

# The Race Novel: An Education

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Gunnar Myrdal knew that most Americans would never read *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, the 1944 volume in which he gathered, over more than fifteen hundred pages, the latest anthropological and sociological research on the “Negro problem.” The Swedish sociologist left it to novelists to reach the masses. For racial apartheid to end, he believed, white Americans needed to reconcile the “ever-raging conflict” in their hearts. He and his coauthors could reach a few of them, but all needed an education in anti-racism, and for that he looked to literature (xlvii). “The personal relations arising out of Negro activity in science and literature are restricted to a small proportion of the white population, whose prejudice—if not already low—is diminished considerably by such contacts. Indirectly the effect may be greater,” Myrdal wrote, offering a favorite example: “The literary product of a Richard Wright will achieve nation-wide publicity and acclaim and will affect people as far down as the lower middle classes” (656). The arts may remain the domain of black and white elites, but what artists created—stories that dramatized the degradations of anti-black racism, tales that invited fantasies of overcoming—could reach the middle and working classes and convince them to live out the nation’s unrealized ideals, a kind of trickle-down anti-racism.

Myrdal, whom the Carnegie Corporation had recruited in 1937 to oversee the writing of *An American Dilemma*, used the protagonist of Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, to illustrate his own sociological observations in other chapters. “In the growing generation of Negroes, there are a good many individuals like Bigger Thomas,” he wrote in a section on “Negro aggression.” “They have a bearing of their whole body, a way of carrying their hats, a way of looking cheeky and talking coolly, and a general recklessness about their own and others’ personal security and property” (763). Anti-racist literature served, he thought, to dramatize anti-racist science and to communicate it to decent but miseducated white people as “far down” as the working classes. (Of course, the valuable “sociological” lesson he took from *Native Son*, it seems, was that young northern black men wore hats and stole wallets.) The list of further reading tucked into the back of *An American Dilemma* included hundreds of scientific studies, Wright’s

*Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Native Son*, and James Weldon Johnson's 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. The sociologist did the research, and the novelist taught it.

Five years later, James Baldwin, then twenty-four, leveled his famous criticism against his former idol Wright in the pages of *Partisan Review*. The aspiring novelist, still four years from his debut, described Wright's *Native Son* as a naturalist inversion of Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), suggesting that it invited readers to witness Bigger Thomas "struggle for his humanity" under the "criteria" that Stowe and other white liberals had set for him (585). "The 'protest' novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene," he wrote. "Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a definite thrill of virtue from the very fact that we are reading such a book at all." Baldwin offered as evidence not Stowe's or Wright's writing, not their treatment of Uncle Tom or Bigger, but something an "American liberal" had once told him: "As long as such books are being published," the liberal said of Stowe's and Wright's fiction, "everything will be all right" (582). While Baldwin described *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "very bad novel" and *Native Son* as a "raging, near paranoid postscript" (578) to Stowe's sentimentalism, his condemnation of the social realist novel had as much to do with how the American liberal read it as how Wright and others wrote it. Baldwin published "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) nine years after *Native Son* made Wright one of the most famous living writers. It was not a negative review of the novel, as most scholars now treat it, but a negative review of how white liberals had, for almost a decade, with the encouragement of social scientists, philanthropists, and civic organizations, read it as an education in black life and a lesson in tolerance—not a work of art or entertainment but a supplement to *An American Dilemma*.<sup>1</sup> Baldwin identified, as Jodi Melamed argues, the rise of a constraining racial liberalism that established terms for legitimate resistance that secured rather than refuted the interests of state and capital (xiii–xv). But he also recognized a troubling faith in the future: his liberal friend's belief that things "will" be all right—that racism had an expiration date, a solution, a cure—if the nation could just read to the end.

Baldwin wrote "Everybody's Protest Novel" at a time when critics were taking stock of the black novel and forecasting a less race-conscious future for black letters. In a special issue of *Phylon*, the journal W. E. B. Du Bois founded at Atlanta University in 1940, contributors debated whether black literature seemed "less propagandistic than before" (Hill and Holman 296). Most thought that it did and, like Baldwin, believed that it should be. Thomas D. Jarrett, an English professor at Atlanta University and a future president of the university, insisted that it was "not enough" for black writers to "talk barrenly about prejudices and merit";

they needed “sounder literary values” to achieve “full maturity” (316). Hugh M. Gloster, an English professor at Hampton Institute and a future president of Morehouse College, condemned the “limiting and crippling effects of racial hypersensitivity and Jim-Crow esthetics” (369). Langton Hughes weighed in to praise black writers working in the “general American field” rather than “dwelling on Negro themes” (“Some” 311).

“Everybody’s Protest Novel” would seem, at first glance, to align with Jarrett’s, Gloster’s, and Hughes’s comments and the Cold War deradicalization of black literature and criticism.<sup>2</sup> But Baldwin did not share their aesthetics-minded agenda. He wondered instead why grand statements about a coming “new society” had gathered around *Native Son* and a few other race novels of the time. “What is meant by a new society is one in which inequalities will disappear, in which vengeance will be exacted; either there will be no oppressed at all or the oppressed and the oppressor will change places,” he wrote. “But, finally, as it seems to me, what the rejected desire is, is an elevation of status, acceptance within the present community.” Wright’s novel, built from and received through the “props of reality” (583) around him, did not incite a revolution. Of course, it did not. Baldwin did not ask how it could have but rather why critics and readers had ever demanded that of it. He asked something far bigger than most scholars acknowledge: not what kind of novel black authors should write, as the *Phylon* contributors debated, but what their readers should ask of literature as a medium for social change. When does remaking the literature facilitate material change? And when might it serve as a substitute for that change?

