

Pulping the Black Atlantic:
Race, Genre and Commodification in the Detective Fiction of Chester Himes

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Abstract

The career path of African American novelist Chester Himes is often characterised as a u-turn. Himes grew to recognition in the 1940s as a writer of the Popular Front, and a pioneer of the era's black 'protest' fiction. However, after falling out of domestic favour in the early 1950s, Himes emigrated to Paris, where he would go on to publish eight Harlem-set detective novels (1957-1969) for Gallimard's *La Série Noire*. Himes's 'black' noir fiction brought him critical and commercial success amongst a white European readership, and would later gain a cult status amongst an African American readership in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Himes's post-'protest' career has been variously characterised as a commercialist 'selling out'; an embracing of black 'folk' populism; and an encounter with Black Atlantic modernism. This thesis analyses the Harlem Cycle novels in relation to Himes's career, and wider debates regarding postwar African American literature and race relations.

Fundamentally, I argue that a move into commercial formula fiction did not curtail Himes's critical interest in issues of power, exploitation, and racial inequality. Rather, it refocused his literary 'protest' to representational politics itself, and popular culture's ability to inscribe racial identity, resistance and exploitation. On the one hand, Himes's Harlem fiction meets a formulaic and commercial demand for images of 'pathological' black urban criminality. However, Himes, operating 'behind enemy lines', uses the texts to dramatise this very dynamic. Himes's pulp novels depict a heightened Harlem that is thematically 'pulped' by a logic of capitalist exploitation, and a fetishistic dominant of racial difference. In doing so, Himes's formula fiction makes visible certain anti-progressive shifts in the analysis and representation of postwar race relations.

My methodology mirrors the multiple operations of the texts, placing Himes's detective fiction in relation to a diverse and interdisciplinary range of sources: literary, historical, and theoretical. Using archival material, I look in detail at Himes's public image and contemporary reception as a *Série Noire* writer, his professional correspondence with French and U.S. literary agents, and his private thoughts and later reflections regarding his career. This methodology attempts to get to grips with a literary triangulation between Himes's progressive authorial intentions, the demands placed upon him as a *Série Noire* writer, and the wider ideological shifts of the postwar era. By exploring these different historical, geographical and literary contexts, this thesis offers a wide-reaching analysis of how cultural and racial meanings are produced and negotiated within a commodity form.

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Introduction: Chester Himes's Harlem and the Politics of Potboiling

In the Harlem of Chester Himes's detective fiction, violent death is not only an everyday occurrence, but a lucrative business. One of the most affluent recurring characters in the author's books is the undertaker H. Exodus Clay. At the end of Himes's first detective novel, *A Rage In Harlem*, Clay puts up the bail money for the villainous *femme fatale*, Imabelle. Harlem's Assistant District Attorney is outraged, pointing out that her actions have led to the gory deaths of at least two people. A lawyer explains that this is precisely the point of Clay's investment:

‘Two of those fellows had eight thousand dollars on them when they were killed.’
 ‘What’s that got to do with it?’
 ‘Why, I thought you knew how that worked, Mr. Lawrence. The money goes for their burials. And Mr. Clay got their funerals. It’s just like they’ve been drumming up business for him.’¹

The novel's graphic depiction of murderous violence (gunfights, acid-attacks, throat-cutting, decapitation) resolves itself at the level of capitalistic exchange. Clay rewards the text's *femme fatale* for ‘drumming up business for him’, the corpses left in her wake fetching a competitive price. Indeed, the phrase ‘shilling for Clay’ becomes a byword in Himes's Harlem for murder, the lives of its citizens valued in dollars and cents.² In Himes's detective fiction, violent death above all *pays*. A sign outside a credit jewellery store sums up such an ethos: ‘*We Will Give Credit To The Dead.*’³

In essence, H. Exodus Clay stands as a metaphor for Himes's own status as a profiteer of black ‘pulp’. Indeed, as this thesis argues, Himes's eight Harlem Cycle detective novels (1957-1969) both enact and thematise black pop-cultural production at the level of brutal capitalist exploitation.⁴ Like his undertaker H. Exodus Clay, Himes is an African American

¹ Chester Himes, *A Rage In Harlem* in *The Harlem Cycle Volume I* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996 [1957]), 177.

² Chester Himes, *The Big Gold Dream* (London: Penguin, 1976 [1960]), 136.

³ Chester Himes, *All Shot Up* (London: Panther Books, 1969 [1960]), 84.

⁴ In order of French publication, the novels' English titles are: *A Rage In Harlem* (1957), *The Real Cool Killers* (1958), *The Crazy Kill* (1959), *All Shot Up* (1960), *The Big Gold Dream* (1960), *The Heat's On* (1961), *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1964) and *Blind Man With A Pistol* (1969). An unfinished conclusion to the Harlem Cycle, *Plan B*, was published in 1983, edited together by Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner from notes and short stories

who, in Paris in 1957, sought to ‘drum up business’ by creating a ‘black’ hardboiled detective series for Gallimard’s cut-price line of pulp fiction, *La Série Noire*. Published in French translation, the novels’ lurid vision of an excessively violent and sexualised Harlem brought Himes a level of financial and critical success with a white European audience. Later, the novels brought him recognition by an African American audience in the early post-Civil Rights era.

As we shall see, Himes’s Harlem fiction mobilises the most anti-progressive elements of both noir/hardboiled fiction and commercial hackwork. Aesthetically, the novels enact the genre’s vision of ‘pathological’ black urban criminality. Indeed, Himes claimed to have tailored his detective fiction, and his public image as a black ex-convict, for those readers ‘looking for things that will amuse or titillate them.’⁵ Moreover, the novels’ primary motivation was financial, their author declaring that they were written ‘simply for the money’ he so badly needed at the time.⁶ The apparent frankness of Himes’s ‘potboiling’ is surprising given his earlier domestic career as a writer of social protest fiction. Indeed, Himes’s most revered literary achievement remains his 1945 exploration of racial discrimination in the domestic war industry, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. With this debut novel, Himes had been hailed as a literary brethren of Richard Wright, and a leading voice of the African American working-class. However, amid the anti-communist hysteria of the early 1950s, Himes, and his left-leaning work, fell out of domestic favour. Forced to take a job as a New York bellhop, he emigrated to Paris in 1953, and remained in Europe to his death in 1984.⁷ In 1956, Marcel Duhamel, the editor of Gallimard’s *Série Noire*, invited a down-and-out Himes to try his hand at a hardboiled detective fiction set in Harlem. As an African American ex-convict, Himes was seen as the ideal candidate to deliver the intended goals of the series: ‘violence...unruly

Himes wrote in the late 1960s. Chester Himes, with Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Plan B: A Novel* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993 [1983]).

⁵ John A. William, ‘My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 46. In 1928, at the age of 19, Himes was given a twenty year sentence for armed robbery in Cleveland, Ohio, of which he served seven and a half years. For a concise biography, see Charles L.P. Silet, ‘Introduction’, in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Reception to Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999). Two book-length biographies have also been published: Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), and James Sallis, *Chester Himes: A Life* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000).

⁶ David Jenkins, ‘Profile Of Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1971]), 101.

⁷ A series of strokes in the early 1970s prematurely ended his writing career. Himes’s final work of fiction was 1969’s *Blind Man With A Pistol*, although he went on to publish the two volumes of his autobiography in the early 1970s. The autobiographies are Chester Himes, *The Quality Of Hurt: The Autobiography of Chester Himes: Volume 1* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973 [1972]), and Chester Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity: The Autobiography Of Chester Himes: Volume 2* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1976 [1976]).

passion [and] hate without mercy.’⁸ Himes thus took financial advantage of the French postwar boom in American hardboiled detective fiction and film noir, and its fascination with black American culture. This thesis traces Himes’s career path from the early 1950s to the late 1960s: from ‘protest’ to ‘pulp’; from high literary realism to commercial formula fiction.

Why, then, if the Harlem novels are products of such a vulgar career shift, are they valuable objects of study? As this thesis argues, Himes’s enforced move into an exploitative, and deeply racialised sector of the literary industry imbued Himes with a highly irreverent view of African American literature. As a commercial noir writer, Himes was placed on the front line of black pop-cultural production, consumption, and exploitation. Working ‘behind enemy lines’, Himes wove these issues into text itself. Indeed, if we can call Himes’s detective fiction ‘potboilers’, his detective fiction is about the praxis of potboiling itself. As exemplified by *H. Exodus Clay*, Himes’s Harlem is populated by economically powerless characters compelled to violently commodify themselves and others to make ends meet. Himes’s pulp novels depict a Harlem that, from the outset, is ‘pulped’ by a logic of nihilistic, capitalist exploitation. The novels exist as deeply ambivalent, and reflexive racial commodities. Fundamentally, this thesis argues that a move into popular fiction did not curtail Himes’s critical interest in issues of power, exploitation, and racial inequality. Rather, it refocused his ‘protest’ to representational politics itself, and popular culture’s ability to inscribe racial identity, resistance and exploitation.

The Harlem Cycle enacts a highly original meditation on the relationship between subject matter, form, and commercial demand. In 1970, Himes told an interviewer that ‘people have begun to think that these stories represent a bolder kind of racial protest than the explicit protest novels I wrote years ago.’⁹ The Harlem novels simultaneously mobilise and critique certain anti-progressive shifts in race relations of the period. Indeed, their vision of a corrupt Harlem both enacts and reflects upon a wider postwar reaction against progressive politics on both sides of the Atlantic. The Cold War era saw both the literary and sociological analysis of American urban segregation rearticulated from a discourse of materialism to one of racial pathology. As such, Himes’s compelled shift from ‘protest’ to ‘noir’ responded to a literary demand for images of racial difference, rather than class consciousness. However, by reflecting back upon these shifts and expectations, Himes’s Harlem fiction explores the African American ghetto of the transatlantic postwar imagination.

⁸ Marcel Duhamel, ‘Promotional introduction to the *Série Noire*’, cited in Jonathan P. Eburne, ‘The Transatlantic Mysteries of Paris: Chester Himes, Surrealism, and the *Série Noire*’, *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No.3 (2005), 812.

⁹ Willi Hochkeppel, ‘Conversation with Chester Himes, the American Crime Writer’ in Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Of Mississippi Press, 1995 [1970]), 27.

This thesis is organised in a way that attempts to get to grips with Himes's dual position as both a conduit and a critic of the era's literary and racial exigencies. Split into three main parts, it moves chronologically through an examination of Himes's late domestic and early expatriate fiction (1953-1956); the early Harlem novels (1957-1961); and Himes's late Harlem novels, which saw his rediscovery by a black American audience (1965-1972). As I will explain more fully later in this introduction, my analysis of the Harlem Cycle incorporates textual analysis, literary history, (auto)biographical analysis, socio-historical contextualisation, and cultural theory. I draw on a wide range of analytical modes so as to illustrate their presence and, moreover, their negotiation, within Himes's popular texts. The Harlem novels stage a battleground between the dominant ideological operations of their day, the generic conventions of formula fiction, the commercial pressures placed on their author, and Himes's privately stated authorial intentions. I thus read Himes as a writer who is highly conscious of the representational politics of black popular culture. To borrow the phrase of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Himes's potboilers dramatise black popular culture's 'end of innocence', its inherent instigation within a system to capitalist exchange and rearticulation; its ability to simultaneously embody both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social trends.¹⁰

This is a mode of analysis that both draws on and challenges a number of existing schools of Himes scholarship. Himes is a figure who has attracted a large and strikingly diverse body of scholarship. Before breaking down my argument and methodology, it is necessary to carefully explore the arguments Himes's detective fiction has inspired. In the following literature review, I organise these critical schools in broadly chronological fashion: orthodox Marxist, culturalist, and postmodern. I offer a detailed analysis of previous scholarship in order to highlight the ability of Himes's Harlem novels to encompass and negotiate a wide range of discourses: formulaic convention, political protest and formal experimentation. All three approaches offer useful platforms for respectively analysing the exploitative, resistant, and formal aspects of Himes's Harlem. Following the literature review, I will discuss the way in which this thesis brings these diverse concerns together within an interdisciplinary methodology, and a neo-Marxist, or Gramscian analysis. Finally, the introduction breaks down the central themes and arguments that this approach throws up regarding postwar developments in issues of race, politics and popular culture.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, 'What is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?', in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay, 1992), 32.

Orthodox Marxist Approaches to Himes's Harlem

In his 1968 study of African American writing, *Native Sons*, Edward Margolies described Himes as ‘the author of six major novels and a number of lively potboilers about a couple of Harlem detectives.’¹¹ This sentence encapsulates a mode of Himes scholarship that is broadly Marxist in nature. This approach focuses on Himes’s place within a populist literary genre and the limits it imposed upon his work. It tends to read Himes’s career as a narrative of decline, his mid-1950s emigration signalling a substitution of the ‘potboiler’ for any ‘major’ literary achievement. Indeed, two years later, Margolies would again dismiss the Harlem Cycle, explicitly citing Himes’s abandonment of both the U.S. and literary naturalism as the reason. He argued:

It is important too that he had been living several years in Paris when the first of his detective novels was published. Hence Himes may have geared his thrillers, consciously or subconsciously, to a European readership for whom Harlem was an exotic landscape... Possibly it is this long range perspective, literary as well as literal, that allows Himes the freedom to laugh at the violence of his vision. For it is humour—resigned, bitter, earthy, slapstick, macabre—that *protects* author, readers and detectives from the gloom of omnipresent evil.¹²

Margolies’s analysis exhibits a number of critical binaries that permeate orthodox Marxist appraisals of Himes’s detective fiction. Firstly, Margolies criticises Himes for tailoring his literature to an aloof, rather than engaged, market demanding ‘exotic’, rather than realistic texts. He goes on to identify this vulgar commercialism as the imperative underlying the Harlem novels’ ‘slapstick’ humour. Finally, and most importantly, Margolies states that this populist comedic streak works to ‘protect’ all parties from the perceived social realism, or naturalism, of Himes’s ‘major’ work. In essence, Margolies suggests that Himes’s career is characterised by a descent from ‘high’ to ‘low’ culture, from realism to comedy.

Margolies’s argument draws on the orthodox Marxist tendency to associate popular or ‘mass’ culture with false consciousness. Before moving on to examine similar examples of Himes scholarship, it is useful to explore the implications of this approach. From the reflectionism of Theodor Adorno to the structuralism of Louis Althusser, the Marxist study of mass culture has frequently been characterised by a ‘mechanical’ binding of popular culture to

¹¹ Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Black American Authors* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1968), 87.

¹² Edward Margolies, ‘The Thrillers of Chester Himes,’ *Studies in Black Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1970), 4. Emphasis added.

the structures of a dominant ideology.¹³ This logic posits that the use value of a popular commodity is subsumed entirely by its capitalistic exchange value.¹⁴ For Adorno, this implied that all forms of popular entertainment insidiously ‘distracted’ or duped consumers from the ‘demands of reality.’ He argued that pop-cultural meanings were necessarily ‘pre-given’ by the dominant classes and ‘pre-accepted’ by the subjugated masses.¹⁵ Despite a more complex analysis of capitalist society, Althusser again conceived pop-cultural praxis as a structure imposed upon the consumer ‘via a [capitalist] process that escapes them.’¹⁶ These ideas are implicit in Margolies’s contention that Himes’s detective fiction was determined by its status as a bourgeois commodity. To use Margolies’s term, the Harlem Cycle’s exchange value ‘protects’ the reader and author from the progressive message of Himes’s earlier work.

Indeed, Marxist critics of hardboiled detective fiction have highlighted the way in which bourgeois ideology functions through this most populist of genres. Stephen Knight writes that its ‘apparent realistic modernism conceals a conservative and elitist position, giving a classic example of the way in which *illusion* can operate in a popular fictional form.’¹⁷ The key word in Knight’s argument is ‘illusion’, which perfectly illustrates the orthodox Marxist association of mass culture with false consciousness.

Of course, these ideas depend upon a concrete equation of ‘serious’ literary realism with working-class consciousness. Raymond Williams argued that literary realism should seek to offer an authentic depiction of the socially dispossessed, offering a voice to those ‘left behind’ by capitalist modernity.¹⁸ In many ways, Himes’s 1940s ‘protest’ novels, and especially *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, have been appraised in this way. In his influential *The Negro Novel In America* (1958), Robert Bone included Himes in the ‘Wright School’ of African American fiction. He described this school as a ‘natural product of depression experience’ and a ‘delayed [black] response to the potentialities of literary naturalism.’¹⁹ In a far more nuanced reading of Popular Front literature, Michael Denning has argued that, whilst not conventionally ‘realistic’, both Himes and Wright were nonetheless ‘plebeian writers’

¹³ On the term ‘mechanical’ see Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 183.

¹⁴ See Karl Marx, ‘Base and Superstructure’, in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2nd Edition, (London: Prentice Hall, 1998).

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, ‘On Popular Music’, in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader: 2nd Edition* (London: Prentice Hall, 1998).

¹⁶ Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Pantheon Books, 1976), 222-223. See also Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology And Ideological State Apparatus’, in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader: 2nd Edition* (London: Prentice Hall, 1998).

¹⁷ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), 136. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, ‘Realism And The Contemporary Novel’, in *The Long Revolution* (London: Broadview Press, 2001 [1959]).

¹⁹ Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965 [1958]), 156.

associated with the proletarian literature movement and the Popular Front. Importantly, both Bone and Denning lament a subsequent diminution of class consciousness in postwar black literature. Denning argues that ‘the Cold War anti-Communist purge of the culture industries and state cultural apparatuses left a deep cultural *amnesia*.’²⁰ Similarly, Bone asserted that this shift had manifested itself in black novelists ‘abandoning protest in favour of potboilers and best-sellers.’ Although not mentioning Himes by name, Bone criticised postwar black writers for ‘sacrific[ing] literary values for sales’ and grounding their novels in ‘*fantasy* and wish-fulfillment.’²¹ Again, both Denning’s and Bone’s language – amnesia, fantasy – delineates a postwar culture industry working to veil proletariat elements in African American literature.

This perceived career trajectory, along with other elements of Margolies’s approach, permeates early analyses of Himes’s detective fiction. In James Milliken’s *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* (1976), the chapter covering the Harlem Cycle is tellingly entitled ‘The Continental Entertainer’. This foregrounds Milliken’s sense that Himes’s break with the U.S. entailed a substitution of bourgeois entertainment for ‘serious’ literature. Milliken argues that Himes’s decision to write for the *Série Noire* forced him to ‘[turn] aside from the high ambitions, the lofty dedication, that had kept him going for so long.’ The same critique of mass culture energises this argument, with Milliken attributing the Harlem novels’ frenetic pace and broadly written characters to ‘*Série Noire* techniques of standardisation.’ Importantly, Milliken argues that Himes’s talents as a realist were ‘refashioned to suit the tastes of European readers who...sought only amusement in its most elemental forms.’ However, rather than entirely dismiss the Harlem novels, Milliken concludes that they exhibit faint signs of Himes’s ‘scrupulous naturalistic style’ amid the stifling commercial demands of the *Série Noire*. He writes:

In the final analysis, the concessions made to popular taste, and to the traditions of the subgenre, are never so extensive that they blunt the impact of the basic message of protest and outrage. However, it must be added that there are innumerable passages throughout these novels in which Himes’s tone suggests that he was not entirely at ease with many of the concessions made.²²

²⁰ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York/London: Verso, 1996), 231, 425. Emphasis added. See also Robert Skinner, ‘The Black Man In The Literature Of Labour: The Early Novels Of Chester Himes’ in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1989]). On the postwar ‘turn’ from proletariat culture and politics see Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

²¹ Bone, *Negro Novel*, 166. Emphasis added.

²² Stephen F. Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), 211, 215-6, 251-2.

Milliken delineates the Harlem Cycle as an uneasy pay-off between the false consciousness of ‘popular taste’ and a waning sense of literary naturalism. Although this is a more complex argument than Margolies, the same binary – between mass culture and working-class consciousness – remains intact. In this reading, Himes’s detective fiction is only salvageable in the brief moments in which its author’s ‘basic message of protest’ is allowed to emerge.

Milliken repeatedly links Himes’s realist credentials to the author’s turbulent biography. He refers heavily to Himes’s criminal past, his ‘intimate contacts with every form of violence, the scores of criminals he had come to know well in prison and in the black ghettos.’²³ In essence, Milliken contends that these personal experiences imbue the series with an air of literary realism, *despite* the exigencies of mass culture. This argument foregrounds a wider tendency in orthodox Marxist approaches to critically resuscitate the Harlem Cycle by identifying elements of Himes’s biography within it.²⁴ These elements are most often put forward as an authentic antidote to the commercial fakery of the series. For example, Robert Skinner (1989) stresses from the outset that ‘it is important to recognise that Himes himself did not stoop to hack work.’ This attempt to play down the commercialism of Himes’s detective fiction is central to Skinner’s analysis. He argues that because Himes ‘[knew] little about the traditional hard-boiled crime story’, any attempt to ‘judge’ them as ‘traditional mystery fiction’ would only ‘devalue his work.’ By disregarding Himes’s place in a literary marketplace, Skinner permits himself to read the Harlem novels as ‘*really* exercises in socio-political thought’ akin to ‘his earlier protest style.’ It is important to note Skinner’s use of the word ‘really’. It once again implies that commercialism compromised Himes’s ‘true’ vocation as the voice of black working-class consciousness. Skinner turns to Himes’s biography to clinch this argument. He argues that the series transcends commercialism because Himes wrote ‘from hard-won experience’ in which ‘criminal Harlem was a place Himes had been: a place where he was one of the characters.’²⁵

The most recent Marxist analysis of Himes’s detective fiction is found in Sean McCann’s *Gumshoe America* (2000). McCann’s discussion of Himes remains the most sustained attempt to resuscitate the expatriate Himes as an exponent of social realism. Central

²³ Milliken, *Himes*, 210.

²⁴ See also James Lundquist, *Chester Himes* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1976), 109, 130.

²⁵ Robert Skinner, *Two Guns From Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green Press, 1989), 2, 181-2, 2-3. Emphasis added. James Campbell similarly argues that Himes’s detective fiction is worthy due to its biographical authenticity. He characterises Himes’s oeuvre by ‘brutality, anger and self-hatred. But the honesty with which he confronts this personal turbulence makes him, at times, an engaging writer.’ James Campbell, ‘Himes and Self-Hatred’, in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Reaction to Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999 [1993]), 48.

to McCann's argument is his association of hardboiled detective fiction with New Deal liberalism. Echoing Denning, McCann reads hardboiled detective fiction as a form of anti-bourgeois 'pop-modernism'. As such, McCann argues that Himes's move into the genre allowed the author to accentuate, rather than diminish, his authentic working-class consciousness. Indeed, he reads Himes's Harlem novels as the 'last serious attempt to use the form as an effort to split the difference between popular literacy and literary expertise.' Crucially, McCann suggests that Himes used the genre to protest Cold War racial liberalism, and rearticulate the issue of racial equality firmly to 'class and economic need.' McCann thus positions the Harlem Cycle somewhere between Dashiell Hammett and early Richard Wright. He concludes by describing Himes as:

[A] moralist who punished hustlers and rewards the square... If his detective novels stubbornly hold on to the naturalist perspective that shaped Himes's earlier work...the message of Himes's first detective novel is much the same as the simple one that ran through his earlier fiction.²⁶

In this reading, Himes's detective fiction is valuable precisely because it resists, rather than acquiesces to mass culture. McCann argues that the 'punishment' dealt out by Himes to his hustler characters mirrors his own refusal to play a commercial game. Instead, the Harlem Cycle continues Himes's 'major' earlier work, and its 'naturalist' critique of capitalist modernity. Although in many ways this opposes the earlier suggestion that Himes 'sold out', both arguments judge the Harlem Cycle using the same theoretical binaries. As in all of these orthodox Marxist readings, the success of Himes's Harlem novels depends on its ability to transcend the 'spreading ooze' of mass culture.²⁷ Where Margolies sees a failure, Milliken sees a pay-off, and McCann sees a resounding triumph for literary realism. All assume that the 'real' Himes is the U.S.-based, hard-living, authentic spokesperson for the black working-class. All, however, recognise that Himes's career change forced him to confront the implications, and limitations, of a literary marketplace.

Culturalist Approaches to Himes's Harlem

Other critics have attempted to disarticulate the Harlem Cycle from an overriding preoccupation with working-class consciousness. For example, when presenting Himes with

²⁶ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2000), 252, 271, 282, 287-88.

²⁷ This term, which epitomised the postwar intellectual fear of mass culture, was coined by Dwight Macdonald in 1957, cited in Andrew Ross, 'Containing Culture in the Cold War', *Cultural Studies*, Vol.3, No.3 (1987).

an award at the 1982 American Book Awards, novelist Ishmael Reed praised Himes precisely for rejecting the ‘fashionable European principles’ of orthodox Marxism. Instead, Reed asserted that exile, and the detective genre, had given Himes the means to stay ‘faithful to the Afro-American Folk Tradition’.²⁸ Reed’s comment raises the possibility of judging Himes’s detective fiction on different criteria, namely its place within the more plural traditions of black cultural expression. This is an approach that imbues popular culture with a markedly different significance. As Reed’s allusion to a ‘folk’ tradition indicates, the popular realm is identified as a site of liberatory cultural practice, rather than a dialectic of false consciousness. Similarly, Reed’s approach enacts an inversion of the previously observed Marxist argument, in which detective fiction is shown to divert Himes from his true vocation of social ‘protest’. By contrast, Reed argues that in his career change, Himes threw off the shackles of ‘fashionable’ Marxism to embrace his true cultural heritage.

I want to label Reed’s reading of Himes as ‘culturalist’ in its approach. Whereas orthodox Marxist theories see popular culture as a manifestation of dominant capitalist ideology, culturalists analyse it as a site of popular resistance. Whereas certain Marxists collapse ‘use’ into ‘exchange’ value, culturalists focus on the ability of producers and consumers to derive resistant meanings within popular culture. This idea is central to the traditions that Reed observes in Himes’s Harlem, in which popular culture is equated with ‘folk’. Such a rubric intersects with a wider backlash against the perceived ‘economic reductionism’ of orthodox Marxism.²⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, cultural critics such as Paul Willis and John Fiske equated the domain of the popular with the ‘exercise of symbolic power.’³⁰ Here, popular culture is conceived as a raw material to be fashioned pluralistically. As Fiske points out, this approach is ‘essentially optimistic’, viewing ‘popular culture as potentially, and often actually, progressive.’³¹ This approach was informed by Michel De Certeau’s *Practise Of Everyday Life*. In it, De Certeau outlined two different forms of resistance in capitalist society. On the one hand, what De Certeau called ‘strategic’ forms of resistance sought an alternative ideology to capitalism. This is an essentially modernist goal, exhibiting a distrust of mass culture. On the other hand, De Certeau argued that ‘tactical’ resistance worked *within* the popular realm, exploiting contradictions and ‘poaching’

²⁸ Ishmael Reed, ‘Speech to the Columbus Foundation’, 01/01/1982, Box 8, Folder 4, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

²⁹ See Turner, *British Cultural Studies*, 183.

³⁰ Paul Willis, *Common Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 2-3.

³¹ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), 21.

subversive meanings.³² Clearly, culturalists are interested in forms of ‘tactical’ resistance, and the ability of pop-cultural producers to evade bourgeois and capitalist ideology.

