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Postmodern Realism and That Class Which Is Not One:
The White Lower Middle Class in American Fiction 1973-83

by

Taylor Johnston

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Dorothy Hale, Chair

Professor Colleen Lye

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Professor Dora Zhang

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Dorothy Hale, Chair

Postmodern Realism and That Class Which Is Not One explores the social and epistemological significance of realist description in white lower-middle-class fiction of the American seventies and eighties. As that period's most canonized fiction reached the height of postmodernism, a cohort of fiction writers depicting white lower-middle-class characters – including Raymond Carver, Marilynne Robinson, and Lucia Berlin – turned its back on metafictional play, finding kinship instead with the political realist novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who brought working-class characters into visibility for a literary readership. I argue that the realist practice of these fiction writers can best be understood in terms of their desire for class-based solidarity, at the moment of the American labor movement's collapse and the political climate's neoliberal turn. In our own era of right-wing populism, their attempt to imagine such solidarity has become more salient than ever.

Through my close readings of these writers' representational strategies, I work out the defining dialectic of postmodern realism. On the one hand, the aim to portray the white lower middle class as a material reality and social identity, beyond the reach of postmodern relativism, leads these writers to reinvest in narrative notations of unmediated referentiality. Particularly in its narrative description, that is, white lower-middle-class fiction supposes a social reality that can be objectively known. But on the other hand, knowledge that the social world is ideologically constituted leads these writers to upset the realist norms established within their literary works, each through a different formal invention. This disruption is not performed in an act of postmodern play but in an effort to better represent the characters' latent class-consciousness, both as an ideological construction and as an unrealized potential for solidarity among white lower-middle-class subjects of the postmodern period. The negotiation of this dialectic forges the connection among the writers who are the focus of my dissertation. In addition to fiction by Carver, Berlin, and Robinson, I examine the contribution New Journalism makes to the realist project through Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979) and the view of white class identity, seen from the African-American lower-middle-class position, offered by

Alice Walker's fiction. By bringing these varied writers into conversation, my study re-conceptualizes the period's literary history, foregrounding realism as a predominant and politically significant form.

In the cases my project explores, realist description, defined by the ethnographic detail, conjures a race-class specific social reality. But in each case, a different formal response to one aspect of white lower-middle-class culture simultaneously disavows the realist description's claim to positive social knowledge. Carver's minimalist short stories, for example, have the effect of stripping away as many ethnographically suggestive brand names or consumer artifacts as possible, without jettisoning referentiality entirely. "Cathedral" (1983) exemplifies this operation in that it not only prunes consumer artifacts, but also deploys an anti-realist mode – allegory – to represent the utopian possibility of experience removed from commodification. In this way, his fiction undermines its own positivist impetus, erasing the social specificity of its realist description. This erasure universalizes whiteness and middle-class-ness, reproducing their cultural hegemony, as Bharati Mukherjee has said of minimalism; however, removing social specificity allows the characters to momentarily break out of the ideologies endemic to their race-class position. This break is only a utopian possibility, but it imagines lower-middle-class whites as capable of social critique and class-based solidarity that could transcend racial categories. In other words, it is precisely the reactionary gesture of treating lower-middle-class white experience as a given in no need of social contextualization that begins to envision a critical consciousness for allegedly apolitical subjects.

My focus is primarily American literature, but my background in Comparative Literature and Critical Theory enables me to consider my central questions across national, historical, and disciplinary distinctions (for example, the ethnographic detail's function in both nineteenth-century French realism and contemporary American critical race theory) and at the intersection of different forms of knowledge. Moreover, as a white scholar from a lower-middle-class background, I am taking the invitation of contemporary figures like antiracist activist Tim Wise and Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza, who rightly insist that it become the task of white activists to confront and address the racism – both explicit and structural – of other whites. And I believe my project has larger implications for literature, scholarship, politics, and teaching: in order to truly imagine new forms of consciousness, we need positive representations of social reality of the kind offered by literary realism – not just diagnoses, fictional or otherwise, of representational failure.

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When I started the graduate program at Berkeley, I had no idea that by the end of it, I would owe so much to the love and company of Amikam Levy, who has brought great joy to my life.

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INTRODUCTION

DETAIL, ELISION, AND THE WHITE LOWER MIDDLE CLASS

‘Who does the baby look like?’
‘He doesn’t look like anybody,’ Phyllis said. And they moved even closer.
‘I know! I know!’ Carol said. ‘He looks like Daddy!’ Then they looked closer at the baby.
‘But who does Daddy *look* like?’ Phyllis asked.
‘Who does Daddy *look* like?’ Alice repeated, and they all at once looked through to the kitchen where the father was sitting at the table with his back to them.
‘Why nobody!’ Phyllis said, and began to cry a little.
‘Hush,’ the grandmother said, and looked away and then back at the baby.
‘Daddy doesn’t look like *anybody*!’ Alice said.
‘But he has to look like somebody,’ Phyllis said, wiping her eyes with one of the ribbons. And all of them except the grandmother looked at the father, sitting at the table. He had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression. (“The Father” 34)

In his 1983 article in *Granta* magazine, Bill Buford coined the term “dirty realism” to describe the portrayals of door-to-door salespeople, office clerks, unemployed workers, and similar characters penned by writers like Raymond Carver. The pen is not a metaphor in Carver’s case; he wrote many of the stories that appeared in his first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet Please?* (1976), on a pad on his knee in the car, time stolen from working mediocre jobs and rearing children of teenage pregnancies (Simpson and Buzbee). Buford’s term has endured despite more recent attempts to repurpose Carver and some contemporaries, such as Bobbie Ann Mason, Mary Robison, and young Ann Beattie, as postmodern writers.¹ “Dirty” is meant to refer to their stories’ plain style and banal content: characters with jobs like Carver’s, surrounded by unremarkable objects like cornflakes, popsicles, and Vaseline. “Realism” has proved to be a far more vexed designation. As Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946) definitively established, all of Western literature has been a changing but continuous attempt to represent social reality. When literary scholars speak of “realism,” then, they are referring to just one instance of this historical project, epitomized by fiction of the European and American nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As later defined by theorists as various as Georg Lukács, Roland Barthes, and Fredric Jameson, this fiction was characterized by the aspiration to represent both everyday life and the totality of social systems, through engagement with historical events and conditions, the creation of prototypical characters, the incorporation of vernacular speech, and the use of detailed description.

But all of these features are conspicuously absent from my epigraph, the ending of Carver’s “The Father.” The entire story transpires in two short pages without any historically suggestive details.

Three daughters, a mother, and a grandmother wonder about the family resemblance of a new baby, concluding that he looks like his father, who looks like nobody. Only an indefinite sense of masculine failure attaches the story to economic decline like that of the early seventies. Viable readings might locate it in Chekov's Russia, say, as readily as the Vietnam-era United States. If we were determined to find characteristics of literary realism, we might talk about the plain style's affinity with vernacular speech. However, this insistent plainness (which critics have described as minimalism in addition to dirty realism), also approximates Hemingway's modernist terseness, undermining the realist ambition to positively represent characters and their social context in a detailed way. As Catherine Gallagher has argued, if realist characters come to represent no one in particular, it is only through detailed accounts of their lives that suggest their quotidian existence and social typicality. "The Father" becomes nobody's story by completely evacuating such details. More than Carver attempts realist representation, it would seem, he collaborates with modernism's thematization of representational failure.

Critics who have taken on Carver's social meanings most often discuss the depressed affect and halting speech of his characters, which seem typical of what Bruce Weber refers to as "blue-collar despair" (84). Ben Harker more specifically locates this despair in the characters' inability to articulate their class position and explain their hardships in class-based terms. Their existence is defined by "a gap between the way things should be (according to hegemonic stories), the way they are (unemployment, bankruptcy), and the absence of a functional language [to articulate] the difference" (724). In "Neighbors" (1971), for example, a couple of limited means, the Millers, enjoy the apartment of their nominally better-off friends, the Stones, who are away on vacation. As the Millers voyeuristically try on the Stones' clothes and sift through their belongings, they begin to fantasize about actually occupying their friends' more luxurious status. The story ends when the Millers accidentally lock themselves out of the apartment – a symbolic indication of the intractable class difference between the couples. Harker suggests that this relatively small difference (the couples live in the same complex, after all) "is experienced as being so vast... because it is inexplicable: it is a slight difference, but as real and insurmountable as a glass ceiling. The Millers have done the right things, but the right things have not happened" (723). Available hegemonic narratives (the American Dream, for example) cannot explain these limitations (724). For Harker, because such characters have no alternative narratives, and because the stories keep close to their perceptions, "the real world, in Carver, is often de-realized" (724). His stories represent the characters' inability to explain their social conditions more than the conditions themselves (726). For this reason, class enters the narrative as a set of feelings (desire, dissatisfaction, shame) and as a "struggle to dramatize and articulate those feelings" (726).²

Alongside class affect, however, an important realist strategy begins to index the characters' positionality. Only when we consider the stories in concert does this function come into view: social detailing that remains scarce at the level of the individual story. In *Will You Please Be Quiet Please?*, the collection that includes both "Neighbors" and "The Father," a common suburban setting is gradually mapped by a network of banal objects, often brand-name products, as I will discuss in my first chapter: Uno-No Bars, peanut-butter crackers, television sets, cat food, ant spray, a Social Studies textbook, M&Ms, highballs, *Reader's Digest*, vacuum cleaners, Mouse-Be-Gone, a U-Haul truck, Denny's, a hose,

dental floss. The characters of the world these objects construct suffer from the vaguely defined hardships to which Harker alludes, at times linked to alcoholism, infidelity, and, most notably, economic precarity. In “Jerry, Molly, and Sam,” for example, a father worrying about the security of his job with a defense contractor and suffering from the guilt of an affair decides to abandon his family’s rambunctious dog, attempting (in the end, tragically) to eliminate at least some chaos and responsibility. Similar precarity defines almost all of the collection’s characters, though most are not typically working-class as Weber’s “blue-collar despair” would lead us to believe. They have finished some college, attend night school, know a few Rilke poems, or struggle to hold down white-collar jobs like the defense-contractor work.

I propose that these details instead locate the characters in the lower middle class – an expanding category during the postwar period of economic growth and deindustrialization, including traditionally “petit bourgeois” shop owners, small businesspeople, and farmers, but also a newer set of clerical workers and other salaried employees, technicians, and secretaries (Felski 34-5).³ Many members of this class only felt the effects of their proletarianized status as white-collar workers after the recession of the early seventies left them newly vulnerable.⁴ Though their parents or grandparents were often of the Depression-era working-class, and their salaries barely more (and at times less) than blue-collar incomes (Felski 35), the lower middle class had little inclination to align with working-class concerns. Instead, they distanced themselves from the narrative of class struggle, an effect only amplified by the recession and concurrent breakdown of the labor movement.⁵ Put differently, rather than building labor power, they conceived of class mobility as a matter to take into one’s own hands – as a question of offloading the family dog, so to speak.⁶

Though Harker explains this privatization of class as a working-class inability to reckon with the myth of upward mobility, the characters’ lower-middle-class status locates them in a somewhat different history. Their limited perspective, and the sparseness of social detailing at the narrative level, do not mimic the frustrated working-class fantasy of social ascent; rather, they register a misrecognition of the lower middle class’s downward mobility at the moment of the early seventies. Carver’s own biography aligns him with this history. Within the Carver family, there was a stark class difference between Carver’s generation and his parents’ blue-collar origins; his father, Cleve Raymond, was a Scots-Irish union agitator who worked on the Grand Coulee Dam and at sawmills in Oregon and Washington, while his mother, Ella, was the daughter of a steam-shovel fireman at an Arkansas gravel pit (Sklenicka 3-6). But by the time Raymond Junior and his brother James were born, C.R. and Ella had reached a different economic status. As James writes in his memoir, “My whole family felt we had finally become middle class and we were overjoyed to be there” (25), like many families of the postwar economic boom.

This material change created a vast experiential and ideological gap between Raymond Junior and his father. For his whole life, C.R. remained proud of being one of the last holdouts in a violent, AFL-backed strike at the Biles-Coleman Sawmill in Omak, Washington (Sklenicka 8). As the family’s first high school and college graduate, Raymond Junior faced a different charge: sustaining the middle-class existence the Carvers had attained. As Harker points out, Carver approached his subsequent economic troubles by putting his faith in a version of the American Dream that C.R.’s generation had eventually been able to realize. As he wrote in “Fires” (1984),

For years my wife and I had held to a belief that if we worked hard and tried to do things, the right things would happen. It's not such a bad thing to try to build a life on. Hard work, goals, good intentions, loyalty, we believed these were virtues and would someday be rewarded [...] The time came and went when everything my wife and I held sacred, or considered worthy of respect, every spiritual value, crumbled away. Something terrible had happened to us [...] We couldn't fully comprehend what had happened. It was erosion, and we couldn't stop it [...] We simply could not have anticipated anything like what was happening to us. ("Fires" 739-40)

What was happening to them was a string of bankruptcies, moves, infidelities, and (at times near fatal) disasters of Carver's alcoholism, as he and Maryann worked various non-union service sector and then white-collar jobs (Harker 719). From the vantage point of the eighties, some critics understood the stories inspired by these events as a referendum on Reaganomics. While Carver allowed that his stories often depicted "the dark side of Reagan's America," he explained that "in that regard I suppose [they] can be read as a criticism, as an indictment [...] But that has to come from the outside. I don't feel I'm consciously trying to do that" (Qtd. in Harker 730). Harker finds this disavowal of class critique echoed in the lack of class-consciousness exhibited by Carver's characters – their inability to explain the gap between the hegemonic narrative of ascent and their actual economic conditions. Carver's rhetoric in "Fires," however, has the distinct flavor of lower-middle-class downward mobility. As much as they failed to gain something ("be rewarded"), he and Maryann had lost something already in their possession: their values "crumbled away," "Something terrible had happened to us," "It was an erosion," "We simply could not have anticipated anything like what was happening to us." Carver makes it clear that they were shocked and confused by their economic status. Yet in contrast to blue-collar workers like his father, accustomed to low wages and hoping for more, he seems to have been assured of, but suddenly denied, middle-class stability. After a decades-long battle to publish, his writing would bring him out of precarity and into a college professorship. But the same would not be true for all of the lower middle class, whose real wages have remained stagnant since 1973.⁷

The class difference between Raymond Junior and C.R. manifests itself in literary representations of their respective generations, particularly in divergent engagements with the legacy of realism. Proletarian and progressive-era writers, including James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck, mobilized detailed description, vernacular speech, and a macrocosmic awareness of historical conditions to portray class-conscious laborers like C.R. The realism of these laborer's sons and daughters, on the other hand, was that of Raymond Carver.⁸ But while his minimalist style may appear to be an effacement of that earlier, more robust realism, it is equally mimetic of its characters social world – even the extreme minimalism of stories like "The Father." Above and beyond the characterological inarticulateness Harker describes, the narrative evacuation of social detail invokes the lower-middle-class's refusal of class-based identity, despite and because of its downward mobility. Only the fact that the baby's basket is "newly painted and tied with ice blue ribbons and padded with blue quilts" (33) suggests it has been repurposed from the childhood of his three sisters, and hence that this family may be of limited means. Moreover, though such details contribute to the story's

realism, its more prevailing minimalism seems to work against their social indexing. A generic alienation from family life or femininity – or the effects of alcoholism, if we think of Carver’s biography – could just as easily account for the father’s ashen countenance at the end of the story. In that climatic moment, his blankness concretizes both the minimalist style and Phyllis’s sad declaration that he looks like nobody, a person devoid of social qualities and determinants.

In other words, the story itself, as much as the characters’ detachment from socio-historical narratives, seems to deprive this father of social identity. The family is searching for a way to identify the baby, via the father, but the father’s seeming lack of social particularity leads them to recruit the baby into this same nobody-ness. And the light inflection of economic limitation only contributes to the overall sense of deficiency, rather than yielding the family any class-based ways of understanding their condition. The story does not specify that theirs is a father overcome by the pressure to sustain his growing family in precarious economic conditions. He must remain an inexplicably depressed man – not only because of his limited perspective, but also at the hands of the narrative’s limitations. This inexplicability, however, is not quite the modernist concern with representational failure; rather, it indicates the father’s lack of a socio-historical narrative – that is, his paradoxically classless class identity – at a moment of economic decline that produced both the downward mobility of the lower middle class and a neoliberal turn in national politics.⁹

Two other aspects of the father’s identity are just as important to the supposed nobody status designated by his daughters and bolstered by the story’s portrayal. Firstly, unlike the rest of the family, he and the baby are male, a fact underscored by the blue basket and Phyllis’s conjecture that the baby “loves us all ... but he really loves Daddy because Daddy’s a boy too” (33). The women and girls’ chatty comradery and shared embrace of the new family member imbues them with social purpose separate from the father’s blankness.¹⁰ But what the story presents as the father’s alienation is also the marker of social hegemony. His capacity to be understood as an empty signifier relies on the dominance of maleness. Less marked but equally crucial is a second site of hegemony: this father and his family are white, a positionality named in the story’s final line, implied by the rest of the collection’s detailing, and essential to his figuration as a social vacuum.

Just as Carver’s spare detailing over the course of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* distinguishes his characters from the working-class constituents of earlier social realisms, their racialization is also different from what it would have been decades earlier. Carver’s Irish predecessors, who immigrated to the United States in order to escape their subjugation under the British caste system, spent the twentieth century assimilating to a new social hierarchy based on the reassignment of their racial appearance.¹¹ This assimilation eventually allowed them to be identifiable as white, in contrast to immigrants from the Global South, enabling their later success in the postwar economy (Ignatiev). In addition to further consolidating the oppression of People of Color, social ascent performed a kind of violence to Irish-American identity, as it did to that of other light-skinned immigrant populations. As Tim Wise has described, the ethnic traditions of these groups were supplanted by a negatively defined racial category; instead of Irish, Italian, or Jewish, they became *not* People of Color. Like the father’s supposedly blank maleness, this negative identity ultimately afforded descendants of light-skinned immigrants the status of supposed race neutrality. By the time Carver was writing, white subjects, among themselves at least,¹² could signify as racial nobodies, to adopt the language of his

story. Many immigrants and their descendants were, and still are, unabashed participants in white supremacist ideologies bound up with this negatively defined white identity. During the postwar period, however, overt supremacy was increasingly replaced by color blindness and dog-whistle politics that denounced welfare rather than promoting an agenda openly opposed to blacks and other People of Color¹³ – both strategies that sustained the newly white population’s fantasy of racelessness. (In the first chapter, I will discuss how and why this fantasy is actually an embrace of white identity.)

Both the hegemony and self-effacement of this position inflects “The Father.” Because its title character is white, he doesn’t have to be raced, a status unimaginable for the protagonists of contemporaries like Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, or Jamaica Kincaid. Importantly, even the word “white” is meant to describe his chagrined mood more than his racialization. But this seeming race neutrality serves as yet another site of emptied social consciousness. In the story’s symbolics, whiteness, maleness, and economic hardship are specious allies in configuring the father as socially blank and hence alienated – specious because white males were of course not the most vulnerable of this socio-economic world. And yet the collaboration of these three categories produces a representation of the white lower middle class’s defining feature: a rejection of both class- and raced-based narratives that is at once oppressive and self-defeating.¹⁴

In mimicking the white lower middle class’s elision of class and race, the story’s form recapitulates that elision. Put differently, by pointing at class- and racelessness as markers of white lower-middle-class identity, Carver is also making those markers signify as such and, in doing so, mobilizing the social hegemony of whiteness and middle-class-ness. But he takes pains to symbolically invoke the costs of dispensing with social identity. The father seems worse for the wear, to say the least, alone and expressionless – a version of the underspecified class feeling Harker identifies. And the recognition that her father is unidentifiable brings Phyllis to tears. She seems to realize that something has been lost. “But he has to look like *somebody*,” she insists (34), and of course he does: he looks like a white man, middle-class but still subject to economic precarity. Rejecting these categories and their histories – becoming irreducible to family resemblance, in the story’s symbolic scheme – brings with it material costs beyond the loss of class-based and ethnic identity. Just as this father seems isolated from his family, so the white lower middle class has cut itself off from the political potential of class solidarity and, by the same stroke, weakened that potential for all workers. In embracing the supposed neutrality of whiteness, moreover, lower-middle-class whites have not only ceded their former ethnic identities but also aligned themselves with racial hegemony, giving up the political potential of solidarity with People of Color who share their economic position. The collaborative rejection of class and race, that is, paradoxically damages lower-middle-class subjects, even as it shores up the social hegemony of their position. The relationship between Phyllis and her father captures this contradiction. We empathize with the sense of distressed confusion Phyllis displays, in recognizing that her father cannot be traced to the family, nor to any recognizable identity. He seems to have wronged her and the others in some way, a fact which the grandmother apparently wishes to conceal with her embarrassed “hush” and glance away. And yet the most damaged of among them is undoubtedly him.

The dirty realism of Carver’s suburban settings were not the only form and social landscape of lower-middle-class whiteness in American fiction contemporary to his work. As this dissertation

will show, during the seventies and eighties, the period subsequent to the '73 crisis, a network of writers was configuring the white lower middle class as one of multiple positionalities and regions across the United States: underemployed college graduates in New Jersey, domestic and technical workers in the urban Bay Area, Vietnam veterans returned to Kentucky, small-town Protestants of rural Idaho, Jack Mormons of Provo, Utah. Though the constituents of these fictional worlds have important similarities – above all, subscription to class- and racelessness – their instantiations of whiteness and lower-middle-class-ness are hardly monolithic. While the protagonist of Ann Beattie's novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1976), is a clerk in government bureaucracy, part of a growing set of postindustrial workers, Vern Damico of Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979) owns his own shoe repair store, a much older petit-bourgeois occupation. Likewise, the adamant Protestantism of Fingerbone, the fictional town of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980), collaborates with its residents' middle-class aspirations, but the white-collar workers of Carver's stories never go to church at all.

Though these literary representations of the white lower-middle-class are as varied as their characters' identities, all have one thing in common: the marshalling of realist detail, which, as I will argue, has the ethnographic function of specifying a social identity. Moreover, each deploys a distinct narrative strategy that seems to undermine the social specificity of its portrayal – minimalism in Carver's case – but in doing so, both indicates and recapitulates the white lower middle class's own ideology of class- and racelessness. I call this hybrid form postmodern realism, insofar as it combines realist description with other narrative strategies – allegory, speculation, and similar effacements of realist specificity – much as high postmodernism mixes various aesthetic modes.¹⁵ But I will propose that instead of mobilizing narrative hybridity as a kind of metafictional play, these writers break the realist dream in order both to represent the reduced social consciousness of their characters and to exploit this same lapse of specificity to reimagine white lower-middle-class identity. In other words, precisely where they collaborate with the white lower middle class's belief in its own social neutrality, postmodern realism opens the possibility that this race-class position could have been other than what it was. "The Father," reveals this sliver of possibility in both the suggestion that nobody-ness has been its title character's undoing, and in Phyllis' brief longing for a way to recuperate him from that status. This dissertation will explore similarly slim openings of social potential in parallel instances of postmodern realist form.

Writers from a white lower-middle-class background were not the only ones practicing certain elements of literary realism during the American seventies and eighties. My own study also considers the realism of Mailer, Harvard graduate and son of a Jewish accountant and business manager, and Alice Walker, born to an African-American sharecropper family in rural Georgia. As I will discuss in the fourth chapter, unlike the other fiction of the dissertation, Walker's systems of African-American characters depict whiteness and lower-middle-class-ness as amorphous entities of social capital. Arguably white male middle-class authors like John Updike, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Richard Ford, whom Robert Rebein has term "Everyman realists," produced the period's most canonical literary realism. As Rebein puts it, however, these writers "make no attempt to capture a wider swath of experience by multiplying the vantage points from which the social world is perceived and judged" (33). Nor does what I have been describing as white lower-middle-class "nobody" realism multiply its

vantage points. But the elision of social identity (as opposed to the detailing of white middle-class identity as the ultimately representative experience) has some strategies in common with ethnic-minority realisms that sought to widen the swath of literary representation. Both deploy other aesthetic strategies alongside realist ones in a more postmodern mode. Moreover, both ethnic-minority and white lower-middle-class realisms relocated their characters in longer social histories – of migration and oppression, in the case of Louise Erdrich, Amy Tan, or Julia Alvarez, and of forgone class- and race-consciousness in the writers I will examine. In particular, Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), epitomizes the hybrid realist-anti-realist form that I have proposed,¹⁶ and in that sense might be deemed postmodern realism as readily as Carver; despite its affinities with realism, her novel is inspired by the structure of Mahjong, its four parts prefaced by parables and interwoven with transliterated Chinese (Rebein 39).

I am more specifically concerned, however, with the intersection of postmodern realist form and white lower-middle-class identity in the years during and following the 1973-75 recession, which Jefferson Cowie terms the “Last Days of the Working Class.” Subject to the precarity of this recession, the lower middle class might have had reason to turn to the labor movement, but, as Cowie chronicles, that movement had just fallen apart. Moreover, white workers more generally may have had reason to build solidarity with People of Color, but to no avail. The neoliberal view of class inequality “as a personal fate rather than collective responsibility” meant that rather than uniting against the capitalist system, workers began to turn on each other (217); white men saw women and People of Color as competitors in a diminishing market (241). Moreover, by the eighties, legal efforts to protect workers had moved from an older program of collective economic rights to new efforts focused on rights for the individual, such as anti-discrimination and anti-harassment laws (239). As important as these gains were, the bifurcation of race and class interests left whites susceptible to “the politics of resentment and promises of a Reaganesque golden age of restoration” (217). In other words, whites substituted one ideology of collectivity, labor power, with a reactionary one that excluded minorities.

During these years, a growing connection between whiteness and literary realism was being fostered not only by the Creative Writing apparatus that sustained Carver, Mason, Ford, and Tobias Wolff,¹⁷ but also by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), whose Literary Program awarded grants to those same writers in the eighties (Doherty 89). Throughout the sixties and seventies, the NEA’s explicit intention was to sponsor “experimental” aesthetics that could not get traction in the literary marketplace; their 1968 *Anthology of American Literature* included W. H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, and Denise Levertov, and subsequent grants were awarded to John Ashbery (1969), Richard Brautigan (1969), Charles Bukowski (1973), Peter Orlovsky (1979), Grace Paley (1967), Ishmael Reed (1975), and Aram Saroyan (1979) (Doherty 84-54). Beginning in 1982, a Reagan-appointed taskforce led by Charlton Heston began cutting the NEA budget and revising its intention. As Margaret Doherty has described,

by the 1980s, the prevailing attitude – both in Congress and in the culture at large – was that the market, not the government, should dictate the terms of artistic success. Those who supported popular taste over critical judgment argued that their position was more democratic than that of the NEA, which relied on the verdict of the few over the votes of the many. (86)

The Literature Program was therefore under pressure “to subsidize fiction that would be popular with a large audience without renegeing on its promise to judge on artistic merit alone,” and dirty realism seemed to fit the bill as a genre at once ambitious and accessible (87).

What Doherty’s astute historical analysis misses is the class context of dirty realism, which produced the genre every bit as much as state institutions. In other words, the pad of paper on Carver’s knee in his car birthed his minimalist style long before Gordon Lish would pare it even more drastically, and the American Master of Fine Arts program (MFA) and NEA would propagate its successors – paving the way for a later state-sponsored generation who would completely forgo the class meanings of postmodern realism (Lorie Moore, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen). Even Doherty admits that dirty realism developed alongside, and not in response to, the government’s new need for accessible literary fiction; the latter went looking for the former, in other words (87). Moreover, the dirty realists emerged as part of a larger union of realism and white lower-middle-class identity in the era’s literary fiction, one that exceeds the confines of MFA and NEA sponsorship. Robinson, for example, only joined the faculty of the Iowa Workshop ten years after the publication of *Housekeeping*, her widely acclaimed first novel, while Mailer’s public affiliations were with journalism, leftist activism, and Hollywood. What this network of postmodern realists *did* respond to, I instead suggest, was the faded class- and race- consciousness of its subjects, from ’73 to a second recession in the early eighties. White lower-middle-class participation in Reagan’s election continued to undermine labor interests and arguably confirmed that color blindness was merely another guise of white supremacy. In addition to offering accessibility, realism could carry the social specificity needed to depict and then critique these class and race dynamics.

Historically the lower middle class has been the alleged engine of reactionary movements from Nazism to McCarthyism (Felski 40), but none of the postmodern realist characters of my analysis make their relation to national politics known, let alone exhibit proto-fascist tendencies. Theirs seems instead to be a quiet neoliberalism, as withdrawn from political passion as from class- and race-based modes of understanding. This quietness leaves out the populist fervor that came to a head with Reagan, but it also indexes the more underlying problematic of that fervor, the absence of class- and race-consciousness, and clears fictional space for other social potentialities to emerge. Rita Felski finds the promise of vaguely defined social progress in the very amorphousness of lower-middle-class experience. Seen from the historical moment of her 2000 article, “Nothing to Declare,” “the lower middle class is not disappearing but expanding, it is not static but gradually changing in response to various social influences, from new information technologies to feminism” (44), an evolution that had already begun in the postmodern period. But the white lower middle class’s complicity in Reagan’s election – not to mention in the reactionary turn in national politics since her article’s publication – would seem to disparage Felski’s progressivist hopes. My analysis does not circumvent the reactionary function of white lower-middle-class-ness and its literary representations. Rather, I suggest that the potentials of postmodern realism lie in its provisional glimpses of a politics that could have been, and still might be – glimpses afforded by the very narrative strategies complicit in shoring up the social hegemony of whiteness and middle-class-ness, which recapitulate the supposed neutrality, even universality, of those positions. These potentials are slim, but only insofar as social mimesis demands – that is, as slim as they are outside the limits on the fictional world: fleeting possibilities for critique,

solidarity, and socio-historical consciousness found in moments of indefinite social portrayal. In close reading such moments, my ambition is to sustain what Jameson calls “simultaneous recognition” of fiction’s mutually constitutive ideological and utopian meanings (*PU* 299), vis-à-vis postmodern realist form and the social conditions of its particular moment in American history.

The Truth Claim of the Ethnographic Detail

In his 1968 essay, “The Reality Effect,” Barthes proposes the detail as an integral rather than ornamental piece of literary realism’s most central project: that of purporting to represent a world that actually exists. The essay hinges on just one moment of description from Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart,” in which the narrator observes “an old piano, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons,” in Mme Aubain’s room (230). Barthes is able to account for the piano, boxes, and cartons as symbolic notations of the narrative; the piano is “an indication of its owner’s bourgeois standing,” while the boxes and cartons function as “a sign of disorder and a kind of lapse in status likely to connote the atmosphere of the Aubain household” (230). But he remarks that “no purpose seems to justify reference to the barometer, an object neither incongruous nor significant” (230). The rest of the essay makes the case that such objects have quite a significant purpose in the story’s claim to reality: they symbolically announce that “*we are the real*” (234). In this way, Barthes reveals that precisely where realism seems most empirical lies its greatest fictional feat – that of attempting to collapse *signification*, a symbolic function, into *denotation*, direct access to the empirical object. Realism’s truth claim, in other words, depends on the highly artificial work of the barometer and similarly inconspicuous details.

In making this argument, Barthes draws a distinction between the function of detail in literary realism and in the descriptive methods of the social sciences. Flaubert’s description is governed by both aesthetic and realist aims (232). The description of Rouen in *Madame Bovary*, for example, is dictated by the need to “to focus on an image or avoid a phonic redundancy condemned by the rules of *le beau style*,” and at times becomes the mere recipient of “the jewels of a number of rare metaphors” (232). But this same description must ensure that “if one came to Rouen in a diligence, the view one would have coming down the slope leading to the town would not be ‘objectively’ different from the panorama Flaubert describes” (232). These two imperatives mutually police each other. By assigning symbolic meaning to certain details – the piano, boxes, and cartons, for example – the aesthetic “halts what we might call the vertigo of notation,” since without the “structural imperatives of the anecdote ... nothing could indicate why we should halt the details of the description here and not there” (232). On the other hand, “by positing the referential as real ... description avoids being reduced to fantasmatic activity” – that is, it resists becoming the mere beautification of a scene according to certain rhetorical ideals (232). In contrast, social science discourse, as Barthes accounts for it, has only one imperative: “to report ‘what really happened’” (233). While literature is defined by its symbolic functions, history and anthropology must resist the symbolic at all costs, in favor of the alleged “concrete”; any given detail supposedly “denotes ‘what took place,’” and in this way, “‘concrete reality’ becomes the sufficient justification for speaking” (233). Without the exigencies of a narrative structure, in other words, detail’s only purpose is to constantly posit the reality of the description – a function confined to the likes of the barometer within realist fiction.

James Clifford posits this same relationship between detail and the claim to reality in his 1983 analysis of anthropology's central method: ethnography. Clifford takes account of ethnography's history in the discipline, at a moment when anthropology was heavily invested in critiquing its own methods – as Barthes and other structuralist-cum-post-structuralist semioticians were doing in parallel, but often overlapping, debates. In its early modern forms, ethnography was conceived of as the transcription of truths – about the totality of human existence as much as any given culture – from historical or exotic objects, rather than knowledge originating in the experiences of the travelling professional who encounters a cultural other (“Authority” 118). Even in the nineteenth century, such professionals did not have the sole purview of ethnographic authority, but shared it with travelers, missionaries, and colonial administrators who had a longer tenure in the field, better contacts, and more developed language skills (121). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, however, through the institutionalizing efforts of Edward Burnett Tylor and Franz Boas, a new concept of field research emerged, later more thoroughly codified by the twentieth-century generation of Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and Marcel Griaule (122): “valid anthropological abstractions were to be based, whenever possible, on intensive cultural descriptions by qualified scholars” (120).¹⁸ Put differently, ethnography was professionalized as a two-pronged practice – that of description and abstraction – in which the “validity” of the latter became dependent on the “intensity” of the former. At the self-conscious moment when Clifford was writing, it had become possible for anthropology to “identify and take a certain distance from these conventions” (120). As I will further discuss in the fourth chapter, this distance allowed for the discipline's new awareness of the anthropological encounter as “shot through with power relations and personal cross purposes,” which ethnography “circumscribed as an adequate version of a more-or-less-discrete ‘other world’” (120).

Clifford is more directly concerned, however, with how ethnographic practice “is from beginning to end enmeshed in writing” (120) and, among other conventions, how its details are assembled to make a truth claim. In the methodology systemized by the Malinowski cohort, “successful fieldwork mobilized the fullest possible range of interactions, but a distinct primacy was accorded to the visual: interpretation was tied to description” (125). While “detailed” is not Clifford's term of choice in designating the quality of ethnographic description, those terms he does use are more colorful stand-ins: “intensive,” or replete with “specific occurrences and gestures” and “particular events” (125).¹⁹ Such description not only allowed the ethnographer to make textured claims about the “other” culture, based in her personal experiences with that culture; rather, much as Barthes' argues of social-scientific practice, the description's very detailedness made the claim that her ethnography was an authoritative one.²⁰ In other words, anthropology has depended on the symbolic function of detail every bit as much as literary realism does, in claiming a particular social reality. And the act of specification itself, more than the contours of social life being mapped, is what stakes that claim.

What Barthes does not account for is that many theorizations of literary realism have suggested it too has an anthropological purpose: to present an allegedly true depiction, not only of a single story, but, if we subscribe to the accounts of Lukács and subsequent theorists, of a particular social world with its own features and types. For Lukács, historical representation (his key term rather than “social”) is constructed by various aspects of the narrative, notably characterization and plot.²¹ (He famously

disparages the naturalist novel's tendency to describe, instead lionizing the dynamic narratives of realism for their Marxist potential.)²² His argument for the social function of realism, however, has an important implication for its description: as in the descriptive practices of anthropological discourse, the realist detail's claim is to social, and not just narrative, reality. In other words, the detail of literary realism has an ethnographic function concurrent with, but in excess of, its symbolic purpose in the structure of the narrative.

If our point of departure is the symbolic working of detail within the ethnography, and not just the narrative structure, of realism, the "reality effect" that Barthes theorizes is far more distributed than he suggests, just as it is in anthropological description. His distinction between Flaubert's aesthetic and realist aims remains intact, but those categories become simultaneous; details can carry both structural and ethnographic significance. While the barometer may have no ostensible function in the narrative beyond the "reality effect," it also performs the ethnographic work of specifying a middle-class, nineteenth-century French home, perhaps one fascinated by the positivist verve of household technologies. Moreover, the barometer's claim to reality lies not just in its seeming insignificance to the narrative structure, but also in its ethnographic specificity – that is, in its very detailedness. As in anthropological description, detailedness as such proclaims that "we are a place-, time-, and class- (not to mention race-) specific real." As part of the narrative structure of "A Simple Heart," the barometer is distinguishable from the piano, boxes, and cartons in that it only advances the narrative truth claim, while the others symbolize certain aspects of that supposedly true narrative: both the family's class status and the instability of that status. Within the ethnographic project, however, the barometer's role is not distinct; all of the objects specify the contours of bourgeois life in the French nineteenth century and, in their specificity, lay claim to the reality of that life. Barthes allows as much, in observing that the piano, boxes, and cartons symbolically locate the Aubain family *within a certain class identity and its perils* – one that is assumed to be as real as the narrative that inhabits it.

Making the symbolic work of ethnography visible became the express purpose of postmodern anthropological theory and practice. In 1986, Clifford introduced *Writing Culture*, a volume dedicated to the study of ethnographic form, by announcing that its ambition was to "[undermine] overly transparent modes of authority, and [draw] attention to the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the *invention*, not the representation, of cultures" (2; emphasis mine). Part and parcel to the "invention" of culture, a term Clifford borrows from Roy Wagner, was the invention of symbolic means of establishing ethnographic authority, those that Clifford elaborated in 1983. Now that the early twentieth-century period of inventing authority was over, anthropology could not only name it as such, but begin to develop alternative modes of ethnographic representation, which Clifford's volume was invested in theorizing. "The Reality Effect" was part of an earlier but analogous moment of self-examination in semiotics and literary studies. Both literary theory and fiction of the postmodern period were expressly devoted to revealing the artifice of representation and its relation to knowledge-production – processes that had covertly gone hand in hand within positivist epistemologies, like those of both nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary realism and anthropological study.

While the artificiality of representation became a theme of literary modernism, later intensified in postmodernism, many theorists of realism have noted that the examination of textual artifice was already, if less robustly, underway in nineteenth-century realist fiction itself. George Levine is particularly invested in explicating both the positivist epistemology of that fiction and the self-aware artificiality of its construction. With regard to the former, he proposes that “What holds realism together in its flexibility and changefulness is the fact that it is always also committed to the common-sense notion that what we see – not our words or our ideas – is ‘really there,’ that the physical world is not a Cartesian dream, but is really real” (16). Like Barthes, that is, Levine identifies the claim (“commitment”) to direct encounter with objects – the elision of signification – as the key instance of the realist project. Barthes argues that in the operations of his “reality effect,” realism undertakes this project “without saying so” (234). By Levine’s account, on the other hand, the earnest claim to the “really there” is always, and paradoxically, a self-consciously artificial one:

realism’s effort to stand in for the world cannot be unself-conscious, naïve, or self-deceived [...] [it] is illusory, finding ways to suggest depth and three dimensions on a two-dimensional canvas, finding strategies by which to create the sense of light, as the impressionists did, just by *not* making the brushstrokes look like the thing being represented. (17; emphasis mine)

The paradox of realism, in other words, is that its devotion to empirical objects requires a self-conscious command of effects that, like impressionist brushstrokes, do not resemble those objects at all. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath makes a similar observation by comparing nineteenth-century literary realism to the realist effects of Italian renaissance painting: “Spectators of Raphael’s *The School of Athens* ... do not explicitly see that the blocks in the parquet floor are square ... The Squares are represented in one aspect only, and so have a trapezoidal visual form” (18). Both of these examples from visual art demonstrate that in order to *claim* denotation of specific aspects of reality – light in impressionist painting or the square tile in Raphael’s – realism must call attention to its own processes: in the former, the painter’s brushstroke, and in the latter, the logic of a single vantage point with its own distortions, nonetheless consistent with other vantage points (20).²³

The “process” of ethnographic form, on the other hand, is the logic I have been tracing: the assumption that detail has a constitutive relationship to authority. Literary realism has its own set of metafictional strategies for indexing that process. Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877) – a novel that thrives on detailed description of tenement housing, liquor stores, laundries, blacksmith shops, and the like in nineteenth-century Paris – deploys one such strategy in depicting its working-class characters’ visit to the Louvre, an alternative to an outdoor wedding celebration. These characters comically lament that the paintings lack explanatory plaques, laugh at the nudes, find family resemblance in the *Mona Lisa*, and gaze sentimentally at the virgins, becoming a spectacle for the other visitors:

Little by little ... the word must have spread that a wedding party was visiting the Louvre. Several painters came running over with broad grins. Some visitors were so curious as to install themselves on benches ahead of the group, to be comfortable while the procession passed in review. Museum guards bit their lips to keep from uttering salty comments. The wedding party,

by now quite weary and beginning to be careless about things, scraped their hobnailed shoes or banged their heels on the resonant parquet floor, in a disorderly trampling like that of stampeded cattle let loose in the bare, compact neatness of these halls. (88)

In this moment of description, readers are prompted to recognize a version of themselves in the observing painters, guards, and resting visitors; just as the wedding party is examining the Louvre's collection, so we and the other observers are witnessing the spectacle of these unlikely visitors. The analogy of the art and the wedding party reminds us that the novel, while purporting to be a scientific examination of Parisian social life (an objective affirmed in Zola's own accounts of his practice),²⁴ depends on highly artificial symbolic work, not unlike that of the paintings. In calling attention to this artifice, the novel also reveals that its symbolic work is, in the words of Clifford, "shot through with power relations"; we laugh at the wedding party because of the steep class difference between them and their observers, both those depicted in the scene and the reader. In *L'Assommoir* and other nineteenth-century works of realism,²⁵ metafiction is a momentary lapse in the realist dream achieved by description. In the transition from realism to modernism, the truth claim of the detail would more fully capitulate to narrative strategies that emphasized both the artificiality and situatedness of fictional form. By the postmodern period, works like "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) were almost exclusively devoted to depicting the various elements of narrative artifice.

I have suggested that during this period of metafictional play, American postmodern realist writers chose to preserve the truth claim of the ethnographic detail in their depictions of white lower-middle-class identity. Detail is unevenly present in the works I will examine. Its function in Carver's stories, as I have observed, only becomes notable from the vista of an entire collection. In other minimalist fiction, nearly every page is replete with particulars – for example, those of Berlin's workplaces, as various as the home and hospital x-ray room. *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer's late work of New Journalism based on 15,000 pages of transcribed interviews, overwhelms the reader with details of life in Provo, to an extent that actually prohibits consensus about the circumstances and motives of its convict protagonist. In each of these cases, however, detail has the ethnographic function of specifying a social world, and through its specificity, claiming that world as a reality. This claim is not a naïve return to an older form and epistemology (one that, importantly, ways never unself-conscious to begin with). Rather, postmodern realism mobilizes detail to summon a particular social category, which it then opens up to reconsideration through narrative strategies that seem to undermine its realist ambition.