Social scientists defined the terms of a rising racial liberalism, trading a hierarchical race science for a normative cultural paradigm. Truman administration officials and pragmatic black leaders domesticated anti-racist struggles, embracing moderate federal reforms and undercutting radical transnational movements. But they and other liberals looked to novelists to educate the white mind, to teach an ethic of racial tolerance. In 1946, Ruth Benedict, the anthropologist who devoted the final years of her life to combating the idea that race determined intelligence and social behavior, urged English teachers to see novels as ammunition in a war on racism. “The only positive approach to a world free of racism lies in seeing people as individuals. The great opportunity of the teacher of literature begins precisely when he realizes that if this simple goal were achieved it would end race discrimination,” she wrote to the National Council of Teachers of English. “And where so easily as in literature can our children in their school studies learn to see people as people?” (301). Benedict believed that children who read broad-minded books would be “inoculated against racism” (303). Wallace Stegner—who founded the Stanford University creative writing program, from which he trained a generation of writers and teachers—wove that humanist mandate into his program. He believed that “the problem of making one nation from the many races and creeds and kinds” called for Americans with “the imagination

and good will to work at it” (Stegner et al. 15) and that literature, which “has as its primary aim the celebration of the human spirit,” could cultivate that imagination (Stegner 522). The racial liberal’s embrace of the novel as an instrument of anti-racism revealed a divided commitment: an anti-racist novel encouraged white readers to see segregation as a social ill, while the belief in change through reading and the progressive narrative time of the national novel militated against material desegregation; social scientists and educators celebrated the race novel for treating black people as “just folks,” while their didacticism created and naturalized categories of difference.<sup>3</sup>

The race novel, a 1940s marketing term for books that addressed Jim Crow, never constituted a coherent genre. The big race novels of the time, including Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* (1944), and Willard Motley’s *Knock on Any Door* (1947), do not share some broad, emerging racial consciousness, but they all circulated through liberal channels committed to solving the Negro problem with the arts. From 1928 to 1948, the Rosenwald Fund, the foundation of early Sears, Roebuck, and Company investor and CEO Julius Rosenwald, awarded more than one and a half million dollars in grants to black writers, artists, educators, and academics, as well as liberal white southerners. Du Bois, a two-time Rosenwald fellow, regarded it as an “epoch-making venture,” and it aided the careers of, among almost a thousand others, Baldwin, Hughes, Smith, and Motley (Letter to Edwin Embree). The curator of a 2009 exhibition dedicated to artists affiliated with the Rosenwald Fund described the program as “the largest and most influential single patron of African American arts and letters in the twentieth century, perhaps ever” (Schulman 13). Publishers would, with the fund’s encouragement, sign former fellows and then advertise their books with educational organizations such as the American Council on Education and the National Council of Teachers of English, which would, echoing the Rosenwald Fund’s initial intent, recommend them to their members as lessons in anti-racism.

Other scholars have identified how literature, education, and moderate, anti-communist civil rights reforms converged in the formation of a new racial liberal consensus. Houston A. Baker, Jr. defined the critical paradigm of that period as an “integrationist poetics” that envisioned an imperfect, segregated “America” moving toward a perfected, integrated “AMERICA” (69). Mary Helen Washington and James Zeigler suggest how racial anti-communism delegitimized material anti-racisms, forcing the black left into a militant, active “underground” and delivering an education in “red scare racism” (Washington 164; Zeigler xix). Gregory Jay, toeing the Myrdalian line (and departing from Baldwin, Washington, and Zeigler), defends the literature of racial liberalism as encouraging a “will-to-action” among white readers (15).<sup>4</sup> Most scholars look instead to what Melamed calls, with a nod to Cedric Robinson, “race radical” literature that,

she explains, reckons with racism as a material regime woven into the liberal humanist institutions from which they often, against the odds, emerged (47).

But the trouble for radical authors did not end there, with Stegner's writing workshop or the Rosenwald Fund, because liberal institutions governed reading as much as they did writing. Universities and foundations treated literature as a tool for transmitting racial liberal knowledge, but they also framed the reading of it as the first and last act of anti-racism, encouraging readers to look to the near future—to the end of the story, the last page—for a promised overcoming. The race novel, more than a mere reflection of the dominant racial paradigm, instilled the time measure of racial liberalism. It could be liberal or radical. All it needed was a linear narrative, or a narrative that could, with a nudge, be received as leading the reader toward a racial awakening. Some novelists catered to the new racial liberal establishment, inviting fantasies of solutions and cures, letting Baldwin's friend and Benedict believe in reading as an antidote or inoculation. Others challenged that establishment, connecting the cultural to the material, the desegregation of minds and bookshelves to the desegregation of social structures—connections often severed as their writing traveled through liberal institutions dedicated to reform, progress, and faith in the near future.

### Everybody's Race Novel

Racial liberal solutionism emanated from elite circles. So did the creed of the race novel. In the spring of 1948, some six hundred guests, including some of the biggest names in literature and the arts, gathered at Stevens Hotel in downtown Chicago to shut down the Rosenwald Fund, which had, as Julius Rosenwald wished, exhausted the twenty-two million dollars in Sears stock he had endowed it with before his death. Former fellows honored Rosenwald and fund president, Edwin Embree, with readings. Hughes, who had received grants in 1931 and 1941, marked the occasion with a story, "Simple and the Rosenwald Fund," in which Jesse B. Semple, or "Simple," Hughes's straight-talking, working-class Harlem protagonist, laments to the narrator, "The Rosenwald Fund's going out of existence and I have never had one of them Fellowships!" The narrator, a writer and stand-in for Hughes, explains that the fund had awarded grants to "extra-ordinary people" but that he, Simple, benefited from the cultural change that fellows created with their art. "A dollar invested in educational, social, or cultural progress is worth many dollars to many more persons than merely the individual carrier of culture in whom it is invested," he continues. "For example, when you read Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* you are benefiting by the Rosenwald dollar. American culture is enriched. In that way you, me, everybody benefits by it." Their conversation ends with Simple reassured that he and other "ordinary people" had benefited. "You are the very problems the Fund has been

trying to solve,” the writer tells Simple (“Simple” 14). The narrator delivers a succinct account of the Rosenwald philanthropic manifesto: give to the best, and the rest will profit from a change in racial attitudes. Although Hughes wrote “Simple and the Rosenwald Fund” as a tribute to Rosenwald and fund trustees and officers—he read it on stage at the gala to an audience that included Rosenwald’s children and Embree—when it ran in the *Chicago Defender* the next month, readers may have thought Hughes had taken a shot at the fund, satirizing it as elitist and condescending. He may well have.

