NOSTALGIA AND THE POSTWAR AMERICAN SOCIAL

By

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Chair: Susan Hegeman
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“Nostalgia and the Postwar American Social” studies the Cold War as a culturally dominant narrative in the United States during the 1950s in which nostalgia represents a unique interpretive system that encourages personal investment in social discourse. I am writing about the Cold War because, as Alan Nadel suggests, it provides “a particularly useful example of the power of large cultural narratives to unify, codify, and contain…the personal narratives of its population,” and I argue that understanding nostalgia as the primary rhetorical figure in Cold War discourse reveals the way individuals participate in collective narratives by personalizing tropes these narratives suggest. “Nostalgia and the Postwar American Social” provides a new perspective on American literary culture, its relationship to national narratives, and on the ways national discourses function. This argument encourages readers to situate cultural artifacts in specific moments of social history, explores ways individuals invest in social discourse, and explains how national discourses are articulated.

This project makes its argument by analyzing several different kinds of texts: novels, travel narratives, essays, films, and television commercials by Richard Wright, Patricia Highsmith, Douglas Sirk, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip K. Dick, and Hal Riney. I
position these texts as exemplars of how rhetorics of nostalgia function in personal narratives and social discourse. Nostalgia conjures up a past moment of cohesion and authenticity that prefigures what a perfect future looks like. Ideological narratives of nostalgia always insist that a natural order once existed, and our longing for this past moment of unity and prosperity forestalls our critical investment in the reality of contemporary life, in the actual production of future versions of the social.

The first chapter of this dissertation looks at three works by Richard Wright: The Outsider (1953), Wright’s first novel written as an expatriate, Black Power: A Record of Reaction in a Land of Pathos (1954), reportage of his experiences and observations in a colony on the cusp of being reborn as Ghana, and Pagan Spain (1957), a travel narrative about his visits to Spain in the early 1950s. My discussion of these texts argues that Wright uses The Outsider’s protagonist, the emergence of a postcolonial nation, and postwar Spain to consider the relationship between political systems and individuals, how the past can be figured in national and personal consciousness, and the ways different social discourses portray freedom during the Cold War.

The second chapter discusses Patricia Highsmith’s second novel and examines themes of agency in individuals, material objects, and spaces. The Price of Salt (1952), with its radical suggestion that a romance between two women could have a happy ending, rejects the standards of popular fiction during this period, which stressed unhappy conclusions for unsanctioned relationships. Here, I shift my discussion of nostalgia and social discourse away from social orders and towards the narratives and agency of individuals, and I look at a character who refuses to coordinate her identity with practices informed by a habitus she decides does not resemble an authentic
version of herself. I discuss how nostalgia’s conjurations can be sourced materially in a dialogical process between people, places, and things. I argue that *The Price of Salt* conceives of the past as both a legacy that must be rejected in order to obtain individual agency and a strong influence on the way these characters articulate this new agency.

My chapter on Vladimir Nabokov features his most famous novel, *Lolita* (1955), which was published after he moved to the United States. I consider *Lolita*’s Humbert Humbert a character who exemplifies a life lived nostalgically. Humbert’s nostalgia, like all others, conspires to confuse the reality of lived experience and obscure an awareness of dialectical reason. This chapter discusses Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectal Reason*, situates nostalgia as an anti-dialectical logic, and examines, like most sections of this project, how individual agency manifests itself in social discourse.

Douglas Sirk, another expatriate in America, began his career as a director in Germany, but my fourth chapter considers a film he made in Hollywood after he moved to the United States. *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956) reiterates a popular 1950s trope of alienation in modern society by dramatizing the lives of two couples set adrift from the dreams and passions of their youth. Through nostalgic tropes, *Tomorrow* critiques the imperatives of a new social discourse and dramatizes classic 1950s themes of domesticity, technology, and suburban life. In my analysis of *Tomorrow*, I focus on the form and content of longing, perhaps nostalgia’s most important component. I argue that the Marxian concept of aura reveals how desire only exists as a product of social relations, helps us theorize ways individuals invest in nostalgic comprehensions of the past to the point of rejecting recognitions of our dialectical relationship with the past, and explains the uncanny nature of nostalgia’s spectral haunting.
My last chapter begins with a review of the Cold War that emphasizes its main tropes of fear and security. I then look at Philip K. Dick’s science fiction novel, *Time Out of Joint* (1959). Here, I focus on ways social discourse functions as structuring systems collectively invested in by individuals, and I argue for a dialectical conception of the agency of individuals. Finally, I consider a couple of short commercials by Hal Riney, authored for Ronald Reagan’s reelection bid in 1984. I use these narratives to extend my argument about the relations between nostalgia, individuals, and social discourse during the Cold War, and I assert that a form of social discourse forged in the 1950s still resonated in American culture thirty years later. My argument infers that this resonance continues in our own social discourse today and, more importantly, that recognizing nostalgic tropes in political and social ideologies helps us become more conscious of the world we live in, a consciousness which is the ultimate subject of “Nostalgia and the Postwar American Social.”
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 1938, about ten years after he had moved north to Chicago, Richard Wright published a collection of short stories about racism in the South that won him national acclaim and a Guggenheim Fellowship. *Uncle Tom’s Children* referenced the most popular American novel of the previous century while attempting to present a new, sharper critique of white supremacy in America. These stories and the collection’s title acknowledge inheritance, as America’s canonical literary heritage and Wright’s own experiences growing up in Mississippi informed his politics as a writer and a citizen in his new home among communists and black community activists. Although his stories distinguished themselves from their titular namesake by portraying compromised heroes, dramatizing unsentimental relationships, and esteeming secular, socialist politics, Wright still considered his fiction a failure. “I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about,” Wright later wrote in a sarcastic nod to critiques of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s own political sentiments (“How Bigger Was Born” 454).

*Native Son*, the content and title of which also acknowledged inheritance, was published two years later and presented something very different: Bigger, a young black man who becomes a rigorously unsympathetic rapist and murderer tracked through Chicago’s segregated landscape. The novel is conventionally read as an alarm to American society, a suggestion encouraged in the novel’s onomatopoeic opening (“Brrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinng!”) and the penultimate scene of Bigger’s trial, where Max, the lawyer provided to Bigger by the Communist Party’s Chicago section, begins his defense by connecting the novel’s events with “‘the destiny of an entire nation’” (382).
This long polemic evokes a corpse who returns from the dead and haunts the living, a simultaneously soporific and terrifying haunting that can only be exorcised by empathy: “the mere act of understanding Bigger Thomas will be … an unveiling of the unconscious ritual of death in which we, like sleep-walkers, have participated so dreamlike and thoughtlessly” (383). The structural imperatives of white supremacy created the specter of Bigger, and contained in this corpse are the means of an exorcism and an opportunity for Americans to awaken from their nightmare and recognize that their gothic invention veils an even darker reality. Instead, the community rallies with torches and pitchforks:

“Obsessed with guilt, we have sought to thrust a corpse from before our eyes. We have marked off a little plot of ground and buried it. […] But the corpse returns and raids our homes! We find our daughters murdered and burnt! And we say, ‘Kill! Kill!’ But your honor, I say: ‘Stop! Let us look at what we are doing!’ For the corpse is not dead! It still lives!” (392)

Max attributes Bigger’s violence to social systems, but he extends a strain theory defense by insisting that the crimes Bigger committed “‘made him free, gave him the possibility of choice’” and were ultimately “‘an act of creation!’” (396, 399). Bigger’s crimes animated or resuscitated a corpse condemned to death at birth; he was impelled towards his crimes by social factors and these crimes provided Bigger with liberating agency. The corpse becomes monstrously alive, haunts the authors of his sentence, and is condemned again. Max insists that executing Bigger functions as a kind of reaction formation, manifesting and perpetuating the very thing Bigger’s judges are so ostentatiously condemning. The fears of Chicago’s white community, premised on white supremacy and articulated in social systems, are materialized in these systems’ consequences, which reveal the fears that presaged them. While attempts to bury corpses like Bigger always fail, they are also always productive. These attempts
imagine an original moment before fear, a moment that, regardless of its ontological validity, suggests an alternative social order. *Native Son* does function as an alarm: a clarion signal to read events as narratives that describe functions of social discourse and announce current social formations as neither natural nor necessarily the foundations of the future.

Wright’s alarm/thesis in *Native Son* inspired me to try to find a singular way to talk about both the narratives of cultural artifacts themselves and what they say about history and society. Towards that end, this project reads aspects of social discourse as nostalgic, considers nostalgia as a unique interpretive system that encourages personal investment in social discourse, and focuses on the early years of the Cold War and some of the cultural artifacts produced during these years. I have five principal aims: (1) to analyze a period of American social discourse by situating the Cold War as the structural imperative of a “cultural dominant” in the United States from the late 1940s through the 1950s; (2) to establish nostalgia as a theoretical formation that facilitates a unique and productive investigation of social discourse; (3) to confirm the intrinsically reactionary character of the logic of nostalgia as a deterrent of dialectical comprehensions of history; (4) to explain the role of individual agency in the social; and (5) to analyze the narratives of six individuals (Richard Wright, Patricia Highsmith, Vladimir Nabokov, Douglas Sirk, Philip K. Dick, and Hal Riney) and position their work, which includes novels, travel narratives, films, and television commercials, as exemplars of how nostalgia functions in social discourse.

Cultural dominants simultaneously suggest both a distinct historical moment and a trope that makes this moment comprehensible, which in turn allow us to identify and
analyze elements of hegemony. Ideally, cultural dominants prompt a recognition of relationships between events and an analysis of unities that constitute social systems. Cultural dominants conceptualize human society as synchronic and diachronic unities of a totality, a representation that goes far in addressing Marx’s two central concerns, described here by Hayden White: “How can man be both immediately determined and potentially free; how can he be both severed and fragmented in his becoming, yet whole and one in his being?” (278, 285). More generally, cultural dominants address two central concerns of historiography: How can events simultaneously be as distinct as the word “event” implies and be both the cause and product of other events? How can historical moments contain radically different events and simultaneously contain characteristics that encourage a singular figuration? Additionally, I employ the concept of cultural dominants because, as this concept neatly allows the tertiary application of Marxism, narrative theory, and the consideration of historical events in analyses of cultural productions, this concept allows me to avoid suggesting that the congruous elements of the narratives I discuss are merely the result of a circumstantial style or fashion.

I think the most important objection to formulating a cultural dominant would be that such a concept necessitates the totalizing features it suggests. Objections to totalities reflect anxieties about epistemological certainties, the violence of silence done to things outside idiosyncratic conceptions of a totality, and quixotic quests for transcendental signifiers or comprehensive conclusions. The tragedies of the twentieth century alone validate these anxieties. The practice of constructing a cultural dominant that references a totality, however, need not conclude with these consequences.
Rejecting vulgarly essentialist interpretations of a Marxian totality and its idealistic predecessor, Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, Fredric Jameson argues that modes of representation articulated via cultural dominants are primarily the local practices of a historian representing the past via a historical moment with discernable features, origins, and consequences (The Political Unconscious 51).

Totalization, as a method of interpretation, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, “is a developing activity, which cannot cease without the multiplicity reverting to its original statute. This act delineates a practical field which, as the undifferentiated correlative of praxis, is the formal unity of the ensembles which are to be integrated; within this practical field, the activity attempts the most rigorous synthesis of the most differentiated multiplicity” (46). In her discussion of feminist subjectivity, Kathi Weeks suggests that the benefits of totalizing theories outweigh the risks when our concept of totalities “contains a multiplicity of subjectivities and is open to multiple sites of contestation and possibilities for rupture” (73). Cultural dominants suggest a social totality that includes rather than dismisses a multitude of elements by focusing on the relations of these elements, which are constantly in a state of becoming whole. Rather than focusing on individual social entities, cultural dominants help us emphasize a different conception of the social by positing a ground that functions as a totality, encouraging us to articulate and privilege relations between various phenomena for purposes of critique. In this respect, a Marxian totality functions as the exact opposite of the systemic positivism and differentiation of social relations employed by modes of capital. Most importantly, we remain conscious of the social and historical context of all phenomena, of the connections between subjects and their communities, by narrating a historical moment
while recognizing our narration as a narrative. My hope is that the central premise of cultural dominants – relations between varieties of historical phenomena can be considered intrinsic and unitary – will allow me to articulate a system of relations between the Cold War and American narratives produced during the Cold War.

I am looking at the 1950s (though my discussion includes texts outside this period) because I think an investigation of the early years of a specific social formation reveals how social discourse in general can be structured. Tradition locates the origin of the Cold War – an ideological struggle between Soviet and American orthodoxies – near the announcement of the Truman Doctrine on 12 March, 1947, and with good cause.² Our national narratives were dominated by the Cold War since then, and while it can no longer be considered a geopolitical reality after the early 1990s, Cold War signs are still readily employed.³ I agree with Alan Nadel’s claim that the Cold War “is a particularly useful example of the power of large cultural narratives to unify, codify, and contain … the personal narratives of its population” (4). Nadel’s point pertains to my project directly: it highlights the function of cultural dominants to discipline both national discourses and individual subjects, and it suggests that the formulation of the Cold War uniquely facilitates an investigation of what a cultural dominant is and can be.

Discussions about America and the 1950s include a massive variety of research, arguments, perspectives, and minutiae. My contribution to this ongoing conversation suggests that we consider nostalgia as a dominant discursive formation during this period. I argue for the heuristic benefits of privileging tropes of nostalgia in social discourse and for considering these tropes to be formative in the designs of social discourse. I am not asserting that the American social in the early years of the Cold War
was a nostalgic formation, rather, that considering social discourse in the terms of nostalgic formations provides a new perspective on our national narratives and on social discourse itself.

Social discourse during the early years of the Cold War played an important role in supplanting the communitarian ethos of the Popular Front and the New Deal with the commercial ethos of the Consumers’ Republic, a dynamic shift that originated in the national trauma of the Great Depression. Michael Denning argues that “the communisms of the depression” during the era of the Popular Front “had a central, indeed shaping impact on American culture” (The Cultural Front xv, 3). An important part of his argument requires us to conceive of the Popular Front as a historical bloc rather than as an unstable coalition of leftists and liberals who mutually hated fascism. Denning calls this period the “Age of the CIO” for a reason he deems best articulated by C. L. R. James’s description of the Congress of Industrial Organizations:

Against the illusion that the CIO was formed as an instrument of collective bargaining or a means to negotiate about wages, James argued persuasively that “it was the first attempt of a section of the American workers to change the system as they saw it into something which would solve what they considered to be their rights, their interests and their human needs.” (The Cultural Front 461)

The emphasis James places on the way a community conceptualizes labor plays an important role in my project, as does Denning’s central thesis about this period: the production of cultural workers effected a “laboring of American culture” during the Age of the CIO, a process which indelibly injected Marxian rhetoric into American culture (The Cultural Front xvi).

The conclusion of the war precipitated another crisis in American social discourse. The statistics that demonstrate the United States’ economic and martial power after
World War Two are startling: America’s income and production had doubled during the war years and after the war American production accounted for half of the world’s manufactured goods. The nation emerged from the collapse of a world order with all of its economic indicators booming, with its industrial and technological infrastructure intact, with its social and political institutions thriving, and, significantly, with exclusive rights to the atomic bomb. American triumphalism became an important part of national discourse after the war, a part of what C. Wright Mills aptly called “the great American celebration” (quoted in Diggins, 42). While Americans were celebrating their triumph, American political discourse quickly solidified into an orthodoxy that situated radical critique as seditious. As I discuss in my final chapter, a narrative of security appropriated from Roosevelt’s administration and the first Red Scare during President Wilson’s tenure eventually elided the dangers of poverty with the dangers of radical politics, situated communism as antithetical to national security, and collapsed various radical critiques into the specter of communism.

Lizabeth Cohen argues that American society fundamentally changed after World War Two with the inauguration of a social discourse oriented around the ethics of a “Consumers’ Republic” (8). Cohen defines the “national civil religion” of the Consumers’ Republic paradigm as “an elaborate, integrated ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom” that collapsed the distinctions between purchasers and consumers by preaching consumption, not as “a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility” (127, 112). The currency of this discourse can be seen in its ability to dominate the many discussions about what a “return to normalcy” would look like after the war ended (13). As Denning situates the Popular Front with central significance in
the American social, Cohen suggests that the discourse of the Consumers’ Republic was articulated as a rebuttal to the radicalism of Popular Front culture, which it ultimately usurped. With Denning, I argue that while the discursive shift from the ethos of the Popular Front and the New Deal to the ethos of the Cold War was successful, trace elements of the former field of opinion remained. I am interested in the ways these elements manifested themselves in cultural objects and how these manifestations reflect significant tensions in this shift.

Nostalgia provides one of the best figurative systems for thinking about the content and dynamics of social discourse, as nostalgia pertains specifically to the relationship between individual experience and the social. The history of the word “nostalgia” begins in 1688 when it was born as a neologism in a medical student’s dissertation. Johannes Hofer combined the Greek words for a return home (nostos) and a painful longing (algia) to diagnose a mysterious ailment found among college students who moved from Berne to study in Basel, foreign domestic laborers, and soldiers stationed abroad (Boym 3). According to Sylviane Agacinski, this debilitating malady was sourced in a “painful feeling of exile, the homesickness that the Germans call Heimweh, the feeling that wherever one is, one is not at home” (16). Hofer intended to transform an emotion, Heimweh, into a disease named nostalgia, which would then be treated by medical science (Spitzer 89). Three symptoms noted by Svetlana Boym, each of which will be specifically important to my project, include “‘erroneous representations’ that caused the afflicted to lose touch with the present,” “an ability to hear voices or see ghosts,” and a “mania of longing” (3, 5, 4). Nostalgia could be cured by “opium, leeches and a journey to the Swiss Alps” while it remained a medical concept, but modernity’s appropriation of
nostalgia changed it into something structurally ambiguous and clinically elusive (Boym xiv).

The concept of nostalgia could prove to be liberating, in both its clinical and its stylistic forms. For example, after Hofer’s paper was popularized in the European medical establishment, a diagnosis of nostalgia provided soldiers a rare opportunity for service exemption. While the medical use of nostalgia waned in the nineteenth century, its liberating effects continued on as a style in the literature of Romantics, Victorians, and their successors. Aaron Santesso argues that nostalgia was employed by the Romantics as a reaction against the aesthetic confines of empiricism (17) and John Su describes this liberation in terms of time: “if nostalgia in Victorian literature functions to liberate readers from the past, it functions in modernist literature to liberate readers from the present” (11). By the twentieth century, nostalgia had become an entirely psychological phenomenon. Contrasted with the period’s ethos of progress, nostalgia was figured derisively as a reactionary sentiment and a rejection of reality, thereby retaining the negative connotation of its original coinage.

Contemporary critical readings of nostalgia describe modes constituted by their contexts and comprehended in different ways by the agents who accommodate them. Gerd Gemünden and Svetlana Boym, for example, evaluate nostalgia by suggesting formal types that classify reactionary and progressive attributes. Gemünden describes essays about nostalgia by three German filmmakers as politically problematic and distinguishes between their “reductive” version of nostalgia and a more progressive form: “A critical nostalgia would recognize the didactic aspect of the past: it alleviates the coercive social bonds of the present and, by providing an idealized image of the
past, establishes a sense of continuity” (131). Boym also separates nostalgic modes into two camps. “Restorative” nostalgia emphasizes nostos, the return home, and manifests itself in negative, reactionary nationalisms. Boym calls nostalgia’s positive and progressive mode “reflective,” which emphasizes algia, or longing, and “suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis” (49). In the reflective mode, the “past opens up a multitude of potentialities, non-teleological possibilities of historic development” (50).

Many contemporary readers of nostalgia concur with Mieke Bal, who argues that nostalgia “is only a structure of relation to the past,” and take a more neutral approach as they wend their way through its varied and often conflicted meanings in attempts to use the concept as a heuristic device (xi). The difference between the nostalgic subject’s investment and the historian’s investment in nostalgia goes some way in describing how I want to simultaneously think about textual tropes of nostalgia and systems of nostalgia in the discursive field these texts were produced in. Fredric Jameson’s early observation on nostalgia recognizes the historically predominant abuses of nostalgia, argues that nostalgia’s reactionary characteristics are not intrinsic to the mode’s form, and provides a succinct version of nostalgia’s use as a heuristic device: “if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other” (Marxism and Form 82).

It seems to me that the differences between progressive and reactionary forms of nostalgia are really the differences between the nostalgic individual’s reactionary
investment in the concept as a heuristic device and the (progressive) historian’s investment in nostalgia for the same purpose. For example, a historian can use a concept like fascism as a heuristic device and produce a critique of reactionary modes of social organization while, at the same time, she can recognize that fascist modes are always reactionary. I want to argue that systems of nostalgia are always reactionary, in an argument that accepts the progressive use of nostalgia as a way to critique systems in discursive fields that the texts I discuss here address. Narratives of nostalgia are intrinsically reactionary, not because they always define a reactionary social order, though they usually do, with varieties of fascism being the most extreme examples of nostalgic narratives so far, but because they always insist that a natural order once existed, and our longing for this past moment of symmetry and cohesion forestalls our conscious investment in the dialectical-materialist process of history. Nostalgias articulate a better version of the present that has already happened, and this desire argues for returns instead of progress. Individuals who invest in nostalgia understand these imagined places and times as authentic possibilities, a dynamic which informs their visions of the possible and transforms their relationship to history. In other words, nostalgia reifies the future.

Reification, the transformation of an abstraction into something considered real, represents, in a Marxian register, the mysterious process wherein relations between people are supplanted by relations with things. In a capitalist society, the production of commodities entails more than manufacturing. Commodities are endowed with a value beyond the cost of labor and materials, and this exchange value appears as the result of social relations. The exchange value of a commodity has only a social form, which
individuals objectify in their own subjective practices of reification and express collectively in social discourse. For Marx, reification does more than foster an illusion that exchange values are natural and necessary. Reification materializes social relations determined by capitalism through the practices of individuals: “implied already in the commodity, and still more so in the commodity as the product of capital, is the reification of the social determinations of production and the subjectification of the material bases of production which characterize the entire capitalist mode of production” (Capital Vol. 3 1020). The resultant social form, narrated through a community’s habitus, allows things to mediate social relations.

When individuals fetishize objects, when they endow things with an uncanny aura that supersedes an object’s innate properties, they participate in a system of relations that exceeds their own agency. However, this process does not entirely alienate individuals from recognizing the social relations they participate in for what they really are. As Abdul JanMohamed argues,

[R]eification and fetishism are not, as popular interpretations of Marx would have it, just forms of alienation, ones that rob people of their “natural liberty” or “truth,” but are also productive: they produce a certain type of behavior by encouraging further consumption and production; the greater the sense of alienation from other people, the greater the tendency to fill the lack with commodities that are in fact inverted condensations of social relations. (42)

In this way, reification can be considered generative, as it produces, or narrates, a perspective on an individual’s relationship with the social. I want to argue that nostalgia does something similar to our relationship with the future. Systems of nostalgia, or narratives of the past that possess the present with mythical and idealized conjurations that anticipate the future, inculcate and satiate a longing for a better place
and time with older, purer versions of social forms, haunting our comprehension of the possible and the new.

Homelands, nostalgia’s traditional specters, are intrinsically uncanny in the logic of nostalgia, whether they are idealized versions of some real place or whether their source never existed at all. Boym, while considering the relationship between nostalgia and the uncanny, collapses the distinction between them: “At first glance, it appears that the uncanny is a fear of the familiar, whereas nostalgia is a longing for it; yet for a nostalgic, the lost home and the home abroad often appear haunted” (251). Similarly, Mark Edmundson recalls Freud’s double definition of the uncanny as “the unhomelike, but at the same time it is entirely homelike, entirely of the house” (115). A homeland featured in nostalgia by definition represents an anachronism, which Agacinski describes as “a relic, a paradoxical holdover, displaced, chronologically strange. It always has something to do with the ghost or phantom” (108). Homelands of nostalgia are apparitions of unity and plenty harshly contrasted with real conditions of existence and couched in social histories, which can be both collectivized and personalized. Nostalgia, instigated by material conditions and usually instigated by a crisis, alienates the subject from her real conditions of experience, and the phenomenon of the spectral home both confuses and reveals the conditions that instigated it.

In my attempt to theorize uses of nostalgia in social discourse and, more specifically, nostalgic tropes of the Cold War, I argue that the best focal point for this investigation can be found in the elusive ideological and material concept of a homeland. Eric Hobsbawm argues in his discussion of the postwar era that a concept like home still plays a crucial role in social discourse: “There is [a] powerful element,
which is valid everywhere... It is the need for the ‘permanent’ and the ‘fundamental’
which takes on a great psychological importance not only for individuals, but also for
communities, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century, an era of change and
constant insecurity. Even in areas... such as the United States... we can see the
emergence of a need to have priority, to be able to say, ‘We are here, this is our land...'
It is a kind of secular version of eternity” (28). Early in his magnum opus, The Principle
of Hope, Ernst Bloch asserts that the “basic theme of philosophy which remains and is,
in that it becomes, is the still unbecome, still unachieved homeland” (9). Hope focuses
on the desire of utopia, the “intention towards this becoming homeland, the future
problem in the bearing, encompassing space of homeland,” the longing for moments
when life and purpose are not mediated, where an existence is not alienated from its
means (16). Bloch strongly privileges this affective state: “When the striving is felt, it
becomes ‘longing,’ the only honest state in all men” (45). This longing, this hope and
desire for the perfect home, constitutes an inspiration for progress even while the
emotion itself may be inspired by loss. An important part of Bloch’s exegesis of hope
involves his description of homesickness, which he associates with travel but elevates
to both a symptom of loss and an opportunity for fresh recognition:

[H]omesickness is not only stimulated by the displeasure which the nonavailability
of habitual objects evokes, but besides the homesickness created by loss of the
habitual world of sensory perception there is the productive kind which makes the
abandoned, long since dully experienced environment itself colourful, in fact
utopian. (373)
The last line of *Hope* describes the prospects and requirements of utopia, with Bloch configuring specters of the past as inspiration for the future: “Once [someone] has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland” (1375). And perhaps even more succinctly, Bloch argues that Marx’s old critique of Feuerbach still “testifies: socialized humanity, allied with a nature that is mediated with it, is the reconstruction of the world into homeland” (286).

If homelands are intrinsically uncanny in the logic of nostalgia, considering nostalgia as a mode of haunting allows us to examine the element of longing that plays such an important role in systems of nostalgia. In this sense, nostalgia can be correlated with structures of the Gothic genre. Edmundson deems the Gothic to be “the art of haunting” (xi) and this genre, according to Ernst Bloch, “discovered the strangely homely aspect of the uncanny” (85). While Edmundson declares Marx to be “perhaps the greatest Gothic political writer” (19), Jacques Derrida’s engagement with Marx, *Specters of Marx*, emphasizes haunting and incorporates the concept into a form of interpretation. Marx’s famous enjoinderment of a “specter” and a “haunting” in his *Manifesto* becomes an imperative in Derrida’s analysis and critique of Marxism and his larger project of articulating a New International.11 Derrida calls the hermeneutics constitutive for both projects “hauntology.” Hauntology proposes a logic of haunting, which primarily consists of the dynamics between the “spirit” and the “specter,” or ghost. The spirit manifests itself in the form of the specter, which becomes “some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” (6). The
specter announces the spirit, and the distinctions between the two are blurred in the process: “The specter is of the spirit, it participates in the latter and stems from it even as it follows it as its ghostly double.” Determining a semblance of identity for either of these entities, however, involves sorting through another paradox, namely that of the ontological and affective aspects of the relationship between spirits and specters. The difference between specters and spirits, according to Derrida, “is a differance. The specter is not only the carnal apparition of the spirit, its phenomenal body, … it is also the impatient and nostalgic waiting for a redemption, namely, once again, a spirit” (136).

Derrida’s preferred inheritance from Marx distinguishes “this spirit of the Marxist critique … at once from Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system, as ‘dialectical materialism,’ from Marxism as historical materialism or method, and from Marxism incorporated in the apparatuses of party, State, or worker’s International” (68). While Derrida’s study almost entirely neglects class, Marxism’s most important category, and while he considers the poststructuralist form of analysis he popularized as an update to a theory that still privileges clunky ontological themes, Derrida’s relaxed appropriation of Marxism and his invention of hauntology is useful for my project in a couple of ways. First, Specters provides an example of a nostalgic system in practice. Derrida claims Marxists are nostalgic for a place where and when it was possible to believe in an ontological analysis of social relations, and I would argue that Derrida is himself nostalgic for a moment some place and time before the spring of 1845 when Marx wrote his famous injunction for philosophers, or at least 1888, when “Theses on Feuerbach” was finally published. Philosophy, according to Marx, should imagine the ends of its abstract means as a transformation of the social, means which necessarily
recognize ontological concerns. The duality of Derrida’s nostalgic system resembles, at least for my purposes, the arguments of Cold War discourse and the premises undergirding them, which I discuss below. Second, following his own example (without his sarcasm), I want to declare and appropriate the “spirit” of Derrida’s argument without worrying much about a fidelity to or the consequences of this inheritance. Derrida’s invention of hauntology provides a tool for synthesizing history, systems of nostalgia, and social discourse.

I would like to associate nostalgia, or longing, with the specter, and associate homeland with the spirit. Here, longing takes the form of nostalgia when it fixates on a homeland, which effectively collapses the distinctions between longing and the system of nostalgia that articulates this longing. Longing becomes nostalgic. Nostalgia – incited by a lack, a need, by negative consequences of, say, the social logic of capital, by an absence – manifests itself in the apparition of an idealized homeland. The homeland, fabricated by the logic of nostalgia, becomes the spectral incarnation of longing. Something constitutive in the lack itself (for example, dead labor) alienates the subject from her real conditions of experience, that alienation is an ideology, and the phenomenon of the specter, this longing, both confuses and reveals the lack that initiated it. Towards that end, I hope that considering spectral qualities in discursive formations of nostalgia and privileging tropes of nostalgia in cultural work from the 1950s can help us learn new meanings about social discourse, these texts, and the historic moment that produced them.

The first chapter of this dissertation looks at three works by Richard Wright published while he lived in Paris: The Outsider (1953), Wright’s first novel written as an
expatriate; *Black Power: A Record of Reaction in a Land of Pathos* (1954), Wright’s reportage of his experiences and observations in a colony on the cusp of being reborn as Ghana; and *Pagan Spain* (1957), a travel narrative about his visits to Spain in the early 1950s. Wright sets *The Outsider* in the cities he knew best: Chicago and New York. After miraculously surviving a subway accident, the protagonist, Cross Damon, hears his death announced on the radio. He seizes this opportunity and begins a new life. Rebirth and freedom are also important themes in *Black Power*, where Wright examines theories of national independence and legacies of colonial practices as well as meanings of “home.” Themes of rebirth and freedom reappear in *Pagan Spain*. Here, Wright investigates Spanish society after the country’s violent transition from socialism to totalitarianism and considers varieties of agency in the new social order. My discussion of these texts argues that Wright uses Cross Damon, the emergence of a postcolonial nation, and postwar Spain to consider the relationship between political systems and individuals, how the past can be figured in national and personal consciousness, and the ways different social discourses portray freedom during the Cold War.

The second chapter discusses Patricia Highsmith’s second novel and examines themes of agency in individuals, material objects, and places. *The Price of Salt* (1952), with its radical suggestion that a romance between two women could have a happy ending, rejects the standards of popular fiction during this period, which stressed unhappy conclusions for unsanctioned relationships. Therese, a young woman in her early twenties with a failing career and an unhappy relationship, falls in love with Carol, an older married woman. They escape on a bucolic road trip but are soon dragged back
to confront the narratives of their former lives that continue to structure their present. Here, I shift my discussion of nostalgia and social discourse away from social orders and towards the narratives and agency of individuals, and I look at a character who refuses to coordinate her identity with practices informed by a habitus she decides does not resemble an authentic version of herself. I discuss how nostalgia’s conjurations can be sourced materially in a dialogical process between people, places, and things. I argue that *The Price of Salt* conceives of the past as both a legacy that must be rejected in order to obtain individual agency and a strong influence on how these characters articulate this new agency.

My chapter on Vladimir Nabokov features his most famous novel, published after he moved to the United States. *Lolita* (1955), perhaps the most conventionally nostalgic novel I discuss, was, like *The Price of Salt*, inspired by a poignant incident from the author’s past. It, too, presents a middle-aged character in love with someone much younger, features a road trip across America, and dramatizes the consequences of a socially unacceptable relationship. But here, the comparisons end. I consider *Lolita’s* Humbert Humbert a character who exemplifies a life lived nostalgically. Humbert’s nostalgia, like all others, conspires to confuse the reality of lived experience and obscure an awareness of dialectical reason. This chapter discusses Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectal Reason*, situates nostalgia as an anti-dialectical logic, and examines, like most sections of this project, how individual agency manifests itself in social discourse.

Douglas Sirk, another expatriate in America, began his career as a director in Germany, but my fourth chapter considers a film he made in Hollywood after he moved to the United States. *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956) features two old friends who
become reacquainted and fall in love. Fred MacMurray plays Clifford, a married family man who owns a toy factory, and Barbara Stanwyck plays Norma, an independently successful woman who used to work for Clifford. Using a toy robot designed by Clifford as a central metaphor for the mechanical modern man whom Clifford himself represents, *Tomorrow* reiterates a popular 1950s trope of alienation in modern society by dramatizing the lives of two couples set adrift from the dreams and passions of their youth. Through nostalgic tropes, *Tomorrow* critiques the imperatives of a new social discourse and dramatizes classic 1950s themes of domesticity, technology, and suburban life. In my analysis of *Tomorrow*, I focus on the form and content of longing, perhaps nostalgia’s most important component. I argue that the Marxian concept of aura reveals how desire only exists as a product of social relations, helps us theorize ways individuals invest in nostalgic comprehensions of the past and reject recognitions of our dialectical relationship with the past, and explains the uncanny nature of nostalgia’s spectral haunting.

My last chapter begins with a review of the Cold War that emphasizes its main tropes of fear and security. I then look at Philip K. Dick’s science fiction novel, *Time Out of Joint* (1959). Dick sets *Time Out of Joint* (the inspiration for Peter Weir’s film *The Truman Show*) in 1998, though the main character, Ragle Gumm, believes he lives in 1959. His world has been carefully constructed to represent the 1950s, but cracks appear and Gumm gradually becomes conscious of reality. I focus on ways social discourse functions as structuring systems collectively invested in by individuals, and I argue here for a dialectical conception of the agency of individuals. Finally, I consider a of couple short commercials by Hal Riney, a prominent advertising executive who
started his career writing press releases for the Army in the mid-1950s and was working in advertising by the end of the decade. According to the Herald Tribune’s obituary, Riney’s work “epitomized the so-called soft sell approach,” an approach he used to decisive effect in the political advertising campaign he authored for Ronald Reagan’s reelection bid in 1984 (Elliot 1). I look at two popular commercials from this campaign, I use these narratives to extend my argument about the relations between nostalgia, individuals, and social discourse during the Cold War, and I assert that a form of social discourse forged in the 1950s still resonated in American culture thirty years later. The argument here infers that this resonance continues in our own social discourse today and, more importantly, that recognizing nostalgic tropes in political and social ideologies helps us become more conscious of the world we live in, a consciousness which is the ultimate subject of Nostalgia and the Postwar American Social.

1 My understanding of hegemony mostly reflects Michael Denning’s definition: “a moment of hegemony is when a historical bloc in the first sense – a particular alliance of class fractions and social forces – is able to lead a society for a period of time, winning consent through a form of representation, and thereby establishing an historical bloc in the second sense – a specific social formation” (Age of Three Worlds 159).

2 The Truman Doctrine’s aggressively interventionist policy was influenced by George F. Kennan’s famous “long telegram,” which described the Soviet Union as violently opposed to sincere diplomacy and Stalin’s communism as an ideology with an insatiable appetite for global domination.

3 See Steven Brydon’s “Dueling Prophets” for an odd and interesting comparison between Cold War rhetoric and the rhetoric of the Bush administration’s War on Terror, and consider Barack Obama’s use of Cold War rhetoric when he proposed an expanded role for NATO in Afghanistan. More recently, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili’s op-ed column in the Wall Street Journal salutes the Cold War, as does much of the U.S. media’s reportage of the Georgian conflict. According to one pundit, “If the United States and Europe don’t stop Russia, I think this is the end of what we thought of as the post-Soviet era” (Sarah Mendelson, quoted in Cooper).

4 My use of the designation “Consumer’s Republic” references Evan Watkins and Lizabeth Cohen’s (at times conflicting) projects, discussed below.

