

Strangers in the City:
U.S. Liberalism, Literary Realism, and the Politics of Illegibility

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Abstract

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Strangers in the City offers an account of the historical production of representational illegibility and, in doing so, proposes a critical re-assessment of the function of cultural narrative in the context of liberal-nationalist social formation. American Cultural Studies scholarship has often centered on a critical understanding of narrative form as a privileged terrain within which imaginations of national community and liberal-nationalist citizenship are negotiated, constructed, or contained. In doing so, it has offered a conception of narrative representation as a site of struggle for an anti-foundationalist conception of national identity. But in the process, these perspectives have tended to construct an easy binary between what the text “contains” and

what “escapes,” “exceeds,” or is anxiously “excluded” from its vision. My goal in this project is to complicate this political conception of the limits of representation. Drawing from materialist critiques of liberal citizenship and the public sphere, I argue that national culture is also the domain where liberal consciousness negotiates its own relation to narrative and representational limits – where it cultivates an account of an authentic and essentially “free” liberal subject who always lies underneath or beyond the particular categories or legibilities that constitute representational presence. Liberal notions of freedom and equality are often staged in opposition to cultural difference as such, and articulated to conceptions of universality that establish a privileged position for identities or collectivities that go “unmarked” as forms of difference in their own right. Thus, it is not enough to simply look to the terrain of cultural legibility as the field of the subject’s interpellation into liberal-nationalist norms; the limits of liberal narrative, representational legibility are not coextensive with the limits of liberal socio-political consciousness. Rather, the meaning of cultural illegibility is itself a domain of cultural, political struggle which liberalism has, over the course of its varied history, routinely colonized with its own privileged figures and values.

To investigate the liberal production of the limits of cultural narrative, I turn to the urban stranger as a narrative figure of non-recognition or illegibility that, I argue, often operates in the service of liberal-nationalist foundationalisms. Especially in situations where literary representation is deemed socially useful for a liberal-democratic order, I argue that the stranger allows for the articulation of representational illegibility to the meanings that are privileged by liberal consciousness, especially when that consciousness needs to maintain its authority by positioning itself outside of representation and culture altogether. The stranger, in this account, is a culturally-produced figure who proposes the possibility of seeing and being “beyond” culture

– a figure whose position outside of culturally-bound frameworks of recognition signifies something that is supposedly more foundational than cultural signification itself. In tracing the strange career of this figure in the literary productions and discourses of nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. urban realism, I hope to call attention to the ways in which the U.S. liberal imagination has itself, explicitly or implicitly, defined the meanings of representational illegibility as a way of preserving the sanctity of its own abstractions and conceptions of political reality.

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As per convention, this manuscript is composed and formatted to maintain the illusion that the work contained within is the product of the individual mind and the singular efforts of its author. But anyone who has ever produced a work of this length and breadth knows the fallacy of these assertions. Academic works (and their authors!) need to be cultivated, supported, and disciplined from a number of different directions. This work, in particular, has been facilitated and sustained by multiple mentors, colleagues, and friends who have generously contributed their insights to the work and, just as importantly, offered friendship, care, and support to its author. They have all, in their own ways, made this work possible.

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This work is dedicated to them and the example they set, without which not a single line of this dissertation would have been possible.

INTRODUCTION

In Search of the Stranger

To propose an investigation of “the stranger” is to proffer an inquiry into one of the most prevalent and most un-interrogated terms to populate our social imaginary. Here at the tail end of the dissertation process, I can understand why so many thinkers have been content to allow this particular label to circulate in its “common-sense” articulation. Strangers might be easy to pick out in a stroll down the city street, but as an object of critical inquiry, they can be rather elusive. Even coming to a satisfactory definition is a struggle. As a label or social category, the stranger seems to be defined by a lack of positive content – we recognize them as the limit of our own capacity for recognition. He or she is defined by nothing more than a lack of knowledge. In this sense, though they are often conflated in our critical vocabularies, what makes “the stranger” different from “the foreigner” is that the latter is already recognized within a representational rubric of “insides/outside” (we know, at least, that “the foreigner” is not “the native”). But what can we know about the stranger? And once we know it, doesn’t he lose the “strangeness” which defined him as such? In this sense, the stranger appears to designate a position, a moment, or a relation prior to recognition or knowledge of any type - he is an admission of ignorance. The only enlightenment he offers is in regard to ourselves, and thus, in the context of an academic inquiry, he seems more suited for the staging of ethical hypotheticals than an investigation of

cultural representation. For, in him, we are confronted with the ramifications of our own not-knowing. It seems appropriate, then, to open this introduction by admitting that when I first began to contemplate this project, there was much I didn't know about where to locate this elusive figure or, even, how to recognize him when I arrived there. In these first few pages, I will attempt to narrate a bit of this personal confusion as a way of orienting my readers to the particular frameworks and goals that eventually emerged over the course of this line of inquiry. If we are going to seriously consider the stranger, we have to seriously consider where this lack of knowledge can lead us.

The desire to initiate an investigation of this sort was motivated by a series of dispersed and seemingly unrelated observations, across a series of archives, about the ways that a discourse of "urban strangers" has played a role in a variety of literary and social-scientific knowledge formations across nineteenth and twentieth-century U.S. history. I first encountered this discourse in an engagement with early urban social theory, sociology and urban planning, much of which frames urban sociality and form as, fundamentally, a matter of the "being together of strangers." Looking to these examples, I wondered how, as a generally accepted premise about the specificity of the urban environment (constructed, obviously, as the inverse of more "traditional" closed or "known" communities embodied in the small town), this framing conditioned and directed the production of knowledge about the city and in what ways. With a mind to giving structure to my inquiry, I wondered if this question could be productively paired alongside a reconsideration of another practically ubiquitous urban conceit, this one from the realm of literary practice and history, about the elusiveness or intangibility of the city as the subject of representational vision. Since many of the earliest urban fictions appeared, they have been accompanied by disclaimers or meditations on the practice of artistic representation that

emphasize the ephemeral experience of the city, its constant flux and incoherence, and its unavailability to totalizing vision or formal representational strategies. This conception of the city, as exceeding or resisting both individual experience and representational form, plays a role in both the most blunt articulations of literature's social value as well as the most esoteric of modernist experiments in form. And of course, the image of the city as unrepresentable is (overtly or implicitly) just as much about the incoherence of crowds of strangers as it is about the rapid creative destruction of the urban built environment and the general pace of modern social, economic life. In both of these cases, the idea of the city of strangers stands to mark out certain formative limits that define (productively or anxiously) the boundaries of aesthetic vision and the theoretical domain of social scientific interpretation and analysis. What could these limits and boundaries be said to produce or perform? What kinds of political and representational effects were generated by them and what hegemonic assumptions accounted for their ubiquity across the urban archive?

With these questions in mind, I set out to locate a means of gaining some kind of critical purchase on the concept of the stranger. Here, I encountered the work of Georg Simmel, in particular, his short essay simply entitled, "The Stranger" which helped to direct my approach in a number of significant ways. One striking component of Simmel's thought is how, from the beginning, he describes the stranger as native to, rather than outside of, the principle logics of political modernity. For Simmel, there is no stranger outside of the social constructions of distance and boundary – inside/outside logics that precede the arrival of the stranger and construct his particularly problematic legibility and status within the closed group. For the stranger is not a mere outsider, but a synthesis or contradiction in the logic of the closed system. "He is fixed within a certain spatial circle – or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to

spatial boundaries – but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong to it initially and that he brings qualities to it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it.”¹ As a “synthesis” of supposedly stable and distinct spatial spheres, Simmel’s sociological theory is a reminder that the stranger is produced by the same conceptual logics which render categories like “the native” and the “foreigner” legible. Recognizing this origin, we must also therefore remember that (contrary to critical orthodoxies generated around the topic) the stranger is not automatically a disruption in the otherwise smooth social order defined by liberal-nationalist constructions of the “closed group.” Rather, Simmel explains how, as “an element of the group itself” and as a “form of union based on interaction,” the stranger’s particular relation to these socio-spatial markers of intelligibility expresses certain forms of attraction that we should recognize as fully incorporated into liberal modernity’s conception of sociality (Simmel 144). For one, the stranger expresses a “character of mobility” based on how he is not a “landowner” and, therefore, “is not bound up organically, through established ties of kinship, locality, or occupation” to those who he interacts with. The “objective” attitude that the stranger brings to the social group and the relations of “universality” that compose his relation to the group, in this sense, are once again expressed as a species of that original synthesis – “a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement” that defines a type of social participation free from “ties which could prejudice his perception” (Simmel 144).

In terms of my thinking for this project, this reading of Simmel served as a reminder that “distance” (often figured as a spatial relation, rooted in a political geography of community) is a symbolic logic of political legibility, and that the stranger needs to be confronted as a complex *relation* interior to the socio-political discourse of liberal-capitalist modernity. The stranger is

¹ Georg Simmel. “The Stranger,” *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*. Ed. Donald Levine. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1971) p 143. All subsequent references to Simmel are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

produced by (and therefore cannot be said to be “outside” of) the various scales and categories of political life and identity that are composed by this modernity – the global, the national, the urban community, the neighborhood. And in this sense, it was possible to pursue an account of how cultural discourse “constructs” the stranger as a figure within representation, operating in the service of any number of political projects. To be sure, while some scholars have taken up Simmel’s formulation, the majority of critical appropriations of the term fail to recognize the stranger’s constructed status. Instead, the stranger is often mobilized to signify the *limits* of social constructions, and to gesture at a reality which exists *outside of* culturally constructed rubrics of intelligibility. As I discovered, this tendency to erect the stranger as a figure strictly defined by an essentialized unintelligibility accounted for a whole series of uninterrogated contradictions in the way that the term is mobilized.

A quick survey will help to elucidate this point. In her popular essay, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” Iris Marion Young argues that “dwelling in the city means always having a sense of beyond, that there is much human life beyond my experience going on in or near these spaces, and I can never grasp the city as a whole... City life thus embodies difference as the contrary of the face-to-face ideal expressed by most assertions of community. City life is the ‘being-together’ of strangers.”² Here, Young attempts to propose the urban stranger as a normative model of collectivity *with* difference, against the liberalist reduction of community to a “face-to-face” ideal where the politics of the group are only validated around a shared identity, whose supposedly transparent and shared desires and experiences frame the collective itself as a version of the individual. The “normative ideal” of urban sociability that might replace this logical fiction is an “openness to unassimilated

² Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference.” *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990.) p. 318.

otherness” which is a necessary component of stranger relations (Young 320). The figure of the stranger becomes the centerpiece of an imagined politics of difference for Young because it effectively “blurs” the social logics that have been built to “suppress differences” and ideologically privilege “wildly utopian” visions of authentic community, opening those boundaries up to a permanently unfixed horizon of expectations beyond the liberal conception of private interest and located in the impossibility of grasping “the city as a whole” (318).

But it is this exact combination of terms – urban elusiveness and stranger illegibility – that leads James Donald to rely upon the stranger as an ideal of liberal political justice. In his book, *Imagining the Modern City*, Donald turns to representations of the city as a means of recovering a sense of the efficacy of the liberal citizen-subject as a “symbolic” and abstract position.³ This focus on the citizen as an “empty” relation between subjects and the Law, helps him to distinguish his ideal of liberal universality from what he identifies as a cultural politics of national *identity*. Seeking to define citizenship in terms of particular cultural (racial, classed) criteria, he concedes, has made citizenship into a principle of inequality by filling in the “empty” or “symbolic” relation of the citizen with exclusionary meanings (Donald 100). The key to embracing the liberatory potential of liberal, juridical norms of subjectivity, he argues, is to refuse to “fill” the subject position of the citizen with cultural meaning – to allow the citizen to remain, for all intents and purposes, a stranger. Thus, Donald turns to the city street as a means of intervening in “the political imaginary shaping current thinking about citizenship” by privileging the performative aspect of urban identity and by staging urban society as built on a general respect for “the opacity of others” (119).

³ James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City*. (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 1999) p 99. All subsequent references to Donald are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

How can we make sense of this confusing overlap in the critical conception of the stranger? How can the figure serve, in its illegibility, as both a challenge to and a reaffirmation of liberalist political norms? It has everything to do, I would argue, with the assumptions that these scholars make about what exactly lies beyond the logics of political legibility that are at stake in their own analyses. For Young, the stranger names an unwritten, unwritable alternative to the liberal norms of community that formulate political action in unproductive ways. Underneath the reductive lens of the liberal political consciousness which defines legible political communities, strangers stand for the actual “unassimilated” free play of difference within the group. For Donald, the figure of urban “opacity” speaks of the contingency of cultural markers of identity which attempt to “fill in” the symbolic and empty relation of the abstract citizen, figuring urban strangers (and the liberal-democratic citizen-subject) as *prior to* the particularizing effects of cultural inscription. Illegibility is, in both of these cases, mobilized as a kind of foundationalism; the stranger is implicitly an argument for what is left when all of the impositions of culture and political legibility are stripped away, leaving behind a figure who signifies nothing more than the human subject in a state of (unpoliticized) nature. Every appearance of the stranger, in other words, comes freighted with an underlying theory of human subjects and the origins and character of social difference. Illegible, unrecognizable, and therefore ostensibly unrestrained, the figure has its utility for both criticisms of liberal exclusions *and* for assertions of the fundamental adequacy of liberal political categories precisely because it hinges on the idea, shared between these two positions, that “freedom” exists beyond the categories, cultural vocabularies, and political forms of intelligibility that delimit the differences that matter for the social order in question. A lack of signification signifies significantly, and yet

what it signifies is often grounded in what kinds of legibilities it can be said to render contingent or untenable.

In this sense, my intent to interrogate the social production of the stranger became, more specifically, an inquiry into the social production of illegibility itself. As a way of imagining an intervention into the arguments I have rehearsed above, I set out to see what kind of ideological conceptions of cultural difference and the social character of man are inscribed within claims about the stranger's illegibility. Turning back to Simmel's text will help me to demonstrate how this approach changed my own reading of the stranger. Reading against the grain of Simmel's positivism, I began to see the stranger's conceptual "objectivity" as calibrated against a typical liberal antipathy. On the one hand, you have an ideal of public good formulated in the language of civic humanism. On the other, you have a particular narrative of negative private interest, imagined in the form of categories of collectivity formulated into various "marks" of status or identity. But instead of offering to balance these terms in the form of the bifurcated subjectivity of the (bourgeois) citizen-subject or a totalizing principle of separate spheres, Simmel narrates the story of "the man who comes one day and stays the next" (143). In the story, the stranger is imagined as uncontaminated by these ties, unburdened by the baggage of cultural meaning that accrues for the more "fixed" inhabitants of the circle. And it is notable that, for Simmel, this "freedom" from social ties is best exemplified in the figure of the "trader," who operates solely within smooth, horizontal relations of exchange between abstract equals. An implicitly utopian interpretation of the stranger, therefore, is authorized in conjunction with a particular theory of social difference, where artificial markers, derived from culture, are the obstacles to an otherwise smooth liberal-capitalist sociality.

The stranger, in this reading, operates within a mystified liberal narrative, to the extent that the social character of the figure (as unmarked, unintelligible, and unincorporated) inscribes and hides within itself a particular theory of the human subject in relation to culture and difference as such. And he participates in this liberal imagination precisely by signifying what it means to lack (or, in some cases, be beyond) signification. He is a culturally produced figure that proposes the possibility of operating outside of or beyond culture. He narrativizes and embodies the possibility that liberal abstractions might be expressed in actual social relations, if the conditions are right and if cultural particularity doesn't get in the way. The stranger, articulated as an objective vision of atomistic individuals engaged in social encounters *outside of* or *free* from artificial markers of cultural value, is therefore freighted with assumptions about the relationship of persons to the categories of social legibility that "mark" differences (which are always already inequalities at the moment of their recognition). This reading emphasizes the extent to which this political imagination of a "union" between strangers is, in fact, presupposed (perhaps formatively) within the "universalisms" that, in other accounts, act to exclude subjectivities that are deemed "alien" or overly particular. Amongst other things, this insight helped me to understand why the stranger might be a figure of *desire* for liberal imaginings.

In its current form, this project is about the political and social construction of the meaning of representational illegibility. As such, the critical impulse of this dissertation has expanded in a number of directions, especially in how I approached my literary archive. Wherever he appears, the stranger is accompanied by a theory of cultural inscription – he appears in the context of specific ideas about what kind of relations of determination or freedom define our relationship to culture as such. In this sense, searching for the stranger as a figure *within* the representational politics of the literary text was insufficient, though not irrelevant. My search for

the stranger moved to a different scale; rather than simply asking how the stranger was represented *in* literature, the analysis contained here searches out conceptions of the stranger that are evident in the political and aesthetic discourses that construct the value and function of literary representation itself in a liberal context. Especially in situations where literature is deemed socially useful for a liberal-democratic order, I argue that the stranger allows for the articulation of literary representational politics to the meanings that are privileged by liberal consciousness, especially when that consciousness needs to maintain itself by divorcing itself from representation altogether. Moreover, in the turn to seeing illegibility as a product of liberal discourse (as opposed to a marker of its organic limits), my inquiry here is also an attempt to trace the trajectory of a particular (un)critical gesture that, I would argue, is still active in the way that radical cultural critics understand the relation between legibility and illegibility, between the text itself and its “outside.” Going back to my earlier survey of Young and Donald, I would suggest that the turn to the stranger as a figure of illegibility, outside of the categories of political legibility that circulate at any given moment, is an incomplete gesture. It is at the very moment that these critics claim to be thinking their way out of the problem of liberalism’s exclusions, that they are most in it. The unthought element that correlates their otherwise incompatible political goals into a single romance of unassimilated otherness is the stranger itself, uninterrogated as a product of our own political imaginations. This project is motivated by a desire to clarify this critical terrain so that we might work towards a more serviceable political imagination, one that can think at the limits of liberal political culture without unknowingly collaborating in its formative assumptions.

Liberalism's Limited Vision and the Production of "Anybody" Politics

The predominant thematic of urban strangers across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has led many to rightfully look to this figure, like the city whose most enduring problematics he seems to symbolize, as a representation of quintessentially modern contradictions. Indeed, as I have come to see it, the stranger is a reminder that the “rupture” of modernity that Susan Buck-Morss refers to in her revisiting of Hegel, from its inception, produced an *internal* form of anxiety. Not an anxiety over outsiders, but an anxiety over the “accidental, blind dependency” that was being constructed under the gradual hegemony of capitalist, bourgeois society.⁴ As a figure that expresses the fundamental “blindness” of this dependency, the stranger circulates as both an anxiety and a desire within the political imaginaries that structure liberal-nationalist understandings of civil society and which have constructed a limited form of perception, framed entirely within that understanding. The first task, therefore, is to situate the construction of the stranger within this perception. Ultimately, my attempts to isolate a specifically liberal logic of political vision has led me to root my inquiry within a number of critical strains of thought, all of which share in common a desire to break down or deconstruct the underlying logics of civil society that compose the liberalist discourse of freedom and equality.

To this end, my project engages a materialist critique of the institution of liberal citizenship. One particularly influential strand of this critique has its roots in the early writings of Karl Marx. In his essay, “On the Jewish Question,” Marx takes up the example of Jewish religious protests against the Christian German government as an occasion to interrogate the principle logics of the liberal-capitalist state in a discursive domain that it claims as its own – the definition of emancipation which it claims to both exemplify and produce. In Marx’s account,

⁴ Susan Buck-Morss. *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. (Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.) p. 8

the particular type of “political emancipation” which defines the (self-imposed, limited) purview of the liberal state is problematically presented as “human emancipation” as such. Rather, argues Marx, “the limits of political emancipation appear at once in the fact that the *state* can liberate itself from a constraint without man himself being *really* liberated; that a state may be a *free state* without man himself being a *free man*.”⁵ This condition is achieved and validated by the “division of man into the *public person* and the *private person*” – a division which mobilizes a whole series of distinctions between the citizen and the individual, between the political sphere and the sphere of “civil society” (Marx 33). The construction of this bifurcated subjectivity authorizes both an “abstract, narrow and partial” definition of emancipation, through what Marx characterizes as a “devious” intermediary logic which politically emancipates the state from any visible prejudice or particularity in relation to its subjects by relegating all governing forms of difference to the realm of civil society. The logic of liberal “political emancipation,” evident in its commitment to constitutional legalism as a principle of universal equality and popular sovereignty, abstractly liberates the state from the forms of inequality that it, in practice, assumes. “Far from abolishing these *effective* differences, it only exists so far as they are presupposed; it is conscious of being a *political state* and it manifests its *universality* only in opposition to these elements” (Marx 31). And yet

All of the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist in *civil society outside* the political sphere, as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained to its full development, man leads, not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality*, in *life*, a double existence – celestial and terrestrial. He lives in the *political community*, where he regards himself as a *communal being*, and in *civil society* where he acts simply as a

⁵ Karl Marx. “On the Jewish Question.” *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co. 1972. 24-51) p. 30. All subsequent references to Marx are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

private individual, treats other men as means, degrades himself to the role of mere means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. (Marx 32)

Thus, on the question of religion, just as in other forms of social difference and distinction established by “birth, social rank, education, occupation” and such, the liberal state “emancipates” itself by banishing these so-called “non-political” categories from the field of its own consciousness inscribed in the law and discourse of democratic representation, proclaiming with this move to have emancipated “the people” by making every member of society “an equal partner in popular sovereignty” *regardless* of their real relations to social, cultural power and authority (Marx 31).

The articulation of liberal freedom and universality, in this account, is always accompanied by a rhetorical disavowal – it can only be said to exist “regardless of” or “despite” the unequal conditions in which people live, thus presupposing what it seeks to eradicate from its own field of consciousness. The limits of liberalist “political emancipation” are visible only when one considers how the public/private logic naturalized under the liberal social order authorizes a totalizing definition of “freedom” as predicated on an opposition to the “recognition” of social distinctions – distinctions which are presupposed and naturalized, even as they are deemed “irrelevant” or “invisible” to considerations of law or legislative authority. Consequently, the very possibility of liberal “freedom” and “equality” is closely tied to (and profoundly truncated by) its foundational construction as a type of self-imposed limiting of vision. By refusing to “recognize” the markers of social inequality generated within what it presupposes as the sphere of individuals exercising their natural and inalienable private interests, the state can claim to offer a political subjectivity divested of all particularity, where “citizens” are (abstractly) equal *regardless* of their actual, particular status in civil (bourgeois, capitalist)

society. But lest we assume that this antagonism to social “recognition” is an exclusive property of the state, we should note that this regulation of socio-political vision (which renders particularity illegible) is, in practice, a kind of mobile logic of “emancipation” that operates across a variety of discursive scales and locales, anywhere a claim to democratic equality is articulated to liberal social practices and institutions, including those figured as internal to civil society and national culture itself.

One such instance is chronicled by Jurgen Habermas’s groundbreaking analysis of the development of the modern, liberal “public sphere.” In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argues that capitalism’s “network of horizontal economic dependencies” (expressed also in the emergence of “towns” and other institutions of public reason) created the conditions for the emergence of a conception of civil society “as a corollary of a depersonalized state power” and, later, of the bourgeois public sphere as a unique arrangement of that civil society where private individuals expressed their interests in rational debate, as the “abstract counterpart of public authority (15-23).⁶ This public sphere maintained a kind of monopoly on “reason” in discourse for the purpose of guarding against “all relations of domination” located in state power. The hallmark of this “public use of rational facility” was in the way that the privileged subjects of this institution

preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from pre-supposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. This tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals” (36).

It was this ability to “disregard status” that allowed individuals to participate in the public sphere through what Habermas admits was a kind of “fictitious identity” assembled by linking and

⁶ Jurgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) pp 15-23. All subsequent references to Habermas are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

differentiating the “two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple” (56).⁷

Whereas the logic of the liberal state, described by Marx, hinges on the public/private divide to establish a definition of political emancipation predicated on its ability to formally and juridically disregard markers of economic, social, or cultural difference, defining “civil society” as a domain of non-intervention, the same pattern of recognition and disregard characterizes the subjectivity of the bourgeois public sphere and the social practices of citizenship constructed within it.

If it isn't yet apparent, my purpose in rehearsing these foundational critiques is to amplify the logics of recognition, disregard, and disavowal which propose the very possibility of defining public-minded reason, freedom, and equality in a liberal frame – a process of political “recognition” which is actually, in practice, what I would like to mark as a foundational *disrecognition*. The formal definition of this freedom (as well as the institutions and citizen-subjects that are, under its discursive umbrella, “free”) are so “regardless of” what differences actually exist. In consequence, what may appear as an admirable commitment to producing discursive conditions of equality, actually harbors a profound rejection of cultural, social difference as a principle of political legibility and an even more submerged structural indifference to the production of civil particularities that constitute subjects in an unequal relation to democracy and national culture. In American Cultural Studies (one interdisciplinary site where these materialist perspectives have been critically extended), these critiques, as Lisa Lowe explains, “have pointed to the need for a critique of citizenship and ‘rights’ defined as the

⁷ It should be said that Habermas largely fails to problematize this disregarding of status in the bourgeois public sphere, and arguably idealizes its operations in the early 19th century. In coordinating this “tendency” towards “disregarded status” with Marx’s critique of the liberatory logics of the liberal state, I am suggesting that this foundational premise of the bourgeois public sphere is an aspect of the liberalist inability to imagine difference positively or productively.

right to property or, in effect, the right of the capitalist to exploit.”⁸ They have also informed critical rereadings of the concept of liberal publicity itself where, as Michael Warner notes, “the ability to bracket one’s embodiment and status is not simply what Habermas calls making public use of one’s reason; it is a strategy of distinction, profoundly linked to education and to dominant forms of masculinity.”⁹ The liberal public sphere, as an organ of “public reason,” operates on the logic that collective, embodied, material experience can be unproblematically classified as “private, local, or merely affective and expressive,” thus individuating the interests of marginalized social groups and requiring their negation and forgetting as a part of entering into an unmarked “public” discourse that assumes the norms associated with bourgeois, white, masculine, heteronormative society. Thus, “the public sphere is not just a place where one could rationally debate a set of gender or sexual relations that can in turn be equated with private life; the public sphere is a principle instance of the forms of embodiment and social relations that are themselves at issue (Warner 54). Similarly, Lowe notes how “political emancipation” in terms of citizenship “is never an operation confined to the negation of individual “private” particulars... It requires acceding to a political fiction of equal rights that is generated through the denial of [collective] history, a denial that reproduces the omission of history as the ontology of the nation” (26-27). This need to bracket, omit, or otherwise deny the material, embodied relations of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the process of recognizing subjects as citizens and as equal members in the supposedly smooth plain of national community, continues to

⁸⁸ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999) p 25. All subsequent references to Lowe are to this edition and will be cited in-text. Lowe, it should be said, *also* poignantly critiques the limits of this Marxist formulation, noting that Marx’s reliance on Enlightenment abstractions makes this analysis unable to account “for the particular racial relations of production on which this nation has been founded. Despite its trenchant indictment of liberal democracy as the protector of capitalist relations, Marx’s theory cannot account for the historical conditions through which U.S. capital profited precisely from racializing Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrant labor in distinction to white labor and excluding those racialized laborers from citizenship” (25).

⁹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005) p. 51. All subsequent references to Warner are to this edition and will be cited in text.

reproduce powerful exclusionary impulses, implicit in the formal definitions of “freedom” and “equality” that persist, as Lowe notes, even in the era of U.S. multiculturalism.

Indeed, this framing of liberal vision, recognition, and the formal “emancipation” that it articulates to is one of the most persistent and durable characteristics of liberal socio-political thinking, evident even in more recent instantiations of liberal political discourse that ostensibly work to bring the “margins” into political recognition for the purpose of incorporation and the administration of social justice. Thus, when Wendy Brown turns to an analysis of the “complex historical production” of late-modern identity politics, she returns to Marx’s original problematic of universality and particularity to reveal how the process of “politicizing identity” within the domain of liberal political practice installs a “structure of desire” within it that “recasts politicized identity’s substantive (and often deconstructive) cultural claims and critiques as generic claims of particularism endemic to universalist political culture.”¹⁰ Strategically, these identity-based claims, Brown argues, produce a discourse of redress that is largely geared at the sphere of law, and figure the liberal state as the ultimate arbiter of justice. In this sense, identity politics works in tandem with the conjoined “universal juridical ideal of liberalism and the normalizing principle of disciplinary regimes” to produce a discourse of equality which aims to count every difference as no difference, as a part of the seamless whole, but also to count every potentially subversive rejection of culturally enforced norms as themselves normal, as normalizable, and as normativizable through law... persons are reduced to observable social attributes and practices defined empirically, positivistically, as if their existence were intrinsic and factual, rather than effects of discursive and institutional power; and these positivist definitions of persons as their attributes and practices are

¹⁰ Wendy Brown. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.) p 59. All subsequent references to Brown are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

written into law, ensuring that persons describable according to them will now be become regulated through them. Bentham couldn't have done it better. Indeed, here is a perfect example of how the language of recognition becomes the language of unfreedom, how articulation in language, in the context of liberal and disciplinary discourse, becomes a vehicle of subordination through individuation, normalization, and regulation, even as it strives to produce visibility and acceptance. (Brown 66)

Hence, while politicized identity sets about the task of bringing minority and oppressed subjects into political representation (ala the formal recognition of the state and the law, as well as the cultural legitimacy which comes from having one's difference officially recognized and formally disregarded), this maneuver cedes tremendous ground to liberalism's circumscribed definitions of (abstract) equality and (formal) justice, while also grounding the "ends" of this recognition in line with normative, capitalist "means". In terms of what I have been calling the liberal process of *disrecognition*, this late-modern version suggests that a specifically liberal "vision" of social order is maintained not only in *what* is recognized (in this case, difference as "identity") but also in terms of exactly *how* this recognition accounts for what it sees through a preconceived conception of political reality; even as post-modern liberalism aims to "recognize" difference, it simultaneously neutralizes its critical, disruptive potential by situating it within, as opposed to against, what is conceived as a more fundamental universality.

For those interested in "developing the politically subversive or transformative elements of identity-based claims," Brown suggests a need to reject this "structure of desire," grounded genealogically in liberalism's purposely limited recognition. "Given what produced it, given what shapes and suffuses it, what does politicized identity want?" (Brown 8).

Consider exploited workers who dream of a world in which work has been abolished, blacks who imagine a world without whites, feminists who conjure a world without whites, feminists who conjure a world either without men or without men or without sex, or teenagers who fantasize about a world without parents. Such images of freedom perform mirror reversals of suffering without transforming the *organization of the activity through which the suffering is produced* and without addressing the *subject constitution that domination effects*, that is, the constitution of the social categories, “workers,” “blacks,” “women,” or “teenagers.” (Brown 7)

Brown’s larger point is that even ostensibly radical subjectivities that buy into the liberal definition of freedom participate in a “paradox in which the first imaginings of freedom are always constrained by and potentially even require the very structure of oppression that freedom emerges to oppose” (7). Moreover, imagining this freedom requires the “omission of history” which would account for the production of these particularities within the very sphere of economic, social, and cultural activity that is defined *a priori* as the sphere of that freedom’s self-evidence. For the purposes of my own interests in this dissertation, I might re-characterize this political fantasy in terms of how it continues to articulate a speculative “equality” to a lack of recognition. This imagination of universal liberty opposes freedom to cultural particularity itself, imagining a world in which cultural markers and signifiers of difference themselves have been excised from the world, leaving only a flat, featureless plane of unmarked, free subjects who are “equal” only to the extent that it is not possible to distinguish between them. It is a fantasy which lays bare the fantastic nature of liberal vision itself (and its conceptualization of the nature of difference); it articulates a utopia where differences don’t have to be purposefully “disregarded” because difference itself is not a recognizable concern.

Though my goal here has been to highlight the persistent and enduring problematic posed by liberal conceptions of “political emancipation” through disrecognition, I do not wish to be understood as eliding historical specificity; my goal in operating through such broad strokes is expressly *not* to situate this formulation of liberal “vision” as an ahistorical, philosophical constant and my purpose, in traversing the distance from Marx to Brown, is *not* to erect an account of a monumental, internally consistent (if not coherent) liberalism. But as Brown and Lowe both (differently) accede, the Marxist analysis of the state and civil society continues to offer a poignant critical perspective from which to assess the limits of liberal freedom across a variety of historical moments. This utility, in turn, begs its own historical questions. For even as the critical apparatus supplies us with a way of figuring the limits of political identity’s “desire” and the contradictions of liberal universality in the postmodern era, Brown’s turn to Marx’s critical engagement with the nineteenth century liberal state – the continuity between his “Jewish question” and the problem of late twentieth century identity politics – is, in a more historical sense, disconcerting. The lack of progress on this issue and the seemingly static status of “political emancipation” and liberal disrecognition across this history speaks to the remarkable resilience of liberalism’s discourse of equality in the face of its abundant and tangible contradictions. How do we understand this resilience? What maintains the abiding conviction that liberalism’s definition of freedom, demonstrably limited even in mainstream nationalist articulations of history, nevertheless, continually offers the only imaginable horizon of human emancipation and civic equality?

One potential answer is that the political need to narrate this “freedom” as the progressive constant of American history accounts for its seemingly ahistorical character within U.S. social and political consciousness. For instance, as African-American struggles for social, political,

and economic freedom were (at various points) incorporated into an official state narrative of national progress, it became necessary to represent the principles of this social struggle as a version of the same revolutionary principles that (in the national imaginary) had motivated the formation of the U.S. liberal state in its foundational break from the hierarchy of British colonial politics, thus, containing the struggle within the acceptable domain of U.S. national identity. In this way, anti-racist struggle was and is made to seem contiguous with the 18th century political liberation of the bourgeois class that, as Marx notes, generated modern definitions of “universality” and “equality” that had originally composed the liberal state’s transcendent relation to the particulars of private personhood. As a consequence of this re-narration, the project of racial equality could be proposed (contained) as entirely a matter of making “race” one of the forms of “status” that the liberal state and its citizen-subjects would agree to presuppose, recognize, and disregard. Equally applicable to the ways that liberal consciousness has incorporated struggles organized across lines of gender and sexuality, this definition of political recognition is mobilized to implicitly argue for the foundational adequacy of liberalism’s promise of universal equality and political representation. Historical re-narration figures the violence of slavery and Jim Crow as consistent with liberal values, to the extent that they become imaginable as historical moments where liberal-nationalist culture had not yet learned how to recognize and disregard the particular “status” that is blackness, a counterfactual error that, in our contemporary “post-racist” moment, liberal nationalism can claim to have corrected by perfecting its limited vision through colorblindness and (paradoxically) nationalist multiculturalism.

This historical elision is evident, necessary even, whenever liberal nationalist discourse proclaims its commitment to an ideal of equality where “anyone” can be incorporated and

participate equally in the political life of the nation. The discourse of “anybody” civics is, perhaps, one of the most historically enduring linguistic frameworks of American political culture, proposing as it does, outside of historical reference, that all subjects are eligible for entry into the national abstraction of citizenship, “regardless of” whatever cultural or social particularities one brings to the table. In this capacity, the figure of “anybody” signifies (for the purposes of the state and the national polity) as “no one in particular,” exposing the purposeful blindness towards any signifying difference that constitutes the governing epistemology of liberal vision. As a figure of nationalist discourse, “anybody” resolves the contradiction inherent in the concept of a (particular) nation which claims to represent the instantiation of (universal) human freedom, where “any” person could ostensibly be recognized as “American” and thus, “free”. In this sense, it is the logic by which a liberalist political imagination imagines its utopias, and how it frames the nature of its own perceived failures. In conventional nationalist historiographies the commitment to “anybody” politics is held to be a historically constant value across U.S. identity, even if practiced imperfectly across its biography. Imported directly from the most colloquial of constitutional universalisms, the figure of “anybody” – the popular narrative stand-in for the abstract individual of liberal philosophy – is politically meaningful for how it automatically expresses the lack of “recognition” on the part of an (absent) looking subject, whether that unspoken, apparently inconsequential spectator is figured as the state or the national culture at large. At the same time though, this discourse of “anybody” politics works to mystify or obscure this underlying visual economy by rhetorically removing the looking subject from the equation altogether, ostensibly making the lack of signifying difference appear as a property of the person being viewed. This abstract ideal, therefore, goes hand in hand with the assertion that immigrants who fail to assimilate into nationalist culture and activists who

continue to assert the primacy of their cultural identities are attempting to dangerously assert their own particular “private interests” in a field that must be cleansed of all but a properly public sensibility. There is something compulsory about U.S. “anybody” politics from this perspective, in that one’s qualifications for entering smoothly into the liberal-nationalist abstractions of citizenship and universality are predicated on one’s ability to present oneself as “no one in particular.” To acknowledge this underlying structure of disrecognition is to, in short, to acknowledge liberalism’s pathological relation to the concept of difference as such.

The abstract figure of “anybody” is, from this critical perspective, one of the discursive means by which the liberal imagination seeks to circumvent the theoretical difficulties associated with liberal disrecognition, arguing implicitly that its inability to acknowledge, confront, or resolve the problem of difference in its field of political recognition is, in fact, the problem of those who are seeking acknowledgment, confrontation, and resolution for the histories of violence, struggle, and abjection – the forms of particularity – that this liberalism has produced. In practice, the extension of liberal “political emancipation” individuates these historically-produced, structural inequalities as essentialized “private interest” and orients political advocacy around an unspoken (white, bourgeois, heterosexual) norm that “retains the real or imagined holdings of its reviled subject as objects of desire” (Brown 60). The figure of “anybody” is inherently individuated, inherently singular – one cannot be “anybody” while at the same time affirming group affiliation or identity. In this sense, “anybody” discourse participates in what Arjun Appadurai refers to as liberalism’s “fear of numbers.” The most mainstream traditions of liberalist ethical and political thought attempt

to imagine collective life as organized around forms of aggregate decision making which privilege the individual or a number of persons no larger than one. In this way, liberal

thought, both in terms of theories of representation, of the collective good, and of social science, imagines aggregations of individuals as constituted by the addition of large sets of the number one.¹¹

This structural need to reduce all collective interest to mathematical aggregates of individuals finds its limits in both “large numbers” (aka, “the masses” which are always imagined as “the product and basis of fascism and totalitarianism”) and in “small numbers” which “in the liberal vernacular of the United States are called ‘special interests’ and thus pose threats to some idea of the ‘general interest,’ which is believed to be best served when individuals deliberate or negotiate as individuals” (Appadurai 62). One of the most important contributions that cultural studies have made to the critique of liberal politics is to forcibly note, of course, that U.S. liberalism’s antagonism to collective politics (which orients the authoritative vision of the state and the conception of civil society itself on the supposedly more equitable basis of the individual), in actuality, elides the founding presupposition that certain forms of collectivity (whiteness, bourgeois masculinity, heterosexuality) are not to be “recognized” as particularities at all and that, in fact, these “collective” norms are a necessary positive (but unspoken) content of the “universality” that defines the essential nature of the individual itself. The privileging of the singular individual in liberal-judicial and representational forms, again, works to obscure the production of this individual (as an unmarked category against all of its collective “others”) in the welt and warp of normative, national culture.

Thus, the privileged “anybody” that describes the utopian, democratic principle of inclusion at the heart of even the most progressive U.S. liberalisms, makes several important concessions to a purposefully-limited liberal epistemology of social order. Its figurative

¹¹ Arjun Appadurai. *Fear of Small Numbers : An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) p 60. All subsequent references to Appadurai are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

equality, founded on an elision of history and material, embodied particularity and predicated on an individuating (culturally normative) political consciousness, is, in this sense, an apparatus of what I identify as liberalism's "stranger politics." The stranger, I argue, is a means of giving a kind of narrative life to this liberal conceit. As a means of scripting the nature of authentic contact between otherwise culturally-embedded individuals, the stranger proffers a situation where non-essential differences are rendered inert and/or noticeably contingent – where the artificial forms of "status" which govern our private social spheres must be discarded in order to truly "recognize" that what we are seeing is "an individual". In this liberal form, the stranger constructs a figurative relation which essentializes liberal vision itself, not as a purposeful disrecognition, but as a *foundational* form of recognition that has been purified of cultural distinctions. In other words, stranger narratives both exemplify and mystify the process of liberal "political emancipation" by recharacterizing its formative disrecognition as a clarified means of recognizing the essential personhood of the (liberal) individual "underneath" the cultural terms which have contaminated our "private" vision with prejudice and difference. These narratives also work to repress their own abundant contradictions, especially ones that highlight the cultural constructedness of "vision" itself.

At the same time, my contention in this dissertation is that the work of liberalist disrecognition, discursively embedded in the imagination of the stranger, should be understood, not as a historically constant form of political abstraction, but as a logic of political representation that is in need of constant cultural maintenance and which, in all of its historical instantiations, is subject to contradictions that are specific to the types of difference or "status" which liberalist discourse seeks to resolve by strategically declaring the limits of its own vision. By looking to the representational politics of the stranger across the historical archive, I want to

suggest that it is possible to produce a cultural history of these “limits of vision” and their specific utility for liberal-nationalist social formation across its varied historical instantiations. To pursue this history is, for all intents and purposes, to build upon many of the critiques that I have already mentioned, whose ostensible goal is to expose the underlying antagonism to cultural difference that founds liberal articulations of citizenship and national belonging – their reliance on constructions of continuity organized in narrative form and their tendency to stage categories of universality (such as “the people”) in particular (racist, bourgeois) terms. But it is *also* an attempt to credit this liberal imagination with more complexity and flexibility than is generally admitted. It is to argue that liberalism has its own invested history of staging the limits of its political and representational vision in ways that maintain the coherence of its social order – that the forms of “blindness” that we discover within it have often been carefully constructed in this service.

The stranger, as a figure in liberalism’s own shifting conception of the politics of culture, plays an essential role in the way that liberalism naturalizes its own relation to narrative and cultural representation in general. Additionally, I would argue, a critical approach to this stranger begs for a more nuanced understanding of the articulation between narrative, representational work and the politics of liberal-nationalism. This reconsideration of the politics of liberal nationalist narrative is one of the main critical interventions that this dissertation hopes to offer.

American Cultural Studies and the Limits of Narrative

One of the major destinations of this intervention is the uncritical reception of the stranger within American Studies scholarship that takes up this liberal cultural politics. The stranger operates in the service of liberal ideals of disrecognition in that he constructs and takes

part in a narrative whose ostensible goal is to draw up mystifying distinctions between what is perceivable as a property of the subject and what is only perceived as a function of the prejudices of the viewer. Strangers, as Simmel suggests, confront us with the repressed contingency inherent within the distinctions that we rely upon to organize our social worlds, primarily by prompting a recognition of sameness where there should be only difference. Yet, as I have suggested, this framework contains its own repressed idealist conceptualization of the social domain itself, ideological to the extent that it characterizes this underlying sameness in terms that are native to classic liberal individualist constructions of essential personhood and agency. Stranger narratives attempt to construct a clean delineation between what is “real” about subjects (figured a priori as individuals, as the principle of sameness that invariably recurses to the terms of liberal humanism) and what is merely “cultural” (as the limited vision of a group mentality that can be easily discarded). Implicit in these conventional stranger narratives, therefore, is a theory of the liberal subject’s relation to culture itself, where the organizing principles of liberal individualism define a foundational condition which is always lurking underneath the false distinctions and forms of “status” that contaminate our vision, effectively inhibiting our ability to recognize everybody as “anybody.” Through this stranger narrative, liberal vision is reconceptualized, not as a social process of dis-recognition, but as a return to a more “pure” form of recognition, inherently more just and, of course, essential for the production of liberal-democratic equality.

To understand the stranger as a culturally constructed framework of social intelligibility in his own right, we must be willing, first and foremost, to challenge the essential, foundationalist claims of liberal conceptions of personhood and political reality. This investigation, therefore, makes use of and seeks to extend work in American Cultural Studies

that is built to show how the liberal citizen-subject (defined by universalisms) is not “anybody” after all – that, in fact, the category of the individual (self-possessed, autonomous, and sovereign) is in fact constructed and delineated through a whole series of cultural criteria for membership. At the same time, I argue that an analysis of “stranger politics” helps to explain why these trenchant criticisms seem so often congruent (or, at least, easily imagined as coextensive) with equally constructed liberal imaginations of freedom, justice, and truth – why these critiques of liberalism’s universalisms are so easily incorporated into liberalisms’ imagination of progress and freedom. The answer, I will attempt to show, is that, in its conceptualization of the stranger, the liberal imagination maintains its own critique of “cultural criteria” while subtly crafting a definition of culture itself that can be discarded so as to preserve the sanctity of liberal categories of personhood, citizenship, and freedom. One basic example of this slippage is in the mainstream critique of “stereotypes” which has become the standard of a contemporary liberal pedagogy of social justice; progressive liberal thinking decries the work of the stereotype, especially as it has historically played a role in defining “cultural criteria” for exclusions around national belonging and citizenship. But it performs this critique (often taking an oppositional stance to any brand of ethno-nationalist culture) only to the extent that its own liberal-humanist universalisms are sanctified as “real” underneath the false consciousness of difference that the stereotype encourages. In this sense, liberal-nationalist culture gears itself to incorporate all critiques of cultural exclusion precisely because, as a cultural perspective, it continually positions itself outside of the field of culture altogether.

This is to suggest that “national culture” – what Lowe refers to as “the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives” which “powerfully shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, and what they remember, and what they forget” – is also as the domain where the national

polity negotiates its relationship to narrative itself and configures its own version of representational politics so as to immunize itself against the charge of particularity (29). “American national culture takes up the role of resolving the history of inequalities left unresolved in the economic and political domains; where the state is unable to accommodate differences, it has fallen to the terrain of national culture to do so” (Lowe 29). But to the extent that “national culture” increasingly contains, within itself, its own account of the nature of this terrain and, accordingly, its own account of the liberal subject in relation to that cultural milieu, an essential part of this materialist critique of liberal-nationalist culture is to be found in a historically-specific account of this relation, one that we can reconstruct through an analysis of the “stranger politics” of the liberal imagination. The work of national narrative is, in this sense, mediated by the historically situated status of narrative itself within a liberal imagination that has its own, often implicit, “common-sense” theory of culture’s relation its subject. It is not enough to simply look to the terrain of narrative as the field of the subject’s interpellation into liberal-nationalist norms. Rather, we must also look to the cultural, political terrain in which narrative itself is situated, where liberalism’s stranger politics work to mediate the way that nationalist reading publics understand the meaning of narrative representation and preserve, as essential, the limited vision that subtends its definition of equality.

Situating narrative in this way, though, highlights and calls into question the sometimes too-easy assumption that scholars make about the political work of representational, narrative legibility in the context of liberal-national social formation. Particularly in the wake of Benedict Anderson’s still-widely influential work on print culture’s foundational relationship to national consciousness, scholars have turned to literature and the novel to make arguments about the narrative production of the national public’s imagination of the “community in anonymity which

is the hallmark of modern nations.”¹² These readings of the nationalist work of literary form have a “stranger politics” at their heart; they credit culture and narrative, in particular, as the domain where the “recognition” of national belonging and citizenship is made possible. Priscilla Wald, for instance, takes up Anderson’s theory (alongside Etienne Balibar’s notion of “collective narrative”) to argue that nation (as a home/space) and nationality (as an identity) are both simultaneously developed in narratives that “transform contestable geopolitical boundaries and plural ethnic and racial peoples into a community with origins that predate those contests.”¹³ In short, the nation is “constituted (both in its geopolitical and affective, nationalist components) in an unending project of narration and re-narration which seeks, always imperfectly, to transform and preserve the conditions of possibility for speaking the “us” of national community. For Wald though, this process is haunted by a simultaneous disavowal and reiteration of a moment of an originally “unrecognizable” plurality which then must be contained through the “continuity” that more narration provides. In this sense, Wald’s own theorization of the work of national narrative hinges on a conventional “stranger politics,” where the cultural recognition of a coherent and continuous national community is tenuously constructed over the reality of an unrecognizable mass of unknown elements.

From a critical angle on these “stranger politics” though, the circuit between recognition and unrecognition is not itself a framework of sociality outside of liberalist consciousness. Thus, analyses like Wald’s miss an important aspect of modern liberal consciousness in the assumption that the “limits of storytelling” are immediately coextensive with the limits of liberal nationalism’s cultural politics. To describe the “anxiety” that is generated by the inevitable

¹² Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991) p. 36. All subsequent references to Anderson are from this edition and will be cited in-text.

¹³ Priscilla Wald. *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) p. 2. All subsequent references to Wald are from this edition and will be cited in-text.

failure of continuity that disrupts and haunts narratives of national identity, Wald turns to Freud's notion of the uncanny to describe the crisis that comes from a collective recognition of "the inevitable inaccuracy of one's experience of self." "Intrinsic to the narrative of identity is the ongoing possibility of a return to its own genesis in the uncanny (the unrecognized self) – in its efforts, that is, to establish continuity where there has been a rupture" (Wald 10). This crisis of uncanny "self-recognition" is itself poised against the need for national community to maintain its authority as a politically coherent and legible body, capable of being "represented" both politically and aesthetically. This crisis, therefore, precipitates the need for an endless cycle of new narrations, which establish forms of continuity that mend the uncanny ruptures of the national self and "fill in" the empty category of the citizen and the national community with content. For Wald, in other words, it is *within* narrative representation that liberal nationalist culture negotiates its own self conceptions and concretizes the terms by which the political recognition of the citizen is made manifest. Correspondingly, what is *outside* of nationalist narrative is indicative of the unincorporated or unreconciled; the unwritten/unrepresented is, in this sense, always a threat to the coherence and universality of national identity. My argument is that it is often exactly in the domain of the unwritten that the liberal subject recognizes itself most perfectly and unproblematically.

Theorizations of the work of national narrative like Wald's argue for important linkages between the formal construction of narrative and the political imaginations that it both engenders and makes available, and, importantly, offer a conception of narrative as a site of struggle for a de-essentialized conception of national identity. But it tends to operate on the assumption of an easy binary between the incorporated and the unincorporated – the writable and the unwritable, the inside and the outside of representation itself – which it attributes to the liberal-nationalist

imaginings it analyzes. Conceptualizing narrative in this way organizes, productively, a conception of cultural representation as a historically, materially productive practice which lends to narrative itself the power to shape cultural memory in terms which are already congenial to prevailing political and nationalist ideologies and which operates, formatively, just as importantly through what it excludes or evades as what it invokes and incorporates. But this binary tends to conceptualize the cultural work of nationalist narrative itself through terms that are not so easily confirmed when one surveys perspectives on the nature of social power and representational inscription more generally. How do we, for instance, understand the point of articulation between this characterization of the work of national culture (its operation in and through representational recognition) and the insights of another line of criticism which suggests that the most prominent domain of privilege operative in the context of liberal-nationalist civil society is not the “written” but the “unmarked”? For these scholars, the domain of representation – where bodies and subjectivities are staged as particularities subject to interpretation, demanding to be read – subverts the privilege that comes from remaining outside of the field of the readable/recognizable altogether.

Lee Edelman’s sophisticated work in his book, *Homographesis*, stands as perhaps one of the more thorough and nuanced treatments of this problem, noting that, in terms of Cold War discourses of sexuality, the need to make homosexuality “legible” as a form of difference, writ on the bodies of its subjects, engendered an anxiety that comes from submitting the normative to representation.

Homosexuality, then, unforgivably, has the effect of compelling heterosexual masculinity to engage in the self-subverting labor of reading and interpreting *itself*, knowing full well that the more susceptible to interpretation it acknowledges itself to be,

and the farther it gets from its “original” condition as a state of “natural” self-evidence, the more aggressively it must insist on its absolute indisputability, thereby compromising itself still more by fueling suspicion that the very insistence of its claim to be indisputable testifies to a state of being always more than potentially in dispute.¹⁴

“Legibility,” in this critical context, is anything but an unproblematic solution to anxieties over social cohesion that are engendered by the problem of difference. The need to generate readable differences in the field of male sexuality, “textualizes male sexuality across the board, opening its every enactment to interpretation as an act” (Edelman 206). In this context, being represented and narrated is to submit oneself to disciplinary vision and “ideology” conspires, not to craft representations consistent with the prevailing modes of production, but to construct masculinity “as the antithesis of representation” which orients it in a privileged relation to both production and liberal political abstractions simultaneously (Edelman 208). Edelman complexly illustrates how the abject and the normative strangely encounter one another in the field of illegibility, placed there by the historically situated discourse of the “readable” that operates as both a space of privilege and as a space of unrepresentable anxiety.

Is it possible to draw a distinction between the unrepresented and the unrepresentable – between that which is withheld from the field of legible differences as a way of producing it as self-evident and that which is relegated to the domain of the unwritten as a way of denying it representation in the domain of the political? Of course. But, it entails an investigation of the historical production of these zones of illegibility, which can be coded as inherently “outside” or always already “inside,” depending on the conditions under which they are desired and read. This is an investigation that, I would argue, many examinations of the representational politics of

¹⁴ Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994) p. 206. All subsequent references to Edelman are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

liberalism neglect. This is not to suggest that liberal politics are *not* invested in cultural narrative and imaginative forms. Far from it, my argument, like many of the scholars I have cited in this introduction, is that liberalist nationalisms and conceptions of citizenship rely upon narrative to construct the absolutely necessary forms of recognition that facilitate the very possibility of imagining community in the face of tangible anonymity. But the idea of an “unmarked” space, outside of the exposure to “representational force” that Edelman describes here, is an equally important category for scholars of liberal citizenship, as to be “unmarked” places one in a privileged position to definitions of equality which, in the liberal-citizen subject, are defined against particularities which prevent the “recognition” of universality that is inherent in liberal personhood. At the intersection of these two perspectives, we can begin to perceive the ambivalent, contradictory relation that liberal-nationalist political consciousness maintains with the very concept of cultural representation. On one hand, foundational liberal-nationalist imaginations are only made possible in and through the work of representation, constructing the conditions for diverse strangers to identify as a public, articulated to a common destiny, imagined as a community continuous through historical temporality. On the other hand, this “stranger politics” reserves as a form of privilege that which it withholds from narrative view, facilitating the recognition of this community in terms of an essentially unmarked universality, as opposed to what it really is: defined through the privileging of particular racializations, genders, sexualities, or relations to capital as normal and therefore already “universal” and not in need of disrecognition.

Dissertation Plan: The Stranger Politics of Urban Realist Writing

My argument, writ large across the various chapters of this dissertation, is that this contradictory relation is in need of constant management at the level of how reading and writing

themselves are discursively framed and articulated to their various civic, liberal-democratic functions. Moreover, as I have attempted to suggest in the following section, the recognition of this “management” calls for a more complex reconsideration of the work of representation itself in the context of liberal-nationalist social formation; it calls our attention to the ways in which the U.S. liberal imagination has, explicitly or implicitly, placed itself at odds with representational inscription as a way of preserving the sanctity of its own abstractions and conceptions of political reality. Returning, then, to the concept of the “city of strangers” which originally motivated my inquiry, I turn to the history of urban literature as an ideal cultural site for examining this ambivalent liberal politics of representation. Urban fictions, as many before me have argued, are a site of struggle for competing modes of political legibility and interpretation. “Reading the city” is an inherently political act of representation, mediating acts of “local” vision and conceptions of social totality, and the techniques that make the city legible should be understood as emerging from historically-situated discourses of political power. In changing conceptions of urban “vision,” in other words, we can bear witness to the always shifting dimensions of U.S. liberalism in its struggle to preserve its privileged definitions of social reality and its “common sense” status as an interpretive framework. But, as I have been laboring to explain in this introduction, liberalism’s definition of reality is preserved not only in the construction of rubrics of legibility and cultural recognition, but simultaneously in the construction of a domain of essential individualism outside of cultural frameworks. I turn to urban literature, therefore, as an archive of historically-situated, liberalist “ways of reading” the urban scene, an archive that documents both the will to legibility that characterizes modern liberalism’s “arts of governance” *and* the self-consciously articulated limits of vision that manage a broader conception of representation’s reach in the service of liberal abstractions.

