

Talk about the Past: Later Life and the Politics of Nostalgia

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On Tuesday afternoons at the *Centro*, a day center for Spanish seniors in a suburb north of Paris, a group of its members gather to take part in a class called *Lengua castellana*, or “Spanish language.” While I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork at the Centro in 2007–2008, about 12 women, aged 65 to 81, attended the class regularly. Almost all of them were born into conditions of poverty around the time of the Spanish Civil War (in the 1930s) and had no more than four or five years of formal education. As young adults in the 1960s, they fled to Paris, shortly after Franco sanctioned their migration as part of an economic stabilization plan. Although they intended to return to Spain after a few years, many of them decided to remain in France, and they are still there today. The Centro (and many others like it throughout the country) were created and funded by the Spanish government to serve its aging population abroad.

The women in the *Lengua castellana* class refer to it affectionately as “*la escuela*,” or primary school. Week after week they practice reading and writing in Spanish, their native language; they memorize and recite poems and, on occasion, they write brief compositions. For one such assignment, their instructor Pablo (a graduate student from Mexico) asked them to write a description of their *pueblos*—the villages or towns in Spain where they had been born and raised. As he explained to the class, he hoped that some students would be willing to read their compositions aloud during the Centro’s upcoming celebration of International Book Day [*El día del libro*], which included public theater and music performances. In this paper I focus on the texts that the women produced for this assignment, as well as the conversational interaction that it provoked as they reflected in the classroom on the process of doing it. Although the women hailed from various municipalities, they represented their *pueblos* in similar ways, employing formal features and evaluative language that, altogether, work to create a similar affect: nostalgia. Through discourse analysis of their texts and talk, I aim to show how nostalgia operates among individuals who share a common history: not only can it bind them together into forms of community, but it may also become the object of oppositional stances that signal distinctions within those communities. Among people who are spatially and temporally marginalized such as the ones I feature here—dislocated from their place of origin, occupying one end of the life course—the expression of nostalgia for the past may help to negotiate belonging in the present.

Nostalgia, as a mode of engagement with the past, has emerged in various fields of study; anthropological investigations of the concept, with which I engage here, have emphasized how its emergence in particular times and places “says a lot more about contemporary social configurations than about the past itself” (Angé & Berliner, 2015, p. 5). According to Pickering & Keightley (2006), nostalgia comprises “a longing for what is... now unattainable, simply because of the irreversibility of time” (p. 920). Nostalgia has been associated with modernity and the experience of rupture—then from now, there from here. The act of nostalgic yearning thus entails a conflation of space and time; it generates social meaning through a relation of contrast with the spatiotemporal coordinates—the here-and-now—in which this act takes place.

An analysis of nostalgia and its various functions in social life, I suggest, invites consideration of the chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981)—that is, in its broadest sense, a representational ground of time, space, and personhood that is mobilized in social interaction. Although Bakhtin first developed the concept to describe a feature of novelistic discourse, the chronotope has proven useful among linguists and anthropologists investigating the sociolinguistic dimension of migration and diaspora. As they have pointed out, a chronotope functions through a relation of contrast, without which it represents little more than one possible world among others (see Agha, 2007). Approaching talk about the past through the analytic of the chronotope can shed light on the various ways that other realms—be they recollected or imagined, past or future—come to bear on the interactional present.

My paper has two parts. In the first, I present one of the seniors’ compositions as a means of illuminating some of the formal characteristics of their nostalgic discourse. I highlight commonalities that emerged across the texts to suggest at least a tacit understanding among students of how a *pueblo*—and the past with which it is associated—should be represented. In the second part of my paper I present two conversational interactions that were recorded in the classroom during the time that students worked on the assignment. These informal interactions manifest other, non-nostalgic—even “anti-nostalgic” (Bissell, 2015)—modes of recollection, thus pointing to the normative expectations that circulated at the Centro with regard to talk about the past. Outside the written assignment that was designed for public performance—that is, in the side conversations that it inspired—students negotiated solidarity and belonging through other means than the expression of nostalgia; indeed, some of them rejected nostalgia altogether.

The excerpts that I’m about to cite were drawn from the corpus of eleven compositions and the audio recordings that I made and transcribed weekly of each *Lengua castellana* class. In my analysis, I draw on over a year of ethnographic fieldwork to make sense of them. For the duration of the six-week assignment, the women practiced reading their texts aloud and then revised them based on feedback from Pablo and their peers. As I mentioned earlier, all of the students were born and raised in conditions of poverty around the time of the Spanish Civil War. And yet, recollections of their *pueblos* largely comprise idyllic descriptions of rural landscapes that include details about animals and vegetation, as well as fond memories of the activities that these landscapes facilitated.