Some critics have understood these breaks in the realist dream as modes of calling attention to the artifice of denotation – as distant echoes of Zola's wedding party, in other words, that more readily correspond to postmodern concern with the metafictional. In Daniel Just's reading, Carver's minimalism is a self-conscious quest to find the outer limits of realism; his plain prose "attempts to bring the referentiality of language to the point of its breakdown, but rather than completing it ...suspends it for inspection" (312). Moreover, Kristin King finds what will I refer to as Robinson's speculative description to be one version of postmodern metafictional play; its subjunctive mood "invite[s] the reader to merge with the author, reconstruct altered versions of the past, and envision

fantastic futures ... until [the narrator] and the reader are unsure of the distinctions between memory, dream, and imagination” (567).

In my own understanding, the symbolic indefiniteness of these highly divergent strategies does break the realism of the ethnographic detail. However, postmodern realism exploits these breaks not to examine its own functioning, but rather to portray a defining quality of the subject-position specified by the ethnography: alleged class- and race-less-ness, which references white lower-middle-class identity every bit as much as the ethnographic detail, a paradox I will examine in the first chapter. Importantly, as King anticipates, indefinite portrayal does give way to “imagination” – to narrative phenomena that seem to violate the norms of the social real. But instead of revealing the artifice of realism, such moments serve as a way of provisionally figuring a white lower-middle-class identity that might have been and still might be – what I will refer to as the utopian impulse of postmodern realism. What’s called into question, in other words, is the inevitability of this identity’s features rather than the claim to social reality.

Chapter Overview

Each of my chapters examines the fiction of a single postmodern realist writer and that fiction’s engagement with a particular instance of white lower-middle-class-ness. Some of these writers are representative of a more widely practiced mode of representing the white lower middle class; Berlin and Carver, for example, participate in the conventions of dirty realism and, as I will discuss, also break with those conventions in strategic ways. Mailer, on the other hand, was a leading innovator in New Journalism – which tackled subjects as divergent as the Vietnam War and Marilyn Monroe – and brought the genre’s affordances to the project of representing Gary Gilmore and his milieu. In Carver, Berlin, and Robinson’s case, lower-middle-class white characters became the central preoccupation of their careers, whereas in highly divergent ways, that subject-position was a minor motif in Mailer and Walker’s oeuvres. All of these writers mobilize ethnographic detail to summon social reality, and through different formal innovations, efface the social specificity of that description – both mimicking the effaced class- and race-consciousness of the characters and opening up the possibility of reimagining their race-class position. The negotiation of this dialectic forges a connection among these writers; by bringing their various realist portrayals into conversation, I seek to re-conceptualize the literary history of their period, foregrounding realism as a predominant and politically significant form.

The first chapter, “Particular Invisibility: Auto-Ethnographic Deconstructions of Whiteness,” provides an account of ethnography’s role in critical whiteness studies from the eighties through the present. A vein of this field, subsequently referred to as critical white auto-ethnography, seeks to make white racialization visible, both in its particular instantiations and in the white claim to racial neutrality. During the early 2000s, critiques of white auto-ethnography’s reliance on the heuristic of privilege revealed its limitations as a political strategy. However, through a close examination of Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege and Male Privilege” (1986), I suggest that her formulation of privilege still has much to teach us about the way whiteness is signified in a variety of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural texts, including the postmodern realist fiction of this dissertation. Both McIntosh’s use of detail and her theorization of whiteness as a claim to the “neutral, normal, and

universally available” (76) correspond to the depiction of whiteness in postmodern realism. Taking Berlin’s “A Manual for Cleaning Women” (1977) as an initial example, I show how postmodern realist fiction signals whiteness – in its ethnographic detail and its portrayal of whites as race-neutral – and begins to elaborate its own critical vision of white lower-middle-class identity.

The second chapter, “‘Inside anything’: The Evacuation of Commodified Space in Raymond Carver’s ‘Cathedral,’” examines Carver’s minimalist style as a response to postmodern culture. I propose that by stripping away as many ethnographically suggestive brand names and consumer artifacts as possible, his stories clear the overpopulated, decorative space of both consumer culture and canonical postmodern literature. In doing so, “Cathedral” both speciously configures whiteness and middle-class-ness as a neutral social space *and* provisionally removes the characters’ experience from the determining effects of commodification. Within this fictional universalized space, which affords a rare moment of social connection, the story allegorically envisions the utopian possibility of autonomous experience and a kind of proto-class solidarity for its white lower-middle-class characters.

In the third chapter, “‘Perhaps only from watching gulls fly’: Critical Protestantism in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*,” I propose that the novel reconfigures white, rural, lower-middle-class Protestantism as a critical epistemology of inventive social potential. Through the narrator-protagonist Ruth, the novel stages a critique of her town’s religious and aspiring middle-class attitudes, and the ideologies that underpin them: neoliberalism, individualism, and conservative Christian thought, which intertwine and collaborate in several postwar Protestant doctrines. This critique is performed structurally through Ruth’s hybrid narration. On the one hand, she provides ethnographic accounts of the town, through which it becomes metonymic of rural, white, lower-middle-class life. But much of her narrative transpires in a very different mode which I term speculative description: portrayals of nature that relocate American Transcendentalism’s generic mysticism in a distinctly Protestant lineage. This description constructs an epistemology which ironically approximates post-Marxist critiques of instrumental rationality and the market economy it sustains. Moreover, Ruth’s revision of Transcendentalism is not a merely philosophical one; rather, it reveals that a critical approach to rationality, and to conservative Christianity, is available via the Protestantism endemic to the white lower middle class – and in a period when most Leftists were blaming such subjects for the rise of a reactionary social and economic agenda. The novel’s depiction of this identity as one of universal value problematically casts whiteness and middle-class-ness as neutral categories. But in doing so, it also temporarily blurs the social real – enough to reimagine the political contours of its subjects.

The fourth chapter, “‘With her little finger sticking out’: Ethnography as a Race and Class Relation in Alice Walker,” considers her short stories that usefully abstract whiteness and lower-middle-class-ness from the individual white subject, unlike the other fiction of the dissertation. Turning to the collection, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), I suggest that in “Everyday Use” and “Her Sweet Jerome,” whiteness is controversially figured as an ethnographic relation between black intellectuals and working- or lower-middle-class black women. Key moments of rebellion by the latter disrupt ethnography, which is variously instantiated in the intellectual characters and in third-person narration itself. These ruptures, both formal and intradiegetic, which appear to undermine the patriarchy of black men and the nationalist social movements they dictate, are in fact subversions of the whiteness

such characters have marshaled in abandoning the black working-class sphere. Black lower-middle-class women have a double-edged role in this dynamic. Lower-middle-class-ness is the threshold across which black subjects assume a white identity, a presentation reiterated in Walker's later story of racial passing, "Source" (1981). Yet the black lower-middle-class woman also unsettles the race and class relations of ethnography, as a hybrid subject whose multiple identifications are at the heart of Walker's decolonial politics.

In the fifth chapter, "The Whiteness of the Convict: *Ressentiment* and Uncertainty in *Helter Skelter* and *The Executioner's Song*," I compare the narrative strategies of Vincent Bugliosi's non-fictional account of Charles Manson's murders and Mailer's late work of New Journalism. Relying on Michael André Bernstein and Andrew Hoberek's elaborations of *ressentiment* as a paradoxical affect, I suggest that *Helter Skelter* consolidates Manson as both an agent of *ressentiment* – a rebel against the middle class – and an unlikely figure for middle-class individualism. Ironically, *Helter Skelter* configures Manson this way through positivist narrative strategies; the book insists on the knowability of his anti-middle-class criminal motives, but by the same stroke, unwittingly suggests a continuity between Manson's crimes and the material costs of middle-class individualism.

Though Mailer's collaborator, Lawrence Schiller, aspired to replicate Bugliosi's achievement in narrating Gilmore's story, Mailer's novelistic practice ensures that Gilmore will not be reduced to Mansonian *ressentiment*. In committing his apparently unmotivated murders, Gilmore refuses to assimilate to the white lower-middle-class world of Mormon Provo. But nor does Mailer's portrayal corral Gilmore into the *ressentiment* motive that paradoxically reproduces middle-class individualism. Rather, both this motive and the certainty of positivist discourse are relativized among the myriad voices and details offered by Mailer's capacious free indirect style. While in the fiction of my other chapters, ethnographic detail ultimately succumbs to a different narrative mode, in Mailer's novel, the detail carried by free indirect style proliferates to the extent that a coherent account of Gilmore and his motives becomes impossible. Despite the novel's incredible social specificity, that is, Gilmore becomes an unknowable figure as generic as Shakespeare's Iago or Melville's white whale. This depiction exploits the alleged neutrality and universality of whiteness, but it allows Gilmore to escape the middle class without recapitulating its fascination with individualist ideology.

The coda, "The Filmic Afterlife of Postmodern Realism," comparatively expands the dissertation's logic to ethnographic depictions of the white lower middle class in contemporary American "neo-neorealist" films, taking Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) as an exemplar. In this genre, a form similar to that of Carver and Berlin persists in the early aughts. As the resurgence of literary realism that such writers enabled took a turn toward more robustly bourgeois characters (e.g. Franzen, Moore, Egan), contemporary, independent neo-neorealist films became a place where the white lower middle class reemerged as an object of consideration. Those I will discuss register the characters' proximity to working-class existence despite their distinct disregard for class identity. In defining this thematic, I engage with criticism on American indie ties to neorealism, suggesting that, like their Italian predecessors, the neo-neorealists reify an imaginary of proletariat (or even sub-proletariat) abjection, to depict that of marginally better-off, middle-class-aspiring subjects. This appropriation, exploitative on the one hand, also moves toward a utopian configuration of a possible lower-middle-class and working-class/sub-proletariat solidarity.

I

PARTICULAR INVISIBILITY: AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC DECONSTRUCTIONS OF WHITENESS

In 1986, Peggy McIntosh took the podium at the Virginia Women's Studies Association to deliver what is now widely considered to be the inaugural lecture of Critical Whiteness Studies, "White Privilege and Male Privilege." After describing her male colleagues' unwillingness to recognize their advantages in the academy – even as they admitted the disadvantages of women in both institutional spaces and humanities syllabi – she goes on to propose that there must be a similar lack of recognition on the part of white scholars vis-à-vis People of Color (70-73). This concept of white privilege has since become a commonplace in progressive discourse and popular culture alike. Moreover, its widespread (but certainly not complete) uptake suggests that for many white subjects, privilege is no longer the invisible player that it once was. We can think of Louis C.K.'s 2009 routine, "Being White," in which he quips, "I'm not saying that white people are better, I'm saying that *being* white is clearly better" – that white people enjoy many privileges which grant us a social advantage over People of Color.²⁶ It's striking that here a comedian later accused of sexual harassment – a leveraging of his advantages over women in the crudest way possible – is able to plainly articulate the gist of McIntosh's lecture: it's easier to be white. Even for someone unwilling to take responsibility for male privilege, that is, white privilege was an obvious fact. The several times that I taught "White Privilege and Male Privilege" to a diverse group of undergraduates at Berkeley during 2018 and 2019, their reaction to the concept of privilege was similar: no duh.

The form of McIntosh's argumentation, however, which later inspired a genre known as critical white auto-ethnography, still has much to teach us about the way white racialization is signified in a great variety of cultural scenes and texts, from the twentieth century to the present. In a key moment, McIntosh asserts that "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks" (71). There is an important tension in this metaphor that guides the logic of the entire text: for white subjects like McIntosh, privilege is both an "invisible" and "weightless" entity *and* one textured in a huge variety of ways. The race-conscious white subject can recognize the contents of the knapsack, the various instantiations of privilege. Yet McIntosh admits that even at the time she wrote her lecture attempting to make these instantiations visible, awareness of privilege was often fleeting: "For me, white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy" (75-6). Even for the critically oriented white subject, in other words, privilege is alternately visible and obscure.

McIntosh seeks to make both of these states evident, explaining what privilege looks like when she notices it and when she and other white subjects do not. The central strategy of the essay is its list of 46 "special circumstances and conditions" she has experienced as a white woman (73), which in

writing her lecture, she began to record in “an untutored way” (71). Even the number 46 is itself quite arbitrary, as are the items she chooses to include:

6. I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented. (73)
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege. (73)
12. I can go into a bookshop and count on finding the writing of my race widely represented, go into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural tradition, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can deal with my hair. (74)
13. Whether I use check, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable. (74)
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color. (74)
18. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race. (74)
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race. (74)
26. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race. (74)
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race. (74)
46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin. (75)

The function of this list is, of course, to make visible the many forms of privilege that often go unnoticed by the whites who experience them. Towards this aim, McIntosh is turning an ethnographic gaze on her own positionality. In doing so, she deploys the same logic I traced in my introduction: detailed accounts of the social world not only make it visible, but also, in their very detailedness, stake a claim to ethnographic authority. We know that McIntosh’s account of herself as a privileged subject has credibility because her specificity in enumerating the instances of privilege – the front page, published article, groceries, credit cards, full mouth, second-hand clothes, greeting cards, IRS audit, body odor, and Band Aids – attests to its reality. The number of details is limited, but both the particularity and variety of their locations suggests they are merely the beginning of a vertiginous

stretch of existent phenomena. She is using this effect – an affordance of the ethnographic detail – to convince her fellow white colleagues that their privilege is both real and sweeping. In subsequent decades, other white scholars and activists, such as Tim Wise, Richard Dyer, and Christine Sleeter, would mobilize the same method in similar claims to the social reality of privilege.

Before and after her list of ethnographic details, McIntosh posits another instance of privilege which is concurrently present in all 46 of her examples: the white subject's misrecognition of the conditions being detailed as "neutral, normal, and universally available to everyone" (76). Before writing the list, she understood its items as "attendant on being a human being in the United States" (78). When she was not yet doing the work of specifying privilege, that is, her privileges manifested themselves to her as features of a universal human experience. This account anticipates Dyer's compelling formulation in *White* (1997):

There is no more powerful position than that of 'just' being human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race. The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppressions, privileges and suffering in its train – dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world. (2)

What Dyer calls "seeing the racing of whites" is for McIntosh a precursor to the strategies that might dismantle white privilege; the white auto-ethnographer must subsequently ask, "Having described [privilege], what will I do to lessen or end it?" (71). For Dyer, on the other hand, making white racialization visible is, in and of itself, an act that undermines white authority by deconstructing its myth of universality. Both scholars, however, identify the belief in "'just' being human" as a constitutive quality of whiteness and its privileges. In other words, if we wished to ethnographically specify white identity, we might point at a woman who is able to find someone of her own skin color on the front page (or homepage) of a newspaper. But we might also point at this woman's belief that finding an experience of identification in a newspaper is universally available – that is, her impression that her own position is merely human. While this belief collaborates with all of the privileges McIntosh names, number 47 on her list might be, "I am permitted to experience my own race as the 'neutral,' 'normal,' and 'universal one.'" This condition too is a particularity of whiteness – one that marks its privilege as much as Band Aids that match light skin color.

Since the time when McIntosh delivered her lecture – first in Virginia and then at the American Educational Research Association and subsequent Dodge seminars for secondary school teachers – several scholars of Critical Race Studies have weighed in on her account of white privilege, its method, and its auto-ethnographic successors. One line of critique is that the invisibility of privilege, and the abiding belief in its universality, is a mode of apprehending whiteness that originates with the white subject. As a theoretical account, that is, white auto-ethnography excludes the perspective and experiences of People of Color. Sara Ahmed explains this exclusion in the following way:

whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don't, it is hard not

to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere. Seeing whiteness is about living its effects, as effects that allow white bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape, spaces in which black bodies stand out, stand apart ... the project of making whiteness visible only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible.

For Ahmed, the elisions of the claim that whiteness is invisible stem in part from white critique's failure to acknowledge its indebtedness to Black Feminism. Already in the seventies and eighties, Audre Lorde and her contemporaries were ethnographically depicting white privilege and "the effects of that privilege on the bodies of those who are recognized as black."²⁷ In failing to understand itself as a limited compliment to this project, white auto-ethnography develops other blind spots; it becomes "an exercise in white seeing, which does not have 'others' in view, those who are witness to the very forms of whiteness, daily." Moreover, it produces race-consciousness as a rarified prerequisite to anti-racism that only certain people can access; "if learning about whiteness becomes a subject skill and a subject specific skill, then 'learned whites' are precisely 'given privilege' over others, whether those others are 'unlearned whites' or learning or unlearned non-white others." Rather than undoing privilege, in other words, awareness of privilege produces itself as yet another privileged status.

Zeus Leonardo is equally skeptical about the efficacy of white privilege as a social heuristic and white auto-ethnography as a form. He alleges that in both McIntosh's lecture and in subsequent privilege-based texts, "the study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents. It obfuscates the historical process of domination in exchange for a state of dominance *in media res*" (138). The privilege heuristic provides a point of entry for "white audiences [who] need a discursive space they can negotiate as safe participants in race critique" (149), but it risks "proceed[ing] at the reluctant pace of the white imagination, whose subjects accept the problem of racism without an agent" (150). The true operation of whiteness, Leonardo argues, is rather that of white supremacy, "direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it" (137). Accordingly, in place of McIntosh's ethnographic list of privileges, he offers his own list of 29 "direct process," both historical and ongoing:

2. In order to promote the 'purity' of the white race, anti-miscegenation laws prevent diversification of the gene pool. White racism's claims to purity are an instance of its problematic humanist essentialism.

7. The Occident creates its infantilized other through methods of cultural imperialism whereby the other is constructed, controlled, and written into inferiority. Through cultural imperialism, ideologies of the West make their way to the shores of the 'heart of darkness' (Conrad's terminology), where the culture of the white race is consolidated into a dominant frame of reference for civilization, moral development, and rationality.

10. Global enslavement of Africans produced profit for white slave owners, compromised African collective development, and established centuries of the master-slave relationship between whites and blacks.

16. Welfare reform legislation in the U.S., reaching its height during the Clinton era, works against the interests of People of Color.

22. Tracking practices in schools limit the educational mobility, curricular offerings, and positive interactions with teachers of black and Latino students.

In centering these processes, Leonardo does not banish the concept of privilege entirely, but relegates it to the status of “daily cognate of structural domination. Without securing the latter, the former is not activated” (148). Put differently, he doubts that race-consciousness can be a procedure in which the white subject first realizes that “bandages in ‘flesh’ color ... more or less match my skin” (McIntosh 74), and then arrives at the fact that “systemic lynching of African Americans served as a tool of social control” (Leonardo 148). The former urgently, and simultaneously, requires the latter. McIntosh does evince this kind of simultaneous awareness, in suggesting that “obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculcated in the United States, so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy” (81). But her passive construction here still confirms the thrust of Leonardo’s critique: that she presents this inculcation as a process without agents. Later white auto-ethnographies, notably Wise’s *White Like Me* (2004), seem to have absorbed some of this criticism by taking on systemic operations like lending discrimination alongside their personal accounts of privilege.

The insufficiencies identified by both Ahmed and Leonardo are evident in the latter’s account of a 2001 seminar co-led by McIntosh. As part of a discussion on white privilege, McIntosh “describ[ed] her own engagement with race as seeing fin-like figures dancing out of the water before submerging and disappearing from sight, a scene taken from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*” (Leonardo 139). (Woolf’s novel is in fact full of such scenes, and the objects partially glimpsed are as various as boats, debris, and reflections.) Having caught sight of these “fins,” McIntosh knew “that beneath the surface something great was attached to [them] ... [she] had seen something significant and it became the work of a critical scholar to make sense of it” (Leonardo 139). The analogy to Woolf underscores an important aspect of McIntosh’s form in both “White Privilege and Male Privilege” and subsequent works: narrative. Her personal accounts of privilege function as stories about her own journey of coming to race-consciousness. They are mimetic of the race-conscious white’s incremental development, and as such, might be instructive to other race-conscious subjects in progress.

But the metaphor of the fin suggesting a larger entity substantiates Ahmed and Leonardo’s critiques. The scenario of comfortably observing something potentially uncomfortable from an exquisite vacation spot is a literal instance of what Ahmed calls “white seeing.” And the white subject’s distance and protection from the discomfort removes her from the process of its becoming; she has nothing to do with this partially obscured threat, so she can choose whether or not to continue observing and identifying it. Finally, and most insidiously, the entire encounter is aesthetically appealing – even sublime. It is difficult to imagine anyone but a white subject experiencing the realization of privilege, let alone dominance or supremacy, in this way. Depicting such a realization as pleasurable affirms another of Ahmed’s assessments of whiteness studies more generally – that the act of identifying one’s whiteness and announcing oneself as an anti-racist tends to convert difficult

affects (shame, pain, fear) into a kind of white pride, not wholly unrelated to the pride of white supremacists.

These might seem like overblown objections to McIntosh's metaphor, but not if we compare them to another, starkly different scene in which whiteness becomes incrementally discernable: Bigger Thomas's arrest in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Having accidentally killed the daughter of his rich white employer, Bigger, the black protagonist, escapes discovery until a police officer spots him hiding on top of a tenement building in the freezing cold of a Chicago winter. The cold, the white snow, the white police officers who are closing in on his hideout and also surrounding the building, the confines of the ghetto itself, the slippery white water tower that he tries to climb, and, finally, the white stream from a fireman's hose that pelts him and freezes immediately, accumulate into a cruel white assault. "The icy water clutched again at his body like a giant hand; the chill of it squeezed him like the circling coils of a monstrous boa constrictor. His arms ached. He was behind his curtain now, looking down at himself freezing under the impact of water in sub-zero winds" (268).

This scene is a singularly violent one, but the reader comes to realize that its violence corresponds to the not always literal, but equally powerful, violence of whiteness in the rest of the novel. The various presentations of whiteness during the arrest correspond to the overwhelming variety of ways that it manifests in Bigger's life – from redlining to the microaggressions of the white communists he meets (both anachronistic terms in this context). Wright is creating an index of whiteness, not unlike McIntosh's list form. But both the actions and affect of whiteness in these two indexes could not be more different. For the black subject of 1930s Chicago, that is, whiteness in its accruing forms is terrifying – in the final analysis, a kind of rape symbolized by both the phallus of water and Bigger's traumatized response (the "curtain" that alludes to Du Bois's "veil" of double-consciousness). By bell hooks' 1992 account, the civil rights movement did not eradicate the daily experience of this terror; being one of the only black scholars at a conference, for example, is an echo of terrifying times in her childhood when she had no choice but to pass through an all-white neighborhood. The gap between this experience of terror in the face of whiteness and McIntosh's casual noticing of its privileges begins to seem unbridgeable.

The bridge that Leonardo suggests is the heuristic of white supremacy; accounts of whiteness by both white and ethnic-minority thinkers must originate with the operations of supremacy rather than the manifestations of privilege. The global turn toward far-right populism in the fifteen years since he wrote his response to McIntosh seems to confirm his assessment of the privilege discourse. White auto-ethnographic writing that works to specify privilege takes aim at color blindness, a white strategy for eliding racial identity that emerged in the postwar period alongside ongoing supremacist strategies, as my introduction discusses.²⁸ In adopting the heuristic of privilege, the genre seems to assume that color blindness became the prevailing form of racism in the contemporary United States. The fact that in 2016, 46 percent of Americans chose to elect a president who ran on an openly anti-ethnic-minority agenda suggests that white racism is not predominantly "blind" but rather strategically intentional.²⁹ The privilege discourse has either outlived its critical potential or finally been exposed as having always been insufficient.

After the 2016 election, and the widespread progressive uptake of the privilege heuristic alongside right-wing populism, reproducing this heuristic in place of one that centers processes of

domination would seem to be an exercise with diminishing returns – if not one that actually stymies the advancement of anti-racism. While privilege critique has limited utility as a contemporary political strategy, however, white auto-ethnography is still revealing of how cultural texts by white writers construct whiteness during the postwar period – the era of colorblindness’s emergence and the realization of many European immigrant populations’ assimilation to the white race.³⁰ In representations of whiteness *in media res*, to adopt Leonardo’s term, we can detect privileges of the kind McIntosh lists. But more importantly, whiteness is often, and paradoxically, signified by the unmarked quality she names and the resulting construction of the experience or identity being represented as “neutral, normal, and universally available.”

Alongside Cultural Studies, American Studies, and Film and Media Studies, one of the major academic disciplines that consider such texts is English and American literature. Having absorbed the contributions of critical race scholarship, American literary studies has made a concerted, if still incomplete, effort to center literature by writers of color and put this literature in dialogue with race critique in both research and teaching. The effort to bring race critique to the study of literature by white writers has been far more limited in scope and largely confined to the 1990s and early 2000s, when critical whiteness studies was in its heyday.³¹ A 2002 special issue of *Modern Language Studies* edited by Dana Nelson, “The ‘White Problem,’” was expressly devoted to the study of whiteness in American literature. Though one article takes on the project of “reading” for whiteness in literature by white writers about white characters,³² for the others, the occasion to critique whiteness is its contact with questions of racial passing, multiracial identity, working-class identity, immigration, or what Toni Morrison calls the restricted “Africanist presence” in American Literature (17).³³ In each of these cases, the literature in question thematizes racialization and its interaction with other sites of social formation.

While such works are certainly worthy objects of study, the dearth of race critique on white literature that does not explicitly thematize race or racism points at a function of whiteness discussed by Wise:

whites too often believe we are not experiencing race until someone who isn’t white is in the room, ignoring the inconvenient truth that the whiteness of whatever room we’re in didn’t just happen. If people of color aren’t around, there’s a reason, one having something to do with history, exclusion, access, and who could and could not take it for granted that they could move where they wanted, live where they wanted, or put down stakes in whatever location their heart desired. (9)

The same is true in the “room” of American literature that is mostly or exclusively about whites; even when People of Color are not present, its characters and writers are immersed in, and constitutive of, both systemic racism and its manifestations as privilege. In some instances, such literature invokes whiteness through the ethnographic details of white life. But in the moment of the 1970s and 1980s – when color blindness was intensifying as a strategy of both national politics and face-to-face social interaction – the subset of white literature I’ve termed postmodern realism was also reproducing the elision of race as a paradoxical marker of white identity. Put differently, in representing its characters

as raceless, postmodern realism marks them as white. Likewise, by signifying whiteness via the absence of race or race-consciousness, this literature constructs white identity as what McIntosh calls “neutral, normal, or universally available.” As I’ve discussed in my introduction, this fiction has a similar function vis-à-vis class; in presenting the lower-middle-class identity of its characters as a kind of classlessness, postmodern realism both reproduces the social hegemony of the middle-class-ness and bypasses the affinity between working-class and lower-middle-class precarity. Choosing not to account for these race and class functions, moreover, is in effect another recapitulation of lower-middle-class whiteness as a socially neutral position.

American Creative Writing programs, often a subset of English and American literature departments, have quite literally reproduced postmodern realism’s supposed neutrality in adopting its texts as pedagogical exemplars. As Mark McGurl has convincingly demonstrated, the genres taught by MFA programs are segregated into those that take ethnic experience as their content, by way of examples like Morrison, and fiction by white writers like Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie, which serves as a formal laboratory from which to harvest literary technique. The effect is that in the former case, social identity is treated as content (“write what you know”) and the rest of writing becomes a socially neutral technology (“show don’t tell”). Because “ethnic” content is allegedly absent from Carver and Beattie’s work, Creative Writing teaches it as a merely formal standard. Their minimalism was consequently adopted as the stylistic precedent for much of the writing generated by MFA programs from the seventies through the present. Carver in particular became the stylistic precedent for fictional worlds as divergent as Lorrie Moore’s upper-middle-class white New York, Luís Alberto Urrea’s depictions of Mexican and Chicano domestic life, and Robert Stone’s variety of short-story scenes, from the anti-abortion movement to drug running – all products of Creative Writing institutions that served as indoctrinators of Carverian minimalism.

Bharati Mukherjee notes the elisions of minimalism (often referred to as “dirty realism”) in her 1988 article for the *New York Times Book Review*, “Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!” She describes minimalist style as “a shorthand of shared, almost coded responses to collective dread”:

Dread over what exactly? Well there’s aging and there’s fear of commitment and there are all sorts of variants on divorce and childlessness and dead-end jobs and midlife crisis ... Minimalist techniques seem a healthy response to too much communication, too much manipulation and too much of everything ... [but] I feel that minimalism disguises a dangerous social agenda. Minimalism is nativist, it speaks in whispers to the initiated. As a newcomer, I can feel its chill, as though it were designed to keep out anyone with too much story to tell. (Qtd. in McGurl 374)

Minimalism leaves much of fictional reality unspecified, that is, precisely because its writers are white. And while the ability to leave one’s identity unspecified is a privilege that could belong to McIntosh’s list, here Mukherjee identifies it as part of what Leonardo calls the “historical process of domination” – the willful exclusion of People of Color, in this case immigrants, from both material resources and hegemonic cultural forms. Because Carver’s Irish family, for example, became American long before Mukherjee came to the United States from India, and because their light skin color matched that of

Americans who had already assimilated to whiteness, he can not only hide his racial identity but withhold cultural notations that would make him legible to (and hence vulnerable to the assessments of) anyone who is not yet “initiated” in white-centric culture. Carver’s reaction to the brief period he spent living in Tel Aviv seems to confirm this nativist intent. He returned to the United States unabashedly proclaiming what we would now call Western Islamophobia, a collaborator with Zionism’s nativist function: “All Arabs are insane, all of them,” as he said in multiple interviews (Sklenicka 160). The inextricable relationship between privilege and willful domination is all too evident in these racist remarks. By linking the privilege of representing one’s identity as a cultural given to willful domination, Mukherjee raises the stakes of race-based analysis of white literature produced during the emergence of Reagan’s right-wing populism. Exposing the racial function of this literature is not a matter of further massaging its social meanings but of revealing its formal entanglement with white supremacist strategies.

Importantly, Mukherjee’s analysis suggests that this entanglement comes to be as a formal dialectic, much as I argued in the introduction. Minimalism excludes immigrants of color, and, by the same stroke, it is “a healthy response” to the excesses of late capitalist culture. In the second chapter, I will propose that clearing these excesses makes way for a critical class imaginary – for envisioning the white lower-middle-class as one with the utopian potential to overcome its determination by the operations of late capitalism and realize a class-based solidarity. David Roediger has thoroughly articulated, through his histories of white labor, that class-consciousness is not anti-racism. As Ricky Allen has argued, however, without class-consciousness, whites in positions of economic precarity would have little reason to understand their fates and identities as intertwined with those of People of Color, and therefore little reason to adopt anti-racist views and praxes. In other words, while class-consciousness alone will not produce anti-racism, it is an essential component of the anti-racist education that Allen proposes in “What About Poor White People” (2008). And as I will argue, class-consciousness is precisely what Carver begins to imagine in the minimalist elisions of his most canonical story, “Cathedral.” Understanding minimalist form dialectically – as one that mobilizes the hegemony of whiteness even as it imagines an alternative – reveals the greater complexity of its engagement with whiteness; Carver’s minimalism shores up white dominance, but in doing so, paradoxically invents a form that can also carry critical potential vis-à-vis both class and race.

We can see this dialectic at work in the fiction of another minimalist, Lucia Berlin, who has become widely read since a posthumous collection of her work, *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, became a 2015 bestseller. Berlin was born to white working-class parents in Juneau, Alaska in 1936, and spent her early childhood moving between mining camps in Idaho, Kentucky, and Montana. After her father served in the Second World War, he moved the family to Santiago, Chile, where Berlin would stay until her undergraduate studies at the University of New Mexico. After being married three times, giving birth to four sons, and spending several years in New York, Mexico, and New Mexico, Berlin moved to the Bay Area in 1971. In both Berkeley and Oakland, she worked as a high school teacher, switchboard operator, hospital clerk, cleaning woman, and physician’s assistant as she wrote, raised her sons, and battled alcoholism (all analogies to Carver’s young-adult years, spent working odd jobs, drinking, and child-rearing). Though she later went on to become an associate professor at the

University of Colorado, her Bay Area life and, in particular, her various jobs there became the content of her best-known fiction.

Those stories share an important formal aspect with white auto-ethnography: a plethora of detail about the narrator's life, accompanied by reticence about her race, suggesting the supposed normality or neutrality that McIntosh describes. (Berlin's reception as a minimalist makes this level of detail counterintuitive; her page-long "My Jockey," for example, won the Jack London Short Prize in 1985.) While many of the largely working-class people the narrator encounters are identified as black or Latino, the accumulation of detail implies her own racial identity but leaves it unnamed. In the reading that follows, I will suggest that her whiteness becomes most evident in her position as ethnographic observer of racial others – a position of which she seems to remain unaware, presenting her experiences as continuous with those of workers of color. She self-consciously notes racial difference, that is, but not the ways in which it constructs her own positionality.³⁴

The title story of the posthumous collection, first published in 1977, begins with an anecdote about an elderly blind woman the narrator observes as she rides to a cleaning job on the 42-Piedmont with "maids and old ladies" (reminiscent of the blind man in Carver's "Cathedral," whom I will discuss as a figure for his narrator's class and race blindness in the second chapter). "The woman got off at Twenty-ninth, where all the letters have fallen from the sign "National Products by the Blind" except for "Blind" (26). In exiting the bus, the woman also exits the narrative without fanfare, leaving us to wonder what, if any, symbolic function blindness has in a story we might call picaresque, told in a series of loosely related episodes that result in a sparse narrative structure. The narrator announces at the beginning that her "alcoholic husband just died, leaving me and the four kids. I had never worked before, raising the children and all" (28). Her snarky tone in describing the inconveniences of her new work obscures the full weight of her grief about these events until the end of the story: "It is a cold, clear January day. Four sideburned cyclists turn up at the corner at Twenty-ninth like a kite string. A Harley idles at the bus stop and some kids wave at the rusty rider from the bed of a '50 Dodge pickup truck. I finally weep" (38). The symmetry provided by the Twenty-ninth street stop invites us to note the difference between the characters who populate it at the beginning and end: the blind woman approaching a deteriorating sign, and the uninhibited riders and children, kite-like and waving. This difference seems to index an analogous change in the narrator, who leaves one troublesome cleaning job, finds a nascent friendship with a new employer, and finally feels permission to openly grieve the loss of her husband. One kind of blindness – the unwillingness to recognize her own grief – has been dispensed with.

But a second elision persists: a misrecognition of her difference from the other cleaning women, which we nonetheless detect from her anecdotes. This misrecognition becomes particularly evident in a bus stop encounter with "Three other maids, black in white uniforms" who are "old friends, have worked on Country Club Road for years" (27). Though she and the black women pass a pleasant hour together, chatting and laughing about their employers as they wait for a delayed bus, the narrator admits that "I'm not easily accepted by most old-time cleaning women. Hard to get cleaning jobs too because I'm 'educated.' Sure as hell can't find any other jobs right now" (28). Here she names her difference from the more seasoned cleaners, like the black women, as a question of class (she is "educated") rather than race. But she counterintuitively explains her education, a resource

disproportionately available to whites, as an obstacle. Without saying so, that is, she presents being white as a disadvantage in finding employment, notwithstanding the years she was able to raise her children on her husband's income while the black women were working as maids.

Though she complains about the inconsiderateness of her affluent employers, to both the other cleaning women and the reader, the characters with whom the narrator most identifies are among them: Linda and Bob, her former neighbors whose house is full of reading materials like *The New York Times* and *How to Build a Patio Roof*, and Mrs. Johansen, a Swedish fellow widow, working intently on a puzzle of Monticello. Upon meeting Mrs. Johansen, described as an "eighty-year-old Glenda Jackson" and a "real lady," the narrator riffs on the word "lady," admitting that "I never think of myself as a cleaning lady, although that's what they call you, their lady or their girl" (36). While here "lady" designates both cleaners and their employers, the narrator disavows her relation to the former and comes to enjoy an intimacy with Mrs. Johansen, after they exchange stories about their respective late husbands. She seems to have more in common with this white "real lady" than with the other cleaners, many of whom are women of color.

One of the stories' recurrent features, parenthetical pieces of "advice to cleaning women" (27), has a double-edged function in constructing the narrator's race-class position. Though she announces these parentheticals as advice to peers, they are ethnographic notations of the lives of cleaning women – lives from which, as I've observed, the narrator is somewhat distant, despite the fact that she is employed as a cleaner:

(Advice to cleaning women: Take everything that your lady gives you and say Thank you. You can leave it on the bus, in the crack.) (27)

(Cleaning women: As a rule, never work for friends. Sooner or later they resent you because you know so much about them. Or else you'll no longer like them, because you do.) (29)

(Cleaning women: As for cats ... never make friends with cats, don't let them play with the mop, the rags. The ladies will get jealous. Never, however, knock cats off of chairs. On the other hand, always make friends with dogs, spend five or ten minutes scratching Cherokee or Smiley when you first arrive. Remember to close the toilet seats. Furry, jowly drips.) (31)

(Never work in a house with 'preschoolers' ... you get shrieks, dried Cheerios, accidents hardened and walked on in the Snoopy pajama foot.) (31)

(Cleaning women: Let them know you are thorough. The first day put all the furniture back wrong ... five to ten inches off, or facing the wrong way. When you dust, reverse the Siamese cats, put the creamer to the left of the sugar. Change the toothbrushes all around.) (35)

As in ethnographic writing, the level of detail anticipated by the story's title ("manual") vies for the credibility of these social observations: cleaning women are subject to the condescension of their employers, have an unpleasant intimacy with those employers' personal lives, are left to deal with the

messes of pets and children, and devise clever ways of coping with the demands of their jobs. Like the travelling ethnographer, moreover, the narrator is distant from the culture that she is documenting but now also a participant in that culture – a key difference from auto-ethnographic writing. Though she presents this documentation as a series of messages to peers, it has much in common with the central conceit of white journalist John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), a nonfictional account of his experiences travelling the still segregated South after temporarily dying his skin. The narrator's ethnography comes from a similar position: "I know because I became a cleaning woman." And just as Griffin returned to being light-skinned, the narrator, if she continues to parallel Berlin's biography, will eventually return to the middle class as a writer.

In a modest, provisional way, however, her pieces of advice are also an attempt to bridge the difference between her life and those of the other cleaners. While the advice has an ethnographic function vis-à-vis those cleaners, it is addressed both to them and to cleaning-women-to-be. Included in this category are white women and women of color, "old-time" cleaners and those who, like the narrator, may find themselves subject to the economic precarity of service work. The narrator's precarity originates from a personal crisis, not unlike many downwardly mobile lower-middle-class women whose economic status changes after the death of, or divorce from, their partners.³⁵ But downward mobility was a position shared by many lower-middle-class subjects after the collective crisis that occurred not long before Berlin's story was published: the 1973-75 recession and the simultaneous collapse of the labor movement. These events left many members of the lower middle class in the situation of Berlin's narrator, newly unable to support or attain a solidly middle-class existence. To them, her advice seems to bring news of their own proletarianization: "though you may not think so, this could be you" (a function especially evident in the warning to "never work for friends" who still have their homes). In other words, she seems to be announcing a proximity, perhaps as of yet unseen by her peers, between lower-middle-class and working-class existence.

As an address to long-standing members of the working class – whom we know, even from her story, are often women of color – the narrator's advice seems to carry a different significance: it is a genuine communication to those in her (now) same line of work, with whom she wishes to share her experiences. As much as it is advice, that is, this address carries the hope of identification. We can imagine that the soiled pajamas or the dog who drank from the toilet are stories she has exchanged with the women at the bus stop. Such an attempt to bridge their positions is aspirational, given the narrator's race and class difference from women who have long been cleaners. But it is an attempt nonetheless – in spite of, and alongside, the ethnographic relation it enacts. Moreover, both the complexity and instability of this address – at once a condescension, a warning, and an attempt at recognition – is highly mimetic of the relationship between white women and women of color, or lower-middle-class and working-class women: one shot through with power differentials, but not inevitably so.

In hailing both white lower-middle-class women like herself and working-class women of color, the narrator is also indexing the affinities between these two positions, notwithstanding their obvious differences. Put differently, her address envisions both groups collectively standing at the bus stop together, sharing their struggles and hopes. This solidarity is imaginary, an affordance of a fictional narrative. But it is also one based in the material conditions of the 1970s: all of the subject-

positions in question were newly vulnerable to the widespread precarity of economic recession. In this way, the story begins to configure a bridge between social reality and the kind of solidarity that as of yet can only be imagined. In doing so, it exploits the hegemony of whiteness; the narrator presents her own race as the neutral one and from this allegedly neutral position, ethnographically indexes the lives of racial “others.” But by the same operation, she is also enacting a kind of solidarity, provisional and unstable, between her own position and that of women of color.

The dialectical function of Berlin’s elision of difference anticipates similar textual dynamics in the other fiction my dissertation examines. Postmodern realism both ethnographically specifies whiteness and strategically exploits its invisibility to white subjects. The lower-middle-class whites who populate its pages are both subject to economic precarity and only fleetingly aware of precarity’s origins in class struggle and systemic racism. When the white ethnographic gaze turns toward racial others, it both elides race and class difference and recapitulates the hegemony of whiteness. These are all methods and dynamics anticipated by the genre of critical white auto-ethnography that originated with McIntosh – who theorizes the invisibility of whiteness as both a particular feature of white subjectivity and a misrecognition of its privilege as a universal experience. Moreover, her critics have shown us that this misrecognition is produced by the willful operations of domination, calling for an analysis of white cultural production that disambiguates collaboration with supremacy.

My own analysis of literary texts by and of white subjects during the seventies and eighties responds to these theorists’ invitation to critique. But it is equally an examination of how the potential for critique can emerge from sites of misrecognition – from the cracks in hegemonic understanding that enable white subjects to become critical of our own race position. These are fissures that often originate in alliances of gender, as McIntosh and Black Feminism before her have theorized, or class solidarity, as the Marxists of critical whiteness studies have shown. In the post 11-8 United States, their hopes of social transformation remain unrealized. Yet in a similar moment of crisis, fictional representation was provisionally imagining a white subjectivity that might transcend its social construction – a project we must now inherit as our own.

