

The Death and Life of the American Novel: Radicalism and the Transformation of U.S.
Literature in the 1960s

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The sixties have long been regarded as a watershed moment in the history of the American novel. In the seventies and eighties critics tended to assume that the era dealt a deathblow to social realism and, by extension, the dream of the Great American Novel. Today the prevailing view is that no such thing occurred; on the contrary, as black, feminist, and queer voices took center stage in American life and fiction during the sixties, the novel enjoyed something of a renaissance. While this assessment of sixties literature holds true, it needs to be expanded to account for how the novel diversified in other important ways. *The Death and Life of the American Novel: Radicalism and the Transformation of U.S. Literature in the 1960s* shows how sixties novels, including those by women and people of color, shifted the locus of political life away from the industrial proletariat to figures previously deemed superfluous to class struggle—housewives, welfare mothers, outlaws, students, and queer bohemians. This shift revealed possibilities for revolutionary agency overlooked in traditional proletarian literature and orthodox Marxism. In the sixties, novelists discovered the feminine domestic sphere, the culture industry, and the administrative state as axes of false consciousness and radicalization. Framing their work in terms of its diverse explorations of political subjectivity not only brings to light how they found new ways to represent class struggle's imbrications with racial and sexual identity, but also how they engaged critically with twentieth-century social protest movements.

Dedication

*For Giulia Riccò
without whom nothing*

And

*In loving Memory of Jeffrey Brown Ferguson
(1964-2018)*

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Introduction: The Radical Novel and the 1960s

There is perhaps no other period in American literary history more closely associated with the demise of the novel than the 1960s. According to Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “the late 1960s” in particular marks “the great surge, arguably the pinnacle of the death of the novel discourse.”¹ In dealing with this issue, literary scholarship has tended to focus on how this discourse reflected concerns about the rise of new media, especially television, and the alleged exhaustion of formal modernism in the sixties.² What gets lost in these accounts is how those who lamented the death of the novel back then tended to have a specific kind of loss in mind, namely, the demise of the radical novel. This form, in the words of Walter Rideout, “demonstrates, either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to the human suffering imposed by some socioeconomic system and advocates that the system be fundamentally changed.”³ The radical novel was

¹ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 2006), 17.

² Fitzpatrick’s work is the definitive book-length study of the relationship between this discourse and “the extremely recent explosion of image-based communication” (106). The idea that the prestige of the novel declined with the advent of television, rock n’ roll, and post-Hays Code cinema runs through much of the work of Morris Dickstein, whose *Gates of Eden* has remained the single most important work on sixties literature in the US since its original publication in 1977. More recently, Dickstein has described the shift in these terms: “In the 1950s [young people] dreamed of becoming knockout novelists, kings of the hill. By the 1960s these energies were dispersed as the young threw themselves into political protest, dreamed of making movies or becoming Bob Dylan.” “The Moment of the Novel and the Rise of Film Culture,” *Raritan* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 102. Jonathan Arac also speaks of an “Age of the Novel” that spans from the mid nineteenth century to 1960 in America, beginning with *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and ending with the likes of *Invisible Man* (1952) and *Lolita* (1955), as new “media” took center stage. “‘This Will Kill That’: A Provocation on the Novel in Media History,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 6; “What Kind of History Does a Theory of the Novel Require?” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 194. The notion that High Modernism had worn itself out by the sixties was popularized by John Barth in his 1967 *Atlantic* essay “The Literature of Exhaustion.” In his discussion of the “apocalyptic strain” of literary discourse that gained currency in the 1960s, Andreas Huyssen implies that writers like Barth participated in “a revolt against that version of modernism which had been domesticated in the 1950s, become part of the liberal-conservative consensus of the times, and which had even been turned into a propaganda weapon in the cultural-political arsenal of Cold War anti-communism.” *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 190.

³ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (New York: Columbia, 1992), 12.

crystallized during the Red Decade of the thirties by writers on the Left, from literary giants like John Steinbeck and Richard Wright to lesser-known figures like Josephine Herbst, often under the robust auspices of the Communist Party USA and its cultural front organizations, this dream of the Great American novel (GAN) had, in the words of Tom Wolfe, “put American literature up on the world stage for the first time.”⁴ At its most celebrated, the radical novel laid claim to a broad social canvas and anatomized the failure of America to achieve its egalitarian promise. According to Wolfe, the movement away from the genre began with the New York intellectuals after World War II and, ironically, established hegemony at the start of the century’s most socially-conscious decade: “The dividing line was 1960. Writers who went to college after 1960...*understood*. For a serious writer to stick with [the tradition of social] realism after 1960 required contrariness and courage.”⁵ If the prestige of the American novel declined in the sixties, Wolfe suggested, neither television nor the limitations of the form was to blame.⁶ On the contrary, the fault lay with novelists themselves, who had abandoned an

⁴ Tom Wolfe, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,” *Harper’s*, November 1989, 48. The crypto-conservative Wolfe does not use the term “radical novel.” Rather, his manifesto laments the demise of the “social novel.” Nevertheless, it is clear from his examples, which range from Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis to Hemingway and Steinbeck, that he means the tradition of social protest fiction outlined in Rideout’s seminal work and Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961). Moreover, the radical novel is descended from the nineteenth-century social novel cultivated by Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy, who all serve as models for Wolfe. Likewise, although, as Alan Wald notes in *Writing on the Left* (New York: Verso, 1994), the term “radical novel” has fallen out of favor since the sixties, when contemporary Americanist scholars invoke the “social novel” or “the Great American Novel,” they invariably have in mind the tradition of social protest fiction inaugurated by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Such novels, writes Lawrence Buell, “are much more likely to insist that national greatness is unproven, that its pretensions are hollow, and that the ship of state is going down.” I therefore use the terms “radical novel” and “social novel” interchangeably throughout this dissertation. *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 18. See also, Tom Wolfe, “Why They Aren’t Writing the Great American Novel Anymore,” *Esquire*, December 1, 1972, 152-272.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶ Despite its attention to the role of new media, Morris Dickstein’s *Gates of Eden* (1977) supports this narrative as well. Dickstein claims that the turn away from straight-ahead social realism to avant-garde experimentalism likely alienated

illustrious tradition of social realism in favor of “absurdist,” “magical realist,” and “neo-fabulist” approaches to fiction that evacuated the novel of ethnography and the news of the day.

Viewed from this angle, the death of the novel is a euphemism for the death of the Old Left, whose origins lay in the socialist movement of the late nineteenth century.⁷ With its contradictory undercurrents of nativist religiosity and immigrant sectarianism, the socialist movement all but collapsed in the teens. Leftists, as the political scientist Daniel Bell has argued, simply failed to adapt the insights of Karl Marx to the American way of life.⁸ Things changed, however, in the 1930s, when the CPUSA cultivated stronger ties with the American labor movement and created a counterpublic to celebrate proletarian culture, especially the radical novel. According to the historian John Patrick Diggins, this Old Left went into a tailspin in the McCarthy era and was “repudiated” by the student-led New Left that burst onto the scene in the sixties.⁹ That the novelists most closely associated with the new spirit of the sixties, from John Barth to Kurt Vonnegut, rejected thirties-style social realism in the terms described by Wolfe thus comes as no surprise. They were part of a broader movement to break with the radical past.

One outcome of that break, we are told by scholars of postmodernism, is the emergence of “the postmodern politics of difference,” which led to “the displacement of

the novel’s mass audience, which had no shortage of alternative and less demanding leisure pursuits. See, *Gates of Eden* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 93-129.

⁷ See John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 82-217; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Frederick A. Praeger: New York, 1962), 1-40.

⁸ Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁹ Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, 38.

the white [male] writer from a long-held position of social centrality.”¹⁰ As Linda Hutcheon noted in her influential study *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, the social protest movements of the sixties “saw the inscribing into history of previously ‘silent’ groups,” most notably women, gays and lesbians, and people of color.¹¹ These groups, she explained, “decentered” white, male heterosexual subjectivity from both political and literary discourse. I call this account of postmodern politics and culture “the Great Decentering” narrative. Its more recent proponents, such as Fitzpatrick and Madhu Dubey, argue that the Great Decentering is the real source of the death of the novel controversy that reached a fever pitch in the sixties and continues to roil American literary culture. These critics point out that the traditional social novel did not die in vain. Since, as Fitzpatrick reminds us, “all literary death notices...are also birth announcements,” then the death of the traditional social novel in the sixties heralded the advent of the “postmodern social novel” that came to dominate the American literary scene in the seventies and eighties.¹²

Pioneered by writers like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, John Edgar Wideman, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston, the postmodern social novel not only awarded new prominence to race and sexuality but also avoided the documentary realism and broad social sweep of its predecessor.¹³ The rise of this new

¹⁰ Madhu Dubey, “Race and the Crisis of the Postmodern Social Novel,” in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 32.

¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 61.

¹² Fitzpatrick, *Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 16.

¹³ This is not to suggest that the postmodern social novel ignores capitalism, as recent critics like Walter Benn Michaels have implied. Leslie Marmon Silko’s *The Almanac of the Dead* is a thoroughly anti-capitalist novel whose only real hero is arguably Karl Marx, though one would not get that impression from Michaels’s reading of it. Nevertheless, Michaels is right to question the emphases that these novels place on ontology and memory. In many ways, they

genre coincides with the retrenchment of the sixties New Left and a growing antipathy toward “totalizing systems,” namely Marxism, within the radical intelligentsia.¹⁴ Indeed, the postmodern social novel helped lead the post-sixties charge against Marxism to some extent. By insisting on the irreducibility and incommensurability of ascriptive identities like race and gender, postmodernism made it all but impossible to imagine a universal subject that could lead the way in transforming American society. The Great Decentering did not assert a new center from which to imagine the realization of universal emancipatory goals so much as proclaim that “the center will not hold.”¹⁵ It shattered the idea—so dear to the Left—of a coherent liberal subject.¹⁶ Under these circumstances, intellectuals were left with “an imagination of struggle for local, partial, limited, shifting, diffuse, complicit versions of the freedom, justice and equality, and joy that mark the utopian project.” This “limited utopia,” as Marianne DeKoven calls it, was both the inspiration and the form of the postmodern social novel.

If the Great Decentering narrative gave scholars an intellectual purchase on post-sixties American literature, then Mark Greif’s more recent genealogy of “the big,

undermine their own ideological and class-based critiques. See *The Shape of the Signifier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 23-24.

¹⁴ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 58-59.

¹⁵ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 58.

¹⁶ Marxism places a strong emphasis on the positive valences of wholeness and cognition. As its greatest literary critic and class theorist Georg Lukács explains, “The reconstitution of the unity of the subject, the intellectual restoration of man has consciously to take its path through the realm of disintegration and fragmentation. The different forms of fragmentation are so many necessary phases on the road towards a reconstituted man but they dissolve into nothing when they come into a true relation with a grasped totality, i.e. when they become dialectical” (141). Marxism thus seeks the realization of “man as a perfected whole” (136). Only the proletariat can accomplish this because it is the only class subjected to a form of reification that compels it to see beyond the immediacy of lived experience and grasp the totality of the capitalist mode of production: “the superiority of the proletariat must lie exclusively in its ability to see society from the centre, as a coherent whole. This means that it is able to act in such a way as to change reality” (69). The fragmentation of the proletariat moves dialectically toward subjective, societal, and spiritual wholeness. For this very reason, it constitutes a revolutionary collective subject. *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

ambitious novel” does so as well.¹⁷ Like Wolfe, Greif traces the death of the novel discourse back to the immediate post-World War II milieu of the influential New York intellectuals, whose critical discourse Wolfe blames for scaring serious young writers away from attempting anything like the big, bold social novels of yesteryear for contemporary audiences. Greif insists that the opposite is true. Charting a direct line from ambitious postwar social novels like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1952) to Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and William Gaddis’s *JR* (1975), Greif argues the supposed death of the novel proved surprisingly generative insofar as it challenged novelists to demonstrate the novel’s power to narrativize the momentous changes in the America that emerged from World War in ways that would capture the dwindling attention spans of American readers. “Vitality becomes its own pursuit,” Greif explains, “in an age when the ‘death of the novel’ is a presumption that can never be laid to rest.”¹⁸ This accounts for “the American meganovel of the decades from the 1970s to the present,” which Greif considers “a form in itself.”¹⁹

The birth of the American meganovel, I would contend, resembles the Great Decentering in that it leaves unrevised what Greif himself calls “the always underexplained ‘Sixties.’”²⁰ It takes for granted that *something* changed in the years leading up to the seventies, but it does not say what. The Great Decentering tells us that

¹⁷ Mark Greif, “‘The Death of the Novel’ and its Afterlives: Toward a History of the ‘Big, Ambitious Novel,’” *Boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (2009): 13-30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

sixties social movements indirectly informed postmodern social novels, but it does not say how sixties social novels might have done the same thing. Both grand narratives suggest the disappearance of the social novel in the sixties, lending credence to the death of the novel discourse that flourished during that decade. What remains to be explained is not only what happened during the “pinnacle of the death of the novel discourse” that provoked and enabled what scholars now agree was a novel renaissance, but also how the sixties created the cultural-political conditions for such contradictory literary tendencies—the postmodern tendency to shrink from representing the social totality on the one hand, and the maximalist tendency to represent the social totality with unprecedented formal vigor on the other. What lessons might the sixties social novel have bequeathed to postmodern identitarian and maximalist novelists alike?²¹

With this question in mind, I have returned to the literature of the sixties and discovered how major novelists during this period, with varying degrees of success, experimented with the traditional radical novel and revised it to articulate the doctrinal politics of the New Left.²² In the chapters that follow, I argue that sixties novelists formally reconfigured social realism to make sense of the new social reality that rendered certain assumptions of Old Left politics largely untenable. The novelists I have in mind led the way in reimagining forms of radical subjectivity and false consciousness once the

²¹ Its impact on the late twentieth-century social realism of Gloria Naylor, Russell Banks, Cormac McCarthy, and Don DeLillo is also worth considering.

²² Following the historian Van Gosse, I understand the New Left as the broad coalition of leftist social protest movements that coalesced into “the Movement” of the sixties and lasted into the mid-seventies. These include the student movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the Black Power movement. See *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 1-8. On the periodization of the sixties as political and cultural phenomenon, see Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7;

CPUSA and its anti-Stalinist rivals could no longer set the terms of revolutionary political discourse. Without losing sight of gender or race, I emphasize how sixties social novelists shifted the locus of political life away from the industrial proletariat to figures previously deemed superfluous to class struggle—housewives, welfare mothers, outlaws, and urban professionals. Far from a decentering move, this shift in focus sought to reveal possibilities for revolutionary agency that had been discounted by traditional proletarian literature and orthodox Marxism. Accordingly, each chapter focuses on moments that make sixties novelists’ revision of an older social realism and the programmatic radical politics that underwrote it sharply legible. Each chapter exposes how sixties radical novelist confronted a hostile literary environment that made every attempt to discredit and silence their voices. If the death of the novel discourse intensified during the sixties, then it did so in large part, I contend, because critics and novelists disagreed so strongly about what counted as serious social realism.

The radical novels that I discuss left an indelible mark on post-sixties culture. They demonstrate how sixties novelists discovered anew the feminine domestic sphere, the culture industry, and the administrative state as axes of false consciousness and radicalization. These novelists did so in response to organized labor’s failure to mount a robust challenge to the capitalist status quo. As the political scientist Cedric Johnson summed up the post-World War II situation, “The revolutionary potential of the mass worker was dashed by the advent of the consumer society.”²³ Together with the civil

²³ Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Makings of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007), 6.

rights movement, the domestication of the industrial working-class inspired writers on the Left to place renewed emphasis on the relationship between culture and politics in their new search for a radical subject that could usurp the world-historic role of proletariat. By exhausting this search, sixties radical novelists paved the way for the postmodern social novel's embrace of a limited utopia rooted in identity politics, its skepticism of class as a vector of revolutionary change. The meganovels of the seventies and eighties are similarly indebted to the radical novels of the sixties for showing how to incorporate new social categories and dimensions of lived experience into models of the social totality.

My account begins in 1963, when Mary McCarthy published a novel called *The Group*. McCarthy's work invokes the social novel only to confine its scope to the lives of eight women who graduated from Vassar College in 1933. It was, as they say, an instant bestseller, and it remained on *The New York Times* bestseller list for two years. Like many a bestseller, the book did not sit well with intellectuals, especially those on the Left, who considered it, in the words of Stanley Kauffmann, "a major disappointment."²⁴ As Kauffmann explained in *The New Republic*, McCarthy was all but destined to write one of the great American novels about the radical thirties. She had after all been there on the front lines as a staff writer for *The Partisan Review*, the main literary organ of what Alan Wald refers to as the anti-Stalinist Left.²⁵ I consider it telling that many of McCarthy's leftist critics identified *The Group* as a failed attempt at a collective novel.

²⁴ Stanley Kauffmann, "Miss McCarthy's Era," *The New Republic*, August 31, 1963, 26.

²⁵ See Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left From the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017).

Widely regarded as the crown jewel of the proletarian literary movement of the thirties, collective novels typically explored the limits and possibilities of class consciousness among a group of characters whose lives are rudely brought together by the socioeconomic logic of monopoly capitalism. Its “single most important pioneer,” according to Barbara Foley, was John Dos Passos, whose *U.S.A.* trilogy made the form synonymous with the GAN.²⁶ Finding McCarthy no Dos Passos, Kauffmann insisted that she was not equipped to manage “the risks of the group protagonist.”²⁷ McCarthy’s former colleague at the *Partisan Review*, Dwight MacDonald, echoed this condemnation in a letter to their mutual friend Nicofla Chiramonte, when he complained that “Mary had tried for something big, a collective novel but didn’t have the creative force to weld it all together.”²⁸

But the most damning critique of McCarthy on this point appeared in a lengthy screed by Norman Mailer published on the front page of *The New York Review of Books* in October 1963, which opened with the following salvo: “*The Group*, as all good literary workers keeping up the work must know by now, is a collective novel about a near (or let us say quasi-) revolutionary period in American life, the nineteen-thirties; its heroines are eight nice girls, all or conceivably all of them Episcopalian at some time or another...all of them Upper-Middle Class and all of them civilized to that point of Christless High Church rectitude whose communal odor is a cross between *Ma Griffe* and contraceptive

²⁶ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 425.

²⁷ Kaufmann, “Miss McCarthy’s Era,” 26.

²⁸ Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1992), 491.

jelly.”²⁹ To “define Comrade Mary’s problem a little further,” he continues, *The Group* is “a collective novel in which none of the characters have sufficient passion to be interesting in themselves, yet none have the power or dedication to wish to force events. Nor does any one of the characters move critically out of her class by marrying drastically up, or savagely down.”³⁰ The book falls short as collective fiction, finally, because of its “pissout characters with their cultivated banalities, their lack of variety or ambition, perversion, simple greed or depth of feeling, their indifference to the bedrock of a collective novel—the large social events of the season or decade which gave impetus to conceiving the book in such a way.”³¹ By “large social events,” Mailer has in mind legendary episodes instigated by the old Left during the thirties. These included the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the wave of sit-down strikes spearheaded by the United Autoworkers Union, the resurrection of the Communist Party USA after the first Red Scare, the clashes between Stalinists and Trotskyists in New York City, and the historic alliance between radicals and liberals known as the Popular Front, which, as Michael Denning has explained, enabled the “laboring” of American popular culture.³² In Mailer’s view, the collective novel was supposed to depict those events that reveal the necessity of a revolution led by either the industrial working class or politically enlightened intellectuals. Because collective novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *U.S.A.* had primarily identified these privileged subject positions with whiteness and

²⁹ Norman Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” *New York Review of Books*, October 31, 1963, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2010).

masculinity, it was only too easy to accuse McCarthy of having travestied the classic proletarian literary form by organizing it around the lives of eight nice girls from Vassar. Adding insult to injury, her eight nice girls fail to accomplish anything remotely revolutionary during one of the greatest moments in the history of the American Left.

Critics were right to identify Dos Passos as McCarthy's predecessor; reading the *USA* trilogy had inspired her to become both a writer and a woman of the Left. But these same critics misconstrued McCarthy's focus on eight nice girls as a retreat from what was traditionally the overriding concern of collective fiction: the problem of revolution. McCarthy's upper middle-class white women are the agents and beneficiaries of first wave-feminism; insofar as they are poised to fulfill, once and for all, the promises of a sexual revolution begun in the nineteenth century, her eight nice girls are in fact revolutionary subjects.

This much is made clear in a tongue-in-cheek description of the novel's opening scene, which assembles the women as a group to celebrate the wedding of their purported leader, Kay Strong. Using free indirect discourse to capture the collective voice of the group, McCarthy reveals that each of these individual women views herself as the proverbial New Woman, an enlightened liberal subject fit to populate "our emergent America."³³ Yes, they fancy themselves liberated from the proscriptions, inhibitions, and smelly little orthodoxies that hampered those who came before them and to which their "stuffy and frightened parents" still subscribe.³⁴ In sharp contrast to the "languid buds of

³³ Mary McCarthy, *The Group* (New York: Signet, 1963), 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the previous decade” these women intend to force their young lives into full flower.³⁵

The moral and emotional conflicts of the narrative that follows grow out of their efforts to remain true to those liberal values they learned at Vassar while fulfilling their collective promise. Each episode of the novel exposes how a different member of the group is torn between her prerogatives as an independent, well-educated woman and the obdurate cultural norms specific to her class, which are tacitly enforced through what I call, borrowing a term from Nancy Armstrong, “a regime of domestic surveillance.”

Armstrong explains how modern bourgeois culture invests women with the authority and the obligation to reproduce normative desires. This culture is quick to withdraw that authority and disavow the femininity of any woman who fails to fulfill her ascribed social obligation. *The Group* shows how easily this “female power” to police taste and decorum can set upper-class women against both themselves and one another. When it does so, female power becomes a mechanism of false consciousness

By identifying Kay as the group’s lodestar and bracketing the novel’s plot with her wedding at the beginning and her funeral at the end, McCarthy implies that she represents a kind of limit case for class consciousness among educated liberal women. So full of potential, the free-spirited Kay gladly puts her social position at risk by simultaneously embarking on a professional career and marrying a left-wing playwright who comes from a family of more modest means than hers. She is ultimately undone not by the physical and emotional pain inflicted by her philandering and abusive husband so

³⁵ Ibid.

much as by the scandal his failed career and their subsequent divorce produce within her social circle. “[Kay] had all but had a real nervous breakdown at the thought of having to be ‘nobody’ instead of the wife of a genius,” one member of the group muses shortly before Kay dies, possibly by suicide.³⁶ While Kay’s is the cruelest fate to be endured by a member of the group, all of the women become some version of her insofar as they fail to achieve self-actualization. Each woman’s hopes founder on the shoals of fear—fear of the unwanted scrutiny, ridicule, and disgrace that flouting bourgeois convention invites from one’s upper class peers.

With *The Group* McCarthy set out to understand why women who were steeped in the progressive tradition and uniquely positioned to seize the new opportunities it seemed to open up for them, ultimately recoiled from that tradition’s vision of freedom and equality. Her answer was visionary: What kept these women from exercising the options available to their male counterparts was a socioeconomically differentiated culture of fear mediated through the domestic sphere. She insisted that the dynamics of the household, rather than the factory, deserved pride of place in the collective novel as the principal site of class reproduction. In doing so, she anticipated work not only by radical feminists like Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, who saw the private sphere as more powerful than formal political institutions in maintaining persistent inequalities between men and women. She also anticipated Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*, which suggested that the mass diffusion of bourgeois domestic culture had led to

³⁶ Ibid.

the wholesale pacification and deradicalization of the American working-class. If McCarthy is correct, anyone looking to understand the prehistory of America's one-dimensional men need not look any further than her eight nice girls. Finally, McCarthy's novel established the viability of collective fiction that restricted its scope to the contradictions and antagonisms within specific marginalized communities. In this respect, *The Group* arguably looks forward to novels as disparate as John Edgar Wideman's *The Lynchers* (1973) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Almanac of the Dead* (1991). While McCarthy's subject matter was not the least bit faithful to the social realism of *U.S.A.* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, there is no question that that subject matter nevertheless breathed new life into the form of the collective novel.

Still, critics like Wolfe could easily dismiss both McCarthy and Mailer as holdovers from a bygone era when the social novel reigned supreme. Writers who came of age before the sixties were, admittedly, part of the residual "structure of feeling" of the radical thirties.³⁷ The force of Wolfe's "death of the novel" argument stems largely from the fact that the sixties surpassed the thirties in revolutionary fervor. In the years following the publication of *The Group* it became all too clear that revolution was in the air: between 1964 and 1967 riots in black ghettos devastated major cities across America, including New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark; in October 1967 thousands assembled before the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War and clashed with Army troops in an attempt to storm the building; and in 1968 the Democratic Party imploded at its

³⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 121-135.

national convention in Chicago, where live television cameras captured police brutally assaulting antiwar demonstrators and the city's Democratic mayor telling a critic from his own party "fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch, you lousy motherfucker, go home."³⁸ It is not for nothing that Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin subtitle their history of the era "the civil war of the 1960s."³⁹ How, then, could the sixties have failed to yield a robust body of social realist novels? It certainly was not for want of interest. To hear Wolfe tell it, "[h]alf the publishers along Madison Avenue...had their noses pressed against their thermopane glass walls scanning the billion-footed city for the approach of the young novelists who, surely, would bring them the big novels of the racial clashes, the hippie movement, the New Left, the Wall Street boom, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam. But such creatures, it seemed, no longer existed."⁴⁰ Morris Dickstein concurs: "[T]here is more than a grain of truth in Wolfe's simplistic account. The sixties were a moribund period for the realistic novel, and perhaps in consequence the commercial market for fiction declined precipitously."⁴¹ Recently, Lawrence Buell has questioned Wolfe's narrative explicitly, but the only "serious candidate for the GAN" that he manages to summon from this specific period is John Updike's *Rabbit Redux*.⁴²

With the emergence of "post-45" as a discrete field of literary scholarship, the notion that the sixties failed to produce salient examples of social realism has become

³⁸ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 21.

³⁹ See Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁰ Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," 47.

⁴¹ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 93.

⁴² Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, 54.

increasingly untenable.⁴³ Thanks to monographs by Stephen Schryer, Michael Szalay, Sean McCann, and Mark Greif we have a much richer understanding of how novelists rose to the occasion of representing that decade's tumultuous events.⁴⁴ But these critics have tended to examine the sixties social novel for its contributions to liberal debates about poverty, technocracy, Democratic politics, and humanism. By contrast, I read sixties social realism in its radical context, with an eye towards its engagement with New Left politics and traditional proletarian literature. This leads me to propose a new genre category that I call "the New Left social novel." These novels are distinguished by their intense focus on the breakdown of discourse and the turn toward political violence; their tendency to invoke documentary aesthetics only to repudiate them through irruptions of surrealism and fantasy; and their rhetorical appeals for solidarity between the lumpenproletariat and a mediatory new class.

I focus on two writers with deep ties to the New Left and each other: Sol Yurick and Marge Piercy. Yurick and Piercy were both members of Movement for a Democratic Society (MDS), an offshoot of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) established for adults outside of the university.⁴⁵ Born to a working-class Jewish family just before the

⁴³ For a succinct overview of the field's history, see David Alworth "Hip to Post45," *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 622-633.

⁴⁴ See Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) and *Maximum Feasible Participation: American Literature and the War on Poverty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ Piercy and Yurick's do not exhaust the list of New Left social novels. A list of other novels that fit this mold would include Robert Stone's *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967), Joyce Carol Oates's *them* (1969), and E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971).

Depression, Yurick was a classic “red diaper baby” who swore off politics altogether in response to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Hitler and Stalin. He attended college and graduate school in New York during the immediate postwar period and embraced the apolitical high modernism championed by the New Critics and New York intellectuals. Around 1964, however, experienced a political reawakening, and by 1966 he had begun to think of himself as a Marxist novelist.⁴⁶ In 1968, Yurick published *The Bag*, which he referred to as his “proletarian novel.”⁴⁷ But Yurick was too much of a product of the Cold War university to use the proletarian social novel of the thirties as his only model. He adapted the genre according to both the high modernist ideals he had introjected in college and the new currents in left-wing thought that took hold after World War II.

One of these was the view that the black lumpenproletariat had replaced the putatively white industrial proletariat as America’s new revolutionary class. Although activists did not seize upon this idea until the mid-sixties, it had already become something of a lightning rod in the literary Left as early as 1957 with the publication of Norman Mailer’s infamous “White Negro” essay in *Dissent*. Mailer reasoned that only “the Negro,” who had yet to be fully incorporated into the Cold War liberal state, occupied a structural position conducive to radical subjectivity.⁴⁸ Indeed, the black man’s isolation from mainstream society had allegedly led him to develop a lumpen culture

⁴⁶ Sol Yurick to unknown correspondent, May 15, 1973, Box 17, Sol Yurick Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 340.

characterized by sexual libertinism and psychopathic violence. This so-called “hip” culture flew in the face of an oppressively stultifying postwar America. While black jazzmen were unquestionably the progenitors of hip culture, it was their cult of white male followers, known as “hipsters,” who took it mainstream. Because they had supposedly “absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro,” Mailer rechristened these hipsters white Negroes and insisted that they represented a new cultural elite capable of not only mediating between the black and white masses but emancipating them both.⁴⁹ For him, the most pressing task of the radical novelist was to imagine how to mobilize this new white male elite, which goes a long way toward explaining his dismissal of *The Group*. But, in a strange twist of fate, Mailer would get his comeuppance from *The Bag* and other novels of lumpenproletarian life that appeared in the sixties.

Yurick’s sprawling social novel critiques Mailer’s theory, which casts white intellectuals as mediators of black life, on the grounds that it reproduces the colonial relation that defines black subjugation and sustains American capitalism. *The Bag* revolves mainly around a white writer turned welfare worker named Sam Miller, who in the process of doing an exposé on poverty abandons the voyeuristic pose of the documentary reporter and becomes a full-fledged member of the lumpenproletariat. This requires him to go on welfare, move to the ghetto, and commit brutal acts of violence against women. His “lumpenization,” as I call it, which culminates in him joining a riot that erupts on New York’s Lower East Side ghetto, amounts to a refusal to mediate black

⁴⁹ Ibid., 341.

underclass experience for middle-class consumption. More importantly, it offers an alternative model for how white male professionals can participate in revolutionary struggle, one that groups like the Weather Underground would put into practice shortly after *The Bag*'s publication.

Establishment critics were nonplussed by Yurick's eclectic mix of documentary realism, Joycean modernism, and Beat-inspired surrealism. Radicals, on the other hand, understood *The Bag*'s literary significance immediately. In the underground newspaper *San Francisco Express Times*, a young Marjorie Heins, echoing the familiar death of the novel trope, wrote that "[s]ocial novels like Yurick's are rare birds these days" and praised *The Bag* for attempting "to fill a very large vacuum."⁵⁰ At long last, here was a contemporary social novel "with real conviction, about society, politics, revolution."⁵¹ At the same time, Heins understood that Yurick's was no simple throwback. He had updated the form by bringing it into conversation with "the new fiction/reality genre that Mailer popularized but hardly perfected with 'Steps of the Pentagon.'"⁵² Writing for the glossy New Left magazine *Ramparts*, former SDS president Carl Oglesby declared *The Bag* a breakthrough in the American social novel: "This new, rough and most American social realism becomes disfigured but is perhaps also made more chaste by its passage through Freud, Stalin and Sartre. Its most acute perception, a despairing one, is of the immense uncreating power of its modern enemy, the bewildered technostate."⁵³ Based on these

⁵⁰ Marjorie Heins, "America is Too Far Gone for Warnings," *San Francisco Express Times*, September 18, 1968, 8.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Carl Oglesby, Bagging It, *Ramparts*, August 24, 1968.

statements, it becomes clear how *The Bag* anticipated a meganovel like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Like Yurick, Pynchon explored how America's gargantuan administrative state vitiated radical consciousness, and he strained to imagine affinities, however tortuous or tenuous, between the professional managerial class and black subalterns. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that Yurick might have had a direct influence on his younger and considerably more famous contemporary.⁵⁴

The Bag appeared the very same year that Tom Wolfe resolved to take on the challenge of writing "a big novel, cramming as much of [contemporary] New York City between covers as [he] could."⁵⁵ It therefore comes as no surprise that he fails to mention it in his death of the novel narrative. But Wolfe could also afford to omit it because by the time he wrote his most extensive essay on the absence of sixties social novels, *The Bag* had long gone out of print. The real question is not whether novels like the one Wolfe aspired to write ever got written, but why the finest example of such a novel fell into obscurity.

One explanation, I contend, lies in the work of Yurick's friend Marge Piercy, who shared both his working-class Jewish roots and his commitment to radical politics. Piercy grew up in African American neighborhoods in Detroit in the forties and fifties. She became politically active in college at the University of Michigan and has remained

⁵⁴ In a 1969 letter to Yurick about a radical magazine he intended to launch with the help of Thomas Pynchon, Kirkpatrick Sale, author of the definitive study of SDS, wrote: "Anyway, we're plowing ahead with it, and I've got Tom Pynchon to scout around the West Coast to see if he can come up with some new thinkers...So the first man he comes up with, naturally, is Sol Yurick. No, Tom, I tell him, *West Coast*. But, man, he says, Sol knows where it's at, and he's interested in these same things." N.D., Box 17, Sol Yurick Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York. Pynchon was also sent a copy of *The Bag* in galley form.

