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Tracing Nostalgia

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TRACING NOSTALGIA

An Art Honors Thesis by Micaela Nee
This honors thesis is dedicated to my art teachers: Judy, Kelly, and Laura.
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INTRODUCTION

I have always been intrigued by the experience of nostalgia, an emotion defined as, “a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one’s life, to one’s home or homeland, or to one’s family and friends; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time” (1). As a visual artist, I was drawn to the color and design of vintage advertisements from the 1950s and 60s, so I began investigating more about these advertisements. The research revealed that these advertisements promoting the prototypical “all-American life” have a specific style in regards to color and content, however, they also emphasize whiteness. The amount of whiteness and brightness overwhelms the viewer.

Why was I fascinated by these weirdly idealized images from a time period well before I was born? Upon further investigation, I discovered that I had “the privilege of experiencing nostalgia” (2). I was able to imagine myself in this fantasy era that only depicted white privileged Americans. It
was easy to be fond of these images that seemed so pristine and perfect and disregard the blinding exclusionary nature of these advertisements. In an effort to combat the nostalgia trap, my goal is to make visible the dangers of nostalgia on society. The advertisements act as a type of propaganda for white superiority.

Oversimplification creates a desire to retreat to a “simpler time,” despite the abounding issues that were prevalent even in America’s “golden age.” It is dangerous to indulge in nostalgia, because our representations of the past are far from reality and colored by biases, influences, perceptions etc. The superficial definition of nostalgia fails to consider the vast implications nostalgia can have not just on personal but societal levels.

Psychologists found that nostalgia is a pancultural emotion and mostly all cultures agree on its set of features (3), however this research clashes...
with Rosaldo who claims, “In any case, the changing meanings of nostalgia in Western Europe, (not to mention the fact that some cultures have no concept at all) indicate that ‘our’ feelings of tender yearning are neither as natural or as pan-human, and therefore not necessarily as innocent as one might imagine” (4). Nostalgia is largely built on power and privilege.

Powerful groups in society can form these nostalgic narratives that are biased towards their own group. The boundary between reality and artificiality can sometimes be unclear. Myths are ingrained in American culture and continue to shape our perceptions today. For instance, take the image of the Wild West and the glorified cowboy image which had been distorted by white dominance and media (5). This image has been drastically distorted from reality in which many of the first cowboys were actually Spanish or black. Furthermore, the work of cowboys was long and labor intensive. Mid-century America was a period of severe inequality and exclusion for people from marginalized groups. Segregation in schools and enforced Jim Crow laws limited and restricted the lives of black Americans. Black Americans and Americans of other marginalized groups were not depicted in the prototypical “all-American” image. Expressing nostalgia for this era also involves longing for a celebration of whiteness. Donald Trump’s infamous “Make America Great Again” encapsulates this expression of colonial nostalgia (6).

Memories are subjective, filtered, exaggerated, biased, and not complete representations of reality. When people engage in nostalgia, they have the desire to return to an idealized past. Through this idealization, integral parts of the past are suppressed, creating an illusive, imaginary, simplified past that does not depict reality. Collective memory shapes people’s thoughts and beliefs (7). There are several dangers of nostalgia that cast major
consequences on marginalized groups in society. Many (mainly white) Americans are drawn to the era of the 1950s and 60s, even Americans not alive for this time period are enticed by vintage imagery and the lust of postwar abundance, innovation, and consumerism. However, this period characterized as “utopia,” was not a dream for many Americans. Life was not perfectly wrapped in shiny cellophane for everyone.

My artwork references nostalgia and how it has instilled norms and beliefs that continue to reverberate today. Vintage imagery illustrates a time of dominant white culture that continues to affect the formation of attitudes. Advertising ignored entire groups in society across all domains, but the promotion of whiteness is specifically evident in white bread advertisements. Products were advertised as superior if they were “whiter,” “brighter,” “sanitary,” or more “homogenized.”

By using imagery from actual advertisements in mid-century America I will show how these images perpetuated and enforced white dominance. In re-contextualizing this imagery, the viewer is exposed to the historical surroundings that have been filtered out over time. Being exposed to heavily idealized, biased, and selective parts of the past creates a nostalgia for a time that never existed. The whitewashing of the past and present leads to many problematic viewpoints. My paintings, drawings, and collages connect whitewashed images with appropriated historical images. Through the use of contradictory imagery, the work suggests the dangers of nostalgic indulgence.

We cannot fall into the nostalgia trap (8).
Part I
Nostalgia and Collective Memory
Nostalgia is defined as, “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition” (1). Tom Vanderbilt describes nostalgia as “a form of propaganda, an exercise in laughter and forgetting, in which the right visual iconography and perceived authenticity can create a longing for an existence which is no longer possible and was in fact never possible” (9). In the colored pencil drawings, Rainy Day and Biking in the ‘50s, I looked at this emotion in a generalized sense regarding childhood. These first investigations were taken from family photographs and executed in a photo realistic style of drawing. Biking in the 50s was drawn from an old family photograph, and incorporates a bicycle advertisement from mid-century America. It questions the construction of memory. Most of us have old family photographs of ourselves, but we do not actually remember that moment, but rather we rely on outside visual and verbal information. I was interested in how we construct these varying sources of information in the formation of our own memories.

