MICHAEL D. DWYER

BACK TO THE FIFTIES

Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, & Popular Music of the Seventies & Eighties

BACK TO THE FIFTIES

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For my friends and family, who got me where I am,
For Rachel, who will be with me wherever I will go.

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Acknowledgments

THERE HAVE BEEN many times while writing that I have felt that the challenge was just too great, my skills as a writer too limited, my understanding of the material insufficient, my ideas too unfinished. One learns, as a writer, not to avoid these feelings but to work through them. So it is perhaps fitting that those feelings of inadequacy should return in my very last day of writing, when faced with the opportunity to acknowledge the contributions of all those who helped me to make this book a reality. Once again, I set myself against what seems to be an impossible task.

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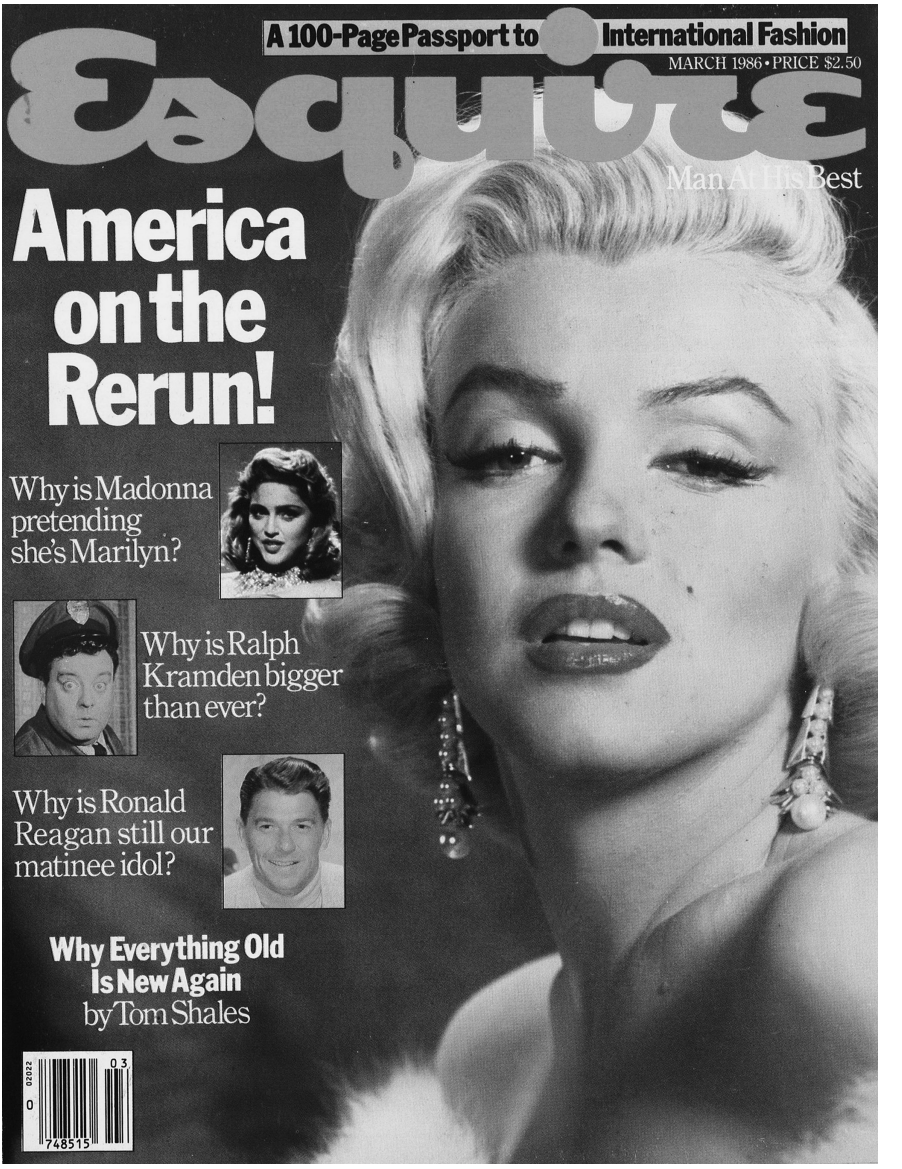
BACK TO THE FIFTIES



March 1986 issue of *Esquire*. Author's personal collection.