Urban spectatorship, enacted in both the work of urban representation and often dramatized in the representations themselves, constitutes an important cultural archive of this dynamic, allowing us to see how liberal consciousness maintains itself through the construction of strategic illegibilities, sanctioned ignorances, and useful blindnesses.

The object that constructs many of these limits is the urban stranger, and my first goal in this dissertation is to outline a method of reading this figure that challenges the liberal narrative of the stranger as an expression of the limits of cultural intelligibility. In chapter one, I turn to a number of early literary depictions of the city in the work of Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne to read the urban stranger as a *product* of liberal-nationalist representational regimes and a *relation* internal to liberal social imaginations. In my investigation of several works of short fiction by these authors, I suggest that while the urban stranger cannot be understood as outside of these representational logics he, simultaneously presents a difficulty for the forms of representational “containment” or “closure” that are central to narrative form and its ideological functions. The stranger, I argue, signals from *within* the narrative all that the narrative cannot contain, resulting in a series of unresolved narrative arcs and interestingly incoherent characterizations. Importantly though, I am also at pains to show that these disruptions are not, as a rule, always already disruptions in liberal-nationalist conceptions of “the people.” While in stories like Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” or Hawthorne’s “Wakefield,” the limits of the narrator’s vision gestures at the contingency of liberal individualist constructions of personhood and nationalist conceptions of the public, in others, like Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” the stranger appears as the ideal protagonist of liberal revolution, which offers both an opportune moment to embrace a new form of individual agency and a frightening, nightmare moment of indistinction and admixture embodied in the urban mob. I argue, at the intersection

of these readings, that in urban fiction, liberal narrative form and liberal political norms actually maintain a tenuous relation to each other, united in their goal of producing the conditions for communal identification (in which case, the stranger is the problem) and departing from each other where liberalism's definition of individual freedom is at odds with representational closure (in which case, the stranger is the solution). This is to suggest that in its investment in the forms of closure that narrative continuity and character provide, liberal-nationalism's own political abstractions enter into a necessarily contradictory relation to the forms of subjection that make them legible (or necessarily illegible) as social realities.

The remainder of my dissertation traces this contradictory relation, and its "management" in the context of American urban realism. In this domain, I argue, the urban stranger is best understood as simultaneously the problem that realistic fiction is built to resolve and the solution to its troubling tendency to subvert liberal norms in its depiction of character and social totality. Urban realism is an ideal location to see this representational problematic in action precisely because it has often been privileged as offering a form of trustworthy vision on urban society for public consumption. As commentators on the linkages between literary realism and urban subjects have long noted, going all the way back to Ian Watt's seminal "rise of the novel" theory, there is often an uncritical relation between the category of so-called "realistic" fiction and the tendency of said representations to portray "the seamy side of life" that is almost always portrayed as a property of the urban underclass – depictions of poverty, suffering, degradation, corruption, and crime that dominate our ideas about what makes a novel or film "realistic." While critics of realism are right to discard this formulation as uncritical or inconsistent, this long-standing association has a lot to say about how the very idea of realism operates to orient public perception towards a particular conception of the work of representation in general.

Representations of urban degradation are “realistic” because they ostensibly overcome the acknowledged problem of representation at its source - the intent to depict poverty or crime, for instance, indicates a willingness to make visible what is, to most “regular people”, invisible or inaccessible in their everyday experience. Thus “realism” accrues most of its general social authority by staging itself implicitly against the “normal” (and limited) vision of those who both craft more idealistic representations and are addressed by them in the first place – the “public” in both its commercial and civic senses. It claims to extend vision (for the purpose of reform or greater understanding), while positioning the subject of this vision within the domain of bourgeois normalcy, morality, and innocence that constitutes the disrecognized liberal public sphere. This understanding of urban realism then, as uncritical as it is in its treatment of both what constitutes the “urban” and what characterizes “realistic” representation, has had the long history that it has precisely because of the ways that realism has been staged as an apparatus of progressive, liberal democracy since the nineteenth-century. To pursue an investigation of the political need for realism, this dissertation pursues a history of realistic fiction that extends well beyond the domain of what is conventionally recognized as Literary Realism, as a literary movement and formal distinction belonging to a specific group of late-nineteenth century authors. Instead, this dissertation looks to “realism” in literature as a changeable discourse of literary value, operative well beyond the period of Literary Realism as an aesthetic movement and contingent, always, on the demands that liberal politics places on its definition and function. So-called “realistic” urban fiction (differently figured in different historical moments) has a privileged status within liberal social formation, typically as a progressive force, because of the way that it claims to fulfill what is an abiding, underlying desire for a cohesive and ostensibly objective (unmarked) public vision on the city. And it is precisely because of this supposed

utility for liberal-capitalist public politics that realism must recourse to “the stranger,” as a theory of cultural inscription and as a figure that naturalizes liberal disrecognition, in order to align itself with an a priori liberal reality.

The liberal public sphere is, I would argue, the destination of this stranger politics and an underlying problematic in the concept of representation in urban writing at the end of the U.S. nineteenth-century. In chapter two of this dissertation, I argue that the late nineteenth-century Literary Realist project of extending representation to the whole of society and capturing the “full effect” of the urban scene is troubled by the contradictory relation between the abstractions of the liberal-nationalist public sphere and the practice of representational inscription. This is to say that the problem of representing the industrial city is not simply the problem of seeing the “other half,” but that the desire for urban representation is subtended by the need to repress the particular “representativity” of the liberal (bourgeois) urban spectator, preserving the “unmarked” status of the bourgeois public sphere. Representations of urban spectatorship in the period are absolutely haunted by the problem of the “representativity” of the spectator, whose own particularities and place in the social order contaminate the project of public vision with underlying private interests. Thus, while urban spectatorship needs to be incessantly *staged* (in order to make urban problems legible to a specifically liberal sensibility) it must also be, simultaneously, *repressed* (in order to preserve the political adequacy and public authority of the liberal perspective in general). Thus, I turn to urban writing in this period to see how the problem of representation inherent in this “circuit of vision” was managed by narrative strategies, both in the ongoing struggle to establish a properly “public vision” in works like Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, and in the logics of “character” and social representativity that are central to the American Realist politics of narrative. In particular, I read William Dean

Howells's New York novel, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, as a paradigmatic realist text which incessantly marks this struggle and attempts, unsuccessfully, to locate a place for the representation of an unmarked public sensibility in the terms of realist literary values, against the dominance of the mass media public sphere.

In pursuing these readings through the work of William Dean Howells, chapter two also offers a reevaluation of the concept of realist literary representation. To this end, I offer a long history of critical evaluations of realism as a social practice. This academic conversation, I argue, is organized according to two competing and totalizing, ahistorical conceptualizations of the work of representation, one which understands realism as productively "extending representation" to those that have been victimized or excluded by liberal-capitalism and another which understands the work of realist representation as a "strategy of containment" which is issued from the standpoint of particular class values and which works in the interest of bourgeois ideologies of social control. These opposing conceptions of representation's "work" (issued from different disciplinary positions within literature and cultural studies) are, in my reading of the period's "circuit of vision," actually implicit as an internal conflict that realism itself struggles with in conceptualizing its own practice. What these perspectives both fail to account for, I argue, is the ambivalent relation that liberal consciousness maintains to representational legibility. My reading of the realist text, therefore, attempts to chart a different approach to the problem of realist representation by looking at *A Hazard of New Fortunes* as a strategic negotiation of this conflict, and calling for a more critical assessment of the representational "outsides" of the realist novel. This is to suggest that the American Literary Realist aesthetic project of total representation is, in some repressed ways, in direct conflict with its avowed confidence in an underlying liberal-nationalist reality and its attempts to characterize its

representational practices as the expression of “the universal” that is American identity. In Howells’s urban realism, the conflict between liberal consciousness and liberal narrative form takes shape as the competing desires to provide a comprehensive narrative “recognition” for all individuals in their particular social position while also banking on the authority of liberal publicity as a position uninflected by social difference itself. As the “recognition” of individual characters comes to entail a representation of their different relations to capital and to the sphere of public discourse itself, it becomes harder and harder to imagine a form of disrecognition that is not simply an expression of class power. At the end of the novel, it is an imagination of “the stranger” that rescues the liberal imagination of the text, resecuring, through a strategic illegibility, the positive sanctity of the liberal abstraction of the unmarked (bourgeois) public.

This is to suggest that the stranger is an underlying liberal desire, offering a discursive strategy for evading the problem of incessantly legible, structuring differences generated by the act of representational inscription. My last chapter seeks to extend this insight into the question of liberalism’s construction of racial difference and its concomitant politics of racial progress. To this end, chapter three shifts to an account of race and realist writing in the postwar era – an era in which struggles for African-American equality are being incorporated into a liberal-nationalist consciousness and historiography. One of the burdens of this chapter, therefore, is to provide a contextualization of both the production of the nature of racial difference and, correspondingly, an account of the redefinition of “realism” under the political pressures of what Michael Denning refers to as the “culture of three worlds.”¹⁵ As several historians of race have noted, the liberal-nationalist anti-racisms that were generated in this period constructed definitions of racism and racial identity that made several important concessions to emerging political pressures brought on by the Cold-War – definitions that were built to emphasize the

¹⁵ Michael Denning, *The Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*. (New York, NY: Verso, 2004)

adequacy of liberalist definitions of equality in the face of a long history of white supremacist democracy and which characterized liberal-capitalist social formation as inherently anti-racist. At the same time, some of the same pressures were responsible for a redefinition of literary realism (to some, “reality” in general), geared specifically as a critique of representational reductionism and articulated as a significant departure from earlier realisms that had depicted cultural, political differences as the result of material inequalities brought on by liberal-capitalist society. These twin developments, I argue, contributed to the emergence of an anti-racism and a conception of literature’s anti-racist function that have a stranger politics at their heart. By defining the problem of race wholly within the conceptual domain of “prejudice” – “prejudice” as a culturally limited vision which must be, through education and greater social intimacy across race lines, transcended – race could be imagined as a problem of strangers, where the recognition of difference itself is a problem which liberal limited vision can resolve.

In this context, I turn to the fiction of James Baldwin who, I argue, significantly departs from his period’s racial liberal consciousness by rejecting the stranger as the organizing principle of his realism. The concept of the stranger, in Baldwin’s New York novel, *Another Country*, is characterized as a dangerously limited way of understanding the work of racial difference and the solution to racism. What the stranger offers, in Baldwin’s fiction, is a means of making racial categories contingent while strategically positioning white liberal identity outside of this contingency, preserving its status as the unmarked representative of U.S. political culture’s universality; as long as the problem of racism is imagined as the problem of strangers, white identity will never be called to acknowledge its own origins in racial difference, nor will it be required to answer to the forms of privilege that accrue to its unmarked status as the opposite of cultural difference. Baldwin’s realism, in rejecting the idea that white liberals are “strangers” to

racial difference, provides an account of the racial production of white liberal identity, charting, along the way, the strategic illegibilities and stranger relations that are constructed by white liberals in order to repress an account of the difference that is whiteness. Baldwin, in other words, makes visible the political effects of liberalism's thoroughly limited conception of difference, built to sanctify the efficacy and "reality" of its own limited vision. As a conclusion to my dissertation, this reading of Baldwin elucidates the cost of liberalism's stranger politics, suggesting that the desire to eradicate race from the liberal perspective (as a way of securing equality) is a violent act which does not "transcend" limited racial categories as much as it obscures the origins of these categories and the ongoing construction of American universality in and through racial difference.

The "city of strangers," as this dissertation sets out to prove, is anything but an innocent or a priori conceptualization of the urban scene. Especially as the stranger is imagined as a social relation that transcends cultural frames of reference, the conception of the city as the site of stranger contact is, in many ways, already an imagination built to affirm a liberal conception of social reality. Scholars of liberal culture need to be prepared to recognize the stranger's constructed and privileged status in order to think critically about the limits of liberalism's definitions of social identity, equality, and freedom. If, as materialist approaches to liberal citizenship and politics continually assert, liberal conceptions of equality are founded on a disrecognition that privileges the "unmarked," we must be able to account for the production of this unmarked position. We must be able to think critically about the cultural production of culture's limits and, accordingly, recognize that the limits of liberal narrative, representational legibility are not automatically coextensive with the limits of liberal-nationalist consciousness. Rather, liberalism recurses to a "stranger politics" to construct its own underlying definition of

the nature of social differences and, in doing so, maintains its own conception of the limits of narrative and representation, colonizing the field of the unwritten with its own preconceived realities. This stranger politics maintains the very possibility of liberal consciousness through a careful scripting of representation's limited value in both the narrative strategies adopted by literary artists and in the discourses that construct reading and writing as liberal practices. It is only by contextualizing social vision and representation itself as contested and contingent fields, constructed in discourses of social reality, that we can bear witness to the true complexity of liberalism's politics of representation. And it is only from this position that the struggle to imagine and articulate a different, more just and inclusive relation to culture and difference itself can properly commence.

CHAPTER ONE: Reading the Stranger in Liberal Modernity

Introduction

For some time now, the figure of the urban stranger has proliferated in attempts to define the relation between the culture and politics of modernity. Marshall Berman certainly had urban strangers in mind when he proposed that “modern environments... cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality.”¹⁶ By the late nineteenth-century, the extreme “dialectics of modernization and modernism” could be said to have produced a “multitude of fragments” with respect to both urban public life and our capacity to represent it; in this milieu, the politics of development and the culture of renewal had temporarily found some common ground (16-17). Richard Sennet, in another sphere, diagnoses the fragmented character of urban modernity as symptomatic of the privileging of “private and intimate life” in the space and social practices of the city.¹⁷ In the wake of the “fall of public man,” this imbalance can be detected in the way that “ritual interchanges with strangers are looked on as at best formal and dry, at worst as phony. The stranger himself is a threatening figure, and few people can take great pleasure in that world of strangers, the cosmopolitan city” (3). At the same time, the supposedly disinterested character of the “public man” produces an abstract, disembodied modern subject

¹⁶ Marshall Berman. *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1988) pp. 16-17

¹⁷ Richard Sennett. *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 1978.) pp. 16-23. All subsequent references to Sennett are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

which surreptitiously universalizes the white, heterosexual male and limits the potential for alternative forms of political participation and collective world-making. For Michael Warner the need for “new forms of gendered or sexual citizenship” is partially met by the particular address of modern counterpublics, which allow for the fashioning of alternative subjectivities “around the requirements of public circulation and stranger sociability” (121). Though Warner and Sennet share very little in terms of their understanding of the ruptures of modern liberal social formation, they both, in their own way, pursue a desire for “a social imaginary in which stranger sociability could become ordinary, valuable, and in some ways normative” (Warner 105).

Strangers really are everywhere. Moreover, they seem to traverse some unthought circuit between attempts to name the founding rupture of modern experience and attempts to describe or escape the cycle of alienation that experience has produced. In our attempts to understand this modernity, they are imagined as producing the feelings of isolation and disorientation that modern consciousness has long associated with urban culture. Simultaneously, whether you envision that alienation stemming from either a monstrously overdeveloped private sphere or an abstract public sphere that reproduces its privileged disembodiment at the expense of particular bodies and social relations, attempts to resolve the contradictions of liberal sociality often take the form of a desire for the stranger. How can we account for this seeming contradiction? Who is this stranger that appears as the passive hero of attempts to recover social logics of liberal modernity and, simultaneously, as the active figure of their resistance? What feature accounts for the stranger’s mobility across all of these perspectives and analytic domains?

In all of these accounts, strangers stand in for the uncertainty and opacity of modern public life – that which is illegible, unrecognizable, or unrepresentable in our current thinking – and most arguments that mobilize strangers have either obliquely decried this unknowability or

attempted to recover it as a form of abjected sociality. But what epistemology has defined the limits of certainty and of our ability to read or see? Under what auspices do we declare that the stranger is unknown and, perhaps, unknowable while, at the same time, political identities, logics of community, stereotypes, and other forms of representational politics conspire to define and “place” all political agents by imposing a kind of incessant symbolic legibility? What forms of knowing and recognition mark the stranger as unknowable and unrecognizable in the first place? In answer to these questions, this chapter argues that strangers are produced in all of their opacity from within the general field of liberal modernity –its foundational assumptions about community and the modern individual, its modes of subjectivity and exclusion, and, especially, the privileged modes of representation which convert these political imaginations into perceptible realities on the surface of the modern city. In this way, the problem of locating illegible strangers becomes the problem of locating strange blind spots in the politics of representation which make liberal modernity “readable” in the first place. Understanding the stranger, in other words, must begin by interrogating the historically specific methods and means by which we know and recognize urban dwellers in and through liberal representational regimes.

In order to investigate these representational politics, I look to a series of stranger “sightings” from the antebellum period of American Literature, a moment which is often characterized by its emphasis on the pastoral over the urban, and for the emergence of a liberal consensus on public life. Here, we encounter some of the earliest literary attempts to imagine the unknowable stranger within the American political landscape. The first sighting, Edgar Allen Poe’s 1840 short story, “The Man of the Crowd,” begins and ends by announcing this figure as the “book which will not permit itself to be read.”¹⁸ Situating us within the first-person

¹⁸ Edgar Allen Poe. “The Man of the Crowd.” *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allen Poe*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1975) p. 481. All subsequent references to Poe are to this edition and will be cited in text.

perspective of an anonymous nineteenth-century urban spectator, Poe leads us through the crowded streets of London, both its sunny business districts and its crowded and ominous back alleys. Through his narrator's casual analysis, the city is dissected and splayed out for our enjoyment and consumption, its intricate social relations and identities made legible. These dynamics have received significant consideration from scholars who have attempted to historicize the various perspectives (literary and otherwise) with which 19th century urban space was mapped, read, and represented in totality according to various ideological imperatives and configurations of knowledge/power. These scholars collectively argue that representations of the "city as a whole" have both historical origins and political ramifications. Engaging various archives, including those that chart the historical situation of emerging literary genres, these studies position "The Man of the Crowd" within a larger historiography of liberal, industrial capitalism. In positioning the stranger within this historical frame, I hope to begin to describe what kind of intervention a critique of "stranger relations" might suggest to this particularly prominent field of urban literary studies.

Somewhere along the way we encounter our first stranger, the title's "man of the crowd" who quickly presents a number of serious problems for both the narrator's vision of the city and his ability to adequately represent it. As an inquiry into the nature of the anxiety which subtends "the book which will not permit itself to be read," I will investigate this story as an extended meditation on the process of reading and writing both urban strangers and the city in general. What is it to write the book that refuses to be read? How does one read this stranger, and, especially, its refusal? As this study will attest, urban strangers are already, in some ways, very much a part of our most conventional social imaginations; they are not simply that which has yet to be assimilated into thought. They emerge out of social narratives and, in some cases, play a

hand in producing the politics that are subsequently legitimated in them. But even in these cases, the stranger appears, as such, by virtue of the fact that he simultaneously exceeds those imaginations and their political ends. In this sense, “refusing” knowability is its own form of resistance, as it continually beckons us towards the unthinkable aspects of our own sense of place.

The connection between strangers and the politics of representation that I am arguing for also links this study to the body of scholarship that has explored the production of “imagined community” and national subjectivity in cultural processes of narration. As I will illustrate through a reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s urban writings, the stranger emerges from and has effects in this context as well. Ultimately, the aim of this chapter is to locate the stranger alongside and against that other hero of liberal modernity: the citizen-subject. These two figures collide in Hawthorne’s work, which locates its urban strangers at the limit points of its various liberal-nationalist imaginations. How does one take up strangers and urban crowds in order to imagine the contours of a “peoplehood” on which to found national belonging? For the unnamed narrator of “Wakefield,” the stranger interrupts any attempt to imagine national community through historical continuity and shared identity. The very idea of the national subject comes under fire as the narrator of this strange story finds himself chasing his own imaginations through the crowded streets of London. Meanwhile, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” stages a disorienting urban space and a riotous city mob in the name of an exploration of the emergence of U.S. national consciousness. Conflating the crowd and the nation, the citizen and the stranger, “My Kinsman” concludes with a vision of political community made strange as a consequence of its refusal to found itself in liberalist principles. In describing his emergence from the uncertain spaces between national imaginations and liberalist representational imperatives, I will conclude

by detailing the outlines of another political imagination, one that takes the stranger as its principle citizen and, in doing so, points to liberalism's own ambivalent relationship to representation narrative.

Reading the City in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd"

Poe's tale opens with an anonymous narrator casually reading the daily newspaper in a London coffeehouse facing "one of the principle thoroughfares of the city" and observing the "dense and continuous tides of population" sweeping in front of the large window which faces the street (Poe 475). An avid consumer of the emerging spectacle of the city crowd (initially described as a series of entirely undifferentiated "tides" – elsewhere, a "tumultuous sea"), the narrator is, nevertheless, not willing to simply bear witness and soon amuses himself with the task of separating this ocean into its "aggregate relations," bearing down on details to transform the mass into a set of highly rationalized and thoroughly legible "types." Occupying a space apart from the crowd, which still remains fully available to his vision, the narrator "reads" in each individual particularities of "figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance" which organize them unequivocally alongside various accumulating axes of difference (Poe 476). Like the 19th century detective, which some argue that he prefigures, the narrator mobilizes a detailed, positivist analysis of bodies and surfaces which, in turn, produces a seemingly rational urban scene. In short, the narrative itself begins by transcribing and legitimating a bourgeois, sociological vision of the social order, one whose "pleasure" and security rest upon categorically arranging all aspects of urban life, clerks and pickpockets alike.

In these early moments of the story, Poe's narrator takes up what we might label, following Fredric Jameson, a project of "cognitive mapping." The phrase, "cognitive mapping," actually originates in Kevin Lynch's now seminal urban planning text, *The Image of the City*, in

which he suggests that urban alienation is proportional to the inability to mentally organize and narrate local cityscapes. Central to his occupations in this argument are the foundations of what he calls the “legible city.”

Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern.¹⁹

Lynch’s goal here is to impress upon his readers the importance of planning designs that allow for urban dwellers to locate themselves (their experiences and desires) within a sense of the “city as a whole.” For Jameson, mapping becomes, more abstractly, a way of marking conceptual or aesthetic operations that mediate between the “local” and the “total” – between the individual subject of perception and experience and the abstract patterns of relational knowledges entitled “the social.” These two scales are also mutually constitutive; any articulation of the “total” authorizes a particular reading of the “local” while stable readings of the “local” confirm the reality of the “total” in all of its coherence and comprehensive authority. Comparing Lynch’s concept to Althusser’s positive conception of ideology as “the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence,” Jameson argues that cognitive mapping is crucial for all forms of political imagination in the ways that it “attempts to span or coordinate” the experiential and the systemic through representation.²⁰

Thus, one way to consider the political import of the story’s narration is in the way that it attempts “to systematically reduce chaos to coherence” by coordinating the rapidly passing street

¹⁹ Kevin Lynch. *The Image of the City*. (New York: MIT Press, 1960) p. 3.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson. “Cognitive Mapping.” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Eds.) (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) p. 347. All subsequent references to Jameson are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

scene with a discourse of physiognomic types.²¹ Importantly, the authority of this categorical method, the way that it seemingly accounts for all of its diverse elements, simultaneously reproduces hierarchies of class value and discourses of gendered and racial-superiority by granting them status as a priori distinctions. In his attempt to contain the radical instability of the “local” (the ever-changing “sea of heads” that compose the unexamined street scene) the narrator mobilizes seemingly independent categories that ultimately prove themselves to be organized around a series of recognizable norms. The first class “which is pointedly termed, the decent” is composed of noblemen, merchants, and various “men of leisure” which “did not greatly excite” the narrator’s attention (Poe 476). The “tribe of clerks,” on the other hand, is characterized by the marks of their office labor (“right ears” which “long used to pen holding, had an odd habit of standing on end”) and by the way that they display “the cast-off graces of the gentry” (Poe 476). Likewise, the “race of swell pickpockets” is characterized generally by the way that they cannot “ever be mistaken for gentlemen.” Even further down on what the narrator calls “the scale of what is termed gentility” are “Jew pedlars with hawk-eyes,” “modest young girls returning from long and late labor” and “women of the town” (Poe 477-78). In these scenes, the narrator produces a “scale” that hierarchically stages all difference and categorical distinctions according to criteria that take the particular features of the leisure class and an unspoken white masculinity as its normative organizing principles. But on its surface, the narrator’s mapping principle seems to construct an urban space organized transparently according to easily readable equivalences and perfectly juxtaposed categories, “totalizing” frameworks whose authority is clearly meant to extend beyond the “local” context of the narrator’s vision – a representation of order that is produced by, and simultaneously legitimates a politically invested rubric for “reading the city.”

²¹ Dana Brand. *The Spectator and the City in Nine-teenth Century Literature*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 83. All subsequent references to Brand are to this edition and will be cited in text.

Characterizing Poe's story in this way creates the opportunity to read his narrator's particular form of "cognitive mapping" (and its eventual failure) as symptomatic of changing material conditions, while inserting it within a much larger historiography of cultural anxiety and political imagination. One of the most famous of the story's critics, Walter Benjamin, seems to have read the story in this way; in an essay on Baudelaire, he writes of "The Man of the Crowd" as being "marked by certain particularities which, upon closer inspection, reveal aspects of social forces of such power and hidden depth that we may count them among those which alone are capable of exerting both a subtle and a profound effect upon artistic production."²² Many of Poe's readers have pursued a similar track, designating the desire to "read the city" as the primary impulse of the narrative in an attempt to track its origin and political effects.²³

Paralleling Lynch's planning imperative in a different register, John F. Kasson argues that "to learn the language of the modern city and to read it as a text was no mere belletristic act; it was essential to a full and meaningful urban life. Without this ability one would remain perpetually an uncomprehending stranger, baffled by the city's signs and codes, unable to represent one's self."²⁴ As with Jameson's cognitive mapping principle, the primary question is how to "locate" oneself within a representational grammar of the "city as a whole." Producing legible and coherent representations of urban space and sociality has broad ramifications, not only in the construction of social identities, but also for the justification and maintenance of "traditional notions of social relations, manners, and appropriate behavior" – indeed, for any "meaning" that

²² Walter Benjamin. "Some Motifs on Baudelaire." *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken Books Inc. 1969) 170. All subsequent references to Benjamin are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

²³ For instance, the nationalist politics of urban literary representations is a well remarked-upon field. For example, attentive to the fact that Poe chose to set his story of urban terror in London, both Andrew Lees and Richard Lehan have suggested that the failure of Poe's narrative vision is symptomatic of anxieties about the European industrial city which helped to reinforce an urban American exceptionalism while warning against the reproduction of those evils in the United States.

²⁴ John F. Kasson. *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 1990) 70. All subsequent references to Kasson are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

might be attached to urban life at all. Conversely, Kasson suggests that the failure of such a comprehensive vision makes one into a “stranger” who is defined by his inability to read social conventions or stage an identity within them. This tension between the “legible city” and what Kasson calls “the city of strangers” – the problem of being “located” within either a thoroughly rationalized and hierarchical grid of identities and functions or an endlessly fluctuating, ambivalent and disorienting street scene – is at the center of this chapter’s investigation.

Narrating the City: Flâneurs and Detectives

Critiques of “The Man of the Crowd” which focus on this desire for a “legible” urban space rightfully take up Poe’s anonymous and evidently leisure-class narrator as the lens through which a politically invested vision of the city is actualized. It is he (within the construct of the narrative itself) who generates a representation which resolves the tumultuous crowd into a vision of urban order with its highly stable relations. Of course, this tension between the “city as a whole” and the illegible street is destined to reemerge with the appearance of the “man of the crowd.” In placing the narrator’s desire to produce a “legible city” at the forefront of their analyses, these critics often reduce the “man of the crowd” himself to an expression of the “anxiety” that subtends the narrator’s “reading” of the urban milieu. This is a tendency that I would like to avoid. Nevertheless, we will return to the figure that Poe equated with the unreadable book in the next section. In the meantime, “locating” the narrator within a historiography of urban spectatorship will help to define the modern, urban political imagination to which the man of the crowd belongs.

Investigations of the politics of the narrator’s descriptions of the crowd have yielded a wealth of competing interpretations which locate it within the historical terms, power structures and contradictions of liberal capitalism. We have already seen, for instance, how the urban

analyst wields an unarticulated white, male norm in formulating the specific differences that structure his categorical knowledge of the crowd. In another reading, Benjamin accuses Poe of attempting to “saddle the crowd” with a repressive logic of industrialized labor in their “uniformity of facial expression” (176). “Poe’s text makes us understand the true connection between wildness and discipline. His pedestrians act as if they had adopted themselves to the machines and could express themselves only automatically” (Benjamin 176). In a similar but competing interpretation, Kasson concludes that the narrator’s bourgeois compulsion to read the crowd stems from the perceived nineteenth century failure of classical individualism and the rise of mass culture where “the whole idea of natural rights, the assumption of individual autonomy and freedom characteristic of eighteenth-century thought, was collapsing in the face of nineteenth-century social realities” (Kasson 82). Both of these readings imply that the narrator’s reading of the city simultaneously reproduces the terms of cultural difference exploited by industrial capitalism’s drive for labor power (the singling out of gendered and raced bodies as naturally marginalized labor subtended by a vision of a docile, automatically functioning working class) while reserving an abstract liberal autonomy for himself and his class. In insisting, like Jameson, on the political nature of any cognitive mapping project, these critics point to the ideological nature of urban spectatorship, suggesting that Poe’s narrator is complicit in reproducing the “imagined relations” which legitimate the class hierarchies of urban, industrial capitalism.

These readings also tend to emphasize the product over the process; they privilege the descriptions of the city that emerge through the narration over the epistemological logic that structures the descriptions and the narration in the first place. This “way of reading” also has a history. Interestingly enough, studies that have attempted to take up this question also draw

upon a history of the literary traditions, genres and tropes which Poe's work operates in and against. Dana Brand, for instance, proposes that the narrator can be read as a transitional literary figure situated somewhere in-between the nineteenth century flâneur and the detective. As a "critique of the interpretative strategies of the flâneur" who attempts to "domesticate" the city through aesthetic consumption, "The Man of the Crowd" ultimately suggests that "the urban crowd cannot be reduced to comfortable transparency" (Brand 88-89). This failure generally indexes the profound growth of nineteenth-century cities and the anxiety of urban spectators struggling to adapt and construct cognitive maps of the rapidly changing urban milieu. For Brand, however, this anxiety is important because of the way that it marks a transition in Poe's staging of urban spectatorship – from the passive flâneur to his newest literary invention: the investigating detective.²⁵

Inventing a new genre, and a new urban spectator, in response to changes that may have been taking place in the public understanding of cities, Poe offered new models for reading and consuming the modern city (Brand 79).

According to Brand, the passive consumption of the urban spectacle that was the interpretive mode of the flâneur is no longer an appropriate perspective in the context of the wide-spread and ever more popular belief that urban spaces were dangerous in all of their chaos and illegibility. Thus Poe's flâneur/detective consumes the spectacle of the city with an analytic that presumes the presence of threatening elements from the outset. Urban order, no longer an assumed object

²⁵ Poe is, of course, widely acknowledged as the founder of the detective fiction genre. The first true example of the form, his "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," was published in 1841, just one year after "The Man of the Crowd."

that can simply be discovered through aesthetic contemplation, is now a goal which must be pursued through the dark and crowded streets.²⁶

Ronald Thomas joins Brand in considering the narrator a precursor to the detective and, in doing so, points to the common discursive roots of the will to legibility in “The Man of the Crowd” and the practices of nineteenth-century criminology. In his analysis, both detective fiction and criminal science share an epistemological imperative to discover a rubric for “reading” bodies in the name of defining the “criminal type”; if the “man of the crowd” is “the book that does not permit itself to be read, then both fictional detective analysis and new technologies such as fingerprinting and criminal photography sought to define the language with which “the criminal body automatically writes itself and signs its own name.”²⁷ Ultimately, Thomas marks these developments as a part of a more general shift in public discourse which privileges a visible grammar of “identity” over the more contingent distinctions of public, social “character” organized according to status, reputation, or publicly recognized accomplishment.

The detective is most effective when he is most suspicious of those qualities, when he regards everyone not as possessing a character in this sense but as embodying an empirically definable identity – a series of discrete material signs that may be categorized, documented, recorded, and compared to the corresponding traces of the criminal body left at the scene of a crime. The detective story not only makes this shift of emphasis the central act in its investigation, it also offers the account of this

²⁶ This distinction is useful to characterize the shifts in narrative voice and convention that coincide with the rise of detective fiction as a dominant urban literary form. Of course, many critics who suggest that the true motives of the flâneur are more political in nature might suggest that the detective is merely continuing the work of the flâneur with a different rhetoric. Benjamin (who once referred to the flâneur as “a spy for the capitalists”): “...the thesis, namely, that the flâneur has made a study of the physiognomic appearance of people in order to discover their nationality and social station, character and destiny, from a perusal of their gait, build, and play of features. The interest in concealing the true motives of the flâneur must have been pressing indeed to have occasioned such a shabby thesis.” Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. p. 430

²⁷ Ronald R. Thomas. *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 204. All subsequent references to Thomas are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

transformation of persons into identities (and the necessity of professional expertise to discern them) as the central story of modern civilization (Thomas 288).

Two paradigms for cognitive mapping emerge here: the socio-political economy of character that is now understood as insufficient, and a positivist criterion of identity which identifies individuals according to visible signs written on the body itself. The “transformation of persons to identities” – the narrator’s ability to read the body’s visible signs in the first section of the story and his emphasis on faces, clothing, and walking styles – mirrors this epistemological shift, while it also allows the narrator to frame himself as an objective analyst. In offering this account “as the central story of modern civilization,” Thomas suggests that “The Man of the Crowd” represents a shift in the knowledge/power relations that subtend both narrative form and state police apparatuses.²⁸

I have rehearsed these critical readings of Poe’s urban narration in order to show how the visual methodology that he employs is already indicative of a liberal mapping of urban space. As both Brand and Thomas seem to suggest, the narrator’s way of “reading the city” is caught up in a much larger story of the relation between forms of perception and social control central to liberal modernity. In other words, they suggest a subtle shift in the relations between aesthetic “readings of the city” and what Michel Foucault calls the “arts of governance.” In a series of lectures entitled *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault elaborates upon his concept of “governmentality,” which emerges here as a complex technique of power composed of a number

²⁸ This shift is similarly elaborated in Alan Sekula’s “The Body and the Archive” through an analysis of nineteenth-century “photographic practice” and the “paradoxical status of photography within bourgeois culture” (3). According to Sekula, the potential of photography to provide an indexical, juridically useful “realism” was realized as early as the 1840s, “in the general context of... systematic efforts to regulate the growing urban presence of the ‘dangerous classes,’ of a chronically unemployed sub-proletariat” (5). The camera became the focal point for the articulation of multiple classification systems for the arrangement of human bodies and for the identification of specifically criminal bodies, organized typologically, and providing “a method for quickly assessing the character of strangers in the dangerous and congested spaces of the nineteenth-century city” (Sekula12). Alan Sekula. “The Body and the Archive.” *October*, Vol. 39 (Winter, 1986) MIT Press.

of different types of “mechanisms,” two of which seem important for our reading of “The Man of the Crowd”: “discipline” which is exercised on “the bodies of individuals,” and “security” which takes “population” as a “set of processes to be managed at the level and on the basis of what is natural in these processes.”²⁹

...discipline structures a space and addresses the essential problem of a hierarchical and functional distribution of elements, and security will try to plan a milieu in terms of events or series of events or possible elements, of series of possible events; it refers to the temporal and the uncertain, which have to be inserted within a given space” (Security 20).

Foucault insists that these different mechanisms do not frame entirely separate processes, but are often complexly woven together. Indeed, in the narrator’s reading, we can see a certain conglomeration of disciplinary discourses (which submit bodies to an intense surveillance, “the assignment of each individual his ‘true name’”³⁰) and security imperatives (which organize those bodies into “types” and normative categories through which the narrator can claim to read “the history of long years”) (Poe 478).

In addition, Foucault suggests that it is the “reality” of these distinctions which allowed for their framing within the definition of freedom produced by liberalist principles.

“The game of liberalism – not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow their course, *laissez faire, passer et aller* – basically and fundamentally means acting so that reality develops, goes its way, and follows its own course according to the laws, principles, and mechanisms of reality itself... More precisely and particularly, freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of security” (48).

²⁹ Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 70. All subsequent references to this text will be cited in text as “Security”

³⁰ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 198

And as I have already suggested, the narrator's system of organization "objectively" reproduces class, race and gender hierarchies to the extent that they can be staged as a priori groupings which assume an un-interrogated interpretive function, transforming "hawk eyes" and right ears into supposedly self-evident identities and "types." Describing and categorizing only according to what is "real" about these groups in all of their random movement through the street, the narrator can deploy the language of population seemingly without inhibiting the "freedom" of the perambulating individual. Foucault's particular account of liberalism helps us to see how "reading the city," in this case, is implicated in a larger historical process in which nineteenth-century human science, secular humanism and cultural production conspired to produce "man" as a "figure of population" that is also the liberal individual.

Consolidating these perspectives, my argument here is that the ability to "read" (and write) the city emerges from this criticism as a social practice which was essential for the reproduction of ideological effects and for the discursive construction of nineteenth-century liberal "man" in all of his historicity. Reading (and mapping) the city is a technology of power in the way that it produces a certain vision of hierarchically-ordered relations from the raw materials of urban chaos, stabilizes those relations within the framework of "the real," and extracts them from the flux and movement of history. But in defining the stakes and contours of Poe's particular cognitive map in this way, we have only gotten half of the story (literally). These readings of the "narrator-as-transitionary-detective" also map interestingly onto a reading of the story's narrative structure. If the first half of the story emphasizes the security and pleasure of an aggressively constructed urban order (even as it includes criminals), the second half breaks that order down around the man of the crowd. He enters the narrative as the "general character" of the crowd changes with the coming of night; his "countenance" is singled out by the narrator "on

account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression” (Poe 478). Seized by “a desire to keep the man in view – to know more of him” and to insert the peculiar stranger into his earlier categorical systems, the narrator leaves his newspaper and his hermetically sealed position behind the coffeehouse window to initiate an investigation which will last for over 24 hours (Poe 478). In this section of the story, therefore, we move into a space in which processes of “reading the city” become increasingly problematic and where the attention of the narrative investigation moves away from its cognitive mapping imperative to focus entirely on the inextricably “local” figure of the stranger.

Reading the Stranger

In both the introduction and the conclusion to his story, Poe equates the “man of the crowd” with a “book that does not permit itself to be read.” But this description is, at least initially, misleading. What really marks this figure is the *overly signified* and *ambivalent* nature of his person. In an instant, the narrator “confusingly and paradoxically” reads his face as containing, “ideas of vast mental power, of caution... of coolness, of malice... of supreme despair” (Poe 478). Even after leaving his isolated observation point in the café to follow the “decrepit old man,” the paradoxes only accumulate; the narrator, in a closer examination, notices that the stranger’s clothes are both “feeble” and “of beautiful texture” and that he conceals on his person, “both a diamond and a dagger” (Poe 479). In short, the “man of the crowd” presents a body and a surface which combines the categorical distinctions which had so nicely mapped the urban scene in the first section. What characterizes the man of the crowd is an “idiosyncrasy” that emerges not out of singularity or simple foreign-ness, but paradox and ambivalence. It is in this figure of paradox that we have encountered our inquiry’s first urban stranger.

Writing in 1908, Georg Simmel defined the stranger as a particular conflation of binary terms. His first line: “If wandering, considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, then the sociological form of ‘the stranger’ presents the synthesis of both of these properties” (Simmel 143). As his argument develops, other binary terms are invoked to frame the ambivalent positionality of the stranger: closeness and remoteness, near and far, fixed and mobile, inside and outside. In each case the stranger represents a contradiction lodged within the easy hermeneutics of these socio-spatial logics.

In the case of the stranger, the union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship is patterned in a way that may be succinctly formulated as follows: the distance within this relation indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near” (Simmel 143).

Thus, the stranger is never the foreigner. This “union” of the close and remote, as Simmel notes, can only be considered as a specific relation when the stranger is “an element of the group itself” – a group whose patterns of membership and exclusion have assumed a positive, spatial character (relations which he notes are both “determining” and “symbolic”). The quality “strangeness,” as Simmel defines it, has the effect of bringing that which is “remote” (far, foreign, or simply outside) within the spatial and symbolic boundaries of any group which has already produced itself and its subjects according to an *a priori* closure or logic of nearness.

There is a dynamic that is worth dwelling upon, a relatively simple point which will nevertheless be essential for locating the stranger within the politics of representation – my primary objective in this section. The useful complexity of Simmel’s description is in how it defines this quality of strangeness as having its origins not outside of or fundamentally against

the logics of the closed group, but *as a consequence of those self-same logics*. In other words, the stranger can only be identified as such because of the way he conflates terms which have already assumed a kind of concrete force; “near and far,” “close and remote” – these terms describe the contradictory positionality of the stranger at the same time they also reference the existence of supposedly stable collective terms by which the group has constructed itself as a discursive totality. The difference I am insisting upon here is the difference between suggesting that the stranger is “*neither* inside nor outside” and maintaining, as I would like to, that he is “*both* inside and outside.” Like the citizen and the foreigner, the stranger is a *product* of modern exclusionary discourses. But while the citizen and the foreigner are easily produced as subject positions within these discourses, the stranger is not an identity but a relation that is defined by undecidability. A (purely utopian) society which does not define itself according to exclusionary principles is, therefore, not the “being-together of strangers,” but a society in which there can be no strangers at all.

But as Zygmunt Bauman points out, the purpose of the binary organization of social relations is not only to position subjects alongside a coherent axis of inside/outside, but “to exhaust the possibilities” of subject formation entirely within this logic. Simmel’s stranger recovers these possibilities as a consequence of his disorienting positionality. From this position, Bauman extrapolates the “threat of the stranger” from Simmel’s original series of propositions. Drawing on Derrida, Bauman suggests that the proliferation of stranger relations are symptomatic of a modern, liberal discourse of difference which “produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that it makes impossible” – the figure of undecidability.³¹

³¹ Zygmunt Bauman. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Inc. 1991) p 55. All subsequent references to Bauman will be cited in-text.

Oppositions enable knowledge and action; undecidables paralyse them. Undecidables brutally expose the artifice, the fragility, the sham of the most vital of separations. They bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos.

This is exactly what strangers do (Bauman 56).

Ambivalence is a threat – in Bauman’s sense of things, a threat more “horrifying” than that which is represented by the foreigner or even the enemy. While the presence of the foreigner threatens the purity of the domain of “home,” the stranger questions “oppositions as such” to the extent that the very possibility of a “home” is subjected to a kind of “terminal paralysis” (Bauman 55). “The stranger threatens sociation itself – the very *possibility* of sociation” (Bauman 55). In his theory therefore, the stranger is exactly what any exclusionary social logic cannot allow. These exclusions often require a vision of “the enemy” as “other,” but the “stranger” as “the undecidable” is precisely what must be repressed – either through increased networks of knowledge/power or, in some cases, genocide.

Following these points, the critique that stranger relations mount from within this context assumes a very specific character. The effect of this relation is not simply to create anxiety around the presence of “foreign elements” within the group (which depends, after all on the ability to classify the element as foreign to begin with – a reconfirmation of the sanctity of the inside/outside opposition) but in the way that it erodes these distinctions from the inside. Simmel thus moves from his definition of the stranger to a discussion of the “trace of strangeness” that seeps into all relations based in commonality.

The stranger is close to us insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of occupation or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, and connect us only because they

connect a great many people... that which is common to two is perhaps never common *only* to them but belongs to a general conception which includes much else besides, many *possibilities* of similarities (Simmel 147).

The effect of strangers, as Simmel sees it, is a growing sense of the contingency of supposedly comprehensive axes of social organization and the confidence in the “inner and exclusive necessity” of these distinctions. The stranger emerges then as a figure whose “belonging” is difficult to question, but, in whom, *states* of belonging are rendered porous and exclusionary criteria, potentially illegible.

These theories of the stranger also have the effect of curbing the problematic assumption that stranger relations are defined by simple status as an outsider. Kasson is wrong it seems; the stranger is not simply outside of (and necessarily ignorant of) social meanings, but a product of those meanings. Reading the “man of the crowd” as “the stranger” therefore presents us with a particular way of diagnosing the anxiety that characterizes the second section Poe’s story – the nightmare of urban life that is represented in the narrator’s failed pursuit of a knowledge of the stranger that might resolve the gaps in his urban hermeneutic. Simultaneously, the effect of the stranger is to render all distinctions contingent by combining them into a figure that is overly-signified and therefore not legible at all. What is ultimately at stake is not the mysterious incoherence of the stranger, but the assumed coherence of the “city as a whole” and the individual’s position within it – a coherence that is dependent on the sanctified and essential nature of the distinctions it posits. The man of the crowd threatens “the total” by suggesting that there might be other categories, other criteria for organizing social identities, other cognitive maps that might produce an entirely different social order.

Narrating the Stranger

How are these possibilities to be repressed? If the second section of the story, as both Brand and Thomas suggest, is analogous to a detective's investigation, one that is primarily aimed not at discovering criminals but at affirming a comprehensive and cohesive order of empirical distinctions, identities and categories, then this investigation must be considered a failure. But examining the full ramifications of this failure requires us to read against the grain of the narration itself. The aim of this investigation is, after all, to establish linkages between action/body and identity – to establish an absolute relation between sign and signification. In my reading, Poe's invocation of the unreadable book is gestures towards the failure of this relation. The book that "does not permit itself to be read" signals the difficulty of writing the figure which refuses to be located within the social meanings proscribed by the "totalizing" grammar of urban life. How does one write what cannot be read? In this section, I will attempt to suggest that the particular ambivalence that stranger represents is not simply a problem for abstract conceptions of social totality, but simultaneously subtle ramifications for acts of narration and literary representation.

Michael Pickering's use of Simmel in his work on stereotyping and the modern politics of representation supplies me with a useful set of insights with which to frame this part of my analysis. In his theory, there is an intimate and antagonistic relation between strangers "as a central feature of modernity" and the modern cultural practice of stereotyping, which operates "as a means of keeping others at a social distance."³²

Stereotyping was part of the complex response to metropolitan life as a world of strangers, and to the cold, impersonal relations of economic rationality and the 'cash-

³² Michael Pickering. *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*. (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 207. All subsequent references to Pickering will be cited in-text.

nexus' which characterize that life and which at times strangers are held to personify (Pickering 208).

For Pickering, the stereotype was primarily a discursive operation that established the "boundaries" and exclusions through which community, identity and difference could all appear as positive terms, while simultaneously containing "the uncertainty, unpredictability and contingency" that also is a part of urban life. Stereotyping "contributes to the drive to order by maintaining some semblance of stability amidst the great blooming buzz of social reality. It attempts to annul difference" (Pickering 211). In other words, Pickering insists upon a concept of stereotyping as social practice (similar to the analysis of "types" that is a part of the discourse of population mobilized by the narrator in the first section) – as another means of "reducing chaos to coherence" through representation. Rather than a simple mobilization of negative projections of "the other," or a symptom of underlying cultural prejudices, stereotyping, for Pickering, is one key process by which objects are *brought into* political representation in the first place.

Characterizing representation as a "strategy of containment," Pickering mobilizes Simmel and Bauman both to locate the stranger within yet another ambivalent relation. As "the continual doubt sitting inside identities which are the result of the production of cultural difference," strangers are a key target of stereotyping "because they are by definition elusive to definition" (Pickering 213). Thus, "strangers exist at the crossover point of relations between the negotiation of modern urban experience and the politics of representation in modern culture" (Pickering 211). Within Simmel and Bauman's definitions of the stranger, Pickering simply points to the fact that the "production of cultural difference" is an ongoing project of mediating between experience and representation. Here we encounter Jameson's "local" and "total" again,

but this time with a different emphasis. On the one hand we have, as before, the experience of the street, and, on the other, an “order” that is not simply an abstract fantasy of social totality or legible coherence, but a product of historical representational practices. Here, I would like to expand upon this idea by suggesting that the flexible “crossover point” where Pickering locates the stranger is a highly problematic space for literary narration. Strangers resist “symbolic containment” in narration and yet are not simply outside of the politics of representation either. Determining exactly what can and cannot be represented in this crossover is the primary goal of my final reading of Poe’s stranger.

The second section of Poe’s story is dominated by an incessantly “local,” sensuous narration. The discourse of “population” that had once served to segment the crowd into its types is conspicuously absent in these scenes, replaced by descriptions of “commotion” and general aimlessness – the “waver, the jostle, and the hum” of the street (Poe 479). Descriptions of motion and rapid change characterize the urban crowds – movements which, in lieu of the logics of identity that organize them, appear bereft of both their socially-legible origin and consequent intentionality. The man of the crowd himself is the most salient example of this sudden loss of exegetical authority. What characterizes his movements is an incommensurable relation between social space and individual action. Entering into a bazaar, “the localities of which the stranger appeared well acquainted” the man of the crowd does not become a consumer (Poe 479). Moving rapidly “among the buyers and the sellers” the narrator observes how he “entered shop after shop, priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all objects with a wild and vacant stare” (Poe 479). Later, encountering a “thronging” audience leaving a theatre, he “threw himself amid the crowd” leaving the narrator “at a loss to comprehend the waywardness of his actions” (Poe 480).

Herein lies the nature of the stranger's "illegibility" – to occupy spaces of consumption without becoming a consumer, to throw oneself into an audience without assuming the role of spectator. What "use" these spaces might have for him remains unclear. He moves with only one apparent aim, to seek out crowds and move within them, and this goal he pursues with a kind of obsessive perseverance. Once again, the man of the crowd is not characterized by a complete illegibility but, rather, the impossibility of subsuming either his body or his behaviors within a larger logic of identity. He moves with obvious desire but without legible motive. Thus the narrator is only able to frame his knowledge of the stranger negatively – not by what he *is* but by what he *refuses*. "He refuses to be alone" (Poe 481). Ultimately it is this conclusion that earns the stranger his titles, "the type and genius of deep crime" and "the man of the crowd." But even these titles are failures. The former invents a discourse of "types" in which to insert the stranger – one that only highlights the anxiety-ridden failure of the investigation which, after all, has failed to identify any actual criminal activity. The latter, the title's "man of the crowd" only succeeds in signifying a relation between the stranger and the incessantly mobile, undifferentiated mass of humanity, designating neither a stable identity nor a definitive locality in which to place him.

Here the narrative concludes, marked by failure and misrecognition. Some critics have suggested that the narrator fails to recognize even himself in this final section – the extent to which he, in investigating the stranger through the streets of London, has himself become a "man of the crowd" – rendering ambivalent even the line that divides the subject and the object. Indeed, in the final moments of the story, the narrator makes a final attempt to confirm some kind of namable relation between himself and the stranger – "stopping fully in front of the wanderer," the narrator attempts to meet the gaze of the man of the crowd (Poe 481). The

stranger, as it turns out, does not only refuse to be a readable text. He also refuses the role of the spectator. Leaving these ambivalences intact, the narrator simply gives up both his pursuit of the stranger and his attempt to narrate him into any kind of “reality” that might be either mappable or legible. The man of the crowd continues, however, fading back into the crowd and towards an unknowable end. Thus, the final failure of the narrative is to assign any kind of trajectory or futurity to the stranger. And even while the narrative has failed substantially to “contain” the stranger within either a “place” or a “name,” the one thing that we are given to know is that he continues beyond the reach of our representational devices as the book “which does not permit itself to be read.” Materially and insistently present, but eluding the logics of placement that would “read” him into a discourse of modern population.

Thus the effect of the man of the crowd within the text is to incessantly signal, from *within* the text, all that which is *has already been excised* from textuality; he moves through the plot with one foot in the action and the other crossing over into the unknowable “outside” of the narrative frame. This strange ambivalence results in a certain necessary inconclusiveness. There is too much that both must be and yet cannot be perceived. This unknown and uncontained element disrupts any cognitive mapping project, forcing us, like the narrator, back into “the jostle and the hum” of the streets. And it is there that we fleetingly encounter desires, practices, and futures that, while they remain unnamed, circulate outside of the agency that is ascribed to urban subjects. By appropriating one of the series of nested definitions that have guided my inquiry in this section, I might propose a hypothesis at the conclusion of this reading. The stranger is “close to us” insofar as that, in him, we recognize both the terms with which we make ourselves and others “legible” and the politics which subtend any “reading of the city.” He is “far from us” in

that he everywhere gestures at the limits and failures of these fantasies of coherence by subtly undermining the representational technologies that are their agents.

Hawthorne's Stranger Narratives

Unlike "The Man of the Crowd," Hawthorne's 1835 short story, "Wakefield," prefaces itself upon the failure of writing.³³ The story of Wakefield, who "absented himself for a long time from his wife" in the crowded London streets, is generated from a partially remembered story out of "some old magazine or newspaper... told as truth."³⁴ Hawthorne's twice told-tale acknowledges and responds to an absence in this "truth" - the unexplained "gap" of years in which Wakefield, "under the pretence of going on a journey, took lodgings in the next street to his own house, and there, unheard of by his wife or friends, and without the shadow of a reason for such self-banishment, dwelt upwards of twenty years." Remaining so close to home as to be able to observe his old apartment and his wife every day, Wakefield eventually (and without any reasonable motive provided by the original printed/remembered version) returns to his wife and "became a loving spouse until death" (Wakefield 152). The newspaper or magazine article itself is described as an "outline" whose "truth" seems insufficient to the narrator; embedded in the story which chronicles this "gap in marital fidelity," there is a larger "gap" (familiar to us) in which Wakefield's motives and substantive identity remain a mystery to the figurative "readers of the city" that a mass-printed text such as a magazine or newspaper implies. In fact, the original printed "incident" provokes only two intertwined responses from the narrator: it

³³ It seems worth noting that some of the earliest critical reactions to "Wakefield" deemed the story itself a failure on aesthetic and moral grounds. My reading thus seeks to understand the failures of this narrative as a crucial part of its engagement with urban social life, not as a collapse of the author's formal abilities. Given that my approach entails understanding this "failure of narrative" as a product of the fraught and ambivalent politics of urban representation, I would argue that the narrator's inability to draw up his urban narrative into an internally coherent story is both the problem and the point.

³⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne. "Wakefield." *The Portable Hawthorne*. Ed. Malcolm Cowley. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976.) p. 151. All subsequent references to this text are to this edition and will be cited in-text as "Wakefield"

“appeals to the generous sympathies of mankind” and simultaneously makes plain the narrative freedom which launches the story – the freedom “to shape out our own idea and call it by his name” (Wakefield 153).

