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# *American Psycho*: Neoliberal Fantasies and the Death of Downtown

SET WITHIN THE BLIGHTED AND ECONOMICALLY polarized geography of 1980s New York City, Bret Easton Ellis's neoliberal revenge satire, *American Psycho* (1991), greets its reader with a chilling smear of graffiti that conflates Dante's *Inferno* with Marx's guided tour in *Capital* with "Mr. Moneybags. . . . into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face 'No admittance except on business'" (279–80).<sup>1</sup> "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood-red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank," Ellis writes in the opening line as he begins to render in visceral detail what Marx called "the secret of profit making" (Ellis 3; Marx 280). The secret formula of profit in *American Psycho* is violence, exploitation, and reification, and what Ellis's novel palpably dramatizes through the handsome, Harvard-educated, Wall Street investment executive and serial killer Patrick Bateman is what it feels like to have one's labor forcibly expropriated through the reduction of oneself to human material. *American Psycho* translates for readers the massive social costs of neoliberal economics into a terrifyingly intimate experience of violence by a psychotic subject who embodies neoliberal theory and performs it through his repeated acts of disembowelment. The first assault in *American Psycho*, a confrontation that I will consider more fully in the pages that follow, makes this claim painfully clear. It is against a "bum, a black man" sleeping among "bags of garbage" in the East Village where Bateman is out on the prowl in "a silk-lined coat . . . by Luciano Soprani" that soon will be stained with flecks of blood (126). Before slicing the man's eyes and leaving him to bleed to death, Bate-

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man berates him: "Why don't you get a job? . . . If you're so hungry, why don't you get a job? . . . Do you think it's fair to take money from people who *do* have jobs? Who *do* work? . . . I don't have anything in common with you" (130–31). The question of fairness may seem out of place in the context of this brutal confrontation, but fairness—understood in *American Psycho* simply as receiving what one deserves—is essential to Ellis's nightmarish vision of the free market as the central apparatus for achieving social justice in a world where the flow and accumulation of capital is unfettered, I argue, by any artificial restraints, such as discrimination based on skin color, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. What *American Psycho* discloses through its late-1980s portrait of class hatred and power is, I will show, the violence that underwrites the utopian fantasy of neoliberal free market economics in which impoverishment is rewritten as a personal choice and a sign of personal failure and crimes against others (the poor, gays and lesbians, sex workers) are rewritten as punishment for the crime of being Other. In short, *American Psycho* chooses retribution for inequality rather than redistribution to end inequality. And in doing so, it simultaneously gives voice to and demystifies a body of popular and academic neoconservative discourse on urban poverty and crime that helped lead an assault on the poor by naturalizing surging class inequality that followed from the forceful implementation of neoliberal economic principles in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Published in 1991, Ellis's notorious third novel is sandwiched between George H. W. Bush's famous 1988 R.N.C. nomination pledge from the floor of the New Orleans Superdome for "a kinder, gentler nation" (fourteen years to the month before the levees broke and 30,000 evacuees gathered in the same spot with roughly 36 hours worth of food) and Rodney King's appeal for calm on the third day of the 1992 L.A. uprising, "People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along?" ("George Bush's Mission" 26; "Rodney King" 6). The publicity firestorm that made *American Psycho* one of most controversial English-language novels of the last third of the twentieth century, however, had nothing to do, curiously enough, with its satiric representation of the slash and burn social policies of the Reagan-Bush administration. "Would the world be a safer, kinder place if Luis was hacked to bits? My world might, so why not?" Bateman, paraphrasing Bush, says of a man he wants to kill (158). The uproar over the text, rather, stemmed

from its nauseating descriptions of the torture of women—"I threw up (literally)," one reader told Ellis in an online exchange on Hotwired. In an article that paired a discussion of *American Psycho* with interviews with women who had suffered from domestic abuse and assault, Maureen Downey concluded that the novel "give[s] substance to a woman's worst nightmare" (Eberly 129). While Bateman's serial killing comprises approximately ten percent of the text, it has effectively dominated responses by readers and commentators on the political Left and Right who have condemned Ellis for his apparent delight in graphically detailing violence against women and who have argued that his novel would be the source of additional sexual violence. Its stomach-turning pages would repel some readers, but would inspire others to copy-cat killings, an instance of life imitating bad art. What I want to demonstrate through a review *American Psycho's* immediate reception is how these critiques were made in the name of the unimpeachable neoliberal principles of individual property rights, personal responsibility, freedom of choice, and the necessity of free markets that the text itself relentlessly skewers.

The majority of Ellis's textual nightmare is devoted to the glorious spoils of the wealthy, as well as to tedious advice about how to be or look rich, which comes in the form of conversations between Bateman and his yuppie colleagues about how to match one's socks to one's trousers, how to score good tables at trendy restaurants and drugs at downtown nightclubs, and exhaustive, repetitive lists of the clothing, beauty products, and furnishings that make up the reified surface of upper-middle-class urban life. The initial commentary on *American Psycho* was concerned almost exclusively with its baroque depictions of violence against women, as opposed to its representation of class hatred or its critique of 1980s' capitalist economy. This has been the case, in part, because Ellis renders Bateman's murders—in particular his murder of women—with extreme precision and flair that sets these passages apart from the pronounced banality and non-literary style of the rest of the novel. *American Psycho*, in fact, implicates its readers who, after suffering through Bateman's seemingly endless catalogue of consumer products, find reprieve when he changes the tempo by killing someone.<sup>2</sup> Serial killing in *American Psycho* erases the numbing tedium of these exchanges while unveiling how they are underpinned by violence. The highly stylized descriptions of torture and dismemberment are ruptural

moments that temporarily break the forgettable sequences of commodity fetishism, which produce a kind of readerly fatigue. Readers are as likely to abandon *American Psycho* because of its monotony as they are because of its shocking depictions of homicidal sadism.<sup>3</sup>

