Essay

War-on-Crime Fiction

THEODORE MARTIN

Is revolt a political act, or a criminal one? This question was at the center of American public discourse and policy debate in the 1960s.[1] It was also a question, this essay argues, that remade the era's crime fiction. Few crime novels of the 1960s and 1970s were untouched by the increasingly blurred relation between crime and rebellion—especially as that relation became one of the period's predominant ways of conceptualizing, and criminalizing, race. Consider, for instance, George V. Higgins's classic novel of organized crime in Boston, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1972). At the start of Higgins's novel, Eddie Coyle, in need of guns, finds himself haggling with the stubborn gun dealer Jackie Brown. Jackie explains that business is booming: "I had a guy seriously ask me, could I get him a few machineguns. He'd go a buck and a half apiece for as many as I could get." The mention of machine guns piques Coyle's interest; he interrupts Jackie to ask, "What color was he?" (8).

Coyle never gets an answer. Yet, one chapter later, now in need of a favor, Coyle tells a cop that he might have some useful information to trade. "Suppose," says Coyle to Detective Foley, "you had a reliable informer that put you onto a colored gentleman that was buying some machineguns" (15). Coyle has clearly invented the detail about the buyer's race. Why? What Higgins wants us to see is how Coyle capitalizes on a chain of equivalences so plausible, as far as the police are concerned, that it appears basically inevitable: "machineguns" really meant the possibility of armed revolt, and the possibility of armed revolt really meant Black militants. "He knows I'm a cop, of course," the detective tells another cop, "and he knows I'm a federal cop, so he's got to figure I got a hard-on for the Panthers. Not that he ever said Panthers. But Eddie's not stupid" (27). What it means to be not stupid

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in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* is to understand how criminality was racialized in the 1960s and 1970s by dint of being radicalized.[2]

"The Panthers're the best thing ever happened to the Mafia," opines another of *Eddie Coyle*'s characters (26)—because Black radicalism offered a valuable distraction from white organized crime. This fact is not only a thematic interest of Higgins's novel, it is the book's formal principle. Indeed, the MacGuffin of Black militancy drives the novel's plot for more than a hundred pages, as the police search for Black radicals who do not exist instead of for the white bank robbers Coyle is working for, who do. Coyle's odd question in the opening pages—"What color was he?"—thus turns out to be the key to understanding the narrative form of a novel whose plot is principally structured around the distinction between Black criminals and white criminals. In this way, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* slyly narrates the essence of an era in which the public imagination was preoccupied by the fantasized link between race, militancy, and criminality.

This essay tells the story of how the fantasy of racialized and radicalized crime found its way into the American crime novel. Such a fantasy bore little relation to the realities of crime. It was instrumental, however, in shaping the reality of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Crime, which was officially launched in 1965. In the early to mid 1960s, worsening poverty and unemployment, constant media coverage of rising rates of crime and drug use, increased visibility of the civil rights and Black Power movements, and frequent uprisings in urban centers all contributed to a federally orchestrated response to what Johnson called the "public malady" of urban crime ("Special Message to the Congress on Crime"). As these conditions, anxieties, and ideologies coalesced into a crime war, they profoundly altered what it meant to read and write the fiction of crime and punishment. In what follows, I show how the cultural logic of the War on Crime infiltrated various kinds of crime writing: the pioneering police procedurals of Joseph Wambaugh; the revolutionary Black radical novels of Sam Greenlee, John A. Williams, and John Edgar Wideman; and the influential vigilante fiction of Donald Goines and Brian Garfield. Each of these subgenres has its own rich literary history and critical tradition. How, though, might their parallel emergence in the 1960s and 1970s clue us in to a broader transformation in the way American culture conceived of crime?

My claim is that these crime subgenres established a new set of character types—the beat cop, the revolutionary, and the vigilante—all engineered to speak directly to the new and heated debates about civil unrest that echoed throughout American society. It is the link between these literary types, and their place in the broader landscape of both postwar crime fiction and postwar criminal justice, that this essay hopes to illuminate through the category of "War-on-Crime fiction." Such a category, I argue, prompts us to reconsider more familiar definitions of the crime fiction genre, directing our attention to the divergent ways that novelists writing about cops and criminals in the immediate wake of the 1964 Civil Rights Act were forced to reckon with the same inescapable problem: the far-reaching conflation of race, poverty, militancy, and militarization whose more common shorthand, since 1965, has been the War on Crime.

The legal scholar Jonathan Simon and his colleagues argue that the War on Crime fundamentally "remade our society" (3). The historian Heather Ann Thompson suggests that mid-century changes to the criminal justice system are tied to "some of the most dramatic political, economic, and social transformations of the postwar period" (734). And the sociologist Stuart Schrader makes the case for putting "the prison at the center of the social and political history of the past four decades" (1). Following these promptings, we may begin to imagine a version of post-1960 American history with the War on Crime at its center: a sociopolitical nexus tying together the dismantling of Jim Crow, the onset of deindustrialization, the collapse of the welfare state, and the increasingly dire conditions of segregated urban poverty that birthed the distinctive late-century version of what is often called "the ghetto." While these historical developments have separately drawn the attention of scholars of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, their

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fusion under the banner of the War on Crime has so far largely eluded the notice of literary critics.[3] Relatedly, while critics like Sean McCann, Erin A. Smith, Leonard Cassuto, Andrew Pepper, and Paula Rabinowitz have established an indispensable critical tradition that reads hard-boiled crime fiction in relation to the liberal state, new labor regimes, and a changing publishing industry (primarily in the first half of the twentieth century), scholars of the genre have not fully reckoned with the radical reorganization of police power, social welfare, criminal justice, and racial ideology that took place under the auspices of America's crime war.[4]

