"A CALCULATED WITHDRAWAL": POSTMODERN AMERICAN NOVELISTS, THEIR POLITICS, AND THE COLD WAR

AN ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE TWENTIETH DAY OF JULY 2016

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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AN ABSTRACT

This dissertation identifies and analyzes the politics of three postmodern authors (Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo) by focusing mainly on their novels that are set during the Cold War. I argue that these authors’ writings, which are often read as apolitical or as cultural critiques, engage with historical and political Cold War issues, like totalitarianism, liberal anticommunism, the threat of nuclear apocalypse, and the expanded role of government agencies. Moreover, I show that although these authors cover similar political topics and often work in similar genres, like the spy thriller, their political orientations vary. What unites their disparate political views is that all three authors endorse individual liberty during the Cold War, and all provide narratives in which their protagonists withdraw from society. The overall implication, then, is that the individual can no longer affect political outcomes in an age of extreme ideologies, overwhelming technology, and seemingly all-powerful governmental agencies.

My first chapter examines the politics of Vladimir Nabokov, and by using theorists, like Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, I argue that Nabokov’s postmodern novels (Bend Sinister, Pnin, and Pale Fire) explore the impact of trauma and reveal the author to be a staunch liberal anticommunist. My second chapter deals with the politics of Thomas Pynchon, and by employing theorists like Fredric Jameson, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault, I argue that Pynchon’s anarchistic leanings in V. and The Crying of Lot 49 give way to a clearer anarchist outlook in “A Journey into the Mind of Watts”—that is, until Gravity’s Rainbow reflects his political despair. My third chapter examines Don DeLillo’s early novels (Americana, End Zone, Players, Running Dog) as well as his more ambitious historical works (The Names, Libra, Mao II, and Underworld), and by using theorists like Linda Hutcheon, Foucault, and Guy Debord, I
argue that DeLillo’s politics reflect a type of left-leaning libertarianism. Ultimately, this dissertation serves as a corrective not only to these authors’ statements about the supposed apolitical nature of their work, but it also identifies their political philosophies, which are placed within the larger historical context of the Cold War.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the people who assisted me while I was working on this dissertation project.

First of all, I would to express my appreciation to my dissertation committee, including my adviser Professor Joel Dinerstein, as well as my committee members, Professor Molly Travis and Professor Supriya Nair, who offered warm support and valuable assistance.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Richard and Marilyn Markell, for their concerns and financial support, and I would like to express my profound gratitude to my wife, Aleksandra Hajduczek, who helped me throughout this process with her encouragement, her patience, and her thoughts. I will always be indebted to her and her willingness to not only serve as a soundboard to my ideas but also to act as a first reader to my numerous drafts.
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Introduction

This dissertation is about the politics of three American post-WWII novelists, and it examines them in regards to postmodernism and the Cold War. While most of us possess a general idea of what these broad terms include, like radical skepticism and proxy wars around the globe, there has never been a clear point of origin for either the cultural field or the historical period nor is there a general consensus about when exactly they ended. Still, in my estimation, both periods were roughly coterminous, encompassing the span between the end of WWII and the start of globalization, and this is a fairly conventional view. By comparison, in his essay “What Was Postmodernism? The Arts in and after the Cold War” (1995), the English scholar and novelist Malcolm Bradbury maintains that the two were strongly interconnected, whereas the postmodern theorist Brian McHale posits that “future cultural historians” will likely “identify late twentieth-century culture as ‘postmodern’”—that is, if they do not refer to it first as “Cold War culture” (Cambridge 1).

However, such an equation would be too broad, as not every postmodern text is indicative of the Cold War nor is every Cold War artifact an example of postmodernism. The two are not interchangeable, but they do overlap, although this common ground is primarily seen in postmodern historical novels written by British and American authors.¹ As a consequence, one of my initial aims is to demonstrate how this historical period influenced or shaped the political views of American authors, like Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo. Moreover, this study will prove that the Cold War
plays a crucial role in these authors’ postmodern novels, and my hope is to refute finally the old canard that postmodern works are simply metafictional and thus lack any interest in politics or history. As a matter of fact, the range of novels I examine, from Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* (1947) to DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), practically reflects the near fifty-year duration of this conflict.²

To clarify, though, I locate the Cold War as officially ending in 1991, with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and unofficially commencing in 1945, when the tensions between the Allies emerged and increased following Yalta.³ This was the year, after all, when the battle over Western democracy and Soviet communism came into immediate focus, as Stalin reneged on his promise of “free elections” in Eastern Europe, and this was the year that nuclear weapons set the parameters for future hostilities, when Truman revealed the U.S.’s possession of the atomic bomb at Potsdam. Aside from these geopolitical events, the term “cold war” first appeared in print in 1945, and its author, George Orwell, would write one of the central texts of this period.⁴

Actually, although Nabokov’s dystopian novel *Bend Sinister* preceded *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Orwell’s vision of the likely political conditions in the Cold War era has proven to be both emblematic and influential, especially to later American postmodern writers. E.L. Doctorow and Pynchon, for example, have both written essays on it, and there are numerous references to the novel in DeLillo’s *Libra*, and what appears to have struck them all is Orwell’s concept that the primary conflict during the Cold War will not be one among nations. Instead, in contrast to a modern political novel, which pits the proletariat against a factory owner or an intellectual versus the bourgeoisie, Orwell’s work focuses on the power of the state, “of governments against individuals”
To be specific, Orwell’s emphasis on “totalitarianism,” surveillance and the secret police, as well as the state’s control “of history and language,” has set the template for many postmodern Cold War novels, which often transplant his social vision into less fanciful genres (Doctorow 60). More importantly, like Orwell’s work, these novels express a sense of “individual helplessness,” a predicament that for some postmodern authors, like Pynchon, conveys the experience of life during the Cold War (Doctorow 60).

And yet, two major historical factors that contributed to this outlook are subjects that Orwell’s novel avoids. After all, numerous authors writing after WWII were not just concerned about the encroaching power of the state; they were also preoccupied with the threat of nuclear holocaust as well as what occurred during the Holocaust. William Faulkner, in his 1950 Nobel prize speech, wondered how authors would address the looming nuclear conflict, and Norman Mailer, in his essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” (1958), speculated about “the psychic havoc” produced by “the concentration camps and the atom bomb” (209). For Mailer, these recent horrors in Western civilization led to existential and artistic crises that coalesced to form a new consciousness, one that feared that life and death would be “causeless,” that time would be “deprived of cause and effect,” and that individual “courage,” if not individuality, would be lost (209). In other words, without meaning to, Mailer provides an early description of postmodernism, which he sees as stemming from traumatic events that occurred or became known in 1945, the year that signaled the start of the Cold War.

Given that multiple events gave rise to postmodernism and its historical framework, so too will multiple theories about postmodernism serve as the basis for how
I read the aforementioned authors’ politics and their Cold War texts. One theory that buttresses my argument is Jean-François Lyotard’s ideas about the death of grand narratives, which helps to explain these authors’ incredulity towards sweeping beliefs regarding the power of art, the ends of history, and the authority of science. Indeed, all of the postmodern novels I examine express a widespread disbelief in Enlightenment rationality as well as liberal notions about progress. For example, after witnessing the October Revolution, Nabokov doubted that reason—and especially “scientific socialism”—led to a better world. Additionally, after learning about the Holocaust, which claimed his brother, he lost his modernist faith in the efficacy of art, which his postmodern novels demonstrate. Similarly, in a manner that echoes Nabokov’s, Pynchon’s novels also reject deterministic theories, like Marxism, although Pynchon mainly indicts the overreach that comes from our fascination with technology as well as the rationalizing impulse that Weber identifies with bureaucracy. Finally, DeLillo, not unlike Pynchon, bases his rejection of Western rationality more specifically on the fallout from the U.S.’s Cold War technology and the actions of its covert agencies.

With all this rejection, then, the question arises as to what these postmodern authors endorse, especially since their ironic works make it difficult to pin them down to any one position. Yet, according to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism is by its nature “paradoxical,” and it “never offers answers that are anything but provisional” (Poetics xi). In other words, postmodern works are less interested in issuing political directives than they are at “generating discourses,” which they accomplish by questioning dominant narratives and problematizing humanist notions of the self (xi). Hutcheon and her theories prove particularly useful to me because she argues that postmodernism, rather
than being ahistorical, tends to interrogate official historical narratives, and it does so primarily through the novel, or what she calls “historiographic metafiction.” Moreover, as stated, postmodernism tends to challenge old, modernist assumptions regarding individual or artistic autonomy. That is to say, postmodern authors realize they can no longer labor under the illusion that their art transcends historical context nor can they, as artist figures, reach an Archimedean point by which they are fully outside the culture or history they critique. If anything, they are complicit by offering yet another construct, or narrative, by which we might understand the world (40). Therefore, for Hutcheon, the aim of postmodernism is not to impose a totalizing vision but to provoke skepticism about “its own and others’ signifying practices” (214).

Indeed, this combination of skepticism and complicity extends beyond historical narratives to encompass the cultural codes found in popular genres. As Andreas Huyssen argues, in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (1986), postmodern authors, unlike their high modernist forerunners, have been more willing to engage with mass cultural forms. While Huyssen locates this change in sensibility and approach in the 1960s, when essays by Leslie Fielder and Susan Sontag attacked the elitism of institutionalized modernism, Huyssen fails to notice that postmodern authors like Nabokov were already using popular genres as springboards to create their own hybrid texts in the late 1940s and 1950s (194). Consequently, all of the postmodern novels I investigate here adopt or incorporate some form of popular genre, from the dystopian to the detective novel to the political or spy thriller, perhaps the most popular genre of the Cold War period.
However, unlike Fredric Jameson, who interprets postmodernism’s embrace of diverse styles as leading to uncritical recycling or indiscriminate pastiche, I tend to agree with Hutcheon, that the relationship that postmodernism has “with contemporary mass culture is not just one of implication; it is also one of critique” (43). For instance, rather than imitate the familiar structures or positivistic plots that readers usually expect from popular genres, these authors usually subvert them, most notably in terms of heroic individual achievement and narrative closure. Moreover, as Brian McHale argues in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), postmodern authors tend to push epistemological issues regarding the limits of knowledge into ontological ones regarding the nature of reality (19). As a character in *Underworld* wonders, “Didn’t life take an unreal turn at some point?” (73). For these postmodern novelists, the answer lies with the Cold War. As a result, in varying degrees, their Cold War novels challenge cultural and historical narratives by exploring either alternate histories or speculating about alternate worlds—all of which suggests that, for them, the reality of the Cold War, with its overwhelming technology and its overbearing politics, was something from which to escape or withdraw.

II.

As the Cold War came to a close, the initial scholarship regarding the connections between this conflict, its politics, and American postwar literature had very little to say about postmodernism. For instance, Thomas H. Schaub’s *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991) examines the postwar writings of modernists, like Mailer, Ralph Ellison, and Flannery O’Conner, and Schaub argues that their works reveal the influence of cultural rhetoric that originated from liberal anticommunists. To be specific, in the 1940s and 1950s, the *Partisan Review* intellectuals as well as policy thinkers, like Arthur
Schlesinger, cultivated a discourse that reinvigorated liberalism, which, after WWII, seemed naïve and unrealistic. This new discourse, which Schaub calls “revisionist liberalism,” stressed mankind’s limitations and devalued utopian ideals (13). Moreover, it was propagated as a clear contrast to the totalitarian mindset best represented by Stalinism. Thus, these anti-Stalinist liberal intellectuals contributed to the institutionalization and politicization of European modernism, a movement whose individualistic ethos and complex aesthetics were employed during the Cold War to tout the West’s cultural superiority against Soviet culture and/or “mass culture.”

Schaub’s study is valuable to my argument because it establishes the consensus politics and cultural background in the U.S. that most obviously influenced the Cold War novels of Vladimir Nabokov, whom Schaub never mentions. What’s more, these postwar ideas about politics and culture had an indirect but unmistakable effect on later postmodern writers, like Pynchon and DeLillo. For instance, their novels not only reveal their esteem for complexity and concern for the individual, but they also echo the liberal anticommunists’ denunciation of ideologies and collectivism, to the point that any group (or, in Pynchon’s case, group thinking) is characterized as fascist or totalitarian. Finally, Schaub intriguingly points out that the “politics of paralysis” which characterized the postwar era has persisted in American postmodernism, which is “perhaps more discontented with” liberalism than its modernist predecessors, and this premise is one that I investigate fully here (190-91).

Whereas Schaub argues that postmodernism’s origins and political views can be traced back, in part, to the immediate postwar period, when the Cold War was starting, other scholars maintain that the cultural phenomenon emerged during the 1960s, after the
height of the Cold War. In *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (1995), Alan Nadel argues that the discourse that we have come to associate with “postmodernism” resulted from a series of events in the mid-1960s, which exposed and dismantled the contradictory logic behind the U.S.’s containment narrative (3). For Nadel, certain events, like the Bay of Pigs or the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, revealed “that centered meaning and authority was a myth” and that “the fissure between event and history is broached by narrative” (3).

Although Nadel is accurate in his characterization of postmodernism and in his points about how prevalent its ideas became in the 1960s, his poststructuralist approach focuses almost exclusively on Cold War rhetoric. Furthermore, while he covers a wide sample of postwar cultural texts, including Hollywood films, Nadel never provides an in-depth examination of a major postmodern novelist, and he only analyzes one significant postmodern novel: *Catch-22*. In fact, as shown with Heller’s text, Nadel tends to employ cultural texts to shed light on historical events rather than the other way around. Thus, for my purposes, his study is mainly useful in its summation of the domestic aspect of the containment narrative, which the postmodern authors that I examine, like Pynchon and DeLillo, criticize in works like *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*.

While Nadel argues that postmodernism arose after the height of the Cold War, from 1946-1964, M. Keith Booker argues, as I do, that it began in the immediate postwar era. However, in *The Post-Utopian Imagination: American Culture in the Long 1950s* (2002), Booker works from Jameson’s totalizing description of postmodernism as the product of an economic metanarrative—that is, postmodernism merely reflects “the cultural logic” of late capitalism. For instance, according to Jameson, postmodernist
culture, with all of its fragmentation, fails to provide “coherent historical narratives” that point beyond or offer alternatives to capitalism (Booker 5). Therefore, for Booker, one clear manifestation of this “crisis in historicity” can be seen in the U.S.’s postwar novels, which lack “utopian energy” (5). What he means by this phrase is that they fail to provide workable alternatives to then-existing economic and political systems, a failure he connects to the “repressive climate of the Cold War,” which, at least in the West, linked any hypothetical substitute to the status quo with communism (2).

Of all the critical studies surveyed here, Booker’s is the most similar to my own, in that he notices a strain of pessimism or futility that runs throughout American postwar novels, which he connects to postmodernism and the Cold War. However, while he links this dystopian impulse to postmodernist culture’s inability to conceive any alternatives to capitalism, I argue that it is related to doubts, arising from the crises of 1945, as to whether an individual can change or even survive against larger political forces, like the state, its technology, or its attending bureaucracies. In fact, as Jameson himself explains, “the term late capitalism originated with the Frankfurt School,” whose members used it as a synonym for “bureaucratic control” and the “interpenetration of government and big business” (xviii). Additionally, in the end, Booker’s Marxist approach causes him to fall into the same kind of binary mindset that characterized the Cold War. In other words, for him, the only alternative to capitalism is socialism, and so he pays virtually no attention to other leftist political philosophies, which, even within the time frame he cites, can be found in postmodern novels, like Pynchon’s V. (1963), with its anarchist characters.

Finally, in a manner reminiscent of Nadel’s book about containment and postmodernism, Steve Belletto’s No Chance, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War
American Narratives (2012) argues that the rhetoric of chance was mobilized during the Cold War, mainly to contrast “the naturalness of American democratic freedom” with Marxist determinism or “Soviet-style totalitarianism” (14-5). According to Belletto, this rhetoric, however, was also employed by postmodern writers to criticize both “totalitarian political systems and Cold War norms” (32). Indeed, the concept of chance not only suited the postmodern sensibility, but it was thematized in postmodern narratives, like V. and Pale Fire, which mocked or tested the old novelistic practice of design or plotting (15).

For the most part, Belletto’s work is applicable to my argument, in that the author notices how postmodern writers, like Nabokov and Pynchon, question both Marxist ideology as well as the U.S.’s Cold War reverence for applied science and technology. Thus, his reading of Pynchon’s V. is useful in this regard, as Belletto argues that Pynchon equates Western scientific norms with totalitarianism. However, given his work’s emphasis on chance, Belletto, for some reason, never links Pynchon’s themes to the author’s own anarchist politics. In regards to Nabokov, Belletto’s scholarship also proves valuable to my reading of Pale Fire, primarily because he was the first scholar to note how Kinbote’s Zembla related to the nuclear strikes at Nova Zembla. Ultimately, though, while Belletto’s arguments about chance are convincing in terms of how it highlights the obvious deterministic flaws behind the Soviet worldview, his contention that Americans embraced chance and “accident” seems overstated. After all, as he admits, for most Americans during the Cold War these very words often conjured up fears regarding a “possible accidental nuclear exchange” or a nuclear meltdown (45). In truth, security, in every sense of the term, was the operating concept during the Cold War, not chance.
III.

As demonstrated by the above survey, the main scholarly works that examine American postmodernism and the Cold War usually contextualize postwar cultural texts within the era’s dominant rhetoric, or they analyze them within the Cold War’s broader political trends, and, to some extent, I too will employ these methods at times. However, what is generally lacking in these studies is that they not only fail to demonstrate how engaged these postmodern texts are with Cold War political issues and historical events, but these scholars also ignore the fact that many postmodern authors possess their own unique political orientation, some of which do not always fit within the reigning paradigm of communism or anticommunism. Whereas Nabokov’s statements and novels actually prove that he safely resided within the latter camp, Pynchon’s writings reveal the author’s anarchist inclinations, and DeLillo’s novels show him to be a rather consistent left-leaning libertarian. What ultimately unites such disparate political views is that all three authors fear the power of the state, and all tend to provide narratives in which their protagonists eventually retreat or withdraw from society or public life.

Such an action is somewhat ironic, considering that a postmodern theorist like Hutcheon argues that postmodernism distinguishes itself from modernism by suggesting that “withdrawal” is not “the only possible challenge” for politically-minded artists (Politics 207). In other words, in contrast to high modernism or the avant-garde, postmodernism is not radical in its politics nor does it endorse the type of aesthetic withdrawal that is summed up by Stephen Dedalus’s motto: “silence, exile, cunning.” However, as I will demonstrate with Nabokov, the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism are not as clearly delineated as Hutcheon seems to think, and the most obvious overlap between the two can be seen in how postmodern protagonists exile or
extricate themselves from society. The difference resides over the issue that postmodern novelists do not believe that a retreat from society, or history, results in a subsequently powerful or restorative artistic vision, one that will someday alter society. Whatever their varied characteristics, from intrusive narrators, to metafictional techniques, to the use of popular genres, the one constant in all postmodern texts is a belief in the limitations of art. The change, then, is one of expectation, but this does not mean that the postmodern novelist has to remain silent about what has brought about this change.

What postmodern art does, with its artist heroes and its self-conscious narrative techniques, is implicate itself within larger cultural and historical narratives in the hopes of demystifying them, and for Hutcheon, this practice is subversive. As I will show, the first half of Hutcheon’s argument is accurate, in that, with the possible exception of Nabokov, most postmodern authors challenge the Cold War’s dominant historical and cultural narratives, and they often do so through subverting genre and narrative conventions, a familiar postmodern tactic. On the other hand, with only a few exceptions, like DeLillo’s Oswald and a few Pynchon characters, in most postmodern American novels, the protagonists withdraw from politics and public life, and this action is not always rendered as being wholly subversive. Indeed, what Hutcheon fails to notice is that, in the American context, the overall implication of many postmodern novels is that the individual can no longer affect political outcomes, and the obvious reasons for this timid worldview involve the hazards contained in the Cold War, the period in which virtually all of the texts I examine were written and set.

My first chapter will examine the political sympathies of Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian writer who immigrated to America in 1940, and whose anticommunist beliefs
helped the author establish a secure position in the U.S. during McCarthyism and America’s second Red Scare. While Nabokov’s fiction has, until recently, been considered to be largely apolitical, I will demonstrate that his postmodern American novels, including *Bend Sinister*, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire*, engage numerous Cold War issues, like totalitarianism, suspected communists in universities, as well as the Soviets’ nuclear testing and their prison camps. By analyzing these issues and comparing them to the biographical information about Nabokov, I reveal the author to be a staunch liberal anticomunist and a rather sincere Cold warrior, although perhaps this is not surprising considering the author’s personal history, which involved losing his homeland to the Bolsheviks and later his father (a liberal statesman) to an assassination attempt.

In fact, by using Dominick LaCapra’s theories about trauma and, to a lesser extent, Cathy Caruth’s and Anne Whitehead’s ideas about trauma fiction, I argue that Nabokov’s postmodern novels reveal the impact of trauma, both at the level of content and at the level of narrative structure. After all, despite their withdrawals and denials, Nabokov’s protagonists are haunted by the past, and they tend to conflate their own personal losses with historical ones. Furthermore, the narratives that describe these losses are marked by symptoms that indicate trauma, including fragmentation, crises in representation or narrativization, as well as detachment and delusions. These traumatic narratives typically involve the historical crimes of the Soviets, which helps to clarify the zeal of Nabokov’s anticommunism, a belief that was also shared by his wife and his cousin Nicolas, who worked with the CIA-backed Congress of Cultural Freedom. In fact, for a recent immigrant, Nabokov’s and his family’s politics were in sync with the dominant political philosophy of the Cold War. Yet, by the mid to late 1960s, as the
protests over Vietnam arose and the Cold War consensus collapsed, Nabokov renounced his liberalism and adopted a more bellicose brand of anticommunism. Thus, this longtime liberal ended his life as a conservative.

My second chapter will examine the politics of Thomas Pynchon, whose writing is often lumped in with the 1960s counterculture, even though Pynchon is part of the “Silent Generation” that came of age during the 1950s. (It has also often been rumored that Pynchon was a one-time student of Nabokov’s, when they were both at Cornell in the 1950s.) However, in clear opposition to Nabokov’s liberal politics and his respect for the law, Pynchon shows a sympathy and an affinity for anarchism in his novels. In fact, by pointing out Pynchon’s critiques of militarism and property ownership along with his negative portrayals of bureaucrats yearning for order, I will show that Pynchon’s initial political reticence and anarchistic leanings in V. and The Crying of Lot 49 give way to a bolder anarchistic outlook in “A Journey into the Mind of Watts”—that is, until Gravity’s Rainbow reflects his political despair after the events of the late 1960s. Furthermore, I will reveal that Pynchon’s fluctuating positions are best understood in the context of the Cold War. After all, many of Pynchon’s novels work within some of the more popular Cold War genres (the spy thriller, the apocalyptic scenario), and his political beliefs are clearly shaped by America’s Cold War history, particularly its actions in Vietnam and its build-up of nuclear weapons, which Pynchon says instilled a sense of “helplessness and fear” among the American populace.

As a result, in a manner that recalls Nabokov’s work, Pynchon’s Cold War novels incorporate Freud’s ideas about the uncanny, mainly through their engagement with conspiracies and paranoid delusions. However, rather than tying his characters’
delusions back to specific Soviet-era crimes like Nabokov, Pynchon’s postmodern narratives point to a nexus of corporate and bureaucratic forces in the West, and in this regard, his later novels recall Foucault’s theories about how disciplinary forces shape our bodies, if not always our consciousness. In fact, Pynchon’s critique of Western modernity is rather comprehensive, in that it encompasses not only imperialism and the arms race, but it also includes Cold War liberalism and the U.S.’s corporate culture, which he condemns for stifling diversity. And yet, despite these constant critiques, Pynchon’s Cold War writing—with the notable exception of his Watts essay and parts of *Lot 49*—avoids offering any type of practical opposition to those in power. What’s more, his novels follow in the postmodern tradition of having his protagonists withdraw from mainstream society, in which they feel wholly alienated.

Dealing with similar subject matter and themes as Pynchon, Don DeLillo’s postmodern novels go further in demonstrating an alienation and withdrawal from American political life during the Cold War. My third chapter, then, argues against those DeLillo scholars who read this author’s work as cultural criticism, by which they mean it fixates on the media and the influence of the image, and it never endorses specific ideologies. Instead, by concentrating on DeLillo’s early novels (*Americana, End Zone, Players*, and *Running Dog*) as well as his more ambitious historical works (*The Names, Libra, Mao II*, and *Underworld*), I argue that DeLillo’s politics reflect a kind of left-leaning libertarianism or “libertarian pessimism.” In fact, more so than Nabokov and Pynchon, DeLillo is consistent in his wide-ranging fears about the power of the state, what with its technology and clandestine and security services (the FBI and CIA)—all of which diminish the capacity of the individual. Furthermore, I reveal that DeLillo’s
historical novels are basically illustrative of Hutcheon’s ideas regarding historiographic
metafiction, and that his use of popular genres, along with his beliefs about artistic
complicity, bear out her theories about postmodernism. Finally, I argue that DeLillo’s
novels and his pessimistic politics are best understood through Foucault’s theories
regarding discipline and surveillance as well as through Guy Debord’s ideas about the
power of the media spectacle, its manifestation in different forms of bureaucratic
capitalism, and détournement.

Ultimately, as diverse as these author’s politics are, the issue around which their
politics revolves is liberalism, perhaps the most contested political philosophy during the
Cold War. As mentioned, liberalism, with its belief in rationalism and historical
progress, seemed weak at the end of WWII, when it proved to be ineffective at
anticipating or stopping various forms of totalitarianism. However, during the Cold War,
it became the dominant political force in the West, once it allied itself with
anticommunism, and the anticommunists’ main propaganda point was that, in contrast
those suffering under the Soviet system, those in the West enjoyed freedom or individual
rights. And yet, individual rights, a cornerstone of liberal thought, were also
compromised in the U.S. because of the government’s concern for national security.
Thus, in light of various threats and totalitarian actions, at home and abroad, the one
political idea that all three postmodern authors endorse is individual liberty. Therefore,
in the end, their characters’ habit of withdrawing should not be read only as an expression
of defeat. At times, it can be understood as a kind of alienation, a rejection of the
dominant cultural and political models that structured people’s lives, or, finally, it can be
interpreted as an anticipatory gesture, a means of waiting for a new world to arrive, after the old one breaks down.
Chapter One: The Nabokovs and the Cold War: Anticommunist Politics in Bend Sinister, Pnin, and Pale Fire

Vladimir Nabokov’s life and those of his loved ones were affected by the most significant political events in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1919, Nabokov’s father, the liberal jurist V.D. Nabokov, led his family into exile two years after the October Revolution. By the late 1930s, the author, his wife Véra, and their son were forced to leave both Berlin and then Paris because of the Nazis. Before the century was halfway finished, Nabokov could say that “Bolsheviks robbed him of his homeland, Russian monarchists assassinated his father [in Berlin in 1922], and Nazi Germany killed his brother in a concentration camp [in 1945]” (Nicol 626). By 1940, Nabokov and his family made their home in the United States—that is, until Nabokov retired from teaching in 1959, and spent the remainder of his life in Switzerland until his death in 1977. In sum, it was a life of early privilege, followed by narrow escapes, then increasing security, and it ended in fame in a country renowned for its political stability and neutrality.

To Nabokov scholars, this familial history is well known. But what has often been less emphasized is that Nabokov and his family resided in the United States during the height of the Cold War, the major political event of the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, there is little doubt that, as Russians in America, they were able to prosper and live in safety during the Second Red Scare in large part because of Nabokov’s and his family’s anticommmunist beliefs. Until the last few decades, Nabokov
scholars have not been especially willing to acknowledge, let alone explore, how the author’s anticommunist politics and Cold War beliefs have found their way into his fiction, most of which has always assumed to be without political import.

That such issues could be downplayed is somewhat understandable, given the author’s own comments and directives. In the years following the combined success of both *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962), Nabokov declared repeatedly in interviews his indifference towards politics, in both life and art. Typical statements plucked from these interviews, later to be collected in *Strong Opinions* (1973), reveal Nabokov’s disinterest with “political novels” as well as his lifelong aversion for “group activities in the domain of political and civic commitments” (3, 48). Such pronouncements, combined with his forewords to his translated Russian novels, which also sought to distance his fiction from politics and “the literature of social comment,” resulted in Nabokov’s reputation as a haughty aesthete (*BS* xii). In truth, it is hard to think of him otherwise when one comes across his stated reasons for writing: “For the sake of pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I’ve no general ideas to exploit” (*SO* 16). Consequently, as if in keeping with this author-endorsed image, the initial scholarship on Nabokov’s writing usually covered formal, metaphysical, or ethical issues. Rarely did it grapple with political ones.¹

As mentioned, though, a marked shift has occurred. Prior to the demise of the Soviet Union, David Rampton’s *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (1984) was one of the few works to scrutinize Nabokov’s novels in terms of the author’s political and social views. However, in the 1990s and 2000s, works by Charles Niccol, Leana Toker, along with the many contributors to *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov’s*
Prose (2002), all began to contextualize Nabokov’s fiction in terms of politics and history, although even then they placed little, if any, emphasis on the Cold War. In the last few years, though, a number of academics have examined Nabokov through this specific historical era, with scholarly work coming from Steven Belletto, Sally Bachner, and Dana Dragunoiu—all of whom have contributed to one’s understanding of how Nabokov’s novels and his politics engaged with the Cold War. Finally, in a more mainstream effort, Andrea Pitzer’s The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov (2013) links the author’s biography not only to the buried political content in his fiction, but it also contrasts his oblique involvement with world politics to that of fellow Russian Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and his familiarity with the Soviet gulags. Thus, despite Nabokov’s earlier protestations, the current scholarship has situated the author and his fiction within his times and within the political realm.

My chapter will build on these recent studies by investigating three of Nabokov’s American novels (Bend Sinister, Pnin, and Pale Fire) in terms of the Cold War and the author’s liberal anticommunism. While Nabokov himself never used the term “Cold War,” his public statements leave no doubt as to where he stood or how he understood the conflict. As he bluntly states in Strong Opinions, “[W]hat is bad for the Reds is good for me,” and he yielded no middle ground regarding “the absolute abyss yawning between the barbed-wire tangle of police states and the spacious freedom of thought we enjoy in America and Western Europe” (113). In other words, in contrast to postmodern American writers who came after him, like Pynchon and DeLillo, Nabokov viewed the Cold War in familiar, binary terms—that of a freedom-loving democracy versus a “totalitarian” state. Still, his stark opposition to Soviet communism stemmed, at least
initially, from a liberal Russian’s point of view, and when asked about his politics in 1968, he replied, “I do not have any neatly limited political views or rather that such views as I have shade off into a vague old-fashioned liberalism” (SO 113).

With this orientation in mind, this chapter will concentrate on how Nabokov’s novels engage the Cold War primarily in their focus on liberal academics, who usually find themselves struggling with either traumatic personal and political losses or with illiberal policies and tyrannical governments. In fact, in keeping with a pattern that I will identify in later postmodern Cold War novels from Pynchon and DeLillo, Nabokov’s works during this period consistently demonstrate that individuals are marginalized, if not outright crushed, by larger political forces or the power of the state. However, rather than organizing or fighting, postmodern protagonists typically withdraw, and in a similar fashion most of Nabokov’s characters tend to seek refuge in art or madness—or both—after enduring political crises. Still, despite this strategy of retreat and the tragic end in which his main characters so often find themselves, Nabokov extols his liberal heroes and, by implication, their brand of politics, which was significant to him after witnessing liberals like his own father displaced following the onset of communism in Russia.

 Appropriately, then, many of Nabokov’s academic protagonists, like Pnin and Kinbote, are political exiles, who escape to the United States and try, as Nabokov did, to educate its citizens about the inhumanity of Soviet communism. As Brian Boyd, one of his biographers, attests, “Throughout Nabokov’s life only one political issue ever excited him: the attitude those outside the country should take toward the Soviet Union” (84).

Yet, few scholars have investigated how this “political issue” recurs throughout his Cold War fiction nor have they studied how Nabokov’s anticommunism affected his rise in the
American literary scene and academia, both prior to and during the Cold War. Therefore, by examining *Bend Sinister*, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire* in conjunction with the biographical studies about him, I will argue that Nabokov’s anticommunism (a belief he also shared with his family and extended family, like his cousin Nicolas Nabokov) intensified and calcified during the Cold War, even through McCarthyism. As a matter of fact, Nabokov’s anticommunism eventually led him astray from the liberal ethos he inherited from his father, to the point that, at times, he condoned, if not almost abetted, the subversion of individual rights among his fellow academics. Not surprisingly, in his later years he aligned himself with American conservatives. Thus, despite his repeated claims of individuality, Nabokov’s American novels as well as his and his family’s political beliefs were intertwined with the dominant politics of the Cold War.

I. “‘You’re a Trotskyite, then?’: Background and Beliefs Before the Cold War

While Vladimir Nabokov’s literary talents were the primary factor in enabling his success in the United States, it should be noted that his political beliefs played a significant role at the start of his career in this country. Not long after his arrival, for instance, Nabokov’s and his extended family’s anti-communist beliefs assisted the author in securing not only an important literary contact, but they also led to an early publication and a job. At first, Nabokov knew very few people in the U.S., aside from a few émigrés, and he found himself seeking and receiving assistance from charity organizations and former Russian exiles. None, though, had helped jumpstart his literary career in America more than his cousin Nicolas Nabokov. A famous composer, who, like his cousin, fled Russia and then Berlin to settle in America in 1939, Nicolas was summering at “Cape
Cod, just across the street from Edmund Wilson,” America’s then-leading literary critic (Boyd 16).

At that time, Wilson was preparing to publish *To the Finland Station* (1940), a historical work that explored the intellectual origins of socialism and Russian communism, and from his limited research, Wilson maintained an idealization of Lenin, of which Nabokov would later try to disabuse him. Still, Wilson, a longstanding liberal, had also “become impatient with any unquestioning allegiance to Marx, let alone to Stalin” (Boyd 20). In other words, by 1940, Wilson was receptive to liberal Russians who held staunch anticommunist beliefs, and while working with Nicolas on an opera, Nicolas “recalled that cousin Vladimir needed help, and wrote to him in Vermont” (16). Thus, through his cousin’s efforts, Nabokov was put into contact with Wilson, and as Boyd states, prior to reading any of Nabokov’s fiction, Wilson had placed “his hard-won knowledge of the literary marketplace at Nabokov’s disposal” (19). As to why an American critic would provide unpaid assistance to a little known Russian writer in the West, Simon Karlinsky explains that, culturally and biographically, the two had much in common, including upper class backgrounds and shared tastes in literature (2). Yet, during this period of their lives, the main issue that led to their emerging friendship was that they now held a similar political orientation, and as Karlinsky states, it was “fortunate that Nabokov and Wilson met when they did, in 1940” (2-3).³

To argue that Nabokov’s liberal anticommunism eventually aligned with the dominant forces in the U.S. does not mean that he came to these two beliefs with the same shared history as other American liberals, like Wilson. In *American Fiction and the Cold War*, Thomas H. Schaub argues that prior to this conflict, most liberals had
undergone a period “of disillusionment—of betrayal” with Soviet Communism after the Moscow show trials and the Stalin-Hitler pact of 1939 (4). Subsequently, left-leaning intellectuals, like Wilson and the Partisan Review crowd, as well as policy thinkers, like George Kennan and Arthur Schlesinger, rejected utopian notions about “progress” as naïve, and they cultivated a “realistic” outlook that emphasized mankind’s limitations and devalued ideology (12-13). Schaub refers to this shift in thinking as “revisionist liberalism,” which he believes led to a more conservative worldview in the discourse of the 1940s and ‘50s, which, in turn, found its way into postwar American literature (24).

Thus, Schaub presents an interpretative community that, in essence, wanted Americans to comprehend the world in terms of its own modernist aesthetics, which is to say that rather than viewing society in terms of class or behavior in terms of determinism, the post-war liberals (along with the more conservative New Critics) encouraged Americans to interpret events as they would literature. To be specific, they wanted them to embrace “complexity,” albeit in terms of psychology and culture since Marxism was now suspect, and they encouraged them to grapple with human motives, instead of history. As the Cold War began, then, a new version of liberalism and its attending modernist aesthetics were being promoted to battle socialist realism and its sponsor, the Soviet Union.

By contrast, by the time he arrived in the United States, Nabokov had no such need to revise his conceptions about either liberalism or Soviet communism, mainly because he already understood them as being fundamentally opposed based on his experiences in modern Russia. In 1917, when the budding author came of age at eighteen, the Russian empire was coming apart, and in his autobiography Speak, Memory (1966), he recalls how during this time he saw his first dead body, a protestor shot by
Russian officers (89). In February of that same year, though, a demoralized military threw in with the protestors and strikers, and the resulting riots in Petrograd led to the czar’s abdication and the creation of a Provisional Government, in which Nabokov’s father served as Executive Secretary (SM 176). According to Dragunoiu, in her work *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (2011), it was “men like [Nabokov’s] father,” along with other members in his Constitutional Democratic Party, “who dreamed of turning Russia into a liberal rule-of-law state,” one modeled on the type established in Western Europe (87). Contrary to the whims of despotic rule, then, V. D. Nabokov and “his closest liberal allies” hoped to institute a government in which certain individual freedoms and liberties would be protected by a constitution and the law (11). V.D. Nabokov’s son would later state that such a government was his ideal, but in the dual power arrangement in which it found itself, Russia’s democratic republic existed for less than a year, and individual liberties never took hold.6

The reason, of course, is that by October the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government and then went about arresting rival political figures and instituting party rule. Subsequently, as mentioned, Nabokov’s father along with various anti-Bolshevik forces, like the White Russians, fled into exile, where their combined efforts ended in failure, as in the Russian Civil War, and these actions were later, in Nabokov’s opinion, distorted by “astute communist propaganda” (*LORL* 3). Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* (1932), for example, covers the February Revolution and mentions V. D. Nabokov, whom Trotsky portrays as a noble anachronism (“almost symbolic in his self-satisfied correctness and dry egotism”), and the derision is palpable when he sums up V. D. Nabokov’s fate and legacy: “In his Berlin exile where he was finally killed by a stray
bullet of a White Guard, he left memoirs of the Provisional Government which are not without interest. Let us place that to his credit” (192).  

Credit or even recognition, though, is exactly what Nabokov believed was lacking in regards to his father’s and the liberal intelligentsia’s contributions to Russia. In the West, on more than one occasion, when Nabokov became involved with the issue of Russian politics and his relations to it, he realized that these liberals’ history was basically unknown. In his introduction to the reissue of *Glory*, for example, Nabokov recounts how, in New York in 1940, he informed “an especially limited left-wing writer” that he was “neither for the Soviets nor for any Tsar,” a position that incited that writer to ask: “‘You’re a Trotskyite, then?’” (xxii). For Nabokov, this type of response confirmed old suspicions: that “American intellectuals,” like the British ones he encountered attending Trinity College, Cambridge, were influenced “by Bolshevist propaganda into utterly disregarding the vigorous existence of liberal thought among Russian expatriates” (xii). As a consequence, whether in his lectures, his letters, or in his novels, Nabokov would trumpet the obscure history of these liberals, and he would brand “Bolshevism” as “an especially brutal and thorough form of barbaric oppression,” one that was “not at all the attractively new revolutionary experiment that so many foreign observers took it to be” (*SM* 255). Thus, rather than remaining the artist who habitually avoided “the political fray,” Nabokov was more than eager to engage if it involved Westerners’ misperceptions about Soviet communism or the history of modern Russia, which he viewed as an outright tragedy (Pitzer 7). 

Indeed, the Bolshevik revolution along with the wrenching loss of his father served not only in establishing Nabokov’s liberal anticommunist politics, but they also
functioned as the “founding traumas” in his life. According to Dominick LaCapra, these traumas, which are usually formed from “extremely destructive or disorienting events,” oddly enough, “become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group” (23). Such a process clearly holds true for Nabokov, whose politics never evolved after the historical event, as he himself revealed: “[S]ince my youth at the age of 19 my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock” (SO 34). Furthermore, these political views only solidified after his father’s assassination, and out of filial tribute, he would claim allegiance to V.D. Nabokov’s principles, including the rule of law as well as individual and minority rights. “My father was an old-fashioned liberal,” he told one interviewer, “and I do not mind being labeled an old-fashioned liberal too” (SO 96). Fittingly, as I will show, in much of his fiction Nabokov privileges the point of view of cultural and liberal elites, who, like himself, harbor nostalgia for either a lost homeland or lost loved ones—or more often than not, it is a combination of both.

This pattern of nostalgia and conflation, of overlapping personal and political losses with a larger transhistorical absence (as in the death of a democratic Russia) is, according to Dominick LaCapra, indicative of trauma (46). For LaCapra, “the very conflation attests to the way one is haunted by the past,” and likewise Nabokov’s oeuvre demonstrates a similar fixation with how the past looms in the present. “[T]he past is not a foreign country,” Michael Wood writes in his study of Nabokov’s work, with its frequent exploration of loss and its provisional recovery through memory. “[T]hen was then and is also now” (86). Yet, as Wood points out, unlike other modernists, Nabokov is largely unconcerned with “involuntary memory,” as in Freud’s work or Hemingway’s
fiction; instead, Nabokov willfully asserts his artistic dominion over the past (87). “I confess I do not believe in time,” he writes in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, and this knowingly hubristic admission points to the author’s wish to “fold” different moments in time in his writing, as if art and the power of memory could arrest time’s forward momentum (139).

For many scholars, this investigation of memory and subjectivity, not to mention Nabokov’s glorification of style and personal autonomy, illustrates why he should be read as a modernist. Certainly his early Russian-language novels fit into this literary movement, with their rejection of the tenets of realism. Yet, Nabokov’s English language or American novels, like *Pale Fire*, have been termed late or “limit-modernism,” with the issue being whether their narrators’ unreliability pushes the texts’ epistemological questions into ontological ones, a distinction that Brian McHale argues determines whether novels are postmodern (19). In other words, rather than only doubting an unreliable narrator’s version of events, readers could also question both the entire narrative and the “reality” of the world in which the fiction is set. With their Magus-like narrators and the stressed artificiality of their narratives, the three Nabokov novels that I examine here should be understood as postmodern works. After all, as I will demonstrate, they provoke a kind of thoroughgoing skepticism that is characteristic of postmodernism, and even McHale admits that there are “ontological consequences” when “epistemological doubt” becomes near “total,” as it does in Nabokov’s mid-century works (18).

Nabokov’s brand of radical skepticism, though, also points to a larger incongruity with his relationship to liberalism. While he personally endorses a liberal political
philosophy in both interviews and essays, his post-WWII novels accentuate his doubts regarding not only the fate of liberalism but also the metanarrative of liberal progress. M. Keith Booker, for example, argues that “[f]or Nabokov, the events of the twentieth century suggest that history is governed by no rational metanarrative whatsoever” (53). Indeed, despite his scientific studies and his work as a lepidopterist, Nabokov lacked “complete faith” in mankind’s ability to arrive at some form of authoritative knowledge; or as Zoran Kuzmanovich states, “Reason in the end is faith in the intelligibility of the world, and Nabokov did not feel the world to be intelligible in a strictly scientific way” (20). Whether Nabokov’s rejection of any scientific or materialistic approach was ultimately based on his aversion to Marxism is hard to resolve, but he remained consistent throughout his life.\footnote{11} For him, as for Pynchon, history does not necessarily serve as instruction nor does it offer a verifiable pattern; thus, his novels mock both “the myth of the return to the past” as well as “the myth that we can know the future” (Boyd “Nabokov” 44). But rather than embrace the present or flirt with nihilism, as the anarchistic Pynchon does, Nabokov, the idealist, believes the burden to find “meaning” lies not with historical models, but with the individual and one’s own imagination. Therefore, in the end, Nabokov’s emphasis on the individual and his aversion to historical inevitabilities about a possible utopia positioned him well not just among other postmodernists but also among the anticommunists of his time. After all, the violent struggle for a new world had taken away the one he loved most, and in this way, Nabokov’s Cold War had already begun in 1917.\footnote{12}

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If one understands the Cold War as consisting of two opposing camps, “one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy, and
(Judeo-Christian) religion” and the other opposed to all three, then it becomes necessary to distinguish what exactly Nabokov promoted in comparison to other American anticommunists (Nadel 3). For one, Nabokov’s political beliefs did not derive from any especial love of capitalism, particularly in its mass market variety. In the post-WWII era, when American consumerism was powered by increased advertising, Nabokov derided it as “poshlust,” or “the falsely clever, the falsely attractive,” and like other left-leaning theorists of the time who were alarmed about mass culture, from Theodor Adorno to Dwight MacDonald, he thought it had a corrosive effect in general (LORL 313). Along similar lines, his anticommunism also did not originate from any resentment regarding his own personal loss of wealth or inheritance after the Bolshevik Revolution. As he informed Edmund Wilson, Nabokov regarded those Russian émigrés who based their loathing of the Bolshevicks out of “a sense of financial loss” with “amusement and contempt” (DBDV 221).

Furthermore, in contrast to most American conservatives, like William F. Buckley, whom he would later befriend, Nabokov’s anticommunism was not buttressed by any fervent beliefs in Christianity nor was it based out of fears regarding the “godless commies” or the “evil” nature of totalitarianism. According to Boyd, Nabokov was “profoundly indifferent to Christianity” (291), and despite a strain of spiritualism in his fiction, he usually favored non-religious characters, like John Shade in Pale Fire, a novel whose working title was The Happy Atheist (SL 212). What’s more, as I will demonstrate later with DeLillo, Nabokov recoiled from the kind of messianic or utopian thinking that he saw as undergirding religion and varieties of “totalitarianism”: “It is the same attitude that one sees in Fascism or in Communism—universal salvation” (LORL 101).
Therefore, while he often hinted at alternate worlds in his fiction, as Vladimir Alexandrov argues in *Nabokov’s Otherworld* (1991), Nabokov was no orthodox believer, and the issue of freedom of religion was never one that he invoked in his condemnations regarding Soviet communism.

On the other hand, what placed Nabokov squarely within the camp of American anticommunists was his vocal support of liberal democracy. After all, this was the type of government his father was working towards before the Bolshevik revolution “betrayed the democratic dream” (*SO* 149). In fact, a year after arriving in America, Nabokov participated on a panel at Wellesley and delivered an essay entitled “What Faith Means to a Resisting People,” wherein he lauds democracy as his ideal model. It is “humanity at its finest,” he states. “[I]t is the natural condition of every man ever since the human mind became conscious not only of the world but of itself” (212). According to Dragunoiu, Nabokov’s conception of democracy here is “pre-political,” which is itself problematic since this transforms democracy into an ahistorical principle. But it is also important to note that Nabokov frames his notion of democracy in a manner that supports his own individualistic ethos (111). He writes:

The splendid paradox of democracy is that while stress is laid out on the rule of all and equality of common rights, it is the individual that derives from it his special and uncommon benefit . . . and . . . it is not perhaps an organization or a government or a community that we really have in mind when say ‘democracy.’ (212)

In other words, Nabokov’s primary concern with a democratic government is that it affords him a certain negative liberty—that is, the freedom to be left alone, which he sees as crucial for an artist. To be required to join in some kind of collective action or, worse, a state-led directive reminds him of the type of tyrannical governments he fled.
In fact, the common overlap between the Nazi and Soviet regimes was one of the main political points that Nabokov highlighted throughout his time in the United States, regardless of changing political alliances. For example, one of his first publications in the U.S. (which Wilson helped arrange) was a review of the current Soviet literature, and unsurprisingly Nabokov critiques its triteness along with the binding aesthetics of Soviet social realism (DBDV 75). Yet, he also finds “curiously similar comments by Lenin and the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg on the ‘freedom’ the artist could have following the party line” (Boyd 24). This type of political equation actually contributed to Nabokov later obtaining a visiting lecturer position at Wellesley, where his employer by no means ignored his politics. According to Boyd, “He had been hired at Wellesley not simply because of the brilliance of his lectures, but also because his outspoken comparisons of the mediocrity and barbarity of Nazi and Soviet rule had been just what people had wanted to hear at the time that the Hitler-Stalin pact was leading to the subjugation of Europe” (43). Put simply, Nabokov’s political analysis was popular enough to help him acquire the job. On the other hand, it soon proved to damage his chances at keeping it.

Before the Cold War, there was a rare interval when Nabokov’s political views placed him at odds with both his employer and some of his fellow Americans. In the spring of 1941, when Soviet Russia was America’s ally, the news of the fighting at Stalingrad led to a “pro-Soviet euphoria,” which, among other things, increased the enrollment of Nabokov’s Russian classes (Boyd 60). Nevertheless, Nabokov held firm to his now unpopular anticommunist beliefs, and so he not only discouraged those enthused students who wanted to become communists, but he also “shocked many with his insistence that there was little difference between the brutish regimes of Russia and
Germany” (Field 225). This familiar comparison, though, was no longer appreciated by the president of Wellesley (Mildred McAfee), who had ties with the Naval Reserve and who later made it “clear that the administration was not going to establish a Russian department while Nabokov was there” (Boyd 43; Fields 228). Still, this type of political disagreement with college administrators was unique in Nabokov’s teaching career, and it would not be repeated later at institutions like Cornell, where Nabokov’s anticommunism only helped to secure his place in academia and in American society at large. As a matter of fact, as the Cold War proceeded, Nabokov would only become more emboldened with his political views, first by presenting his take on “totalitarianism” in his first American novel and later by denouncing Soviet history and its sympathizers in his academic satires.

II. “Escaping from Padukgrad”: Bend Sinister, Trauma, and Totalitarian Narratives

Nabokov once described his liberal political philosophy as being “classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me” (SO 34-5). What did concern him, though, was the mirror image of his “ideal state”—that is, tyrannical or “totalitarian” regimes, and for over a decade, from the mid-1930s to the mid-40s, Nabokov’s more politically-tinged fiction tackled this subject, with Bend Sinister representing the apogee. Most examinations of this novel start by stating that it was the first Nabokov wrote after coming to the United States, but it was also the first one he wrote during the Cold War. Published in June of 1947, Bend Sinister emerged a few months after Truman announced his “Doctrine” and a year after Churchill delivered his “Iron Curtain” speech. Of course, one could argue that the purportedly apolitical
Nabokov ignored these famous speeches, which linked the Soviet Union’s recent actions with “totalitarianism.” Yet, as his letters prove, Nabokov kept abreast of world events, and his own summary of *Bend Sinister*, which he wrote to a publisher in 1944, already refers to his fictional regime as a “totalitarian government.” With this rhetoric in mind, Nabokov would put forth his first postmodern Cold War novel, despite his belief that he was working within high modernism.

*Bend Sinister* presents the story of a widowed philosophy professor (Adam Krug) who refuses to endorse a dictator (Paduk), who has recently come into power in an unnamed country. Krug’s refusal, though, derives less from his political principles than from his desire to escape politics altogether, and after ignoring the risks to those around him, what finally provokes Krug’s loyalty is that the secret police capture his son. However, in a grotesque mishap on the part of the regime’s “psychiatrists,” the boy is later beaten to death by a gang of institutionalized criminals. In the end, Krug goes mad and, given the opportunity, attacks the dictator, but before he is shot during his attempt, the novel’s God-like narrator “rescues” Krug from this cruel narrative, leading him into “another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty” (*BS* xv).

From the above description, *Bend Sinister*, with its dire political vision and its emphasis on its own fictional status, resembles a postmodern dystopia. In fact, according to Booker’s *The Post-Utopian Imagination: American Culture in the Long 1950s*, the latter term basically complements the former in regards to U.S. postwar culture. Building on Jameson’s ideas about postmodernism, Booker argues that this culture’s primary trait was an inability “to project viable utopian alternatives” to the status quo, and in support of his argument, he points to Nabokov’s American works, especially *Bend Sinister* (4).
However, Nabokov, somewhat unconvincingly, distanced his writing from this genre, admitting only the possibility that *Bend Sinister* was a “mock anti-utopian novel,” and his estimation of other dystopian works, from Zamyatin’s *We* (1921) to Orwell’s *1984* (1949), ranged from indifference to distaste (*SO* 65-66). Furthermore, in his introduction to the 1964 edition of *Bend Sinister*, he spurns the notion that this work should be mistaken for any type of fiction that promulgates ideas or has a lesson in tow: “I am not ‘satirical.’ I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer. Politics and economics . . . the Future of Mankind . . . leave me supremely indifferent” (xii). As is his custom, Nabokov fashions himself as an independent artist creating an autonomous work, and in this manner, along with his elucidations regarding his text’s allusions to Joyce and Mallarmé, one cannot help but notice how Nabokov affiliates himself with high modernism.¹⁸

Accordingly, most critics and academics read *Bend Sinister* as a modernist work, albeit an excessive one. For instance, Edmund Wilson and early reviewers (V.S. Naipaul, Frank Kermode) criticized what might have been a realistic, “straightforward” political story of the individual against the state—a common trope in postmodern Cold War novels—as being too alienating and self-conscious, a judgment that even sympathetic Nabokov scholars, like Boyd, later echoed: “*Bend Sinister* does not reward us enough . . . to justify all its difficulties and disruptions” (95, 105). All in all, the problem was not just that Nabokov ignored genre conventions for an absurdist take on life in a “totalitarian” state, but that his high modernist aesthetics overshadowed or simply clashed with his political subject.¹⁹ Like other post-WWII works, then, this one presented a crisis in representation. But this crisis can be explained if one understands *Bend Sinister* as an example of trauma fiction, which, like other postmodern texts, foregrounds narrative
limitations and deploys stylistic devices self-consciously (Whitehead 3). In other words, it is not just the dystopian vision which gives *Bend Sinister* its “specifically postmodern quality,” as Booker argues; it is also the disruptive form and subject of the novel itself (53). Moreover, while Nabokov’s novel offers no workable utopian goal, what with its repeated acts of retreat and artistic withdrawal, it still hopes to provoke, like other traumatic narratives, a kind of empathy for the victims, especially liberal ones, of historical tragedies.20

In contrast to his public utterances and the persona he cultivated of being an aloof artist, recent events related to WWII had caused Nabokov to, at least, question his adherence to his political principles and artistic detachment. Two letters from his private correspondence, in particular, shed light on the impetus behind *Bend Sinister*. In 1945, after reading that a “representative of the Russian émigrés in France” had participated in a toast to Stalin, Nabokov wrote to a friend, speculating about what would make him compromise his own integrity (Boyd 84). The only situation Nabokov could imagine is one in which “those closest to me would be tortured or spared according to my reply,” and then he admitted, “I would immediately consent to anything” (qtd. in Boyd 84).

Another letter, this one to his sister in 1946, similarly reveals Nabokov’s awareness of the precarious position of the autonomous artist, especially in a world in which the horrors of the Holocaust had become public. “Much as one might want to hide in one’s little ivory tower,” he writes, “there are things that torment too deeply, e.g., the German vilenesses, the burning of children in ovens—children as funny and as strongly loved as our children” (qtd. in Toker 177). Although he himself had avoided experiencing any direct suffering from the Soviet and Nazi regimes, Nabokov could easily imagine his fate as an
artist under communism, and at this point after the war, he knew very well what could have happened to his Jewish wife and half-Jewish son if they had remained either in Berlin or Paris (Boyd 95). As a result, *Bend Sinister* is Nabokov’s exploration of what it would be like to endure state oppression as well as the loss of one’s wife and child in an amalgamated “Communazist” state (*CE* 217).

Issues regarding loss and absence, especially in a post-WWII context, are also frequently evoked in the discussions of trauma theory. While Nabokov did not knowingly operate within this theory nor within postmodernism, *Bend Sinister* aligns not only with LaCapra’s ideas about individual and historical trauma but also with certain characteristics of what scholars like Anne Whitehead have identified as the “trauma novel,” which she sees as arising from the context of both postmodernism and “a postwar legacy of consciousness” (81). With its disorienting, expressionist opening, *Bend Sinister* recalls these notions about trauma, first, by focusing on Professor Krug’s scattered thoughts, as he tries to cope with the sudden loss of his wife after a failed surgery, and, second, by Krug’s inability to grapple with the recent passing of his once-democratic country. Actually, in terms of the narrative, the two events seem almost interrelated, especially since the reader learns about the political situation at the same time that Krug begins his grieving. However, because Krug’s point of view is privileged, the personal repeatedly takes precedence over the social or communal here, and as Krug sees it, the “world . . . had crashed when she died” (140). Therefore, as LaCapra states, the traumatic narrative that unfolds is one in which personal loss is transformed into transhistorical absence, resulting in “endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable *aporía* in which any process of working through the past . . . is foreclosed or
prematurely aborted” (46). The result is that the mournful Krug not only disregards the political realities of the present, but he also fails to apprehend the ominous possibilities which lie ahead in the future.

Consequently, the past plays a significant role in regards to both the plot of *Bend Sinister* as well as to Krug’s conscious and unconscious mind. In fact, as in other traumatic narratives, Nabokov’s protagonist revisits and relives past events, and thus certain “distinctions tend to collapse” for him (LaCapra 46-47). For example, in a bravura chapter that explains Krug’s connection to Paduk, Nabokov’s narrator presents Krug’s “recurrent dream” of adolescent schooling, which revisits such moments in his life as his juvenile bullying of the future dictator as well as Krug’s abstaining from political clubs, one of which led to an early version of Paduk’s “party of the Average Man” (65). The dream ends, though, with Krug’s adult wife dismembering parts of her body at the front of his classroom, and while this surreal image might appear superfluous, it demonstrates how Krug unconsciously relocates her death at the site of Paduk’s initial path to power. Even more disturbing is that this specific act of dismemberment is later acted out upon Krug’s young son at the behest of Paduk’s henchmen. Knowledge of this death, as stated, drives Krug insane (like King Lear before him), but it also spurs Krug to reenact his bullying of Paduk at the end, when Krug finds that the yard in which he and other political undesirables have been imprisoned is his old schoolyard. As usual, then, Krug views his broader political circumstances through the prism of his personal history, and his final response to both his own persecution and the traumatic loss of his son is to regress and repeat old patterns from childhood.
Still, the most characteristic manner in which *Bend Sinister* resembles other trauma narratives is its concentration on Krug’s detached and disordered consciousness, which flits from memories to dreams to philosophical musings—that is, when it is not reflecting his disengagement with political situations. “I am not interested in politics,” Krug declares early in the novel (5), and while this lack of concern proves to be irresponsible to the safety of those around him, there are indications that Nabokov not only sympathizes with Krug’s position here, but that he also presents it as a qualified form of subversion. For instance, Krug’s nostalgia and his indulgence in the freoplay of his consciousness defies the narrow strictures of Paduk’s regime, which discourages individual creativity and solitude for the promotion of state-led group activities. “People are made to live together,” asserts one fan of Paduk’s reign, “to meet in clubs and stores . . . and not sit alone, thinking dangerous thoughts” (18). However, Nabokov argues through his spokesman Krug that this project of intellectual conformity is doomed to fail, mainly due to basic human inquisitiveness: “curiosity . . . is insubordination in its purest form” (40). Chief among its critiques, then, *Bend Sinister* condemns the mental and emotional impositions that “totalitarian” states make upon its citizens, and Nabokov proclaimed that his novel is more concerned with Krug’s inner turmoil than “about life and death in a grotesque police state” (xiii). As a result, scholars like Boyd maintain that *Bend Sinister* is “not really a political novel at all; it is a philosophical one that aims to set out a certain philosophy of consciousness which, to be sure, has political consequences” (97).