⁵⁵ Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," 45.

firmly on the Left ever since. In 1965 she moved to New York City, where she befriended Yurick and co-founded MDS. Four years later she penned a searing essay, “The Grand Coolie Dam,” which offers the most well-known account of sexism in the New Left after Robin Morgan’s “Goodbye to All That” (1970). In that essay, Piercy condemned the chauvinism and elitism of many college-educated movement men, insisting that their tendency to cast themselves as revolutionary experts ran counter to the New Left’s egalitarian ethos and compromised its ability to reach a diverse public. Piercy’s essay signaled the increasing frustration women on the Left had begun to feel with a movement that seemed to privilege the needs and aspirations of white, middle-class professional men—that is, men like Yurick’s Sam Miller. Despite her friendship with Yurick, Piercy felt that she wrote in a different vein from him and other Left writers, whose work encouraged “the read[er] to keep an emotional distance from the characters.”⁵⁶ Piercy, on the other hand, invited readers to identify strongly with her subaltern heroines. In this way, she hoped to show them how much they had in common with those they considered alien. By the same token, she wanted to show how poor and working-class women could have political agency.

Thus, when Piercy turned her attention to “the bewildered technostate” and the problem of revolution in her classic feminist novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), she did not write from the perspective of the male welfare worker.⁵⁷ Rather, she told the

⁵⁶ Marge Piercy, “Fiction Workshop,” Box 44, Marge Piercy Papers, University of Michigan (Special Collections Research Center).

⁵⁷ Although it was not published until 1976, Piercy began the novel in the early 1970s at the height of the radical feminist movement. See *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), xii.

story through the eyes of the female welfare client. In the novel a Chicana welfare recipient named Connie Ramos must resist attempts by medical professionals to implant a mind-control device in her brain. The novel implies that the realization of a utopian future depends on Connie's ability to preserve her individual sovereignty and vanquish her tormentors. While critics like Stephen Schryer read this plot simply as an allegorical attack on professionalism and the welfare state, I interpret it as a critique of the masculinist Marxist-Leninism espoused by New Leftists like Yurick. I argue that *Woman* uses science fiction to explore the question of how to activate class consciousness in the lumpenproletariat by nonhierarchical and noncoercive means. Signaling the turn toward postmodernism, the novel posits the tribal bonds of ethnicity and gender as the most egalitarian means of mediating radical consciousness. When read alongside *The Bag*, its precursor in many ways, *Woman* reveals how deeply and irrevocably the structure of feeling changed with radical feminism. Piercy's New Left social novel, which has become a feminist classic and remains in print, rendered Yurick's anachronistic.

Having shown how the sixties entailed the reinvention of radical fiction in the form of the collective novel and the social novel, I then turn my attention to the end of the civil rights era, which saw the unraveling of the relationship between the radical novel and African American literature. Sam Greenlee's Black Power novel *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* provides access to this moment. Greenlee's protagonist is an ex-gang member from the South Side of Chicago named Dan Freeman. Thanks to the machinations of a white liberal Senator out to curry favor with black voters, Freeman becomes the first black officer in the CIA. As a token hire, he is appropriately consigned

to a “glass-enclosed office in the director’s suite,” where his only “job was to be black and conspicuous.”⁵⁸ Unwilling to be the spook who sits by the door providing cover for his racist government, Freeman uses his privileged position to gather intelligence and develop technical skills, which he later imparts to the Cobras, a Chicago street gang. By ingeniously reversing the terms of Mailer’s white negro, the black spook helps the Cobras become the Freedom Fighters, a guerilla group responsible for a wave of attacks on law enforcement throughout America’s urban ghettos.

Upon its release in 1969, Hoyt Fuller had this to say about the novel in his magazine *Black World*: “It sets a publishing precedent. It is about a black hero who goes systematically about the business of putting black power to one of its more effective uses, and that is revolutionary.”⁵⁹ Fuller’s claim is valid in several respects. Greenlee’s was not only among the first novels to offer a protracted exploration of the idea that America’s black lumpenproletariat could operate as a political vanguard; it was also written the novel against the grain of traditional black protest fiction. “I was determined not to write a ‘protest novel’ wherein the protagonist would be physically or spiritually destroyed in a futile effort to confront American racism,” Greenlee maintained. “On the contrary, I would write a novel of defiance that featured a protagonist without illusion concerning the futility of appealing to the nonexistent conscience of white America, [one] who would meet racism on its own military terms.”⁶⁰ In this respect, the novel was meant as “a

⁵⁸ Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 47.

⁵⁹ Hoyt Fuller, “*The Spook Who Sat By the Door*,” *Black World*, May 1969, 74.

⁶⁰ Michael T. Martin, David C. Wall, and Marilyn Yaquinto, eds., *Race and the Revolutionary Impulse in The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 26.

conscious departure from classic works such as Wright's *Native Son*; Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*; and Ellison's *Invisible Man*.”⁶¹ Conceived as a “handbook” for revolutionary violence—replete with detailed descriptions of how to create clandestine cells, rob banks, and train snipers—the novel achieved a level of documentary realism that was strictly off-limits before the sixties.⁶²

To produce this distinctive quality of realism, Greenlee drew on his own—in some respects uncommon—experience. Born and raised in a working-class community on the South Side of Chicago, he boasted of having graduated from the same high school as the black Communist writers Willard Motley and Lorraine Hansberry (Hansberry was his classmate and friend).⁶³ After completing a master's thesis at the University of Chicago on the Bolshevik Revolution, Greenlee served from 1958 to 1965 as an officer in the United States Information Agency in Iraq, East Pakistan, and Greece.⁶⁴ His experiences in the Middle East taught him to see the situation of American blacks as analogous to that of colonial peoples and he became “determined to write the story of a Third World colonial revolution as it might happen in the United States.” The resulting

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Sam Greenlee, interview by Michael T. Martin and David C. Wall, “‘Duality is a survival tool. It's not a disease’: Interview with Sam Greenlee on *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*,” in *Race and the Revolutionary Impulse in The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, ed. Michael T. Martin, David C. Wall, and Marilyn Yaquinto (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 30.

⁶³ Sam Greenlee, “Hope Beyond Harlem,” *The Times Saturday Review*, March 1, 1969; Doris E. Saunders, “Wine Tasting at McCrones’ for Greenlee ‘Spook,’” *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 4, 1969. One important area of inquiry that lies beyond the scope of this study is the connection between Greenlee's work and the street literature of the late sixties and the seventies, some of which dealt with themes like the ones found in *Spook*. Richard “Iceberg Slim” Beck, also of Chicago's South Side, and Donald Goines, a native of nearby Detroit, both wrote novels tinged with black nationalist rhetoric. Robin D.G. Kelley, for instance, suggests that Beck's novel *Death Wish* (1977) recalls *Spook*. See “The Fires that Forged Iceberg Slim,” *The New Yorker*, August 19, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-fires-that-forged-iceberg-slim>.

⁶⁴ Martin, et. al., *Race and the Revolutionary Impulse*, 211.

novel calls to mind Frantz Fanon's 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* in its glorification of the lumpenproletariat and anti-colonial guerrilla warfare.⁶⁵ No doubt the novel's ability to bridge the gap between Fanon and the American scene helped make it a bestseller. For his part, Greenlee claimed to have arrived at his insights largely through firsthand experience. "I spent more time in a wider variety of Third World countries than Fanon did," he told an interviewer. "I didn't need him to tell me about what was going on out there."⁶⁶ But if, as Greenlee claims, he wrote the novel in "defiance" of outside influences, then why, one must ask, is it so easy to read *Spook* as another version of Mailer's hipster-as-vanguard scenario?

By way of an answer, I want to suggest that both can be true. Greenlee indeed restages Mailer's white Negro scenario, but he does so in a way that restores the figure of the hipster to its rightful place in postwar black culture. He does this sleight of hand by replacing Mailer's white negro with Ellison's Rinehart as hipster, performing a racial reversal that refigures the role of the vanguard. Rinehart is the Harlem con-artist whose persona is adopted by Invisible Man adopts at the conclusion of Ellison's classic 1952 novel. In becoming what Lee Konstantinou describes as an enigmatic "hipster-like figure," the invisible man strikes gold: he discovers how irony—or the careful manipulation of cultural signs and symbols—might give him greater social mobility.⁶⁷ The novel's epilogue famously invites us to consider what would happen if he were

⁶⁵ See, Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 66-67, 80-83.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016),

indeed to use this hidden power not for personal gain, as Rinehart does, but in the interests of a collective black subject. What would it mean for a black man to become, in the words of the invisible man's grandfather, "a spy in the enemy's country?"⁶⁸

Greenlee's protagonist reinvents the hipster to precisely that end; he will become the master of an ironic persona that cloaks his willful retention of a black racial essence. While infiltrating the CIA, Freeman makes frequent trips to Ellison's beloved Harlem, where he visits jazz joints and enjoys the company of a dark-skinned prostitute he calls "the Dahomey Queen."⁶⁹ In the words of the narrator, "[a] shower, a shave, a Beefeater's martini, and Freeman the Tom became Freeman the hipster."⁷⁰ Where their participation in patterns of consumption and behavior marked ethnically black allowed white people in earlier novels to imagine they were part Negro, here cultural appropriation allows members of the rising black middle class to maintain their connection to the folk. Becoming hipster enables Freeman to distance himself from both his white colleagues and the assimilationist black elite.

And yet from one angle, Spook's race group politics appear to collapse underneath the weight of its own class critique. At the end of the book, Freeman is confronted in his apartment by his best friend, a black assimilationist cop named Dawson, who tries to turn him in, and the pair end up fatally shooting each other. This would seem to undercut the book's message that a politics predicated on racial solidarity can

⁶⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 16.

⁶⁹ Greenlee, *Spook*, 37.

⁷⁰ Greenlee, *Spook*, 48.

overcome class conflict among black people. On the other hand, the book implies that Dawson's killing Freeman cannot stem the tide of History. Chicago and seven other cities are already engulfed in race riots. That means Freeman can die contentedly, "listening...to the shooting, the rapid crackle of automatic weapons, the spit of rifles, the explosion of grenades" outside his window.⁷¹ His last words, lyrics from a Billie Holiday song, celebrate the message of black empowerment encoded in the hip culture of jazz: "God bless the child that's got his own. Go on, you black ass cobras, go get your own."⁷²

If nothing else, *Spook* exposed with crystalline clarity what was sure to become the most pressing dilemma of black politics in the post-civil rights era: how to reconcile race and class. These two vectors of inequality had been conjoined under Jim Crow, which interpellated blacks of all classes into a collective subject. Under these circumstances, the critique of segregation was, in the words of Harold Cruse, an "indirect challenge to the capitalist status quo."⁷³ The collapse of Jim Crow and the rise of the black middle class significantly diminished the importance of race group interest. It is on account of this that Kenneth Warren regards the sixties as the beginning of the end of African American literature. Since African American literature is an "representational and rhetorical strategy" designed to promote race-group interest in response to Jim Crow, then presumably it has no place in post-civil rights America.⁷⁴ But a novel like *Spook* reveals where Warren's argument errs. Jim Crow did not deal a deathblow to African

⁷¹ Ibid., 247.

⁷² Ibid., 248.

⁷³ Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 100.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 9

American literature so much as throw into question its status as a critique of American capitalism. *Spook* demonstrates just how easily “black ethnic politics” can end up sanctioning the unequal distribution of wealth and power.⁷⁵ This very slippage inaugurates a new task for the radical novel, which is to make visible what Richard Iton describes as “the literal and emotional redistricting that has taken place in the post-civil rights era.”⁷⁶ Focusing on the radical novel, enables me to modify the stark life and death terms in which Warren portrays the history of African American literature.

Each chapter of *The Death and Life of the American Novel* offers new evidence that social realism did not die in the sixties but was transformed in ways pursuant to the shifting political and intellectual landscape. The writers I study were often at the forefront of a broader intellectual movement that included everyone from Betty Friedan to James Boggs, everyone, that is, who fell on the Left in the turbulent sixties. This movement, according to Johnson, amounted to “an effort to reinvent American radicalism in light of the rise of Stalinism, the spread of Cold War social conformity, the emergence of the southern civil rights movement and Bandung era anticolonial struggles abroad, and the apparent failure of revolutionary formulae articulated by American left intellectuals during the prewar period.”⁷⁷ *The Death and Life of the American Novel* sheds light on the novel’s crucial contribution to this postwar reshaping of radical discourse and, in so doing, finally brings to light the epistemological and aesthetic lineaments of the literary

⁷⁵ Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 100.

⁷⁶ Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

⁷⁷ Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 6.

New Left. It shows that radical novelists ultimately could not envision a plausible new universal subject to replace Marx's proletariat. Neither ascriptive identities nor new forms of class power could supply adequate means for revolutionary transformation in America. Their novels tend to end in failure because of the impossible task they set before themselves. In this and other ways they anticipated the fate of sixties radical politics.

1. Norman Mailer and “The Mary McCarthy Case” Revisited

The runaway success of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*, a novel about the lives of eight Vassar graduates during the 1930s, was one of the most sensational literary events of 1963. “What no one anticipated,” writes McCarthy’s biographer Carol Brightman, “was the speed with which *The Group* would make it to the nation’s bedside tables, not just the tables of people who read *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Herzog* but their mothers’, uncles’, sisters’, doctors’, and neighbors’.”¹ The novel made McCarthy a household name overnight. None were more scandalized by this than her New York intellectual confreres, who regarded her as a respectable, albeit still relatively minor literary figure with unabashedly “highbrow” tastes and a “Puritan” cast of mind.² As the eminent leftist critic Granville Hicks noted, McCarthy’s fellow “highbrows almost unanimously disapproved of the novel.”³ This was a bit of an understatement. Stanley Kauffmann wrote that the novel compelled one to recite “a miserable rosary of defects.”⁴ Norman Podhoretz declared that McCarthy had written “a trivial lady writer’s novel that bares scarcely a trace of the wit, the sharpness and the vivacity that glowed in her earlier work.”⁵ In “The Mary McCarthy Case,” a four-thousand word screed written for *The New York Review of Books*, Norman Mailer, never one to be outdone when it came to vituperation, expressed his distaste for the novel in characteristically scatological terms,

¹ Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1992), 485.

² Granville Hicks, “What to Be After Poughkeepsie,” *Saturday Review*, August 31, 1963, 19; Benjamin Demott, “Poets, Presidents, and Preceptors,” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 1, 1963, 98.

³ Granville Hicks, “The Group on Second Meeting,” *Saturday Review*, February 22, 1964, 51.

⁴ Stanley Kauffmann, “Miss McCarthy’s Era,” *The New Republic*, August 31, 1963, 26.

⁵ Norman Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings* (New York: Noonday Press, 1964), 93.

accusing McCarthy of having “deposited a load on the premise.”⁶ How does one account for this level of vitriol? If the novel was really as trivial as its detractors made it out to be, why did it elicit such outpourings of contempt?

Two exceptionalist narratives underwrite what I too will call the “The Mary McCarthy Case” — one having to do with her token status in the literati, the other with the so-called Great American Novel (GAN). Both help to explain the by turns wounded and wistful responses to the novel and its particular significance in the history of American literature. Among her peers, McCarthy was seen as a cold and cerebral — which is to say, unladylike — writer. When a critic once dismissed “the whole tribe of lady novelists” as mere catalogers of “dress, furniture, and food,” Podhoretz proffered McCarthy as a notable exception. “Surely she was different,” he retorted, “surely she was better than that.”⁷ What a shame, then, he and others now mused, that *The Group* was filled with so many detailed descriptions of domestic life that it often read like an issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, confirming the unnamed critic’s assessment of McCarthy as “an intellectual on the surface, a furniture describer at heart.”⁸ Some of McCarthy’s one-time admirers now confessed to feeling duped. With the publication of *The Group*, it suddenly became clear to them that she had been putting one over on the intelligentsia for decades.⁹

⁶ Norman Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” *New York Review of Books*, October 31, 1963, 3.

⁷ Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings*, 87.

⁸ Norman, Podhoretz, “Mary McCarthy and the Leopard’s Spots,” *Show* 3, October 1963, 52-55.

⁹ In response to the storm of negative reviews and what he deemed a poor defense of *The Group* published in the *Columbia University Forum*, the ex-Stalinist Hicks did an about-face and publicly retracted his previous, mostly positive review of the novel (see note 3). Poor, hapless Hicks: first duped by Joseph Stalin, then Mary McCarthy.

That McCarthy had supposedly succumbed to the banalities of domestic fiction, however, was just the tip of the iceberg. What especially galled critics like Podhoretz and Mailer was that her narrative had allowed the trials and tribulations of upper-middle-class women to eclipse the high-stakes drama of socioeconomic upheaval and ideological strife that beset Depression-era New York City, the world in which the novel's action largely takes place and in which McCarthy herself came of age. *The Group*, Mailer opined, was “a collective novel about a near (or let us say quasi-) revolutionary period in American life, the nineteen-thirties,” whose characters displayed an inexplicable “indifference to the bedrock of a collective novel — the large events of the season or decade which gave impetus to conceiving the book in such a way.”¹⁰ By invoking the collective novel, that shibboleth of 1930s proletarian literary culture popularized by former Marxists like Hicks, Mailer sought to draw attention to the gap between McCarthy's ostensible ambitions and her actual achievement.¹¹ McCarthy had traduced the so-called Red Decade's revolutionary élan and travestied its radical aesthetic. After all, the collective novel had been the holy grail of socially-conscious American literature since the 1930s, a constitutive element of what Lawrence Buell has identified as one of the four major “scripts” of the GAN.¹² Its “single most important pioneer” was John Dos Passos, whose

¹⁰ Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” 1, 3.

¹¹ See, for example, Granville Hicks, “Revolution and the Novel,” *New Masses*, April 10, 1934, 23-24.

¹² Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 6-8, 391-392.

U.S.A. trilogy, with its epic historical sweep and group protagonist comprising a dozen socioeconomically-disparate characters, remains a paradigmatic example of the genre.¹³

With *The Group* McCarthy became the first major American author to publish a collective novel written entirely about the lives of women, and Mailer, his condescension and crudity notwithstanding, was the critic who came the closest to discerning the stakes of her shrewd aesthetic gambit.¹⁴ The novel, Mailer grudgingly admitted, had “something new in it,” namely its “method” of exploring “everything in the profound materiality of women.”¹⁵ This feminine maximalism was indeed a point of pride for McCarthy, who had boasted that “[n]o male consciousness is present in the book; through these eight points of view, all feminine. . .are refracted all the novel ideas of the period concerning sex, politics, economics, architecture, city-planning, house-keeping, child-bearing, interior decoration, and art.”¹⁶ Mailer perceived that, insofar as it recuperated the multifarious focalization and scrupulous documentary aesthetics of the collective novel, *The Group* implicitly laid claim to GAN status. But, he slyly insisted, no collective novel about a group of women “whose communal odor is a cross between *Ma Griffe* and

¹³ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 425. Foley offers the most thoroughgoing dissection of the collective novel and its relation to the proletarian literature movement of the 1930s. While she identifies several of the genre’s distinguishing traits, the most important, in my view, is its construction of a group protagonist.

¹⁴ This does not mean women writers came late to the collective novel genre. On the contrary, as Paula Rabinowitz has shown, Mary Heaton Vorse, Josephine Herbst, Clara Weatherwax, and Tess Slesinger took to the form early to explore issues related to women. But in Slesinger’s *The Unpossessed* (1934), the collective novel that prefigures McCarthy’s work, “primary narrative weight is given” to the male characters. Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolution Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1991), 141. Dos Passos’s *USA* is similarly lopsided. Although half of the narrative’s main fictional characters are women, only one of the book’s twenty-seven biographical sketches is devoted to a woman. And while Janet Galligani Casey has persuasively argued that a “nonpartisan radical” woman named Mary French emerges as the hero of *The Big Money*, one should keep in mind that French’s counterparts in the other two volumes, Mac and Ben Compton, are both men. Galligani Casey, *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 171.

¹⁵ Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” 3.

¹⁶ Quoted in Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 484.

contraceptive jelly” would stand up alongside collectivist masterworks like *U.S.A.* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Such a book “could be said to squat on the Grand Avenue of the Novel like a shabby little boutique,” dwarfed by the Olympian achievements of the form’s original architects.¹⁷ For much of his career, Mailer — who had burst onto the literary scene in 1948 with his own Dos Passos-inspired collective novel about World War II, *The Naked and the Dead* — remained in thrall to a thirties-era conception of collective fiction and, by extension, the GAN. That tradition, which “required venturing out to get experience” in order to write about the worlds of military warfare, local politics, and labor unions, had always privileged male subjectivity.¹⁸ Thus Mailer concludes his review with a predictable patronizing quip: with *The Group* now out of her system, “McCarthy may finally get tough enough to go with the boys.”¹⁹ But *The Group* had already changed the terrain. It had revealed both the aesthetic viability and the American public’s voracious appetite for collective fiction, and it did so without what Mailer and others had always assumed was the genre’s sine qua non, namely, men.

And yet *The Group*’s primary claim to our attention as a collective novel or GAN contender does not rest on its replacement of a male subjectivity with a female one. We should not overlook what novels like *The Group* and Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* have in common besides their construction of collective protagonists. Since its inception the collective novel has offered writers, particularly those on the socialist Left, a means

¹⁷ Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” 1.

¹⁸ Mailer, *The Spooky Art* (New York: Random House, 2004), 114.

¹⁹ Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” 3.

with which to explore the valences of egalitarian and collectivist politics. Because it aims toward the synoptic representation of group life and subjectivity, the collective novel tends to call attention to those forces that make or break social solidarity and emancipatory movements. In this way, it becomes an important resource for understanding how writers on the Left have sought to account for the phenomenon of American exceptionalism. By exceptionalism I do not mean that bogey from which some American Studies scholars are perpetually in flight, but rather the specter that has haunted America's radical Left ever since Werner Sombart asked why there is no socialism in this country — the specter of radical failure.²⁰

The Group's contribution to this exceptionalist discourse makes it a turning point in the history of the collective novel and the tradition of the GAN. We can begin to appreciate how if we examine *The Group* in relation to *The Naked and the Dead*, a novel that is, in many respects, its dialectical twin. Doing so reveals that what Mailer's novel did for the American military industrial complex McCarthy's did for Depression-era domesticity — that is, it disclosed in painstaking, sensuous detail the role of that domain in the affective production of classed and gendered subjects. It showed how the methods

²⁰ Werner Sombart, *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?*, trans. Patricia M. Hawking and C.T. Husbands (White Plains: Macmillan., 1976) The concept of American exceptionalism has its roots in early twentieth-century socialist discourse about the comparative weakness of class struggle in the US and the American Left's failure to gain a foothold in mainstream politics. According to Donald Pease, however, "the founders of American studies as an academic field reappropriated the term in the 1930s in an effort to portray the United States as destined to perform a special role in the world of nations." Donald Pease, "Exceptionalism," in *Keywords for American Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 108. In their quest to expose and repudiate the conservative mythmaking of their predecessors, contemporary American studies scholars have tended to overlook the fact that the original American exceptionalism never ceased to obtain and has been of profound interest to some of the nation's most important novelists. See also Richard Iton, *Solidarity Blues: Race, Culture, and the US Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

of social control built into bourgeois domestic life made it all but impossible to generate or maintain anything like radical political consciousness. In both novels, 1930s radicalism gives way to the attenuated, “compensatory liberalism” that prevailed during the Cold War and still shapes Democratic Party politics today.²¹ But while *The Naked and the Dead* demonstrated the vitality of the proletarian literary tradition after the demise of the Popular Front, *The Group* erased the distinction between politics and culture upheld by that same tradition, boldly asserting the primacy of the household in Left politics and, in so doing, cultivating the structure of feeling that gave rise to radical feminism in the late 1960s. The Mary McCarthy case thus heralded the moment when the American Left would finally have to reckon seriously with the place of the so-called female sphere in revolutionary politics.

1.1 The Politics of Norman Mailer’s Fear Ladder

Like McCarthy, Mailer attributed his conversion to Left politics to his early encounters with the radical literature of the 1930s, especially the novels of Dos Passos.²² While works by many leftist writers — notably Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and James T. Farrell — inspired him to write, he claimed that “*U.S.A.* meant more than all of them.”²³ Dos Passos’s masterpiece precipitated Mailer’s embrace of socialism and the GAN, leading him to conflate the two concepts. As a “socialist,” Mailer felt compelled to produce “large literary works which were filled with characters, and were programmatic,

²¹ Alan, Brinkley, *The End of Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 268.

²² J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 32.

²³ J. Michael Lennon, “A Conversation with Norman Mailer,” *New England Review* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1999) 141.

and had large theses, and were developed, let's say, like the Tolstoyan novel." It was not for nothing that Dos Passos's contemporaries had characterized him as an "American Zola or Tolstoy."²⁴ *U.S.A* showed Mailer that the collective novel created the most powerful synthesis of radical politics and literary nationalism: "Dos Passos gave me the strongest, simplest, most direct idea about what it is to write a great American novel. There is no replacement for The Great American Novel as an ideal for a writer to hold up for himself."²⁵ But as he embarked on his literary career in the late 1940s, Mailer would have to adapt the collective novel to a world that was markedly different from the one Dos Passos had sought to represent.

Completed in 1936, Dos Passos's trilogy depicts what Michael Denning calls "the decline and fall of the Lincoln Republic," the post-Civil War regime that presided over the hitherto unprecedented expansion of rights and economic opportunities for ordinary citizens. The key figures in Dos Passos's story are the sons and daughters of those "native born white Americans" who reformulated their self-enclosed worlds following the Civil War in order to forestall recognition of the country's festering class and racial antagonisms.²⁶ The trilogy chronicles how the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti and the stock market crash of 1929 destroyed the egalitarian myth peddled by America's corrupt Anglo Protestant establishment, revealing once and for all that "[t]he Lincoln Republic,

²⁴ Norman Mailer, "The Art of Fiction, No. 32," interview by Steve Marcus, *The Paris Review*, no. 31 (Winter-Spring 1964), 37. Michael Gold, "The Education of John Dos Passos," *The English Journal* 22, no. 2 (February 1933), 87.

²⁵ J. Michael Lennon, ed., *Conversations with Norman Mailer* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1988), 189.

²⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 2010), 196. A powerful psychoanalytic reading of Dos Passos's rhetoric of revolutionary failure can be found in Seth Moglen's *Mourning Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 95-234.

redeemed from the sin of slavery, had been lost to the great robber barons, to Mr. McKinley's wars in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and to Mr. Wilson's war in Europe."²⁷ Consequently, *U.S.A.* "is an epitaph for an America that no longer exists."²⁸ To the extent that it offers a definitive, firsthand account of a particular historical epoch, Dos Passos's masterpiece of course remains inimitable. However, by demonstrating the possibilities of collective representation and thematizing "the failure of American socialists, anarchists, and Wobblies to win over American workers to a vision of the cooperative commonwealth," the trilogy laid the groundwork for a GAN tradition.²⁹

In Denning's telling, once Dos Passos's collective novels clarified the passing of the Lincoln Republic, a new form — the "ghetto pastoral" novel popularized by Mike Gold's *Jews without Money* — could emerge as "the most important genre created by the writers of the proletarian literary movement."³⁰ Like *U.S.A.* these novels recorded the ravages of industrial capitalism on American life but from the perspective of "plebeian men and women of...ethnic working-class neighborhoods."³¹ Far from displacing collective fiction as the preeminent proletarian literary genre, however, ghetto pastorals further demonstrated the form's unique technical affordances. The collective novel allowed ghetto writers to portray the urban neighborhood, with its various local types and internal conflicts, as a microcosm of the social totality under capitalism. It afforded similar opportunities to those interested in institutions, as Mailer and others would

²⁷ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 168.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

eventually discover. Indeed, no other form would strike them as better suited to capture the new role that institutions came to play in American life during the decades that saw the development of a national, if inadequate, welfare sector, the spread of industrial unions, and the creation of a gargantuan security state. Throughout his career, when he spoke of his ambition to write “the big one,” Mailer clearly had in mind a novel which would bring the formal strategies of *U.S.A.* to bear on the large-scale institutions that had, in his view, contributed to the defeat of American radicalism during the New Deal and Cold War eras.³²

The Naked and the Dead's most obvious departures from the formal protocols of realism are its ten “Time Machine” sequences sketching the personal histories of key characters, which read like crude imitations of the short biographies of real historical figures interspersed throughout *U.S.A.* But if the novel “technically. . . advances no farther than Dos Passos,” as Diana Trilling claims, it nonetheless shows Mailer wrestling in earnest with problems that became more pressing during the postwar period.³³ Chief among these was how to maintain a commitment to resistance, if not bring about revolution, amid the encroachment of the military industrial complex upon all aspects of American life. Mailer's collective novel imaginatively enters the world of the armed forces in order to stage a pitched battle between the ideological factions that would soon set the terms of the Cold War.

³² Charles McGrath, “[Norman Mailer, Towering Writer with Matching Ego, Dies at 84](#),” *New York Times*, November 10, 2007.

³³ Diana Trilling, *Claremont Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964), 182.

On one side stands General Cyrus Cummings, who oversees the campaign to liberate the island of Anopopei from the Japanese during World War II. A consummate egotist and temperamentally conservative social climber, Cummings determines early on in his military career that “the eventual line to power in America would always be anticommunism,” an insight that, in turn, leads him to conclude that the so-called American Century “is going to be the reactionary’s century.”³⁴ Although he strives to appear politically noncommittal, he privately confesses to his aide that his sympathies lie with the “dream” of fascism, which “merely started in the wrong country” (*ND*, 321). Cummings contends that “America is going to absorb that dream, it’s in the business of doing it now.” By this he means that as the US transitions into a warfare state, it will progressively realize fascism’s goal of subjecting civilian life to the ideological imperatives and mechanisms of social control that govern the military. In his view “the Army functions best when you’re frightened of the man above you, and contemptuous of your subordinates”; similarly, under industrial capitalism “the majority of men must be subservient to the machine” (*ND*, 176, 177). As a result, he explains, “[t]he natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety” (*ND* 177). Only fear can keep soldiers and civilians in their place — and what better way to ensure that both groups live in constant, mutually reinforcing states of fear and submission than to integrate economic production and warfare, to make the captains of industry virtually indistinguishable from those in the

³⁴ Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Picador, 1998), 427, 85; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *ND*.

military? Thus the General sees World War II not as a struggle between democracy and fascism but as an economically-driven “power concentration.”

Under a war economy, American diplomacy falls largely to the likes of Cummings, a man experienced, “in [his] capacity as an officer,” at negotiating financial deals with foreign companies (*ND*, 423). As he assumes control of both the American military and the economy the General moves one step closer to fulfilling his highest aspiration, which is “[t]o achieve God” (*ND*, 423). Cummings thus instantiates what C. Wright Mills calls a “military metaphysic,” the conception of “reality as essentially military reality.”³⁵ Mailer crafts the General to predict the rise of those cold warriors in the armed forces who competed with corporate executives and politicians not only to determine the direction of world affairs but also to bring about “the triumph in all areas of life of the military metaphysic, and hence the subordination to it of all other ways of life.”³⁶

Mailer offsets Cummings’s discreet yet resolute fascism with the milquetoast radicalism of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hearn, the General’s aide. Although the Harvard-educated Hearn comes from money and, as a result of his background, enjoys the privileged status of an officer, he rejects the politics of the ruling class. At Harvard he has vague literary aspirations and participates in the John Reed Society; before enlisting in the Army he briefly considers “joining the Party” (*ND*, 352). But like the classic hero of Lukács’s novels of “romantic disillusionment,” Hearn, who cares for others “only in

³⁵ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 198-224.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

the abstract and never in the particular,” possesses a soul more expansive than the world he inherits.³⁷ As a result, he can neither assume his natural role as a member of the power elite with the confidence of General Cummings nor fulfill his fantasy of rescuing the working class from its misery. Out of despair, Hearn settles into a “particular isolated position on the Left” where his notion of rebellion has degenerated into the personal defiance of army protocols and the rejection of bourgeois values (*ND*, 169). Where Hearn is feminized by his enclosed world, Cummings is closeted. In an expression of sublimated homosexual desire, the General strives to impress upon Hearn that “in functioning as an officer for a long enough time he would assume, whether he wanted to or not, the emotional prejudices of his class” (*ND*, 168). Every soldier, Cummings insists, must be taught to appreciate his place on “the fear ladder” (*ND*, 176). In so educating Hearn in military-style sado-masochism, Cummings hopes to break off the Lieutenant’s lingering attachments to egalitarianism and resistance. True to his philosophy, Cummings resorts to fear to bring Hearn under his control. In a pivotal scene the General instructs Hearn to pick up the cigarette butt that the Lieutenant intentionally left on the otherwise pristine floor of his commanding officer’s tent in an ineffectual display of insubordination. When Hearn, on the threat of court-martial, literally and figuratively bends over for the General, the novel makes it clear that this is not simply his acquiescence to military discipline but a prefiguration of the American Left’s submission

³⁷ György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 13, 97-11.

to homegrown fascism.³⁸ Having reasserted his authority over Hearn, Cummings is then free to send the Lieutenant off to lead a reconnaissance platoon on a quixotic mission to infiltrate the Japanese lines.

