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Crime Fiction and Black Criminality

Theodore Martin*

*Nor was I up to being both criminal and detective—though why criminal
I didn't know.*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

1. The Criminal Type

A remarkable number of US literature's most recognizable criminals reside in mid-twentieth-century fiction. Between 1934 and 1958, James M. Cain gave us Frank Chambers and Walter Huff; Patricia Highsmith gave us Charles Bruno and Tom Ripley; Richard Wright gave us Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon; Jim Thompson gave us Lou Ford and Doc McCoy; Dorothy B. Hughes gave us Dix Steele. Many other once-estimable authors of the middle decades of the century—like Horace McCoy, Vera Caspary, Charles Willeford, and Willard Motley—wrote novels centrally concerned with what it felt like to be a criminal. What, it is only natural to wonder, was this midcentury preoccupation with crime all about?

Consider what midcentury crime fiction was not about: detectives. Although scholars of twentieth-century US literature often use the phrases *crime fiction* and *detective fiction* interchangeably, the detective and the criminal were, by midcentury, the anchoring protagonists of two distinct genres. While hardboiled detectives continued to dominate the literary marketplace of pulp magazines and paperback originals in the 1940s and 1950s, they were soon accompanied on the shelves by a different kind of crime fiction, which was

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less concerned with the solving of crime than with the experience of committing it.¹

The subgenre often referred to as the “noir” novel or the crime thriller—defined here as crime fiction that swapped out the detective’s perspective for the criminal’s—had a number of cultural antecedents.² Midcentury crime novels owed a debt to noir films of the 1940s, whose protagonists were often embattled or unwitting criminals; to the detective fiction invented and popularized in the pulps of the 1920s and 1930s, whose heroes were often partially outside the law; and to the expansive landscape of magazine culture preoccupied with sensationalist accounts of crime, which, as Paula Rabinowitz recounts, created a “working-class reading public . . . immersed in the language of crime reporting” (44). Nevertheless, readers in the pulp era hesitated to sympathize with unreconstructed criminals. The editor and anthologist Otto Penzler notes that this audience “didn’t mind criminals as central characters just so long as they stole from the rich.” To this end, Penzler explains, a criminal could “salvag[e] himself to some degree by swearing . . . that he never shot anyone” (571). It took a slow drip of more serious and celebrated true crime novels—most notably, Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925), Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (first published serially in 1936), and Wright’s *Native Son* (1940)—to establish the criminal’s point of view as a standard feature of twentieth-century US literature. From there, more and more novelists went on to position the consciousness of the criminal as the proper subject of the crime novel.

Why did this intensified focus on criminality appeal to writers and readers alike? In what follows, I argue that midcentury crime fiction took shape primarily in response to midcentury discourses of racialized crime. Crime, of course, has been a perennial preoccupation for US literature and a key term in the drama of US democracy since the founding of the republic. There is, however, a more specific story to tell about crime fiction in the 1940s and 1950s, as novelists began to explore what it meant to inhabit the perspective of the criminal at precisely the moment when discourses of criminality gained renewed traction as responses to the second Great Migration and the emergence of the Civil Rights movement. In the thick of a historical moment whose racial and economic upheavals found common expression in the language of crime, the crime novel became a key site for investigating how the narration of crime might be linked to the criminalization of race.

Midcentury crime fiction can thus be read as a genre not merely about individual crimes but about the process of criminalization itself. This process of ascription has long been central to the

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production of US ideas about race. From the reaction to newly freed slaves and newly arrived immigrants in the nineteenth century to the construction of the category of the “illegal alien” in the twentieth, the designation of particular population groups as inherently criminal is a key way that racial difference has acquired and sustained its meaning throughout US history.³ If criminalization and racialization are two sides of the same coin, that coin was a particularly important currency in the realm of midcentury public life, when the obsession with crime among liberals as well as conservatives functioned both as an expression of anxiety about the prospect of black civil rights and as a strategy for disavowing the realities of racially segregated urban poverty. At a moment when crime and race were publicly bound together, crime fiction could not avoid the uncomfortable yet implacable fact that being black in the US was often synonymous with being seen as a criminal. The widespread cultural circulation of preconceptions about black criminality posed a pair of particularly live and urgent questions for crime writers of the period. What did it mean to write about crime in the shadow of postwar racial politics? And to what extent did crime stories threaten to perpetuate the dynamics of racial criminalization? These questions, and the variety of literary responses they engendered, helped define the distinctive midcentury genre of novels about criminals.

Here I may appear to be making a claim too obvious or overly literal to need saying: *crime fiction was about crime*. This impression would seem to be compounded by the equally obvious point that *crime was about race* in the twentieth century. The aim of this essay, however, is to show how such obviousness posed a problem for midcentury writers themselves. Indeed, it was precisely the presumed obviousness and cultural obstinacy of both of these apparent equivalences that midcentury crime novelists found themselves obliged to address. The literary project of the midcentury crime novel was shaped by a set of social givens that crime novelists did not wish to submit to yet could not wish away. The troubling obviousness of the two too-literal correspondences that are essential to historicizing midcentury crime fiction—between crime fiction and crime and between crime and race—was thus the very problem motivating the genre itself. As we shall see, however, if the problem was obvious, the genre’s responses to it were anything but.

To establish how midcentury crime fiction consciously situated itself against the backdrop of blackness, we can begin with a well-known midcentury novel readily assumed to be all about criminality and not at all about racial criminality. Highsmith’s *Strangers on a Train* (1950) opens when the architect Guy Haines meets the wealthy and Oedipally afflicted young man Charles Bruno. They strike up a conversation, during which Bruno offhandedly suggests that

they plan the perfect double murder. Guy at first finds the proposition ludicrous as well as alarming, only to find himself inexorably drawn into Bruno's scheme. At the end of the novel, overcome by guilt over the murder he committed for Bruno, Guy turns himself in.

Guilt, neurosis, repression, self-consciousness: these are the representative modes of inner life that, in *Strangers on a Train*, register deviance, abnormality, and criminality. Obsessively cataloging its characters' various inner torments, *Strangers on a Train* establishes itself as a novel whose primary concern is to locate criminality at the level of thought. This, indeed, is the very argument Guy and Bruno have upon first meeting. When Bruno asks Guy whether he's ever thought of killing someone, Guy replies, "I may have had fleeting ideas, but I'd never have done anything about them. I'm not that kind of person." Guy, in other words, thinks there's a meaningful difference between thinking about murder and doing it. Bruno disagrees: "That's exactly where you're wrong! Any kind of person can murder. Purely circumstances and not a thing to do with temperament" (29). Highsmith appears to agree with Bruno. The rest of her novel strives to demonstrate that even the most outwardly unsuspecting character may turn out to harbor an inner criminal.

