THE BIG NO

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Center for 21st Century Studies

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

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Antisocial (A Literary History)

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> There is no phenomenon [. . .] which does not take
> place *in* society.
>
> —*Émile Durkheim*

Is there such a thing as society? Scholars across the disciplines are
becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea that there isn't.
"What if," the literary critic David Alworth wonders approvingly,
"there is no such thing as society?"[1] If the claim that society does
not exist once called to mind the austere neoliberalism of Marga-
ret Thatcher, today it is more likely to invoke the iconoclastic so-
ciology of Bruno Latour, for whom "there is no social dimension of
any sort, no 'social context,' no distinct domain of reality to which
the label 'social' or 'society' could be attributed."[2] Associations, not
totalization: this is the bedrock of a Latourian "school of thought"
that Latour himself admits "could use as its slogan what Mrs.
Thatcher famously exclaimed (but for very different reasons!)."[3]
With Latour's actor-network-theory, Thatcher's neoliberal slogan
appears to have been raised to the level of methodological princi-
ple.[4] This principle insists that there are flexible networks, tempo-
rary affiliations, weak ties—but there is no such thing as *society.*
That particular term, these critics suggest, is a meaningless ab-
straction, if not a misleading fiction.

   Is society really so debased a concept? In one sense, the charges
against it are true. Society *doesn't* exist—if what you mean by

society is an object whose existence can be measured, quantified, or empirically confirmed. This is what someone like Rita Felski seems to mean when she suggests that "the social just is the act and the fact of association." For Felski, there is no "shadowy," ineffable society that lies "behind [. . .] human practices"; there are just those concrete human (and, she would probably add, nonhuman) practices.[5] Felski, Latour, and others present their debunking of the myth of society as a new and necessary corrective to decades of ossified thinking about social determination. In fact, it is not so new. More than a century ago, the sociologist Émile Durkheim sought to refute exactly the claim that Latour and Felski make today: the claim that society is nothing but "a mental construct, a metaphysical entity which the scholar can and must neglect [. . .] a composite in which there is nothing more than the sum of its components."[6] At the time Durkheim was writing, this claim was associated with the discipline of mainstream economics, which sought to reduce the "metaphysical entity" of society down to the acts and associations of so many individual *homines oeconomici*. As Durkheim saw it, it was a mistake to think of society as just the acts and facts of individuals and their associations. What such a view failed to acknowledge were the "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the remarkable property of existing outside the individual consciousness." These "collective habits," no matter how remarkable in their apparent disembodiment, nonetheless "find expression in definite forms: legal rules, moral regulations, popular proverbs, social conventions."[7] It is this feedback loop of collective habits and institutional forms that points to an entity that "exist[s] outside" the material fact of individuals. The term for that entity is *society*: at once the end product and the governing process of human lives lived in the plural. And as Durkheim reminded his readers a century ago, the fact that we can't see it does not constitute sufficient proof that it does not exist.

In what follows, my attempt to intervene in current debates about the critical value of the concept of society takes the form less of a theoretical argument than of a literary-historical inquiry: what has it meant at different moments for novelists to suggest that society doesn't exist, and how has that suggestion been recorded by literary form? Across the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, the form of the novel was persistently torn between the desire for social withdrawal and the force of the social whole. Yet the literary history of these dueling impulses is hardly a static one. Rather, such a history helps us see how the imaginative uses of antisociality changed over time. What began as a pleasurable fantasy of social escape, I'll argue, would soon become a violent record of the very inescapability of social determination.[8]

To be sure, the novel is at once a profoundly social literary form and a peculiarly antisocial one. Historians and theorists of the novel have long insisted on the novel's defining social uses: its instruction in sympathy, its teaching of economic credibility, its articulation of invisible community.[9] Yet there is a well-known antisocial side to the novel as well: it narrates public life, yet shores up private property; it depicts social interaction, yet affirms the primacy of interiority;[10] it teaches us sympathy, but only in sessions of private reading;[11] most of all, it guarantees its own special social status only by inventing a category—fiction—that is defined first and foremost as the formal opposite of the social world.[12] These constitutive antisocial elements—the solitude of reading, the priority of privacy, and the extrasocial status of fiction itself—suggest a kind of shadow history of the modern novel. This is a history in which the novel form turns out to be less a lesson in empathy or identification than a way of grappling with a series of escalating contradictions that lie at the heart of both social life and literary form: the contradiction between ourselves and other people, between the concreteness of other people and the abstraction of society, and finally between society and literature—which is to say, between what we take to be the real world and what we are capable of imagining as alternatives to it.

The history of sociality and the literary history of antisociality have recently garnered a fair share of critical attention in the context of nineteenth-century Britain. In an era shaped by the birth of social science, by the new dominance of an industrialized market economy, by unprecedented levels of social density, and by what D. A. Miller famously called "the emergence of [. . .] modern disciplinary power in general," nineteenth-century British novels frequently sought both to map the scope of the social system and to imagine some (purely fictional) escape from it.[13] As

Jeff Nunokawa points out, "people go to considerable lengths to get away from others in the nineteenth-century novel, and to get others away from them."[14] There are different ways of understanding the nineteenth-century inclination toward social withdrawal. Christopher Lane, for one, emphasizes the deep vein of misanthropy running through the period. Exemplified by Oscar Wilde's well-known quip that "the only possible society is oneself," Victorian culture, Lane suggests, gave "antisocial behavior a thrilling, if vicarious, appeal."[15] In doing so, nineteenth-century literature taught readers "whom to hate, and what [to] do with that emotion."[16] Gage McWeeny notices the same "weak forms of sociality, or even apparent antisociality," shaping the Victorian novel. But he sees the period's representative "antisocial sociability" as having a more positive function for British culture. "Social detachment," in McWeeny's account, ironically expresses not hatred or rejection but a "yearning toward collective social life."[17]

For Lane, Victorian antisociality reveals the inhospitable and unneighborly feelings lying behind the facade of British sociability; for McWeeny, that same antisociality bespeaks the desire for an abstract, impersonal collectivity located beyond domestic intimacy. But if Lane and McWeeny disagree on the precise connotations of antisocial sentiment, they nevertheless agree that such sentiment emerged as a challenge to the Victorian era's compulsory forms of sociality. For both critics, the nineteenth-century antisocial novel represents a fictional counterpoint to the historical emergence of modern society—a society that was densely populated, tightly regulated, highly conventionalized, and consolidated into an object of both literary and scientific study. Under those historical conditions, literary depictions of escaping from society were as necessary as they were imaginary. Put differently, such escapes were constitutively novelistic. The Victorian antisocial novel existed in dialectical relation to the compulsion of social belonging and the perceived force of social regulation. The possibility of getting away from other people appeared in so many nineteenth-century novels precisely because it wasn't felt to exist in nineteenth-century society itself.

