Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature

Jennifer K. Ladino

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The goal of Jennifer K. Ladino's recent book *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature* is neatly set out by the first two words of its title: to reclaim nostalgia for a progressive politics that uses it to encourage ethical relationships between social groups as well as between humans and nature. Responding to a number of critics who have read nostalgia as an inherently conservative or uncritical emotion, Ladino demonstrates nostalgia's malleability as an affective posture that can be put to a wide variety of political uses. Not least, she argues, it can "aid in environmental movements by invoking an organic or unspoiled natural world in order to enlist sympathetic proponents of preservation" (xii). Ladino's study seeks to identify how this strategy takes shape in modern American environmental literature. Examining a variety of twentieth and twenty-first century texts that "envisio[n] nostalgia as a disruptive, productive, even progressive force," Ladino shows how these texts, by invoking nostalgia as a central affective means through which humans relate to the past and to the natural world, and advocate for a future in which humans foster more sustainable and sustaining connections with each other and with the nonhuman world around them (7).

Ladino's foremost critical archive in her book is American fiction. Her six main chapters consist of chronologically ordered readings of a variety of texts in which nature and nostalgia play a defining role. Interspersing these chapters are shorter "interchapters" that offer brief readings of cultural texts gathered from wide-ranging genres and periods that demonstrate, to varying degrees, nostalgia in its traditional (and often problematic) forms. These include Ansel Adams's *Born Free and Equal* (1844), the writings of the Southern agrarian writers, and the TV show *Survivor*. Due to their brevity, the arguments in these interchapters sometimes appear slightly rushed, and not all of them are entirely effective. However, they do provide helpful "mainstream" counterpoints to the more complex instances of nostalgia Ladino examines in her main chapters.

Ladino situates these more complex versions of nostalgia as literary evocations of what she calls "counter-nostalgia." Contrasting counter-nostalgia to white, mainstream (and inherently problematic) "frontier nostalgia," Ladino defines it as a "performative, strategic" means of appropriating nostalgia, typically through "creative, often literary" techniques, in order to subvert and challenge hegemonic discourses surrounding nature or nation (15). Counter-nostalgia can be "ambivalent, localized, contingent,

and ironic"; it occurs whenever authors deploy nostalgia as an affective tool rather than fall prey to it themselves (15). Perhaps sensing its limitations, Ladino uses the term sparingly—for example, it does not surface at all in the chapter on DeLillo —and I am not entirely convinced of its utility. In part, my uncertainty owes to the fact that in practice, "counter-nostalgia" often seems to be defined according to the subject position of the individual wielding it: it could almost be described as "minority nostalgia." It may be that the defining trait of counter-nostalgia is less whatever rhetorical maneuvers accompany it than its ideological thrust, which is inevitably in resistance and response to the mainstream liberal culture it seeks to transform (or, on some occasions, to condemn).

The first chapter of *Reclaiming Nostalgia* analyzes Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* (1921) in order to show (as Ladino seeks to do throughout the book) how nostalgia for a past community can spark a writer's critique of the injustices and power imbalances in his or her own time. Ladino emphasizes the materiality of the disappeared origin Zitkala-Ša remembers in her stories and memoirs: "[r]ather than longing for an idyllic past that has mysteriously disappeared, *American Indian Stories* longs for a historically rooted, 're-placed,' tribal community" (49). Zitkala-Ša's idealized natural state is one that includes humans, who exist in a symbiotic relationship with their surroundings, so that "any Edenic qualities [this state] possesses stem from human interactions with their environment, not from the absence of humans" (40). In so doing, Zitkala-Ša "emphasiz[es], rather than downplay[s], the widespread conception of Indians as closer to nature" (37). Given this depiction, it is not always clear to what extent non-native readers are part of this envisioned and remembered community. In one essay, "racial categories dissolve" for Zitkala-Ša, and "she sees the world as consisting of a 'living mosaic of human beings' that renders not just her tribe but all of humanity 'one large family'" (39). But this notion jars with the politics of her stories, in which, as Ladino's observes, "whites are cast in the role of Eden's serpentine devil" (44). The wider culture against which Zitkala-Ša writes is sometimes welcomed, sometimes castigated—a tension Ladino never fully resolves, though she does note that the upper-middle-class white audience for which Zitkala-Ša wrote as a contributor to *Harper's* magazine may have contributed to the "ambivalence" detectable in her writing (49).

In her next chapter, Ladino considers Claude McKay's early novel *Home to Harlem* (1928), in which nostalgia takes on political overtones similar to those discernible in Zitkala-Ša's writing. McKay's nostalgia, though, is more multilayered. Jake, the protagonist of *Home to Harlem*, remembers places in both his personal and his ancestral past: these include the rural South where he was raised, his homeland of Haiti, and the continent of Africa. From the regional to the transnational, "[e]ach of these homes is imported, in symbolic and narrative form, as a counterpoint to the present in such a way as to generate a critique of current circumstances and, in the process, extend the geographic possibilities for African American solidarity" (68). Because Jake recognizes (at least some of the time) that these past locales were not always themselves ideal homes, his nostalgia is conflicted, forcing him to consider what might have been different. In this way, "rather than functioning as a conservative, reactionary version of the past that justifies the present, nostalgia instead reimagines the future by contrasting it with the past" (71).