But why worry, as Highsmith clearly does, about what a criminal thinks like? Such a worry only makes sense if you can't reliably know what a criminal looks like. This is the entire point of Guy and Bruno: they do not look like criminals. Guy, according to Bruno, was not "the kind of fellow to plan a murder with" (45). Then again, Bruno himself does not necessarily seem like that kind of fellow either; he is white and wealthy, and "anyone seeing him would have judged him a young man of responsibility and character, probably with a promising future" (68). Even Guy has a hard time believing Bruno could have murdered: "Supposing Bruno had done it? He couldn't have, of course, but just supposing he had?" (90). The novel repeatedly insists that neither man looks the way one would expect a murderer to look. This is the substance of Guy's concluding epiphany: "He didn't look like a murderer . . . in his clean white shirt-sleeves and his silk tie and his dark blue trousers, and maybe even his strained face didn't look like a murderer's to anybody else. 'That's the mistake,' Guy said aloud, 'that nobody knows what a murderer looks like. A murderer looks like anybody!'" (274).

The fundamental "mistake" Guy fathoms in the novel's final pages is not simply that "nobody knows what a murderer looks like." It is also that people tend to think they do know. If the point of *Strangers on a Train* is to demonstrate that criminals don't always look the way one would expect them to, this point depends on the assumption that readers would have that sort of expectation in the first place. Clearly, Guy and Bruno are the enemies within, the criminals

we can't see. Who, in that case, are the criminals we believe we can see?

Whoever they are, Guy seems to have a clear image of them. In their first conversation, Guy grows increasingly frustrated with Bruno's obsessive focus on murder: "You read too many detective stories." "They're good," Bruno insists. "They show that all kinds of people can murder." Guy replies, "I've always thought that's exactly why they're bad" (30). What makes detective fiction bad, according to Guy, is that it universalizes crime; it gives the impression that there are not particular criminal types. Guy, by contrast, believes there *are* criminal types: "A certain type turned to crime. And who would know from Bruno's hands, or his room, or his ugly wistful face that he had stolen?" (22). What type turns to crime? Whose hands or face—in contrast to Bruno's—could tell us directly that they were a criminal's? As it turns out, there is one particular social context referenced in the text that makes clear what type of person Highsmith's characters associate with crime. That context, as the novel discloses in its final scene, is an explicitly racialized one. It is a lynching. "People might collectively lynch a murderer," Guy says seemingly out of nowhere, to which his companion replies, "Never hold with lynchings. . . . Gives the whole South a bad name" (278). This unexpected reference to racial terror in the South provides an answer to the lingering question of who exactly in Highsmith's novel is supposed to look like a criminal. In *Strangers on a Train*, the criminal type is at heart a racial type. The reason that nobody believes Guy and Bruno could be criminals is that the predominant stereotype of the criminal in the mid-twentieth-century US was everything Guy and Bruno weren't: poor and black.

2. The Color of Crime

African Americans have long been, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, "accused and taunted with being criminals." "Nothing in the world is easier in the United States," Du Bois wrote in *The Crisis* in 1932, "than to accuse a black man of crime" (126).⁴ And nothing is harder, in Highsmith's novel, than to accuse a white architect. When Guy is deposed about Miriam's murder, "Guy was sure that his own straightforwardness alone had absolved him from any suspicion" (98). Guy's faith in the link between the "straightforwardness" of his appearance and the certainty of his innocence is also the novel's implicit but unmistakable premise: an awareness of the racial and class codes that dictate who does and doesn't come under suspicion. Fifties-era writers used the genre of crime fiction to try to make sense of these codes of suspicion. We

can thus better understand midcentury novels about criminals by reading them in light of the longer history of racial criminalization.

At least since Emancipation, the meaning of race in American life has been routed through crime. Seeking new ways to secure and control black labor after 1865, Southern states passed a series of new laws—the so-called black codes—that criminalized the everyday acts and behaviors of African Americans. These laws served to recapture freed slave labor in the form of chain gangs and convict leasing. They also created the ideological feedback loop that laid the groundwork for the discourse of black criminality needed to justify these new carceral forms of ostensibly free labor. By the 1890s, new statistical work in the social sciences helped ensure that “the notion of black people as a race of criminals was pervasive and ubiquitous,” as the historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad powerfully demonstrates (86).

With the changing demographics of Northern US cities in the late 1800s and early 1900s, crime became a common way to frame discussions about how both black migrants and European immigrants did or did not fit into US society. These discussions advanced in two profoundly different directions. Although Irish and Italian immigrants, for example, were commonly viewed as criminals, social reformers in the Progressive era argued that white ethnic criminality should be understood not as an inborn racial characteristic but as an unfortunate consequence of poverty. The turn-of-the-century “environmental critique” of immigrant criminality—which, according to Muhammad, “located the source of white pathology in the economy”—was not extended to African Americans (102, 92). Instead, black criminality was more likely to be perceived as either biologically or culturally innate. The result, Muhammad argues, was a deep “inconsistency between a hopeful vision of white criminality as largely a symptom of industrial capitalism and a reason to intervene, and a pessimistic view of black criminality and the futility of reform” (98).

The notion of an immutable link between blackness and criminality persisted throughout the twentieth century, while European immigrants steadily shed their reputations as criminals in the course of being recoded as white. I do not wish to simplify the history of whiteness, especially in the context of early century nativism; in Matthew Frye Jacobson’s classic summation, “The contest over whiteness . . . has been a fairly untidy affair” (134). The untidiness of white racialization is made clear, for instance, by Thomas A. Guglielmo’s work on Italian immigration at the turn of the twentieth century, a moment when Italians could be both “racially undesirable” and securely “accepted as white” (6). Starting in the mid-1920s, however, the presiding racial distinctions between

various European immigrant groups were gradually replaced with a newly consolidated conception of Caucasian whiteness, which gained its meaning primarily in opposition to blackness. Erstwhile European racial differences slowly melted away in the cauldron of immigration restriction and the working-class coalitions of the New Deal.⁵ As they did, black difference was entrenched as uniquely criminal. By the early 1940s, Muhammad points out, the writers of the FBI's *Uniform Crime Reports*—one of the twentieth century's most important innovations in the collection of crime statistics—had gotten rid of the category of “Foreign-born white” altogether. With this, European immigrant criminality promptly vanished, and “[b]lackness now stood as the singular mark of a criminal” (Muhammad 271).

Racialized anxieties about crime became a standard feature of US public discourse after World War II, a full two decades before national crime rates began to rise in any meaningful way. The gap between crime fears and crime rates makes clear that the midcentury obsession with crime wasn't really about crime. As the second Great Migration and the making of the suburbs again transformed the demographics of urban centers, media reports about growing rates of juvenile delinquency and inner-city crime stoked fears of black criminals.⁶ Media alarmism over urban crime helped shape the cultural fantasy of what David Roediger calls the “black, antineighborly, and uninhabitable city,” paving the way for white flight to the suburbs (234).