However, when viewed in terms of the Cold War and in terms of Nabokov’s reaction to Soviet models, it becomes obvious that *Bend Sinister* is a much more pointed
“political novel” than some have allowed. For one, Nabokov understood that when contrasted to the aesthetics of Soviet socialist realism his modernist approach, both in terms of style and content, was broadly political in nature. Instead of writing a positive, linear portrait of an ordinary citizen enjoying his or her labors in a collectivist society, as so many works of Soviet socialist realism did, Nabokov’s pessimistic novel focuses on the inner workings of an individualistic writer, who spurns groups and mass society (a contrast that DeLillo also explores in *Mao II*).\(^{22}\) Furthermore, unlike Marxist critics, like Lukács, who bemoaned the fragmentation in modern literature, Nabokov presents “the deliberate fragmentation of experience in positive terms, as a measure against totalitarian assault on individual difference” (Toker “Nabokov’s” 243). In point of fact, this is how Nabokov characterizes the theme of *Bend Sinister*—as an attack against an individual and his sensibility.\(^{23}\) Therefore, instead of serving to alienate the reader, Nabokov’s use of “modernist temporal aesthetics” are meant to convey how Paduk’s regime invades Krug’s autonomy, largely “by interrupting his subjective experience of time and coercing him into a common, determined present” (Norman 79). Thus, in this traumatic novel, Krug’s fragmented thoughts and his fixation on the past are, to some extent, forms of resistance against a regime that seeks to limit his thinking. Indeed, Krug’s brand of internal opposition is why some read this novel as being philosophical or allegorical. And yet, Nabokov acknowledged that he had specific political regimes in mind with his fictional tyranny, and in his introduction he concedes that there are “certain reflections” in *Bend Sinister* “of Fascists and Bolshevists” as well as “bits of Lenin’s speeches . . . a chunk of the Soviet constitution, and gobs of Naziist pseudo-efficiency” (xiii).\(^{24}\)
With this admission, many critics believe Nabokov tries to have it both ways, at least: he presents an apolitical novel that condemns “totalitarianism,” and he participates in an ahistorical modernist philosophy, despite his subject’s historical origins. Yet, to my mind, Nabokov is trying to unite the dominant cultural and political currents of the Cold War. After all, among American cultural arbiters, like the anti-Stalinist left, with which Nabokov associated, high modernism was promoted because its experimental nature bespoke a subversive, individualistic ethos, one that set itself against rules and customs, including literary and political ones (Booker 13). What’s more, despite its ostensible resistance to authority, modernism was later promoted during the Cold War by Western cultural and political forces, like the CIA-backed Congress of Cultural Freedom, which utilized it as a contrast against not only Soviet socialist realism but also to show how much freedom Western artists had versus those under communism. Whether Nabokov had such grand geopolitical concerns in mind with his use of high modernism is by no means irrefutable, but he knew this style countered the aesthetics of Soviet literature, and he would later tout this novel, along with his earlier dystopia Invitation to a Beheading, as “final indictments against Russian and German totalitarianism” (SO 156). At the very least, by employing this familiar equation along with the term “totalitarianism,” Nabokov demonstrated that he was willing to back his new country’s Cold War rhetoric and political interests.

Whereas before Nabokov had often referred to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as “tyrannies,” he now eagerly adopted this revived term to connect a defeated regime with another he wished to see follow suit. In so doing, according to Booker, Nabokov ended up “repeating one of the favorite (and weirdest) clichés of Western Cold
War propaganda,” one that elided the “radical ideological opposition between fascism and communism” (49). However, as mentioned, this rhetorical action was already in keeping with Nabokov’s pre-Cold War anticommunist position. Still, as the Cold War was starting, Nabokov had no qualms about working to promote American propaganda against the Soviet Union. For example, while he was composing *Bend Sinister* in 1946, Nabokov attempted to join the newly created Voice of America, and with a “letter of reference from Edmund Wilson in his support, he came close to being appointed head of the Russian section” (Boyd 113). Ironically, though, the job went to his cousin Nicolas, who would also later apply to the CIA before finally serving as the General Secretary for the Congress of Cultural Freedom (Saunders 93). In this instance, then, Nabokov displayed an early inclination to lend his talents to his government’s fight against communism, a fight he carried on in his own manner within his Cold War novels.

In truth, it is difficult to read *Bend Sinister* without noting Nabokov’s antipathy to communism, particularly given the parallels with Paduk’s regime to the Soviet’s. The novel starts, for example, after a revolution occurs in November, just as the Bolshevik one did (following the Gregorian calendar), and the fictional city where the action takes place is called “Padukgrad.” Yet, what stands out most is that Paduk’s political philosophy, known as “Ekwilism,” is characterized as “a violent and virulent political doctrine,” which attempts “to enforce spiritual uniformity” upon its citizens, all of whom are placed “under the supervision of a bloated and dangerously divine State” (67). This description, with its emphasis on conformity and a statist government, clearly evokes Soviet-style communism. Nevertheless, there are scholars, like Lee, who suggest that there are “perhaps more parallels to Nazi doctrine” in *Bend Sinister* (97), and there are
others, including Booker and Norman, who detect a wider, Adorno-inspired political
critique, one that encompasses America’s mass culture and its wartime “conformism”
(Booker 52). Inarguably, though, the main political system that serves as Nabokov’s
model and that receives the bulk of his scorn is the Soviets’; theirs was the one with
which he was most familiar, and theirs was the one that preoccupied him continually.30

Indeed, Nabokov’s novel frames political events in a manner that mirrors his own
personal response and grievances with the Bolshevik Revolution. To be specific, Bend
Sinister alludes to a revolution that overturns a liberal parliament and, once in power, the
new regime targets not only liberal politicians, as was Nabokov’s father, but also the
liberal intelligentsia, as did Lenin’s.31 Early in the novel, for instance, Krug endures a
Paduk supporter, who maligns their country’s “so-called liberal government” for its
supposed decadence and absenteeism: “[A]ll those Parliament members and Ministers of
State whom we never saw or heard” (17). Yet, following this statement, the narrator
makes the reader aware of the liberal victims of Paduk’s reign, such as “a former member
of parliament” and Krug’s colleague, the Political Science professor (Dr. Rufel), both of
whom are imprisoned (30). In fact, when Krug too is finally placed in a prison camp, for
refusing to endorse Paduk’s government, it is Rufel who implores Krug to cave to the
dictator’s demands, so that he, Krug, Krug’s friends, and “twenty other liberalishki” can
be released to enjoy their freedom (208). That a country’s past liberal elite would face
this type of treatment after a political upheaval (from either the far left or the far right) is
not atypical, and in his study Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War (1995),
Abbott Gleason states that “historically liberalism was the great enemy of totalitarianism”
(69).
Still, by depicting imperiled liberals in a post-revolutionary setting, Nabokov goes further in his novel about “totalitarianism” than just equating fascism with communism during the Cold War. He casts a wider net by connecting “totalitarian” practices to the early history of the Soviet Union, an argument he often made, and would make repeatedly, to an American audience. For instance, only a year after Bend Sinister’s publication, Nabokov informed Wilson again, this time in a lengthy letter detailing the history of Russia’s liberal intelligentsia, that whatever “changes that took place between [the Bolshevik Revolution] and now have been changes in the décor which more or less screens an unchanging black abyss of oppression and terror” (DBDV 223). For Nabokov, the Soviet police state did not just appear under Stalin, as Wilson seemed to think; it was there from the start under Lenin (Boyd 20). In fact, scholars, like Walter, believe that this was one of Nabokov’s primary goal with his novel: to “disabuse” Wilson about his “naïve idealization of Lenin,” whom Nabokov saw as monstrous (“Many” 82-3). This narrow goal, with its intended reader of one, would, of course, limit the impact of Nabokov’s novel, but this possibility still reinforces the argument that Nabokov’s political interests veered towards correcting the record about Russia’s past rather than providing political advice for the future.

Nabokov’s fixation on past political losses or on his country’s decline eventually finds its way into Bend Sinister, and as before, the manner in which it is expressed recalls LaCapra’s ideas about trauma. Near the end, for instance, when Krug comprehends how risky his negligence has been, he plans for him and his child to repatriate to the United States. However, he fancies his future exile as a kind of displaced homecoming: “He saw the possibility of escaping from Padukgrad into a foreign country as a kind of return into
his own past because his own country had been a free country in the past” (160). This odd notion, with its “misplaced nostalgia,” as LaCapra calls it, evokes his theories about how personal loss and transhistorical absence become conflated. Yet, one problematic result of conflating events is that traumatic accounts end up becoming converted “into displacements of the story of original sin wherein a prelapsarian state of unity . . . is understood as giving way through a fall to difference and conflict” (LaCapra 48). In a similar manner, Krug’s vision of his pre-revolutionary country has become idealized, and correspondingly there is very little explanation in the novel as to why Paduk’s revolution succeeded in the first place. It is simply a tragic, traumatic event, and as such, it allows the novel’s narrator and Krug to “avoid addressing historical problems” (LaCapra 48).

Indeed, Krug’s plan in exile is not to grapple with what has transpired in his country, as Pnin and Kinbote do; instead, he thinks that the lost “character” of his old country “could be replaced” by his new one, “where his child could be brought up in security, liberty, peace” (160). The suggestion, then, is that Krug’s habit of idealization will carry over to his future home, the U.S.

However, Krug never manages to escape to a new country, and the lack of options available to him both reinforces the novel’s dystopic vision and pushes Nabokov’s self-styled modernist novel further into the realm of postmodernism. After all, as the plot in Bend Sinister advances and Krug finds himself further entangled in Paduk’s political world, the presence of the narrator (“some anthropomorphic deity,” he calls himself) becomes more pronounced (131). For example, a climactic depiction of a dialogue between Krug and Paduk is later recounted after the narrator states that the entire exchange “did not go on quite like that” (131). Likewise, in later scenes, the artifice and
the theatricality surrounding Krug escalates, and according to Boyd, the reason behind all these “self-conscious devices” is that Nabokov wants to demonstrate that “Paduk and his party are advocates of the unreal,” emphasizing their contrived worldview over human suffering (99). And yet, something similar could be said of this narrator, whose cruel story has Krug lose his family, his sanity, and what looks to be his life—that is, until Krug is whisked away in a kind of deus ex machina or ontological shift, which reveals the narrator to be an author, pausing in his duties “among the chaos of written and rewritten pages” (216).

For many scholars, this abrupt, dissatisfying ending reveals the creative impasse that Nabokov constructed for himself in writing a political novel that denounces the primacy of politics. In other words, by setting up a chain of events in which Krug’s only options in a police state are acquiescence, imprisonment, or death, Nabokov “solves” this dilemma by having his narrator intercede on Krug’s behalf, removing him from both the horrible fiction that is Krug’s police state as well as the fiction that takes up the bulk of the novel. Such an impractical, aesthetic solution, as opposed to a viable, political one, is what gives *Bend Sinister* its “postmodern quality,” according to Booker. But, as shown above, one could also argue that the novel is postmodern in its suggestion that we are subsumed into narratives beyond our control, in its foregrounding of the limitations of narrative and representation—which is what it shares in common with trauma fiction—and finally in its compromised politics.

According to Linda Hutcheon, the defining feature of postmodernism is “its paradoxical, not to say, contradictory nature . . . [which] results in a curious mixture of the complicitous and the critical” (*Poetics* 201). This description encapsulates
Nabokov’s fictional treatment of “totalitarianism” and artistic withdrawal, both of which he criticizes here, even though his narrator problematizes, if not undermines, these positions. For instance, as stated earlier, Paduk’s dictatorial actions towards his citizens is analogous to the narrator’s control over Krug and the story, which finally just suggests another level of tyranny. Furthermore, the narrator’s inability to provide a satisfactory resolution to a story involving the efficacy of art versus the power of politics is one in which Nabokov is also complicit. As Walker writes, “Nabokov intends to implicate himself in the narrator’s failure” and thus *Bend Sinister* is Nabokov’s “clearest acknowledgement of the limitations” that modern artists face in attempting to represent political tragedies and “the reality of totalitarianism” (281, 262).34

Finally, as shown earlier with his letters, Nabokov was cognizant that in a post-WWII environment one could no longer retreat into art, like a modernist hero. And yet, as in other postmodern Cold War novels, in which individuals find themselves at odds with an all-powerful state, *Bend Sinister* shows that the preferred option is to withdraw, and so Nabokov has Krug work through various states of withdrawal, from indifference to madness—that is, until his narrator withdraws Krug from the narrative entirely. In fact, even the narrator seems safely removed from the outside world, as he labors in his study, and it is tempting to read this Olympian figure as a stand-in for Nabokov himself. Yet, as this chapter will show, Nabokov was more engaged with political subjects than has been previously recognized. Indeed, his liberal anticommunism can be detected in his later, less overtly political, academic novels, where his professor characters engage with the Cold War from American soil.
III. “Political Trends in America”: McCarthyism, Academia, and the Cold War in *Pnin*

Besides *Bend Sinister*, another contemporary political work Nabokov wrote after WWII was a story, published in *The New Yorker*, entitled “Double Talk,” and later renamed “Conversation Piece, 1945.” Told in first person, the story involves a liberal Russian narrator who, because he shares the same name of another, is mistakenly invited to an odd political discussion group in America. Initially supposing his hosts to be familiar and friendly “leftist artists,” who will nevertheless chide his “contempt for the [Communist] Party line,” the narrator instead finds himself at a strange, anti-Semitic gathering (588). Before long, after hearing the group’s speaker (a German sympathizer) assure his audience that the Nazi party was “an alien organization” and that “so-called slaves” acted voluntarily in the camps, the narrator is appalled and denounces the attendees before departing (595). Later, at home, though, he starts “writing a letter to the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” only to realize that his memory is hazy and that the whole affair had a “grotesque, dreamlike aspect” (595-96).

Although it was one of his few American works that explicitly condemned the Nazis, along with those who would minimize their atrocities, the germ of Nabokov’s story came under different circumstances. Attending a party in February of 1945, Nabokov noted the presence of Marc Slonim, a distant relation of his wife and “an émigré critic with whom he had been friendly in Paris” (Boyd 85). While many there assumed Nabokov would greet his compatriot warmly, Nabokov actually “snubbed Slonim” and later denounced him in a letter to Wilson as a Stalinist agent (85). The problem, though, was that Nabokov could not be further off the mark. A respected literary scholar, who, like Nabokov, fled the Bolsheviks, Slonim helped publish Zamyatin’s *We* in Prague in its
original Russian (which Nabokov read), and he would later teach at Sarah Lawrence from 1943 to 1962. Less likely to dismiss all of Soviet literature as propaganda, Slonim was nonetheless “firmly against Stalin and the Soviet system” (Boyd 85). Still, in 1954, during the height of McCarthyism, he was called to Capitol Hill to testify about communist infiltration at his college (Pitzer 210). Denying any and all possibility of student indoctrination, Slonim’s testimony went over so well that his college president offered him a raise afterwards (Reece 5). Certain rumors notwithstanding, then, Slonim survived McCarthyism, and eventually he too would retire from teaching to reside in Switzerland, not far from Nabokov.

Suspected communist sympathizers, German atrocities, and Russian professors hoping to secure their jobs during McCarthyism—all find their way into Pnin (1957). Written, in part, for The New Yorker and often regarded as one of Nabokov’s slighter comedic works, the fact that there are Cold War elements, let alone an overriding anticomunist theme in Pnin, is not always apparent to those who read it as a version of the Russian “little man” stories or as one of the more conservative subgenres of the Cold War: the academic novel. In fact, in her study Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents, Elaine Showalter argues that the “academic novels of the 1950s depict a society . . . cut off from the outside world” (14). Yet, Nabokov’s novel concerns itself with Pnin’s efforts in adapting to the social customs of post-war America, and the general plotline of the novel is that “outside” forces, particularly historical and political ones, continually intrude on Pnin’s fragile security. As a lonely Russian exile, whose life has consisted of losing those closest to him, this pitiable figure mainly aspires to obtain a home in his new country and to continue teaching Russian at the fictional college of
In the end, though, these wishes are ultimately upended by another incoming Russian scholar, a callous and dubious figure, who, in the final chapter, reveals that not only has he had a deleterious influence in Pnin’s past, but that he has also been the narrator of *Pnin* all along.

Despite sharing a similar narrative twist with the dystopic *Bend Sinister, Pnin*, by contrast, is generally a more “realistic” affair, with its American setting, its focus on customs and academic labors, as well as its intradiegetic narrator, who operates within the same social world as the characters. And yet, instead of safely assuming that this narrator is subjective, as in other modernist novels, the reader comes to learn, through Pnin, that the narrator “is a dreadful inventor” (185). Moreover, at the end of *Pnin*, we realize that prior events which the narrator has recounted, like the opening scene, have come to him through secondhand, prejudicial sources. Altogether, then, Nabokov pushes the epistemological issues surrounding the narration to the point where they become ontological. Thus, as in other postmodern works, it becomes difficult to know whether this unreliable narrator’s version of events has any basis in reality, especially since he is described as a person “who makes up everything” (185). Finally, like many postmodern works that blur the line between fiction and autobiography, there is a level of complicity here between narrator and author, which Nabokov signals by bestowing this narrator with both his name and patronymic (“Vladimir Vladimirovich N.”) as well as his politics.

In his 2004 essay on *Pnin*, though, scholar and academic novelist David Lodge overlooks this resemblance, emphasizing instead the biographical links between Pnin and Nabokov, and as far as it goes, this is accurate. In its broad strokes, the trajectory of
Pnin’s life mirrors Nabokov’s: both escape “from Leninized Russia”; both spend time in Germany, where they lost loved ones to the Nazis; and both immigrate to the U.S. in 1940, becoming citizens in 1945 (8). However, the affinity I would highlight is that both Pnin’s and the narrator’s political views align with their author. Like Nabokov, they are intellectuals who hold what is referred to in Pnin as “antikvarny liberalism” or “antique liberalism,” and they both harbor nostalgia for a Russia before it was “abolished by one blow of history” (72, 12). As in his other novels, then, Pnin portrays the Bolshevik Revolution as a traumatic, tragic event, one that cost Pnin not only his homeland, but it is also linked to the loss of his loved ones. For example, in 1917, the same year of the Russian Revolution, both of Pnin’s parents died of typhus, and later, the Russian Civil War of 1918-1922 separated Pnin from his first love (Mira Belochkin), or as the narrator phrases it, “history broke their engagement” (134). In league with these type of connections, Nabokov continually ties his character’s personal past to larger historical and political events, including American ones.\(^3\) Thus, in contrast to Showalter’s detached fictional scholar of the 1950s, Pnin is entangled with the “outside world,” but this is not to say that he does not occasionally view or conflate his new surroundings through the prism of his traumatic past.

Although it is not a trauma novel in the manner of Bend Sinister and Pale Fire, what with its relatively unobtrusive narrative style and its lack of fragmentation or self-conscious devices, Pnin still explores the impact of trauma through its protagonist’s reaction to historical absence and personal loss. For instance, according to LaCapra, one indication of trauma is an inability to work through the past or to mourn properly for “unspeakable losses” (45), and the result is that “one is haunted or possessed by the past”
(21). Much of this holds true for Pnin, who does not know the circumstances of his parents’ remains, and in the case of Mira, whose exact death is never made clear to him, he “had taught himself . . . never to remember” her (134). To make matters worse, Pnin also believes, in a plain rebuke to modern psychiatry, that one should avoid declaring one’s “private sorrows to people” (52).37 As a result, he fails to come to terms with his losses, and as LaCapra states, “specific phantoms” from the past come to “possess the self” (65). In Pnin’s case, his inability to speak about or narrativize his pained psyche causes him to experience hallucinatory memories of his parents and Mira. Ultimately, then, one’s fraught relations with memory serves as Pnin’s primary theme, and any slipshod effort in one’s duty to remember, as the narrator flagrantly demonstrates, is what finally offends Pnin the most (22-23). As the narrator says of him, “It was the world that was absent-minded, and it was Pnin whose business it was to set it straight” (13). It is also perhaps because of this duty that Pnin’s reaction to tragic loss does not, at first, result in a total or even an immediate withdrawal from the world of politics.

Notwithstanding the claims of some Nabokov scholars, the seemingly timid Pnin has a political background and a history of opposing communist Russia that far exceeds Nabokov’s, let alone any of his other characters. For instance, Lucy Maddox argues that this protagonist is the “most apolitical Slavophile” of all the characters in the novel (155). But, in point of fact, Pnin holds “a degree in sociology and political economy,” and during the Russian Civil War, he joined the White Army, “first as a ‘field telephonist’” and “then at the Military Information Office” (11, 33). Furthermore, following that war’s cessation, Pnin maintained his interest and close ties with his country’s anticommmunist community. For example, in Paris in 1931, Pnin attended a Russian émigré party, where
he is seen to be “engaged in a political discussion with [Alexander] Kerenski,” the former Minister of the Provisional Government, who later led a propaganda campaign against the Soviets (184). Moreover, according to the narrator, the other attendees at this party consisted of not just anticommunist politicians but also “free-minded philosophers and scholars,” representing in total “a kind of special knighthood, the active and significant nucleus of an exiled society” (184). Therefore, as mentioned with Nabokov, it is clear that for Pnin and the narrator, if not all their Russian acquaintances, that the Bolshevik Revolution forms “a cathedect basis of identity for an individual or a group,” the members of which in this case unite around the sole purpose of defeating Soviet communism (LaCapra 23).

And yet, Pnin’s anticommunist credentials do not help him escape suspicion upon entering the U.S. nor does it keep him from becoming ensnared in its Alien and Sedition Acts. When Pnin enters Ellis Island in the summer of 1940, for instance, he is detained for two weeks for suspicions of being an anarchist, mainly because the pedantic Pnin quibbles with an immigration official about the various types of anarchism. “‘Anarchism practical, metaphysical, theoretical, mystical, abstractical, individual, social? When I was young,’” he states, “‘all this had for me signification’” (11). While Nabokov mines this scene for its comic potential and thus eschews identifying which specific law Pnin has broken, it is quite likely that Pnin has run afoul of the recent Smith Act, or the Alien Registration Act of 1940. Passed to penalize or imprison those who advocated overthrowing the U.S. government, like German fascists and anarchists, it was actually American communists who suffered the most from it. In fact, according to Stephen J. Whitfield, in his study *The Culture of the Cold War*, the Smith Act was the “most
powerful national instrument for the political elimination of Communism” in the U.S., resulting in numerous prosecutions—that is, until the Supreme Court reversed many of the convictions in 1957, the year that *Pnin* was published (46). Thus, in spite of his own anticommunist orientation, Nabokov touches here on the U.S.’s longstanding anxieties regarding leftist politics, which would only worsen during the Cold War (Boyd 87; Barabtarlo 297). What’s more, with this scene, Nabokov initiates a running theme in *Pnin* regarding the familiar Cold War issue of domestic loyalty or potential enemies within, especially as they relate to American intellectuals.

After facing such a welcome, in what he calls “unpredictable America,” one might expect that the Russian Pnin would avoid politics altogether in the Cold War era, becoming a version of Gramsci’s “traditional intellectual” (13). However, when he becomes a naturalized citizen in 1945, he publicly engages in international politics. Of course, for many, 1945 is often cited as heralding the Cold War, in that it marks the end of WWII and the emergence of the atomic bomb. But what was also significant that year was the Yalta conference, in which Churchill and Roosevelt tried to extract promises from Stalin about setting up free elections in Eastern Europe. In Nabokov’s novel, we are told that, with the narrator’s help, Pnin wrote a letter to the *New York Times* “anent the Yalta conference,” presumably to warn the paper’s readers about Stalin’s intentions (16). Considering his strained relationship with the narrator, whom Pnin dislikes so much that he later resigns from Waindell rather than work under him, Pnin must have felt that the information in this letter was of crucial importance. Therefore, in this instance, Pnin and the narrator’s joint anticommunism overrules their personal history, and their
letter demonstrates their eagerness to express their concerns about the Soviet Union to an American audience.

Indeed, enlightening Americans about Russia, its literature, and its politics seem to be Pnin’s main activity in the novel. After all, the novel opens with Pnin’s inability to reach the Cremona Women’s Club, to whom he is supposed to deliver a lecture; yet, few notice that the title of this lecture is “Are the Russian People Communist?” (16). Moreover, when Pnin finally arrives to his destination, he has a brief hallucination that carries not only some sinister political implications but it also evokes LaCapra’s ideas about trauma. Experiencing heart palpitations, Pnin has a vision that mixes and conflates his American audience with his long-lost Russian friends and family:

Murdered, forgotten, unrevenge, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people, such as Miss Clyde, who had modestly regained a front seat. Vanya Bednyashkin, shot by the Reds in 1919 in Odessa because his father had been a Liberal, was gaily signaling to his former schoolmate from the back of the hall. And in an incongruous situation Dr. Pavel Pnin and his anxious wife, both a little blurred but on the whole wonderfully recovered from their obscure dissolution, looked at their son. (28)

With this scene, one can detect how Pnin’s consciousness, in line with LaCapra’s theories about trauma, is preoccupied with the past, to the point that it will often “collapse all distinctions, including that between present and past” (21). Furthermore, besides charting Pnin’s psychological distress, blurring these time frames helps Nabokov push his political point. To be specific, he not only stirs his American readers about Soviet Russia’s violent past, but by inserting the ghosts of communism’s victims into an American women’s club, he also implies that “It could happen here,” with Mrs. Clyde serving as the Soviets’ next potential victim. All in all, it is the novel’s earliest and most ingenious example of its author’s anticommunism.
Other instances, however, are more problematic and less effective. In the same scene, for instance, soon after Pnin’s horrific vision fades, an American academic in the audience is singled out for not listening to Pnin’s speech. Identified as “Old Miss Herring”—note the pun—the narrator paints her as a potentially pro-communist “retired Professor of History, author of Russia Awakes (1922)” (28). At the end of the first chapter, then, Nabokov has set a template that he reworks throughout the rest of Pnin and that he repeats in Pale Fire, and in my opinion, this template best reveals his position towards potential Communists during the Cold War. In short, Nabokov piques one’s sympathies about communist Russia’s political victims, dismisses left-leaning American professors who might support communism (and, by extension, would disregard such victims), and he portrays them either as oblivious, humorless, or paranoid.

Given the period in which Pnin is set, their paranoia is justified. The present action in the novel starts in 1950 and ends in 1955, an era known as the Second Red Scare, which followed Alger Hiss’s perjury conviction and encompassed the Korean War along with Senator McCarthy’s rise and fall.\(^3^9\) These events, in and of themselves, have no major impact on the novel’s plot, yet they serve as a backdrop which provokes reactions from the characters. For instance, in 1953, Pnin watches a documentary that is essentially a Soviet propaganda piece, complete with “handsome, unkempt girls,” marching “with banners bearing slogans for ‘Hands off Korea’ and ‘Peace Will Conquer War.’”\(^4^0\) As usual, Nabokov’s description of this trite proletarian work is amusing, but our humor is tempered when we read what the film depicts: “Eight thousand citizens at Moscow’s Electrical Equipment Plant unanimously nominated Stalin candidate from the Stalin Election District of Moscow” (81). Artificial as the film may be, Pnin is saddened
by what he sees, and in this scene, we see how Cold War political events have reached provincial Waindell and affected the novel’s main character. Yet, we also notice that Nabokov makes sure that the Korean War affects his readers only in relation to offensive communist propaganda, which inadvertently reveals how undemocratic their system is.

Likewise, the specter of McCarthyism is treated in a rather indirect manner in *Pnin*. Again, no one at Waindell is directly affected by it, yet the novel’s references to McCarthy stand out precisely because Nabokov treats it as a minor issue. For instance, at a faculty party, one Professor Thomas brags about a grant he received that will allow him to study in Cuba. Yet, he adds, “with a hollow laugh,” that he hopes “‘Senator McCarthy does not crack down on foreign travel’” (155). Later, Thomas notices a colleague arrive at the party carrying “a bottle of vodka,” so he greets him by saying: “‘I hope the Senator did not see you walking about with that stuff’” (155). In other words, this character comes across as paranoid and socially awkward, as if he has something to hide, and this is the point Nabokov hopes to convey. That is to say, in *Pnin* the academic who harps about Senator McCarthy probably has reason to worry, so Nabokov provokes his readers to question a suspect professor rather than the tactics of America’s infamous anticommmunist, who himself was officially censured by the Senate in 1954, the same year that Pnin’s party takes place.

Even if one is mindful of Nabokov’s anticommmunist beliefs and his aversion to politics in art, one still expects a novel set in the time of McCarthyism with a Russian academic as the protagonist to make more of this issue. Yet, McCarthy is never mentioned by nor in relation to Waindell’s two Russian faculty members, one of whom (Komarov from the Fine Arts Department) is described as a “Sovietophile.” It is highly
unlikely that in a novel with so much campus gossip, set in a historic period of anticommunist hysteria, that no administrator would be suspicious of this character, whose “ideal Russia consisted of the Red Army” (71). After all, as shown earlier, one of McCarthy’s main activities was to interrogate suspected communists from colleges, even though, as Slonim’s testimony illustrated, “not a single case of [communist] indoctrination ever came to light, despite the fact that well over a hundred faculty members were dismissed for political reasons” (Whitfield 24). By the end, the closest Pnin comes to dealing with the Red Scare is when Pnin’s boss (Hagen) chalks up Pnin’s dismissal by saying, “Political trends in America, as we all know, tends to discourage interest in things Russian” (169). The problem, however, is that as readers of Pnin we do not know. In this novel Nabokov provides too little information and background about McCarthyism and America’s anticommunist movement because he does not disagree with either in principle.

What he prefers to show instead is that most of his Russian exiles have found a perplexing but overall receptive home in the United States during the Cold War. In a period when states like “Indiana had forced professional wrestlers to take a loyalty oath,” there are no questions in Nabokov’s novel about these Russians’ loyalties nor is there any mention of governmental harassment because of their origins (Whitfield 45). On the contrary, in America the Russian exiles have appeared to flourish. Pnin, for example, seems to grow in confidence as the novel progresses, and his affection for the U.S. might best be represented by his feelings about his new dentures: “It was a revelation, it was a sunrise, it was a firm mouthful of efficient, alabastrine, humane America” (38). On the whole, postwar America is more than just a political refuge for those who have “traveled
quite a bit on both sides of the Iron Curtain”; it is a land of opportunity, where the hardworking and the politically practical can renew their health and achieve economic security, if not always abundance (26). Such a depiction is in direct contrast with the more critical visions of Cold War America provided by later postmodernists, like Pynchon and DeLillo, who focus on Americans’ paranoia and apocalyptic dread. But, in Nabokov’s novels, the improved lives of his émigré characters evoke age-old American myths, and it is more than possible, I admit, that Nabokov is having fun with clichés about America as “the New World.” Still, these transformed exiles also bear out the U.S.’s Cold War propaganda about native freedoms and comforts, and the novel as a whole practically begs the question of who would prefer to live under communism.

For those who are still uncertain about Soviet Russia, Nabokov depicts it, in *Pnin’s* fifth chapter, as a modern “dictatorship,” marked by “hopeless injustice” (117, 125). In fact, this chapter was seen as being so anti-Soviet, with its references to “medieval tortures” and those “put to death” under Lenin’s reign, that *The New Yorker* rejected it for publication (Boyd 270). Nevertheless, Nabokov refused to excise the offending passages, and what’s more, in *Pnin* he, again, aligns the Soviets’ atrocities to those committed within Hitler’s Germany, that favorite Cold War association of Nabokov’s. For example, stirred by a reference to Mira, whom he later imagines seeing, *Pnin* also remembers how her “family escaped from the Bolsheviks to Sweden and then settled down in Germany,” where finally she was placed in a concentration camp at Buchenwald and then “was selected to die” (134-5). The proximity of Buchenwald to “the cultural heart of Germany” grieves *Pnin’s* German boss, but in Nabokov’s novel, and in his political beliefs, Germany’s atrocities are also in close proximity to communist
Russia’s (135). Therefore, it is not long before the narrator refers to modern Russia as “another torture house” (137-8). That Soviet Russia under Lenin and Stalin committed abundant crimes against its citizens, that it instituted gulags and forced labor camps are all historical facts that should not be diminished. On the other hand, as mentioned, it is careless of Nabokov to continue to compare the two countries’ atrocities without noting the differences in their ideologies, and it is the kind of “ahistorical cultural narrative” that, Schaub argues, typified the Cold war era (24). But, of course, Nabokov’s political generalizations sprang from his devoted anticommunism, which, in turn, prevented him from questioning American cant. For him, the major tragedy of the twentieth century was the Bolshevik Revolution, and this blinded him when it came to American politics, which he screened only in terms of how it affected Soviet Russia, international communism, and America’s security.43

It is because of this worldview, in fact, that Nabokov had a less than critical view of McCarthyism. For an ostensibly liberal couple, Nabokov’s and his wife’s beliefs about McCarthyism were far from typical, and they were not shared in the larger academic community. According to Brian Boyd, “Though they disapproved of McCarthy’s random accusations . . . the Nabokovs believed many of his charges were correct, that there was serious Communist infiltration in high places in American officialdom” (186).44 Such beliefs largely originated from their experiences in pre-revolutionary Russia and Nazi Germany and, to some extent, from the connections their extended family had to America’s clandestine agencies. As Pitzer summarizes, “After a childhood amid Tsarist double agents in St. Petersburg, more than a decade in a Berlin teeming with informers, and a postwar landscape in which the Nabokovs’ siblings and cousins all
seemed to have ties to intelligence work, its seemed more than plausible that not just Washington, D.C. but also the residents of Ithaca, New York, should be on guard against spies and traitors” (214). Nabokov’s wife, for one, was literally “on guard” in this period, and in her biography Véra, Stacy Schiff relates how Véra toted a pistol around Cornell, where it was thought that she kept it in case “the Bolsheviks came for them” (198). Indeed, according to Schiff, Véra’s anticommunism “was rabid and instinctive,” and from Véra’s standpoint, McCarthy did not go far enough (191-93). In fact, in a 1971 letter, Véra took issue with a blurb on a Penguin edition of *Pnin* that mentions “such Nabokovian enemies as McCarthyism,” to which she wrote: “VN has never criticized or attacked McCarthy for the simple reason that he found anti-McCarthyists much more repulsive than McCarthy himself” (*SL* 495-96).

From a contemporary perspective, one could point to later discoveries about Alger Hiss along with Julius Rosenberg’s guilt and argue that maybe the Nabokovs had some insight about Communist methods that homegrown Americans lacked. On the other hand, one should also recognize anticomunist paranoia for what it was. For one thing, the CPUSA had only “31,000 members in 1950, skidding to just a few thousand in 1956, the majority of whom were said to be FBI undercover agents” (Saunders 191). In other words, like most Americans during the Cold War, the Nabokovs’ fears were disproportionate to the actual threats. As the literary critic Philip Rahv stated, “Communism was a threat to the United States, but it was not a threat in the United States” (qtd. Whitfield 4). Nevertheless, the Nabokovs’ attitudes towards suspected communists in the U.S. could lead to insensitive behavior on their part, and according to
Galya Diment, at Cornell, Nabokov “had a reputation of someone who was cavalier with accusations of ‘Bolshevism’ even in the midst of McCarthyism” (Pninid 166).

As a matter of fact, during Nabokov’s tenure at Cornell, two professors were cited for communist affiliations (Field 303). One of them, Philip Morrison, was a physicist who had been called in front of HUAC and was later denounced by a Senate subcommittee as having “one of the most incriminating pro-communist records in the academic world” (qtd. in Lewis 211). Soon after, FBI agents were placed in Ithaca, and according to Cornell’s president, Deane Malott, they were there “to try to get some dope” on Morrison (qtd. in Lewis 254). For the most part, the FBI received a cold welcome and little enthusiasm from the academics at Cornell. Yet, one Russian professor became closely acquainted with one of the agents, offered him “warm support” (Field 303), and “declared he would be proud to have his son join the FBI in that role” (Boyd 311). While this action is alarming for some Nabokov scholars, I would argue that when one considers the author’s lifelong anticommunism and his earlier eagerness to work for the VOA, Nabokov’s befriending an FBI agent during the Cold War is not out of character. Still, his sympathies were misguided, and his actions were more than accommodating towards Cornell’s shortsighted administration. As Field points out:

> There can be little doubt that, in the eyes of President Malott . . . Nabokov’s impeccable anticommunist credentials did much to compensate for the fact that he was not a committee man and that there were almost no students of Russian when the time came to consider granting him a full professorship. (304)

Thus, to some extent, Nabokov’s academic career at Cornell benefited from his political views. Certainly, during the Cold War, it is hard to imagine how such views could have hurt his career.
Even still, after living in the U.S. for almost a decade, Nabokov was not above suspicion, and his high regard for the FBI was mistaken. According to Schiff, the FBI had investigated Nabokov and his family twice: once in 1948, when the Bureau found that they were loyal Americans, who rarely interacted with their neighbors; and again in 1949, when they unwittingly became part of a government surveillance in Wyoming (135, 148). In both cases, the FBI agents determined that “the family did not qualify as subversives,” and on both occasions, the Nabokovs had no knowledge of these investigations (148). One wonders, though, if it would have truly bothered Nabokov if he had known, or if he knew that the FBI had kept files on many of his friends and fellow writers, including Edmund Wilson. My guess is he would not, mainly because he believed such measures to be necessary to secure a democracy from insurgent elements and because he himself had tried to work for the U.S. government.

Indeed, it is possible Nabokov knew that his cousin Nicolas was working for it as well. According to Schiff, both Nicolas and Vladimir Nabokov were often mistaken for each other by the FBI, perhaps because, as stated, both applied for the same government position early in the Cold War. After leaving the Voice of America, though, Nicolas was recruited in 1950 to serve as the General Secretary to the CIA-backed Congress of Cultural Freedom (Saunders 93). As stated, the Congress’s outward purpose was to trumpet the cultural achievements of the U.S, an emerging superpower that many Europeans dismissed as vulgar and materialistic. Therefore, according to Francis Stonor Saunders’ *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (1999), the Congress’s actual mission “was to nudge the intelligentsia of western Europe away from Marxism and Communism and towards a view that was more accommodating of ‘the
American Way” (1). To accomplish this feat, the CIA “did what no intelligence service has ever done, or will ever do again: they bankrolled the avant-garde” (Joffe “America’s”). Regardless of whether such a covert plan was sound to begin with, the snag for the Congress is that it had to operate without revealing the CIA’s influence, and the Congress’s political agenda did not always allow it to accept, let alone promote, artists who had opposing political views. The whole enterprise was built on a contradiction. As Saunders writes, “To promote freedom of expression, the Agency had first to buy it, then to restrict it. The market for ideas was not as free as it appeared” (90).

None of this seemed to bother Nicolas, who, like Nabokov, was a liberal anticommunist who believed Americans should take measures to counteract Soviet influence, even in the realm of culture. Usually Nicolas’s work included organizing musical conferences, but he also launched “the Congress’s first magazine, Preuves,” and he knew who funded Encounter, a British magazine of which he was a contributor and which published one of Nabokov’s articles on Pushkin (Saunders 101, 165). With the Congress’s vast influence, its magazines and cultural outlets, so many of which involved Nicolas, it seems improbable that Vladimir Nabokov was unaware of this organization or his cousin’s role in it, especially since friends, like Wilson, wrote to Nabokov, saying that he “saw Nicolas on his way to Salzburg for his eternal cultural liaison work” (Karlimsky 335). In fact, there is a potential reference to the Congress in Pnin.

Most of the Russian characters in Pnin are, like Nabokov and his cousin, liberal in their politics, and all are deeply concerned with Russia’s state of affairs. For instance, in chapter five, when Pnin and his friends gather at a resort called “The Pines” in 1954, a few of these men “discuss the tactics to be adopted at the next joint meeting of the Free
Russia Committee... with another, younger, anti-Communist organization" (117). This second and more recent “anti-Communist organization” could be the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which formed four years earlier. Admittedly, at this point, there has been no evidence that links the two conclusively. Still, the larger point here is that in *Pnin* and in the Nabokov family, a liberal Russian exile should speak up, write about, or take part in organizations to actively fight against Soviet communism.

And yet, Nabokov scholars have not remarked upon the political irony at the end of *Pnin*: the combined presence of a fellow Russian liberal along with the U.S.’s anticommunist “political trends” contribute to Pnin’s leaving Waindell. In this manner, then, one can appreciate that Nabokov’s fictional works are usually more complex and contradictory when it comes to politics than his nonfictional statements. After all, unlike Krug in *Bend Sinister*, Pnin is not singled out as an individual nor does he serve as a martyr against a dictatorial regime; the political forces that displace him are those to which he subscribes. Therefore, he quits, rather than work alongside the narrator, and this refusal is the closest he comes to making a principled stand about his situation. Additionally, with this action, Pnin follows in the steps of so many other protagonists in postmodern Cold War novels—that is, he withdraws, believing that the current academic and political environment has little use for him.

In fact, by closing with the liberal Pnin’s inability to secure a position as an intellectual in the West, one final effect Nabokov’s novel has is that it shows liberalism to be at odds with itself or in decline—which, of course, it was at that time in the U.S. According to Whitfield, “Never in the twentieth century had the democratic left been so demoralized” (20). This kind of liberal pessimism comes through in *Pnin*, with the exiles
lamenting the years of “hopeless injustice” occurring in Soviet Russia (125), and Pnin himself wondering, after the horrors of the Holocaust, how he is “expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death was possible” (135). For a time, the promise of a home and a professorship at Waindell strikes him as recompense for what he has lost. Yet, the final image the narrator gives us of Pnin is him driving away from both Waindell and the narrator, an image that suggests that Pnin is distancing himself from failure and the narrator’s cruel story. As a result, many Nabokov scholars read this finale as one in which Pnin gains his freedom. However, it is also possible to see Pnin as trapped in a kind of permanent exile, always on the move, and the arc of his life undercuts the old liberal faith that life improves. What’s more, the history that he is caught up in does not demonstrate, even to him, a progression from tyranny to freedom. By the end, the only metanarrative that Pnin understands and hopes to teach is that the “‘history of man is the history of pain!’” (168).

As Charles Nicol argues, Nabokov favored a democratic system that stayed out of people’s lives and prized individual rights (627). But the U.S. government and many colleges did neither during McCarthyism and the Cold War. In her study of McCarthyism, Many Are the Crimes, Ellen Schrecker argues that the anticommunist crusade “narrowed the spectrum of political debate, violated civil liberties, and destroyed careers” (xii-xiii). On the other hand, when one compares these actions with other repressive governments, the second Red Scare added up to being a “disgrace, but it was not a collective tragedy” (Whitfield 4). Aside from the Rosenbergs, suspected Americans were given a pink slip and a spot on the blacklist; they lost “their livelihoods, but not their lives” (Whitfield 16). During the Cold War, this was the mindset for Nabokov, who
gave primacy to the Bolshevik Revolution, which he understood as a traumatic event or as a historical crime, one that most Western intellectuals failed to properly acknowledge. As a consequence, he held comparatively little sympathy for the harassment, the firing, and the exclusion of America’s political undesirables.

Yet, many of those who were either deemed as such, either by the FBI or by McCarthy and his ilk, were people Nabokov considered close friends or ardent supporters. Edmund Wilson, for example, had to suffer the indignity of being personally called out when McCarthy labeled his book *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946) as “pro-Communist” (O’Neill 300). Another writer who later championed Nabokov’s writing was Graham Greene, who found himself escorted out of the U.S. and denied re-entry (Whitfield 206). Strictly speaking, Greene, who helped propel Nabokov to international success in his praise of *Lolita* and who was even willing to “go to prison” in order to publish the novel, was a one-time communist (SL 198). But Greene had joined the Communist Party in England when he was nineteen as a joke, and because of this youthful lapse in judgement, he was bothered with the FBI’s ban for the rest of his life (Whitfield 206). Thus, the organization Nabokov wanted his son to join prevented Greene from ever returning to the United States.

What’s more, during the early 1950s, many anticommunist writers and thinkers Nabokov knew or respected were critical of McCarthy and his supporters’ tactics, and their criticism was based on their beliefs about liberalism and democracy. For instance, Mary McCarthy, Wilson’s wife at the time, argued in 1952 that the best way to challenge communist members was to openly debate them and their views; therefore, unlike Nabokov, she “defended the rights of communists and former communists to teach in
public schools and universities” (Abrams 65). In a similar manner, Hannah Arendt, one of the major philosophers behind “totalitarianism,” disparaged McCarthyism and “ex-communists,” like Whittaker Chambers, for limiting dissent in a democracy, which these activists would end up destroying anyway if they turned democracy into a “cause.” Indeed, even Chambers, the man who helped launch the anticommunist movement in the U.S., denounced McCarthy in the 1950s as a “raven of disaster.”

In Nabokov’s estimation, though, McCarthy was essentially a minor figure, and the U.S. was, in the grand scheme of things, far from a police state. After all, unlike Soviet Russia, its political dissidents were not transported to one of many prison camps, an issue he would touch on in Pale Fire. Therefore, in the end, Nabokov’s Manichean view of the Cold War blinded him in regards to the hypocrisies and abuses of his newly adopted homeland, and the ultimate paradox with Pnin is that it makes us aware of the pain of those we exclude or pity, so long as they are not suspected communist sympathizers.

IV. Nabokov’s “Prisoner of Zembla”: Trauma from the Iron Curtain in Pale Fire

By the early sixties, Senator McCarthy had long since passed and the movement that bore his name had begun to lose its power. Nonetheless, Nabokov’s anticommunist beliefs never flagged and even his more baroque fiction, like Pale Fire (1962), demonstrates that he still held the Cold War in mind. Set in the years 1958-59, this unique novel consists of an autobiographical poem by John Shade and an accompanying exegesis by Charles Kinbote, a troubled émigré scholar who believes that he is the king of “Zembla” and that Shade’s poem is about this foreign land. As a parody of scholarly explication, then, Pale Fire strikes many as an artful academic novel, in more ways than
Yet, Nabokov also expands his Cold War subject matter here to include foreign spies, nuclear testing, and Soviet actions in Central Europe, the latter of which provides the subtext as well as one of the fictional models for this genre-bending work.

In an early description of his novel-in-progress, Nabokov’s letter to his publisher conjured up a Ruritanian romance, in which an “ex-king” must flee from “an insular kingdom,” following “a palace intrigue” (SL 212). However, as he elaborated further, Nabokov’s fanciful story incorporated more familiar and recent political subjects, to the point that it also came to resemble that most recognizable genre of the Cold War: the spy thriller. For instance, the king’s deposition had resulted from a “dull and savage revolution,” and upon making his way to America, after “some wonderful adventures,” the royal defector’s presence causes definite “political complications” for President Kennedy (SL 213). While Kennedy never manifests in Nabokov’s finished novel, Soviet premier Khrushchev does, and eventually it becomes clear that Kinbote’s Zembla delusion serves as both a coping mechanism and as a commentary on the Soviet Union’s oppressive measures, both within and outside its borders. Therefore, Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* is simultaneously a work of trauma fiction as well as a postmodern Cold War novel.

With only a glance at its contents, most readers can grasp that *Pale Fire* is one of Nabokov’s more identifiably postmodern novels. Indeed, for many scholars, aside from Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it could serve as the paradigmatic postmodern text. Unlike modernist works that explore an alienated figure’s subjective interpretation of personal events, Nabokov’s novel largely focuses on the act of interpreting a fictional text, and as a sendup of literary scholarship, it comes equipped with the usual apparatus of foreword, text, commentary, and index. In other words, *Pale Fire* is distinctly
postmodern due to its interest in reception and interpretation and, to risk stating the obvious, it is a work of metafiction. In fact, in her study *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh practically breaks down Nabokov’s novel when she provides a catalogue of postmodern traits, such as “the over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator,” the “use of popular genres,” “parodic doubles,” “Chinese box structures,” and “infinite regress” (21-22).

In regards to these latter items, though, Brian McHale has argued that *Pale Fire* is a “text of limit-modernism” (*Postmodernist* 18), and he contends that there is “a finely balanced ambiguity” to it, especially in terms of whether Kinbote’s Zembla exists (*Cambridge* 16).52 The problem is that the novel’s differing perspectives mean that the “real” cannot be located, but the result, for McHale, is an uncanny tension rather than a full-blown push into fantasy or multiple worlds, which he sees as the defining factor of postmodernism.53 However, these benchmarks can be limiting and arbitrary; for example, McHale goes on to classify Nabokov’s *Ada* as post-modern because it offers a “familiar-yet-alien . . . projected world,” although the same could be said of Zembla (19). Furthermore, a number of postmodern works, like Morrison’s *Beloved*, possess an uncanny quality in that they refuse to harp on the ambiguity between a character’s point of view and “fantastic” events. Finally, like *Beloved, Pale Fire* differs from a modernist work because here the construction of an alternate reality does not point simply to a character’s response to a personal trauma. Instead, it points to one or more traumatic historical events.

And yet, until recently, historical readings have not been the favored approach to *Pale Fire*. With its embedded levels and its fixation on “secrets” to be found, Nabokov’s
novel invites the type of hermeneutical strategies that were most popular during the Cold War, like psychological and New Critical analyses. The latter, in fact, provides the bulk of *Pale Fire* scholarship, which often consists of arguments involving the true identity of the narrator(s), whether one created the other, or whether one narrator influenced the other—even from beyond the grave.\(^{54}\) Having led or taken part in all of these debates, Brian Boyd writes, “More than any other novel, *Pale Fire* is committed to the excitement of discovery” (425), and what has been discovered and widely accepted is that Kinbote is not King Charles II of Zembla nor is he even Kinbote. He “is Botkin; Russian not Zemblan,” states Michael Wood. “He is a fussy, disliked, exiled, Russian academic in America, sadder than Pnin and . . . nastier than the narrator of *Pnin*” (177).\(^{55}\)

Consequently, if Botkin is Russian, as many clues indicate, then the impetus behind his imaginary Zembla and his concern with Soviet Russia’s actions make more sense.\(^{56}\)

That is to say, the “kernel of truth” behind his delusion involves the same two historical events that preoccupied Nabokov: the Bolshevik Revolution and the Cold War. Therefore, this section will explore how *Pale Fire* touches on these subjects as well as other Cold War-related phenomena, including academic loyalty, nuclear actions, as well as Russian prison camps. My argument is that *Pale Fire* should be understood as a work of trauma fiction, what with its structure, its themes involving the return of the repressed, and its haunted narrator. In fact, the novel gestures towards a few historical traumas that the Russian Botkin (or “Nikto”) might have endured and sublimated, and Nabokov’s main point here is to incite empathy for a lonely exile.

Prior interpretations involving Kinbote and the Cold War have tended to focus on the character’s homosexuality, which, according to Freud, would explain his delusion.\(^{57}\)
In his study of Schreber’s memoirs, Freud argues that “the driving force behind [Schreber’s] delusions was an unacceptable homosexual impulse,” which also sparked his paranoia (Erwin 141). Surprisingly, despite Nabokov’s old enmity towards Freud and the fact that his novel disparages Freud’s followers as “those clowns,” *Pale Fire* builds off a number of Freudian theories (271). For example, as Boyd and Belletto have noticed, in conjunction with Freud’s notions about paranoia, Kinbote’s fantasy is remarkably detailed and “coherent,” and his persecution complex is so grand that he imagines himself the target of an assassination plot (Boyd 433). Then again, these scholars also maintain that Nabokov finally “upends” Freud by having Kinbote be an active homosexual, instead of a repressed one (Boyd 435), and Belletto goes further to contend that Nabokov not only subverts “pop Freudian ideas” but also homophobic Cold War norms when he portrays Kinbote as both a “sexual subversive” and an anticommunist Cold Warrior (66–67).

While it is true Nabokov largely removes any internal conflict concerning Kinbote’s homosexuality, the rest of the character’s behavior still reflects Freud’s theories about delusions. After all, just as Freud noted how the deluded Bleuler saw his own name in various words he misread, Kinbote assumes that words—and even typographical marks—from an elderly man’s 999-line poem allude to himself or his fantasy (Erwin 142).58 Indeed, Kinbote goes so far as to posit that Shade himself fell under the influence of Zembla while composing: “One can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of the story acted as a catalytic agent” (81). As a result, one wonders why Kinbote so desperately needs this delusion to be reflected in another’s work, and the most obvious
answer is that Shade’s poem offers a wider audience regarding the “dazzling Zembla,” which Kinbote himself admits that he is “helpless to put into verse” (80).

Yet, Kinbote’s Zembla delusion also clearly serves as some kind of compensation for what he has lost. In fact, Freud believes that, “[i]n the face of psychotic withdrawal, delusions may be seen as an attempt at recovery and reconstruction” as well as “an attempt to recapture relations with people, even if those relations are manifestly destructive” (Erwin 142). Such a description clearly holds true for the socially ostracized Kinbote, who interacts with Shade only a few times over a five-month interval, a period that culminates with Kinbote stealing Shade’s last poem from his corpse. Long before their brief relations come to this grisly end, though, Kinbote admits to feeling “that cold hard core of loneliness which is not good for a displaced soul” (95). Since it seems unlikely that solitude alone has incited Kinbote’s delusion, it appears more than probable, particularly with his reference to displacement, that his Zembla fantasy originates from a historical trauma, one that involves a loss of national ties, at least. For instance, even Boyd, who believes that Kinbote’s distress arises from suicidal ideation, proposes that this narrator’s delusion has developed “to cope with an overwhelming sense of loss,” one that is connected to Russia (434). After all, as Boyd explains, “Zemlya is Russian for ‘land’” (434).

The loss of one’s homeland or other such broad political or historical crises were not typically issues that Freud explored in regards to trauma. However, theorists like LaCapra and Cathy Caruth have taken up this line of inquiry, and they have argued, in distinction from Freud, that history can function as the basis of trauma. In particular, both authors look at how traumatic experience complicates representations of historical
events, and Caruth specifically, in contrast to LaCapra, suggests that literary depictions of trauma might best represent its elusive nature, its belatedness, and its concerns with repression. Furthermore, both LaCapra and Caruth ultimately claim that stories about trauma (whether nonfictional or fictional) are similar to survivor testimonies, which call out for a witness or listener, who will, ideally, be affected or moved towards empathy. These ideas about trauma narratives, I believe, help explain not only the structure of Pale Fire, but also Kinbote’s behavior, in that he has sublimated his traumatic experiences into an elaborate, literary fantasy. Yet, having seen that it has largely fallen on deaf ears, when he personally recounted it to Shade, he decides instead to project it through an alternate text.

That Kinbote’s commentary has not been read as a trauma narrative could be explained by the odd manner in which it is told. After all, Kinbote attempts to work through his trauma, not through a straightforward recounting, but through a series of displacements which mask it. Such a method is not unheard of in regards to narratives that deal with this issue. Caruth, for instance, refers to the “indirectness of [the] telling” in regards to fictional representations of trauma, like Hiroshima mon amour, which deals with the aftereffects of the atomic bomb (27). Similarly, LaCapra states that one’s attempt to grapple with trauma is often “open to an infinite series of displacements in quest of a surrogate for what has presumably been lost” (59). For Kinbote, his Zembla fantasy clearly acts as one of these surrogates, but then so does Shade’s poem, which Kinbote hopes will endow his delusion with a more authentic literary patina. In fact, this narrator’s obsession with intertextuality and his circuitous route of storytelling are also characteristics of trauma fiction, according to Anne Whitehead. For her, “the broken or
fragmented quality of testimonial narratives . . . demand new structures of reading or
reception,” and Kinbote’s traumatic story, told entirely through footnotes, reflects
Whitehead’s criteria (7).^{59}
Still, the most obvious trait that marks Pale Fire as a work of trauma fiction is
Nabokov’s handling of Kinbote’s repressed memories involving Russia, which
increasingly encroach upon his Zembla delusion. For instance, early on, Kinbote, like
Krug in Bend Sinister, depicts his pre-revolutionary country with the kind of prelapsarian
nostalgia that LaCapra believes can occur when traumatic accounts conflate
transhistorical absence and personal loss (48). Kinbote writes:

Harmony, indeed, was the reign’s password. The polite arts and pure sciences
flourished. Taxation had become a thing of beauty . . . Everybody, in a word, was
content—even the political mischief-makers who were contentedly making
mischief paid by a contented Sosed (Zembla’s gigantic neighbor). But let us not
pursue this tiresome subject. To return to the King. (75)

With these last two sentences, then, one can see how Kinbote would rather focus on a
fantasy involving his royal alter-ego than exploring the political realities that led to a
revolution that displaced him. Here the only hint he offers is that Zembla’s neighbor was
paying potential fifth columnists (known as “Extremists”) to disrupt the kingdom, and
given the novel’s Cold War setting, it is not surprising that, soon enough, “Sosed” is
revealed to be Russia.

Indeed, aside from Zembla, Russia looms largest in Kinbote’s mind, and as his
commentary progresses, it becomes obvious that his perception of this country aligns
with Nabokov’s. At one point, for example, Kinbote states that when he “was a child,
Russia enjoyed quite a vogue at the court of Zembla but that was a different Russia—a
Russia that hated tyrants and philistines, injustice and cruelty, the Russia of ladies and
gentlemen and liberal aspirations” (245). Thus, this ostensible monarch from “a distant northern land” also believes, like Nabokov, that a tragedy occurred in liberal-leaning Russia when it fell “under the Soviet regime” (243), and this interpretation of historical events is basically overlaid when Kinbote recounts Zembla’s upheaval. On May 1, 1958, it seems the “Royalists, or at least the Modems (Moderate Democrats), might have prevented the state from turning into a commonplace modern tyranny,” but they were overrun by “Extremist” elements, along with ancillary troops provided by a nearby “powerful police state” (119). In light of the time period in which this revolution transpires, Kinbote’s description of Russian troops invading an adjacent country evokes the suppressions in Hungary and Poland; and thus, as Belletto and Bachner argue, the Ruritanian Zembla could also operate as a stand-in for one of “Russia’s satellite countries” (Belletto 71).