Rosenwald, the son of middle-class Jewish German immigrants from Springfield, Illinois—who had bought a twenty-five percent stake in Sears in 1895—founded the Rosenwald Fund in 1917 to advance “the well-being of mankind” (Embree and Waxman 223). (His admirers never failed to mention that the future benefactor of black education and art was born in 1862 in a house one block from Abraham Lincoln’s home.) Rosenwald ran the fund himself—collaborating with Booker T. Washington and his Tuskegee Institute to build hundreds of schools for black children in the South—until 1928, when he hired Embree, a vice president at the Rockefeller Foundation, to take over. Embree shared Rosenwald’s belief that foundations should “be expended within a generation” while “enthusiasm is fresh” and before they “sink into commonplace bureaucracy” (“Business” 329). But the career foundation director had his own ideas about what the fund should invest in, believing that the creative class, if encouraged with a thousand dollars here and there, could instruct the masses in tolerance and national fellow feeling: an education from above rather than below. He blasted the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations for overinvesting in education and medical research when no board had yet “dirtied its hands with paint or clay or fabrics, or risked its morals with the drama or with the popular embodiment of the fine arts to-day—the talking movies” (328). Embree created the fellowship program in his first year on the job, awarding the first grant to James Weldon Johnson, then the executive secretary of the NAACP. Although Rosenwald, who died in 1932, did not devote much of his own time to the arts—he “enjoyed the theater and tolerated opera,” his biographer and grandson writes (Ascoli 363)—he believed, as Embree did, that books could change the world, himself having come to the cause of black education in the South through Washington’s autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) and John Graham Brooks’s biography of William H. Baldwin, the president of the Long Island Rail Road and an early Tuskegee trustee (Embree and Waxman 25).

Embree—the grandson of John Fee, the abolitionist minister who founded Berea, Kentucky, and the integrated, coeducational Berea College in 1855—considered himself a “student of races” before he ever arrived at the Rosenwald Fund (qtd. in Perkins 45). He wrote or cowrote at least six books about race in the United States during his tenure there, including *Brown America: The Story of a New Race* (1931), *American Negroes: A Handbook* (1942), and *Thirteen against*

*the Odds* (1944), in which he assembled thirteen miniature biographies of high-achieving black Americans. Du Bois, Hughes, and Wright all received chapters. Embree believed—following the British historian Arnold Toynbee, author of the twelve-volume *A Study of History* (1934–61)—in “the transforming power of the ‘creative minority’ in the development of civilizations” and that foundations should serve that creative class so it could serve the less talented (“Timid” 37). An unapologetic elitist, he once tried to convince the Rosenwald board to launch a magazine titled the *Aristocrat* that he envisioned as “not for the masses” and “high hat and proud of it” (qtd. in Perkins 155). The board voted against it. Embree instead carried out his vision for cultural change through the fellowship program, doling out 865 awards (587 to black fellows, 278 to white southerners) from 1928 to 1948. The fund president wanted the best of the best, insisting that fellows be more than “worthy and deserving”; they needed to be “people of exceptional ability” who, with an extra two thousand dollars in their bank accounts, might “come to their fullest powers” (Embree and Waxman 148). He regarded white interest in anti-racist literature as an index of the state of black life and a reflection of the nation’s gradual realization of an American creed. “Books and pamphlets on the Negro and race relations have been in striking demand,” he declared at the end of his time at the fund, “and novels bitterly attacking racial and religious discrimination—*Strange Fruit*, *Kingsblood Royal*, *Gentlemen’s Agreement*—have been among the most popular and widely acclaimed books of recent years” (172). All of Embree’s own books in the 1940s included a list of “books by and about Negroes” sorted into the categories “by Negroes” and “by white authors.”<sup>5</sup> The ultimate success of the fund, Rosenwald and Embree agreed, would come down to whether “the work is taken up by the state or by general giving,” and Embree and his team built a network of publishers, government agencies, universities, and other philanthropies through which they encouraged a generation of liberals to see literature as the leading edge of the civil rights struggle and reading Wright, Smith, and Motley as their contribution to the cause (“Timid” 29).

Although the Rosenwald Fund stressed that it did not dictate the kind of work their fellows undertook, Embree and the other two regular members of the selection committee—the sociologist Charles S. Johnson and Will Alexander, the chief executive of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and “dean of liberal white Southerners”—still chose the winners and sometimes offered feedback (Egerton 95). The committee did not, for example, award a grant to Motley until he had completed the manuscript for *Knock on Any Door*. The first-time novelist, they could see, shared their moderate humanism. Embree believed, as he wrote in *American Negroes* in 1942, that “prejudice leads to discrimination” and favored writers and artists who challenged wrongheaded ideas about black people rather than the more intractable, material structures that disadvantaged them from birth (52). The former, he convinced himself, caused the latter and should be treated as

the root cause of all racial stratification. Johnson and Alexander agreed. In the early 1940s, the three men warned the Rosenwald board that the black movement had taken a “proletarian direction” that could lead it to elevate “less responsible” leaders. The fund should, they counseled, be mindful of which causes they backed (qtd. in Jackson 235). While the committee did offer the more radical Du Bois two sizeable grants in the 1930s, Embree offered some unsolicited advice in a 1931 award letter. After stating that the Rosenwald Fund did not enforce “any vestige of restriction, supervision, or censorship,” he asked if he could make a “purely personal suggestion,” not as a foundation officer but as a friend. “As you know, I am greatly interested in literature as a means of conveying both truth and beauty. I have long felt that you have a literary gift that might well express itself occasionally in general beauty rather than in advocating special aspects of truth as you see them,” he wrote. “I hope you can take some of the freedom made possible over the next two years to undertake at least one important composition in a non-controversial field” (Letter to W. E. B. Du Bois). Embree wanted Du Bois to model black achievement, not advocate for black rights. Du Bois took the fund’s seven thousand dollars and, ignoring the foundation president’s feedback, wrote *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935).

