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Short Running Title: Formations of belonging in Australia

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Conflict of interest: We declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Australian Research Council, through grants DP1094132, DP0557902, and DP0209462. Professor Johanna Wyn is the Lead CI of the project. We are grateful to participants on the research project for their longstanding commitment to it.

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as doi: [10.1002/psp.2214](https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2214)

# Formations of belonging in Australia: The role of nostalgia in experiences of time and place

## Abstract

While residential mobility has been studied at length, residential *immobility* has been addressed comparatively rarely. In this article we draw on interviews conducted with 35 participants aged 38-39 in 2012 in Victoria, Australia, in which they were asked to reflect on their lives over the previous 20 years, focusing specifically on those who have remained in or returned to the areas in which they grew up. We focus on the role of nostalgia in the participants' experiences of and relationships with place, finding that far from signifying a purely, or even predominantly, melancholic experience their expressions of nostalgia held the power to enliven the present, even while anchoring them to the past. We contend that nostalgia can form an integral part of practices which reconcile continuity and change, and produce feelings of familiarity and comfort which buffer individuals against the uncertainties associated with wider contexts shaped by rapid social change.

Keywords: belonging; nostalgia; place; rural stayers; urban stayers

## Introduction

As a result of the mobilities turn that has unfolded in the social sciences over the last two to three decades heightened attention has been paid to the significance of place in people's lives. This attention to mobilities has often dovetailed with increased focus on materiality,

providing fertile ground for research considering individuals' experiences of place. Due to its conceptual underpinnings such work has, however, focused predominantly on the experiences of those who are mobile, attending less to those who remain in or return to a single place.

Although conceptual work has sought to draw together mobility and immobility, viewing them as two sides of the same coin (Adey, 2006), this approach has only recently witnessed uptake in research on residential mobility and immobility. Scholarship which has addressed the question of why some people do not leave the area in which they grew up has focused predominantly on practical concerns (e.g. Hjälml, 2014; Clark & Lisowski, 2016), attending less to the significance of place (for notable exceptions see for example Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018; Stockdale, Theunissen & Haartsen, 2018).

Amidst a background of growing mobility of different forms of capital, it has become increasingly challenging to assert where people belong. Concerns about this question are reflected in the multiplicity of recent studies on belonging. Several important studies have focused on belonging in urban spaces by examining political and social sites of exclusion, boundary-making and social differentiation. For example, Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst's (2005) study of suburban Manchester argued for an 'elective' belonging built upon choice and differentiation rather than historical and intergenerational attachment to a particular place. They argue that different forms of capital and social imaginations are used to compare various places and discern the opportunities that each of them bring to individuals and their family members. Processes of urban residential differentiation are also analysed by Watt (2009) in his theorisation of belonging as 'selective'. In this study, a group of affluent residents in an outer suburb of London use 'spatial metaphors of purity (oasis) and pollution'

both symbolically and through everyday practices to segregate themselves from their less well-off neighbours and generate a place of belonging within a wider area (Watt, 2009, p. 2890; see also Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018, for a rural approach to selective belonging).

However, in response to such studies Benson and Jackson (2012) have suggested that 'choice alone' cannot explain individuals' formation of belonging, arguing that it needs to be aided by an analysis of place-making and maintenance through mundane, everyday practices. This insight places the emphasis on considerations of belonging as a process rather than an outcome. In this vein, Bell (1999) reminds us that belonging is never an a priori construct and that one does not simply belong to a collective or a place; rather, belonging is performed, produced and sustained over time. This connection or belonging to a place has been found to be sustained also by the notion of memory – through familiarity with a neighbourhood based, for instance, on its flora, and the childhood experiences that it contains (Fenster, 2005). Thus, memory and nostalgia also form part of the broad constellation of relational and affective factors that generate a sense of belonging.

In this paper we address the formation of belonging by exploring the significance of nostalgia for a group of adults in Victoria, Australia, who have either remained in or returned to the area in which they grew up. We draw on interviews conducted with 35 participants aged 38-39 years old in the Life Patterns study, a two-decade mixed-methods ongoing longitudinal research program, in which they were asked to reflect on their experiences of place in the 20 years following their completion of secondary school in the early 1990s. We revisit this data to focus specifically on the experiences of individuals who have either stayed in or returned to the places in which they grew up. Our aim is to examine the role of nostalgia in shaping

their experiences of belonging and place. In so doing we contribute to the existing literature on nostalgia, which has focused almost exclusively on national forms of belonging, by using the concept to address small-scale, everyday experiences. Further, while we acknowledge that nostalgia has often been associated with a ‘sense of loss’, a yearning for an idealised past, we agree with Vanessa May’s (2017, p. 404) recent contention that nostalgia, along with the memories that it evokes, can be used as a ‘technique to bring warmth and vitality to the present’. Thus, we demonstrate how nostalgia can be a mechanism or strategy for ensuring continuity between past and present in a way that facilitates attachment to place in contexts otherwise shaped by rapid social change.

