

THE MARY MCCARTHY CASE

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This article was originally published in Post 45:

<https://post45.org/2020/01/norman-mailer-and-the-mary-mccarthy-case-revisited/>

THE RUNAWAY SUCCESS OF MARY MCCARTHY'S *THE GROUP*, a novel about the lives of eight Vassar graduates during the 1930s, was one of the most sensational literary events of 1963. "What no one anticipated," writes McCarthy's biographer Carol Brightman, "was the speed with which *The Group* would make it to the nation's bedside tables, not just the tables of people who read *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Herzog* but their mothers', uncles', sisters', doctors', and neighbors'" (485). The novel made McCarthy a household name overnight. None were more scandalized by this than her New York intellectual confreres, who regarded her as a respectable, albeit still relatively minor literary figure with unabashedly "highbrow" tastes and a "Puritan" cast of mind (Hicks, "What to Be" 19; Demott 98). As the eminent critic and former Marxist Granville Hicks noted, McCarthy's fellow "highbrows almost unanimously disapproved of the novel" ("The Group" 51). This was a bit of an understatement. Stanley Kauffmann wrote that the novel compelled one to recite "a miserable rosary of defects" (26). Norman Podhoretz declared that McCarthy had written "a trivial lady writer's novel that bears scarcely a trace of the wit, the sharpness and the vivacity that glowed in her earlier work" (93). In "The Mary McCarthy Case," a four-thousand word screed written for *The New York Review of Books*, Norman Mailer, never one to be outdone when it came to vituperation, expressed his distaste for the novel in characteristically scatological terms, accusing McCarthy of having "deposited a load on the premise" (3). How does one account for this level of vitriol? If the

novel was really as trivial as its detractors made it out to be, why did it elicit such outpourings of contempt?

Two exceptionalist narratives underwrite what I, too, will call the “The Mary McCarthy Case”—one having to do with her token status in the literati, the other with the so-called Great American Novel (GAN). Both help to explain the by turns wounded and wistful responses to the novel and its particular significance in the history of American literature. Among her peers, McCarthy was seen as a cold and cerebral—which is to say, unlady-like—writer. When a critic once dismissed “the whole tribe of lady novelists” as mere catalogers of “dress, furniture, and food,” Podhoretz proffered McCarthy as a notable exception. “Surely she was different,” he retorted, “surely she was better than that.” What a shame, then, the consensus now went, that *The Group* was filled with so many detailed descriptions of domestic life that it often read like an issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, confirming the unnamed critic’s assessment of McCarthy as “an intellectual on the surface, a furniture describer at heart” (Podhoretz 87). Some of McCarthy’s one-time admirers now confessed to feeling duped. With the publication of *The Group*, it suddenly became clear to them that she had been putting one over on the intelligentsia for decades.¹

That McCarthy had supposedly succumbed to the banalities of domestic fiction, however, was just the tip of the iceberg. What especially galled critics like Podhoretz and Mailer was that her narrative had allowed the trials and tribulations of upper-middle-class women to eclipse the high-stakes drama of socioeconomic upheaval and ideological strife that beset Depression-era New York City, the world in which the novel’s action largely takes place and in which McCarthy herself came of age. *The Group*, Mailer opined, was “a collective novel about a near (or let us say quasi-) revolutionary period in American life, the nineteen-thirties,” whose characters displayed an inexplicable “indifference to the bedrock of a collective novel—the large events of the season or decade which gave impetus to conceiving the book in such a way” (“McCarthy Case” 1, 3). By invoking the collective novel, that shibboleth of 1930s proletarian literary culture popularized by critics like Hicks, then a member of the communist party, Mailer sought to draw attention to the gap between McCarthy’s ostensible ambitions and her actual achievement (Hicks, “Revolution and the Novel” 23–25). McCarthy had traduced the so-called Red Decade’s revolutionary élan and travestied its radical aesthetic. After all, the collective novel had been a holy grail of

socially-conscious American literature since the 1930s, a constitutive element of what Lawrence Buell has identified as one of the four major “scripts” of the GAN (Buell 6–8, 391–392). Its “single most important pioneer” was John Dos Passos, whose *U.S.A.* trilogy, with its epic historical sweep and group protagonist comprising a dozen socioeconomically-disparate characters, remains a paradigmatic example of the genre (Foley, *Radical* 425).²

With *The Group* McCarthy became the first major American author to publish a collective novel written entirely about the lives of women and Mailer, his condescension and crudity notwithstanding, was the critic who came the closest to discerning the stakes of her shrewd aesthetic gambit.³ The novel, Mailer grudgingly admitted, had “something new in it,” namely its “method” of exploring “everything in the profound materiality of women” (“McCarthy Case” 3). This feminine maximalism was indeed a point of pride for McCarthy, who had boasted that “[n]o male consciousness is present in the book; through these eight points of view, all feminine . . . are refracted all the novel ideas of the period concerning sex, politics, economics, architecture, city-planning, house-keeping, child-bearing, interior decoration, and art” (qtd. in Brightman 484). Mailer perceived that, insofar as it recuperated the multifarious focalization and documentary aesthetics of the collective novel, *The Group* implicitly laid claim to GAN status. But, he insisted, no collective novel about a group of women “whose communal odor is a cross between *Ma Griffe* and contraceptive jelly” would stand up alongside collectivist masterworks like *U.S.A.* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Such a book “could be said to squat on the Grand Avenue of the Novel like a shabby little boutique,” dwarfed by the Olympian achievements of the form’s original architects (“McCarthy Case” 1). For much of his career, Mailer—who had burst onto the literary scene in 1948 with his own Dos Passos-inspired collective novel about World War II, *The Naked and the Dead*—preserved a fascination with a thirties-era conception of collective fiction and, by extension, the GAN. That tradition, which “required venturing out to get experience” in order to write about the worlds of military warfare, politics, labor unions, and later, for Mailer, Hollywood and hipsterism, had always privileged male subjectivity (Mailer, *Spooky* 114). Thus Mailer concludes his review with a predictable, patronizing quip: with *The Group* now out of her system, “McCarthy may finally get tough enough to go with the boys” (“McCarthy Case” 3). But *The Group* had already changed the terrain. It had revealed both the aesthetic viability and the American public’s inter-

est in collective fiction, and it did so without what Mailer and others had always assumed was the genre's *sine qua non*, namely, men.

And yet *The Group's* primary claim to our attention as a collective novel or GAN contender does not rest on its replacement of a male subjectivity with a female one. We should not overlook what novels like *The Group* and Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* have in common besides their construction of collective protagonists. Since its inception the collective novel has offered writers, particularly those on the socialist Left, a means with which to explore the valences of egalitarian and collectivist politics. Because it aims toward the synoptic representation of group life and subjectivity, the collective novel tends to call attention to those forces that make or break social solidarity and emancipatory movements. In this way, it becomes an important resource for understanding how writers on the Left have sought to account for the phenomenon of American exceptionalism. By exceptionalism I do not mean that bogey from which some American Studies scholars are perpetually in flight, but rather the specter that has haunted America's radical Left ever since Werner Sombart asked why there is no socialism in this country—the specter of radical failure.⁴

The Group's contribution to this exceptionalist discourse makes it an illuminating document in the history of the collective novel and the tradition of the GAN. We can begin to appreciate how if we examine *The Group* in relation to *The Naked and the Dead*, a novel that is, in many respects, its dialectical twin. Doing so reveals that what Mailer's novel did for the American military-industrial complex McCarthy's did for Depression-era domesticity—that is, it disclosed in painstaking, sensuous detail the role of that domain in the affective production of classed and gendered subjects. It showed how the methods of social control built into bourgeois domestic life made it all but impossible to generate or maintain anything like radical political consciousness. In both novels, 1930s radicalism gives way to the attenuated, “compensatory liberalism” that prevailed during the Cold War and still shapes Democratic Party politics today (Brinkley 268). But while *The Naked and the Dead* demonstrated the vitality of the proletarian literary tradition after the demise of the Popular Front, *The Group* erased the distinction between politics and culture upheld by that same tradition, boldly asserting the primacy of the household in Left politics and, in so doing, cultivating the structure of feeling that gave rise to radical feminism in the late 1960s. The Mary McCarthy case thus heralded the moment when the Amer-

ican Left would finally have to reckon seriously with the place of the so-called female sphere in radical politics.

