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FEELING THE PAST

Embodiment, place and nostalgia

I see the hands of the generations
That owned each shiny familiar thing
In play on its knobs and indentations

Thomas Hardy¹

The past is not only discussed and thought about, it is also materialised in bodies, things, buildings and places. It is felt, experienced and expressed through objects, such as ruined buildings, monuments, flared trousers or the marks of wear on old furniture; and practices, such as commemorative rituals, historical re-enactment, eating a sun-warmed peach or hearing a familiar melody. It is so in ways that may run counter to, or be in excess of, verbal articulations; the ‘feel of the past’ can be hard to express. Specific and embodied constellations of affect accompany some forms of past presencing – perhaps sadness and a feeling of loss in the commemorative ceremony; an uplifting sense of connection with people who lived long ago during a historical re-enactment; a sense of awe and even fear in encountering an embalmed corpse. Others are harder to characterise – the mix of melancholy and pleasure in touching, and being touched by, the indentations on an old chest of drawers or spade handle left by years of use; or the sense of being pulled into wistful recollection by the scent of hyacinths or notes of a street piano. Individual memories can prompt senses of joy, amusement, shame or grief, which in turn can have consequences for how they are addressed in ongoing life; and emotions may contribute to processes of remembering and forgetting, of feeling compelled or unable to speak about the past.

In dedicating a chapter specifically to embodiment and emplacement, materiality and affect, I do not intend to imply that these can be separated out from

other aspects of past presencing. On the contrary, remembering and forgetting that reach beyond the individual are inevitably externally materialised in some form,² be this speech, text, rituals or objects; and we experience them through our senses and in, and usually in relation to, specific places. Moreover, they are inevitably imbued with particular, more or less strong, feelings. Remembrance may be embodied in practices, perhaps collectively repeated as ritual. Objects and places are widely recognised as capable of triggering recollection; and the attempted preservation of memory through forms of materialisation is embedded in numerous practices throughout Europe. As such, many other chapters, as already evident in the previous ones, also consider aspects of ‘feeling the past’ both in relation to particular topics considered here and others that might have been included. Addressing the embodied (including affective and sensory), emplaced and material dimensions of the past more specifically, however, allows more in-depth consideration of some of the anthropological research on Europe that explores and theorises these.

In this chapter I first outline some of the theoretical background to the increased emphasis in anthropology – and in studies of memory more generally – on the embodied, emplaced, sensory, material and affective.³ Discussing these together makes sense partly because they are so intertwined – discussions of embodiment, for example, almost inevitably give attention to the body’s materiality, sensory capacities and affective experiences – but also because, even where the emphasis is upon one in particular, researchers typically draw on broadly shared theoretical resources. As I argue below, while theoretical positions often rely on an either/or stance in relation to more discursive approaches, or on a form of universalism, neither of these is either necessary or adequate for tackling the kinds of questions that arise in relation to memory practices in Europe – nor, perhaps, for much else.

What is needed instead is to couple some of the insights from phenomenological and related approaches – as they have come to be understood within much social and cultural study – with attention to the historical, socio-cultural and political-economic. In the second half of the chapter I argue this largely through attention to ‘nostalgia’ – a form of past presencing, originally designated as a particular bodily/affective affliction formed in relation to displacement, which has been discussed in numerous ethnographies in Europe. As in other chapters, what we see here is a set of practices that is widespread in Europe – yearning for the past, for home, for place, and a cherishing of objects from times now passed, at the same time, considerable variation – in effect, manifold nostalgias – that need to be understood in relation to particular historical, socio-cultural and political-economic contexts.

Turning to embodiment, materiality and affect

In the pirouettes of innovation that disciplines like to claim, giving attention to embodiment, place, materiality, affect and the senses have all been hailed as

'turns' in a wide range of social and cultural studies over the past decade or so. Commonplace in these claims is what Margaret Wetherell, in this case addressing 'the affective turn', bluntly calls a 'rubbishing' of the discursive (2012: 18). Words are dismissed as of lesser social and cultural significance than what is embodied, materialised or felt. The implication, and sometimes the explicit claim, is that domains of experience 'beyond discourse' are somehow more 'real' or 'authentic' than those expressed in words. This has the effect of separating 'the felt' from the linguistically expressed, and regarding these as relatively autonomous domains, only one of which deserves in-depth attention. As Wetherell argues, however, this cuts off investigation of the relationship between discourse and affect (and also embodiment and materiality) and does not recognise how language might, say, trigger, crystallise or intensify particular feelings and, more generally, denies or at least downplays, meaning-making, sometimes even to the extent that 'new' theorising looks close to older psychological theories of 'instinct'. In addition, it rests on a mind-body distinction that it generally decries; and its privileging of the non-verbal as (explicitly or implicitly) more 'authentic' replicates a set of divisions involved in constituting memory as 'a romanticized object' (Lambek 2003) as discussed in the introduction. Moreover, in its most linguistically-dismissive forms it is analytically self-defeating in its own use of words to try to explain what it has deemed 'beyond words'.

Dismissing discourse can only mean that we ignore much that matters. We have already seen that how the past is told and written, and the particular words and linguistic constellations used, can be highly significant. The past is often the subject of intense debate or of poetry. Moreover, these are never 'purely' verbal – debate happens in particular locations and may be accompanied by shaking of fists; poetry may be inspired by affectively intense experiences and lead to them. At the same time, as we saw in the last chapter and discussed in terms of the Ardeners' notion of 'mutedness', not all forms of past presencing are expressed through language, and there may be a 'gap' between what is said and what is articulated or performed in other ways. The notion of 'mutedness' itself, however, is not entirely helpful here as it implies that a lack of verbal expression is centrally at issue, whereas the Ardeners' main point is that it is researchers' privileging of this mode of expression that limits attention to other, more embodied, forms. To those involved – Bakweri women in the Ardeners' example – their embodied and materialised ritual performance is not 'mute' but highly expressive. Embodied and material forms, then, need attention; and neither language nor the embodied/material should be seen simply as supplement to the other. Not only do the discursive and the embodied/material not necessarily 'say' the same things, however, they do not necessarily work in the same ways or produce the same effects.

Part of the critique of discursive approaches is that these sometimes assume that all aspects of experience can be analysed in the same terms, as though they all work in essentially the same way as language. This is an important criticism, though sometimes overstated. Approaches that make analogies with language

and draw on concepts from literary theory to tackle a wide range of cultural forms – from art to food to clothing – have often been insightful and subtle; and the use of analogies and concepts does not mean that what is being considered is being ‘reduced to’ language. At the same time, such approaches do not usually help convey people’s actual experience of, say, eating a fruit or hearing a melody. Such experiences merit consideration in themselves but also for understanding social action and its motivations. There is here too a question as to whether other cultural forms necessarily work in the same way as language and whether, therefore, the ‘decoding’ approaches of linguistics and literary theory are most appropriate or insightful. Assemblage and ‘non-representational’ theorising, which put more emphasis on what particular forms do than what they mean, and also theorising drawing from phenomenology, have been influential here, as we will see further below. Certainly, different cultural forms – or media – have different capacities, or in this case what we might call ‘memorizing capacities’, in relation to their durability, mobility and so forth; though attending to this does not necessarily mean that meaning and the symbolic need to be abandoned altogether. Indeed, attending to temporality – for example, how the past may be enfolded into the present – may provide a means of bringing them back in.

Phenomenologies

In all of these related ‘turns’, phenomenology has been an important alternative theoretical source of inspiration to more semiotic approaches. Phenomenology encompasses various strands of philosophical and theoretical work, not all of which agree and not all of which have been widely taken up in social and cultural studies. This is not the place for an extended account but in broad terms social and cultural studies, including anthropology, have characterised phenomenology as emphasising subjects’ perception and experience of the world.⁴ Experience here is generally understood as going beyond that which people might verbally articulate to include, indeed, often to concentrate upon, bodily and sensory experience. Phenomenologically-inspired anthropological research typically entails paying careful attention to people’s actual practices (e.g. walking, cooking) as part of their ‘being in the world’ – to use a phrase from Heidegger that often features in such work; as well as trying to convey how they feel about it. Attempts to find more adequate ways to convey experience have also inspired experimental, evocative approaches, including use of visual and other sensory media, such as those of Irving and Grossman described in the previous chapter.

