THE UNCANNY CHILD OF AUSTRALIAN NATIONHOOD: 
NOSTALGIA AS A CRITICAL TOOL IN CONCENTUALIZING SOCIAL CHANGE

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Nostalgic, socially privileged ideals of childhood have actively contributed to the formation of Australian national identity, as well as modern subject-formations more broadly. This paper argues that, while such nostalgia has been drawn on for normative ends—in the service of the management of the modern individual—nostalgia also has the power to disrupt our conceptions of the normal. In the context of the contemporary “crisis” of childhood particularly, opportunities to reconstitute ideals of “childhood” and “family” differently have become available to communities such as Aboriginal Australians, who previously have been denied access to these nostalgic forms.

Nostalgia for childhood has long been a central motif of Australian cultural life. The lost childhood that is longed-for, however, is very specific to the “relaxed and comfortable” modernity to which Australian nationhood aspires.¹ What is idealized through this figure is a

¹ Leading up to the 1996 Federal election, the then opposition leader (and soon-to-be Prime Minister) John Howard captured the public imagination by affirming a modest, and somewhat domestic, vision of Australian aspiration centred on the phrase “comfortable and relaxed.” Notably, Howard’s usage of this phrase evokes nostalgia in its most conservative connotation, as a consoling false memory that reassures Australians of their legitimacy, in response to unsettling re-evaluations of that history, and the ignoble legacies of colonization. This position is encapsulated in a pivotal interview of his campaign: “I would like to see [the Australian people] comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I’d also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future.” Edited transcript of an interview with Liz Jackson on 4 Corners, “An Average Australian Bloke,” first
freedom from care, an obliviousness to “adult” (political/economic/sexual) concerns, and an unselfconscious absorption in the present moment. This is a relatively recent and socially privileged conception of childhood, then, already rescued from labouring productivity and organized according to modern temporal, geographic and domestic partitions: five-day school week; suburban quarter-acre block; separation of adult and juvenile private spaces.

While childhood has been the object of heightened concern in recent centuries across the more affluent sectors of the globe, Australians are arguably more acutely afflicted by nostalgia for childhood than are other nationalities. Australian identity is discursively elaborated in terms of its affinities with youth: in relation to England, for instance, which is positioned as negligent mother in narratives concerning pivotal moments of our history—from first settlement, to Gallipoli, to the abandonment of the Pacific front during WWII. Likewise, Australians, when engaged in describing their “national character,” reference key terms that come from the same pool as descriptors of childhood: a notional “we” is guileless, innocent, free, open, and unencumbered by the historical baggage of other, “older” nations. As Peter Pierce has shown, in *The Country of Lost Children*, colonial Australia has suffered from an especially keen anxiety concerning children lost to the bush, which amounts to a kind of acting out of nostalgia. The figurative lost children of settler folklore, Pierce argues, elaborated Europeans’ fears regarding their own “homelessness”—their distance from a world that had felt secure—and gave voice to concerns about their perilous future here. This anxiety about lost children ironically shadowed the situation of first Australians, who were not only dispossessed of their home by colonials, but moreover *literally* lost their children after they were removed by state authorities, and so whose cultural futures were thereby rendered genuinely precarious. There is, then, a complicat-

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3 Formal state policies of removal of Aboriginal children of mixed descent existed between approximately 1869 and 1969, although children were informally removed since first colonization, and are still often fostered out to non-indigenous families despite recommendations of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report into the history of these policies and their effects on Aboriginal communities, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).
ed, conflicted, and at times strangely complicit relationship between the significances of childhood and of nostalgia, for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

Nostalgia, childhood, and colonial Australia share one further significant provenance: each is a condition particular to modernity.\(^4\) Settler Australia and “childhood” as we now understand it, have each been forged by the same epoch, and are shaped by common hopes, aspirations, anxieties and pathologies—chief among which is nostalgia. As Patricia Grimshaw and Graham Willett note, “the Australian family was born modern,” as the development of the “nuclear family” (as an economic unit defined by very narrow kinship terms) had already taken place in Europe before and as a precursor to settlement.\(^5\) Australian settler society was a society of nuclear families, and convicts were also encouraged to marry and procreate, as a key component of their rehabilitation, but also for the viability of the colony (and later for the sake of nation building). The psycho-social focus on homemaking in Australia, from the First Fleet onward, follows a nostalgic impulse to return home—as a colonial society that attempts to remodel and expand home into a new place, by displacing those who would otherwise claim that place as “home.” In turn, the use of the figure of the wild “colonial child” to illustrate authentic (white) Australian identity informs the positioning of Australia globally as a place of recreation and adventure—an unheimlich “home away from home,” so to speak.\(^6\)

If modernity is intrinsically homesick—nostalgic both for a place of belonging and for a less careworn mode (or stage) of life—we might also say that transposed outposts of Europe, such as colonial

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Australia, hypostatize this sense of loss. The modern family is a mobile family, shaped by the exigencies of Empire... Yet it is also thereby a settler family—a family that attempts to embody for itself “home,” symbolized by nostalgic images of childhood that both commemorate and ameliorate the pain of loss. The question we might pose to this situation concerns whether nostalgia for childhood, as a strategy of compensation, has the capacity to address the colonial subject’s sense of being out of place, or else is only palliative; a retreat to delusion, which instead distracts from the deeply endemic—even ontological—forgetfulness that both structures and problematizes Australian identity. This inquiry participates in existing debates about the political significance of nostalgia and its critical place in conceptualizing social change. While many theorists—most notably Frederic Jameson—have argued that nostalgia intrinsically serves reactive, conservative political aims, others contend that nostalgia may be engaged with in a manner that demands far-reaching social change. Likewise, the nostalgic tropes of childhood that abound in contemporary Australian culture at times undoubtedly entrench conservative cultural norms, and are drawn on quite consciously to do so. Yet I contend that an emerging current of anxiety regarding the representation and significance of childhood highlights the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent to nostalgic enjoyment: It is here that the potential for social change inheres, through the imagining of different significances of childhood, and different social conceptions of family and nationhood.