“a form of propaganda, an exercise in laughter and forgetting, in which the right visual iconography and perceived authenticity can create a longing for an existence which is no longer possible and was in fact never possible”(9)
Rainy Day

Micaela Nee
Colored Pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches
Biking in the ‘50s

Micaela Nee
Colored Pencil on paper
30 x 22 inches
I wanted to make work that spoke to a larger audience. Additionally, I wanted to look more critically at nostalgia and memories and how these influences and biases affect us on a national level. Imagery from pop-culture and mid-century advertising has been recurrent throughout my work. Advertising imagery is particularly interesting because it is mass produced and distributed to massive numbers of people. After noticing the repetition of whiteness in advertising imagery, I began to explore how advertised images and products promote a white America.

The initial stages of my research involved looking into how memories are influenced by perceptions and biases. I was interested in how memories are formed and distorted in America, so I focused on how memory transpires on a large scale, otherwise known as collective memory. Collective memory is the way cultures remember events in history and how these memories shape people’s thoughts (10).

Nicolas Dhervillers, is an artist who works with the concept of collective memory (11). Dhervillers collects his imagery from an archive of a town in Switzerland from the 1800s. His goal is to make new scenes and images with “scraps of the past” (11). Similar to Dhervillers, I use appropriated imagery from the past to make new scenes. Moreover, he also uses imagery collected from a time period from before he was born. Paul Anthony Smith is another artist who works with memory, and is interested in the way reality becomes transformed through memories (12). He also uses photographs, but uses a tool to physically take out aspects of the image to visually replicate fragmented memory. These artists are examples of a number of artists, like myself, exploring collective memory.

Nicolas Dhervillers
My Sentimental Archives, 2011
Photograph
There are several factors that contribute to how events are remembered in collective memory. One of these factors is location, which creates ethnic bias in memory recall. For instance, a study in psychology by Lewicka, conducted with people from two neighboring towns showed that people remember events differently based on where they lived. They thought that their individual town and its leaders were more significant in history than the other town (13). This same phenomenon is also seen on a national level, in which countries recall memories differently from one another (10). Americans and Russians remember events in World War II in which they were victorious, despite it being the same War, they have drastically different perceptions. They do not even call it by the same name, as Russians refer to World War II as the Great Patriotic War. American history textbooks and media coverage are also biased to portray America in the best light possible. These sources of information reflect an incomplete history. In my work, my goal is to connect the lost parts of the past and portray a more accurate and complete history. Parts of the past are lost over time through nostalgia, in which the past is viewed through a “rose colored lens.” Additionally, collective memories shift based on age and generation (10). People who have lived through events have stronger memories. For instance, Americans who lived through the war described the bombings as positive, whereas younger Americans rated them as negative. The younger Americans lacked a direct experience of the time, resulting in an incomplete view of events. The contrasting viewpoints of the younger and older Americans show how time influences perceptions.

The danger of incompleteness is evident in research on collective forgetting. Research shows how dramatically information can be forgotten over time (14). An experiment revealed that 97% of college students recalled Eisenhower and Johnson as presidents, whereas only 71% of college students recalled them as presidents in 1991. Also, college students
recently identified Hamilton as a president when given a list of names to choose as being previous presidents. This was most likely due to the impact of the play, Hamilton. This example shows how perceptions quickly change and result in extreme inaccuracies. The recall of presidents studies show how people’s knowledge can be changed just based on the availability of current information in their environment.

Being a psychology major, I am reminded of the effect of availability of information in one’s environment, otherwise known as the availability heuristic. This psychological concept describes how information that is readily present in the environment makes people believe something is more prevalent than it actually is, for example, the excessive coverage in the media makes people think events occur more frequently than the actual base rate. The availability heuristic is “a common quick strategy for making judgements about the likelihood of an occurrence”, and “use of this strategy may lead to errors of judgement” that lead “people to believe that those kinds of events are more probable than they actually are” (15). If one connects this concept to American advertisements, in which only white, patriarchal families are shown, it appears that America is only made up of this one version of families and people. A prime example of this is an advertising campaign by Can’t Believe it’s not Butter, which featured a fake family from the 1950s named the Buttertons in a commercial (16). The commercial featured a 1950s white, patriarchal family in black and white as well as a modern day white patriarchal family in color. This commercial aired in 2008 and reveals how the past can be used to reinforce and mold current perceptions. The idea of an overly happy, white, patriarchal family being the All-American image, leaves out many families and people who do not fit this description. A constant influx of happy white people delivered by the media, suggests that whiteness is necessary to not only attaining happiness, but also Americanization.
Clips from the 2008 “Meet the Buttertons Commercial”
Figure 5
“Our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sitcoms”

- Stephanie Coontz
The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap, p. 8
The United States contains the largest advertising industry in the world (17). The media constantly delivers information nationwide. The visual information delivered to society exudes values and norms. The same values and norms of mid-century America still help define America today. Images that represent mid-century America are often reused through media outlets. These images are still fed to Americans and continue to shape our perceptions.

In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Stephanie Coontz discusses how the 1950s image of an All-American family is an illusion (8). American culture is still centered on the idea of the nuclear family that emerged around the 1950s. The 1950s family continues to be the standard for the composition of American families today. She reminds us that, “real life was not so white as it was on television” (8, p. 31). Some people’s existence was denied by the media. As on television, advertisements depict a utopia of a white family with a nice home in suburbia. Coontz points out the illusion of this time period, “1950s family strategies and values offer no solution to the discontents that underlie contemporary romanticization of the ‘good old days.’ The reality of these families was far more painful and complex than the situation-comedy reruns or the expurgated memories of the nostalgic would suggest” (8, p. 31). In reality, the time period had many problems, like any time period. Mid-century America was a drastically worse place for immigrants and people of color, however, it was not even a utopia for white people. Coontz talks about how many white families were poor and struggling during this time.

