

**RESTORATIVE AND REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA IN LANA DEL  
REY'S "NATIONAL ANTHEM":  
DEL REY'S RECONSTRUCTION AND REWRITING OF THE  
1960s**

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In her essay "Nostalgia and its Discontents," Svetlana Boym typifies the mechanisms of nostalgia into two forms: "restorative" and "reflective." She argues the two work together in a paradoxical confluence: that restorative nostalgia "returns and rebuilds one's homeland with paranoid determination" (Boym "Nostalgia and its Discontents" 15), while reflective nostalgia "fears return with the same passion" (Boym 15). Lana Del Rey's music video for her trip-hop song "National Anthem" is a representation of these two forms working synergistically: Del Rey emphasizes a return to 1960s America by attempting a "transhistorical reconstruction" (Boym 13) of it, while simultaneously creating a narrative that both "savours [its] details and memorial signs" (Boym 15), and critiques its dominating ideals. In this way, Del Rey's employment of both restorative and reflective nostalgia in "National Anthem" allow her to return to a time where the homeland, America, was "great", while calling this "greatness" into question by renovating the home, opening up possibilities for what 1960s American could have been.

Nostalgia in Boym's restorative form thinks of itself as "truth and tradition" (13), which Del Rey attempts to reconstruct through her reappropriation of the heralding attitude towards 1960s American political figures. At the beginning of the video, Del Rey delineates Marilyn Monroe's performance of "Happy Birthday Mr. President," which is effective in reviving John F. Kennedy's (JFK) legacy and the nationalism it evoked within American citizens at the time. In her crooning, Del Rey praises JFK for the "battles that [he] won" (Del Rey 0:46-0:48) and the "way [he] deal[t] with U.S Steel" (Del Rey 0:49-0:53), echoing the patriotic American society that commended his prominent political ploys. Although Del Rey strives to capture the overwhelming affinity for JFK in the 1960s, her celebration of the President aligns with Boym's argument, that "the stronger the [...] emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is usually presented" (14). It is American tradition to be patriotic, a past tenet that has extended its reach to the present, and thus, Del Rey's discernment of JFK can be understood as distorted. JFK won battles and enforced a rollback in steel prices, but he also played a role in instigating the Cuban Missile Crisis and escalating the Vietnam War ("The Cold War"). As much as Del Rey attempts to

reconstruct American political truths, the country's patriotic traditions distort her reconstruction, causing her to be selective in what parts of the truth she reveals.

While Del Rey aims to reconstruct the political sphere of the 1960s based on her outlook of its figures, she attempts to revive its social atmosphere by exercising its "emblems and rituals" (Boym 15). Del Rey engages with symbols inherent to 1960s American culture: she plays the role of the wife in a nuclear family, the familial structure heavily espoused in the 1960s, and cruises around in a Ford Mustang, a car that alludes to the American domination of the automobile market in the same decade. The inclusion of this iconography is effective in mirroring America's social atmosphere in the 1960s, but Del Rey takes her reconstruction further by personifying the tenets the hippie era brought about, one of which being "turn on, tune in, drop out" (Leary 253). As depicted through the political elite, Del Rey's capturing of this embraced ethos does not completely align with reconstructive nostalgia, however; her representation can be seen in what politicians such as Trump are parrot as their promise to return to. In following this ethos, which Del Rey characterizes as drinking and taking drugs, Americans seemed to be free from the society that they believed infringed upon their freedom. This freedom, which Trump and his followers so desperately desire to return to, is seen in the unbridled lifestyles depicted in Del Rey's video, however, both Del Rey and Trump's utopic portraits of the past are distorted. They only consider the freedom of the privileged, as the racism, sexism, and classism of the 1960s shackled the rest.

While Del Rey engages in restorative nostalgia by trying to recover prominent political and social attributes of the 1960s, she simultaneously participates in reflective nostalgia by lingering "in the dreams of another place and another time" (Boym, *The future of nostalgia* 41). In the "National Anthem" video, Del Rey's rendition of JFK and Jackie Kennedy Onassis' love story is rendered through Onassis' perspective, and the transition from the beginning footage of JFK's assassination to their time together confirms her perspective is being shared in retrospect. This does not stop her from dwelling in its feeling, however; Del Rey's employment of aesthetics allows her to savour both the ambience of the 1960s and the feeling of being in love. The entire video is executed through 8-mm film, exuding the authentic warmth of a hand-held home movie. Del Rey's compiled clips depict a playful and pleasurable life in the 1960s: she shows the happiness of the nuclear family, the freedom of "turn[ing] on, tun[ing] in, [and] drop[ping] out" (Leary 253), and a love so utopian viewers feel empathetic towards it. In this way, Del Rey invites viewers to "cherish [the] shattered fragments of [her] memory" (Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents" 15) along with her, as when JFK's assassination arrives at the end of the video, it is

clear that the video not only depicts an alluring love story, but the deeply personal memories of the storyteller.