The story of the antisocial novel in nineteenth-century Britain, then, is a story about the sometimes unbearable feeling of

ineluctable sociality. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, antisocial fiction began to tell a rather different story— one about the gradual fraying of social bonds and the apparent disintegration of the social whole. In the United States today, this is a story that most commonly appears under the title *neoliberalism* and whose most frequently cited chapters include stagnating wages, rising unemployment, increased inequality, and the concerted dismantling of the welfare state. Most readers will be familiar with how the rise of austerity politics has played out in the twenty-first century. Many will further recognize that these are processes that began in earnest several decades ago, with the twin assaults on social welfare and organized labor that entered the political mainstream in the 1980s. Yet to grasp the full scope of our contemporary epoch of antisocial social relations, it is necessary to begin still earlier in the twentieth century—not with Thatcher and Reagan but with the crisis of the liberal state that, in the wake of World War II, reshaped American conceptions of social responsibility and the common good.[18]

One of the most intractable puzzles of midcentury U.S. history has been how the "proto-social democracy" of the New Deal broke apart in the 1940s and 1950s.[19] In the postwar years, New Deal aspirations toward social democracy and wealth redistribution ran aground on the transformed ideological framework, policy imperatives, and material conditions of the incipient Cold War. Emergent suspicions about the role of the federal government manifested both in liberal reconciliation with the free market and in the conservative push for government collaborations with private industry. This ideological convergence had a profound impact on American social life. Public policy became narrowly focused on promoting growth and boosting consumption; welfare was privatized (in the form of benefits tied to employment, for example); and images of American freedom and individualism— emblematized in the classic figure of the teenage rebel[20]—were used to ward off the ostensibly deadening force of Soviet-style central planning. Viewed through the lens of these epochal social and political changes, a midcentury era generally associated with conformity and consensus turns out to be the decisive period in which the commitments to social welfare and economic equality

were replaced by bipartisan allegiance to privatization, deregulation, and individual consumption.

As the historian Ira Katznelson argues, the dissolution of the New Deal order during and after the war "changed the locus of political debate from questions of social organization and class relations to issues of technical economics and interest group politics."[21] With this shift of focus, the New Deal principles of economic equality and a strong regulatory state gave way to the alienation and anomie of a new postwar consumer society, one whose ideological sense of abundance and celebration of choice dramatically weakened support for social welfare while making class solidarity appear, in the face of such apparent prosperity, all but unnecessary.[22] The decisive turn away from "macroeconomic planning and social welfare goals"[23] in the midcentury United States cast into new and radical doubt the ideals of social welfare and shared responsibility that had shaped the major achievements of the New Deal. The abandonment of social and economic planning in the 1940s signaled a major shift in liberal thought in the period. Whereas New Deal liberals had insisted that the structural inequities of a capitalist economy could only be managed by a strong state, postwar liberals made peace with a capitalist system that was visibly booming during and after the war. With this about-face, the collectivist, state-centered vision of society that briefly entered American public life in the 1930s was displaced by an unapologetically capitalist, consumerist, and individualist worldview. As Alan Brinkley argues,

> by 1945, the wartime experience had led most to conclude [. . .] that neither a new economic order nor active state management of the present one were necessary, possible, or even desirable; that the existing structure of capitalism (including its relative independence from state control) was the best hope for social progress; and that the government's most important task was less to regulate the private economy than to help it expand and to compensate for its occasional failures.[24]

The incontrovertible evidence of capitalist success supplied by the postwar boom helped transform the period's political ideology.

As the historian Carol A. Horton explains, "growing prosperity widely discredited the progressive position that it was important to have socially directed governmental interference in the capitalist market." In short, by the end of the 1940s, "the achievement of a booming consumer economy [. . .] replaced the vision of a more equitable society."[25]

The upheavals of the postwar years—including the economic boom, the rise of the suburbs, the diminished horizons of the labor movement, and increasingly undeniable evidence of the country's constitutive racial violence—can, in a sense, be said to have remade the very idea of society as it circulated in American discourse. As the political scientist Theodore Lowi argued in 1969, the postwar social order was built on a newly institutionalized "dread of such poetic terms as 'public interest,' 'the state,' and 'sovereignty.'"[26] Katznelson concurs; the post–New Deal social order, he suggests, institutionalized a growing disinclination to consider social and economic problems in terms of a larger "social totality." Rather than attempting to make sense of the complex and shifting nature of society, public policy was now dominated by a version of neoclassical economics that considered economic problems in isolation from social ones. The new dominance of professional economists in the arena of public policy meant that, in Katznelson's words, "social organization and human nature were now to be taken as givens."[27] In particular, what was now taken as a given was the very idea that Durkheim had sought to debunk half a century before: that "society" was nothing but an aggregate of isolated, individual economic actors. On this view, there were neither structural problems nor systemic solutions; in fact, very little about the world could be understood as shared at all. With social and political problems successfully retranslated into the language of economic (and specifically microeconomic) theory, social life in postwar America came to be dominated by what Annie McClanahan calls, in her cultural history of microeconomics, a kind of "philosophical antisociality," a philosophy that served to authorize the "ostensibly virtuous rejection of the very idea of society."[28]

This newly antisocial moment in American history—a moment that marked a radical rethinking of the relation between individuals and the construct we call society—created the conditions for

a new kind of antisocial novel. The particular antisocial slant of midcentury American literature is captured by one of the era's most distinctive literary creations: the criminal sociopath. As Sean McCann explains in his history of American crime fiction, the paperback originals of the 1950s "remade the hard-boiled [detective] story into a drama of psychopathology" whose "typical protagonist became a freak, a loser, or a sociopath."[29] Leonard Cassuto likewise views the 1950s as a key moment in the invention of "nonconformist crime fiction," a genre style that sought to "inhabit the twisted minds of the transgressors."[30] Eschewing the law-abiding and order-restoring work associated with the canonical character of the detective, many midcentury crime writers began instead to explore the literary affordances of the sympathetic sociopath. They did so, I argue in the remainder of this essay, as a way to come to terms with the new antisocial dynamics of their time.