A significant strand of phenomenology in anthropology, and even more so in other disciplines, is concerned with commonalities in human perception and experience.⁵ The shared experience of embodiment is the primary basis for the supposition of common human experience – and includes the ‘life-events’ of birth and death, as well tendencies to perceive scale and spaces through analogies with the body. In addition, hypothesised shared human urges and responses,

such as a longing for a place to be ‘home’ (a need to ‘dwell’ in the Heideggerian lexicon)⁶ or being moved by the experience of certain natural phenomena, have also been variously theorised as central to human experience, and, in the work of anthropologists, fleshed out in ethnographic description. In its quest for what is humanly shared, however, such work risks paying insufficient attention to cultural and historical specificity. Moreover, as has been a criticism of Heidegger, some of the phenomenological language and oppositions seem to reproduce a particular romantic vision that should, perhaps, be seen as part of a specific European complex rather than sought out and substantiated.⁷ Certainly, notions of dwelling and being-in-the-world bear a strong resemblance to ideas involved in musealisation that we will discuss in [Chapter 6](#), and they have been influential in ‘compensation’ theorising of the memory phenomenon – that is, seeing it as primarily a response to loss. And, as we will see below, they may be used in explanations of nostalgia. While much research carried out in this vein is interestingly suggestive, my contention here is that its further investigation merits coupling with attention to the historical and cultural specificity of sensory/bodily/affective ‘regimes’. This should, furthermore, include reflexive attention to the potential analytical dilemmas of shared frameworks (the ‘analytical double take’ discussed earlier).

Materialities

Anthropological phenomenology typically emphasises the ‘materiality of sociality’ (Hsu 2008: 437). It is sometimes coupled with an emphasis on the ‘agency’ of materials or objects, which has been central to a range of theorising including actor network theory, assemblage theory, non-representational theory, the influential theorising of Alfred Gell (1998) and the new material culture studies.⁸ These variously overlap and in their ‘strongest’ versions are sometimes hyperbolically referred to as ‘post human’ in that they seek to avoid giving privileged position to human beings and meaning-making in analyses (e.g. Latour 2005). While this might seem to be incompatible with a phenomenological approach, which attends foremost to the human experience of the world, it is sometimes brought together by theorists in an interest in how certain objects or materials might shape that experience.

While a researcher might not want to go the whole hog on the de-privileging of human agency for which strong versions of these approaches argue, they might nevertheless wish to draw on some of its insights about how materials work on and in us. That is, while they might want to give attention to questions such as when and why people choose to roast hogs, the symbolic meanings with which it is attributed, how the labour of cooking and carving are allocated and how the eating is distributed, they might also consider phenomenological and material questions about how the smell of the roasting hog might get our stomachs rumbling and whether there is something about hogs that make them suggestive to certain uses. Giving attention to materialities not only

recognises the inevitably material nature of human existence but also opens up investigation of how the differential properties of particular materials, objects or technologies interact with human endeavour and understanding; in other words, what difference do the differences between things make?

In relation to past presencing, this can be unpacked into questions such as those posed by Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey in their exploration of death, memory and material culture:

why it is that certain objects are infused with the capacity to endure time, persisting and rejuvenated *in* memory, whereas others are constrained in their temporal reach as ephemera, as *only* memories, barely present as fading traces that may be cut adrift by the passing away of certain generations or individuals.

(Hallam and Hockey 2001: 8)

How, in other words, do particular media forms – such as writing or monuments – make a difference to what persists over time and its relative openness or resistance to reinterpretation? In trying to grasp some of these material distinctions we might consider relativities of *durability*, *mobility*, *singularity*, *labour of production* and *size*. How readily something persists or perishes over time, how easily it can be transported, whether it can be replicated, how much effort is needed to create it and how large it is, all play into the work that particular material forms do in relation to memory – though not in neatly pre-determinable ways. Here I only note these relativities and suggest that the moments of shift from one medium to another – e.g. as when a photograph is taken of a mountain – can act as productive entry points for analysis of mediation in past presencing. In addition to these relativities, and in interaction with them, are also other, metaphorical resonances that, likewise, may give them specific ‘expressive potency’ (D. Abram 1996: 80), as we will see below in examples such as gardening or things left in abandoned houses.

Studies giving weight to materiality tread a difficult line between identifying properties of things that may widely evoke certain responses or share ‘affordances’, to use a term (from psychologist James J. Gibson 1979) that has come to be widely adopted in such discussions, and recognising the potential variability of responses or attributions of meaning that people may make. This is dealt with well in the studies that are discussed in more detail below, which on the one hand show how certain material properties – e.g. of the dead body – can lend themselves to certain affectively charged ritualisation, and on the other alert us to ‘other’ ways of responding (or not responding at all). So while, for example, carrying around a piece of a dead person’s body – as in the hair jewellery that was popular in Victorian Britain – might be seen as a natural way to preserve the memory of a loved one in some contexts, it is not currently in favour in most parts of Europe – and might, indeed, be viewed with distaste (Hallam and Hockey 2001). The ideas of Robert Hertz

(1960/1910) are insightful here.⁹ He notes that positive associations of the right side (e.g. the term ‘right’ referring to both a direction and a positive value in many languages) are found widely across the world and argues that this is prompted by the statistical prevalence of right-handedness. What we see here is certain physical features of the natural world, in this case the ‘sidedness’ of the human body, acting suggestively, but not deterministically, to prompt certain apprehensions. Paul Connerton argues likewise in relation to bodily morphological features of verticality and the distinction between inside and outside, which, he suggests, are frequently the mode through which place is apprehended (2011: [Chapter 4](#)). However big the hints that bodies and the natural world may give, however, these are inevitably incorporated into socially and culturally particular life-worlds and will bear their specific inflections. This is evident in many of the examples below, beginning with Katherine Verdery’s brilliant investigation of what she calls the ‘political lives of dead bodies’ in post-Socialist Europe (1999). What we see here, alongside an insightful analysis of the ‘bodily hints’ that dead bodies may make, is also how these become enmeshed in the historically, politically and culturally specific – in this case, Eastern Europe post 1989.

Post-Socialist dead bodies

Bodies, dead as well as alive, Verdery argues, are especially symbolically effective and emotively resonant because they are capable of, on the one hand, evoking human commonality – the shared fact of inhabiting bodies – and, on the other, of evoking human particularity. It is ‘because all people have bodies that any manipulation of a corpse directly enables one’s identification with it through one’s own body, thereby tapping into one’s reservoirs of feeling’ (1999: 32–3). As well as this ‘ineluctable self-referentiality’ (1999: 32), the fact that dead bodies ‘suggest the lived lives of human beings’ – death is a time for reflecting back on a life – also means that ‘they can be evaluated from many angles and assigned perhaps contradictory virtues, vices and intentions’ (1999: 28). A corpse is also that of a *specific* individual, and so, while on the one hand a corpse might be invested with numerous identifications and meanings, its particularity simultaneously creates ‘the illusion [that is has] ... *only one* significance’, a singularity that is further emphasised by its discrete physical form (1999: 29). This dual referentiality – general *and* particular – is why the dead body is potentially so resonant for use in political ritual, allowing a playing with both generalising and more specific motifs. Moreover, the body’s ‘deadness’ contributes to imbuing ritual with powerful affect both by indexing other rituals – the funeral and the commemorative ceremony – and by the more general sense of awe and of connection with ‘the sacred and the cosmic’ (p.32) that surrounds death.¹⁰

If these are commonplace ‘affordances’ of corpses, they have specific inflections in the wake of the collapse of communist regimes. According to

Verdery, this collapse produced 'a problem of reorganisation on a cosmic scale ... a reordering of people's entire meaningful worlds' (1999: 35). In the face of this, dramatic ritual acts moral regeneration (a notion she takes from Durkheim) – such as the return of dead bodies and their ceremonial reburials – abound. But where Durkheim would see these as acts of consensus-making, Verdery observes that they are frequently 'sites of political conflict' (1999: 36). Nevertheless, by reburying the bodies in their 'homelands' – another evocative notion, and one that sometimes entails selective memory (Gal 1991) – the new political regimes also conduct 'proper burial', which symbolically helps to restore cosmic order. As Verdery describes and others have also documented, ideas about risks that may follow from improper or non-existent burial are widespread in Europe, especially Eastern Europe.¹¹ Such improper burial risks incurring the wrath of the spirit of the dead, who may even become a vampire or other vengeful spirit, as is the case in Transylvania (Verdery 1999: 41–2). Exhumation and proper burial, thus, are not only general but are also locally charged material and symbolic modes of trying to effect a 'proper' social order in which bodies are, literally, re-rooted into place.