The discourse of black criminality determined not only urban demographics in the postwar decades but also public policy. The political scientist Naomi Murakawa offers an indispensable “prehistory to the 1960s war on crime” by showing how stereotypes of black criminality forged a bipartisan political framework in the 1940s and 1950s (29). As lynching, police brutality, and state-sanctioned white violence in the South were becoming a national and increasingly international embarrassment—leading Harry Truman to form the President's Committee on Civil Rights in 1946—legislators on both sides of the aisle saw the defining problem of the time as the problem of the black criminal. At midcentury, Murakawa suggests, liberals and conservatives were preoccupied with the same central question: “what explains black criminality?” (50). For Republicans and Southern Democrats, the answer was that racial liberalization produced and licensed black crime. For Northern Democrats, by contrast, black aggression was understood as a response to the lack of civil rights. The key point is that both sides unquestioningly “accepted black aggression as the center of debate” (53). Putatively black crime could be taken as evidence for either the danger of or the need for civil rights reform, but either way, it was taken as a

fact. As Murakawa argues, “Liberal racial pity mirrored conservative racial contempt, and . . . [these] ‘competing’ partisan frames locked linkages of blackness to criminality. By repeating terms of warped, deprived, and even justifiably rageful blackness, liberal law-and-order entrenched notions of criminality” (13). Across partisan lines, midcentury politicians framed crime as a pathology peculiar to African Americans.

As crime became the main proxy for talking about black civil rights, other forms of crime that had previously gripped the US imagination were steadily destigmatized. When Daniel Bell wrote his famous 1953 essay “Crime as an American Way of Life,” what he really meant was that crime had become a specifically white way of life—a form of “social mobility” (as well as racial alchemy) for Irish and Italian immigrant communities (133). As Bell saw it,

mobsters, like the gamblers, and like the entire gangdom generally, were seeking to become quasi-respectable and establish a place for themselves in American life. For the mobsters, by and large, had immigrant roots, and crime, as the pattern showed, was a route of social ascent and place in American life. (142)

But while Bell’s European immigrants were accessing a new “route of social ascent,” less mobile city dwellers were confronting the beginnings of deindustrialization and labor-market segmentation, which disproportionately affected undertrained urban populations that were themselves disproportionately black. The divergence in the racial discourses of white and black criminality at midcentury must also be understood, then, as a recoding of increasingly divergent experiences of class mobility. Starting in the 1950s, explains the historian Carol A. Horton, “a new class of discouraged workers, disproportionately composed of African-American men suffering from the effects of long-term unemployment, was becoming a permanent fixture of life in American cities” (129). The postwar shift to a suburb-centered service economy had a particularly deleterious effect on black employment prospects. Once the short-lived industrial employment boom of the war years began to fade, the black unemployment rate rose precipitously; whereas the unemployment rate for blacks and whites was about the same in 1930, by 1955, black unemployment had more than doubled the rate for whites—a two-to-one ratio that has since remained a startling yet implacable fact of the US labor market (Katznelson 14).

The postwar rise of black unemployment is inseparable from the era’s racialized conception of crime. As US cities transformed into racially segregated ghettos, crime became a key strategy by which mainstream society sought to redescribe the structural

conditions of urban poverty and unemployment that were ever more disproportionately racially distributed. “For white social scientists at midcentury,” notes Muhammad, “America’s ‘great army of unfortunates’ was still the white working class” (275). Members of the black urban underclass, by contrast, were not described in terms of class at all. We know how they were described instead. In the post-war decades, the perception of criminality offered a powerful discursive strategy for renaming and thereby reframing the dual struggles for civil rights and economic equality.

3. Race, Crime, Fiction

Thus, through routes both economic and ideological, did the myth of the black criminal acquire a new centrality in political and popular culture in the decade and a half leading up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the official launch of the War on Crime in 1965. By this point, writes the historian Elizabeth Hinton, “notions of black criminality” were “considered an objective truth and a statistically irrefutable fact” (19). The myth of the black criminal is everywhere in the midcentury period—not least its literary culture. It is in the letters of Highsmith, one of US literature’s foremost reactionaries, who attributed the high crime rate of Newark, New Jersey, to the city’s predominately black population.⁷ And it is in the writings of the consummate liberal Norman Mailer, whose infamous 1957 essay “The White Negro” fetishized black culture in part for its connection to crime. When Mailer glibly praises the courage it takes for “two strong eighteen-year old hoodlums . . . to beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper,” he has succumbed to the same cultural mirage as Highsmith: the mythical figure of the black urban criminal—a figure, needless to say, made no more real for being commended than for being condemned (284).

The pervasive discourse on black crime that shaped midcentury social life gave new meaning to the genre of the crime novel. This new meaning comes most clearly into focus when situated within the longer tradition of US detective fiction. The first detective story written in English—Edgar Allan Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841)—doubled as a racial allegory. As Richard Kopley meticulously reconstructs, Poe likely based his tale of a killer orangutan on a series of articles published in *The Philadelphia Saturday News and Literary Gazette* in 1838 about an orangutan in the London Zoo, an escaped ape in New York City, and a black man named Edward Coleman who murdered his wife. Poe’s fictional “conflation of black man and orangutan,” Kopley suggests, was clearly connected to “race-related fears that the orangutan’s attack

on two white women would have suggested, including slave rebellion and miscegenation” (38, 35).⁸ Eighty years later, Dashiell Hammett’s stories about Chinese criminals in San Francisco make clear that detective fiction remained swayed by the equation of villainy with racial difference. As Maureen T. Reddy has influentially argued, “traditional hard-boiled fiction of the 1920s–1950s is largely about whiteness . . . with the villains of that fiction racial Others who must be destroyed” (115).⁹

The popular culture of crime and detection in the first half of the twentieth century was indeed predominately white; so much so that black characters were less often villainized than they were largely absent. The ubiquitous true crime magazines of the period, for instance, focused exclusively on “white America”: “There are no black criminals sensationalized in true story magazines,” Rabinowitz informs us (96). Something similar could be said of the era’s crime fiction. One exception, as Justin Gifford points out, is Raymond Chandler’s 1936 short story “Noon Street Nemesis” (later retitled “Pickup on Noon Street,” and whose depiction of South Central Los Angeles likely inspired the famous opening scene of *Farewell, My Lovely* [1940]), in which a white detective fights and kills a black criminal in a purple suit who has broken into his hotel room (18). Generally speaking, though, it’s not all that common for black characters to be identified as criminals in hardboiled texts. As Frankie Y. Bailey establishes in her illuminating study *Out of the Woodpile* (1991), black characters, when they appear at all in the fiction of the pulp era, are more often on the margins of the narrative, in the roles of maids, bouncers, hotel clerks, and parking attendants (44–50).