Marisol was born in Navalcán, near Toledo, in 1943 and migrated to Paris 24 years later. The composition that she wrote about her *pueblo* illustrates some of the features, both formal and thematic, that appeared throughout the texts that I analyzed. Here it is in its entirety:

Yo nací en Navalcán, en la provincia de Toledo. Entonces mi pueblo era pequeño, y todos nos conocíamos. Hoy todo es diferente. Ahora es más

grande. Yo me siento un poco perdida. Cuando yo era pequeña, siempre estaba en la calle. Entonces, las calles estaban llenas de barro. Y cuando lluvía, bajaban los regueros por todo el pueblo. Yo recogía suelas de alpargatas y hierros, y a cambio, me daban tevecos, que me gustaban mucho leer. También me gustaba mucho ir al campo, a recoger cosas de la temporada, sobre todo en primavera, que todo es más bonito. Mi pueblo no tiene museos ni catedrales, pero para mí, cuando en él estoy, me siento en el mejor paraíso que mis pies hayan pisado.

I was born in Navalcán, in the province of Toledo. Back then my pueblo was small, and we all knew one another. Today everything is different. Now it is bigger. I feel a bit lost. When I was small, I was always in the street. Back then, the streets were full of mud. And when it rained, trails of water would form all around the pueblo. I used to collect espadrille soles and iron, and in exchange, they would give me comic strips, which I loved to read. I also used to like to go out to the meadows, to collect seasonal things, especially in spring, when everything is prettier. My pueblo doesn't have museums or cathedrals, but for me, when I'm in it, I feel as though I'm in the best paradise that I've ever set foot in.

In this brief paragraph Marisol repeats the word “*pueblo*” three times, modifying it twice with the possessive adjective “my” (“*mi pueblo*”). This expression appeared throughout the compositions, as well as in conversations with other members of the Centro; it reflects the deeply personal affiliation that she and her peers feel with their places of origin.

At the beginning of her composition, Marisol activates a chronotopic contrast through the use of temporal deictics that situate her *pueblo* as it was *then* in relation to how it is *now*. As she writes: “Back then, my *pueblo* was small, and we all knew one another. Today everything is different. Now it is bigger. I feel a bit lost.” Marisol juxtaposes “back then” with “today,” associating the former with the *pueblo*’s small size, which facilitated a provincial kind of familiarity among its inhabitants that she values. She goes on to invoke an explicit disjuncture between that moment and today; Navalcán has grown bigger and become unfamiliar to Marisol, who describes herself feeling “a bit lost” when she returns. Bringing these temporal coordinates into relation with one another, Marisol articulates a stance on the contrasts that this juxtaposition highlights: the *pueblo* that she recollects from the past is a more hospitable place than the one she experiences now.

And yet, at the *end* of her composition, Marisol invokes a *spatial* contrast between her *pueblo* today and larger metropolitan centers, which are often associated with grandiose architecture and cultural institutions: “My *pueblo* doesn’t have museums or cathedrals, but for me, when I’m in it, I feel as though I’m in the best paradise that I’ve ever set foot in.” Here, Marisol may be alluding to Paris, where she now lives—a city whose cold modernity may repel any impulse for nostalgic longing. Even though she acknowledges that Navalcán has changed, and that she sometimes feels lost there when she returns, Marisol punctuates her composition with a starkly positive evaluation of it: her *pueblo* is the “best paradise” that she has ever known. This final sentence casts the narrative that precedes it in a nostalgic light; it also echoes remarks from her classmates that describe their past lives in Spain in similarly rosy terms. Remembering her *pueblo* in Andalucía, for example, Ana wrote the following: “*no éramos ricos, pero qué felices éramos—toda la familia, mis abuelas, mis abuelos, mis hermanos, tíos y vecinos*” [we weren’t rich, but we were so happy—the whole family, my grandmothers, my grandfathers, my siblings, my aunts and uncles, and my neighbors]. As such a declaration suggests, in the recollected

pueblo material wealth matters little given the tightly-knit structures of kinship that characterize it. Although these structures have altered over time, the *pueblos* that contained them remain objects of nostalgic longing. The yearning for place enfolds a recollection of the social relationships that once sustained it; space, time, and personhood are again conflated.

Marisol's text comprises a particular representation of the past—one that softens, excludes, or simply ignores its negative or painful dimensions. As I learned through a life-story interview with her, Marisol was born into an impoverished family with five children; her mother died when she was three years old. She attended school until the age of 12, at which point she left in search of menial labor, like many other women at the time. In 1967, with virtually no possibilities of social mobility in Spain, she decided to migrate to France, where she lived with her sister's family for two years in a *bidonville*, or shantytown, north of Paris. Marisol's narrative thus constitutes a selective engagement with the past. Including certain details and omitting others, she mobilizes a chronotope of nostalgia. This mode of remembering dominated her classmates' texts as well; they, too, displayed a largely sentimental perspective on the facts of their biographical trajectories and the historical circumstances in which they unfolded—at least within the bounds of the written assignment. In conversations *about* the assignment that occurred in the classroom, however, students engaged with other forms of memory altogether.