In addition, the metaphorical resonance of the return of dead bodies for reburial also helps to fortify unified national visions – even if these are contested. Returned bodies are widely conceived as 'ancestors' or 'sons' of the nation, thus mobilising kinship metaphors that are widespread in conceptualising nations and their continuity over time. Repatriation of bodies thus plays into a reaffirmation of nations, and national distinctiveness, that is especially salient in the immediate post-Socialist years as countries strive to perform their national independence – frequently turning to the past, including past heroes, in the process. Not only are the returning dead bodies conceived as ancestors, and as national figures returning to the fold, they are also described as forms of 'cultural heritage' or 'national treasure'. This not only further substantiates the nation's possessive individuation, but also emotively invokes globally increased calls for the repatriation of property to 'those to whom it properly belongs' (1999: 48–9). The new post-Socialist nations are thus also positioned as heritage-possessing actors in a global scene in which repatriation claims are part of an identity-performing currency. Repatriating dead bodies is simultaneously a reproduction of persons and things, and, as such, it also acts to equate these; and in the process it reinforces the idea that the nation may have property and members elsewhere – but that these should, ideally, return 'home'.

Verdery does not discuss the post-Socialist 'repatriation' of dead bodies as a manifestation of nostalgia, and this would be to stretch the term. But as we will see later in this chapter, forms of nostalgia have been widespread in post-Socialist countries, with a looking back and calls for reviving aspects of both pre-Socialist and Socialist pasts. Moreover, the affective and epistemological constellations of nostalgia – a positive gaze and longing for aspects of the past and for home – are also entangled in the necro-rituals that Verdery describes. In the rest of this chapter I turn to various nostalgic practices that have been documented in

Europe over the past 30 years, some of which can be seen as part of the memory phenomenon that is the focus of the chapters that follow. In exploring this, I am concerned too to consider further how subjective experience and the ‘prompts’ or affordances of bodies or materials are articulated in particular ways in specific times, places and circumstances.

Nostalgia

As Svetlana Boym, among others, has discussed, the term ‘nostalgia’ was coined in the seventeenth century by a Swiss medical student to designate an illness – ‘the sad mood originating from the desire to return to one’s native land’ (Dr Johannes Hofer 1688, quoted in Boym 2001: 3) – that he identified as being suffered by ‘various displaced people ... [including] freedom-loving students from the Republic of Berne studying in Basel, domestic help and servants working in France and Germany and Swiss soldiers fighting abroad’ (Boym 2001: 3). Since then, Hofer’s Greek neologism has found its way into various European languages, sometimes supplanting and sometimes existing alongside, or perhaps eclipsed by, local variations. Mostly, ‘nostalgia’, and what are deemed its cognates, is used to indicate a more or less general longing for the past, often, but not necessarily, including the longing for home indicated by the Greek (*nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing’, Boym 2001: xiii). While ‘nostalgia’ is no longer a medical diagnosis in most countries and medicines, it still often retains a taint of the pathological, and, as we will see, is frequently moralised; though it also has other connotations, not least in Greece.

Nostalgia emerged as a focus among anthropologists working in a wide range of countries in Europe during the 1990s and 2000s, though studies were not usually brought together for comparative analysis.¹² In most cases, nostalgia was not part of what the researchers had initially intended to research but its significance in the locality in which they were working, as well as in wider debate, drew their attention. In many but not all cases discourses of nostalgia were entangled in the growing memory phenomenon, and specifically the expansion of ‘heritage’. For some commentators, as we will see further in following chapters, the memory phenomenon – or specific renditions such as ‘the heritage industry’ – was a manifestation of a rather naïve nostalgia, a rose-tinted looking back to a time of ‘safety’ in the face of disruptive change and dislocation. Nostalgia from this perspective was a foolish sentimental view that the past had been better and might somehow be returned to. What anthropological research brought to the debate were on-the-ground perspectives, based on lived experiences, which contributed to a more informed as well as nuanced picture of the kinds of relationships to the past involved in the booming of heritage and tradition. In addition, anthropological research highlighted different understandings and experiences of ‘nostalgia’ and its relatives – such as ‘home’, ‘the past’, ‘return’; and some also sought to bring this together with an attempt to grasp the sensory, affective and material dimensions involved.

The breast of Aphrodite, sensory memory and the historical unconscious

The difference between the connotations of the Greek-rooted 'nostalgia' as it is widely used in the English language and its meanings in Greek is one spur of C. Nadia Seremetakis's compelling argument for attending to the entanglements of language and experience, and to memory as sensory and embodied.

In English the word nostalgia (in Greek *nostalghía*) implies trivializing romantic sentimentality. In Greek the verb *nostalgó* is a composite of *nostó* and *alghó*. *Nostó* means I return, I travel (back to homeland); the noun *nóstos* means the return, the journey, while *á-nostós* means without taste ... The opposite of *ánostos* is *nóstimos* and characterizes someone or something that has journeyed and arrived, has matured, ripened and is thus tasty (and useful). *Alghó* means I feel pain, I ache for, and the noun *álghos* characterizes one's pain in soul and body, burning pain (*kaimós*). Thus *nostalghía* is the desire or longing with burning pain to journey. It also evokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement; it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experiences of spiritual and somatic exile to the notion of maturation and ripening. In this sense, *nostalghía* is linked to the personal consequences of historicizing sensory experience which is conceived as a painful bodily and emotional journey. (1994: 4)

This dense semantic complex maps an affective and moral constellation that is significantly unlike the romantic 'freezing' of the past that 'nostalgia' is often seen to imply in English. Nostalgia in the Greek context instead 'evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience' (1994: 4).

Seremetakis shows this well through poetically crafted cameos that seek to evoke as well as to represent the sensory and affective experiences of *nostalghía* and of memory more generally. In Proustian fashion, her account begins:

I grew up with the peach. It had a thick skin touched with fuzz, and a soft matte off-white colour alternating with rosy hues. *Rodhákino* was its name (*ródho* means rose). It was well rounded and smooth like a small clay vase, fitting perfectly into your palm. Its interior was firm yet moist, offering a soft resistance to the teeth. A bit sweet and a bit sour, it exuded a distinct fragrance. This peach was known as 'the breast of Aphrodite' (*o mastós tis Afrodhítis*).

(1994: 1)

The nostalgia here lies not only in looking back at childhood, now gone, but also in that this kind of peach is no longer available, having been supplanted by more watery, *á-nostós*, varieties.

Seremetakis' nostalgic memory of the breast of Aphrodite is also a basis for her argument for attention to the sensory dimensions of memory. She regards the senses and memory as thoroughly intertwined: 'The senses are ... implicated in historical interpretation as witnesses or record-keepers of material experience' (1994: 6). Indeed, memory, she suggests, might be understood as

a distinct meta-sense [which] transports, bridges and crosses all the other senses. Yet memory is internal to each sense, and the senses are as divisible and indivisible from each other as each memory is separable and intertwined with others.

(1994: 9)

This does not mean that the senses are outside culture – or history. On the contrary, she emphasises how these are thoroughly mutually implicated. The peach that she remembers has all but disappeared, a consequence of European 'economic and social transformations' (1994: 3) – it has become history, in the sense of no longer extant. New trade-routes and transportation technologies have brought new products, with new sensory qualities – such as the kiwi fruit – and these too are embedded in the lived, embodied experiences that form 'the historical unconscious' (1994: 4). A starting point of an object, and the embodied and sensory experiences of it, thus leads into questions of remembrance, personal but also, inevitably, entangled in wider socio-cultural and political-economic histories.

Seremetakis' essay is partly a methodological exemplar: beginning with accounts of various powerful embodied memories and using these as a journey – *nóstos* – into a specific cultural history, one in which the senses themselves are historicised. It is also a manifesto for recognising the significance of the sensory, embodied and material in how we apprehend history and historicity. Rephrasing one of her questions (which her essay surely answers in the affirmative) as a statement, her argument is that 'memory [is] stored in specific everyday items that form the historicity of a culture, items that create and sustain our relationship to the historical as a sensory dimension' (1994: 3).