The collective dynamics of the platoon recapitulate the conflict between Cummings and Hearn while demonstrating some of the options available to white working-class men for navigating a bipolar world circumscribed by American proto-fascism on the one hand and pseudo-communism on the other. Sergeant Sam Croft is a bloodthirsty bigot who shoots a Japanese POW in cold blood, just as he once killed an unarmed striker as a member of the National Guard. He serves as the platoon's primitive stand-in for Cummings. While Hearn clearly outranks him, Croft has commanded the platoon before the Lieutenant's arrival and, on this basis, is its de facto leader. Red Valsen, an anti-authoritarian drifter who recalls *U.S.A.*'s Wobbly-inspired "Vag" characters serves as Lieutenant Hearn's working-class counterpart and thus Croft's chief antagonist. Like Hearn, Valsen has nothing but contempt for the hierarchy and discipline of the Army. When Hearn offers him a coveted position as a corporal the infantryman refuses, knowing that "[i]f he took something like that, the whole thing fell apart. They

³⁸ Sean McCann rightly identifies General Cummings's predilection for sodomy as "the first appearance of what will become a central Mailer obsession" ("The Imperiled Republic: Norman Mailer and the Poetics of Anti-Liberalism," *ELH* 67, no. 1, [Spring, 2000], 302). According to McCann, Mailer laments the loss of "a central political authority" (304) and community that ensued after the onset of post-WWII American imperialism, which championed cosmopolitanism, liberal individualism, and free market capitalism. The novelist then insists "that the compelling bonds of common identity can be fully established only through violence and especially through his two favored narrative scenarios — war and buggery" (313). For all its shrewdness, McCann's essay obfuscates the role that violence, particularly sexual violence, plays for Mailer in defining the left-right continuum. The fascist Cummings definitively demonstrates his authority over the leftist Lieutenant Hearn by compelling him to submit to a figurative bugging. Thus, what comes to distinguish the Right in relation to the Left, the winners in relation to the losers, is the former's willingness to terrorize — that is, to forcibly subdue — its opponents. The novel's central concern, then, is not the loss of political authority but the Left's unwillingness to seize it.

got you in the trap and then you worried about doing the job right and started fighting with the men and sucking off the officers” (*ND*, 660). Valsen’s refusal to align himself with Hearn speaks as much to the immutable power differential between commissioned officers and enlisted men as it does to his suspicion of insurgent political action in general, which only seems destined for failure in a world dominated by unabashed brutes like Croft. Despite his repudiation of upward mobility, Valsen proves no more immune to the fear ladder and the humiliation it inflicts than Hearn.

When the Lieutenant dies abruptly in a shootout and Croft refuses to abort the platoon’s misbegotten mission, Valsen initiates a mutiny, only to balk at the inevitable physical confrontation with Croft. Any fight with the diabolical Sergeant, who purposely embroils the platoon in the unnecessary gun battle that claims the Lieutenant’s life, is bound to be a fight to the death. Terrified of the boundlessness of Croft’s killer instinct and demoralized by the drudgery of military life, Valsen acknowledges that “[t]he Army had licked him” (*ND*, 693). When push comes to shove, both he and Hearn abandon their pretensions to recalcitrance and “crawfish” to their superiors. Like Hearn, Valsen suffers from a fear of cooptation so acute that it ultimately leads to paralysis. In the end, he is left to wonder how things might have turned out differently “[i]f they all stuck together” (*ND*, 704). But how could they when all “they knew was to cut each other’s throats”? The redundancy of Valsen and Hearn’s defeats underscores what Mailer viewed as the incredible potency of the warfare state’s “fear ladder, whereby blandishments, threats, favors, and physical harm were increased or decreased as necessary for the maintenance

of control.”³⁹ The pairing of the two men leaves little doubt about what Mailer thought would happen if the radical American Left went up against fascism: it would lose.

Yet, in its subtle glorification of right-wing barbarism, the novel also suggests a path to victory. Norman Podhoretz aptly observes that towards the end of the book Cummings and Croft begin to look like its “natural heroes.” He writes: “If life is truly what *The Naked and the Dead* shows it to be — a fierce battle between the individual will and all the many things that resist it, then heroism must consist in a combination of strength, courage, drive, and stamina such as Cummings and Croft exhibit and that Hearn and Valsen conspicuously lack.”⁴⁰ In this formulation, the novel becomes a story about the age-old conflict between the human impulse toward personal autonomy and the need of institutions to control their subjects — the individual vs. the State. According to Podhoretz, Croft and Cummings turn out to be the novel’s more authentic individuals because they both accept and act upon the notion that “man’s deepest urge is omnipotence” (*ND*, 323). In reading the novel as a panegyric to liberal individualism, however, Podhoretz overlooks the fact that Cummings and Croft’s quests for personal glory also advance the power and influence of an institution. Rather than seek “absolute freedom,” the two men strive to maximize their personal agency within the omnipresent confines of the fear ladder.⁴¹ In doing so, they sublimate their desire to annihilate all that differs from or resists them into a relentless pursuit of concrete military objectives,

³⁹ Lennon, *A Double Life*, 50-51.

⁴⁰ Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings*, 185.

⁴¹ Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings*, 185.

including the rationalized administration of violence and terror. What makes them heroic is not just their “strength, courage, drive, and stamina,” but also their willingness to adapt their personal instincts and ambitions to the demands of an organized political project, specifically American militarism. The twin triumphs of Cummings and Croft over Hearn and Valsen — neither of whom can whole-heartedly commit to organized collective action — render the novel at once a lament and a warning for radicalism. To avoid defeat and realize their egalitarian dreams, Mailer would seem to argue, leftists must learn to govern institutions and resort to the use of force with the same steely resolve as Cummings and Croft. Instead of shrinking from political confrontation, conspiracy, and social coercion, as it so often seems to, the American Left must relish these military practices.

At the same time, however, Mailer points to an American Third Way. Between the “no guts, no glory” ethos of Cummings and Croft and the impotent radicalism of Valsen and Hearn there is the racial nationalism adopted by the novel’s other infantrymen. Predictably, Mailer’s reconnaissance team conforms to the stereotype of the “multicultural platoon, a unit made up of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, southerners, westerners, and easterners, all of whom were white,” popularized by World War II-era Hollywood films.⁴² On this basis, one could argue that *The Naked and the Dead* bridges the gap between Dos Passos’s Anglocentric collective fiction and the ghetto pastoral.

⁴² Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 204. Mailer’s multicultural platoon also includes a Mexican-American Sergeant, an important reminder of the fact that “Mexicans, legally defined as white. . .were allowed to serve with Euro-American troops” (411, n41).

Through his depictions of Jews and southerners in particular, two groups whose presence in the platoon raises discomfiting questions about race, Mailer shows how the military's organization of all-white combat regiments "went a long way toward fulfilling Theodore Roosevelt's prescription for forging a racialized American nation."⁴³ Such a nation would come to rest on a pact between northern and southern whites to exist peacefully alongside each other as relative equals while disavowing the exclusion and dehumanization of blacks.⁴⁴ Crucially, however, for Mailer this did not entail "melding the many streams of Euro-Americans into one."⁴⁵ On the contrary, it meant embracing ascriptive identities, including those that drew distinctions between so-called white people, and positing the maintenance of racial and ethnic purity as the key to self-preservation in warfare. Those who survive in Mailer's military world, that is, do so precisely because they eschew assimilation and race mixing.

Thus, we find that the two enlisted men in *The Naked and the Dead* who violate racial taboos, Roth and Wilson, meet similarly grisly fates. Roth, an assimilated Jew and CCNY graduate who identifies primarily as "an agnostic" and "an American," initially refuses to believe that anti-Semitism motivates the mistreatment he receives from others in the platoon and scorns the rhetoric of racial solidarity of his religious comrade Joey Goldstein (*ND* 54, 476). Alienated from the platoon by his physical weakness and the other men's racism, Roth commits suicide. Viewed alongside the survival of Goldstein,

⁴³ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁴ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 159-172.

⁴⁵ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 204.

the proudly provincial, Yiddish-speaking Jew from working-class Brooklyn, Roth's downward spiral can only seem like punishment for his stubborn refusal to count himself among what he calls "a race which didn't exist" (*ND*, 661). Likewise, Wilson, an irreverent hedonist, dies from a gunshot wound not long after he confesses to his fellow southerner, a soldier named Ridges, that he lusts after black women, to whom he refers as "nigger stuff" (*ND*, 645). By contrast, Ridges, a devout, dull-witted Christian who regards interracial sex as "one of the excessive things you could not do and survive," makes it out alive.

After Wilson's death, Goldstein and Ridges, who had attempted to carry their wounded comrade to safety for miles through the jungle, stop to rest and reflect on their failed effort. Goldstein graciously gives the remainder of his canteen to Ridges, whose last words to his Jewish compatriot before they move on and the chapter ends are "we'll git along" (*ND*, 683). This is Mailer's way of representing the unspoken racial politics that had sustained the Democratic Party's fragile coalition of northern white ethnics and southern racists during the New Deal era. By restaging the formation of that racial compact in a war zone, Mailer reminds us that New Deal liberalism was forged in a climate of fear. He therefore anticipates the work of the historian and political scientist Ira Katznelson, who has argued that the threat of fascism and the onslaught of war abroad led Americans into a fateful compromise with illiberalism at home.⁴⁶ But more importantly, Mailer contrasts the drab and humble existence promised by the identitarian

⁴⁶ Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 317-363, 484-486.

Third Way with the literal and figurative deaths of the novel's would-be socialists, thereby casting racial politics as a mere pittance for the loss of more radical egalitarian hopes and dreams.

Mailer's career attests to the fact that success can overturn a writer's ambitions just as easily as defeat. Intending to "work on large collective novels about American life," Mailer found that the "celebrity" status he acquired with the critical and commercial success of *The Naked and the Dead* "took away much of the necessary anonymity [he felt he] needed personally for that."⁴⁷ The proletarian literary tradition to which he adhered had enshrined documentary realism as an aesthetic standard. According to this school of thought, one learned to write about the harsh realities of American life through the direct experience of living inconspicuously amongst one's (mostly male) working-class subjects.⁴⁸ No longer able to pass as just another working stiff, Mailer abandoned the "big fat one" based on his experience of a labor strike and anti-communist sentiment in Indiana that he began just months after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*. The "notes and clippings"⁴⁹ he had amassed and the "few days" he had spent conducting research among a "union in Evansville with which [he] had connections" came to naught.

⁴⁷ Mailer, *Spooky Art*, 114.

⁴⁸ Perhaps no other work gives a better sense of the masculinist and empiricist assumptions underpinning that standard than Mike Gold's "A New Program for Writers," an essay on the founding of New York's John Reed Club. Gold's essay suggests that "every writer in the group attach himself to one of the industries. That he spend the next few years in and out of this industry, studying it from every angle, making himself an expert in it, so that when he writes of it he will write like an insider, not like a bourgeois intellectual observer." *The New Masses* 5, no. 8 (January 1930), 21. For Gold a phrase like "bourgeois intellectual observer," as Paula Rabinowitz has shown, connoted femininity (Labor and Desire, 22-23, 68, 94). For a critical overview of documentary fiction, see Barbara Foley's *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). On the relationship between documentary aesthetics and the collective novel, see Foley, *Radical Representations*, 399-441.

⁴⁹ Lennon, *A Double Life*, 114.

“I didn’t have the book,” he confessed. “I didn’t know a damned thing about labor unions.”⁵⁰ The GAN remained out of his reach long after his initial plans for this second book fell through. Mailer’s next experiment in the collective novel genre, *The Armies of the Night*, which gives a slightly fictionalized account of his participation in the 1967 March on the Pentagon organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, did not appear until 1968, two decades after his debut.⁵¹

1.2 Fear and Domesticity in McCarthy’s GAN

Like Mailer, McCarthy had been schooled in the proletarian literary tradition of the 1930s and believed that “[t]he staple ingredient in all novels in various mixtures and proportions but always in fairly heavy dosage is fact.”⁵² Her essay “The Lasting Power of the Political Novel,” reveals that the works of Dos Passos played the same pivotal role in her literary and political development that they did in Mailer’s. It was Dos Passos who inspired her to pursue a career as a socially-committed writer. After she “fell madly in love” with the *42nd Parallel*, as she tells the story, she “looked up every line that Dos Passos had published” and “read them all.” From Dos Passos she learned about the Sacco-Vanzetti case and the imprisonment of labor leader Tom Mooney, which “moved”

⁵⁰ Mailer, “Art of Fiction,” 35.

⁵¹ His return to the genre was not exactly a triumphant one. As we have seen, in *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer held out the racial nationalism of the Third Way as a possible substitute for more robust collectivist dreams. In his second collective novel, however, there is no such alternative. Bimbisar Irom has thus described *The Armies of the Night* as “a failed collective text,” one that never manages to narrate a successful transition from individual to group consciousness. Although Mailer’s novel, Irom argues, traffics in the tropes of collective fiction, it ultimately reasserts “the primacy of the individual as the final moral arbiter in any political formation” (31). Bimbisar Irom, “Genre and Political Transition: The Problematic of the Collective Novel in Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel; The Novel as History*,” *Genre* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 29-53. For more on Mailer’s late-career collective novels, see McCann, “Imperiled Republic.”

⁵² Mary McCarthy, *On the Contrary* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1961), 251.

her “to become aware of *The New Republic*. One thing leading to another, soon after graduation, I was writing little book reviews for *The New Republic*, then for *The Nation*, and I never looked back. Like a Japanese paper flower dropped into a glass of water, it all unfolded, magically, from Dos Passos.”⁵³ The rest, as they say, is (literary) history.

In contrast to Mailer, the swashbuckler manqué, McCarthy refused to take up the collective novel via warmed-over “class transvestitism.”⁵⁴ Where Mailer considered it the novelist’s task to capture the *Sturm und Drang* of world historical events and epic battles between good and evil, McCarthy saw it has her job to exploit the novel’s special ability to expose realities that lay closer to home, particularly “the finite scandals of the village and the province.”⁵⁵ While she shared Mailer’s appreciation for Tolstoy, what she found most significant about his work was not its vast sweep, but the fact that, despite its reputation for high seriousness, it affects a “tone” of “gossip and tittle-tattle.”⁵⁶ Scandal amplifies the dramatic power of a novel in part by limiting its scope. In her view, the novel’s “repercussions are like the echo produced in an enclosed space, a chambered world.”⁵⁷ One cannot get worked up, she argues, by a novel about a “world-wide scandal or a universe-wide scandal,” such as nuclear war or the holocaust because these events, by virtue of their “magnitude,” defy comprehension as components of our reality.

⁵³ Mary McCarthy, “The Lasting Power of the Political Novel,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1984.

⁵⁴ Eric Schockett uses this term to describe a narrative form popularized in the late nineteenth century by middle-class writers who sought “to close the epistemological gaps” in knowledge about the working classes through “cross-class impersonation” (106). Class transvestitism, Schockett explains, allowed middle class male writers to “reconstruct their manhood” through intimate contact with their supposedly more authentic impoverished brethren (110). One can think of Gold’s program as an updated version of this approach. See *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ McCarthy, *On the Contrary*, 266.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

McCarthy made these remarks when the “scandals” of World War II and the Cold War remained unfinished business. The remaining perpetrators of the Holocaust had not yet been brought to justice, as the trial of Adolph Eichmann — covered in *The New Yorker* by McCarthy’s close friend Hannah Arendt — made abundantly clear, and the Cold War was in full swing. This was Mailer’s bailiwick, or so he thought. As one critic put it, “Mailer’s concern with history. . . is [actually] a concern with history-in-the-making. It is the Marxist’s preoccupation with present-day action in the light of future necessity.”⁵⁸ With *The Group*, by contrast, McCarthy set her sights on the 1930s and reconstructs that period through the spatio-temporally limited “scandals of a clique.” She opposes the retreat of its female members into private life with the renewed political concern for the commonweal that manifested itself in the era’s expanding public welfare sector. To some extent, their divergent approaches to the collective novel reflect the structural discrepancy in *U.S.A.* between the deep history of the trilogy’s biographies, which “parallel the arc of individual lives with the arc of the republic,” and the “continuous present of the fictional narratives.”⁵⁹ Where McCarthy drew principally on the first tendency, Mailer observed the second.

And while Mailer continued to follow the masculinist dictates of proletarian literature in modeling his heroes on lower-class men, McCarthy took her cues from elsewhere. Her use of such descriptors as “scandal,” “gossip,” “tittle-tattle,” “enclosed

⁵⁸ Trilling, *Claremont Essays*, 188.

⁵⁹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 174. This tension is also present in the contradictory term — “contemporary chronicles” — that Dos Passos often used to describe his collective novels. See John Dos Passos, “Art of Fiction 44,” *Paris Review* 46 (Spring 1969), 153.

space, “chambered worlds,” tells us that she is also revising a different tradition. These are not the hallmarks of proletarian literature but of domestic fiction. Indeed the commonplace concerns of the family and the household — courtship, sex, marriage, homemaking, childrearing, and income — dominate *The Group*. And yet one cannot accuse McCarthy of writing “[r]espectable fiction” modeled on earlier domestic fiction, “which represented political conflict in terms of sexual differences that upheld a peculiarly middle-class notion of love.” Nor does *The Group* recall the discursive practices associated with Manifest Domesticity that sought to enlist women, as caretakers and overseers of the household, in the project of imperial expansion.⁶⁰

One would have no more success in trying to fit *The Group* into the tradition of women’s revolutionary fiction that emerged in the 1930s and, according to Paula Rabinowitz, offered “a curious revision of the domestic novel.”⁶¹ Works published by radical women during the Depression era attempt to intervene in a discourse that pitted “feminine desires (historicized in domestic fiction)” against “masculine economies (domesticated by historical fiction),” the loving and nurturing bodies of women against the hungry and laboring bodies of men, and the effete art of bourgeois storytelling against the virile act of making history through class struggle.⁶² Like those of their male counterparts, radical women’s collective novels, “posit the development of class conflict

⁶⁰ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 41; Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” in *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 111-134.

⁶¹ Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 67.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 36.

in the form of the rising proletariat or the declining bourgeoisie.”⁶³ In Rabinowitz’s view, their female protagonists ultimately are either subsumed into “the revolutionary body” of the labor movement, which is “already constructed as masculine,” or “positioned outside of the collective space.”⁶⁴

No such dichotomies confront the characters of *The Group* because, as we already know, “no male consciousness is present in the book.” *The Group*’s collective space is thoroughly feminized, focused as it is on a circle of friends who graduate from a women’s college in 1933 with every intention of participating in society at large. This is made clear from the opening chapter, which unfolds at the nontraditional wedding of the group’s free-spirited leader, Kay Strong. Written from an omniscient point of view but in the indirect, self-congratulatory voice of the group as a whole, the chapter introduces each of the novel’s principal characters. Like Kay, who supposedly marries for love rather than money and will soon embark on a career in marketing at Macy’s, the other members of the group regard themselves as ambitious and proudly unconventional:

They were a different breed, they could assure the curate, from the languid buds of the previous decade: there was not one of them who did not propose to work this coming fall, at a volunteer job if need be. Libby MacAusland had a promise from a publisher; Helena Davison, whose parents, out in Cincinnati, no Cleveland, lived on the income of their income, was going to be teaching — she already had a job sewed up at a private nursery school; Polly Andrews, more power to her, was to work as a technician in the new medical center; Dottie Renfrew was slated for social work in a Boston settlement house; Lakey was off to Paris to study art history, working toward an advanced degree; Pokey Prothero, who had been given a plane for graduation, was getting her pilot’s license so as to be able to commute three days a week to Cornell Agricultural School, and last but not least, yesterday little Priss Hartshorn, the group grind had simultaneously

⁶³ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 85.

announced her engagement to a young doctor and landed a job with the N.R.A. Not bad, they conceded, for a group that had gone through college with the stigma of being high hat. And elsewhere they could point out girls of perfectly good background who were going into business, anthropology, medicine, not because they had to, but because they knew they had something to contribute to our “emergent America.”⁶⁵

As Vassar graduates, the women in the novel feel duty bound to become important members of the workforce as well as wives and mothers. In matters of politics and culture, “[t]he Group was not afraid of being radical,” for “they could see the good that Roosevelt was doing,” (*G*, 15) and “even the most conservative among them, pushed to the wall, admitted that an honest socialist was entitled to a good hearing” (*G*, 15-16). None of them intends to “marry a broker or a banker or a cold-fish corporation lawyer” or one of the “dull purplish young men of their own set,” and they even consider it socially acceptable “to marry a Jew” (*G*, 16). They are emancipated from the prejudices of their class and, above all, their parents: “The worst fate, they utterly agreed, would be to become like Mother and Dad, stuffy and frightened” (*G*, 16). The moral and emotional conflicts of the novel grow out of the women’s efforts to remain true to these liberal values and to fulfill their collective promise. In aspiring to do so, the members of the group do not attempt to reconcile male and female spheres — encoded, in Rabinowitz’s schema, as “labor” and “desire,” respectively — but to fulfill a distinctly feminine ideal.

That said, if we agree with Rabinowitz that in “the bourgeois psychological narrative of domesticity gender supplants class” and women’s revolutionary fiction, by contrast, shows us that class is “gendered” and gender “classed,” then McCarthy’s novel

⁶⁵ Mary McCarthy, *The Group* (New York: Signet, 1963), 15; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *G*.

clearly belongs to the radical tradition.⁶⁶ Bolder still than her predecessors, McCarthy turns the collective novel genre on its head. For both male and female authors of proletarian literature, “the truth about society, knowledge of its inner workings, was available if and only if one wrote from the position of contiguity or identity with ‘the revolutionary proletariat,’” a concept that was coded as male.⁶⁷ *The Group* brazenly scuttles this aspect of the radical tradition, while exploiting the formal capacity of the collective novel to assemble “characters from comparable social origins” for purposes of assessing “the role of dominant — or, conversely, revolutionary — ideology in determining consciousness within different classes.”⁶⁸ Where *U.S.A.*, for example, “presents through Mac, Joe Williams, and Charley Anderson a commentary on various options available to white working-class characters at different junctures in early twentieth-century U.S. society,” *The Group* offers us portraits of Kay Strong, Dottie Renfrew, Helena Davison, Libby MacAusland, Priss Hartshorn, and Eleanor “Lakey” Eastlake, thereby shedding light on the paths and privileges afforded to educated, upper-class white women in the New Deal period. Not only does this adaptation of the collective novel shrewdly sidestep a problem that arises when middle class writers attempt to represent the “real” conditions of the working classes, namely the tendency to fetishize the figure of the worker or some other potentially revolutionary subject, a habit that tends to reinforce readers’ fantasies about the poor, but *The Group* also reveals how a

⁶⁶ Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 15.

⁶⁷ Schockett, *Vanishing Moments*, 203.

⁶⁸ Foley, *Radical Representations*, 403.

novel that privileges another ascriptive group can advance a powerful critique of class differences in its own right.⁶⁹

The stories of McCarthy's well-heeled women follow the same pattern as those of Dos Passos's white male working-class heroes. Their noble ambitions are frustrated by underachievement and various forms of cooptation that make a mockery of the triumphalist tone we encounter in the opening chapter. Libby, the only member of the group to have "made her mark," abandons her dream of writing and editing serious literature after she takes to heart an editor's comment that only "[o]ld maids" succeed in book publishing (*G*, 211). She pursues an alternative career as a "high-powered agent" who peddles fluff to *Mademoiselle* (*G*, 259). Dottie marries a "mining man who owned half the state of Arizona," giving up social work to become a socialite (*G*, 104). Priss leaves her job with the League of Women Shoppers, a job she had taken up after the Supreme Court upended the National Recovery Administration, and becomes a stay-at-home mother. Helena Davison allows her parents to "bribe" her away from teaching with "a trip to Europe" (*G*, 115). Kay suffers a nervous breakdown after her marriage to an unsuccessful playwright dissolves, and she later accidentally plunges to her death from a room in New York City's Vassar Club. Kay's onetime rival, Lakey, having earned a

⁶⁹ McCarthy reveals her awareness of this pitfall in her scathing review of Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!*, the collective novel that won a competition sponsored by *New Masses*, an unofficial literary organ of the Communist Party USA, in 1935. Weatherwax's brutalized "worker heroes" elicit disgust instead of sympathy and identification, according to McCarthy, and thus the novel achieves the opposite of what it sets out to do. If McCarthy does not pretend to unveil the abject miseries of a rising proletariat or the decadence of a declining bourgeoisie in *The Group*, it is not because she "suffers from a lack of reach" and "is too weak to push through the crust [of the horror beneath]," as Mailer claims ("The Mary McCarthy Case," 3); rather, it is because she understood all too well that adducing the most sordid pathologies of classed subjects as documentary proof of capitalism's injustice could have counterrevolutionary effects. Mary McCarthy, "St. Francesca of the Pacific Northwest." *The Nation*, January 15, 1936, 82.

doctorate in a field where there are few jobs for women, settles for an undistinguished life as the kept woman of a baroness in suburban Connecticut. Polly Andrews, whose family lost most of its fortune in the Great Crash, becomes a nurse and narrowly escapes a miserable life of penury in that profession by marrying a successful, kind-hearted psychiatrist. McCarthy implies that Polly escapes the fate of the rest of the group because her once-precarious class position had tempered her expectations. She is perhaps “the only girl in the class of ’33 who is truly happy” (*G*, 324).

When we consider these lackluster outcomes in relation to what this group initially seemed poised to accomplish, a single question comes into focus, which Brenda Murphy states as follows: “How did it happen . . . that these young women, trained at Vassar to believe in the efficacy of the New Deal and their own potential to make significant contributions to the betterment of society, amounted to so little?”⁷⁰ I would like to suggest that *The Group*’s affinities with the collective novel tradition, which takes as its grand theme the chronic failure of the American Left, and McCarthy’s own description of the book as “the history of the loss of faith in progress,” invite us to formulate the question in different ideological terms. Why did these young women, who were steeped in the progressive tradition and uniquely positioned to benefit from the new opportunities it had created in society, ultimately recoil from liberalism’s vision of freedom and equality?⁷¹

⁷⁰ Brenda Murphy, “The Thirties, Public and Private: A Reassessment of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 15, no. 1 (2004), 82-83.

⁷¹ Mary McCarthy, “The Art of Fiction 27,” *The Paris Review* 27 (Winter-Spring, 1962), 62.

McCarthy's question resembles the one that haunts a book published by another female veteran of the Old Left in 1963 — Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. After describing the spiritual emptiness felt by many housewives in the 1960s, an affliction she famously calls “the problem that has no name,” Friedan put the same question to her readers in these terms: “why did so many American women, with the ability and education to discover and create, go back home again, to look for something more in housework and rearing children?”⁷² She surveys the romantic fiction that appeared in popular women's magazines in the 1930s and finds that the period's typical female “heroine” was a “New Woman” who sought and attained male companionship while remaining fiercely “independent and determined to find a life of her own.”⁷³ It is this feminine ideal that the women of *The Group* initially embraced.

This situation began to change, Friedan claims, during the postwar period as women were driven back into the home by what she called “the feminine mystique,” which encouraged them to believe that “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity.”⁷⁴ Those who adopted this model would realize their “femininity” not by pursuing some vocation or a career but by managing a household, raising children, and satisfying the needs of their husbands. Friedan does not deny the fact that discrimination and increasing competition with men in the job market after World War II played a part in deterring educated, privileged women

⁷² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 7, 65. Interestingly, Friedan and McCarthy were inspired to write their masterworks by survey data from their respective alma maters, Vassar and Smith. See Murphy, “The Thirties, Public and Private,” 85.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

from holding to the more liberal values and aspirations cultivated in the preceding decades. Her book, however, is less concerned with discrimination in the workplace than with the means by which an “image — created by the women’s magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis — shapes women’s lives today and mirrors their dreams.”⁷⁵ In pinpointing the allure of the mystique, she calls attention to how the mass media of the age used its considerable power to persuade educated, upper-class women to abjure their independence.

McCarthy performs a similar maneuver, but she demonstrates that the problem has much deeper roots in the radical thirties, establishing a direct connection between this paralyzing image of femininity and the failure of liberal politics. Reading Friedan in connection with McCarthy and the collective novel tradition enables us to see the problem that has no name as an important iteration of the problem of revolutionary failure. Like Dos Passos and Mailer, McCarthy sought to understand why Left values failed to take root within a certain segment of American society. Although she shares Friedan’s interest in “the cultural apparatus,” her reinvention of the collective novel genre allows her to investigate the ways in which class-specific interpersonal dynamics influenced women’s ultimate rejection of radical liberal values.⁷⁶ When she combined the

⁷⁵ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 24.

⁷⁶ C. Wright Mills, *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 203-212.

collective novel's technique for constituting a group subject with domestic fiction's fixation with what Nancy Armstrong has called "the power of domestic surveillance," McCarthy threw into sharp relief the mechanisms of social control that dictated upper-class women's participation in the labor market.⁷⁷ As Armstrong notes, bourgeois culture invests women with the authority to inculcate normative desires and forms of behavior in the domestic sphere. Women are thus obliged to keep watch over the household and the reproduction of bourgeois subjectivity.⁷⁸ With *The Group* McCarthy proposes that domestic surveillance operates as a feminine counterpart to what Mailer called the fear ladder by showing how this "female power" to police discretion and taste set upper-class women not only against one another but also themselves.⁷⁹

McCarthy wants us to know that not only the experts and the mass media lured women back into the home but also a socioeconomically inflected culture of fear. The women of *The Group* live in a world suffused with fear — fear that the intimate details of their personal lives will become fodder for public consumption, fear that they will be found wanting as lovers and mothers, and fear that they will consequently lose the authority afforded to women of their social rank. The fears that limit their choices are the products of a culture of domestic surveillance that they perpetuate by means of "gossip," "tittle-tattle," and "scandal." "Everything that happens emotionally or just in ordinary life to these girls," McCarthy explained during a reading at the 92nd Street Y in 1963, "is

⁷⁷ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 123.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 122-125.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

turned into a subject matter for group conversation.”⁸⁰ Thus these women live primarily in fear that other members of their chambered world will detect betrayals of the values and norms that they — as friends, as Vassar graduates, and as members of the upper class — have pledged to maintain. After graduation, they quickly succumb to that “worst fate,” which is “to become like Mother and Dad, stuffy and frightened.” Fear of domestic scandal — real or imagined — and its paralyzing effects are the overriding subjects of almost every major scene in *The Group*. To be sure, McCarthy’s notorious reliance on irony and free indirect discourse frequently lend these scenes an element of humor. But while she could certainly exhibit a flair for satire, McCarthy was nothing if not a thoroughgoing realist. *The Group*’s tightly focalized scenes and abundance of social and psychological detail suggest that she was less interested in provoking readers’ scornful laughter than accurately evoking the paranoid, stultifying world her characters inhabit.

For example, what worries Dottie most after she loses her virginity to the poor, misogynistic painter Dick Brown, a friend of Kay’s husband, is what Kay might say about her to Dick. It strikes us as bizarre that of all things “she could not bear the idea of Kay dissecting and analyzing her and explaining her medical history and Mother’s clubs and Daddy’s business connections and their exact social position in Boston” (*G*, 51). Once Dottie tells Kay of the affair herself and undergoes the humiliation of obtaining a diaphragm at a women’s clinic, it begins to seem as though this offspring of Boston Brahmins has overcome her fears. But as she waits for Dick in a public park with her

⁸⁰ Mary McCarthy, “Mary McCarthy at the 92nd Street Y,” November 10, 1963, 1:12:50.

newfangled contraception, she grows increasingly apprehensive and self-conscious. How will she explain what she had been up to that day to Helena, her roommate at the Vassar Club? What if “someone she knew” saw her waiting (*G*, 76)? It does not help that during her visit to the clinic, Kay had sought to impress upon her “just how big a step it was, much more than losing your virginity,” to get fitted for a diaphragm (*G*, 62). Kay is dismayed to witness Dottie use her “real name” at the clinic, “[a]s though she were living in Russia or Sweden, instead of the old U.S.A.,” where even some of the most open-minded people, like Kay’s father, “would look at her askance if they could see what she was up to” (*G*, 63). In the end, the potential for public exposure proves too much for Dottie to bear and drives her into the security of a traditional marriage.

During a dinner party she hosts at her apartment, Libby regales her guests with a story about a woman who was brutally assaulted when she invited a cab driver back to her home to enlighten him about communism. Intended as an object lesson in the dangers of consorting with “the workingman” (*G*, 224), McCarthy uses Libby’s telling of the story to illustrate how women in her milieu use gossip to enforce gender norms. Not willing to let Libby’s object lesson go uncontested, McCarthy ironizes it by having Libby get duped into a similar scenario when her aristocratic suitor Nils almost rapes her. It is telling that even as the victim, Libby is stricken with dread at the thought that her friends might discover “the shaming, sickening, beastly thing that had happened, or failed to happen” to her (*G*, 236).

In other instances, the domestic interior itself becomes the cause of shame. Although Libby does not live with Polly, she tries to talk her out of taking an influential

editor home for fear her shabby rooming house might redound on her friends. “[D]on’t,” Libby pleads with her, “please don’t, take Gus into that place of yours and introduce him to all those weird characters. For my sake, if not for your own, don’t” (*G*, 228). Libby is concerned that both Polly and her living quarters give off “the smell of having seen better days ... and not making those crucial distinctions any more, not having any real ambition.” Consequently, she worries that the exposure of Polly’s reduced situation in society might rub off on her and affect her own career. In Kay’s tragic case, domestic scandal not only exiles her from her own household but also prevents her from seeking asylum among the women she considers her friends. When she confronts her husband about his affair with one of her former classmates, he has her committed to a psychiatric hospital. Here, she refuses to be seen by members of the group, as if the only thing more terrifying than her confinement is the thought of her friends getting wind of it. “If you tell my friends,” Kay warns her husband during a moment of tentative reconciliation, “I’ll kill you” (*G*, 349). Eventually Polly discovers Kay’s whereabouts and lobbies for her release, but McCarthy has made her point. The system of reciprocal relationships that these women adopted in college and vowed to carry out in the world crumble in the face of domestic surveillance that makes women of the upper-classes terrified of any lapse in self-control. That Kay, even when wrongfully incarcerated, is afraid to call on her friends indicates the effectiveness of this form of social discipline.