This freedom, as it turns out, is a problem, in that it continually marks its own failure to present Wakefield to the reader in a convincing and completely legible way. We are made aware, at almost every point, of the artificiality of the representation – of the distance between the imagined “idea” and the completely inaccessible “gap” that is the supposedly real man “outlined” in the newspaper. Similar to the investigation carried out by Poe’s detective/flâneur, Hawthorne’s narrator embarks on a project that attempts to posit Wakefield’s ultimate “knowability” by inserting him into a logic that his readers can use to mediate between the “us” and “the other.” And like Poe’s story, this narrative is punctuated by the failure of the first person voice which, in this case, suggests that any attempt to imagine Wakefield and fill in the “gap” left by the newspaper account is a fiction that imposes a “name” upon what is still, ultimately, unnamable. Thus, in calling attention to itself as a project of representation, Hawthorne’s story takes back that same “freedom” that it initially seeks to offer. It posits an essential system of representation which can fill in Wakefield’s “gap of years” with assumptions, motivations and actions, while it simultaneously marks that same system as foundation-less and ultimately impossible to substantiate. Once again, we can see how a narrative confrontation with the urban stranger seems to necessarily provoke an engagement with the most basic epistemological assumptions of representation itself.

But we must, of course, inquire into the specific assumptions at work in this case. True: the narration in “Wakefield” is marked by some of the same anxiety that marked Poe’s city reader in “The Man of the Crowd.” But in Hawthorne, we encounter a different series of

referents for that anxiety. The story properly begins when the narrator almost “loses” Wakefield in the streets. The reader is instructed to keep up lest Wakefield (and the story itself) escape into anonymity.

We must hurry after him along the street, ere he lose his individuality, and melt into the great mass of London life. It would be in vain to search for him there. Let us follow close at his heels, therefore...” (Wakefield 154).

The narrator’s anxiety in this passage interestingly conflates a number of important issues ranging from the vision of the writer to the problem of individualism in the context of urban crowd culture. On one hand Wakefield’s potential to disappear into the “great mass” of the city self-consciously highlights the insecurity of the narrator in his attempt to imagine the man in such a way as to make him legible to the “generous sympathies” of the readers whom he addresses as conspirators in the project (Wakefield 154). On the other hand – and what makes “Wakefield” an interesting transition point between the urban imaginations of Poe and Hawthorne – the anxiety of losing the man in the “masses” makes use of a familiar set of urban discourses designed to shorthand the conflict between the abstractions of liberal citizenship and concrete forms of urban collectivity. In producing the “masses” in opposition to even the possibility of “individuality,” Hawthorne quietly invokes larger historically-situated questions about the possibility of liberal democracy in the early era of America’s urbanization.

I begin the second part of this chapter with a brief incursion into “Wakefield” in order to situate Hawthorne’s urban strangers within this more specific set of “near and far” references and to investigate their ramifications for national community and liberal citizenship. In this second section, Hawthorne’s work will serve as a means of “locating” the stranger at the intersection of various discourses designed to legitimate political abstractions and democratic practice in and

against the everyday figures and spectacles of nineteenth century urban life. Replacing Poe's anonymous reader-narrator with his own anonymous writer-narrator and a reading public who is imagined as the recipient of the narrative address, Hawthorne's "Wakefield" constructs a stranger-hero whose uncertain horizon of belonging extends to the scale of national, democratic community. The narrative pursues Wakefield through the urban scene, all the while attempting to locate him within the assumptions and conceptual referents designed to propose the possibility of this community. Instead, we find ourselves wandering in an uncertain territory where strangers and national citizen-subjects are indistinguishable and, perhaps, one and the same. Consequently, my reading of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" will engage the stranger as a figurehead of a radical, de-centered national consciousness and the center of a problematic impasse between shifting definitions of citizenship and the pressing demands of democratic political agency. Marked again by production within and against the political logics native to their context, Hawthorne's strangers straddle the uncertain distinctions between heterogeneous street crowds and national audience-publics, between particularized individuals and liberal citizen-subjects and, ultimately, between representations of liberal-democratic community and the persistent spectre of popular sovereignty that is the mob.

National Subjects "Lost Amid the Crowd"

In "Wakefield," we can begin to locate the conjoined problematics of narration and nation within the aforementioned layering of print devices that Hawthorne uses to frame the contingency of his tale. Several key commentators have remarked upon the role of the newspaper (and the emergence of mass-print culture in general) in setting the conditions for the conceptualization of the "imagined community" of nation. De Tocqueville in 1835:

The effect of the newspaper is not only to suggest the same purpose to a great number of persons, but also to furnish means for executing in common the designs that they may have singly conceived. The principle citizens who inhabit an aristocratic country discern each other from afar; and if they wish to unite their efforts, they move towards each other, drawing a multitude of men after them. It frequently happens, on the contrary, in democratic countries, that a great number of men who wish or who want to combine cannot accomplish it, because as they are very insignificant and lost amid the crowd, they cannot see, and know not where to find, one another. A newspaper then takes up the notion or the feeling that occurred simultaneously, but singly, to each of them. All are then immediately guided towards this beacon; and these wandering minds, which had long sought each other in darkness, at length meet and unite.³⁵

Whereas aristocratic forms of authority arrange the multitude around the high center of “principle citizens” who manage their movements and form the basis of their unity, the newspaper provides the “beacon” for the expression of one of the central principles of liberal-democracy – individuals whose self-interests concretize in the collective expressions of “the people” via the mechanisms of civil society. Simultaneously, the individual that is “lost amid the crowd” is the citizen who has found no means to exercise his part in the project of popular sovereignty. He is “lost” precisely because he has not transitioned from the feeling of “insignificance” that is the experience of “the crowd” to the feelings of participation and belonging that are the effect of being in “a public.”

More contemporary investigations of the relation between print capitalism and the cultural processes of identification that facilitate “peoplehood” have largely taken their cues from

³⁵ Alexis De Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Trans. Henry Reeve, Francis Bowen. (New York: NY: The Century Co., 1898) p. 136

the influential work of Benedict Anderson (still one of the “principle citizens” in contemporary theories of nationalism). Anderson famously suggests that the modern newspaper produced a consciousness of modern “homogeneous, empty time” in the early nationalist period, laying the groundwork for the “simultaneity” that De Tocqueville describes and eventually culminating in “the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically” which is “the precise analogue of the idea of nation” (Anderson 24-26). For my purposes here, Anderson’s anti-foundationalist approach significantly diverges from the former perspective in that it highlights what De Tocqueville tends to obscure. It seems that the citizens of De Tocqueville’s democracy are already seeking one another, lacking only the ability to “see” and “know” one another in order to “meet and unite” (136). But for Anderson, famously, the nation must be “imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them” (6). Thus, he foregrounds the conditions of stranger-hood that are both the precondition and underlying consciousness of any nationalist imaginings. While print media and narrative can facilitate these imaginations, these devices operate in the context of an impossible desire for what Raymond Williams has called “the knowable community.”³⁶ And while “the idea of a sociological organism” anointed under the banner of “the people” can be outfitted with both a specific character and a destiny, it is really “the community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (Anderson 36).

These perspectives on the culture of nationalism allow me to repose certain questions of national community in terms of my investigation of urban fictions and stranger representations. Here, the stranger emerges as the odd centerpiece of nationalism; “imagined community” exists in order to bring those that are “far” into a kind of ideological proximity by erecting “image[s] of their communion” facilitated by print-capitalism and the principles of modern, narrative time.

³⁶ Raymond Williams. *The Country and the City*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 165.

On the strength of this imagined proximity, strangers are constructed as national subjects. But simultaneously, these imaginings seem to be haunted by the remnants of what they are working to obscure: the actual conditions of stranger-hood which are concretized in the experience of the nineteenth-century urban crowd. Whereas cultural articulations of imagined community work to bring those who are “far” (unknown and unknowable) into national co-presence, the image of the crowd continually invokes the idea that those who are “near” (immediate and included) are, in fact, quite distant. As Lauren Berlant notes in her study of “national fantasy” in Hawthorne’s fiction, the project of national culture is to feed the “fantasy of the citizen to be empowered by a collective activity and identification that is also realized and preserved by a politically legitimate nation-state.”³⁷ The problem with crowds of urban strangers is that they must be reconciled with existing liberal-nationalist configurations of agency and identification – cultural frameworks for intelligibility which they emerge from and simultaneously resist. Written into the conventional logics of the liberal political imagination, the stranger is a deep-seated, self-conscious preoccupation of nationalist culture. But he is also, simultaneously, a deeply repressed rupture upon the smooth landscape of national identity – the foundational illegibility which is avowed in many celebratory discourses of nationalist political community and repressed when the question of difference and identity rears its head.

The cycle of repression inherent in nationalist culture has been well remarked upon by scholars that have taken up conjoined questions of nation and narration. These examinations have helped to produce an understanding of nationalism as a multiply determined, overlapping and incomplete process, contested across the historical archive by myriad forms of counter-memory. Priscilla Wald’s work, for instance, insists not only on the role of “official stories” in

³⁷ Lauren Berlant. *The Anatomy of a National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991). p. 21. All subsequent references to Berlant are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

“constituting Americans” but also identifies what she sees as a process of disavowal that is fundamental to these national narratives. While narrative provides a medium for the construction of the national imagination in terms of historical continuity and liberal identity, the maintenance of these imaginations entails a necessarily unending process of re-narration, haunted always by the possibility that the nation might become “unrecognizable” to itself. Scholarship on national narrative, in other words, has been central not only for providing an account of the image of nation that is produced through representation, but in allowing us to see what Homi Bhabha calls

...the particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of nation... an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality.³⁸

As the “doubt sitting inside identities,” the stranger would seem to be a clear expression of this uncertainty, but there is a difficulty in attempting to locate our urban stranger in this new conceptual setting. The danger would be in inadvertently positing stranger-hood as a foundational or essential condition as Anderson and de Tocqueville do, whereas I have been attempting to argue that the stranger is actually produced as an ambivalent relation within historically-situated representational practices. Towards this end, I would argue that the stranger, as we have been laboring to understand it, is produced by the need for national imaginings to assume a “continuity” legitimated by a concrete identity. But, situated once again at the crossroads between representations of national subjects and the experience of modern, urban life, the stranger also provokes an “uncanny” response to these imaginings where “the

³⁸ Homi Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation.” *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990) p. 1

continual doubt sitting inside identities” finds expression in the representation of crowds of unknowable persons (Pickering 213). It is in the moments where this “doubt” runs up against the desire for “continuity” that citizens begin to appear to each other as strangers, and where a totalizing and historically-contiguous image of “the people” threatens to become “lost amid” the heterogeneous and indissolubly local character of the crowd.

In this way, we find ourselves confronted with another problematic form of cognitive mapping; national community desires forms of continuity which mediate between the local and the total. The failure of the “old magazine or newspaper” story to provide an account of Wakefield is, in essence, a failure of modern representational technologies to provide “the beacon” of shared identity and values which allow for the crowd to identify with something like a unified national audience-public. In this sense, I would argue that it is an inability to think “the people” as a coherent entity moving, unified, through time while dispersed anonymously across space that subtends Hawthorne’s narrator’s anxious attempts to contain Wakefield within the story’s frame. This narrator operates entirely within these assumptions; community is made tangible in the confidence with which he addresses (and constitutes) his reading audience as a conspiratorial “we.” At the same time, the narrator’s capacity to represent community through something like shared destiny is contingent upon his ability to “read” Wakefield and insert him into that same logic. In the name of this task “we” attempt to ascertain “what sort of man was Wakefield” (Wakefield 137). And it is with this goal in mind that the narrator seeks to interrogate and perhaps give substance to what he imagines as an “indefinable” quality – “a little strangeness” – in Wakefield’s disposition (Wakefield 138). “Now for a scene!” the narrator exclaims, once again foregrounding the fragile artificiality of this project (Wakefield 143). An elder Wakefield, separated from his wife for over ten years now appears to the narrator “with

few characteristics to attract careless observers, yet bearing, in his whole aspect, the handwriting of no common fate, for such as have the skill to read it” (Wakefield 159). This passage would seem to imply that it is the narrator himself who claims such “skill” and yet as the story attempts to secure that which the newspaper has failed to resolve – Wakefield’s place within the “common fate” of the larger reading public – the narrator’s attempt to write Wakefield into legibility lapses into a struggle between the author and his own representation.

As we have seen, the problem of the man “lost amid the crowd” is the problem of a man who is both inside of “community” and outside of any sense of legible commonality, and it is this condition that forces the narrator outside of any comfortably, anonymous exposition, establishing clear limits to his knowledge and ability to adequately represent. “Where are you going Wakefield?” the narrator cries as his character once again threatens to exceed the boundaries of his vision (Wakefield 141). Of course, Wakefield never turns from his path, never recognizes the narrator’s call. Importantly, these anxious hailings are directed, not at the Wakefield of the original newspaper account, but the Wakefield of the narrator’s own creation – the fictional Wakefield who, nevertheless, refuses to speak his own name and account for his choices.³⁹ These attempts to hail the figure that has already been framed as the narrator’s own “idea” only underscore that which remains stubbornly unthinkable: Wakefield’s decision to remain unseen and, as it were, “lost in the crowd.” The ease and seeming unaccountability with which Wakefield abandons his former life to become “another man,” entering into what the narrator insists is “another world” altogether, is clearly the source of this anxiety. For it is the

³⁹ The language of “hailing” here intentionally references Louis Althusser’s famous from “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” where the process of subject formation is equated with “the hail” that is issued between anonymous persons in the street. Importantly, in this case, Wakefield does not recognize the hail, arguably resisting the call to claim this name and constitute himself according to the dictates of an external symbolic framework. Additionally, these readings are intended to support my claim from Part 1 – that the stranger maintains a kind of agency that is not properly the agency of the subject.

problem of choice and rational self-interest in tension with the totalizing logics of communal identity that inform and remain at the heart of the narrator's self-conscious desire to construct the man for his readers.

While Wakefield's status as a representation is clearly vexed, the categories of social life that might make him legible – those that might supply the necessary symbolic grammar to represent him as an individual whose motives and desires are (or are not) clearly in line with the “common fate” and “general sympathies of mankind” – are readily available. Throughout the story, it is the wife who remains the symbol of these “general sympathies,” just as it is his disavowal of that “little sphere of creatures and circumstances, in which he was a central object” which becomes the primary means by which Wakefield (according to the narrator's estimation) gives up “his place and privileges with living men” (Wakefield 160). Here, we have entered into the realm of the nation as a multi-faceted and multiply-determined “system of cultural signification,” where, as Bhabha puts it, the nation is forged through “the representation of social *life* rather than the discipline of social polity” and where ostensibly “private” matters assume thoroughly public significance (2). As a part of this hybridized representational landscape, the “little sphere” of family plays two important and complimentary roles. First, it allows national subjects to assemble around a clear formation of communal values and privileged roles, and, second, it provides a representational stage for the expression of the freedoms and individualist ideologies that are a part of the liberalist conception of civil society. In the family, individual free will becomes a principle of community, provided that it chooses to assume proscribed domestic forms and functions.

In this sense, the actual contradiction of Wakefield's choices is not that he opts to abandon his family, but that he decides to abandon his family without seemingly abandoning community altogether. As the narrator notes:

The life of the hermit is nowise parallel to his. He was in the bustle of the city, as of old; but the crowd swept by and saw him not; he was, we may figuratively say, always beside his wife at his hearth, yet must never feel the warmth of the one nor the affection of the other. (Wakefield 160)

The underlying question can be framed as such: why would any man choose to exchange his position for a condition of stranger-hood? Between the clear proximity of familial relations and the overt distance implied by "the life of the hermit," the third option is to remain so near to the home as to practically feel the heat of the hearth and yet so distant as to remain outside of the purview of any socially authorized articulations of intimacy, "affection," or reason. This third position is, of course, the position of the stranger. The contradiction of the story itself, then, is the way that it both clearly occupies and explores this ambivalent positionality while actively attempting to disavow its possibility. And in this way, we can see Hawthorne's narrator leaning heavily upon the assumption of a clear inside/outside logic of community – a logic which the stranger exposes as thoroughly dependent on a number of representational processes. It is no wonder, then, that Hawthorne's narrator eventually enters into a meditation on the nature of "systems" where "individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole" that any individual who exposes himself faces "the fearful risk of losing his place forever" (Wakefield 161-62).

If the narrative is incapable of "placing" Wakefield in some predetermined "system" of belonging, it also seems incapable of determining the means by which to displace him

completely. Through these ruminations, Hawthorne's narrator posits the potential danger of forthright exclusion, while, in practice, refusing to do any more than entertain it throughout the course of his story. The other option for this exclusion would be to excise Wakefield from the realm of the rational individual. And in fact, drawing to the end of the story and clearly frustrated by his stranger-protagonist, the narrator aggressively proclaims that Wakefield "could not be said to possess his right mind" (Wakefield 145). In this way, we can locate, at the heart of this narrative's anxiety, what Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified as a conflict inherent in the Western construction of the "modern" individual. Surveying the work of William Connolly and Timothy Mitchell, Chakrabarty poses the problem as such:

The very conception of the modern individual... poses a threat to the conception of the social and the general, for if individuals are endowed with infinite individuality (which is what the drama of passions is supposed to reveal – each person his or her own novelist and analysand at the same time), what is there to guarantee the unity of the social? What would prevent the social realm, made up of such individuals (that is, people not simply subject to social practice, as they were supposed to be in primitive societies), from collapsing into the nightmare of anomie? The answer, at the level of the individual, would be: reason. Reason, by focusing the mind on the general and the universal, would guide the individual's passion into its rightful place in the social realm. This thought, taken by itself, was not necessarily modern, but its generalization through society, one could argue, marks the coming of modernity.⁴⁰

Between the individual of passion and choice and the need for a unified social realm built on the supposed consensus of those individuals, the frameworks of reason "guide" persons to their

⁴⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarti. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 131

“rightful places.” The problem that the stranger poses in “Wakefield,” therefore, is the problem of the reasoning individual who, motivated by his own illegible passions and desires, chooses to abandon his “rightful place” for a condition of stranger-hood. The desire to see this stranger as dispossessed of his “right mind” can be read as a desire to repair the rupture (between the “modern individual” and his supposedly organic relation to the social order) that the stranger has produced. Even more, it is an attempt to cover over the contradictory patterns of distance and proximity that threaten to expose the strangeness that lies at the heart of that individual.

But even after proposing it, Hawthorne proves unwilling to abandon his troublesome protagonist to madness. This explanation does not adequately account for the gap between Wakefield’s choice to remain “in the bustle of the city” and the unknowable purpose with which he pursues it. In the final scene, Wakefield finally approaches his home after twenty years absence and, in the process, gestures once again towards his ultimate inscrutability.

The door opens. As he passes in, we have a parting glimpse of his visage, and recognize the crafty smile, which was the precursor of the little joke that he has ever since been playing off at his wife’s expense. How unmercifully has he quizzed the poor woman!
(Wakefield 161)

The narrator himself concludes his own pursuit of Wakefield at this exact point, refusing to follow him “across the threshold” of his property. Instead of abandoning Wakefield to madness (effectively excluding him from the category of the rational, self-determining individual), the story concludes by literally and figuratively granting Wakefield the capacity with which to close the door on the narrative itself. And, if this enigmatic smile does in fact signify “the little joke” played at the expense of “the poor woman” who can clearly not be expected to understand, it is a joke whose punch line is never quite delivered.

Thus, Wakefield himself simply refuses to supply the closure to his own story, leaving the narrator and his audience standing out in the cold with their speculations. Does Wakefield reconcile his relationship with his now aged widow-wife? Does this reconciliation bring him back in line with the “common fate” and “general sympathies” of his pursuers? In a certain sense, this return to the domestic stage is a return from the dead – both the assumed death of the patriarch and the social suicide that is implied in the narrator’s “systemized” thinking. We are not given to know the outcome of this potential rebirth, nor are we allowed to investigate the validity of any of the narrator’s claims to this point. So if there is a malicious, inside joke at work here, then it is one that is aimed equally at Wakefield’s pursuers. In the end, our own “idea” looks back at us and gives us a “crafty smile,” taking the last laugh by finally evading any attempt to explain and locate his person within a larger geography of belonging. Once again, it is the future that is at stake in the uncertain and ambivalent figure of the stranger – in this case, a national futurity which takes up strangers as constitutive of its speculative universality. In this sense, Wakefield “closes the door” on the possibility of consolidating community along an imagined temporality of common destiny or organic unity.

I have sought to, in this reading, give an account of the issues that emerge as the stranger is produced at the intersection of a modern nationalist imagination and representations of urban crowds and street scenes. Straddling the uncertain boundaries of the representable, the stranger gestures to everything that is excluded from these nationalist narratives, the potential discordances and problematic ruptures that “imagined community” smoothes over by proliferating assumptions of historical continuity and cultural unity. And it does so by stubbornly refusing to be excluded from these subjectifying imaginations, preferring instead to circulate amongst city crowds as a non-subject whose negative agency must be included within,

but certainly cannot be reduced to, the agency of “the citizen.” In “Wakefield,” the stranger is a deconstructive principle lodged in the formative historiography of nation and the modes of identification that secure participants as national citizen-subjects. In this way, my reading of “Wakefield” prompts a question for national subjectivity and the conjoined problematics of cultural belonging and political agency. What does the “community in anonymity” of the modern nation actually look like? This question asks us to return to some of the ambivalent relations of urban life that we have glimpsed but have yet to fully problematize: the status of the crowd and “the people” as distinctive and completely disparate realms of social personhood and the problem of citizenship as yet another rubric of cultural legibility and political identity. With this question in mind, I turn to Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” as a nationalist counter-narrative, which productively complicates these terms by imagining citizenship as a condition of stranger-hood.

Citizen Mobs

In some ways a discussion of citizenship emerges quite naturally from the examination of the “strange” dynamics of national subjectivity that I have argued for here. Berlant, reading Hawthorne, mobilizes a similar understanding of cultural nationalism to extract her theory of “the National Symbolic” – “the order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space produces, and also refers to, the “law” in which the accident of birth within a geographic/political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively held history” (20). Taking up “‘America’ as an assumed relation” as well as “an explication of ongoing collective practices,” Berlant asserts that various productions of national fantasy designate how “national culture becomes local – through the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness” (5). The language and symbolic order of

this fantasy identification is also the means by which the nation “aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of natural law, a birthright” (Berlant 20). In this sense, the cultivation and assertion of a national subjectivity is the precondition for imagining the substantive limits, as well as the embodied, lived contours, of citizenship as a rubric of belonging (“birthright”) and “individual” identification in the “collective” endeavor of national community. To move this discussion into a conversation about citizenship is to link these concerns to a series of historically-situated questions regarding the nature of both political sovereignty and civic responsibility. These terms defined the struggle around citizenship as it was publicly articulated and fought over in the political skirmishes of the early 19th Century U.S. – the rights of the individual citizen-subject measured against the obligations and advantages of membership in national community. As I will illustrate in this section, these political battles were often waged in and through representations of the urban mob.

“My Kinsman” begins by posing the question of “popular” will within a thinly-veiled editorial on early American revolutionary sentiment. The story opens with “a preface” – a commentary which frames the tale against the historical conflict between the appointed colonial governors and “the people” who “looked with most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power that did not emanate from themselves.”⁴¹ Reserving a fair amount of even-mindedness (if not full-blown sympathy) for the colonial governors, Hawthorne’s historian/narrator purports to summarize colonial records, recalling several loyalists who were exiled due to “popular insurrection” and one who was “hastened to his grave by continual bickering with the House of Representatives” (102). Simultaneously, the reader is asked to “dispense” with any detailed description of the events which, in the story, “had caused much temporary inflammation of the

⁴¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne. “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” *The Portable Hawthorne*. Ed. Malcolm Cowley. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976.) p. 102. All subsequent references to this story are to this edition and will be cited in-text as “Kinsman”

popular mind” (Kinsman 102). Besides prefacing the historical backdrop and thematic content of the story, Hawthorne uses this introduction to play the very mythology of American origins against the anti-urban sentiments of his own time. “The people” are “jealous,” prone to “insurrection,” bickering,” and “inflammation”; the violent gestures of the mob are comparable to, perhaps contiguous with, the excesses of representational government and its institutions like the House. As Nicolaus Mills notes, this mob is motivated by “self-interest rather than political principle,” separating the colonial crowd from the terms by which revolutionary actions were justified as expressions of the popular will.⁴² The story begins, then, by framing the urban street mob as the brutal expression of individualist personal interest and (simultaneously and contradictorily) as the hero of the narrative of popular sovereignty that is the American Revolution.

The antebellum U.S. that Hawthorne writes for is famous for its “fear of the mob,” for many reasons. For one, the period leading up to and including the 1830’s was marked by a sharp increase in urban violence, riots, and mob action, and questions regarding the legitimacy of these events were ultimately inseparable from the larger struggle to define the nature and contours of popular sovereignty and democratic citizenship. “Crowds,” “mobs,” “the people”: as Daria Frezza notes, these terms themselves were defined in nineteenth century political discourse with the goal of distinguishing and managing the public perception of urban democracy.⁴³ The prevailing problem (in the post-revolutionary moment) was how to parse out two competing terms: “the mob” as a popular revolt and “the people” as a subject/agent of popular sovereignty shaped through the processes of political citizenship and sanctioned by democratic community. For the period’s many street skirmishes were only rendered meaningful (as social ills or

⁴² Nicholas Mills. *The Crowd in American Literature*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986). p. 9

⁴³ Daria Frezza. *The Leader and the Crowd: Democracy in American Public Discourse, 1880-1941*. Trans. Martha King. (Athens, GA: U of Georgia Press, 2007)

expressions of popular will) via the period's competing ideas about the relations between the governing and governed, and emerging concerns over property, individual right, and the classed nature of the body politic, each with its own distinct ways of validating or repudiating group action of all kinds.

In this way, the nineteenth century “fear of the mob” is often read in order to track more fundamental shifts in political consciousness. Paul Gilje's history, for instance, argues that changing assumptions about national community from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth recast the very understanding of mob politics. Early republicanist rhetorics (of the same type that had legitimated the revolutionary agitation of the war of independence) operated according to the assumption of a single-interest community – the “image of corporatism” – which often legitimated the street mob as a representative of a united people defending perceived rights and shared values.⁴⁴ Richard Butsch's history of audience politics also proposes that, in the early national period, “the crowd had its purpose.”⁴⁵ This vision of the audience-crowd was “fixed in Revolutionary language and iconography” and legitimated mobs of artisans and the working-class in a way that was “not easily dislodged by elites” (Butsch 25). A republicanist rhetoric of citizenship participation, in other words, often validated the urban crowd by conflating it with political visions of “the people” defending their rights and freedoms in collective action.

However, conflicts between regular government and the mob which, after the revolution, “intensified under the impact of urbanization, immigration, emancipation, and dramatic economic change... shattered any possibility of maintaining the single-interest ideal” which was so vital to republicanist notions of civic virtue (Gilje 287). In the wake of this failure to posit

⁴⁴ Paul Gilje. *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of NC Press, 1987.) p. 36

⁴⁵ Richard Butsch. *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, Individuals*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008) p. 25

and adequately represent a unified community, these republicanist sensibilities found themselves competing with an emerging liberalist rhetoric.

A new value system, based on the sanctity of the individual and his right to make his own choices in politics, economics, and religion, emerged in the early nineteenth century.

Equal access to opportunity became the scripture of an ideology that blamed an individual's failure on his own shortcomings... Violations of an individual's rights, especially by a mob, had to be punished or prevented (Gilje 205).

Recalling De Tocqueville's idea about the citizen "lost amid the crowd," liberalist urban conceits sought to define political sovereignty as located firmly in the individual – a position that is only fully articulated by producing the mob as its opposite number. Butsch's history also locates this shift (slightly later) as one in which the public discourse of crowds, mobs and audiences moves away from public acknowledgment of the rights and collective validity *of* the crowd to liberalist assertions of the rights of individuals *against* the crowd – an emerging language which took up mob action in order to define "which rights and which citizens the state should defend, and which to attack, thereby revoking their citizenship" (Butsch 30). Likewise, Marco Pamplona's study of print responses to urban rioting (written and propagated by the urban bourgeoisie) suggests that these exact debates were actually staging grounds upon which the elite classes developed and disseminated "the notion of citizenship they were attempting to build and make hegemonic over other alternative views in the period."⁴⁶ Rioting (in the case of the Anti-Abolitionist Riot of 1834, for instance) could be framed as a reasonable and perhaps venerable defense of the shared ideals, traditions, and values of the culture of white-supremacy. But it would be necessarily condemned as the excesses of the mob placed in jeopardy the rule of law

⁴⁶ Marco Pamplona. *Riots, Republicanism, and Citizenship: New York City and Rio de Janeiro City During the Consolidation of the Republican Order*. (New York, NY: Garland, 1996) p. 176

and the sanctity of an order which was concretized, above all, in respect for individual private property (and, covertly, the interests of the owning class). Hence, not only did the struggle to define proper governance ultimately inform several varied and contested interpretations of the urban crowd, but many of the era's reigning definitions of proper citizenship (and its exclusions) were initially cast against the spectre of mob violence. The enduring legacy of the nineteenth century "fear of the mob," therefore, is symptomatic of the liberal-individualist ideological perspectives on urban public life that have ascended to dominance in (and through) the wake of this history.

My goal here is not to throw in with either of these political perspectives or to argue over the relative merits and dangers of crowd citizenship or mob violence. Rather, these histories produce a more complex political and cultural terrain in which to situate a reading of the city of strangers. They suggest a need to read early nineteenth-century representations of crowds and mob politics as a contested field where different theories of citizenship and political sovereignty struggle for hegemony. While political histories of the nineteenth century crowd are relatively insistent on this point, literary perspectives on the same topic seem to have had a more difficult time unburdening themselves from the assumptions that are informed and cultivated by the same political projects that I have been describing here. Nicolaus Mills, for instance, acknowledges the importance of remaining skeptical of the discursive distinctions between crowds, mobs, and riots in his *The Crowd in American Literature*. But he explicitly builds his archive upon texts which contain a certain type of crowd: "the face-to-face, direct contact crowds we associate with revolutions, strikes, protests, lynchings, and elections" (Mills 9). Focusing on the "political actions of crowds, not the crowd in general, or the crowding of mass society," Mills draws a methodological distinction between the politically motivated crowd and the crowd as such. But

as we have already seen, the crowd itself is already a politicized representation, serving to produce the distinctions between the reasoning polity and its irrational other. We can see, therefore, how Mills' distinction (which, for one thing, excludes Poe's "Man of the Crowd" from his archive) consents to and proceeds from the assumption that representations of crowds and mobs are reflective of an authentic, subjective engagement with political reality, instead of already emerging from and implicated in the conflicting definitional projects of its era.⁴⁷

Mill's analytic reads "My Kinsman" as a parable of overt mob violence whose meaning is that "revolutionary action can be justified only when it is inseparable from genuine political liberation" (50). What Mills fails to account for here, is how representations of the mob were one site where "genuine political liberation" was defined and contested in Hawthorne's era. In essentially declaring the mob in "My Kinsman" as the opposite of legitimate democratic community, he reproduces the liberal ideology which understands the mob as a threat to legitimate democratic principle, exemplified most crucially in the crowd's "other," the individual citizen-subject. Another scholar of crowd literature, Mary Esteve, has also critiqued this tendency in Mills' work and responds with a more complex historical understanding of these representations, noting the "ambivalence" with which representations of the crowd are approached and validated by literature of the antebellum period. And while she notes that the danger of crowds in this era was ultimately the way that they tended to "violate the republican or liberal virtues by means of which the polity legitimates its democratic structure," she exchanges Mills' liberally-invested "man versus men" methodology with one that understands crowd

⁴⁷ It has also been argued that Hawthorne uses his historically remote setting to contain the anxiety that clearly subtends the themes of social unrest and political discord which the mob presents. These readings suggest that, in locating the mob in the context of early revolutionary agitation, Hawthorne sidesteps any investment in his own era's thoroughly vexed relation to urban uprising. But, in another sense, his use of this pre-revolutionary history does not "contain" the struggle to define mob citizenship as much as it makes it central to questions of national community and political right. These questions are inherent in a retelling of early American community formation which conflates the urban mob with an emergent national consciousness.

representations as “positioning those with a diminished capacity to reason justly against others... who possess the faculty of reflective, ethical judgment.”⁴⁸ In this way she reads Hawthorne’s work as “portraying the human frailties and psychic susceptibilities that weaken liberal democratic governance” while deliberately disavowing the possibility that these fictions might betray “an internal contradiction within democracy itself.” More specifically, she reads Hawthorne and “My Kinsman” as inherently invested in a critique of crowd culture where the revolutionary mob has “pre-political relevance or even historical necessity” but cannot be legitimized as “a constitutive feature of liberal-democratic collectivity” precisely because the very conflict which she identifies emerges from and assumes, as its founding epistemology, a liberal vision of political right (Esteve 23).

Simply put, these modes of “reading the city” reproduce the investments and foundational principles of liberalism – what I earlier referred to, via Foucault, as the forms of perception and social control central to liberal modernity – in their mobilization of the reasoning, individual against the spectre of the mob. In this sense, they join the narrators of “Wakefield” and “The Man of the Crowd” in attempting to locate subjects within an imagination of social totality which is already defined and mapped according to liberal-nationalist principles. Nevertheless, my aim here is not to prove that Hawthorne’s work overtly pits itself against these liberalist interpretations of the crowd. Rather, my goal in the inquiry that follows is to see what emerges from a reading that takes urban crowds and national citizenship as fluxing, mutually-constitutive terms instead of as framing devices. My argument is that this reading is made possible through a reading of the stranger in which illegibility and disorientation emerge as a principle of citizenship, rather than its opposite number. Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major

⁴⁸ Mary Esteve. *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003.) p. 24

Molineux” as I explained above, begins by inserting this specter of the mob into a parable about the rise of national community in the American Revolutionary period. In this retelling of national origins, the liberal crowd of unreasonable and unrestrained passions is conflated or combined with the revolutionary, republicanist crowd of popular will. Rather than locating their particular subjectivity against the mob, or becoming “lost amid the crowd[ed]” and illegible space of public interest, citizens encounter and address one another by taking the crowd itself as a principle of national community and belonging.

Stranger Nationalism:

“My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is, at its core, a tale of social change. More specifically, it is the story of a social order, organized around the high-center of colonial authority, in the process of re-imagining itself as a “horizontal” community founded on democratic sovereignty. As if to conjure the narrative of progress that usually accompanies this shift to liberal consciousness, Hawthorne makes his revolution the context for a story of personal growth; at its base, “Kinsman” is the story of a young man, Robin, entering and exploring the city for the first time in search of his kinsman, the title’s Major Molineux, who, as we will learn, is one of the “colonial governors” who are targeted by the pre-revolutionary mob. In this context, the city is a space of uncertainty, violence, and laughter, where changing social relations are remapping the city and the nation simultaneously. As Robin attempts to navigate this rapidly shifting space, his assumptions about the nature of power and identity in the “little metropolis” are gradually unwound until, finally, he is forced to acknowledge the actual uncertainty of his place within the community of city-dwellers and becomes a member of the revolutionary mob. In other words, Hawthorne narrates a tale in which the process of coming into national consciousness is synonymous with the process of coming into consciousness of oneself as a stranger. The

stranger appears here as both the index of these changes – the product of the uncertain world that emerges from amidst the ruins of an older hierarchy – and the central actor in the primal scene of national identity.

Like the other stranger narratives that I have taken up in this chapter, the story proper begins with an act of cognitive mapping. Robin enters the darkened streets of an unnamed New England colony with an “eager eye.” Handsome, young, and dressed in clothing that is “the incontrovertible work of a mother or a sister” and an iconic three-cornered hat, the young protagonist is a picture of innocence, composed through the visual tropes of a Revolutionary American colonial (Kinsman 103). The country-bred youth is a newcomer to the town and not altogether familiar with its rituals and institutions, as evidenced early on by the “depreciated” currency that he offers the ferryman for the late-night conveyance (Kinsman 103). Robin’s quest to find his kinsman is undermined initially by his confidence in his relative Major Molineux’s fixed position of prominence and authority within the town’s social structure. Upon stepping off of the ferry, Robin immediately determines that the “small and mean wooden buildings” lining the narrow streets could not possibly be worthy of his kinsman’s high status within the community. Searching out wider streets and houses “more respectable in their appearance,” the self-described “shrewd youth” proceeds confidently into unknown territory, mapping his own expectations onto the light and dark spaces of the gradually unfolding urban space (Kinsman 104). But, as he will discover, this map is a particularly useless one.

Always in pursuit of his kinsman, Robin relies on his preconception of the town’s hierarchy to interpret and “place” all of the townsfolk he interacts with in his quest. Entering a local tavern and speaking the name of his kinsman “in a lofty confidence,” Robin at first interprets the “sudden and general movement of the room... as expressing the eagerness of each

individual to become his guide” (Kinsman 107-8) When he is forced to flee the inn under threat (scarcely bothered by the laughter that follows him into the street) Robin, “with his usual shrewdness,” attributes their reaction to “the confession of an empty pocket,” conveniently disassociating it from his larger goal. His understanding of his kinsman’s importance allows him to “account for the mystery” of their reactions, misinterpreting their antagonism as ignorance and their laughter as evidence of his own innocence. But we, unlike the “shrewd youth,” are made immediately aware that we are not in on the joke. While for Robin, the Major operates as a mapping principle, a means of assigning identity and social position to everyone he meets on a sliding scale of respectability and prominence, the reader becomes immediately aware of how this map structures inappropriate interpretations and interactions. But for Robin, the Major remains a secure and untouchable referent, a fact which Hawthorne drives home when Robin imagines that he sees the Major’s face gazing at him from within the Gothic windows of a church that a moment before had impressed him for its “visible sanctity... visible because no earthly and impure feet were within its walls” (Kinsman 115). Leaning heavily on the presumed stability of his kinsman’s name, Robin’s interactions with the community are, in a sense, already predetermined by the figure of Major Molineux, who, in his spectral absence, becomes a means of reducing experience to a dangerously limited understanding of the rapidly changing colonial scene.

Thus as we follow Robin’s attempts to interact with the townsfolk, we are educated in the absurd nature of this strategy of “reading the city,” as his symbolic invocation of his kinsman structures crude and incongruous interpretations. From Robin’s perspective, the Major is the one given factor in an otherwise infinitely variable equation that includes not only the community at large (whose relative value can be determined in relation to this fixed position), but his own

identity. After exhausting himself in his quest, Robin finally encounters a “gentleman stranger” who greets him with “a tone of real kindness” and who is the first to inquire about the nature of his relation to Major Molineux (Kinsman 117). In this short tale, Robin connects the kinsman to a multiplicity of intersecting relations between an untouchable past and a foreseeable future, the ultimate goal of which is a meeting of the two which might offer the possibility for self-continuity. In his father’s cousin, Robin first seeks the reassurance of a familial past, a connection to the safe environment of the farm he was raised on and is now “excluded” from. Major Molineux, at least partially, represents the possibility of making that past meaningful in the present. The kinsman is also a potential benefactor whose “generous intentions” offer the promise of a positive destiny, a place for a young man to “begin in the world.” Ultimately though, this temporal continuity is important because it creates the basis for a stable self. Robin’s self-proclaimed identity as a “shrewd youth” hangs precariously on his ability to negotiate the town and successfully realize the object of his pursuit – not really the Major at all, but the possibility of the stable context that this identity requires. And it is precisely this self that comes under threat when “the shrewd youth” attempts to apply his kinsman’s name for this purpose and finds himself labeled a criminal and a “fool.”

Paradoxically, in attempting to use the Major as a reference point for his own personal continuity, Robin freezes his kinsman in history, confining him to one meaningful relation (as a prominent and respected citizen) that everyone must share. That notion of stability is, of course, demolished when the Major finally does appear, physically repositioned by the community in all of his “tar-and-feather dignity” (Kinsman 122). As a colonial official appointed by the British crown, Major Molineux is suddenly resituated in an entirely different set of relations to the “frenzied” mob. In the midst of the “senseless uproar” that marks this event, Robin recognizes

both his disgraced kinsman and many of the townsfolk whom he has encountered throughout the course of his quest and it is their communal laughter that finally initiates him into belonging.

The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street – every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin’s shout was the loudest there.
(Kinsman123)

In this account, we can locate the ambivalence with which Hawthorne approaches liberalist conceptions of the city crowd. On one hand, this passage invokes one of the popular tenets of anti-urban liberalism: the crowd mentality is a “contagion” which sweeps Robin up into its compulsive and dangerously senseless collective activity. But simultaneously, this laughter operates as a corrective to Robin’s faulty interpretations by bringing him into contact with the historical and utterly contingent relations that structure an emergent national community. Laughter serves as a critique, breaking down the sanctity of preexisting hierarchies by bringing them into their specific historical and cultural context. It performs a function that Mikhail Bakhtin found useful in making a distinction between the heroic reverence of the epic and the practical knowledge of the novel form.

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a

world, making it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it.⁴⁹

In other words, laughter signals our departure from the “totalizing” contexts of allegory and into an incessantly “local” context where objects (and subjects) circulate uncontained by the “piety” of fixed meaning and position. For Bakhtin, laughter transports us out of the “world of ‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’” that characterize the “inaccessible” nature of the epic by destroying any hierarchical distance – the distance that is required to make a kinsman into a referent point for identity and community, for instance, or that is required to narrate national history as a linear narrative. Through this laughter, “a dynamic authenticity was introduced... man ceased to coincide with himself, and consequently men ceased to be exhausted entirely by the plots that contain them” (Bakhtin 35). In short, this laughter returns social meaning to the realm of social practice, where attempts to “contain” subjects within narrative are undermined by the tangible possibility of uncontained elements.

In its destabilizing function, the encounter with the mob does not simply rationalize the desire for a more foundational individualism, but instead marks the emergence of a kind of stranger consciousness. The particular hierarchy which has informed Robin’s reading of the city collapses in the face of a new experiential referent and a new political reality. But the crowd itself does not serve to simply replace that mode of cognitive mapping with a new series of stable loci for the imagining of community and the positioning of subjects. Rather, the story concludes by emphasizing Robin’s disorientation and, simultaneously, suggesting the possibilities inherent in such a condition. As Robert Abrams notes:

⁴⁹ M.M. Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.) p. 23

What the community collectively enacts at such a tumultuous moment is not a ritual or event through which it becomes intelligible to itself, but, rather, the wildcard possibility of its own radically transformative power...⁵⁰

As the mob departs, leaving them alone in the “silent street,” the gentleman stranger turns to Robin to ask whether his experiences that night have succeeded in forcing him to pursue “a new subject of inquiry”:

“Why, yes sir,” replied Robin, rather dryly. “Thanks to you, and to my other friends, I have at last met my kinsman, and he will scarce desire to see my face again. I begin to grow weary of town life, sir. Will you show me the way to the ferry?”

“No, my good friend Robin – not tonight, at least,” said the gentleman. “Some few days hence, if you wish it, I will speed you on your journey. Or if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux.” (Kinsman 124)

Robin’s “weary” disillusionment with “town life” and his desire to return to the ferry reflects some of the feelings of disorientation and dispossession which are produced by an inability to locate oneself within a larger sense of conceptual totality. He is incapable of even retracing his footsteps back to the place where his story began. In this sense, his desire is for a return to the beginning of the tale where localized experiences have not disrupted the purity of his vision – a desire to come full circle and return to a sense of self-continuity and confirmable belonging. The final act of Hawthorne’s gentleman stranger (and the story itself) is to deny him this return, suggesting instead that a more productive response to the night’s events might be to “remain

⁵⁰Robert E. Abrams, *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 126.

with us” and explore the possibility of “ris[ing] in the world without the help” of totalizing referents at all.

With this assertion, whose validity it neither confirms nor denies, “My Kinsman” concludes as all stranger narratives must – without resolution. Robin’s future prospects are opaque. The question of whether he will stay with his “new friends” or depart is left unanswered. But unlike the examples that I have explored earlier in this chapter, this irresolution contains within it a kind of optimism and sense of possibility. Considering that the night’s events have radically called into question Robin’s self-identification as a “shrewd youth,” it is striking to note how this status is affirmed by the gentleman while remaining unconfirmed within the narrative itself. In this case, the gentleman stranger refuses to confine Robin to the narrative which has consistently shown him for a “fool.” It is the emergent national community itself (all of the townspeople who shunned him over the course of the night, only to reappear in the body of the mob) which has assigned Robin that position throughout the narrative, and, in refusing it, the gentleman refuses to replace the kinsman with a new political subject derived from some stable and totalizing notion of popular will or opinion. The “subject of inquiry” which will replace the kinsman as the stable principle of belonging and identity is, in this way, the central irresolution of the text. In its place, we find a gesture towards an undetermined, yet-to-be-imagined national future that is articulated in and through the possibility of the citizen-stranger.

Thus, in one sense, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” situates the stranger amidst the incomplete narratives and interrupted imaginations which have marked his presence in the other texts that I have examined in this chapter. But at the same time, Hawthorne’s story can be read as an attempt to arrive at, truly, a representation of the “community in anonymity that is the modern nation.” Within this condition of anonymity, Robin encounters the urban mob – the

sneaking suspicion underlying all national fantasies of coherence. But rather than simply appearing as the death knell of these fantasies, the crowd proves capable of engendering its own elusive national imaginings, devoid of any desire for coherence or comprehensive legibility. These imaginations are not founded on an attempt to grant national subjectivity and citizenship any form of positive content or historical continuity. Rather, the emergent national community in “My Kinsman” itself operates on a logic of un-decidability. It is from within this incoherent nationalism, that a figure that I have labeled the “citizen-stranger” emerges.

Representing the Citizen-Stranger

In what sense can citizenship and national belonging be formulated on a principle of stranger-hood? James Donald’s work in his book, *Imagining the Modern City*, provides us with a conceptual starting point for this question. Donald approaches the “citizenship debate” by returning to the city and taking it as a testing ground for the various competing forms of “political imaginary shaping current thinking about citizenship” (Donald 96). In attempting to reproduce the many varied conversations on this issue, Donald distills the theoretical problem of citizenship into an underlying conflict between the liberal-democratic ideal of the citizen as a principle of universality and the cultural/historical processes which have harnessed that universality in the name of a politics of identity. No doubt, this critical model does highlight one of the abiding problems of the citizen from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives; Berlant, for instance, suggests that the history of U.S. Constitutional law, articulated primarily through the question of African-American enfranchisement, can be read as “a record of the nation’s gradual recognition that it needs officially to theorize an ideal relation between its abstract ‘citizens’ and the person who lives, embodied, an everyday life” (13). But in producing the issue in this way, Donald’s argument ends up dismissing culture as a field of identification

altogether. Culture, in his reading, is the villain in a story where the legal, philosophical ideals of the citizen-subject as “substancelessness” – as an abstract positionality designated by the formal “universality of rights” and a purely symbolic relationship between subjects under the Law – are continually threatened by “any claim to identify citizenship in terms of cultural identity” (Donald 99).

My argument is therefore that ‘the citizen’ should be understood in the first instance not as a type of person (whether German nationalist or constitutional patriot) but as a position in a set of formal relations defined by democratic sovereignty. Just as ‘I’ denotes a position in a set of linguistic relations, an empty position which makes my unique utterances possible but which can equally be occupied by anyone, so ‘the citizen’ too denotes an empty space. It too can, in principle, be occupied by anyone – occupied in the sense of being spoken from, not in the sense of being given a substantial identity.

(Donald 99)

Donald’s particular way of distilling the “citizenship debate” acknowledges and, in a sense, responds to those who have struggled to illuminate culture as a field of power and legitimation in the arena of political struggle. But, simultaneously, he sets himself against the claim that this disembodied citizen is already an index of privilege – issued by those who “dismiss the idea of a desirable but unachievable universality as an alibi for ignoring, or even colluding in, actual inequalities and domination” (Donald 99). His positions are ultimately posed in an attempt keep some of these criticisms amenable to a liberal vision of political action, arguing that this “empty, symbolic relation” is a necessity if we are to make exploitation visible and articulate the needs of the oppressed to the Law and the State. But in advocating for the importance of the “ideal” of the substance-less citizen, Donald recurses to the idea that citizenship offers national subjects

passage out of their local, particularized context by locating them in a supposedly more secure and more equitable symbolic order. He concludes his argument by insisting that the vision of the citizen as an ideal of equality and radical participation is worth preserving and hinges on our ability to avoid recourse to cultural definitions by learning “to respect the opacity of others” (Donald 119).

At this point, Donald’s investment in the city as a space of political inquiry becomes apparent, as does its connections to my own inquiry into crowds and illegible strangers. His inquiry is provoked by and largely pursued through an investigation of the street politics of identity – similar, in some ways, to the concerns which motivate this project. The city is a historically pertinent field for an investigation of the theoretical dimensions of the citizen precisely because it brings to the forefront the problems of “the opacity and illegibility of others” (Donald 105). While Donald proposes a politics of stranger sociality as a corrective to the dangerous tendency in cultural representations to “fill in” the necessarily “empty” universality of the ideal citizen-subject, I ask, what would it really mean to re-imagine citizenship and, subsequently, national community by learning to “respect the opacity of others”? First, it should be apparent that Donald’s concept of “opaque” urban strangers runs contrary to the model that I have been building in this inquiry. For him, the opacity of those he meets in the city street is evidence of a clean escape from representational politics; the stranger is prior to both cultural definitions and the claims to identity that he is at pains to disavow. But, as we have seen, the particular illegibility of the urban stranger is not prior to cultural/political representation, but only recognizable as such in relation to these representational regimes. The opacity of the stranger signals not an authenticity but a contradiction lodged in the same liberal political frameworks that Donald is attempting to recover. This last point is, perhaps, the most crucial.

For Donald's "respect for opacity" is ultimately a respect for the stranger that is here produced as a thoroughly essentialized liberal citizen-subject – the "empty and universal" political actor who speaks and participates in a rubric defined by the Law and the State. In this way, Donald argues for the stranger as the citizen-subject, par excellence, by virtue of his innocence in the face of oppressive cultural representations and his ability to simply step into the universalizing, symbolic relations of the liberal order.

My final goal in this chapter is to position "My Kinsman" as a response and a challenge to Donald's paradigm of opaque citizenship. From this angle, Hawthorne's urban strangers bear little to no resemblance to the stranger/citizen-subject imagined by Donald as the standard-bearer of a liberal-democratic ideal. On the contrary, the strangers of "My Kinsman" represent a critical response to the uncritical linking of urban "opacity" and liberal universality. The most pertinent example of this comes as Robin is at the height of his disorientation. Wandering in frustration through the darkened streets, he accosts a passing stranger, demanding for the last time the location of his kinsman. As the stranger turns to respond, cryptically suggesting that his kinsman will "pass by" this very spot in no less than an hour, Robin recoils with "dismay and astonishment" at "the unprecedented physiognomy of the speaker":

One side of the face blazed an intense red, while the other side was black as midnight, the division line being in the broad bridge of the nose; and a mouth which seemed to extend from ear to ear was black or red in contrast to the color of the cheek. The effect was as if two individual devils, a fiend of fire and a fiend of darkness, had united themselves to form this infernal visage. The stranger grinned in Robin's face, muffled his party-colored features, and was out of sight in a moment. (Kinsman 114)

“Strange things we travelers see,” he remarks (Kinsman 114). Strange things indeed. The strangeness of the situation is only compounded when Robin realizes that he has met this individual before, earlier in the night, and that, since, then “the man’s complexion had undergone... [this] twofold change.” Beginning as one man, the stranger now appears in this context as “two individual devils... united” in a single person. Most importantly for my purposes here, the two-faced stranger’s “opacity” is certainly not a function of his outsider status or of his essential individualism, uninflected by cultural representations that identify him as a part of this or that political category. The stranger’s body is flooded and overdetermined by cultural signification; he is a stranger by virtue of that oversignification and his twofold complexion can and should be read in relation to the larger regime of representation from which it emerges. Interestingly enough, the red/black face invokes the racial character of nineteenth-century liberal citizenship – both Native and African American racial “types” formally excluded from (and yet constitutive of) “modern” historiography, the privileged, disembodied subjectivity of the citizen, and rationality of the modern individual. “Near” to liberal political community on the basis of his participation within a rubric of “public will” and “far” from it in that he wears its formative exclusions on the visible surface of his body, the two-faced man invokes the strangeness of nineteenth century citizenship itself by bringing all that is foreign within its boundaries.

Beyond even this, the very possibility of the two-faced stranger proceeds to complicate liberal conceptions of political community by challenging assumptions of the internal coherency of the individual itself. Shortly after this confrontation, a distant “noise of shouting” announces the impending arrival of the revolutionary mob. Surprised by the sound, Robin turns to the gentleman stranger noting that

“...an army of watchmen would never make head against such a multitude of rioters.

There were at least a thousand voices went up to make that one shout.”

“May not a man have several voices, Robin, as well as two complexions?” said his friend.

(Kinsman 119)

The possibility of the citizen-subject is, itself, under fire in this representation of the man of many voices. In one sweep, the gentleman stranger challenges all of Robin’s assumptions about the nature of both the crowd and of political sovereignty. Robin envisions the impending mob along the conceptual axis defined by the urban, political struggles of Hawthorne’s era; the crowd is made up of distinct and coherent individuals (voices) which, through either a rubric of popular will or a compulsive mob-mentality, form a single “shout.” But the stranger is not constrained by a rubric of individualism – not in his voice and not in the representations of subjectivity that he invokes and exceeds. Against this foundational individualism, the gentleman presents his own “man of the crowd” – the two-faced stranger – as the principle citizen in a decentralized representation of political community. In a rubric of stranger-citizenship, every man is a crowd.

As Donald suggests, the citizen-subject can be understood as that linguistic position from which a person is given the authority to speak the supposedly uninflected and empty “I” of democratic sovereignty. And in some ways, this representation of the man of “many voices” and multiple “complexions” achieves many of Donald’s goals for a conception of citizenship that renders that speaking position as radically inclusive and undetermined by cultural identity. But it does so, not by arguing for the sanctity of citizenship-as-subjectivity (individualist in its agency and singular voice), but by replacing that subjectivity with a condition of stranger-hood. And instead of demanding a new principle of universality based on a strictly open subjectivity, the stranger demands an incessantly local form of citizenship that defers universality altogether by

taking the “subject” out of the “citizen-subject”. The assertion that this authoritative speech issues from a position that is itself not unitary – an “I” that is already exploded by cultural over-signification into a multitude of voices – is to suggest that the principle actor of this revolutionary democratic sovereignty is not a “subject” at all, but a citizen-stranger who comes into view as an already-challenge to the stable positionalities implied in a liberal politics of representation. The de-individualized, de-rationalized man (who was always assumed to be the product of mob mentality) becomes the model of the public man who cannot be silenced even in his multiplicity. Against Donald’s assertion that the citizen’s potential inclusivity can be realized through an intentional blindness or illiteracy (the “respect for opacity” which he recommends), Hawthorne poses the mob, a vision of community and participation that is inclusive simply because it is not clear what logics of exclusion would apply to it. In this way, the “opaque” and illegible citizen-stranger becomes, fleetingly, the centerpiece of a more inclusive and unfixed rubric of national belonging and participation.

It is no wonder, therefore, that when the mob/community does appear it is characterized, in part, as a pseudo-demonic, carnivalesque mass. The national stranger imparts his particular blend of terror and possibility upon the whole urban milieu. From sounds of “discord” and “wild and confused laughter,” the mob finally appears as “a mighty stream of people” bearing shrill instruments and fantastic costumes. Vision is crucially at stake here; “a dense multitude of torches shone along the street, concealing, by their glare, whatever object they illuminated” (Kinsman 121). The light which “formed a veil” over the procession once again references failure of vision which always characterizes an engagement with strangers. In the absence of a visual identity, this crowd is characterized by a diversity of voice – sometimes individual “voices of mirth or terror” and in the next moment, “a universal hum, allied to silence” (Kinsman 121-

22). As a counter-narrative of national community, the mob refuses to locate its origins in individual reason, crowd compulsion, or the will of “the people.” It comes into vision as an undefined grouping and swings out of view in much the same manner, maintaining only the indeterminacy which provokes such potent terror and, simultaneously, a sense of unarticulated possibility.