Although Del Rey utilizes aesthetics to linger in the feelings her beloved past times have given her, she also uses them to critique the past by creating a narrative that is “ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary” (Boym 15). As the Civil Rights Movement was still making progress in the 1960s, casting African American rapper A\$AP Rocky to impersonate JFK is a counterfactual manifestation of both the social and political climate of the decade. This casting, however, serves as a commentary on America’s disproportionate power and race dynamic, as in the 1960s, an African American president was far from reality. A\$AP Rocky playing JFK can further be seen as Del Rey’s way of musing over the “relationship between [the] past, present, and future” (Boym 16). Since Barack Obama was in office at the time of the video’s release in 2012, this casting decision performs an anachronism by actualizing Del Rey’s contemporary political climate in the 1960s. Del Rey takes her rewriting of JFK’s presidency one step further by giving it an ironic twist: she juxtaposes the prevailing customs of the white political elite with the rituals of the black hip-hop subculture. This rewriting creates a travestied portrayal of the Kennedy’s marriage and their time in office, as the two lovers are recorded lasciviously dancing, drinking, and smoking. Del Rey’s ironic portrayal is furthered by dressing JFK in gold jewelry characteristic of hip-hop culture, including gold chains, a chunky ring, and a big watch. In this way, Del Rey’s revision allows Black culture and politics to intersect, which begs the question: why were they, and why are they, so divided in the first place? By rewriting JFK as Black, Del Rey exposes how renovating the home can expose its faults.

In her rewrite, Del Rey explores alternatives of success that deviate from capitalist ideals, allowing her depiction to “move beyond the normative pressures of hegemonic capitalist control” (Steele 74). The line “money is the anthem of success” (Del Rey 2:12-2:15) repeated throughout the video, is an echo of the capitalist ideal that one must work tirelessly to attain wealth, but Del Rey shows viewers that their definition of success does not have to be solely attributed to riches. By depicting a marriage idyll that is not focalized around wealth, but rather, grounded by a happy family and exhilarating celebrations, Del Rey demonstrates that money may be the “anthem of success” according to capitalism, but it is not the anthem of happiness. Revealing this notion through the perspective of the first lady allows her to resist the “mainstream culture and normativity” (Steele 74) enforced by the political party she was a part of. It is important to note, however, that although capitalist society oppresses women, Onassis’ privileged lifestyle allowed her to benefit from it. Thus, it is reasonable

for Del Rey to depict her offering an escape from it in the video, but she had no reason to attempt to dismantle it.

By the end of the video, Del Rey returns to JFK's assassination, where she and others reenact the reactions to the lethal gunshot that killed JFK. Up until this point, Del Rey has suspended Onassis in nostalgia, both restorative and reflective, but it is this gunshot that shifts temporality in the video. In Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin introduces Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus", a painting that depicts an angel "looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating" (Benjamin 257). Before the assassination scene, Del Rey takes on the role of the angel, as she is "turned toward the past" (Benjamin 257) shuffling through a series of memories in remembrance. The time of the gunshot is when Del Rey recognizes a limitation of nostalgia: the "inability to return home" (Boym 16). The flashback of scenes Del Rey cycles through while she repeats "I loved him" (Del Rey 7:01-7:06) suspends her in reflective nostalgia a little longer, demonstrating her desire "to stay [...] and make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin 257). The gunshot, however, snaps her out of her nostalgic trance, into a reality that "precludes the restoration of the past" (Boym 16). In this way, the gunshot not only reminds Del Rey of the transience of valuable moments, but also the nostalgia for them: that one can live in the past through rewriting it, but they cannot stay.

Del Rey's rendition of the Kennedy's love story simultaneously embodies the tenets of restorative and reflective nostalgia: she is "homesick and sick of home [...] at the same time" (Boym 18). Her reconstruction of the 1960s through its truths, traditions, emblems, and rituals help to build a mirror image of the time in which her video is set in, but can also serve as an archetype for what Trump and his supporters long to return to. Further examination reveals that this mirror image of a "great" time is distorted, as the 1960s came with inequalities and issues of its own. Nostalgia through its reflective form allows Del Rey to indulge in the utopic feelings of the past through her aestheticization of it, but also, critique its dominating ideologies through her rewritten narrative. In this way, Del Rey's employment of reflective nostalgia helps her call this "greatness" into question, as rewriting the time allows her to explore its faults, and in turn, explore alternative possibilities. Thus, Del Rey uses restorative nostalgia to reconstruct 1960s America and uses reflective nostalgia to rewrite it, in an attempt to both grasp and distance a past that, nevertheless, she can never have back.

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