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DETECTING COMMUNITY:
JOSEPH McCARTHY, THE DETECTIVE FORM, AND RECENT AMERICAN FICTION

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Detecting Community:

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Introduction

Horror flicks, western shootouts, and espionage thrillers captivated theatre and television audiences in the 1950s. People flocked to the movie houses to see The Thing, It Came from Beneath the Sea, The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms, The Fly, and Creature from the Black Lagoon. Similarly, serials such as "Gunsmoke," "The Rifleman," and "I Led Three Lives" were some of the most popular television programs in America. The prominence of these and similar productions in the 1950s can be and have been traced to the historical tensions and political language of Cold War America. Script writers and directors capitalized on Cold War depictions of an alien Other encircling the United States and subverting it from within. In presenting rugged individualists fighting against outlaws, westerns presented contemporary themes in a frontier world. Similarly, cheap detective paperbacks and television spy thrillers dramatized international spying, domestic subversion and criminality, and police activity to counter them.¹

But studies which portray these popular forms as exploiting Cold War political language have overlooked the extent to which political rhetoric during the 1950s made use of popular forms. As Hayden White argues about historical representation generally:

Narrative accounts of real historical events . . . admit of as many equally plausible versions in their representation as there are plot structures available in a given culture for endowing stories, whether fictional or real, with meanings.²

White suggests here, and argues more extensively in his Metahistory, that historical narratives can be characterized as tragedies, romances, epics, and so on. He also suggests that historians working in a culture inevitably structure their narratives in ways that generate meaning for that culture. Meaning here is structural; it depends on the form as well as the content of the narrative.

Like historians, politicians, television anchormen, newspaper reporters, and other public figures also appropriate popular narrative forms to captivate and persuade their audiences. In speeches or newspaper headlines, these public narrators appropriate dramatic metaphors from popular genres. The narrative forms provide them with frameworks that their audiences are familiar with. Their use of popular tropes provides them and their audiences with connections between new conceptual frameworks and older, more established figures of speech. By appropriating these narrative forms and tropes--usually unselfconsciously--these public narrators often succeed in reaching and captivating the audiences they are seeking.

This study takes up the detective narrative and traces its use by a significant speaker, narrator and public figure of the Cold War: Senator Joseph McCarthy. Appropriating a form that had

become part of the language of popular culture, McCarthy transformed its metaphors and narrative strategies into a political language. He was probably unaware of his appropriation of the detective form. But as I will show, his narratives clearly used detective structures and metaphors to generate animosity toward a criminal (communists), support for an outnumbered detective (himself), and suspense over his upcoming actions and investigations. Through his use of the detective narrative, McCarthy prompted his own rise to best-seller status. Largely because of the form and rhetoric of his own representations, McCarthy's accusations became an event to be represented by other authorities. When he claimed that he was prepared to name the "top Russian espionage agent" in the United States, the Senator's rhetoric, irrespective of the activities of the official in question, became the basis for the next day's headlines. Newscasters sat before the camera and narrated McCarthy's words. Comic strips hounded him. And advertising copy writers exchanged worn World War II quips for fresh Cold War rhetoric.

At the dawn of what has become known as the media age, McCarthy capitalized on making representation itself an event to be recorded and reported by the news media. The media, always in need of a story, prodded McCarthy to do so. Transforming representation into an event for public consumption was not particularly new, of course; long before, P. T. Barnum had revealed the power of suspense and hyperbole in mass advertising. But with the advent of the television and the flood

of nationwide advertising in all media in the 1950s, staged events for news coverage increasingly began to take the place of spontaneous "news." As Daniel Boorstin noted in 1962, one effect is that representation and event have become blended so that any public relations consultant "not only knows what news value is, but knowing it, he is in a position to make news happen. He is a creator of events."³ Boorstin also claimed that Americans "have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality. . . . We demand [our illusions]. And we demand that there be always more of them, bigger and better and more vivid."⁴ Twelve years later, Umberto Eco organized his travel pieces about America around the same theme. Referring to advertisements, amusement parks, wax museums, and other American landscapes, he wrote that "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake."⁵

Other theorists of contemporary American culture also remark about the extent to which representation has replaced the real. For instance, Frederic Jameson considers the real as history: "not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but . . . an absent cause, . . . inaccessible to us except in textual form."⁶ Like Eco, he claims that through "postmodern" forms of representation, historical or "real" events are reconstructed as simulacra, so that "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us nothing but texts."⁷ These theorists may be nostalgic about a real which always has been bracketed by and

characterized through representations. But they are correct to suggest that with the hyperbolic bombardment of images before the public by national media, political candidates, nationwide food chains, and coast-to-coast advertising firms, representation has truly come to circumscribe and distort what we think of as real. Joseph McCarthy was a master of such distortions.

Many American writers and artists of the sixties, seventies and eighties delight in the free play of representation which Jameson laments. They appropriate forms from vastly different historical periods. Juxtaposing genres, splicing together traditions, and mixing styles, they self-consciously create conceptual frameworks which they then parody, thereby revealing their own work as yet another assemblage of transformed constructions.

