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Fabricating Religion

Fanfare for the Common e.g.

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8 The Magic of the Melancholy: Shifting Gears in the Study of Religion

It's delicate ... but potent.
(Don Draper)

Jazz fans might know of the Canadian singer Holly Cole and maybe even her 1995 album of Tom Waits songs, "Temptation." In particular, I have in mind Cole's haunting version of his 1974 song, "(Looking for) The Heart of Saturday Night." It's bitter/sweet, for it makes me think of a home that I left long ago – one for which I may long but, because it doesn't exist anymore, it's a longing never to be satisfied.

And, at least according to its etymology, that's precisely what nostalgia is, isn't it? For it derives from two Greek terms that, once put together, might as well be translated as "homesickness." For whereas the word neuralgia is today used for a pain associated with a nerve, and myalgia is a pain in a muscle, nostalgia is a pain associated with a homecoming (Greek: *nostos*) – or, better put, a homecoming that is imagined, delayed, or even denied. So while the term could apply to a character such as Odysseus, who famously worked to return home amid obstacles, when applied to anything but a mythic hero, it is a word that's linked to an impossible task. While Odysseus successfully returned to Ithaca (after twenty years away), there will be no return to the place that this Holly Cole song conjures for me when I hear it, for no amount of cunning intelligence (that virtue known as *mētis* to the ancient Greeks [Detienne and Vernant 1991]) can reverse time. As a child, I recall that after returning from more extended times away from

Note: Curiously, at least to me, I often seem to find my work criticized as not providing constructive alternatives to accompany its critique of the academic study of religion. While critique can rightfully stand on its own, if one wishes, contrary to this characterization, I tend to see all of my published work as offering practical and repeated alternatives, sometimes described in great detail, from the concluding chapter of my very first book, *Manufacturing Religion*, to the many essays I've written over the years on pedagogy and the various edited volumes and classroom resources that I've been involved with creating or helping to get into print (some of which have been explicitly directed toward early-career scholars). I see this (mis)representation of my work as a strategic caricature that undermines (by never seriously entertaining) the alternatives that I do offer; what would be far more helpful would be an argument, in some degree of detail, as to why these alternative approaches are not viable. And so, with that in mind, I've sometimes focused in specific detail on one site within the field and offered thoughts on how to rethink our approach to the topic – from how we, as scholars of religion, discuss the problem of evil to how we examine origins or discourses on spirituality, let alone how we use the category religion itself. This chapter, like the previous, follows in that tradition, this time inviting readers to reconsider what's going on when someone talks about being nostalgic.

home, such as going away to summer camp for a few weeks, I would go through the house looking for changes, finding the gaps and surprises that signified my absence (and which, upon finding them, signified my return). Here was an item that was moved or something that was new; but they were judgments based on an absent, imagined standard that allowed me to spot changes in which I hadn't participated – as if finding them somehow involved me in the change. But I hadn't been involved, of course; I had been away. And so finding the lamp that was now there and no longer here was a way to make the place mine all over again.

As with me making the rounds of the house as a child, we all try to bridge the gaps – which might be why a term such as *nostos* makes such a great marketing device, as was figured out by the owners of the Nostos Restaurant located in the U.S. (in Vienna, Virginia, to be precise – a city name that, like so many others in North America, carries its founders' own longing for a far off home).¹ For as they say on their website:

“Nostos” is at the root of the word nostalgia and means a return to one's origins, a longing for a special time in our past. Through Nostos, we wish to share this past with you and stimulate your senses with a variety of traditional and new Greek dishes.²

Their hope seems to be that the gap between past and present, between traditional and new, between origins and the one who coaxes the time of the ancestors into existence here and now by retelling the origins tale, can be bridged when seated at their tables, eating their food, and no doubt listening to bouzouki music over their loudspeakers (sooner or later we'd expect to hear Mikis Theodorakis' well-known theme from “Zorba the Greek,” no? For *that's* what Greek music is supposed to sound like, right?).

After all, who among us doesn't want to be like Dorothy Gale, tapping our heels together three times to extricate ourselves from some current predicament and just go back home? Apparently, there's no place like it.³

But there's a problem: to which of the many possible homes will we each return? For upon each return from camp it was apparent to me, even as a child, that home had changed yet again, and my idea of it was continually estranged from the actual place – minimally, yes, but my recognition of the differences meant

1 Although originally known as Ayr Hill (named after a county in Scotland), in 1854 some of its new inhabitants, the Hendrick family, successfully moved to change the town's name to Vienna, after their own town in New York state. See the town's version of its own history posted at <http://www.viennava.gov/index.aspx?nid=335> (accessed March 16, 2016).