Proustian perspectives – food memories

That Seremetakis' plea for a sensory approach to memory begins with a peach is not, perhaps, surprising, for food is often a powerful trigger for nostalgic remembrance – as Proust has shown so ineluctably. Her essay contains several other examples that also centre on her own food memories from her childhood in Greece. The small cups of strong aromatic coffee that serve as temporal 'decompressions' in daily rhythms, allowing moments of reflection and recollection, inform an argument about how moments can be created for bringing 'the senses and memory ... into play' (1994: 14). Her experience of discovering, after years living away in America, that she knows which wild greens to pick, even though she has only

eaten and not gathered them before, illustrate her claim that embodied memory is also transferable between different senses: ‘When I went out to collect them, the sensory memory of taste, order, orality stored in the body was transferred to vision and tactility. My body involuntarily knew what I consciously did not’ (1994: 16).

This ‘sensorial transfer’ is also discussed by David Sutton, in *Remembrance of Repasts* (2001), as a form of ‘synaesthesia’. Food, he argues, is particularly powerful in memory not only because it is embodied but because of its synaesthetic qualities – taste, smell, vision, touch and sound.¹³ This creates an ‘experience of “returning to the whole”’ (2001: 17), which can be important for creating senses of identification as well as being the object of nostalgic longing. The capacity of food to sensorially link to a wide range of other aspects of experience – as well as for eating to be an important social experience itself – also contributes to its prevalence in nostalgic recollections, sometimes even being their starting point. Its mnemonic resonance for exiles has been shown in a wide range of research in Europe, including that of Lynn Harbottle with Iranians in the UK (2004), Regina Römhild with Cretans in Frankfurt (2002), Elia Petridou on Greeks in England (2001), Elia Vardaki with returnees to Kythera, Greece (2006), Andrea Smith with Algerians in France (2003) and Marta Rabikowska with Poles in London (2010). In addition, it can act methodologically as an entry point for a wide range of other, sometimes nostalgic, memories, as in Alyssa Grossman’s memory meal in Bucharest, described in [Chapter 3](#), or in Carole Counihan’s use of what she calls ‘food-centred life histories’ to explore ‘the largely missing voices of the consumers’ (2004: 2), especially those of women, in her Tuscan research. As we will see in the following chapter, it may also be entangled with the nostalgia-entangled notions of tradition, heritage and authenticity. In addition, food’s material properties mean that food comes from *somewhere* – it is grown and produced in particular (not necessarily singular) locations. This can create affectively and sensorially powerful links with *place*, perhaps generating longings for locations as well as times when a particular food was consumed. While some foods are highly perishable, others are more mobile or reproducible, and thus available for creating senses of connection – and perhaps sparking recollections or new longings – over space as well as time.

Re-rooting memory

Depending upon the climate, one possibility for exiles to create material connections with ‘back home’ may be to grow produce from their homelands in their new locations. Doing so may carry the metaphorical resonance of people themselves also putting down new roots in a new place, roots being a commonplace notion invoked in nostalgic and diasporic discourse, and also in the memory phenomenon more widely.¹⁴

Anne Jepson’s study of gardening in Cyprus (2006) provides an interesting commentary on this idea – at once highlighting the fertility of metaphorical affordances and actual capacities offered by plants and gardening, but at the same time highlighting its cultural, historical and political situatedness.¹⁵ As



FIGURE 4.1 Elemental rooting practices: planting potatoes in Cyprus. Photograph courtesy of Anne Jepson

she writes, gardening involves ‘direct and sensual interaction with the soil, the immediate stuff of a place, as well as an immediate sense of physical integrity’ (2006: 159), which constitute what she calls ‘elemental rooting practices’ (*ibid.*). Yet, although gardening brings people into direct sensory engagement with the place whose soil they are tilling, it does not necessarily ‘root’ them to that place.

Those she studies are mostly Greek Cypriots who, since the 1974 division of the island, live in houses that still formally belong to the Turkish Cypriots who were evicted from them (2006: 166). As such, they consider themselves refugees, who may at some time in the future have to give up the properties in which they live. Despite – or as Jepson suggests, perhaps partly because of – this sense of fragile residence, such refugees often create gardens even while they may resist carrying out work on the houses that they live in. Moreover, many expressed to her how important gardening was to them, doing so through phraseology of ‘a need to grow’ (2006: 166). Although gardening would seem redolent with metaphors of setting down roots, of becoming one with the land in a particular territory, she suggests that it also affords other notions that are mobilised in this case. While rooting, locating and the resulting flourishing do seem to be important to those she describes, the rooting is not prioritised and is, perhaps, seen as relatively ‘shallow’. Instead, she suggests, it is ‘the very provisional, transient, cyclical nature of the garden that draws them towards this work’ (*ibid.*). This is different from – and less political than – work on the house, which is regarded as ‘investment in concrete’ (*ibid.*). Gardens require constant tending and renewal if they are not to return to wilderness; buildings deprived of human

attention are relatively durable. Gardens will disappear once people vacate them; buildings will remain. Moreover, plants can be dug up and moved or replicated through cloning or gathering seed for re-sowing. As such, they allow for the possibilities of a future re-rooting elsewhere. At the same time, they also invoke a 'sensual memory' through the growing – and smelling and sometimes eating – of plants that were grown 'back home'; the creation of 'something that is both new and connected with the past through identical sensual experience' (2006: 173).

The importance of plants in sensory memory and for creating connections with place is also vividly evident in Andrea Smith's insightful ethnography of visits to Malta by *pieds-noirs* – settlers from Algeria living in France – with Maltese ancestry.¹⁶ These former inhabitants of Algeria talk longingly of Algeria, often slipping into the present tense as they do so, and dwelling on richly sensual memories of foods and places. They have even coined the term *nostalgérie* to describe their self-recognised affective practice (2003: 340). While this is often dismissed by non-*pieds-noirs* French citizens as a form of 'colonial nostalgia' – a misplaced longing for the colonial order of French-ruled Algeria – Smith argues that the longing is more to do with *pieds-noirs*' intense sensory evocation of *place* and sense of not fully belonging, of being unable to 'root themselves', in France. As one woman struggles to explain to her:

You see, in France ... I don't find the *plains*, the, the *mountains*, the, the, the same *landscapes* (paysages), the same *smells* ... the same colors ... Thus, I get the feeling that I am always traveling (en voyage) in France. I'm floating.
(2003: 341; original emphases)

On visits to Malta, however, even though this is a place where most of the *pieds-noirs* who visit have never lived, they manage to find landscapes, smells, colours – and especially plants – that evoke their nostalgically imagined Algeria. Smith describes the excitement and sensory delight of the *pieds-noirs* during one such visit when they discover prickly-pear cactuses, and enjoy eating their tasty, red-juiced fruits. In a sense, what these *pieds-noirs* of Maltese ancestry are doing is re-rooting their memories of Algeria in Malta; a process in which Malta in effect becomes a sanitised substitute for an Algeria to which they either cannot return or that would likely bring disappointment if they did. The 'pilgrimages of nostalgia' to Malta thus act as sensorially intense visits to 'an Algeria without anti-Maltese discrimination' and in which being a European settler makes one no less Algerian – that is, to 'an Algeria that never was' (2003: 354).

Varieties of nostalgia

What these studies show is that natural materialities, such as plants, and commonplace practices, such as gardening, may be richly metaphorically suggestive – they may make big hints – but that this is still woven into culturally specific and historically contingent interpretations. In the cases above it is the

particular predicament of the semi-rooted Greek-Cypriot ‘refugees’ that shapes the symbolic import with which they imbue gardening; and of the peculiar double displacedness of the *pieds-noirs* that flavours their delight in the Maltese landscape and its fruits. Also highlighted here is that there may be different kinds, and intensities, of nostalgia – as of other affective constellations. This, indeed, is one of the most strongly emerging themes from research on nostalgia in the anthropology of Europe.