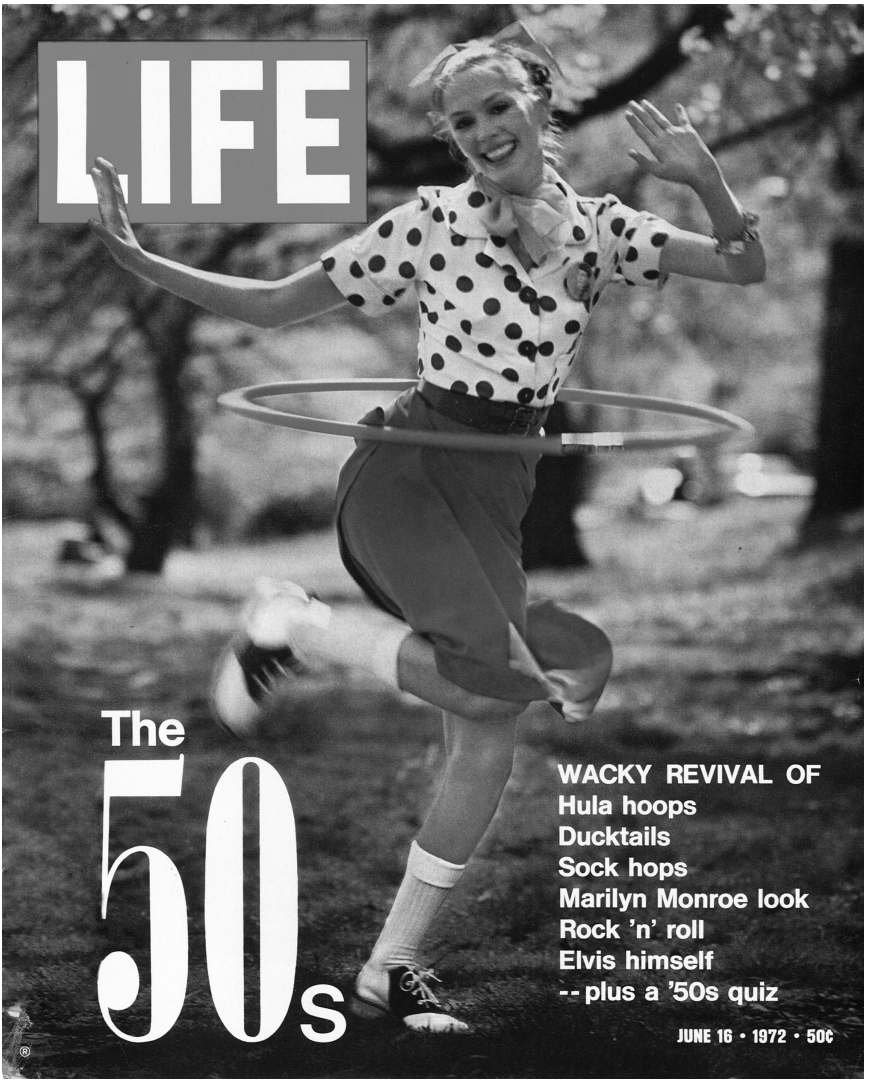
INTRODUCTION

UNDER THE HEADLINE "America on the Rerun," the cover of the March 1986 issue of *Esquire* asked, "Why is Madonna pretending she's Marilyn? Why is Ralph Kramden bigger than ever? Why is Ronald Reagan still our matinee idol?" The accompanying story penned by television critic Tom Shales argued that America was in the midst of an era defined by cultural processes of "replay, recycle, retrieve, reprocess, and rerun" (67). Considered in retrospect, Shales's observations ring quite true. Given the industrial and technological changes in the entertainment industry (the circulation of syndicated television reruns, the growth of oldies radio and revival concerts, the popularization of home video technology, etc.), it is easy to conclude that Americans had begun to utilize the practice of "time-shifting" with more than just their new VCRs.