For example, after Elena, another participant, read her composition out loud during the second week of the exercise, Pablo suggested that she divide it into small paragraphs and expand on each of its ideas with personal details. The following exchange begins as Pablo helps Elena imagine how to do this:

(1) "If I tell you everything I'd have a book"

1. **Pablo:** *no lo vas a dejar así en un solo párrafo, lo vas a redondear*
you're not going to leave this in just one paragraph, you're going to fill it out
2. **Elena:** *de acuerdo*
okay
3. **Pablo:** *te falta decir más sobre eso*
you need to say more about this
4. **Elena:** *sí sí porque hay pocas cosas*
yes yes because there's not much
5. **Pablo:** *paciencia* (to another student)
patience
6. **Elena:** *te cuento de cuando tenía 4 años—fíjate—que empezó la guerra de España*
I could tell you about when I was 4—listen—the Spanish war started
7. **Pablo:** *sería muy bonito que dijeras eso*
it would be really nice if you said that

8. **Elena:** *oh là là teníamos que correr cuando venían a bombardear los aviones, que eran los alemanes, teníamos que correr a escondernos en los refugios*
oh là là we had to run when the planes came to bomb, the Germans, we had to run and hide in a shelter

9. **Pablo:** *ah sería muy interesante que hablaras de eso*
oh it would be really interesting if you said that

10. **Elena:** *me acuerdo de eso—fíjate—cuando ya entró Franco y todo eso, que me acuerdo que me hacía mi madre una peina con un chinchorro con un lazo rojo, y vinieron los de—los falangistas—y a mi madre la—*
I remember this—listen—when Franco had arrived and all that, I remember that my mother used to give me a hairstyle with a net with a red tie, and they came—the falangistas—and said to my mother—

11. **Carmen:** *yo me lo acuerdo también*
I remember too

12. **Elena:** *la dijeron, “oiga al favor de quitarle ese lazo a la niña”*
they said to her, “hey, please take that bow out of the girl’s hair”

13. **Benita:** *porque era rojo*
because it was red

14. **Elena:** *porque era rojo, sí señora*
because it was red, yes ma’am

15. **Nuria:** *ay pues eso sería muy bonito*
oh well that would be really nice

16. **Elena:** *y luego después mi padre fue—bueno si le cuento todo tengo un libro*
and afterward later my father was—well, if I tell you everything I’d have a book

Elena’s brief narrative illustrates the fraught nature of the time period in which it is set: bombs fall, and families must run for cover; a girl’s red bow becomes a sign of sedition. Although she recounts this memory rather matter-of-factly, Elena nevertheless seems aware of its affective charge, imploring her classmates twice to pay attention (lines 6 and 10) and uttering an evaluative discourse marker in French—“*oh là là!*” (line 8). When she begins her narrative, she no more than mentions the war when Pablo jumps in to encourage her to write about it—a sentiment that he repeats after she reveals details about German bombardments.

Pablo often encouraged students to talk about their experiences of traumatic historical events. But frank discussions about the war and its aftermath were rare among members at the Centro. In communicative acts designed for public display, or in modes of expression—such as writing—thought to confer authority, the seniors tended to represent

the past within a frame of nostalgic recollection. In this informal interaction, however, Elena evokes the past without any sentimental longing. She brings up the war, Franco, and his political affiliates, as well as their deleterious effects on her family's everyday life. This perspective on the past seems to excite Pablo, given its inclusion of sensitive topics. But Elena's openness about such experiences is only momentary. When she returned with a revision the following week, she had extended the paragraph about her childhood by including just one additional sentence. Using the third person, she wrote simply: "*Elena pasó su niñez con mucha dificultad a causa de la guerra.*" [Elena had a very difficult childhood because of the war.]