Sean McCann explains the presiding whiteness of early hard-boiled fiction by placing it in the context of early twentieth-century nativist populism. As McCann reminds us, the first recurring hard-boiled detective—Carroll John Daly’s Race Williams—was introduced in a 1923 issue of *Black Mask* devoted to a debate about the recent resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. On McCann’s reading, hard-boiled fiction sought to differentiate itself from the nativist ideology of the Klan by showing how “racial opposition has ceased to be meaningful” in a market-driven society of constantly shifting personal interests (83). “Long after the twenties,” McCann concludes, “hard-boiled fiction’s emphasis on urban exchange and on the ubiquity of self-interest continued to appeal to some writers exactly because such attitudes encouraged a doubtfulness about the fictions of race” (84). McCann offers an invaluable history of how the hard-boiled genre was forged in the crucible of 1920s nativism. Yet I think he might overstate the easy separation of class from race in the period. After all, New Deal class politics depended less on the

rejection of racial categories than on the consolidation of one racial category in particular—the category of white, whose inclusion of European immigrants depended on the social and economic exclusion of blacks.¹⁰ If “racial opposition” seemed no longer to matter in hardboiled detective fiction, this was in part because certain of those oppositions had disappeared into a newly expansive idea of whiteness, and in part because that idea of whiteness had in turn succeeded in making its own status as a race disappear.

My claim is that one function of midcentury US fiction about criminals was to make the dynamics of racialization reappear. In a society governed by Jim Crow in the South, residential segregation and employment discrimination in the North, and black criminality as a national fabulation used to justify both regimes, fifties crime fiction began to directly address the racial ideologies of crime that were more often left unstated in hardboiled detective fiction and film noir.¹¹ That is not to say that the crime fiction of the era had a single, monolithic conception of race, however. Instead, midcentury novelists wrestled with the relation between criminalization and racialization in a host of ways. On one end of the spectrum is a novel like *Strangers on a Train*, whose investigation of white criminal inferiority takes place, as I suggested earlier, against the implied backdrop of black crime. The turn of writers like Highsmith, Hughes (in her 1947 novel *In A Lonely Place*), and Thompson (most memorably in *The Killer Inside Me* [1952]) to the psychology of crime constituted a conscious acknowledgment of criminality’s double circulation, as a social force at once visible (on the skin) and invisible (in the mind). The animating question for Highsmith, Hughes, and Thompson in these texts was: What if anyone could be a criminal?¹² And what gave this question its distinctly literary frisson was how it upended the widely held assumption that people would know a criminal when they saw one—which is to say, saw him by his race.¹³

On the opposite end of the spectrum are writers like Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes, who sought explicitly to challenge the misrecognition of blackness as criminality. In *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison stages both the frequency and the absurdity of this misrecognition as his narrator is repeatedly mistaken for a criminal: from trying to get rid of the package containing Mary Rambo’s broken figurine (“You some kind of confidence man or dope peddler or something?” [330]) to disguising himself as Rinehart (a character he knows the Brotherhood will “see . . . simply as a criminal” [500]) to running from the two white men who chase him underground (catching sight of the narrator’s briefcase, they ask him accusingly, “What’d you steal?” [566]).¹⁴ A similar critique of black criminalization is at the center of Himes’s *Run Man Run* (1966), which tells

the story of a black law student on the run from a homicidal white detective who is trying to frame him.¹⁵ Elsewhere in his oeuvre, Himes explored the way that presumptions of criminality obscure the realities of poverty. This point is made most forcefully in the first of his Harlem crime novels, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957, originally published in the US under the title *For Love of Imabelle*), a novel whose focus is not yet on the policemen—Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones—who would become the heroes of the subsequent books, but on everyday acts of crime and the people who are forced to survive by them. As Jackson, the petty-criminal hero of *A Rage in Harlem*, puts it early in the novel: “I know I did wrong, but I’m not a criminal. . . . My woman wanted a new winter coat, we want to get a place of our own, maybe buy a car. . . . You’re a colored man like me, you ought to understand that. Where are we poor colored people goin’ to get any money from?” (9). Jackson is no criminal, he protests; he is simply poor. The genius of Himes’s crime novels is to demonstrate how these two terms had become interchangeable ways of describing the racially segregated conditions of urban life—the “vice-and-crime-ridden slums,” as Grave Digger puts it in another of the Harlem novels, “where you force colored people to live” (*The Real Cool Killers* 65).

For Highsmith, the black criminal served as an unnamed foil to the invisible white killer. For Himes, the black criminal served as an aesthetic strategy for making visible the structural poverty wrought by segregation. And for still another group of writers—to whom I turn in the next section—the black criminal became the site of a more complicated and far-reaching literary dilemma: how to depict a fictional figure who was as likely to be used to perpetuate midcentury discourses of crime as to contest them.

Among US literature’s best-known black criminals is *Native Son*’s Bigger Thomas. From Bigger’s first foray into the Dalton family’s wealthy neighborhood, Wright makes clear that this is a world in which blackness is equated with criminality: “Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody” (44). Yet Bigger’s awareness of race as a concept made meaningful by criminalization—the “feeling he had had all his life: he was black and had done wrong” (219)—leads him to a disheartening realization: his only chance at freedom is to commit a crime even worse than white society could imagine. “Would any of the white faces all about him think that he had killed a rich white girl?” Bigger thinks.

No! They might think he would steal a dime, rape a woman, get drunk, or cut somebody; but to kill a millionaire’s daughter and burn her body? He smiled a little, feeling a tingling sensation

enveloping all his body. He saw it all very sharply and simply: act like other people thought you ought to act, yet do what you wanted. (113)

Bigger's sense of self-determination is achieved not by escaping the stereotype of black criminality but by pushing it further, as if to underscore the inherent lawlessness of a black man "do[ing] what [he] wanted" rather than what he was expected to do. What is thus most profound and also most unsettling about *Native Son* is Wright's vision of black criminality as simultaneously ideological and insurrectionary—both the predominant mechanism of white racism and the last remaining wrench for black men to throw into the country's racist machine.

Wright also grasped that the taut relation between crime-as-ideology and crime-as-insurrection risked creating a vicious circle. As the prosecutor declares at the conclusion of the novel's climactic courtroom scene, the real import of Bigger's trial is to ensure that the public will "not tremble with fear that at this very moment some half-human black ape may be climbing through the windows of our homes to rape, murder, and burn our daughters!" (408). Thus does Bigger's radical act of self-determination end up merely fueling white society's fantasy of "half-human" criminals dangerously desegregating the neighborhoods of Northern cities. In turn, Bigger realizes that what defines his identity is really the feedback loop of racial criminalization, not his own radically criminal act of self-making. "What I killed for, I *am*" (429): here criminalization precedes and produces ontology. The famous final words that Bigger speaks to his lawyer Max show that Bigger understands what Max refuses to accept: even the most complex account of social determination or distributed agency is doomed to be reduced—through the channels of public discourse and the institutions of criminal justice—to an ontological claim about black pathology.

Ultimately, Bigger's attempt to escape his racially determined fate through the commission of an unthinkable crime only binds him more firmly to the myth of black criminality he tries to escape in the first place. A similarly dispiriting irony shaped the fate of Wright's novel itself. In his influential survey of race relations, *An American Dilemma* (1944)—cited everywhere from the 1947 Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*—the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal did as much as any liberal commentator to naturalize the character type of the black criminal, suggesting that African Americans' "occasional acts of violence" "are undoubtedly to be explained as concealed aggression." Where did Myrdal and his team of researchers find evidence that black criminality was a form of

concealed aggression? In part, they found it in *Native Son*. As Myrdal explains, “In the growing generation of Negroes, there are a good many individuals like Bigger Thomas.” These real-life versions of Bigger Thomas “can be seen . . . everywhere in the Negro slums of American cities,” where they are characterized by “a general recklessness about their own and others’ personal security and property” (763).¹⁶ Myrdal’s reading transforms Wright’s novel from a radical critique of prevailing assumptions about race and crime into a cautionary tale about how current social conditions made black violence inevitable.