2 See <http://www.nostosrestaurant.com/page/about-nostos-restaurant> (accessed July 25, 2015).

3 Although not the same approach, I think here of Salman Rushdie's wonderful meditation on the *Wizard of Oz* (2012).

it was estranged nonetheless. Even mythic Ithaca had changed when Odysseus finally returned – if it had been the same, then he would not have had to fend off (which is a nice way of saying “kill,” I suppose) all the suitors who were by then vying for his wife, Penelope. And so, even for a hardcore realist who argues that an actual chronological past is real and tangible, which of all those memories, of all those different past homes, all competing for our attention today, will rise to the top and constitute some definitive sense of home? In my case, perhaps it will be that house on Weaver Road where I first lived and which my father built himself, the one that always smelled like sulfur (due to the well water), the one of which I have only vague and disparate childhood memories. Or perhaps it will be the one on Mitchell Street, to which we then moved and where, as a little boy, I first learned to write my own name and address (and yes, it was 321 Mitchell St., thank you very much). Or maybe it would be the small gas station on Davis Street, owned and operated by my parents, into which we moved in 1968 and where, from outside, I would tap lightly on the glass of the living room window, on dusky summer evenings, to be let in the back door, with my bicycle, fresh from some adventure with friends. And so which will remain standing once I’ve winnowed them all down (having already sorted the good from the bad moments, perhaps, highlighting the former and overlooking, even forgetting, the latter), inasmuch as it gets to stand in for the definitive distillate that will count as the “special time in our past” (as that Virginia restaurant’s marketers phrased it)? In fact, how does this winnowing actually work? And even if there are many past homes from which to choose today, are they each some stable thing, a yesterday that’s the same today as it will be tomorrow? Or are each prone to continual revision, adaption, and maybe even complete alteration, inasmuch as the historically situated, remembering subject him or herself is no less prone to revision, adaption, and yes, even complete revision?

Question: will I always remember tapping on that long past window? Given that my own father is now 94 (his birthday was yesterday, as I write this), and, though in fine shape, that I sometimes hear the same story repeated almost verbatim to me when I call home to chat, I know something about how fleeting the past can be and how we live more in the present than many of us may realize. After all, I’m likely not the same person now, fondly remembering some past occasion, as I was when I was a teenager unknowingly living it as some sort of all-consuming present, not yet in the position, as a 56-year-old man, to pick and choose from among what I happen to remember now. (And don’t forget how the scientists now tell us that memory is more constitution than retrieval.) Might it all be much like how a favorite novel is somehow different each time it’s read, all depending on the mood or situation of the reader? If so, then inasmuch as it makes no sense to ask what such a novel is really about, what it *really*

means – for, as the reader-response theorists told us some time ago, its meaning is continually changing inasmuch as it's the function of an always-changing reader – it will make just as little sense to talk of definitive originary points to which we try to return or which we use as authoritative standards by which to judge the present.⁴

In fact, might there be, as the homesick Dorothy was so wisely instructed to recite by the charlatan wizard, no place like home at all, not because all others pale in comparison but, instead, because the reference point of home itself is an untrustworthy source, given that it is an unstable isotope that's continually created anew by means of the always-shifting needs of a continually decaying present? If so, then this might explain the pain of nostalgia: it's not just a longing for a home that, as I suggested at the outset, no longer exists, but, because we remember what we now either wish or happen to recall, and forget the rest, it may be a desire for an idea or image of home *that might have never existed to begin with*, a construct of the present. That would put it forever out of reach – except in the epic tales that we tell to ourselves, whether around campfires or in darkened movie theaters, when we vicariously return to a place of no place that we've constituted in the present moment, by flipping through an old photo album or, in my case, putting that old Holly Cole CD into the tray. (Yes, I still use the CD player.)

So the Saturday night of the song that I mentioned at the outset is, for me, a good place to start thinking about how the socially formative use of a longing for a past works, and to consider its link to what a number of us know as essentialism: that effort to boil down complex and ambiguous situations to an essence, a pristine distillate, leaving what we take to be a deeply significant, perhaps even definitive and thus all-powerful residue, much like in an experiment in a chemistry class that leaves an intense, concentrated powder as the lone trace of the ambiguous, cloudy liquid that once filled the laboratory flask. If you listen to Waits' lyrics, you may realize that from all that might have once characterized that weekend evening he's selected – and *choice*, and along with it, the *interests* that direct it, both of which are in the present and not the past, are the key issues here! – a series of discrete and condensed vignettes are offered, none more or less indicative of what any particular Saturday night surely feels like or ought to feel like. (Question: what *does* Saturday night feel like? And why does it feel that way?) But, when strung together in the right way, and conveyed in Cole's dreamy, sultry style, they begin to paint a picture where the gaps between past and present, us and them, *seem to be bridged*; and, even if you don't directly

⁴ See the introduction and afterword to McCutcheon 2015a for a more detailed, and directly related, discussion of the problem of origins.

identify with its specific parts, you might find yourself imagining a distant, alien moment as if it were intimately familiar, and longing for a long past and seemingly simpler time – and, along with it, a long past and seemingly simpler self.

The song opens:

Well, you gassed her up
 Behind the wheel
 With your arm around your sweet one
 Your Oldsmobile
 Barrelin' down the boulevard
 Lookin' for the heart of Saturday night

From the outset, I should be clear to state one important thing: despite the nostalgia that I admit to be inspired by this song, this is *not* the sort of Saturday night that I grew up with, living in southern Ontario in the 1960s and early '70s; I state this so that I'm clear that an actual memory, or some actual but distant past, is not what this nostalgia is about. Much as with that Greek restaurant, it may instead be more about the particular present, and specific self that occupies it now, that we're each trying to legitimize and fortify, by persuading ourselves that all of our history anticipated it and led up to it. For I was not yet driving, didn't play pool, and I likely wasn't even sure just what a boulevard was. (To be honest, I'm still a little foggy on the difference between a lane, drive, avenue, and a street.) And besides, my dad was a Ford man – back in the day, when and where I grew up in Canada, the choice between Ford and Chev (which is owned by General Motors, as Oldsmobile was) plotted you no less than either reporting on whether you were Protestant or Catholic or that you spoke English or French.