Reed’s praise of Himes cites the Harlem Cycle as an example of tactical cultural resistance. Similarly, it asks us to reposition Himes in relation to a black ‘folk’, rather than strictly ‘working-class’, consciousness. In the 1970s, Albert Murray was one of the first African American critics to urge a refiguring of blackness as a ‘cultural identity’ rather than an ‘economic and political identity.’ He condemned the ‘Wright school’ of literary realism for ‘depersonalis[ing]’ black identity in the interest of ‘revolutionary political theory.’ Rather than seeking a ‘way out’ of a dominant capitalist ideology, Murray demanded an emphasis on the ‘riff-style life style that Negroes have developed in response.’³³ Later critics such as Lawrence Levine, in their exploration of black songs, folk tales and verbal games, have concluded that the value system of African Americans can only be understood through an analysis of their culture.³⁴ Similarly, scholars of black diasporic cultures such as Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy have highlighted performance and mimicry over literary realism and mimesis as the primary mode of black cultural resistance. Gilroy writes that ‘black performance culture’ operates by ‘unpredictable means in non-linear patterns’, rather than employing a monolithic Marxist critique.³⁵ Akin to the notion of ‘tactical’ cultural resistance, these arguments focus on the protean nature of black culture, its ability to find a resistant space even when occupying a social position of relative powerlessness.

Himes has been celebrated for doing just this with his detective fiction, and no more completely than in Stephen Soitos’s 1996 study of African American detective fiction, *The Blues Detective*. Citing Himes as the successor to Harlem Renaissance crime writer Rudolph Fisher, Soitos argues that the series eschews Marxist politics in favour of accessing a more profound cultural ‘blackground’. He writes:

With this mythical cityscape to work with, Himes constructed a world that reflected truth in a more complex way than did his previous social-realist fiction. Detective fiction allowed him to work at the Archetypal level, utilizing the important moral scenario that myth allows. When Himes talks about the ‘true’ in his detective fiction, he is suggesting truth on a metaphorical rather than a historical level.

³² Michel De Certeau, *The Practise of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 34-39. See also James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

³³ Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), 173, 174, 184.

³⁴ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 382-86.

³⁵ Paul Gilroy, “‘...To Be Real’: The Dissident Forms of Black Expressive Culture’ in Catherine Ugwu (ed.), *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance* (London: Bay Press, 1995), 15. Homi Bhabha, 'On Mimicry and Man' in Henry Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004).

This excerpt suggests that, far from jettisoning social ‘truths’, the Harlem novels arrive at a more profound level of authenticity than ‘social-realist fiction’ could hope to achieve. Himes’s tools in this project are not ‘historical’ dialectics, but the myth, archetype and ‘metaphor’ of expressive folk practices. Importantly, Soitos validates the cultural authenticity of the novels by linking elements of them to Himes’s ‘violent personal history’. He writes: ‘I emphasise the details of Himes’s life because I believe they help readers to understand...a perception of black America that has its roots in horrible reality, not heroic fantasy.’ Again, Soitos inverts the previously-observed critical binary regarding Himes’s career. Instead of identifying the populist form as a distorting ‘veil’, Soitos mobilises Himes’s biography to prove his vocation as a popular ‘folk’, rather than highbrow ‘protest’, writer. Accordingly, Soitos explicitly rejects a Marxist analysis, arguing that the only ‘meaningful way to understand these *black* novels...is to understand that Chester Himes lived what others only dream about.’³⁶

Soitos’s emphasis of the word ‘black’ prioritises cultural authenticity over any explicitly leftist, or working-class credentials. Of course, this is not to say that culturalists view the Harlem Cycle as apolitical. Manthia Diawara (1993) argues that the Harlem novels employ folkloric elements in order to envision a progressive politics of black community. Diawara criticises orthodox Marxism for its willingness to pathologise the black community as ‘lumpen’. He further equates the pessimism of this approach with the rigid racial aesthetics of the noir genre itself. By contrast, Diawara argues that Himes’s Harlem novels are ‘materialist’ in a manner that is much more responsive to the ‘communicative’ practises of black folk culture. Central to this is Himes’s ‘revalorisation’ of the lawbreaker, the hustler and the badman. Diawara reads Himes’s criminal characters as embodying the ‘heroic and defiant traditions in Black culture which...resist the policing of Black life in America.’ Diawara suggests that criminal violence is Himes’s most profound expression of the communal ‘rage’ and ‘defiance’ of an embittered community. He links these characters to Himes’s own rejection of a moralising ‘white’ Marxism. In doing so, Himes’s texts ‘resist the colonisation of Black life by systems that are controlled by white people.’³⁷

Other critics have similarly suggested that Himes uses folkloric archetypes in ways that explicitly challenge the reductive tendencies of orthodox Marxism. In his 2003 study of the badman archetype in black literature, Jerry Bryant argues that Himes’s Harlem novels are

³⁶ Stephen F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 128, 164, 143, 157, 129. Emphasis in original. See also Sallis, *Chester Himes*, 296.

³⁷ Manthia Diawara, ‘Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema’, in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), 526, 530-2, 534, 535.

defined by the strength and guile of his male criminal characters. Bryant suggests that their graphic violence disqualifies these characters ‘from the “poor victim” role seen in the work of so many black protest writers.’ As such, Himes’s Harlem is not populated by ‘noble revolutionaries’, but by a ‘wild, untameable power’ that is altogether more authentic and powerful. Bryant concludes:

Indeed, the signature feature of Himes’s domestic novels is anger. This is what makes these eight hard-boiled Harlem detective novels so personal, for Himes himself was a man in a fury and projected it in characters equally angry. It is not an anger of protest, or rather not simply of protest, but a kind of existential rage at the general conditions of living.³⁸

Akin to Soitos, Bryant suggests that Himes’s grasp of black folklore stems from his biography. He reads Himes’s badmen characters as ‘projections’ of the author’s own personal experience of black urban life. Echoing Diawara, Bryant argues that it is this authenticity that gives Himes the courage to reject ‘protest’ in favour of ‘rage’. Here, it is European Marxism that is identified as the distorting ‘veil’ that Himes must cast aside in favour of reclaiming a sense of black cultural authenticity.

In keeping with culturalists’ interest in black folklore, certain critics have labelled Himes a trickster, arguing that his detective fiction reclaims the hardboiled detective genre for the black community. For example, Robert Crooks (1995) argues that Himes revises the genre by ‘rejecting the privilege of white supremacist ideology.’ Crooks reads the typical detective novel as a continuation of frontier romance, distinguished by the containment of ‘truth’ by a white male individual perspective. In contrast, Himes rejects this vision by presenting the ‘collective practises that invisibly link disparate individual stories.’ For Crooks, it is Himes’s ‘decentred detectives’ who embody this reorientation. He reads Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones as trickster figures who ‘[twist] situations and police procedures in such a way as to subvert them and turn them to the use of the Harlem community.’ Crooks explicitly cites Himes and his protagonists as examples of De Certeau’s ‘tactical’ resistance in action. Rather than transcending the conventions of popular culture, they work to reclaim them for the black urban community.³⁹

³⁸ Jerry H. Bryant, *Born In A Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man In African American Folklore and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 112, 108, 100. See also William L. Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 174. See also Gilbert H. Muller, *Chester Himes* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 85, 96, 87.

³⁹ Robert Crooks, 'From The Far Side of the Urban Frontier: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Moseley', *College Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1995), 74, 86, 80, 75. See also Scott Bunyan, 'No Order From Chaos: The Absence of Chandler's Extra-Legal Space in the Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley', *Studies In The Novel*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2003), 347.

Two more recent studies of the Harlem Cycle develop this culturalist approach, both citing Himes as an agent of popular resistance. In *At Home In Diaspora* (2005), Wendy Walters argues that Himes used his detective fiction to ‘reclaim the space of “home”...and to invest this reauthored space with a radical politics of black freedom and community.’ Whereas orthodox Marxists read exile as alienating Himes from an engaged readership, Walters argues that emigration granted the author access ‘to a roomier cultural space.’ This space allowed Himes to create an ‘ideal’ Harlem based around a diasporic and imaginative, rather than a nationalistic or mimetic, conception of blackness. In it, both detectives and criminals alike ‘employ specifically community-based, folk-heroic strategies of self-defence and solidarity in the face of an intrusive, dominating power structure.’⁴⁰

Finally, Norlisha Crawford (2006) examines the way in which tactical resistance is thematised by his female characters. She calls them ‘femmes’ inasmuch as they ‘go against the grain’ of both the genre’s *femme fatale* figure and pervasive stereotypes of ‘bestial’ black women. Crawford emphasises the way in which these characters use their heightened sexual appeal to advance both their material wealth and community status. Indeed, it is their ‘profound alliance with [the] community’ which distinguishes them most radically from the pathological sexual threat embodied by the *femme fatale*. She reads Himes’s female hustlers as valorised tricksters who riff on pop-cultural stereotypes in order to ‘direct the critical gaze for [their] own purposes’ and the wider benefit of the community. She concludes that in doing so:

[Himes] makes his femme characters resistant to critical evaluation by those characters within the text that live outside his “Harlem”, as well as by readers of the texts, who would judge ambitious poor racialised female characters as simply immoral, degraded and ugly.⁴¹

As in other culturalist approaches to the Harlem Cycle, Crawford places Himes’s text in the black folkloric tradition of tricksterism. At the centre of Crawford’s reading is the way in which the actions and meanings produced by Himes’s characters ‘resist’ and confuse the bourgeois gaze. She and others argue that, by moving into detective fiction, Himes does not so much acquiesce to bourgeois generic conventions as signify on their accepted meanings. The orthodox Marxist binary is again inverted, with Himes’s move into popular fiction allowing him to engage with ‘reality’ in a more authentic, and less pessimistic manner. As in other culturalist readings, the Harlem Cycle stands as an authentic evocation of a marginalised

⁴⁰ Wendy W. Walters, *At Homes In Diaspora: Black International Writing* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 59, 64, 72, 65.

⁴¹ Norlisha Crawford, ‘Good, Bad And Beautiful: Chester Himes’ Femmes in Harlem’, *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 18, No.2 (Summer 2006), 194, 197-8, 203, 202.

community, and an example of popular culture as popular resistance.

Postmodern Approaches to Himes's Harlem

A third trend in Himes scholarship challenges both the arguments of structuralists and culturalists. Specifically, it contests both schools' implicit reading of the Harlem Cycle as a stable ideological agent, be it hegemonic or counterhegemonic. In his influential 1988 work *The Signifying Monkey*, literary critic Henry Louis Gates writes that Himes's detective fiction 'exemplifies all eight...markers of Signification.'⁴² Gates's theory of literary 'Signifyin(g)' maps out 'two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white.' As the absent 'g' indicates, Gates argues that these two spheres are most sharply distinguished by black vernacular discourse. Gates uses the metaphor of dialect to argue that African American literature fundamentally disrupts the accepted semiotic equation of 'sign = signified/signifier.' He thus suggests that African American literature's primary characteristic is its ability to frustrate meaning at the level of the signifier itself. Gates writes that 'Signifyin(g)' texts are characterised by a pastiche, punning, 'doubling and (re)doubling' of white literary conventions. 'Repetition, with a signal difference,' writes Gates, 'is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g).' Crucially, Gates cites Himes's move into detective fiction as the moment in which he breaks with 'Richard Wright's realism' and embraces the discourse of Signifyin(g). He argues that Himes's Harlem novels display a 'curious two-tone Harlequin mask of influence,' mediating between 'black...substance' and 'Western...form.' In essence, Gates reads the Harlem Cycle as a 'black' riff on a quintessentially 'white' genre. He argues that, in doing so, Himes works to complicate, and parody, the accepted meanings and formulas of the hardboiled detective form.⁴³

Gates's argument foregrounds more recent applications of postmodernist, or 'continental' philosophy to the Harlem Cycle.⁴⁴ Here, Himes's burlesque and contradictory treatment of a populist genre is reappraised not as a socio-political intervention, but as a formal enquiry into the act of reading and writing itself. Similarly, his texts' tricksterisms are analysed less within a black folkloric tradition, than as an example of the 'carnavalesque'. This

⁴² Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey : A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1988), 97. Gates is citing the eight markers of 'Black English' outlined in Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin And Testifyin: The Language Of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986).

⁴³ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 45, 51, 47, 52, 111, 122, 97. See also Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (London: Chicago University Press, 1984).

⁴⁴ See Simon Glendinning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

term was coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay ‘Discourse In The Novel’. It refers to a literary mode that subverts an accepted form or ideology through the insertion of humour and chaos. Fundamentally, the carnivalesque works to resist narrative resolution, employing a wealth of ‘voices’ to destabilise any authoritative influence. Bakhtin ascribed the term ‘heteroglossia’ to what he saw as the ‘jolly relativity’ of literary meaning, the inescapable coexistence of divergent speakers and meanings within a single ‘utterance’. Bakhtin believed that an apprehension of literary heteroglossia enabled the reader to challenge the hegemony of ‘authoritative discourse’.⁴⁵ In other words, his theory rejected the idea that a novel could be possessed or defined by a single reading, a single convention, or a single ideology. To cite another postmodern figurehead, Jacques Lacan, the effect of such narrative simultaneity on the reader could be said to be one of ‘*jouissance*’. Rather than the limited ‘pleasure’ of responding to a preconceived formula, *jouissance* implies an altogether more subversive engagement with the multiple possibilities of reading itself.⁴⁶ This is central to Gates’s contention that Himes’s detective fiction is a ‘two-toned’, parodic riff on ‘white’ literary conventions. For Gates, Himes’s acts of Signifyin(g) unlock the infinitesimal meanings that work through a text.

Postmodern theory casts Himes as a writer solely interested in subverting conventional narrative teleology. This is not a new idea. In a 1966 magazine article celebrating the *Série Noire*’s one thousandth title, Gilles Deleuze praised the series for rejecting the classic detective story’s search for ‘metaphysical or scientific’ truth. Rather, Deleuze read the series as documenting a world of endless deception and con-artistry, a world ‘in the fullest power of its falsehood.’ He specifically praised Himes’s detective novels for their ‘extraordinary moments’ of parody. Deleuze believed that Himes’s text not only parodied the genre, but parodied the very notion of mimetic representation itself. He wrote: ‘Parody is the category that surpasses the real and the imaginary.’⁴⁷ Deleuze read Himes’s Harlem as neither real nor imaginary, but rather a text that served to disqualify both of these terms as discrete or coherent. For Deleuze, the multiple, contradictory voices running through Himes’s texts

⁴⁵ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin and Michael Holquist (trans.), ‘Discourse In The Novel’, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 263, 293, 342. On the wider application of Bakhtin to African American literature see Dorothy Hale, ‘Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory’, *English Literary History*, Vol. 2 (1994).

⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan and Dennis Porter (trans.), *The Ethics Of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1992). See also Jonathan P. Eburne, ‘Surrealism Noir’, in Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss, *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Mike Taormina (trans.), ‘The Philosophy Of Crime Novels’, in David Lapoujade (ed.), *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953–1974*. (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2003), 81-85.

revealed this flux of difference that structured the illusion of a coherent reality.⁴⁸ This explicitly counters the idea that Himes's Harlem can be read as a realistic embodiment of either proletariat consciousness, or black folk culture. By contrast, Deleuze suggests that Himes subverted the idea of a stable 'reality' itself.

Deluzian readings of the Harlem Cycle have largely re-emerged over the last decade. However, Michael Denning's brief 1988 article on the Harlem Cycle touches on the idea of a Himesian *jouissance*. In contrast to his Marxist critique of Himes's Popular Front fiction, Denning finds no stable ideological referents in the later Harlem Cycle, with the exception of the final work *Blind Man With A Pistol*.⁴⁹ In his discussion of the preceding novels, Denning argues that:

Violence does not signify oppression in Himes, nor the myth of the stoic American killer, nor the myth of regeneration through violence...Rather, violence in Himes signifies nothing but its own arbitrariness, its random intrusion on everyday life. And as such it is comic.

Denning objects to the notion that Himes's detective fiction can be appropriated by any rubric, movement or ideology. He dismisses the novels' violence as a manifestation of either bourgeois frontier romance, or black communal resistance. Rather, it 'signifies nothing' other than its own capricious pleasure, or 'comic' absurdity. Whereas McCann argues that the series should be read as (high) literary realism, Denning suggests that the Harlem novels are a 'mocking' dismissal of 'realism' itself. Similarly, whereas Soitos argues the series engages in black expressive resistance, Denning writes that in Himes's Harlem, 'signifiers have *no* signified.' Denning thus concludes that in Himes's text, 'the detective genre is twisted to postmodernist experimentation.'⁵⁰

Recent critics have applied postmodern theory more explicitly to the Harlem Cycle. Kevin Bell (2005) argues that materialist readings fail to grasp the power of Himes's detective fiction. 'Himesian authenticity,' he writes, 'unfolds not at the levels of the sociological, but always within the exquisitely temporal core of the affective.' In particular, Bell contests Robert Bone's suggestion that Himes's oeuvre expresses a naturalistic 'cry of anguish.' Rather, Bell argues that 'Himes's work actually produces something much closer to the cry of thereal that by necessity escapes every symbolic coding and classification.' Clearly, Bell

⁴⁸ Gilles-Deleuze and Martin Joughin (trans.), *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995 [1972]), 21.

⁴⁹ Michael Denning, 'Topographies Of Violence: Chester Himes' Harlem Domestic Novels', in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1986]), 165. The tendency to analyse Himes's final Harlem novels (*Cotton Comes To Harlem* and *Blind Man With A Pistol*) as more conventional protest novels is evident in Bunyan, Crooks, Lundquist, Milliken, Muller, Soitos and Walters.

⁵⁰ Denning, 'Topographies Of Violence', 162, 167, 162.

views Himes's career change as the author's disillusionment with 'reality' as a stable category itself. As such, the value of the Harlem Cycle depends not on its mimetic realism, but its ability to invoke the Lacanian 'real', and a space beyond social categorisation. Bell thus reads Himes's narrative as depending not on 'dogma or advocacy' but in sound, texture and narrative disjuncture. Indeed, Bell rejects any notion that the Harlem Cycle can be used as either an 'ideological referent or an object of aesthetic manipulation.' Rather, Himes's goal is to interrogate the act of reading itself, and to 'expose and eviscerate the American culture industry that produces "race."' ⁵¹

Similarly, Jonathan Eburne (2005) argues that Himes's relocation to Paris gave the author a conscious appreciation for surrealist and emerging Deleuzian theory. He suggests that this allowed Himes to radically interrogate accepted rules of narrative, authorship and political instrumentality. Eburne writes:

Himes's transformation into a 'French' writer is characterized not by what his fiction loses in translation but by what it gains: namely, an involvement in French thinking about modes of writing that frustrate instrumentality through their irretrievable lapses and excesses of meaning.

Eburne echoes Bell's claim that the Harlem Cycle 'frustrates' the idea of literature's ideological instrumentality. Moreover, he ties this specifically to exile, equating Himes's emigration from the U.S. with an expunging of social realism or protest. For Eburne, Himes's 'transformation' into a 'French' writer allowed him to reject both the Wright school of naturalism, and contemporary existentialist notions of 'engaged writing'. Rather, Himes embraced an 'indulgently disengaged dark humour' and 'absurdity'. In defining these terms, Eburne cites Deleuzian and Bakhtinian notions of parody and heteroglossia. Indeed, Himesian absurdity is figured by Eburne as a motif in which 'white people and black people fail to make sense of each other', the narrative split into 'countless fragments'. The power of Himes's texts, argues Eburne, is in their irresolvable contradictions. Citing Lacan, he concludes that this narrative disorientation enables the reader to sense their own 'unconscious, subterranean cachet of revolutionary knowledge.' ⁵²

These approaches refuse to claim Himes as either an authentic leftist realist, or an authentic black folklorist. Rather, they argue that Himes's exile imbued him with the confidence to subvert these very labels, and debunk the idea of a coherent reality, let alone

⁵¹ Kevin Bell, 'Assuming the Position: Fugitivity and Futurity in the Work of Chester Himes', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2005), 858, 850, 857, 864.

⁵² Eburne, 'The Transatlantic Mysteries of Paris', 808, 816, 815, 820.

protest it. Greg Forter's *Murdering Masculinities* (2000) argues something similar in its assertion that the Harlem Cycle's central subject is the 'ruin of cultural identity'. Forter emphasises the way in which Himes burlesques existing black stereotypes, rendering them absurd yet refusing to offer the reader any authentic alternative. Forter reads the 'stereotypical spectacle [as] part of a larger attempt to expose the "postmodern condition" of Harlem – depthless instability of identity, superficiality of meaning, breakdown of narratives of self-making.' In doing so, Himes debunks the genre's claims to realism, and prevents readers 'from finding in it an uncontaminated image of self.'⁵³ Forter's reading again portrays the Harlem Cycle as experimenting with the hollowness of cultural meanings and, to use Bakhtin's term, the outdated notion of 'authoritative discourse.' In these readings, Himes's Harlem is radical specifically because it cannot be 'brought to heel' by the cultural imaginary. Critics argue that, by moving into detective fiction, Himes neither cashes in nor signifies on mass cultural forms. Neither does he offer an authentic glimpse of working-class or folk consciousness. Rather, he engages with ideas of the carnivalesque and heteroglossia in order to explore the shifting boundaries of narrative, identity and epistemology.

Methodology: Formula Fiction and Cultural Hegemony

I want in this thesis to reclaim and revise the Marxist materialist analysis of Himes's detective fiction discussed above. On the most basic level, this means that I ground my analysis of the novels in the context of their production and consumption within a postwar, transatlantic culture industry. Similarly, I explore the ways in which the content of the novels is overdetermined by its position within a capitalist system of exchange. Himes openly stated that the primary motivation underlying his move into detective fiction was financial gain. He spoke frankly of his own fiction's 'profit incentive' and his wider conviction that white and black writers alike 'write for profit'.⁵⁴ Accordingly, this thesis takes seriously the commerciality of Himes's detective fiction. It is an approach that demands we once again consider Margolies's assertion that the Harlem Cycle was produced for a 'European readership for whom Harlem was an exotic landscape.' It also requires us to explore the ways in which

⁵³ Greg Forter, *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 173, 190, 213. See also Thomas Heise, 'Harlem Is Burning: Urban Rioting and the "Black Underclass" in Chester Himes's *Blind Man With A Pistol*', *African American Review*, Vol. 41, Issue 3 (Fall 2007).

⁵⁴ John A. Williams, 'My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 72.

Himes's novels were delimited by the bourgeois racial conventions of the noir and hardboiled literary formula. As such, I do not view Himes's Harlem fiction as either an exercise in literary realism, or a defiant example of black folk culture, or a postmodernist formal experiment. Rather, the Harlem Cycle remains a heightened example of literature as a commodity form. I argue that the Harlem novels are defined by the very qualities other critics have attempted to play down: namely, their commerciality, their marketability, and their exchange value within a postwar publishing industry.

Crucially, however, I want at the same time to offer a more nuanced reading of market-driven popular culture than is implied in other Himes scholarship. Indeed, this thesis's approach does not reduce the Harlem Cycle to some passive tool of capitalist ideology that works to 'veil' or 'protect' the reader from an existing social truth. By contrast, I read Himes's detective fiction as an example of popular culture at its most contested, an arena in which both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas compete. In writing the Harlem Cycle, Himes does not eschew proletariat 'realism', embrace 'folk', or, indeed, 'sell-out'. The central tension identified by critics, between Himes's proletariat reputation and the novels' bourgeois populism, is not comfortably resolved. Rather, this tension plays out as an ideological give-and-take throughout the Harlem Cycle. The novels are thus defined by a supreme sense of double agency: challenging regressive racial stereotypes whilst simultaneously enacting them; depicting a Harlem energised by black hustlers yet ravaged by capitalist exploitation. Rather than reading this duality as an example of postmodern heteroglossia, I argue that it enacts the ambiguous politics of commercially-oriented formula fiction. As such, Himes's Harlem detective fiction inhabits a space in which social realism and formulaic fantasy, black urban indignation and bourgeois racism, are intertwined.

The paradoxical nature of the Harlem Cycle suggests a model of popular culture that is defined by contradiction and negotiation, rather than any fixed ideological function. Before developing my argument, I want to clarify the ways in which my approach both draws on and challenges the conception of popular culture and formula fiction outlined in existing Himes scholarship. Indeed, both orthodox Marxist and culturalist arguments offer productive platforms from which to assess Himes's place in a postwar culture industry. Both ask important questions concerning exploitation, agency and resistance. However, I take issue with their shared tendency to simplify the relationship between popular culture and capitalist ideology. Specifically, both Marxists and culturalists offer readings of popular culture as a respective tool of *either* the ruling *or* subordinate classes. By implication, their arguments

hinge on a static conception of bourgeois ideology as something that can either be capitulated *to* or escaped *from*. Tony Bennett has identified a shared Marxist and culturalist tendency to conceive capitalist ideology as ‘monolithically bourgeois’ and ‘imposed from without, as an alien force, on the subordinate classes.’ A hermetic distinction is created between that which is ideological, and that which is cultural; that which is ‘bourgeois’, and that which is ‘resistant’.⁵⁵

As such, the complexity of the relationship between capitalist ideology and popular culture is underplayed. Instead, the question recurrently comes down to Himes’s place either ‘in’ or ‘out’ of a capitalist ideology. As we have seen, Marxist critics debate whether Himes’s realist credentials are ‘protected’ by a populist form, or whether the Harlem novels are ‘*really*’ a stubborn continuation of an earlier realism. Regardless of what conclusion is reached, the same distinction is maintained between bourgeois false consciousness and authentic working-class consciousness. Similarly, although culturalists challenge the orthodox Marxist reading of Himes’s Harlem, they also seek to validate the Harlem Cycle by its perceived place outside of dominant capitalist ideology. Conforming to the culturalist belief in popular culture’s relative autonomy, these critics imbue Himes’s Harlem with folkloric resistance, or what Bryant calls a ‘wild and untameable power’. Accordingly, Himes is painted as a grand trickster figure working within ‘roomier’ diasporic expressive traditions. In both cases, these appraisals respectively place the series ‘outside’ vulgar capitalist exchange.

By contrast, this thesis places Himes’s Harlem novels very much inside a literary market. However, as already stated, this does not imply that the series is a passive tool of dominant ideology. Instead, I argue that Himes’s detective fiction exemplifies the way in which popular culture works to negotiate and mediate between a number of conflicting ideological discourses. In this respect, the thesis draws heavily on Gramscian theories concerning the ‘reciprocation between structure and superstructure’, or the interaction between civil and political society.⁵⁶ Here, the popular realm is conceived as a battleground in which both opposition and agreement are engineered between social groups. This idea helps construct a model of capitalist society in which rule is established primarily through consent, rather than absolute domination. Gramsci expressed this idea when writing:

⁵⁵ Bennett, ‘Popular Culture’, 219. See also Turner, *British Cultural Studies*, 202.

⁵⁶ Antonio Gramsci, with Quintin Hoare (ed.) and Geoffrey Nowell (trans.), *Selections From Prison Notebooks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 366, 380. See also Martin, *Gramsci’s Political Analysis*, 71, and Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe’s Footprints* (Routledge: New York, 1990), 95.

The dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of subordinate groups...[leading to] equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of a narrowly economic interest.

As the above passage argues, capitalism works insidiously through a system of negotiation and articulation, in which sweeping class distinctions and intentions are continuously frustrated. Gramsci argued that popular culture, whilst instrumental in reflecting the aspirations of the economically subordinate, concurrently engineers the consensus of that same group.⁵⁷ As Graeme Turner argues, this challenges both the orthodox Marxist distrust of popular culture, and the culturalist valorisation of it. Instead, popular culture emerges as something ‘both dominated and oppositional, determined and spontaneous.’⁵⁸

These various and conflicting political currents move through Himes’s detective fiction. As evidenced by the conclusion of *A Rage In Harlem*, the texts are defined by a host of crossed purposes, and a heightened ambivalence. On the one hand, a character such as the manipulative and hyper-sexual Imabelle mobilises the most judgemental and fetishistic aspects of the postwar racial imagination. Himes the commercial *Série Noire* writer condenses various racial and gender stereotypes into a highly marketable image of the African American *femme fatale*. At the same time, a character like H. Exodus Clay, and his assertion that Imabelle has ‘drummed up business’ for him, offers a critique of this exploitative logic. The idea that the Harlem community depends on the ‘credit’ generated by its ‘dead’ suggests their dual status as an impoverished and subjugated people. In essence, Himes’s Harlem novels capture the fetishistic dynamics of popular culture, whilst reflecting back upon their workings.⁵⁹ As such, they are novels that actively complicate the line between resistance and acquiescence,

⁵⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 366, 182, 242.