This essay makes the case for the literary and cultural centrality of the War on Crime. I have several reasons for wanting to make it. First, I hope to persuade literary historians that the War on Crime names a coherent and pivotal historical period—one that provides an essential point of entry for beginning to understand the role that literature played in the rise of mass incarceration. Second, I want to convince scholars of crime fiction that our histories of the genre remain incomplete if we fail to account for the way it was remade by the economic, juridical, and ideological transformations that underpinned the crime war. And third, I propose that understanding the literary dimensions of the War on Crime may require a new way of assessing what counts as crime fiction in the first place.[5] None of the seven novels discussed in this essay are what you might traditionally call crime—usually meaning detective—fiction. Some star low-level beat cops, others criminals, still others political activists; none feature a detective, and none involve the solving of a mystery. All, however, are set in racially segregated urban centers; all revolve around acts of police violence; all are focused on the possibility of uprisings; and all are preoccupied with the politics of crime control. Accordingly, the readings that follow may be considered an attempt to recenter the "crime" part of our idea of crime fiction. This essay's provocation is to ask what would happen if we were to see the political history of crime, rather than the formal history of generic convention, as the key to defining the crime novel. Rethinking the genre in these terms allows us to see how the ostensibly disparate kinds of crime novels that flourished in the 1960s in fact sprung from a single set of historically specific debates about crime, race, and protest.

Such a reframed vision of genre, at once historically narrowed and formally expanded, is what this essay dubs War-on-Crime fiction. Writing in the first decade of the government's crime war, novelists found themselves left with a time-honored literary topic—crime—that was suddenly inextricable from the political tangle of race, radicalism, poverty, and state violence. These historical changes to the concept of crime spurred the development of new crime stories, built around a set of literary protagonists who had previously existed mainly on the fringes of the American novel. Despite targeting different readerships and drawing on different generic traditions, the characters of the beat cop, the revolutionary, and the vigilante all embodied a common frustration at the state's inability to prevent crime and ameliorate poverty. Yet these entangled protagonists worked to shore up deeply divergent political understandings of the causes and consequences of urban rebellion, a topic that remained open to heated debate. Thus capable of serving both radical and conservative ends, the War-on-Crime novel can ultimately be understood, I argue, as a contested literary site for managing competing cultural responses to a regime of dispossession dually rooted in the racialization of crime and the criminalization of revolt.

War Story

The War on Crime was forged in the crucible of revolt. In an address to Congress in the spring of 1965, Johnson lamented that crime had "become a malignant enemy in America's midst" and announced his plans to begin an "active combat against crime." As the Johnson administration saw it, crime was "no longer merely a local problem" but "a national problem," and federal initiatives were now required "to intensify our crime prevention and crime-fighting at all levels of government" ("Special Message to the Congress on Law Enforcement"). Several months later—and a mere one month before the first piece of War-on-Crime

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legislation was unanimously approved by Congress—police violence during a traffic stop in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles led to one of the largest urban insurrections in American history. The Watts rebellion lasted six days, involved 35,000 African American residents, mobilized 16,000 National Guard soldiers and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers, led to more than 3,000 arrests, and left 34 dead. The historian Michael W. Flamm notes that the uprising in Watts significantly "complicated the White House's efforts to separate street crime and civil disorder in the public mind" (52). As a result of Watts—along with the uprisings in more than 250 American cities that took place between 1965 and 1968—the fear of crime became interchangeable with the fear of riot. Indeed, the watchword of the day, "crime in the streets," was effectively synonymous with what Barry Goldwater, in the 1964 speech introducing his presidential campaign, had called "mobs in the street." By the summer of 1967, polls showed that riots now outranked the Vietnam War as the public's primary concern (Flamm 101); a year later, the number one domestic issue was "crime and lawlessness" (143). The rise of what is now widely known as "law and order" politics was thus deeply tied to perceptions of urban civil disorder. In public discourse, the term *crime* more often than not meant *riot*, and rioters in turn were consistently cast as criminals. The equation of rioter to criminal was made explicit by Johnson himself in his nationally televised address during the 1967 Detroit uprising, in which he underscored that "the looting, arson, plunder, and pillage which have occurred are not part of the civil rights protest. There is no American right to loot stores, or to burn buildings, or to fire rifles from the rooftops. That is crime."[6] And the "criminals who committed these acts of violence against the people deserve to be punished" ("President's Address").

The hundreds of urban uprisings that swept the nation in the mid to late 1960s—political responses to the structural unemployment, poverty, and police violence concentrated in racially segregated neighborhoods—were, as Elizabeth Hinton has shown, central to shaping both the policies of and the rationale for the War on Crime (110). Thus was the War on Crime founded on the conflation of rioter, criminal, and African American. As the general public panicked about rising crime rates, media reports about the threat of drug addicts, and televised images of Black protesters, the Johnson administration responded with the Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965 and the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968. These founding pieces of War-on-Crime legislation directed federal funds to state and local police departments, with the aims of professionalizing, modernizing, and above all militarizing the police. Between 1969 and 1976, the budget for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA)—a federal agency created by the Safe Streets Act, whose purpose was to dispense block grants to states for crime prevention—grew from $63 million to $800 million (Schoenfield 33). Amid this massive expansion of the federal crime-fighting budget, riot control was a task the LEAA "disproportionately favored with funding" (Siegel 46).

The "war" part of the War on Crime was more than a metaphor. One of the main goals of the Safe Streets Act, as Julilly Kohler-Hausmann explains, was to enable "the transfer of expertise and technology from the military to local law enforcement agencies" (23). Through Johnson's crime control acts, local police departments acquired funds for "military-grade rifles, tanks, riot gear, walkie-talkies, helicopters, and bulletproof vests" (Hinton 89). Police militarization took place not only against the backdrop of the Vietnam War but also in response to the growing fear that urban uprisings at home would turn into a full-blown race war—a fear that Hinton argues was "the fundamental force underlying federal policy-making beginning with Watts in 1965" (132–33). The fear of a race war, and the military response that fear ostensibly demanded, was further stoked by government officials' belief that the uprisings were somehow linked to Black militants (112).

In short, the War on Crime operated by blurring war, unrest, urban crisis, and Black militancy into a single social ill—and by then presenting that

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ill as one that could be assuaged only through increasingly militarized force. How, the rest of this essay asks, did the era's new kinds of crime stories work either to corroborate or to contest this newly fabricated conception of crime?