5 Later, Denning conjectures (provocatively, for my project) that the “US 1930s – the period of the New Deal and the old left – are a kind of American Risorgimento, a passive revolution from above, an incomplete and failed popular struggle that has haunted later generations just as the Italian Risorgimento of the 1850s and 1860s haunted Gramsci” (Age of Three Worlds 158).
Cohen argues that the distinctions between two ideal types ("citizen consumers" and "purchaser consumer") previously articulated in social discourse were collapsed after World War Two: "In the postwar Consumers' Republic, a new ideal emerged – the purchaser as citizen – as an alluring compromise. Now the consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest, since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a dynamic mass consumption economy" (8-9).

Nostalgia’s currency as a medical diagnosis was accepted for over a century, though Aaron Santesso notes that, while "Hofer has proved a very popular figure in recent academic discussions of nostalgia...[D]uring the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only a tiny number of people used the word nostalgia at all" (14).

Both scholars’ distinctions recall, for me, the first two classes of historical consciousness posited in Hegel’s Introduction to his Philosophy of History. "Original" historiography, according to Hayden White’s reading, "develops out of the simple awareness of the historical process itself,” and “reflective” historiography “recognizes itself as such (historical consciousness for itself)” (Metahistory 97).

Perhaps the third class in Hegel’s hierarchy of historical consciousness may be relevant here: "philosophical" historiography, according to White, presents "a historical consciousness which not only knows itself as such but which reflects upon both the conditions of its knowing ... and the general conclusions about the nature of the whole historical process that can be derived from rational reflection on its various products” (Metahistory 97).

Georg Lukács argues for a much more pervasive influence of reification in modern social forms: "Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man. Marx often describes this potentiation of reification in incisive fashion. One example must suffice here [from Capital Vol. 3]: ‘In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, is brought out in its pure state and in this form it no longer bears the birth-marks of its origin. The social relation is consummated in the relation of a thing, of money, to itself. Instead of the actual transformation of money into capital, we see here only form without content’" (93-4).

Derrida begins his project by recalling the Manifesto’s promulgation: “A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of communism” (4).

Derrida claims deconstruction, as an "attempted radicalism of Marxism," as a more honest and rigorous critique of social relations, "goes beyond" both the opposition of "living work" and the "spectral logic" inherent in Marx’s system of capital and the “ontology [this opposition] presumes” (92, 75).
CHAPTER 2
NOSTALGIA, SOCIAL DISCOURSE, AND RICHARD WRIGHT IN THE 1950S

Richard Wright seemed to have confirmed a professional transition in the early 1950s. *The Outsider* (1953) was his first published novel in thirteen years, and its narrative suggested a shift away from the specific conditions of African Americans. Four books that followed featured three nonfiction accounts of international subjects and a novel with a white main cast. Many critics’ responses to these later texts, including those from old friends like Horace Cayton, Jr, Arna Bontemps, and James Baldwin, note a talented artist who neglected fiction, radical politics, and his native home (Coles 53). Wright, however, had been writing polemic essays and journalism on international subjects since the 1930s as executive secretary of Chicago’s John Reed Club and later as the *Daily Worker‘*s Harlem correspondent, and his work in the 1950s could be considered the successful production of projects that failed in his native home.¹³ Wright and his family left the United States in 1946 to escape daily racist confrontations and professional obstacles erected in response to his communist sympathies, and he chose Paris because, as he noted about five years later, “there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America” (“I Choose Exile”).

The freedom he mentions here may have included the way a new environment, with its large community of Marxist and postcolonial intellectuals, encouraged him to further explore a literary mode he had used for *12 Million Black Voices* (1940), a long essay on African American history and experience. Wright was still writing novels set in places where he used to live (*The Outsider* [1953], *Savage Holiday* [1954], and *The Long Dream* [1958]), but in Paris he also began to publish books like *Black Power: A Record of Reaction in a Land of Pathos* (1954), which expressed the themes of social
systems and individual agency that dominated his earlier fiction. A genre collage of memoir, travelogue, journalism, propaganda, interview, anthropology, sociology, epistle, and prophesy, *Black Power* investigates the birth of a nation and presages the new journalism experiments that would appear in the following decade. Wright continued in this form with *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), his reportage on the 1955 conference of independent Asian and African states, and *Pagan Spain* (1957), a record of three trips into Franco’s simultaneously solidifying and fragmenting version of fascism.

My discussion of this stage of Wright’s career reads *Black Power, Pagan Spain*, and *The Outsider* with an emphasis on how Wright uses innovative hermeneutic modes to examine familiar themes of history, political participation, and the social, and on what *Black Power* and *Pagan Spain* combined with the more conventional fiction of *The Outsider* suggest about the moment in which they were produced. Wright’s work during this period provides an opportunity to translate his earlier critiques of capitalism and racism in America into different contexts and, with *The Outsider*, consider the pervasiveness of Cold War discourse in social and political life inside and outside the United States. The formal keys for my investigation here will be the consideration of death as a symbolic device in Wright’s work, systems of nostalgia, and Cold War social discourse. I want to figure death in systems of nostalgia during the early years of the Cold War and in Wright’s books from the fifties as a linking motif that suggests an equivalence between longing and haunting in social discourse and individual practice, where the dead never really die and where investments in the past confuse a consciousness of history and the present.
Richard Wright begins *Black Power*, his first long travelogue and the first of several he would write during the fifties, with a conversation he had on Easter Sunday, 1953, in his Paris apartment. His wife, Ellen, and George Padmore’s wife, Dorothy, suggest he visit Africa after reading about Kwame Nkrumah’s recent motion for self-government in the Gold Coast. “Something strange and disturbing stirred slowly in the depths of me,” Wright recalls (18). “I am African! I’m of African descent…. Yet I’d never seen Africa; I’d never really known any Africans; I’d hardly ever thought of Africa.” Wright then realizes that he had always thought about Africa, that he had inherited a concern about the origins of his “great-great-great-great-grandfather” even as “three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and the ‘racial stock’ from which I had sprung.” Buried inheritance becomes a prominent theme in *Black Power*, a text concerned with definitions of modernity, the Gold Coast as a special political event, and the concept of Africa generally. Wright arrived in Accra in mid-June, 1953, stayed for about two and half months, interviewed many of the main political players, attended private meetings and public rallies, and traveled to rural areas of the Gold Coast as it was becoming the first sub-Saharan African colony to transform into an independent country, which it did in 1957.

The subtitle of *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* frames Wright’s investigation and hints at the conclusion he would write as a letter to Kwame Nkrumah. Wright’s appellation for his subjects’ community refers to a Nietzschean phrase, the pathos of distance, which he mentions in a discussion about “the fragility of the African as compared with the might of the British” (210). For Nietzsche, the pathos of distance refers to the affect of superiority that provided the origins for the categorical
distinctions of “good” and “bad.” Wright seems to use this phrase both as a description of an existing principle when he describes cultural differences between Africa and the West and as an explanation for his bias when he admits his own ignorance and prejudice. For example, Wright argues that the “fragility of the African” can be discerned with attention paid to his subjects’ comprehension of time: “It was quite obvious that the African’s time sense was not like our own; it did not project forward in anticipation; it oscillated between the present and the past” (215). The comparison becomes succinct with a reference to the inability of the African worldview to conceptualize progress:

The African did not strain to feel that which was not yet in existence; he exerted his will to make what had happened happen again. His was a circular kind of time; the past had to be made like the present. Dissatisfaction was not the mainspring of his emotional life; enjoyment of that which he had once enjoyed was the compulsion. (216)

At least one reader has considered Wright’s use of Nietzsche’s phrase to indicate the difference “between an instinctual, emotional, reflexive life on the one hand and a rational, industrial life on the other” (Shankar 17). Much of Wright’s text supports this paraphrased distinction between Western rationality and something different, though the distinction is usually contextualized by the ornery frustration of a confused traveler.

Wright continues in this vein with an open letter to Nkrumah, published as the conclusion of Black Power, which he begins by noting his affiliation with the people of Ghana and their political project: “I felt an odd kind of at-homeness, a solidarity that stemmed not from ties of blood or race, or from my being of African descent, but from the quality of deep hope and suffering embedded in the lives of your people” (409-10). Wright moves from a fraternal gesture to a critique of the “African’s mentality” and its
“sodden vagueness...that renders that mentality incapable of grasping the workaday world” (410). He insists that individuals in this community must effect “an inner reorganization” aligned with one imperative: “AFRICAN LIFE MUST BE MILITARIZED!” before their community can transform from a colonial entity into a genuinely independent country (410, 415). Wright proposes a distinction between a military dictatorship, which he abhors, and “a militarization of the daily social lives of the people; I’m speaking of giving form, organization, direction, meaning, and a sense of justification to those lives” (415):

[A] military form of African society will atomize the fetish-ridden past, abolish the mystical and nonsensical family relations that freeze the African in his static degradation; it will render impossible the continued existence of those parasitic chiefs who have too long bled and misled a naïve people; it is the one and only stroke what can project the African immediately into the twentieth century! (417)

Wright’s version of progress presents an anti-racist, anti-essentialist polemic that accepts popular narratives of modernity and rejects the nostalgic vestiges of this community’s idiosyncratic cultural practices.

Wright’s friend, C.L.R. James, observed in Ghana just three years after its independence exactly this dynamic of overwhelming form, organization, direction, and meaning, which he compared to what he considered a crucial moment of Europe’s modernity: the France of Karl Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

That is what I saw in Ghana in 1960 and this is what has been mounting in ever-widening circles as the outstanding social and political development in contemporary Africa. The African state enmeshes, controls, regulates, superintends and tutors civil society from its most insignificant stirrings. *(Nkrumha and the Ghana Revolution* 13)

Wright’s version of modernity combines the rejection of traditional narratives of the social, an oppressed people’s longing for freedom, and standardized practices that
could facilitate oppression but are hopefully not destined to do so. The things Wright says about the Gold Coast and Africa, especially in his letter to Nkrumah, force readers to confront the troubling moments where Wright muses on sundry superiorities of Eurocentric institutions and behaviors. Wright’s interpretation of the religious rituals, political machinations, gender norms, and other social mores he observed in the Gold Coast are occasionally contextualized with his own comments about his positional subjectivity, though these recognitions seldom make his interpretations and prescriptions any less objectionable, perhaps especially because Wright consistently emphasized the utility and power of polemic positions throughout his career. However, in the context of Wright’s discussions of individual agency and his attempts to comprehend meanings of cultural heredity, these recognitions allow us to read Black Power as an attempt to interrogate a culture while simultaneously acknowledging his own political failings.

The last of three epigraphs that introduce Black Power quotes novelist and anthropologist Robert Briffault: “The entire course of the human race […] is as a whole and in detail coincident with the course of transmitted social heredity” (7). Wright considers many of the behaviors and opinions of his subjects as traditional memes and consequences of socioeconomic conditions, as trace elements of larger forces personalized by individuals. He frames this point autobiographically with a discussion about his association with the Community Party. Noting that he had been a member for twelve years, he also asserts that he is no longer a member and still employs “Marxist instrumentalities of thought” (12). He inherited the predilections of Marxism from party mentors and reading lists, but this inheritance is willful and idiosyncratic. Wright insists
that the utilization of a Marxist analysis does not make him a surrogate for Soviet propaganda, a particularly important distinction considering the anxiety much of his Western audience had about Soviet influence in the Gold Coast and other emerging postcolonial nations. With a nod to his experience as a blacklisted cultural worker, Wright distinguishes between himself as an individual who employs a worldview and some assumed intrinsic connection this worldview shares with his identity.

Wright had spent most of his adult life writing and speaking about racism in the United States and much of his work was autobiographical. The suggestion of a visit to Africa prompts a series of questions about the import of Africa as the homeland of his racial identity and a conceptual marker for a collective past: “Africa! I repeated the word to myself….Africa was a vast continent full of ‘my people.’…Or had three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and the ‘racial stock’ from which I had sprung?….am I African?” (18). Wright was interested in national transitions from colonial captivity to independence generally and Nkrumah’s project specifically, but he recognized that a “far more important question was trying to shape itself in me. According to popular notions of ‘race,’ there ought to be something of ‘me’ down there in Africa” (19). The combination of two popular sociological categories – biological determinism and individual will – coalesce around a central question in this text and many of Wright’s other works: how does a concept like freedom function in a society governed by capitalism and white supremacy?

Marx famously introduces his early treatise on history and inheritance, The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, with a gothic analogy for the dynamics between the agency of individuals and history: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it
just as they please….The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living‖ (15). Marx was writing about social crisis and transformation and the primacy of materialism for any historical interpretation, though a theme about how historical actors comprehend social crisis and transformation also wends its way through his argument, a theme repeated in Black Power. Wright’s discussion simultaneously examines the ways and whys of the community he travels through and his own varied reactions to his travels in an attempt to contextualize his thoughts about history and individual agency in the drama of a colony’s burgeoning independence.  

These thoughts, like much of Wright’s writing in the early fifties, take the form of a narrative privileging themes of death and freedom. In Black Power, Wright incorporates African worldviews, with their thematic categories of death and freedom as he understands them, in his argument about collective identities and individual agency.  

The register of popular anthropology might be considered an unfortunate genesis for an analysis of important theoretical categories, but like Marx’s frequent appropriation from the genre of gothic literature, folklore and myth provide Wright a poetic frame for his argument.  

The moment of death conceptualizes a radical break separating before and after. Death as a concept, and not unlike the biological category of the cessation of life, can mean the end of what was and the end of what was to be. For example, revolutionary narratives always imagine the death of old social orders and the birth of freedom, but freedom that follows a radical break means something different from what it was imagined to be before the moment of death. Freedom that comes after the cessation of captivity means both the end of captivity as it existed and the end of captivity as it would
have existed if not for the moment of its death, and this new freedom as it was conceived before the moment of death, must change, as it was at that prior moment dialectically defined by the conditions of captivity. A liberation not falsely defined by a version of freedom conditioned by the past requires a recognition of the historical process that facilitates radical breaks and a consciousness of the new social order these breaks inaugurate; all other forms of liberation are forms of nostalgia.

For Wright’s African, death is not an event separated from life or the living; it is not “death as we know it; in fact, it was not death at all. It was a departure” (259). The dead depart to another world, though this world does not exist separately from our own: “In Africa the ‘dead’ live side by side with the living” (260). The dead need to be constantly placated and they get angry when they are neglected, so much so that “the pacification of the ‘dead’ constitutes one of their biggest problems of life.” Wright sees a connection between his conception of African (cyclical) temporality and moments of death, where death itself “does not round off life; it is not the end; it complements life” (265). Death functions as part of life through ancestor worship, and this practice manifests itself as a vestige of the past that haunts the present and instigates a nostalgic reticence to realize progress. Ancestor worship inhibited cognitive and material practices the West had developed, practices that would function as a way to lead the Gold Coast “strait-jacketed into the future” (275). Death lingers on even as a new order discourages it, causing confusion and temporal dissonance: “they wanted a chance to turn the clock back; they didn’t want history to catch up with Africa….But the past had gone; the magic wouldn’t work anymore.” Something is lost in the exchange as death takes on a new meaning, with the old version of death withering into a relic:
Would an African, a hundred years from now, after he has been trapped in the labyrinths of industrialization, be able to say when he is dying, when he is on the verge of going to meet his long dead ancestors, those traditional, mysterious words: *I am dying / I am dying / Something big is happening to me…*? (276)

Wright finds his African subjects to be literally living in the past, as the moment of death in their conception never transforms into something new while “industrialization” permanently transforms the material conditions of their society. Wright believed that the Gold Coast revealed one community’s experience with the cultural logic of modernity; “the twentieth century,” he asserts, “was throwing up these mass patterns of behavior out of the compulsive nakedness of men’s dis inherited lives” (119). Here, traditional rituals and ideologies of death contribute to a reactionary temporality that fails to accommodate a new hegemony.

Wright codes his subjects’ conception of death as a part of a nostalgic worldview by connecting death rituals with homelands. In an interview with a white missionary’s cook, Wright learns about burial practices, where the dead are buried with their heads pointed towards their villages when they die away from home. Ties to homelands are crucial elements in this cosmology and almost equally important is the suggestion that those far from home have been abandoned by their ancestors. This belief explained “why Africans had sold so many of their black brothers into slavery….To be sold into slavery meant that your ancestors had consigned you to perdition!” (239, 240). “These, of course,” Wright continues, “are but dreams, daylight dreams, dreams dreamed with the eyes wide open!” (241). Dreams, for Africans and others, Wright suggests, “are the staunchest kind of reality.” “Maybe men are happier when they are wrapped in warm dreams of being with their fathers when they die…?” Nostalgia represents the trace elements of reality’s older version comprehended before death, lingering on like ghosts.
in a new life, providing comfort and resisting change. Wright observes the tenets of this experience articulated in the political rhetoric of Nkrumah’s opposition, as conservative elites like J. B. Danquah and Kofi Abrefa Busia formulate their platform with “the nostalgic but futile cry: ‘Preserve our traditions!’” (114). The death of the old order and the birth of a progressive new order only signify a radical break with social systems, conceptual paradigms, and what constitutes home itself.

No death is absolute, no break is radical enough to completely erase any of the conditions of that old life, and it is in this analysis of death and haunting, in this insistence that elisions are not synonymous with replacements, that Wright contextualizes his discussion of freedom in Africa. The dead never leave; not only are they mediators between us and spirits that “insisted on hanging around and haunting the living,” but they also own the land we live on and/or call home (342). Wright considers this narrative about the past and homelands as a system of knowledge helping individuals process tragedy and loss: “are not these living men projecting their hostile impulses upon the dead and converting those dead into a dead that can never die?” (308). The projection provides individuals with an agency, deferred in a narrative about the past but relevant to ways of thinking about the present.

For Nkrumah’s cultural nationalism, freedom means combining the power of folk culture with an explosive new political worldview that has the potential to radically alter social orders. In 1948, the solidly bourgeois United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) was the main independence party and Nkrumah was the head of its Committee on Youth Organization (Nkrumah viii). Nkrumah transformed this committee into the Convention People’s Party (CPP), an organization of political activists from the Gold Coast’s youth
and working class, which broke from the UGCC and their incrementalist motto, “Self-Government within the shortest possible time,” with a new motto: “Self-Government Now” (xi, 97). The CPP came to power in 1951 and achieved independence from Great Britain six years later. The foundation of Nkrumah’s movement was “Positive Action”: “legitimate political action, newspaper and educational campaigns and, as a last resort, the constitutional application of strikes, boycotts and non-cooperation based on the principle of absolute nonviolence” (111). When Wright attended rallies with Nkrumah, he observed the CPP’s astute appropriation of indigenous cultural forms into their rhetoric, a fusion of modern postcolonial tactics with traditional versions of individualism and democracy:

[I]n Africa “freedom” was more than a word; an African had no doubts about the meaning of the word “freedom.” It meant the right to public assembly, the right to physical movement, the right to make known his views, the right to elect men of his choice to public office, and the right to recall them if they failed in their promises. At a time when the Western world grew embarrassed at the sound of the word “freedom,” these people knew that it meant the right to shape their own destiny as they wished. (76)

The CPP’s application of these principals of participatory democracy was coupled with religious ceremonies, another traditional version of social cohesion. Many of the political rallies Wright attended included religious rites featuring the ecstatic mantra of “FREE-DOOOOOM! FREE-DOOOOOM!” (210). Wright notices similarities between American “Holy Roller Tabernacles” and the devout performances in the Gold Coast, but he also notices something different (78). The uniqueness of this version includes the way the CPP and their constituents explicitly combined traditional beliefs with the divine and freedom with radical politics. Wright calls this combination “politics plus” (78, 119). Wright’s prescient observations provide a minority report to the congratulatory “development theory” popular among first and second world commentators in the
1950s, which imaged the steady and inevitable secularization of third world countries as they industrialized (“A Western Man” 5). The strength of new nationalist movements, Wright contends, resides in the fusion of independence rhetoric with traditional narratives, appropriating practices from the past for a radical participation in the present.

_Pagan Spain_ presents an investigation similar to _Black Power_. Wright arrived in Spain almost a year after he left the Gold Coast and he returned to Spain two more times between 1954 and 1955. _Pagan Spain_ begins, like _Black Power_, with a discussion about why Wright decided to travel there. This time, it was Gertrude Stein who initially encouraged him: “‘You’ll see the past there,’” she told Wright, “‘[y]ou’ll see what the Western world is made of’” (4). Wright’s original subtitle, _A Report of a Journey into the Past_, refers to Stein’s advice (Weiss 221). An interest in Spain had already been planted in Wright by the Spanish Civil War, which was a profoundly important event in the political education of him and many of his generation. In 1936, General Francisco Franco led a revolt against the Second Republic with the formal support of Germany, Italy, and Portugal and the material help of American corporations. The Second Republic’s coalition of socialists, communists, and anarchists were formally supported by the Soviet Union and Mexico, and the war itself became a cause célèbre for the popular front in America, figured as a neat contrast between left and right political positions. Franco’s fascist Falange won three years later. Wright had researched and written about the war in the _Daily Worker_, and Stein’s suggestion resonated with his desire to confront old ghosts and unanswered questions: “The fate of Spain had hurt me, had haunted me,” Wright recalls, “I had never been able to stifle a hunger to understand what had happened there and why (Pagan Spain 4). Wright distills this
quest into one question that would become a mantra for his project in Spain: “How did one live after the death of the hope of freedom?” About ten years before, Wright had written about the lived experiences of African Americans after Reconstruction and the Great Migration: “The seasons of the plantation no longer dictate the lives of many of us; hundreds of thousands of us are moving into the sphere of conscious history. We are at a new tide. We stand at the crossroads” (*Black Voices* 147). *Pagan Spain* often reads like a companion to *12 Million Black Voices* and a sequel to *Black Power*, with themes of the past, death, and freedom evincing a community in transition after a crisis, and individuals finding forms of agency in new social orders.

The first section of *Pagan Spain* (titled “Life After Death,” which precedes “Death and Exaltation”) continues the admissions of subjectivity from *Black Power* as Wright recalls a first encounter that illustrates both his general confusion (his French was better than his Spanish) and the layered process of comprehension experienced by an outsider. When he drives across the border into Spain, Wright is almost immediately hailed by an armed soldier. Fearing the worst, he hands over his passport, only to discover that the soldier just wants a ride. The encounter continues with Wright misinterpreting the soldier’s hand gestures, intended to direct Wright towards a stop, as an imperative to increase speed. Although Wright was confused about significant aspects of his initial interaction with a state functionary, the main bit of communication was perfectly clear: the state has supreme power to impose its will upon individuals, but that power is not always manifested in arrest and detainment; sometimes it is manifested in less violent ways, like the imposition of a car ride. Wright consistently concedes his outsider’s perspective, outlined with this episode and sustained
throughout the text, and he privileges the fresh eye this perspective popularly allows. Simultaneously, Wright emphasizes his personal experience with authoritarianism: his childhood and teenage years spent in Mississippi’s “racist regime,” twelve years “under the political dictatorship of the Communist party,” and one year living in the “police terror of Perón in Buenos Aires” (3). Wright positions himself as a conscious interlocutor who also brings a history of sympathetic experience to the conversation, buttressing his rhetorical ethos and emphasizing the significance of individual experience.

Wright’s investigation of individuals and Franco’s state apparatuses creating a social discourse together focuses on the practices of agents governed by both the habitus of social history and the inculcation of Franco’s regime. Wright’s Spain can be read as an example of a martial social order with an extra element, another form of the “politics plus” that he had observed and theorized before in the Gold Coast. Antonio Gramsci’s classic discussion of individuals and civil society in his *Prison Notebooks* provides a relevant exposition of the ways social discourse exceeds the formal limits of ideological narratives when manifested in the practices of individuals. Gramsci extends his discussion with a provocative gesture towards what he calls the “so-called ‘problem of the younger generation’”; namely, “can a rift between popular masses and ruling ideologies as serious as that which emerged after the war be ‘cured’ by the simple exercise of force, preventing the new ideologies from imposing themselves?” (276).

Gramsci was writing this in 1930, about eight years into the rule of the Mussolini’s National Fascist Party, and his line of reasoning primarily supports the assertion that the reactionary social order following Italy’s postwar crisis was not inevitable and, therefore, was reversible. The National Fascist Party’s success emphasized force in the traditional
forms of economic and political power, and Gramsci recognized that a recourse to this force would be something else, a political plus (here, as in Wright’s usage, meaning something intrinsic to real politics, but something neglected from formal politics): the “reduction to economics and to politics means precisely a reduction of the highest superstructures to the level of those which adhere more closely to the structure itself – in other words, the possibility and necessity of creating a new culture.” Fascism, a radical reaction to modern leftist politics characterized by a unified aesthetic of martial order, corporate statism, and fantasies of naturally national collectives, was maintained precisely in the repression of a genuinely new culture, which nostalgias always conspire against.

Six years after Gramsci discussed the dynamic between individuals and state apparatuses, Italy sent Franco material support for his own resolution to a state crisis. By the time Franco had taken control of the fascist Falange movement, it emphasized Catholicism, anti-communism, a Spanish variety of Italy’s national syndicalism, and myths of Spanish nationalism. After their success in 1939, Franco moved to solidify his program in Spanish society through martial law and reactionary indoctrination. Wright’s interest in Spain not only included trace elements of his early investment in the Spanish Civil War and the larger political field this conflict represented. He was also interested in looking at a version of Western European authoritarianism that seemed anachronistic to the current celebration of liberal democracy. His primary question, stated above, about how one lived after the death of a hope the Second Republic had inaugurated before Franco’s coup d'état, is framed to find an answer in the practices of individuals. And, like Gramsci, Wright was concerned with the “problem of the younger
generation.” In his investigation of two formal ideological apparatuses, the Catholic Church and Franco’s Falange, Wright primarily focuses on how these apparatuses function in regards to young women, the embryonic sample of a demographic he decides represents the most important bloc of Spanish society.23

Wright’s first personal encounter with Spanish Catholicism comes in the form of two young men in their mid-twenties he approaches for directions to a pension in Barcelona. André and Miguel instead guide him to what is probably the Sagrada Familia, Spain’s famous cathedral oddly left unscathed in the base of anticleric anarchists during the war.24 After various forms of genuflection, they encourage Wright to participate and are surprised to learn he is not a Catholic. He realizes they brought him here as a form of Christian fellowship for a stranger, “their solicitude cutting across class and racial lines. And there had been no hint of conscious propaganda in them” (12). Wright quickly befriends André and Miguel and through them and their families he gains access to some interiors of Spanish life. Wright extrapolates their social worldview to Spanish society generally, with some collaboration of personal observation and other testimonies. Wright’s understanding of Spain’s postwar generation comes primarily from these men and his first impressions “indicated that Spanish youth was cut off from the multitude of tiny daily influences of the modern Western world” (15). While much of Wright’s study describes a prominence of older modes of social thought existing alongside a Spanish version of modernity, he does not insist that individuals in Spain are subjects without agency, living in the past and not quite up to speed with the current Western European social forms.25 Rather, Wright wants to discover individual agency in practices he had observed in other repressive social orders. For example, with Russia’s
“tyranny,” “you would also find a confounding freedom secreted somewhere”; in France’s “stifling bureaucracy,” “there was a redeeming element of personal liberty”; in Argentina’s “police state,” “you had under it, disguised, a warm comradeship”; and in the English “restrained and reserved attitude,” “you had, somewhere nearby, equalizing it, a licentious impulse to expression.” Wright wonders if he will find the same dynamic in Spanish life and, in that dynamic, a form of lived experience after the death of the hope of freedom.

Women play the lead role in his early conversations with André and Miguel and they would be the topic of many conversations with others that followed. According to his new friends, “the feminine half of mankind was divided into groups: ‘good’ women and ‘bad’ women. ‘Good women were women like their mothers, sisters, and sweethearts; ‘bad’ women were the women who could be bought, or who could be slept with for nothing” (14). Extramarital sex with women was a sin for men as well, though somewhat justified because “they had to have women.” Attending a dinner party at André’s house, Wright meets his friend’s family and discovers more proof that gender-based distinctions of patriarchy are never confined to sexual propriety. André’s fiancée’s virginity “was a kind of profession in itself,” a role that required limited mobility and constant supervision (100). Her virginity, however, did not come with a materially elevated stature in the household: “Spain being a man’s world, we men were served first by André’s mother; the women had to wait meekly for their turn. No nonsense here about the priority of women, of the mothers of the race, not even if they were certified virgins” (104). The role of the Spanish Catholic church in disciplining its subjects by codifying sexual behavior also provides the rationale to justify the virgin’s opposite. The
Church’s doctrine of sin “anchors prostitution in the social structure”; here, “prostitution is not something to be grappled with in terms of social or economic engineering…it is simply an indication that the work of salvation is not yet complete” (179). Wright uses the rational contradiction inherent in this dichotomy between “good” and “bad” women, and the ways society accommodated the behavior of “bad” women and oppressed the agency of “good” women, to suggest that Catholic precepts were simply employed to justify a much older social order, that the logic of patriarchy can be sustained by individuals investing in updated versions of the same narrative with their own practices.

Habitus, a code of behavior produced by history and articulated by individuals in infinite and predetermined varieties, provides social agents with unspoken parameters enclosing acceptable choices reified by past practices and affirmed by a future these very choices anticipate. These unspoken parameters are revealed by the aggregate of practices performed by individuals. While the habitus of any given community does not specifically restrict the agency of individuals, it does inform the individual of how their agency can be articulated. This concept provides a particularly useful tool in the investigation of social discourse because, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, habitus helps our analysis transcend “the usual antinomies” implicit in most discussions about agency: “determinism and freedom, condition and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society” (Logic of Practice 55). The concept of habitus allows us to think about social discourse as a narrative that simultaneously regulates practice and reacts to the practice of individuals. Vernacular versions of the “unconscious” can be a corollary concept if figured as Bourdieu insists, where the unconscious “is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself
produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of
habitus” (Theory of Practice 78). In Spain, Wright looks for agency in the practices of
individuals, in practices that conform to an established order but may also reflect
something buried beneath the rote dogma of church and state.

The practices of women in Spain under the duress of a theologically-narrated
patriarchy provide Wright with examples his project was formulated to discover. In
Granada, Wright accepts a dinner invitation from a woman he met on a train. During
dinner, Wright “marveled at how strong and self-possessed the women of Spain are in
comparison to their men” (202). In the fellowship of this woman and her friends, Wright
muses on an agency in their behavior tied to their social necessity. The “women of
Spain,” Wright argues, “make her a nation” a result of their “striving and suffering”
“knitting together” a structure of Spanish society (220). In a long two-page sentence,
Wright contrasts the lived experiences of women “who whirl and clack their
castanets…who plow the fields; who wash clothes…who nurse their babies” with the
man who “babbles abstract nonsense in the countless smoky coffee houses” and
suggests that individual practices participate in and perhaps exceed a discourse
designed to discipline individual agency (221). Wright covers a wide demographic of
women in class, age, profession, and sexual orientation, and ends this segment with a
notice that the experiences of women are the foundational element of their society:
“Spanish men have built a state, but they have never built a society, and the only
society that there is in Spain is in the hearts and minds and habits and love and
devotion of its women” (222). Though Wright’s final conclusion here about women’s role
in a state/society dichotomy differs from points raised in Simone de Beauvoir’s The
*Second Sex*, both writers are concerned with explaining how relations of domination are determined in social strata and how individuals navigate repressive societies. Wright read Beauvoir’s famous theorization of the material histories that create and define women as social agents the year before he went to Spain, and they were close friends (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 321, “French Extentialists” 49; Rowley 350). Interestingly, Wright’s methodology of privileging practice as a precursor to theory anticipates a project Beauvoir suggests as a hypothetical sequel to *The Second Sex*:

> [I]t should be rooted in practice rather than in theory. *The Second Sex* went the other way. Now that’s no longer valid. It’s in the practice that one can now see how the class struggle and the sex struggle intertwine, or at least how they can be articulated. But that’s true about all struggles now: we must derive our theory from practice, not the other way around. What really is needed is that a whole group of women, from all sorts of countries, assemble their lived experiences, and that we derive from such experiences the patterns facing women everywhere. (“25 Years Later” 84)

Practice, Beauvoir tells us, not only functions as the subject of theory, but must also be recognized as the object of theory. Identities stratified in a confluence of categories are the result of socially constituted and individually performed practices, which define the content, not the form, of social discourse. In other words, individuals are agents produced by social discourse, a narrative sustained by the experiences of these individuals. Without diminishing the significance of social apparatuses, Wright draws attention to the way a social discourse relies on the practices of individuals.

Wright’s argument about social discourse in the context of the Spanish Catholic Church and Spanish citizens hinges on the relationship between a formal doctrine and the lived experiences of individuals. In this relationship, individuals participate in a social discourse by allowing dominant narratives to inform their practice while altering the dictates of the doctrine in performance and producing an updated narrative but not a
new culture. Culture works because we do, and as Michael Denning reminds us, culture is simply another “name for that habitus that forms, subjects, disciplines, entertains, and qualifies labor power” (Age of Three Worlds 96). According to Wright’s observations, the practices of the people he met in Spain were occasionally subversive in relation to a Catholic program, but subversive only in this relation. Wright observed practices articulated in a different register, for which a Catholic narrative had provided an updated set of signifiers that reflected one version of contemporary objective reality, while the habitus remained essentially the same. Wright’s conclusion proclaims: “Spain was not yet even Christian! It had never been converted, not to Protestantism, not even to Catholicism itself!” (229). Catholicism, Wright insists, “had here in Spain been sucked into the maw of a paganism buried deep in the hearts of the people. And the nature and function of Catholicism had enabled that paganism to remain intact” (230). Catholicism still functions as a formal doctrine, but only to the extent that it adequately confirmed the sedimented collective knowledge of this community, the group memory informed by a social discourse confirmed in the aggregate of individual practices.

When Wright finally makes it to a pension after his tour of the cathedral, he meets Carmen, a desk clerk who attends a preparatory school for state service. Wright interrupts her reading Formación Política: Lecciones para las Flechas (Education Policy: Lessons for the Arrows), a 176-page Falange doctrinal tract of answers to hypothetical questions for young women that Carmen and her colleagues have to memorize in order to qualify for diplomatic jobs outside of Spain. “The book was the real thing; it had been designed to inculcate the principles of Fascism in young girls,” Wright observes, contrasting its pedagogy with the cathedral’s symbolic and more abstract formula (21).
Wright borrows Carmen’s “political catechism” and reprints many selections throughout *Pagan Spain* (17). His inclusion of this artifact displays the rhetorical tactics Franco’s regime employed in their attempt to reproduce old tenets of Spanish tradition in an updated cultural form. Narratives that posit a former collective and encourage a resurrection of this mythic totality articulate an imperative of fascist ideology, an imperative sustained only by the personal investment of individuals Carmen’s book was designed to inculcate.

*Formación Política*’s first lesson outlines Spanish history and defines Spanish nationalism (“destiny has constituted all the people of Spain…for all time into a unit in the natural order of things”) and the second lesson, in tandem, discusses the history and purpose of the Falange movement (26). According to Lesson 2, “Spaniards had lost the consciousness of their historic destiny,” a consciousness which the Falange movement aspires to renew (40). “I was staring at the mouth, at the veritable fount of Western history,” Wright writes in response to the lessons’ recollection of imperial grandeur stretching back to Spanish Roman emperors. Lesson 5, titled “For Girls Ten to Twelve Years of Age – The Concept of Tradition,” defines the purpose of tradition: “To know what we can do in the future” (142). A follow-up question, “what must be done?” hints at Lenin’s own revolutionary polemic and offers the antithesis of Lenin’s argument: “We must try to guess what our ancestors would do if they lived now and do it ourselves” (143). Lesson 5 collapses the distinctions between the practices of a past community with the intent behind the worldview currently offered by the Falange, whose founder, Jose-Antonio Primo de Rivera, argues here that “‘tradition…is not a state but a process, and for nations as for men it is difficult to walk backward and return to
childhood.” “But can we use the same formula as yesterday?” Lesson 5 asks, and responds: “The same formula but not the same process.” Lesson 5 employs nostalgia in its argument about an imagined past that can be reconstituted in the present, providing a familiarity to the modern tenets of fascism. Nostalgia, the longing for the objective conditions reflected in practices generated by the habitus of a social order that has past, results in cognitive dissonance, which the Falange hoped to both encourage and resolve.

*Formación Política*’s call-and-response format allows the reader to imagine their own agency anticipated by the authors, lending the screed a more dynamic mechanism of indoctrination. The Falange movement’s program and the imagined community this movement posits are questioned and affirmed simultaneously, strategically narrowing the field of opinion:

> Because of the last centuries of our failure, we want to bind our times with those of the Catholic Kings.
> Why?
> Because we want Spain to achieve a glory similar to that which she achieved during their reign.
> Will this be possible?
> Yes, with adaptations to the era in which we live, of course. (55)

The touchstones of nostalgia, of new ideological narratives that incorporate a habitus of tradition, are all here: a perfect moment of unity and prosperity, a slide of failures and the need for renewal, and a bright future anticipated by the coordination of transcendent truths with the reality of contemporary life. The key to unifying traditional memes into a social form that justifies the Falange’s program can be found in Lesson 8, which defines the Falangist concept of the state as “a totalitarian instrument in the service of the country’s destiny” (171). In “principle,” a totalitarian state provides a social form “which does not admit the existence of universal suffrage, nor of political parties, one which
seeks the justification of its existence in its own historical or vital theories and which orientates the whole machinery of the state toward serving these theories” (173). The Falange’s method of affirming narratives of nostalgia involves marshalling all the elements of Spanish society into a single mode, a singular synoptic model of a social order, or totalitarianism, which provides *post hoc* the premise for the Franco regime, the Falange movement, and these lessons.