### **The concept of nostalgia**

The term ‘nostalgia’, drawn from the Greek words *nostos* (home) and *algia* (pain or sorrow), was originally coined to describe a pathological longing for one’s home country. Its common use has, however, broadened to include, in the words of May (2017, p. 404), ‘a general sense of loss and regret, a kind of mourning for the impossibility of return because the longed-for object of one’s desire exists “somewhere in the twilight of the past,” unattainable’. As May observes, nostalgia has often been conceptualised as the product of some degree of unhappiness with the present in favour of a preferred, often idealised past (see Byrne, 2007). Against such a reading Pickering and Keightley (2006) have suggested that nostalgia has multiple modalities, meaning that while its expression can be purely conservative or melancholic in character, this does not preclude an experience of nostalgia that is positive and

affirming in the present. We draw on this plural conceptualisation of nostalgia in the present article, and in so doing explore the emotionality that our participants associate with it, taking seriously the possibility that it may ‘enliven’ the present, as May (2017) has suggested, even while it necessarily anchors them to the past.

Discussions of nostalgia have often addressed it as a collective experience, which resonates with Dickinson and Erben’s (2006) claim that it is a culturally derived emotion. However, it has less commonly been studied as an individual, everyday experience. Some recent studies conceptualising nostalgia in this way have used it to understand, for example, biographical construction (Dickson & Erben, 2006), the loss of specific types of identities (Strangleman, 2012), collective cultural experiences and national identity (Byrne, 2007), and the experience of and desire for specific aesthetics in the form of photography (Bartholeyns, 2014). The concept has, however, also been used to conceptualise belonging to place in a way that has direct application for our study.

### **Nostalgia and place**

The relationship between nostalgia and place has been addressed in research conducted in geography, with recent scholarship in this field beginning to problematise the association of nostalgia with passivity and disengagement from the present. For instance, in their study of ex-residents of a rapidly urbanised city in the United Kingdom Bonnett and Alexander (2013) conceptualised nostalgia as a productive and living disposition, finding that their participants’

experiences of it were far from straightforward. Their participants' experiences of nostalgia exceeded simplistic dualisms such as 'positive' or 'negative', as many of them related to the city as a place of memory and return, even while experiencing regret for the loss of community and heritage. In a similar vein, Degnen (2016) has addressed the relationship between social memory and place. Although she does not address nostalgia directly, her work has significant application to the concept as memory is central to the experience of nostalgia. Addressing later life specifically, Degnen (2016, p. 1646) conceptualised place attachment as situated within a 'concatenation' of things including 'place, belonging, social memory, embodied subjectivity and everyday experiences'. Ultimately, she follows Connerton's (1989) understanding of social memory as embodied, contending that memory is both a form of ongoing practice and an aspect of social relationships, and that it can be used to maintain an ongoing attachment to place.

Similarly, several studies have considered how places themselves are constituted by the ways in which people experience belonging to them. Edwards (1998, p. 150) addressed this issue with a specific focus on the role of memory, claiming that:

the past presents people with a problem: what to select and what to ignore; what to emphasise and what to screen out. Stories about the past do not merely render visible a person's connections to persons and places, they make and break those connections.

Allison Hui (2011) has also addressed this topic in her more recent work on the role of nostalgia in leaving and then returning to one's home. She has contested the equation of nostalgia with passivity, conceptualising it instead as an active and ongoing engagement with

place. Hui argues that although nostalgia is often depicted as a longing for something bygone, this is immutably true in only a temporal sense because it is possible to return to the place that forms the object of one's nostalgic longing. While it is not possible to separate place from time simply because longing for place may often be longing for place *as it was at a specific time*, Hui contends with this issue by considering how material and virtual conceptions of place interact in experiences of nostalgia and home. Specifically, she draws upon Kevin Hetherington's (1997, p. 188) concept of 'placing' which adds nuance to the well-established distinction between places as man-made and spaces as comparatively empty by conceptualising places as '*being in the process of being placed in relation to*' (author's emphasis) rather than as fixed or immutable.