On the Beat

Now one of the most ubiquitous forms in American popular culture, the police procedural barely existed before the 1940s. Until then, the American crime novel was far more likely to feature a private investigator than a police officer. It was only after World War II, building on the popularity of radio shows like *Dragnet*, that the police novel become a recognizable subgenre of mystery fiction (Panek 34). Critics like Leroy Lad Panek and Christopher P. Wilson have shown how the police procedural of the 1950s emerged in concert with a new set of beliefs about the professionalized, technocratic labor of modern policing. The narrative emphasis on procedure required a new kind of professional hero; as Wilson puts it, "not . . . the maverick loner of hard-boiled detective stories" but "a modern office worker" (*Cop Knowledge* 59).

However, by the end of the 1960s, the procedural's celebration of by-the-book professionalism and technocratic efficiency had given way to a different literary vision of policing. This vision was embodied in Wambaugh's debut novel *The New Centurions* (1970), which helped alter the course of the police procedural. It did so by detaching the genre from the narrative teleology of the murder mystery and recentering it on a long-overlooked figure: the beat cop. Wilson calls Wambaugh "the cultural figure perhaps most responsible for creating the modern mass-cultural image of the paramilitary patrol cop" (*Cop Knowledge* 97). The character of the beat cop played a particularly important role in translating the statistical discourses underpinning the War on Crime into the terms of popular fiction.

Based on Wambaugh's experience as an LAPD patrolman (he eventually rose to sergeant), *The New Centurions* traces the lives of three LA cops in a series of plotless, disconnected episodes that chart their transformation from police academy cadets in 1960 to jaded veterans in 1965. The novel was enormously popular (it stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for forty-four weeks [Wilson, *Cop Knowledge* 246n7]), and also profoundly ideological; it often reads more like LAPD public-relations material than like a novel. *The New Centurions* laments the Supreme Court's protection of the rights of the accused ("the court is lying in wait for bad cases like *Mapp vs. Ohio* so they can restrict police power a little more" [Wambaugh 25–26]); it defends police brutality ("Police brutality means to act as an ordinary prudent person, without a policeman's self-discipline, would surely act under the stresses of police work" [216]); it promotes victims' rights ("The judges and the probation officers and social workers and everybody else think mainly about the suspect . . . but you and me are the only ones who see what he does to his victims" [67]); it complains about the "ignorant bastards" of the press who criticized the police for shooting rioters (476); it steadfastly refuses to acknowledge that race plays a role in policing ("I treat everyone the same, white or black" [82]); and all the while, it conjures a steady parade of criminal characters who are primarily poor and Black.

Indeed, the most obvious thing one notices about *The New Centurions* is the tension between its fixation on the racial specificity of crime and its doubtfulness about the social significance of race. The meaninglessness of racial difference is the novel's repeated refrain: "An asshole is an asshole, they're just a little darker here" (196); "People are all murderous bastards, they're just a little darker down here" (384). Sentences like these transform race into color in order to insist on the superficiality of racial difference as an index of social inequality. Some people may be "a little darker" than others, but the important point, *The New Centurions* assures us, is that because everyone is "an asshole," everyone will be treated equally badly by the police.

Yet this repeated insistence on the color blindness of policing and on human beings' universal propensity for doing ill is hard to square with the novel's singular focus on the crimes and policing of Black people. One character sums up the book's basic premise early on: "Lots of crime when you

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have lots of Negroes" (82). *The New Centurions* thus finds itself in a compromised position, clinging to the meaninglessness of race as a factor in policing while offering as its central narrative premise the explicit anti-Blackness of urban police work. How Wambaugh resolves this paradox tells us a lot about the emergent anticrime ideologies of the period—and about what it took for the police procedural to formally reorient itself around those ideologies.

The tough-on-crime policies of the late 1960s and early 1970s were, Kohler-Hausmann argues, rooted partly in beliefs about "the inherent ungovernability of the poor in African American and Latino communities" (4). Ungovernability offered one way of talking about race and class without directly talking about them. And for *The New Centurions*, as for much of the American public at the time, what ungovernability really looked like was riot. The novel's final section is titled "August 1965," and it takes place during the Watts rebellion, where, Wambaugh's narrator reports, "thousands of felonies were being committed with impunity" (421). It is hard to know which he thinks is worse, the felonies or the impunity. Either way, it is the number that interests me here. Wambaugh's quantitative rhetoric of crime ("thousands of felonies") is paired with aggregate depictions of the people committing those felonies: "Roving bands of Negroes, men, women, and children screamed and jeered and looted" (422). Between the composite "bands" of rioters and the quantification of their crimes, Wambaugh has given the ideology of ungovernability one last, historically specific twist. This is a lesson in how to write crime fiction for an era dominated by the discourse of crime rates.

The criminal imaginary of the moment was indeed centrally data-driven.[7] "Throughout the 1960s and 1970s," Hinton explains, "flawed statistical data overstated the problem of crime in African American communities and produced a distorted picture of American crime" (24). Despite their significant flaws, however, the era's crime statistics shaped both the public perception of crime and the state's putative solutions to it.[8] Measured by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's *Uniform Crime Reports*, "the overall crime rate increased by double digits every year" from 1965 to 1969, and each increase became the focus of extensive and often inflammatory media coverage (Flamm 125). As Kohler-Hausmann puts it, this was "an era when dramatic rises in crime were widely reported and highly politicized" (37). Yet the popular obsession with crime rates was only the tip of the iceberg; beneath it was the beginning of a larger shift toward the use of statistics in policing. Computer programs and data analysis became key facets of crime control as early as the 1970s, as the LEAA funded the development of "new statistical systems" to track crime and facilitate information sharing (Hinton 156). Pilot programs in cities like St. Louis, for instance, used federal funds to develop a "computer identification project" aimed at predicting crime before it occurred (23). LEAA funding also fueled what Loïc Wacquant calls the "relentless growth of official criminal databases," which by the late 1990s held as many as "55 million 'criminal files'" across local, state, and federal agencies (138, 135). More recent innovations in digitized crime control and predictive policing—systems like New York City's CompStat and Chicago's CLEARmap—thus have their origins in the early years of the War on Crime, when the public uproar over rising crime rates went hand in hand with the federal government's attempt to fuse crime fighting with data collection.

