

“The Enigma His Efforts Had Created”: Thomas Pynchon and the Legacy of America

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Jake Gittes	How much are you worth?
Noah Cross	I have no idea. How much do you want?
Gittes	I want to know what you’re worth—over ten million?
Cross	Oh, my, yes.
Gittes	Then why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can’t already afford?
Cross	The future, Mr. Gittes, the future.

Robert Towne (Shooting script of *Chinatown* [dir. Polanski, 1974])

In the best tradition of classic American literature, the existential narrator of Norman Mailer’s *American Dream* (1965) lights out at the end for the territory. Stephen Richard Rojack has survived a thirty-two hour journey through the subterranean depths of New York City and left it behind. The catch is that, instead of being ahead of the rest, he confronts a frontier previously settled many times over. Upon arriving in the Southwest, Rojack has a revelation: the bifurcated atmosphere of this terrain (110° furnace outside, 70° of air-conditioned oxygen inside) was “again producing a new breed of man.”¹ Rojack, however, rejects the empty, orbital quality of the machine-made atmosphere; moreover, he rejects the “new man” the last frontier left behind. Gazing upon the city lights of Las Vegas from his desert vantage point, Rojack indicates that he will try his luck elsewhere. Perhaps this time he will head south, toward another America.

This is a story, as Mailer’s title makes explicit, of an American dream. Although the dream is a nearly archetypal motif in U.S. fiction, Rojack’s encounter with it needs to be situated historically. The American dream of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* (1925) is, for Mailer, no longer possible. No longer does New York City hold a romantic residue of the “first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.”² For Mailer, the dream Fitzgerald christened in the roaring twenties the “greatest of all human dreams” (GG 182) has

become, in the wake of events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy,³ a nightmare. Like the literature of late modernism John Barth pronounced judgment on in 1967, the promise of the nation's dream appears to have lapsed into a state of "exhaustion."⁴

I

"Replenishment," as Barth would call postmodernism nearly fifteen years later,⁵ is hard work. Jean Baudrillard, postmodern theoretician *par excellence*, believes he is up to the task where "America" and its dream are concerned. His 1986 travel diary, *Amérique* (published in English as *America* in 1988), an infuriating but nonetheless trenchant book about the contemporary predicament in the U.S., celebrates "America" as *the* national space of postmodernism. Like the experience manufactured in Hollywood for television or movies, the essence of Baudrillard's American dream can be experienced only through "the refraction of a giant screen." Postmodernity in the U.S. is characterized, not by Mailer's sardonic description of the contemporary southwestern desert, but by "an ecstatic form of disappearance" similar to the vanishing point on the desert horizon. "The [southwestern] desert is a natural extension of the inner silence of the body," Baudrillard says. "If humanity's language, technology, and buildings are an extension of its constructive faculties, the desert alone is an extension of its capacity for absence, the ideal schema of humanity's disappearance." While the individual is displaced in postmodernism, so too are the nation's finite borders. Furthermore, Baudrillard tells us that, unlike modern forms of nationalism which generate myths of authenticating origins in the distant past, U.S. neo-nationalism lacks the impulse toward originality. "[T]here is no truth of America. I ask of the Americans . . . only to populate a space incommensurate with my own, to be for me the highest astral point, the finest orbital space. . . . Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams."⁶ Baudrillard's "incommensurate" dream—"the highest astral point, the finest orbital space"—sounds suspiciously like Fitzgerald's description of Gatsby's (or Nick Carraway's) modern myth of a national past, of a vision that compelled "man" to come "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (GG 182).⁷ The incongruity between Gatsby's and Baudrillard's conceptions of American origins reflects a postmodern mutation. While Gatsby's capacity for wonder is "commensurate" with modernism's enlightened project of a universal language—the claim of architecture's International Style to be the "greatest of all human dreams" comes to mind—Baudrillard's

postmodern America is "incommensurate" with any metaphysical communicative capacity whatsoever.

