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Introduction: Beyond Nostalgia, Discomfort and Difference in Stranger Things

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Lucy Baker, Amanda Howell and Rebecca Kumar

Season One of *Stranger Things* (Netflix, Duffer Brothers, 2016-present) was praised by critics for how it captured the “allure of simpler, innocent times,” as it offered its audiences the chance to “bliss out” on nostalgia for child and teen-focused entertainment of the Reagan era (Poniewozik; Britton). As four preteen boys play Dungeons and Dragons in a suburban basement while mom cooks a family dinner in the kitchen above, the opening episode recalls the “imagined family happiness” that is the persistent, aspirational trope of Spielberg’s most popular works (McBride 516). Its heart-warming snapshot of boyhood friendship owes a debt to the “Loser’s Club” of Stephen King’s 1986 horror novel *It*, while its imagery of bike lights cutting through the darkness is an explicit quotation of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982). Cocooned in recollected engagements with fantasy entertainment, *Stranger Things* focuses on wonder, excitement, and imaginative play in a world where the suburban home and the intense bonds of preteen friendship offer physical and emotional security against encroaching darkness. Appropriately, one of the dominant motifs of Season One is the cozy blanket-fort retreat in the basement of the Wheeler family home; surrounded by toys and collectables, it’s an open invitation to binge-watchers everywhere to join “The Party” and retreat to the imagined securities of suburban domesticity and the nerdy delights of vintage fantasy entertainments.

Viewed from the perspective of this suburban fastness, this quilt-lined bulwark against the darkness, *Stranger Things* creates a storyworld that confirms Stephen King’s summary of horror as being “as conservative as an Illinois Republican . . . its main purpose. . .to reaffirm the virtues of the norm” (421). And yet, the series likewise insists on and is deeply invested in an alterity that cohabitates with what Nancy Wheeler, the 1980s girl-next-door character, drunkenly reviles as the “bullshit” of this cozily repressed suburbia (2.02 “Trick or Treat, Freak”). With an eye to the central role played in the series by weirdness and weirdos, trauma, chaos, and threats to security that come from without and within, this Special Issue concerns itself with how *Stranger Things* never fully embraces—yet can never quite bring itself to foreclose—a nostalgia aimed at rebuilding “the mythical place called home” (Boym 50). Like the iconic blanket fort, which in the trauma and losses of Season Two becomes an object of nostalgic recollection and site of mourning, the comforts of *Stranger Things* are never secured. Of ongoing interest to the papers collected in this Special Issue is how the series persistently betrays

unease with its objects of nostalgia, likewise with the putative securities and normative reassurances of the past—even as it insists upon them. And which is the more discomfiting? The insistence or the betrayal? It's difficult to tell. When the monstrous otherness of the Upside Down is revealed beneath the nostalgically romantic pairings of The Snow Ball at the conclusion of Season Two . . . where two thirteen-year-old actors gaze longingly into one another's eyes and awkwardly kiss . . . it's frankly a bit difficult to choose which scenario is the more horrific.

In "Queering the Clock" Clavin and Kuryloski focus on just how strange relations between time and space can be in the peculiar nostalgia of *Stranger Things*. Its temporal and sexual queerness, the "perpetual confrontation with the indeterminate" shaping its relation to 1980s cultural productions and norms. Then Kumar considers a different aspect of the series' relation to the 1980s, focusing on racial difference and black otherness in "We're All Patriots in this House." Drawing on key developments in Afro-pessimist thought, she highlights the ideological whiteness of the series, which she argues is informed by a colorblindness that betrays its amnesiac relation to Reagan-era "racism without racists" and bids us to reflect critically on its narrative insistence on the securitization of Hawkins. Taking yet another approach to otherness and liminality in *Stranger Things*, McAvan focuses on its religious dimensions, drawing on Kristeva's theory of the "semiotic" to explore how monsters and mothers "destabilize the syntax of the symbolic" suggesting "another world is possible," a "monstrous sacred." Nichols, on the other hand, focuses closely on the liminality of one character, Eleven (Millie Bobbie Brown), prompted by her popularity as a focus of cosplay to consider her role as a "living paper doll, a blank slate" where gendered identities can be performed. As Nichols makes clear, the repeated attempts within the storyworld of *Stranger Things* to make Eleven less strange, to restore her to heteronormativity, are in striking contrast to fan enthusiasm for the non-normative "weirdo Barbie" version of her character. While McAvan focuses on the nonverbal and abject in the maternal representations of *Stranger Things*, and Nichols considers the ambiguities of pre-teen girl-weapon Eleven, Hudson focuses on anger expressed by both Joyce Byers and Eleven, observing how differently female rage signifies in the era of Trump and #MeToo than in the "strong women" archetypes of Reaganite horror and sci fi. Similarly, both Li and Mollet reflect on how male gendered tropes of the Reagan era are evoked and contested in *Stranger Things*. Li, in "Reconstructing the 1980s man," considers how *Stranger Things* uses and revises heroic masculinities found in action film and fantasy fare like the Indiana Jones franchise, to create a father figure like Hopper and nerds like Mike, Luke, Dustin and Will, who "reject macho individualism and instead celebrate collaboration with females." Similarly, Mollet reflects on how the series attempts a reparative reading of geek masculinity, revising 1980s gender and narrative tropes in a way that simultaneously speaks back to intolerance and abuse of the GamerGate scandal of 2014, but also registers discomfort with its own nostalgia. Discomfort is also the focus of Baker and Howell's paper, "Parenting into the Spin," which looks at how families of Hawkins respond to trauma and threat, simultaneously registering a nostalgic desire for the assurances of the Spielbergian domestic alongside a very contemporary sense of the flexibility, adaptability, and resilience required when parenting in uncertain times. Wildermuth also considers the contemporary frame of *Stranger Things*, namely its adherence to the aesthetic and thematic characteristics of contemporary quality, prestige, or peak programming, specifically in its pervasive literal and metaphoric darkness which noirishly shadows its nostalgic recollection of childhood.

While *Stranger Things* has been praised for the authenticity and intertextual depth of its portrayal of the past, it clearly also speaks to our contemporary moment, marked by the Trumpian slogan, “make America great again.” Dripping with desperate nostalgia, this rhetoric of American exclusivity sees the past as undebatably better than the present. Back then, its proponents think, the United States was economically sound, its borders were secure, and women and people of color knew their places – things were simpler, more straightforward. *Stranger Things* serves as an important reminder of nostalgia’s precariousness, the erasures it relies on in order to blur popular recollections. As this collection thinks “beyond nostalgia” its authors reflect on the largely revisionist character of nostalgia, its wishful projection onto—and through—the past. In its longing, nostalgia interrupts authentic memory and recall, leaving some things out, adding more things in, and making things stranger than they ever actually were, in both productive and reductive ways. In other words, on our most despondent days, *Stranger Things* doesn’t tell us to regress into a utopic fantasy; instead, it models the possibilities that arise when present and past collide, new ways to see the future.

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