THE POLITICS OF NORMAN MAILER'S FEAR LADDER

Like McCarthy, Mailer attributed his conversion to Left politics to his early encounters with the radical literature of the 1930s, especially the novels of Dos Passos (Lennon, *Norman Mailer* 32). While works by many leftist writers—notably Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and James T. Farrell—inspired him to write, he claimed that “*U.S.A.* meant more than all of them” (Mailer, “Conversation” 141). Dos Passos’s masterpiece precipitated Mailer’s embrace of socialism and the GAN, leading him to conflate the two concepts. As a “socialist,” Mailer felt compelled to produce “large literary works which were filled with characters, and were programmatic, and had large theses, and were developed, let’s say, like the Tolstoyan novel” (Mailer, “Art of Fiction” 37). Dos Passos’s contemporaries had characterized him as an “American Zola or Tolstoy” (Gold, “Education” 87). *U.S.A.* showed Mailer that the collective novel created the most powerful synthesis of radical politics and literary nationalism: “Dos Passos gave me the strongest, simplest, most direct idea about what it is to write a great American novel. There is no replacement for The Great American Novel as an ideal for a writer to hold up for himself” (Lennon, *Conversations* 189). But as he embarked on his literary career in the late 1940s, Mailer would have to adapt the collective novel to a world that was markedly different from the one Dos Passos had sought to represent.

Completed in 1936, Dos Passos’s trilogy depicts what Michael Denning calls “the decline and fall of the Lincoln Republic,” the post-Civil War ideal of an individualistic and classless society that many thirties radicals like Dos Passos believed had been betrayed by the Gilded Age rise of “The Big Money.” The key figures in Dos Passos’s story are the sons and daughters of those “native born white Americans” who reformulated their self-enclosed worlds following the Civil War in order to forestall recognition of the country’s festering class and racial antagonisms (Denning 196).⁵ The trilogy chronicles how the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti and the stock market crash of 1929 exposed the corruption of the egalitarian myth of American democracy, revealing once and for all that “[t]he Lincoln Republic, redeemed from the sin of slavery, had been lost to the great robber barons, to Mr.

McKinley's wars in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and to Mr. Wilson's war in Europe" (168). Consequently, *U.S.A.* "is an epitaph for an America that no longer exists" (199). Dos Passos's masterpiece of course remains inimitable. However, by demonstrating the possibilities of collective representation and thematizing "the failure of American socialists, anarchists, and Wobblies to win over American workers to a vision of the cooperative commonwealth," the trilogy laid the groundwork for a GAN tradition (196).

In Denning's telling, once Dos Passos's collective novels clarified the passing of the Lincoln Republic, a new form—the "ghetto pastoral" novel popularized by Mike Gold's *Jews without Money*—could emerge as "the most important genre created by the writers of the proletarian literary movement" (230). Like *U.S.A.* these novels recorded the ravages of industrial capitalism on American life but from the perspective of "plebeian men and women of . . . ethnic working-class neighborhoods" (230). Far from displacing collective fiction as the preeminent proletarian literary genre, however, ghetto pastorals further demonstrated the form's unique technical affordances. The collective novel allowed ghetto writers to portray the urban neighborhood, with its various local types and internal conflicts, as a microcosm of the social totality under capitalism. It afforded similar opportunities to those interested in institutions, as Mailer and others would eventually discover. Indeed, no other form would strike them as better suited to capture the new role that institutions came to play in American life during the decades that saw the development of a national, if inadequate, welfare sector, the spread of industrial unions, and the creation of a gargantuan security state. Throughout his career, when he spoke of his ambition to write "the big one," Mailer clearly had in mind a novel which would bring the formal strategies of *U.S.A.* to bear on the large-scale institutions that had, in his view, contributed to the defeat of American radicalism during the New Deal and Cold War eras (McGrath).

The Naked and the Dead's most obvious departures from the formal protocols of realism are its ten "Time Machine" sequences sketching the personal histories of key characters, which read like crude imitations of the short biographies of real historical figures interspersed throughout *U.S.A.* But if the novel "technically . . . advances no farther than Dos Passos," as Diana Trilling claims, it nonetheless shows Mailer wrestling in earnest with problems that became more pressing during the postwar period (182). Chief among these was how to maintain a commitment to resistance, if not to

bring about revolution, amid the encroachment of the military industrial complex upon all aspects of American life. Mailer's collective novel imaginatively enters the world of the armed forces in order to stage a pitched battle between the ideological factions that would soon set the terms of the Cold War.

On one side stands General Cyrus Cummings, who oversees the campaign to liberate the island of Anopopei from the Japanese during World War II. A consummate egotist and temperamentally conservative social climber, Cummings determines early on in his military career that "the eventual line to power in America would always be anticommunism," an insight that, in turn, leads him to conclude that the so-called American Century "is going to be the reactionary's century" (Mailer, *Naked* 427, 85). Although he strives to appear politically noncommittal, he privately confesses to his aide that his sympathies lie with the "dream" of fascism, which "merely started in the wrong country" (321). Cummings contends that "America is going to absorb that dream, it's in the business of doing it now." By this he means that as the US transitions into a warfare state, it will progressively realize fascism's goal of subjecting civilian life to the ideological imperatives and mechanisms of social control that govern the military. In his view "the Army functions best when you're frightened of the man above you, and contemptuous of your subordinates"; similarly, under industrial capitalism "the majority of men must be subservient to the machine" (176, 177). As a result, he explains, "[t]he natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety" (177). Only fear can keep soldiers and civilians in their place—and what better way to ensure that both groups live in constant, mutually reinforcing states of fear and submission than to integrate economic production and warfare, to make the captains of industry virtually indistinguishable from those in the military? Thus the General sees World War II not as a struggle between democracy and fascism but as an economically-driven "power concentration" (177).

Under a war economy, American diplomacy falls largely to the likes of Cummings, a man experienced, "in [his] capacity as an officer," at negotiating financial deals with foreign companies (421). As he assumes control of both the American military and the economy the General moves one step closer to fulfilling his highest aspiration, which is "[t]o achieve God" (323). Cummings thus instantiates what C. Wright Mills calls a "military metaphysic," the conception of "reality as essentially military reality" (Mills 223, 195). Mailer crafts the General to predict the rise of those cold warriors in the

armed forces who competed with corporate executives and politicians not only to determine the direction of world affairs but also to bring about “the triumph in all areas of life of the military metaphysic, and hence the subordination to it of all other ways of life” (223).

