" Beetle was unveiled. The last original model rolled off the assembly line in Mexico on July 30, 2003.

In my summer special topics course (2002), "Nostalgia in Contemporary Society," my students and I embarked upon a research project which involved collecting stories about Volkswagens. The class project was called, "The VW Bug: Stories Told." In fact, we ended up collecting

stories individuals had about any kind of Volkswagen—not just the VW Bug. A senior colleague of mine has a 1968 VW Bug. On Thursdays during our summer session, he parked the car in Canal Park—a tourist area in Duluth, MN. My students and I collected stories from passersby. We did this in shifts; e.g., one group collecting stories from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.; another group from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Because Duluth is heavily populated with tourists in the summer months, many of our respondents were from outside the state and, in some cases, outside the country. In this sense, we had a lot of diversity in our convenience sample. Armed with signs which read, "VW Stories Wanted," cassette recorders, and consent forms, we set out to conduct research.

The purpose of this research project was to ascertain the cultural significance of the VW Bug, how individuals' recollections provoke nostalgia, and how that nostalgia facilitates continuity of identity. Subjects were simply asked to share a story about a Volkswagen. As a class, we conducted a content analysis of the stories, searching for patterns in the data, discovering themes and, in so doing, also ascertaining the degree and type of nostalgia that was present. Research questions guiding the study include: What kinds of meanings do people attribute to this particular car (or other Volkswagens)? What kinds of recollections are triggered when seeing a VW Bug?

A total of forty-nine interviews were conducted, but many more stories were told, as some individuals told several stories. Themes that emerged in the data include memories of bad experiences with Volkswagens (which are actually recalled with humor and a seeming fondness for the vehicle), recollections of what the VW was like in the winter, memories of deviant activities associated with Volkswagens, and underlying themes of the association of the VW with camaraderie and with coming of age.

The VW: A Deathtrap?

Many of the stories individuals shared with us were stories of how their VW broke down, or at least had quirks which one would think would be quite frustrating. Yet, as these stories were shared, for the most part, the respondents had smiles on their faces and their memories were clearly fond ones. A man told us that a VW Bug was the first car he ever owned. The year was 1975. He described the car as "rusted with blue accents," and remembers "winter driving right through floorboards, blan-

kets over the feet, not a lot holding the car together." He recalled a time when he picked up a hitchhiker, and the hitchhiker's foot went through the floorboard of the backseat, which apparently freaked him out. The hitchhiker didn't want to admit that he had put his foot through the floorboard. When he got out of the car, "he slammed the door, and the radio came on which hadn't worked for two years." The respondent was then asked: "When you see a Bug does it trigger that recollection?" His response: "Oh no, there's worse things that happened in that car. But cannot tell because of my parents." (This man was probably in his mid-40s, and his parents were standing there with him). He did also note that the engine blew up in the car.

Another respondent recalled that, in the fall of 1969, he bought a used 1964 VW Bug, which had a broken transmission and needed valve work. He fixed it up. At the time, he was living in New York City; he and his friend, Bob (both of them were 19 or 20 years old) wanted an adventure, and so "we drove the car from New York City to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, etc., etc., Texas to Mexico through Mexico City to Acapulco, and back." On their way back, they "had to replace a generator, had to push-start it a few times." He said that they "enjoyed it a great deal and slept in it almost all the time. Went to Woodstock in it." The respondent was asked: "When you see a VW, does it trigger any kind of memories?" He shares:

> Oh yeah. We were driving an old Bug out to Wyoming, my friend and I, on vacation. We drove it out to Yellowstone National Park. We almost died twice on that one (laughs). When I think of a bug, that's what I think of. Once we were driving along late at night, and this thing was all rusty. We got out of the car and were just high as kites; we were just floating. And we realized that we had almost died from carbon monoxide poisoning because the exhaust system was leaking into the car. And then the other part of that trip, we were driving along and we started smelling gas. The fuel pump had busted and fuel was blowing all over the air cooled engine, which are great for catching on fire. Another time, I had another old Bug. I was coming down [highway] 94 going to Wisconsin; there's a big long drop, just before you get to the river, St. Croix River. I was in the left lane and a big semi was in the right lane. He starts coming over, and I'm "Oh my God, I gotta get out of here, he doesn't see me." So I slammed on the brakes; of course the whole braking system failed at this point; I'm doing 60 downhill. My first thought was, "I'm dead. That's it, this is the end, I'm dead." Thankfully, my emergency brake worked so it saved the day. And my brakes failed another time; same thing. Those old Volkswagens only had a single circuit braking system, and where they routed the

brake fluid line you would often rust through right at the firewall to the front, so that happened to me twice in the same vehicle. It's like, this is a bad design, you know? When I see a Bug, I think, death trap! (laughs) But I'm still alive, so the gods must have been smiling on me.

Another respondent remembers the 1963 VW Bug that he bought in the 1970s:

This was in the mid-'70s during the oil embargo. Lived 20 miles from work and that's why I bought it. It got me back and forth to work with no problems. The only thing that happened was I-35 in Kansas City was under an overpass and something hit the windshield and it just exploded. There was thousands of little pieces of glass all over the inside. Instant wind in your face. But, you know, it was a good little vehicle, seeings how I worked for General Motors, it was a real ticklish problem getting it into the parking lot.

Such stories indicate that these automobiles were quite dangerous. Here is another:

Let's see, I had a Volkswagen when I was a freshman in college. I was in school in Madison at the university. Four of my buddies from my home town wanted to go see our high school basketball team in the tournament. I think it was 1995; it was the weekend before St. Patrick's Day. There was a tremendous snow storm. And on the way back there were five of us in the Volkswagen and a snow plow was coming at us. I was driving. Slipped off the road and spun around in front of that snow plow, and I just, you know, Volkswagens didn't give you a tremendous feeling of security. It's just terrifying. It's still terrifying to me today when I see the lights of a snow plow, thinking about what could have happened to the five of us, being compressed by a snow plow in that Volkswagen. So that's my Volkswagen story.

["So when you see one, does it . . . ?"] "It brings back, actually, fond . . . I loved those little . . . especially that style. I really liked them a lot. I think of that story, but I really liked having a Volkswagen. I think they are really great cars."
 A female respondent recalls driving a VW to high school:

Well, my parents when I was a kid had a car that was a '78 Volkswagen convertible and it was a great car. I got to drive it to high school a lot. After awhile it didn't work very well in the rain and so every time it rained it would stall out pretty bad. I went to East High School up on the hill. I'd have to get pushed down the hill to start it pretty much every day

after school for awhile. So it was kind of annoying, although I got to know a bunch of the football players really well because they're the ones that pushed my car down the hill to get it started.

Consider the following individual's seemingly unpleasant recollection, which he closes with implying that this is but one, of many, *good* memories he has about this car:

I had this orange Volkswagen Bug, and it was old; it was getting rusty. It was fun to drive because everything was so little. I was in a hurry to get home because I had company for supper and I was going down our road and all of a sudden I got splashed in the face and here the floor rusted out, and so when I went over the puddles, they hit me right in the face. And then the seats had springs in them and I had a brand new pair of Calvin Klein jeans. [I was driving] up to Ely [MN]. After two hours of driving, I tried to get out of the car and the spring poked my pants and ripped a hole in back (laughs). So I have lots of good memories of that Volkswagen Bug.

An old '60s activist shared the following story:

Coming back from a peace maker conference, a bunch of us had been meeting in Kansas City and heading back up and I caught a ride with some folks. They were going to Chicago, went through Des Moines, Iowa; it was a glare of ice. People were just packed in there. It was a really pretty black, I don't know like from '67 or something like that. Anyway, a car pulled out in front of us and the driver swerved and we did like an 8 without hurting the car. I mean, it was exhilarating. It was like the tilt-a-whirl. And that baby, nice low baby, didn't tip over. I think another car would have flipped. Well-engineered.

These stories, and others like them, were shared by informants who, for the most part, loved their VW and clearly enjoyed reminiscing about their experiences. It did not appear that individuals held a grudge about what they went through with their vehicle or harbored negative feelings. Given their design, perhaps expectations were low for this automobile. On our last day of interviewing, we talked with a man from Seattle, who recalled:

My brother had an old VW Bug, it was about a 1956. About the time he bought it, it was 1962, so it had put on lots of miles and boy I loved that thing. We would roll around in the back end of that thing and drove from Seattle up into the mountains to go skiing and back again. It could handle any kind of traffic, any kind of weather pattern, you know you'd get into

snow and ice and it just kept going.

["So you loved it, but did you ever have any problems with it, any mechanical problems?"]
"Oh, who cared, when you had a VW Bug, who cared?"
["Why do you think that is? A lot of people seem to say, 'oh it broke down on me . . .' but yet they have all of this fondness . . ."]

> You know, you didn't do wheelies in a VW Bug. They weren't overly powerful and so you tended not to over-drive them. You tended to drive a little more gently, maybe because it was this little top hat on wheels. And so, you know, it was great. I had a couple problems with the Vanagen, the articulation where the wheel joins the body and that little device would fail every two years and I'd have to replace it, but I learned how to do it myself after the first few years so it was no problem after that.

["What about emotions when you see a VW going down the street?"]
"Oh, nostalgia for me, because it's connected to so many memories, places that I went, things that I did, periods of my life, you know."

One of our respondents told us about his car being on fire!