While he never could control what fellows did with their grants, Embree had much to celebrate in 1948. He had achieved his goal: the wider culture, including the government, had absorbed and institutionalized the fund’s doctrine that literature and the arts could end racism through an education in the lives of others. Embree recruited Eleanor Roosevelt to the board in 1940 (he also served as an adviser to her husband). Twenty-one of the twenty-four black social scientists who contributed to *An American Dilemma* had received Rosenwald grants. The fund’s 1945 *Directory of Agencies in Race Relations* cataloged more than two hundred local, state, and national agencies founded since 1943 to address “cultural and racial problems” (Johnson 3). Hundreds more would follow. The Rosenwald Fund financed some of them; others modeled themselves on it. Johnson saluted Embree at the closing gala, declaring him “a social statesman of rich wisdom” and “a prophet of the democratic ideal and practitioner of the art of democratic living” (qtd. in Reid 195). Jacob Lawrence designed the program. Sterling Brown read a few poems. Myrdal spoke. Pearl Primus danced. Smith, a former fellow and the author of *Strange Fruit*, thanked Julius Rosenwald for recognizing that “once a dream [her own novel] starts other people dreaming there is no end to it” and that “here in the dream’s power to set off a chain reaction of dreams lies the secret of the growth of the human spirit” (“Artist” 233). Smith had it right: the Julius Rosenwald Fund had set off a chain reaction of dreams. But no one at Stevens Hotel that evening, thirteen miles from the site of the 1947 Fernwood Park race riot, wanted to ask if perhaps it was just a dream. Well, almost no one.

Du Bois delivered an address titled “Race Relations in the United States, 1917-1947,” tracing the course of black life since the founding of the Rosenwald Fund with almost no mention of the fund itself. He instead reminded the audience that the NAACP received “90 per cent of its revenues by Negro laborers”—not, he seemed to say, from white philanthropists—and that all of “its chief workers have been Negroes” (234). Du Bois, at a gala otherwise dedicated to celebrating Rosenwald, Embree, and black achievement in the arts and sciences, tied the struggle for black rights in the United States to anti-colonial movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. “Negroes are in a quasi-colonial status,” he said. “They belong to the lower classes of the world. These classes are, have been, and are going to be for a long time exploited by the more powerful groups and nations in the world for the benefit of those groups” (245). White people in the United States and elsewhere did not exploit black and brown people just because they learned some racist ideas, although racist ideas offered cover, but because it paid. The West believed that all other societies should conform to a “single white European standard” (245) of education, literature and art, and government, but most of the world, Du Bois told the gathering of philanthropists, felt that “the Anglo-Saxon type of cultural organization has failed and that other patterns should be tried.” If the United States wanted “political democracy,” as it said it did, it would first need to embrace an ethic of “cultural democracy,” which it had refused (246). Embree, not acknowledging Du Bois, offered some closing remarks that, he said, testified to the dream to which they had all committed themselves—lines from his friend Archibald MacLeish, the white modernist. The Rosenwald Fund and other racial liberal enterprises could see the error in the white man’s burden, but they had left Du Bois fending off, and Embree touting, the white man’s solution.

## The Education of Bigger Thomas

That white man’s solution—the race novel, literature as social cure—entailed cultivating and marketing authors but also training readers for an education in anti-racist feeling. “Dear Mr. Wright,” Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a selection committee member for the Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC) wrote Richard Wright on 1 July 1944, after receiving the revised ending to his forthcoming memoir, *Black Boy* (1945), “I admire, as I did when you accepted with what seemed to me such reasonableness some changes in *Native Son*, your freedom from the traditional author’s prickly touchiness.” Fisher and her colleagues had, as she did not hesitate to remind him, selected Wright’s first novel for the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1940, delivering it straight to the doors of hundreds of thousands of subscribers and making *Native Son* an instant best-seller and, for Edwin Embree and other liberal philanthropists, the model race novel. (Embree

recruited Wright as an adviser to the Rosenwald Fund and measured younger black novelists, including Baldwin and Chester Himes, against him.) The BOMC had asked for substantial changes to the *Native Son* manuscript. It had demanded even more with *Black Boy*, insisting that Wright cut the entire second half of the manuscript—two hundred pages dedicated to the author’s adult years in Chicago—and instead end the book with his flight from the South as a teenager. It had also suggested a new name for the manuscript Wright had first titled “Black Confession” and then “American Hunger.” Wright obliged. He cut the manuscript. He retitled it. Fisher wanted more.

In the closing pages of the revised manuscript, Wright wondered what had given him the “sense of freedom” that emboldened him to leave the South as a young man. Fisher asked in a 1 July letter if, in answering that question, he could acknowledge “American ideals” as a source of his freedom dream. “Could it be,” she mused, “that even from inside the prison of injustice, through the barred windows of that Bastille of racial oppression, Richard Wright had caught a glimpse of the American flag?” Wright returned a draft in which he acknowledged not American ideals but “novelistic narratives” as that which had motivated his younger self. Fisher, unsatisfied and undeterred, asked in a letter on 12 July whether some of the novels and stories he read were American and could have taught him “American ideals” as a child through “American delineation of American characters.” Wright relented. “It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life’s possibilities,” he wrote in the published version of *Black Boy*, which Fisher and her colleagues selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1945. “What enabled me to overcome my chronic distrust was that these books—written by men like Dreiser, Masters, Mencken, Anderson, and Lewis—seemed defensively critical of the straightened American environment” (227). Wright did not give her “The Star-Spangled Banner,” but Fisher got something she and the Book-of-the-Month Club’s white liberal readers valued almost as much: a testament to reading as a transformative act of national fellow feeling. Juliana Spahr, the poet and critic, observes what she describes as the almost inevitable slide of radical “autonomous” literature toward state “conscription,” including Wright’s fiction (16). Fisher’s behind-the-scenes maneuvering reveals how the liberal’s faith in time—of the young black man’s passage to freedom, of the white reader’s enlightenment—guides that conscription, sometimes before there is a book to conscript.

Fisher, an educational reformer who introduced the Montessori method to the United States, believed that the American novel should, above all else, bring Americans closer together by offering them an inside look at how others lived their lives. “What readers seem to like to find in a book,” she wrote in 1944, explaining the BOMC’s criteria, “is the feeling of contact with living, vital personalities,” of “meeting, really meeting, fellow human beings” (“American” 191). Readers may have liked that feeling of contact, but the Book-of-the-Month

Club also encouraged them to pursue it.<sup>6</sup> Fisher contributed a three-page introduction to the first edition of *Native Son*—the edition that reviewers received and that 215,000 readers bought in the first three weeks after publication—in which she framed the novel as a chance for readers to meet Bigger Thomas on the page so they would not have to meet him in real life. She dedicated the first half of her introduction not to Wright and his novel, but to describing how scientists triggered “psychopathic upsets” in rats by manipulating their environment—an apparent allusion to the opening scene of the novel in which Bigger, a twenty-year-old black man who finds a sense of release in murdering a young white woman and then his black girlfriend, corners and kills a rat in the apartment he shares with his mother and siblings. Fisher did not mention the novel itself until the fifth paragraph, in which she made an abrupt transition: “*Native Son* is the first report in fiction we have had from those who succumb to these disturbing cross-currents of contradictory nerve-impulses, from those whose behavior-patterns give evidence of the same bewildered, senseless tangle of abnormal nerve-reactions studied in animals by psychologists in laboratory experiments.” She then instructed readers on how they should respond to the novel: “It can be guaranteed to harrow up any human heart capable of compassion or honest self-questioning” (x).