When I asked the Centro's activities director, Josep, a 38-year-old Spaniard, why its members seemed inclined to recall the past in nostalgic terms, he knew exactly what I was talking about. Josep replied that any other narrative is "forbidden" [*prohibida*], alluding to broadly circulating discourses among older Spaniards that advocated collective forgetting in the wake of Spain's transition to democracy in the 1970s. He went on to describe how such mnemonic practices continue to operate within his own family, who has never left Spain: "*Mi padre no habla de la guerra. Mis abuelos tampoco. En España fue muy duro, eh? La gente no quiere hablar... Se habla mucho del pasado como si fuera algo nostálgico idealizado y tal y cual cuando tuvieron una juventud de mierda. Que hablan del pasado no me extraña. Que hablan del pasado idealizándolo me deja alucinado.*" [My father doesn't talk about the war. My grandparents either. It was really hard in Spain, eh? People don't want to talk about it... [Those at the Centro] talk a lot about the past as though it were something idealized and nostalgic and everything, when they had a really crappy childhood. It doesn't surprise me that they talk about the past. But the fact that they idealize it amazes me.] Josep's social and administrative positions—that is, his age and his institutional role—afforded him a unique perspective on the practices of remembering among members of the Centro. He could understand the decision *not* to speak about things in the past that were "really hard," but he was flummoxed by the act of representing those things in "idealized and nostalgic" terms—a viewpoint that he shared with some of the Centro's most peripheral members, such as Benita.

Benita had experienced a different trajectory than most of her classmates. Her father had been a successful agriculturist, and her mother had been a schoolteacher. She migrated to France in the 1960s to accompany her husband, but she never worked outside the home. Although she is strongly affiliated with the Centro, Benita frequently invokes these differences to distinguish herself from its other members. After the Book Day performance, Pablo asked students in the class to discuss the experience of reading their compositions out loud. The following exchange took place between Benita and Carolina:

(2) "I don't have any nostalgia for Spain"

1. **Benita:** *yo no tengo ninguna nostalgia de España. Cuando voy, voy y me la gozo. Y cuando vengo aquí, vengo y me la gozo. Y no tengo ningún problema de—pero el caso es que no he trabajado. No tengo la misma situación. Siempre me ha gustado ir al cine, al teatro, a los museos. Y a todo lo he seguido haciendo—*

I don't have any nostalgia for Spain. When I go, I go and I enjoy it. And when I come back here, I come back and I enjoy it. I don't have any problem with—but the thing is I never worked. I don't have the same situation. I've always liked to go to the movies, the theater, and to museums. And I've kept doing that all along—

2. **Carolina:** *Toma—a todas nos ha gustado. Pero hacía falta tener esto para ir*
(makes a gesture with her thumb and forefinger to indicate money)

Wow—we all liked that. But you needed to have this to go

Here, Benita distinguishes herself from the other women in the *Lengua castellana* class by explicitly dissociating herself from their expression of nostalgia. Claiming that she does not have such a “problem,” she describes her experience of transnationalism in matter-of-fact terms, associating nostalgic recollection with a lack of the cultural interests that she claims to have, due to the good fortune of her upbringing. Romanticized recollections of the past, she suggests, remain the preserve of expatriates who fled conditions of poverty with little education and no cultural capital.

Benita’s invocation of difference among her peers also points toward a broader commonality: how they engage with the past is informed by their histories of migration, as well as their situation now in later life. As Nuria stated one afternoon, provoking vigorous nods among her classmates: “*Hay muchos recuerdos. Yo pienso también que vamos siendo mayor, y pensamos en la vida que hemos tenido en España... Estamos más perdidas nosotras que los que han quedado allí. Hay algo que nos falta al interior.*” [There are lots of memories. I also think that we’re getting older, and we think about the life we had in Spain... We’re more lost than the ones who stayed there. There’s something lacking inside us.] The experience of this lack can generate the kind of yearning that characterizes nostalgic discourse—yearning that surfaces long after a significant rupture. As Atia & Davies (2010) write, “whatever its object, nostalgia serves as a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity; it insists on the bond between our present selves and a fragment of the past, but also on the force of our separation from what we have lost” (p. 184). The loss that occurs after migration entails spatial and temporal distinctions—there and here, then and now—that may be subsequently recruited in projects of personal and community identity formation—projects that entail chronotopic calibration such as the kind we see in Marisol’s text.

Unlike other practices of remembrance, nostalgia functions through an emphasis on “distance and disjuncture” rather than commonality (Bissell, 2005, p. 216). As my data show, the feeling of loss may bind a community together through the halcyon recollections that it engenders—a process that often involves partial revelation or even outright censorship. For the people in the *Lengua castellana* class, and at the Centro more generally, nostalgia most often materialized in discursive acts that involved public expression or institutional authority—an assignment, a class, a performance. Nostalgia may thus operate as a regime of remembering, prescribing not only *what* is remembered, but also *how* it is remembered. Alongside this dominant form of memory, other modes of engagement with the past circulate among members of as community. The choice of one or another of these modes may create social meaning—indexing, for example, affiliation or distance. Various mnemonic practices (and their differentiation) are thus available to individuals as resources for making sense of their participation in the communal formations with which certain memories are associated. This is perhaps especially germane to transnational migrants in later life who, far away from their places of origin, remain displaced in space and time. The experience—and recollection—of loss may enable new forms of attachment in the present.

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