Collective memories are largely influenced and passed down to new generations by the media. New generations learn about the past from these biased images. Images that do not represent the full history of the time period, lead people to long for an illusion of the past. There are many different types of memory that influence how information is passed.
down and processed. Aiding collective memory is collective forgetting. Organizational forgetting is one way collective forgetting can occur. This is when organizations collectively forget information. In an organization, other workers can help remember information, however, there are often organizational hierarchies in which there is limited access to information. Limited access to information leads to biased information that is less complete, more one-dimensional, and only remembered by a select few people (16).

The concept of borrowed memory also comes into play when considering memory on a societal scale. Borrowed memory is when information is remembered based on others’ memories. For instance, learning information from the news and then remembering this event, despite not actually experiencing it. If we are not there to experience the event, we are remembering the event through the perceptions of others (18). Another type of memory is historical memory. This form of memory covers a long span of time, unlike personal memory, therefore it is less detailed and more schematic than our memories that we have personally experienced and lived through. Organizational forgetting, borrowed memory, and historical memory all pose threats to the validity of memory. Limiting access to others in organizations can lead to more likely forgetting important information, as well as less complete memories. Borrowed memories are dangerous to rely on because when relying on someone else’s memory they are subject to the biases of the information source. Moreover, historical memory is more schematic, meaning that there is less detail.

The core of my thesis work is centered around advertisements from mid-century America. Researching the perplexing question, Why I was drawn to advertisements printed years before I was born?, led to the discovery that these advertisements employ a “then and now set-up” (16). This is a set-up in which consumers imagine themselves in a past that they did not live through, because the worries and concerns
of the time period have been extracted, despite there being many issues during that time period. It is easy for people who have not lived through a time period to imagine themselves in this fictitious past that appears to be worry-free. Nostalgia can be a source of comfort when people are anxious. VanDerWerff sums up the purposes and consequences of nostalgic reverie: “Nostalgia is a perpetual allure for those who would dream up a less complicated past, who would love to lose themselves in gauzy memories of beloved childhood entertainments. But the past was just as complicated as the present, filled with just as many real and human struggles and probably some nostalgia for a different past that came before. We forget that at our peril, but, then, so will our own children, looking back on the halcyon, uncomplicated days of 2016 in what now seems like the far-off future” (6).

In addition to the “then and now set-up” (16), I realized there was another reason I was attracted to this imagery. Being a white American, I had “the privilege of experiencing nostalgia” (2, 17). It was easy for me to imagine myself in these images of the “golden age.” Willmore discusses the privilege of nostalgia in relation to the movie, La La Land. She describes the glorification of whiteness in the movie and the entitlement and privilege that leads one of the main characters, a white male, to take credit for jazz music, despite this genre being founded by black people. She describes the privilege associated with nostalgia: “The Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone musical isn’t just about being in love with the past — it’s about who gets to see themselves in it” (2). The film also glorifies whiteness and promotes a nostalgia for whiteness; “Whiteness is part of the point of La La Land as well — it is, after all, a privilege of whiteness to see yourself so easily in the stars of the studio golden age” (2).

As previously mentioned, I am investigating the danger
of nostalgia, and the following quote sheds some insight into how power factors into the danger of this emotion: “Nostalgia is dangerous not because it’s easy to lose yourself in it, but because it’s too easy to redefine the past based on whomever is in power in the present. The past is always better than the present, because we selectively remember what we want to remember. You get lost there not because it was actually better, but because you can never get back to the person you were, just as America can never become the country it was, for good and ill” (6).

Privileged people and groups in society can shape how the past is remembered. This is dangerous, because it leads to a whitewashing of the past. Whitewashing is seen throughout our culture and manifests through pop-culture, which has been referred to as “America’s subconscious” (6). The author warns that pop culture cannot keep looking at the past and that we need to remember that the past is not as happy and uncomplicated as it seems (6). Longing to retreat to a past of even greater injustices will lead to past issues resurfacing in the future.

“it is, after all, a privilege of whiteness to see yourself so easily in the stars of the studio golden age” (2)
Part II

Uncontaminated Field
Wonder bread is an icon in America and most people recognize the bright red, yellow, and blue circles on the packaging. However, this white loaf is not as innocent as it appears and comes with a “dark” history. White Bread by Aaron Bobrow Strain uncovers how racial and social hierarchies and anxieties were molded into the production of the stark white loaf that symbolizes America (20). Behind a simple loaf of white bread, is a history of racism and elitism, and even “Something as simple as bread choice is an act of racial superiority” (21, p. 195).

In twentieth century America, there was an influx of immigration, leading to heightened anxieties that were channeled through bread production. In the early 1900s, bread was baked in small factories owned by immigrants, however, shortly after fears about “impurity” began to surface. Surprise inspections of bakeries were motivated more by anxieties about the immigrant owners, than about the anxieties of dirty bread.
During this time period, people were afraid immigrants were causing “racial decline.” The immigrant owned bakeries were shut down for being “dangerously impure,” (21, p. 24) leading to industrialized bread production. During this time, science was warning the public about the danger of germs. Industrialization ensured that bread would never be touched by “dirty hands.” In the Pure Foods Movement, “visions of food purity cross pollinated easily with nativist politics and ideologies of racial purity” and it was “hard to distinguish between descriptions of food borne contagion and the terrifying prospects of racial contamination” (21, p. 35). Immigrants were heavily targeted around this time and blamed for un-American values.