Narratives like nostalgia are only consequential when individuals invest in them, and this kind of investment always becomes particularly attractive during periods of transitions after a crisis, when parameters of social discourse are fragile. Wright went to Spain after a violent civil war and the defeat of a democratically-elected government, looking for ways people lived when hope for a new social order had died. Wright found two apparatuses that dominated Spanish social discourse during and after the war. The Catholic Church and the Falange movement were symbiotic institutions materially and ideologically, and Franco’s regime used both to inculcate a narrative of nostalgia and the concomitant themes of a natural order neglected and redeemable. “[I]n a nostalgic structure,” Lynne Huffer argues, “an immutable lost past functions as a blueprint for the future, cutting off any possibility for uncertainty, difference, or fundamental change” (19). Huffer’s reference to a blueprint provides a succinct metaphor here, as both the Church and the Falange offer teleological theories that function as histories, which provide strategies for individuals to interpret and participate in social discourse.

Carmen disdains her book’s nostalgias, but she cannot imagine the worldview Wright proclaims. “‘I have no religion in the formal sense of the word,’ [Wright] tells her. ‘I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to
which I’m obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I’m free. I have only the future’” (21). “I wish I could say that,” she responds. Objective limits to Carmen’s freedom dictated by state laws combined with rules of her habitus determine her practice so thoroughly she cannot imagine articulating counter narratives not already anticipated by these laws and rules. Although the contrived nature of Falangist propaganda appears obvious to her, the rules of her habitus, which much of that propaganda exploits, are less obviously contrived. The power of this combination results in practices only recognized as anticipations of future events rather than dominant social narratives manifested in individual agency. Practices “produced by the habitus,” as Bourdieu reminds us, “are only apparently determined by the future”; they are actually always “determined by the past conditions which have produced the principle of their productions” (Theory of Practice 72). Practices themselves, informed by historical narratives that deduce future events, endows these narratives with the means to sustain individual investment. Carmen recognizes what has been “forced upon” her, while Wright, who moved to Paris to escape political and racial discrimination and traveled to Spain because he was free to do so, privileges conscious decisions he made to extricate himself from a rigorously religious upbringing and massive racial indoctrination instead of the material conditions that shaped those decisions or the luxury of his trip to Spain.31

Deciding to privilege conscious decisions posits a method for overcoming the impetus of habitus, which Wright explores in The Outsider, his first novel as an expatriate. Wright’s insistence that he has “no traditions,” that he’s “free,” that he has “only the future,” reflects the ostensible prerogatives of The Outsider’s protagonist, who struggles to assert independence from discursive social structures by violently rejecting
Published in March, 1953, a few months before he arrived in Accra, Wright sets *The Outsider* in the Chicago and New York City of 1950, two cities he had lived in. Wright’s protagonist, Cross Damon, begins the novel as a beleaguered Post Office employee in Chicago beset with a vengeful wife, a pregnant mistress, a disappointed mother, mounting debts, and annoying friends. Damon miraculously survives a subway accident, smashes a man’s head so he can climb over him, and escapes out a train window. When reporters confuse Damon’s identity with the man whose face he destroyed, he seizes the opportunity of his reported death to change his identity, move to New York, and begin a new life. For Damon, this opportunity means the actualization of his “fondest and deepest conviction”: “[t]hat all men were free….And his acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom” (457). Damon imagines freedom as a form of agency unmoored from the structured system of his life. The rules and conditions of his previous identity had determined his practice so thoroughly he could not imagine articulating counter narratives not already anticipated by the precepts of that identity. Released from these rules and conditions, he was free to become someone else. But neither identity could be isolated by the dictates of social discourse. The consequences of Damon’s rebirth are realized within a week, as he loses his wife and children, kills four men, falls in love, witnesses the suicide of his lover, and dies murdered and alone.

The last segments of Damon’s life are punctuated by interactions with the Communist Party and the District Attorney’s office. These intervals are mainly discussions about the nature of Damon’s character and outline Wright’s theory of a “third man” in social discourse. Ely Houston, the District Attorney investigating two of
Damon’s murders, conceives of a third man to explain their deaths, which appear to be a mutual homicide. The men Damon killed were fighting themselves when he confronted them; one was a fascist and the other was a communist. Houston speculates on the character of this third man with Damon, who now is only a person of interest. Houston assumes the murders were ideologically motivated and he sets this motive outside of the extreme right/left spectrum the dead men represent: “in order to kill the two of them on ideological grounds, this killer would have to have the support of a third set of ideas” (671). This “third man with the third set of ideas,” “this outside killer,” sits across from him in the personage of Damon, who is both terrified and amused that the D.A. would stumble so close to his subject. Later, Houston expounds on his thesis, describing the third man as someone “‘speaking our language, dressing and behaving like we do, and yet living on a completely different plane’” (711). While being interrogated by the Communist Party, Damon follows Houston’s lead and associates himself with this construct of a man outside the spectrum of political polarities. After clarifying the similarities between communism and fascism (they’re both totalizing fantasies peopled with individuals addicted to power), Damon insists that he is “‘propaganda-proof’” and functions on “‘pre-political ground’” (752 & 761). He rejects the “‘vast spiderwebs of ideology’” and wants to resists “‘this surge toward the total and absolute in modern life’” (761, 763). Damon warns that “‘the future will reveal many, many more of these absolute systems’” and advocates a radical departure from their discursive realities (764). Such an exit would not only reveal the limits of discourses designed to conceal their own limits, it would also allow individuals an agency within ideological structures designed to determine practice.
Although it only takes him a few days to discover that Damon committed those murders, Houston lacks hard evidence for a conviction. He confronts Damon with his discovery and his theories in a speech similar to Max’s didactic tone at the end of Native Son. “‘You are an atheist’” Houston tells him, “‘and that is the heart of this matter….real atheists are rare, really….Men argue about their not believing in God and the mere act of doing so makes them believers. It is only when they do not feel the need to deny Him that they really do not believe in Him’” (822-3). Houston considers Damon a “‘free man’” who rejects strictures of social discourse most people accept, but this freedom cannot be absolute. Damon’s actions are still disciplined by doctrine even in their transgression of rules and laws: “‘you made one mistake. You saw through all the ideologies, pretenses, frauds, but you did not see through yourself’” (823). “‘Did you calculate every moment?’” Houston adds in emphasis. “‘Or did you act without knowing it? Did you realize what you were doing? Or did you invent the idea of it afterwards?’” (824).

Houston lets him go, but warns him that he will never be truly free: “‘From now on, there will be a dead hand holding life back from you’” (829). This dead hand, a combination of all the crimes he had committed and all the social codes that prefigured the very system Damon employed to reject them, will continue to haunt him. According to Houston, Damon’s attempt and failure to transcend the bipolar framework of his society’s discursive strictures reveal an individual whose agency is determined by systems of relations beyond his control. However, atheists who find themselves too frequently in the company of believers are no less authentically atheistic when they express their worldview in the register of belief. Houston’s analysis does not reveal a “mistake” in Damon’s performance; his analysis reveals the necessity of employing a semblance of
decisive will as a critique of these discursive strictures and thereby expanding the range of imaginable practices.

Wright’s novel appeared during the peak of McCarthyism, perhaps America’s most succinct variety of Cold War discourse. Many initial readers found evidence of an existentialist’s reaction to the Cold War, though the popularity of this reading seems to have receded by the 1970s. In corollary readings, others see Wright’s own ambivalence toward dominant versions of communism (he accepted Marxism and rejected Stalinism) exhibited in Damon’s personal crisis specifically and the novel’s Cold War themes generally. Here, I want to consider ways Wright uses the Cold War narrative as a template to investigate structures of social discourse. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s model of social discourse, we can describe the operating principles of Cold War rhetoric as a closed system where the entirety of social discourse exists in two realms: the “universe of the undiscussed” or “doxa” and the “universe of discourse” or “opinion” (Theory of Practice 168). The field of doxa contains all referents, all self-evident truths that have an immutable relation to natural laws. The field of opinion translates those referents in countervailing spheres, heterodoxy and orthodoxy, which manifest the field of doxa in social discourse. Orthodoxy seeks hegemony in its quest to constitute epistemological certainty; it metastasizes, spreading out from social discourse into social practice. Heterodoxy counters with dissent, sustaining the field of opinion by preventing the field of doxa and orthodox narratives from being synonymous, but using the same categorical referents and strategies as orthodoxy. For example, the narrative of anticommunism exists in a field of opinion where orthodox and heterodox voices contest each other and incite the material conditions of anticommunism and its
transgressions while sustaining an ideological matrix, hermetically contained within a political calculus of success and defeat. Although this dynamic is dominated by orthodoxy, orthodox narratives are not ubiquitous; the history of social discourse is the history of reactions to orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{36}

The Cold War represents a micro field of opinion, where, in America, orthodoxy equals varieties of anticommunism. The central premise of the Cold War insists on the existence of only two legitimate political worldviews. National discourses that did not ostentatiously support or reject communism represented a social system that was still in flux and had not yet matured to first or second-world status. The structural imperative of bipolarity in America’s version of this narrative collapsed distinctions between varieties of dissent from the Left that had been briefly accommodated during the thirties and forties in cultural productions and political rhetoric. Transforming these prerogatives into a national discursive system such as anticommunism utilized older versions of anticommunism, formal state apparatuses and their corporate allies, and the informal participation of individuals.\textsuperscript{37}

Wright’s “third man” in \textit{The Outsider} imagines a position outside of the Cold War’s bipolar paradigm by recognizing that Cold War narratives constitute an orthodoxy and not an entire field of opinion, but he finds the practices of this position still disciplined by social discourse. Damon’s last speech to his former Communist comrades discussed briefly above provides an early version of Wright’s essay, “Tradition and Industrialization: The Historical Meaning of the Plight of the Tragic Elite in Asia and Africa,” first presented at the 1956 First International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists and later included in \textit{White Man, Listen!}\textsuperscript{38} Damon argues that the advent of
modernity changed our objective conditions, with “industry uprooting man from his ancestral, ritualized existence” too quickly for our cultural forms to accommodate (755). “A split took place in man’s consciousness; he began living in the real world by the totems and taboos that had guided him in the world of myths….The real world stands at last before our eyes and we don’t want to look at it, don’t know how to live in it; it terrifies us.” Damon implores his audience to “discipline [their] dread,” to overcome the cognitive dissonance produced in the disjuncture between habitus and really existing conditions by excising the ghosts of the past and recognizing the opportunities of the present (764).

While a figurative death allows Damon a new perspective on himself, as he moves to a new city, meets new people, and encounters new ideas, he also finds his ability to participate in and transcend the larger Cold War discourse confined within the practice of murder. Damon could only achieve a semblance of agency through violence against Cold War principles rather than through a rejection of Cold War discourse, a narrative which contains even practices of contestation. Damon’s semblance of agency, however, dramatizes the first step in a process of liberation, where subjects can name the system of oppression even if they do not yet possess the means of extracting themselves from it.

Wright’s employment of themes of death in Black Power, Pagan Spain, and The Outsider equates the period after death with a qualified freedom, and Wright consistently focuses on the trouble individuals have with new material conditions haunted by old narratives. Perhaps the primary difficulty for social subjects navigating social discourses in search of individual agency will always be false, idealized, and
often diametrical distinctions (such as “freedom” and “captivity”) that organize the way individuals think about the past and the present, forestalling a conscious investment in the future. Popular in every period, the usual antinomies of rhetorical symmetry and cohesion were especially popular during the early years of the Cold War, a social discourse that rushed in after the crisis of the second World War and the collapse of many colonial powers to solidify social orders wildly in flux. Systems of nostalgia encourage the maintenance of these distinctions with pat iconographies and easy premonitions of the past that distort personal, material, and political realities and possibilities.

Wright advocates other versions of social organization outside the bipolarity of Cold War discourse in his public letter to Nkrumrah, echoed a couple years later in the first section of *The Color Curtain*, “Bandung: Beyond Left and Right,” but originally published as the conclusion to *Black Power*:

> You and your people need no faraway “fatherland” in either England or Russia to guide and spur you on; let your own destiny claim your deepest loyalty. You have escaped one form of slavery; be chary of other slaveries no matter in what guise they present themselves, whether as glittering ideas, promises of security, or rich mortgages upon your future. (419)

Simultaneously rejecting the nostalgic solace of a homeland during crises and finding promise in an indigenous destiny, Wright argues that the death of one social order, namely colonialism, provides a unique opportunity to conceptualize a new order. But new orders are not necessarily progressive, as Wright warns in *Pagan Spain*, and these orders can be misrecognized as such by individuals who invest in them. *The Outsider* imagines a position outside of a sphere of discourse defined by orthodox and heterodox polarities and simultaneously affirms the unsustainably of this position in the character of Cross Damon, whose name invokes the figure of a classical daimon with a special
destiny (or “genius” for Romantics, or “spirit” for Christians, or “measure” for Herder, etc.) with a radical difference: here, tragically disfigured as a synthesis (or “cross”) between a scripted future and an intrinsic will. Wright suggests that the vestiges of the old order are stronger than the will of individual practices, even as they are determined by the aggregate of individual practices. Wright also suggests, however, that Damon’s position and his failure, somewhat like Bigger’s at the end of *Native Son*, represent one initially tragic step in a journey towards freedom, towards a consciousness of the narratives determining our selves and towards a positive action nostalgia conspires against. *Black Power*, *Pagan Spain*, and *The Outsider* describe moments when the matrix of social discourse accommodates and subsumes agency independent from practices otherwise determined by a reified future mistaken as an understanding of history, but these texts also insist that these moments do not preclude the revolutionary agency of individuals or social transformations.

13 The many strengths of Michel Fabre’s biography of Wright include long discussions of Wright’s failed projects attempted before he moved to Paris, including a magazine that examined American industrial society via “biographical sketches, simplified academic studies, extracts from novels and…criminal case studies” called “American Pages,” a series of radio programs on black families, and a collection titled “The Meaning of Negro Experience in America” that would include “studies by black writers and sociologists on black culture and the racial problem” (258-267).

14 See Nietzsche’s “First Essay” in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

15 Wright attends numerous cultural events and honestly conveys his confusion and frustration: “I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me,” he notes after a dance performance (161). Later, after a religious ceremony, he laments: “I’m of African descent and I’m in the midst of Africans, yet I cannot tell what they are thinking and feeling” (172). “I feel like the Africans have put their *juju* on me,” he says as his disorientation heightens (199). His final two interpretative sources seem to me intentionally ironic: “I was still in the dark as to how the African mind functioned and I wanted to come to closer grips with it. I appealed at last to a white missionary, Lloyd Shirer, telling him that I wanted to ask an African, a cook or a houseboy, his beliefs” (235).

16 Some assessments of these moments include Eileen Julien’s assertion that Wright’s “failure to read Africa correctly could serve as a cautionary tale for other African Americans” (in her otherwise excellent synthesis of Frantz Fanon, poet/politician Aimé Césaire, and Wright) and John C. Gruesser’s section title for his discussion of *Black Power*: “*Black Power*: Failing to Escape Prepossessions” (Julien 161, Gruesser 9). Kevin Gaines defends Wright by pointing out a psychological context: “Wright was responding
emotionally not only to Ghanaian culture, but also to the poverty, misery, and exploitation he witnessed" (81).

17 Wright frequently expresses the ornery frustration of a confused traveler: “I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me,” he notes after a dance performance (161). Later, after a religious ceremony, he laments: “I’m of African descent and I’m in the midst of Africans, yet I cannot tell what they are thinking and feeling” (172). “I feel like the Africans have put their juju on me,” he says as his disorientation heightens (199). His final two interpretative sources seem to me intentionally ironic: “I was still in the dark as to how the African mind functioned and I wanted to come to closer grips with it. I appealed at last to a white missionary, Lloyd Shirer, telling him that I wanted to ask an African, a cook or a houseboy, his beliefs” (235). This tone, then, might be reconciled with the first sentence of 12 Million Black Voices, Wright’s first long ethnographic study: “Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem” (10).

18 See Carla Cappetti’s Writing Chicago for a discussion of the Chicago school of sociologists’ influence on methodology in Wright’s travel narratives.

19 Wright cites Dr. J. B. Danquah’s The Akan Doctrine of God as a seminal resource for his understanding of African culture, though he also criticizes this work: “his unjustified feeling that he must demonstrate that the African has a religion whose concepts are on par with that of the religion of the Western world” (262). See Franz Fanon’s classic critique of the uses of national consciousness in Wretched of the Earth for another reading of the issues Wright addresses, published about ten years after Black Power.

20 This was not entirely unique, as Taylor Branch frequently notes in his history of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the American 1950s. Ghandi, one of Nkrumah’s mentors, is another example of a contemporary fusion of politics and fervent religious beliefs. One of the more recent examples of the relationship between Pentecostal narratives and radical politics, especially for a group of people economically and politically exiled in their own country, is discussed by Mike Davis at the end of his essay, “Planet of Slums”: “the eschatology of Pentecostalism admirably refuses the inhuman destiny of the Third World city [and] sanctifies those who, in every structural and existential sense, truly live in exile” (34).

21 Paul Preston argues against mechanistic models of fascism that may prompt us to label Franco’s regime as something else. And Franco’s ties to Mussolini included more than material support; Preston notes that moments where “some commentators have seen Mussolini falling short of ‘full scale’ fascism, that is to say, of a notional approximation to Nazism, are precisely where his regime coincides with that of Franco” (Politics of Revenge 15).

22 The official title of this movement was “Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista” (Traditionalist Spanish Falange and the Assembly of the National Syndicalist Offensive). In his classic study of the Falange Española, Fascism in Spain, Stanley Payne suggests that the Falange movement’s era of real consequence was over by the time Franco inaugurated major economic reforms in the late 1950s (shortly after Wright’s visits), an observation seconded by Sheelagh Ellwood’s own review, Spanish Fascism in the Franco Era, which emphasizes the techno-bureaucratic role the movement would be relegated to after the war.

23 See Frances Lannon’s Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy, a 100-year review of Spanish Catholicism for both familiar tales of the Catholic Church’s collusion with fascists and less familiar examples of Spanish clerical proto-liberation theology organized against Franco’s regime.

24 George Orwell, in Spain during the war, also toured Antoni Gaudi’s monument to a style that would later be defined by his name: “[O]ne of the most hideous buildings in the world….Unlike most of the churches in Barcelona it was not damaged during the revolution — it was spared because of its ‘artistic value,’ people said. I think the Anarchists showed bad taste in not blowing it up when they had the chance, though they did hang a red and black banner between its spires” (225).
Wright does, however, compare the systematic and brutal repression of Akan culture in the Gold Coast to Spain’s entrenched and robust traditions: “The African…was free to create a future, but the pagan traditions of Spain had sustained no such mortal wound” (229).

For two relatively recent studies of women’s experience in Spain during and after the Spanish Civil War, see Shirley Mangini’s *Memories of Resistance* and Paul Preston’s *Doves of War*. Mangini’s study details the second-class legal and social status of women in Spain and suggests that one socialist-feminist’s concern about women’s suffrage proved prescient: “‘If women were to intervene in our political life, they would be inclined very sensitively towards the reactionary spirit, since women here – the majority of them…are meek disciples of their confessors, who are, we must not forget, their mentors’” (25). Preston’s unique study looks closely at the experiences of two British volunteers and two Spanish activists, each set featuring a proponent of the Left and the Right.

Bourdieu’s definition collaborates Stanley Aronowitz’s discussion of Marx and the unconscious: “Marx grasped the existence of a ‘second’ nature – believing it to be constituted within humans as the historical sediment of *habitus*, the meeting ground between the physical organization of human beings which generated needs (our biological structure) and the socially-produced needs that became internalized as ‘natural’” (78).

Carmen tells Wright, “if you’re a woman, unmarried, and not a domestic worker, you must put in six months of social service to the state to prove your right to leave Spain,” service which includes memorizing the entire book (21).

Paul Preston points out that boys were also the targeted for political indoctrination during this period, when *Formation del Espiritu Nacional* instruction was compulsory (*Politics of Revenge*).

In his study of *Pagan Spain*, Guy Reynolds considers Wright’s observation here to be a “rewriting of his mentor Stein’s comment that Spain is where one can find what the Western world is made of. Wright recasts Stein to imagine this ‘Westness’ in explicitly ideological terms: Spain as avatar of imperialism” (“Sketches of Spain” 499). Reynolds also provocatively points out what Wright ignores: “Where,” Reynolds asks, “is the discussion of slavery in *Pagan Spain*?” (502). Referencing Robin Blackburn’s *The Making of New World Slavery*, Reynolds concludes: “Blackburn’s magisterial study suggests one reply to Stein’s assertion that in Spain Wright would find ‘what the Western world is made of’: the West is here ‘made of’ slaves, a practice established by colonists from the Iberian peninsula.”

In an early unpublished essay about his grandmother, who he frequently lived with, and the consequences of her strict religious worldview, Wright acknowledges the habitus that informed his early years and continues to haunt him: “My grandmother practiced the Seventh Day Adventist religion, a ritual of worship that reaches down and regulates every moment of living. (I sometimes wonder – even though I have abandoned that faith – if some of my present-day actions are not derived, in whole or in part, from the profound and extreme effects of the emotional conditioning which I underwent at that period.)…Perhaps a man goes through life seeking, blindly and unconsciously, for the repetition of those dim webs of conditioning which he learned at an age when he could make no choice” (Quoted in Fabre, 33 & 36).

Wright himself was probably the source for much of Cross Damon’s biography. They were both autodidacts who grew up in the South, moved to Chicago as soon as they could, worked in the Post Office, eventually moved to New York, and were involved in political activism.

Many on the radical left considered Washington’s anticommunism as the embryonic form of fascism. According to Paul Carter, even some Stevenson supporters believed after Eisenhower’s election in 1952 that “[f]ascism had come at last; that Eisenhower would re-enact the part of the old duffer/war hero Hindenburg, the last properly elected president of prewar Germany; and that rabble-rousing Joe McCarthy would be our Hitler” (25).
The first academic version of this meme might be Charles Glicksberg’s in 1958, but an early definitive version would probably be Widmer Kingsley’s in 1960, when he named *The Outsider* “one of the very few consciously existentialist works in American literature” and “the most sustained American existentialist novel” (13, 14). The reading of French existentialists in connection with Wright’s novel had its disparaging versions even as late as 1992, when James Tuttleton claims “existentialism in ill-digested clumps, unfortunately mars his novel *The Outsider*” (264), but after Michel Fabre wrote his biography on Wright and challenged these readings, most readers found “existentialist” themes in Wright’s work long before he moved to France. See Fabre’s “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists” (1978) for an expansion of the discussion on this topic he began in his biography, Nina Kressner Cobb’s and John Reilly’s discussion of this shift, and Michael Lynch’s more recent 1995 review of *The Outsider* criticism (256-9). Incidentally, Cobb and Lynch both argue *The Outsider* rewrites Dostoyevsky.

Bourdieu’s theory of this dynamic describes it as “a science of the dialectical relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access and the structured disposition within which those structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them” (*Theory of Practice* 3). Toril Moi locates these critical discursive reactions to orthodoxy in the “polysemic” content of communicative action: “[T]hough it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been reduced to total silence. The power struggle intersects in the sign” (158). In his discussion of American socialism, John Laslett describes what these requirements look like in practice: “One is in the formal manifestation of public opinion expressed in law…which in terms of the actual size of the American communist or other kinds of revolutionary movements unquestionably represents overreaction of a very marked kind. More important, however, and at the same time more insidious and widespread, is the informal expression of public opinion, expressed on the one hand in the social unrespectability of Marxism…and on the other hand in a readiness to resort to intimidation or violence (sometimes sanctioned by law, but more often not) to suppress popular movements” (Laslett and Lipset 49).

See “Tradition and Industrialization” for a more explicit (and more notorious) outline of modernity and rationality in relation to colonial subjects (699-728). Here, too, is Wright’s most succinct discussion of himself as a historically determined subject (705-7), which partly inspired Paul Gilroy’s classic 1993 study of modernity and black identity, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and the Double Consciousness*. 
CHAPTER 3
PLACES, POSSESSIONS, AND PATRICIA HIGHSMTIH'S THE PRICE OF SALT

Patricia Highsmith’s literary career began a year after World War Two ended. She earned her first significant commendation when her short story, “The Heroine,” won the O. Henry Memorial Award in 1946. On the strength of this prize and Truman Capote’s recommendation, Highsmith was granted a two-month residency in 1948 at Yaddo, a community of artists and writers in upstate New York. There, she finished her first novel, Strangers on a Train, which was published in 1950 and directed as a movie by Alfred Hitchcock a year later. Traits that would become standard in Highsmith’s fiction are all present here: complex psychological and philosophical explorations written in sparse, accessible prose that dramatizes themes of identity, sexuality, morality, and individuals’ relationships with society. Her fiction frequently features protagonists who reject normative social mores and narratives that reject punishments traditionally meted out for aberrant practices.\textsuperscript{39} Two examples include Highsmith’s most popular character, Tom Ripley, who was always able to murder with impunity throughout five novels, and her lesbian romance, The Price of Salt, which gained fans in part because a homosexual couple faced the reader on the last page alive and relatively happy.\textsuperscript{40}

This chapter looks at Highsmith’s second novel, The Price of Salt, which she published under a pseudonym in 1952, and my discussion considers the ways this text conceptualizes individual agency. Two main ideas discussed in the previous chapter on Richard Wright reappear here: nostalgia provides a trope for thinking about how individuals navigate social discourse, where protagonists accept and reject personal narratives always socially contextualized and temporally situated, and freedom provides a trope for recognizing the narratives that determine our selves and moving towards an
authentic practice nostalgia conspires against. My emphasis in this chapter shifts the
discussion of nostalgia and social discourse away from social orders and towards the
narratives of individuals, and I look at one character in Highsmith’s novel who refuses to
coordinate her identity with practices informed by a habitus she decides does not
resemble an authentic version of herself. In the fifties, a period popularly associated
with conformity and uncontested relationships between individuals and a static social
order, Therese Belivet provides an example of heterodoxy within this moment’s sphere
of opinion – an example in the form of an individual achieving a kind of freedom from
narratives rooted in a past that structure her present. Therese is a nineteen-year-old
woman freshly-moved to New York City who struggles with career options, halfheartedly
dates an annoying boyfriend, and falls in love with an older woman. Her sexual
awakening coincides with a road trip across America, which ends abruptly when her
lover has to rush back and face the penalty of their transgression. Therese returns
some weeks later, transformed and purposeful. As Therese reorients her identity to new
coordinates, she reveals how social discourse establishes these coordinates in the first
place, and her actions illustrate the ways individuals invest in social discourse.

In addition to reframing the previous discussion around different literary artifacts
from the same period, I want to consider the agency of places and possessions.
Nostalgias frequently employ places and objects as touchstones for a material
reference in their ideological narratives. My discussion of The Price of Salt situates the
agency of places and possessions in a dialogical context with the novel’s protagonist.
The proceeding chapter uses the term “aura” to explore the content of this kind of
agency, but here I want to examine how the agency of material spaces and things
works in narratives formally. While the preceding chapter argued that systems of nostalgia possess the present with conjurations of the past that prefigure the future, its argument was focused on how and why individuals invest in social discourse. Now, I want to turn to the ways these conjurations are sourced materially, with nostalgia’s painful longing supplied by the personal investment of individuals in a dialogical process that includes both the agency of individuals and the agency of places and things. My reading of *The Price of Salt* highlights the communicative action between characters, their past and present physical settings, and some physical objects these narratives privilege. Communicative action here refers to moments of reflexive transfer that occur between places, things, and the individuals that come into contact with them. Considering communicative action between people, places, and things will help us understand how experience manifests nostalgia and reveal what literary narratives can tell us about dynamics between individuals and materiality. Ultimately, this chapter argues for considering the agency of materiality in any narrative reading concerned with individuals, the social, and the comprehension of experience.

Much of my interest in place and social relations has been prompted by Doreen Massey’s ongoing investigation of the form and content of space, place, and gender. For Massey, the concept of place includes material environments and the actions of individuals in those spaces. Massey describes the agency of places in terms of articulations and she insists this agency has consequences. “Spatial form,” she argues, “has emergent powers which can have effects on subsequent events. Spatial form can alter the future course of the very histories which have produced it” (*Space, Place, and Gender* 268). An essential part of Massey’s investigation relevant for my project lies in
the distinction she makes between progressive and reactionary modes of place.

Reactionary modes conceptualize place “as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity,” and progressive modes define place as “absolutely not static” and “full of internal conflicts” (5, 155). “[A] ‘place,’” according to Massey, “is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location. And the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location…and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location…will in turn produce new social effects” (168). Like Massey, Heike Schäfer understands our relationship to places as dialogical. “[E]nvironmental perception,” she tell us, “is an interaction and…the direction of this interaction tends to be reversible. It is a dialogue between experiencing or narrating subject and the environing world” (332). She asserts that “our observations and conceptions are literally emplaced” and that “the environment affects our readings of it.” I prefer Massey and Schäfer’s description, which could be contrasted with Yi-Fu Tuan’s earlier distinction between place and space, where place represents “security” and “a pause in movement,” and space represents “freedom” (3, 138).

The agencies of places are always aided and abetted by social relations and by individuals themselves, and an awareness of the sort that Massey calls for requires the critical practices that create this awareness. I find Massey’s ideally dialectical version of place to be more politically and theoretically valid than vernacular versions, but I think the ontological validity of her version depends on a key element that she does not emphasize: the agency of individuals. Places tend to reify spaces, delimiting the ability of individuals in those places to recognize social relations and produce new social
effects. In other words, I am arguing that the parts that form the singularity of any place are not equal, and the agency of individuals plays a crucial role in the dynamics of these places and the social effects they produce. If individuals are not conscious of the role their own agency plays in these dynamics, the new social effects produced there will look a lot like the old ones. What matters most in discussions of place as an actually existing construct are the ways individuals conceptualize and respond to places, practices that Highsmith’s novel dramatizes particularly well. All places are constructed, and both the agency involved in constructing places and the social mechanisms that transform reflexivity into articulation are beyond the scope of this essay. What I am interested in here are the consequences of placial agency and the agency of things, communicated between the novel’s characters and the places and things they encounter, and the agency of the characters themselves.

My interest in the agency of things owes much to Bill Brown’s investigation of the role material objects play in literary narratives. Brown’s project of troubling immediate comprehensions of things via explications of literary narratives fits neatly into my own investigation of the ways social discourse can be comprehended. In *The Material Unconscious*, Brown proposes a “new materialism” that would “investigate how the literary helps to identify the cultural illogic that exposes history’s noninevitability. This does not mean displaying the shards of the past as so many bits and pieces; rather it entails testing the limits of those shards to assume recognizable form” (18). My argument about nostalgia insists that nostalgic systems do exactly the opposite, that all nostalgias strive to conceal history’s noninevitability by positing an idealized version of the past that functions as a blueprint for the future. Brown’s version of materialism
provides a hermeneutic that transcends the popular antinomies of history writing between ideology and ontology and between consciousness and practice by allowing us to momentarily privilege materiality without neglecting human agency. Toward that end, considering the role of places and possessions in a novel that features a protagonist who rejects a scripted future highlights the significance of materiality in the constructions, maintenances, and revisions of social discourse and individual identities.

Brown elaborates on this new materialism, which augments rather than rejects dialectical materialism, in his essay “Thing Theory.” Here, Brown defines old materialism in poetic terms that can also provide an excellent description of nostalgia’s logic:

Why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else – in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory. From there, they might offer us dry ground above those swirling accounts of the subject, some place of origin unmediated by the sign, some stable alternative to the instabilities and uncertainties, the ambiguities and anxieties, forever fetishized by theory. Something warm, then, that relieves us from the chill of dogged ideation, something concrete that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction. (1)

Brown’s materialism, like Massey’s progressive modes of place, avoids the desire to name the referent but not the practice of naming, a distinction that affords us a space to recognize materiality as a practice and to critique our relationship with things. (Proponents of a progressive nostalgia also highlight a distinction between desire and practice, but I would argue that a corollary of this kind between materialism and nostalgia fails precisely because longing is always an intrinsic part of nostalgia’s logic, and longing is never critical of itself.) Brown’s critical new materialism hinges on a social component, and he argues that this kind of reading “takes objects for granted only in order to grant them their potency—to show how they organize our private and public affection” (7). In A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature, Brown
points out how interactions with inanimate objects can create a dynamic of agency, a “quotidian animism”: “Our habitual interactions with objects both bring them to life and impose order on that life; our habits both mark time and allow us to escape from time, as we perform the present in concert with the future and the past” (64). According to Brown, material objects “transcend their merely physical instantiation” when they interact with people and exert an agency not always recognized by people (185). Brown calls this ability and tendency to interrupt human consciousness “tyranny” in his discussion of the mysterious power of the Great Seal in Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*, an example of a “possession that is irreducible to ownership” (13). Throughout Brown’s “tale of possession,” he consistently stresses the idea that the relationship between people and things is a dialogical process contextualized by culture and time. Like Massey’s theory of people and places, this process necessarily becomes a discursive dynamic between individuals, places, and things within, for my purposes here, the postwar American social.

Perhaps most importantly, as Susan Buck-Morris reminds us in her discussion of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, an awareness of materiality allows us to recognize real history buried beneath the “mythic immediacy of the present” (x). Buck-Morris, with Benjamin’s own words, describes his project as a “‘materialist philosophy of history,’ constructed with ‘the utmost concreteness’ out of the historical material itself” (3). Benjamin’s critical interrogation of things themselves and the symbolic action these things participate in provides us with a better understanding of how tradition and ideology function in social discourse. Benjamin and Buck-Morris’s discussions are mostly focused on modernity, but Buck-Morris also argues that Benjamin’s application
of materialist philosophy facilitates a revolutionary praxis more generally: “the rupture of tradition now frees symbolic powers from conservative restraints for the task of social transformation, that is, for a rupture of those social conditions of domination that, consistently, have been the source of tradition” (Buck-Morris 279). While some theorists suggest that material objects encourage personal investment in nostalgias and help sustain modes of nostalgia in social discourse, Benjamin, Buck-Morris, and Brown’s work suggests that, by applying a critical consciousness to the material world, the opposite may also be true.42

For the purposes of my argument, the things I discuss are uniquely possessions and, for the most part, the places I discuss are spaces where the characters live. These distinctions emphasize an intimate investment, but the agency of places and things cannot be consequential without the ideological literacy practiced by individuals who come into contact with these material spaces and objects. This literacy allows people to function in social life, to, as an early theorist of space said about the function of houses, “give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (Bachelard 17). The rituals by which ideologies are practiced (for example, patterns of sexuality, professions, parenthood) are articulated in a field of discourse and become, to use Émile Durkheim’s terminology, “collective representations.”43 Collective representations simulate meaning ideologically with a signifier or assemblage of signifiers that accumulates enough use in social discourse to form a consensus of mass recognition. This consensus posits a limit in a continuum of representation, which results in a narrative of orthodoxy. Dominant, orthodox narratives in social discourse are intrinsically ideological, in that they maintain the established order by perpetuating false consciousness, simultaneously alienating
individuals from real conditions of experience as they allow individuals to participate in these narratives through practices of reflection. This is not to say that ideologies always prevent individuals from understanding themselves or their society, but, like nostalgias, ideologies do exactly that when they are not critically comprehended.

Highsmith’s opening section of *The Price of Salt* introduces the tone of Therese’s character by describing an awareness of herself and her surroundings before she discovers options for a new identity, and this section also provides a convenient moment to frame my own discussion of reflexive communication and material agency. The novel begins with Therese eating lunch in the workers’ cafeteria of a large department store where she has taken a short-term position as a sales clerk in the toy department during the busy Christmas season. An almost formal exposition of Taylorism, Frankenberg’s cafeteria corrals workers past “wooden barricades by the cash register” towards “tables in search of a spot they could squeeze into” (3). The cafeteria emanates “the din of a single huge machine,” which provides a fitting soundtrack to Therese’s choice of a lunchtime break distraction: the store’s employee manual. “Are *You* Frankenberg Material?” the manual asks her, after listing the benefits of employment, including three weeks of vacation achieved with fifteen years of service (4). Frankenberg’s provides many in-house services for their employees, and Therese notes the environment only lacks a church and a hospital for birthing new automatons. The features and benefits of this place do not form a environment of well-being or ease: “[t]he store was organized so much like a prison,” Therese thought, and “she was part of it.” Therese looks towards a window to feel relief from the imposition of the store and the cafeteria, a “little square section of window in the corner open to a white sky” with “no
bird to fly in or out,“ and tries “to think of something else.” Her mind cannot escape her surroundings; quickly, she “was back again.”