Chapter three discusses two related environmental texts of the Cold War period, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). Ladino argues that both texts deploy "pastoral nature" as "an ideal that might be revived in the present—or at least invoked as a rhetorical strategy for environmentalism" (93). This

thesis remains somewhat under-articulated in Ladino's rather brief reading of *Silent Spring*, but she does helpfully distinguish between Carson's self-aware deployment of nostalgia and its more mainstream, unreflective iterations. Thus, "[n]ostalgia does not govern Carson's text; she is not writing in the grips of it, or of any emotion. Rather, she uses nostalgia as an emotional tool in her argument" (98). Leopold's work is, according to Ladino, more nakedly emotional, more unabashedly nostalgic, but it still uses this impulse in service of environmental aims, as when Leopold induces what Ladino calls "anticipatory nostalgia" in the reader, warning us that if we "fail to grieve" for what has already disappeared "we may no longer even know what we have lost" (103). In general, Ladino argues, Leopold's essays "use familiar, even troubling, narratives in the service of promoting environmentally progressive ones"—a tactic that links him to many of the writers already discussed in *Reclaiming Nostalgia* (113).

Ladino then turns to N. Scott Momaday, evaluating how the "American land ethic" he espoused in a 1971 essay figures within his novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968). Again, a tension mounts between the apparent universality of the ethic outlined in Momaday's essay—an ethic that is "open to all," even if Momaday "does privilege an Indian perspective" (131)—and its restricted reach in *House Made of Dawn*, which "positions non-Native readers as alienated from [Momaday's ideal of reciprocity]" (138). Nonetheless, the novel's ultimate ethical imperative is one that extends out to all its readers, inviting them to "consider the positive alternatives that might emerge from a return to the remembered earth" (136). With respect to Momaday's work, the phrase "remembered earth" offers a rich multiplicity of meanings: nostalgia here is linked not only to natural but to social environments. *House Made of Dawn* affirms connection to "landscape, family and culture," so that home, the site of nostalgic memory, is "linked with a communal past...as well as with landscape" (147-148). Momaday's nostalgia thus "functions like Claude McKay's and Zitkala-Ša's in that it reaches back to a harmonious time and place that precedes the violent history of colonization" in order to present "an ethical ecological worldview in which connection and belonging are central" (151, 150).

In Chapter five, we encounter a text that reads nostalgia in a somewhat different manner. This is a welcome change at a point in *Reclaiming Nostalgia* at which the reader might feel, given the similar themes in the previous works discussed, that thus far a rather contained argument has been made at considerable length. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) takes the study into the realm of the postmodern, in which nostalgia is complicated by an irony that, far from negating it, may in fact compound it. Ladino claims that nostalgia appears in *White Noise* "primarily through a sense of lost nature"—an effect of the fact that in the modern world, "second" and even "third" nature have displaced any notion of unmediated nature (169, 170). But Ladino's argument is most provocative where it observes other forms of postmodern nostalgia. Characters in *White Noise* are nostalgic for "authentic and useful knowledge," especially the traditional and communal ways in which that knowledge was transmitted (176); they are nostalgic for stably embodied selves (178); and they are nostalgic for "authentic experiences that are less mediated" (175). Though Ladino does not suggest the idea outright, her argument implies that the characters in *White Noise* are even nostalgic for nostalgia itself—or, more specifically, for a time in which sincere and unselfconscious nostalgia was still possible. Her critique of nostalgia in *White Noise* leads Ladino to ask some cogent questions: "If nostalgia is understood as a longing for an ideal of sorts, then what are those ideals? Who establishes them? Who benefits from our belief in them, from our continually unfulfilled longings?" (186). In forcing us to ask these questions of ourselves, DeLillo

intimates that "some of nostalgia's power comes from exposing the gap between the 'real' and the 'ideal'" (186)—a gap we will have to navigate, Ladino argues, in order to properly evaluate nostalgia's influence in the postmodern world.

Chapter six focuses on Ruth Ozeki's 2003 novel *All Over Creation*. Ladino argues that Ozeki's novel updates and revises the pastoral American nature myth by considering that myth in light of technological and late-capitalist developments of the last few decades. The novel's central conflicts are between those who represent a lost communal past and a Native American culture, on the one hand, and the proponents of the agribusinesses and marketing schemes whose hegemony has displaced and erased this culture, on the other. In delineating this conflict, Ladino suggests, *All Over Creation* often tips toward romanticizing the past: it features "nostalgia for an Eden in which humans live in harmony with each other and with their environment" (202). This nostalgia instantiates a tension in the text, as the novel "seems to idealize an imaginary origin that is as yet untouched by socioeconomic forces, even as it recognizes the increasing impossibility of such a state of affairs" (204). The challenge readers are left with is to develop a responsible politics that is both hopeful about the future and honest about the past.