There was a fear of racial decline embodied by this quote:

“By the end of the nineteenth century, shocked by the conditions in urban tenements and by the sight of young children working full time at home or earning money out on the streets, middle-class reformers put aside nostalgia for ‘harnessed’ family production and elevated the antebellum model once more, blaming immigrants for introducing such ‘un-American’ family values as child labor. Reformers advocated adoption of a ‘true American family’- a restricted, exclusive unit in which women and children were divorced from the world of work”

- Stephanie Coontz, American Families and the Nostalgia Trap, p. 8
Bread color “defined boundaries between civil and savage” (21, p. 7), as the whiter bread was for elites and the darker bread was for everyone else. Advertising portrayed only “savage people” and “unwashed immigrants” eating dark bread. Moreover, white bread was even thought to “Americanize” skin color and some even claimed it could change immigrants’ complexions.

Driven by the hidden past of this American icon, my thesis work explores the way inequalities and hierarchies are channeled and promoted through the food industry. Mid-century Americans wanted whiter bread, because they could see the cleanliness of the loaf and nothing could be hidden like in darker breads. There was a “moral panic around dirt, germs, and immigrants,” that lead to factories transforming into “snow white temples of cleanliness” (21, p. 41).

People became obsessed with ensuring that their bread was safe and pure. It was no longer even considered safe to make homemade bread. Advertisements began to emphasize the cleanliness of the bread. For instance, a Ward Bakeries advertisement boasted, “human hands never touch the bread” (21, p. 41). In the pursuit of complete cleanliness, consumers would tour sanitary bakeries brimming with “shining surfaces, crisp white uniforms, medical inspectors, mechanical mixers” (21, p. 43). A lengthy advertisement for Ward Bakeries repeatedly uses the words “clean” and “white” (21). This advertisement, claims that in the “inviting, snowy-white bakery, “Ward’s Bread is made pure and clean and right” by “our white-uniformed, white-gloved salesmen.” The advertisement contains several paragraphs about the cleanliness of the bread, machines, facility, and even employees.
Ward Bakeries Advertisement, 1911
Figure 10
To ensure purity, bread was made whiter and moved to factories for production. However, to keep the bread safe after leaving the factory, cellophane was introduced. Cellophane kept things “at their best.” Moreover, cellophane advertisements proclaimed, “smart shoppers want their bread protected by cellophane.” In my work, I explored this idea of protection and keeping things safe from surrounding impurities. Researching several advertisements from mid-century America, a common theme emerged around whiteness and protection. The most disturbing and provocative cellophane advertisements featured white children and infants being wrapped up in cellophane. These advertisements contain messages such as: “You see so many good things in DuPont Cellophane,” “Everything’s at its best in Cellophane,” and “The best things in life come in Cellophane.” My painting, “The best things in life come in Cellophane” - DuPont Cellophane, takes its title and imagery from a 1950s DuPont Cellophane advertisement. This advertisement features a baby protected by cellophane held by a large white stork. Just as white loaves of bread are wrapped in cellophane to be protected from germs and dirt, this white baby is protected from the outside world. I chose this advertisement, because of the shocking and disturbing content. This was a circulated advertisement in the American public domain, despite the obvious concern with suffocation. As is evident from the imagery and messages, these advertisements were not simply advertising Cellophane, but promoting white privilege.
Advertisment for DuPont Cellophane, 1954
Figure 12

Mom says
I’m so fresh
and so clean
(sometimes)—
she ought to
wrap me in
Cellophane
to keep me
that way.

Advertisment for DuPont Cellophane, 1956
Figure 13
“The best things in life come in Cellophane” -DuPont

Micaela Nee
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches
White, factory produced, perfectly sliced bread represented a “future of ease” and a “utopia” for Americans. White bread mimicked how some people wanted society to look. This is exemplified by the image pictured below, which displays bread with female legs, although, this image was created by an artist, and is not an advertisement, it forms a strong association between bread and the body. Strain describes the bread as “slender beauties” in which “imperfection [was] overcome by science (21, p. 63).” White bread served as a symbol of wealth, control, and racial purity. Inspired by the way a simple loaf of bread symbolized racial purity, I began to look at the role of white bread in America in my work.

My painting, *Enriched Bread*, combines a 1954 DuPont cellophane advertisement image of a girl eating bread with a photograph from 1960 of Ruby Bridges during school desegregation in New Orleans. The advertisement argues that cellophane “keeps things clean, sanitary--safe from germs and dirt.” Both of these images contain girls from around the same time period that are around the same age, however, the white girl appears happy and carefree, whereas Ruby is struggling just to attend school. The girl from the advertisement is painted in color, whereas the photograph of Ruby Bridges is in black and white. The difference in color creates a dichotomy between the two scenes. Although both images are from the same time period, both scenes do not receive equal attention. The colorful, whitewashed advertisement covers up the harsh reality of the past referencing the dangers of selected memory and nostalgia. The lust of post-war abundance covers over the issues ingrained in that time period, specifically civil rights.