Therefore, Nabokov’s intention with Zembla is to expand its frame of reference, even as he continually hints that, for Kinbote, Zembla functions as a kind of nostalgic fantasy of pre-revolutionary Russia. After all, its revolution occurs on May Day, an official holiday in the Soviet Union, and as shown above, it pitted both monarchists and parliamentary democrats against “Extremists,” just as the October Revolution involved the Whites and V.D. Nabokov’s Kadets (Constitutional Democrats) against the Bolsheviks. What’s more, Kinbote provides numerous slips that reveal his background as Russian. Instances range from the minor, including his knowledge of what a “mujik’s izba,” or Russian peasant’s cabin, looks like, to the major, as shown when a professor asks if he was “born in Russia,” after seeing him speak the language (141, 267). In fact, in an entry meant to clarify the phrase “two tongues” in Shade’s poem, Kinbote supplies
a list of languages, but the recurring pair that predominates are the two he knows best: “English and Russian” (234). What remains of the list, though, consists almost exclusively of the names of Russian satellite countries, where the inhabitants speak what Kinbote calls a “BIC language,” from “behind [the] iron curtain” (215). Altogether, then, with Zembla, Nabokov’s purpose is to conflate the tragic history that ensued in Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution to Khrushchev’s brutal repressions outside it, and in this way we are meant to understand that there is a continuum of suffering caused by the Soviet Union.

Yet, this is not to say that Zembla acts only as a kind of floating signifier or byword, vaguely alluding to Soviet offenses without any firmer connection to real-world events. On the contrary, as Belletto points out, Kinbote’s “Zembla” could refer to Nova Zembla, an island off Russia’s northern coast, which gained prominence during the Cold War when it served as the primary testing site for the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal (71). In fact, the Tsar Bomba, the most powerful bomb ever detonated in history, was discharged there in 1961, and according to scholars, like Pitzer and Bachner, these tests preoccupied Nabokov while he composed Pale Fire. Pitzer cites how, after moving to Switzerland, Nabokov “would have seen more than a dozen front-page stories mentioning Nova Zembla” in “his daily reading of the New York Herald Tribune” (275). Similarly, Bachner argues that Pale Fire’s quotation from a New York Times article demonstrates that not only was Nabokov aware of the Western response to the tests, but by incorporating this material he also meant to entangle Kinbote’s delusion with “historical and political” realities (36). For instance, on July 21, 1959, the Times reported that Khrushchev had “put off a visit to Scandinavia,” and Kinbote recites this verbatim, only
to have Khrushchev visit Zembla afterwards (qtd. in Bachner 37). But what Kinbote omits is that the Soviet premier cancelled his trip to Scandinavia due to “the ‘anti-Soviet’ atmosphere,” which had arisen after the nuclear tests had spread fallout into these countries. For Bachner, then, *Pale Fire* “insists that the cold war admits no zone of safety,” and that Nabokov’s novel broadly condemns “political violence,” which spreads like fallout “from the Soviet Artic and Pacific atolls” (34).

In point of fact, Nabokov’s acute anticommunism would never allow him to make this kind of general indictment, and Bachner’s study elides Nabokov’s opinions about technology as well as his devotion to the U.S. government. For one, in contrast to later postmodern writers, like Pynchon and DeLillo, Nabokov was, at best, uninterested in technology; as a lepidopterist, his pre-modern notions about “science” meant that he privileged “above all natural science” (*SO* 79). Consequently, any references to atomic weapons, the defining feature of the Cold War, were scarce in his oeuvre. Yet, *Pale Fire* distills his distaste with bombs and the Sputnik era’s passion for gadgetry when he has Shade characterize it as “An age that thinks spacebombs and spaceships take/ A genius with a foreign name to make . . . When any jackass can rig up the stuff” (270). Still, this derisive attitude does not mean that Nabokov was an anti-nuclear activist or a partisan for peace, like Bertrand Russell and Albert Schweitzer, the latter of whom is mocked in *Pale Fire* as “a great sage” (270).61 Outside of his novels, Nabokov would also make his position regarding the U.S.’s foreign policy and its relations to peace activists quite clear: “I am definitely on the government’s side. And when in doubt I always follow the simple method of choosing the line of conduct which may be the most displeasing to the Reds and the Russells” (*SO* 98). Therefore, while Nabokov held no fascination with nuclear
weapons, he would not advocate disarmament during the Cold War—and certainly not in this period when the Soviet Union was displaying the strength of its own arsenal in Nova Zembla. Furthermore, had Nabokov ever endorsed nonproliferation or even condemned the U.S.’s “political violence” years earlier, at the height of the Cold War, he might have been investigated, again, by the FBI, just as the aforementioned Philip Morrison was at Cornell.62

Actually, in a scene that Bachner ignores, there is a potential allusion to Morrison as well as explicit references to “Nova Zembla” and nuclear fallout, all of which help to illustrate Nabokov’s entrenched anti-communism and loyalty to the U.S. For example, while debating other academics regarding the King of Zembla, Kinbote singles out a physics professor, who, like Morrison, is described as having “antiatomic” beliefs (49). Yet, Kinbote goes further to label the physicist “a so-called Pink, who believed in what so-called Pinks believe in (Progressive Education, the Integrity of spying for Russia, Fall-outs occasioned solely by US-made bombs . . . the existence in the past of a McCarthy era . . . and so forth)” (266). Compared to his treatment of leftist academics in Pnin, Nabokov here clearly has become much blunter in his opinions. Moreover, when Kinbote later complains about American “Left-Wingers” and their “careless . . . demagogic” equation of anti-Semitism with racism, his rhetoric, as before, betrays an odd familiarity with the U.S.’s recent history (217). In other words, this language reflects Nabokov’s politics and his growing distance from modern liberals more than it does Kinbote’s, who would not have been in the U.S. at the time to witness McCarthy or his abuses.

Additionally, this antipathy towards fellow travelers or “Pinks”—who deep down are really just “Reds”—was already becoming de trop in the U.S. by the early 1960s, when
*Pale Fire* was published and when other American artists were starting to mock fervent anti-communism. As a matter of fact, in 1959, the year that this scene takes place, former President Truman was even calling HUAC “the most un-American thing in the country today” (Whitfield 124).

However, as stated, the political motivation for Kinbote generally has less to do with the U.S.’s policies than with the Soviet Union’s exploits and its history with Nova Zembla, which could also shed light on this narrator’s trauma. In that earlier scene with his fellow academics, for instance, a “Professor Pardon” questions Kinbote about the origins of his identity, asking him if he originated from Russia and if his “name was a kind of anagram of Botkin,” to which Kinbote replies: “‘You are confusing me with some refugee from Nova Zembla, [sarcastically stressing the ‘Nova’]’” (267). According to Pitzer, aside from its infamy as a site for nuclear testing, Nova Zembla was also notorious for being one of Russia’s most “feared” prison camps (281). Rumored to be a place where Socialist Revolutionaries were exiled following Lenin’s purging of the intelligentsia in 1922, Nova Zembla would become a prison of last resort for the Soviet Union’s worst criminals (83). Therefore, Pitzer sees Kinbote (or Botkin’s) denial here as possible proof that he was a “refugee” from “a nightmare corner of the gulag” (285). Such a reading might seem farfetched, but her interpretation helps to clarify, as she points out, Kinbote’s cryptic utterances, like “the frozen mud and horror in my heart” (258), as well as his thoughts about a “legible tale of torture” upon holding Shade’s poem for the first time (289). This prison background would also lend credence to the possibility, which Andrew Field once floated, that the narrator’s name could be an anagram for “Nikto,” or Russian for “nobody” (315). In fact, many Russian prisoners, or “zeks,”
would self-apply this anonymous name upon “being taken to the gulag,” although neither Field nor Pitzer make this connection (“Of Russian”).

Still, whatever name one is supposed to call this narrator (who adopts yet another “new incognito” after leaving his college community), Pitzer appreciates what it means if Kinbote is a survivor who endured this horrible ordeal (17). For one, his prison experience might explain his delusion regarding his time in Nova Zembla, which, like other traumatic crises, is marked by its “unassimilated nature,” which “returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Furthermore, Pitzer picks up on how Kinbote “longs to bear witness,” not only to his own suffering but, by extension, to the lost and forgotten who perished in the Soviet prison system (287). In this regard, then, *Pale Fire*, and Kinbote’s commentary especially, accords with how Caruth and LaCapra interpret numerous traumatic works. After all, for Caruth, trauma narratives contain “a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing”; therefore, what lies “[a]t the heart of these stories is an enigmatic testimony,” one that “demands a listening and a response” (5-9). However, the central conflict in *Pale Fire* is that Kinbote never receives the type of response he desires from Shade, and Pitzer fails to explore this issue fully along with the premise that Nabokov is criticizing Americans’ inability to heed the tragic history of Russia’s victims, if not other foreign exiles.

From its divided structure to its lengthy commentary, *Pale Fire* attests to the fact that a potential exile from Russia—or from wherever the Soviet Union has imposed its system—feels marginalized and ignored in post-war America. As stated, prior to meeting Shade, Kinbote lived a solitary life within their academic community, so much so that this usually expansive narrator confesses: “I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness
and distress” (95). And yet, companionship arrives when an esteemed poet spends time with his new neighbor, who then feels the pressing need to unburden his fantasy in the hopes that it will receive some form of tribute. What Kinbote yearns for is a poem, which, he says, “would contain the wonderful incidents I had described to [Shade], the characters I had made alive for him . . . and that special rich streak of magical madness which I was sure would . . . make it transcend time” (296-97). Thus, for an entire spring term, Shade patiently listens (or endures) Kinbote’s story, and by the end, he admits to his neighbor: “‘I think I guessed your secret quite some time ago’” (288).

Yet, all of his statements, his poetry, and his actions suggest that Shade never knew the exact nature of this “secret” nor did he realize the extent to which Kinbote had suffered. Of course, he picked up on Kinbote’s delusion, as seen when he declares, in Kinbote’s presence, that the term “madness” does not do justice “‘to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention’” (238). But Kinbote clearly underwent some trial far worse than a “drab past,” and the main obstacle is that Shade, like other Nabokov protagonists, has limits in terms of how much interest he can or will show towards another’s anguish. As Richard Rorty writes, in his 1992 introduction to Pale Fire, “Nabokov helps us remember that we can only respect what we can notice, and that it is often very hard for us to notice that other people are suffering” (xviii). What compounds this problem with Shade is that, prior to meeting Kinbote, he is caught up in his own private agonies. Having recently survived a heart attack as well as grieving the loss of his only child (Hazel), who committed suicide a few years earlier, Shade transmutes these painful memories into his personal yet capacious
poem. By contrast, Kinbote’s displaced trauma, his “wound that cries out,” is simply not enough to spark Shade’s curiosity or his imagination (Caruth 2).

According to LaCapra, a work of historical trauma “should lead” to some form of “empathic understanding” (39). However, the best that the preoccupied Shade can offer his foreign neighbor is distant sympathy, and Nabokov hints, and perhaps Shade himself gleans, that the poet’s brand of compassion finally falls short. For instance, in an argument with Kinbote, Shade states that what spurs one to lead an ethical life, or to avoid causing pain, is “pity” (225). Nevertheless, whatever amount of pity he extended to Kinbote, Shade also seems unconcerned with the kind of foreign or Cold War politics that might have contributed to Kinbote’s suffering. For example, in his description of historical actions, ostensibly happening in 1958, Shade writes pithily, “Mars glowed. Shahs married. Gloomy Russians spied” (58). This summary, then, is as detailed as he cares to get regarding events which could encompass the testing of nuclear weapons, the FBI’s capture of the communist spy Rudolf Abel, and the marriage of Shah Reza to Farah Diba (which actually occurred in 1959). Thus, Shade’s domestic problems and his scant interest in political or international events prevent him from digging too deep into the painful history from which Kinbote has emerged. Furthermore, Nabokov signals this fault in Shade when he has him state in his poem, axiomatically, that no one can “help the exile” (55).

In the end, though, it is hard to criticize this character too much for failing to notice something that is so well hidden. After all, Kinbote himself admits in his foreword that the two men “never discussed . . . any of my personal misfortunes” (27). Added to this caginess is the fact that most of the historical and political issues that might have
factored into Kinbote’s delusion are so subtly buried within the text that, for some time, few if any of Nabokov’s readers picked up on them as well. As Pitzer notes, Kinbote’s prison history, his traumatic origins, even the novel’s references to specific Cold War events, like the nuclear tests at Nova Zembla—all “have gone unnoticed by critics for decades” (276). To be frank, this outcome is rather ironic, especially considering Pale Fire’s reputation for being pored over mainly by critics and scholars, who often gravitate towards the novel’s complexity and puzzles (276). Then again, one of the key problems with this level of subtlety is that it blunts Nabokov’s overall political point.

That Pale Fire might contain a larger political message is something only a few scholars have addressed, but it is an issue they rightly connect to postmodernism and the Cold War. For example, besides detecting a critique regarding Americans’ homophobia during the Cold War, Belletto argues that Nabokov’s novel “makes chance legible as a political critique” (64). In other words, by creating a novel that builds toward “chance events,” like a poet’s accidental shooting, Nabokov prioritizes contingency and uncertainty. As a result, Belletto sees this brand of radical skepticism as undermining the type of rational, deterministic thinking that characterized much of the geopolitics behind the Cold War. By contrast, Booker argues that Pale Fire’s enervating randomness and its delusional narrative provide the reader with no realistic basis on which to move forward. Worse still, what little utopian aspects the novel has consists of a brand of nostalgia that Jameson identifies as a familiar postmodern trait—that is to say, Kinbote’s nostalgia for Zembla shows that he not only pines for the past, but he also pines for a past that “never existed in the first place” (Booker 63).
However, as I have been arguing, Nabokov’s postmodern Cold War novels are
marked by trauma and tragedy, and as stated, theorists like LaCapra contend that
nostalgia is typical of traumatic works that often conflate absence and loss. Yet, this
conflation does not mean, as Booker suggests, that *Pale Fire* is a hermetic work that
never refers to any real-world historical events nor is it, as Belletto implies, the kind of
novel that revels in its anarchistic vision of “accidents and possibilities” (63). Instead, it
is typical of other postmodern novels written during the Cold War, in that its protagonists
withdraw from society and the political arena, and in Nabokov’s novel they often do so
through delusion or dedication to art.

To a large extent, this tactic is a response to a political era that seems
overwhelmingly threatening, although in Nabokov’s novels, his characters’ fears
regarding the Cold War only seem to build off earlier horrors from the first half of the
twentieth century. For instance, in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov hints that various historical and
political crises could serve as the basis for Kinbote’s trauma, a condition that this
character attempts to address with his Zembla delusion. As I have mentioned, this
delusion could be a reimagining of the Bolshevik Revolution or a sublimated rendering of
the Soviets’ repressive measures in Central Europe in the 1950s. On the other hand, it
could also be the site of nuclear testing, or one of the most feared prison camps in
Northern Russia. Either way, in Nabokov’s work, Soviet Russia is at the root of the
destruction, both within and beyond its borders, leaving millions of lives either trapped
behind the Iron Curtain or traumatized if they manage to escape.

Indeed, so powerful is the reach of the Soviet Union that the exiled Kinbote must
have felt some modicum of relief upon taking refuge in the U.S., despite his overall
loneliness there. Yet, one of the sad ironies in *Pale Fire*, which no scholar has addressed, is that even in his new country Kinbote is not entirely safe from visiting Soviets. After all, for half of the month of September in 1959, when Kinbote has withdrawn to write his commentary, Nikita Khrushchev was the first Soviet premier to visit the U.S. Thus, perhaps it is this historical visit that finally prompts Kinbote to write his commentary, one that he hopes will bear witness to the Soviet Union’s crimes and awaken the sympathies of his readers during the Cold War.

**V. Conclusion**

Throughout the 1960s up until his death, Nabokov and his wife resided in Montreux; yet, they still proudly considered themselves Americans, and the now famous author claimed to be offended by any “[c]rude criticism of American affairs” (*SO* 98). In other words, as removed as they were from their favorite country, they continually tried to stay informed about its changing politics. Nabokov, for instance, would voice his support for the push towards civil rights and call himself an “anti-segregationist,” a position that corresponded with his father’s and his own liberal hatred of prejudice. However, throughout this decade, Nabokov’s liberalism would be tested less from fights over racial equality and more over his devout anticommunism, which he would make known in a manner that was far more public than in earlier periods.

After WWII and throughout the 1950s, for instance, when he was still working at colleges in the U.S., Nabokov’s political opinions would come through occasionally in his lectures or in his personal correspondence. Otherwise, as shown here, they would have to be discovered in his complex novels, where they could, at times, be inconspicuous, even in his more obviously political works. For example, if a political
issue, like a loyalty oath, was explored, as it is in Bend Sinister, then Nabokov would leave it vague as to whether he was referring to a tactic from the Truman administration or from a “totalitarian” regime. As mentioned, the public persona he liked to cultivate was that of a litterateur who was above the petty issues of politics, and according to those few Americans who worked with him and knew him well, like Morris Bishop at Cornell, Nabokov had very little “interest in politics, none in society’s economic concerns” (235).

Yet, privately, Nabokov kept aware of which intellectuals in his immediate orbit might be sympathetic towards “Bolshevism,” and as shown with Marc Slonim, he was willing to cut ties with those whom he felt lacked his anticommmunist zeal. For example, in 1957, Nabokov informed the scholar Roman Jakobson that he no longer planned to work on a project with Jakobson after learning that he visited the Soviet Union: “Frankly, I am unable to stomach your little trips to totalitarian countries, even if these trips are prompted merely by scientific considerations” (SL 216). A year later, Nabokov would submit a complaint to Cornell’s administration over the teaching abilities of Douglas Fairbanks, a Russian language professor whose methods could presumably jeopardize national security during the Cold War. “At a time when the country desperately needs Russian-language experts,” Nabokov writes, “it is distressing to think what havoc Mr. Fairbanks’ MA’s and PhD’s are bringing into the work of the State Department and of other agencies which require ... able translators” (SL 264). Finally, in 1958, Nabokov would recite his essay “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers,” which informed his audience that neither new leadership nor secret speeches could alter the repressive nature of Soviet Russia: “Not a jot changed in the philosophy of the state when Lenin was replaced by Stalin, and not a jot has changed now, with the rise of Khrushchev” (LORL
8). Thus, since the Soviet Union was an unchanging tyrannical regime, Nabokov believed that his fellow Americans should remain vigilant in their efforts to defeat Soviet communism. Indeed, even as close friends began to question the U.S.’s military actions and its Cold War rhetoric regarding “freedom,” as Edmund Wilson did in his introduction to *Patriotic Gore* (1962), Nabokov never expressed any doubts nor did he ever deviate from his initial anticommunist position.

In fact, beginning in 1964, when he started to grant numerous interviews, Nabokov would become more outspoken about his political loyalties and goals, and his answers provide the best summation of his Cold War mindset. To cite one example, in response to a question about “Russian letters,” Nabokov goes on to proclaim:

> I certainly hope that under the influence of the West, and especially under that of America, the Soviet police state will gradually wither away. Incidentally, I deplore the attitude of foolish or dishonest people who ridiculously equate Stalin with McCarthy, Auschwitz with the atom bomb, and the ruthless imperialism of the USSR with the earnest and unselfish assistance extended by the USA to nations in distress. (SO 50)

In almost every way imaginable, this speech provides a textbook version of American anticommunist views during the Cold War. Moreover, the comment concerning America’s “unselfish assistance” to foreign nations signals how, in the years to come, the patriotic Nabokovs would, again, have little in common with their more liberal American friends, especially in a period when liberalism itself was under attack.

After all, by the mid-1960s, clear cracks were emerging in the postwar consensus over the U.S.’s anticommunist politics. One early example included the revelation in 1966 that the Congress of Cultural Freedom was funded by the CIA. Sensitive to this criticism, even as he never denied the agency’s financial backing, Nicolas Nabokov protested the notion that the CIA had any real influence over the independent minds of
the Congress’s artists (Pitzer 301). In a similar manner, eminent Cold War figures, like George Kennan, Robert Oppenheimer, and Arthur Schlesinger, wrote a public letter of support for the Congress and its mission (Pitzer 301). Still, by this time, few American citizens and their elected officials believed their government needed to fund the cultural products of the anticommunist left, and what, no doubt, had contributed to this lapse in fervor was the national discord over the Vietnam War.

In this period, as in previous ones, the Nabokovs’ primary concern about the U.S. government was its foreign policy towards the Soviet Union. Thus, it is not surprising that this outlook colored their views regarding the Vietnam War and its growing number of protestors. According to D. Barton Johnson, in his essay “Nabokov and the Sixties,” the Nabokovs held that “what was bad for Soviet Communism was to be endorsed,” so the author and his wife “strongly supported U.S. government action in Vietnam” (147). That said, upon detecting an anti-war sentiment among their literary acquaintances and friends, the Nabokovs felt the need to clarify their position. Véra, for instance, would state:

Nothing could be worse than this war, but we honestly do not see what the President or anyone else can do about it. Leave the country and the entire Far East to the Communists? People do not want to see that it is Russia that is fighting against the U.S. in Viet Nam. Without Russia the North would have been beaten ages ago. This is a life and death struggle against Communism, not just a little war somewhere at the end of the world, alas. (qtd. in Schiff 336)

For the Nabokovs, the worldwide communist threat surpassed any reservations one might have about America’s means or motives, and those who dared criticize them, like protestors and student demonstrators, could be dismissed as “‘goofy hoodlums’” (SO 139). There was no point in listening to such criticisms anyway when the greater enemy remained in existence. By 1969, at the start of détente, Véra would explain that they
considered themselves “the senior authorities in judging the Communist utopia, and nobody is going to tell us anything new” (qtd. in Schiff 357).

As the 1970s began, the Nabokovs’ once-liberal political views, which they had carried from Europe, had revised in America, and had weakened during the Vietnam War, were barely in existence. Nabokov began reading *The National Review*, struck a friendship with the magazine’s editor William F. Buckley, Jr., and he and Véra “were all for Nixon in 1972” (Schiff 336). In the end, their anticommunist beliefs and binary worldview had brought them to a political party that mocked liberalism and touted a return to “law and order” after the urban riots and student demonstrations, all of which must have reminded the Nabokovs of earlier upheavals they had fled. Indeed, these aspects of Nixon’s campaign might have been what attracted the Nabokovs to the candidate in the first place. After all, by the late 1960s, Véra “attributed most of America’s troubles to an ill-advised liberalism” (Schiff 336).

Indeed, based on their understanding of the Bolshevik Revolution and what Nabokov had learned from his father, the jurist, the Nabokovs seemed to prize liberalism because of its protection of individual rights, its push for change through existing institutions, and its respect for the law (Dragunoiu 11). Yet, Nabokov was never clear about what should be done when existing institutions or parties continue unpopular policies or wars, which is what the established parties were doing in the U.S. in 1968, and it is what his father’s Provisional Government had done in regards to Russia’s continued participation in WWI. Despite his avowed praise for liberal democracies, then, Nabokov was unwilling to admit that an indifferent or corrupt liberal government should fall if it repeatedly failed to carry out the will of its citizens. Certainly his uncritical embrace of
the concept of “totalitarianism” did not stir any doubts, although perhaps it was never meant to. As Žižek argues, “totalitarianism” served as a kind of intellectual “stopgap,” in that it prevented many from questioning certain historical realities about democracies for fear of being labeled fascists or Stalinists, with the end result being that the “liberal-democratic hegemony” endures (iii). Such an outcome would be fine for Nabokov.

And yet, Nabokov’s support for liberal democracies also carried the implicit understanding that they should be maintained by elites rather than the masses, and other critics have grappled with this elitist impulse in Nabokov. In an examination of his fiction and how it “assigns worth . . . to a few selected human beings,” Joyce Carol Oates once criticized Nabokov’s “scorn for the democratic ideal” (37). But it would be more accurate to argue that Nabokov primarily understands “democracy” as an ideal, one that his beloved Russia was not able to achieve and which the U.S., to him, had offered the best substitute. For Nabokov, democracy is not a continuing or an involved process, and it is certainly not something that would require him to take part in a group or public protest. As he stated, “I don’t belong to any club or group . . . or take part in demonstrations,” and this attitude carried over to the possibility of even observing them (SO 18). For example, in 1968, Nabokov turned down an historic assignment to cover the Democratic convention in Chicago, chalking it up as “some sort of joke on the part of Esquire—inviting me who can’t tell a Democrat from a Republican and hates crowds and demonstrations” (126). In fact, aside from his suspicions about communists in his midst, Nabokov’s apathy towards domestic politics extended even to the most minor participation. As Pitzer writes, “He never voted, he never put a yard sign out for a candidate, he never signed a petition” (7).
In the end, even though Nabokov preferred to live in a liberal democracy, all that he truly required of any government was that it maintain law and order and grant certain freedoms so that the individual, like himself, can be left in peace—unless, of course, that individual was a suspected communist. Actually, it is Nabokov’s overriding concern for the individual versus the state, not to mention his general lack of concern regarding the political process, which places this author in accordance with subsequent American postmodernists, who otherwise share little in common with Nabokov’s liberal anticommunism. Finally, what Nabokov’s fiction shares with the work of later writers like Pynchon and DeLillo is that his protagonists withdraw from their communities, if not society in general, and while the exact impetus behind this withdrawal varies for each author, the looming backdrop is the Cold War.
Chapter Two: “Courting Chaos”: Pynchon’s Anarchist Politics and the Cold War

As in his first novel *V.* (1963), Thomas Pynchon’s latest historical fantasy *Against the Day* (2006) charts the rise of global modernity from the 1890s, with settings, once again, in Italy, New York, and a fictional location off the maps. In Pynchon’s telling, this period of technological innovation, political upheavals, and growth in capitalism results in a diminishment of magic in the Weberian sense, as the plot proceeds from the splendor of Chicago’s World Fair to the carnage of World War I. Nevertheless, Pynchon frames this vision of modern society with the Chums of Chance, a group of young aeronauts, who have no clear earth-bound obligations and who are pleased, at first, to float safely above as “political delusions reigned more than ever on the ground” (31). As the novel develops, though, the Chums do as well, and they become increasingly entangled with the conflicts and politics of the era, so much so that one of them worries that “folks will begin to confuse us with the Anarcho-Syndicalists” (111). Indeed, as they admit more people on board and swell to a floating city, it is easy to interpret the perpetually adolescent Chums as representing Pynchon’s ideal political community: they transcend national boundaries, they function with a minimal reliance on technology, and they demonstrate a kinship with “working people” and anarchists (112). This is not to say that Pynchon remains unaware of how utopian such a community would be—the Chum’s airship is called the *Inconvenience* after all. If anything, with its plutocrats and labor strikes, Pynchon is quite clear about the tangible costs of opposing capitalism in this novel. Still, what is most surprising about *Against the Day*, at least in comparison to his
other novels, is how unequivocal Pynchon is not only in his support for the anarchists’
.ethos but also their methods, including bombings and industrial sabotage.

Such was not always the case. As Kathryn Hume notes in her essay “The
Religious and Political Vision of Against the Day,” typically in Pynchon’s novels, “many
characters express their own ideologies or moral values, but Pynchon as author rarely
pushes his own views” (167). With that said, though, many Pynchon scholars, including
Hume, have picked up from reading his works, like Vineland, that this author’s “political
sympathies” have been generally “leftist and pro-labor,” even as his novels rarely, if ever,
demonstrate any forms of “effective political opposition” (167-170). However, what
many Pynchon scholars fail to examine, and what I plan to emphasize here is that, like
other postmodern writers, Pynchon’s initial reticence and developing political philosophy
are best understood in the context of the Cold War.

After all, it is this period in American history that, by Pynchon’s own admission,
influenced his early adulthood and writing. Although often linked with the
counterculture, Pynchon started out as a member of the Silent Generation, and in his
introduction to his short story collection, Slow Learner (1984), he describes himself as
“an unpolitical ‘50’s student,” one among many who had “a tendency to self-censorship”
during the height of the Cold War (6). In fact, in this era, when James Bond was “John
Kennedy’s role model,” Pynchon admits that his reading consisted “of spy fiction” and
that his writing interests veered towards “lurking, spying, false identities, psychological
games” rather than towards “[p]olitical decision-making” (9, 11, 18). Therefore,
Pynchon’s novels, especially his grand historical fictions, like V. and Gravity’s Rainbow,
are best understood, I believe, as rooted in the spy genre. What’s more, when Pynchon
departs from this model, he frequently returns to one of its obvious antecedents: the detective genre, which he reworks in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Inherent Vice* (2009), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013). Altogether, then, the hallmarks of these two genres, including ratiocination, surveillance, and conspiracies, remain a constant in all of his novels.

Still, the Cold War did not only influence Pynchon’s affinity for certain genres. It also serves as the background or as the impetus for many of his novels, which is not surprising when one considers Pynchon’s connections to Cold War history and events. For instance, Pynchon’s *V.* is framed around the activities of the U.S. Navy, primarily in regards to the impending Suez Crisis of 1956. From 1955 to 1957, Pynchon himself served in the Navy’s Sixth Fleet, specifically “aboard the USS Hank,” which patrolled the Mediterranean and which would have offered him firsthand knowledge of the United States’ part in the Suez Crisis. Likewise, in the early 1960s, Pynchon worked as a tech writer at Boeing, where he wrote about Cold War technology, like the Minuteman ICBM and “the ‘Bomarc’ winged surface-to-air missile” (Weisenberger “Gravity’s” 45). At Boeing, Pynchon also learned more about the history of rocket development and its ties to the German V-2 program, which forms the basis of his third novel *Gravity’s Rainbow.* Finally, in 1964, Pynchon applied to UC Berkeley’s mathematics program, and although he was denied admission, he established a residence in the city. As a result, he was placed in close proximity to Berkeley’s student-led protests, most of which were directed against Cold War norms and policies, and in *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon describes these protests, including the Vietnam Day Committee. Two years later, Pynchon’s own animus towards the Vietnam War became so heightened that, by 1968, he signed (with over 400 other American authors) an advertisement that denounced this war and pledged
not to pay any related tax increases. It was the most public political stance Pynchon took, placing him on an FBI list, and it came after a decade of being involved or associated with Cold War events (Kraft 12).

Yet, perhaps the primary Cold War influence that shaped Pynchon’s writing and politics was what he refers to as “Our common nightmare The Bomb” (18). For him, the threat it raised was terrifying during the height of the Cold War and has only grown worse with persistent nuclear proliferation (18). Because of this state of affairs, Pynchon indicts not only every presidential administration from the start of the Cold War onward, but he also reveals his practice of sublimating his anxieties about the bomb into his fiction. In an illuminating passage from Slow Learner’s introduction, he writes:

> Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we have all tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us... Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it—occasionally... offset to a more colorful time and place. (18-19)

Thus, like many postmodernists, including DeLillo, Pynchon interprets this Cold War technology as breeding a feeling of political “impotence,” especially in relation to the state, which in DeLillo’s phrasing “controls the means of apocalypse” (564). What’s more, Pynchon’s admission here of “helplessness and terror” not only hints at a version of trauma that authors like Nabokov used to create postmodern work, but Pynchon’s manner of dealing with “fear” by displacing it in his fiction evoke key aspects of Freud’s ideas about the uncanny.

In his 1919 essay “Das Unheimliche,” Freud argues that the uncanny is linked to fear and anxiety, that it provokes a “sense of helplessness,” that it is marked by ambivalence (in terms of straddling reality and fantasy), and that it can be induced by
coincidences or repetition. All of these features broadly describe Pynchon’s Cold War novels, which build off Freud’s ideas about the uncanny through their engagement with conspiracies and paranoid delusions. However, like Nabokov, Pynchon is skeptical of and, at times, parodies Freud’s methods of finding the “root cause” of one’s paranoia or neuroses through exploring one’s psychosexual development. Instead, Pynchon’s postmodern narratives embrace indeterminacies and proliferating clues, all of which point to a nexus of corporate and political forces that could be plotting against his heroes. Yet, in the end, Pynchon frustrates his characters’ (and his readers’) need to find solutions or resolution within his novels. Indeed, despite their focus on investigations and analyses, these novels critique Western or Enlightenment ideas regarding the drive for knowledge. Thus, on this issue as well as his interest in how modern institutions or forces gain power over individuals’ bodies, Pynchon’s later work, like DeLillo’s, recalls Foucault’s theories about discipline and power. In fact, in these two authors’ postmodern Cold War novels, their protagonists find themselves enmeshed in a lopsided power dynamic, and their response is usually characterized by an opting-out or an isolation from the dominant American political ideologies, particularly liberalism.

This trend has not stopped some Pynchon scholars, however, from aligning Pynchon and his writings with liberalism, a link that proves to be problematic, as the scholars themselves acknowledge. For instance, Cyrus R. K. Patell, in his book Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology (2001), and Jeff Baker, in his essay “Politics,” both read Pynchon as working out of Emersonian liberal traditions, even as they point out his critique of individualism and his concern for liberty, one that turns a skeptical eye towards “the idea of a common moral order” (Patell 74).
Less conflicted is Jerry Varsava, who, in his essay “Thomas Pynchon and Postmodern Liberalism,” argues that novels like *Lot 49* and *Vineland* offer a “defense of American political liberalism,” a philosophy that in Pynchon’s treatment is ironic and self-aware but which stands in contrast to American libertarianism, with its greed and hopes for a minimal state (63).

By contrast, I contend that liberalism, at least as embodied during the Cold War, is increasingly what Pynchon distances himself from, and in this manner he diverges clearly from Nabokov, who supported the U.S.’s Cold War liberalism, at least until the late 1960s. By my reading, when Pynchon started writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, his politics were not explicitly laid out nor fully formed. Yet, they still emerged as being distinguishable from the dominant Cold War ideologies of the time: liberal anticommunism and communism. Furthermore, as the Vietnam War expands and his disillusionment with America’s political establishment grows, liberal anticommunism is interpreted as being simply a hollow consensus, even if it pays lip service to chance and freedom, whereas Marxism is too deterministic, even though it offers hope to the oppressed and the opponents of capitalism. In contrast to Nabokov, then, Pynchon, like many on the New Left in the mid-to-late 1960s, rejected the Cold War binaries and held out hope for something different on the political horizon. Paul Berman in *A Tale of Two Utopias* best summarizes this mindset when he writes about “[t]he dismal old choice between a democratic civilization in the West that appeared to have lost its soul to capitalism and a Soviet civilization in the East that had surely lost its soul to bureaucracy (such was our understanding of the cold war)” (13). For Berman and others of his generation, the hopeful alternative “was going to be a society of direct democracy in a
fashion that might be rustic (Third World style), sophisticated (Czechoslovak style), anarchist (workers’ council style), or countercultural (hippie style)" (13). In my view, Pynchon held out hope for the latter two.

To classify Pynchon as favoring anarchism is, I realize, by no means novel. Since George Levine’s 1976 essay, “Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon’s Fiction,” scholars have observed recurrent anarchist leanings in Pynchon’s work, pointing to his heterogeneous style as well as towards his themes, which favor chaos over ordered systems. One Pynchon scholar in particular, Graham Benton, has examined numerous Pynchon’s novels through this political lens, and according to him, “Anarchism—as a political philosophy, as a theory of history, and as a program for social change—has always been an important subject in Pynchon’s work” (“Daydreams” 191). However, this chapter will distinguish itself from previous studies by examining Pynchon’s postmodern novels and one of his essays through the history and the discourse of the Cold War, which I believe helps clarify Pynchon’s politics and anarchist worldview, one that becomes more pronounced as the Cold War proceeds. Through readings of V., The Crying of Lot 49, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts,” and Gravity’s Rainbow, I will demonstrate that Pynchon’s anarchist politics are best represented in his criticism of the Cold War’s dominant ideologies; his recurrent denunciation of militarism and property ownership; his exploration of utopian spaces; and his investigation into fascism and its appeal for those who yearn for order and control.

I. “What Monsters Shall Rise in Our Wake?”: Delusions and Dehumanization in V.

In its presentation of almost sixty years of modern history, Pynchon’s V. (1963) covers a range of political beliefs. Yet, it has proven rather difficult for scholars to come
to a consensus regarding Pynchon’s own political position in this novel. A critical overview, for instance, reveals that *V.* contains “residual conservatism” (Cooley 308); that it criticizes Marxism (Belletto) and the drive behind fascism (Booker, “Mastery”); or that it denounces politics entirely, advocating an ethical middle ground (Dugdale; Kerry Grant; Schaub). It is as if, in keeping with its 1950s setting, *V.* reflects Daniel Bell’s “end to ideology,” which explains the hurdle in determining what Pynchon endorses here. After all, in this work Pynchon refuses to privilege a specific character’s political point of view or even grant authority to a specific historical interpretation of events. Thus, Pynchon’s politics are hard to discern when he leaves readers wondering not only how to make sense of the past but also how to build towards a future.

What is unmistakable, though, is Pynchon’s indictment of a past system, imperialism, which this novel links to nascent forms of totalitarianism. Additionally, Pynchon’s novel suggests that both systems persist in the Cold War era. However, since *V.*’s bifurcated narrative spans from 1898 to 1956 (or roughly the period of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, which figures in the novel’s plot), most Pynchon scholars have focused on *V.*’s handling of imperialism and have undervalued the novel’s Cold War aspects or how the two interrelate. My argument is that *V.* works within and mostly undermines familiar Cold War rhetoric and modes, like the spy and apocalyptic genres, in order to criticize dominant Cold War narratives. Furthermore, rather than stemming from a Marxist or liberal position, *V.*’s critiques derive from Pynchon’s burgeoning anarchist political views, best recognized in the novel’s opposition to militarism; to imperial administration in the realm of spying; and, more broadly, to any organization, political
model, or scientific worldview that would disregard humanity in order to enact its vision.²

As a matter of fact, V.’s anti-authoritarian ethos extends to its own interpretation, with Pynchon frustrating readers’ hermeneutical strategies to impose meaning on his text. And yet, as much as it mocks interpretative models, V. builds on Freudian ideas about paranoia and the uncanny to advance a consistent Pynchonian theme: that we should grant less attention to personal fantasies and dogmas and extend more empathy to our fellow humans.³ After all, as seen through its title figure, V. insists that people have become dehumanized and disfigured in the modern era and that this development will only worsen during the Cold War.

Although it has gone unmentioned by Pynchon scholars, V.’s story and themes recall a work of fiction that Freud analyzes in terms of paranoia and destruction.⁴ In “Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s Gradiva” (1907), Freud explicates a novella by Wilhelm Jensen and diagnoses the protagonist’s “chronic delusion” as a form of paranoia, one with elements of “fetichistic erotomania.” Jensen’s narrative revolves around an archaeologist, Norbert Hanold, and his growing obsession over a Roman bas-relief, which depicts a woman walking, with her dress slightly hiked up to reveal her sandaled feet.⁵ Hanold christens the figure “Gradiva” (translated as “the woman who walks,” with links to Mars Gradivus, the god of war), and not long after buying a copy of the artwork, which he hangs on his wall, Hanold dreams of the woman in ancient Pompeii, prior to the eruption of Vesuvius. What ensues is a fixation, and soon after, Hanold travels to Pompeii, where he believes he has spotted Gradiva in the flesh, and by interpreting signs and monitoring her movements, he finally meets her. Yet, upon doing
so, the modern Gradiva is revealed to be a childhood friend, an early love that Hanold had displaced and transfigured. Only by talking to her at length—a method that Freud naturally approves of—is Hanold finally cured of his delusion, as he falls in love again.

In its broad outline and in numerous details, Jensen’s novella serves as a springboard to Pynchon’s novel. An ambitious historical romance, *V.*, in large measure, concerns the paranoid delusion of Herbert Stencil, who believes a woman he designates as “V.” has precipitated political outbreaks and chaos in the first half of the twentieth century. Built with “impersonations and dream,” Stencil’s informal history—or archaeology in the Foucauldian sense—consists of imagining V.’s activities, from Egypt to Florence to Southwest Africa to Paris, and noting her fetishistic love for objects, some of which she incorporates into her body (32). Eventually, in Stencil’s rendering, V. becomes both a symbol of his growing preoccupation with the “inanimate” and a malevolent force of history, a White Goddess transformed into a goddess of war. For example, with his habit of sweeping generalizations, Stencil considers V. to be the force behind WWI and a few of the colonial crises that preceded it, that the “etiology” of WWII “was also her own” (387), and by the end, in the Cold War era, he is concerned that “now, of all times” her spirit could lead to a nuclear apocalypse (451). Therefore, in Stencil’s delusion—and unfortunately outside of it—we all live under Vesuvius’s threat.

In view of such dire possibilities, it is not surprising that Pynchon’s work fails to offer a cure for Stencil and humanity’s designs towards apocalypse. “There’s no magic words,” says the character McClintic Sphere in his analysis of the crises engulfing the world of V. “Not even I love you is magic enough” (366). Thus, the shift in emphasis here from Freud to Pynchon, or from the modern to the postmodern, is that Pynchon is
not concerned with personal traumas or psychosexual development, nor does he believe that delving deep into a mystery will uncover a final truth. Instead, he is more interested in the construction of a historical narrative, one that this protagonist, like Pynchon’s later ones, fashions into a plot or a conspiracy. But, as Linda Hutcheon points out in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, postmodern novels like *V.* sustain an ambivalence towards plotting because of its potential to yoke “multiple or scattered events” into a “totalizing representation” (68). In other words, postmodern writers retain a profound skepticism regarding overarching narratives, mainly due to their cultural and political power, and what contextualizes this awareness, as Hutcheon’s analysis of *V.* notes but fails to expand on, is the Cold War. 

Written, published, and set in part during the height of the Cold War, Pynchon’s *V.* is less a realistic reflection of this era than it is a subversion of the Cold War’s dominant rhetoric and genres. The novel’s current timeline occurs from Christmas Eve 1955 to early November 1956, and according to J. Kerry Grant, “[G]iven Stencil’s conspiracy theories, it is perhaps no accident that the present time of the novel situates its action squarely in the midst of America’s obsession with the communist threat” (2). As a result, scholars like Paul Celmer have argued that *V.* is specifically a parody of “the Communist-plot genre,” and to an extent, this reading is accurate, in that the novel intimates an international conspiracy, borne out of modernity and radical politics (6). However, Pynchon’s *V.* only uses the word “communism” twice (when it is uttered in a fantastical exchange by a rat) and his novel does not concern itself with typical American anti-communist issues, like national loyalty or domestic threats from within. What’s more, Pynchon ends *V.*’s contemporary storyline with the Suez Crisis, one of those rare
occasions during the Cold War when the United States and Russia worked in collaboration. Overall, then, _V._ is that rare Cold War novel that pays little to no heed to post-war fears about “the communist menace.”

Then again, as Celmer and others have noticed but not linked to Pynchon’s politics, _V._ engages with Cold War rhetoric when it parodies what the historian Richard Hofstadter has termed “the paranoid style.” According to Hofstadter, the central concern of “the paranoid style” revolves around “a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as the motive force in historical events,” and that the “paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms” (29). Likewise, this is how Stencil understands his discovery about _V._: “that she had been connected, though perhaps only tangentially, with one of those grand conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon” (155). With that telling “perhaps,” though, Pynchon signals to his readers the cracks in Stencil’s delusion, one that even Stencil nurtures doubts about but which he cannot abandon. Nevertheless, as the novel advances, Pynchon’s theme persistently echoes Hofstadter’s final analysis—that the paranoid cannot accept that history might proceed by accident (40). For example, upon reading a confession from a character who actually encountered _V._, Stencil learns “that there is more accident to [life] than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime” (320-1). Undeterred by this insight, Stencil still clings to his suspicion that “events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic,” and it is this conspiratorial Cold War outlook that Pynchon subverts in _V._, largely by offering in stark contrast a vision of history as chaos (449). In my opinion, this vision helps to reveal Pynchon’s early inclinations towards anarchism.
These political leanings also come into sharper relief when Pynchon distinguishes his worldview from those who represent almost every political practice he condemns: Western spies. As mentioned, Pynchon has proclaimed his fondness for the spy fiction he “had grown up reading,” including John Buchan’s thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, which bears certain similarities to *V.*, the most notable being the uncovering of an anarchist plot before WWI (*Slow 18*). However, in comparison to that novel and the genre’s typical features, *V.* does not present heroic protagonists foiling nefarious plots across Europe through their deductive reasoning. Instead, Pynchon’s depicts spies who are inept (“You’re a bad detective and a worse spy,” says a character to Stencil) or who simply use people because they are “interested only in information” (153, 479). Moreover, Pynchon highlights the imperial aspects behind this popular Cold War genre. For instance, his spies are not stylish James Bond-types, “kicking third world people around,” as Pynchon has described that series (*Slow 11*). Rather, they are increasingly referred to as “civil servants,” sent out by someone in the “Office—high up, of course” to monitor dissent and safeguard the empire, tactics which Pynchon deplores (473). Still, what troubles his political sensibilities even more are the agents’ narrow readings of foreign crises and their connections to men of power (“cabinet ministers, heads of state”); thus, the larger concern Pynchon has is that these elites’ “private visions of history” could possibly result “in action” affecting entire populations, a scenario that has obvious implications to the Cold War (225).

No doubt because of this influence and the ability to alter history, many of *V.*’s civilian characters, like DeLillo’s, imitate spies by engaging in their own “clandestine political activity” or adopting an attitude of “We’re all spies in this together” (405,
For example, a youthful V. does not cling to “any romantic illusion about spying—
in that business she saw mostly ugliness and little glamour,” but after being seduced by
British agents, she also detects “a latent talent of her own for espionage” (198).
Similarly, Stencil’s quest for V. is often mistaken for “espionage,” and not without cause,
since his search originates from entries in his father’s spy journals. Pynchon’s point here
is that spying is a method or “legacy” that entangles everyone and can be passed down,
among families as among nations, and while there is no telling how it will be employed—
V., a self-proclaimed “citizen of the world,” emerges as a non-state actor—Pynchon
demonstrates that it historically involved maintaining political order (111). Therefore, it
makes sense that the spies’ chief opponents, at least in Stencil’s histories, are anarchists
on the “lookout for any news favorable to even minor chaos” (66). Beyond this
stereotypical goal, though, they also hope to disrupt the European nations’ occupancy or
expansionism in their lands, and this is the political backdrop in many of V.’s chapters
(66).

Indeed, as stated, Pynchon repeatedly concentrates on imperial conflicts in V., and
one of his main interests lies in how they were managed by competing powers. In this
regard, though, Pynchon is looking to the past to write a Foucauldian “history of the
present,” so as much as V. discourages facile historical connections, Pynchon is
“scanning the past for the first signs of the phenomena . . . of the Cold War,” a period that
also involved rival global powers (Dugdale 117). For instance, aside from its chapters set
in the U.S., V.’s plot unfolds as imperial forces, largely the British, attempt to hold onto
colonial outposts either from the encroachments of rival empires (the Fashoda Incident)
or from nationalist insurrections (the June Disturbances, the Suez Crisis). With each
outbreak, Pynchon also reminds his readers on how or if the Western empires decide, after engaging in a period of “premilitary activity” or espionage, to deploy their armed forces (53). Accordingly, V.’s main protagonists once served their own countries in these capacities: Stencil worked in Britain’s Foreign Office as a spy, like his father, and Benjamin (“Benny”) Profane served and was later discharged from the U.S. Navy.

As it happens, the activities of the U.S. Navy and its sailors frame V.’s narrative, and near the end, which is set in the colonial port of Malta, Pynchon’s divergent plot finally brings together not only Stencil and Profane, in the search for V., but also recently deployed British and American forces, who mix and brawl after the Suez Crisis began. Thus, at the level of character and history, Pynchon’s novel illustrates the U.S. and Britain’s close connections, their shared methods of asserting power, and their occasional clashes, which flare up in regards to territorial disputes in the third world. As a matter of fact, by charting these conflicts with the British, from references to the Venezuela Crisis of 1895 to the Suez Crisis—the latter of which effectively marked the end of Britain’s global dominance—Pynchon lays out how the United States emerged as Britain’s postwar successor and became the de-facto Western hegemon.11

Such a link, understated as it is here, challenges one of America’s Cold War narratives, which portrayed the new superpower as being chiefly interested in promoting democracy and freedom abroad, a narrative that Nabokov, for example, championed. Yet, in the case of the Suez Crisis, this familiar rhetoric actually helped to mask the U.S.’s strategy to supplant European empires and secure Western access for Middle Eastern oil. In his study of the Crisis, “Eisenhower and the Sinai Campaign of 1956,” Isaac Alteras argues that, at the time, the U.S. government’s vocal “commitment to broad
principles of justice and international law,” as shown by its appeals to the United Nations against Israel’s actions, mostly served as “public relations purposes” (32). As a Cold War player, the U.S. had “military, economic, and political interests” in the Middle East—all of which would be compromised if the Soviets later moved into the region and controlled “petroleum resources,” which were necessary to supply NATO forces (32).

Pynchon scholars, though, often fail to explore this sort of Cold War history, even when tackling the novel’s purpose in paralleling the U.S.’s actions with its earlier depictions of European imperialism. For example, some read V. as implying a continuum of nineteenth-century imperialism with mainly America’s Cold War “rhetoric” (Booker 92) or “cultural logic” (Belletto 55), while others have faulted Pynchon for not inviting his readers to comprehend the “economic terms” behind colonial and Cold War events in V. (McClure 157). But, near the end, Pynchon has an American naval officer divulge the economic reasons behind the Suez Crisis, when he addresses British fears about “[n]o petrol” as well as Nasser’s “economic jihad,” in which the Egyptian leader appealed to other Middle Eastern nations to blow up their “oil refineries” (436). Here, then, is the primary motive behind these nations’ involvement in the Middle East, and by focusing on their military maneuvering and spying in order to retain access to oil, Pynchon ventures well beyond parallels about Cold War rhetoric and “cultural logic.”

Still, this type of critique, which examines the causes and practices of imperialism, should not be mistaken as simply revealing Pynchon’s Marxist politics. As mentioned, although V. avoids harping on Cold War fears about the communist threat, Pynchon’s proto-anarchistic work also challenges orthodox Marxist beliefs, especially when it comes to interpretative models like historical materialism. For example, when
the aptly named Profane jocosely adopts Marx’s theory that “history unfolds according to economic forces,” his crude analysis reveals that “all political events” originate from those who crave money in order to “get laid steadily” (214). Sexual incentives, however, do not explain the political vision of the one future communist in V., a Russian expatriate named Kholsky, whom Pynchon characterizes as “homicidal” and whose beliefs are described as “non-human,” mainly because Kholsky trusts in the “irreversible” future of socialism and cares little for those who “may fall by the wayside” (405). Of course, one could counter that this negative portrait is filtered through Stencil’s biased narration, but Kholsky’s authoritarian brand of politics still epitomizes what Pynchon opposes, what with its indifference towards humanity and its unthinking embrace of ideology.

Actually, without labeling Pynchon an anarchist, Steven Belletto argues that in this instance and in the novel’s overall emphasis on contingency V. overlaps with American Cold War rhetoric. According to him, V. denounces the Soviets’ narrow ideology as a perversion of reality because it denies any element of “choice and chance” in history and in life (8). All things considered, though, Kholsky is just one figure, whom we never see act upon his beliefs, unlike other fanatical characters in this novel. Furthermore, as much as V. derides any belief in historical inevitability, like Marxism, its criticism of leftist ideologies is comparatively minor. In other words, whatever focus there is in V. on “totalitarian political systems,” it generally does not involve those on the left (Belletto 32).

On the contrary, the main political assertion in V. is that European imperialism paved the way for modern fascism. Such an argument, as scholars like Cooley and Belletto have noted, owes a debt to Hannah Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism
Yet, in distinction to Arendt’s study, Pynchon concentrates less on racism as the main principle behind both systems and more on their shared “totalitarian” impulses, which are seen not only in their need for control and organization but also in their “objectification of human beings” (Cowart 53).14 This mindset, for Pynchon, views politics as “a kind of engineering,” in which people serve as the “raw material” (242), and in a perverse illustration of its bearing to the character V., Pynchon has her internalize and embody it, especially when she replaces her own living tissue with objects. In addition, through her, Pynchon connects the two systems by tracing her involvement with imperial agents in Egypt and Florence, with Nazis in Southwest Africa, and with Mussolini and his “fasci di combattimento” in Malta (484). In fact, it is in this colonized country where the fascistic V. reencounters the British spy Stencil, Sr., and upon seeing him gather intelligence against a future uprising in Valletta in 1919, she sums up Pynchon’s political views about both imperialism and fascism: “We are on the same side . . . Our ends are the same” (487).

But, of course, totalitarian impulses were not exclusive to the European powers nor were they extinguished after WWII, and in its Cold War chapters, Pynchon’s V., in stark contrast to Nabokov’s American novels, suggests that the United States and its citizens are drifting towards fascism. As stated earlier, Booker has explored this proposition, and by employing Adorno’s ideas about domination, he argues that “the drive towards mastery,” which characterized both imperialism and fascism, has resumed in contemporary America (95). Yet, to illustrate his claims, Booker focuses on sexual motivations and the treatment of “the Other,” as opposed to issues related to weaponry and supervision. To my mind, the clearest examples of American fascism in V. involve
the U.S.’s Cold War military build-up and the minor characters’ fascistic tendencies. For example, there is Profane’s “civil service” boss (Zeitsuss), who wants to organize his underground workers and equip them each with “an armband” (113); there’s Mafia Winsome, an Ayn Rand-type novelist, whose racist theories are so troubling that her own husband calls her a “Fascist” (349); and, as usual in Pynchon’s work, there are the government agents and police officers, who harass Profane and his decadent friends, “the Whole Sick Crew”—who are, in turn, likened to fascists by Stencil (296).

Still, the foremost indicator in V. of the U.S.’s movement towards fascism is seen in its increased production of armaments. As mentioned, Pynchon’s novel is framed around the U.S. Navy, but as Tony Tanner notes, there are frequent allusions to “weapons of war” throughout V. (54). In spite of this, Tanner fails to mention the Cold War context that would account for the then-current level of proliferation, even though Pynchon makes the historical connection clear. For instance, early in the Cold War, a defense contractor (Clayton Chiclitz) takes on government contracts that would install one of his devices “on ships, airplanes, and more lately, missiles” (227). By 1956, “less than ten years later he had built up an interlocking kingdom,” an “empire” called Yoyodyne, which becomes “responsible for systems management, airframes, propulsion, command systems [and] ground support equipment” (227). As if this production of matériel were not enough, Yoyodyne also employs a former Nazi engineer, and Chiclitz himself characterizes his company in terms that Pynchon connects to fascism, such as “the idea of force, enterprise, engineering skill and rugged individualism” (227). Already in this first novel, then, Pynchon links fascism to the United States’ desire for missiles and Cold War weaponry, a point he will expand on in Gravity’s Rainbow. What's more, it is on this
issue of technology that *V.* most plainly offers the kind of Frankfurt school critique that Booker and Belletto have detected but have not fully explored in terms of Pynchon’s anarchist politics or the Cold War.

As is often remarked upon, Pynchon’s postmodern novels “question and undermine all of the West’s master narratives,” yet it is the Enlightenment narrative of scientific progress that Pynchon repeatedly critiques in his oeuvre, and *V.* is no exception (McHale 98). Here, rather than displaying their dominance, Pynchon’s characters find themselves enmeshed or at the mercy of technology and science, and as Belletto states, “for Pynchon, science is its own ideology” (55). For instance, Pynchon has an employee of Yoyodyne’s “Anthroresearch Associates” facility present to Profane a historical “notion of progress,” even though this summation exposes modern science’s record of conceptualizing man as a mechanism (284). He states:

In the eighteenth century it was often convenient to regard man as a clockwork automaton. In the nineteenth century, with Newtonian physics pretty well assimilated and a lot of work in thermodynamics going on, man was looked on more as a heat-engine . . . Now in the twentieth century, with nuclear and subatomic physics a going thing, man had become something which absorbs X-rays, gamma rays, and neutrons. (284)

According to Pynchon, then, science, like the other ideologies he condemns, has only advanced in its disregard for humanity. Worse still is that by the time of the Cold War, technology has developed to the point where mankind has become vulnerable either to total annihilation or to “nuclear radiation” (48, 356). As a result, Pynchon’s characters, like Profane, submit and want only to live “in peace” among the “inanimate objects” of post-war America, a place where modernity and the “inroads” of “democracy” have initiated such a shift that “crude flying machines have evolved into ‘weapons systems’ of then undreamed-of complexity” (37, 97). The general thrust here is that technology has
outstripped the ken and capabilities of much of humanity, and by inverting the typical model of subject-object relations, Pynchon undercuts not only the metanarrative of the Enlightenment but the U.S.’s Cold War faith in technology as well.

In effect, by reworking these narratives about progress, Pynchon also challenges the attending Cold War rhetoric that touted the superiority of the American way of life. For one thing, in contrast to Nabokov, Pynchon’s Cold War America, like DeLillo’s, is devoid of any “liberal optimism” about the future (McHale 98). Instead, the atmosphere in V., as Tanner recognizes, is “full of hints of exhaustion, extinction, [and] dehumanization,” as if America were the last stop in the decline of Western civilization (53). For Tanner, this enervating “environment” is tied to Pynchon’s usual theme of entropy, although it is more likely that the nihilism and despair in V. result from the existing fears about the Cold War and the bomb. After all, why engage in change and struggle if one believes the world will be obliterated? Certainly, this is what many of the characters in V. dread, and in the first chapter, we are already informed that an enlisted man “saw apocalypse” (11). Thenceforth, the path of V.’s plot continually points to an impending war, so much so that near the end, when the Suez Crisis ramps up and the Western nations dispatch their ships and submarines, it makes sense that some characters would agonize about a future apocalypse, in which the “Middle East, cradle of civilization, may yet be its grave” (427, 387).

As scholars, like David Cowart, have pointed out, “This apocalyptic tenor is a standard feature in Pynchon’s work” (Darkness 103). Still, given Pynchon’s anarchistic fondness for disrupting patterns and beliefs that point to a determined outcome, these fears about an inevitable Armageddon never materialize—and not just with the Suez
Crisis but with any of the earlier crises involving V. the provocatrix. In truth, after encountering so many conflicts that always fail to widen into larger wars, it soon becomes apparent that Pynchon’s novel is, as Celmer states, “chock full of mock apocalypses” (26). Therefore, in addition to revising the spy genre, V. also reworks the apocalyptic thriller, a genre that, ironically, grew in popularity during the Cold War due to its suspenseful plots, which hurtled “inexorably toward holocaust” (Schaub “Underworld” 71). In this case, though, no such ending comes about, and besides undercutting the plot mechanics, Pynchon also places the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Cold War in perspective, mainly by having the paranoid Stencil adopt it and relaying it in the thoughts and speech of his characters, who are also preoccupied about seeing their world “lit into holocaust” (194).

