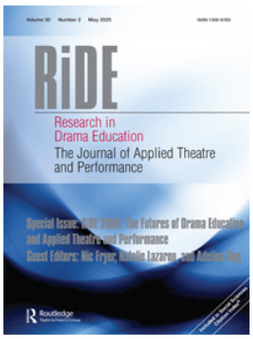

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Hannah Arendt's table: on nostalgia, democracy, and potlucks

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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant rise in food-based performances in recent years. This paper explores the role of nostalgia within these practices, and what this tells us about the future of theatre – particularly in relation to its civic role in fostering a 'culture of democracy'. Nostalgia is oriented towards the past, however, I will argue that it also has a role to play within imagining alternative futures. Using Hannah Arendt's public realm – in particular, her metaphor of gathering at a shared table I will explore how my own and others' food-based performances can channel nostalgia into collective future-building.

KEYWORDS

Socially engaged performance; food-based performance; civic role of the arts; participatory democracy; nostalgia

It's September 2021 and we are gathered in an old railway tunnel next to a canal, sat along two long tables and curry is coming out to us on paper plates – our group splintered up during the parade and now we sit amongst strangers (new friends) for the meal. We are interrupted as an actor stands up in the middle of the space and starts to tell us a story about a tree.

In November 2022 we are sat on a stage around low tables picking at the crumbs of our tacos and listening to an artist tell us a story about hospitality. Unexpectedly, the heavy red curtains begin to creak open and the space triples in size – behind the curtains are delicately lit dinner tables and in the centre of the stage a man stood behind an enormous, steaming pot of soup.

It's June 2024 and we are gathered, standing and sitting, around a horseshoe table rolling out bread and making summer rolls. The person showing me how to make the rolls seems to have never done it before today, but she's doing a good job of it. It is not always clear who is part of the team and who is a guest.

There has been a significant rise in the number of food-based performance projects in recent years, particularly within socially engaged practice – in part as artistic material and in part as a method of engagement. The vignettes above are drawn from some I have attended and some I have led. In what follows I aim to explore the role of nostalgia within these practices, and what this can tell us about the future of theatre – particularly in relation to its civic role as a space to foster 'a culture of democracy' and enable collective future-building. Nostalgia is a powerful force within the public, democratic realm. At times

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this has been problematic, weaponised by populists and fuelling prejudice, but may also be a useful tool in more progressive experiments in democracy. Nostalgia is ever-present within theatre and storytelling, and this is reinforced and heightened in food-based performances.

This inquiry draws from my own practice-based research and performance practice – namely the *Potluck Series* (2021) I initiated with Artsadmin (London, UK) between 2021 and 2023 and continue to tour and develop. This work was inspired by the democratic theory of Hannah Arendt, in particular her metaphor of a table as the public realm:

> To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit at it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (Arendt 2018, 52)

Each of us brings something to Hannah Arendt's table, this 'public realm'. In food-based performances, this is sometimes literally food, but it is also our ideas and perceptions of what this table needs and what we want from it. This table is what connects us, and our relationship to each other in these spaces are oriented around the table – it gives a common focus. Yet it also keeps a structured barrier between us. Crucially, Arendt argues that this table has been here since before we all arrived and will be here long after we go – others will inherit this table from us however we leave it. Our time at the table, this public realm, is focussed on deciding how to live amongst each other well, as well as about the future and in what state we will leave this table for those who come after.