"Criminality," write the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, channeling Durkheim, "is a critical prism by means of which societies know themselves."[31] In the case of midcentury American fiction, we can go one step further and think of criminality as the prism through which writers attempted to determine whether society—a collection of social imperatives that, in Durkheim's words, are "external to the individual"—could actually be said to exist in the first place. The literary sociopath's rejection not only of social norms but, as we shall see, of the very idea of society captures in microcosm what Erving Goffman would diagnose in his 1963 book *Stigma* as the "collective denial of the social order."[32] This collective refusal—its feasibility, its effects, and, finally, its contradictions—was the main subject of the midcentury antisocial novel. The character of the criminal sociopath offered a uniquely apt literary test case for deciding, are we governed by a shared sense of social ties, or are we ruled, paradoxically, by nothing but our shared denial of them?

Who Is Society?

One of the great antisocial moments in American literature comes at the end of Patricia Highsmith's 1950 crime novel *Strangers on a Train.* In the novel's final scene, the tormented protagonist Guy

Haines—who, after a chance encounter on a train with the so-
ciopath Charles Bruno, is implicated in two separate killings—
attempts to confess his crimes to a stranger. But Guy discovers
something strange: the stranger doesn't care.

> "What business is it of mine?" [Owen] asked firmly.
>
> "What business? Because you—you are a part of society!"
>
> "Well, then it's society's business," Owen replied with a lazy
> wave of his hand.
>
> What business, Guy thought. Was that his real attitude, or
> was he drunk? It must be Owen's attitude. . . . Then he remem-
> bered it had been his own attitude. . . . Was this most people's
> attitude? If so, who was society?[33]

Society, Guy discovers, is made up of people who don't believe in
society. Society's abstraction in the form of what Guy will later
call "inexorable rules" is something that everyone assumes every-
one else is responsible for policing but that no one feels responsi-
ble for themself. With this realization, Guy is led to ask himself,
"Would Brillhart [his former boss] have reported him? No. He
couldn't imagine Brillhart reporting him. Everyone would leave it
for someone else, who would leave it for someone else, who would
leave it for someone else, and no one would do it."[34] The irony wo-
ven into our idea of society is that it is not a way of inculcating col-
lective responsibility so much as a way of letting everyone off the
hook. If it's society's business, it's really nobody's business. Society
appears here as a whole that has no individual parts. In *Strangers
on a Train,* other people are not the synecdoche for society but the
proof—in all their narrow self-interest and indifference—that the
collective we lazily think of as a society doesn't actually include us,
or any real person, at all.

Guy's epiphany about the nonexistence of society alters his own
sense of personal responsibility. This is because responsibility
makes no sense without recourse to a larger set of social norms:

> Did he care about rules? Wasn't it a rule that had kept him tied
> to Miriam? Wasn't it a person who was murdered, and there-
> fore people who mattered? If people from Owen to Brillhart

> didn't care sufficiently to betray him, should he care any
> further? Why did he think this morning that he had wanted
> to give himself up to the police? What masochism was it? He
> wouldn't give himself up. What, concretely, did he have on his
> conscience now? What human being would inform on him?[35]

If there is no collective social body to care about what Guy has done, why should he care about it himself? In the absence of a society that abstractly governs the relations between individuals, guilt is nothing but "masochism": not an expression of social responsibility but—because there is no order that can be called social—a purely narcissistic form of self-punishment. Indeed, Highsmith suggests that the very idea of "conscience" is a social construct, in the strict sense that it, too, assumes the existence of society as a totalizing whole. What we think of as conscience is, in this passage, nothing but the unsustainable fantasy of a society that will hold one accountable for the actions one feels most guilty about. In a social world where no "human being would inform on" any other and where no one is willing to hold anyone else accountable, the issue is not simply that Guy's guilt doesn't matter. It is that, without the assumption of a larger society, it no longer counts as guilt at all.

Highsmith's antisocial riposte to social belonging—aimed at demystifying the fantasy of a society that could somehow exist above and beyond individually embodied interests—is itself the product of a historically specific kind of society. Terrified of the "enemy within" while working to undermine structures of social welfare and common belonging without, the anti-Communist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic culture of the early Cold War depended in a very real sense on the social regulation of interiority: on the rigorous policing of the gap between public sentiments and private desires, between what one was willing to say and what one really thought. At the most immediate level, *Strangers on a Train* registers its anxiety about this sort of policing through its fixation on privacy. As Guy puts it at the end of the novel, "My mistake was in telling a stranger my private business."[36] The emphasis on privacy marks *Strangers on a Train* as a distinctly Cold War crime novel, one preoccupied with the tension between private life and the public sphere.

In Highsmith's novel, this tension proves to be both threatened and threatening. While Guy understands the lesson of his criminal misadventures to be the mistake of disclosing his "private business," he is also extremely anxious about others' ability to keep their private thoughts to themselves. Other people's inaccessible thoughts are Guy's biggest worry; he is obsessed with his own inability to know what other people are thinking. Reflecting back on his relationship with his ex-fiancée Miriam, Guy thinks, "How sure he had once been that he possessed her, possessed her every frailest thought! Suddenly it seemed that all love was only a tantalizing, a horrible next-best to knowing! He knew not the smallest part of the new world in Miriam's mind now. Was it possible that the same thing could happen with Anne?"[37] The dynamic of patriarchal possession associated with heterosexual marriage is here extended as far as the mental realm: Guy once believed that he owned even Miriam's thoughts. But he was mistaken, and this mistake is indeed something that "could happen" and in fact will happen again and again. The inability to access the "world" of someone else's mind is the dilemma that defines Guy's entire world, not just with his ex-fiancée but also with his new fiancée, Anne: "She spoke slowly, and Guy was all at once terrified, realizing she was a separate person from himself, a person with a different mind."[38]