Kelly Gilleran
*Wonder Women*
Enriched Bread

Micaela Nee
Oil on canvas
36 x 30 inches
Uncontaminated Field is a companion painting to Enriched Bread. It is based on a collaged composition and addresses issues of school desegregation. The background of the painting is based on a photograph of a classroom during school integration of the 1960s. The classroom appears nearly empty, because all of the white students were kept home from school by their parents as an act of protest. Only a few black students remain in the classroom with their white teacher. There is a white bread advertisement imposed over the classroom scene of two white children eating a lunch of white bread from their lunchboxes. The two children are laughing and appear carefree. Both images are from the same time period, but reflect very different realities for the children. As in Enriched Bread, the background is in black and white, so immediate attention is drawn to the colorful, detailed image in the front. Mimicking segregation with the use of color, the white and black students are removed from each other spatially. Upon closer inspection of the pieces, viewers can begin to question their perception of the past. More attention and detail was given to the advertised imagery, mirroring the attention that is given by society. Plastering the advertised images over the reality of that time oversimplifies the past. Oversimplification is a danger of nostalgia that often leads to false illusions of the way things were in the past. Through these two pieces, I intend to connect the vintage imagery characteristic of the time period with the surrounding context that is often glossed over.
Uncontaminated Field

Micaela Nee
Oil on canvas
36 x 36 inches
Issues of segregation also spurred a series of collage images. *Back to School?* juxtaposes a photograph of black students outside of a school they were not allowed to enter with an advertisement of prototypical, white, heterosexual all-American students.

In constructing a new space around the advertised image, I want people to connect what is displayed as being the past with the reality of that era.

*Back to School?*
Micaela Nee
Collage
Jim Crow laws enforced segregated businesses and sections of town. The collage, *Hidden Power*, was inspired by the role beauty salons played in empowerment during the Jim Crow era. Black beauty salons were often places of empowerment and mobilization, where black women could freely talk to each other (23). A hairdresser at one of these salons would send women to sign up to vote while they were waiting for their treatments. The background photograph is of a school where black women are learning how to work in salons. I obstructed this image with a photograph is of two white women who appear happy, carefree, and oblivious to the struggles around them.
Jim Crow laws also made many lunch counters exclusive to white customers and inspired the collage, *Glass Fully Empty*. Diner culture played a major role in Americans’ nostalgia for the 1950s, however many lunch counters only served white customers. White only lunch counters prompted several sit-in protests by black people at these counters (24). The white server from a Coca-Cola advertisement superimposed over an image from one of these sit-in protests blatantly ignored the struggles of those behind him. The title, *Glass Fully Empty*, originated from the row of empty Coca-Cola glasses despite the full counter of people, symbolizing the refusal of service.
Have a Coke!

Micaela Nee
Collage
Many of the messages and images of mid-century America still exist today. This messaging still surrounds us, but is perhaps more subtle. The messaging today may not be as apparent to us as it is in the old advertisements, but the same underlying themes prevail. In the future, what may be subtle messaging now, may be more apparent with the progression of time. Although Wonder bread’s peak has passed, it is still produced and sold in stores. The current packaging on the loaf reads “Classic White.” The label, classic white, is deeply problematic, as this promotes whiteness as the norm. This label does not even include the word bread, but simply reads “classic white.” Currently the descriptions of products on the Wonder bread website (24) subtly reinforce white superiority. Classic white is described as being “it” and “the loaf that made Wonder Bread a household name. It’s soft, white, and as wholesome as childhood itself.” Whole-grain white is described as combining “the best of both worlds” and as having the timeless taste and texture with the addition of whole grain.” The idea of whole grain being an additive element is also evident in the description of whole wheat bread, which is connected to nature and “firm and flavorful,” moreover it says, “you can toast it, top it, and enjoy it anyway you like.” This idea of addition to whole wheat suggests that it is not good enough to consume as is. While white bread is hailed as bringing the bread its fame, darker bread is advertised as being a base on which to add.

Wonder bread is not the only brand or food still on shelves that promotes whiteness. Sara Lee whole-grain white bread proclaims, “Kids love the white bread taste!” Other white bread packages read “million dollar white,” “simply white,” and “colonial is good bread.” Strain also points out the white bread packaging usually contains red, white, and blue colors and sometimes yellow (21). The colors make the bread appear patriotic and American, therefore linking whiteness with being American. Inspired by the qualities of the packaging as well as the enormous impact
Wonder Bread has had in American culture, I created a larger than life painting of this food “staple.” The 8 x 5 foot canvas is titled, *Classic White.* The giant loaf mighty in size and stature, places emphasis on its role in American diet and culture. The text, “CLASSIC WHITE,” on the side is distorted, to indicate a challenge to this white hierarchy in the world today.
“It’s soft, white, and as wholesome as childhood itself”

-Wonderbread.com
Classic White
Micaela Nee
Oil on canvas
108 x 60 inches
Beyond the influence of white bread, the food industry is saturated with suggestions of inequality in names, text, imagery, and logos. For instance, the simple names of cakes form racial associations. Devil’s food cake is “a rich chocolate cake” (26) and Angel Food Cake is “white sponge cake with a light, delicate texture” (27). These words are both “American-isms,” meaning they originated in and are unique to America. The following images are advertisements for Angel and Devil food cake. In the Duff’s Devil food cake advertisement, it states that there are no ‘hidden’ costs, supporting the association between hidden and darkness. The Betty Crocker Devil food cake advertisement, similar to Duff’s, emphasizes the rich, lusciousness of the cake. In the Duncan Hines and Betty Crocker Angels food cake advertisements, both appeal to the lightness of their cakes made from egg whites. One advertisement proclaims their cake is “higher than you can bake with the whites of 13 eggs,” seemingly suggesting the loftiness of the cake, whereas the other advertisement boasts its new lightness and features a super white cake with a halo glow.