Decades of erosion of the public realm via privatisation and neoliberal policy (Hay 2007) – as well as the widespread insipid message that we are consumers, not citizens (Brown 2015) – have undermined our ability to be at this table, and we have very few opportunities to do so. This is of particular concern in light of a growing consensus amongst political theorists that a healthy and participatory democracy is key to addressing the existential issues we face today including climate change, populism, and rampant inequality (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2019; Smith 2021; Willis, Curato, and Smith 2022). Whilst specific democratic innovations like citizens' assemblies (Willis, Curato, and Smith 2022) and participatory budgeting (Ryan 2021) offer important and exciting steps towards the kind of democracy we need, we also need a 'culture' of democracy to enact broader change as well as ensure these innovations are effective (Cunningham and Hammond 2025). This culture of democracy is one in which there are multiple and accessible opportunities for formal and informal political engagement – some of which are specifically focussed on policy making, whilst others offer less structured opportunities to discuss, challenge and reflect on how we live together well and what the future should look like. This is to say, we must cultivate and diversify many opportunities to gather in the public realm – at our common metaphorical table.

Socially engaged performance can offer us a distinctive place at this table for playful, imaginative, reflective interventions which help us connect with others and reconsider how we want to live, and crucially, how we may leave this table to the future. As cultural policy and applied arts scholarship increasingly moves beyond limited economic arguments for the arts, there has been a growing interest in the civic value of the arts (Banks 2022; Gross and Wilson 2018; O'Connor 2024). In questioning what the future of theatre may be – alongside acknowledging the urgent need for a stronger, participatory democratic culture – this paper seeks to contribute practical insights into the potential of food-based performance in creating opportunities for people to gather as citizens, and the role nostalgia may play in these spaces.

In this paper I will argue that food-based performance can evoke nostalgia for other social worlds and that these yearnings can be useful in future-building, and that this quality is part of its potential civic role. I will begin with a description of the *Potlucks Series,* before making the case for food-based performance as a site of political discourse and future building, particularly in relation to its ability to hold strong emotion. This sets the scene for the next section of the paper, which will focus on role of nostalgia within future-building and political discourse, as well as its presence within food-based performance and the *Potluck Series* in particular.

I have aimed to make Hannah Arendt's table more literal in the *Potluck Series* (2021). At these events everyone who attends suggests an ingredient to 'add to the pot' in advance – these suggestions are then combined into a three-course meal. This method harks back to an older tradition of potlucks in which everyone would bring along an ingredient 'for the pot'. Each of the potlucks in the series has been themed; sometimes these themes are based on ideas I am working on in other projects and research, at other times it is decided through conversations with collaborators. Past themes have included utopia, community building, methods, lost lands, and rest and slowness (this was created in collaboration with artist Jennie Moran). The themes of the potluck influenced who was invited along to meals, who spoke and the public who decided to come were those with an interest in the theme. In this way, the themes set a tone for the events and influenced the content. However, nostalgic reflections were present at each of the events, regardless of theme, as this mood was often linked to food and the act of collective eating. The specific format varied to each event, although generally, as people arrive, they are invited to wash their hands and help with the meal – to knead dough, make a salad, prepare summer rolls. Alongside suggesting ingredients, some guests also bring 'toasts' – small interventions and interruptions which punctuate the event. So far, we have had poems, theoretical speeches from economists, games, presentations of projects, performances, folk tales, drag performances, and honey tastings.

This work has been an exploration in how I might shift the emphasis away from myself as the 'host' or the 'artist' and offer space to others to take over the event in different ways. The purpose here is political – for the table to be in common, to build an Arendtian table for the night, it cannot be owned by one person or group. The use of food as a material for democratising spaces has a long history within contemporary performance. For example, in Suzanne Lacy's *The International Dinner Party* (1979), Lacy (along with her collaborators) organised thousands of women to have simultaneous dinner parties around the world. The women sent in telegrams and photos describing it to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (which Lacy then pinned across an enormous map). This work was part of her 'interest in meals as vehicles for large-scale organising through art, and in the interaction between people as a form of aesthetic gesture' (interview in Smith 2013, 78). Or Theaster Gates's piece *Soul Pavilion* (2011), which took the form of a series of Sunday dinners, with guests selected from across Chicago via a public lottery. Within these performances, the food and dinnerware were a key material and set piece, with 'black sacrament' (chitlins) served on specially designed ceramics. Music, poetry, sermons, and performances punctuated the evening. 'At each of these occasions, Gates used the history of soul and the rituals of hospitality to bring people together across lines of culture and class' (Smith 2013, 188).[1]

The universality of gathering over a shared meal makes it a useful tool in terms of bringing strangers together for political discourse. Anger and disagreement are present within these spaces, as they must be within any pluralist space. As Audre Lorde argues 'anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification' (Lorde 1984, 127). It is an integral energiser and 'loaded with information' (127).