> I had a '72 blue Beetle Baja edition. I was at a bank drive through and the woman came on the speaker and said, "You know the back end of your car is on fire?" so I'm like, "What?" she's like, "The back end of your car is on fire." I said, "ahh, hang on a second." So I pulled up and I got out and there was flames shooting out of the little vent, so I had this blanket in the back that I used to keep over the engine in the winter and I got the engine cover off and I'm whipping the fire with the blanket.

This respondent also remembers:

> I had a '69 and a '72 and my '69 had bad oil leaks in the winter. When it was cold I had to open up the vents because you would use the vents to control the heat inside by the engine exhaust, umm, you'd get really light-headed when you were driving because of the exhaust, so to keep warm you had to keep the window down about this far and keep only the passenger vent open and it was a great car. I loved it.

["You say it was a great car, but it sounds like it had some of these quirks and problems..."]

> The one that caught fire had 247,000 miles on it when I got rid of it. It was a four-cylinder air-cooled engine that just jerked and I got it from

some guy. Who knows how many people had it? My other one I bought
from my track coach in high school; same thing, he had bought it from
somebody and drove the crap out of it. Zero maintenance; put gas in it
every week.

These stories about problems experienced with the VW reflect the
values of simplicity and control. In most cases, it sounds like the drivers
themselves could fix whatever was wrong with the vehicle. The design
was simple and thus so was the maintenance. Especially with the VW
Bug, given its size, the driver would feel a sense of control. It is not sur-
prising that these stories and the values they reflect are prevalent at the
present — a time when vehicles are complex, repair typically requires an
expert who has all of the right equipment, and the individual, in general,
may feel that he or she has control of very little in his or her life.

Most of the stories recalled were from the 1970s — a time when the
environmentalist movement was growing. Some of the respondents
mentioned getting rid of big gas hogs they had been driving and getting
a VW Bug both because it was cheaper given the good gas mileage and
because the car was better on the environment. As Naughton and Vlasic
(1998) observe, "[w]ith its simple design and no-frills engineering, the
original Beetle was the antithesis of Detroit's gas-guzzlers."[2] Driving a
VW was, for some Baby Boomers, a way of expressing identity in a
slightly counter-culture way. Again, Naughton and Vlasic (1998):
"Cheap to own, easy to fix, and giddy fun to drive, the Beetle personified
an era of rebellion against conventions."[3]

The VW in the Winter

We repeatedly heard about how cold the VW Bug was, but respon-
dents also indicated that these cars were good in the snow. This Du-
luthian shares a winter story:

One time we went up to a cabin by Three Lakes. It was in the winter
time; we pretty much spent the night partying. We got up the next morn-
ing; it was 28 below inside the cabin and we had had a pretty good fire
going that night, so who knows what it was outside. So we went out, and
we had 3 VWs up there, of course the older ones were still 6-volts battery
systems which didn't really work very well in the winter. The newer ones
were 12-volt and those would turn over better, but you couldn't jump a 6-
volt with a 12-volt. And so it was so cold, they would just go, "rrrrrr." So

we went back into the cabin, got another fire going, and we took the pro-
duce pan out of the bottom of the refrigerator and filled it with coals from
the fire and put it under the VW to warm up the oil because there was no
block heater, because there was no radiator. In fact, we didn't have elec-
tricity. But by having those hot coals underneath the engine, the engine
would warm up enough that we could start it. And once we got 'em
started, wouldn't shut 'em off, because the bottom was sealed on all of
those.

This same man expresses how good this car was in the snow:

One of the great things about VW, and I had a '66 VW, is that they were
really good in the snow. But one of the best things about driving them in
the snow, especially here in Duluth because the hills are so steep, [is that]
if you couldn't make it up a hill going forward, because the engine was in
the rear, you could always drive backwards up the hill. So you could
make it up any hill in Duluth and this was before 4-wheel drives. While
everybody else was struggling, you could always back up a hill in Duluth
and it was a very common thing to see.

Another respondent recalled:

We had a 1965 Bug. Living in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, going to Central
Michigan University, living in a mobile home park and we had a terrible
snow storm, drifts of snow just everywhere. We were in the VW and I
thought I could get through the snow drift and I ran into the snow drift
and I was stuck and I tried to rock it back and forth and back and forth,
and it wouldn't come unstuck and, being the calm, cool guy I am, I got
pissed off. I jumped out of the car and went up to the house, which was
only a few feet away and I left it in gear in reverse and the rear engine
had heated the snow that had pushed it up off the ground, so as I walked
away, it heated up the snow; the back end slopped down on the pave-
ment and it started backing away from me. So I had to run and catch up
with it and get in it. The only time I get stuck, and it un-sticks itself.
That's it!

The VW and Deviant Activities

Among some of the respondents, the VW is clearly associated with
activities which we would label "deviant." The majority of respondents
were Baby Boomers, and some of the stories they shared are indeed the
kinds of stories we might expect, based upon how that generation has

been portrayed in the popular culture and, also, simply based on the ages these individuals were when they were driving a VW.

A man from Georgia had this to say:

> Well, I can tell one [a story], and I told my wife this recently. We took four people on a ten-hour drive to Hampton, Virginia, to see the Grateful Dead, and now she and I travel together, you know, in big cars and all this stuff and we can barely fit it in, but I don't know how we did that when we did it. That was pretty interesting, just being in the Bug. What else can I tell you about the Bug? That's where I used to party and do everything else you did in a Volkswagen Bug when you were a young man, somehow. Have you heard more than you wanted to know? ["Should we read between the lines on that?"] Yeah, I can't incriminate myself in Minnesota. I'm from Georgia. Wish I was a good storyteller; I did so much in that Volkswagen.

A woman from Texas told us that she had a VW Bug, convertible, orange with black top, when she was in high school (in the early '70s). A very spirited individual, she recalls:

> We had a lot of fun, a lot of adventures, most of them illegal. (laughs) We grew up in a small town in East Texas. We had to drive to Shreveport, Dallas, Houston, and Oklahoma to have fun which we did a lot in my VW Beetle. We bought a lot of pot and would bring it back, smoking it. (laughs) But we don't do that anymore; grew out of it—and the Beetle (laughs).

["When you see a Bug does it trigger memories?"]

> Oh, I think of buying pounds of dope, splitting it up into ounces and selling to my friends and going back to Houston and get more pounds of dope. (laughs) That's what I think of, having five flat tires on the way back from Houston with pounds of dope in the car and driving from East Texas and being picked up by the guy of *Deliverance* (laughs), getting a ride from him to the tire store and thinking we were going to get killed (laughs). Yeah, it triggers nostalgia.

Another woman remembers her husband's 1962 olive green Bug:

> We dated in it and did some things in it we can't talk about, and the night we got married our wedding party picked it up and physically put it four blocks away so we couldn't find it. And then when we were at a basketball game our friend picked it up and put it on a snow bank outside of

Mankato [MN]. We came out and there it was, sitting on top of a snow bank. I don't know how they got it there. And then when our first child was born, my dad measured the backseat and made a cradle for our daughter that just fit in the backseat. Oh, I forgot. We got arrested for drunk driving too. There was two in the front seat and two in the back seat and we had just gotten it and we were going to Mankato and all we had had was Pepsi, but you know those old ones had those heaters on the floor and we didn't know how to run the heater yet, so he was bending down to run the heater and he kind of went like that, [swerved] and he had to walk the line.

Another woman was succinct in her description of what is triggered when she sees a VW Bug: "I think beer. Beer, Volkswagens, college; they all kind of blend together."

One man shared the following memory:

1968—I learned how to drive in a VW. Since it was a standard shift, you know it was very difficult, especially with your mother there yelling at you, you know, because I was real short, just like I am now, and you had to push the pedal down real far so it jerked. So she took me to the high school parking lot so I wouldn't hit any cars. That's about the extent of it.

["Did you drive it anymore after that?"]

Yeah, that was the only car we got to drive. In fact, when I had my learner's permit, I took a girl out on a date and totaled the VW, and when my mother came home and found the totaled VW in the driveway, she came in and screamed, "Johnny!" and I thought she was mad about the totaled VW, but there were cigarette ashes on the side of the car, so she was really mad about the smoking and she didn't seem to notice that the VW had four flat tires and was crushed like a bug. That's about it. That's all I can remember.

A man from Seattle, a very gifted storyteller, shared the following story:

I was coming back from a boy scout camp where I had been working all summer long about 1967 or so. I saw this old Vanagen on the side of the road; actually it wasn't a Vanagen, it was before that, it was the van. It was a camper van, so it was the old-style one; it didn't have the pop-top. And so I happened to tell my dad. He said, "Are you sure about that?" So I said, "Yeah, I think it was on sale in this parking lot for $1,700." So he went back there and, sure enough, the next day he bought it and he and my mother drove that van everywhere. I mean, they drove it across the

country two or three times, through Canada, through the United States, the south, north, they went down to Mexico twice with this thing. You just keep working on it. Now, my mom was about five-foot-two, weighed about 350 pounds, and she just loved that sucker. It was like her life on wheels. She would spend her whole year planning their trip. I was by then in college and so they were on their own, and they would take their three or four weeks of vacation and they would just drive.

[His wife says: 'didn't they bring your antique organ back, and you were playing it?']

So I was graduating from college and I had bought an old antique organ and they came up to help get me home from college and I said, well somehow I have to get this old antique organ home. Well, we could open up the side of the van and we could lift the organ and slip it in, but I had to get in with it because I had to have some place to sit. Well, we could actually just close the door, and I could sit in the back end with this antique pump organ in the middle of the van and my mom and dad in front. And we're rolling down the freeway, and I'm playing this antique organ, (makes music sound, dum-da-da . . .) And I'm rolling down the highway with all the bellows open and I'm playing this organ, faces turn and look at this van.