The central role of statistics in the War on Crime explains why Wambaugh's influential reinvention of the police procedural took the particular form that it did. *The New Centurions* pioneered a literary form capable of expressing the tendential and aggregative nature of crime data. That form is fashioned from the narrative logic of the beat—a geographic unit that, still today, plays a primary role in the collection and deployment of crime statistics. As Brian Jordan Jefferson explains, in contemporary crime-mapping systems like CLEARmap, "all data are organized at the scales of beats and police districts" (783–84). Decades earlier, Wambaugh was already using the scale of the beat to organize a story in which crime could appear constant, cumulative, and geographically contained. In this way,

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The New Centurions offers itself up as a kind of alternative crime report, one in which the steady accumulation of unrelated criminal episodes becomes the basis for building a pseudo-statistical profile of racialized space—an on-the-ground plotting of "the high crime rate" that, Wambaugh tells us, distinguishes Black neighborhoods from white ones (113). Thus is Black criminalization made to appear a matter of statistical likelihood rather than racial ontology. The beat narrative conceals race by remapping it as a rate.

The emergence of the beat-cop novel reflects a moment when American criminal justice was beginning to reorient itself around an ever more quantified view of both crime and race.[9] Crime data was a crucial tool for reconciling Black criminalization with the victories of the civil rights movement and the legal enshrinement of color blindness. In the episodic logic of the beat patrol, Wambaugh discovers the perfect narrative form for converting isolated criminal incidents into the quantitative—and thus allegedly race-neutral—expression of a particular group's apparent tendency toward crime. What *The New Centurions* finally both fictionalizes and formalizes for its readers is a seemingly endless string of police encounters with those agents of disorder who may indeed come in all colors but who are, according to the unspoken laws of the novel's hidden statistical imaginary, most likely to look like the residents of Watts.

Revolutionizing the Crime Novel

In Wambaugh's telling, the Watts rebellion was an event without cause or reason, an occurrence more natural than political. This was, according to the sociologist Naomi Murakawa, very much in line with "the white public opinion of the day. In 1967 roughly 70 percent of black survey respondents identified police brutality as the major cause of riots, but less than 20 percent of white survey respondents had this opinion" (85). As Joshua Clover argues, the racially coded language used to characterize riots as "purportedly thoughtless . . . lacking reason, organization, and political mediation" was key to their delegitimation and criminalization in the second half of the twentieth century (112). Framed as irrational, apolitical, and criminal, the urban revolts of the 1960s were rarely interpreted as political acts. Yet, ironically, they were often blamed on political agitators. In the wake of the uprising in Detroit, the Johnson White House heatedly debated whether the riots were part of a conspiracy by Black militants (Flamm 93). The criminalization of riot was thus based paradoxically both on the denial of riots as political tactics and on the fear of the growing influence of Black radical politics.

The status of militancy in the age of urban insurrection was an evident preoccupation for African American writers in the period. Novels explicitly depicting Black revolution were part and parcel of what Valerie Babb has described more broadly as "the increasing radicalization that would emerge in much black expression of the 1960s–1970s," an aesthetic radicalization that occurred in tandem with the rise of Black Power (124). The era's Black militant novels have frequently been read through the lens of science fiction. Kali Tal characterizes this body of work as a "subgenre of African American science fiction: the black militant near-future novel" (66); Mark Bould has called it "Black Power SF"; and Julie A. Fiorelli argues that such novels deployed "the speculative mode to produce an imaginative testing of . . . black revolution."

But there was also a less speculative way that such novels interacted with the political conditions of their present: through the hot-button issue of crime. In this section, I argue that the Black militant novel must also be understood as a species of crime novel. This was an era, after all, shaped not only by Black radicalization but also by the perceived interchangeability of the radical and the criminal. Three novels in particular make explicit how political militancy remained bound to racial criminalization: Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969), Williams's *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (1969), and Wideman's *The Lynchers* (1973). Highlighting the troubled relation between the stock character of the Black criminal and the emergent figure of the Black revolutionary, these novels show us the

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unexpected way that future-oriented Black radical fiction was entangled with the present-day politics of crime control. For Greenlee, Williams, and Wideman, the story of what it might take to foment a revolution had, in the age of the War on Crime, become impossible to separate from the story of what it meant to be presumed a criminal.

The transformation of street crime into armed rebellion is most straightforwardly imagined in Greenlee's *Spook*, which tells the story of Dan Freeman, a disaffected ex–CIA agent turned social worker who secretly begins training street gangs in Chicago to wage guerrilla war against the United States government. *Spook* explicitly riffs on the conventions of the crime genre: Freeman's nemesis is a detective named Dawson, winkingly referred to as "the Sherlock of the South Side" (130). Yet *Spook* can be read as a crime novel as much for its relation to the prevailing social discourses on crime and riot as for its generic allusions. Indeed, Freeman's revolutionary strategy is tied up with the decade's crime politics at every step. As professional cover, Freeman "made speeches in the white suburbs concerning juvenile delinquency . . . and spiced them with the white man's statistics concerning Negro crime" (137). As part of his argument for radical action, Freeman points out that debates about crime are simply ways of mystifying poverty: "The conditions they force us into cause the crime, then they use the crime to justify the conditions" (176). And as the spark for revolution, Freeman "need only wait for . . . an arrogant, head-whipping cop to spark the riots" (146).