In *Slow Cooking Live* (de Sousa 2024) a food-based performance event at Theatre in the Mill in Bradford (UK), artists Selina Thompson, Toni Dee Paul, and Xavier de Sousa discussed charged and fractious meals they had hosted in the past – laughing at the possibility of 'angry eating'. Whilst they acknowledged that anger may well be present in a charged conversation over a meal, the act of sharing food, the enjoyment of being satiated and the slowed pace of conversation necessitated by the physical act of eating, softens the edges of conflict, whilst allowing those conflicts to occur.

In a recent Potluck I presented in Edinburgh a White woman spoke of her desire to create diverse political spaces which 'included Tories'. A Black woman at the table challenged her, pointing out that she wouldn't necessarily feel safe in those spaces; that she often felt unsafe in the majority White environments she found herself because there was an unpredictability which put her on edge. The White woman tried to correct herself, interrupting the Black woman. The Black woman repeated her point with a rebuke for the interruption. There was tension, embarrassment and irritation within this exchange, but they continued their meal together and tension faded as dessert appeared. Whilst there may be lingering irritations and embarrassments for these audience members, they were able to continue their conversation, finding laughter and humour together at other points in the meal. This example demonstrates that whilst anger and disagreement can be present, and are often necessary within political exchanges, it does not necessarily mean the total breakdown of communication. As Lorde argues above, the feeling of anger itself is not antithetical to collective future-building, it is how the anger is held and interpreted which is important, and arguably, the softening impact of sharing food can aid those exchanges.

In the *Potluck Series* (2021), the use of food within the performance serves several functions. Firstly, the meal offers a kind of dramaturgical scaffolding – with the rituals and pacing of the meal structuring the performance. Secondly, it is part of the entertainment. Sometimes this is expressed as a big aesthetic moment (as in the 'soup reveal' described in the opening of this paper). At other times this is simply through the anticipation of what the next course will be. And finally (and arguably most importantly to this civic value of this practice) it shifts the dynamics of the space. We must relate to our neighbours at this table because we want to get at the salt, we may well pour our neighbour water when we pour our own. The tableware and the table is 'what connects us' (Arendt 2018, 52). It offers an easy conviviality as we remember and embody the other times we have gathered at long tables for food – which brings us to the nostalgic power of these events.

The nostalgia and memories associated with food make it a rich material for performance and the *Potluck Series* (2021) was conceived from my own memories of food. Potlucks were a big part of my rural Canadian childhood, which gives me a strong nostalgic pull towards tables loaded with plates of food shared with a room of friends and strangers. This longing for my own imagined past was my aesthetic starting point as an artist, but this project also explores collective ownership and future-building with others.

These two starting points: one rose-tinted memories of childhood and another focussed on possible futures are not as opposite as they may seem. Like utopia, nostalgia is fundamentally a yearning for a world other than our current reality; for something which has never and cannot really exist, but which we, nonetheless, reach for. Echoing the definition of utopia as 'no place', Svetlana Boym (2007) defines nostalgia as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy'. Obviously, unlike utopia, nostalgia yearns for the past, rather than the future. Yet nostalgia can be used to vision how the future could be. Perhaps the clearest example of this is how nostalgia has been weaponised by right-wing, nationalist political campaigns, and particularly populist political movements across the world in their visions for the future (van Prooijen et al. 2022). 'Make America Great *Again*', 'Let's take *back* control' – these slogans suggest that there was some moment in the past which was better than what we have today, and we if we could return to that everything would be better. The danger is, that alongside a sense of nostalgic comfort, these visions and slogans often dog whistle racism, sexism, colonialism, and nationalism. Indeed, there are studies linking sentimental longing for the past and anti-immigrant views (Smeekes et al. 2018).