I will argue that, notwithstanding the politically reactive uses to which nostalgia for childhood is most often put, to the extent that childhood is currently understood to be in crisis, this signals the potential for a re-evaluation of childhood, of its social function, and of who gets to manage and speculate on it.7 Particularly in the con-

text of the precarious colonial domesticity that is supported by nostalgic visions of childhood in Australia, the interpretative opening enabled by focussing on the ambivalence innate to the nostalgic imagination, can shed new light on indigenous childhood and family life. By revealing these ambiguities, representations that unsettle conventional (i.e., white, middle-class) notions of childhood may enable a redeployment of nostalgia that is constructive for re-establishing community identity and political agency.

I. The Uses and Disadvantages of Nostalgia for Political Philosophy

The two key moments of nostalgia that, I contend, enable its deployment as a political intervention involve: (1) its inherent connection to modern subject formations, and, more acutely, to the constitution of colonial (and postcolonial) subjectivity; and, relatedly, (2) its inherent ambivalence as a mode of “enjoyment,” grasped as a mood through which a critical self is situated. In arguing for this usefulness of nostalgia for what might be called Left, or “progressive” politics, we need to make a conscious departure from construals of the political meaning of nostalgia by the majority of Left thinkers thus far. Disapproval of nostalgia is embedded within the rhetorical organization of temporality that is constantly reiterated in declarations of the radical position. The language that pits “progressive” or “radical” politics against “conservative” politics already passes judgement against the past, privileging instead a future-oriented present. While this may be presented as a “realist” position (in contrast to nostalgic “escapism”), this outlook quite unwittingly affirms the same values that support arguments for the growth of capital: chiefly the notion that the future—glossed as progress—inevitably brings improvement and innovation, while the past—or tradition—represents oppression and backwardness. The relationship, then, between Left thought and the ideology it critiques is, as they say, complicated. As Alistair Bonnett puts it, “radicalism...emerged in and against modernity.”

9 Bonnett, Left in the Past, 1. A significant aim of Left in the Past is to recover the work of “nostalgic” thinkers of the British Left, in order to put their thought into contact with contemporary social movements, and particularly “psychogeogra-
Importantly, the temporal imaginary of modernity—reflected in the language both of Capital and the Left—promotes the kind of deracination, or “unworlding,” that then gives rise to the very nostalgia it also rails against: This is why nostalgia is proper to the modern. The radical changes in commerce, travel, production technologies, working hours, and possible life trajectories, associated with modernization precipitated a violent separation from the familiar lifeworlds that nostalgia commemorates. This situation of complicity, in turn, deepens the ambivalence that also characterizes nostalgia, but is, as we shall see, largely overlooked by the critical literature. Before elaborating the implications of this analysis of nostalgia, I will briefly outline its history and critical reception thus far.

The word “nostalgia” first came into usage in 1688, as the modern era burgeoned, and thus a protest was stealthily registered against the modern nation state’s demands on subjectivity. A neologism combining the Greek terms “nostos” (return) and “algos” (sorrow, suffering, or longing), “nostalgia” was coined to describe the condition of acute homesickness in Swiss mercenary soldiers serving in foreign armies. Both the complaint and the appellation became epidemic, and sufferers exhibited a range of symptoms including loss of appetite, severe anxiety, and hallucinations. In the late 19th century this clinical significance was replaced by the more metaphorical understanding of nostalgia familiar today, as it came to be associated with a homesickness for the past, or a sense that the past had been one’s true home, and that one’s present is inhospitable to the form of life that one favours. As Pickering and Keightly write, this resignification of nostalgia “involved a shift from spatial dislocation to temporal dislocation, and the sense of feeling oneself a stranger in a new period that contrasted negatively with an earlier time in which one felt, or imagined, oneself at home.”

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In postmodern literature, this later meaning has been further diluted, rendering nostalgia less painful than its etymology would suggest—as a pleasurably nihilistic indulgence of the past through the consumption of period drama or retro appliances. In this vein, an orthodoxy regarding nostalgia has understood it as the expression of a conservative and reactive sentiment: nostalgia as false memory or as a motivation to falsify memory. Nostalgia is thereby a site for the amplification of anxieties about the epistemic reliability of memory more generally: because it is so deeply personal, and so intimately connected with affect, but also because nostalgia tends not to pick out particular facts or details, nostalgia is understood as a *general impression* of the past and one’s relation of belongingness to it. Nostalgia’s imprecision renders it philosophically suspect, according to an understanding of political psychology that pits unambiguous facts and “reality” against the more nebulous claims of nostalgia and “ideology.” From this perspective, the emphasis for these interpretations is placed on the potential for disagreeable political uses of sentiment: nostalgia is seen to distort and idealize the past by glossing over details, including class, race, or gender inequalities of the day—and so enabling a retreat to a depoliticized vision of sociality. The threat of such nostalgic reveries is that they can manifest dangerously, as nationalism, racism, sexism, or elitism.