Though serialized violence in *American Psycho* is an extension of the deadening effects of serialized consumer exchanges in an economy where commodities and bodies become interchangeable and indistinguishable, this point largely escaped the notice of the novel's harshest critics. This anomaly testifies to the power of representations of violence against women to activate deep cultural fears of sexual assault that override other critical prerogatives. But the oversight also might be explained by the fact that at least some of the early responses were based on excerpts of the book's most gratuitously brutal passages, rather than on the finished manuscript. The text was evaluated on its "pieces," ironically a reduplication of Bateman's own fetishization of body parts. The story of *American Psycho*'s botched publication and critical castigation is well known, but it is useful to review the text's immediate reception for the way it discloses how the public vituperation against *American Psycho*'s misogyny was made in the name of the neoliberal principles that Bateman embodies and which the text itself satirizes.<sup>4</sup> *American Psycho* originally was purchased by Simon & Schuster for a reported \$300,000, but a month before its release excerpted sections featuring graphic violence against women were leaked to *Time* and *Spy*, creating an uproar that caused Richard Snyder, Simon & Schuster's chair, to kill the novel. Snyder cited the book's "questionable taste" and refused to release it, even though it already had been printed and was awaiting distribution (McDowell, "Killing" C40). Vintage bought the book forty-eight hours later and planned for its release the following year. Months before publication, *American Psycho* and Vintage were savaged by reviewers, many of whom did not distinguish between violence in the text and the violence of the text and instead excoriated the novel as violence by other means. In the *New York Times* Lorrie Moore linked it to "sexual violence in art" produced in a climate in which violence against women was rife, noting that "Even a woman reviewer, one who dates precariously and lives alone with four locks on the door, might have overlooked certain passages" (A1). Moore's article was followed by Roger Rosenblatt's front-page review in the *Times* which accused Ellis not only of depicting crimes against women (for which he

was guilty), not only of bad writing (which is a matter of “taste”), but accused him of crimes against women (a more charged and problematic claim). Terry Teachout followed suit in the *National Review*, asserting that “Every bad thing you’ve read about it is an understatement. . . . It is, in the truest sense of the word, obscene. And the main charge of the feminists is right on the mark” (46). The main feminist charge belonged to Tammy Bruce, president of the L.A. chapter of NOW, who conflated Ellis with his murderous creation: “Mr. Ellis is a confused, sick young man with a deep hatred of women who will do anything for a fast buck” (Cohen C18). Bruce labeled *American Psycho* “a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women” (McDowell, “NOW” C17) and called for a boycott of books by Random House (which owns Vintage), “feminist works excepted” (Kennedy 427). Questioned whether it was fair that other writers should suffer, she retorted “No one is going to go to the soup lines here. . . . The issue is how many women are going to be alive this year. That’s the only issue and we need to get serious about it” (Marchand A4).

Bruce’s statement raised the specter of neoliberal economics and poverty while discounting its importance to the reception of Ellis’s text. But because the logic of neoliberalism is crucial to understanding *American Psycho*’s representation of violence and urban poverty, we would do well not to rush past Bruce’s dismissal of economics for the real “issue,” in fact, “the only issue” of sexual assault. While numbers are hard to come by, it is not unreasonable to assume that hundreds of thousands of Americans did stand in soup lines in 1991 to partake of meals prepared from the 253 million dollars in federal aid for “emergency feeding” (“Federal Food Programs”). Another 17 million partook of the chronically under-funded food stamp program that same year. On the back of the first edition, Vintage strenuously tried to frame the socio-economic context in which the novel was meant to be read: “*American Psycho* is set in a world (Manhattan) and an era (the Eighties) recognizably our own. The wealthy elite grow infinitely wealthier, the poor and disturbed are turned out on to the streets by tens of thousands, and anything, including the very worst, seems possible.” That Vintage felt compelled to describe this “world” as “recognizably our own” spotlights the degree to which income inequality precisely is not recognized in a world where, as Walter Benn Michaels argues, classes are treated “like races or cultures—different but equal” (*Trouble* 10). The social construction of

class—class as a matter of taste—has worked to make classes equal and exchangeable, and has made the perception of class inequality, to say nothing of the reasons for it, difficult to discern. “Only a very few seem dimly aware that things are getting bad,” Ellis writes (385).

A closer look at the public commentary reveals how outrage over Ellis’s representation of women as objects of sexual violence was channeled into a reaffirmation of the principles of freedom of choice and the freedom of markets to operate without government regulation, principles to which Ellis’s Wall-Street executive not insignificantly also is committed. It was a “misnomer” to term Simon & Schuster’s cancellation “censorship” Moore contended, when it was simply a calculated business decision (A1). Rosenblatt asserted that “There’s no civil liberties issue here. But there’s plenty of dough. . . . Thumb through it, for the sake of normal prurience, but don’t buy it” (3). What was clear to U.S. commentators was that the sanctity of free speech and free markets was in fact proven by the unregulated distribution of the book. For novelist Madeleine L’Engle, not purchasing *American Psycho* was an exercise of choice as a consumer and an expression of her right of privacy to read or not read whatever she desired: “I am totally against censorship. *American Psycho* is certainly a book I would not want in my home and that is my privilege” (Birkerts 22). Even Bruce was adamant that “We are not telling them not to publish.” Instead she directed women “to exercise their free expression by refusing to buy the novel” (McDowell, “NOW” C17).<sup>5</sup>

From Ellis’s perspective, however, the cancellation by Simon & Schuster was a breach of a contract into which he had entered as a sovereign individual selling his labor in return for remuneration and publication. As David Harvey has recently argued, the neoliberal state’s “legal framework is that of freely negotiated contractual obligations between juridical individuals in the marketplace. The sanctity of contracts . . . must be protected” (64). Ellis was a victim of a violation of this fundamental principle. But the fact that another corporation was able to freely purchase the novel, along with the fact that it became a bestseller and made Ellis even richer, reaffirmed the market’s ability to recognize potential sources of profit where some saw a source of moral opprobrium. In short, the negative critical reactions to *American Psycho*’s misogyny—and the way these reactions were framed in terms of freedom and rights—disclose two important aspects of late twen-

tieth-century American culture: 1) the narrowing of the ideological spectrum of permissible discourse as the precepts of neoliberalism are further universalized and 2) the way the public commitment to positive representations of a diverse social field sometimes militate against analyses of income inequality and exploitation. This is not to argue that feminist reviewers of *American Psycho* are unsympathetic to critiques of capitalist economy, many of whom recognize how it is bound up with the reproduction of heteropatriarchy. But it is to say that the outrage by both the Right (*The National Review*) and the Left (NOW) rarely saw beyond Ellis's spectacle of violence. In casting their critiques as exercises of freedom, these reviewers left neoliberal social domination and exploitation uninterrogated.