As these episodes show, the members of the group are torn between their prerogatives as independent, well-educated women and the domestic norms enforced by their class. Vassar has taught them to enjoy the former, while their affluent upbringings

have trained them to obey the latter. McCarthy brilliantly individuates her characters to show how women could navigate this dilemma differently and still end up in similar positions. Libby, a careerist determined not to offend the wrong people, pursues the most conventional path to success, all but shunning those she finds useless or beneath her. Kay, the most status-conscious member of the group experiences a “nervous breakdown at the thought of having to be ‘nobody’ instead of the wife of a genius” (*G*, 384). Her “ruthless hatred of poor people” resembles Libby’s pronounced professional elitism (*G*, 98). With age, both women seem to grow increasingly vapid intellectually. Lakey offers an illuminating counterexample. Introduced as supercilious and snide, she is nonetheless the least concerned of the group with how others view her. As Dottie explains in the first chapter: “Lakey is her own law” (*G*, 22). Only Lakey is capable of making *outré* life choices: she moves to Europe, earns her PhD, and comes out as a lesbian. This distance from the group gives her the opportunity to cultivate her mind and to mature emotionally. When she returns from Europe, the rest of the group observes that she has become “more human in many ways than they remembered” (*G*, 390). In thus setting her in contrast with Kay and Libby, McCarthy implies that the more embedded one is in the upper class, the more she will crave the recognition and approval from its members. The more she craves approval, the more she will fear committing the transgressions that might lead to her self-actualization.

And yet it is important to keep in mind that Lakey’s radical decisions do not cost her in economic terms. The same holds true for the other members of the group who hew to the values touted at Vassar. Polly not only pursues a rewarding career but also weds a

successful man willing to support her and her spendthrift father. As the only child of wealthy, doting parents, Helena is free to lead an independent life in New York City once she gives up teaching. As McCarthy explained in an essay on her collegiate experience, “the statistical fate of the Vassar girl, thanks to Mother and Dad and the charge account, is already decreed.”⁸¹ Liberal subjectivity requires freedom from economic necessity and a progressive education. But what happens when this is not enough? Although the women of the group have been “trained in progressive ideas,” come of age at the apogee of liberalism, and have the practical means to enjoy their social and political rights, they nevertheless remain virtual prisoners to the desires, prohibitions, and anxieties of their class.⁸² The upper-class culture of domestic surveillance infuses the lives of privileged women with its own equivalent of the fear ladder. This feminine fear ladder is all the more effective at deterring Left political consciousness because it operates in the realm of private life, which appears extraneous to work and politics.

1.3 Failure Begins at Home

McCarthy was perhaps too much of an isolato to embrace “the type of affiliation later favored by the progressive social movements that emerged in the Cold War era, all of which advocated bonds of intimacy and group identification.”⁸³ Indeed, in its depiction of how the feminine sphere stifles women’s ambitions, *The Group*, like *The Naked and*

⁸¹ McCarthy, *On the Contrary*, 202.

⁸² McCarthy, “Mary McCarthy at the 92nd Street Y.”

⁸³ Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 73. For an analysis of McCarthy’s shifting political opinions see Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, *Mary McCarthy: Gender, Politics, and the Postwar Intellectual* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

the Dead, advances its own idiosyncratic critique of identity politics. The heroines who achieve self-actualization can do so only at the cost of rejecting solidarity with women of their class. But in showing how fear tactics prevented women from achieving what they set out to do even as they attained greater economic and political freedom, McCarthy, anticipates radical feminists like Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, who emphasized the role of the private sphere over and against that of formal politics in maintaining inequalities between men and women.⁸⁴ Domestic surveillance operates much like the fear ladder to keep female subjects in their place, but it does so principally through the coercive power of socialization rather than by means of brute force. It thus represents an alternative model for how the ruling class maintains an inegalitarian socioeconomic order. This model presupposes a social world underwritten by enlightenment ideals and material abundance. While such circumstances only existed among the rich in the 1930s, during the postwar period they became far more widespread, as politicians reached the consensus “that protecting consumers and encouraging mass consumption, more than protecting producers and promoting savings, were the principal responsibilities of the

⁸⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 176-177; Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (Verso: New York, 2015), 24-28. The link between gender and class — so crucial and explicit in *The Group* — is all but effaced in the works of Millett and Firestone, who conceive of upper-class white women as surrogates for all women. That said, Firestone clearly grasped the nature of the Mary McCarthy case. Here is her description of the female artist’s predicament: “In those cases where a woman, tired of losing at a male game, has attempted to participate in culture *in a female way*, she has been put down and misunderstood, named by the (male) cultural establishment ‘Lady Artist,’ i.e. trivial, inferior. And even where it must be (grudgingly) admitted she is ‘good,’ it is fashionable — a cheap way to indicate one’s own ‘seriousness’ and refinement of taste — to insinuate that she is good but irrelevant” (143, emphasis in the original). She then goes on to pose the following question to illustrate her point that literature focused primarily on “the female side of things” is no less “limited” than male-centered literature: “Is Mary McCarthy in *The Group* really so much worse a writer than Norman Mailer in *The American Dream* [sic]? Or is she perhaps describing a reality that men, the controllers and critics of the Cultural Establishment, can’t tune in on?”

liberal state.”⁸⁵ The postwar economic boom and liberal government’s creation of a “consumer’s republic” (not to be confused with a welfare state) promised to eliminate any reason to use violence as a means of controlling certain segments of the lower classes.⁸⁶

At the same time, these conditions amplified the importance of social control by means of the cultural sphere. As Herbert Marcuse noted in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), subaltern groups were increasingly acculturated to ruling class ideology through the technological innovations of mass society: “The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life — much better than before — and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change.”⁸⁷ The objects Marcuse mentions here constitute the infrastructure of a prosperous domestic life, a fact which suggests that the household functions as the primary site whereby ruling class ideology is internalized and enforced.

In *The Group*, we indeed see that upper-class women maintain their collective subordination by surveilling and policing each other’s personal lives according to the

⁸⁵ Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 168.

⁸⁶ On the role of consumption in New Deal politics and postwar liberalism see Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic* (New York: Vintage, 2004). On consumer society as a form of social control see Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 8-55. Marcuse tends to see American consumer society and European welfare states as interchangeable, but they are distinct. One seeks to democratize access to markets while the other enshrines individual access to public goods (e.g. healthcare, social security, housing, collective bargaining, etc.) as a basic constitutional right. For a concise explanation of the differences between America and Europe in this regard, see Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, *European Foundations of the Welfare State*, trans. John Veit-Wilson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 225-247.

⁸⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 12.

principles they learned at home from their “stuffy and frightened” parents. To the extent that they thereby experienced the benefits of “a good way of life” while simultaneously reproducing the very culture that “militated against qualitative change” in their professional and intellectual lives, McCarthy’s Vassar girls prefigure the one-dimensional man of the so-called affluent society. It would seem, then, that Marcuse’s “one-dimensional society” emerges from the mass feminization of the working-class majority on the order of ruling class women, which means the crucial frontier of social control and political struggle is a distinctly feminine one. *The Group* insists that the household, with its “female power ... of domestic surveillance,” deserves greater attention in Left thought as a guarantor of capitalist class relations than the traditionally masculine realms of war and state violence.⁸⁸ His blind spot notwithstanding, Marcuse unwittingly vindicated McCarthy’s experiment. As it turned out, the formation of upper-class female subjects — “nice girls” as Mailer called them — in the 1930s is key to understanding how the forces of reaction stymied revolutionary change into the 1960s.⁸⁹

Mailer was having none of this. For his part, the success or failure of radical Left politics always came down to the issue of violence. One either used it or fell victim to it. *The Naked and the Dead* is consequently a parable about the need for the Left to use the military’s disciplinary apparatus — the fear ladder — to execute its own political agenda. The Left, Mailer contends, must produce its own versions of General Cummings and Sergeant Croft if it wants to defeat a powerful and emboldened crypto-fascist Right.

⁸⁸ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 19.

⁸⁹ Mailer, “The Mary McCarthy Case,” 1.

When the fascist state envisioned by Cummings failed to materialize in the postwar period, Mailer did not lose interest in violence as a political tactic, but he did develop new justifications for its use. With violent proletarian rebellion becoming an increasingly remote prospect, he turned his attention to the figure of “the Negro,” who continued to live in constant fear of state terror. Black Americans, Mailer claimed, had evolved a culture of “hip” that was conducive to psychopathic violence and could thus potentially overturn the liberal consensus in favor of a “radical vision of the universe.”⁹⁰ For Mailer, the only way to escape the oppressive ideological and cultural conformity of Cold War liberalism was “to encourage the psychopath in oneself.” He simply supplanted Croft and Cummings as role models for the Left with the hipster and his “white Negro” counterpart. In doing so, he imagined a revolutionary scenario in America even more implausible and unlikely to succeed than the conventional Marxist one.

Mailer’s exaltation of violence, his desperate search for a new (male) revolutionary subject, and his attack on *The Group* are all of a piece. They show that his masculinist proletarian literary tradition was inadequate to the task of challenging the culture of mass consumption that displaced the dream of socialism. The onset of the Cold War and the increasing importance of state surveillance only made matters worse for collective novelists who followed in Mailer’s footsteps and shared his fascination with psychopathy, sadomasochism, and bloodletting. Whereas *The Group* is an important precursor to GANs like Joyce Carol Oates’s *them* (1969), which continue to place women

⁹⁰ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 343.

and the dynamics of the household at the center of collective narratives about revolutionary failure, *The Naked and the Dead* looks forward to the paranoid fantasies of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). In the latter, the Left's romance with revolutionary violence becomes all the more ludicrous and quixotic, as it is transmuted into the magical thinking of the comically-inept Counterforce and the radical death drive of the Schwarzkommandos, who prove the absurdity of embracing force as a tactic of resistance against America's omnipotent national security state. Postwar revolutionary failure thus occurs first as tragedy in *The Naked and the Dead* and repeats itself as farce in *Gravity's Rainbow*. No doubt, imagining the state's indomitable monopoly on technologies of violence as the answer to "the melancholy question" of why there is no socialism in America makes for titillating adventure stories. But it ultimately absolves us of the responsibility to create a more egalitarian society through collective action.⁹¹ And it does so by overlooking a no less disturbing but perhaps more politically viable path of escape from the prison-house of American exceptionalism, a path that begins in the comforts of hearth and home.

⁹¹ Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3-4.

2. The Revolution Will Be Novelized

The conservative writer Tom Wolfe famously traced the decline of the American social novel back to the sixties. It was at that time that “serious young writers”—many of them having come of age after Lionel Trilling popularized the view that class antagonisms were no longer the lifeblood of the novel—began “dismantling the realistic novel just as fast as they could think of ways to do it.”¹ Crystallized during the Red Decade of the thirties by writers on the Left, from literary giants like John Steinbeck and Richard Wright to lesser-known figures like Josephine Herbst, often under the robust auspices of the Communist Party USA and its cultural front organizations, “the big realistic novel, with its broad social sweep had put American literature up on the world stage for the first time.” No longer inclined to see the novel as a “secular news report,” sixties writers abandoned this longstanding tradition of the Great American Novel.² Adding insult to injury, they did so just as American society was undergoing a political and cultural revolution. Consequently, what Wolfe describes as “the big novels of the racial clashes, the hippie movement, the New Left, the Wall Street boom, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam” never materialized.³ By 1972 it was only too clear, as Wolfe put it in an article for *Esquire*, that “there is no novelist who will be remembered as the novelist who captured the sixties in America, or even in New York, in the sense that Thackeray was the chronicler of London in the 1840s and Balzac was the chronicler

¹ Tom Wolfe, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1989, 47, 48.

² Richard Locke, “Rabbit Returns; Updike was Always There—It’s Time We Noticed,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1971, Section BR, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

of Paris and all of France after the fall of the Empire.”⁴ Five years later, the liberal critic Morris Dickstein surveyed the literary culture of the sixties and conceded that “there is more than a grain of truth in Tom Wolfe’s simplistic account. The sixties were a moribund period for the realistic novel, and perhaps in consequence the commercial market for fiction declined precipitously.”⁵ Along with Wolfe, Dickstein contends that in this period “the dream of the Great American Novel disintegrated” and that “readers who look to the novels of the sixties to learn about society are sure to go awry.”⁶

At the same time, Dickstein considered it wrongheaded to lament the fact that sixties novels eschewed topicality and formal realism. For what works by Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, and Donald Barthelme lack in terms of “social commentary” they more than make up for in narrative virtuosity.⁷ It is “through their experiments in form” that these novelists “illuminate society.” Well before Fredric Jameson’s critical injunction to “always historicize” became gospel among literary critics, Dickstein had pioneered a “loosely Hegelian” approach that sought to establish an allegorical relationship between the shifting discursive tendencies of the sixties novel and coeval transformations in American society. According to his schema, the experimental “Borgesian phase” of late sixties literature, which crystallized “[b]etween 1967 to 1970,” corresponds to the “Weatherman phase” of sixties politics, “when the frustration of the often unrealistic hopes of [the mid-sixties] and the need for continual radicalization led to

⁴ Tom Wolfe, “Why They Aren’t Writing the Great American Novel Anymore,” *Esquire*, December 1972, 157.

⁵ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden* (New York: Norton, 2015), 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94, 94-95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

a state of guerilla warfare not only in politics and the universities but also in the arts.”⁸

Thus the militant anti-realism, flat affect, and miniaturist aesthetics characteristic of late sixties avant-garde literature are symptomatic of a political moment when radicals “lost touch with reality” and turned from resistance to revolution.⁹ To put this in Jamesonian terms, the Weather Underground is the “political unconscious” of late sixties literary style.

For all its ostensible concern with literature as an attempt to deal with the contradictions of its political moment in history, such a symptomatic reading fails to tell us anything about the literary thinking of the New Left. Indeed, the tendency to read avant-garde form as homologous to sociopolitical conditions leads critics like Dickstein to shortchange or simply overlook the more concrete, reciprocal relationship between literature and politics that prevailed during the Cold War era. What’s worse, this interpretive method lends credence to a conservative narrative that links the decline of American culture with the rise of sixties radicalism. In light of this, the burgeoning tendency to mine novels of the sixties for sociological and political content is a welcome one. Recent scholarship on post-World War II literature has given the lie to Dickstein’s claim that “[t]here was little good sociology in sixties novels, even among realists.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, while revisionist scholars have made it abundantly clear that “Wolfe

⁸ Ibid., 217.

⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰ Ibid., 95. I have in mind here the critical texts by Sally Bachner, Michael Szalay, and Stephen Schryer that I engage in this chapter. Other notable examples include Andrew Hoborek’s *Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Sean McCann’s *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

overshot the mark” and that “realism did not die out” in the sixties, they have not explained the precise character and significance of changes that occurred in the form of the social novel as “the tide of modernist and postmodernist fashion put [realism] on the defensive.”¹¹

This chapter clarifies the specific form that social realism took in the sixties and their immediate aftermath by focusing on two of the most important novels forged in the crucible of New Left politics: Sol Yurick’s *The Bag* (1968), and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). It argues that the sixties gave birth to a new kind of social novel organized, both diegetically and discursively, around the inability of traditional, thirties-style realism to represent the social contradictions of the Cold War liberal period, which saw the rise of urban unrest, the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, protests against the Vietnam war, and battles for welfare rights. These events inspired writers like Yurick and Piercy, who understood themselves as heirs of the social novel tradition touted by Wolfe, to anatomize the valences of revolutionary violence in unprecedented detail. As the contradictions of American life rendered the Left’s use of force at once morally imperative and quixotic, this antinomy found unique expression in New Left social novels. These novels invoke the aesthetic of social realism only to undermine it as their characters become increasingly invested in liberatory violence. In such narratives, departures from social realism signal the impossibility of negotiating one

¹¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 53.

of the era's most pressing dilemmas through the hegemonic discourse of political liberalism.

But reading Yurick and Piercy's novels alongside each other does more than reveal their shared critique of an earlier realism and its liberal underpinnings. It also brings into focus two competing trends within New Left thought. Although both saw violence as a necessary means of resolving class antagonisms, they nonetheless posited different mechanisms of revolutionary consciousness. In *The Bag*, Yurick depicts the gradual lumpenization of a modestly successful white novelist turned welfare investigator as he tries to write an essay exposing the indignities of urban poverty. What begins as his effort to document lumpen life through cross-class impersonation or "class transvestitism" culminates in him joining a riot. By embracing lumpenization over class transvestitism, Yurick's protagonist transcends the colonial relation between the white "professional managerial class" or PMC and black slum-dwellers that became a flash point in sixties politics owing to the expansion of urban welfare rolls. In so doing, he carves out a new vanguard role for white male intellectuals amid the rise of Black Power nationalism, anticipating the political jockeying of the Weather Underground. *Woman on the Edge of Time*, by contrast, focuses on the radicalization of a Mexican American welfare mother who finds herself committed to a mental institution. While being poked and prodded by megalomaniacal medical professionals, she discovers that she can commune with inhabitants of a future egalitarian society that has done away with what Michel Foucault called the "carceral archipelago." The activation of her political consciousness is thus conveyed through a shift from social realism to speculative fiction.

When the heroine's psychic visions of the future inspire her to slay her captors, the link between experimental form and radical praxis becomes palpable. So, too, does the novel's central thesis that social transformation depends not on the lumpenization of white professionals but on the willingness of the lumpenproletariat to "fight back against this professional control using any means necessary."¹² Piercy's work thus gives voice to an ascendant postmodern tendency in Left politics that privileged the revolutionary agency of subjects interpellated along multiple axes of oppression. At the same time, Piercy's flights into fantasy underscore the failure of the New Left to imagine a plausible scenario in which the underclass could achieve revolutionary consciousness without the mediatory interference of the PMC.

2.1 Sol Yurick and the Art of Lumpenization

Sol Yurick's *The Bag* is a confounding book, not least because of its style. That was the consensus that emerged after it appeared in the watershed year of 1968.¹³ The main problem, as Ronald Sukenick put it in *The New York Review of Books*, was that the book refused to adhere to the form of the social novel. Much to Sukenick's dismay, Yurick had written "a novel about poverty in America, about poverty programs, about the New Left, about Welfare, about the Lower East Side" that toggled between the

¹² Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 148.

¹³ Perhaps this explains why the reviews themselves tended to be so puzzling. Like several other critics, Richard Elman could not make up his mind about the political message of the book: "*The Bag!* Is it New Left tract? Or an allegory about corruption... The trouble is that it is always asserting the observed, the real, that which is, and then doubling back..." (34) Despite assuring us that "Yurick's style is fluent and mimetic" (4) and that his work offers an "accurate depiction of the sociology of despair," Elman concludes that *The Bag* "is a potpourri of failures posing as a novel" (34). See "Everybody Has One," *The New York Times*, May 19, 1968, BR 4, 34.

sociological reportage of Dreiser and Zola on one hand and the belletristic bravura of Joyce and Faulkner on the other.¹⁴ “If you want to write a naturalistic novel, it might be better to stick to a naturalistic style,”¹⁵ he complains, as if to suggest that *The Bag*’s subject matter demands what Michael Denning called the more “straightforward representationalism” of social realism.¹⁶ Regarding Yurick’s literary models, Sukenick was not off the mark. In an unpublished essay on how he came to write *The Bag*, Yurick explained that he indeed “had to rediscover Zola, Balzac, Dickens, and these being inadequate, Marx.”¹⁷ In addition to classic nineteenth-century social realists he acknowledged kinship with the proletarian novelists of the thirties, going so far as to refer to *The Bag* as “my proletarian novel”¹⁸ and insisting that writers “must still look to the direction indicated by the Dos Passos of *U.S.A.*”¹⁹ But if *The Bag* is not altogether assimilable to this storied social realist tradition and its high modernist pyrotechnics seem somewhat strained, the fault lies not in Yurick’s craftsmanship, as some critics claimed, so much as the set of literary-historical conditions that made it, according to him, “quite impossible to write novels in the old way.”²⁰ Yurick’s attempt to leapfrog from social

¹⁴ Ronald Sukenick, “Not My Bag,” *New York Review of Books*, March 13, 1969.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2010), 118.

¹⁷ Sol Yurick, “Burning the Bank of America,” n.d., Box 10, Sol Yurick Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York.

¹⁸ Sol Yurick to unknown correspondent, May 15, 1973, Box 17, Sol Yurick Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York. Interestingly, Yurick dedicated *The Bag* to the proletarian writer and former Communist Party member Warren Miller, author of the classic novel of gang life *The Cool World* (1959). On Miller’s activity in the CPUSA see Alan Wald, *American Night: the Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 21, 293, 313.

¹⁹ Sol Yurick, “Symposium Questionnaire,” Box 35, Sol Yurick Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York.

²⁰ Sol Yurick, “Burning the Bank of America,” n.d., Box 10.

realism to “sociological surrealism” marks his work as a product of three intersecting postwar trends that came to a head in the late 1960s: Cold War anticommunism, Fordism, and a new discourse on poverty and race.²¹

Born in the Bronx in 1925 to working-class parents who were active members of the Communist Party, Yurick came of age during the Depression and began his writing career amid the Cold War backlash against Popular Front cultural politics. Anticipating recent revisionist scholarship on Cold War culture, Yurick’s 1972 essay “The Politics of the Imagination,” asserts that he and other writers “were taught, in the fifties, to eschew the obviously political,” especially the proletarian novel: “Protest novels came close to being the eldest literary sin of all. Proletarian fiction was a bust...Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Hemingway triumphed.”²² As he saw it, “Art went from the dangerously social of the thirties to the abstract expressionistic [of the fifties].”²³ Rather than explore the dynamics of social relations, “fiction writers came more and more to take extensive flights of whimsey, head-biography, experimentalism, more and more free of restraints, playing extremer games with time and space, paratactically listing things, events, people.”²⁴ To comply with the Cold War imperative toward containment, the novel “became a personalistic index.”²⁵

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sol Yurick, “The Politics of the Imagination: The Problem of Consciousness,” in *Literature and Revolution*, ed. George Abbot White and Charles Newman (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 501. See also Thomas Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1991); Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

²³ Sol Yurick, “Burning the Bank of America,” n.d., Box 10.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Yurick exaggerated the erasure of proletarian literature in the fifties. In their influential work *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (1957), Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, two veterans of the anti-Stalinist Old Left, were only too eager to characterize “the individual novels and poems that have been grouped under the rubric of proletarian literature [as] actually quite various in tone, meaning, and value.”²⁶ Howe and Coser spoke for many establishment critics when they spelled out why certain proletarian novels would continue to stand the test of time: “Almost always, those novels that were written out of a private feeling of rebellion or indignation yet were not chained to an explicit politics—James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan*, John Dos Passos’ *USA*, Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locusts*—have survived far better as works of art than the books written close to the shadow of Stalinism.”²⁷ The message that the éminences grises of the literary establishment conveyed to young writers of the fifties was not that proletarian literature “was a bust” and should be consigned to the dustbin. Nor was it that class had become less important to the novel. It was that the expression of strong ideological commitment ran counter to the creation of great literature. In particular, it was the proletarian “conversion” narrative that had the anti-Stalinist critical establishment seeing red.

As Walter Rideout explained, proletarian novels generally fell into four categories: “(1) those centered about a strike; (2) those concerned with the development

²⁶ Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Praeger: New York, 1957), 305-306.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 307.

of an individual's class-consciousness and his conversion to Communism; (3) those dealing with the 'bottom dogs,' the lowest layers of society; and (4) those describing the decay of the middle class."²⁸ The conversion narrative was doubly disliked for its ideological content and conservative aesthetics, which tended to forego the highly self-reflexive discourse characteristic of formal modernism.²⁹ The veneration of modernism as the benchmark of literariness in the Cold War university went a long way toward ensuring that anyone looking to revive the conversion narrative would have to reckon with the likes of Joyce and Faulkner. The hegemony of modernism had an upside in that "modernist autopoetics" afforded writers a more sophisticated way of representing the internal contradictions and modalities of class consciousness.³⁰ And yet judging by the confused response to *The Bag*, which is a neo-conversion novel about one man's turn to political violence, this much is clear: adapting the formal techniques of modernism to the conversion narrative fundamentally destabilized conventional notions of social realism.

It could not have helped the novel's reception that Yurick also revised the conversion narrative in ways that contradicted orthodox Marxism. *The Bag* shamelessly dispenses with the "labor metaphysic" that underwrote Old Left literature and politics.³¹

²⁸ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society, 1900-1954* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1956), 171.

²⁹ On criticism of the conversion narrative, including its formal conservatism, see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929, 1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 129, 280-281.

³⁰ I borrow the term "modernist autopoetics" from Mark McGurl who uses it to describe "one of the routine operations of literary modernism," whereby artists draw attention to their self-formation and the discursive status of literature. See *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 46-56. For a discussion of the institutionalization of modernism under the auspices of the anti-Stalinist Left, see David R. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 287-292.

³¹ C. Wright Mills, *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Sommers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 263.

The typical thirties-era conversion narrative traces the “process whereby a worker becomes class conscious or a middle-class individual comes to identify himself with the proletarian masses.”³² This reflects the fact that the genre emerged during the heyday of the labor movement, which gained momentum after the system of mass production designed by Henry Ford became the basis for capitalist accumulation in the United States.³³ The explosion of labor radicalism in the thirties—epitomized by the wave of sit-down strikes that occurred at General Motors in 1936-1937 and the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938—reaffirmed one of the basic tenets of Marxism: that any hope for a socialist revolution lay with the industrial working class. But in the words of the political scientist Cedric Johnson, “The revolutionary potential of the American mass worker was dashed by the advent of the consumer society.”³⁴

The postwar economic boom “brought Fordism to maturity,” setting the stage for more cooperative relations between capital and labor.³⁵ According to Lizabeth Cohen, workers acquired the “rewards of material prosperity and social integration in return for ceding shopfloor control and company governance to management, and for accepting private corporate welfare such as pensions and health insurance in place of an expanded and more social democratic welfare state.”³⁶ This is what was known as the “‘Fordist Compromise’...in reference to the United Auto Workers paradigmatic contract with

³² Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, 180

³³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 125-140.

³⁴ Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007), 6.

³⁵ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 133.

³⁶ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 155. See also, Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 8.

General Motors in 1950.”³⁷ With remarkable speed, the Fordist “family wage” and Keynesian fiscal policies transformed industrial workers into mass consumers, recruiting them to a bourgeois way of life that strengthened their identification with the capitalist class.³⁸ Labor unions no longer stood at the forefront of the battle for greater industrial and social democracy. During the postwar era, unions even came to symbolize a strain of conservatism that culminated in the figure of the “hard hat.” Rabidly anticommunist, the hard hat was a “white, usually ‘ethnic’ blue collar worker” who represented “the answer to the black power militant and the welfare slacker, because his humble breadwinner ambitions, his unbridled patriotism, and his unflinching work ethic were celebrated as contrasts with their unreasonable demands.”³⁹

When he began writing *The Bag* in 1966, it was obvious to Yurick that the radical novel, like Marxist thought more generally, could no longer invest its hopes for the future in the traditional mass worker. Indeed, he attributed his decision to avoid writing about workers in *The Bag* to their increasing embourgeoisement and support for the Cold War: “The most organized segment of the working class were by the time the movement started, the most retrograde segment, their leaders entirely coopted, many of them working for the CIA... Thus, to have written about the worker would have been to get

³⁷ Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 156.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁹ Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 42. To be sure, this conception of the worker was arguably a natural extension of the masculinist, racialized imagery of Popular Front cultural production. See Denning, *Cultural Front*, 267-268 and Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 165. For accounts of the purging of Communist elements from the labor movement and the notorious hard hat riot of 1970, in which members of the building trades attacked peaceful antiwar protestors, see James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1954-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 53-55 and 755-756.

into the history of labor struggles in America and why they were made to fail.”⁴⁰ Instead Yurick’s neo-conversion narrative chronicles how a middle-class intellectual named Sam Miller acquires revolutionary consciousness by identifying with one of the figures that made it necessary to invent the hard hat, namely, the welfare slacker. Yurick seized on this element of the so-called lumpenproletariat as the new mainspring of revolutionary power.

Karl Marx coined the term lumpenproletariat to describe “the lowest sediment of the relative surplus population” that comprised “vagabonds, criminals, and prostitutes.” Members of this group had often appeared in proletarian literature of the thirties and forties, especially “the bottom dogs” novel.⁴¹ But as Nathaniel Mills points out, exponents of this genre “narrated underclass life largely in accord with classical Marxist assumptions about the lumpenproletariat’s apolitical or reactionary character.”⁴² While some African American writers of the thirties did assert the revolutionary potential of this class, their insights could not become doxa until the Fordist Compromise, which generally excluded blacks, led mainstream observers to equate the problem of poverty with the so-called Negro question.⁴³ At that point, lumpenproletarian existence became synonymous with the black ghetto and the obverse of postwar consumer society.

⁴⁰ Sol Yurick to Wilfried Hülsemann, January 27, 1974, Sol Yurick Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 797.

⁴² Nathaniel Mill, *Ragged Revolutionaries: The Lumpenproletariat and African American Marxism in Depression-Era Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 12.

⁴³ I will have more to say about representations of the lumpenproletariat in African American literature in the following chapter. On the racialization of poverty discourse in the sixties, see Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving poor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 106-107.

Michael Harrington's groundbreaking exposé *The Other America* (1962) not only helped make poverty one of the defining public policy issues of the sixties, but it also popularized the idea that the black ghetto fostered a different way of life and subjectivity. "There is a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a worldview of the poor," Harrington wrote: "To be impoverished is to be an internal alien, to grow up in a culture that is radically different from the one that dominates society."⁴⁴ Designating Harlem the quintessential "home of America's internal aliens," Harrington marshaled evidence that the culture of poverty hindered black advancement and thus warranted some form of government redress.⁴⁵ When he declared that these poor "need an American Dickens to record the smell, texture, and quality of their lives," however, he failed to consider how postwar industrial production had changed the conditions of possibility for social realism.⁴⁶ From the standpoint of the radical novelist, the poor could not be considered apart from other classes, and the working-classes had come to see themselves as separate from the poor. If the working class had come to identify its goals with the "affluent society," then perhaps only those "internal aliens" steeped "in a radically different culture" had access to revolutionary consciousness.⁴⁷ Viewed from this angle, poverty was not so much a handicap as a source of political empowerment. Yurick came to precisely this conclusion during the mid sixties, as he became increasingly involved in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the flagship organization of the New Left, and

⁴⁴ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁷ John Kenneth Galbraith coined this phrase to describe the culture of abundance that flourished during the postwar boom in the US. See *The Affluent Society* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998).

determined to respond to Harrington's call for a Dickensian treatment of contemporary poverty.⁴⁸

As I explained in the previous chapter, the same idea animates Norman Mailer's infamous 1957 treatise on the White Negro. Mailer had suggested that the sex and crime-ridden culture of Hip purveyed by black urban jazzmen and their white hipster acolytes had the power to liberate postwar society from "the mean empty hypocrisies of mass conformity."⁴⁹ Part minstrel, part class transvestite, Mailer's hipster was a white intellectual who had "absorbed the existential synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a White Negro."⁵⁰ With his ability to mediate between the black lumpenproletariat and white mass society, the White Negro was supposed to serve as the vanguard of a new revolutionary class. On the face of it, then, Yurick's *The Bag* recapitulated the theory of the White Negro, which Mailer had himself novelized in his bestselling *An American Dream* (1965). Despite their shared symbolism, however, Mailer and Yurick's projects reflect different attitudes toward the "professional managerial class"—one liberal, the other radical.

According to Barbara and John Ehrenreich, the PMC is made up of "salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist

⁴⁸ Yurick, "Politics of the Imagination," 503. Yurick writes: "Michael Harrington had called for a new Dickens to chronicle the plight of the poor, that invisible nation, and to some extent I saw myself in that tradition...but what I was discovering was that Dickens had been soft, reformist, unwilling to face certain realities..."

⁴⁹ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 357

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

class relations.”⁵¹ After the culture industry bowdlerized and repackaged it for mass consumption, Hip culture came to function as an important means of reconciling members of the PMC to their administrative role in relation to the lower classes. As Michael Szalay puts it, “Hip conjured only to stylize the social relations that obtained between the PMC and the working class whose labor it was employed to oversee.”⁵² In the case of white collar workers, this process deflected their attention away from the fact they represented capitalism’s first line of defense against the working-class. As a form of “false consciousness,” Hip contributed significantly to the realignment of the Democratic Party in the sixties by enabling the white PMC to profess identification with black culture while subordinating black voters to technocratic governance.⁵³ Mailer’s famous description of John F. Kennedy as a “hip” figure offers one example of how liberals turned to Hip culture to interpellate black and whites alike. But *An American Dream* really gives the game away. Szalay astutely reads the novel’s story of a hip, Democratic Party politician named Stephen Rojack “who must physically best a hyper-masculine jazz musician, Shago Martin, who grew up struggling on the mean streets of Harlem,” as an expression of the white PMC’s desire to establish its dominance over the black working class, “from whence derived the preponderance of the Democrats’ black votes.”⁵⁴ In

⁵¹ Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, “The Professional Managerial Class,” *Radical America* 2, no. 2 (March-April 1977), 13.

⁵² Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 23.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

Mailer's fiction the White Negro thus becomes at once a trope and an instrument of black subjugation.

The Bag critiques this version of postwar liberal politics from the Left. Its main target is the welfare system, which, alongside civil rights, became the ultimate symbol of Democratic Party patronage to black voters after the number of blacks, especially black women, on Aid to Families with Dependent Children skyrocketed under the Johnson administration.⁵⁵ The sudden uptick of black women on AFDC, coincided with increasing displays of defiance and self-assertion among the black population, from urban riots to calls for Black Power and expanded welfare rights.⁵⁶ For many radicals, the administration of AFDC and other social welfare programs perfectly encapsulated the hollowness of white liberal overtures to blacks who could not enjoy the spoils of Fordism due to discrimination and creeping deindustrialization. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton articulated the radicals' point of view in their book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1967) when they wrote that “[m]any of the social welfare agencies—public and private—frequently pretend to offer ‘uplift’ services; in reality they end up creating a system which dehumanizes the individual and perpetuates his dependency. Conscious or unconscious, the paternalistic attitude of many of these agencies is no different from that of many missionaries going into Africa.”⁵⁷ Carmichael and Hamilton went on to call this “welfare colonialism,” arguing that anything less than

⁵⁵ Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 187.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 222-247, 329.