Mailer offsets Cummings’s discreet yet resolute fascism with the milque-toast radicalism of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hearn, the General’s aide. Although the Harvard-educated Hearn comes from money and, as a result of his background, enjoys the privileged status of an officer, he rejects the politics of the ruling class. At Harvard he has vague literary aspirations and participates in the John Reed Society; before enlisting in the Army he briefly considers “joining the Party” (*Naked* 352). But like the classic hero of Lukács’s novels of “romantic disillusionment,” Hearn, who cares for others “only in the abstract and never in the particular,” possesses a soul more expansive than the world he inherits (Lukács 112–131; *Naked* 72). As a result, he can neither assume his natural role as a member of the power elite with the confidence of General Cummings nor fulfill his fantasy of rescuing the working class from its misery. Out of despair, Hearn settles into a “particular isolated position on the Left” where his notion of rebellion has degenerated into the personal defiance of army protocols and the rejection of bourgeois values (*Naked* 169). Like Cummings, Hearn represents for Mailer not just a kind of political personality but an erotic style. Where Hearn is feminized by his enclosed world, Cummings is closeted. In an expression of sublimated homosexual desire, the General strives to impress upon Hearn that “in functioning as an officer for a long enough time he would assume, whether he wanted to or not, the emotional prejudices of his class” (168). Every soldier, Cummings insists, must be taught to appreciate his place on “the fear ladder” (176). In so educating Hearn in military-style sado-masochism, Cummings hopes to break off the Lieutenant’s lingering attachments to egalitarianism and resistance. True to his philosophy, Cummings resorts to fear to bring Hearn under his control. In a pivotal scene the General instructs Hearn to pick up the cigarette butt that the Lieutenant intentionally left on the otherwise pristine floor of his commanding officer’s tent in an ineffectual display of insubordination. When Hearn, on the threat of court-martial, literally and figuratively bends over for the General, the novel makes it clear that this is not simply his acquiescence to military discipline but a prefiguration of the American Left’s submission to homegrown fascism.⁶ Having reasserted his authority over Hearn, Cummings is then free to send the Lieutenant off to

lead a reconnaissance platoon on a quixotic mission to infiltrate the Japanese lines.

The collective dynamics of the platoon recapitulate the conflict between Cummings and Hearn while demonstrating some of the options available to white working-class men for navigating a bipolar world circumscribed by American proto-fascism on the one hand and pseudo-communism on the other. Sergeant Sam Croft is a bloodthirsty bigot who shoots a Japanese POW in cold blood, just as he once killed an unarmed striker as a member of the National Guard. He serves as the platoon's primitive stand-in for Cummings. While Hearn clearly outranks him, Croft has commanded the platoon before the Lieutenant's arrival and, on this basis, is its *de facto* leader. Red Valsen, an anti-authoritarian drifter who recalls *U.S.A.*'s Wobbly-inspired vagabond character serves as Lieutenant Hearn's working-class counterpart and thus Croft's chief antagonist. Like Hearn, Valsen has nothing but contempt for the hierarchy and discipline of the Army. When Hearn offers him a coveted position as a corporal, the infantryman refuses, knowing that "[i]f he took something like that, the whole thing fell apart. They got you in the trap and then you worried about doing the job right and started fighting with the men and sucking off the officers" (600). Valsen's refusal to align himself with Hearn speaks as much to the immutable power differential between commissioned officers and enlisted men as it does to his suspicion of insurgent political action in general, which only seems destined for failure in a world dominated by unabashed brutes like Croft. Despite his repudiation of upward mobility, Valsen proves no more immune to the fear ladder and the humiliation it inflicts than Hearn.

When the Lieutenant dies abruptly in an ambush and Croft refuses to abort the platoon's misbegotten mission, Valsen initiates a mutiny, only to balk at the inevitable physical confrontation with Croft. Any fight with the diabolical Sergeant, who purposely embroils the platoon in the unnecessary gun battle that claims the Lieutenant's life, is bound to be a fight to the death. Terrified of the boundlessness of Croft's killer instinct and demoralized by the drudgery of military life, Valsen acknowledges that "[t]he Army had licked him" (693). When push comes to shove, both he and Hearn abandon their pretensions to resistance and "crawfish" to their superiors (327). Like Hearn, Valsen suffers from a fear of cooptation so acute that it ultimately leads to paralysis. In the end, he is left to wonder how things might have turned out differently "[i]f they all stuck together" (704). But how could they

when all “they knew was to cut each other’s throats”? The redundancy of Valsen and Hearn’s defeats underscores what Mailer viewed as the incredible potency of the warfare state’s “fear ladder, whereby blandishments, threats, favors, and physical harm were increased or decreased as necessary for the maintenance of control” (Lennon, *Norman Mailer* 50–51). The pairing of the two men leaves little doubt about what Mailer thought would happen if the American Left went up against fascism: it would lose.

Yet, in its subtle glorification of right-wing barbarism, the novel also suggests a path to victory. Norman Podhoretz aptly observes that towards the end of the book Cummings and Croft begin to look like its “*natural* heroes.” He writes: “If life is truly what *The Naked and the Dead* shows it to be—a fierce battle between the individual will and all the many things that resist it, then heroism must consist in a combination of strength, courage, drive, and stamina such as Cummings and Croft exhibit and that Hearn and Valsen conspicuously lack” (Podhoretz 185). In this formulation, the novel becomes a story about the age-old conflict between the human impulse toward personal autonomy and the need of institutions to control their subjects—the individual vs. the State. According to Podhoretz, Croft and Cummings turn out to be the novel’s more authentic individuals because they both accept and act upon the notion that “man’s deepest urge is omnipotence” (Mailer, *Naked* 323). In reading the novel as a panegyric to individualism, however, Podhoretz overlooks the fact that Cummings and Croft’s quests for personal glory also advance the power and influence of an institution. Rather than seek “absolute freedom,” the two men strive to maximize their personal agency within the omnipresent confines of the fear ladder (Podhoretz 185). In doing so, they sublimate their desire to annihilate all that differs from or resists them into a relentless pursuit of concrete military objectives, including the rationalized administration of violence and terror. What makes them heroic is not just their “strength, courage, drive, and stamina,” but also their willingness to adapt their personal instincts and ambitions to the demands of an organized political project, specifically American militarism. The twin triumphs of Cummings and Croft over Hearn and Valsen—neither of whom can whole-heartedly commit to organized collective action—render the novel at once a lament and a warning for radicalism. To avoid defeat and realize their egalitarian dreams, Mailer would seem to argue, leftists must learn to govern institutions and resort to the use of force with the same steely resolve as Cummings and Croft. Instead of shrinking from political con-

frontation, conspiracy, and social coercion, as it so often seems to, the American Left must relish these military practices.

At the same time, however, Mailer points to an American Third Way. Between the “no guts, no glory” ethos of Cummings and Croft and the impotent radicalism of Valsen and Hearn there is the racial nationalism adopted by the novel’s other infantrymen. Predictably, Mailer’s reconnaissance team conforms to the stereotype of the “multicultural platoon, a unit made up of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, southerners, westerners, and easterners, all of whom were white,” popularized by World War II-era Hollywood films (Gerstle 204).⁷ On this basis, one could argue that *The Naked and the Dead* bridges the gap between Dos Passos’s Anglocentric collective fiction and the ghetto pastoral. Through his depictions of Jews and southerners in particular, two groups whose presence in the platoon raises discomfiting questions about race, Mailer shows how the military’s organization of all-white combat regiments “went a long way toward fulfilling Theodore Roosevelt’s prescription for forging a racialized American nation” (203). Such a nation would come to rest on a pact between northern and southern whites to exist peacefully alongside each other as relative equals while tolerating the exclusion and dehumanization of blacks (Katznelson 159–194). Crucially, however, for Mailer this did not entail “melding the many streams of Euro-Americans into one” (Gerstle 204). On the contrary, it meant embracing ascriptive identities, including those that drew distinctions between so-called white people, and positing the maintenance of racial and ethnic purity as the key to self-preservation in warfare. Those who survive in Mailer’s military world, that is, do so precisely because they eschew assimilation and race mixing.