For researchers in the 1980s, working in areas caught up in the heritage boom, they faced questions being asked in other disciplines, and the media, about whether this was just a nostalgic looking back to a time that was, in the words of critic Robert Hewison, ‘past, dead and safe’ (1987: 144). Was nostalgia basically a longing for a past in order to escape an increasingly unprepossessing present? In post-industrial northern England, for example, Jeanette Edwards, working in a former mill-town, documented local people’s new-found concerns with preserving their industrial past – a major form of the new heritage expansion. Confronting arguments by Hewison and others, she argued that what was involved was not a romantic nostalgia for that period – people were well aware of its negative dimensions. Rather, it was a means by which local people could – variously and in particular contexts – make claims of belonging through knowledge of local history (1998; see also 2000).¹⁷ While some forms of preserving or restoring the past (such as in the town’s museum) would be enthusiastically supported, others (such as to erect ‘Victorian railings’ in the town centre) would be soundly rejected. What was involved was not some blanket nostalgia for the past or wish to return to it but a select discourse embedded in ongoing social relations. Elsewhere in post-industrial Northern England, Susan Wright (1992) likewise argued that the flourishing of ‘galas’ – traditional mining festivals – in towns in which collieries had been closed was not just a romantic recollection of a time imagined as better than the present – a world of full-employment. Instead, she showed, these forms allowed the performance of a critical historical perspective and contemporary political commentary, and perhaps also subterfuge emotions, albeit often in coded form.

This seems to call for distinguishing between forms of nostalgia, as does Matt Hodges in his discussion of how villagers in Monadières, southern France, periodise the past. Pointing out that nostalgia is in effect a form of periodisation – typically making a sharp divide between a certain ‘then’ and ‘now’ – he shows how, even within one village, and even within one person, nostalgia may operate variously. He draws especially on discussions with local ‘amateur ethnographer’, Guy Cadas, who collects stories of ‘the old days’, making a sharp distinction between the past and today, and describing the pain that he feels in recollecting all that has gone as ‘the knife’, so physical is his sense of loss (2010: 121). Yet, in looking back in this way, Guy Cadas not only engages in what Hodges calls ‘palliative nostalgia’ – ‘searching out a blissful if temporary shelter from the demands of the present’ (2010: 120), but also in ‘critical nostalgia’ – ‘critically ... subjecting the present to comparison with remembered or invented pasts’ (ibid.).¹⁸ In doing

so, Guy Cadas draws upon, and tries to make sense of, his lived experience of the considerable change that the village is undergoing, not least from the growth of heritage tourism, which has also given a new validation to his self-appointed work collecting up and commenting on the locality, tradition and change.

Returning to the case of Cyprus provides further illustration of how distinct affective sensibilities embedded in different socio-political situations that may co-exist – in this case, between the different populations on the island. According to Papadakis *et al.* (2006), after the 1974 division of the island, ‘nostalgia ... became a patriotic duty’ for Greek Cypriots who had been displaced from their original homes in the North and continued to long for them (2006: 13). (These are the ‘refugees’ of Jepson’s study.) Turkish Cypriots, however, faced ‘an official rhetoric that the past was all negative and that the north was now their true and only “homeland”’, which meant that they were not supposed to ‘feel nostalgic towards the homes they left behind in 1974, as that could imply that they wished to return or that life there was not always bleak’ (2006: 13–14). Papadakis *et al.* draw on Aciman (2000), in what is perhaps an over-stated opposition, to characterise the Greek Cypriot position as *nostomania* and that of Turkish Cypriots as *nostophobia* (Papadakis *et al.* 2006: 14).¹⁹

Below, I return to differentiation of nostalgias and their playing out in particular histories and locations through an examination of post-Socialist nostalgia.²⁰ First, however, I turn further to the theme of place, which so often also figures in nostalgic longing, as well as informing the original definition of the term.

Touching places

Place is bound up with a wide range of affects, not only nostalgia; and it is central to heritage – which is always emplaced.²¹ In heritage it is through place – and its specific physical elements, such as buildings or natural features – that the past is made present. According to Edward Casey’s phenomenological perspective, place is central to human experience: ‘To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in’ (1996: 18). This perhaps informs the capacity of places to ‘touch’ those who come to them – and thus the affective resonance of history presented as heritage; as well as, sometimes at least, their capacity to exert a pull of return.

The idea that pasts that are not known to those who visit or inhabit certain places can nevertheless be somehow sensed is widespread in European cultures; and is often expressed through forms such as ghostly presences and ideas of haunting, as we will see below.²² If ‘memory’ is understood as not only cognitive but as embodied or emplaced, such traces may be transmitted through, say, sedimented bodily movements or sculptural and architectural forms. Chris Tilley’s phenomenological exploration of various prehistoric remains in Europe – Breton menhirs, Maltese temples and rock carvings in Sweden – suggests, not uncontentiously, that there are various common human structurings of

perception that we will bring to any actual encounter and that our embodied experience of this, while inevitably interpreted through ‘a contemporary cultural frame’, can nevertheless allow the stones to ‘exert their muted agency in relation to us’ (2004: 219) in ways that are likely to echo those of prehistoric peoples.

Where an anthropologist has shared in the way of life of a people over time, they may come to share not only narrated memories but also embodied ones, including senses of longing for particular places and times. This is illustrated in Judith Okely’s research with the rural aged in Normandy. In the local authority ‘home’ (her inverted commas) to which the rural aged move once they can no longer work their farms, they choose to sit in a ‘cold and draughty’ corridor from which they can catch a distant glimpse of the fields beyond the town (2001: 106). Although they do not verbally explain their reasons for sitting there, Okely draws on her shared tacit experience of having helped them in their fields to suggest that they are engaged in longingly recalling their lives on the land.

In research among older people in a former mining and steel-working village of Dodworth in the North of England (2005), Cathrine Degnen likewise shared embodied experiences and everyday recollections with those she studied. This included walking the changing local village-scape with its residues of past times, and talking about it – the village past being a topic of relentless enthusiasm among local people. The effect of this everyday mundane chatting and walking the locality was that she was tacitly taught how to populate the village streets with names and histories of former inhabitants. The past thus became locally and spatially present for her, as it was for local people, in what she calls ‘three dimensional memory’. This is a kind of ‘place memory’ that Connerton (2009) would designate the *locus*, a lived taken-for-granted emplacement, and that he contrasts with the *memorial* – more active and conscious designation of some places as significant for remembrance. While Connerton’s discussion of this distinction implies that the locus is a more important form of memory than the memorial, much of his other work highlights the significance of both, as of the embodied practices that variously characterise them. A more productive approach, therefore, is to consider the cultural work that they variously achieve. Furthermore, while the distinction is useful, it should be noted that these ‘types’ may blend into one another or become transformed over time, as for example, when everyday knowledge and memory become recorded into official memorials and heritage, as Jane Nadel-Klein describes of the fisherfolk of Ferryden, Scotland (2003); and sometimes these in turn become the focus of everyday sociability, as Angela Janelli discusses in relation to amateur – or what she calls ‘wild’ – museums (2012; see also [Chapter 6](#)).

Home

Many of the studies already discussed in this chapter have illustrated the significance of ‘home’ in some form, perhaps especially for those who feel exiled from it; and the anthropology of Europe is rich in further examples.²³ ‘Home’,

we have seen, may variously refer to particular countries, regions or villages; and it may be indexed by particular foods, smells, bodies and practices. Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson (1998) rightly caution that we should be wary of thinking that 'home' is necessarily emplaced and static; but at the same time it is clear that ideas about 'home' as rooted in particular places are widespread – and highly affectively and politically charged – in Europe. Indeed, Stef Jansen notes that 'the war that tore Yugoslavia apart was precisely a war about the notion of "home"' – who had the right to use it and with precisely what reference (1998: 86). The very fact that 'home' readily encompasses different scales – referring either to the whole country or possibly even continent as well as to familial domestic space – affords this affective and political charge. While there are particular renditions within Europe, as in the German notion of *Heimat* discussed in [Chapter 6](#), an idea about home as a significant locus of our identities and senses of well-being, and as existing as part of a set of nested realisations, especially that of the domestic house and the nation-state, might be seen as part of a European complex. Certainly, it is multiply challenged – by mobility, migration, those with 'homes' in more than one place and those with no homes at all; but it is also, simultaneously, multiply reinforced by memories of, and longings for, 'home' by those who feel its lack.

The sensory and affective density of domestic homes, coupled with the fact that these are often locations of life intimacies and developments over more or less lengthy periods of time, shapes the particular emotive and symbolic resonance of 'home' – and its significance for past presencing. Many anthropological studies have explored the significance of the particular spatial arrangements of houses and their contents, many, especially in Europe, highlighting the salience of the idea that the home and home possessions act as carriers of personal identity and memory.²⁴ Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things* (2008) does so in a particularly compelling fashion by focusing on a London street and exploring the meanings of 'things' – which range widely from furnishings to clothing to internet images – for the street's various inhabitants. By doing so, he paints a vivid portrait of the multiple memories, affects and capacities with which they are invested.