The world that Vintage called "recognizably our own" is the neoliberal state. Neoliberal theories of the state, which drastically reshaped social policy in the 1980s and '90s, were formulated in influential works such as Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (1980) and Friedrich von Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960). "The scope of government must be limited" Friedman announced in the opening pages of *Capitalism and Freedom*, adding later that its limitations should be written into the U.S. Constitution through "an economic Bill of Rights" (*Capitalism 2; Free 299*). According to neoliberal theory, the state's power must be reduced to its most essential functions, such as the maintenance of the money supply, the securing of private property rights through law enforcement, and the guaranteeing of open markets through legally binding trade agreements, and if need be, through force. A free-market society was, Hayek believed, by its nature economically unequal, but this was reason to be sanguine for inequality indicated economic growth. "The rapid economic advance that we have come to expect seems in a large measure," he wrote, "to be the result of this inequality and to be impossible without it" (42). In a free-market society, the "invisible hand" of the market does most of the heavy lifting, albeit passively, since the individual pursuit of one's own economic well-being, in theory, secures the welfare of others through the promotion of efficient and profitable goods and services within competitive markets. With this principle in mind Hayek could be confident that "Those forces which at first make inequality self-accentuating thus later tend to diminish it" (48). Yet it was also true, he noted, "that to be free may mean freedom to starve" (18).

In a recent critique of neoliberalism, David Harvey comments that in the neoliberal state, “The social safety net is reduced to bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility” (76). “Most of the present welfare programs,” Friedman declared in 1980, “should never have been enacted. If they had not been, many of the people now dependent on them would have become self-reliant individuals instead of wards of the state” (*Free* 119). Individual self-reliance—the ability to be free to choose and the responsibility for choosing correctly—was not only a theoretical proposition but increasingly a necessity as the legacies of the New Deal began to be dismantled through cuts to social assistance programs, reductions in federal expenditures on subsidized housing, the shuttering of publicly funded mental health services in cities, wage-freezes in the public sector, and through historic tax cuts for corporations and upper-income earners. Before their application nationally, many of these measures were imposed by Wall Street firms—like Bateman’s aptly named Pierce and Pierce—on New York City as it edged towards bankruptcy in the 1970s. When Gerald Ford was famously quoted as telling New York to “Drop Dead” in 1975, it was in the context of refusing the city federal aid, a forced neoliberalization that left New York at the mercy of financial institutions that hacked away at its infrastructure of social welfare as a condition of debt financing (“Ford to City” 1). By the Reagan-era, homelessness was reaching epidemic levels. “The Death of Downtown” is here, proclaims a headline in *American Psycho* (14). “Beggars and homeless seem to have multiplied . . . and the ranks of the unfortunate, weak, and aged lined the streets everywhere,” Ellis writes (278). “I’VE LOST MY JOB I AM HUNGRY I HAVE NO MONEY PLEASE HELP,” reads a sign held by a man whom Bateman describes as “lounging below the *Les Misérables* poster” (113). For the neoliberal Bateman, all unemployment precedes from a lack of personal incentive, a desire to “loungue” rather than work. If the impoverished do work in *American Psycho*, it is as symbolic labor in a leisure economy in which they cannot afford to participate. They are, cynically enough, human advertisements for a musical of Victor Hugo’s novel of pre-revolutionary foment that has been watered down to a middle-class audience with money and time on its hands. *American Psycho*’s dystopian New York is what follows when most forms of social welfare have been eviscerated. And Bateman’s revengeful, private vigilantism brings death to downtown by punishing those who have failed

in this new harsh reality. He strikes the coup de grâce of forced neoliberalization.<sup>6</sup>

In order to get under the skin of *American Psycho*, we have to get under the skin of neoliberalism and understand the logic by which it operates. To begin, it is crucial to recognize that the neoliberal state's legitimacy in the face of dramatic polarizations of wealth and poverty is maintained only by the elimination of the social meaning of arbitrary differences—such as race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—that hinder one's ability to produce wealth for oneself or others. Discrimination based on any of these artificially impedes the flow of labor and capital. Thus the elimination of discrimination secures neoliberal theory, which is predicated upon the ability of the neoliberal subject to freely make rational choices. By making race and gender discrimination illegal, the state guarantees the free functioning of the market and the radically atomistic freedom of its subjects to succeed or fail. This logic underpins the terrifying truth of Bateman's assertion to a former girlfriend as he kills her: "No one cares. No one will help you" (246). Those who fail have made poor choices, but these choices were freely made, the argument goes, and not the outcome of feudal prejudices over blood, skin color, or gender. Friedman makes this point by noting how "the substitution of contract arrangements"—which are voluntary and are based upon what one *does*—"for status arrangements"—which are involuntary and are determined by what one *is*—is the reason that "the development of capitalism has been accompanied by a major reduction in the extent to which particular religious, racial, or social groups have operated under special handicaps in respect to their economic activities" (*Capitalism* 108). The economic disincentives of discrimination are clear: "those of us who regard color of skin or religion as irrelevant can buy some things more cheaply as a result" (110).

Neoliberal economics does not eliminate diversity, but rather seeks to eliminate the determinative power of social differences by rendering them equal and unimportant. *American Psycho* enacts this logic by dramatizing the violent reduction of all social relations to relations of money, pure and simple. Michaels, who briefly considers Ellis's text in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004), posits: "the categories of difference in which *American Psycho* is relentlessly invested . . . have nothing to do with either respect for or hostility to racial or cultural difference" (149–50). In *American Psycho* race, gender, and ethnicity are outmoded mark-

ers of identity that possess none of the explanatory power of class to divulge one's character and one's worth. We see this early in the novel when one of Bateman's colleagues calls a rival a "Lucky Jew bastard" for winning a lucrative account, and Bateman responds, "Oh Jesus, Preston . . . What does *that* have to do with anything?" (37). That racial and gender differences continue to be accorded unequal status and that this affects income is obvious, but such distinctions are supererogatory to neoliberalism. As Michaels has also argued, classes, unlike races, by definition, are not equal and the production of class inequality is not an unintended outcome of capitalism but a central mechanism for registering the market's effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> The abolition of the meaningless horizontal differences of race, gender, and ethnicity allows the market to stratify a diverse social field by class, replacing *differences* with *distinctions* that are not arbitrary but legitimate. When Bateman attacks the "bum, a black man," he does so not because he is black, but because he's a "bum" who has grown weak from his reliance upon the charity of strangers. Ellis's clumsy syntax carries with it a charged commentary about the priority of class in subject formation. If racism is not Bateman's motivator, it also seemingly is not a factor in the man's joblessness. The man has been laid off, a victim of corporate downsizing, and Bateman attacks him because he expects to survive despite not working, which Bateman considers unfair to those who do. In neoliberal theory all unemployment is considered voluntary, since there is always someone who will work for less (notwithstanding minimum wage laws, which neoliberal theory decries). Not working thus negatively impacts the employed—through higher taxes and through lower property values due to urban blight—and for this Bateman wants retribution.