Hui draws on Hetherington's claim that the construction and significance of a place persists beyond its existence in a specific material form, considering the way in which places which no longer exist in a way that one remembers them (such as homes that have been demolished to make way for a road) nevertheless retain a virtual existence, persisting as an immaterial place. We find useful in Hui's work the claim that even when individuals leave places that are significant to them, these places nevertheless persist not just in memories that were formed within them, but in memories of the specific ways in which one related to them. In Hui's (2011, p. 80) words, when people return to places that were once significant to them they engage in a practice of 're-placing', and through this 'negotiate the gaps between familiar places and somewhat unfamiliar spaces, in the process layering new affects on top of old ones'. By emphasising that places are not static, that they are formed and re-formed over

time, Hui's work provides an entry point for thinking through the role of nostalgia and memory in the way that individuals relate to specific places over time.

Similar claims have been made by researchers focusing on the materiality of places, and how they become meaningful to individuals. We find Casey's (2001) distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' places particularly useful. 'Thick places' hold the self in place. They are made of affect and practice, and implicate the body as a vehicle 'of being-in-place', bearing traces of 'the places it has known' (Casey, 2001, p. 687-688). On the contrary, 'thin places' do not hold the self in place, they lack substance and can melt away much like 'programs on television' that disappear when we change the channel (p. 684). Drawing on this notion of thick places, Duff (2010) focused on the role of affect in youth experiences of place-making in Vancouver, Canada. For Duff, 'to experience place is to be *affected by place*' (p. 881, emphasis in original). Here affect is understood not merely as emotions, but also 'specific manifestation of a body's "power of acting"' and an individual's dispositions to the world (Duff, 2010, p. 882). An important component of the construction of 'thick places' is memory. On one hand, 'thin places' fail to forge affective connections, do not hold the self in place and provide no memorable experience of the place (Duff, 2010, p. 882). In contrast, 'thick places' provide the individuals with 'affective traces of lived intensity', awaiting to be reactivated in the self for its interaction and immersion (p. 892). In this sense, the affective connection to a place involves memorialisation in and of that place. Indeed, the cultivation of 'thick' places through a layering of affect formed over time, as well as the ways in which they remain, waiting to be reactivated, is directly reminiscent of Hui's (2011) concepts of 'placing' and 're-placing'.

Although the existing literature elucidates the concept of nostalgia and provides fruitful ways of conceptualising how it is related to places – which are themselves formed over time and through specific practices – it focuses solely on places that one has left. Hui makes the point that nostalgic longing is always temporal because it is constituted not just by longing for a specific place (to which one could return), but by longing for this place as it was *at a specific time*. Thus, nostalgia is not necessarily ameliorated by simply returning to a longed-for place. It instead necessitates an active process of re-placing. However, Hui focuses solely on those who have left and then returned to their longed-for place, leaving the question of whether nostalgia is experienced by those who do not leave unaddressed. We seek to respond to this question in the present article. Specifically, we consider the significance of nostalgia for a group of adults who lived either in or near the area in which they grew up. In so doing we extend Hui's work to consider a form of re-placing that occurs over time, through mundane, everyday interactions with place, and which underpins a form of attachment to place that is imbued with a type of nostalgia which gives affective resonance to everyday experiences and practices.

## **Methods**

The data presented in this article are drawn from interviews conducted with 35 members of the Life Patterns research program, an ongoing mixed-methods longitudinal panel study which follows the lives of a group of individuals in the state of Victoria, Australia, from the time at which they left secondary school (1991-1992) into adulthood. This group of

individuals were witness to significant economic and social change. For example, they experienced the expansion of further and higher education opportunities, as well as the demise of the manufacture sector, the collapse of the youth labour market (which resulted in the loss of full-time employment for many young people), and the subsequent rise of casual and precarious forms of work driven by the deregulation of the labour market and the growth of the service sector (e.g. retail, hospitality) (see Andres & Wyn, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2011; Blatterer, 2007). In addition, their first post-secondary school years coincided with the last financial recession experienced by Australia. In many ways, this group of individuals forged new patterns of life (e.g. in education and work) and a new transition to adulthood under conditions of significant uncertainty and social change.

The cohort of the research program initially consisted of 29,155 participants in 1991. In 1996 the cohort was reduced to a manageable sample of 2,000 participants but it maintained consistency in terms of gender, geographic location and socio-economic background.

