

# THE FUTURE(S) OF (COLONIAL) NOSTALGIA OR RUMINATIONS ON RUINS

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*Why is there a global boom in colonial nostalgia? And what, exactly, is it about colonialism that we are nostalgic for? Pamila Gupta ruminates on the possibilities nostalgia might offer for a future-oriented politics, utopian or otherwise.*

*Nostalgia (from nostos—return home and algia—longing)*

A four hundred and fifty year old decaying corpse of a Roman Catholic missionary-turned-saint lies in Goa, India (a former Portuguese colony from 1510-1961), its future uncertain. What is the future post-coloniality of a colonial corpse? Should it be quietly buried in the face of its increasing material fragility, as the Jesuits who proclaim his corpse as (one of) theirs suggest time and time again? Or should it be propped up as it is every ten years for his Exposition (1964, 1974, 1984, 1994, 2004), during which Catholic pilgrims (local and diasporic), Goans, and international tourists flock to Goa? Or rather, does the holy body of St. Francis Xavier merely serve as an archaic reminder of the anachronistic history of

the *Estado da Índia*, including its increasing relic status over time? Is there such a thing as a future to colonial nostalgia, and should it be sustained by such ritualized events as this one? What is the future of valorizing, sentimentalizing, or indulging the colonial past? And are we becoming even more nostalgic about colonialism the further we are historically from its demise (and particularly to the peculiar lateness of Portuguese decolonization, my area of interest)?

**What is the future postcoloniality of a colonial corpse?**

If in fact there is a striking “boom in colonial nostalgia” the world over, as Richard Werbner suggests in the 1998 volume *Memory and the Postcolony*, then what does this suggest about the troubled times we live in now? And what is it about colonialism that we are nostalgic for exactly? Is it merely its materiality, its ability to be consumed via objects, manifest in design, décor, and dress (a *lá colonial chic* as Bissell reveals in his 2005 article in the journal *Cultural Anthropology*)? Or does its nostalgic power rest elsewhere, in its remembered (or rather forgotten) way of life in the past (its “order” and “rules” as opposed to the “chaos” of today), as I have heard lamented (by many a Goan) on many an occasion. Such expressions, however unsettling they may be, need to be reckoned with, not simply in relation to “poor” or “fictitious” history but rather, as Bissell argues, “as a social practice that mobilizes various signs of the past (colonial and otherwise) in the context of contemporary struggles”. Finally, how much can we think of nostalgia as a cultural practice operating in historical time, as depending on “where the speaker



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stands in the landscape of the present”, as Kathleen Stewart puts it. I want to use this case study to open up a critical space to think about future tenses of nostalgia (including its different discourses, not only colonial), the power of material ruins for invoking nostalgia, and for conceptualizing nostalgia as an affect with political potentialities. What follows are a few ruminations on these topics.

As Svetlana Boym notes in *The Future of Nostalgia*, “It would not occur to us to demand a prescription for nostalgia. Yet in the seventeenth century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, akin to the common cold. Swiss doctors believed



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that opium, leeches and a journey to the Swiss Alps would take care of nostalgic symptoms. By the twenty-first century, the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition. The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia. Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s. Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space.”

Can we take Boym’s ruminations on nostalgia as

a starting point for thinking through, around (and perhaps even sideways) its relation to utopian futures? In other words, *where do we locate nostalgia, not only temporally and spatially, but historically as well*, and can we think through this analytic more thoroughly? Is nostalgia wholly produced in relation to the past, or is there, a theory of the future implicit in each evocation of nostalgia? Do we, in fact, only turn to nostalgia when the future (and by implication, the present) looks increasingly bleak, as if a return to or a revisiting of the past from this particular perspective of longing, loss or desire will somehow stand in for or at least explain how we got to this future point? And, finally, if nostalgia is the “incurable modern condition” then what does this say about the moment we live in here and now? And what does it say about the power of nostalgia to make us perceive the future in such stark terms? Are we then becoming increasingly more nostalgic (for what we perceive as *what was*) as we experience the long-ness of the twenty first century ahead of us?

As Susan Buck-Morss argues in her book *Dream-world and Catastrophe*: “We would do well to bring the ruins up close and work our way through the rubble in order to rescue the utopian hopes that modernity engendered, because we cannot afford to let them disappear.”

Next I want to explore why ruins are so evocative of the nostalgic. In what ways do the material ruins (of not only colonialism, but also socialism, and communism) occupy particular temporal and spatial matrices today (as sites of pilgrimage, commemoration, memorialization, heritage tourism, and/or aesthetic wonderment) that in turn, help us to reconcile and/or recover *our senses of self in relation to larger pasts, presents, and futures*? And



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what can ruins tell us about the power of nostalgia as a tool for forgetting (rather than remembering) the conditions of possibility of history? I also want to ask whose forgetting exactly is taking place in the process of contemplating (colonial) ruins: can nostalgia then be understood as a form of both collective (national) and individual amnesia? As a sign of excess for some and not for others? Is there ever a theological (or existential for that matter) element to nostalgia? Finally, if we take up the call to work through the rubble of ruins that continue to pile up around us, then perhaps we can think about nostalgia more closely in relation to possible futures.

Lastly, I want to pose a question that came up in the Future Tense study group based at WISER in 2008: whether engagement in nostalgia is a conservative or liberatory exercise? In other words, how can we understand nostalgia in relation to (utopian) politics? And more specifically, how can we understand it in relation to thinking through the (radical) politics of the future and *future futurisms*? If nostalgia (for something lost) produces utopian longings (for change, for hope, for possibility), can we think about this (ordinary) affect as a catalyst for individual and collective action that is not always reductively conservative (war, genocide, xenophobia), but rather as potentially liberatory through its articulation of the sensory, the sublime, and the sloppily sentimental, all at once? And as Morss notes, through its ability to “surprise” the present rather than explain it? If radicality “lies in the constant effort to keep things open”, as Achille Mbembe puts it, can nostalgia serve as the (future) basis for political organization, agency, peace, justice, reason, and love?

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