The appeal of this combination can be understood when we understand nostalgia as a response to fear. Sedikides, Wildschut, and Baden (2004) argue that a key part of nostalgia's purpose is to reinforce or sustain a sense of meaning through 'identification with a specific cultural worldview'. That our 'alienation', 'loneliness' and 'existential fears' might be alleviated through nostalgic relationships with rituals and cultural tradition (207). We seek comfort in an imagined past, in which we can connect to our personal identities with cultural experiences. It is a search for belonging and meaning in a hyper-mobile world which is changing very quickly – in which 'home is no longer necessarily where the hearth is' (Davis 1979, 6). Nostalgia can be grounding and comforting in a world which is rapidly changing, and in the face of uncertain, complex, frightening futures.

In contrast, a foundational concept in Arendt's understanding of the human condition and of humans as fundamentally political beings (in that we are social beings), is pluralism ([1958] 2018). We will all see the table differently when we come to it based on our assumptions, experiences and feelings. 'While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition of all political life' (7). It is important to note that Hannah Arendt's democratic theory was based in opposition to totalitarianism and nationalism. Her philosophy was written from her positionality as a refugee from Germany in the 1930s. With this context in mind, how pluralism and complexity is held is both the danger and opportunity of politics, and how we respond to our inherent pluralism is the difference between totalitarianism and democracy.

We bring differing perspectives: our homesickness, our fear of the future, our discontent, and our yearning for alternatives to Hannah Arendt's table. Bringing these feelings with us into the public realm, drawing them out even within food-based performances, with warm bowls of soup, long tables, and the smell of onions frying[2], can be a powerful starting point for conversations about the future and how we want to live. The sureness of 'I was' or 'we were' is a necessary component of 'I am' or 'we are' (Davis 1979, 30), which in turn creates a powerful foundation for 'we could be'.

Sara Ahmed argues that it is not our feelings themselves which are the source of racist or misogynistic views, but our interpretation of them. Our feelings of nostalgia, of anger and fear, of hope and joy are what moves us, and

> how we are moved involves interpretations of feelings, not only in the sense that we interpret what we feel, but also in that what we feel might be dependent on past interpretations that come before us. (Ahmed 2014, 171)

In acknowledging this, can we seek out new interpretations of our nostalgic feelings, which prioritise care and joy rather than xenophobia and racism? Can we reclaim our nostalgia for the past as yearnings for greater social equity and sense of community, rather than yearnings for patriarchy and rigid class structures? Can nostalgia be a tool within democratic movements, rather than totalitarian and nationalist ones?

In the *Potluck Series* there are numerous examples of the food or atmosphere of the events sending the audiences into their own reminiscences of past gatherings over food. In May 2022, once we had all eaten, spent our evening speaking with strangers, and listening to stories, the guests spontaneously pulled their chairs away from their separate tables to gather in the middle of the room. The conversation turned to past communal meals in our lives. One guest remembered her 'migrant Christmas dinner' when many expats gathered, bringing their own family's unique personal traditions together whilst far from home. This memory captured a kind of Arendtian pluralism, with each guest bringing their own idea of Christmas dinner to the communal table. The story was nostalgic and joyful, and subtly signalled values and approaches of how we might live well amongst each other by welcoming each other's different cultures to sit alongside our own.

Despite the clear affective power of nostalgia, theatre and art theorists have more readily turned to utopia in their explorations of the political role of theatre in future building (Busby 2022; Dolan 2005). As I argue above, utopia and nostalgia are not opposites – they can even be complementary theories. Both fundamentally yearn for alternatives to the present. The risk within utopian practices can be that we drift too far into the future and risk creating 'flaccid nirvanas' (Cunningham, Rubin, and Woods 2025), which can feel disconnected to our lived experiences or daily lives. Whilst projecting ourselves forwards into imagined futures may feel useful for some, remembering our personal or collective memories be feel more possible and tangible for others. As we have seen in populist rhetoric, the sense that 'it was better' might help to ground a belief that 'it could be better again'. Depending on how we hold and use these feelings, this can also be used for progressive social action.