Then again, this does not mean that Stencil’s overheated projections are entirely at odds with the pessimistic forecast that Pynchon predicts in V. That is to say, as much as Pynchon’s novel debunks deterministic theories, the author still insinuates that humanity is on a course in which its technology will, if not destroy a great number of people, then it will certainly “alter them” (48). In other words, according to his vision in V., the history and politics of the modern era has become evident not just in our charred landscapes, but also in our bodies, our diminished sense of self, and our treatment of each other. Thus, Pynchon reworks the apocalyptic genre in V. not by suggesting that mankind is doomed, or that a revelation is at hand to deliver us (“Nobody is going to step down from heaven and square away . . . us and Russia,” says McClintic Sphere), nor is he arguing that our technology is beyond our control (366). Instead, as Tanner argues, Pynchon hints that humanity will be complicit in its own dehumanization (53).
It is this prospect that terrifies Stencil, and it helps to clarify his paranoia. According to Freud, “the purpose of paranoia is to ward off an idea that is incompatible with the ego, by projecting its substance into the external world” (“Draft H. Paranoia” 209). This process is exactly what Stencil does with his “remarkably scattered concept” about V., in which, through all the historical scenarios he places her, the only clear progression is her increasing dehumanization (389). But to decipher the precise psychological motivation as to why Stencil does this, as Freud did with Hanold, is a fool’s errand because Pynchon mocks the idea even thru Stencil. “You’ll ask next if he believes [V.] to be his mother,” Stencil says to a woman asking about his idée fixe. “The question is ridiculous” (54). Even so, for many scholars, Pynchon’s and Stencil’s purpose with V. is to employ her as a symbol for “why we pursue our destruction” (Olderman 124), and as Judith Chambers notes, it surely seems relevant to this Cold War novel that Stencil’s obsession with V. develops in 1945, the year that nuclear bombs appeared (57).

Then again, in an anarchistic novel that lauds indeterminacy, there is no reason that Pynchon should confine V. to one symbolic meaning or that Stencil should hold to one position about her. In fact, I would argue it is more accurate to say that Stencil utilizes V. as an uncanny object of fascination and revulsion; or as the character Eigenvalue tells Stencil about his obsessive search: “your attitude toward V. must have more sides to it than you’re ready to admit. It’s what the psychoanalysts used to call ambivalence” (249). For Stencil, though, this ambivalence does not pertain to V.’s true identity or even really to her motives, but to her actual existence, and of all the lines
from his father’s journals, the key ones he recites are these: “There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she” (53).

Consequently, with his fixation on her ever-changing body, V. comes to resemble Kristeva’s reworking of Freud’s uncanny as the abject, an idea that has political connotations in terms of Stencil’s views about anarchy. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order”; it “does not respect borders, positions, rules”; and it is finally “immoral, sinister, scheming and shady: a terror that dissembles” (4). This description sums up Stencil’s conception of V., and rather than accepting that her historical presence might “add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects,” his grotesque imagination builds to where she is finally, at seventy-six, made up of “plastic” skin, “nylon limbs,” and “a platinum heart” (445, 411). In his telling, then, the modern era and a fetishism that extended even to the self have eventually transformed a once proper English girl named Victoria Wren into a fascist cyborg.

Outside of Stencil’s paranoid obsession, though, the issue remains as to whether V. is just a singular case, a fantasy of aberrant behavior that has no real connection to the other characters, especially those in the Cold War period. However, if one accepts that V., at least, serves “[a]s a Foucauldian reminder of the destructive effects of history on the body,” a site where Pynchon often conveys meaning given his rejection of ideology, then she functions as a kind of extreme model or cautionary tale (Cornel-Pope 116).

After all, Pynchon shows that the dehumanizing forces that transformed her have enacted a similar toll on others, and given the later increase in objects and weaponry, they will only worsen in the postwar period. For example, in a chapter that covers the Siege of Malta, the narrator Fausto Majstral recounts not only the sequence of identity changes he
underwent during the bombing raids but also the dissociation he experienced to cope. “Fausto III was born on the Day of the 13 Raids,” he explains. “Fausto III had taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city” (307). Like V., Fausto here chooses to align himself with the inanimate, giving in to the death drive and living only “at the threshold of consciousness,” like “an automaton,” in order to survive “the rain of bombs,” one of which later kills V. in Malta (309).

Unlike V., though, Fausto finds his desensitization unsettling and wonders how the incessant bombing will affect the “strange generation” of children who have “grown used to it” (310). Observing kids, like his young daughter, he suspects that they will internalize the mentality he has adopted, one that asks, “But what’s a human, after all? No different from a church, obelisk, statue” (356). Even more troubling, though, is that Fausto fears that the only lesson they will take away from this Siege is that “it’s the bomb that wins,” so when he muses about the postwar future, he asks himself, “What monsters shall rise in our wake . . .” (356, 309). The implication, then, is that the Cold War era will be rife with multiple versions of V.

Indeed, Pynchon plays upon this possibility once the Cold War has been fully established. Placing Profane as a night watchmen at Yoyodyne’s Anthroresearch facility, Pynchon introduces two test dummies, one of which is used to measure accidents (SHOCK), the other “radiation absorption” (SHROUD), although as far as Profane is concerned, they are “entirely lifelike in every way” (284). In fact, their uncanny qualities disturb Profane to such an extent that he imagines that one of them is addressing him, and what he hears is another example of Pynchon’s prediction about mankind’s future
alteration. “Me and SHOCK are what you and everybody will be someday,” says SHROUD. “None of you have very far to go” (286). When pressed about how this change will transpire, the manikin argues that it has “already started,” as demonstrated by the postwar “photographs of Auschwitz,” which showed the corpses of the Nazis’ victims heaped in a manner that resembled a junkyard of “car bodies” (295). Implying the now familiar link between the factory system and Auschwitz, a link he would later make explicit in his essay “Is It OK to Be a Luddite?” (1984), Pynchon focuses, again, on mankind’s increasing ability to dehumanize one another, a process that, according to SHROUD, will become exacerbated in the future, perhaps to the point where a human being will be regarded in the same way that Profane looks upon one of the test dummies: as “a human object” (285).

Because of this repeated emphasis on how modernity has led to a decrease in the value and dignity of human beings, many scholars contend that Pynchon is a humanist and, as such, is less interested in taking a political position in this novel. To be sure, the general concern in *V.* is that to regain “humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity,” but, as Pynchon’s novel repeatedly demonstrates, the problem is that we have become decadent or, in the novel’s terms, “less human” (322). The general result, then, is that we have transferred our lost humanity onto “inanimate objects and abstract theories” or ideologies (405). To counter this trend, the best advice Pynchon offers is levelheaded empathy, a view that, for most scholars, is reflected in McClintic Sphere’s advice of “Keep cool, but care” (366). However, as Kathryn Hume points out, this potentially trite slogan “expresses an attitude but does not supply a blueprint” (“Religious” 170). Moreover, Pynchon scholars rarely seem to notice that Pynchon
undercuts this advice when his narrator states, right after Sphere’s utterance, that
“somebody had run over a skunk a ways back,” as if the advice were so stale it left an
odor (366). In any case, none of Pynchon’s main characters fulfill “Sphere’s ethos” nor
are they “shown struggling to effect any kind of explicit political change” (McClure 164).
At the end of the novel, for instance, Stencil retreats into Sweden, like Heller’s Yossarian
in Catch-22, and Stencil is obsessed as ever with his pursuit of V. Unattached to
anything, Profane characteristically drifts along, this time in Malta, admitting that after
all his adventures, he has not “learned a goddamn thing” (454).21

It is statements like Profane’s, combined with Pynchon’s rejection of
metanarratives and his embrace of chaos and fragmentation, that lead many scholars to
conclude that V. is “deliberately hollow” (Tanner 66) and “almost nihilistic” (Cowart 6).
After all, as stated, while it is quite clear what Pynchon is against in V., it remains
difficult determining what exactly he endorses here, aside from basic notions about
recognizing one’s humanity. Additionally, in regards to politics, there are obvious
conundrums that Pynchon runs into, especially if one examines his positions in terms of
Cold War rhetoric. For one, as Belletto says, by denouncing ideology or totalitarianism,
Pynchon falls in line, however inadvertently, with Cold War rhetoric that equated
ideology with communism. Secondly, by championing the need to recognize the value
and complexity of individuals and their freedom as well as minority rights, Pynchon
would appear to be defending liberalism. Therefore, if one combines these two positions,
Pynchon’s first novel seems to reflect the dominant politics of the Cold War: liberal
anticommunism.
However, as mentioned, Pynchon’s novel undermines classical liberalism when it denounces any notions of historical and scientific progress. As Brian Jarvis sums it up, “There is little doubt that V. is openly hostile towards the principles of Enlightenment rationality” (56). Moreover, I would contend that Pynchon shows modern liberalism to be a rather weak bulwark against fascism. In fact, what many scholars fail to realize is that often those characters in V. who seemingly represent liberal views are usually exposed as hypocrites or borderline fascists. In the postwar era, for example, there are the white patrons of jazz clubs who “go through the old Northern liberal routine” of hoping others will notice them, sitting and socializing with African-Americans (280). Still, the best example remains the passage in V. that for many scholars indicates Pynchon’s supposedly middle-of-the-road politics:

If there is any political moral to be found in this world . . . it is that we carry on the business of this century with an intolerable double vision. Right and left, the hothouse and the street . . . What of the real present, the men-of-no-politics, the once-Respectable Golden Mean? Obsolete, in any case, lost sight of. (468)

This paean to moderation, though, comes from the journal of Stencil, Sr., the British Field Office agent who is usually sent to spy on colonials who hope for national independence. Pynchon’s portrait of this elitist character reveals someone who yearns for stability and fears “mob violence”; who once “believed in social progress” because he “saw chances for personal progress” (460-1); and who becomes so nostalgic for the virtues of the imperial past that he commits “treason by being lured into a liaison with a Fascist agent,” V. (Dugdale 111). It is, therefore, highly unlikely that this nationalistic, establishment figure represents Pynchon’s views.

As stated, Pynchon’s political beliefs in V. show themselves more through opposition rather than outright declaration and while he advances no utopian agenda here,
this does not mean he negates any and all possibilities. For instance, when a character asks if he is witnessing a “revolution,” Pynchon’s narrator explains that it is “better than that: it was a free-for-all” (439). Indeed, despite the ramifications surrounding V. and her supposed adherence to upheavals, there is a repeated motif in V. that admires the potential that emerges from chaos or, better yet, from liberty in all its messy glory, and Pynchon will only embrace this outlook as his work progresses. This, then, is why his politics come closest to aligning with anarchism, although besides a noted antipathy to militarism and imposed hierarchies, there is nothing especially orthodox about his views in V. If anything, they are perhaps best embodied by an anarchist group in Florence, one that Pynchon describes as lacking “any particular fondness for authority,” a group that is not “politically speaking, especially liberal or nationalistic; it was simply that they enjoyed a good riot now and again” (179). It is as if Pynchon is most enamored of creative destruction, in which a new world can emerge.

Therefore, in the end, while Pynchon’s V. never offers an unambiguous authorial message nor a specific framework on which to build, this absence should be understood as being freeing rather than nullifying. After all, it suggests that readers “give up external plans, theories and codes” in order to arrive at their own conclusions (201). Furthermore, with its embrace of accident and randomness, Pynchon’s first novel rejects old, established notions of history, with their emphases “on continuity” or “the fiction of cause and effect” (306). The alternate conception that Pynchon advances here and elsewhere, according to Amy Elias, is “subjunctive,” one in “in which multiple possibilities of interpretation coexist simultaneously,” resulting in the potential “for alternative ways of being, thinking and acting” (129). The result, then, is “an unsettling,
uncanny, but also liberating space,” which, to my mind, best reveals Pynchon’s emerging anarchist politics in \textit{V}. (129).

\textbf{II. “The Separate, Silent, Unsuspected World”: Alienation and Anarchy in \textit{Lot 49}}

In \textit{The Anarchists} (1964), a book that Pynchon has clearly read, historian James Joll touches on the many rifts that had been building between Mikhail Bakunin and Marx, as they and their supporters quarreled over doctrines in the International Working Men’s Association.\textsuperscript{22} One such dispute emerged in 1869, during the Basle Congress, where Bakunin argued that the right of inheritance should be abolished. This matter was important to Bakunin, who believed that “hereditary fortunes” had led to inequality and that the dissolution of inherited wealth would lead towards a similar disbanding of the state, so he wanted it explicitly stated in the International’s charter (85). The Marxists, however, argued that this issue was minor, or one that a future revolution would resolve (85). In the end Bakunin won his case, but thereafter relations deteriorated between both leaders and their supporters, with Marx believing that Bakunin was behind “a vast secret conspiracy” and Bakunin denouncing Marx’s ideas as authoritarian (86). By the next Congress at The Hague, the two factions formally split.

Anarchism, conspiracy, inheritance, Bakunin—all find their way into \textit{The Crying of Lot 49}. In his first novel, Pynchon explored the paranoid musings of a detective-like protagonist who strived to make sense of a historical “conspiracy” as well as the legacy of a lost loved one (Stencil’s father). In his second, Pynchon does much the same but on a reduced scale, and the Cold War genre trappings of \textit{V}. are exchanged for a more contemporary focus on Cold War socioeconomics. Here he presents an amateur detective (Oedipa Maas), who, upon acquainting herself with the estate of an old
boyfriend (Pierce Inverarity), encounters a possible conspiracy involving the Trystero, an alternate postal service whose history and ubiquitous presence obsess her to such a degree that she fears it could be a projection of her paranoia. Despite these familiar plot patterns and the recurrence of themes involving entropy and the uncanny, *Lot 49* ultimately distinguishes itself from *V.* because in this work Pynchon is much more emphatic about the consequences of his protagonist’s solipsism. In other words, unlike Stencil’s delusion, which never seems to hold much social weight or exact any cost from him, Oedipa’s blinkered pursuit of the Trystero uncovers a social reality she had previously ignored, and in a novel that centers on an inheritance, Oedipa finally wonders what her part will be in the legacy that is left behind.

Not surprisingly, *Lot 49*’s storyline, in which a self-identified “Young Republican” receives an education about alienated groups in America, has attracted much critical attention in regards to Pynchon’s politics (76). For the most part, scholars read Pynchon as indicting the conformity and consensus politics of the Cold War, especially since many of the citizens Oedipa interacts with have become either disenchanted with America’s corporate culture, or they are too poor to participate fully in its consumer ethos. Such a focus on capitalism and class, then, would seemingly mark *Lot 49* as a Marxist work. However, as Brian Jarvis states, Pynchon’s novel fails to “formulate the kind of collective and programmatic response to [the capitalist] system which is traditionally favored by the left” (64). By the novel’s abrupt conclusion, for instance, Oedipa fails to take any definitive action, and the shifting political allegiances of the Trystero make it difficult to locate which side, if any, it would take in a revolution.
Nevertheless, both Oedipa and the Trystero offer certain possibilities or tactics that allow one to contend with a hegemonic culture. Since these tactics are not strictly Marxist or liberal, which is apt given the novel’s setting of 1965, when the Cold War consensus was breaking, I contend that *Lot 49* reflects Pynchon’s growing affinity for anarchism. Furthermore, this position can be discerned, broadly, in how *Lot 49* reworks the law-and-order tenets of the detective genre; specifically, in its references to anarchism’s history and early methods; and thematically, in its denunciation of the state and property. Thus, in keeping with the novel’s focus on “plots,” this essay will utilize Jameson’s theories about the detective genre and cognitive mapping along with his and de Certeau’s ideas about urban space. My argument is that, in contrast to Oedipa’s desire for order, Pynchon favors anarchism’s hope for a freer, more diverse world, one that offers a pointed alternative to California’s Cold War milieu, with its defense industries, its sprawl, and its consensus politics, all of which have resulted in a state, if not a nation, of alienated citizens.23

Regarded as a seminal work of postmodernism, *Lot 49* can actually be hard to classify, even for some Pynchon scholars. In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale, for instance, has argued that *Lot 49* is “modernist in form” because the narration remains within Oedipa’s “mediating consciousness” and the plot never raises ontological issues, which he sees as characterizing postmodernism (23).24 On the other hand, as shown by the title of his recent essay “Pynchon’s Postmodernism” (2012), McHale has now re-categorized *Lot 49* by pointing out that it, like “[a]ll of Pynchon’s novels,” serves as an example of historiographic metafiction, as it follows Hutcheon’s theories about postmodernism’s concerns with problematizing history (101). Moreover, for McHale,
Lot 49 aligns with other postmodern theories since it rejects the metanarrative of Enlightenment rationality, and it destabilizes the popular genre within which it operates (101). In point of fact, these two aspects are interrelated, and as Patell claims, by attacking the “core concepts” that undergird detective fiction—i.e., rationality and positivism—Pynchon also challenges the Enlightenment philosophy that supports liberalism (111, 126). And yet, in his study, Patell does not extend this critique to Cold War liberalism nor does he consider the notion that Pynchon’s reworking of the detective genre is grounded in an anarchist outlook.

Given its familiar tropes, including stories that are geared towards justice and order and heroes who are asocial loners, the detective genre is not generally associated with radical or left-leaning politics. A Marxist scholar, like Jameson, for example, maintains that the standard detective story is a “form without ideological content” (“Raymond” 625-7). By contrast, in his study The Doomed Detective (1984), Stefano Tani asserts that the genre is, by its nature, “conservative,” in that the detective “reestablishes the status quo” after a murder or outbreak of violence (21). As if this plot function were not enough, detectives and later private eyes also work as models of efficiency or “middle class enterprise,” adhering often to a personal, almost chivalric, code while mixing among rich clients and the underclass (Tani xi). Because of this code, to many critics, modern detectives resembled mythical or existential figures—anything other than political ones. But, according to Tani, during the height of the Cold War, when the hardboiled genre sunk into “kitsch” and “macho escapism,” it also, at times, served as political propaganda, as shown when the private eye Mike Hammer expressed his disgust with “‘Reds’” and his wish “‘to mop them out of America’” (xi,
Blunt political opinions, though, were rare for the genre, and by the 1960s, philosophical and formal issues took precedence as postmodern writers employed detective elements for anti-positivistic ends. The trend became known as “the anti-detective story,” and Lot 49 is ostensibly the ideal model (Spanos 25).

For scholars like Tani, Pynchon’s novel is less a parody of detective fiction than it is “a deliberate negation of the fundamental purposes of the genre” (24). Still, there are political connotations linked to Pynchon’s brand of subversion that Tani fails to explore. First off, besides placing a female heroine in a habitually “macho” genre, Lot 49’s most famous break from the detective story is its deliberate lack of a solution, an absence Tani connects to postmodernism’s “lack of a center, its refusal to posit a unifying system” (39). Yet, as stated with V., Lot 49’s open ending and centrifugal plot also reflect Pynchon’s anarchist aesthetic, which embraces chaos and mystery over closed, teleological narratives. For example, in most detective stories the investigator’s powers of deduction lead to the dismissal of false leads, whereas Oedipa’s inquiry brings about such a level of uncertainty that it extends even to her identity. “Where was the Oedipa who’d driven so bravely up here from San Narciso?” she asks, after facing numerous clues. “That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye . . . believing all you needed was grit . . . to solve any great mystery” (124). With such persistent doubts, then, in both his heroine’s mind and with his novel’s ending, Pynchon throws the ordered, “conservative” world of the detective story into a permanent state of disarray.

This vision, though, can strike critics, as it did with V., as nihilistic. That is to say, by deconstructing the genre’s structural order, Pynchon also removes its implied moral order, and in the end, Lot 49 provides neither the “punishment of the culprit nor the
triumph of justice” (Tani 44). But these omissions, again, only further prove how anarchic Pynchon’s novel is, mainly because there is no “illegal” act committed in Lot 49’s present, save for the encroachments the Trystero poses to the U.S. postal service. In contrast to most works of its ilk, including Pynchon’s more conventional detective novel Inherent Vice, Lot 49 does not open with a kidnapping or a murder nor is there a police or criminal presence that impedes the protagonist’s quest. Instead, from the beginning, Oedipa becomes initiated into the law, through a codicil in Pierce’s will, and what Pynchon demonstrates is that if there is a “crime,” it relates to how Pierce has built his fortune: by altering the region with his investments and shady real estate deals.

Actually, in its portrait of corruption, real estate, and urban alienation in southern California, Lot 49 hews rather closely to the traditions of its hardboiled precursors, especially Chandler.28 In an essay entitled “On Raymond Chandler” (1970), Fredric Jameson argues that this author’s novels were notable in American literature because they presented a “darker, concrete reality” of local politics, one marked by a city’s “ever-present corruption,” often involving civic issues like “property taxes” (631). Moreover, Jameson reads Chandler’s depictions of a socially fragmented Los Angeles as predictive, so by the “fifties and sixties,” almost every American city resembles Chandler’s “centerless” L.A., with its lack of “organic social unity” (628). In other words, Jameson bemoans the social effects of urban decentralization, which entailed a “loss of central city employment, the development of outlying shopping and activity centers, and the continuing erosion of downtown” (Jones 109). Altogether, then, the Cold War era is a time of increased alienation, in which the “various classes have lost touch with each other,” as they close themselves off in “identical prefabricated houses” or in cars that
pass each other on newly constructed highways and freeways (628-9). Such a description sums up the world of *Lot 49*.

Pynchon’s novel opens with Oedipa living a buffered existence in suburbia, and it is only after leaving that “cheered land,” in the hopes of understanding Pierce’s estate, that she is confronted with mass alienation and social fragmentation (180). This jolt of reality, as Heise states, challenges not only her “middle-class worldview” but also her “need for an organizing principle” (200), and Pynchon hints at this mindset early on with Oedipa’s misreading of San Narciso. Driving along the highway to this satellite city of Los Angeles, a place described as “Pierce’s domicile and headquarters,” Oedipa stops to obtain a macro-view, but what she beholds is “less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts,” like “census tracts” and “shopping nuclei” (24). Still, her instinct is to impose an “ordered” unity (24), and by doing so, she mimics the “totalizing eye” perspective that de Certeau describes in “Walking in the City,” in which an elevated viewer tries to make “the complexity of the city readable” (128). The problem, though, is that Oedipa, who in the first chapter is likened to Rapunzel in her tower, needs to preserve the illusion of mastery that her towering, panoptic view provides. Often beset with dense information, she believes that, like a detective, she can unify any dispersed plot with which she is presented, whether it is a city or “the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity” (90). Either way, she “would give them order, she would create constellations” (90).

Like Stencil, though, the manner in which Oedipa does this is through a conspiracy, so the bulk of *Lot 49* presents what Jameson would call a “degraded attempt” at cognitive mapping. For Jameson, this term refers to a new aesthetic that could
represent how a postmodern subject made sense of his or her position among the bewildering realities of late capitalism (“Cognitive” 347). While admitting uncertainty as to what form this aesthetic should take, Jameson rejects out of hand the notion that it would resemble “conspiracy plots,” which he derides as “the poor person’s cognitive mapping” (356). In his opinion these types of plots overly concern them-selves with “content” and paranoid themes and thus fail to advance new forms that passably represent the system of late capitalism or “the spatial peculiarities” of life in “the postmodern age” (356). Based on this criteria, as McHale notes, Lot 49, if not all of Pynchon’s novels, would be dismissed as diversionary entertainment, in that their paranoid plots work only towards “distracting and deflecting us from recognizing our true situation” (“Pynchon’s” 109).

But, of course, Pynchon does not uncritically embrace his protagonists’ paranoia, and in Lot 49, he repeatedly demonstrates that Oedipa’s fixation on conspiracy distracts her from investigating the structural forces that have shaped her environment. What’s more, Pynchon’s focus on urban settings and alienation recalls Jameson’s source behind cognitive mapping, specifically Kevin Lynch’s ideas in The Image and the City. According to Lynch, “urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmappability of local cityscapes” (353), and in a similar manner, Pynchon’s emphasis on Oedipa’s misreading of San Narciso and later cities is meant to predict her increasing alienation. For many critics, one reason for Oedipa’s difficulties with comprehending California’s cities and its postwar economy, if not late capitalism as a whole, is her bourgeois ideology. In fact, for Jameson, this is why Lynch’s theory is so politically useful: it offers “a spatial analogue of Althusser’s ideology” (353). Ultimately, then, for
both Jameson and Pynchon, the city serves as a stand-in for the larger “social totality,” and in *Lot 49* the implied hope is that by better grasping her surrounding environs, Oedipa will see through her nation’s and her own ideology, which, to some extent, she belatedly does (355).

From the start, though, Oedipa’s “growing obsession” with conspiracy distracts her from contemplating Pierce’s holdings and the Cold War economy that has developed the region (90). For instance, when Oedipa first descends off the highway, she encounters San Narciso’s main “source of employment, the Galactronics Division of Yoyodyne, Inc., one of the giants of the aerospace industry,” a company Pierce had “lured” to the city through a tax deal (25-26). Thus, the city owes its existence to Pierce and Cold War spending, just as the region at large was dependent on government funding for, among other things, its defense industries. As if to belabor this point, Pynchon later has Oedipa overhear the Yoyodyne president (Clayton Chiclitz from *V.*) sing a ditty that supplies a then-current list of defense contractors: “Bendix guides the warheads in, / Avco builds them nice. / Douglas, North American, / Grumman get their slice” (83). Yet, even after hearing this catalogue, which lays out the correlation between regional economies and Cold War politics, Oedipa persists in her investigation of the Trystero conspiracy. As a consequence, she pays little heed to what drives the region economically, just as she disregards, for most of *Lot 49*, the effects of Pierce’s city planning.

With a novel that begins in the suburbs and ends with an auction, it is only fitting that one of Pynchon’s main concerns lies with property. After all, along with inheritances, the rejection of private ownership is a major issue that animates anarchism.
(Joll 14). However, early on, this subject’s significance eludes Oedipa, whose interest is not piqued even after she learns more about Pierce’s assets. In the second chapter, for example, Pierce’s lawyer (Metzger) familiarizes Oedipa with the deceased’s many investments and holdings—so many, in fact, that the estate almost becomes a caricature of the tangled “nexus” of late capitalism, with its “extended capacity for convolution” (33). “What the hell didn’t he own?” Oedipa asks out of frustration (39). One of Pierce’s final projects included the “Fangoso Lagoons, a new housing development” that he had ownership in, and upon seeing a commercial for this future subdivision (“a map of the place flashed across the screen”), Oedipa is “reminded of her look” at San Narciso (31).

The shared connection here involves Oedipa’s cursory scan of Pierce’s planned communities, and as with her prior glimpse of San Narciso, Pynchon demonstrates that, after a brief yearning for “revelation,” Oedipa is all too ready to move on, literally and figuratively. Unconcerned with investigating the larger social costs related with these locations, she instead directs her energies towards other plots.

Therefore, Pynchon sets up a pattern in which Oedipa, driving along the freeway in her pursuit of the Trystero, ignores the effects of exurban sprawl. Of the many factors that led to this historical trend, like cheap housing and lower taxes, two major incentives came from the government in response to the Cold War: the National Industrial Dispersal Policy of 1951 and the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956, both of which Eisenhower believed were necessary to mitigate the losses from a potential atomic attack. Yet, the actual losses comprised an abandonment of cities, resulting in the “fragmented and abstracted” postwar social arrangement that Jameson believes is made evident by the lack of an urban center and increased access to transportation.
As if to illustrate this shift and its resulting alienation, Pynchon has Oedipa see from her perch on the freeway “a vast sprawl of houses,” but the only community or even repeated contact she later enjoys among San Narciso’s residents occurs in a motel (24). By the same token, Pierce’s plans for Fangoso Lagoons also do not offer much in the way of a substitute for an urban center, what with its ersatz “social hall in the middle of an artificial lake,” attainable only by boat (31). These inorganic enclaves, as Heise argues, are marked by a lack of “history and traditions that would anchor the formation of community” (205). Nonetheless, they have still managed to lure the middle class away from the city, and for Pynchon, the most glaring facilitator behind all this mobility and development is the freeways.35

Representing a new means of possible connection, the freeways in *Lot 49* actually serve as one of its symbols of alienation, not unlike the Trystero’s post horn. Oedipa’s initial sighting of San Narciso, for example, reveals that the only shared characteristic among the various “tracts” and shopping districts is that each section is “overlaid with access roads to its own freeway” (24). Thus, these suburbanites have found a way to avoid not only the urban poor but also each other. What’s more, just as Oedipa employs the Trystero as a form of displacement for dealing with Pierce’s death and byzantine estate, Pynchon indicates that literal displacement is occurring to California’s citizens and its deceased. On two occasions, Oedipa is told that a cemetery was removed because it lay in the route of the East San Narciso freeway. “[I]t had no right to be there,” Metzger explains, “so we just barreled on through” (61). In a recent essay about this subject, Stephen Hock argues that the freeway in *Lot 49* “destroys the land and effaces the memory of the dead,” all in the service of late capital and a “repressive political power”
However, these are not terms or frameworks that Oedipa uses to grasp this type of disclosure.

Upon hearing about the freeway and the cemetery for the second time, Pynchon’s heroine “recognizes signals” and “clues”; yet, true to her mindset, she only situates them in regards to the Trystero conspiracy or to a “revelation” (95). At this point, she will not connect a social reality to “this secular announcement” about the freeways, so Pynchon’s narrator teases that Oedipa may never discover “the central truth,” although given Pynchon’s anti-deterministic nature, it seems unlikely that there is one key to explain Oedipa’s travails (95). Critical orthodoxy, after all, holds that Pynchon’s work typifies postmodern depthlessness, that “behind his false surfaces are only more false surfaces, the ones that we create” (Wood “All” 24). Even so, much of Lot 49 still suggests that the urban underclass, which Oedipa has ignored, will find itself displaced by the freeway’s expansion. Thus, it is no coincidence that when Oedipa finally notices a city’s derelicts, they are living “among the sunless, concrete underpinnings of the freeway,” where, needless to say, she also finds a W.A.S.T.E. mailbox for the Trystero’s correspondence (129).

Because of this eventual convergence, it is hard to accept that the Trystero simply functions as “one of the biggest red herrings in post-war fiction” (Heise 176). To be sure, as stated, the Trystero conspiracy works initially as a distraction, preventing Oedipa from fully examining California’s economic and political realities. Nevertheless, as I will later show, it puts Oedipa in touch with a variety of alienated citizens, including “the poor, racial minorities, political extremists, homosexuals” as well as “the mad, lonely, and frightened” (Jarvis 65). Whatever else, then, Oedipa comes across a number of groups
who were either demonized or marginalized by Cold War norms and rhetoric, and the
general thrust of *Lot 49* is that the Cold War consensus is breaking down, resulting in a
possible outbreak of social and political diversity. Indeed, with the surfacing of the
Trystero and its “constant theme” of “disinheritance,” it seems, at times, as if *Lot 49*’s
plot will fulfill Bakunin’s prediction: that the state will unravel just as an inheritance is
dissipating (160). At the very least, as critics like Schaub and others have claimed,
Pynchon’s novel “captures a mood” of a nation on the brink of social upheaval (“Crying”
32).

Set in the summer of 1965, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and
Johnson’s landslide victory of 1964, Pynchon ironically presents a world in which
America’s citizens are disenchanted with government and liberalism is in decline. In
fact, scholars, like Schaub and Varsava, read *Lot 49* as being “in dialogue with an
enervated liberalism,” which, as in *V.*, finds itself challenged by radical ideologies, like
anarchism and fascism (Schaub *American* 191). This emergence of extremes, though,
does not mean that Pynchon yearns for the “excluded middle” position of liberalism nor
does he support, as Varsava maintains, its “rationalism and consensus politics” versus
Pierce’s economic libertarianism (7). Rather, Pynchon sees them all as being inextricably
linked, and for him, postwar liberalism is just as at fault for the stifling status quo as
postwar conservatism. As Schaub states, for Pynchon, the political middle ground “is
occupied by the consensus culture of government and business,” which he “represents as
monopolistic and oppressive” (“Crying” 32). For instance, in *Lot 49* we are told that the
dominant anticommunist politics of the Cold War, embodied by “secretaries James and
Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear daft numina,” created a “time of nerves, blandness,
and retreat,” a period that shaped Oedipa and her Silent Generation as well as “most of the visible structure around and ahead of them” (103). The result was a culture of containment, as Alan Nadel has termed it, and in *Lot 49* it lingers, extending from Oedipa’s Tupperware party to San Narciso’s industries of “sealant makers, bottled gas works, fastener factories, [and] warehouses” (26). For Pynchon, then, the height of the Cold War was so constricting and closed, it almost resembled totalitarianism.

Thus, in a manner that recalls Marcuse’s arguments in *One Dimensional Man* (1964), Pynchon understands advanced industrial society as one in which capitalism, technology, and various forms of bureaucratic rationalization all contribute to a pervasive conformity. The general outcome is a “society without opposition,” in which the individual lacks power and critical awareness. Previously, scholars like Dugdale and Thomas have explored Marcuse’s influence throughout *Lot 49*, but it is best illustrated in regards to Yoyodyne and its workers. The key symbol of the confluence between capitalism, technology, and bureaucracy, Yoyodyne encourages its employees to submit their individual talents under a corporate ethos of “teamwork.” On the other hand, the very factors that define the company’s business—specialization, technology, efficiency—place employees at risk, and this precariousness is exemplified in the anecdote of the Yoyodyne executive who finds himself terminated “for specialized reasons,” only to learn that an efficiency expert had him “replaced by an IBM 7094” (113-15). Cut off from the “corporate root-system,” this executive contemplates suicide, yet he goes on to perform a Marcuse-like act of “Great Refusal, a protest against that which is” (63). He creates one of the many Trystero-affiliated underground groups: the IA or “Inamorati Anonymous,” a “society of isolates” who communicates only through W.A.S.T.E. (116).
In and of themselves, these actions might seem minor, but in *Lot 49* they are part of an endemic breakdown in the national consensus and thus not without political implications. After all, the primary shared characteristic among the various Trystero groups is that they forego a government-owned system (the U.S.P.S.) that officially connects them with their fellow citizens. This type of decision, according to Oedipa, “was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery” (125). Examining passages like this along with the IA’s model, Thomas, in his study *Pynchon and the Political* (2007), argues that Pynchon offers a negative but “legitimate” form of political praxis: a type of resistance through withdrawal (125). Furthermore, he reads this as constituting a “refusal to comply” with hegemonic norms, and while it is more “involution than revolution,” withdrawal could also potentially lead to a new set of values (121-5).

However, as I will show, Thomas fails to identify the act of withdrawal as one of anarchism’s primary methods. Moreover, he reads this type of praxis solely through Pynchon’s “oblique politics,” whereas withdrawing is one of the primary actions that other postmodern writers, like Nabokov and DeLillo, present during the Cold War. In this view, overreaching governments, with their clandestine services and superior technology, cannot be easily altered, let alone opposed. Therefore, the default option is to withdraw, taking refuge, if possible, in “a separate, silent, unsuspected world” (125). In fact, on this issue, *Lot 49* even presages the political landscape of the postmodern era, with its “random and undecidable world of microgroups,” a development that Jameson
reads as “post Marxian,” whereas such a change historically arose in the U.S. with the collapse of the Cold War consensus and the liberal establishment (“Cognitive” 356).

In truth, this breakdown with liberalism helps to resolve some of the difficulties many scholars have with determining how the Trystero fits into a recognizable political framework. Reputedly founded by a nobleman/con artist (known as “El Desherdado, The Disinherited”), the Trystero organization has its origins in sixteenth century imperialism, starting out as a postal monopoly’s rival (159-60). In its later manifestations, though, it chiefly opposes industrial capitalism and established governments—and does so from both far-left and far-right positions. Therefore, while scholars like Dugdale argue that it “is difficult to tell what the Trystero stands for politically,” since the group is unstable and switches radical positions throughout its history, it is evident that liberalism is never a philosophy it adopts or wholeheartedly endorses (180). On the whole, this protean organization wants nothing to do with a unified state nor does it desire a public role in the civic sphere. Instead, it habitually withdraws into hiding or conspiracy.

Because of such strategies, along with its history in Europe in the nineteenth century, the Trystero holds much in common with anarchism. As a matter of fact, Pynchon makes this association in obvious ways, like the Trystero’s habit of appearing in anarchist black and its “handling [of] anarchist correspondence”; yet, there are also the more typically obscure historical allusions, like the group’s ties with Budapest revolutionaries in 1848, or its presence “among the watchmakers of the Jura, preparing them for the coming of M. Bakunin” (174-5). On account of these references, scholars like Benton argue that the Trystero’s history “is intertwined with the history of anarchism,” but even beyond the shared history, there are, as stated, certain methods that
link the Trystero with anarchism ("Network" 539).

Commonly associated with acts like bombings or shootings, anarchism in its earlier phases often favored less violent means. For example, in *The Anarchists*, Joll states that withdrawal "represent[s] one of the most important strands in anarchist thought and action" (x). Rather than signaling defeat or political quietism, withdrawal implied not only a critique of the existing society, but it also had the potential to be "dangerously subversive," as it "led to the establishment of a group of like-minded devotees" (3-4). Indeed, according to Joll, Bakunin’s predilection was always for “loosely organized secret societies” rather than “mass political parties” (90-1), and throughout his life Bakunin possessed a “love of conspiracy” (74). With such an influence, it seems appropriate, then, that the Trystero operates exclusively “in the context of conspiracy” (173), and that the one anarchist who mentions Bakunin in *Lot 49* is a member of the “Conspiracy of Anarchist Rebels” (Grant 120).

And yet, Oedipa’s first exposure to the Trystero does not lead her to a cadre that opposes the government from an anarchist position; rather, she comes upon “one of those right-wing nut outfits” (48). In other words, in a manner that recalls Foucault, Pynchon shows that opposing political groups tend to mirror each other in tactics and organization, so just as a penchant for conspiracy marked Bakunin and latter-day anarchists, so did it define radical groups during the Cold War, like the John Birch Society. Pynchon’s send-up of the Birchers is the “Peter Pinguid Society,” a group whose founder partook in the “first military confrontation between Russia and America,” a nineteenth century naval battle that Pynchon recounts with clear nods to the Gulf of Tonkin incident (50). Although this figure, like Pierce, would become rich in Los Angeles from real-estate
speculation, Pinguid’s main significance lies in his social philosophy, which is so broad as to seem almost contradictory. Elucidating these views, a member named Mike Fallopian says, “Sure he was against industrial capitalism. So are we. Didn’t it lead, inevitably, to Marxism? Underneath, both are part of the same creeping horror” (50-1). Odd as this clarification might appear to some readers and scholars—Varsava sees it as proof of Pynchon’s support for liberalism—it actually best reveals Pynchon’s near-Luddite worldview. That is, Pynchon’s politics rejects both modern capitalism and Marxism because his worldview is based in an overriding antipathy to industrialization. What’s more, although Benton and Varsava ignore the incongruity, when it comes to concerns about liberty and an expanding government, Pynchon’s anarchist politics, in principle, at least, overlap with these archconservatives.

The affinities, though, end there. After all, Pynchon is not naïve about the counter-revolutionary potential behind the Pinguid society, if not the Trystero altogether, especially in a time when liberalism is on the wane. As he showed in V. and as he would lament in Vineland, Pynchon is aware that removing the liberal establishment could lead to a more repressive regime, a change that is often heralded and sustained by domestic surveillance. With its mail system and its members’ love of secrecy, the Trystero could function in this role, luring dissidents into a wide, albeit diffuse, “sting operation,” and Pynchon hints at this prospect.

For one thing, in contrast to its European predecessors, the Trystero’s American members became known for “rendering their services to those who seek to extinguish the flame of Revolution” (173). Later, Pynchon has an academic explain to Oedipa that the Trystero’s “emphasis” is on “impersonation,” or “opposition masquerading as
allegiance,” but the reverse seems just as likely: that a conservative group could pose as an oppositional one (174). For example, early on, Fallopian admits to Oedipa that W.A.S.T.E. is “not as rebellious as it looks” (53); midway through, he suggests the Trystero postal marauders of the 1860s were possibly “hired by the Federal government” (93); and near the end, he affirms that the Pinguid Society has ties with a local fascist (166). In fact, when Oedipa asks about the discrepancy between his group and other Trystero factions, he answers: “Maybe we are using W.A.S.T.E., only it’s a secret” (166). Surrounded by all this surreptitious activity, it is no wonder that order-loving Oedipa finally asks, “Should we tell the government?” But the man who hears this question is wearing “a Barry Goldwater shirt,” and he informs her, “I’m sure they know more than we do” (94-8). Therefore, Pynchon plays upon the possibility that the Trystero, instead of offering up a “real alternative,” could actually be a ruse, one that monitors and, in time, detains local dissidents, like a right-wing version of Orwell’s “the Brotherhood” (170). While this authoritarian turn is proffered only as a hypothetical in Lot 49, it still reveals a cognizance on Pynchon’s part that an end to the consensus might lead to a conservative counterrevolution—which, of course, it did in California, with the rise of the New Right and Ronald Reagan, who would become governor in 1966.41

In the above scenario, the Trystero exposes itself as akin to the sprawl of San Narciso and the multiple holdings of Pierce’s estate: one of the many groupings in Lot 49 that appears to be diverse but which eventually bares an underlying systemic consistency. In other words, just as the latter stand out as proof of the continued workings of late capitalism, it is also plausible that the many bands operating under the Trystero could be serving (knowingly or not) “some kind of covert governmental agency” (Grant 89). Such
pessimistic patterns are not exactly new in Pynchon’s work. As he did with the Western empires in *V.* and as he shows with the cartel-like interests in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon concentrates on periods when an hegemony is in crisis, and while ruptures and technological advances point to freedom, the trend is that order will re-assert itself or lead to greater control. As Jonathan Lethem sums it up, “In Pynchon’s view, modernity’s systems of liberation and enlightenment—railway and post, the Internet, etc.—perpetually collapse into capitalism’s Black Iron Prison of enclosure, monopoly and surveillance.” With the consensus collapsing, the Trystero could be another of these systems.

Then again, the indeterminate Trystero can never be pinpointed into an exact category nor can it be assumed to fall in line with existing patterns of modernity—assuming it exists at all. As *Lot 49* proceeds, Oedipa fears the Trystero might be a paranoid fantasy, although this wishful notion gets complicated once she encounters possible members throughout her time in San Francisco. In fact, Oedipa’s trek into the Bay Area offers her not only a glimpse of California beyond its suburban confines, but it also presents her with *terra incognita* that exposes her limitations in terms of cognitive mapping. For instance, in a later passage that recalls her entrance into San Narciso, Oedipa drives across the Bay Bridge, and, again, looks at a city from an elevated position; yet, this time her view is blocked by “haze,” as if indicating the difficulties she will have comprehending what she sees (108). Initially, though, she knows her exact location, from the famous neighborhoods to the streets: “She got off the freeway at North Beach . . . walked along Broadway” (108). But, while walking in the city, she finds, as de Certeau states, that the “everyday has a certain strangeness” (128), and soon it
becomes clear that Pynchon has moved Oedipa into the uncanny, or a seemingly alternate world where her ideology is tested.

This kind of disorienting strategy is nothing new for Pynchon. Scholars like McHale have noted “the complex spatialities of Pynchon’s texts—their proliferation of worlds” which “imply different, more constructive possibilities of cognitive mapping” (“Pynchon’s” 109). Likewise, as stated earlier with V., Amy Elias believes Pynchon’s novels provide “an unsettling, uncanny, but also liberating space” (129). As far as Oedipa is concerned, certainly the first two descriptions apply. When she first enters San Francisco, for instance, she hopes “there might still be a chance of getting the whole [Trystero] thing to go away and disintegrate quietly” (109). Instead, she immediately discovers a “profusion of post horns” strewn all over the city (124), and this information overload, or what Jameson calls a “perceptual barrage,” helps her recognize the tenuousness of her obsession: “With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together” (109).

Once this conspiracy unravels, though, so does Oedipa’s sense of self, and she drifts “at random.” Still, this aimlessness also allows her to take in a social reality she had bypassed on the freeways, and Oedipa at long last comes into contact with Pynchon’s much-beloved “preterite,” those who, according to Calvinist theology, have been “passed over” or left disinherited. In this case, they are largely those who have not enjoyed the full benefits of California’s Cold War economy.

In many ways, then, Oedipa confronts what de Certeau describes as “the element that the urbanistic project excluded,” the so-called “‘waste products’” that usually encompass “abnormality, deviance, illness, death,” although here it mostly consists of the
city’s loners and indigents who operate with W.A.S.T.E. (130). Included are the insane and the withdrawn (like the Inamorati Anonymous); yet, Oedipa also looks upon those who are out in the open and aligned with public spaces or public transportation, like the transients gambling at the airport or the “exhausted busful of Negroes going on to graveyard shifts all over the city” (121). To her credit, Oedipa interacts with those she meets and offers solace to some, most signally to the dying sailor whose letter she delivers to a W.A.S.T.E. mailbox. Still, her urban experience, in her reckoning, is far from “liberating,” and her knowledge of the Bay Area has its limits. For example, while pursuing a W.A.S.T.E. courier in San Francisco (from “Market and over on First Street to the trans-bay terminal”), Oedipa finds herself in majority-black Oakland, where she instantly loses her bearings: “The carrier got off in a neighborhood Oedipa couldn’t identify. She followed him . . . along streets whose name she never knew . . . into slums and out, up long hillsides jammed solid with two- or three-bedroom houses, all their windows giving blankly only the sun” (130). Thus, Oedipa’s cognitive mapping extends only so far, and for many, the question remains as to whether her brush with the alienated and the underclass will be dismissed by her as fantasy or lead to a “partial enlightenment” (Nicholson and Stevenson 96).

The far ends of this debate consist of those, like Cowart and Watson, who believe that the once-blind Oedipa, like her namesake, sees what has happened to her region and arrives at some form of anagnorisis. For instance, by the end, Oedipa even intuits that the social and structural problems she has observed are, quite likely, national in scale: “If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, any other estate, then by that continuity she might have found the Tristero anywhere in her Republic,
through any of a hundred lightly concealed entrances, a hundred alienations, if only she’d looked” (179). By contrast, scholars like Heise contend that Oedipa will never grapple with the “realities” she has seen, that given her bourgeois subjectivity, she is incapable of perceiving “the networks of power through which flow money, cheapened labor, technology, and information” (209). But this kind of reading is too severe towards Oedipa, who was never going to become an immediate expert on the post-Fordist economy. Worse still, Heise discounts any evidence that she has learned, even though at the end, she already gathers how unjust the current system is and ponders ways to correct it.

In a moment that sets her apart from the Red-hating Mike Hammer, for instance, Oedipa entertains the idea of reallocating Pierce’s estate to the disinherited. “What would the probate judge have to say about spreading some kind of legacy among them,” she wonders. And yet, Oedipa, who earlier held a “deep ignorance of law, investment, and real estate” (82), has become such a quick study she soon realizes that the law constrains her from fully remunerating those who have been affected by Pierce and his ventures: “[The judge would] revoke her letters testamentary, they’d call her names, proclaim her through all Orange County as a redistributionist and pinko” (181). Thus, in this anarchistic detective novel, the investigator hopes to reverse the status quo by providing social and economic justice, but she is stymied by the law and Cold War rhetoric. As a result, Oedipa finds herself so estranged from the America she once knew that she likens herself to an “alien” and ponders “joining Tristero itself” (181).

Whether she does or not is beside the point. Moreover, it leads to the kind of binary thinking that Pynchon wants Oedipa to move beyond, as he shows in the end when
the prose is focalized through her trapped perspective: “Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of true paranoia or a real Trystero” (182). The point is that it is “not a case of either/or” (Slow 7), and so at the close of Lot 49, Pynchon leaves his heroine contemplating different options and waiting for an alternate world: “The waiting above all; if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land . . . then at least . . . waiting for the symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew” (181). If this “symmetry of choices” refers to the binary ones animating the Cold War, which had certainly “conditioned” California’s landscape, then Oedipa would be waiting for some time. What’s more, there is always the likely prospect that Oedipa, who sees herself as “unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins,” is looking for an excuse not to act (104). But it is also possible that Pynchon wants her, first off, to imagine what a new “land” could be like.

At one point in Lot 49, Oedipa asks herself, “Shall I project a world?” and this question is often held as evidence that Oedipa indulges solely in a private vision, like the Trystero conspiracy, which distances her from social and political realities (82). Yet, her investigation ultimately allows her to learn more about her environment and the limitations imposed on her and her fellow citizens, so her ability to project could be a way in which to imagine, hope, or wait for a new world to emerge. This outlook is clearly utopian, and in a review of Against the Day, James Wood states that Pynchon’s “work has been consistently involved with the notion of utopia . . . of opting out.” Yet, as stated earlier, these beliefs and strategies, like withdrawing, are closely connected to anarchism, as are Lot 49’s many references to alternate “worlds,” which evoke the
anarchists’ belief that a freer world exists on the horizon. No character illustrates this philosophy better in *Lot 49* than the anarchist Jesus Arrabal. He states:

‘You know what a miracle is. Not what Bakunin said. But another world’s intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there’s cataclysm. Like the church we hate, anarchists also believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul’s talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself.’ (120; emphasis)

Arrabal’s vision presents what resembles a riot, an action that is missing in *Lot 49* but which Pynchon would address in his essay “A Journey into the Mind of Watts.” What Pynchon offers here instead are diverse and nonviolent group actions, like the scene of the deaf/mute dancers, in which various couples move in “many rhythms” to “some unthinkable order of music” (131-32). Gazing upon this utopian sight, Oedipa believes it fulfills Arrabal’s “anarchist miracle,” and scholars like Schaub have noted its “libertarian element” and its redefinition of consensus, which in this case is “a product of miracles and revolutions rather than liberal politics” (“Crying” 34).

But this begs the question of why this model, in which no communication is possible, outside of, say, physical gestures, is preferable. It is certainly impractical. In fact, according to Jarvis, one of the main issues with evaluating the “counterhegemonic potential” of Pynchon’s visions lies in “determining the extent to which such utopianism is inspirational or simply mystifying and ultimately counterproductive” (67). With the case above, I contend that Pynchon’s vision veers closer to the latter. On the other hand, Pynchon presents another model of Arrabal’s “miracle,” which is more practical and no less “inspirational,” and it is explicitly set up in opposition to the liberal consensus politics of the Cold War.
Driving this time towards the Berkeley campus, Oedipa recalls the publication date of an obscure book that mentions the Trystero: “1957. Another world,” a time that Pynchon links to the height of the Cold War, when, as mentioned, Oedipa attended college (103-4). Now, in 1965, Oedipa comes upon a college that is teeming with political activity, where students are communicating “in nose-to-nose dialogue” and the campus is adorned with “posters for . . . FSM’s [the Free Speech Movement], YAF’s [the Young Americans for Freedom], VDC’s [the Vietnam Day Committee]” (103). At this campus, then, Oedipa views not just a diverse, “leaderless” revolt but a workable vision of citizens manipulating public space to their own ends and rather than being alienated, they are engaged and engaging, in that Oedipa is “attracted” yet “unsure, a stranger, wanting to feel relevant” (103). However, in keeping with her nature—or in keeping with what she has learned from the conformity of the Cold War and the conspiratorial Trystero—she withdraws, thinking that she is out of her element and wondering what “alternate universes it would take” to make her belong (103). In this instance, it is even tempting to compare twenty-eight-year-old Oedipa with the then twenty-eight-year-old Pynchon, who also seems unsure here about how closely he wants to align himself with this youthful outbreak, even though his narration characterizes the students’ actions as largely positive.

On balance, what Oedipa witnesses remains the most hopeful political representation Pynchon ever offers in his Cold War novels. This is a far cry from the “Keep cool but care” ethos this author floated in V., and there is none of the sense of compromise or desperation that surrounds the informers and former spies of Gravity’s Rainbow and Vineland. The political scene at Berkeley is characterized as being not just
liberating for those involved or watching, but it is rendered as a potent force, a locus
“where the most beloved of folklores may be brought into doubt, cataclysmic of dissents
voiced . . . the sort that brings governments down” (104). In other words, Pynchon
portrays these student activists, with their combined desire for greater personal liberty, as
so anti-establishment that they could topple the state—as if their motives were aligned
with anarchism. Pynchon even furthers this connection when his narrator employs
similar language (“cataclysm”) that Arrabal used to describe his anarchist miracle.

To be frank, this kind of representation also stands out as unique compared to
other postmodern writers. Nabokov, for one, would never present a group political action
positively nor would he portray politicized college students with this level of respect. As
stated, by the 1960s, he actually compared those protesting the Vietnam War as
“hooligans” (Schiff 336). In a somewhat similar manner, most of DeLillo’s novels would
satirize this kind of group politics, and until Underworld, his habit would be to liken the
students’ protesting to playacting.

In hindsight, of course, Pynchon’s presentation of the activism at Berkeley seems
idealized and somewhat naïve, especially since those protests would in the short term
help Reagan obtain the governorship. Yet, in this moment Oedipa finds herself
compelled, and while at the end of Lot 49, she remains stuck in a kind of radical
uncertainty, Pynchon elsewhere hints that she has the knowledge and the sensitivity to
change. Indeed, it seems more than possible that Oedipa’s investigation of the Trystero
network, with its deep history and its convoluted links to governments and businesses,
could be meant as a rehearsal or practice for a time when she can better map the tangled
connections of late capitalism. It all depends on whether she decides to become involved, or to emerge from a state of withdrawal, and “execute a will” of her own (19).

III. “Various Forms of Systematized Folly”: “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” and Gravity’s Rainbow

In August 1965, only a few months after the events in Lot 49 have taken place, a segment of the population within Los Angeles engaged in a different kind of “leaderless revolt,” one that was far more violent and destructive than anything Oedipa saw or imagined during her travels. In the largely black neighborhood of Watts, rioting occurred for six days, and while there were similar disturbances in New York and Philadelphia the summer before, the Watts Riots (or Watts Rebellion) ended up becoming the “worst urban violence in American history” — that is, until the L.A. riots of 1992 (Perlstein 4). Before the National Guard came in to quash this upheaval, which included arson and sniper fire, the familiar spark that started it all involved “police tactics,” the same problem that has led to almost “every major riot by the black community since WWII,” including recent ones in Ferguson and Baltimore (Cobb “City”). It is the response to these “tactics” as well as to the frustrations of living in a segregated, urban environment that Pynchon explores in “A Journey into the Mind of Watts.”

Written a year after the riots, Pynchon’s essay opens by addressing the fear as to whether there will be “a repeat” of such activities (34). But rather than mollifying the beliefs of those who hope that “things in Watts” are improving, Pynchon’s essay challenges his readers by depicting the persistent poverty and harassment that those in Watts still face (34). In fact, in a manner that has not been appreciated by critics and scholars, Pynchon’s “Journey” presents his most direct criticisms of American liberalism, while at the same time revealing his own anarchist beliefs. For instance, in the wake of
the riots, after President Johnson “instructed federal agencies to pump $29 million” into Watts (Perlstein 17), Pynchon reports that the neighborhood is filled with government employees as well as “other assorted members of the humanitarian establishment” (35). And yet, in his estimation, “somehow nothing much has changed”; Watts’ residents have not experienced any significant turnaround in fortunes or attitudes as a result of the new visitors (35). After all, Pynchon’s beloved preterite (“the poor, the defeated, the criminal, the desperate”) still endures, but those seeking employment find themselves either turned down for jobs or judged by “optimistic child bureaucrats” from ad hoc groups, like the “Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency” (80).

Therefore, Pynchon presents a Foucauldian scenario in which federal bureaucracies and city employees (“social workers, data collectors”) attempt to normalize the unruly or despondent residents of an isolated community so as to make them productive members of society. For Pynchon, though, some of these employees’ difficulties lie, first off, with the outdated approach of using “Great Depression techniques,” like infusing an impoverished area with federal funding (81). Furthermore, there is the notable disconnect in outlook between the locals and those who are trying to socially engineer them. Pynchon writes, “Besides a 19th-century faith that tried and true approaches . . . will set Watts straight, [the middle-class professionals] are also burdened with personal attitudes . . . about conforming, about failure, about violence” (81). Indeed, it is this liberal mindset and its concurrent attitudes about violence that Pynchon ties to his broader race-based analysis regarding the riots.

Pointing beyond local details regarding geography and class, Pynchon ultimately chalks up the differences in worldview to a starker divide in culture, “one white and one
black” (35). L.A.’s white culture, as he sees it, is wrapped up in a “fantasy,” one that is perpetuated by “various forms of systematized folly” (35). Chief among the culprits is the media, which drives the city’s (and the nation’s) consumerist economy; yet, Pynchon goes on to include the region’s Cold War defense industries, which “flourish or retrench at the whims of Robert McNamara,” as well as the area’s legion of psychiatrists, “who counsel moderation and compromise” (78, 82). In other words, with the notable exception of the cops, white Angelenos have submerged their violent impulses in escapism or in the pursuit of wealth, and as a result, their buffered, plastic world, like Oedipa’s in *Lot 49*, is marked by “so much well-behaved unreality” (82). By contrast, the black citizens of Watts—not one of whom Pynchon identifies by name—occupy “a pocket of bitter reality” (78), one in which their hardships force them to confront basic facts of existence “like disease, like failure, violence and death” (35).

In other words, the usually postmodernist Pynchon idealizes the black community as the more authentic presence, as its members maintain a “vitality” that is missing from the more conforming whites, who never fear a constant danger to their persons in their daily lives (34). This kind of analysis owes much to Norman Mailer’s essay “The White Negro,” which, in 1957, laid out a similar contrast between a stifling white culture and that of the modern “Negro,” whose pleasure-seeking, improvisational ethos (“kicks” and jazz) offered a better code of conduct to urban hipsters hoping to lead meaningful lives in a “partially totalitarian society” (213-14). However, Pynchon, to his credit, abjures Mailer’s more primitivist stereotypes, and rather than instructing American whites about how they could live, he focuses on how the blacks from Watts endure the rituals of dealing with distrustful whites and the police. “If you do get to where you were going
without encountering a cop,” Pynchon writes, “you may spend your day looking at the white faces of personnel men, their uniform glance of suspicion, their automatic smiles, and listening to polite put-downs” (80). Facing the “hell and headache” of these kind of repeated interactions, it makes sense to Pynchon that some in Watts would turn to violence.