⁵⁸ Turner, *British Cultural Studies*, 196.

⁵⁹ I use the term ‘fetishistic’ to refer to the arbitrary attribution of an ‘intrinsic’ or ‘inherent’ value to an object. In the Freudian sense, fetishism describes a form of paraphilia in which an inanimate object or particular body-part is imbued with a sexual allure. In the Marxist sense, commodity fetishism describes the mystification (or ‘veiling’) of concrete social relations via a system of capitalist exchange. Marx argued that the capitalist consumer had ceased to value ‘things’ as ‘products of labour’ born of unequal social relations. Rather, he suggested that, in the ascribing of monetary value, a commodity is imbued with ‘an objective character...[that has] absolutely no connection with [its] physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.’ Drawing in particular on this latter theory, this thesis chronicles the ‘fetishising’ of U.S. race relations in both postwar social policy and transatlantic literary currents. Rather than viewing Harlem as a poor neighbourhood born of historical dialectics, postwar social scientists and noir theorists misrecognised the black urban space as *intrinsically* (‘objectively’) sexualised and criminalised. Himes’s Harlem novels, themselves racial and sexual commodities, make visible the role popular culture played in this misrecognition. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (ed.), *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy - Vol. I-Part I: The Process of Capitalist Production* (New York: Cosimo, 2007 [1867]), 83. See also Jean Baudrillard, ‘Desire in Exchange Value’, in Jean Baudrillard and Charles Levin (trans.), *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981) and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 32-33.

progressive realism and bourgeois fantasy. They are, in a Gramscian sense, ‘dominated and oppositional, determined and spontaneous.’

A central way in which this thesis conceptualises these cultural politics is to suggest that Himes’s detective fiction makes visible the exigencies of formula fiction. As John Cawelti has influentially argued, the power and pleasure derived from a work of formula fiction can not be neatly aligned with any particular class consciousness. The success of formulaic literature is located in its ability to faithfully recreate a generic formula, or a familiar aesthetic, rather than a particular social ‘truth’. In this sense, I read formula fiction as a supreme embodiment of popular culture’s ability to encompass a number of opposing interests in a way that cuts across conventional social groups. To this end, Cawelti argues that literary formulas work to ‘resolve’ or ‘assimilate’ the conflicting interests of different groups within a ‘conventional imaginative structure’. Cawelti’s argument subscribes to the idea that, above all else, popular culture offers a site of ideological negotiation. Moreover, formula fiction encapsulates the way in which culture does not merely reflect ideology, but actively shapes it.⁶⁰

In particular, this thesis examines Himes’s place within Gallimard’s *Série Noire*, and the imaginative conventions of noir and hardboiled detective fiction.⁶¹ This is a genre that exemplifies the ability of literary formulas to provide a site of cultural and ideological negotiation. Indeed, hardboiled detective and noir fiction is notable for its ability to withstand radically different analyses concerning its social or class allegiance. For example, Stephen Knight contends that the genre’s ‘realistic’ aesthetic ‘conceals’ a ‘fully bourgeois romantic structure’ that enacts white male privilege, and an individualist, protestant work ethic.⁶² By stark contrast, McCann argues that the genre’s Depression-era roots imbues it with a fundamental working-class consciousness that champions ‘equality’, ‘mutual commitment’ and ‘a common culture’.⁶³ The two classic characteristics of the genre – the lone private eye, and the deprived urban space – attest to the relevance of both readings. How can we account,

⁶⁰ John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 35, 27.

⁶¹ This thesis reads the terms ‘noir’ and ‘hardboiled’ as mutually constructive poles of the same literary formula. Although the concept of ‘noir’ was first explicitly theorised by Nino Frank in 1946, scholars have recognised its actual preceding of hardboiled detective fiction in various forms. Indeed, hardboiled detective fiction has been analysed as a white, male working-class reaction against the ‘social menace’ embodied by the term noir. Their symbiosis can be seen in the classic premise of the genre, in which the hardboiled male attempts to maintain a clarity of vision, and thus resist the affect of noir (greed, hyper-sexuality, violence or madness.) On the hardboiled-noir dialectic see Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) and Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

⁶² Knight, *Form and Ideology*, 125, 152.

⁶³ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 30.

then, for this seemingly uneasy mix of capitalist apology and critique? Cawelti highlights this paradox as an example of a literary formula mediating between proletariat and bourgeois ideologies. Despite the hardboiled genre's progressive focus on social injustice, the detective formula 'affirms the view that true justice depends on the individual rather the law.' Whilst highlighting uneven capitalist development, the genre feeds into a capitalistic valorisation of a rugged individualist morality.⁶⁴ In this sense, a literary formula captures the way in which there is no place 'outside', and, by implication, no place 'inside' dominant ideology. Instead, capitalism is a protean rubric that rules primarily through consent, and the continuous flux and exchange of ideas between different social groups.

On this basis, this thesis does not read Himes's encounter with commercial formula fiction, in the orthodox Marxist sense, as sounding the death knell for his progressive authorial intentionality. Neither do I read it, in the culturalist sense, as allowing Himes to carve out an autonomous space of black 'folk' resistance. Rather, Himes's formula fiction dramatises the competing tensions (progressive, anti-progressive, commercial) that inspired his emigration from the U.S., and overdetermined his subsequent agency as a *Série Noire* writer. Noir formula fiction thus 'pulped' Himes's authorship, enabling us to see Himes the 'protest' writer and Himes the 'hack' negotiate each other at a formal level. I argue that it is this tension that energises the 'carnavalesque' formal qualities identified by certain Himes scholars. As we have seen, scholars such as Gates, Eburne and Bell argue that Himes offers a Deleuzian deconstruction of literary indeterminacy. In identifying the series as an exploration of literary heteroglossia, they argue that Himes rejects social 'protest' in favour of formal experimentation. However, the claiming of Himes as an early postmodernist or surrealist overlooks the author's place within a racialised sector of the culture industry, and the commercial pressures it entailed. Indeed, the Harlem Cycle, whilst containing multitudes, is not an 'unreadable' literary cipher that transcends historical narrative. Rather, the novels' many contradictions capture the way in which different modes of reading and writing operate within a particular literary formula, or power structure. My analysis of the Harlem novels is thus an attempt to ground their irreverent stylistics and narrative contradictions into an understanding of a particular historical moment. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, this thesis makes black literary 'style' the 'subject of', rather than a distraction from, 'what is going on' in terms of a particular social reality.⁶⁵

The thesis's structure and methodology is designed in a way that enables me to address

⁶⁴ Cawlti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, 35-6.

⁶⁵ Hall, 'What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?', 27.

the cultural tensions that inform, and are informed by, Himes's formula fiction. Part one explores Himes's career and work between 1947 and his move into the *Série Noire* in 1957, a period that saw his emigration from the U.S. to Europe. Part two examines Himes's early Harlem novels (1957-1961). Part three examines Himes's late Harlem novels (1965-1969) and his recognition by a post-Civil Rights black American audience in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This extended chronological focus assesses Himes's success and failures at various 'stages' in his career, and on both sides of the Atlantic. This allows me to put into tension the myriad literary categories with which Himes was associated through his career: Popular Front protest fiction; Cold War noir fiction; Black Arts fiction; and the various 'high' and 'low' cultural connotations of each. As we shall see, Himes's formula fiction works to complicate and collapse these ostensibly discrete literary categories under the auspices of the commodity form.

Moreover, in order to grasp these processes, this thesis employs a kind of methodological 'pulping', grounding its textual readings of Himes's detective fiction within a number of interdisciplinary analytical modes. On a macro scale, I place Himes's Harlem fiction in tension with the contemporary sociological developments in American race relations. Similarly, I examine Himes's career in relation to the transatlantic literary and cultural debates regarding black protest fiction, the noir formula and, later, the Black Arts Movement. On a micro level, this thesis examines not only Himes's published works, but archival material relating to Himes's career. I look in detail at Himes's public image and contemporary reception as a *Série Noire* writer, his professional correspondence with French and U.S. agents, and his private thoughts and later reflections regarding his career. This methodology attempts to get to grips with a literary triangulation between Himes's progressive authorial intentions, the demands placed upon him as a *Série Noire* writer, and the wider ideological shifts of the postwar era. By invoking these different contexts, this thesis offers a wide-reaching analysis of how cultural meaning is produced within a particular historical moment.

Core Themes:
Pulping the Black Atlantic

A 'negotiation' model of popular culture, and its erosion of authorial sovereignty, begs a fundamental question: in what ways can Himes's detective fiction, and more widely popular literature, make a critical statement, argument, or intervention? As this thesis will argue, the

Harlem Cycle's critical work exists in the form of an acerbic reflexivity regarding its place in an exploitative, racialised culture industry. I argue that this reflexivity allows Himes to reflect critically upon the postwar imagination; its racial expectations, demands and prejudices. Certainly, Himes's career change disavowed him of certain modernist authorial ideals. It did not, however, curtail his interest in issues of power, exploitation and racism. Indeed, the pressures and demands he faced at the *Série Noire* made visible what, to Himes, was the wider containment and commodification of African American literature in the postwar period.

More specifically, this thesis reads the success of the noir and hardboiled formula in the postwar period as encapsulating certain anti-progressive discourses in regards to race relations. From Paris in 1955, Himes expressed the following sentiment in a letter to his American editor:

Let's face it, people are sick and tired of the poor downtrodden Negro. Their sympathy is spent; their interest left at the end of the war – even before. The public now demands that the Negro be unusual.⁶⁶

The comment alludes to the two central objects of Himes's critique. Firstly, Himes laments his failing career as a writer of proletariat 'protest' fiction, and what he perceives as the waning public interest in narratives of 'downtrodden' race/class oppression. Secondly, in the year following the 1954 *Brown* ruling, Himes exhibits a wariness concerning the integrationist preoccupation with the 'unusual', or psychologically damaged, black urban community. In voicing these two concerns (one literary, the other political) Himes links the racial fantasies of the noir genre to the dominant Cold War ideology of racial liberalism. Indeed, Himes's Harlem makes a series of transatlantic connections between French literary and U.S. social discourses that conceived the black urban poor as peculiar, as transgressive, and as 'other'. The 'dark city' of American hardboiled fiction that so enthralled French noir aficionados is linked to the pathological 'dark ghetto' of Cold War social science.⁶⁷ In doing so, Himes's detective fiction captures various assumptions of behavioural 'difference', individual freedom, and capitalist exploitation that helped maintain racial inequality in the postwar era.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Cited in McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 255.

⁶⁷ See Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir In Post-War French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989 [1965]), and Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Decolonisation, and the Reordering of French Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995).

⁶⁸ See Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics Of Mass Consumption In Postwar America* (New York : Vintage, 2004), and Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanisation Of The United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

This anti-progressive turn in racial analysis and representation is the central transatlantic connection that this thesis makes. To this end, I read Himes's career through the lens of what Howard Winant calls 'racial formation theory'. This is a neo-Marxist approach that explores the way in which racial identity has become a fundamental organising principle of social life. Winant writes that this can be conceived of as a '*process* precisely because the inherently capricious and erratic nature of racial categories forces their constant rearticulation and reformulation.'⁶⁹ This thesis places Himes's career within the context of what Winant calls a 'post-World War II break' in racial analysis and representation. Winant cites this 'break' as the moment in which theories of biological white supremacy were displaced by more complex formulations of racial identity and inequality. Winant argues that the postwar outbreak of civil rights and anti-colonialist movements fostered the rise of diasporic models of blackness. Crucially, Winant argues that this postwar 'break' failed to negate a more insidious form of racial hegemony:

[T]he comprehensive racialisation of *identity* in the modern world was also built upon a tremendous debt...it was the use made of the "other" to define the self, *the reliance on difference to produce identity*, that constituted the cultural dimensions of modernity on the foundation of racial hierarchy...their most crucial applications were arguably to be found at the level of the quotidian, of everyday life, of popular culture.

Winant suggests that whilst discourses of biological racism waned in the mid twentieth century, the 'foundation of racial hierarchy' left in their wake did not. Moreover, he reads a dominant identity politics of racial 'difference' as working to actively legitimise the racial status quo. Winant thus figures a postwar diasporic 'break' as a hegemonic struggle, in which a resurgent racial awareness was mediated by 'new forms of subordination and voicelessness among black native, or colonised people.'⁷⁰ This is an approach that avoids romanticising a black diaspora, or the black Atlantic, as an oppositional space beyond forms of white supremacy. In particular, postwar Paris, the locus of noir, has been identified as a site of progressive black internationalist politics and cultural resistance.⁷¹ However, scholars such as Brent Hayes Edwards argue that the unprecedented 'boundary crossings, conversations, and collaborations' of Black Atlantic politics were matched by 'misreadings, persistent

⁶⁹ Howard Winant, 'Racial Formation and Hegemony: Global and Local Developments', in Ali Rattansi and Sallie Westwood (eds.), *Racism, Modernity and Identity on the Western Front* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 273, 270-1.

⁷⁰ Howard Winant, *The World Is A Ghetto: The Making Of A New World Racial Order* (Plymbridge: Basic Books, 2002) 16, 274, 312.

⁷¹ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), and Jonathan P. Eburne, 'Paris: Capital Of The Black Atlantic', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.51, No.4 (2005).

blindnesses and solipsism.’ This thesis investigates Himes’s own Parisian exile as deeply paradoxical in this sense. Himes’s success at the *Série Noire* is indicative of the ways in which the category of blackness was not only reinvigorated but commodified on a transatlantic scale.⁷²

Winant identifies popular culture as a key crucible in which the fictions of racial difference are forged. To this end, the transatlantic commodification of Himes’s racial identity was primarily enacted through the noir/hardboiled formula. Broadly speaking, the power and pleasure of the noir/hardboiled formula reflected the postwar turn away from a materialist analysis of race, as embodied by Himes’s ‘protest’ fiction of the 1940s. Christopher Breu distinguishes hardboiled texts by their ‘inability to imagine a collective politics’. Instead, the genre presents, via the figure of the hardboiled subject, a fantasy of rugged individual freedom and transgression. Crucially, Breu argues that this fantasy of ‘individualist transgression’ is organised by a fundamental of racial difference. He writes:

[W]hite hardboiled masculinity gains its racialised identity through a disavowed borrowing from and envy of the perceived pleasures of black masculinity, fantasised as a less fully civilised and more enjoyably transgressive form of subjectivity.

The classic narrative of the white male private eye ‘going native’ in the ‘wrong’ part of town thus depends upon and is organised by an essentialist notion of black abjection.⁷³ Rather than presenting a cogent solution to capitalist inequalities, the genre offers the individual (white) reader a series of ‘libidinally charged’ and racialised ‘fantasies about the social’. As such, the genre’s key dynamic of individualist transgression channels a preoccupation with racial difference, as opposed to class consciousness.⁷⁴

Himes’s flight from ‘protest’ to ‘pulp’ allows us to unpick these formal and political operations. This thesis uses Himes’s encounter with the noir formula to look at three key ‘diasporic’ forms of racial hegemony in the postwar period. The first, as suggested in Winant’s

⁷² Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘The Practise of Diaspora’ in Janice Radway (ed.), *American Studies: An Anthology* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 [2003]).

⁷³ Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*, 175, 67-68. My use of the term ‘abject’ is informed by Julia Kristeva’s following definition: ‘abjection – at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion.’ Kristeva described the abject as that which society constructs as ‘disturb[ing] identity, system, order.’ At the same time, the abject functions as a ‘lack’ that is used to constitute and confirm the subject’s presence within the symbolic order. This thesis explores various modes of thought (U.S. social science, existential humanism, ‘Black Power’, the noir formula) that constructs the black urban space (Harlem) as ‘outside’ the dominant social order in just this way. Most fundamentally, the idea of black ‘abjection’ gestures towards the expediency of racial difference in the production of identity. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay In Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 8, 4.

⁷⁴ Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*, 184. See also Eric Lott, ‘The Whiteness of Film Noir’, *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Autumn 1997).

analysis of racial formation, is the privileging of cultural and behavioural difference as the principle cause of racial inequality. Rather than biological difference, a system of racial ‘othering’ evoked spectres of cultural difference, or ‘ethnicity’ in order to maintain and naturalise racial hierarchies. Of relevance here is the work of Pierre-André Taguieff. Like Winant, Taguieff argues that a ‘*fundamentalism of difference*’ replaced the discourse of biological racism in the postwar period. A consequence of this shift was the disassociation of racial identity from issues of inequality and hierarchy. In its place, a capitalist dogma of pluralism and individualism worked to reformulate existing racial inequalities as an example of ‘cultural diversity’. Taguieff’s theory highlights the dangers of wholly abandoning a Marxist materialist reading of race relations.⁷⁵ This thesis argues that Himes’s detective fiction stands as a complicit critique of the hegemonic shift described by Taguieff. Himes, by appropriating the commodity form, ambivalently mobilises a black urban space defined by an appealing and marketable cultural ‘difference’ rather than social inequality.

Secondly, Himes’s Harlem engages with a postwar shift towards a more individualist, flexible conception of racial identity and political resistance. In his study of the postwar racial imagination, Taguieff traces the emergence of a postwar consensus ‘centred on the vision of a final destruction of collective identities.’⁷⁶ As I will demonstrate, Harlem fiction captures and critiques the growing postwar disillusionment with forms of collective identity: national, class and racial. In doing so, Himes uses his noir fiction to dramatise the ‘subjectivisation’ of Cold War literature; its inability to imagine collective solutions to social problems.⁷⁷ His most famous Harlem characters, detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, are paradoxically placed to explode the era’s racialised fantasies of individualism.⁷⁸ In many ways, his detectives represent the paradox of their author’s success. They emerge as ambivalent, divided characters, both empowered and subjugated by a cultural imaginary that privileges individual success over communal justice, and difference over equality. Moreover, Himes uses his post-Civil Rights Harlem novels to explore the failure of black nationalism, and revolutionary violence, to evade this same discourse. In doing so, the Harlem Cycle

⁷⁵ Pierre-André Taguieff and Hassan Melehy (trans.), *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and its Doubles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4-5. See also Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt And Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁷⁶ Taguieff, *The Force Of Prejudice*, 6.

⁷⁷ Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction In the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 69.

⁷⁸ See Ross, 'Containing Culture in the Cold War'.

foregrounds the wider post-Civil Rights disillusionment with collective politics, and the hegemony of Cold War – and hardboiled – individualism.⁷⁹

Finally, this thesis argues that Himes's detective fiction captures an increasingly nihilistic logic of capitalistic exploitation and self-commodification within black urban culture. Indeed, if the Harlem Cycle can be justifiably described as a series of 'potboilers', then we must also recognise that the novels' central and enduring subject matter is 'pot-boiling' itself. As we shall see, the titillating behaviour of the Harlem community is overdetermined by a social context of capitalist competition, self-commodification and political disillusionment. Shortly before his death, Himes discussed the relationship between capitalism and racial inequality, and his detective fiction's attempts to tackle it at a formal level. He said:

Most of the characters are petty criminals or victims, and many of them have only a hazy perception of the oppression they suffer, or any understanding of the link between racism and economic exploitation. Of course, all of this is part of the fabric of their lives, and they aren't thinking about it. They're far too busy surviving.⁸⁰

The comment suggests Himes's desire to depict a community struggling to 'survive' on the margins of society. This materialist context of 'survival' provides a sober counterpoint to the lurid racial stereotypes that run through the series. Harlem's aura of racial 'difference' does not represent a regressive pathology, or a transgressive freedom, but rather meets an ongoing market *demand*. Indeed, Himes's Harlem is a milieu in which heightened racial images, and promises of racial transgression, are continuously bought, sold, and exchanged. It is populated almost exclusively by black hustlers engaged in strategic commodification of themselves and others: con men, pimps and prostitutes. Accordingly, it is an area frequented by a variety of tourists and voyeurs, many of them white and middle-class. The novels thus document the attempts of Harlem citizens to *survive* within what Cornel West calls the 'cutthroat morality' of capitalism, 'devoid of any faith in deliverance or hope for freedom.'⁸¹

Fundamentally, then, this thesis argues that the Harlem Cycle, because of its very status as a commodity, is uniquely situated to explore the intersecting racial and social fantasies that structure popular culture. This form of resistance does not depend on Himes

⁷⁹ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁸⁰ Michel Fabre, 'Chester Himes Direct', in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations With Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995 [1983]), 126.

⁸¹ Cornel West, 'Nihilism In Black America' in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 41.

being ‘outside’ of capitalist ideology, as critics as diverse as McCann and Soitos have argued. Rather, Himes works behind enemy lines, his complicity in an exploitative market enabling him to reflect critically upon it. In an essay entitled ‘The New Sentence and the Commodity Form’, Andrew Ross discusses the critical options open to writers working within a system of consumer capitalism. Ross argues that an imagined authorial place in the Marxist ‘real’ or ‘concrete’ is no longer of use. Instead he writes of the commodity form’s ability to:

[E]xpose our patterns of consumption at the commodity level of meaning. Clearly, this is no celebration of the utopian reader, free to produce meanings at will, in response to the open invitation of canonical post-structuralism. Nor is it the celebration of a liberatory, utopian language, like the surrealists’ discourse of contradictions. The construction of a future, utopian or otherwise, lies instead in a technologically planned present, or more properly, in the *shock* of recognising the fully systematic domination of the present.⁸²

This passage perfectly describes the Harlem Cycle’s literary project. The series’ many contradictions, its overwhelmingly ambivalent tone, reflect a sober realisation of capitalism’s polyvalence. As I will argue, the novels offer the reader a darkly comic pleasure which is less an example of literary *jouissance*, and more the ‘*shock*’ of cultural hegemony. As such, Himes’s detective fiction is a valuable object of study precisely *because* it is caught inside a capitalist market, right on the borderlines of domination and resistance. It thus disabuses readers of a sense of ‘naturalness’ towards the capitalistic production of racial identity.⁸³

Part One: Noir Atlantic

Chapter one examines the end of Himes’s domestic career as a writer of black ‘protest’ fiction. It traces the author’s disaffiliation from postwar America, and the dominant national modes of thought concerning race relations and black literature. Himes’s emigration was the consequence of a postwar ‘revolt’ against black protest fiction of the 1940s, itself energised by a Cold War backlash against the form’s Popular Front origins. This chapter thus traces Himes’s marginalisation as a proletarian ‘protest’ writer, and his attempts to form a critique of this literary shift. Himes’s *End Of A Primitive* (1954) satirises the rearticulation of ‘protest’ fiction to paternalist discourses of black pathology. The novel reflects Himes’s emerging conception of black ‘protest’ literature as a commodity form, susceptible to fetishism, appropriation and rearticulation.

⁸² Andrew Ross, ‘The New Sentence and the Commodity Form: Recent American Writing’, in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 368, 373.

⁸³ Martin, *Gramsci’s Political Analysis*, 79.

In chapter two, I explore Himes's early output and public image as an expatriate writer. I argue that Himes's exile is essentially paradoxical; defined by a continuation of, rather than a liberation from, the limits imposed by black protest fiction. Scholars have argued that postwar Paris offered African American writers a radical cosmopolitanism, an 'exceeding' of racial and national stigmas. However, this chapter argues that the Parisian celebrity of African American writers was ironically contingent upon a fetishistic discourse of racial difference and transgression. Himes's unpublished novella *A Case Of Rape* (1956) debunks the idea of Black Paris as a site outside hegemonic postwar racial categories. In its account of the Parisian rape trial of four exiled African American intellectuals, the novella explores the transatlantic consensus that constructs blackness as a radical 'other' to a privileged white Westernism.

The final chapter in part one discusses Himes's move into the noir/hardboiled genre, and the construction of his sensational public image as a *Série Noire* writer. I argue that Himes's career change represented the culmination of his postwar literary disillusionment, whilst also providing a platform from which to critique issues of pop-cultural commodification. Although motivated primarily by money, Himes was intrigued by the way in which the genre collapsed literary categories of 'realism' and 'fantasy' within its commercial exigencies. Himes dramatised his and his work's racial fetishisation in an early noir sketch Himes submitted to *Série Noire* editor Marcel Duhamel entitled 'Naturally, the Negro' (1956). The sketch experiments with the genre's racialised logic and aesthetics, making the point that the postwar symbol of difference and transgression is 'naturally, the Negro.' I thus suggest that the *Série Noire*, whilst commodifying Himes, provided an opportunity to thematise postwar race relations, and their fundamental of 'difference'.

Part Two: 'The crossroads of Black America.'

Chapter four is the first of three chapters that explore the way in which Himes's Harlem enacts a self-conscious critique of racialised popular culture. It asks the question: whose 'Harlem' is Himes depicting: the abject 'Dark City' of the noir genre, or the marginalised and disenfranchised black community of the postwar era? This chapter argues that Himes delivers a heightened 'Harlem' that, whilst mobilising the genre's anti-progressive racial stereotypes, burlesques them as bourgeois projections. In doing so, Himes dramatises the way in which the noir formula distorts, rather than explores, urban segregation. I analyse *A Rage In Harlem* (1957) and *The Big Gold Dream* (1960) as grift narratives that centre around the conniving

members of ‘dysfunctional’ African American families. The novels both enact and critique the link between the postwar rubric of racial ‘difference’ and the growing racial segregation in the postwar American city. As such, the novels explore black urban literary (mis)representation, thematising the hardboiled/ noir formula as a kind of literary ‘grift’.

Chapter five examines the ways in which the Harlem Cycle comments upon its own status as a pop-cultural commodity. Critics have previously read the black hustler characters in Himes’s detective fiction as embodying a defiant black vernacular culture and performative tricksterism. This chapter argues that Himes’s focus on black urban performance rubs up against more problematic motifs of white voyeurism and exploitation. In doing so, Himes comments critically on the text’s own eroticism and marketability. Looking at the trickster/hustler characters in *The Real Cool Killers* (1958), *The Crazy Kill* (1958) and *All Shot Up* (1960), I argue that their performativity is overdetermined by economic powerlessness, and a nihilistic market morality. In doing so, Himes draws attention to his texts’ own primary appeal to white liberal fantasies, and their instigation within a logic of commodity fetishism.

Chapter six looks at Himes’s detective heroes Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. I suggest that the duo dramatise Himes’s crisis of authorship, and liminal agency within a commodity form. The protagonists are defined by a central conflict between a desire to serve a disempowered black community, and their official duty to a racist and oppressive white police force. I read Digger and Ed less as unified characters and more as indeterminate ciphers who play out the conflicting fantasies of various (racial) reading constituencies. In particular, *The Heat’s On* (1960) sees Coffin Ed suspended from the force, and engaged in a solo revenge mission following the shooting of his partner. In the process, Ed embodies a fantasy of (white) phallic agency, and the abject black body upon which this fantasy depends. Himes’s protagonist is thus empowered yet ultimately subjugated by his acts of heroic individualism. I argue that this debunks the fantasy of racial othering that structures hardboiled masculinity and authorship.

Part Three: Pulping the Black Aesthetic

Chapter seven is the first of two closing chapters which examine Himes’s rediscovery in his homeland during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The late 1960s saw the valorisation of Himes and his Harlem fiction by a number of African American writers affiliated with the Black Arts Movement. However, Himes’s liminal position within a noir marketplace problematised the

literary ideal of a pure and instrumental 'Black Aesthetic'. Moreover, Himes found that his U.S. construction as a 'radical' Black Arts writer continued to be bound up in the same rubric of racial difference and pathology that had energised his emigration. This chapter traces both Himes, and his detective protagonists' problematic 'Black Arts' rebirth. Digger and Ed's progression in the final Harlem novels *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1965) and *Blind Man With A Pistol* (1969) dramatises the struggle of Black Arts writing to evade a chauvinistic, and peculiarly Americanist, rhetoric of resurgent black manhood.