The class dynamics of this initial assault inform all of the subsequent aggression and murder in the text, even though these assaults primarily have been understood as hate crimes against women and ethnic and racial minorities. Yet Bateman is best understood not as a misogynist or a racist or even a serial killer but as Ellis's fantasy of the quintessential neoliberal subject or, as Barry Keith Grant has suggested, as "merely 'the logical end of human relations under capitalism'" (29). Ellis hyperbolizes neoliberal class animosity and power through Bateman, who corporealizes it so excessively as to make the violent presuppositions of the market's invisible hand frighteningly visible. Bateman is an ideological construct who denaturalizes the putatively naturally

transparent flow and accumulation of capital, and thus makes manifest that the production of class inequality is undergirded by violence. That Ellis's deranged anti-hero is a serial killer, is less important than the fact that he is a young, upwardly mobile professional earning six figures in finance to needlessly supplement vast reserves of inherited wealth. It is less important because, as Carla Freccero has shown, serial killing is an eccentric and socially decontextualized act. To understand Bateman through the frame of this mystified fetish reveals nothing about the etiology of his crimes or their meaning. In what amounts to a convention of the serial killer crime drama, Ellis's text intimates that the origins of Bateman's psychopathology might be found in early childhood trauma. But Ellis soon mocks the idea when Bateman quips to a friend he axes to death: "Hey, I'm a child of divorce. Give me a break" (215). The reader is left with the option of discounting Bateman as a truly random, horrific, but ultimately inconsequential monster or with the option of understanding Bateman as originating in "a world . . . recognizably our own."

Since *American Psycho* provides no other narrational viewpoint to Bateman's, the reader is left with the killer's humorous, unhinged efforts at self-analysis:

Today I'm meeting Bethany for lunch at Vanities . . . I'm still extremely nervous. The cause is hard to locate but I've narrowed it down to one of two reasons. It's either that I'm afraid of rejection . . . or . . . it could have something to do with this new Italian mousse I'm wearing, which, though it makes my hair look fuller and smells good, feels very sticky and uncomfortable, and it's something I could easily blame my nervousness on. (230)

Hardly the cool killer with ice in his veins, Bateman is a self-loathing, nervous wreck for much of the novel. His anxiety arises from his own failed acts of self-interpretation. He encourages but resists analysis and this resistance engenders panic in readers in turn. He is a text that we recoil from, dismiss, cast aspersions on, and fail to take seriously. "There . . . is . . . no . . . key" to deciphering him, Bateman announces slowly and deliberately, adding "there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me" (264, 376). The effect of

*American Psycho's* vigorous depsychologization of Bateman's hatred is to foil efforts to read exploitation in terms of individual actions, rather than in terms of the violence of class power.

While Bateman bristles at anti-Semitic statements and racist jokes, he himself is repeatedly guilty of the most vulgar castigations. What are we to make of this contradiction? First, we should note that focusing on Bateman's misogyny, racism, or homophobia as a cause of violence, rather than as a symptom of something else, obfuscates the origins of the cruelty in the text by casting its violence and pathology within the terms of individual action and choices, rather than in terms of structural inequality, reification, and commodity fetishism. Whether Bateman hates the poor (or Ellis hates women) is not the issue, since individual hatred for (or even respect for) the poor is counterproductive to discussions of inequality. It is counterproductive because it too frames exploitation in terms of individual actions and choices, rather than in terms of social policy and the violence of structural inequality. As a neoliberal subject, this is exactly how Bateman would wish to frame the issue: as a choice. On closer examination, the determining effects of unequal class power in Bateman's invective-filled confrontations become clearer. His spastic tête-à-tête with a Chinese drycleaner is framed by Bateman "brush[ing] past a crying bum" on his way in the door (81). Yelling at the launderer, "Stupid bitch-ee? Understand?" Bateman's outburst is triggered by the woman's inability to do correctly the job for which he has hired her, namely, to remove blood stains from his designer shirts (83). "You can't bleach a Soprani," he hisses (82). And even though these cleaners "really *are* the best," Bateman becomes unglued at the prospect that they "can't get *these* stains out" (84). The outdated, dried-up essentialisms of blood cannot be leached from the signifiers of class to Bateman's enormous frustration. In effect, he has paid her to make blood go away. Her inability to do so testifies not to the primary foundational importance of blood (or race) but to its capacity to stain our thinking about class.

The legacies of racial and ethnic essentialisms continue to inform Bateman's own thinking, but Ellis also makes clear that each and every instance of his anti-hero's racist slander occurs when he does not receive services or goods for which he has paid. Though these uncomfortable collisions often end in blood, their common denominator is not blood, but money. In the novel African Americans, ethnics, and