As a matter of fact, rather than viewing this expression of rage as regrettable or “evil,” as the liberal bureaucrats do, Pynchon describes it in affirmative, self-actualizing terms. According to him, “violence may be an attempt to communicate, or to be who you really are” (84). Such a radical notion would never be entertained in Nabokov’s oeuvre, and in Pynchon’s earlier fiction, with his protagonists’ various withdrawals, he never explicitly championed violent action per se, even though some of his characters embraced it without considering its consequences. In V., for instance, Stencil, Sr. sums up the title character by stating that “Riot was her element,” but this increasingly inhuman figure ends up becoming closely tied with fascism (487). Additionally, in that novel, the primary black character, McClintic Sphere, offers mainly pacifistic advice (“Keep cool, but care”) to the political turmoil surrounding him. Similarly, by 1964, with his short story “The Secret Integration,” Pynchon would finally address the anger that African-Americans retain about their treatment from racist whites, but, again, there is nothing in this work nor in Lot 49 that endorses violence as a response. Therefore, when Pynchon scholars examine his fiction alone, they usually maintain that “Pynchon’s relation to radical politics is equivocal” (Jarvis 64). Yet, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” is less ambiguous, and so a few scholars, like Bachner, have noted “the implicitly positive value” that Pynchon “assigns to violence” in this work (49).
What has not been detected is that these ideas about violence are tied to Pynchon's anarchist political beliefs. For instance, according to Graham Benton, "anarchist theory and practice is drawn to the expression of violence," particularly in it philosophy derived from Bakunin (551). However, Benton believes that Pynchon's fiction "censures" the anarchistic partiality towards destruction, as seen by the way that his anarchist characters, like the Gaucho in *V.*, interrogate their own beliefs about "violence for the sake of violence" (554). Yet, Pynchon presents no such qualms in regards to the violent protests in Watts. For example, unlike the city leaders and the liberal bureaucrats, who are appalled that the rioters destroyed local property, Pynchon perceives these actions as a genuine rejection of the status quo, of the capitalist ethos of consumption and possession. Thus, by extension, it appears as if all this disorder were undertaken to issue forth the anarchistic hope for another world, one without property. Moreover, any attempt to entreat Watts residents to acquire property, like "a car or color TV," is viewed as a "false welcome," a way to persuade "the Negro poor into taking on certain white values," including, say, law and order (84).

However, in Pynchon's estimation, these efforts to persuade and remodel the citizens of Watts will likely fail. After all, the residents have wised up. No longer subscribing to the various models provided to them, either by the media or the civil rights movement, they will not allow themselves to be complicit by believing "in the white version of what a Negro was supposed to be" (35). What's more, many have begun to replace earlier cultural myths with new ones regarding the riots, which are "being remembered less as chaos and more as art" (84). This type of counternarrative, though, is not something Pynchon is especially critical of here; if anything, his accounts of their
recollections overlap with his own anarchistic passages in *Lot 49*. For instance, in that novel, as mentioned, Oedipa describes the “anarchist miracle” of deaf-mute dancers moving gracefully “to some unthinkable order of music” (131-31). Likewise, in “Watts,” Pynchon relates how some “remember [the riots] in terms of music,” as seen with “jazz musicians,” with “everybody knowing what to do and when to do it without needing a word or a signal” (84). Thus, in Pynchon’s rendering, the Watts Riots serve as yet another example of Bakunin’s preferred model of anarchy: a spontaneous, self-organized grouping of people, one in which “nobody had to give orders” (84).

On balance, when read alongside Pynchon’s earlier novels, this favorable portrayal of the Watts Riots reads like a frank distillation of the author’s anarchist themes and political beliefs. Indeed, many read “A Journey into the Mind of Watts” as a bookend to *Lot 49*, with its similar exploration of California’s underclass living beneath its freeways, as white suburbanites drive above in oblivion. However, although it is not often read as such, this essay also prefigures numerous topics that Pynchon will fully develop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, including the divide between black and white culture, with one stuck in an alternating mindset of hopelessness and radical action, while the other is fixated on transcending nature through technology and chemistry. Furthermore, there is the same emphasis on the panoptic presence of state authorities, the influence of the media and proliferating bureaucracies, and as always, there is the abiding concern that a reversion to the status quo will destroy whatever new possibilities opened up following a period of violence.

After all, following the riots, the larger white community outside of Watts would soon yearn for a return to law and order—and not just within California but in the rest of
the nation. In fact, in his historical work *Nixonland* (2008), Rick Perlstein argues that the “complex set of forces unleashed by Watts” would prefigure the reemergence and rise of Nixon (19), and “for those white, middle class folks,” who watched the riots on their television, “American politics could never be the same again” (4). Thus, when judged in light of subsequent events, including the various protests over the Vietnam War, the political assassinations of 1968, and the rise of conservatism in the U.S., Pynchon’s essay appears like a lost horizon, a revolutionary moment that fails to imagine the inevitable blowback or the scale of the counterrevolution. Such a state of affairs, in which oppressive systems and an entrenched elite maintain power, will preoccupy Pynchon in his next work *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Indeed, at one point, his main character wonders about “the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from,” and although this pessimistic novel mainly takes place during WWII, it is no accident that Pynchon ends it in L.A., with Richard Nixon at hand, presiding over a possible apocalypse (556).

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In a significant chapter in the middle of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Pynchon’s narrator delves into the fantasies of a German rocket scientist, Franz Pökler, as he watches a film. Aroused, in particular, by a sadomasochistic scene, Pökler leaves the “Ufa theatre,” makes his way home through Weimar-era Berlin, and with his mind “flooded with tonight’s image of the delicious victim,” he has sex with his wife, which leads to the conception of his only daughter (397). “That’s how it happened,” thinks Pökler. “A film. How else?” (398). What preoccupies Pökler here is the need to pinpoint a moment in his past when his fantasies resulted in unintended consequences. In fact, at the end of the chapter, Pynchon has the passive Pökler regret that his dream of building a
rocket to the moon not only made him complicit with the Nazis and their V-2 rocket program, but it prevented him from grasping that this program was sustained by slave labor. Thus, after witnessing the bodies at Dora, the nearby concentration camp, Pökler realizes that “[A]ll his vacuums, his labyrinths, had been the other side of this,” and before leaving to escape the oncoming “American units,” he offers his wedding ring to one of the survivors (432).

Rocketry, complicity, film, fantasies about domination or control—all of these issues constitute Pynchon’s third novel, which also builds on subjects and themes from his previous works. In line with V., for instance, Gravity’s Rainbow explores the dark legacy of modernity and the Western Enlightenment, which, in this author’s view, point to both the concentration camps and the intercontinental ballistic missile. As a matter of fact, in the period in which Pynchon composed his novel, from the late 1960s to early 1970s, when the U.S. was coming apart over its conflict in Vietnam, the nation achieved historic feats with its Apollo moon landings. Yet, rather than directly question the triumphalism around those events or chronicle N.A.S.A.’s technological prowess, as Mailer’s Of a Fire on the Moon (1970) did, Pynchon turned to the origins of rocket technology and its immediate postwar purpose: to deliver warheads upon one’s Cold War rivals.

With these concerns in mind, Pynchon sets Gravity’s Rainbow from December 1944 to early September 1945, and this historical novel covers the London Blitz, the Potsdam Conference, and Operation Paperclip, a clandestine program in which the U.S. scrambled to pick up the remaining scientists and matériel from the Nazi rocket program. Pynchon writes, “American Army Ordinance, and a host of competing research teams,
are all busy collecting everything in sight. They’ve already rounded up von Braun and
500 others,” (273); or as one American soldier states, they have to acquire it all “before the Russians come” (295). Therefore, *Gravity’s Rainbow* explores the origins of the Cold War, and in a manner that evokes Foucault’s writings (and that sets the terms for DeLillo’s work), it does so not in terms of ideology, but in terms of technologies of control and networks of power, all of which will come to define the postwar or postmodern era.

Actually, for many scholars, Pynchon’s novel is the “definitive postmodern text,” with its poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity, its undermining of depth models and cause-and-effect logic, and its notion that history consists of either “new ‘events’” (56) or cultural narratives (Meyer 82). In regards to the latter, *Gravity’s Rainbow* subverts official versions of history and thus fulfills one of Hutcheon’s requirements for a postmodern work. For example, Pynchon’s historical romance bypasses conventional WWII narratives—not to mention the conventions of the war genre—by eschewing the depiction of battle scenes, which in this war’s case are often used to illustrate how the Allied powers freed Europe from fascism. If anything, in Pynchon’s countercultural work, fascism still persists, primarily, but not exclusively, in the various corporate-backed systems (“the Firm,” “The System”) that seek to control populations as well as the earth’s resources. “Taking and not giving back,” says the narrator, “the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit” (421). In other words, *Gravity’s Rainbow* has characters argue that “this War was never political at all” (521), that its "real business" is "buying and selling" (105), and per Jameson’s request, Pynchon’s novel endeavors to
map the world of late capitalism by disclosing the close collaborations between Western militaries and certain multinationals, like Shell and IG Farben. Yet, rather than offering up a Marxist screed or focusing on the elite who profit from all this disorder, Pynchon’s novel concentrates on “those bureaucratized and militarized servants,” the middle-class functionaries who will help perpetuate the “new order” (Weisenberger 48).

Initially, what these “servants” fixate on—and what gives this novel its uncanny premise—is the supposed correlation between the sites of an American officer’s sexual conquests (as shown on his own map) and the locations of V-2 strikes in London. Rejecting the likelihood of sheer coincidence, a cohort of Allied intelligence forces (psychologists, behaviorists, agents) view this American (Tyrone Slothrop) as a threat or an object of study, a site to which they can apply their concepts and assumptions. Consequently, the carnivalesque Gravity’s Rainbow enacts not only Bakhtin’s notions about heteroglossia, as the scientists address this bizarre situation in terms of their own specialized discourses, but it also illustrates Foucault’s theories about how discourses make a subject into “an object of knowledge” and how disciplinary forces administer the body (Racevks 230).

After all, the plot of Gravity’s Rainbow is Slothrop’s “attempt to uncover a corporate conspiracy,” which sponsored the work of chemists and behaviorists, one of whom manipulated Slothrop when he was a child (McClure “Forget” 255). To be specific, in a parody of both Freudian castration anxiety and behaviorist studies, like the Little Albert experiment, Pynchon’s narrative suggests that Slothrop was conditioned as an infant, to the point that he produced erections after being stimulated by an unknown substance. This “Mystery Stimulus” intrigues the Allied scientists and their corporate
backers (84), and it plays a part in Slothrop’s later picaresque adventures, as he is
encouraged to find in postwar Germany another unknown device (the “Schwarzgerät”) that was used in one of the last V-2 rockets that fired. Thus, rather than cure Slothrop’s “condition” or repress his sexuality, the scientists and other establishment figures hope to rechannel his interests and energies to their advantage. In this manner, then, *Gravity’s Rainbow* dramatizes Foucault’s ideas about the productive nature of power, although it must be said that Pynchon does not wholeheartedly endorse this arrangement.

Pynchon deviates most clearly from Foucault in the theorist’s assessment of power and its disciplinary practices, which Foucault argues should not be seen “in negative terms” (*DP* 194). By contrast, the anarchistic Pynchon cannot hide his disapproval of any organized form of social control; in fact, his depiction of wartime London is almost dystopian in its portrayal of state power and the proliferation of government bureaucracies that dwarf individuals. For instance, the department head of the “Slothrop group,” General Pudding, is bewildered by all the wartime agencies in his midst: “P.W.E. laps over onto the Ministry of Information, the BBC European Service . . . When the Americans came in, their OSS, OWI, and Army Psychological Warfare Department had also to be coordinated with” (76). The irony with all of these different agencies, though, is that the majority of those who work within them hold the same ideas about “the usable emanations of power,” and so they seek out “brain dossiers on latencies, weaknesses . . . erogenous zones of all, all who might someday be useful” (77). Instead of concentrating on the actual war, then, these Allied intelligence branches have set up profiles and placed everyone under surveillance, including Pudding and especially Slothrop, who finds himself “under the usual surveillance” wherever he goes (244). Like other postmodern
Cold War novels, then, *Gravity's Rainbow* is overpopulated by spies or government agents, and it is not surprising that Pynchon’s protagonist, like DeLillo’s, mimics the spies’ behavior by adopting various identities, which Slothrop does once he starts his quest in Western Europe.

While the first third of *Gravity's Rainbow* presents a Weberian world of rationalization and bureaucratization, the remainder occurs mostly in the landscape of a recently liberated Germany called “the Zone,” where the state and other institutions have been dismantled or decentralized. As a result, many of the figures Slothrop initially encounters believe that the disruption of the war has engendered new possibilities or modes of resistance, and in these instances Pynchon offers glimpses of his own political beliefs. For example, an Argentinean anarchist named Squalidozzi states that “this War” has destroyed the political “center,” and so in “the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless” (265). Indeed, even the paranoid but nonpolitical Slothrop, after spending months in this area, eventually wonders if this “anarchist . . . was right,” and so he too hopes that humanity might find “a route back” to a place where “all the fences are down . . . depolarized . . . without elect, without preterite” (556).

As Pynchon well knows, this type of nostalgic and utopian thinking is not without its perils or faults. For one, as Squalidozzi and others admit, the space that has opened up is impermanent, or akin to what the anarchist theorist Hakim Bey calls a “temporary autonomous zone,” and those within it still have to make “thousands of arrangements” and “[t]emporary alliances” (291). Such a state of affairs has provoked scholars, like McClure, to see Pynchon as advocating a Deleuzian ethic of “multiplicity” and “nomadic deterritorialization” (“Resisting” 168-69), which, for McClure, means that Pynchon
favors escaping from rationalized structures, like the emerging “Rocket-State,” and that he lauds transgressive acts (566). While McClure’s reading is convincing, this “ethic” actually amounts to self-indulgent countercultural behavior (drugs and sex) or Yippie-style subversive pranks, as shown late in the novel by an oppositional group called “the Counterforce,” whose methods of bringing down the “They-System” consist of publicly offending department heads or other authoritarian figures.

Moreover, what McClure interprets as “escape” looks more like the familiar postmodern tactic of withdrawal. Slothrop, for instance, ends his quest in solitude as a quasi-hippie, “letting hair and beard grow” in the Zone, where he is “feeling natural,” now that he is free from society and surveillance (626). Still, there are scholars, like Jeff Baker, who believe that Pynchon is criticizing the final actions of Slothrop and the Counterforce, either for being too individualistic or for being too taken with the “‘rationalist’ methodology” of “the system” (139). According to Baker, Pynchon indicts these characters for failing to form a “communitarian alternative” that would offer an effectual “collective resistance” (139). Yet, most of the alternative communities in Gravity's Rainbow fail to offer any examples of actual or positive resistance besides, perhaps, withdrawing, and this action is best seen with the anarchists. Squalidozzi, for example, refuses out of principle to defend whatever territory or gains his fellow anarchists might make (“Taking land is building more fences”), and it seems symbolic that he and his anarchist brethren reside on a submarine, floating away from all entanglements and nationalities, like the Inconvenience crew in Against the Day (265). Thus, while Pynchon hints that his characters’ anarchistic strategies are impractical or
that their ideal lies in wistful conceptions of the pre-modern world, he too seems overly enamored of their romantic vision—maybe because the alternative is worse.

After all, if Pynchon’s more utopian gestures appear as faint or feeble, it is probably because his interests (or talents) lie in cataloguing the variety of ways that oppression works itself into not just our bodies or daily lives, but into our fantasies. For instance, near the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the leader of a band of African Hereros realizes that new methods are needed to map and comprehend the cartel-like structures that prevail. “We have to look for power sources here, and distribution networks we were never taught, routes of power our teachers never imagined, or were encouraged to avoid,” says this leader Enzian (521). However, instead of embracing Enzian’s ideas about analysis, most of the Hereros, who have been relocated by the Germans or inducted into their army, adopt their oppressor’s fantasies. They do so either by masochistically embracing racial suicide, or by building their own V-2 rocket, which they look for throughout the novel, after having become entranced with the Germans’ weaponry.

Thus, as in *V.*, fantasies of destruction and domination permeate *Gravity’s Rainbow*. But what has changed from that early work is that now Pynchon ties these fantasies to those widely circulated in Western culture, specifically movies. In point of fact, as Scott Simmon argues, in his essay “Beyond the Theater of War: *GR as Film,*” Pynchon’s novel concerns itself with more than just film references and characters’ fantasies; the novel itself is structured as a movie. Simmon writes, “As both movie audience and as novel readers we are . . . characterized by Pynchon as pathetically alone, passively observing, having to be pointed to truths which we still manage to convert to cinema dreams” (349). Therefore, in a nod to soft power, Pynchon argues that we have
all been conditioned or undergone a kind of interpellation by cultural forces, and as Pynchon’s narrator states, “The Man . . . has a branch office in each of our brains” (712-13). As a consequence, we have internalized all too well the state’s teachings about power, which we subsume or redirect in our private dealings and personal relationships, thereby explaining the novel’s interest in sadomasochism. In a similar manner, Foucault has argued, in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, that the “major adversary” is the fascist “in our heads and everyday behavior,” which causes us “to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (xiii). However, Pynchon, to his credit, does not exclude himself as being above all of this conditioning and our rage for order. If anything, by presenting his novel as the type of cultural artifact that influences his characters (and, by extension, his readers), Pynchon ensures that his work retains that “curious mixture of the complicitous and the critical,” which Hutcheon argues is the “defining feature of postmodernism” (*Poetics* 201).

And yet, while Hutcheon views this feature as being subversive, it is not at all clear that Pynchon, in this novel anyway, understands that his problematizing or making readers aware of insidious cultural narratives is all that useful. For example, in this surrealist work, his most memorable story of political resistance involves an immortal figure, a light bulb named Byron that can shine his light forever. Yet, in the end, Byron is described as being in the debilitating predicament of “knowing the truth and powerless to change anything,” a quandary that leaves Byron “perverse” and “enjoying it” (655). Worse still, rather than put up an effort to dismantle whatever powers or forces that constrain us, we usually make the “decision to live on Their terms” (712-13). In other words, according to Pynchon, when we are not being compliant, we allow ourselves to
become complicit, and this message is far more pessimistic than Lot 49, where it seemed that change and “cataclysm” might occur and that Oedipa might break free from her bourgeois lifestyle. Instead, in this post-1960s novel, characters speculate about whether the “chances for freedom are over for good” (539).

In summation, Pynchon Gravity’s Rainbow is a darkly comic jeremiad that argues that Western capitalist culture is destroying itself, if not the planet, by its “addiction to energy,” to power, and to technology (412). Given this trajectory, it is not surprising that the Cold War is viewed as the final stage of history, and perhaps this is why Pynchon ends his novel with a V-2 rocket heading towards a movie audience in 1970s Los Angeles, so that the specter of rocket technology haunts us. Yet even when the danger is poised above our heads, we are still too busy being entertained. What’s more, even if we were to leave the theatre, like Franz Pökler, or somehow escape annihilation, it is more than possible that we would still remain passive or enthralled to the technologies or networks of power that control us, a situation that Pynchon explores in Vineland and that DeLillo will explore throughout his novels. Then again, as Pynchon states, “Just as there are, in the World, machineries committed to injustice as an enterprise, so too there seem to be provisions active for balancing things out once in a while” (580). Until those “provisions” or “balance” comes, though, the best advice Pynchon offers here is to try and escape “the System” by withdrawing.

IV. Conclusion

In the years following Gravity’s Rainbow, it almost appears as if Pynchon heeded his own advice about withdrawal too well, as he failed to publish anything for over a decade. Still, when he published again, his later (and slighter) work would help to clarify his once obscured political interests and beliefs. In 1984, for instance, Pynchon broke
years of silence with his short story collection *Slow Learner* and his essay “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?”, which provides a reassessment of postwar science fiction. According to Pynchon, this much-maligned genre actually displayed more “literary talent” than American “mainstream fiction,” which he believes was “paralyzed by the political climate of the cold war and McCarthy years” (40). While Pynchon fails to specify whether he includes his own Cold War-era writing, like *V.*, as marked by political paralysis, he does make it clear that he appreciates this genre’s “Luddite impulse,” or its interrogation of the direction in which Western technology was heading (40). Joining in this impulse, Pynchon himself despairs over the fact that America’s current political leadership has failed to learn this genre’s message; instead, the U.S.’s representatives appear to be enthralled to weapons of mass destruction. Pynchon writes:

> Since Hiroshima, we have watched nuclear weapons multiply out of control, and delivery systems acquire ... unlimited range and accuracy. An unblinking acceptance of a holocaust running to seven- and eight-figure body counts has become—among those who, particularly since 1980, have been guiding our military policies—conventional wisdom. (40)

Thus, as he shows in *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon here remains preoccupied with apocalyptic scenarios, but now one can detect his exasperation and disbelief that such scenarios have become normalized among those in power, especially within the Reagan administration.

In fact, in his next dystopian novel, *Vineland* (1990), which is set in 1984, Pynchon provides his most polemical work, in which his main targets are President Reagan and the drug war. And yet, Pynchon’s novel opens with former hippies who have withdrawn to a commune somewhere in Northern California, and what sets the plot in motion is the activities of the FBI, who have revoked the government assistance of its
informers, many of whom were sixties radicals. Indeed, for many scholars, *Vineland* indicts the sixties generation not just for its posturing and lack of historical analysis, but its acquiescence to the allure of power (Booker 88). Thus, following the themes he set in *Gravity's Rainbow*, many of the characters appear to be obsessed with the media, or they are complicit with “the System.” In fact, as the FBI villain of the novel postulates, the “activities of the sixties left” were “not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it” (269). As a result, in line with his previous use of Foucault, Pynchon shows that the agent believes that these radicals need “some reconditioning” and are “longing for discipline,” and the rest of the novel does not contradict him (269).

Whatever the faults of the New Left, though, Pynchon is much more scornful in *Vineland* of the conservative backlash that ran from “the Nixonian Reaction” to Reagan (269). The novel, for instance, covers Nixon’s crackdown of student radicals, his setting up the “machinery for mass detention,” as well as his inveterate love for wiretapping, in which he was aided by the FBI (264). Still, in Pynchon’s estimation, Nixon’s actions pale in comparison to Reagan’s policies, which aim to “dismantle the New Deal” (265); which wage war against “a botanical species” (38), given his administration’s “antidrug-hysteria” (340); and which, from all evidence, hopes to “restore fascism at home and around the world” (265). Such direct criticisms of a contemporary political leader or his domestic policies is not something Pynchon allowed himself in his earlier postmodern Cold War novels, and one wonders if the ending of the Cold War helped Pynchon move beyond his usual reticence. Furthermore, while Pynchon’s anarchist impulse always sought out glimmers of fascism in the U.S., *Vineland* is the first work that indicates that
his once frequent criticisms about liberalism might have been misplaced, especially now that he has become familiar with the political alternative.

A similar, though less strident, critique of the “Nixonian repression” finds its way into Pynchon’s later California novel, *Inherent Vice*, which is set in Los Angeles in 1970, after the Manson murders, when the radical energies of the late sixties were approaching their decline. In truth, Pynchon’s novel reflects this subdued quality, both in form, as it is a somewhat conventional detective work, and in its politics, which concerns local issues, like the “sad history of L.A. land use” (17). In other words, Pynchon avoids *Vineland’s* explicit political diatribes, although he does return to his anarchist hatred for authority figures (cops and the FBI) and for property. One new development, though, is Pynchon’s explicit interest in class, as shown when an antagonist makes his class prerogatives clear: “We’ve been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor—all of that’s ours, it’s always been ours” (367). Another notable difference is the protagonist’s response. After all, in prior works, Pynchon’s heroes might have publicly mocked this figure or withdrawn to await the changing of the guard, whereas in this novel the detective speculates vaguely about a “savage mob” (367), and it seems telling that the detective wonders, at the end, if anyone in his social sphere could still recognize “revolution,” even “if it had come up and said howdy” (356).

By contrast, the waning of revolutionary energies is difficult to detect in *Against the Day*, Pynchon’s last postmodern historical romance. As stated, Pynchon sets this work in the early twentieth century, before WWI, when “the inexorably rising tide of World Anarchism” is “peculiarly rampant” (51). In fact, the novel’s story revolves around the avenging sons of an anarchist bomber, and not since his essay on “Watts” has
Pynchon so clearly advocated the use of violence, a move that has startled some scholars. For instance, Kathryn Hume notes that, unlike his earlier novels, which never offered any “effective political opposition,” Against the Day “presents a political program [that] appears to favor attacking industrial infrastructures as the way to slow or derail capitalism” (168). For Hume, then, this novel advocates a form of resistance that is analogous to terrorism, and so she reads Pynchon’s supposedly new political outlook as one that originates “out of despair over a lack of effective peaceful alternatives” (168). It is as if the persistence of capitalism has made Pynchon desperate and wildly radical.

Yet, as this chapter has shown, Pynchon’s anarchistic writing has always speculated about the potential for chaos and violence. What has overshadowed this potential, though, is his protagonists’ withdrawals or delusions, neither of which represent practical strategies for change. Indeed, the Cold War world his characters inhabit is usually rendered as being so oppressive and stifling, what with its powerful confluence of corporate and government interests, that alternatives do not seem possible. And yet, Pynchon’s historical work also concentrates on crises or moments of disruption, when structures of power are faltering and certain spaces open up, and it is in these rare moments that Pynchon invests his dimming hopes for new possibilities.
Chapter Three: Loners and Lunatics: DeLillo’s Libertarian Politics and the Cold War

In his novel *Falling Man* (2007), a work that is set in the early years after 9/11, Don DeLillo presents a political march in New York City, “a march against the war, the president, the policies” (181). The march itself evokes the demonstrations near (and largely against) the Republican convention in August 2004, although specifics are omitted. Still, the lack of details is insignificant, not because the march is trivial or typical—in fact, a political march is atypical in DeLillo’s oeuvre. What is significant is that the event depicted here illustrates how DeLillo so often treats politics in his fiction.

As is his custom, the protestors are briefly sketched as trendy, with their “sun hats and symbol-bearing paraphernalia,” until they eventually become a crowd, that most reviled of entities in DeLillo’s fiction (181). Within the vicinity are also the ever-watchful police, ready to “detain the overcommitted and uncontrollable,” the zealots (182). In contrast to the cops, the crowds, the radicals, and the radical chic is the protagonist, a freelance editor, who participates in the march yet cannot feel kinship with her fellow protestors. Instead, “she felt a separation, a distance. This crowd did not return to her a sense of belonging” (182). This short scene, then, encapsulates DeLillo’s pattern of juxtaposing and privileging an individual versus a crowd, deriding left-leaning activists, noting the panoptic presence of authorities, and demonstrating that alienated Americans cannot connect nor effect major political change, at least in comparison to terrorists and a far-reaching American government, as the rest of the novel shows. For
many scholars, certain DeLillo novels, like *Falling Man* and *Mao II*, speak to our historical moment, in that they explore political issues like religious fanaticism and terrorism. However, what is often elided is that DeLillo’s political views were already formed in an earlier period: the Cold War.

After all, most of DeLillo’s works were written during the latter half of the Cold War, from 1971-1991. Many of his early postmodern, genre-bending novels (*Americana, End Zone, Players,* and *Running Dog*) explore subjects that we have come to associate with the Cold War, such as the omnipresence and threat of technology, usually in the forms of media or nuclear weapons, and the spread of paranoia and conspiracies. In addition, his more ambitious works are historical novels (*The Names, Libra, Mao II,* and *Underworld*) that are expressly set during the Cold War. As a matter of fact, as Timothy Parrish has observed, DeLillo, unlike his contemporaries, like Pynchon or Doctorow, has never set or dramatized an event before the Cold War in his writings. Therefore, it is the point of origin in his fiction and the historical era that most influenced his critical representations of America. Of course, since the publication of his epic work *Underworld,* which spans from 1951-1992, many academics have begun to read DeLillo in terms of the Cold War. Still, they have done so chiefly with that novel, and in my opinion, too few have examined DeLillo’s major works in conjunction with his earlier Cold War novels, and even fewer have read them altogether in regards to his politics.

One reason for the scarcity of Cold War political readings of DeLillo is that his political views are difficult to discern. Those looking for clues in his public life will find no partisan leanings, and DeLillo seldom offers an explicit declaration that would help one to classify his political beliefs. In a 1988 interview, he stated that he lacks “any
political program. Not only for my books, but for my life or for the life of my country” (Connolly 38). By 2007, his most forthcoming response about his political orientation was: “I am independent. And I would rather not say anything more about it” (Amend and Diaz 2). In short, DeLillo fashions himself as an outsider, free from influence and agenda; and he is often read in this way. The consensus is that he is not a political writer, or, at best, the politics in his novels strike most as paradoxical and anti-ideological.³ As a result, his works have often been read in terms of Linda Hutcheon’s ideas about postmodern politics, which she characterizes in a similar manner, although she also argues that postmodernism’s practices are ultimately “subversive,” in that they criticize or “denaturalize” cultural representations. Appropriately, DeLillo scholars, like Frank Lentricchia and John Duvall, maintain that his writing is “an act of cultural criticism” (“American” 2; “Intro” 3).

The problem, though, is that DeLillo scholars underestimate how much of DeLillo’s ideas about American culture, and by extension, American politics stem from a Cold War political event: the Kennedy assassination.⁴ Furthermore, they ignore how this event establishes political patterns in DeLillo’s novels and how these patterns coalesce into an ideology. According to DeLillo, the Kennedy assassination remains the most crucial event in American culture over the last half-century because it had shaken “our trust in a coherent reality most of us shared,” and what developed henceforth has been a “culture of distrust and paranoia” as well as “a sense of the secret manipulation of history,” a point of view that also animates much of Pynchon’s work (“Who Was”; “American” 22-4). In this interpretation, the event and its fallout generate a shift, and while DeLillo never classifies this shift as postmodern or political, his description evokes
them, what with his notions of a shared uncertainty regarding historical and national narratives. Indeed, for critics, like Peter Knight, the assassination figures in DeLillo’s oeuvre as “the primal scene of postmodernism” because it issues in not only this Lyotardian skepticism, but also a Guy-Debord version of the society of the spectacle (“DeLillo” 34; “Everything” 814). Knight’s points here about the assassination and postmodernism with respect to DeLillo’s novels are cogent, yet he fails to explore their political implications. This chapter will extend his use of Debord, incorporate Foucault’s ideas about power and discipline, as well as Hutcheon’s theories about postmodernism in order to illustrate DeLillo’s Cold War politics.

In broad terms, DeLillo’s political ideas about the Cold War revolve predominantly around technological threats and random violence. In a 1997 interview with Jonathan Bing, he argued that in “the last thirty-five years or so, there have been two levels of violence—the clear, vivid overarching threat we’ve faced until recently of nuclear exchange. And the other is something which I think began to flow from the Kennedy assassination and the social disruption of the 1960s” (261). Since the two superpowers never deployed nuclear weapons against each other and since such a scenario is only considered in *End Zone* and *Underworld*, it is not surprising that a violent act, preferably captured on film, becomes the only effective political performance in DeLillo’s Cold War novels. In comparison, political leaders, political parties, and even common or nonviolent political action, as shown earlier, are seemingly beside the point unless their efforts provoke a certain amount of fear that would break through the cultural glut. Likewise, the possibility of apocalypse and the growth in media technology render ideological arguments (communism, anticommunism) obsolete. Such a worldview, no
doubt, is what leads many academics to claim DeLillo is not a political writer. Still, if one thinks beyond domestic politics or parties, one notices DeLillo’s concern for the individual, who is distracted by technology and controlled by systems of power; and here it is helpful to understand DeLillo’s political views in terms of Debord’s ideas about the spectacle and Foucault’s theories about disciplinary power.

With a body of work that revolves around media culture, DeLillo’s fiction corresponds easily with Debord’s society of the spectacle, a consumer society that is ruled by images, in which “the world we see is the world of the commodity,” and we can no longer grasp the real (21). Numerous DeLillo protagonists, from the television executive/filmmaker David Bell to the despairing novelist Bill Gray, are at odds with this media-saturated environment, although their struggles are mostly cultural since they lack interest in or feel divorced from politics. Only a radical few in DeLillo’s fiction attempt political modes of resistance to the spectacle, and their efforts are posited as the only ones that might affect the culture at large. And yet, the acts of a loner, like Oswald, or of a few terrorists are often dismissed as ultimately futile, resulting in another media spectacle. Perhaps as a consequence, many of DeLillo’s protagonists strike one as passive and estranged, and in general his characters cannot connect or commit themselves to each other. “There is a motel in the heart of every man,” states DeLillo’s first narrator, and this outlook is sustained, so that by Underworld, DeLillo’s eleventh novel, Nick Shay declares: “I’ve always been a country of one” (275). In this way, DeLillo’s social vision aligns with Debord’s society of the spectacle not just in terms of a society ruled by images, but also in regards to the relations between people, which are invariably alienated and temporary. Then again, it must be said that DeLillo’s political extrapolations are
more pessimistic than Debord’s because almost all of DeLillo’s novels provide no collective action to an oppressive environment. DeLillo offers mainly loners and lunatics for political models; there are no progressives and his sole liberal is assassinated.

Perhaps more famous for their bleak political vision, Foucault’s theories regarding power and domination also coordinate with DeLillo’s ideas of control in a Cold War environment. Analyzing techniques and relations of power rather than ideologies, Foucault argues that technological apparatuses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Bentham’s panopticon, led to more effective disciplinary systems, equipped with their own discourses and achieved through surveillance and then normalization. Thus, at a level beyond brutal State repression, this new mechanism of power is able to administer and control individuals’ bodies and behavior. In a manner that recalls Foucault, DeLillo, like other postmodernists, is primarily concerned with depicting how invasive and powerful state apparatuses and the media are, and what replaces politics and intrigues (yet cows) DeLillo’s characters are the new forms of technology, whether it is the omnipresence of television, film, and surveillance in *Americana* and *Running Dog*, or the negative influence of the bomb in *End Zone* and *Underworld*. Linked to the technological attractions and threats are the mysterious institutional agencies (FBI, CIA) whose agents provide models of behavior for his characters, just as they do in Pynchon’s novels. DeLillo explains: “Agents seem eager to be turned. In fact, nearly everyone does . . . The air hums with casual espionage, conspiracy and treason. It is possible that technology helps create the clandestine mentality” (“American” 27). In general, DeLillo’s Americans in the Cold War behave like spies in a panoptic world where everyone is watched and everyone becomes, in
DeLillo’s term, “Self-watchers,” and this kind of self-regulation is “how the power centers operate and manipulate” (Begley 103).

The inevitable question, of course, is whether DeLillo offers a practical response or an alternative to this environment. He has stated that writers ought to write “against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean” (Remnick 142). However, as demonstrated in his novels, the main act of opposition he offers his artists and stubborn loners is to withdraw, which is inevitable since they cannot stay loyal to nor connect with one another long enough to develop any solid opposition or community. What is more disheartening is that DeLillo also fails to see anything positive in having his characters connected to initiate change because they could then be united. In his fiction, unification leads to crowds, crowds lead to a loss of self or individual consciousness, and this loss invariably leads to some form of totalitarianism. A DeLillo character, like Bill Gray, might contend that a novel is “a democratic shout,” but DeLillo’s novels never show how a democracy is maintained through a group of citizens, whom he cannot conceive as a group of individuals (159). Therefore, while I grant that DeLillo’s novels are not exactly political tracts, I find that if one takes into account his abiding concern for increasing threats to individuality and his fears regarding the state and collective politics, DeLillo’s politics should be classified as left-libertarian; or, to be more specific, his novels reflect a brand of “libertarian pessimism,” to borrow Terry Eagleton’s term for postmodern politics. Moreover, this type of political reticence and pessimism is typical of many postmodern writers who grew up and wrote during the Cold War.
I. “I Can’t Seem to Get Involved”: Political Alienation in *Americana*

*Americana* (1971), DeLillo’s first novel, sets the standard by which his characters demonstrate a broad apathy towards and withdrawal from Cold War politics and gravitate towards media representations. A nominally modernist work, *Americana* is about a burned-out television executive named David Bell, who, writing from an island in 1999, narrates his earlier efforts to create a personal film on a drive out west. Considered in terms of genre and theme, however, *Americana* is ultimately postmodern, in that it is a parodic *künstlerroman* about the impossibility of finding authenticity and one’s self due to media influence; and this predicament has a Cold War context in the novel. After all, the bulk of the action occurs during an unspecified year in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and Bell lists his age in this period as twenty-eight, which means that his childhood to early adulthood, detailed in the second half of the novel, occurred during the post-war era. Thus, DeLillo’s first protagonist might dub himself a “child of Godard and Coca Cola,” but he is also a product of the Cold War (269).

Nevertheless, aside from brief references to John Foster Dulles, Lyndon Johnson, and the positioning of American missiles in Turkey, Cold War leaders and subjects are rarely mentioned in Bell’s narration. Instead, he concentrates on what had the most impact on him: the mass media. For Debord, the mass media’s “manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment” stand for “the dominant model of life,” and this model holds true for Bell, who grew up emulating film icons, analyzing commercials with his father, and studying films in college before working in television (8). He writes, “All the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams” (130). With such an emphasis on media, scholars, like David Cowart, read *Americana* as a strictly
cultural, as opposed to a political, indictment against a nation that is “wholly given over to the image” (76). 7

However, DeLillo and his narrator occasionally show that the media culture and Cold War politics are related. For instance, the adult Bell understands in retrospect that his media dreams were linked to pro-American national narratives during the Cold War. He writes that as a child until “the era of the early astronauts” he bought into America’s Cold War myths: “I believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words” (130). Moreover, Bell realizes these myths and his fantasies distracted him from American foreign actions during the Cold War, as when he sardonically contrasts the difficulties in maintaining his “almost totally symbolic existence” to “mining the buried metals of other countries” or dropping “bombs over some illiterate village” (130). For Bell, Cold War propaganda and the media masked American imperial and military dealings. Admittedly, though, this rare and belated display of political awareness does not characterize the Bell of the late 1960s or the majority of characters in Americana.

In general, their knowledge about current Cold War political events, like the Vietnam War, originates from the media; and in the society of the spectacle that DeLillo offers, they usually refer to or frame the war as entertainment—if they discuss it at all. Bell’s boss at the network, for example, is disappointed with the war because “[r]atings on the warcasts are way down,” and his vague queries about the Cold War sound like a search for potential programming, as shown when he asks “whether the World War III idea is any more viable than it was a week ago in the light of recent developments on the international scene” (62, 65). For others, however, the distinction between media and
politics is much clearer: entertainment has become the dominant force. As Bell states, in a line that recalls Hemingway’s opening to “In Another Country,” “The war was on television every night but we went to the movies” (5).

Media consumption, though, is not the only factor that constitutes the spectacle, according to Debord. It is also a kind of social separateness in which people are united as passive spectators, and DeLillo’s writing demonstrates this theory, yet pushes it full circle in Americana. For instance, when films no longer captivate Bell and his friends, they “turned on or off” and became quiescent, although Bell’s eventual response is to take his camera and start filming, a potentially modernist declaration of artistic independence to some scholars. Peter Boxall, for instance, believes Bell’s resulting personal film offers “a new way of understanding the relationship between art and the world” (50); and in a similar manner, Mark Osteen argues that Americana itself questions “the possibility of authentic political and artistic activity in a world consumed by cinematic and capitalist representations” (30). The problem, of course, is that Bell’s film, whatever its artistic merits, is yet another cinematic representation; it provides more images to the spectacle and leads to more passivity and alienation. As mentioned earlier, Bell finally withdraws to an island. Furthermore, in Americana, DeLillo dismisses all political possibilities, authentic or otherwise.

Overall, DeLillo presents a near-constant atmosphere of political futility and indifference in a period marked by protests. The novel’s first example of anti-war activity includes bohemian New Yorkers who express themselves only by using political symbols as accessories (“peace earrings”) or adornments (“revolutionary wall posters in Chinese script”). Later, halfway through Americana, Bell asks an actress in the Midwest
about the war, and her response sums up the attitude of much of the other characters: “I can’t seem to get involved, maybe because the whole thing is so half-hearted” (226). As a whole, DeLillo’s vision of America in this period is one in which its citizens have a shared blasé or uncommitted quality to them, qualities that he himself perceived at the time. Looking back, he states:

I found the sixties extremely interesting, and, at the same time that all this was happening—enormous social disruption—I also felt that there was a curious ennui, a boredom, which actually may be part of my first novel . . . I suppose what I felt for much of this period was a sense of unbelonging, of not being part of any kind of official system. Not as a form of protest but as a kind of separateness. It was an alienation, but not a political alienation, predominantly. (Remnick 140)

Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, a “political alienation” and “a sense of unbelonging” are precisely what his protagonists show—and not just in his first novel, but in all of them.

What is more, in Americana DeLillo commences his pattern of treating left-leaning characters that offer resistance or alternatives to dominant political models as play-acting hipsters or unbending ideologues. On this issue DeLillo departs considerably from Debord, who at least calls for people, specifically the working class, to formulate a critique of the spectacle and “set a practical force in motion” (111). For DeLillo, all manner of political opposition, regardless of class, is impractical. Case in point is Warburton, an ostensible liberal who works with Bell and is presented as the conscience of the network. Bell explains, “Nobody ever paid the slightest attention to Warburton’s pleas on behalf of humanity and good taste, but we all felt, I think, that he was indispensable” (63). By the end of Americana, however, Bell realizes that Warburton is the mysterious “Trotsky,” a figure that had been covertly distributing unsettling memos to his coworkers. With Warburton, DeLillo sets up how a subversive that cares about
“humanity,” a character that could spur change at a network that shapes the consciousness of its viewers, is mainly ignored, and his acts of resistance come off as petulant pranks.

Still, a more active and open approach is by no means preferable. DeLillo’s satirical treatment of the left in Americana extends to a Vietnam vet named Brand, whose trajectory from soldier to protestor to activist indicates that he has undergone a political awakening. On the other hand, the narrator’s description of Brand’s political actions makes them sound trite, as when he writes that Brand “drifted into peace movements of the sing along type and finally discovered acid, political activism and writing” (114). In contrast to the majority of media-obsessed characters caught in the spectacle, Brand is far from passive; he resists the political environment and attempts to write a controversial novel. But, through Bell, we are told that Brand’s activities could be part of his habit of adopting new selves, as he “seemed to change his personality every few weeks and sometimes minutes” (114). Thus, the lone figure in DeLillo’s oeuvre that fought in and then against the Vietnam War is characterized as a near schizophrenic, and from this novel to his later ones, political activism is caricatured as role-playing.

Therefore, since working within the system and working against it are satirized and dismissed, creating an alternative to it would seem to be the only acceptable form of opposition to America’s Cold War environment in Americana. Yet, near the end, Bell encounters a commune that proves to be more repressive and admits to being “much more conservative” in its politics than the dominant culture’s (358). The commune’s inhabitants, free from the spectacle, have renounced American technology and consumer culture only to find boredom and a lack of purpose. "We don't expect to accomplish
anything," says one member, and yet the commune members are not without any plan in regards to their fears about outside threats. As the leader of the group explains, "[S]oon big government will take this land from us . . . The answer is indistinguishability . . . The death circus is coming to town and benign totalitarianism is the only feasible response” (358). Naturally, much of what the commune and its leader believes is paranoid, but their concerns mirror DeLillo's own preoccupations, like the threats we face from encroaching technology as well as from the state or "big government." Moreover, with the example of the commune and its leader's wild speech, we see that DeLillo's fiction, from this first novel to Mao II, demonstrates how a group, cowed by a technologically-driven society, usually turns to a form of “totalitarianism.” In this manner, DeLillo's work is not entirely subversive because it tends to portray any collective, often identified as leftists, as backward looking and totalitarian, a comparison that was common during the Cold War.

II. The Thrill of the Game: End Zone, Players, and Running Dog

In his subsequent postmodern novels from the 1970s, DeLillo experimented more openly with genres, and what political import these works contain is often read in terms of how DeLillo undermines readers’ genre expectations, which are usually read as conservative (Frow; O'Donnell). According to this reasoning, the quasi-thrillers Players and Running Dog are subversive because they withhold any sense of narrative closure or individual, heroic achievement with regard to their protagonists, as does End Zone (1972), a sports novel that becomes a commentary on the logic and language of nuclear war. Still, it is debatable that upending genre conventions and frustrating readers’ expectations reveal a text’s (and author’s) radical politics, especially since radical politics—if not all politics—are essentially rejected in these three novels. Indeed, these
three works follow DeLillo’s pattern of presenting apolitical protagonists that are drawn
to technology and conspiracy until they withdraw from all commitments. Nonetheless, if
one sets genre experiments and political apathy aside, one can at least acknowledge that
these novels cover tangible political issues, like nuclear warfare, the excesses of the CIA,
and the effects of America’s involvement in Vietnam. As a consequence, they should be
understood in terms of the Cold War.

More so than Americana before it, End Zone is inescapably a Cold War novel
since DeLillo’s concerns about technology have moved from the media to the bomb. As
in the previous work, the specific year is withheld, yet the era is evoked by characters
discussing the United States’ fight against communism and the prospect of nuclear
holocaust. Once again, though, Cold War politics are repeatedly dismissed in it. The
narrator Gary Harkness characterizes himself and his teammates as free from “whatever
dark politics of the human mind” lurk beyond the football field (5). Even so, politics in
terms of Cold War technologies and discourses have shaped Harkness, just as they
shaped David Bell in Americana; and the result is that DeLillo presents another
protagonist so enthralled to them that he eventually cannot act. Here the problem is
compounded by the fact that Harkness orders his life around ideas of discipline that he
has learned from social institutions, which recall Foucault’s writing about power and
discipline.

According to Foucault, modern society has expanded its power over subjects
through a variety of institutions (prisons, factories, and schools), in which power operates
on individuals through disciplinary procedures, like surveillance or corrective training,
that are later normalized. He explains: “[P]ower had to be able to gain access to the
bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour. Hence the significance of methods like school discipline” (125). With *End Zone*, a novel set at a college with a cast of athletes who later impose ascetic standards for themselves, Foucault’s ideas are particularly relevant. For instance, Harkness is told that “Football is discipline” (164); the field where he and his teammates practice resembles a panopticon, with their coach “up in the tower studying overall patterns” (9); and Harkness continually tries to master himself by pursuing a Spartan existence: “Simplicity, repetition, solitude, starkness, discipline upon discipline” (30). In short, Harkness and his teammates have applied the routinization they learned on the field to their lives off it, and the result is a Cold War campus novel in which there are no student rebellions against authority. “Lead a revolt,” says Harkness to a teammate, who instantly replies, “Coach would break me in half” (63). For Harkness and his fellow overly obedient students, they believe their only challenges are with themselves.

In addition to shaping his body and behavior, college supplies Harkness with a Cold War subject that fires his imagination, yet crucially not to the point of historical or political awareness. His morbid obsession, stirred from “assigned reading,” revolves around the possibilities of nuclear war and its aftermath, and his favorite courses are ROTC ones, like “Geopolitics,” “History of Air Power,” and “Aspects of modern war.” In other words, new branches of learning have emerged following a technology that is meant to curb aggression. Thus, Foucault’s ideas about how power and truth are circulated and understood through discourse are pertinent, especially since Harkness focuses on the terminology of nuclear war. He declares, “I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill . . . stark deterrence . . . the language of past
world wars became laughable” (21). With a protagonist fascinated by jargon, *End Zone* is often analyzed strictly in terms of language. John Johnston, for instance, argues that the parallels between “the precision and vectorial power of the languages” of football and nuclear warfare are more crucial than their more obvious links with violence (263).

However, what is significant is what the technical language of nuclear warfare excludes and, following Foucault, how its potential violence shapes points of view. As shown above, this militaristic argot has reduced Harkness’ ability to consider the political motivations behind wars, in that he only remains fascinated with how they are fought. (One wonders what he has learned from his “Geopolitics” course.) Consequently, Harkness understands history—in a statement that partially echoes Foucault—to be “the placement of bodies. What men say is relevant only to the point at which language moves masses of people or a few momentous objects into significant juxtaposition” (45). His college studies, then, have provided Harkness with an impersonal vision of history that sees causes only in terms of broad effects or looming threats, one that is similar to DeLillo’s thoughts about the Cold War.

In fact, perhaps the strangest argument in *End Zone* is that politics and ideology are beside the point in the Cold War. During a meeting in a motel off campus, Harkness’ instructor Major Staley bluntly reveals to Harkness the true reason behind the War. He states, “I think we can forget ideology. People invent that problem, at least as far as the U.S. is concerned . . . Obviously we can live with Communism . . . Today we can say that war is a test of opposing technologies” (83-4). Containment, spreading democracy, or the superiority of Western capitalism—all are ultimately irrelevant to Staley; and this position, that technology is actually the key feature of the Cold War, is one DeLillo
repeats, particularly in *Libra* and *Underworld*. Furthermore, such an approach, to concentrate on technology and power rather than ideology, is in accordance with Foucault’s writing. For Foucault, we should be less interested in “why certain people want to dominate” than how mechanisms of power affect our bodies and behavior (97). In *End Zone*, however, most of the characters do not seem to comprehend how the specter of the bomb has affected them.

DeLillo suggests it has caused them to become near fascist. In an interview, he has stated that “the more advanced technology becomes, the more primitive our fear becomes” (Connolly 66); and in *End Zone*, Staley argues that the bomb has created a “theology of fear” (80). As a result, Americans “capitulate to the overwhelming presence” of it, and their only outlet is to find order in what they can control (80). For instance, besides the football players’ focus on discipline and violence, their coach has a preoccupation with “self-denial,” and we learn the population off campus is in a constant state of readiness. As Harkness observes, “a word appeared all over town. MILITARIZE” (20). Now, on the whole, not all the characters in *End Zone* lose themselves to regimentation or violence, but the one holdout is particularly anxious in regards to the totalitarian aspects of the citizenry. Late in the novel, a professor confesses to Harkness that his dread does not revolve around “our traditional cold-war or whatever-kind-of-war enemies”; he is more afraid of his fellow Americans, who love crowds and exhibit “ridiculous patriotic manifestations” (159-161). Of course, as he acknowledges, his fear might be paranoid, yet DeLillo’s overall presentation of a fearful, disciplined populace does not contradict the professor’s analysis.
It is here in this early novel that DeLillo voices his concern for the individual, a figure that stands in contrast to crowds and whose power is diminishing in this era. For example, during his speech about technology and the Cold War, Staley ruefully explains, “I don’t think we care too much about individual bravery anymore,” which implies that individual action is beside the point in the nuclear age (84). Fittingly, there are no individual acts of bravery from any of the characters in *End Zone*, especially the narrator, who withdraws from all responsibility. By novel’s end, Harkness is promoted as a team leader, but rather than celebrate, his eventual response is to undergo a hunger strike, an action usually taken out of protest. But, according to DeLillo, Harkness “isn’t protesting anything” so much as testing himself, once again (LeClair, “Interview” 8). Therefore, while Harkness is the rare DeLillo hero who is part of a team, he cannot feel part of a group nor take action to oppose one. This individual is self-absorbed.

As stated earlier, it is uncharacteristic for a DeLillo protagonist to wholeheartedly join a political group or adhere to a specific political issue. However, Harkness’s complete lack of opinion about the politics surrounding the bomb demonstrates an obtuseness that goes beyond any other DeLillo hero. The subject of nuclear warfare, despite its political history and implications, appeals to Harkness chiefly as an abstraction: “[I]t’s the hypothetical part of it that interests me” (158). Thus, even with all his knowledge about the bomb’s effects, Harkness does not favor disarmament nor does he side with the hawks. For instance, when Staley encourages him to join the Air Force, Harkness declines, explaining, “I wouldn’t want to put on a uniform or anything like that. I wouldn’t want to march or visit air bases,” and this refusal does not reveal his opposition to the military so much as his habit of not taking sides (158). With *End Zone*,
as in *Americana*, DeLillo presents a protagonist who is enthralled with technology and who cannot bother to formulate or even take a political stance during the Cold War, despite his thorough knowledge of how it could be fought.

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In contrast, DeLillo’s next two postmodern Cold War novels provide central characters that seek out and are consciously aware of their involvement with politics. However, these protagonists, like earlier ones, are not attracted to ideologies or concerned “with policy”; they are fascinated with politics because of its potential for intrigue (*RD* 82). As a result, *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978) are often classified as political thrillers, albeit unique ones that overturn the genre’s requirements for escalating tension and resolution and offer instead their protagonists’ inability to affect political events—or even to hold political commitments. As stated earlier, these genre reversals, for many DeLillo critics, make the novels both subversive and postmodern. The problem, though, is that dissenting political action, especially subversive activities, is dismissed in both novels; and the protagonists’ lack of political loyalty is perhaps less indicative of postmodernism than of a covert mindset that DeLillo connects to technology and the Cold War, a period which itself has links to the political thriller.

As Tim Engles notes, the political thriller genre became popular during the height of the Cold War and “emerged primarily in response to the post-World War II establishment of such national intelligence organizations as the American CIA and MI6” (66). Not surprisingly, the CIA figures into the plot of *Players* and looms even larger in *Running Dog*, which concerns itself with a covert proprietary or “breakaway unit” of the CIA. Yet, what is most pertinent to my argument here is how the agency’s influence has
pervaded the American populace in these novels and, according to DeLillo, outside of them. Indeed, John Duvall argues that *Players* demonstrates “the extent to which by the 1970s the secret agency had become a feature of late Cold War American identity,” an assessment that he fails to elaborate upon, but it is one that equally applies to *Running Dog* (6). How this influence works is that surveillance technology and domestic espionage activities shape and provide models of behavior for DeLillo’s amenable characters. Thus, DeLillo’s shift from the football field in *End Zone* to the field of espionage in *Players* and *Running Dog* is not that odd because, as he states, “Espionage is well known to be a game,” and his characters in these political thrillers want to play—and why not since they assume someone is always watching? ("American" 27).

In both these thrillers and in later ones, like *Libra*, DeLillo’s Cold War environment is one in which his characters are frequently filmed or spied upon, resulting in an amalgamation of Debord’s society of the spectacle and Foucault’s panopticon. While Foucault might object to such a merger, as he argues, “our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance,” the two are not mutually exclusive and overlap since both involve viewing (218). As in his first novel, with its echoes of Debord, images surround DeLillo’s characters in *Players* and *Running Dog*, and they too are obsessed with film. *Players*, for instance, opens with the characters watching a movie, and its plot revolves around a self-described “media event,” or potential terrorist attack, while *Running Dog*’s characters scramble for a film of Hitler’s last days. Unlike *Americana*, however, DeLillo’s characters are now apprehensive about being caught as images: “Go into a department store, you’re filmed,” says one in *Running Dog*. “Spy satellites, weather balloons, U-2 aircraft. What are they doing? . . . Putting the whole world on film” (149).
Moving from cinema to surveillance, from his first novel to these later ones, DeLillo demonstrates that what had once distracted his characters from the Cold War has now made them a part of it.

Moreover, this new omnipresence of the camera’s gaze perfectly illustrates Foucault’s theories about how power asserts itself, usually through technology, and how it administers behavior (93). These theories are even summarized in *Running Dog*, where surveillance and “the superabundance of technology,” along with data-collecting institutions and regulatory forces (“police agencies, intelligence gatherers”), make people “feel like criminals” who “can’t escape investigation” (93). Attempting to elude this systematic intrusion, people adopt, as DeLillo believes, a “clandestine mentality”; and the larger effect of these increases in technology is that they lead to a lack of “loyalty and patriotic commitment” because “we are more easily shaped, swayed, influenced” (“American” 27). And yet, most of his characters, while not strictly patriotic, have been conditioned to such an extent that they imitate or act in the service of the authorities. For example, Lyle, the Wall Street-working protagonist in *Players*, finds “himself putting together a physical description” of a stranger and admits that “the secret dream” of those like him is “[C]alling some government bureau” (45, 101). Not long after, his dream is realized: he gravitates towards a terrorist group, eventually grows bored with them (“Lyle hadn’t been able to feel wholly engaged”), and spies on the group for the CIA (100).

According to some scholars, behavior like Lyle’s reveals how DeLillo’s protagonists engage in politics as a kind of playacting or thrill seeking. Mark Osteen, for example, argues that these characters are “like film actors” that “exist in a cinematic world that conflates behavior and performance” (108), while John McClure contends that
they desire only mystery and risk, forgoing any deeper political loyalties; and he points to how the central character in *Running Dog*, Moll Robbins, shows less concern about her investigative journalism than in the spy (Glen Selvy) she sleeps with and the former CIA unit he works for (126-9). To an extent, I agree with these readings, especially McClure’s assessment about these characters’ need for excitement and how their aesthetic sense of politics explains their lack of political effectiveness. Nonetheless, despite what he and DeLillo claim, these characters maintain a fidelity to the American government, in that their behavior and their fantasies are attached to it, particularly its clandestine services.⁹

In these thrillers DeLillo’s protagonists are furtive, harbor secrets, or often take on new identities; thus, they are not so much actors in the society of the spectacle or surveillance state in which they live—they are spies. Aware of this appropriated role, Osteen argues that these characters “invent secret lives as fantasies of subversion” (5), or as Lyle states, “Imagine how sexy that can be . . . the suggestion of a double life” (101). But Osteen claims characters like Lyle “find those secrets reappropriated by the institutions they meant to serve,” whereas I would contend that their notion of secret lives originates from institutions (5). According to Debord, the individual in the society of the spectacle finds that his “gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him” (16). In *Players* and *Running Dog* that “someone else” is a government spy, the preeminent model these main characters have in terms of how to operate in their Cold War world (16). At some point, however, they seek to move beyond imitation and come in contact with the power structure behind the camera; but, aside
from a senator in *Running Dog*, the only governmental figures DeLillo’s characters meet are, again, spies, who basically are the power structure in his novels.

In *Players* and *Running Dog*, if not all his Cold War works, the federal government is symbolized by its intelligence agencies, which is not surprising since, to DeLillo and his characters, these agencies are the most influential branches of government, mainly because they are unknowable. As a matter of fact, because of their inscrutability, DeLillo imparts a religious aspect to them: “They represent old mysteries and fascinations . . . They’re like churches that hold the final secrets” (Begley 106). Correspondingly, his characters in *Players* refuse to speak the acronym CIA, to the point where Lyle asks, “Is there a curse attached if you utter the goddamn thing?” (90). Of course, DeLillo here is parodying the cult of secrecy surrounding these organizations.

Nevertheless, the larger impression one gets is that spying is all DeLillo and his characters care to know about their government, which itself is portrayed as nebulous yet menacing. In *Players*, the terrorist/agent Kinnear proclaims:

> Our big problem in the past, as a nation, was that we didn’t give our government credit for being the totally entangling force that it was. They were even more evil than we’d imagined . . . Assassination, blackmail, torture, enormous improbable intrigues . . . Cameras, microphones, so forth. Behind every stark fact we encounter layers of ambiguity. This is all so alien to the liberal spirit . . . This haze of conspiracies and multiple interpretations. So much for the great instructing vision of the federal government. (104)

This paranoid, post-consensus view of the American government is no doubt accurate for the period in which this novel and *Running Dog* occur, during the mid-to-late 1970s, after Watergate and Vietnam. But Kinnear’s speech also epitomizes DeLillo’s own narrow, pessimistic beliefs about what government represents. Throughout his oeuvre, he and his protagonists, excluding J. Edgar Hoover, cannot imagine a benevolent or indifferent
federal apparatus. Once, as children, like David Bell in *Americana*, they might have believed in the government’s “institutional messages”; but as adults, they are disenchanted with them. Even so, in terms of how his main characters behave and regard the world, the federal government has instructed them all too well: they spy on each other and, with the exception of those in *Libra*, they dismiss any direct action against it. By the end of these two novels, for instance, Lyle retreats to a motel, Moll’s journalism is never published, and Selvy allows himself to be killed.