Conclusion: Strange Narratives, Stranger Liberalisms

At the pinnacle of his night’s frustration, and just prior to its illumination at the end of the story, Robin passes the time by looking at the city streets. The moonlight, he notes, imparts a kind of “romance” to the street, “creating, like the imaginative power, a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects” (Kinsman 114). This beautiful strangeness, cast over the familiar objects of national life, is a fitting image with which to draw up my conclusions at the end of this investigation. The stranger, as I have been laboring to elucidate, is not the figure that Donald positions beyond the horizon of cultural vision that has “filled in” the ideally “empty” position of the citizen-subject. To figure the stranger in this way is to position him outside of cultural frames of vision and intelligibility – to essentialize his “opacity” as a condition prior to cultural mediation. Rather, as Robin discovers in this scene, “strangeness” is made visible when the “familiar” is rendered contingent upon perspective, when the normal refuses to resolve into identity, and when the comfortable narratives of continuity and sameness which construct national consciousness fail to congeal into a stable logic of community. In the stranger, agency circulates outside the bounds of subject-hood and proposes the limits of intelligibility in general. As these “romances” of the stranger have shown, it is in these ways that the stranger is in conflict with narrative – why his very presence distorts reading and writing by exposing the contingency in their underlying liberal-capitalist/liberal-nationalist functions. This is to say that the stranger’s

indeterminacy is not a function of his illegibility to a culturally-produced systems of intelligibility, but a product of his enclosure within these systems and their failure.

But while the stranger is disruptive to representation, these readings have suggested that it is also incorrect to presume that he circulates entirely “outside” of the liberal-nationalist imagination. Sometimes, as “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” shows in all of its ambivalence, the anxious indeterminacy of the stranger is not always cast as class anxiety. Sometimes, it looks like freedom. In Robin, the stranger is the essence of a revolutionary nationalist consciousness, freed from the determining constraints of kinship and set loose on the field of history to make his fortune by his own shrewdness and youthful vigor. The lack of closure that we find in this story is not an expression of anxiety, but an expression of the citizen-stranger’s agency, best figured as an unwritten future; disrecognized and, hence, freed from the determinations of status, Robin’s equality with his newfound “friends” at the dawn of national community is defined as a “freedom from” his previous destiny and the sudden discovery of his inherent private interest and its intimate dependence on his own individual interest. Liberal freedom, as it is articulated through the stranger, is in *productive* conflict with narrative closure and historical continuity, figured here as a destiny constructed by tyranny. In this strange tale, then, we have discovered the space where liberalism is antagonistic to narrative and representation – the discursive overlap where its abstract freedom appears most pure precisely because it is unrepresentable. The ambivalence that attends to this libratory indeterminacy comes from the unfixed and undecidable community which this stranger-citizenship constructs. From the position of this freedom, the citizen-stranger defies all of the terms of subjection that go into making that citizen-position amenable to liberal definitions of legitimate political action, blurring the line between the figure of popular sovereignty and the mob, bringing back into the narrative frame all that has been

formally excluded under its terms, and undermining even the logic of representation that speaks the singular “voice” of the people. In this reading, we might see even the most nightmarish aspects of Hawthorne’s story as the author tracing this concept of freedom to its logical end (well beyond any “end” which narrative might ascribe). The stranger erodes the liberal imagination from within, appearing alternately as its villain or its hero, embodying its promise of freedom by deconstructing its structures and formative divisions.

CHAPTER TWO: Representing “Real” Strangers in Gilded Age New York

Introduction: Seeing and Being Seen in the Realist City

By the late nineteenth century, it had become both practical and fashionable to express a kind of writerly humility in the face of the urban spectacle. Authors regularly confessed their inability to represent the industrial city, characterizing their failure not only in terms of artistic vision, but in the sense of larger civic mappings as well. Even Henry James, who upon returning to New York in 1900, claimed to find in the city, “a conception of publicity as the vital medium organized with the authority which the American genius for organization... alone could organize it,” was forced to admit that, to him, the metropolis remained a “gorgeous golden blur” -

a paradise peopled with unmistakable American shapes, yet in which, the general and the particular, the organized and the extemporized, the element of ingenuous joy below and of consummate management above, melted together and left one uncertain which of them one was, at a given turn of the maze, most admiring.⁵¹

Even as James praises, above all, the “organization” of the public as a particularly American “medium,” he also admits that his ability to perceive that organization – notably the core difference between “the general and the particular” – is blunted by his inability to bring its “unmistakable American shapes” into clearer focus (James 102). For the writer confronting the city, these shapes have the tendency to “melt together,” leaving its most crucial distinctions

⁵¹ Henry James, *The American Scene*. (New York, NY: Harpers & Brothers Publishers, 1907) p. 102

undecidable and obscure. One of the leading proponents of literary realism, James's good friend, William Dean Howells, might have agreed. He wrote, in 1891, that, while American writers might "excel" in their presentation of small, rustic communities, "our grasp of the more urbane life is feeble; most attempts to assemble it in our pictures are failures, possibly because it is too transitory, too intangible in its nature with us, to be truthfully represented as really existent."⁵² Howells's diagnosis of this "failure" is particularly striking considering how it follows right on the heels of his more famous realist dictum that these same writers must rightfully "concern themselves with the smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests" (60). The writer actively "seeking" to represent a properly optimistic American universality is forced into a more passive role of reception and assemblage by the city which defies "truthful representation." And for Howells, to suggest that the city cannot be "truthfully represented" is tantamount to suggesting that it was never "really existent" in the first place. Like James, Howells's verdict on these "feeble" urban representations is diagnosed in the context of a firm confidence in the existence of something which is presented as "unmistakable" – "the general" and "the universal" as the guiding principles of an American public identity. For these writers, an effective urban representation is one which affirms something that they already know. In assessing their own failures of vision, these elder statesmen of the literary arts adopted the language of liberal political community, internalizing the forms of vision that attend to this symbolic order and pitting the "transitory" nature of their representations against the obvious constancy of American political identity.

Given his skepticism towards urban representations, it is not surprising that Howells's writing often approaches the city as a rumor – the differed object of an excessive and unreliable

⁵² William Dean Howells. *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*, ed. by Clara M. Kirk and Rudolf Kirk (New York: NYU Press, 1959) p. 63.

discourse. Each discursive encounter with the city requires one to “see it for himself”; the rumor of the city gives form and purpose to the journalistic ethos that drives literary realism.⁵³ In his short 1902 urban sketch “The Midnight Platoon”, urban spectacle enters the writing as something an unnamed “friend” had “often heard of” and “had recommended to him as one of the most impressive sights of the city” (Midnight 40). We first become aware of it as a discursive object passed between “connoisseurs of such matters” – offered up for tasteful reflection with all of the privileged critical distance implied by such a form of consumption. It circulates amongst a collection of “young newspaper men,” “unwary editors,” and “young authors eager to get life into their literature” (Midnight 40). Faced with this situation, Howells’s friend has little choice but to try and trace the rumors back to their referent. In this case, the gossip (along with the strangely militarized metaphor of the essay’s title) refers to a late-night bread line for the city’s starving poor – one “interesting spectacle” amongst many in the late era of Gilded Age urban-industrialization. And thus, the experience of the Howellsian city begins with the writer negotiating a maze of competing discourses, prior representations and analytic perspectives built by a whole industry of urban explorer-writers. As if to shelter himself from the traffic in bourgeois taste, Howells passes this quest along to his unnamed “friend”/narrator whose experiences he will receive secondhand and work into writing. From this narrative position Howells will critique the “connoisseurs” of drawing room culture from the position of the drawing room – simultaneously speaking from the position of bourgeois culture and seeking to contain what it perceives as the undemocratic excesses of industrial-consumer capital.

Also characteristic of Howells’s work (and late-nineteenth century urban writing in general) are the ethical ambivalences that emerge from this classed form of urban spectatorship.

⁵³ William Dean Howells. “The Midnight Platoon” *Short Stories and Essays*. (Laverne, TN: Dodo Press, 2010) p. 40. All subsequent references to this text are to this edition and will be cited in-text as “Midnight.”

The storyteller almost remorsefully professes the “pleasure of seeing,” while admitting that “there seems no reason why a man should delight to see his fellow-men waiting in the winter street for the midnight dole of bread” (Midnight 41). This “pleasure of seeing” is figured as a kind of consumption by the unnamed friend who desires to “glut his sensibility in a leisurely study of the scene” – a scene which he takes in from the comfort and safety of his covered coach. But this necessary separation also makes for an awkward transaction (Midnight 41). Even as he exercises “the greatest possible advantage” in his perspective, his “leisurely study” is troubled by the possibility that some of these huddled men might be imposters – that no “test” existed “that would prove them deserving or undeserving” of this small bit of charity afforded the urban poor (Midnight 43). In contrast, he is much more comfortable imagining them in elaborate sentimental narratives – as “slaves and convicts... taken in some cruel foray, and driven to the market where no man wanted to buy” (Midnight 43). He wonders whether their “slavery... would ever be abolished” – taking pleasure in the generous sentiments of his own liberal imagination. Swapping the figure of the urban poor with the figure of the slave does more than anchor his observations in a series of recognizable narratives and histories. In this reimagining, liberal capitalism moves from being the setting of this tragedy to the hero of a romance that concludes with a more inclusive free-market, a move which ironically does more to reinstate his “leisurely” consumption as a positive social act than it does to shed light on their specific conditions or alleviate their suffering.

The speculative value of the urban scene as a commodity is, therefore, linked to its status as “a representative thing” – as a meaningful object for the exercise of a distinctly bourgeois reading/writing practice (Midnight 43). But as Howells’s narrator gives the urban spectacle literary form so, too, do the textures and signifying characteristics of his own spectatorship take

shape within the scene. He becomes aware of the quality of his own looking – “the celerity, the simultaneity of his impressions, his reflections” (Midnight 44). And as these thoughts devolve into “fragments of conjecture” and “vague, reproachful thoughts for all the remote and immediate luxury of his life” the “friend” becomes “suddenly aware of a certain quality of representativity” in himself (Midnight 44).

...he stood for these men for all the ease and safety that they could never, never hope to know. He was Society. Society that was to be preserved because it embodies Civilization. He wondered if they hated him in his capacity of Better Classes. (Midnight 46)

In Howells’s sketch, urban spectatorship (and, consequently, the visual-ideological rubric of social class) cuts both ways. The succession of proper names serves to locate the urban spectator in a whole series of social scales – “Society...embodies Civilization” which, in turn, is synonymous with “Better Classes.” The “pleasure of seeing” circles back and becomes an anxiety over being seen; his own desire to read this “representative thing” takes shape, tethers him, pulls him into the scene and brings him face to face with his own “representativity.” In the middle of his own story Howells’s friend is dragged into representation, heralded by the terms of cultural difference that essentialize the political dominance of the capitalist class. Even as these terms seem to mark off categories of distinction and cultural authority, the very possibility of being a readable subject itself propels him into a defensive position where he seeks to reassure his daughter (and himself) that “what we are and what we do is all right. It’s what they are and what they suffer that’s all wrong” (Midnight 46). Whereas the one-way circuit of vision constructed earlier in the sketch produces sentimental narratives, the even distribution of “representativity” produces essential differences (“what we/they are”) and an awkwardly

segregated sense of social responsibility. And when Howells himself – the narrator all along – finally asserts his own voice it is only to ask (rhetorically) whether this “view of the situation” would “satisfy” both ends of the visual circuit. It is on this uneasy question that the sketch draws to (a clearly insufficient) closure.

I would argue that this ambivalence towards “representativity,” contained within the “visual circuit” of urban spectatorship, is a major component of the political unconsciousness of urban realist writing in this era. The representational tropes that I have described above are native to a moment when urban spectatorship itself was imagined as a liberal form of social intervention. Protestant moralists, realist writers, muckrakers, bureaucrat-scientists, advertisers – the aforementioned “connoisseurs of such matters” – all shared a conception of themselves as cultural workers whose civic, national duty was to present the city as a readable object. In this sense, urban vision itself became a zone of ethical contestation (and market competition) as various writers and genres claimed the authority to render this legibility in the last instance. Street-level narrative tropes, virtually identical to the ones that I have just described in Howells’s “Midnight Platoon,” were staging these conflicts everywhere across the cultural production of the period. In Charles Loring Brace’s 1872 account of the “dangerous classes of New York,” for instance, the prominent Protestant reformer promises to allow his readers to visualize “explosive social elements beneath the surface” of the city.⁵⁴ The threat of “American communism,” claims Brace, can be imagined as “thousands upon thousands” of homeless, criminal poor who everyday “behold the gilded rewards of toil all around them, but are never permitted to touch them” (Brace 29). Elsewhere, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards* critiques the shortsightedness of the industrial bourgeois by representing all of Gilded Age society as “a prodigious coach which the

⁵⁴ Charles Loring Brace. *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Year’s Work Among Them*. (New York, NY: Elbrion Classics, 2005.) p. 29

masses of humanity were harnessed to.”⁵⁵ By establishing the social order as divided between those who ride in the coach and those that pull it, he invokes a “spectacle of misery,” only to question the era’s prevailing social vision. For Bellamy, the process of imagining a radically new social basis for liberal humanism, one that could transcend its industrial counterpart, had to begin by marking class difference as a bourgeois “hallucination.” Meanwhile, Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser all give literary shape to the internal struggles of their working-class heroines by placing them on the street-corner as witnesses to the opposing spectacle of urban middle-class consumption.⁵⁶ In all of these cases, the period’s competing conceptions of the “urban problem” are represented through these circuits of vision, each of which variously embraces and disqualifies perspectives in a larger struggle to decide how urban difference will be represented and through whose eyes.

This struggle also defines the ambivalent relationship between representation and liberal-progressive vision in the industrial city. Though these authors differed profoundly in their understanding of the excesses and contradictions of industrial capital, they similarly staged these political-epistemological conflicts in terms of how the various “spectacles” of urban poverty and consumption were to be interpreted – circumscribing structural questions of political economy into the field of urban hermeneutics. But Howells’s sketch suggests that, at base, this particular brand of urban imagination is caught between both a desire for *and a resistance to* the “representative” nature of the urban scene. In the figure of the urban spectator/“friend”, the impulsive, liberal desire for urban intelligibility fixates on the figure of anonymity and attempts to locate and contain it within the subjectifying logics of narrative history. But for Howells, this desire for “representativeness” faces new challenges in the late-nineteenth century, challenges

⁵⁵ Edward Bellamy. *Looking Backwards, 2000-1887*. (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1986) p. 37

⁵⁶ Edith Wharton *House of Mirth*, Stephen Crane *Maggie: Girl of the Streets*, Theodore Dreiser *Sister Carrie*.

which are imagined as the problem of the urban subject “looking back.” While the position of the bourgeois urban spectator allowed one to “read the city” from a variety of competing angles, it seems clear that, no matter how these visual rubrics fell on the scale of charity and recrimination, the greater problem was the “representativity” of the spectator himself, made manifest in the competing gaze of the urban subject. This problem hinges on a strange relation to urban differences which must be represented in the name of a literature devoted to social justice but simultaneously, must be repressed in order to maintain the forms of vision which can provide a stable foundation for said literature. Howells’s writing, in this case, manifests a profoundly ambivalent relationship to Gilded Age urban representation itself. As perhaps the primary voice in the late nineteenth-century Literary Realism movement, and a confident proponent of the ability of national literature to “seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests,” Howells’s anxiety here, I argue, demands a reevaluation of the socio-political practice that is realist writing.

Critical studies of American Literary Realism have continually struggled to account for this problematic which on its surface, appears as an ambivalence in the representational goals of Howells’s work. In the scholarship on Howells, this ambivalence is apparent in the way that critics attempt to explain the seemingly contradictory relations between the author’s democratic values and his genteel investments. In 1942, Alfred Kazin would probably have attributed this representational crisis in Howells’s realism to a paradigm shift in the writer’s personal politics around the late 1880s. In his book *On Native Grounds*, he begins by quoting a letter written to Henry James in which the realist writer/editor experiments with a newfound critical perspective:

I suppose I love America less because it won’t let me love it more. I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of

optimistic content with ‘civilization’ and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality.⁵⁷

For Kazin, this seachange in Howells’s political attitudes is central to “the opening struggle for realism” – a struggle which can be said to initiate the American tradition of literary experimentation. Howells wrote these comments soon after his public defense of the Haymarket anarchists, and Kazin recounts them as part of an argument which links Howells’s uneasy politics to his developing realist aesthetic. Looking to Howells’s later novels, Kazin marks a series of formal strategies wherein “each character” is assigned “his representative place” and “his characteristic criticism or apology” along an increasingly stratified social geography (27). “When they talked together,” Kazin writes, “they represented a whole society in mediation” (27). To preside over this “society in mediation,” Howells adds “a foreground observer, a central intelligence in all these novels” whose job it is to “testify against” the excesses of corporate-industrialist society, if not to act against them. Working within these representational dynamics, Howells is portrayed in a struggle between his growing criticisms of American culture and his own “personal limitations of taste and prudery” alongside his “simple belief in simple justice” (Kazin 25). The search for “real equality” manifests in Howells’s ability to “represent a whole society” in and through the “representative” nature of his individual characters. And the limits of this vision are an effect of Howells’s “prudery” – genteel values which cause him to shudder at the “audacity” of his own vision and manifest in a newfound lack of “trust” in “pen and ink.” It is no wonder then (suggests this critical perspective) that his urban spectators exhibit this tendency to shy away from exactly what they set out to see and understand. In this conception

⁵⁷ Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Fiction*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co, 1956.) p. 3

of Howells's work, Kazin is joined by a whole generation of scholars who understood the success of realist representation according to its fidelity to a broad conception of representative national types.⁵⁸

In Kazin's understanding, class consciousness marks the limits of Howells's ability to see and represent the city; bourgeois ideology is manifest at the limits of vision – a willful blindness to social problems. More recent voices have, of course, asked us to fundamentally reevaluate our understanding of representation's relation to social power. Perhaps the most influential of these, Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism*, resituates realist writing squarely in the realm of social practice, working within the context of late-nineteenth century consumer capital. For Kaplan, realistic fictions “contribute to the construction of a cohesive public sphere while they at once resist and participate in the domination of a mass market as the arbiter of America's national idiom.”⁵⁹ And they set about these tasks with an “anxious and contradictory” perspective on social changes “so elusive to representation” that they left strange silences in the formal backgrounds of their narratives (Kaplan 9). These social changes were undeniably urban in nature; Kaplan argues that the city “did not provide a ready-made setting which the realistic novel reflects,” but rather that rapid urban industrial changes “radically challenged the accessibility of an emergent modern world to literary representation” (8). “Those urban spaces often treated as the unproblematic setting of the realistic novel prove, on closer scrutiny, to be a threatening repository of the unreal which must be brought into the realm of representation and tamed...” (Kaplan 12). Here, Kaplan argues that to bring the city (and all of its various “characters”) into representation was itself a bourgeois “strategy of containment” in which the category of the real serves to “represent a broad and complex society by dissolving the threats of

⁵⁸ See also Everett Carter, *Howells and the Age of Realism* and Eric J. Sundquist, *American Realism: New Essays*

⁵⁹ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 9. All subsequent references to Kaplan are to this edition and will be cited in-text

otherness – whether from individual strangers or organized classes – into the common denominator of the ordinary” (25). Bourgeois ideology preserves itself by exiling any challenges to its worldview into a realm of “the unreal” where it is disqualified from vision altogether. In this sense, what is represented within the rubric of realism is far more “representative” of genteel common sense than what is exiled from its purview.

In this critique, Howells (and literary realism itself) is evidence of the urban anxiety of the Gilded Age bourgeois; his writing manages this anxiety through its attempts “to contain the centrifugal force of his urban materials within a coherent narrative frame” (Kaplan 47). In this sense, one of Kaplan’s main contributions is her understanding of the realist representational apparatus itself as a productive form of social power. In this, she joins a whole generation of critics, many of whom have made a point of linking realism to the concurrent social reform movement. In his study of the charity organization movement, for instance, Paul Boyer notes how the impulse to “learn more about the lives of the poor” was simply “the first step in reopening moral conduits between the classes.”⁶⁰ The “scientific” nature of its investigative procedure simultaneously obscured and reflected the way that this movement “provided a rationale and institutional outlet for the urban social control impulses of the American middle class” (Boyer 161). Similarly, Eric Trachtenberg finds liberal-reformers and realists alike embroiled in the struggle to “take control of urban reality, to define it, shape, and order it according to an evolving urban ideal” – an ideal that would “transform” the city’s “mysteries into light” and rend the veil of unintelligibility presented by earlier imaginations of the city.⁶¹

The shared investment of these overlapping groups, and their greatest challenge, was to imagine

⁶⁰ Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) p. 149

⁶¹ Alan Trachtenberg. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. (New York: NY Hill and Wang, 2007.) p. 104. All subsequent references to Trachtenberg are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text in parentheses.

the solution to “the problem of knowing and representing others” in the name of a decidedly middle-class sense of security and in terms that were often covert as opposed to overt (Kaplan 40). Donald Pizer, meanwhile, has commented that the debate on the aesthetics of realism, taking place in literary magazines amongst genteel critics, was “conducted largely by means of a coded diction in which ideas about people as social, ethical, and above all sexual beings were expressed in terms heavily inflected by cultural values.”⁶² And Mark Seltzer claims, even more forcefully, that the realistic novel “operates by placing the entire world of the text under scrutiny and under surveillance and invokes the possibility of an absolute supervision, in which everything may be comprehended and ‘policed.’”⁶³ Drawing heavily on Foucault’s analysis of the disciplinary society, Seltzer identifies realism’s exegetical authority with a fantasy of monolithic vision, coextensive with sociological discourse, various agencies of social training, and the law. Together, these critics argue that the representational apparatuses native to realism productively structure a variety of social and cultural discourses of power and control.

I present this long perspective on the history of literary scholarship on realism in order to highlight the longstanding tension in the way that realism is approached and critically characterized as a social practice. In some ways, this debate continues to structure interpretations of Howells and his work, as contemporary perspectives continually assume positions along the scale that is defined by these oppositional reading strategies. John Fairfield, for instance, still reads Howells as overcoming “the genteel separation of culture and city life” – throwing off the anti-democratic impulses of his class by representing the oppressions that

⁶² Donald Pizer. “Introduction” *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*. Ed. Donald Pizer (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998) p. 3

⁶³ Mark Seltzer. *Henry James & The Art of Power*. (Cornell University Press, 1984.) p. 53

resulted from them.⁶⁴ Carrie T. Bramen, argues that the “rather harsh assessments” of Howells by Kaplan, Trachtenberg, and others are a product of our “late-twentieth century sensibilities,” against which she proposes a reading of Howells as representing (if not solving) important moral and ethical problems in his experiences of the city.⁶⁵ Philip Barrish, on the other hand, writes of Howells’s “realist taste” as embracing things like irony and contingency “as a way for *some* middle- and upper-class readers to claim cultural superiority over *other* middle-and upper-class readers.”⁶⁶ Howells criticism seems to revolve around this foundational representational problematic in his work – a problematic that is central to understanding both its aesthetic mission and its status as a socio-political practice. This long perspective on the conversation identifies two competing camps: one which sees realist representation as radically critical of liberalist-capitalist institutions and another which sees it as an apparatus of the liberal disciplinary regime, structured by bourgeois ideology and active in reproducing its formative subjects. The first perspective attempts to construct Howells as an emerging political dissident and the second finds him to be representative of an embattled bourgeois status quo. The first sees representation as a way of challenging social inequality; the second identifies representation itself as a covert agent of institutions of social power. Put together, this two-fold understanding of the work of realist representation mirrors the simultaneous confidence and anxiety that we find in Howells’s urban spectator/narrator. My purposely vexed reading of “Midnight Platoon” is built to suggest that this argument is, in some form, a part of how realism understands its own practice. But what does it mean to locate these critical conflicts with the text’s account of its own historically-

⁶⁴ John Fairfield. *The Public and its Possibilities: Triumphs and Tragedies in the American City*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple U. Press. 2010) p. 64

⁶⁵ Carrie Tirado Bramen. “William Dean Howells and the Failure of the Urban Picturesque.” *New England Quarterly*. 73:1 (mar 2000) 82-99, p. 84

⁶⁶ Phillip Barrish. *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige: 1880-1995*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001.) p. 17. All subsequent references to Barrish are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text in parentheses.

situated production? How do we account for the realist's simultaneous confidence in the emancipatory potential of literary form and anxiety over its origins and complicity in foundational differences and relations of power? What are the historical origins of this contradictory relationship to literary representation? And what kind of political subject can embody such contradictions?

Whoever this subject is, he seems doomed to be mired in this contradiction in its conception of social practice. Perhaps the one thing that all these critical perspectives on realism share is a conception of Howells as a failure, which, for my purposes here, constitutes a more productive entry point for these questions. Joseph Entin, for instance, has argued that for Howells and his contemporaries, "professional efforts to survey the bodies of the lumpenproletariat often result in various forms of cognitive dissonance that undermine realism's will-to-legibility."⁶⁷ This representational failure, always approached in the scholarship as a problematic relation between Howells's class consciousness and his liberal humanism, I argue is a consequence of the dueling, simultaneous imperatives that structure realist writing – above all, the imperative to "see and not be seen." My reading of Howells's "Midnight Platoon" has suggested that the forms of "cognitive dissonance" produced by "realism's will-to-legibility" ultimately stem from a crisis in the model of "public participation" offered by the ideal of "a disinterested, abstract universal public" voice – what Michael Warner has entitled "the liberal tradition" of the bourgeois public sphere. Thus, tracing the dual representational investments suggested in Howells's sketch through the urban writing of the period is to investigate the way that various writers attempted to speak this unmarked "public" voice in an industrial context that was making this position more and more difficult to imagine and sustain. This chapter is,

⁶⁷ Joseph Entin. "'Unhuman Humanity': Bodies of the Urban Poor and the Collapse of Urban Legibility." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 34:3 (Summer 2001) p331-337, p314

therefore, about the role that narratives of the city played in the (re)production of the bourgeois public sphere during the era which is marked by both the growing dominance of consumer media and the emergence of a series of competing rubrics for constructing political legibility. As with earlier democratic publics, this public sphere was bound to a liberal “logic of abstraction which provides privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle-class, the normal” (Warner 167). And as Warner has argued, the construction of this utopian “public subject” of the constitutional public sphere is, in some senses, challenged by the onslaught of mass consumerism.

Where consumer capitalism makes available an endlessly differentiable subject, the subject of the public sphere proper cannot be differentiated. It can represent difference as other, but as an available form of subjectivity it remains unmarked. (Warner 168-69)

This threat to the coherence of the “public subject” came at the same time that class struggle and conflicts with organized labor were exploding into unprecedented forms of urban spectacle and violence, and these scenes of public unrest certainly contributed their own violence to the notion of a singular, representative national interest. Strikes, riots, and the increasingly visible underclass were reminders of the profound differences and inequalities which structured American public life (so often obscured in the shadow of its growing affluence) many of which were a challenge to the very social relations which were legitimated under liberal capital. In this sense, urban spectatorship is the contested territory for multiple fields of representational conflict in this period – overlapping fields which account for, amongst other things, Howells’s seeming ambivalence towards urban narrative. On one hand, there is the debate – taking place amongst “connoisseurs” within the consumer sphere of mass cultural production – over how to “see” and represent the challenges of the city in liberal terms. And on the other, there is another struggle to

preserve the abstracted, disembodied character of the bourgeois public sphere itself – the logics of representation by which citizens recognized the universal voice of public reason and authority. The first competition must be presented as the very basis of social debate; the second must be repressed as a prerequisite for entering into the same debate.

Reading through these twin investments is one way of extending our understanding of realist writing as an embedded socio-political practice. As Amy Kaplan has argued, realism “strives to pave a common ground for diverse social classes by extending literary representation to ‘the other half’ while reassuring middle-class readers that social difference can be effaced in the mirror of the common-place” (46). But these two goals work at cross purposes. For one, this process of “extending literary representation,” in practice, “dominates and silences the very subject it represents” (Kaplan 42). This process is crucial to a specifically middle-class “reassurance” that leans heavily on the forms of difference offered by industrial capitalist social formation. At the same time, that “reassurance” must be issued from a position validated by the abstractions sanctioned under liberal individualism. What can be understood as the tendency of Howellsian realism to conflate literary representation with democratic representation, in practice, quickly becomes entangled in its inherent contradictions. Its twin investments come into conflict with each other when the democratic impulse of “extending literary representation” ceases to “reassure” the middle-class – when the “mirror” that realism holds up to social conflict suggests that the differences it contains cannot be easily “effaced” through a logic of transcendent liberal publicity (Kaplan 42). This is to argue that, within the “will to legibility” that characterizes urban realist fiction, there is a competing, repressed “will to illegibility” that is necessary in order to orient realist fiction to the essential “reality” of the liberal-nationalist

public, an investment in liberal political norms that is actually in conflict with its representational aims.

The stranger sits at the center of this contradiction as the figure that both must be exiled in order for representation to achieve wholeness and who simultaneously represents the ideal, abstracted social relations which are the philosophical backbone of the liberal public sphere itself. Thus, this critical reassessment of Gilded Age realist representational politics is intended, above all, to provide a different context for considering the urban stranger as figure embedded in the American liberal imagination, one which once again locates him at the center of, and not outside of, the era's most prominent representational politics. In this sense, the goal of this chapter is to offer a corrective to social theory which identifies the stranger as the unterritorialized, authentically liberal "before" of cultural politics. One important example, Richard Sennett's influential history of urban modernity, *The Fall of Public Man*, looked to the capital cities of Europe to locate the origin of what he saw as a crisis in "the balance of public and private life" that had come to haunt western modernity. At the center of his diagnosis is a growing concern of the status of strangers in urban life.

Today, public life has also become a matter of formal obligation... Manners and ritual interchanges with strangers are looked on as at best formal and dry, at worst as phony.

The stranger himself is a threatening figure, and few people can take great pleasure in that world of strangers, the cosmopolitan city. (Sennett 3)

For Sennett, a growing sense of the threat of the stranger is, itself, a symptom of a larger undervaluation of a species of sociality that he identifies as "public life" and which, he complains, has been so evacuated that people have begun "working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal

meaning” (5). Here, Sennett himself applies a liberal-realist lens to urban society, one built on a vision of political personhood whose legitimate foundation is a distinct division and functional balance between public and private meaning. The “public life” which he mourns is built on “impersonal” discourse – the “proper” approach to “public matters” (Sennett 5). This public ideal is threatened by an over-vitalization of the sphere of private personhood and an excessive valorization of its particular understandings of the self. This imbalance has the effect of rendering all public life (which, for Sennett, is defined by interactions with strangers) as suspicious and fundamentally meaningless in contrast to the relatively vital stage for the cultivation of personality, distinction, and cultural identity that is the private; the public, conversely, becomes an arena where fundamentally private identity is formalized in a disingenuous manner, prompting a kind of wide-scale obsession with revealing “the person hidden behind the mask” of social artifice (Sennett 5).

In Sennett’s formulation, these anxieties about public life are directed primarily at the urban stranger and, thus, a positive vision of the city as “a milieu in which strangers are likely to meet,” he argues, is the primary casualty of this waning in the perceived value of liberal publicity. In this sense, the urban stranger stands as a diagnostic tool for Sennett, and his historical investigation begins by positing two different historical instantiations of the figure. First, there is the stranger as “alien,” “intruder” or “outsider” who “appears in a landscape where people have enough sense of their own identities to form rules of who belongs and who does not” (48). A stable sense of identity inevitably produces a series of signifying differences which tells the community “how to think about these intruders.” But...

There is another sense of stranger in which these rules do not apply: the stranger as an unknown, rather than an alien. A stranger can be experienced on these terms by someone

who does have rules for his own identity... people who are unclear about their own identities, losing traditional images of themselves, or belonging to a new social group that as yet has no clear label. (Sennett 48)

Whereas the stranger as “outsider” is clearly the product of representational processes – “race and language providing instant distinctions” – this second stranger is associated with historical emergence. In the “more amorphous milieu,” which Sennett associates with the period of revolutionary liberalism in the capitals of Paris and London, self-consciously arbitrary social norms of conduct do not “force people to attempt to define to each other who they are” (49). In the circumstances which figure the stranger as “unknown” we find a properly liberal “public geography [which] is on the way to being born” (Sennett 49).

This chapter’s inquiry shares many critical impulses with Sennett’s now-classic history, among them, the desire to read “imagination as a social phenomenon” contributing to the creation of this public geography. And it attempts to reckon with what Sennett identifies as a growing suspicion towards urban public-ness in this historical imagination. But I would argue that the distinction that Sennett offers – between the stranger as “outsider” and “unknown” – is, at the outset of his investigation, made to participate in a mystified historiography which neatly distinguishes the practices of a kind of authentic democratic community (which operates temporally or epistemologically prior to the terms of “race and language” – a prior moment which Sennett sees as liberalism in a pure form) from the practices of an emerging white, bourgeois norm which defines the limits and character of that same community.⁶⁸ My

⁶⁸ Sennett himself is quite forthright about his “uneasy” relationship to the idea of the bourgeois as historical actors of this type. “There are too many conspiracy stories of the virtuous proletariat done in by the forces of evil led by the bourgeoisie...” (47). While “class is a fact” which cannot be ignored, Sennett declines to participate in the “demonology” that is perpetuated by Marxism’s “mechanical class analysis.” Instead (I’m suggesting) his use of the stranger imposes an equally mechanical distinction between the political practice of liberal civil society and the history of bourgeois social order. This historiography is certainly not confirmed by contemporary treatments

interventions in this historiography are two-fold. Firstly, it represents as historical development a shift that is best understood as a historically embedded representational practice. In my last chapter, I attempted to suggest that the stranger as “unknown” (rather than simply representing an authentic individual underneath the façade of cultural identity) is the product of residual contradictions within the same rubrics of legibility which produce the stranger as “outsider.” Instead of an emergent liberal community without “clear rules” and “clear labels,” the unknown/unknowable stranger takes shape within the overlapping rules and labels that converge on the urban subject, originating in contradictory forms of intelligibility and producing a profound contingency which challenges the authority of representation itself. Hence my second criticism – Sennett’s historiography participates in a “common-sense” conception of the stranger whose character is in direct proportional relation to what is conceived of as the confidence or internal integrity of a community whose basis is individual identity. The more that we develop a “sense of [our] own identities,” the more that a politics of definitive exclusion develops as a natural course – so we are told. On the other hand, reassessing this relation by replacing rubrics of socio-evolutionary development with representational practice asks us to evaluate the mechanisms that can be said to produce both communal identity and strangerhood simultaneously.

This mechanism is the liberal public sphere, and my argument in this chapter is that the representational politics of this sphere are shot through with constitutive stranger relations. This claim calls for a critical reassessment of the relationship of the “outsider” to the “unknown.”

Sennett is correct to suggest that the stranger as “outsider” is the product of a kind of historically

of the liberal public sphere by Warner and others, who often locate bourgeois norms at the philosophical heart of liberal-democratic institutions, abstractions and social imaginations. My own goal is not to argue for or defend this “mechanical class analysis,” but to argue (with many others) that class analysis has a role to play in understanding the abstract foundations of the liberal imagination that takes shape in representational, as well as social, practices.

contingent legibility that simultaneously marks the “unknown” stranger’s erasure. And he is certainly correct to attribute the varied career of this “intruder” to questions of perception and identity, both in and of the public. Because of this, the stranger as “outsider” cannot be alien to the concerns of this chapter. While anxieties over urban unrest and the crowd were nothing new to the bourgeois liberal imagination, this period’s particular conflicts had found a new literary figure through which to traffic them. “As social scientists classified the voiceless multitude, “the tramp” topped the hierarchy of negative connotations of the streets. The antithesis to the taxpayer, the tramp represented the greatest social menace... With increasing labor unrest and unemployment, the tramp menace enveloped all working people” (Fairfield 135). As I have already suggested, this urban, working class subject finds himself, in this era, at the center of a growing literature and as the subject of a divisive public debate about the nature of the industrial-capitalist social order. The figure of urban threat had a face, now it needed a narrative – a narrative which would identify the tramp as a member of the community whose character is contrary to the well-being of the same community. In literary representational terms, this growing socio-political imperative to identify “the tramp” marks the “unknown” stranger’s exile from the realm of “character.” At the same time, this exile does not evidence the proper functioning of political community and express the confidence of its internalized, essentialized “sense of identity.” Rather, the stranger’s erasure is a part of the same process which identifies that community through difference and paradoxically produces a profound insecurity about the character (and limits) of “the public” as an identifiable political body. This tension manifests itself as an ambivalence about the forms of “representativeness” that operate through particular social identities on the one hand, and upon a concept of abstract, public citizenship on the other.

As always, this ambivalence (and the strangers it constructs) can be experienced in the strategies that are called up to “read the city.”

The Rumor of the City: Competing Visions

Historian Thomas Bender is not alone when he argues that it was in the mid-nineteenth century that American urban centers grew large enough that they were no longer accessible as “immediate experience” and required new strategies to convey a sense of coherence.⁶⁹ Indeed, scholarship on urban vision suggests (reversing Sennett) that a fundamentally unrepresentable city accounts for the retreat of the middle-classes into suburbs, as well as their dogmatic adherence to a politics of private personhood and their growing suspicion of public life. It has become commonplace to describe the Gilded Age city as escaping “the imposition of a single vision,” a claim which connects urban-industrial development to the emergence of a middle-class political consciousness marked by “a preoccupation with deception, imposture, and false and mistaken identities.”⁷⁰ Certainly urban scale and the inaccessibility of experience were some of the motivating factors for this anxiety. But this period, rightfully characterized by a fretful visual insecurity, is also notable for inventing a multitude of different and competing modes of representational intelligibility. Scholarship on nineteenth-century urban history and mass culture describes a virtual explosion of new venues, new genres, and new demands for urban representations in the Gilded Age. While many consumers were escaping to suburbs where the harsh realities of corporate-industrial capitalism were less apparent on the surface of the urban experience, paradoxically, they were also stoking a rapidly growing demand for cultural materials which “mapped” the city and attempted to domesticate all of its disparate problematics.

⁶⁹ Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Ideal* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) p. 20

⁷⁰ Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880-1924* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2008) p. 5, 14. All subsequent references to Romeyn are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text in parentheses.

In this way, the same industrial market forces which had contributed to the city's general incoherence (as well as the general withdrawal of the middle class to the suburbs) offered a solution in the form of widely disseminated cultural texts whose "new principles of social order began to give a new kind of coherence to the vastly expanded social geography of the city" (Bender 20).

In these forms, the obscurity of the city was "raised to the level of spectacle" and commodified as "a new figure, a fusion of social, political, and technological peril" (Trachtenberg 104). Bolstering this new culture industry (figuratively and literally) was a series of underlying political investments. These new models for "reading the city" were the cultural field in which an embattled liberalism struggled to articulate its own brand of common sense in the post-bellum era leading up to the turn of the century. I have described this liberalism as "embattled" because, as many social and political historians will attest, the prevailing social questions and prominent external challenges of the era had the effect of provoking a heated internal debate amongst liberals.⁷¹ In New York, the unified group of free-labor liberals who had assembled under the banner of abolitionism and nationalism in the Civil War period were not given much time to revel in their victory; Nancy Cohen suggests that, "as modern labor and socialist movements arose in the developing economies of the transatlantic world, liberalism faced challenges from the left that were in certain respects more threatening than those from its

⁷¹ Earlier histories of the period, though insisting on the hegemony of classic liberalist principles in the era, did not emphasize the challenges which this ideology faced and defined itself against. One possible reason for this is their emphasis on the famously self-appointed "best men" of the genteel class – a group of intellectuals, writers, and opinion-makers (including Riis and Howells) who were instrumental in facilitating the relocation of American values from its rural roots to the perspective of the more "bureaucratically-minded middle class" in this period. More recent histories of liberalism and, in particular, histories of city politics, are more insistent in situating the liberal reformers in a more conflicted context. See Richard Hofstetler's *Age of Reform*, Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920*, John G. Sproat, *"The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age*.

right.”⁷² The 8-hour work day movement, the Haymarket incident, Pullman strikes - conflicts with organized labor (often very visible at the street-level of the urban, industrial centers of the nation) were accompanied by a series of objections to the emerging corporatist, monopoly-capital formations. Debates over both of these issues very publicly questioned core liberalist values including doctrines of *laissez-faire*, economic individualism. Cohen, therefore, suggests that the Gilded Age bourgeois dogmatic observance of the principles of classic liberalism and “economic man” was a fundamentally defensive position, one front in a larger struggle to define the nature of social, economic and political reality. This struggle was staged in confrontation with the period’s urban spectacles which liberals struggled to interpret and represent, seeking to legitimate their political values by demonstrating their “reality” at the level of the street. And, as accounts of the period’s political climate suggest, these readings would be called upon to resolve challenges, not only from radical leftist, anti-corporatist social movements, but also from within and among their own ranks.

Consequently, the urban writing of this era is organized by relatively explicit forms of political competition on the market of urban “reading strategies.” And in the Gilded Age, no city was as “well read” as New York City; no urban center in the U.S. produced as many competing representations and staged as many impressive spectacles for public consumption. This market trafficked in cognitive maps built on different types of rhetoric, expertise and common-sense, effectively initiating what Angela Blake has described as “a cultural contest over urban meaning.”⁷³ Looking primarily to the contest between urban social reformers of the era and “boosters” – an emerging class of entrepreneurs, investors and businessmen – Blake argues that

⁷² Nancy Cohen. *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism: 1865-1914*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of NC Press, 2002.) p. 8

⁷³ Angela Blake, *How New York Became American, 1890-1924* (Baltimore: John’s Hopkins University Press. 2006) p. 17. All subsequent references to Blake are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

written and visual genres produced in this market (guidebooks, sketches, postcards, and tourist maps amongst others) shaped the concept of the city as a civic and national subject well into the twentieth century. These texts participate in a larger struggle to define the character (and limits) of the national identity in an urban context, confronting problems of social and cultural heterogeneity and the historical meanings of American identity. Betsy Klimasmith similarly suggests that novelistic representation and the emerging epistemological frameworks of the social sciences “contend for primacy” during this period in the project of constructing legible urban social landscapes – a contest which ultimately revolved around the question of what life in the city “would mean to individuals and communities, as well as how urban settings would shape notions of individualism and community.”⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Esther Romeyn argues that most urban exploration narratives (including missionary testimonials, sensationalized journalism, and the American popular theatre) responded to the incoherent city with “a scopic regime that uncovered its underlying codes and registers” – “an epistemological grid that consistently mapped the congruence of place (neighborhood), class, labor, body, and physiognomy, language, customs, and (ethnic) identity” (60). Taken as nodes in a broader survey, these studies point to a whole series of diverse “cognitive mappings” of the city separated by genre, media, rhetorical strategies, epistemological assumptions, and ideological investments. Amongst other things, “reading the city” scholarship paints a picture of the many varied forms of representational authority that were descending upon the industrial urban scene in the late-nineteenth century.

These examples also cumulatively suggest how the struggle to secure an overarching urban representational strategy was gradually being subsumed within the mass-market logics of a growing culture industry. Even as increasingly specialized representations of the city were

⁷⁴ Klimasmith, Betsy. *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930*. (Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press. 2005)p. 5

competing with each other for the right to define urban social reality, New York's status as "the de facto capital of the burgeoning consumer economy" made "attempts to resolve the issues of urban cultural legibility and meaning" important in a different sense (Blake 18). As both the object of mass culture representation and a public organized by an increasingly robust mass-media consumerism, New York became the subject of a larger and more complex movement to establish "consuming as the basis of a reconstituted modern citizenship."⁷⁵ This is to suggest that, while the market on urban vision was producing an almost endlessly differentiated series of urban subjects, it was simultaneously crucial for the production of a consumer public whose place within a national imaginary was becoming increasingly prominent. Mass media advertising and market strategy, according to Charles McGovern, "represented consumer interests in public debates" and "used American national symbols and political language... to unite a nation in a citizenship based on purchasing, ownership, entertainment, and display" (7). In this sense, the competition over how the city was to be read was also linked, inexorably, to a struggle to reestablish "the sphere of public authority" on properly universalist grounds. The search for a transcendent, authoritative perspective on the city was motivated by the political desire to transcend the market, while the search itself was thoroughly grounded in a market competition in urban vision.

The texts which participated in this market are marked by this contradiction; they set out to capture consumer culture in the sphere of their visual authority, while struggling to transcend their own role within this culture. Discursively, they testify to the explosion of urban discourse and the "contest over urban meaning" in the way that they self-consciously stage multiple forms of vision in confrontation with their own. One example, *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis's

⁷⁵ Charles McGovern. *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina Press. 2006) p. 5

now-classic work of photojournalism, makes a point to operate on a number of scales and through a variety of different visual registers. And it does so with an acute awareness of the fact that it traffics in vision within a market already flooded with competing perspectives. This places a high-premium on rhetorics of both expertise and authenticity. In a chapter entitled “The Mixed Crowd, Riis asserts that “the one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctively American community.”⁷⁶ Riis confirms this thesis in conversation with an elderly tenement dweller who, when asked about the fate of the “old inhabitants,” responds that he “don’t see them ‘round here” (73). The authenticity of the old man’s dialect – the local quality of his character – makes for a kind of local vision. But when it comes to visual acuity and scale, Riis gives himself the last word:

...his eyes did not deceive him. They are not here. In their place has come this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements, ever striving and working like whiskey and water in one glass, and with the like result: final union and a prevailing taint of whiskey. (73)

Looking through this nationalist frame, Riis encounters heterogeneity – a “union” which has been “tainted” by foreign elements. The “hordes” of Jews, Italians, and Chinamen have “crowded out” the “distinctively American,” contaminated it with their “denser swarms.” “A map of the city, colored to designate nationalities,” notes Riis, “would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow” (75). The city appears, even from the vastly totalizing perspective implied by a map, as “an extraordinary crazy-quilt,” essentially representing the city as a formerly domestic space radically re-territorialized by foreign elements. This observation is only one example of the language mobilized in a relatively

⁷⁶ Jacob Riis. *How the Other Half Lives*. Ed. David Leviathan. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2011) p. 73-74. All subsequent references to Riis are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

conventional reformist imagination of the city – articulations of its foreign-ness and its un-American-ness – which arises alongside (and, arguably, as a catalyst for) a contemporaneous shift in the literary representational politics of the era. It is this mixed and un-resolved geographic imagination – the city as a new “frontier” in the era of the western frontier’s “closure” - which articulates the anxious imperative to “read” the city.⁷⁷ Facilitating this imagination, the heavily particularized vision of the elderly tenement dweller is quietly confirmed and ultimately transcended by the ostensibly more objective authority of Riis’s map (populated by rainbows and zebras).

Thus, Riis’s text also calls on us to recognize that the struggle to define a liberal-nationalist means of reading the city was not simply a matter of mapping it according to an inside/outside rubric of foreign-ness, separating the outsiders from the natives in a project which is simply resolved by drawing up borders and defining exteriorities. A method of reading the city which secures true “recognition” must offer a logic which provides a passage between surface and depth and, as Riis’s prose reveals, it was upon this conceptual terrain that the struggle to define the nineteenth century liberal response to poverty was waged. So to those who

⁷⁷ This example also illustrates how the imperative to present a stable and unmarked perspective on the city was grounded in imperialist imaginations. Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued that while it is “important to see U.S. foreign policy as an extension of principles and trends long apparent in the conquest of the continent” the 1880s and 90s marks a distinct acceleration in the “scale” of industrial (over)production, immigrant labor, and the burgeoning culture industry which “not only narrated these events for mass consumption but served up images of the world and its peoples that at once naturalized ‘large policies’ and gave birth to the anxieties engendered by these grand designs.” This “culture industry” is exactly what, in this period, took up the project of “Americanizing New York” through tourist pamphlets, guidebooks, maps, photography and various other “branding” projects. According to Angela Blake, these “branding efforts” were in response to anxieties about immigration, sheer population, and the “incoherence” or unknowable-ness of the city – anxieties like the ones that Riis articulates in his imagined map of the “mixed crowd” of the Fourth Ward (5). These representations of New York as America’s city were put to work in “efforts to develop national markets” as well as attempts to “establish American power overseas” fundamentally linking their nationalist aims to contemporaneous imperialist ends. Nationalism and imperialism are joint projects in the period; as Thomas Peyser has noted, “the very idea of modern – in our context, post Herderian – nationalism is unthinkable without a highly developed sense of internationalism; only when an acute consciousness of different cultures has arisen will one feel impelled to catalogue or cultivate those traits that allegedly distinguish one’s own national culture from all the others.” Matthew Frye Jacobson. *Barbarian Virtues*. (New York, NY: Wang and Hill, 2000) p. 6, , Thomas Peyser. *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism*. (Duke University Press, 1998) p. 10

would argue that “the worst tenements in New York do not, as a rule, *look bad*” Riis responds that “to get to the pregnant facts of tenement-house life one must look beneath the surface. Many an apple has a fair skin and a rotten core” (234). Here, Riis discredits the visual claims of those who have “seen” only the architectural facades and street scenes of the tenements. These surfaces are deceiving and only serve to obscure the true conditions that lie beneath. Likewise, to the minister who accuses him of “looking too much to the material conditions of these people... forgetting the inner man,” Riis responds that, “you cannot expect to find an inner man to appeal to in the worst tenement-house surroundings... you cannot expect to find a sound core in a rotten fruit” (235). Just as an analysis which is content to examine the “surface” of the tenements is blind to the “core” of degradation, the assumption of an autonomous spiritual “core” is passed off as merely an idealistic fantasy which cannot be validated by the reality of the “surface.” Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, one of the most influential urban reform texts of its day, is thus thoroughly embroiled in a contest to produce and secure urban meaning. The metaphor of the apple may seem like a simple rhetorical device, but Riis’s insistence on it, and the variety of arguments that it is put to use against, describe the analytic terrain upon which the middle-class struggled amongst themselves to articulate a position of morality and liberal value. This struggle was nothing less than an ideological battle over who would have the authority to define social and political reality in America’s urban-industrial era. As Riis’s apple metaphor suggests, at the center of this struggle were a series of competing ideas about how the city should be read – what “surfaces” speak in what way to “cores” and “inner men”; exactly which “surfaces” matter most in the final instance; and, consequently, what particular heuristics for “reading the city” would be most effectively allow liberals to define “what is to be done” about the social problems they faced in the late-nineteenth century.

This reading speaks of a New York which was multiply defined in the public social imagination – an imagination that was flooded with anxiety over foreign elements, labor conflicts, capitalist excesses, national identity, and imperial ambitions. With these arguments, Riis devotes his book, not to defining and representing the poor, but to identifying the optimized form of vision which would do so definitively. The need to stage these confrontations is clearly born out of an explicit competition with a series of spectators who stand beside him on his side of the industrial class line. In the process, he particularizes these other perspectives, locating and containing them in the figures of a series of recognizable characters: the bourgeois slum tourist and the reform minister. These representational strategies are, therefore, crucial to understanding class conflict in the era, not only in terms of what they choose to represent, but in terms of the ways they represent vision itself. Rhetorically, Riis’s capacity to speak in the name of a properly abstract public interest is dependent on his ability to represent other voices as characters within his own visual field.

Jacob Riis: Making the Stranger Speak

There is, of course, a difference between the characters that embody competing urban epistemologies and the characters which are the ultimate objects of the vision. Given how important an objective, scientific, public-oriented voice is to this project, it is somewhat surprising when, towards the end of his investigation, Riis briefly throws off his documentary prose style to give us a short imaginative narrative which he titles “The Man with the Knife”:

A man stood at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fourteenth Street the other day, looking gloomily at the carriages that rolled by, carrying the wealth and fashion of the avenues to and from the big stores down town. He was poor, and hungry, and ragged. This thought was in his mind: “They behind their well-fed teams have no thought for the morrow; they

know hunger only by name, and ride down to spend in an hour's shopping what would keep me and my little ones from want a whole year." There rose up before him the picture of those little ones crying for bread around the cold and cheerless hearth – then he sprang into the throng and slashed about him with a knife, blindly seeking to kill, to revenge. (Riis 233)

In this simple little story, built to give form and literary structure to Riis's social consciousness, we again encounter that stock figure of the late-nineteenth century urban imagination – the working class/underclass subject who "looks back." A mute witness to the spectacle of Gilded Age consumer capitalism, the anonymous man on the street corner, swept aside by the tidal movements of fashion, encapsulates the class anxiety of the era. For a middle-class readership who "know hunger only by name," this little parable of poverty and street violence has a clear lesson: the conditions of the other half demand "recognition" if urban despair is not to spill over into full-fledged class warfare. Here, we find Riis invoking the specular circuit which I earlier identified in Howells's sketch and across the urban writing of the late nineteenth century. Invoking this visual exchange seems to necessitate a return to narrative form, but unlike Howells's sketch, Riis uses it as an object upon which to reproduce the narrative operations of the bourgeois public sphere.

Here, it is certainly worth pausing to reflect on how Riis's narrative charts a new discursive terrain for the liberal production of urban strangers. Nothing could be more obvious than the distance between Riis's confident representation of "the man with the knife" in 1890 and Poe's 1840 narrative anxiety over his "man of the crowd." Whereas the latter was presented as an illegible text – the "book which refuses to be read," Riis's figure of urban threat is a reading and readable subject, thoroughly legible and clearly positioned in a larger socio-

economic landscape. And whereas Poe's man (and his dagger) spoke only to the contingency of the narrator's categorical vision and the failure of his representational apparatus, Riis's man (and his knife) "speak" directly and insistently of a specific narrative complete with an origin story, a compellingly furnished set of motives, and probable trajectory. He is not a stranger – indeed, his "place" in an ordered social scale and, more broadly, his substantive "knowability" are never in question. In the place of the stranger, we have the working-class subject, complete with a functional interiority and secure position in the social imaginary, a position outside of its normative structures.⁷⁸ Instead of the "unknown" stranger, we encounter the outsider – not in the sense of a foreigner whose particular subjectivity is "outside" of the national borders, but a threat whose subjectivity marks him as "outside" of "public interest." And in the place of the restless and horrified narrator, Riis himself assumes an extreme exegetical authority, framed through a documentary realist style which, for David Leviathan, was the result of "a popular groundswell of popular interest in a wide variety of forms of inquiry deemed to be scientific."⁷⁹

But the story of the "man with the knife" is the product of a narrative strategy that is only "scientific" in its broadest impulses. And while Riis leans heavily on the authority of his journalistic empiricism in producing this figure, the actual necessity for the story itself runs up against the limits of the "scientific" vision which he has been laboring to offer us.

To a certain extent, we are all creatures of the conditions that surround us, physically and morally. But is the knowledge reassuring? In the light of what we have seen, does not the

⁷⁸ There are certainly those who would suggest that mounting this comparison between Poe and Riis radically effaces more essential distinctions between two authors, whose opposing visions of cities and strangers can certainly be attributed to differences in literary genre or intellectual tradition. Indeed. It is precisely my intention to inquire into these differences. But rather than leveraging them in order to explain away the cultural politics inscribed in their different representations of the urban scene, my goal is to situate these historical differences in relation to the ideological demands of an embattled Gilded Age liberalism.