immigrants are overrepresented in the service economy, and thus Bateman's encounters easily give way to typecasting. The "black Hispanic doorman" who works the front desk of Bateman's luxury building infuriates him because he is inattentive to his needs, leading Bateman to mock his speech patterns (70). When Bateman lashes out "Do it yourself, nigger" at a "black custodian" in a Central Park bathroom who asks Bateman to flush the urinal, his anger is explicable (if not excusable) if understood in terms of Bateman's loathing towards the working-class who are not performing the services for which they are, however meagerly, compensated (297). In one of the text's more comically disturbing scenes, Bateman unsuccessfully tries to order a cheeseburger and milkshake at a kosher delicatessen, only to scream at the waitress who refuses him, "Fuck yourself you retarded cocksucking kike." His rage has less to do with any anti-Semitism he may or may not harbor and is more the outcome of the sudden uselessness of the "platinum AmEx" he slaps down on the table (152). He cannot purchase what he wishes because the religious dietary restrictions of another have been imposed on his desires. This is an unforgivable offense because it has rendered Bateman's most sacrosanct principle of the freedom of choice null and void. Additionally, Bateman's rape, torture, and murder of women are presented explicitly in terms of choice and privilege. "It could be that she's safe because her wealth, her *family's* wealth, protects her tonight," he says of Patricia, a model and a would-be victim, "or it could be that it's simply my choice" (76-77). Christie, a streetwalker, whom Bateman picks up in the Meatpacking district is not so fortunate, in both senses of the word. He tempts her into his limousine by waving a hundred-dollar bill while asking if she takes American Express. After he has sex with her, verbally degrading and physically assaulting her in the process, she disappears from the novel until Bateman hires her again. Despite her "reservations," she agrees for the "money . . . is simply too good to pass up" (284). As a prostitute she is a person-as-commodity; and as a commodity, she is, in Bateman's twisted imagination, his to do with so long as he pays for her. In this case it means killing and eating her. His act of cannibalism is capitalist consumerism *reductio ad absurdum*.

Michaels postulates that "The dream of a world free of prejudice, the dream of a world where identities (whether American or hyphenated American) are not discriminated against, is as foundational to the right as it is to the left. And this dream is completely compatible with

(is, actually, essential to) the dream of a truly free and efficient market” (*Trouble* 75). Such remarks help explain the alignment of liberals and free-market conservatives against *American Psycho* for its misogyny and their mutual silence regarding its representation of inequality. But such remarks do little to explain the level of animus that everywhere in the text is directed at racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects. The logic of identity in *American Psycho* is complexly valenced and to understand it requires that we probe deeper into the processes of reification and fetishism which are fundamental to capitalist political economy. The commodity and sexual fetishism in the text reduces individuals to an assemblage of body parts: “I’m staring across the room at a great-looking woman—blonde, big tits, tight dress, satin pumps with gold cones,” Bateman leers while at an upscale restaurant (100). But it is also the case that the text extends the outcomes of reification so greatly as to expose its barely sublimated violence. In effect, *American Psycho* over-identifies with the processes that produce standardized racial and sexual subjectivities that are optically recognizable. In other words, Bateman’s reified vision assembles (and then disassembles) women in order to produce erotized, dehumanized gender and racial formations. Through Bateman, we can anatomize the logic of reification as he, in turn, performs his own private autopsies. At one point late in the novel, Bateman takes inventory of his night of labored killing: “What is left of Elizabeth’s body lies crumpled in the corner of the living room. She’s missing her right arm and chunks of her right leg. Her left hand, chopped off at the wrist, lies clenched on top of the island in the kitchen, in its own small pool of blood. Her head sits on the kitchen table” (291). This over-identification with how bodies are put together and subject-positions formed is what Mark Seltzer terms “the absolute conformism to the system without belief in the system—the mimetic identification without identity that constitutes that madness” (163). It is the text’s way of proffering a critique in the absence of a normative moral position with which a reader might wish to identify.<sup>8</sup> Notoriously, there is no moral subject position in *American Psycho*, one of the supreme indicators of its failure as a novel for some of its first reviewers. This absence itself negatively assesses liberalism’s desire for a “consoling fantasy” about violence that a “moral framework” might provide (Freccero 55). Had *American Psycho* lodged an unambiguous critique of the ideologies of sexism and racism, it surely would not have received such a public flogging. But for Ellis,

sexism and racism are not the problem, but a symptom of the reification of social relations in a modern capitalist economy.

*American Psycho* demystifies the reification it mimics stylistically by showing it as the outcome of unequal exchanges of power, which are exercised either through violent suppression or through consumerism gone mad (Murphet 13). These unequal exchanges produce standardized or abstracted persons of both those who are the subject of power—Bateman and his wealthy colleagues—and those who are subjugated by power—Bateman’s victims and the poor. As Ellis’s title makes clear, Bateman is American and psycho, each side of the equation mutually determining. His psychotic behavior is the measure of his typicality, rather than existing in excess to it. Or as Seltzer posits, “the only difference between the normal subject (the psychic killer) and the pathological one (the psycho killer) is the passage from fantasy to act” (146). In other words, the serial killer’s fetishistic, ritualized cruelty highlights a general condition of reified consciousness that obtains among all Americans in the text. But it is also the case that it obtains among the rich with parameters distinct from the poor.

Let me illustrate this last point by turning to Bateman’s girlfriend Evelyn’s claim “*Everybody’s rich*,” an early assertion in the novel that points up a hidden truth. The truth of her statement is not that everybody is rich, but that as a rich person she thinks everyone is (23). And in a limited sense she is correct because, at least among her yuppie cohorts, everyone is more or less equally rich and thus more or less equal. Consider, for instance, that one of the novel’s running jokes is the exchangeability of persons within a closed economy of status-oriented signs—“Owen has mistaken me,” Bateman says “for Marcus Halberstam . . . but for some reason it doesn’t really matter” (89). Because Bateman and his colleagues are nothing more than the accretion of their multiple commodity exchanges, they easily can be substituted for one another. If this condition is a source of grim humor, it also exemplifies the commodification of subjectivity through serialized acts of consumption. The following catalogue cements the point through commodity fetishism in which the exchangeability of persons is achieved through the erasure of difference under the guise of individuality:

Reed Thompson walks in wearing a wool plaid four-button double-breasted suit and a striped cotton shirt and a silk tie, all

Armani, plus slightly tacky blue cotton socks by Interwoven and black Ferragamo cap-toe shoes that look exactly like mine. . . . Soon after, Todd Broderick walks in wearing a wool chalk-striped six-button double-breasted suit and striped broadcloth shirt and silk tie, all by Polo. . . . McDermott walks in next . . . wearing . . . a black and white wool houndstooth-check single-breasted suit with notch lapels, a striped cotton dress shirt with a spread collar and a silk paisley tie, all of it designed and tailored by John Reyle. (108–09)

Personhood is flattened here to “some kind of abstraction, . . . something illusory,” the outcome of the deadening exchanges of consumerism in which one sign substitutes for another in a series without end (376). The ultimate effect is a “depersonalization [that] was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure” (282).