Baudrillard's sense of the postmodern American dream provides a possible gloss on a moment late in Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), published just a year after *An American Dream*. Pynchon's heroine, Oedipa Maas, recalls that her ex-lover, deceased business tycoon Pierce Inverarity, was unable to meaningfully communicate with her, "her love, such as it had been, remaining incommensurate with his need to possess, to alter the land, to bring new skylines, personal antagonisms, growth rates into being." *Lot 49* resigns itself to the fact that, although Inverarity's "legacy was America," all that remains for Oedipa to reveal is the "enigma his efforts had created."⁸ The figure of Inverarity never generates, like *Gatsby*, the effect of modern nationalism's prerequisite myth of a glorious past. In fact, Pynchon's description of Inverarity's legacy sounds remarkably like Baudrillard's more recent pronouncement on postmodernity in America. In an interview printed just after the English-language publication of *Amérique*, Baudrillard claims that, instead of attempting to "resolve the enigma" of the contemporary U.S. nation, "I seek to preserve the enigma—the enigma of America."⁹

Preserving the "enigma of America" at all cost seems to be one of the objectives of *Lot 49*. Consumer culture literally and figuratively frames the novel's narrative. The book opens with Oedipa standing among a conspicuous display of suburban household items and closes with the heroine awaiting the auctioning of lot 49—a piece of Inverarity's estate: his collection of stamps known as the Tristero forgeries. Although the title of Pynchon's novel makes multiple references, I am particularly interested in its debt to a post-Second World War commodity culture. Pynchon suggests that, in the contemporary marketplace, forgeries are valuable art rather than worthless junk. Those objects placed under the sign of art are dramatic examples of postmodern capital: they are valued in a market economy, not so much for their underlying utility or even for their exchange-value, but rather for their sign-value within a system of exchange.¹⁰ Collectable art, like the Tristero forgeries, might represent the most acute form of commodity fetishism known to late capitalism.

Commodity culture also produces waste. Pynchon indicates that, in today's disposable culture, waste may be, not a mere by-product of commodity production, but the stuff of social transformation. Pynchon's representation of the Tristero is largely conditioned by the social upheavals of the sixties, particularly the crisis of race relations in the U.S. His 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," on the refuse produced by the August 1965

Watts riots is especially revealing for what it can tell us about the status of the Tristero in *Lot 49*. In the article, Pynchon conceives of the paradoxical way “waste” is imposed on the black community of South Central Los Angeles only to be violently rejected and creatively reconstructed in potentially oppositional forms.

At the novel’s end, Oedipa still awaits the auctioning of the stamp collection. We also await Oedipa’s final word on both the meaning of Inverarity’s contemporary American dream and its relation to the potentially oppositional Tristero. If Oedipa’s silence at the novel’s end marks her failure as the interpreter of the “legacy of America,” her failure is nonetheless productive. After all, Oedipa now understands that Inverarity’s vast empire is locked into the circulation of money and power within California’s dream-machine. She perceives that Inverarity’s dream and its legacy have a hold on her own sense of truth and lie, reality and fiction, self and other. While Oedipa finally understands that her sense of reality is specific to her particular experience, she also knows that any critical knowledge of this experience depends on her ability to break the grip Inverarity’s empire has on her interpretive capacities. Oedipa is, in the end, unable to identify with the dispossessed of the Tristero. Nevertheless, her encounter with an unfamiliar world provides her with a means to investigate and unlearn her personal privilege.

II

Throughout *Lot 49*, Oedipa has access only to the various texts Inverarity has left in his wake: his will, which Oedipa is compelled to execute; the letter informing her that Inverarity’s will exists and that she is its executor; the envelope that contains the letter; the postmark on the envelope; the stamp on the envelope that keeps the mail moving; etc. Oedipa soon realizes that Inverarity—and the American dream—can be known only through the institutional and textual “post” which materializes his effects through various inscriptions. Making sense of the materials Inverarity has left behind is precisely what Oedipa is charged with doing. Can Oedipa solve the enigma the letters in the text create? What we have here is no traditional detective fiction. Instead of *Lot 49*’s de-riddler moving from mystery to revelation, the enigma seems only to heighten as each clue “crowd[s] in exponentially” (81) on Oedipa. A transcendent myth of national origins is endlessly deferred in Pynchon’s dream text. The novel is situated in the “wake” (152) of the modern American dream. It is a “dead man”—as Inverarity is repeatedly characterized—who is “the linking feature in a coincidence” (120–21).¹¹