In her conclusion, Ladino makes clear that she recognizes the limits of nostalgia, but insists again that "a nostalgic pastoral ideal helps challenge social injustices and provide a vision to strive toward" (228). Her analyses of these novels testify, at least to some degree, to the validity of this claim, and in so doing, they successfully show how the concept of nostalgia can be linked to a progressive politics. Another of the general strengths of *Reclaiming Nostalgia* is its unweaving of some of the complex ways in which nature and nostalgia intersect, not only in American literature but in the American cultural imagination. Ladino's emphasis on the material and spatial dimensions of nostalgia is also welcome. Ladino furthers the critical debate over nostalgia by attempting "to map nostalgia, to follow its winding courses and plot its particular trajectories," and her attention to nostalgia's physical history and dimensions opens up useful avenues for continued discussion (7).

Despite these notable strengths, certain aspects of *Reclaiming Nostalgia* invite criticism. First of all, while Ladino's attention to the materiality of nostalgia's origins is admirable, it sometimes leads her to overlook the fact that nostalgia is, first and foremost, an inherently temporal affect. On occasion, Ladino invokes the distant past as the site of nostalgia in a text, but the chronology of this past state remains unfixed, to the point that it is debatable whether it ever really even existed. Examples of this tendency abound. As I noted earlier, Zitkala-Ša imagines an ideal "Edenic" community (40). Similarly, the Southern agrarian writers "conjur[e] an ideal of a lost pastoral environment in which humans and nature coexist peacefully" (55). Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* "constructs…an American land ethic that begins with a nostalgic return to an imagined pastoral past—a community that was not necessarily 'real,' but 'could have been'" (136). Ozeki's nostalgia is for an "imagined space" of "healthier nature" that is also more or less explicitly romanticized (221). The immediate difficulty such idealizations force us to confront is that the progressive politics of nostalgia for which these writers advocate may well be, in some cases, a politics rooted in fantasy. And political movements that hinge on historical fantasies or idealizations are (arguably) deeply problematic from the outset.

Defending Ozeki's novel from this very objection, Ladino argues that imagined sites of nostalgia can be politically effective even if they are only abstractions: "Whether such a space ever existed is beside the point. What matters is the kind of society we want for ourselves now, and the past is as valid a place as any to find an ideal toward which to strive"

(221). But if the pastoral space never existed at all—as Ladino admits it may well not have—then the past is exactly where it cannot be found. In this sense, even the "ideal toward which to strive" is located much less in any past than in the nostalgic temperament of the present day. For this reason, I would argue that some of the literary instances of nostalgia diagnosed by Ladino would be better defined as fundamentally atemporal moments of pastoral idealization—of the wish, that is, for the *locus amoenus* that has been the governing trope in pastoral literature since its inception in ancient Greek poetry. While related to nostalgia, this concept differs from it in that—much like the ideal communities envisioned by some of the writers Ladino assesses—it is not necessarily located in any particular material past.

The dangers associated with an environmental politics rooted in nostalgia are also exacerbated by the fact that nostalgia for local past environments can romanticize those environments, glossing over negative memories and accentuating positive ones. When Ladino reads Claude McKay as suggesting that "before the U.S. occupation, Haiti was a peaceful, pastoral society living out a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment," she does little to question the accuracy of his sentiment or to consider the ramifications of the possibility that this representation of the past may be idealistic (77). A still more divisive feature of McKay's text, observed but left unquestioned by Ladino, is that it "reclaims savagery as a healthy part of a precolonial black history and identifies 'life' as something only blacks possess" (65). Such essentializing and reductive forms of nostalgia are surely more damaging than helpful.

Finally, this study might well have benefited from a deeper investment in the question of how critical theory relates to and interlinks the concepts of nostalgia and nature. Several theoretical domains—affect theory and postcolonial theory, to take only two examples—are closely connected to the subject matter with which Ladino engages. Ladino is certainly aware of these connections, but does not make as much use of them as she might have. After citing in her introduction Edward Said's argument that beginnings are not repositories of original truth but sites of repetition and return, Ladino invokes Said's claim six different times later in the book (and, perhaps ironically, thereby enacts repetition even as she discusses it), but never engages with his assertion in a significant way, whether by expanding it or by contesting it. Ladino's unwillingness to grapple with the theory she cites is disappointing precisely because the terrain she is working in—at the intersections of nature and memory, desire and temporality—seems a promising space in which to pursue the several theoretical and philosophical issues related to her main argument.

The above criticisms qualify, but certainly do not invalidate, the strengths of *Reclaiming Nostalgia*. Ladino reads a wide array of American fiction with acuity and demonstrates how nostalgia can inform competing versions of both the past and future of the United States, particularly with respect to the relations between human communities and between humans and nonhuman nature. As such, this book should prove a helpful critical resource for scholars researching in the areas of cultural and social memory, environmental studies, and/or twentieth-century American fiction.