Particular attention was paid to maintain representation of participants from urban, regional and rural towns. Participants were surveyed annually in the 1990s and every two to three years since the year 2000. A sub-set of 30-50 participants has been interviewed at an interval of two to three years since 1997. At the time of the in-depth interviews that form of the basis of this article (in 2012), 302 participants remained in the research program. In 2017, 256 participants completed and returned the survey. Notably, over half of these participants in 2017 were living less than 10kms away from their 1991 place of residence, including 41% of urban participants and 21% of rural participants currently living in the suburb or town where

they grew up, which suggests that the experiences of the participants that we discuss in this article are unlikely to be uncommon or atypical.

The initial set of interviews consisted of 19 participants (11 women and 8 men) who grew up and either remained in or returned to live in rural areas. These participants were interviewed as part of a study considering how belonging and place were experienced in rural contexts. Following this round of data collection, we decided to interview 16 urban participants (11 women and five men living in Melbourne) to examine if similar approaches to belonging to people and places were present in a different space. The semi-structured interview questions addressed topics ranging from the participants' everyday lives (e.g. a normal day in your life) to their decisions and actions concerning education, work, family and social relationships, wellbeing, and living in an urban and rural community. The longitudinal data from the surveys was used to map out each participants' trajectory before the interviews. The interviews then focused on the participants' subjective assessment of their choices and actions, and their feelings about them when reflecting on the last 20 years. In other words, what interested us was participants' memories of and reflections on their pathway to adulthood.

The initial or a priori coding was based on the interview questions. This enabled us to identify commonalities and differences between participants' pathways, and particularly highlighted the structural opportunities and challenges that the participants faced in relation to further study and gaining meaningful employment. For example, we found that male participants who grew up on family farms were often supported by their parents while studying an agricultural tertiary degree to prepare them for work in the agricultural industry.

This decision was related to the difficulties facing family farms and the possibility that participants would need to find a job with a larger agricultural company if they wanted to continue in this area of work. A closer analysis of the data revealed that educational and employment trajectories were only part of a broader strategy to remain connected to rural areas. We found that it was people and places that underpinned a sense of belonging. Similar findings were reflected in the interviews with participants living in urban areas. Specifically, we found that many of them remained in the suburb in which they grew up and that, while reflecting on this aspect of their lives, they discussed the materiality of place, along with social ties, as a factor in their decisions to stay local.

### **Childhood nostalgia and recreating life in rural areas**

As outlined above, most of the participants expressed a strong sense of attachment to their local area. This attachment was mediated by idyllic and often nostalgic childhood memories, with all of the participants reporting positive memories of their childhoods. While the tendency to look back upon the past, and especially one's childhood, with 'rose tinted glasses' is well established, the possibility that the participants were misrepresenting or omitting aspects of their experiences does not pose a significant challenge to the validity of this study. This is because the participants' recollections, rather than the realities of their childhood experiences, are what is relevant to the present discussion, since they are what is directing their thoughts about and interactions with place.

Due to their age (38-39 years old at the time of the interviews) many of the participants had young children and focused on how their local areas impacted upon them. As such, their nostalgic childhood memories were often called upon in discussions of their children's present-day experiences. This tendency was particularly evident among three of the participants living in rural areas, each of whom had grown up on a family farm.

Kylie, a mother of three, was working as an Integration Aid in her local primary school and remained in the rural part of southeast Victoria in which she grew up. While reflecting on her childhood and her experience of growing up on a farm she stated 'It was great. I loved it... I really enjoyed my time on the farm.' Once she finished recounting her positive and idyllic childhood memories she moved on to reflect on what she wanted for her own children, stating:

It was a bit of a shame when my parents moved off it that my kids don't get to experience the farm life.

Her joyful recollections were seemingly disrupted by movement into the present, and reflection on the fact that her children would not experience the lifestyle that she had enjoyed in her own childhood. Notably, this shift of topic was accompanied by a marked shift in the tone of the conversation. However, Kylie's nostalgia for her family farm, and her seeming disappointment that her own experiences would not be recreated for her children did not function in a passive or purely negative way. Instead, she reflected on her enjoyment of her local area and gratitude that it could also be enjoyed by her children. Additionally, she sought to recreate aspects of her early life that she valued for her children, despite the loss of the

family farm on which many of these experiences took place. Specifically, Kylie's fond memories of growing up on the farm were related to the sense of 'independence' and the 'resilience' it gave her:

I did spend a lot of time outside... I guess that has made me a bit sort of independent as well, just given me the tools to be able to support myself.