Oedipa attempts to make the contemporary world cohere through the act of organizing and understanding Inverarity's unsettled estate. She dedicates herself "to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind" (178). This is no simple matter. Her "growing obsession" concerns "'bringing something of herself' . . . to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations" (90). Yet, in her effort to order Inverarity's legacy, Oedipa seems to produce a quantity of information beyond her control (what Pynchon refers to as entropy¹²). Much of the disorder created by the accumulated information concerns the apparent existence of an underground and anarchic postal service, the Tristero—a Janus-faced system of communication. On the one hand, the Tristero works to sustain the power of Inverarity's estate; on the other, it has the potential to disrupt Inverarity's legacy and his dream of an influential after-life. *Lot 49* anticipates Baudrillard's dream of "America" in as much as it represents a totalizing flow of information and capital tied, not only to Inverarity's personal financial empire, but to the maintenance of government institutions. Unlike Baudrillard, however, *Lot 49* criticizes the dominant logic of the American dream in U.S. society. The oppositional figure of the Tristero points to the efficacy of active or strategic silence where resistance to the logic of the dream is concerned.

As *Lot 49* begins, Oedipa stands in her California home amidst consumer-household mechanisms (like the "dead-eyed" TV), having just received the letter that names her executor of Inverarity's will. Reading letters (epistles, telegrams, acronyms) or simply reading to-the-letter is Oedipa's principal task throughout the novel. It is a task without a telos. The postal service ensures (as Jacques Lacan concludes of Poe's purloined epistle¹³) that the letter *as signifier* arrives at its destination. This is not to suggest that the letter has a definitive meaning or transparent truth. Rather, the letter's destination in Pynchon's novel (as in Poe's story) is a function of a particular reading which depends on the subject position of the interpreter, to whom the letter is addressed. Oedipa, in other words, does not simply interpret the letters at will, but is simultaneously read by Inverarity's estate.

The mail which arrives at the opening of *Lot 49* represents the testament of Pierce Inverarity.¹⁴ The epistle concerns inheritance: not merely Oedipa's, but America's. A postal service sets the novel's narrative in motion. The letter touches off Oedipa's memory of her last contact with Inverarity, a long-distance call a year earlier that featured Inverarity's impersonations, ranging from a "comic-Negro" voice to a "Gestapo officer," and concluding with "his Lamont Cranston voice" promising or threatening "'a little visit from The Shadow.'" Inverarity

is nothing if not the shadow of an absence in the novel. "The shadow waited a year before visiting" (11-12). This final visit, however, is mediated by the mail, and it takes the form of the letter that names Oedipa executor ("or she supposed executrix" [9]). The letter, in all its various forms in the novel, appears to be a metonym for Pierce Inverarity. As such, it is the materialization of his after-life dream of uninterrupted influence and power. Or is it? As we will see, when it takes the form of the Tristero, the letter potentially becomes the utopian bearer of a counter-hegemonic movement. The letter—the stuff of communicative practice—is the site of political as well as interpretive struggle in *Lot 49*.

As executor of Inverarity's estate, Oedipa quickly learns that his business interests ranged from real estate development to the Yoyodyne aerospace and defense contracting industry. The culmination of his real estate development effort is a place called Fangoso Lagoons, on which rests "a sculptured body of water named Lake Inverarity" (56). Although Oedipa's faith in pastoralism allows her to believe "in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California" (55), Inverarity's California dream is based on a mix of Gatsby's West Egg mansion and Disneyland. "Out in [Lake Inverarity], on a round island of fill among blue wavelets, squatted the social hall, a chunky, ogived and verdigrised, Art Nouveau reconstruction of some European pleasure-casino." Inverarity's superficial pastoralism has the desired commercial effect: "Oedipa fell in love with it" (56).