In the drawing, Angel’s Food and Devil’s Food, I juxtaposed the two cakes inviting people to look at them in a different way. Americans are desensitized to the connotations the names of these popular cakes carry. The still life was set up against a shiny foil backdrop with an angel food cake slightly raised on a plate and covered by a glass dome, and a Devil’s food cake placed in a lower position. The drawing represents the protection of whiteness in America. This still life was largely inspired by the old cellophane advertisements that covered white infants and children as well as the numerous white bread advertisements that emphasize the importance of keeping bread safe from germs and dirt.
Additionally, the background is very shiny and reflective inspired by this quote from Strain’s *White Bread*,

“*In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a strong current of anxiety clearly flowed beneath the shiny surfaces of the time*”
-Aaron Bobrow-Strain
*White Bread*, p. 127

My interest in reflective surfaces stems from the way they gloss over what is beneath the surface. The beautiful, shiny surfaces of the dome and bread packaging on the outside prevents viewers from seeing the full image underneath. The way reflective surfaces obscure what is underneath, connects to how the past is obscured through nostalgia. This distortion is seen throughout advertisements which reflect life as shiny and pristine, and cover up issues, particularly of racialization.
Angel’s Food and Devil’s Food

Micaela Nee
Colored pencil on paper
19 x 23 inches
New! A lighter Angel Food… made with extra-fluffy fresh egg whites!

It’s the New lighter Duncan Hines Angel Food!

Lighter than if you selected and separated the eggs yourself!

"The fluffer the Sephardic, the higher the Angel Food!" says Duncan Hines, America’s authority on good eating. That’s why you get extra-fluffy egg whites in Duncan Hines new Angel Food Mix. Every egg selected for fluffiness, all whites. Specially separated, too, so you get every bit of fluff in your cake. No other mix gives you this amazing fluffiness. Nor can you buy yourself a cake so light and fluffy. You’ll see the difference the first time you try Duncan Hines new Angel Food Mix. Look for the bright new box.

One of ten new cake mixes… all Duncan Hines delicious!

Duncan Hines Ad,
1958
Figure 18

Duncan Hines Ad,
1957
Figure 19
Betty Crocker Ad, 1960
Figure 20

Of course it's better
~ it's Duff's

Deep and dark and chocolate-fragrant. Meltingly rich, like homemade fudge. This is real old-fashioned devils food cake. Only one mix could make it—our new Country Kitchens Cake Mix. We found the flavor secret by searching hundreds of chocolate cake recipes we've collected in our Betty Crocker Kitchens. Look for new Betty Crocker Country Kitchens Devil's Food Cake Mix in its beautiful new package.

Duff’s Ad, 1950s
Figure 21
Strain also points out the association Americans have with food and defense (21). During the war, Americans were encouraged to eat whole-wheat bread, to get more vitamins and nutrients, however, Americans only wanted to purchase “chalky, dazzling white” bread. In the 1930s-40s, white bread accounted for the majority of Americans’ daily calories. Synthetic enrichment, or adding back the nutrients that have been stripped from the white bread during production, was the solution to the whole-wheat debate. During World War II, eating enriched white bread was Americans’ patriotic duty to build strong bodies, because “to eat white bread was to participate in the process of building a better nation.” In 1954-1955, 95% of people bought white bread, despite race or class. Wonder bread had an advertising campaign called “How to Build a Body 8 Ways.” Enriched white bread became linked to strength. Even after the war, the link between enriched white bread and strength continued to be enforced. After the war, advertisements focused on strength through images of children, mostly boys, instead of soldiers. Bread advertisements featured boys with black eyes or boys outsmarting their less intelligent sisters. An advertisement for Wonder Bread boasts how it was the 1984 supplier for Olympic athletes with an image of white bread, twinkies, and a gold medal. Strain associates the “golden age of Wonder bread” with the campaigns for enriched white bread during the war that were supported by the government (21, p. 130). Processed foods grew in popularity as a result of the associating them with strength. “Kitchens were battlegrounds” to fight off germs and immigrants that threatened “domesticity and national vitality” (21, p. 128). America saw their industrialized bread as superior to other countries. Even though Russia had dark, healthier bread, America viewed their bread production as inefficient. America felt superior by producing bread with vitamins and nutrients that fed large quantities of people. The switch in advertising from soldiers to boys prompted the collage, *Eat up!*
Eat Up!
Micaela Nee
Collage
White bread is not naturally white and has to go through a process of synthetic whitening. I was intrigued by this counterproductive process, as it confers no nutritional benefit and actually leads to nutrient depletion. The whitening agent often used is called azodicarbonamide (ADA) (28). The European Union has banned ADA, because of its carcinogenic properties. However, the FDA claims “Based on the science, FDA is not recommending that consumers change their diets based on exposure to ADA/SEM.” The FDA is permitting the use of a potentially carcinogenic substance in breads, and many Americans have limited access to healthier options. White bread is no longer a symbol of elite status, but a symbol of lower class. Higher income consumers seek homemade, darker, artisanal bread, the opposite of the previously sought after factory produced white bread. Artisanal bread “combined nostalgia for 1950s vintage family values with a cash charged belief in the possibility of achieving self-actualization through consumer choice” (21, p. 184) However, although darker, artisanal breads are much more nutritious, they are only available to the upper class who can afford them. White bread is now for lower class people. Additionally, eating healthy and having control over what goes into one’s body is elitist, because many Americans do not have the resources to choose what goes into their bodies. People who eat unhealthy are judged for their choices. Going gluten free is a popular diet fad, however, gluten free products are so expensive that not everyone can participate in this form of an “old American dream” in which people have control over their bodies. In the 1900s, the safety of white bread was for privileged Americans and now artisanal breads and gluten free breads are to benefit privileged Americans. The way gluten free and expensive darker breads define social hierarchies is similar to how white bread defined boundaries between the “civil and savage.” Strain is concerned that “the combat minded dreams outlined in this history mostly lead back to the mistakes of
the past” (21, p. 195), meaning that providing the healthiest foods to only a segment of the population is replicating the past in which whiter breads were only provided to the elite. Enrichment and low cost of white bread during the war enabled all Americans to have access to white bread, so everyone could be strong for the war. However, there needs to be a way everyone can gain access to quality bread without a wartime campaign.