But many of these novelists--some from within and some from outside "postmodern" circles--are careful to portray the tragic effects of this free play of representation on contemporary culture. Like many of their protagonists, they struggle with a world out of balance. They create characters who are traumatized by the gaps between representation and event, between official history and oral traditions such as storytelling, and between history as a construction and history as felt experience. Portraying protagonists who attempt to bridge these gaps by seeking to remember and narrate important historical events, many of these writers turn not only to the quest motif, but to the detective quest: it too attempts to reconstruct significant

events which occur before the narrative begins. For the detective and for the protagonist of many recent American novels, acute perception and effective representation become the keys to discovery, tools which help them as they try to connect a present to a past.

This study takes up four such authors who make considerable use of quests of detection. Thomas Pynchon, in The Crying of Lot 49, E. L. Doctorow, in The Book of Daniel, Toni Morrison, in Song of Solomon, and Leslie Marmon Silko, in Ceremony, weave together (and leave disjointed) distinct historical, mythical, and fictional narratives. They juxtapose historical documents with fictional episodes and mythical stories. Their protagonists, finding themselves excluded and disinherited from official versions of history, suffer not so much from a loss of identity as from a loss of identification: an inability to identify with the communities around them. By taking on quests of detection, they struggle to reconstruct meaningful relationships to their own personal and cultural histories.

Of course, the approaches of these authors to the detective quest varies. McCarthy's appropriation of the detective form sets a pattern which Pynchon and Doctorow both follow and resist. These novelists, directly taking on issues relating to inheritance and disinheritance from McCarthy's narrow "Americanism," provide revisionist histories of Cold War America. They present characters who, as children of the fifties and youths of the sixties, are troubled by but also are attracted to McCarthy's depiction of a conspiratorial Other who

threatens American--or at least their own--security. Engaging in quests of detection, these characters take on--that is, assume as well as critique--McCarthy's language of conspiracy and paranoia. By the end of their narratives, they come close to finding meaningful alternatives to it, but if they do so, it is unclear what such alternatives would entail.

Morrison and Silko, on the other hand, come from traditions outside of Cold War politics. McCarthy rarely mentioned ethnic and racial groups in America. As a significant absence in his rhetoric, however, these groups exist on the margins of his brand of Americanism, a paranoiac Americanism which jibes cleanly with racist depictions of ethnic Others threatening America's sanctity. Yet because Morrison and Silko come from strong cultural traditions that have been excluded by rhetoric like McCarthy's, they can and do provide counter narratives to his language and to his version of the detective quest. Many of their characters must relearn their own storytelling traditions, and in doing so, they reveal the difficult, traumatic effects of moving from an oral to a written culture. In seeking to regain a sense of their oral heritage, these protagonists engage in quests of detection, but they are less interested in identifying a villainous Other than in regaining a lost treasure: the language of storytelling. As a result, their quests become inclusive rather than divisive, and they result in connecting the characters to the communities around them.

This study thus provides a contemporary history of the rhetoric of the detective form: traced from Raymond Chandler's

The Big Sleep through McCarthy's political language, and into four significant narratives by American novelists of the sixties and seventies. In tracing this rhetorical and narrative history, I inevitably outline an approach to theories of the postmodern in America, a word which until now I have used only with quotation marks. It is best to explain at the outset what I mean by it. I consider the postmodern as largely a heuristic device, a shorthand tool that is useful in describing some of the complex cultural and narrative qualities prevalent in post-World-War-II America. Nonetheless, I agree with Jameson, in his "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism," that it is useful to conceive of it conceptually as "a cultural dominant." As he claims, establishing a cultural dominant is not directed toward obliterating emergent or underlying differences by projecting a "massive homogeneity" onto them. Rather, as he argues, it is "only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm that genuine difference could be measured or assessed."⁸

My first chapter takes up Jameson's depiction of the connections between multi-national capitalism and postmodern culture to provide an historical analysis of Cold War rhetoric. Many of the same economic and institutional forces which Jameson describes as crucial in demarking postmodernism, also set the stage for the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Chapter Two traces McCarthy's detective gambits and reveals the extent to which his narratives depended upon such postmodern features as superficial appropriations from historical texts, digressive

narrative tactics, and the transformation of representation into an event. My third chapter, in comparing Pynchon's and Doctorow's narrative forms with McCarthy's detective strategies, portrays Lot 49 and Book of Daniel as prime examples of "dominant" postmodern narrative forms. My fourth chapter, however, explores some specific examples of those emergent forms of "genuine difference" which Jameson's article, with its attention to the "dominant" aspects of postmodern culture, refers to but overlooks. Morrison and Silko come from outside the postmodern tradition, and they work against the dominant strain of postmodernism to suggest alternative possibilities for contemporary life and culture.

As well as considering postmodernism as a useful term to describe a dominant, but not pervasive, set of cultural features, I also use the postmodern to economically refer to certain narrative qualities, most of which have become so frequently classified as such that they can be considered as stereotypes: for instance, the self-conscious appropriation of forms from other media, the juxtaposition of disparate texts, and the mixing of different genres and voices so as to produce a fragmented parody or pastiche. But perhaps the most important postmodern narrative characteristic is overkill: the hyperbolic appropriation and juxtaposition of forms and voices. Not coincidentally, McCarthy used hyperbole with abandon.