In San Narciso, where Inverarity seems to have owned just about everything, Oedipa first encounters the always ambiguous—although often seemingly oppositional—sign of the Tristero. Oedipa receives a letter from her husband which, although "newsless inside," has a distinctive "outside": the cancellation blurb on the envelope reads "REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTSMASER" (46). At about the same time, Oedipa finds herself one evening in a local bar, the Scope—"a haunt for electronics assembly people from Yoyodyne" (47)—where Mike Fallopian, proselytizing for the Peter Pinguid Society, tells her a story which seems to have a bearing on what she will come to know as the Tristero, although no direct connection is ever explicitly made. According to Fallopian, the Peter Pinguid Society is named for a Confederate commodore with a keen sense of the way the Union's abolitionist rhetoric disguised the North's capitalist interests. But Pinguid's politics were conspicuously contradictory: he fought for the pro-slavery South, but apparently deplored Northern industrial workers' "wage-slavery"; after the war, although "he was against industrial capitalism," he embraced the entrepreneurial spirit of private property.

Anticipating Inverarity by three quarters of a century, Pinguid grew wealthy “[s]peculating in California real estate” (50–51).

Oedipa searches simultaneously for the meaning of Inverarity’s estate and the Tristero empire. She learns that, historically, the processes of mail delivery, and systems of communication generally, have involved a struggle over nation-state formation and bureaucratic power. “‘Delivering the mail,’” an acquaintance reminds her, “‘is a government monopoly’” (52), and has been so since at least the seventeenth century. At a performance of the Jacobean *Courier’s Tragedy*, where she first hears the word Trystero, Oedipa begins to learn of the struggle between what will become the official Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly and the apparently “‘counter-revolution[ary]’” “Trystero” (158). The Trystero is bent on “muting” the legitimate Thurn and Taxis system.

From this point on, Oedipa’s primary line of inquiry becomes: Does the Tristero empire simply help maintain Inverarity’s vast legacy? Does it adhere to the logic of the American dream? Or, in opposition to the legacy of America, does it expose the structures of power the dream helps to sustain? Historically, the Tristero attempts to subvert the state-sponsored means of communication while it maintains its own clandestine postal service. This breeds reactionary politics as often as progressive struggle within its ranks. At times the Tristero works to secure the interests of the ruling classes; at other times it is an instrument or weapon which serves marginalized groups. From the sixteenth century onward, the Tristero shows up at different times and places, especially at historical moments when the nation is unstable (like the English Civil War and the French Revolution). After the failure of the 1848 Revolutions in Europe, most Tristero members immigrate to America, but arrive in 1849 only to learn that, four years earlier, “the U. S. government had carried out a great postal reform, cutting their rates, putting most independent mail routes out of business” (173). Thus once again the Tristero finds itself fighting against a government monopoly. According to Emory Bortz, when the Civil War breaks out, the Tristero refuses to side with its postal opposition, the Union, and is “‘not about to be suppressed. While the Pony Express is defying deserts, savages and sidewinders, Tristero’s giving its employees crash courses in Siouan and Athapascan dialects. Disguised as Indians their messengers mosey westward. . . . Their entire emphasis now toward silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance’” (173–74). The mutability of the Tristero’s identity—whether disguised as native Americans or fashioned as “*masked marauders in mysterious black uniforms*”—allows them to “*remain shrouded in mystery*” (89). While this characteristic of the Tristero

recalls Inverarity's multiple impersonations, it more forcefully suggests, as Bortz says, that the Tristero "'symbolize[s] the Other'" (156). As its muted post horn emblem implies, the Tristero's mission in the U.S. is to "mute" the official "post" (97).

In contemporary America, Inverarity's financial empire constrains and even appropriates the oppositional potential of Tristero's postal apparatus. For example, Inverarity owned, along with numerous related commodities, a stamp collection of Tristero "forgeries," which are to be sold at auction as lot 49. Furthermore, Oedipa's employment as executor of Inverarity's estate always influences her interpretation. "Every access route to the Tristero could be traced also back to the Inverarity estate" (170). Yet Oedipa also encounters opposition to Inverarity's empire wherever she goes. Resistance usually takes the form of the Tristero, which works against the dominant flow of information by providing an alternative mail system to those dissatisfied with or dispossessed by the high cost of maintaining the California dream-machine. By mid-twentieth century, the oppositional politics of the Tristero have been forced "underground" (88). Oedipa encounters the Tristero in a postmodern form: WASTE. WASTE is another name for the Tristero's contemporary underground mail system, and the name is significant for a variety of reasons. On the aesthetic level, the vast quantities of mass-cultural waste the U.S. produces have become the raw material of postmodernism. On the political level, waste is also the stuff of revolt against inequity and inequality in the United States.