Of course, Guy's terror at realizing that he can't know his girlfriend's thoughts is largely a projection of his fear that she might know his—and, in knowing them, discover that the innocent person he claims to be on the outside isn't the guilty person he knows himself to be on the inside. In this way, crime turns out to be the name the novel gives to the mismatch between thought and expression, interiority and exteriority—an inner life of deviance versus an outer life of what the novel repeatedly calls "happiness." Everyone in the book wants everyone else to be happy, and everyone thinks everyone is happy except them. Happiness is what Guy's fiancée Anne has and Guy lacks; it is what Bruno never has except when he is with Guy; it is what Guy never feels with Bruno. "I know you have it in you, Guy," says Anne, "the capacity to be terribly happy."[39] Happiness, for Highsmith, is another name for social normativity. It is also the novel's measure of deviance. Guy is tormented not merely by his own unhappiness but by the awareness

that his unhappiness makes him abnormal. Another way to put this is that it is really the self-conscious awareness of not being happy that makes Guy unhappy. Happiness in the novel is less a state of mind than it is the ideal of not having to deal with your own mind. And unhappiness, in turn, is simply the problem of thinking too much about happiness.

Or perhaps it is just the problem of thinking too much in general—the problem of having unconfessable thoughts. Guy is unhappy because his guilt over the murder of Bruno's murder can't be expressed. Bruno is unhappy because his sexual desire for Guy can't be admitted. What crime and queer desire have in common in Highsmith's novel—where they are explicitly conjoined—is that they both exemplify the ways that the social realm sustains itself by suppressing private thought. In Highsmith's view, the idea of society is the fantasy of a world in which the inner forms of guilt, anxiety, perversity, and desire don't exist, a world in which there is never any misalignment between what we think and what we say. But of course, that misalignment is always there, a fact we are re-minded of by the very last line of *Strangers on a Train*: "Guy tried to speak, and said something entirely different from what he had intended. 'Take me.'"[40] The gap between speech and intention is also the gap between thought and word, a guilty conscience and a happy face. *Strangers on a Train* thus seeks to reassert the primacy of interiority against a repressive social order that convinces us it exists by pretending that the gap between a person's outward per-sona and inner thoughts doesn't. For Highsmith, it is because we live in a world in which *everyone* has secret thoughts, in which no one ever means what they say, that the idea of a society based on communication and consensus can only be an illusion.

Getting Away from Others

Crime rendered as a metaphor for society—or more specifically, as a metaphor for the impossibility of society—is even more vividly and viciously staged by the pulp writer Jim Thompson in his 1958 novel *The Getaway*. *The Getaway* tells the story of Doc and Carol McCoy, a husband-and-wife criminal team who rob a bank and end up on the run, killing many people along the way (including

their partner in the robbery) before eventually escaping to Mexico with the heist money. Once there, they discover a new and unsettling kind of social order. This is the veritably antisocial order of the kingdom of El Rey, who offers refuge to criminals on the lam. But living in El Rey's kingdom comes with a catch: the cost. "All accommodations—everything one must buy—are strictly first class," and in this way, the kingdom is meticulously designed to slowly and inevitably drain the savings of the criminals who flock there.[41] If you don't put your money in El Rey's bank, it will likely be stolen, but if you do put it there, it is you who will have to pay interest to the bank for holding it:

> On balances of one hundred thousand dollars or more, the rate is six percent; but on lesser sums it rises, sharply, reaching a murderous twenty-five percent on amounts of fifty thousand and under. Briefly, it is almost imperative that a patron keep his account at or above the one hundred thousand figure. But he may not do this by a program of skimping and doing without. When one's monthly withdrawals fall under an arbitrary cost—the approximate amount which it should cost him to live at the prevailing first-class scale—he becomes subject to certain "inactive account" charges. And these, added to his withdrawals, invariably equal that total.[42]

Thus do the citizens of El Rey have no choice but to watch "their assets trickle, nay, pour away on every side."[43]

What happens when those assets run out, as they are designed to do? Doc discovers the answer when, one day, he takes a stroll into the neighboring village, whose "one street was attractively cobblestoned" and whose air was filled with the enticing "smell of roasting peppery meat."[44] The village turns out to be a "cooperative" in which "each resident contributes such labor as he is able to."[45] Weary of the rapacious capitalist conditions of El Rey and perhaps seduced by the echoes of Marx, Doc is enchanted by the idea of moving to the cooperative—that is, until he is told that there is "no drink or food of any kind" for sale in the village. What do the people there eat, then? The answer, Doc discovers, is present in the "*smell that filled the air. The odor of peppery, roasting flesh.*

Peppers could be had anywhere, for the picking, the asking, but the meat . . ." That's right: the residents of the village, sent there from El Rey when their savings are finally depleted, survive by cooking and eating each other. As Doc's guide to the village puts it to him, "Quite fitting, eh, *señor*? And such an easy transition. One need only live literally as he has always done figuratively."[46] What seems at first like an opposition between the mercenary economy of El Rey and the cooperative structure of the village is, on second look, a mirror. In the shadow of capitalism, "cooperation" is simply another word for cannibalism—and cannibalism, in turn, simply the truth of a capitalist order organized by nothing but self-interest in the service of self-preservation.

The kingdom of El Rey thus stands as an ornate allegory for the dissipation of cooperative social relations in capitalist society. Indeed, as Thompson's narrator tells us, in El Rey, "there is almost no social life." Trapped in a place where a person's sole concern is making his savings last as long as possible, people have neither need for nor interest in each other, and so "anyone approaching another is suspect or suspicious."[47] As for the kingdom itself, it is the spitting image of the laissez-faire, noninterventionist state. Here every criminal is left to their own vices and devices; El Rey "will not cheat you. He will not kill you. He cannot and will not provide for you, but he will not put an end to your life, no matter how long you live."[48] This is the paragon of a liberal society detached from any notion of the social whole or social good, a world where neither your neighbors nor your government will "provide for you . . . no matter how long you live."

"The tiny area where El Rey is uncrowned king appears on no maps," Thompson informs us.[49] This is surely because, in Thompson's view, it is something like the map itself, a representation of the entirety of a U.S. society that had clearly become, in the two decades since Thompson had been employed by the WPA during the New Deal, decisively postwelfare. Just as the cooperative village represents both the literalization and the culmination of the principles that shape El Rey, so does El Rey—ostensibly opposed to and located outside the United States—literalize and distill the essential values of postwar America.