As an illustration of how the sensory experience of the house may furnish nostalgic memories of home, I turn to Anat Hecht's account of the home in Croydon, London, of 'Nan', a Scot in her sixties. Hecht describes Nan's house as a 'private museum of memory' (2001: 141; Hecht 2013), packed with numerous everyday items that she has collected over time; and she describes how these are used by Nan for narrating her life and linking it to the wider histories through which she has lived. Nan's narrations are often nostalgic, as engrossingly conveyed through her use of words and descriptions of the places in which she has dwelt: 'the warmth, light and shininess of the interior [that Nan describes] grants it an almost magical quality, regardless of its modesty. The glowing fire illuminating the multitude of objects in the small family room, creates a sense of warm enclosure, intimacy and care' (2001: 126). At the same time, it is through the everyday possessions that surround her that Nan 'feels



FIGURE 4.2 Display of family photographs and ornaments in Nan's home. Photograph courtesy of Anat Hecht

at home' (2001: 141). These, as well as the stories that she tells, enable Nan to make her past homes present to her; or, as Hecht puts it: 'By "housing" the material and sensory evocations of her narrated memories, Nan symbolically revives the past homes she has left behind' (2001: 141). Interestingly, not only does she do so in her everyday life but also in 'Memory and Smell reminiscences sessions' that she runs at her local museum in London – organised events in which she uses objects as a starting point for memory conversations with visitors (2001: 140).²⁵

Dispossessions and repossessions

Houses, even homes, are not, however, always places in which their inhabitants feel 'at home'. As a final area of discussion in this section I briefly turn to cases in which people find themselves living in houses in which they do not feel they fully belong. This is a departure from my focus on nostalgia except insofar as these residents long to be elsewhere, perhaps in a less troubled past, or in a more homely relationship with the places that they occupy. What these studies show is the powerful affective resonance of houses and their contents; as well as the historical and political situatedness of 'dwelling'.

Yael Navaro-Yashin's research on Turkish-Cypriots' experience of living in houses that, before the war and partition of the island, belonged to Greek-

Cypriots, details a particularly intimate uncomfortable presence of the past. These homes – and the things belonging to previous householders with which they are often filled – are described by their inhabitants as generating a ‘state of mental depression, deep and unrecoverable sadness, and dis-ease’, called ‘*maraz*’ in the local dialect and glossed by Navaro-Yashin as ‘melancholia’ (2009: 4). The objects and spaces of these houses seem to carry something of the loss experienced by their former owners, and this then penetrates their new owners’ bodies through powerful and disconcerting affect. Perhaps this is an especially troubling feeling and needs to be kept subterfuge if, as Papadakis *et al.* suggest, the official affective script of rehoused Turkish Cypriots advocates that they should now feel ‘at home’ in their new locations (2006, discussed above).

In other post-conflict contexts of homes being occupied by new inhabitants, senses of discomfort among the new owners have been recorded. In many parts of the Balkans, houses have been reallocated post-war, as in the village of Knin, in what is now Croatia, where houses that previously belonged to Serbs now have Croatian owners (Leutloff-Grandits 2006: 117, 122–3). As among the Turkish Cypriots, some of these new inhabitants report senses of depression, guilt and fear. However, Carolin Leutloff-Grandits also observes other, different, emotional dynamics in play. These include a sense of righteous entitlement, the houses being viewed as a form of ‘compensatory restitution’. Among some inhabitants this is fuelled not only by ethnonationalism but also religious conviction: ‘I think that the houses were given by God’ explains one new settler to the ethnographer (2006: 122).²⁶ In post-Socialist countries more widely there has also been considerable dispossession and reallocation of houses, sometimes to relatives of former owners, as well as contests over ownership, generating mixed and unsettling emotions, and also encounters with ghosts inhabiting the properties. In Estonia, for example, there has been an escalation of ghost stories in the media and everyday life since 1990 (Valk 2006). As Ülo Valk discusses, while these ghosts generally take forms familiar from Estonian folklore, their variable prevalence historically is also bound up with issues of property distribution; and it is also perhaps not surprising that similar kinds of ghosts – human presences continuing to inhabit specific locations after their death – should be widespread in Europe as ‘ownership is such a powerful relationship between the self and material objects that it is often projected beyond the grave’ (2006: 49). Even so, the ‘affecting touch’ of ghosts is not necessarily always disquieting; as Valk reports, in some cases the ghosts return to quell the anxieties of the new owners, usually vanishing after they have done so.

This section has attempted to show ‘place’ – and some of its specific renditions, especially ‘home’ – to be an important and constitutive element in the European memory complex, not least because of the affect with which it is so often entangled. As a prime mode through which the past can be experienced as a powerful physical presence, ‘place’ is variously ‘made up’ not only in rooted locations but also through memory and imagination and the various media that enable them. That the term *nostalgia* might be interpreted as longing for, and

yearning to return to, either the past or home is, perhaps, a significant elision, for it is the past as potentially suitable ‘home’ that nostalgia summons up; and it thus also makes sense that forms of nostalgia emerge and proliferate at times when people are challenged by displacements of various sorts. As we see below, however, and discuss further in [Chapter 6](#), this does not complete an explanation of nostalgic practices in Europe.

Post-Socialist nostalgia

In the rest of this chapter I continue the discussion of nostalgia through what has emerged as one of the most interesting and extensively documented and debated examples in Europe – nostalgia for aspects of the Socialist past in many post-Socialist countries. That nostalgia for the Socialist past has generated so much interest and discussion speaks partly to the surprise that the phenomenon generated, especially but not only among those who had never directly experienced living in a Socialist country. According to dominant accounts, the demise of socialism should, surely, be viewed entirely positively, especially by those who had ‘escaped’ it. Given the deprivations and abuses of the Socialist period, why should anybody look back with any longing whatsoever?

Ostalgie

Germany – where post-Socialist longing goes under the name *Ostalgie* (‘nostalgia for the East’) – was probably the first country in which the phenomenon emerged; and this looking back by former East Germans was in sharp distinction to the future oriented temporality that Borneman argued characterised most citizens of the German Democratic Republic (see [Chapter 2](#)). Daphne Berdahl provides one of the most insightful accounts of the phenomenon. Like Verdery, she describes the post-Socialist context as one of ‘profound displacement’ – summed up in East Germans’ ‘popular saying that we have “emigrated without leaving [home]”’ (2010: 55). While she suggests that *Ostalgie* ‘can be an attempt to reclaim a kind of *Heimat* (home or homeland)’ (ibid.), she also argues that there have been different phases of *Ostalgie*, none of which has as its object or objective ‘recovery of a lost past’ (ibid.). The first phase arose in the early-1990s, after an initial rejection of all things eastern. It was mostly a low-key minority movement, instances including middle-aged women wearing the work-smocks that they had discarded in the immediate aftermath of the *Wende* (transition) – thus literally re-embodying their vilified past. But this was not out of a wish to return to that past – to all aspects of lives lived in those smocks. Rather, according to Berdahl, it was about some of those from the former German Democratic Republic asserting ‘identity as East Germans’ and in effect refusing the relentlessly negative associations that others typically made of their former lives (2010: 43).

By the mid-1990s, however, there was a move to a new phase in which a ‘nostalgia industry’ developed, with increased production and consumption of



FIGURE 4.3 Display of popular culture in the Olle DDR Museum, Apolda, 2007. Photograph by Sharon Macdonald, reproduced courtesy of the Olle DDR Museum

East German products, such as particular brands of beer or detergent, and also special East German ('Ossi') discos and television shows. This was commonly reported in the press as a rather retrograde romanticisation of the Socialist past engineered by capitalist entrepreneurs; and many waxed vehement against the way that it sanitised the past, forgetting the brutalities of the regime in its shallow concentration on consumer products and popular culture. Acknowledging that this move did entail a degree of knowing forgetting, Berdahl argues, however, that it nevertheless allowed East Germans to share and express their knowledge of the former East, 'of a period of time that differentiates Ossis' (2010: 44). Rather than a purely commercial phenomenon, creating a tidied up past, it was, she claims, a mode of self-identification for East Germans as 'Ossi'. In addition, the focus on consumer products, she suggests, 'reveal[s] a certain mourning for production' (2010: 44), expressive of a sense of real loss.