An analysis of the political in terms of popular literary forms not only brings out the representational qualities of the historical, but it also prompts us to rethink literary

categories. From its inception, the novel has been closely associated with popular culture, yet little academic attention has centered on the ways in which literary forms and tropes are exchanged and manipulated in public arenas. Fiction writers certainly speak within and against certain literary forms and traditions, but they also inherit and manipulate popular forms and representations that later political, television, and advertising "narrators" again appropriate. Recent American novels are especially effective in weaving popular forms--for instance, the detective story, the newspaper article, the slave song, or the Navajo chant--into their narratives, and in doing so, they call into question the space of the literary critic who interprets their work. At stake is the sanctity of literary criticism as opposed to analysis of history, politics or popular culture, a sanctity that this study transgresses.

When the representations of public "narrators" are considered beside fictional narratives, common and normally useful literary distinctions break down. As McCarthy's accusations became an event to be represented by other authorities, those authorities functioned as readers as well as narrators, and as authors as well as characters. This blending of characterization with narrative voice and reader response theory is stylistically and thematically highlighted in recent American fiction. In each of the four novels I focus on, the primary characters are either readers of texts or listeners of stories, and they all attempt to narrate their own stories. Oedipa, in The Crying of Lot 49, traces obscure literary and

historical texts, out of which she must sort out the traces of a story that is meaningful to her. Milkman, in Song of Solomon, must negotiate between shifting stories: some are forced upon him by others, many narrate him in a way that threatens his identity, and some he eventually narrates himself. In Ceremony, Tayo is caught between contrasting traditions that appear to be mutually exclusive, but from which he learns to narrate his own history. The Book of Daniel is perhaps most significant in this area. The narrator of this novel is a character within it, and as a character, he is the narrator of another text, a dissertation, which he is not writing in order to author the novel itself. He has profound misgivings about his own authority. And as a narrator, character, and author, Daniel is also a reader and transcriber of history.

If my analysis begins with an historical approach and is held together by a study of narrative, it is directed toward an understanding of community and culture; or more specifically, toward an understanding of the depiction of community within recent American narratives of detection. McCarthy's meteoric rise to national prominence depended upon his ability to reject responsibility for his own narratives. For instance, when one of his hyperbolic charges was revealed to be unfounded, he would typically shift his object of inquiry; the detective form provided a model for these digressive tactics. He also portrayed a nationwide American community defined and unified by the threat of an alien and conspiratorial Other. Detective motifs of

a criminal Other and of a corrupt system helped him to establish these themes.

In each of the novels I focus on, the primary characters likewise create and envision communities, and their own places within those communities, through their narratives of detection. My reading of them depends very much on the extent to which these narrators/characters/authors/readers accept or reject responsibility for the communities that they bring about through their own struggles for power. It depends upon their depiction of the Other, and on their attempts to identify with the communities around them. At stake is a relation between authority, responsibility, and voice, all of which serve to establish the individual's place in a community, and that community's place in relation to other communities. Also at stake is the relationship between an author (who is also a reader of culture) and a reader (who must eventually author his/her own stories in a community of voices).

Finally, by focusing on representation, narrative strategy and community in post-World-War-II America, I outline an approach to what Raymond Williams refers to as "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production. In order to enliven depictions of the social in studies of contemporary culture, he describes what he calls "structures of feeling," which, as "changes of presence . . . do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action."⁹ In focusing on McCarthy's narrative strategies and

representations, I will be looking at the emerging forms of cultural production that later became defined by Jameson and others, in relation to other narratives, as postmodern. Yet even as those narratives became defined as such, they were already being undermined by new strategies of representation, such as those presented by Morrison and Silko. By relating narrative strategies to depictions of community in four novels written in the 1960s and 1970s, I show the extent to which the social experience of recent American culture, as Williams says generally of his structures of feeling, "is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies."¹⁰

Notes: Introduction

1 Most work in this area has related the popularity of horror/science fiction films to Cold War paranoia. But some recent work is also being done to relate the popularity of mystery and western films to a renewed faith in the rugged individual. In relation to horror/science fiction films, see Brian Murphy, "Monster Movies: They Came from Beneath the Fifties," Journal of Popular Fiction 1 (Winter 1972) 31-44; Vivian Carol Sobchack, Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film (New York: Ungar, 1987); and Bill Warren, Keep Watching the Skies: American Science Fiction Movies of the Fifties (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1982). More attention needs to be given to mysteries and westerns in relation to this topic, but for a start concerning both genres on television, see J. Fred MacDonald, Television and the Red Menace (New York: Praeger, 1985) 101-45.

2 Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," Critical Inquiry 12 (Spring 1986) 489.

3 Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image; Or What Happened to the American Dream (New York: Atheneum, 1962) 11. Emphasis his.

4 Boorstin 5, 6.

5 Umberto Eco, Travels in Hyper Reality (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986) 8.

6 Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 35. Emphasis his.

7 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review 164 (1984) 66.

8 Jameson "Postmodernism" 57.

9 Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 132.

10 Williams 132.