Therese remains passively influenced by the agency of Frankenberg’s generally and the workers’ cafeteria specifically during most of this experience. She soon realizes, however, “what bothered her at the store” when she thinks about how her life has seemed “less real” since she started working here:

[T]he store intensified things that had always bothered her…the pointless actions, the meaningless chores…the sense that everyone was incommunicado with everyone else and living on an entirely wrong plane, so that the meaning, the message, the love, or whatever it was that each life contained, never could find its expression. It reminded her of conversations at tables, on sofas, with people whose words seemed to hover over dead, unstillrable things, who never touched a string that played. (4-5)

The built environment of Frankenberg’s articulates a narrative of a staid and static life where individuals are reduced to common denominators that cannot accommodate personalized expression or encourage novel experience. Here, freedom and the thoughts and actions that represent freedom are already articulated; Frankenberg’s even provided a company camp for the three weeks of release time earned by its most loyal workers. Significantly, this narrative does not originate in the store itself. Frankenberg’s “intensified things” about her life and her world that Therese had already noticed and had already been concerned about. The workers who “wandered about between the tables in search of a spot they could squeeze into” dramatize and emphasize Frankenberg’s narrative of conformity, and the sealed window represents the predominant and pervasive character of both the narrative itself and Therese’s relation to its precepts.
The communicative action of Frankenberg’s placial agency is effective because of the personal investment by individuals like Therese, and this investment initially subsumes Therese’s individual agency because she does not recognize her agency as a key element in the productive dynamic of this place. Frankenberg’s built environment communicates with Therese through a kind of gaze, an act that initiates a relation between them. The narrative situates Therese in a position of passive relation to Frankenberg’s, as the unconscious recipient of communicative action. She exists in these moments as a body acted upon. Her passivity in this dynamic subsumes her agency into reflexivity: she responds to Frankenberg’s communication by acknowledging the precepts of its narrative (life is staid and static, and individuals are common denominators who do not have idiosyncratic ideas or experiences). Frankenberg’s gaze and Therese’s response illustrate reflexivity, defined here as a dialogical moment between two principals, one being active and the other being passive.

The absence of recognition does not negate agency; this absence subsumes agency into another mode of action, into a different kind of response. Therese’s response to Frankenberg’s gaze is a reflection and these communicative actions (its gaze and her response) constitute a dialogical moment even in the absence of Therese’s conscious acknowledgement. Frankenberg’s gaze via Therese’s reflection articulates a position of dominance, suggesting the precepts of a preordered and measured life, dead to change and progress. Instigating the act itself does not achieve this kind of dominance; only an absence of the act’s recognition by Therese completes this position. Therese’s response – the reflection of the gaze – functions as a catalyst
for the dynamics that result in this moment. I am not saying that these suggestions can only be articulated if Therese fails to actively acknowledge Frankenberg’s role here; rather, the mode of Therese's agency, subsumed into reflexivity, profoundly influences this communicative action. Frankenberg’s gaze initiates its own position of dominance, but this gaze is not solipsistic. The absence of its act’s active reception by Therese conditions this act’s meaning, forming the communicative substance of the gaze only in its reflection. The subsuming of Therese’s agency disallows recognition but facilitates a reaction, which takes the form of a reflection.

Therese’s passivity in this dynamic between herself and the space she occupies ends with a moment of comprehension when she discovers the relationship between her thoughts and emotions and the communicative agency of “what bothered her at the store.” This recognition becomes more pronounced when she meets Ruby Robichek, a long-term employee with a visage “like all the fifty-year-old faces of women who worked at Frankenberg’s, stricken with an everlasting exhaustion and terror” who introduces herself with both her name and her employee number (6). Her kind personality overcomes Therese’s first impression (influenced by the cafeteria, I would argue) of Ruby’s plain appearance and rough manners and “suddenly the woman’s ugliness disappeared” (7). After they are released from the store, Therese goes home with Ruby for dinner. Ruby’s house, “like the one Therese lived in, only brownstone and much darker and gloomier,” suggests parallels between Ruby and Therese (11). Therese quickly sees her life reflected in Ruby and her apartment, an observation that she cannot immediately source in this new environment. “Therese could never remember how it began. She could not remember the conversation just before and the

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conversation didn’t matter, of course.” Communicative action functions here like ideology, with its traces of origin and construction erased, affirming its conclusions as natural.

Ruby’s past contrasts sharply with her present circumstances, and she tells Therese her story to explain this shift and, perhaps, to argue for another version of herself. Ruby used to own a small dress company before her eyes started to fail and she was forced to find a job selling mass-produced dresses at Frankenberg’s. She unearths an artifact of her previous profession and Therese soon finds herself in one of these old handmade dresses. The first physical description the reader gets of Therese describes her reflection in a mirror, her body augmented and possessed by Ruby’s dress, “[h]erself meeting herself. This was she, not the girl in the dull plaid skirt” (13). The image of herself in Ruby’s dress startles Therese, and “[s]uddenly Mrs. Robichek and her apartment were like a horrible dream that she had just realized she was dreaming.” The communicative agency of Ruby’s apartment and her dress reflects a parallel past that ended in a current despair, imposed on Therese as a projection of her own future. Highlighting a material version of reflection in communicative action, this scene reveals the agencies of a place (Ruby’s apartment) and a thing (Ruby’s, and now Therese’s, dress), and dramatizes how materiality encourages and affirms ideas in a way similar way to the practices of verbal communication and human agency.

Once again, Therese initially reacts passively to the agency of her environment, and, again, she quickly comprehends the meaning and significance of this communication:

It was the hopelessness of Mrs. Robichek’s ailing body and her job at the store, of her stack of dresses in the trunk, of her ugliness, the hopelessness
of which the end of her life was entirely composed. And the hopelessness of herself, of never being the person she wanted to be and of doing the things that person would do. It was the terror of this hopelessness that made her want to shed the dress and flee before it was too late, before the chains fell around her and locked. (14)

Therese’s ideal career would be to design sets for plays; she had attended a couple workshops, designed several models, and had been successfully employed as a set designer for a brief period of time. She took the salesperson job at Frankenberg’s because she was having difficulty living on the income the itinerant nature of her chosen field provided. Ruby’s life suggests a future version of Therese’s, complete with an artistic vision, a craft talent, and an independent vocation, all foiled by time and fate. Ruby’s house and her possessions, including the dress she gives to Therese, articulate a likely trajectory Therese would rather ignore. She leaves Ruby’s apartment, and leaves the dress behind, to escape that prefigured future, even as she recognizes the content of this dress and the apartment’s agency depends as much on her own self: “It was easy, after all, simply to open the door and escape. It was easy, she thought, because she was not really escaping at all” (15).

In addition to displaying the relationship between the agencies of materiality and individuals, *The Price of Salt* consistently ties the content of material agency to interpretations of time. This communicative action, as it is facilitated and comprehended by individuals, often suggests narratives about the past and the future, while maintaining the viability of its content by sourcing itself firmly in the present. After the introduction of Therese’s character and her relationship with Ruby (whom the text frequently allegorizes with the department store that employs her), Therese meets another older woman at Frankenberg’s. Carol Aird becomes the catalyst for Therese’s personal trajectory as an individual who develops an agency liberated from the
communicative action of her environment, which includes the material agency of places and things, and the tenets of social discourse these inanimate objects articulate. Carol presents a sharp contrast to Ruby as a beautiful, wealthy customer in her early thirties who buys a doll for her daughter from Therese. Therese immediately falls in love with Carol and sends her a formal greeting card, signed with her employee number. They are soon meeting for drinks, and their first conversation outlines one version of how individual identity and the past relate to each other, a theme the novel repeats with variety several times. When Therese tells Carol her story, she lies about her parents and claims to be an orphan. Therese surprises herself with this contrived biography, but she also discovers a potential inherent in constructing a new identity: “she was happy now, starting today. She had no need of parents or background” (39). “What could be duller than past history!” Therese says to Carol, who responds enigmatically, “Maybe futures that won’t have any history.” Utopia for both characters here resembles a future untethered from formal versions, and identities free to transform the present into something meaningful and liberating.

After they mutually conspire to reject a blueprint drafted for them by a past in which they were obliged to participate, Therese experiences a moment of clarity with an emotion definitively at odds with heteronormative narratives: “An indefinite longing, that she had been only vaguely conscious of at times before, became now a recognizable wish” (40). Heteronormativity, rigorously naturalized and codified in the social discourse of postwar America, even to the extent that it became a constitutive element in categories that distinguished American communities and values from their Soviet counterparts, here represents a normalcy that merits critiquing and almost merits
rejecting. Later, when Therese reconsiders her longing for Carol, she can only compare it to the rumored and storied varieties of romance: “It would be almost like love, what she felt for Carol, except that Carol was a woman. It was not quite insanity, but it was certainly blissful” (42). Therese’s experience with her boyfriend, Richard, a socially-acceptable alternative to Carol, pales in comparison to something so viscerally real and authentic, “so absurd, so embarrassing a desire,” and her conversations with Carol encourage a recognition and acknowledgment of this desire, which functions as the beginning of a new identity for Therese.

A marked change in both Therese and in her relationship with Carol occurs when Therese visits Carol’s house in a northern suburb just outside of Manhattan.44 Carol’s husband moved out a couple of months before, and trace elements of his presence are scattered throughout the suburban residence. They enter through the living room, an interior public space, and pause as Carol “looked around the living room, and the same puzzled dissatisfaction came back to her face. ‘Let’s go upstairs. It’s more comfortable,’” she tells Therese (49). Carol gives Therese a quick tour, including the game room, which Carol claims as her favorite, and they end up in Carol’s bedroom. Sitting on the bed, Therese feels at ease reclining in the warmly furnished room, encouraged and relieved to tell Carol her true story:

Carol asked her three questions, one that had to do with happiness, one about the store, and one about the future. Therese heard herself answering. She heard her voice rise suddenly in a babble, like a spring that she had no control over, and she realized that she was in tears. She was telling Carol all that she feared and disliked, of her loneliness, of Ruby, and of gigantic disappointments. (54)

Carol’s three questions are concerned with Therese’s current emotional state, her career, and her future prospects, but they lead Therese to share concerns from her
past, indicating the haunted quality of her daily life and her imagination. Therese’s father died when she was young, and her mother abandoned her to a parochial school when she remarried. After Therese graduated and left the “home,” she remained rootless and alone; “She had fled them all” (56). “I just disappeared. I suppose it was my idea of starting a new life, but mostly I was ashamed,” Therese tells Carol. Carol finds these conditions appealing: “Disappeared! I like that. And how lucky you are to be able to do it. You’re free. Do you realize that?” Therese enjoys these new environs, while Carol still feels trapped by a life this same environment sustains and portends.

The sense of home Carol’s place provided Therese resembles the sense of community and solace she found in Richard’s room at his parents’ house, but her experience with Carol diminished the import of that response the next time she spent time with Richard in his room: “She loved his room – because it stayed the same and stayed in the same place – yet today she felt an impulse to burst from it. She was a different person from the one who had stood here three weeks ago” (78). This moment on Christmas day juxtaposes the two romantic figures in her life by placing their own homes experientially adjacent to each other; Therese had left Carol’s place that morning to spend the afternoon with Richard. Carol’s and Richard’s houses had begun to represent their characters and the experiences Therese had with both of them, and the narratives they articulate resonate in Therese’s reflection: “This morning she had awakened in Carol’s house. Carol was like a secret spreading through her, spreading through this house, too, like a light invisible to everyone but her.” The traditional setting of Richard’s family during an epitome of annual family gatherings provides something comforting and familiar and yet stultifying, while Carol’s house, sparsely decorated for
the season, suggested a liberating alternative worldview, mixed with Therese’s own
growing non-normative desire.

Richard, a struggling art student who frequents bohemian circles in the Village
while biding his time before accepting his destiny as his father’s industrial apprentice,
has some attractive qualities, including his family. The Semcos are old-world Russian
immigrants who provide Therese with a traditional and formal family structure. They are
fond of her and she often celebrates holidays with them. In a thematic repetition of
Therese’s earlier experience with Ruby, Richard’s mom also decides to give Therese a
homemade dress. “She’s already got the material. She wants to measure you for it,”
Richard tells Therese (44). On this Christmas day, Therese finds herself surrounded by
Richard’s family and becomes overwhelmed with a sense of home and community,
however transient this sense proves to be:

They had measured her with a tape in the living room, in the midst of all the
singing and present opening….Suddenly Therese embraced [Richard’s
mother] and kissed her firmly on the cheek,…in that one second pouring out
in the kiss, and in the convulsive clasp of her arm, the affection Therese
really had for her, that Therese knew would hide itself again as if it did not
exist, in the instant she released her. (80)

As she leaves, Richard’s mom warns her: “‘I’m going to make you that dress!’ Richard’s
mother called to Therese, wagging her finger admonishingly. ‘I know your
measurements!’” Crafting a “measure” of Therese with numbers and tape serves to
reinforce the costume of tradition and inheritance Richard’s mother wants to provide to
a prospective daughter-in-law, and it emphasizes the way these molds are
simultaneously independent of the original object and premised on the original object.

Ruby’s homemade dress, with its succinct metaphorical contrast to Ruby’s current
employment, and Richard’s mother’s dress, with its succinct reference to traditional
domestic craft, projects striking statements about individuality, the past, and a proscribed future – statements Therese readily reads correctly. Four other things in Therese’s possession contain more subtle agencies, although they share a similar narrative arc: they are all initially endowed with a meaning related to the past and they are eventually released or destroyed in acts that correspond to a freedom from the narratives they articulate. When Therese decides to buy Carol a present, she pawns a silver medallion Richard had given her. Money was not the object: “She knew she had pawned it only because it was from Richard, and she didn’t want it any longer” (63). Therese was replacing the narrative this object articulated with another, more current version of her own design. Another episode revealing her growing disillusionment with her identity features a wooden Madonna she bought when she first arrived in New York City; it was “the one beautiful thing in her apartment” (17). As it tips off her shelf, Richard makes an impressive leap for it, saves it, and proudly hands it to Therese. Therese's reaction underscores the transition this episode suggests: “‘Thanks.’ Therese took it from him. She lifted it to set it back, then brought her hands down quickly and smashed the figure to the floor” (139). When this occurs, Therese has already realized her love for Carol. The idol of the Madonna, which she prays to on occasion, articulates a classic narrative of traditional womanhood she rejects. Richard, connected to this traditional narrative of heterosexuality and conventional domesticity, attempts to preserve the narrative’s representation, but Therese confirms her rejection of both the narrative’s precepts and Richard himself by destroying the narrative’s object. Near the end of the novel, Therese make a final purge of things she possesses that are linked to a former worldview. Sister Alice, who cared for Therese in a parochial school until
adulthood, gave Therese a pair of green gloves, which she never wore but kept even as her hands outgrew the gloves’ size. The gloves appear in the narrative during moments of crisis when Therese feels herself adrift and alone (6 & 106). These gloves provide her a sense of solace and represent a connection to a lost past of comfort and community. Only when Therese attains a sense of personal agency does it occur to her that this artifact can be thrown away (149).

The fourth object relevant to my argument plays an important role in the narrative’s discussion of individual agency. On Christmas day, after Richard’s family collectively forms a measure of Therese, Richard and Therese fly a handmade Russian kite in a nearby park. Initially, Therese has trouble with the impertinent toy: “She hadn’t won against the kite. It hadn’t done what she wanted it to do….Now it was climbing in short, upward darts, as if it had found its own mind suddenly, and a will to escape” (81). Therese notices a communicative agency in the kite, reflected in her emotions, as she muses on her desire for Carol and her more conventional relationship with Richard: “She felt the kite meant something, this particular kite, at this minute” (82). Therese asks Richard what he thinks about homosexuality, and Richard insists such desires are rooted in an individual’s environment, that “those things don’t just happen. There’s always some reason for it in the background.” The kite begins to comply with her design and she accommodates the kite’s flight in her own emotions. The kite’s buoyancy and loft lift her from the heteronormative orthodoxy Richard intones; “she was happier than she had ever been before. And why worry about defining everything?” The relation between her own agency and the communicative action of the kite increases as it lifts higher and higher; “When she let her arms go all the way up, she could feel it lifting her
a little, delicious and buoyant, as if the kite might really take her up if it got all its strength together.” Richard decides it would be more fun to watch the kite fly away, and the reader could assume that this decision reflects the fact that he was not guiding the kite himself. He cuts the string violently, and Therese reacts, “speechless with anger and amazement. There was an instant of fear…and then she staggered backward, the pull gone, the empty stick in her hand” (84). When Richard severs the line connecting her to the kite, her first reaction reveals the power of her investment in material agency, and only later, when she achieves a relative consciousness about her relationships to the things she owns (like “a sweater you particularly liked, and throw it away finally”) does she also recognize that the investment, then in the form of reflecting the kite’s articulated narrative of flight and freedom, was ultimately sourced in her own agency, that individuals “could make another kite” (106).

The kite’s flight also provides the context for the novel’s first explicit discussion (of three) about homosexuality. Perhaps the most important section of Therese and Richard’s conversation includes her insistence that homosexuality should not be considered a comprehensive category for individuals. She rebuffs Richard’s suggestion of such a definitive character: “I don’t mean people like that. I mean two people who fall in love suddenly with each other, out of the blue. Say two men or two girls” (82). Homosexuality as a definitive category for individuals appeared sometime in the nineteenth century, and since then it has provided costumes imposed on individuals by social discourse. The dress designed by Richard’s mother preludes the kite episode, and it eventually plays an important part in the early stages of Therese’s relationship with Carol, during a period when Therese’s own agency was differed and subsumed by
exterior narratives, including Carol herself. The dress, originally measured from Therese’s form, becomes a mold she feels reluctant to accept as her own. Before Therese and Carol set off on their road trip, Therese collects some things from her apartment, including the finished dress newly arrived at her doorstep. Carol wants her to wear it, but Therese demurs; it reminds her of Richard, whom she had recently broken up with, and, as she tells Carol, the traditional cut and pattern uncomfortably suggest a wedding dress (149). Carol admires it, even if she thinks of it as a “museum piece” (150). Therese relents and decides to wear the dress to please Carol. In a scene that nods to the earlier episode in Ruby’s apartment, Therese studies a reflection of herself and her dress in a mirror: “She untied the waist and the sleeves, glanced at herself in the mirror, then tied them all back again. If Carol wanted her to keep it on, she would.”

This compromise hinges on the communicative action between Therese’s new dress and her own desire to acquiesce to Carol’s desire. And again, Therese eventually becomes aware of this thing’s agency, as she and Carol argue without an obvious cause: “And the mood went on. Nothing Therese said or did could change it, and Therese blamed the inhibiting dress for not being able to think of the right things to say.” Therese recognizes herself possessed by a thing designed especially for her, an object with a formal design of measurements and fabric, and the larger design of tradition and inheritance imposed by an eager perspective mother-in-law. Carol may be amused or may simply want to reinforce the distance between them by encouraging the agency of the dress by asking Therese to wear it.

This episode provides a set piece that emphasizes the distance between the beginning of Therese’s personal trajectory and its end, a distance dramatized by her
cross-country journey with Carol, which culminates in Therese’s transformation from a passive recipient of exterior agencies to an individual who becomes conscious of herself and her own agency. Therese’s mood that evening eventually abates, and the first half of the novel ends with Therese and Carol making plans to “[see] America” on a road trip across the country (118). Section two of *The Price of Salt* removes Carol and Therese from their homes, their communities, and their possessions, creating a new environment where their own individual agencies are set in relief against a larger national context.

The modern idea of authenticity provides a useful device for conceptualizing the process of individuals participating in the dynamic between the communicative action of exterior agency and the practice of reflection that facilitates the content of this action. In other words, authenticity can mean the ways individuals actively interpret and participate in the world around them. According to Charles Taylor, the modern version of an individual’s “authenticity” began in the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment belief that we all possess an innate sense of morality (*Ethics of Authenticity* 25). Later in that century, Herder described this intrinsic property as a person’s own “measure,” a novel conception that suggested the existence of the individual’s unique “character” (28). Our modern conception of individuals as separate entities in a collective society can be heard in the writings of Descartes, but the primacy of reason wasn’t coupled with an innate sense of moral virtue until later, when it was popularized in literature by the Romantics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and through the political sanctification of individualism in American, French, and Haitian revolutions. This virtue, a rational extension of the idea that everyone possesses a personal truth, asserts by proxy the importance of discovering this essence and aligning one’s life with it. Taylor
argues that authentic identities are created in the public articulation of identities ("Politics of Recognition" 31), and he also suggests that “articulation” does not refer to singular pronouncements; it is an explicitly dialogical action:

My discovering my identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized with others. This is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new critical importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others. (Ethics of Authenticity 47-8)

Here, discovering a personal essence and living authentically in social life forms a dialogical process, though we now understand that the authenticity or essence of an individual can be considered the result of a dialogical process and the product of the symbolic activity of social discourse. In his essay, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival,” K. Anthony Appiah agrees with Taylor, as he argues that a pursuit of authenticity means a pursuit of recognition, and he refers to the resulting paradigm as the “politics of recognition” (154, 158). And, significantly, Taylor's claim that the “genesis of the human mind is…not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical” suggests that individual authenticity only occurs dialogically, that the authentic selves are constructed by articulations (“Politics” 32). Individuals do not construct their identities alone; they depend on the recognition and the affirmation of other subjects and social discourse.

Ideological systems of nostalgia and authenticity articulate social narratives in similar ways. Like the mode of authenticity, nostalgias manipulate individuals' faculties of representation by appropriating what individuals recognize as transcendental signifiers, providing individuals a site of return that can rebound existential doubt and nausea. Relationships to real conditions of existence become obscured and deferred
when individuals invest in this system of representation, which always appears to have already been internalized and substantiated by social discourse. However, Fredric Jameson, in his discussion of historical novels, asserts that although representations convincingly mediate reality, these representations also allow a recognition of their mediation; they “can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past…. [I]t is a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement [in Plato’s cave] and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Postmodernism 53). Jameson’s point about a certain slippage in systems of representation that allows a comprehension of real conditions of existence and an awareness of social discourse’s ever-operating symbolic action concurs with the formula for authenticity I use here. Therese, in the first half of The Price of Salt, experiences external communicative agencies of places and things in two stages: first, she passively reflects the narratives of these communicative actions, transforming these narratives into personal responses that affect the way she views herself and the world around her. Second, she becomes aware of this communication by comprehending its source and interpreting the narrative actively and consciously. In the second half of Highsmith’s novel, Therese begins to articulate another version of herself, a version which can also be sourced in the communicative action of materiality, but which incorporates a new authenticity molded from a more active participation and understanding of the social discourse this communicative action originates from.
Therese’s transformation into an active participant in nonverbal communicative action begins with a conversation she has with Carol at a roadside diner. The diner features a large model of a traditional Dutch village in the front window. Therese, who builds such models herself for stage productions, excitedly points out the impressive craft to Carol, who not only fails to register appreciation, but also criticizes Therese’s enthusiasm: “‘I wonder if you’ll really enjoy this trip,’ Carol said. ‘You so prefer things reflected in a glass, don’t you? You have your private conception of everything. Like that windmill. It’s practically as good as being in Holland to you. I wonder if you’ll even like seeing real mountains and real people’” (156). Carol’s reaction “crushed” Therese, who “knew better than Carol the work that had gone into the little village, but she could not get a word out.” Their trip begins with this experience, with Therese “floundering in a sea without direction or gravity, in which she knew only that she could mistrust her own impulses” (157). Set adrift in the open landscape of the American highway with Carol determining their direction and purpose, Therese struggles to identify an element in herself that could provide a lodestar independent of Carol’s version of their relationship and their experiences. Therese’s awareness of an element in herself that recognizes a fallacy in Carol’s judgment indicates a reference point for independence and, with growth and encouragement of this element, the possibility of an unscripted future.

Even with this awareness, her dependence on Carol’s interpretive narratives intensifies when they reach Chicago, a city Carol had lived in years before:

Her impression of Lakeshore Drive was always to be of a broad avenue studded with mansions all resembling the White House in Washington. In the memory there would be Carol’s voice, telling her about a house here and there where she had been before, and the disquieting awareness that for a while this had been Carol’s world, as Rapallo, Paris, and other places
Therese did not know had for a while been the frame of everything Carol did. (164)

Chicago, the main destination of their trip, has the distinction of being an excitingly novel place for Therese and one of the last places where Therese’s agency remains obscured by exterior narratives. Carol’s familiarity with the city and Therese’s reliance on Carol’s interpretation are reflected in the dynamics of their relationship, as Therese almost feels confident enough to make amorous advances on Carol, whose emotional aloofness narrates the physical parameters of their relationship and discourages another interpretation. In Chicago, Therese cannot initiate an alternative to Carol’s script: “If she simply asked, she thought, Carol would let her sleep tonight in the same bed with her” (165).

Waterloo, their next stop after they extend their trip westward, becomes the site of a turning point in the maturation of Therese’s character. Here, Therese and Carol consummate their relationship and Therese experiences a sense of sexual fulfillment for the first time. The novel’s description of her orgasm parallels many of her previous movements towards a comprehension of reflective agency in a much more temporally compressed moment. At first, her physical sensations subsume herself, and her agency becomes incapable of articulating a narrative to comprehend this experience: “her body seemed to vanish in widening circles that leaped further and further, beyond where she thought she could follow” (167). Next, she becomes aware of an arrow (perhaps referencing an untethered kite), flying through space, abstracted from the experience and her interpretative agency. But almost immediately after her vision of the arrow, Therese comprehends her relationship to this object and the import of the imaginary object’s communicative agency: “The arrow seemed to cross an impossibly wide abyss
with ease, seemed to arc on and on in space, and not quite to stop. Then she realized that…the arrow was herself” (168). Afterwards, everything looks different, and Therese’s own mood becomes projected onto the space around her, usurping the reflective transfer the hotel room had previously initiated; “Therese looked up at the corners of the room, that were much brighter now.” Therese’s altered perspective continues to affect the communicative agency of her material environment when she leaves their room: “She stepped into the elevator and turned around in the exact center of it. She felt a little odd, as if everything had shifted and distances were not quite the same, balance was not quite the same” (169). When Therese thinks about the changes in herself, she recognizes the pivotal nature of this sexual experience and collapses the distinctions between the experience itself and the place where it occurred, with the town of Waterloo becoming a place marker for this transformational experience: “Ordinary sounds, yet the moment was not an ordinary one. No moment had been an ordinary once [sic] since the morning in Waterloo” (174).

The next morning, Therese and Carol have their first frank discussion about homosexuality. Carol insists that much of human behavior can be traced to the repeated performance of a habitus validated in social discourse. Normative actions, for Carol, are conscious concessions and unconscious capitulations. People accumulate more instructions and perform more normative actions over time, a process that provides young people a relatively greater opportunity to practice unorthodox behavior. “[W]hom you sleep with depends so much on habit,” Carol tells Therese (172). “And you’re too young to make enormous decisions. Or habits.” Carol also argues that the place where they are now has influenced their actions and allowed them to experience something
authentically aligned with their desires: “you have to live in the world….I mean responsibilities in the world that other people live in and that might not be yours. Just now it isn’t, and that’s why in New York I was exactly the wrong person for you to know” (176). Therese senses the liberating effects of their current environs and hopes these effects can be sourced in something besides the foreign open road, and Carol disagrees when Therese expresses doubt about their ability to maintain a relationship upon their return to New York (179). Removed from the placial agency of their homes, even the location of fixed and definitive points convert to a fluid relevance for them; when Carol asks Therese for the location of their next destination, Therese responds: “On the road.” Therese relishes their new intimacy and associates her feelings with moments of perfect authenticity, even as she senses that the transformation she anticipates has yet to be completed: “It was something like the morning in Waterloo, Therese thought, a time too absolute and flawless to seem real, not merely props in a play….But at moments she felt like an actor, remembering only now and then her identity with a sense of surprise, as if she had been playing in these last days the part of someone else, someone fabulously and excessively lucky.”

Carol’s husband, Harge, suspects their relationship and has sent a detective to follow them and obtain evidence of their transgressions in order to gain custody of their daughter. Therese first notices the suspicious character in Waterloo. He tracks them relentlessly and clandestinely places dictaphone devices in their hotel rooms. The detective’s presence represents the long tentacles of a former place, stretching across the miles the couple traveled, and yet they refuse to end their trip and even appear to relish his presence as a confirmation of their relationship’s validity. Together, and with
the aid of new places they willfully inhabit, Carol and Therese supplant a formal narrative of domesticity and heteronormativity with their own version of an authentically lived experience. They continue on, “taking any road they saw. Once they came upon a little town they liked and spent the night there, without pyjamas or toothbrushes, without past or future, and the night became another of those islands in time, suspended somewhere in the heart or in the memory, intact and absolute” (190). Their idyll lasts only long enough to confirm their desire; Carol’s past finally reaches them and forces her to choose between her daughter and Therese. In the visage of the detective, whom Carol finally confronts, Therese recognizes the formidable will of the narratives they had transgressed: “She had seen just now what she had only sensed before, that the whole world was ready to be their enemy, and suddenly what she had and Carol had together seemed no longer love or anything happy but a monster between them, with each of them caught in a fist” (205). Carol decides to end their relationship and return to New York, leaving Therese to spend another two weeks traveling alone. During this period away from both her former home and Carol, Therese's ability to recognize her own agency matures and she completes the transformation so many material representations of social discourse had conspired against.

Evidence of Therese’s transformation from a subject passively reflecting the communicative agency of places and things to an individual whose own agency dominates the dynamic between herself and social discourse’s inanimate avatars appears most prominently in her new interpretation of familiar spaces. When she finally makes it back to New York and her old apartment, “the first thing she noticed was that the carpet corner lay flat. And how small and tragic the room looked. And yet hers, the
tiny radio on the bookshelf, and the pillows on the studio couch, as personal as a signature she had written long ago and forgotten" (243). Even pubic spaces feel altered: “She remembered walking in a certain street in the West Eighties once, the brownstone fronts, overlaid and overlaid with humanity, human lives, some beginning and some ending there, and she remembered the sense of oppression it had given her….Only two or three months ago. Now the same kind of street filled her with a tense excitement, made her want to plunge headlong into it.” With placial agency, these spaces communicate an older version of herself, which she can now identify as something rejected and surpassed.

Perhaps the most significant piece of evidence that distinguishes the difference between her new identity and her former self appears when she meets Carol in the same café where they had their first date. Carol immediately notices a difference: “‘You’ve come out all of a sudden. Is that what comes of getting away from me?’” she asks Therese. Carol has a proposition for Therese; Carol left her husband, sold their house, and wants Therese to live with her in a Madison Avenue apartment:

Therese felt she balanced on a thin edge. The resentment was gone now. Nothing but the decision remained now, a thin line suspended in the air, with nothing on either side to push her or pull her. But on the one side, Carol, and on the other an empty question mark…. [T]hey were both different. It would be a world as unknown as the world just past had been when she first entered it. (250)

Therese follows her simple answer, “No,” with cruel notice about a gift Carol had given Therese before she left to return home: “‘The flowers you gave me – they died,’” Therese tells her (251). Later that night at a party, Therese flirts with Genevieve Cranell, the star of the gathering and, when asked “‘Are you an actress,?’” she names her profession for the first time definitively: “‘No. A set designer.’” Genevieve invites
Therese to a smaller private party and Therese almost accepts the invitation. But her new agency recognizes the source of her desire: “Therese knew suddenly that Genevieve Cranell would never mean anything to her, nothing apart from this half-hour at the cocktail party, that the excitement she felt now would not continue, and not be evoked again at any other time or place” (255). Therese's ability to identify the communicative action of her environment also allows her to recognize her love for Carol with a clarity sourced in her own identity: “[I]t was Carol she loved and would always love,” Therese realizes. “Oh, in a different way now, because she was a different person, and it was like meeting Carol all over again, but it was still Carol and no one else. It would be Carol in a thousand cities, a thousand houses” (257). *The Price of Salt* ends with Therese walking towards Carol as an individual with a future liberated in a way only an agency conscious of itself could allow.

Communicative action creates and defines the relationship between individuals and society. Social discourse, as discussed in this chapter and the preceding one, depends on the participation of individuals and conditions the content of this participation. Ideally, the public and private spheres of symbolic activity work in a balanced and sympathetic manner, articulating sincere patterns of representation to forge a consensus between liberal and communitarian wills. In order to determine the political content of individuals' discursive relationship with social discourse, or, in other words, to determine how close this activity resembles its ideal version, we have to understand the ways individuals are conscious of this dynamic and employ a model of individual agency in communicative action. A traditional version of ideology provides a convenient lynchpin for this kind of model. Ideologies help us conceptualize abstract
ideas and help facilitate individual participation in collective units, and they also always obscure the fabricated nature of their representations, which encourages individuals to become falsely conscious of the world around them. “Ideology,” according to Louis Althusser’s classic version, “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (97). Terry Eagleton’s corollary suggests that ideology also “signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole” (17). Ideological narratives are useful as heuristic devices, but this usefulness depends on an ideology’s ability to successfully blur the distinctions between real conditions of existence and the representations ideology mediates. “Ideology,” according to David Hawkes, “consists in an inability to recognize the mediating function of representation, in assuming that it is an autonomous sphere, and thus mistaking the appearance for the thing-in-itself” (98). When subjects integrate their selves with ideological systems by practicing the narratives these systems articulate uncritically, the distinctions between these systems of representation and the subjects’ real conditions of experience always become unrecognizable.

As the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Doreen Massey, and Bill Brown has shown, all narratives produced in social discourse are the result of individuals’ investment and practice, a production which suggests that ideologies are not hermetic instructions universally comprehended. The communicative action of places and things never resembles a one-way street, even when individuals passively reflect the agency social discourse endows these places and things with. Marx emphasizes the practices of individuals in his consideration of the relationship between individuals and ideology: “As
individuals express their life, so they are….The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life” (“The German Ideology” 150, 154). Antonio Gramsci, in his discussion of intellectuals, argues that readings of social phenomenon should shift their focus from the “nature of intellectual activities” to the “ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities…have their place within the general complex of social relations” (8). Individuals manifest and sustain the ideological import of this complex of social relations by, as Althusser puts it, “practice[ing] rituals of ideological recognition” (91).

With her “theory of infantile citizenship,” Lauren Berlant discusses an example of narratives in American culture based on a kind of placial agency, empowered by the poetic theme of authentic individualism, and performed in rituals of ideological recognition. Berlant argues that national discourse in the United States interpellates a narrative of citizenship by positing Washington D. C. as “a place of national mediation, where a variety of nationally inflected media come into visible and sometimes incommensurate contact” (25). Washington is more than a site of sublime relevance and a metonymical substitute for the United States; it is a narrative that physically tests “citizen competence.” Americans who travel to Washington are “‘playing at being American’” in a drama that requires them to “be capable not just of imagining, but of managing being American.” This plot reflects the “patriotic view of national identity, which seeks to use identification with the ideal nation to trump or subsume all other notions of personhood” (27). The embedded significance of notions of personhood necessarily produces a need for these notions to be articulated, insofar as these notions
are significant. In the way consumers are created by products, views of national identity necessitate the existence of individuals to enact the drama of patriotic representation. The pilgrimage-to-Washington narrative articulates notions of individuality, which situate “personhood” in relation to the national body, a formulation that, via reflection, occasions a pilgrimage to Washington. This narrative simulates a “the national body” with a prefabricated system that expediently concludes the pursuit to realize a notion of individuality. The individual becomes patriotic.

Ideological apparatuses are constitutionally impelled to seek out narratives as systems of promulgation. These narratives, “which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and, which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding” (Nietzsche 44), provide ideological apparatuses with requisite epistemological centers and, over time, form a critical mass of recognition in social discourse. The desire of subjects to fulfill basic requirements of communicative action with an epistemological system that wards off the dread of entropy with signs of structure and meaning diminishes their critical faculties. This desire empowers narratives like those of national identity, which allows citizens/subjects to “‗forget’…their utopian political identifications in order to be politically happy and economically functional” (Berlant 29). Investment in such systems of representation insures parameters, a field of doxa minus competing discourses, a tentative escape from nihilism, and, ultimately, hope. The more subjects invest in these constructs and reflect their tenets in individual practices, the more powerful these ideologies become. As they integrate their selves with ideological systems, these individuals not only
alienate themselves from their real conditions of experience, this alienation and these systems of representation become their conditions of experience.