This sense of self-reliance was something she worked hard to instil in her children, amidst 'concerns for the future' and 'what things are going to be like when they grow up'. Kylie appeared to draw on her own positive childhood experiences when faced with an uncertain future, and in doing this sought to create a sense of continuity between her own past and her children's present in an effort to manage her concerns about the future.

Similarly, Peter, who grew up in rural northwest Victoria, reflected on the loss of his family farm. After attending university in an urban location and living and working in other rural communities, he returned with his own family to the community in which he grew up. Much like Kylie, his family could not compete with bigger (corporate) farming production and had to sell the family farm. Interestingly, when Peter was asked whether he considered taking over the family farm he presented a balanced account of why it was not feasible for him to do so, reflecting a sober view of the challenges facing independent farms. However, as the interview progressed, he began to reflect fondly on his childhood spent on the family farm, and ultimately expressed the desire to replicate his childhood lifestyle for his own children:

I'd love to have some land for my kids to go back to. Even if it's only a few acres on the outskirts of town to experience those sorts of things that I had. Yeah, I would love my children to be out and experience some of the stuff that I experienced on the farm.

Ultimately, while Peter made an active decision not to take over the family farm, he nevertheless related to his childhood memories of the farm with a sense of nostalgia, and sought to recreate his own experiences for his children. This appeared to be facilitated by remaining close to the specific area in which he grew up. Indeed, by 2017 Peter was living on the outskirts of a small regional town 20 kilometres from where he grew up.

Anthony, who also grew up on a farm in rural northwest Victoria, had a slightly different experience. He owned and worked on his family farm and gained a significant sense of constancy and continuity from it, stating:

The family farm is very important to me, it was my grandparents before me and hopefully it'll be my kids after me.

However, despite his strong attachment to the farm in the present, as well as in his imagined future, he nevertheless expressed a sense of nostalgia for things as they were during his 'parent's time', expressing a desire to replicate aspects of their experience:

I think happiness, belonging to the community and having mateships around [is important] and I think that has dwindled a bit in the last 10 or 15 years... in my parent's time they had a big group of friends who gathered all the time, no matter what happened and we probably need to rekindle that sort of thing a little bit.

Nevertheless, Anthony – much like Kylie and Peter – reflected on positive childhood experiences, and desired to replicate them for his own children. He stated that he wanted to remain on a farm, ‘so I can have my animals and my free space to run around and let children run around and do what I did as a young person growing up... Yes, so hopefully my kids can enjoy that too.’

For these participants childhood memories appeared to evoke a yearning for the past that resonates with a reading of nostalgia as longing for something that has been lost, a bygone era (Hui, 2011). While idealised versions of the past are present in these, and other, participants’ reflections, we do not find that their memories signify an incapacity to cope with change or a desire to hold on to the past because they cannot construct a sense of attachment to the present (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). On the contrary, these participants used their experiences of nostalgia to inform their desires for their children’s lives. As such, their experiences of nostalgia represented ‘critical interventions in the present’ that acknowledge the past as a source of ‘renewal and satisfaction’ in their present lives, as well as those of their children (May, 2017, p. 404).

Evidently, beyond wanting their children to enjoy the same general positive experiences that they had, many of the participants wanted their children to share the specific places in which they had grown up. This goes beyond desire for a lifestyle, and suggests an attachment to the materiality of specific places in a form that takes on a generational dynamic. Many of the participants appeared to desire to recreate for their children the ‘thick’ places which had emotional resonance for them, and in which they grew up feeling safe and at home. As Casey puts it, ‘thick’ places have the capacity to hold the self in place through a complex web of

affect, dispositions and performative acts. They present the opportunity for the personal enrichment of individuals (Duff, 2010). Thus, the self inhabits a place by 'moving through it or staying in it' but also by holding it 'in mind' (Casey, 2001, p. 687). In other words, agency, memory and habit work together to actively collude self and place and produce a robust sense of attachment or belonging. The creation of 'thick' places, and their dual existence in material and 'in mind' aligns closely with Hui's (2011) account of placing and re-placing. Specifically, these approaches each facilitate analysis of a nostalgic relationship with place that can persist from afar in both a geographical and temporal sense.