To better understand the politics of WASTE in the novel, we may turn to "A Journey Into The Mind of Watts," Pynchon's journalistic account of the aftermath of the 1965 race riots in South Central L.A., published only weeks after *Lot 49*. "Watts is country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel," Pynchon writes. That is, although Watts lies within the official borders of the United States, racism effectively isolates and excludes Watts (and other urban ghettos) from the imagined community of the nation. Political opposition to racism in Watts takes the form and content of violence and waste. While the debris accumulated in the aftermath of the riots symbolizes the poverty of everyday life for the urban underclass, the waste also represents a site of struggle. In contrast to the "Disneyfied" superficiality and incorruptibility of the California dream, South Central L.A. is coded as "Raceriotland." Watts is an urban wasteland of "busted glass, busted crockery, nails, tin cans, all kinds of scrap and waste." The relentless garbage yields, in part, a utopian impulse within Watts toward social and economic transformation. The famous Watts Towers created by the Italian immigrant Simon Rodia express the troubled hopes of what

Langston Hughes called "a dream deferred." This is "perhaps [Rodia's] own dream of how things should have been: a fantasy of fountains, boats, tall openwork spires, encrusted with a dazzling mosaic of Watts debris." Pynchon suggests there is a redemptive quality in the type of violence that produces the Watts riots: "Far from a sickness, violence may be an attempt to communicate."¹⁶

Pynchon is interested, not merely in oppositional violence from the margins, but in the creative and communicative potential of the waste and debris accumulated by Watts residents in the wake of the riots. Analogously, Oedipa slowly comprehends that the Tristero's WASTE communication system may serve as an alternative to the official channels of information circulation controlled by Inverarity and the U.S. government. The letters in WASTE even designate a utopian promise: the acronym decodes "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire" (169). On her night quest among Tristero's underground communities, Oedipa encounters the poor and dispossessed who do not live the California dream. By using the WASTE system to communicate, the marginalized transform their faceless oppression into calculated opposition:

For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U. S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (124-25)

The marginalized are actively silent in their deliberate withdrawal from the machinery of modern society. They refuse to use the official postal service. Their silence, paradoxically, undermines their passive incorporation into the legacy of America. If the only goal of the Tristero were to keep the already silenced silent, then its political efficacy would be limited indeed. Pynchon forcefully suggests, however, that the Tristero's mission is revolutionary (and, hence, still in the process of being imagined). The dispossessed maintain an alternative communication apparatus and a different representational system situated at a different time and in a different space from those of mainstream U.S. culture.

Oedipa stumbles upon the post horn repeatedly during her night journey. Her most moving experience occurs when she meets an old sailor with the post horn tattooed on the back of his left hand, which covers his face. Huddled in a doorway, the sailor visibly shakes with

DT's (delirium tremens). "Dt" is also, Pynchon reminds us, a mathematical notation for "time differential" (Δt), representing the Tristero's alternative means of communication. The sailor is subject to a different time, a different experience, a different history from those Oedipa is familiar with. Oedipa is stopped in her tracks when the sailor suddenly lowers his hands, allowing her to see his "wrecked face, and the terror of eyes." For the first and only moment in *Lot 49*, Oedipa feels something like compassion for another person in an otherwise dehumanized world. Although "shaking" and "tired," she reaches out to him: "'Can I help?'" He responds, "'My wife's in Fresno. . . . I left her. So long ago, I don't remember. Now this is for her,'" and hands Oedipa a tattered letter. "'Drop it in the,'" and he held up the tattoo and stared into her eyes, 'you know. I can't go out there. It's too far now, I had a bad night'" (125). Oedipa's own shaking suggests her identification with the sailor. Overcome, she touches him. Yet this momentary connection, which seems to transcend class difference, is fleeting. Oedipa makes contact with the sailor only to recognize that she cannot comprehend his predicament, his terror. Rocking him in her arms, she whispers, "'I can't help . . . I can't help'" (126). The moment of bonding is simultaneously the moment a wedge is placed between Oedipa and the sailor. The price of Oedipa's sympathy is non-identity. Her failure to communicate with the disadvantaged is the cost of her class privilege, including her legal relation to Inverarity's will and his national legacy.