Most readers in 1940 would have been encountering Wright for the first time. All received an edition with Fisher’s introduction wedged between Wright’s dedication to his mother and the first page of the novel. Before they ever met Bigger, Fisher had instructed them to see him as a sociological case (his violent “behavior-patterns” the result of the “contradictory nerve-impulses” of an unequal, segregated urban environment) and advised them how to feel about his plight (not fear but a condescending “compassion”). The later dismissal of Wright as a “fiction writer posing as social psychiatrist” may have as much to do with how liberal institutions such as the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Rosenwald Fund, and social science departments framed his fiction as what he wrote (Scott 98). When Shirley Graham told her future husband, Du Bois, that the novel turned her “blood to vinegar” and Hughes answered it with a call for fewer “tragedies of frustration and weakness” and more stories of “the heroes of the race,” they may have been responding as much to the packaging as to the product (“Need” 184). From the first roman-numeral page, the BOMC and Wright’s publisher, Harper and Brothers, sold *Native Son* to white readers as an education in black suffering and a means of cultivating and demonstrating an anti-racist consciousness.

That is not to say that Wright, a famous friend of the Chicago school, did not invite sociological readings of his novel. In the mid-1930s, he met Louis Wirth, a distinguished urban sociologist at the University of Chicago, either through Wirth’s wife and Wright’s welfare caseworker, Mary, or through the anti-fascist John Reed Club, which one biographer describes as “Wright’s university”

(Rowley 78). Wright asked Wirth for a reading list, and Wirth gave him a crash course in his and his famous department's research on race, crime, and urban life. In *12 Million Black Voices*, his 1941 ode to the black working class, Wright cited some of that reading list, including the work of sociologists Horace R. Cayton, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, Ira De A. Reid, Charles Taussig, and Wirth, as his source material. Scholars often remark on Wirth and the Chicago school's influence on *Native Son*, but few attend to the influence Wright's novel had on the Chicago school. Robert E. Park, who taught at Chicago from 1914 to 1933 and mentored a small army of young sociologists, including Wirth, had advocated scientific detachment. He did not think sociologists should concern themselves with how government officials might use their research and that scientists should observe and document, not campaign. The rise of the Third Reich changed all that. Wirth, a Jewish German immigrant, seemed to take the success of Wright's novel as a lesson in mass communication and counterpropaganda. In the war years, he addressed, as his article titles from the time communicate, the "Responsibility of Social Science" and "Race and Public Policy"—issues that Park never would have touched—and took an interest in reforming social science education, urging teachers to test "new educational frontiers" ("Postwar" 162) to "undo as quickly as possible the havoc wrought by the miseducation" of fascism and eugenics (157). In his 1947 presidential address at the meeting of the American Sociological Society (now the American Sociological Association), Wirth called on his fellow sociologists to engage mass media, including literature, radio, and television. "Since the mass media of communication are capable of providing the picture of social reality and the symbolic framework of thought and fantasy and the incentives for human action on an enormous scale," he stated, "the knowledge of their effective use should become the most important quest of social science, and particularly of sociology." Social scientists could no longer afford, he added, to "sit in their ivory tower while burly sinners rule the world" ("Consensus" 14–15). Wirth and his colleagues sought to share sociological knowledge with the masses, and they looked to Wright's race novel as a model for how to reach them.

Some social scientists tried to write novelistic accounts of their own research. In 1941, W. Lloyd Warner, another Chicago sociologist, teamed with the American Youth Commission—the board of which included Fisher and the Rosenwald Fund's Will Alexander—to write *Color and Human Nature: Negro Personality Development in a Northern City*. Warner introduced the volume with a nod to how Wright had used the "techniques of fiction" to show how a young black man "reacted to his lot" and offered as evidence a few lines not from the novel but from Fisher's introduction. "As the author of a novel must often do, Wright was obliged to simplify facts and generalize freely in his interpretation," he explained. "The present volume, *Color and Human Nature*, which is not limited to the story of one Negro youth in Chicago, includes facts about

hundreds of lives on which generalizations may be established” (xi). Warner evaluated *Native Son* not as a novel but as a work of sociological research—research that he found wanting because he thought it made “generalizations” about young black men. Of course, Wright’s *novel* did nothing of the sort; Fisher, Wirth, and Warner made the generalizations. While Warner encouraged readers to see *Native Son* as bad science, he invited them to read *Color and Human Nature* as good literature: “While the present volume reviews the Negro’s reactions to [discrimination] in a systematic way, the reader’s interest is held almost as though he were reading a novel” (xi–xii). If Wright had once looked to the Chicago school for material for his novel, the Chicago school now went to Wright’s novel to authorize their research. In his footnotes, Warner cited *Native Son* as if it were the work of another sociologist, comparing some of his case studies to Bigger Thomas and using Wright’s protagonist to illustrate what he termed the “darkskin male series” (65n7). Education scholars acknowledged the sociological value of the race novel, too, urging high school teachers to integrate fiction into the social science curriculum because, as two education professors wrote in 1946, “fiction stimulates and permits identification—‘putting oneself in the place of another’—in ways coldly intellectual analysis does not” and can act as a “powerful aid in destroying stereotypes and developing better intergroup relations” (Taba and Wilson 21). The new public-facing Chicago school of Wirth and Warner wanted to combat white supremacy, and they looked not to courthouses, union halls, or legislative chambers but across campus to the English department, where a formalist, the-text-is-the-text “new criticism” had taken hold.