And depending on which, it might even predict which hockey team you supported. Case in point: consider Roch Carrier's well-known and much-beloved (at least in Canada) 1979 children's book, *Une abominable feuille d'érable sur la glace* ("An abominable maple leaf on the ice," otherwise known in English translation simply as *The Hockey Sweater*); set in the 1940s, a little boy in the largely French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec receives the wrong hockey team's sweater from the mail-order catalogue. (Was it a mistake of his non-English speaking mother's poorly written English order? Or was it an error on the part of the department store? Perhaps the hegemony of English-speaking Canada?) While wearing it (though he strenuously resists putting it on, of course, for its blue and white colors defined not who *he was* but who *he was not!*) he has no choice but also to adopt the identity it connotes – in his own eyes and those of his friends at the outdoor rink – much to his disappointment, of course; for he's no longer seen as a member of the home team from Montreal (wearing their red, white, and blue) but, instead, as their arch rivals from Toronto.

Like the song, that story resonates with me, though I was born decades after it's set, never lived in Quebec (but, importantly perhaps, everyone else in my family was born there), and, when it was first published, I was 18 and thus hardly reading children's books. But I can easily imagine playing hockey on a rink outdoors in the winter or waiting, in the small living room of that gas station on Davis Street, about 90 minutes outside Toronto, for the theme from "Hockey Night in Canada" to come on TV precisely at 8 each Saturday night to announce the start of the Leafs game – making *my* home team and the sweater that *I* wore with pride (number 14, Davey Keon!) ironically a symbol of Carrier's alienation (given that he was a fan of what *I* considered to be *our* arch rivals: the Montreal Canadiens). So my Saturday night, at least as an adolescent and then teenager, did and did not overlap with these two models that I'm considering here: it involved being on the opposite end of the gas pump, as compared to Waits' song, for I was watching people gas up and drive off into the darkness and then, after we closed up shop, I went in to watch the Leafs game, which involved getting the TV trays out and a big bowl of potato chips, with some corn chips mixed in among them. Maybe some chip dip too. And a pop – yes, we called it "pop" and not "soda" – from the cooler, up front (and yes, we called the store part "the front") – the one with bottles of Coke and Pepsi, Orange Crush and Mountain Dew, all lined up in neat rows, like obedient soldiers, and submerged halfway in the cold water, gently tinkling from the compressor motor's vibrations when they stood too close to each other.

However, these details are all (predictably?) absent from Carrier's story and also from Waits' song – but does that matter? For into the space that each has opened, I've seamlessly added my own details, not unlike the supporters of then-candidate Donald Trump, perhaps, at his early 2016 campaign rallies, who responded so well to his own version of nostalgia. "Make America Great Again" (the "MAGA" written on their ball caps and used as hashtags to their online posts) was his catchy slogan (Reagan had already used it in his 1980 campaign, though), despite it being utterly devoid of all concrete detail. (It's the "again" that signals the nostalgia.) Some commentators at the time criticized him for this lack of specificity, of course, but thinking back on how easily, and without realizing it, I've personalized Waits and Carrier's tales with details of my own, I think the generality of the slogan, unencumbered by historical specifics, was the key to its success. After all, forming alliances across large numbers of people who have previously never met can likely only happen at the level of vague generalization (studies of nationalism have long told us as much), offered in just the right way, so that listeners populate the narrative with their own details. "Yes, we need to make America great again" they might say to each other, nodding in vigorous agreement, while never specifying for each other just what constitutes

the historical referent for the claim – the 1960s? Perhaps the 1950s? Or what about the 1850s? The generalized rhetoric encompasses them all and its success is predicated on no one ever specifying, for the last thing we want is to put our cards on the table, or to see those of the others playing the game with us, for then we risk disagreement, and disunion, among our ranks. Simply put, we may come to realize that we're not playing the same game.

But, to return to the song, it continues:

You got paid on Friday
 Your pockets are jinglin'
 And then you see the lights
 You get all tinglin'
 Coz you're cruisin' with a 6
 Lookin' for the heart of Saturday night

Cruising with your girl and a six-pack of beer in your Olds – a more particular Saturday night is being created, but it remains one with which, despite my affinity for the song, I have little in common – at least not when growing up and certainly not when Cole released the song and thus back when I first heard it. I was then working at the University of Tennessee, already uprooted from my “home and native land” (to quote the Canadian national anthem) in the Great White North (to quote the toque-wearing comedians and Canadian stereotypes, Bob and Doug McKenzie),⁵ and I'd already grown used to hearing “Rocky Top,” Tennessee's so-called fight song echoing all over campus in the late afternoon as the band marched around campus and rehearsed. Come to think of it, it's a song from 1967 that packs a nostalgic punch of its own; written by the married songwriting team of Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, its lyrics are easily read as a lament for simpler days in the Appalachian hills of east Tennessee (when, notably, strangers met a mysterious fate for bucking local habits). Its opening verses read:

Wish that I was on ol' Rocky Top
 Down in the Tennessee hills
 Ain't no smoggy smoke on Rocky Top

5 For those either puzzled or alienated by my casual use of local jargon, in Canada a toque (pronounced *tōōk*) – contrary to the good people of Tennessee and other parts of the American south, where the term toboggan was instead used – is a knitted winter cap, with or without a pom-pom on the top. The word comes into English from French but, as the label on the University of Tennessee winter hat that I once bought for my mother, to illustrate how strange my new home in Knoxville was (it was instead named as if it was a winter sled), made clear, unpoliced designations are never anchored all that well.