The way in which gluten free and other specialty breads replaced the exclusiveness of white bread prompted the collage, Gluten Free = Genius!

In this advertisement, I replaced the white loaf from the old advertisement with a gluten free loaf to show that the impact bread has on elitism has not vanished with the downfall of white bread, but has simply been replaced by expensive gluten free and artisanal breads only available to a privileged segment of the population.
Part III

Colonial Chic
My interest in the danger of nostalgia and glorifying a past imbedded with exclusion led me to create a series of collages that uncover hidden pasts. I constructed several collages inspired by advertisements and other appropriated imagery. My intention is to create a more complete representation of the past as well as make people rethink their perceptions of the past. If people are able to recognize the whitewashing of the past and how it is filtered through the influences and biases of the powerful, then they are less will be able to avoid falling into the nostalgia trap.

*Addicted to Americana* (29), a book celebrating America from the 1950s and 60s, in which a white man talks about his love for this era of America fueled a number of my collages. The book opens with this quote: “The pop culture explosion that rocked the United States in the 1950s and 60s was second only to the Big Bang. Never before or since has a society so cleverly fashioned such a high quality, colorized, progressive-and-proud of it supercalifragilisticexpialidocious buffet feast of productivity, prosperity, and national pride.” (29).

One section of the book is called “exotic flavors” and this displays the exoticism and mystification inherent in colonialism. Another part of the book raves about the “wild west.” The concept of the “wild west” is a fantasy, but is portrayed throughout America, capitalized on by people and depicted in restaurants, parties, rides, books, movies, etc. However, the wild west is a myth; “The myth of the cowboy is only one of many myths that has shaped our views of the West in the late 19th century.” (5). Although modern day images of wild west feature white cowboys, there were many black and Spanish cowboys. Cowboys also endured laborious days, not matching their glorious current depictions. Inspired by the glorification of cowboys in the media I created the following collages: *Corn Flakes No. 1*, *Corn Flakes No. 2*, and *Get off your High Horse.*
Corn Flakes No. 1
Micaela Nee
Collage

Corn Flakes No. 2
Micaela Nee
Collage
Get off your High Horse
Micaela Nee
Collage
This series dismantles the idea of “colonial chic” (30), that is facilitated through colonial nostalgia. Two kinds of nostalgia have substantial consequences on relations between powerful groups and minority groups. Colonial and imperialist nostalgia are largely ingrained in society today. These forms of nostalgia are intertwined with power, domination, and hierarchy. Imperialist nostalgia is when agents of colonialism long for what they have ruined. Agents of colonialism use nostalgia as an innocent way to hide their association with domination (4). An example of imperialist nostalgia is in Ralph Lauren’s Safari clothing line in which “Lauren’s empire of nostalgia offers its participants a chance to relive the days of the tragically doomed upper class engaging in their white mischief on the plains of the Serengeti; lost in any of this aesthetic splendor is the notion of what Renato Rosaldo calls ‘imperialist nostalgia’”(4, p. 7). Colonial nostalgia is longing for a time of colonialism. This type of nostalgia can make places appear oriental and exotic. Bissell highlights a story of a city affected by colonial nostalgia (31). This exoticism was seen in the rebranding and investment campaigns of Zanzibar, a city in Africa. This area had a divided past, with Arabs, Indians, and Europeans in the rich side of town and African slaves and immigrants on “the other side” separated by a creek. Eventually, a revolution lead the people on the poorer side to live in the wealthy side, however, ended up running out of resources. Zanzibar was then invested in and seen as a tourism opportunity. It was rebranded as “Stone Town” even though the current residents did not refer to it that way and that evoked its colonial past. Zanzibar was marketed as a mystical, exotic place with vast heritage. It was described as “timeless” and a “step back in time,” while referring to the colonial time period. The current residents were no longer able to live there due to rising costs as new hotels and other tourist structures began to develop.
Tourism marketing has embraced the idea of colonial chic, by targeting white consumers through creating a place that has a hidden past. The allure of the past draws in many tourists who are seeking new and “exotic” destinations (30). A prime example of this is The Hilton Rose Hall Hotel and Spa resort in Jamaica that was built on an old sugar plantation. Kehinde Andrews points out the colonial nostalgia embodied by this resort, “The Hilton Rose Hall Hotel and Spa in Jamaica is somehow proud to advertise itself as ‘once the site of an 18th-century sugar plantation’. For an additional fee at the hotel you can even get married in the exclusive Rose Hall Plantation House; celebrating your nuptials on the site of the rape, torture and murder of countless enslaved Africans” (30). I made a collage based on the “Sugar Mills Plantation Water Park,” which is a water park containing leftover architecture of a plantation that was converted into a swim-up bar. This collage titled, Sugar Mills Water Park, combines a photo from the hotel website of the water park with a photograph of slaves on a sugar plantation. The hotel’s infamous destination wedding site is the same place slaves were formerly murdered and raped. Inspired by the way in which a place of murder became a place of marriage, the collage, Hilton Rose Hall Resort & Spa, combines an idyllic photograph of a white couple getting married at the Rose Hall plantation with a photograph of slaves hidden in the bushes at the bottom. Standing on the stairs, the white couple is spatially elevated above the slaves. Visitors are wrapped up in the allure, mystification and power of this plantation, and the harsh reality of the plantation is suppressed. This mystification is evident on the hotel website, in which the parts of the plantation are advertised as ancient ruins.