The crime fiction that Wright went on to publish in the 1950s directly repudiates *Native Son*’s co-optation by liberal sociology. In later novels like *The Outsider* (1953) and *Savage Holiday* (1954), which attempted to crack open the closed loop of racialization and criminalization, Wright made explicit the peculiar challenges that crime posed to many fiction writers of the period. For a range of authors who turned to the genre in the fifties and early sixties, crime fiction offered a deeply obvious and deeply problematic framework for reassessing literature’s relation to crime, race, and social experience. Obvious, because crime was now a universally understood codeword for blackness in public discourse. Problematic, because crime fiction was perpetually at risk of being folded back into (or worse, taken as evidence for) that discourse. Part of the history of midcentury crime fiction is the history of writers struggling with this dilemma: how could popular fiction address the racialized ideology of crime without appearing to sociologically confirm it? Aware of their place in a media landscape that played a determinative role in sowing fears about black urban criminals, midcentury crime novelists began to explore ways of impeding the collapse of race into crime. They did so by refusing the collapse of literature into sociology—that is, by refusing to allow fiction to be mistaken for the ethnographic reporting of direct experience. This refusal took shape through two crude but complementary imperatives. For white crime writers, it meant writing about more black characters. For black crime writers, it meant writing about fewer.

4. Crime Fiction in Black and White

One way crime writers sought to short-circuit the link between race and crime was through the narrative form of the false accusation. The story of the wrongly accused proved a particularly apt way to demonstrate how criminalization operates as a means of racialization: how the presumption of criminality is coextensive with the ascription of race. The white crime writers Willeford and Hughes both

wrote novels about falsely accused black protagonists. Hughes's *The Expendable Man* (1963) tells the story of a wealthy black doctor, Dr. Hugh Densmore, falsely accused of killing a young white woman named Iris. Hughes sets out to explore how the perception of black criminality in an unevenly desegregating society (post-*Brown*, pre-Civil Rights Act) cuts across class lines. "The fear of trouble," Densmore thinks, "was so close to the surface in even the most secure of them" (103).

Indeed, the first thing we know about Densmore is not that he is black but that he is economically secure—an "educated, civilized man" with "a big Cadillac and money" (6, 7). Hughes waits more than 50 pages to reveal her protagonist's race. Through the formal strategy of this delayed disclosure, Hughes suggests that the process of being labeled black is inseparable from being labeled a criminal. It is no coincidence that the first characters in the novel to mention Densmore's race are the police.

The Expendable Man is thus a novel about what it means for blackness to be inherently suspect, for white society to "have a hard time believing that a Negro doctor had the ideals and ethics of a white doctor" (147–48). Although the arc of the novel appears at first glance to move predictably from the racist presumption of guilt to the vindicating proof of Densmore's innocence, it also tracks a certain kind of innocence lost. What is lost is Densmore's naive belief in a colorblind justice system ("What could they charge him with? . . . This wasn't the Deep South" [57]), replaced by his confrontation with a social system that is structured at every level by the perception of black guilt. Walking into a Scottsdale police station at the end of the novel, Densmore sees on the faces of the police a "matter-of-fact acceptance that two shabby young Negroes were guilty until proven innocent" (236). This assumption of guilt makes the novel wonder whether, for a falsely accused black protagonist, innocence is even a relevant category. In the final pages, we find Densmore more anxious than celebratory, wondering whether "he would ever be cleansed of his innocent guilt," by which he means the guilt that US society writes into race (243).

Hughes's decision to write a novel about a wealthy African American doctor framed for murder by a white working-class bus driver (that would be Iris's boyfriend, Fred Othy, the novel's villain, who forced Iris to have an illegal abortion and then, after it went wrong, hid her body) may at first seem an odd or even alarming choice, as if Hughes were trying to determine who is more deserving of our sympathy: rich blacks or poor whites? The novel, however, is more complicated than this, suggesting that the economic conditions of crime are exactly what get rendered invisible when crime is read reflexively through race. What everyone sees in Densmore, by virtue

of seeing his race, is the spurious proof of his criminality; what no one can see in the situation of Othy and Iris is the evidence that crime is in fact tied to economic conditions (Othy wanted Iris to have the abortion in the first place because he couldn't afford to support the child). The problem of how crime does and doesn't become visible is registered in Hughes's obvious nod to Ellison in her title, as well as in a more explicit allusion later in the novel, when Densmore says of Othy, "he's the invisible man" (139). For Hughes, blackness is not so much invisible as it is rendered expendable by virtue of being criminalized. And what that act of criminalization renders invisible, in turn, is the economic desperation that turns white people into criminals whom no one can admit to seeing. Hughes's purpose in contrasting Densmore and Othy is thus to show how racial criminalization gets both race and crime wrong. To believe in the tenuous fantasy of racial pathology, according to Hughes, is to refuse to acknowledge the actuality of poverty, whether white or black.

In *Pick-Up* (1955), Willeford uses the same narrative elements as Hughes—the falsely accused protagonist and the belated racial reveal—to pursue a more formally radical claim about the crime novel's relation to race. *Pick-Up* tells the story of Harry Jordan, an ex-soldier and ex-abstract artist who takes up with an alluring alcoholic woman named Helen, quits his job to move in with her, and eventually strangles her at her request (she can't bring herself to commit suicide). Harry, who is likewise suicidal, confesses to the crime and asks to be sent to the gas chamber, only to be released by way of a highly implausible *deus ex machina*—Helen is found to have died from natural causes rather than the strangling. The racial framework of this entire plot is concealed until the last two lines of the novel, when Harry describes himself as "Just a tall, lonely Negro. Walking in the rain" (571).

At minimum, these concluding sentences shade in the context of *de facto* segregation and the scandal of interracial romance that Willeford has coyly redacted from his narrative, such as in a scene where "three workmen . . . made a few choice nasty remarks about Helen and me" (435). More specifically, the final lines of *Pick-Up* compel us to take a second look at McCann's suggestion that the novel depicts "an efficient and surprisingly just legal system" (240). The justice Harry gets is surprising indeed—surprising enough that one realizes that Willeford's vision of the legal system is fair and efficient to the point of disbelief. Harry, a black man who strangled a white woman in her bed and confessed to doing so, asks for the punishment he knows is coming to him, only to be told that the charges have been dropped. As Harry says to his court-appointed lawyer, "But if I didn't actually kill her . . . I must have at least hastened

her death! And if so, that makes me guilty, doesn't it?' 'No,' [Harry's lawyer] replied flatly. 'She'd have died anyway. . . . Malnutrition, I don't remember what all'" (593).