It is essential here to differentiate between dehumanization—a condition suffered by women, racial minorities, the sexualized, and the poor, often through their intense corporealization—and “depersonalization”—a condition suffered by Bateman and his friends in which the illusion of a unique subjectivity is continually deferred through the substitution of signs. The latter is an effect of privilege (the privileges of consumerism) while the former is the effect of exploitation by the privileged (the expropriation of one’s labor and one’s reduction to material). At multiple junctures *American Psycho* directs readers to think of Patrick Bateman not as a real psychopath that might lead one to install four locks on the door or even as a psychopathic character created with the three dimensionality that comes with good realist portraiture, but as a nodal point upon which overlapping consumer exchanges have accrued on the “surface, surface, surface” (375). As Bateman says of himself, he has, at best, “a rough resemblance of a human being” (282), is “truly vacant” (275), and is “some kind of abstraction” (376) in a consumer society where “everyone is interchangeable” (379). What is most important to recognize is that the equality that comes with money—“*Everybody is rich*”—erases differences while the inequality that comes with the lack of it produces distinctions. To put it another way, the logic of neoliberalism maintains the equivalence of all bodies despite race, gender, and sexual differences, while also producing distinctions

between bodies which are determined by class. This is to say, all of the rich people in *American Psycho* are equal despite their differences and all of the poor people in the novel are also equal despite their differences, but the rich and the poor are, of course, never equal. Furthermore, it is fundamental to note that the erasure of differences is possible as long as the chimera of choice is sustained. One body (black or white) or one sign (Armani or Polo) can substitute for another, so long as they are of equal value. At the same time, the erasure of differences between these bodies or signs or embodied signs renders these choices empty since they do not distinguish. Since one who can afford Armani can also afford John Reyle and Polo, we have differences reduced to choices without social meaning. It simply doesn't mean anything to wear John Reyle rather than Armani. Neither does it mean anything to hire a white worker over a black worker, or vice versa, so long as their labor and their productivity are the same. We have in each instance an exercise of freedom of choice, but choice without real options because these choices don't produce meaningful distinctions. This is also why "Patrick Bateman," "Reed Thompson," "Todd Broderick" and "McDermott" are not only "interchangeable" but indistinguishable. And if Owen happens to mistake Bateman for Marcus Halberstam, Bateman is correct to say "it doesn't really matter."

It is also true that Bateman is less flesh and blood than he is a discursively produced matrix of verbal utterances which have coagulated into the shape of a person, more a corpus of words than corporeal. He is not just a point where commodity exchanges occur; he is also a center where linguistic signs that foster these exchanges are registered. In fact, much of *American Psycho* is nothing more than a pastiche of discourses spoken without affect, a Barthesian tissue of quotations from advertising ("Next apply Gel Appaisant, also made by Pour Hommes, which is an excellent, soothing skin lotion" [27]), music reviews ("Whitney's talent is restored with the overwhelming 'The Greatest Love of All,' one of the best, most powerful songs ever written about self-preservation and dignity" [254]), pornography ("positioning Sabrina's face over my stiff, huge cock which I guide into her mouth with my hand" [174]), and even economic policy ("we need to promote economic growth and business expansion *and* hold the line against federal income taxes" [15]). In each instance Bateman is speaking, but as he says "*I am simply not there*": "there is no real me" (377, 375). There is no there *there*, only

an empty vessel into which prefabricated ideas, rhetorics, and styles have been poured.

Given this fundamentally evacuated sense of subjectivity, Bateman and his yuppie colleagues engage in the most rigorous forms of self-discipline, continually monitoring themselves and others to make sure that they are perfectly coiffed, sporting the right combination of accessories, and following every protocol relating to their own compartment. They over identify with these protocols so as to appear resolutely heteronormative. Ellis hyperbolizes male rituals of self-disciplining, self-creation, and social surveillance when he offers Bateman's step-by-step description of his morning toilette over several pages uninterrupted by paragraph breaks (24–30). Unfolding in real time before a mirror, it is a manual on how to construct a person one lotion at time: "Never use cologne on your face, since the high alcohol content dries your face out and makes you look older. One should use an alcohol-free antibacterial toner with a water-moistened cotton ball to normalize the skin" (27). In such moments, *American Psycho* is itself a performative discourse of self-presentation. Yet its excessive quality doubles back on itself, throwing into high relief the intensely provisional nature of subjectivity as it obtains in a consumer economy. Later, Bateman tells himself "All it comes down to is: I feel like shit but look great" (106), and being able to look great despite how one feels is one of the indicators of class distinction between the rich, who are shaven and perfumed, and the poor in *American Psycho*, who "reek of . . . shit" (130). In his encounters with the street poor in Manhattan, Bateman takes great offense to how they look and smell: "Jesus, will you get a fucking shave, *please*," he yells at an unemployed man begging for change (113). Bateman may "feel like shit," but he does not smell like it. His class privilege affords him the luxury of concealing the nausea that stems from the continual displacement of subjectivity into commodity exchanges. The poor, for their part, smell nauseatingly like poverty. The accoutrements of wealth "spares" the poor Bateman's depersonalization, whereas the poor's lack of wealth reminds everyone of their dehumanization.

To return to Bateman's initial assault, we now see that his confrontation with the "bum, the black man" springs from radical class inequality. To the extent that Ellis's protagonist has everything in common with other upper-middle class urbanites, he has nothing in common with the poor. Their lack of commonality and Bateman's inability "to

feel compassion” are interrelated (282). The former derives from the production of class distinctions by neoliberal economics. The latter stems from Bateman’s depersonalization, which is an outcome of the commodification of subjectivity under neoliberal regimes and also is, I want to now note, a product of a late-twentieth-century discourse on poverty that the compassionless Bateman embodies. What I want to consider in closing is how Ellis, through Bateman, voices and demystifies the ideas and attitudes of a body of neoconservative popular and sociological literature that licensed the implementation of neoliberal economics and that was extremely influential in making social policy more punitive by arguing that the poor were, at worst, genetically inferior, and at best, simply lazy. If, as David Harvey contends, “neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power,” this project was advanced not only through the implementation of neoliberal economic principles, but also through a neoconservative discourse of post-Fordist urban crisis (16). This discourse found its most thorough expression in wonkish texts such as Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* (1984) and Lawrence Mead’s *Beyond Entitlement* (1986), but also was popularized through mainstream outlets such as *Time* which in 1990 ran an alarmist cover story about crime and homelessness titled “The Rotting of the Big Apple,” and through tabloid, right-wing journalism such as the *New York Post*, which we learn in the first chapter of *American Psycho* that Bateman and his friends read voraciously (Macek x). As does neoliberalism, neoconservatism champions corporate power, free market economics, and freedom of choice, but it departs from neoliberalism in two ways: “first, in its concern for order as an answer to the chaos of individual interests, and second, in its concern for an overweening morality as the necessary social glue to keep the body politic secure in the face of external and internal dangers” (Harvey 82). By providing intellectual cover to policy advisors and by manufacturing popular consent among citizens, neoconservative social discourse in the 1980s abetted the retrenchment of the federal government from the economy in the areas of welfare, mental health services, and other social assistance programs. It thus was instrumental in advancing goals that neoliberals championed and whose effects are everywhere in Ellis’s terrifying world.