⁷⁹ David Leviathan "Introduction" *How the Other Half Lives*. Ed. David Leviathan. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2011) p. 22

question arise: what sort of creature, then, this of the tenement? I tried to draw his likeness from observation in telling the story of the “tough.” (Riis 234)

The “man with the knife” is built to answer a question that is motivated by, but not answered by, “what we have seen” – Riis’s detailed analysis of the “conditions” of the “other half.” The need to define the “creature”-status of the urban underclass requires Riis to “draw his likeness from observation” in order to bridge the rhetorical gap between the earlier chapters which document the tenement scene and the later “what is to be done” chapters that attempt to define municipal policy around the “problem of the urban poor.” Here, a literary idiom steps in to supply a speculative futurity rooted in the status of the poor as individual – the diverse population which has been the subject of analysis becomes a character in a story that begins with “the cold and cheerless hearth” and ends with open class violence and “the madhouse.” Observing the “creature”-status of “the other half” in its native environment means setting him free on the terrain of self-determination and internalized struggle which is narrative form. And in this turn to narrative, Riis’s problem of determining conditions becomes a problem of choice, a sense of the urban future building towards either the man’s “solution of violence” or a possible “solution of justice” which the later chapters attempt to elaborate (234). Riis’s empiricist vision, it seems, is insufficient to mediate the distance between an emerging scientific rationality and the vision of liberal agency that legitimates the bourgeois municipal state. To a more literary representational mode (“telling the story”) falls the responsibility of reinserting the newly-legible poor into the cultural politics of *laissez-faire*.

But who is being presented with the choice here? As with the scholarship on Howells, the bourgeois character of this move is much remarked on in the long line of scholarship on Riis and his reformer contemporaries. Interpellated into Riis’s address, the readers of *The Other Half*

come to occupy what critic Joseph Entin has identified as a “privileged narrative position” where the denizens of the tenements are made “comprehensible, even predictable” and where “the ragged man’s mind is transparent to us, his motives and actions immanently legible” (Entin 310). In this sense, Riis’s middle-class audience is placed in a favorable position from which to read the “creatures” of poverty that they encounter in the street. Riis moves past the “ragged” surface of the anonymous stranger and ascribes to his imagined assailant a history, an interiority, and a speculative future. This classed reading practice becomes the primary investment of Riis’s narrative strategy; the tenements of late-nineteenth century New York demand “recognition of their true character on the part of the well-meaning, but uninstructed, who are always in the majority” (Riis 234). As a response to this imperative, the narrative suggests that the “conditions” of the slums – their “true character” – could be reduced to the failure of the working-class domestic scene to live up to the standards defined by its middle-class counterpart, anchoring the possibility of this “recognition” in a particular set of values.⁸⁰ At the same time, it suggests that the dangers of not recognizing the conditions of the poor are, first and foremost, the threat to middle-class consumers and the inherent menace of an emerging class-consciousness on the part of the laboring populations. Here, both the narrative’s analytic and its address speak to the dominance of a middle-class perspective (both its values and distinctive anxieties) whose

⁸⁰ This bourgeois attitude towards domesticity in the city is well-documented in the period, as are the ways that it emerges from the liberal (gendered) conception of civil society as divided into separate spheres. The consensus was that the tenements, in particular, were responsible for the breakdown of traditional values associated with the home as the seat of an ennobling and civilizing privacy. Of middle-class reformers, Paul Boyer argues that the concurrent charity organization movement built its mission statement on the “assumption that the urban poor had degenerated morally because the circumstances of city life had cut them off from the elevating influence of their moral betters” (149). Betsy Klimasmith describes Riis, as well as several fiction writers including Stephen Crane and Abraham Cahan, as writers who “both transformed the tenement home into an open spectacle and reinforced middle-class notions of privacy and enclosure” (92). Christine Stansell writes that “for their social betters, who were beginning to pride themselves on the ability of women to create a private space in a city they perceived as corrupt and alienating, the domestic turbulence of the working-class neighborhood posed a serious threat.” Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 62

growing hegemony underwrote late-nineteenth century reform in general. As if to drive this point home, Riis himself quotes the Forty Fourth Annual Report of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, where the “fear” associated with potential unrest of the urban scene is that it may manifest itself in “a burst of public indignation destructive to property and to good morals” (233).

“Property and good morals” – analyses of Riis and his contemporaries have importantly emphasized these mutually constitutive ideological investments as the twin entrenchments of an urban, middle-class consciousness which had dug back into its classical liberalist roots in the post-bellum period. In the moment that “property and good morals” become the representative values of a monumental “public interest” the perspective of the working class finds itself excluded *a priori*. A clear demarcation between “public interest” and “labor interest” is a precondition for recognition within the bourgeois public sphere; as Habermas has argued, the “identification of the property owner with the natural person... presupposed a separation inside the private realm between, on the one hand, affairs that private people pursued individually each in the interest of reproducing his own life and, on the other hand, the sort of interaction that united private people into a public” (160). And in this sense, with Riis, “the man with the knife” is quickly fed through the discursive maneuvers which Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge argue are central to the constitution of the bourgeois public sphere. On the individual worker:

He can make only “private” use of a public sphere that has disintegrated into a mere intermediary sphere. The public sphere operates according to this rule of private use, not according to the rules whereby the experiences and class interests of workers are organized. The interests of workers appear in the bourgeois public sphere as nothing

more than a gigantic, cumulative ‘private interest,’ not as a collective mode of production for qualitatively new forms of public sphere and public consciousness.⁸¹

Towards this end, the turn to narrative that we find in the “man with the knife” facilitates a representational/visual slight-of-hand. While those who constitute the “wealth and fashion” of New York are the objects of the “ragged” man’s jealous gaze, they are simultaneously the recipients of Riis’s narrative address. In contradistinction to the “privileged narrative perspective” that he offers his readers, Riis presents his unnamed assailant as possessing a distinctive rubric for reading the city, an optic which reads the spectacle of “wealth and fashion” and the signs of carefree consumption and thoughtless wellbeing. Within Riis’s narrative, this rubric is given its own story: a dangerous class-consciousness is produced by the intolerable conditions of the tenements. This consciousness looks out on the city and reads the middle-class as a text whose meaning for the “man with the knife” is injustice. But this mode of “reading the city” is not summoned up as an alternative to the untroubled naiveté of those who are propelled by the power of “well-fed teams” and have “no thought for the morrow.” Rather, this way of reading is presented as the disastrous origin for “a gigantic, cumulative ‘private interest’” which rises up to threaten a larger public sphere in which he is now no longer included. Though the man with the knife may “see” class differences easily enough, his violent revenge is used to characterize him as “blindly seeking” (and failing to find) a place in the public interest.

For Riis and many of his contemporaries, the threat of urban uprising was engendered by a particular (working class) way of reading the city – a perspective which could not be offered as an alternative to the reformist agenda. In order to avoid this possibility, Riis takes the fact of this “seeing” itself – this way of “reading the city” – as both the culmination of his urban exploration

⁸¹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge: *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Owen Daniel, Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p. 7

and the central object of his analysis. His story provides an account of this point of view only in order to propose another way of reading that manages to contain it in a seemingly less particular analytic frame. Those who are charged with “the choice” are not called to recognize the truth of the man’s narrated thoughts; Riis instead insists that this man (along with his knife and his class-consciousness) “speaks,” in a particularly “ignorant, impatient way” of the danger that this figure poses to civilized society as a whole – a “voice” which, for the reformer, drowns out the actual claims the poor might desire to make about their condition. The man with the knife is invited to participate in the conversation about poverty, not as a speaker, but as a text. In this way, Riis offers his readers a sheltered detour which takes them from their cloistered carriages directly to the perspective which already treats proletariat consciousness as a symptom. Class conflict, in this account, is a product of a dangerously limited perspective which Riis, speaking from a position of narrative authority, claims to transcend – a position that he invites his middle-class readership to participate in and occupy. While Riis’s urban journalism provided the means of representing the urban poor as a subject, the turn to narrative allows for this subject to be subsumed within bourgeois, liberal representational politics.

In this way, the reproduction of a coherent public sphere was facilitated through the social relations crystallized in a particular mode of “reading the city” – through the representational maneuvers which replaced urban strangers with legible subjects and removed bourgeois reformers from the discomfort of their coaches in order to fit them more comfortable vehicle – the abstraction of public reason. For liberal reformers, the first step towards transcending the marginal voices which threatened their own ability to speak from a universal “public interest” was to make these voices into a text – to imagine them in the mouths and minds of particular bodies moving linearly and simultaneously through social space. And this could

only be achieved to the extent that the city itself could be made the principle of this subordination – the “conditions” which eventually become narrative origins and a means of grounding the struggles of the working class in a “recognizably” particular and bounded frame. It is only by writing the stranger back into subjecthood that the narrative of liberalism can be told from its preferred, transcendent perch where stories about people are contained by the perspective of “The People.” In this case, it allows Riis to deftly sidestep the accusatory gaze of the underclass, positioning him in and through a perspective that can diagnose the city scene, while effectively disrecognizing its own particular origins in bourgeois consciousness. In this sense, tracing the representational dynamic between the urban spectator and the denizens of the street is one way of charting the checkered history of nineteenth-century democratic universalism and its formative exclusions.

As Michael Warner puts it, “The public sphere as an environment, then, is not just a place where one could rationally debate a set of gender or sexual [in this case, classed] relations that can in turn be equated with private life; the public sphere is a principle instance of the forms of embodiment and social relations that are themselves at issue” (54). As I have argued, the “circuit of vision” which Howells describes in “A Midnight Platoon” is the hinge upon which this distinction is either acknowledged or repressed in liberal public consciousness. From the coach window, the bourgeois reformer positions the urban spectator at a literal and figurative remove from the scene of inequality, ideally, as with Riis’s narrator, from the abstract, disembodied, and transcendent position of liberal reason itself. From this perspective, difference is a matter of debate. The urban scene becomes a text, complete with characters who speak their difference, all contained within the unmarked vision of the unrepresented spectator. But when the circuit swings back – when, like in Howells’s sketch, the urban spectator becomes aware of his own

legibility – that comfortable position of public authority assumes its own “representative” meaning and liberal vision itself enters the debate as a text written with bourgeois difference and privilege. For a liberal public sphere invested in disrecognizing its own investment in bourgeois norms and in positioning a particular class subjectivity as the essence of an unmarked public consciousness, this latter form of representation is a problem which must be disavowed.

This visual circuit also, in this function, defines the ambivalent relationship that realist writing maintains with the stranger and with representational inscription. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter, I turn to Howells’s urban novel, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, to diagnose its treatment of stranger relations as a symptom of liberal realism’s necessarily ambivalent relation to representation itself. Previous scholarship, I have shown, has made us well acquainted with the “will to legibility” that defines realist representational practice; within this totalizing aesthetic vision, the stranger, I argue, is a problem to which representation is the solution. “Containing” urban dwellers within the logic of representative characters, *Hazard*, like Riis’s “Man with the Knife” episode, captures urban difference and class conflict as a text upon which to exercise its more transcendent reading practice. But, unlike Riis, the all-encompassing reach of this representativeness (capturing, as it does, both labor agitators and bourgeois capitalists in its narrative frame) slowly consumes the positions from which an unmarked sensibility might be said to be possible. Appropriately, the story of this collapsing possibility is embedded in the novel’s account of the mass media public sphere and its engagement with the material conditions of reading, writing and publishing that construct the public sensibility. Realist writing, as the novel suggests in its story of editors, writers, and urban spectators, defines itself against the failures of the mass media market. But in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the realist writer himself struggles and fails to resolve the conflict between the norms of liberal publicity and his

commitment to the total “representativity” of the urban scene. This is to suggest that, at its heart, Howells’s urban realism contains a tangible series of doubts about its own possibility or, rather, the possibility of the liberal-nationalist public sphere which authorizes it. As I will attempt to show in what follows, the novel recovers the possibility of liberal political freedom by embracing the “unknown” stranger which it had earlier written over, breaking its own commitments to a representative “reality” in order to posit an unmarked stranger as the representative of liberal public vision.

The Realist Editor and the Problem of the Capitalist Public Sphere

In 1890, the same year that Riis published *The Other Half*, Howells wrote the first realist novel to be set in New York City. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, he attempts to engage the problematics of urban spectatorship and the public sphere separately and, at the same time, through a singular character: Basil March. March, both a writer and an editor, avows a commitment to realist representational politics while maintaining the same contradictory impulses in relation to the public sphere as Howells’s “friend” in “The Midnight Platoon.” Like this friend, March first engages the rumor of the city well in advance of the novel’s attempts to describe it in its own representational terms. Howells’s novel begins with the March family’s decision to relocate from Boston to New York, prompted by the prospects of Fulkerson’s new magazine, *Every Other Week*, and his desire to have Basil as the literary editor of this new entrepreneurial endeavor. The opening portions of the novel are therefore dominated by contentious conceptions of the city, introduced as the Marches discuss and argue over the potential move. In this sense, Basil March faces the problem which Realism itself confronted, a public imagination that has been structured in advance by multiple and competing forms of vision, many of which are explicitly connected to the political projects that engendered them. As

a way of managing this problem, the narrative particularizes each perspective in a way that allows the realist novel to manage them at the level of plot and character – what Kazin identified as the representational apparatus which Howells uses to represent and critique the excesses of Gilded Age society. But, as we will see, while this narrative approach to character does seem to construct a vision of the “whole society in mediation” (in the sense that it manages to represent and, hence, “contain” its most potent conflicts), the “central intelligence” of the novel, March himself, is not placed in a position to “testify” truthfully as to its excesses. Instead, the characters themselves make it impossible for the realist editor to properly contain them within a conception of the social whole. In the process, the editor’s office itself becomes the terrain of their conflict, calling into question the potential of the mass-market public sphere to transcend private interest in the name of this testimony.

The first perspective on the city that we encounter is the entrepreneur, Fulkerson’s justification for locating his new literary magazine in the city in the first place. When Basil suggests that Fulkerson could locate the press in Boston, Fulkerson responds, “Wouldn’t do. You might as well say St. Louis or Cincinnati. There’s only one city that belongs to the whole country, and that’s New York.”⁸² Whereas St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Boston are characterized as particular and thoroughly bounded by their own localized sense of possession (March is compelled to agree: “Boston belongs to the Bostonians”), New York is constructed by Fulkerson’s capitalistic ambitions as “belonging” in a larger sense to the nation as a whole. His definition of the city as national property stands in for a much longer and more direct answer to March’s question: New York is the necessary starting place for the magazine because it is the one place where a potentially national reading public might locate their investments and sense of identity. New York “belongs” to the nation imagined as an indeterminate and potentially

⁸² William Dean Howells. *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. (New York, NY: 2001) p. 10

unlimited sphere of national consumers, and consumption itself is built up to provide a universal entitlement which is conceived as a type of mutual ownership of and investment in public property. In this way, Fulkerson frames the city from the perspective of consumer citizenship.

In this imagination of the city, New York is the primary commodity in a national market which entitles every consumer equally and without exception. In this way, it becomes a means of imagining a figurative liberal-national public. But while the idea of buying and owning the city on the literary market allows Fulkerson to represent the mass-media public sphere as a principle of equality, it also allows him to actively forget the forms of possession and property which organize that public sphere and “repress the knowledge of the dispossession” inherent in its very structure (Kaplan 56). In this sense, the nightmare opposite of Fulkerson’s national consumer public is the German socialist Lindau’s claim that “Dere *iss* no Ameriga anymore!” (*Hazard* 287). As a permanently disabled veteran of the Civil War, Lindau is often spoken of by the more genteel characters in the novel as having more of a claim to an authentic American identity than anyone. Here, however, Lindau insists that the structural inequality of corporate capital has undermined the possibility of a cohesive national public.

You start here free and brafe, and you glaim for efery man de righdt to life, liperty, and de bursuit of habbiness. And where haf you entedt? No man that vorks vith his hants among you hass the liperty to bursue his habbiness. He is the slafe of some richer man...
(*Hazard* 287)

Here, Lindau acts as the (heavily-inflected, heavily-particularized) voice of labor conflict – a completely different conceptual rubric for representing the urban-industrial scene and, consequently, the nation as a whole. For while consumption organizes a unified, imagined community of common (conceptual) ownership, the relation of the worker to the capitalist in

urban-industrial production highlights the violence and inequality of property relations. In directing his vision to the scene of production, Lindau imagines a set of social differences so profound that they disqualify any possibility of a national public at all.

Neither the realist novel nor the realist writer/editor seek to inhibit the tension between these two politicized approaches to the city; rather, both are invested in representing them as though they had free reign to circulate and jostle against one another. This is largely facilitated by the efforts of the editor, March, who is happy to act as the informed reader of both Fulkerson's bombastic theory of consumer citizenship and Lindau's aggressive class consciousness. His role is to keep both figures in close proximity, within the purview of the novel's vision. In this sense, the role that March plays in the novel itself is functionally similar to the editorial role that he is supposed to play for the magazine by which he is employed. This role, which Fulkerson defines early on, is to "manage" the contributions while maintaining a position of functional invisibility. "The editorial management was going to be kept in the background, as far as the public was concerned; the public was to suppose that the thing ran itself. Fulkerson did not care for a great literary reputation in his editor..." (*Hazard* 29).

This management principle describes a relatively straightforward marketing strategy, predicated on a sleight of hand manipulation of public vision. "Reputation" would draw reader's attention to the particular arrangement of the magazine's various contributions; a more positive "public" perception can be cultivated by purposefully leaving the magazine unmarked by particular agendas at the level of its organization. The goal, put in other terms, is to keep the public eye trained on the object-status of the various perspectives contained *within* the magazine, and to avoid, at all cost, the public scrutiny of the perspective which presents and arranges them in the first place

In this sense, the realist editor's goal is to appear as the disinterested organizing principle of the democratic, national public sphere, even if those that are assembled within his sphere seem to operate in and describe different realities altogether. Like a good editor, his job is to arrange these perspectives for the consumption and debate of a larger reading public. There is, initially, a kind of inclusionary impetus which seems to drive this work. In his capacity as editor, he hires the radical Lindau to do translation work for the literary wing of *Every Other Week* and even brings him into his home as a tutor for his children. In this role, he is often prompted to defend the aging socialist, which he does willingly, albeit through a characteristic and condescending point of view. When his wife worries over the influence that Lindau's "distorted" ideas could have over their son, Tom, Basil responds that "it will be a good exercise for his faculties of research" for Tom to discover for himself "where they're false" (*Hazard* 265). Here, Lindau is both a teacher and, more importantly, evidence for another lesson altogether. Tom responds to this lesson, questioning Lindau's calls for justice with the idea that "there have been and there always will be" hard times and suffering (*Hazard* 272). On this point, he is praised by his father for displaying "good common sense." Like "the man with the knife," the working-class, immigrant subject is admitted into bourgeois consciousness as a text upon which it can confirm its own "common sense" reading practice.

While his private treatment of Lindau is characteristically genteel in orientation, in the workplace, March feels compelled to defend him on different grounds. To Fulkerson, March proclaims that Lindau is "as good an American as any of us, and it's only because he has too high an ideal of us" that his rhetoric is so often offensive to his co-workers; his only crime is the "injustice" he does himself in his self-presentation and manners (*Hazard* 288-89). Here, March locates the liberal-democratic limits of genteel personhood – Lindau might offend the refined

sensibilities of his social betters, but this alone does not exclude him from his share in the common property of the nation. In this sense the self-conscious “us” that excludes Lindau speaks from within, and yet is not fully representative of, “America” – it constructs an anonymous public which is self-consciously differentiated and particular. With this proclamation, however, March comes dangerously close to confirming Lindau’s claim that “*dere iss no Ameriga*” in the first place. A nervous faith in the universality of “American-ness” – some principle of inclusion that remains unspoken and which the novel defers – is all that separates the speaking “us” from the objective “him.” But this separation is essential. For without it, the socialist translator could never be figured as an objective character and placed in the foreground of the novel. And this inclusion could not be made to obscure the fact that the same vision of a national public which brings Lindau back into this sphere of common sympathy is in direct conflict with his own definition of social reality. The man who proclaimed that “*dere iss no Ameriga anymore*” is rescued from genteel censure by the claim that he is “as good an American as any of us.” Thus does the liberal realist imagination arrive on the urban scene, already working clean-up in a conflict whose terms are defined by political economies totally alien to its own self-consciousness. Its response is to sweep these terms “under the rug,” so to speak, recording them within a catalog of the socially “real” which only exists as an object for bourgeois reflection and consumption. In this way, realism attempts to speak the privileged “us” of the bourgeois public sphere while simultaneously claiming for itself a universal vision that transcends class conflict by assigning object status to the judgments of the other.

The troubled security that March reaches in these moments works from the same position of autocratic authority and contains the same sense of dread which characterized Riis’s narrative voice. Despite its clear anxiety about the future, this perspective nevertheless succeeds in

stabilizing a clear sense of the socially “real.” As we have seen, Riis rhetorically plants his feet upon this rhetorical ground and braces himself for a confrontation with urban municipal policy. But in *Hazard*, the realist editor is confronted with the limits of his ability to maintain this social reality. Liberalism may have been facing its biggest threats from the left in the Gilded Age, but the biggest challenge to March’s liberal-realist sensibility comes not from the leftist Lindau, but from Dryfoos, the capitalist financier of *Every Other Week*. At a party for the magazine’s staff at the Dryfoos home, the struggle between labor and capital explodes over March’s head when Lindau takes offence at his host’s casual dismissal of organized labor. And when March finds Dryfoos waiting in his office the next morning, calling angrily for the dismissal of the “red-mouthed labor agitator,” he is forced to concede that the terms of Lindau’s inclusion are not at all within his hands (*Hazard* 313). Instead of assuming the perspective of the privileged, transcendent “public subject,” March finds himself thrown back into the “us and them” politics of class warfare. As a consequence, the liberal vision of the realist editor finds itself abruptly pulled into the scene of conflict itself.

For March, the problem with Dryfoos is that he “wants to punish [Lindau] for his opinions” (*Hazard* 325). As many scholars have pointed out, March’s words here mirror Howells’s own mournful and bitter descriptions of what he termed the “civic murder” of the Haymarket Affair, a moment which marks, for some, “the transformation of Howells from conservative to radical” (Carter 183). Indeed, in a letter to his father, Howells assumes what he calls “the historical perspective,” declaring that the record will show that “this free Republic has killed five men for their opinions” (Kazin 59). Modeling March’s critique of the capitalist financier on his own political stance from only four years earlier, Howells, many have argued, translated his own growing frustration with Gilded Age politics into his novel with the realist

editor, March, as his mouthpiece. On this basis, Howells has been presented as a moral radical, struggling against Gilded Age capitalist excess. But this view of Howells's political achievements is contrary both to realism's sense of its own aesthetic mission and to the significant challenges posed by more recent critical perspectives. Kaplan, for instance, notes that "March's defense of Lindau against Dryfoos has the similarly paradoxical effect of silencing Lindau's disruptive voice" (58). True; this silencing is produced by the forms of misrecognition and re-labelling that are required to argue for his inclusion. To the editor, being "told to discharge a sensitive and cultivated man like Lindau as if he were a drunken mechanic" is a violation of the sanctity of both of their classed identities. In this case, March's defense of Lindau requires slotting him into a system of classed differences that he himself would surely object to, preferring identification with the laboring "mechanic." By incorporating Lindau into the category of the "sensitive and cultivated" (whereas before, his conduct and manners were in question), March paradoxically offers up the terms of genteel identity as a means of transcending vulgar class conflict, simultaneously refusing to face up to both the ramifications of Dryfoos's property relations and his ultimate "powerlessness" in the face of capital. Read this way, March's most generous impulses can be traced back to their roots in anxiety over the potential erosion of liberal ideology and the exposure of its capitalist base.

Whereas March offers bourgeois character as a transcendent norm for the assimilation of conflicting political ideologies, Dryfoos silences Lindau by rehearsing a stock narrative through which to exclude him from both class and nation. "He's one of those foreigners that come here from places where they've never had a decent meal's victuals in their lives," he tells March, "and as soon as they get their stomachs full they begin to make trouble between our people and their hands... Let 'em go back if they don't like it over here" (*Hazard* 313). Lindau's banishment

from the national body is accomplished by the imposition of a whole life narrative – the origin story and destiny of a sociological group which problematically severs the national body from its “hands,” interrupting what classic liberalist ideology describes as the harmonious, mutually dependent relationship of capital and labor. In this sense, Dryfoos’s version of the corporate national “body” is one that is founded on the principles and social relations of liberal political economy. March’s futile response to these accusations is that he doesn’t “know who you mean by *they*, generally speaking” (*Hazard* 313). In the face of Dryfoos’s exclusionary nationalism, March’s only move is to disavow the “us/him” dynamic which he had earlier clung to. He does so by questioning its reality, speaking as “generally” as possible and effectively arguing against its status as a difference which can be represented. In this sense, March’s attempt to assimilate Lindau into the category of the “sensitive and cultivated class” and his challenge to Dryfoos’s exclusionary nationalism work at cross purposes. The first offers the “red-mouthed agitator” shelter in the protective category of bourgeois representational politics. The last is an attempt to withhold Lindau from the field of representational difference altogether.

This analysis, once again, locates March’s inconsistent and contradictory defense of Lindau within the inconsistencies and contradictions of the late nineteenth century public sphere. In the conflict between Dryfoos and Lindau, Howells places his realist editor at the center of a crisis which is not fully accounted for as another straightforward instance of representational class warfare. Not that the problem itself “transcends” the social problematics of class – rather, transcending class is itself the zone of crisis. For one, March’s defense of Lindau is expressly not about claiming legitimacy for his ideas – we have already seen the rhetorical lengths which the realist editor will go to in order to simultaneously include his former mentor while effacing his more aggressive social arguments. Likewise here, his defense of Lindau is built on the argument

that while “we don’t print his opinions... he has a perfect right to hold them” (*Hazard* 325).

This particular defense is only possible because of a separation between the public sphere where opinions circulate as print and that realm of private individualism where the ownership of ideas is protected as a fundamental right. This complicated stance marks both March’s social compassion – his desire to directly challenge what he perceives as the enemies of democratic universalism – and his inability to transcend the relations of liberal capital which structure Dryfoos’s privilege and Lindau’s exclusion.

That Howells would position March as his moral spokesperson is no great surprise; the “editor’s chair” was a position from which he was used to taking stands. And it is in the editor’s office, and not the streets or the drawing room, that March mounts his resistance to Dryfoos and Fulkerson. In this sense, March’s outrage implies much more than the challenge to his liberal-democratic values. Rather, his frustration stems from the seemingly contradictory status of those values located in and against the structural reality of the public sphere. His frustration with Dryfoos has arguably more to do with how *he* has been figured in the conflict as “an agent” of capitalism against democratic inclusion. While he rails against the dismissal of the “sensitive and cultivated” Lindau, he is equally disturbed at being addressed as “the foreman of a shop” (*Hazard* 316). And when Fulkerson attempts to intervene in the matter by correctly noting that “Dryfoos owns the magazine,” March responds by insisting “He doesn’t own *me*.” In these instances, the realist editor draws up liberal lines of containment around the social relations constructed by industrial capital. He declines to imagine himself or his office anywhere near the scene of production – the shop, the sphere of private property – and struggles most with his position as a “hireling” who is called on to “submit to the dictation” of Dryfoos’s capital (*Hazard* 318). “Dictation” is, here, both the imposition of writing – the requirement to perform a voice

which is not one's own – and a form of authoritarian power. It is the “dictation-ship” built into the structure of the capitalist public sphere that March rejects, finding it to be incompatible with his vision of himself as an objective arbiter of public sensibility.

In mediating the conflict between capital and labor, the realist editor finds that it is impossible to attain a stable perspective that both contains and includes Dryfoos and Lindau in the same category of “the real” – a category which, in this case, seems virtually synonymous with “the representable.”⁸³ His moral response is to quit his post as the editor, opting out of the corporate-industrial relations that structure and found the liberal public sphere. But tellingly, March can only envision alternatives to this situation in a muted fantasy of economic individualism. As he returns home to reflect upon his arguments with Dryfoos and Fulkerson, the novel entertains a number of speculative outcomes. In the most optimistic of these, March and his wife imagine a future in which the realist editor emancipates himself, achieving economic freedom from corporate political relations.

They began to consider their ways and means, and how and where they should live, in view of March's severance of his relations with *Every Other Week*... they built a future in which they easily lived on that and on what March earned with his pen. He became a free lance and fought in whatever cause he thought just; he had no ties, no chains.

(*Hazard* 323).

⁸³ Importantly, the novel itself displays no such difficulties. While the realist editor struggles to include anti-nationalist rhetoric in his definition of America, and is ultimately powerless in the face of Dryfoos's controlling interests, the novel “extends representation” to the whole lot. Certainly the novel (like March himself) does its best to not “punish Lindau for his opinions” and assigns Dryfoos and his family a balanced and representative portion of the narrative. Whereas March struggles to reconcile his liberal-democratic values to the structural reality of the public sphere, his various promises are themselves alive in the novel itself. The realist novel attempts to provide at least one eminent example where literary representation could stand in for democratic representation or testimonial. In the next section, I will describe the failures of this project as it relates to the way the novel represents the writer.

Outside of the “chains” of Dryfoos’s dictation-ship and the alienation of voice, the fantasy of free-agency facilitates a return to more authentic relations with both the economy and his political individualism simultaneously. The pen provides for the needs of the family; freedom of contract ensures the authenticity of the voice to speak of “whatever cause he thought just.” While March’s refusal in these scenes announces a liberal condemnation of corporate capital, it also places the realist writer in the essentially defensive position that is the private individual.

This retreat into the private home facilitates, paradoxically, the only vantage point from which the “reality” of the public as a liberal sphere and the narrative of economic individualism can be imagined. On one hand, these fantasies must be understood as just that – a dream of the public sphere minus the foundational violence imposed by capitalist alienation. March is never given the opportunity to actually test the reality of this libratory future; Lindau arrives soon after, hauling the discursive materials and relations of the shop into the March home. Bitterly renouncing his position at *Every Other Week* and all of his wages, he leaves in a furious rant which “included Basil in the guilt of the man whom Lindau called his master” (*Hazard* 327). On this insistent need to locate Basil as capitalism’s slave, Dryfoos, Fulkerson, and Lindau all agree – the corporate relations which found the magazine cannot be so easily disavowed. Lindau’s bitter recriminations once again deprive March of his privileged self-conception as the independent arbiter of liberal-democratic inclusion. In the meantime, he withdraws from the *Every Other Week* workforce and actually returns the total sum of his pay, exiting both the scene of production and the scene of the novel simultaneously. As the work at the magazine settles back into a routine, the issue of March’s corporate “master” also disappears from the narrative; while the problems posed about March’s position remain completely unresolved, they are also in

no immediate need of resolution. Lindau walks out the door and is decisively forgotten when, moments later under Basil's urging, the Marches depart impulsively for the theater.

On the other hand, the articulation of the private individual as the only secure foundation for a democratic, public-oriented subjectivity has more than a speculative existence in the novel. In this fantasy, the Marches fall back on the figure of the "free lance" writer who is imagined as transcending the editor as the arbiter of liberal reality. From their musings in this scene, you would think that the position of the realist writer represented a previously un-explored series of libratory possibilities. But the fantasy of the writer as emancipated figure serves to obscure the actual failures of writing that haunt the novel (and Basil March, in particular) up to and beyond this critical moment in the narrative. In fact, the freedom of the realist writer is a freedom that is bestowed upon March as one of the earliest conditions of his employment at the magazine. When Basil expresses doubt at his own literary ability in the very first conversation of the novel, Fulkerson responds by saying, "I don't care if you never write a line for the thing, though you needn't reject anything of yours, if it happens to be good, on that account" (*Hazard* 6). Effectively acting as his own editor, March is free to write as he chooses, and like so many of his contemporaries, his first impulse is to exercise this freedom by representing the diverse, chaotic and messy street scenes of his new home. To trace this narrative of private personhood and free vision, we must return to the beginning of the novel. As the Marches' "fantasy" of freedom from capitalist relations illustrates, the desire for the writer and the desire for the recognition of the irreducible freedom inherent in private personhood are interestingly conjoined in the novel. To trace their twin development in the story of the March's New York move is to encounter the lived contradictions of class identity and public sensibility that are embodied in the concept of the democratic public sphere.

The Realist Writer and the Problem of Public Vision

If *The Hazard of New Fortunes* constitutes the liberal capitalist public sphere as too already structured by private interests to be a stable staging ground for “the real,” it is simultaneously ambivalent about attempts to construct a public sensibility from the vantage point of the private individual. While the former critique enters the narrative as a consequence of March’s employment as the editor of *Every Other Week* and his subsequent corporate relations with capital and labor, the latter is articulated in his role as a family man and, especially, as a freelance realist writer attempting to capture the flux and flow of New York City. In fact, looking at March’s struggle to attain a properly “real” vision of the city in these terms illustrates exactly how the basic commitments of Howellsian realist aesthetics operate, above all, in the name of a kind of democratic faith in this private, liberal individualism. While almost all of Howells’s critics have accused him of “retreating” into bourgeois domesticity in his urban fictions, I would argue that this retreat marks an attempt to return to the classic liberal foundations of realism and abstract public subjectivity alike. Figured as the only authentic position from which citizens could construct an unmarked perspective on public problems, the private individual’s attempts to construct this perspective are synonymous with the realist author’s attempts to write the city. But like the unnamed “friend” of “The Midnight Platoon,” March struggles to find a rubric with which to narrate the New York street scene. His goal is to construct it as meaningful in a way that is free of particular interest of any type. These efforts permeate the novel yet are never fully realized and, in this sense, *The Hazard of New Fortunes* is a realist novel about New York which attempts to record the failure of realist writing about New York. Like the quote from Howells which initiated this chapter, the novel confidently asserts the reality of a city whose very existence as a social-political object of contemplation is in some way

unrepresentable. Here, we can see the stakes of “the real” – how it is conjured up in order to structure the very possibility of a liberal democratic, urban public sphere.

Competing conceptions of the city as a nationalist consumer public or as a tightening web of unequal property relations are not the only rumors which attempt to “map” the city in the early parts of the novel. They are not the only perspectives on the city which precede the realist author’s authentic engagement with it, nor do they corner the market on public discourses of urban space. Basil March’s wife, Isabel, who initially objects to the idea of relocating from Boston to New York, offers yet another competing idea of the city as “so big, and so hideous” as to defy any sense of common identity or possession.

“I could go west with you, or into a new country – anywhere; but New York terrifies me. I don’t like New York; I never did; it disheartens and distracts me; I can’t find myself in it; I shouldn’t know how to shop. I know I’m foolish and narrow and provincial,’ she went on; ‘but I could never have any inner quiet in New York: couldn’t live in the spirit there. I suppose people do. It can’t be that all those millions –”

“Oh, not so bad as that!” March interposed, laughing. “There aren’t quite two.”

“I thought there were four or five. Well, no matter. You see what I am, Basil. I’m terribly limited. I couldn’t make my sympathies go round two million people; I should be wretched. (*Hazard 22*)

While a larger geographical imagination subtends Mrs. March’s rejection of New York, it is not motivated by problems of scale or border in any conventional sense. Isabel’s panic over the move is contrasted to her apparent willingness to “find” herself in either the newly integrated “west” or “a new country” altogether. In the exposition directly before this quote, the Marches are described as a “very cultivated,” cosmopolitan couple, certainly more “worldly” and well

travelled than “the simpler folk around them” (*Hazard* 21). Their exposure to continental tastes, as the narrator explains, allows them to feel a sense of “distinction” which elevates them above their more “provincial” neighbors in Boston. Though he cannot “help contrasting his life and its inner elegance with that of other men,” March is careful to avoid arrogance in the name of his “democratic instincts” and the “sympathetic” principles which they both attempt to bestow upon their children, teaching them “to loath all manner of social cruelty” (*Hazard* 22). Here the Marches’s travel experience is recognized as a form of cultural capital, a difference or distinction which is mediated (and effaced) by a more liberal impulse. Whereas the contrast between the “provincial” and the “cultivated” seems to speak insistently of meaningful, legible class differences, it also nurtures “the democratic instinct” which moderates the effects of those same differences through the leveling embrace of sympathy. In this sense, the cultivation of a distinction offers the distinguished a means to disavow their distinctions. Thus, the problem of population that Mrs. March finds in this passage (“all those millions”) is not a straightforward problem of quantity, scale, or foreignness, but of the question of her ability to treat them as objects of a sentimental forgetting that is essential to her own conception of bourgeois democracy.

For Isabel, New York threatens to escape the enclosure of her “sympathies” which, in turn, makes it difficult for her to imagine the city as a place for the construction of a reform-era, middle-class, liberal identity. Her ability to “find” herself within it is intimately connected to both her status as a consumer (“I shouldn’t know how to shop”) and, as we have just seen, her assumed role as the bourgeois, cosmopolitan center of an expanding sphere of “sympathy” whose goal it is to level differences in the name of democracy. While the language that Isabel utilizes here is incessantly “private” or interiorized in nature – she speaks of consumption

practices and “inner quiet” – it is also clear that these terms refer always to a kind of public identification, where to “live in” the city is to be able to experience it as a “spirit” or metaphysical unity. Identifying herself as “too narrow and provincial” to be able to reconcile herself to any such unity that the city might offer, Isabel initially balks at the proposed move. On the strength of these objections, March assures her that he will not “take [her] from the only safe place on the planet, and plunge [her] into the most perilous” (*Hazard* 24). Here, the problem of sympathy becomes one of locating “safe” and “perilous” places for an American middle-class identity with contradictory investments. The city’s status as a “safe” space is dependent upon its ability to present itself as a stage for both the symbolic, differentializing language of cultural capital and for the cultivation of democratizing liberal sentiments. In other words, Isabel’s opening conception of the city serves to mark the failures of the sentimental public sphere.

As Glenn Hendler has argued in his work on nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, “sympathy” and “sentimentality,” rather than being purely “private,” individual responses (largely associated with the feminine sphere), must be understood in the context of a very public need to cultivate “a moral and proper repertoire of feelings, a sensibility.”⁸⁴ The sentimental novel, therefore, operated in its historical moment as a political agent to the extent that “sympathy” could be harnessed in the name of various socially positive forms of “identification.” But these forms of identification required careful management, specifically in the way that they structured the relationship between a sympathetic observer and the suffering object of that sympathy. On the one hand, readers are invited to experience an “analogically” similar experience to the object of their sympathy, “in a way that maintains a degree of difference between subject and object.” But to the extent that sympathy demands that the observer “feel

⁸⁴ Glenn Hendler. *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth Century American Literature*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of NC Press, 2001) p. 2. All subsequent references to Hendler are to this edition and will be cited in-text.

with” the object and even submerge his identity within an image of their suffering, sentimental representational politics “threatens to negate their individuality by confusing the *analogy* it posits between subjects with a fictional and dangerous *coincidence* between them. The mediation between a distanced observer and the sufferer is always at risk of collapsing” (Hendler 5). Sentimental politics therefore relies on a “fantasy of experiential equivalence” whose response to difference is often simply “to negate or suppress it” (Hendler 7-8).

The sentimental novel (and the politics of sympathy more generally) can therefore be understood as “an institution of the public sphere” and “an instrument of subject formation, producing, through acts of identification, a publicly oriented form of subjectivity” (Hendler 22). Hendler draws these conclusions by binding together the “fantasy of experiential equivalence” with what Warner has identified as the liberal “fantasy of publicity” and self-abstraction. In this sense,

only those with certain attributes – in the American context these have included whiteness, maleness, property ownership, and native birth – could perform the abstraction or “disincorporation” essential to the validation of their public discourse; thus self-abstraction is in actual practice linked to specific traits even as it disavows the public relevance of particularity... Just as the experience of sympathy depended upon a fantasy that differences could be effaced by defining human identity affectively, publicity depended on a fictional erasure of status attributes. (Hendler 18-19)

Howells’s realism is, of course, most adamant and self-assured in its project when defining itself against the sentimental and romanticist traditions which preceded it. Walter Benn Michaels, drawing off of Howells’s own words, characterizes the central project of realism as an attempt to “replace the monstrously disproportionate role played in the sentimental novel by love with a

more balanced vision of ‘human feelings in their true proportion and relation.’”⁸⁵ In *Hazard*, Basil and Isabel’s search for a “safe place” in the city calls upon them to do just that. Similarly, March will do so by “attempting to assemble” the materials of the city in preparation for a series of sketches – the good realist writer, his aesthetic goal is to construct a perspective which is not mediated by sentimental politics. An essential step in this project, the realist campaign against sentimentalism begins with the reinstatement of the subject/object relation.

But for March, this relation is not, as we will see, a simple recourse back to the dynamic of the bourgeois spectator-subject and the object of poverty. Rather, realism’s aesthetic project begins by staging a series of confrontations with the “seeing/being seen” dynamics of the sentimental public sphere. When Conrad Dryfoos (older Dryfoos’s young Protestant reformer son) mentions March’s sketches at a social gathering, he displays a modest enthusiasm for them, speaking excitedly of the notes and ideas that he has been assembling in his free time. But their conversation quickly reveals a series of competing interests in the project. March’s enthusiasm is motivated by his belief that he “can get something quite attractive out of it,” a belief which is supplemented by Fulkerson’s insistence that there is “no subject so fascinating to the general average of people throughout the country as life in New York” (*Hazard* 131-2). To this end, he proposes to capture the “picturesque” quality of the city “low life” alongside the “contrasts of luxury for the sake of the full effect.” But Conrad has different goals in mind:

If you can make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable people live, it will be a very good thing, Mr. March. Sometimes it seems to me that the only trouble is that we don’t know one another well enough; and that the first thing is to do this. (*Hazard* 132)

⁸⁵ Walter Benn Michaels. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1987) p. 38

While Conrad gestures at a private understanding – a kind of intimacy that would be the staging ground for social change – March speaks only of the consumption habits of “the general average” of the populace. And while March refers to both “low life” and “luxury” as carefully balanced elements in an aesthetic calculus, Conrad’s “we” indicates that he locates both himself and March within that equation. In this sense, Conrad’s reformer consciousness posits the possibility of a more inclusive, more unified community based on sentimental “knowing” while March, the realist writer, proposes a more unified aesthetic based on the “contrasts” that a stable class structure can provide.

At the same time, the realist imagination effectively exposes and rejects the class politics of sentimental spectatorship. Conrad’s sentimental “knowing” has a directionality to it. His suggestion that it is the “comfortable people” could benefit from seeing how the other half lives implicitly acknowledges a specific classed audience who, in this social imagination, seem to remain safely anonymous in their covered coaches as passive, sentimental consumers and strangers to the problems of the “other half” – the subjects of the urban gaze and the recipients of its particular education. March’s response is to quietly insist that a “full effect” can only be achieved by bringing these spectators into the representational balance itself. On this note, he quietly criticizes the privilege which structures the sentimental representational apparatus and acts to bar his own realist vision from achieving this “effect.” After all, “you can’t penetrate to the dinner party of a millionaire under the wing of a detective as you could to a carouse in Mulberry Street, or to his children’s nursery with a philanthropist as you can to a street boy’s lodging house” (*Hazard* 132). The poor are an eminently available subject for representation in public, while the owning class is protected under the shield of bourgeois privacy. Here, the “safe place” of private personhood is a class privilege and a barrier; the “full effect” of the realist

scene can only be achieved through an act of penetration comparable to the invasive nature of the detective's investigation or the reformer's inspection. In other words, the "safe places" for sentimental bourgeois personhood in the city operate, as such, by removing class difference, as a whole, from the scene of urban representation. In this sense, the search for the "full effect" continues to keep the realist writer at a critical distance from the scene of class conflict (he is evidently identified with neither the "low life" nor the "millionaire" and cannot be as limited in his vision as the agents of state power or bourgeois morality). Momentarily disavowing his own investment in this "safe place," the realist writer also refuses to reconstruct the privileged spectator logic of sentimental publicity by implicitly assigning a classed character and private interest to his larger "public" readership, relying instead upon a statistical "average" and deferring positive identity markers.

A little later, March will "confess" that he "was a little ashamed... for having looked at the matter so entirely from the aesthetic point of view" (*Hazard* 133). But in his own defense, he offers a version of the literary realist maxim that "to work at those things with an ethical intention explicitly in mind... should spoil them." While ethical intent and the politics of sympathy must be kept at an arms-length from the realist representational project, they are not wholly alien to the writer's social consciousness. Rather, the realist is called upon to process and contain these sentiments within the realm of the private and carefully distinguish between personal and public visual rubrics. Earlier, in their tour of vacant flats and apartments, Basil and Isabel are exposed to "a poverty as hopeless as any in the world" from the perspective of their (what else?) covered coupe. In this moment, the novel remembers a time when the Marches would have "contented themselves with saying that it was as picturesque as a street in Naples or Florence" (*Hazard* 55). This cosmopolitan perspective would have figured the urban scene to a

consumable spectacle while quietly gesturing at the cultural distinctions of the well-travelled viewers. But instead of settling into a distinguished “contentment” in urban flaneur spectatorship, the Marches are compelled to question the motives of their guide – the unseen hand which directs their vision in the first place. As Basil speculates,

This driver may be a philanthropist in disguise... and may want us to think about the people who are not merely carried through this street in a coupe, but have to spend their whole lives in it, winter and summer, with no hopes of driving out of it, except in a hearse... And I wonder what they think of us, making this gorgeous progress through their midst? I suppose they think we're rich, and hate us – if they hate rich people; they don't look as if they hated anybody (*Hazard* 55).

The unseen driver must be represented if the “full effect” is to be maintained, yet can only be speculated upon. Consequently, these (familiar) musings take place purely in the context of private reflections; when Isabel remarks that he should “get Mr. Fulkerson to let [him] work up some of these New York sights” for the magazine, March argues that, to do so, would be to “leave the personal ground.” On this “personal ground,” March can admit that the urban street scene compels one to “think about how particular you are” – a series of self-reflections that he jokingly attributes to his “humane sentiments” (*Hazard* 56). These sentiments prompt (in Hendler’s terms) a “fantasy of equivalence” which prompts the Marches to imagine giving all their money to the poor. Their realization that this charity would fail to actually effect meaningful change in the face of structural inequality marks a rational rejection of this sentimental identification – the poor are actually better off maintaining an “unbroken intimacy with the wolf.” March’s “humane sentiments” are presented as a failed social imagination which cannot be realistically achieved by imaginatively dissolving the differences between the

spectator and the suffering object. But abandoning sentimentalism's "fantasy of equivalence" seems to simultaneously entail marking one's own particularity as insurmountable difference. In this version of the real, the question of whether or not the poor "hate rich people" necessarily precedes the question of whether poverty can be solved.

But the stakes of "the real" are framed, not just to resolve the class privilege buried in sentimental identifications, but to call up the very possibility of a bourgeois "safe place" in the wake of sentimentality's failure. Confronted with the reality of New York during their house hunt, Isabel is forced to abandon her sentimental liberalism in favor of an ostensibly more realistic point of view. Her strategies for putting "human feelings in their true proportion" are both an attempt to locate a new "safe place" for bourgeois identity and simultaneously an attempt to reimagine its basic democratic impulses – both of which, prior to their arrival, were defined by a "sphere of sympathy." In this sense, it is Isabel who first articulates the project of realism. In these moments the ethical and socio-philosophical stakes of "reality" become abundantly clear. Overwhelmed by their search for a New York flat which will fit to their "sad knowledge of the line" between "respectability and shabbiness," Isabel charges her husband with the responsibility of realist objectivity. As Kaplan suggests, this realism is necessary in order that they might establish their private life within the New York scene – a domestic space in which to escape the destabilizing pressures of the street.⁸⁶ In this scene, her conception of "the real" is built on the foundation that this line provides.

⁸⁶ This concept of the line was mobilized in a variety of urban social arguments, and contains a contradiction similar to the one we encounter in Basil and Conrad's disagreement. Riis's introduction, for instance, declares that "the boundary line of the Other Half lies through the tenements," anchoring his object of analysis to this imagination. While this line allows Riis to make an argument about conditions which seemingly sidesteps the limitations of bourgeois morality, it also locates this ostensibly more central "half" of society in the obscurity afforded by his abstract narration. As Kaplan has suggested, the knowledge of this line "does more than passively distance the Marches from the tumultuous city streets; it aggressively composes the fragments of urban life into a

“I’m beginning to *feel* crazy. But I don’t want *you* to lose your head, Basil. And I don’t want you to sentimentalize any of the things you see in New York. I think you were disposed to do it in that street we drove through. I don’t believe there’s any real suffering – not *real* suffering – among those people; that is, it would be *suffering* from our point of view, but they’ve been used to it all their lives, and they don’t feel their discomfort so much.” (*Hazard* 58)

The question of urban suffering is, here, completely subsumed under the logics of “the line,” allowing Isabel to posit a fundamental, un-traversable difference between “our point of view” and theirs. By building her ethical mapping of the city on the assumption of an impenetrable distinction between the urban classes, Isabel is able to dismiss the reality of “suffering” on the basis of its roots in sentimentality and a false sense of equivalence. What the bourgeois subject experiences as suffering or discomfort is “life” for their underclass counterpart – “*real* suffering” is reserved for those who experience it as an exception. But beyond Isabel’s privileging of the bourgeois “point of view,” her thesis proposes that suffering, only “real” at the level of perspective, is simply not a stable base upon which private individuals might form an unmarked relation to the public world; as a principle, it is not granted the ability to transcend class-based differences. A social perspective based on suffering cannot be realist as long as the definition of “the real” is coextensive with the “full effect” of contrasting class differences.

In these scenes, the cultivation of the realist writer’s sensibilities and the preservation of a distinctively bourgeois, urban social consciousness are both evident in the confrontation with a sentimental politics of “identification” and “equivalence.” In abandoning sentimentalism’s affective definition of identity, realism instead cultivates a definition of reality which is founded

spectacle for observation.” In either case, the concept of the line is most important for how it organizes classed vision.

on differences which cannot be responsibly ignored. It is, in this sense, confined to the social imagination that these differences structure, even as it quietly insists on positing a position above them. In Riis's narrative, this stalemate is resolved by the recourse to the unmarked voice of the narrator, who steps in intrusively to assure the reader that the difference between the occupants of the coupe and the sufferers on the street can be transcended by a social conscience unmarked by private interest – a transcendence that, in practice, only universalizes the private interests of those that ride comfortably away in their coaches. On its surface, however, it expresses a desire to act as a third party to these disputes, remaining unidentified with any particular interest, while belonging to the unified whole that designates public interest. But *Hazard* seems to retreat from even this possibility, lacking a voice which might be able to (realistically) assume this privileged, transcendent position. We remain inside the coupe, overtly aware of the impossibility of adopting these reflections as a public ideal; importantly, Howells's characters seem to recognize the problematics inherent in Isabel's ideas about suffering. Basil responds to his wife's concept of the "real" by lampooning her ideas with a characteristic irony – what Philip Barrish has described as March's self-satirical "taste for contingency" (43). Insisting that he doesn't "propose to sentimentalize" the social conditions of New York, he laughingly agrees that "when people get used to a bad state of things they had better stick to it" (*Hazard* 58). In this sense, March's ability to turn the conversation into a personal joke between the two of them seems to suggest that he is aware that Isabel's thesis on "real suffering" is also built on the shaky foundation of their own private perspective. But it simultaneously marks his inability to establish a point of view that transcends that "personal ground." In this sense, the March's perspective in this scene never achieves that unmarked "full effect" which Basil will offer as the realist mission statement.

Because of this, March is quite aware that these comments, offered within the sheltering context of “personal ground,” are not fit for circulation in public via *Every Other Week*. For Barrish, these moments of self-satire are best understood as exemplifying yet another mark of class distinction – “realist taste as a way for *some* middle- and upper-class readers to claim cultural superiority over *other* middle- and upper-class readers” (17). The cultivation of this distinctive reading practice (which is, above all, takes the city as its text of choice) “exemplifies the failings” of sentimental liberalism while illustrating how realist liberalism ultimately justifies its own inaction by associating “the real” with bourgeois common-sense. In Barrish’s argument, this distinction involves March’s ability to recognize the “reality” of the city: private individuals are not in a position to effect change, no matter how “contingent” structures and institutions of inequality may be made to look. But while an anxiety about how to properly “see” urban poverty steps up to the foreground of rational debate (a debate which self-consciously defines “the real” with logical arguments), a larger anxiety about the underlying origins of that reality is barely detectable in the background. It can be felt, above all, in Basil’s nervous question as to whether their driver is a reformer “in disguise” and in the way he seeks to contain their conversation on “personal ground.” While the use of an ironic, self-conscious voice becomes yet another mark of class distinction, these self-serving conversations can be reconciled with liberal values to the extent that they can be separated from the kind of transcendent discourse that would identify them as “public” speech. In this, the realist writer paints himself into a corner, preserving the democratic sanctity of the public sphere by assuring that no one is qualified to speak as a representative of it. The very possibility of an urban-realist public sphere wanes as it becomes more and more difficult to transcend “personal ground.”

As such, the possibility of realist writing is continually deferred and foreclosed throughout the course of the novel. Importantly, Basil's proposed urban sketches never materialize beyond a purely speculative stage; they remain notes jotted in his journals and ideas stored up in his head. On multiple occasions, when pressed, he admits that his inability to assume a proper perspective is what causes him to hesitate over the project. To Fulkerson, he insists that "merely superficial sketches" will never do and that he first must find a means with which "to philosophize the material" in order to do it justice (*Hazard* 160). But this imperative returns with interesting implications in the events which lead up to March's presence in a striker's riot and the deaths of both Lindau and Conrad Dryfoos. Howells presents the public transit strike as the novel's climactic urban spectacle and, characteristically, it first enters into the narrative indirectly through writing and "a good deal of talk" (*Hazard* 369). In the literary offices of *Every Other Week*, newspapers bring the spectacle to the table and define its discursive boundaries. Fulkerson's inability to comment on the failure of the State Board's attempts at arbitration between "the roads" and the strikers, for instance, is structured by the onslaught of print media; "he did not know what to say, perhaps because the extras did not" (*Hazard* 370). March, for his part, mourns the fact that "the public has no rights" in this "private war in our midst." But when asked if he had personally witnessed the strike, March responds that he "can philosophize the situation about as well from the papers," also mentioning a pledge he had made to Mrs. March "not to go near any sort of crowd" (*Hazard* 371). The "safe space" of bourgeois domesticity is seemingly synonymous with his "philosophical" perspective. And this "philosophical" position places him at a remove from the crowd in both a literal and a figurative sense; it keeps him off the street and allows him to remain identified with an unnamed "public"

that plays the invisible and disinterested third party to the “private war” between business and labor interests.