This negative framing of nostalgia often returns it to its clinical, melancholic origins—nostalgia becomes a pathological withdrawal from reality and from thinking. This approach is well exemplified by Susan Stewart:

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before the experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire...: nostalgia is the desire for desire.\(^\text{12}\)

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Stewart thereby opposes historical truth and reality to nostalgia, narrative, and ideology, as if it were possible that these terms might be kept thoroughly apart. Likewise, Frederic Jameson sees nostalgia as a negative and counter-productive force that has overshadowed other cultural resources for experiencing the past in postmodernity. Accordingly, nostalgic films such as American Graffiti reproduce a mythic style that is felt to summons the past, but can only do so inauthentically, according to Jameson: that is, complacently, as a flight from what had been the social, or collective affective content of that time of life. Jameson, too, places his “diagnosis” of nostalgia within a clinical, even psychoanalytic discourse, characterizing nostalgic representations as a form of “virtual symptom-formation, a formal compensation for the enfeeblement of historicity in our own time.”

Considering Jameson’s characterization of nostalgia as a disease of postmodernity—as well as Stewart’s conclusion that nostalgia is “the desire for desire”—each of these formulations suggests nostalgia as a site of ultimate nihilism and emptiness. Indeed, viewed in these terms, it is easy to see nostalgia as a state of existential homelessness and, more pathologically, traumatic repetition. Here philosophical efforts to positively reevaluate nostalgia—by way of the “phenomenology of nostalgia”—have taken root. Edward Casey reappraises an understanding of nostalgia as trauma with the aid of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “an original past” as “a past which has never been a present.” Accordingly, nostalgia provides a background, or “condition of possibility for all thematized temporal experience.” Nostalgia provides the impression of a lived world of childhood that was not experienced as such, but rather has been retroactively constructed with reference to the present: as a lost plenitude, or form of life. In this way, for Casey, in agreement with Hofer and Kant, nostalgia is a product of imagination rather than memory, and thus can also be understood in psychoanalytic terms as fantasy. Yet instead of disqualifying nostalgia as a source of judgement—as Stewart and Jameson do—for Casey nostalgia as fantasy provides a structure of experience: a “deep anteriority” that, by dint

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of this depth, “will never become the specific content of a memory,” but rather gives the evaluative framework for memory and judgement.16

Likewise, the Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas argues against the peremptory dismissal of nostalgia as a genre of philosophy, arguing that as a mode of thought nostalgia reveals, in Heidegger’s terms, the homelessness of human being.17 While most recent discussions of nostalgia tend to emphasize its temporal significances, Malpas bids us to bring the more original geographical or spatial resonances of nostalgia back into play—and particularly its reference to homesickness—in order to access its phenomenological significance: as a longing for “place” (which is neither wholly spatial nor temporal, but rather constitutes the self through both magnitudes). Following Heidegger (whom, he admits, is often criticized for his nostalgic thinking), Malpas characterizes nostalgia as a “mood” (Stimmung): not in the sense of internal whimsy, but as “a certain mode of appearing of both self and world.” (PN, 93) Nostalgia, like other moods (such as boredom) situates the self in its world. It is attributed a special status in relation to other moods, however, as Malpas relates it to a properly philosophical mode of thinking: as a homecoming or convalescence. (PN, 91)

Although one of the characteristic features of moods is...a certain dissolution of the distinction between self and world, in the case of nostalgia, it is the relation between self and world that is brought to the fore as problematic—and together with that, the very relation of the self to itself. What is at issue in nostalgia is our own self-identity, but as the mood of nostalgia is no mere internal feeling, so the way in which identity appears as an issue here is precisely in terms of the way we find ourselves not at home in the world, as longing for home, as homesick. (PN, 93)

Critical to understanding the condition of homesickness that nostalgia discloses is an appreciation of the ambivalence that characterizes it: “nostalgia” refers not only to a return (nostos) but crucially also to the pain of separation (algos). Nostalgia thus addresses the existential discontinuity between self and world through which the self is constituted as such—the “yearning for a home that [the self]...
cannot reach." (PN, 96) In phenomenological terms, this is an “externalized self,” which can be rendered very roughly in psychoanalytic terms as a “split self”: a self separated from its own hoped for plenitude or self-presence, from a sense of oneness and self-mastery. It is a self already limited by language, thrown into the world and into its finitude. This self experiences its dwelling, then, uncomfortably, and uncannily: it cannot recognize itself, finds its situation unfamiliar, uneasy, *unheimlich*. For Malpas, nostalgia recognizes this dis-ease. It is a coming home to what one has been and so also to what one is, and yet a coming home that is fundamentally uncanny—so that what one encounters is a ghostly, spectral self.... It is this odd tension between the own-ness of what is recollected in nostalgia and the fact of its loss, its pastness, that renders nostalgia as characterised by both a sense of home and a sense of homesickness and loss of home. (PN, 97)