The final chapter of the thesis explores the way in which Himes's ambivalent critique of black nationalism is brought to fruition in his two 'late' Harlem novels. Both novels are preoccupied with themes of violent political protest and black collectivity. However, both novels ultimately use their status as literary commodities to disrupt their vision of a militant black uprising. In *Cotton*, the Harlem community's desire to go 'back to Africa' is undercut with the generic conceit of the grift narrative. In *Blind Man*, the very nature of the political uprising itself remains elusive, as Himes plays with narrative linearity and perspective to create a sense of radical disorientation. I argue that the novels, both in plot and form, explore the failure of pop-cultural praxis to communicate an instrumental and collective revolutionary message.

Part One:
Noir Atlantic

1

‘I felt like a man without a country.’: Himes’s American Dilemma

In late 1948, Chester Himes was invited by Horace Cayton to address a writers’ club at the University of Chicago. Himes gave a talk entitled ‘The Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the U.S.’ The speech offered a bleak summation of postwar African American writing. In it, Himes appeared to suggest that the Negro novelist’s sole duty was to excavate the psychological pain of African American life:

If this plumbing for the truth reveals within the Negro personality homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority, paradoxical anti-Semitism, arrogance, Uncle Tomism, hate and fear and self-hate, this then is the effect of oppression on the human personality.

The passage suggests that the black writer is a conduit of supposed black psychological truths: violence, hyper-sexuality, servitude, self-hate. Himes goes on to claim that these qualities, and their centrality in the black novel, were endemic to the national temper. Both writer and protagonist are ‘the product of this American culture; his thoughts and emotions and reactions have been fashioned by his American environment.’¹ Here, Himes’s ‘dilemma’ appears to correlate with the *American Dilemma* hypothesised by Gunnar Myrdal only four years earlier. Myrdal’s government-sponsored report on racial segregation had delineated an African American populace cruelly cut adrift from a democratic national culture. To this end, Myrdal condemned Jim Crow for denying black Americans the nourishment of an ‘American Creed’. Myrdal argued that such segregation had fostered a self-perpetuating, ‘passively rotting mass’ of African American psyches defined by the desperate qualities Himes had listed in his speech.² Fundamentally, both Myrdal and Himes’s description of the black self stress the pathological behavioural defects that centuries of segregation had inscribed.

However, ‘Dilemma of the Negro Novelist’ goes on to subvert the clinical nature of the above excerpt, and complicate the notion of Himes as an uncritical advocate of Myrdal’s

¹ Chester Himes, ‘Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the US’ in John A. Williams (ed.), *Beyond the Angry Black* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966 [1948]), 58, 53.

² Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996 [1944]), 167.

thesis. Later in the speech, Himes argues that the black author's dilemma 'lies not so much in what he must reveal, but in the reactions of his audience...[and the] limitations which so often confine men to habit.'³ This second comment reveals that Himes is less concerned with matters of mental health than he is with literary convention. Indeed, his allusion to the 'limitations' of the writer's 'audience' works to demystify the earlier diagnosis of the African American psyche. It suggests, in fact, that the black 'horrors' he spoke of do not so much precede as derive from the orthodoxies, or 'habits', of postwar African American fiction. Similarly, it suggests that the black postwar writer does not 'reveal' but responds to a *demand* for said horrors. Implicit in Himes's speech is a critique of the limits placed upon African American writing in the era of Myrdalian consensus. In many ways, Himes's 'dilemma' concerned racial liberal reading practices, and the Negro novelist's place in a national culture that, following Myrdal's lead, equated racial difference with behavioural difference.

The speech foregrounds what this chapter argues was Himes's increasing disillusionment with the accepted perimeters of African American literature. In particular, this chapter traces Himes's marginalisation by, and subsequent critique of, a postwar 'revolt against protest.'⁴ This refers to the widespread denunciation of black 'protest' fiction as pioneered by writers such as Himes and Richard Wright in the 1930s and 40s. By the early 1950s, Wright's *Bigger Thomas (Native Son)* and Himes's *Lee Gordon (Lonely Crusade)* were denounced as degrading, nightmarish characterisations of black masculinity by emerging voices such as James Baldwin.⁵ For such critics, the gathering momentum of the Civil Rights movement had rendered the perceived 'victim' status of such characters obsolete. Instead, African American novelists, intellectuals and sociologists called for a more redemptive 'integrationist' literature.⁶

As Himes's speech suggests, however, literary meanings are as much a reflection of readers' 'habits' as they are the writer's. Indeed, this chapter argues that the postwar revolt against Depression-era and Wartime protest fiction was based around a fundamental misreading of the form. Grounded in the Marxist politics of the Popular Front and Chicago School, the Wrightian protest novel offered a materialist critique of race relations. However, the postwar era saw the black protest novel retroactively, and unfavourably, judged on the terms of a Myrdalian consensus. The association of the form with regressive racial stereotypes

³ Himes, 'Dilemma of the Negro Novelist', 56.

⁴ The phrase 'revolt against protest' was coined by Robert Bone in his *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965 [1958]).

⁵ *Bigger Thomas* and *Lee Gordon* are the respective protagonists of Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998 [1940]) and Chester Himes, *Lonely Crusade* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1997 [1947]).

⁶ Arthur P. Davis, 'Integration and Race Literature', *Phylon*, Vol. 17, No.2 (Summer 1956).

reflected a critical, rather than authorial, preoccupation with racial behaviour. As demonstrated above, Himes was keenly aware of the ideological ‘habits’ and ‘limitations’ that misread black protest fiction in terms of racialised pathology. Moreover, he viewed the distortion of black protest fiction as a sign that ‘the movement of the working people of the world’ had been reduced to a ‘cesspool of buffoonery.’⁷ This shift in national temper would ultimately catalyse the author’s 1953 relocation to Paris. It would also catalyse Himes’s emerging critique of black protest fiction as a commodity form; its susceptibility to fetishisation, appropriation and rearticulation. Indeed, the postwar appropriation of black ‘protest’ encapsulates the way in which racial liberalism worked hegemonically to ‘contain’ cultural and racial meanings ‘by incorporation’ rather than ‘excluding by isolating.’⁸

The first part of this chapter traces the emergence of Himes as a writer of the Popular Front. I explore the way in which wartime black activism gave voice to a civic nationalism that was proletariat in nature. Secondly, I examine Himes’s rapidly declining reputation amongst both black and white critics in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I demonstrate the ways in which this marginalisation was indicative of a wider postwar disaffiliation from the nation amongst black writers associated with the Popular Front. Finally, I analyse Himes’s 1954 novel *The End Of A Primitive* as a satirical critique of the postwar publishing industry. It is a novel that captures the postwar rearticulation of ‘protest’ fiction within paternalist discourses of black pathology. It self-consciously depicts the attempts of a failing African American protest writer, Jesse Robinson, to shake off the stigma of ‘protest’ and write a satire. Ironically, however, Robinson’s attempts are thwarted by the inability of publishers to conceive of his work in any other way. The novel thus dramatises the very ‘dilemma’ Himes spoke of, and debunks racial liberalism as a reading practice. As Jodi Melamed has pointed out, the novel is an ‘unstable satire’ inasmuch as it predicts its *own* misreading as a study of black pathology.⁹ In an apt twist, the novel was purged of its satiric content by editors and ironically re-titled *The Primitive*. The episode embodies Himes’s emerging sense of black ‘protest’ writing as a category both demonised and forced upon the black writer from without.

⁷ Chester Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity: The Autobiography Of Chester Himes: Volume II* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1976), 126.

⁸ Andrew Ross, 'Containing Culture in the Cold War', *Cultural Studies*, Vol.3, No.3 (1987), 339.

⁹ Jodi Melamed, 'The Killing Joke Of Sympathy: Chester Himes's *End Of A Primitive* Sounds the Limits of Midcentury Racial Liberalism', *American Literature*, Volume 80, Number 4 (December 2008).

Wartime Patriotism

Himes's decision to leave the U.S. in 1953 reflected his disillusionment with the values and promises of his native country. He later wrote of his emigration that 'the whites rejected me, the blacks did not want me. I felt like a man without a country, which in fact I was.'¹⁰ The most extraordinary thing about this statement was its disavowal of a previously held patriotism. Indeed, Himes's disaffiliation with the U.S. would have seemed incongruous ten years earlier. In 1942, Himes had penned an enthusiastic essay urging African Americans to embrace their national identity. The essay, entitled 'Now Is The Time! Here Is The Place!' expressed a 'Double V' faith that the global battle against fascism would inspire progress in the domestic fight for black civil rights. Himes reminded African American readers that the U.S. was 'our native land, our country,' and that 'our participation in the war effort is a fight for what is ours.'¹¹ Himes's vision of a patriotic, national collective of black activists reappeared in an essay written two years later called 'Negro Martyrs Are Needed'. In it, he urged a 'Negro American revolution' not against the nation, but for it. 'This is what a Negro American revolution will be,' he writes: 'a revolution by a racial minority for the enforcement of democratic laws already in existence.'¹²

Himes's wartime sentiments reflect his close involvement with Popular Front and New Deal activism. In the late 1930s, Himes was employed as a labourer by the Works Progress Administration, and wrote the official history of Cleveland whilst assigned to the Ohio Writer's Project. He later wrote of these experiences: 'We were all, black and white alike, bound together into the human family by our desperate struggle for bread.'¹³ Himes's vision of an interracial, proletariat brotherhood is indicative of the Popular Front patriotism that flourished in the 1930s and '40s. The period saw the widespread coming together of black and white radicals who sought to engineer a more inclusionary national identity, particularly regarding matters of class and race. Nikhil Pal Singh argues that the Popular Front can be characterised by a series of ideological balancing acts; Marxist, yet distanced from the Communist Party of the USA; patriotic, yet critical of their country; regionalist, yet offering a global perspective on class and race inequalities. This pluralism incorporated what Singh calls

¹⁰ Chester Himes, *The Quality Of Hurt: The Autobiography of Chester Himes: Volume 1* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973 [1972]), 102-3.

¹¹ Chester Himes, 'Now Is The Time! Here Is The Place!', *Opportunity*, Vol. 20 (September 1942), 273.

¹² Chester Himes, 'Negro Martyrs Are Needed', *Crisis*, Vol. 51 (May 1944), 159.

¹³ Himes, *Quality Of Hurt*, 72. On Himes's Popular Front credentials, see Robert Skinner, 'The Black Man In The Literature Of Labour: The Early Novels Of Chester Himes' in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1989]).

an ‘inclusive discourse of civic nationalism aimed expressly at blacks.’ As Himes’s wartime essays indicate, the war only sharpened the dialectic of race and nation.¹⁴

Above all, Himes and others’ civic nationalism reflected their materialist definition of racial identity. Indeed, the Depression-era and Wartime emphasis on national collectivity was bound up in a Marxist conception of race as a social category. The University of Chicago’s interwar sociology department pioneered this approach. Here, African American academics challenged biological essentialism by establishing a class-oriented approach to race relations. As Daryl Michael Scott has documented, the ‘Chicago School’ put forward the view that racial behaviour was fundamentally determined by social environment. It viewed the increasing urban ghettoisation of African Americans as ‘an outgrowth of social rather than personal pathology.’ Most notably, in 1945’s *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton concluded that uneven urban development, rather than biology or culture, was at the root of racial inequality. Accordingly, Chicago School scholars encouraged African American involvement with the labour and ‘Double V’ movements. For example, Chicago sociologist E. Franklin Frazier expressed a hope that the ‘black male would join the white male in the proletariat.’¹⁵ In essence, the Chicago School embodied the Popular Front belief that racial exploitation was inseparable from capitalist exploitation. As Michael Denning has argued, this led to a fundamental conception of racial identity as a ‘modality through which working-class peoples experienced their lives.’ For black activists of the period, the rubric of racial difference was superseded by a common class culture.¹⁶

Class-consciousness thus energised the sense of national belonging expressed by Himes in his essays of the early 1940s. His greatest literary influence in this respect was Richard Wright, who had a close personal relationship with a number of Chicago School thinkers. In his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Wright criticised those who perceived Chicago’s South Side or Harlem as a space of racial or culture difference.¹⁷ Instead, he urged African American writers to confront their national identity. He argued:

¹⁴ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 101-108.

¹⁵ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt And Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 45, 50.

¹⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1996), 239.

¹⁷ Richard Wright, ‘Foreword’, in St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1945), xx.

Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them... They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must *possess* and *understand* it.¹⁸

For Wright, accepting 'nationalist implications' did not entail a celebration of black American identity. Rather, nationalism meant acknowledging the lowly position of blacks in an American social hierarchy. Wright argued that African American writers and readers could only 'transcend' racial inequality if they sought to collectively change the nation itself. To this end, Wright explained that the pointedly titled *Native Son* warned against black disaffiliation from the nation. The novel's powerless and murderous protagonist Bigger Thomas was a character cut adrift from a 'culture which could hold and claim his allegiance or faith.'¹⁹ As Michael Denning has argued, the Wrightian 'ghetto pastoral' told a specifically national tale. This willingness to engage with and change the nation defined a generation of activists bound by a 'common ethnic formation', and not a racialised psychology.²⁰

Sean McCann argues that Himes's fiction similarly casts race as a 'potent, but empty, fiction' that stands in opposition to a national proletariat 'fraternity'.²¹ Certainly, the privileging of national over racial identity defines Himes's two major works of the 1940s, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *Lonely Crusade* (1947). Both of these 'searing proletarian novels' are set in the industrial workplace, and depict a wartime America of labour movements, union activists and Communist Party agents.²² Both detail the attempts of a neurotic African American labourer to gain the respect and fidelity of his colleagues. Himes explicitly figures this quest as the protagonists' struggle between racial and national identities. The journeys of both Bob Jones in *Hollers*, and Lee Gordon in *Crusade*, delineate a choice between, on the one hand, a nightmarish vision of racialised alienation, and on the other, the realisation of an interracial, proletariat and national brotherhood. Akin to Bigger Thomas, these are characters tortured psychologically by pathological feelings of violence, emasculation, and self-hatred. In both cases, salvation lies in their acceptance within the workplace. Although Bob Jones is ultimately frustrated by the racial prejudices of his colleagues, his desire for professional respect stands as an embodiment of Popular Front ideals. As Jones attests:

¹⁸ Wright described racial identity as something 'forced upon [us] from without by lynch ropes, bayonet and mob rule.' Richard Wright, 'Blueprint For Negro Writing', *New Challenge*, Vol. 2 (1937), 58.

¹⁹ Richard Wright, 'How Bigger Was Born', *Early Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1991 [1940]), 851.

²⁰ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 230-1, 238.

²¹ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham/ London: Duke University Press, 2000), 273.

²² Skinner, 'The Black Man In The Literature Of Labour', 188.

That's all I ever wanted, to be accepted as a man – without ambition, without distinction, either of race, creed, or colour; just a simple Joe walking down an American street, going my simple way, without any identifying characteristics but weight, height, and gender.

Bob is a character determined to cast off the stigma of race. As the excerpt suggests, he cares only for his commonness, his gender, and his nationality. Indeed, his shipyard uniform makes him feel 'stronger than a white-collared worker.' Moreover, his job in a war industry gives him a sense of national belonging, leaving him with a 'filled-up feeling of my country.'²³ As such, the novel communicates the black wartime desire to embrace a working-class, rather than black, national identity.

The same 'Double V' patriotism defines Lee Gordon in *Lonely Crusade*. Again, Gordon's attempts to unionise an aircraft factory are ultimately sabotaged by corrupt union officials and communists. However, the novel's vision of a national, interracial brotherhood is encapsulated in its final scene. Here, the soon-to-be martyred Gordon walks into an anti-labour rally holding aloft a union banner. The novel reads: 'he did not feel lost or black or unimportant, but a part of it, contained by it, as a ripple in the river of humanity.'²⁴ The image encapsulates the Popular Front emphasis on common class interests, rather than racial difference. Indeed, in Himes's 1940s output, as in Wright's, racial identity is an affect that serves only to alienate the individual from the national body politic.²⁵ In this sense, Himes's wartime patriotism represented a wider desire not only to address what Wright called the 'nationalist implications' of race, but change them from the bottom-up.

Postwar Alienation

Unfortunately for Himes, the critical reception to 1947's *Lonely Crusade* was disastrous, and ironically catalysed his *disaffiliation* from his home country. Rather than celebrating the novel for its civic patriotism, critics derided it for what they saw as a dehumanising portrayal of the African American male psyche. Critical focus was reserved entirely for Lee Gordon's troubled marriage, his lust for white women, anti-Semitism and self-hatred. *The New Republic* glossed over the novel's treatment of unionisation and judged the novel on its depiction of black male 'emotional chaos'. They argued that the novel did not so much offer a specific political

²³ Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New York: Chatham's Press, 1973 [1945]), 153, 8, 38.

²⁴ Chester Himes, *Lonely Crusade* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1997 [1947]), 386.

²⁵ See Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 150-166.

message than explore the ‘universal disasters’ of ‘sexual neuroses’.²⁶ Similarly, in a 1948 *Ebony* review entitled ‘Time To Count Our Blessings’, the novel was dismissed as ‘a virulent, malicious story of a Negro.’ For the reviewer, the psychological torment of Lee Gordon offered ‘a biological but not common-sense response’ to racial inequality. Again, the review made no mention of the novel’s labour setting, choosing instead to berate it for its negative images of the African American personality. As its title suggested, the review demanded a more optimistic take on black mental health. It concluded by asking: ‘is it so terrible to be a Negro in the United States? Certainly not!’²⁷

This critical reaction exhibits an important postwar shift in the way Popular Front ‘protest’ fiction was appraised. As the postwar Civil Rights movement gathered momentum, black critics began to judge the form on its ability to encourage personal and behavioural, rather than collective and social, emancipation. This served to disarticulate the Wrightian protest novel from its ‘Double V’ roots. For example, in 1956, the year of the Montgomery bus boycott, Arthur P. Davis penned an essay entitled ‘Integration and Race Literature’. Davis described postwar America as having ‘committed itself spiritually to integration.’ As a result of the nation’s moral uplift, Davis urged African American writers to ‘write intimately and objectively of our own people in universal human terms.’ Moreover, he concluded that the ‘possibility of imminent integration has tended to destroy the protest element in Negro writing.’²⁸ As the Davis article and *Lonely Crusade* reviews indicate, the Wrightian protest novel, and its call for proletariat emancipation, had little role to play in the postwar Civil Rights movement. Instead, their rhetoric indicates a postwar national discourse of ‘universal’ or normative humanism. Within this discourse, troubled protagonists like Lee Gordon would come to symbolise the very stigma of racial pathology that their creators had attempted to critique.

Accordingly, Himes’s career path would follow what Nikhil Pal Singh calls a ‘disaffiliation from the nation’ amongst black radical thinkers in this period. Singh notes the ways in which America’s postwar pursuit of global hegemony had a profoundly ambivalent impact on domestic race debates. He argues that the early postwar period saw ‘the meaning of freedom distorted in its subordination to patriotic cant and fear.’²⁹ As such, the era saw Popular Front struggles for social equality reduced to a mere tactic in the pursuit of global

²⁶ ‘Review of *Lonely Crusade*’, *The New Republic*, 16/10/1947, Box 8, Folder 1, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²⁷ ‘Time To Count Our Blessings’, *Ebony*, 01/03/1948, Box 8, Folder 1, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²⁸ Davis, ‘Integration’, 141, 146, 142.

²⁹ Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 126, 169, 159, 171.

capitalist expansion. The issue of postwar racial integration remains the paramount example of this dynamic. As previously mentioned, Gunnar Myrdal had identified the issue of racial difference as a moral dilemma residing ‘*in the heart of the American.*’ Implicit in this assumption was that (white) American culture, whilst in crisis, remained fundamentally normative. Myrdal never wavered in his belief that ‘it is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans.’ Although laying the blame at the altar of racial segregation, he indicted the behaviour and character of black America, describing its ‘performance, manners, and morals’ as ‘lower’ than that of whites.³⁰

The ambivalent consequences of this rationale was played out in the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown* decision, which declared the unconstitutionality of racial segregation in public schools. The court justified the ruling using research that highlighted the damaging psychological impact of racial segregation. In it, sociologist Kenneth Clark argued that segregated African American children suffered from a chronic inferiority complex that indicated ‘a fundamental conflict at the very foundation of the [black] ego structure.’³¹ As such, Chief Justice Earl Warren based his ruling on the ‘intangible considerations’ of segregation upon the ‘hearts and minds’ of African American children.³² Rather than condemning the wider social structures of white supremacy, the government castigated Jim Crow for depriving blacks of a right to a normative, ‘healthy personality’.³³ The *Brown* case is indicative of a wider postwar discourse that disarticulated both racism and ‘damaged’ African American culture from the U.S. body politic.³⁴ The 1950s saw the labour movement displaced at the forefront of social change, to be replaced with a technocratic discourse of behavioural psychology. Rather than issues of social and collective justice, questions of normative and personal happiness became dominant.³⁵ Daryl Michael Scott argues that this shift worked to quarantine the Civil Rights movement from its Popular Front roots. He writes that ‘as mental

³⁰ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, lxix, 145, 97.

³¹ Kenneth Clark, ‘The Effects of Prejudice and Discrimination’ in Helen Leland Witmer and Ruth Kotinsky (eds.), *Personality in the Making: The Fact-Finding Report of the Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 350.

³² Earl Warren, ‘Supreme Court of the United States, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) in Peter B. Levy (ed.), *Let Freedom Ring: A Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement* (Westport: Praeger, 1992), 37.

³³ Cited in Ben Keppel, ‘Kenneth B. Clark in the Patterns of American Culture’, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 57 (January 2002), 32. Thomas Ross criticises the terms of the decision for its ‘preservation of the rhetoric of white innocence.’ Thomas Ross, ‘The Rhetorical Tapestry Of Race’, in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind The Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997 [1990]), 96.

³⁴ See Ross, ‘Containing Culture in the Cold War’, 330.

³⁵ In 1946, Congress established the National Institute of Mental Health, and in 1950 committed to the ideal of ‘A Healthy Personality for Every Child.’ Similarly, the number of psychiatrists more than doubled during the 1950s, reaching twelve thousand by 1960. Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 71-72.

health became a cultural value, so did the belief that the individual should not be a victim of society.’³⁶

This shift is clearly seen in the postwar careers of those associated with the Chicago School. For example, the era saw Horace Cayton distance himself from the materialist aspects of his own work. Instead, Cayton became increasingly interested in the behavioural ramifications of racial inequality. He discussed his own feelings of inadequacy and rage with psychologist Helen McLean. Together, they concluded that these feelings did not simply reflect social oppression, but stemmed from a self-perpetuating psychological hatred of whites. Cayton described therapy as a ‘great revelation’ in which he realised ‘Yes – I hate white people. Not all of them, but the idea of white people as a group.’³⁷ Cayton became convinced that the psychological model he most closely resembled was that of Bigger Thomas. Cayton’s identification with Bigger Thomas as a psychological case study enacts an important rereading of the Wrightian protest novel. It symbolises the way in which such a protagonist ceased to be viewed as a grotesque caricature of capitalist alienation, and begun to be read as a mimetic representation of the ‘damaged’ black psyche. This reinforced what Scott calls ‘the trend of psychologising race relations’ and gave Wrightian protest fiction an unintended, and unwanted behavioural significance.³⁸

This was thus the value system on which Himes’s *Lonely Crusade* was condemned. Cayton himself reviewed the novel harshly, stating that Himes portrayed his black characters as helpless victims inasmuch as they were unable to redeem themselves on a psychological level.³⁹ Cayton later wrote a letter to Himes that urged him to embrace a black literary shift away from the collective and social, and towards the personal and behavioural. Cayton advised Himes to cease with his ‘bitter complaint’ about social subjugation, stating that ‘society binds us, but far from completely.’ Referring to his own ‘five years of deep analysis’, Cayton encouraged Himes to plunder instead his own ‘character defects’ and familial relationships in order to ‘conquer’ his personal ‘anxieties’. Cayton concluded by telling Himes to forget about ‘Bigger Thomas’ and ‘write about someone like a Southern Negro attending a

³⁶ Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 74.

³⁷ Horace R. Cayton, *Long Old Road* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970) 260.

³⁸ Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 102. Similarly, in the 1950s E. Franklin Frazier focussed more and more on the personality disorders observed in the lower-class black household. Frazier’s two 1957 works, *The Negro In The United States* and *Black Bourgeoisie* depicted black familial disorder as self-perpetuating, characterised by ‘self-hating’ males and ‘domineering’ females. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro In The United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1949). E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957).

³⁹ Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 67.

white college as the first Negro student.’⁴⁰ Cayton’s letter encapsulates the way in which black protest fiction ceased to be aligned with a ‘Double V’ civic spirit. Instead, a Myrdalian consensus placed sole emphasis on individual progress and psychological redemption.

However, the most robust criticism of *Lonely Crusade* came from a young James Baldwin. Baldwin repeatedly castigated the previous decade’s protest novel for what he perceived as its ‘dehumanisation of the Negro’. He lamented its ‘sociological’ depiction of racial identity, joining Cayton in the belief that ‘the reality of man as a social being is not his only reality.’ He called for a redemptive literature that explored the ‘interior life’ and spiritual ‘salvation’ of the African American.⁴¹ Accordingly, he described *Lonely Crusade*’s unionisation narrative as ‘the most uninteresting and awkward prose I have read in recent years,’ Baldwin condemned Himes for his failure to offer the African American reader a ‘*path out*’ of a pre-determined psychological hell. Baldwin’s review delivered the now standard dismissal: ‘Bigger Thomas is becoming irrelevant.’⁴² Elsewhere, Baldwin argued that the violent and frustrated Wrightian protagonist was a figure ‘trapped’ by black pathology, and the degrading sympathy it inspired. He wrote:

[T]he contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deathly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other’s slow, exquisite death.⁴³

This remarkable image exemplifies how violently the black protest novel had been disarticulated from its materialist intentions. Baldwin compares Wright and Himes not to social realists, but to the nineteenth-century writer of sentimental abolitionist literature. Both forms, he suggests, offer a one dimensional, pitiful image of black America in order to illicit sympathy from a superior and condescending white audience.⁴⁴ Finally, the image’s morbid sexualisation casts black protest fiction as both titillating and exploitative.

Baldwin and Cayton’s (mis)reading of black protest fiction shows the extent to which Myrdalian discourses of pathology and sympathy impacted the very definition of racial identity. The grotesque aspects of the ‘ghetto pastoral’ are here taken as a dangerous

⁴⁰ Letter from Horace Cayton to Chester Himes, 28/03/1954, Box 2, Folder 8, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁴¹ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon, 1984 [1955]), 15, 31, 64.

⁴² James Baldwin, ‘History as Nightmare’, in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1946]), 3-5.

⁴³ Baldwin, *Notes Of A Native Son*, 21-40.

⁴⁴ The centrality of white sympathy to racial liberalism can be seen in Myrdal’s assertion that: ‘With all we know today, there should be the possibility to build a world and a nation where people’s great propensities for sympathy would not be so thwarted.’ Myrdal, *Dilemma*, 1024.

prescription, as opposed to an exaggerated symbol of capitalist alienation. Rather than the failures of the form itself, Baldwin's critique reflected his era's exclusive focus on issues of segregation and personal development. There was a certain tragic irony to such a reading. Not only did it judge the Wrightian protest novel by a series of irrelevant values, it judged their worth against a rubric of racial difference that the form explicitly attacked. The episode embodied the extent to which black Popular Front activists were vilified within a postwar climate that distrusted the notion of a common class culture, and focussed instead on racialised behaviour.