For Shales, this cultural phenomenon was most prominently symbolized by "a President made up of reprocessed bits and pieced of old movie heroes": Ronald Reagan (70). The fortieth president served as a symbol of an age when America seemed compelled to turn back the clock. As both a political and cultural figure, "the Gipper" relied on his ability to evoke the mythic Fifties small-town America depicted in film, television, and other forms of popular media—an America that featured a booming consumer economy, military strength, domestic stability, dominant "family values," and national optimism and belief in "the American Way." Never mind that, as Stephanie Coontz demonstrates in *The Way We Never Were*, this America did not actually exist. As media historian Daniel Marcus describes, Reagan's rise to power was coincident with the New Right's strategy in the late

1970s and early 1980s of presenting "an overarching sense of national return to an earlier age after a period of American decline" (37).

The nostalgic fascination with the Fifties in the United States, however, did not begin with Ronald Reagan, nor was it wholly defined by neoconservatism. The cover of another mass-market magazine evidences this. The June 16, 1972, issue of *Life* announced the "wacky revival" of the Fifties on American college campuses—hardly strongholds of conservative cultural attitudes. Rather, the teenagers interviewed by



June 16, 1972, issue of *Life*. Author's personal collection.

Life drew lines of continuity between the Fifties and the Counterculture: "Those greasers were the first freaks," one teen said (42–43). Outside of the pages of *Life*, the Fifties appeared in Hollywood film (1971's *The Last Picture Show*), theater (*Grease*), and popular music (Don MacLean's "American Pie"). In what follows, I argue that popular culture was a crucial site of contestation, debate, and exchange over the cultural definition of the Fifties in the United States.

This is a book about the creation, circulation, and interaction of the competing meanings for the Fifties in Hollywood film and popular music in a period roughly defined by the fifteen years from 1973 to 1988. As the increasingly corporatized film and music industries developed synergistic production and marketing practices, they enthusiastically embraced the Fifties. Hollywood produced a slew of nostalgia films (*American Graffiti, Porky's, Back to the Future, Blue Velvet*, and *Hairspray*, among many more) and found new markets for films from the 1950s via cable television and home video. Simultaneously, popular music mined its own past through the "Golden Oldies" radio format, revival concerts, and album reissues on cassette and compact disc. Allusions to Fifties styles stretched from the top of the charts (Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll") to punk rock clubs (The Stray Cats' rockabilly revival) and the jazz/folk scene (David Amram's "The Fabulous '50s"). Working collaboratively, the film and music industries delivered Fifties nostalgia through soundtrack albums (*Diner, Dirty Dancing*) and the emerging form of music videos (Madonna's "Material Girl," Morrissey's "Suedehead").

While no single vision of the Fifties can be gleaned from the multiple invocations of the Fifties on record and in movie theaters, the persistent invocation of the Fifties in film and pop music strongly suggests that it had become a vital signpost in American cultural life. As Mary Caputi puts it in her book *A Kinder, Gentler America*, "persons of varying and often contrasting political opinions and professional interests have engaged [the 1950s'] varying connotations differently. But, importantly, they all engage it" (4). In film, "Fifties-ness" is often signaled through costume, hair, props, and decor: letterman jackets and blue jeans, poodle skirts and saddle shoes, switchblades and hot rods, jukeboxes and soda shops. In music, "the Fifties" is invoked through pop songs that predate the British Invasion—Buddy Holly, doo-wop, rockabilly, bubblegum, and rhythm and blues. Along with many other symbols, these sonic and visual markers communicated a prosperous, peaceful, and optimistic period in American history after World War II but before the Kennedy assassination.

Taken as a whole, these invocations of the Fifties in film and pop music participated in a broad-ranging cultural formation that had immense influence on American society. By using the term *cultural formation*, I mean something more than just a "style" or "aesthetic," but rather the networks of representational practices, historical developments, spaces, social groups, articulations, and effects that

Lawrence Grossberg describes in his work. Equally indebted to Michel Foucault's concept of "discursive formations" and Raymond Williams's notion of "structures of feeling," Grossberg's "cultural formations" are articulated across a range of activities and sensibilities in everyday life, but not unilaterally or consistently—different social groups, or different social locations, might engage with a cultural formations more, or less, or in a different way (*We Gotta Get Out of This Place* 69–74).