Furthermore, by contrast, the government in *Players* and *Running Dog* remains more alluring than any of the radical or left-leaning alternatives DeLillo presents. Since most of the characters in these novels spy and double-cross each other, there is the suggestion that both those on the right and left lack any ideological allegiance. However, a few minor characters that work against the status quo are politically committed; but DeLillo repeatedly portrays them, as he did in *Americana*, as insane loners or fanatics. For instance, near the beginning of *Players*, a single protestor at Federal Hall denounces the “RECENT HISTORY” and atrocities of Western capitalism (13). This unnamed character, one of the few in DeLillo’s novels that can think historically about the system he lives in and protest against it, is rendered as mentally absent: “The life inside his eyes had dissolved. He made his own space, a world where people were carvings on a rock” (150). Similarly cut off from humanity is the terrorist Marina, who is depicted in *Players* as single-minded (“She believed in one thing . . . to the exclusion of everything else”) and her group’s ideology “is calculated madness” (98, 108). What's more, the terrorists’ political plan, to blow up the Stock Exchange in order to demystify the sacrosanct authority of global capitalism, is written off as “[A] lot of ridiculous theatrics,” a “stupid”
spectacle that “accomplishes nothing. It’s another media event” (180). In DeLillo’s world, then, terrorists are the “film actors”—they are too resolute to be spies—and they are in thrall to the image like everyone else, a point he will return to in Mao II. Additionally, whatever oppositional politics they offer is vague (“They had no visible organization or leadership. They had no apparent plan”) and destructive (121, 106).

Still, it is not just the radical politics of those in the present that are derided. DeLillo mocks the left-leaning politics of those who opposed the Vietnam War in Running Dog, continuing a practice he initiated in Americana. Besides referencing a pejorative term that Chinese and North Korean communists gave to imperialist lackeys, Running Dog is the title of a fictional magazine, which was once “fairly radical” and which employs two female characters (Moll, Grace Delaney) that were themselves involved in “radical adventures” (21, 216). One dated a bomber and suffered injuries for protesting the war, while the other moved money around for “the movement” when it “was a living thing” (216). In the novel’s present era, though, these characters are not especially proud about their former commitments, and their past rebellious activities have been replaced by a fascination with conspiracies. For McClure, this facile attraction suggests that their interest in politics was always motivated by fantasy, and he believes that DeLillo’s treatment of these characters, particularly Moll, reveals a critique of the counterculture (129). But, as shown earlier, DeLillo’s critique extends beyond one generation, and it demonstrates, as John Kucich argues, a “suspiciously inflexible, and often thinly contrived disenchantment” with all of his characters’ activism (340). Therefore, in these supposedly subversive thrillers, DeLillo presents a post-Vietnam era in which the Left lack all conviction, while the terrorists are full of passionate intensity.
And in the end, intelligence agencies, with all their influence, strike the reader of *Players* and *Running Dog* as the only plausible and effective political organizations in America.

Such an analysis, of course, does not mean that DeLillo is an apologist for the American government, its foreign policy towards Vietnam, nor its agencies. In fact, in *Running Dog*, DeLillo reveals a detailed knowledge of the CIA’s practices and critiques its past “extravaganzas that brought on the thirst for reform,” a reference, perhaps, to the Church Committee that was investigating the CIA’s illegal activities in the mid-1970s (74). DeLillo has even described *Running Dog* in an interview as “a response to the war in Vietnam,” that “the paranoia, manipulation, violence” in it are a “form of fallout” to how the War affected Americans (Begley 106). However, the type of response he never presents in *Running Dog* and *Players* is any practical form of political action against corrupt institutions or failed policies. Group politics, as shown earlier, are not endorsed, and the individual—to the extent that these purposefully thin characters can be labeled as such—is too distracted or controlled and is seemingly unable to break “free from the interpellative power of state or counterstate apparatuses” (Boxall 51-52).

For some critics, the question is whether this political impasse is indicative of postmodernism in general rather than a particular failing on DeLillo’s part. Patrick O’Donnell, for example, argues that DeLillo critiques the left, with its ideas of conspiracies; subverts the right, with its trumpeting of individualism; and evokes Jameson’s theory of postmodernism as the “cultural logic of capitalism.” He writes that in *Running Dog* “any potential for political change is diverted by the fascination of consumers with objects, exteriors, and the pessimism which attends the knowledge that one is part of an objectifying political/economic mechanism that is fully ‘known’ and
completely beyond one’s control” (66). Still, O’Donnell believes that DeLillo’s work, however pessimistic it is, suggests we move beyond these so-called “known” determinants, even though he admits that DeLillo neglects to provide a workable alternative along the lines of “a Pynchonesque ‘counterforce’” (67). Other academics, though, are far less forgiving. Rather than blaming postmodernism, McClure argues that DeLillo “repudiates all forms of political engagement” (132). For him, *Players* criticizes capitalism, but only “in the name of an apolitical ethos of tragic resignation and solidarity in suffering,” while *Running Dog*, with all its protagonists’ failings, demonstrates we may no longer have the ability or the language to criticize capitalism, along with “any hope in resisting it” (127, 131).

What scholars are less inclined to explore is that DeLillo seems ambivalent about resistance to what protects capitalism—that is, the government. In interviews he has stated, “People need rules and boundaries, and if society doesn’t provide them in sufficient measure, the estranged individual may drift into something deeper and more dangerous” (Begley 96). By default, the government and its agencies in *Players* and *Running Dog* best offer his protagonists order to help them define their lives and answer some yearning within them. At one point in *Players*, for example, a character sizes up Lyle and states, “You need this, don’t you? A sense of structure” (106). Here we see DeLillo returning to his notion, explored earlier in *End Zone*, that Americans seek control in a technologically-complex Cold War environment that leaves them feeling helpless, although here they defer to a familiar yet fascinating authority that controls them. As a result, academics, like Duvall and Osteen, have noted how these thrillers, especially *Running Dog*, comment on “fascist urges in American culture,” yet they explored them in
relation to film, not in terms of government’s mystique (Duvall 6). For DeLillo, the
government, with its technology and clandestine services, regulates his characters; yet,
until *Libra* at least, he never advocates an attack nor envisions a full break with it. For
him, the American government during the Cold War is too complex and mysterious to be
dismissed and, as shown in his novels, it appears to be superior to whatever group would
attack it. At best, as a libertarian pessimist, he can only be distressed about the U.S.
government’s hold over individuals here, and, as he shows in *The Names*, overseas.

III. “A Greek Word, Of Course. Politics”: Cold War History and *The Names*

Often referred to as another of his political thrillers, *The Names* (1982) represents
a notable amendment in DeLillo’s writing about the Cold War. His previous postmodern
works, with their emphasis on genre experimentation, explored Cold War topics and were
vaguely set during this era, but they never focused on Cold War history or historical
events *per se.* From *The Names* onward, though, DeLillo’s Cold War works are
historical novels that offer higher levels of verisimilitude and, perhaps as a result, a
greater concentration on Cold War politics. Still, despite his turn towards realist
techniques, novels like *The Names* and *Libra* are recognizably postmodern for a variety
of reasons, not least of which is their skepticism about official historiography.

Accordingly, numerous DeLillo scholars have categorized his historical works using
Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction,” her term for postmodern fiction that
deals with history yet calls into question the conventions of historical writings as well as
certain presumptions about history. However, none have read *The Names* with
Hutcheon’s theory nor have they explored how it fits into (or deviates from) her ideas
about the politics of postmodernism, which, as mentioned earlier, offers “de-naturalizing
critiques” but remains compromised or paradoxical. As DeLillo’s writing temporarily shifts here from Cold War technologies to Cold War history, Hutcheon’s theories, more than Debord’s and Foucault’s, best enable one to understand DeLillo’s politics.

In contrast to postmodern theorists, like Jameson, who sees postmodernism as ahistorical, Hutcheon argues that what best typifies postmodern fiction is historiographic metafiction, historical novels that problematize historical representations and knowledge, mainly through parody and an uncertainty towards totalizing narrative and “facts” (“Pastime” 275). Hutcheon realizes, of course, that “[f]or some critics, all novels are ambivalent in their attitude toward the separation of fact and fiction, but,” she believes, “historiographic metafictions . . . seem more overtly and problematically so,” primarily because postmodern authors are aware of how history is discursively structured, and how it cannot maintain a higher status of truth over fiction since both involve narration (Politics 76). Examining postmodern novels from the late 1970s to early ‘80s (Midnight’s Children, Ragtime, etc.), Hutcheon contends that historiographic metafiction differs from typical historical novels, in that it blurs the boundaries between history and fiction; explores historical gaps and “unofficial histories”; employs marginal figures instead of conventional, period-appropriate types; raises ideas about subjectivity and identity; and is “self-conscious about the paradox of the totalizing yet inevitably partial act of narrative representation” (78). Unfortunately, in her studies about postmodernism, Hutcheon never references DeLillo’s novels. Even so, Libra and The Names fit her criteria for historiographic metafiction. After all, both have writers (or failed writers) as protagonists, trying to understand the past or their place within historical events; and with both,
DeLillo paradoxically demonstrates how the past can never be known with any certainty, even as he advances his own “unofficial” narratives about historical periods and events.

To be fair, though, there are obvious reasons as to why Hutcheon and DeLillo scholars have avoided reading *The Names* as a work of historiographic metafiction: the novel does not focus on one famous historical event nor is it parodic or overtly metafictional. In fact, many critics understand DeLillo’s novel to be about language, as opposed to narrative, and how brutally reductive language can be, since so many characters in the novel impose linguistic systems that relegate people to information—and even initials—rather than capturing their complexity. For instance, one of the key plot threads revolves around a primitive cult that seeks to escape the ambiguities of language by killing innocent victims whose initials match the initials of the place where they are killed. With its interest in “[t]he alphabet itself . . . in letters, written symbols, fixed in sequence” (30), the cult and its members have been interpreted as “terrorists of textuality,” as part of DeLillo’s overall condemnation of “the imperialism of print” in a novel that extols oral exchange (LeClair 194). But, obviously, such a critique is, as Hutcheon would argue, deeply compromised, coming as it does in a novel written by a Westerner.

Besides, print and text-oriented Westerners in *The Names* are not negatively assessed as a whole. Writing occupies some of the more sympathetic characters, including the protagonist’s family: “Kathryn was writing reports on the excavation . . . Our boy . . . was working on a novel” (8). Additionally, the character that has the most to do with imperialism and print uses his narrative as a kind of corrective for the harm he committed as a risk analyst, in which he reduced the economic and political activities of
Middle Eastern countries to insurance reports for multinationals. Therefore, even though he does not harp on the conventions of storytelling and he is not exactly a marginal figure (as he was once part of the business elite), DeLillo’s protagonist presents a self-conscious narrative that blurs the boundary between memoir and history, chiefly because it revisits a history in which he is implicated.

*The Names* concerns an American expatriate named James Axton, who, writing in a period after the Iranian Revolution, reflects upon his time a year earlier (1979) in the Near and Middle East, where he traveled while working for the “Northeast Group,” a subsidiary that “specialized in political risk insurance for corporations with foreign holdings” (48). The impetus behind his reflections is that subsequent Cold War events, combined with a possible attempt on his life and a belated realization that his risk reports were fed to the CIA, cause Axton to rethink his time abroad. A once tranquil summer, for instance, “the summer in which we sat on his broad terrace,” is framed in his narrative as “the period after the shah left Iran, before the hostages were taken, before the Grand Mosque and Afghanistan” (66). Later events are also remembered, rather than recently recorded, as occurring “before crowds attacked the U.S. embassies in Islamabad and Tripoli, before the assassinations of American technicians in Turkey” (67).

Reminiscences like these, scattered throughout the narrative, reveal how Axton, who once characterized himself as “politically neuter,” has come to comprehend his own private history through America’s crumbling hegemony in the Middle East (17). Through Axton, then, DeLillo offers a history about Americans’ waning political influence in a part of the world that no longer welcomes them; and with this approach, *The Names* supports Hutcheon’s theory that postmodern works are inescapably political.
And yet, as stated previously, the majority of DeLillo scholars have given scant attention to political and historical issues in *The Names*. One exception is Anne Longmuir who argues that DeLillo plotted *The Names* “against a historical intertext,” the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis, which illustrated the inability of the West, particularly the CIA, to comprehend eastern societies and foresee the rise of religious fundamentalism and anti-Americanism (1). Unlike many critics, Longmuir also praises DeLillo for his political acumen regarding “the limitations of the cold war paradigm,” for his “early recognition that American neocolonialism, combined with its failure to imagine anything beyond the cold war binary, was bound to have violent repercussions” (2). As historically minded as her study is, though, Longmuir fails to investigate how DeLillo offers an earlier Cold War historical intertext in *The Names*, one that explains the more immediate violence and anti-American sentiment that his main characters face—namely, America’s Cold War involvement with Greece, where the novel is principally set. More so than Iranians’ or any other countrymen’s ire, *The Names* concentrates on Greeks’ resentment towards America (and Americans) during the latter stages of the Cold War. But this animus is best understood by exploring the troubled history the two countries have shared throughout the Cold War. As a matter of fact, one could argue that Greece, with its postwar political struggles, along with America’s trepidations about Soviet influence in Europe, helped initiate the Cold War. In 1947, a year into the Greek Civil War (1946-49), President Truman delivered the Truman Doctrine, which stated that the U.S. needed to offer economic and military aid to a devastated Greece, as well as to a slightly less threatened Turkey, in order to bolster their democracies against “armed minorities” and “their terrorist activities,” and most of all, “totalitarian regimes.”
(“Truman”). In other words, in order to prevent communist expansion in these and surrounding countries in Europe and “the entire Middle East,” Truman shifted American policy towards the Soviet Union from détente to containment, a policy idea proposed a year earlier by George Kennan.\(^{15}\) Thus, the first country in which America’s longstanding policy against communism was enacted is where *The Names* by and large takes place. But, rather than showing the Greeks’ appreciation for the U.S.’s continued assistance, DeLillo illustrates the disdain the “free peoples” of Greece harbor towards their Western benefactors.

As seen in the novel, the causes of such antipathy stem from Greece’s utter dependency on American financial aid, combined with America’s interfering (or perceived interfering) in Greece’s national politics. From 1947-1956, Greece received more assistance from the U.S. than any other underdeveloped country, but America’s main concerns were focused around security; as a result, the bulk of the aid went to the military rather than towards “liberalization and democratization” projects (Botsiou 279). Due to this lack of modernization, internal domestic strife and anti-American protests occurred during the 1960s—that is, until a military junta came to power through a *coup d’état* in 1967, and “put a violent stop to both political agitation and cultural reform” (Botsiou 280-81). This junta, known also as “The Regime of the Colonels,” lasted until 1974; and while the American government was initially cool towards the fascist regime, by 1973, ours “was the only nation in the developed world on friendly terms” with it (Weiner 383-84).

Regardless of the U.S.’s initial wavering relations with the junta, many Greeks believe the U.S., specifically the CIA, actively planned or wholly backed the *coup* as a
“solution” to Greece’s domestic crises (Botsiou 278). To date, no evidence supports this theory, although one of the junta’s leaders, George Papadopoulos, was once a “recruited CIA agent,” and the agency’s station chiefs in Athens maintained close relations with Greece’s military and intelligence establishment for decades (Weiner 383). This level of CIA involvement was not lost on the Greeks, four of whom, from the radical Marxist group 17 November, shot a newly arrived CIA station chief, Richard Welch, in Athens in 1975 (Weiner 387). In the end, because of the CIA’s influence and the American government’s relationship with the junta, Greek society has held “a uniquely negative perception of American political culture ever since,” to the point that their views regarding “their overall postwar history runs through this channel of anti-American bias” (Botsiou 278). This political environment, then, is the one in which the American characters of *The Names* find themselves, five years after the collapse of the junta.

Yet, one of DeLillo’s main political points is that they take little to no notice, so the historical gaps in this historiographic metafiction occur in the American characters’ consciousness (and, by extension, the American public’s in general). In a manner that recalls his characters’ response to Vietnam in *Americana*, the Americans operating in Greece in *The Names* are almost entirely disinterested in their host country’s Cold War history and current politics. For instance, early in the novel, Axton recalls translating his first line of Greek, “a wall slogan” that reads “Death to Fascists,” yet he never ventures to glean its potential relevance in Greece (81). Later, observing a children’s masquerade that ends “in front of a war memorial,” he admits to being “happy not knowing” what the event was or “what was being commemorated” (44). Such ignorance is odd in Axton’s case, considering that his job entails the study of “political situations”
in other countries; but, as he admits, he is determined to remain a tourist in Athens, his “legal home,” because it allows him “to be stupid” and thereby “escape accountability” (34, 43). Still, this role is neither appropriate for him—tourists, after all, seek out historical or cultural sites, whereas Axton avoids a visit to the Parthenon until the end of the novel—nor does tourism clarify why Axton and his fellow Americans reside in Greece but ignore its politics and history (43). More than likely, the explanation lies in Axton’s remark that characterizes him as the postmodern multinational: “Americans used to come to places like this to write and paint and study, to find deeper textures. Now we do business” (6).

In short, what these Americans value about Greece is what their government cared about with this nation throughout the Cold War: economics and security. As “business people in transit . . . versed in percentages,” they believe Greece to be the final Western outpost where they can safely earn a profit (6). This view, though, results less from their firsthand observations of Greece and more from their travels outside it. For much of The Names, these Americans consider Greece’s political situation only in relation to the neighboring Middle Eastern countries, or “terrorist playpens,” where Western businesses and Westerners are fleeing (232). Simply by comparison, then, Greece, to them, is a politically stable bulwark, “our own model of democratic calm,” and Athens in particular assumes “the soft glow of an executive refuge” (96). Any deviation that would complicate these businessmen’s idealized notions of Greece is disregarded for as long as possible; and, what is worse is that these neocolonial Americans’ political obstinacy has a larger effect: “The occupiers fail to see the people they control” (237).
However, as the novel develops, Axton and his countrymen are confronted with Greece’s Cold War past and political present through Greek citizens. For example, Axton, despite his previous willful ignorance, acknowledges Greece’s history when he encounters provincial Greeks who hold “the black memory of the Civil War” in their faces, although even then he does not engage them nor do any of these Greeks challenge him about politics in particular (104). The exception is an Athenian named Eliades, who draws Axton into two lengthy discussions in which Americans and their government are held accountable for Greece’s postwar history. After introducing the topic of politics (“A Greek word, of course. Politics”) and later mentioning “the politics of occupation,” Eliades provokes Axton, who senses quickly that Eliades “is leading up to poor little Greece and how we’ve abused her. Turkey, Cyprus, the CIA, U.S. military bases” (57-8).

With this statement, Axton betrays some familiarity about America’s role in Greece’s Cold War history, but the remainder of his exchanges with Eliades reveals not only what he and his fellow Americans dismiss but also cannot imagine.

Facing a variety of political complaints (from thriving American investments in Greece during the junta to America’s Cold War strategies that marginalize Greece), Axton insists to Eliades that Greeks themselves bear responsibility for their pro-American government and their current economic status. But this response only addresses part of Eliades’s objections:

Our future does not belong to us. It is owned by the Americans. The Sixth Fleet, the men who command the bases on our soil, the military officers who fill the U.S. embassy, the political officers who threaten to stop economic aid, the businessmen who threaten to stop investing, the bankers who lend money to Turkey . . . We are repeatedly sold out, taken lightly, deceived, totally ignored. (236)
Here, at its most basic level, DeLillo supplies a minor character bemoaning the overreaching influence of the American government, just as he did in *Americana* and *Players*. But unlike the vague rants in those works, this catalog of political grievances marks the rare instance in DeLillo’s oeuvre, up to this point, in which a character explicitly addresses the larger effects of America’s Cold War policies—and does so with historical specificity and an international outlook that ties the policies to global capital. Indeed, for the first time, DeLillo reveals that the U.S.’s fight against communism was (or has become) merely a front for international business, a point he will return to in *Libra*. Furthermore, Eliades is one of the few left-leaning characters in DeLillo’s Cold War works whose political beliefs are not satirized or dismissed, which implies that DeLillo sympathizes with, if not endorses, his critiques. (Stranger still, this treatment of Eliades suggests that in DeLillo’s novels only non-Americans have an authentic gripe with the U.S. government.) Then again, in this postmodern and, thus, according to Hutcheon, contradictory work, DeLillo leaves open the possibility that Eliades’ protestations, valid as they might be, link up with a larger anti-American sentiment that DeLillo critiques for its simplicity in *The Names* and elsewhere.

Before composing *The Names*, DeLillo, like his protagonist, relocated to Athens and traveled in the region (Middle East, India) from the late 1970s to early 1980s (LeClair 176). Wherever he went, though, he was reminded of his national identity and encountered a pervasive, if not entirely unjustified, anti-Americanism. As he told an interviewer afterwards, he realized:

> The thing that's interesting about living in another country is that it's difficult to forget you're an American. The actions of the American Government won't let you. They make you self-conscious, make you aware of yourself as an American. You find yourself mixed up in world politics in more subtle ways than you're
acquainted to. On the one hand, you're aware of America's blundering in country after country. And on the other hand, you're aware of the way in which people in other countries . . . use America to relieve their own fears and guilt by blaming America automatically for anything. (Harris 18)

This combination of connecting and reducing an American solely to his or her nation and government works itself into The Names, which, as seen with the cult and Axton’s policy updates, thematically revolves around reducing people to basic data. In this regard, The Names, like many works of historiographic metafiction, demonstrates that one’s subjective notions about personal autonomy and identity can be overridden by history and national enmities, and it follows DeLillo’s concerns that the individual is no longer held in high esteem. Yet, at least in The Names the characters are already cognizant of how this prejudicial practice works; Axton and his countrymen understand their “function, to be character types” to anti-American forces abroad (114). Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, these Americans feel safe in Greece, as opposed to countries “[i]n the Middle East” where “they attack Americans” (114). Near the end of The Names, though, an American banker and Axton are shot at in Athens by an assassin who might have had ties with Eliades. While his friend is killed, Axton survives, yet Axton believes he was the principal target because his ties to the CIA had recently been revealed.

With plot points like these, scholars complain that DeLillo muddles his final political message in The Names or, worse, engages in the same kind of reduction he indicts, primarily by equating anti-Americanism with terrorism. Kucich, for instance, argues that DeLillo “turns the world’s political complexity into a sign of the mindless intransigence of non-Americans” and “smugly blurs the very real political differences . . . between one kind of terrorist and another” (340). Echoing these sentiments, McClure is disappointed that DeLillo not only “reduces resistance to the American presence to . . .
ruthless terrorism” but also shortchanges the CIA’s “bloody history of interventions and manipulations” (137). In my opinion, though, criticisms like these result from the confusion of DeLillo’s beliefs with Axton’s, especially when Axton argues that terrorists act from the premise that “There’s no sense of wrong when you kill an American” (114). Furthermore, these scholars fail to situate the novel within Greece’s Cold War history and to give DeLillo credit for acknowledging America’s “interventions” in Greece.

For one thing, DeLillo provides some background and history behind this “terrorist” shooting because it clearly alludes to the killing of the CIA chief Richard Welch by 17 November. To make the connection to this group’s activities even more solid, DeLillo has a character specifically mention “November seventeen” in relation to a recent killing of “the head of the riot police,” itself a historical reference to the killing of Pantelis Petrou, deputy commander of the Greek police Riot Control (257). It is unconvincing, then, to maintain that DeLillo does not have a specific “terrorist” group in mind nor does he obscure what this organization’s political motivations might be in The Names. After all, large chunks of the novel are about Greeks’ anger over how Americans, their government, and the CIA have treated Greece in the past and present. Axton himself wonders, “Wasn’t there a sense, we Americans felt, in which we had it coming?” (41).

Still, it must be admitted that with The Names DeLillo falls into familiar patterns he set with his earlier Cold War novels. Once again, any opposition to the American government, represented here by radical leftists or terrorists, is portrayed as violent and inferior to what it attacks; or as McClure sums up: “America may be bad . . . but her critics are no better and possibly much worse” (137). On this point DeLillo’s critics, like
Vlatka Velcic, are correct in taking the author to task for conflating leftists with terrorists, a practice seen in *Players* and later in *Mao II*, as well as linking leftists to totalitarianism. As a matter of fact, DeLillo’s method of equating leftists with totalitarianism follows a Cold War practice initiated by Truman in his Doctrine, which never mentions communists but instead focuses, as mentioned earlier, on “terrorist activities” and “totalitarian regimes.”

Taken as a whole, *The Names* is a rarity in DeLillo’s oeuvre. It is mostly leftist in its condemnation of American political and financial power abroad, even as it derides foreign radicals and anti-Americanism. Nonetheless, in comparison to his previous Cold War novels, with their political apathy and satirical treatment of political activists, *The Names* actually proposes a political theme that is, at last, subversive for the Cold War: that even citizens of America’s Western allies—rather than just its enemies in the East—want Americans dead. By itself, of course, this idea might seem simplistic but only if one is ignorant of America’s troubled history with Cold War allies, like Greece. Therefore, in the end, *The Names* confirms Hutcheon’s sense of the politics of postmodernism as subversive yet paradoxical.

IV. “Men in Small Rooms”: Secrets, Surveillance, and Shaping History in *Libra*

By the late 1980s, DeLillo’s politics finally became a point of interest, even contention, among scholars and critics, many of whom were responding to a change in method on DeLillo’s part. In contrast to his genre-bending early works, which often approached Cold War political issues indirectly, with *Libra* (1988), DeLillo pushed political subject matter to the forefront, so much so that there is comparatively little genre play in it. A subplot about a fictional CIA historian (Nicholas Branch) and his attempts
to compose an in-house narrative about the Kennedy assassination lend the novel some metafictional aspects. Otherwise, *Libra* reads like a standard political thriller, with converging plot lines, one of which consists of a biography of the assassin, Lee Oswald—“a strongly political man,” in DeLillo’s words—while the other presents a conspiracy, devised and carried out by CIA agents, elements of the mob, and anti-Castro figures (Remnick 142). Near the end, both lines meet to produce the Kennedy assassination. Therefore, in his most conventionally written Cold War novel, DeLillo provides his most potentially subversive storyline. And for the first time in his corpus, he offers politically minded characters, who, rather than withdrawing from commitments, take action against the U.S. government and produce a traumatic outcome: the death of a president.

Perhaps inevitably, DeLillo’s approach to this subject (focusing on the left-leaning assassin, challenging the Warren Commission’s lone gunman theory) sparked the critical reactions to *Libra* and the queries about his political orientation. Most famously, conservative reviewer George Will branded DeLillo a “paranoid leftist” for trying to rewrite history by offering a conspiracy without a “particle of evidence” (A25). DeLillo’s academic defenders, on the other hand, pointed out that *Libra* was fiction—not history; that his novels often investigated conspiracies; and that *Libra* actually challenged paranoids’ desire for a master plot because of its emphasis on coincidence and contingency (Willman 405). In particular, Frank Lentricchia, countered, in pointed opposition to Will’s review, that *Libra* was not even a traditionally leftist work, with a concern for class. If anything, DeLillo’s novel was more of a cultural than a political critique, one that showed how Americans “are a people of, by, and for the image” (195).
As mentioned earlier, this reading of DeLillo, as cultural critic, has since become the dominant one in DeLillo scholarship, and it is one I will contest here.

To begin with, *Libra* offers the fullest representation of DeLillo’s political views regarding the Cold War. After all, this novel addresses almost every political concern of his previous works, including the power that covert agencies and surveillance technology possess, the influence of the media, and the outbreak of violence from radicals. What’s more, in *Libra* DeLillo scrutinizes a major political subject he had downplayed in his earlier Cold War novels: anticommunism. Now, such a combination of issues does not, in my opinion, reveal DeLillo to be a “paranoid leftist” nor do I read him as being simply a cultural critic of America. Rather, as shown in *Libra*, DeLillo offers a global political vision that reveals his libertarian outlook, one that is preoccupied with unrestrained governments, with their invasive agencies and technologies, and their effects on the individual. Furthermore, since *Libra*, in my view, encompasses almost all of DeLillo’s political concerns, my prior references to Hutcheon, Foucault, and Debord are all germane to this type of work, a postmodern historical novel that closes with a spectacle: a televised execution.

Predominantly set from 1953 to 1963, *Libra* takes place during the height of the Cold War. Yet, like *The Names* before it, *Libra* is not a typical historical novel, what with its themes regarding historical indeterminacy and its characters’ obsessions with history as narrative. In fact, *Libra* could serve as a model for Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction, and numerous DeLillo scholars have already amply demonstrated their connections. As stated earlier, a few, like Peter Knight, have further argued that DeLillo provides not only an exemplary postmodern historical novel with *Libra*, but that
he also locates postmodernism’s origins in the Kennedy assassination. To buttress this case, critics like Knight point to DeLillo’s earlier treatment of this subject in his 1985 essay “American Blood,” but in this work DeLillo never strictly labels the Kennedy assassination as postmodern. Nevertheless, he characterizes it in ways that evoke postmodernism’s contestation of the real and epistemological skepticism. DeLillo describes the assassination as “a natural disaster in the heartland of the real, the comprehensible, the plausible,” a tragedy that “in the end, is a story about our uncertain grip on the world” (22). Moreover, in interviews, he reads the assassination’s aftermath as issuing in a period marked by historical uncertainty. “We still haven’t reached any consensus on the specifics of the crime: the number of gunmen, the number of shots,” he explains. “Beyond this confusion of data, people have developed a sense that history has been manipulated” (DeCurtis 56). Thus, with his own analysis, DeLillo links the Kennedy assassination to postmodernism by noting how an initial disbelief about the event broadened into a general distrust about official and historical narratives. 

And yet, if one were to follow DeLillo’s criteria for this epistemological shift, it is clear that another Cold War event and its aftermath mark the transition into postmodernism in *Libra*: the Bay of Pigs invasion. Often eclipsed by the assassination that followed it, this episode, in its way, also contributed to a loss of authority and a sense of disbelief regarding official stories. To be specific, after news broke of the CIA-led invasion into Cuba, Kennedy’s explanations for the once-covert mission exposed his administration’s inability to control the public narrative and led to a lack of credibility with the government. On a broader level, according to Alan Nadel, who also connects postmodernism’s emergence with the Bay of Pigs invasion, the result was that “public
“discourse” and official rhetoric broke down, and there emerged a “fissure between ‘history’ and event” (3).

In Libra, this breakdown manifests itself in terms of who has the power to create and shape historical events, specifically in regards to America’s future course with Cuba. And on this topic, dissenters of every political stripe (from right-wing extremists, to Marxist-Leninist Oswald, to vengeful CIA agents) challenge the Kennedy administration. In other words, the situation is ripe for a power grab from some political entity, a state of affairs that would seemingly result in anarchy. (One can imagine how Pynchon would treat this material.) Yet, DeLillo, with his libertarian worldview, constructs a narrative in which clandestine agencies with their technologies maintain power, an ironic outcome considering how weakened the CIA was following the Bay of Pigs debacle. As one of his CIA agents thinks, “After the Bay of Pigs, nothing was the same” (22); and what has changed is that these agents, with their knowledge of staging events and creating “narratives,” desperately want to prove that authority resides with them, that “history was in their care” (127).25

Early in Libra, DeLillo’s agents meet on “the second anniversary of the Bay of Pigs” and conspire an assassination attempt that they hope will instigate another invasion (31).26 Their original plan, though, is not to kill the president—but “to miss” (122).27 As their ringleader states, “We want to set up an event that will make it appear [Cuban intelligence agents] have struck at the heart of our government” (27). The final goal that they (and later co-conspirators) have in mind is to remove Castro and undermine Kennedy. However, one of the agents, T.J. Mackey, holds that killing Kennedy would be a better reprisal for the Bay of Pigs fiasco, so he proceeds as if Kennedy’s death were the
objective—and in *Libra* he succeeds, with the aid of a mercenary and two Castro-hating Cuban exiles, one of whom fires the fatal shot. As he stated in interviews, DeLillo believes this scenario is “the most obvious possibility: that the assassination was the work of anti-Castro elements” (DeCurtis 58). And while he understands objections to blaming “renegade agents from the CIA,” he believes “it’s hardly a leftist position to think that,” although it is unlikely that someone on the right would credit the assassination to the CIA and various other anticommunists (Connolly 38). What is more likely is that an author with a libertarian bent would depict this assassination as one in which government agents are out of control and the head of the U.S. government is everyone’s enemy.

Still, as his explanations indicate, DeLillo’s political point of view in *Libra* is by no means straightforward, and it can seem downright convoluted when it comes to his treatment of anticommunism. For instance, DeLillo’s depictions of the conspirators, all of whom are anticommunists, tilt toward approbation. Unlike the leftist characters in his earlier novels, most of the right-leaning conspirators in *Libra* are not easily dismissed, and their goal(s) are fulfilled, to the extent that Kennedy is no longer an obstacle. Scholars like McClure even posit that the conspirators resemble “honorable men,” in that they uphold “commitments abandoned by the U.S. government” (143). Thus, traitorous CIA agents, Kennedy-hating *mafiosos*, and anti-Castro Cubans—all of whom collaborate in the killing of a liberal president—are written so as to earn a reader’s grudging admiration. As a consequence, one might peg DeLillo as an archconservative.

Then again, DeLillo is at his most cutting in *Libra* with his treatment of real-life conservative anticommunists, who view the world through a lens of extreme paranoia. The right-wing New Orleans detective Guy Bannister, for example, maintains his
government’s leadership is surrendering to international communism, while the more bizarre General Edwin Walker believes a mysterious organization (the “Real Control Apparatus”) has infiltrated American society, weakening its resolve against communism and left-wing organizations. Comparable as these men’s paranoid visions are, they are further united by racist fears about a loss of white hegemony: Walker leads segregation marches, and Bannister connects America’s fight against the Reds with his fight against the blacks. “We gave away Eastern Europe. We gave away China. We gave away Cuba,” he laments. “We’re getting ready to give away Southeast Asia. We’ll give away white America next” (141). With these men and others of their ilk, fears about appeasement and containment turn out to be simply Cold War euphemisms for upholding “the White Man’s Burden,” at home and abroad. Anticommunism in *Libra*, then, comes off as a set of reactionary prejudices rather than a coherent creed.

Thus, to debunk an ideology while at the same time eliciting respect for certain conspirators that act on that ideology can make DeLillo’s politics in *Libra* appear contradictory. Yet, according to Hutcheon, postmodern works are marked by their political complications, and postmodernism in general “is fundamentally contradictory” (*Politics* 4). Indeed, because no political philosophy is privileged nor endorsed by postmodern artists, Hutcheon contends that postmodernism is anti-ideological; and certainly, in *Libra*, DeLillo criticizes any Cold War ideology that his characters hold. Nevertheless, DeLillo’s postmodern novel problematizes Hutcheon’s theories because it contains an ideological position (libertarianism), and often comes close to espousing another (Marxism) with its critiques of consumerism and U.S. imperialism. Furthermore, DeLillo’s ostensibly contradictory approach to anticommunism can be explained in terms
of his libertarian views—that is, he holds some regard for characters that act against the U.S. government, whereas he criticizes those that work for it, especially if they do so overseas.

As a matter of fact, when American anticommunism is applied internationally, DeLillo links it with systematic sabotage and imperialism; and on these positions, at least, he resembles the “leftist” that Will charged him as. For example, DeLillo mentions how one of his CIA agents, Lawrence Parmenter, took part in “the crisp and scintillating coup in Guatemala,” which ousted the Árbenz government in 1954 (19). Almost a decade later, the same agent hopes to liberate Cuba because he “had rights, claims, hidden financial involvement in a leasing company that had been working toward a huge land deal to facilitate oil drilling” (30). Therefore, Parmenter’s capitalist pursuits nicely coincide with his government’s anticommmunist agenda, and the combination of the two makes the latter appear to be nothing more than a pretext for imperialism.29 Yet, DeLillo has more in mind than just this one CIA agent’s interests in Latin America. He also alludes to the agency’s entanglements with Vietnam, as shown when Mackey overhears how Saigon “was the talk around the base” on May 20, a few weeks after the CIA-backed coup against Diem (120). Altogether, then, these references are not recounted merely to establish the CIA’s habits of subverting foreign governments and eliminating Third World leaders; they are meant to illustrate how such methods could be transferred to domestic soil.

Put simply, DeLillo advances in *Libra* a variation on Malcolm X’s comment about “chickens coming home to roost,” and it is not just the CIA that falls under the author’s critique. DeLillo widens the circle of blame to divulge that the agency’s
procedures were often committed with the tacit agreement of, if not direct orders from, American presidents, like Kennedy, who was no stranger to undermining foreign governments. As Mackey explains, “When Jack sent out word to get Castro he put himself in a world of blood and pain . . . So it’s Jack’s own idea we’re guided by” (302). Thus, DeLillo proposes that the White House’s violent pursuit of anticommunism abroad contributed to the president’s assassination in a form of internal blowback; killers trained for “work” overseas have turned on their own head of state. Now this reaped-what-he-sowed thesis might strike some as more biblical than political; yet, it is in accordance with DeLillo’s libertarian interests in how the U.S. government cannot contain the forces it unleashed.

For the sake of argument, though, *Libra*’s points about the U.S.’s Cold War crimes could, I realize, problematize my reading of DeLillo as a libertarian. On the one hand, these examples add up to support my point that DeLillo exhibits libertarian tendencies in his isolationist stance, which condemns America’s foreign interventions. Then again, such a focus could also reveal him to be a liberal, arguing for greater oversight of the CIA and the executive branch. In his own study of *Libra*, McClure reads DeLillo as a “Jeffersonian democrat disillusioned by his country’s failure to live up to its own democratic precepts” (141). However, when one considers DeLillo’s Cold War output, besides *Mao II*, it is hard to imagine him as being overly concerned about democratic principles—and even harder to envision which group he’d endorse to uphold them. Throughout his postmodern Cold War novels, his primary political interest in regards to his government is with the fallout of its excesses, usually in relation to its
agencies, its foreign offenses, and its technologies. The sole difference with *Libra* is that DeLillo now broadens his scrutiny beyond the U.S.

In contrast to earlier thrillers, like *Players* and *Running Dog*, *Libra* extends DeLillo’s critique of government interference by examining the ubiquity of surveillance methods and technologies worldwide; and on this issue, his libertarianism is as explicit as it is wide-ranging. Whether it is FBI agents monitoring criminals, Soviet handlers spying on citizens, or U-2 planes photographing everyone from above, surveillance connects all of the novel’s disparate characters, thereby demonstrating DeLillo’s global expansion of Foucault’s panopticon. Therefore, as fixed as he is about anticommunism and the U.S. government’s overreaching abroad, DeLillo’s main concern in *Libra* is with any government’s intrusion into people’s lives—and the more enveloping the intrusion, the more he believes the individual is threatened. For example, we read that the anti-Castro Cubans “blamed the government” for the communists’ total control of their island, where now “the individual must disappear” (297; 196). Similarly, in Russia, where the Soviet government monitors everyone, we are told: “No choice, however small, is left to the discretion of the individual” (205-6). Surpassing them all, though, is the U.S.’s new surveillance technology, the U-2, which can seemingly record “all the secret knowledge of the world,” a risk that preoccupies even one of the CIA conspirators, who fears that these “devices will drain us, make us vague and pliant” (77). Thus, despite their interactions with various political systems, virtually all the characters in *Libra* share an antipathy towards government and its encroachment into their lives, and for these reasons, DeLillo’s politics in *Libra*, again, best align with libertarianism. The standard political threat to an individual, from any country, comes from the government.
That said, DeLillo complicates his libertarian vision in *Libra* when he has to account for the final actions and behavior of an atypical threat to the government: Lee Oswald. As mentioned previously, DeLillo, like Foucault, envisions power relations and modes of domination that extend beyond the government; and in *Libra*, state institutions and the media play their part in affecting an individual, like Oswald. The problem with this dispersive vision, though, is that it weakens DeLillo’s politics just as it undercuts Oswald’s. That is to say, by presenting this character that acts against his government as a decentered subject, shaped and influenced by multiple forces—or, more to the point, as an unbalanced figure who tilts like Libra’s scales—DeLillo drains the character’s political motives and practically eradicates individual agency. Consequently, in DeLillo’s pessimistic version of libertarianism, an “individual” like Oswald barely comprehends his own actions—and, worse, he is hardly an individual to begin with.

From the start, DeLillo presents Oswald as a subject, an impressionable figure that is “easily, easily influenced” by a variety of discourses and institutions (315). Indeed, much of Oswald’s early life recalls Foucault’s “carceral continuum,” in which the subject is shaped by near constant supervision from a variety of disciplinary organizations (Foucault 303). In the first chapter alone, a delinquent Oswald is caught by a truant officer; sent to a Youth House, where “the nut doctors pick at him”; and is assessed by a psychologist, a social worker, and a school teacher (10-12). As if this “carceral network” were not enough, Oswald later joins the Marines, only to end up in a military prison, where, like Bentham’s prisoner, he “knows himself to be observed,” a suspicion Oswald internalizes long after his incarceration (Foucault 201). Neary the end of the novel, after his encounters with Russian and American agents, Oswald supposes
“he is being photographed not only by hidden Soviet cameras but probably by CIA cameras concealed in the building across the street or in a parked car or dangling, for all he knows, from a satellite in the sky” (356). Still, even with his awareness of surveillance tactics and his history with disciplinary institutions, Oswald is never normalized; his contrary nature and private fantasies make him ungovernable. Therefore, as much as Libra recalls Foucault’s panoptic society, with its “men in small rooms” motif, DeLillo breaks with Foucault’s ideas that surveillance and discipline lead to docile bodies (181).

This divergence, however, does not mean that DeLillo offers up an independent Oswald, a lone individual with a unified self. Oswald’s defining feature is his split subjectivity, which allows him to indulge in secret fantasies that offer “a respite from the other life,” a mindset that is only exacerbated by the surveillance he endures (16). For instance, Oswald’s early reaction to supervision and a marginal existence is to align himself with Marxism, in the hopes that its revolutionary promises will propel him beyond a life of obscurity. “The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin,” he tells himself. “He knew what Trotsky had written, that revolution leads us out of the dark night of the isolated self” (101). Yet, once Oswald experiences Soviet communism firsthand, as a repairman in Minsk, this dream loses its luster and is swapped for another involving espionage. Like Lyle in Players before him, then, Oswald seeks out a double life as a spy, imitating government agents who monitored him and adopting aliases and false selves. In fact, he becomes so adept at the latter that no one, including his wife, is “sure who he really was” (202).
For the reader, though, it is clear that Oswald is meant to embody the postmodern subject: he appropriates many roles but is never secure in any of them; and while this mutability could be liberating, DeLillo shows that it results in a loss of individuality. At *Libra*’s conclusion, for instance, Oswald has taken on so many identities and so thoroughly rejected “important things, family, money, the past,” that he ends up buried under his last alias, William Bobo (37). In sum, Oswald’s fantasies, his conception of “himself as part of something vast and sweeping,” are not explained by Foucault’s theories, which fail to address how the subject might assert the self through secrecy, a retreat into fancy, or through public violence against the State (41).

What clarifies Oswald’s final motivations, as imagined by DeLillo, is, again, fantasy, prompted this time by the media and consumerism. As a result, Debord’s theories have particular relevance to *Libra*, especially in the novel’s later sections, where the emphasis shifts from surveillance to spectacle. For Debord, the spectacle’s “reigning economic system” (a version of consumer capitalism) creates “a vicious circle of isolation” through technologies, like television, which teach consumers not only what they should have, but how they should appear (15). Similarly, in *Libra*, Oswald is depicted as being ever more alienated upon his return from communist Russia to capitalist America, where he is especially distraught about his inability to provide for his family—and television serves to remind him of this. Upon watching two films and various commercials, Oswald thinks he should “start saving right away for a washing machine and car” in order to help his family, but also to help himself because these objects “are standard ways to stop being lonely” (371). Television, it seems, will best
teach the ex-Marine how to become an upright citizen and how to attain the American Dream.

Yet, in DeLillo’s mordant conception, television also inspires Oswald to finally take action, and it does so far more effectively than his links to clandestine agencies or his political philosophy. The two films he absorbs involve assassination plots, and while viewing them, Oswald “felt connected to the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals . . . They were running a message through the night into his skin” (370). As if by osmosis, then, this combination of the cultural and the political in Libra spur Oswald in his assassination attempts against General Walker and later Kennedy. But, according to DeLillo, it is the media’s influence that best explains Oswald’s behavior prior to the Kennedy assassination, and in an interview with Adam Begley, he states:

I see Oswald, back from Russia, as a man surrounded by promises of fulfillment—consumer fulfillment, personal fulfillment. But he’s poor, unstable, cruel to his wife, barely employable—a man who has to enter his own Hollywood movie to see who he is and how he must direct his fate. This is the force of the culture and the power of the image. (106)

Thus, in DeLillo’s analysis, Oswald’s assassination of the most powerful political figure in the Western world stemmed from despair and fantasy—not politics.32

Authorial statements like these lend credence to scholars who hold that DeLillo is a cultural rather than a political writer. For them, image trumps ideology in his novels; or, as Lentricchia states, “the environment of the image is the landscape” (195). Such an argument, admittedly, has merit, and support can be found in any of DeLillo’s novels, with the apotheosis occurring in Libra, when Kennedy materializes at Love Field and is recognized because he resembles his photographs. The president is, first and foremost, a
celebrity (a conception that recalls Debord’s reference to Kennedy as one of the “stars of decision making”), and we get the point: spectacle subsumes all.\textsuperscript{33}

However, the problem remains that by this logic \textit{Libra}, a novel filled with political conspirators and built around political events, must be about media culture and its effects; and too many DeLillo scholars emphasize this aspect of it. Peter Knight, for example, argues that one of DeLillo’s chief interests in \textit{Libra} is “understanding how Oswald’s sense of self came to be constructed through the media” (“DeLillo” 32). On a similar note, Lentricchia believes DeLillo’s purpose is to show that none of us have an autonomous self because we are all enthralled and shaped by the media: “Oswald is ourselves painted large, in scary tones, but ourselves” (205). But to emphasize how Oswald is yet another DeLillo protagonist shaped by the media robs this character of his unique political inspirations, just as it ignores the numerous other characters in \textit{Libra}, like the CIA agents, that have little to no interest in media culture. Furthermore, in regards to Lentricchia’s point, most contemporary Americans can dismiss the media and its messages that bombard our consciousness, so “we” most certainly are not Oswald, whose political convictions were hardly shared by a majority of Americans. What is reductive, though, about these arguments is the implication that if the mass media absorbs a political figure, especially a left-leaning one like Kennedy and Oswald, then his or her political ideas must be similarly absorbed. The stubborn fact remains, however, that Oswald did not shoot at a celebrity; he shot at a president, and thus had political reasons that should be acknowledged or explored.

Whatever sway the media might have had upon Oswald in his final days, his assassination of Kennedy was more likely connected to his radical political beliefs. A
longtime Marxist and a recent admirer of Cuba’s revolutionary brand of socialism, Oswald had hoped to defect to Cuba in October of 1963, but his requests to the Cuban embassy were denied. Hence, it is highly probable that Oswald envisioned that killing Kennedy would transform him into a freedom fighter to Cuban authorities. After this exploit, he would be welcomed as a hero. Scholars, though, often ignore this more credible motivation, despite the fact that DeLillo’s novel touches on it when Oswald asks himself, “What would he have to give Fidel before they let him live happily in little Cuba?” (373). Indeed, considering how much of *Libra* revolves around characters’ reactions to Kennedy and Cuba, this motive proves to be not only more convincing but also more amenable to the novel’s plot. After all, it is not just Oswald in *Libra* who fires upon Kennedy because of his approach to communist Cuba. As a character states, “Think of two parallel lines . . . One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President . . . What makes a connection inevitable? . . . It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It’s not generated by cause and effect” (339). Yet, this vision of random, ahistorical coincidence, which DeLillo advances at the end, is needlessly mysterious. What connects the lines is Kennedy’s handling of Cuba.

Nevertheless, the postmodernist in DeLillo does not endorse this single political explanation, nor any single explanation. Based on a historical event filled with “contradictions and discrepancies,” *Libra* is constructed to be resolutely anti-deterministic, and as a literary method, this is fine (300). DeLillo, as a writer, is not expected to deliver final answers, but he manages to further obfuscate an already infamous mystery, and another result of his approach here is that leftist politics become
irrelevant; Oswald, like DeLillo’s terrorists, ends up wanting attention and can obtain it only through violence. He is not conceived as, say, a precursor to the New Left radicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, bringing the violence of the state back home. Instead, DeLillo ultimately reinforces the old stereotypes about Oswald: a patsy for the CIA and a fame-hungry misfit, a portrayal that jibes with how other postmodernists, like Martin Amis, see Oswald, “a malevolent Charlie Chaplin with a wonky rifle and a couple of Big Ideas” (275). But, again, DeLillo dismisses the “Big Ideas” as incentives. In the end, he takes an official story, in which a left-wing radical killed a president for political reasons, and argues instead that the assassin is barely an individual and his final motivations were apolitical. At most, Oswald introduced an element of random violence into the culture, heralding what DeLillo calls “the American absurd,” and serving as an inspiration to later “media-poisoned” assassins, like “Bremer, Hinckley, Ray, and others” (“American” 27). It is almost as if DeLillo shortchanges Oswald’s political motives because his act left no political program behind (or, at least, not an intentional one).34

And yet, in terms of the panoptic, dystopian world DeLillo presents in Libra overall, it remains startling that anybody, especially Oswald, could accomplish a political act. Assessing his place in American society, Oswald exclaims at one point, “It’s the whole huge system. We’re a zero in the system. It’s like Big Brother in Nineteen Eighty-four. This isn’t a book about the future. This is us, here and now” (106). Thus, the power of the state looms large, even for a character that endeavors to shoot a head of state—but he is able to do so all the same. In fact, without lauding his exploit, Oswald proved that an individual could change history and, what’s more, show that the state is vulnerable. Ironically, though, DeLillo concludes Libra with the opposite theme: the American
government endures, at least in terms of its clandestine agencies and technologies (143). By the end of *Libra*, the CIA splinter group is never exposed; the evidence and secret history that Branch labors with is for agency eyes only; and Oswald himself dreams of state technology (the U-2) as he dies. Fittingly, he is buried by FBI agents. In DeLillo’s libertarian retelling of these Cold War events, then, the point is neither the meaningless tragedy of Kennedy’s assassination nor the spectacle of Oswald’s shooting, televised for everyone watching at home. The point is that the state would go on to watch us, and according to DeLillo, aside from a random act of media-inspired violence, there is little to be done.

V. “Imposing Their Vision”: Totalitarianism and the Spectacle in *Mao II*

As the Cold War concluded, and even six years after its end, DeLillo’s libertarian political outlook and his concerns about the individual versus totalitarian systems or the state would not change significantly. His emphasis, however, would alternate. At first, for instance, DeLillo’s politics were made uncharacteristically explicit in *Mao II* (1991), a novel of ideas about the transfer of cultural power from novelists to terrorists. Conversely, his politics were almost subsumed in *Underworld* (1997), an 800-page historical novel about waste and the lingering impact of the Cold War. Perhaps because of this disparity regarding political content, critics and academics’ readings of these works usually concentrate on DeLillo’s treatment of post-Cold War subjects, like international terrorism and the effects of global capitalism; or they trace DeLillo’s perpetuation of earlier cultural themes, like his uses of artist figures. In other words, with only a few exceptions, like Velcic, McClure, and Knight, most DeLillo scholars failed to
relate these two novels to DeLillo’s already established politics and its links to the Cold War.

Often examined from a post-Cold War perspective, Mao II is, strictly speaking, set during the closing years of that conflict. The novel’s prologue occurs in the mid-1980s, and the remainder of Mao II transpires from mid-April 1989 to 1990. (The Cold War would not officially cease until 1991, a year that marked both the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR.) All the same, traditional Cold War subjects for DeLillo, like nuclear warfare or the power of covert agencies, are not explored here. In fact, in a novel that is, in part, named after a communist leader, none of the characters mention the Cold War nor do they remark upon the Soviet empire’s disintegration, which occurs during the novel’s time frame. For some scholars, specifically Boxall and Cowart, the latter’s historical omission is intentional; it serves as DeLillo’s unspoken counterexample to the seemingly implacable hold of authoritarian regimes, like China and Iran, which Mao II investigates (Boxall 161, Cowart 23). But, as I will demonstrate, the popular uprisings against Soviet power is more than likely excised because it weakens DeLillo’s political arguments in Mao II, if not his pessimistic political philosophy en toto.

To begin with, DeLillo does not present (or predict) an era in which democracies flourish and totalitarianism fades as the Cold War winds down and a new century beckons. Rather, he sees a period in which fanaticism spreads, bringing with it a renewal of fascism and absolutism. For example, in his 1989 essay “Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson, and the Millennium,” DeLillo notes the rise of neo-Nazi groups in heartland America; and what he believes are animating them is a form of millenarianism. Citing Norman Cohn’s The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval
and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements (1961),

DeLillo sees religious mania and totalitarianism as highly analogous. By his comparison, the followers who submit to them are guided by a “strong leader” (living or dead), and they retreat from the real world to one of apocalyptic fantasy, longing “for destruction to hammer down, for history to end,” so that a new age can emerge (“Silhouette” 346). Thus, DeLillo ties fascism back to its pre-modern roots, before the state was the vehicle through which totalitarian regimes exerted their power, and this historical positioning is crucial since the shift DeLillo is chronicling here and in Mao II is one in which nation-states, aside from clear holdouts in the East, have ceded power. Western capitalism has now gained dominance, but in DeLillo’s depictions, the true believers either turn away from this system and its goods, or employ its more spectacular currency of images and publicity to attack it.

In many ways, then, DeLillo’s prediction for the twenty-first century recalls Debord’s modern spectacle. After all, much of Mao II’s themes, such as the global reach of capitalism, the police state practices of Eastern dictatorships, and their shared usage of reproducing images to maintain power, are considered in Society of the Spectacle. Writing in the late 1960s, Debord also looked past Cold War divisions because, with the “crumbling of the global alliance of pseudo-socialist bureaucracies,” he recognized that commodity capitalism was a hegemonic force (10). With a global market came a “global spectacle,” a means of control that differed only in the levels of sophistication with which certain governments imposed it. Either way, the spectacle promoted a total ideology and, thus, was ultimately totalitarian, offering a “realm of illusion” that Debord also traced back to religion and fascism, which he saw as “a significant factor in the formation of the
modern spectacle” (61). The result of all this manipulation was to keep people alienated, alter their notions of reality, and discourage any critiques or historical awareness they might develop. Such a worldview finds fruition in DeLillo’s novel.

From the start of *Mao II*, DeLillo shares Debord’s understanding of how religion leads to a form of ahistorical thinking, how religion aligns with fascism, and how both contribute to the spectacle. In his study of monotheism and millenarians—one that also encompasses Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium*—Debord argues that these believers were “radically opposed to history,” viewing time as “a sort of countdown” and waiting for it “to run out before the Last Judgment and the advent of the other, true world” (79). Similarly, in *Mao II*’s prologue, the followers of Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church turn away from secular history, seeing themselves in “pali-pali” or “hurry-up time” (9), and they chant to bring “the End Time closer,” “for new life, peace eternal, the end of soul-lonely pain” (16). From alienation to devotion, DeLillo’s believers imagine another world that will compensate them for their sacrifices. This same fantasy, according to Debord, undergirds the modern spectacle, which he calls “a material reconstruction of the religious illusion,” with its “promised land of total consummation” (12, 34). In his conception, both modern consumers and religious believers forego the real world for images or signs, and surrender their own agency because they are hypnotized by a “separate power,” one that has always been “spectacular” (14).

For Debord and DeLillo, this power and the submission it requires results in a form of totalitarianism, and both *Society of the Spectacle* and *Mao II* are largely about the varieties, characteristics, and persistence of totalitarianism and fascism. Working from a familiar Marxist approach, Debord understood fascism as a reactionary “defence of the
main icons of bourgeois ideology . . . family, private property, moral order, patriotism” but it was not “fundamentally ideological” (61). If anything, fascism presented itself as what it was: “a violent resurrection of myth calling for participation in a community defined by archaic pseudovalues: race, blood, leader” (61). DeLillo largely ignores these first two “pseudovalues,” and his fanatics, whether believers or terrorists, are actually anti-bourgeois, renouncing private property, family, and even the self. With the state seemingly diminished, they desire instead to form their own makeshift nations. Still, early on, DeLillo evokes Debord’s latter model of fascism, along with Susan Sontag’s ideas from her essay “Fascinating Fascism,” when he demonstrates what his true believers prize most: their following, their religious or political faith, and their leader.

Mao II opens with a Moonie mass wedding at Yankee Stadium, and DeLillo impels the reader to question the political aesthetics and connotations of this gathering. The initial point of view is that of an American bourgeois father (Roger “Rodge” Janney), who cannot find his daughter Karen among the crowd and who “hasn’t come here for the spectacle but it is starting to astonish him” (4). Early on, DeLillo indulges in satire with Roger’s anxieties about the “strangeness” he is seeing “in a ballpark”; yet, Roger’s analysis of this event comes to mirror DeLillo’s in both politics and language (4). For example, in “Silhouette City,” DeLillo describes Hitler’s followers as “yearning to be spellbound, unburdened of free will” as they submit to their leader (347). Similarly, in Mao II, Roger notices how the Reverend Sun Myung Moon accepts his followers’ “yearning” and “unburdens them of free will and independent thought” (7). Hence, DeLillo’s political fears about a renewed totalitarianism from homegrown fascists in “Silhouette City” have been transferred onto an Eastern religious cult, one that
transfigures “a mass of people . . . into a sculptured object” (7). It’s Nuremberg at Yankee Stadium, and it alarms Roger, especially as he witnesses “the drama of mechanical routine played out with living figures” (7). With these descriptions, DeLillo’s novel also aligns with Sontag’s breakdown of fascist art, which she says “glorifies surrender” and “mindlessness,” takes “the form of characteristic pageantry,” and turns “people into things” over and over until they become a mass, grouped around a “hypnotic leader-figure or force” (316).