This “uncanniness” within nostalgia, resulting from its ambivalence—particularly its reference to a comfort that causes pain through irremedial loss—provides a key to how nostalgia might become a critical tool for political thought. In order to access these productive potentialities of nostalgia, it is necessary to attend to the ambivalences that reside in idealized representations of the past that offer themselves up in rebuke of the present. Following the phenomenological treatment sketched above, nostalgic reveries need not be dismissed as destructive, delusional, and reactive, but may instead be considered as a timely form of protest, and valued for the schematic and stylized vista onto the past that nostalgia can provide. According to Stuart Tannock, for instance, nostalgia organizes a subjective response to the past and present. Nostalgia thereby can be understood not simply as a mode of disengagement from reality, but, rather, as potentially furnishing the ground for a productive affective engagement with the past. Such affective engagement, Tannock writes, may be reactive, but it may equally be critical, by revealing and clarifying the stakes of a particular situation: “Invoking the past, the nostalgic subject may be involved in escaping or evading, in critiquing, or in mobilizing to overcome the present experience of loss of identity, lack of agency, or absence of community.”

Nostalgia’s function is, accordingly, to register a grievance with the present and its alienating influences. For Tannock, there is thus scope to

18 Tannock, “Nostalgia Critique,” 454.
deploy nostalgia for socially and politically progressive ends. The negative evaluation of the present in relation to the past that nostal-gia comprises can lead to a regressive romanticization of previous ways of life that neglects the particular character of social inequalities that had then prevailed. But, according to Tannock, proneness to this response depends on the viewer’s disposition: nostalgia can also avail “previously overlooked historical materials and practices” as resources for engaging anew with the present and future.\textsuperscript{19} By taking another look at the past through representations that stylize and heighten particular of its aspects—or that, in phenomenological terms, provide a ground for experience—the potential exists for a creative retrieval and re-purposing of practices or dispositions that have become obscured in the present.

The nostalgic representation is a gesture toward the past, which returns into circulation in order to remind us of the loss through which modern subjectivity is constituted. When its intrinsic ambivalence is ignored or underestimated, nostalgia is seen to promote the fiction that in a previous epoch—centuries or only decades past—the self had \textit{not} been riven with schism and otherness; that the self was whole. But when its ambivalence is attended to, when its schisms are allowed to open up \textit{within the nostalgic representation} and become palpable to the viewer, this is where the use of nostalgia as an \textit{intervention} in the present becomes most feasible. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, this moment of crisis, or, perceptible disputation, occurs especially when it is most needed: where the contradictions that engender dissatisfaction in the present can be read most visibly in the presentiments that the nostalgic image of the past reveals.\textsuperscript{20} My contention is that nostalgic images of children especially demonstrate this currency crisis: a crisis of interpretation that will open the way to thinking and experiencing differently. Let us now turn to this connection between crisis, nostalgia for childhood, and the development of potentialities for social change.

\section*{II. The Crisis of Childhood and Social Change}

Because nostalgic images so readily attach to feeling, these implicit contradictions can provoke the affective imagination in surprising

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.} 457. See also Pickering and Keightley, “The Modalities of Nostalgia.”

and sometimes productive ways. Nostalgic images of children are an interesting case in point. The child has become in modernity a perfect exemplar of the self as a site of nostalgic enjoyment: it furnishes an image of the self from which we are quite literally separated through maturation, and so also embodies the indistinct sense of memory that, according to Casey, comprises the “original past” that had never been present.\(^\text{21}\) The family home has come to be represented as the child’s natural habitat, so that childhood symbolizes the core of nostalgia—the resting place from which each is alienated, and to which each longs to return. The idea of childhood readily suggests a respite from the demands of the contemporary social world.\(^\text{22}\)

Nostalgic images of children at leisure in the family setting are regularly drawn on by advertisers to inspire a desire to consume, and by politicians to inspire a sense of urgency, and desire for comfort and simplicity. Such images most often depict middle-class, or at least aspirational, families, ordered according to middle-class values. Yet the most provocative images successfully employ the frame of nostalgic childhood in order to unsettle expectations about class, gender, sexuality, or race.

A number of controversies, to which we will soon turn, have erupted in recent years over the representation of children. The controversy is usually framed by an expressed concern for the safety of individual children represented (that they have been victims of pornography, pedophilia, or bad parenting). Discussion invariably shifts to broader moral concerns for childhood, however: that it is a stage of life that elicits a moral duty of protection from “adult” matters and involvements. At stake is the critical role that childhood performs for adulthood: as an image of a simpler life through which to evaluate one’s own experience. Again, this capacity as an object of reflection is what renders childhood nostalgic.

The child, qua nostalgic object, thereby performs a unifying function for the subject, but is also a site of contradiction for modern subjective formations. On the one hand, childhood represents an ever present now; or an inner playfulness and residual plenitude that is drawn upon in order to articulate the virtues of contemporary liberalism (principally “freedom”). This elaboration of childhood

\(^{21}\) Susan Stewart discusses the meaning of childhood in relation to nostalgia. She writes that the child is, quite literally as well as figuratively, a “miniature of the adult,” representing an enchanted and “fictive chapter in each life history” (Stewart, On Longing, 44).

addresses the anxiety which attends the “syncopated” tempo of contemporary culture; driven by the imperative of illimitable progress, unremitting deadlines, and, “around the clock” responsiveness to client demand. The child, in this context, represents stability and the possibility that desire may find satisfaction. This mode of childhood is enjoyable, and celebrated, insofar as it is imagined to be achievable, and is aided by cultural elaborations of childhood such as the photography of Anne Geddes, or the novels of J. K. Rowling.23 Such uplifting representations are also embedded with conservative messages regarding class, and other aspects of social order. The child here reassures us that, fundamentally, nothing will change.