But despite his promise to his wife, and his insistence that his ability to “philosophize” does not require his presence (in either a literal or metaphysical sense), March is unable to stay off the streets. Motivated by the strike’s “importance as a great social convulsion” and careful to maintain a “safe distance” from any potential violence he encounters, he is struck by the “indifference of the city” and the “very quiet, decent-looking people” who constitute the crowd of strikers. Their “decent” appearance causes him to doubt the various newspaper accounts of “riotous outbreaks in other parts of the city” (*Hazard* 374). The only evidence of potential trouble comes in the form of a surly policeman who recalls, for March,

the fine sense of ferocity which he had read of the French troops putting on towards the populace just before the *coup d’etat*; he began to feel like populace, but he struggled with himself and regained his character of philosophical observer. (*Hazard* 374)

The street is destabilizing to March’s liberal realist reading practice in a number of ways. The reality of the strikers as “decent” (ostensibly against their characterization in popular media as urban threat, bearing bat and club) undermines the public narrative of the strike as mediated urban spectacle and instead evokes associations with liberal political revolution. This new perspective recomposes the terms of identification, undermines his own unmarked public sensibility, and threatens to carry him off within the statistical figure of “populace.” To “feel like populace” is, thus, in opposition to his role as a “philosophical observer.” Whereas to be a philosophical observer is to assume an unparticularized position of reason, abstractedly distinct from any articulated private interest, to “feel like populace” places one firmly within the crowd, momentarily imaginable as the proper seat of liberal political sovereignty.

It is at this moment that the novel, famously, reaches the limits of its own “will to legibility.” Just as March overcomes his desire to identify with “the populace” (foreclosing the fleeting revolutionary identification which is defined as the opposite of the realist political project), the car comes to an abrupt stop, throwing him from his seat and signaling the end of the chapter concurrently. The abrupt stop (which, as we will learn, signals March’s only real encounter with the violence of the street protest) does its own violence to the narrative time of the novel. Interestingly, his own insistence that he has finally managed, through private internal struggle, to achieve a properly realist perspective, also announces his forced withdrawal from the narrative itself. Rather, the next chapter jumps back in time to the Dryfoos family drawing room and starts the whole story over again, this time to narrate the sentimentalist Conrad’s journey to the same disaster. This narrative rupture not only generates suspense around one of the novel’s most climactic moments; it marks, simultaneously, the limits of vision for the realist novel and the realist public sphere in general. And it is too simple to suggest that the violence itself is what causes the novel to timidly veer away from the riot. For the next chapter suggests that the strike’s violence has found its own expression in the bourgeois drawing room, where old Dryfoos (characterized, as always, by a passionate, classic liberal dogmatism) viciously strikes his own son over his sentimental identification with labor struggles and his “pity” for the workers. This conflict drives Conrad out into the street where he will meet his own end; the conflict with his father (as well as a brief exchange with fellow sentimentalist and romantic interest, Margaret Vance) suggests that Conrad’s sentimental politics are, themselves, driven by a series of personal motivations, all of which embolden him and propel him into the center of the conflict. While these elements of his story disqualify him from the “philosophical” outlook which March achieves and beg for containment in the category of “personal ground” which

March used to qualify his own investments, they, nevertheless, provide one crucial element that was missing from March's interrupted narrative track. They plant Conrad firmly *within* the scene of conflict, identify him with the struggle, give him a reason to be there, and, ultimately, allow for him to be represented in the street alongside the strikers. They give the realist novel a figure to represent – as opposed to the figure of public vision which cannot be represented if it is to maintain its transcendent function. In this sense, March is momentarily abandoned by the narrative in order to briefly cede his role as “philosophical observer” to the novel itself. In the end, the private interests which make it possible to narrate Conrad's perspective in a realist mode are exactly what drive him to his death at the hands of a police bullet. Importantly, March reenters the narrative at precisely this moment, having emerged from the streetcar which was halted in the face of the mob violence. The realist writer can only be represented again in immediate wake of the disaster, drawn to the conflict by an unnamed “something stronger than his will” and just in time to report the death of the sentimental reformer.

This reading of the realist writer is intended, above all, to present a picture of Howells's novel struggling to answer to its own twin representational investments – contradictory investments which are the borrowed property of the figure of the liberal public individual. The novel displays a supreme confidence in this public vision, even as it betrays its own aesthetic values in order to maintain its possibility. The realist writer *must* be represented as a failure if the transcendent voice of the public sphere that it claims to enact is to remain wholly outside and above the various social conflicts of the novel – conflicts which must be represented as a threat *to* this sphere and not *within* it. And in this sense, the need to preserve this ideological structure not only accounts for March's ambivalence towards his own public vision; it also explains the realist novel's ambivalent relationship to its own foundational formal tenets. In the novel's

narrative ruptures, we can see how the realist goal of objectively representing the “full effect” of class differences (and, thus, the realization of its inclusive vision of the public) is, paradoxically, only made possible by ostensibly withholding “the public” itself from representation.

Strange Publics and the Problem of “Real” Characters

As the imperative to produce social legibility in its “full effect” informs a vision of an internally-conflicted society of private interest, it becomes more and more difficult to imagine the “public” which can be figured as the disinterested mediator and innocent victim of these conflicts; a truly democratic public must be kept further and further outside of the scene of representation if it is to survive realism’s will to legibility. With *Hazard*, I have attempted to offer a deconstructive reading which reorganizes the novel around this contradiction in realist representation. In attempting to resolve the escalating series of conflicts which emerge from this contradiction, the story criss-crosses back over itself. The story of capitalism’s controlling interest in the mass media public sphere motivates and is concurrent to the story of the private individual struggling to transcend his own relation to private interest. One is the story of March’s relation to his workplace and his role as a realist editor, the other is about his relationship to his home and his status as a freelance realist writer. The unmarked figure of individual, rational autonomy whose ability to make contracts signals his free, unmediated entrance into the bourgeois public sphere is presented as a fantasy. Instead, we witness the development of a double-narrative about the private individual mustering all of the ideological resources at his disposal in order to reconcile his *own* existence to a democratic norm. This struggle might be properly understood as realism’s attempt to reconcile its belief in the democratizing efforts of representation (which must reach for a “full effect” of contrasting differences in order to remain equitable in its vision) with the political relations which govern its

exercise (the need for this “full effect” to be legitimated by a liberal subjectivity unmarked by particular interest).

Here, we return to the problems of “representativeness” that opened this chapter – the simultaneous desire for and anxiety over the “representativity” of the urban scene. The desire to “see and not be seen.” This vexed desire, structured by the requirements of the bourgeois public sphere, produces strangers: “outsiders” who must be represented in realism’s vision of the community “as a whole” and excluded on the basis of their inability to transcend “private interest” and speak as representative of that community. As these outsiders accumulate to include even the realist writer at times, the possibilities for the “unknown” stranger and the “unmarked” public sphere are both severely curtailed. In this sense, the possibilities for a representative liberal public subjectivity wanes as more outsiders are made legible and knowable by realism’s rubric of character. But this same rubric of character produces “unknown” strangers as well. And if the need to “see and not be seen” constitutes and motivates a liberal-realist politics of representation, then the appearance of the unknown stranger signals the political unconsciousness of the novel – a story so submerged within the narrative as to be barely perceptible. My last task is to trace this stranger’s story through *The Hazard of New Fortunes*. Appearing at two strategic moments in the text, these “sightings” disrupt the coherence of the realist narrative and its representative logics, in order to reconfirm the possibility of the liberal public.

The first occurs on the streets. Immediately after delivering her idea about “real suffering” (thus, introducing a realist social perspective into the novel) Isabel is startled by the sudden appearance of a “decently dressed person” scavenging for food in garbage heaps on the road. Descriptions of the man insist numerous times upon his “decent” appearance, while also

noting the signs of his class – “the hard hands and broken nails of a workman” (*Hazard* 59). He speaks French, bringing the March’s cosmopolitan distinction into close contact with the air of foreign-difference which adheres to the working class. The “decent-looking” tramp’s distinguishing marks have a tendency to bleed into marks of distinction and thus straddle class boundaries, speaking directly to the contingency of class identities. The category crisis which his appearance suggests marks him as a stranger to Isabel’s realist sensibilities and seems to negate her earlier ideas about the essential unreality of suffering. March, for his part, is so convinced of the man’s need that he steps into the tableau and offers cash which the man takes with an almost painful gratitude. Having made “his benefactor... shocked and ashamed,” he takes the coin and lapses “back into the mystery of misery out of which he had emerged” (59). While recognizing the suffering of another, March’s reaction to poverty remains firmly rooted in the reality of their difference. His shame and embarrassment (similar to the discomfort of “Midnight Platoon’s” narrator) certainly displays an awareness of his different position relative to this figure of poverty who steps out of the scene as much a “mystery” as he entered. In this sense, March’s sympathy for the stranger does not “negate difference” through a politics of identification, nor does it attempt to level it via any rubric of nation. Rather, the stranger testifies to the representational unreality of class identity categories even as he insists upon the absolute and simultaneous reality of both suffering and socio-economic difference.

This moment represents a point of trauma for the Marches’s political consciousness (a trauma which will have its own uncanny return later in the novel). For Isabel, it is the “possibility of his needing the help that badly” which is most horrifying to her bourgeois liberal sensibility. Foregrounding the concrete reality of class difference and the essential unreality of class identity, the appearance of the stranger serves a greater function in the narrative than to

simply reassure us of the Marches's capacity for sympathy. When the episode with the decent-looking stranger prompts Isabel to abandon their search for a "safe place" in New York, Basil asks her where she will go since "such things are possible everywhere" (*Hazard* 60). And when she proposes impulsively that they "must change the conditions," he suggests that they instead "go to the theatre and forget them," retreating all the way back into the "safe place" of consumer citizenship where, we are given to assume, spectatorship is not so complicated a relation. The effect of the stranger is to break the couple out of their self-constructed containment by forcing them to take their eyes off of "the real" – here, already hedged in by its origin in liberal realist ideology – and turn instead to the much more fluid question of "the possible." For if, as was suggested only pages before, there is no "real suffering" because of the relative character of class experience, then the "possibility of his need" construes this reality as contingent and founded on "conditions" that, as March notes, are universal. But this political consciousness proves impossible to sustain; as March insists, the only thing to do with this information is to forget it. But what exactly begs to be forgotten here? What exactly is so unsustainable about this particular remembering? Barrish suggests that Basil's paternalistic response to his wife's concern in this scene is not only indicative of his misogyny, but a retreat from the inevitable panic over the social contingency of this position (20). But I would argue that this contingency is most disruptive in the materialist form of universality that it seems to construct. The "conditions" which produce the "decent" beggar's need are "everywhere"; the search for a "safe place" outside of these conditions is as futile as attempts to deny the reality of their effects. Rather than a concept of "real suffering" that can be privatized, designated as the property of a particular class and made into a geography of the other half, an encounter with the stranger summons up a public consciousness which locates the Marches within the scene yet again, and

which does not attempt to essentialize and transcend differences as much as ground itself in the conditions which produced them.

Put another way, we might say that March's ironic redirection here represents an attempt to "forget" that the "full effect" of his realist vision not only ended up challenging the classed terms with which that effect was designated "full" in the first place, but also that the universality that is achieved in that moment is actually counter those that are legitimated by liberal discourse. For a brief moment, the Marches are brought face to face with a political consciousness generated by questions of historical, material "possibility" as opposed to the ability of private individuals to achieve abstract citizen personhood. Their search for a "safe place" is motivated by the need to establish a sphere of private containment in which to cultivate a properly universal public sentiment – the transcendent vision of the bourgeois public sphere is, ironically, only made possible by a confirmation of the essential reality of difference. And while the rejection of sentimentality is plainly necessitated by the bourgeois need for a "safe place" in which to cultivate their opinions free of the influences of both capital and labor, a realist mode of reading the city does not find a place to stand outside of capitalist social relations. The concept of the theater, on the other hand, offers exactly the kind of sanitary, unproblematic spectatorship necessary to achieve this effect. At the same time, the forms of stranger public consciousness produced in this contradiction, by contrast, seem to discount the possibility of an unmarked perspective on the world at the same time that they seem to operate without its blessing. Faced with the dual investments of liberal realism – the need to achieve a "full effect" by containing all classed differences and conflicts within its frame, tied to the requirement to assume a perspective outside of the play of differences – the couple can only flee the scene. But it is not just the "contingency" of the social world which prompts the Marches's retreat. Rather, it is the idea that

that contingency could provide an alternative conceptual foundation for a more radical public sensibility.

As much as these imaginations might be theoretically expanded upon, what is most important to recognize is that they are, immediately upon their articulation, purposefully and intentionally forgotten. And this strategic forgetting is seemingly achieved for the majority of the novel, as the rest of the story's conflicts play out within the structures of difference that are legible to liberal realism. The narrative itself manages to "forget" the decent beggar, to a certain extent, by displacing him with the figure of the friendly neighborhood socialist, Lindau. Shortly after these scenes (but prior to Lindau's short and volatile employment with *Every Other Week*), March seeks his old friend in his flat on Manhattan's East Side. There he encounters a "frantic panorama" – a "vast hive of populations" which composed a "picturesque admixture" of ethnicities, "unintelligible dialects", and other "aspects" which he "identified and which gave him abundant suggestion for the personal histories he constructed, and for the more public-spirited reveries in which he dealt with the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth" (*Hazard* 163). His thoughts overcome any "vague discomfort" in the disorder of the scene, and, instead, he begins to speculate upon the types of illustrations which should accompany his planned urban sketches. "He thought he would particularly like his illustrator to render the Dickensy, cockneyish quality of the shabby-genteel ballad-seller... whom he instantly perceived to be, with his stock in trade, the sufficient object of an entire study himself" (*Hazard* 164). Secure in the realist rubric of representative character, and the realist vision which structures it, March is capable, here, of comfortably consuming the spectacle of the tenement district in the name of a "public-spirited" literary agenda. The only question which occupies him is how his friend, Lindau, (who he knows as an accomplished gentleman, former

mentor, abolitionist and Union veteran, musician and literary guide) can possibly fit into this context. While the urban street scene presents no real challenges to his social vision, the possibility that the gentleman Lindau could be “too poor to live elsewhere” is the only thing that March “refused to believe” (*Hazard* 166).

But in Lindau’s case, this anxiety over the sanctity of class identity is resolved post-haste. Lindau’s poverty is revealed to be self-chosen; he himself readily testifies that he was “becoming a little too much of an aristocrat” in his more comfortable, younger life (*Hazard* 168). Later, he will confess to having returned the whole of his military salary so as to remain consistent with his political ideals of class solidarity. The rubric of character (consistency, identity in duration) explains away any possible exceptions to the logic of “the line.” Thus, unlike the “decent beggar” who embodies some of these same contradictions, Lindau (as we have seen) eagerly provides an account of himself that is available to bourgeois common-sense reading practices and consistent with the differences of belief and manner that are figured as constitutive within it. Through Lindau, the “outsider” stranger is compelled to speak and declare himself a representative voice. But even with Lindau’s “representative” presence to testify to stable differences of condition and ideology at the forefront of the narrative, the trace of the stranger’s contingency is not so easily forgotten. It reappears, for instance, in the “almost loss of individuality” that March both fears and desires to experience in his anonymous walks through the city (*Hazard* 268). And it appears in the “decent” appearance of the crowd of strikers which, as I have already described, prompts a momentary lapse in March’s liberal-realist sensibilities, allowing him to briefly entertain identifications with “the populace”. The danger of these contingent identifications: that the private individual would misidentify something unsavory like labor interests for properly “public” investments.

The character of Lindau plays a hand in resolving this last misidentification as well. Like Riis's man with the knife, the narrative eventually "discovers" the old revolutionary on the street, threatening revenge upon the elites and calling for the police to aim their clubs at "the bresidents that insoalt your lawss" (*Hazard* 383). Conrad is shot attempting to defend Lindau during the violence which ensues and Lindau himself is seriously wounded. But in the novel, one of the most important ramifications of these events is that they split the opinion of the March household. Isabel blames Lindau for Conrad's death while Basil quietly holds the police responsible. The tableau that was objectively constructed by narratively removing March from the scene now assumes its proper role as a subject of ethical contemplation for the crowd of private spectators, its players having testified of themselves for the benefit of the drawing-room jury. Via the strategic forgetting of the "decent" beggar and the insertion of the working-class, political subject that is Lindau, the proper functioning of the bourgeois public sphere is made possible, even as the man himself lays dying in the service of its opposite cause.

But in the March's divided opinions, a trace of the forgotten stranger's contingency remains in the form of a crisis in the logics of liberalism. For, in the wake of Conrad Dryfoos's death, the March's are forced, once again, to take stock of their uncertain "situation." Dryfoos's personal interest in the magazine is understandably weakened by Conrad's death. In considering their limited options, should he choose to sell his stake in the venture, Basil and Isabel, once again, have a reason to reflect upon their own role in contemporary "conditions." But whereas before the strike, the private individual was a position of autonomy and free expression, now Basil finds little to be optimistic about in their formerly "safe place."

It ought to be law as inflexible in human affairs as the order of the day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat, and shall not be

harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come. But in our state of things no one is secure of this. No one is sure of not losing it. I may have my work taken away from me at any moment by the caprice, the mood, the indigestion, of a man who has not the qualification for knowing whether I do it well or ill. (*Hazard* 396)

Here, the private individual is himself the object of a self-reflective gaze which speaks the “we” of the public without attempting to abstract it out and away from material forms of class difference. The social world in which this figure circulates, according to Basil, is one where “someone always has you by the throat unless you have someone else in *your* grip” (*Hazard* 395). And when capitalist relations of dominance are the foundation of their social world, the “reality” of bourgeois safety and private personhood themselves are left to intolerable chance. This “philosophical perspective”, ironically, finds March identifying with “populace” as a kind of public figure produced through the exclusion of the corporatist “man” whose private interest founds and structures a universal insecurity. Reversing the logic of the “man with the knife” – where an unmarked vision on social conflict was achieved by identifying the voice of the underclass as a massive private interest which would, if allowed to circulate, threaten the well-being of (bourgeois) public safety – March instead identifies a “state of things” where contingency and uncertainty are the rules in a different order of public subjectivity, built upon the representation of capitalist “caprice” as threatening the private individual and the founding conditions of public sensibility itself with a condition of permanent insecurity.

Additionally, this thesis on the “conditions” of Gilded Age liberalism necessitates an epistemological reorientation. Lindau’s role in the novel is to conveniently supplant the figure of the stranger and secure the realist narrative’s “full effect” on the more stable ground of character, a necessary representational maneuver if the figure of the urban poor was to be presented for

middle-class consumption in terms amenable to a liberal conception of political difference. Therefore, we might be tempted to read these statements, spoken by the realist writer with an uncharacteristic verve, as evidence of Lindau's lingering influence on March's public sensibility – evidence that the realist can, in fact, adequately reproduce the formal “full effect” of public debate, even as its representative characters have completed their testimonies and are (forcibly) returned to the formal/ideological background. Isabel accuses him of as much, asking him if he had “seen Landau today” instead of responding to his radical claims. But far from simply re-representing Lindau's leftist positions and testing them in a rational debate on public problems, March uses them to destabilize the liberal-realist public sphere's logics of representation. When Isabel attempts to argue that it is simply “greed” and “foolishness” that are at the root of these unstable “conditions,” March responds by offering a different reading practice.

“Oh, without doubt! We can't put it all on the conditions; we must put some of the blame on character. But conditions *make* character; and people are greedy and foolish, and wish to have and to shine, because having and shining are held up to them by civilization as the chief good of life.” (*Hazard* 397)

These thoughts, on their own, are not particularly radical. Riis's *Other Half* opens with similar sociological assertions (though, of course, directed at the urban underclass). But unlike Riis, Howells looks to “conditions” and finds, not a “dividing line...through the tenements,” but a condition of profound insecurity – the rule is the permeability of “the line,” not its empirical reality. But as Alfred Kazin has pointed out, realism's program is to extend representation to the “whole society” via a register of character and representational types. We have seen this logic inform realism's inclusive social consciousness (in March's treatment of Lindau, for instance) as well as its aesthetic mission to represent “the full effect” of class differences. And we have seen

how this representational logic frames the need for a “philosophical” vision which can only belong to someone who is somehow outside of and above the totality of the social – a public voice that is, thus, necessarily unrepresentable. In this statement, March effectively accuses this perspective of mistaking the symptom for the disease. “Characters” are only “real” to the extent that the “conditions” which define “civilization” produce and reproduce these conditions of insecurity by obscuring them; according to March “we dare not” teach children of this contingency for fear that others “will crowd them out of the palace into the poorhouse” (*Hazard* 397). This alternative public sensibility pulls the rug out from under the realist representational apparatus, suggesting that the “full effect” and “contrast” that is provided by assembling “characters” is only a “surface” which actually obscures the true “depths” of social power.

Just as in the encounter with the “decent” beggar, we enter into an analytic territory where the contingent roots of both class ideology and realist “character” are exposed. The logics of realism are revealed as complicit in a “surface” reading of social character which misrecognizes the broiling conflicts which inform its production. As before, these reflections are given by March in a characteristically sarcastic tone, emphasizing their particular distinctions and separating them from unmarked public discourse. But unlike the couple’s previous encounters with contingency, a quick trip to the theatre does not seem to be the answer. Instead March offers an unusual diagnosis of public life where he invokes the figure of the “decent” beggar in order to provide an unusual testimony by proxy. The stranger, as it turns out, has not been forgotten – in fact, both Basil and Isabel confess (against all textual evidence to the contrary) that the “decent” beggar has always haunted the recesses of their political consciousnesses. Resurfacing in both their memories and the narrative foreground, the stranger “once again emerges out of nowhere like the return of something repressed” (Kaplan 63). There

is a certain logic to his reemergence at this point. Contingency is, after all, the stranger's representational character, and he therefore emerges in the narrative as the ideal figure upon which to exercise the new "reading practice" that March has just elaborated. If the tramp is the given representative of "real" poverty, then the stranger is the figure who embodies the simultaneous contingency and "possibility" of that symbolic, liberal order.

As the realist writer/editor philosophizes his own insecurity and contemplates his own possible poverty, he wryly imagines himself in the "role" of "that desperate man on Third Avenue who went along looking for garbage in the gutter to eat" (*Hazard* 398). And when Isabel misunderstands, thinking that March has accused the beggar of being a scam-artist, he responds with a strange defense.

Oh I don't say he was an imposter. Perhaps he really was hungry; but if he wasn't, what do you think of a civilization that makes the opportunity of such a fraud? That gives us all such a bad conscience for the need that is that we weaken to the need that isn't? Suppose that poor fellow wasn't personally founded on fact; nevertheless, he represented the truth; he was the ideal of suffering which would be less effective if realistically treated. (*Hazard* 398)

Kaplan reads this scene as reconfirming the "knowledge of the line" via the figure of the tramp: "...at the end of the novel, Basil speculates that he was probably a confidence man and thereby negates his reality" (*Hazard* 52). For her, Basil's invocation of the beggar "reminds us of the unsettling pressure of city streets" even as his dismissal as an "imposter" reinstates the sanctity of the stable social world captured by realism's "strategy of containment" (Kaplan 63). But, as the above quote illustrates, this is a rather reductive way of approaching March's position on the matter. In fact, Basil is unwilling to provide a once-and-for-all account of the man's motives.

His status as “an imposter” remains a possibility, yet not a certainty which March can testify to. The point is that he is simply *unknown* and therefore *undecidable*. In this speculative imagination, the stranger is given range to circulate in his actual representational ambivalence outside of the narrative constraints of “character.” He appears therefore not as a person, but an abstract “ideal” of a concept of “suffering” which had earlier been repressed as “unreal.”

Moreover, Basil claims that there is a representational “truth” to this stranger outside of the realm of what realism approaches as “fact.” The “truth” offered here is *not* of a sociological subject whose story “tells the tale” of class difference – a top-down “truth” which accounts for those caught in its visual, diagnostic lens and disqualifies them from participation in an unmarked public subjectivity. It is not a “truth” which is accessed by sentimental identification with supposedly discrete and coherent subjects. Nor is this “truth” represented in terms of a more authentic liberal subject who transcends the representational trappings that distract from or inhibit the exercise of his irreducible, individual rational agency. The “ideal of suffering” which is represented in this contingent figure has nothing to do with whether one is “personally founded on fact,” but rather, hinges on the “opportunities” for recognition/misrecognition afforded by the broken terms of social legibility. The practice of this recognition is grounded in “the sensibilities of the passing stranger” who encounters this ideal on the street (*Hazard* 398). The “passing” of this unknown stranger is quite significant, in that it marks the only moment in the text in which the unmarked public is allowed any representational presence in the novel. Instead of simply reconfirming bourgeois, liberal ideology and deploying a logic of particularizing difference, the uncanny return of the stranger facilitates and, in a sense, rescues the concept of liberal publicity. Speaking for the first time as someone who is “seen” instead of the privileged, abstract “seer,” March attempts to locate the “public” on the street (instead of the

various characters which designate private interest) and finds himself surrounded by unknowable strangers. In this stranger, the novel finally evades the problematic circuit of vision that was anxiously marked by the urban subject “looking back.” The betrayed confidence in a properly public vision (which, over the course of the novel’s struggles with industrial capitalist structures and private economic agency, has been whittled down to a sliver) is given a last glimmer of hope in the one “character” who breaks out of the realist mode long enough to gesture at the possibility of an unmarked “sensibility.”

In realist writing, the “unknown” stranger experiences a gradual exile from the street scenes of the modern city. But we encounter him again at the heart of realist political consciousness – as the name which is given to its constitutive, unmarked subjectivity. At this point, I can perhaps finally produce a response to Sennett’s stranger thesis. The stranger as the “outsider” is *produced*, not in “a landscape where people have enough sense of their own identities to form rules of who belongs and who does not,” but as a part of the representational process which secures the possibility of the public sphere both in terms of and despite the pervasive structural inequalities of industrial-corporate capital. This stranger is not inherently “outside” of the national body, but the conditions of his inclusion are his incessant and permanent legibility, all of which exclude him from being counted as part of the public voice. But the “unknown” stranger continues to express the contingent, socially constructed character of this particular arrangement representing nothing more than that which should exist *despite* what we know. In the process, he exposes the limits of the “real” as a means of assessing political community – marks the point of crisis between the desire to represent that community “realistically” and the need to maintain the essential character of liberal terms which can only be said to exist despite this “reality.”

As you might imagine, these reflections are as unwelcome in the realist novel as the “decent” beggar was to Isabel’s thesis on “real” suffering. And, as it was in that earlier episode, the solution of the narrative is to inflect these comments with March’s wry sarcasm and move as quickly away from them as possible. And while the narrative abandons this line of inquiry almost as soon as it has begun, it does attempt to contain it in its own characteristic way. For one, the problem itself is “solved” when Dreyfoos decides to sell *Every Other Week* to Fulkerson and March, eliminating the need to think about potential poverty at all. In this sense, the frame of the novel itself performs the same representational maneuver which we have observed in Riis’s “man with the knife” example and in March’s earlier treatment of Lindau. It moves to categorize (even validate) these comments as thoroughly “particular” while it represents them for “common sense” liberal reading practices as the reflections of individuals whose private interests are the ultimate meaning of their utterance.

But this is not its only response. *Hazard*’s ending is famously elongated and plural; the novel moves slowly and somewhat inexplicably past the climax of the riot and invests itself in tying up the plotlines of the various bourgeois characters who have stood as representative of New York high-society. Here we have the withdrawal into bourgeois domesticity which, as many have noted, marks Howells’s retreat from the city. While many critics have bemoaned both this investment and the seeming lack of formal narrative focus, we can now read each of these episodes as an attempt to close off and “forget” the criticisms of both realist and liberalist values implied in the stranger episodes. One of these, a failed marriage plot, once again testifies to the “unreality” of sentimental narratives and prompts yet another conversation between Basil and Isabel. In considering Alma Leighton’s rejection of the artist, Beaton, Basil challenges the

assumptions which organize the social value of marriage, finding, in this critique, more stable ground on which to speak “the real”.

Why shouldn't we rejoice as much at a nonmarriage as a marriage?... We get to thinking that there is no other happiness or good fortune in life except marriage, and it's offered in fiction as the highest premium for virtue, courage, beauty, learning, and saving human life. We all know it isn't. We know that in reality, marriage is dog-cheap, and anybody can have it for the asking – if he keeps asking enough people. (*Hazard* 434)

The “reality” which is described here is possible because of the stable realm of bourgeois values which organizes its vision and limits. The “anybody” it references buries the figure of the bachelor – the man who asks – in a tacit universality, just as it buries a gendered relation (bourgeois marriage proposal) in a negotiation with “people.” From this stable sense of bourgeois “reality” issues a need for narrative. When March suggests, offhandedly, that someone should write a novel which reflects this “reality”, Isabel declares it to be “a delightful idea,” proclaiming that Basil himself could “do it splendidly” (*Hazard* 434). The category of “the real” having been firmly redrawn around bourgeois private personhood, realist writing rediscovers itself within the discursive conditions of its own possibility.

Conclusion: The Strange Foundations of Liberal Publicity

This chapter has covered a lot of ground in its attempts to address the complicated relationship between late nineteenth-century urban representation and the foundational abstractions of the bourgeois liberal public sphere. The larger goal has been to provide an account of the complicated representational maneuvers which were necessary to articulate the norms of this publicity to the mechanics of narrative and character favored by realist literary form. In the city, the realist logic of representation enters into a crisis; the representativeness it

ascribes to the characters it arranges within its vision leaves no one unmarked. As we can see in *Hazard*, the ruptures and blind-spots of the urban realist representational apparatus are not all generated at the limits of bourgeois social vision or consciousness; some of them indicate strategic omissions built to preserve liberal public in the face of its impossibility, turning away from the scene of capital's social relations of dominance. For the realist writer and editor, this is a crisis in his commitment to a representational form dedicated to the essential reality of the liberal-nationalist polity. For critical readers of the novel, this crisis speaks again of liberalism's specific conflicts with representational inscription. The failure of the realist novelist's "will to legibility" is, in this sense, sacrificial and necessary to preserve the possibility of the liberal public sphere and its foundational conception of social differences as rooted in "character."

CHAPTER THREE: Baldwin's Stranger and Liberal Anti-Racist Desire

Introduction: The Difficulty of Reading Baldwin

In this, my final chapter, I will turn to James Baldwin's New York novel, *Another Country*, as a way of extending the history of liberalism and realist literature that I initiated in chapter two. Here, as before, I will attempt to historically situate the production of urban realist conceptions of representation in the context of contemporaneous shifts in liberalist discourse – in this case, I am interested in the production of a concept of realism that would articulate properly to the multiple prerogatives of Cold War nationalist social formation. Specifically, my goal is to situate urban realist literary production of this period within an emerging discourse of racial liberalism, a particular account of racial difference and political liberation that came to compose the linguistic, imaginative contours (and limits) of mainstream, white American anti-racism, and which prompted significant revisions in the conception of the value of realist literature and its practical relation to social problems like the black ghetto. As many literary historians and cultural critics have suggested, literary culture itself is one of the privileged domains for the construction of this revision of liberal race consciousness, most poignantly in its generation of a liberal reading practice which reproduces foundational liberalist assumptions about the nature of social “reality” and which delimits a kind of representational ethics generated out its specific ideas regarding social struggle and liberation. This reading practice – its limits and implications

for thinking “race” in a mid-to-late twentieth century U.S. context – is the true subject of this chapter’s critical impulse.

To observe this liberal reading practice at work, we can look to the nature of the praise and criticism that Baldwin’s novel received in the moment of its original publication in 1962. As a discourse, it composes itself around the central issue of the novel’s representational relationship to the individual. In *Time* magazine, Baldwin was panned for having constructed “a wholly inadequate fictional frame: six characters in search of love and self-knowledge in a Dostoevskian substratum of Greenwich Village. Each has been chosen as a representative of Melting-Pot America.” For this reviewer, characters like Rufus Scott are “representative” only as exemplary “sociological stick figures.” Rufus might serve as an “example of what can happen... but as an individual he does not exist.”⁸⁷ Meanwhile, a much more laudatory *Newsweek* review praises Baldwin’s urban character work. The strength of Baldwin’s representation of “the New York Bohemia which still flourishes in and around Greenwich Village” is that “they cannot be classified. They are individuals...”⁸⁸ The consensus that constructs the terms of this debate is the conviction that the novel’s success or failure can be judged according to whether it can access the reality of this “individual” by going beyond categorical language or mechanistic reductions attributed to social science. Rather than delimiting a criteria which explicitly privileges some representative differences over their “others,” the postwar liberalist approach to “character” adopts a position where difference is managed in terms of an a priori conception of “representativeness” as such – where the “individual,” who is the only proper subject of literary expression, assumes an antagonistic relationship to representational, narrative reductionism and can only be glimpsed in its natural

⁸⁷ “New World Cacophony.” *Time Magazine* 29 June 1962: 76

⁸⁸ “Man Without a Race.” *Newsweek* 25 June 1962: 91

habitat, outside of or beyond any kind of “sociological” or “categorical” inscription. In other words, the conversation itself displays a commitment to a particular conception of realism in literature, in which “character” becomes the site where representation is compelled to prove its commitment to the epistemological transcendence and foundational unity/irreducibility of the liberal self.

At the same time, the expectation is that this liberal-realist character must be “believable.” In *Harpers*, the reviewer critiques Baldwin’s depiction of Rufus as “very hard to understand, fictionally,” leaving the reviewer with the feeling that the character must “come directly from some deep experience of the author’s life that cannot be realized on the page.” “Much is claimed for Rufus” but the fact that Baldwin would withhold his protagonist from full legibility “on the page” stops him from serving as a viable representative of either “Village characters” or the “link between the black and white world.”⁸⁹ This reviewer attributes his own difficulty interpreting Baldwin’s character to what he calls an overly “sentimentalized” treatment, where the novelist’s personal attachment to the object contaminates the novel’s vision. Notably, the reviewer does not encounter the same problem in his assessment of the novel’s white characters; he sympathizes (if not identifies) with their “disappointment” in their “hope to find love from the Negro.” In this, the reviewer finds something affecting (if not futile) in the novel’s depiction of “the individual case, the single heart, burned by the racial fire.” “Believability,” it seems, is a matter of bringing the black subject “wholly” into representational view as an object of white readerly consumption (even for the purpose of “love”), a point at which both the white characters and the liberal reader are both invested in the same way. At stake in this criticism of the novel’s representational adequacy, I will argue, is an attempt to regulate the terms of legibility for racial difference itself. Just as the reviewer sympathizes with

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Hardwick. “All About Love.” *Harpers* July 1962: 90-92

the white characters' attempts to "find" a love object in the Negro, so does the conversation itself express a desire to define race in the context of the liberal representational discourse of the individual. Novelistic representations of racial character, in order meet the claims made for their social value, must exceed but not fall short of the preexisting expectations for "completeness" and "legibility" constructed by this "common-sense" approach to realistic fiction. Baldwin's novel, as this survey of its popular reception hopefully shows, was the source of some controversy for its post-war reading public – a public whose ideological commitments surface, in their disagreements, through the desire to regulate the perception and representation of the "race problem" wholly (and uneasily) within the epistemological domain of the (white) liberal individual.

In many ways, I shall be attempting to suggest that the difficulty of reading Baldwin's novel is actually the problem that he poses to this liberal reading practice, cultivated by a discourse of post-war realism and which has and continues to determine how liberal readers characterize the work of representation at its formal and narrative limits. This difficulty stems, I will show, from the way that Baldwin's novel identifies and amplifies contradictions within the post-war liberal conception of liberation through (or against) realist representation. Thus, the first few sections of this chapter turn to the racial-literary discourse of the U.S. post-war era in order to trace the ongoing complicated, intertwined relationship between urban writing, realist representational norms, and the politics of liberal difference; an investigation of this sort, first and foremost, requires a thorough grounding in the historical development of "realism" as a socio-political, aesthetic category. For this, I turn to a series of American Studies scholars whose work attempts to trace the simultaneous, shifting definitions of literary realism and racism in the Cold War era. This contextualization reveals two conflicting conceptions of the articulation

between the practice of realist writing and the promise of racial liberation. On the one hand, there is the enduring conception of realist and, especially, urban-realist literature as a privileged and enlightening vision on the social underclasses, a conceit which in the era of the post-industrialization of many urban centers in America made urban novels into a privileged vehicle of truth about the nature of the black ghetto and the “race problem” in general. On the other hand, there is the substantive *rejection* of realism (as un-American) during this same period, a rejection which cultivated a revised liberal pedagogy of social, political equality that embraced avant-garde suspicions of novelistic representation and which culminated (amongst other things) in an understanding of literature and the work of reading which called upon American liberals to read against social categories and representational legibility in the service of an individualist foundationalism. Together, these two liberal discourses of literary realism define, in limited ways, both the work of literature as a vehicle of racial progress and the practice of reading for a properly (white) liberal public.

By turning to Baldwin’s work and, in particular, his New York book, *Another Country*, I argue that the African-American novelist upends mid-century assumptions about the libratory value of race realist representation through his rejection of what I referred to in my last chapter as the “liberal-realist stranger”. This stranger, as I have attempted to show in my arguments to this point, gives discursive life to a particular liberalist scripting of difference as such – the fantasy of an unmarked, pre-cultural form of recognition which confirms the foundational coherence of liberal subjectivity. This conception of the limits of “cultural vision” is useful for concretizing the essential reality of the liberal order, even as it is productive of a number of contradictions in the way that this liberal order imagines its relation to the national culture that is its vehicle. In chapter one, I attempted to explain how the stranger marks a particular

contradiction between various liberal-capitalist/liberal-nationalist conceptions of personhood and literary representation more generally. To the extent that liberal citizenship is sustained by the idea of a particular and yet unmarked subject who travels alongside others within a specific cultural, narrative context, the stranger is both an anxiety and a necessity, representing, as he does, the very possibility of both “freedom” (from hierarchical status) and absolute discontinuity (from national sameness). This dual status marks the liberal stranger’s ambivalent relation to narrative representation in general. In chapter two, I argued that this stranger has a privileged role in the conception of the liberal-democratic public sphere and, as such, is implicated in the forms of “vision” mobilized in and by realist writing from its conception. In the totalized conception of social universality that realism both assumes and claims to perceive, the stranger is both the privileged base and unincorporated margin of the public sphere, marking, above all, the impossibility (which must be repressed) of maintaining “public vision” in the context of the liberal-capitalist, national order.

This chapter contributes to this line of inquiry by marking how this “stranger” becomes an essential concept for the problem of U.S. race relations at a moment when black struggles for equality and liberation are being incorporated into a larger Cold-War narrative of national progress. The liberal-realist stranger becomes a central player in the emerging discourse of national antiracism by staging, in a covert way, the nature of racism’s problem and solution in ways that are immediately and “naturally” amenable to a liberalist vision of social progress. In this way, the stranger also marks the palpable limits of liberalism’s conceptualization of the origin and function of race as a category and a domain of social difference. My reading of Baldwin’s urban fiction is an attempt to chart the different conceptualization of racial difference that the novelist attempts to construct there – one where race is not simply a mark or

disenfranchised status that can be easily discarded in the name of a more proper recognition of the essential individual. This reconceptualization begins with a recalibration of the social relations that are implied and naturalized in liberal imagination of the stranger, and with an attendant and necessary reimagining of the work of urban realist writing itself. At the end of this reading, I hope to be able to show that, rather than consenting to the liberal construction of race realism or, conversely, working unproblematically through the critique of representational reductionism that was advocated by Cold War literary culture, Baldwin's realism revises the liberal conception of race itself, by configuring it as prior to and necessary for the construction of the liberal transcendence narrative and the production of white, liberal anti-racist identity.

Cold War Liberalism and the Discourse of Race Realism

In the postwar era, realism in literature is less a particular school of shared literary philosophy or practice as it is a concept and a label that overtly organizes the politics and morality of literary practice, making it an object of controversy and regulation on a number of different cultural fronts. "Realism" itself becomes a highly mobile distinction (even as its terms and investments are being scrutinized from every angle), whose definition and logics of social value are themselves sites of struggle for postwar and Cold War political cultures. Thomas Schaub, for one, argues that the very term "realism" itself was redefined in the literary discourse of the postwar period "in ways meant to distinguish it sharply from either 'naturalism' or 'social realism,'" and that this transformation of 'realism' was at once part of and inseparable from "the liberal revision of reality" in general.⁹⁰ Schaub's study of the postwar literati (mainly, the New York school of critics, including Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, and others) centers on the profound sense of "betrayal" and "disillusionment" that inflected liberal identity in the decades following World War II – what Schaub refers to as an emerging "narrative of chastened

⁹⁰Thomas, Schaub. *American Fiction in the Cold War*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. 1991) 31

liberalism” (7). This narrative, which was cultivated in the political consciousness of influential texts like Trillings’s *The Liberal Imagination*, posits a break between the more traditionally left-aligned cultural politics of the early twentieth century and the direction of the liberal intelligentsia following the war. On the one hand, the “old liberalism,” exemplified in the representational politics of literary naturalism (and for Trilling, in the work of Theodore Drieser) and the Popular Front “proletariat fictions” of the twenties and thirties. These representational dialects were perceived as contaminated by prewar dabbling in communist utopianisms which now seemed dangerously naïve in the face of the brutalities of Stalin. Marked by this disillusionment with both communism and the politics of earlier literary realisms, these critics played a vocal role in the move towards the “new liberalism” which would embrace complexity and contradiction (and seek to incorporate conservative viewpoints) in a postwar “politics of the center” (Schaub 26).

In this sense, the conversation on literary realism helped to refine the moral and political consciousness of what historians have identified as the “consensus culture” of the postwar years, articulated in the context of a liberal reading practice. Working through the argument that naturalism encouraged “a naïve rationalism, a dangerous optimism and certainty in human affairs,” the New York intellectuals sought to balance the emphasis on the morality of form (often in line with the work of their contemporaries and sometimes adversaries, the New Critics) with a sense of literature’s potential for social change. The “new liberalism” was generated as a “prescriptive orthodoxy” within this shift, framing literary production and consumption in a number of ways, ultimately leading towards a more psychologically founded, “moral realism, in which literature became “politics recollected in anguish” (Schaub 37). Predicated as it is on a formative distinction between political and aesthetic practice and a “psychologization” of

historical contradiction, oppression, and social struggle, it is telling that African-American literary production was one of the primary sites where a mid-century liberal-realist sensibility drew its lines in the sand. Looking to Ellison's *Invisible Man* as the paradigmatic example of the discursive struggle over racialized realist literature, Schaub notes how the praise for Ellison's novel was staged in terms of how it went "beyond" social realism and the protest novel" (92). Showcasing "postwar liberalism's contempt for the naïve politics of the thirties," these assessments posited Ellison's superiority as a writer in terms of how he avoided what they perceived as a didactic approach to social oppression in his writing. Schaub also points to a long legacy of (ongoing) criticism of the novel from various left, Black Nationalist, or black literary studies perspectives that have objected to the politics of *Invisible Man* on similar terms, as appealing too overtly to the period's conservative values. Schaub himself, while emphasizing Ellison's ability to leverage the largely formalist values of "irony" and "contradiction" in a critique of race, reads the writer as "essentially in step with the politics of literary culture at this time," participating in the critique of naturalism and communist anti-racism, and embracing "the new liberalism" where "solidarity has become universality and class conflict an expression of moral contradiction shared equally by all" (115). But regardless of one's assessment of the actual work of Ellison's novel, this contextualization makes visible the extent to which the postwar conversation on literary realism had shifted to accommodate the terms which suited a Cold War, liberal sensibility, articulating a delineated, formal criteria for what could constitute an acceptable political discourse on oppression and reform.

In this sense, the political discourse of liberal realism disciplines and normalizes conceptions of racial identity, struggle, and oppression within the boundaries of liberal nationalism. This literary history is corroborated by more recent considerations of postwar U.S.

racial formation which have argued for an understanding of emerging Civil Rights discourse in the context of Cold War international policy and culture. Mary Dudziak, for instance, provides a historical account of how international criticism of black-white racial oppression in the forties and fifties “gave the federal government an incentive to promote social change at home” on the basis that America could not justify its mission to spread liberal democracy across the globe without setting its own house in order.⁹¹ At the same time, “the Cold War would frame and thereby limit the nation’s civil rights commitment... by promoting a particular vision of racial justice, the Cold War led to a narrowing of acceptable civil rights discourse” (Dudziak 13). Nikhil Pal Singh’s work elaborates on these “limits,” arguing that by signifying racial progress in the frame of liberal nationalism, Cold War liberal approaches to anti-racism defined freedom as entry into nationalist abstraction of universal citizenship and obscured the way that race had (and continued to) supply “highly durable shorthand and broadly disseminated rubrics” for constructing this universality through difference.⁹² By conceiving of national identity as “the antithesis of a system of ethnic and racial marks,” liberal anti-racisms positioned U.S. citizenship (and the unmarked relation it offered to the law and the state) as the solution to racial oppression while relying upon a renewed language of racial difference to variously qualify or disqualify black subjects on the basis of their political and cultural normativity. Liberal nationalism “offers to overlook the negative particularities of racial ascription on the condition of an absolute rejection of any positive particularities that may have accrued to black cultural and communal practices over time” (Singh 40). In this way, Cold War liberals articulated an anti-racism that structured a much-needed national narrative of racial progress, while attempting to immunize liberal capitalism’s global ambitions against the charge of white supremacy. The ongoing

⁹¹ Mary Duziak. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 200) p. 12

⁹² Nikhil Pal Singh. *Black is a Country*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press. 2004) p. 29

conversation on literary realism was one of the cultural sites where liberal knowledge and subjectivity were shaped in collaboration with this new political consciousness.

Roderick Ferguson also attends to this history when he describes the postwar shift in literary, aesthetic values as part of the “ideological offensive” of the Cold War, where “the political interest in capitalist expansion and the rhetoric of democratic freedoms were accompanied by the emergence of an American avant-garde.”⁹³ The “product of the de-Marxianization of the American Left during the 1940s,” the new liberals of the New York school “insisted on a representational complexity” that ultimately invested in the liberal individual and the universality of American capital. The “protest novel” was characterized as a remnant of Popular Front representational norms, staged in contrast to a properly idealist, liberal nationalist investment in the authenticity of the individual who inherently “exceeds” repressive cultural, representational inscription. But while this postwar New York, avant-garde sensibility attempted to define a politically viable realism within a political consensus on the universality of Cold War American consciousness, it did not succeed in totally delegitimizing the representational logics of the protest novel. Rather, the same Cold War logics also gave social realism and naturalist fictions a privileged relation to “the race problem.” Jodi Melamed’s recent study contributes a particularly literary angle on the “narrowing” of racial discourse under Cold War liberalism, documenting the development of a cultural apparatus that was produced in the crucible of “a formally anti-racist, liberal capitalist modernity articulated under conditions of U.S. global ascendancy.”⁹⁴ In this reading, liberalist approaches to race were under two competing pressures in the Cold War; it needed to generate a perception of the U.S. as a model of racial progress (thus

⁹³ Roderick A. Ferguson. “The Parvenu Baldwin and the Other Side of Redemption: Modernity, Race, Sexuality, and the Cold War.” *James Baldwin Now*. Ed. Dwight McBride. (New York, NY: NY University Press. 1999) p. 237

⁹⁴ Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2011) 4

heading off Soviet criticisms of white supremacist capitalist imperialism and postwar consciousness of racial oppression and genocide as a global issue) while framing capitalism as a means of accommodating and empowering people of color and the new postcolonial world. Melamed's account of mid-century liberalist conceptions of anti-racism – organized under her term, “racial liberalism” – directs our attention to the cultural institutions and discourses which took “the race novel” as its privileged object and vehicle.

Race novels emerged as a central cultural technology of racial liberalism within a framework that defined racism as primarily a problem of attitude or prejudice. Defined as literature about race or by African American authors that transmitted rare and intimate information about black consciousness and conditions to white audiences in a way that uniquely aroused their sympathies, race novels were perceived as enabling changes in white attitudes that were presumed to have a leveling effect on racial disparity. (Melamed 54)

Importantly, the precondition for this privileging of the communicative potential of literature is a particular reformulation/re-imagination of the race problem itself, which Melamed locates in the hugely influential work of Gunnar Myrdal. In his seminal work, *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal framed racism in terms of “psychic isolation as an urgent and escalating national emergency” where “because black and white Americans had neither intimate nor factual knowledge of one another, they formed no relations” (Melamed 62). “In a framework that conceptualized racism as prejudice, sympathy – a quasi-moral, quasi-psychological, and quasi-social concept – was a state or situation that could close the knowledge and relations gap between white and black Americans” (Melamed 63). In staging the origins of racism in terms of the “knowledge and

relations gap,” sympathy became the common-sense means of eliminating prejudice and the “race novel,” the privileged means of achieving it.

Besides providing another angle on the “psychologization” of literature, Melamed’s account of racial liberalism, I would argue, also documents how the value of “social realism” was preserved in (or rather, contained within) the genre of the race novel.

The social, literary, and ideological object referred to as the race novel was consolidated in popular and scholarly discourse from the early 1940s to the late 1960s under a variety of names, including the *sociological novel*, *problem novel*, *protest novel*, *psychological novel*, and *negro novel*. Genre-minded critics also identified race novels as naturalistic and realistic fiction and as novels of social and sociopolitical realism. (Melamed 63).

Supported, funded, and awarded by various liberal philanthropies and educational reform foundations (particularly, for Melamed, the Rosenwald Fund), the race novel was necessarily “realist.” In Schaub’s account, the postwar critique of leftist representation had struggled to define a criteria for realism (and a realist reading practice) that complied with new liberal nationalist universalities while containing political struggle within acceptable frameworks of intelligibility. But in this account, realism was reconstructed as an appropriate, *nee* privileged literary mode for producing white liberal *sympathy* precisely because of its supposedly transparent, unmediated nature – for the way that it could be simplistically staged in terms of “information retrieval.” While there may initially seem to be a contradiction in these two accounts, it is also possible to see the powerfully normalizing function of the race novel as an extension of the Cold War liberal-capitalist containment project. Figured as a “helpmate to the social sciences,” race novels were supposed to provide “accurate depictions of African American consciousness and conditions, thereby undercutting the social power of prejudicial stereotypes”

(Melamed 67). They were also figured, simultaneously, as providing the essential “sameness” (underlying any cultural differences) of black and white Americans, “demonstrating black cultural normativity” within a national frame (Melamed 68). In Melamed’s analysis, “race novels functioned as a cultural technology for disseminating powerful signifying systems and regulative concepts and discourses that produced and circumscribed acceptable discourse on race.... They created a new regulative field of racial meanings that recalibrated white privilege, demanded African American political, cultural, and sexual normativity, and suppressed political and economic understandings of racialization that did not cohere with Cold War liberal nationalism (71). While literary critics were articulating themselves to a reading practice which defined and valued realism (and “reality”) in line with Cold-War liberal-nationalist imperatives, race novels were valued in terms of a “field of racial meanings” that constructed their representations in terms of unmediated “information” made meaningful to the extent that they reproduced a normative, liberal-nationalist consciousness of race.

The literary histories that I have rehearsed here each construct a postwar literary sensibility that was under pressure to frame itself (to itself and others) in anti-racist terms which did not contradict the values and assumptions of either liberal capitalism or the dominant liberal nationalist “culture of consensus.” On the cultural front, these pressures were felt in the discourse of meaning and social value that mediated and defined “realist” representation. In this, Schaub and Melamed are in agreement on one particular point – that a historically-distinct impulse to monitor, regulate, and redefine the form of realism in the novel is visible in the discourses that frame the value of literary representation in terms of an ideal, liberal, anti-racist reading subject. At the same time, “race liberals never theorized readership or questions of interpretation or reception; instead, they proposed that information retrieval and sympathetic

identification were built into the literary object, were qualities of race novels themselves” (Melamed 71). The postwar “racial liberalist” privileging of the realist race novel, then, was predicated on the following discursive premises: 1) the containment of anti-racist knowledge and practice (in both representation and reading) within the epistemological domain of liberal-nationalism, 2) the Myrdalian formulation of the “race problem” in the limited terms of the “knowledge and relations gap, and 3) the framing of the genre as a transparent technology for representing the social reality of racial subjectivity.

I have rehearsed this history of literary culture in order to paint an ambivalent portrait of Cold War liberalism’s investment in literary realism as a political technology. In these accounts, we can track the emergence of two simultaneous and distinct regulatory discourses of the literary “real,” both descending in different ways from the imperatives of Cold War liberal nationalism. On their surface, these regulatory modes seem to work at cross purposes – one recognizes realism as a “transparent” media and the other vilifies it as invested in reductionist political ideologies that fail in the face of more complex liberal realities. In other words, the attempt to suture literary realism to the project of Cold War liberal-nationalism produced a number of potential contradictions. Race is the logic that sustains and normalizes these contradictions. Racial liberalism privileges “the race novel” as the agent of racial truth and liberal sympathy, claiming for it the capacity to resolve racial exceptions to liberal citizenship. But the race novel itself is an exception to the criticisms of realist/naturalist fiction built to confirm the primacy of a normalizing liberal subjectivity which “exceeds” reductive representations and social categories. As Melamed herself suggests, in the preface to her book, one would be hard pressed to locate a more prescient evaluation of these issues than James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” an essay originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1949 and republished as the first chapter of

Notes of a Native Son in 1955. Probably best known for its criticism of Baldwin's mentor, Richard Wright and his novel *Native Son*, "Everybody's Protest Novel" is more appropriately understood as a rejection of the representational politics located in the discourse of racial liberal realism. According to Melamed's reading, Baldwin "captured the elevation of the first formation of official antiracism, racial liberalism, to a new, nationalist common sense, exposing its transparency and guarantees as the hallmark of ideological dominance" (xi). Locating this ideological dominance, first and foremost, in the discourse of certainty and sentimental reform surrounding the protest novel, Baldwin diagnosed the racial liberal discourse of literature as a part of a larger project of disciplining racial knowing, generating "precisely the knowledges about race that conventional epistemological and political forms of postwar American modernity required. (Melamed xiii)

Baldwin wanted to make plain to his readers that the new knowledges about race disseminated by protest novels constituted a new form of normative and rationalizing violence... the new violence was more powerful because (1) sociological discourses and their truth effects had been incorporated into discourse of sentimental reform and (2) liberal categories of racial difference had become the dominant mode for securing institutionalized conditions of knowing. (Melamed xiii)

This reading of Baldwin's essay situates him as a critical witness to the dominant discourses of U.S. postwar racial formation, aware of the ways that the emerging liberal anti-racism participated (with the protest novel as its privileged vehicle) in the project of securing consent for normalizing and reductive categories of difference

While I largely agree with Melamed's contextualization of Baldwin and her characterization of his critique as a rejection of "the supposedly benevolent rationalizing of

liberal orders and their capacity to colonize the consensual real,” my own interests in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” are slightly different. For one, I would argue that Baldwin’s complex position within the postwar liberal moment is legible not only in terms of his criticism of the era’s racial knowledge projects, but how it partakes in the “liberal revision of reality” that Schaub locates in the era’s literary and critical practices. Melamed, at one point of her analysis, notes how “Baldwin did occasionally use language that sounded like New Criticism” but insists that “it is a mistake to read “Everybody’s Protest Novel” as a diatribe against *Native Son* for its aesthetic flaws or lack of a humanist orientation” (xiv). But his mobilization of this language is not as easily dismissible as Melamed would like. Ferguson, on the other hand, has argued that Baldwin’s critique of the protest novel emerges from the idea that “naturalist fiction could not evolve the representational complexity that the literary avant-garde favored” (243). Ferguson’s account of Baldwin situates him firmly within this avant-garde sensibility, which “coincided closely with the ideology of the American state during the cold war” in its “demand for a representational complexity that conformed to liberal ideology” (254). Nevertheless, Ferguson also finds, in Baldwin, a critique of the universality of the liberal citizen-subject (who was the ultimate frame of intelligibility for that avant-garde literary rubric), which he attributes to the author’s recognition of “contradictions within liberal-democratic rhetoric, contradictions generated by discourses of race and sexuality” in the Cold War era (256). In his reading, Baldwin’s call for an anti-essentialist politics of representation is his response to this contradiction, a call which Ferguson characterizes as a product of the ongoing, reflexive project of political modernity – the always incomplete project of narrating and defining modern experience – and an anxious recognition of its ever-present elisions and failures. In this sense, Ferguson goes farther than Melamed in situating Baldwin’s critique within the normative domain

of Cold War liberal nationalism, implicating his critical vocabulary in liberal normalizing discourse and attributing his suspicion of American political norms to a contradiction between the nation's democratic rhetoric and its practices. Both of them suggest that Baldwin's critique of "categories" is the most crucial dimension of his representational project, though one sees this critique as a rejection of racial liberal epistemologies of struggle and, the other, as a ratification of Cold War liberal universalities. But while Melamed simply brushes aside Baldwin's literary language, Ferguson finds an investment in liberal individualism within the author's representational commitment to "the irreducible complexity of the human being" (244). But even this reading conflates Baldwin's anti-essentialist gesture with an "avant-garde" call for "complex representations"; the primary assumption is that what Baldwin expected to find underneath the stereotypes and reductionary representations of African Americans was "the freedoms and agency of the individual."