Greenlee's speculative narrative about riot as the starting point for revolution is best understood in the context of the government's military mobilization in response to urban crisis—a process that, as Greenlee recognized, had already effectively rendered poor African Americans as enemies of the state. The worldview enshrined in the War on Crime was profoundly shaped by the language and logic of the military counterinsurgency then being perpetrated abroad, most visibly in Vietnam (Siegel 25–51; Darda 82–83; Schrader). Hinton notes that the police in Watts "saw themselves as confronting a new type of 'urban guerrilla warfare'" (69). During the Detroit uprising, *Newsweek* wrote that rioters had "turned the nation's fifth largest city into a theater of war" (qtd. in Camp 53), while *The Detroit News* suggested, "It was as though the Viet Cong had infiltrated the riot-blackened streets" (qtd. in Hersey 21). The connection enshrined in that last phrase between riot, Blackness, and war makes clear that Greenlee's reimagining of the Black poor as trained guerrilla fighters was simply to take literally the way poor inner-city residents were already portrayed and policed. Thus is armed rebellion made to appear in *Spook* both as the radical corrective to Black poverty and as the literalization of white fears about it. Greenlee's literary response to the War on Crime is to imagine what it would look like for the criminalized masses to wage war back.

Other novelists were more uneasy about the relation between criminality and radicalism. Like *Spook*, Williams's *Sons of Darkness* is an attempt to understand the kinds of political action that become available once one has "run out of nonviolence" and come to terms with "the vain attempt to obtain legal redress" for racism, poverty, and police brutality (Williams 58, 59). The hero of *Sons of Darkness* is Eugene Browning, a Black professional who works for the Institute for Racial Justice. At the novel's start, he learns that a white cop has just shot an unarmed Black teenager. Knowing that the crime is likely to go unpunished, and wary of further unrest, Browning seeks a more radical response to the problem of state-sanctioned white violence. He hires a hit man to assassinate the cop.

But Browning's decision is less a brief for organized revolt than it is for a kind of radical secrecy: for the anonymous and above all individual criminal act. The assassination is Browning's "own little act of violence," an act that he believes should ideally involve "one black man and not five hundred" (82, 58). "Power, real power," he thinks, "resided in anonymity" (101). *Sons of Darkness* thus strategically reimagines revolutionary violence as a matter of individual consciousness, a kind of criminal interiority or secret guilt lodged in Browning's mind alone. Drawing on a literary tradition of psychological crime fiction that runs from Dostoevsky to

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Richard Wright and Patricia Highsmith, Williams harnesses free indirect discourse and focalized narration to imagine the inner consequences not simply of Browning's decision to have the cop assassinated but also of his inability to tell anyone that he did so: "Browning longed to share his secret with someone, ached to set it down" (84). Browning's "ache" to "share his secret" shifts the arena of radical violence from the external world to the internal one. He becomes tethered to a political act whose message is compromised precisely to the extent that it cannot be communicated to anyone.

Because it must be kept secret, Browning's "simple, selective violent act, calculated to deliver a message," is predictably misread, leading to paramilitary-style attacks by police on Black neighborhoods and the apparent onset of an all-out race war (269). Ending on this uncertain note, Williams signals his doubt as to whether any kind of violence, no matter how well organized or secretly devised, can avoid producing an even worse "murderous reaction" by the state (72). But there is equally a lesson here, at the novel's end, about the figure of the secretive, solitary criminal that Browning imagines himself to be. As Browning reconciles with his wife in the book's final chapter, Williams draws our attention less to the political consequences of Browning's radical act than to the guilty solitude the act condemned him to. "Shit," Browning confesses to his wife, "I've been lonely myself" (271). This long-delayed confession, the finally soothed "ache" of Browning's hitherto unshareable secret, makes clear that Williams's skepticism of violence has both a political and a personal dimension. In the end, *Sons of Darkness* rejects revolutionary violence not only because it invites intensified racial oppression by the state but also because it has forced a Black man like Browning—so sincerely intent on fighting that oppression—to keep a secret that makes him feel like a criminal.

The criminal isolation, rather than political solidarity, produced by revolutionary violence is even more cynically rendered in Wideman's *The Lynchers*, a neomodernist stream-of-consciousness novel that obliquely narrates the plot of four men—Littleman, Wilkerson, Saunders, and Rice—to lynch a white cop and use the public spectacle to spark a revolution. Although *The Lynchers* seems at first sympathetic to the Black nationalist motivations behind the lynching, Wideman ultimately views these men less as political actors than as criminals. "If they were going to talk about killing," Wilkerson realizes early on, "they had to believe in each other as killers" (46). Later, Saunders is described as "ripe for killing . . . murder was in his blood" (148). The belief in each other "as killers," the murder in one's "blood": these are the ways that Wideman rewrites militant action as a kind of criminal identity, implying that the tactics of political violence may in the end be indistinguishable from the affects of criminality.

It is no accident that the narrative of *The Lynchers* is bookended by radio reports of senseless, apolitical violence. Early in the novel, Wilkerson's father, Orin, hears news of the murder of Sharon Tate ("Somebody had killed the pregnant movie star. . . . A damned shame. Somebody crazy did it" [41]). Toward the novel's end, in an obvious parallel, Rice hears news on the radio that Orin Wilkerson himself has been arrested for stabbing a friend during a drunken argument in a vacant lot. These invocations of senseless violence foreshadow the novel's conclusion, which chaotically devolves into a series of misdirected crimes: Rice shoots the younger Wilkerson in a fit of paranoia, Saunders is driven nearly to homicidal madness when Wilkerson never arrives to meet him, and Littleman is imprisoned in a mental hospital. Thus, in *The Lynchers*, does the inherent violence of revolutionary desire finally unravel the would-be revolutionary.

The political differences among these three novels cannot be overstated—especially as they track a growing disillusionment with the possibility of a Black revolution that, by the mid-1970s, seemed increasingly unlikely to come to pass. Yet despite these novels' not insubstantial political disagreements, they are nevertheless built on a shared premise. At the core of all three books is an awareness of how the mere act of criticizing the state—especially by African Americans—had become a crime. As one of Wideman's characters starkly puts it, Black people "may survive, but if they ask for

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more, they are criminals" (221). This insight into the criminalization of political demand had important literary consequences. It explains why all three authors considered the story of Black revolution inseparable from the literary history of the crime novel. The determining force of genre is evident in Greenlee's climactic staging of the showdown between the revolutionary mastermind and "the Sherlock of the South Side," no less than in Williams's and Wideman's use of modernist techniques to plumb the hidden depths of the criminal conscience. These invocations of genre give form to the novels' shared insight that Black revolutionary desire was fated to be misrecognized as criminality. Read together, Greenlee, Williams, and Wideman reveal the bind of the revolutionary novel written in the shadow of the War on Crime: a literary form struggling, sometimes unsuccessfully, to separate the outwardly political commitments of the Black radical from the inner torments of the perceived criminal.