### **Social memory and continuity in urban areas**

Although, for many of the participants, attachment to place was shaped by the desire to recreate the positive experiences that they had enjoyed for their children, the pull of childhood memories was not exclusive to those who had children. Turning to the urban participants, we found that Jennifer, single and working as a pharmaceutical consultant, who grew up and remained in a suburb in the east of Melbourne expressed a similar degree of attachment to the area, even though she did not have children. While discussing her experience growing up in the area she stated:

Oh, it was fantastic. I had lots of kids around to play with and tennis courts across the road... I was always able to hop on my bike and go round the corner and go play in the park.... I had it pretty good.

While discussing her choice to stay in her local area Jennifer actually identified the role played by childhood memories:

I think you just go back to what you're familiar with, what you're comfortable with.

You know you remember how it was for you as a child and you think well, this is a good neighbourhood, and I think all the childhood memories that you've got probably bring you back to it.

Jennifer's experience suggests that the pull of childhood memories might go beyond the desire to recreate the positive aspects of one's own childhood for their children to also encompass a personal desire to stay in an area that was imbued with memories. The accounts presented in this section point to the critical role that memories play in anchoring the self in the present. As May (2017, p. 402) astutely argues, 'memory is a crucial part of the 'unending work of selfhood'. Jennifer's use of memory as an anchor for place attachment was also reminiscent of Connerton's (1989) conception of social memory, as she volunteered for approximately 20 hours each week at the tennis club that she had attended for the majority of her life. Through her volunteering Jennifer engaged with a key site in which nostalgic childhood memories had been forged in a way that was both embodied and social.

The use of memory as an anchor for place attachment was also evident in the experiences of several other participants. For instance, while discussing the decision to stay in her local area Heather, married with two children and working in a bank, stated the following:

Knowing where things are, having a sense of history about the place. Feeling like it's an area that's targeting your needs... to me I like passing the school I went to or

passing the shop where I worked as my first part-time job, I like that sense of history and familiarity.

Interestingly, for Heather the comfort that came from living in a local area amid all of the lived history was tied to the constancy that it offered. When asked what the sense of familiarity and history that she experienced in her local area gave to her she responded: 'A sense of belonging, a sense of consistency, not everything always changes, some things are just the same and it's a comfort factor.' The constancy offered by one's local area was also touched upon by Fiona, who recounted planting trees with her parents and siblings, and then visiting them as an adult with her own children. Discussing this topic, she stated that 'throughout everything that changes in the world, that's something that's still there 35 years later.' However, it is important to note that although these participants emphasised the importance of continuity as a source of comfort, this did not mean that they did not also observe change. For instance, Fiona identified the trees that her family planted as an oasis of constancy amid a changing suburb. She was thus nostalgic for both the space around the trees that had changed, and the time that had moved on despite the material continuity of some aspects of the place.

The experiences of Jennifer, Heather and Fiona each indicate how attachment to place can be constructed through small-scale and seemingly ordinary daily practices, and in a way that builds upon existing memories of a place. As Hui (2011, p. 69) contends, these everyday practices transform what is otherwise just an abstract generalisation of comfort, or of being at home. These practices, as embodied activities, produce affective attachment to place that is constitutive of feelings of belonging. The 'comfort' that the constancy of their local areas

offered to these participants appeared to stem from the continuity that it forged between the past and the present. Drawing again upon Hui's work, this experience also suggests that these significant places may have something of a dual existence. For instance, Fiona and Heather identified significant places within their local areas as points of constancy amid dynamic change. This sentiment appeared to be associated with these places not because they did not change at all, but because the recollections that they had of these places (specifically, of how they were when they were children) could be reconciled with their present-day form. The participants' memories of these places appeared to facilitate a constant, everyday experience of re-placing which, in Hui's (2011, p. 80) words 'layer[ed] new affects on top of old ones' and in so doing forged a sense of continuity between past and present, by way of memory and nostalgia. As such, it appeared that rather than engaging in 're-placing' over a contained period of time once they returned to a significant place after a period of time away, the participants who remained in their local area instead engaged in a form of 're-placing' that was sustained and ongoing. It was in this way that they reconciled change with continuity, and continued to make specific places meaningful to them, thus using nostalgia to enliven the present even while they, at times, mourned the loss of the past. Furthermore, the participants appeared to use this process of re-placing to attend to specific meaningful spaces (such as the trees for Fiona, and the tennis club for Heather). Returning to Casey's account of 'thick' and 'thin' spaces, it appears that the participants returned to particularly meaningful (thick) spaces and through their ongoing interaction with them engaged in a layering of affect over time. These thick spaces appeared to be woven into a patchwork with the surrounding (thin)

spaces of change in a way that facilitated an active form of attachment to their local area for these participants.