‘INSIDE ANYTHING’: THE EVACUATION OF COMMODIFIED SPACE IN RAYMOND
CARVER’S ‘CATHEDRAL’

In 1986 John Barth gave a cheeky account of the American minimalist movement “both praised and damned under such labels as ‘K-Mart realism,’ ‘hick chic,’ ‘Diet-Pepsi minimalism’ and ‘post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism’” (1). He provides the following list of its possible origins:

Our national hangover from the Vietnam war ... The more or less coincident energy crisis of 1973-76 ... The national decline in reading and writing skills ... Along with this decline, an ever-dwindling readerly attention span ... Together, with all of the above, a reaction on these authors’ part against the ironic, black-humorist “fabulism” and/or the (sometimes academic) intellectuality and/or the density, here byzantine, there baroque, of some of their immediate American literary antecedents ... [and finally] The reaction against the all but inescapable hyperbole of American advertising, both commercial and political, with its high-tech manipulativeness and glamorous lies, as ubiquitous as and more polluted than the air we breathe. (5)

This rather schizophrenic theory encompasses both the objections to and celebrations of the movement: according to critics, minimalism operated via the consumer idiom (K-Mart, Diet-Pepsi), but also positioned itself against the excesses of consumer culture – advertising in particular. In making these comments, Barth relies on superstructures like political history (the Vietnam War and energy crisis) and class (“hick chic,” blue-collar workers, anti-intellectualism). But if you asked Raymond Carver, as *The Paris Review* did in 1983, the origins of his style were personal and simple, though readily identifiable as lower-middle-class circumstances: “I used to go out and sit in the car and try to write something on a pad on my knee,” his only refuge during the period of his late twenties and early thirties when his children from teenage pregnancies were adolescents and he was still working a series of odd jobs. His writing was minimal in the most basic sense of the word; he wrote very short stories because time between service sector work and child rearing was limited. When he finally had the means to attempt a novel, he was only months away from his untimely death. This chapter will attempt to straddle these very different ways of explaining Carver’s minimalist style. His spare prose strips away the commodities to which Barth refers, at once reacting to the extravagance of postmodern culture and carving out an aesthetic for the white lower-middle-class characters who resemble Carver himself. “Cathedral” will serve as an important example in that it both prunes brand names and allegorizes the utopian possibility of experience removed from commodification.

As discussed in my introduction, the critical consensus defines minimalism (referred to as “dirty realism” in the introduction) as a tendency that encompasses Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison,

and Bobbie Ann Mason, among other white writers. For many of their contemporary critics, what united them aesthetically and conceptually was an alleged “unstylized and even clumsy attempt to depict the more prosaic aspects of everyday life, resulting in a literature of utter banality,” as Daniel Just puts it in his 2010 article “Is Less More?” (304). The symbolic uncertainty of minimalist stories (gaps in description and inconclusive endings) was deemed disorienting and inadequate in combination with an at times brutally humdrum aesthetic (316). Just repurposes this assessment for his own, more flattering definition: “The referentiality of [Carver’s] style arises precisely from the heaviness and exhaustion of his language – blank and transparent ... The effect of heightened realism thus becomes paradoxically indistinguishable from a blankness of meaning that, as he hopes, can still carry all the notes” (312).³⁶ Minimalism’s particular achievements can be found in this collision of a realist portrayal of everyday, white lower-middle-class life and the near collapse of referentiality (315), which confounded the critical discourse’s available means of describing literature of the postmodern period. This confusion conformed to the more general privileging of the luxuriant, decorative, excessive style employed by maximalist writers like Thomas Pynchon, who became exemplars of canonical postmodernism.

A second critique of minimalism coalesced around the moralism to which Barth alludes: minimalism crumples the distinction between art and mass culture by inviting the artifacts of late capitalism into its pages as ethnographic signifiers. As a realist literature, that is, minimalism colludes with the signifying work of Pepsi and Kmart by allowing those brand names to signify precisely as they are meant to in the context of consumerism (unlike, say, the distorting surrealism of Warhol). Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country* exemplifies this operation. As Phillip Simmons observes in “Minimalist Fiction as ‘Low’ Postmodernism,” brand names and consumer products do their usual symbolic work to serve the novel’s characterizations. The character Anita is marked as elegant by the protagonist Sam because she “smelled like a store at the mall that has a perfume blower in the doorway” and prefers Betty Crocker brownie mix over Duncan Hines (Qtd. in Simmons 53). (Hydrox cookies and other products enjoyed by the protagonist, Charles, accomplish similar work in Ann Beattie’s *Chilly Scenes of Winter*.) For Simmons, the reliance on consumer culture is an historically authentic strategy that “questions the adequacy of the mass cultural idiom while remaining sympathetic to the characters’ use of that idiom” (57); however, contemporaries of minimalism objected to consumer language for its collaboration with late capitalism, and, more specifically, for its compromise of both the morality and meritocracy of literature:

The marked presence of mass culture in these texts, in which outward signs of emotion or psychological conflict ... are given as a choice between fast food outlets or the impulsive decision to buy a ceramic cat at the mall, is seen by some critics as a renunciation both of moral seriousness and the rigors of the novelist’s craft. That reliance on mass cultural allusions makes this fiction “shallow” in its characterization and historical sense is another instance of the complaint that postmodernism sacrifices “depth” for a banal poetics of “surface.” Worse than banal, the reliance on mass culture is seen as an abandonment of the historical awareness necessary to stave off cultural decline. (57)

One such critic, Diane Stevenson, writing the same year *In Country* was published and four years after “Cathedral” first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, describes minimalism’s allegedly complacent treatment of consumer objects as the following:

The writer tells you his character eats Cheerios. The Cheerios he means are not something you eat. They are not themselves. They are simply code (a sign). And here’s the rub, everyone knows that the Cheerios augur ill, allude to something lacking in the character. There is consensus here, and this is the real break with modernism, the issue of consensus: *which* consensus? Everyone will see green after red, say the modernists. Everyone will see a class code, a consumer code, a code of enervated character when he sees Cheerios – this is the leap the postmodernist makes. (88)

Reading her irritated account of minimalist writing, one begins to wonder about the status of the “everyone” gazing at the Cheerios being consumed by the lower-middle-class character. Six years after Stevenson was writing, Fredric Jameson told us that while we may cast lamenting looks at our fellow Cheerio-eaters, we are all in a literal and figurative sense eating postmodern Cheerios now that “aesthetic production ... has become integrated into commodity production generally” (4). Not only that, but the Cheerios discourse has learned to neutralize countercultural observations of the kind that Stevenson is attempting. In other words, mass culture now knows that “Cheerios augur ill, allude to something lacking in the character” and can thematize this lack. We need only think of the recent advertising campaign that depicts Jack-in-the-Box meals as junk that people would only choose to eat late at night while high in their parents’ garage.

In “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Jameson warns against moralizing critique along the lines of Stevenson’s by describing both the all-encompassing nature of capitalist influence and its efficiency in coopting all capacity for critique into its own functions. As in the Jack-in-the-Box commercials, mass culture seems to acknowledge the ways in which it has been (and might yet be) criticized, and incorporate that critique as its own content. A more notable example of this procedure is mass culture’s response to sixties social critique: it simply reproduced that critique as its own material (think mass-produced tie-dye shirts with peace signs). For these reasons and others that I will observe, the critic and the content she criticizes are now in the same cultural category:

... if postmodernism is a historical phenomenon, then the attempt to conceptualize it in terms of moral or moralizing judgments must finally be identified as a category mistake. All of which becomes more obvious when we interrogate the position of the cultural critic and moralist; the latter, along with the rest of us, is now so deeply immersed in post-modernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories, that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable. (46)

In postmodernism, the historical specificity that enables real political engagement has been replaced by a simulacrum of the past (more on this in a few pages), and the subject is disoriented to the extent that viable criticism has been abolished. And still no leftist theory has been able to forgo “the

possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital, from which to assault this last” (48). Taking the postmodern subject’s cognitive disconnect from global capital as a metaphor, Jameson configures this critical impotence as a spatial problem that denies us the “time-honored formula of ‘critical distance,’” that persistent darling of the Left; “our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation” (49). Multinational capital has successfully inhabited the realms we have considered pre-capitalist (the psychological, for example), an invasion which even the conspiracy theories pervasive on the left have failed to account for (49). Most simply put, a category separate from capital and its functions does not exist. All forms of resistance the Left has cherished – from guerilla warfare to *The Clash* – “are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (49).

The critique of minimalism like Carver and Mason’s as a collaborator in late-capitalist cultural decline (along with all similar critique of postmodernism generally) has been effectively debunked by this argument. The only hope for culture as a political intervention in our present historical context exists in a hypothetical aesthetic, as of yet completely unrealized; this representational strategy would have to restore the subject position proper to criticism and to an uncompromised awareness of capitalism’s totality, as the compass once oriented explorers to totality mediated by the stars and the mathematics of triangulation (52). As hopeless as this sounds, however, Jameson elsewhere observes a different kind of potential in leftist postmodern productions that have had to narrate the exhaustion of American radicalism “by way of that very cultural logic of the postmodern which is itself the mark and symptom of [this] dilemma” (25). These works achieve a distinguishing self-consciousness even if they do not constitute a true alternative. E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, for example, takes the twentieth-century demise of the Left as its “elegiac backdrop,” at the same time collaborating with the ahistoricity symptomatic of that demise; an apparently realistic novel, it is “in reality a nonrepresentational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram” (23). Its mix of historical and fictional characters exceed the usual operations of historical novels by reifying Houdini, Tateh, Coalhouse, etc. into a simulacrum that evades historical specificity (24). Moreover, Doctorow’s particular use of the simple declarative sentence renders the plot a series of “isolated punctual event objects” that are severed from the contemporary context (24). But in this sense, the novel and its postmodern cohort does ironically achieve a kind of historical mimesis,

a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping [our] confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop history and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach. (25)

I will return to this crisis of historicity later on, but for now I would like to observe the particular way in which minimalism performs a similar kind of realism, which adopts this aesthetic of ahistorical “mirage,” but to an historically apt effect. Just as *Ragtime* uses its fantastical simulacrum of history to narrate the very real demise of historical consciousness, so writers like Carver empty commodified

space in order to depict an alternative that can only exist as fantasy in our historical context. The mirage quality of the minimalist aesthetic parallels the fantasy status of utopian desire in late capitalism.

Importantly, as alluded to in my introduction, Carver himself never understood his project as a political one, the way that Doctorow certainly did.³⁷ But his stories foreground a crisis observed by the American Left every bit as much as Doctorow's work. That crisis is the status of the American lower middle class, a contingent that subscribed to the hegemonic narrative of social ascent much in the way that Carver and his first wife once did. Despite their middle-class aspirations, bankruptcy and unemployment haunted their marriage as they plagued much of American lower middle class in the earlier seventies, the population of Carver's stories. "Popular Mechanics,"³⁸ for example, retells a familiar middle-class scenario: a husband packing for an abrupt move-out from what we understand to be the small suburban home he shares with his wife. This precipitates their violent conflict over who will keep the baby. The story's title – the name of the magazine that explains the workings of automobiles, electronics, and other appliances – signals that something instructive about middle-class life will be divulged. But in place of a class-specific narrative, we receive an ahistorical parable-turned-upside-down that abandons its context entirely. A biblical allusion accompanies the story's palpably biblical aesthetic; as Francoise Sammarcelli rightly identifies, "the theme of the judgment of Solomon is never made explicit but can be detected as if in a negative image, since the edifying conclusion brought about by the king's sentences strikingly contrasts with the parents' mad determination of the story" (235). Unlike the mother of the biblical episode who forgoes the right to her child in order to preserve its life, "the parents pictured in Carver's text seem impervious to their child's suffering and go on fighting to keep him at all costs" (235). After narrating a perverse tug of war, the story ends with the horrific suggestion that the baby has been torn in two, though it leaves this event in uncertainty. The dismemberment itself is never named (and it feels like a violation to do so now).

The entire story transpires in three short pages, and with only the fewest of details to locate it in what we know (after reading the other stories of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*) must be the post-Vietnam United States.³⁹ (In the story, the only words traceable to this context are "flowerpot" and "backyard" [123]). At the climactic moment, the wife gathers the swaddled baby and goes to hide in the "little kitchen," specifically "behind the stove" (124), a scene we could imagine in the late nineteenth century or 2008. This generality leaves the story guilty of the postmodern deployment of pastiche described by Jameson: "the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language" (17), which is in this case the biblical borrowed from "the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (18) to be paired with the idiom of the middle-class magazine. But these historically abstracting moves lend the narrative the grave simplicity denied to these kinds of characters in much other postmodern content, from television soaps to the garish scenarios of Hollywood blockbusters; even the grotesque ending is chastely described as the "manner" in which "the issue was decided" (125). In deploying this aesthetic, the story grants new weight to a commonplace fixture of the middle-class narrative (divorce). According to the American Dream, this couple could have (and still might) work hard and attain some kind of social mobility. Instead, an unnamed hardship – which we imagine to be the kind of working-hard-and-getting-nowhere Carver describes in his interviews – has brought the couple to where we now discover them, in a separation which (in this case literally) tears their child apart. The pared-down prose permits the story to flee the particular setting that likely suffocated its

characters in the first place and grants their crisis the weight of its bare brutality; it asks us to imagine the horror of the drama, but without the sensational means conventionally provided that might render it an absurdity.

We might wonder: is this not the very crisis of historicity that Jameson describes, “the spell and distance of a glossy mirage” (21) resulting from the fantasy collage of historical contexts and genres enacted by postmodern literature? I’d like to propose that in Carver’s work, mirage is being enlisted as allegory, which seeks to supplant commodified space as an alternative form, even if it cannot entirely succeed in doing so. His prose strips away as many commodified objects as possible without jettisoning referentiality entirely; in this way, it clears the overpopulated, decorative, excessive space of both consumer culture and the more canonical iterations of postmodernism. A few consumer artifacts necessarily survive the cleanse, but these form part of the biblical feeling sparseness that so often makes way for allegorical meaning. In “Popular Mechanics,” the baby becomes not only symbolic of the way parents commodify children in the negotiations of divorce, but also a more general example of the violence of reification. Unlike the magazine, which collaborates with capitalism’s commodifying functions, the story is an oblique warning against them.

These allegorical meanings endeavor to preserve the characters from the determining grasp of commodification. In doing so, however, allegory also masquerades as an autonomous space unfettered by late capitalism while surreptitiously collaborating with it every bit as much as the rest of postmodern cultural production, insofar as it relies on generic, ahistorical representation. Is it a sleight of hand to represent “reality” in this fashion? Yes, absolutely, and not least because it promises greater subversive potential than is actually available in postmodernism if we subscribe to Jameson’s argument. But as in the rest of postmodern realism, this kind of slippage may be the only slim but available means of configuring the *possibility* and *desirability* of an alternative political reality and critical consciousness for its white lower-middle-class characters. For Theodor Adorno and others of the Frankfurt School, art’s oblique access to critique is the most potent subversion it can enable; the artwork’s semblance of a not yet existing reality verges on consolatory fantasy, and yet persistently reminds us of its own illusion status, as Carver’s stories do in their refusal to provide definitive meaning.

The following analysis will propose that “Cathedral” allegorizes the utopian possibility of shedding the artifacts and effects of commodification and, through its allegory, conveys the slimness of this hope for change. Some of the consumer world survives in “Cathedral” as it does in rest of minimalism (and certainly all of it will revive as soon the story is over), but only as a necessary frame of its startling omissions; these relocate the act of reading from the entrapments of the consumer apparatus to symbolic indeterminacy. The effect will necessarily be blurred, ahistorical, and (yes, still) defined by the productions of late capitalism. But the story’s simultaneous uncertainty *wishes to* pause commodification, positioning itself against the overpopulated landscape of central postmodern content. This tenuous desire is both utopian in its longing for experience that predates commodification and ideological in its collaboration with the neoliberal concept of universal, autonomous experience – an ideology that is, importantly, also reproduced by whiteness. The story’s dutiful attention to the undecidability of these alternatives places a careful wedge for minimalist social critique. In doing so, it breaks with the usual treatment of commodification in minimalism, as I believe many of Carver’s stories do.

In “Cathedral” we meet a white lower-middle-class couple, hardly in the crisis of “Popular Mechanics,” though palpably disconnected, who spend most of their discretionary time in the living room, in which the organizing object is the television. Even in this relatively luxurious phase of Carver’s minimalism – which is slightly less paratactic, more ornate, and no longer under Gordon Lish’s tight editorial grip – we have almost no visual sense of the characters and their home apart from its most determining features. We know they have a driveway (in which the wife and an important guest arrive), a kitchen (in which they stuff down what sounds like a 2,000 calorie meal), a bar (in an unknown location which they often frequent), and an upstairs (which interestingly includes a separate room for the wife). Beyond this we have no sense of the objects that populate their home, nor do we see any of their physical traits, which serves to deprioritize whatever sensory experience one could have in this space. We could chalk this muteness up to the depressive mood of the narrator and a certain sensory obtuseness that the wife and their guest also seem to share at times. But if we read our confined knowledge of this commodified space (the white lower-middle-class home) against the established genre of minimalism and its abundant ethnographic use of the brand name, we recognize Carver’s attempt to empty out a typically over-determined setting (which is also scattered with consumer objects in much of canonical postmodernism and mass-cultural content like advertising). The objects that survive the minimalist trim in “Cathedral” get repurposed for the story’s own critical purposes; the television, for example, becomes the occasion for what turns out to be a transformative moment of quiet subversion in the narrator’s experience.

The character who ironically comes into most precise focus is a blind man – their guest and the only character who has a name (Robert). He’s an old friend of the narrator’s wife who comes to visit them after his own wife dies of cancer. We know that he’s a well dressed, “heavy set,” balding man, probably in his late forties, with “stooped shoulders,” a full beard that’s getting some “winter” (an adjective supplied by the blind man based on what he’s heard from other people), a booming voice, and eyes that “seemed to move around in the sockets without his knowing it or being able to stop it” (greatly preoccupying the narrator) (215-6). And we soon perceive his relative emotional adeptness, particularly in relating to the narrator’s wife – much to the narrator’s chagrin, it seems. From the moment he first introduces us to the blind man, the narrator can only begin to comprehend him through the mediation of consumer content. “His being blind bothered me,” he tells us – in narration that has a distinctly spoken feel – “My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to” (209).

The narrator first encounters the blind man through the tape-recorded letters he sends to the narrator’s wife; eventually, the blind man sends a tape in which he comments on the wife’s nascent relationship with the narrator, and she coaxes him into listening to it with her. Even in this preliminary encounter, the narrator can only apprehend the blind man’s aberrant way of corresponding as though it were part of the televisual spectacle; “I got us drinks and we settled down in the living room. We made ready to listen” – only to be interrupted by “a knock at door, something,” from which they never return, much in the way that one can easily never return to a casually chosen television program

(212). The narrator never hears the part where the blind man mentions him, but this disjuncture doesn't seem to bother him – in the same way that his apparent disconnect with his wife rarely and barely gets any mention as a source of worry. In fact, all content which resists the mode of perception he has clearly borrowed from the hours he spends watching TV seems to slip from the narrator's grasp – he cannot assimilate it into his more global understanding, nor does he wish to (at least not until the end of the story).

The blind man's inability to interact with the content familiar to the narrator in the "proper" way – the one dictated by consumer code – makes him suspect from the moment he enters the house. The narrator is persistently uncomfortable with the fact that the blind man cannot see the TV when they sit down to watch it (at a later point in the night he tells us the blind man was "leaning forward with his head turned at me, his right ear aimed in the direction of the set. Very disconcerting" [222]). Blind people can't even *see* their wives and appreciate them in the way that televisual culture instructs, a fact that disturbs the narrator when he reflects on what must have been this blind man's relationship with his now deceased wife. "Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. A woman who could go on day after day and never receive the smallest compliment from her beloved" (213) – a woman outside the hegemonic scheme of the televisual, which requires that she be processed as image. "She could, if she wanted, wear green eye-shadow around one eye, a straight pin in her nostril, yellow slacks and purple shoes, no matter" (210), much in the way the blind man's right eye is often "on the roam without his knowing it or wanting it to be" (218). This kind of life-gone-rogue from the televisual mode proves threatening to the narrator – less because it is estranged from his own way of apprehending the world, and more because it evades the guiding hand of hegemony that dictates when and how one should gaze and be gazed on. All of the blind man's modes of contact and expression – from the tapes to his aural relation to the TV – seem to flout the hyper-visibility of consumer culture, in which the narrator is fluent. For these reasons and others which I'll shortly examine, the blind man is clearly someone for the narrator to distrust – particularly at times when he seems to have greater intimacy with the wife than the narrator has ever enjoyed, a fact which continues to dumbfound him in its small manifestations throughout the story. As the wife pulls into the driveway with the blind man after picking him up from the train station, the narrator says "I saw my wife laughing as she parked the car. I saw her get out of the car and shut the door. She was still wearing a smile. *Just amazing*" (214, my emphasis).

The blind man's arrival ushers in a nearly insurmountable awkwardness that the narrator wants to locate in the shortcomings associated with his disability, though it seems much more traceable to the narrator's continuing misapprehensions of blindness. Much in the way that the televisual mediated his initial conceptions, he relies on commonplaces in speaking with the blind man, which continually fail to anticipate and account for experiences outside the hegemonic one:

... I wanted to say something else, small-talk, about the scenic ride along the Hudson. How going *to* New York, you should sit on the right-hand side of the train, and coming *from* New York, you should sit on the left-hand side. (215)

The narrator does ask which side of the train the blind man sat on, and his wife immediately registers a clumsiness about this comment. But the blind man seamlessly proceeds to detail his train ride, and how good it is to see them, as though nothing out of the ordinary has been said – and it hasn't in terms of his own experience. Next the narrator recalls having read that the blind don't smoke, supposedly because they don't see the smoke they exhale;

I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people. But this blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one. This blind man filled his ashtray and my wife emptied it. (217)

This generic act of “knowing” and “reading” about certain commonplaces begins to resemble the lack of cultural and historical specificity Jameson attributes to the postmodern subject and his culture; any kind of nuance for which the cliché and commonplace cannot account seems out of the narrator's reach.

The narrator's reliance on the stereotypical past grows more pronounced as the story reaches its thematic cornerstone, a television program about cathedrals. After their robust dinner, the three return to the living room where the wife falls asleep on the couch and the narrator and blind man reach a stuttering agreement to stay up smoking and watching television together. (Even when they are asleep, high, and blind respectively, they can't seem to do without TV.) The program about cathedrals comes on –

Something about the church and the Middle Ages ... Not your run-of-the-mill TV fare ... I turned to the other channels. But there was nothing on them, either. So I turned back to the first channel and apologized. (223)

The narrator soon feels socially obligated to describe this regrettably out of the ordinary program to the blind man, since the voiceover often lapses into montages of Spain, France, Portugal, or Italy. (But again this urge to cancel or dispel blindness comes from the narrator and not the blind man himself.) The narrator quickly realizes, however, that he's unable to narrate this particular content because he can't seem to summon the historical context surrounding cathedrals; their televisual reproduction as reified image seems to have created this de-historicizing effect. “There's a painting on the walls of this one church,” he explains, but when the blind man asks if the paintings are frescoes, he's forced to admit that it's a “good question” but he doesn't know (223).

Though he can glean no visual content from the program, the blind man ironically retains much more of the historical as it has been presented in this commodified form. In doing so, he begins to take his place as the figure and catalyst for a provisional alternative to experience determined by consumer culture and its language of stereotype. When the narrator asks him if he has any idea what cathedrals are really like, he rehearses what was apparently part of the voiceover:

I know they took hundreds of workers fifty or a hundred years to build ... I just heard the man say that, of course. I know generations of the same families worked on a cathedral. I

heard him say that, too. The men who began their life's work on them, they never lived to see the completion of their work. In that wise, bub, they're no different from the rest of us, right? (224)

Here the blind man produces a clichéd though somewhat applicable stand-in for the class-consciousness that has largely slipped away from his world, and which evades the narrator entirely. We learn through their earlier conversation that the narrator feels numbed by his unnamed job:

From time to time, [the blind man would] turn his blind face toward me, put his hand under his beard, ask me something. How long had I been in my present position? (Three years.) Did I like my work? (I didn't.) Was I going to stay with it? (What were the options?) Finally, when I thought he was beginning to run down, I got up and turned on the TV. (218)

Bill Mullen's analysis of the televisual in Carver can lend an explanation of this moment. We frequently meet his characters before or after their jobs (if they have one), when "the dull, omnipresent hum of television serves as a soporific cocoon against the intrusion or consideration of social discontent" (103) – the kind of discontent this narrator seems to feel over the futility of his current work. Yet he is unable to synthesize this futility with the one experienced by the individual laborers who built the cathedrals, in the way the blind man seems to do intuitively. And this disconnect in itself constitutes a blindness of cognition.

The reception history of this story has explained the narrator's experience as various kinds of blindness (that prove far more blind than the blind man's blindness) – a willful spiritual blindness (Peterson 168), a general lack of interest in examining feeling on the part of Carver's characters (Clark 113). These readings offer a compelling account of the narrator's particular obtuseness, but his condition also pertains to a more collective blindness, a class (and race) blindness, which refuses to see its position as a historically situated one. It surfaces in the narrator's attempts at describing cathedrals, as it variously does at other moments. In this way, the narrator becomes a figure for the postmodern "waning of our historicity" described by Jameson. The past that produced the surviving artifacts of the cathedral blurs into the commonplaces of the cultural present in the narrator's account of it; "In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be closer to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life. You could tell this from their Cathedral building" (225).

And the narrator is hardly unaware of the impotence of these remarks; his preparations to make them read like an attempt to summon the working-class urgency for which Carver longs in his biographical writings.⁴⁰ "I stared at the Cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else" (224). These mental exercises fail to produce, which the narrator finally acknowledges to the blind man; "I'm sorry ... but it looks like that's the best I can do for you. I'm just not good at it" (225) – at producing anything other than utterly generic notions of the "olden days" that therefore remain in the obscurity of Jameson's "stereotypical past." Cathedrals don't really signify much of anything for him – a fact he attributes to his indifference towards religion – but even his own

agnosticism remains culturally nondescript: “I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it’s hard. You know what I’m saying?” (225). He seems not to know quite what he’s saying – or what this religious “it” is exactly. “The truth is, cathedrals don’t mean anything special to me. Nothing,” he continues; “Cathedrals. They’re something to look at on late-night TV. That’s all they are” (226).

The narrator’s inability to generate historically specific content is a social rather than a personal poverty, indicative of his interpellation by the hegemonic, largely televisual discourse; and this content determines, even scripts all that he can say about cultural artifacts like, say, cathedrals. But the blind man, provisionally and paradoxically allows him to break out of this class “blindness.” Much ink has been spilt over the meaning of the narrator’s apparent epiphany in the final scene of the story. In it, the narrator draws a cathedral on a shopping bag he recovers from the trash while the blind man follows his movements and then retraces his lines. The act of drawing finally obviates his pseudohistorical attempts to explain the structures. And the moment abruptly becomes an occasion for what we the readers experience as unexplainable intimacy; “His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now” (228). Critics often describe this experience as a kind of awakening – spiritual or otherwise (Peterson 168) – and the story’s somewhat incidental religious content (cathedrals) assist this kind of reading. I would add, however, that in this moment sensory experience becomes a stand-in for the emotional depth and understanding the narrator lacks (like so many of Carver’s characters). Instead of an epiphany of understanding, he gets the rapture of shared sensory experience (drawing a cathedral with the blind man) that leads to greater intimacy, at least provisionally.

This small miracle goes largely unexplained, though we can easily recuperate its origins, in light of the way it interacts with the symbolic elements I’ve already identified – the narrator as a figure for postmodern lack of historicity (and a more specifically lower-middle-class lack of class-consciousness), and the blind man’s growing candidacy as a faintly possible alternative. The beginnings of the narrator’s drawing resemble his other efforts to recover something of cathedrals, with his own limited means; “So I began. First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At the end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy” (227). In constructing this unfamiliar historical artifact, he is literally using the tools of his own domestic sphere – the commodified space of what is likely (though significantly we’re never told) his small tract home or condo in a white suburb. This reliance renders the drawing as culturally and historically indeterminate as his previous attempts to explain cathedrals. The narrator himself admits that, while the box he draws could be the likeness of a medieval structure, it could just as easily be his own house – until he adds the simulacra of historical detail he’s gleaned from the television program, his persistent mediator.

But rather suddenly his tacit awareness of this mediation seems to dwindle in the fury of the creative act; “I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn’t stop” (227). The more his sense of himself as creator grows in these urgently brief sentences, the greater his precision becomes, until he’s actually naming the very details of cathedrals that before either eluded him or came off as inadequate souvenirs of what the TV told him. And then, “the TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers. The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded” (227). It would be easy to read this moment as the senses supplanting cognition (Clark

110) or some other surmounting of the numb quality that has until now characterized the narrator. This interpretation would be a sensitive one, if also somewhat blind to the more prevailing allegorical meaning that emerges from this sparsely illustrated moment; for the channel going off marks something else as well – the *apparent* receding of hegemonic determinants in the narrator’s experience. His drawing still relies entirely on the content of the television program, but he no longer mentions TV or wants to remember it at all.

The allegory amplifies this small change, to the extent that the narrator’s wife is unable to fathom their project when she suddenly wakes up, saying “What’s going on? Robert, what are you doing? What’s going on?” (227). What she seems to register as uncanny is in fact the real significance of this moment: the narrator’s provisional power over the media which until now stymied his ability to create – or to say anything worth hearing at all. And for the first time, what he creates, in this case draws, can mean something to the blind man; “We’re going to really have ourselves something here in a minute” (227) the blind man says, affectionately, following which he tells the narrator to close his eyes:

Then he said, ‘I think that’s it. I think you got it,’ he said. ‘Take a look. What do you think?’

But I had my eyes closed. I thought I’d keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.

‘Well?’ he said. ‘Are you looking?’

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything.

‘It’s really something,’ I said. (228)

The narrator is now as blind as Robert the blind man, and as blind to specificity as he ever was – he doesn’t feel like he’s inside anything at all, let alone inside a class history that might somehow include cathedrals. But if nothing else, he experiences this make-believe silencing of the hegemonic as a welcome and striking novelty he wishes to extend, even just for a few moments. And for the reader as well, the entirety of the story’s commodified space is emptied, leaving us a few lines of darkness in which to contemplate this character’s experience as something other than its role in late capitalism. The story adamantly refuses to reassure us about the significance of these final events. What is the narrator experiencing exactly? We cannot know, yet neither do we feel that meaning has been hung out to dry. Carver removes the significance of his “revelation” from textual determination and delivers it to our own cognition, where it exists as a multiplicity of possible meanings – just as it seems to for the narrator. A palpable *desire* for autonomous dark – or what we might think of as a blank canvass – emerges in this moment, but its agency is as vague as the longing for the bourgeois household that Jameson identifies in a descriptive passage from Balzac’s *La Vieille Fille* (*Political Unconscious* 420);

... we cannot attribute this particular desire ... to any individual subject. Biographical Balzac, Implied Author, this or that desiring protagonist: none of these unities are (yet) present, and

desire here comes before us in a peculiarly anonymous state which makes a strangely absolute claim on us. (420)

In “Cathedral,” the desire for autonomous experience is as class-specific as the Balzac novel’s bourgeois yearnings, and yet desire is felt as a universally applicable utopian value that ultimately comes to rest with the reader in the way Jameson describes – a movement assisted by the story’s deliberate omissions.

Wolfgang Iser argues that such gaps in meaning are not only commonplace in reading fiction but constitutive of it. Literary texts structure the reader’s understanding, but the latter will never submit entirely to their control (24); fictional objects “cannot have the total determinacy of real objects, and, indeed, it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to ‘communicate’ with the reader, in the comprehension of the work’s intention” (24). This collaborative meaning, made available by the text and completed by the reader in the fulfillment of “communication” depends on what Iser refers to as “blanks,” which have taken various forms in narrative – for example, in Jane Austen’s apparently superficial dialogue that, as Virginia Woolf observed, “expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial” (Woolf in Iser 168). In this case and in narrative more generally, “What *is* said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning” (168).

This account of reading would *seem* to perfectly describe the experience of reading Carver, particularly when we consider that so much of his description is inhabited by what is not said. However, for Iser these blanks have the instrumental role of coalescing into the themes of narrative. An initial set of blanks prompts the reader to produce theories to fill them, and secondary sets allow her to modify the initial ideation into a more complete understanding (203). Ultimately,

The discarded image imprints itself on its successor, even though the latter is meant to resolve the deficiencies of the former. In this respect, the images hang together in a sequence, and it is by this sequence that the meaning of the text comes alive in the reader’s imagination. (203)

At the culmination of this effect, the images and understandings enabled by the text’s series of blanks become linked seamlessly enough for the blanks to effectively “disappear” (183). But in “Cathedral,” as in much of Carver, the narrative fetishizes its blanks to the extent that they never fully submit themselves to this process of meaning-making; rather, they maintain their status as conspicuous holes in referentiality, in collaboration with the allegorical removal of the hegemonic. We struggle to supply images of the un-described narrator, wife, and living room, which, in their starkness, do not completely conform to whatever pre-fabricated image of commodified space we might summon. Likewise, we develop theories of the narrator’s revelation in drawing the cathedral, but this last, like so many final moments of Carver, refuses to be consolidated by ideation and instead ends the narrative on an utterly unfinished note.

Benjamin’s observations in “The Storyteller” can help us make sense of this undetermined quality in relation to the rest of postmodernism. It is precisely indeterminacy which most distinguishes Carver from the prevailing postmodern content – the overpopulated space of advertising and the

more canonical maximalist novels that respond to the political dilemmas of representing commodified space in the exact opposite mode. Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, for example, narrated by Wall Street banker and serial killer Patrick Bateman, crowds the reader's imaginary space with brand names and consumer objects. This too has the effect of distorting commodified space, but, unlike Carver's strategies in portraying the white lower middle class, Ellis multiplies consumer objects into a hyperactive satire of white upper-middle-class New York. We can observe this effect in Bateman's description of the objects of his apartment:

A down-filled futon lies on an oakwood frame in the center of the bedroom. Against the wall is a Panasonic thirty-one-inch set with a direct-view screen and stereo and beneath it in a glass case is a Toshiba VCR. I'm not sure if the time on the Sony digital alarm clock is correct so I have to sit up then look down at the time flashing on and off on the VCR, then pick up the Ettore Sottsass push-button phone that rests on the steel and glass nightstand next to the bed and dial the time number. A cream leather, steel and wood chair designed by Eric Marcus is in one corner of the room, a molded plywood chair in the other. A black-dotted beige and white Maud Sienna carpet covers most of the floor. (Easton Ellis in Weinrich 68)

This narrative obsession with the minutia of commodified space confines the novel's meaning to the surface of Bateman's words and actions (68); even the heinous murders he commits are unfelt and unjustified. The dichotomy of Ellis' congested prose and Carver's omissions corresponds to Benjamin's distinction between information and storytelling as a retreating form. In particular, the novel has disembodied the modern act of reading, banishing the artisan process by which the oral narrator of epic, folklore, and fairytales conveys his experiences as counsel to his listeners (though writers like Leskov still succeed in replicating this act). This kind of knowledge has been supplanted by modernity's obsession with information:

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it ... The most extraordinary, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (Benjamin 89)

We can read Ellis' novel as a parodic exaggeration of information's determining effects (though ironically "the psychological connection of the events" is nonetheless banished by the sheer quantity of both descriptive details and murders), and Carver's stories, an aesthetic and social counterpoint, as an attempt to recuperate the symbolic openness of storytelling. Their meaning derives from the extent to which the reader is permitted to "interpret things the way he understands them." The negative

spaces left by the stories' abstention from explanation are where their intensity surges through, and where allegorical meaning finds its location.

Though they must speak to each other across theoretical schools, Iser and Benjamin are actually closer than we might think in their shared desire for a reading practice that prioritizes the reading (or listening) subject's participation. For Benjamin, storytelling grants the reader a collaborative role in meaning denied by the novel. The story's "chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis" (what better descriptor of Carver?) and resistance to "psychological shading" has the strange effect of installing it more completely in the reader's memory (91). This in turn means the story has been integrated into the reader's own experience, making him more inclined to repeat the story and its wisdom (91). In describing the reader this way, he subtly removes him from the status of interpreter to that of co-experiencer and co-author; in both the moment of the story's recounting and the subsequent times when the reader will tell it again, he becomes an intimate associate of its contents and effect. This status puts him in closer, more sensory proximity to the writer as well; storytelling

does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (92)

It is exactly this kind of contact that thrills the narrator in the culminating moments of "Cathedral," with the blind man's hand encouragingly pressed to his own in (perhaps proto-class-) solidarity; representing the cathedral to the blind man enables a moment of counsel between them as much as it produces an informational understanding of the cathedral's structure. And the indeterminacy of this act creates a parallel experience for the reader, who has the impression of a creative subjectivity behind the imperfect rendering. The utopian *desire* for this kind of subjectivity, free from commodification, is precisely what "Cathedral" allegorizes in this last scene.

But how can such a recruitment of Iser's "Reader" serve what I've interpreted as the story of a class- and race-specific experience? After all, this undetermined reading act is not only symptomatic of the alleged neutrality and universality of whiteness, but is also a virtual experience of the kind of subjectivity that no longer seems possible in late capitalism, according to Jameson and the Frankfurt School before him: that of the autonomous subject with meaning and value-making capacities not limited by the political context, as meaning in Carver is often undetermined by the text. The narrator is allowed his few moments of sovereign darkness, and we too have the quiet space with which to supply our interpretation of whatever revelation has occurred (or not). This may seem like the ideological fantasy of independence entertained by the bourgeois subject that Adorno and others have so thoroughly problematized, yet it is at the same time utopian, albeit in an ahistorical sense. Carver's narrator, like all postmodern subjects, can no longer have the autonomous experience he may wish to have and believe he is having. For Adorno, however, this kind of fantasy is constitutive of the artwork's critical capacity;

Fantasy is also, and essentially so, the unrestricted availability of potential solutions that crystallize within the artwork. It is lodged not only in what strikes one both as existing and as the residue of something existing, but perhaps even more in the transformation of the existing. (173-4)

We can locate this “transformation of the existing” in the story’s repurposing of a hegemonically determined setting as autonomous, creative space. The narrative’s provisional enactment of autonomy may be the only kind of utopia its characters – and we as readers – can access at all, a fictional critique of both the seeming inevitability of late capitalism and art’s collaboration with its operations. Moreover, our identification with what seems like the narrator’s own experience in “lack of symbolic closure” collapses the kind of readerly moralism Stevenson practices in her objection to Cheerios. Both reader and narrator are determined by late capitalist productions, and in turn the dismissal of those productions functions as a utopian alternative in both the diegetic world and our own.

Consolidating reader and characters may seem like a reinstallation of the bourgeois subject as ideal recipient and an erasure of the story’s class awareness. But such a move is either universalizing in Iser’s mode or utopian in the Benjaminian sense of recapturing a creative act that predates commodification. I locate the story’s most important moment of critique in the very *simultaneity* and *undecidability* of these two contingencies. They sustain the crepe-like thinness between utopian and ideological thought, a thinness essential to art’s critical functioning. As Adorno has described, art wishes to be utopian, “yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation” (32). To avoid crystallizing into this static, self-satisfied utopia, a kind of fluctuation is required, between the ideology of empirical reality and the autonomy towards which the aesthetic necessarily, though problematically, strives:

Artistic experience is brought of its own accord into movement by the contradiction that the constitutive immanence of the aesthetic sphere is at the same time the ideology that undermines it. Aesthetic experience must overstep itself. It traverses the antithetical extremes rather than settling peacefully into a spurious median between them. (349)

In “Cathedral,” the moment when we might distinguish between the utopian and ideological intentions of the aesthetic is configured as blindness with a double valence; the narrator can literally close his eyes, remove the hegemonic narrative, even if these few moments are a delusion of autonomy and a recapitulation of the white subject’s allegedly universal experience. And this allows for brief tenderness with the only person he has encountered who can sidestep the hegemonic, through a disadvantage that ironically enables fledgling access to affective, social, and historical knowledge – the blind man, Robert. Moreover, the narrator’s experience with Robert generates a creative act parallel to the reader’s own interpretive co-authorship in Benjamin’s analysis. When he closes his eyes in sympathy and concentration, the space of his home recedes to the point that he doesn’t feel like he’s “inside anything” – itself an ahistorical, universalist status – but one that serves as a fragile subversion to being inside the consumer something.

‘PERHAPS ONLY FROM WATCHING GULLS FLY’: CRITICAL PROTESTANTISM IN
MARILYNNE ROBINSON’S *HOUSEKEEPING*

Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (2004) is the story of a Congregationalist pastor, John Ames, but his atheist brother Edward gets a brief cameo. After studying in Germany for a period, Edward “came home with a walking stick and a huge mustache. Herr Doktor” (25), recommending that everyone read Feuerbach. According to Edward, truth is not available in a place like Gilead; “John,” he says, “you might as well know now what you’re sure to learn sometime. This is a backwater – you must be aware of that already. Leaving here is like waking from a trance” (26). Yet it is from within the “trance” that Ames, who is dying of heart disease, writes his articulate meditation on aging, intended for his seven-year-old son who would otherwise never get to know him well. The novel is a highly optimistic account of life in midcentury, small-town Iowa, where the ideals of Christian fellowship seem to be fully, functionally realized. Even its most sinister character, Jack Boughton, turns out to be one half of a courageous interracial marriage.

Twenty-four years before Ames and Boughton met the page, however, Robinson published the story of another resident of a small, midcentury Christian town: Ruth Stone.⁴¹ Unlike Ames, Ruth, the narrator-protagonist of *Housekeeping* (1980), is a decided outsider of Fingerbone, presumed to be located in Idaho based on Robinson’s biography.⁴² She has not read Feuerbach either, but through her narration, Robinson stages a critique of the town’s religious and aspiring middle-class attitudes. This critique importantly approximates that waged by the cohort of Feuerbach admirers to which Edward belonged: midcentury European post-Marxist thinkers like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, working against what they saw as the instrumentally rationalist epistemology of the modern period that underpins capitalist ideology. Ruth’s similar critique is performed structurally, through the hybrid power of description that Robinson bestows upon her.⁴³ On the one hand, she provides ethnographic accounts of the town, through which, I will suggest, it becomes metonymic of rural, white, lower-middle-class life – less stable than that of middle-class suburbs, although in no way as precarious as the existence of the transients depicted in the novel. But much of *Housekeeping* transpires in a very different mode which I term speculative description:⁴⁴ Ruth’s portrayals of nature and imaginings of the afterlife that resemble American Transcendentalism, though with a tentative flavor which allows her to remain unsettled about the mind’s relation to the divine.