Renewed Vigilance

Goines's *Crime Partners* (1974) introduces readers to a somewhat different kind of revolutionary criminal. The novel's hero—who starred in three subsequent novels by Goines, all published under the pseudonym Al C. Clark—is Kenyatta, the leader of a revolutionary organization that trains militants on a farm outside Detroit. Named after Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya after colonial rule, Goines's Kenyatta has a headquarters decorated by "pictures of Che, Ho Chi Min, and other men of color who were dedicated leaders in various revolutions" (42). Goines was a key figure in the development of Black pulp fiction. Heavily influenced by Iceberg Slim, Goines updated Slim's formula for an era of Black Power and a newly targeted Black readership (Nishikawa 137). Many critics have attributed Goines's massive and ongoing popularity to his innovative fusion of pulp and politics. L. H. Stallings reads Goines's oeuvre as an extended political commentary on "the process of decolonization following enslavement" (200), while Justin Gifford argues that the Kenyatta series in particular "combined popular entertainment and militant black politics in ways unrepresented in American literature before" (87). Other scholars, however, have suggested that the "universally bleak and pessimistic outlook" of Goines's work lacks a clear political agenda (Munby 153). The book historian Kinohi Nishikawa goes so far as to suggest that "Goines was not writing politics" at all (148). For Nishikawa, the Kenyatta novels express only "Goines's stone-cold cynicism about Black Power" (188).

This debate over the complexities of Goines's political legacy cues us to the fact that there was already something complicated, in Goines's own moment, about the relation between radical politics and anticrime politics. Indeed, *Crime Partners* is less politically straightforward than the revolutionary heroes hung on Kenyatta's walls would have us think. Though he is driven by the Black Power–inflected "rally cry" of "Kill the honkie. . . . Death to Whitey," Kenyatta is also "trying to clean up the ghettos of dope pushers and pimps" (Goines 48, 99). His goal, he says, is to "rid" the city of both "dope-pushers and race-hatin' cops" (49). Rendered in these terms, Kenyatta is not only fighting the racial violence of the state—he is also taking the state's place in policing crime in Black neighborhoods. Kenyatta thus embodies a kind of militant politics whose program has shifted from large-scale social transformation to local punishment. Such a shift calls forth a revolutionary figure—Kenyatta himself—who could also plausibly be described as a vigilante.

The literary character of the vigilante was then a recent invention. Crime fiction's first recurring "serial vigilante" did not appear until 1969 (Mengel 5). The War on Crime thus turns out to have been particularly fertile ground for the growth of vigilante fiction. In fact, Goines's vision of the Black vigilante makes a good deal of sense in the context of a historical moment when the overpolicing of urban uprisings went hand in hand with the underpolicing of a mounting drug crisis. The rising crime rates of the late 1960s were frequently blamed on addicts and dealers. Heroin use is estimated to have "increased tenfold during the 1960s," rising to the level of roughly half a million users by 1970;

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in 1971, Richard Nixon famously announced that "America's Public Enemy Number One is drug abuse" (Kohler-Hausmann 35, 64). Both users and sellers of heroin were concentrated primarily in poor, racially segregated parts of major cities. In response to this concentration, community organizations blamed state neglect and police indifference. The evidence of a drug epidemic that had been allowed to thrive in inner cities prompted some African American activist groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, to call for increased policing and harsher punishments for drug dealers (54–55). Other activists and organizers decided, as the historian Michael Javen Fortner puts it, "to take matters in their own hands" (184). A "grassroots vigilante movement" grew quickly in Harlem in the late 1960s and lasted through the 1970s (187). Local vigilante groups cultivated an unlikely alliance between working- and middle-class African Americans and Black militants, Fortner argues, because both groups "considered vigilantism a necessary response to junkies and pushers" (186).

Part revolutionary, part vigilante, Goines's Kenyatta testifies directly to this tangled history of drugs, crime, race, and underpolicing. Indeed, *Crime Partners* is a furiously antidrug novel, one shaped by Goines's worry that heroin use "was becoming a way of life for black people" (58). As one of the most famous characters in Black crime fiction, Kenyatta captures the complexities of an era in which the broadly transformative aims of Black revolutionary movements were increasingly tempered by the need to respond to local concerns about public safety and the state's refusal to police drug markets. But if anxieties about crime and drug use helped spawn a new kind of Black vigilantism meant to fill the practical void left by police neglect, they also served to create a less radical and more unambiguously punitive figure, who happens to be one of the most recognizable products of 1970s American popular culture: the white vigilante.

The most infamous fictional vigilante of the period was immortalized in film by Charles Bronson but first created by the novelist Brian Garfield. Garfield's 1972 novel *Death Wish* tells the story of a white liberal accountant named Paul Benjamin, who, after his wife is killed and his daughter traumatized during a home invasion, starts killing petty criminals on the streets of New York City. Garfield famously hated the film adaptation of his book, claiming that it shamelessly romanticized the vigilantism that he had been attempting to criticize. If you have read the novel, you may find this a somewhat surprising account of its political intent. That is because the novel is far less focused on the dangers of vigilantism than it is on the failures of liberal crime policy that made the vigilante necessary in the first place. "Someone had to guard the city," Paul thinks. "Obviously the cops weren't doing it. . . . *Then it's up to me, isn't it?*" (131). The failures of liberalism, as the novel enumerates them, include the indulgences of the welfare state and permissiveness toward radical protest, both of which, Garfield suggests, foster crime. "These young scum grow up in a welfare state where they see that violence goes unpunished," opines a character whom Paul learns to agree with (62). Another connects neighborhood integration to Black militancy: "They don't just want to move in next door to you, they want to burn your fucking *house* down" (80). Ultimately, Paul comes to the conclusion that "permissive societies were like permissive parents: they produced hellish children" (80).