Thus, we find that the two enlisted men in *The Naked and the Dead* who violate racial taboos, Roth and Wilson, meet similarly grisly fates. Roth, an assimilated Jew and CCNY graduate who identifies primarily as “an agnostic” and “an American,” initially refuses to believe that anti-Semitism motivates the mistreatment he receives from others in the platoon and scorns the rhetoric of racial solidarity of his religious comrade Joey Goldstein (54, 476). Alienated from the platoon by his physical weakness and the other men’s racism, Roth commits suicide. Viewed alongside the survival of Goldstein, the proudly provincial, Yiddish-speaking Jew from working-class Brooklyn, Roth’s downward spiral can only seem like punishment for his stubborn refusal to count himself among what he calls “a race which didn’t

exist" (661). Likewise, Wilson, an irreverent hedonist, dies from a gunshot wound not long after he confesses to his fellow southerner, a soldier named Ridges, that he lusts after black women, to whom he refers as "nigger stuff" (645). By contrast, Ridges, a devout, dull-witted Christian who regards interracial sex as "one of the excessive things you could not do and survive," makes it out alive.

After Wilson's death, Goldstein and Ridges, who had attempted to carry their wounded comrade to safety for miles through the jungle, stop to rest and reflect on their failed effort. Goldstein graciously gives the remainder of his canteen to Ridges, whose last words to his Jewish compatriot before they move on and the chapter ends are "we'll git along" (683). This is Mailer's way of representing the unspoken racial politics that had sustained the Democratic Party's fragile coalition of northern white ethnics and southern racists during the New Deal era. By restaging the formation of that racial compact in a war zone, Mailer reminds us that New Deal liberalism was forged in a climate of fear. He therefore anticipates the work of the historian and political scientist Ira Katznelson, who has argued that the threat of fascism and the onslaught of war abroad led Americans into a fateful compromise with illiberalism at home (Katznelson 317–363, 484–486). But, more importantly, Mailer contrasts the drab and humble existence promised by Goldstein and Ridges's ethnic identity with the literal and figurative deaths of the novel's would-be socialists, thereby casting racial politics as a mere pittance for the loss of more radical egalitarian hopes and dreams.

Mailer's career attests to the fact that success can overturn a writer's ambitions just as easily as defeat. Intending to "work on large collective novels about American life," Mailer found that the "celebrity" status he acquired with the critical and commercial success of *The Naked and the Dead* "took away much of the necessary anonymity [he felt he] needed personally for that" (*Spooky* 114). The proletarian literary tradition to which he adhered had enshrined documentary realism as an aesthetic standard. According to this school of thought, one learned to write about the harsh realities of American life through the direct experience of living inconspicuously amongst one's (mostly male) working-class subjects.⁸ No longer able to pass as just another working stiff, Mailer abandoned the "big fat one" based on his experience of a labor strike and anti-communist sentiment in Indiana that he began just months after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* (Lennon, *Norman Mailer* 114). The "notes and clippings" (115) he had

amassed and the “few days” he had spent conducting research among a “union in Evansville with which [he] had connections” came to naught (Mailer, “Art of Fiction” 34). “I didn’t have the book,” he confessed. “I didn’t know a damned thing about labor unions” (34). The GAN remained out of his reach long after his initial plans for this second book fell through. Mailer’s next experiment in the collective novel genre, *The Armies of the Night*, which gives a slightly fictionalized account of his participation in the 1967 March on the Pentagon organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, did not appear until 1968, two decades after his debut.⁹

FEAR AND DOMESTICITY IN MCCARTHY’S GAN

Like Mailer, McCarthy had been schooled in the proletarian literary tradition of the 1930s and believed that “[t]he staple ingredient in all novels in various mixtures and proportions but always in fairly heavy dosage is fact” (McCarthy, *Contrary* 251). Her essay “The Lasting Power of the Political Novel,” reveals that the works of Dos Passos played the same pivotal role in her literary and political development that they did in Mailer’s. It was Dos Passos who inspired her to pursue a career as a socially-committed writer. After she “fell madly in love” with the 42nd *Parallel*, as she tells the story, she “looked up every line that Dos Passos had published” and “read them all.” From Dos Passos she learned about the Sacco-Vanzetti case and the imprisonment of labor leader Tom Mooney, which “moved” her “to become aware of *The New Republic*. “One thing leading to another, soon after graduation, I was writing little book reviews for *The New Republic*, then for *The Nation*, and I never looked back. Like a Japanese paper flower dropped into a glass of water, it all unfolded, magically, from Dos Passos” (McCarthy, “Lasting”).

In contrast to Mailer, McCarthy refused to take up the collective novel via warmed-over “class transvestitism” (Schocket 105–142).¹⁰ Where Mailer considered it the novelist’s task to capture the *Sturm und Drang* of world historical events and epic battles between good and evil, McCarthy saw it as her job to exploit the novel’s special ability to expose realities that lay closer to home, particularly “the finite scandals of the village and the province” (*Contrary* 266). While she shared Mailer’s appreciation for Tolstoy, what she found most significant about his work was not its vast sweep, but the fact that, despite its reputation for high seriousness, it affects a “tone” of “gossip and tittle-tattle” (265). Scandal amplifies the dramatic power of a novel in

part by limiting its scope. In her view, the novel's "repercussions are like the echo produced in an enclosed space, a chambered world" (266). One cannot get worked up, she argues, by a novel about a "world-wide scandal or a universe-wide scandal" such as nuclear war or the holocaust because these events, by virtue of their "magnitude," defy comprehension as components of our reality (266).

McCarthy made these remarks when the "scandals" of World War II and the Cold War remained unfinished business. The remaining perpetrators of the Holocaust had not yet been brought to justice, as the trial of Adolph Eichmann—covered in *The New Yorker* by McCarthy's close friend Hannah Arendt—made abundantly clear, and the Cold War was in full swing. This was Mailer's bailiwick, or so he thought. As one critic put it, "Mailer's concern with history . . . is [actually] a concern with history-in-the-making. It is the Marxist's preoccupation with present-day action in the light of future necessity" (Trilling 188). With *The Group*, by contrast, McCarthy set her sights on the 1930s and reconstructs that period through the spatio-temporally limited "scandals of a clique" (*Contrary* 265). She opposes the retreat of its female members into private life with the renewed political concern for the commonweal that manifested itself in the era's expanding public welfare sector. To some extent, the two novelists' divergent approaches to the collective novel reflect the structural discrepancy in U.S.A. between the deep history of the trilogy's biographies, which "parallel the arc of individual lives with the arc of the republic," and the "continuous present of the fictional narratives" (Denning 174).¹¹ Where McCarthy drew principally on the first tendency, Mailer observed the second.

And while Mailer continued to follow the masculinist dictates of proletarian literature in modeling his heroes on lower-class men, McCarthy took her cues from elsewhere. Her use of such descriptors as "scandal," "gossip," "tittletattle," "enclosed space," "chambered worlds," tells us that she is also revising a different tradition. These are not the hallmarks of proletarian literature but of domestic fiction. Indeed the commonplace concerns of the family and the household—courtship, sex, marriage, homemaking, childrearing, and income—dominate *The Group*. And yet one cannot accuse McCarthy of writing "[r]espectable fiction" modeled on earlier domestic fiction, "which represented political conflict in terms of sexual differences that upheld a peculiarly middle-class notion of love" (Armstrong 41). Nor does *The Group* recall the discursive practices associated with Manifest Domes-

ticity that sought to enlist women, as caretakers and overseers of the household, in the project of imperial expansion (Kaplan 111–134).