Oedipa's encounters with the Tristero during her investigation into Inverarity's estate are fraught with obstacles. For instance, the sailor refuses or is unable to name the communication system through which he wants his letter delivered. When Oedipa confesses her ignorance of its whereabouts, he says, "'Under the freeway.'" He waved her on in the direction she'd been going. 'Always one. You'll see it'" (125). With this comment, the sailor's eyes close, without his having spoken that which cannot be adequately represented to Oedipa: WASTE. "'Just mail the letter,'" he pleads shortly after this; "'the stamp is on it.'" The stamp is "the familiar carmine 8¢ airmail, with a jet flying by the Capitol dome." However, "at the top of the dome stood a tiny figure in deep black, with its arms outstretched" (127). Although Oedipa is not sure what to make of this disfigurement, the curious image on the otherwise legitimate-looking stamp gives a clue to its significance. The figure, whose garb recalls the Tristero couriers dressed in black, displaces the figure of state-authorized liberty and justice (which oversees the U.S. Capitol) with an unsanctioned symbol of social justice.

This counter-nationalist stamp is similar to a number of Tristero forgeries in Inverarity's collection. One of particular interest is described as follows: "In the 15¢ dark green from the 1893 Columbian Exposition Issue ('Columbus Announcing His Discovery'), the faces of three courtiers, receiving the news at the right-hand side of the stamp, had been subtly altered to express uncontrollable fright" (174). Like the other oppositional Tristero forgeries, this stamp implies, not only a commentary on state-sponsored postal service, but also a challenge to U.S. nationalism's myth of origins. It satirizes conventional representations of America's beginnings, commenting critically on a mythic narrative. By implication, the stamp also challenges Frederick Jackson Turner's famous Frontier Thesis, delivered during the same 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Shaken by her encounter with the sailor, Oedipa begins to probe the connection between identity and interpretive capacity. "The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was. Trembling, unfurrowed, she slipped sidewise" (129). By understanding the relation between the practice of interpretation ("the act of metaphor") and the position of interpreter ("depending where you were"), Oedipa begins to comprehend the Tristero's refusal to use the communicative system controlled by its opposition. The Tristero thrusts her into a different and unfamiliar space where truth and lie are matters of different realities: "because DT's [delirium tremens] must give access to dt's [time differentials] of spectra beyond the known sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright" (129). The Tristero generates a potentially transgressive communicative practice.¹⁶ Following the sailor's directions, Oedipa walks to an underpass, where "she prowled among the sunless, concrete underpinnings of the freeway, finding drunks, bums, pedestrians, pederasts, hookers, walking psychotic, no secret mailbox." Finally, "in the shadows," she finds "a can with a swinging trapezoidal top, the kind you throw trash in. . . . On the swinging part were hand-painted the initials W.A.S.T.E. She had to look closely to see the periods between the letters" (129-30). Now able to read the meaningful details of what might otherwise appear to be insignificant markings, Oedipa comprehends the difference between a Tristero W.A.S.T.E. mailbox and an ordinary trash can.

At the end of *Lot 49*, the Tristero and its tangled relation to Inverarity's estate, which were once unreadable to Oedipa, remain only partly so. She comprehends that the Tristero communication system works in the "shadow"—within the infrastructure, underneath the freeway—of the California dream. Inverarity apparently had business interests in construction firms that built California's extensive freeway

system, and, not surprisingly—like American entrepreneurs before him—is implicated in criminal activity concomitant with the construction of the East San Narciso Freeway: “No bribes, no freeways” (61). Ultimately, Pynchon leaves open the question of whether the Tristero is simply a curious cog in the wheel of Inverarity’s vast empire or works silently in the shadows of the California dream to unsettle the latter’s authority. More certainly, the Tristero is a by-product—refuse or waste—of contemporary society. As waste, the Tristero is also a site for cultural struggle in the 1960s and beyond.