⁵⁷ Kwame Toure and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 18.

indigenous control over the political and economic institutions governing black life would lead to “prolonged destructive guerilla warfare.”⁵⁸

Having worked at the New York City Department of Welfare as a social investigator for five years in the 1950s, Yurick was no stranger to the welfare colonialism that so often pitted white bureaucrats like himself against their largely black clientele. *The Bag* draws heavily on his experiences as a welfare worker to offer one of the most scathing indictments of that dynamic in postwar literature. But in the wake of Black Power, it would not suffice simply to condemn the welfare system. The most pressing task for white New Leftists, the majority of whom belonged to the PMC, was to figure out how to combat the prevailing liberal order without reproducing the colonial antagonism in a different guise. Thus, Yurick recapitulates the established tradition of traversing class and racial boundaries through discursive performance only to reject it in favor of radical self-destruction.

Over the course of *The Bag*, the novel’s protagonist inhabits three distinct yet imbricated subject positions, each of which corresponds to a stage in his development toward radical consciousness. We first encounter Sam Miller in the book’s opening chapter as an apathetic caseworker at the New York City Welfare Department who has recently abandoned a promising career as a novelist for fear of selling out. By the end of that chapter, however, Miller has instigated a violent confrontation between a welfare client named Minnie Devlin and the police that convinces him to resume his literary

⁵⁸ Ibid., 183, xi.

career—only this time he resolves to write a “fact-piece” on poverty for a liberal magazine.⁵⁹ Aiming to present a case study of a “typical welfare client,” Miller rents a studio on the impoverished Lower East Side and uses his position as a caseworker to process an aid application for himself under the alias Mr. Alpha, making up his mind to “budget himself as if he *had* to live on a welfare budget”(104). With this decision, he embarks on an experiment in class transvestitism that recalls previous efforts by Stephen Crane and James Agee. As Miller assumes the mantles of caseworker, writer, and class transvestite, we discover how each such perspective fails to give him epistemological purchase on the lumpenproletariat. It is only when Miller has exhausted the discursive strategies of the PMC that he becomes conscious of the poor as a seething, roiling mass of revolutionary energy.

Yurick’s autopoetic narrative not only thematizes discourse but lays it bare as a device. The novel’s multiple narrative voices frequently emulate the discursive practices specific to Miller’s different subject positions. Thus, in the first chapter, which revolves mainly around Miller’s encounter with the recently evicted Minnie at the welfare center, the omniscient voice adopts the drab, impersonal language of bureaucratese. In this way, Yurick shows how the discourse of the welfare sector at once defines and determines the treatment of welfare recipients. The following passage sets the tone for the encounter, which ends with Minnie’s beating and arrest:

Everyone thinks that the unit is aware of the presence of the evicted ADC, but after a long time it becomes clear that they have forgotten or they have chosen to overlook the matter. The Intake supervisor, in a rage, finally talks directly to the

⁵⁹ Sol Yurick, *The Bag* (New York: Trident, 1968), 94. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *B*.

worker's supervisor and threatens to make a report to the case supervisor. Mr. Connor transmits the message to the worker as he is about to go out and have his afternoon coffee break. There is no time for the worker to really read the case, only the last entries...but he doesn't have to. Old story. Cut-and-dried. Twelve children...three out of the house...misspent funds...eviction...unreachable...thousands of agency contacts...(32)

The narrator refers to Minnie and Miller by their social status—"ADC" and "worker," respectively—rather than their given names. But while ADC is clearly shorthand for welfare recipient, its use in this case also conveys the sense that Minnie, whom the narrator identifies as "a big fat woman" with a "[b]lack sullen face" and five unruly children in tow, instantiates poverty (34). Likewise, as a white middle-class man, Miller is the archetype of the worker who administers ADC. By referring to Minnie and Miller in these terms the narrator reveals that the seemingly objective language of the administrative state is in fact deeply racialized and indicative of liberal efforts to regulate the urban poor. In other words, a colonial point of view inheres in the discourse of welfare bureaucracy. This is reinforced at the story level by Miller's a priori dismissal of Minnie's case, which has been temporarily reassigned to him due to exigent circumstances, on the basis of a few of stock phrases: "misspent funds," "eviction," "unreachable." The last of these terms is used as shorthand for the hardcore lumpenproletariat throughout the novel. Armed with this rational, fact-based vocabulary, Miller and his colleagues can feel justified in viewing Minnie as someone unworthy of serious attention and sympathy. Thus, by the time Miller sits down to interview Minnie about her new application for housing assistance, he has already been conditioned by the semantic field of casework to treat her like a veritable nonentity: "He hardly looked to see who his ADC was: he didn't know her: he knew her: it wasn't his case...but it was

open-and-shut” (33). As the narrative voice switches to free indirect discourse focalized through Miller, we see how his attention homes in on features of Minnie’s body that not only confirm his preconceptions but dehumanize her further. Minnie, he observes, is a “[b]ig big woman, almost as tall as him, wider than him, fat, black, smelling of...what was it? Whiskey? Bad underarm odor? Smell of an alien way of life and alien food: greensfart and perfume and soul-sweat, all stale. She wore an orange wig, a little askew. Debit...how could she afford?” Minnie’s obesity, smell, and clothing presumably betray how her funds were misspent and she wound up evicted. They also mark her as one of those internal aliens described by Harrington.

From Miller’s standpoint, this obligates her to play the role of the dutiful supplicant who cheerfully endures the indignities of white paternalism: “He smiled at the client. Client, wary, did not respond; she would not laugh. If she was going to get the money anyway, the least she could do was laugh. He would make her sweat...” (40) Minnie upsets Miller’s expectations of her by refusing to abase herself before him and boldly accusing him of racism: “I am no child, you hear? I am forty-one years old...you know what is wrong with you? You hate the colored people. Yousay, this is no human being here, yousay, this is a nigger...” (43) Her mounting fury catches Miller by surprise and soon leads the welfare center’s security guard to involve the police. Two officers arrive and violently subdue Minnie, while Miller looks on in “shameful glee” (49):

She tried to stand. The worker punched the case record. Kicked in the stomach, it doubled her up, and both cops, taking turns now, hit her on the head, the back as she turned away, hit her kidneys as she bent, and Miller pounded the case record as she straightened out, and she was hit along to a desk, beaten over it and turned on her back, her legs swinging free, her brown breasts free from the slitapart dress, the big belly up now and the red slip-panty seam split and the black bush

fluttering under the club as the case folder split and the fastener snapped and the brass pin shot out and her knees doubled up and her faceblood drooled to the composition desksurface and she bleated respectfully and the pain of Miller's grinning face and they smashed her great tits now and she somersaulted completely over the desk, her great brown arse and her gold dress-rags swirled in the air and she fell, landed, kneeling, slumped, hands hanging, her head bloody and bowed, whimpering, not able to backtalk and lip down anyone now, panting, pissing, frightshitting, dirtying up the bloodspotted floor (48-49).

Each blow delivered against Minnie by the cops is reenacted by Miller on her case record. His mindless drubbing of her file is an instance of reduction ad absurdum that drives home the point made earlier by the narrator's metonymic use of the term ADC: for the purposes of the caseworker, the client is whatever welfare discourse defines her to be. Thus, for Miller, Minnie is her casefile. By hitting it he expresses his vicarious desire to inflict pain on his client.

More importantly for my purposes, Miller's act demonstrates the cost of his need for Minnie to conform to the presumptions attached to her category as a welfare client. His disciplinary gesture backfires and the casefile, like Minnie, explodes, suggesting that she cannot be subjugated by epistemological means alone. Yurick Juxtaposes Miller's figurative act with Minnie's literal beating by the police to underscore the fact that law enforcement exists to perform the PMC's dirty work. Forced to confront the violence that sustains his middle-class existence, Miller responds in a way that seems odd for someone with his refined literary sensibility. Rather than make a show of disgust and horror, he exhibits uninhibited pleasure. This is evident in his "grinning face" as well as the lushly sadomasochistic description of the violence to which he bears witness. Sure enough, after Minnie has been taken away, Miller discovers that he has "an erection" (50). As a

novelist who could assume “control was his essence,” how does he reckon with a response to violence that is “beyond reason...the joyful animality that welled out of him...the *glee*...” (53)? The chapter ends with him on the phone with his agent, plotting his escape back to the publishing world. It seems Miller has caught sight of an inconvenient truth—that despite its claims to rationality and altruism the welfare system has taught him to revel in poor people’s suffering.

The poor do not fare much better when it comes to literature. If the discourses of welfare bureaucracy prevent Miller from seeing their humanity, then the world of belles lettres prevents him from seeing them at all. Miller’s return to literature is inaugurated by an opulent lunch at a fancy Italian restaurant with his agent and a magazine editor named Enshel, who bears an obvious resemblance to *Commentary*’s Norman Podhoretz. In a scene dripping with irony, Enshel commissions Miller to write an essay about the horrors of poverty over a three-course meal topped off with espresso and Cuban cigars. The delicious food, posh atmosphere, and attractive female patrons contrasts so sharply with the world of welfare work portrayed in the previous chapter as to give Miller the feeling that he has “been in hell too long” (103). Keeping up the Christian rhetoric, Yurick has Enshel conclude the meeting with a quote from the New Testament: “After all,” he says “the poor are always with us” (106). Whereupon Miller hallucinates an image of Minnie sashaying through the restaurant in an ironic comment on Enshel’s smug piety. Among the literati, the poor are conspicuous for their absence.

For this very reason, Miller quickly runs into problems carrying out his assignment. Located in a building on New York’s affluent Riverside Drive, Miller’s

writing studio ensures the separation of art and life, rich and poor, right down to its very layout: “He had deliberately chosen a room to work in that had no view other than the airshaft, which he curtained off so that he wouldn’t be distracted by anything” (144). Thus sealed off, Miller cannot even glimpse the vestiges of poverty etched in New York City’s tenement architecture, let alone a flesh-and-blood poor person.⁶⁰ Indeed all he can see is literature: “Above were crisscrossed narrow beams from which he had suspended sheets of Homosote onto which he pinned all his materials, newspaper clippings, photographs, posters, booklets on poverty and welfare, graphs, economic projections. He had also hung up theme maps and flow charts and used Program Evaluation and Review Technique. Paper scraps were everywhere.” He has become consumed by the discourse that historian Alice O’Connor describes as “poverty knowledge.”⁶¹ Such knowledge is “produced by a network of public agencies, think tanks, university-based and privately operated research institutes that traffics in the shared language and recognized methods of applied economics and policy analysis.” Is it not fitting, then, that Yurick describes Miller’s desk as “enclosed, like some kind of think tank?” Miller did not “sit down” but rather “*fused* himself into a paper network” in the hope of making his archetypal welfare recipient, “Mr. Alpha,” come to life. Once again Miller attempts to make the poor

⁶⁰ As Jacob Riis reported, the air-shaft was an “aesthetic” hallmark of the tenement slum: “Tenement-houses have no aesthetic resources. If any are to be brought to bear on them, they must come from the outside. There is the common hall with doors opening softly on every landing as the strange step is heard on the stairs, the air-shaft that seems always so busy letting out foul stenches from below that it has no time to earn its name by bringing down fresh air, the squeaking pumps that hold no water, and the rent that is never less than one week’s wages out of the four, quite as often half of the family earnings.” Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Scribner, 1890), 163-164.

⁶¹ Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

conform to a prefabricated discourse, and once again he fails miserably: “In spite of a feast of fact, Mr. Alpha did not thrive: he was as poor in his generation as he was in his theoretical pocket” (144-145). Anticipating O’Connor, Miller discovers that poverty knowledge, which does not “countenance knowledge honed in direct action or everyday experience... especially from being poor,” is itself impoverished.⁶² The only solution is “to go back in the field” and “see how the client lived at night” (146). And so begins Miller’s foray into class transvestitism.

Unable to imagine Mr. Alpha from the confines of bourgeois life on the Upper West Side with his wife and teenage daughter, Miller abruptly moves to the Lower East Side, the same ghetto where Minnie has been rehoused and nineteenth-century writers like Jacob Riis and Stephen Crane began the tradition of class transvestitism.⁶³ The turn-of-the-century originals claimed to discover “authentic knowledge” about the poor “through the act of embodiment.”⁶⁴ This knowledge had less to do with the raw facts and figures of poverty than the subjectivity of the poor. A writer like Crane would disguise himself as a member of the working poor in order to enter poor people’s spaces undetected and “translate” their way of life for middle-class readers.⁶⁵ In developing this documentary aesthetic, they made poor people’s private lives objects of public scrutiny and advanced “the production and vitalization of new forms of middle-class authority.”⁶⁶ The White Negro extended this project by framing the “mediatorial role” of the class

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Eric Schocket, *Vanishing Moments* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 105-142.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 142.

transvestite in explicitly racial terms and placing it in the service of the Democratic Party.⁶⁷ Miller's move to the Lower East Side and his decision to impersonate Mr. Alpha, whom he envisions as a black man, harken back to this peculiar tradition of seeking to "momentarily embody the Other."⁶⁸ The keyword here is "momentarily." When Miller begins accepting welfare checks in the name of Mr. Alpha, he tells himself that it is simply performative: "Simulation. Role acting. Total part. Great character. He promised himself to act it out a little better" (260). Miller can choose to renege on his "temporary vows of poverty" at any time, which is to say "he could always get away." Knowing this, he is dogged by doubts about the efficacy of the strategy he is pursuing. If he can go back to bourgeois life, then he is "not really like an Alpha, but more like one of the beat, hippie, bohemian kids" voyeuristically invading the neighborhood alongside him. Miller's project participates in the dispossession of the poor and can be understood as an extension of the same colonial relation that underwrites welfare liberalism. He soon realizes that the question he needs to answer is: "What did it feel like to know that you *couldn't* get away, really couldn't get away?"

The answer lies in lumpenization, a form of conversion that would liberate him from the corrupt cocoon of class transvestitism. To put his protagonist through this process, Yurick has Miller commit a series of transgressive acts whose cumulative effect is to destroy any chance he can return to bourgeois life. First, while still employed at the Welfare Department, Miller has an illicit sexual affair with Minnie and impregnates her.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 109.

Later on, in a surreal scene narrated in the black vernacular of Mr. Alpha, he beats and rapes his estranged wife when she shows up unannounced at his apartment in hopes of reconciling. Finally, after a riot erupts on the Lower East Side, setting off a chain of rebellions throughout the city, Miller is “fused into...the frenzy and joy of the mob” (448). Tellingly, this last renunciation of his class affiliation occurs almost immediately after Enshel rejects the final version of Miller’s article detailing life among welfare recipients on the Lower East Side. Enshel, echoing Harrington, had asked Miller to “do for the whole poverty scene what Dickens did for it”—that is, give readers a “feel” for what it means to be poor (232). Appalled by the result Enshel accuses Miller of resorting to “shock treatment” and “a bag of tricks out of such writers as [Hubert] Selby [Jr.], or William Burroughs” in order “to persuade us that the disadvantaged, the poor in particular, the Negro most specifically, represents a kind of inverted culture-hero of the day” (409). In closing, Enshel throws Miller’s outrage against himself back in his face: “after your season in hell, you can always escape” (411). Coming on the heels of this rejection, Miller’s assimilation into the marauding “mobbeast,” is meant to assure us that his transformation is complete (443). His willingness to carry out acts of political violence in solidarity with the black lumpenproletariat becomes the signature as well as the means of his break with his class.

Enshel’s rejection of his manuscript strips Miller of his way back into the PMC as a writer. During his sojourn in the ghetto he never leaves home without his work in progress: “Get up in the middle of the night and go out into the street, always carrying Enshel’s essay and the novel with me in the shopping bags because they will rob me

blind if I don't carry my life along with me" (387). In his effort to channel Alpha, Miller has finally whittled his own life down to his identity as a writer. Just as Minnie was crudely reduced to the casefile that made her legible as a member of the lumpenproletariat, Miller is now reduced to the manuscripts that make him legible as member of the PMC. The rejection of his manuscript strips Miller of the mediatorial role that defines his class. This loss of class identity is represented in the final chapter when the narrator abruptly shifts to calling him Alpha, collapsing the boundaries between the first and third-person narrative:

And in losing himself, I felt liberated, without a sense of personal pain, but something greater, better. His face was bleeding: he was beginning to hurt...and they, it, what was the word for it, O mob of battles, *I* had done things he had never dreamed of doing...his body...the extension...the other end of myself ...he was dimly aware of it...throwing bottles through windows and thrown a brick at a policeman and had felt the joy of staggering the hateful fuzz and the rest of him roared. (448)

The passage, which depicts Miller's transformation into Alpha ("I felt liberated") and Alpha's into the lumpenproletarian mob ("they, it...*I*," "the rest of him roared"), offers a fine illustration of what Yurick meant by sociological surrealism. Its elliptical sentences and whirligig of pronouns convey the difficulty of mediating a shift from bourgeois individualism to lumpen collectivity discursively. This is to be expected given the paradox that lumpenization presents for the bourgeois writer. As the passage shows, what Miller loses in elite class privilege, he makes up for in affective knowledge about the poor. Knowing that you cannot escape poverty, he now understands, gives rise to the feeling that you have no choice but to engage in radical violence. This is precisely what makes the lumpenproletariat a revolutionary class.

At the same time, in order to attain this knowledge, Miller must first forfeit the ability to mediate it through literature. His self-erasure and the novel's final descent into narrative instability thus reflect Yurick's struggle to represent that which by the force of his own logic must not be represented. Stated simply, *The Bag* suggests that the white PMC can redeem itself from the colonial relation only by means of lumpenization, a process of conversion whereby one renounces class transvestitism and embraces a radical political violence that short-circuits literary representation. In this respect, Yurick's novel strains to assert a place for white radicals in a new era of revolutionary struggle organized largely around questions of racial oppression. In particular, the novel predicts the politics of the Weather Underground, a Marxist-Leninist spinoff of SDS founded by a coterie of college students and young professionals in 1969. Their manifesto, published that same year, argued that the antagonism between colonizer and colonized, white and black, now superseded the one between capital and labor. "The main struggle going on in the world today," they wrote "is between US imperialism and the national liberation struggles against it."

Extrapolating from the claim that the black ghetto constituted a domestic colony, the group argued further that black Americans "reflect the interests of the oppressed people of the world from within the borders of the United States; they are part of the Third World and part of the international revolutionary vanguard." It urged white radicals to "support the blacks in moving as fast as they have to and are able to" toward liberation. In practice, this meant taking cues from the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a self-styled vanguard organization that drew its ranks from the black lumpenproletariat and

engaged in “armed propaganda.” Weathermen, as the group’s members were called, went on to stage a riot in Chicago and wage a years-long bombing campaign against the US government. Thus, like *The Bag*, “Weathermen asserted...that violence alone had the power to force whites to resolve their dual identities either in favor of ‘the oppressed’ or their roles as ‘oppressors.’”⁶⁹ By the same token, in succumbing to government repression, factional splits, and the fatigue of fugitivity during the seventies, Weathermen revealed the costs and limits of carrying out the political violence advocated in *The Bag*. One is tempted to view this as an explanation for why the novel, which won considerable acclaim among New Left activists, went out of print. *The Bag*’s radical call to arms was drowned out by the resounding defeats of those who answered it.

But even if we were to consider *The Bag* collateral damage of the war between the government and left-wing revolutionaries, this fact alone cannot account for the novel’s failure to find a lasting audience. One must also bear in mind Adolph Reed’s observations that “repression and co-optation can never fully explain the failure of opposition, and an exclusive focus on such external factors diverts attention from possible sources of failure within the opposition itself.”⁷⁰ To understand why *The Bag* fell into obscurity we need to turn to the debate within the Left about the politics of the Weather Underground. The most notable denunciation of the group appeared in Robin Morgan’s now classic 1970 essay “Goodbye to All That.” Written for a special women’s

⁶⁹ Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 156-157.

⁷⁰ Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 55.

issue of the underground newspaper *Rat*, Morgan's essay is her swan song to the New Left, whose principles and practices were inextricable from male chauvinism and misogyny. The essay refers to the Weather Underground mockingly as "the Weather Vain" and lambasts the organization for its "Stanley Kowalski image and theory of free sexuality but practice of sex on demand for males," its cultivation of "machismo style," and glorification of "gratuitous violence."⁷¹ Years later the social scientist and former SDS member Todd Gitlin recalled the group in similar terms: "the Weathermen didn't recruit through force of argument so much as through style. Their esprit was undeniable. They were good-looking. They had panache."⁷² This performance entailed an overtly sexist rhetoric, which was evident at their last public meeting before they became a network of underground cells. One of its most prominent spokespeople, Bernardine Dohrn, gave a speech in which she famously professed her admiration for the Manson family: "Dig it; first they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the room with them, then they even shoved a fork into pig [Sharon] Tate's stomach. Wild!"⁷³

Dohrn's statement was perhaps the most outrageous of many attempts "to blend militant politics with the libertine spirit of the counterculture."⁷⁴ But while the counterculture celebrated sex and violence—particularly against women—as ends in themselves, this tendency ran counter to left-wing ideals. "A genuine Left," she wrote,

⁷¹ Robin Morgan, "Goodbye to All That," Fair Use Blog, September 29, 2007, <http://blog.fair-use.org/2007/09/29/goodbye-to-all-that-by-robin-morgan-1970/>

⁷² Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 385.

⁷³ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 160.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

“doesn’t consider anyone’s suffering irrelevant or titillating.”⁷⁵ She saw the Weathermen’s vision of revolutionary violence as “the logical extreme of the normal American male’s fantasy” that made a fetish out of women’s subaltern status. On this basis, Morgan defined such “male-dominated” groups as the Weather Underground as the “counterfeit Left,” arguing “that a legitimate revolution must be led by, made by those who have been most oppressed: black, brown, yellow, red, and white women.”⁷⁶ In what must have seemed like a remarkable display of radical bravado at the time, she ended her farewell manifesto with the following declaration: “women are the real Left.”⁷⁷ History shows that this was more than mere bluster. As the male-dominated New Left imploded in the late sixties and early seventies, Gitlin explains, second-wave feminism went into high gear: “With amazing speed [feminists] spawned not only theory but practice—a web of women’s health collectives, clinics, legal centers, newspapers, therapeutic groups, battered women’s shelters, rape counseling centers, legislative campaigns, professional caucuses.”⁷⁸ In other words, the white male radicalism of the Weather Underground was ultimately superseded by the Women’s Movement.

Much of what Morgan has to say about the Weather Underground applies to *The Bag*. For all its embrace of lumpenproletarian radicalism, Yurick’s fable of white male redemption was predicated on female degradation. As I have already suggested, Miller attains radical consciousness by witnessing and committing brutal acts of violence

⁷⁵ Morgan, “Goodbye to All That.”

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 374.

against women. The sexism of the novel is only compounded by Yurick's decision to narrate it in a flamboyant style that strikes one as over-the-top, even glib, aimed more at titillating readers than stoking their sense of moral outrage. Even his vision of the riot as the crucible for revolutionary transformation reflects a masculinist bias since men rather than women tend to engage in rioting as a form of social protest. Although Yurick's novel did nothing more than put flesh on the rhetoric of the male-dominated Left, it nonetheless proved the adage that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk. No sooner did *The Bag* appear in print than feminists began to say "goodbye to all that" and place themselves at the rhetorical center of revolutionary politics. This, accelerated a shift in the radical novel that had its beginnings in Mary McCarthy's *The Group*. Yurick's masculinist fantasy of the New Left novel was displaced by a fantasy that emerged from second-wave feminism.⁷⁹

2.2. Marge Piercy: Between Bottom Dogs and Postmodernism

No novel illustrates the feminist turn in the radical fiction more clearly than Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Like *The Bag*, Piercy's novel chafed at the limits of social realism. As Margaret Atwood noted in her review, much of the book depicts life inside of a mental institution "in excruciating, grotty, Zolaesque detail, pill by deadening pill, meal by cardboard meal, ordeal by ordeal." The rest takes place in the future and assumes the form of utopian fiction.⁸⁰ Not surprisingly, Piercy's more radical

⁷⁹ Tellingly, Gitlin, a novelist and friend of Yurick's makes no mention of *The Bag* in his lengthy history/memoir of the sixties.

⁸⁰ Margaret Atwood, "An Unfashionable Sensibility," *The Nation*, December 4, 1976, 601.

genre mashup drew even sharper objections than Yurick's. For the most part, reviewers saw its nonrealistic elements as unwelcome distractions. Indeed, even Atwood's largely laudatory review chided Piercy for attempting to resurrect "a genre more at home in 19th-century England than in the America of the 1970s."⁸¹ But where the critical response to Yurick's experiment helped seal its fate as a repressed memory in the annals of sixties literature, negative reviews did nothing to stop Piercy's novel from attaining the status of a modern classic. Today the novel is widely regarded as a major contribution to the renaissance in utopian literature that exploded in the 1970s. Critics have thus tended to read *Woman* alongside works like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), and Samuel Delany's *Trouble on Triton* (1976).⁸² And yet its substantial engagement with the tradition of social realism makes Piercy's novel an outlier among this bunch. *Woman* is not "a utopia," as Atwood insisted, but rather an updated proletarian conversion novel that uses elements of science fiction to expose the ideological limitations of realism and circumvent problems in revolutionary theory. As a radical novel, it is in direct conversation with *The Bag*.

Just how direct can indeed be gleaned partly from Piercy's biography. Like Yurick, Piercy hailed from a working-class background. Raised in predominantly black neighborhoods on Detroit's West Side, she became politically active while studying literature and creative writing at the University of Michigan, where she received her BA in 1957. In 1965 she and her then-husband Robert Shapiro moved to New York City and

⁸¹ Ibid., 602.

⁸² Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class*, 144, 231n8.

soon “became very close to Yurick and his wife, who had just had a baby girl, and joined their circle of friends.”⁸³ Piercy remembered Yurick “as a brilliant charismatic man with a dark beard, dark intense eyes, smoking incessantly and given to bodybuilding.”⁸⁴ Their friendship and Yurick’s nascent writing career were goads to her own literary ambitions: “When I first met him, he had been unpublished except for a couple of stories—much like me. Robert and I read his novels in their various drafts and gave criticism, and he read my work. Then *The Warriors* was accepted and there was even more interest, although nothing came of it till years later. Then *Fertig* sold...I felt like the only failure in our small group. However, now I had regular contact with other writers and as much stimulation as I could reasonably endure.”⁸⁵ Piercy acknowledged her debt to Yurick by dedicating her first novel, *Going Down Fast* (1969), to him and his wife. For her second, *Dance the Eagle to Sleep* (1970), she paid a more complicated tribute to Yurick by adapting the premise of *The Warriors*—his debut novel about a failed attempt to mobilize youth gangs into a revolutionary army—to the New Left student movement. In Piercy’s parable, a group of delinquent high school students organizes a powerful antiwar movement that tragically falls apart when a small, male-dominated faction within it called the Warriors becomes excessively violent. This fictionalized restaging of the conflict between the Weather Underground and the broader New Left is at once an

⁸³ Marge Piercy, *Sleeping with Cats* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 177.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

homage to Yurick's creative vision and a sharp rebuke of the hypermasculine conception of revolutionary violence that his work endorsed.

Piercy was no armchair critic. When it came to radical politics, she had as much skin in the game as Yurick. Shortly after meeting him in 1965, she became involved with SDS and cofounded an important offshoot of the group for adults called Movement for a Democratic Society (MDS). She quickly emerged as one of the most important voices in the New Left on questions of work and womanhood. As Stephen Schryer notes, her 1968 essay "Beginning to Begin to Begin," coauthored with Robert Gottlieb, was "one of the key statements of new-class theory within the New Left."⁸⁶ Derived largely from innovations in post-World War II sociology, new-class theory sought to understand the political potentialities of capitalist society's burgeoning stratum of white-collar professionals.⁸⁷ Proponents of new class theory within the New Left aimed to assign a revolutionary role to the PMC.

For Piercy and Gottlieb, the role of the PMC was mainly twofold. First and foremost, as experienced and articulate members of society, middle-class professionals could provide a "radical analysis"⁸⁸ of what Louis Althusser the called "ideological state apparatus,"⁸⁹ the softer but no less coercive means by which elites reproduce capitalist class relations: "It is people who have worked in corporations, taught in the schools, practiced medicine in the clinics and done research under the massive umbrella of the

⁸⁶ Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class*, 145.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

⁸⁸ Bob Gottlieb and Marge Piercy, "Movement for a Democratic Society: Beginning to Begin to Begin," in *The New Left: A Documentary History*, ed. Massimo Teodori (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 403.

⁸⁹ See Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 1-60.

Department of Defense contracting, who have the most to say about the subtle forms of middle class oppression, the pressure for consumption, the powerlessness and alienation of the physically comfortable.”⁹⁰ Secondly and relatedly, the PMC could create “counter-institutions,” such as underground magazines and news networks, that offer models of more meaningful and egalitarian human relations: “For the MDS constituency—people out of school and into jobs, maybe with a profession to which we are emotionally committed, maybe with dependents or habits of comfort or interest to support—we must work out alternative jobs, alternative ways of living in the society, alternative ways of bringing up and educating children. We need counter-forms of recreation and enjoyment and communication to replace the cultural manipulations, the addiction to consumption, the passivity of packaged entertainment, the subtle condition and gross lies of the media.”⁹¹ This sentiment had deep roots in the history of the New Left. In the early sixties, Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman, for instance, had insisted that the primary goal of SDS should be to help recent graduates discover “radical life vocations.”⁹²

But Piercy’s deepening involvement with the New Left led her to conclude that counter-institutions and the professionalization of left-wing activism tended to reproduce the same gender inequality that marred mainstream society. In 1969, Piercy published “The Grand Coolie Dam,” a seminal essay on sexism within the New Left that anticipated Morgan’s “Goodbye to All That.” She argued that “[t]he typical movement

⁹⁰ Ibid., 406.

⁹¹ Ibid., 408.

⁹² Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman, *Toward an Interracial Movement of the Poor* (New York, NY: Students for a Democratic Society, n.d.), 23.

institution consists of one or more men who act as charismatic spokesmen, who speak in the name of the institution and negotiate and represent that body to other bodies in and outside the movement, and who manipulate the relationships inside to maintain his or their position, and the people who do much the actual work of the institution, much of the time women.”⁹³ A cultural bias toward charismatic male leadership had allowed certain men, whom she called “machers,” to become the face of the movement, even though its “real basis is the largely unpaid, largely female labor force that does the daily work.”⁹⁴ Branding themselves “professional revolutionaries,” these self-assertive machers deployed “abstract analyses” and “technical jargon” derived from Marxist theory in order to assert their status as a revolutionary vanguard and thereby absolve themselves from the diurnal duties of movement building.⁹⁵ Piercy charged that under these circumstances “[o]nly a woman willing and able to act like a stereotyped American frontier male can make herself heard,” an observation which helps to explain the chauvinistic behavior of Weatherwoman Bernardine Dohrn.⁹⁶ Like Morgan, Piercy ended her essay with both a valediction to movement men and a feminist call to arms: “Manipulation and careerism will not evaporate of themselves. Sisters, what we do, we have to do together, and we will see about them.”⁹⁷

Still, there is a world of difference between calling on women to organize among themselves and calling women “the real Left.” The latter smacks of the very chauvinism

⁹³ Marge Piercy, “The Grand Coolie Dam,” *Leviathan*, November 1969, 16.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

that Piercy and Morgan so justly and ably criticized. Piercy's essay shows that she was not concerned with replacing one revolutionary elite (men) with another (women), but rather with ensuring that the movement did more to put its egalitarian and universalist principles into practice: "All right," she conceded "we cannot have little islands of revolutionary culture, but we can try a little harder not to reflect the ugliest aspects of the society we are presumably rejecting."⁹⁸ Failing to do so would only exacerbate the Left's "big problem," which was "learning how to reach all kinds of people."⁹⁹ Hers, then, was a plea for more of what SDS had originally termed "participatory democracy," a politics that did not simply anoint charismatic leaders and intellectuals to speak on behalf of the oppressed but found a way to let the oppressed speak and act for themselves. After all, she asked, "[i]f you have contempt for people and think they cannot know what they want and need, who the hell is the revolution for?"¹⁰⁰ With this in mind, we can see how Schryer, in an otherwise astute reading of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, misses the mark when he states that "[t]he problem, for Piercy, was to discover new, communalistic models of professionalism that avoided the twin dangers of bureaucracy and charisma." On the contrary, Piercy dismissed professionalism as conducive to patriarchy and elitism. Instead she championed a world in which everyone would enjoy a meaningful and non-repressive vocation. Her problem, both as a "political writer" and New Left activist, was

⁹⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 18.

to discover how that utopian dream might come true—that is, how to make a revolution.¹⁰¹

Like Yurick, a self-proclaimed “Marxist,” Piercy was steeped in left-wing revolutionary theory. In a response to a questionnaire on Marxism published a year after *Woman on the Edge of Time* she wrote: “The three equally radical collections of theory and practice (Marxism, Anarchism, and Feminism) have shaped and actively shape my political activities, my political thinking and all my writing.”¹⁰² Marxism remained especially important for her as a writer and activist, she explained, because it continued to nourish her “sense of class.”¹⁰³ At the same time, having witnessed firsthand the damage done by adherents of Marxist-Leninism to the movement, she was wary of Marxism’s top-down theory of revolution and its blind spots on race and gender. “You will never hear me talking about control of the means of production but rather control of the means of production and reproduction, you will never hear me praise the dictatorship of the proletariat or any authoritarian structure,” she wrote, before going on to say that her “appreciation of Marxism is tempered by...the racism that marred a lot of Marxist thought in the past and its practice since.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, Piercy’s thought bears the same stamp of revisionist Marxism as Yurick’s.

Both novelists set their literary sights on categories of experience and subjectivity that had been written off by orthodox Marxism and the Old Left. But, as we have seen, in

¹⁰¹ Tom Hayden, *Port Huron Statement* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2005), 53-55.