The value of these antisocial values is reiterated throughout

The Getaway. Doc's is a world in which social charm is a screen for criminal self-interest. On one hand, Doc is charming, amiable, sociable; he "was born popular; into a world where he was instantly liked and constantly reassured of his welcome. Everyone smiled, everyone was friendly, everyone was anxious to please him."[50] On the other hand, behind the superficiality of charm—behind the fact that Doc "liked to be liked"[51]—lies a deeper commitment to the values Doc first learned from his father: "that a man's best friend is himself, that a non-friend was anyone who ceased to be useful, and that it was more or less a moral obligation to cash in any persons in this category, whenever it could be done safely and with no chance of a kickback."[52] The imperative to "cash in" persons the moment they no longer serve a use represents a kind of "moral obligation" that does not resemble morality much at all. This way of viewing other people as momentarily useful and ultimately disposable culminates in the cannibalism of the cooperative village, but it is present in the novel well before. In fact, it is even the secret to Doc and Carol's seemingly happy marriage: "she was his wife. . . . And if circumstances compelled him to think of her as an opponent—and he was not sure that they did, just yet—it was with no less love and a very great deal of regret."[53] For Doc, the distinction between "wife" and "opponent" is finally immaterial. After all, "as a professional criminal, he had schooled himself against placing complete trust in anyone."[54] In this way, Thompson uses the married criminals of *The Getaway* as the master symbols of a society in which social bonds have disintegrated, and where the best we can aspire to in our relations with others is to be as thin as thieves.

Outsider Art

The link between criminality, society, and literary form similarly preoccupied Richard Wright. Wright's 1953 opus *The Outsider* tells the story of Cross Damon, a Black postal worker living in Chicago who longs to escape the stifling constraints of his social obligations to his children, his wife, his mistress, and his mother: "He had to break with others and, in breaking with them, he would break with himself. He must sever all ties of memory and sentimentality."[55] He is given the chance at precisely such a break when he is involved

in a train crash and the body of another Black passenger is mistaken for his own. Presumed dead, Cross leaves Chicago for New York to live out the radical freedom of his new identity—a freedom that consists primarily in having lengthy arguments with members of the Communist Party and, later on, in murdering several of them.

Wright wrote *The Outsider* while in exile in France and under the strong influence of existentialism, and he hoped that the novel's publication would allow African American literature to escape the shadow that was still cast by his own 1940 classic of social protest, *Native Son.* Yet, Wright predicted to his friend and protégé Ralph Ellison about *The Outsider,* "Negroes will not like it."[56] The reason, Wright assumed, was because the story of Cross Damon was at heart a story about rejecting all forms of social determination, obligation, and identification—including those of race. As Wright's narrator says of Cross, "being a Negro was the least important thing in his life."[57] Though to be fair, plenty of other things have no importance to Cross: his embrace of radical freedom means rejecting the ties—of race, community, family, and political affiliation—that, in his mind, make society less a fabric than a fabrication. All it takes to give the lie to society and social obligation, Cross realizes, is simply no longer to feel obligated to it. He embodies just the act and the fact of refusing to associate:

> At some point in his past life . . . he had come to a consciousness of having somehow fallen into a vast web of pledges and promises which he had not intended to make and whose implied obligations had been slowly smothering his spirit; and, by a stroke of freakish good luck [i.e., the train accident], he had been able to rip the viscous strands of that web and fling them behind him. . . . He knew, of course, that his commitments were no more galling or burdensome than those which other millions of men and women about him shouldered so uncomplainingly every day; yet he knew that deep in the hearts of many of those millions was the same desire—shamefaced, inarticulate, and impotent—to have done with them as he had.[58]

Wright thus used the character of Cross Damon as a kind of thought experiment, a test of what it would look like to extricate oneself fully from the "web of pledges and promises" that forges social belonging and social identity through the ingrained rituals of social obligation. Wright's gambit is that the potential value of this thought experiment is not confined to Cross alone; "deep in the hearts" of "millions of men and women," he imagines, is "the same desire" Cross has to escape one's social commitments. At the heart of what makes up society, in other words, is the "shamefaced, inarticulate" truth of antisocial sentiment.

The pinnacle of such sentiment is what the novel calls "ethical murder," by which Wright means not so much killing for good reason as killing for no reason whatsoever. "These killings will be marked unsolved," Cross's nemesis, the district attorney Eli Houston, tells him. "And, in a sense, they are. Even now I cannot say why you killed in a rational manner."[59] The withholding of any motive for his killing is Cross's most disturbing antisocial feat. "Oh, God in Heaven! Why *did* you kill him?" Cross's love interest, Eva, asks him. "'I don't know,' he whispered. '*Why*? There must be some *reason . . .*' He shook his head. . . . 'I don't *believe* in anything.'"[60] This lack of belief in any kind of social responsibility or prohibition is what links Cross's repudiation of social bonds to his acts of motiveless murder. It is also what eventually allows Houston, the DA, to solve the crimes:

> At first I didn't believe it, but when you stared so unfeelingly at your sons, when you laughed when your poor wife could not summon enough strength to identify you, I knew that you were beyond the pale of all the *little* feelings, the *humble* feelings, the *human* feelings . . . *I knew that you could do anything*! Not in a towering rage, not to save falling mankind, not to establish social justice, not for glory. . . . But just because you happen to feel like that one day.[61]

The final explanation for how Cross could murder without reason is to be found in his refusal of the most basic social "feelings," which are here synonymous with basic social obligations. The

person who acknowledges no social connections whatsoever is the person who is capable of doing anything, for the simple reason that he has no reason not to do it.

But what in the first place enables Cross's "contemptuous repudiation of all the fundamental promises that men live by"?[62] It is his sense that those promises—the commitments among people that constitute a social order—have, in the modern societies of the industrialized West, already decayed beyond recognition. As Cross sees them, the "great cities of the earth today—Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburg, London, Manchester, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong," are now only "vast pools of human misery, networks of raw human nerves exposed without benefit of illusion or hope to the new, godless world wrought by industrial man. Industrial life plus a rampant capitalism have blasted the lives of men in these cities. . . . The people of these cities are lost."[63] The degraded social conditions of urban modernity are thus the precondition for Cross's social repudiation. To live among the lost souls of the West's urban centers is finally to be, as Cross is, only "vaguely conscious of other people whose presence seemed remote and unimportant."[64] At the core both of Cross's murders and of his repudiation of his social and familial obligations is, finally, this elemental truth of modern urban life: the remoteness and ultimate insignificance of "other people."