Underlying Themes: Camaraderie and Coming of Age

The vast majority of stories featured many protagonists. Most often respondents remembered activities with friends or family, whether those activities were seeing how many people could fit into the Bug or trying to get the vehicle started. Many stories were of trips taken in a VW bus or van. There was also the camaraderie that the presence of the Bug seemed to trigger among strangers. Consider this person's recollection:

Because I owned one and several of my buddies owned ones, it used to be just a big game. And one of the things we used to love to do—if the three of us were out driving around, and we did that all the time—saw any other VW on the street, it didn't matter who was driving it, a grandmother, an old bald-headed fart, it didn't matter, if one of you zoomed past and passed him, and another zoomed past and passed him, whoever was in that other one would always pass and go zooming past you. The oldest lady driving one would come zooming by you, the thing going just

as fast as it could, and you could do that for miles and miles and miles, going up the road. Anybody would do it with you, because all the Volkswagen owners played games like that.

Another respondent noted that "it's like a big family. You're driving down the road and someone else has a Volkswagen, and you give the peace sign. It's like everybody does it."

Another reaction people typically have to the VW Bug is "slug bug," in which the person who spots a Bug slugs the person next to him, and so on. Particular advertising campaigns seem to capitalize on this aspect of the VW Bug. A recent ad for the VW convertible associates this car with a chain reaction of smiles. Theresa Howard (2003) describes:

> [A] woman walking on a city sidewalk smiles at a man as she helps him retrieve something he's dropped; he continues the karma by smiling and helping another person, and so on down the block. The ad rewinds at the end to show what sparked the first smile: a VW convertible.[4]

Much of the nostalgia that was present was clearly for the time of life that was being recalled. The presence of our prop, the 1968 VW Bug, in conjunction with the open-ended questions we posed, sent many of the passersby down memory lane. As a class, my students and I wondered to what extent the stories these respondents shared with us are actually stories which are more reflective of "memories of my first vehicle" than memories of the VW, per se. For many respondents, a VW was their first vehicle. It is difficult to separate their nostalgic feelings toward the car as being specifically focused on the fact that it was a Volkswagen or as being focused on the fact that it was their first car. Perhaps, given the status of the VW Bug (in particular) as a cultural icon, these two possibilities converge. Many of us might have some sort of nostalgic feelings about our first vehicle; but if, as in my case, that first vehicle was an Oldsmobile Omega, then it doesn't have the weight of the culture behind it. In other words, the combination of the status, "first vehicle" and "VW" make nostalgia likely, and this is a nostalgia that is personally experienced but also linked to a broader cultural base.

Recurrent themes in individuals' stories hint at a collective (generational) identity among members of the Baby Boom generation. Some of what we associate with that generation is reflected in the stories shared—namely, the camaraderie with peers, the long road trips, and various deviant activities. The cultural fascination with the VW Bug continues. The new version of the Bug that is now available is testimony

to the power of nostalgia to market and sell products. As Naughton and Vlasic (1998) note, "[w]ith a familiar bubble shape that still makes people smile as it skitters by, the new Beetle offers a pull that is purely emotional."[5] Older adults may want one of the new Bugs because it reminds them of their past; it is a meaningful symbol to them. Young adults may want one of the new Bugs because it has become a cultural icon and it facilitates the displaced nostalgia that is so prevalent among the young.

With the VW Bug, we see how identity is shaped and nostalgia triggered via this particular object. Our prop, the 1968 VW Bug, clearly produced emotional reactions in passersby—those who actually did stop and talk with us and also those who just kept walking. Among the latter, we observed nonverbal behaviors such as smiling and laughing as they looked at the car. The individuals who were most likely to have stories about Volkswagens were, not surprisingly, those in their forties and fifties. In many of the stories, links between past and present were evident. For example, in some instances, individuals distinguished their current self from their former self. This most often took the form of accounting for memories and stories by pointing to one's age at that time, as in the woman who repeatedly mentioned "dope" as what comes to mind when she sees a VW Bug; recall her statement: "We bought a lot of pot and would bring it back, smoking it. (laughs) But we don't do that anymore; grew out of it— and the Beetle (laughs)." The deviant activities she recalls are viewed as activities which were appropriate given her age and the social climate at that time. Another way in which links between past and present were manifested was in respondents' expression of wanting to get another VW, or, in fact, of perhaps still having one. Some individuals indicated that they wanted to get a VW for their kids. One respondent said:

> Oh, I love Volkswagens. I think that maybe when my children are older I'd love to buy them the new Beetle. I'm going to Mexico next year; I'm going to see millions of them I know and I'm going to wish I could bring them back and I can't. Actually, I've been looking at convertibles recently. Thinking about buying one for a second, summer car, and I have looked at Bugs; actually, I've been looking at the Beamer 325, the older ones, I have a little romance for the older ones. I have looked at the Bugs, although they're really expensive, the old ones that have been lovingly taken care of. And you've got a lovely one [pointing to the 1968 Bug].

A woman who had stories about her husband's 1962 Bug said that

I want one, especially the ones in Mexico because they're all shaved off and into little rental cars. I'd like one of the new ones, too. I told my daughter yesterday, in fact, when she gets nice and rich, she can buy me one of those weird color ones, like the yellow, or the green, and there's this lavender now. But they're not quite the same.

Some of the passersby thought we were selling the Bug we had parked there, and told us that they had been thinking about buying one; they indicated that it was as if our being there with this 1968 Bug was another temptation for them to do so. Naughton and Vlasic (1998) quote Greg Stern, a forty-seven-year-old film producer in Santa Monica, who, in 1998, indicated that he was in line to get a 1998 silver or white Beetle: "In 1967, my Dad got me a VW. I loved it. I'm sure the new one will take me back. I'm getting the new Beetle as a surprise for my daughter, but I'm sure I'm going to be stealing it from her all the time."[6]

While respondents "placed" their stories in time (e.g., attributing some of their stories to their age at the time), they also exemplified a connection between their former and current self. In subtle and sometimes more direct ways, respondents indicated that memories or values associated with the VW have contemporary relevance for them. The stories collected in this unique project suggest that continuity of both individual and collective identity is facilitated by nostalgia for these vehicles. As individuals shared their recollections, and, in many cases, had their companions help them fill gaps in their memories, their nonverbal behavior became more open; they smiled and laughed. It is not hyperbole to suggest that, in recalling their younger days, they actually *appeared* more youthful. As the collectors of the stories, we felt that we were learning about these individuals' former selves, and seeing a connection between past and present, between former and current self. To borrow an image from LeAne Rutherford (2003), the lines deepen in our faces as we age, and most of the time we do not change where the lines are; the "furrows" just deepen. LeAne tells of a friend who was commenting on a mutual friend of theirs who is very much his own person: "I asked her, 'How's George (fictitious name)?' She said, 'About the same, just more so!'"[7] This speaks volumes about the reality of continuity of identity.

The appeal of this car to those in the Baby Boom generation may reflect both a nostalgia for the past and an attempt to hold onto youth. The more general appeal of this car to people of all ages most likely reflects how powerful images in our popular culture can trigger nostalgia—perhaps resulting in the active process of recollection or, with displaced nostalgia, the exercise of the imagination and fantasy.

Part IV

Conclusions

In chapter 8, I briefly present the results of a study of grandmothers' perceptions and recollections of child-rearing. In so doing, I revisit the related concepts, nostalgia and reminiscence, with the purpose of demonstrating possible applications of the kinds of findings my research has produced.

In the last chapter, I consider what the foregoing chapters mean. That is, what am I trying to accomplish in my study of nostalgia? What is the relationship between nostalgia and identity? There are certainly many more facets of and possibilities for nostalgia than those discussed here, but I consider this book to be one contribution to an area of study which has been relatively little used by social scientists.

8

Application: Reminiscence and Nostalgia Serving Individual and Family Continuity (Interviews with Grandmothers)

> This is the way that continuity and change are united — by patterns
> that are multipersonal and cross-generational.
>
> — David Keith and Carl Whitaker[1]

IN CLOSING, I WISH TO SUGGEST SOME OF THE AVENUES ALONG WHICH nostalgia may be fruitfully pursued. Certainly, the predominant theme throughout this book has been that nostalgia can be seen as an intrapersonal expression of self which subjectively provides one with a sense of continuity. The research studies described in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 demonstrate the potential for this use of nostalgia. Also at the micro level of analysis, nostalgia may be viewed as an interpersonal form of conversational play which serves the purpose of bonding between individuals. At a more macro level, while I attempt to make problematic the prevailing sociological notion of nostalgia as a form of ideologizing or mystifying the past, it must be acknowledged that nostalgia can indeed be used in this regard, the purposes of which may be for political or economic gain. Even with such a use, however, we find that the nostalgia that is "created" by dominant groups in society may have the effect of forging generational (or cohort) collective identities.