Indeed, Mao II is about which figure’s vision is powerful enough to enthral the masses. As DeLillo told Maria Nadotti in an interview, his novel asks: “Is it the writer who traditionally thought he could influence the imagination of his contemporaries or is it rather the totalitarian leader, the military man, the terrorist, those who are twisted by power and who seem capable of imposing their vision on the world?” (110). Therefore, Mao II posits a struggle regarding who can deliver the most compelling narrative. But with this lopsided match up, it seems impossible that the work of a writer, who lacks the assistance of the mass media and the state, can prove dominant; and initially Mao II’s protagonist, a reclusive novelist named Bill Gray, despairs over his lack of influence and how writers can no longer “alter the inner life of the culture” (41). Still, when later confronted with a devout Maoist, Bill is able to champion his vocation and its political implications and contrast them with the practices of that totalitarian regime. In fact, DeLillo’s characters’ encomiums and critiques about Mao’s rule bring to mind Debord’s writing about the spectacle, at least in terms of how it operates in a bureaucratic economy.
As mentioned, for Debord, commodity capitalism dominates the global marketplace, although there are variations in how some regions and their economies assert their spectacular power. For instance, the West, in its stage of advanced capitalism, presents a “diffuse” version of the spectacle, one that displays an abundance of commodities. By contrast, those living in less developed economies (in the East or the South) endure a form of bureaucratic capitalism, which imposes a “concentrated” version of the spectacle that sets strict limits on goods and images (31). According to Debord, these “bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialized countries” are basically dictatorships (28). They control their citizens by leaving them little to no choices; they shape reality with their overt “totalitarian ideological pronouncements” (58); and they submit only one model of behavior to follow, “a single individual, the guarantor of the system’s totalitarian cohesion” (31-2). The best example Debord provides for such a leader is Mao. He writes, “If the entire Chinese population has to study Mao to the point of identifying with Mao, this is because there is nothing else they can be” (32). Under this totalizing system, individual identity is inhibited, with the leader’s political vision determining his citizens’ future, and it is this dynamic that DeLillo and his characters are preoccupied with.

Midway through the novel, for instance, an extended debate arises over the merits and weaknesses of Mao’s brand of authority. Preaching to an incredulous Bill, a terrorist spokesman named George Haddad extols the all-encompassing power of Chairman Mao, who offered “total politics, total authority, total being” to a people who welcomed the structure he brought to their lives (158). Haddad explains, “In China the narrative belonged to Mao”; his Little Red Book “was a call to unity, a summoning of crowds
where everyone dressed alike and thought alike” (162). Bill, though, rejects this authoritarian model, explaining that his own thinking, which prizes “internal dissent and self-argument,” instructs him “how total control wrecks the spirit” (159). As a matter of fact, Bill understands all too well how such control in Mao’s case operated beyond the realm of theory, and his pointed ripostes to George recall Debord’s ideas about the coercive tactics of bureaucratic regimes. For Debord, these regimes “simply used police-state methods to transform people’s perceptions of the world” (58), and under their version of the spectacle, “Everyone must magically identify” with the dictator “or disappear” (31-2). Echoing these critiques, Bill reminds George about the human costs behind dictatorial plans, like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, before he asks: “What do these men do with the millions they kill? The point of every closed state is now you know how to hide your dead . . . You predict many dead if your vision of truth isn’t realized. Then you kill them. Then you hide the fact of the killing and the bodies themselves” (163). Thus, a monologic narrative for the masses has resulted in mass deaths, and here, for the first time in his oeuvre, DeLillo decries the body count behind communism.

This speech and *Mao II*’s broader themes about the organized masses and the loss of individuality conjure up the rhetoric of the Cold War. As a matter of fact, the term “totalitarianism,” according to Abbott Gleason in *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (1995), only became a “great mobilizing and unifying concept” during the Cold War (3). Consequently, a few scholars have faulted DeLillo for being stuck in that Manichean mindset. John McClure states that in *Mao II* “[DeLillo] rehearses the old opposition between the democratic West and Communist—now Maoist or post-Maoist—
East”; and it seems inarguable that DeLillo plays on old suspicions about the West being under threat by the totalitarian East, with its greater numbers and its citizens’ blind devotion to ideology, which could, in turn, affect Americans (146). In a later scene, for example, Roger has Karen “deprogrammed” from her time with the Unification Church, and DeLillo indulges in Cold War paranoia about brainwashing, a debunked idea that harks back to the Korean War, when Americans panicked that Chinese soldiers under Mao’s government had mentally coerced American P.O.W.s (79). On the whole, though, DeLillo’s larger point here is not just to rehash Cold War tropes or indulge in xenophobia towards the East. In this novel of ideas, DeLillo complicates any binaries his work proposes, and the most obvious example involves “the democratic West” and the authoritarian East, especially since both regions and its people are enmeshed in the spectacle.

Regardless of how it is enacted in certain hemispheres, the spectacle, for Debord, is totalitarian by nature because it dominates “all aspects of life” by presenting examples to follow (13). The “diffuse” spectacle in the West bombards its citizens with a variety of images, and the result is that people remain passive spectators, whereas those experiencing the “concentrated” spectacle are faced with an “image of the good,” which, as stated, they must emulate (30-1). The level of choices varies, but the primary means of control stays constant—and, of course, most people usually embrace this distraction anyway. As Bill declares, to a photographer no less, “In our world we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too,” and though in this scene Bill is referring to the West, DeLillo applies this statement to the rest of the world (37). Beirut, for instance, is described as a “millennial image mill,” and the totalitarian regimes in China and Iran that
DeLillo depicts in *Mao II* are seemingly buttressed by their leaders’ images, even as these regimes undergo internal outbreaks (109).

No matter how controlling the spectacle appears, according to Debord, it can be undermined. Bureaucratic economies, he argues, are typically “tied to an ideology that is no longer believed by anyone,” and a Stalin-like leader who is held up for worship can become just another “outmoded commodity” (62, 34). Predictably, though, when a dictatorship’s power is tested in the “concentrated” spectacle, the “dictatorship must be enforced by permanent violence,” and in *Mao II* DeLillo portrays two such suppressions of the populace, with the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the funeral riots following Khomeini’s death (31). Still, as is customary in his writing, he is less concerned with the particular political goals behind these events than with the significance that certain images have when projected to the world.

Both, for instance, are narrated in terms of how they appear on television, specifically from the perspective of Karen, who, as always, is unconcerned with historical context and is attracted to mass gatherings. For her, the protests consist largely of masses of people (“a million people in a great square,” “crowds estimated at three million”), with the loyalists dressed in homogenous garb, like the “high officials in Mao suits” and the mourners “dressed in black” (176, 189). Yet, what also captures Karen’s attention and connects the events are the leaders’ images and their relation to their nations’ stability. For example, Mao’s portrait in Tiananmen Square becomes vandalized with “paint spattered on the head” as the protests develop (176-7). However, the government’s crackdown eventually prevails, and as if to demonstrate its reassertion of power, the cameras “show the portrait of Mao up close, a clean new picture” (177).
A somewhat similar scene occurs in Tehran, where Karen notices the “Great photographs of Khomeini hung from building walls” and where officials maintain the state’s permanence against massive crowds (189). The difference here is that the Iranians remain so devoted to their “Supreme Leader” that they cling to his corpse; and once it is placed in the ground, with “a black cargo container” over the gravesite, they circle it, like hajj pilgrims around the Ka’bah. Moreover, they adorn the container with “photographs of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini” (192). In short, rather than desecrate the leader’s image, they have created a shrine and rushed to fill the absence of “Khomeini the idolmaker” with his own image (193).35

Now one might object that such state tactics and blind devotion rarely occur in the West and that Debord’s ideas about totalitarianism are too broad. But the differences come down to “soft” versus “hard” power or how the state or ruling elite delivers its message. Also, by having Karen view these crowds on television, DeLillo clearly intends to make connections between the two regions and contend, like Debord, that totalitarianism in the West operates through technology. For Debord, “If the spectacle” is “considered in the limited sense of the ‘mass media,’” which is the most obvious way it functions in the West, “it should be understood that this apparatus is in no way neutral” (13). With a similar top-down approach, it transmits an ideology (of consumerism) and sets up a “social relation between people that is mediated by images,” one that, perhaps, more easily results in passivity and separation in the West (7).

DeLillo demonstrates Debord’s argument by presenting a “motionless” Karen and the photographer Brita watching television together. The two talk intermittently until the “voice that spoke behind the images” overrules their conversation and instructs them
about what is transpiring in Tehran (188). Absorbed by the footage, Karen notices how Brita “is calmly sitting in this frenzy,” and from this example, Karen speculates about how many millions of viewers are behaving the same way: “If others saw these pictures, why is nothing changed, where are the local crowds, why do we still have names and addresses and car keys?” (191). This ex-Moonie’s unique reaction is to join in the following and sacrifice possessions for belief, but DeLillo’s and Debord’s point is that she and the other viewers are already part of “the lonely crowd” and are too alienated to revolt. As Knight writes, they are “the virtual crowd of a television audience, isolated yet fused into an unthinking mass mind of passive spectatorship, a fragmented indoors crowd watching the massed ranks of outdoor crowds” (“Mao II” 35). Therefore, whether it’s the TV or the state-controlled image, the spectacle seeks to placate its captive audience.

The issue emerges, then, in DeLillo’s work regarding who can oppose such a totalitarian system. Is there a character in Mao II that poses some form of resistance or offers a model that enables us to break free of the image’s hypnotizing force? The obvious candidate appears to be the writer Bill Gray, an arch-individualist who believes the “image world is corrupt” and whose non-authoritarian politics seeks to “increase the flow of meaning” (36, 200). By setting up a diminishing writer as a possible figure to challenge oppressive systems like this, DeLillo’s novel brings to mind Foucault’s ideas about the “universal intellectual” in Power/Knowledge. According to Foucault, “the intellectual par excellence used to be the writer,” a kind of “bearer of values,” like Voltaire, who could serve as a spokesperson for workers or the masses (126-28). Yet, after WWII, with a rise in prestige in scientific fields and technology, “specific
intellectuals,” like Oppenheimer or “technicians” and “teachers” aligned with the state, displaced the disappearing “great writer” (127). As a result, Foucault proposes that “specific intellectuals,” who face the workers’ same foes (“multinational corporations and police apparatuses”), should worry less about ideology and “changing people’s consciousness” and more about power (126-29). If they hope to constitute “a new politics of truth,” one that challenges the current political/economic regime, they need to alter systems of power that circulate truth (126).

In DeLillo’s novel, though, the problem is that the writer is fixed in the mindset of the “universal intellectual.” Bill, for instance, denounces contemporary values and people’s fascination with the image, and he wishes that writers could “influence mass consciousness,” even though, like Foucault, he believes they are in “decline as shapers of sensibility and thought” (157). To his mind, “bombmakers” and “terrorists” are in ascension, and they have replaced writers because they supply the media with images and “news of disaster” (41-42); and DeLillo himself made a similar statement to Nadotti: “The news is fiction, the news is the new narrative—particularly the dark news, the tragic news” (114). Here, though, is the production of truth that Foucault might have in mind, and somewhat surprisingly, Bill gives increasing concessions to the media landscape. He has his photograph taken by Brita, he participates in a media event in London, and he offers to exchange himself for a hostage, held by terrorists in Beirut. Yet, after all these sacrifices, Bill lets himself die from a mortal wound before the exchange occurs, and this discomfitting ending is why many critics believe Bill is not the model readers should look for in terms of politics, let alone for initiating a new regime of truth.
For many DeLillo scholars, Bill is presented as a high modernist relic, and his pessimism about the world and his writing undercut any potential actions he could take. Jeoffrey S. Bull argues that Bill outlines “an ideology of despair and political inefficacy” (221), and according to Silvia Bizzini, despite Bill’s attempts to “demonstrate to himself that he still exists as a committed intellectual, the resistance he offers . . . is not enough” (251). However, Bill never was a “committed” or action intellectual; he does not “write political novels or books steeped in history,” and he avoids the chance to compose socially engaged literature that would “take up the case of the downtrodden” (102, 158). The strongest resistance he can offer, after years in self-seclusion, is to write about what he knows: being alone in a room, like the hostage. Indeed, perhaps Bill’s main impediment is that, despite his involvement with new systems of power, he remains attached to and promotes an outdated form. “Do you know why I believe in the novel? It’s a democratic shout. One thing unlike another,” he explains. “Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints” (159). Thus, this old medium embodies his politics, and Bill winds up being a sort of Lionel Trilling intellectual, an anti-communist leftist touting liberal modes, individualism, and complexity against ideology. For Bill, writing is “how we reply to power and beat back our fear” (200), but as DeLillo suggests with Bill’s demise, this brand of post-WWII liberalism might not be the most effective way to oppose totalitarianism in the age of the spectacle.

The most subversive method of resistance advanced in *Mao II* is to turn the image back on those who employ it for power. In this case, terrorists would seem to be more than capable of manipulating the mass media for political ends, and DeLillo’s novel, at first, purports that this figure could truly stymie the society of the spectacle, perhaps in
ways Debord could not conceive. According to Debord, a “purely spectacular rebelliousness” against the society of the spectacle could “itself become a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material” (29). In other words, opposition against a capitalist system can, in time, be transfigured to promote that system’s ideology—or, to be specific, Mao’s image can eventually be used to sell a T-shirt.

Yet, as DeLillo points out, some tactics and figures of rebellion have proven to be stubbornly resistant to absorption. George Haddad states, “In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act,” primarily because Western media outlets (and, by extension, commodity capitalism) cannot “assimilate” the terrorist figure or the practice of killing civilians (157). Moreover, as suggested in DeLillo’s “Silhouette City,” the terrorists’ methods and conviction provoke an existential crisis among some Westerners, who come to doubt their liberal institutions as well as their own ideals. DeLillo writes, “It appears to us today that only terror succeeds, only fanatics win unconditional victories, and that every vital design of our democratic mandate must pass through a network of compromise and distortion. This has caused a wavering of the grace of moral vision” (346). It is this despondent outlook that permeates the bulk of Mao II and is personified in Bill Gray, who holds that writers have become “incorporated” in comparison to radical terrorists (41). Nevertheless, not all of Bill’s statements are endorsed by DeLillo and not every artist figure in the novel defers to terrorists and their followers.

As a matter of fact, one utilizes the power of the image against them. Near the end of Mao II, for instance, the photographer Brita participates in a photo session with
Haddad’s terrorist leader Abu Rashid, and the reader might understand this scene to be only a demonstration of Bill’s maxims: that terrorists are the new luminaries, supplanting the writers that Brita took pictures of at the start of the novel. And yet, during the session, Brita questions Rashid’s methods of employing terror and taking hostages, she dismisses his Mao-inspired political speeches as “Eloquent macho bullshit,” and finally she unmask one of his hooded followers, a young boy who reacts violently after Brita snaps his picture as well (236). Thus, ostensively there to perpetuate only the leader’s image, Brita, as a “specific intellectual,” moves beyond her technical role of photographer. She challenges a totalitarian leader’s ideology, and as she “reloads and shoots,” she turns her camera into a weapon against one of his anonymous disciples, thereby violating his precious dogma by recognizing his individuality (235). This spontaneous, paradoxical act is the only resistance DeLillo approves of in the novel, and it points out certain affinities that Mao II shares with Linda Hutcheon’s ideas about postmodern politics. After all, Brita and DeLillo, with his in-laid photographs within his text, use or incorporate pictures in their work, even though they are aware of the pernicious influence of images. Their method is one of complicitous critique, which Hutcheon argues typifies postmodern art, “which thus at once purveys and challenges ideology—but always self-consciously” (4).

This political mindset, one that is aware of its compromises, stands in stark contrast to that held by the terrorist figure, which becomes DeLillo’s final object of critique here. Indeed, with Abu Rashid, DeLillo combines all of the totalitarian aspects he indicted earlier in Mao II: devout belief (or ideology), a de-emphasis on individuality, and a propensity to exploit violence to achieve an authoritarian political vision. In the
novel's terms, Abu Rashid's underground political group is simply a miniaturized autocracy, taking hostages just as a dictatorship turns its own citizens into hostages. But the correlations extend beyond shared methods and ideas. As stated by Bill Gray, the terrorist figure is far from being a "solitary outlaw"; he is also part of a group "backed by repressive governments. They're perfect little totalitarian states. They carry the old wild-eyed vision, total destruction and total order" (158). A terrorist, then, is just a fanatic with ties to the most entangling institution in DeLillo's world: the state. Moreover, he is dependent on and imitative of both versions of the spectacle, in that he feeds images to the media, which gives him publicity, and he adopts the coercive techniques of oppressive regimes, which supply him funding (158). On this issue, DeLillo, again, follows Debord, who warns that "a revolutionary organization" poised against the spectacle must avoid replicating "the dominant society's conditions of separation and hierarchy" (70).

Yet, with this critique, DeLillo falls back into his longstanding pattern of dismissing leftist radicals along with any form of political organization. Rashid's band, after all, has ties to the Lebanese Communist Party, and every other political group that Mao II explicitly references, including the Shining Path and the I.R.A., has leftist origins as well as links to terrorism. As a result, critics, like Vlatka Velcic, rightly censure DeLillo for indulging in Cold War narratives that equate leftists with terrorists and present leftists as "the political Other" (407). Moreover, John McClure believes DeLillo's overall treatment of the political other is "manifestly reductive" because readers "are invited to link Moon to Mao, Mao to Khomeini and the various terrorist factions in Beirut" and thus ignore the Cold War historical factors that distinguish them
In other words, DeLillo’s ambitious mélange of cultural and political topics fails to cohere and convince because he partakes in the kind of ahistorical thinking he indicts elsewhere in Mao II. The only explanation I can furnish for DeLillo’s lumping together disparate groups, like religious fanatics with Mao-inspired communists, is that all strive toward a desired goal, be it the end times or utopia. Such thinking is anathema to DeLillo’s pessimistic worldview, which does not support any political plans (however practical or minor), and which almost never envisions a better future. As one character says in the novel, “Think of the future and see how depressed you get” (89). But is this the lesson to be learned from events in 1989 and soon after?

In the time period that Mao II covers, DeLillo avoids depicting the most famous political actions that resulted in the toppling of a totalitarian empire. No references are given to any Eastern European country’s opposition against Soviet Russia, and scholars, like Boxall and Cowart, notice that other major events of 1989 are passed over in the novel. Cowart writes, “DeLillo makes no mention of the great crowd scenes with which that year ended. But why elide the Velvet Revolution, with half a million people in the streets of Prague, or before that, the breaching of the Berlin Wall?” (23-24). One answer could be that these omissions are in keeping with DeLillo’s theme regarding his characters’ lack of historical awareness. Cowart, though, believes that this massive “historical ellipses” is deliberate on DeLillo’s part, and citing Hemingway’s iceberg technique, he contends that Mao II is structured so that readers must become historiographers who realize that tyrannies actually did fall in this period (23-24).

However, I submit that for DeLillo to reference this breakdown in the Soviet empire would be an acknowledgement that political groups, composed of rational or
secular individuals, can bring down the state. Unfortunately, as seen throughout his Cold War works, DeLillo’s political view does not allow representations of how governments, especially totalitarian ones, can be defeated by crowds, collective action, or nonviolent revolutions. He is not interested in Solidarity because he has never been interested in actual solidarity among people. To him, a united group is invariably totalitarian in nature and is a threat to the individual. DeLillo cannot endorse the belief, which Marshall Berman articulates, that “Solidarity is not sacrifice of the self but the self’s fulfillment” (16). He has bought into the separation that the spectacle encourages.

In the end, DeLillo’s inability to envision positive political change through organized groups distinguishes his politics from Debord’s. Like DeLillo, Debord warned of “pseudo-revolutionary collective action,” and he too believed that a new form of “historical truth” would not be delivered by “atomized and manipulated masses” (119). On the other hand, he also argued that the “isolated individual” would not demonstrate a means of emancipation from the spectacle. For Debord, workers’ councils and a proletarian class that was able to wholly critique the spectacle offered the best solution to destroying the spectacle’s reign, and Debord was even encouraged by then-recent student protests, which he thought prefigured “a second proletarian assault against class society” (67-68). By contrast, DeLillo shows little to no interest in class or the proletariat here, focusing instead on an estranged intellectual, a chic artist, and political and religious fanatics. (Some attention is given to the homeless in New York, but DeLillo is more fascinated with their psychological problems rather than, say, with the breakdown in a city’s social services.) Thus, in what is often a weakness in the novel of ideas, DeLillo’s 

*Mao II* fails to explore the material conditions behind its characters’ lives, especially
those in the East. Discussions about crowds and the image recur, but there’s very little
talk about labor or money, as if publicity were all one needed to survive on.
Furthermore, aside from a few references to global capitalism, DeLillo fails to investigate
which specific economic or historical factors might actually impel people to embrace
totalitarianism or extremity. By ignoring these issues, which so often beget revolutions,
DeLillo fails to suggest how a future one could ever arise.

VI. “All the Power and Intimidation of the State”: Underworld’s Counternarratives

With the Cold War at an end, DeLillo’s political patterns change up slightly in
Underworld (1997). Leaving behind his focus on terrorism and Marxist ideology in Mao
II, DeLillo concentrates, once again, on the influence of the United States government
and how its technology affected its citizens from 1951-1992, almost the entire period of
the Cold War. Told in reverse chronology, with a few interstitial chapters that unfold in
linear fashion, Underworld’s story stems from the Dodgers/Giants pennant game on
October 3, 1951, with Bobby Thomson’s homerun ball serving as a recurring memento
that various characters possess throughout the ensuing decades. However, on this same
day, unbeknownst to the fans and the majority of Americans, Russia tested a plutonium
bomb in Kazakhstan, thereby heralding a new stage in the developing Cold War: the
nuclear arms race. In DeLillo’s ironic history, then, the resulting weapons buildup shapes
these characters’ lives far more than their precious collectibles, which occupy most of
their nostalgia and which displace their angst about their own powerlessness in the
nuclear age.

Surprisingly, with this disquieting subject matter and unique narrative structure,
Underworld became a bestseller, and well after its publication, scholars and critics have
held it in high esteem. In 2006, a New York Times survey of critics and authors judged DeLillo’s novel to be the second best work of American fiction published in the last twenty-five years, coming in only behind Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Likewise, DeLillo scholars consider it to be the author’s magnum opus, containing all of his typical themes, including the psychic costs of living with the bomb (End Zone), the fixation with secrets (Libra), and the power that images and crowds have for American consumers (Americana, Mao II). Nevertheless, Underworld distinguishes itself from those earlier works in type, if not in theme, because with it DeLillo eschews any kind of familiar genre reworking. In other words, here is a popular text that lacks a popular model.

Consequently, critics and scholars rarely agree on how to label Underworld, and this categorical confusion has a bearing on how to understand the novel’s and the author’s politics. Underworld has been referred to as a "novel of circulation," an eighteenth century subgenre that followed an object in order to describe its diverse owners and their society (Parcell); an “encyclopedic narrative,” a wide-ranging, iconoclastic work, like Gravity’s Rainbow (“Underworld” O’Donnell 108); and a “modernist epic” that resembles the fragmented, highly allusive model set by Ulysses or Dos Passos’s U.S.A. (“DeLillo” Nel 16). Indeed, DeLillo has stated that Underworld is perhaps “the last modernist gasp,” and many scholars have examined its affinities with modernism. Philip Nel, for one, has argued that Underworld’s modernist, avant-garde aesthetic reveals its politics, which does not offer “clearly defined goals,” but which critiques the dominant culture through advocating subversive attacks upon it (“Small” 730). Nel’s political analysis of this ostensibly modernist novel, though, recalls Hutcheon’s description of postmodern politics, which she also reads as destabilizing
cultural norms and official representations. Moreover, as John Duvall notes, the best way to categorize *Underworld* is to use Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction (“Power” 3). Thus, by incorporating Hutcheon’s ideas about postmodernism, Foucault’s theories about power, and Debord’s notions about *détournement*, I intend to demonstrate that *Underworld* largely follows the political patterns of DeLillo’s earlier postmodern Cold War novels. On the other hand, as Nel discerns, there are some unique changes here, especially in regards to DeLillo’s treatment of protestors, which suggests a different attitude towards political action during the Cold War.

The last in a string of DeLillo’s novels that can be classified as historiographic metafiction, *Underworld* meets Hutcheon’s criteria for this term more in its design than in all of its details. As mentioned, historiographic metafiction combines the self-reflexivity of metafiction with a self-aware or ironic presentation of history in order to problematize basic assumptions about historical texts, artifacts, and even historical knowledge. Utilizing characteristics, like multiple points of view, mixing fictional characters with historical personages, and employing parodic forms, historiographic metafiction “blurs the line between fiction and history” by making readers aware of their shared narrative conventions (“Pastime” 283). With even a cursory examination, one can see that *Underworld* fulfills many of these requirements. After all, its roster of characters includes fictional as well as historical figures, like J. Edgar Hoover and Lenny Bruce; it plays with conventional notions of historical narratives by incorporating multiple points of view and experimenting with temporality and causality; and finally one of its main themes involves our attempts to know the past through historical artifacts, or in this case, objects.
On this issue, though, as scholars like Duvall have failed to note, *Underworld* begins to deviate somewhat from Hutcheon’s template. For instance, in contrast to historiographic metafiction’s emphasis on textuality, *Underworld*’s interests lie less with printed matter than with images and junk, or discarded material, some of which is reconfigured into art (141). In fact, *Underworld*’s use of visual artists is the closest this novel comes to being metafictional. Its taciturn protagonist, Nick Shay, has taught English and has written corporate speeches, but as a waste management executive and a one-time killer, he is not composing a fiction or history to be read, which distinguishes him from the writers in *Libra* or *Mao II*. Furthermore, unlike those earlier thrillers and previous works of historiographic metafiction, *Underworld*, as I stated, is not parodying a specific form. Rather, it presents a counterhistory to official or well-known versions of America’s Cold War past, and in a 1997 essay about *Underworld*’s genesis, entitled “The Power of History,” DeLillo expressed his desire for writing a “version of the past that escapes the coils of established history.” Therefore, even though *Underworld* does not build off an aesthetic past, this kind of narrative undertaking, one that “juxtapose[s] what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation,” is one that Hutcheon endorses (*Politics* 71).

Most works of historiographic metafiction, according to Hutcheon, present the “story of the non-combatants or losers,” and likewise DeLillo’s *Underworld* avoids offering up a triumphalist chronicle, one that champions native freedoms and capitalism against a deteriorating communist system (51). DeLillo also shows little interest here in a great man theory of history, concentrating instead “on small narratives about the quotidian lives of his characters” (Yagano 241). Still, this is not a realist work since
DeLillo emphasizes the vast technological threats that unite them, and here “All technology refers to the bomb” (467). For instance, J. Edgar Hoover, having been informed about the Soviet tests, looks out at his fellow Americans at the Dodgers game and thinks, “All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction” (28). In DeLillo’s history, the bomb has created the postwar consensus, and its specter has warped Americans, who panic over its threat, repress its existence (and its attendant waste), or become fascinated by its power (467). Thus, for DeLillo, the Cold War was, at best, a Pyrrhic victory, turning the victors into psychological victims; and he exposes how the Age of Anxiety, extended for almost half a century, has traumatized many Americans, who believe that their lives took “an unreal turn at some point” (73). As one character asks, after learning about American nuclear tests in the 1950s, “Is this when history turned to fiction?” (459).

DeLillo’s counternarrative, then, links the potential violence of the state with its citizens’ psychic numbing, and he has explained in an interview that Underworld refers not only to “the underhistory of the Cold War, a curious history of waste and weapons” but also “to suppressed or repressed memories” (Echlin 146). Most obviously, this connection occurs with Nick, the waste executive whose intrusive memories about shooting a waiter with a shotgun as a teenager reveal his troubled consciousness. When the memory of this event arises (“I felt something drawn up out of me”), he almost always suppresses it: “I was able to pull it down in the table talk” (290). As a result, scholars, like Leonard Wilcox, have interpreted Underworld in terms of trauma theory,
and Wilcox points out that “traumatic experience” explains not only *Underworld’s* subject matter (at individual and collective levels), but also its fragmented form and reverse chronology, since trauma can only be understood “partially and belatedly” (122). Therefore, even in its structure, DeLillo’s novel follows Hutcheon’s dictum that “narrative representation is a historical and political act,” as it demonstrates that a cohesive historical narrative about the Cold War would be insufficient in conveying the unassimilable fear of living with the threat of nuclear annihilation (51). Thus, while *Underworld* may appear modern, with its themes about memory and the return of the repressed, it is, like Morrison’s *Beloved*, postmodern in its presentation of historical trauma. Moreover, its political argument is unique to postmodernism, and it is one DeLillo has made before: that the United States’ advanced technology has rendered its own citizens cowed and disturbed, yet not wholly unproductive.

Because a nuclear strike never materialized for most Americans and the bomb’s presence was largely symbolic, DeLillo’s novel illustrates a variety of training measures that conditioned people to acclimate themselves with the bomb while also reminding them of future threats. In these instances, *Underworld* evokes Foucault’s theories about governmentality and disciplinary power. According to Foucault, mechanisms of power work across the social body and influence people in a manner that is subtler than outright domination, in that power “touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (*Power* 39). As shown in *Underworld*, as in *End Zone* before, this power works initially in schools. For example, in 1952, kids, like Matt Shay, are instructed to wear dog tags to school, “to help rescue workers identify children who were lost” or killed after an atomic attack, and as if
this reminder were not enough, Matt and his classmates later undergo a surprise “duck and cover drill,” which leaves them “too shocked to think straight” (717, 727). Soon after, though, Matt finds the drill comforting and internalizes its lesson: that “the drill was not a remote exercise but was all about them, and so was atomic war” (718). Such disciplinary tactics occur throughout Underworld and help to clarify how Americans normalized a looming threat and later complied with an unseen authority.

Outside of schools and drills, DeLillo also exposes how his characters’ formation as subjects involved more insinuating social discourses and practices, which penetrate into the domestic sphere and reveal the characters’ personal relationship to Cold War weaponry. In the realm of language, for example, we read how Erica Deming, a 1950s American homemaker, basks in the glory of her “crisper,” her “breezeway,” and her “broadloom”—the mere sound of which prove that “the things around her were important. Things and words. Words to believe in and live by” (520). As we later learn, though, Erica fixates on these words and commodities to ward off her fears regarding the recent news about Sputnik as well as her own sexual anxieties; she cannot bring herself, for instance, to put her beloved Jell-O (“a push button-word”) into a “sort of guided-like missile” mold, which “made her feel uneasy somehow” (515-7). Less conflicted is her son Eric, who “ate Hydrox cookies because the name sounded like rocket fuel” and who masturbates into a condom because it reminded him of “his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile” (519, 514). For scholars, like Yoshihiro Nagano, DeLillo’s point is to show “the interlocking fantasies of individuals and the state,” even as some characters go further in fetishizing the state’s technology (242).
However, Nagano’s study fails to investigate how these fantasies are transmitted to American citizens and what enables them to become so thoroughly interpellated.

Apart from the bomb, the primary influences that find their way into Americans’ consciousness include television and advertising (76). Of course, in previous Cold War novels, like *Americana* and *Libra*, DeLillo linked Americans’ desires to this medium and its messages; yet, in *Underworld* he is more explicit in demonstrating how these mechanisms of power promote the state’s interests. For example, an advertising executive named Charlie Wainwright reviews an “Equinox Oil campaign,” concerning a commercial that had two cars racing in New Mexico towards the “[s]ite of the first atomic test shot” (529). For Wainwright, the commercial bears an unmistakable Cold War message: “White car versus black car. Clear implication. U.S. versus U.S.S.R. First car to get to the Trinity site wins” (529). With these ads, Wainwright and his creative team, with their “sublimated forms of destruction,” are not only uniting consumerism to the arms race, but are also circulating images that enter the nation’s collective psyche, making its citizens both patriotic and passive (530). It is a power Wainwright relishes, and he summarizes Debord’s argument when he tells his client, from the “Bomb Your Lawn campaign”: “Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world” (530).

For Foucault, this chain of power networks that shapes people through tactics and discourses exerts more control than the state, which must employ preexisting networks to operate (*Power* 122). However, while DeLillo’s novel explores how power is conveyed through these already established systems, his characters tend to retrospectively attribute their indoctrination to the state. One character is told that the Cold War is “the one constant thing” in his and his fellow Americans’ lives, and he should understand that
when the war ceases, he will be diminished: “All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream” (170). This statement, which reads like a parody of Foucault’s theories about how power works upon the body, betrays an awareness of the pervasive influence the state has played upon Americans.

Nevertheless, many of DeLillo’s characters here are not resentful. In point of fact, the more mature ones become rather wistful about the state’s technology. For instance, in 1992, with the Cold War over, Klara Sax reminisces about an earlier time, when she possibly witnessed B-52 bombers flying overhead and felt a “complex sensation” (75):

I think if you maintain a force in the world that comes into people’s sleep, you are exercising a meaningful power . . . Now that power is in shatters or tatters and . . . I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. (76)

This nostalgia for the certainties of the Cold War is DeLillo at his most sardonic, exposing Klara’s psychological dependence on “the terror” she and others grew accustomed to. Moreover, Klara’s speech practically embodies Foucault’s approach, in that her analysis of this geopolitical conflict revolves around not ideology but the strategic application of power, which operates on subjects or the populace through “forces” and elevated technology.

Still, Foucault’s theories do not conceive of a society in which power relations remain fixed. In his model, the practices and tactics that authorities employ can be opposed, resisted, or turned back against them. Similarly, in DeLillo’s Underworld, as the Cold War consensus breaks down, protest movements arise along with more subversive appropriations of the state’s tools. Thus, in the most startling development of
DeLillo’s Cold War canon, characters that are not terrorists, fanatics, or media-saturated loners engage in forms of resistance and challenge their government—and the state reacts out of fear. For instance, in 1966, before attending Truman Capote’s Black & White Ball, J. Edgar Hoover worries over the nearby presence of Vietnam protestors, whom he likens to turn-of-the-century anarchist groups, “trying to break the state and bring about the end of the existing order” (564). And yet, the initial forms of rebellion that panic Hoover are basically revamped strategies that his agency employed for decades. Known for his surveillance and the files he kept on Americans and their activities, Hoover is briefed by his longtime aide/companion Clyde Tolson that “urban guerillas” plan to raid the F.B.I. Director’s trash outside his home and make it public: “Confidential source says they intend to take your garbage on tour” (558). The secretive Hoover is mortified, but what troubles Tolson is the replication of the agency’s tactics, as he tells Hoover, “I knew it was a mistake to publicize our methods against organized crime” (557). In this case these adopted tactics lean towards political mischief, but, as DeLillo later demonstrates, some of his protestors boldly decide to position their bodies against the state in an effort to challenge “the existing order.”

*Underworld*, for instance, recounts a 1964 Civil Rights March in Jackson, MS, as well as the 1967 student demonstrations at Madison, Wisconsin, and with both protests, DeLillo fixates on the state’s excessive response to protestors, specifically in terms of its deployment of tear gas. In Jackson, the freedom marchers and sit-in demonstrators encounter the National Guard, who drag the protestors’ bodies and later club them. Yet, what captivates everyone, including the nearby racist whites, is the CS gas which “made people dizzy almost at once and caused a stinging on the body” (525). A similar scene
occurs in Madison, where students protest against the Vietnam War as well as Dow Chemical, “whose recruiters were active on campus and whose products included a new and improved form of napalm” (599). Here resistance takes the form of riots and street theater, and one subversive takes over a mechanism of power (a radio station) to transmit information about how to create a fertilizer bomb and “make your own napalm” (603). But, again, the state’s forces prevail, with cops clubbing students and “firing tear gas,” even as students run into it “because they thought the moral force of their argument would neutralize the effect of the chemicals” (602). With these examples, DeLillo finally breaks from his previous Cold War novels that dismissed protestors and left-leaning groups, and in Underworld he, at least, grants his protestors “moral” arguments and achievable political goals, like civil rights. Furthermore, he also deviates from Foucault, who often downplays the state’s oppressive power, whereas these protests reveal how the state can operate through brute force and not just “strategies.” In fact, in the end, DeLillo suggests that no matter how many tactics are subverted, the state holds onto its power because of its superior weaponry. As Hoover notes, it possesses “the most destructive power available,” the bomb (563).

Therefore, since the state seemingly cannot be overturned and its most powerful weapons cannot be reappropriated, Underworld’s more frequent depictions of resistance involve artists who mock or subvert the Cold War culture and its power structures. Examples abound, from Lenny Bruce’s stand-up and impersonations of the Kennedy administration’s handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, to Klara Sax’s paintings of retired B-52 bombers, to an unknown theatrical group that crashes the Black & White Ball and later dons police gear to mimic cops. Much of these parodic and public cultural
enterprises, involving performance art or bricolage, smack of postmodernism. However, Philip Nel, pointing to the fictional Eisenstein film *Unterwelt* as an ekphrasis model, contends that DeLillo favors the modernist avant-garde, with its surreal juxtapositions and its "politics of montage" (727). *Underworld*, to him, advocates "sneak attacks on the dominant culture," which decenter a reader, causing one "to rethink" what was "thought to be 'normal' or true," and thereby offering a "qualified resistance against those structures of power embedded in cultural discourses" (730). As stated, though, this description of *Underworld*'s political strategy mirrors Hutcheon's ideas about the politics of postmodernism, which she also reads as contesting "cultural dominants," even though, for her, postmodern art is both complicit and critical, as "it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests" (*Politics* 142, 289).

The best subversive act, though, that exemplifies Hutcheon's and Nel's ideas about cultural resistance occurs near the end of *Underworld*, and it is actually an illustration of Debord's détournement. Often referred to as "cultural jamming," détournement, like Hutcheon's postmodernism, transforms "an official truth" by exploiting familiar language or forms to convey an alternate or opposing idea (113). Debord likens the method to plagiarism, in that "it sticks close to an author's phrasing, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one" (113). Yet in the society of the spectacle he describes, the stronger example would include images or, more specifically, advertisements, which is what DeLillo manipulates in the form of a Minute Maid billboard. Situated in a poverty-stricken section of the Bronx, the billboard presents a "vast cascade of orange juice pouring . . . into a goblet that is handheld" by "a female caucasian of the middle suburbs" (820). Incongruous as this ad may appear to its
blighted surroundings, where “drifters and squatters” reside, it still promotes the official ideology of consumerism (820).

However, DeLillo subverts the ad and its ideology, as his Bronx citizens perceive a miraculous vision within it. To be specific, “when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard a face appears above the misty lake and it belongs to the murdered girl,” a homeless pre-teen named Esmeralda, who was recently thrown to her death from a tenement building (821). Of course, one of the more skeptical onlookers explains that the supposed miracle is “just the undersheet,” the trace image from the previous “papered-over ad” that shines “through the current ad” (822). Yet, crowds gather anyway, as they so often do in DeLillo’s finales, hoping for “something holy that throbs on the hot horizon” (824). A postmodern reworking of Gatsby’s Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, DeLillo’s Minute Maid billboard has been transformed into a kitschy holy site, and while one might argue that DeLillo replaces one false ideology with another, his eventual point is that the state and its consumer economy cannot allow its images to be reappropriated or misinterpreted. After all, the pilgrims come to find that the “next evening the sign is blank” (824).

In the end, subverting familiar representations is what Underworld is primarily about, especially in regards to America’s Cold War history. During this period, America’s consumer culture and technological superiority were held up as evidence that the United States had the better system and that American citizens led more contented lives than their Soviet counterparts. DeLillo’s postmodern counternarrative, however, charts the deleterious effects that America’s weaponry and economy had on its own citizens, who repressed their existential dread about the bomb, became compliant through
various state networks, or, in some cases, yoked themselves to the state after buying into its ideology. One such character, Matt Shay, looks back at his Cold War career, including his service in Vietnam and his work on weapons systems in New Mexico, and he realizes that he is “part of something unreal,” that he is stuck inside “a dream someone’s dreaming,” a dream which he believes is one of the state’s “massive fantasies” (458, 421). Nevertheless, it is a fantasy he accepted and enlisted in, and Underworld’s main political point is that we need to face the reality of the Cold War’s legacy, the varieties of waste left behind. “All those decades,” says a Russian character, “we thought about weapons all the time and never thought about the dark multiplying by-product” (791). Thus, in DeLillo’s telling, the most significant tokens of the Cold War are what we ignored: the accumulation of trash and toxic waste that still blot our landscape. That said, though, DeLillo finally does not diminish our capacity for change, especially in this rare novel of his that documents how protestors and artists are able to sublimate their fears to challenge the state and its tactics. However, any action first requires our recognition and acknowledgement. As Nick Shay’s therapist explains to him, as he recovers from his traumatic experience, “You have a history,’ she said, ‘that you are responsible to . . . You’re answerable. You’re required to try to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention” (512).

VII. Conclusion

The specter of the bomb, the power of clandestine agencies, and the relationship between radicals and the media—these are some of the recurring political subjects that Don DeLillo has examined throughout his postmodern Cold War novels. However, despite his concentration on these topics, the critical consensus over the years has been that DeLillo’s “books, though profoundly political, presented no clear agenda” (Passaro
Thus, DeLillo has all too often been read as a cultural critic, the type of author who, according to Louis Menand, “certainly has a take on contemporary life,” but whose overall worldview is too “unrelenting to sponsor a politics. He is not a writer who imagines that there is a handy exit from our condition” (72).

Indeed, this strain of pessimism regarding any political project has been consistent throughout DeLillo’s work, despite the author’s assertion in an interview that he does not “think in terms of optimism or pessimism” (Moss 166). Nonetheless, by examining his novels that were set during the Cold War, from *Americana* to *Underworld*, this chapter has argued that DeLillo’s outlook, and, by extension, his politics, can be detected in those novels’ patterns. In summation, DeLillo tends to focus on alienated protagonists, to deride left-leaning activists or radicals, and to show that the U.S. government or, more specifically, agents of it, maintain power, whatever challenges they might encounter. Thus, at first glance, DeLillo would appear to be a conservative, a kind of postmodern Conrad, whose works present liberalism as a quaint anachronism. After all, the few characters that espouse it or embody its creed, like Bill Gray or President Kennedy, are ineffectual or are killed.

However, this attitude towards liberalism and DeLillo’s pessimistic politics is best understood when placed in the context of the Cold War. DeLillo marks the Cold War’s initiation with the nuclear arms race, as shown by his periodization in *Underworld*, and because of the increased risk of atomic war, the state, in turn, possessed a newfound power: it “controlled the means of apocalypse” (564). Yet, as a result, it has also implicitly forfeited any liberal political goals. As Thomas Schaub points out, “liberal thought requires a future . . . and the specter of atomic devastation made the idea of a
future doubtful” (65). Here, then, one can imagine how Kennedy’s presidency and his brand of reinvigorated liberalism in the early 1960s brought a brief glimmer of hope to DeLillo and his generation. If it were otherwise, Kennedy’s assassination would not have affected DeLillo and his work as much as he admitted, and after this event, DeLillo’s fiction operates not only in a postmodern world but also a post-liberal one, in which the government no longer sets out a beneficent vision for its citizens. Thus, as if in lockstep to Lyotard’s theory that the postmodern condition constitutes the death of metanarratives, including the progress of history, DeLillo rarely focuses on or champions progressive or liberal political issues. Additionally, as if they too were inconsequential, partisan debates over foreign policy and domestic issues are often given scant attention in his novels, at least until *The Names* and *Libra*. Therefore, DeLillo’s constant political interests revolve around what he recognizes as possessing the most power during the Cold War: technology and the state’s apparatuses (FBI, CIA), which fascinate and serve as models of behavior for his protagonists.

Because of his emphasis on these controlling mechanisms of power, DeLillo’s political vision closely aligns with Foucault and Debord. Like Foucault, DeLillo illustrates how surveillance and disciplinary institutions train his characters and their bodies, and like Debord, DeLillo reveals how the media, in all its permutations, shapes his protagonists’ reality, keeping them passive and in thrall to images and diminishing their critical awareness. Altogether, these interpellative forces often result in soft totalitarian outcomes, where there are too few choices and where the individual has little control over his or her life. Consequently, DeLillo’s protagonists tend to imitate or act in the service of institutions or ideologies that shaped them. “I wanted to be bound by the
company,” says Nick Shay in *Underworld*. “I felt complicit with some unspoken function of the corporation” (301). In fact, many of DeLillo’s wised-up protagonists eventually become aware of how they are being used or manipulated by the powers that be, yet they hardly ever rebel or act out against oppressive systems. Instead, they cut all ties and withdraw from society, and when asked by Tom LeClair why so many of his characters do this, DeLillo answered, “I think they see freedom and possibility as being too remote from what they perceive existence to mean” (8). Placed in context, though, this despairing outlook of DeLillo’s heroes can seem odd, especially since almost all of his characters reside in post-war America, where freedom and opportunity are purportedly abundant.

Thus, to represent America during the Cold War, as DeLillo so often does, as a quasi-totalitarian environment, where freedom is limited and systems of power impose false choices to its citizens, would never occur to a conservative, and this is why he can never safely be labeled as such. As his critics on the right have noted, DeLillo’s novels veer towards the left on the American political spectrum because they undermine American post-WWII myths about individuality, either in terms of autonomy or fulfillment through consumption. Moreover, DeLillo’s historical novels, from *The Names* to *Underworld*, have consistently condemned the American government’s presence abroad, pointing to the CIA’s subversion of democratic governments and to our indiscriminate bombing during Vietnam. Beyond these critiques, DeLillo’s mid-to-late novels serve as examples of what he calls “a form of counterhistory”—that is, writing that questions not only dominant cultural representations about the superiority of the “American way of life” but also official historical narratives about America’s foreign
policy ("Power" 63). As such, DeLillo’s novels fit nicely with Linda Hutcheon’s theories about postmodernism ("Pastime" 289). Indeed, Hutcheon’s description of postmodernism practically encapsulates the main aspects of DeLillo’s politics, in that it has “critical clout” with its subversive representations, but it is finally “not truly radical” because it offers “no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political action” (Politics 3).

In other words, aside from random acts like détournement, DeLillo fails to endorse any clear opposition to existing power structures. Terrorists and left-leaning radicals, for instance, are often explored in his novels as initially offering forms of resistance against Western capitalism, but DeLillo eventually characterizes these groups as fanatics, blinded by ideology and obsessed with spectacles and Western media. Stranger still, secular political groups that would attempt even a minor positive change to their totalitarian environments are typically ignored or dismissed, although DeLillo has made some exceptions in his later works, with the Tiananmen Square protests in Mao II and the Civil Rights groups in Underworld. Nevertheless, for the most part, DeLillo is too disturbed by groups or the masses, which he sees as limiting one’s consciousness. As stated, throughout most of his Cold War novels, he cannot imagine how group politics could lead to a better, more progressive future.

In the end, like numerous American writers before him, DeLillo’s main political concern is the individual. To some readers, of course, such a statement must seem strange, especially since DeLillo appears more interested in charting the technological and governmental threats that assail his characters rather than delineating their individuality. All the same, it is the individual that he holds above all else, and in an
interview with Adam Begley, DeLillo summed up his understanding of the Cold War by saying, “Our postwar history has seen tanks in the streets and occasional massive force. But mainly we have the individual in the small room, the nobody who walks out of the streets and changes everything” (103). Based on his oeuvre, however, this kind of “nobody” is rarely a political figure and can typically only effect change in regards to the culture, a la Oswald.

Therefore, DeLillo, in my reading, can best be understood as a libertarian pessimist. He values personal autonomy and freedom of choice, and he maintains a deep-seated skepticism about state power or governments. In his latest novel Point Omega (2010), he even has a character state, “A government is a criminal enterprise” (33). Still, DeLillo will in no way sanction a political action or entity that would fight back against oppressive powers or even hope to expand personal freedoms. Now such a worldview, I realize, could potentially place DeLillo on either the far left or the far right; but DeLillo never endorses the dissolution of the state, as would an anarchist, nor does he ever extol the virtues of the free market, as the current economic libertarians do. In point of fact, both of those political camps actually fall under DeLillo’s derision in Cosmopolis, in which a postmodern theorist explains that the cherished belief of anarchists “is also the hallmark of capitalist thought. Enforced destruction” (92). Ever the satirist, DeLillo is not a radical, looking to burn down the state, and he is far from being a champion of capitalism; but as I have shown, he discounts the middle ground (liberalism) that would attempt to tame capitalism’s excesses along with any other extreme ideology.

To be honest, this is where DeLillo’s political philosophy meets an impasse. As the Cold War has ended, DeLillo has found himself defending liberal ideals against a new
brand of totalitarianism, as shown in his denunciation of Islamic terrorism in *Mao II*, his defense of Salman Rushdie against the fatwa, and in his post-9/11 essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” which praises America’s tradition of upholding religious pluralism. Yet, as shown in his earlier Cold War novels, DeLillo rejects liberalism as a political philosophy that would counter such extremism, and as stated from the outset of this chapter, DeLillo still fashions himself as a political independent. In many ways, then, DeLillo is typical of those postmodernists who rejected the primary political philosophies of the Cold War (Western liberalism, Soviet authoritarianism), and who shied away from creating explicitly ideological fiction. After all, when DeLillo started his writing, in the late ’60s and early ’70s, America’s political establishment had discredited itself with the Vietnam War and, as a result, had fostered extremists on the left; and based on his fiction, DeLillo harbored little sympathy for either. In this environment, it seems, DeLillo withdrew, like so many of his characters, and he has henceforth based his critiques in his fiction, the only political action he finds amenable.
Epilogue

In 1988, scholar John Kucich wrote a critical essay entitled "Postmodern Politics: Don DeLillo and the Plight of the White Male Author," and in this work, Kucich addressed "the decline of politically-engaged fiction" from white male American postmodernists (328). The writing of this group, in contrast to postmodern fiction from Latin America or from "female and ‘minority’" writers, struck Kucich as being "politically neutered," and he posited various theories for this problem (329). Was it the absence of a supportive "leftist political community" (329)? Was it the writers’ own doubts about their political "legitimacy," seeing as how they could not authentically speak from an oppressed position? Or was it simply that these writers believed the postmodern axiom: that they lacked critical distance to offer truths about a system within which they worked? In the end, for Kucich, the main issue was that postmodern writers operated from the principle that "political conflict is ultimately constituted in language . . . rather than in overt forms of repression, in individuals, or in the shape of historical events" (330).

Kucich’s emphasis on the privileged status that American postmodernists accord to language is a familiar one, and, to some extent, it is supported by the writers themselves, who often stress that this is where their main concern lies. However, what Kucich’s essay ignores is that the Cold War might account for these authors’ political reticence. For example, when the Cold War ended (a few years after Kucich’s article appeared), these same postmodern writers delivered their most politically-engaged
fiction, including *Vineland* and *Underworld*, both of which would offer broad critiques regarding America’s Cold War politics. In particular, what these novels demonstrate is that the Cold War was a traumatic event that resulted in various “forms of repression,” and the causes behind all of this involved far more than just language. It had to do with the era’s new atomic weaponry along with the state’s concomitant concern for security, especially in the domestic sphere. In other words, in spite of what Kucich argued, these postmodern authors were showing that “political conflict” had arisen from the “shape of historical events,” and the only change in these novels from these authors’ earlier fiction is that now they were much more explicit about what the U.S. government had done to its citizenry during the Cold War. Whatever faults lie within these later postmodern works, no one would criticize them for a lack of political engagement.

And yet, the purpose of this dissertation has been to show that three postmodern novelists (Nabokov, Pynchon, DeLillo) had always engaged political topics and addressed historical events, although, admittedly, during the Cold War, their handling of this material was often presented with no small amount of subtlety. One obvious reason for this approach was the political atmosphere in the U.S. at the start of the Cold War, when writers were blacklisted or called in front of HUAC. In fact, it does not seem like a coincidence that after McCarthyism Nabokov would follow up his most politically-explicit novel from 1947 (*Bend Sinister*) with some of his most formally complex writings, including *Pale Fire*, wherein the political content was so intricately buried that many scholars never noticed it for decades. By the same token, later postmodern writers, like Pynchon and DeLillo, came of age during this reactionary period, and from their early work to their later statements, it seems evident that they internalized the West’s
Cold War modernist aesthetics, particularly the idea that a work of art should avoid any hint of ideology. For instance, in regards to his first novel, Pynchon would tell his editor “that [writing a protest novel] ‘was the furthest thing from [his] mind’” (Herman 62), and even after writing *Underworld*, DeLillo would inform an interviewer that he never “consciously [made] political statements” in his novels nor does he have “any political program” (Connolly 38).

This dissertation, then, serves as a corrective not only to these authors’ own public statements about the supposed apolitical nature of their work, but it also identifies, through close readings of their Cold War novels, their specific political philosophies, from right-leaning liberalism to anarchism to left-leaning libertarianism. Furthermore, it places these authors’ politics within the larger historical context of the Cold War, and it shows that, despite their divergent views, they all understood this global conflict as one that jeopardized individual liberty. As a result, the one consistent political action that is tacitly endorsed in all of their novels is the act of withdrawal, either into delusions or social isolation, and in the end, perhaps this is what is most distinctly American about their writings.

While there has been some scholarship about this idea of withdrawal in regards to individual authors, like Samuel Thomas’s *Pynchon and the Political* (2007), there does not exist a more general study that examines how this political response recurs in the postmodern American novel. As mentioned, previous scholarship on Cold War literature tends to ignore postmodernism altogether; or it follows a broad approach, which examines one of these author’s novels in terms of “Cold War culture,” rhetoric, or genre; or it takes the more in-depth approach, which focuses on a single postwar author, like
John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain (2001). Therefore, my hope is that this study will fill in certain gaps within the larger scholarship on Cold War literature and that it will help eradicate the fading but persistent notion that postmodern works are mainly apolitical.

That said, there are clear gaps within my own study. For instance, this dissertation does not examine either a female or African-American writer, and if this work were to be expanded into a book I would analyze the political writings of Joan Didion, although I still have some difficulty finding a postmodern African-American writer who deals consistently with the Cold War. Aside from these obvious absences, my study generally does not examine these white male postmodern authors or their novels in terms of the multicultural triad of race, gender, and class. In regards to race, the main problem is that, aside from Pynchon, most of these authors have very little to say about race and ethnicity, which is itself problematic, considering the fact that these postmodernists were either writing after the Holocaust or during or after the fight for civil rights in the U.S.

Recent scholarship, though, has begun to examine Nabokov’s lifelong hatred of anti-Semitism, and these studies could benefit by linking this concern with the author’s and his wife’s anticommunism. For instance, as her own biographer Stacy Schiff attests, Nabokov’s wife Véra, who was Jewish, often took pains to establish her anticommunist credentials in order to counter then-existing stereotypes that communists were predominantly Jewish. In regards to DeLillo, the scholarship involving his handling of race needs to extend beyond White Noise and examine some of his Cold War novels, like Libra and Underworld, both of which show that African-Americans bore the brunt of the
state’s violence during this period. Finally, Pynchon’s 1965 essay about Watts
practically begs for critical reexamination, especially since the domestic issues it
addresses are the same ones African-Americans face today, including police misconduct
and urban riots.

Whatever difficulties scholars might have with these postmodern authors in terms
of race and the Cold War, they will face many more complications in regards to these
authors’ treatment of gender issues. Although there exists some scholarship regarding
gender roles and the Cold War, like Suzanne Clark’s *Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial
in the Rhetoric of the West* (2000) and K.A. Cuordileone’s *Manhood and American
Political Culture in the Cold War* (2005), there is, again, an obvious scarcity in critical
studies about American postmodern writers, their handling of gender, and the Cold War.
On the whole, postmodern American fiction is a literature populated with lonely,
paranoid men, like Kinbote and Oswald, and so there are few well-drawn female
characters. For example, despite his modern beliefs about art, Nabokov was notoriously
old fashioned in regards to gender roles, and he rarely, if ever, provided independent
female protagonists. Therefore, the most fertile approach for future scholars might be to
address why Nabokov and his male narrators tend to deny his female characters any
political agency, especially since they largely function as victims in his male-dominated
narratives.

In a similar manner, with the exception of *Lot 49*, Pynchon’s early Cold War
novels often stick to stereotypical gender roles, with women functioning as seductresses
or agents of destruction. However, unlike Nabokov, there is some awareness on
Pynchon’s part about the narrow and dehumanizing nature of these social roles.
Furthermore, since his later novels, like *Vineland*, offer up complex female characters, who take an active role in Cold War politics, it would help if there were more studies that compared his evolving outlook about gender, specifically in terms of his rejection of Cold War models. Much the same could be said of DeLillo, whose Cold War novels, what with their male characters’ focus on plots and weaponry, often implicitly condemn the limited notions of Cold War hyper-masculinity. While there have been some essays on this issue in regards to *Libra*, there remains a need to address DeLillo’s treatment of female characters and how they counter the political despair and nihilism of his male protagonists during the Cold War.

Given the relative dearth of Cold War literary studies involving race, gender, and postmodernism, it should not be surprising that there is even less scholarship in regards to class. After all, if an American author were to focus on class issues during the Cold War, this author would invite accusations that he or she was a potential communist. Consequently, any issues related to class are often downplayed or indirectly treated in U.S. postwar novels, and postmodern works are no exception. In fact, in postwar essays by Irving Howe and Harry Levin, the term “postmodern” was initially characterized as relating to a loss of class consciousness, and in general, there is very little focus on the working class or labor in postmodern novels (Schaub 189). Instead, the focus has typically involved the bourgeoisie, and while Andrew Hoberek’s *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (2005) proves useful in regards to DeLillo’s *The Names*, there is a clear opportunity for academic studies regarding Nabokov’s and Pynchon’s treatment of class issues. After all, much of their postmodern Cold War novels have intellectuals, artists, or technicians as
protagonists who specialize in one particular field, and the authors’ general point is that these alienated protagonists often hold myopic or pessimistic views about humanity. Therefore, by focusing on the occupational or social positions of their protagonists, one could provide a more nuanced portrait of these authors’ ideas about not only class but also their notions about the possibility of community and political change.

There is also the larger question as to whether readers and scholars should interpret these postmodern Cold War novels as having any political or cultural relevance to our current era. After all, there are some obvious differences from how we live now to the Cold War world that these postmodernists describe. These days, in our globalized economy, the state, like other institutions, no longer seems all that powerful, and in actuality, most of the threats we face do not come from nations but from terrorists emerging out of failed states. As a result, the targets of these radicals are not presidents or heads of state; they are almost exclusively civilians, like tourists and cartoonists. Furthermore, the means of our destruction does not appear to include the elaborate weapons systems that characterized the Cold War. Instead, they are mundane objects (box cutters) and familiar forms of transportation (trucks, planes). Still, as chaotic and violent as our current era might appear, it must be acknowledged that sporadic attacks from terrorists could never match the potentially apocalyptic destruction that could have occurred during the Cold War. In short, we are now much safer, although we are by no means inviolate.