In *Losing Ground*, for instance, Murray recommends abandoning “the entire federal welfare and income-support structure for working-

aged persons, including AFDC, Medicaid, Food Stamps, Unemployment Insurance, Worker's Compensation, subsidized housing, disability insurance, and the rest" (227–28).<sup>9</sup> Monies spent in these areas, he asserts, actually cause poverty, crime, and other cultural pathologies—teenage pregnancy, drug use, fatherless homes—among the residents by encouraging and perpetuating dependency, laziness, and immorality. Whereas Keynesian liberalism managed delinquent populations through the welfare state's extensive bureaucracy—turning them into what Friedman called “wards of the state”—neoconservatism's method is to make them wards of the prisons. Policing of poor and working-class urban neighborhoods, harsh penalties for petty, quality-of-life crimes, and lengthy prison sentences for drug offenses are all measures which help absorb marginalized populations into the penal system rather than empowering them economically in civil society. Bateman's vigilantism augments this function of the state. Serial killing efficiently disposes of surplus populations that strain limited resources. Where the welfare state is slow and rehabilitative, Bateman is swift, delivering punishment as deserved. He is the “invisible hand” of the market, wielding a knife concealed in a designer jacket.

Near the end of *American Psycho* in a chapter titled “Bum on Fifth,” Bateman surveys the Upper East Side and remarks that “the street looks sad, the air is full of decay, bodies lie on the cold pavement, miles of it, some are moving, most are not” (385). Like Paul Kersey in *Death Wish* (1974), Bateman has “to fight the impulse to blow them away.” He does so by “look[ing] up, admiringly, at the Trump Tower, tall, proudly gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight” (385). The citadels of corporate power do not stand aloof, Ellis implies, but sprout from the urban degradation they manufacture. Rising inequality might delegitimize neoliberal principles if not for a neoconservative discourse that argued that the poverty piling up around us is the outcome of personal failings and biological predispositions. When Bateman tersely dismisses the poor as “the genetic underclass” (266), in effect naturalizing poverty, he anticipates Murray and Richard Herrnstein's claims in *The Bell Curve* (1994) that the economically disadvantaged are also cognitively disadvantaged. In a critique of such assumptions, Steve Macek argues in *Urban Nightmares* (2006) that the ideological function of the discourse on “urban underclass” poverty in the 1980s and '90s was “to reconcile the fact of rampant inner-city poverty, decay, and squalor with the seem-

ingly incompatible idea that American capitalism is the most free, most egalitarian, and most just political and economic system history has ever known" (97). Murray and Hernstein argued for the genetic inferiority of the poor while drawing upon a mythos of individual self-reliance at the very time the poor are confronted with forms of capitalist and state power far beyond the control of any individual. Ellis allegorizes this power and reveals how its class agenda is concealed beneath a rhetoric of self-empowerment, free market economics, and equal opportunity. Shopping at the upscale boutique Paul Smith, Bateman points out to a salesperson that a "crying homeless man" is in front of the store and says "You should call the police or something" (223). A few pages before, he informs a friend that "I beat up a girl today who was asking people on the street for money" (213). Bateman divulges the class violence that secures consumerism, a violence wielded by corporate power (Paul Smith), the state (the police), and privileged subjects (Bateman).

Nothing about the solutions to poverty that Mead, Murray, and Hernstein offer is antithetical to the promotion of diversity or equal rights. Addressing the seemingly incurable blight of poverty, Mead maintains that "it is *not*, on the whole, due to oppression" since "systematic discrimination against minorities" has been eliminated (68, 21). He argues that "equality to Americans tends not to mean middle-class income or status at all, but rather the enjoyment of equal citizenship, meaning the same rights *and* obligations as others" (12). Mead admits that "The great merit of equal citizenship as a social goal is that it is much more widely achievable than status . . . It does not require that the disadvantaged 'succeed'" (12). The admission reveals how the neoliberal and neoconservative endorsement of social equality is divorced from the promotion of economic equality. In fact, the goal of this discourse is the very substitution of equal rights and obligations for economic equality. Furthermore, if, according to neoliberalism, a truly free market depends upon "equal citizenship," it also depends on the realization of class inequality. Or, as it is dramatized in *American Psycho*, the urban blight of Manhattan (a result of the "functioning problems of the jobless themselves") is a reassuring sign that neoliberal theory is working as it should (Mead 24). The "bum[s] on Fifth" are a visual annoyance, but they are a marker of Bateman's success. Without them, his money would be less meaningful.

In its most vilifying expressions, the neoconservative discourse on urban poverty and crime drowned out the neoliberal rhetoric of freedom