The specific cultural formation I investigate in this book is a retrospective pop cultural phenomenon that I call "pop nostalgia." I identify pop nostalgia by three prominent features. First, its production, circulation, and reception are facilitated by commercial media for mass audiences. While individuals might have their own personal nostalgic attachments (bittersweet memories of their high school, wistful recollections of social movements or music scenes, etc.), pop nostalgia operates on a broader, cultural scale. Second, pop nostalgia can be prompted by tropes, symbols, or styles, even without claims for historical verisimilitude. A film set in the present, for example, can still evoke nostalgic response through strategic use of dialogue, soundtrack, or wardrobe. Finally, and most importantly, pop nostalgia is not to be found exclusively within the formal or stylistic qualities of texts, or the demographic qualities of audiences, but rather in the affective relationships between audiences and texts. In other words, pop nostalgia does not describe a genre (like the Western) or a reception practice (like queer readings) but rather the un-, semi-, or extra-conscious intensity one experiences with a cultural text that produces meaning for the past and the present. Period films, historical archives, documentaries, or other cultural forms that either do not generate or are not invested with affect cannot be understood as participating in pop nostalgia. Understanding pop nostalgia as an affective cultural formation is crucial because it broadens our focus from the texts themselves, or the biographies of audiences, and toward the historical, cultural, and political conditions that structure the way we collectively "feel" the past.

SCOPE OF THE PROJECT: WHY 1973–1988? WHY THE FIFTIES?

Attempts at periodization are inherently fragile and artificial. This is perhaps even more the case when the periodization is applied to cultural phenomena. At the same time, management of the scope and scale of any analysis requires the boundaries that periodization offers. So here goes: my interest in this book is a period of American cultural history in which the nation alternately attempted to reckon with and move past a contentious and even frightening period of unrest, self-doubt, and upheaval ("the Sixties"). This period is marked by reassessments of Great Society social reforms, pitched battles over the permanency and character of civil rights movements, a

renewed emphasis on patriotism and optimism, and fierce debates over American identity and American responsibility in everything from international conflict to global environmental reform. This period of American history was also one in which the New Right gained political and cultural momentum. An appropriate starting point for this study is 1973, not only because it saw the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the Watergate scandal, but also because it marked the arrival of Ronald Reagan as a serious national political figure. Of course, it is important to remember that Reagan was neither the original nor the most prototypical member of the New Right. Nevertheless, his arrival on the national political stage still serves as a marker of a new era in United States cultural history, as Reagan became the most prominent symbol that embodied the shift away from "the Sixties" and toward a new (or was it an old?) American future. In using the term "the Reagan Era" to signify the period from 1973 to 1988, I do so not to suggest that Reagan wholly defined the time but only to acknowledge the massive influence he (and the backward-looking values he embodied) had on American society. This influence, I argue, extends beyond the years that Reagan resided in the White House.

Similarly, throughout the book I differentiate between "the Fifties" (as a concept) and "the 1950s" (as the years 1950–1959). "The Fifties" operates as a key structuring myth of American self-understanding. In the broadest terms, this Fifties begins with the peace, prosperity, and blossoming consumer culture that followed the Second World War and end with the assassination of President Kennedy. Articulating the boundaries of a socio-historical period is always tricky business. I do not mean to argue that there is, or ever was, a singular Fifties. Rather, as Caputi explains, "the Fifties" represents "an array of ideological connotations, a swirl of aesthetic resonances, a battery of moral implications so highly charged and emotionally laden that any mention of the decade in the current context far exceeds literal, historical references" (1). For some, "the Fifties" connotes a fantasy ideal of American peace and prosperity that began with the close of World War II and stretched through the Eisenhower years and into the optimism of the Kennedy administration. For others, "the Fifties" signals a repressive and conformist era to be left in the dustbin of history. In any case, the idea of the Fifties has become a crucial point of reference for America's self-image. One of the enduring legacies of American culture and society in the Reagan Era, I argue, are these competing visions of the Fifties.