The Antisocial Order

Read together, *The Outsider, The Getaway,* and *Strangers on a Train* exemplify a cultural moment defined by radical skepticism about the nature of social obligation and the possibility of social relations. Wright's antisocial antihero has "cynically scorned, wantonly violated every commitment that civilized men owe."[65] Thompson's affable criminal escapes to a place where "there is almost no social life." Highsmith's anxious architect is no longer certain it is "people who mattered." What, finally, was the point for these authors of writing fiction that so perfectly matched the sentiments of their antisocial era?

At the time, the loss of conviction that other people mattered grew, in part, out of a growing skepticism that other people could be known or understood at all. Friedrich Hayek, one of the found-

ing fathers of microeconomics, put it this way in 1948: "It is not only impossible to recognize, but meaningless to speak of, a mind different from our own."[66] The impossibility of knowing other minds was a pressing issue for Wright, Thompson, and Highsmith. We've already seen how this works in *Strangers on a Train*, where Guy is wracked with worry about the inaccessible secrets lodged in other people's minds: "Guy was all at once terrified, realizing she was . . . a person with a different mind." Guy is not alone in his terror of other people's irreducible unknowability. In *The Getaway*, Doc's perpetually affable demeanor becomes a source of deep dread for his wife, Carol: "He could be breaking apart inside and you'd never know it from the way he acted. He'd be just as pleasant and polite as if he didn't have a care in the world. You had to be careful with someone like that. You could never know what he was thinking."[67] If you can "never know [. . .] from the way he acted" what someone actually thinks, then you can no longer believe in the possibility of a social world that is legitimately shared.[68] This is the disturbing possibility that Cross confronts directly at the end of *The Outsider*: "Was there really no direct bridge between the subjective worlds of people? Was the possibility of communication only a kind of pretense, an arrangement assumed to exist but which really did not?"[69] The "pretense" Cross has in mind here is nothing less than the pretense of society—the fantasy that so many impenetrable "subjective worlds" can really be assumed to come together to form some sort of social whole.

Is there any way to solve this problem, any means to "bridge" the seemingly separate "subjective worlds of people"? In response to this question, all three novelists suggest that the novel form itself might contain an answer. That answer is connected to the novel's special capacity to render private thought in a publicly shared, quasi-objective form. The technical name for this capacity is free indirect discourse, and it is the defining literary style of all three novels I have been discussing. It is therefore not quite right to imply, as I did in the preceding paragraph, that in *The Outsider*, it is Cross who wonders, "Was there really no direct bridge between the subjective worlds of people?" Because Wright fuses Cross's thought with third person narration, it is, in truth, not actually clear whose idea this is. It isn't exactly Cross's, and it isn't exactly not. "Were

we really that much alone in this life?" Cross or the narrator asks a few lines later. "Was the core of the subjective life of each person sealed off absolutely from that of another and one could tell what transpired in another heart only when the contents of that heart were projected outwardly in some objective form?"[70] In fact, the isolation Cross feels is already interrupted by the impossibility of saying who has said this. If the depth of his "subjective life" is what kept Cross "sealed off" from other people, what he needs to break the seal and rediscover sociality is the outward projection of some "objective form" of his inner life. That objective form is nothing less than the form Wright has bestowed on his novel. This is the literary form of free indirect style, which does exactly what Cross deems necessary: it turns subjectivity into objectivity, isolation into connection, by transforming the "contents" of his heart and mind into the ostensibly "objective form" of omniscient narration.

Likewise, in *Strangers on a Train*, Highsmith's thematic commitment to the social crisis provoked by private thought is managed by a formal commitment to free indirect discourse—a literary style uniquely capable of giving us access to all those secret, guilty thoughts that might otherwise give the lie to social belonging. At several points, Highsmith goes to extreme lengths to make clear just how expansively the style operates in her novel. Take this short passage: "She looked increasingly loathsome, so he began not to want to put his hands on her soft sticky-warm flesh. Well, he still had the knife. A clean instrument. 'A clean instrument!' Bruno shouted jubilantly, for no one could possibly hear him."[71] It is unusual to find a line of unattributed narration repeated verbatim as dialogue. What is Highsmith up to here? The repetition of the line "A clean instrument" at once confirms and inflames our suspicion that everything a reader has assumed to be omniscient narration might really be subjective thought. Put more starkly, the repetition suggests that, in *Strangers on a Train*, such a distinction may finally be immaterial. If privacy is what Guy prizes in himself and fears in others, it is what the novel itself renders meaningless.

Actually, it is what *every* novel renders meaningless. There is no such thing as privacy in fiction, and no such thing as private thought in the literature of free indirect style, which not only exposes the hidden thoughts of its characters but transforms those

thoughts into the building blocks of the novel's objective language.[72] This is equally the case in *The Getaway*, where Carol's implicitly first person anxieties about Doc's implacable demeanor—*I*, she implies, "could never know what he was thinking"—are translated, by way of the royal "you," into a universally applicable social rule: "you had to be careful with someone like that." In the sociopathic novels of Wright, Highsmith, and Thompson, free indirect discourse represents the "objective form" that makes private being indistinguishable from public expression, that turns inner life into social life.

In short, these novels think through what it would look like for it to *not* be (pace Hayek) "meaningless to speak of a mind different from our own." The content of other minds conveyed through free indirect discourse—the X-ray vision of this quintessentially modern type of novelistic narration—is ultimately a way of communicating the possibility of social or collective life as such. As Thompson puts it in *The Getaway*, "You cannot do what you must unaided."[73] Cross learns the very same lesson at the end of *The Outsider*: "The search can't be done alone."[74] The necessity of aid, the overcoming of solitude: these turn out to be the unexpected truths of the antisocial novel written in an antisocial age.