One would have no more success in trying to fit *The Group* into the tradition of women's revolutionary fiction that emerged in the 1930s and, according to Paula Rabinowitz, offered "a curious revision of the domestic novel" (67). Works published by radical women during the Depression era attempt to intervene in a discourse that pitted "feminine desires (historicized in domestic fiction)" against "masculine economies (domesticated by historical fiction)," the loving and nurturing bodies of women against the "hungry" and "laboring" bodies of men, and the effete art of bourgeois storytelling against the virile act of making history through class struggle (36). Like those of their male counterparts, radical women's collective novels, "posit the development of class conflict in the form of the rising proletariat or the declining bourgeoisie" (69). In Rabinowitz's view, their female protagonists ultimately are either subsumed into "the revolutionary body" of the labor movement, which is "already constructed as masculine," or "positioned outside of the collective space" (85).

No such dichotomies confront the characters of *The Group* because, as we already know, "no male consciousness is present in the book." *The Group's* collective space is thoroughly feminized, focused as it is on a circle of friends who graduate from a women's college in 1933 with every intention of participating in society at large. This is made clear from the opening chapter, which unfolds at the nontraditional wedding of the group's free-spirited leader, Kay Strong. Written from an omniscient point of view but in the indirect, self-congratulatory voice of the group as a whole, the chapter introduces each of the novel's principal characters. Like Kay, who supposedly marries for love rather than money and will soon embark on a career in marketing at Macy's, the other members of the group regard themselves as ambitious and proudly unconventional:

They were a different breed, they could assure the curate, from the languid buds of the previous decade: there was not one of them who did not propose to work this coming fall, at a volunteer job if need be. Libby MacAusland had a promise from a publisher; Helena Davison, whose parents, out in Cincinnati, no Cleveland, lived on the income of their income, was going to be teaching—she already had a job sewed up at a private nursery

school; Polly Andrews, more power to her, was to work as a technician in the new medical center; Dottie Renfrew was slated for social work in a Boston settlement house; Lakey was off to Paris to study art history, working toward an advanced degree; Pokey Prothero, who had been given a plane for graduation, was getting her pilot's license so as to be able to commute three days a week to Cornell Agricultural School, and last but not least, yesterday little Priss Hartshorn, the group grind had simultaneously announced her engagement to a young doctor and landed a job with the N.R.A. Not bad, they conceded, for a group that had gone through college with the stigma of being high hat. And elsewhere they could point out girls of perfectly good background who were going into business, anthropology, medicine, not because they had to, but because they knew they had something to contribute to our emergent America. (*The Group* 15)

As Vassar graduates, the women in the novel feel duty bound to become important members of the workforce as well as wives and mothers. In matters of politics and culture, "[t]he Group was not afraid of being radical," for "they could see the good that Roosevelt was doing," (15) and "even the most conservative among them, pushed to the wall, admitted that an honest socialist was entitled to a good hearing" (15–16). None of them intends to "marry a broker or a banker or a cold-fish corporation lawyer" or one of the "dull purplish young men of their own set," and they even consider it socially acceptable "to marry a Jew" (16). They are emancipated from the prejudices of their class and, above all, their parents: "The worst fate, they utterly agreed, would be to become like Mother and Dad, stuffy and frightened" (16). The moral and emotional conflicts of the novel grow out of the women's efforts to remain true to these liberal values and to fulfill their collective promise. In aspiring to do so, the members of the group do not attempt to reconcile male and female spheres—encoded, in Rabinowitz's schema, as "labor" and "desire," respectively—but to pursue a model of women's professional vocation that they view as newly opened by the political environment of the 1930s.

That said, if we agree with Rabinowitz that in "the bourgeois psychological narrative of domesticity gender supplants class" and that women's revolutionary fiction, by contrast, shows us that class is "gendered" and gender

“classed,” then McCarthy’s novel clearly belongs to the radical tradition (Rabinowitz 15). Bolder still than her predecessors, McCarthy turns the collective novel genre on its head. For both male and female authors of proletarian literature, “the truth about society, knowledge of its inner workings, was available if and only if one wrote from the position of contiguity or identity with ‘the revolutionary proletariat,’” a concept that was coded as male (Schocket 203). *The Group* brazenly scuttles this aspect of the radical tradition, while exploiting the formal capacity of the collective novel to assemble “characters from comparable social origins” for purposes of assessing “the role of dominant—or, conversely, revolutionary—ideology in determining consciousness within different classes” (Foley, *Radical* 403). Where *U.S.A.*, for example, “presents through Mac, Joe Williams, and Charley Anderson a commentary on various options available to white working-class characters at different junctures in early twentieth-century U.S. society,” *The Group* offers us portraits of Kay Strong, Dottie Renfrew, Helena Davison, Libby MacAusland, Priss Hartshorn, and Eleanor “Lakey” Eastlake, thereby shedding light on the paths and privileges afforded to educated, upper-class white women in the New Deal period (403). Not only does this adaptation of the collective novel shrewdly sidestep a problem that arises when middle class writers attempt to represent the “real” conditions of the working classes, namely the tendency to fetishize the figure of the worker or some other potentially revolutionary subject, a habit that tends to reinforce readers’ fantasies about the poor, but *The Group* also reveals how a novel that privileges another ascriptive group can advance a powerful critique of class differences in its own right.¹²

The stories of McCarthy’s well-heeled women follow the same pattern as those of Dos Passos’s male protagonists. Their noble ambitions are frustrated by underachievement and various forms of cooptation that make a mockery of the triumphalist tone we encounter in the opening chapter. Libby, the only member of the group to have “made her mark,” abandons her dream of writing and editing serious literature after she takes to heart an editor’s comment that only “[o]ld maids” succeed in book publishing (211). She pursues an alternative career as a “high-powered literary agent” who peddles fluff to *Mademoiselle* (259). Dottie marries a “mining man who owned half the state of Arizona,” giving up social work to become a socialite (104). Priss leaves her job with the League of Women Shoppers, a job she had taken up after the Supreme Court upended the National Recovery Ad-

ministration, and becomes a stay-at-home mother. Helena Davison allows her parents to “bribe” her away from teaching with a “trip to Europe” (115). Kay suffers a nervous breakdown after her marriage to an unsuccessful playwright dissolves, and she later accidentally plunges to her death from a room in New York City’s Vassar Club. Kay’s onetime rival, Lakey, having earned a doctorate in a field where there are few jobs for women, settles down with a baroness in suburban Connecticut. Polly Andrews, whose family lost most of its fortune in the Great Crash, becomes a nurse and narrowly escapes a miserable life of penury in that profession by marrying a successful, kind-hearted psychiatrist. McCarthy implies that Polly escapes the fate of the rest of the group because her once-precarious class position had tempered her expectations. She is perhaps “the only girl in the class of ’33 who is truly happy” (324).

When we consider these lackluster outcomes in relation to what this group initially seemed poised to accomplish, a single question comes into focus, which Brenda Murphy states as follows: “How did it happen . . . that these young women, trained at Vassar to believe in the efficacy of the New Deal and their own potential to make significant contributions to the betterment of society, amounted to so little?” (Murphy 82–83) *The Group*’s affinities with the collective novel tradition, which takes as its grand theme the chronic failure of the American Left, and McCarthy’s own description of the book as “the history of the loss of faith in progress,” invite us to formulate the question in different ideological terms (“Art of Fiction” 62). Why did these young women, who were steeped in the progressive tradition and uniquely positioned to benefit from the new opportunities it had created in society, ultimately recoil from liberalism’s vision of freedom and equality?