¹⁰² Marge Piercy, “A Fish Needs a Bicycle: Responses to a Question on Marxism and the Arts” (from the *Minnesota Review*, 1977), box 37, Marge Piercy Papers, University of Michigan (Special Collections Research Center).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

its efforts to show how the PMC might insinuate itself into the revolutionary class, Yurick's novel validates some of the most alienating tendencies of the movement. If the New Left's "big problem" was indeed "learning how to reach all kinds of people," then *The Bag* was more symptom than solution. On the other hand, the answer was not to retreat from its Marxist class analysis—as feminists like Morgan did—but to supplement it with more sensitivity toward the modalities of subaltern experience. As Piercy explained, her approach to storytelling was to reformulate what had come before: "When I was a child, I first noticed that neither history as I was taught it nor the stories I was told seemed to lead to me. I began to fix them. I have been at it ever since."¹⁰⁵ With *Woman* Piercy attempts "to fix" *The Bag* by shifting the primary focus of its lumpenproletarian conversion narrative from the welfare worker to the welfare client. By this simple reversal, she not only draws attention to the unique circumstances underclass women of color must overcome to achieve radical consciousness; she also insists that such women have a decisive role to play in revolutionary struggle, thus making it clear how the realization of a more egalitarian future is contingent upon the Left's ability "to reach all kinds of people" in the present. From her perspective, the problem of revolution ultimately turns on the issue of how to mediate radical consciousness for those that both mainstream society and traditional Marxist theory have deemed unreachable.

Broadly speaking, the later New Left had developed two competing methods of mediation, both of which have roots in Marxism and inform the drama of *Woman on the*

¹⁰⁵ Marge Piercy, introduction to *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), x. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *W*.

Edge of Time. The first to gain widespread support—thanks to the emergence of factions within SDS such as the Weathermen and Progressive labor—was a Leninist-style, cadre-training approach that focused on dispatching the most articulate and learned members of the new class to proselytize among their peers, the proletariat, and the underclass.¹⁰⁶

Although initially an advocate of this method, Piercy, as I have shown, began to distance herself from it as early as 1969 on the grounds that it tended to advantage charismatic, college-educated white men and reinforce the exploitation of women. In its place, she and other radical feminists proposed a different model centered on the formation of what they called consciousness-raising groups. Piercy explained the concept behind these groups in an essay on women's liberation that she wrote for the short-lived radical journal

Defiance: “The basic unit of women's liberation is the small consciousness-raising group in which women learn from each other and offer criticism and support. This is the basic unit for remaking your relationships with other women, for understanding your interactions with men, for tearing out the programming that cripples you.”¹⁰⁷

Consciousness-raising differed markedly from cadre-training in several ways. First and foremost, it was a method designed by and for women. Consciousness-raising groups focused exclusively on issues that affected women in their everyday lives and sought to create a space that “supports rather than negates a woman's identity.”¹⁰⁸ Where cadre-training emphasized mastery of political theory and history, consciousness-raising

¹⁰⁶ For a classic articulation of this approach see, Karen Ashley, Bill Ayers, et. al. “You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know,” *New Left Notes*, June 18, 1969.

¹⁰⁷ Marge Piercy, “Women's Liberation: Nobody's Baby Now,” *Defiance: A Radical Review*, no. 1 (1970): 159.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Freeman and Marge Piercy, “Getting Together: How to Start a Women's Liberation Group,” 1972, box 44, Marge Piercy Papers, University of Michigan (Special Collections Research Center), 3.

privileged the discussion of immediate lived experience: “The consciousness raising group is personal and political. It is not a study group discussing ideas abstractly, removed to some other plane. The matter of the group is the women in it. The group is oriented toward actual change and has to deal with real life situations and real emotions and real problems.”¹⁰⁹ Finally, consciousness-raising groups eschewed formal leaders.

On this key issue, they differed sharply from groups like the Weather Underground, which operated according to a strict cadre model. Women on the Left were perfectly aware that Weather collectives could be rife with abuse. As one historian put it: “Entranced by the Leninist notion of ‘democratic centralism,’ Weatherman exalted their leaders, granting them immense power to control—and, as former ‘cadre’ members would later charge—to manipulate those below them. In some collectives nearly all personal decisions in the collectives, as basic as where one went at any given time, were subject to the approval of the leadership.”¹¹⁰ What amounted to infantilization disproportionately impacted women, who “were confined mostly to the ‘second -tier leadership,’ had to mute or disavow certain of their feminist beliefs, and, no matter their activist credentials, had to prove their ability to engage in ‘independent’ actions as part of ‘women’s cadres.’”¹¹¹ Piercy dismissed cadre training as “elitist bullshit.”¹¹² By doing away with such hierarchies, she argued, consciousness-raising groups would encourage members “to go through the strains, tensions, and fulfillment of accepting personal

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁰ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 58.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 59-60.

¹¹² Piercy, “Coolie Dam,” 17.

responsibility for making something work” and become “spokeswomen for [their] own feelings.”¹¹³ Only under these circumstances, so the thinking went, could each woman “have a crack at developing [leadership qualities].”¹¹⁴ Consciousness-raising sought to radicalize women so that they could assert themselves politically without aping the authoritarian behavior of movement men.

The conflict between these two schools of mediation and conversion—one masculinist and elitist, the other feminist and egalitarian—lies at the heart of *Woman* and finally enables us to make sense of its peculiar narrative form. The novel tells the story of Consuelo Camacho “Connie” Ramos, a Chicana ADC recipient committed to a psychiatric hospital for assaulting her niece’s pimp, placing it squarely within the “bottom dogs” genre. As the narrative unfolds analeptically, or after the fact, we learn that Connie’s life has largely comprised an unremitting series of encounters with patriarchal violence. Born to working-class parents and raised in Chicago, she recalls that “her father...had beaten her every week of her childhood” (*W*, 9). Determined not to “to lie down and be buried in the rut of family, family, family” (*W*, 45) like her mother, she moves out on her own at a young age and takes “a good job as a secretary to a real estate man” in Chicago but is soon forced to flee to New York after a man she calls “El Muro” stalks and rapes her (154). In New York she has a string of ill-fated romances. First comes Chuck, an “Anglo boy” who abandons her after impregnating her. She then marries a loving and supportive man named Martín, but he dies in a knife fight only a

¹¹³ Freeman and Piercy, “Getting Together,” 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

year later, causing her to drop out of college for lack of financial support. Her next husband, a serial philanderer called Eddie, subjects her to brutal beatings and eventually deserts her and their daughter, Angelina. Connie finally finds solace with Claud, a sensitive musician and petty criminal who also succumbs to an untimely death brought about by a prison medical experiment. With each of violent setback Connie becomes increasingly ensnared by the world of poverty and squalor made familiar by literary naturalism and proletarian novels.

Piercy uses what would otherwise be just another bottom dogs narrative to offer a painstaking account of how America's welfare sector employs biopolitical violence to convert poor women into obedient subjects. Connie's back story is riddled with tales of abuse at the hands of a callously paternalistic PMC. When she sought medical attention following a botched abortion and a "beating from Eddie," for instance, the doctors performed "a complete hysterectomy because the residents wanted practice" (*W*, 44). Similarly, during her first sentence for accidentally breaking Angelina's wrist in a moment of despair over the death of her beloved Claud, she is persuaded by the authorities into giving her daughter up for adoption. Her second period of confinement takes place in the present and is even more harrowing. Because of her history of "destructive violence," a cadre of high-ranking male doctors coerces her into receiving a brain implant. "Cold, calculating, ambitious, believing themselves rational and superior," the narrator tells us, the doctors "chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel. From an early age she had been told that she was unreal and didn't matter. Now they were about to place in her something that would rule her feelings like a

thermostat” (308). On the pretext of helping her, Connie’s doctors give themselves the power to “monitor and induce reactions through the microminiaturized radio under the skull,” reducing her to an automaton (221). After the operation, Connie learns that these men represent the vanguard of a scientific revolution whereby professional managerial elites, acting in concert with the rich, will come to exercise complete control over the lives of the proletarian masses.

Using her recently discovered psychic ability to transport herself to different worlds, Connie visits a future New York where “everybody’s implanted” (315) and owned by “a corporate body” (327). Here women are bred purely for “[c]ontract sex” (316) and live under constant surveillance in heavily guarded apartment complexes with professional men they call “flacks” (315). Meanwhile, the poor, referred to as “duds,” are harvested “like animals” for their organs. This dystopian world, Piercy insists, is the logical outcome of a state founded on technocratic liberalism. Of course, given what we know of Piercy’s politics, this was not her only target. Much of what she has to say about the welfare sector in *Woman on the Edge of Time* reiterates her critique of Marxist-Leninism. Indeed, the novel casts the helping professions as cadre organizations par excellence. Professionals in these fields draw sharp, hierarchical distinctions between experts and laypeople, leaders and led, masters and apprentices. As with professional revolutionaries, this leads them to regard those in their charge as incapable of expressing “what they want and need” and all the more contemptible for that. In one scene, for instance, Connie catches her “social worker...giving her that human-to-cockroach look” (22) and in another she recalls how “[a]ll those experts lined up against her in a jury

dressed in medical white and judicial black—social workers, caseworkers, child guidance counselors, psychiatrists, doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, probation officers—all those cool known faces had caught her and bound her in their nets of jargon hung all with tiny barbed hooks that stuck in her flesh and leaked a slow weakening poison” (60).

Understanding how the hospital personnel systematically robbed her of her ability to speak for herself, she muses: “If you complained, they took it as a sign of sickness. ‘The authority of the physician is undermined if the patient presumes to make a diagnostic statement.’ She heard a doctor say that to a resident, teaching him not to listen to patients” (15). In Piercy’s view, then, the Marxist-Leninists of the New Left share with the PMC basic assumptions about mediation, social change, and the appropriate distribution of power. Both posit that the road to social amelioration must be paved by a technocratic vanguard, which establishes its legitimacy through alienating “jargon.” Both marginalize women’s issues and seek to convert subjects by depriving them of their autonomy. The welfare sector simply shows us what New Left Marxist-Leninism would look like if put into practice on a larger scale. Far from emancipating the poor, it would provide a professional managerial elite with a rationale for developing technologies of population management, which inevitably leads to totalitarianism.

Fortunately for Connie, her psychic abilities also enable her to contact a woman named Luciente, who inhabits a future world built on “the ideas of the women’s movement.”¹¹⁵ In Luciente’s world, “the women’s long revolution” has finally destroyed

¹¹⁵ Marge Piercy, *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 100.

“all the old hierarchies” (110). Gendered pronouns have been abolished, biological reproduction occurs by means of a device called a “brooder,” and children have up to three parents of any sex. Polyamory is the norm. Moreover, “decisions were made forty years back to breed a higher proportion of darker-skinned people and to mix the genes well through the population” without abandoning “cultural identities.” These kinship practices “broke the bond between genes and culture... forever” (108). People of all the world’s various cultures now coexist and intermingle without fear of losing their identities. This transformation of social life is only possible because work has been socialized, eliminating the need for a professional managerial elite. As Luciente explains to Connie, “We share the exciting jobs and the dull jobs. We don’t think telling people what to do is a real-world skill” (131). The socialization of work has likewise put an end to alienated labor and enabled the democratization of education and expertise: “We never leave school and go to work. We’re always working, always studying. We think, what person thinks person knows has to be tried out all the time. Placed against what people need” (138). As a result, the people of Mattapoisett do not have professions but rather fields of study, which they pursue in accordance with their personal interests and the commonweal. In this academic paradise, each person is entitled to a one-year sabbatical every seven years, during which “[s]ome go study in their field. Some learn a language or travel. Hermit in the wilderness. Pursue some line of private research. Or paint. Or write a book” (139). Mattapoisett thus comes fascinatingly close to realizing Marx’s vision of a world in which everyone enjoys the freedom to “do one thing today and another

tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner...without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.”¹¹⁶

That the utopia of Mattapoissett can exist alongside the dystopia of New York suggests the contingency of Connie’s historical moment. She lives in what Luciente calls a “crux-time. Alternate universes coexist. Probabilities clash and wink out forever” (191). Whether or not this feminist utopia comes into existence depends on whether people like Connie, having seen and experienced it with their visionary powers, will fight for it in the present. “That’s why we reached you,” one of Mattapoissett’s other inhabitants, a black man named Bee, says to her (212). They do so on the conviction that “the powerful do not make revolutions” which result in societies like theirs. The people of Mattapoissett thus seek to convert Connie to their cause, but their process differs markedly from the therapy imposed on Connie by the helping professions. Theirs follows the principles laid out in Piercy’s writings on feminist consciousness-raising groups. It is no accident that Connie’s primary liaison, for instance, is another woman of color, whose “gentle” (33) and “smooth Indio face” (28) and her “air of brisk, unselfconscious authority” demonstrate how a woman can have qualities “associated with men” but without the same masculinist will to power (68). Likewise, while the “cold, calculating, ambitious” members of the PMC consider Connie insane, Luciente explains to her that she has special qualities that make her a world-historical figure. She is a “catcher,” someone “whose mind and nervous system are open, receptive, to an unusual extent” (40). In all

¹¹⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. Lawrence & Wishart, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers), 53

these ways, Luciente affirms Connie's identity. Unlike the doctors, the people of Mattapoissett "aren't mad to control" her or make her feel ashamed (148). Luciente's relationship with Connie is a nurturing, nonhierarchical one based on mutual dependence. Connie needs Luciente's advice and knowledge about how to escape her miserable circumstances just as much as Luciente needs Connie's help to survive in the future. They "must work to commune" with one another (41). Luciente wins Connie's assent not by subjecting her but by cultivating her sense of self-worth and personal agency. After visualizing herself fighting alongside Luciente in a battle between the two future worlds, Connie realizes that she must do something to liberate herself in the present. In the novel's final scene, she poisons her doctors, justifying this as an act of class warfare: "I murdered them dead. Because they are the violence-prone. Theirs is the money and the power, theirs the poisons that slow the mind and dull the heart. I killed them. Because it is war" (410). The novel would have us believe that a utopian future cannot come about unless the lumpenproletariat liquidates the PMC.

Triangulating these disparate narrative genres—naturalism, dystopian, utopian—affords Piercy a means of mediating the dialectic between socialism and barbarism that, as Marx insisted, inheres within capitalist development. It also suggests an attempt to negotiate a shift from modernism to postmodernism. Insofar as it foregrounded epistemological questions, the proletarian conversion narrative was always a distinctly modernist form.¹¹⁷ In it the quest of an individual to ascertain the truth about capitalist

¹¹⁷ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.

society invariably culminates in some form of radical class consciousness. By virtue of its debt to formal realism, modernism reflects a bias toward empiricism, according to which changes in a character's consciousness issue from his or her direct engagement with material reality. Although it makes access to truth contingent upon one's standpoint in capitalist society, proletarian modernism nonetheless asserts a stable, objective world. Postmodernism, by contrast, emphasizes ontological questions, such as "What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?"¹¹⁸ As these questions suggest, postmodernism invites us to consider the possibility of multiple worlds, each with their own attendant modes of being and degrees of verifiability. Piercy begins her novel in the familiar territory of social realism, but she quickly opens up this genre by means of Connie's surreal excursions to other worlds. These episodes call into question the hegemony of realism and the empiricist assumptions that underwrite it, as evidenced by the book's final pages, which are composed of excerpts from Connie's psychiatric records that diagnose her as a paranoid schizophrenic and suppress her final insurrectionary act. Like Yurick, Piercy recasts the documentary as complicit in the exploitation and dehumanization of the lumpenproletariat.

At the same time, Piercy's more radical departure from realism leads her to subordinate class to identity. Connie's conversion rests on ontological assumptions in a

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

double sense. As we have seen, she achieves radical consciousness by experiencing alternative worlds, but she can do so only because of her innate psychic ability. It is neither her relationship to the means of production nor her experience with class conflict that primarily determines her conversion, but rather her unique ontological status as a “catcher.” More traditional notions of identity also play an instrumental role in Connie’s conversion process. It comes as no surprise that her mentor from Mattapoissett, like Connie herself, is phenotypically “Indio” or that the only other person in this future utopia with whom she experiences a direct telepathic connection is a fellow Chicana named Parra, in whom she sees a better version of herself: “Parra fascinated her. She could be no more than twenty-one or twenty-two, yet she was serving as people’s judge. Doctor of rivers. She herself could be such a person here” (232). In relying on identity in this sense as the connective tissue between the present and the utopian future, Piercy’s novel would seem to anticipate the claims of the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group whose 1977 manifesto stated that “the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity.”¹¹⁹ In a move that Linda Hutcheon has since identified as characteristic of postmodern literature and theory, Piercy “decenters”¹²⁰ the master narrative of class from radical discourse and turns to what the CRC called “identity politics” as a more effective means of combating “the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” 1978, https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf.

¹²⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 57-73.

¹²¹ Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement.”

No one can fault Piercy for improving upon the narrative of lumpenproletarian revolution proffered in *The Bag*, for, to some extent, she did precisely that. Connie Ramos has far more depth than Minnie Devlin and *Woman* is thankfully free of the gratuitous violence and sensationalism that marred Yurick's lesser known work. Connie's observation that "white men got off on descriptions of brown and black women being beaten" is no doubt a subtle dig at Yurick's aesthetic and a partial explanation for why much of the violence in Piercy's novel is related indirectly (97).¹²² Still, *Woman on the Edge of Time* is no less of an exercise in wish-fulfillment than *The Bag*. Piercy's time-travel conceit simply suspends the practical problem of reaching the lumpenproletariat in the present by way of an ontological impossibility. While Luciente and Connie's egalitarian interactions are clearly intended to evoke feminist consciousness-raising sessions, they are notable for the fact that they have no material basis or corollary in Connie's everyday lifeworld. This indicates an acknowledgement on Piercy's part that consciousness-raising groups were not an ideal mechanism for reaching poor women like Connie. On the contrary, such groups privileged bourgeois women and elided class exploitation. Something similar holds true for ethnic identity politics, which, as I explain more fully in the next chapter, typically serve the interests of the nonwhite professional-managerial elite and mark "a crucial pivot to the postmodern repudiation...of universalist

¹²² At the very least, reading the novel as a response to Yurick in this regard complicates Sally Bachner's claim that its refusal to represent violence reflects a broader tendency among the "cultural elite" to avoid confronting the "political practices that sustain [that elite's] power" (5). Simply put, Piercy's decision to cast rape as "unspeakable" must also be viewed within the context of the New Left literary discourse examined in this chapter (88). See, Bachner, *The Prestige of Violence: American Fiction, 1962-2007* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

emancipatory goals.”¹²³ In the final analysis, these two New Left novels founder on the same question: how do you mediate class consciousness? If *The Bag* shows that Yurick could not find a way to represent lumpenproletarian consciousness without succumbing to class transvestitism, *Woman* reveals that Piercy could not come up with a model for conveying a radical analysis of capitalism to the lumpenproletariat without reinstating the mediatory role of the PMC. That Piercy’s novel has outlived Yurick’s is due in no small part to the welcome triumphs of feminism. But both novels remain important for the fact that they offer crucial evidence of how the New Left responded imaginatively to the most pressing political question of its moment. And that question, it behooves us to remember, still demands an answer.

¹²³ Marianne Dekoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 250.

3. Power to the Novel: On the Radicalism of African American Literature After Jim Crow

For Kenneth Warren, the 1960s mark the endpoint of African American literature. In his pathbreaking monograph, provocatively titled *What Was African American Literature?*, Warren shows that the imperative for African Americans to produce a distinct literature arose in direct response to Jim Crow segregation, a system that interpellated a collective black subject. Under Jim Crow, “black literary production could count, indexically or instrumentally, as a blow against the segregation order regardless of the standing of this work among actual black readers and regardless of whether these readers shared the work’s political vision.”¹ In other words, books by black authors could plausibly be said to speak to or on behalf of all black people, irrespective of their class and gender. One could argue that this was a necessary fiction to the extent that it helped to create the political solidarity needed among African Americans to dismantle de jure segregation. The events of the sixties changed that. The landmark passage of civil rights legislation in that decade not only toppled Jim Crow. It also sundered the collective black body postulated by African American literature. With the loss of its *raison d'être*, Warren avers, “African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end” (*W*, 8).

¹ Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 110. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *W*. Following Warren, I understand the object we call African American literature to be a rhetorical strategy that posits a black collective subject. It is not, as critics such as Henry Louis Gates and Houston A. Baker have argued, an aesthetic or a tradition specific to writers who happen to be black. See, Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Warren's intervention in the long-standing debate about what constitutes African American literature has become a lightning rod in literary studies.² The most salient argument marshaled against it is that it underestimates the importance of ongoing racial oppression—namely, mass incarceration or what Michelle Alexander has called “the new Jim Crow”—as a compelling ground for African American “race-group interest” in the post-civil rights era (*W*, 109).³ Those who make this objection, however, fail to meet the challenge of Warren's argument, which calls upon us to articulate the connection between African American literature as a “representational and rhetorical strategy” that posits a collective black subject and emancipatory politics (*W*, 9). I contend that by virtue of its opposition to Jim Crow, African American literature met the definition of literary radicalism laid out by Walter Rideout: it advocated that America's socioeconomic system “be fundamentally changed.”⁴ But what purpose does African American literature serve once the change it demands has become a *fait accompli*? What radical political agenda can such a literature advance in the post-civil rights era?

This chapter argues that Sam Greenlee's Black Arts movement novel *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969) attempts to answer these questions. By no means “the first black nationalist novel,” as its publisher claimed, Greenlee's book about a black man named Sam Freeman who abandons his token position at the CIA to teach Chicago gang

² Several academic journals devoted special issues or forums to Warren's book. See *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013), 386-408; *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011), 570-591; and “What Was African American Literature? A Symposium,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 13, 2011, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-was-african-american-literature-a-symposium/>.

³ For examples of this line of argument see Erica Edwards' response in the symposium organized by *LARB* and responses by Sonnet Retman and Gene Andrew Jarrett in the special issue of *PMLA*.

⁴ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society, 1900-1954* (New York: Columbia, 1992), 12.

members how to liberate the ghetto from white colonial occupation nonetheless went farther than any other novel in translating the rhetoric and symbolism of Black Power politics into fiction. In doing so, Greenlee betrayed his debt to the black literary Old Left. Through its jazz-loving hipster protagonist, Spook hypostatizes at once the insurgent energies of the black PMC and the black lumpenproletariat, fulfilling a cross-class fantasy first intimated at the end of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. But while the novel mobilizes this black Popular Front cultural politics to sound the call for "indigenous control" of the black ghetto, it also exposes the internal class antagonisms that undermine appeals to black race group interest.⁵ Indeed, the novel's climax, in which Freeman is betrayed by two of his upwardly mobile friends, reveals class as the major fault line in black life, the shoal on which dreams of an independent black nation might very well founder.

Returning to *Spook* allows us to see how the Black Arts movement, which lasted into the 1970s, sought to extend the shelf life of African American literature as a radical project by yoking it to the burgeoning campaign for Black Power in America's ghettos. Though clearly an outgrowth of the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement differed from it in important ways, not least in its assertion of a black ethnic identity as justification for ghetto self-rule. Since African American literature posited a collective black subject with a unitary political interest, it served as an important rhetorical strategy for writers like Greenlee who were sympathetic to the aims of the Black Power

⁵ Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 66.

movement. At the same time, *Spook*'s radical class critique brings to light the limitations of this strategy. By organizing his narrative around a member of the PMC, Greenlee suggests that sixties black nationalism was in fact a utopian project rooted in the frustrated aspirations of black urban elites. Viewed from this angle, the novel's invocation of black folk culture begins to look like a compensatory fantasy devised to conflate the interests of the black PMC with the welfare of black people in general. In other words, it begins to look a lot like "the literature of identity" that, according to Warren, "emerges as a cultural dominant in the 1980s and 1990s" (*W*, 107, 106).⁶ But *Spook* does more than offer an example of this literature in its embryonic form. It helps us to understand how the transition from civil rights to Black Power made the "literature of identity" possible.

Spook signals that African American literature would not die after the defeat of Jim Crow so much as enter a vexed relationship with radical politics. On the one hand, by way of novels like *Spook*, African American literature amplified post-civil rights calls to expand social democracy to black ghettos. On the other hand, African American literature's formulation of an organic black community aided the development of an ethnic politics that ultimately forestalled those efforts. As scholars such as Adolph Reed and Cedric Johnson have shown, the Black Power Movement led to the rise of a black

⁶ Here Warren is building on insights from Walter Benn Michaels' *The Shape of Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). In the final chapter of *What Was African American Literature?* Warren suggests that African American literature survives as a subset of the literature of identity on the "belief that the welfare of the race as a whole depends on the success of black writers and those who are depicted in their texts." He concludes that today "[t]hose who write it, and those who write about it, need it to distinguish the personal odysseys they undertake to reach personal success from similar endeavors by their white class peers" (139).

political class that quickly acquiesced to the dictates of neoliberal capitalism upon seizing power in various cities at the beginning of the 1970s.⁷ The rhetoric of ethnic solidarity proffered by African American literature and given new life through novels like Greenlee's helped the leaders of these "black urban regimes" legitimize their hold on power even as they implemented policies that obstructed demands for social justice among their poor and working-class black constituents.⁸ If *Spook* is complicit in this process, the novel also foreshadows it insofar as its plot turns on the antinomies of race and class in the struggle for black self-determination. Its narrative of black class warfare foregrounds a domain of literary representation that remains fruitful, if underexplored, in radical fiction and criticism.

3.1 A Tale of Two Nationalisms

Because of its controversial subject matter, *Spook* initially had trouble finding a home. Rejected by almost forty American publishers, the novel first came out with a small London-based press in January 1969.⁹ The following year a paperback version finally appeared in the U.S. with Bantam. While the book received a favorable review in the *Times Literary Supplement* and even won the *Sunday Times*' Book of the Year

⁷ Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*; Cedric Johnson, *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxvii-xxviii.

⁸ Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 79-115.

⁹ Rosalind Cummings, "Local Lit: The Relaxed Rage of Sam Greenlee," *The Chicago Reader*, April 14, 1994, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/local-lit-the-relaxed-rage-of-sam-greenlee/Content?oid=884266>; Sam Greenlee, interview by Michael T. Martin and David C. Wall, "'Duality is a survival tool. It's not a disease': Interview with Sam Greenlee on *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*," in *Race and the Revolutionary Impulse in The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, ed. Michael T. Martin, David C. Wall, and Marilyn Yaquinto (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 35-36.

Award, it got a chilly reception from mainstream American critics.¹⁰ The novel became a bestseller in the US largely on the strength of the attention it received from the black press, which was immediately struck by its documentary realism and hortatory power. So much so that black critics felt compelled to append warnings to their encomia. In one of several effusive pieces she wrote about the novel for the *Chicago Defender*, Doris Saunders only half-jokingly warned: “Caution: reading this book may be harmful to your peace of mind! It is so real—and frightening—that even the most secure liberal will be shaken.”¹¹ Jim Cleaver of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* recommended the book “for all readers who would read about warfare at its best,” but not without advising them “to remember this is a work of fiction and not a statement of fact.”¹² Hoyt Fuller, the leading figure of Chicago’s Black Arts movement and a friend of Greenlee’s, did not exaggerate when he proclaimed in his magazine *Negro Digest* that the novel “sets a publishing precedent.”¹³ Here is a book, he explained, “about a black hero who goes systematically about the business of putting black power to one of its more effective uses, and that is revolutionary.” As I have already suggested, Greenlee was not the first novelist to focus on black nationalism and the black lumpenproletariat as a revolutionary vanguard. Not until *Spook*, however, do we encounter a novel offering a protracted exploration of these

¹⁰ Review of *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, *Times Literary Supplement*, March 4, 1969, 372; “Miscellaneous Notes,” *Black World*, July 1970, 68.

¹¹ Doris E. Saunders, “Confetti,” *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 9, 1969.

¹² Jim Cleaver, “The Spook Who Sat By the Door Exposes Black Tokenism in the CIA,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 29, 1970.

¹³ Hoyt Fuller, “*The Spook Who Sat By the Door*,” *Black World*, May 1969, 74. Fuller was the founder of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), the cynosure of Chicago’s Black Arts movement. Greenlee was active in OBAC in the late sixties but was expelled for being in a relationship with a white woman—rapping black, but sleeping white, as they said back then. See Jonathan Fenderson, *Building the Black Arts Movement: Hoyt Fuller and the Cultural Politics of the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 76-78.

themes, let alone one so convincing in its social realism that it literally spooked critics.

But *Spook* also broke new ground in another way more important to my argument.

Spook was the first novel that attempted to bridge the gap between the two opposing nationalisms of the Black Power movement: revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism. Black revolutionary nationalists promoted solidarity between black Americans and Third World peoples in opposition to “Western capitalist imperialism.”¹⁴ Heavily influenced by figures such as Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon, they won notoriety for their willingness to take up arms against the state. The most famous example of this strand of sixties black radicalism is the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, an organization that described itself as “nationalist in form, socialist in content.”¹⁵ Black cultural nationalists, by contrast, tended to substitute political organizing and economic concerns with an Afrocentric version of *Bildung*. According to Kwanzaa inventor Ron Karenga, for example, only after blacks had recuperated their authentic folk heritage could they busy themselves with questions about economics and formal politics.¹⁶ Tensions between adherents of these two competing ideologies flared throughout the Black Power era, sometimes escalating into outright violence.¹⁷ In its attempts to negotiate a third way between them, *Spook* looks forward to the black ethnic politics that led to the rise of black urban regimes in the seventies. To understand fully the importance

¹⁴ Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America* (New York: Harper, 1986), 357. See also, Ernie Mkalimoto, “Revolutionary Black Culture: The Cultural Arm of Black Nationalism,” *Negro Digest*, December 1969, 11-17.

¹⁵ Michael Dawson, *Blacks In and Out of the Left* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2013), 36.

¹⁶ Jennifer Jordan, “Cultural Nationalism in the 1960s: Politics and Poetry,” in *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 36.

¹⁷ For instance, in 1969, the same year that *Spook* was published, followers of Karenga engaged in a shootout with Black Panthers on the campus of UCLA that left two Black Panthers, Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter and John Huggins, dead. See, Dawson, *Blacks*, 160.

of Greenlee's intervention, however, we first need to look backward to the tradition of literary nationalism that he inherited from the black Left.

Ironically, the two warring nationalisms of the Black Power era both had roots in ideas promulgated by the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). Chief among these is the "Black Belt thesis," a theory popularized by the black Communist Harry Haywood and endorsed by the Communist International at its Sixth Congress in 1928.¹⁸ This theory held that "[i]n those regions of the South in which compact Negro masses are living" blacks had the "Right of Self-Determination."¹⁹ Barbara Foley offers the following explanation of the mechanistic Marxism undergirding this claim: "For rural-based blacks, the most pressing economic need was control of the land, and the most pressing political need was completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution in the South. Self-determination in those states possessing a black majority was thus a necessary stage in the revolutionary struggle for socialism."²⁰ Insofar as it linked black self-determination to the violent overthrow of capitalism and white supremacy, the CPUSA's Black Belt thesis advocated an early version of black revolutionary nationalism. Indeed, anticipating the Black Panthers, the party recognized the need for black self-determination in the South as part of a broader struggle against colonialism. At the same time, the Black Belt thesis also presumed that blacks shared a uniform set of organic traditions and mores handed

¹⁸ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 24; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 223.

¹⁹ Communist International, *Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-Colonies* (Vienna, 1928), 59.

²⁰ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press), 175.

down since slavery. As Robin D.G. Kelley notes, “Stalin’s mechanical definition of a nation, which embraced a ‘community of culture’ as a central concept, simply reinforced the modern nationalist idea that the basis of nationhood was a single, identifiable culture.”²¹ Predicated as it was on this Stalinist idea of nationhood, the Black Belt thesis sanctioned a form of black cultural nationalism. Having convinced themselves that black people, particularly those in the rural South, constituted a “folk,” members of the CPUSA began to lionize those elements of black vernacular culture that supposedly “served as indices to the revolutionary spirit of the black masses and that, moreover, might be effectively mobilized in winning black workers and farmers to the Communist movement.”²² But therein lay the rub. The party defined the revolutionary spirit of the black masses as ethnonationalist—which is to say separatist—in character and yet the Communist movement in America needed to temper race consciousness if it ever hoped to make inroads among workers, especially in the South. Thus, while Communists affirmed black people’s right to self-determination in theory, they sought to recruit them to a movement that prioritized interracial solidarity and class struggle in practice.

Realizing the stakes, “Third Period commentators unequivocally urged proletarian writers to advocate class-based multiracial unity.”²³ Consequently, Communist writers of the late twenties and early thirties, regardless of their race, did not invoke black folk

²¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 115.

²² Foley, *Radical Representations*, 183-184.

²³ *Ibid.*, 187. The term “Third Period” refers to a period from 1928 to 1935 when the Comintern believed global capitalism was on the brink of collapse and strongly discouraged Communist parties from forming alliances with social democrats in their home countries. See, Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 178.

culture in the name of self-determination but rather to heighten class consciousness among the black proletariat. For all intents and purposes, then, literary discourse disarticulated black revolutionary nationalism from black cultural nationalism. This cleavage only grew more pronounced during the period of the Popular Front, which saw the Comintern pursue a policy of rapprochement with liberals to combat the rise of global fascism. In the US, Communists embarked on an enthusiastic campaign to assimilate Marxism into the national mythos. Earl Browder, the CPUSA's general secretary, became the poster child for this new direction by reinventing himself as a "Jeffersonian Democrat" and famously declaring that "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism."²⁴ The emphasis on national unity led the party to jettison the Black Belt thesis to the point of expelling members who continued to press the issue of black self-determination.²⁵ Nevertheless, as James Smethurst points out, "the party's version of multiracialism did allow for the celebration of distinct African American experiences and traditions."²⁶ Among Communists, black culture was touted as one of the many threads woven into the colorful tapestry of American democratic life. Relatedly, Popular Front politics encouraged Left writers to highlight the oppositional characteristics of mass culture, a task which inevitably put black-derived idioms in the spotlight. In addition to the folklore and folk art of blacks from the rural South, black Popular Front writers focused increasing attention on the mass-produced commodities, such as jazz and blues

²⁴ Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 11, 12.