Ain't no telephone bills
 Once I had a girl on Rocky Top
 Half bear, the other half cat
 Wild as a mink, sweet as soda pop
 I still dream about that

Once two strangers climbed ol' Rocky Top
 Lookin' for a moonshine still
 Strangers ain't come down from Rocky Top
 Reckon they never will

Corn won't grow at all on Rocky Top
 Dirt's too rocky by far
 That's why all the folks on Rocky Top
 Get their corn from a jar

I've had years of cramped up city life
 Wrapped like a duck in a pen
 Now all I know is it's a pity life
 Can't be simple again.

Rocky Top you'll always be
 Home sweet home to me
 Good ol' Rocky Top
 Rocky Top Tennessee, Rocky Top Tennessee

But despite the specificity of the picture being painted, both here and in Cole's song, which is surely quite alien from the specificity of those who hear both today (after all, despite how fans from my own school might taunt them as hillbillies, it's more than likely that few college football fans from Tennessee today drink moonshine, no?), there's something here that grabs us, helping us to overlook the inevitable gaps.

But to return to Cole's song – it continues:

Then you comb your hair
 Shave your face
 Try to wipe out every trace
 Of all the other days
 In the week
 You know that this'll be the Saturday
 You're reachin' your peak

By means of the necessarily compact, distilled language of poetry (which is what gives it its ideological power), we know a surprising amount about this fellow – yet the danger, as already suggested, is that the more we know, the less affinity we might have for him, for the more distinct he becomes, in distinction from ourselves, our memories, our long-past Saturday nights.

Then, not long after, the singer asks about those very details:

Tell me, is it the crack of the pool balls?
 Neon buzzin'
 Telephone's ringin'
 It's your second cousin
 Is it the barmaid that's smilin' in the corner of her eye?
 The magic of the melancholy tearin' you right up

And then the song finishes:

Makes me kind of quiver
 Down in the core
 Been dreamin' of those Saturdays
 That came before
 And now you're stumblin'
 Stumblin' onto the heart of Saturday night
 Right now you're stumblin'
 Stumbling onto the heart of Saturday night

So here we have a song trying to identify (meaning to describe an identity or, instead, to assert and thereby claim one? That's the question! – something “down in the core:” the essence or the heart of Saturday night) not any old weekday evening, mind you, or the expectation-laden Thursday or Friday nights (just when *does* the weekend actually start? On my campus it seems to start on Thursday night), and certainly not the workweek's somber eve (i.e., Sunday night). But, instead, we're working to understand the distilled and purified core of the weekend: Saturday night. But this is no easy task, of course; in fact, the difficulty is apparent in the lyric that begins “Tell me, is it the ... ,” for it could have had innumerable items listed after it, such as, in my case, “... the theme song from ‘Hockey Night in Canada?’” or “... the sound of the corn chips pouring into the bowl?” – confirming that, as already suggested, there are surely as many Saturday nights as there are definers of what counts as definitive of that evening, which also confirms that a search for its heart, much like a homecoming, is a rather pointless quest. If anything, there are innumerable hearts, much as an infinite, boundless space has innumerable centers, all equally distant from an undefined and thus continually retreating margin. Case in point: I recall my late older sister, a nurse who worked shift work for pretty much all her career, and how the holidays – days that just inherently felt like a holiday to me as a young boy, due to a host of cues and prompts all around me – were, for her, not necessarily the holidays at all; hospitals, after all, have a schedule of their own, and are in business 365 days a year, so somebody's always on the job there. When you're sick, there's no weekend respite and so,

for her, Saturday night was just another night shift and thus one step closer to getting back on days.

Or I think again of my father, with whom I joked, when he retired, that he'd never again have a Sunday night for as long as he lived – i.e., he'd never again have to mourn the end of the weekend's break from the workweek and thus never again have to get up for work on Monday morning. For from now on, despite retaining a daily schedule (though, significantly, not a *work* schedule), every night was a Friday night.

So, returning to the song, whose idea of that weekend night gets to stand in as definitive, its very heart? That's a far better question than asking what its heart is.

Now, if there are as many centers as there are definers making choices and drawing boundaries, then, the trick to making the heart you've selected stand out as if it's *the* center is in painting a picture that takes a stand (i.e., provides some details) but, as already suggested, is also just vague enough to allow a variety of listeners to connect with it in some unexpected way. Like how, for me, this song brings back memories of young guys (who, though, were older than me) driving their old cars up and down the streets of my small childhood town, hanging out in the early evenings, maybe in the parking lot of a grocery store, or over at the high school, and lifting the hoods to, well, just stare at the engines for a while and swap repair stories. Primatologists would no doubt study this as mating behavior. Oh, and of course, they were listening to Rush playing on someone's car stereo, cranked up loud – that's not a detail in Waits' 1974 song, of course (since the band had not even gone mainstream yet – that came a few years later), but I'm free to insert some details of my own into his rather minimal narrative, customizing it, filling in the gaps, and drawing on a repertoire of recollections that suit my interests, my needs, today. That's just how it works.