The gendered obsession with liberal permissiveness was deeply ingrained in the political rhetoric of the time, especially in New York City. Studying the archive of letters written to the New York governor Nelson Rockefeller in the early 1970s, Kohler-Hausmann finds that letter writers frequently lamented the permissiveness of government policies and connected that permissiveness to the extension of rights to minority communities. The criticism of permissiveness was thus both racialized and gendered. As Kohler-Hausmann details, "The rhetoric in these letters often belittled and discredited welfare-state and therapeutic programs by linking them with attributes typically associated with bad mothering" (64). The feminization of permissiveness—with its maternal production of what Paul describes as all those "hellish children"—prompted

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an equally gendered response: "Again and again, citizens called for 'tough' responses to these problems" (64). The character in *Death Wish* who first recommends vigilantism to Paul calls for pretty much the same thing. "You got to get tough with the bastards, it's the only thing they understand" (Garfield 80).

Responding to the liberal permissiveness and feminized lack of toughness that putatively fostered crime, *Death Wish* turns out to be yet another crime novel about the relation between criminality and radicalism, but with a twist. It is the story of what the novel dubs "the right-wing radicalization of Paul Benjamin" (63). Garfield's counternarrative of radicalization reimagines the radical not as a type of racialized criminality but as a bulwark against the perceived proliferation of racialized criminal types.

A perversely inverted image of the era's Black radical novels, *Death Wish* testifies to the crisis of a historical moment at which crime and its solutions were becoming harder and harder to tell apart. This was, on the one hand, because of the criminalization of radical political tactics that sought to transform the economic conditions metonymized by crime, and, on the other, because of the modes of counterinsurgent violence that had already been mobilized by the state—and that, to many anxious observers, still did not seem violent enough. Such are the multiple, conflicting ways that criminality, riot, and radicalism converged as the defining terms of both crime policy and crime writing in the 1960s and 1970s. The literary character of the Black revolutionary emerged as a radical alternative to the criminalized rioter but—as Goines and Garfield demonstrate—was haunted by the conservative shadow figure of the vigilante. Sometimes militancy could look a lot like militarization. Toward the end of *Death Wish*, Paul imagines himself as "the first of the Resistance—the first soldier of the underground" (124). There are two revealing historical ironies in this line. The first is that it shamelessly borrows the language of the era's militant movements, reimagining revolution (the "underground" of a capital-*R* "Resistance") not as a tool of the oppressed but as a tool to shore up oppression. The second irony is that—as Paul himself would surely have known—seven years into the War on Crime, he was hardly the first armed soldier to put boots on the ground in the Black neighborhoods of an American city.

Crime's Fiction

In *Death Wish*, the motivating force behind Paul's so-called radicalization is his realization that urban crime is a real rather than a fictional concern. This realization inspires one of the strangest passages in the novel:

> He had never seen real violence except on television or in the movies. Until [his wife's murder] had happened, he had been secretly convinced that a good part of it was fictitious . . . he did not really believe, in a personal way, that hoodlums and killers existed. . . . Sometimes it was hard to escape the feeling that the pages of the *Daily News* and the *Mirror* were filled not with fact-news but with the lurid fantasies of pulp-fiction writers. . . . Now he had to get used to an entire new universe of reality. (46–47)

Why would a novel so committed to convincing us of the "reality" of crime draw so much attention to its status as a work of fiction—indeed, as a work of the very kind of "pulp fiction" that Paul claims is to blame for his own misreading of the facts of crime reporting? At minimum, we cannot avoid reading this as a glimmer of hesitation on Garfield's part, a moment of uncertainty about which "universe" the public crisis of crime really does belong to, the "universe of reality" or the universe of fiction. And there's more. For the knots of real and fake in the passage may point to a yet grimmer possibility, one that Garfield certainly recognized and perhaps actively courted: that citizens would ultimately be convinced of the urgent reality of street crime as a public menace not because it was real but because they saw it "on television or in the movies"—or, more to the point, because they read about it in novels like *Death Wish*.

What Garfield warily confesses here is something I believe all the writers discussed in this essay understood: that the crisis of crime was in part a crisis of perception, and that fiction might

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have an outsize role to play in the shaping of that perception. Indeed, it was none other than Johnson who in 1967 acknowledged that the "public malady" of the day was not simply crime but also "the fear of crime" ("Special Message to the Congress on Crime"). With this kind of fear in mind, we may finally read the texts of what I have been calling War-on-Crime fiction not as mere reflections of the crime war but as a set of attempts to intervene directly in the fight over crime's public perception. Wilson describes crime narratives in the late twentieth century as vehicles for teaching "citizens . . . to 'learn to live' with crime" (*Learning* 3). Before readers could learn how to live with it, however, they had to be instructed—per *Death Wish*—that crime was a problem at all. Wambaugh's beat cop whose daily walk statistically confirms the existence of so many Black criminals; Goines's and Garfield's vigilantes punishing those whom a permissive state would not; and the Black radicals of Greenlee, Williams, and Wideman working to differentiate their acts from crimes: each of these main characters was a vehicle for conveying to readers just what kind of problem the so-called crime problem was supposed to be. Each was an attempt to adjudicate what—or whom—the War on Crime was really a war against.