²⁵ Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*, 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

records, that captured the ambience of black urban life, especially in the North, and the imaginations of many white Americans. Although the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Belt thesis was off the table, it became possible at this time for writers of African American literature to posit an alternative cultural nationalism grounded in the modernity of the black ghetto. Black writers in particular played a crucial role in helping to make the “ghetto pastoral,” a genre that combined elements of urban naturalism and pastoralism, into “one of the foremost literary forms of the Popular Front.”²⁷ But as the career of Richard Wright famously shows, these writers also tangled with the question of whether this revised cultural nationalism was a compensatory gesture that came at the expense of appreciating more direct forms of black radical resistance. Beginning with Wright, we see how Popular Front politics crystallized the dichotomy between revolutionary and cultural nationalism.

Consider the chasm between Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), his Popular Front-era defense of black literary nationalism, and his pioneering ghetto pastoral *Native Son* (1940). Wright’s literary manifesto instructed black writers to address themselves to “the Negro masses.”²⁸ This they should do by exploring the “aspects of Negro life” that fomented a sense of racial solidarity, namely black folklore, music, and social institutions. While Wright acknowledged that this “Negro way of life in America” had its roots in the Old South and Jim Crow, he called on black writers to portray its

²⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2010), 234. See also the discussion of Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* in Chapter 1.

²⁸ Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 99.

entanglements with modern capitalism.²⁹ He insisted that they “learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth surface belongs to the working class” and to “create in [their] readers’ minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.”³⁰ In contrast to the Black Belt thesis, Wright’s “Blueprint” implies that the “nationalist implications” of black life are as evident in the South as they are in Harlem or Chicago. The novelist’s task is to bring them to the surface, albeit “not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them.”³¹ By explicating this inarticulate cultural nationalism and exposing its contradictions, black writers can enable the black masses to see that their aspirations to self-determination “are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America.”³² In other words, the process of working through black cultural nationalism leads to radical class consciousness. So far so good.

But in *Native Son*, Wright’s groundbreaking ghetto pastoral about black life on the South Side of Chicago, both the nationalist implications of black folk culture and the oppositional tendencies of (black) popular culture turn out to be dead ends rather than thruways to revolutionary anti-capitalism. For one thing, the novel reveals that Wright saw little room for the retention and elaboration of black vernacular culture in the urban North. As Anthony Dawahare has noted, “One finds cultural nationalist identifications

²⁹ Ibid., 100.

³⁰ Ibid., 104.

³¹ Ibid., 101.

³² Ibid.

most eroded in [Wright's] male urban protagonists from the 1930s" and *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas is a case in point.³³ Though he hails from a black Southern family, Bigger has "become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race" while living in Chicago's black ghetto.³⁴ Not that these would have done him much good. By 1940 Wright had begun to regard black self-determination and black expressive culture as mutually exclusive. Among the blacks living under the yoke of American apartheid, he argued, those who "employed a thousand ruses and stratagems of struggle to win their rights" stood on one side. On the other side stood those who either "got religion" or "projected their hurts and longings into more naïve and mundane forms—blues, jazz, swing—and, without intellectual guidance, tried to build up a compensatory nourishment for themselves."³⁵ On this view, black folk culture is not only devoid of nationalist sentiment but a practical impediment to it. As for mass culture, it does furnish alternative fantasies, but only retrograde ones. Thus, in "trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life," Bigger is drawn to the violent ethnonationalism of fascism.³⁶ But because "American oppression...has not allowed for the forming of deep ideas of solidarity among Negroes," his nationalist instincts get diverted toward lumpen acts "of individual anger and hatred," some of which, such as his killing a white woman, threaten to destabilize the racial

³³ Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 115.

³⁴ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 439.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. 439, 440-445, passim.

order.³⁷ When Wright describes Bigger as “a black nationalist in a vague sense,” he means that Bigger’s nationalism stems not from his culture but rather his subaltern position, which Bigger understands in starkly racial terms.³⁸ Absent the nourishing bonds of culture, Bigger’s black nationalism amounts to a willingness to resist racial subjugation with criminal violence. In this sense, he is the prototype of the revolutionary black nationalists who rose to fame in the 1960s.³⁹

In the intervening years, however, Popular Front-style cultural nationalism found an important champion in Wright’s friend and onetime protege Ralph Ellison. Under Wright’s tutelage, Ellison had been active in New York’s CPUSA literary scene during the late thirties and early forties, mostly as a critic. His reviews for the left-wing press show that Wright’s “Blueprint”—published around the time the two befriended each other—had a profound impact on him. Throughout the Popular Front era, which officially lasted from 1935 to the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, and much of World War II, Ellison followed Wright in arguing that black writers needed to draw on black folklore to arouse the latent revolutionary consciousness of their people.⁴⁰ Like Wright, he dismissed the writers of the Harlem Renaissance for their pandering to white

³⁷ Ibid., 447.

³⁸ Ibid., 451.

³⁹ For instance, in his classic prison memoir *Soul on Ice*, Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver recognized Wright and Bigger as kindred spirits. Cleaver claims that “Bigger Thomas, Wright’s greatest creation, was a man in violent, though inept, rebellion against the stifling, murderous, totalitarian white world. There was no trace in Bigger of a Martin Luther King-type self-effacing love for his oppressors.” He then goes on to say the following about Wright: “Of all black American novelists, and indeed of all American novelists of any hue, Richard Wright reigns supreme for his profound political, economic, and social reference.” Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 104,105.

⁴⁰ See, Barbara Foley, “Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist,” *Science & Society* 62, no. 4 (1998-1999): 541. The standard version of Popular Front history in the US can be found in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser’s *The American Communist Party*, 319-436. However, more recently, Michael Denning has made a convincing case that the Popular Front, as a sociocultural movement, lasted into the early sixties. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 21-38.

audiences and “ignoring the folk sources of all vital Negro art.”⁴¹ But by the early forties, Wright and Ellison’s views on culture could not have been more divergent. If Wright had lost faith in popular culture as a terrain of struggle, Ellison had begun to see it as the one that mattered most. In a 1943 editorial on the failures of black political leadership during wartime he wrote: “A third major problem, and one that is indispensable to the centralization and direction of power, is that of learning the meaning of the myths and symbols which abound among Negro masses. For without this knowledge, leadership, no matter how correct its program, will fail. Much of Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential powers—if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle. On this knowledge depends the effectiveness of any slogan or tactic.”⁴² Even at his most sanguine, Wright never went so far as to suggest that engaging black vernacular culture was the crux of black liberation. At best, this creative process would enable black writers “to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as other professionals.”⁴³ Ellison’s editorial, however, does Wright one better, arguing that what both men saw as the black artist’s *métier*—the practice of manipulating folk myths and symbols—is the *sine qua non* of politics. In his formulation, the sort of cultural work described in “Blueprint” plays not only a meaningful role in human affairs but a decisive one. Here Ellison reveals his belief that black politics is cultural politics.

⁴¹ Ralph Ellison, “Recent Negro Fiction,” *New Masses*, August 5, 1941, 22.

⁴² Quoted in Larry Neal, “Ellison’s Zoot Suit,” in *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 92-93. Neal’s essay, originally published in 1970, was among the first to recognize Ellison’s “cultural nationalism” and the importance of the hipster in his work (93).

⁴³ Wright, “Blueprint,” 105.

Most important for my purposes, though, are the examples that Ellison chose to make his point: the Lindy-hop and the zoot suit. Both sprang from the black urban jazz culture of the North and thus show how transplanted black southerners adapted to the conditions of modernity with grace and skill. While Wright insinuated in *Native Son* that black folk culture became attenuated in the North as blacks like Bigger confronted circumstances far beyond their ken, Ellison could never bring himself to accept this view. On the contrary, he would often insist that black folk culture became *more* advanced in the North. In a 1941 article for the Marxist journal *New Masses*, for instance, Ellison heralded “the partly urbanized, somewhat distorted folk culture found in Negro streets, slums, cabarets, and dance halls” as “the basis of a new proletarian literature.”⁴⁴ Indeed, his major criticism of William Attaway’s otherwise commendable proletarian Great Migration novel *Blood on the Forge* was that it depicted “the dying away of the Negro’s folk values.”⁴⁵ According to Ellison, “Attaway grasped the destruction of the folk, but he missed its rebirth on a higher level. The writer did not see that while the folk individual was being liquidated in the crucible of steel, he was also undergoing fusion with new elements. Nor did Attaway see that the individual which emerged, blended of old and new, was better fitted for the problems of the industrial environment.”⁴⁶ Dutiful Marxist that he was, Ellison predictably added that “the most conscious” iteration of this new individual was “the black trade unionist.”⁴⁷ In the late forties, however, he began to

⁴⁴ Ellison, “Recent Negro Fiction,” 22.

⁴⁵ Ralph Ellison, “The Great Migration,” *New Masses*, December 2, 1941, 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

disavow Marxism and his radical past.⁴⁸ This left him in need of a new black folk hero, one that would show the rebirth of the folk individual on a higher level but in a guise more amenable to the Cold War liberal consensus. For that, he turned to the figure that had popularized the Lindy-hop and the zoot suit.

Five years before the appearance of Mailer's infamous "White Negro" essay, Ellison proffered the hipster as the quintessential postwar culture hero in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), which chronicles the misadventures of an unnamed "race man" who moves to Harlem following his unceremonious expulsion from college in the Deep South.⁴⁹ Ellison's earlier valorization of the hipster is of signal importance to African American literature because it turns on the rejection of black revolutionary nationalism. In the novel, the specter of hipsterism appears at two pivotal moments when *Invisible Man* must confront his disenchantment with what one Cold War liberal described as "the smelly little orthodoxies contending for our souls."⁵⁰ In the first instance, the narrator encounters a trio of zoot-suited young men on a subway platform after witnessing the police shoot down a black man who once worked with him in a CPUSA-style organization called the Brotherhood. Suddenly reminded of the cheapness of black life,

⁴⁸ Foley, "Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist," 538-541. See also, Lawrence P. Jackson, "The Birth of the Critic: The Literary Friendship of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright," *American Literature* 72, no. 2 (June 2000): 340-341. Jackson notes that Wright and Ellison's "different perceptions of African American folk life and folk culture remained a considerable gulf between them" from the forties onwards. By contrast, Ellison shared a deep, career-long bond with the writer Albert Murray based on their shared fondness for black folk culture. Indeed many of Ellison's basic, scattershot ideas about the relationships between folk culture, literature, and black urban life are fleshed out fully in Murray's work, especially his *Stomping the Blues* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017), *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement* (New York: Knopf, 2012), and *The Omni Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (New York: Library of America, 2020).

⁴⁹ The term "race man" is a longstanding synonym for race leader that, as Hazel Carby has pointed out, is loaded with masculinist assumptions. See Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harvest, 1981), 104.

he pauses for a moment to dwell lovingly on the swagger and sartorial flair of the hipsters:

What about those three boys, coming now along the platform, tall and slender, walking stiffly with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot-for-summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their hard conked hair? It was as though I'd never seen their like before: walking slowly, their shoulders swaying, their legs swinging from their hips in trousers that ballooned upward from cuffs fitting snug about their ankles; their coats long and hip-tight with shoulders far too broad to be those of natural western men. These fellows whose bodies seemed—what had one of my teachers said of me?—“You’re like one of these African sculptures, distorted in the interest of design.” Well, what design and whose?⁵¹

While watching the three lavishly-dressed black men “move like dancers in some kind of funeral ceremony, swaying, going forward, their black faces secret,” the narrator begins to wonder if conventional Marxist theory has erred in placing such lumpenproletarian figures “outside historical time.”⁵² Their elegance alone is a stone-cold rebuke to Marxism, which dismissed the urban underclass as “proletarians in rags.”⁵³ What if, in fact, “they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious?”⁵⁴ The question leads the narrator to wonder further “if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge?”⁵⁵ But Ellison does not mean to suggest that these hipsters are revolutionary subjects in the traditional sense. Rather, they are prefigurations of a

⁵¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 440.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Nathaniel Mills, *Ragged Revolutionaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), 2, 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 441.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

new type of race man whose mastery of signifying practices enables him to navigate America's shifting social hierarchies. Neither "African" nor "western" but a tantalizing mixture of the two, Ellison's hipsters appear fittingly at a site of modern transit to suggest possibilities of physical and socioeconomic boundary-crossing that confound Marxist class analysis.

Ellison elaborates on this idea in the novel's second major scene revolving around hipsterism. Because of his work with the Brotherhood, Invisible Man runs afoul of a Pan-Africanist rabble-rouser named Ras the Exhorter. When Ras's henchmen come after him in the novel's final act, he throws on a pair of dark shades to elude them, thereby giving himself the appearance of a local confidence man named Rinehart. As various people throughout Harlem mistake him for Rinehart, Invisible Man grows increasingly shocked at the range of his doppelgänger's social identities. He is "Rine the [numbers] runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend."⁵⁶ He is what the narrator calls "a broad man, a man of parts who got around."⁵⁷ Thus if "[h]ip's central romance" is "the myth of reinvention," then Rinehart is the hip figure par excellence.⁵⁸ In his immense capacity for self-creation he represents an important advance over the mechanical Marxism of the Brotherhood, which the protagonist had swallowed hook, line, and sinker: "He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must

⁵⁶ Ibid., 498.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 87. See also, Lee Konstantinou's invaluable reading of Rinehart as a hipster figure in *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 55-76. Konstantinou writes: "Rinehart and, more generally, the hipster become the first models of (almost) fully realized humanity that the invisible man encounters, the first person and type of person who do not merely passively accept prefigured roles and rigid ideologies but who instead author their own identities, in however imperfect fashion" (64).

have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it.”⁵⁹ At the same time, it is not a coincidence that *Invisible Man* discovers the hidden powers of hipsterism while evading capture by a group of revolutionary black nationalists. Instead of pursuing a violent confrontation with the forces of capital and white supremacy, Ellison’s folk hero outwits them and bends them to his will by exploiting the culture of conspicuous consumption. Rinehart’s garish black shades are “a political instrument” that at once signal his affinity with Harlem’s folk and imbricate him in the city’s far-reaching underground economy.⁶⁰ *Invisible Man* thus asserts black aesthetic sensibility, over and against organized politics, as the essence of black power. As Ellison told an interviewer when asked about his early radical writings, “style is more important than political ideologies.”⁶¹

Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) marked the first major literary attempt to synthesize the Left tendencies represented by Wright, on the one hand, and Ellison on the other. Like both Wright and Ellison, Cruse was a veteran of the black Popular Front, but he did not become widely known until he published *Crisis*.⁶² Appearing just in time for the start of the Black Power movement, Cruse’s tome refracted the history of twentieth-century black politics through the prism of the national question.

⁵⁹ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 498.

⁶⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 499.

⁶¹ Ralph Ellison, interview by George Ford and Mike Thaler, “A Very Stern Discipline,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 1, 1967, 86.

⁶² An exhaustive overview of Harold Cruse’s career in the New York literary left before the publication of *Crisis* can be found in historian Van Gosse’s “More than Just a Politician: Harold Cruse and the Origins of Black Power,” (unpublished manuscript), <https://www.vangosse.com/uploads/9/6/4/0/964078/cruse.pdf>.

To a large extent, its understanding of black nationalism is derived from the radical Left discourse of the interwar period. Cruse's argument that "the American Negro was also a subject, of a special kind of domestic colonialism," holds echoes of the CPUSA's Black Belt thesis, which essentially conceived of the black South as an internal colony.⁶³ Moreover, Cruse regarded Wright's "Blueprint" as "the last outstanding attempt to clear up the Negro intellectual's severe confusion of the 1920s and 1930s."⁶⁴ But Cruse rejected the interracial, class-based organizing of the CPUSA as a ruse devised by the party's white ethnic leadership to prevent the black masses from exercising their political power as a bloc. Despite showing how their class interests led black elites to champion a specious integrationism, Cruse, much like Ellison, insisted on seeing American democracy as basically pluralist in nature.⁶⁵ He argued that "[t]he path to ethnic democratization of American society is through its culture, that is to say through its cultural apparatus, which comprises the eyes, the ears, and the 'mind' of capitalism and its twentieth-century voice to the world. Thus to democratize the cultural apparatus is tantamount to revolutionizing American society itself into the living realization of its professed ideals."⁶⁶ The task of democratizing the cultural apparatus in the interests of black group power fell to "creative intellectuals"—by which Cruse meant artists and cultural critics like himself.⁶⁷

⁶³ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), 433.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁶⁵ For a definitive statement of Ellison's pluralism, see "The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His Audience," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison: Revised and Updated* (New York: Modern Library), 493-523.

⁶⁶ Cruse, *Crisis*, 188.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Cruse never spelled out how this intellectual elite should go about fulfilling its duty, but he did make one thing clear: revolutionary violence, particularly the guerilla warfare advocated by some “Black Powerites,” was out of the question.⁶⁸ For Cruse, the matter of armed resistance revealed the limit of framing black American politics in colonial terms: “It is a serious mistake for the black revolutionary exponents of ‘guerrilla warfare’ to take their cues from Asian or Latin American experts in guerrilla warfare when the geographical and communication realities of the United States indicate the existence of little or no conditions for the establishment of the all-important ‘guerrilla base’ and the security maintenance thereof. The outlook here is that urban uprisings (even if coordinated) will be short-lived cataclysms of destruction which will waste themselves through armed suppression and the lack of necessary resources for sustained warfare.”⁶⁹ But Cruse had written himself into a corner. If American blacks did indeed live under a special kind of domestic colonialism, their situation differed not only from that of colonial subjects in the third world but also other ethnic minorities in the US. How, then, could they be expected to follow the same well-trodden path to power as those other minority groups? Cruse’s failure to solve this riddle stems perhaps from his own status as a creative intellectual. By his own admission, such people were “[d]etached from the Negro working class” and “floating in ideological space.”⁷⁰ As a result, he could not see how culture interacted with more concrete forms of political mobilization.

⁶⁸ Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 251.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

Greenlee noted this class-based myopia in his mostly laudatory review of the 1969 British edition of *Crisis*, stating that Cruse “seems to feel that another, more meaningful Harlem renaissance is in order, possibly in a salon over which he presides.”⁷¹ Greenlee pointed out that in successful anticolonial struggles “revolutionaries found it necessary to develop their revolutionary theory out of and not prior to active revolt. The same development is likely to occur in the United States where black revolutionaries are already engaged in on-the-job training.”⁷² Here Greenlee, who at the time worked in his native Chicago for a fair housing group called Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities, hinted at the compromise he had struck between Wright and Ellison in *Spook*. For him, revolution was a matter of training and skill; it took place not in the salon but in the street. He thus asserted that the rising class of black urban professionals hired by the administrative state to mediate the race problem was better suited to play the vanguard role that Cruse assigned to creative intellectuals. Wedded to the black masses by way of both hip culture and racialized labor, this emergent breed of race men—and to a lesser extent race women—could work in collaboration with its client base to orchestrate strategic attacks against white institutions and thereby liberate the black ghetto from colonial occupation. Such attacks would indeed require violence, namely guerrilla warfare. But Greenlee did not need to look to Asian and Latin American experts on the subject to imagine how such a scenario might play out in the US. Rather, he could draw freely on his own on-the-job training.

⁷¹ Sam Greenlee, “Hope Beyond Harlem,” *The Times Saturday Review*, March 1, 1969.

⁷² *Ibid.*

3.2. *Hipster's Revenge*

Readers of *Spook* first get a sense of the novel's dual commitments through its paratext. The original mass market paperback edition opens with the following statement from the author:

MY NAME IS SAM GREENLEE.

I am a black American and I write; not necessarily in that order of importance. I was born of a refugee family in Chicago, 13 July 1930, a second generation immigrant from the deep south. My father was a chauffeur, my mother a singer and dancer in the chorus line of the Regal Theater on the south side of Chicago...

I have recently returned from four years of writing in Greece. I am employed, with fat salary and fancy title, by an otherwise white civil rights organization in Chicago. My job is to sit by the door.⁷³

Embedded in this tongue-in-cheek author biography are performative nods to both the Ellison and the Wright schools of African American literature. In the first sentence Greenlee tentatively asserts his right to be identified first and foremost by his profession rather than his race, echoing a sentiment that Ellison, much to the chagrin of many in the Black Arts movement, frequently expressed in interviews and essays throughout the sixties.⁷⁴ Greenlee's reference to himself as "a second generation immigrant" of a "refugee family" gives expression to Ellison's "Negro nationalism," which sought to assimilate black Americans into the postwar discourse of ethnic pluralism. The references to his father's working-class job and his mother's career at the Regal Theater in

⁷³ Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (New York: Bantam, 1970), i. Hereafter cited in the text as *S*.

⁷⁴ See Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 107-142.

Chicago's Bronzeville, a neighborhood that once rivalled Harlem as an epicenter of black life, lay claim to the legacy of black urban folk culture that Ellison had romanticized.⁷⁵

At the same time, however, Greenlee's boasting of having "recently returned from four years writing in Greece" signals his allegiance to the cosmopolitan black expatriate tradition represented most famously by Wright, who moved to France permanently in 1947.⁷⁶ Last but not least, Greenlee ends by identifying himself directly with his novel's protagonist Dan Freeman and, by extension, with the violent black nationalism glorified in Wright's *Native Son*. As the first black agent hired by the CIA, Freeman's "job is to sit by the door" of the director and thereby ensure that "no one could accuse the CIA of not being integrated." Unbeknownst to the agency Freeman is biding his time until he has gathered enough intelligence to carry out his own mission back home in Chicago, the same city where Bigger Thomas went on his rampage. While working for a liberal nonprofit that does outreach to at-risk youth, Freeman surreptitiously organizes one of the local street gangs into a guerrilla force called the Freedom Fighters and launches a bloody campaign to free black America from white colonial rule. The book's front matter adds a layer of provocation that recalls "How Bigger Was Born," which Wright appended to *Native Son*. Just as Wright confessed to sharing Bigger's murderous rage and nationalist sentiments in that essay, here Greenlee acknowledges his structural and philosophical kinship with his own, even more brazen black nationalist hero.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ See Clovis Semmes, *The Regal Theater and Black Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

⁷⁶ Jackson, "The Birth of the Critic," 340.

⁷⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 451.

What gave Greenlee the ability to mediate the revolutionary and cultural nationalist tendencies of Wright and Ellison? Where Wright and Ellison grew up poor in the segregated South and the Southwest, respectively, Greenlee was raised in relative comfort in the urban North. As he put it in an interview, “I did not grow up in the stereotypical family of black literature. I did not grow up in grinding poverty à la Richard Wright. Nor did I grow up in a professional middle-class affluence. I fell in-between, and I emphasize that I grew up in a working-class comfort. We were not poor. I never missed a meal, not even during the Depression.”⁷⁸ In the 1940s, the Greenlees joined a small cohort of working-class families living in West Woodlawn, a close-knit black community that has been described as “Chicago’s first black middle-class neighborhood.”⁷⁹ Greenlee’s claim that he “fell in-between” poverty and affluence is indeed literally true: for a brief period, West Woodlawn was a middle-class “oasis” flanked by the city’s expanding, poverty-stricken Black Belt on one end and the upper-class white enclave bordering the University of Chicago on the other.⁸⁰ During Greenlee’s youth, white residents fiercely protected their remaining strongholds on the South Side by means of restrictive covenants and terrorist violence, forcing upwardly mobile blacks to carve out safe spaces of their own. In Greenlee’s case, moving to West Woodlawn would prove pivotal. A place where “blues [music] was everywhere” and black people flourished,

⁷⁸ Sam Greenlee, interview by Julieanna L. Richardson, November 1, 2001, Session 1, tape 2, story 1, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive, Chicago, IL.

⁷⁹ Julianna St. Onge, “Best Village: Blacks in Green,” *South Side Weekly*, October 1, 2014. <https://southsideweekly.com/best-village-blacks-in-green/>

⁸⁰ Betty Anne Hennings Jackson, *Girl, Don’t You Jump Rope!: A Memoir* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2014), np.

Greenlee's idyllic neighborhood left him with a tangible sense that black communal life could provide ballast against a hostile white world.⁸¹

The most important difference between Greenlee and his predecessors was his early status as a college-educated professional. Although Wright and Ellison did temporary clerical work for the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, neither earned a college degree.⁸² Greenlee, by contrast, earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Wisconsin in 1952. At the suggestion of the black Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche, he went on to do graduate work in international relations at the University of Chicago between 1954 and 1957.⁸³ He spent the two years in between undergraduate and graduate school serving as a lieutenant in the recently integrated U.S. Army. Before he could even finish his master's thesis on Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution, Greenlee became one of the first blacks recruited into the Junior Officer Training Program of the United States Information Agency (USIA), a newly minted federal department that used mass media technology to promote American interests abroad.⁸⁴ Greenlee's elite education catapulted him into "the new class" of professionals tasked with overseeing the expansion of the postwar state. That education also landed him on the frontlines of "the cultural Cold War."⁸⁵ Never one to mince

⁸¹ Greenlee, interview by Julieanna L. Richardson, Session 1, tape 2, story 7.

⁸² On Wright and Ellison's involvement in the WPA, see David A. Taylor, *The Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009), 36.

⁸³ Michael T. Martin, David C. Wall, and Marilyn Yaquinto, eds., *Race and the Revolutionary Impulse in The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 211; Greenlee, interview by Julieanna L. Richardson, Session 1, tape 3, story 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Session 1, tape 3, story 3; see also, Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency, American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸⁵ See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2015).

words, he responded to a question about his work as a “cultural officer” for the USIA in these terms: “I was a propagandist. I sold the United States like toothpaste. [We] used all forms of media—journalistic releases, pamphlets, magazines...poets, playwrights, orchestras, jazz musicians...to put a good face on American culture.”⁸⁶ Like no other black writer before him, Greenlee knew firsthand how culture could be weaponized in the name of national power.

As was the case with his contemporaries in the Black Arts movement, most notably its unofficial spokesperson Amiri Baraka, Greenlee came to consciousness with the rise of what Cedric Johnson has called “the New Afro-American Nationalism.”⁸⁷ In Johnson’s view, this “militant political tendency” developed in conjunction with the acceleration of the civil rights movement in the South following *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was a decidedly “northern, metropolitan” phenomenon that entailed “anticolonial politics, critique of the civil rights establishment, and rhetorical posturing toward revolutionary violence.”⁸⁸ What made the New Afro-American Nationalism unique was its embrace of national liberation struggles in the Third World. For many black Americans, the spectacle of black and brown people leading armed revolts against Europe’s imperial powers had a galvanizing effect. While the vast majority only encountered these events by way of the mass media, Greenlee witnessed them up-close and personal. As a result, he “intellectually grew up in the Third World.”⁸⁹ His eight

⁸⁶ Sam Greenlee, interview by Cheryl Aldave, “The Revolution,” *WaxPoetics*, 2011, <https://www.waxpoetics.com/blog/features/articles/the-revolution/>.

⁸⁷ Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 49.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Greenlee, “Duality is a Survival Tool,” 28.

years in the USIA took him to Iraq, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and Indonesia, where he found himself “rubbing shoulders with successful revolutionaries, people who had fought either as armed rebels or as nonviolent protestors to rid themselves of European occupation.”⁹⁰ Ostracized by his white colleagues, Greenlee pursued relationships with locals, who “accepted [him] like a brother.”⁹¹ These interactions impressed upon him “the parallel history and correspondence of Third World people to African Americans—first as slaves and later as a target for manipulation and oppression. The same tactics,” he observed, “were used, the same kind of propaganda, the same kinds of methods of hiring flunkies to control people. And I came to realize that the South Side of Chicago was a Third World country.”⁹² No doubt this realization contributed to Greenlee’s decision to leave the USIA in 1965 during his assignment in Greece, whereupon he retreated to the island of Mykonos and began writing *Spook*.⁹³

And yet to hear him tell it, the fact that the USIA snubbed his hero Duke Ellington was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The year before Greenlee joined the agency, the US State Department had implemented a program that deployed jazz musicians as goodwill ambassadors, sending them on tours throughout the Third World

⁹⁰ Ibid., 28, 211.

⁹¹ Ibid., 31.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Mykonos was a burgeoning bohemian hotspot in the late sixties and it would become known for being especially gay-friendly in the 1970s. Interestingly, Greenlee claimed that the government sought to sabotage the distribution of the film version of *Spook*, which he wrote and produced, by circulating misinformation about his sexuality “On one hand, they were saying I was a womanizer, and a homosexual on the other—only fifty percent of which is true,” he told an interviewer. Aldave, “The Revolution,” *WaxPoetics*. Something similar happens to Freeman in *Spook*. After he is hired by the agency agents go looking into his personal life to determine whether he has “homosexual tendencies” (36).

and the Soviet Union.⁹⁴ Ellington's tour, which inspired his 1967 Grammy Award-winning masterpiece *The Far East Suite*, was "cut short" after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963.⁹⁵ Officials at the State Department claimed that continuing the tour would send the wrong message to the remaining countries, some of "which forbade public performances in a time of mourning."⁹⁶ Greenlee had a different explanation. He found it significant that Ellington "was the only one, out of the scores of people on tour under the State Department grants, to be canceled."⁹⁷ This despite the bandleader's intention "to complete the tour with memorial concerts" that included a requiem he had written for the slain president. Greenlee, who had hoped to see Ellington when he made a scheduled appearance in Thessaloniki, received the news with indignation: "I said, 'If they could do that to Ellington, what could they do to me?'" Thus, he alleges, "I sat down that night to write the first chapter of one of my novels. And less than a year later I was on the island of Mykonos, writing. I quit. I said, 'I've got to get out of here. This is one of the finest products we've had. And they treat him like that?' I said, 'No way. I'm not sticking with these people.'"⁹⁸ He took the Ellington contretemps as an affront not only to the esteemed musician and the black expressive culture he represented but to members of the black professional class who relied on white patronage. No matter their talents or achievements, Greenlee inferred,

⁹⁴ Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1-26.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143-145.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹⁷ Sam Greenlee, interviewed by Julieanna L. Richardson, Session 1, tape 2, story 6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

black professionals would always be expendable to their white benefactors. While getting to know Third World revolutionaries might have led Greenlee to recognize the family resemblances between black Americans and colonial subjects abroad, it took the humiliation of another black professional cultural worker like himself to make him embrace revolutionary violence. The black cultural politics of the Cold War facilitated his conversion to black revolutionary nationalism. He was, in other words, uniquely positioned to combine the insights of Wright and Ellison.⁹⁹

Greenlee's protagonist combines Bigger's rage and nationalist impulses with *Invisible Man's* hip cultural sensibility. In contrast to his predecessors, Greenlee's protagonist is a member of the professional managerial elite. In this respect, we might say that *Spook* picks up where *Invisible Man* left off—or, more precisely, where it began. In the opening chapter of Ellison's novel, the narrator recounts the dying words of his grandfather: "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."¹⁰⁰ According to this formulation, it takes subterfuge rather than violence for blacks to subvert America's racial caste system, a lesson brought home to *Invisible Man* only at the end of the novel when he transforms into the hipster Rinehart. Greenlee uses

⁹⁹ Greenlee cited Ellison and Wright as direct influences. Martin, et. al., *Race and the Revolutionary Impulse*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 16.

the grandfather's deathbed confession to imagine what would happen if Invisible Man were to become a professional "spy in the enemy's country" and exploit Rinehartism for the sake of black self-determination.

Once again, we find the hipster serving as the revolutionary vanguard. But *Spook's* Freeman must use hip culture to negotiate interracial tensions brought on by token integration. The new order obliges Freeman to appear nonthreatening to his white colleagues and superiors at the CIA. Thus, Freeman becomes the racist caricature of black urbanity that they expect him to be. In a passage that turns Invisible Man's loving description of the young zoot suiters on its head, Greenlee shows how Freeman remodels himself to comply with the stereotypes characteristic of the white gaze:

He was dressed in quiet bad taste, his suit a bit too light, his cuffs a bit too deep, lapels a bit too wide, shoulders a shade too padded, tie too broad, trousers too wide at the knee and ankle, socks too short. He wore large airplane-type sunglasses, his hair was closely cropped and there was a thin surrounding of gold around a front tooth. His suit was a bit too cheap and his wristwatch, of eighteen-carat gold, a bit too expensive. He walked with a gangling shuffle, his head tilted slightly toward one shoulder and there was always a smile on his face, even when alone in the building in which he worked, broadening and flashing the thin gold when people approached. He was very well liked and would be missed. (*S*, 67)

In his garish, ungainly suit and aviator shades, flashing his gilded grin, and moving with his lazy shuffle, Freeman channels a history of ambiguous black performance called "Tomming," as in pretending to be an Uncle Tom for white people. The same could be said of the revolutionary bebop musicians who inspired hipsterism, despite their attacks on jazz elder statesman Louis Armstrong for his supposedly

Tommish public persona.¹⁰¹ To break into the white mainstream it was necessary for these musicians to make concessions to white audiences. At the same time, they felt compelled to play music that expressed black America's growing sense of self-assertion. Before the State Department designated them goodwill ambassadors, mid-twentieth-century black jazz musicians practiced a kind of racial diplomacy on the home front; they learned to thread the needle between minstrelsy and militancy in an effort to appeal to both white and black audiences. Greenlee suggests that black civil servants in the immediate post-civil rights era labored under the same conditions. As tokens of American liberalism, they found themselves torn between pursuing their own personal ambitions and representing the interests of blacks as a group.