Debunking Racial Liberalism

Himes engaged with these literary shifts in ambivalent fashion. In many ways, his next work, *The Third Generation* (1953), can be read as an attempt to acquiesce to a new set of literary standards. Certainly, the novel ticks many of the racial liberal boxes set out by Cayton and Baldwin. For its setting, Himes substituted the home for the workplace. For its primary narrative focus, Himes replaced a union with a family. Moreover, the novel is the most autobiographical, and ostensibly personal, in Himes's entire oeuvre. In a potted retelling of his own childhood, the novel documents a dysfunctional black middle-class family as they move throughout the South and finally to Ohio.⁴⁵ The work was tentatively entitled *The Cord*, and it attempts to work through the effects of racial segregation upon a mother and a son. To this end, Myrdal and Clarke's thesis of black 'self-hate' is writ large upon the novel. The mother-son relationship is defined by the lighter-skinned Lillian's hostile sense of superiority, and the dark-skinned Charles's crippling inferiority complex. The novel's central, recurring image is that of an eternal, bittersweet bond between the two, a 'love and hatred which never cooled.' Although profoundly morbid, the novel documents the young Charles's growing understanding of his internal and familial 'hurt'. Akin to Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1950), the protagonist plays a Christ-like role, confronting a series of painful truths and memories in order to gain a redemptive self-knowledge.⁴⁶ These were qualities that did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics. Arthur P. Davis cited *The Third Generation* as an

⁴⁵ This structure touches on an orthodox tradition of African American autobiographical fiction, closely resembling Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* (London: Harper Perennial, 1993 [1945]).

⁴⁶ Chester Himes, *The Third Generation* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham Booksellers, 1973 [1954]), 79. After falling down a lift shaft, Charles is described in the following way: 'There was something of the crucifixion in his posture, a stone of rigid tragedy in a field of barren loneliness. Some instinctive memory, working even then, warned him that to run was dangerous.' Himes, *Third Generation*, 143.

example of the move away from ‘typical protest work’ and towards ‘integration literature’. He noted that Himes had ‘shifted his emphasis from the protest aspect of Negro living and placed it on the problems and conflicts within the group itself.’⁴⁷

However, despite the autobiographical nature of the piece, *The Third Generation* ultimately illustrates Himes’s irreverent attitude towards the rubric of racial liberalism. Indeed, Himes later described the novel as his least favourite work and a ‘subtly dishonest book, made dishonest deliberately for the purpose of making money.’⁴⁸ In short, Himes produced what he thought postwar American wanted to read: a ‘confessional’ novel that introspectively picked apart the dysfunctional black family unit.⁴⁹ Akin to his later detective fiction, Fabre and Margolies critique the novel as an ‘attempt to exploit what was then fashionable.’ In fact, so cynically did Himes go about this task that the novel was taken for the cash-in that it was. Contemporary reviewers, whilst praising it as a ‘searing book’, found it melodramatic and psycho-sexual to the point of tedium. ‘By tying his story to a Freudian mother complex formula,’ one reviewer wrote, ‘Mr. Himes removes his characters as far from the readers’ sympathy as they are from convincing reality.’⁵⁰ Thus, although the novel contains no satirical element in itself, its cynical production indicates Himes’s unwillingness to genuinely engage with the paradigm set out by Myrdal’s ‘American Dilemma’. Instead, the writing of the novel captures the liminal situation outlined by Himes a few years earlier in his own ‘Dilemma’ speech. It is the work of an author acutely aware of what he had called the ‘limitations’ and ‘habits’ of a black writer’s audience. Indeed, it stands as an attempt to produce racial liberalism at the level of literary supply-and-demand. The novel thus exhibited Himes’s waning faith, not only in Popular Front politics, but in the ability of an African American writer to write freely.⁵¹

It is thus entirely apt that *The Third Generation*, although far from the bestseller he had hoped for, financed Himes’s emigration from the U.S. in Spring 1953. Moreover, the novel marked Himes’s decisive break with ‘protest’ fiction. As he commented from Paris in 1954: ‘I don’t want to get caught within [this] limited evaluation of racial protest writing.’⁵² In a bid to

⁴⁷ Davis, ‘Integration and Race Literature’, 143.

⁴⁸ Cited in John A. Williams and Lori Williams (eds.), *Dear Chester, Dear John: Letters Between Chester Himes and John A. Williams* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 26.

⁴⁹ The novel continues to be read as a ‘confessional’ work by some. See Gilbert H. Muller, *Chester Himes* (Boston: Twayne, 1989).

⁵⁰ Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), n185, 83.

⁵¹ Richard Wright wrote similarly of a dawning realisation that his protest fiction could be misread. Regarding *Uncle Tom’s Children*, he claimed that his ‘naïve mistake’ had been to ‘[write] a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about.’ Wright, ‘How Bigger Was Born’, 31.

⁵² Cited in Margolies and Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*, 93, 81.

ensure this did not happen, Himes immediately set to work on a satire of the postwar publishing industry entitled *The End Of A Primitive*. In stark contrast to his previous work, Himes always maintained that this was his ‘favourite book’, written in a completely ‘free state of mind.’⁵³ Certainly, it sees the first major flowering of the acerbic self-reflexivity that would later distinguish his detective fiction. The novel documents a fraught six-day relationship between a black man and a white woman in New York City. The former is Jesse Robinson, a character clearly modelled on Himes himself inasmuch as he is a fading ‘protest’ writer searching for a new literary approach. His cohort is Kriss Cummings, an employee of a philanthropic foundation that awards scholarships to foreign students. Both are alcoholics who share a history of destructive interracial relationships. The novel documents the orgiastic and violent period leading up to Jesse’s murder of Kriss.

The duo form part of a wider group of characters whose histories closely mirror those of Chicago School sociologists. Having once engaged in Popular Front activism, almost all of them have gone on to become ‘black Sigmund Freud[s]’ and experts in racial behaviour.⁵⁴ Their postwar career change is described by Himes in terms of the effect it has on Kriss’s ‘guilt’ regarding the ‘Negro problem’. The novel states: ‘Where before, the guilt had provoked remorse, afterward it provided a thrill.’ (75) The idea of racial difference as a sexual ‘thrill’ is at the heart of the piece. Whilst this thrill provides Jesse and Kriss with the illusion of catharsis, it ultimately embeds them deeper into the most degrading aspects of their culture. For example, their mutual attraction hinges explicitly on their racial difference. At one point, Jesse tells Kriss:

‘Damn, you’re white!’

She opened her eyes and looked at him with the last flicker of sensual pleasure. ‘I am about as white as one can be,’ she said distinctly. (85)

The postwar focus on racial difference is here depicted as an erotic encounter. Moreover, it is an encounter in which Jesse is ‘assailed by the futility of his position.’ (71) Similarly, Kriss’s desire for Jesse inspires an internal mantra of ‘Niggers! Niggers! Niggers!’ (78) The duo’s relationship thus provides a ‘sex ritual of laceration’ that, perversely, neither ‘can do without.’ (155) The novel debunks the professed sympathies and behavioural politics of racial liberalism as an exploitative interracial relationship. Apropos Bigger Thomas, it is one that will end with

⁵³ Cited in John A. Williams, ‘My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 67.

⁵⁴ Chester Himes, *The End Of A Primitive* (New York: Norton, 1997 [1955]), 111. Subsequent references to the text will be parenthesised.

the black man murdering the white woman. This is a conclusion described sardonically in the novel as '[n]ot just logical and unavoidable and right, but essential in our culture.' (179)

In many ways, Jesse and Kriss's relationship burlesques that between *The Third Generation's* Charles and Lillian. Similarly, it dramatises James Baldwin's image of a sadomasochistic tryst between black male protest writer and white female philanthropist. As such, *The End Of A Primitive* offers a metacritical comment on how black 'protest' was rearticulated to a discourse of racial and behavioural difference. Much of the humour in the novel comes from the fact that Jesse (like his author) is utterly aware of this shift, and his subjugated role as Kriss's 'primitive'. To this end, he is depicted in distinctly hybrid terms, vacillating between pathological rage and wily self-consciousness. At one point in the novel, he suffers a degrading attack of diarrhoea in front of Kriss's intellectual friends. However, Jesse feels not so much ashamed as 'half-amused' by the 'really staggering stink of foul putrescence he was giving them to smell.' (31) The incident sees Jesse move between a position of debasement and what Himes describes as 'a complete and detached curiosity.' (176) He represents both an ironic subjectivity and an objectified spectacle. As he frequently tells himself: 'don't get bitter, son...[it's f]unny, really. Funny as hell if you just get the handle to the joke.' (190) Unfortunately for Jesse, *he* is simultaneously the very butt of this joke. This is a paradox which reduces Jesse's 'sharp' brain and satiric insight to the value of 'intellectual horseshit', or perhaps more fittingly, to diarrhoea. (133)

Jesse thus emerges as a character desperate yet unable to evade the dogma of racial liberalism that his relationship with Kriss embodies. His sexualised entrapment is mirrored in his doomed attempts to forge a literary career beyond these limits. For example, Jesse conducts a drunken literary word game in the hope of stumbling across a 'solution' to his predicament. The novel reads:

He tried combinations of words...Black-love...black-thin...white-right...white-light...repeat-defeat...change-same...change-stay...change-ever...Adam-atom...beige-age...blood-black...blood-mix. (130)

Even Jesse's subconscious is unable to function beyond the literary parameters of racial liberalism. Although desperate for an escape, his mind returns him inexorably to Myrdalian buzzwords, and the white privilege they represent. Indeed, the final word combination he hits upon – 'blood-mix' – defines his and Kriss's relationship, and its fundamental of racial difference. This meta-literary passage reinforces the central characterisation of Jesse as a highly self-conscious, and entirely unwilling, protagonist of a black protest novel. Moreover, it

depicts him as a prisoner to the sexualised and pathological stigma such a character was imbued with in the postwar era.

Ultimately, then, the novel debunks the way in which the postwar Myrdalian consensus trapped and distorted the black ‘protest’ novel within its own terms. In this respect, Himes intended the novel as ‘an affront and challenge to all white American editors.’⁵⁵ He utterly succeeded, with William Targ of New American Library telling Himes that the novel was ‘simply not publishable.’ To add insult to injury, Targ said that the work was not up to the standard of the throwaway *The Third Generation*, and advised that he go back to ‘serious writing’.⁵⁶ Himes wrote back complaining that people were only interesting in reading ‘books by Negroes that are either shockingly honest or shockingly hateful.’⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the novel was severely cut and censored by the publishing house and ironically renamed *The Primitive*. Himes considered the changes to have converted the original from ‘macabre satire’ to ‘stark, unrelieved realism’, with Jesse reduced to an ‘abject, paranoiac, and sadistic personality.’⁵⁸

As Jodi Melamed points out, the novel’s censoring rendered its content entirely self-prophetic. She writes that the novel ‘predicts that the force of racial liberal reading practises will cause the novel to be misread by its white liberal readers as protest rather than satire.’⁵⁹ The clearest instance of this in the novel can be found in an exchange between Jesse Robinson and his white editor, Pope. In it, Pope explains the reasons why Robinson’s satire, *I Was Looking For A Street*, has been rejected on the grounds of genre:

‘What’s protest about this book?’ Jesse argued. ‘If anything, it’s tragedy. But no protest.’
 ‘The consensus of the readers was that it’s too sordid. It’s pretty strong – almost vulgar, some of it.’
 ‘Then what about Rabelais? The education of Gargantua? What’s more sordid than that?’
 Pope blinked in disbelief. ‘But surely you realise that that was satire – Rabelais was satirising the humanist Renaissance – and certainly some of the best satire ever written... This-’ tapping the manuscript neatly wrapped in brown paper on his desk – ‘is protest. It’s vivid enough, but it’s humourless. And there is too much bitterness and not enough just plain animal fun.’ (123)

Despite the satiric content of Jesse’s novel, the publisher insists on reading it as a visceral evocation of ‘vulgar’ and ‘sordid’ black life. Similarly, Jesse’s attempt to compare it to the work of Rabelais is met with ‘disbelief’. In attempting to explain this reaction, Pope unnecessarily counters that Rabelais is a satirist and repeats: ‘this...is protest.’ We again

⁵⁵ Himes, ‘Introduction’, *The End Of A Primitive*, 11.

⁵⁶ Letter from William Targ to Chester Himes, 01/07/1954, Box 3, Folder 6, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

⁵⁷ Letter from Chester Himes to William Targ, 06/07/1954, Box 8, Folder 12, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

⁵⁸ Cited in Melamed, ‘The Killing Joke of Sympathy’, 777.

⁵⁹ Melamed, ‘The Killing Joke of Sympathy’, 772.

observe Jesse caught in a futile double bind. On the one hand, his editor demands that he makes a break with moribund protest writing. Yet simultaneously, the same editor refuses to entertain the notion that an African American writer is capable of writing anything other than honest, earnest, and uncomplicatedly *black* fiction. The editor demands humour, satire and ‘fun’, yet refuses to relinquish his exclusive identification of such writing *with* whiteness and *against* blackness. It is thus not Jesse but Pope, the white liberal reader, who is unable to get beyond the literary category he views with such revulsion.

The novel thus offers a withering comment regarding the hegemony of U.S. racial liberalism, and the way in which it demonised, yet enforced the category of black ‘protest’ fiction from without. Jesse Robinson is condemned to vulgarity by a national environment that conceives racial inequality solely in terms of behavioural, or psychological difference. The novel signals Himes’s break with his homeland, and the postwar marginalisation of progressive black intellectuals who had strived towards a national class culture. Above all else, Himes (and Jesse’s) entrapment by a distorted conception of ‘protest’ fiction reflects the way in which Cold War-era culture worked to *contain*, rather than obliterate, resistant cultural practises. Himes’s postwar alienation enacts Andrew Ross’s contention that the era saw the hegemonic neutering of cultural difference within a rubric of liberal pluralism. The racial liberal emphasis on behavioural difference, rather than common class oppression, worked to diffuse the momentum of the Popular Front by propagating the idea that society was defined by ‘mutual differences’. Crucially, Himes’s early postwar oeuvre straddled this shift, its reading and rereading imbuing it with contradictory political and cultural meanings. As such, Himes’s career in the early 1950s proves Gramsci’s point that the distinction between ‘hegemonic’ and ‘counter-hegemonic’ culture is a false one. Rather, the rise and fall of Himes’s domestic status illustrates the way in which a single cultural artefact (‘black protest fiction’) can be rearticulated within a shifting political terrain.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ross, ‘Containing Culture in the Cold War’, 339, 341, 340.

2

‘What else can a black writer write about but being black?’: Himes’s Paradoxical Exile

In his autobiography, Himes recalls an argument he witnessed between Richard Wright and James Baldwin. It occurred in Spring 1953 at *Les Deux Magots* café in Paris’s Saint-Germain-des-Prés district, a popular haunt of African American expatriates. Wright and Baldwin reportedly shared a tense relationship, with Baldwin’s widely-read criticism of *Native Son* rankling the more established writer. Himes recounts the following exchange:

Dick accused Baldwin of showing his gratitude for all he had done for him by his scurrilous attacks. Baldwin defended himself by saying that Dick had written his story and hadn’t left him, or any other black writer, anything to write about. I confess at this point they lost me.¹

In keeping with the postwar political climate, the discussion delineates the Wrightian protest novel as an unwanted literary stigma. Wright accuses Baldwin of sabotaging his legacy through the ‘scurrilous’ (mis)reading of his work. In turn, Baldwin complains that Wright’s literary dominance had severely limited both his and any other black writer’s ability to write freely. The argument indicates how the term ‘protest’, in its postwar context, worked to categorise, limit, and contain African American literature.

Moreover, this anecdote asks us to consider the fundamental question posed by this chapter: to what extent did the Wright-Baldwin debate, and the postwar stigma of ‘protest’, shape Himes’s expatriate career? This was, after all, the very argument he had hoped to escape through emigration. Himes’s response (‘they lost me’) has been read as just this: his transcendence of U.S. literary discourses. Kevin Bell argues that Himes’s puzzlement indicates his desire to go ‘outside’ the categories Wright and Baldwin were arguing about. For Bell, Himes is ‘lost’ because he no longer recognises the category ‘African American’ as an ‘object of aesthetic manipulation’.² Bell’s reading of the incident represents a wider body of scholarship that conceives Himes’s emigration as a clean break with protest fiction, and the

¹ Chester Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity: The Autobiography Of Chester Himes: Volume II* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1976), 200. For Wright’s account of this episode see James Campbell, *Paris Interzone: Richard Wright, Lolita, Boris Vian and Others on the Left bank, 1946-1960* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), 126. For Baldwin’s account, see James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell, 1961), 153.

² Kevin Bell, ‘Assuming the Position: Fugitivity and Futurity in the Work of Chester Himes’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, no. 4 (2005), 857, 852, 848.

national and racial limitations the form implied. In essence, scholars argue that the exiled Himes took up residency in what Paul Gilroy has called a Black Atlantic ‘counter-culture of modernity.’ Gilroy defined this counter-culture by its ability to salvage racial identity from dominant Western (and Cold War) discourses. In particular, he argues that on the Parisian Left Bank, African American writers were able to ‘exceed’ the ‘ideological and cultural legacies of Americanism.’³

However, as Brent Hayes Edwards suggests, the processes of black internationalism were not built around such a smooth continuum of resistance. Rather, they were plagued by ‘misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindnesses and solipsisms.’⁴ Taking its cue from Edwards, this chapter argues that Himes’s exile was paradoxical; defined by a rearticulation, rather than by an ‘exceeding’ of national, racial, and literary stigmas. I cite the argument in *Les Deux Magots*, not to highlight Himes’s aloofness from it, but to indicate its enduring relevance to Himes’s expatriate career. Indeed, although claiming in his autobiography to be ‘lost’ by the Wright-Baldwin spat, Himes referred to it elsewhere as a defining moment in his career:

[Baldwin told Wright that] ‘you’ve written the theme of the Black writer.’...I thought at that time it was a very silly argument, but later on I realized, I understand, that both knew what they were talking about and it wasn’t silly at all...he was right, I understand what he was saying, I understand now much more than I understood at the time.⁵

[Baldwin] meant, of course, that when Dick wrote *Black Boy* he had written the story of all black boys. Anyway, the point I’m trying to make is what else can a black writer write about but being black? And it’s very difficult to hide.⁶

Both of these comments emphasise the way in which the Baldwin-Wright argument helped Himes ‘understand’ his continued overdetermination as an expatriate African American writer. Baldwin’s sense of black literature as a carefully regulated currency, with accepted limits and goals was not solely an American problem. Neither, it seems, did national boundaries limit the construction of African American writers as psychologically damaged ‘Black boys’. As Himes suggested, even in Paris, these writers felt the postwar demand and expectation to write about ‘being black’ as an end, or a ‘theme’ in itself. In this sense, I argue that exile did not afford Himes a ‘roomier’ authorial space, but instead galvanised his interest in the ongoing

³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 171, 173.

⁴ Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘The Practise of Diaspora’ in Janice Radway (ed.), *American Studies: An Anthology* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 [2003]), 35.

⁵ Hoyt Fuller, ‘Chester Himes: Traveller On The Long, Rough, Lonely Old Road’, *Black World*, Vol. 25 (March 1972), 7.

⁶ John A. Williams, ‘My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 66.

containment of African American literature.⁷

This chapter documents the problematic construction of Himes as an African American expatriate. Firstly, I analyse the politics of nation in Black Paris. I suggest that the Parisian acceptance of African American expatriates was contingent upon their categorisation as Americans, rather than Africans, and their public silence regarding the Algerian War. Secondly, I explore the politics of race on the Left Bank. Whilst Himes and Wright's nationality marked them as Western, the colour of their skin constructed them as Western 'others'. This reflected the existential humanist faith in African American culture as a locus of radical, primitive freedom from (white) bourgeois convention. Finally, this chapter details Himes's critique of black expatriate identity as what he termed 'expedient' within postwar Western discourse. Himes's *A Case Of Rape* (1956) is an obscure novella that debunks the perceived cosmopolitanism of Black Paris. It details the false conviction of four African American writers for the rape of a white woman in Paris. This phoney 'rape' narrative burlesques the perceived freedoms of expatriate life as a heavily fetishised, and politically expedient, identity category. Moreover, in the guise of 'failed' expatriate novelist Roger Garrison, the novel dramatises Himes's own 'awakening' to the hegemony of racial literary and identity categories.

Ultimately, this chapter details the way in which Himes's experience in Paris debunks the supposed 'rootless' or cosmopolitan freedoms of expatriate life. By contrast, Himes's expatriate experiences in the mid 1950s map out a black diasporic culture that both simultaneously challenged and acquiesced to dominant Western (and American) discourses. Parisian exile allowed African American writers to evade more avowed forms of white supremacy. However, as we shall see, it attuned Himes to the way in which race was glamourised and depoliticised on the Left Bank as a symbol of liberating cultural difference.⁸ As Didier Gondola argues, black Americans were 'constantly battling, not so much French racism, but more subtle, yet vicious attempts to control their image and identity.'⁹

⁷ Wendy Walters argues that by emigrating, 'Himes moves from an identity of "convict" or "number 59623"...to a roomier cultural space where he can say, "I am a famous French writer."' Wendy W. Walters, *At Home In Diaspora: Black International Writing* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 64.

⁸ See Howard Winant, *The World Is A Ghetto: The Making Of A New World Racial Order* (Plymbridge: Basic Books, 2002), 275-6.

⁹ Didier Gondola, '"But I Ain't African, I'm American!": Black American Exiles and the Construction of Racial Identities in Twentieth-Century France', in Heike Raphael-Hernandez (ed.), *Blackening Europe : The African American Presence* (London: Routledge, 2003), 206.

National Identity in Black Paris

Gondola comments that, for postwar African American writers and artists, ‘the idea of a tolerant, generous, and colour-blind France assumed mythical qualities.’¹⁰ Few expatriates did more to create this aura than Richard Wright, who emigrated to Paris in 1947. Like Himes, Wright had felt stifled in a postwar America of hysterical anti-Communism and racial liberalism. He claimed in an unpublished 1950 article that ‘there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America!’¹¹ For Wright, this ‘freedom’ implied an emancipation from his identity as an American. In 1957’s *White Man, Listen!*, Wright famously described himself as a ‘rootless man’ unburdened by ‘emotional attachments, sustaining roots, or idealistic allegiances.’¹² Wright’s claim of rootlessness stands as an influential treatise on the perceived freedoms of diasporic blackness. Paul Gilroy argues that a Parisian setting granted Wright the freedom to ‘exceed...the confining structures of the nation state.’¹³ More widely, ‘Black Paris’ has been identified as the locus of a ‘radical cosmopolitanism’. Here, black writers, artists and activists grasped a ‘radically solitary position’ that enabled them to transcend the racial and national stigmas enforced by Western society.¹⁴

However, Himes appeared deeply wary of the presumed cosmopolitanism of Black Paris. Indeed, many of his professional anxieties continued to centre around questions of national identity. In an unpublished 1954 article for *Ebony*, Himes wrote: ‘the longer I stay the more I discover how much of America is in me and how much of me is in America.’¹⁵ Himes’s comment should not be taken as an expression of homesickness. Rather, it expresses surprise that his presence in a black expatriate vanguard did not so much relieve as reinforce the stigma, and privilege, of national identity. In Paris, Himes joined a highly visible group of African American writers, artists and journalists that included Richard Wright, James Baldwin, William Gardner Smith, Ollie Harrington and Richard Gibson. These illustrious figures ‘held court’ in the cafes of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where their stories of Jim Crow

¹⁰ Gondola, ““But I Ain’t African, I’m American!””, 203.

¹¹ Cited in Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of the Light* (Boston: Houghton, 1996), 186.

¹² Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), xxix.

¹³ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 160, 164.

¹⁴ Alexa Weik, “The uses and hazards of expatriation”: Richard Wright’s Comopolitanism In Process’, *African American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 459. See also Jonathan P. Eburne, ‘Paris: Capital Of The Black Atlantic’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.51, No.4 (2005).

¹⁵ Cited in Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris : Black American writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 221.

America would fascinate the Left Bank intelligentsia.¹⁶ However, Himes appeared suffocated, rather than liberated, by this Parisian celebrity. In letters from the time, he wrote that he felt ‘blocked off’ from pursuing his own path by the group, and in particular the towering figure of Wright.¹⁷ He described the African American exiles as ‘a lost and unhappy lot,’ divided by jealousy and paranoia.¹⁸

In essence, Himes was conscious that the reverence accorded African American expatriates was contained within what Tyler Stovall calls the ‘limitations of citizenship’.¹⁹ This refers to the way in which the seemingly colour-blind treatment of Himes and others in Paris was contingent upon their status as Americans, or more pertinently, as Westerners. Indeed, the liberty enjoyed by Himes and others was one denied to millions of colonised people in the French empire. Following the onset of the Algerian War in 1954, Africans were subject to increasingly xenophobic and racist treatment by French authorities. This paradoxical treatment of nonwhites placed Himes and others in a liminal position. The Parisian acceptance of African Americans was secured by their status as sophisticated Westerners, and was offered in return for a public silence regarding French colonial atrocities. As such, Himes was aware of his political and cultural expediency to those who wished to keep intact the (false) image of postwar Paris as colour-blind.

As Stovall has documented, many African American expatriates supported the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), and viewed the conflict as a race war. Yet they were also acutely aware that their guest-status in the country depended on their abstinence from involvement in French political issues.²⁰ Richard Wright’s expatriate career symbolises this paradox, vacillating between a position of critique and apology in regards to Western hegemony. On the one hand, Wright immersed himself in third world politics. After meeting Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire in 1946, Wright became one of the sponsors of the negritude journal *Présence Africaine*. Together, they organised the 1956 International Congress of Negro Artists and Writers. Featuring sixty delegates from twenty-four countries, the conference sought to develop an understanding of racism as a global phenomenon. Moreover, Wright visited Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast in 1953, publishing his

¹⁶ Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 223.

¹⁷ Cited in Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 219.

¹⁸ Cited in Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 79.

¹⁹ Tyler Stovall, ‘The Fire This Time: Black American Expatriates and the Algerian War’, *Yale French Studies*, No. 98 (2000), 186.

²⁰ Stovall, ‘The Fire This Time’, 191.

observations of anti-colonial revolts as *Black Power* the following year.²¹ In short, Wright appeared to embrace the movement known as Pan-Africanism. Gilroy argues that the movement's potency derived from its substitution of an internationalist for a nationalist analysis of race. For Gilroy, this broader perspective allowed Wright to 'escape the ideological and cultural legacies of Americanism.'²²

However, Wright offered only a deafening silence in regards to the Algerian War. In an interview with *Ebony*, Wright acknowledged France's poor treatment of Algerians, but pointed out that he could not comment on the issue if he wished to remain in Paris.²³ Indeed, Wright and others were careful not to criticise their adopted homeland, travelling only to those African countries that were not former French colonies.²⁴ In a 1959 interview, Wright went as far as to praise the French presence in Algeria for 'forcibly convert[ing] Muslims, who are religious fanatics, to Western civilisation.'²⁵ The paradoxes of Wright's position betrays the Cold War politics that worked to contain anti-Western sentiments amongst exiled African Americans. Whilst in Paris, James Baldwin wrote articles in USIS-sponsored magazines defending 'Western values' and favourably comparing American and French racial politics to those in 'primitive' and 'totalitarian' countries.²⁶ On this basis, he spoke of his disidentification from Algerians in Paris, writing that 'the Arabs were not like me, they were not "civilised" like me.'²⁷ Baldwin concluded that the racial situation in France afforded him the 'discovery' of his American, as opposed to his colonial, identity.²⁸ Moreover, fear of expulsion provoked distrust amongst this expatriate community. The notorious 'Gibson affair' of 1957 saw Richard Gibson release letters that appeared to expose Ollie Harrington's support for the FLN. Gibson later admitted faking the documents, in a bid to drum up support for the Algerian cause.²⁹ Gibson would later cite the incident as evidence that the expatriate community was 'torn apart' by Cold War pressures, and by their contrasting attitudes to the Algerian struggle.³⁰

Himes's actions in this period betray a similar ambivalence regarding political allegiances. On the one hand, Himes's wife, Lesley Himes, maintained that he was 'very

²¹ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 197-8.

²² Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 173.

²³ Stovall, 'Fire', 191.

²⁴ Richard Gibson, 'Richard Wright's "Island of Hallucination" and the "Gibson Affair"', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.51, No.4 (2005), 901.

²⁵ Cited in Fabre, *Harlem to Paris*, 185.

²⁶ Baldwin published articles in *Perspectives* and *Rapports France-Etats-Unis*. See Fabre, *Harlem to Paris*, 202.

²⁷ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell, 1961), 27.

²⁸ Cited in Fabre, *Harlem to Paris*, 196.

²⁹ Gibson, 'Richard Wright', 916.

³⁰ Gibson, 'Richard Wright', 917.

moved' by the plight of the Algerian resistance.³¹ Similarly, Himes claimed in his autobiography that 'at the height of the racist Algerian war, all the Parisian press claimed that I was calling the French racists.'³² This referred to an article he wrote for the French tabloid *Candide*, in which he compared the respective racial conflicts in America and Algeria. He claimed in a letter to Van Vechten that the article had landed him in 'trouble with the OAS,' the French secret services, and that he would 'have to leave France for a time.'³³ However, biographers contend that Himes's account of both the article's content and subsequent reaction was hyperbolic. Indeed, Fabre argues that, despite his anxieties, Himes was largely silent regarding the subjugation of Africans in the French capital. At the time, Himes felt cut off from events outside the expatriate cocoon, claiming that 'I don't even think about the Algerian problem about which the French are going crazy.'³⁴ He expressed a similar wariness regarding Wright's contradictory stance on colonial politics. Fabre claims that in conversation, Himes would describe Wright as a 'kind of bourgeois Frenchman who had taken to driving a Citroen.'³⁵ In essence, Himes felt the expatriate community enjoyed a bittersweet liberty, one that was contained within certain national parameters. He also felt that their presence helped preserve a synthetic façade of racial equality. He told his American editor in 1954 that Wright's work was being 'exploited as anti American propaganda' by Parisians in a bid to deflect attention from their own race war.³⁶ Similarly, he would later state that his Harlem novels permitted his French readers 'to avoid [their] Algerian problem, no doubt.'³⁷

As such, Himes was mindful of the black expatriate community's political expediency. He appeared conscious of the way in which France granted 'honoury white status' to African Americans in return for their tacit acceptance of French colonial hegemony.³⁸ Gondola argues that, in return, the presence of black Americans allowed Parisians to enjoy a 'vicarious, "sanitized" African experience.' If in France, 'colonial history had constructed Africans as

³¹ Michel Fabre, 'Interview with Lesley Himes', 01/01/1986, Box 9, Folder 2, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³² Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 269.

³³ Cited in Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 229.

³⁴ Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 230, 223.

³⁵ Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 219.

³⁶ Letter from Chester Himes to William Targ, 06/07/1954, Box 8, Folder 12, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³⁷ Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 290. William Gardner Smith offered a similar critique of Western privilege, arguing that global images of American segregation 'permitted [the French] to feel self-righteous and look down on white Americans whose money they envied anyway.' William Gardner Smith, *Return to Black America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 14. Smith's 1960 novel *The Stone Face* offers an extended treatise on the relationship between the Jim Crow America and the Algerian war. William Gardner Smith, *The Stone Face* (Chatham, NJ: The Chatham Bookseller, 1975 [1963]).

³⁸ Stovall, 'The Fire This Time', 194.

“niggers””, then the sophisticated black Americans in Paris continued the myth that it was culture, and not race, that maintained this construction. The ‘cultural’ identity of African Americans in Paris worked to imaginatively contain French colonial atrocities as a battle between Western civilisation and non-Western primitivism. The expatriate freedoms experienced by black Americans in Paris thus worked to legitimate racial oppression, a situation that caused considerable unease amongst the expatriates.³⁹

Fundamentally, this political situation compromised the expatriate ideal of a ‘rootless’ cosmopolitanism. Himes’s comment regarding his heightened sense of national identity reflected the enduring privilege of Americanism, and Westernism, as a social category. As Stovall comments, Paris’s interpellation of black expatriates as American, and not African, ‘ensured [their] continued connection to the other side of the Atlantic.’⁴⁰ Indeed, the African presence in Paris, and their markedly lower social position, only heightened Himes and others’ self-definition as Westerners. As Wright noted in his African travelogue, what he perceived as the ‘kaleidoscope of sea, jungle, nudity [and] mud huts’ made him long for the ‘ordered, clothed streets of Paris.’⁴¹

The ‘Other’ Americans

Emigration has been cited as triggering Himes’s interest in his radical alienation from Western society. Himes is said to have conceptualised this alienation as giving him an ‘absurd’ perspective on modernity. Indeed, he later entitled the second volume of his autobiography *My Life Of Absurdity*, its opening lines citing Albert Camus: ‘racism introduces absurdity into the human condition.’⁴² ‘Absurdity’ in this sense refers to the existential humanist view that modern man was enslaved by arbitrary social categories. As Left Bank thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre argued, to acknowledge the ‘absurdity’ of these categories was to be emancipated from them.⁴³ Paul Gilroy suggests that an encounter with existential humanism enabled black expatriates to transcend racial stigmas and productively explore their own feelings of Western alienation, or Du Boisian double-consciousness. Gilroy argues that in Paris, Richard Wright became fascinated with the idea of the Negro as a ‘central symbol in the psychological,

³⁹ Gondola, “‘I Ain’t African, I’m American!’”, 206, 202.

⁴⁰ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 190. See also Fabre, *From Harlem To Paris*, 183-7.

⁴¹ Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995 [1954]), 42.

⁴² Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 1.

⁴³ See Jean-Paul Sartre and Hazel E. Barnes (trans.), *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956 [1943]).

cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole.’ Inspired by Sartre, Wright came to regard his racial identity not as an American social category, but as a metaphor for Western man’s absurdity.⁴⁴ Wright wrote that his racial marginalisation gave him a “‘frog’s perspective’” of modernity ‘from below’.⁴⁵ Accordingly, exiled African Americans in Paris came to represent a radical dislocation from bourgeois society. For existential humanists such as Sartre, black American exiles symbolised a side of Western man described as ‘tragic, cruel’ yet ultimately ‘sublime.’⁴⁶

However, as Tyler Stovall argues, the existential ‘absurdity’ of black expatriates was in many ways a ‘creation of the Left Bank imagination.’⁴⁷ Moreover, it was a creation that depended on the continuation of fetishistic racial myths. Indeed, Himes felt uneasy about the Parisian construction of African American expatriates as Western outsiders. He noted that, far from exceeding identity categories, the perceived ‘absurdity’ of black expatriates depended on their continued interpellation as marginal, or ‘damaged’ African Americans. On the one hand, Himes noted the ‘US Go Home’ slogans daubed on the walls of the Latin Quarter. Yet he observed with curiosity the way in which Parisians simultaneously revered black American expatriates. In a 1953 letter to Carl Van Vechten, he wrote:

[T]he French whom I met swore it was the ‘other’ Americans they hated because I wasn’t an American. I didn’t particularly like the connotation, nor the exclusion. If I’m not an American, what am I?⁴⁸

Himes’s comment once again attests to a pervasive sense of his own national identity whilst in exile. However, it suggests that the perceived alienation of black expatriates fixed them with a specific identity as ‘other’ Americans. As the comment above attests, this was an identity that Himes ‘didn’t particularly like.’ In many ways, the anecdote highlights the way in which the Left Bank construction of black Americans as Western ‘others’ mirrored the blinkered focus on racial difference observed in postwar America. Certainly, for Himes, black expatriatism embodied the same essentialist exclusion from ‘normative’ society that he had sought to escape in the U.S. On this basis, he would come to regard his ‘absurdity’ as less of an

⁴⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 171, 159. Gilroy links his theorisation of an ‘absurd’ Black Atlantic condition to Du Bois’s famous definition of double-consciousness: ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’ WEB Du Bois, with Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliber (eds.), *The Souls Of Black Folk* (New York: Norton, 1999 [1903]), 5.

⁴⁵ Richard Wright, ‘Foreword’, George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (New York: Doubleday, 1971 [1955]), 42

⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘American Novelists In French Eyes’, *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1946), 130.

⁴⁷ Stovall, ‘The Fire This Time’, 189.

⁴⁸ Cited in Margolies and Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*, 80.

ontological condition, and more of a carefully policed identity category.

As Himes's anecdote indicates, the celebrity of African American expatriates was bound up in the Left Bank's love-hate perception of the U.S. Indicative of this view was a 1952 *Paris-Match* article in which a number of grievances against the U.S. were listed. These included the view that the Marshall Plan and anti-Communist hysteria had 'passed beyond a joke.' Moreover, it condemned the U.S. for its sluggish effort to improve the lot of its 'imported colonial population, the blacks.' In an echo of Himes's anecdote, the article finished by reassuring Paris's own 'expanding black colony' that the 'US Go Home' graffiti was not aimed at them.⁴⁹ The article's use of the word 'colony' was, of course, highly ironic given the ongoing Algerian conflict. Moreover, it encapsulated the very notion Himes felt uneasy about: an America hermetically distinguished by race.

No Left Bank intellectual expressed this double (racialised) view of the U.S. more concretely than Jean-Paul Sartre. Although Sartre became vehemently anti-American in the 1960s, he earlier maintained a far more ambivalent stance.⁵⁰ He argued that the U.S. was defined by a dialectic between its 'system' and its 'people'. Sartre criticised the former as a faceless corporate-state infrastructure, a 'relentless machinery which one might call the objective spirit of the United States.'⁵¹ However, he argued that this infrastructure was in ceaseless battle against 'the other side of the United States: its freedom.'⁵² Sartre located such 'freedom' in deprived sections of the U.S. cities and the dispossessed people who inhabited them. Although faced with pressure to conform to the 'system', these individuals remained forever 'external' to it 'because they are people and it is a thing.'⁵³ In essence, he suggested the presence of a liberated, humanistic America submerged beneath a conformist veneer. Sartre did not identify this 'other' America in a revolutionary, or collective class consciousness. Indeed, he maintained that 'the exterior signs of class are nonexistent' in America.⁵⁴ Rather, Sartre defined American freedom as a restless behavioural category, a primitive ontological condition, and a 'Nietzschean individualism.'⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Cited in James Campbell, *Paris Interzone*, 116-117.

⁵⁰ John Flower, 'The American Dream - or Nightmare: Views From The French Left, 1945-1965', *French Cultural Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1(2009), 51.

⁵¹ Cited in Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extreme-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 109.

⁵² Jean-Paul Sartre and Annette Michelson (trans.), *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (New York: Collier, 1955), 125.

⁵³ Cited in Mathy, *Extreme Occident*, 110.

⁵⁴ Cited in Rob Kroes, 'French Views Of American Modernity', in Michael Kazin, Joseph Anthony McCartin (eds.), *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 228.

⁵⁵ Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, 113.

Importantly, Sartre found this barbaric American ‘otherness’ in African American protest fiction. In particular, he was awestruck by Richard Wright’s unflinching treatment of racial violence. Sartre and others on the Left Bank viewed the violent and nihilistic Bigger Thomas as a symbol of radical freedom and phenomenological self-creation.⁵⁶ As such, they did not hail black protest fiction as an emblem of a common class consciousness. As in postwar America, the existential humanists read the form as an exploration of *behavioural* difference. Sartre wrote of Wright:

He is the man who sees the whites from the outside, who assimilates the white culture from the outside, and each of whose books will show the alienation of the black race within American society.⁵⁷

Sartre casts Wright as an alien ‘black’ presence that is ‘outside’ of normative ‘white’ culture. This reflected Sartre’s belief that lower-class black American culture embodied a radical alienation from society, rather than collective class oppression. Indeed, Sartre defined the act of reading as a subjective assertion of individual liberty, and a means to grasp the ‘absurdity’ of reality. Racial or cultural difference provided Sartre with one of his central metaphors in this respect. He wrote: ‘the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the *other*.’⁵⁸

In many ways, the construction of black expatriates as Western ‘others’ mirrored the rearticulation of black protest fiction by U.S. racial liberals. On the Left Bank, blackness continued to be essentialised as a spectre of otherness; only here it was constructed as a kind of existential self, indicative of a liberating void beyond social propriety. As Geraldine Murphy argues, this can be read as part of the Cold War shift in intellectual discourse ‘from the social to the individual, from objective to subjective.’⁵⁹ Tellingly, James Baldwin’s postwar criticism of progressive social realism was inspired by his feelings of ‘depthless alienation’ whilst in Paris.⁶⁰ Alone in the city, Baldwin became convinced that African American identity was best conceived, not as a social category, but as something that ‘does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds.’⁶¹ It was this idea of blackness as an existential metaphor, rather than as a concrete social reality, that delimited the acceptance of

⁵⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 164, 16.

⁵⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre and Bernard Frechtman (trans.), *Literature and Existentialism* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1962 [1949]), 177-9.

⁵⁸ Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, 61, 59, 51, 65.

⁵⁹ Geraldine Murphy, ‘Subversive Anti-Stalinism: Race and Sexuality in the Early Essays of James Baldwin’, *ELH*, Vol.63, No. 4 (Winter 1996), 1029, 1031.

⁶⁰ Cited in Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 205.

⁶¹ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon, 1984 [1955]), 25.

African American expatriates as Western ‘others’ in Paris. For Baldwin, as for Wright, as for Sartre, it was a metaphor that suggested a therapeutic individual freedom, rather than progressive social change.

As it had in the U.S., this shift away from a materialist definition of racial identity sat uneasily with Himes. In particular, he noted that the existential valorisation of black expatriatism propagated an array of essentialist racial stigmas. As Himes argued in 1970, Wright’s Parisian celebrity had worked to reinforce, rather than dissolve, his status as an American ‘Black Boy’. As Sartre’s reading indicates, Wright’s allure came at the expense of his interpellation as a segregated African American. Himes thus complained that the Left Bank would not let Wright become the ‘world personality’ he wanted to be, because they ‘liked to believe that he belonged to them.’⁶² Elsewhere, he expressed doubt that the French were interested in ‘actual Negro advancement.’ Rather, he argued that their reverence towards African American culture was contingent upon the presence of ‘all the good grim gristly French adjectives.’⁶³ In other words, Himes became conscious that, as in the U.S., the Left Bank essentialised and fetishised black protest fiction as racially grotesque.

Moreover, when Himes emigrated to Paris, he found that his work of the late 1940s and early ‘50s was being hailed in just these terms. In contrast to its dismal U.S. reception, *Lonely Crusade* had been selected by Parisian reviewers as one of the top five American novels published in 1952. The novel’s translator, Yves Malartic, had earlier written to Himes assuring him that he would remain faithful to the novel’s Popular Front roots. ‘I believe this book,’ Malartic wrote, ‘is not some sort of exciting sexy thriller written in a queer language.’⁶⁴ Himes later validated the reading, telling Malartic that the novel aimed to give a ‘completely objective picture of the American Negro problem in relationship to the working classes.’⁶⁵ However, in many ways, the novel was received precisely as the kind of ‘queer’ and ‘sexy’ curiosity the duo had disavowed. Rather than focussing on the novel’s unionisation narrative, French critics celebrated what they saw as Himes’s treatise on the absurdity of existence. They

⁶² John A. Williams, ‘My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995), 82. On Wright’s emerging critique of existential humanism see Jeffrey Atteberry, ‘Entering the Politics of the Outside: Richard Wright’s Critique of Marxism and Existentialism’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2005).

⁶³ Letter from Chester Himes to Walter Freeman, 05/03/1956, Box 5, Folder 5, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University. Similarly, William Gardner Smith asked: ‘what was this, but a kind of racism – the vision of the black man as a virile (or passionate) animal, the seeking of erotic pleasure in the “sin” of contact with forbidden skin?’ Smith, *Return To Black America*, 57.

⁶⁴ Letter from Yves Malartic to Chester Himes, 06/12/1951, Box 4, Folder 3, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁶⁵ Letter from Chester Himes to Yves Malartic, 29/07/1954, Box 4, Folder 3, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

praised the novel for its depiction of a fundamentally irrational world, and hailed its troubled protagonist as a metaphor of modern dislocation and radical freedom.⁶⁶ Similarly, the French press promoted *The Third Generation* as an exploration of racial difference, and the modern alienation it represented. Indeed, the novel was praised for ‘surpassing the treatises of the classic “Negro novel”’ and exploring the human condition. In doing so, it was said to have obtained ‘universal significance’, rather than offering a social realist ‘complaint’.⁶⁷

Even more tellingly, the Parisian editors at Gallimard rejected *The End Of A Primitive* in its original satiric form, calling it a work of ‘sadism and buffoonery.’⁶⁸ Their reaction was perhaps inevitable, given that the novel ridiculed, rather than embraced, the idea of African American ‘otherness’. Malartic commented that the characterisation was inconsistent. Himes replied in presumably deadpan fashion: ‘It is not supposed to make sense. It is a book about idiots.’⁶⁹ When it was eventually re-edited and released in translation, Gallimard billed it as a ‘violent and hard book, of a frantic sexuality.’ The accompanying synopsis cast Jesse as an existential hero:

Through the murder, Jesse gets revenge for having been taken for a primitive, an instrument of pleasure at the service of a white woman; he finally accedes to the rank of a man.⁷⁰

Given the satiric goals of the novel, Gallimard’s description of the novel is horribly earnest, and deeply misogynistic. Moreover, for a novel attempting to lampoon the postwar fascination with racial difference, the notion that Jesse is out for racialised ‘revenge’ is highly ironic. Nonetheless, the notice encapsulates the existential humanist notion of two Americas, distinguished by behaviour, culture and race. In an ironic echo of the U.S. reaction, Jesse continued to be misread as a pathologically damaged ‘other’ within Western society. In Paris, however, these qualities were celebrated as shoring up a radical vision of (white) individual freedom and nonconformity.

The Parisian censoring of *End Of A Primitive* thus suggests that black expatriates’ encounter with existential humanism was something that contained, as much as it liberated, their work. On this basis, Himes came to view African American ‘absurdity’ or ‘double-consciousness’ as less of an existential condition, and more of a politically expedient identity

⁶⁶ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 208.

⁶⁷ ‘Plon Press Release for *La Troisième*’, 1953 (otherwise undated), Box 4, Folder 3, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁶⁸ Himes, ‘Introduction’, 12.

⁶⁹ Letter from Chester Himes to Yves Malartic, 18/10/1955, Box 4, Folder 3, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁷⁰ ‘Gallimard Press Release for *La Fin D’Un Primitif*’ (undated), Box 4, Folder 3, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

category: safely non-African, yet imbued with just enough transgressive cultural appeal. Recalling 1955 meetings between himself and other expatriates in the Café Tournon, Himes wrote: ‘The absurdity of the other blacks was oftentimes hurting. But ours never, it was only entertaining.’⁷¹ The comment recasts the idea of black expatriate ‘absurdity’ as something of a performance, demanded from without. This irreverent view of existential humanism problematises the scholarly view that Himes’s emigration provided him with a ‘roomier’ authorial space. By contrast, Himes seemed continuously aware of his liminal position in relation to dominant literary discourses, be it in the U.S. or Paris. Moreover, Himes’s account of his time in Paris maps out a black expatriate identity that worked to reinscribe national and racial stigmas in the service of white (individualist) privilege.

Diasporic Expediency

The containment of black Parisian exiles as ‘African Americans’ inspired in Himes a profound irreverence regarding the potentials and limits of expatriate literature. As he stated in his autobiography: ‘the only French people who saw me were those who thought they could use me or get something out of me.’⁷² In 1956, Himes addressed these feelings in a self-reflexive novella entitled *A Case Of Rape*. Described by Michel Fabre as Himes’s ‘most mysterious work’, it was first published in French translation in 1963, and is actually a synopsis for what Himes envisioned as a Dostoyevskian saga of several volumes. It stands as Himes’s sole effort to fictionalise his Parisian experience, drawing heavily on actual characters and episodes observed on the Left Bank.⁷³ Above all else, Himes intended the novel to dramatise the Western expediency of his expatriate identity. In 1956, he told his American editor that he was working on ‘a condemnation of French racial attitudes.’⁷⁴ To this end, the novel details the bogus trial and false conviction of four black American writers for the rape and murder of a white American woman in a Parisian hotel room. This plot device burlesques one of the perceived freedoms of expatriate life: conspicuous interracial relationships. Stovall cites the Parisian acceptance of black-white sexual liaisons as ‘the single greatest difference between black life in Paris and in the United States.’ He suggests that ‘both black men and white

⁷¹ Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 223.

⁷² Himes, *The Quality of Hurt*, 289.

⁷³ Michel Fabre, ‘Dissecting Western Pathology: A Critique of A Case Of Rape’ in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response to Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1972]), 25, 26.

⁷⁴ Letter from Chester Himes to Walter Freeman, 10/12/1958, Box 5, Folder 5, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

women symbolised for each other the romance and Bohemianism of Paris.⁷⁵ However, in Himes's 'rape' narrative, this relationship comes to embody less a radical freedom, and more a lurid, exploitative, and expedient racial spectacle. Moreover, in the form of a fifth African American expatriate who seeks to clear the name of his fellow countrymen, Himes dramatises his own 'development' as a disillusioned, and critically self-conscious writer.

The few scholars to have analysed *A Case Of Rape* focus on the relationship between the victim, Elizabeth Hancock, and the defendant who features most prominently in the novella, Scott Hamilton.⁷⁶ The two characters are former lovers, who meet while crossing the Atlantic for Paris on the *SS Liberté*.⁷⁷ Calvin Hernton suggests that the novella hinges on the 'romantic aura of desperate love between Scott and Elizabeth.'⁷⁸ Both characters are presented as stereotypical American 'innocents' bound by the same 'moral outlook, the same disappointments by goodness and God.' (79) Elizabeth possesses a 'puritanical woman's soul' and is 'ignorant of the most rudimentary knowledge relating to sex.' (83) Scott is every inch the 'tragic mulatto' figure of American literature, who 'instead of being proud of his white ancestry' is 'ashamed of it'. (75) As such, their meeting en route to the French capital is depicted as a mutual, sexualised escape from their domestic burdens. Indeed, their Parisian affair represents a 'dark void of peace beyond escape, free from all the anxieties and hurts and demands of her race and culture.' (59) In essence, Himes mobilises the idea of Paris as a violation of American norms, and a locus of racial transgression. In explicitly existentialist terms, emigration allows the naive couple to enter 'a dark void without thought, that had not past or future, no pretensions or necessities.' (85)

However, Scott and Elizabeth's relationship emerges as parodic, rather than tragic. Himes uses the 'rape' trial to debunk the duo's existential awakening as an exploitative, racialised fantasy projected from without. As the prosecution allege, Scott's 'rape' of Elizabeth arises from a professional dispute. Whilst in Paris, the two co-author an autobiographical novel, but for the sake of propriety agree to release the novel under Elizabeth's name. However, a rogue letter to the publisher discloses Scott's involvement, and

⁷⁵ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 211.

⁷⁶ Scott Hamilton and Elizabeth Hancock's relationship is closely based on Himes's own affair with Willa Thompson, a white American woman he met whilst first crossing the Atlantic. Like their fictional counterpart, Himes and Thompson collaborated on an unpublished novel based on Thompson's experiences called *The Silver Alter*. Fabre, 'Dissecting Western Pathology', 28.

⁷⁷ Chester Himes, *A Case Of Rape* (New York: Carroll and Graft, 1994 [1980]), 11. All subsequent citations to the text will be parenthesised.

⁷⁸ Calvin Hernton, 'Postscript: A Case Of Rape', in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response to Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1984]), 145. Similarly, Fabre writes that the novella documents the disruption of 'such an essential human bond as the man-woman relationship.' Fabre, 'Dissecting Western Pathology', 31.

the book is dropped by publishers. Elizabeth confronts Scott, blaming him for the leak. The prosecution allege that Scott then brings Elizabeth to his hotel room, where she is drugged with the aphrodisiac ‘Spanish Fly’, raped by the four expatriates, and then strangled. For Scott, these false allegations distort his and Elizabeth’s relationship as something altogether more contrived, and perverse. As the case unfolds, Scott reflects that his existential journey with Elizabeth was something ‘he had dreamed into existence.’ (84) By extension, Paris emerges as a milieu in which the ‘dreamers who gravitated there’ were ‘destroyed’ and ‘all meanings were changed and distorted.’ (54-5) Rather than relieving him of social and racial burdens, the Parisian ‘rape’ trial turns Scott into a vulgar stereotype of African American manhood; another Bigger Thomas character. As such, Paris offers itself no relief from racial or national stigmas, leaving Scott with ‘the feeling that a terrible, terrible joke had been played on him.’ (88)

Similarly, Himes’s depiction of Scott’s co-defendants lampoons the standardised construction of black expatriates as Western ‘others’.⁷⁹ Their potted biographies paint an exaggerated picture of the exiled African American as an alluring refugee from conventional society. They are radical artists, writers and journalists whose works are ‘devoted entirely to sex.’ In Paris, they ‘[hold] court nightly in the *Café Tournon*’ where they titillate Parisians ‘without shame or apology.’ (40) Akin to Scott and Elizabeth’s relationship, their allure is bound up in the suggestion of racial mixing. For example, Himes describes Sheldon Edward Russell’s appearance as ‘a curious mixture of white and Negro lineaments, as if the bloodstreams of his forebears waged a continuous battle for domination of his face.’ (41) True to life, this racial metissage secures Sheldon’s acceptance as a Westerner, yet imbues him with a transgressive celebrity. As Sheldon reflects, his status as an ‘other’ American prevents him from ‘becoming an anonymous black person in French civilisation, such as anonymous Arabs and Africans.’ (43)

However, this radical allure is ultimately critiqued as a containing, rather than liberating force acting upon the expatriates. Indeed, Himes explicitly links the global media’s unquestioned assumption of guilt to the defendant’s transgressive appeal. For example, English press reports presume the ‘rape’ to be the action of an individual ‘enclosed in an alien European culture.’ The sanctimonious American media claims it to have proven the danger of ‘American Negroes running off to Europe.’ The Soviets, meanwhile, perceive the case as a symptom of alienation and ‘the violation of human rights in a capitalistic society.’ The

⁷⁹ Again, Hernton more reads these characters more earnestly as African Americans who have ‘departed from the mores of their culture’ in Paris. Calvin Hernton, ‘Postscript’, 145.

differing takes on the ‘crime’ are unified only by an unquestioned assumption of the defendants’ guilt, itself the product of a radical and dangerous liberty. As such, both the phoney ‘rape’ trial, and its appropriation as a postwar ‘propaganda horse’ dramatise the ways in which black expatriate celebrity was contained (or, indeed, imprisoned) within national and racial parameters. To use Himes’s own phrase, all parties ‘get something out of’ the black expatriates, be it a political show trial or a lurid tabloid story. (24-26)

More than this, however, Himes uses the novella to thematise the way in which African American literature failed to evade this hegemonic system. Following the conviction of the defendants, a fifth African American expatriate called Roger Garrison sets out to uncover the ‘truth’ of the matter. Garrison is a famous yet fading novelist, reportedly modelled on Richard Wright.⁸⁰ He hopes to prove that the case is a ‘racist-political’ show-trial, and part of an international plot to ‘re-establish the inferiority of the entire Negro race.’ (29) As such, Garrison initially appears to be the novella’s hero, and the man poised to debunk Paris’s colour-blind reputation. However, he ultimately emerges as a bumbling fool, who utterly fails in his quest. Himes writes: ‘Roger had discovered nothing that was not already known or assumed. He unearthed no startling revelations, came across no new data, found no new clues.’ (27) These clues, if revealed, would have proven that Elizabeth’s estranged (white) husband was responsible for her drugging, ‘rape’ and physical abuse only hours before she met with Scott. Secondly, Garrison would have discovered that it was only one of the defendants, Ted Elkins, who gave Elizabeth another dose of Spanish Fly, out of ‘spite’ concerning her and Scott’s relationship. (29) Thirdly, he would have discovered that it was this double dose of drugs which accidentally caused Elizabeth’s fatal heart attack. (28)

Fundamentally, Garrison never uncovers these facts because he is not interested in them, or the even the possibility of the defendants’ innocence. Indeed, he believes his fellow expatriates to be guilty, and regards the question of innocence or guilt to be ‘irrelevant to the fact of their conviction.’ (28) This makes Garrison an accessory, rather than an exception, to the very system he seeks to critique. Like the global media, he finds himself unable to conceive the case as anything but the inevitable product of interracial transgression. Himes writes that Garrison ‘completely ignored the fundamental principle in the moral fabric of a democratic society, the assumption of innocence.’ (69) Garrison thus emerges as an impotent figure, whose acceptance on the Left Bank amounts to a ‘political gimmick.’ (67) His failed attempt to unearth (or even imagine) anything new about the case leads him to reflect critically

⁸⁰ Fabre, ‘Dissecting Western Pathology’, 28.

on his own identity as an expatriate. He determines that he has been ‘used by the French’ to both ‘illustrate their freedom from racial bias’ and focus attention on ‘America’s brutal persecution’ of blacks. (33) Garrison’s inability to ‘solve’ the case of rape is a manifestation of this very liminality. He cannot find a critical space because he is in the same perilous position as the defendants.