McCarthy’s question resembles the one that haunts another book published in 1963 by a female veteran of the Old Left—Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. After describing the spiritual emptiness felt by many housewives in the 1960s, an affliction she famously calls “the problem that has no name,” Friedan puts the same question to her readers in these terms: “why did so many American women, with the ability and education to discover and create, go back home again, to look for something more in housework and rearing children?” (Friedan 7, 65)¹³ She surveys the romantic fiction that appeared in popular women’s magazines in the 1930s and finds that the period’s typical female “heroine” was a “New Woman” who sought and attained male companionship while remaining fiercely “independent

and determined to find a life of her own" (30). It is this feminine ideal that the women of *The Group* initially embraced.

This situation began to change, Friedan claims, during the postwar period as women were driven back into the home by what she called "the feminine mystique," which encouraged them to believe that "the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" (35). Those who adopted this model would realize their "femininity" not by pursuing some vocation or a career but by managing a household, raising children, and satisfying the needs of their husbands. Friedan does not deny the fact that discrimination and increasing competition with men in the job market after World War II played a part in deterring educated women from holding to the more liberal values and aspirations cultivated in the preceding decades. Her book, however, is less concerned with discrimination in the workplace than with the means by which an "image—created by the women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis—shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams" (24). In pinpointing the allure of the mystique, she calls attention to how the mass media of the age used its considerable power to persuade educated, upper-class women to abjure their independence.

McCarthy performs a similar maneuver, but she demonstrates that the problem has much deeper roots in the radical thirties, establishing a direct connection between this paralyzing image of femininity and the failure of liberal politics. Reading Friedan in connection with McCarthy and the collective novel tradition enables us to see the problem that has no name as an important iteration of the problem of revolutionary failure. Like Dos Passos and Mailer, McCarthy sought to understand why Left values failed to take root within a certain segment of American society. Although she shares Friedan's interest in what C. Wright Mills identified as "the cultural apparatus," her reinvention of the collective novel genre allows her to investigate the ways in which class-specific interpersonal dynamics influenced women's ultimate rejection of radical liberal values (Mills, *Politics* 203–212). When she combined the collective novel's technique for constituting a group subject with domestic fiction's fixation on what Nancy Armstrong has called "the power of domestic surveillance," McCarthy threw into sharp relief the mechanisms of social control that dictated upper-class women's participation in

the labor market (123). As Armstrong notes, bourgeois culture invests women with the authority to inculcate normative desires and forms of behavior in the domestic sphere. Women are thus obliged to keep watch over the household and the reproduction of bourgeois subjectivity (122–125). With *The Group* McCarthy proposes that domestic surveillance operates as a feminine counterpart to what Mailer called the fear ladder by showing how this “female power” to police discretion and taste set upper-class women not only against one another but also themselves (123).

McCarthy wants us to know that not only the experts and the mass media but also a socioeconomically inflected culture of fear lured women back into the home. The women of *The Group* live in a world suffused with fear—fear that the intimate details of their personal lives will become fodder for public consumption, fear that they will be found wanting as lovers and mothers, and fear that they will consequently lose the authority afforded to women of their social rank. The fears that limit their choices are the products of a culture of domestic surveillance that they perpetuate by means of “gossip,” “tittle-tattle,” and “scandal.” “Everything that happens emotionally or just in ordinary life to these girls,” McCarthy explained during a reading at the 92nd Street Y in 1963, “is turned into a subject matter for group conversation” (“92nd Street Y”). Thus these women live primarily in fear that other members of their chambered world will detect betrayals of the values and norms that they—as friends, as Vassar graduates, and as members of the upper class—unconsciously pledge to maintain. After graduation, they quickly succumb to that “worst fate,” which is “to become like Mother and Dad, stuffy and frightened.” Fear of domestic scandal—real or imagined—and its paralyzing effects are the overriding subjects of almost every major scene in *The Group*. To be sure, McCarthy’s reliance on irony and free indirect discourse frequently lend these scenes an element of satire. But *The Group*’s tightly focalized scenes and abundance of social and psychological detail suggest that she was less interested in provoking readers’ scornful laughter than accurately evoking the paranoid, stultifying world her characters inhabit.

For example, what worries Dottie most after she loses her virginity to the misogynistic painter Dick Brown, a friend of Kay’s husband, is what Kay might say about her to Dick. It strikes us as bizarre that of all things “she could not bear the idea of Kay dissecting and analyzing her and explaining her medical history and Mother’s clubs and Daddy’s business connections

and their exact social position in Boston" (*The Group* 51). Once Dottie tells Kay of the affair herself and undergoes the humiliation of obtaining a diaphragm at a women's clinic, it begins to seem as though this offspring of Boston Brahmins has overcome her fears. But as she waits for Dick in a public park with her newfangled contraception, she grows increasingly apprehensive. How will she explain what she had been up to that day to Helena, her roommate at the Vassar Club? What if "someone she knew" saw her waiting (76)? It does not help that during her visit to the clinic, Kay had sought to impress upon her "just how big a step it was, much more than losing your virginity," to get fitted for a diaphragm (62). Kay is dismayed to witness Dottie use her "real name" at the clinic, "[a]s though she were living in Russia or Sweden, instead of the old U.S.A.," where even some of the most open-minded people, like Kay's father, "would look at her askance if they could see what she was up to" (63). In the end, the potential for public exposure proves too much for Dottie to bear and drives her into the security of a traditional marriage.

Libby's narrative shows a similar example of social coercion. During a dinner party she hosts at her apartment, Libby regales her guests with a story about a woman who was brutally assaulted when she invited a cab driver back to her home to enlighten him about communism. Intended by Libby as an object lesson in the dangers of consorting with "the workingman" (224), Libby's story is used by McCarthy to illustrate how women in her milieu use gossip to enforce gender norms. Not willing to let Libby's object lesson go uncontested, McCarthy ironizes it by having Libby get duped into a similar scenario when her aristocratic suitor Nils almost rapes her. It is telling that even as the victim, Libby is stricken with dread at the thought that her friends might discover "the shaming, sickening, beastly thing that had happened, or failed to happen" to her (236).

In other instances, the domestic interior itself becomes the cause of shame. Although Libby does not live with Polly, she tries to talk her out of taking an influential editor home for fear her shabby rooming house might rebound on her friends. "[D]on't," Libby pleads with her, "please don't, take Gus into that place of yours and introduce him to all those weird characters. For my sake, if not for your own, don't" (228). Libby is concerned that both Polly and her living quarters give off "the smell of having seen better days . . . and not making those crucial distinctions any more, not having any real ambition" (228). Consequently, she worries that the exposure of Polly's re-

duced situation in society might rub off on her and affect her own career. In Kay's tragic case, domestic scandal not only exiles her from her own household but also prevents her from seeking asylum among the women she considers her friends. When she confronts her husband about his affair with one of her former classmates, he has her committed to a psychiatric hospital. Here, she refuses to be seen by members of the group, as if the only thing more terrifying than her confinement is the thought of her friends getting wind of it. "If you tell my friends," Kay warns her husband during a moment of tentative reconciliation, "I'll kill you" (349). Eventually Polly discovers Kay's whereabouts and lobbies for her release, but McCarthy has made her point. The system of reciprocal relationships that these women adopted in college and vowed to carry out in the world crumble in the face of domestic surveillance that makes women of the upper-classes terrified of any lapse in self-control. That Kay, even when wrongfully incarcerated, is afraid to call on her friends indicates the effectiveness of this form of social discipline.