Transcendentalism and Marxism are somewhat strange bedfellows, despite their shared lineage in German Idealism. Yet they are more formally wedded by Robinson’s later essays. In “Thinking Again” (2011), for example, she writes that “If I were not myself a religious person, but wished to make an account of religion, I believe I would tend toward the Feuerbachian view that religion is a human projection of humanity’s conceptions of beauty, goodness, power and other valued things, a humanizing of experience by understanding it as structured around and mirroring back these values” (127) – the same that Transcendentalism finds reflected in a nature which indexes the divine. Put

differently, Robinson would choose to understand religion in the Marxian sense, as an iteration of human potential, misallocated but nonetheless indicative of collective desire for a more perfect social sphere. By her logic, such an understanding is compatible with a personal Protestantism indebted to Transcendentalist and humanist philosophy; like recent theories of postsecularism,⁴⁵ that is, she traces an affinity between theological and secular critiques of instrumental rationality – not least, as I will propose, in *Housekeeping*. And by elaborating this affinity within the world of a novel, she is configuring a critical potential specific to its social context. The protagonist of this novel revises Transcendentalism accordingly, by locating its generalized mysticism in the Protestant lineage suggested by the novel’s ethnographic content and Robinson’s essays. This revision is not just a philosophical one, as much of *Housekeeping*’s reception history has assumed;⁴⁶ rather, it reveals that a critical approach to rationality, and to conservative Christianity, could be available within the rural “trance” – via an iteration of the evangelical Protestantism widespread among its constituents. In other words, through Ruth, *Housekeeping* is reimagining white, rural, evangelical subjectivity as one of critical potential, in a period when most Leftists were blaming such subjects for the rise of a reactionary social and economic agenda. Her aesthetics and epistemology function as a utopian image of what evangelical Protestantism *might* have become – as both an epistemological orientation and an identity.

Both the novel’s content and the concerns I’ve outlined here leave no doubt that its primary thematic is a particular set of middle-class white people: while he lived, Ruth’s grandfather worked on trains; her mother sells cosmetics at a drugstore (22); their sometime neighbor in Seattle, Bernice, is a cashier at a truck stop (22); Ruth’s aunts, Lily and Nona, are destitute retired women who live in the basement of a hotel and enjoy *Reader’s Digest* (28, 30); and her father used to sell farming equipment (52). Christopher Douglas reads Robinson’s engagement with whiteness as an attempt to imagine a white Protestantism that challenges its contemporary alliance with right-wing populism. In *Gilead*, he argues, she willfully ignores Protestantism’s historical involvement in slavery, in order to construct a selective counter-history of liberal Calvinist thought; the novel allegedly “mourns the road not taken: there might have been a wiser, less arrogant and contentious, more spiritually humble and compelling national religious experience instead of the flavor that ultimately became prominent” (102). I propose that *Housekeeping*, by contrast, suggests a more complex understanding of Protestantism’s social meanings on Robinson’s part, via the highly speculative mode in which Ruth functions as a counterfactual alternative to postwar evangelical doctrine and politics. In other words, *Gilead* is a strongman successor of what in *Housekeeping* is an aptly wispy possibility – the reinvention of a Christianity deeply ensconced in the class and race positions of its subjects. Though most of my discussion will deal with *Housekeeping*’s configuration of white lower-middle-class attitudes vis-à-vis the instrumental rationality of neoliberalism, toward the end of the argument, I will propose that it avoids *Gilead*’s simplification of race relations⁴⁷ – through the extreme tentativeness of Ruth and Sylvie’s affinity with a Native American transient, enabled by their outsider status in a middle-class-aspiring town.

Evangelicalism of the Postwar United States

The delineations of postwar evangelical Protestantism are every bit as intricate as its depiction in Robinson's novel. In a special issue of *Christianity Today* dedicated to the question "What is evangelicalism?" (1999), Timothy George defines evangelical Protestants (literally, bringers of "glad tidings") as the following:

a world-wide family of Bible-believing Christians, committed to sharing with everyone everywhere the transforming good news of new life in Jesus Christ, an utterly free gift that comes through faith alone in the crucified and risen Savior. (Qtd. in Sweeney 17)

But for other commentators, evangelicalism is a religious identity stretched to the point of being barely viable. Donald Dayton, co-author of a central study titled *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (1991), even declared it dead. The term should be done away with, he argues, because it is "theologically incoherent" and "sociologically confusing"; according to him, evangelicals have never rallied around a common doctrine and the label consolidates the multiple identities of its supposed members (qtd. in Sweeney 21-2). Twentieth-century evangelicals did hail from an extremely diverse set of social groups: "white trash"; white suburbanites of the Sunbelt, newly affluent in the postwar period with the growth of military and high-tech industries (Schäfer 26); both rural and urban African Americans; the extremely wealthy; an assortment of politicians that includes Jimmy Carter, Reagan, and Bill Clinton; and a cohort of Christian celebrities like neo-fundamentalist Jerry Falwell and the somewhat more middle-of-the-road Billy Graham. For Dayton, however, the most significant disparity is between evangelicalism's contemporary, lower-class, Pentecostal majority and the historical, privileged, Calvinist theologians (e.g. Jonathan Edwards) emphasized by preeminent scholars of the movement (22).

Though she does not mark it as an evangelical history, Robinson herself provides a similarly elitist and celebratory account of Calvinist theology in "Marguerite de Navarre":

It is no accident that the most liberal branch of American Protestantism descends from Calvinism, or that New England and upstate New York, in their Calvinist era, were great centers of social and educational reform and experimentation. (And gloomy, like Geneva [where Calvin was a church reformer] we are always told – compared with the slave states presumably. Again, people differ in where they find cause for gloom.) (205)

It's easy to see how the gloss Robinson provides here corresponds to the social and theological conflict that Dayton identifies. Fault lines analogous to her palpable contempt for conservative Protestants were active between liberal and fundamentalist evangelicals throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁸ In fact, it was only after fundamentalism's rise in the early twentieth century that mainline Protestant denominations like Robinson's own Congregationalism (presumably the "most liberal branch" in the above passage) largely distanced themselves from evangelicalism.⁴⁹ Robinson herself does not identify with the movement, despite her unambiguous endorsements of its theological origins and her

challenges to secularizing accounts of American history – which, for Douglas, counter-intuitively align her with conservative evangelicals of the contemporary Christian resurgence (104). In other words, though Robinson is not evangelical, her simultaneous affinity with, and division from, the movement’s conservatives echo its own political rifts.

These rifts suddenly widened in the seventies and eighties with the conservative Christian resurgence to which Douglas’ analysis refers. Emergent evangelicalisms embodied exactly what their Calvinist forefathers most feared: that capitalism and consumerism would completely redefine religious doctrine (Brekus 301). This is precisely what happened, for example, in the Word of Faith movement (also called the “prosperity gospel”), founded around the time that *Housekeeping* was published.⁵⁰ The movement relied heavily on John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly,” and 2 Corinthians 8:9, “Yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich” (295), promulgating a literalist interpretation of both. As Catherine Brekus describes, Word of Faith preachers believed that “Christianity and capitalism are virtually the same thing: both involve free individuals trying to maximize their profits in this world” (295). As part of this scheme, individuals could control their own economic destinies through faith (295). Paula White variously preached that, “you can deceive yourself into thinking that you are in poverty” and “*your words create your world*” (qtd. in Brekus 298). In her supernatural brand of neoliberalism, simply speaking one’s desire to be rich or healthy could make it so (298). Members of the movement who did not get what they wanted assumed it was their own fault, like one woman in her thirties who gave a Sacramento church a thousand dollars, hoping to receive ten thousand in return; she told a researcher, “I’m not doing what God tells me to do in order for me to get it” (300-1). Though not all contemporary evangelical movements are this extreme in their focus on the divine justice of capitalism or their belief in the individual as the primary locus of value, many have doctrines that nonetheless share these assumptions; conservative evangelicals have long believed that the free enterprise system was God’s design, comparing it to the laws of physics (Schäfer 115-6).

During the seventies and eighties, evangelicalism was also being shored up to accommodate a conservative social agenda (anti-feminist, anti-abortion, anti-gay), adverse to the one espoused by many socially liberal evangelicals in the sixties. As with Word of Faith economic doctrine, the most orthodox evangelicals believed sinful hearts and minds to be the cause of personal and social ills, the cure for which was also individual faith (22). Nonetheless, an enabling relationship existed between the rhetorical practices of sixties counterculture and the political efficacy of conservative movements that emerged in the seventies and eighties (121). Leftist evangelicals of the sixties had translated countercultural urges into a moral voice that was more acceptable to the cultural mainstream; and although conservative evangelicals rejected the political agenda of these leftist counterparts, they benefitted from the new rhetoric of social action (121). As Axel Schäfer puts it, by adopting a language of traditional “social issues,” “the Right built upon the emphasis on social concern and political involvement that sixties evangelicals had succeeded in placing at the center of the resurgence” (121). Because of these tactics, both the conservative social agenda and consumer capitalism were cast as countercultural, even as the Christian right enacted a program of “containment and retention of insurgent impulses” (121);

the subversive potential of evangelical revivalism, which had at times posed a direct challenge to the rise of capitalism, as in the Populist revolt of the late nineteenth century, was channeled into conservative politics that preserved the sense of a spiritual revolution at the core of a countercultural identity, yet sanctified the dominant socioeconomic order. (128)

From the vantage point of 1980, the year that Reagan was elected with robust support from the Christian right, *Housekeeping* constructs an appraisal of postwar evangelical Christianity's liberal-conservative continuum: what Schäfer calls sixties "mystical meaning systems in which the unmediated experience of the divine was the primary way of constructing identity" (12) *and* the resulting conservative appropriation of such systems. It does so via a constellation of characters (the grandmother, Lucille, the townspeople, Sylvie) who symbolically invoke the ideologies that underpin evangelicalism's historical transformation, already present during the novel's early postwar setting. Most significantly, these characters situate Ruth's speculation as a nuanced alternative to their theology and its eventual politics.

Neoliberal Eschatology and Hippie Fervor

The novel provides a substantial amount of ethnographic information about Fingerbone and the domestic lives of its inhabitants – Christians who are largely white and lower-middle-class. We know that the town is home to a drugstore, dry-good store, and five-and ten (56-7); a fourth of July parade with representatives from both the white and Native American populations (176-7); the several churches with "zeal of the purest and rarest kind" (183); and "a tall red-brick junior high school ... named for William Henry Harrison" (known for his efforts toward settling the West),⁵¹ also described as "a square symmetrical building with high windows that had to be worked by long poles," where students "did elaborate multiplication and division, working on pulpy tablet paper with thick black pencils" (76). In other words, though it is encircled by woods and frightening natural disasters,⁵² the town aspires to middle-class order, perhaps most evident in the school's height, square-ness, symmetry, and insistence on rigor and substantiality (the paper is "pulpy," the pencils "thick").

Though few of its inhabitants come into detailed focus, Ruth and Lucille's grandmother – who dies early on in the novel, leaving them in the charge of her eccentric daughter Sylvie – is made to do considerable work in representing the tastes and concerns particular to Fingerbone as a lower-middle-class white town with aspiring bourgeois attitudes. Her life has consisted of "white shoes and braided hair and fried chicken and turned back bedclothes" (25); her friends are "very old, and fond of white cake and pinochle" (23); when she was raising her own daughters,

Her bread was tender and her jelly was tart, and on rainy days she made cookies and applesauce. In the summer she kept roses in a vase on the piano, huge, pungent roses, and when the blooms ripened and the petals fell, she put them in a tall Chinese jar, with cloves and thyme and sticks of cinnamon. Her children slept on starched sheets under layers of quilts, and in the morning her curtains filled with light the way sails fill with wind. (12)

This calm domestic sequence evinces a desire for order less adamant than the school's but equally marked. Just as she lives on the peripheries of the town (an isolation compounded by her traumatized status as a widow whose adult daughters go on to leave her), the grandmother seems to be a quieter echo of its tendencies. While the school is armed against the constant threat of weather and flooding ("surrounded on three sides by a hurricane fence," which, Ruth wryly conjectures, "had been placed there, perhaps to catch wind-borne paper bags and candy wrappers" [10]), the grandmother's life disciplines its surroundings in a highly symbiotic way. Baking projects temper the rain, the orchard's bounty ornaments the house in summer, generous bedding assuages the cold, and the curtains actually welcome light. Lucille inherits this set of concerns after the grandmother's death. Though she seems to accept Ruth's fascination with nature, for example, she clearly hopes it will take on a tidier form; as an adult, Ruth might like to be a botanist, she suggests (135). Moreover, Lucille's attitudes toward Ruth and Sylvie foreshadow those of Fingerbone, much as the grandmother seems to distantly orbit its practices. Like Lucille, more than it objects to any other form of neglect (of the house, hygiene, education, etc.), Fingerbone cannot abide by Sylvie and Ruth's willingness to merge their existence with the outside world – nature and transients alike. Ultimately, Lucille moves in with her home economics teacher, and the town decides to challenge Sylvie's guardianship in court.

If we understand Lucille and the grandmother as typical of Fingerbone, it seems that the ambition of rural living is a harmonious but domesticating relationship to nature. Details like the Chinese vase, presumably a keepsake of her late husband who was fascinated by East Asia, suggest a similar relationship with worlds other to this one; they are welcome, though only as manageable artifacts. Importantly, our knowledge of the grandmother's will corroborates this desire for a stable relationship to what is vast or unknown – beyond the confines of her individual subjectivity. As an aspiring bourgeois subject, she looks forward to the time when the procedures of her house will converge with larger economic ones; according to Ruth,

Since my grandmother had little income and owned her house outright, she always took some satisfaction in thinking ahead to the time when her simple private destiny would intersect with the great public processes of law and finance – that is, to the time of her death. All the habits and patterns and properties that had settled around her, the monthly check from the bank, the house she had lived in since she came to it as a bride, the weedy orchard that surrounded the yard on three sides where smaller and wormier apples and apricots and plums had fallen every year of her widowhood, all these things would suddenly become liquid, capable of assuming new forms. And all of it would be Lucille's and mine. (27)

That is, in the grandmother's class imaginary, her domestic efforts are wieldy instantiations of capital itself, which in its great "liquid" form corresponds to nature or the East as a grand but overwhelming other.⁵³ And this understanding is apparently of some comfort to her, insofar as it stabilizes her individual relationship to that other.

This story of what will happen to her assets also adopts the language of Christian eschatology: her "private destiny" will merge with a "great" one, "assuming new forms." An earlier passage is the

inversion of this semantic strategy. The grandmother's religious beliefs suggest the same desire for order that is evident in the description of her domestic economic practices:

[she] conceived of life as a road down which one traveled, an easy enough road through a broad country [...] one's destination was there from the very beginning, a measured distance away, standing in the ordinary light like some plain house where one went in and was greeted by respectable people and was shown to a room where everything one had ever lost or put aside was gathered together, waiting. (10)

Religious life, in other words, is a process of making one's straight way through messy territory, until a middle-class permanency begins to amass. The ultimate destination involves people who are "respectable" (an adjective with a distinctly class-sensitive flavor) and one's assets both lost and existent, now miraculously "gathered together." This eschatology is never explicitly named as an evangelical one. But in the imagination of this white, lower-middle-class, Christian woman, economic success, morality, and salvation all stew in the same juices, as they later do for the Word of Faith movement and similarly neoliberal evangelicalisms; one's wealth has an afterlife, and one's afterlife will have wealth, if certain practices are carefully observed.

It is a gross understatement to say that Sylvie's approach to both religion and the domestic – ushered into Ruth and Lucille's life when they fall under her care after their mother's suicide – has nothing to do with the customs of Fingerbone or the grandmother (from whom Sylvie has become estranged, living instead as a train-hopping transient). Even when she moves back into the house with Ruth and Lucille (after being summoned by a hapless pair of aunts who didn't wish to care for them), Sylvie maintains the habits of a transient, typified by the many details of her existence that Ruth provides: she sleeps in her shoes and clothes, keeps all her belongings in a cardboard box, and lives off leftovers and condiments listed in descriptive passages which formally resemble Ruth's ethnographies of her town and grandmother.⁵⁴ Perhaps as an instantiation of the latter's concealed trauma (that of an abandoned homemaker), Sylvie converts the parlor into a place to store empty cans and newspapers, and soon birds, cats, crickets, and dead leaves take up residence with her and the girls.

Any Christian beliefs that Sylvie may hold are at best erratically manifested, a characterization that nonetheless symbolically links her to experience-based, liberal evangelicalisms of the postwar period. More often she seems to intuit vague supernatural presences – for example, her notion that mysterious children live on the lake's islands and the woods surrounding it. She tells an incredulous Ruth, "Sometimes if I think I see smoke I go walking toward it, and now and then I'm sure there are children around me. I can practically hear them" (148). Unlike Ruth's carefully deliberated ideas of the metaphysical, Sylvie's passion for these fancies is intense but fleeting. Her impulsiveness is particularly evident when she rows Ruth out in the bitter cold on a stolen boat with next to no food for a chance at glimpsing the children, only to disappear when the two of them reach the collapsed house where the children supposedly live. Later on in the same episode, Sylvie and Ruth stay out on the lake all night for the chance to be underneath the bridge when a train passes, an event to which Sylvie suddenly attaches mystical significance. As the train finally does pass, she almost capsizes the boat by standing

up to greet it; “she combed her fingers through her hair and said something inaudible” and then “gestured at the bridge and the water with upturned hands” (167). Though none of these gestures come close to being markers of Christian faith, they do bear some resemblance to evangelical modes of the sixties. By Schäfer’s account, these modes “further domesticated traditional evangelical conversionism by emphasizing the experiential [...] aspects of Christianity” (12) – those that collaborate with the neoliberal individualism to which the lower middle class subscribes. Put differently, “experiential” evangelicalism obscures doctrine in favor of vaguely defined, mystical encounters with the divine that center the individual subject (12).

Sociologist Stephen Warner shows how such evangelicalism could even be an incidental outcome of hippie culture’s more eclectic religious cocktail (Schäfer 135). At one commune called “the Land” in Mendocino, California, nudity, free love, and psychedelic drugs were combined with an assortment of spiritual practices that included Tibetan Buddhism, Vedic Hinduism, and a Native American peyote cult (135). Warner writes that, “by 1971, some were even experimenting with Christianity” (135). By the spring of 1972, after a series of rapid changes in leadership and infrastructure, most of the members had converted, traditional gender roles were adopted in housework, and men became the leaders (135-6). All this suggests that the apparent world of difference between the grandmother’s neoliberal eschatology and Sylvie’s flighty spiritual moods might not be so vast after all: they exist at the ends of a continuum, along which the material world is mystically conjured or dispensed with, as it is in free market logic and the reactionary social agendas that often correspond to it.

Clearly Sylvie abets the spiritual, symbiotic relationship with nature that comes to replace Ruth’s discomfort in the town and form the basis of her theology. But the capriciousness of Sylvie’s projects and ideas even stretches Ruth’s sympathy, amounting to a complete separation from material and social conditions alike: hunger, cold, the need for company, and the law (as when she steals the boat or allows Ruth and Lucille to be truant). After the long, dark wait for the train to pass the boat on the lake, during which Sylvie remains indifferent to their uncomfortable conditions, Ruth asks in seeming exasperation, “Aren’t you cold, Sylvie?” (169). It becomes clear that Sylvie hasn’t even thought to go home, though returning was their purpose when they left the island.⁵⁵ Likewise, while Ruth’s meditations on the divine and the natural are careful, even belabored, an utter discontinuity characterizes Sylvie’s relation to both – as when she abandons Ruth on the island for no apparent reason but to go wandering alone. In a purely aesthetic economy, this whimsicality would be beautiful; in a material one, however, it is also of dubious responsibility⁵⁶ – like the Land’s wafting hippie fervor that too easily drifted towards reactionary social politics. A certain affinity also exists between Sylvie’s complete willingness to believe in her own stories, like that of the children in the woods,⁵⁷ and White’s specious “*your words create your world*,” which corroborates the seemingly odd proximity of their magical individualisms.

Though the idea of breaking with worldly circumstances is mesmeric – as much for Ruth as it was for the Land or for White’s followers – Ruth never accomplishes Sylvie’s total departure from material and social conditions.⁵⁸ Even if she ultimately joins Sylvie in train hopping, she continues to be haunted by memories of Fingerbone, the house, her mother, and Lucille (who lives in the cruel belief that her only family members are dead). Details of Ruth’s ethnographic project survive into the

two women's afterlife of sorts.⁵⁹ And this survival is a symbolic reprimand of Sylvie's individualism; against her aunt's literal escapism, Ruth's longings continue to seek a social context in which to rest her reflections, as they do throughout the novel. Despite her increasing isolation from the town, that is, these reflections revise, rather than abandon, Ruth's own race- and class- specific social reality.

Ruth's hybrid description

Shortly after Sylvie moves back into her mother's house and becomes Ruth and Lucille's guardian, a flood of biblical proportion submerges Fingerbone. Ruth describes its damage to various landmarks of the town, among them the library, "flooded to a depth of three shelves, creating vast gaps in the Dewey decimal system" (62). This quietly ironic example corresponds to the novel's central descriptive tension: just as natural disasters perpetually threaten to overcome Fingerbone's orderliness, Ruth's own attempts to document the town where she lives are interrupted by her speculative description, which only tentatively configures the mind's relation to nature and, by extension, the divine. Though critics have identified her cascading portrayals of the natural world with American Transcendentalism or Wordsworthian Romanticism,⁶⁰ I detect an important difference from both in Ruth's speculation, much as Hannes Bergthaller does. Unlike Bergthaller, however, I locate speculative description in Calvinist theology, via the tropes Ruth mobilizes and Robinson's later essays. And while Transcendentalism balloons away from its Christian origins into a more generic mysticism, singular to *Housekeeping* is the way Ruth's ethnographic depictions of the social reprocess her universalized epistemology. Mary Esteve notes a similar hybridity that she refers to as the novel's "double-stranded form" (225): the realistically portrayed social reality combined with an Emerson idealization of the spiritual over the material (239). In her reading, this combination is a specious conflation of the real and the imaginary, in which miraculous "transfiguration," Ruth and Sylvie's alleged magical thinking, functions as a regressive alternative to liberal values. But such a reading passes over both the novel's repurposing of the local religion and the highly provisional quality of Ruth's speculative description. Within this hybrid novelistic structure, in other words, what appears to be Transcendentalist thought becomes a private evangelical Protestantism – one that provides an imagined, white lower-middle-class alternative to the neoliberal Christianity of her grandmother and, by metonymic extension, the town.

If this epistemological approach is a distinctly Christian one, it also approximates midcentury secular critiques of rationality, in the way that Vincent Pecora has separately described. By staging such a critique in rural Idaho, however, *Housekeeping* makes its own comment about religion and social theory's shared skepticism toward purely rationalist epistemologies: that one need not study in Germany (like Edward of *Gilead*) to arrive at a way of knowing that circumvents both conservative evangelicalism and instrumental rationality – that is, rational thought naturalized as a politically neutral heuristic, and recruited to serve a market economy which is likewise assumed to be politically neutral. Put differently, Ruth finds her critical orientation to these ideologies via her own version of the Protestantism characteristic of her class, race, and location. And for this reason, she is something of a utopian alternative to actually existing Protestantisms – a woman who authentically belongs to, yet is critical of, the white, rural, lower-middle-class subject-position. Her depiction of this social identity as

one of universal value problematically casts whiteness and middle-class-ness as neutral categories. But in doing so, she also temporarily blurs the social real – enough to reimagine the political contours of its subjects.

When Ruth describes the town and its inhabitants – in a lucid way that rhymes with their common-sense orientation – she is most often documenting phenomena threatening to her and Sylvie’s existence (figuratively but also literally since Sylvie’s guardianship of Ruth is in jeopardy). And like her descriptions of the grandmother, whose life was also separate from Fingerbone yet far more aligned with its apparent values, Ruth’s documentation of the town relies on ethnographic detail. This strategy creates an ironic formal parallel between her methods and the town’s positivism, but nonetheless performs important work towards specifying the novel’s social world.⁶¹ Unlike Ruth and Sylvie’s disorderly home and overgrown orchard, First Street consists of “cottages and bungalows with swings on their porches and shady lawns” (106); the drugstore is where Lucille stages her conflict with Ruth’s slovenliness, over cokes and women’s magazines; and the school, detailed as I’ve already observed, is a vaguely menacing structure where Ruth often feels humiliated or exposed. Every townspeople who comes into brief focus is there to admonish her or Sylvie – most notably, the sheriff who comes to check on them: “a tall, fat man ... with his chin tucked in and his hands folded beneath his belly and all his weight on his heels... in a gray suit with hugely pleated pants and a jacket that was taut as upholstery in the back and upper arm” (176). Though he is deeply embarrassed to be paying two women a visit, his appearance suggests almost comic sturdiness antithetical to Ruth and Sylvie’s transient ways – not only when he turns up at the house, but also in the Fourth of July parade Ruth briefly recalls, where he appears “dressed in buck skins and tooled-leather boots and mounted on a broad, faded bay” with “an oversized flag that rested on his stirrup” (176). With these details, Ruth portrays the sheriff as a stereotypical settler,⁶² there to banish her and Sylvie’s less formidable life. Along with him, the school principal, home economics teacher, and “church women” (bearing casseroles, coffee cakes, and a generalized aversion to transience [178-9]) all emphatically oppose the two women’s erratic rhythms. They become more estranged successors to the grandmother’s somewhat peripheral status.

The natural world that surrounds Fingerbone, as other to its class- and race-specific beliefs, is where Ruth devotes her speculative description, and where her corresponding theology begins to take shape – distinct from the town’s yet still authentic to white lower-middle-class-ness. The landscape is often more bleak than it is hospitable, but Ruth’s descriptions of nature suggest a correspondence between her reflections and what she observes, never evident in her portrayals of Fingerbone’s prim attitudes and Christian “zeal” (a word that certainly connotes evangelical practice).⁶³ When she spends a summer night out by the lake with Lucille, for example, water that is sometimes sublime in her description becomes “almost viscous, membranous ... here things massed and accumulated, as they do in cobwebs or in the eaves and unswept corners of a house” (133). Like *their* house, this inlet “was a place of distinctly domestic disorder, warm and still and replete” (133). In this instance and others, the intelligibility of the landscape depends on its likeness to Ruth and Sylvie’s own ways of being – their private alternative to the town and grandmother’s aspiring-bourgeois attitudes, which, as I will demonstrate, is still born out of white lower-middle-class Protestantism.

In order to fully articulate this relation between the social and natural environments of *Housekeeping*, I must clarify the novel's intertextual stock in Transcendentalism: Ruth's narration marshals Transcendentalist thought via her speculative description and reconfigures it as a Protestant theology specific to the novel's context.⁶⁴ At various moments, she seems to align with Emerson's claim in "Nature" that "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (79),⁶⁵ as when she likens the glad tidings of evangelicalism to instances of ascension in nature:

It was perhaps only from watching gulls fly like sparks up the face of clouds that dragged rain the length of the lake that I imagined such an enterprise [her aunt Molly's missionary work] might succeed. Or it was from watching gnats sail out of the grass, or from watching some discarded leaf glimmering at the top of the wind. Ascension seemed at such times a natural law. If one added to it a law of completion – that everything must finally be made comprehensible – then some general rescue of the sort I imagined my aunt to have undertaken would be inevitable. For why do our thoughts turn to some gesture of a hand, the fall of a sleeve, some corner of a room on a particular anonymous afternoon, even when we are asleep, and even when we are so old that our thoughts have abandoned other business? What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally? (92)⁶⁶

Here descriptive detail (domestic objects like the sleeve or corner of the room), which is elsewhere put to ethnographic use in documenting the social, transforms into speculative description that metaphorically and very tentatively suggests Christian salvation; Ruth's theory of ascension as "natural law" is certainly reminiscent of Emerson's "natural facts" (like the movement of the gulls, gnats, and leaf) that symbolize "spiritual facts" (in this passage redemption or afterlife).⁶⁷ However, the several critics who find a resemblance between *Housekeeping* and Emersonian Transcendentalism also note how Ruth destabilizes the latter.⁶⁸ By Bergthaller's account, Ruth's reworking of Transcendentalist thought and tropes supplants the ecstasy of Emerson's famous "transparent eyeball" with a more melancholy version of the mind's relation to nature. Even in the relatively optimistic passage above, Bergthaller finds that the subjunctive mood ("perhaps," "seemed," "If [...] then") casts a spectre of doubt on Ruth's meditations – to the extent that they are no longer Emerson's "rigorous translation of material facts into spiritual facts" but rather "wishful thinking" (92). Though she treads a little heavily on the delicacy of Ruth's hesitation (since redemption remains an arresting, if not overtly Christian, possibility despite its unsettledness), Bergthaller is right to say that "something very important is missing, namely the faith in the mutual adequacy of the worlds of mind and matter which is the linchpin of Transcendentalist metaphysics – what Emerson called the 'sacred faith' in the permanency of nature's laws" (91).

But this difference from Emerson ultimately locates Ruth in a more identifiably Christian lineage, which becomes evident through subtle moments of correspondence with the tropes of Calvin's theology. Ray Horton has also noted the importance of Calvinism to Robinson's novelistic aesthetics, in particular the concept of nature as God's address to the human mind (122). For Horton, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Housekeeping* all hinge on a Calvinist phenomenology: the "conditions of possibility – what modes of seeing, perceiving, experiencing, and narrating – belief makes available" (121). In his

argument, *Housekeeping* “endows finite memory,” for example, Ruth’s recollections of her mother, “with what Robinson calls the ‘Calvinist wonder’ of religious vision” (131). His emphasis on the exhilaration of this vision, however, does not adequately consider the terror often characteristic of Ruth’s reflections, which contrasts with the relative hopefulness of the later novels’ experiential theology.

Among these reflections are the many images of characters attempting to move or gaze in darkness: Sylvie, Lucille, Ruth, and in one instance, a hypothetical woman of Ruth’s morbid reflections who may be her dead mother. While narrating her night out in the stolen boat with Sylvie, Ruth attempts to imagine how it would be to understand the cosmic order of things after one’s death, a discussion she arrives at very circuitously. As in the description of ascending objects, she has pulled away from the social world to theorize a relationship between the mind and the divine – but in an even more tentative mode, untethered from empirical events:

The only true birth would be a final one, which would free us from watery darkness [like her mother’s grave], but could such a birth be imagined? What is thought, after all, what is dreaming, but swim and flow, and the images they seem to animate? The images are the worst of it. It would be terrible to stand outside in the dark and watch a woman in a lighted room studying her face in a window, and to throw a stone at her, shattering the glass, and then to watch the window knit itself up again and the bright bits of lip and throat and hair piece themselves seamlessly again into that unknown, indifferent woman. (163)

This haunting contemplation is a shadow of the many instances in which Ruth looks at nature and hesitantly recognizes her belief in redemption.⁶⁹ The passage transpires in the most subjunctive of moods; it describes hypothetical images summoned by hypothetical thoughts. Instead of *seeing* the world from the safety of the house, as she does in earlier descriptions, Ruth *supposes* herself to be out in the night, looking in on a woman who stands at her former position. Symbolically, this imagined Ruth is in a kind of beyond, perhaps even dead, gazing back at a living, observing subject. Staring out at an obscure natural world, the woman finds her own face in the dark (as elsewhere Ruth finds her own beliefs in the landscape). After Ruth shatters the woman’s image – an act suggestive of another suicide – the shards of window “knit” themselves into the same image (like the fragments that might be “knit up finally” in her previous formulation). Ruth goes on to remark that such reassembly is “terrible” precisely because nothing changes; the image reproduces itself and remains impenetrable. And like these uncannily reassembled shards, human thoughts “will suffer no changing shock, no permanent displacement” in their transfiguration to the afterlife, but will rather “persist outside the brisk and ruinous energies of the world” (163). That is, subjective perception will extend into the opaque beyond, but how and to what end can only be configured in a disturbingly precarious way – which, in this example, is bound up with Ruth’s recollection of a near death experience.⁷⁰ As she says quite matter-of-factly a few pages later, “I wished utterly to be elsewhere” (165).

In this way, tenuous identity between the mind, natural world, and divine beyond survives Ruth’s darker moments; the connection is uneasy and unknown, troubling the optimism of her earlier descriptions, but it nonetheless forms the essence of her theology. In Bergthaller’s analysis, this

indecisiveness is an ameliorated atheism that leaves more definitive conclusions about nature to environmental science; the Emersonian correspondence between mind, nature, and divine is obtainable only in art or death (95-6) – Ruth’s “wishful thinking” or her mother and grandfather’s drownings, which literally merge them with the elements. In essays subsequent to *Housekeeping*, however, Robinson emphasizes that an unstable link between the mind and the divine is central to Calvinist theology, and often configured in the image of the mirror (which she claims Calvin may have borrowed from Marguerite de Navarre’s poetry [“Marguerite II” 218]):

[Calvin uses] the image of the mirror almost obsessively [...] to describe a state of being that is experiential, fluid, momentary and relational, and which reveals, without in any sense limiting or becoming identical with the thing revealed. In this sense, the natural world mirrors God, a human being mirrors God. (217-8)

The way Robinson describes the mirror trope has much in common with her complex scheme of Ruth looking at the woman who is looking at her face in the window, only to have it shattered by a stone. For Calvin, the mirror-like human mind fleetingly reveals God, while in Ruth’s speculation, human thoughts reach into a divine beyond that remains impenetrable; she imagines a death-like state from which she gazes at the woman – a position that should unveil metaphysical knowledge – yet the meaning of the woman’s image remains opaque.⁷¹ (If the novel portrays this relation less buoyantly, it still suggests fragile but existent contact between humanity and divinity.) Robinson goes on to note an analogous paradox in Calvin:

Heaven’s essence for him is that it is inconceivable in the world’s terms, another order of experience. This is true even though his conception of this world is utterly visionary. He says that while God is not to be seen ‘in his unveiled essence’ he ‘clothes himself, so to speak, in the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation [...] arrayed in the incomparable vesture of the heavens and the earth [...]’ (225)

Put differently, the natural world – figured in *Housekeeping*’s descriptive details as a private or even domestic retreat – so often prompts human beings to contemplate God, though as in the novel, divinity never fully reveals itself, remaining in menacing obscurity.⁷² As Bergthaller notes, this complex scheme is most readily intelligible as a kind of agnosticism. But both Robinson’s enduring interest in Calvin and Ruth’s engagement with Protestant tropes cast her deeply speculative mode as a markedly Christian exchange with the divine.

By mapping the speculative onto this Christian lineage, the novel moves Ruth away from Emerson’s generalized mysticism. As I have been suggesting, however, equally important to this project is the way Ruth’s ethnographically depicted social context situates her theology: the hybridity of her narration is precisely the way in which *Housekeeping* builds up its implicit social critique. Unlike the Transcendentalist subject who could anywhere, at any time, recognize his own correspondence with nature, Ruth comes to her reflections alongside – and at times in direct response to – ethnographic accounts of her aunt’s missionary work, her grandmother’s Christianity, Sylvie’s

whimsical spirituality, or the “church women” who want to stamp out transience with their good works. And while Ruth’s hesitancy in the face of “natural facts” might still be considered an amiable revision of Emerson, it more squarely contradicts Fingerbone’s metonymically constructed evangelicalism and positivism, ideologies which, as I’ve observed, often comingled in the postwar period (e.g. Word of Faith and other neoliberal sects).⁷³ While the former may be especially evident at the end of the novel (insofar as the church women’s visits directly precipitate Ruth and Sylvie’s flight from the town), the latter is more subtly implied by details like the spoiled Dewey Decimal System or the schoolchildren’s “elaborate multiplication and division.” Though Ruth’s speculative description of nature conflicts with the positivism lightly inflected in these examples, Robinson more boldly opposes it in her essays. For her, positivist accounts of the natural world are every bit as anthropocentric as spiritual understandings:

Holding to the old faith that everything is in principle knowable or comprehensible by us [via science] is a little like assuming that every human structure or artifact must be based on yards, feet, and inches. The notion that the universe is constructed, or we are evolved, so that reality must finally answer in every case to the [scientific] questions we bring it, is entirely as anthropocentric as the notion that the universe was designed to make us possible. (“Humanism” 14)

Fingerbone’s concern with orderliness and the church women’s implicitly conservative evangelicalism are consonant with the positivist “knowable or comprehensible” that Robinson admonishes. Elsewhere, she herself admits that, “positivist science, dominant among us, resembles pre-Reformation theology in its drive to unite all knowledge in one vocabulary of description” (“Givenness” 85). What Ruth puts into practice, by contrast, is a simultaneity of descriptive vocabularies – ethnographic, Transcendentalist, speculative – in a variety of moods, grammatical or otherwise.

I have observed that Ruth’s speculative mode does considerable work to specify her theology as a Protestant one, juxtaposed to her town’s evangelicalism. Yet as this mode reaches a pitch toward the end of the novel, it obscures the social context to the extent that her reflections drift back into Transcendentalist universalism; that is, they begin to seem more like those of a universal subjectivity than the thoughts of a lower-middle-class, Christian, white woman from rural Idaho, the identity suggested by her earlier ethnography.⁷⁴ As the house begins to decay and Ruth recoils almost entirely from the town, her attention turns more and more to nature, and her description becomes ever more speculative, until the impression of a realistic place nearly evaporates – true at various points in the novel, but most so just before Ruth and Sylvie flee the town. Long stretches of the tenth chapter are rather dark imaginings of the afterlife, presented as possibilities or associations – for example, the following gesture towards Ruth’s relatives who have drowned in Lake Fingerbone:

I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather’s, and that the lake’s heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother’s limbs and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight. There is remembrance, and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken. Curse and

expel them, send their children wandering, drown them in floods and fires, and old women will make sounds out of all these sorrows and sit in the porches and sing them on mild evenings. Every sorrow suggests a thousand songs, and every song recalls a thousand sorrows, and so they are infinite in number, and all the same. (193-4)

In this prose poem of sorts, it seems that Ruth's obsession with drowning as communion with family (and elsewhere with nature) has finally overcome her senses, such that even a sip of water evokes these dreamlike images. And in direct conflict with the particularizing function of her descriptions of the social real, here the deaths of her mother and grandfather open outward to universal ("human") truisms, in which every family's sorrows become "all the same."⁷⁵

Even at this late point in the novel, however, Ruth's is not quite the universal subjectivity we would find in Emerson, and, yet again, her reflections are far more speculatively proposed; ethnography resurfaces in the tenth chapter, but only as fragmented visions of what would have happened had Ruth's mother returned to the house instead of committing suicide. Fantasy is crosshatched with supposed actual memories:

Imagine that my mother had come back [to Fingerbone] that Sunday, say in the evening [...] say we had driven home [to Seattle] the whole night long, Lucille and I asleep on the back seat, cramped and aware of the chilly air that whistled through the inch of open window, diluting my mother's perfume and the smoke from her cigarettes. She might sing, 'What'll I do when you are far away,' or 'Love letters straight from your heart,' or 'Cottage for sale,' or 'Irene.' Those were her favorite songs. I remember looking at her from the back seat as we drove toward Fingerbone, the waves in the crown of her hair, the square shoulders of her good gray dress, her long hands at the top of the steering wheel, the nails gleaming deep red [...] We [Lucille and Ruth] fought and counted horses and cemeteries [...] We asked to stop at an ice-cream stand by the road in the woods and she stopped and bought us hot fudge sundaes. (196)

Though the specificity of her description remains the same throughout this passage, with the words "I remember," Ruth moves seamlessly from an imagined ride back from Fingerbone to their apartment in Seattle, to their actual trip from Seattle to Fingerbone, quietly pinning her visions back to their social context. In her reading of the wild strawberry image that appears both in diegetic reality and in Ruth's imaginings, Esteve notes a similar "fastening" of the two by which Ruth can "displace" the former with "her own version of the past" (240). But such fastening does more than recklessly collapse the social real into fantasy. In the above passage, for example, the near indistinguishableness of Ruth's descriptive modes – there and back, recalling and imagining – has two functions: it seems to deprioritize the social, questioning the viability of Ruth's ethnographic project. But also, and more subtly, it still binds her speculative mode to the white, lower-middle-class subject-position. Details of that identity infiltrate her often more universalist imaginings (car rides, hot fudge sundaes, manicured nails), an effect which corresponds to the structural hybridity I have been tracing: Ruth's alternation between visions of nature or the afterlife that present hers as a universal subjectivity, and the specificity of her own social identity.

The combination offers a specific instance of white middle-class-ness as a social vacuum in which metaphysical questions can be explored, forming it as a neutral subject-position much as Transcendentalism does. This move smacks of Barthes' claim that the petite bourgeoisie – utterly “unable to imagine the Other” who it reduces to “sameness” – aspires to the mythical neutrality of the bourgeoisie proper (151). Later in the same paragraph, his generic “Other” is racialized as a “Negro,” a move that betrays the crucial function of race in what Barthes defines as a question of class. He anticipates the assumed neutrality of whiteness, collaborative with the assumed neutrality of the middle classes, the “powerful position ... of ‘just’ being human,” as Richard Dyer puts it (2). Yet it is through this universalized, “human” perspective that Ruth's speculative description also contradicts two unexpected allies, characteristic of her town and her subject-position: conservative evangelicalism and instrumental rationality. Most importantly, her description does so via its unresolved but persisting engagement with a Protestantism indebted to evangelicalism's theological origins. In other words, the description's hybridity configures an orientation to the world that displaces conservative ideologies, and still relies on religious beliefs constitutive of white, rural, lower-middle-class subjectivity. This strategy is the novel's most problematic universalism and simultaneously its utopian edge – its mode of imagining a critical consciousness for the subjects of its pages. And just as the unsettledness of Ruth's speculative description leaves her theology in hesitant possibility, the utopia it instantiates remains fittingly hazy and provisional, in contrast to *Gilead*'s robust Protestant community.

I have thus far discussed *Housekeeping*'s politically double-edged narration as a set of descriptive or theological practices, but in constantly engaging metaphysical questions, these practices also construct an epistemology⁷⁶ – one that works against positivist or conservative ideologies in the ways previously discussed, and which resembles the critiques waged in Robinson's essays.⁷⁷ Despite their animosity to modernist assessments of religion and humanism,⁷⁸ at times the essays pass remarkably close to the rationality critique of mid-twentieth-century European theory. As I've already suggested, many of Robinson's claims past and recent could be lifted from Adorno and Horkheimer's central *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) or Marcuse's critiques of technology and progress in *The One Dimensional Man* (1964). Like them, Robinson objects to science deploying its methods as if they were neutral heuristic tools: “There is no art or discipline for which the nature of reality is a matter of indifference, so one ontology or another is always being assumed if not articulated” (“Humanism” 5). Moreover, she does not wish to question the methodology or undeniable achievements of science, but rather disparages scientific thought that “does not practice the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished” (“Human Nature” 2). And as I've previously noted, she acknowledges similarities in the totalizing functions of instrumental rationality and fundamentalist religion – in the spirit of Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that science now functions as myth once did.

For both Robinson and Adorno (a prepositional phrase perhaps no one would anticipate!), the way to overcome the anthropocentrism of the scientific method is to constantly situate it in a different epistemology. Very much like Adorno in his critique of the infamous “Kantian block” (which forecloses any contact with noumenal existence), *Housekeeping*, as I've repeatedly observed, wishes to reopen the possibility of non-rational thought. Adorno, of course, sees this potential in the dialectic;⁷⁹ Robinson, on the other hand, is unabashedly turning to the metaphysical in both her novels and essays.