Hernton suggests that the novella’s ‘rape’ narrative makes the comment that ‘truth, no matter how unpleasant or taboo, is the ultimate beauty of a work of art.’⁸¹ By contrast, I would suggest that the various characters’ failure to permeate the illusions surrounding the case suggest that the idea of a crystalline, or existential black literary ‘truth’ is itself a fiction. Garrison searches for a new perspective on the case, yet is unable to ‘remove the doubt, to make such truth impregnable.’ (66) Similarly, the defendants decline to tell the real story because ‘they had been so conditioned by their culture...they could not conceive of a white jury believing their innocence.’ (101) The supposed tenets of Western civilisation – truth, justice, innocence – remain buried beneath the desire to exploit the fictions of black expatriatism. From this, the novel deduces its most profound conclusion regarding black expatriate identity:

[T]he true stature of Negroes in any field of endeavour could not be determined from what they had accomplished, but only from what they had been permitted to accomplish...that the virtues of Negroes were never determined from the true nature of their motives, but only from the construction placed upon their motives for racist expediency; that their vices were never presented in the framework of good and evil, but only in their application to the opinion of whites in their judgements of blacks. (33)

In Himes’s analysis, the only ‘truth’ is the one that is expedient. The excerpt reflects back upon Himes’s paradoxical exile, his sense of escaping national and racial stigmas only to be returned to them from a distance. The radical, or ‘absurd’ condition of black expatriates is depicted not as a quality that ‘exceeds’ hegemonic discourse, but one which is bound in them. It suggests that the radical freedom of black expatriation is yet another cultural ‘construction’ open to misreading and political appropriation.

However, despite his sense of humiliation, Garrison departs the narrative a stronger figure. Himes writes: ‘The proof of Roger’s development was the fact he understood [his expediency]. He was released from his ambition to become a French bourgeois intellectual.’ (34) Garrison’s bittersweet payoff is thus his disillusionment regarding the mythical freedoms of expatriate life in Paris, and the realisation that hegemony cannot be skipped out on. In this

⁸¹ Hernton, ‘Postscript’, 151.

sense, I would suggest that Garrison could be more accurately described as a metaphor for Himes himself. Garrison's authorial self-consciousness and self-deprecation was exactly Himes's 'development' as well. *A Case Of Rape* is not an exploration of black existential 'absurdity' or modernist alienation. Rather it stands as a kind of protest fiction that deals with the production of racialised expatriate fictions, and their (transatlantic) political expediency. The notion that, in diaspora, Himes left behind his interest in America, race and 'protest' is thus misleading. Rather, Himes remained critically aware of how, even on the Left Bank, categories such as 'black' and 'American' were traded within a system of cultural hegemony.

Within these terms, the idea of diaspora is not distinguished by a principle of continuous resistance, as Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* thesis puts forward. Rather, it is marked by a Gramscian principle of articulation. Brent Hayes Edwards posits that students of black diasporic cultures must 'attend to the ways the term always can be re-articulated and abstracted into evocations of untroubled essentialism or inviolate roots.'⁸² This is precisely what Himes noted in his early years as a black expatriate writer. The radical allure of exiled African American in the 1950s did not equate to their occupying of a critical space outside national or racial politics. Rather, it uncovered the way in which their public image and work continued to intersect with an essentialist discourse of Western privilege, individual freedom, and racial difference.

⁸² Edwards, 'The Practise of Diaspora', 37.

3

‘Naturally, the Negro.’: Himes and the Noir Formula

Melvin Van Peebles recalls interviewing Himes in the early 1960s whilst working as a journalist for *France Observateur* magazine. By this time, Himes was an established writer of detective fiction, having won the prestigious *Grand Prix de la Litterature Policière* for *A Rage In Harlem* (1957).¹ Peebles was dispatched to Himes’s Parisian apartment with the task of gaining an insight into his writing practises. Once there, Himes drew Van Peebles’s attention to a pile of paper on his desk. Himes informed him that it consisted of exactly 220 pieces of carbon paper, which he used to duplicate his manuscripts. Van Peebles picks up the account:

‘What’s the significance of 220 pages?’ I asked, fascinated. ‘Are you into numerology or something?’

‘Numerology my ass,’ Chester laughed. He explained that his contract with the publisher required that he deliver a manuscript of at least 220 pages. ‘When the pile on the right hand side begins to get low I know it’s time to start winding the story up.’²

It seemed that Himes’s winning approach to detective fiction was more pragmatic than it was artistic. The anecdote suggests that Himes perceived his newfound craft in terms of contractual obligation. Both the fixed page-count, and the use of carbon duplication, indicate that the content of Himes’s Harlem fiction was literally shaped and standardised by a commercial imperative.

Himes’s literary technique stands as a metaphor for what this chapter argues was his commodification, or ‘pulping’ as an African American noir writer. On the most basic level, Himes’s move into formula fiction was instigated by financial pressures. In the same interview, Van Peebles asked Himes what got him into ‘writing mystery novels’, to which Himes responded flatly: ‘money’.³ Himes repeatedly accredited his career as a writer for

¹ Himes was the first American to pick up the top award for crime fiction in France. To mark the occasion, Jean Giono wrote that he would ‘give all of Dos Passos and Fitzgerald for a few pages of Himes.’ Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 105.

² Melvin Van Peebles, ‘The Unconquered’, in Chester Himes, *The Harlem Cycle Vol. 1* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2002 [1957]), ix-x.

³ Van Peebles, ‘The Unconquered’, x.

Gallimard's *Série Noire* to the advance offered to him by its editor, Marcel Duhamel.⁴ By the mid-1950s, Himes's 'protest' work was selling poorly or not at all, and his latest ideas (including *A Case Of Rape*) were being declined by publishers. In a 1956 letter to New American Library, he pleaded for a decision regarding his work, stating: 'I am in deep trouble now and I am trying desperately to get out before it is too late.'⁵ Little wonder, then, that Himes turned his mind to a literature designed primarily to *sell*. In the same period, he told a friend of his intention to 'write a novel of 225 pages, packed with so much good clean American brutality that every publisher in the city will yearn to publish it.'⁶

As Van Peebles's anecdote attests, Himes was eerily accurate in his prediction that short, standardised and gratuitously violent fiction would prove his financial saviour. In this sense, Himes's turn to noir fiction enacted a dynamic of commodification, or 'pulping', on an aesthetic level also. Indeed, 'good clean American brutality' was the central tenet of Duhamel's *Série Noire*. Launched in 1945 after a wartime embargo on American culture, the series translated and published the classics of American noir and hardboiled detective fiction. In doing so, Duhamel popularised a vision of American urbanity defined by violence, hypersexuality and racial abjection. Moreover, as implied by its name, the success of the *Série Noire* encapsulated the Left Bank fascination with African American urban culture. As countless scholars have argued, the noir and hardboiled aesthetic relies upon a fundamental of racial difference to convey its vision of social corruption. More bluntly, Fredric Jameson has argued that the genre 'gives vent to everything racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise socially resentful and reactionary in the American collective unconscious.'⁷ Himes, as a black American ex-convict, was thus a particularly satisfying, and highly visible, candidate for the *Série Noire*. Both his Harlem fiction and his public image were perceived to embody the sensational, and racialised, urban corruption the genre aimed to deliver. As we shall see, Himes regarded his role at the *Série Noire* in just these terms. He saw it as his job to supply a bourgeois readership with exotic images of racial abjection, including his own criminal image.

⁴ See, for example: David Jenkins, 'Profile Of Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1971]), 101.

⁵ Letter from Chester Himes to Victor Weybright, 12/12/1956, Box 7, Folder 10, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

⁶ Letter from Chester Himes to Yves Malartic, 08/03/1955, Box 4, Folder 3, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, 'The Synoptic Chandler', in Joan Copjec (Ed.), *Shades Of Noir: A Reader* (London, Verso: 1993), 37. On the exploitative gender politics of the noir and hardboiled detective fiction, see E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women In Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1980 [1978]). On the exploitative racial politics of the form see Manthia Diawara, 'Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema', in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993).

As this chapter argues, then, Himes's identity as a *Série Noire* writer was overdetermined by a logic of racial exploitation, in both a contractual and an aesthetic sense. Indeed, the noir formula, and its fundamental of racial difference, stood as a literary correlative to Himes's own supply-and-demand relationship with Duhamel and his white European readership. In essence, the willingness of Himes to 'pulp' his authorship and image reflects his literary cynicism. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, Himes's career as a writer of social realism had been derailed by a postwar 'revolt against protest' on both sides of the Atlantic. These shifts had inspired in Himes a profound irreverence regarding the uses, limits and potentialities of black literature. At the end of his career, Himes stated:

I doubt any book helps the race problem. I've never believed that literature has any effect at all on social or political issues...I think that writing should be a force in the world, I just don't believe it is. It seems incapable of changing things.⁸

In ten years, Himes had gone from pioneering 'black protest fiction' to doubting the very ability of black literature to engage purposefully with social truths. As such, Himes's move into a racialised literary formula encapsulated his growing postwar sense of black literature as a commodity form, problematically instigated in, rather than aloof from, the production of racial inequality. Paradoxically, however, the form provided Himes with a fresh object of materialist critique in this sense. As John Cawelti has commented, a literary formula's potential for social critique is 'ultimately controlled and limited by the familiar world of the formulaic structure.'⁹ This formulaic structure provided a literary space with which Himes could dramatise his own pop-cultural 'pulping', and explore the limits and uses of black literature and popular culture.

The first part of this chapter examines the way in which the noir formula encapsulated the postwar containment of literary 'realism' within discourses of racial and behavioural difference. By analysing the professional dialogue between Himes and Duhamel, I demonstrate the way in which Himes's *Série Noire* fiction, and its potential for literary realism, was, from the outset, delimited by a demand for images of racial and behavioural abjection. Secondly, this chapter examines the way in which noir's aesthetic of racial difference fuelled a consumer fantasy of 'hardboiled' subjectivity and transgression for the intended white reader. By examining the promotion of his public image as an African

⁸ Michel Fabre, 'Interview With Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 86-89.

⁹ John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 16.

American *Série Noire* writer, I demonstrate the way in which Himes himself was objectified and consumed as part of a fantasy of white individualist (consumer) agency.

However, by examining an early noir sketch Himes submitted to Duhamel entitled 'Naturally, the Negro' (1956), we will see that Himes was acutely and critically aware of these politics. The sketch experiments with the genre's racialised logic and aesthetics, making the point that the postwar symbol of abjection and transgression is 'naturally, the Negro.' In a double move that would come to define his Harlem fiction, Himes exaggerates the racial exploitation he saw at the heart of the genre, and reflects critically upon it.

Noir Realism

The *Série Noire* offered Himes the opportunity to relieve himself of some 'deep trouble' financially. Yet what was the wider significance of this former 'black protest' writer's move into the genre? As we have seen, critics have been divided over whether Himes's career change entailed a continuation of, or a break with, his earlier work. Certain scholars argue that the noir formula allowed Himes to maintain and develop his dedication to social realism, be it 'working-class' or 'folk'.¹⁰ Elsewhere, however, Himes is accused of selling out to a form that deals in lurid and impressionistic fantasies of black criminality.¹¹ In his autobiography, Himes described the process of writing detective fiction in ways that complicates both arguments. Describing his initial foray into the genre, he wrote:

I would sit in my room and become hysterical thinking about the wild, incredible story I was writing. But it was only for the French, I thought, and they would believe anything about Americans, black or white, if it was bad enough. And I thought I was writing realism. It never occurred to me I was writing absurdity. Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one can not tell the difference.¹²

The comment suggests that the noir formula actively blurs, rather than distinguishes between, social realism and racial fantasy. Himes sardonically claims that when it came to the subject of black America, his *Série Noire* audience would 'believe anything' as long as it was 'bad enough'. Thus, to ask whether Himes was writing 'realism' or 'absurdity' is to miss the true significance of the form. Rather, the postwar theorisation of 'noir' reflects the way in which

¹⁰ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2000), 282. See also Diawara, 'Noir by Noirs', 261-278.

¹¹ For example, see Wanda Coleman, 'Wanda Coleman', in Andrea Juno (ed.), *Angry Women* (San Francisco: Re/Search, 1991).

¹² Chester Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity: The Autobiography Of Chester Himes: Volume II* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1976), 109.

literary realism was itself increasingly contained by what Thomas Hill Schaub has called a ‘moral’ and ‘psychological idea of “reality.”’¹³ Himes’s *Série Noire* output was billed as delivering a ‘realistic’ Harlem of social and capitalist corruption. Yet, as we shall see, this ‘realism’ was to be judged on its evocation of moral, behavioural, and above all *racial* abjection.

Himes regarded the political exigencies of American hardboiled detective fiction with ambivalence. In some ways, his move into the genre was logical. He identified with its Popular Front origins, and in particular the leftist leanings of hardboiled godfather Dashiell Hammett.¹⁴ Himes claimed that, in prison, he experienced something of a literary epiphany whilst reading the *Black Mask* serialisation of Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*. He claimed to have been ‘captivated’ by Hammett’s searing condemnation of capitalist America. ‘He had an extraordinary gift for telling stories,’ Himes said, ‘while describing at the same time...the corruption of American society.’¹⁵ Hammett and Himes’s early fiction share a preoccupation with the labour movement, and a faith in New Deal liberalism. Christopher Breu argues that both authors’ early work depict ‘the poisoning of democratic ideals by corporate and criminal interests.’¹⁶ Similarly, Hammett pioneered the objectivist style that Himes would employ in the 1940s. One could imagine *If He Holler’s* Bob Jones envying Hammett’s Continental Op for his deadpan ability to, in the words of one of his adversaries, ‘take all the colour out of life.’¹⁷ Hammett doesn’t so much point his finger at an individual as construct a panorama of corporate corruption and violent labour suppression. The culprit of a novel like *Red Harvest* is Poisonville itself, an ‘ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been all dirtied up by mining.’¹⁸

However, whilst Himes revered Hammett’s critique of capitalist corruption, he was less enamoured by other aspects of the classic hardboiled aesthetic. In particular, Himes criticised Raymond Chandler’s social commentary for its ‘asinine’ protagonist and reliance

¹³ Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction In the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 21.

¹⁴ In 1951 Hammett was convicted of contempt of court when questioned before the US District about the bail fund of the Communist-sponsored Civil Rights Congress of New York. He spent six months in prison. ‘Chronology’ in Dashiell Hammett, *Three Novels: The Maltese Falcon, The Thin Man, Red Harvest* (London: Everyman’s Library, 2000 [1929]), xl.

¹⁵ Michel Fabre, ‘Chester Himes Direct’ in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1983]), 141.

¹⁶ Breu, *Hardboiled Masculinities*, 63. Similarly, Mike Davis cites *If He Hollers Let Him Go* as fronting ‘the brief appearance of Black noir’ in the mid 1940s. Mike Davis, *City Of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 42-43. See also McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 282.

¹⁷ Dashiell Hammett, *The Dain Curse* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962 [1930]), 61.

¹⁸ Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*, in *Three Novels: The Maltese Falcon, The Thin Man, Red Harvest* (London: Everyman’s Library, 2000 [1929]) 437.

upon African American and Mexican stereotypes.¹⁹ Himes singled out as ‘crap’ a moment in Chandler’s *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) in which ‘he has this joker [Marlowe] ride about in the Central Avenue section.’²⁰ The novel in question depicts L.A.’s nonwhite ghetto as otherworldly in its deprivation, made eerie by the ‘dead alien silence of another race.’ Similarly, its inhabitants are not so much characters as ‘quiet shadows that drift soundless across the floor.’ The narration is almost entirely sensuous and impressionistic, a collage of smells (‘stale sweat’, ‘engine oil’) and sounds (‘negroes chant[ing] and chatter[ing]’).²¹ Fred Pfeil writes that these instances see the genre depart from a ‘Hammett-like statement of bare fact’ to give us a ‘moral and aesthetic atmosphere.’²² Moreover, Chandler presents an atmosphere grounded wholly in the consciousness of the white male. This ‘sadistically filthy’ nonwhite area has a delirious effect on the narrator Marlowe, as he drifts slowly ‘like a paper bag blowing along the concrete sidewalk.’²³ Here, the social corruption that the genre aimed to represent is coded in terms of racial boundaries, rather than class dialectics. Moreover, it is a corruption that poses a specific threat to the hardboiled hero’s white heteronormativity.

The representation of social corruption as gender and racial difference defined the genre’s appeal for noir theorists on the Parisian Left Bank. Influential theorists of noir saw the hardboiled detective novel as a dose of existential, anti-bourgeois realism. Claire Gorrara writes that if the *roman noir* was a product of American capitalism, ‘it also appeared to offer a stringent critique of that social and political order.’²⁴ In their influential 1955 *Panorama Du Film Noir Americain*, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton cited a ‘new realism’ about urban violence and savage capitalism as a key feature of the genre.²⁵ Similarly, Claude-Edmone Magny claimed that the new techniques in modern writing were journalistic adaptations of *cinéma vérité* technique, an ‘and then, and then, and then effect.’²⁶ However, as James Naremore writes, these critics ultimately conceived the genre ‘as if it were an

¹⁹ Michael J. Bandler, ‘Portrait Of A Man Reading’ in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1972]), 109.

²⁰ Williams, ‘My Man Himes’, 1954.

²¹ Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, in *Three Novels* (London: Penguin, 1993 [1940]), 169-171, 193.

²² Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies In Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995), 115.

²³ Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 187, 193.

²⁴ Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir In Post-War French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 41. Similarly, Naremore has traced the roots of postwar film noir theories in French popular front films of the 1930s and left wing politics. James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 15. See also Carl Richardson, *Autopsy: An Element of Realism in Film Noir* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1992), 190.

²⁵ Gorrara, *The Roman Noir*, 14, 20.

²⁶ Louis Menand, ‘The Promise Of Freedom, The Friend Of Authority: American Culture In Postwar France’, in Michael Kazin, Joseph Anthony McCartin (eds.), *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 217, 209.

existential allegory of the white male condition.’ For Left Bank thinkers, the corruption of capitalist society equated to a specific violation of heteropatriarchal norms.²⁷ In an influential 1946 essay, Jean-Pierre Chartier read American film noir’s vision of social breakdown in just these terms. Chartier cited the genre’s Taylorist vision as offering a ‘disgusted point of view regarding human behaviour.’ Above all, Chartier was struck by the behaviour of the form’s female characters, describing them as ‘particularly monstrous’ and driven by a ‘sexual drive that dooms them.’ Importantly, Chartier asserted that the ‘action’ of the drama ‘doesn’t spring from exterior causes.’²⁸ Chartier attributed the hard exteriorising ‘action’ of the genre to the underlying presence of abject and immoral behaviour. Similarly, Nino Frank, often cited as the definitive noir theorist, wrote that the genre’s power came in its *behavioural* insight. He wrote: ‘the essential question is no longer “who-done-it?” but how does this protagonist *act*?’²⁹

Noir theories reflected a wider trend amongst leftist and existential thinkers towards a humanist discourse that viewed ‘white heteropatriarchy’ as ‘the racialised essence of Man.’³⁰ As such, they did not so much reject the Popular Front’s anti-capitalist critique as subsume it within the language of moral behaviourism and individual choice. For Marc Vernet, these tendencies reduce the genre’s social enquiry to that of a ‘jeremiad’ based on the ‘privilege’ of white manhood.³¹ Similarly, Eric Lott defines the noir formula by a Manichean racial politics, a dynamic embodied in its aesthetic interplay of light against dark. Lott argues that the genre permitted the (white male) viewer or reader to acknowledge the “dark” side of the Western self.’ However, Lott argues that ‘by relying on race to convey that pathology, it in effect erected a *cordon sanitaire* around the circle of corruption it sought to penetrate.’³² The ameliorating of social realism to racial abjection, even primitivism, contained and disavows the ‘realism’ of the genre within a discourse of behavioural abnormality.

²⁷ Naremore, *Film Noir In Its Contexts*, 26.

²⁸ Jean-Pierre Chartier and Alain Silver (trans.), ‘Americans Also Make Noir Films’, in Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds.), *Film Noir: Reader 2* (New York: First Limelight Edition, 1999 [1946]), 21-23.

²⁹ Nino Frank, ‘A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure’, in Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds.), *Film Noir: Reader 2* (New York: First Limelight Edition, 1999 [1946]), 16. Emphasis added.

³⁰ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations In Black: Toward a Queer Of Colour Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 7, 15, 6. For an example of Marxist Humanism at its most heteropatriarchal, see Georg Lukacs and Rodney Livingstone (trans.), *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 99-103.

³¹ For all its ‘radical’ leanings, Vernet links the postwar French popularity of the genre to the flowering of Poujadism, a populist movement which lamented modernity as a violation of middle-class traditions. Akin to the kind of American nationalism seen in the McCarthyite era, the genre’s vision of an immoral universe intersected with a ‘conservative reaction on the part of the petty bourgeoisie.’ Marc Vernet, ‘Film Noir On The Edge of Doom’, in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades Of Noir* (London: Verso, 1999), 19.

³² Eric Lott, ‘The Whiteness of Film Noir’, *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Autumn 1997), 545, 562, 545.

Duhamel's *Série Noire* popularised this brand of moral and psychological realism. Claire Gorrara writes that the series endorsed a vision of social reality in which 'scenes of physical and mental anguish titillate the senses and draw a guilty complicity from the reader.'³³ If we look at the series' promotional material, we can see the way in which its editor Marcel Duhamel aimed to represent social ills in just this way. Duhamel defined the series by its commitment to:

[A]ction, anxiety, and violence...As in good movies, the state of the soul manifests itself in gestures, and readers fond of literary introspection are obliged to perform an inverse mental gymnastic. There is also love, preferable bestial, unruly passion, hate without mercy. In short, our goal is to prevent you from sleeping.³⁴

On one level, Duhamel is describing social realism at its most hard and exteriorising, all 'violence', 'action' and 'gestures'. However, he simultaneously refers to these tenets as a manifestation of the 'state of the soul'. Readers of 'literary introspection' are asked not to close the book, but to perform an 'inverse mental gymnastic.' The genre's air of realism is thus relegated by Duhamel to a product of deeper behavioural truths, and a desire to 'prevent [the reader] from sleeping.' Here, the competing tenets of the genre (materialism, moralism) resolve themselves in the form of a 'realistically' described nightmare.

In this sense, Himes's dual identity as black protest writer and ex-convict seemed to offer just the right mix of realistic and 'bestial' aesthetics. Duhamel duly instructed his new writer to infuse his writing with both. On the one hand, Duhamel urged Himes to focus on 'action in detail', to present 'visible' scenes, rather than an introspective 'stream of consciousness'.³⁵ Similarly, he told Himes not to 'invent plots' but instead draw on his 'past experience' of Harlem.³⁶ Simultaneously, however, Himes remembers Duhamel instructing him to 'put plenty [of] comedy in it, not too much white brutality, in fact there didn't need to be any white people in it, just an action-packed funny story about Harlem.'³⁷ From this, Himes deduced that his new editor did not want 'heroic, educated or professional Negroes. [He] liked Negro clowns, musicians, horn players, dancers, etc. No other.'³⁸ Thus, in keeping with the

³³ Gorrara, *The Roman Noir*, 14.

³⁴ Cited in Jonathan P. Eburne, 'The Transatlantic Mysteries of Paris: Chester Himes, Surrealism, and the *Série noire*', *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No.3 (2005), 812.

³⁵ Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 102.

³⁶ Cited in Milliken, *Chester Himes*, 209.

³⁷ Letter from Chester Himes to Carl Van Vechten, 16/12/1954, Box 9, Folder 7, Chester Himes Collection, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³⁸ Letter from Chester Himes to Rosalyn Targ, 17/12/1967, Box 8, Folder 11, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

noir aesthetic, the *Série Noire* appeared to demand from Himes a realistic depiction of urban corruption, yet one that was deeply racialised.

In response to Duhamel's instructions, the cash-strapped Himes reassured him: 'I will follow your suggestions in all aspects.'³⁹ In 1956, Himes penned a sketch entitled 'Naturally, the Negro', with the aim of illustrating to Duhamel his ability to match his editor's demands. 'Naturally, the Negro' illustrates the extent to which an emphasis upon race and colour was central to the type of 'realism' Himes was expected to deliver. In an echo of *A Case Of Rape*, the threadbare story details the interracial sexual exploits of Pays, an African American jazz pianist in the Latin Quarter. It opens with Pays 'improvising on Chopin' in the St. Germain Club at 5am.⁴⁰ Thelma, a 'redheaded white American woman', is draped over his piano, armed with a gun. Kitty, a 'young blonde woman' and Pays' lover, enters the club, warning him that Thelma is armed. (381) The following night, Pays momentarily leaves his piano to go to the bathroom, to find on his return that Kitty has been murdered. Fearing incrimination, Pays' embarks on a search for Thelma, asking other black expatriates if they know any 'redheaded patrons of black pianists.' (383) The story ends with a redheaded woman, possibly Thelma, confronting Pays with the words 'I'm a viper.' (385)

The story communicates its pervasive sense of danger and criminality through images of racial and gender abjection. Whilst Pays embodies a bohemian vision of black masculinity, the white female characters suggest violence and hyper-sexuality. Before making love in a hotel room, Pays and Kitty undress and smoke dope, Pays 'looking dreamily at her clear white skin.' (382) The scene binds the duo's air of criminality to their racial and gender transgression. Indeed, the story relentlessly emphasises the interplay of colour as defined by Lott: the hotel room is 'lit by a pink shaded bed lamp'; Kitty lies naked on a 'green spread' (382); Pays plays *Deep Purple* and *The Champagne Blues* at the club. (385) The racial significance of Pays and Kitty's sexual relationship is heightened through this stark emphasis on colour. We learn that 'during the two weeks he had known her he had always decorated her nude body with a coloured scarf before taking her.' Whilst tying a yellow scarf around Kitty's ankle, Pays tells her, 'I'm in a yellow fever for you, baby.' (382) Similarly, this same technique links interracial sex to murderous violence. Pays finds Kitty's corpse 'clad in a green satin sheath' with a 'bright yellow scarf ...knotted tightly about her neck. Her face was purple.' (383) Himes thus presented Duhamel with a story, in its sensational subject matter and dreamlike delivery, that

³⁹ Letter from Chester Himes to Marcel Duhamel, 16/10/1956, Box 1, Folder 12, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

⁴⁰ Chester Himes, 'Naturally, The Negro', in *The Collected Stories Of Chester Himes* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990 [1956]), 381. All subsequent citations are parenthesised.

was duly designed to ‘prevent the reader from sleeping.’ To a heightened degree, the story’s noir milieu uses colour to signify both sexual and violent deviance. Rather than an objective urban panorama, Himes delivers what the story itself refers to as ‘a dream of varicoloured desire.’ (383)

As such, the creation of a noir formula actively blurred the line between social realism and moral impressionism; between objective critique and subjective prejudice. In this sense, Himes’s move into the *Série Noire* was a logical culmination of his postwar rearticulation as a black ‘protest’ writer. As we observed in the previous chapters, Himes’s materialist analysis of racial and class oppression became increasingly outmoded within a transatlantic discourse of racial difference and psychology. Schaub writes that a pervasive anti-Stalinism encouraged writers to ‘convert historical, Marxist terms into romantic, ahistorical categories.’ This Cold War shift did not negate the term ‘realism’, but instead ‘redefined [it] in ways meant to distinguish it sharply from either “naturalism” or “social realism.”’ Proponents of these ideas were found amongst liberal critics on either side of the Atlantic: Lionel Trilling’s *Partisan Review*, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes*.⁴¹ For example, Trilling urged writers to reject the idea of a ‘wholly external’ reality, and instead exercise the ‘free play of the moral imagination.’⁴² Similarly, Sartre sharply distinguished his definition of ‘engaged literature’ from ‘the old social realism’ that desired ‘an impartial picture of Society.’⁴³ The French theorisation of American hardboiled fiction and film as ‘noir’ reflected a transatlantic consensus in this respect. Moreover, Himes took advantage of the fact that, in this shift from social to moral consciousness, the spectre of racial difference was a precious commodity.