Nostalgia is an ideological narrative premised on notions of authenticity and endowed with meaning by individuals who practice rituals of recognition. Nostalgia’s ability to codify interpretations of home and the past depends on the epoxy of authenticity these interpretations wear and, most importantly, the individuals who brush the veneer on and polish it until their own reflections replace the wood itself. Therese initially participates in the communicative action of her possessions and surroundings passively and, in language that resembles the tenets of nostalgia discussed in the previous chapter, invests in the future this action narrates. With a passivity conditioned and encouraged by her investment in the habitus of heteronormativity, domesticity, and femininity, her thoughts and actions merely reflect orthodox representations articulated by ideological apparatuses. These reflections, however, do not completely overwhelm Therese’s character, as her ability and willingness to conceive of counter-narratives reveals slips in the narratives these reflections represent. Only when she becomes conscious of subjective agency does the political dynamic in these moments of reflexivity shift to include Therese’s active participation. Therese proves the ability of an individual to comprehend ideological narratives, recognize her own subjective agency, and actively participate in social discourse.

39 In 1966, Highsmith published a book about her writing process, Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction. Here, she describes social mores as a relative construct: “I find the public passion for justice quite boring and artificial, for neither life nor nature cares if justice is ever done or not” (51). Highsmith published The Talented Mr. Ripley, her most famous novel, in 1955, a few years after The Price of Salt. Like all of the Ripley novels and most of her other work, The Talented Mr. Ripley meditates on amorphous identities, alienated individuals, ambiguous realities, and the absence of moral constants. Like Therese, Tom lives in New York City without clear personal objectives. In his mid-twenties with little money and fewer prospects, he accepts a job from Herbert Greenleaf who wants Tom to convince his son, Dickie, to return from an extended vacation in Europe and start his career. Tom meets Dickie in Italy and soon falls in love.
with him and his affluent lifestyle. When their relationship falters, Tom kills Dickie and assumes his identity for a brief period. Although some suspect foul play, everyone eventually accept his version of events, and the novel concludes with Tom rich and free in Greece.

40 Yvonne Keller divides most lesbian pulp fiction produced between 1950 and 1965 into two categories: “pro-lesbian” and “virile adventures,” the latter of which includes roughly 85 percent of this genre. Highsmith’s novel would fit squarely in the “pro-lesbian” category, which Keller argues “are women-centered, often told from a woman’s point of view, dominated by a love story, without obviously extraneous sex scenes, and with well-developed characters” (391 & 400). Catharine Stimpson similarly divides early-to-mid twentieth-century lesbian fiction into “the dying fall, a narrative of damnation, of the lesbian’s suffering as a lonely outcast attracted to a psychological lower caste; and the enabling escape, a narrative of the reversal of such descending trajectories, of the lesbian’s rebellion against social stigma and self-contempt,” and she cites The Price of Salt as an example of “enabling escape” narratives (364).

41 See Teresa de Lauretis’s “Feminist Studies/Critical Studies” and Ernesto Laclau’s New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, which Massey cites as important sources for her understanding of the ontological significance of articulation. Elsewhere, Massey refers to the dynamics of these “emergent powers,” especially dynamics regarding movement through space, as “power-geometry” (“Power-Geometry” 61).

42 For prototypes of the former suggestion, see Charity Scribner’s Requiem for Communism and Svetlana Boym’s The Future of Nostalgia.

43 See Émile Durkheim’s The Rules of Sociological Method. Paul E. Johnson provides us with an historian’s reading of Durkheim’s idea, defining collective representations, or “social facts,” as the “habits and ways of feeling that shape individual consciousness and behavior, yet exist outside the individual and coerce him independent of his will” (emphasis added, 11).

44 Lizabeth Cohen, in her review of postwar America, cites the huge growth of private homes as “the center of Americans’ vision of postwar prosperity” (A Consumers’ Republic 73). Carol’s house, contrasted with Ruby’s apartment, represents an archetype of the concept of home as it was articulated in social discourse: “images in government publications, advertisements, and popular culture were even more specific: they overwhelmingly depicted ‘home’ as a detached single-family house in a suburban setting.” One fourth of every American house in the 1960s was built in the 1950s (122).

45 Perhaps our most succinct discussion about the performative basis of identities and the agency of performers can still be found in Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990). Butler argues that gender categories are fluid, circumstantial, and relational rather than stable, natural, and immutable. Butler sources the popular binary opposition of gender identities in Western epistemology and argues that feminism as a political project should move from correcting the descriptives of gender identities to an investigation and critique of the ways these identities are constructed and regulated. This move can be accomplished, according to Butler, by recognizing that gender identities are performative, not expressive; that they are, in fact, discursive fictions built on biological categories of sex designed to discipline, not explain, social subjects.

46 See Michael Trask’s discussion of Highsmith’s The Talented Mr. Ripley, where he situates the novel in the context of popular modes of authenticity and performance in mid-1950s American social discourse. He successfully attempts to “recover a cultural moment that harbored more complexities with respect to the dichotomy between performance and authenticity, construction and essence, than contemporary readers have been inclined to address” (587).

47 Carol’s reaction here recalls an earlier conversation they had about Therese’s set designs: “‘What do you think of first when you start to make a set?’” Carol asks Therese. “‘Do you think of the kind of play it is, or of something you want to see?…You have to know a lot to be absolutely subjective, don’t you?’” “I think you’re too subjective – without knowing enough,” Carol decides (143).
Their journey across the country encourages the sense of freedom and wonder that conventional popular tradition associates with our national heritage, especially when their trips turns firmly westward: “The West unfolded like a magic carpet, dotted with the neat, tight units of farmhouse, barn, and silo that they could see for half an hour before they came abreast of them….and Therese thought in a fervid burst of patriotism – *America* (178).

Consider Marx’s early depiction of this dynamic: “Production is also immediately consumption, consumption is also immediately production. Each is immediately its opposite. But at the same time a mediating movement takes place between the two. Production mediates consumption; it creates the latter’s material; without it, consumption would lack an object. But consumption also mediates production, in that it alone creates for the products the subject for whom they are products” (*Grundrisse* 228).

Althusser describes what finally happens when an idea occasioned by a narrative is realized in the experience of an individual: “Ideas have disappeared as such (insofar as they are endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus. It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief” (115).

Consider Fredric Jameson in his discussion of Ernst Bloch: “The structure of nihilism…is simply the reverse or negative of that of the doctrine of hope; whereas the doctrine of memory is so to speak its obverse side, its absolute inversion, in which everything which in reality belongs to the future is attributed to the past, in which time is stood on its head conceptually” (*Marxism and Form* 128).
CHAPTER 4
THE DIALECTIC AND HUMBERT’S LOLITA

Arguments about the reactionary nature of nostalgia’s rhetoric and logic are easily developed with a critical mode that formally insists on a dialectical analysis of history and culture. Narratives of nostalgia retain their powerful appeal because they appear hermetically sealed; they do not allow critical alternatives to their own versions of the past, which means that these versions lose their validity when they are interpreted through dialectical reason. Nostalgia’s function as a blueprint for the future, as a conjured moment of cohesion and authenticity that prefigures some future moment while it yarns about fantastic pasts, means that nostalgia rejects theories of dialectical progression and confuses the past with the possible. Essentially, ideologies of nostalgia always suggest that a natural order once existed, and our longing for these moments of unity and prosperity nostalgias describe forestalls our critical participation in the realities of contemporary life, our critical understanding of the past, and our critical imagination of the future.

At the same time, the use of dialectical reason, as opposed to, or as a redressed version of, postivist readings, makes such facile arguments problematic. The prevalence and power of nostalgia in social discourse could not be sustained if nostalgia only disciplined individuals to accept and practice tradition. In my discussion of Wright, I emphasized the influence of habitus in social life and the ways individual practice reflects and contributes to these collective patterns. With Highsmith’s novel, I considered how individual agency rejects sanctioned narratives and articulates more authentic versions of personal life. In both cases, nostalgia provides a coherent logic to systemize my critiques. Nostalgia, I argued, presents a reified version of the future in
social discourse with narratives that mix the materiality of history, the solace of tradition, and the desire of individuals. Wright and Highsmith offer examples of how people invest in nostalgia and how people transcend their nostalgic investments. In these examples, people initially invest in reactionary narratives by accepting social orthodoxy and eventually reject these narratives with heterodox versions of lived experience. This transition, I want to argue here, represents a dialectical progression that can only be performed when social agents reject narratives of nostalgia in their own individual practice.

The previous chapters outline and discuss the political and personal consequences of nostalgia’s logic, but their polemics do not leave much room for important questions about discrepancies in patterns of nostalgia, individual performances, and social discourse. For example: What does the lived experience of a reified future look like? Can individuals live lives of nostalgia and simultaneously reject social orthodoxy? What are the consequences of a life lived nostalgically? If nostalgia helps blur the distinctions between ideologies and real conditions of existence, is it possible for individuals to invest in narratives of nostalgia without foregoing a critical consciousness of daily life? In other words, can individuals be consciously nostalgic? And finally, what does a life lived nostalgically in early postwar America tell us about social discourse generally and individual relationships to social discourse specifically?

The antagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel, Lolita (1955), represents a subject who simultaneously rejects important parts of his society’s habitus and structures his life within an extreme nostalgic system. Nabokov’s Lolita resembles Highsmith’s The Price of Salt in interesting ways: both plots feature young characters who experience a sort of
sexual maturity with older lovers; both include long road trips across America as central sections; both chart the trajectory of lived experience with and without agency; and both articulate responses to the power and consequences of individuals navigating the narratives of social discourse. Their depictions of agency and nostalgia, however, are very different. In *The Price of Salt*, Therese discovers an independent form of agency in heterodox sexual desire and succeeds in achieving a critical consciousness about herself and her future. *Lolita*’s Humbert maintains his daughter as a sexual slave for two years in order to satiate the desire he mostly blames on a profound childhood experience. Humbert’s nostalgia, like all other versions, functions as a blueprint that informs his worldview, and his violent actions dramatize ways nostalgia conspires to confuse the reality of daily life. *Lolita* provides a case study of an individual who cannot extract himself from a nostalgic narrative, even while the practices this narrative encourages are socially deviant. Humbert’s demise represents the consequences of a life lived without a critical awareness of this life’s position as both the coordinates of an individual dialectical ground and the larger context of this ground’s position within its social totality. Nabokov’s text suggests that nostalgia, when personalized, can supersede the systems of social discourse that it was designed to sustain, and that nostalgia, in practice, represents an anti-dialectic process, a force that reacts against history and suppresses new forms of the social. Nostalgia reveals the limits of social discourse, even as these limits are encouraged by social discourse itself. The crucial aspect of this dynamic, the key that allows a contestation of the ostensibly hermetic sphere of social discourse, is individual agency articulated in a register of habitus that transcends the very rules this register systemizes. What this proves, then, is the
persistence of the dialectic, even when performed in modalities like nostalgia that discourage an awareness and practice of dialectical reason.

The dialectic can still be understood, with important considerations, as the progression from thesis, through antithesis, to synthesis; as Fredric Jameson recently noted, “that stupid stereotype was not altogether wrong” (“First Impressions” 7). More importantly, dialectical reason allows us to comprehend dynamics between the social and the individual. Making interactions between social discourse and individual agency intelligible – interactions that we could also call history itself – was an ambition of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which informs much of my discussion here. Framing his investigation with Marx’s quote about man’s relationship to the past (“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please”) I discussed above, Sartre attempts to create a method for both understanding dialectical reason and employing a dialectical critique in historiography. The “crucial discovery” allowed by dialectical reason, a discovery Sartre refers to as “dialectical circularity,” “is that man is ‘mediated’ by things to the same extent as things are ‘mediated by man’” (79). “Things,” here, mean the external aspects of life internalized by individuals to make their own existence intelligible. Sartre’s investigation encourages us to simultaneously recognize the agency of individual praxis in collective forms and the relationship individuals always have to the social.

Totality provides the key concept for any dialectical critique. As I mentioned above in my discussion of cultural dominants, totalities only posit the existence of constitutive and compounded connections between individuals and historical phenomena. A dialectical analysis, Jameson argues, “is precisely this preference for the concrete
totality over the separate abstract parts,” a formulization which precludes understanding dialectical thinking as “a thought to the second power, a thought about thinking itself” (Marxism and Form 45). The latter point facilitates the former, and vice versa; privileging the totality allows the observer to consider the act of observation. Jameson insists that there “is no content, for dialectical thought, but total content,” but he also warns against the hubris of individual perception: “We cannot, of course, ever really get outside our own subjectivities…but, every time they begin to freeze over, to spring us outside our own hardened ideas into a new and more vivid apprehension of reality itself is the task of genuine dialectical thinking” (306, 372). Some have used this concept to craft totalitarian narratives about society and history, but Sartre rejects all tendencies related to describing the dialectic as a mechanistic and natural force:

[T]he dialectical movement is not some powerful unitary force revealing itself behind History like the will of God. It is first and foremost a resultant; it is not the dialectic which forces historical men to live their history in terrible contradictions; it is men, as they are, dominated by scarcity and necessity, and confronting one another in circumstances which History or economics can inventory, but which only dialectical reason can explain.54 (Critique 37)

Critical investigations informed by dialectical reason and premised on historical materialism begin with an examination of human action, as Wright and de Beauvoir remind us with their arguments about practice discussed above. In other words, we can better understand the relationship between individuals and the social by examining the actions of individuals while recognizing their participation in a larger context.

In some ways, this process resembles the way astronomers identify black holes in distant galaxies by charting a planet’s elliptical orbit and ruling out a nearby body’s force as an explanation for the planet’s odd trajectory. The aim of this kind of investigation, as Sartre puts it, “will set out from the immediate, that is to say from the individual fulfilling
himself in the abstract praxis, so as to rediscover, through deeper and deeper conditioning, the totality of his practical bonds with others and, thereby, the structures of the various practical multiplicities and, through their contradictions and struggles, the absolute concrete: historical man” (52). With these caveats in mind, the best way to synthesize the important parts of an investigation of individuals and social discourse is to posit a coordinating conjunction, a dialectical ground that processes our process.

Caren Irr defines Hegel’s version of the dialectical ground as “the location of a utopian negation that reveals freedom at work in the heart of necessity” (216). Significantly, this freedom cannot be entirely “voluntaristic and idealist”; it can only be realized “immanently in the situation,” in the concrete factors that collectively create the possibility of a negation. The dialectical ground, the site of this negation, facilitates freedom by unifying categories of identity and difference in a moment that transforms both categories. In this moment, “identity and difference discover themselves the determinate effects of a particular ground – that is, in the totality” (217). In other words, “the ground is where condition and consequence meet, providing both the possibility of causal explanation in the identitarian sense and complicating causality with the resultant problem of what if anything provides the unity of condition and consequence.”

Categorical markers defer the recognition of a holistic social perspective, and the dialectical ground allows individual historical subjects to comprehend their participation in a totality that transcends distinctions of identity and difference employed by social discourse to formalize orthodoxy.55

When applied to theories of history, the dialectic can help us understand not only the way events are related to each other, but also the ways individuals participate in
making history. A crucial concept underlying our employment of a dialectical method will always be historical materialism, which Jameson defines as “the doctrine of the unity of thinking and action, or of the social determination of thought” (Marxism and Form 161). Acknowledging the socially determined context of thought rides in tandem with the acknowledgment of the central role contradictions play in thought determined socially. Contradictions are inherent qualities of all understandings of all phenomena, and dialectical thinking emphasizes contradictions. Jameson calls this emphasis “representational contradiction” for the system of relations that is discovered through dialectical investigations (Archaeologies of the Future 39). Jameson relates his observations about the primacy of contradiction in dialectical thought to Bertolt Brecht’s work and notes how Brecht teaches us that “dialectical thinking begins with the contradiction, that it means finding the inevitable contradiction at the heart of things and seeing and reconstructing them in terms of contradictions” (Valences of the Dialectic 281). Terry Eagleton, in his discussion of Brecht, quotes a passage from On Theatre, expanding Jameson’s suggestion: “When our theatres perform plays of other periods they like to annihilate distance, fill in the gap, gloss over the differences. But what comes then of our delight in comparisons, in distance, in dissimilarity – which is at the same time a delight in what is close and proper to ourselves?” (11). Likewise, Theodor Adorno stresses the recognition of slips in our versions of reality as a crucial component of dialectical thinking, where versions of the past always remain in flux so that we can appreciate the constant postponement of total comprehension as a necessity in our comprehension of the present; “Thought,” he tells us at the end of his essay on “gaps,” “waits for the day that it is awakened by the memory of what was omitted, and is
transformed into teaching” (81). The ability to accommodate contradictions and acknowledge gaps in comprehension distinguishes dialectal thinking from nondialectical thinking, which “can always be identified as so many strategies for containing, repressing, or naturalizing contradictions as such” (Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* 281). The mode of dialectical thinking provides recourse to positivist and mechanistic histories and anti-dialectic strategies by situating the totality as the focal point of all investigations and simultaneously accommodating contradictions in our comprehension of this totality.

Nostalgia perfects anti-dialectic strategies by combining apodictic narratives and individual desire in the process of comprehending old versions of thought in the present with a kind of reverse dialectic. Sartre defines the anti-dialectic as the “result of a *praxis* being turned against itself by the practico-inert” (*Critique* 827). The practico-inert, the material consequences of a past praxis, maintain a presence in living social culture and presents what are ultimately institutional resistance to a consciousness of the dialectic.56 These old patterns are rehabilitated in a loop that short-circuits the formation of a synthesis and sends the trajectory back to its origin. Modes of reason that defer recognition of contradictions, like nostalgias, inevitably defer the agency of individual experience within the social. Dialectical thinking presents a premise diametrically different from modes of nostalgia. Nostalgia’s ossifications of the past also present a totality, but only with a ground of specifically proscribed content. To strain an old analogy, nostalgia provides a map of a forest and argues that any conception of this area that fails to match the map cannot be considered ideal. Dialectical thinking, on the other hand, grounds our conception of the forest in an awareness of the trees around us.
and encourages us to recognize the most significant characteristic of each tree: together, they form a forest. If we fail to recognize and privilege this characteristic, nothing we learn about these trees or the forest matters. Nostalgia’s map falsifies history, confuses the present, and delineates a future by conditioning social agents to think about themselves and the world around them in a specific way via formalizing versions of potential perspectives molded from the matter produced by past praxis.

Dialectical thinking emphasizes the interrelatedness of social agents and social forms by positing a ground that functions as a totality, encouraging us to conceptualize and articulate relations between various phenomena. Dialectical thinking also remains conscious of the social and historical context of all phenomena, of the interconnections between subjects and their community that are too often convenient to neglect or diminish. But most importantly, a dialectical analysis insists on the constant change these phenomena have the potential to effect on social reality. Consider the totality as a typical picture puzzle with one crucial difference: the resultant image will not be standardized. The pieces may, at some level, be the same, but they can be arranged in many different ways. Dialectical thinking considers each piece as part of a totality, a consideration that reminds us of the larger picture, and the game itself. At the site of social discourse, individuals participate in moments of conflict and crisis, where the potential for a new orthodox assemblage always exists, for a new synthesis of the different elements constantly competing for hegemony. When the actors in this struggle recognize the collective power to shape social reality, the categorical polarities so often used to represent reality are collapsed into a spectrum of the forces they represent. The
synthesis of these extended polarities cannot end with a conclusion, but rather with reflexivity, and the resultant optimism of new conflicts.

As an early reviewer notes, *Lolita* can be read as a literalized version of the sad romantic state of nympholepsy, the passionate attachment to an unattainable object (Hollander 82). *Lolita* features Humbert Humbert’s first-person declaration of guilt, drafted in a prison’s psychiatric ward after Humbert was arrested for the murder of his daughter’s lover. “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male” was written for Humbert’s jury as an explanation for his crime and as an exploration of the “precise science” of nympholepsy (*Lolita* 3, 129). Humbert orients the reader with scenes from his early childhood, the formative and traumatic experience of a preadolescent love affair, wanderings as a young adult in Europe, serial romantic failures, and his move to the United States at the beginning of World War Two. He encounters the novel’s titular protagonist shortly after securing a teaching position at a small New England college in 1947. The fateful meeting takes place when he inspects a room to rent from the recently widowed Charlotte Haze. Annoyed by her and her furnishings, Humbert makes to leave before she invites him to view the garden. There, he finds her daughter and immediately falls in love. Dolly, who Humbert calls Lolita, was “the same child” that he had fallen in love with years ago, and, in his estimation, she presents the opportunity to live an authentic life once again. “[M]y discovery of her,” he insists, “was a fatal consequence of that ‘princedom by the sea’ in my tortured past. Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy. Everything they shared made one of them” (40). Humbert quickly marries Charlotte, who quickly dies, leaving twelve-year-old Dolly in his care. Humbert removes her from the safety of her
community and they embark on a road trip between the summers of 1947 and 1948, a journey which allows him complete control over her; as Humbert puts it, “she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (142). When they return, Dolly meets another older man – Clare Quilty, her drama teacher at school – and she plans another road trip to meet Quilty in California. She eventually escapes from Humbert with Quilty, who she leaves after another series of abuses, and who Humbert eventually discovers and murders.

Nympholepsy specifically refers to the passion nymphs instill in the hearts of men and to the pain caused by the inaccessibility of these semi-divine spirits. Nabokov appropriates that term to infer a connection between the magic power of nymphs and the allure of young girls made inaccessible by the dictates of his culture’s habitus. Written during road trips across America hunting for butterflies in 1951, 1952, and 1953, Nabokov’s text (which was rejected by multiple American publishers until it made a splash in Europe) resonates with the anxieties of early Cold War discursive formations. *Lolita* seems to contest this moment’s attempt at codifying normative sexual predilections in social discourse. As Frederick Whiting notes:

> At a time when the family had become a focal point for America’s fear of internal subversion and the innocence of children had been elevated to the premier trope of national vulnerability, both Humbert and Nabokov threatened to disrupt the system of private freedoms and public obligations informing U.S. Cold War ideology. Humbert the pedophile threatened the home, innermost bastion of privacy and last redoubt guarding liberal democratic freedoms. \(^57\) (834)

While the term “pervert” was ascending in popular parlance to describe sexual deviancy and to ascribe this deviancy in a political context, the threat social deviants posed to American society remained “external,” according to Whiting, “and thus meeting it was a matter of greater vigilance and policing rather than of a redefinition of the concepts of the desiring individual and his free agency that the binary logic of the Cold War could
not accommodate” (857). Humbert’s rigorous attempts to explain his desire reveals the strong trends towards normative categories in Cold War social discourse and his own resistance to the narratives his adopted country articulates.\textsuperscript{58}

Humbert contextualizes his tale of nympholepsy with empirical descriptions and historical examples of nymphets: girls between the ages of nine and fourteen “who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic” (16). They all eventually become “the little deadly demon among the wholesome children” (17). While he reviews the legal definitions of the term “girl-child” in Europe and Massachusetts, he argues that these orthodox categories are arbitrary. For evidence, he notes canonical examples like Rahab, the ten-year-old Biblical heroine and prostitute, and mentions Dante’s nine-year-old lover Beatrice along with Petrarch’s twelve-year-old Laureen and Edgar Allan Poe’s thirteen-year-old Virginia (19, 43). He also provides examples of moments when social discourse generally accepted pedophilia, “since the lamented end of the Ancient World B.C.” to the “days of the Romans,” the practices of “dignified Orientals” “in still more luxurious times,” and prepubescent marriages in “certain East Indian provinces” today (124, 19). The “whole point” of these digressions, Humbert insists, “is that the old link between the adult world and the child world has been completely severed nowadays by new customs and new laws.” Normative behavior and desire sanctioned by social discourse frame his perspective as ugly and unhealthy, and Humbert attempts to sanction his perspective with isolated examples from an obsolete habitus.\textsuperscript{59} He believes that personal experience has allowed him to appreciate accepted practices of the past; the only difference, he argues, between the sexuality of “normal big males” and their
“normal big mates” and his own inclination can be attributed to the fact that “those gentlemen had not, and I had, caught glimpses of an incomparably more poignant bliss” sanctioned by older traditions and rejected by new social norms (18). His behavior and desire in practice performed a moment of praxis that transformed his perspective, elevating his sexual tastes above the morass of convention. Humbert considers himself assaulted by the norms of his society, by the “[t]aboos” that “strangulated” him. Humbert collapses the distinctions between his own practices and those of certain older paradigms in an attempt to portray the social discourse of his contemporaries as mere opinion, as merely new idiosyncratic versions of doxa that his desires reasonably contest.

*Lolita* introduces Humbert’s story with an essay by an academic who represents the voice of established opinion. John Ray, Jr. PhD, psychologist and prize-winning author of “Do the Senses make Sense?”, emphasizes two aspects of Humbert’s autobiography: that of an interestingly aberrant individual and that of a social bellwether. Humbert, Dr. Ray intones, is “abnormal,” “horrible,” “abject,” “not a gentleman,” and “a shining example of moral leprosy” whose “singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced” (5). At the same time, “in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson…these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. ‘Lolita’ should make all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (5-6). This faux introduction pokes at rhetorical touchstones of Cold War social discourse and takes up Nabokov’s penchant for mocking academic cultural critiques.
His essay, “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” written in 1957 as an afterward for many American editions, sustains this position. “It is childish,” Nabokov intones, “to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author” (316). But Nabokov also tells us that his Lolita was an attempt at “inventing America” (312). Here, too, the personal becomes the social, as Nabokov nostalgically laments the difficulty of writing about a strange land in a strange tongue without the liberating agency others may experience in a similar endeavor:

My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses – the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions – which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way.60 (“On a Book” 316-7)

Like Nabokov, Humbert is a European expatriate who moves to the United States at the beginning of World War Two, settles in New England, and teaches literature at a small liberal arts college. My interest in momentarily conflating these two men does not extend beyond the convenience of their similarities highlighting the way Lolita represents a relationship between individual practice, social habitus, and modes of nostalgia. Humbert signifies an individual who, having left his homeland, attempts to reject “heritage” and “traditions” through the very means that usually verify these pillars of habitus: namely, modes of nostalgia.

Humbert’s tale of rape and murder begins with a short history of his life in Old Europe where he “grew, a happy, healthy child in a bright world” (10). His father owned a luxury hotel on the Riviera, where Humbert meets Annabel one idyllic summer. They were both preadolescents and, “all at once,” “were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other” (12). The adult world around them conspired
against the sexual consummation of their desire; they were, Humbert notes, “unable even to mate as slum children would have so easily found an opportunity to do.” Under the constant watchful eyes of their “stuffy” “elders,” the children rarely had time alone. One example of their stymied attempts at sex took place after Annabel “managed to deceive the vicious vigilance of her family” (14). They escaped at night to a small set of ruins and began caressing each other when, with Annabel holding Humbert’s penis, they are interrupted by her mother’s “frantic” call (15). On another occasion, they escaped to a slight cave on the beach and came close to intercourse before they were interrupted by “two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother” (13). Both lovers rejected their society’s moral code in private but immediately accepted this censure when it was performed by adults in public. Their relationship and its promise ended when Annabel left at the end of the summer and died of typhus four months later.

Humbert knows enough about popular psychology to recognize the significance of formative experiences (in college, he majored in psychiatry before switching to English literature), but he also considers the possibility that the Annabel episode reveals “only the first evidence of an inherent singularity” (13). Humbert’s process of choosing which reading of his desire most accurately describes the source of his pedophilic predilections, coupled with his attempt to convey this reading to us, reveals a more singular cause than either trauma or chemistry could provide. Important sections in Humbert’s story about Annabel reflect tropes of nostalgic logic and suggest that, regardless of the nature or nurture origins of his pathology, his condition is thoroughly nostalgic. He begins this process by obsessively “leaf[ing] again and again” through the events of that summer to isolate some evidence of a pre-Annabel desire for young girls.
His recollections of that summer focus on a classic totem of the object of his past desire: a photograph of Annabel “lost during the wanderings of my adult years” (12-3). Later, his condition manifests itself in the willful return to an Edenic past (which includes a stated preference for Lilith over Eve), and he pleads: “Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up” (21). His love affair with Annabel presents “a permanent obstacle to any further romance throughout the cold years of my youth,” as he fails to return to the “perfection” this affair provided, to that “enchanted island of time” (14, 9). Finally, the hallmark of nostalgic logic can be seen in his summation of the process he uses to locate the source of his worldview: “When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddening complex prospect of my past” (13). Humbert relinquishes his critical faculties to the nostalgic imperative of interpreting the present through a lens that imagines the past. He “surrender[s]” his ability to understand his own “cravings, motives, [and] actions” by forgetting that these cravings, motives, and actions could exist independent of the past, could answer only to his own agency, and could create a future that does not have to confirm the context that forged them. Instead, the explanation of his desires wends its way through a feedback loop that visualizes fake alternatives in a closed system of nostalgia.

On the other hand, perhaps the Annabel episode created a dynamic of personal agency where all of Humbert’s actions really did become slaves to a set of practices forged in the past that inform his present and reflect his future. Jalal Toufic, during his
discussion of “surpassing disasters,” offers an expository frame for Humbert’s behavior specifically and systems of nostalgia generally. Toufic argues that some events are so profound that they force a “withdrawal of tradition,” which nullifies the validity of previous patterns of thought and behavior. His argument includes two historical examples of a collective surpassing disaster: the battle of Siffin (657 CE), which helped crystallize the split between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and the pogroms against Jews during the Ukrainian Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648-1657 CE), which gave birth to the Jewish Sabbatean movement. In both cases, a profound event surpassed previous systems of order and belief and created a revised apostastic version of reality that evidenced the invalidity of the usurped version. However, the resultant synthesis does not always manifest itself in the practices of individuals or in the rhetoric of social discourse; in fact, both spheres often reject the consequences of the disaster and double down investments in the now-obsolete modes of comprehension. The vestiges of the past haunt the living, providing comfort for the pains wrought by the disaster but veiling this same disaster’s consequences.

Toufic considers postwar Zionist rhetoric to be an example of this dynamic. “How is it,” he asks, “that the surpassing disaster of the Shoah has not produced a widespread attitude among Jewish artists, writers, and thinkers revealing the withdrawal of the traditional holiness or specialness of a particular land?” (Forthcoming 55). The logic of nostalgia provides an explanation, for both the form of a living dead habitus and this zombie’s practico-inert content. Nostalgia, which Toufic considers an “evil” “symptom of the desuetude of the will,” not only provides a narrative of social unity and solace, but it intensifies the desire to reestablish this homeland of tradition out of the
wilderness a catastrophe created (76). Nostalgia allows the will of individuals to atrophy precisely when this agency, which is always the result of a critical comprehension of social life, becomes most necessary. Surpassing disasters present a crisis that can be resolved by a progressive synthesis or a reactionary collapse. Toufic recognizes the import of dialectical reason during moments of crisis, moments where individuals can reject nostalgic returns to pre-disaster moments by “unmask[ing] the hypocritical abuses to which such a rhetoric can lead. In turn, it is vital that one not become oblivious of the withdrawal past a surpassing disaster, which is the reason that would validate the continuation of such a rhetoric” (57). Social subjects are participants in the drama of social life, whether or not their actions represent authentic expressions of their will. While nostalgic narratives reconsolidate the orthodox apparatuses that govern social life and that are constantly disturbed by crises, only the simultaneous acknowledgement of the former order (or thesis) and the new order inaugurated by a crisis large enough to be considered a surpassing disaster can allow individuals to willfully participate in social discourse with an agency nostalgia conspires against.

The question asked above about the parameters of possible actions available to Humbert can be answered with another question: can Humbert’s worldview be considered nostalgic? If we understand his worldview to be homologically nostalgic, the answer to the previous question would conclude that his thoughts and actions are indeed slaves to a set of past experiences that inform his present and reflect his future. Evidence presented from his description of the Annabel episode would not be enough to represent his worldview as an adult. While tropes of nostalgia are common for representing the distant past, readers of his testimony encounter the same rhetoric
when he describes his relationship with Dolly. It could be argued that Humbert cynically employs this rhetoric to encourage his audience (“Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury”) to sympathetically understand his crimes in terms of an unavoidable conclusion to a series of events (9). Without objecting to this reasonable reading, I also want to consider his narrative as an authentic description of the way he understands these events. Taken as such, Humbert provides an example of how one individual invests in nostalgia, how this investment determines his actions, how his actions transform a narrative designed to inculcate standardized versions of lived experience into a narrative that transgresses social sanction, how this transgression performs an anti-dialectic reversal, and, ultimately, how nostalgia incorporates the praxis of individuals while its genetic code resists the dialectic and history itself.

Praxis, the purposeful human activity by which individuals participate in history, results from the ways people understand the social temporally and materially, and this understanding always takes a narrative form. Hayden White, in his discussion of history and narratives, outlines how the process of emplotment, of assigning narrative form to history, can endow the past with an agency manifested fluidly in the present and the future. Individual agency, here, contributes personal ingredients that can affect ways these narratives reflect the past, comprehend the present, and anticipate the future:

We usually think of historical agents’ freedom as being manifested in the launching of projects into a future, with the past serving as a repository of a certain knowledge about human actions, and the present, as the base from which the project into the future is to be launched. Actually, however, human beings can will backward as well as forward in time; willing backward occurs when we rearrange accounts of events in the past that have been emplotted in a given way, in order to endow them with a different meaning or to draw from the new emplotment reasons for acting differently in the future from the way we have become accustomed to acting in our present. (Content of Form 150)
As White points out, narratives are not always reactionary reversals or minor upgrades to cultural forms practiced in the past. The progressive use of narratives involves a dialectical process that allows us to draft “new emplotment reasons for acting differently” that evolve out of contradictions inherent in past praxis. But narratives do not necessarily have to work this way. Nostalgia, like all narratives, requires individual agency when it organizes how we think about history and group life. What makes nostalgia different from progressive narrative forms can be found in the way nostalgia determines the things we privilege when we understand the past and the present; nostalgia creates fantastically perfect moments of existence that intrinsically resist critique. Nostalgia exploits narratives and our penchant for them as the principle means of drafting and replicating versions of reality, versions that discourage a dialectical progression and replicate old reasons for acting in familiar ways. Nostalgia encourages individuals to will a new past that represents the fulfillment of current needs, which, in its anti-dialectic perfection, confuses both current needs and future solutions.

The practico-inert, or the dead habitus that haunts personal and collective praxis, can be accepted or neglected by the agency of individuals. While this ghost structures social discourse with the aid of institutions and individual practice, it can also be challenged by a praxis informed by dialectical reason. The practico-inert resists this challenge by turning praxis against itself, a dynamic that Sartre calls the anti-dialectic. The anti-dialectic reverses the will of praxis towards a dialectical progression, a reversal aided and abetted by the practico-inert, by “activity which has been transcended and preserved by inertia precisely to the extent that, both for the individual agent himself and in the apodicticity of the investigation, it presents itself as the transcendence of
individuality, in this agent and in everyone, by a suffered original statute of reifying sociality” (Critique 319). Nostalgia performs the anti-dialectic in the practices of individuals. Its utopian narratives of social cohesion and the absence of scarcity, of the perfect social incorporation of the individual, of a reified futurity, delimits the possibilities of praxis in the present by standardizing the possibilities of the future. In an aside about anti-dialectical thinking, Sartre asserts that when “knowing is made apodictic, and when it is constituted against all possible questioning without ever defining its scope or its rights, then it is cut off from the world and becomes a formal system” (Marxism and Existentialism 33).

The success of anti-dialectic strategies relies on the ability of a narrative to simultaneously create a desire and the means of satiating this desire. Such narratives accomplish this feat by closing comprehension inside an ostensibly apodictic loop, which these narratives design and seal. Humbert’s narrative wills his own version of the events that lead to his arrest, and this story privileges his subjective will at the expense of all other actors in this drama, subsuming their agency into his own narrative. In this way, potential voices of critique are marshaled for his defense. Even when he quotes letters written by Dolly and her mother, these notes are only recollected versions of their actual words. Humbert assures us of his photographic memory, but he also qualifies the validity of memories by describing “two kinds of visual memory: one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel…); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita)” (11). Humbert elaborates on
his theory of memory with an essay, “Mimir and Memory,” he submitted to the *Cantrip Review* about “a theory of perceptual time based on the circulation of the blood and conceptually depending…on the mind’s being conscious not only of matter but also of its own self, thus creating a continuous spanning of two points (the storable future and the stored past)” (260). Mimir, a character in Norse mythology who has comprehensive knowledge of the past and the future, here represents the possibility of figuring the past through memory traces. Our own consciousness accomplishes this; individuals are the median agents that connect the past and the future in the present. Human agency constructs our relationship between periods of time and translates this relationship into narratives that help us comprehend the consequences of this relationship in the present.