My own reading looks to challenge this assumption with a renewed attention to Baldwin's own literary practice in "Everybody's Protest Novel." Baldwin's rejection of Stowe and Wright at the level of their literary practice indicates a complex negotiation of liberal nationalist representational conceits, which I will argue are part and parcel of his attempt to reconceptualize the work of realist representation. This aspect of Baldwin's argument, located, importantly, in the way that his assessment of the protest novel participates in a critique of "sentimentalism" and proposes a revision of the social/cultural perception of "reality," takes us past his critique of conventional anti-racist liberalisms and into his attempts to imagine a more effective representational politics of racial protest. Within this essay, in other words, Baldwin leverages his critique of the protest novel as an attempt to recover realist literary practice from the epistemological violence of racial liberal reading practices and to propose an entirely

different politics of “representational complexity” – one that does not assume the liberal individual as its foundation. And rather than rooting this practice in “complex representations” which are built on an a priori conception of the liberal individual, I argue that Baldwin’s “realism” implies a more critical understanding of social legibility and identity than are authorized under that particular liberal epistemology. In this sense, I argue, Baldwin’s most potent critiques of Cold-War racial consciousness are to be found *not* in his dismissal of “categories” (which only aligns him with what Schaub calls the “liberal revision of reality”) but in a critical conception of what one finds “underneath” those categories. Whereas Ferguson’s critique of the author’s “avante-garde” aesthetics hinges on his recourse to a foundational individualism, I am attempting to argue that, for Baldwin, there is something much more complex, much less coherent to be found in the domain beyond representational reductions.

This is fine line to draw, and, precisely because it amounts to an attempt to describe what evades description through cultural frames of reference, Baldwin himself often recourses to conventional frameworks, even as he subtly departs from them. It should be remembered that Baldwin’s critique of racial liberal “knowing” in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” is rooted firmly in an account of representational practice and participates in a regulatory approach to the definition of the novel; racial liberalism discourages a recognition of mainstream race novels as “badly written and wildly improbable” and Harriet Beecher Stowe is “not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer.”⁹⁵ But far from being a series of purely aesthetic distinctions, Baldwin’s understanding of the work of the novel falls back on a distinction between sentimental and realist representation and an emphasis on the “truth-telling” capacity of the literary project. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is “a very bad novel” first and foremost for how its representational practice indulges in sentimentalism, “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion... the

⁹⁵ James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*. (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press. 1957) p. 14;18

mark of dishonesty” (*Native* 14). And the “violence” of its representational vocabulary is located in how racial liberal reading practices convert this sentimental impulse, whose definitions of liberation are fundamentally theological, into a definition of “reality.” What Melamed (correctly) identifies as a rejection of sociological discourse in liberal reading practices and the “brutal criteria” of postwar racial knowledge projects that make the “race problem” legible to racial liberal uplift politics, is couched in terms of the protest novel’s allegiance to the “cage of reality” which assures that “the allegedly inferior are actually made so, insofar as societal realities are concerned” (*Native* 20). In the postwar era, truth, claims Baldwin, is a “battered word.” In Baldwin’s final diagnosis: “the failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (*Native* 23).

In mobilizing the language of transcendence in his critique of the sociological, categorical politics of representation which epistemologically reproduces white supremacy, Baldwin seemingly leverages one liberal logic against another. Transcendence is, after all, the ideal relation of the liberal citizen-subject to his own cultural inscription, including representations which fail to capture his inherent “complexity.” This desire for transcendence is invested in “the power of revelation which is the business of the novelist”; only by pursuing this “web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves” (*Native* 15). Stowe’s sentimentalism, on the other hand, is the limit of her ability to “discover and reveal something a little closer to the truth” (*Native* 15). Surveying these terms (transcendence; paradox; a universalized, pseudo-psychologized definition of both struggle and freedom, “truth”), we might be tempted to suggest that Baldwin is simply partaking in the rubrics of the national, “chastened liberalism” which characterize the

Cold War realist discourses described by Schaub. Indeed, “America” is explicitly the frame of reference, referred to as the “country devoted to the death of the paradox” even as Baldwin outlines the various paradoxes of racial liberalist reform consciousness and refers to the “American Dream” as a “sunlit prison.” And while the liberal humanist concept of “transcendence” through literary expression seems to imply an authentic, autonomous subject and the possibility of a more perfect representational language that correctly calibrates to it, Baldwin is careful to differentiate his investment in the “human being” from the “devotion to Humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause” (*Native* 15). “Causes,” he notes, are “notoriously bloodthirsty,” linking, once again, the “catalogue of violence” that is the protest novel and “the zeal of those alabaster missionaries to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and thence to slavery,” exposing the humanist pretension that underlies them both. Simply looking to these rhetorics leaves us with an ambivalent picture of Baldwin’s investments in his era’s liberal consensus, particularly in how he seems to mobilize the logics of liberal identity while simultaneously arguing that conventional liberal categories of transcendence (the nation, humanity) are forms of false consciousness, productive of their own historical violences.

The key to understanding this ambivalence, I would argue, is in Baldwin’s reconceptualization of the subject’s relationship to representational “reality,” where the author departs from conventional liberal abstractions in order to propose a more critical history of identity. Thus this reorientation does not posit a clean break between Baldwin and the foundational assumptions of Cold War liberalism, but it does suggest a critique of the “complex representations” model of liberal-realist sensibility. As “Everybody’s Protest Novel” draws to a conclusion, Baldwin elaborates on the social cost of the “cage of reality” defined by racial liberal

sentimental realisms. This section, which I will quote at length, challenges the liberal faith in the a priori status of the individual and its innocent relation to literary representation.

Now, as then, we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization. And escape is not effected through a bitter railing against this trap; it is as though this very striving were the only motion needed to spring the trap upon us. We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed. Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into the void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden. From this void – ourselves – it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us – “from the evil that is in the world.” With the same motion, at the same time, it is this toward which we endlessly struggle and from which, endlessly, we struggle to escape.

It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality. (*Native* 20-21)

One of the most important things to recognize about this quote is that the “we” that is addressed here includes both “the oppressed and the oppressor” who are both “bound, first without, then within” by a dependence on the repressive terms of reality. Whether we “take our shape” within or against these terms – whether we consent to them or proceed with “bitter railings” against them – the “trap” is sprung, because the possibilities for self-legibility and desire are exhausted within its epistemological limits. Rather than offering salvation, racial liberal categories

endlessly reify the terms of oppression through the limited array of subjectivities that it makes available. In this sense, Baldwin could be said to participate in the “new liberal/avant-garde” redefinition of the real, where oppression is universalized as a struggle for self-recognition and where the “foundations of society” are located in “ourselves”. But this self (where we might, like the readers of his novel, expect to find “the individual”) is a “void,” “like the earth before the Word” unsignified and unreadable, whose only visible characteristic is a “need” which is both protected by reductionistic racial liberal “knowing” and obscured within it. It is this concept of a socially-organizing “need” or desire, underlying the frameworks of individual legibility offered by postwar liberalism, that frames Baldwin’s representational project as well as his anti-racist sensibility.

I argue that this conception of an organizing “need” is crucial for understanding Baldwin’s critical reconceptualization of the work and limits of literary realism. In an article for *Playboy*, published in 1964, the writer refers to *Another Country* while attempting to describe the work of the realist novelist. “Every artist,” he writes, “is involved with one single effort, really, which is somehow to dig down to where reality is.”

We live, especially in this age, and in this country and at this time, in a civilization which supposes that reality is something you can touch, that reality is tangible... The things that people really do and really mean and really feel are almost impossible for them to describe, but these are the very things which are most important about them: These things control them and that is where reality is. What one tries to do in a novel is to show this reality.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ James Baldwin. “Words of a Native Son.” *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction: 1948-1985*. (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press. 1985) p. 396

Unlike the logic of transcendence, reality is something that you need to “dig down” in order to access – somewhere below the surface of a “tangible” reality, organized by the epistemological limits of empiricist, sociological categories, resides a motivating force that evades the language of experience and self-knowledge. In this conception, Baldwin rejects any literary realism that takes its epistemological cues from either a visual register of empirical truth or an expressivist-idealist model of language, implicitly rejecting racial liberal conceptions of the race novel, organized around the concept of the “knowledge-relations gap” that can be closed (in the work of literary representation) by racial testimony on one hand, and white liberal sympathy on the other. Locating novelistic “reality” at this epistemological scale, Baldwin offers this unspoken “motivation” as a means of defining the individual in excess of what can be easily “described” but not, importantly, outside of or above the politics of race itself. It is this conception of the desiring self underneath language that constitutes Baldwin’s conception of “reality” in literary representation.

In offering these readings, I want to argue that Baldwin’s literary theory and practice dramatically reconfigures a more mainstream, liberal relationship to realist representation. Rather than offering representations of psychological complexity as the means of transcending what Cold-war liberalism conceives of as racism’s limited or contaminated perception, this “need” is crucial to Baldwin’s assessments of how the “race problem” in the Cold War United States is maintained and reproduced in its anti-racist moment. In other words, race is still an issue even in the space beyond representational reductionisms. Like his realist sensibility, Baldwin’s racial consciousness is suspended at this unwritten scale, invested in a desire to name the unidentified “needs” that have historically and personally organized racist ideology and practice. A quick anecdote may bear out this out more clearly. On Wednesday, August 28th,

1963 – the same day that Martin Luther King would deliver the “I Have a Dream” speech, an event that would become a central narrative touchpoint for a liberal nationalist, anti-racist historiography of racial progress – James Baldwin participated in a roundtable discussion for CBS on the status of the “Negro problem.” Hosted by David Schoenbrun, the TV special makes a clear investment in cultural politics, enlisting the famous black writer alongside film stars Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brandon, Charlton Heston, and writer/director Joseph Mankiewicz. The polite, contained conversation nevertheless suggests an underlying struggle over the definitions and legibility of black struggle under the new anti-racist liberalism, what Jodi Melamud has called, “the shared institutional conditions of knowing that liberal antiracisms officialized” (xv). Certainly, a Cold War liberal-nationalist conception of race struggle on the global stage operates as the underlying consensus and impetus for this conversation; Mankiewicz speaks passionately about the “urgency” of Civil Rights as “something that must exist if America is to exist, if its image is to exist, and if our moral fiber is to exist.” Similarly, Belafonte roots the urgency of the movement in the idea that “this country has not even begun to realize its potential” while Schoenbrun claims that the opportunity to protest is particularly American, noting that “we haven’t seen a march on Moscow.” Nevertheless, the conversation does become contentious as it turns to the question of the nature of the “Negro problem” itself. In response to Poitier’s poignant insistence that “I am not a problem,” Mankiewicz and Brando argue over whether the race question should be understood as a “white problem” (articulated in typically paternalistic terms) or a “human problem” (universalizing struggle in democratic terms). Through this argument, Baldwin is largely silent. But when Schoenbrun moves to close the debate, he turns to Baldwin to deliver a final response to the question: “what is the most

important thing to be done?” Overtly declining programmatic responses like “jobs” or “schools”, Baldwin responds as such:

It's in the social fabric... The first step probably has to be somewhere in the American conscience. I think the American white republic has to ask itself why it was necessary for them to invent “the nigger.” I am not a nigger. I have never called myself one. But one comes into the world and the world decides that you are this for its own reasons. And it is very important, I think, for the American, in terms of the future, in terms of his health, in terms of the transformation that we are all seeking, that he face this question – *that he needed “the nigger” for something.*⁹⁷

Baldwin is a writer who demands to be read in the context of postwar liberalism, and whose literary sensibility was often founded upon (and, perhaps, limited by) liberal-nationalist conceptions of racial progress. Nevertheless, my goal is to illustrate how this question – why did the white man need the “nigger”? – offers a powerful corrective to post-war liberal imaginations of race and realist representation simultaneously, exposing the forms of white privilege that are preserved in each. I will argue that Baldwin approaches this question through the (purposefully) thwarted desire for sociological realism and representational coherency, targeting the pressure points that are afforded by the discourses that have assembled around the concept of “realism” in literature and redefining it in the name of a critical, historical consciousness of race. *Another Country* disrupts the racial liberal desire for sociological realism by calling into question the “knowledge and relations gap” which was the founding principle of the project of U.S. racial liberal reconciliation. By staging and calling into question the discursive, representational maneuvers which allow white liberals to claim, first and foremost, the empirical existence of this “gap,” Baldwin denies white racial liberals the possibility of approaching the race problem as

⁹⁷ DocChannel. “Civil Rights Roundtable 1963.” Online Video Clip. *Youtube*. Youtube. Nov 9 2009.

objective observers whose own subjectivities are exempt from the struggle to secure a more equal position for the black subject in American society. According to his conceptualizations of the social real, this challenge to racial liberalism involves constructing a representational apparatus for laying bare the unnamed and unspoken desires for this “gap.” And as I will show, this politics of representation cannot be properly characterized as a call for “complex representations,” which, in this period, are often fully in collaboration with liberal universalist conceits and individualist convictions. Rather than merely devoting himself to a literary project in which characters “transcend” the categories and stereotypes which reduce them to “ciphers,” Baldwin seeks to use his realism to inquire into the hidden desires and needs which make it necessary to produce and reproduce these categories as the limited terrain of personal and social imagination in the first place.

Importantly, the ability to represent subjects within this critical realism manifests itself, first and foremost, as a rejection of the liberal-realist stranger, who once again makes his appearance as a pre-cultural relation. As he makes clear through the radical reorganization of imaginations of cultural and interpersonal “knowing,” racial privilege is preserved in the figure of the stranger through the way that its supposedly culturally-uninflected relation posits the possibility of an authentically outside (or “innocent”) relation to the racially constructed “cage of reality” which, in Baldwin’s conception, must be understood as supplying the terms of “knowability” and self-legibility for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Simultaneously, his own realist aesthetic departs from Cold-War anti-realist convictions about the “transcendent” relation of the abstract individual to racial categories. In this sense, Baldwin’s critique of racial liberalism contributes to the larger inquiry of this dissertation in drawing our attention to an imagination of the stranger which mediates and enables post-war liberal imaginations of social,

democratic equality and which composes a key part of its formative definition of social progress. It is to this critique, made clear later in *Notes of a Native Son*, which I will now turn.

Strangers “From the Point of View of Power”

As I have suggested, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” – the essay that Baldwin chose to open the larger investigation of postwar racial politics that is *Notes of a Native Son* – positions the novelist in opposition to the regime of racial liberal literary discourse, calling into question the epistemological foundations of anti-racist liberal knowledge projects in the form of the race novel. This critique takes the form of an imperative to understand the forms of “dependence” which make these fictions plausible and necessary – the pre-representational reality which constructs identity and knowledge as a way of “protecting” us from an ultimately disruptive truth. With this in mind, I will turn to the essay that he chose to conclude *Notes of a Native Son*. In “Stranger in the Village,” James Baldwin attempts to describe the experience of being a particular type of stranger – the only black man in a small Swiss village which, before him, “had never seen a Negro” (*Native* 79). This situation offers Baldwin a rare opportunity for reflection because of its simplified, contained conditions – a small, homogenous, relatively isolated community’s first face-to-face encounter with black/white racial difference. And it is, perhaps, in expectation of a kind of Myrdalian imagination of this encounter that Baldwin announces that, after two visits over the course of a year, “I remain as much a stranger today as I was on the first day that I arrived” (*Native* 81). Attempting to come to some understanding of this counterintuitive, seemingly permanent situation, Baldwin will encounter a series of cultural narratives which precondition both the perception of strangers in the modern world and the

experience of being a stranger, marked by race, within it. In doing so, he challenges a liberal-realist account of the stranger as a “pre-cultural” or authentic, pre-ideological relation as a means of effecting a kind of reversal in accepted notions of the “Negro problem” in postwar U.S. political culture. In this opening reading, I will attempt to isolate the stranger’s function for Baldwin’s conception of social reality and his explicit and implicit criticisms of the forms of racial liberal “knowing” that circulated prominently during the Cold War era. Broadly put, a theory of the stranger as a liberal power relation not only calls into question the authenticity of the “knowledge-relations gap” that dominated racial-liberal conceptions of the race problem, it also goes one step further towards articulating the disruptive, determinate “reality” that Baldwin locates underneath the protective façade of liberalist modern consciousness.

First of all, Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village” is about the category of the stranger framed within a critical understanding of western modernity’s narrative of cultural progress – “people,” writes Baldwin, “are trapped in history and history is trapped in them” (*Native* 81). Even in this village, which has never actually laid eyes on a black man, a structural imagination of race has preceded the young writer in the form of “a custom... of ‘buying’ African natives for the purpose of converting them to Christianity” (*Native* 82). Baldwin describes this annual ritual through a series of recognizable tropes, centered on a holiday “*carnaval*” where the village children, in blackface, solicit money to support European missionaries in Africa. Their recognition of this stranger in their village is conditioned by this understanding of the moral position of Africa (as Baldwin writes, the villagers “never really believe” that he is from America). Baldwin’s own entrance into the village has been heralded by a prior formation of identity, stereotype and narrative, which frames the racist reactions of the villagers to this black “stranger.” This stranger is, therefore, first and foremost a social relation framed in the

narratives which we carry with us. “Every legend,” he writes, “contains its residuum of truth, and the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it” (*Native* 84). These rituals have their root, suggests Baldwin, in that grand narrative of colonial first contact; he imagines “white men arriving for the first time in an African Village” where, for all intents and purposes, they should be “strangers there, as I am a stranger here” (*Native* 82). But he is also at pains to elaborate “a great difference” between the experiences of “being the first white man to be seen to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites” (*Native* 82). This difference is rooted in the given framework for interpreting this condition of “being seen.” Whereas the white man finds “tribute” in the astonishment of the natives “whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned,” the black man finds himself “among a people whose culture controls [him]” regardless of whether they know of his existence (*Native* 82). To the extent that culture (and the relations of power and identity that compose it) precedes the reception and interpretation of interactions between strangers, the experience of being a stranger in the world is foregrounded by these narratives of identity; while all are potentially strangers, they differently experience their “strangeness” as a consequence of these racialized narrative positions. In this sense, Baldwin argues, the experience of perpetual stranger-hood is a consequence of the way the African subject has been “strangely grafted” into a dominant cognitive mapping of white, Western modernity.

This familiar narrative, made strange through the author’s reversal of common-sense conceptions of strangerhood, is the foundation of an “innocent” white supremacy that Baldwin chronicles throughout his entire written corpus. Here, this innocence is evident in the villager’s unselfconscious mobilization of these tropes of white supremacy. Recognizing, in some way, that the most painful meanings of this tableau of European contact with “the primitive” are part

of a history that he carries exclusively in his own experience, Baldwin is “careful to express astonishment and pleasure” at the charitable impulses of his white hosts. Like the village children who run ahead of him shouting “*Neger*,” the village hosts have “no way of knowing the echoes” which resonate across the West’s imagination of blackness to reflect his own history and experience. They “can scarcely be held responsible for European culture,” even as they are its direct and most privileged heirs (*Native* 83). Like himself, the villagers are “trapped in history” and inherent in this “trap” are the rationalizations that are required to maintain this innocence.

It is of quite considerable significance that black men remain, in the imagination, and in overwhelming numbers in fact, beyond the disciplines of salvation; and this despite the fact that the West has been ‘buying’ African natives for centuries. There is, I should *Hazard*, an instantaneous necessity to be divorced from this so visibly unsaved stranger, in whose heart, moreover, one cannot guess what dreams of vengeance are being nourished; and, at the same time, there are few things on earth more attractive than the idea of the unspeakable liberty which is allowed the unredeemed. (*Native* 84)

Contained within the religiously inflected imagination of first contact is the dynamic which, extrapolated, defines the white, Western world’s dangerously ambivalent perception of the African subject – the moral rejection which is also a form of desire. This is reflected in the treatment of the villagers over time; some children greet him, while others, “having been taught that the devil is a black man,” still run screaming. And while some of the village men drink with him, others accuse him of stealing wood behind their back and glare at him with “paranoiac malevolence” when “out walking with their Sunday girl, they see a Negro male approach” (*Native* 85). Thus, even as Baldwin admits that his claim to perpetual strangerhood is “not quite true,” we can see how the relationship that he eventually achieves with the villagers is ultimately

conditioned by an extrapolation of that original imagination of the primitive, “visibly unsaved” (ultimately, unsavable) native, tropes which touch down inexorably on the black man as a specifically sexual threat. What results, according to Baldwin, is not an understanding of the Negro “as a man” but the preservation of the “innocence” and moral supremacy of white identity itself. Remaining “comfortably abstract” in relation to their own consciences, the black man is recognized only as an ever more local version of the cipher that he was originally designed to be. White and black encounter each other as strangers, not in the village, but in a “legend” which organizes a much less local imagination. It is in this sense, that Baldwin will proclaim that, “these people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it” (*Native* 83). Every relationship that he has with his hosts reenacts this primal scene in some form; civilization encounters the primitive in every case, and, in every case, the purpose of this misrecognition is to preserve the condition of possibility for both western modernity and white supremacy simultaneously. Narrative (in the broadest sense) is the true scene of first contact, and encounters with strangers are actually encounters between subjects arranged in their moral and social positions “from the point of view of power.” In this sense, the relations of power which define and condition our experience of strangers are native to the foundational racist imaginations of Western modernity. For Baldwin, the conceptual organization of “strangerhood” is symptomatic of the power relations embedded in the true site of “first contact” – the modern imagination of race.

Thus does Baldwin’s social consciousness invest itself in the recognition of a “reality” that is *obscured* by the forms of “knowing” that define one as a stranger. Moreover, it is important to note that Baldwin’s leveraging of a conventional understanding of strangers is

exactly how he is able to reorient his readers to his understanding of social “reality” with which to diagnose the United States’s racially exceptional status in Western history. Baldwin insists that there is a “dreadful abyss between the streets of [the Swiss] village and the streets of the city, in which [he] was born” (*Native* 85). “No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive” (*Native* 89). American national identity, suggests Baldwin is already a complex condition of productive ambivalence. Looking on the black man “as a stranger” is a “luxury,” because it is under a condition of stranger-hood that the very possibility of white supremacy can be maintained. But while the black man “remained comfortably abstract” for a European context where these racialized “possessions” were located largely in the colonies (thus representing “no threat whatsoever to European identity”), in the U.S., the American Negro’s status is defined by an “inescapable ambivalence” centered on his status as “a citizen” in the context of the West, where, for all the legends, he should be a perpetual stranger (*Native* 86-88). Recalling Zygmunt Bauman’s formulation (see Chapter 1), this ambivalence “threatens the comfort of order” by making “innocence” impossible – those Americans who are privileged “from point of view of power” were loath to extend full inclusion to the black man, “for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men. But not to accept him was to deny his human reality, his human weight and complexity...” (*Native* 88). In America, writes Baldwin, the reality of black humanity is inescapable, and the history of race relations in the U.S. can be thought of in terms of white struggles to deny or rationalize what they cannot avoid seeing. This “weakening of our grasp of reality” is consequence of the desire to preserve not simply white supremacy, but its status as “innocent” (*Native* 89).

In breaking down the terms of analysis in “Stranger in the Village,” I have attempted to suggest that Baldwin’s rejection of the liberal-realist stranger is a vital component of his challenge to racial liberal epistemology and the “knowledge-relations gap.” While Myrdal-ian formulations of a *lack of knowledge* between white and black communities called for representational technologies to familiarize them (resulting in the normalizing dimensions of the race novel that Melamed details), Baldwin suggests that this condition of strangerhood is *constructed* in order to obscure the roots of white identity (recalling his imperative to interrogate “the nigger” as a white “need” in the 1963 roundtable). As always, the stranger’s particular recognition is set in motion relative to claims to “realism,” in this case, Baldwin’s attempt to generate a usable realism (both social and literary) in the context of postwar U.S. racial struggle. Interestingly, this realism is only perceivable through the recognition of the stranger’s role in mystifying the relations between blacks and whites and obscuring the historical truth of national intimacy between them. Not only does Baldwin’s recognition of the stranger’s vexed epistemology manifests as a series of profound reversals in common-sense interpretations of the term, where the stranger is conceptually located interior to (rather than prior to) the recognition of cultural markings and social identities, but the stranger becomes, in this turn, evident as a series of proscribed social positions, all of which are symptomatic of the historical power relationships (reproduced in and through narrative conventions) that make the African-American a perpetual stranger within context of liberal modernity, i.e. the world that whites have made. This re-conceptualization of stranger realism, as we will see, hinges on the author’s ability to assume a critical relation, not simply to legibility and representational reductionism, but to illegibility as a representational strategy. It is precisely this representational strategy, built on a

rejection of the liberal-realist stranger, which Baldwin reaches for in his 1962 New York novel, *Another Country*.

As an epigraph to the novel, Baldwin chose a passage from Henry James's *Prefaces*, a work originally published as a series of introductions to a multi-volume New York Edition of his fiction in 1909. In context, the quote itself is about the problem writing and representing beyond the great "convenience" of conventions of recognition and signification (what James refers to as "the old sweet Anglo-Saxon spell") which "suggest more communities and comprehensions than conundrums" and which exist to inspire "confidence" in a "familiar" and "more or less conceivable tradition."⁹⁸ That James diagnosed this "confidence" and intelligibility in a language of race and nation (the answer to all questions of human motivation and character being, "why, they're just the American vague variety of the dear old Anglo-Saxon race") would not have escaped Baldwin's notice. On the other side of this racial/national logic of representative "convenience," James finds "alien syllables and sounds" and "exotic symbols" whose meanings and subjects ("Ninevites" he calls them, "for convenience") are "beyond his divination." Thus, in order to describe the necessary breakdown of conventional literary (ethnic) frames of meaning and to critique reader's reliance on them, James mobilizes a totally conventional, racial-political language of inside/outside distinctions to describe the field of non-meaning that he finds beyond his own subjective, cultural borders.

They strike one, above all, as giving no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated by human use; to this inarticulate state they probably form, collectively, the most unprecedented of monuments; abysmal the mystery of what they think, what they feel, what they want, what they suppose themselves to be saying.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Henry James. "Lady Barbarina" *Henry James: Literary Criticism*. (New York, NY: Library of America, 1984) p. 1217

⁹⁹ James Baldwin. *Another Country*. (New York, NY: Vintage International. 1993) epigraph

Herein lies the irony, I would suggest, inherent to Baldwin's mobilization of this quote. For Baldwin's epigraph captures James critically assessing the limits of a conventional interpretive apparatus, while uncritically framing his own understanding of intelligibility itself in the terms of Western colonial modernity. But in *Another Country*, the "they" of this epigraph refers not to James's "exotics" but to the New Yorkers of Baldwin's novel, locating the problem of the outside squarely on the inside. As a statement on the function of narrative convention, Baldwin uses this quote to frame his novel in the breakdown and aftermath of traditional (racialized) frames of representational meaning, relocating this crisis in the city which only decades before had served as the symbolic heart of American progress. As a statement on the novel's basic content, it expresses a desire to isolate and represent a truth of human motive and purpose which is unapproachable and even obscured by stable, conventional frameworks for realist social meaning: the transparency of language and the logic of testimony. At the intersection of these two interconnected projects, we encounter a critique of the racially inflected discourse with which the Western subject has approached forms of experience and expression alien to its own frames of intelligibility. Whereas James looks to the realm of the "inarticulate" beyond linguistic convention in the terms which defined Western man's "first encounter" with the black man, Baldwin's appropriation of this text implies his desire to locate James's "exotic" and inarticulate strangers in the very heart of postwar American modernity.

Invoking this politically-vexed critique of literary representation in the opening of his novel, Baldwin roots his story in failures of legibility that are problematically attributed to failures of "articulation" – problems of the listener that are hoisted on the speaker by way of an uneven relation to power, secured by a logic of race. The distinction between James and Baldwin articulates two forms of representational illegibility, each inflected differently by the

political, cultural vocabulary used to define their encounter. One form of illegibility is constructed as a means of authorizing a kind of sanctioned ignorance, naturalizing racial liberalism's claims to be able to approach the race problem authentically as a stranger while incorporating traditional frameworks of dominance in the relation. The other is a form of illegibility that refuses the stable positionality of the listener/viewer and speaker/object relation, making the self and the home into illegible objects in need of translation. While James can suggest the ethical dimension of representational complexity (critiquing the "conformity" of those who expect their specific cultural assumptions to provide the answer to every question of human character), he approaches and identifies illegibility itself through a vocabulary which confirms the stable boundaries of his own self-knowledge. But in adopting this quote as the defining problematic of *Another Country*, Baldwin implicates both white and black subjects (those that have been privileged as the readers of the "race problem" and those who are its objects) in the "mystery" of motivation, desire, and articulation. In terms of the critique of racial knowledge, this describes his intent (evident throughout the whole novel) to interrogate white desires for racialized knowledge alongside the construction of black subjectivity in the crucible of postwar anti-racist discourse.

This reading of the epigraph is meant to suggest that Baldwin's rejection of the stranger is simultaneously a criticism of racial liberal constructions of race and a critique of a traditional liberal conception of representational difference itself. And, in performing this rejection of the stranger implicitly in his novel, Baldwin disrupts a traditional conception of subjectivity rooted in these same assumptions. In an early moment of what will become one of the central couplings of the novel, Vivaldo Moore and Ida Scott wake together in his Greenwich Village apartment. The death of Rufus (Vivaldo's best friend and Ida's brother) has brought them together, and

here, we see them at the beginning of their relationship. As Vivaldo looks over his new lover's sleeping face, the narrative entertains a reflection on the paradoxical nature of intimacy.

“Her face would now be, forever, more mysterious and impenetrable than the face of a stranger. Strangers' faces hold no secrets because the imagination does not invest them with any. But the face of a lover is an unknown precisely because it is invested with so much of oneself. It is a mystery, containing, like all mysteries, the possibility of torment” (*Country* 172).

On its surface, this statement upends a more traditional antipathy between the stranger and the lover by positing “imagination” as a mediating third party, inviting a comparison to Baldwin's treatment of the concept in “Stranger in the Village.” While strangers are essentially “unknown,” the imagination conspires to reduce them to a cipher; strangers are perpetual and familiar to the extent that the imagination “invests” them with forms of inherited, received cultural “knowing” – knowledge that is built to confirm the relations that originally composed it (the seer who discovers the coherence of his own identity in the discovery of its limits). From this perspective, nothing could be less mysterious than the face of a stranger, whose “place” and relation to the looking subject is never in question. The lover's face, on the other hand, is “unknown” because the distance between “us and them” – the moral and social distance maintained by the forms of “knowing” which frame strangers (and, conversely, a stable point of orientation for knowing “oneself”) - is in crisis. Thus does Baldwin attribute a symptomatic certainty to the figure of the stranger while characterizing the face of the lover in terms of a deconstructive uncertainty; in doing so, he devises a narrative trope with which to express his critique of liberal “reality.”

Of course, the not-so-hidden subtext of Vivaldo's reflections here is the racial difference between the two lovers: Vivaldo is the novel's quintessential white, male liberal and Ida is a young black woman from Harlem. And readers of the novel will recognize that it is exactly this relationship between Ida and Vivaldo (each of which are "trapped in history" in their own way) that Baldwin will use to investigate both the "mysteries" and the "torment" of postwar liberal race politics. As she sleeps, Vivaldo's "torment" comes from his considerable anxiety at the thought that "she was in his bed but she was far from him; she was with him and yet she was not with him" (*Country* 172). Unable to tolerate this figurative distance, he is "troubled with questions" including a desire to know the racial identity of her former lovers. These questions eventually turn inward, as he angrily asks himself "what difference does any of it make?" This turn in the questioning turns the questioner into the object of the inquiry (placing Vivaldo's own rubric of difference under spotlight). This disruptive line of questioning is intolerable; Vivaldo defers the problem by reassuring himself that "she would tell him one of these days," turning back to Ida as the "mystery" and ignoring the greater mystery of his own investment in race. But he remains haunted by the sense that she is only acting as "the vehicle of his relief," frustrating his attempts to "strike deeper into that incredible country." This enduring structure of reflection and repression describes a post-war liberal subject who's psychical and emotional "investments" maintain an imagined, mystified concept of social distance. As an account of "psychological complexity," this representation of Vivaldo's internal struggles does not confirm the transcendent universality of the individual beyond the vulgar reductions of race, but locates race itself at the center of a struggle to understand the repressed desires that motivate white anti-racism. The allusion to the novel's title in this scene signals a reversal of the type that is proposed in both the epigraph and the rejection of the stranger in general, at the scale of liberal

nationalist identity; the logic of the “country” that proposes a stable set of boundaries with which to identify the unknown Other in relation to a known and stable self is, here, an evasion. The liberal-nationalist subject is, in this framework, defined by a series of underlying desires for racial self-knowledge that it must, by definition, disavow.

My larger argument here is that Baldwin’s rejection of the conventional liberal imagination of the stranger is at the center of the writer’s critical intervention into the epistemological underpinnings of the postwar transformation of racial discourse. Rather than articulating the moment of cross-racial intimacy in more conventional racial-liberal progressive terms, where two strangers learn to establish a transcendent relation above or beyond race categories, Vivaldo and Ida’s intimacy is coded as a crisis of knowing, one which confounds the comfortable (illusory) distance and illegibility constructed by the imagination of the stranger and opens up a much more disruptive relation to the self, articulated through the same racial, sexual terms that this intimacy is supposed to render as reductive and contingent. As I will attempt to show in the remainder of this reading, this rejection supplies *Another Country* with the conceptual tools with which to incorporate an account of the production of liberal anti-racism into its own representational vision and to drastically reconfigure many of the conventions of character and urban sociality that have contributed to this production. The challenge to these conventions operates, in a number of different ways, as a challenge to racial liberal conceptions of realism and liberal political consciousness simultaneously. As an urban novel, *Another Country*, offers a radical urbanism that challenges the conventional narratives of social vision and interaction which made the Myrdal-ian “knowledge-relations gap” so common-sense. And in challenging the way that realist novels about race in the city have been articulated to liberal anti-racist projects, Baldwin offers an alternative vision of urban “reality” where liberal norms

offer a purposefully reductive and ultimately violent conception of racial difference and where writing cannot “realistically” be a matter of transcending/repressing the investments in racial identity that motivates both the postwar desire for and rejection of racial categories.

The Postwar Urban Realism and the Problem of Difference

In the postwar period, the possibility for speaking and writing the truth about race (and, truly, the nature of social differences of all types) was invested in the city and urban representations in a number of important ways. In the postwar “culture of containment,” the city was, once again, “un-American”, and this categorization was explicitly about how urban environments impacted a political logic of social identity. Julie Abraham’s investigation of postwar sexuality, for instance, argues that while “homosexuality was clearly, in itself, to be rejected,” the postwar gay community’s visibility as an urban phenomenon meant that “it could also represent two other, more general forms of attachment – to social group and to place – which were to become increasingly unpopular.”¹⁰⁰ Abraham, in this analysis, points us to “an underlying cultural campaign of the post war years” to reinforce the classic liberal antagonism towards social groups in the city. As Abraham explains, this politics of urban containment was sustained through a series of seemingly paradoxical imaginations of urban sociality.

Homosexuals’ and communists’ pursuit of improper relations took two other, particularly dire, linked forms in the popular imagination, both dependent on an urban setting. First, they crossed proper social boundaries of class and of race, and second, they formed groups. These behaviors were associated with the city because cities not only contained people of different classes and races but were understood to foster the blurring of class

¹⁰⁰ Julie Abraham. *Metropolitan Lovers: The Homosexuality of Cities*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2009) p. 170

and racial boundaries in the promiscuous intermingling inevitable in urban crowds. Yet, at the same time, those who lived in cities belonged to groups. (Abraham 174-175)

It is worthwhile to pause and reflect on this ambivalence. On the one hand, the anxiety over the “blurring” of boundaries registers a familiar concern with urban illegibility, mass culture politics and social disorder. But as Abraham notes, both communists and homosexuals were characterized by “their potential illegibility to ‘normal’ persons *and* their invariable legibility to each other” (177, my italics). It was this last point that lent an air of conspiracy and threat to the Cold War anxiety over urban difference and the idea that the city fostered social groups – the conviction that, below the surface of what “normal” vision could perceive, the members of these groups “all know each other” due to some special knowledge or perception that was an essential result of their difference. This concern with “improper attachments” and the danger of a supposedly un-American affiliation to particular identity or place-based groups was also applied to racial or ethnic slum populations reinforcing the view of American nationality as “the antithesis of a system of ethnic and racial marks” (Singh 18). The danger of the city was that it fostered particular group affiliations, giving free expression to the natural un-American tendencies of all forms of social deviation from a norm of unmarked (white, heterosexual, liberal) individualism. The contradiction that is evident in the collision of these anxieties – that urban minority groups were a threat to an American way of life because they both formed politicized groups based on their identities *and* because they dared to blur the lines that bound them into these groups – speaks to the ambivalent position that visible or “legible” differences hold in a mainstream liberal imagination of social wellbeing. In another sense, Abraham points us to an important dynamic: the production of these urban groups as “improper” was coextensive

which their production as “illegible” to an American norm, defining them both as a threat to this normativity and a desirable object of inquiry for this normative vision.

Within the realm of postwar literary production, these anxieties were disseminated and managed through the strong influence of noir on urban representations. Reading these fictions, Elizabeth Wheeler offers a version of literary containment where “the quarantine of memory goes together with the fictional containment of violence and quarantine of neighborhoods.”¹⁰¹ Usually organized by the perspective of a lone, alienated, male protagonist, who “has a privileged standpoint on urban reality unavailable to those who surround him,” and dedicated to the partitioning of safe and dangerous urban spaces, noir fictions narratively contain any potential for “blurred boundaries” while simultaneously pathologizing any form of community as “improper connection. “Lack of hominess may provide noir’s greatest form of social critique. The decadent city of noir cast a shadow over a determinedly cheerful postwar optimism. It mocks the ideal of community based on hypocrisy, false prettiness, and false consensus... Nevertheless, noir offers no alternative vision of community. Instead it offers lone manhood” (Wheeler 24). Wheeler notes that the authority of the detached male expertise that surveys this “decadent city” is granted with a paradoxical combination of rights – totally detached from social relations, but granted extreme mobility and full access to urban society’s many enclaves and divisions. The freedom of the white, male noir hero is precisely his *freedom from attachments* to community and social groups of any kind. But scholarship on postwar urban writing also suggests that this genre of literature was equally subject to the racial contradiction of realist literature that I argued in the first section of this chapter. Wheeler notes that, “in a segregated city... the African American noir hero cannot have total access or avoid racial specificity. He is

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth A. Wheeler. *Uncontained: Urban Fiction in Post War America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 2001) p. 11

marked by race, and this marking confines him to certain parts of town” (20). Part of my argument here is that his critical rubric of racial “marking” consents in many ways to the very liberal discourses of freedom (defined as rugged individualism) that it sees itself as critically engaging. For if these noir fictions perpetuate a liberal conception of freedom as in opposition to any form of social allegiance or relations, then the conceptualization of race as a “mark” operates in collusion with this limited politics by offering a parallel imagination of emancipation as only possible once the circulation and recognition of these surface “marks” can be done away with, freeing the now “unmarked” subject from the “confines” that are determined by his or her particular identity. Wheeler, in other words, characterizes noirs privileged meanings as roughly congruent with liberalist definitions of freedom as freedom *from* identity.

But while urban community could be said to inhibit the exercise of socially transcendent freedom evident in the noir hero whose masculine individualism transcends the corrupted relations derived from group-based affiliations, the logics of segregation also resulted in a different type of “representative authority” for black (male) writers. In his *October Cities*, Carlo Rotella documents many of the dramatic changes in postwar urban landscape including the shift to postindustrial modes of production (including an attendant decline in white ethnic enclaves and the rise of the black slum) as well as a renewed language of “urban crisis.” This crisis, which went about the task of linking the sociology of juvenile delinquency with the “race problems” of Northern formerly-industrial cities, produced a “ghetto-centric” account of the era’s most publicly visible urban problems, inexorably linking urban life with a conception of a pathological culture. In this way, the ghetto became *the* primary object of analysis for anyone concerned with “the Negro problem.” Buttressing this new focus was a new genre of ghetto testimonial which, amongst other things, reinstated a model of “social representativeness” upon

the frame of the authoritative insider, a model that relied upon the accreditation provided by various forms of linguistic and narrative “street credibility.” “As the ghetto became the definitive inner-city terrain in which to pursue the definitive urban subject of race, the ex-delinquent authors of first-person ghetto narratives became powerfully authoritative urban intellectuals.”¹⁰² According to Rotella, these narratives would conjure up “a new set of appropriate voices and characters through which American culture undertook to know the ghetto by the testimony of its inhabitants” (270). There is a dialectical relation, in this circumstance, between the extent to which the “second ghetto” was produced (or “contained”) as a discreet and alien territory internal to the US and the political need to produce knowledge of it based on the privileged experience (and narrative tropes) of the inner-city insider. As a paradigm shift in the dominant rubric of city representation, this “changing calculus of authorship” indicated a reorientation of the terms with which American culture attempted to develop “a comprehensive conceptual response to the urban transformations postwar period” by leaning heavily on a logic of representative speakers and dialects, made authoritative by the containment of urban geographical imaginations (Rotella 212). And as another example of a racial liberal discourse of realist representation, the ghetto testimonial only achieves this authority to the extent that its inhabitants can be (culturally, geographically) constructed as strangers who can, through the testimony that is their writing, be unproblematically made “known” to a white liberal audience.

Baldwin, in this account, was (or was quickly becoming) out of step with a literary idiom that was documenting changes and challenges in the urban landscape through the dominant language of ghetto “crisis.” While surveying the reception of Claude Brown’s *Manchild of the Promised Land*, Rotella cites a *Newsweek* review which celebrates the supplanting of an “elegant

¹⁰² Carlo Rotella. *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature*. (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press. 1998) p. 270

Baldwinian rhetoric” with the “unmistakable authenticity” of Brown’s street dialect, and which claims for Brown’s novel a pedagogy which “could have told Governor Brown more about Watts than all the reports compiled by all the McCone commissions, past, present and – inevitably – yet to come” (211). For Rotella, “the Watts riot and the McCone Commission’s effort to explain it lent special force to Brown’s representation of Harlem in ways that elevated it above those written by literary sophisticates like Baldwin, Hughes... all of whom suddenly appeared to be out of touch with what was happening on the streets of contemporary cities” (211). The authenticity of narrative voices like Brown’s was becoming essential for the production of authoritative knowledge of the “day-to-day” street-level existence of the residents of the racial ghetto. But, importantly, it was also constructed by the logics and conventions of “urban crisis” itself, confirmed as “authentic” (and thus, authoritative) in its delinquent register and its logics of personal development. Specifically within the construction of the African-American urban narrative, then, we can see the extension of Abraham’s characterization of the threat of urban sociality in a liberal nationalist frame. In the ghetto testimonial (and its privileged status within racial liberal conceptions of racial progress), we have a literary form that articulates directly to the desire to make readable what has been constructed as un-American in its group-based illegibility to the unmarked norm. The logic of authentic voice that it leans on should be understood as an extension of the racial liberal conception of the race novel’s “transparency.”

In this short survey of perspectives on postwar urban literary, cultural production, the question of the city as the site of social difference revolves around a series of familiar liberal tropes and contradictions. Urban difference is presented as an inherent problem for liberal political perception, imagined as illegible in ways that frame anxieties over non-normative identity-based groupings and, conversely, that offer literary forms as a corrective to this limited

vision. Urban illegibility is the constant feature in the way that both the problem and solution of urban difference is imagined. My concern (and, I would suggest, Baldwin's) is not so much in whether we can empirically verify the fact or experience of this illegibility, but in how the continual assertions of illegibility, as the key problem of the city, shape conceptions of the nature of that difference and whether that difference can be socially, politically transcended in the name of establishing a more equal, liberal order. As the *Newsweek* article suggested, Baldwin's politics of representation do indeed depart dramatically from the racial liberal conventions of the postwar urban race novel, but not solely in terms of its literary "rhetoric" or high-culture posturing. As I will attempt to show here, *Another Country* labors to represent an urbanism that not only challenges the "urban illegibility" model of thinking the postwar "race problem" but that suggests that the forms of liberal anti-racism that emerge to resolve the issue of urban difference are themselves a kind of self-imposed limited vision.

To begin with, the novel opens by expressing a profoundly ambivalent relation to the idea of recognition. In the first chapter of the book, which tells the story of Rufus's last night in the city and, finally, his suicide, Baldwin attempts to chronicle the racial consciousness of the postwar city in terms of Rufus's experience of urban space. The chapter begins with Rufus, standing on the streets in Times Square, in a condition of hunger and desperation, unable to find a place to use the bathroom for fear of being "recognized." While this fear of recognition is attributed, in the novel, to his shame over his dirty, degraded appearance, due to a whole month of "hiding" in streets, subways, and darkened theaters, it is the representation of the city itself that presses against the assumptions of racial liberal urbanism. Walking under the skyscrapers, the novel presents Rufus as "part of an unprecedented multitude."

There were boys and girls drinking coffee at the drugstore counters who were held back from his condition by barriers as perishable as their dwindling cigarettes. They could scarcely bear their knowledge, nor could they have borne the sight of Rufus, but they knew why he was in the streets tonight, why he rode the subways all night long...

(Country 4)

Thus, at this most early stage of the novel, Baldwin moves to undo the urban geography of difference, illegibility, and “knowledge” that subtends the ghetto testimonial’s authority and social value. Rather than populating his city with ignorant white citizens characterized by a limited vision, in need of the education provided by black testimony, Baldwin suggests that, not only the fact of Rufus’s suffering, but also the terms of its production, are already known. Thus, instead of embedding itself in the underlying political “common sense” of the knowledge-relations gap, the novel opens by presenting the problem of urban blackness as a condition where being recognized – being named – is a type of violence. Rufus’s suffering in these scenes derives from the idea that “nothing of his belonged to him anymore,” including the terms of his own self-recognition. The section ends with him imagining Ida’s voice in his head, chiding him for the visibility of his degradation. “My Lord, Rufus, you got no right to walk around like this. Don’t you know we’re counting on you?” (*Country 7*). Ida’s “we” evokes, not just family, but racial community, an abstraction that has claimed ownership over Rufus’s experience in the name of producing a logic of racial representativeness. The abundance of outside voices that populate Rufus’s thoughts in this scene, therefore, stand for more than his self-consciousness and shame. They articulate the various rubrics of legibility (and intentional illegibility) that claim and value black visibility for their own political ends.

A complex interplay of recognition and purposeful non-recognition – a careful and strategic negotiation of which knowledges can or cannot be admitted – are evident in every encounter with racial difference in Rufus’s New York. There are, of course, the anxieties over the racist terms of black, public legibility and the fear of racially motivated violence that Rufus narrates. On the streets of Times Square, he contemplates walking to Harlem “but he was afraid of the police he would encounter in his passage through the city” (*Country* 41). However, the majority of this anxiety over recognition in public space is reserved for scenes of interracial sociality, with his white friend, Vivaldo and, primarily, with his white girlfriend, Leona. On the night that he meets her, he becomes uneasy when it becomes clear that Leona will soon be the only white person left in the club and is relieved when they are able to catch a cab to avoid the policemen that patrol the streets in front of the club. In a later recollection, Rufus and Leona venture out into the Village with Vivaldo, where “the big world... stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people” (*Country* 27). Though Rufus is acutely aware of the surveillance they are subject to on the streets, Leona “seemed to be oblivious of everything and everyone but him. And if there had been any doubt concerning their relationship, her eyes were enough to dispel it” (*Country* 30). When Rufus reacts angrily to a young man who “looked at him with hatred” and glanced at Leona “as though she were a whore,” she recognizes his discomfort and attempts to dispel it, claiming that the problem with the racist adolescent is that he “don’t know no better.” This claim, that a lack of “knowledge” is what motivates racism, articulates itself along conventional white liberal lines; she insists that Rufus “could probably make friends with him real easy if [he] tried,” insisting upon the idea that a lack of intimate “knowing” is all that stands in the way of cross-racial harmony. In doing so, she (inadvertently) situates her own “knowledge” in a position of authority with which to definitively describe the

problem of race – “I’m telling you boy, I know.” Rufus does not attempt to impose any privileged “knowledge” of his own, instead reacting abruptly to being called “boy,” foreshadowing, at this early stage of their relationship, the forms of racial resentment and violence that will eventually bring it to its tragic conclusion.

In this way, white, liberal discourse situates itself as the privileged narrator on the nature of social difference – knowing what is not known – and, like the epigraph from Henry James, unselfconsciously replicates the language of subjection that is native to the racist discourse that it proposes to have an objective vision of. The privilege of whiteness, in this passage, is not figured discursively as a position of authority within the realm of represented difference, but rather as an authority over the signification of difference as such, a position, presiding over knowledge itself, from which to subtly manipulate the structure of sameness and difference which makes social experience legible. A position from which to assign people the position of the stranger. But this position of knowledge, scripted by the racial liberalist conception of the knowledge-relations gap, is deeply complicated by the terms which construct Leona and Rufus’s relationship in the first place. In the tense flirtation that marks their initial encounter, Rufus provokes Leona over her Southern accent, asking her “Didn’t they warn you down home about the darkies you’d find up North?” (*Country* 13). Her response, that “people’s just people as far as I’m concerned,” provokes an ambivalent reaction from Rufus. In his mind, he ruminates angrily that “pussy’s just pussy as far as [he was] concerned,” but at the same time is “grateful” for the way that her tone allows him to “locate himself.” For Leona, the assertion that “people’s just people” roots her perception in a liberal definition of racial justice, diffusing the question of blackness rather than answering it – unlike the young man, she claims to have eradicated race from the frameworks of recognition that she uses to negotiate the social landscape of New York.

Her recognition of people's "people-ness" proves that her vision is free of racial prejudice, imagined as an illegitimate form of recognition laid over a more just and secure liberal humanist vision. Rufus's ambivalent relationship to this vision (which is already a non-recognition of his own experience) serves to illustrate the violence of this abrupt rhetoric of universality. If there is nothing particular about him, then there can be no particular reason to value her either; his equation of the deeply misogynist conceit that "pussy's just pussy" and Leona's liberal humanist mantra calls attention to the way that both mobilize the violence of "sameness" as a form of purposeful non-recognition, freeing them from the need to reckon with each other in any specific way. Moments later, Leona will relate a small piece of her own troubled past, including her own specific struggles with white domesticity, which Rufus will attempt to shrug off. "Something touched his imagination for a moment, suggesting that Leona was a person and had her story and that all stories were trouble. But he shook the suggestion off. He wouldn't be around long enough to be bugged by her story. He just wanted her for tonight" (*Country* 13). Here, the idea of Leona as a "person" does not confirm the transcendent logic of liberal humanist universality; rather, it constructs a discursive distance that maintains a logic of exploitative disinvestment. For Baldwin's urban citizens, "all stories were trouble" in the sense that they disrupt the counterfactual universality which, in this scene, marks Leona's degraded status as "no one in particular." In this complex string of overlapping social logics, being a "person" (marked by "stories" and, hence, differences) and being "people" (unmarked in a way that frames the possibility of a liberal anti-racist relationship) are antithetical, in that the need to recognize persons as "people" precludes the possibility of hearing the individual stories which would make them more (not less) than signifiers of a universal condition.

This need to reject “stories” runs parallel to Vivaldo’s inability to make his novel’s characters “testify” of themselves, and embedded in this disjunct – suspended in the silence that runs between them – is the liberalist conflict between universality and representational inscription. The entrance of the concept of the “story” into Baldwin’s narrative, and its position within the social world that *Another Country* seeks to represent, marks the novel’s ambivalent relation towards the racial liberal representational project, acknowledging as it does the vulnerability of any act of “saying” to the knowing rubrics of meaning that are imposed upon it. In terms of the “story” of race that the novel itself is attempting to tell, this attempt to incorporate “storytelling” and acts of reading/hearing into the representational vision of the narrative draws our attention to all the moments where Baldwin’s characters *refuse* to hear the stories which express forms of reality that they would rather not incorporate into their own vision. After a racially-motivated barfight in which both of them are badly injured, Rufus urges Vivaldo to go to seek professional treatment without him, knowing that “it’s gonna be a whole lot of who shot John” if he accompanies his white friend to hospital. Vivaldo, barely able to walk, replies, “I really don’t want to hear all of that shit, Rufus” (*Country* 35). Vivaldo’s refusal to hear that his own potential survival and his friend’s relative vulnerability to violence are constructed by race is coextensive with his commitment to their friendship; the fight itself had occurred as Vivaldo defended his “buddy” from the explicitly racial slurs of his own ex-girlfriend, Jane. Like Leona, Vivaldo’s refusal to see or hear “all that shit” is a rhetorical maneuver which proves his allegiance to a project of racial justice, imagined within the discursive limits of racial liberalism’s definition of prejudice. Ironically, for him, throwing his body into the fight against racial prejudice and disavowing the story of racial difference are simply different tactics in the same war. This seeming contradiction is only resolvable by noting that the war itself is not

primarily concerned with ending racial violence as it is in preserving a racial liberal hermeneutics of that violence.

This conflict between liberal universalisms and representational inscription is what maintains the need to keep whiteness unmarked and outside of the play of difference. In a scene much later in the novel, Cass and Richard's children are attacked by a group of "colored boys" outside their home. When the eldest boy, Paul, asks, crying and upset, why these boys would want to attack them, especially since they "never even *saw* them before," the parents and their guest, Eric, are put in the position of having to explain the scene of racial conflict in liberal terms. The results are deeply unsatisfying. Richard tells his son that "sometimes the world is like that... You just have to watch out for people like that" (*Country* 243). He specifically avoids making use of a language of race, gesturing instead with universalized terms framed within unmarked, unarticulated differences (worlds and people "like that"). And when Paul, perceiving perhaps that something is remaining unsaid, asks, "Is it because they're colored and we're white?", Richard and Eric struggle to respond in liberal terms.

Richard swallowed. "The world is full of all kinds of people, and sometimes they do terrible things to each other, but – that's not why."