As these episodes show, the members of the group are torn between their prerogatives as independent, well-educated women and the domestic norms enforced by their class. Vassar has taught them to enjoy the former, while their affluent upbringings have trained them to obey the latter. McCarthy brilliantly individuates her characters to show how women could navigate this dilemma differently and still end up in similar positions. Libby, a careerist determined not to offend the wrong people, pursues the most conventional path to success, all but shunning those she finds useless or beneath her. Kay, the most status-conscious member of the group, experiences a "nervous breakdown at the thought of having to be 'nobody' instead of the wife of a genius" (384). Her "ruthless hatred of poor people" resembles Libby's pronounced professional elitism (98). Both women seem to grow increasingly vapid intellectually. Lakey offers an illuminating counterexample. Supercilious and snide, she is also the least concerned of the group with how others view her. As Dottie explains in the first chapter: "Lakey is her own law" (22). Only Lakey is capable of making unconventional life choices: she moves to Europe, earns her PhD, and comes out as a lesbian. This distance from the group gives her the opportunity to cultivate her mind and to mature emotionally. When she returns from Europe, the rest of the group observes that she has become "more human in many ways than they remembered" (390). In thus setting her in contrast with Kay and Libby, McCarthy implies that the more embedded one is in the American upper class,

the more she will crave the recognition and approval from its members. The more she craves approval, the more she will fear committing the transgressions that might lead to her self-actualization.

And yet it is important to keep in mind that Lakey's radical decisions do not cost her in economic terms. The same holds true for the other members of the group who hew to the values touted at Vassar. Polly not only pursues a rewarding career but also weds a successful man willing to support her and her spendthrift father. As the only child of wealthy, doting parents, Helena is free to lead an independent life in New York City once she gives up teaching. As McCarthy explained in an essay on her collegiate experience, "the statistical fate of the Vassar girl, thanks to Mother and Dad and the charge account, is already decreed" (*On the Contrary* 202). Liberal subjectivity requires freedom from economic necessity and a progressive education. But what happens when this is not enough? Although the women of the group have been "trained in progressive ideas," they come of age at the apogee of liberalism, and have the practical means to enjoy their social and political rights, they nevertheless remain virtual prisoners to the desires, prohibitions, and anxieties of their class ("92nd Street Y"). The upper-class culture of domestic surveillance infuses the lives of privileged women with its own equivalent of the fear ladder. This feminine fear ladder is all the more effective at deterring progressive political consciousness because it operates in the realm of private life, which appears extraneous to work and politics.

FAILURE BEGINS AT HOME

McCarthy was perhaps too much of an isolato to embrace "the type of affiliation later favored by the progressive social movements that emerged in the Cold War era, all of which advocated bonds of intimacy and group identification" (Nelson 73).¹⁴ Indeed, in its depiction of how the feminine sphere stifles women's ambitions, *The Group*, like *The Naked and the Dead*, advances its own idiosyncratic critique of identity politics. The heroines who achieve self-actualization can do so only at the cost of rejecting solidarity with women of their class. But in showing how fear tactics prevented women from achieving what they set out to do even as they attained greater economic and political freedom, McCarthy, anticipates radical feminists like Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, who emphasized the role of the private sphere over and against that of formal politics in sustaining inequalities

between men and women.¹⁵ Domestic surveillance operates much like the fear ladder to keep female subjects in their place, but it does so principally through the coercive power of socialization rather than by means of brute force. It thus represents an alternative model for how the ruling class maintains an inequalitarian socioeconomic order. This model presupposes a social world underwritten by enlightenment ideals and material abundance. While such circumstances only existed among the rich in the 1930s, during the postwar period they became far more widespread, as politicians reached the consensus “that protecting consumers and encouraging mass consumption, more than protecting producers and promoting savings, were the principal responsibilities of the liberal state” (Brinkley 268). The postwar economic boom and liberal government’s creation of a “consumer’s republic” promised to lessen class conflict and the role of state coercion in maintaining social order.¹⁶

At the same time, these conditions amplified the importance of social control by means of the cultural sphere, as Herbert Marcuse noted in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964): “The products” of mass culture, Marcuse wrote, “indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood . . . it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life—much better than before—and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change” (Marcuse 12). The objects Marcuse mentions here constitute the infrastructure of a prosperous domestic life, a fact which suggests that the household functions as the primary site whereby ruling class ideology is internalized and enforced.

In *The Group*, we indeed see that upper-class women maintain their collective subordination by surveilling and policing each other’s personal lives according to the principles they learned at home from their “stuffy and frightened” parents. To the extent that they thereby experienced the benefits of “a good way of life” while simultaneously reproducing the very culture that “militated against qualitative change” in their professional and intellectual lives, McCarthy’s Vassar girls prefigure the one-dimensional man of the so-called affluent society. It would seem, then, that Marcuse’s “one-dimensional society” emerges from the mass feminization of the working-class majority on the order of ruling class women, which means the crucial frontier of social control and political struggle is a distinctly feminine one. *The Group* insists that the household, with its “female power . . . of domestic surveillance,” deserves greater attention in Left thought as a guarantor of cap-

italist class relations than the traditionally masculine realms of war and state violence (Armstrong 19). His blind spot notwithstanding, Marcuse unwittingly vindicated McCarthy's experiment. As it turns out, the formation of upper-class female subjects—"nice girls" as Mailer called them—in the 1930s is key to understanding how the forces of reaction stymied progressive change into the 1960s ("Mary McCarthy Case" 1).

Mailer was having none of this. In his view, the success or failure of radical politics always came down to the issue of violence. One either used it or fell victim to it. *The Naked and the Dead* is consequently a parable about the need for the Left to use the military's disciplinary apparatus—the fear ladder—to execute its own political agenda. The Left, Mailer contends, must produce its own versions of General Cummings and Sergeant Croft if it wants to defeat a powerful and emboldened crypto-fascist Right. When the fascist state envisioned by Cummings failed to materialize in the postwar period, Mailer did not lose interest in violence as a political tactic, but he did develop new justifications for its use. With proletarian struggle becoming an increasingly remote prospect, he turned his attention to the figure of "the Negro," who continued to live in constant fear of state terror (*Advertisements* 340–341). Black Americans, Mailer claimed, had evolved a culture of "hip" that was conducive to psychopathic violence and could thus potentially overturn the liberal consensus in favor of a "radical vision of the universe" (343). For Mailer, the only way to escape the ideological and cultural conformity of Cold War liberalism was "to encourage the psychopath in oneself" (339). He supplanted Croft and Cummings as role models for the Left with the hipster and his "white Negro" counterpart.

Mailer's exaltation of violence, his search for a new (male) revolutionary subject, and his attack on *The Group* are all of a piece. They reveal that his masculinist literary tradition was inadequate to the task of challenging the culture of mass consumption that he himself believed had displaced the dream of socialism. Whereas *The Group* is an important precursor to novels like Joyce Carol Oates's *them* (1969), which continue to place women and the dynamics of the household at the center of collective narratives about revolutionary failure, *The Naked and the Dead* looks forward to the paranoid fantasies of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). In the latter, the Left's romance with revolutionary violence becomes all the more ludicrous and quixotic, as it is transmuted into the magical thinking of the comically-inept Counterforce and the radical death drive of the

Schwarzkommandos, who prove the absurdity of embracing force as a tactic of resistance against America's omnipotent national security state. Post-war revolutionary failure thus occurs first as tragedy in *The Naked and the Dead* and repeats itself as farce in *Gravity's Rainbow*. No doubt, imagining the state's indomitable monopoly on technologies of violence as the answer to "the melancholy question" of why there is no socialism in America makes for titillating adventure stories. But it ultimately absolves us of the responsibility to create a more egalitarian society through collective action (Bell 3–4). And it does so by overlooking a no less disturbing but perhaps more politically viable path of escape from the prison-house of American exceptionalism highlighted by McCarthy's *The Group*, a path that begins in the comforts of hearth and home.