It's a summer night, the dusk sky still lit more than it ought to be while the store lights are just all coming on – the neon's buzzin'

The lyrics therefore resonate with me not because they match some event in my past – i.e., assuming the correspondence theory of meaning illuminates everything is precisely the problem – but because they provide an opportunity for me, in the here and now, to pick and choose from my own archive of the past, its contents vague and disconnected, matching up items, in ways the songwriter never imagined, with Waits' own selections, even though each discrete memory has no necessary relation to the other elements of this nostalgic scene.⁶ So

⁶ The idea of an archive of the past, from which we pick and choose to suit our current needs, is one that I borrow from the late Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1997).

although I never did the things mentioned in the song, and though the memories it seems to evoke are not connected themselves, that's not exactly what the song is about; instead, the few minutes of that song are an occasion for a set of possibly random childhood memories of my own to get hooked together, on the spot, by means of something vague enough not to repel what it was that this one listener wanted to do with it when he first heard it sometime in the mid-1990s, and what he does with it each time he hears it again. That another listener would do something else should be clear – maybe they'd not even “like” the song at all (I'm assuming few readers even know the tune, let alone Cole's rendition); in its place they'd probably select another occasion to legitimize their happenstance present by means of a wrapping that conveys the power of what we take to be an authoritative past. All of which makes plain that there are as many hearts as there were Saturday nights, as there were people cruisin', workin', or just sleepin' their way through them – correction: as there are people today spinning yarns about them.

(As made plain by my earlier aside concerning Trump's attempt to become the Republican nominee for U.S. president, it should also be clear that this is the secret to good political campaigning. For if you're trying to build a broad coalition, then your specificity must be moderated by pithy vagaries with which listeners can do as they like – Hope, Change, A Stronger America, A Thousand Points of Light, Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow, Yes We Can [slogans all associated with so-called mainstream U.S. presidential candidates, indicating this is hardly a rhetoric of outsiders] – suggesting the strong correlation between social formation, generalization, and the acquisition of power.)

And so, this song *works* – at least for me, with memories of listening to it while having already moved to the U.S. from Toronto, but with the melody tethered to yet other memories, from other, disparate occasions, such as discovering what was then the Holly Cole Trio a few years before, in 1990, back when their first album “Girl Talk” came out, three years before I moved to Tennessee and five before her eventual album of Waits' tunes was released (no “Trio” noted on that later one, just her). There's also a memory of seeing her perform live in 1990 or '91, in a small bar, with a dirty bathroom, as I recall, out in the west end of Toronto, all of which indicates to me, now, that the song is an occasion for me to miss not the home that *it* spins but *my* current idea of a long past home, which I continually re-spin out of the raw materials of my always-changing memory. It captures – or, better put, by it *I* now capture, maybe even *create* – a dream of a forgotten Saturday that, if I'm being truthful, I've neither ever had nor likely ever will. What's more, inasmuch as it works with so few discrete elements, providing me with just so many opportunities to pair my own memories to its invitations, it can't help but suggest a simpler, condensed time (a more complex song, that put all the details into words, would make the seven minutes of “Hey

Jude” look pithy and succinct and would risk all of the perplexing problems of the exactitude of Borges’ fabled cartographers as well as his never-ending library). Although when the past was the present (what some in our field today call lived experience, as if the immediacy of the moment is somehow naturally signified), it was likely just as complex or ambiguous as we take our current moment to be; when we tell tales about it later, it was always a simpler time when pocket change mattered, when second cousins lived around the corner and knew where to find you, and when driving up and down the streets was a sufficient pastime.

The trick of being a good essentialist, then – for, as you may have realized, this is what we’ve been discussing all along, not just nostalgia – is to select (and, as I signaled earlier, *choice*, *agency*, and *interested situation* are all crucial to keep in view, so that we recall that nostalgia is not something that happens to us but, instead, is a technique we use in the here and now) what champions your case. Then, while portraying it to your own advantage as emblematic of something universal, timeless, self-evident, offer details just open-ended enough for others to buy into it and latch onto it – *but for their own reasons* (thereby universalizing and, in turn, re-authorizing, your particular all the better). It’s a simple but effective technique, with far-reaching consequences if done correctly; in fact, it’s something marketers (along with those campaigning politicians I mentioned earlier) have long known.

Case in point: consider episode 13 from season 1 of the once-popular television series “Mad Men” from which my epigraph originated. Entitled “The Wheel,” it involves Don Draper – an advertising executive who is representative of an early-1960s shift in how we sold products to one other – pitching his idea to the executives from Kodak for how their new slide projector, which they just call “the wheel,” ought to be sold:

Well, technology is a glittering lure. But there’s the rare occasion when the public can be engaged on a level beyond flash, if they have a sentimental bond with the product. My first job: I was in-house at a fur company, with this old pro copywriter. Greek, named Teddy. And Teddy told me the most important idea in advertising is “new.” Creates an itch. You simply put your product in there as a kind of [dramatic pause] calamine lotion. But he also talked about a deeper bond with the product: nostalgia. It’s delicate [dramatic pause] but potent. Teddy told me that in Greek, “nostalgia” literally means, “the pain from an old wound.” It’s a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn’t a spaceship. It’s a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called the Wheel. It’s called a Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels. Around and around, and back home again [dramatic pause] to a place where we know we are loved.

Midway through his pitch – after calling out “sweetheart” over his shoulder to a woman at the back of the room, who then dims the lights (is this the America that

some wish to make great again?) – Don calmly talks while clicking through family pictures projected from “the wheel” onto a screen at the end of the darkened boardroom: we see him and his new bride at their wedding, then their children, and a family vacation. The men swivel in their chairs to watch while they listen to his pitch. It’s so effective that, before the lights come back on, one of his own colleagues quickly has to leave the room; it looks like he’s going to cry. (Who among us has not felt teary-eyed at, say, a commercial that reminds us to call – “reach out and touch someone” AT&T called it in their late-1980s ads – the people we love?) That viewers already know that Don’s marriage is far from perfect, that he regularly has affairs, that he himself, looking at the homey slides of his own presentation, knows there’s no such home to which to return (and that there probably never was an actual Teddy), makes the moment all the more effective, for both the gaps and the technique for bridging them, and thereby minimizing them, are both apparent to us, the viewers.