On the other hand, childhood has also come to represent the very scene of separation and alienation that characterizes modernity as nostalgic: childhood is a “moment,” or alternative temporal modality, that is always already lost to individuals regulated by social or political demand (the Swiss soldier, but also the office worker). This aspect of childhood, then, is an object of mourning, felt primarily as a sense of time slipping away: the heightened sensitivity, for instance, for the passing of the child’s childhood right before one’s eyes; which conveys a nostalgia for the present because one knows it will soon be past (the phenomenological corollary of which would be the externalized self, or the split self for psychoanalysis). This representation of childhood, again, verges on crisis, as the fear of lack and the disappearance of childhood looms within it. Childhood represents, then, both a sense of stability that underwrites human temporality, and transience in extremis. It is limited to a particular stage within the individual’s life course—so underscoring the transitory nature of human existence. Yet childhood also represents eternity within the individual; or an unchanging, fundamental nature that constitutes the value of being human.

The cultural mandate of representing childhood is to fashion an apparently unbroken thread, which would connect the adult back to their hidden reservoir of potentiality, or the yet-to-be fulfilled self. The tension between presence, loss, and anticipation that the figure of the child embodies is what renders childhood so desirable for nostalgic contemplation. This tension reprises the motive force of desire itself, and, indeed, encapsulates the human condition, pace Malpas, as essentially homesick.

This idea of childhood—as both transient and eternal—comes to serve, in modernity, the conceptual negotiation of the passage of a

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23 For a discussion of Anne Geddes in relation to Bill Henson, see my “Vulnerability and the Passing of Childhood,” 51–52.
temporality that is otherwise felt to be discontinuous, and impossible to traverse. The child, conversely, approximates a peculiar continuity between past, present and future, and so is able to synthesize adult temporal experience. Existing in adults’ interiority as their past, the child of the present will, in the future, become an adult. Because of this association, in the western cultural imagination, between childhood and the passage of time, representations of children are also marked by a resistance to change and time’s passing. Most notably, images and expectations of children are often anachronistic: idealized children wear outmoded fashions and play with traditional toys, whereas attempts to depict a contemporary crisis of childhood dress children in up-to-date (“adult”) clothes, and represent them glued to computer games, understood as impoverished forms of play. A childhood that engages in contemporary culture thus signifies a childhood in decline, chiefly because the cultural function of childhood is to provide an access to the past, and to an essential self—albeit reconstructed, idealized and simplified.

This anxiety about children’s engagement with society is a feature of modern narratives of subject formation, organized as they are by nostalgic attitudes to the past. The child is supposed to provide an egress from quotidian anxieties, and an access to a primordial self, retroactively imagined to exist before the schism that constructs the subject. If the child is to accomplish this complicated task, then it must faithfully re-enact those attitudes or comportments that modernity apparently effaces, and which are specifically unviable according to the attributes and demands of liberal individualism. The cultural privilege of childhood is to be countercultural, but paradoxically: in ways that in fact support the dominant culture by alleviating the symptoms of its internal contradictions. In other words, childhood provides an outlet for the distress caused by individualism, and affords access to a self that is not already assimilated to a prevailing trajectory of decline: an imaginary, impossible self, dialogue with which compensates for the sacrifices the individual must make to citizenship.

The controversy, then, short-circuits such compensation, by bringing to the fore our essential homelessness through an uncanny image of childhood. A recent Australian crisis in art appreciation-cum-moral panic may help illustrate this point. Bill Henson, a well-respected photographic artist, had nevertheless managed to remain beneath the radar of mainstream Australia before 2008. He had been photographing children for some years: children on the cusp of adulthood, and whose ambiguity provokes anxiety as their social value is renegotiated. Yet these previous exhibitions, of fifteen and
sixteen year-olds engaged in proto-sexual activity, failed to rouse the public's attention. For his 2008 exhibition at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, however, Henson chose to illustrate his invitation to friends of the gallery with a haunting image of a nude twelve year old girl. Following a media frenzy, and proclamations from child abuse activist Hetty Johnson that the photograph was pornographic (even the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was drawn to call the image “repulsive”), the New South Wales police force shut the exhibition down, pending a ruling by the Office of Film and Literature Classification. The exhibition was eventually rated “PG”—meaning children can view it with the advice of an adult supervisor.24

A number of commentators (myself included) have already made the point that children's views were markedly neglected by the intense media coverage of this controversy and debate concerning it.25 Beyond the welfare of that particular girl, or any of Henson's child models, the upset concerned the incipient demise of childhood as a cultural value, in a culture that clings to childhood innocence as a marker of national identity. Because of this intense cultural investment in childhood as a reference point for national identity, there is very little scope for ambiguous representations of childhood. Henson is a master of ambiguity, and of visually documenting the uncertain passage between one stage of life and another, as well as implicit contradictions within subjectivity—catching a face mid-change of mood, or a body in a movement that it has not yet decided, for instance. The offending photograph's power—at work even in its diminutive reproductions in the press and the exhibition's publicity—hangs on its ambiguity and uncanniness: that it put the viewer ill at ease regarding the subject's age, her complicity in the artwork, the purpose of the work, one's appropriate response to it. The fact that