What interests me is the continuity of these approaches, which by their own definitions and in the popular imagination are diametrically opposed – one adopting the social as its master category, the other, the divine. Contemporary post-secularist theories, however, have seen these epistemologies as dialectically intertwined. As Pecora formulates in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, post-Enlightenment society “never fully outgrows its desire for religious sources of coherence, solidarity, and historical purpose,” but rather “continually translates, or transposes, them into ever more refined and immanent, but also distorted and distorting, versions of its religious inheritance” (22). (He cites Adorno making an analogous claim about secular art: that its attempt to eliminate its own “inherent claim to represent something absolute” only sustains the aesthetic “spell” or “halo of uniqueness” [19].)⁸⁰ By situating its rationality critique in rural Idaho, *Housekeeping* makes its own comment about the proximity of theology and secular criticism: that Christian belief endemic to the white lower middle class can also produce an epistemology that undermines instrumental rationality and conservative religion alike. We might even say that Ruth is counterfactual: an unrealized possibility of the shifts and tremors in postwar Christian identity.⁸¹

Certainly the most apparent potential of Ruth’s epistemology is the possibility of reorienting white lower-middle-class consciousness vis-à-vis instrumental rationality and the market economy it sustains. But Ruth and Sylvie’s tentative affinity with the racialized others of Fingerbone subtly echo David Roediger’s historical argument in *The Wages of Whiteness* – that American class and race politics have always been intensely collaborative and self-sustaining; whites in economic precarity have declined class-based solidarity with People of Color in order to receive the social and economic protections of whiteness. By extension of this logic, if working- or lower-middle-class whites refused whiteness as a racial construct, they could emerge as both class-conscious and anti-racist subjects. Though Sylvie and Ruth undoubtedly benefit from white settlement in Idaho, it is no coincidence that their transient status sometimes aligns with that of displaced ethnic minorities: Alma, presumably a Latina woman, who was Sylvie’s fellow transient (88-9), and an elderly Native American woman whom they meet while squatting in a boxcar (172). The encounter with the latter is very brief, but she and Sylvie enjoy an immediate understanding; Ruth recalls how the woman sizes her up and tells Sylvie “She’s gettin’ growed,” to which Sylvie replies “She’s a good girl” and the woman rejoins “Like you always said” (173). Here the novel draws an analogy between Fingerbone’s relations with the Native American woman – metonymic of a displaced population – and its intolerance of Ruth and Sylvie’s transient existence. Just as the woman’s ancestors were driven from this area, so the town’s anxieties threaten to overcome Ruth and Sylvie.⁸² The two women’s distance from Fingerbone’s neoliberal orientation, in other words, produces a fleeting alliance with two Women of Color – a quiet reversal of the ways in which the market economy has sustained the racism of lower-class whites, and a shadowy outcome of *Housekeeping*’s anti-neoliberal politics.

In recruiting Ruth for this implicit critique, the novel also confronts a problematic Leftist belief: that alternatives to reactionary ideologies can never arise from what Edward calls the backwater. Through her, I have argued, the novel offers a utopian vision of a class, race, and religious identity that once had subversive potential but was coopted by neoliberal economics and a reactionary social agenda. This is in part the alleged Calvinist beautification of evangelical history.⁸³ But it is also a much-

needed exploration of the ways that evangelical Protestantism could have posed challenges to instrumental rationality in its contemporary forms – and still might.

‘WITH HER LITTLE FINGER STICKING OUT’: ETHNOGRAPHY AS A RACE AND CLASS
RELATION IN ALICE WALKER

Though Alice Walker’s protagonists are most often, and like her, black women from Southern sharecropping families, her fiction also has much to reveal about both lower-middle-class-ness and whiteness. Her own trajectory from a childhood in rural Georgia to the position of writer, activist, and public intellectual deeply inflects her work. *The Third Life of Copeland Grange* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976), her first and second novels, trace similar socio-economic ascent – that of individual protagonists and of their families across several generations. One of *Copeland Grange*’s first reviews, in the Boston-area *Bay State Banner*, praised Walker’s “poignant [...] relating of the lives of black women, who were ready and strong and trusted, only to so often be abused by the conditions of their oppressed lives” (Qtd. in White 188). But the combination of suffering, resilience, and social mobility proved intolerable to Josephine Hendin, a white critic for the *Saturday Review* who opened her article on *Copeland Grange* with the following question: “Can one still shed tears for blacks of the lower middle class? Is their misery too ordinary, their suffering too quiet to arouse the compassion of an age addicted to extremes of violence?” (188-99). (Walker responded with the quip, “Can Josephine Hendin really express such mid-Reconstruction condescension and be taken seriously ...?” [189].) What Hendin finds most objectionable is the fictional politicization of lower-middle-class characters, which she deems clichéd and unrealistic, doubting that “any man’s soul [has] ever been healed by politics” (189).

Though Hendin’s assessment is bound up with a paternalistic fetishizing of black suffering, elsewhere Walker’s own view of lower-middle-class blackness is equally pessimistic. The protagonist of “Source” (1981), a black woman named Irene who teaches in a government-funded literacy program, voices this pessimism, shared by many of Walker’s activist contemporaries. Reflecting on her white students, Irene observes that:

When white people reach a certain level of poverty (assuming they were not members of the Klan, or worse, which they very often were), they ceased to be ‘white’ to her. Like many of her quasi-political beliefs, however, she had not thought this through. She was afraid to, and this was one of the many failings in her character. If she thought this through, for example, she would have to think of what becomes of poor whites when (if) they became rich [...] and what becomes of blacks when they become middle class; she was already contemptuous of the black middle class. In fact, for its boringly slavish imitation of the white middle class, which she considered mediocre in its tiniest manifestations, she hated it. And yet, technically, she was now a part of this class. (144)

This quotation – like much of Walker’s oeuvre, as I will suggest – tracks the interlocking relationship between whiteness and social ascent, rendered inseparable but not equivalent. And though Berlin,

Carver, and Robinson more directly thematize lower-middle-class whiteness, Walker's character systems usefully abstract it from the individual white subject. In Irene's reflections, for example, whiteness dissipates from her poor students, only to reconstitute itself when they enter the middle class, regardless of their racial identity.

More insidiously, however, whiteness seems also to have breached Irene's own logic. Well before she announces that she is now part of the middle class, we sense her distance from poverty in the languor of the "quasi-political beliefs" that she hasn't yet bothered to work out, for fear that they would implicate both her work and her own identity. Even her assessment of this fear as a character flaw rather than a class-motivated condition subtly evinces a deracinating universalism, not unlike Hendin's in her unfavorable review. If black subjects become affluent enough, Hendin implies, they enter a race-free sphere as her social equivalents and are therefore unworthy of her interest. Irene finds the same to be true of the black middle class, yet refuses to acknowledge her own participation in their alleged race treason. What Irene cannot admit here, the narrative later concretizes when she becomes a well-off educational consultant and her good friend Anastasia, a lighter-skinned black woman, decides to pass as white. (The name Irene itself is one she shares with the protagonist of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*.)

Particular to Walker's engagement with passing is the importance of lower-middle-class-ness as the threshold across which one leaves black identity for the social benefits of assumed whiteness. Moreover, crossing the threshold can happen in two ways: what Irene calls the "boringly slavish imitation of the white middle class," often manifest in domestic behaviors of newly affluent characters, and in the reluctance of black intellectuals and activists, like Irene, to admit their own remoteness from poverty and working-class interests. In the latter instance, assumed whiteness is not simply reducible to upward mobility, as the rest of this chapter will make evident; rather, relations between intellectuals and the other black characters provocatively recapitulate the colonial paternalism of Euro-American culture vis-à-vis the Global South, a history conjured by the stories' ethnographic form. In developing this argument, I deliberately alternate between the lexicon of Marxist and postcolonial theory because I believe Walker's form (also deliberately) grafts class politics onto colonial history.

Though lower-middle-class-ness is the threshold of assumed whiteness, I will propose that the social liminality of Walker's black lower-middle-class characters also allows her to depict a political alternative to the black nationalist movement, with which she continually butted heads in the sixties and seventies. Walker's reception history has duly noted her critique of the patriarchal functions of black nationalism. I will suggest, however, that equally important is her provocative figuration of the movement as aligned with the colonizing functions of Euro-American ethnography in its relation to working- and lower-middle-class blacks. The black lower-middle-class woman has a subversive function in this colonial relationship – a hybrid subject who, in her encounter with black nationalism, absorbs and reprocesses its strategies, elaborating an alternative decolonial politics.

Unlike the other fiction of my dissertation, the ethnographic description of Walker's stories self-consciously references the history of anthropology as a field deeply embedded in the Western colonial project. As in *Housekeeping*, ethnographic notations of the lower middle class invoke a positivist tradition and then ultimately succumb to a different narrative mode – one motivated by religious thought endemic to that subject position, as I will discuss. This narrative hybridity, which

correlates to the hybrid lower-middle-class black position, disrupts the description's ethnographic function. But in doing so, it also approximates decolonial experiments within the discipline of anthropology during both the modernist and postmodernist periods. Recurrently, lower-middle-class black women, in their race-class liminality (and perhaps in their gender) are the characters who occasion this transformation in the narrative. Their radicalization assigns decolonial potential to a subject-position that, according to Walker herself, collaborates with the logic of whiteness.

Walker's deep investment in anti-racism, both in her work and her activism from the sixties through the eighties, makes her more recent expressions of antisemitism all the more baffling and disappointing, in particular her endorsement of David Icke's anti-Semitic work of New Age conspiracism in a 2018 *New York Times* interview. Over the past decade, her own thinking has tended toward the New Age, making it possible for her to speak, in the same interview, of "Shakti" and "the quality of energetic feminine connectivity with life that means inevitable change." This kind of magical thinking risks an irrational politics, in which it becomes possible to think of Icke's *And the Truth Shall Set You Free* as an imaginative work of social inquiry. It seems that Walker has let her fascination with the supernatural, already evident the works discussed in this chapter, drift toward these dangerous conclusions. Without disregarding this outcome, I would like to bring attention to the way she ties the imaginative to vital questions of social justice in several short stories of the seventies and eighties.

Mules and Men and the History of Ethnography

Walker did not discover Zora Neale Hurston until well into her career; she writes, however, that "I became aware of my need of [...] Hurston's work some time before I knew it existed" (*Mothers' Gardens* 83). This time was 1970, when she was writing stories that would become the collection *In Love and Trouble* (1973), among them "Everyday Use" and "Her Sweet Jerome." Though Walker's immediate "need" of Hurston was for research on Southern Black voodoo practices, I suggest that the narrative fabric of *In Love and Trouble* owes much more to Hurston's studies of folklore.⁸⁴ In the stories I will examine here, working- and lower-middle-class black characters seize control of an ethnographic narration with strategies that resemble those of the Southern black folklore in Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935): an amalgam of Christian, pagan, European, and African tropes. But the affinity between Walker's stories and Hurston's work exceeds this initial resemblance. I argue that the apparently hybrid structure of the stories, ethnography which succumbs to folklore, borrows from the immanent hybridity of Hurston's ethnographic position – at once northern anthropologist and black Southerner, documenter and creator, narrator and character within the social world she attempts to record.⁸⁵ Just as *Mules and Men* troubles ethnography's historical collaboration with imperialist appropriations of the other,⁸⁶ analogous narrative structures in Walker's stories open similar possibilities of critique. By destabilizing their ethnographic point of view – rendering it hybrid, or at times multiple – the stories construct characters of a similarly hybridized race-class identity, one that proves to have an emancipatory function within the diegetic world. "Everyday Use" assigns this function to a black sharecropper; "Her Sweet Jerome," on the other hand, reveals that the mixed identifications of lower-middle-class black subjects – unfavorably depicted elsewhere in Walker's oeuvre – have the same emancipatory potential.

When Hurston became Franz Boas's student of anthropology (and the only black student at Barnard College), she was entering a discipline grafted onto the colonial history of both Europe and the United States. Risa Applegarth recounts how, in the British tradition, nineteenth-century study relied on the fieldwork of "colonial administrators, missionaries, traders, and adventurers" (6) – an arrangement recapitulated by twentieth-century Oxford and Cambridge degree programs in anthropology, designed for "colonial civil servants" (Kuklick qtd. in Applegarth 6). After World War I, changes in the French administration and academy led to similar relationships between anthropologists and "colonial figures" (Sibeud qtd. in Applegarth 6). Moreover, both European and American anthropology undergirded "mapping and collecting projects that shared both institutional and epistemic underpinnings with colonialism," like British anthropologists A.C. Haddon and W.H.R. Rivers who led the 1898 Torres Straits Expedition (Applegarth 6-7). All of these efforts were motivated by a common Eurocentric, pro-modernist ideology: as Applegarth puts it, "widespread intellectual investment in the belief that modernity naturally and inevitably supplanted premodern societies and practices contributed urgency to the ambitious projects of collection that enabled anthropologists to fill museums and pages of their journals" (7). In the American context, these full "museums and pages" were devastating for indigenous communities. But what Vine Deloria Jr. characterizes as the "burying" of Native American culture "beneath the mass of irrelevant information" (Qtd. in Applegarth 7) approximates the sociological treatment of African Americans that W.E.B. Du Bois describes in 1900: "so much of the work [...] is notoriously uncritical; uncritical from lack of discrimination in the selection and weighing of evidence; uncritical in choosing the proper point of view [...] and, finally, uncritical from the distinct bias in the minds of so many writers" (77).

Walker's 1976 protagonist, Meridian, of her novel by the same name, registers the proximity of these two communities' fates at the hands of social science, in its collaboration with an ongoing colonial project. After her Southern city reclaims a Native American burial site on her father's farm as "Sacred Serpent Park," blacks are not allowed in until "long after [his] crops had been trampled into dust" (52). In effect, both communities lose their land by the same appropriative stroke, which reiterates the nineteenth-century violence of slavery and the settlement of indigenous land. The narration of these events is bound up with Meridian's memory of a visit to "the Capital's museum of Indians," where she sees "the bones of a warrior, shamelessly displayed, dug up in a crouched position and left that way, his front teeth missing, his arrows and clay pipes around him. At such sights she experienced nausea at being alive" (52). The generic nature of Meridian's disgust – she too is implicated in the warrior's position – gestures at the complex historical relations of blacks and Native Americans invoked by the novel. Yet her empathy with the warrior also relies on their shared history of subjection to cultural appropriation.

When Walker went looking for studies of black voodoo practices of the 1930s, she found an archive as "shameless" as the warrior's display, and useless in the same way Du Bois describes the earlier sociological one: "A number of white, racist anthropologists and folklorists of the period had, not surprisingly, disappointed and insulted me. They thought blacks inferior, peculiar, and comic, and for me this undermined, no, *destroyed*, the relevance of their books" (*Mothers' Gardens* 83). Her account is consistent with recent histories of interwar American anthropology, which was attempting to shore

up its reputation as a legitimate scientific discipline (Applegarth 3). This attempt to render the discipline more objective only maintained its historical colonial impetus. As Applegate formulates,

scientific discourse systematically constitutes its objects of knowledge *as objects*, subject to the scientist's superior control and understanding; consequently, scientific knowledge practices and institutions still perpetuate gendered and racist social formations and help to secure the material and epistemic privileges enjoyed by white, male, Euro-American elites. (Applegarth 14)

Walker and anthropology itself went in search of alternatives to this discourse around the same time. Studies questioning anthropology's allegedly objective presentation of the cultural other emerged in the early seventies, alongside poststructuralism's more general critique of positivistic discourses.⁸⁷ As described in my introduction, this new concern extended into the next decades, taking aim at the discipline's central methodology: ethnography. In the introduction to James Clifford's edited volume, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), for example, he announces that "Ethnography in the service of anthropology once looked out at clearly defined others, defined as primitive, tribal, or non-Western, or pre-literate, or non-historical – the list, if extended, soon becomes incoherent. Now ethnography encounters others in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other" (23).⁸⁸

More recent scholarship, however, dates the same reconceptualization of ethnography to a much earlier generation of anthropologists, many of them women and People of Color working on the discipline's fringes in the modernist period.⁸⁹ And the hero of this alternative history is often the same ethnographer to whom Walker turned: Hurston. Daphne LaMothe locates Hurston among a modernist cohort, including Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, and Katherine Dunham, who by her account:

shuttle continually between the inside and outside of the cultures they observed. Their resistance to an ethnographic authority based solely on scientific detachment and an absolute assurance of the boundaries between the observer and the observed anticipates poststructuralist critiques of such anthropological conventions, making these individuals – who are to this day frequently dismissed as amateur or failed anthropologists – innovators in the field. (15-16)

In *Mules and Men*, this shifting "between the inside and outside" begins in the introduction. There Hurston writes that "the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive" (2), casting immediate doubt on the availability of her ethnographic object.⁹⁰ Yet in the next sentence, a seamless shift in pronouns allows Hurston to include herself in this evasiveness: "You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, 'Get out of here!' We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing" (2).⁹¹ And when she begins to report this sentiment in the dialect that characterizes the rest of the book's folklore, she remains implicated;

the theory behind our tactics: 'The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.' (3)

As Lamothe observes, "the reader wonders if the speaker is the informant or the ethnographer [...] The answer, of course, is that Hurston is both native informant, by virtue of her racial identity and place of origin, and ethnographer, by virtue of her training" (2).⁹² This hybridity in Hurston's ethnographic point of view persists as she narrates her trips to Eatonville, Polk County, and Georgia, and the "lies" (the tellers' term for their own stories) that she hears there; often she renders herself a character speaking their dialect at the gatherings, dances, and parties where these "lies" are exchanged. Kevin Meehan suggests that in constructing her text this way, Hurston is "manipulating [ethnography] away from a tendency to represent native populations as exotic and dependent Others" – a decolonizing move that also admits Hurston's own implication in anthropology's imperialist underpinnings (Qtd. in LaMothe 143).

I find an additional decolonizing function in the hybridity of Hurston's ethnographic position: in choosing this representational methodology, she is borrowing from the similarly hybridized form of the "lies" themselves. As she writes of one gathering on the Eatonville store porch,

Some of the stories were the familiar drummer-type of tale about two Irishmen, Pat and Mike, or two Jews as the case might be. Some were the European folk-tales undiluted, like Jack and the Beanstalk. Others had slight local variations, but Negro imagination is so facile that there was little need for outside help. A'nt Hagar's son, like Joseph, put on his many-colored coat an paraded before his brethren and every man there was a Joseph. (19-20)

Just as Hurston's form alternates between "native informant" and "ethnographer," the "many colored" coats of the Josephs throughout *Mules and Men* patch together a variety of discourses and positionalities. Stories that take up explicitly Christian themes, for example, rely just as much on local landscape, voodoo practices,⁹³ or folkloric tropes ("You know de hawk and de buzzard was settin' up in a pine tree one day, so de hawk says: 'How you get yo' livin', Brer Buzzard?' 'Oh Ah'm makin' out pretty good, Brer Hawk. Ah waits on de salvation of de Lawd'" [117].) Hurston describes this multiplicity as "the Bible [...] made over to suit our vivid imagination" (3): within such stories, "Brer Fox, Brer Deer, Brer 'Gator, Brer Dawg, Brer Rabbit, Ole Massa and his wife were walking the earth like natural men way back in the days when God himself was on the ground and men could talk with him" (3). In this way, the Southern blacks she documents are recasting the religious tradition to which their ancestors assimilated under European colonialism, to carve out a place for their own social world. Put differently, Hurston's own de-colonizing project takes as its object a culture with its own decolonial literary tradition.

In accordance with this decolonial function, many episodes of the Bible "made over" explicitly thematize race relations. One told by Jim Presley in Polk County explains why blacks are made to work for whites. "God let down two bundles 'bout five miles down de road," and a white man and

black man race toward them. (74) The black man arrives first and chooses the larger bundle, leaving the smaller one to the white man. But when they open the bundles, the black man's contains a pick and shovel, the white man's a pen and ink. Since then the black man "been out in de hot sun, usin' his tools and de white man been sittin' up figgerin'" (75). This story and others like it (a separate account of why blacks work for whites [74], the tale of how "de colored folks" became black [29-30]) follow the generic conventions that Hurston names ("God himself was on the ground and men could talk with him"). But their narratives also concretize the function of such revisions to the biblical story: making sense of the racist world in which Southern blacks lived, without assigning their race the inferior place it occupied in white Euro-American thought.

In both her fiction and essays, Walker has had a longstanding preoccupation with aspects of Southern black culture that, like the stories of *Mules and Men*, seek to reconcile Christianity with black history and practices. Her identification with the Bible stems from affinities between the life of Jesus and the historical plight of African-Americans in their struggle for liberation:

Everybody loved Jesus Christ. We recognized him as one of us, but a rebel and revolutionary, consistently speaking up for the poor, the sick, and the discriminated against, and going up against the bossmen: the orthodox Jewish religious leaders and rich men of his day. We knew that people who were really like Jesus were often lynched. I liked his gift for storytelling. I also loved that, after Moses and Joshua, he is the greatest magician in the Bible. He was also, I realized later, a fabulous masseur, healing by the power of touch and the laying-on of hands. Much later still I learned he could dance! This quote from the Acts of John, from the Gnostic Gospels, is worth remembering: "To the Universe belongs the dancer. He who does not dance does not know what happens. Now if you follow my dance, see yourself in me." (*Everything We Love* 18)

By this account, the New Testament converges with many features of the culture that Hurston represents: storytelling, voodoo-like healing practices, dancing, and a subversive relationship to "bossmen" (identified as orthodox Jews and "rich men," an example of the anti-Semitism which many consider typical of Walker's thought). Elsewhere, Walker configures Christian doctrine as equally compatible with the natural world, as it often is in *Mules and Men*. She refers to her own spiritual practice as born-again paganism, reconciled with "my pagan African and Native American ancestors, who were sustained by their conscious inseparability from Nature prior to being forced by missionaries to focus all their attention on a God 'up there' in 'heaven'" (*Same River* 37). For Walker, that is, understanding Christianity as continuous with historical African or African-American culture is a politicized act – one that integrates the postcolonial reality of African-Americans with indigenous religious traditions.

Figures throughout Walker's oeuvre accordingly meld Christian symbolics with the natural. In "My Daughter Smokes," for example, she writes that "Maybe sowing a few seeds of tobacco in our gardens and treating the plant with the reverence it deserves, we can redeem the tobacco's soul and restore its self-respect" (123-24). She longs to free tobacco from both its historical association with plantations and the way it is currently made to "enslave" smokers like her own adult daughter (123-

24). Kimberly Ruffin reads this passage as “the Christian language of redemption combin[ed] with a paganistic reverence for the plant world. By applying a liberation theology to [tobacco] Walker encourages readers to think seriously about the relationships they form with nonhuman nature” (106). Ruffin has in mind the potential for “human beings [to] express religiosity” in such a relationship (106), but equally important its role in negotiating postcolonial reality: the aftermath of tobacco plantations, but also Christianity’s enduring place in African-American culture. Within Walker’s metaphor, a plant subjected to a kind of slavery, and suggestive of the slaves themselves, might be liberated by way of a religion historically forced on African slaves by their colonizers. An emancipatory epistemology, here and elsewhere in Walker’s thought, turns toward this cultural hybridity in African-American culture: the same hybridity characteristic of Hurston’s ethnography, in the folklore it relates and in its ethnographic point of view. As I’ve suggested, Hurston herself embraces a colonial anthropological tradition, analogous to the Christian one that Walker adopts. Moreover, through her ethnography, Hurston admits her own implication in that colonial practice and, in doing so, remakes it – just as Walker’s work refashions Christian redemption.⁹⁴

In my readings of “Everyday Use” and “Her Sweet Jerome,” I will argue that Walker stages an ethnographic point of view which becomes hybridized in the mode of *Mules and Men*, borrowing from both the folkloric “Bible remade” and its formal echoes in Hurston’s shifting ethnographic position. In the first instance, the narrator-protagonist, Mama, reverses the authority of her educated daughter, Dee, through a point of view that approximates Hurston’s “inside and outside” ethnography; while in the latter, the protagonist overcomes her ethnographic treatment by the third-person narration, which dissolves into amalgamation of Christian and folkloric tropes as she gains agency in the narrative. Provocatively, however, both protagonists are undermining the cultural authority of black characters strongly identified with black nationalism, the prevailing ideology of contemporary liberation movements. In the stories’ symbolic schemes, the position of these educated, black nationalist characters recapitulates the historical relationship of domination between white ethnographers and Southern blacks (not to mention anthropology’s longer colonial history). This ironic analogy between black nationalism and colonialism – the very ideology it wishes to reverse – becomes a highly polemical way for Walker to fashion an alternative politics of liberation based in hybridity, Homi Bhabha’s answer to nationalist conceptions of identity. But unlike Bhabha, Walker is more specifically exploring hybridity’s potential vis-à-vis an ethnographic positionality: a hybrid ethnographer is one of multiple identifications, discursive practices, and perspectival vantage points, who is both observer and informant. In her more canonical story, “Everyday Use,” working-class characters are the lynchpin of such a politics. In “Her Sweet Jerome,” however, the protagonist’s lower-middle-class blackness – though at the outset fully assimilated to whiteness and aspiring-middle-class interests – proves capacious and mobile enough to inhabit this hybridity, through which Walker begins to imagine a decolonial politics.⁹⁵

‘Inside and Outside’ Ethnography in ‘Everyday Use’

“Everyday Use” presents two ethnographers: Mama, who narrates the story’s events, and Dee, her college-educated daughter, returned for a visit, who obsessively photographs the family home.

The story wastes no time in establishing a dramatic contrast between them: like Walker's older sister, Molly, and later Walker herself, Dee has left home, while Mama stayed in Georgia with Maggie; Dee reads texts inscrutable to her family, Mama quilts and farms; and perhaps most significantly, while her mother attends church and watches Johnny Carson, Dee has rejected all traces of white culture, adopting the dress and practices of her African ancestors alongside her new Muslim partner. The most notable instantiation of this change is her adopted African name, Wangero, which she announces to Mama and Maggie upon arrival at their house, located in the middle of a pasture. "What happened to 'Dee'?" Mama asks; Dee answers, "She's dead [...] I couldn't bare it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me" (53), explicitly aligning herself with the decolonial ideology of contemporary black nationalist movements.

The story's critical reception has revolved around the betrayal evident in this response; in choosing Africa, her education, her husband, Dee has left Mama and Maggie behind, both literally and culturally. Critics have explained this change as a kind of vanity or faddishness, invoking Dee's childhood interest in clothes, the many photos she takes before even kissing her mother, and her greedy desire for old family possessions which are now apparently *à la mode*. "I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table," she remarks, "and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher" (56).⁹⁶ Dee is engaged in a sort of cultural tourism, their argument goes, hoping to bring back tastefully authentic artifacts from her trip South.⁹⁷ Nancy Tuten describes this dynamic as a more willful exploitation on Dee's part: her education has "equipped [her] to oppress and manipulate others and isolate herself" (125).

What these readings miss is the story's configuration of Dee as not only a generic oppressor, come to dominate Mama and Maggie, but both an ethnographer and participant in a colonizing project – despite her own insistence that her choices are self-consciously decolonial. Her fascination with the family's household objects is without a doubt aesthetically motivated; as Mama puts it, "everything delighted her," even old benches that Dee now finds "lovely" because "You can feel the rump prints" (55). Equally important, however, is Dee's urge to document a world positioned as utterly foreign to her and her partner (who shares the "doctrines" of neighboring black Muslim farmers, yet claims that "farming and raising cattle is not my style" [55]). Mama recounts how Dee "lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering beside me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard she snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house" (53). Mama's description invokes a vocabulary of artistic composition (Dee "lines up" the pictures); but more marked is Dee's urge to record a particularized social context, now quite different from her own – even undiscovered since it is not the home where she grew up (the old house burned in a fire that scarred Maggie).

This symbolic scheme, which positions Dee as an ethnographer, provocatively locates her alongside the very ideology she wishes to overcome: whiteness. David Cowart's assessment of Dee admits as much; in her desire for the household objects, Dee "wants, in short, to do what white people do with the cunning and quaint implements and products of the past [...] only to preserve that heritage as the negative index to her own sophistication" (175). But Cowart stops short of explicating the colonial function of this desire, analogous to anthropology's historical belief in the supremacy of Euro-American modernity over "primitive" cultures. This function is more evident in Toni Cade Bambara's

short story, “Blues Ain’t No Mockingbird” (1971), published two years before “Everyday Use” with a strikingly similar plot. In “Mockingbird,” two white county workers come to photograph a Southern black family, whose “Granny” wastes no time in letting the men know they are unwelcome. The workers’ self-proclaimed mission is to document the family’s garden, in order to suggest that the county food stamp program is unnecessary. But the narrator registers this ethnographic project as a colonial one, just as “Granny” seems to do; the men “talk secret like they was in the jungle or somethin and come upon a native that don’t speak the language” (6). And in fact, the purpose of the men’s photography is to render the family other to the state’s concern, locating them in a more primitive economy. Though Dee’s intention is to overcome white oppressors like these county workers, her jarring arrival, photographs, and interest in Mama and Maggie’s now exotic belongings position her alongside their colonial purpose.

The resemblance between Dee and the white county workers is not a merely symbolic one, insofar as her visit proves to be traumatic for, even exploitative of, her sister and mother. Maggie is “trembling” and sweating from the start (52). Dee instructs Mama to stay seated, not wanting her to inconvenience her “stout” body (52); yet this coercive benevolence renders Mama the perfect, static subject of her daughter’s photographs. In other words, Dee is not only a voyeur, but one whose distance from her own family constructs them as the passive objects of cultural appropriation. The violence of this appropriation becomes more apparent in the story’s climactic moment, when Dee is “rifling” through Mama’s trunk (57). By the time Dee has two quilts in hand and is backing away from Mama, “They already belonged to [Dee]” (57); she has in effect pillaged from the culture of two women now decidedly other. Put differently, in assimilating to a culture and ideology outside the one from which she came, Dee has reproduced the colonial structure that black nationalism seeks to undo.⁹⁸

Her new orientation to her mother and sister, as a college-educated black nationalist returned home to her working-class origins, bears a highly ironic resemblance to the black subject educated in France and returned to the Antilles in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952): this subject “feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him [...] or that he no longer understands it” (14). Fanon details two responses to such alienation: the educated black “congratulates himself [...] and enlarging the difference, the incomprehension, the disharmony, he finds in them the meaning of his real humanity,” or alternatively, he longs for his old sense of belonging in his colonized home (14). Dee’s complex position as an educated black nationalist returned to the South spans both attitudes. Though it is the latter, belonging, that she wishes to recover, albeit in a different postcolonial context, she feels the pride of the former attitude, rejoicing in the difference between her new “enlightened” practices and those of her origins. And in this way, the pleasure she finds in documenting Mama and Maggie recalls anthropology’s self-satisfaction in its encounter with the cultural other.

Yet by relishing her own difference, she falls into the same “complex” to which Fanon’s nostalgic black is subject, “renounc[ing] the present and future in the name of a mystical past” (14); and the “present and future” Dee renounces are the social reality of her mother and sister. As a result, her African name and adornments function like the European habits of educated blacks that Fanon describes. He quotes a study in *The African Today* to detail this comportment via the African context analogous to the Antilles:

The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (Westermann qtd. in Fanon 25)

Mama experiences Dee's clothes, phrases, and "social intercourse" as "bombastic" indeed. Her yellow and orange dress "is so loud it hurts my eyes [...] I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out"; her gold earrings and noisy bracelets collaborate with this effect, as does her new hairstyle, "stand[ing] straight up like the wool on a sheep," which makes Maggie let out an intimidated "Uhhnnh" (53). Moreover, "Wasuzo Teano!" and "Asalamalakim," with which Dee and her husband greet Mama and Maggie, are similarly overbearing, causing Maggie to begin her shaking and perspiring (53).⁹⁹ Dee has adopted these practices to distance herself from oppressive relations with Euro-American culture; it is the educated black nationalist with whom she wishes to identify, not "the European and his achievements." But they have a decidedly oppressive effect on her mother and sister, positioning them as cultural inferiors in the same way Fanon's educated black demotes his former culture in favor of newfound European tendencies. In other words, though Dee belongs to a movement descended directly from Fanon's decolonial project, her configuration in "Everyday Use" only corroborates his proclamation that "For the black man there is only one destiny, and it is white" (10) – insofar as her ethnographic relation to Southern black culture loudly echoes that of the white colonizer.

In the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes that "What I want to do is help the black man free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment" (30). Walker seems to have a comparable purpose in mind with Mama's narration and the escalating aggressiveness of her responses to Dee. Though Dee's visit has an ethnographic purpose, as narrator, Mama becomes the ethnographic observer of the story's events, adopting a shifting position inversely related to Hurston's. Similarly, within the diegetic world, Mama borrows from – but in doing so reworks – the vehemence of Dee's politics. By responding to Dee's dominance in this way, Mama begins to configure a decolonial politics that does not merely reproduce existing structures of oppression, in the way Dee's black nationalism does.

Mama's account of her daughter's visit refuses to conform to the language and practices of Dee's newfound culture. Though at first Mama complies with Dee's insistence on being called "Wangero" – not only in their conversations but also in her narration – as the story progresses she resorts to "Dee (Wangero)" and by the end reverts to just "Dee." The partner's name is similarly compromised; unable to pronounce "Asalamalakim," Mama calls him "Hakim-a-barber" as he requests, but wonders to herself if he's actually a barber, overlaying the name with its meaning in her own culture. These revisions recall Bhabha's theory of mimicry as a mode of postcolonial subversion, or Walter Benjamin's concept of mimesis-with-a-difference as a mode of social development. Moreover, they resemble the narrator's treatment of the white county workers in "Mockingbird," who, after their first appearance, are referred to only as "Smilin" (the one who smiles while speaking) and "Camera" (the photographer). In a similar move, rather than merely receiving Dee and Asalamalakim's

language and preserving the colonial relationship, Mama perverts but does not entirely reject it.

Her sudden change from present to past tense midway through the story marks a similar shift. In quietly distancing herself from the story's present, Mama calls attention to her status as documenter of its events, stealing the role that Dee assumed in the moment she emerged from the car with her Polaroid. Sam Whisitt discusses this tension between the women as a contest of narrative "frames," each of which captures a different "whole": "That Dee constructs a whole from which she excludes herself is no doubt Dee's way of maintaining a relation to the world that she does not want to be part of" (450). By beginning her narration in the first-person present, Mama, by contrast, puts no distance between herself and the story's events. But when Mama changes suddenly to past, "A frame begins to emerge, with Mama outside, yet inside, separated by a critical distance [...] a spatio-temporal dimension opens up, which makes possible reflection, knowledge, epiphany, manipulation, and power" (452). For Whisitt, this change is a swing in representational authority, in which Mama adopts the mode of "the museum, book reviews, and art dealers" (453).¹⁰⁰ By switching to the past, that is, she is surrendering an aesthetic "authenticity" to a voice that, like Dee, constructs a narrative "frame."

Significantly, to make this point, Whisitt invokes the same institutions that Applegarth names in her discussion of anthropology's history – its drive to "fill museums and pages of [...] journals." Their shared vocabulary indicates that this is not a purely narratological question, as Whisitt himself admits (the past tense grants Mama "power"). Mama's new voice re-positions her as arbiter of the narrative "whole," displacing the ethnographic relation of domination that Dee has constructed. Yet it does not merely reproduce that relation. Unlike Dee's photography, the total effect of Mama's narration, in its switch from present to past, leaves her partially within the scene: she is "outside, yet inside," by Whisitt's own account. This is precisely the way that LaMothe and Ifeoma Nwankwo describe Hurston's ethnographic position – at times distant, at others vividly located within the diegetic present. In this way, Mama becomes a photographic negative of Hurston's assimilation to the culture she documents: even as Mama remains an actor in the story's events, she gains a perspectival distance from them, approximating some of Dee's own strategies.

A parallel struggle between the women plays out in the diegetic world of the story, as they offer competing accounts of their family's culture. The competition reaches a critical point during a second conversation about the name "Wangero," in which Mama begins to use Dee's own tactics against her. Reiterating the colonial relation I've discussed, Dee attempts to engage Mama in a Socratic dialogue about her given name's origins:

'You know as well as me you was named after your aunt Dicie,' I said [...]

'But who was she named after?' asked Wangero.

'I guess after grandma Dee,' I said.

'And who was she named after?' asked Wangero.

'Her mother,' I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. 'That's as far back as I can trace it,' I said. Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches.

'Well,' said Asalamalakim, 'there you are.' [...]

‘There I was not,’ I said, ‘before “Dicie” cropped up in our family, so why should I trace it that far back?’ (54)

Here Dee offers an historical account in which African origins prevail. But instead of accepting the pedagogical intent of this exercise, Mama supplants Dee’s history with that of her own origins story: the family, its farming vocabulary (“cropped up”), and its entrenchment in war and slavery. In this moment, her intra-diegetic strategies begin to mirror those of her narration; she refuses Dee’s chosen history just as she refuses Dee’s new language and culture in narrating the story.

Several critics have noted, however, that even in such moments, Mama’s comportment resembles Dee’s rebellious urge.¹⁰¹ With energy similar to Dee’s, that is, Mama refuses to maintain the initial passivity that her daughter enforces. Mama has dreamed of this visit as an amicable reunion, like the joyful displays of the child who has “made it” and her grateful parents on Johnny Carson’s show (47). But Mama admits that, even before she wakes up from this dream, she knows such a scene would be disingenuous; her actual reactions to Dee are anything but warm and complacent, in the same way Dee herself repels from her family’s culture. At the beginning of the story, moreover, Mama contrasts her own passivity (and that of Maggie) with Dee’s past and present rebelliousness; while Mama cannot imagine herself “looking a strange white man in the eye,” Dee reportedly “always looked anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature” (49). Yet in Mama’s own farming culture, she has a similarly bold spirit: “One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall” (48).¹⁰²

This affinity between the two women becomes most evident in the story’s climax. Dee grabs the two quilts reserved for Maggie, objecting that her sister might “Be backward enough to put them to everyday use” (57).¹⁰³ Looking at Maggie’s fearful reaction to this quarrel, Mama is struck with a sudden passion. Like “Granddaddy,” who seizes and destroys the county workers’ camera in “Mockingbird,” Mama wrests the quilts from “Miss Wangero’s hands” and throws them in Maggie’s lap (58). In narrating this event, Mama draws from her own cultural repertoire: “something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I’m in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout” (58). Her action, however, resembles Dee’s own passion in having seized the quilts and in her dramatic exit after Mama takes them back. Before leaving, Dee manages to tell Maggie “to try to make something of yourself, too” (59). And “Maggie smiled [...] a real smile, not scared” (59). Maggie is subtly but decidedly transformed, and so is Mama; Dee’s coercion has prompted her to defend her cultural narrative.¹⁰⁴ Though Dee insists that Mama doesn’t understand her “heritage” (59), Mama advances her own account of that heritage by preserving the quilts’ cultural function.

Here the colonial relation splinters and, in doing so, multiplies. Has Mama taught Dee her rebelliousness? Has Dee produced rebelliousness in Mama? Does this make Dee a more emancipatory presence than the story initially suggests? In defending her heritage, has Mama stolen Dee’s historicizing approach, or has Dee merely reproduced, with a difference, the more local history to which Mama subscribes? And which of the women’s examples has produced this promising change in Maggie? Just as Mama never gives Dee the final word (quite literally in the case of her name), the story resists resolving these questions, leaving them in tense but productive suspension.¹⁰⁵ What seems

most important is that, in foiling Dee's attempt to re-appropriate the quilts, Mama relies on an amalgamation of strategies and attitudes from her own culture and that of Dee's radical politics – just as, in narrating the story, she combines the distance of Dee's ethnographic position with her own proximity to its events. In this way, even as she seizes both narrative and intra-diegetic control, she does not merely reproduce Dee's domination, but rather develops her own hybrid method.

'Her Sweet Jerome' and the Lower Middle Class

While the protagonist of "Her Sweet Jerome" is a textbook example of the "slavish imitation of the white middle class" that bothers Irene, her husband, Jerome, is proximate to Irene herself – a black nationalist who seems to abhor his wife's tastes, despite being quite literally in bed with her. (At various points, in fact, we suspect that he is only with her in order to poach her money for the movement.) Her contact with Jerome's black nationalism produces a transformation similar to Mama and Maggie's; in rebelling against Jerome, she assumes the role of ethnographer vis-à-vis his black nationalist cohort. While in "Everyday Use," Dee instantiates the ethnographic treatment to be overcome, it is the third-person narration of "Her Sweet Jerome" which subjects the protagonist to this treatment. Ethnographic attention to the protagonist's life and body initially dominates the narrative, but as she gains power over Jerome, the ethnography fractures into multiple tropes and genres. And though the protagonist is a lower-middle-class black woman, the hybridized narrative that portrays her transformation resembles the hybridity of the *Mules and Men* "Bible retold": an amalgamation of born-again Christianity, pagan practices, and, significantly, the black nationalist revolutionary urge itself. Like Mama's transformation, that is, the protagonist's empowerment is not configured as a simple rejection of black nationalism; rather, as in "Everyday Use," the protagonist absorbs and reprocesses it in reference to her own cultural heritage. Moreover, while "Everyday Use" presents a working-class black character as the centerpiece of this political potential, "Her Sweet Jerome" locates this same potential in lower-middle-class-ness, reimagining the immanent hybridity of the protagonist's position as the starting point of a decolonial politics.

A hairdresser with her own shop who has married a younger schoolteacher, the protagonist is considered one of the "colored folks with money" by her own community (25), though her tastes and concerns have a decidedly lower-middle-class or petit-bourgeois flavor. The opening specifies this class position by ethnographically detailing the clothes she has purchased for her husband, which she is rifling through after suspecting he has had an affair (the frame that begins and ends the rest of the story's events). Jerome's ties in particular become the occasion of detailed description: "Glorious ties, some with birds and dancing women in grass skirts painted on by hand," significantly a colonialist image, and "some with little polka dots with bigger dots dispersed among them" (24). The attention afforded to these ties indicates both the intensity with which she inspects the clothes and her regard for their appeal. And we learn that her initial interest in Jerome took a similar form: she wanted him for "Looking so neat and *cuté*" (26), like the ties themselves. Erotic and consumer desire are apparently collaborators in her class-specific fantasies: "What popped into her mind was that if he was hers the first thing she would get him was a sweet little red car to drive [...Then] She had started right away to save up so she could make a down payment on a brand-new white Buick deluxe, with automatic drive

and whitewall tires” (26). The free indirect style betrays that she admires these cars (“sweet,” “brand-new”) in the same way she regarded Jerome (“so little and cute and young”).