"She'd have died anyway": this is not exactly an airtight legal defense. And that's before we recall that Harry has already admitted to trying to kill Helen, whether she ended up having a heart attack or not. This series of implausibilities affords only one conclusion: the familiar narrative form of the falsely accused man triumphantly gaining his freedom cannot be made to make sense for a black protagonist. Harry himself realizes this the moment he is released: "Freedom meant nothing to me" (566). The disappearance for Harry of a meaningful difference between freedom and confinement, innocence and guilt, is finally explained by the act of racialization the novel performs in its last lines. Suddenly illuminating the structural incompatibility between the machinery of justice and the fact of blackness, these lines reveal that the story we have just been reading is less crime fiction than crime fantasy: the fantasy of a colorblind justice system whose claim to justice only applies in the absence of racially ascribed subjects.

The appeal of the falsely accused narrative as a form for thinking about racialized crime was apparent even to practitioners of other popular genres. In a 1956 issue of the magazine *Fantastic Universe*, Philip K. Dick published "The Minority Report," which imagines a world in which crime control has been perfected by a system called "Precrime" that arrests people in advance of the crimes it predicts they will commit. The plot of Dick's story concerns the false accusation of John Anderton, the founder of Precrime, who is faced with a difficult choice: if he proves his innocence, Precrime will be exposed as fallible and disbanded; if he wants to protect the Precrime institution, he must commit a crime he hadn't actually been planning. In the end he chooses to carry out the murder and save Precrime, but not before confronting the harsh truth that the Precrime "system can survive only by imprisoning innocent people" (246). As another character explains, "The allegations against [Anderton] were patent frauds, diabolical distortions of a contaminated penal system based on a false premise—a vast, impersonal engine of destruction grinding men and women to their doom" (256). What exactly is the penal system's "false premise"? In Dick's story, the mechanisms that allow the particular form of predictive injustice that we now call *profiling* are the "majority reports" of future criminal acts, which override the "minority reports" that maintain the innocence of those who have been accused. Within this rhetorical framework, it is not hard to see what Dick is getting at. To be falsely accused, to be unjustly perceived or predicted to be a criminal, is simply what it means to be subject to the police power of a

white majority. In this context, it would not be so far-fetched to read “The Minority Report” as an allegorical report on the systemic criminalization of minorities.¹⁷

The decision of these white writers to write crime fiction from the perspective of black or minoritized protagonists served as a rebuke to a midcentury literary establishment that especially prized the literature of firsthand racial experience. As Jodi Melamed has valuably documented, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the sociological novel of black experience was all the rage among white readers and white patrons of the arts. Literary patronage in the forties was predominantly devoted to supporting what Melamed calls “the sociological race novel,” which was “presumed to retrieve and transmit sociologically accurate information about African American life conditions and psychology” (775). Literary institutions strongly preferred that such novels be written by African Americans, “based on the presupposition that African American authors personally experienced the psychic effects of racial oppression and could translate them accurately into literature” (776).¹⁸ The assumption that only black authors could write about racial oppression laid the grounds for both the novelized form of racial liberalism and the literary version of black pathologization. Crime novelists like Hughes and Willeford, in turn, undercut the racial expectations of literary form by severing the link between personal experience and narrative perspective. What better way to expose the fallacy of reading literature as a record of authorial experience than for a white female crime writer like Hughes to name her falsely criminalized black male hero, Dr. Hugh Densmore, after herself? Through the cross-racial adoption of the black protagonist’s viewpoint, these white crime writers replaced the liberal novel of lived experience with the structural novel of racialized crime.¹⁹

But if Hughes and Willeford saw something aesthetically and politically salutary in writing from the perspective of black protagonists, Richard Wright—whose *Native Son* essentially invented the paradigm of the sociological race novel—found himself in a more delicate position. Wright’s crime novels of the 1950s, widely panned when they were published, map out his own confrontation with the dilemma imprinted on the genre: how to write about crime and race without appearing to confirm racist assumptions about crime. The critical challenges posed by Wright’s fifties fiction demonstrate how seriously he took the question, and how difficult he found it to answer.

Wright’s 1953 opus *The Outsider* tells the story of a black murderer who rejects racial identification. “Being a Negro,” the novel explains of its antihero, Cross Damon, “was the least important thing in his life” (385). If *The Outsider* is at heart an existentialist fantasy

about the radical freedom afforded by the refusal of all social ties, including the ties of “racial struggle,” this is a fantasy best realized through motiveless crime (195). The main reason Cross kills people (mostly members of the Communist Party) is to prove that he feels no social obligation not to. By the end of *The Outsider*, what Cross considers his real crime is not his many literal crimes but the extreme antisocial stance that makes it possible for him to commit them in the first place: “he had cynically scorned, wantonly violated every commitment that civilized men owe . . . to those with whom they live. That, in essence, was his crime. The rest of his brutal and bloody thrashings about were the mere offshoots of that one central, cardinal fact” (501).

Yet the novel can’t finally decide how to explain those “bloody thrashings about.” On one hand, Cross imagines that his “contemptuous repudiation” of social ties frees him from the obligation to obey social rules (501). In a savvy gesture of social constructivism, Wright reminds us that what makes someone a criminal is merely the fact that society has labeled his acts “crimes”; that’s why, for Cross, the ultimate criminal act is to expose the arbitrariness of society’s decision to consider something a criminal act. On the other hand, for as much as Wright wishes to portray Cross as a grand existentialist antihero who chooses to expose the illusion of social bonds, he is acutely aware that Cross’s image of himself as an outsider is not an image of Cross’s own choosing. The crucial lesson of *The Outsider* is that Cross was set outside his society well before he decided to set himself outside it. As another character explains, “In America the Negro is outside. Our laws and practices see to it that he stays outside” (169–70). To admit this is to admit that Cross’s outsider status is hardly unique to him; rather, it is the structural condition of being black and excluded in the Jim Crow US. Cross has thus mistaken for a consequence what the novel takes to be a cause. Maybe his crimes are the acts that place him outside society. Or maybe they are the futile response to a society that had already cast him aside—and done so in large part by casting him as a criminal. As Cross puts it, “I’m *colored*, see? You know the police . . . They’d try to frame me” (316, ellipses in original). To Wright, *outsider* and *criminal* are two words for the same thing: a method of racial domination that is made to resemble a feeling of freedom.

The Outsider makes clear how the criminalization of blackness that organizes US society ultimately makes its way into African American art. Listening to the radio one night, Cross reflects that “Blue-jazz was the scornful gesture of men turned ecstatic in their state of rejection; it was the musical language of the satisfiedly amoral, the boasting of the contentedly lawless, the recreations of

the innocently criminal” (178). Wright’s description of black music doubles as the conundrum of his own black crime novel: how to create a suitable literary language for the complexities of “lawlessness”? How to parse the racial paradox of “the innocently criminal”? In Wright’s hands, crime fiction is made to absorb the contradictions of a world in which criminality is as much an ascription as it is a stance, and in which lawlessness is both the outcome of and the rationale for structural exclusion. These are the keys to the contradictory account of crime Wright offers in *The Outsider*. It is a crime novel about the difficulty of deciding what to do once you realize that the radical criminal act of rejecting an unequal society happens to be the very justification society gives for the fact that it is unequal.