### **Ease and familiarity with place**

We have found that nostalgia can serve a positive function, drawing people to places that are significant to them even when it is shot through with elements of regret and loss, and that it can provoke an active relationship with place, imagined as a specific type of what Hui has termed 're-placing'. We next turn to the question of how these experiences of nostalgia manifest and were attended to in the present. In so doing we consider what exactly, beyond the abstract notion of memories, prompted our participants to stay in the areas that they related to in the ways in which we have identified.

As outlined above, several of the participants drew feelings of comfort from the spaces of continuity that they observed in their local areas. Many of the participants who remained in the area in which they grew up reported similar feelings of comfort, being at ease, or feeling at home (see Antonsich, 2010), which they expressed as familiarity. Focusing specifically on the urban participants, we found that the term 'familiarity' appeared to capture an aspect of belonging to place that extended beyond (as well as overlapped with) enjoyment of the community, and especially of proximity to family (see Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). While the role of family was important to all of our participants – especially those who were parenting and needed support with their children – we also found that the materiality of place played a significant role in generating affects of attachment. We read the affects of attachment that

were generated through experiences of familiarity with place as mediated by nostalgia, imagined in the positive register that we have suggested. Specifically, we suggest that the nostalgic memories of place that the participants referenced provoked feelings of familiarity, homeliness and belonging which, in turn, generated affects of attachment which rooted them to specific places.

For instance, John, who was living with his girlfriend and working as a primary school teacher and grew up and remained in a suburb in Melbourne's inner north, identified the role that proximity to family played in his choice to stay in this area. However, while doing this he also touched upon the relationship between familiarity and the material aspects of the area:

I think family has a lot to do with it. My family is still in the family home that I grew up in. That for me is a definite. I want to be close to them, but it's also the familiar, being aware of where to go, who to see, doctors, shopping centres, all that sort of stuff. So I like having a familiarity where I live.

Similarly, Mary, a single mother and a human resources officer in the government sector who grew up and remained in a suburb in Melbourne's inner north west, discussed her experience of leaving and then returning to this area:

I did move out for a short time when I lived one suburb over but I've always stayed in the area, as I am quite used to living here... I know the facilities and the amenities in the area.

John also commented that having shops near his house was important, particularly 'knowing the people that work there'. This generated in him 'a sense of community'. The familiarity

that many of the participants felt with their local areas was also evident in the sense of ease that they associated with these areas. For instance, Nicole, married with two children and a part-time kindergarten teacher who had grown up and remained in a north-eastern suburb of Melbourne, mentioned the dual considerations of community and familiarity, and then elaborated on the latter, stating:

As I said I think belonging means community and it's also feeling familiar; because I know that when I've lived elsewhere and I've gone to the shops, to the shopping centre or whatever place I don't know where anything is, I feel a bit lost and it's hard finding your way around. You don't know what's in the area. Where here because I've lived for so long if I need something I know exactly where to go to get it. My shopping trips are really efficient, I know where everything is. I know what is available in this area so I can access it and use it more fully than I would in an area that I don't know.

Ultimately, while the nostalgia experienced by the participants was, at times, tinged with melancholy, it also called forth memories that enlivened the present. By serving this seemingly positive function, this experience of nostalgia appeared to prompt the participants to remain in the areas that were significant to them.

Importantly, the participants' strong attachment to their local areas also provided them with a sense of constancy amid the precarity and uncertainty that characterised the wider socio-political context. This was particularly evident in the contrasting ways in which the participants spoke about their experiences of their local area on the one hand, and their wider

concerns on the other. For instance, although Heather felt safe and comfortable in her local area, she was facing the possibility of being made redundant at the time of the interview:

Facilitator: You seem to have a strong concern about being made redundant. Do you think that's a strong possibility?

Heather: Well I've had three different managers in six months at work and the previous two have been made redundant for nothing to do with them personally, it's just numbers cutting. So yeah, I think it's a very realistic possibility.