In the first chapter, I differentiated nostalgia from other, related terms. This is important and useful theoretically, but at a practical or applied level, it may be less so. When we are thinking of possible applications of nostalgia, it is wise to cast the net large. How might the acts of recollection, reminiscence, and the corollary emotional experience of nostalgia be applied in meaningful ways? Nostalgia is a type of autobio-

graphical memory. These memories are highly available for recall; they are detailed and are comparatively resistant to forgetting. Such memories are important because they are concerned with information related to the self. An example of a beneficial way of using the past comes from reminiscence therapy, which is geared toward individuals who suffer from a variety of mental and emotional problems, such as dementia, anxiety, and depression. Reminiscence therapy is used in many nursing homes and assisted living communities as a way of helping the elderly (especially those who suffer from dementia) maintain an awareness of who they are. Individuals working with the elderly, in various settings, increasingly evoke the past in an attempt to help their patients/clients. Objects might be brought into the nursing home, for example, that remind patients of the past; opportunities are offered for elderly individuals to share stories from yesteryear. In this context, we see nostalgia as a type of therapy.

As Kunz (1998) says, "reminiscing helps us maintain an awareness of who we are, where we've been and what roles we've played in our lifetime."[2] Similarly, Kovach (1995) notes that the process of reminiscing "may help the person maintain his or her self-concept through the life span."[3] Further, she suggests that "[f]or the person who verbalizes primarily validating interpretations, reminiscence may serve to remind him or her of past accomplishments, past successes at coping with life's stresses, and success at sustaining meaningful relationships."[4] Meacham (1995) identifies three reasons why reminiscences are valued:

> a) they reflect the remembering individual's membership in and identification with significant social groups, b) they arouse similar feelings in others and incite them to cooperative action, and c) the constructed meanings of the memories can be validated through dialogue with others.[5]

Another concept which is relevant and applicable in this context is the "life review." As Butler (1995) says, "reminiscence has a constructive purpose . . . the life review should be recognized as a necessary and healthy process in daily life as well as a useful tool in the mental health care of older people."[6] Wong (1995) suggests that major transitions trigger active life review. He explains:

> [I]n active life review, people are seeking something that imbues their past with a sense of meaning and significance. They need the validation that they have not lived in vain. Related to the search for meaning and self-worth is the quest for self-identity. People want to know who they

are. There must be, at the very core of their being, some basic, irreducible, and immutable elements that define who they are.[7]

In such fragmented times, reminisces can create intrapersonal and interpersonal links (e.g., between memories, between generations) and help to give meaning to life. Peter Coleman (1999) suggests that there are many valuable outcomes of reminiscence. In addition to life satisfaction, he includes generativity, creativity, and spirituality.[8] At a reminiscence conference I attended in New York City in 1999, Pam Schweitzer talked about the *drama* of memories, pointing out how our imagery of the past can affect us in the present. According to Schweitzer, the process of gathering memories can be as powerful as performing them, for we find patterns in our lives and contextualize those memories and patterns; we use improvisation and storytelling to string our memories together; and we share experiences and memories which tell us who we were and who we are.[9] Indeed, as discussed in chapter 3, it makes sense to think of identity as narrative. Deciu Ritivoi (2002) notes that the identity of a person "emerges from the person's life story"[10] and also that one's "life/identity is a story in constant making and remaking."[11] She contends that it is through narrative scenarios that individuals make sense of their identities and also help others to make sense of them. The potential effect of the combined experience of recollection, reminiscence, and nostalgia is clear here.

Perceptions and Recollections: Interviews with New Grandmothers

The role of reminiscence and nostalgia in facilitating continuity of identity was evident in a study I conducted on how new grandmothers conceptualize and enact their role of "grandmother." Themes that emerged in interviews with thirty women who had become grandmothers within the last five years include: the special meaning attached to being a grandmother, the notion that this role somewhat offers women a second chance at parenting, and that this role does not require that they be responsible for the children's discipline and daily needs. The theme I wish to explore here, however, comes from the informants' comparing and contrasting child rearing in the past and child rearing in contemporary American society. Nostalgia was most apparent in the way informants responded to this issue. As the women draw contrasts between what it was like when they were raising their kids and what it is like for

parents today, a great deal of nostalgia for a better, safer, and more simple time come through, accompanied by concern and fear for future generations coming of age in times that they view as hostile and dangerous. One informant, Joan, observes:

> One thing I've noticed is that the schools were much more helpful, because they had summer school, and kids went to summer school because they wanted to, and not because they were sent there. They had all kinds of things to choose from–from cooking, learning to play chess, etc. Today, if your kid is going to get anything extra, you have to pay. Dance lessons, music lessons. We could have never done all that.

The majority of these informants were raising their children in the 1960s and 1970s. They view those times as being easier for raising children. This is due, in part, to different financial requirements. For many of these women (most of whom would identify as lower-middle, or middle class) two incomes were not necessary in the family. They see, however, that most families today need the dual incomes. As the number of activities for children to be involved in increases, so do the resources required to take advantage of these opportunities. Furthermore, there is the realization that the role of the school is different than it was when these women were raising their children. Fiscal restraints in schools necessitate charging parents for their children's participation in various activities. Because many of today's new mothers are in the work force, they have a different relationship with school personnel than many of the informants had. The school-parent relationship is more apt to be distant. This does not necessarily indicate apathy, but rather, different structural conditions and restraints.

Colleen comments on requirements of children in school today:

> The expectations now of kids going into kindergarten—there's a pressure that they need to know everything. And they do. There are basic requirements of things kids have to know before they get into kindergarten. My kids didn't have to when they went to kindergarten. They knew some of their colors, their full name, their phone number. That was the requirement then. So, even the expectations in school have changed.

As the knowledge about and information on child development increases, there seems to be more pressure put on both parents and children to achieve. Parents are getting their children involved in various scholastic programs at younger and younger ages, in an effort to "do the right thing."

Child Care

Child care is certainly an important issue for parents of young children. Janice recalls that when she and her husband were bringing up their children, most of their friends were also having children at the same time. She says, "so particularly when they were quite young, a lot of times we would just bring them along whether we were playing cards or whatever we were doing." For those times when they did need child care, she says, "we were relatively fortunate in that the neighborhood we lived in had a lot of teenagers, so when the children were old enough, we could leave them with [a teenage babysitter]." With regard to child care, Janice notes, "in this day and age, it is very expensive." Contemporary American society is characterized by the increasing mobility of people. One consequence of this is that families become quite spread out geographically. Furthermore, neighborhoods and communities may not be as close-knit and homogenous as was the previous experience for many of the respondents. These factors, coupled with the fact that mothers of young children today are likely to be in the paid labor force, make child care a problematic issue. Not only did many of the informants quit working while their children were young, but they were also living in neighborhoods that provided an informal network—people who could be relied upon if necessary. If these neighbors were not relatives, they were at least likely to be similar to respondents in terms of family size, attitudes, and values. Daycare, then, is perceived by these informants as a much more problematic issue today.

Safety

Many of the responses stress the different community atmosphere today, emphasizing that, in the past, there was less fear about crime. Informants view the times in which they were bringing up their children as times when people "felt" safe.

Sharon says:

> I think it's just so scary. When my kids were little, they were mostly safe. Now, even in day care sometimes they're not safe. You hear these terrible things—at day cares, or schools, or church. When my kids were children, you could put your little ones out in the back yard and have them just play. Now, you have to sit there or have them fenced in. It's very scary for young kids these days—there's so much stuff out there. There's so many things that are out there that weren't there when I was raising my kids,

like drugs. Some kids in grade school are into drugs. And there's so much violence now. It wasn't like that before.

She expresses concern for what to expect in the future:

I don't know what this place is going to be like in another twenty years, unless things change real fast. Nowadays, it seems like either people pay a lot of attention to their children, and keep them extremely busy, or else kids just kind of raise themselves. Drugs are so free these days, and alcohol for kids. I don't envy anybody raising a child nowadays. . . . You really have to watch your kid carefully, but you can't cushion everything because a kid has to learn to deal with things. I don't know how you do that, and I'm glad that I don't have to do it.

Joanne shares these thoughts on raising a child today:

I think the kids are learning a lot of frightening things nowadays because of what we see in the news. School shootings and all this stuff. It's sad. They've lost a little bit of innocence. I don't know how parents deal with all that without frightening them. You want them to have common sense about not getting into a stranger's car, but nowadays you read so many things that are beyond your control.

Carol says: "It's got to be a lot tougher today. I could let my kids run out in the neighborhood and play. So many women work now. Back yards are fenced in; ours were all connected." Similarly, Doris notes:

I can see the traps, the problems. It's scary what the kids are up against. It's frightening what kids are into. I didn't have that fear. Maybe I was ignorant. The expressions of kids are more violent. I wouldn't want to be a parent of young children now.

Though Karen suggests that raising kids is much harder today, she also admits that her father probably said the same thing in his time, thus demonstrating an awareness of the way in which we tend to romanticize the past:

[Raising kids today is] much harder, I would believe, and I'm sure my dad said the same thing. The world changes, and the cars get faster. With the little kids, I worry about some of the people out there in this world that would rape, kidnap, whatever. I think drugs are out there more. That was kind of my dad's fear, but I thought doing drugs was shooting up in downtown Chicago, not in my school.

Jean echoes many other grandmothers when she says:

I think it's got to be much more of a challenge, with working parents, with the influence of the media, with the world as it is today, with the drugs, violence, safety issues, problems in the schools. A whole myriad of negative influences out there. Even just the world economy and all that; I just think, what kind of world is he going to grow up in or grow up to inherit? We were such innocent Midwesterners, thirty years ago.