One year after the critical and commercial failure of *The Outsider*, Wright published an even more widely disparaged crime novel, *Savage Holiday*. It was Wright’s only novel to feature no black characters. *Savage Holiday* tells the story of a middle-aged white man named Erskine Fowler, a recently fired insurance executive who accidentally kills a young boy in his apartment building and then, in a fit of repressed sexual jealousy, less accidentally stabs the boy’s mother. Critics have situated *Savage Holiday* within a larger midcentury tradition of “white life fiction” by black authors.²⁰ But white life novels like *Savage Holiday*, Ann Petry’s *Country Place* (1947), Willard Motley’s *Knock on Any Door* (1947), and Chester Himes’s *Cast the First Stone* (1952) are not just any type of novel; they are crime novels. The strategic whiteness of this body of fiction thus needs to be placed in the midcentury context of racialized crime. In a 1960 interview, Wright explained, “I picked a white American businessman to attempt a demonstration of a universal problem” (Kinnamon and Fabre 239). Elsewhere, Wright described this as a problem of “social morality” (Kinnamon and Fabre 167). Yet we may also think of it as the problem of universality as such. The “universal problem” addressed in *Savage Holiday* is how to universalize, rather than racialize, criminality. For Wright, it was not enough to refute the stereotype of the black criminal, which had been statistically refuted, to little avail, for over half a century.²¹ What he tried to do instead was show that, deep down, everyone is a criminal.

The drama of *Savage Holiday*, then, is not whether Erskine will turn out to be a murderer. It is whether anyone will believe that he is. Wright is less than optimistic. When Erskine walks into the police station at the novel’s conclusion and announces, “I want to surrender . . . I just killed a woman,” the policeman asks, “You’re sure that you’re not drunk?” (217). This back and forth goes on for several pages: “The policeman gaped. ‘Mr. Fowler, you look like a

solid citizen to me” (221). Clearly, a society committed to the presumption of white innocence—to the “look” of “solid citizen[s]”—must be equally committed to the presumption of black guilt. That commitment is clear enough when, after a woman reports having seen something suspicious before the young boy’s death, the building supervisor remarks, “It’s a wonder she didn’t say it was a nigger she saw” (109).

False accusations of illusory black figures consistently hover at the edges of this novel about the foundations of the white criminal mind. The lingering presence of racialized suspicion suggests that Wright may have sensed the deeper futility of his literary project: the limits of crime fiction’s capacity to reframe the entrenched cultural discourse on crime. Suffice it to say that Wright’s novel does not think highly of novels. On the first day of Erskine’s forced retirement, he wonders what he’s going to do with all his free time: “What . . . did he want to do at this moment? . . . Read a book? No; no; God, no! He would have resented some novelist’s trying to project him upon some foolish flight of fantasy” (31). This apparently tossed-off moment of literary self-consciousness acquires a more savagely poignant meaning in the context of *Savage Holiday*, which was, if nothing else, a book that no one wanted to read. Wright’s regular publisher, Harper & Brothers, rejected it; eventually it was published by Avon, a less prestigious paperback press, whereupon it was ignored by readers and went quickly out of print. After the ordeal of publishing *Savage Holiday*, Wright’s former editor Edward Aswell wrote to dissuade him from working on the novel’s philosophical sequels.²² Instead, Aswell encouraged Wright to pursue “something that you can write about with intuitive knowledge and something with which you can make effective use of your own experience” (qtd. in Rowley 473). Wright took Aswell’s advice and abandoned the trilogy. In doing so, he confirmed that the most profound insight offered by *Savage Holiday* is not that white people or even all people are criminals. It is that, when it came to a novel about nonblack criminality written by a black author, no one was particularly interested in reading it.

Thus did the pseudosociological imperative that literature reflect its author’s “own experience” return to Wright’s crime fiction with a vengeance. The point of Wright’s choice of genre was to make clear just how illogical that imperative was. Surely, Wright could be expected to have no more “intuitive knowledge” of the black murderers of *Native Son* and *The Outsider* than he had of the white murderer of *Savage Holiday*. Yet Aswell, speaking for a larger reading public, saw a career-defining difference between Wright’s fiction about black crime and his fiction about white crime.²³ This difference would only have made sense if one assumed that what it

took to write about black criminality was not experience in being a criminal but only experience in being black.

If one of the aims of the midcentury crime novel was to imagine ways of uncoupling race from crime, this was an act of imagination that, as Wright discovered, remained primarily confined to the page. Crime novelists were well aware that they were writing in the face of historical circumstances that conspired to make *black*, *crime*, and *crime fiction* appear as a chain of commonsense equivalences and thus a set of interchangeable terms. This interchangeability is precisely what *Savage Holiday* set out to dispute. Yet it also turned out to be the primary obstacle to the novel's reception. The uncertain struggle of literary form to outpace the social linkage of blackness and criminality offers an instructive snapshot of the contradictions that defined crime fiction in the middle decades of the twentieth century—and, I would suggest, that have shaped the genre ever since. Struggling to contest embedded assumptions about the racial character of crime, the midcentury crime novel teaches us, finally, how to read the genre of crime fiction as one of the defining cultural forms of a postwar US social order that, now for more than half a century, has managed the economic crisis of deindustrialization through the increasingly intertwined processes of racialization, criminalization, and incarceration. At the same time, and no less importantly, the paradoxes of the midcentury crime novel make clear that the story crime fiction has to tell about the postwar history of black criminalization and the formation of the US carceral state—a story that spans the literature of racial profiling and white psychopathology in the 1950s; of race war and revolutionary criminality in the 1960s and 1970s; and of drug war and urban crisis in the 1980s and 1990s—is not necessarily a redemptive one. The arc of US crime policy has thus far not bent toward justice. What Wright had already begun to suspect, through his repeated efforts to rewrite the relation between crime and race, was that the arc of US crime fiction may not be angled any differently.

Notes

1. The pulp historian Geoffrey O'Brien suggests that "By the early Fifties, the private eye had pretty much run his course" (139). Whereas mysteries had accounted for half of all paperbacks published in 1945, O'Brien reports, by 1955 they accounted for only 13 percent (139). Leonard Cassuto similarly observes that 1950s crime fiction was split between conventional detective stories and "nonconformist" narratives of "sentimental distress." Against O'Brien, however, Cassuto insists that the "outliers" of the period—writers like Jim Thompson, Patricia Highsmith, and Charles Willeford—were very much in the "minority" of the genre and did not reflect the popular tastes of the time (123). That these writers have since become central to critics' understanding of the period is, according to Cassuto, a result not of

their popularity in their own time but of their retroactive canonization at the hands of editors like Robert Polito and institutions like the Library of America, whose executive editor was none other than Geoffrey O'Brien. Cassuto's point—that one shouldn't overstate the midcentury popularity of nonconformist crime fiction—is well taken. Yet popularity is one thing; literary production is another. My aim in the present essay is to avoid making overblown claims about the popularity or representativeness of this kind of "outlier" crime fiction while still seeking to explain why the particular subgenre of crime fiction about criminals emerged when and how it did. See Cassuto, *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories* (2009); O'Brien, *Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir* (1997), expanded edition.