The narration subjects the protagonist to similarly detailed treatment, the same attention she pays to Jerome and her gifts to him: “She was a big awkward woman, with big bones and hard rubbery flesh. Her short arms ended in ham hands, and her neck was a squat roll of fat that protruded behind her head as a big bump. Her skin was rough and puffy, with plump molelike freckles down her cheeks” (25). Only through this emphasis on the physical do we glimpse traces of her interiority. Suggesting a rather limited consciousness, her eyes would “[dart] about at nothing in particular while she was dressing hair or talking to people” (25). This implication is confirmed by her disregard for what she refers to as “eddicashion” (a perversion reminiscent of Mama’s responses to Dee) (26), and her confusion at Jerome’s reputation as an “‘intellectual’ ... a word that meant nothing whatever to her” (31).

Though the story keeps to her perspective, such early depictions render her an object to be carefully described, and one that reveals a stark contrast between her body and its adornments: “Her eyes glowered from under the mountain of her brow and were circled with expensive mauve shadow,” an almost comedic collision of natural and consumer images, whose battleground is apparently her face. Sentences later a new front appears in the movements of her limbs: “when she drank coffee she held the cup over the saucer with her little finger sticking out, while she crossed her short hairy legs at the knees” (27). The conflict between this comically exaggerated gesture of social refinement and “her short hairy legs” is metonymic of a larger one: lower-middle-class-ness as a contentious point of contact between the black body and assumed whiteness. Through these conflicting images, moreover, the story anticipates from the outset that her petit-bourgeois tastes will not be the final boundary of her race-class identity.

Close scrutiny of the racialized body is never a neutral practice in Walker’s fiction. In the 1982 short story “Elethia,” a woman learns that a dummy displayed in the window of a restaurant is actually the preserved body of a slave – which she begins to suspect after closely examining his nails and hair. She is so disturbed by this discovery that she steals the body and burns it in a high school’s incinerator. As I’ve already observed, Meridian similarly experiences “nausea at being alive” after viewing the remains of the Native American warrior at the museum. Remains are not the only objects of a violating ethnographic gaze, if we think again of Dee’s observation of Maggie and Mama. These various sites of ethnographic relations charge the third person description of “Her Sweet Jerome” in its documentary treatment of the protagonist. Significantly, it is only when she begins to pose an intradiegetic challenge to her black nationalist husband that the narrative begins to fragment into hybrid representation, which becomes the basis of Walker’s provisional decolonial politics.

As the story progresses, its attention moves from the protagonist’s physique and domestic objects to her fears and actions, a change that occasions the hybridization of narrative style. Departing from its ethnographic mode, the narration drifts into folkloric tropes in describing her growing jealousy,¹⁰⁶ of the kind that appear in *Mules and Men*. Occasioned by the talk of women in her hairdressing shop, the protagonist’s search for Jerome’s alleged mistress is detailed in repetitions of three, a number typical of the European fables “retold” in the culture Hurston documents: for example, “She searched high and she searched low. She looked in taverns and she looked in churches. She

looked in the school where he worked” (28). And unlike the earlier descriptions of the clothes, cars, etc., this sequence relies on more prosaic details, far less suggestive of any particular class and race context; “high and [...] low,” “taverns,” “churches,” and the “school” are typical of any small town, rather than one in the postwar American South, much in the way that the details of folklore have a highly symbolic rather than realist function. As her paranoia becomes a kind of madness, a similar difference opens up in portrayals of the protagonist’s body, which are lightly surreal, intertextual with the nocturnal metamorphoses that occur in folklore: “Her eyes were bloodshot and wild, her hair full of lint, nappy at the roots and greasy on the ends” (29), and she “had taken to grinding her teeth and tearing at her hair as she walked along” (30), subjecting the women in her path to “blood-chilling questioning” (29). The wildness of her eyes and hair, and the fear she inspires in her fellow townswomen, locate this moment of the story between ethnography and more fantastical genres; the details seem typical of madness, but their excessiveness takes the portrayal to the brink of realist effect.

Alongside this animal jealousy, the protagonist develops an intense concern over what the reader understands to be Jerome’s nascent interest in black nationalism, though she is largely unable to define it. Nonetheless, contact with this interest transfers something of a revolutionary urge to her surrealist jealousy, in which she is “buying axes and pistols and knives of all descriptions” (28). Likewise, whenever the protagonist questions a woman sitting under the hot comb, “she would end up burning her no matter what she said” (30), foreshadowing the larger fire of the story’s climax. Jerome, on the ironic other hand, remains studiously passive, observing “her maneuverings from behind the covers of his vast supply of [political] paperback books” (28), study that his wife encourages without knowing its content. As per her father’s wishes, Jerome becomes the recipient of her inheritance (“he had ‘learnin’ enough to see fit” [30]), and tells her little about what he does with the money – only that it is “Something very big ... Like a tank” (31). But whatever the very big something is, it seems puny in the context of his wife’s increasingly violent tendencies.

This new symbolics of revolution is continuous with, not distinct from, the quasi-magical, folkloric depiction of the protagonist’s changed demeanor. Images from both modes are furnished simultaneously, and they collaborate to render her an actor rather than a mere object of description. Just as her eyes are “bloodshot and wild” in her search for the mistress, they are later described as “glowering darkly behind [Jerome who is reading],” as she is “muttering swears in her throaty voice, and then tramping flatfooted out of the house with her collection of weapons” (29). As her arsenal grows and her search through the closet intensifies (this search reappears as the frame towards the ending), her body becomes even more animal-like: she “pawed” the clothes, “and sometimes even lifted to her nose to smell” (33). Yet counter-intuitively, the intensification of both her bodily wildness and violent urges ignites her intellect; as she paws, smells, and shakes, we learn “she felt there was something, *something*, some little thing that was escaping her” (33). This something (an echo of Jerome’s “something big”) turns out to be a stash of black nationalist books that she finds in an “intense blackness underneath the headboard of the bed” (33). Intense blackness, however, more than it is metonymic of her husband’s ideology, anticipates the protagonist’s own violent action at the story’s climax. The space under the bed is “dusty and cobwebby, the way the inside of her head felt” (33). But this mental dust suddenly clears: “She was panting and sweating, her ashen face slowly coloring

with the belated rush of doomed comprehension” (33), that the books were the “preoccupation” she assumed to be a mistress (though we suspect he probably has a mistress as well) (34).

Distinct parallels emerge between Mama’s moment of rebellion against her own daughter and this protagonist’s domestic experience of “revolution,” the word that drives the final events of “Her Sweet Jerome.” Both women take action against the intellectuals who dominate them, and yet in doing so, ironically borrow from those intellectuals’ ideology and methods.¹⁰⁷ Reading the books’ titles,

With a sob, she realized she didn’t even know what the word ‘revolution’ meant, unless it meant to go round and round, the way her head was going [...] Then the word ‘revolution’ took over [...] With the largest of her knives she ripped and stabbed them through [...] she hastened with kerosene to set the marriage bed afire. (34)

As with Mama, “comprehension” happens without the usual signs of comprehension; instead, both women register their fledgling knowledge as a call to action that is a rejection of their domination at the hands of family members turned black nationalist. And like Mama’s feeling of being “in church [when] the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout,” the moment in which both the protagonist and house begin to burn draws from born-again Christian symbolics, the revolutionary verve, and the scheme of folklore that has slowly accumulated in the story’s imagery:

Thirstily, in hopeless jubilation, she watched the room begin to burn. The bits of words transformed themselves into luscious figures of smoke, lazily arching toward the ceiling. “Trash!” she cried, over and over, reaching through the flames to strike out the words, now raised from the dead in glorious colors [...] But the fire and the words rumbled against her together, overwhelming her with pain and enlightenment. And she hid her big wet face in her singed then sizzling arms and screamed and screamed. (34)

As in evangelical rebirth (“jubilation”), they books are “transformed,” “raised from the dead.” And this is equally a moment of violence of the kind her husband envisions, as he begins to attend political meetings and invests in the “something big.” The protagonist’s “enlightenment,” then, like Mama’s in “Everyday Use,” is fomented by separate but ironically collaborative oppressive forces: the religion of the colonizer, and contact with a black nationalism which would disavow the heritage that traffics in that religion.

But just as important is the continued symbolics of bodily wildness previously bound up in the protagonist’s folkloric metamorphosis; like the gradual foregrounding of her body, which emerges from the likes of her “expensive mauve shadow,” the smoke itself is “luscious,” “lazily arching,” perhaps an answer to the chastity to which Jerome has abandoned her. Yet black nationalism itself would have her recover such a moment of bodily transformation from Euro-American tastes, another ironic transfer of its ideology; as the narration discloses, “The women in Jerome’s group wore short kinky hair and large hoop earrings. They stuck together, calling themselves by what they termed their ‘African’ names, and never went to church” (31). Their appearance is not unlike the protagonist’s new one, that is, despite her intense feelings of alienation and resentment when she attends one of their

meetings. Most importantly, however, it is the orgiastic collision of these political alignments and antagonisms that enable her profound moment of both action and consciousness.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, as in “Everyday Use,” an analogy emerges in “Her Sweet Jerome” between the way that black nationalism dominates uneducated blacks and the similar dominance of a colonizing whiteness. The former consolidates both in Dee; her ethnographic fascination with Mama and Maggie’s now foreign way of life, and her desire to assimilate them to the black nationalist narrative, are configured in the story’s colonial symbolics. In the latter story, however, black nationalism and white middle-class tastes are counter-intuitively aligned but separate forces. Its imagery of both revolution and folklore amass into a decided break with the protagonist’s initial petit-bourgeois interests and appearance. No longer a woman in heels who “teetered and minced off to church [...] with her hair greased and curled and her new dress” (27), her new look, not unlike that of the black nationalist women, suggests a departure from both her former interests *and* her husband’s domination. Both stories, in other words, propose that however much black nationalism intends to break with white middle-class culture, it parallels, even reproduces that culture’s dominance by occupying a similar position of power vis-à-vis working- and lower-middle-class characters.

And like the moment of “Everyday Use” in which the past tense grants narrative authority to Mama, just before she literally seizes it from Dee, the “Jerome” protagonist’s break from her petit-bourgeois appearance coincides with another reorientation in the narrative. Just as in the beginning, the protagonist and her way of life are the objects of ethnographic attention, so in the final pages she assumes an ethnographic role in relation to the black nationalist characters:

One hot night, when a drink helped stiffen her backbone, she burst into the living room in the middle of the evening. The women, whom she had grimly ‘suspected,’ sat together in debative conversation in one corner of the room. Every once in a while a phrase she could understand touched her ear. She heard ‘slave trade’ and ‘violent overthrow’ and ‘off de pig,’ an expression she’d never heard before. One of the women, the only one of this group to acknowledge her, laughingly asked if she had come to ‘join the revolution.’ [...] Jerome rose from among the group of men, who sat in a circle on the other side of the room, and, without paying any attention to her, began reciting some of the nastiest-sounding poetry she’d ever heard. (32)

Here the vast difference between her and her husband’s friends enables a kind of critique to foment; her position as ethnographer amidst a foreign culture, that is, allows her to feel, if not yet recognize, the women’s condescension and the willful inaccessibility of Jerome’s poetry. These observations are like a negative image of Dee’s orientation to her family, which allows her to view once familiar objects as ones of aesthetic or cultural interest. In negotiating a similar difference of class, the protagonist begins to reclaim the critical capacities available to Dee and her husband’s milieu. Her efforts to understand that seemingly impenetrable culture directly precipitate her subversion of it in the ending. Moreover, this change stems directly from her lower-middle-class positionality, which brings her into proximity with working-class modes of representation *and* grants her access to the radical politics of

intellectuals like Jerome. Put differently, the story proposes an allegedly uncritical class-position as a path to transformation along the lines of Mama and Maggie's.

Unlike "Everyday Use," however, "Her Sweet Jerome" more directly suggests that black nationalism's dominating relation to uneducated blacks is aligned with the same white culture it seeks to overcome. Jerome's black nationalist friends have much in common with Dee's figuration as a colonizer: his closest friend among them is a transfer from "some famous university in the North," and trying to understand their conversations makes the protagonist feel as if she is going to faint – like Maggie, battered by Dee's confusing presence. But in her newfound ethnographic orientation, the protagonist correctly identifies the cultural alliance never explicitly named in "Everyday Use":

Among Jerome's group of friends, or 'comrades,' as he sometimes called them jokingly (or not jokingly, for all she knew), were two or three whites from the community's white college and university. Jerome didn't ordinarily like white people, and she could not understand where they fit into the group. The principal's house was the meeting place, and the whites arrived looking backward over their shoulders after nightfall. She knew, because she had watched this house night after anxious night, trying to rouse enough courage to go inside. (31-32)

The presence of whites (who are apparently afraid of the black neighborhood) in this cohort seems to confirm Cowart's reading of Dee's analogous positionality in "Everyday Use": that in her fascination with the objects of her mother and sister's household, Dee aligns with the Euro-American desire "to preserve [their] heritage as the negative index to her own sophistication." The woman who "laughingly asked if [the protagonist] had come to 'join the revolution'" (32), for example, seems to appreciate the protagonist's presence only as a foil to her own politics. Jerome himself is not configured in the same symbolics that render Dee a colonizer (though, significantly, both are invested in reeducation), but his comportment has a similar effect: he values his wife only for her domestic labor and inheritance, which he uses to serve his own political ends, and in doing so frequently abuses her. In both "Everyday Use" and "Her Sweet Jerome," that is, the black nationalist relation to working- and lower-middle-class black culture ironically, and toxically, reproduces white positionality vis-à-vis that same culture.

The two stories collaboratively propose that only in wresting this position from black nationalism can working- and lower-middle-class blacks overcome its dominance. And in both, claiming that power does not reiterate the same methods, but rather reprocesses them through Southern black culture: figuratively, by advancing that culture's own modes of representation, but also literally, as in Mama and the "Jerome" protagonist's reclaiming of domestic space and artifacts. Their transformation amounts to a kind of radicalization, in which each absorbs black nationalism's revolutionary urge in the process of overcoming its oppression. In this way, the stories propose a decolonial politics that supplants black nationalist ideology via the hybridity of the characters' postcolonial subject-position. And in doing so, they echo Hurston's representational strategies and the cultural hybridity of the folklore she documents. In "Her Sweet Jerome," moreover, the move to overcome black nationalism is, by the same stroke, a move to supplant whiteness. By setting Jerome's home on fire – figuratively burning the ideology of his books – the protagonist is also destroying his affiliation with white, Northern culture; her hybrid subject-position seems to construct a more

generalizable decolonial politics.

Hybridity and Passing

Eight years later, in the collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), Walker reprised her interest in lower-middle-class black women, in both "Source" and "Advancing Luna – and Ida B. Wells." Instead of invoking the potentials of this subject-position, however, the story of Irene and Anastasia offers an advisory: that eschewing a nationalist political agenda must not mean losing its radical impulse. While Irene can articulate the violence of assumed whiteness, which the "Jerome" protagonist only obliquely discovers, she feels none of the earlier characters' urgency in combatting it; as I've observed, her beliefs are only "quasi-political" and "not thought through." Perhaps because of this half-heartedness, when funding for her literacy program is cut, Irene leaves to visit Anastasia, whom she met while they were both at a New York college. Though Anastasia is living off food stamps at a commune in Marin, she has externalized the middle-class imitation of whiteness far more explicitly than the "Jerome" protagonist: in New York, Anastasia had already lightened and bobbed her hair, and was "always [with] a swinging purse and absurd snub-toed shoes" (a description the free indirect style borrows from Irene's assessment) (139). When she moved west, the purse and shoes apparently disappeared, but she took to "rinsing her hair in vinegar and staying out in the sun" (140).

Despite being (quite literally) marked as white in this way, much of Anastasia's life in Marin functions as a satiric echo of the black nationalism's presence in Walker's earlier stories – yet another confluence of whiteness and the nationalist ideology. If Dee, like Fanon's educated black, "renounces the present and future in the name of a mystical past," Anastasia and her commune have turned to an even more past and mystical origin story – one offered by an Indian guru named "Source," which implodes into farcical universalism. As one commune member puts it (a young, white mother named "Calm," about to leave her baby with Anastasia and depart for South America), "Source teaches us that all children belong to everyone, to the whole world" (149). Source himself delivers an explicitly racist version of this ideology when Anastasia brings Irene to visit him; "I used to live in Africa, in Uganda [...] and the Africans wanted to be black black black. They were always saying it: black, black, black. But that is because Africans are backwards people" (151). Irene is shocked to discover that Anastasia now subscribes to this understanding; Anastasia explains that "You [Irene] still think you are Somebody. That you matter. That Africans matter. They don't [...] And if they are nothing – if nobody is anything – it's impossible to humiliate them" (152). In stark contrast to the radicalized characters of *In Love and Trouble*, Anastasia adds that she is "so *bored* with color being the problem," dispensing with race in favor of a supposedly idyllic "indifference" (153). As in Berlin, Carver, and Robinson's depiction of white subjects, that is, it is Anastasia's elision of race, as much as her embodiment, that marks her emergent whiteness.

Though the most evident object of the story's satire is a culture that mimics the "flower children of the sixties" (140) (as Irene reflects), it takes aim at an additional target. Much in the way that the earlier stories symbolically link black nationalism with a colonizing whiteness, the satire of "Source" suggests that the outer extreme of origins logic reaches the very end which it wishes to overcome: the denial of racial identity. When Irene and Anastasia meet years later in Alaska, Anastasia

instantiates this risk, identifying as a white woman and living among indigenous Alaskans. Both women have arrived there circuitously; Irene is “astounded to find herself discussing teaching methods with a group of Native American and white women educators” (155), apparently on a brief trip, while Anastasia made Alaska her home with a husband whom she has now left. She lives with an Aleut man in a fishing village, where the women are “delighted” that she has learned to smoke salmon with them (160). As she explains when the women meet up at a bar, “It was as if I’d evolved. They don’t know this yet, but I’m on my way to being them” (160-61). Despite this professed interest in assimilating, Anastasia still takes pleasure in what she experiences as an exotic situation; “She liked the way that the [Native] people looked as if they had come, that very month, from someplace else” (155).

As if to preserve this relation, Anastasia no longer identifies as a black woman; since she ultimately “couldn’t feel like someone without a color,” she has chosen to pass as white (161). In this way, the story suggests that the extreme outcome of an origins-based ideology reproduces the hegemony of whiteness; if the final origin is “humanity,” in other words, the most efficient way to become “‘just’ human,” as Richard Dyer describe whites’ self-perception, is to adopt a white identity. Moreover, the only relationship such whiteness can achieve to other cultures is one of appropriation, confirmed by Anastasia’s “hair in braids [...] held by leather thongs with feathers” and her eyes that “literally danced [...] as if Anastasia were receding, receding, receding, into the blurred landscape” (156). Via this free indirect style, Irene admits that the latter “was only a momentary and maudlin vision” (perhaps assisted by the whiskey she has just finished) (156), in seeming recognition of her friend’s specious relationship to the place and people she has chosen.

Though the story initially offers Irene as a foil to Anastasia’s universalism, it signals in several instances that Irene has also left black culture behind. As Anastasia narrates her departure from Source and her new life as a white woman, Irene attempts to share the story of Fania, her former half-black student in the literacy program. (Interestingly, in depicting Irene and Fania, Walker quotes a nineteenth-century ethnography of a half-black woman, written by a white minister [160].) But by the time Anastasia pauses long enough for Irene to tell her about Fania, Irene says she is too drunk to do so. At first she seems somewhat annoyed by Anastasia’s transformation, even moved to feel “the strangest sensation” as she looks into her friend’s eyes and realizes “Those eyes now looked out of a white person. What did that mean?” (157). But as their evening progresses, Irene’s drunkenness ameliorates that annoyance as well: “she understood everything Anastasia said as if she’d thought it herself. But she also forgot it at once” (161). In other words, this literal and symbolic drunkenness allows her to avert the passionate affect that such moments of conflict produce in Walker’s earlier stories.

“Source” crescendos when Anastasia confesses her feelings of alienation as a light-skinned black woman in college with Irene, when what was once a mark of prestige became a burden. She tells Irene that “You *loved* being adored. Being exceptional. Representing the race [...] I never got any of the attention you got, and I could have used some, because those white folks were just as strange to me as they were to you” (164). Like Mama and the “Jerome” protagonist, Irene experiences a kind of revelation when Anastasia accuses her of betrayal; she feels “as if live coals had been thrown down her back” (165). But rather than taking this tension to any actionable conclusion, the women merely congratulate each other on a new, post-racial understanding. Anastasia feels that they are “simply two

women, choosing to live as they liked in the world” (165); Irene theorizes that “I was looking toward ‘government’ for help; you were looking to Source. In both cases, it was the wrong direction – *any* direction that is away from ourselves is the wrong direction” (166). After an erotic embrace (reminiscent of the same-sex desire invoked in *Passing*), the women leave the bar, looking out in the direction of Mt. McKinley with a group of tourists. What they glimpse in this moment of self-affirmation turns out to be yet another “wrong direction”: “They thought they were finally seeing the great elusive mountain, a hundred miles away. They were not. It was yet another, nearer mountain’s very large feet, its massive ankles wreathed in clouds, that they took such pleasure in” (167).

These final lines of the story reprimand the women’s post-racial imaginary in the same way Fanon admonished Jean-Paul Sartre three decades earlier. In *Orphée Noir* (1948), Sartre’s preface to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, he elaborates a post-racial politics that prioritizes class struggle over anti-racism, writing that *negritude*, the francophone correlate of American black nationalist aesthetics,

appears as the minor term of a dialectical progression: The theoretical and practical assertion of the supremacy of the white man is its thesis; the position of *negritude* as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is insufficient by itself, and the Negroes who employ it know this very well; they know that it is intended to prepare the synthesis or realization of the human in a society without races. Thus *negritude* is the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end. (Qtd. in Fanon 133)

Fanon responds that, in locating *negritude* poetics in this Hegelian account of progress, Sartre “forgot that [...] negativity draws its worth from an almost substantive absoluteness; his “mistake was not only to seek the source of the source” – the origin, that is, of the revolutionary urge *de jour* – “but in a certain sense to block that source” (134). In other words, by turning to a universal “origins” narrative, allegedly more originary than *negritude*, Sartre deprives the movement of its historical agency. As Fanon writes, “so it is not I who make meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not [...] that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history” (134). Sartre’s position vis-à-vis this historical struggle, we might say, is only one of distant observation; like the Euro-American ethnographer in his study of non-white cultures, he presents black liberation as a merely initial movement in the long story of progress, in which Western universalism is the ultimate destination.

Irene and Anastasia seem to desire the same, agent-less transition that Sartre describes, bypassing the constitutive struggle by which race categories might one day be deconstructed. In grasping for the “great elusive mountain” of emancipation, that is, they are not willing to find the “torch” that Mama and the “Jerome” protagonist are beginning to shape (quite literally in the latter case). And for this reason, what Irene and Anastasia experience as emancipatory can only reproduce what Sartre calls the “assertion of the supremacy of the white man.” Though in their various ways, the characters of the earlier stories challenge the nationalist politics Fanon proposes, in favor of one that mobilizes the hybridity of their subject-positions, the urge to wield his torch survives.

This embrace of hybrid identity will not be unfamiliar to anyone who has studied developments in critical race and postcolonial theory over the past decades. However, though the “Jerome” protagonist subversively mimics the strategies of her oppressor, she is not a subaltern subject. On the contrary, she is a lower-middle-class black woman who, at the beginning of the story, attempts to imitate the white middle class in her comportment and desires, willfully distancing herself from histories of racial subjugation. What might Walker intend by casting such a subject in this role, if not symbolic incoherence? In concluding this chapter, I’d like to suggest that Walker’s portrayal of the un-cohered potentials of her lower-middle-class characters relies on the liminality and nebulosity of lower-middle-class-ness itself. As Rita Felski points out, lower-middle-class subjects may have once been blue-collar workers or may go on to become university professors like herself. Walker is attempting to imagine this instability as a source of strength and multiple solidarities: an unexpected possible link between the culture of working-class African-Americans and the radical politics of critical race theory. This portrayal risks glossing over the reactionary politics that have also characterized the lower middle class; but it is at the same time a much-needed exploration of its political potentials in both postcolonial reality and late capitalist class struggle.

THE WHITENESS OF THE CONVICT: *RESSENTIMENT* AND UNCERTAINTY IN *HELTER SKELTER* AND *THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG*

In July of 1976, Gary Gilmore shot a gas station attendant and a hotel manager in the Provo, Utah area, after robbing each of a pittance. Though Gilmore and his girlfriend, Nicole Baker, were back together soon after his arrest, she had left him just before the murders, the only exceptional circumstances of that period.¹⁰⁹ Gilmore himself never cited the distress of their breakup as his motive. The murders were both unexplained and banal. But they inspired *The Executioner's Song*, a nearly 1,100-page novel which Norman Mailer published three years later. In one of its early scenes, Gilmore spends the night of the first murder with Nicole's teenage sister, April, who suffers from schizophrenia after a past acid trip.¹¹⁰ After shooting his victim unbeknownst to April, Gary tells her, "No more riding around. I want a fancy place to sleep like the Holiday Inn" (238). Though the murder itself transpires in less than a page, what soon follows is a two-page description of their Holiday Inn room and the all but eventless hours they spend there:

The washbowl was set in a synthetic-walnut top. Along this top two glasses wrapped in cellophane carried the logo of the Holiday Inn, and two small cakes of soap in the Holiday Inn wrappers were placed next to a small tent-shaped piece of yellow cardboard that read, 'Welcome to the Holiday Inn.' There was also a notice that the liquor store would be open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. These pieces of paper were damp. The rounded surface of the washbowl acted like a centrifuge when you turned on the tap and threw water out of the sink onto the floor ... A strip of white paper was looped around the seat of the toilet bowl to certify that no one had sat there since the strip was place in position. The toilet paper from the toilet-paper holder in the wall to the left of the toilet seat was soft and very absorbent, and would stick to the anus. (242)

In several ways, this peculiar passage becomes microcosmic of Mailer's entire novelistic project. It teems with ethnographic detail of both the Holiday Inn and the lives of Gary and April: an ex-convict living with his lower-middle-class family and the daughter of a distinctly "white trash," Jack Mormon clan on the outskirts of town, for whom the motel room – with its synthetic walnut, damp notice about the liquor store hours, white strip to guarantee sanitation, and highly absorbent toilet paper – is apparently a "fancy" option, beyond the means of their everyday existence. The description is strictly limited to its perspectival character, April in this case, whose particular mind both identifies these markers of fanciness and affords the acute degree of detail, even down to the scatological.

Moreover, though this part of their night has no special importance to the narrative, it receives many times the description that the novel's governing event does, giving the non-events of the motel room an odd gravitas. As is often the case in Mailer's novel, we wonder if something significant is

about to happen, or if these details will prove important later on, in Gary's trial perhaps. But neither is true. The narrative simply moves to its next event, the second murder, and April is all but forgotten in a burgeoning cast of characters. If the reader happens to reflect on this scene while moving through the hundreds of pages that follow, she will not know how to explain its significance to the murders or their aftermath, or even decide whether it is significant at all. Only a passing moment augurs the trouble to come: "[April] saw the room very clearly like she was looking through a magnifying glass. 'It's just one more night in a prison cell,' she said to herself, 'and I've been in prison all my life'" (245). Gary has spent half of his thirty-five years in actual prison and will spend some months more there before his execution by firing squad in January of 1977. April, on the other hand, is likely referring to the prison of her traumatized mind. Both, however, are in the shared prison of social precarity. Though April will likely stay there (the novel never specifies her fate), Gary's extended family is attempting to welcome him out of both his recently ended incarceration and the economic instability of his youth. He works at his Uncle Vern's shoe shop and then an insulation company, lives with both Vern and his cousin Brenda Nicol, and attempts to date with Brenda's help. In committing his homicides, he rejects this invitation to middle-class-ness, but Mailer's novel is in the process of giving him a second chance to make it out of his circumstances – symbolically if not materially. His social world is placed under the various magnifying glasses of the characters who comprise the free indirect style. Yet the total effect of these myriad lenses does not trap Gary in their white lower-middle-class world but rather leaves his identity undecided.

Of course, there are those characters who long to isolate both Gary's social identity and his motives – not least Lawrence Schiller, the photographer and journalist who secured the rights to Gilmore's story before hiring Mailer to author it, and whom Mailer writes into the novel. When Schiller began work on the Gilmore project, he was reeling from his recent failure to adequately chronicle the murders of Charles Manson – another product of a troubled working-class family who spent half his life in prison before committing mass murder at the age thirty-four. Schiller wanted Gilmore to be his *Helter Skelter*, the 1974 true-crime book published by Vincent Bugliosi, prosecutor of Manson's trial. In Bugliosi's best-seller, the meticulous detail of legal and investigatory discourse attempts to know Manson's crimes and their motive to completion. Though Schiller's role was journalist and not prosecutor, and though he wished to consider Gilmore's social circumstances in addition to the details of his crimes, his impulse was largely the same: comprehensive knowledge of his criminal subject.

In what follows, I will elaborate a contrastive analysis of *Helter Skelter* and *The Executioner's Song* that reveals the class meanings of their respective protagonists' depictions. The former's positivism has the ironic effect of reifying Manson's self-fashioning as monstrous agent of *ressentiment*, in contrast to Gilmore's undecidedness in the latter. Moreover, though Bugliosi goes to great lengths to insist on Manson as absolute other to his implied middle-class reader, his narrative participates in an effect anticipated by Michael André Bernstein: violent anti-establishment figures solicit readerly desire because the reader's social order paradoxically celebrates and idealizes rebellion against its own tenants, whatever they may be. Andrew Hoberek's similar analysis historicizes this effect: in literature of the postwar United States, middle-class desire is instantiated in the rebel's utter individualism as much as in the white-collar figures who become his victims. In a similar fashion, by insisting on Manson as

anti-establishment, Bugliosi's positivist narrative ironically consolidates him not only as object of middle-class desire but also as the protagonist of the middle-class mythmaking that Hoberek describes.

Schiller allowed Gilmore to escape this treatment in two ways: by widening his detail-collecting to a vast network of players in Gilmore's social context, and by handing the project over to Mailer. The result of these decisions, *The Executioner's Song*, participates in the New Journalistic project of challenging the positivist aims that conventional journalism shares with Bugliosi's legal and investigatory discourse. Rather than foregrounding its author's subjective experience, however, as Mailer's earlier works of New Journalism do, the novel relativizes positivist discourse – which variously presents as journalistic, investigatory, legal, medical, and psychiatric – as one among the many non-hierarchized voices of the free indirect style. These voices share the ethnographic project of detailing the white lower-middle-class social context of Gilmore's crimes and their possible motives. The result, however, is not the epistemological certainty attempted by Bugliosi's meticulous project, but instead an uncertainty that only proliferates as each voice brings forward new details and a new point of view.

This uncertainty has an important function vis-à-vis Gilmore's race-class position. As I've observed, he is a white convict from a working-class nuclear family, offered the greater security of his extended family's lower-middle-class life after being released from his second prison term. In committing homicide, Gilmore finalizes what we have already come to suspect: that he will not assimilate to lower-middle-classness. But in leaving Gilmore's motives in suspense, neither does the narrative corral him into the middle-class myth of individualism that Bugliosi's book unwittingly produces. Instead of a rebel who despises middle-class-ness – yet in doing so, comes to embody middle-class individualism – Gilmore becomes a more universalized figure: the inscrutable offender, proximate to Shakespeare's Iago or Melville's Moby-Dick. Much as the narrator of "Cathedral" provisionally transcends the determinations of consumer culture, or Ruth's Protestantism resists consolidation to neoliberal politics, Gilmore's ability to escape both middle-class-ness and positivist discourse relies on the hegemony, and supposed universality, of his race-class position. But the very symbolic openness afforded by this identity is what allows him to resist middle-class myth-making. In other words, just as he refuses to join the lower-middle-class – even murders two of its members – he refuses to become yet another iteration of its pursuits and desires.

Who, What, Where, Why, and the Narrative of *Ressentiment*

Schiller flew to Utah in November of 1976 with the express purpose of securing exclusive rights to Gilmore's story from all involved. After his conviction of homicide, Gilmore and Baker had just attempted double suicide. But what truly interested Schiller was not this drama but another specter of death: that Gilmore insisted the state carry out its sentence of capital punishment without any appeals. As I've discussed, the Gilmore case was not Schiller's first foray into true crime. Before the Manson trial had even started, Schiller bought the first-person account of Susan Atkins, accomplice to eight of the murders, which was sold abroad and eventually reprinted in the United States. When it broke in the *Los Angeles Times*, some speculated that she could no longer be the prosecution's star witness as previously agreed, having a vested interest in the story.¹¹¹ At the very least, the prospect of

a fair trial was threatened by this publicity, which had snuck in before an official gag order was imposed (Bugliosi 262-3). Schiller's thirst for commercial success was implicated in damaging the State's case, a fact that still plagued and embarrassed him (*ES* 623-4).

In a *Newsweek* interview about the Atkins paperback, published as *The Killing of Sharon Tate* in 1970, Schiller defensively remarked, "Look, I published what Susan said. I don't know whether it's true or not" (*ES* 624). It was this line, the one that ended *Newsweek's* article, which still irked Schiller when he began pursuing the Gilmore story (624). He knew that people with "class" stuck to the facts ("checkbook" journalists and "carrion birds," both names he had been called, did not). Adding insult to injury was the wild success of Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter*; Schiller felt that its sprawling story had been his to lose (624). And lost it he had, by settling for the account of one dubious and inadequate player. With Gilmore, Schiller was determined to make up for what he previously lacked, not only in sales but also credibility, scope, and, whenever possible, ethics.¹¹² I propose that by embracing this ambition, and eventually turning the book project over to Mailer, Schiller would ultimately undo the narrative operations of *Helter Skelter*, those which reproduce Manson as agent of class *ressentiment*. Throughout Bugliosi's book, extreme detail mobilized in the positivist discourses of law and investigation have the Foucauldian function of shoring up Manson's self-professed motive. Though these same discourses find expression in the voices of Mailer's free indirect style, they are relativized in a total effect of epistemological uncertainty – the same that allows Gilmore life beyond the *ressentiment* narrative.

In an article that locates Manson's crimes in a literary tradition including Dostoyevsky, Céline, and Kesey, Bernstein makes a case for him as knowing participant in a longstanding poetics of *ressentiment*. This genre conditions readers to identify with the figure of anarchy or rebellion against the social order to which those same readers presumably belong. And it is the social order's claim to authority, rather than any specific value or defender of the order, that is constructed as an object of contempt or disgust. Despite the open antagonism of the order and anarchist, the literary tradition Bernstein is tracing comes to idealize the agent of *ressentiment*, contorting itself into the ironic posture of lauding its own adversaries – like Ivan Karamazov, who exclaims in court that "My father has been murdered and they pretend they are horrified . . . Liars! They all desire the death of their fathers" (Qtd. in Bernstein 358). As Ivan makes evident, the adversary's apparently marginal status obscures an important fact: that the social order has produced its Karamazovs, who are secretly representative, even constitutive of its own desires. As Bernstein puts it, the "disguise [of marginality] was never intended to hide the existence of the underside, but rather to mask the fact that it was already entirely within, and indeed central to, the very core of the culture's most self-idealizing moments" (373).

For Bernstein, Manson's accomplishment is twofold: he mobilizes the logic and rhetoric of *ressentiment* and demonstrates the ethical limits of celebrating it beyond the confines of fiction. In a startling affirmation of Manson's libidinal pull, Bernstein admits that "Céline and Manson are dear to me, bizarre as that phrase may seem, because they make . . . self-congratulatory self-deception impossible, because, in their different ways, they show us where the celebration of what we are not could lead as soon as we leave our comfortable studies or crowded lecture" (382). Even as Bernstein makes the case for Manson's centrality – indeed, dearness – to himself and his culture, here he posits Manson as the boundary rather than the center of that culture's *actions*. Though the social order might idealize Manson, that is, most of its members will not become serial killers, precisely because of

Manson's example as "what we are not." By bringing this argument into conversation with Andrew Hoberek's treatment of *ressentiment* as a class affect, I will suggest that Manson instead concretizes the unbounded individualism which the American middle class wishes not only to celebrate but practice. In doing so, Manson consolidates the very middle-class ideologies that he claims to oppose. These are the same middle-class ideologies, moreover, that Gilmore ultimately escapes, through his irreducibility to the poetics of *ressentiment* in *The Executioner's Song*.

The early biography detailed in *Helter Skelter*, which Bugliosi first pieced together as a prosecutor, works to establish Manson's stark difference from middle-class existence that would later become his professed criminal animus. Manson was born to a sixteen-year-old alcoholic who spent several of his early years in jail. He may never have met his alleged biological father, who worked at various mills around Cincinnati and escaped his mother's paternity suits. The father on his birth certificate, listed as a "laborer" at a drycleaner's, left Manson's life when his parents divorced in 1937. After moving to West Virginia and then Indiana, narrowly avoiding more jail time for grand larceny, and remarrying, Manson's mother failed to place him in foster care, eventually consigning him to the Gibault School for Boys. Already a petty thief, Manson escaped from the Gibault School twice, settling the second time in an Indianapolis apartment he afforded by stealing from stores. When he was finally caught, he escaped a juvenile facility and joined his uncle, a seasoned thief in Peoria, Illinois. Arrested and linked to two armed robberies at the age of thirteen, Manson was sent to yet another reform school for several years, only to escape in a stolen car and find himself arrested again in Utah.

Bugliosi considers this arrest a turning point (192-3): crossing state lines in a stolen car is a federal offense – for Manson, the first of many that suggested "a need, amounting almost to a compulsion, to challenge the strongest authority" (203) – and it landed him in Washington, D.C. at the National Training School for Boys. His psychiatric assessment there deemed him low-IQ, illiterate, and pathologically antisocial. Though he was soon transferred to a minimum-security institution and was up for parole, he was discovered raping another boy at knifepoint and transferred to a reformatory in Virginia, where he continued his streak of disciplinary offenses and violent acts and was moved to a maximum-security reformatory in Ohio. Released a year and a half early at age nineteen, he went to live with his aunt and uncle before marrying a hospital waitress, Rosalie Jean Willis, and working as a busboy, service-station helper, and parking lot attendant.

That same year he drove Rosalie to Los Angeles in a stolen car – a second federal offense for which he received a five-year probation. He violated this probation, failing to appear in court to be charged with yet another auto theft, for which he was sentenced to three more years in prison in San Pedro, California. Shortly before a parole hearing, he attempted to steal a car and escape. Some months later when he finally did receive parole, Rosalie, by then mother of his young son, divorced him. He began prostituting a sixteen-year-old girl and attempted to cash a forged U.S. Treasury check, federal offenses which resulted in a suspended ten-year sentence and another probation. He remarried a young woman name Leona, whom he took to New Mexico with another woman, intending to prostitute them, still another federal offense and another violation of probation. He would have to serve the suspended ten-year sentence on McNeil Island, Washington. Leona, alleged mother of his second son, would divorce him. By the time he was released in 1967, Manson had spent over seventeen of his thirty-two years behind bars or detained at other institutions. On the morning of his release, he

pleaded with authorities to let him stay in prison where he felt at home, fearing that he wouldn't be able to adjust to normal life.

In his epilogue, Bugliosi reflects that “had anyone heeded his warning, this book need never have been written, and perhaps thirty-five to forty people now dead might still be alive” (635). But to simply say Manson was right does not do justice to the complex project he was able to realize and which *Helter Skelter* narrates: instead of attempting a reentry into the world outside prison, Manson created his own. After his request to remain in prison was denied, he put in a second request to be transported to San Francisco, where during the so-called Summer of Love, he would begin to amass the Manson Family, a cult following of mostly young women. During her Grand Jury testimony, Atkins described meeting him in Haight-Ashbury that summer. Wanting to catch Manson's attention, she asked to play his guitar, thinking to herself, “I can't play this,” and became convinced of his telepathic powers when he told her, “You can play that if you want to” (Bugliosi 236). Some days later, Manson allegedly intuited that Atkins desired her father, and invited her to play that fantasy out with him (Bugliosi 236). She recalled that “I gave myself to him, and in return for that he gave me back to myself. He gave me faith in myself to be able to know that I am a woman” (236). The youth whom Manson continued to gather in this fashion were social outcasts, much like Manson himself: juvenile runaways, high school or college dropouts, or otherwise alienated from the families and institutions to which they once belonged (or all three, as was Atkins' case). He eventually relocated them to a movie ranch north of Los Angeles, then other ranches in Death Valley. It was from the Los Angeles base that he ordered Family members to murder at least nine people in 1969,¹¹³ the most famous of whom was Sharon Tate, then wife of Roman Polanski and pregnant with his unborn son.

Perhaps because of their outcast status, the Family proved susceptible to Manson's peculiar narrative of *ressentiment*. Under his tutelage, they came to believe in a theory that Bugliosi reconstructed from the many interviews he conducted with Family members and eventually with Manson himself: that the world was on the brink of a race war in which blacks would kill all whites, predicted in Revelation 9 and coded in the Beatles' White Album, especially in songs like “Piggies” and “Helter Skelter,” the latter of which became Manson's master term for his theory.¹¹⁴ The belief in a coming race war was not an anomaly in the late sixties, but Manson's iteration of this belief had more than a few particularities. Though he was an unabashed white supremacist who railed against miscegenation, Manson welcomed the onset of the war, believing blacks would perceive the call to action in the White Album and his own music, which he promoted with only nominal success to celebrities like Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys.¹¹⁵ Moreover, while blacks decimated the white population, Manson and his followers would be hiding in a bottomless pit in Death Valley, waiting for the new world leaders to reach a moment of confusion in which the Family would emerge and take control. In the summer of 1969, Manson got tired of waiting for blacks to initiate Helter Skelter. Though he predicted that whites would be murdered indiscriminately, his sympathy with the supposed black rebellion was motivated against “pigs,” his preferred term for the generic white “establishment,” borrowed from the Beatles and redolent of the Black Panthers' usage. He apparently decided to show blacks how it should be done by murdering several “pigs” of the Hollywood area. Some were iconic members of the leisure class and frequented the very entertainment circles that had largely rejected the music Manson wrote

as a rallying cry. “Death to Pigs” and “Healter Skelter,” with that misspelling, were two of the phrases written in blood that summer at the targeted homes.