Wright’s following among sociologists may account for why St. Clair Drake and Cayton, Wright’s close friend and a former Wirth advisee, invited him to contribute an introduction to their 1945 book *Black Metropolis*. He acknowledged his debt to Park, Wirth, and other social scientists, through whose research he “discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me” (xvii) and “found that sincere art and honest science were not far apart, that each could enrich the other” (xviii). But Wright did not see his novel as an argument for reform, as Fisher, Wirth, and Warner did, but as a warning that reform would never be enough, that Bigger Thomas demanded not civil rights but revolution. “Current American thought is so fastened upon trying to make what is *presently* real the only and right reality, that it has quite forgot the reality of the passion and hunger of millions of exploited workers and dissatisfied minorities,” he wrote. “It has quite forgot the reality of the impulses that made the men of Western Europe rise and slay the feudal dragon” (xxiii). Industrialists did not believe that another revolution could come because, he observed, they failed to see “the lives of the dispossessed,” the lives of people like Bigger Thomas, as real (xxiv). Wright observed elsewhere that Bigger’s revolution could be communist or fascist, but one thing was certain: he would never be, like the

philanthropists and social scientists who treated him as a case for intercultural education, a “supporter of the *status quo*” (“How” 19). The novelist, a careful reader of Marx, believed, as Robinson later remarked, that “the destruction of capitalism would come at the hands of the brute social force that it had itself created”—at the hands, that is, of Bigger Thomas and the lumpenproletariat (428).<sup>7</sup> In 1940, Wright asked himself, “would not whites misread Bigger and, doubting his authenticity, say: ‘This man is preaching hate against the whole white race?’” (“How” 20). White liberals did misread Bigger, but they never doubted his authenticity or thought that he hated them. Instead, they seemed to say, “This man had a tough life because of his environment, and that environment will be better if enough of us read this book.” Wright’s white readers did not see hate in the novel but something perhaps more destructive in their own reading of it: a solution.

### Playing in the Dark

Unlike future iterations of racial liberal English education that assumed that novelists should write about characters who shared their racial, gender, and sexual identities, the social scientists, philanthropists, and educators who created the race novel celebrated books that crossed over because they seemed to augur a desegregated national culture (attained without desegregating much else). In 2002, Shelley Fisher Fishkin looked back on the twentieth century to consider the fate of “transgressive texts”: novels and stories in which black authors created white protagonists and white authors black protagonists. She argued that novels such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph and the Suwanee* (1948) (black author, white protagonist) and Sinclair Lewis’s *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) (white author, black protagonist) had suffered under the unwritten rules of a segregated American literature. “Transgressive texts—books that violate these norms—are, as often as not, ignored,” she wrote (125). Fishkin was right, of course. *Seraph and the Suwanee* and *Kingsblood Royal* did not sell, and scholars had never taken much interest in them. But Hurston’s and Lewis’s lack of commercial success in the late 1940s cannot be attributed to readers’ aversion to transgressive texts. There was nothing all that transgressive about them in the years after World War II, with liberal social scientists, philanthropists, and educators embracing novels that crossed over as instruments of integration. In 1944, for example, Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* (white author, black protagonist) shot to number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list. In 1946, more than a million readers bought Frank Yerby’s debut novel *The Foxes of Harrow* (black author, white protagonist), and Twentieth Century Fox spent 150,000 dollars to secure the film rights. In 1947, Motley’s *Knock on Any Door* (black author, white protagonist) lodged itself on the best-seller list for close to twelve months, and Humphrey Bogart starred in

the film adaptation. Scholars may have forgotten transgressive texts, but readers never ignored them.

The Rosenwald Fund would not let them. In 1945, Bucklin Moon, author of *The Darker Brother* (1949) (white author, black protagonist), edited, with Rosenwald funding, *Primer for White Folks*, a volume that brought black and white writers together to, as he wrote in the preface, “shatter some of white America’s most popular ideas about the Negro.” Moon believed, as his title suggested, that white people needed an education in black life before they could know themselves and see what segregation had “cost” them, the architects of racial apartheid (xi). The table of contents read like a roll call of Rosenwald fellows, advisers, and trustees. Du Bois, Hughes, Wright, Brown, Thomas Sancton, Alexander, and Himes all contributed to the volume. But Moon gave the first and last word to Smith, then at the height of her fame. “Is there really a Negro problem or is it, as Lillian Smith recently suggested, actually a white problem?” he asked in his preface (xii). Smith elaborated on that problem in the closing essay, “Addressed to White Liberals,” in which she described segregation as an illness or disease, “a mechanism so destructive that it, in itself, has become a menace to the health of our culture and our individual lives,” a “cultural schizophrenia” with a “curious resemblance to the schizophrenia of individual personality” (485). Segregation had made the whole South sick, she argued, and that sickness radiated from white southerners’ failure to know themselves and reckon with their investment in white supremacist ideas and customs. For this, Smith, a lifelong southerner, prescribed a reading cure. “In the beginning was the Word, and today the Word is powerful”—powerful enough to “shake this way of life to its roots” (487). She prescribed the book in the reader’s hands. She prescribed the race novel as cure-all, merging two of the dominant conceptual metaphors of racial liberalism: racism as disease and racism as miseducation. “Narrative temporality is itself a powerful vehicle of liberal progress,” Lisa Lowe observes, assuring the reader of the protagonist’s progress from bondage to freedom—from sickness to health, from ignorance to enlightenment (60).

Smith believed in anti-racist reading because it had worked for her. In the early 1930s, while running the Laurel Falls girls summer camp in north Georgia, she undertook what her biographer describes as a “reading program on the South” of more than 130 books, including the work of Frazier, Horace Mann Bond, and Du Bois (Loveland 27). In 1936, she and her partner Paula Snelling launched *Pseudopodia*, which they soon renamed the *North Georgia Review* and then *South Today*, to advocate for an unromantic, anti-racist southern literature. Smith devoted one of her first columns to condemning Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), which she described as a “curious puffball compounded of printer’s ink and bated breath” (“One” 15) that conformed to the “nostalgic terms of the old Planter-ideology” (6).