24. The image can be accessed at [http://www.roslynxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/1098/40934/](http://www.roslynxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/1098/40934/) (accessed 11 August 2014). It is, indeed, notable that this incident was seen to require a political response: both Rudd and then New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma addressed the media as parents, to condemn Henson. This indicates the deep significance of childhood to Australian political culture. I have already discussed this case more extensively in “Vulnerability and the Passing of Childhood”; *The Importance of Being Innocent*; and “The Innocence Fetish”; and Henson's work more broadly in “Innocence, Evil, and Human Frailty.”

the photograph was clearly taken in Henson’s professional studio, and that the girl is alone (possibly unsupervised) seemed to unnerve Henson’s critics most, and rhetorically they took upon themselves the mantle of loco parentis, in criticism of her parents’ apparent poor judgement. The child was pictured outside her natural habitat (the home), and so was too easily cast as prey to the exploitative artist/pornographer. Publicity itself was a threat to childhood in this instance: the child outside of the home alerted the adults to their own homelessness.

American photographer Sally Mann has been subjected to similar criticism, both as artist and as mother, but casts the relationship between the child and home differently—perhaps even more riskily than Henson. Mann produces ambiguous images of domesticity, which prompt reflection on nostalgic conceptions of childhood by disturbing the peace of the domicile. Whereas photographs of children in the home usually attempt to encapsulate the innocence of childhood—the “Kodak moment,” which distills what we long for in children—Mann chooses to immortalize the moments parents usually prefer to conceal from the public; moments that unsettle children’s innocence and demonstrate the messiness of childhood and of family life.26 As Mann herself puts it, the photographs in her collection Immediate Family are “about everybody’s memories, as well as their fears.”27

By focussing on moments of rupture within nostalgia for childhood—her children’s injuries28, their defiant looks29, their incipient sexuality30—Mann reworks the form of the family snapshot in order

26 For excellent discussions of the “Kodak moment,” and of Sally Mann’s critical relationship to it, see Anne Higonnet, Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of the Ideal Childhood (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998). See in particular chapters Five, Seven and Nine.
30 See ‘Jessie at 5’ [http://lamblegs.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/sally_mann-jesse-at-5.jpg], This untitled piece from her ‘At Twelve’ Series [http://deekneees.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/6a00e54ef51a8883300e553b7c8058834-500wi1.}
to bring attention to the crisis that underlies childhood in its connection to nostalgia: the separation between “the child” and the ideal that introduces lack into the scene of white, middle-class identity. The power of images like Mann’s photographs concerns their ability to reprise contradictions at the scene of the formation of subjectivity: the tension between a whole and an alienated self; between the self absorbed by the present, and a self that is divided between past, present and future—the tension that nostalgia summarizes. By undoing the illusion of cohesion and innocence that childhood and the middle-class family are supposed to signify, these images contribute to what is presently understood as a “crisis” in the value of childhood, or the widespread feeling that childhood itself is in decline.

This crisis of childhood is most palpable, in recent times, through discourse about the “sexualization of children” that first emerged in Australia in the first decade of this century, but which has since “gone global” through its uptake in the U. K., the United States, and Canada.\(^{31}\) The idea that not only underprivileged and non-white children, but even white, middle-class children may be deprived of their childhood (through parents’ inability to protect them from an adult world), has unleashed renewed anxieties regarding childhood reminiscent of the child rescue movement of last century.\(^{32}\) What


\(^{32}\) See Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850–1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); and Shurlee Swain, “Sweet Childhood Lost:
this crisis demonstrates is that a particular form of nostalgic childhood is no longer viable: specifically, that the practices and values that sentimentalized childhood nourishes are becoming subject to critique; that their association with commercialism, for instance, undermines their value.

Representations of childhood such as those of Henson and Mann use nostalgic forms to bring to the fore the underlying tensions and anxieties that nostalgia (in this case through the figure of the child) is supposed to reconcile. In the Australian context, we might say that these tensions pertain to a social scene that depoliticizes children in order the better to use it politically: where, for instance, the vulnerability of refugee children is mobilized against their parents in the “children overboard” incident.\(^3\) The fundamental historical precedent for such a use of childhood, however, was the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, which was framed in terms of the protection of wellbeing or virtue.\(^4\) In regard to Australia’s peculiarly intense relationship to childhood, the stolen generation forms an enduring original past that continues to influence and

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33 In October 2001, an event of political ignomy occurred that arguably won the incumbent Liberal Party the next election. In line with government policy, the Australian Navy was in the process of turning back a boatload of people (SIEV 4) who were approaching Australian waters to claim political asylum. Then immigration minister, Philip Ruddock, alleged that parents on the boat then threw their children into the water in order to blackmail Navy personnel into rescuing them, and these allegations were then repeated by Defence minister Peter Reith and Prime Minister John Howard. Reith also released photographs that were purported to show the children in the water. A Senate inquiry later established that this incident did not occur and that the photograph that had been cited as evidence was taken after the SIEV 4 sank, and did not involve parents throwing children overboard. It was alleged by a senior Navy officer that Reith had, in fact, been told early that the photograph did not depict the incident he claimed it had. I have discussed this instance of political manipulation of the value of childhood already in *The Importance of Being Innocent*, and “The Eternal Jouissance of the Community: Phantasm, Imagination, and ‘Natural Man’ in Hobbes,” *Theory and Event*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2009). DOI: 10.1353/tae.0.0077.