Oedipa’s search for the Tristero enables her to begin to draw what Fredric Jameson calls a “cognitive map”: “a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.”¹⁷ Oedipa’s search for and contact with the Tristero allow her to create an imaginative road map on which she might better understand her place within the global system of multinational capitalism to which Inverarity’s post-Second World War American legacy properly belongs. If there is a politics to postmodernism, Jameson concludes, it “will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping on a social as well as a spacial scale” (P 54). In *Lot 49*, Pynchon provides an aesthetic of cognitive mapping which allows Oedipa to investigate the political efficacy and transformative potential of communication in a postmodern age.

Near the end of *Lot 49*, Oedipa concludes confidently that Inverarity’s “legacy was America.” This pronouncement is followed by its near repetition on the next-to-last page, with the difference that, in the latter instance, Oedipa factors in the possibility that the Tristero (and, by implication, she herself) has the capacity to create some kind of critical distance from Inverarity’s legacy:

Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (182)

Paranoia, and its bearing on interpretation, is a common thread in Pynchon’s work.¹⁸ *Lot 49* is no exception. Lacan theorizes that knowledge is necessarily characterized by paranoia to the degree that there is always an imaginary disjuncture between inner self and outer world, perception and reality.¹⁹ *Lot 49* suggests something similar about paranoia and its relation to narrative in contemporary society.

In the language of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Oedipa's "creative paranoia" generates an alternative "We-system" of critical intervention (Tristero's empire) in opposition to the "They-system"²⁰ of dominant culture (Inverarity's empire).

Questions remain. Has Oedipa been in contact solely with Inverarity's American dream and thus encountered only the official legacy of America? Or has she stumbled upon the Tristero difference, which takes on "the *appearance* of the legacy America" in an effort to disguise its mission, and which allows her to generate a genuinely oppositional interpretation of America? In a postmodern turn, Pynchon collapses (for his reader) the binary opposition within which Oedipa is imprisoned. Despite Oedipa's effort to keep things separate and ordered, the novel persistently deconstructs the Inverarity/Tristero opposition. The indeterminate relation between Inverarity and the Tristero, between the American dream and the political unconscious, remains throughout business still unfinished.²¹ The status of lot 49 at the end of the novel suggests as much. While the reader awaits, along with Oedipa, the crying of lot 49, we can only speculate that the still silent Tristero represents American dreams deferred.

Postscript

At the end of *An American Dream*, having journeyed southwest from New York City, Rojack finds himself in the open desert facing the bright lights of Las Vegas. With the eclipse of modernity upon him, he is unable to envision the pristine pastoral promise of the nation's past:

The night before I left Las Vegas I walked out in the desert to look at the moon. There was a jeweled city on the horizon, spires rising in the night, but the jewels were diadems of electric and the spires were the neon of signs ten stories high. I was not good enough to climb up and pull them down. . . . But in the morning, I was something like sane again, and packed the car, and started on the long trip to Guatemala and Yucatán.
(AD 251-52)

Despite a contemporary culture prone to the logic of simulation, consumption, and greed, Rojack sustains his investment in a modern, Gatsby-like American dream of both an uncorrupted frontier on the horizon and a shining city upon a hill. In relation to postmodernism, Rojack's stance might be called oppositional; but it is equally nostalgic. Unlike Pynchon's Oedipa, Mailer's existential protagonist ultimately desires to venture beyond U.S. borders to rediscover an authentic self. Disillusioned with postmodern America, Rojack staunchly refuses to

learn from either Las Vegas²² or the dispossessed at home. Alternatively, Oedipa actively confronts the postindustrial society we call progress, the consumer waste we label culture. She envisions Inverarity's legacy—and is, perhaps, prepared to call it catastrophe.²³ The postmodern dream continues to amass refuse and hurl it in front of her feet. It is a pile of debris which, before Oedipa, crowds in exponentially.

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Notes

¹*An American Dream* (rpt. New York: Dell, 1966) 251.