of choice and equal opportunity. In New York and other cities, popular media in the 1980s propagated an urban catastrophe around welfare, crime, and disease, stoking a climate of fear while appealing for greater punitive measures against the poor. This popular discourse created not just a city of fear, but a city of revenge or what Neil Smith, referring to New York, labels “the revanchist city” (211). “More than anything the revanchist city expresses,” he writes “a race/class/gender terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites who are suddenly stuck in place by a ravaged property market, the threat and reality of unemployment, the decimation of social services, and the emergence of minority and immigrant groups, as well as women, as powerful urban actors” (211). The reader’s entry into *American Psycho* is through the most prominent outlet of popular neoconservatism, the *New York Post*. In the novel’s opening scene, Bateman and his friend Timothy Price read the *Post*, their disgust building sentence by sentence over several pages: “in one issue—in *one* issue—let’s see here . . . strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis . . . baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets” (4). At first glance the report appears mimetic of the city: “Outside the cab,” Ellis writes, “on the sidewalks, black and bloated pigeons fight over scraps of hot dogs in front of a Gray’s Papaya while transvestites idly look on and a police car cruises silently the wrong way down a one-way street. . . . Panning down to the sidewalk there’s an ugly old homeless bag lady holding a whip” (5). But the filmic cues—“Pan down to the *Post*” and “Panning down the sidewalk”—underscore that *American Psycho*’s highly stylized representations draw upon a set of tropes and conventions that condense the mean streets of the city into a surreal collage of deviancy (5). The paper’s lurid reporting of urban squalor fuels Bateman’s vengeance. The *Post* consolidates, for both Bateman and its readers, disparate social phenomena (homelessness, gridlock, disease, sexual non-normativity) into a spectacle that is so frightening that one disengages from public life or views it as sordid entertainment, or lashes out against it physically. Later, Ellis draws upon the *Post*’s reporting by implicitly alluding to its sensational coverage of the horrific gang-rape of the ‘Central Park jogger’ in 1989, perhaps the most stunning instance of a media-induced panic over urban disorder in recent memory. The tabloid repeatedly accused the African American

assailants of “wilding,” like wolves loose in the urban forests of New York. Surely it is not insignificant in this context that Ellis has Bateman “roaming the zoo in Central Park, restlessly,” pacing back and forth. Bateman is the animal we should fear (297).

Where does this novel leave us in the killing fields of our bankrupt American cities? *American Psycho* is a fantasy of what a radically free market might look like if all noneconomic obstacles on acquisitive and consumptive desires were abolished, which for all intents and purposes they are, as Bateman’s crimes go unnoticed and unpunished. Neither his freedom nor his wealth are ever impugned, and as he listens to “the national anthem play” to Bush’s inauguration in the novel’s closing moments, Bateman “sigh[s], shrug[s], whatever” (398). *American Psycho* returns to us “a world . . . recognizably our own,” giving it a form that reveals the workings and effects of late twentieth-century urban economy. It is a world where freedom is reduced to individual choice without restraint and to free enterprise without regulation, neither of which are prescriptive rights but simply appurtenances of privilege. Bateman has not earned his money; he has inherited it, like his victims have inherited their poverty or had it foisted upon them. His hate crimes cannot be traced to psychosexual compulsions that are far in excess of Roger Rosenblatt’s “normal prurience” because they are structural not psychological. Ellis dramatizes the violence of structural inequality by presenting it from the perspective of the rich who benefit from it at the expense of the poor who have ‘freely chosen’ their hunger. “At another new restaurant” Bateman’s toasts “tiredly” to “Freedom” (330). Freedom, as *American Psycho* makes plain, is only liberation for compulsory, serialized acts of consumption that evacuate all interiority and free will. At least this freedom—as false of a choice as it may be—is better than the freedom of having nothing left to lose but one’s life.

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#### NOTES

1. I am following Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2).

2. Grant has this same response: “our tedium in reading these consumer litanies is relieved only when something—that is to say, something violent—happens”

(30). Calling the violence in the text “an act in language,” Murphet writes: “its effect is to launch these passages into a different stylistic plane, which is really one of the major reasons that these passages leave such an impression” (45).

3. *American Psycho*’s contrapuntal rhythms exactly illustrate what Fredric Jameson has described as two characteristics of postmodern literature—“affectlessness” and “an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity”—which Jameson keys to the loss of historicity under late capitalism (6, 28–29). At any given moment Bateman swings from self-abnegating boredom—“Soon everything seemed dull. . . . There wasn’t a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and possibly, total disgust”—to sublime elation—a “relief that is almost tidal in scope washes over me in an awesome wave” (282, 39). With *American Psycho*, Ellis hones a strategy that he began developing with his first novel *Less Than Zero* (1985), in which traditional plot-driven narrative is forsaken for recurring episodes of wealthy adolescents in Los Angeles wearing name-brand clothing, hooking up, eating at restaurants, and snorting lines of cocaine. Every new scene in *American Psycho*’s unnumbered chapters seems always already to have happened as the locations, characters, and descriptions of daily minutiae begin to blur.

4. Eberly scrutinizes the outrage generated by *American Psycho*, noting how publicity came to factor in the anxiety over the text. Publicity, of course, led to increased sales (107).

5. Outside of the U.S. responses to the text were more varied. *American Psycho* was censored by Australia’s Office of Film and Literary Classification, which restricted its sales to adults only (“Australia” F.7.BRE). And in Canada, Montreal’s Council of Women’s executive director demanded “federal legislation,” arguing that the book should be banned as “hate literature” under Canada’s Bill of Human Rights: “We have to go beyond saying ‘There can’t be any restrictions’” (Greenaway B.1.BRE; Abley A.1.FRO).

6. Some numbers reveal the stunning achievements of the neoliberal turn: in 1980 minimum wage was on par with poverty, but was 30% below poverty by 1990 (Harvey 16); the median compensation of workers to CEO salaries that was just over 30 to 1 in 1970, was 500 to 1 by 2000 (16, 25); whereas real after-tax income for the wealthiest 1% of households grew by 119% between 1977 and 1999, it declined 12% for the poorest fifth (Macek 21). “In 1994, the *New York Times* reported that the income gap between the rich and the poor in Manhattan had reached Third World levels” (Macek 22).

7. Michaels argues that “treating [classes] as if they were like races or cultures—different but equal—is one of our strategies for managing inequality rather than minimizing it or eliminating it” (*Trouble* 10).

8. Seltzer argues, “Serial killers make a study of their own kind of person,” often reading fictional and nonfictional accounts of other serial killers which, in turn, make their way into FBI profiles of “real” serial killers through a process of “empty circularity” (14, 108). “Our antecedents,’ FBI agent John Douglas says, ‘actually do go back to crime fiction more than crime fact’” (qtd. in Seltzer 16).

Ellis has revealed the following about the origins of Bateman: "I had a friend who introduced me to someone who could get me criminology textbooks from the FBI that really went into graphic detail about certain motifs in the actual murders committed by serial killers and detailed accounts of what serial killers did to bodies, what they did to people they murdered, especially sex killings. . . . I did the research, because I couldn't really have made this up" (Clarke).

9. Macek has described Murray's *Losing Ground* as "the Reagan administration 'bible' on social policy" (73).

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