Thus, my informants clearly had much to say about the differences raising children today as opposed to when they raised their own children. The predominant theme is that it was easier in their time. Issues such as drugs, safety, and the state of the world economy create fear about the kind of world that their grandchildren will inhabit. As these women shared recollections of what it was like when they were raising their own children, they did so with some degree of nostalgia for a safer, more simple time, and they expressed a sense of loss.

Though I was not testing formal hypotheses, I had expected to find that informants would express longing for the time when their own children were young. However, this was not the case. While nostalgia was expressed for the cultural climate of when their children were growing up, there did not appear to be a romanticizing of or longing for the time when the children were young. Instead, informants expressed, for the most part, great joy in being a grandmother and, in fact, relief that they are not currently raising children. Some of the women indicated that, because they are not as busy as they were when their own kids were dependent, they can truly enjoy time spent with the grandchildren. Donna shares:

There's nothing like holding a baby and rocking him to sleep, and kicking back in the recliner, just cuddling for awhile. The world can go away, you just get to hold this little tiny person for a bit and snuggle. And you usually arrange to do this, so you don't feel that the laundry is waiting or this and that, like you did when your own kids were little. You'd get them rocked to sleep, but then you had all these things to do. If you are babysitting for grandkids, mostly you've already lined up your day, and can have it devoted to the child.

Family Continuity, as Facilitated by Grandchildren

Many of my informants allude to the grandchildren as the continuing of the family, and often comment on looks or characteristics that remind them of their own children or of themselves. The birth of a new genera-

tion naturally brings this type of thing to mind. Beth said that the best thing about being a grandmother is that "it's like having a piece of your own child back [such as their] mannerisms." Similarly, Ruth notes that "it's like seeing your own kids again; seeing their reactions." Jean observes: "You look at this little baby, and you think, 'That's part of us.' " The implications this has for self, reflexivity, and family continuity are profound. The presence of grandchildren take these women back in time to when their own children were young. In so doing, reflection ensues. The grandmothers note aspects of the grandchild's behavior and appearance which are similar to how their own kids were at that age.

New grandmothers might find themselves establishing a more healthy and mature relationship with their adult children. As Yeandle (1987) observed in her study of forty-two married women aged 38–60 years, living in a town in South Wales, the experience of those women who were able to have regular contact with their grandchildren demonstrates the role that the grandchildren can play in drawing together parents and their adult children:

> Ties between the two generations of adults often become quite weak as the younger ones start work, leave home, marry and establish an independent network of social contacts. Yet in favorable circumstances the birth of grandchildren can reverse this process, and ties, especially between the adult women concerned, can become much stronger.[12]

The grandmothers themselves play a vital role in giving their children and grandchildren a sense of continuity. As Kesler (1993) says, "grandparents . . . can do more than give our grandchildren fond memories. We can lay a solid foundation under their feet, offer them a sense of continuity with the past."[13] And, further, grandparents "can become carriers of culture from one generation to the next."[14] Also significant is that, for grandchildren, "a grandmother is often enormously important because she is the only stable element in wildly shifting sands" (Elgin 1998).[15] Hooyman and Kiyak (1996) note that "grandparents play a role that emphasizes emotional gratification from their grandchildren, and serve as a symbol of family continuity."[16]

SUMMARY

The questions I asked of informants required them to consider the past and to share recollections as well as experiences and impressions

that they are currently having in their new roles as grandmothers. Based upon the data gathered (only a small portion of which is shared here), it is reasonable to suggest that the act of recollecting helps to facilitate the continuity of identity. The recollections and experiences informants shared with me reflect who they are. These women identify strongly with the mother/caretaker role and, for the most part, are proud of what they have done in their roles of mother and now grandmother. Their memories of earlier experiences juxtaposed with present observations and experiences appear to coincide with developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's late adulthood stages involving generativity and integrity. We find that the act of constructing self narratives can activate integration and generativity, thus enhancing psychosocial health and sustaining meaning and continuity throughout the life course.

The questions asked of my informants invited a type of hermenuetical project. They interpret their past from the perspective of the present. In the narratives that evolve, meaning is created. The memories and perceptions they shared are windows to their selves. While the transition to grandmotherhood most likely triggered some general reminiscence and life review among my informants, the *act* of recollection that I asked of them may, then, have been beneficial in their (perhaps unconscious) "quest for self-identity"—or, at least, the desire (need) for a sense of continuity of identity. While hard evidence (i.e, "proof" in the more statistical sense) cannot be provided to support this claim, it is reasonable to draw this conclusion, given what we are learning about the value and uses of reminiscence.

Individuals who have recently undergone a particular transition in life (in this case, becoming a grandmother) draw upon their recollections and the emotional state of nostalgia to establish and maintain who they are. This study allowed me to take advantage of a time when recollecting seems natural. New grandparents move from the present to the past and back to the present again, as they enact their grandparent role. Kivnick (1988) also observes the importance of recollection (in general) and occupying the grandparent role (in particular) in facilitating continuity of identity. Consider her interpretation of a particular woman in her study of grandparenthood:

> The past experiences she relives are integrated into a present that includes the special feelings borne of grandparenthood. When she conquers old frustrations, this new mastery carries the special strength she feels as a grandmother. Old memories are brought forth by a woman who defines

> herself as a grandmother, and their images are juxtaposed with images of the grandchildren who contribute so much to the resilience she feels today. . . . The grandchildren and her identity as a grandmother . . . are part of the memories she summons from these years, illustrating the mix of joy and pain she believes God has apportioned for each of His children. Their enduring presence in her recollections of the recent past gives her a reassuring sense of continuity, in the face of the losses and disruptions she struggles to master.[17]

Narrative is a vehicle for constructing self and for facilitating continuity of identity. Whether narratives are shared among relatives at a family reunion or between informant and researcher, this function of the *telling* and *re*-collecting can be realized.

9

Concluding Thoughts

There is an intelligent and unintelligent way of handling nostalgia,
a way of sickening under it and a way of using it. We are likely to be
self-enclosed, too conscious of consciousness to get across the fences
of our egoism even by means of nostalgia which hits us hard.
We need understanding of its role to support any resolution
to use it as a means to an end we need.

—Ralph Harper[1]

Summarizing the Point of this Book

The relationship between nostalgia and identity that Fred Davis put forth in 1979 makes sense intuitively and, based upon research shared in the preceding chapters, that relationship is borne out. Nostalgia can indeed help to facilitate the continuity of identity. This is not the only possible effect that nostalgia can have upon identity, of course. It is acknowledged that nostalgia can impair a functioning identity by causing one to fail to live in the present. In this way, nostalgia could lead to a stifling or constraining of self; the proverbial person who is stuck in the past. But it is important to emphasize that the way in which nostalgia has been conceptualized and described here demonstrates that it is not simply a "living in the past," but rather, an active engagement with the past, and a juxtaposition of past and present. This notion of living in the past is one of various (mis)understandings of nostalgia that abound. Others include nostalgia as (merely) false consciousness and as something which is rather uncomplicated. In the paragraphs that follow, I take these common (mis)understandings to task and, in so doing, reiterate points made throughout this book.

As discussed in chapter 2, nostalgia can be seen as an ideology, a false consciousness. This view of nostalgia is apt to be the party line taken by

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most sociologists. Certainly, an area where we can especially see nostalgia as operating in this way is in advertising or, more generally, mass media and popular culture. The trend of using nostalgia as a way to sell various products is not new. For example, in the late 1800s, there was widespread interest in early American life, as evidenced by the popularity of colonial kitchens, by the fact that historical novels set in the colonial period were best-sellers, and by the tendency for advertising campaigns to appropriate the names of historical figures from the colonial era; e.g., Quaker Oats adopted a William Penn—like character as its trademark in 1877 and also hired a Quaker man to appear at state fairs and town celebrations. Since nostalgia is a bittersweet emotion, marketers have to be tricky about evoking it. For example, they would not want the sense of loss to predominate. Yet, it seems that nostalgia is used quite ubiquitously (and, we could guess, effectively) as a marketing tool. The chapter on the VW Bug demonstrates the power of the relationship between marketing and nostalgia.

Advertising campaigns for many products are clearly attempting to trigger nostalgia in potential consumers. As Theresa Howard (2003) says, "[m]any marketers are looking backward these days to try to move sales forward."[2] She notes that, "[i]n these tough times, nostalgia for rosier days seems to be driving a consumer appetite for retro products and design."[3] Andrew Wernick (1997), in his semiotic analysis of a 1993 ad for a new four-season resort that promotes the product by constructing "a complex of values and symbols which harks back to the joys of the past and of returning to origins,"[4] notes the use of nostalgia in advertising campaigns. This is evidenced, more generally, in trends such as "retro fashion, period movies, 'natural' foods and materials, resistance to modernist architecture, not to mention 'green' thinking, identity, politics, and preoccupation with cultural roots."[5] Wernick offers an explanation:

> The view forward has become bleak. . . . Even though the nuclear threat has apparently (for the moment) been lifted, this is not a time of great hope. Widespread disillusionment, both private and public, has attended the decline of Western economic expectations that followed the end of the long boom and the shocks provoked by globalisation and the "restructuring of capital." The mood has been fed by eco-pessimism, a sense of urban deterioration and tales of mad conflict everywhere.[6]

Considering the power of the nostalgia industry, many sociologists would be quick, indeed, to view nostalgia as ideology, false consciousness, or mystification. I contend, however, that this also is too simplistic

(or at least incomplete) a perspective, as it does not take into account the ways in which nostalgic images supplied by the dominant culture are actively selected and used by individuals and the myriad ways in which those images might resonate with individual biographies. Individuals can fight against what Habermas calls "the colonization of the life world";[7] i.e., the encroaching of the dominant culture's ideologies into one's taken-for-granted subjective experience. A dissonance is created when one realizes that her thoughts, goals, and ideas are mere reflections of what the powers-that-be dictate. That dissonance creates a terrain of both conflict and negotiation. Meanings that are created and sustained, then, are not simply givens. Active engagement occurs. As Raymond Williams observes, within a particular effective and dominant culture, there also exists something alternative; in fact, something that "we can call oppositional" (Higgins 2001).[8] Certainly, a key cultural contradiction of capitalism is that it is based on production (characterized by rationality and efficiency) and yet operates on consumption (characterized by materialism and emotion). But at least individuals can have agentive action, which comes from transforming commercialized values back into the everyday and thereby jettisoning the commodified expression of value.