Sure, it’s just a recent TV show, deeply embedded in its own nostalgia for the 1960s, but the scene nicely captures what all of us have likely seen in ads and heard in speeches at both the dinner table and political rallies: nostalgias for a lost (or, better put, absent) home are thus effectively used for countless different contemporary purposes. For that 30-second commercial can somehow make us tear up – not to mention the tingles from hearing a national anthem or a host of other songs that conjure absence into presence.

Nostalgia, then, might best be understood as the effect of a set of social strategies, techniques whose analysis might be enhanced by a little attention from the sort of scholar of religion whom I have in mind. I say this, claiming that we have something to say about jazz tunes and longing, knowing full well that the academic study of religion was first instituted in public universities across the U.S. by means of an argument that the field was concerned with how *unique* and thus incomparable its objects of study were. As that old nugget went, religion (or what are often assumed to be its synonyms: faith, experience, or belief) was so utterly distinct that its adequate study required an equally distinct approach that was able to capture the *sine qua non* of its subject matter. After all, or so it was argued then, we can’t expect the sociologists to do it, no matter how important religion’s so-called “social dimension” might be, and the same goes for the psychologists, art historians, literary theorists, historians, folklorists, and anthropologists, and pretty much anyone else who might have already been employed in the university to study religion. They studied its various aspects (what our predecessors would have called manifestations, of course), to be sure, but none got to the ... well, I might as well just say it: none of them identified the *heart* of the matter. And that argument – or was it a nostalgia for a time, back during the Renaissance perhaps, when scholars transcended today’s compartmentalized

specialties and made grand, universal claims about the human condition? – was persuasive and won the day: departments of Religious Studies, whose members aimed to interpret what were portrayed as the deeply significant and, in many cases, long-lost meaning of religious expressions found in different historical and geographic settings (i.e., the troublesome world religions paradigm, complete with its no less problematic East/West taxonomy, reigns supreme, even to this day), sprang up all over the country in the mid- to late 1960s. This happened only once the U.S.’ legal and political systems understood that studying religion didn’t require one to promote or criticize it (thereby making studies *about* religion constitutionally sound in a publicly funded school). Although judged neutral on questions of religious truth, such an approach nonetheless presupposed religion’s transcendental status (it was, after all, assumed by most to be a deeply personal, mysterious, transhuman experience projected outward, into the public domain, in countless forms – hence the importance of such terms as manifestation or expression throughout the history of the field). Religion, in the singular, was real and somehow eternal yet intangible, whereas religions, in the plural, were empirical yet merely derivative forms that it adopted here or there – hence the enthusiasm for studying religion *in context* as a way to see, feel, taste, or even hear and smell historical changes in this presumably invisible, eternal thing,⁷ along with examining religion’s interactions with that domain loosely collected together as “not religion,” i.e., culture or politics (separate identities signaled by the conjunction in the still-common terms “religion *and* culture” and “religion *and* politics”). In many cases, the goal of such studies, then, was to use the comparative method to identify tangible, cross-cultural similarities (a technique our 19th-century predecessors perfected) all in order to infer the existence of the ever-present, ethereal essence that is assumed to animate it all. In fact, such a scholar of religion – and there are plenty around still, who practice the field in this manner – might not even recognize this very chapter as a contribution to their field – hence the incentive to see the alternative being proposed as no legitimate alternative at all.

But then along came the effects of structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics, feminism, literary critical theory, and race studies in the second half of the 20th century, and, with them, a focus on difference and disruption, as well as a critique of such things as the canon, the author, intentionality, and an interest to

7 Such as studying, for example, the history of Christianity, which many still narrate as unfolding in suitably Hegelian fashion, inasmuch as some modern idea of the thing is anachronistically presumed to have been there at its birth; thus we routinely refer to a subfield known as “Christian origins” while its members nonetheless argue that, at its beginning, there was no such thing as Christianity (for a longer discussion of this one example, see McCutcheon 2015b: chapter 6).

study meaning and identity as historical products or effects. Broaden that out and, instead, identify the role played over the past forty years (all across the human sciences) by that curious mix of Marxism and postmodernism, in which we forgo the quest for origins and essences and, instead, historicize the very efforts to identify a heart, seeing claims like “All Europeans believe ...” not as an innocently descriptive claim but as a situated act with socially formative consequences and practical interests. (This is all too apparent today, perhaps, what with the difficulties social actors in the EU are having with convincing their peers that there is such a thing as a common set of interests across that continent.) And so, not unlike other scholarly fields, in the academic study of religion, this has all had quite an effect; sure, there are all sorts of scholars in this field today who resist these influences and who, for instance, still look for the right way to interpret something self-evidently known to them as a ritual, those who tell us that the category Hinduism was a colonial-era invention but who yet somehow know that ancient things in the Indus River Valley were obviously set apart from others and therefore constitute Hinduism’s origins, or who are very concerned with what the Apostle Paul *really meant* when he wrote such-and-such to so-and-so. But there are yet others who, for principled reasons, toss out these sorts of speculative inquiries and, instead, take seriously the findings of recent social theory, working hard not to fall into old habits concerning authentic sources and apolitical lived experiences versus derivative, symbolic expressions.⁸ Instead, they look toward the operations, always in the here-and-now – like me, today, listening to that Holly Cole song, or Tennessee fans signaling their differences from the other team by singing along to “Rocky Top” – along with examining the situated, strategic effects of rhetorics and gestures, examining how authority (even our own, as scholars) is continually re-asserted, amidst a surprising number of always-present alternatives – a situation not unlike Odysseus dealing with Penelope’s many eager suitors.