It is true, of course, that American popular culture has turned its attention to other historical eras, and that Fifties nostalgia exceeds this particular span of history. Films like *Chinatown* (1973), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) all clearly reference 1930s and 1940s Hollywood, while audiences in the 1990s were treated to a spate of films revisiting the Sixties—*The Doors* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Apollo 13* (1995), and *That Thing You Do!* (1996), among others.

However, both the scale and scope of the Fifties "nostalgia wave" (as sociologist Fred Davis termed it in 1979) compel us to pay particular attention to Fifties nostalgia in the 1970s and 1980s. Alan Nadel points to Fifties nostalgia as one of American cinema's hallmarks in the period. In terms of the sheer numbers, it is difficult to dispute that. I've counted over ninety Hollywood films that were set in, represented, or recreated the Fifties, with even more prompting Fifties nostalgia through soundtrack or narrative allusions. The amount of radio stations that transitioned to the Golden Oldies radio format and the number of Fifties artists who returned to the charts similarly suggest that the Fifties were in American hearts and minds more than twenty years later. The aforementioned popular magazines and academic studies in sociology (Davis's *Yearning for Yesterday*), history (Miller and Nowak's *The Way We Really Were*), and literary and cultural studies (Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism*) all, to varying degrees, interrogated the Fifties nostalgia phenomenon. This is all to say that, while nostalgia for other eras in American history surely exists, the Fifties occupy a privileged position in what many scholars in cultural studies would refer to as the "national popular" of the United States. The "national popular" refers to not only the shared cultural texts and practices but also—and crucially—the shared *identity* of a nation. In other words, the Fifties was not only important in American popular culture but central to American self-understanding in the Reagan Era.

THE "RE-GENERATION"

In some very important ways, the American teenager is a product of the Fifties, particularly the popular film and music that courted the American youth market during that period. At the same time, the teenager became a symbol of American national identity in the postwar years. Among scholars of youth in film and popular culture, Leerom Medovoi's work is noteworthy for its emphasis on the emergence of the teenager as an ideological as well as historical phenomenon. In *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, Medovoi argues that postwar representations of the teen rebel, figures standing in stark opposition to established Cold War society, were the foundation for identity politics of the mid- to late twentieth century. The invention of the teenager (through marketing campaigns and psychiatric discourses) allowed postwar culture to both sanction and contain "youthful rebellion" and thereby justify the conditions of American society. While Medovoi does vital work in unearthing the 1950s emergence of the teenager as a matter of sociopolitical importance, what remains undone is analysis of the repeated invocations of this Fifties teenager throughout the rest of the century. If the figure of the

teenager helped the nation understand itself in the Cold War era, then analyzing the way that figure has been recreated, recontextualized, and revised will help us to understand America's sense of historical trajectory, its shifting conceptualizations of then and now.

The almost exclusive focus on teenagers and youth culture in the Fifties nostalgia boom of the Reagan Era draws connections between the youth of the characters depicted in these texts and the "youth" of the American superpower. The retrospective invocation of the Fifties teen struggling to define her identity or trying to make his way into the world often functioned as a synecdoche for a United States poised on the verge of maturity, at a point in its national history when everything (for better and for worse) began to change. But pop nostalgia didn't just *represent* teenagers; it was directly sold to them as well. Many of the performers and texts that this book considers were offering visions of the Fifties to audiences that had no living memory of the 1950s. Fans of *Back to the Future* (1985) or The Ramones did not go to the multiplex or the record store in order to relive their youth. Rather, their brushes with Fifties nostalgia were part of a generational redefinition of America in its past, present, and potential futures.