The work of cultural studies scholar John Fiske provides many examples of the ways in which "the masses" actively engage with resources provided by the dominant groups in society. He uses the term "excorporation" to refer to the process by which the subordinate create their own culture out of the resources that the dominant provide.[9] Customs and practices of Gen X consumers provide examples of this process. Naughton and Vlasic (1998) note that, while Gen Xers have "adopted many products and fashions from the 1960s and 1970s as their own, they often update them with an ironic twist."[10] In this way, some creativity ensues. As noted in Chapter 5, Gen Xers may struggle to find their niche in a culture that is so awash in Baby Boomer nostalgia. But, in fact, Gen X nostalgia is right there alongside of the Boomer nostalgia. Millennial Kids (or Gen Y), the next cohort, are beginning their struggle to create a niche, to find a means to define and characterize their generation. Surely, they will use the cultural resources available to them, which might mean some interesting mix between Boomer and Xer popular culture. This is, to some extent, what Gen Xers have done; e.g., remakes of '60 songs, retro culture as expressed in the revival of bell-bottom pants and platform shoes. Members of the generation take what is provided culturally and make it their own. As a postmodern generation, this group also does

much to collapse—or, rather, eliminate—the distinction between high and low (or "popular") culture. In general, Gen Xers (and their "Y" successors) do not give binary opposites much legitimacy. This might be the first cohort that encourages us to think more in terms of "both" or "and," rather than "either/or."

It seems that people typically dismiss nostalgia as insignificant, unimportant, or uncomplicated. Part of my mission with this book has been to make problematic that quick dismissal. In considering the origin of the term and its permutations over time, we see that nostalgia is not a simple term nor is it an uncomplicated experience. Much is brought to bear in the experience of nostalgia. We can take a critical approach in dealing with nostalgia—either at the micro or macro level. The individual experiencing nostalgia might identify which of Davis's three orders of nostalgia characterizes the experience (e.g., "simple," "reflexive," or "interpreted" nostalgia, as described in chapter 6). Rather than merely "waxing nostalgic," one might question the truth or accuracy of the nostalgic claim, identify what triggers the nostalgia, and consider what purposes might be served by the experience. Individuals and groups might identify sources of nostalgia in culture at large, which of course are plentiful—especially in the marketplace—and examine how and why nostalgia is being used and consider what effect, if any, these nostalgic images or ideas have on themselves. Nostalgia from what, and for whom?

It is important to reiterate that "continuity of identity" does not imply that identity is static. Rather, one observes both sameness and differentness in oneself over time. The act of reminiscence and the experience of nostalgia may result in our truly seeing, "That was then, this is now." In this way, we note changes in the self over time. Depending upon the nature of those changes, we might feel a sense of growth or we might feel a sense of loss. Most likely, *both* growth and loss feelings are triggered and those feelings may be important in one's understanding of self and the construction and maintenance of a coherent identity.

FINAL REMARKS

Much of what sociologists do is to take what is commonly taken for granted and turn it on its head. While some people may quip that sociology is simply "common sense," in fact, sociological research often challenges and overturns commonsensical notions. My treatment of nostalgia is consistent with this characteristic of sociology. The notion of

nostalgia as passive and as connoting one who has checked out of the present is challenged and, I think, overturned. The kinds of things that sociologists study are such that, once we have made what we are studying problematic, it is virtually impossible to go back to holding a more comfortable or straightforward view of what many take for granted. My own conception and experience of nostalgia, for example, is likely affected by my study. Just as we wonder if those who study popular culture can ever truly enjoy watching a movie as a recreational thing to do rather than as an analytical exercise, I have to wonder if my study of nostalgia has somehow affected my genuine experience of nostalgia. Inevitably, this is the case. But if study such as this makes us more reflective and aware, then this is a positive outcome. We might examine our own experience of nostalgia, keeping in mind the three orders of nostalgia that Davis identified. We also might brainstorm areas in which nostalgia could have applications that are beneficial to people and, conversely, what dangers nostalgia may present. As we continue to be inundated with images of the past in our popular culture, we might find that we take a more critical look at those images—are they accurate presentations of the past? Who is putting forth those particular images and why?

 I hope that my treatment of nostalgia here has been gentle. Recall Elihu Howland's (1962) admonition that:

> Some poets, authors, artists and musicians have mastered the skill of preserving and communicating the feeling of nostalgia without violating it. We should learn from them; and, until we do, perhaps remain silent.[11]

The ideas presented in this book are not static; rather, ideas about and conceptions of nostalgia are dynamic. Some of the research reported upon in this book is in progress; it is ongoing. I would like to think of this book as a beginning in the dialogue about the nature and the use(s) of nostalgia. More correctly, it is a continuing of a dialogue that began long ago but, in recent years (at least in the social sciences), has been truncated. If nostalgia can be a sanctuary of meaning, then let's explore this. I think we always need a sanctuary.

Appendix
Methods:
The Construction of Meaning

I am a mirror that reflects back their pain, their fears, and their victories. I am also the inquirer who asks the sometimes difficult questions, who searches for evidence and patterns. I am the companion on the journey, bringing my own story to the encounter, making possible an interpretive collaboration. I am the audience who listens, laughs, weeps, and applauds. I am the spider woman spinning their tales. Occasionally, I am a therapist who offers catharsis, support, and challenge, and who keeps track of emotional minefields. Most absorbing to me is the role of the human archaeologist who uncovers the layers of mask and inhibition in search of a more authentic representation of life experience.

—Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot[1]

CHAPTERS FOUR THROUGH EIGHT FEATURE RESEARCH I HAVE CONDUCTED over the past several years. In this appendix, I wish to more clearly describe my methods of research.

CHAPTER 4
RECOLLECTIONS OF THE 1950S

This study represents an attempt to reconstruct the experience of the 1950s—not simply by consulting history books or other sources of "official record," but by talking with individuals who grew up during that decade.

Two works which most mirror my own are Benita Eisler's *Private Lives: Men and Women of The Fifties* (1986) and Brett Harvey's *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (1993). In the former, Eisler, who was herself a teen in the 1950s, talked with "sixteen contemporaries," the majority of whom she found through snowball sampling. She attempted to give a voice to the "silent generation." Indeed, she suggested that "[w]e were not so much a 'silent generation' as a secretive,

private one; a cohort of closet individualists, our 'real' lives were lived underground."[2] Harvey, too, conducted interviews. Her informants were ninety-two women who came of age in the '50s. These women talked about what they were thinking, feeling, and doing during that decade. Harvey notes that they "seemed to feel almost ashamed they'd been so docile, so quick to submerge their identities into their husbands'. They needed to be reminded that they were hardly alone; that millions of American women were doing just what they were doing."[3]

The methodology I used is one commonly found within cultural studies, where interdisciplinary approaches are applied in the study of cultural texts and practices in an attempt to reconstitute or reconstruct people's experiences. The cultural studies approach considers those groups and areas of life which have been left out of analysis. Feminist methodologies are often synonymous with such an approach. As Stimpson (1987) says, "we must recover the stories of those whom official memory has excluded."[4] Consistent with this, the individuals I interviewed were not specifically selected because of special attributes or because they are well known. Rather, they are "ordinary" individuals who, like all of us, have insights to offer. Within the context of their own local experience it is they who are the experts.

A major tenet of cultural studies is the rejection of culture as monolith. Scholars working in this area emphasize the lack of consensus about common values and meanings. They stress the conflictual nature of social relations inherent in societies where divisions by sex, race, and class are reproduced. This is precisely the condition which is foundational for the postmodernist's rejection of the "grand narrative." The approach suggests that there are *multiple* agencies in society struggling for domination. Such an approach makes the question of a "collective memory" of the '50s even more interesting and important. A cultural studies approach is, in essence, ethnographic.

One major objective of my research was to "listen" for the unheard voices. Beyond the dominant voices via the mass media, what other "stories" are out there? I invited the discordant voices to be heard. As Stimpson (1987) aptly states:

> [W]e must realize that no single memory of anything is sufficient, any more than any single method for the study of memory is adequate. Even to begin to represent the past, we must create a collage of recollections, which overlap and collide with each other.[5]

A collage, by definition, juxtaposes fragments of disparate realities. Inviting individuals' memories of the 1950s, which did not always coincide with the collective memory, resulted in more of a collage than an all-encompassing, monolithic picture of that period of time.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) describes the interpretive study of culture as representing an attempt to "come to terms with the diversity of the

ways human beings construct their lives in the act of leading them."[6] Such interpretive explanation better enables us to understand varieties in human experience.