²*The Great Gatsby* (rpt. New York: Scribner's, 1953) 69. Joan Didion, in her review of *An American Dream* ("A Social Eye," *National Review* [20 Apr. 1965]: 329–30), makes the connection between Mailer's novel and Fitzgerald's. *An American Dream*, she remarks, is "perhaps the only serious New York novel since *The Great Gatsby*."

³In *The Presidential Papers* (published only a few days before the assassination of John F. Kennedy and immediately prior to *An American Dream*), Mailer promotes J.F.K., not only as "the existential hero" of U.S. politics, but also as the embodiment of the mythically promising yet mysteriously enigmatic American dreamer. With the 1960 election results hanging in the balance, Mailer had dubbed Kennedy heir to "the unstated aristocracy of the American dream," and asked, "would the nation be brave enough to enlist the romantic dream of itself" and thus elect Kennedy (*The Presidential Papers* [New York: Putnam's, 1963] 58–59)?

⁴"The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic* (Aug. 1967): 29–34. It is important to note that Barth goes to great lengths to claim that the idea of exhaustion is "by no means a cause for despair."

⁵"The Literature of Replenishment," *Atlantic* (Jan. 1980): 65–71.

⁶*America*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1988) 55, 5, 68, 27–28.

⁷It is interesting to note that Fitzgerald is the only novelist, American or otherwise, Baudrillard names in *America*.

⁸*The Crying of Lot 49* (rpt. New York: Perennial, 1986) 178.

⁹Judith Williamson, "An Interview With Jean Baudrillard," trans. Brand Thumin, *Block* 15 (1989): 18.

¹⁰The ability to conceptualize the commodity form without use-value suggests the historical difference between nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and late-twentieth-century capitalism. According to Marx's analysis of market capitalism, even though exchange-value overwrites use-value under the sign of the commodity form, use-value is necessarily embedded in commodity production. In the (so-called) postindustrial economy, however, the sale of art work for seemingly unchecked prices forces us to think the

possibility of exchange under the rubric of sign-value within a consumer economy. For a discussion of these issues, see Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972).

¹¹Inverarity's literal and figurative absence from *Lot 49* suggests a number of possibilities, including the so-called "death of the subject" in postmodernity, and the increasing facelessness of multinational corporate hierarchies in late capitalism. These are references, respectively, to Roland Barthes's often-cited sixties pronouncement that the humanist subject is dysfunctional ("The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath [New York: Harper and Row, 1977] 142-48), and to the idea that those who run today's multinational corporations lack the conspicuous public personae accrued by monopoly capitalism's captains of industry.

¹²Cf. Pynchon's "Entropy," *Kenyon Review* 22 (1960): 277-92. For a fuller explication of Pynchon's use of the notion of entropy, see Anne Mangel, "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*," *TriQuarterly* 20 (1971): 194-208.

¹³"Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988) 55. For a Derridean treatment of this issue in relation to Pynchon's work, see Alec McHoul and David Wills, *Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990) 108-30.

¹⁴This is a reference to the title of the excerpt "The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity," published in *Esquire* (Dec. 1965).

¹⁵"A Journey Into The Mind of Watts," *New York Times Magazine* (12 Jun. 1966): 78, 84.

¹⁶Pynchon's old sailor is, perhaps, not unlike Ralph Ellison's invisible man, who, while listening to the "muted horn" of Louis Armstrong, maintains an underground existence by inhabiting a different historical frequency from that of mainstream U.S. society.

¹⁷*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991) 51.

¹⁸Critics have dealt extensively with paranoia as a thematic concern in Pynchon's novels. Like his contemporaries (including Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, and John Barth), Pynchon implies that Americans in the post-Second World War era experience their lives through paranoia.

¹⁹"Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 8-29.

²⁰*Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973) 638.

²¹My debt here is to Paul Coates's brief but provocative "Unfinished Business: Thomas Pynchon and the Quest for Revolution," *New Left Review* 160 (1986): 122-28.

²²See Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT, 1972).

²³My characterization of Oedipa's concluding perspective is indebted to Walter Benjamin's description of the "angel of history." See "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 257-58.