(Pictured top of next page):
Hilton Rose Hall Resort & Spa
Micaela Nee Collage

(Pictured bottom of next page):
Sugar Mills Plantation Water Park
Micaela Nee Collage
Colonialism and its “chicness (30)” has seeped into our country and manifests itself through food, the “Old Colonial Burger,” toys, Colonial Barbie, and even furniture, as Colonial is style of furniture that is all white and elegant.

There are many examples of colonial nostalgia throughout Western cultures. Visiting an old Wonder Bread factory in California that was converted into a brewery, I noticed the words, “Wonder Bread” established in 1894, still streaked across the top. The Wonder Bread name was more apparent than the current name, Mission Brewery. Similar to the Hilton Rose Hall Resort and Spa, the brewery’s location in an old Wonder Bread factory gives the place an alluring past and a colonial chicness that attracts customers. This local, craft brewery, that even offers tours, is capitalizing on colonial chic, by reusing the old white bread factory to create “historic awe” (32).

The lure of the past in relation to dominance and violence is seen by the actions of political leaders. The British Prime Minister, Theresa May, wants to succeed from the European Union in order to “take back the British Empire” (33). However, the “glory days” she is referring to were built on colonialism and violence. The desire to return to this period of colonialism has been dubbed “postcolonial melancholia,” and it largely ignores how The British Empire came about from the exploitations...
and murders of people around the world. The campaign to leave the European Union has already increased racial attacks. Also, Winston Churchill’s Keep “Calm and Carry On” slogan has regained popularity, which shows ties to nostalgia and domination. Even the surge in popularity of tea, rum, and cupcakes in Britain harkens back to the days of the British Empire (33). Similarly, the association between dominance and nostalgia is displayed by the current United States President. Donald Trump’s campaign was based on the slogan: “Make America Great Again.” This slogan is based on being nostalgic for a colonial past (6). Trump is advocating to return to a past America, that in many ways is worse than present America, especially for marginalized groups. He is glorifying the past to create an illusion of a past that was successful and powerful, even though every time period has its issues. Trump’s followers have fallen into a nostalgia trap where they believe they can create a present that is “rosy colored” and carefree. Only selective parts of the past are remembered, which can create a present that is “rosy colored” and carefree. Only selective parts of the past are remembered, which gives Trump the power to manipulate how people perceive the past (6). The danger of both the president and prime minister’s misguided use of nostalgia is how they both promote white supremacy and encourage the chicness of colonialism.
CONCLUSION

This written thesis accompanies an exhibition of artworks presented in the Cummings Art Center from May 4 - 20, 2018.
LIST OF WORKS

Rainy Day
Colored Pencil
2017
30 x 22 in.

Biking in the ‘50s
Colored Pencil
2017
30 x 22 in.

Enriched Bread
Oil Paint
2017
36 x 30 in.

Uncontaminated Field
Oil Paint
2018
36 x 36 in.

“The best things in life come in Cellophane”
- DuPont
Oil Paint
2017
48 x 48 in.

Classic White
Oil Paint
2018
96 x 60 in.

Angel’s Food and Devil’s Food
Colored Pencil
2018
20 x 24 in.

Glass Fully Empty
Collage
2017
12 x 12 in.

Hilton Rose Hall Resort & Spa
Collage
2017
12 x 12 in.

Sugar Mills Water Park Collage
2017
12 x 12 in.

Hidden Power
Collage
2017
12 x 12 in.
COLOPHON

This book was designed by Micaela Nee in 2018.

The primary typeface is Calibri and the secondary typeface is Century Gothic.

This book was printed by the Connecticut College Print Shop.


FIGURES

1. 1953 Du Pont Cellophane Advertisement, Bread Builds Home Run, Retrieved from RetroReveries on etsy.com


3. Jane Parker Bread Advertisement, Published in *Woman’s Day*, April 1, 1956

4. 1958 Jane Parker Bread Advertisement, Published in *Woman’s Day*, June 1, 1958


8. Arrow Advertisement, “How to make Father Pop...with Pride!,” 1954, Image credit: Philip Dormont


10. Ward Advertisement, Published in *Brooklyn Eagle*, 1911


12. DuPont Cellophane Advertisement, “You see so many good things in Du Pont Cellophane,” Published in *Saturday Evening Post*, 1945.


16. Image credit: Micaela Nee


18. 1958 Duncan Hines Advertisement “Duncan Hines Angel Food Cake Mix,” Retrieved from sallycotton on Flickr.com


23. Sign for Gourmet Burger Kitchen, Image credit: Isobel Cotogni

24. “Colonial Barbie,” from Amazon.com