We can contextualize Humbert’s theory on memory with the description of his early romance, where the “spiritual and the physical had been blended in us with a perfection” that remains unparal-leled until, “at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (14). Humbert incorporates this distinction, which admits that both objects of his desire haunt him, into his argument about nympholepsy, a dynamic in which “the idea of time plays such a magic part”: “it is a question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight” (17). Humbert frames his story of Dolly, and even her very existence, in his version of the past: “Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain girl-child” (9). Annabel was not Humbert’s lost object; the unattainable thing promoted by his nympholepsy consists of her image and
the moment itself when she existed with him. His nostalgia takes the form of a willed version of something he imagined he lost, and this nostalgia’s desire wills a return to the moment where this experience can be repeated.⁶⁶

Significantly, Humbert admits that Annabel exists as an image created in the “laboratory” of his mind. While he does not admit this Annabel is a simulacrum, a representation without an original, molded from the combination of a historical subject, some experiences, and his own desires, Humbert suggests that Dolly can be considered as such. The transition between her role as a real historical subject and “a little ghost” in Humbert’s memory starts almost immediately; in fact, he cannot imagine her as a self outside of his own imagination. From the moment he sees her, she “was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses” (39). “It was the same child,” he insists, Annabel’s “alias,” up to and including the physical detail of a “tiny dark-brown mole on her side” (39, 167). Humbert subsumes the agency of Dolly within his own narrative, and his history replaces her with a replication of her that he can possess without contestation: “What is most singular is that she, this Lolita, my Lolita has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is – Lolita” (44-5). Humbert invents another character to replace Dolly, a love object of his “own creation,” “perhaps more real” than the girl she replaces, with “no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own” (62, 64). “Lolita,” he concludes, “had been safely solipsized” (60). Like the eternal garden of peace and plenty so many nostalgias reference, Lolita becomes an ideal that eclipses whatever Dolly may be or become. Humbert is aware of his fantasy’s default on reality, and he explains the discrepancy in terms of love: “I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would
not be forever Lolita….The word ‘forever’ referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood” (65). Later, Humbert explicitly addresses this discrepancy and admits that he was conscious of the fact that Dolly existed outside of his fantasy of her:

I should have understood that Lolita was already proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphaean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I should have known (by the signs made to me by something in Lolita – the real child Lolita or some haggard angel behind her back) that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. (124-5)

Humbert’s process of comprehending Dolly as his Lolita, of revising the reality around him into a new version that reflects a past reality demonstrates the anti-dialectic in practice, and the material consequences of this process for both Dolly and Humbert confirms nostalgia’s insidious translation of daily life.

The dangers of false narratives articulated by individuals do not reside in the narratives themselves; nostalgias would be harmless fantasies if they did not have real consequences. The consequences of nostalgia are evidenced in the actions of individuals after they have internalized nostalgia’s representations and accommodated these representations in their lives. As social subjects, these consequences in turn effect new versions of individual praxis and social order. Humbert’s process of internalizing a fantasy of Annabel and using that perfect memory as a coherent system that redefines Dolly as his own possession (named Lolita) takes place beyond his imagination and has consequences in real time with real people. His fantasy, the subject of his nympholepsy, informs a system of representation that incorporates Dolly as the object of his cathexis. Humbert supplies his nostalgic system of representation with a material subject that functions as a way to authenticate this system’s translations.
Here, “Lolita” replaces “Dolly” in an exchange that disallows Dolly’s own agency and confirms Humbert’s fantasy. Jean Baudrillard’s discussion of this kind of reality play suggests that the function of Humbert’s substitution “is [not] a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (170). In this process, systems of representation like nostalgia not only translate the agency of real subjects; they subsume both the agency of the translated subject and the agency of the individual who invests in this system.

The substitution of Lolita for Dolly fulfills the requisite materiality for Humbert’s system of nostalgia, and this semblance of Dolly usurps her own agency by translating any contestations of his narrative into twisted confirmations. The most egregious example of Humbert’s translation of Dolly as Lolita appears in his description of the first time they have sex, where he divines her motives as the cause of this event: “I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me….She saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster’s furtive world, unknown to adults. What adults did for purposes of procreation was no business of hers….Did I deprive her of her flower? Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover” (132, 133, 134). Clare Quilty, who similarly abused Dolly, repeats Humbert’s mantra: “I did not force your little protégée to join me. It was she made me remove her to a happier home” (301). With rhetoric often used in defenses and/or explanations of rape, Humbert shifts the blame from his own actions and desires to the agency of his victim. Humbert’s
desire for a real constant to confirm his fantasy leads him to create, from Dolly, a
classically feminine space, coded as such in a patriarchic register, in which he can
narrate her desires and interpret her practices. In this rhetorical space, Humbert
manufactures a personage that translates Dolly as Lolita to provide material stability
and authenticity as validation for his nostalgic system.

Humbert admits to slips in this system, moments where Dolly startlingly escapes
his version of her self, but these slips, for Humbert, fail to articulate an identity
independent from Lolita; rather, these moments signify an absence of agency and a
mystery of intent. At first, Humbert excludes her awareness of even the physical
consequences of his transference; she does not seem to notice the first time he molests
her: “The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her” (62). Later, after she has
obviously become conscious of his actions, Humbert catches a glimpse of Dolly, not
Lolita, and strains to accommodate this transgression: “I happened to glimpse from the
bathroom, through a chance combination of mirror aslant and door ajar, a look on her
face…that look I cannot exactly describe…an expression of helplessness so perfect that
it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity just because this was the very
limit of injustice and frustration – and every limit presupposes something beyond it –
hence the neutral illumination” (283). “I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s
mind,” he tells us shortly afterward; “it was always my habit and method to ignore
Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self” (283, 287). Stella Bruzzi
reminds us that when women are “relegated permanently to the realm of the ‘unknown,’
[they are] also rendered invisible except in the imagination. Femininity thus becomes an
empty surface on which male fantasies can be incessantly imposed and enacted” (125).
Humbert’s reading of Dolly codifies her self for him. She becomes a transcendental signifier that organizes the strands of his narrative and represents an existential constant that placates the nausea of nympholepsy’s nostalgia by positing this longing’s object. Humbert accomplishes the logic of this program by ignoring Dolly’s authentic will; Dolly’s own agency, the composite of her actions and thoughts, remains obscured and deferred.

Hayden White, in his description of the dialectic, emphasizes both the principle things involved in this process and the moments of transition that give birth to new principles. His emphasis is helpful because these original principles can be forgotten in the celebration of resolved contradictions:

> In [the dialectical mode], when something dies, something else is born; but that which is born is not merely the same thing in its essence as that which has died, as it is in plant and animal life. It is something new in which the earlier form of life – the action of the play, the argument of the dialogue – is contained within the later form of life as its material or content, which is to say it is turned from an end in itself into a means for the attainment of a higher end only dimly apprehended in the afterglow of the resolution. (*Metahistory* 113)

When Humbert translates the world around him into a system of representation that interprets this world as the fulfillment of his nostalgic fantasy, he does more than imagine real people falsely. He counters a dialectical understanding of his own life by freezing a formative experience into a system of representation, ignoring the multitude of matter that contests this system and incorporating the world around him into the moment he now imagines it has become. Humbert does not merely project his fantasy as a tapestry over reality; he forces reality to conform to his fantasy through a process of introjection that concludes with an incorporation of Dolly as Lolita. In Jacques Derrida’s reading of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, he notes the use of
incorporation as a recourse to the failure of introjection: “Faced with the impotence of the process of introjection (gradual, slow, laborious, mediated, effective), incorporation is the only choice: fantasmatic, unmediated, instantaneous, magical, sometimes hallucinatory” (xvii). “With the real loss of the object having been rejected and the desire having been maintained but at the same time excluded from introjection,” Derrida continues, “incorporation is a kind of theft to reappropriate the pleasure object.” The mode of incorporation shares important similarities to nostalgia, which can also be described as fantasmatic, unmediated, occasionally instantaneous (as in Humbert’s case when he meets Dolly), magical, and always hallucinatory. The concept of incorporation as seen in practice also helps explain how nostalgia prevents the comprehension of the dialectic as it articulates and promotes an anti-dialectic comprehension of existence.

As a homological system, Humbert’s nostalgia exceeds the consequences of a subjective fantasy because of his own praxis. Humbert’s Lolita usurps the agency of his daughter and, through a process of introjection, transforms their relationship and robs her of the opportunity to grow into her own agency. In Michael Wood’s reading of Lolita, Humbert’s “crime is not to ruin or abduct” Lolita, but rather “to lock this girl out of her history, to shut [her] away from her time and her place and her peers” (24). The consequences of his actions have real effects on the life of Dolly and, by the end of the novel, Humbert seems to acknowledge the violence of his practices. When Humbert finally meditates on the tragedy of her experiences with him (in a passage prized by sympathetic readers), he does so in a way that emphasizes the importance of individual participation in social discourse. While awaiting his arrest, he “evoked a last mirage of
wonder and hopelessness” at the top of a hill overlooking a small town (307). He hears “a melodious unity of sounds” from the valley below, vague and nondescript until he recognizes the chorus as the happy voices of children playing. “[T]hen,” he tells us, “I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (308). This last, poignant strain of his apologia echoes Dolly’s sarcastic description of her own summer idyll: “We loved the sings around the fire in the big stone fireplace or under the darned stars, where every girl merged her one spirit of happiness with the voice of the group” (114). For Humbert’s audience, even the specter of Dolly’s lost youth, which should reveal the epistemological distinction between subject and object that Humbert’s system had formerly collapsed, remains coded through the nostalgic system Dolly rejects and Humbert himself articulates.

Systems of nostalgia, aided and abetted by the desire of individuals, provide a totalizing epistemological system that, in its requisite hermeneutical fulfillments, diminishes the individual’s critical faculties. Annabel, the hero in Humbert’s surpassing disaster without his acknowledgement of her as such, instead becomes the “poison…in the wound” that “remained ever open,” portending a tragic return and encouraging Humbert’s incorporation of Dolly as Lolita (9). Humbert’s nostalgia and the consequences of this system remain his own, even as he blames Annabel first and later Dolly herself for the moral turpitude of their transgressions. As they integrate themselves with ideological systems, authors of nostalgias not only alienate themselves from their real conditions of experience, this alienation and these systems of representation become their conditions of experience. Without a dialectical comprehension of his
traumatic experience, Humbert could not transform his desires into new narratives. And with a rigorous investment in an anti-dialectical, or nostalgic, comprehension of his present, he created a new and more horrible trauma for his daughter.

Humbert’s reading of Dolly as Lolita transforms the conditions of his existence into a tangible version of his fantasy. On one hand, he understands his practices to be normal and natural: “There is nothing wrong,” he insists. “I have but followed nature. I am nature’s faithful hound” (132). On the other hand, his practices radically transgress the norms of social discourse, and when he finally secures the object of his desire, “gradually the odd sense of living in a brand new, mad new dream world, where everything was permissible, came over me” (133). Humbert’s fantasy ends when he finds Dolly a few years after she fled from him and offers her another chance to be together, which she refuses. Shifting the blame of his latest failure to his rival, he tracks Quilty down and murders him. Humbert makes no attempt to disguise his crime and, instead, relishes small actions that transgress his social habitus. These experiences suggest an individual who has transcended the straits of normative behavior, in one instance neatly analogized with automobile traffic:

[I]t occurred to me – not by way of protest, not as a symbol, or anything like that, but merely as a novel experience – that since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic. So I crossed to the left side of the highway and checked the feeling, and the feeling was good. It was a pleasant diaphragmal melting, with elements of diffused tactility, all this enhanced by the thought that nothing could be nearer to the elimination of basic physical laws than deliberating driving on the wrong side of the road. In a way, it was a very spiritual itch. (306)

The irony, of course, is that these actions do not suggest a genuinely new world at all. They reflect the irony of the anti-dialectic; a new form of practice that exceeds traditional practices but, in failing to transcend the narratives themselves that informed this new
practice, fails to create anything new outside of the nympholept’s own individual imagination. So, perhaps Nabokov’s foiled desire, his “private tragedy” for the author of *Lolita* to, like the “native illusionist,” “magically” “transcend the heritage in his own way” was successful after all.

52 These similarities have encouraged at least one scholar to believe that Nabokov read *The Price of Salt* and modeled parts of his novel on Highsmith’s (Castle 32-3).

53 “If this statement is true,” according to Sartre, “then both determinism and analytical reason must be categorically rejected as the method and law of human history. Dialectical rationality, the whole of which is contained in this sentence, must be seen as the permanent and dialectical unity of freedom and necessity. In other words,….the universe becomes a dream if the dialectic controls man from outside, as his unconditional law” (35).

54 Sartre’s text, in part, can be considered a response to the abuses of Stalinism and this mode’s lesser versions in radical postwar political discourse. He repeatedly makes assertions like the following to distinguish his project from reactionary ones: “The supreme paradox of historical materialism is that it is, at one and the same time, the only truth of History and a total indetermination of the Truth. The totalizing thought of historical materialism has established everything except its own existence. Or, to put it another way, contaminated by the historical relativism which it has always opposed, it has not exhibited the truth of History as it defined itself, or shown how this determines its nature and validity in the historical process, in the dialectical development of praxis and of human experience. In other words, we do not know what it means for a Marxist historian to speak the truth” (*Critique* 19).

55 Ernesto Laclau, who attempts to qualify the practices allowed by the “dimension of ground,” refers to the freedom discussed here as “emancipation” and argues that the dichotomy inherent in the dialectical ground “is not constitutive but is rather the expression of a positive process, the ‘other’ cannot be a real other.” Laclau insists that totality “is impossible and, at the same time, is required by the particular: in that sense, it is present in the particular as that which is absent, as a constitutive lack which constantly forces the particular to be more than itself” (1, 3 & 15).

56 In a 1972 interview, Sartre elaborates on this concept, which he introduces in *Critique*: “An institution or collective object is always a product of the activity of the group in matter, whether verbal matter or physico-chemical matter, and is thereby sealed and surpassed by an inertia which separates the group and imposes itself on it as the instituted and sacred” (“The Itinerary of Thought” 55).

57 See Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound*, especially pp. 94-100, for a discussion about the significance of “home” as a cultural marker during this period and the ways sexuality figured in this marker.

58 Many readers have commented on the ways *Lolita* reflects and responds to traits in the postwar American social. *Lolita*, Susan Mizruchi argues, examines early postwar American consumer culture, and she suggests that “the portrait of Lolita as a consumer (of candy, ice cream, and a variety of kitschy objects) serves as the means by which her own consumption by Humbert is rationalized and excused” (631). Dana Brand also offers an argument that reads *Lolita* as a commentary on American social discourse after World War II: “Nabokov suggests in *Lolita* that the society which claims to have freed itself from traditional forms of coercive authority has evolved new and more covert forms to replace the old. Each of the Americans Humbert encounters constructs their identity and view of the world according to the images of normalcy provided by advertising, mass culture, and applied social science. Only Humbert the foreigner is able to resist the influence of these new and powerful forms of coercion. He does this by aesthetically distancing himself from the American commercial and social environment” (14).
Eric Rothstein frames *Lolita* as a commentary on notions of normality in postwar America. “[A]s it plays with norms and normativity,” he argues, “it tries to naturalize the normative for itself and to offer a model for doing so” (23). “[B]ecause of *Lolita*’s conundrums of reading,” Rothstein adds, “one can arrive at good inferences about those norms. Nabokov not only keeps to them, he also naturalizes them enough so as to underpin an ethics” (24).

Incidentally, Nabokov talks about his various international residences and other sundry life experiences as moments in a dialectical spiral, as “a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free” (*Speak, Memory* 275). “I thought this up when I was a school boy,” he tells us, “and I also discovered that Hegel’s triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time.”

Humbert mockingly references psychoanalytic readings of his actions on several occasions. For example: “The able psychiatrist who studies my case...is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the ‘gratification’ of a lifetime urge, and release from the ‘subconscious’ obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee” (166-7).

“The continuing Zionist discourse,” Toufic continues, “[i]s thus an obliviousness to the ‘Final Solution’ as a surpassing disaster, through its treatment as a vast, extreme catastrophe with localized effects. The ambivalence that many of the Zionists in Palestine betrayed toward the survivors of the Shoah, especially during the early years following the second world war and the establishment of the state of Israel, is to be ascribed not only to a wish to forget the figure of the Jew as a passive victim; but also possibly to an intuition that the more the Shoah is underscored and pondered, the more it would reinforce the feeling of the withdrawal of the holiness or simply traditional ultra-special significance of the land of Palestine (*Forthcoming* 56).

I like Raymond Williams’ description of “homology,” as it, like totalities, encourages us to consider the unifying aspects of tropes in social discourse: “This conception can reveal determining relations at a quite different level from the bare proposition that ‘ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships’; among other reasons is the fact that something more than reflection or representation is then often in question, and art and ideas can be seen as structurally formed...within a general social order and its complex internal relations” (“Marx on Culture” 224).

Humbert admits to the purpose of his text, but he does so with a flippancy that appears genuine: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, ‘impartial sympathy’” (57).

See James Phelan’s reading of *Lolita* for an interesting gauge of Humbert’s authorial voice. Phelan distinguishes “between estranging unreliability, by which I mean unreliable narration that underlines or increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, and bonding unreliability, by which I mean unreliable narration that reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience,” and argues that an awareness of “Nabokov’s specific and complicated deployment of these two kinds of unreliability” helps us solve the “problem of technique and ethics” that arises with our encounter with the novel’s content and form (223-4).

Magic and enchantment play an important role in the way Humbert describes nympholepsy, and Frederick Whitling convincingly connects the role agency plays with themes of magic in Humbert’s narrative: “One thing these metaphors of enchantment accomplish is to suggest that Humbert is in some sense passive before a particular phenomenon in the world – nymphets. This passivity is precisely what the notion of compulsion requires. At the same time, however (and herein resides a crucial difference from his historical account), this supplement must remain mysterious because it endows nymphets with a certain agency; through it they are capable, indeed given to, acting upon Humbert, bewitching him, mounting an assault against which he is defenseless. Which is to say they have, among other things, a subjectivity and an ability to return – or not – his desiring gaze” (842).
Humbert also provides the details of his fantasy extrapolated: “with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second, who be eight or nine around 1960, when I would still be dans la force de l’age; indeed, the telescropy of my mind, or unmind, was strong enough to distinguish in the remoteness of time a vieillard encore vert – or was it green rot? – bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad” (174).

Elizabeth Patnoe contests the familiar version of Lolita in both academic and popular cultures with close readings of both the first time Humbert and Lolita have sex and reader responses to this passage, and asks: “Why didn’t the Lolita myth evolve in a way that more accurately reflects Nabokov’s Lolita? Why isn’t the definition of ‘Lolita’ ‘a molested adolescent girl’ instead of a ‘seductive’ one?” (113). See Linda Kauffman’s essay, “Framing Lolita,” for an early version of this refreshing polemic. The readings this argument corrects could be extended to address popular versions of Humbert himself. A recent example includes his appearance on The Independent’s 2005 list of favorite fictional characters accompanied by this blurb: “There’s no funnier monster in modern literature than poor, doomed Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita. Going to hell in his company would always be worth the ride” (“The 100 Favourite Fictional Characters…As Chosen by 100 Literary Luminaries”).

For a more contemporary example of this rhetoric, see Nicole Colson’s essay on media and community responses to the gang rape of an 11-year-old girl in Cleveland, Texas.

O. Kernberg defines introjection as “the reproduction and fixation of an interaction with the environment by means of an organized cluster of memory traces implying at least three components: (i) the image of an object, (ii) the image of the self in interaction with that object, and (iii) the affective coloring of both the object-image and the self-image” (quoted in Malancharuvil, 376).

Marx notes the initial distinction between ideology and experience and the dynamic relationship between narratives and individuals: “[W]e do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process” (“The German Ideology” 154-5).
CHAPTER 5
THERE’S ALWAYS TOMORROW

Much of my discussion of nostalgia in the preceding chapters focuses on the logic of this system of representation. The replication of narratives in social discourse relies on systemizing the logic of these narratives in ways that both formalize their representations and encourage individuals to participate in creating formations of systems like nostalgia. Looking at these formations of social discourse tells us important things about the historic moment that produced them and suggests how and why narratives are articulated in the first place. And nostalgias, I argue, provide an especially informative example of ways social discourse works. Although they consistently posit notions about the past that reify conceptions of the future, narratives of nostalgia are manifested in many different varieties because individuals actively contribute to their discursive formations. Like ideologies, nostalgias are not merely instrumental illusions imbuing the hearts and minds of social subjects (although this is partially true); rather, nostalgias distort dialectical dynamics of individual agency and social histories in an organic process that features individual contributions to social forms. This distortion often appears as specific ideological scripts (for example, varieties of nationalism like fascism), but these scripts are always materialized in the idiosyncratic practices of individuals. If we recognize the combination of a habitus’s sedimented instructions and the material consequences of praxis in a discursive formation like nostalgia, we can discover the framework of nostalgia and learn important lessons about the functionality of systems of representation in social discourse.

However, comprehending the framework, or logic, of nostalgia only recognizes part of nostalgia’s form and practice. As a narrative form, nostalgia maintains a
collection of tropes that encourages standardized interpretations of history and culture. The power and, frequently, the uniqueness of nostalgia reside in how individuals recognize these tropes and invest in their instructions. Readers of nostalgia refer to “longing” as a key component in nostalgic narratives, a component that explains the allure and value of fantastic versions of history. As an emotive category, the idea of longing resists rational critique and encourages unalloyed allegiance. While it might be easier to adjudicate the reactionary political consequence of longing and describe the function of longing in terms of positivist psychology or factual falsity, I want to consider an element of this component that resonates with the critical tradition of Marxism.

Walter Benjamin distinguishes between two different varieties of “aura”: the participatory sublime initiated by material objects and the same aura induced by nature. Both versions work for me here. In the former, “[e]xperience of the aura…rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man….To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 188). In the latter version, Benjamin defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (“The Work of Art” 222-3). For my purposes, the concept of aura can be used to elucidate the way longing functions in nostalgic narratives specifically and social discourse generally, explain the mysterious and gothic nature of nostalgia’s spectral haunting, suggest reasons why people choose nostalgic recognitions of the past instead of recognizing our
dialectical relationship with the past, acknowledge an aspect of these narratives that exceeds political or moral machinations, and, finally, provide a vantage point outside of nostalgic and anti-nostalgic polemics by articulating nostalgia's relationship to human desire.

Before I describe the way aura functions in narratives of nostalgia, I want to briefly compare nostalgia to religion and appropriate a concept that might help explain personal investments in nonrational discourses. A religious concept works here because this field of discourse so readily applies to the personal experiences and social consequences of representation. Accordingly, I want to argue that the pleasures of nostalgia are examples of individuals experiencing the “numinous,” a moment of recognition which intimates the truth of aura, which intimates the truth of nostalgia. “Numinous” is a theological term coined by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1923). The central proposition of Otto’s argument stems from a rehabilitation of the idea of the “holy” that grants it an “overplus of meaning” beyond its conventional moral attributes (5). In a way similar to Wright’s “politics plus,” Otto defines and describes the process of exchange between the “synthetic essential attributes” of the sublime and the actual practices of individuals occasioned by them, which he collectively refers to as the state of numinous consciousness. Adopting the Latin *numen* (a nod of approbation, usually with a divine connotation) in a progression parallel to *omen* → “ominous,” Otto avers the existence of a “‘numinous’ category of values and a ‘numinous’ state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied” (6). It exists as the result of both a “feeling of dependence” and “creature consciousness.”
Such a “feeling of dependence” can be distinguished from other conditions of experience “determined by circumstances and environment” because of its qualities as a “feeling of pious or religious dependence,” which “can only be suggested indirectly through the tone and content of a man’s feeling-response to it” (10). “Creature consciousness” refers to the capacity of an individual to invest in a nonrational narrative without a corresponding loss of agency in the exchange. In fact, this agency or willfulness itself completes and verifies the experience. Experiences of the numinous are the experiential consequence of an aura that has been affirmed by individuals in practice.

The numinous situates the individual in a site of interpellative reception, a space that conditions them to recognize and respond to stimuli in a procedure that Otto refers to as “schematization” (16). Schematization, or the process that conditions a subject’s receptivity to narratives that condition her to be receptive to these same narratives, appropriates systems the subject already participates in and infuses them with an aura. This process is a proposition and a confirmation, which occasion the numen, the nodding of the head, the recognition and sanctioning of this hailing. Otto discusses various manifestations of this phenomenon, ranging from the numinous in the Old Testament, the numinous in Martin Luther, a numinous experience of John Ruskin, the expression of the numinous in English, and “original numinous sounds.” He argues that the logic of the numinous is inferential, and that we can only comprehend a numinous dynamic through the examination of examples of its manifestation.

Auras of nostalgia begin in social discourse, as they exist in a system of signs that establish the receptive potential for nostalgia. A past experience, such as the memory of
a lost loved one, does not necessarily contain the fundamental elements that imbue that memory with longing. Like a thing’s transition into a commodity, these auras are manufactured by appropriating touchstones the nostalgic individual can recognize and appreciate in a process that engages the agency of individuals with the evocation of reverential modes of the *mysterium tremendum*. This practice concludes with the conceptualization of a utopian future that contains the lost object of the individual’s affection. For example, the advertising industry, as Raymond Williams points out, exploits this dynamic between individuals and social discourse. An association between a product and “personal and social meanings,” Williams tells us, provides the primary element of modern advertising’s power and effectiveness (335). Williams refers to this pattern of associations as “the magic system,” which he defines as “a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies.” This magic system obfuscates the “fundamental choice” between “man as consumer and man as user” (336). This choice delineates an individual’s consciousness of social relations, a consequence of capitalism’s penchant for fetishizing goods and needs, which Georg Lukács also highlights in his study of Marxism and culture, “Marx and Engels on Aesthetics.” “[U]nder capitalism,” Lukács states, “all these [economic] categories appear absolutely reified so that their true essence, men’s relationships, are obscured. It is this inversion of the fundamental categories of existence that produces the fetishizing of capitalist society” (69). The product itself plays a secondary role in the articulation of its aura; this aura only appears in the communicative action of individuals participating in social discourse.
Richard Dyer, in his discussion of professional entertainment and utopia, describes the marketing strategy of the entertainment industry, which resembles nostalgia’s process of inculcating a sense of aura within its narratives: “Entertainment offers the image of ‘something better’ to escape into…the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized” (20). The rhetoric of this strategy is insidious, as the industry suggests a need under the guise of satiating a need. By accepting the suggestion of the product (“this is something better”), an individual accepts the suggestion of the need (“there is something better”). The entertainment industry articulates an aura of utopianism “contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an effective code that is characteristic of…a given mode of cultural production” (20). This system of signs is romantically sensorial; rather than describe the empirical qualities of the product, the aura articulated by this system is entirely premised on human sensation and desire.

I want only to draw attention to correlations between aura and utopianism and neglect a discussion of utopia itself, which is beyond the scope of this study. This correlation is useful here because, like nostalgia, utopian narratives demonstrate the way aura functions in social discourse. Nostalgia posits a perfect past, a utopian moment that encourages a longing for a different version of the present. The only possible place for a new version of the present resides in the future, and with this logic nostalgia collapses into utopia. Both systems translate alternative realities into the register of aura, which individuals experience as the numinous. While Dyer only alludes
to the significance of aura, Fredric Jameson, in his discussion of Benjamin, mentions aura specifically in relation to utopianism: “the objects of aura stand perhaps as the setting of a kind of Utopia, a Utopian present, not shorn of the past but having absorbed it, a kind of plenitude of existence in the world of things” (77). Aura both prescribes the relationship between the individual and the productions of a system and incorporates the individual into the product’s social existence as a commodity. To the extent that this aura is codified in the rhetoric of the participatory sublime, it exceeds rational critique. An aura created by such a system exists as a subjectively interchangeable referent that is compelling and yet possesses no particularly rational connection to the object it is adhered to, providing the system a powerful hermeneutic means of persuasion.

The main players in this dynamic between the aura and a numinous experience include the social apparatuses that articulate the aura’s rhetorical reference points (beauty, love, plentitude, etc.), the individuals who invest in the narratives of these reference points, and the aura’s object itself. This dynamic is cultivated, maintained, and sustained through a system of signs individuals invest in and replicate. The relationship between individuals and the narratives they invest in facilitates an experiential moment, or the numinous, which becomes manifested in the practices of individuals. Jean Baudrillard describes a movement similar to this sequence and refers to its instigative element as “hyperreal.” It is helpful to consider aura as hyperreal, an “artificial resurrection [of referentials] in systems of signs,” because the analogy construes aura as a referent that can be sustained by its own volition, by its own logic, once it is articulated (170). In this analogy, the aura extends itself past the “magic of the concept” to encompass the highest order of simulation, the “divine irreference of images,” the
simulacrum. This process of simulation, as I discussed in my previous chapter, situates the aura in a space of autonomy, separated from the origin of its articulation and forever replicated in its moments of recognition. I pause at Baudrillard’s theory here to give voice to the silent subject that he infers in the “operational” function of the hyperreal but neglects in the famously hyperbolic extension of his analogy. Baudrillard states that the hyperreal acts as a substitute for reality, that it is “an operation to deter every real process by its operational double,” which ultimately “bears no relation to any reality whatsoever” (170, 173). I want to suggest that as a representation that marshals signs of actual experiences, this referent actually occasions experience. The aura is the synthetic idea of a proposition, but an individual’s numinous experience of nostalgia is real.

Jacques Derrida’s Marxist intervention, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, attempts to accommodate the ontological themes of political economy in the same field of his own project and provides us with a convenient rhetoric to understand how numinous experience works in nostalgia. Derrida anticipates academic apprehension about nonrational concepts with the assertion that scholars are generally unqualified to talk of ghosts because they “believe that looking is sufficient” (11). He points out early in *Specters of Marx* that “[t]here has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal,” and he calls for a critical analysis of what might be called the experiential nonrational, or the numinous, or the hyperreal, or nostalgia (11, 10). Derrida claims that deconstruction, as an “attempted radicalism of Marxism,” “goes beyond” both the opposition of “living work” and the “spectral logic” in Marx’s analysis of
capital and the “ontology [this opposition] presumes” (92, 75). As I discussed in my introduction, Derrida’s hermeneutics encourages us to recognize how the past influences the present and the future, how history haunts the way the social lives.

Hauntology, with its attendant distinctions between spirits and specters, asserts that any analysis of what the future means must accept the subjective orientation of the observer: “what stands in front of it must also precede it like its origin: before it. Even if the future is its provenance, it must be, like any provenance, absolutely and irreversibly past” (xix). The content of social history, or the spirit of the past, remains with us in the present and takes the form of a specter, which haunts the social of the future. I want to argue that the objects of the past that provide the content of nostalgia (people, places, things, and experiences) contain an aura, or spirit, that is spectrally manifested in the experiential numinous, in the practices of individuals. These manifestations are specters of the initial aura, they always take the form of human desire, and they indicate crucial elements of their historical context in social discourse. And as a representation that marshals signs of actual experiences, this referent also occasions experience. This distinction aids my attempt to describe nostalgia as an experience and not merely as an example of a fantasy falsely conscious of the world that these experiences both accommodate and shape.

*There’s Always Tomorrow*, a 1956 film directed by Douglas Sirk and starring Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, provides a cultural artifact that specifically articulates a nostalgic narrative, allows for an opportunity to consider the aura’s numinous value as the touchstone of nostalgia’s longing, and suggests reasons why individuals find this system of representation so beautifully valid. *There’s Always*
Tomorrow represents a dark departure from Sirk’s other 1950s melodramas, which feature noble characters performing slight transgressions in saturated Technicolor. Shot in black and white with a screen couple reunited ten years after their doomed affair in Double Indemnity, There’s Always Tomorrow challenges an era’s trenchant version of male and female domestic responsibility, affirms the era’s notions and fears of modern masculinity, and troubles standard trajectories from childhood to adulthood. My discussion of this film will focus on the relationship between the two main characters, Cliff and Norma, the dynamics between Cliff and his home, and the symbolic properties of a toy robot. All three of these elements articulate versions of auras that the characters invest in with their own numinous experiences.

Fred MacMurray plays Clifford Groves, a middle-aged owner of a toy manufacturing company in Los Angeles, a husband of twenty years, and the father of three children: a late high school-aged son and two younger daughters. Barbara Stanwyck’s Norma Vale worked for Cliff twenty years ago when he founded the Groves Toy Manufacturing Company. After falling in love with him and then leaving the company without an explanation, she moved to New York City, where she started her own career designing dresses. She drops by his house while in Los Angeles on business and they recount old memories. After meeting again by accident, they initiate a mostly chaste affair, which is noticed by Cliff’s son, Vinnie (played by William Reynolds) and his daughter, Ellen (played by Gigi Perreau). Vinnie’s girlfriend, Ann (played by Pat Crowley) argues with Vinnie about Cliff’s behavior, and this young romance forms the film’s important subplot and provides a dramatic foil to Cliff’s relationship with his wife Marion (played by Joan Bennett). Cliff decides, with Norma, to leave his family, but
Norma changes her mind after a meeting with Vinnie and Ellen, who beg her not to steal their father away from them. When Norma calls off their plans and returns to New York, Cliff returns home, resigned to complete the marital and paternal narrative he began twenty years before.

*There’s Always Tomorrow* opens with a title card that wryly situates the film: “Once upon a time, in sunny California…,” a notice that immediately precedes a harried delivery woman crossing the street in the rain heading towards Cliff’s factory. In a match cut, we see the delivery woman enter the workshop from the interior, framed in a deep focused long shot by a foregrounded display of toys that include four clowns and a stuffed monkey poised to clap. She hands the receptionist a bouquet of flowers (ordered for Cliff’s wife, Marion) and then wanders around the lobby waiting for a signature and admiring the displays. “Hobby horses and pinafores! What a dreamy place to work in,” she says to the receptionist, who drearily responds, “Yes, I suppose it is.” Almost immediately after this exchange, we meet Cliff attempting to reach his wife at home on the telephone while discussing a new toy with his inventor. They are examining an eight-inch-tall plastic robot and decide to name it “Rex, the Walkie-Talkie Robot Man.” This scene ends with a cut to Cliff’s home, where his children are monopolizing the telephone. Cliff enters, meekly mentions his failure to reach Marion on the phone because of the occupied line and, after being shushed by Vinnie, apologizes before heading upstairs to find his wife.

Two of the film’s elements I want to consider are featured in this opening sequence. The idea of toys and their associative value as totems of childhood and dreams sets the stage for our introduction to Cliff. Themes of childhood specifically and
the past generally are associated with dreams of altered realities here, and much of the film dramatizes its characters’ investment in the aura of these desires. Toys were big business at the time, the result of a prosperous peacetime economy’s disposable income, many new synthetic materials ideally suited for cheap and novel products, and a massive baby boom, which would peak a year later in 1957. Cliff’s name on the factory’s trucks outside and his confidence and authority in the workplace allow us to connect his identity with the successful products of his labor. We meet Rex, which I will discuss at length below, at the same time Cliff appears, providing a temporal coupling that anticipates the frequent collapsing of distinctions between Cliff and his production. The second element introduced in this sequence is the juxtaposition between Cliff’s fantasy of happiness, manifested in the toy shop, and the reality of his life, which is manifested in his home. When he finds Marion upstairs, she declines his offer to see a show because their youngest daughter has a dance recital, and he insists they plan a vacation for the following weekend. “I’d like a change,” he tells her. “I’m tired of the fog and the smog and the rain. I…I’d like to lie in the sun.” Soon, the house empties out and he finds himself alone, frustrated with the preparation of his dinner. The sharp distinctions between the different performances and responses in these spheres of work and home highlight the crisis that develops later in the film: Cliff, unhappy with his home life, seeks the promise of a new affair in the renewal of an old relationship.

We are introduced to the third element I want to privilege when Norma Vale rings Cliff’s doorbell. He fails to recognize her at first, but she reminds him of their shared past and he happily invites her in. Norma looks around the living room while Cliff exchanges his apron for a sports jacket. “Oh, the house is beautiful, warm, cheerful,”
she says when he returns, “just as I had imagined it, the kind you always wanted.” After a notable pause, he responds: “Yes, I guess I did.” The rest of the family has left, and they soon leave the house themselves to see the variety show Cliff had planned to see with Marion. Framed in a long shot surrounded by other patrons, Norma reminisces about their previous experience in this same theater, an experience Cliff had forgotten. They skip the second act to tour his factory, and he proudly shows her his latest product. In a medium shot with its edges softened by fill light, they stand next to an empty table with Rex spotlighted and centered in the frame. Cliff turns Rex on and it rolls towards the viewer in a close-up, moving its arms and repeating, “I’m Rex, the Robot, the mechanical man. Push me and steer me wherever you can.” “Cliff, you’ve done so well,” Norma says after appreciating the new toy. “And you look so well, so happy. You are happy, aren’t you?” “Sure,” he says, after another notable pause, “sure I’m happy.” As they move towards the back of the workshop, Norma notices a large hurdy-gurdy, which they had designed together years ago. They retell that story, splitting up remembrances between themselves. Their inspiration for the toy came from an old organ grinder, and when Norma fails to remember the grinder’s song, Cliff winds the “relic” and it plays “Blue Moon.” “Oh Cliff, it’s been a wonderful evening,” Norma sighs as she listens to the music and begins winding the organ herself. The song’s synchronous track soon melds with nondiegetic orchestra strains of the same melody. “Blue Moon” will become an aural trope throughout the rest of the film.79 “You know,” Norma muses, “tonight, for a little while, time stood still.” As they leave, the camera pans back to the hurdy gurdy, with the soundtrack of “Blue Moon” fading out before a cut to Marion sleeping. Cliff had planned a wonderful evening with his wife that night,
and his soft fling with Norma supplants the former desire, an exchange highlighted by the sequence’s juxtaposition (again) with a jump cut from the toy shop to Cliff’s home’s interior.