The title of Shales's 1986 *Esquire* cover story, "The Re-Decade," is a reference to Thomas Wolfe's influential 1976 essay "The 'Me' Decade," which outlines the way that Americans in the 1970s had abandoned communitarian values in favor of an emphasis on the individual. Influenced by economic expansion, the rise of self-help discourses, the rapid growth of the suburbs, the cultural politics of the New Left, and LSD, Wolfe explains, American culture had become increasingly self-enamored. Ten years later, Shales claims that Americans had elaborated on this cultural navel-gazing by looking backward as a way of turning inward. With new media and communications technology (home video, computer editing, cable television, the synthesizer, etc.) America's relationship with time, and especially with its past, had been fundamentally altered. "[N]ever before have people, or a people, had nearly unlimited access to what has gone before, been able to call it up and play it back and relive it again and again," says Shales (68). And beyond accessing artifacts of mass culture, this same technology allowed Americans of the 1970s and 1980s to continually access personal media archives: "No citizens of any other century have ever been provided so many views of themselves as individuals or as a society" (72). Taken together, the conditions that Wolfe and Shales describe fostered a "Re-Generation" of Americans that utilized an ever-expanding archive of media texts, cultural practices of replay, recycle, and reinvention to remake themselves as individuals and reimagine the nation itself. This generation, in other words, was uniquely positioned politically and historically to recast nostalgia from a personal to a popular experience.

THE HISTORY OF NOSTALGIA

Partially as a result of the New Right's successful utilization of the Fifties in the "culture wars," nostalgia garners skepticism and disdain from many academics and critics. This is so much the case that the term "nostalgia" is often used pejoratively to describe ahistorical and manipulative conceptualizations of the past. Fifties nostalgia's association with Reaganism has led many to assume that nostalgia in politics is inherently regressive, an impulse to undo the reforms of the Great Society, or to walk back the (still insufficient) gains in civil rights for marginalized peoples. Noam Chomsky denounced the nostalgic tenor of American politics as creating a period of "organized forgetting," in which it was "the responsibility of the system of ideological control and propaganda to . . . return the domestic population to a proper state of apathy" (4). In statements like these, the Fifties represent a period of apathy and quietism, even though the historical record shows them to be anything but. Similarly, critical theorists like David Harvey and Fredric Jameson position nostalgia as a distortion or commodification of the past, a practice that mystifies the material and historical realities of capitalist exploitation. Jameson specifically contends that the emergence of the "nostalgia film" in the 1970s and 1980s stands as a testament to American society's inability to represent its own historical conditions and its transformation of history into fashion and commodities. This diagnosis of the function of nostalgia in popular culture has become almost omnipresent in scholarly work on the subject.[1]

It is somewhat peculiar that Jameson has had such an immense influence on the topic of nostalgia, as he expresses considerable ambivalence over using the term "nostalgia" at all. Describing the reappropriation of cinematic styles and cultural signs of the past (specifically, the recreation of 1930s film serials in 1977's *Star Wars*), Jameson explains that the word "does not strike one as an altogether satisfactory word for such fascination" (66). Still, he argues, the "nostalgia film" participates in "a new depthlessness" (58), a "waning of affect" (61), and a crisis of historicity in which our authentic past is "gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether" (67). When a film like Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987) recreates the famous Odessa Steps sequence from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), in Jameson's logic, the techniques of montage that were developed under specific historical and political conditions are replaced with "blank parody." In other words, Jameson's conceptualization of nostalgia/pastiche is that of a representational practice that *flattens, evacuates*, and eventually *elides* the authentic past. This, he argues, is a cultural process that facilitates the perpetuation of late capitalism.

This is an argument with considerable merit. Surely, certain types of Fifties nostalgia generated in and around popular culture helped to clear cultural terrain for

the rise of neoconservatism in the latter part of the twentieth century in the United States. In addition, there can be no question that representations of the Fifties in film and pop music often obscure the actual historical conditions of American life for many people from 1950 to 1959. However, it is also important to understand the origin and historical development of the concept of nostalgia itself. Recall that Jameson expresses some trepidation over using the term. I would argue the other term he considers employing, *la mode retro*, more accurately describes the phenomenon he critiques. Retro, I contend, describes a representational practice that connotes historical eras through its use of cultural signifiers (in the case of the Fifties, poodle skirts, motorcycle jackets, ducktail haircuts, etc.) without any claim for historical truth. Retro, that is to say, is a quality *of texts*. Retro representations can prompt nostalgia, and can be complex and interesting in their own right. But—and this is a distinction on which I will insist—retro is not the same as nostalgia.[2] Nostalgia is, and has been throughout its long and complex history, something else altogether.