In his analysis of the Manson’s theory and legacy, Bernstein takes pains to note that for all Manson’s fantastical elements, unlike the Karamazovs, he is a real person – one who really killed other people. But if Manson is (unfortunately) not the protagonist of a novel, “in the realm where cultural history and popular mythology intersect, [he] has attained, at least for the moment, the kind of emblematic significance that we think of as preeminently literature’s role to articulate” (Bernstein 369). This significance has certainly outlived 1991, the year of Bernstein’s article. (In 2019 alone, the movies *The Haunting of Sharon Tate*, starring Hillary Duff, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, directed by Quentin Tarantino and starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt, and *Tate* continue to unpack the Manson drama.)¹¹⁶ Just as notable, however, is Manson’s textual self-fashioning during the Family’s own era. Bernstein suggests that in calling his followers the Family, for example, Manson parodies both the “tribal” aspect of hippie and politically radical culture, which Manson despised as merely alternative “establishments,” and the middle-class television families of the fifties generation (371). Perhaps most significantly, Manson’s extended speech during his trial – delivered in the courtroom but not in the presence of the jury, a fact that evinces its textual value more than its contribution to his defense – self-consciously recycles the style of teen angst (370), not to mention the motifs of the sixties anti-war and countercultural movements. Bernstein cites the following passage from the speech, found in *Helter Skelter*:

I have stayed in jail and I have stayed stupid, and I have stayed a child . . . and then I look at the things that you do and I don’t understand . . . you say how bad, and even killers, your children are. You made your children what they are . . . *These children that come at you with knives, they are your children. You taught them. I didn’t teach them* . . . Most of . . . the Family were just people that you did not want, people that were alongside the road, that their parents had kicked out, that did not want to go to Juvenile Hall. So I did the best I could and I took them up on my garbage dump . . . I know this: that in your hearts and your own souls, you are as much responsible for the Vietnam war as I am for killing these people . . . I can’t judge any of you . . . But I think that it is high time that you all start looking at yourselves, and judging the lie that you live in . . . you can project it back at me . . . but I am only what lives inside each and every one of you. My father is the jailhouse. My father is your system . . . I am only what you made me. I am only a reflection of you. I have ate out of your garbage cans to stay out of jail. I have wore your second-hand clothes . . . I have done my best to get along in your world and now you want to kill me, and I look at you, and then I say to myself, You want to kill *me*? Ha! I’m already dead, have been all my life. I’ve spent twenty-three years in tombs that you built . . . It’s all your fear. You look for something to project it on, and you pick out a little old scroungy nobody that eats out of a garbage can, and that nobody wants, that was kicked out of the penitentiary, that has been dragged through every hellhole that you can think of, and you drag him and put him in a courtroom. *You expect to break me? Impossible! You broke me years ago* . . . I may have implied on several occasions to several different people that I may have been Jesus Christ, but I haven’t decided yet what I am or who I am . . . Is it my fault that your children

do what you do? What about your children? (He rises, leaning forward in the witness chair)
You say there are just a few? There are many, many more, coming in the same direction. They are running in the streets-and they are coming right at you! (Bugliosi qtd. in Bernstein 369-70)

Evident here is Manson's disgust with his listeners' supposed claim to moral authority. Equally evident is the marginality of Manson and his followers, a confirmation of Bernstein's claim for Manson as idealized but peripheral figure. But several moments of the speech suggest a closer relationship between Manson and his implied listeners than that of social order and paradoxically desired other: "I am only what lives inside each and every one of you," "I am only a reflection of you," and especially, "Is it my fault that your children *do what you do?*" (emphasis mine). In Manson's own words, that is, he does not represent what the order secretly desires and openly idealizes, but rather instantiates what it actually *does* – murdering innocent people (the Vietnamese), manipulating social outcasts (Manson himself).

The equivalence Manson draws between his crimes, Vietnam, and incarceration points toward a constraint of Bernstein's otherwise shrewd analysis: Bernstein massages "post-Dostoyevkian psychoanalytic truisms about human nature" (377), by his own account, rather than situating Manson in cultural desires and phenomena unique to the late sixties. More historicist explanations have linked the Manson Family to other countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies, either as their dark underbelly or dystopian endpoint (Bugliosi 639). Such understandings are bolstered by some leftists' identification with the Family's crimes, notably Bernadine Dohrn's now infamous statement at a Students for a Democratic Society convention: "Offing those rich pigs with their own forks and knives, and then eating a meal in the same room, far out! The Weathermen dig Charles Manson" (Qtd. in DeCurtis). The details of Manson's Helter Skelter theory and, more specifically, his courtroom testimony reveal that he, Dohrn, and her fellow Weathermen existed in the same rhetorical ecology of pigs, revolution, and protest of the Vietnam War.

But if we historically locate the most basic structure of both Bernstein's argument and Manson's speech – that is, the dialectic of anarchist and social order – Manson's *ressentiment* should have more to do with the center of 1960s structures of feeling than their left- or right-wing peripheries. Hoberek makes just such an argument about postwar literature of *ressentiment* (a key term he shares with Bernstein), exemplified by Flannery O'Connor and, perhaps not incidentally, Mailer's "The White Negro" (1957). In Hoberek's greater literary history of the postwar United States, fiction that appears to dispense with class and the economy is deeply preoccupied with the middle class's gradual evolution from independent property owners to white-collar, but nonetheless proletarianized, workers (*Twilight*). Much as I have argued that postmodern realist fiction of the seventies and eighties sought to reimagine white lower-middle-class identity in both an ideological and utopian sense, Hoberek argues that fiction of the forties and fifties expresses nostalgia for the middle class's era of small property ownership, a feeling that supplants engagement with class struggle. Middle-class fear of proletarianization remains difficult to track in this fiction, however, because it presents as anxiety about preserving individualism in the context of employment within large bureaucracies (*Twilight*).

O'Connor and Mailer reproduce this misrecognition in a particular way – one that, according to Hoberek, antedated the *ressentiment* against the welfare state, and the cultural elites who would

defend it, that would materialize in the coming decades (“Liberal Antiliberalism”). Characters like O’Connor’s Misfit, who murders a family painstakingly marked as middle-class in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953), configure an historically nascent misrecognition: rather than placing dispossession in a Marxist narrative, frustrated members of a diminished middle class rage against the hegemony of perceived cultural elites (25). Though this phenomenon is largely associated with the “red states,” as Thomas Frank has argued, its misrecognition is not geographically confined (Hoberek 25). Moreover, it would become full-bodied only after the fifties, with the more advanced demise of (ironically reviled) welfare-state protections – that is, well into Manson’s criminal heyday.

Hoberek’s argument revolves around the slipperiness of middle-class identification reflected in, and produced by, the postwar literary tradition under his inspection. The middle-class objects of *ressentiment* are not cultural elites but families of destabilized white-collar workers (31). Even more complexly, the agents of violence “are at once non-middle-class and representatives of the middle class’s heyday” (31). Put differently, what appears to be a working-class structure of feeling is, by Hoberek’s account, characteristic of a middle class in the process of becoming proletarians obliged to sell their labor (33). But they understand this trajectory in cultural rather than class terms (33). As Hoberek writes, “the elitist enemy is always a grotesque version of those qualities (mental labor, commitment to organizations) with which the middle class identifies its declension, while the figure of the people is always characterized by those elements of agency and autonomy that the middle class has lost” (33). The enemy and the rebel are not distinct social categories but rather two variegations of middle-classness: white-collar work that enforces conformity on the one hand, and an anarchistic brand of individualism on the other. And it is through this anarchism – which despises the selling of labor but refuses class-based agency – that the middle class “cuts its own throat,” in Hoberek’s words (33).¹¹⁷

What Hoberek can add to Bernstein’s poetics of *ressentiment* is not only historically specific, class-based analysis. Both may deliver similar conclusions about the social order’s orientation to the anarchist: that while the white-collar families of O’Connor’s South or Manson’s Los Angeles may fear their respective violent fiends, these fiends are not Others but rather variations on the same abstract individualism that representatives of the social order desire (in accordance with a cultural tradition and its psychoanalytic outcome in Bernstein case, and a class drama of the American twentieth century in Hoberek’s). But Hoberek might have something to tell Bernstein about Manson’s homicidal feelings for the establishment.¹¹⁸ In his own class origins, Manson seems to be the epitome of an economically marginal figure – the son of a teenage mother and dry-cleaning laborer, himself a manual worker turned criminal. However, by Hoberek’s account of the doubled-edged nature of *ressentiment*, Manson is not merely the repressed desire of middle-class order, ironically celebrated in its literary-cultural tradition. Rather, in his very non-middle-class-ness, he instantiates a middle-class desire which is not sublimated but openly manifested: utter, even brutal individualism, a misdirected response to the economic dispossession to which both Manson and a middle class in decline are subject. In other words, Manson’s individualism is not the middle class’s id but its conscious aspiration – desire which, as Hoberek notes, would soon be translated into the self-defeating neoliberal politics of the seventies and eighties.¹¹⁹

This discovery has a counterintuitive affinity with Manson's self-fashioning in his courtroom speech: by his reasoning, "your children," that is, the Manson Family, "*do what you do.*" Hoberek likens his agents of *ressentiment* to the neoliberal politics embraced by the middle class – and not the violence of Vietnam and incarceration that Manson references – but for both, the brutal effects of *ressentiment* are analogous to those of the middle class's active agenda as much as its unrealized desires. Manson's crimes may, as Bernstein puts it, "show us where the celebration of what we are not could lead," insofar as most of us are not mass murderers. But if "we" are a set of middle-class professionals of the office or lecture hall, as Bernstein supposes, "what we are not" is also economically independent capital owners, the mistaken figure of liberation in Hoberek's analysis. The political pursuit of economic individualism, however, even if it remains unrealized, does have material costs: undermining class agency over the long twentieth century (Hoberek 33). For Hoberek, this decline is the process by which the middle class "cuts its own throat" – and not just those of a handful of property owners in Bel Air. As he proposes a political and literary history, moreover, Hoberek reveals an important function of Manson's installment as cultural icon: his murders are continuous with, not opposed to, an albeit self-defeating middle-class politics. And in presenting himself as an agent of class *ressentiment*, he is ironically consolidating that politics – a project sustained by Bugliosi's narrative.

If *Helter Skelter* accomplishes one thing faithfully, it is the meticulous accumulation of detail about Manson, the Family, and the crimes they successfully carried out or attempted, first gathered during the police investigations and trials. (We learn, for example, that one fingerprint lift card from the Tate residence read "8-9-69/10050 Cielo/1400/JAB/Inside door frame of left French door/from master bedroom to pool area/handle side" [39].) But Bugliosi is equally intent on another purpose, first as prosecutor and then as narrator: establishing without a sliver of doubt the motive of the crimes that became known, after their victims, as the Tate-LaBianca murders. A compelling motive, in his professional opinion, is essential to any conviction (292). In the writing of his book, however, it becomes a literary-epistemological project as well, in which Manson's crimes and motive become imminently knowable as their details accumulate. In November of 1969, Bugliosi's investigation of the murders turned toward this purpose,¹²⁰ which would consume the remaining time that led up to the beginning of Manson's trial in June of 1970. Recalling this six-month period, Bugliosi penned the following:

Occasionally writers refer to 'motiveless crimes.' I've never encountered such an animal, and I'm convinced that none such exists. It may be unconventional; it may be apparent only to the killer or killers; it may even be largely unconscious – but every crime is committed for a reason. The problem, especially in this case, was finding it. (190)

Bugliosi was prepared to go to any lengths, however desperate, to do so. Certain that such an unusual set of crimes could never be assigned to motives as banal as robbery, and knowing that Manson trafficked in the New Age, Bugliosi began reading the astrological forecast of Manson's sign in the *Los Angeles Times*, scouring for anything that could have provoked him (265-66). When these efforts came up dry, he relentlessly prodded Family members and associates for details of their leader's philosophy.

While talking with Gregg Jakobson, a talent scout Manson had met at Wilson's Malibu home, Bugliosi first stumbled across the Helter Skelter theory, later affirmed in several other interviews. The thrill of this discovery is palpable in Bugliosi's narration. "What before had been only fragments, bits and pieces, now began slipping into place," he writes; "The picture that eventually emerged ... was so incredibly bizarre as to be beyond belief" (303). He would soon perform his own analysis of the White Album, down to elements as detailed as a man's voice, obscured by machine-gun fire and pig oinks, saying "Rise," which Manson claimed to hear in the song "Revolution 9." "I also heard it twice repeated," Bugliosi writes, "the first time almost a whisper, the second a long-drawn out scream. This was potent evidence ... I'd now linked Manson, irrevocably, with the word 'rise' printed in blood at the LaBianca residence" (326). (Manson seems to have been a somewhat more imaginative reader than Bugliosi, who frequently repudiates the convict's more symbolic interpretations; for example, though a literature student might find ample reason to discern social revolution in the song "Helter Skelter," as Manson apparently did, according to Bugliosi, "There was a simpler explanation. In England ... 'helter skelter' is another name for a slide in an amusement park" [324].)

Perhaps the most interesting narrative function of Bugliosi's book is this persistent tension between establishing Manson as a monstrous other and Bugliosi's increasing proximity to, even craving for, the "bizarre" details of Manson's thought and actions. Though Bugliosi never admits, let alone explains, this fascination, it seems consistent with Bernstein's account of readerly desire in the *ressentiment* genre, which Manson self-consciously marshals. Bugliosi as character, that is, becomes subject to the "sympathy for the devil" Bernstein anticipates, while Bugliosi the narrator, as I will show, unwittingly propagates that sympathy through the very details he believes to be Manson's undoing. Even as he sets these operations in motion, he continuously insists on the professional necessity of delving into Helter Skelter. In narrating the accelerating thrust of the investigation in the period before the trials, he claims that,

In this case, even more than others, proving motive was important, since these murders appeared completely senseless. It was doubly important in Manson's case, since he was not present when the murders took place. If we could prove to the jury that Manson, and Manson alone, had a motive for these murders, then this would be very powerful circumstantial evidence that he also ordered them. (292)

But Bugliosi's insistence on the legal relevance of Manson as the sole originator of the murders begins to unravel, as even the defense would later note during the trial, objecting that Bugliosi's lengthy questioning as to Manson's domination of his followers had become ungermane. When the judge's ruling in favor of the defense in one instance infuriates Bugliosi, the reader is inclined to agree with Irving Kanarek, Manson's attorney: "I think the heart of what we have here is this, that Mr. Bugliosi has lost his cool, because he has a monomania about convicting Mr. Manson" (465).

More than a monomania for conviction, however, Bugliosi's project seems to be that of fastidiously constructing Manson as one half of the *ressentiment* narrative elaborated by Bernstein and Hoberk: the anti-establishment fiend set on terrorizing not only the elite (Elizabeth Taylor and Frank Sinatra were also on his hit list, as came out during the trial), but also the middle-class Americans

among the millions following the trial's prolific media coverage (not to mention the seven million that would eventually buy *Helter Skelter*), frightened by the randomness with which the family often chose its victims. (Rosemary and Leno LaBianca, for example, were not celebrities but low-profile business people who enjoyed boating.) Several of Manson's enemies do endear themselves in the way Bugliosi might have hoped, not least former Family member Linda Kasabian, described as "serene, soft-spoken, even demure" by the *Times* (Qtd. 423), who became the prosecution's star witness in place of Atkins, and whom Bugliosi admires for her eventual reentry into the middle-class nuclear family. Far more remarkable is the ironic effect Bernstein describes, in which the agents of *ressentiment* invite greater sympathy than their would-be vanquishers. Nowhere is this effect more distinct than in an incident which occurred during Bugliosi's argument at the end of the trial in 1971, by which point he had amassed more than four hundred pages of handwritten notes. Led past the lectern where Bugliosi stood, Atkins managed to grab and tear some of these notes, to which Bugliosi blurted out "You little bitch!" (521). "Though provoked," he writes, "I regretted losing my cool" (521) (an echo of Kanarek's earlier accusation and the period's jargon).

This halfhearted apology invites readers to join in Bugliosi's assessment of Atkins and the many disturbances of the other Family members, Manson included, during the trial. But the joke is on Bugliosi, insofar as their appeal as characters outdoes his. More often than not, the reader waits for their wild interruptions to bring color to what is otherwise an excessively thorough account of a nine-and-a-half-month legal proceeding. (At one point, for example, Manson sabotages the sequestering of the jury by stealing a copy of the *Times*; he waved the headline of Nixon saying Manson was guilty of the murders in the jury's line of sight.) Put differently, we identify with Atkins' urge to snatch away some of Bugliosi's legal minutiae more than his own battle for a motive and conviction. The important irony, however, is that Bugliosi as narrator is providing the very details of the Family that fuel this identification, solidifying their role and ours in the *ressentiment* myth.

Bugliosi himself becomes subject to Manson's fascination not only in his fastidious investigating, but also during his various courthouse meetings and encounters with Manson. During the arraignment, for example, he glanced at his watch to find that it had stopped: "Odd. It was the first time I could remember that happening. Then I noticed that Manson was staring at me, a slight grin on his face ... It was, I told myself, simply a coincidence" (259). As in this incident, he goes out of his way to remark that all of his run-ins with Manson during the trial were either accidents or initiated by Manson himself, who at times requested that Bugliosi visit his cell (once for some man-to-man talk about the unattractiveness of Atkins and the other female accomplices). But in June of 1971, by then finished prosecuting Manson, Bugliosi decided to drop in on the proceedings of the subsequent Hinman-Shea trial, where Manson again faced murder charges. Incidentally, or perhaps conveniently, Manson invited him to the prisoner's dock after court recessed, for a lengthy discussion of Manson's ideas and their debts to Scientology and the Church of the Final Judgement (608-9).

Bugliosi's dogged pursuit of the Helter Skelter motive (even adopted as his book's title) has two principle effects. Firstly, the more he indicts Manson as exceptional in his anarchy, the more both Bugliosi and his readers become implicated in the consolidation of the story as a middle-class myth. If Bugliosi went on to a prominent crime-writing career that made him something of a celebrity, at the time of the trial he was one among many white-collar employees of Los Angeles County. Moreover,

his implied reader is an equally white-collar, middle-class American willing to share in the presentation of Manson as a singularly diabolical criminal, wholly other to their straight-laced values. But the irony of the reader and writer's relation to Manson is not only their fascination, but that, as Hoberek anticipates, the representative of social order and the criminal both emerge as versions of middle-class ideology: the former an exaggeration of the devoted employee, amassing a detailed paper trail, the latter an anarchist dedicated to nothing but individualism in its greatest, and perhaps most realized, extremities. In other words, though *Helter Skelter* is set on reifying Manson as anti-middle-class icon through its own mass of positivist detail, the book actually installs him as the satirical epitome of that class's individualism *and* reconstructs reader and writer as his subordinated foils – notwithstanding the fact that they can't look away. The book's exhaustive positivism, that is, has the countereffect of perpetuating an ideological myth.

But also, and just as significantly, participating in this myth-making still allows Bugliosi to defend epistemological certainty vis-à-vis his strange object of analysis. In his epilogue, Bugliosi rehearses not only his later discoveries about *Helter Skelter*, including a lengthy comparison of Manson and Hitler, but also a litany of possible reasons why Manson was able to convince others to buy into his theory and commit murders that continued even after his imprisonment: “the ability to utter basic truisms to the right person at the right time”; the strategic use of hallucinogenic drugs, group sex, fear, religion, and music; the mobilization of anti-establishment feelings; and the fostering of community and love among the Family (627-29). He concludes this discussion, however, on a rare note of disavowal:

But when you add [all these factors] up, do they equal murder without remorse? Maybe, but I tend to think that there is something more, some missing link that enabled him to rape and bastardize the minds of so many of his followers that they would go against the most ingrained of all commandments, Thou shalt not kill, and willingly, even eagerly, murder at his command ... It may be something in his charismatic, enigmatic personality, some intangible quality or power that no one has yet been able to isolate and identify. It may be something he learned from others. Whatever it is, I believe Manson has full knowledge of the formula he used. And it worries me that we do not. For the frightening legacy of the Manson case is that it could happen again. (630)

In the same breath by which he admits the incompleteness of his understanding, Bugliosi again marshals the positivist vocabulary of investigation, this time to insist that such completeness could and should exist – that Manson's “formula” is still ours to “isolate” and “identify,” as Manson allegedly has unbeknownst to our best efforts. Put differently, had Bugliosi been a still more canny Ahab, we might have secured the knowledge that would not only satisfy our enthrallment but spare possible generations of victims to come.

In broaching his own project about Gilmore, Schiller certainly seems to have been inspired by Bugliosi's meticulousness. But he also identified with the collaborative aims of constructing a narrative of class *ressentiment* and of knowing its protagonist to completion. Such aims were not antithetical to the interpretations of some who were intimate with Gilmore or his family. His mother's once dear

friend, Grace McGinnis, suspected that Gary had killed two Mormon boys because years before, the church had refused to help the Gilmore family retain their one artifact of middle-class-ness – a large home near Portland, Oregon, which his mother could no longer afford or maintain, forcing her into a small trailer (*ES* 483). Another possible site of *ressentiment* was Gilmore’s own insistence on the death penalty. Though his former attorneys, his mother, and the ACLU wished to appeal the sentence, which the governor eventually allowed, Gilmore did not; “I took them literal and serious when they sentenced me to death just as if they had sentenced me to ten years or thirty days in the county jail or something. I thought you were supposed to take them serious. I didn’t know it was a joke” (Qtd. in Edmundson 438). By Mark Edmundson’s interpretation, Gilmore himself was playing a dearly won joke on the state, which was scrambling to organize his execution, the first in the United States after a longstanding Supreme Court moratorium:

Gilmore’s only ‘motive’ is a hunger for passionate disruption, an urge to fracture any set of social forms in which he finds himself. His profession that he wants to die made in front of the Board of Pardons may be the inception of an existential project. It may also be an act of simple, spontaneous anarchism, aiming a joke at a venerable institution, then living out the joke for the possibilities of future disruption that arise from it. (445)

Though some have identified Gilmore’s Mansonian streak in his arrant manipulation of Baker (notably her mother, who called him a “Manson type” after the suicide attempt [Mailer 636]), here Edmundson locates an instance of Manson-like *ressentiment* in the very element of the story that first attracted Schiller.

Though Bugliosi seemed to have scant respect for Schiller (Bugliosi 621-2), the prosecutor and journalist’s approaches to their respective criminals were similar: sustained questioning that, in keeping with positivist modalities, almost always pointed toward the motives and circumstances of the crimes. Gilmore’s attorneys initially arranged for him and Schiller to speak in person during prison visiting hours, but after Schiller was recognized by the press, he was reduced to submitting written questions to his object of study: “Do you wish you had not killed Bushnell?,” “Why did you kill, and could you have stopped yourself from killing if you wanted?,” “How would you describe your personality?” (*ES* 716-18). Such a line of inquiry is unsurprising in the context of a homicide trial. But the reader is inclined to agree with the assessment of Barry Farrell, assistant to Schiller, later rendered in the free indirect style of *The Executioner’s Song*; Schiller’s was a “niggling business of translating the best thoughts of one’s soul and conscience into one more rotten question, one more probe into the private parts of a man as protected from self-revelation as a clamshell from the knowledge of a caress” (1041).

Schiller himself came to recognize that his questions and Gilmore’s answers were too limited to sustain the kind of work he hoped to create (*ES* 718). In a 2007 interview, having praised Bugliosi’s as a “fine book,” Schiller went on to describe the project that he had begun to imagine: “I wanted to take it one step further [than *Helter Skelter*] – not write about a crime in detail but to write about the horizon, as I called it, the environment in which this crime was produced” (Severs 88-92). He had already initiated this wider study by the time Mailer officially joined him in 1977, to help collect the

15,000 pages of transcribed interviews that, two years later, would become *The Executioner's Song*. By this time, Schiller knew that the nascent project he was handing over to Mailer would be vastly different from Bugliosi's. The first-person narrative of *Helter Skelter* gives the final word to its professional investigator; Schiller, on other hand, was on his way to becoming just one character in Mailer's intricate constellation that would gradually dissolve the narrative of *ressentiment*.

An Ethnography of Uncertainty

Schiller is hardly the only journalist figured in *The Executioner's Song*. Those as celebrated as David Susskind and Stanley Greenberg get cameos, and Tamera Smith, one-time reporter at the *Deseret News* of Salt Lake City, is sensitively rendered in her unlikely friendship with Baker. The *News* itself is often excerpted, along with the *Provo Herald*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine. But perhaps the most prevailing marker of journalistic discourse is Mailer's enduring use of two simple words: "he said." This pair and its variations speckle nearly every page of the novel, beginning with its opening chapter on Gilmore's release from prison:

For one thing, Gary wasn't coming into an average community. He would be entering a Mormon stronghold. Things were tough enough for a man just out of prison without having to deal with people who thought drinking coffee and tea was sinful.

Nonsense, said Brenda. None of their friends were that observing. She and Johnny hardly qualified as a typical straightlaced Utah County couple.

Yes, said Johnny, but think of the atmosphere. All those super-clean BYU kids getting ready to go out as missionaries. Walking on the street could make you feel you were at church supper. There had, said Johnny, to be tension. (9)

This passage is exemplary of the novel's distinctive blend of direct and free indirect style. Without it being explicitly marked as such, we understand that a debate-like conversation about Gary's chances for success is transpiring between Brenda and her husband, Johnny, who will soon be picking Gary up from the airport. The absence of quotation marks to accompany the several markers of direct discourse – "said Brenda," "said Johnny" – allows the narrator to make his presence subtly known as the quiet seamstress of this inchoate narrative cloth. It is a move he often repeats in the middle of sentences ("There had, said Johnny, to be tension"), as if to stamp his presence on what would otherwise be the seamless transpiring of free indirect style, which inhabits the minds and lexicon of the myriad characters. Of Brenda's conversation with Gary's parole officer, for example, the narrator says, "He had worked, Mont Court told her, with a lot of people who had just come out of prison" (10).

Through such sentences, the prevalent function of reported speech in journalistic discourse haunts the narrative, a shadow of conventional journalism's positivist intent. But even at the level of the sentence, "he said" immediately dissolves into a network of other discourses afforded by free indirect style. This effect relativizes journalism as just one among so many kinds of speech that will carry the novel's wealth of ethnographic detail (the voices of individual characters, prison psychiatrists'

records, the autopsy report, just to name a few), unlike the centrality of other positivist discourses, legal and investigatory, in *Helter Skelter's* first-person narration. Several critics have remarked the extreme relativizing function of Mailer's particular free indirect practice, exemplary of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the novel as dialogic discourse.¹²¹ John Brenkman discusses this function vis-à-vis the technologically delivered "information" that Walter Benjamin disparages in "The Storyteller." In Brenkman's analysis, "the mediations of print and novelistic writing do not kill storytelling but appropriate and transform it in keeping with the exigencies of the modern forms and institutions of publicness" (297). Mailer's novel is the ur-example in this recuperation of the novel, as a work that transforms mechanical reproduction, the recorded interview in Mailer's case, into the preservation of experience and subjective communication, which Benjamin finds only in storytelling (300).

Brenkman also notes a journalistic presence in Mailer's novel, somewhat different from that of the reported speech. He finds it in another quality of the fleetingly detectable narrator: "the flattening tone and deadpan concision that give the novel's voice its relative consistency across the multiple voices, in keeping with the norms of both journalism and Flaubertian free indirect style" (300). But even this consistent flatness and concision seems devised for easy capitulation to the other voices, as Brenkman himself allows. Their variety, as much the journalistic backdrop, remains most consistently present. Put differently, it is not just the "information" of the recorder that is reprocessed by Mailer's novel, but also journalistic discourse, the arbiter of information for Benjamin, that becomes a mere participant in the total effect of the free indirect style.

Challenging journalism's supposed objectivity was certainly not a project unique to *The Executioner's Song*, even among the other works of Mailer's oeuvre. Beginning in the sixties, a cohort of writers including Mailer, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion elaborated the genre of New Journalism, largely in response to the "plethora of detail in each joint of society," as Mailer put it, that had rendered novelistic realism of Balzac or Tolstoy impossible in his view (Qtd. in Olster 46). Most especially, a boom in communication technology brought such multiplicity to the representation of reality that relying on a single, "objective" interpretation had come to seem woefully obsolete (Olster 47). With the exception of Capote, whom I will soon discuss, these writers' solution to the objectivity crisis was to foreground their own experiences as subjective observers of, and often even participants in, the events they documented, much like the postmodern ethnographers discussed in my fourth chapter. In *Dispatches* (1978), Michael Herr narrates going to Vietnam to watch battles and airstrikes, knowing he could retreat to the safety of the hotel or press center, only to find himself firing as part of the Tet Offensive. Likewise, in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail* (1973), Thompson admits that more than a political journalist, he had become a "flack for McGovern" (Qtd. in Olster 48). When Mailer himself went to observe and participate in the 1967 March on the Pentagon, he was arrested and spent a night at a Virginia workhouse. But this did not stop him from wildly embellishing, and flat out inventing, details of the March's most important events in Book 2 of *The Armies of the Night* (1968) (Olster 50). Mailer's absenteeism makes literal what the rest of the novel already suggests: that the project had become an account of Mailer's subjective experiences and imaginings more than an historical work (Olster 50).

Though *The Executioner's Song* was marketed as a novel, winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1980, Mailer insisted on calling it a work of non-fiction, claiming to have relied only on established

facts about Gilmore's case. He allegedly mobilized his skills as a novelist to accelerate the narrative and polish dialogue, "until it dawned on me that the story was as good as it could be. I realized that God is a much better novelist than the novelist" (Peterson qtd. in Lennon 95). An atheistic account of this creative process might be that, as opposed to his subjective steering in *Armies*, he simply decided to let the "detail in each joint of society" sprawl as it may. Most critics find Mailer virtually undetectable in *The Executioner's Song*. The voices of the free indirect style, on the other hand, so fully populate the narration that it becomes their ethnography of Gilmore's social world. But as the details of this ethnography proliferate, Gilmore's own experiences and motives become less and less clear. In place of the cauterizing detail of *Helter Skelter*, in others words, the extreme relativity of Mailer's narration leaves Gilmore suspended in uncertainty. While each of Bugliosi's details further convince us of his airtight understanding, each new voice of *The Executioner's Song* brings with it more detail but ever-dwindling conclusiveness.

Through these many voices and their detailed accounts, the social "horizon" that Schiller originally hoped to capture begins to emerge, dotted in the first half by no shortage of lower-middle-class residents of the Provo, Utah area, most of them variously observant Mormons. Several are small business owners of modest means: Spencer McGrath, Gary's eventual employer, has developed a new home insulation technique and employs fifteen men; Val Conlin, a used car-salesman, outfits Gary with a '66 Mustang; and Vern owns the shoe repair shop where Gary briefly works. Brenda's nutshell account of Vern's financial situation reveals that he is stable if not comfortable: "[Vern] has a little . . . But he's *hurting* for money. He's trying to save for his operation. Vern doesn't carry on, but that leg gives him pain all the time" (43). This relative precarity seems generalizable to much of Provo and Orem, though we do meet its share of white-collar employees – Roger Eaton, for example, who is briefly involved with Nicole and brags to her of his \$11,800-a-year job in the Utah Valley Mall's administration. Details of such characters are often delivered in the cadence and lexicon of their own voices, through the affordances of the narrative style. Even in the brief section narrated from Mont Court's perspective, for example, we learn some of his verbal ticks: "*Of course*, a person had to be willing to accept authority . . . *Of course*, he laid it out. Gilmore had certainly been in violation of his parole agreement [in driving out of state]" (55; emphasis mine).

Still other moments that establish the Mormon- and middle-class-ness of the area are delivered in the words of those who would ironize it – characters who have either drifted from the church or were never part of it, or by Edmundson's account and my own reading, even Mailer himself. Lu Ann Price, for example, Gary's first date after his release, takes him to one Fred's Lounge; in the words of the free indirect style then beholden to her perspective, "there were no nice cocktail lounges around. Mormons didn't see any reason for public drinking to take place in agreeable surroundings. If you wanted a beer, you had to get it in a dive" (28). Her dryness in regard to her Mormon fellow citizens inflects this observation, not unlike another moment when it is the narrator – and, by the implication of non-fiction, Mailer – who pokes light fun at their (in this case literal) squareness:

Provo was laid out in a checkboard. It had very wide streets and a few buildings that were four stories high. It had three movie theaters. Two were on Center Street, the main shopping street, and the other was on University Avenue, the other shopping street. In Provo, the equivalent

of Times Square was where the two streets crossed. There was a park next to a church on one corner and diagonally across was an extra-large drugstore. (25)

The subtle irony here, buried under the narration's journalistic stoicism, finds its footholds in the right angles of the city – its “checkboard” streets and “diagonal” orientations – and the modesty of its scale, with only two shopping streets and a handful of multi-story buildings. The lightly mocking comparison of these streets to Times Square, moreover, betrays itself as a reference from Mailer's own landscape (he spent much of his life in New York). Provo's only site of excess seems to be the ample drugstore – perhaps a soda- and ice-cream-filled stand-in for the bars that Lu Ann found lacking. Evident in this passage is a collaboration between the Mormon and the middle-class, which Mailer flags, often with similar irony, throughout the course of the novel: the greater one's proximity to the Church of the Latter-day Saints, the better one's prospects for class mobility. The boys Gary shoots and Nicole are all three Mormons, for example, but the observant BYU students seem destined for the suburban home, while Nicole and her Jack Mormon family live on the city's “white trash” periphery.¹²²

In Edmundson's reading, Mailer's barely perceptible curation of the most upstanding-Mormon and middle-class characters generates a similar irony. The paragraphs that describe Gary and the working-class characters often end on an elegiac note. A description of Gary saying goodbye to his Brother Mikal, for example, finishes with the following sentence: “He leaned over and kissed Mikal on the mouth. ‘See you in the darkness,’ he said” (Qtd. in Edmundson 441). In quiet contrast, the shape of one paragraph that describes the wife of Benny Bushnell, Gary's second victim, hardly lends her the same dignity: “Debbie didn't know about matters outside the house. She knew a lot about plastic plants and disposable diapers and just about anything to do with children at the day-care center. She was terrific with kids and would rather mop her kitchen floor than read” (250).¹²³ While Debbie may have owned everything said of her in the novel, for Edmundson, “given what passage endings mean in this book” – both Gary and Nicole's resound with “tragic tones” – “and given that the recipient of this information is at the moment a reader, holding a thousand-page volume” – with multitudinous opportunities for curation – “it's clear that the presentation is potently biased” (442-43).

In other words, the lightly mocking treatment of the Bushnells – like the subtle irony in the description of Provo – allows Mailer to intrude on what seems to be a narrative wholly dictated by the perspectives of his characters. And the object of covert ridicule just so happens to be the same found in Mailer's earlier works like “The White Negro”: the jail (not an incidental figure in Edmundson's analysis) of middle-class life, which “imprison[s] one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits” (Qtd. in Edmundson 443). Edmundson concludes that Mailer is fashioning Gary as the answer to this prison; the “shape” of his criminal career is one that the provocative “author of ‘The White Negro’ might have desired for his own” (444-45). Not only the murders, but several of Gary's encounters with middle-class Mormons do imply as much. (Visiting a friend, John, recovering from hernia surgery, for example, Gary approaches John's Mormon Bishop father in “a dirty white T-shirt, old slacks, tennis shoes, and, by God, a joke tie that came down to his knees – it had very wide alternating stripes of maroon, gold, and white” [207].) I suggest, however, that in spite of Mailer's noticeable bias against the Mormon middle class, the multiplying voices of *The Executioner's Song* do

not allow Gary to be reduced to the scheme of *ressentiment* that Hoberek identifies in “The White Negro.”

Much of Gary’s early biography, narrated piecemeal over the course of the novel, does make him a viable candidate for middle-class other. Gilmore was born in 1940 to a lapsed Mormon and an alcoholic conman, the second of their four sons. Though he was probably legitimate, his father, Frank Gilmore Sr., was the product of a passing union that foreshadowed the family’s own transient existence across several Western states. An abusive man with other wives and families in his past, Frank supported Gary, his mother, and brothers by selling subscriptions to fake magazines, did time in prison, and was often on the run from the law. When the family settled in Portland, Oregon in 1952, Gary followed his father into petty crime before dropping out of high school and running away to Texas, only to return to Portland several months later. Like Manson, Gary soon began stealing cars, his first at age fourteen. After two more arrests and time at two juvenile facilities, he wound up at the Oregon State Penitentiary, convicted of armed robbery and assault. While Gary was in prison, Frank died of lung cancer. Though their relationship was vexed at best, Gary attempted suicide when he learned of his father’s death. Two years later in 1964, he was again arrested for armed robbery and assault and this time sentenced to fifteen years. A prison psychiatrist deemed him pathologically antisocial (sixteen-year-old Manson’s diagnosis at the National Training School for Boys) and intermittently psychotic. Despite this assessment, Gary was released to study at a community college in 1972. A month later, he committed another armed robbery, having never registered for school. He was transferred to a federal prison in Marion, Illinois, after several violent disciplinary offenses, and would serve the rest of his time there under maximum security. As rendered in the novel, when Brenda takes Gary shopping after his release from Marion, he has been in so long that he does not know how to try on clothes or pay.

Despite this troubled and transient nuclear family life, in the pages of *The Executioner’s Song*, Gary’s lower-middle-class family in Provo continually look for reasons to reassign him to middle-class status and decorum that exceeds their own means. Their concerns evince a more feminized petite-bourgeoise idea of middle-class-ness than the white-collar conformity of Hoberek’s discussion. Vern’s wife, Ida, reminisces about the taste of her sister and Gary’s mother, Bessie; though their family were poor Mormons, Ida says Bessie “had the same elegance about her as our mother who is French and always had aristocratic traits” (23). Brenda often finds the same traits in Gary, albeit tainted by his years in prison; in the free indirect discourse assigned to her perspective, “Gary had long artist’s fingers, small at the tips, nice-looking hands like a pianist might have, but he gripped his fork with his fist and bulldozed in” (38). Further compromise to this aristocratic potential seems to be what most troubles Brenda about Gary’s relationship with Nicole and what she tries to ameliorate by focusing on Nicole’s exceptional looks. When Brenda meets Gary’s girlfriend for the first time, she thinks to herself, “another girl who pops a kid before she’s 15 and lives on the government ever after. One more poverty-stricken welfare witch. Except she had to admit it. Nicole *was* a looker. Star quality for those parts” (67). Even in the face of Gary’s murders, Brenda wishes to preserve whatever remains of his class status. Attempting to explain why she cooperates with the police in their strategy to apprehend him, she tells her cousin, “I really didn’t want you to get blown away like some common criminal . . . To me, you’re very uncommon. You’re crooked, but you’re not common” (293). Though here she seems

to be referring to a personal exceptionalism more than a class status, importantly even this distinction is conveyed in the jargon of class anxiety.

If in his comportment and eventual murders, Gary refuses to toe the line of middle-class-ness, nor do the many assessments of him that comprise the novel allow him to be simply reduced to the anti-middle-class individualist of the *ressentiment* narrative – even despite Mailer’s own biases. Every character who surfaces in the free indirect style emphasizes a different quality, unlike the Manson family who are notably consistent in accounts of their leader’s animus throughout *Helter Skelter*. Mont Court knows Gary is violent but finds “tenderness” in his paintings (55); Spencer initially deems Gary a loner who ate brown-bag lunches by himself, while “nobody knew what he was thinking” (57); the Mormon prison chaplain, Cline Campbell, fascinated by Gary’s art and sense of humor, comes to consider the convict a good friend; Gary strikes state prosecutor Bob Hansen as “being on an intellectual par with the Court” (557); Gary’s one-time lawyer, Dennis Boaz, could see [Gary] as a holy man in New Delhi” and admires his fluency in New Age thought (546-47); Gary’s cellmate, Gibbs, decides “this guy was a roulette wheel” (376); and as we might expect, Schiller’s first impression of Gary, while seeing him leave the hospital after his first suicide attempt, is of a face “full of hate ... It was the livid, vindictive look of a cripple who could kill you for sheer outrage at how life had ruined his chances” (643).

But even Schiller cannot stabilize Gary as an agent of *ressentiment*. By the end of all his questioning in person and by proxies, Schiller no longer believes in the class simplicity of Gary’s story, but nor does he trust the one that Gary is manufacturing. “Sometimes you sound like you’re telling a story you’ve told many times before,” he tells Gary; “A number of the stories told in ... these interviews are stories that you also told Nicole in your letters oft accompanied by, let us say ... little indications that you wanted to charm the reader ... in a very practiced, calculating way” (880). To this accusation of disingenuousness, Gary merely replies, “Shit, ain’t nothing calculating about that. I get lonely. I like language, but I tell the truth” (880) – though after such various accounts, both Schiller and the reader have no definitive way of assessing Gary’s sincerity.

Perhaps most poignantly, during her first meeting with Gary, Nicole almost immediately believes in an exceptionalism on his part that transcends social circumstances; she “began to think this guy had some kind of psychic power, and could really see what was going to happen. As if he were a hypnotist or something of that ilk. She hardly knew if she was about to like that” (78), a description not unlike Atkins’ account of her first encounter with Manson. Sometime later, while wandering the hills behind the very mental hospital that would alternately house them both, Nicole “had the odd feeling of an evil presence near her that came from Gary. She found it kind of half agreeable. Said to herself, Well, if he is the devil, maybe I want to get closer ... It wasn’t a terrifying sensation so much as a strong and strange feeling” (111). Though here too Nicole’s description smacks of Manson’s alleged mysticism, the “devil” she describes never comes to direct his “evil presence” against a specific adversary, as Manson consistently did; the presence remains instead a “strong and strange” but vague impression –¹²⁴ as indeterminate as the reader’s own in navigating the many accounts of Gary.

Speculation about Gary’s motives in shooting Bushnell and Max Jensen only recapitulate this confusion about his true identity. If *Helter Skelter* is resolved about Manson’s motive, *The Executioner’s Song* is equally resolved to perpetuate undecidedness about Gilmore’s reasons and state of mind. He

may well have simply hated Mormons, if we are to believe Grace (518). The prolonged administering of the drug Proxilin at the Oregon State Penitentiary may have left him with psychopathic tendencies, according to one psychiatrist (416-19). Farrell eventually wonders if a rape during his early prison years traumatized Gary, or more fantastically, if Gary was secretly a pedophile who, deprived of teenage Nicole, had become disgusted with his own desires in a homicidal and then suicidal way (912-13). Christopher Ricks is particularly apt in describing this novelistic uncertainty about the most important events of the story; the novel “does not despair of knowing why, but it knows that it doesn’t know (487) ... But then it is not any lack of reasons that makes the mystery, it is the chasm between the piled reasons and the snatched act. For Gilmore’s murderousness we have more reasons than we know what to do with” (489). Such uncertainty is not an anomaly in the genre of New Journalism. What many consider to be its inaugural text, Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1956), remains similarly inconclusive about Perry Smith and Dick Hickcock’s reasons for killing several members of the Clutter family. In Stacey Olster’s reading, what does emerge is the characters’ growing disillusionment with what were once the pillars of small-town American life – “faith in God and innate human goodness” (47). But no such modernist meanings develop in Mailer’s novel; far from a sense of disillusionment, the novel ends with friends and family warmly remembering a murderer while still speculating about the possible meanings of his life and death.