NOTES

1. Indeed, McCarthy's newfound reputation as a master of literary deceit reached comic proportions in the pages of *The Saturday Review*, where, in response to the storm of negative reviews and what he deemed a poor defense of *The Group* published in the *Columbia University Forum*, the ex-Stalinist Granville Hicks did an about-face and publicly retracted his previous, mostly positive review of the novel.
2. Foley offers the most thoroughgoing dissection of the collective novel and its relation to the proletarian literature movement of the 1930s. While she identifies several of the genre's distinguishing traits, the most important, in my view, is its construction of a group protagonist.
3. This does not mean women writers came late to the collective novel genre. On the contrary, as Paula Rabinowitz has shown, Mary Heaton Vorse, Josephine Herbst, Clara Weatherwax, and Tess Slesinger took to the form early to explore issues related to women. But in Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* (1934), the collective novel that prefigures McCarthy's work, "primary narrative weight is given" to the male characters (Rabinowitz 141). Dos Passos's *USA* is similarly lopsided. Although half of the narrative's main fictional characters are women, only one of the book's twenty-seven biographical sketches is devoted to a woman. And while Janet Galligani Casey has persuasively argued that a "nonpartisan radical" woman named Mary French emerges as the hero of *The Big Money*, one should keep in mind that French's counterparts in the other two volumes, Mac and Ben Compton, are both men (Casey 171).
4. For a more recent exploration of the Left and American exceptionalism, see Iton.
5. A powerful psychoanalytic reading of Dos Passos's rhetoric of revolutionary failure can be found in Moglen 95–234.
6. Sean McCann rightly identifies General Cummings's predilection for sodomy as "the first appearance of what will become a central Mailer obsession" (302). According to McCann, Mailer laments the loss of "a central political authority" (304) and community that ensued after the

- onset of post-WWII American imperialism, which championed cosmopolitanism, liberal individualism, and free market capitalism. The novelist then insists “that the compelling bonds of common identity can be fully established only through violence and especially through his two favored narrative scenarios—war and buggery” (313). For all its shrewdness, McCann’s essay obfuscates the role that violence, particularly sexual violence, plays for Mailer in defining the left-right continuum. The fascist Cummings definitively demonstrates his authority over the leftist Lieutenant Hearn by compelling him to submit to a figurative bugging. Thus, what comes to distinguish the Right in relation to the Left, the winners in relation to the losers, is the former’s willingness to terrorize—that is, to forcibly subdue—its opponents. The novel’s central concern, then, is not the loss of political authority but the Left’s unwillingness to seize it.
7. Mailer’s multicultural platoon also includes a Mexican-American Sergeant, an important reminder of the fact that “Mexicans, legally defined as white . . . were allowed to serve with Euro-American troops” (Gerstle 411, n41).
 8. Perhaps no other work gives a better sense of the masculinist and empiricist assumptions underpinning that standard than Mike Gold’s “A New Program for Writers,” an essay on the founding of New York’s John Reed Club. Gold’s essay suggests that “every writer in the group attach himself to one of the industries. That he spend the next few years in and out of this industry, studying it from every angle, making himself an expert in it, so that when he writes of it he will write like an insider, not like a bourgeois intellectual observer” (21). For Gold, a phrase like “bourgeois intellectual observer,” as Paula Rabinowitz has shown, connoted femininity (Rabinowitz 22–23, 68, 94). For a critical overview of documentary fiction, see Barbara Foley’s *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*. On the relationship between documentary aesthetics and the collective novel, see Foley, *Radical Representations* 399–441.
 9. His return to the genre was not exactly a triumphant one. As we have seen, in *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer held out the racial nationalism of the Third Way as a possible substitute for more robust collectivist dreams. In his second collective novel, however, there is no such alternative. Bimbisar Irom has thus described *The Armies of the Night* as “a failed collective text,” one that never manages to narrate a successful transition from individual to group consciousness. Although Mailer’s novel, Irom argues, traffics in the tropes of collective fiction, it ultimately reasserts “the primacy of the individual as the final moral arbiter in any political formation” (31). For more on Mailer’s late-career collective novels, see McCann.
 10. Eric Schocket uses this term to describe a narrative form popularized in the late nineteenth century by middle-class writers who sought “to close the epistemological gaps” in knowledge about the working classes through “cross-class impersonation” (106). Class transvestitism, Schocket explains, allowed middle class male writers to “reconstruct their manhood” through intimate contact with their supposedly more authentic impoverished brethren (110). One can think of Gold’s program as an updated version of this approach.
 11. This tension is also present in the contradictory term—“contemporary chronicles”—that Dos Passos often used to describe his collective novels (Dos Passos 153).

12. McCarthy reveals her awareness of this pitfall in her scathing review of Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!*, the collective novel that won a competition sponsored by *New Masses*, the unofficial literary mouthpiece of the Communist Party USA, in 1935. Weatherwax's brutalized "worker heroes" elicit disgust instead of sympathy and identification, according to McCarthy, and thus the novel achieves the opposite of what it sets out to do (McCarthy, "St. Francesca" 82). If McCarthy does not pretend to unveil the abject miseries of a rising proletariat or the decadence of a declining bourgeoisie in *The Group*, it is not because she "suffers from a lack of reach" and "is too weak to push through the crust [of the horror beneath]," as Mailer claims ("Mary McCarthy Case" 3); rather, it is because she understood all too well that adducing the most sordid pathologies of classed subjects as documentary proof of capitalism's injustice could have reactionary effects.
13. Interestingly, Friedan and McCarthy were inspired to write their masterworks by survey data from their respective alma maters, Smith and Vassar. See Murphy 85.
14. For an analysis of McCarthy's shifting political opinions, see Abrams.
15. Kate Millett 176–177; Shulamith Firestone 24–28. The link between gender and class—so crucial and explicit in *The Group*—is all but effaced in the works of Millett and Firestone, who conceive of upper-class white women as surrogates for all women. That said, Firestone clearly grasped the nature of the Mary McCarthy case. Here is her description of the female artist's predicament: "In those cases where a woman, tired of losing at a male game, has attempted to participate in culture in a female way, she has been put down and misunderstood, named by the (male) cultural establishment 'Lady Artist,' that is, trivial, inferior. And even where it must be (grudgingly) admitted she is 'good,' it is fashionable—a cheap way to indicate one's own 'seriousness' and refinement of taste—to insinuate that she is good but irrelevant" (143, emphasis in the original). She then goes on to pose the following question to illustrate her point that literature focused primarily on "the female side of things" is no less "limited" than male-centered literature: "Is Mary McCarthy in *The Group* really so much worse a writer than Norman Mailer in *An American Dream* [sic]? Or is she perhaps describing a reality that men, the controllers and critics of the Cultural Establishment, can't tune in on?"
16. On the role of consumption in New Deal politics and postwar liberalism, see Cohen. On consumer society as a form of social control, see Marcuse 8–55. Marcuse tends to see American consumer society and European welfare states as interchangeable, but they are distinct. One seeks to democratize access to markets while the other enshrines individual access to public goods (for example, healthcare, social security, housing, collective bargaining, etc.) as a basic constitutional right. For a concise explanation of the differences between America and Europe in this regard, see Kaufmann 225–247.

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