2. On different ways of categorizing the psychological crime thriller, see Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (2005), pp. 112–19.

3. On criminalization and incarceration as part of the sequence of "'race making' institutions" that have defined blackness in the US since slavery (54), see Loïc Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the 'Race Question' in the US," *New Left Review*, vol. 13, Jan.–Feb. 2002, pp. 41–60. On the relationship between criminalization and racialization in US immigration policy, see Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (2004), especially pp. 56–90.

4. For additional commentary on Du Bois's remark, see Muhammad, p. 272.

5. Roediger argues that the New Deal was both "white" (a set of benefits offered primarily to whites, a racial group now broadly construed) and "whitening" (203): part of the process of white racialization by which "new immigrants could mobilize as whites and exclude others" (8).

6. Although I do not have sufficient space to explore it in this essay, white juvenile delinquency played its own complex role in the criminal imaginary of the midcentury US. For an illuminating discussion of the relation between delinquency and identity in fifties popular culture, see Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (2005), pp. 135–65. While cultural fears of juvenile delinquency were initially attached to white suburban youth, by the end of the 1950s, the problem of delinquency had taken on an "increasingly racial cast," in the words of historian Michael W. Flamm (13). Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (2005).

7. In a 1971 letter, Highsmith complained that increased racial diversity in New York City would lead to increased crime, "coons hanging from 50th story windows, plugging their neighbors (other coons) before taking the lift down to fleece their neighbors. It has already happened to Newark, New Jersey—which is now almost cleared of whites; they have a black mayor, even, and the highest crime and dope and welfare rate in all the USA" (qtd. in 321). See Andrew Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* (2003).

8. Thanks to one of this essay's anonymous reviewers for pointing me to Kopley's book.

9. Along similar lines, Megan Abbott reads the novels of Cain and Chandler as texts "in which the white male hero asserts his whiteness through distancing himself

from perceived encroachment by, most especially, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans” (10). See Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (2002).

10. As Ira Katznelson has carefully documented, the social welfare programs of the New Deal were both designed and administered to exclude African Americans (25–52). Job opportunities for African Americans in the North were also significantly limited. Roediger reports that a government survey of “1,500 firms in Philadelphia in 1940” found that “only five had *any* black production workers,” while a “survey of over 2,000 New York City defense firms in 1941 found that a third had a blanket ‘white required’ policy and another third ‘white preferred’” (212–13).

11. Eric Lott argues, for instance, that film noir both invokes and successfully disavows the racial connotations of “the self’s and society’s darkness” (96). See the chapter “House of Mirrors: The Whiteness of Film Noir” in Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism* (2017), pp. 93–117.

12. In these novels, the police, the press, and the general public all cling hopelessly to some idea of the immediately legible criminal type. In Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), for instance, the police repeatedly fail to detect Tom Ripley because he doesn’t fit the type: “The police think it’s some outsider who dropped by occasionally to pick up his mail, because none of the dopes in this house look like criminal types” (233). Meanwhile, in Hughes’s *In a Lonely Place* (1947), even witnesses find it impossible to believe that the killer is really the killer: “She was sure he couldn’t be the strangler; he wasn’t that kind of a man at all” (40). What Hughes’s Dix Steele, Highsmith’s Tom Ripley, and Thompson’s many secret sociopaths all embody is the social chaos that ensues when one is no longer sure exactly what “kind of a man” is likely to be a criminal.

13. For Highsmith, the issue was also undoubtedly linked to the specter of queer criminality—what Michael Trask calls “stereotypes of gay male villainy that a homophobic world has long presupposed” (585). While queerness and blackness were both avatars of criminality at midcentury, we may think of them as representing opposite sides of the criminal coin: race marked the criminality everyone could see, while homosexuality described the criminality everyone feared precisely because they couldn’t see. Trask, “Patricia Highsmith’s Method,” *American Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 585–614.

14. Rabinowitz sees Ellison as staging a conversation with the tradition of hard-boiled crime fiction, suggesting that “Ellison brilliantly deploys the genre’s first-person narration to tell his noir tale of descent” (88). Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism* (2002).

15. Gifford reads *Run Man Run* as a key transitional text in the emergence of the marketplace for black crime fiction in the later twentieth century (14–39).

16. For further analysis of Myrdal’s reference to Wright, see Murakawa, pp. 49–51.

17. Dick’s story would have quite real resonances with crime policy in the ensuing decades. Hinton explains how the Nixon administration pioneered the policing of future crime in the black neighborhoods of cities like St. Louis, where law enforcement

officials used statistics to target “‘questionable’ youth who might go on to engage in illegal activity” (23). In response to the program, one federal official wrote in a memo that he was worried about the legal ramifications of a system that “turns people into suspects for future crimes” (qtd. in Hinton 23).

18. For a longer history of how the ideology of “racial realism” has shaped the canon of African American literature, see Gene Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007), especially pp. 1–17.

19. This is a slightly different—but not, I think, incompatible—story from the one Michael Szalay tells in his illuminating book *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (2012) about the ways that midcentury literary “works . . . transport whites into the imagined bodies of African Americans.” For Szalay, these fictional gestures of cross-racial embodiment were meant to “hold together the straining coalitions of a Democratic Party undergoing decisive change” (4). On my reading, these gestures were taken up by crime writers as a way of showing how criminalization helped determine what racial difference meant in the first place.

20. See John C. Charles, *Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel* (2013), pp. 182–201; and Stephanie Li, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* (2015), pp. 61–94.

21. As early as the 1930s, Muhammad notes, researchers had begun to demonstrate the unreliability of crime statistics by “rewriting black criminality in terms of police misconduct” and highlighting the role of “racism in the criminal justice system” (269, 270). Yet the many studies pointing out the flaws of black crime statistics “seemed to fall on deaf ears” (270).

22. As Wright initially planned it, *Savage Holiday* was to be the first in a trilogy that represented, in Gerald Early’s words, “a thoroughgoing critique of the religious foundations of the western mind.” The second volume, “to be called ‘Strange Daughter,’ was to have as its subject a white American girl working through her sexual repression in a perverted relationship with a Nigerian and her subsequent murder. The third, ‘When the World Was Red,’ was to be an exploration of the psyche of the Aztec ruler Montezuma, as well as a psychohistory of western religion at the time of the Cortez expedition” (233). Early, Afterword, *Savage Holiday* by Richard Wright (2004), pp. 223–35.

23. In another letter to Wright, Aswell made the racial significance of this distinction quite explicit: “It seems to me—and of course I am only guessing now—that as you have found greater peace as a human being, living in France and not made incessantly aware that the pigmentation of your skin sets you apart from other men, you have at the same time lost something as a writer” (qtd. in Rowley 472).

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