34 The “stolen generations” is a term first coined by Peter Read, who was a catalyst for the family reunion movement. He initially recorded oral histories provided by survivors of Australian government policies that removed—by force, duress, and deception—Aboriginal children of mixed descent from their families and communities. He was, most significantly, instrumental in setting up Link-Up—a corporation that offers counselling and support to aboriginal people seeking family reunion [http://www.linkupnsw.org.au/] (accessed 23 January 2013).
haunt Australia's present, as an uncanny reminder of its essential homelessness. It is to this background that we now turn.

III. Unsettling Australia

In *Bringing Them Home*, the report into the stolen generations, we find a range of images of Aboriginal childhood, some of which show separation from parents and from ideals of childhood, while others may be read—in this particular context—nostalgically to renegotiate relationships to family and pre-colonial modes of life. These latter, more obviously “nostalgic” photographs of Aboriginal family life and childhood represent instances, I contend, of a use of nostalgia in support of a countercultural cause. Minority communities such as the stolen generations, which previously were deprived of the ability to assert an existence as “family,” can thereby make a claim to that cultural privilege. Yet this new use is only made available through speculation on childhood brought about by crisis: only once, that is, white Australian, middle-class childhood has been rendered inherently unstable, so that it cedes its authority over modes of being family.

In order to make room for such “speculation,” one must engage in cultural criticism, in the vein of Walter Benjamin, by observing, interpreting, and bringing into play one’s own affective involvement in images such as Henson’s and Mann’s, as well as the whole range of photographs used in *Bringing Them Home*. These representations of

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35 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home* (1997). I should clarify that I am not making any claims here with respect to the intentions of those who originally took these photographs, and the significance of these images that would have been available at the time they were taken. My reinterpretation here is deliberately anachronistic—in order to recuperate meanings that are only made available through a reinterpretation of these images for present purposes—and I take their inclusion in *Bringing Them Home* to be in a similar vein: as a reappropriation of images of Aboriginality, in order to rework the meaning of that identity in relation to family and culture. My thanks to Lisa Ford, whose questioning at a presentation of an earlier version of this paper helped me to clarify this ambiguity.

36 The Aboriginal newspaper, *The Koori Mail*, also engages in attempts to re-deploy nostalgia for children and family through their regular features “My Family”—which includes a photograph and short article on an indigenous family in every issue—and “Our Children”—a captioned photograph of happy Aboriginal children, also in every issue. I would argue that this is a political gesture of reappropriation of family and childhood to Aboriginal identity, and a building block for community.
childhood encourage the viewer to pause for thought, and to develop a range of complicated and ambivalent affective responses. These artistic photographs of children embody a sense of play with the ideal of natural childhood that, in turn, potentially opens childhood to a new use; or to new understandings of children’s part in society. As Giorgio Agamben might articulate this point, both Mann and Henson engage in a “profanation” of childhood that brings it out of its “sacred” separation from the commerce of everyday life, into a new availability to those who were previously excluded—who were not privy to its rites. This mode of semiotic “play” with childhood “frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it.” In other words, through these artists’ irreverent, yet serious, representations of children (as occupying the twilight between dependency and autonomy, and as a burgeoning agency and sexuality), childhood is allowed to retain its powerful significance, but is no longer restricted to the service of social privilege. The metaphor Agamben draws on to demonstrate the work of profanation is telling in this regard:

Children, who play with whatever old thing falls into their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as serious. All of a sudden, a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy. What is common to these cases and the profanation of the sacred is the passage from a religio [piety] that is now felt to be false or oppressive to negligence as vera religio [authentic faith]. This, however, does not mean neglect (no kind of attention can compare to that of a child at play) but a new dimension of use, which children and philosophers give to humanity.

For Agamben, children (like philosophers—whom he seems to suggest should emulate children) are paradigmatic agents of profanation. In order to elaborate his concept of profanation, Agamben thereby picks out an alternative significance of childhood, which had existed alongside and in antagonism to “innocence” (childhood conceived of as religio). This alternative meaning of childhood consists in abandonment to playfulness, and, moreover, a playfulness

37 Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, (tr.) J. Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73. See also my discussion of profanation in relation to toys in The Importance of Being Innocent, and of conceptions of childhood and Agamben’s account of potentiality in “Innocence, Evil, and Human Frailty.”
38 Agamben, Profanations, 76.
39 Ibid.
that risks destruction or crisis. Rather than signifying the peace and
perfection of life apart from politics and the social, the child, for
Agamben—like an amoral demigod—enacts a playful revaluation of
our pieties. By earnestly reenacting within the field of play those
aspects of life we take most seriously—social roles and responsibili-
ties; laws; the economy—children, according to Agamben’s figurative
use of them, profane our social signifiers, thereby making them
available to a new use.

They thereby also render the social practices of modernity un-
canny, by rendering what is proper to the home unheimlich: unfamil-
iar, but also unhomely. The child’s practice of apparently “adult”
actions and comportments—whether pretending to smoke or model-
ling for art—perforates the boundaries that preserve a place of
wholeness or authenticity, uncontaminated by public modernity. It
evokes fears that there is, in fact, no home to return to...and, I would
contend particularly in Australia, fears that one’s home is always
unfamiliar, because it was never really one’s home to begin with. The
postcolonial condition demands that we attend to this uncanniness,
by paying attention to the ambivalence at work in nostalgia—and
particularly an underlying knowledge that home cannot legitimately
be claimed. The existential condition not only of modernity, but most
especially of postcolonial nations such as Australia, is homelessness.
One’s connection to thought, to Being, to traditions, geography, and
to property, is, under this constellation, always in question.40 Only by
keeping this ambivalence and destitution in play, and constantly
negotiating with the impropriety of our being here, will something
like “reconciliation” be possible—but not as “reconciliation” per se
(which implies a state of accomplishment or rest), but rather as a
commitment to continue to engage with questions of home and
homelessness.