Cohort Analysis

A cohort is a group of individuals who experience the same event. As demographer Norman Ryder (1965) says, "[i]n almost all cohort research to date the defining event has been birth, but this is only a special case of the more general approach."[7] As an analytical tool, the cohort is especially useful in the type of research I am doing. Much like other variables that social scientists draw upon (such as social class), the cohort has explanatory power because it is an index "for the common experiences of many persons."[8] Cohort analysis is especially suited to a study like this one because "[t]he cohort record, as macro-biography, is the aggregate analogue of the individual life history."[9] In my study, the cohort consisted of individuals who came of age in the 1950s.

Sample

When I undertook this project in 1994, Americans in their mid-fifties, roughly, those between the ages of nine and twelve in 1950, constituted the theoretical population for the study. People of this age grew up in the fifties. Schuman and Scott (1989), in their study, "Generations and Collective Memories," demonstrate that "events and changes that have maximum impact in terms of memorableness occur during a cohort's adolescence and young adulthood."[10] Indeed, in addition to the personal development during this time, it is also during the adolescent years that individuals begin to become more aware of larger political and social events. Schuman and Scott show that "adolescence and early adulthood is the primary period of generational imprinting in the sense of political memories."[11] In her book, *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) searches for an authentic and subtle rendering of African Americans of privilege by talking at length with six individuals, all between their early forties and mid-fifties—"a developmental place from which we tend naturally to look backward and forward."[12] She suggests that, in addition, to providing a "wide-angle view of generational contrast," the middle years are also a "propitious moment for reflection and reinterpretation of a life story."[13] In her study, Lawrence-Lightfoot found that the reshaping of core sources of identity "seems to be a critical developmental task for people in their middle years."[14]

The principal method I used in creating a sample was the snowball sample, which involves locating individuals with the characteristic(s) you are looking for (in this case, membership in a particular age cohort) and asking these indi-

viduals for names of others who meet the criteria. To supplement this method, I also used alumni lists from local high schools, identifying persons who graduated from high school in the late '50s. I interviewed thirty-three individuals. I sought some reasonable diversity (in terms of the Midwest) on the basis of gender, race, and social class. In the service of seeking diversity, I interviewed a few individuals who fall out of the "theoretical population."

I share the oral historians' creed: "We are not testers of memory or recall. . . . [rather] we want to know what the events under discussion meant to those who recall them" (Grele 1991).[15] Interviewees are selected not because they represent "some abstract statistical norm, but because they typify historical processes."[16]

In terms of the aggregate demographics of my informants, I talked with twelve men and twenty-one women. Twenty-eight of the participants were white, and five were African American. Twenty-four of these individuals were married (nine men, fifteen women), seven were divorced (one man, six women), and two were single (men). Fourteen informants had occupations which the sociologist would label "professional;" six had "skilled" jobs; another six had "semi-skilled" jobs; and seven worked (or had retired from) "unskilled" occupations. The majority of my respondents (twenty-six) were in Michigan during the 1950s. I also talked with three people who grew up in California, one in Virginia, one in Louisiana, one in Indiana, and one who spent part of the decade in Mississippi before moving to Michigan.

Interviewing

The social sciences have been characterized by two broad approaches to collecting verbal data. One orientation seeks to discover or describe an objective world. Those with this orientation believe they are obtaining "Truth." The other approach is phenomenological. Researchers working within this latter orientation (most often in the disciplines of cultural anthropology, ethnography, and ethnomethodology) take the point of view that "social science should be interested in how human beings 'experience' their worlds rather than how physical events impact upon one another" (Foddy 1993).[17] This is the approach I take.

My interviews were semistructured and attempted to elicit views of the world from the subject's perspective by using "unscheduled probes that arise from the interview process itself" (Berg 1989).[18] Thus, my questions were open-ended; respondents were allowed to express themselves in their own words, answers were not suggested, and format effects were avoided. My interviewing approach closely followed Elliot Mishler (1986), who makes problematic the gap that exists between research interviewing and naturally occurring conversation. He offers a critique of the way interviewing is conducted in the mainstream and suggests that the interview should be viewed as

jointly produced "discourse."[19] Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) describes her role this way: "I am the companion on the journey, bringing my own story to the encounter, making possible an interpretive collaboration."[20] She does not view herself as "the interviewer," for she says, "[r]ather than being *'interviewed'* these six people are *'collaborators'* or *'cocreators'* of their life stories. . . . I am both audience and mirror, witness and provocateur, inquirer and scribe."[21]

To reiterate, my objective was not to glean facts, but rather, to obtain individuals' recollections of the 1950s. Historian David Thelen (1989) argues:

> In a study of memory the important question is not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time.[22]

My interest in and focus on the use value of the past was consistent with this line of thinking. Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) states that, in conducting interviews, her search was not for objective truth or replicable evidence, but rather, for "the reconstruction and reinterpretation of experience."[23]

I asked informants general questions which assessed the way that both the past and present are viewed, in an attempt to measure the social meaning of time. I inquired about the kinds of things they did for fun and asked them to describe personal, social, or political events during the 1950s which stand out in their memories. If they didn't touch upon social or political issues on their own, I probed and asked about notorious 1950s events (e.g., the Korean War, McCarthyism, the atomic bomb).

The historian would label the interviewees' responses "popular memory," which refers to "commonly held representations to be found in the oral accounts people give of past events, traditions, customs and social practices" (Cole 1990).[24] Cole adds a point especially relevant in this study: "Discussions of popular memory immediately extend beyond a conceptualization of memories as the property of individuals."[25] That is, the information gleaned from respondents in this study does not merely constitute what a specific individual remembers about the '50s; responses lend themselves to a broader, more encompassing interpretation. Indeed, interviewees' responses (or rather, the "narratives" that are constructed) link micro and macro concerns. As communication theorists David Middleton and Derek Edwards (1990) suggest:

> It is not only that conversation affords examination of the micro-processes of collective remembering, as these unfold with talk. Larger, societal themes are also available for examination, including historical, ideological and political ones.[26]

A major issue in a study such as this is the confounding of the effects of aging and life experiences on the individual. For example, if I had interviewed

these same people twenty years ago, I would undoubtedly have elicited quite different responses. As Ferrarotti (1990) aptly states: "we are what we have been—more exactly, what we *remember* being. But how is memory possible? The lived is at once mediated by the already experienced."[27] And, as Connerton (1989) says:

> Hence the difficulty of extracting our past from our present: not simply because present factors tend to influence—some might want to say distort—our recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present.[28]

Another possibility, however, is that "different responses" may be indicative of changes in the collective memory. This latter possibility would suggest that people re-write their own history—a phenomenon which qualitative methodologists refer to as "retrospective interpretation."

CHAPTER 5
A CASE OF DISPLACED NOSTALGIA:
YOUNG ADULTS LOOK BACK

The primary method that Jerry Markle and I employed for this study was content analysis. We asked the time machine question to students enrolled in sociology courses at two different universities in the Midwest, and then analyzed their responses following the method of content analysis. The sample was a convenience sample, meaning that generalization is not possible. (However, there is reason to believe that the students included in this sample are not much different from students enrolled at other public universities in the country).

Content analysis takes written materials, media presentations, and artifacts as its data. We analyzed the responses to our question by using pattern codes, which are "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, pattern, or explanation that the site suggest to the analyst" (Miles and Huberman 1984).[29] We first divided responses into "future" and "past," and then noted, more specifically, what dates were chosen. We grouped the dates into decades (for example, "the Fifties" and "the Sixties"). As discussed in the chapter, recurrent themes emerged in the reasons given for selecting a particular time in which to live.

CHAPTER 6
OBJECTS IN THE HOME

In our study of reasons individuals collect antiques, Carmen Latterell and I asked over one hundred antique collectors the following question: "Why do

you collect antiques?" As noted in the chapter, we located these collectors first through Latterell's membership in the Midwest Sad Iron Collectors Club. This club has 340 members across the United States and twenty-six members from other countries. The purpose of the club is to serve as a bulletin board for the exchange of information about antique pressing irons. Club members come from all walks of life, having in common a love for antique irons. The average age of these collectors is sixty-two, and most are married couples. Second, data were collected through e-mail from a club of Depression glass collectors. The club is comprised of dues-paying members who exchange information on antique glassware. Membership is restricted to the United States and Canada. The average collector is male and in his forties. Finally, the same question was asked of individuals at antique shows and auctions during the summer of 1996.

Content analysis was used to analyze the responses. We each, separately, categorized responses and found our inter-coder reliability to be very high. In addition, Latterell employed participant observation at antique shows and auctions. Because she is a collector herself, entry to these events remained nonproblematic. The observations she made at such events provided us with much insight into collecting as a subculture.

For the sojourner study, I conducted seven interviews with sojourners (three men, four women); the homelands represented include: Romania, China, Japan, Moldova, Bulgaria, and India. At the time of the interviews, these individuals had been in the U.S. for at least two years. My interview method followed that described earlier. The sample was a convenience sample.