The new millennium saw the continuation of some of these themes, especially that of shared knowledge, but also – in what she sees as a new phase – 'a playful appropriation and ironic parody of Ostalgie [in which] East German things became "camp" rather than objects of nostalgic longing or counter-memory' (2010: 121–2). This was exemplified in the film *Goodbye Lenin!* On the one hand, she claims, the film's own irony, parody and playfulness exemplify a dimension of Ostalgie that 'celebrate[s] and naturalize[s] capitalism as the inevitable outcome of socialism's demise' (2010: 131). On the other, however,

the film also offers an alternative to relentless capitalism, Ostalgie thus providing 'a means of assessing and critiquing global capitalism' (2010: 132).

Evident here is that dealing with 'the past' is neither a once-and-for-all process nor uniform (see also Berdahl 1999). 'Transition' was not encapsulated only in the immediate before and after – although it was often thought of as such, as in the idea of it as a 'turn' or 'new beginning'. In practice, however, it was a longer-term ongoing process in which the past was continually reconfigured in the changing present; and in which different phases were accompanied by different predominant affects and materialisations. My own observations over many years of Germany-observing and especially the academic year 2006–7, that I spent largely living in the former East Germany (mainly Jena), support this too. In addition, though new forms of Ostalgie – the consumerist and the camp – emerged over time, the previous versions did not necessarily vanish; everyday low-key assertions of an Ossi identity – exhibited perhaps in choices of words or jokes – existed alongside the noisier publicly mediated ones. Post-Socialism was also characterised by diverse processes that did not always act in concert. So, for example, while there were manifestations of Ostalgie on the one hand, there could be a simultaneous embracing of capitalism and hurtling future momentum on the other. As everyday furnishings of homes in the Socialist East were lovingly salvaged and put into museums, citizens flocked to the newly opened IKEAs for the globally ubiquitous Swedish replacements. Perhaps other languages, such as Bulgarian, which used plural terms, such as 'changes', captured better what was underway (Creed 2011: 15).

It seemed to me that the dominant and most enduring feature of GDR Ostalgie was an imagined time of greater communitarian solidarity – often refracted through notions of shared willingness among ordinary people to 'make do' with few consumer goods (even if their leaders were behaving otherwise) and to seize other forms of enjoyment; and that this sometimes played itself out through continuing forms of leisure (willingness to sit in bars) and (generous) hospitality. At the same time, however, there was also often a deep ambivalence among former GDR citizens about 'Ossiness', sometimes also seen as a kind of complacency and lack of drive that, it was feared, could lead to them being 'trodden on' as in the past. Likewise, there was considerable ambivalence – about the West and the new Germany (often regarded as more or less synonymous), providing opportunity on the one hand and an 'elbow society', pushy and selfish, on the other. The material culture of the former East could act as a site for the playing out of ongoing identifications and differences, not always in ways that followed along predefined or straightforward identity-categories – not least because so many Wessis ('West Germans') were acknowledging kinship or other links to the East. The burgeoning DDR museums – especially the smaller ones, usually begun by enthusiasts – sometimes provided space for encounters of this kind. Offering the material culture of the former East Germany up for public viewing – museumising it – was itself an ambivalent enterprise. On the one hand, museumisation provided an affirmation of worth. On the other,

however, there was a risk that those coming to view would simply confirm their stereotypes of the German Democratic Republic as backward. While I noted this in various things told to me by museum staff, a visit as a tourist to the newly opened Haus der Geschichte in Lutherstadt Wittenberg provided an illustration in practice.²⁷

As my husband and I began visiting the museum, we were greeted with suspicion, verging on hostility from one of the museum staff members, who followed us from one room to another of the museum – set out primarily, as with so many others of this type, into different ‘rooms’ of a house. As we entered a living room, my husband pointed to some plastic crockery and exclaimed: ‘We had those!’ The woman laughed at his enthusiastic identification and a friendly conversation followed about how fashionable these had been in the 1960s and how the GDR had produced lots of very smart things. She opened cupboards for us to see more items, many of which were very similar ones to that we had also had at the same time. Elsewhere in the museum too, there were lively conversations underway with visitors – mainly East Germans – also sharing memories of the items, and times, displayed. Not so much about a wish to return to those times, the Ossi material culture provided a valuable focus for shared memories and for forging conversational links mainly between those who had directly shared the East German past but also, to some extent, to those who were willing to judge in the same terms as Ossis themselves.



FIGURE 4.4 Site for shared reminiscence. Exhibition of everyday life in the Haus der Geschichte, Lutherstadt Wittenberg, 2007. Photograph by Sharon Macdonald, reproduced courtesy of the Haus der Geschichte Wittenberg

Other post-Socialist nostalgias

Post-socialist nostalgia, at least in its public versions, seems to have emerged later in most other countries than it did in Germany. Gerald Creed suggests that the variation can be explained by the fact that it requires two conditions to do so: (1) the impossibility of return to a Socialist system; and (2) actual economic improvements in people's lives (2010: 37). While the re-unification of Germany rendered going back to any kind of Socialist system unthinkable and also led to quicker economic gains than was the case elsewhere, it is among those who have been disadvantaged by the new political-economic system – especially those who are unemployed – that *Ostalgie* is especially strongly felt. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Creed's two conditions seem to provide part but not all of the explanation for the different timing and different forms of post-Socialist nostalgia that have emerged. In Albania, for example, where the socialist period was especially brutal and marked by extreme hardship, and where there is still considerable poverty, there has been little such nostalgia – at least expressed publicly (Schwander-Sievers 2010).²⁸ In Romania, where there was 'continuity in the Communist and post-Communist elites' (Gille 2010: 282), nostalgia does not seem to have emerged until there were prospects of EU accession, and it has remained restrained (Grossman 2010). Creed's own study is of Bulgaria, where, he notes, it was only in the twenty-first century, as prosperity grew and the prospect of joining the EU began to look likely, that nostalgia for socialist times began to blossom.

Hungary is an interesting case here, for it seems to contravene Creed's conditions, but perhaps what is involved is not in fact 'nostalgia' even though it takes some of the same forms. In the immediate wake of the collapse of Soviet control, 'even before [the country's] first democratic elections took place' (Nadkarni 2010: 194), there was a revelling in things Soviet. These included a booming market in Soviet memorabilia, and setting up 'Socialist-themed parties, happenings, and even a pizzeria ("Marxim")' (ibid.). This was too soon for there to have been any material change in people's lives – and indeed Hungary was one of the most prosperous of the Eastern bloc countries – and before it had even been decided which party would control the country. Characteristic of the 'nostalgia' was that it was mostly expressed through Soviet materialisations. In some ways this was peculiar, for from the 1960s Hungary had managed to gain more autonomy than most other countries under Soviet rule, in what was sometimes called 'Goulash Communism'. Equating the Socialist past with Soviet rule, however, suited the political Right – by equating Socialism with its more repressive face; and also the Left – by depicting the Socialism of the past as unlike their new, freshly renamed version. What was involved here then was not in any sense a longing to recuperate any aspects of the Soviet past. Rather, as Maya Nadkarni argues, it entailed a commodification of Socialist 'historical relics as humorous kitsch'; and in doing so managed to 'demonstrate not only... emotional distance from the recent Socialist era – but also the success of Western



FIGURE 4.5 Soviet sausage. Photograph courtesy of Neringa Klumbyte

capitalism in Hungary' (2010: 195). This, then, was a kind of 'meta-nostalgia' – a strategic and ironic playing with the nostalgic form to demonstrate its opposite.

In Lithuania too, in a splendid discussion of 'the renaissance of the Soviet sausage', Neringa Klumbyte argues that the growing popularity of this sausage – and various other 'things socialist', including some populist political parties – should not be equated with a wish to 'return to oppression' (as some journalists complain) or to not have democracy. In this case what is involved, however, is not so much ironic meta-nostalgia as an attempt by a politically and economically marginalised population to reclaim themselves as being and having been 'honourable citizens'. Imagined as a healthy, non-contaminated product, 'Soviet' sausages (reintroduced in 1998) do not signal a desire for all aspects of the Soviet system but rather for a 'new postsocialist utopia, successfully consumed in the literal and metaphorical sense, which mixes the imagined Soviet past and the European present in people's imaginations to produce a distinctive fantasy of their reconcilability' (Klumbyte 2010: 33). Many consumers claimed, simply, that the sausages tasted good (2010: 24).