And perhaps it’s because the study of religion is a field where it is so easy to find assumptions of transcendence and authenticity, or pristine meanings sadly polluted by their ineffective expressions and manifestations – assumptions found not only among the people we sometimes study but among colleagues as well – that the shift throughout the human sciences has had such a profound effect on

⁸ These are just the sorts who would, for example, question the traditional scholarly distinction, still in use today among some Bible scholars, between *exegesis* (drawing the meaning *out of* a text) and *eisegesis* (reading meaning *into* a text), for example. After the death of the author movement, this distinction is, of course, untenable – at least for many contemporary scholars; that it continues to be used is then the curious thing, suggesting some practical utility to the nostalgia for a day when a text’s meaning was assumed somehow to be separate from a reader.

some. For it has produced a subgroup within the current generation of scholars of religion who hardly study religion at all but who, instead, *study what's at stake in designating something as a myth, a ritual, a symbol, a canon, an orthodoxy, a cult, and, of course, even a religion*. It has therefore resulted in a group of scholars attuned to what's involved in naming something *as* orthodox or *as* sacred or *as* tradition or *as* the past, and who are always keen to inquire as to what's at stake when we, as scholars who claim to be rigorously historical in our approach, fail to see such designations as the part of processes and competitions in which we are no less involved than are the others whom we may study. What cost is paid, they might ask, by our work when we take something as representative without asking for whom and against what alternative(s) – such as when we think that there is a single heart amid the cacophony of difference and possible arbitrariness that is historical existence and social life. It doesn't mean that we have to study it all, of course, as if the totality needs to be grasped or appreciated, but it does mean that we're willing to own the piece that we bit off to chew on for a while.

Sadly, though, too few outside the study of religion seem to understand that such a shift has taken place in this field; perhaps it is because the personal and familial lives of many in other fields are deeply implicated in those very rhetorics of authenticity and origin and, because of this, they remain uninterested in entertaining the implicated and situated historicity of it all. For instance, in my experience, we often find experts in other fields who, in their own work, are finely attuned to critiques of essentialism, perhaps as applied to those other widely used fabrications of gender or race, but who, when they turn their attention to that domain they (in an act of folk designation, since the term is commonly used all throughout our culture) know as religion, suddenly lose their critical edge altogether. They end up repeating what might as well be termed commonsense truisms or even platitudes – completely incapable of seeing this domain as being just as historically constituted as they might usually argue gender to be, or class, or race, etc. If there's no substantial there “there” to such things as, say, citizenship or one's familial identity, and if, instead, they are both performed and continually reconstituted in situationally specific networks of power and negotiation, then so too with those “things” called religiosity or spirituality, no? But for too many, the answer is indeed an emphatic and unironic “No,” since this apparent aspect of the human is still thought by many to be the totalized place where history stops and the gaps are not just smoothed over but, rather, completely nonexistent.

And that's where, at least to me, the shift represented in this volume comes in; those outside the study of religion (not to mention many within) ought to be reading scholars of religion, or at least reading those who are game to ask tough questions about identity and place, about power and contest, those who do so at a variety of seemingly mundane sites in our contemporary world – like an old Tom

Waits song, for example. For if (drawing here on the work of Jean-François Bayart, for example, but I could easily also name Rogers Brubaker and others) we're serious about how identity is an ongoing work in progress, made possible by an assortment of basic, culture-wide techniques, then no matter which sort of identity we're talking about, an understanding of agency and structure as continually co-mingled and mutually informed domains is necessary, one that then prompts us to rethink claims of experience and meaning as just that – claims! – and thus something other than a reflection of a pristine, inner impulse easily pushed out into the world like an innocent baby being born. Instead, amidst the claims, we'll now be listening for all the kicking and screaming that comes with not just delivery but, as Bayart terms them, the “operational acts of identification” we each use every day to make ourselves into particular sorts of selves and our social worlds into particular sorts of worlds – rhetorics of nostalgia among them. And if this is the shift we're willing to entertain making, then the sort of reinvented scholars of religion who I have in mind each sit atop a rich archive where this move from necessary, ahistoric essence to the historical (and by historical, I mean contingent, negotiated, happenstance, accidental, etc. – along with social actors' responses to the unanticipated) can be illustrated quite nicely.

What's so exciting in this still young but promising branch of the contemporary study of religion, then, at least to me, is that once we leave behind assumptions of the inherent specialness of just some objects of study – the so-called sacred ones – and, instead, turn our attention toward the identification process of, shall we say, sacralization itself (which might as well just be a synonym for signification, as least as a Durkheimian scholar would approach it), then we're able to use as an example any number of mundane sites where people, to use an apt metaphor, stake a claim. Regardless the site and regardless the intensity of the claim, we'll make the move toward seeing not the object as having agency or meaning (as if some item compels us to do this or that or just means this or that) but focus, instead, on those doing the signifying and the otherwise generic items in the world – like a Saturday night, perhaps – that seem to become animated by means of those acts. For “the song evokes nostalgia,” as some might phrase it, strategically bestows agency on the object and merely passive receptivity on the listener, thereby passing the buck (much like the use of passive language in general) by absolving us – the song's writers, as well as the singers and listeners – from the consequences for the choices we've made and the settings in which we've not just found ourselves but which we've helped to create; instead, the situated social actor, the chooser, and the situation that limits or empowers their choice, becomes our new focus. We easily fall back into old habits when we fail to see that the text, in and of itself, means nothing – is not even “a text” but, instead, a collection of incoherent jots and scribbles on some surface that might be indistinguishable from its surrounding