The term "nostalgia" was first used by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss medical student, in the research for his 1688 dissertation (Anspach 376). Hofer constructed the neologism by combining the Greek *nostos*, for "homecoming," and *algia*, for "suffering," and used the term to describe clinical cases of extreme homesickness among Swiss mercenary soldiers. Hofer speculated that the malady was due to "a continuous vibration of animal spirits through those fibers of the middle brain" (Anspach 384) and suggested that the incessant sound of cowbells ringing would damage the brain and ears in such a way that would result in nostalgia (seriously!). Over the next two hundred years, nostalgia would be diagnosed across the globe, with recorded cases in the ranks of the Russian Army in 1733 (Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* 11) and from the crew of James Cook's HMS *Endeavour* expedition in 1768 (Bonnett 5). With the rise of psychiatric discourses in the nineteenth century, nostalgia came to be understood as a mental disorder rather than cowbell-induced brain trauma, and diagnoses for the disorder proliferated. There were so many cases of chronic nostalgia diagnosed in the American Civil War, in fact, that many regiments were specifically prohibited from playing songs like "Home, Sweet Home" or "Dixieland" that were understood to produce nostalgic longing that might drive soldiers to desert (Matt). In the early twentieth century, nostalgia was typically described as an "immigrant psychosis" that reflected compulsive tendencies related to the condition of melancholia. It was not until the mid- to late twentieth century that nostalgia became fully associated with the temporal dimension, and removed from the sense of spatial dislocation.

Understanding the concept of nostalgia—and the cultural value we place on it—is fundamental to this project. So I want to pause here to draw specific attention to the conditions under which nostalgia emerges throughout its first 250 years. Before the mid-twentieth century, the primary victims of nostalgia were itinerant

soldiers enduring the challenges of protracted combat; sailors on life-threateningly long voyages; imprisoned and enslaved people forcibly removed from their homes; and immigrants dislocated from their families, traditions, and local cultures. Let us recognize here that nostalgia is not simply a romanticization or idealization of the comforts of home. Rather, nostalgia arises when the desire for homecoming is simultaneously coupled with a recognition of its impossibility. As such, it must be understood as a kind of affective critique, a response generated by reflection upon the conditions of its own emergence. Swiss pikemen fighting endless wars for a crumbling European aristocracy in the seventeenth century, I would argue, were not nostalgic because they had brain damage, a psychiatric disorder, or a perniciously romanticized notion of the beauty of the Alps. They were nostalgic because, frankly, getting slaughtered in the service of the French crown was a pretty rough gig. Similarly, we should understand the temporal nostalgia in contemporary culture as something more than just faulty historiography. Nostalgia is the product of an affective engagement with the present that produces a sense of loss. Whether that loss is real or perceived is not the point. The point is that we find something lacking in our current conditions.

Scholars like Alastair Bonnett, Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Janelle Wilson, Marcos Piason Natali, and Sean Scanlan have all used this history of nostalgia to inform their reconceptualizations of its cultural work. In their sociological investigation of nostalgia, Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley remind us that nostalgia can be "seen as not only a search for ontologocial security in the past, but also a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present" (921). Nostalgic longing, in other words, can be used in efforts to remake the present, or at least to imagine corrective alternatives to it. It is important to draw the distinction between retro as a representational mode and nostalgia as a critical affective response because this forces us to confront the contingencies that shape our ever-changing responses to texts: history, culture, politics, intertextual networks, even our subjectivity.

FIFTIES NOSTALGIA BEYOND REAGAN

Once we understand nostalgia to be an affective response, we can begin to appreciate that, like horror, grief, or laughter, nostalgia can be directed toward diverse, overlapping, or competing interests. And in the case of Fifties nostalgia in the 1970s and 1980s, it was.

When media studies scholars have addressed Fifties nostalgia in the Reagan Era, they have most often explained it as the simple product of blockbuster economics