Rex, the Walkie-Talkie Robot Man, Cliff’s latest product, matches well with one of his oldest in this sequence, as it connects objects with loaded technical references (the hurdy-gurdy represents old fashioned technology while the robot signifies the pleasures of the new) that relate to different periods of Cliff’s life. In his discussion of technology and our relationships with objects and the past, Evan Watkins coins the term “technoideological coding,” which provides a useful perspective on how objects manifest auras and how Cliff accommodates these auras in the numinous experience of nostalgia. Technoideological coding, according to Watkins, presents a “master narrative” that confuses immediate social relations with notions of obsolescence and progress; “it mystifies its own temporal scene, its own legitimizing powers of social definition within the terms of present configurations of position” (3). Watkins argues that versions of this narrative utilize temporal references to “configure ideologically assigned indices of position,” which can be employed by political apparatuses to design public opinion (33).\footnote{80} Crucially, notions of obsolescence produced by these narratives are “not at all a survival from the past. [They are] produced by and integral to the conditions of dominance in the present. And because [they are] integral to these conditions, [objects or ideas deemed obsolete are] potentially dangerous to them” (39). Both of the toys in Cliff’s shop are matched in the film with moments of his life: the hurdy-gurdy’s technoideological coding, its wind-up power, quaint wooden finish, and its plaintive music, suggest that the man who produced it came from another time, while Rex, the
walking, talking, mechanical man with shiny metallic skin replaces the former Cliff, insisting that his youth or his conception of his youth has become necessarily obsolete.

There are many factors influencing the way these objects produce an aura of the past, and the past itself plays a crucial role. Actual circumstances, including the first years of Cliff’s marriage, his relationship with an employee who deeply admires him, the promise of a successful career, and the trappings of a fulfilling family life form the spirit of the past, a chosen collection of fond memories that are prompted as a spectral salve for the disappointments of the present. The aura of these objects, juxtaposed in a single experience, elicits the numinous reaction of nostalgia that the viewer sees and hears in Cliff’s responses to Norma’s questions. These objects become the classic signifiers employed by the nostalgia mode, providing a site of return that can relieve the existential doubt and nausea in a system of recognitions that appears to have already been internalized and substantiated. The aura of the spectacle, now internalized in the numinous experience of Cliff, displaces the objects that occasioned it. This aura capitalizes on a longing for a sustainable return and supplants two toys with semblances of their meaning that possess no particularly rational connection to the objects they represent. Although the numinous is facilitated by the aura, the aura manifests itself in the numinous through the agency of the individual, and the entire dynamic depends on individuals who affirm it in the language of their experience, the *numen* of recognition.⁸¹

The next weekend, Cliff travels down to Palms Valley, a small resort about an hour south of Los Angeles. This was the get-away-weekend he planned with Marion, which she declined after their youngest daughter Frances (played by Judy Nugent) sprained
her ankle. The opening scene of this section provides the film’s first sunny exterior shot, with Cliff bouncing out of his car in sunglasses and a light-colored sports jacket. The sunny atmosphere continues with an intimation of romance in the bellman’s pronouncement: “you certainly picked a nice weekend, sir. The place is jumping. Three women for every man. We call the cocktail lounge ‘Bachelors’ Paradise.’” While Cliff drinks in the lounge, Norma greets him; she happened to drive down before her flight to New York. They are soon swimming, sun bathing, horseback riding, and dancing slowly to “Blue Moon,” at Norma’s request. They share old memories and, by all appearances, relive this friendship from their youth. Cliff appears happy for the first time in the film, and he recognizes a difference from his previous condition: “You know, Norma,” he tells her, “it’s so easy for a man to slip into a rut. And once he’s caught in it, he doesn’t dare do the things he used to do. He doesn’t feel the excitement he used to feel. If anything, he feels a little scared of life.” The aura of a vacation, of sunlight and the revisited joys of horseback riding and dancing with an old friend encourage an investment in nostalgia, which becomes manifested in Cliff’s numinous experience of almost bewildered joy. His relief and the happiness he shares with Norma are palpable, but the film also presents a foreboding strain, as Vinnie and his friends arrive to surprise Cliff and obtain a free swim in the resort’s pool. Unbeknownst to Cliff, Vinnie sees and hears his father and Norma together, promptly leaves, and decides that Cliff is having an affair. The Palms Valley sequence continues with a new context: Cliff’s happiness, for the viewer, remains haunted by the source of his angst, personified by his son. Cliff’s house and family play off screen as trace elements for the viewer, and we anticipate a
confrontation when he returns home. In this context, we can also recognize the transient nature of Cliff’s new source of happiness.

Cliff’s nostalgia here cannot be considered an imposition of someone’s active will (for example, Norma’s desire) on passive acquiescence (Cliff’s naiveté), nor can the linchpin to the success of this nostalgic narrative be considered the result of a system of representation especially designed by Cliff himself. The linchpin and agency of this narrative results from a signifier or an assemblage of signifiers that accumulates enough use (through Norma’s and Cliff’s consensual recognition) to posit a limit in a continuum of representation, which in turn causes a pause in the process of simulation. This pause allows signs to form connections and gel into a system. In this scenario, the agency of individuals may appear consequential because each system depends on a critical mass of recognition. Individuals who invest in the aura of systems of representation and manifest these systems in their own numinous experiences sustain the system with their own practices, a dynamic which reveals the way individuals can simultaneously sustain systems of representation and find their agency subsumed by the narratives of these same systems.

For example, American television viewers in the 1980s did not believe a man named Bo could be found somewhere in Georgia driving a car named General Lee, but they did believe Bo was a good man, Daisy was a sweet girl, Uncle Jesse was wise, Boss Hog was bad, and Rocco was a dolt. The recognition of this hyperreal function of narrative in its projection of these attributes (good, sweet, wise, bad, doltish) is deferred somewhere between the script and the couch. To recognize this function, to acknowledge this mediation, is to deconstruct the aura of the narrative, which would
change the type of pleasure received, a change that may initially appear to be unpleasant. Our way of looking at magic shows, to use another example, emphasizes the illusion and the mystery of the machinations that create it as pleasurable. Our pleasure is sourced, not in the understanding of a magician’s craft, but in the numinous experience that comprehends the craft as unknowable and only manifested in the illusion. The investment in systems of representation, especially nostalgias, insures parameters, a field of doxa minus competing discourses, a tentative escape from nihilism and a guide towards hope and happiness.83

When Cliff returns home, the anticipated confrontation occurs when he invites Norma over for dinner. Vinnie rudely excuses himself from the table, and Norma leaves early. Cliff’s discusses the embarrassing evening with Marion on the balcony outside their bedroom, and he expresses his disappointment, which reflects a deeper anxiety about his family and his home:

I’m tired of the children taking over. I’m tired of being pushed in the corner. I’m tired of being taken for granted….I’m becoming like one of my own toys. Clifford Groves, the Walkie-Talkie Robot. Wind me up in the morning and I walk and talk, and I go to work all day. Wind me up again and I come home at night and eat dinner and go to bed. Wind me up the next morning and I drive to the office and work all day to pay the bills. I’m sick and tired of the sameness of it, day in and day out. Don’t you ever want to get out of this house? Go some place, move around?

Marion demurs, and attempts to reinforce the strands of connection that have frayed since Cliff returned from Palms Valley. She mentions their responsibilities and hints that his desires are childish and foolish. But Cliff insists that while his romantic notions may be sourced in the past, the past was better than the present: “Oh Marion,” he says, exasperated, “when we were younger we did so many things together. We had fun. No two days were ever alike. Life was an adventure. But, now…” As he fades off, she
returns inside the bedroom yawning, reviews her daily planner, and begins mentioning to herself out loud the variety of errands she has to do the next morning.

In referencing a toy robot as his doppelgänger, Cliff’s harangue nods to a diagnosis of masculinity frequently discussed in postwar America’s popular sociology and psychology renaissance. Critical fictional and nonfictional studies like Philip Wylie’s wide-ranging collection of essays in Generation of Vipers (1942), David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney’s The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Culture (1950), C. Wright Mills’ White Collar: The American Middle Classes (1951), Paddy Chayefsky’s teleplay Marty (which dramatized Wylie’s popular notion of “momism”), Sloan Wilson’s novel The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit (1955), William H. Whyte’s The Organizational Man (1956), and Norman Mailer’s long essay, “The White Negro” (1957) describe a variety of complexes modern men face and prescribe a variety of solutions. The Lonely Crowd suggests that Americans were becoming “other-directed” (21), that individuals in this era frequently base life decisions on what they observed their contemporaries doing, a theory which parallels Whyte’s Machiavellian warning for men who want to maintain their individuality as they navigate the new “Social Ethic,” this pernicious “contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual” (6, 7). Men must recognize the ways this ethic stifles their agency so they can ultimately subvert the corporatization of citizens. Wilson’s best-selling The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit lauds a protagonist who successfully struggles through a mid-life crisis while his wartime past haunts his peacetime present, and Mailer’s “The White Negro” presents an exotic alternative to the white malaise of suburban conformity and consumerism that echoes the poetic
adventures of the Beat Generation. These artifacts tapped into a zeitgeist that revealed an anxiety about postwar individuals and masculinity in an era of prosperity and progress coupled with the anxieties of the Cold War. In *There’s Always Tomorrow*'s version, much of this anxiety stems from a lag between the bliss, comfort, and halcyon security promised by model homes and the reality of lived experiences.

According to Elaine Tyler May, the glorified nuclear family unit in the fifties “was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of ‘traditional’ family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all of its members’ personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life” ("Cold War – Warm Hearth" 157). Appropriating the era’s political rhetoric, May argues that in “the domestic version of containment, the ‘sphere of influence’ was the home,” which also provided the “most tangible symbol” of the “postwar American dream” (*Homeward Bound* 14, 162). In Lizabeth Cohen’s version of postwar American society, she situates the concept of home at “the center of American’s vision of postwar prosperity” (73). Cliff understands this narrative, but he also senses a lag between its precepts and his own experiences. Cliff wants something different; he wants to “get out of [the] house,” to “[g]o some place, move around.” When Cliff shows up uninvited to Norma’s business meeting and announces his love for her, he contextualizes his announcement in terms of his dissatisfaction with his home life. They are on a balcony of her hotel’s bar overlooking the lights of Los Angeles, and strains of “Blue Moon” provide a backdrop to his lament: “After you called, I went home. It’s the same house I’d lived in for years. I’d always felt comfortable there….All of a sudden I felt desperate sitting in my own living room. I felt as though I were trapped in a
tomb of my own making. And all the years until today were stones closing up the tomb and I had to escape because I was still alive, alive and wanting you.” Later, when Vinnie and Ellen confront Norma with their suspicions, she shifts the onus of this situation back on them: “Why should Cliff need me if he was given love at home? Why would he go on the outside for it?”

As I discussed in the introduction, the social logic of home provides nostalgia its symbolic lynchpin. Interestingly, Cliff rejects the real manifestation of home, with its attendant wife and children, while he confuses his desire for something different with a strong nostalgia for a former opportunity. One key to understanding this duality can be found in Rex, the Groves Toy Manufacturing Company’s latest product. Rex, the specter of Cliff’s spirit, the ghost he produces that manifests something intrinsic about himself, appears frequently enough throughout the film to be considered a totem for Cliff’s crisis. This reference point exemplifies the constraints Cliff feels on his agency and his happiness, and the source of these constraints. As so many of this era’s analyses of society and the individual argue, these constraints can be traced to social discourse as it is articulated through Cliff’s relationship with his family, his job, and, increasingly, his past. The static nature of Rex’s essence – it always moves in the same way, it always says the same things, and it will never learn or grow – correlates with the constraints Cliff senses around him. Rex contains everything it will ever be, the past becomes fulfilled in its practice, and the future, inscribed cosmetically in the toy’s design, remains singularly determined.

Above, I argued that the practico-inert, the material consequences of a past habitus that haunts living social culture by influencing personal and collective praxis,
facilitates the anti-dialectic and can be accepted or neglected by the agency of individuals. Perhaps Rex, then, can be considered more of a talisman than a totem.

Much of Cliff’s professional life in the film concerns his latest product. We are introduced to Cliff in his workshop examining the new toy and naming it; Cliff vacations in Palm Valley to meet a department store owner and promote Rex; and in Cliff’s and Norma’s final scene, Norma interrupts a meeting about Rex between Cliff and a management team. When Cliff gives Norma a tour of his company’s accomplishments over the past twenty years, Rex becomes his workshop’s first exhibit, and when Cliff reaches for an analogy to explain his depression, he references the mechanical man. In Sartre’s discussion of exteriority (or Nature) and its relation to the agency of individuals, he calls exteriority the “essence of man in the sense that essence, as transcended past, is inert and becomes the transcended objectification of the practical agent” (Critique 72). This exteriority “produc[es] within everyone and within every multiplicity the continually resolved and constantly renewed contradiction between man-as-producer and man-as-product.” Individuals, here, become objectified by their own practice, as the distinctions between their own (personal, internal) agency and the social habitus that informs their consciousness of the present are collapsed in their praxis. Sartre compares the consequences of this dynamic to a robot:

The objectification of man places a seal on the inert. Thus, a transcended objectification, in so far as it is the space of the practical man, is, in the last analysis, a robot. In the strange world which we are describing the robot is the essence of man: he freely transcends himself towards the future, but he thinks of himself as a robot as soon as he looks back on his past. He comes to know himself in the inert and is therefore a victim of his reified image, even prior to all alienation. (72)

Rex, Cliff’s negative talisman, promotes an aura of the past in the present that reifies the future. Cliff comprehends his agency as a series of mechanical responses that react
in predetermined ways to events that have already occurred. There exists a semblance of agency in this dynamic, but an exterior narrative dominates that agency. “The men of the system, as products of fetishized production,” Sartre argues later, “are reified and…are never completely so. Robots are designed to be manipulated” (Existentialism and Marxism 94).

The last time we see Norma and Cliff together, she arrives at Groves Toy Manufacturing with bad news. He was supposed to leave his family, and she was going to stay with him in Los Angeles. Instead, she decides to leave for New York that night. When she enters his factory, he guides her through the workshop, past a long steel table, and up to a large window streaming rain. In a wide shot with Rex sharply foregrounded on the table, Cliff excitedly tells Norma his plans, which are premised on an event that happened twenty years before: “Do you remember that place overlooking the ocean? Where we celebrated after I sold my first contract? We’re going to drive down there right now.” In a close-up excluding Rex, Norma interrupts Cliff with a brief history of her love (she was “the little girl who couldn’t face reality”) and, in the third person, concludes: “today, Norma Vale is leaving because she can face reality.” “There’s only one reality,” he insists, “I love you.” But Norma privileges a different reality, one that claims the present over the past and situates historical subjects in another context: “No, you don’t love me,” she tells him. “It’s your search for youth to push back the years, to feel carefree again. And you can’t, not ever, none of us can. That isn’t life. But you have a wonderful life with Marion and the children. And I, too, have a life. And I’m going back to it.” “Be happy Cliff. You will be happy,” she tells him before leaving. He runs out after her, just misses her cab, and, framed in an exterior
medium shot, stands for a full minute in the rain, presumably watching her car disappear. When he returns to the factory, he heads back upstairs to the workshop. He leans over the large table and, before moving to the window, nudges Rex as he stands up. While Cliff recedes from the camera, Rex, somehow turned on, walks towards the camera in time with the soundtrack’s orchestral crescendo, and the scene ends immediately before Rex falls off the table with a cut to the exterior of Cliff’s house.

The scene with Rex almost falling off the table was Sirk’s original ending, but Universal Studios insisted on tacking on another scene that sends Cliff home disorientated and despondent. Standing by the window, framed in an aerial shot forlornly watching Norma’s plane, Cliff ignores his family until Marion approaches him. Leading him away from the window towards the house’s interior, she asks him if he feels better than he has been acting: “It’s not like you to be irritable and depressed.” “I know,” he agrees. “But I’m alright now. You know me better than I know myself.” “Well,” Marion responds, “I should, after a lifetime with you.” The film concludes with Cliff and Marion, arm in arm, walking past their children, who are framed behind banister bars. Frances happily exclaims, “They make a handsome couple, don’t they?” and Ellen’s affirmation (“Yeah”) provides the film’s last word. There’s Always Tomorrow ends as it begins with a wry folksy adage of hope and promise starkly contrasted with the reality of lived experience.

Cliff sought refuge in longing for an experience forged in the past rather than critically responding to challenges of the present. Roughly half of nostalgia’s etymological content concerns the state of longing, which Ernst Bloch avers as “the only honest state in all men” (45). The longing for another state of being, for something
better, does not necessarily include imagining the risk of encountering something worse. However, any critical conception of what something different might look like does include this risk. In his treatise on hope, Bloch insists that while “fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators, of the human race, concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor” (5). A genuine hope couples the recognition that what comes next may not be better than what currently exists with the longing for progress that instigates a praxis motivated by change. Cliff, longing for another place and time, fraudulently imagines that this future contains Norma in a manner that resembles their first relationship. Here in this fantasy, Cliff will finally be conscious of her love for him and his love for her. Norma comprehends their situation critically and recognizes that Cliff has sublimated his boring midlife crisis into a noble romance. Norma loves Cliff but she does not transform this longing, this sublime aura infused by her past, tempered by the present, and infused with a future promise, into a numinous experience.

If, as Eric Hobsbawm argues in his discussion of Marxism, we choose to recognize “that a particular historical stage is not permanent, [that] human society is a successful structure because it is capable of change, and thus the present is not its point of arrival,” we are forced to also recognize that individual agency can determine the future (6). But there are two different versions of the future, and nostalgia argues for a reactionary trajectory. The opposite of that version, which Bloch calls home, represents a future “of the genuine, progressively open kind [that] is therefore sealed off from and alien to any mere contemplation. Only thinking directed towards changing the world and informing the desire to change it does not confront the future (the unclosed space for new
development in front of us) as embarrassment and the past as spell” (8). The numinous content of nostalgia’s social form depends on a personalized and yet socially constituted spell of an imagined past, and an investment in this aura encourages individuals to satiate their longing with attempts to make this spell real. A genuine version of the future recognizes that what follows the present always remains undetermined and critically open, and an investment in this system encourages a critical comprehension of the past as a movement towards something different and something always determined by the agency of individuals.

72 Interestingly, the etymology of the word suggests both a judicial and a religious context: “[N]umen is cognate with Numa, the legendary king who was said to have been the original lawgiver of Rome, and to have visited the great goddess in her sacred wood (nemus) for counsel and inspiration” (Young 408).

73 The notion of a “feeling of dependence” originates with F. E. D. Schleiermacher, who Otto criticizes but ultimately incorporates.

74 Perhaps incidentally, Otto’s descriptions of the numinous and schematization are poetic rather than ideological and do not imply negative or positive political attributes. An example of his tone: “[W]here the wind of spirit blows, there the mere ‘rational’ terms themselves are indued with power to arouse the feeling of the ‘non-rational,’ and become adequate to tune the mood at once to the right tone….He who ‘in the spirit’ reads the written word lives in the numinous” (61).

75 Jameson also notes an old relationship between aura and the sacred that concurs with William’s discussion of the magic system: aura, he tells us, “is the equivalent in the modern world…of what anthropologists call the ‘sacred’ in primitive societies” (76).

76 Baudrillard concludes that the representational application of the hyperreal supercedes the ideal equivalence between reality and signs, creating a simulacrum that is substituted for reality. Disneyland, for example, “is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus saving the reality principle” (173). The hyperreal, according to Baudrillard, “only acts as a substitute for reality, that it is “an operation to deter every real process by its operational double,” which ultimately “bears no relation to any reality whatsoever” (170, 173).

77 Following Marx, Derrida regards the commodity as a ghost, a phantom product from capitalism’s phantasmagoria. Derrida questions, however, the authenticity Marx finds in objects prior to their transformation into commodities. Rather than critique the commodity on its own terms, Marx, according to Derrida, posits an originary form of the object and claims “to know and make known where, at what precise moment, at what instant the ghost comes on stage” (161). In his failure to either notice or acknowledge that such an originary form never existed, “Marx continues to want to ground his critique or his exorcism of the spectral simulation in an ontology. It is a – critical but pre-deconstructive – ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity” (170). Derrida hints that Marx chose the rhetoric of ontology strategically, perhaps even duplicitously. Proclaiming a haunting of physical and immediate consequence necessitates an exorcism of an equally physical and immediate nature. In other words, in taking note of
masses of people who allow their labor to be exploited, Marx conjured up a ghost that signifies living hours killed by capitalism in order to clarify managers' aggression and antagonize laborers' rapprochement. “To make fear,” as Derrida puts it, “to make oneself fear. To cause fear in the enemies of the Manifesto, but perhaps also in Marx and the Marxists themselves” (104). “[T]his,” Derrida avers, “has never stopped happening to what is called Marxism” (116). Derrida’s intervention aims to “distinguish this spirit of the Marxist critique, which seems to be more indispensable than ever today, at once from Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system, as ‘dialectical materialism,’ from Marxism as historical materialism or method, and from Marxism incorporated in the apparatuses of party, State, or workers’ International” (68). Derrida’s revision of Marxism could be considered the sort Fredrick Jameson calls, in reference to popular revisions of Freud, “the act of making a theory comfortable and palatable by leaving out whatever calls for praxis or change, whatever is likely to be painful for the purely contemplative intellectual consumption of a middle-class public” (Marxism and Form xv).

78 See Eric Rentschler’s “Douglas Sirk Revisited: The Limits and Possibilities of Artistic Agency” for a review of Sirk’s work in the 1950s, the evolution of its critical reception, and a discussion about “the political potential of generic pleasure” (150).

79 Written in 1934, the song would peak on the charts with Mel Tormé’s version in 1949. The chorus, which contains the refrain most frequently referenced in There’s Always Tomorrow, articulates notions of joy and melancholy at the same time: “Blue moon, you saw me standing alone / Without a dream in my heart, without a love of my own / Blue moon, you knew just what I was there for / You heard me saying a prayer for someone I really could care for.”

80 Watkins uses the first Reagan campaign as a political example of technoidiological coding in practice, and he notes that the “point for Reaganism was how to understand the nascent promise of a living past still awaiting what nobody yet knew would emerge as the future” (181). “What’s new initially about Reaganism,” according to Watkins, “is the transformation of a historically familiar, ‘traditional’ conservative defense of established principles and order against ‘disruptive’ threats from the borderlands, into what is instead a vision of dominance itself gone haywire, like the sinister Something Else that surrounds the Miata ads generating all kinds of confused and confusing effects from who knew what mysterious center” (179).

81 The objects that occasion the numinous experience are, according to Otto, only half of the whole that completes this dynamic. To use an example of Otto’s: when Abraham faithfully pleads with God to save the men of Sodom, he refers to himself as “but dust and ashes” in reference to his awe of God (Otto 9). The other part of Otto’s construct – the idea of creature-consciousness – emphasizes the agency of the individual. Creature-consciousness helps us resist considering these experiences to be complete mystifications that subsume the agency of individuals in feelings of dependency and uncritical piety. Otto points out that we must remember the fact that Abraham addresses God at all.

82 Baudrillard illustrates this dynamic in the terms of politics. “All the hypotheses of manipulation [by the Right or the Left] are reversible in an endless whirligig. For manipulation is a floating causality where positivity and negativity engender and overlap with on another; where there is no longer any active or passive. It is by putting an arbitrary stop to this revolving causality that a principle of political reality can be saved. It is by the simulation of a conventional, restricted perspective field, where the premises and consequences of any act or event are calculable, that a political credibility can be saved” (177).

83 Jameson, in his discussion of Ernst Bloch, connects this kind of escape to memory and notions of the past: “The structure of nihilism...is simply the reverse or negative of that of the doctrine of hope; whereas the doctrine of memory is so to speak its obverse side, its absolute inversion, in which everything which in reality belongs to the future is attributed to the past, in which time is stood on its head conceptually” (128).

84 See Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique for its still-relevant discussion of how norms of gender and domesticity frame individual agency in social relations. Friedan’s study was published in 1963, but its material was culled from women’s testimonies during the late 1950s.
In her provocative reading of Sirk’s fifties films, Barbara Klinger argues that adultery and other subversive themes found in these productions were actually the result of and not necessarily in conflict with the era’s social discourse: “If the ‘sophisticated family melodrama’ attained a transgressive status during this time, it was not because its representations of sexuality proved an exception to the repressive rule of the Eisenhower years; it was because such representations were so much a part of a dominant, and for some objectionable, trend in filmmaking” (56).

“Already during the war,” Cohen notes, “home ownership had grown spectacularly, with an increase of 15 percent in owner-occupied dwellings, outpacing any previous comparable period on record” (73). “New house construction provided the bedrock of the postwar mass consumption economy, both through turning ‘home’ into an expensive commodity for purchase by many more consumers than ever before and by stimulating demand for related commodities…One out of every four homes standing in the United States in 1960 went up in the 1950s” (121-2, 123).

Roger McNiven argues that there are three distinct phases in Sirk’s films from the fifties, and he examines their evolving depictions of domestic architecture, which he suggests “is geared to conveying the disruption of family integrity”: “In the early fifties films, the framing of the background scene connotes the fragility of family harmony as an ideal. In the middle pair of films, the ideal becomes a trap for the protagonist, who forever seems to be attempting to escape into the foreground space. In the late films, the framed background is more an illusion which is mediated by different characters hovering around the foreground” (40).

Hobsbawm also suggests that one important element in confounding progressive versions of history consistently posits a kind of homeland, or “the need for the ‘permanent’ and the ‘fundamental’ which takes on a great psychological importance not only for individuals, but also for communities, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, an era of change and constant insecurity. Even in areas where it is not possible to live in isolation, such as the United States where wave after wave of new arrivals come to settle, we can see the emergence of a need to have priority, to be able to say, ‘We are here, this is our land, the others came later, and we are the ones who have always been here.’ It is a kind of secular version of eternity” (28).
CHAPTER 6
TIME OUT OF JOINT AND THE LOGIC OF FREEDOM

Much of this project has been concerned with the idea of freedom in society. The theme of freedom in the cultural artifacts discussed here – Wright’s investigations of a postcolonial rallying cry in the Gold Coast, the revision of cultural memes updated with nods to equality in Franco’s Spain, and the countervailing tendencies of the Cold War’s ideological bipolarity in the United States, Highsmith’s celebration of sexual mores contested by individual agency, Nabokov’s version of this agency violently usurped, and Sirk’s dramatization of a will to freedom relinquished – all feature individuals navigating social discourse and expressing their wills with varying degrees of success. I would argue that these narratives posit a semblance of individual agency at variance with traditional liberal versions of freedom as a negative concept, where “freedom” means “the absence of coercion or domination,” or, in a Hayekian register, a retreat from the “Enlightenment superstition” of managed human progress (Rose 1, 67). Accepting that all forms of society necessarily subject individuals to collective design, I want to define freedom as a positive concept of becoming, as a desire towards the social design of equal opportunity for individuals to express the agency of their wills, to manifest their will in Nature collectively, or, if you prefer, in realms exterior to their own subjective experiences.

American social discourse during the 1950s always emphasized the idea of freedom. After the Allied victory in a war fought under the rhetorical auspices of freedom, Cold War narratives framed American society as the acme of freedom in the modern world. While American society in this period cannot be considered as oppressive as the fascisms defeated in World War II, the institutionalized tenets of white
supremacy, male chauvinism, homophobia, McCarthyism’s fierce suppression of political dissent (discussed below), and the creeping corporate theft of the commons reveal a structural disconnect between rhetoric and practice when coupled with the freedom this era so ostentatiously avowed. The cognitive dissonance of this disconnect between the rhetoric of Cold War narratives and social realities suggests that the postwar American social can be characterized in part as a duality between the rhetorical celebration of freedom and the suppression of freedom. (There may not be anything particularly unique about this dynamic in American history; the same duality could characterize the Revolutionary War period.) America in the 1950s restricted the freedoms of its citizens, even as it sought to establish itself as the exemplar of a free society. Thinking about the American social in the Cold War’s nascent years as a contradictory narrative encourages us to also think about how individuals participate in a system of representation like the Cold War that belies their own lived experience and the lived experiences of others in their community.

Towards that end, I want to argue that Cold War discourse shares a logic with nostalgia. Like nostalgia, with its specter of a lost collective haunting the present and projecting the spirit of its desire as a more perfect future, the Cold War also haunts the social with a specter that intimates the triumph of American heritage and a logic of freedom. Here, the specter represents a world of absolute nonalterity, a world without any contestation of American hegemony, a world that was briefly imagined after the United States defeated Japan in 1945. Communism does haunt the American social after World War II, but not as an alternative social form. Its antithesis, or its absence, or its complete defeat, provides the inspiration for America’s nostalgic Cold War
narratives. The spirit of anticommunism presents a world uncorrupted by the virus of communism that, like red paint poured over a globe, portends its own universal dominance. Nostalgia, the longing for the objective conditions reflected in practices generated by the habitus of a social order that has passed, results in cognitive dissonance when the present refuses to comply with some nostalgic fantasy. This dissonance, the painful part of nostalgia’s component of longing, encourages individuals to misunderstand the real conditions of their experience and confuse the free possibilities of the future with fears of insecurity.

In this last chapter, I want describe Cold War discourse as a repressive social narrative and consider Philip K. Dick’s novel Time Out of Joint as an exemplar of how the Cold War may have been lived in the 1950s. And I want to conclude this project, in tandem with my discussion of Dick, with an examination of Hal Riney’s commercials for Ronald Reagan’s 1984 campaign, which I consider exemplars of the liberal version of freedom and the nostalgic return of tenets from American social discourse generated during the 1950s.

After World War II, voices of orthodoxy in America’s social sphere of opinion pulled back from the communitarian ethos of the war years and substituted a more corporate narrative of social cohesion. These voices were contested by the vestigial voices of the Popular Front, which were systematically suppressed. Dominant ideological systems sustain and enhance the power of elites by maintaining their dominance in a nation’s political discourse through mechanisms of suppression; the suppression of dissent is the existential imperative of dominant ideological systems in political discourse. Suppressing voices of dissent after World War Two was the primary function of a
national orthodoxy of anticommunism that can be traced to the Haymarket Red Scare, which originated from a violent labor rally in Chicago’s Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886. President’s Wilson’s Espionage Act (1917) and Sedition Act (1918) formalized this suppression and led to the prosecution of over 2,000 radicals and the prohibition of radical publications. The federal government’s domestic actions during World War One were landmark initiatives because, according to Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, this was “the first time the state itself became a major participant in articulating the nationalist discourse and in enforcing a specifically antiliberal, chauvinistic conception of the nation” (221).

The stakes for dominance were raised on 29 October, 1929. The stock market crash ended the “roaring twenties” and initiated a rapid downward spiral that revealed the nation’s economy as incapable of regulating itself. The Crash tipped into the Great Slide; between 1930 and 1932 the GNP dropped from $90 to $58 billion and unemployment rose from 3 percent to 24 percent, with an additional 25 percent qualified as underemployed. As the confidence of investors vanished, networks of credit destabilized, financial institutions were liquidated, industrial growth ground to a halt, and the job market collapsed. Millions of people lost their businesses and farms, and many remaining industries were drastically downsized. The fabric of the liberal state began to unravel as the economic crisis worsened, and many feared that forces antithetical to laissez-faire capitalism would prevail in an opportunity of crisis. Washington responded to the crisis by accommodating a communitarian ethos promoted by various progressive voices. Roosevelt began rehabilitating financial institutions through executive orders like the March 1933 Bank Holiday and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation
(FDIC) and, rejecting the previous administration’s aversion to a federal deficit, initiating a plethora of recovery and relief programs. Recovery agencies like the NIRA (which included the NRA and the PWA), the AAA, and the TWA organized markets and production while pump priming various industries. Relief agencies like the CCC, FERA, and CWA provided direct relief for millions of the unemployed. Later, labor laws and Reform Acts like REA, FSA, and WPA provided federal funds and opportunities for unemployed and underemployed citizens.

The cornerstone of Roosevelt’s New Deal came in 1935 when Congress passed the Social Security Act, which created a generational social contract that guaranteed subsistence welfare for most Americans. Washington’s oversight of financial institutions, broad social programs, and Keynesian deficit spending shored up the foundation of the liberal state by putting rider clauses on free market practices and, perhaps more importantly, articulating a narrative of security. “Security,” Alan Dawley maintains, “was the very cornerstone of the New Deal – secure investments, secure bank accounts, secure jobs, secure mortgages, secure livelihood, secure retirement, and, transcending all, the emotional security of having a benevolent protector in Washington” (386). The rhetoric of security never abated as the economy improved. In Roosevelt’s second-to-last State of the Union address, he described plans to create “a second Bill of Rights . . . an economic bill of rights.” The president summed up these new measures with what David Kennedy calls “a ringing reaffirmation of the New Deal’s animating philosophy”: “All of these rights,” Roosevelt intoned, “spell security” (quoted in Kennedy, 746).

The nation’s economy and many Americans’ standard of living did improve. The United States’ gross national product estimates leapt from $56 billion in 1933 to $158
billion in 1942. The percent of unemployed Americans plummeted from 25 percent in 1933 to less than 5 percent in 1942, while the consumer price index remained relatively steady during these years. The social milieu reflected this prosperity, with many trumpeting American triumphalism in what C. Wright Mills called the “great American celebration” by the end of the decade (quoted in Diggins, 42). The statistics that demonstrate the United States’ economic and martial power after World War Two are startling. During the war years, America’s income and production had doubled, and after the war it accounted for half of the world’s manufactured goods. The nation emerged from the collapse of a world order with all of its economic indicators booming, its industrial and technological infrastructure intact, its social and political institutions thriving, and exclusive rights to the world’s most powerful weapon. However, full with a healthy economy, a popular communitarian ethos, and a federal mandate of social responsibility, America turned away from the opportunity to dialogically accommodate radical critique and, instead, extended the ideology of security to roll back New Deal policies, reject a more egalitarian social order, and facilitate the prerogatives of corporate elites.

A catalyst for the dissolution of the New Deal’s political capital was the prerogatives of big business after the war, as corporate elites predicated their participation in federal defense measures on the diminution of federal labor movement advocacy. Nelson Lichtenstein argues that aggressive efforts against the labor movement after the war forced labor unions to capitulate on worker’s rights, which “foreclosed the possibility of a more progressive approach to American capitalism’s chronic difficulties” (122). A stark example of this can be found in the failure of the
Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) efforts to organize Southern laborers in the immediate postwar years. Southern congressional Democrats railed against pro-union candidates, highlighted the existence of associative relationships between unions and Communists, and campaigned on themes of racial conflict over jobs and living space. Thomas Sugrue’s study of local politics in Detroit describes a similar dynamic in the urban North. A growing assembly of disgruntled northern whites, Sugrue maintains, “believed in a conspiracy of government bureaucrats, many influenced by communism or socialism (terms used interchangeably), who misused tax dollars to fund experiments in social engineering for the benefit of pressure groups” (568). In this anti-union milieu, red baiting provided a key ingredient for a pushback against the extension of New Deal policies. James Patterson notes how this rhetoric encouraged Americans to understand communism as “not only totalitarian but also a threat to their social and economic futures” (180). Orthodoxy in social discourse situated heterodox narratives like communism, labor activism, and federal programs as threats to capitalism, white supremacy, Christianity, and other traditional social forms. New Deal recovery and relief programs were designed to simultaneously assist destitute Americans and shore up the foundation of the liberal state, and the Cold War became an instrument to disguise the denouement of the former tenet while enabling the extension of the latter.