"Some colored people are very nice," said Eric, "and some are not so nice – like white people. Some are nice and some are terrible." But he did not sound very convincing and he wished he had held his peace. (*Country* 243)

This pedagogical moment operates with the intent of establishing the essential equality of black and white subjects, but, in doing so through a negation of categories of difference, it cedes its ability to see or explain anything about the nature of racial aggression. Racial justice is, here, played out as the discursive emptying of racial categories of any meaning at all. And this

particular discourse of racial equality betrays its own implicit investment in whiteness. Eric's comment is particularly telling; to avoid stereotyping the black boys, he recurses to a broad language of human variety – some people are “nice” while others are “not so nice – like white people.” The category of whiteness signifies as everything and, therefore, as nothing in particular – whiteness reads as a lack of difference, period. Whiteness is not a privileged racial category; it signifies, instead, as the absence of racial specificity, providing the unmarked content for a universality which is ostensibly empty and without particularity. In this framing, to say that “colored people” are “like white people” is meant to establish their shared humanity and the inadequacy of racial categories. But to do so is to lose your ability to speak of race at all, leaving both of Richard and Eric unable to construct a “convincing” explanation for the violence which has taken place on the street. Here an inability to say “what is happening on the streets” is not a matter of the illegibility of blackness to liberal vision, but a function of the need to maintain an account of racial inclusiveness in terms of a universality based on an unmarked whiteness.

Thus, for Baldwin, the possibility of a discursively functional liberal anti-racism is maintained in and through a careful disciplining of the hearing, seeing subject in relation to the urban scene and results in a functional disrecognition of difference masquerading as a commitment to universality. Part of the critical project of the novel, I argue is in crafting representations of the city itself that display the constructedness of this vision – the standard conception of the urban scene as filled with strangers divided by the color line is presented as a false consciousness. Moreover, the project of perfecting urban vision – of envisioning the urban scene from the perspective offered by liberal vision is itself under fire in this novel. This critique of urban vision is exemplified in a strange scene, as Rufus's recollection of his first night with Leona builds to its climactic moment on the rooftop of an apartment building. As their flirtation

builds, he asks her, “See anything you want?” (*Country* 19). Before she can answer, this naming of desire is correlated in the novel with the desire for the city.

At the same time he realized how far they were above the city and the lights below seemed to be calling him. He walked to the balcony and looked over. Looking straight down, he seemed to be standing on a cliff in the wilderness, seeing a kingdom and a river which had not been seen before. He could make it his, every inch of the territory which stretched beneath and around him now, and, unconsciously, he began whistling a tune and his foot moved to find the pedal of his drum. (*Country* 19-20)

Envisioned as an unconquered “territory,” the city “calls” to Rufus as a visible, possess-able totality – a “kingdom” which Michel de Certeau refers to in his essay, “Walking in the City,” as the “atopia-utopia of optical knowledge.”¹⁰³ From this perspective, “Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text” (de Certeau 92). As de Certeau suggests, the production of the city as “text” is motivated by an underlying desire to be “lifted out of the city’s grasp – a “lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (92). This vantage point on the city, in other words, stages a particular fantasy of the city as a text and posits the stability of the reading subject outside and above the play of meaning that operates below. In Baldwin’s novel, this “lust” for a transcendent visual mastery is simultaneous to Rufus’s lust for Leona, both a product of his having cleansed his perspective of her “story.” But in Rufus’s case, this desire for visual mastery does not offer a transcendent perspective “above” and independent from the “mark” of race, but rather, cites racial life as the “unconscious” impulse of this totalizing vision. Rufus’s involuntary move to “find the pedal of his drum” recalls what he earlier referred to as

¹⁰³ de Certeau, Michel (*The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. Berkley, CA: University of California Press. 1984) 92

“the beat” – the rhythms of an inner-city black culture that, in the words of his father, “a nigger...lives and dies according to...” (*Country* 6). Turning back to Ida, he once again asks her to name her desire. Her response is that she wants “it all” and, with that, he aggressively initiates their sex, taking on, in an unremarked way, the role of the “black male rapist.” His recollections narrate their sex act as a kind of unstoppable violence against the “milk-white bitch”, unrestrained by either “the white God himself or the imagination of “a lynch mob arriving on the wings” (*Country* 22). The vision of the city as a totality evades (rather than resolves) its racial character, just as Leona’s claim to “want it all” avoids locating her sexual desire for Rufus in racial terms. The result is a coupling wherein the racial struggle for conquest and revenge plays out in an unspoken, unacknowledged manner. In this account, the desire for the city as a readable text produces a reading subject whose condition of possibility is the repression of the racial symbolic vocabulary which mediates the relation between the black man and the white woman.

Inherent to Rufus’s narrative (and the novel at large) is a revised urbanism, one that includes an account of the unintended effects of liberal anti-racist discourse and its attendant politics of legibility. Challenging the construction of the urban scene as an illegible object, suggesting, instead, that the urban scene is the site of multiple recognitions that are repressed in the discourse of liberal universality that imagines transcendence as the only productive response to racial difference, Baldwin’s conception of the city is, I would argue, a critical response to the urban “stranger politics” of the postwar liberal imagination. This reconceptualization allows Baldwin to characterize liberal urban vision as a fundamentally defensive posture, one that is designed to limit the vision of the liberal looking subject in order to accommodate a racialized and unmarked definition of equality (as the recognition of an a priori whiteness) and liberty (as a

freedom from particular group identity and identification). It is notable, therefore, that Rufus's last night is spent in flight from the city itself. On the train, he sees "many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history" all of them "in a hurry to get away from one another" (*Country* 86). In these scenes, Rufus envisions the racial antagonism that is repressed in liberal vision as an antagonism to the recognition of race. And his suicide, throwing himself into the off of the George Washington Bridge into the Hudson River comes with his recognition that "he was black and the water was black" (*Country* 87). A final act of identification is what ends Rufus's story, making his suicide into a final, desperate attempt to wrestle back the conditions of legibility for this story – the story of his racial experience that is disrecognized in the production of liberal racial progress.

Who Can Say What Happens in Harlem?: The Production of Liberal Vision

Despite the significant violence that Baldwin's urbanism does to the assumptions of the postwar urban race novel and the logics of liberal urban spectatorship, the novel does strategically replay the discursive construction of race in the city under the regime of racial liberalism, especially in the scenes following Rufus's suicide in the first chapter. These scenes showcase, through extensive dialogue between Rufus's white friends, the discursive strategies that both construct and mediate the "knowledge-relations gap" between diverse subjects in ways that secure a liberal vision of social order. In other words, Baldwin stages the "gap" between white and black subjects, only to observe how the "meaning" of that gap is variously (and problematically) staged through liberal discourse and secured for (equally problematic) visions of the "race problem" from a white liberal perspective. Importantly, this narrative staging of "distance" is part and parcel of Baldwin's definition of realism in literature, as the writer himself suggested in the aforementioned *Playboy* article. Seeing the "reality" of postwar U.S. culture

involves, first and foremost, a recognition of an inherent “mystery.” Baldwin suggests this much in his elaboration of the novel’s foundational interest in the direction and suffering of Ida Scott.

In order to get this across, I had to put great lights around Ida and keep the reader at a certain distance from her. I had to let him see what Vivaldo thought, what Cass thought, what Eric thought, but what Ida thought had to remain for all of them the mystery which it is in life, and had to be, therefore, a kind of mystery for the reader, too, who had to be fascinated by her and wonder about her and care about her and try to figure out what was driving her to where she was so clearly going. (*Country* 397)

Baldwin’s realism – his attempt to make his fiction yield up mysteries as they are “in life” – is built on his ability to both the white liberal characters *and the reader* from “knowing” Ida in any conventional way. Baldwin explains his realism as Ida alone on a stage of “great lights” for the other character’s concerned, loving, but ultimately segregated consumption. Framing his own novel as a play within the play, Baldwin then makes his readers a part of the same audience space, constructing a position for the reader that is narratively designed to reproduce the epistemological limits of the white characters enclosed within the fiction. In emphasizing the open access we are given to the white character’s “thoughts” Baldwin also emphasizes that it is Ida’s interiority which defines this gap, left off the table “in life” and his fiction simultaneously. This “distance” would seem to describe the same space as the Myrdalian “knowledge-relations gap” if it weren’t that the relation of determination has been reversed; a lack of knowledge does not inhibit relations, it persists despite relations.

At the same time, this strategy conversely figures Baldwin’s white characters as “readers” themselves, bringing a variety of liberal reading practices into the frame of the narrative itself. In other words, Baldwin crafts a narrative where the relative means by which

blackness and the social “problem” of race are “recognized” by racial liberal vision are themselves brought into narrative view. Within these competing liberal epistemologies of social difference, the narrative develops a critical angle on different forms of social “knowledge” (and sanctioned ignorance), constructed to secure relations between subjects on the principle of strangerhood; hidden within the underlying logics of these various liberal explanations and apologies, *Another Country* documents the forms of legibility and, conversely, illegibility that are constructed in this discourse of race. In this sense, Baldwin’s novel represents and critiques the means through which black experience enters into representation for the purpose of public consumption in the era of an emerging, official antiracism. Returning to the conversation between James and Baldwin implied in the epigraph, I would suggest that this strategy of narrative distance is an attempt to demonstrate the problematic limits of language – its inability to produce any legibility that is not already invested in traditional frameworks of (racialized) meaning – while *also* breaking apart the racist terms which produce illegibility itself as an object of analysis. The relationship between the looking, hearing white subject and the unknown and testifying black voice is not a relationship between strangers, and to think of it as such is to consent to the relative racial positionalities proscribed by modernity’s narrative of “first contact” outlined in “Stranger in the Village.” In doing so, the novel suggests that all of these anti-racist imaginations are predicated on a series of disavowals and strategic silences, all subconsciously performed in the name of repressing an account of the production of white subjectivity in the crucible of racist discourse. In what follows, I will endeavor to track how these various accounts of “the race problem” can ultimately be understood as attempts to maintain what Baldwin would refer to as the “innocence” of white liberal identity.

It is notable that the readers of the novel receive the official news of Rufus's death alongside fellow "readers" Cass and Richard, in the context of their white, middle-class domestic routine. The questions which revolve, both spoken and unspoken, in this scene are, at heart, about their own complicity in the death of their friend. And as their conversation vacillates between guilt and judgment, Baldwin stages the work of racial-social "knowledge" in producing the postwar black male subject.

"He was heading that way," said Richard, mildly, "nothing, no one, could have stopped him."

"How do we know that?" Cass asked.

"Oh honey, you knew what he's been like these last few months. We hardly ever saw him but everybody knew."

Knew what? she wanted to ask. Just what in hell did everybody know? But she dried her eyes and stood up.

"Vivaldo tried like hell to stop what he was doing to Leona. And if he could have stopped him from doing *that* – well, then, maybe he could have stopped this, too."

(*Country* 106)

Richard's response is worth dwelling over here. In the scene prior to this one, he had reacted sharply to Ida's assertion that the police would not search effectively for Rufus because he was a black man. Reacting to what he characterizes as an unfair evaluation, Richard insists that there is no reason to believe that the police will not "look for him just like they look for any other citizen of this city" (101). When Ida insists upon her own personal racial knowledge on the subject ("What would you know? I *do* know..."), his weak rejoinder is simply, "I don't think you should look at it like that" (*Country* 101). This short, terse exchange reveals much about the

discursive struggle for racial knowledge, played out here in a wrestling match between the embedded, testimonial “knowing” that Ida wields and the promises that are supposedly secured by abstract figure of the “citizen.” In the face of Ida’s testimony, and knowing very well that he lacks the racial experience to bring to bear on the situation, Richard’s only recourse is to (halfheartedly) point out that her experience posits nothing more than a “way of looking” at the issue, a perspective which can be rendered as relative to the truth of race in the postwar city. But what is, in fact, emphasized in this scene is the way that the concept of the citizen facilitates a type of “forgetting” which erases the context of the racially segregated state and secures a kind of *a priori* formal equality which is immune to both history and experience.

Richard’s position in these scenes replays a well-known liberal dogma, one that understands race as a problem of seeing to be overcome at the level of individual perception and by recourse to the unmarked neutrality of the citizen-individual. It is telling, therefore, that his primary concern in his conversation with Cass after Rufus’s death is to address questions of responsibility (theirs and his) and blame. Justice and justification. In this conversation, Richard claims the position of objectivity by evacuating race from his visual spectrum.

I couldn’t help feeling, anyway, that one of the reasons all of you made such a kind of – *fuss* – over him was partly just because he was colored. Which is a hell of a reason to love anybody. I just had to look on him as another guy. And I couldn’t forgive him for what he did to Leona. (*Country* 107)

Judgment is what is at stake in the cleansing of race from individual perspective, an attempt to construct a Rufus that is unmarked by prejudices of love. The impetus to treat Rufus as just “another guy” is an operation intended purely to secure a seemingly-pragmatic, pseudo-juridical objectivity, cleansed of both “color” and “love” in the name of distributing blame or forgiveness

to a blamable and forgivable subject – in this case, the figure of the stranger. But most important for our purposes here is how this position of judgment operates rhetorically around the proposition of what “everybody knew” and what “no one could have stopped.” While race-less vision gifts Richard with an objective moral position, the concept of Rufus’s inexorable trajectory towards suicide secures the possibility of a tidy assessment of “known” causes and effects, based on an unspoken series of racial knowledges. Though Richard’s explanation attempts to obscure the specificity of Rufus’s trajectory in a series of flat temporal markers (“*that...this*”), the implication is that Rufus was inexorably “headed” for suicide at the very moment where Richard himself deems him unforgivable. In this rescripting of Rufus’s life, the point when his destiny is clear and the point of Richard’s ultimate condemnation (when forgiveness is impossible) are conflated and the “narrative turn” of Rufus’s life is made neatly intelligible according to an (unremarked) convention of the “black brute.” While Richard is insistent on describing this knowledge as properly specific to Rufus (as a reasonable assessment of what he has “been like”), its specific content (what exactly “everybody knows”) is unarticulated because it references a widely disseminated discourse of black pathology that has confirmed itself in Rufus’s “destiny” – a destiny which is properly beyond intervention. The unmarked, objective judgment that Richard wields is predicated on racist “knowledge” and, simultaneously, on its erasure.

At this point in the narrative, readers are well equipped to perceive the reductionism involved in Richard’s judgment. This scene does not add to our understanding of Rufus’s struggles with racial “recognition” – rather, it stages a perspective which seems to deny the need for such knowledge in an assertion of moral teleology. Once again, Baldwin shows how this ultimately violent liberal (pseudo-juridical) universality as precluding intimacy and care, as

Richard equates “love” with the recognition of Rufus’s racial difference. In doing so, it opens up a recognizable “distance” between the claims of a defensive liberal universalism and the actual experiences of race; Richard’s story is clearly inadequate as means of remembering Rufus’s struggles. As a type of narrative, Richard’s storytelling renders Rufus as a fully known and knowable subject – something that the urban novel itself, in its earliest moments, cryptically and confrontationally insisted upon. But Rufus’s story refuses to “testify” to this narrative approach to his “destiny.” And so Baldwin sets the reader up to side, instead, with his wife, Cass, who insists she “just [doesn’t] know enough to be able to judge him” (*Country* 107). The “I just don’t know enough” that suspends Cass’s judgment appears, at first, as a recognition of this representational gap, against the discourses of race-blindness that simply resecure an unproblematic vision upon which to mete out justice. Here, Cass mounts a defense of Rufus built on the boundaries of the “knowledge-relations gap” – she declares him to be a stranger, despite the fact that Rufus was a friend. Interestingly, a key part of this defensive position is a refusal to acknowledge the unarticulated forms of “knowledge” that Richard leans on – in response to his claim, she thinks to herself, “just what the hell did everyone know?” Like her husband, she makes no attempt to name this knowledge, suggesting that her racial liberal defense of Rufus is predicated on a preliminary disavowal of her own knowledge of racist culture. Part of what Cass strategically “doesn’t know” is how the black male subject is constructed through the discourses of racialized, sexual pathology.

Similarly, Cass’s ability to wield a kind of testimony-based knowledge of her own is built on a strategic silence. In this short scene, part of her attempts to disrupt or complicate Richard’s moral judgment are derived from her perspective on women and relationships; she complicates Rufus’s guilt by invoking women’s ability to “undermine” men and the idea of “love” as being a

mutually destructive relation, suggesting that Leona might be equally culpable in their tragic relationship while subtly bringing their own marriage into the frame of judgment. In this sense, Cass replays the confrontation with Ida, posing her own identity-based knowledge (speaking as a woman) against Richard's reductionist, universalist evaluation of cause and effect. Richard also repeats the pattern, acting in character by reacting sharply against the idea of "all this female intuition shit" as a viable position. A short argument follows, and when Cass sarcastically questions his love for her, Richard exploits the moment in order to question the efficacy of her "specialized – point of view." As the argument (and the scene) draw to a conclusion, Cass admits that her own perspective "doesn't seem to work so well" when it comes to "love." Here, Baldwin inserts another principle of uncertainty, this time into the concept of identity-based testimony, noting its insecurity in assessing the truth of "love," leaving the scene spinning in an insecurity that even comes to infect the stability of the Silenski marriage. This admission, that Cass's own testimony - her own self-knowledge - has its limits at "love," references the "stranger/lover" dynamic which I mentioned earlier, just as the whole conversation on the nature of love and violence will foreshadow the conflict in their own marriage that will develop over the course of the novel. Ironically, Richard will eventually assume the position of the abuser of women, after learning of Cass's affair with Eric. For now though, he declines the comparison between their relationship and Rufus and Leona's, refusing to consent to the idea that "love" can find its expression in destruction. Cass, reflecting at length on "how many small lies had gone into the making of their one, particular truth," is less certain (*Country* 107). But in the end, she agrees with him, holding these "lies" to herself as a means of fitting her testimony to this "truth." But the ease with which the question of Rufus's guilt becomes a question of their own heteronormative domestic identities is telling. Race provides the underlying logic that defines

Rufus's interracial relationship as pathological and destined for tragedy, while also eliminating the possibility of comparison to their own relationship. In this sense, Cass's silence (meant to preserve the "particular truth" that validates their own middle-class domesticity) operates to contain what "everybody knows" about Rufus and Leona in the domain of racial particularity. This containment of racial knowledge (as well as her own identity-based testimony) is necessary in order to maintain the "truth" of white domesticity as an American ideal.

Between Richard's mobilization of (clearly insufficient) racial knowledge and Cass's (purposefully limited) racial liberal response, Baldwin traces the application of racial liberal discourse in practice, while drawing our attention to the silences and omissions that it constructs in its wake. This analysis has suggested that these silences are necessary to keep the scene of white identity out of the frame of political representation, maintaining its eligibility for entrance into postwar liberal, normative category of unmarked, objective citizenship. The same pattern reappears when Cass and Vivaldo travel uptown for Rufus's funeral, once again staging the struggle of these characters to find, in their experiences, a means of connecting to the suffering of their lost friend. This scene, with Vivaldo and Cass in a cab, touring the Harlem ghetto, recalls earlier realist tropes (the covered coach and the man on the corner) by self-consciously staging the epistemological distances, both social and physical, which empower a white liberal discussion of social difference and inequality. But Baldwin does significant violence to the "rational" premise of this discussion by drawing unacknowledged connections between the ways that these white liberals conceive of racial uplift and their lack of self-knowledge – in each case, the premises of their liberal anti-racisms are surreptitiously undermined by an inability to face the racial dimensions of their own subjectivities. For Vivaldo, the street scene in Harlem replays his own upbringing in Brooklyn – a place where "you had to be a man" and where the antics of

the neighborhood children are “the same, really the same” as the activities of the black children. For Vivaldo, the realization of this shared experience produces an almost desperate desire to prove his innocence, especially to Ida.

“...I wanted so bad to take that girl in my arms and kiss that look off her face and make her know that I didn’t do it. I wouldn’t do it, whoever was doing it was doing it to me, too... I know I failed him, but I loved him, too, and nobody there wanted to know that. I kept thinking, They’re colored and I’m white but the same things have happened, really the *same* things, and how can I make them know that?” (*Country* 113).

In this scene, Vivaldo describes the alleged hostility that greets him upon visiting Rufus’s family after the news of his death – the way that “they all looked at [him] as though – well, as though [he] had *done* it.” Reeling from the imagined accusation, Vivaldo’s course of action is to try and establish a cross-racial solidarity, where the recognition that “the *same* things have happened” would allow his love (for both Rufus and Ida) to be acknowledged as evidence of his allegiance to a project of mutual uplift. While Vivaldo’s desire to commiserate with black struggles here would seem to be miles away from Richard’s cold pragmatics, the results are the same. Once again, the specificity of black experience is overwritten in the need to produce suffering as an unmarked field where what has “happened” is applicable to anyone; the question of blame once again overshadows the need to actually *name* the “it” that is said to be affecting both black and white subjects. But more to the point, this elision allows Vivaldo to map his own experiences of emasculation and sexual humiliation (articulated by him in terms of a crisis in masculinity, the degradation of the father figure, and various scenes of gendered/sexual violence) onto the black population of Harlem. The project of cross-racial understanding, therefore, is a project of “making them know” that suffering is not an exclusive property of the black experience in

America. In this theory of racial sympathy and equality, the African American subject needs to be educated on his own universality, which serves to bridge differences maintained by both resentment and a lack of cross-racial knowledge.

Importantly, Baldwin does not attempt to deny the fact of Vivaldo's own suffering (or the suffering of any of his white characters for that matter). Instead, he locates the source of their suffering in the fraught negotiations of race and sexuality needed to construct and maintain normative white identity, inserting a productive dissonance into their attempts to universalize struggle. Vivaldo's recourse to his own (gendered, classed) experience – the confessional nature of his reflections in this scene – may be staged in the name of establishing the universality of trauma. But readers attentive to the narrative distance between this universalizing claim to liberal sympathy and the specific complaints that it is based on will recognize that Vivaldo's masculinity (and its trauma) is constructed in various scenes of racial and sexual difference. The irony of Vivaldo's displacement of a specifically black ghetto experience with his own expressly masculine insecurity and the assertion of its universality is only apparent when one realizes how much of this insecurity is a result of his own uncritical encounters with racial and sexual difference. In Vivaldo's boyhood neighborhood, "you had to be a man... and you had to prove it, prove it all the time" (*Country* 111). Recalling this masculine imperative prompts him to relate a scene of homophobic sexual violence from his youth, where he and his friends abducted, raped and beat a queer inhabitant of the Village, leaving him for dead in a parking garage in Brooklyn. Vivaldo expresses both shame and retroactive sympathy for the queer man in this confession, but Cass suggests that these memories fail to "express" the underlying meaning of these scenes – that "Vivaldo's recollection in no sense freed him from the things recalled" (*Country* 112). Rather, she suggests that there is something in this experience that he is "afraid

to look at again” and that in approaching these scenes with a “fascinated, even romantic horror,” Vivaldo is actually “looking for a way to deny [them].”

There is another denial at work in this scene, one that enables Vivaldo’s liberal sentiments of black/white “sameness.” Indeed, in elaborating this liberal theory, Vivaldo declines the idea that his knowledge of this “sameness” is derived from his own experiences of Harlem. “Nervously,” he admits that he “was hardly ever there in the daytime anyway,” repressing the fact that most of his time in Harlem was spent slumming and “running after whores” (61). In one recollection of this time in his life, he describes a particular confrontation, where his liaison with a black prostitute is interrupted by a large black man who intends to rob him. In the tense exchange that follows, Vivaldo is confronted by a series of reversals in the sexual and gendered logic of race.

“Suppose I told you that that was my sister,” the man said, gesturing towards the girl.

“What would *you* do if you found me with your sister?”...“I want you to name your punishment.” He waited. Then: “Come on. You know what *you* guys do.” (*Country* 64).

In this scene, Baldwin portrays the good, white liberal in a position where he is unable to say what he clearly already knows about the precarious condition of the black man in U.S. gendered and familial discourse. Turning the tables, so to speak, on the imaginations of violated white femininity that have traditionally accompanied the lynch mob, the unnamed black man rhetorically suspends the significance of racial difference in the scene of interracial sexuality. By offering a comparison, based on a temporary, counterfactual equality (suppose you were me), at this precise moment, he traps Vivaldo in a particularly dangerous situation. Almost as a gross reversal of the liberal reasoning that Richard would mobilize in a later scene, the robber posits a situation where the harsh and uneven conditions of black social life (rather than white bourgeois

norms) are taken as a universal framework of justice. This particular form of “sameness” (which takes black American experience as its “unmarked” norm) does not offer justice, but, rather, traps Vivaldo in a dangerous situation. Ultimately, of course, Vivaldo cannot name his own punishment or provide an account of “what you guys do,” for to do so would be to place himself in the realm of justified extralegal violence. His only move is to exempt himself from the hypothetical situation in different terms, claiming (untruthfully) that he doesn’t have a sister and, thus, removing himself from this scene of judgment by claiming an exemplary particular status. What is made clear, in this example, is the un-reversability of the logic of liberal universality (defined through white norms), where Vivaldo must perform a willful ignorance of black struggle in order to preserve his own sense of indignity at the challenge to his privileged white masculine access to (black) feminine bodies. Reflecting back on his assertions of the universality of struggle, we can see how this claim to black/white “sameness” is predicated on this silence – a willful disavowal of how his particular struggle to attain white masculinity is invested in racist constructions of black sexual difference.

Later, in a series of cascading recollections brought on by the failures of writing that I documented earlier, Vivaldo elaborates on his experience “uptown” in a way that overtly constructs Harlem as a site for his own masculine struggle. In this reflection, he recounts the sense of belonging that he had experienced there “precisely because the history written in the color of his skin contested his right to be there” (*Country* 132). Harlem, as a site of “danger” becomes the perfect place to stage his masculinity; he had imagined himself as “snatching his manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity and testing it in the fire” (*Country* 132). But admitting the failure of this project in the present brings about another connected realization:

He knew that Harlem was a battlefield and that a war was being waged there day and night – but of the war aims he know nothing.

And this was due not only to the silence of the warriors – their silence being, anyway, spectacular in that it rang so loud: it was due to the fact that one knew of battles only what one had accepted of one's own. (*Country* 133)

Admitting, momentarily, that his own “battle” is what led him to Harlem culminates in a critical understanding of his relationship with Rufus, where his own insistence that “he and Rufus were equals... far beyond the reach of anything so banal and corny as color” is performed as a rejection of Rufus's own accusatory recognition of his friend's internal struggle. The “liberal, even revolutionary sentiments of which he was so proud” are, here, staged as a way of disavowing his own personal investment in a logic of race. In this “game” (“a game in which Rufus had lost his life”) the proof of their mutual investment in this anxious and superficial “equality” had been in a series of homosocial/homoerotic exploits – “they had slept together, got drunk together, balled chicks together” (*Country* 133). Their “equality” (exemplified most incessantly in scenes where they had “balled chicks together”) is staged, anxiously, on the same racialized, sexual terrain which had prompted his earlier attempts to “snatch his manhood from the lukewarm waters of mediocrity.” This equality is, therefore, predicated on a racial/sexual difference that it is always working to disavow, something that is made clear when Vivaldo's reflections shift yet again, this time to an episode in his earlier military service in German when he and “a colored buddy” had exposed themselves to a girl in a bar, “but also to each other” (*Country* 134). Vivaldo admits that their exposure “had had very little to do with her,” but neither was its aim “to attract each other.” Rather, Vivaldo recalls a sense of relief from the comparison of his own “manhood” to the black penis – he was “doing all right... there was

nothing frightening about it” – accompanied by the “faintest pang” at the thought that his black friend was, perhaps, “doing a little better” (*Country* 134). This description seems designed to neutralize their difference, primarily by staging Vivaldo’s comfort with the comparison. But his unwillingness to consciously avow the resentment and anxiety which subtend these recollections – his own “battle” – is suggested when he briefly remembers “occasional nightmares” where this same “buddy, pursued him through impenetrable forests came at him with a knife on the edge of precipices, threatened to hurl him down steep stairs to the sea” (*Country* 134). In each of these nightmares, he remembers his own desire for “revenge” upon the buddy. This desire for revenge marks the limit of Vivaldo’s recognition of his own “battle”; he moves on, unable to name the slight that has motivated this desire, back to his own writing where “nothing was happening” (*Country* 135). Not only does this inability to define the “battle” leave the racial roots of Vivaldo’s masculine struggle unacknowledged, it also suggests that this elision is coextensive with his inability to produce meaningful representations. His characters remain reproachful strangers to the extent that he is unwilling to recognize how his own struggle with heterosexual masculinity (far from being the “same” as theirs) is actually invested in both engaging racist articulations of black sexuality and disavowing their connection.

But, returning to the cab scene, we should note that Vivaldo’s articulation of universal (white masculine) struggle is only one position in the development of racial liberal consciousness. As she did with her husband, Cass steps in to insert a principle of uncertainty into this liberal impulse, reinstating the racial liberal conception of the “knowledge-relations gap” by insisting on a crucial “difference.” As a response to Vivaldo’s assertion that “the same things have happened” in both Brooklyn and Harlem, she moves to reconfirm Harlem as a particular space dominated by a racial logic.

“But they didn’t,” she said, “happen to you *because* you were white. They just happened. But what happens up here” – and the cab came out of the park; she stretched her hands, inviting him to look – “happens *because* they are colored. And that makes a difference.” And after a moment, she dared to add, “You’ll be kissing a long time, my friend, before you kiss any of this away.” (*Country* 114)

As a corrective to Vivaldo’s vision of Harlem, this invitation to look at the ghetto street scene as a scene of racial determination insists upon the racial logic of suffering. While this premise challenges Vivaldo’s easy assertions of “sameness,” it does so by performing the geographical imagination inherent to the urban race novel, cordoning off the ghetto as *the* site for racial knowing and constructing its inhabitants as fundamentally illegible, except for the easy assurance that the logics of their difference are reducible to “because they are black.” Notably, their own experiences are *not* calculable according to this racial logic, as what “happened” to Vivaldo “just happened,” leaving whiteness off the proverbial table as a logic of social determination. In this sense, Cass, even as she moves to correct his easy equation of racial suffering, also collaborates in a disavowal of racial reality: that his own selfhood “happened” within the domain of racial difference which is also the origin point for white male identity and privilege. What “happens because they are colored,” in this epistemological reorientation, becomes the principle object of urban inquiry for an unmarked white subjectivity.

In this case, the racial liberal discourse of certainty is put under pressure when, moments later, Cass is forced to wander the streets of Harlem in search of a hat, necessary to maintain propriety in the black church where Rufus’s funeral is being held. Despite her confidence in Harlem as a black space, the appearance of “one small, lone, white woman hurrying along 125th Street on a Saturday morning was apparently a very common sight” (*Country* 117). And despite

the lack of attention (or perhaps, as we will see, because of it), Cass finds herself “mysteriously afraid.” This fear takes on a particularly destabilizing character when she finally finds a women’s apparel store and enters it to find that the black, female clerks have (in some sense) already anticipated her arrival. The shopgirl greets her with a smile which Cass attempts to suggest was similar to the smiles that “all salesgirls, everywhere have always worn,” but that makes her feel “poor and shabby” anyways (*Country* 117). She is somehow aware that “the dry aristocratic sharpness” that she performed in similar transactions downtown “would fail of its usual effect here.” The shopgirl’s smile (and the whole performance) “had clearly been taught her by masters” for the purpose of catering to “strange, breathless, white woman” who appeared regularly in their shop on Sunday morning. Cass’s discomfort with this realization is manifest in her sudden discomfort with the performances of privilege that would normally define the customer/retailer relation, and her panicky impulse to flee the scene outright. While this scene ends quickly, with Cass rushing to purchase a scarf and resisting the desire to forget the funeral and take a cab home, it suggests a significant problematic within the underlying premises of the racial liberal “knowledge-relations gap.” While Cass had earlier championed a sympathetic and contained conception of Harlem where what happens “happens because they are black,” this interaction brings back a conception of blackness as being constructed in difference – where what happens in Harlem happens because they are black and because *she is white*. Her discomfort in this scene speaks to a recognition that black *and* white subjectivities are forged in the context of negotiations of difference such as this, bringing whiteness back into the frame of racial inquiry.

All of these scenes of liberal discourse stage the various contradictions, silences, and willful ignorances necessary to incorporate black subjects into an anti-racist liberal logic that

takes whiteness as its unmarked and necessarily unremarked point of reference. Staging both the “logical” development of these discourses and their particular explanatory power for liberal viewers who have their own suffering, Baldwin simultaneously destabilizes them by exposing their investment in white illegibility to liberal anti-racist vision. Whether it is Richard’s attempt to produce Rufus as a subject of liberal justice by leaning on an unremarked logic of black sexual pathology; Vivaldo’s mobilization of liberal universality, predicated on the erasure of his own racial investments; or Cass’s defensive assertions of racial liberal non-knowledge, built on a systematically truncated account of the actual work of racial systems of difference, constructions of white-black relations of knowledge are invested in maintaining what the white subject can claim not to know or be a part of. They are, even in their assertions of sameness and universality, invested in the white liberal subject as a stranger to racial rubrics of social meaning and self-making. And while these articulations of liberal goodwill (excepting, perhaps, Richard) are all ostensibly built to help Rufus’s friends account for his death and “what they should have known” about his inner turmoil, they all, in practice, operate to keep them (through difference and sameness both) isolated well away from the scene of his death. That Baldwin rejects these assertions of strangerhood is made manifest when Vivaldo and Cass arrive at the funeral, where the reverend acknowledges their presence as fellow lovers. “I know some of your faces and some of you are strangers to me... But ain’t none of us really strangers. We all here for the same reason. Someone we loved is dead” (*Country* 120). Invoking the stranger/lover dichotomy that he described in another, more intimate scene, Baldwin takes this opportunity to reiterate his investment in a logic of deconstructive, destabilizing “love.” It is to this logic which I will now turn.

Baldwin’s Lovers and the Reconstruction of Realist Racial Legibility

As the readings in this chapter have suggested so far, *Another Country* stages many of the narrative tropes of the postwar urban race novel, offering Rufus as the object of race-progressive scrutiny, only to turn that scrutiny back around to expose the contingent construction of postwar liberal vision and its anxious attempts to exempt whiteness from the domain of racial production. The novel's frustration with urban realist writing coalesces around the character of Vivaldo, who, in the background of *Another Country*, is struggling to compose his own book. This struggle is described in terms of Vivaldo's frustrating realization that "he did not seem to know enough about the people in his novel."

They did not seem to trust him. They were all named, more or less, all more or less destined, the pattern he wished them to describe was clear to him. But it did not seem clear to them. He could move them about but they themselves did not move. He put words in their mouths which they uttered sullenly, unconvinced. (*Country* 127)

The problem of knowledge that Vivaldo describes is not a lack of identity (they are all "more or less" named) or of "destiny"; for the novelist, these things are all too easily defined and assigned. The struggle of the novelist to subdue his characters, to incite them to action which fulfills the "the pattern he wished them to describe," is a strange mix of control and consent, surrender and conviction. Vivaldo experiences it as a kind of "seduction – "he was trying to seduce his people: he begged them to surrender up to him their privacy" (*Country* 127). Their refusal to be seduced in this manner foreshadows his relationship with Ida, who he has plans to meet the following day. In fact, as the night wears on these characters – who he describes as his "cloud of witnesses" – begin to cluster around "the desired and unknown Ida" in his mind. His "chilling" realization at that point is that perhaps "though he had been seeing them so long, perhaps he had never known them at all" (*Country* 128). Collapsing these two issues – his desire for the

African-American female and his desire to be a writer – the novel offers a lack of knowledge as the problem of both. In his attempts to write, his characters remain “silent” because he does not know them, and is only able to populate their actions and words with his own intended destinies and patterns; as “witnesses,” they steadfastly refuse to testify of themselves.

One of Baldwin’s contemporaries, Whitney Baliett, jazz critic and reviewer for *The New Yorker*, made use of this very section of the novel to describe Baldwin as a one of those “soft-shelled” novelists who “unwittingly describe, unfavorably and accurately, the very books they are writing” (*Country* 69). Vivaldo’s struggles with storytelling here are interpreted as evidence of Baldwin’s own writing difficulties surfacing “unwittingly” in his novel – as evidence of the novelist’s ineptitude and of the novel’s own failure to “ring properly” with the reviewer’s sense of what constitutes a realistic depiction of human relationships and subjectivity. No space is made for the possibility that the problem of narrative and representation self-consciously expressed here is a part of the larger project of the book – that Vivaldo’s failure to write is coextensive with the failures of representation, testimony, and “reality” that so inform Baldwin’s perception as an artist and a critic of American racial consciousness. But echoing, as it does, the epigraph to the book itself, I would propose that the failure of Vivaldo’s novel is not an unconscious expression of Baldwin’s weaknesses as a writer, but rather acts as a part of a larger critique of representational intelligibility and recognition in the urban novel form itself, and in American cultural politics more generally. This engagement with narrative, I argue, is where we should locate Baldwin’s complex critique of his era’s conjoined politics of realist fiction and the construction of a U.S. liberal-nationalist universality that covertly maintains racial relations of power through an implicit discourse of non-recognition and illegibility, eliding or repressing the

anxious politics of difference that is evident in both the construction of the white self and the production of white liberal antiracist social imaginings.

In implicitly rejecting the epistemology of the social self that is implied by Myrdal's "knowledge-relations gap," Baldwin challenges the (unmarked) "vision" of social justice native to postwar racial liberalism by narrativising the production of a (white) looking subjectivity in the crucible of racial difference. In this way, Baldwin denies white liberal anti-racism its own privileged position as a sympathetic observer to racial suffering, itself untouched by the stigma of racial marking. As he argued in "Stranger in the Village," "no road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity... where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger" (*Country* 89). For characters like Vivaldo and Cass, to claim to "not know" blackness" or, conversely, to claim that the experiences of blacks and whites are abstractly comparable on the basis of their shared irreducibility, is to deny a kind of self-understanding which can only be acknowledged as the construction of the unmarked self in and through racial difference. In other words, by rejecting the stranger, Baldwin robs liberalism's political subjectivity of its unmarked status, exposing the racial terms which construct its universality and its implicit desires.

In this last section, I will labor to show how Baldwin's rejection of the liberal stranger and his revision of the political practice of realist representation work hand in hand. My final engagement with *Another Country* also, therefore, acts as a fitting conclusion to the work of this dissertation as a whole. The liberal desire for the stranger, as I have sought to illustrate, is grounded in how the figure seems to present and exemplify a "common sense" conception of social difference that is congruent with liberalist conceptions of equality. By reassuring us that social differences are merely an effect of "cultural" legibilities that can be either discarded or rendered contingent in order to reveal the universal condition of individualism "underneath," the

stranger works to confirm the essential reality of liberal abstractions and definitions of freedom. It also, as this chapter in particular has labored to explain, structures and supports an incomplete conception of the work of social differences like race, envisioning them as categories or “marks” can be disregarded if one can discipline oneself to see others in a less contaminated, more authentic way. Baldwin’s rejection of the liberal-realist stranger makes available a wholesale revision of the post war “race problem” where attempts to preserve the “simplicity” or “innocence” of white identity in the crucible of racial discourse – attempts to keep white liberals fundamentally outside of the scene of contingent representational processes – mark the tangible limits of the liberal imagination of race. From this perspective, understanding race as a “mark” or superficial layer of cultural legibility which can and should be elided by a more liberal reading practice is clearly untenable. Not because racism does not encourage reductive and violent representations and essentializing notions of identity, but because (against the liberal conceit) “underneath” or “beyond” these reductive representations, the concept of race does not simply cease to be an issue, having yielded to a more fundamental equality between essentially unmarked individuals.

It is with the intent to stage this particular reimagination of the work of race and representation that Baldwin turns to “the face of the lover” as the alternative to the stranger. This investment in the figure of the “lover” could be construed as a kind of liberal-humanist sentimentalism, but for the way that Baldwin presents it as an unstable and deconstructive relation -“the face of a lover is an unknown precisely because it is invested with so much of oneself.” It is worthwhile to dwell for a moment on this complex re-conceptualization of intimacy, particularly for how it seems to both offer a stable spectator position (recognizing the face of the “lover”/Other) and, simultaneously, confound the boundaries between the object and

the subject of the gaze in the act of perception. In this process, Baldwin captures Vivaldo in a problematic version of what Lee Edelman would call the process of “figuration.” For Edelman, working through a treatment of De Man, the face “comes to signify the capacity of language to posit – and thus conceptually to produce – totalized, coherent entities that it then misrepresents itself as merely having recognized or perceived” (193).

Such a rhetorization of the gaze implicates visual perception in a figuralizing – and therefore necessarily disfiguring – discourse, a discourse that requires that the bounded surface figured as “face” be conceptualized as a coherent referential entity even as it renders such reference impossible since the totalized entity is only produced through the positional power of language. (Edelman 195)

What the face stands for, in Edelman’s explanation, is the “point of impossibility” produced by a system of representation in its attempts to construct itself as complete and total. Baldwin’s turn to the face of the lover works critically towards “the placement of the gaze in a linguistic context” disrupting the system of representation in its attempts to close itself off as a system. To put this another way, Vivaldo’s (momentary) realization that the mystery of Ida’s face originates in his own “investments” brings his vision itself as a constructed object into the narrative’s representational scope. Whereas the face of the stranger only confirms the figurative “distance” that maintains the boundaries between subjects, against the ongoing project of the novel to show what kinds of “investments” are obscured in the stranger’s conceptualization of distance or universalist proximity, the “face of the lover” implicates the self in the construction of the other. It is in this sense that Vivaldo and Ida’s relationship operates as the scene of the liberal self’s own disfiguration and the relation that exposes its own self-misrecognition in relation to the system of representation that is race. The representation of the liberal subject is “a

misrepresentation precisely because of the unspoken need to keep the white normativity outside of the realm of representation altogether, preserving its privileged position as the very definition of humanist universality. By rooting its representational project in “the face of the lover”, Baldwin’s novel confronts this liberal subject with desires that drive this misrecognition.¹⁰⁴

First of all, it is important to note how the novel decries any attempt to conceptualize an ideal humanist “love” which transcends the social logics of race. Because of the racial-liberal orientation of his race politics, Vivaldo envisions the racial dimension of his relationship with Ida as primarily about the recovery of a condition of innocence, something that he conceives of his love as achieving. But the terms of this affection, applied concretely to Ida, constantly reproduce the racial terms which recall the colonialist relations of primitivist strangerhood that Baldwin elaborated on in “Stranger in the Village.” When admiring her at Richard and Cass’s party, he notes her elegance and poise – the way that she “carried her head high, as though it had bourne, but only yesterday, the weight of an African water jar” (*Country* 143). Later, in the bedroom, her gaze reminds him of “a virgin, promised at her birth to him, the bridegroom,” and

¹⁰⁴ It also needs to be said that, in pursuing a reading of the “face of the lover” as a critique of liberal racial discourse, this last section of my chapter will focus almost exclusively on Vivaldo and Ida as the relation which most clearly deconstructs the principle of misrecognition that Baldwin argues is at the heart of liberal vision and the postwar conceptualization of realist writing. In doing so, I will be bracketing a much more complex and equally important discussion of the politics of sexuality and gender, except for how it impacts this couple and, specifically, Vivaldo’s growing consciousness of the limits of liberal racial consciousness. I do this despite the fact that the representational politics of sexuality and gender as essential for developing a full picture of liberal nationalism’s cultural politics in the Cold-war era. Moreover, the novel itself is clearly invested in these connections, and in maintaining a focus on my end-goal, I have been forced to omit a larger account of these issues. Given my focus on love and desire, probably my most glaring omission is of a treatment of the queer politics of race, a connection which is evident in several important aspects of the novel which I will here ignore, including Rufus and Ida’s homophobia, and Eric’s relationship to Rufus and his black servant back-home, Henry. Though the last couple of chapters have addressed (and will continue to address) the politics of race and sexuality implicit in the interracial relationships of Rufus, Leona, Vivaldo, and Ida, I have not been able to do much more than brush up against the complex historical production of these racial-sexual imaginations. And while I recognize and affirm the rich body of work which interrogates both the historical frameworks and complex political meanings of this intersection, my own overt goal in this chapter is to provide an account of the stranger politics which make race illegible in these domains. In this sense, I hope to provide an account of how these important histories and politics are rendered inert and contingent in the liberal political culture of the period, even though it means providing a less than complete depiction of them in these pages.

he likens their sex to a journey “up a savage jungle river, looking for the source which remained hidden just beyond the black, dangerous, dripping foliage” (*Country* 175-77). Implicit in the language which describes Vivaldo’s desire for Ida is an unspoken, underlying longing to return to the scene of “first contact” – place that is unburdened by history and prejudice – where the primitive authenticity of the native testifies to the innocent, objective position of her observer. Put this way, we might say that Vivaldo’s desire for Ida in these scenes is actually the desire to be able to approach the black subject as a stranger “from the point of view of power,” while the language he applies to this scene of first contact indicates that all of the relations within it are already caudified in the Western imagination of race.

Baldwin’s “love” therefore does not indicate an easy liberal-humanist solution to America’s “race problem,” serving, rather, to open up hidden territories within the liberal self, where desire assumes a textual character and enters into representational inscription. Thus both the desire for racial meaning and the desire to elide it are presented as conflicting elements in the discursive construction of the novel’s central relationship. For Vivaldo, being in a troubled relationship with Ida makes him acutely aware of how they remained “locked away from one another,” forcing him to realize that “love was a country he knew nothing about” (*Country* 296). His desire for Ida is continually haunted by the possibility that their relationship is founded on racial logics, rather than any more transcendent, more authentic affections.

Perhaps it was only because she was not white that he dared to bring her the offering of himself. Perhaps he had felt, somewhere, at the very bottom of himself. That she would not dare despise him. (*Country* 296)

Vivaldo’s self-doubt – his concern that “at the very bottom” of his character, he harbors inaccessible racial motives – is founded on the conception of race as a form of contaminated

perception, marking his own inadequacy and weakness. In a related and similar vein, one of the major sources of conflict in Vivaldo's relationship with Ida comes out of her insistence that his behaviors towards her are legible in terms of how "white people" act. In a type of argument that plays out several times over the course of the novel, Vivaldo angrily rejects her discourse of racial categories, replying aggressively, at one point, "I am not *white people!*" (*Country* 263). Whereas in earlier sections of the novel, whiteness is staged in liberal discourse as an unmarked "anybody", here Vivaldo resists being categorized as "white" when the category seems to signify as a group-based particularity. This resistance to racial identity is complemented by other moments where Vivaldo offers to "give up [his] color" for the sake of their love (*Country* 308). Always, to be identified as "white" by his lover is tantamount to wounding, pain, or even a kind of death (324). In all cases, race is constructed as a barrier that "lock[s] him out." It is in these scenes that the novel insistently represents Vivaldo's relation to Ida as coded by racial motives – not in the sense of prejudice or racial antagonism, but in terms of an underlying *need* to resist racial representational inscription for himself and his imagination of his lover.

Vivaldo and Ida's final scene in the novel plays out as a final refusal of the erasure produced by white liberal discourse. The scene, generally takes the form of Ida's final confession of her affair with Ellis, but in another, perhaps, more important sense, it is about Vivaldo discovering a new way of encountering the story of race. Several times throughout her tale, Vivaldo interjects, first by expressing his pain at her making him "feel white," again by insisting that he too, "loved Rufus" and eventually through his desperate insistence that "suffering doesn't *have* a color" (*Country* 414-17). With this last interruption, he begs her to allow them to "step out of this nightmare," claiming to be willing to do "whatever has to be done, to set us free" (*Country* 417). The freedom that Vivaldo begs for in this scene is a freedom

from race which is, simultaneously, a freedom *from* the story that she is in the midst of telling.

All of these various interruptions are designed to anchor the meaning of her tale in liberal terms, largely by insisting that its meaning be located somewhere beyond racial categories. Liberal convictions about the contingency of racial categories, here, very obviously appear as a defense mechanism designed to manage the discourse of racial testimony and experience in the name of protecting the sanctity of (white) liberal interpretation. In every case, Ida calmly asks to be able to continue her story. Even when, having exhausted his attempts to secure the premises upon which the story can be told, Vivaldo tells her that, “nothing you say will make a difference,” she continues. It is at this point that Vivaldo realizes his vulnerability – that he cannot rely upon “love” to “lend him a transcendent perception and concentration” and that, without that perception, his mind is actively engaged in “gorging on the conundrum of himself” (*Country* 418).

For her part, Ida tells a story that starts with Rufus, providing for the first time her account of his life and death, the meaning of which is sharp distinction to the accounts which I documented in the earlier sections of this chapter. The story that she tells about her brother, rather than “locking him out” with a discourse of white/black difference, produces in Vivaldo the opposite sensation of “being locked in” (*Country* 415). In the wake of Rufus’s death, and realizing that she can’t succumb to “what happened to Rufus, and what was happening all around [her],” Ida describes assessing her options as a young black woman, options that are only imaginable in relation to how she is perceived by white men. And when she speaks of “how they see girls like me on Seventh Avenue,” we begin to perceive the hidden stakes of Vivaldo’s earlier interruptions. “And now he knew that he did not want to hear the rest of her story. He thought of himself on Seventh Avenue; perhaps he had never left” (*Country* 418). At this part of

the “story” Vivaldo recognizes himself as a character – the looking “they” who are complicit in the racial//sexual seeing that composes Ida’s future prospects – in her narrative. As earlier analyses have suggested, Vivaldo’s own “battle” with heterosexual masculinity has been formatively articulated in terms of the differences of race; he has “never left” Seventh Avenue to the extent that the scenes of sexual contact and violence rooted in this difference remain essential to his sense of his own manhood. Here, in a sense, Ida unknowingly narrates Seventh Avenue as the scene of their first meeting, where his “gaze” (his imagination of black femininity) first encountered her and played a formative role in the direction of her life. Ida’s story, for once unfettered by the frame of liberal meaning, brings the white liberal subject into narrative view, reintroducing the otherwise repressed scene of the production of white masculinity and confronting Vivaldo with his own “investments” and origins in the discourse of race. These hidden investments, in Ida’s narrative include and investment in obscuring the politics of race and sexuality under a discourse of “the real.” As she explains, “I used to see the way white men watched me... they wanted to do something dirty and they knew that you knew how. All black people knew that. Only, the polite ones didn’t say dirty. They said real” (*Country* 419).

Eventually, Ida confesses to her involvement with Ellis; at the same time she accuses Vivaldo of harboring a hidden denial, saying, “I used to hate you for that sometimes... pretending to believe me because you didn’t want to know what was happening to me” (*Country* 422). Thus does the relationship between the lovers assume the same complex configuration with which Baldwin would characterize the postwar urban scene in general, where what is known and seen remains unacknowledged and obscured under the need to secure a principle of interracial togetherness that transcends history and present inequalities. Both parties are, in a sense, complicit in this dynamic; as Ida says to Vivaldo, “I’m not blaming you. I’m just telling it

to you like it is” (*Country* 422). At the same time, what Vivaldo comes to realize is that his willful ignorance, which was constructed by his desire to “trust” Ida and to preserve their relationship, was not only casting a blind eye at her unfaithfulness, but at her suffering as well. In the last part of her story, Ida tells a story of being at a club, forced to sing with the black house band at Ellis’s request. After the song, one of the musicians accosts her, calling her a “black white man’s whore” and threatening to rape her “once for every black man you castrate every time you walk, and once for your poor brother” (*Country* 425). The story of Ida’s infidelity is inextricably tied to the way that she is produced, as a black female, within the frameworks of racial struggle defined by masculinity. Whereas in the very first pages of the novel, it was Ida’s voice that rang in Rufus’s ears, reminding him that the race was “counting on” him as a representative black man, here, Rufus returns as a misrecognized avatar of black masculine resentment over her association with white men. The terms which allow Ida to “ride the A train” are the same as the ones that victimize her once she has arrived. Her confession, in this scene, mixes guilt with an account of subjection to racial norms on both sides of the color line, constructed by the terms of the struggle which Vivaldo himself is acquainted with from his experiences in Harlem. The novel does not acquit Ida of her guilt, but it does display an equal desire to acquit Vivaldo of his ignorance which has kept him so isolated from her reality. Their relationship remains, at the end of the novel, unresolved, with her guilt fully disclosed and with the both of them “like two weary children” comforting each other on the kitchen floor, with her “stroking his innocence out of him” (*Country* 431). If there is any closure to the “mystery” that is implied in the face of the lover, it is in the deconstruction of the “innocent” white liberal subject.

Vivaldo's writing resumes at this point of the novel, roughly simultaneous to his loss of "innocence." Interestingly, the train of thought that leads him to it is marked by the search for something "real" – not as in the confirmation of some form of vision, but as in the reconstruction of a sense of the world. Starting with the coffee pot and cups, and moving to confirm the table as "another reality", Vivaldo's quest for realism comes from a position of vulnerability and out of a need to reimagine his own relation to this new perception of reality. In this process, he rediscovers his writing:

...a detail that he needed for his novel, which he had been searching for for months fell neatly and vividly, like the tumblers of a lock, into place in his mind. I seemed impossible that he should have thought of it before: it illuminated, justified, clarified everything. (*Country* 427)

The thought process of composition is described as no less than a shift in consciousness, a cleansing of the vision and the imagination both. Like so many things in Baldwin's novel that remain unwritten, the "detail" that Vivaldo discovers here is never named; what specific "detail" is of so much importance, we will never know. But as the conclusion of its central conflict, the novel leaves us with Vivaldo working at his table (while Ida sleeps) as one of the novel's final images. The question of writing, its possibility, is less an issue of plot and character as it is about critically adjusting the position with which one approaches racial "truth."

He stared deep into his cup, noting that black coffee was not black, but deep brown. Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night, not even the mines. And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hint of its origins, in fire. He thought to himself that he had at last got what he wanted, the truth out of Ida, or the true Ida; and he did not know how was going to live with it. (*Country* 430)

The possibility of realist writing is predicated on the death of the unmarked subject that authorizes a more truncated imagination of difference that limits the discourse of race in liberal norms. The account of the contingency of racial categories that we find at the end of the novel does not recourse to an easy liberation on the basis of a shared sameness or transcendence. Rather, it is a contingency that seeks out the origin of both blackness and whiteness together in the “fire” of social struggle and desire. The “not knowing” that results does not emerge from an easy position of the white spectator, but from the position of a subject who must “live” with an understanding of this production. This uncertain position, for Baldwin, is the position from which writing is newly possible.

The rejection of the liberal stranger opens up a wholly different conception of both the nature of social difference and the practice of novel writing, against the liberal frameworks that have appropriated both in the post war moment. Liberal anti-racism imagines racial difference as a matter of “marks” or faulty legibilities that can be eradicated with a new reading practice, one that recognizes the always already liberal individual underneath the “surface” of cultural distinctions. It is on this conception of racial society that liberal anti-racist culture builds a definition of realist representation which is compelled to demonstrate the reductiveness of representation itself in the face of this liberal relation, and offers a conception of the social value of literature that is built to acquaint black and white strangers to this reality. But Baldwin’s narrative commitment to the “lover” seems designed to breakdown the substantive epistemological limitations of the stranger imagination inherent to liberal definitions of freedom and equality. To imagine social difference in this way is to note that this very individual, constructed by an unmarked whiteness, is itself produced in the “fire” of racial struggle. Charting the production of the privileged series of illegibilities and omissions that must be

maintained in order to maintain the stranger conception of social reality, an unmarked urban spectatorship, and an “innocent” white liberal subjectivity simultaneously, Baldwin provides an account of this fire, even as it is actively disavowed by liberal vision.

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