In this light, the fantasies of settler children being lost to the bush
and to the savages within it, which so vex the Australian social imag-
ination, are disclosed as uncanny reminders of the conditions—legal
and practical, as well as ontological—that have enabled colonization.
In the image of the child leaving home to establish itself in its own
terms (represented by enlightenment thinkers from Defoe to Rou-
seau and Mill), Australia was colonized. To address the homelessness

40 For a consideration of Australians’ relationship to the land as proprietal,
and the ontological effects of this, see Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassila-
copoulous, “Racism, Foreigner Communities and the Onto-pathology of White
Australian Subjectivity,” in Whitening Race, (ed.) A. Moreton-Robinson (Canber-
upon which the ideals of the modern individual—and particularly the colonial—are founded, we need to find ways to think the unfamiliar: especially the home of another people, with its own quite different ontologies, temporalities, associations of place, ways of living as family, and ways of understanding home.

With a new attention turned toward the unfamiliar within nostalgia, let's finally consider the photographs of families and children at play in Bringing Them Home. Like Henson's and Mann's unsettling of childhood and home, these representations are also somewhat speculative: they engage viewers in a revaluation of how they understand family, and especially Aboriginal family, which in recent years has come under renewed scrutiny and demonization. The images used in the report fall into three categories: (1) historical photographs, documenting governmental intervention into Aboriginal life; (2) historical photographs of less specific or certain origin, demonstrating traditional practices; and (3) present-day photographs of Aboriginal families, usually smiling and having fun together. Considered collectively, all of these photographs produce an uncanny effect, as multiple histories (and possible futures) jostle their way into being.

The first group of photographs reproduces the abject history of a present that continues to dispossess indigenous people of a home: of their land and laws, as well as a self-determined place in Australian society. These photographs provoke the question of Aboriginal homelessness after colonization—where communities were removed from land and herded onto missions, removed to training schools, and to work on farms and in homes “owned” by white settlers. But further, by showing up elements of the past that now cause deep ambivalence for white viewers, especially the photographs in Bringing Them Home of removed children consigned to domestic work with white families provoke an affectively unsettling revision of past community values and their relation to the present. They also work at multiple levels to unsettle nostalgia and its constituents: the return to home—to childhood and the past—that is blighted by alienation; a blocked return.

The photograph of the child house laborer, “Biddy,” makes this point most poignantly. It shows a girl of eleven or twelve years, who makes home for the white family who have taken possession of her.

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But, one wonders, what is her real name? Where is her home and community? Does she know where they are? And would it have been possible for the colonials to have succeeded in their domestication of "Australia" without children like her to provide domestic labor? Although it has caused less sensational controversy, this photograph is more obscene (in the proper sense of the word) than Bill Henson's work from 2008: instead of giving publicity to what was felt to be a child's private moment (the cusp of puberty) by removing her from the home, as was the case for the unnamed girl in Henson's photograph, "Biddy" reveals a very private, and inappropriate, use of Aboriginal children in Australian homemaking.

The second group of historical photographs in the report renders uncanniness of a different kind: through a nostalgia for traditional practices, these images demonstrate historical trajectories left under-exploited and stymied by the endemic destruction of Aboriginal family life. They implicitly give pre-colonial ways of life as something to be recovered, but also disclose the chasm between that time and the present. These images dare the viewer to hope for a return, and to create the circumstances in which traditional life worlds, rhythms and practices would be more viable—valued both culturally and economically. The third group of photographs, finally, demonstrates a present in dialogue with the past, as well as with the destitute news images of present-day Aboriginal life, with which they compete. The "return home" is represented as already immanent in these photographs, in which the Aboriginal family is seen to embody home for itself.

**IV. Conclusion**

I have elaborated my analysis of nostalgia, and account of its consitutive ambivalences, by demonstrating the pivotal role of the child as a place-holder for nostalgia in contemporary western culture. Anxiety concerning children and childhood brings to the fore the psychological and ontological contradictions that vex modernity into crisis. Expressions of crisis regarding the moral safety of white children reveal a sense of danger for white privilege in Australia that

indicates something more fundamental: an impending sense of uncertainty regarding our right to be here. The images reproduced in *Bringing Them Home* demonstrate our belonging to the narratives that form a shared reality, and our responsibility to interpret these narratives in ways that open new possibilities for community. Finding a way to manage the passage between past, present and future—finding one’s “home” in history, and in dialogue with those who share that history—would be the challenge of a nostalgia situated within ambivalence. Especially in postcolonial Australia, where the uncanniness of home is such a pressing issue, a reconsideration of nostalgia is due. Nostalgia, if engaged with in all its complexity, situates us in our historicity, and so may open channels to transforming the present through the reinterpretation of the past. As a structure of subjectivity that discloses homelessness, nostalgia may dispose us to political insights regarding belonging, and more specifically, it may put us into a relation of consideration for those who have been displaced by colonization.

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