The New Deal had become a political liability by the time Harry Truman announced his candidacy, but he reasoned that articulating a conservative line in foreign policy would forestall some criticism on the domestic front. Influenced by George F. Kennan’s containment policy that described the Soviet Union as a violent
aberration of civilized diplomacy and communism as an ideology with an insatiable appetite, Truman, in what became known as the Truman Doctrine, pledged American intervention in any situation that threatened national interests.\footnote{Truman’s foreign policy was domesticated eight days later when he signed Executive Order 9835 on March 21, 1947. Popularly known as the Truman Loyalty Oath, this code of federal regulations instituted mechanisms and criteria for the adjudication of federal employees’ loyalty to the United States and codified communism as anti-American. National Security Council Document 68 (NSC-68), perhaps the most revealing artifact of this policy, was drafted three years later by Pentagon functionaries and industry representatives. NSC-68 tolled the bell of Soviet ascension and American demise, insisting that Soviet leaders were “animated by a new fanatical faith, antithetical to our own,” and describing the communist menace as a direct threat to American’s way of life (Patterson 177).\footnote{NSC-68 vastly overestimated the arsenal of the Soviets, maintained that this enemy would inevitably attack the United States, and advocated a huge increase in peacetime defense spending. Washington accepted this analysis and entered the Korean War shortly thereafter, which then provided justification for meeting the defense budget recommended by NSC-68. A quick succession of events in 1949 and 1950 – the Soviet’s nuclear bomb test, the “loss” of China, the trial and conviction of New Dealer Alger Hiss, and the confession of Klaus Fuchs – allowed Washington to extend Truman’s bellicose narrative with the Internal Security Act of 1950, which provided recourse to the constitution by allowing the government to arrest “subversives” and hold them in “concentration camps” without judicial hearings.}
McCarthyism developed in tandem with these martial versions of Cold War discourse. What we now call McCarthyism was inaugurated on May 26, 1938, with the opening of the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities (HUAC), initially called the Dies Committee after its first chairman, Representative Martin Dies (D-Texas). HUAC provided an institutional apparatus for elites to suppress heterodox voices, to eliminate their role in political discourse by defining them as un-American. Although HUAC was charted to investigate all subversive organizations, the vast majority of its resources were spent investigating progressives and communists. Revolutionary groups on the right like the racist Ku Klux Klan and the fascist Silvershirts were largely left unmolested. These organizations fit the ideological algorithm of orthodoxy, albeit in an exaggerated fashion. HUAC was an organ of orthodoxy; it determined what voices were heterodox, it defined these voices as communist, and it declared them antithetical to American principles.

HUAC was legislatively augmented in 1940 with the Alien Registration Act, commonly called the Smith Act for its sponsor, Representative Howard Smith (D-VA). The Smith Act prohibited “conspiracy to teach and advocate the duty and necessity of overthrowing” the United States government, and was used extensively to prosecute communists. A plethora of “little Smith Acts” enacted by state legislators required employees to swear anti-communist oaths. Executive Orders 9806 (1946) and 9835 (1947) were issued by President Truman to supplement section 9A of the Hatch Act (1939), enforcing ideological loyalty in federal employees. In addition, the Taft-Hartley Labor Act of 1947 forced trade union members to sign anti-communist pledges. These federal and state actions never successfully uncovered a communist conspiracy after
the prosecution of Hiss and the investigation of over 16,000 “subversives.” However, the political and social consequences of this Red Scare were real. In 1942, 25 percent of Americans thought socialism would be “a good thing” for the country, as opposed to 40 percent who did not and 34 percent who were undecided (Lipset 81). In 1946, most Americans were against forbidding Communist Party membership, but by 1954 more than 75 percent of Americans favored stripping Communists of their U.S. citizenship and over half wanted them jailed (Whitfield 14).98

McCarthyism became a national spectacle when Senator Eugene McCarthy grimly declared on 3 February 1950, in Wheeling, West Virginia, that he possessed (“here in my hand”) a list of 205 members of the Communist Party employed Secretary Dean Acheson in the State Department. Michael Rogin argues that McCarthyism “reflected the specific traumas of conservative Republican activists – internal Communist subversion, the New Deal, centralized government, left-wing intellectuals, and the corrupting influences of a cosmopolitan society” (quoted in Rieder, 247).99 This social movement, according to Patterson, not only exhibited an aversion to Communism and progressive reform, it also “revealed the volatility of popular opinion, the growing capacity of the State to repress dissent, and the frailty of civil libertarian thought and action in the United States” (179). Michael Rogin argues that McCarthyism “reflected the specific traumas of conservative Republican activists – internal Communist subversion, the New Deal, centralized government, left-wing intellectuals, and the corrupting influences of a cosmopolitan society” (quoted in Rieder, 247).100 Towards that end, McCarthyism specifically and Cold War discourse generally narrated, as Athan Theoharis puts it, a culture of “absolute security” (quoted in Steinberg, 27). Rejecting
Roosevelt’s most famous aphorism, this narrative of security required the cultivation of fear, which the specter of communism provided. Reactionary opponents of the New Deal attempted to solidify the dominance of orthodoxy and diminish heterodox positions by appropriating the New Deal rhetoric of security in the bipolar narrative of the Cold War. In this version, distinctions between all radical critiques of orthodoxy were collapsed into the juggernaut of communism. Patrons of orthodoxy articulated a narrative about the absence of security and consistently associated heterodox positions with security’s absence. This narrative of fear posited the certainty of a national epistemology premised on corporate prerogatives; “[r]arely has an era striven so hard,” according to Thomas Hine, “in the midst of immense social change, to define the normal and seemingly immutable” (quoted in Whitfield, 230).

Shortly before McCarthy waved around his little black book, Archibald MacLeish argued that America was in the grips of a psychosis, a condition that prevented the nation from seizing the postwar opportunity to realize its promise of democracy and equality. This failure to represent on the world’s stage an example of a truly egalitarian and open society, MacLeish concluded, “may well turn out to have been the costliest blunder in our history” (17). Roosevelt’s relief and reform policies, the return of investor confidence, the Allied victory in World War II, and the economic boom during the postwar years laid the foundation for a new progressive social order. These policies could have been extended to augment labor advocacy, advance economic equality, secure civil rights, and create an example of a truly egalitarian society that would have contested the legitimacy of USSR in ways that martial approaches could not. Instead, the programs of the New Deal were eclipsed by the prerogatives of elites and the
suppression of critique. Imbued with the rhetoric of nationalism, class privilege, male
chauvinism, and white supremacy, the nation’s social discourse privileged traditional
social forms and rejected the advocacy of dissent. As orthodoxy succeeded in
suppressing heterodox voices by rejecting a dialogical framework in America’s political
discourse and consolidating the dominance their eminence provided, an opportunity for
restructuring America’s social order was lost. During these early years of the Cold War,
federal and state powers instituted formal mechanisms of suppression, national media
encouraged a bipolar perspective on international relations and a paranoiac perspective
on domestic dissent, complicit citizens accommodated demands for black
oaths, and labor concessions, and Americans neglected the principles of freedom that
they were so ostentatiously trying to secure.

This was the milieu that inspired Philip K. Dick’s early science fiction novels.
Although he began his career writing realist fiction, he turned to the more thematically
and formally flexible and (for him) lucrative genre of science fiction. This fantastic
narrative form accommodated and accentuated his penchant for stories about
mysterious phenomena, psychedelic hallucinations, cynical conspiracies, alternative
histories, and visions of the future. Most of his novels dramatize beleaguered individuals
trying to navigate the social without losing themselves within simulacra of meanings and
relations and succumbing to a paranoia birthed from the cognitive dissonance these
simulacra encouraged.¹⁰¹ *Time Out of Joint* was published in 1959, the last year of a
decade that had seen Senator McCarthy’s personal defeat and the social movement
named after him permanently grafted into the nation’s culture. The novel’s protagonist,
Ragle Gumm, exemplifies the process individuals undergo when they become aware of the ways their worldviews are shaped by the nostalgias of Cold War narratives.

Ragle, a middle-aged white man, lives in a small nondescript American town in 1959 with his sister, her husband, and their son. His only source of income comes from a national media contest called “Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next?,” which he has won continuously for two and a half years. Although there are a few hints that his reality does not correspond to our understanding of this era’s proper historical representation (Uncle Tom’s Cabin has just been published and Tucker is a popular car brand), the novel appears realistic for the first few chapters. Ragle’s world soon starts to fracture, and he eventually realizes that everything around him, including the identity of his sister and the contest itself, has been manufactured by nefarious agents. He finally escapes the hermeneutic boundaries of his town, enters the real world outside, and discovers that the year is actually 1998, the contest he was playing has real consequences in a war against colonists on the moon, and the community he lived in for almost three years was modeled on his childhood memories. He becomes conscious of his previous sympathies for the lunar colonists and, at the end of the novel, he decides to leave this planet and join the “lunatics.” Ragle progresses from the thesis of his understanding of the world around him to accepting the antithesis of this world by becoming aware of the real world his town pretended to be, and finally synthesizing this consciousness into accepting the freedoms promised in a new world on the moon.

*Time Out of Joint* reflects popular Cold War concerns: anxieties about threats to America’s supremacy, desires for a security national bellicose rhetoric endangered, and fears about impending dramatic cultural changes. Ragle and his friend Jack set the tone
for these concerns early in the novel when they discuss domestic and international affairs. In response to Ragle’s comment about the insincerity of modern advertising, Jack says, “‘There’s sure no principles left in the world any more. You look back to before World War Two, and compare it to now. What a difference….Kids smashing up cars, these freeways and hydrogen bombs’” (11). Margo, who Ragle believes to be his sister, muses about the state of the world on her way to the supermarket: “nothing was perfect. In all the world. Certainly not in this day and age, with H-bombs and Russia and rising prices” (16). Ragle also ruminates on the spirit of the times, imagining the apocalypse (“[w]hen the H-bombs start falling…[w]e’ll all perish alike”) and wryly comments on popular desires for old social forms: “Think in your mind of all the homes, people sitting around saying, ‘What’s happening to this country? Where’s the level of education gone? The morality? Why rock-and-roll instead of the lovely Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy *Maytime* music that we listened to when we were their age?’” (20, 24). These critiques of American society are limited to cosmetic changes in inflation and musical modes, while the existential fear of nuclear bombs threatens their cherished home. The “great American celebration” version of the Cold War during the 1950s required both the fear of an exterior menace and the illusion of freedom and prosperity menaced by this exterior force. Members of Ragle’s community have immersed themselves in Cold War discourse, an historical perspective that mediates their comprehension of the present and conceals possibilities of the future with a longing for the past.

Sartre describes the investment of individuals in a nostalgic narrative like the Cold War as a kind of amnesia of the present, a miscomprehension of social relations and a
deferred critique of national prerogatives. The consequences of this type of investment prevent individuals from recognizing their own agency in dialectic constructions of new versions of the social:

In so far as man is immersed in the historical situation, he does not even succeed in conceiving of the failures and lacks in a political organization or determined economy...because he can not even imagine that he can exist in it otherwise....It is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we decide that these are unbearable. (Being and Nothingness 561)

Individuals immerse themselves in a historical situation through their practices, which inform and are informed by their community’s habitus. Habitus, the handbook that reifies traditional forms of social relations, discourages an apprehension of real conditions of experience and an appreciation of possible new forms of the social. Time Out of Joint dramatizes this dynamic in its depiction of how Ragle’s world has been constructed and how its illusions are sustained. The first scene that clarifies for the reader the nature of this built environment occurs at a soft-drink stand. Ragle, after placing a bill on the counter, suddenly feels dizzy as everything around him “shut off” (54). His money drops to the ground as the soft-drink stand “fell into bits. Molecules. He saw the molecules, colorless, without qualities, that made it up. Then he saw through, into the space beyond it. He saw the hill behind, the trees and sky.” The only remnants of the structure appear as a small piece of paper that reads, “SOFT-DINK STAND” (55). This was the sixth time Ragle has experienced such a revelation. He put the slip of paper in a box with the others, which include “DOOR,” “FACTORY BUILDING,” “HIGHWAY,” “DRINKING FOUNTAIN,” and “BOWL OF FLOWERS” (60) “’I’m having a nervous breakdown,’” he tells Vic. “’I may take a long trip somewhere. Even leave the country’” (57). Beyond his self-diagnosis, Ragle also considers the significance these papers
have on larger questions of constructions of consciousness: “Words, he thought.…Relation of word to object…what is a word? Arbitrary sign. But we live in words….Thingness…sense of substance. An illusion” (59, 60).

As Ragle tries to comprehend the world around him, he reconsiders the contest he has been playing for fame and money. The game consists of a grid with 1,208 squares and an axis that represents space and time. Each day, the newspaper prints a new grid with some clues and contestants have to guess which square the “Little Green Man” will appear in next. The clues are extremely vague (“A swallow is as great as a mile,” for example) and they may or may not relate to the correct answer (37). Even though Ragle never discovers a correlation between the riddles and the correct answer, he “assumed that in some peripheral fashion they contained data, and he memorized them as a matter of habit, hoping that their message would reach him subliminally.”

Ragle appreciates the loud public announcement every morning; “His name, of course, was huge. Unique. In a box by itself. Every day he saw it there. Below his name, other names had a transient existence, not quite at the threshold of consciousness.” But the contest has been rigged to promote a single winner, echoing the era’s quiz show scandals. Ragle has submitted an incorrect answer eight times, according to Mr. Lowery, the newspaper representative. In addition to his uncanny ability to correctly predict the right answer, the reason “[a]s it was explained to him” for Ragle’s continued promotion argues that “the public liked to see a name they could identify. They resisted change. A law of inertia was involved….The force of stasis worked on his side. The vast reactionary pressures now ran with him, not against him” (40-1). Here, the contest represents the allure of habitus in a community’s collective psyche and analogously
suggests the role of desire in the logic of nostalgia. The contest provides a narrative of security by imitating a factor of risk and then resolving the tension each morning with the comfort of a familiar conclusion.

During one of Mr. Lowery’s visits with Ragle, their discussion of Ragle’s methods reveals a process similar to the kind of investment individuals make in social discourse generally and the numinous project of nostalgia specifically. “‘You work from an esthetic, not a rational, standpoint,’” Lowery says. “‘You view a pattern in space, a pattern in time. You try to fill. Complete the pattern. Anticipate where it goes if extended one more point. That’s not rational; not an intellectual process’” (41-2). The process requires physical resources – Ragle employs a collection of “[r]efERENCE books, charts, graphs, and all the contest entries that he had mailed in before” – but the process that synthesizes these materials remains mysterious (12). “‘The more times I’m correct, the more I have invested,’” Ragle tells Margo, while she notes that the addition of more sources and his continued success creates a paradox visible in his growing restless and anxiety: “‘The more he had to go on, the easier it was for him. But instead, it seemed to her, he was having more and more trouble” (13). “‘I guess that’s what they want,’” she concludes. “‘They get you involved, and maybe you never live long enough to collect” (14). This investment, and this investment’s concomitant practices, produce a system of dispositions that encourage subjects to think and act in a certain way by providing, according to Bourdieu, “the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them a rational basis” (Outline of a Theory of Practice 82). A system of dispositions, the code that functions as the heart of habitus, represents “a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate
itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles.” For Ragle, this contest thoroughly permeates his life: each morning begins with a review of the new grid and riddles, his next eight or ten hours are spent on the project, and when he tries to understand strange events that reveal a fabricated environment, he attributes them to a nervous breakdown wrought by the contest.

Like most of Ragle’s world, the contest itself is a ruse. Before he entered this bubble of fictions, he had worked for the military predicting missile strikes from their lunar adversary. Ragle possessed an inexplicable ability to forecast exactly where missiles would land the day before they were launched. The town, his family and friends, and the contest’s form were designed to retain his services when it was discovered that he was ready to defect. He started the process himself, experiencing a “withdrawal psychosis,” a “fantasy of tranquility,” as a defense mechanism to ward off the angst of participating in an martial operation he no longer believed to be ethical (240). The material for this fantasy was located in his childhood during the 1950s, which the government reproduced as a “system” that allowed him to live in comfort and peace. Interestingly, Ragle never experienced the “systematic brainwashing” that enemy combatants were tortured with when they were captured. He induced the fantasy himself, which was aided and abetted by the faux social designed with a blueprint of his own past. Small details like Uncle Tom’s Cabin provided touchstones for his investment; the novel had been a childhood favorite, which he loved “because it was a stable element; it did not change. It gave him a sense of certainty. A sense that he could count on it to be there, exactly as it had always been” (250). For almost three years, the plan
worked. Ragle never knew the difference between the fantasy world he lived in and the real world this model imitated.

Pierre Bourdieu describes what happens when our habitus determines our conception of the present, when the vestiges of past practice determine contemporary practices, “when the scheme is identified with the model: retrospective necessity becomes prospective necessity, the product a project; and things which have happened, and can no longer not happen, become the irresistible future of the acts which made them happen” (Outline of a Theory of Practice 8). In other words, a practice unaware of itself reifies our understanding of the social and instructs us with a system of responses to events that these practices have imagined before the events even happened. In this way, the future has already been, and all attempts to imagine or create a new future are forestalled. An individual’s agency, here, is conscripted by her own participation in a system of dispositions previously determined, and this individual’s freedom to act authentically remains deferred.

The process of Ragle’s awakening to consciousness of the world around him picks up speed when Sammy, Margo’s son, finds old magazines and a phone book in the ruins at the edge of town. This site contains all that was left of the old town, before it was transformed into Ragle’s nostalgic fantasy. These artifacts contain evidence that confuses the household, and Sammy intuits the cause of this confusion: “They’re trying to dupe us,” he tells the adults (86). “The enemy that’s everywhere around us. I don’t know their names. But they’re everywhere. I guess they’re the Reds.” When Ragle discovers more evidence of a sham, an agent assigned to observe him wonders, “[s]uppose Ragle was becoming sane again?” (77). The final element that clarifies
Ragle’s doubt occurs in a community Civil Defense seminar at a neighbor’s house. The host’s son unveils a model of an underground factory. As Ragle looks it over, he experiences cognitive dissonance: “How familiar, he thought…. [T]he scene had occurred before, somewhere in the past…. A magazine page. Photograph, but not of a model; photograph of the original, of which this was a model…. I know every inch of that. Every building and hall. Every office” (181). The model encourages Ragle to imagine the future as something that could be imagined for perhaps the first time, even if this image still pertains to the formula of his habitus, even if it was still a scheme identified with the model. “I must want to live in the future,” he thinks. “Because the model is a model of a thing in the future. And when I saw it, it looked perfectly natural to me” (183-4). “I want to see that factory,” he finally decides, “not the photograph or the model, but the thing itself” (188).

After Ragle decides to discover the truth, he tries to convince Vic, Margo’s husband, of their situation by showing him the pieces of paper he has been collecting with nouns printed on them: “‘Reality,’ Ragle said. ‘I give you the real’”: “‘Under everything else,’ Ragle said. ‘The word. Maybe it’s the word of God…. ’ I can’t figure it out. All I know is what I see and what happens to me. I think we’re living in some other world than what we see, and I think for a while I knew exactly what that other world is…. The future, maybe”” (188-9). He eventually escapes with Vic and discovers the real world outside, meets up with the rebels, and has everything explained to him. Ragle learns that he once owned a factory, and the model factory presented to him in “Old Town,” was designed by members of the lunar colonists who had infiltrated Ragle’s community for the purpose of jogging his memory back to the present. He undergoes a
process of rehabilitation, which proceeds slowly. “The pull on you is strong,” they tell him. “The tug back into the past” (248). He gradually confirms his former political prerogatives and the novel ends with his second attempt to leave earth, join the rebels on the moon, and obtain a freedom contextualized by a new community in a new world.

*Time Out of Joint* consistently situates Ragle as the focal point of the world he navigates. “Our lives depend on Ragle Gumm,” one of government functionary thinks (152). “Him and his contest.” Ragle was named *Time’s* Man of the Year in 1996, and he is a celebrity both inside and outside Old Town. For most of the novel, the reader and the characters live in a world premised on Ragle’s solipsistic fantasy. A condition of stasis provides the cornerstone of this model world and its formal logic of nostalgia. The novel’s dramatic exposition of nostalgia and the dialectic works with the combination of these two elements: the individual, Ragle Gumm, and the world he creates and eventually contests. Sartre argues that a notion of history in stasis can only dispelled by individuals who recognize the agency inherent in their praxis and their own participation in history itself:

> The dialectic reveals itself only to an observer situated in interiority, that is to say, to an investigator who lives his investigation both as a possible contribution to the ideology of the entire epoch and as the particular praxis of an individual defined by his historical and personal career within the wider history which conditions it....I must be able to say that the praxis of everyone, as a dialectical movement, must reveal itself to the individual as the necessity of his own praxis and, conversely, that the freedom, for everyone, of his individual praxis must re-emerge in everyone so as to reveal to the individual a dialectic which produces itself and produces him in so far as it is produced. (*Critique of Dialectical Reason* 38)

In the novel’s hyperbolic version of this dynamic, Ragle must revise his comprehension of his own existence in order for the world to be transformed into something new that can accommodate the freedoms of individuals. When he decides that he will no longer
invest in the reality of Old Town and the Little Green Man contest, he withdraws the linchpin of these constructs and, most importantly, the reality that produced these constructs. Like the threats Cold War discourse narrates, the necessity of war between the earth and the moon was a fabrication. Ragle eventually remembers “a well-guarded secret”: the colonists had agreed to peace terms three weeks into the war (252).

Without Ragle’s assistance, which allowed just enough protection to ease the war’s severity, and with public awareness of the rebel’s modest demands, the government would be forced to end the conflict.

Ragle’s actions provide the impetus for a different world order. He rejects his desire that the future look like the past, and this rejection allows for a dialectical progression of his life, the social he participates in, and history itself. The progression he inaugurates through a practice determined by an agency aware of the present and conscious of genuinely new possibilities opens a door previously sealed by the logic of a past reified as the future. “[I]f there is any such thing as dialectical Reason,” Sartre tells us, “it must be defined as the absolute intelligibility of the irreducibly new, in so far as it is irreducibly new. It is the opposite of the positivist analytical enterprise of explaining new facts by reducing them to old ones” (Critique of Dialectical Reason 58).

And the linchpin to this version of history remains the praxis of individuals; “it is man,” Sartre avers, “who brings novelty into the world.” Time Out of Joint argues that the social contains the promise of agency even under holistic duress, that an individual who lives a life under a severe regiment of false consciousness can overcome the ideological and institutional apparatuses that confuse her understanding of history, and that the precise opposite of nostalgia’s logic will always be dialectical reason, or, in
Sartre’s words, “the dialectic as the logic of creative action, that is to say, in the final analysis, as the logic of freedom” (69).

89 Stanley Aronowitz, in his discussion of this formative period of a new world order, notes significant ways the American social restricted freedoms during the 1950s: “Millions of southern blacks were literally deprived...of citizenship despite constitutional guarantees of voting rights to all qualified citizens; youth under twenty-one could not vote while, at the same time, subjected to an almost continuous postwar draft, political dissent was ruthlessly suppressed and higher education...was increasingly regimented by academic administration that had drawn closer to the goals of the corporations and their state allies” (275).

90 “The New Deal coalition,” according to Aronowitz, “was a major instance where a section of the ruling class joined with workers, blacks, women and other groups to constitute an alternative within the framework of late capitalism. In this coalition, the working class and the trade unions became the core of the new hegemony, which dominated American politics until the mid-1950s” (17).

91 Howard Fast recalls this time as a “moment when our country was grand and splendid beyond what I can make a reader imagine today,” and Virginia Foster Durr concurs: “the country had a feeling of hope. We were going forward” (Fast 14, Durr 166).

92 Lichtenstein insists that the labor movement’s prospects were good for the left’s Operation Dixie: “Unions seemed on the verge of recruiting millions of new workers in the service trades, in white collar occupations, across great stretches of the South and Southwest, and even among the lower ranks of management” (123).

93 As Peter Steinberg argues, “Truman considered the Communist Party an inconsequential sect whose destruction could do little harm to the essential fabric of American democracy. The CP, he believed, safely could be sacrificed to the appetite of the right wing, thus protecting liberal America from a conservative flash point” (xii).

94 Did the Cold War begin when the wires announced the Bolsheviks’ success in March or November, 1917? Somewhere in-between, perhaps, when Woodrow Wilson signed the Espionage Act in 1917. Or, maybe it started when the United States invaded Russia the following year. Many events happened between the moment communism was considered a viable threat to American society and the announcement of the Truman Doctrine on 12 March, 1947, which makes theorizing the Cold War (as defined here) difficult. I am more concerned with what the Cold War consistently represents: an ideological struggle between Soviet and American orthodoxies.

95 One of the drafters, Robert Lovett, situated this bipolar worldview in an even harsher perspective with this emotional missive: “We must realize that we are now in a mortal conflict; that we are now in a war worse than any we have experienced. Just because there is not much shooting as yet does not mean that we are in a cold war. It is not a cold war; it is a hot war” (quoted in Patterson 176).

96 Godfrey Hodgson estimates that four-fifths of the committee’s resources were spent investigating leftist groups and individuals (40).

97 Albert Canwell, chairman of Washington State’s Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, bluntly summed up his modus operandi, which mirrored his committee’s Federal counterpart: “If someone insists that there is discrimination against Negroes in this country, or that there is inequality of wealth, there is every reason to believe that person is a Communist” (quoted in Whitfield 21). HUAC, according to Chairman Martin Dies, should be more interested in threats like “the fact that throughout out the South today subversive elements are attempting to convince the Negro that he should be placed on social equality with white people” (Whitefield 21).
The same poll also found that 42 percent of Americans believed that it should be against the law for the media to criticize the “American form of government” (Whitfield 15). And in the same year, the Indiana Textbook Commission recommended banning Robin Hood stories, perhaps having concluded that the popular folk hero of poetic justice suggested too stark a corollary between his society’s ills and their own (Shannon 190).

This broad net cast under the auspices of anti-communism was stitched to catch heterodox voices generally, as veteran Communist Will Weinstone observed shortly after McCarthy’s speech: “The anti-communist drive cannot and will not be limited to Communists. The Communists are singled out for attack first of all because they are staunch fighters for peace against a ruling class gone war mad; because they are unyielding battlers for democracy against a bourgeoisie which is turning to fascism and hate and fears every vestige of democracy” (quoted in Shannon, 192).

Patrick O’Donnell connects themes of paranoia in postmodern fiction to national discourse and argues that this fiction dramatizes the “Cold War subject formed within the cybernetic economy of contemporary America” (191). Carl Freedman also locates the root of Dick’s penchant for paranoia in economic social relations: “If we are economically constituted as capitalists and workers who must buy and sell human labor that is commodified into labor-power, then we are physically constituted as paranoid subjects who must seek to interpret the signification of the objects – commodities – which define us and which, in a quasi-living manner, mystify the way that they and we are defined” (“Towards a Theory of Paranoia” 18).

Jill Galvin argues that technology in the hands of a nefarious government plays a crucial role in Dick’s fiction as an alienating force that “ruptures the human collective” (418). See Christopher Palmer’s monograph on Dick for a more positive assessment of Dick’s cynicism that argues we consider Dick a humanist. Ian Watson reads social confusions in Dick’s novels as evidence of his role as a trickster, and Peter Fitting argues that the moments when characters become aware of social simulacrum “around which so many of his novels turn are, in a spontaneous and unconscious way, a representation of the discovery of ideology itself” (220). Andrew Hoberek echoes Freedman’s assessment of economic social relations as the instigator of social alienation: “specifically, the rise since World War II of the new form of multinational, monopoly capitalism – marked by the concentration of corporate power, increased intimacy between corporations and the state, and the shift from production to consumption” (375). Patricia Warrick coins a neologism (“quantum-reality fiction”) to describe Dick’s use of these themes.
CONCLUSION

In 1928, the United States War Department’s Army Training Manual (No. 2066-25) defined a rhetorical touchstone of the nation’s political discourse:

Democracy: A government of the masses. Authority derived through mass meetings or any other form of direct expression. Results in mobocracy. Attitude toward property is communistic – negating property rights. Attitude toward law is that the will of the majority shall regulate, whether it be based upon deliberation or governed by passion, prejudice, and impulse without restraint or regard for consequences. Results in demagogism, license, agitation, discontent, anarchy.\(^{102}\) (Quoted in Vito Marcantonio, 63)

This passage was quoted by Representative Vito Marcantonio (R-NY) in a 1936 speech addressing the use of government troops as strike-breakers. He also quoted passages from the “Domestic Disturbances” section of the War Department’s 1935 Basic Field Manual, which described harrowing instructions for the National Guard: “When a rifle is resorted to the aim should be low so as to prevent shots going over the heads of the mob and injuring innocent persons that could not get away” (64). To clarify and reiterate, the same manual insisted: “Blank cartridges should never be used against a mob, nor should a volley be fired over the heads of the mob even if there is little danger of hurting persons in rear” and “[b]ayonets are effective when used against rioters who are able to retreat.” “Federal troops,” the manual noted, “have been used in the suppression of domestic disturbances on more than a hundred occasions” (65). The historical precedent of the War Department’s “Domestic Disturbances” provisions, according to Marcantonio, have been “directed against labor, against labor strikes, against mass picketing, and against the right of striking workers to assemble” (66). Marcantonio argued that this legacy, with its instances of violence and excess, was not
an aberration of government policy; it was an example of institutional prerogatives that denied the American project of freedom.

As the Cold War permeated the nation’s social consciousness and accommodated a rapidly changing world with minor adjustments and updates, the years rolled on with military defeats in small countries, violently reorganized race relations, economic recessions, the precipitous decline of labor rights, political scandals in the nation’s highest office, and countercultural usurpations. For many Americans, the 1950s became, in an apt phrase of Fredric Jameson’s, “the privileged lost object of desire” (*Postmodernism* 19). In a period that might be considered the acme of the nation’s introspective contemplation of decline since World War Two, the early 1980s also saw what might be considered the acme of Cold War rhetoric, personified with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. In his discussion of the Age of Reagan and its “increasing colonization of social life by the commodity structure,” Carl Freedman suggests that the 1980s “proved Dick even more right than his own era did” (“Philip K. Dick and Criticism” 128). Reagan’s 1984 presidential campaign’s ad team, led by industry heavyweight Hal Riney, capitalized on this moment and designed a highly symbolic series of commercials that emphasized rhetorical images and traditional narratives over the more familiar attack modes and litany of political proposals. Two ads in particular, “Prouder, Stronger, Better” (popularly known as “Morning in America”) and “The Bear,” articulate themes of Cold War discourse that Reagan himself consistently employed. These ads visualize a distilled version of the Cold War’s logic of nostalgia and reveal the trenchant power of this logic’s narratives in American social discourse thirty-five years after they were first produced.
“Prouder, Stronger, Better” features a series of white people, station wagons, church steeples, and flags set to soft orchestral accompaniment and Riney’s own low melodious voiceover. The ad begins with its refrain, “[i]t’s morning again in America,” before reciting a mixture of momentous occasions like weddings, new home ownership, and low interest rates. “It’s morning again in America,” the ad continues to insist, “and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better” (emphasis added). The images collapse distinctions between sensations of familiarity and a sense of community, suggesting a return to a Norman Rockwell version of American security where everyone lived in small towns, worked hard, and smiled often. Repeatedly, young people are juxtaposed with elderly people, ascribing an orderly transition between the greatest generation and their younger progeny, between the nation’s oldest president and his constituents who yearned to “look forward with confidence to the future” that would resemble the security a previous era promised. As Reagan’s administration worked to remove remnants of the New Deal coalition’s political culture by redistributing wealth upwards, expanding corporate prerogatives over the commons, defunding urban projects, defeating the Equal Rights Amendment, delegitimizing unions, and denouncing welfare recipients, their campaign announced that the nightmare of malaise wrought by deep shifts in the social since the 1950s was finally over.

“Prouder, Stronger, Better” privileges a notion of security, comfort, and solace with homespun iconography, and its campaign companion, “The Bear,” privileged the same themes with a different mode. Also authored by Riney, “The Bear” defines the Soviet Union as a primordial threat and features Russia’s metonymic animal as the main
character. The commercial begins with a brown bear rising over a rock and a sparse soundtrack of double beats played on a single timpani. The viewer follows the bear through woods and a stream as Riney intones, “There is a bear in the woods. For some people the bear is easy to see. Others don’t see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it’s vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who is right, isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear.” Before the ad ends with Reagan’s campaign decal, it frames a bear on a hill facing a man in a wide low angle shot. This noble image provided what Reagan’s massive arms race against a failing state required: the maintenance of a narrative that would justify quadrupling the national deficit. The fear articulated in this ad accurately represents the central premise of the Cold War: there are two options in contemporary geopolitics at war with each other, and only one of these options authentically represents American society. The threat itself remains vague enough to accommodate military interventions in third world countries premised on theories about dominos, or a peace with communist China based on that nation’s market potential. But ultimately, the fear of a threat overrides any other consideration. “Prouder, Stronger, Better” and “The Bear” employ a rhetoric with a proven track record in a community educated to nod at the evils of communism and the prospect of some return to the secured freedoms of the past.

In his discussion of Reaganism and the New Right, Evan Watkins argues that “[w]hat Reaganism learned…was the strategic importance of an educational process that seemed to proceed not by trying to explain…why a compelling image was compelling, but instead by constructing corroborative elaborations of the image that opened a space where people could continue to fashion and refashion explanations on
their own, out of their own specific circumstances” (177). The innovation was the semblance of agency afforded to individuals who invested in the narratives these images articulated. This new version of Cold War discourse was more user-friendly, even as it contained participatory options within a specific field of opinion. Here, according to Watkins, the “New Right is useful precisely in its nostalgias, in how these nostalgias…preserve the distinctiveness of a field of representation” (129).

“Educationally,” Watkins elaborates, “the danger of New Right politics is not that it produces the role of public education in these terms, but that its nostalgias create the conditions for the role to be perpetuated by absorbing alternatives” (131). When orthodoxy succeeds in almost entirely removing the legitimacy of heterodoxy in social discourse, when heterodoxy is considered radical rather than different, when the precepts of orthodoxy’s version of doxa become “common sense” and social subjects immediately nod with approval at its narratives, then the future becomes contained in the past. And in this sense, crucially, Reaganism’s use of the past had more to do with determining the future than it did with comprehending history and positing a time out of joint with real conditions of experience. “The intent was not to go back to [the past],” Watkins argues, “but to realize its best tendencies in the future….The point for Reaganism was how to understand the nascent promise of a living past still awaiting what nobody yet knew would emerge as the future” (181). With the failure of the New Left to fundamentally shift America’s social discourse towards a critique of capitalism, the American social in the last stages of the Cold War was able to accommodate significant cultural changes without altering its corporate prerogatives, which were sustained by a desire for a recognizable future that had never been.
When Howard Fast explained why so many Communist Party members worked for the US Office of War Information during World War Two, he noted two reasons: “this was almost the only available pool of men and women who had both a deep understanding of the political forces at work in the world and a consuming patriotism – a patriotism so totally embedded in them that it verged on the ridiculous” (27). These patriots were the first victims of the Cold War, and their absence can be observed in the shape America’s social discourse would take during the 1950s. The first national contestation of orthodoxy after World War Two was the Civil Rights movement, which inspired the New Left’s cultural critiques and antiwar protests with radicalism in practice. When four black college students initiated a sit-down protest in Greensboro, North Carolina on 1 February, 1960, almost exactly ten years after McCarthy’s famous speech in West Virginia, their courage initiated a mass movement against white supremacy that spread to over thirty cities in eight Southern states within a month. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., immediately recognized the import and novelty of this action: “What is fresh, what is new in your fight is the fact that it was initiated, led, and sustained by students. What is new is that American students have come of age” (quoted in Branch, 276). Ten weeks later, radical students formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which became a decisive organization in this new freedom movement. Rennie Davis, one of the founders of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was inspired by the actions of SNCC and provides a representative testimony: “Here were four students from Greensboro who were suddenly all over Life magazine. There was a feeling that they were us and we were them, and a recognition that they were expressing something
we were feeling as well and they’d won the attention of the country” (quoted in Isserman, 217-8).

In his discussion of the ways social change happens and does not happen, Marx insisted that the “social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future (The 18th Brumaire 18). The New Left lauded their Marxist traditions and appreciated the leftist rhetoric from the thirties, but, as many acknowledged, none of their successes would have been possible without the example of contemporary practices by Civil Rights activists who rejected incrementalist politics and other traditional venues for social agency. In a social discourse dominated by white supremacy, Civil Rights activists imagined a different social order that was condemned by nearly every cultural apparatus their national community provided. These activists may have fantasized about a distant homeland or another time when their agency was accepted and respected, but only their rejection of any nostalgia linked to their immediate social context could provide a vision for a truly new order of social relations in the real place and time they called home. The example of their definite challenge to a habitus that informed their own practices proves that the agency of individuals can produce genuinely new practices that transcend their origins and genuinely new visions of freedom in collective struggle.

102 This manual was revised four years later with its definition of democracy expunged.

103 Positive assessments of the USSR’s military strength were not universal. See, for example, Andrew Cockburn’s The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine, which, in 1983, accurately pointed towards the impending collapse of the Soviet empire.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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