The category of the War-on-Crime novel thus allows us to see how very different kinds of crime writing participated in a single, urgent debate about the meaning of crime in the 1960s and 1970s. If such a category expands the parameters of what gets to count as crime fiction at a given moment, it also stands to enrich our sense of how the genre has evolved over the last century. We might notice, for instance, how the literary apologies for state violence and riot suppression that emerge in the 1960s mark a striking reversal of Dashiell Hammett's early sympathy for striking miners, or how the geographic constraints of the beat cop offer a strategic revision of the free-ranging social and spatial movement that defined Raymond Chandler's version of the private detective, or how the ethical dilemma of the Black revolutionary ironically updates the moral and legal ambiguity of an earlier era's white male hard-boiled heroes.[10] My claim is that these generic links cannot be understood outside the political history of criminalization—the history of changing ideas about which crimes, and which criminals, threaten society the most. What looks from one perspective like the logical evolution of a genre must also be seen as a series of formal transformations keyed to shifting conceptions and implementations of law and order. In the case of the War on Crime, this means understanding how the new and intensified mechanisms of racial criminalization that American society devised in the 1960s broadly altered the forms of crime, criminality, and political affiliation that populated the era's popular fiction.

As the beat cop, the revolutionary, and the vigilante rose to prominence in the crime literature of the 1960s and 1970s, these characters became the unmistakable mouthpieces for a series of directly competing claims about the basic reality of crime. The "entire new universe of reality" that Paul Benjamin thinks he has discovered in *Death Wish* was a universe of racialized urban crime whose reality remained, in fact, an open question. This was a universe shaped as much by the fear of crime as by the fact of it. Flamm, the historian of liberalism, argues that the key error of liberal strategy in the 1960s was not to take the fear seriously enough. Liberals' skepticism of the accuracy of crime statistics, he contends, "distracted them from a larger reality. Simply put, the fear was real" (128–29).

But what made the fear of crime real was not necessarily real crime. Flamm's "larger reality," like Garfield's "new universe of reality," is inextricable from a set of fictions that were both ideological and literary. These are the fictions that the unconventional category of War-on-Crime fiction helps us see. The fear of crime in the sixties and seventies was stoked by a set of stock social characters—the Black criminal, the Black rioter, the Black radical—that circulated widely in American popular discourse. Such fear was further reinforced by a set of literary characters—the jaded ex-liberal cop, the righteous ex-liberal vigilante—who claimed to offer first-person views of crime's statistical and lived reality. To read the variety of American crime writing in relation to the War on Crime, as

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I have sought to do in this essay, is thus to be made powerfully and perhaps painfully aware of the concerted role that literary works played in alternately contesting and abetting the postwar transformation of the United States into a carceral state. As the American government commenced its "active combat" against the racialized and criminalized poor in the 1960s, the supremely consequential task of separating fact from fiction on issues of crime was performed in no small part by crime fiction itself. Understood in these terms, the War-on-Crime novel did not simply offer a belated or second-order representation of America's crime war. It was, rather, one of several simultaneous theaters in which that war was waged.

Notes

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1. The conflation of protest and crime is hardly a relic of the past, as the summer 2020 protests in response to the murder of George Floyd pointedly reminded us. Indeed, the criminalization of political resistance has been a consistent feature of American social life—and of American anti-Blackness—for over a century. As I show in this essay, the 1960s were a decisive moment in the history of this particular form of racial criminalization and the institutional and ideological mechanisms that supported it.

2. For a longer history of the United States government's preoccupation with Black radicalism, see Maxwell. For readings of how American novelists responded specifically to the rebellions of the 1960s, see Fiorelli; Heise; and Schryer 99–124.

3. An exception is Wilson's book *Learning to Live with Crime*, which recognizes that "the particulars of our recent war on crime too rarely make their way into academic criticism on crime narrative" (7).

4. For alternative accounts of how crime fiction adapted to the political turmoil of the 1960s, see Pepper 166–205; Dussere 109–87.

5. Several recent edited volumes have begun to revise and expand traditional definitions of crime fiction. The volume *Crime Fiction as World Literature* treats crime fiction as a "globalized and hybridized genre" informed by the transnational literary marketplace (Nilsson et al. 4), while *The Centrality of Crime Fiction in American Literary Culture* surveys "the myriad ways in which acts of crime and detection shape the entire range of American fiction" (Bendixen 6).

6. Allegations of sniper fire during the rebellions of the 1960s were a frequent justification for police violence and military intervention and were rarely, if ever, corroborated. See Hersey.

7. For the longer history of the role that crime statistics have played in constructing Black criminality and propping up white supremacy since the late nineteenth century, see Muhammad.

8. For more on the flaws of crime statistics, see Hinton 6; Kohler-Hausmann 37. For the classic cultural studies critique of crime rates, see Hall et al. 13–21.

9. The historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad has called this the "post-Moynihan social-scientific and public policy view of black pathology" (7). Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report *The Negro Family* overflowed with stats, graphs, and charts aimed at quantifying what Moynihan infamously called the "tangle of pathology" in African American communities (47). Black feminists and queer-of-color theorists have offered some of the most salient critiques of the Moynihan report's pseudo-statistical and heteropatriarchal assumptions about gender, sexuality, and family structure. As the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins puts it, in the Moynihan report, "racial difference was used to explain class disadvantage while gender deviancy was used to account for racial difference" (882). See also Ibrahim 43–80; Ferguson 110–37.

10. On Hammett's commentary on state power in *Red Harvest* (1929), see McCann 77–86; Pepper 131–65. On Chandler's mapping of social space, see Jameson 31–56. On the ambiguities inherent to hard-boiled white masculinity, see Abbott; Breu.

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Abstract: This essay tells the story of how the War on Crime helped remake American crime fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. Amid starkly racialized public anxieties about rising crime rates and urban uprisings, Lyndon B. Johnson officially launched the War on Crime in 1965. The cultural logic of Johnson's crime war infiltrated various kinds of crime writing in the ensuing decade. Tracking the crime war's influence on the police procedurals of Joseph Wambaugh; the Black radical novels of Sam Greenlee, John A. Williams, and John Edgar Wideman; and the vigilante fiction of Donald Goines and Brian Garfield, I argue that crime fiction in the War-on-Crime era emerged as a key cultural site for managing divergent political responses to a regime of social control that worked by criminalizing both race and revolt. By studying how novelists responded to the formative years of the War on Crime, we can begin to understand the complex role that literature played in alternately contesting and abetting the postwar transformation of the United States into a carceral state.

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