(as Derrida asked so long ago, where do texts start and end, after all?) – without readers trained in a grammar and a vocabulary not of their making, which resulted from structures imposed upon them (i.e., us) by their elders that are themselves historical phenomena (accidents, in the technical sense), prone to change with the introduction of yet more agents with unanticipated goals. So what I think is so encouraging about this shift – and thus why I hope that making it is entertained by those who are open to rethinking what the study of religion has to offer to the human sciences at large – is that it makes evident what is to be gained when we turn our attention away from self-evidently interesting objects and, instead, ask some tougher questions – at any and all points where we mark our place and claim to be something – about why we become so curious to begin with, inquiring for whom something is seen as interesting, and under what circumstances might that interest continue or depart.

So it was in that spirit that, as the careful reader hopefully understood, I elected to open *not* with an obviously nostalgic song that tugs at me whenever I hear it (which it does, yes) but with an attempt to historicize myself, the listener, as an interested, even alienated and displaced, agent, in order to examine the potent thing that's transpiring when I slide that CD into the player – or, better put, why and how I use that song in just that fashion on just those occasions. In fact, it's playing as I first write these very lines (for inspiration, perhaps). Her slow hum that starts it off and that long lost / never was Saturday night begins to unfold:

Stoppin' on the red
 Goin' on the green
 Tonight'll be like nothin'
 You've ever seen

And so, if the shift I'm describing is made, it turns out that the song is more correct than I'd imagined, for this nostalgic night, and the melancholy that surrounds it, is indeed "like nothing you've ever seen." In much the same way, Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, was also right: *there's no place like home* – for not even home itself is like our idea of home. (Thomas Wolfe made that evident in his well-known posthumous 1940 novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*.) Yet, if sung correctly, listened to in the right setting and on the right occasion, and if the heels are tapped in just the proper way, it all works, like magic – Don Draper's colleague cries and leaves the room. It's potent, after all. And that's the fascinating thing that needs our scrutiny; for it isn't magic at all but, instead, a finely tuned, delicate technique that, not unlike how nationalism itself works, provides a widely divergent group with a series of discrete opportunities for identification and the production of affinity. We see just this happening, or at least I do, in that Holly Cole / Tom Waits song – but if we look in the right way, and ask the right questions, we also see it in

far more places than just that (as my various asides should have just made clear and as the final chapter makes even more explicit). In fact, readers for whom this shift (from focusing on products to scrutinizing modes of production) is new may want to step back for a moment and follow-up by considering where they can put it to work for themselves. They might want to consider something like Cole's slow jazzy rendition and the melancholy it somehow inspires (at least in me); if we can't understand its workings there, then we'll never understand it in those many other places where the stakes may be far higher and its workings far less transparent (such as in a presidential campaign or a TV commercial, perhaps? – occasions when long-past events are cited as authorizing anchors for contemporary actions, to rally groups, or when used as points of comparison to paint a disenchanting present that's somehow lacking a magic that the past supposedly once had).

Memories and nostalgias, no matter how exotic or special, are magical and potent, to be sure, but also mundane, consequential, and implicated. It's a lesson that might be new to some readers, but it is one that I learned long ago; for – if you'll bear with me and one more recollection – I once again recall my dad, when I was a boy, talking to a customer at that gas station my parents owned and operated. The fellow was complaining about the price of gas going up and up and waxing nostalgic for how much it was years ago. Now, my dad, who was born in 1923, also remembered plenty of things about the past, but his memories ran counter to his customer's – or at least he selected (and there's that *choice* again) one that did; so I recall him replying by stating how much a quart of milk used to cost (yes, my dad once was a milkman, going door-to-door with a horse and wagon), pointing out that no one today seemed to complain about its astronomical rise in price. If we use the early 1930s as our benchmark, when he was a kid, then the cost of milk has increased somewhere around 800%. So it seemed pretty evident that the customer's concern with gas prices in his present drove his selective memory concerning what it was in the past that ought to be marked and remembered. And it was equally obvious, judging from how my dad himself used the past on that occasion, that a duel in the present, over current issues, could be fought based on which past was recounted – such as my father defending his business from a complaint.

It was an early lesson for me (at least as I sit here now, many years later, and think back on it) in ideology analysis and in how signification and discourses on the past function – i.e., on how the past is created in the very act of seemingly remembering it. So when I find myself in classes today, trying to make points similar to this – such as bringing to the students' attention that we are right now living someone else's good old days, someone who will come along after us and wax nostalgically about an early 21st century that we ourselves might no longer even recognize despite supposedly living through it – well, I often think back on

that lesson that I learned that day in the gas station, surely completely unaware at the time of just what I had been taught.

Which is itself an interesting little moment of nostalgia too, no?⁹

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⁹ The opening to this essay, relying on the illustration of Waits' song, was originally posted, in an earlier and far shorter version, on April 4, 2014, at <http://edge.ua.edu/russell-mccutcheon/magic-of-the-melancholy/> (accessed July 3, 2015), while the closing anecdote derives from a different post, dating from Jan. 5, 2016, at <http://edge.ua.edu/russell-mccutcheon/coz-these-are-the-good-old-days/> (accessed Jan.10, 2016).