The participants thus appeared to use their familiar local areas as a buffer against the uncertainty endemic in broader aspects of their lives (see Andres & Wyn, 2010). As such, it appears that the importance of nostalgic memories is also rooted in its capacity to manufacture cultural and historical belongings that help individuals to firmly secure one's social and spatial position in the context of uncertainty and rapid social change. This was facilitated for the participants by the feelings of familiarity that were produced by their everyday interactions with their local area, and by the specific ways in which they engaged in re-placing to cultivate thick spaces, and weave them together with (thin) spaces of change.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, engaging with the concept of nostalgia has enabled us to better understand our participants' decisions to remain in or return to the places in which they grew up. Much like Stockdale and Haartsen (2018), we have sought to put 'stayers' (and returners) in the

spotlight, and to contest the negative perceptions that are often associated with those who decide to make a living in their childhood communities. We have done so by examining what the concept of nostalgia may contribute to formations of belonging. The participants' comments reveal a particular experience of nostalgia; one that, although often tinged with loss of regret, is predominantly positive. Against conceptions of nostalgia as passive or regressive we find that, for our participants, it was often part of ongoing practices related to the specific places that were meaningful to them. Similarly, for many of the participants nostalgia was manifest through the recollection of happy and often idyllic childhood memories which informed the desire to either recreate these memories for their own children (including the specific spaces in which they occurred) or remain close to the area in which they unfolded themselves. Importantly, this is not to suggest that the participants did not witness change in their local areas; several of them commented on changes that they viewed as negative and associated with loss or disappointment. Rather, several of the participants appeared to focus on specific places that they had interacted with consistently over their lifetime, anchoring their experiences of attachment most deeply in these specific places. In light of this we conceptualised these areas using Casey's notion of thick spaces, which are layered with affect over time and through continual interactions, and have the ability to draw individuals back to them.

We found that the participants used the thick spaces which they interacted with consistently over time, and which provided them with a sense of continuity, as a means of managing the change that they saw around them. Understood in this way, their interaction with their local areas consisted of drawing together a patchwork of (thick) spaces of continuity and (thin)

spaces of change. Drawing upon Hui's work we conceptualise this as an ongoing practice of re-placing, in which change is reconciled with continuity. However, while Hui developed this concept to account for the experiences of those who leave their local area (or indeed home country) only to return after a significant period of time, we adapt the concept to apply to those who do not leave, or do so only for short periods. In so doing we imagine re-placing as a mundane, everyday process through which change is reconciled with continuity and attachment to place is formed and reformed.

Importantly, while considering the specific ways in which this nostalgic experience of place is manifest in the present and how it impacts on individuals in a way that prompts them to remain in or return to the areas in which they grew up, we found that this process elicited feelings of familiarity which the participants often associated with comfort and safety.

Moreover, these feelings of familiarity and comfort appeared to allow the participants' local areas to act as a buffer against the wider uncertainties that they faced. This is particularly salient given the profound social changes that this cohort of Victorians navigated in their pathway from youth to adulthood. These changes included experiencing a national financial recession when they left secondary school, policy demands to study well into their twenties and looking for secure employment amidst an increasingly casualised and precarious labour market (Andres & Wyn, 2010). For rural participants, it also often involved the reality that continuing with further and higher education meant leaving their community. In addition, the unviability and decline of family farms due to competition from corporate farms also meant that a way of life became harder to sustain. Our conceptualisation of belonging and place attachment through the feeling of nostalgia suggests that the production of familiarity and a

sense of being at ease contributes to buffering the participants against these structural uncertainties. In this sense, our analysis produces a depiction of nostalgia not as a melancholic feeling that predispose the self towards longing for a lost community, thus rendering one 'stuck' in the past, but as an affective connection to place that orients and shapes habits, practices and experiences in the present. As such, our findings align with May's (2017) contention that far from drawing individuals into the past, nostalgia actually enlivens the present, imbuing it with affective resonance. It does this to the extent that it has the power to draw people back to places, or prompt them to remain in them. Ultimately, our findings add to emerging research considering why individuals may remain in the areas in which they grew up.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council, through grants DP1094132 and DP160101611. We are grateful to the participants on the research project for their long-standing commitment to it, and to the other members of the Life Patterns team: Johanna Wyn, Helen Cahill, Dan Woodman, Carmen Leccardi, Jenny Chesters, Josie Reade, Katherine Romei and Shirley Jackson.

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Formations of belonging in Australia: The role of nostalgia in experiences of time and place

**Date:**

2019-07-01

**Citation:**

Cuervo, H. & Cook, J. (2019). Formations of belonging in Australia: The role of nostalgia in experiences of time and place. *POPULATION SPACE AND PLACE*, 25 (5), <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2214>.

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