In late 1938, Smith and Snelling wrote Edwin Embree, the Rosenwald Fund president, seeking a grant to sustain the *Review*, facilitate Smith's work on a novel then titled "Jordan Is So Chilly," and support the research of a coauthored "book of criticism of southern literature" that would "contribute toward the South's incipient willingness to move out from under the shade of the dead magnolias" ("Statement"). Embree awarded them a thousand dollars. When they asked for a renewal in 1940, they explained why they thought a new southern literature could transform the region. "The book's approach to the southern scene will be through its literature," they wrote. "For, we believe, literature not only mirrors (with clearness, or distortion) a region's surface life but serves as symbol and symptom of the dilemmas and ambivalence of its culture and of its human relationships; hence often holds within its content the means and mechanisms for understanding and interpreting those very elements of which it seems a mere reflection." Smith and Snelling, both of whom took social science courses at Columbia University in the 1920s—Snelling earning a master's degree in 1925—would situate southern literature in "its societal-racial-psychological context" and then, seeing literature as mirror and mechanism, use it to remake that context ("Plans"). The two women never completed the book, to which they had given the tentative title "Southbound," but their research informed Smith's 1949 memoir *Killers of the Dream*, in which she condemned southern literature for fabricating "the official daydream that the southern authoritarian system wanted the world to think our life was" (215). Embree liked what he read from Smith and Snelling. He shared their belief that literature could turn casual racists into liberal anti-racists, and he hired them as talent scouts for three years in the early 1940s, sending them all over the South to interview and recruit young writers and artists on behalf of the Rosenwald Fund.

In almost all her writing on race, Smith described white supremacists as disabled and Jim Crow as disabling the South. In a 1943 issue of *Common Ground*, an organ of the Carnegie-funded Common Council for American Unity, she chronicled her growing awareness as a child and young woman that segregation had left her and her fellow southerners "crippled." "The warping distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child from birth also," she wrote. "As in its twisting distorted form it shapes and cripples the life and personality of one, it is shaping and crippling the life and personality of the other. It would be difficult to decide which character is maimed the more—the white or the Negro—after living a life in the southern framework of segregation" ("Growing" 51). In a 1945 "Statement of Purposes and Intentions" for *Strange Fruit*, Smith described the "over-esteem of one's skin color" as a "regressive narcissism, a symptom of psychosexual maladjustment" ("Personal" 10). In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, anti-abolitionists and anti-suffragists had attributed disabilities to black people and women as an argument against their freedom and enfranchisement.

This sometimes led social movements, including the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements, to claim their rights by insisting on their able-bodiedness, making ableist arguments against racism and sexism. Smith took that liberal ableism further in the 1940s, attributing disabilities to white supremacists as evidence of their inferior status. "The concept of normality" (35), Douglas Baynton writes, arose alongside industrialism and Darwinian evolution as the West shifted from "a God-centered to a human centered world, from a culture that looked within to a core and backward to lost Edenic origins toward one that looked outward to behavior and forward to a perfected future" (36). When Smith declared white supremacists abnormal, she cast them as anachronisms: relics of a fast-receding, nineteenth-century world that could not resist the inevitable force of progress, the next bend in the moral arc of the universe. Time would take care of the white problem. The South would evolve.

Smith's first novel, *Strange Fruit*, delivered her ableist anti-racism to millions of readers. Although the front matter credited the title to the Lewis Allen-written, Billie Holiday-performed song of the same name, and although Smith acknowledged hearing the song before retitling her novel, she later insisted that it referred not to Holiday's "southern trees bearing strange fruit" but to a story she had written in 1943 in which a white man's bad conscience tells him, "I'm the seed of hate and fear and guilt. You are its strange fruit which I feed on" ("Two" 14). In an unpublished reflection from the time, Smith remarked, "*Strange Fruit* seemed like the right title—not because it symbolized a lynching, but because it symbolized a people. We the people, white and colored, are the strange fruit which our culture has produced" ("Lillian" 71). The novel, about the fallout from a love affair between a white man, Tracy Deen, and a black woman, Nonnie Anderson, in a small Georgia town, identifies bad racial consciousness with disabilities and good racial consciousness with able-bodiedness. Tracy embodies the former, his bad racial consciousness manifested in a never-explained limp. The reader first encounters him as he walks toward Nonnie's house: "A drag of left foot, a lift of shoulder, half limp, half swagger. Limp, swagger" (2). On the one occasion that another character mentions his uneven walk, he retorts, "I'm not crippled" (69). Nonnie embodies good racial consciousness with her able-bodiedness, "her head held effortlessly high" (99) and her bearing suggesting an "invulnerableness" and a "superiority to hurt" (23). Not until Tracy scorns her for her skin color does she find herself disoriented and struggling to stand. Other characters have lost legs at the local mill, and the children tell ghost stories about a woman who lost an arm in a train accident and now wanders the town at night searching for her missing arm. A segregated South is, in Smith's fictional Georgia, a disabled South, a region fighting the "normal" march of time into a desegregated future.

*Strange Fruit* offers itself as a cure for what ails the South. All the novel's good white liberals—Tracy's younger sister, Laura, and the mill owner's two children,

Charlie and Harriet Harris—read fiction. Others either do not read the right kind of books or do not read at all. Tracy, with his tragic racial consciousness, has read the social science but not the novels. “The anthropologists had proved there was no superior race. Sure he knew that,” Tracy reflects after an evening with Nonnie. “Books were written showing this, telling it, proving it even. He didn’t read books all the time, as Laura did, but he knew what the world was thinking. He knew what the facts were. They had no more to do with his feelings than knowing the facts about bone structure or the reproductive process has to do with your feeling about the mother who bore you” (40). Tracy knows the “facts” but has not learned the “feelings” to live them out. He knows what to believe but not how to act on that belief. He knows that Nonnie’s Blackness should not change how he feels about her, but it does. His mother often read to Laura as a child, we learn, but not to him. He sensed as a seven-year-old how his mother’s reading could “shut out the emptiness, shut out the bigness he had felt lost in,” and he would sit with her and Laura until she sent him outside, banishing him from the “softness and warmth” of the world of imagination and feeling (74).