This conclusion is not without some irony. After all, both Doc and Cross are doomed to learn such lessons much too late: Cross on his deathbed, McCoy on the verge of becoming food for his fellow thieves. Moreover, such a conclusion risks banalizing the antisocial novel and misunderstanding its social function, which is not so much to ask, *should people work together and aid one another?* (surely they should) as it is to wonder, *why don't they?*

On this point, all three novels provide a more counterintuitive answer. In the antisocial actions of Doc McCoy, Guy Haines, and Cross Damon, what we find is not evidence that society doesn't exist. What we find is evidence that it does. Literary antisociality in 1950s crime fiction was not only the mirror of an era's waning belief in social collectivity. It was also the historically specific product of that era's particular forms of not only of social organization but also of social exclusion. For Thompson, Doc's antisocial commitment to nothing but his own self-interest is the product of a capitalist system that had just recently begun to systematically

abandon its most vulnerable workers, such as the sharecroppers Doc meets, who are so impoverished and cut off from liberal society that they were essentially "an autonomous body, functioning within a society which was organized to grind them down."[75] For Highsmith, Guy's and Bruno's shared belief in the inviolability of private thought is ultimately a reflection of a homophobic society that polices certain forms of private sexual desire; this is why Bruno's suppressed criminal impulses are ultimately indistinguishable from his repressed queer desire: "Everything was silly compared to the night in Metcalf. Every person he knew was silly compared to Guy. Silliest of all to think he'd wanted to see a lot of European women!"[76] For Wright, finally, even Cross's self-styled stance as a social outsider is merely a literalization of the forms of de jure and de facto segregation that shaped American society at midcentury: "In America the Negro is outside. Our laws and practices see to it that he stays outside."[77] To be Black in segregated America was to be part of a class of "men who had been rejected and yet who still lived and shared the lives of their rejectors."[78] This paradoxical stance—to be rejected while living among one's rejectors—is the most profound lesson imparted by the midcentury American novel's antisocial antiheroes.

Social withdrawal doesn't work unless there is something to withdraw from. And the way someone like Cross knows that there *is* a society to withdraw from is that he has been forced to live outside it. At the end of *The Outsider,* Cross is devastated to realize that he will not be held accountable for his crimes: "He had broken all of his promises to the world and the people in it, but he had never reckoned on that world turning on him and breaking its promise to him too! . . . Men would not give meaning to what he had done! Society would not even look at it, recognize it! That was not fair, wasn't right, just."[79] A character who earlier insisted on the illusory nature of social bonds now invokes the collective viewpoint of a "society" that will barely "look at" let alone "recognize" him. With these lines, which echo not only Guy's final regret at his own failed confession but also Carol's self-deluding request to be told that social connection really does make a difference ("T-tell me it does, Doc, and I'll tell you it does"[80]), the antisocial novel of the 1950s confirms that its aim is not so much to repudiate society as it

is to investigate what it means to be repudiated *by* society—a concept whose abstract yet undeniable and above all unjust existence, it turns out, has been haunting these novels all along.

In the novels I've been discussing, the antisocial criminal act turns out to be less a gesture of radical freedom than a desperate attempt at social recognition. What these thrusts at recognition underscore are the resolutely social, rather than individual, processes of exploitation and exclusion that organize human life in capitalist modernity: the structuring antisocial imperatives of a market whose newfound "freedom" is made possible by the vigorous policing of race and sexuality.[81] Such imperatives were nothing less than the lived realities of postwar liberal society writ large, and the attention paid to them in these seemingly antisocial novels—one written by a closeted queer woman who wrote lesbian pulp fiction under a pseudonym, another by a Black man who grew up amid the racial violence of Jim Crow, and a third by a former Communist who directed the Oklahoma Federal Writers Project during the New Deal—is not hard to explain. For these writers, the politics of being antisocial are located not in the gesture of setting oneself outside society but in the grim apprehension of how society structures itself by setting certain groups of people outside it.

The unexpected invocation of the group in these novels—queer people in *Strangers on a Train,* African Americans in *The Outsider,* poor farm workers in *The Getaway*—may seem merely a symptomatic index of what scholars of postwar politics have disparagingly referred to as the era's "interest-group liberalism."[82] Yet the thing that defines a group in all three novels is not their shared interests. It is their ascriptive constitution and their socially exterior position. To live "on a racially defined edge of [. . .] society," Karen and Barbara Fields write in their book *Racecraft,* is "to experience the social intuitively as a realm fundamentally distinct from the realm of nature." This intuitive grasp of the social realm, this view of the social whole from outside it, is rooted in the irreducible social fact of "human groups—in the social and intellectual processes that designate groups, their boundaries, their members, and the place of all the foregoing in the larger cosmos."[83] In this way, the seemingly divisive or dispersive fiction of the group turns out to have a powerful heuristic function after all. Exposing the abstract

social norms that invisibly yet inexorably structure all our ostensibly autonomous individual lives, the ascriptive group is at once the material evidence of society's antisocial origins and a stark rebuttal to the magic of antisocial thinking: a reminder of the very real ways our world is indeed shared, whether we like it or not.

Notes

1. David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 4.
2. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.
3. Latour, 5.
4. On the roughly contemporaneous emergence of Latour's and Thatcher's theories of society's nonexistence, see Jodi Dean, "Society Doesn't Exist," *First Monday* 18, no. 3–4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i3.4616.
5. Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 578.
6. Émile Durkheim, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Anthony Giddens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 67.
7. Durkheim, 64, 66.
8. A different theoretical account of antisociality can be found in queer theory's "antisocial thesis." The antisocial thesis, most frequently associated with thinkers like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, emphasizes the negative potential of what Robert L. Caserio calls "queer unbelonging" as a site for questioning the liberal-capitalist norms of sociality, community, and (in Bersani's words) "civic service." Robert L. Caserio, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819.
9. On the role of the novel in shoring up the "invisible community" of the nation-state, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); on the relation between the novel and the rise of consumer credit, see Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
10. On the centrality of "private experience" to the development of the novel, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957),

esp. 174–207; on the novel's role in inventing the category of the modern individual, see Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

11. "Among the novel's modern functions . . . was as a socially acceptable means of remaining detached while in public," writes Gage McWeeny. McWeeny, *The Comfort of Strangers: Social Life and Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

12. On the historical emergence of the category of fiction, see Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel, Vol. 1, History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti, 336–363 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); on fiction's defining capacity to mark "a strategic difference from reality," see Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 29.

13. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 2.

14. Jeff Nunokawa, "Eros and Isolation: The Antisocial George Eliot," *ELH* 69, no. 4 (2002): 839.

15. Christopher Lane, *Hatred and Civility: The Antisocial Life in Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xvii.

16. Lane, 32.

17. McWeeny, *Comfort of Strangers*, 7, 25, 8.

18. For an indispensable account of how an earlier generation of American modernists was influenced by the social imaginary of the New Deal, in particular by its founding concept of social security, see Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

19. Ira Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 189.

20. On the far-reaching ideological implications of the teenage rebel, see Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

21. Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Missed Opportunity?," 187.

22. Both the working-class gains of the New Deal and the middle-class prosperity of the 1950s were built on the exclusion of African Americans—a point to which I will return at the end of this essay. See Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold*

History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

23. Carol A. Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 130.

24. Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in Fraser and Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, 101–2.

25. Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism*, 128, 130.

26. Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 48.

27. Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Missed Opportunity?," 191.

28. Annie McClanahan, "Methodological Individualism and the Novel in the Age of Microeconomics, 1871 to the Present," in *Timelines of American Literature,* ed. Cody Marrs and Christopher Hager (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 270, 271.

29. Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 199.

30. Leonard Cassuto, *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 125, 126.

31. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *The Truth about Crime: Sovereignty, Knowledge, Social Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), xiv.

32. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 144.

33. Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 277.

34. Highsmith.

35. Highsmith, 278.

36. Highsmith, 271.

37. Highsmith, 38.

38. Highsmith, 162.

39. Highsmith, 54.

40. Highsmith, 281.

41. Jim Thompson, *The Getaway* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1994), 170.

42. Thompson, 171.

43. Thompson, 170.

44. Thompson, 173.

45. Thompson, 174.

46. Thompson, 175.

47. Thompson, 173.

48. Thompson, 178.
49. Thompson, 169.
50. Thompson, 25.
51. Thompson, 127.
52. Thompson, 43.
53. Thompson, 168.
54. Thompson, 71.
55. Richard Wright, *The Outsider,* restored text (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 114.
56. Quoted in Paula Rabinowitz, *Black and White and Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 87.
57. Wright, *Outsider,* 385.
58. Wright, 503.
59. Wright, 572.
60. Wright, 531.
61. Wright, 564.
62. Wright, 501.
63. Wright, 485.
64. Wright, 582.
65. Wright, 501.
66. Quoted in McClanahan, "Methodological Individualism and the Novel," 270.
67. Thompson, *Getaway,* 148.
68. Michael Trask argues that a certain kind of performativity—and the fluid identities and identifications implied therein—was a core feature of Cold War liberalism. Liberalism, in Trask's account, was above all about the performance of beliefs and commitments one wasn't actually expected to believe in or remain committed to: "In the postwar ideal of social order, persons were compelled by no regulatory agency more onerous than their agreement to behave as if an institution had a constraining effect on their actions that no one honored except in the breach." Trask, *Camp Sites: Sex, Politics, and Academic Style in Postwar America* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013), 3.
69. Wright, *Outsider,* 446.
70. Wright.
71. Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train,* 78.
72. Theorists of the realist novel have long noted the fact that the form depends on a kind of invasion of privacy, an entry into the private space of the home. As Peter Brooks explains, the realist novel is premised on the act of "seeing through the roofs . . . to the private

lives behind and beneath." In *The Rise of the Novel*, Watt offers an
even more evocative metaphor: "the novelist in the house of fic-
tion is, if not that of the peeper through the keyholes, at least that
of the 'watcher at the window'" (200). Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New
Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 3.

73. Thompson, *Getaway*, 122.
74. Wright, *Outsider*, 585.
75. Thompson, *Getaway*, 123.
76. Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*, 218.
77. Wright, *Outsider*, 170.
78. Wright, 111. For more on the racialized character of literary crimi-
    nality in the 1950s, see my "Crime Fiction and Black Criminality,"
    American Literary History 30, no. 4 (2018): 703–29.
79. Wright, 573.
80. Thompson, *Getaway*, 184.
81. On the "unique structure of state violence and social emancipa-
    tion" that has defined U.S. liberalism throughout the twentieth
    and twenty-first centuries, see Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Vio-
    lence: Race, Sexuality, and the U.S. State* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Uni-
    versity Press, 2011), 37.
82. Lowi famously defined the "new American public philosophy"
    that emerged after World War II as interest-group liberalism.
    Lowi, *End of Liberalism*, 71. This brand of liberalism emerged out
    of a pluralist worldview that, pitting itself against Marxism, un-
    derstood power not as divided between two classes but as widely
    "dispersed" among groups: "Groups, of which corporations are
    merely one type, possess power directly over a segment of society
    and also a share of control of the state." The major consequence
    of this view of the group as the "dominant reality of modern life"
    was to render things like universal struggle or unified class interest
    impossible: "As long as even a small proportion of all interests re-
    mains strong and active, no unitary political class, or 'power elite,'
    will emerge. That is, in the pluralist system it is highly improbable
    that a consensus across a whole class can last long enough to insti-
    tutionalize itself" (45). Thus, as Sean McCann explains in *Gumshoe
    America,* following Lowi, "to be a democratic subject" in the post-
    war United States "did not entail a direct role in self-government;
    nor did it make one a faceless member of a mass constituency. It
    meant, rather, that one belonged to one or more of the various
    'support group constituencies' that negotiated through the state
    over the direction of society" (34–35). The idea of a society con-

tingently hammered out through the negotiations of competing groups radically transformed the liberal theory of the state. As Lowi elaborated in *The End of Liberalism,* "the zeal of pluralism for the group and its belief in a natural harmony of group competition tended to break down the very ethic of government by reducing the essential conception of government to nothing more than another set of mere interest groups" (48). In a political system shaped by interest-group liberalism, "the role of government is one of ensuring access particularly to the most effectively organized [groups], and of ratifying the agreements and adjustments worked out among the competing leaders and their claims" (71). As a result, the battle between liberalism and conservatism was no longer a battle over competing definitions of the function of the state. Instead, Lowi concluded, *"the most important difference between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats . . . is to be found in the interest groups they identify with"* (72, emphasis original).

83. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 237, 260.

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