Even the possibility that there is no reason remains one of the most compelling. Gerald Nielsen, a homicide detective and the first person to interrogate Gilmore, was accustomed to seeing hatred, remorse, or indifference in a suspect, “but Gilmore had a way of looking into his eyes that made Nielsen shift inside. It was as if the man was staring all the way to the bottom of your worth. It was hard to keep the gaze ... ‘Hey,’ said Gilmore, ‘I don’t know. I don’t have a reason.’ He was calm when he said it, and sad” (300). This moment of the novel is an impactful one. But for all Gary’s apparent earnestness in Nielsen’s appraisal, there remains the possibility that Gary has some idea of why he shot the boys – the emotional tumult of his temporary break-up with Nicole, for example – and is refusing to bring it up. His favorite saying, as told to Brenda, cryptically allows for this possibility: “An honest man will look you in the eye, but the soul of a man will try to convince you of his lie” (649). Both the slipperiness of this riddle and the blankness of his response to Nielsen create a void analogous to the one left by the free indirect style’s endless conjecture. Gary comes out as a textured but ultimately empty signifier, in a novel satisfied to “know that it does not know,” to adopt Ricks’ words. The effect of over a thousand pages, that is, can be reduced to the same words Iago last utters about his sadistic but apparently unmotivated manipulations: “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know./ From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.355-356).

The indeterminacy of such a conclusion seems to utterly defeat the ethnographic specificity built up by the many voices of the free indirect style. If the novel begins as a work of social inquiry – about a man of a specific class, race, place, time, and legal status – in the end, it seems to dissolve into an epistemological project elaborated not only in *Otello* but throughout the history of Western literature. Ironically, the novel itself marks this project quite early on, in one of Brenda’s many reflections about her cousin: “It was time to recognize, Brenda decided gloomily, that when you had Gary around, there were questions for which you would not get answers. The snow kept coming down. Out on the roads, the universe would be just one big white field” (50). This evocative passage operates

via two slippages. Gary's opaqueness becomes continuous with the snow outside Brenda's house; then the snowy landscape around Provo stands in for the entire universe. The uncertainty surrounding Gary's motives in this instance (the parole violation) not only foreshadows the rest of the novel's uncertainty, but also suggests that Gary is symbolic of a more universal impenetrability of experience. The snow in Provo could just as easily be the impenetrable whiteness of Ishmael's meditations in *Moby-Dick*: "a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink" (212). What better metaphor for Gary than "colorless, all-color"? The novel details him to the extent that he becomes illegible. And yet the metaphor's aptness collapses Mailer's social specificity into the universal mysticism of whiteness for Melville. Gary too, in other words, can serve as a universal figure for epistemological uncertainty.¹²⁵

Gary's impenetrability, however, has as much to do with the color white as with his race, marked by his white supremacist attitudes in several moments of the novel: he addresses a Latino guard with racist slurs, brags of having stabbed a black convict, and writes to Nicole of his sympathy with the Confederacy. Though these incidents align him with the racism of Manson's Helter Skelter theory, the more prevailing function of racial whiteness in the novel is its alleged non-signification – the same that allows Gary to be as blank as the snow in Brenda's reflections and as universal a figure as *Moby-Dick*, despite the novel's social specificity. As much as the blankness of Gary motives, moreover, his supposed racial blankness affords his irreducibility to the narrative of *ressentiment*, despite Mailer's known fascination with that narrative. It is difficult to imagine the black psychopath Mailer describes in "The White Negro" making that same escape. A subject "hated from the outside and therefore hating himself" and "forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life," in Mailer's now widely criticized words, could never abscond from his positionality to become a universal signifier of epistemological uncertainty. As with Carver, Berlin, and Robinson's protagonists, the configuration of Gary's life as one of universal relevance exploits the supposed neutrality of whiteness.

Though it depends on the hegemony of Gary's racial position, his symbolic proximity to Iago and the whale is not quite the liberal humanist program of universalism. Rather, his refusal to answer Nielsen's question about his motives – or indeed, to answer any question with finality – is also a refusal to reproduce the middle class's desire for, and collaboration with, the myth of *ressentiment*.¹²⁶ Unlike Manson's, that is, Gary's rebuke of middle-class-ness does not simply shapeshift into another ideology endemic to his social context – that of unbridled individualism, celebrated in Mailer's earlier work. If Mailer previously dominated his New Journalistic projects, Gary overruns *him* in this later novel. And in doing so, he achieves a status unavailable to the other residents of Provo – the transcendence of both the conformity of middle-class proletarianization *and* the neoliberal politics of *ressentiment*.

CODA

THE FILMIC AFTERLIFE OF POSTMODERN REALISM

Ten years ago, A.O. Scott announced the arrival of a quiet but important trend in contemporary film: a movement he termed neo-neorealism in an article for the *New York Times Magazine* that has since garnered attention in several academic studies. According to Scott, the founding member of this movement was *Wendy and Lucy*, a 2008 film by American director Kelly Reichardt that enjoyed modest success in reviews and art-house theaters. The film tells the story of Wendy, a young woman from Indiana played by Michelle Williams, who drives West with her dog, Lucy, hoping to eventually find cannery work in Alaska. Wendy's plan goes awry when her car breaks down in Oregon, effectively ruining her careful budget, and she is forced to steal dog food from a supermarket – a petty crime for which she is caught, jailed, and separated from Lucy, her only companion. This classically naturalist plot – of an individual subject trapped by her social circumstances – most obviously thematizes the precarity of an economic crisis that had only just begun when the film came out. Scott notes that poverty was not an anomalous subject that year; the Academy's Best Picture, for example, was *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film that also represents an albeit very different kind of abjection. But he argues that while *Slumdog Millionaire* offers the fantasy of a popular culture that fulfills one's wildest dreams, *Wendy and Lucy* and its neo-neorealist cohort provide no such consolation – and perhaps rightly so:

For most of the past decade, magical thinking has been elevated from a diversion to an ideological principle. The benign faith that dreams will come true can be hard to distinguish from the more sinister seduction of believing in lies. To counter the tyranny of fantasy entrenched on Wall Street and in Washington as well as in Hollywood, it seems possible that engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy. Perhaps it would be worth considering that what we need from movies, in the face of a dismaying and confusing real world, is realism.

This account of contemporary politics and culture as a “tyranny of fantasy” bears no small resemblance to Lauren Berlant's now widely deployed notion of “cruel optimism”: the pervasive “sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment” (3). Moreover, the remedy that Scott finds in contemporary filmic realism is a cognate of what Berlant has called “the cinema of precarity, in which attention to a pervasive contemporary social precariousness marks a relation to [both] older traditions of neorealism . . . [and] new aesthetic forms” (Qtd. in Fusco and Seymour 10).

In examining the formal ties between neo-neorealist film and literary postmodern realism, I will briefly explore the idea that neo-neorealism generally, and *Wendy and Lucy* in particular, self-

consciously works against contemporary American cinema's addiction to specious wish fulfillment, by referencing its Italian predecessors' aesthetic strategies and concern with working-class precarity. In doing so, I suggest, the neo-neorealists often (though not always, as I will discuss) import an imaginary of proletarian or even sub-proletarian abjection to depict that of marginally better-off subjects like Wendy, who has lower-middle-class family back home in Indiana and invests in the idea of individual economic ascent. As in the dialectic of postmodern realism, this ahistorical connection between lower-middle-class American and blue-collar or sub-proletarian Italian characters is double-edged; even as films like *Wendy and Lucy* suggest a possible class alliance between these groups based in affective experience, they simultaneously erase material differences, in what amounts to a flattening of class disparity in favor of a universalized subjectivity. This erasure of difference is analogous to Ricky Allen's historical narrative of the way middle-class whites invoke poor white experience, and Nancy Isenberg's recent account of the "cult of the country boy" in popular culture (231). Both theorizations point to the exploitative nature of appropriating working-class experience. In the films, however, I recognize subtle but distinct moves toward a utopian – if highly provisional – reconfiguration of both the lower-middle-class and working-class or sub-proletariat. Like the neorealists before them, that is, neo-neorealists transcend an ideology of the individual subject – in a slim but politically significant re-imagining of class-consciousness.

In parsing the class politics of *Wendy and Lucy*, I am intentionally choosing a somewhat anomalous neo-neorealist film as my exemplar, since its protagonist is both lower-middle-class and white. The genre *does* include several representations of lower-middle-class whiteness, notably *Half Nelson* (2006) and *Short Term 12* (2013), which tell the stories of a white teacher and social worker respectively, and their affective connections to the youth of color at their institutions. Most of the films named in Scott's original formulation, however, represent working-class or sub-proletarian People of Color – for example, Ramin Bahrani's *Man Push Cart* (2005), *Chop Shop* (2007), and *Goodbye Solo* (2008); So Yong Kim's *In Between Days* (2006); and Lance Hammer's *Ballast* (2008). It would seem that by placing itself in dialogue with this cohort, Reichardt's film not only references an Italian working-class genre to represent a newly precarious subset of the middle class, but also reifies the American imaginary of an allegedly "white working class" – a term which, according to David Roediger, has historically obscured labor performed by workers of color and associated whiteness with a morally superior status. Reichardt's comments about her inspiration for *Wendy and Lucy* also seem to confirm this problematic portrayal of whiteness. In an interview with filmmaker Gus Van Sant, she remarked:

The seeds of *Wendy and Lucy* happened shortly after Hurricane Katrina, after hearing talk about people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, and hearing the presumption that people's lives were so precarious due to some laziness on their part. [Co-writer] Jon [Raymond] and I were musing on the idea of having no net – let's say your bootstraps floated away – how do you get out of your situation totally on your own without help from the government? We were watching a lot of Italian neorealism and thinking the themes of those films seem to ring true for life in America in the Bush years. There's a certain kind of help that society will give and a certain help it won't give. (Qtd. in Fusco and Seymour 37)

Though Wendy's bootstraps certainly do float away, to use Reichardt's metaphor, she is a white woman – and most of those whose possessions were submerged by Hurricane Katrina were black (37). Parsing this contradiction in their book on Reichardt's films, Katherine Fusco and Nicole Seymour suggest that recent accounts of the precariat to which Wendy belongs “cite the relatively new, and ‘surprising,’ precarity of white, middle-class citizens”; in pointing this out, they write,

we do not mean to suggest that race is irrelevant when it comes to situations of precarity. But Reichardt helps us see how, in contemporary states of emergency, the protections of race – and the class into which one was born, and aspiration, and hard work – may not be the reliable protections one might hope. (37)

Though Fusco and Seymour's commentary here conforms to a prevailing trend in the contemporary United States – granting more attention and importance to white distress than the ongoing oppression of People of Color – their argument indicates one potential of white economic crisis: that downwardly mobile white subjects might see themselves as more natural allies of workers of color rather than associates of the white elites who continue to hail them with the cruelly optimistic bootstraps narrative. (Of course, this is potential which has not yet played out in our current moment of right-wing populism.)

I would like to propose that the questions of white lower-middle-class identity formation at play in postmodern realism found an afterlife in neo-neorealist representation, during the ongoing canonization of Carver's “dirty realism” (minimalism) as a universalized aesthetic standard rather than a mode of representing a particular social reality. In 2014, for example, Carver's fiction made a surprising appearance at the Academy Awards. In *Birdman*, that year's Best Picture, his short story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” inspires a Broadway play by washed-up actor and would-be playwright Riggan Thomas. Both in the film and at the Awards that year, Carver's style and content – originally devoted to lower-middle-class experience in the ways I've described – was mobilized as a signifier for universal suffering. The film, that is, draws a generalizing parallel between Thomas' exhausted career and the social exhaustion of Carver's characters. The plot of *Birdman* is a microcosmic of dirty realism's more general contemporary reception – as several of its writers garnered support from the National Endowment for the Arts and were installed as standards in English and Creative Writing departments, their return to realism became an available mode for later writers portraying decidedly bourgeois characters via divergent engagements with realist style: Jonathan Franzen, Lorrie Moore, Jane Smiley, Jennifer Egan. But I claim that concern with white lower-middle-class social reality persists in neo-neorealist films of the early aughts like *Wendy and Lucy*, which with their low budgets, small production teams, and arthouse theater runs, are proximate to Carver's cultural status before his canonization. Moreover, just as dirty realism of the seventies and eighties referenced an earlier realist form in representing white lower-middle-class subjects, so a particular set of neo-neorealist films mobilize the style of their Italian predecessors in order to map the lower-middle-class onto an earlier moment of class struggle.

As defined by Andre Bazin and exemplified by Vittorio De Sica's films, neorealism is characterized by long takes, long shots, deep focus, the absence of flashbacks or flash-forwards, simple plots, a slack sense of causality, limited geography or temporality, concern with poverty, on-location shooting, and what Scott calls representation of "the world as it" (Fusco and Seymour 22). These are all features common to both Reichardt's directing and neorealist classics like De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) or *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). In the latter, much like Wendy, the protagonist Antonio is thrown into turmoil when his bicycle is stolen and, as a result, he risks losing his new job putting up movie posters. And just as much of *Wendy and Lucy* revolves around Wendy's search for her lost dog, most of *Bicycle Thieves* transpires as Antonio searches for the stolen bicycle.¹²⁷ Though *Wendy and Lucy*'s small-town Oregon setting makes it much quieter than De Sica's portrayal of the urban grind of Rome, the images that establishes the hopelessness of Wendy's search for Lucy closely resemble those that portray the fruitlessness of Antonio's search for his bicycle. Sequences from both films, for example, alternate between deep focus on the protagonists' hopeless faces and an endless stream of bicycle parts and dogs at the pound respectively, which could be theirs but turn out not to be. Though Antonio is a worker of the devastated postwar Italian economy and Wendy is a lower-middle-class American woman struggling to find employment, the troubles of both are rendered equivalent by their affective responses to a crushing realization: their struggles are not novel but rather indistinguishable from a more general crisis.

The devastation of finding that one's plight and its abiding affect are collective rather than singular is yet another of the protagonists' common experiences. Throughout *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio is physically separated from – though threatened to be overtaken by – masses of people who are seeking work, boarding public transport, bicycling, etc., a directing choice that signals his unwillingness to see himself as part of a collective experience. Put differently, though his circumstances are in every way working-class, his affect is that of aspiration to middle-class means and "morality": he revels in the policeman-like uniform of his new position, insists on taking his son Bruno to a restaurant frequented by bourgeois customers, though he can by no means afford it, and even refuses to jeopardize his credibility by denouncing the man who stole his bicycle, whom he and Bruno finally locate, since he has no witnesses to confirm the accusation. Ironically, the sub-proletarian community who protect this thief – perhaps more cognizant of their material circumstances within economic structures – enjoy the community, even solidarity, which elude Antonio and his family. Wendy also conceives of her own positionality as upwardly mobile, despite material evidence to the contrary: she refuses the community of more seasoned transients who have previously worked in canneries, seems undeterred by the laments of a security guard she befriends (who explains the area's declining economy after a mill closure), and gives away the cans she has gathered to a group of homeless men, in seeming denial of the fact that she is also effectively homeless.

Finally, both Antonio and Wendy, are eventually rendered equivalent to the very sub-proletarian lives from which they strive to distance themselves. In the climatic moment of *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio himself decides to attempt bicycle theft rather than lose his job and, though he is caught, narrowly escapes legal consequences when his accuser decides to take pity and let Antonio go. Though we might read this moment as a karmic return for Antonio's leniency with the man who took his own bike, I think the opposite is true: depending on another's charity completes his affective

transformation into sub-proletarian subject. The film ends with alternating shots of Bruno's horrified face as he witnesses these developments, and Antonio's own ashamed countenance. The occasion for Wendy's transformation is different, but its effects are the same: when she finally locates Lucy, who is being fostered in a middle-class suburb, she realizes that Lucy's new circumstances will be happier and decides to leave the dog behind. (In the interim, Wendy has learned that she cannot afford to fix her car and will now have to train hop to Alaska.) Though Wendy promises to return and speaks of her plight as an accident ("I'm sorry, Lu, I lost the car," she says), the dog's sad whining and Wendy's tears confirm the likely truth – that this goodbye is final and that therefore Wendy is materially different from the middle-class man who becomes Lucy's new owner.

But Antonio and Wendy's proximate shame in the face of their respective crises elides an important difference between them. Though both face homelessness at the end of their stories, Antonio has no way out of his circumstances, whereas Wendy could likely call her married lower-middle-class sister back in Indiana (which she actually does earlier in the film) and borrow the money to take a train home. If Wendy's class shame is any example, her sister would likely hand over the money rather than become a woman with a homeless, train-hopping relation. We might even read Wendy's refusal to solicit this charity as the remnants of her middle-class aspiring pride. Put more simply, there are both material and historical differences between a laborer in postwar Italy and downwardly mobile lower-middle-class American woman of the twenty-first century, who refuses to accept the bankruptcy of her own cruel optimism. The consolidation of these identities in Reichardt's plot and cinematography risks the kind of universalizing characteristic of *Birdman's* appropriation of Carver. Perhaps even more problematically, her invocation of working-class experience seems consonant with the romanticization of the "redneck" or "country boy" that Isenberg describes. Moreover, it parallels Allen's accusation in "What About Poor White People?" – that affluent white subjects often invoke poor white experience as a way of disavowing their own racial privilege by turning to a discourse of class. These critiques ring true to me – and yet, I wonder if the sliver of possibility offered by films like Reichardt's might begin to envision a solidarity between lower-middle-class whites and working-class whites or People of Color. In other words, these shifts in class affect, for all their elision of material difference, begin to detect and reimagine the precarity of lower-middle-classness, in an economic moment analogous to that of postmodern realism – and even as many lower-middle-class whites refuse to.

NOTES

Introduction: Detail, Elision, and the White Lower Middle Class

¹ See, for example, Francoise Samarcelli and Phillip Simmons for discussions of Carver and minimalism respectively as postmodern fiction.

² Harker cites Raymond Williams' term, "structure of feeling," in explaining this dynamic (724).

³ Mark McGurl refers to Carver's stories as part of "lower-middle-class modernism." When John Alton suggested that Carver wrote about the lower middle class rather than the working class in a 1986 interview, Carver bristled, responding "Working class, lower-middle class, sure" (Qtd. in Harker 716). As Harker points out, this response indicated that the distinction was not meaningful for Carver, who emphasized his working-class roots (716). My own analysis will consider the proximity between working-class and lower-middle-class existence as a site of possible, though unrealized, solidarity between those positions.

⁴ See the chapter "Apocalypse Now," of Lawrence Samuel's *The American Middle Class*, 68-91.

⁵ For an account of this labor history, see Jefferson Cowie.

⁶ Harker also notes this privatization of economic hardship, relying on the working-class attitudes described in Stanley Aronowitz's *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working-Class Consciousness* (1973). I instead explain the characters' private responses to precarity as a function of their lower-middle-class-ness, despite the middle class's white-collar proletarianization during the post-war period. For a detailed history of white-collar proletarianization and its representations in postwar literature, see Andrew Hoberek's *The Twilight of the Middle Class*. Harker alludes to the proletarianization of the professional managerial class (718-19) but takes it as a reason to conflate working-class and white-collar feeling in his analysis of Carver's stories.

⁷ Drew Desilver of the Pew Research Center notes that the average wage growth in the United States has not kept pace with inflation, resulting in stagnant real wages since 1973 for all but the highest income levels.

⁸ Harker notes a similar difference between progressive-era realism and Carver's, but, again, attributes it to a reduction in working-class-consciousness rather than lower-middle-class downward mobility: "Whereas a fully functional set of already codified narrative strategies and conventions are in place to explain and give narrative form to his father's experiences – including 1930s working-class fiction – no such conventions are available to represent Carver's own generation" (724).

⁹ Harker also references this history in terms of reduced working-class consciousness. See note 6.

¹⁰ Moreover, perhaps in symbolic acknowledgment of the distinction between older working-class and lower-middle-class consciousness, the grandmother is the only character interested in locating the baby in a history older than his parents' generation ("'He has his grandfather's lips,' the grandmother said, 'Look at those lips'" [33]).

¹¹ See David Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness* and Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*.

¹² Social theorists like Sara Ahmed and bell hooks have noted that for African Americans and other People of Color, whiteness has always been violently visible rather than a neutral identity, as I will discuss in the first chapter.

¹³ See Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II*.

¹⁴ While one could also perform a meaningful analysis of the rejection (or embrace) of the struggle for gender equality in the genre I will call “postmodern realism,” my own argument will be limited to race and class.

¹⁵ Critics as varied in methodology as Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon have described postmodern as the mixing of modes and genres.

¹⁶ Rebein even calls *The Joy Luck Club* a “hybrid” of realism and genres like folklore and mythology (39).

¹⁷ See Mark McGurl for a history of the MFA’s propagation of dirty realism, which he terms “lower-middle-class modernism,” as mentioned in note 3.

¹⁸ While Clifford notes the contributions of Tylor and Boas, for him the true professionalization of ethnographic practice begins with Malinowski cohort. However, I find it important to include professionalizing efforts of the nineteenth century, since they were contemporary to the realist novels discussed in this introduction.

¹⁹ For additional accounts of the relationship between detail and ethnographic authority, see James Buzard’s *The Beaten Track*, 172-92, and *Disorienting Fiction*, 26, and Clifford Geertz’s *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, 3.

²⁰ Importantly, Clifford also discusses several other features of early twentieth-century ethnography that made the claim to authority alongside detailedness – for example, the practice of participant observation.

²¹ See Lukács, *The Historical Novel*.

²² See Lukács, “Narrate or describe?”

²³ “This realist consensus is in some ways a profoundly self-reflexive device, because it calls attention to the act of [rationalizing sight] itself rather than the objects used to specify that act” (Ermath 21).

²⁴ See Zola, “The Experimental Novel.”

²⁵ *L’Assommoir* is considered a canonical example of naturalism, a late nineteenth-century outcropping of realism critiqued by Lukács in “Narrate or describe?”

1 Particular Invisibility: Auto-Ethnographic Deconstructions of Whiteness

²⁶ I cite Louis C.K. by his real name, Louis Székely.

²⁷ Arguably, the project of ethnographically depicting whiteness originates much farther back – with W.E.B. Du Bois, or perhaps even in slave narrative. The heuristic of “privilege,” however, rather than supremacy or dominance, is more particular to contemporary critique.

²⁸ See Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto*.

²⁹ See “Presidential Election Results,” *The New York Times*.

³⁰ See Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto*, and Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*.

³¹ Though it’s too early to definitively say, the critical study of whiteness in American literature may be on the upswing since the 2016 election, as suggested by Steven Delmagori’s “Super Deluxe

Whiteness: Privilege Critique in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*" (2018) and Claire Cothren's "Aesthetics of Whiteness: Racial Hierarchies in Fitzgerald, Hurston, and Beyond" (2019).

³² See Sharon Desmond Paradiso's "Eula's American Dream: White Womanhood in Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy."

³³ The special issue includes articles on the legacy of Huckleberry Finn, Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, the African-American writer George Shuyler, the Irish-American writer Mary Gordon, biracial identity in Danzy Senna, "white trash" in the work of Dorothy Allison, and the practice of teaching whiteness.

³⁴ Interestingly, "white" does appear as a self-referential racial marker in some stories, like "Here It Is Saturday," first published in the 1990s – during the rise of whiteness studies.

³⁵ See Felski, "Nothing to Declare," 43.

2 'Inside anything': The Evacuation of Commodified Space in Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral'

³⁶ Here Just alludes to Carver's remark in "On Writing": in what Carver calls "clear and specific language," "words can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes" (18).

³⁷ See Harker, 730.

³⁸ The story was republished as "Little Things" in Carver's 1988 collection *Where I'm Calling From*.

³⁹ *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) was published with the editor Gordon Lish, now understood to have coerced Carver into a more extreme minimalism than he wanted. For more on this controversy, see Arthur Bethea's *Technique and Sensibility in the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver*.

⁴⁰ See Carver, "My Father's Life."

4 'Perhaps only from watching gulls fly': Critical Protestantism in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

⁴¹ The only hard and fast historical signifier in the novel is *Not as a Stranger*, a bestseller published in 1954 that Ruth happens to be reading as a young girl (Magagna 369).

⁴² See Magagna, 347.

⁴³ Esteve also identifies this hybridity, but does not consider its function a critical or progressive one: the novel's "double-stranded form" – consisting of "speculation" and "realistic idiom" – "both facilitates and obscures its regressive ethical and economic vision" (225). I will address her assessment of the novel in the section titled "Ruth's hybrid description."

⁴⁴ See Bergthaller and Esteve, who both use the words "speculative," "speculate," or "speculation" to describe this aspect of the narration; unlike them, I take the term speculative – and the description to which it refers – as the centerpiece of my argument about Ruth's critical function in the novel, performed through her hybridity as a narrator.

⁴⁵ Milbank, Pecora, and Taylor exemplify this line of postsecular thought.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Bergthaller, Florby, Hartshorne, and Ravits, though for the last two *Housekeeping* is a feminist reworking of Transcendentalism.

⁴⁷ For Douglas, Robinson's new stridency in imagining a liberal Christian alternative responds to the solidification of the conservative Christian right in the decades between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* (91).

⁴⁸ See Balmer and Marsden for two recent accounts of this history.

⁴⁹ Bendroth provides the following description of Congregationalists at the emergence of twentieth-century fundamentalism: "Somewhere in between [...] absolute faith or absolute doubt [turn-of-the-century] Protestant laypeople continued to attend church, listen to sermons, and teach their children the tenets of Christianity. Even Congregationalists, generally more liberal than most, still enjoyed many of the traditional evangelical pieties they had inherited from their parents and grandparents" (112).

⁵⁰ The movement, which became international, is centered around three organizations: the International Convention of Faith Ministries (1979, Arlington, Texas), The Rhema Ministerial Alliance International (1985, Tulsa, Oklahoma), and the Fellowship of Inner-City Word of Faith Ministries (1990, Los Angeles) (Brekus 295).

⁵¹ For a reading of Harrison as allusive to both rural vulnerability and settler colonialism, see Magagna, 353.

⁵² "Engendering acts of human and natural violence, the landscape that encompasses the small town simply seems unsuitable to human habitation. The people themselves hold onto their place – and perhaps to their own humanity – by their very fingertips" (Magagna 351).

⁵³ Esteve notes that Ruth's tone here is one of "bemusement" (220), which signals early on her distance from the grandmother's attitudes.

⁵⁴ See, for example, 45, 57, 84-9, 99-103, 130-2, 136-7, 151-2.

⁵⁵ By the end of the novel, this indifference to the elements has rubbed off on Ruth; she claims that "if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort," or that "hunger has its pleasures," or that there is liberation in "breaking the tethers of need, one by one" (204). Esteve disparages the politics of this disregard for the material, also referencing Sylvie's lack of consideration for the fisherman who owns the boat they stole.

⁵⁶ See Esteve, 238.

⁵⁷ "Have you seen any of [the children]?" Ruth asks; "I think I have," Sylvie replies (148).

⁵⁸ See Esteve, Mîle, and Kaviola. The latter admits that "the text asks us to consider whether Ruth's decision to follow Sylvie and become transient, to exist without community and beyond rituals of nurturing and sustenance, is indeed just about the 'worst possible thing' that could have happened," that being death (672). Ultimately, however, Kaviola's conclusion is that "Structurally similar to Ruth's grandmother's indiscriminateness and Sylvie's housekeeping, the text itself accumulates details, but not in service of one particular way of seeing the world it presents" (674).

⁵⁹ Some critics – Bergthaller and Toles, for example – leave open the possibility that Ruth is dead and narrating from the beyond, a reading sustained by the at times universalized, even disembodied (see Mîle), quality of her description.

⁶⁰ See Bergthaller, Florby, Hartshorne, Liscio, and Ravits.

⁶¹ As specified in 14, Esteve detects a note of irony ("bemusement") in Ruth's tone when she describes her grandmother, also present in some descriptions of the town or its inhabitants – for example, the library's Dewey Decimal System to which I refer.

⁶² Magagna describes the sheriff as a performative representation of Western settlement (353).

⁶³ A similar contrast between ethnographically depicted social contexts and more accommodating natural environments exists in the American realist novels that succeeded Transcendentalism. For example, despite all their obvious differences, Ruth is not unlike Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening* (1899), a work of American regionalism that also turns on a woman who drowns herself as Ruth's mother does. Like Fingerbone, the Gulf of Mexico (where Edna spends her summers) and her upper-middle-class home in New Orleans come into specific focus via ethnographic detail, though primarily to suggest their hostility to her own instincts. The natural environment offers a romantic reprieve from this social context, as when Edna decides to sleep outside in an act of rebellion against her husband, or leaves church one Sunday to spend the morning by the sea with Robert, her would-be lover. Even on the day of Edna's suicide, the sea beckons to her self-destructive desires (220), an episode that exemplifies moments of both *The Awakening* and *Housekeeping* in which nature and the subject mystically relate. Echoing a Whitmanian trope, the sea is personified as a lover – its waters “seductive,” “inviting” (220). In both novels, similar moments not only engage with Romantic or Transcendentalist aesthetics, but also use this engagement to comment directly on the realistically portrayed social context. While *The Awakening* invokes a generic mysticism in the service of this effect, *Housekeeping*, via Ruth's speculative description and the social context, relocates her encounters with nature in a Christian tradition.

⁶⁴ Hartshorne points out that many clear parallels exist between the content of Ruth's life and that of the most central Transcendentalist thinkers: for example, like her and Sylvie, Thoreau lives in relative isolation by a lake, describes an imaginary family living in the woods (whose “coat of arms is simply a lichen”), idealizes the man “not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries,” and recommends the practice of the “busk” in which discarded items are “cast together in one common heap, and consum[ed] [...] with fire,” as Ruth and Sylvie's house is at the end of the novel (53-5). These quotes come from “Walking,” *Walden*, and “Economy” respectively. Liscio finds similar parallels between *Housekeeping* and Wordsworth's oeuvre: like Ruth, he recalls ice-skating, a groaning frozen lake after torrential rain, and a canoe trip in a stolen boat (146).

⁶⁵ This quote comes from Emerson's “Nature” and is cited by Bergthaller, 79.

⁶⁶ See 124 for a similar moment of description.

⁶⁷ Christian divinity that is evident in the natural world also aligns with Calvinist theology. For Calvin, “nature” includes the human mind and body, as in the following quotation cited in Robinson's “Marguerite de Navarre”: “[men] substitute nature for God. But such agile motions of the soul, such excellent faculties, such rare gifts, especially bear upon the face of them a divinity that does not allow itself to be readily hidden” (183).

⁶⁸ For Hartshorne and Ravits, *Housekeeping* is a feminist reworking of a patriarchal tradition. Liscio makes a similar argument about the novel's relation to Wordsworthian Romanticism: “Robinson places herself within the tradition of Wordsworth's lyrical epic in order to honor his blend of the ordinary and the rhetorical sublime as well as to establish the outdatedness of its male economy of dramatic ups and downs [the sublime], possession and loss” (143).

⁶⁹ See, for example, 70, 92, 154.

⁷⁰ Ruth and Sylvie spend a cold and exhausting night out on the lake, during which their boat nearly capsizes and sinks (161-71).

⁷¹ Robinson notes that this makes historical sense, since during Calvin's life "the art of making glass mirrors was newly recovered and flaws and distortions would have been inevitable" (221). These passages from the second part of "Marguerite de Navarre" could also support a reading of the face in the broken window as the face of God.

⁷² In essays Bergthaller does not cite, Emerson identifies a similar instability in the mind's relationship to the natural world. In "Circles" (1841), for example, he writes that "we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding" (258). Apparent affinities between the mind and nature are only "approximate" indications of a "deeper law" (258). He remains quite convinced, however, about divine omnipresence and the "eternal generation of the soul" as "higher fact" (258), in contrast to Ruth's markedly frightened speculations about the "terrible" beyond. Moreover, Robinson's remarks about Calvinism in "Marguerite de Navarre II" and the Protestantism of the novel's social context both suggest that she is locating Ruth's undecided-ness in a more distinctly Christian lineage than Emerson's generalized mysticism.

⁷³ Transcendentalism itself developed in opposition to both positivist and dogmatic belief systems, a contrast which the speculative quality of Ruth's meditations amplifies.

⁷⁴ Toles associates this universal quality with Mikhail Bakhtin's account of scripture as "absolute utterance," which "can only be cited, and recited. When spoken, it belongs to no one" (Morson qtd. in Toles 148). The universal "no one" of Ruth's voice is particularly evident in some critics' suggestion that Ruth may be narrating from the afterlife (including Toles').

⁷⁵ It's worth noting, however, that the "old women," still suggest a gendered subjectivity, despite the universalizing depiction here. Robinson emphasizes the value of the universal in Calvin's theology: "The vision of the unworthy soul in an unmediated encounter with Christ, for all the world as if there were no other souls in the universe whether more or less worthy, as if there were no time, no history, certainly neither merit nor extenuation – this is the classic Calvinist posture" ("Marguerite II" 218). Moreover, before God, "there is no meaningful distinction to be made between one soul and the next – each one is simple, absolute soul, and as if the only soul. This is heaven without hierarchy, a very revolutionary idea" (225). Just as Ruth's existence is unbearably lonely, there is something quite desolate about the idea of feeling like "the only soul."

⁷⁶ Here Ruth also resembles Emerson and Thoreau, whose aesthetics always have a philosophical function.

⁷⁷ See, for example, "Humanism," "Human Nature, and "The Givenness of Things."

⁷⁸ See, for example, the introduction to *Absence of Mind*.

⁷⁹ Interestingly, Robinson's method in her nonfiction might be described as dialectical. In her introduction to *The Death of Adam* (1998), for example, she claims that the volume's essays "assert, in one way or another, that the prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong, and that its opposite, being its image or shadow, can also be assumed to be wrong. They undertake to demonstrate that there are other ways of thinking, for which better arguments can be made" (1).

⁸⁰ John Milbank also argues that much of secular thought covertly assumes an irreducible beyond, but emphasizes secularism's desire to "police" where and how this beyond fits into public discourse: "religion is regarded [...] as belonging to the Kantian sublime [...] a realm of ineffable majesty beyond the bounds of the possibility of theoretical knowledge, a domain which cannot be imaginatively

represented, and yet whose overwhelming presences can be acknowledged by our frustrated imaginative powers” (104).

⁸¹ Robinson herself is very interested in recuperating political meanings counter to the prevalent ones found in Christian theology – particularly in Calvin, whom she considers central to the formation of Western democracy, despite the fact that he is widely considered a social reactionary: “We tend to imagine that political culture must in effect be inherited, passively received. This assumption has as a corollary the notion that the social order will sustain itself if we do not think and theorize about it, and in any case will not benefit if we do” (“Marguerite” 178). Later in the same essay, she writes that “If subsequent generations found in [Calvin] a pretext for misogyny or rapacity or contempt for humankind, as historians sometimes claim, it is surely because they were determined to find one. They could easily have found pretexts in his theology for acting well, if they had wanted one” (187).

⁸² Magagna also notes the parallel displacements of the two protagonists and the Native American population (368-9).

⁸³ See Dayton quoted in Sweeney, 21-2.

4 ‘With her little finger sticking out’: Ethnography as a Race and Class Relation in Alice Walker

⁸⁴ Walker’s most canonical novel, *The Color Purple*, is also highly indebted to Hurston’s study of folklore and dialectic.

⁸⁵ See Applegarth, LaMothe, and Nwankwo.

⁸⁶ See LaMothe, 20, 143, 159.

⁸⁷ Such studies include Dell Hymes’ edited volume, *Reinventing Anthropology* (1974), and Roy Wagner’s *The Invention of Culture* (1975).

⁸⁸ Other volumes and studies of this nature include Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988), Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1989), Faye Harrison’s *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation* (1997), and George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer’s *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (1999).

⁸⁹ See LaMothe and Applegarth.

⁹⁰ “By linking her text so closely with a community that is never willing to completely expose itself to scrutiny, Hurston subtly challenges the assumption that one can attain complete, unmediated access to this culture by reading the ethnographic narrative” (LaMothe 2).

⁹¹ In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston also registers the proximity of Native American and Southern blacks in their response to ethnographic treatment: “The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries” (2-3).

⁹² Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo observes similar ethnographic strategies in Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*, in her article “Insider and Outsider, Black and American: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston’s Caribbean Ethnography.”

⁹³ “De sow milk wore outa mah eyes gradual lak, but Ah seen dat wind fo’ more’n a week. Dey had to blindfold me tuh keep me from runnin’ wild” (*Mules and Men* 128).

⁹⁴ Walker herself writes of the great influence *Mules and Men* had on her writing and life: “Condemned to a desert island for life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora’s: *Mules and Men*, because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth; and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (*Mothers’ Gardens* 86).

⁹⁵ For a discussion of how gender problematizes Black Nationalism in Walker’s fiction, see Davis, Korenman, and Yoon. Their arguments are analogous to my own about the function of class in constructing “postcolonial hybridity.”

⁹⁶ See Bauer and Tuten.

⁹⁷ “Cultural tourist” is Romine’s vocabulary for describing what he sees as overly simplistic readings of Dee’s character.

⁹⁸ The story often points at Dee’s parallel urge to educate Mama and Maggie. In documenting her mother and sister, Dee is a student of sorts; in reading to them, she becomes a teacher. Yet both capacities have the same effect: “She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn’t necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand” (50). By offering the same knowledge that has proved empowering in her own cultural context, Dee is coercing Mama and Maggie in the guise of benevolence: they are forced, “washed,” “burned,” “pressed,” and “sitting trapped” – just as Mama was sitting before the camera. Their stereotypically Samba-like response to her instruction, in other words, is the same they exhibit toward her arrival. But significantly, by Mama’s account of this educational scene, they are “dimwits” only when they “seemed about to understand” – that is, in their willingness to accept Dee’s knowledge rather than in their ignorance. The subtle distinction Mama draws here reveals a slim critical distance that only widens as the story progresses.

⁹⁹ “Every dialect is a new way of thinking [...] And the fact that the newly returned Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation” (Fanon 25).

¹⁰⁰ This point references the claim that Mama’s art (quilting) “is not defined by social institutions such as art museums, books reviews, and art dealers” (Baker qtd. in Whisitt 452).

¹⁰¹ See Farrell and Mullins.

¹⁰² Farrell also points out this similarity.

¹⁰³ Admitting the increasingly evident affinity between Mama and Dee, Faith Pullin proposes that “the mother is ... the true African here, since the concept of art for art’s sake is foreign to Africa – all objects are for use. Dee has ... taken over a very Western attitude towards art and its material value” (Qtd. in Cowart 185).

¹⁰⁴ See Farrell.

¹⁰⁵ Mullins describes this un-decidability in his case for surface reading; literary texts, he suggests, perform a self-reflexive critique, which the reader need only make evident.

¹⁰⁶ See Lambert for an argument about folkloric form in *The Color Purple*. Unlike me, he reads the adoption of folklore as a kind of wishful thinking collaborative with capitalist logic.

¹⁰⁷ Davis and Korenman provide an overview of the gendered nature of this oppression and its representation in contemporary black literature and Walker's oeuvre respectively.

¹⁰⁸ See Collins for a similar reading of form in Walker's novel *Meridian*.

5 The Whiteness of the Convict: *Ressentiment* and Uncertainty in *Helter Skelter* and *The Executioner's Song*

¹⁰⁹ Throughout this chapter, I will use last names when referring to a person's biography and first names when referring to their representation in the novel, in keeping with its frequent use of first names.

¹¹⁰ April was also raped multiple times during this bad acid trip.

¹¹¹ See Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, 623.

¹¹² "I was making up for the mistakes that I'd been criticized for," Schiller told Jeff Severs in 2007 (Severs 89).

¹¹³ Some Family members claim they actually killed 35-40 people (Bugliosi 625).

¹¹⁴ A 2019 book by the journalist Tom O'Neill, *Chaos: Charles Manson, the CIA, and the Secret History of the Sixties*, proposes that there may have been a (possibly CIA) cover-up of evidence that contradicts the narrative told by Bugliosi.

¹¹⁵ A group of Family members lived for some time with Dennis Wilson, even borrowing his car to make scavenging runs at supermarkets; according to one lawyer, Family associate Danny DeCarlo remembered an occasion "when, to the astonishment of supermarket employees, the girls had driven up in Dennis Wilson's Rolls-Royce" (Bugliosi 238).

¹¹⁶ Mary Harron's film, *Charlie Says*, was also released in September 2018.

¹¹⁷ For a different Marxist account of *ressentiment*, see Jameson's "Authentic *Ressentiment*: Generic Discontinuities and Ideologemes in the 'Experimental' Novels of George Gissing," in *The Political Unconscious*.

¹¹⁸ As Berstein himself notes, though Manson is not a textual character, he self-consciously fashions himself as such, not least in the testimony I've cited.

¹¹⁹ See Hoberek, "Liberal Anti-liberalism" and Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas*.

¹²⁰ Bugliosi repeatedly complains about the incompetency of LAPD during the Manson investigation, e.g. 286.

¹²¹ See, for example, Joseph Comprone, John Brenkman, and Andrew Wilson.

¹²² Being Mormon involves belief in the immortal permanency of one's marriage, particularly poignant since Nicole's marriages, and those of her family members, are far from mortally permanent; "[Colleen and Max Jensen] were going to be married in time and eternity, married not only in this life, but as each of them had explained to many a Sunday School class, married in death as well, for the souls of the husband and wife would meet again in eternity and be together forever. In fact, marriage in other Christian churches was practically equal to divorce, since such marriages were only made until parting by death. That was what Max and Colleen had taught their students. Now they were marrying each other. Forever" (*ES* 221).

¹²³ A similar passage on Colleen Jensen reveals equal contempt for the Mormon middle-class, and perhaps also a snobbery on Mailer's part vis-à-vis their petite bourgeois tastes: "[Colleen] had once been told she looked like a Botticelli. She was tall and slender, and had light brown hair, ivory skin, and a long well-shaped nose with a small bump on the bridge. Yet she hardly knew Botticelli's work. They did not teach a great deal about the Renaissance at Utah State in Logan where she was majoring in art education" (*ES* 217).

¹²⁴ At times Gary's assessments of his own potentials also smack of the immortal; warned by Spencer that someone would give him a beating if he continued his violent behavior, Gary remarks, "I'm Gary Gilmore ... and they can't hurt me" (*ES* 161).

¹²⁵ An unidentified audience member at the 2013 meeting of the International Norman Mailer Society asked Jerome Loving and J. Michael Lennon the following question during a panel discussion of *The Executioner's Song* and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925): "it seems to me in *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer really comes to say 'I don't have an answer,' it's like *Moby-Dick*, he looks at Gary from all sides: the law, psychology, the media ... did you feel Dreiser in *An American Tragedy* felt he did understand and the critique is stronger?" (Loving and Lennon 83-84).

¹²⁶ Gilmore's celebrity did endure after his execution; years later, for example, he would be installed in Madame Tussaud's, where every three minutes his effigy was executed by an invisible firing squad (Edmundson 436). He was also commemorated in the single "Gary Gilmore's Eyes" by the punk rock band the Adverts (1977). But unlike Manson's professed criminal nonconformity, it was Gary's willingness to die for his crimes that would install him as a cultural icon.

Coda: The Filmic Afterlife of Postmodern Realism

¹²⁷ The plot of searching for a lost dog also recalls the father's search for the dog he abandoned in Carver's "Jerry, Molly, and Sam."

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