In *Spook*, jazz provides perhaps the most obvious means of negotiating this dilemma. Freeman has "pondered the danger of leading a double life and decided that the strain of squaredom would have to be eased somehow from time to time" (*S*, 31) Without regular contact with black culture, he might be tempted to sellout. With this in mind, he travels every weekend to Harlem from Washington, D.C., which he calls "one of the squarest towns in the world," (33). In the undisputed birthplace of hip culture, he checks into a hotel and transforms from "Freeman the Tom" into "Freeman the hipster."¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ As John Leland explains, "When the bebop generation arrived, one of their first targets was jazz showmanship. Gillespie, who revered Louis Armstrong, also chastised him for ingratiating himself to white audiences" (122). But Gillespie later confessed to having his own penchant for Tomming and playing the fool on stage. Leland points out that fellow bop musician Miles Davis "criticized Gillespie's stage antics in the same way that Gillespie criticized Armstrong's" (127). *Hip: A History*. See also, Douglas Malcolm, "'Myriad Subtleties': Subverting Racism through Irony in the Music of Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie," *Black Music Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 185-222.

¹⁰² This tension between the Hipster and the Tom is present in Ellison's work as well. It is worth remembering that, as Konstantinou points out, Todd Clifton, *Invisible Man's* former comrade who dies at the hands of the police, is originally introduced in the narrative as a hipster figure. At the time of his death, Clifton has become so demoralized

Sporting “black-rimmed glasses of plain glass, cordovan bluchers, a dark button-down shirt of English oxford and a sharkskin suit from J. Press,” he makes appearances at various local bars, visits the downtown jazz clubs, and entertains himself in the wee hours with “a six-foot, compatible whore” (33). In DC he picks up another “whore on U street,” the city’s black ghetto, and nicknames her “the Dahomey Queen,” on account of her striking Africanesque features (37). Such immersion in black folklife strengthens his resolve to resist the blandishments of the white man’s world and complete his mission. Freeman’s strong sense of cultural nationalism enhances his commitment to revolutionary nationalism.

The same appears to hold true for Freeman’s lumpenproletarian lieutenants. In his cadre-training sessions Freeman uses black popular culture to consolidate his connection to these disaffected young men. Not surprisingly hip culture plays an especially prominent role in this process. In one session, Freeman seizes on Billie Holiday’s “God Bless the Child” as it issues from the radio and uses it to arouse their feelings of nationalism: “‘Pappa may have and Mamma may have, but God bless the child that’s got his own.’ Dig that? We got to get our own! But before we can, we got to get that black nigger pride working for us” (113). Lady Day’s ode to individual success becomes a black nationalist anthem that encourages liberatory violence based shared ethnic identity. This makes Holiday part of Freeman’s broader attempt to resituate hip in black proletarian life. Through her performances at Harlem jazz clubs and recordings with the

and disillusioned—presumably as a result of his work with the mostly white Brotherhood—that he is reduced to peddling Sambo dolls on the streets of Harlem.

saxophonist Lester “Prez” Young, whose rakish look and peculiar slang made him the godfather of hipsterism, Holiday became an icon of black hip culture.¹⁰³ At the same time, Holiday also enjoyed considerable crossover success, and her popularity among Beat writers enshrined her as a symbol of countercultural rebellion for many young whites.¹⁰⁴ The Beats’ adoration of Holiday articulates with the broader commercialization and deracination of jazz that occurred in the postwar period. As Freeman observes, his young recruits “knew the doo-wops, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, but jazz was something played for white folks in clubs in the loop or in concert halls” (110). He goes on to contrast the deterritorialization of postwar jazz musicians with the economic decline of Chicago’s working-class Black Belt: “He wondered how some of the jazz musicians would feel if they knew how far away many of their people felt they were. He remembered the days when Negroes in Chicago were allowed to work, before the stockyards moved west to the right-to-work-law states and before the steel mills and other plants automated, before the railroads cut back and laid off. There was jazz on the South Side, played by Negroes for Negroes.” Freeman appropriates funds from the foundation where he works to “take [his lieutenants] to hear Miles Davis” at the Drexel Hotel lounge, the South Side’s last remaining jazz spot. By way of such gestures, we are told, “[h]e became the father and big brother they had never had and, although he fought it, he returned their affection and love” (11). This reclamation of black jazz culture

¹⁰³ Joel Dinerstein, *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 37-72, 165-186.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. See also Martin Torgoff, *Bop Apocalypse: Jazz, Race, the Beats, and Drugs* (New York: Hachette, 2017).

symbolizes the restoration of the cross-class alliance between black urban professionals and the underclass that supposedly prevailed in the civil rights era, and which the hipster, as both a professional musician and a denizen of the ghetto demimonde, had once embodied. In linking the fate of the black urban underclass to deindustrialization and the exodus of black professionals from inner-city neighborhoods, Greenlee anticipates key tropes of post-civil rights discourse, validating the sociologist William Julius Wilson's theory that the black middle-class had provided the ghetto with "role models" and a "social buffer" against the economic ravages of modernity.¹⁰⁵

Greenlee's expression of nostalgia for the "vertically class- integrated" ghetto in the above passage became commonplace over the following decades, with the entrenchment of the post-civil rights era trends he identified.¹⁰⁶ It is perhaps fair to say that nostalgia informs much of the enduring fascination with *Spook* itself. If only blacks had followed Greenlee's "handbook," which ends with the Freedom Fighters instigating riots in cities across America, then perhaps, so the thinking goes, some version of that lost black ghetto might exist today on a higher, autonomous plane.¹⁰⁷ Seen through this utopian lens, Greenlee's novel is a poignant reminder of what might have been. To so regard *Spook*, however, one must overlook the fact that it makes a persuasive case for the impossibility of forming the collective black subject required to execute its radical project. While Freeman chooses "to identify with the slum people [he] left behind,"

¹⁰⁵ William Julius Wilson, "The Ghetto Underclass and the Social Transformation of the Inner City," *The Black Scholar* 19, no. 3 (May/June): 13.

¹⁰⁶ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 58.

¹⁰⁷ Greenlee, "Duality is a Survival Tool," 32.

neither his ambitious, college-educated girlfriend Joy, nor his childhood friend, Dawson, who has become a cop, shares his sympathy for the black poor (51). Thus, when Freeman says to Joy, “Except for your college degree, those [slum] people are just like you,” she bristles at the comparison and launches a tirade against the ghetto: “Not me, baby! I left that behind me: all those hot, stinky rooms, those streets full of ghosts. Junkies, whores, pimps, con men. The crooked cops, the phony, fornicating preachers. And the smells: garbage, stale sweat, stale beer, reefers, wine and funk. That bad, hand-me-down meat from the supermarket, the price hiked up and two minutes this side of turning a buzzard’s stomach. I’ve had that shit and going back won’t change things.” Joy’s memories of the offensive sights and smells of the ghetto contrast sharply with Freeman’s rosy retrospection, an acknowledgement that not everyone remained as enchanted with the black urban life as he did. Many in fact were perfectly willing to tolerate income inequality among blacks.

What is more, many blacks were content to lay the blame for that inequality at the feet of poor blacks themselves. Dawson brushes off the notion that the social conditions of the ghetto are an excuse for the rioting that erupts on the South Side after cops shoot an unarmed black teenager. “It’s not enough to say they had it tough,” he tells Freeman. “[T]hey didn’t have it any tougher than we did” (174-175). Echoing the liberal “culture of poverty” thesis, Dawson insists that the root problem is not socioeconomic but behavioral: “If everyone out there devoted as much energy trying to improve themselves as they did last night burning and looting [sic], they might be where we are” (177). Of the novel’s three characters from the rising black middle class, then, only Freeman has the

desire to commit what Elda Maria Roman calls “class suicide” by joining hands with the lumpenproletariat.¹⁰⁸ Joy and Dawson are more representative of their class than Freeman. Indeed, if the novel is any indication, the Freemans of bourgeois black America were outnumbered two to one.

The real threat to Greenlee’s project is not, as one might expect, white opposition but rather black class conflict. This becomes abundantly clear in the novel’s conclusion, when the Freedom Fighters pull off a series of dramatic stunts in the hope of expelling white business and law enforcement from the ghetto. Under Freeman’s leadership, they vandalize the vehicle of a black alderman affiliated with the city’s corrupt machine, blow up the mayor’s office, carry out sniper attacks against National Guardsmen, and kidnap the racist colonel sent in to quell the riot. While these events combined with the anti-white propaganda distributed by the group draw support from the ghetto’s impoverished masses, they also lead to a white backlash against affirmative action policies that benefit the black middle class. In this way, Freeman’s revolution exacerbates the class contradictions in the local black community. As Joy complains to Freeman: “People are losing jobs they worked and sacrificed to get, all because of ignorant niggers who know nothing but hate” (238). Recognizing Freeman as the only person on the South Side with the expertise needed to lead such an insurgency, Joy tips off Dawson, who in turn tries to bring him in. This leads to. To bring the novel to a close, Greenlee stages a at Freeman’s apartment, where the two men kill each other, and has Freeman, in his final moments,

¹⁰⁸ Maria Elda Roman, *Race and Upward Mobility: Seeking, Gatekeeping, and Other Class Strategies in Postwar America* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2017), 69-99.

listen to “God Bless the Child,” while reiterating his revolutionary message to black people: “go get your own” (248). But Greenlee’s novel shows that black professionals already have their “own” and will keep “ignorant niggers” from taking it away by any means necessary.

Close attention to *Spook*’s class politics reveals that Greenlee identified the forces that would determine the course of black politics for years to come. As Adolph Reed, Jr., explains the Jim Crow era gave birth to a “brokerage style” that remains the lodestar of black politics to this day: “Civic exclusion and the centripetal reaction to the tidal wave of white supremacist counterrevolution combined to install, as unexamined common sense, a political rhetoric that accepted the synecdochic projection of the outlooks of the race’s articulate elite strata as the collective mentality of the whole. The result was a default mode of politics in which individual ‘leaders’ could determine and pursue agendas purportedly on the race’s behalf without constraint by either prior processes of popular deliberation or subsequent accountability.”¹⁰⁹ Under Jim Crow, these leaders were the proverbial race men to whom I referred earlier. Often, they were members of a hereditary black elite. The historic defeat of Jim Crow led to calls for “indigenous control of economic and political institutions in the black community,” particularly in the urban North.¹¹⁰ As I have shown, this new politics of “Black Power” evolved largely out of the revolutionary and cultural nationalisms of the black Communist Left during the first half of the twentieth century. It bears repeating that these two nationalisms—one rooted in

¹⁰⁹ Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 20.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

radical critiques of political economy, the other in racial essentialist communitarianism—existed in tension with each other. These tensions, as Reed observes, were resolved through “an emergent stratum of black professional and managerial functionaries, administrators, and officials.”¹¹¹ The call for community control “was met by an expansion in the scope of the black political and administrative apparatus. Through federal funding requirements of community representation, reapportionment of electoral jurisdictions, support for voter ‘education,’ and growth of the social welfare bureaucracy, the black elite was provided with broadened occupational opportunities and with official responsibility for administration of the black population.”¹¹² By the 1970s this new black “administrative elite” had seized control of numerous American cities where blacks represented an increasing share of the electorate because of deindustrialization, white flight, and suburbanization.¹¹³ These new black “urban regimes” embraced neoliberal “pro-growth” agendas organized around financialization and knowledge work, a move that advanced the interests of the local black professional managerial class and white business leaders.¹¹⁴ Although these policies proved harmful to poor and working-class blacks, leaders of black urban regimes found that they could use the language of “black ethnic politics” to manufacture consent among their disgruntled constituents.¹¹⁵ Blacks

¹¹¹ Adolph Reed, “From Black Power to Black Establishment,” *The New Republic*, April 28, 2020.

<https://newrepublic.com/article/157182/black-power-manifesto-establishment-politics>

¹¹² Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 70.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80-85.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102-103; on the concept of “black ethnic politics,” see Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, xxvii-xxviii and “Black Politics and the Blue Lives Matter Presidency,” *Jacobin*, February 17, 2019,

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/02/black-lives-matter-power-politics-cedric-johnson>. In the late the nineties this mode of politicking reached a new level of decadence with the election of President Bill Clinton, whom no less of a cultural authority than Toni Morrison referred to as “our first black president.” According to Morrison, Clinton was “[b]lacker

might have won power, but for those blacks whose neighborhoods and livelihoods subsequently fell victim to neoliberalism Black Power was a pyrrhic victory.

Through Freeman, Greenlee's novel registers the shift from the black brokerage politics of the Jim Crow period to those of the black urban regime. Like the classic race men of the civil rights era, Freeman is an unelected representative of his race who pursues his mission out of a sense of duty and racial solidarity. He can assume the role of race leader on the basis of his privileged access to white institutions of power, which enables him to secure unofficial favors for his mute and disenfranchised people. To be sure, Freeman is like no other race man before him in his willingness to risk both his life and his social position to empower the black masses. He is indeed "a black Prometheus among the gods, who had stolen the secret of fire from Olympus by the Potomac and was teaching its use to his people" (91). Nevertheless, his Promethean act of imparting top-secret CIA knowledge to the lumpenproletariat reifies the antidemocratic assumptions of an earlier brokerage politics. In their climactic showdown, Dawson has every right to ask him, "Who appointed you the savior of soul?" (243) This pointed question implies that

than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime" because he "displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas." Morrison, "Talk of the Town: Comment," *The New Yorker*, October 5, 1998, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/10/05/comment-6543>. As the political scientist Richard Iton pointed out, "Clinton's ability to establish a certain playful insider status within certain circles of the African American community provided him with (black) political capital he could expend elsewhere (and against the interests of other black constituencies). With his frequent visits to black churches, his enthusiasm for the saxophone, his strong record of appointing blacks to positions in the civil service, and his sponsoring of an investigation of race and race relations under the leadership of John Hope Franklin, in combination with his facility with black folkways, the anthropologist-cum-president was able to curry favor among those classes of blacks who generally prospered during his administration." At the same time, however, this "facility with black folkways" kept Clinton from taking too much heat from black politicians for signing into law the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which eliminated AFDC, a program that benefited the black urban poor. See Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.

Freeman's thinking is colored by the ethos of the new black administrative elite that came to power in the post-civil rights era. Despite his elite public sector job, Freeman has "soul," which means he is hip. His authority to act on behalf of the black masses consequently rests at least in part on his claim to racial authenticity and his skill at manipulating cultural symbols. Freeman thus serves as a harbinger of the politicians who led the black urban regimes of the 1970s with a political style that "has continued to set the terms of mainstream black political debate."¹¹⁶

To the extent that it suggests the fate of black America lies in the hands of a professional managerial elite, *Spook* espouses a brokerage politics that would prove conducive to neoliberalism. It is tempting to conclude from this that *Spook* is ultimately not that radical at all. A similar logic has led Reed and Warren respectively to arrive at the same conclusion about the Black Power movement and post-Jim Crow African American literature in general. There is truth to their claim that post-segregation era appeals to black collectivism are ipso facto defenses of a conservative brokerage politics which poses no real threat to capitalism. Some moments in *Spook* confirm this. For instance, Freeman tells Dawson, "I don't want to change this system, just get it off my back." He is content to let whites have their "chrome-plated shit pile" so long as he can enjoy personal autonomy (243). This betrays a deeply individualist and class-inflected understanding of revolution that promises to leave the relations of capitalist production in place. Against that well-stacked deck, however, I want to stress *Spook's* devastating

¹¹⁶ Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 18.

critiques of tokenism and the black professional managerial class, which require us, if not to interpret its political project more sympathetically, then at least to differentiate it from the “neoliberal turn in black politics” and literature.¹¹⁷

As Harold Cruse wrote in *Rebellion or Revolution?* (1968), “The Negro movement represents an indirect challenge to the capitalist status quo not because it is programmatically anti-capitalist, but because full integration of the Negro in all levels of American society *is not possible within the present framework of the American system.*”¹¹⁸ Both Cruse and Greenlee recognized tokenism as a ploy to offer symbolic remuneration to the black masses, the majority of whom would never experience the financial and educational rewards of an integrated, middle-class existence. Greenlee’s condemnation of the status quo reflects his individual class experience and racial romanticism, but no one can deny that it retains a social democratic thrust. Freeman rejects tokenism not only on the ground that it dehumanizes him personally, but also on the ground that it fundamentally excludes the black urban poor. This is a far cry from the contemporary identity politics of the professional managerial class, which flattens class distinctions among blacks to preserve racial set-asides that disproportionately benefit elites while passing over the demonization of the black underclass and the gutting of welfare programs in silence.¹¹⁹ Whatever we might make of Greenlee’s solution to tokenism, his novel leaves little doubt that he deplored the careerism of the emergent

¹¹⁷ See Lester K. Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (New York: Punctum, 2015).

¹¹⁸ Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 100.

¹¹⁹ See Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 140-194. See also note 114 above.

administrative elite. Looking around the plush bachelor pad that he has paid for with money from his cushy social welfare job, Freeman sneers to himself: “Yes, the Negro profession is really swinging nowadays, but it looks like I’m going to throw a little shit in the game” (189) *Spook* belongs to a utopian moment when such statements were more than just idle threats. Just two years before the novel was published, local leaders in Greenlee’s very own Woodlawn neighborhood had secured a grant of almost a million dollars from the Office of Economic Opportunity to organize a youth development project for two of the South Side’s most notorious gangs, the Blackstone Rangers and the East Side Disciples.¹²⁰ Under the influence of the Black Power movement, members of these gangs allegedly went on to engage in some of the acts of coordinated political violence that Greenlee describes.¹²¹ Hence, the alliance between a segment of the black middle class and the lumpenproletariat posited in *Spook* did not seem nearly as far-fetched in the Black Power era as it indeed does today. This is not to suggest that Reed and Warren are wrong about the dominant trends in post-civil rights black politics and culture. On the contrary, if we can hardly imagine such an alliance in any concrete sense today, it is a testament to how alienated we have become from even the most vaguely radical hopes and dreams of the immediate post-civil rights era.

¹²⁰ Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001), 171.

¹²¹ John Kifner, “Chicago Police Face New Sniping Wave,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 1970, 1. Jeff Fort, the former leader of the Rangers is currently imprisoned in the ADX Supermax Prison in Colorado for conspiring with Libya to carry out acts of domestic terrorism in the U.S. See also, Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P. Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011).

Conclusion: The Death and Life of “White Man Marx”

I began this inquiry with the question of what happened to the radical novel in the 1960s. Already in 1956—the same year Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” destroyed the last remnants of faith that many in the CPUSA still had in their cause—critics like Walter Rideout had begun to speak of the genre’s demise. When Rideout arrived at the post-World War II period in his classic survey of radical novels published between 1900 and 1954, he marked it as the start of “a long retreat.” Since its heyday in the thirties, he observed, “the flow of radical novels has diminished from a small noisy torrent to a small quiet trickle.”¹ Without the motive engine of the proletarian literature movement and the CPUSA to propel it along, he reasoned, “[t]he future of the radical novel—and it is a precarious one—probably lies almost wholly with the independent radical.”² No doubt this is why Alan Wald’s magisterial three volume history of literary Communism in the US sputters to an end shortly after the death of the party in the late fifties.

Picking up where Rideout and Wald left off, this study has shown that the radical novel endured not only as the province of “independent radicals” throughout the long sixties, but also as a key heuristic device for writers active in the organized New Left. It has also shown how sixties novelists introduced new radical subjects into both literary and political discourse. Before the sixties, American radical novelists had neglected to consider the revolutionary potential of urban gangs, welfare recipients, the New Woman,

¹ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society, 1900-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 259.

² *Ibid.*, 290.

and the professional managerial class. And it was not until after sixties novelists had done so that political activists began to do the same. *The Group* is a prelude to the women's movement and Robin Morgan's proclamation that "women are the real Left." Yurick's *The Warriors* and *The Bag* predate the theoretical statements of the Black Panther Party and the Weather Underground. And Sam Greenlee wrote the book on the black race leaders that came to power in the seventies. There can be no doubt that these sixties social realists are heirs of the proletarian literature movement of the thirties and that their work, considered as a whole, represents a giant leap forward in the longstanding quest to Americanize Marxist thought.

One simply cannot overstate the importance of this Americanization. Since the turn of the twentieth America has posed a serious problem for Marxism and socialist theory in general. In 1905 the German Marxist economist Werner Sombart spelled out the problem in a series of essays that were later collected and published the following year as *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* (*Why is there no Socialism in the United States?*), which is now considered a classic in American political science. Though he did not use the term, Sombart essentially made a case for American exceptionalism. He noted that "nowhere on earth have the economic system and the essence of capitalism reached as full a development in North America."³ Miraculously, Americans seemed to have built a society in which the ethos of laissez-faire capitalism permeated all aspects of everyday life:

³ Werner Sombart, *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* (White Plains: Macmillan, 1976), trans. Patricia M. Hocking and C.T. Husbands, 4. Hereafter cited in the text as *W*.

Nowhere else is acquisitiveness as clearly seen as it is there, nor are the desire for gain and the making of money for its own sake so exclusively the be-all and end-all of every economic activity. Every minute of life is filled with this striving, and only death ends the insatiable yearning for profit. Making a living from anything other than capitalism is as good as unknown in the United States, and an economic rationalism of a purity unknown in any European country serves this desire for gain. Capitalism presses forward, even when its path is strewn with corpses. (*W*, 4)

Most importantly, this system had the enthusiastic support of the American proletariat. Sombart observed that “the American worker has a share in capitalism,” and because of this “he loves it” (20). He argued that no one embodied the spirit of American capitalism as much as the American worker: “If there is anywhere in America where the restless striving after profit, the complete fruition of the commercial drive and the passion for business are indigenous, it is in the worker, who wants to earn as much as his strength will allow, and to be as unrestrained as possible.” Such workers, he contended, had a reason to feel invested in capitalism: they enjoyed a high standard of living. Sombart found, for instance, that “in his eating habits as in other things the American worker is much closer to the better sections of the German middle class than to the German wage-laboring class. He does not merely eat, but dines” (97). This prevented Americans from developing “oppositional consciousness” (22). Americans lacked the “envy, embitterment, and hatred against those who have more and who live extravagantly” that has formed the basis of class consciousness among their European counterparts (18). According to Sombart, there could be no appetite for socialism under such circumstances.

To be sure, Sombart noted other factors that have also become part of the catechism of American exceptionalism, namely America’s two-party system and race. Like contemporary Marxists, Sombart found “no trace of any fundamental difference of

viewpoint between the two American parties on the most important political questions” (45). Nor did he detect “any particular class features in America’s two major parties” (50). He correctly pointed out that “[t]he Negro question has directly removed any class character from each of the two parties and has caused the concentration of strength to be much more according to geographical areas than class membership,” a situation which largely holds true for American politics to this day (49). But for Sombart race and formal politics were not the causes of socialism’s failure in the US. Rather, they were symptoms of it. Their successful occlusion of class is made possible by the existence of a labor elite. Sombart summed it up in these terms: “All socialist utopias come to nothing on roast beef and apple pie.”

One can quibble with Sombart’s ethnographic analysis of the American character, but it must be acknowledged that his argument has aged remarkably well. The reason for that is the continued absence of socialism in the US, whether we define socialism as the nationalization of the means of production or the provision of public goods, such as healthcare and higher education, by the state. Unlike its mother country, America has no labor party. Indeed, it has failed to sustain even a labor movement. Nor does the US have a national healthcare system. By contrast, Germany has had one since the 1870s. America is one of two countries in the world that has “no national policy guaranteeing paid maternity leaves.”⁴ The other is Papua New Guinea.⁵ The gains made during the New

⁴ James W. Russell, *Double Standard: Social Policy in Europe and the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 105.

⁵ “Looking after Baby: Paid Family Leave,” *The Economist*, July 20, 2019.

Deal under President Roosevelt, while not inconsequential, were modest at best.

Presidential historian William Leuchtenberg, an admirer of FDR, had this to say about the Social Security Act of 1935, which many consider the crown jewel of the New Deal: “In many respects, the law was an astonishingly inept and conservative piece of legislation. In no other welfare system in the world did the state shirk all responsibility for old-age indigency and insist that funds be taken out of the current earnings of workers. By relying on regressive taxation and withdrawing vast sums to build up reserves, the act did untold economic mischief.”⁶ He added that social security “not only failed to set up a national system of unemployment compensation but did not even provide adequate national standards.”⁷ Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the provision of FDR’s social security legislation that ensured federal assistance to single mothers and their children, was eliminated under President Bill Clinton when he signed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (commonly known as welfare reform). What was true in 1906 has remained so ever since: there is no socialism in the United States of America.

All this poses several problems for the Marxist script, which novelists in the sixties exploited with unprecedented scope. Marx had insisted that the triumph of the capitalist mode of production would lead to society’s “splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”⁸

⁶ William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works, Vol. 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 15, <http://activistmanifesto.org/assets/original-communist-manifesto.pdf>

He predicted that the latter would increase inexorably in number and face a steadily deteriorating standard of living. At the same time, the proletariat would become increasingly conscious of its status as a class through socialized labor in large-scale factories, which would in turn enable society to produce a superabundance of goods. Taking stock of this reality, the proletariat would finally overthrow the bourgeois capitalist class, seize control over the means of production, and establish a socialist society in which everyone could finally enjoy the fruits of their labor. Marx was certain that no other class could lead the battle toward socialist transformation. “Of all the classes that stand face-to-face with the bourgeoisie today,” he and Engels wrote, “the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class.”⁹ This class, he added, “cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into air.”¹⁰ Insofar as it is the only one that can effectuate revolutionary change on everyone’s behalf, the proletariat constitutes a universal class.

The battle between capitalists and proletariats was supposed to play out first at the level of nation-states and then become a global phenomenon. By Marx’s logic, then, the US should have been in the vanguard of the struggle for socialism. Marx had even declared that “[t]he most perfect example of the modern [capitalist] State is North America.”¹¹ And yet America has lagged behind all other Western societies in moving toward some form of socialism. Something is amiss. If we subscribe to Sombart’s

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 80.

dubious theory that the American proletariat has experienced immiseration under capitalism, then we must conclude that Marx was wrong about the development of capitalist economics. If, on the other, hand we subscribe to the view developed later by the Frankfurt School that the American proletariat has embraced its own immiseration, then we must conclude that Marx clearly underestimated or misunderstood the role that ideology and culture play in mediating the class antagonisms he identified.¹² On either reading the American proletariat's status as a universal class is plunged into question.

We have seen that sixties social novelists responded to this conundrum by positing new, universal classes: bourgeois women, black and brown welfare mothers, and black street gangs. But for all their revisionism, these writers continued to rely on a soft form of economic determinism. The revolutionary subjects of sixties social novels were more identity-inflected than their predecessors but no less defined by their relation to the means of production. Sixties authors still took for granted that America is a class society and that economic interests play a decisive role in revolutionary struggle. Consequently, their novels reinforce the notion that ascriptive identities cannot overcome class antagonisms. In all these ways, they remained deeply indebted to classical Marxism.

Once sixties novelists began to rethink the universal class and its relation to culture, however, they opened a Pandora's box. By the seventies it had become possible and indeed commonplace to imagine factors other than class struggle as the prime mover of history and capitalism in the radical novel. One senses the change already in Thomas

¹² I have in mind here Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. See also, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), trans. Edmund Jephcott.

Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), that capstone of the long sixties, when the narrator berates Marx for his supposed class reductionism. In a passage describing the genocide of the Herero, Pynchon dismisses the idea that economic exploitation can suffice as an explanation for the depravities of colonialism:

“What’s a colony without its dusky natives? Where’s the fun if they’re all going to die off? Just a big hunk of desert, no more maids, no field-hands, no laborers for the construction or the mining—wait, wait a minute there, yes it’s Karl Marx, that sly old racist skipping away with his teeth together and his eyebrows up trying to make believe it’s nothing but Cheap Labor and Overseas Markets....Oh, no. Colonies are much, much more. Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit. Where he can fall on his slender prey roaring as loud as he feels, and guzzle her blood with open joy. Eh? Where he can just wallow and rut and let himself go in a softness, a receptive darkness of limbs, of hair as woolly as the hair on his own forbidden genitals. Where the poppy, and cannabis and coca grow full and green, and not to the colors and style of death, as do ergot agaric, the blight and fungus native to Europe.”¹³

According to Pynchon, colonies are only secondarily sites of extraction. Their primary purpose is to satisfy the soul’s boundless cravings for racialized violence, sex, and drugs. Pynchon implies that Marx was in denial about this, which makes the nineteenth century theorist “a sly old racist.” But Marx simply held a different view of human nature. A student of Epicurus and Hegel, Marx believed that, once their basic material needs were met, human beings desired nothing so much as self-actualization.¹⁴ In other words, their greatest desire was to become individuals. They could only achieve this, he argued, by performing labor that redounds to their immediate personal benefit. Following the political scientist Sebastian de Grazia’s schema, we might say that Marx

¹³ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 317.

¹⁴ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 53-54.

believed that human beings desired the “utopia” of leisure and culture where Pynchon believed that they desired the “Cockaigne” of “ease and abundance.”¹⁵ Hence Marx insisted that the horrors of primitive accumulation and other forms of capitalist extraction were necessary byproducts of a contingent system that warps human desires, producing Marcuse’s one-dimensional men. Pynchon, on the other hand, suggests that capitalism’s horrors have more to do with natural human urges than independent economic laws. This logic requires Pynchon to jettison Marx’s economic categories. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) the world is not divided between capitalists and proletarians but between “the elect” and “the Preterite.”¹⁶ Ironically, these categories first appear in a religious tract published by the colonial ancestor of Tyrone Slothrop, the novel’s protagonist. The Preterite are “the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation.”¹⁷ In contrast to class, “preterition” is an ontological category referring to those “possessed not by demons but by trust for men, which the men kept betraying.” Thus, it is not economic status but rather one’s nature that makes one a member of the Preterite. In keeping with the limited utopia of postmodernism, Pynchon’s Preterite—Army intelligence agent Slothrop among them—are diffused, engaged in isolated, small-scale acts of resistance against the elect.

Somewhat surprisingly, it is Leslie Marmon Silko’s postmodern social novel of Native American life *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) that attempts to salvage Marx. Indeed,

¹⁵ Sebastian de Grazia, *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 381. For de Grazia’s take on Marx see 350-351.

¹⁶ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 555.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Silko's novel celebrates Marx for his sensitivity to the indignities of human exploitation and his knowledge of indigenous history. In the novel, an indigenous young woman Angelita convinces an Indian community in Mexico to execute a smug, narcissistic Cuban Marxist who proselytizes among them "for crimes against the revolution, specifically for crimes against Native American history."¹⁸ Angelita accuses Bartolomeo, the Marxist in question, of having "disgraced [Marx's] name, the way Jesus was disgraced by crimes of his alleged 'followers,' the popes of the Catholic Church" (*A*, 519). She correctly points out that Marx had derived his ideas about Communism from Native American history: "Marx had been inspired by reading about certain Native American communal societies, though naturally as a European he had misunderstood a great deal. Marx had learned about societies in which everyone ate or everyone starved together, and no one being stood above another—all stood side by side—rock, insect, human being, river, or flower. Each depended upon the other; the destruction of one harmed all others." Bartolomeo, by contrast, has disparaged and discounted Native American folkways in his efforts to arouse their class consciousness. He has shown no regard for their indigenous history of "big uprisings and revolutions" (527). Angelita contrasts Bartolomeo's "white man Marx" with her own "Marx of the Jews, tribal people of the desert, Marx the tribal man" (518). In addition to learning from Native American culture, this Marx had "gathered official government reports of the suffering of English

¹⁸ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 515. Hereafter cited in the text as *A*.

factory workers the way a tribal shaman might have, feverishly working to bring together a powerful, even magical, assembly of stories” (520).

What are we to make of this rehabilitation of Marx at the so-called end of history, just two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the defeat of global Communism? Obviously, it participates in the same ontological turn as *Gravity's Rainbow*. The literary scholar Walter Benn Michaels takes it as another sign that “all politics” has “become identity politics.”¹⁹ In other words, how we differ in our beliefs and economic status has begun to matter less than how we differ in race, culture, gender, and sexuality. Silko’s reclamation of Marx epitomizes the shift: “Marx the Marxist taught that men belonged to classes; Marx ‘the tribal Jew’ himself belongs to a race. Preferring Marx to Marxism, Silko prefers race and the appreciation of ethnic difference to class and the elimination of economic difference. That’s why the revolution she envisions involves not the workers of the world casting off their chains but its ‘indigenous people’ taking back their ‘ancestral land.’”²⁰ But still, why bring Marx into this at all? Why resurrect this Lutheran political economist only to misread him as a “Jew” and repudiate his categories?

For the same reason that Pynchon accused him of racism. Both decisions only make sense within the context of revolutionary failure that I have laid out. As radical novelists, Pynchon and Silko acknowledge the need for revolutionary change, but neither sees class as the primary fault line of capitalist society. Both contend that forces more abstract and elemental—race, sadism, faith, history—underwrite social conditions. They

¹⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

do not make their claims in a vacuum. Since the sixties Americans have responded more readily to narratives organized around such issues, partly because they have become more sensitive to them, partly because other avenues of struggle have largely been foreclosed. Nevertheless, these novelists have absorbed Marxist thought and understand that a commitment to revolution requires a revolutionary subject. If postmodern social novelists imagine Marxist-style universal classes rooted solely in identity or ontology, it is their attempt to come to terms with the failures of the class-based paradigms that governed radical literature up through the sixties. Thus, it is not enough to say, as Michaels does, that these novels elide class. We must be careful to add that they do so at moments when Marxist thought has suffered resounding defeats in America. We must bear in mind this same historical reality when we turn to those more traditional social novels, from Russell Banks's masterful *Continental Drift* (1985) to Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), that continue to keep class in the foreground and yet offer no possibilities for radical subjectivity or revolutionary hope. Each of these reformulations of Marxist ideas, however blinkered, reveals a desire to keep Marx's anti-capitalist critique alive as a means of solving the problem that is America.

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