Sojourner Nitika Malik interviewed seven respondents (four females, three males) who represented a group of transnational migrants. These informants were international students enrolled at the university where I work and where Nitika was an Honors Sociology major. The sojourners voluntarily immigrated to the United States where their residency has ranged from one month to five years. Their countries of origin include Indonesia, Kenya, Tanzania, India, and Sri Lanka. Nitika describes interviewing her subjects thus:

> The questions took me on a personal, one-on-one journey with my informants: the journey began with some basic, demographic questions about their goals, the duration that they had been in the United States, first impressions, and this made way for more delving talks about their notion of house, home, and homeland. We walked down the memory lane together, with me asking them about their recollections of home, the life they have recreated for themselves here, changes in roles and expectations they experienced when they visited home after having been here and the objects that were special to them, which they brought with them to the U.S. and what they signify to them. These interviews were held in a variety of field

settings, neutral to both my informants and me; they varied from the university campus to coffee shops.[30]

Nitika and I shared with one another the stories that informants shared with us. And, in so doing, we observed themes and patterns, and worked on building a lexicon to express our findings.

CHAPTER 7
THE VW BUG: COLLECTING STORIES

As described in the chapter, students in my summer course (2002), "Nostalgia in Contemporary Society," embarked upon a research project that involved collecting stories about Volkswagens. Beginning the second week of the summer session, we designated the remaining three Thursdays of the session to collecting data. One of my colleagues allowed us to park his 1968 VW Bug in a tourist area in Duluth called Canal Park, where we spent a total of three days collecting stories from passersby. Because Duluth is heavily populated with tourists in the summer months, many of our respondents were from outside the state and, in some cases, outside the country, providing us with a lot of diversity in our convenience sample. Armed with signs which read, "VW Stories Wanted," cassette recorders, and consent forms, we conducted forty-nine interviews which we then transcribed and analyzed, searching for patterns in the data.

CHAPTER 8
APPLICATION: REMINISCENCE AND NOSTALGIA
SERVING INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY CONTINUITY
(INTERVIEWS WITH GRANDMOTHERS)

The study on grandmothers alluded to in this chapter involved semistructured interviews conducted in the beginning of the summer of 1998 and ending in the winter of 1999. The informants were thirty women who had only recently become grandmothers (i.e., within the last five years). For the majority of these women, the grandmother role was very new (this was their first grandchild). A snowball sample was used in the selection of potential informants for this study. The participants were recruited on the basis of their having become a grandmother within the past five years. The origin of the sample was the public university in Minnesota where I am a faculty member. The sample first included members of the local community and then residents in the Twin Cities area. Contacts in the state of Michigan allowed for an expansion of the study there. The sample was, admittedly, quite homogenous. All

of the women in the sample were white. The majority of informants had been (or were currently) employed in the labor force. The age range of respondents was 48 to 75 years of age, with the majority of respondents in their 50s and 60s. All participants had at least a high school diploma. Almost half of the informants had had "some college."

I wanted to interview individuals who had recently gone through a life transition. During times of transition, it would seem that individuals may look back on the past and, in comparing/contrasting or somehow reconciling the past and the present, the self surely is affected (i.e., constructed or, better *re*-constructed). Interviews with individuals who were experiencing a life transition—that of becoming a grandmother—enabled me to address questions surrounding the relationship between past and present roles and the implications for the self. The semistructured format of the interviews enabled me to somewhat guide the interviews and draw comparisons and contrasts between the informants' experiences and perceptions, while also allowing them to go into more depth in certain areas. Informants were asked questions about motherhood and grandmotherhood.

The interviews were transcribed and, using a word processing program, responses to specific questions were compared. I followed a grounded theory approach, and thus the process of coding the data was inductive.

It is significant to note the emotional aspects of this project. In the course of certain interviews, the memories and emotions that were triggered for participants were sometimes painful for them. There were a few instances when informants shed some tears. In one case, an informant remembered a terrible car accident that one of her daughters had been in, which has left her daughter with a handicap. Another informant cried as she talked about one of her daughters who had gotten involved in drugs. And yet another difficult instance was when an informant talked about the fact that one of her sons has never really gotten along with his father. Also, one informant lost her son; Sue remembers:

> He played soccer and little league and football. I loved going to his games. I was like, "That's my boy." He was a big kid with blond hair and blue eyes. Him dying was . . . I can't think of anything that comes close. That was the biggest, hugest, most horrible thing in the world.

Another sensitive situation occurred when an informant told me that her daughter-in-law hated her and would not let her have anything to do with her one-year-old granddaughter. As the interviewer, these were difficult situations. How can one be the objective, distant, social-scientific interviewer in such instances, remaining indifferent and untouched by such suffering? I certainly could not. I saw, heard, and felt (to the extent I could) their emotions.

I owe much to my informants—these wonderful women who invited me into their homes or met me at restaurants so that I could interview them about their experiences. I found it very valuable and meaningful to meet and talk with these individuals. The vast majority of my informants indicated that they enjoyed participating in the study a great deal. This study, as well as the others which comprise this book, was the result of collaboration between myself and the research participants, who freely offered their time, sharing memories and perceptions in response to my questions. I appreciate their willingness to let me be a companion on their journey.

Notes

Preface

1. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 13.

2. Elihu S. Howland, "Nostalgia," *Journal of Existential Psychiatry* 3 no. 10 (1962): 199.

3. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

4. Roger C. Aden, "Nostalgic Communication as Temporal Escape: *When It was a Game*'s Re-construction of a Baseball/Work Community," *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (1995): 22.

5. Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *The Quantum Society: Mind, Physics, and a New Social Vision* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 261.

Chapter 1. "Nostalgia"

A previous version of this chapter appeared in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, volume 56, Fall 1999, 296—304. I am grateful to editor Paul Johnston for permission to publish material from that article.

1. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 14.

2. Willis McCann, "Nostalgia: A Descriptive and Comparative Study." (Ph.D. diss., Dept. of Psychology, Indiana University, 1940), 5.

3. Ibid., 22.

4. There is a paucity of research on nostalgia in sociological theory. Yet there was certainly a great deal of nostalgia embedded in the work of some of the early theorists in the field. Ferdinand Töennies, for example, saw his own time (the late nineteenth century) characterized by *Gesellschaft*, a form of calculative and contractual relationships that governed the interaction between strangers. *Gemeinschaft*, on the other hand, was characterized by intimate relationships of friendship and kin and had also been found among the community at large. For Max Weber, European rationality had a serious downside: the role of tradition was diminished. Weber's critical stance toward bureaucracy seems to reflect some nostalgia for a more personal, traditional past. Rationality was viewed as leading to alienation and dehumanization. For Emile Durkheim, modern industrial society was rootless and gave its members no sense of identity and role. Pre-industrial society, however, provided a stronger bond between the individual and the community.

5. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 4.

6. Jan Morris, "Home Thoughts From Abroad," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2002, 137.

7. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

8. Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html.

9. Andrew Wernick, "Resort to Nostalgia: Mountains, Memories and Myths of Time," in *Buy This Book: Studies in Advertising and Consumption*, ed. Mica Nava, Andrew Blake, Iain MacRury, and Barry Richards. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 219.

10. Ibid.

11. M. A. Mills and P. G. Coleman, "'Nostalgic Memories in Dementia'—A Case Study," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 38 (1994): 205.

12. Ralph Harper, *Nostalgia: An Existential Exploration of Longing and Fulfillment in the Modern Age* (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1966), 120.

13. This phrase is from a student in my "Nostalgia in Contemporary Society" class: Melissa Kramer, summer 2002.

14. Elihu Howland, "Nostalgia," *Journal of Existential Psychiatry* 3, no. 10 (1962): 198.

15. Ibid.

16. McCann, "Nostalgia," 43.

17. Harper, *Nostalgia*, 105.

18. Howland, "Nostalgia," 198.

19. Cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams developed the "structure of feeling" concept, which highlights the relationship between the individual and society. It is recognized that there is an organization—a structure—to feeling. Individuals draw upon a sense of feeling that remains in culture over time, while participating in the ongoing construction (or *re*-construction) of the structure.

20. Stuart Tannock, "Nostalgia Critique." *Cultural Studies* no. 9, no. 3 (1995): 456–57.

21. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 13.

22. Steve Chilton, personal conversation with author, October 2002.

23. George H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, ed. Arthur E. Murphy. (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1932), 12.

24. Steve Chilton, 1997.

25. Kimberly Smith, "Mere Nostalgia: Notes on a Progressive Paratheory," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2000): 523.

26. Keith Naughton and Bill Vlasic, "The Nostalgia Boom: Why the Old is New Again," *BusinessWeek*, March 23, 1998, 60.

27. David Lowenthal, "Nostalgia Tells it Like it Wasn't," in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, ed. C. Shaw (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1985), 28.

28. Kimberly Smith, "Mere Nostalgia," 510.

29. Chilton, personal conversation.

30. Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

31. Leslie Chang, "In China, a Wave of Nostalgia That Comes in Red: TV Ads Revisit the Revolution," *The Miami Herald*, Jan. 20, 2003, http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/business/special_packages/business_monday/4975446.htm.

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CHAPTER 3. CONTINUITY OF IDENTITY

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CHAPTER 4. RECOLLECTIONS OF THE 1950S

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a matriarchal black family, the failure of black youth, higher rates of delinquency and crime among blacks, the poorer competitive position of blacks in the job market, the alienation of black men which results in the withdrawal from stable family-oriented society, higher rates of drug addiction among blacks, and despair in achieving a stable life," 224. Foster criticizes Moynihan for placing the blame on the structure of the black family: "Where such conditions do exist, it is not the structure of the black family that is to blame, but the racism of the white society," 224. See Herbert J. Foster's article, "African Patterns in the Afro-American Family," *Journal of Black Studies* 14, no. 2 (1983): 201–32.

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CHAPTER 5. A CASE OF DISPLACED NOSTALGIA

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Chapter 6. Objects in the Home

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