Smith believed that the right kind of reading could transform the South, that it could save the region as it had saved Laura. In a 1943 pamphlet “There Are Things to Do” (elsewhere titled “Addressed to Intelligent White Southerners”), of which the Rosenwald Fund bought and distributed more than a thousand copies, she called on white southern readers to act—“there are things we can do NOW”—before advising them to “read a Negro’s book or his articles; then write him a letter” (“Addressed to Intelligent” 35) or “subscribe to a Negro magazine or a Negro newspaper” (37). Racial apartheid would end, she argued, when white liberals learned to read for facts and for feeling—to know what “the anthropologists had proved” but also the “softness and warmth” of fictional lives. Although it advocated nothing more radical than reading novels and subscribing to black newspapers, “There Are Things to Do” attracted the attention of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. In the author’s 134-page Bureau file, meticulous underlining suggests that an agent read the pamphlet like an honors student.

Smith, who studied at Columbia’s graduate school of education, regarded the next generation as a blank slate that could be raised without the wrongheaded ideas that afflicted hers. “Members of school boards can make magnificent contributions now to world peace and human understanding,” she advised in her how-to pamphlet, “by putting into the school system books which will build appreciation and understanding” to people of other races (39). Her belief in education as the frontline of anti-racist struggle informed how she and Snelling ran Laurel Falls, which Smith bought from her father in 1928. A 1944 *New York Herald Tribune* article described it as “a summer camp for girls as different from the average as [*Strange Fruit*] is from *Gone with the Wind*.” The girls hiked and learned arts and crafts but also gathered in the afternoons to listen to Miss Lil, as they knew her, discuss race, segregation, and the South. “Suppose I had a

child,” she told them at a lesson recounted in the *Tribune*, “and I thought she had a heart murmur. Would I say to myself, ‘I love my child so much that I don’t want to know if she has a heart murmur?’” The girls answered that, of course, she would not. “Suppose,” she continued, “I said, ‘I love the South so much that I don’t want to know if it has anything wrong with it.’ Is that any more sensible?” The *Tribune* article concluded that an attendee “could not help finishing the summer a more tolerant girl than she started it” (Mendelson A4). That may be true, but Smith and the other white liberals of the Rosenwald Fund failed to see that reading the right books might be the first rather than the last act in transforming the white supremacist structure of the United States, that more than racist attitudes barred black people from wealth, health, and government. Laurel Falls closed in 1948, the same year that Embree shuttered the Rosenwald Fund. It never admitted a black girl.

In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright reflected on his first book, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, admitting that it had solicited a sentimental response that comforted white readers, making them feel virtuous for having read his stories. “When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about,” he wrote, describing sentimentalism in familiar gendered terms. “I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears” (29–30). That commitment led Wright to *Bigger Thomas*, his antihero, and *Native Son*, his anti-sentimental novel. He did not want white readers to feel good about feeling, for the duration of a few stories, bad. He would not allow them to believe that they knew his protagonist, that they identified with him and felt his suffering from the inside. Wright blamed the sentimental response to *Uncle Tom’s Children* on his writing—his “mistake”—and dedicated himself to writing a different kind of book. But perhaps that response had more to do with the reviews, the whole apparatus of reception, than it did with his stories. Wright’s novel and the novels that it inspired, including Smith’s, entered a network of liberal channels—the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Rosenwald Fund, a public-facing Chicago school, publishers and “race novel” marketing campaigns, newspaper book criticism—that framed them, no matter their content, as three-dollar educations in how to feel like an anti-racist. The race novel emerged as a celebrated form in the 1940s because it cohered so well with a wider culture of racial solutionism, a desire among liberals to find, on the near-future horizon, an end to racial time. Perhaps an imagined one, at the end of a good read, would do. This does not mean that all readers consumed race novels as consoling assurances of the magic of books and progressive time. But readers who did not—readers who refused the dominant liberal paradigm, who worried that cultural integration might supplant rather than facilitate material redistribution—had to read against a growing chorus of racial

liberals telling each other that as long as such books are being published everything will be all right.

## Notes

1. For more on how scholars, critics, and authors have read and misread the black protest novel, see Stephanie Brown (7–40). Brown argues against sometimes one-dimensional accounts of the 1940s as a “golden age of ‘protest fiction’” in which Wright imitators dominated, attracting the ire of Baldwin and a wave of anti-communist critics (12).
2. Mary Helen Washington attributes the conservative bent of the special issue to FBI surveillance and other Cold War tactics designed to bring black leftists into the anti-communist fold, observing that contributors “reproduce, almost verbatim, the official State Department line that racism ‘was a fast-disappearing aberration, capable of being overcome by talented and motivated individuals’” (41). Kenneth W. Warren identifies the *Phylon* special issue instead as signaling a waning of African American literature, which he defines as a form bound to Jim Crow, a form that “was” rather than “is” (44–88). The contributors, which included novelists and poets, should also be understood as responding and contributing to the constraining liberal channels into which their books were fed and consumed as totems of sociological truth and racial solutionism.
3. Jodi Melamed, to whom this essay is indebted for her paradigm-shifting genealogical account of liberal anti-racisms, describes that masking of ascription (race-making) with description (disinterested data collection) as the “trick of racialization” (2), in which the state constitutes “differential relations of value and valuelessness according to reigning orders while appearing to be (and being) a normative system that merely sorts human beings according to categories of difference” (11). The time measure of racial liberalism—linear, progressive, accelerated relative to earlier liberal racial ideologies with a gaze on the not-too-distant future—is integral to that trick, resigning racial ascription to the past and assuming racial description to be a means to a future end. The race novel instilled that temporal trick like nothing else.
4. Gregory Jay argues that the “affective work” of racial liberal literature can counteract the violence of racial capitalism—that racial liberalism does not have to be the soft glove of a profit-seeking regime—but that affective engagement has often stood in for material change, further elevating the status of white liberal elites and off-loading blame onto black and brown Americans themselves or members of the white working class, whom they assume not to have received an education in anti-racist feeling (16).
5. See, for example, Edwin R Embree’s *American Negroes: A Handbook* (70–74) and *Brown Americans: The Story of a Tenth of the Nation* (235–40).

6. The Book-of-the-Month Club, Janice Radway writes, encouraged “a reading experience that promoted interest in an object or situation beyond the self” and nurtured “hope and the possibility of commitment to the future” (288). It also fostered a belief among racial liberals that to feel was to be committed, that to read was to act and perhaps overcome.
7. For a thorough account of the lumpenproletariat in the fiction of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Margaret Walker, see Nathaniel Mills.

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