For example, in September 2024 I hosted a potluck at the Earth Rising festival at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin), themed around 'lost lands' – lands which we have known in our lives which have changed irrevocably. At the event we had a honey tasting with artist and apiarist Antony Freeman O'Brien. He grew up in the Liberties of Dublin and told us about his memories of a derelict rooftop he could see from his childhood bedroom. As the roof decayed, flowers, grass and shrubs took over. He linked this memory to his work now, keeping urban bees on the rooftops of buildings across the city and teaching local people about beekeeping. In his retelling, his nostalgic memories for this unintended urban green space offered a touchstone for his current ambitions for creating a kinder, more sustainable city for humans, flora and fauna.

Whilst nostalgia may come with baggage, it can be an important and effective part of building collective visions for the future. The experience of nostalgia is both intensely personal – reminding us of moments or feelings within our own histories, as well as collective. Particularly in moments of sudden social change (e.g. wars, pandemics), we cling to 'what we were' to assure ourselves of 'what we are' (Davis 1979), and indeed, what we 'could be'. How we interpret 'what we were' is where the political power of nostalgia sits. As the 'past is never something simply there just waiting to be discovered' (115). How we define it, how we feel it, and how we use it to shape our futures is a crucial part of our work in the public sphere, as well as our work as theatre-makers and storytellers.

Overall, in considering the future of theatre and its potential civic role, particularly in fostering a culture of democracy, food-based performance has a unique contribution to make. Gathering amongst strangers, at Arendt's metaphorical (and in this case literal) table, to exchange ideas on how we want to live and what future we will leave for those who come later are emotionally charged spaces. Where there is plurality there is disagreement and yet plurality is an essential component of democracy – 'the attempt to do away with this plurality is tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself' (Arendt 2018, 220). However, food-based performances can soften the edges of our anger, allowing conviviality and continued discourse within disagreement. Disagreements will arise, yet our irritations and embarrassments can fade over a shared slice of pie and a need to pass the cream.

As we have seen, regardless of whether we fear or revere the power of nostalgia, it is undeniably present within our political discourse and within food-based performance. Whilst it has been used to divide us within populist politics, it can also be used to unify and ground utopian visions for the future. How we interpret and use our yearnings for the past is where the danger and opportunities of nostalgia lie, such as remembering the beautiful, derelict rooftop next door as a source of inspiration for future green cities, rather than an eyesore reinforcing a sense of poverty and decay. Or remembering Christmas far from home as a moment of celebration of a diversity of traditions, rather than a time of loneliness or disconnection.

At the *Potlucks Series,* as at Arendt's table, we each bring different perspectives, nostalgic yearnings, convictions and ingredients with us – yet we find commonality and conviviality at these tables. Food-based performances like these have a unique contribution to make in terms of holding and softening our disagreements and reframing our nostalgic impulses towards progressive social futures. Opportunities to gather in this way are fundamental to creating the culture of democracy we need for a liveable future.

Notes

1. Food and collective meals are not accessible for all. For some, these events may evoke painful memories and experiences. The problematisation of the use of food within community-building is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to note that food and collective meals, for some, can be wrapped in difficult experiences of harmful gender norms, mental health problems, and childhood / family trauma.
2. There are strong connections between food and nostalgia. Researchers have suggested multiple reasons for this. Some argue that the link between food and memory is key here – with consumption of food addressing all five senses (and in particular smell), it leaves a lasting mark (Hirsch 1992). Others reference the ritualistic and collective nature of many of our

food experiences – marking significant, ritualised and recurring occasions (Vignolles and Pichon 2014, 229).

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