In fact, the most valuable aspect of these postmodern Cold War novels is their emphasis on surveillance, which has only become worse after 9/11, and, of course, one cannot blame only the state. At this time, in addition to the presence of street cameras,
drones, and camera phones, practically every appliance where we live could potentially be used to spy on us—that is, if it is connected to the internet, which, in its own way, is another tracking device. Thus, the features of the postwar landscape that inspired such paranoia in postmodern novels now seem comparatively crude, and even Orwell never foresaw the level of complicity involved in how we have rushed to sacrifice our privacy. In other words, agents no longer need to dig through our trash to discover information about us.

Actually, from this contemporary vantage point, the Cold War years in the U.S. seem comparatively attractive, especially that brief interval after the Civil Rights Act had passed and before the social convulsions spread and effectively weakened liberalism for twenty-five years. Indeed, the habit that later postmodernists had of decrying liberalism and the power of elites in the fields of science just does not seem relevant or appealing in our current age of tribalism, religious fanaticism, and anti-intellectualism. Put simply, this a time when knowledge is no longer prized or put to use for the public good, as it was during the Cold War. In the West, the present ideology of neoliberalism ensures that there is little to no public good, only profit. While some postmodern novelists have been quite perceptive regarding the pervasiveness of capitalism and consumer culture (“Capitalism burns off the nuance of a culture,” DeLillo writes in Underworld), they have been less interested in ways to practically oppose it, at least in terms of group or collective action (785). Therefore, their ideas about withdrawal strike this writer as antiquated, a relic of the Cold War, especially when what is needed is some solidarity or class consciousness, given our current levels of inequality. In fact, what would help is an
issue that these postmodern Cold War novels often avoid: an idea about how to achieve future goals beyond the individual.
Notes to Pages 1-19

ENDNOTES

1. There have been recent attempts to expand cultural investigations regarding the Cold War beyond the U.S. and England. For instance, *Global Cold War Literature: Western, Eastern and Postcolonial Perspectives* (2012), offers a collection of essays that examines Cold War literature from countries, including Latin America, Japan, Cuba, France, China, as well as East and West Germany. Soran Radu Cucu’s *The Underside of Politics: Global Fictions in the Fog of the Cold War* (2013) also widens his study beyond American Cold War novels by examining novelists from Eastern Europe, like Milan Kundera.

2. I choose the novel as a genre because I believe it is best equipped to capture one of the main themes of postmodern Cold War works: how the state and other systems place pressure on individuals or, at least, infiltrate their consciousness over an extended period of time.

3. Gaddis, 1. While most historians believe the Cold War started in 1947, when Truman laid out the U.S.’s foreign policy doctrine of containment in his famous Doctrine, I believe that the issues surrounding the conflict were already in place years earlier. The Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis also argues in *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997) that “the division of the world began in 1945,” the year of Yalta and Potsdam.


5. George Packer, “The Uses of Division,” *The New Yorker* (August 11 & 18, 2014): http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/uses-division. Throughout this dissertation, I will often employ the term “consensus” or “Cold War consensus” by which I mean, as Packer defines it, the U.S.’s postwar “social contract,” one that was “founded on a mixed economy at home and bipartisan Cold War internationalism abroad.”

CHAPTER ONE: The NABOKOVs and the COLD WAR: ANTICOMMUNIST POLITICS in *BEND SINISTER*, *PNIN*, and *PALE FIRE*

1. See Alter, Hyman, and Lee for early examples of Nabokov scholarship that examines novels like *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* in relation to the author’s own political views.
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2. Boyd’s biography Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years has only two references in its index to the Cold War. Nichol’s “Politics” provides the best brief overview of Nabokov’s political views; yet, he also never mentions the Cold War. Similarly, essays from Discourse and Ideology, like D. Barton Johnson’s “Nabokov and the Sixties,” review Nabokov’s anticommunist political beliefs and his reaction to contemporary political events, but they fail to fully situate him within the Cold War. M. Keith Booker’s section on Nabokov in his Post-Utopian Imagination, however, stands as an exception.

3. Diment, “Nabokov” 17. In comparison to most Nabokov scholars, Diment provides one of the more sympathetic overviews of Wilson’s politics. She writes, “By the time he met Nabokov, in 1940, both his Marxism and his very brief love affair with Soviet Russia were largely behind him, but to the end of his days he, unlike someone like Dos Passos or Steinbeck, remained a staunch liberal. Throughout his life, he protested inequalities in the position of American Indians and blacks, and he also publicly condemned the Vietnam War.”

4. Wilson, Finland, xxi. In his 1971 introduction, Wilson admits that “American socialists and liberals” had idealized the Russian Revolution, that they had not foreseen that Imperial Russia’s worst aspects (“the censorship, the secret police”) would continue in the Soviet Union, nor did they suspect that it would “become one of the most hideous tyrannies that the world had ever known.” Illustrating Schaub’s thesis, Wilson writes, “We were very naïve about this.”


6. Karlinsky, 8. According to Karlinsky, Russia’s “Provisional Government was doomed by its devotion to fair play, its concern with securing the consent of the governed and its determination to guarantee civil rights and freedom of expression to everyone, including those who were determined to destroy it.” This same liberal ethos, according to Dragunoiu, informs Nabokov’s Lolita, with its exploration of “the competing claims of individual rights,” as enjoyed by Humbert, versus “the social good.”

7. Speak, 175. It is possible Nabokov had Trotsky’s work in mind when he writes of his father’s potential reaction to such portrayals: “With his keen sense of humor he would have been tremendously tickled by the helpless though vicious hash Soviet lexicographers have made of his opinions and achievements in their rare biographical comments on him.”
8. *Speak*, 176. In regards to his father, for instance, Nabokov writes, “History seems to have been anxious of depriving him of a full opportunity to reveal his gifts of statesmanship in a Russian republic of the Western type.”

9. See Foster, Jr., 85; Norman, 22-8. Foster, Jr. has written on Nabokov’s relationship to various modernist movements (European, Russian, American), even though Nabokov mocked notions of literary movements and “isms” along with the idea that he was part of one. He was also dismissive towards his contemporaries in modern prose, like Faulkner and Mann, and he was highly critical of the Anglo-American high modernists, like Pound and Eliot. Still, as Norman argues, Nabokov aligned himself with a selected European strain of modernism, which runs from “the work of Baudelaire and Flaubert, evolving through Mallarme and Verlaine in poetry, and later Joyce and Proust in fiction.”

10. Dolinin, 197. Without referring to postmodernism or McHale’s distinction, Dolinin argues that ontological issues are a hallmark of Nabokov’s writing: “Crossing a border between two worlds . . . has always been one of Nabokov’s major themes. A recurrent image in his work is that of a leap . . . that transports a hero to a different reality.”

11. *DBDV*, 36-8. Upon reading *To the Finland Station*, Nabokov wrote a letter to Wilson illustrating his views about Marxism: “Without its obscurities and abracadabra, without its pernicious reticences, shamanic incantations and magnetic trash, Marxism is not Marxism.” For him, Marxism ignored “deeper truths” about “individual rulers” with its “vulgar generalisations of class war,” and the *Capital’s* “peculiar mathematical and historical howlers” only provided the basis for “cruel stupidities,” which were rationalized according to “the synthesis of Revolution.”

12. Gaddis, 6. Some historians have placed the start of the Cold War in 1917, although I tend to agree with the Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis, who argues that the “events of 1917-18 created a symbolic basis for conflict between communism and capitalism.”

13. Karlinsky, 53. The Nazis’ war against the Soviet Union provoked complicated reactions among anticommunist émigrés, and Nabokov was no different. Writing to Wilson in July 1941, he states: “For almost 25 years Russians in exile have craved for something—anything—to happen that would destroy the Bolsheviks—for instance, a good bloody war. Now comes this tragic farce. My ardent desire that Russia, in spite of everything, may defeat or rather utterly abolish Germany—so that not a German be left in the world, is putting the cart before the horse, but the horse is so disgusting that I prefer doing so.”
Notes to Pages 33-36

14. Field, 228. Field’s biography recounts a scene between McAfee and Nabokov in which the president asked the lecturer to no longer make remarks about America’s Soviet ally. Nabokov responded by saying, “I refuse. If you want me to lecture only on classical Russian literature, it’s all right. But if I’m going to lecture on modern Russian literature, I’m going to make those remarks.”

15. Before Bend Sinister, Nabokov’s political fiction included an earlier, Kafkaesque dystopia called Invitation to a Beheading (1935); the mock-biography chapter in The Gift (1937), which offers a burlesque of Lenin’s favorite writer, Nikolay Chernyshevsky; as well as various short stories (“Tyrants Destroyed,” “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” “Conversation Piece, 1945”), many of which actually prefigure the fictional and political concerns of Bend Sinister.

16. Gleason, 74. In his book Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War, Gleason writes, “Truman’s rhetoric conferred the ultimate legitimacy on the term totalitarianism in the American political lexicon” and that “the totalitarian idea—that the Communists were the successors of the Nazis and closely connected to them—was the most powerful political idea of the 1940s.”

17. DBDV, 164; SL, 71. In a letter to Wilson in 1945, Nabokov referred to Stalin’s blaming “Trotskyists” for Stalin’s difficulties in postwar Greece. Later, in 1946, Nabokov was already anticipating future hostilities between the United States and Russia, and he declined an invitation to speak to the American Society for the Study of Russian Culture. In his letter to its representative, Nabokov writes, “I do not think that unless we face boldly all the facts, this country [the U.S.] can evolve a sincere and constructive international policy [with the Soviets].”

18. Norman, 79. Norman argues that “Bend Sinister bears the marks of its modernist antecedents to an extent unmatched elsewhere in [Nabokov’s] oeuvre.”

19. Walker, 259. Walker’s essay examines the perceived failures with Nabokov’s text, and he, like many scholars, cites the political background as contributing to its flaws, but he fails to note that trauma could also explain its design. He writes, “Part of the reader’s difficulty is in determining precisely what kind of book Bend Sinister is meant to be. Its date and subject—the plight of Adam Krug, a brilliant philosopher trapped in the web of a burgeoning police state—would seem to cast it as obviously a reflection of recent political history.”

20. Toker, Mystery, 197. Although she does not read Bend Sinister in terms of trauma nor does she explore Nabokov’s partiality for liberal victims, Toker argues that it is “a muted call for attention and empathy.”
Notes to Pages 38-42

21. Karlinsky, 9. Karlinsky persuasively argues that Krug’s attitude towards politics originates from Nabokov’s negative experience with the liberal Tenishev School he attended: “Nabokov encountered the phenomenon of ideological compulsion and conformity masquerading as liberation during his school years.”

22. LOLR, 3-7. As stated, Nabokov was aware of how Russian artists fared in the first few years under Lenin’s reign and then Stalin’s. In his 1958 essay “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers,” he writes how “from the very start the Soviet government was laying the grounds for a primitive, regional, political, police-controlled, utterly conservative and conventional literature . . . literature that was the tool of the state.” By contrast, American writers, he believed, were constrained only by public opinion in terms of subject matter and were not compelled by governmental decree about the nature of their writings nor did they fear oppression, like those under Soviet control. “Authors in America,” he writes, “are never ordered by the government to produce magnificent novels about the joys of free enterprise and of morning prayers.”

23. BS, xiv. In his introduction, Nabokov writes: “The main theme of Bend Sinister, then, is the beating of Krug’s loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to—and it is for the sake of the pages about David and his father that the book was written about and should be read.”

24. Walter, 27. Walter cleverly points out that, with this admission, Nabokov not only reveals Bend Sinister’s historical relevance, but in doing so, he “ironically” also performs the task of a Marxist critic: he reestablishes “the traces of history” surrounding a text.

25. Applebaum, xxiv-xxii; Gaddis, 10. There are historians, like Applebaum, who contend that “totalitarianism” remains a useful and necessary empirical description,” given that certain regimes sought “total control” over their citizens by using similar tools (secret police) and by pursuing similar goals to achieve power (pushing a particular party’s agenda through the state). However, most historians agree that the final goals for communism and Nazism were different. Gaddis writes, “But where Stalin looked toward an eventual world proletarian revolution, Hitler sought immediate racial purification . . . [and] never placed the security of his state or even himself above the task of achieving . . . his goals of Aryan supremacy and Jewish annihilation.”

26. SL, 494-5. Nabokov’s attitude towards anticommunist propaganda did not diminish over time. Twenty-four years after applying to the VOA, Nabokov had Véra write a letter to America, a Jesuit magazine that requested an interview with the author. The request was declined with regrets, which also extended to the magazine’s “neutral apolitical character.” Véra closed the letter with: “What is needed, [Nabokov] thinks, is vigorous political propaganda.”
Notes to Pages 42-44

27. Schiff, 130n; Karlinsky, 106. In a note, Schiff writes, “The rumor around the VOA office was that the personnel office had intended to offer the post to Vladimir and hired the wrong Nabokov. The FBI could not keep the two Russians straight. Nicolas’s photos ran even with Vladimir’s obituary.”

28. BS, vii-viii. Certainly the similarities between Paduk’s philosophy and that of their communist opponents were not lost on the editors of the 1964 *Time-Life* edition of *Bend Sinister*. For example, as if to please the devout anticommunism of both Nabokov and their publisher Henry Luce, the editors inform readers that not only has Nabokov “been at war with totalitarians virtually all his life,” but they also point out that his fictional tyranny’s ideology shares “that fatal affinity for involved and labored nonsense that has characterized so much Soviet philosophy.”

29. Rampton, 43. Booker and Norman cites the novel’s condemnation of pop culture (movies, comics) as an indictment of American mass culture, but Nabokov’s critique in this aspect is rooted more in taste and ethics than politics. As Rampton argues, “The tyranny is Fascist or Communist, but the vulgarity is American,” which, of course, leads to another historical problem for Nabokov: “vulgar Americans” were actually “the ones who fought totalitarianism” in WWII.

30. Clancy, 93; Toker, “Who” 84. In her study *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, Clancy argues that the author’s dystopian works are more closely aligned with the Soviet regime rather than the Nazis. Toker also believes that Nabokov’s dystopian works reflect “certain specifically Soviet realities.” With *Bend Sinister*, for instance, she notes parallels in how “the regime periodically eliminates its own henchmen, starts an assault on a prominent personality by systematic arrests in his entourage, exacts a demonstrative support of prominent intellectuals, uses a child as a hostage to make the parent collaborate, throws a political prisoner (symbolically represented by David Krug) into the den of depraved criminal convicts who abuse, torture, and murder him, and proclaims the interchangeability and uselessness of the individual selves.”

31. See Finkel, “Purging the Public Intellectual: The 1922 Expulsions from Soviet Russia,” for more information of modern Russia’s treatment of its *intelligentsia*.

32. Amis, 32; *LOL*, 376. Nabokov was not wrong about Lenin’s establishing a police state. Amis points out that, two months after the October revolution, “the Cheka (or secret police) was in place,” and by 1918, Lenin had already set up concentration camps and was using “psychiatric hospitals as places of detention.” Toker and Norman also posit that Krug’s treatment under Paduk alludes to the fate of the Russian poet Nikolay Gumilyov under Lenin, and in his essay “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Nabokov mentions Gumilyov, whom he says “was put to death by Lenin’s ruffians.”
33. *DBDV*, 210. This lack of background about Paduk’s rise to power was one of the first criticisms Nabokov received regarding *Bend Sinister*. Wilson wrote to him, arguing that Nabokov and, by extension, the reader of this novel has “no idea why or how [Paduk] was able to put himself over, or what his revolution implies. And this makes your picture of such happenings rather unsatisfactory.”

34. Toker, “Who” 83. In addition to the narrator’s complicity, Nabokov’s novel also suggests, rather intriguingly for a dystopia, that the protagonist is somewhat at fault for what Paduk has become and what he has created in this society. Toker, for one, points out how Krug’s bullying of Paduk lasted for over a half a decade and that this action must have affected “the young misfit’s psyche.” Ultimately, she argues that “Krug is not directly responsible for the ambitions of the future tyrant but is part of the soil that has fostered these ambitions.”

35. Barabtarlo, “Pnin,” 606. Without employing the term postmodern, Barabtarlo argues against a modernist reading of *Pnin* as a relativistic battle of differing interpretations. For example, certain incongruities regarding the narrator’s intimate knowledge of Pnin (his childhood memories, etc.) can only be explained if we accept that the entire narration is “the fruit of N.’s creative imagination.” He writes, “Pnin does not seem to admit of any other philosophically cohesive interpretation.”

36. *Pnin*, 14. Besides linking Pnin’s entrance into America during the same year as the institution of the Smith Act in 1940, Nabokov also has Pnin become an American citizen and begin teaching at Waindell during the year that the U.S. became a superpower, in 1945. Furthermore, he dates Pnin’s ability to “handle practically any topic” in English during “the time that Truman entered his second term” in 1949.

37. *Pnin*, 51-52. To read *Pnin*, or any Nabokov novel, in terms of trauma might seem incompatible with the author’s aversion to psychiatry. *Pnin*, in particular, mocks the idea of group therapy, with its goal of eliciting “traumatic episodes floating out of everybody’s childhood like corpses.” However, this line points to how Nabokov’s distaste for Freudian psychiatry usually involved its fixation on childhood/psychosexual development, whereas the kind of trauma I am exploring revolves around historical and personal loss, which occurs in adulthood with Nabokov’s characters.

38. *SL*, 497. Not surprisingly, at the time Nabokov shared Pnin’s and the narrator’s concerns about Soviet expansionism. In a 1972 letter, written on his behalf, Véra explains, “The great mistake was made in the peace-making period [after WWII] when so much power was allowed the Communists, when the Allies surrendered half of Europe to Russian control.”
Notes to Pages 56-64

39. Hiss was convicted in 1949, the Korean War reached its height from 1951-1953, McCarthy gained prominence in 1953, and he steadily lost credibility after 1954. He died in 1957.

40. Barabtarlo, 143. These phrases appear in French, German, and Russian, and I owe the translation of these slogans to Barabtarlo.

41. It is possible Nabokov wanted to steer clear of McCarthyism in *Pnin* because of Mary McCarthy’s use of the same subject in a previous campus novel, *The Groves of Academe* (1952). Nabokov, of course, was friends with McCarthy, who was Wilson’s wife for a time, and he even gave her some advice about her Russian characters after *Groves* was published.

42. *Pnin*, 96. *Pnin’s* Nabokovian narrator, for instance, offers his opinions about aesthetic issues, and when he states that “there is nothing more banal and more bourgeois than paranoia,” he helps to differentiate Nabokov’s work from later postmodernists, like Pynchon and DeLillo.

43. *SO*, 126. Nabokov rather famously cared little for American domestic politics, and he once admitted he could not “tell a Democrat from a Republican.” He also never voted.

44. Schrecker, *Many*, ix-x. Despite the Nabokovs’ fears, the truth is that there were very few Russian spies who were active in America after WWII and throughout the 1950s. Schrecker states that the KGB archives show “that most of the men and women charged with delivering information to the Soviet Union during the 1930s and WWII had indeed done so” and that “[h]owever much espionage damaged American security, it essentially came to an end in 1945.”

45. Schrecker, *Many*, 203. One reason why Nabokov scholars might be bothered by Nabokov’s cooperation with the FBI is that organization’s actual role during McCarthyism. Schrecker writes, “Had observers known in the 1950s what they have learned since the 1970s, when the Freedom of Information Act opened the Bureau’s files, ‘McCarthyism’ would probably be called ‘Hooverism.’ For the FBI was the bureaucratic heart of the McCarthy era,” as it “ran much of the machinery of the political repression, shaping the loyalty programs, criminal prosecutions, and undercover operations.”

46. See Mitgang’s *Dangerous Dossiers: Exposing the Secret War Against America’s Greatest Authors*, which provides a entire chapter on the FBI’s file against Wilson.

47. Saunders, 13. For most of the Cold War, Nicolas Nabokov’s liberal political sentiments about communist Russia mirrored those of his cousin. Saunders
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provides one of Nicolas’s letters that reads: “I could not accept nor espouse the philo-
Communist attitude of so many Western European and American intellectuals. I felt that
they were curiously blind to the realities of Russian Communism and were only reacting
to the fascist tides that were sweeping Europe in the wake of the Depression.” For a
similar note by VN, one should consult Karlnsky, 222.

48. Saunders, 1, 395, 409. Saunders writes that “At its peak, the Congress for
Cultural Freedom had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel,
published over twenty prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned a news and
features service, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded
musicians and artists with prizes and public performances.” She also points out that, by
1964, practically “anybody who was anybody had at least heard rumours connecting the
Congress to the CIA.” Nabokov’s editor, for one, Jason Epstein claimed to know.

49. Barabtarlo, 198. In a note on “the Free Russia Committee,” Barabtarlo
points out that there were “several post-war anti-communist émigré groups” in the U.S.,
of which “the most notable was the Union for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia,
founded in 1949 by Rafail Abrámovich Abramóvich.” He provides no note for the
second “younger, anti-communist organization,” which I suspect to be the Congress for
Cultural Freedom.

50. McCarthy, “Bolt.” The literary origins of “Zembla” harken back to
Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Man,” which is mentioned in Pale Fire. Less mentioned is
O. Henry’s comic story from the early twentieth century called “The Prisoner of
Zembla.” Like Pale Fire, it has a courtly setting and contains the word “Bodkins,”
although the resemblances largely end there. In an early review of Pale Fire, Mary
McCarthy first noted that the geographical Nova Zembla (or “Nova Zemlya” in Russia) is
an island “behind the Iron Curtain” in Northern Russia. Some of the island’s rich history,
both prior to and during the Cold War, will be addressed later in this chapter.

aficionado’s book, far more popular with critics, who enjoy the gamelike attempt to
untangle its complexities, than with general readers.” However, in contrast to McCarthy,
critics and early reviewers, like Dwight McDonald and Simon Raven, were not exactly
impressed with Pale Fire, which, to them, was too indulgent, too ingenious for its own
good, and, in the end, it was “not a novel.”

52. McCarthy, “Bolt”; Boyd 463. As stated, McCarthy noted the geographical
“Zembla,” but as with most postmodern works, she argued that the “real, real story, the
plane of ordinary sanity and common sense, the reader’s presumed plane, cannot be
accepted as final.”
53. Booker, 62. Using McHale’s dictum for postmodernism, Booker also argues that *Pale Fire* “derives its principal energies from a complex entanglement of ontological levels,” but for him, the overall effect is a weakening of utopian energies since any alternative becomes a delusion.

54. Tammi, 575-76. Debates about *Pale Fire*’s narrators and their wide influence occurred soon after the novel’s publication. Page Stegner, in *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1966), posited that Kinbote is actually both narrators. Andrew Field, in *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (1967), countered that Shade is actually the author of the commentary, not Kinbote. Later, D.B. Johnson, in *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (1985), argued, plausibly, that Botkin is the overall narrator. Boyd, though, has gone further than all by positing that Shade’s ghost is influencing Kinbote’s commentary and then, in *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999), that Shade’s daughter, Hazel, is influencing the narrators’ writing.

55. *Pale Fire*, 306; Boyd 456. In Kinbote’s index, in an entry under the name “Botkin, V.,” there is the phrase “American scholar of Russian descent.” Furthermore, Boyd points out that Botkin along with other important coincidences in *Pale Fire* derive from the most personal tragedy of Nabokov’s life: his father’s murder. “V.D. Nabokov’s birthday was July 21, the day of Shade’s murder,” Boyd writes. What’s more, “after V.D. Nabokov died, it was one S.D. Botkin . . . who succeeded him as the acknowledged head of Russian émigré organizations in Berlin.”

56. Boyd, *American Years*, 709. In a footnote, Boyd explains that Nabokov was willing to reveal the true identity of one of his narrators. He writes, “At the end of his 1962 diary, Nabokov drafted some phrases for possible interviews: ‘I wonder if any reader will notice the following details: 1.) that the nasty commentator is not an ex-king and not even Dr. Kinbote, but Prof. Vseslav Botkin, a Russian and a madman.”

57. For examinations of Kinbote’s homosexuality and the Cold War, see Belletto’s chapter, “The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold,” from his *No Chance, Comrade.* See also Steven Bruhm’s “Queer, Queer Vladimir,” *American Imago* 53.4 (1996), 281-306.

58. *Pale Fire*, 167-68. So narcissistic is Kinbote that he even believes that a dash in one of Shade’s variants refers to him. The line “Poor old man Swift, poor —, poor Baudelaire” is interpreted by him “as spelling out the name of an eminent man who happens to be an intimate friend of his.”

59. LaCapra, 6-7. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra actually refers to *Pale Fire* and its use of footnotes. He sees them as being less of an illustration of blurring the lines between fiction and historiography and more as an example of setting
up an enclosed, self-referential fiction. He does not explore how *Pale Fire* itself could be a work of trauma fiction.

60. Pitzer, *Secret*, 408n44. I owe this explanation of the “BIC” acronym to Pitzer.

61. Albert Schweitzer, the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner, broadcasted a series of radio speeches calling for the eradication of nuclear weapons in the years that *Pale Fire* takes place. Still, Nabokov had mocked Schweitzer earlier in a television program called *Close Up* in 1958, following his success with *Lolita*, and he did so again over a decade later in *Ada*, calling him “Dr. Swiss Air of Lumbago.”

62. Lewis, 211. Lewis writes, “At the height of the Cold War, Morrison advocated to campus audiences greater American concessions on atomic energy control, negotiations with the Soviet Union, and an immediate cease fire in Korea.”

63. *SO*, 96. The incongruity behind Pitzer’s suggestion that Kinbote could be a former Social Revolutionary who was imprisoned in a gulag and is now deluding himself into thinking he is a monarch, or monarchist, can be explained by the fact that both political groups opposed the Bolshevists. The liberal Nabokov admitted to having cordial relations with people from both these political factions: “I have friends among intellectual Constitutional Monarchists as well as among intellectual Social Revolutionaries.”

64. Pitzer, 285. Pitzer also sees Kinbote’s past as part of a continuum of Nabokov novels (*Bend Sinister, Pnin, Despair, The Gift*) that deal with characters who have been affected by either concentration camps or Russia’s gulags. She writes, “There is hardly a novel in Nabokov’s mature repertoire that does not have a major character shattered by his own imprisonment or haunted memories of those who perished in the camps.”

65. Boyd, 463. While trying to dictate the indeterminate ambiguity behind Kinbote’s fantasy, it is amusing to think that Nabokov’s wife Vera also revealed Kinbote/Botkin as “Nikto”: “Nobody knows, nobody should know—even Kinbote hardly knows—if Zembla really exists.”

CHAPTER TWO: “COURTING CHAOS”: THOMAS PYNCHON’S ANARCHIST POLITICS and the COLD WAR

2. McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 165. McClure argues that *V.* shows “a political style that verges on anarchism in its distrust of all organized movements,” but he downplays the Cold War aspects of the novel to trace the persistence of imperialism. Furthermore, he specifically identifies Pynchon’s proto-anarchism in tonal or thematic traits—that is, it is a political ethos “that values eccentricity and variety” and “that tempers its own seriousness with moments of carnivalesque mockery and self-mockery.” By contrast, I locate it in relation to Cold War narratives and genres as well as to political and historical issues related to the Cold War era.

3. Sklar, 92. In his essay “An Anarchist Miracle: The Novels of Thomas Pynchon,” Robert Sklar points out that a Freudian explication “would serve the book quite comfortably,” even “though Pynchon has dropped his broadest hints in the service of a historico-philosophical interpretation.”

4. Dugdale, 115. In *Allusive Parables of Power*, John Dugdale argues that Pynchon’s novel takes its inspiration from other writings by Freud to explain Pynchon’s handling of paranoia, “namely the case history of Schreber (1911), *Totem and Taboo* (1912-3), and *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914); and that the characterization of Stencil the conspiracy-theorist is influenced by the figure of Schreber.”

5. Coincidentally, Mark Penberthy’s cover illustration on the 1990 Harper Perennial edition of Pynchon’s *V.* presents a picture of a woman in antiquated dress, and while she is not walking, she is hitching up her skirt and turning her face in profile like the original Gradiva bas-relief.

6. Hutcheon, *Politics*, 68. In relation to *V.*, Hutcheon mentions “the recognizable historical context of the Cold War years and their paranoia,” but she fails to delve much further into these issues in the novel nor does she link this period to her theories about postmodernism or metanarratives.

7. Olderman, 136. One historical reason as to why Pynchon would parody the “communist-plot” genre is that it was weakening in America as its most public practitioner was falling in disrepute. Senator McCarthy’s censure by Congress occurred in 1954, and as Raymond Olderman points out, the “McCarthy hearings closed only shortly before the opening of” Pynchon’s *V.* It is also possible that given the novel’s contemporary setting of 1956 that Pynchon wanted to reflect how communism was flagging, as shown by Khrushchev’s speech that year that denounced Stalin. The same could not be said, however, for the FBI’s pursuit of communists and other political “subversives,” especially since Hoover would begin COINTELPRO during the year that *V.* is set.

8. What examples there are about communism include a Russian expatriate in Paris in 1913, which I will later examine, and in the Cold War context, Pynchon has
characters worry over the global ramifications of the 1956 revolutions in Hungary and Poland.

9. Although “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” was published in November 1964, in *Harper’s Magazine*, Hofstadter’s essay was first presented as a lecture at Oxford University in November 1963, the same year that *V.* was published. In *Lot 49*, Pynchon would also later mock the then-current political inspiration for Hofstadter’s essay: Barry Goldwater supporters and other paranoid right-wingers. In regards to readings of *V.* through Hofstadter, Dugdale, like Celmer, compares Stencil’s narrative to “the paranoid style,” but unlike Celmer, he does not read it as a parody (117).

10. McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, 157, 165. McClure rightfully argues, “One of *V.*’s many achievements . . . is to challenge the propaganda that marginalizes colonial history and colonial peoples.” Pynchon does this by depicting “a world inhabited by morally complex beings and communities and threatened by drives at work in First, Second, and Third Worlds alike.” Unfortunately, with *V.*, McClure doesn’t point out that spy fiction, like other Western genres, could also marginalize colonial subjects with its emphasis on Western protagonists and political concerns.


12. Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 146-7. One obvious disconnect between the U.S. government’s public statements and its private strategies was that in the months leading up to the Suez Crisis, one of the CIA’s members (Frank Wisner) made plans with a British intelligence officer (Sir Patrick Dean) to topple Nasser’s rule. Thus, instead of using “lethal force” against Nasser, the CIA “favored a long, slow campaign of subversion against Egypt.”

13. Tal, 12. In his introduction to *The 1956 War*, Tal points out that Britain was “critically dependent on Middle Eastern oil” and thus considered it “vital” to control the Suez Canal.

14. Herman, 26. Although Pynchon’s *V.* addresses a type of submerged racism in colonized regions—and deals with the more overt kind in the Southwest Africa chapter—his novel makes fewer references to it in the Cold War era. According to Herman, Pynchon told his editor “that [writing a protest novel] ‘was the furthest thing from [his] mind,’ and so made many cuts” to passages with McClintic Sphere, an African-American character.

15. Belletto, 45-7. Belletto also explores the Anthroresearch facility, but he ties it to “a totalitarian ideology that resulted in genocide.” Furthermore, his overall
argument about V. is informed by his understanding that “[d]uring the Cold War, there was an insistent and recurrent cultural need for Americans to tell themselves that accident was manageable because of the overwhelming psychic weight of a possible accidental nuclear exchange.” My reading of V. argues otherwise—that the “psychic weight” of a possible nuclear attack is far from manageable, in that it leads to submission or a need to render one’s self as inanimate or insensate.

16. Slade, 36. Slade argues, “Western civilization, as Pynchon sees it, is caught in a dying fall. Randomly dispersed natural energies, creeping inanimateness, rampant colonialism and racism, expiring romanticism, perverted sexuality, degenerate politics, and holocaustic wars have turned the Western world in a wasteland.” However, this provokes the reader to ask why Pynchon would lament its decline, especially since he only recounts its inhumane history, and one wonders if he believes that Western civilization is worth saving. The best explanation for Pynchon’s attitude about it in V., I believe, can be found in his reading of Orwell, who wrote in his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale,” “To accept civilization as it is practically means accepting decay. It has ceased to be a strenuous attitude and become a passive attitude—even ‘decadent,’ if that word means anything” (219).

17. According to Alteras, “an atmosphere of doom—a fear that the world was teetering on the brink of disaster” was even present at the deliberations at the United Nations, where diplomats had to address both the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Revolution in late 1956.

18. In Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History, Cowart argues that at some point the reader of Pynchon’s novel “realizes that in fact V. is not present for the important violence of the century.” After all, as he notes, “she puts in no appearance at Passchendaele or the killing fields of the Spanish Civil War—not does she gravitate to Gallipoli, the Somme, the Battle of Britain, Dresden, the Ardennes, or Hiroshima” (51).

19. Slade, 35. This emphasis on ambivalence perhaps links back to Pynchon’s use of Robert Graves’s The White Goddess, a figure that, according to Slade, “is an ambivalent deity, at once creative and destructive, loving and cruel, beneficent and implacable.”

20. Pynchon, “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” 41. Pynchon writes, “By 1945, the factory system—which, more than any piece of machinery, was the real and major result of the Industrial Revolution—had been extended to include the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps, such as Auschwitz.”

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22. Joll, 80. Since it was published before Lot 49 and its subject matter is one that interests Pynchon, it seems likely that he was familiar with it, especially when Pynchon’s novel uses Joll’s points, like the anarchist’s emphasis on withdrawal, as well as minor details, like the reception the Swiss watchmakers gave to Bakunin, which in Lot 49 becomes the “watchmakers of the Jura, preparing for the coming of M. Bakunin” (173).

23. See Nicholson and Stevenson’s “Words You Never Wanted to Hear”: Fiction, History, and Narratology in The Crying of Lot 49” for an early reading of the novel through anarchism. Instead of examining Lot 49 through the Cold War, they argue the title refers to anarchist refugees who came to America in 1849, and that anarchism ties in with Pynchon’s thematic concerns regarding entropy and disorder, which the novel lauds over ahistorical, closed readings.

24. See Lawrence’s “To Cry from Within or Without? Pynchon and the Modern–Postmodern Divide” for a more in-depth analysis of McHale’s initial problematic categorizing of Lot 49.

25. Davis, 38; Chandler, Big Sleep, 10. Davis makes an argument similar to Tani’s about the bourgeois position of the hardboiled detective, when he writes that Chandler’s Marlowe “symbolized the small businessman locked in struggle with gangsters, corrupt police and the parasitic rich (who were usually his employers).” Beyond symbolism, though, Chandler makes explicit Marlowe’s middle-class status when Marlowe informs a client that he “went to college.”

26. Tani xi; Chandler, “Simple,” 18. According to Tani, the private eye figure embodied French existentialism for many post-WWII readers, in that he was an incorruptible figure, following his own personal code in an environment without clear values. However, Chandler’s conception of Marlowe is basically an updated knight-errant figure. In his essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” Chandler writes that his ideal detective “hero” is a “man of honor” on an “adventure in search of a hidden truth.” He’s the Galahad of Los Angeles.

27. Tani, 34; Pearlman, 22. Tani contends that “the second expression emerges in the highbrow literary detective fiction of Borges, of Nabokov, of the nouveau roman,” and he cites Nabokov’s The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941) and Borges’s “The Death and the Compass” (1942) as early examples of anti-detective fiction. It’s probable both influenced Pynchon, especially Borges. In an article about his time with Pynchon in the mid-1960s, Pearlman states that Pynchon told him “he had written The Crying of Lot 49 under the influence of Borges.”

28. See Macleod’s “Playgrounds of Detection: The Californian Private Eye in Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 and Inherent Vice” for a detailed study on
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Pynchon’s use of the detective genre. See McClintock’s “The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State of California in Pynchon’s Fiction” for a comparative analysis of Pynchon’s attitudes towards California real estate. In contrast to my study, neither essay examines Pynchon’s politics nor does either historicize their topics very deeply in relation to the Cold War.

29. Jameson, “Postmodern,” 20; Davis, 17-18. It’s unclear, given his familiarity with Chandler and his presentation of a decentered Los Angeles, as to why Jameson believes that the detective genre could not serve as an example of cognitive mapping, unless he feels that an updated version of it would simply be pastiche, camp, or something in the “nostalgia mode,” which is how he reads Lawrence Kasdan’s contemporary film noir Body Heat (1981). Davis, on the other hand, argues that L.A. noir, both film and literature, “has been fertile soil for some of the most acute critiques of the culture of late capitalism.”

30. Jarvis, 64-5; Heise 200. Jarvis believes that Oedipa, the suburban housewife, eventually comes to an “historical and political consciousness”; in his phrase, she “undergoes a disembourgeoisment.” Heise, on the other hand, counters that any social insight Oedipa gains will never truly change “her middle-class worldview.”

31. Shoop, 72-3; Whitfield, 75. During the postwar period, California received about a quarter of the nation’s government contracts. Historian Stephen J. Whitfield states that military spending made up “59 percent of all jobs in the Los Angeles area.” As Shoop points out, the defense industry, then, “was the lifeblood of [Southern California’s] regional economy.”

32. Dugdale, 146. Dugdale notices that since San Narciso’s biggest employer is Yoyodyne and Yoyodyne is dependent on government funding, then the city is dependent “on the continuation of Cold War paranoia,” in the form of weapons and missiles. It is appropriate, then, that Oedipa’s paranoia surrounding the Trystero starts in San Narciso, particularly when she is with Yoyodyne employees at a bar called the “The Scope,” a name that denotes her limited or expanded vision.

33. Gauman 53; Jackson 249; Hock 208. Based on his experiences in WWII and his knowledge about bombing patterns, Eisenhower made industrial dispersal the official American policy so that industrial centers would not be wiped out. For similar reasons, he signed the Interstate Highway Act, which would help in case of evacuation. Hock points out that Eisenhower’s inspiration for highway building also originated in WWII: from his travels on the autobahn.

34. Pierpaoli, 185. The effects of dispersal, however, cannot truly be blamed on the government. Pierpaoli argues that, even with the government’s policy, industrialists usually made up their own minds about whether to relocate. He writes how
decentralization standards were based on “pragmatic business concerns,” like “access to transportation networks; tax structures and the business climate of a locality; and of course, the willingness of local officials to provide special incentives to attract new industry.” As mentioned previously, Pynchon lays out how Pierce and San Narcisco are able to attract the aerospace division of Yoyodyne for these exact reasons.

35. Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963*; Hollander, “Pynchon’s Politics,” 11. Starr’s historical study mentions the protest groups that formed against highway expansion in California, particularly in San Francisco, where residents were worried about the impact it would have on local neighborhoods. It is possible Pynchon was familiar with these groups at the time. Still, even if he wasn’t, he might have developed an interest in this subject from his father. As Hollander points out in his essay, Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Sr. served for a number of years as “Superintendent of Highways for the Town of Oyster Bay, Long Island until . . . 1962.”

36. Mohl, 1; *Inherent Vice*, 17. In his California novels and in his essay on Watts, Pynchon explores how the state’s poor will find themselves the victims of future “progress,” at least as it pertains to real estate and highway construction, which was historically the case. In his study, “The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing, and the Freeway Revolt,” Mohl examines how the interstate system’s freeways broke through urban areas and ended up “destroy[ing] low-income and black neighborhoods.” Pynchon focuses on the racial component more in his essay on Watts, which I will address later, and in *Inherent Vice*, where the narrator refers to the “[L]ong, sad history of L.A. land use . . . Mexican families bounced out of Chavez Ravine to build Dodger Stadium. American Indians swept out of Bunker Hill for the Music Center.”

37. Many scholars place *Lot 49*’s setting as 1964, and there is some textual evidence to support it. However, there are also examples that place it in 1965. For one, Oedipa breaks a mirror and says it will bring her seven years bad luck or until she’s thirty-five, which means the heroine is twenty-eight, the same age as Pynchon at the time (41). Secondly, in a detail about the bones of soldiers who fought in WWII, Metzger says that Oedipa “wants to right wrongs, 20 years after it’s all over” (76). Finally, Oedipa sees signs at Berkeley for the Vietnam Day Committee, which didn’t form till the spring of 1965. It is possible, though, Pynchon didn’t settle on an exact year.

38. Grant, *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*, 96. Grant states that these names reference Eisenhower’s secretary of defense (James Forrestal), his secretary of state (John Foster Dulles), and of course, McCarthy. Elsewhere in *Lot 49*, Pynchon has a character note that Senator McCarthy “had achieved a certain ascendancy over the rich cretini,” or cretins, a line that, again, links American anti-communist politics with wealthy business interests (62-3).
39. Samuel Thomas. *Pynchon and the Political*, 13-14. In contrast to my project, Thomas makes clear that his study does not involve presenting “an Anarchist version of Pynchon” nor does he examine Pynchon “in generic terms by invoking some entity called the ‘modern political novel.’” Finally, Thomas does not compare Pynchon to “recent American writing like DeLillo,” and he largely situates Pynchon’s politics in response to Adorno’s ideas about the post-war environment and in terms of 1960s political strategies.

40. *Lot 49*, 175. One possible exception would be the Frankfurt Assembly of 1848, which was comprised mostly of German liberals. However, Pynchon’s text states that the Trystero were “only peripherally engaged” and that the assembly was “ill-fated.”

41. See Shoop, “*Thomas Pynchon, Postmodernism, and the Rise of the New Right in CA*” for an extended analysis on how *Lot 49* treats or anticipates California’s conservative movement, Reagan’s rise to power, and postmodern politics. Shoop notes how *Lot 49* prefigures how direct mailing would be used to spur the burgeoning conservative phenomenon: “Pynchon imagines an alternative mail system that would link all of the *disinherited* into a shared legacy of America at the very moment when the federal postal system has become the New Right’s means to consolidate and defend the status of the *entitled*” (71).

42. Rosenfeld, 263. In *Subversives: The FBI’s War on Student Radicals, and Reagan’s Rise to Power*, Rosenfeld states that the left-leaning students at Berkeley, especially from 1964 to 1965, were united in their opposition to the liberal consensus, and what led to this unification was the shared opposition to the Vietnam War. Referring to the Vietnam Day Committee protests, which occurred at Berkeley in the summer of 1965, he writes, “The speakers [at the VDC] had no one point of view, but all displayed deep disillusionment with Democrats who had bought into Cold War politics, appeased Joseph McCarthy, acted slowly on civil rights, and now, overwhelmingly supported the war.”

43. Rosenfeld, 366. Pynchon’s characterization of the VDC as anarchistic is not that far off. Formed by such figures as Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, some of the VDC’s objectives included a need for “militant action” and the need to “achieve national and international solidarity.” Furthermore, according to Rosenfeld, “the VDC was nonideological, nonexclusionary, and operated to an extraordinary degree on the basis of participatory democracy.”

44. Perlstein, 16. In point of fact, even liberals, like Robert F. Kennedy, were aware of the fraught history involving African-Americans and U.S. law. After the Watts riots, he stated: “There is no point in telling Negroes to obey the law. To many Negroes the law is the enemy.”
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45. GR, 272. Pynchon’s psychologists are so wedded to their discipline and its methodology that one of them rationalizes their actions, even if the evidence proves that Slothrop’s map sites are actually products of Slothrop’s own imagination. Pynchon writes, “And what if many—even if most—of the Slothropian stars are proved, some distant day, to refer to sexual fantasies instead of real events? This would hardly invalidate our approach, any more than it did young Sigmund Freud’s back there in old Vienna, facing a similar violation of probability—all those Papi-has-raped-me stories, which might have been lies evidentially, but were certainly the truth clinically.”

46. McConnell, 162. In a useful essay that delineates the differences between Pynchon and Foucault, McConnell argues, in contrast to my argument, that Pynchon actually suggests that the subject “carries within him/her self the propensity for violence later exploited and encouraged by the parental and wider social sphere.” In other words, for Pynchon, the urge to cruelty is innate.

47. One wonders what Pynchon and other left-leaning radicals from the sixties might have made of the historical irony that Nixon’s downfall began with the leaking of his own director of the FBI, Mark Felt, otherwise known as “Deep Throat.”

CHAPTER THREE: LONERS and LUNATICS: DON DeLILLO’S LIBERTARIAN POLITICS and the COLD WAR

1. Parrish, "Pynchon and DeLillo," 85-6. In an essay that compares DeLillo’s work to Pynchon’s in terms of their interests in the effects of technology, Parrish writes, “That [DeLillo’s] fiction is mostly unmarked by a sense of history that precedes the dawn of the Cold War era is a logical consequence of DeLillo’s interest in the material and narrative effects of technology.”

2. See "The Artist Naked in a Cage," The New Yorker 26 May 1997: 6-7; "Rushdie Novel Stirs Passions East and West; Answer to the Cardinal," The New York Times 26 Feb. 1989: 2. There have been instances in which DeLillo has made public political stances or speeches, and they are usually done so in defense of writers who have been imprisoned (Wei Jingsheng) or threatened by totalitarian regimes (Rushdie).

3. DeLillo’s “apolitical” stance, however, has not prevented some critics and scholars from interpreting his politics as everything from "anti-American" leftist (Bawer, Will), to anti-radical (Kucich, Velcic), to paradoxical (Cornier Michael). The most familiar political readings of DeLillo came from conservative reviewers Bawer and Will in the 1980s. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Kucich and Velcic argue that DeLillo is, in fact, dismissive of left-leaning characters that show political commitments. Their arguments are the most relevant to my own here, and I tend to agree with many of their points, although they fail to thoroughly tie in DeLillo’s political issues to the Cold War.
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4. DeCurtis, 56; Passaro 77-78. This Cold War event, as DeLillo admits, has influenced his writing. When Anthony DeCurtis asked DeLillo about this event and its relation to his literary output, DeLillo acknowledged that “a lot of tendencies” in his earlier novels “seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination.” Furthermore, he later affirmed to Vince Passaro: “I don’t think my books could have been written in the world that existed before the Kennedy assassination . . . It’s conceivable that this made me the writer I am.”

5. With his customary reluctance to label anything postmodern, DeLillo has likened the assassination to a work of modernism. He has argued that after this event, Americans entered a “world totally modern in the way it shades into the century’s ‘emptiest’ literature . . . the literature of estrangement and silence” (“American” 22). Intriguing as this interpretation is, reading the modern era as continuous from, say, the assassinations of Archduke Ferdinand to President Kennedy and beyond, the snag lies in the fact that DeLillo himself posits a shift—that is, unless DeLillo understands the period prior to this event as one encompassing realism.

6. Cowart, 71. Cowart deduces that “the story’s present would seem to be 1970,” since Bell is twenty-eight, and he was “apparently born in 1942.”

7. Cowart, 76. Cowart also approves of DeLillo’s lack of political engagement with America’s Cold War political leaders (“Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara or Richard Nixon and Melvin Laird”), who had already been caricatured enough by 1971, the time of the novel’s publication.

8. My application of Foucault with these novels is not novel. Mark Osteen has interpreted Running Dog using Foucault, but few DeLillo scholars have examined both novels with Debord as well or with DeLillo’s political pessimism in terms of the Cold War.

9. Players, 105. In one passage in Players, the terrorist Kinnear makes the connection regarding fantasies between the American government and its citizens. He states that the government had “too many fantasies. Right. But they were our fantasies, weren’t they ultimately?”

10. LeClair, 5; Begley, 96. In an early interview with LeClair, DeLillo argues that “People whose lives are not clearly shaped or marked off may feel a deep need for rules of some kind. People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control in their lives.” Later, in an interview with Begley, he explains that Players is about “Structure as something people need in their lives.”
Notes to Pages 196-202

11. LeClair, 178; Hoberek, 115. Most critics agree that DeLillo is less concerned with genre reworking in *The Names*, yet they disagree as to what kind of genre this novel fits into. LeClair argues that it is a “Jamesian version of the international novel,” Andrew Hoborek believes it is “a compromise between . . . a fully individualized, modernist style . . . and borrowings from the spy novel,” while others simply see it as an “intrigue” (Johnston) or a historical work (Longmuir).

12. *The Names*, 34. Until *Libra* and *Underworld*, Axton is the rare DeLillo protagonist that is interested in politics and concerned with Cold War policies, with one glaring exception that I will explore here. Still, his job, which consists of “Policy updates,” requires him to be attentive to global politics. He explains: “I review the political and economic situation of the country in question. We have a complex grading system. Prison statistics weighed against the number of foreign workers. How many young males unemployed. Have the generals’ salaries doubled recently. What happens to dissidents . . . Together we analyze the figures in the light of recent events. What seems likely? Collapse, overthrow, nationalization? Maybe a balance of payments problem, maybe bodies hurled into ditches. Whatever engenders an investment.”

13. Longmuir, 1. Longmuir writes how “from its first publication . . . critics have rendered the novel a metaphysical meditation on language, ignoring the political ramifications and historical circumstances of the text.” However, Peter Boxall has focused on history in his chapter on *The Names*, as has John McClure in his chapter on DeLillo.

14. Longmuir, 9. Longmuir is aware that “DeLillo sets the novel in ‘strategically located’ Greece, the site of covert American action for years,” but she does not explore America’s Cold War history with Greece beyond this statement.

15. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 65. In his study of the U.S.’s containment policy, Cold War historian Gaddis points out that this shift was not coincidental: “In general, the Truman administration can be said to have implemented the first stage of Kennan’s strategy with remarkable fidelity.”

16. Weiner, 383. In fact, Weiner’s history of the CIA, much of it culled from interviews and oral histories, presents how “angry” the then-director Richard Helms was when the coup occurred. Apparently, the agency knew of some Greek generals’ plan to stage a coup—but not the colonels’ plans.

17. *The Names*, 58. A Greek character, Eliades, offers his theories about Americans’ ignorance about foreign countries: “I think it’s only in a crisis that Americans see other people. It has to be an American crisis, of course. If two countries fight that do not supply the Americans with some precious commodity, then the education of the public does not take place. But when the dictator falls, when the oil is threatened, then
you turn on the television and they tell you where the country is, what the language is, how to pronounce the names of the leaders, what the religion is all about . . . The whole world takes an interest in this curious way Americans educate themselves. TV. Look, this is Iran, this is Iraq.”

18. *The Names*, 184. Oddly enough, Axton opposed and marched against the Vietnam War, thereby making him rather unique in DeLillo’s oeuvre. He states, “It was our favorite war, your mother’s and mine. We were both against it.”

19. *The Names*, 257. It is indicative of DeLillo’s point about Americans’ historical ignorance that in a later scene a British citizen, instead of an American, provides some historical background to another wall slogan: “Greece is risen,” Ann said. “And the date is the date the colonels took power. Sometime in sixty-seven.”

20. Arensberg, 45. Despite what his detractors might think, DeLillo does not dismiss the Warren Commission’s findings as a whitewash. However, he does fault the Commission for its political expediency and lack of thoroughness. He states in an interview with Ann Arensberg: “To my knowledge there was no specific cover-up. [The Warren Commission Report] was an attempt to produce a report for the 1964 elections, so that some uncertainty would disappear . . . But there are areas that should have been investigated that were immediately closed off.”

21. See Parrish, “Lesson”; Michael, “Political”; Carmichael, “Lee”; and Duvall “Power.” These scholars (and others) have explored how *Libra* fits in terms of Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction, and while there are some differences and discrepancies, there are far more obvious similarities, such as the novel’s unofficial history of the assassination; the use of marginal figures, like Oswald; and DeLillo’s self-consciousness about providing a totalizing narrative, as seen with the Branch figure.

22. Carmichael, 207; Lowry, 200. Scholars and writers, from Fredric Jameson to Norman Mailer, have made connections between the Kennedy assassination and postmodernism, along with the assassination’s influence on Americans’ increased suspicion of history. On the first connection, Thomas Carmichael points out that “[i]n the popular and professionalized discourses of contemporary cultural history, the Kennedy assassination is often read as the first postmodern historical event.” On the second one, Malcolm Lowry, in his chapter “Postmoderns and Others: the 1960s and After,” states that following the assassination the “[t]reatment of contemporary history grew more critical,” even in 1960s fiction.

23. Tate, 31. Although he does not link the Bay of Pigs to postmodernism, Tate is one of the few DeLillo scholars to emphasize how important the invasion and its aftermath are to the novel and how they connect to American imperialism. He writes,
“While the Kennedy assassination has been seen as the harbinger of things to come in the ’60s U.S. of A, prelude to an era of shocking violence, through DeLillo we come to see the Bay of Pigs and the many failed plots against Castro as the era’s true preview—the first inkling that the American imperialist monster might not be such hot sh*t after all.”

24. Qtd. in Leebaert, 299. Kennedy did not help himself when he informed the press on April 12, “There will not be, under any conditions, any intervention in Cuba by U.S. Armed Forces.”

25. *The Names*, 317. The CIA conspirators’ unstated belief that they are the true power and guardians of America is not contradicted in DeLillo’s novels. At the end of *The Names*, James Axton states, “If America is the world’s living myth, then the CIA is America’s myth. All the schemes are there in tiers of silence, whole bureaucracies of silence, in conspiracies and doublings and brilliant betrayals. The agency takes on shapes and appearances, embodying whatever we need at a given time to know ourselves or unburden ourselves.” These familiar ideas of DeLillo’s, that the CIA not only possesses untold secrets but also serves as a means to help Americans find a new identity, demonstrate how this agency, despite its numerous failures, has a greater power than any other government entity or figure in his worldview.

26. *Libra*, 54; Leebaert, 301-3; Weiner 209-217. Considering their ties to the government and the CIA, it is strange how wildly off the mark DeLillo’s conspirators are when it comes to Kennedy’s desire to oust Castro—even after the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. One of them remarks, “Kennedy had the chance to get rid of Castro and he ends up guaranteeing the man’s job.” Actually, it was Kennedy who, in 1961, formed the Cuban Group (also known as the Special Group-Augmented), which was a secret program that pursued psychological warfare and sabotage against Castro’s regime, as well as assassination attempts against Castro until 1965. In 1962, Bobby Kennedy declared that Castro’s overthrow was “the top priority” of the administration. Bobby was also placed in charge of the Cuban Group and was reported as being highly motivated and involved regarding operations to assassinate Castro. In short, the Kennedy administration and its secret programs were already carrying out what the conspirators wanted.

27. Leebaert, 303; Weiner, 214. In terms of attacks meant to provoke war with Cuba, the conspirators’ plan is not that far off from actual plans proposed by the White House and the Pentagon. According to Weiner, some of them included “faking a terrorist attack against an American airliner to justify a new invasion” and “blowing up an American ship in Guantánamo Harbor.” Leebaert writes, “*Remember the Maine*’ would pale in comparison.”

28. McClure, 143. According to McClure, DeLillo’s novel “attempts a complex and thorough repudiation of the reigning political romances of the Cold War
era,” indicting both anticommunism and communism. However, as McClure also notes, DeLillo discredits “that other locus of leftist hope in the Cold War era, Castro’s Cuba,” the result of which is that no existing political system is openly endorsed, so revolutionaries are, once again, dismissed.

29. McClure, 141. For McClure, DeLillo’s point on this issue is that capitalism has triumphed over anticommunism—that is, in the age of multinationals there is “no country to serve.” The snag with this argument, though, is that Parmenter sees no conflict of interest with his clandestine work and capitalist pursuits; in his experience he “could not always tell where the Agency left off and the corporations began” (127). In all likelihood, with Parmenter, DeLillo is foreshadowing how global capitalism will overtake anticommunism in the West, a point he also made in The Names. Yet, in the period in which Libra transpires, political beliefs still motivate the bulk of the novel’s characters, most of which are unconnected to multinationals.

30. Weiner, 217-221, 249, 199. In addition to plans to oust and/or assassinate Castro, Kennedy plotted to “subvert the government of Brazil and oust its president, Joao Goulart”; “authorized a coup” against “Papa Doc” Duvalier of Haiti; employed the CIA to depose Cheddi Jagan, prime minister of British Guiana; and gave consent to a coup against President Diem of Vietnam in 1963. In regards to the killing of Rafael Trujillo, the president of the Dominican Republic, Weiner writes, “There were no fingerprints. But the assassination was as close as the CIA had ever come to carrying out a murder at the command of the White House.”

31. DeLillo’s Oswald is right to harbor such suspicions. In Russia, Oswald’s Soviet handler Alek believes “that surveillance be maintained, indefinitely, wherever the boy was sent,” which certainly holds true (167). In America, FBI agents keep tabs on Oswald, as do American citizens. The best example involves William Stuckey of WDSU of New Orleans, who conducts a radio interview with Oswald and is impressed by his knowledge “about the United Fruit Company, the CIA, collectivization, the feudal dictatorship of Nicaragua,” and so on (329). After this interview, though, we are told that Stuckey “sent a copy to the FBI” (329).

32. DeCurtis, 60. DeLillo has repeated this point in other interviews. He told the interviewer DeCurtis: “I think [Oswald’s attempt on Kennedy] was based on elements outside politics, and as someone in the novel says, outside history—things like dreams, coincidences . . . The rage and frustration he had felt for twenty-four years, plus the enormous coincidence that the motorcade would be passing the building where he worked—these are the things that combined to drive Oswald toward attempting to kill the President.”

33. Debord, 29. Debord does not mean to praise Kennedy’s political talents by this phrase. Instead, he argues, “The agent of the spectacle who is put on stage as a star is
the opposite of an individual; he is as clearly the enemy of his own individuality as of others.” In this conception, Kennedy is a passive actor, thrust into the fields of politics and media, a figure that diminishes his self as he emerges in and perpetuates the spectacle. One could argue that a similar trajectory occurs with Oswald, and DeLillo links them further by focusing on their media deaths.

34. Arensberg, 43. DeLillo is aware that Oswald produced a political outcome, if only for the short term, when he writes, “In direct reference to the assassination, he was a man of the left who ended up carrying out the wishes of the right wing.”

35. Oddly enough, the Iranian government still goes overboard in marking events with Khomeini’s image. In 2012 and 2014, for instance, the government presented a larger-than-life cardboard cutout of Khomeini leaving an inflatable aircraft to mark his return from exile in 1979. Iranian citizens, though, mocked this practice on social media. See: http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_world_/2014/02/05/carboard_cutout_of_ayatollah_khomeini_tours_iran.html.

36. DeLillo, “The Image and the Crowd,” 72-3. In this essay, DeLillo clarifies his, admittedly subjective, ideas about how images lead to a diminished individual identity. He explains, “I keep thinking, without too much supporting evidence, that images have something to do with crowds. An image is a crowd in a way, a smear of impressions. Images tend to draw people together, create mass identity.”


40. In fact, DeLillo’s narrative is at its most fragmented in its fifth section, “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry. Fragments in the 1950s and 1960s,” which covers the height of the Cold War and such events as the Cuban Missile Crisis.
41. Bawer, 21. Bruce Bawer, one of DeLillo’s right-wing critics has argued that “DeLillo’s novels are born out of a preoccupation with a single theme: namely, that contemporary American society is the worst enemy that the cause of human individuality and self-realization has ever had.”
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BIOGRAPHY

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