These examples, and especially the possibility of ironic nostalgia, illuminate the fact that the same practice may be invested with different meanings and affects. This is well illustrated in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, with their various, and sometimes absent, nostalgias. Zala Volčič argues that the fact

that most of these countries suffered ‘destruction and ethnic cleansing in the wake of the collapse of socialism’ meant that it was *post*-Socialism that was linked with ‘brutality and the subsequent rekindling of ethnic and religious hatreds’ (Volčič 2007: 27), leading to a more fertile ground for the growth of nostalgia for Socialist times. Yet, Svetlana Boym recalls visiting *Nostalgija Snack Bar* in Ljubljana in 1997 and being told by one of her friends in Zagreb that there could never be such a place in Zagreb or Belgrade, because ‘Nostalgia is a bad word ... Nostalgia is Yugo-nostalgia’ (2001: 51). From a country that *had* suffered post-Socialist brutality, unlike Slovenia, it was precisely this – the suffering that had gone in to achieving a redrawing of the maps – that made Yugonostalgia ‘bad’ and only possible in places outside the war zone.

Since then, however, there has been a flourishing of Yugonostalgia across most of its former countries – with it now ‘perhaps loudest in Bosnia-Herzegovina’ (Burić 2010: 227). One reason for this may be that Yugonostalgia has since come to be seen as a way of ‘not talking about the war’. In ethnographic research in long-term ethnically mixed villages in Croatia, on the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the late 1990s, Stef Jansen (2002) shows that it was Serbian villagers who mostly articulated Yugonostalgic sentiments. Not wanting to draw attention to Serbian violence of the war, Yugonostalgia allowed them to express willingness to exist peaceably alongside their neighbours (see also Jansen 2009; further discussed in [Chapter 8](#)).

Yugonostalgia takes a wide range of forms, however, and is unevenly embraced not only by different ethnicities but also by different generations and genders. A particularly ‘noisy’ form is a cult of former President of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, which includes the turning of his (luxurious) home into a holiday resort, the use of his image in advertising, opening of *Café Tito* in Sarajevo, and restoration of his official train by the Serbian Railway company for themed trips.²⁹ While some of this looks like ironic nostalgia, and to some may well be, Fedja Burić describes how it also includes visits to his birthplace, and a Tito ‘homepage on the Internet, which has generated thousands of emails addressed to the deceased Marshal’ (Burić 2010: 227). Her interviews with Bosnian Muslims in Chicago show them to differ sharply on the question of whether Tito ‘got the Muslims their nation’; however, their reference to Tito as a father figure (an image that was propagated during his regime) helps them to straddle this difference and their own potentially conflicting positions. At the same time, however, Burić notes that this father figure image appeals less to her younger, female interviewee, so highlighting potential variations of nostalgic affinity along gender and age as well as ethnic, political and individual lines.

Transnational or other ‘external’ players, such as tourists or Western media, have also influenced the shapes and strength of post-Socialist nostalgia. Dominic Boyer argues that *Ostalgie* in Germany, especially as manifest in a film such as *Goodbye Lenin!*, is a ‘West German...naturalizing fantasy’, that allows West Germans to ‘claim a future free from the burden of history’ (2006: 363) – it is turned instead into harmless kitsch. As such, it also speaks to the fantasies – and

historical consciousnesses – of those who never lived under Socialist regimes. Certainly, souvenirs of Socialist times – like the gas-masks, fur-hats, currency and Lenin statuettes on sale in a Berlin market – and the chance to eat at a Communist-themed café, visit a museum of the Socialist past or even stay in an ‘Ostel’ (a GDR-themed hostel) have proved popular tourist draws throughout the former Eastern bloc.³⁰ While much of this is infused with an ironic, playful affect – very different from that surrounding Holocaust tourism (see [Chapter 8](#)) – it remains open to more complex interactions and historical awareness, especially in its museums, some of which detail brutalities as well as consumer goods.

In an argument based on fieldwork among young far-Right-supporting East Germans in Berlin, Nitzan Shoshan argues that their nostalgic affect ‘exceeds’ the specificities of German memory politics and also ‘the broader story of post-Socialism’ (2012: 44). His argument is that a nostalgic sensibility towards commodities from the past – which may be Nazi memorabilia as well as the cheaper beer of pre-*Wende* times – is also part of a more global waning of a forward-looking temporality exemplified by material accumulation. Shoshan’s study is also a reminder that not all of the new forms – or intensities – of nostalgia in post-Socialist countries have been for the Socialist past. Indeed, most have been for other, especially pre-Socialist, times. Among Slavic Muslim Pomaks in Bulgaria, for example, Kirsten Ghodsee has described the rise of more orthodox forms of Islam – perceived as more traditional (especially in terms of gender relations) – alongside nostalgia for a Socialist past in which standards of living are claimed to have been better (2010; see also Parla 2009). Other examples include many of the returned dead bodies, as discussed above, as well as traditional and folk heritage ([Chapter 6](#)) and Jewish heritage ([Chapter 8](#)). This turn to the pre-Socialist variously offers a means of claiming temporal integrity of identity over time, perhaps ‘skipping’ the Socialist period; as well as ground for debating and affectively engaging with the present via the revisited past.



This chapter has sought to make clear that memory does not only occur ‘in the head’. It is also distributed in practices, materials, bodies and interactions with others; it is sensory and affective experience, including talk. Ethnographic research on past presencing in Europe has begun to pay greater attention to the embodied (affective and sensorial) and material (especially objects, food, homes and place), describing the sensory and affective experiences of recall, and showing how these may involve material ‘prompts’ and widespread human experiences but at the same time take shape in specific times and places. Research also explores how particular kinds of objects – such as the furniture of others or foods from childhood – may be especially memorially or affectively affecting; that which is strongly felt seemingly being more likely to be remembered.³¹

Nostalgia has repeatedly emerged in this literature. It can, I suggest, be understood as part of the European memory complex, as one of its elements, or



FIGURE 4.6 Market with Socialist-era-style souvenirs, Berlin, 2011. Photograph by Sharon Macdonald



FIGURE 4.7 DDR café and exhibition in a popular tourist area of Berlin, 2011. Photograph by Sharon Macdonald

perhaps shapes, repeatedly occurring, available for 'borrowing', and morphing into different forms. While nostalgia might be felt acutely by an individual – perhaps rendering them listless and unable to concentrate on their task at hand – the research discussed here shows nostalgia to be social and cultural, and about the here-and-now as much as the past or elsewhere. This does not mean that it is not expressive of real changes that are underway (Heady and Miller 2006). The chapter has highlighted variations in nostalgias – including post-Socialist and meta- or ironic nostalgia – though has not attempted a taxonomy. Distinctions are useful, as that between 'restorative' and 'reflective' (Boym 2001), but the aim should not be to try to fulfil the collector's dream (or is it nightmare?) of the full set. Rather, the task is to probe into what is going on, explore subtleties and nuance, as well as to grasp any commonalities. In the end, 'nostalgia' might not be the right characterisation of a particular phenomenon. Its role is that of entry point rather than object to be pinned down.

Nostalgias do seem to have increased alongside the wider memory phenomenon. Maybe this is almost a tautology, for the memory phenomenon is so centrally concerned with 'looking back'; nostalgia is just one of the modes in which this is done. Precisely what this mode is, however, has become less clear the more closely 'nostalgia' is examined. Typically seen in English-language discussions as looking at the past or distant home through rose-tinted spectacles, seeing only the nice parts and ignoring the rest, the anthropological studies show both that the word or its 'translations' often carry other connotations and also that what is called 'nostalgia' can be very different from this characterisation. Certainly, there are forms of looking back that *do* fit the description – the shiny, glowing interiors of Nan's recollections or juicy fruits in the memories of the *pièdes-noirs*. But even here, what the anthropologists show, is that these are not simply uninformed or naïve understandings of what the past was like but are part of people's ongoing articulation – not only in words but also in actions – of their relationships to the present and to each other. These are themes too of the chapter that follows, which explores them further in relation to questions of commodification, authenticity and that noisy form of memory materialisation: heritage.