Hardboiled Exploitation

For Himes, the expectations and demands associated with the *Série Noire* confirmed that the concept of literary ‘realism’ or ‘black protest’ fiction had been distorted beyond recognition. He commented retrospectively that his ‘philosophy in writing changed around 1955’ upon realising that ‘the protest novel no longer could accomplish anything as a black literary work.’⁴⁴ How did such a realisation impact Himes’s sense of authorial agency? As we have

⁴¹ Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War*, 37, 31.

⁴² Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking, 1950), 4, 221.

⁴³ Jean-Paul Sartre and Bernard Frechtman (trans.), *Literature and Existentialism* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1962 [1945]), 5, 23.

⁴⁴ Flontina Miller, ‘Author’s Career’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1973]), 117.

seen, certain scholars have argued that Himes's commercialist career change signalled that 'he was ready for a rest' from such concerns altogether.⁴⁵ However, others have suggested that the *Série Noire* liberated Himes from the concerns of realism altogether, and allowed him to take his work into areas of modernist experimentation. For example, Jonathan Eburne argues that Himes collaborated with Duhamel, a former surrealist, to pioneer a 'vernacular surrealism'.⁴⁶ Eburne regards noir as innately surrealistic, with many of its key theorists and publications sharing links to the movement of the 1920s and '30s.⁴⁷ He argues that noir's focus on behaviour, rather than sociology, entailed a surrealist rejection of both causality and 'the vulgar reduction' of crime 'to an emblem of class struggle.' Instead, noir revelled in the chaos of the criminal subconscious, thus aggravating the 'heap of broken images' that structure reality.⁴⁸ As such, Eburne suggests that the *Série Noire* allowed Himes to consciously reject 'the instrumental use of language that characterised [Richard] Wright,' and deliver a surrealist vision that wilfully frustrates stable meanings.⁴⁹

However, Himes appeared to regard the noir formula's negation of social realism in more irreverent terms. Indeed, when asked of his surrealist credentials in an interview, he claimed to have 'no literary relationship with what is called the surrealist school.' Instead, he suggested that the force of 'racism' and social exploitation had made it so 'black life could sometimes be described as surrealistic.'⁵⁰ The comment suggests a lingering concern with social and racial exploitation, despite the *Série Noire*'s formulaic expectations and commercial pressures. Moreover, the exigencies of noir could be said to energise this concern. Indeed, I argue that it is these exploitative formulaic expectations that Himes turned his authorial gaze upon. Rather than jettisoning social critique in favour of formal experimentation, Himes's liminal place in the *Série Noire* provided him with a fresh subject matter. Indeed, Himes explained that his Harlem fiction was fundamentally overdetermined by an exploitative, and racialised, audience demand. Reflecting on his *Série Noire* career, Himes told John A. Williams:

⁴⁵ Milliken, *Chester Himes*, 211.

⁴⁶ Eburne, 'The Transatlantic Mysteries', 808.

⁴⁷ See Naremore, *More Than Night*, 18-22.

⁴⁸ Jonathan P. Eburne, 'Surrealism Noir', in Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (eds.), *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 94, 97, 106.

⁴⁹ Eburne, 'The Transatlantic Mysteries', 807-808. Similarly, Kevin Bell has argued that the power of Himes's *Série Noire* fiction lies in its 'unavailab[ility] to instrumentalist or identitarian/ideological concerns.' Kevin Bell, 'Assuming the Position: Fugitivity and Futurity in the Work of Chester Himes', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2005), 859.

⁵⁰ Fabres, 'Chester Himes Direct', 140.

The white readers read into a book what they wish, and in any book concerning the black people in the world, the majority of white readers are just looking for the exotic episodes. They're looking for things that will amuse or titillate them. The rest of it they skip over and pay no attention to.⁵¹

Himes describes his encounter with the noir formula as something that compromised, rather than liberated, his authorial agency. The comment suggests that Himes's move into noir fiction indeed enacted a flight from literary 'instrumentality'. However, this is not to say this flight was a formal exercise in surrealist illegibility. Rather, it reflects his critical awareness of the perilous financial pressures, and ideological currents, that actively worked upon and delimited his formula fiction. Moreover, it suggests that Himes's own identity as a black noir writer was overdetermined by a logic of racial voyeurism he was all too aware of.

Himes's comment on the ability of his white readers to read 'what they wish' into his fiction alludes to an insidious racial binary at the heart of the genre. Eburne reads the genre as allowing the reader to spontaneously experience their own latent fears and desires. However, other critics view this as a freedom that was both racially and ideologically coded. Christopher Breu argues just this in defining the genre by a fetishistic relationship between (white male) reader and corrupt (black) urban milieu. The former, typically embodied in the text by the hardboiled detective, is defined by an ultimate control over, and redemption from, the criminal landscape. He is, in this respect, the text's hardboiled 'subject' rather than its noir 'object'. In particular, Breu suggests that the hardboiled genre's depiction of nonwhite criminality enables an 'individualist transgression against the rationalised order of modern society.' The original *Black Mask* hardboiled detective series thus allowed the white reader to figuratively don a mask of blackness so as to experience an exotic underbelly of modernity. As Breu argues, the white male reader/protagonist 'draws implicitly on the racist iconography of black masculinity in order to construct a more fully transgressive version of male identity.' As such, noir's chaotic vision of racial abjection not only delineates social chaos, but constructs a thrilling and guilt-free metaphor of transgression for the buttoned-down white subject. In this sense, Breu argues that the genre is structured around a 'resolutely negative cultural fantasy' rather than a realistic vision.⁵²

This racial dialectic (white subjectivity - black objectification) energised the appeal of the genre to postwar noir theorists. Jill Forbes argues that, faced with a shadowy *mise en scène*, the hardboiled reader could imagine themselves as an 'individual...explorer on the road

⁵¹ Williams, 'My Man Himes', 46.

⁵² Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*, 61, 149, 34.

to knowledge.⁵³ For example, André Bazin argued that the genre's 'deep chiaroscuro' compelled the individual to explore the limits of their own morality. Bazin saw in the interplay of black and white a moral enactment of 'all human experience', and a conflict between 'good and evil, light and dark, west and east, city and country.'⁵⁴ Similarly, for these very reasons, Jean-Paul Sartre fantasised about becoming the kind of hardboiled hero played by 'Gary Cooper.' He envisioned himself riding into town on the back of a 'cattle-truck' in the mould of a James M. Cain hero.⁵⁵ For Sartre, the appeal of the hardboiled subject (defined explicitly as white and male) was his perilous journey to the social margins.⁵⁶ As we saw in the previous chapter, Sartre's vision of literary freedom hinged on the idea of *difference* and transgression. This places the genre's surrealist aesthetic within the context of racial voyeurism. As Sartre suggested, the ability of the (white male) subject to penetrate modernity was affirmed primarily through an identification with the 'other'.

Another Left Bank existentialist and noir aficionado took these racialised fantasies one step further. In 1946, Boris Vian wrote *I'll Spit On Your Graves*, a novel set in the American south and featuring a revenging African American protagonist. Most interestingly, Vian published the novel under the pseudonym of Vernon Sullivan. At the time, Vian claimed that Sullivan was an African American writer who had asked him to translate the novel for a French audience, as it was too shocking for American publishers.⁵⁷ Breu argues that Vian's ruse stands as a 'perfect distillation of the racial fantasy narrative at the heart of noir.'⁵⁸ In effect, Vian 'passed' as a black American in order to imbue his text with the transgressive qualities so crucial to the genre's appeal. Like others on the Left Bank, Vian was convinced that black American culture offered a more authentic perspective on modernity.⁵⁹ Vian claimed to want to 'grab his reader with his pen' and to 'invoke a physical reaction.'⁶⁰ This desire manifested itself in a preoccupation with racial origins, and the blurring thereof. The novel depicts the sadistic exploits of Lee Anderson, a light-skinned African American, who 'passes' in a white southern community. Lee is out to avenge the white race following the racist murder of his brother, the memory of which makes his 'good Negro blood throb in

⁵³ Forbes, 'Winning Hearts and Minds', 38.

⁵⁴ Forbes, 'Winning Hearts and Minds', 37, 34.

⁵⁵ Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, 47. Jean-Paul Sartre and Quintin Hoare (ed. and trans.), *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War, 1939-1940* (London: Verso, 1984), 273.

⁵⁶ Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, 51.

⁵⁷ Vian's ruse fooled many, until the author was prosecuted for obscenity and briefly jailed by French authorities. Naremore, *Film Noir In Its Contexts*, 13.

⁵⁸ Breu, *Hardboiled Masculinities*, 35.

⁵⁹ See Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 167.

⁶⁰ Cited in Keith Scott, 'Pornography, Parody and Paranoia - The Imagined America of Vernon Sullivan', *French Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 29 (1999), 209.

anger.’ Lee’s revenge takes the form of the rape and murder of wealthy and promiscuous white women. The reader follows his explicit acts of sexual violence, as he and his victims are figuratively reduced to ‘a bunch of monkeys, untidy, greedy, chattering, vicious.’ This, for Vian, was ‘realism a little advanced,’ a means for the white reader to confront the ‘underbelly’ of modern life, and their own latent desires.⁶¹ Crucially, in both the novel’s content and promotion, Vian borrowed from the perceived pleasures and horrors of black masculinity in order to offer such a transgression.

Within this context, we can perhaps compare Himes’s appeal as an African American noir writer to that of the fictional Vernon Sullivan. Himes, as a black ex-convict, was perfectly placed to fuel the genre’s fantasy of racial and criminal transgression. Indeed, Himes seemed to regard his celebrity as a construction akin to that of Sullivan. Late in his life, Himes told an interview that ‘it’s Duhamel who created Himes, the writer of detective fiction.’⁶² Himes, it seems, perceived his role in the *Série Noire* as a racial commodity to be consumed by his white readers. In interviews with the French press, we can observe Himes playing up his credentials as a damaged African American ex-convict. In a 1955 interview with Annie Briere, Himes reflects on the familial tensions of his childhood, and his time in prison, stating ominously, ‘I was a bad boy.’ Referring to his criminality, he puts himself forward as a ‘typical American’, claiming ‘we seldom think before we act.’ Moreover, Himes suggests that these psychological qualities permeate his fiction:

The scenes in my novels are usually based on my own experience. They remain so strongly in my memory that they help me paint a more authentic picture. I always try to find material for my novels within myself, and in my own experience, instead of borrowing from other writers.⁶³

In contrast to his private irreverence regarding his expatriate identity, the public Himes is seen to push all the right noir buttons. By stressing the ‘authentic’ nature of his work, and its roots in his psychological hurt, Himes panders to the Left Bank faith in black America as a site of dangerous and naive liberty. Similarly, in a 1964 interview with Francois Bott, Himes claimed that, in his childhood, ‘racism...seemed to stick to me. It contaminated everything. It was like

⁶¹ Boris Vian and Milton Rosenthal (trans.), *I Spit On Your Graves* (Los Angeles: Tam Tam Books, 1998 [1948]), 66, 29, xii.

⁶² Maurice Cullaz, ‘Chester Himes’s Crusade: An Interview’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1985]), 144.

⁶³ Annie Briere, ‘Conversation with Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995 [1955]), 1-4.

a disease I couldn't shake.' The pathological roots of Himes' rage, and by extension his fiction, led Bott to call him 'the quintessential noir writer.'⁶⁴

It would perhaps be more appropriate to suggest that the formula designated Himes as a 'quintessential noir *author*,' in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault distinguished between the "'writer,' source of the text' and the "'author" as a secondary formation derived from the text and used to organise reaction.'⁶⁵ Clearly, Himes's role in the *Série Noire* constructed him as a noir 'author', a coveted public figure within the genre's dynamic of racial othering. Indeed, French reviews of early Harlem Cycle novels placed Himes alongside his text as an object of consumption. For example, René Masson's review of *The Heat's On* billed Himes's move into the genre as a kind of racial vendetta. Masson suggested that in his Harlem fiction, Himes 'undertook to revenge the frustrations of his adolescence' and 'liberate himself' from the 'dusty streets' and 'prying eyes' of his racist homeland. As such, the novel itself was likened to a 'strong liqueur' offering the French reader an intoxicating journey into its author's psyche. Himes is promoted here in a manner akin to Vian's Vernon Sullivan: a symbol of primitive anger returned to haunt bourgeois society.⁶⁶ This idea of a racial tension between author and reader was lauded by Sartre, who wrote that the black writer 'must make [the white reader] indignant and ashamed.' He continued: 'whatever the good-will of the white readers may be, for a negro author they represent the *Other*.'⁶⁷ Again, Sartre communicates the idea that the surrealistic noir vision of fear, desire, and abjection depended upon a dialectic of white subjectivity, and black objectification.

As we will see in following chapters, the exigencies of such pop-cultural exploitation provided Himes with his critical subject matter, even whilst galvanising his commercial appeal. The title of the sketch Himes wrote for Duhamel, 'Naturally, the Negro', indicates the self-consciousness that would energise this critique. The title sardonically references the fetishistic appeal of black noir fiction, and the idea that the noir formula 'naturally' formulated blackness as a site of abjection and transgression. As previously discussed, Himes's 'audition' piece is defined by the stark interplay of colour. Colour in the story communicates urban decay, sexual deviance, and murderous violence. Of course, this same emphasis on colour and interracial transgression logically (yet falsely) situates the African American pianist Pays as

⁶⁴ Francois Bott, 'Chester Himes: An Interview' in Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Of Mississippi Press, 1995 [1964]), 12, 16.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, 'What Is An Author?' in Josue V. Harari (ed. and trans.), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithica, NY: Cornwell University Press, 1979), 159, 160.

⁶⁶ René Masson, 'A Black Man in the *Série Noire*', *Candide*, 15/06/1961, Box 7, Folder 15, Michel Fabre Collection, Manuscript and Rare Books Library, Emory University.

⁶⁷ Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, 80.

Kitty's murderer. Himes exacerbates this implication by making Kitty a character who is 'straight out of Alabama.' (382) Moreover, Pays admits to a 'bad stateside record where white dames are concerned.' (384) The narrative thus mobilises the racially charged tryst Vian used so liberally: a black male rapist and a white Southern woman. With a reflexivity that would define his detective fiction, Himes goes on to dramatise the moment Pays realises his generic interpellation:

He worked it out in his mind. His scarf. His woman. Sex Murder. Naturally, the Negro. He was stuck... Who else would have done it but the nigger? (384)

Himes cleverly draws our attention to the racial exigencies of the noir formula. In a milieu defined by colour variance and moral chiaroscuro, Pays is guilty of a 'Sex Murder' even before the event. In many ways, the passage works as a metaphor for Himes's own liminality as a *Série Noire* writer, his sense that his white readership could 'read into a book what they wish.' As a black writer, Himes is skewered by noir's dependence upon racial abjection, in the same way Pays is 'stuck' by the circumstances surrounding Kitty's murder. Both author and character find themselves objectified within noir's fantasy of white agency, and black abjection.

Wendy Walters argues that Himes's move into the *Série Noire* saw his 'misappropriation' by a 'fetishistic logic of the sexualisation of blackness.' She cites those French reviews that highlighted the erotics of the Harlem Cycle as evidence that Himes was 'misread, perhaps because of its placement in a popular form.'⁶⁸ Whilst Himes's subjection to a 'fetishistic logic' is unquestionable, Walter's citing of it as a 'misreading' or 'misappropriation' is problematic. Indeed, Walter's contention that there is a 'wrong' way to read Himes's Harlem suggests by implication that the novels communicate a stable set of cultural meanings. However, as we have seen, Himes's move into formula fiction was catalysed by his disillusionment regarding the idea of fiction as an instrumentalist 'force in the world'. In particular, the consumer fantasy at the heart of noir enacted Himes's idea that 'readers read into a book what they wish.' Moreover, the commercial pressures acting on Himes firmly robbed him of any modernist authorial ideals (including surrealism). As such, it is hard to get away from the idea that Himes's move into noir fiction was defined from the outset by a logic of capitalistic exchange and fetishisation. In other words, both author and text were commodities, their value open for projection and rearticulation. The 'fetishising logic'

⁶⁸ Wendy W. Walters, *At Home In Diaspora: Black International Writing* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 69.

seen in contemporary reviews was thus not so much a misreading, as a logical end product of Himes's liminal situation, and the noir formula itself.

Noir Atlantic

Himes's 'creation' as a noir writer thus enacts John Cawelti's point that a literary formula enacts a mode of perception rather than cleanly reflect a social problem, or particular authorial intention.⁶⁹ If, then, we are to suggest that Himes's move into the genre equated to his flight from 'instrumentality', we must frame it in these more materialistic terms. In particular, the noir formula's fantasy of hardboiled freedom can be placed within a Cold War 'mode of perception' that privileged ideas of individual choice and cultural difference. As Schaub has detailed, Cold War intellectuals in the U.S. advocated a 'new realism' that could express man's 'inside otherness' and resist the monolithic spectre of ideology.⁷⁰ Similarly, Michel Fabre argues that Parisian existentialists sought a literature that enabled them to 'stand both inside and outside' of modern society.⁷¹ Schaub argues that the subjective perspectives, and surrealistic aesthetics, of such postwar fiction as noir was 'itself an ideology' advocating the sovereignty of the individual.⁷² The hardboiled, individualist fantasies venerated by Bazin, Sartre and Vian thus reflected a broader suspicion of collective identity. As we have seen, an increased emphasis upon what Pierre-André Taguieff calls a '*fundamentalism of difference*' (be it racial, cultural, or both) helped galvanise such a turn.⁷³

Amid these currents, then, both Himes's work and public image responded to the increasing emphasis upon racial difference to provide literary meaning. His career progression in this period embodies the postwar reaction against popular front politics, and a class-based analysis of race relations. From the 'revolt against protest', through his paradoxical exile, and to his 'creation' as a noir writer, Himes's belief that people were 'sick and tired of the poor downtrodden Negro' was played out.⁷⁴ As we have seen, the *Série Noire* turned Himes's career around in this respect. Duhamel's series provided an outlet in which he could capitalise

⁶⁹ Cawelti, *Formula Fiction*, 10, 27, 35.

⁷⁰ Schaub, *American Fiction In the Cold War*, 31, 181, 21, 179, 81.

⁷¹ Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 181.

⁷² Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War*, 73, 65. Perhaps the most definitive example of the Cold War liberal idea of 'inside otherness' is Lionel Trilling's assertion that reality is a 'dialectic' and the individual is defined by 'their contradictions.' Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 9.

⁷³ Pierre-André Taguieff and Hassan Melehy (trans.), *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and its Doubles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4-6.

⁷⁴ Cited in McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 255.

financially on the Left Bank's fetishistic view of black American urban culture. This move subjected his fiction to a market logic, and a literary formula, that situated the (white) reader as a rampant *consumer* of racial images. As such, Himes's success in the *Série Noire* marked the completion of his postwar shift from 'protest' to 'pulp' in the most literal of ways.

Crucially, however, this was a progression that demystified Himes's views of 'race' literature. It developed his understanding of fiction as a (transatlantic) commodity form, and his own authorship as a politically expedient identity category. In this respect, Himes described his move into genre fiction as a particularly *invigorating* form of disillusionment:

I was writing some strange shit. Sometime before, I didn't know when, my mind had rejected all reality as I had known it and I had begun to see the world as a cesspool of buffoonery...All of reality was absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting. It was funny really. If I could just get the handle to the joke. And I had got the handle, by some miracle.⁷⁵

On the one hand, Himes refers to his Harlem fiction in the most flippant of terms, dismissing it as a form of literary waste, or 'shit'. However, he goes on to describe this same quality as disarming him of certain literary convictions or absolutes. In essence, it enables him to reject a stable, or essentialist view of his own role as a writer, and a political agent. Instead, his *Série Noire* experiences illustrate the 'contradictory' and 'absurd' nature of popular culture. Gramsci argued that all social and class identities were 'relational' inasmuch as they defined each other. He suggested that as a result of such dynamism, a cultural work should be evaluated 'not for what it professes to be but for what it really is and show itself to be in concrete historical works.'⁷⁶ An awareness of his own fiction's 'concrete' materialism was the crucial offshoot of Himes's frank view of his literary 'shit'. As we shall see in the next part of the thesis, this awareness runs through his detective fiction, turning a series of lurid potboilers into a critique of genre, authorship and racial commodification itself. To use Himes's terms, it is an ascerbic self-consciousness that provides Himes with the 'handle' to the 'joke' of black popular culture.

⁷⁵ Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 126.

⁷⁶ Antonio Gramsci and Quintin Hoare (ed.) and Geoffrey Nowell (trans.), *Selections From Prison Notebooks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 120.

Part Two:
‘The crossroads of Black America.’

4

**‘Stick in a hand and draw back a nub.’:
The Aesthetics of Urban Pathology in Himes’s Harlem**

As we have seen in part one of the thesis, Himes’s move into the *Série Noire* was a culmination of certain literary and political shifts regarding the analysis and representation of American race relations. Broadly speaking, the era saw the materialist aspirations of the Popular Front give way to a greater emphasis on behaviour, psychology and individual freedom. In the context of this shift, the question of how Himes represents Harlem in his detective fiction is a crucial, if complex, one. Should we read his literary milieu as a faithful rendering of a subjugated and impoverished urban space? Or is it simply a vision of noirish abjection, designed for racial voyeurs? Perhaps Himes’s most pointed attempt to address the matter comes in the following passage from his first Harlem novel *A Rage In Harlem*:

Looking eastward from the towers of Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on the high banks of the Hudson River, in a valley far below, waves of gray rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of a sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish. Blind mouths eating their own guts. Stick in a hand and draw back a nub.
That is Harlem.¹

The excerpt begins with an objective panorama of social marginalisation. From a supreme vantage point, Himes describes the impoverished Harlem ‘Valley’ nestled ‘far below’ the more affluent Columbia University area. It is a geographic contrast that suggests urban segregation, and uneven capitalist development. However, no sooner is this air of objectivity established, than it is negated. Himes describes the narrative perspective as ultimately ‘distorted’ by its distance, a ‘sea’ of rooftops masking that which lies below. The presumption is, then, that what follows can only be *imagined*, rather than perceived. In more lurid terms, the narrative proceeds to contrive the ‘murky waters’ of black urbanity as a primitive, cannibalistic underworld. Himes concludes by encouraging the unsighted viewer to act accordingly: to reach down, ‘stick in a hand and draw back a nub.’ The passage thus makes a

¹ Chester Himes, *A Rage In Harlem* in *The Harlem Cycle Volume I* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996 [1957]), 102. All subsequent references will be parenthesised with the prefix *RIH*.

curious double move. Whilst initially defining Harlem by its socio-economic context, it concludes by inviting the aloof reader to extract their own personal ‘nub’ or essence, from the black urban milieu.

Perhaps, then, the final sentence of the passage requires a question mark: ‘That is Harlem?’ Indeed, as this chapter argues, Himes used urban representation to pose, rather than resolve the question of his text’s authenticity. As the excerpt suggests, his detective fiction self-consciously explores the limits of literary representation. In particular, his Harlem fiction dramatises the inability of the noir formula to objectively explore the socio-economic factors underlying black urban poverty. As above, Himes thematises a postwar modality that constructs, or rather *distorts*, the African American ghetto as racially grotesque and primitive. As we have seen, Himes felt contained by his position as a commercial writer of formula fiction. Accordingly, he felt his capacity to depict a mimetic Harlem was severely compromised. On the one hand, Himes was familiar with Harlem itself, telling interviewers that ‘if you went to Harlem, you could quickly recognise the streets, the stores, and the people I depicted.’² Moreover, he appeared to view its postwar marginalisation in a materialistic fashion, commenting in 1954 that ‘unemployment, an incredible level of unemployment, was the reason for the ghetto riots...Harlem is poverty.’³ However, in his autobiography, Himes stated flatly that, in writing his Harlem novels:

I had been as much of a tourist as a white man from downtown changing his luck...The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real.⁴

Himes’s depiction of Harlem is thus defined by a fundamental paradox. Himes, a writer of Popular Front sensibilities, was fully aware of the historical dialectics underlying Harlem’s poverty and criminality. Yet, as a producer of *Série Noire* potboilers, he was compelled to offer instead an urban milieu of Manichean racial boundaries, and thus transgressive thrills.

This chapter explores the way in which *A Rage In Harlem* (1957) and *The Big Gold Dream* (1960) explore this paradox. Ultimately, these novels self-consciously critique the noir genre, and its stark racial aesthetics, as formally enacting the social marginalisation of the African American ghetto. As we have seen, certain scholars argue that Himes reclaims the

² Maurice Cullaz, ‘Chester Himes’s Crusade: An Interview’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1985]), 145.

³ Francois Bott, ‘Chester Himes: An Interview’ in Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Of Mississippi Press, 1995 [1964]), 12.

⁴ Chester Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity: The Autobiography Of Chester Himes: Volume II* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1976), 126.

genre in order to give a mimetic representation of socio-economic exploitation. For example, Manthia Diawara suggests that Himes's noir novels 'highlight less an aesthetic state of affairs than a way of life that has been imposed on black people through social injustice.'⁵ However, as we shall see, Himes's detective fiction unquestionably mobilises the most anti-progressive aspects of the genre. Indeed, his Harlem is ostensibly defined by what postwar sociologists (and noir theorists) perceived to be a pathological will towards deviancy in black urban areas. Yet Himes deals in such false consciousness so as to ultimately burlesque it as just that. Rather than presenting a picture of the 'real' Harlem, as Diawara suggests, Himes delivers a heightened, ambivalent version of the pathological one.

This chapter begins by looking at how, in his use of the 'grift' narrative, Himes mobilises the era (and genre's) black urban pathology thesis. In particular, Himes constructs a criminal milieu characterised by the master narrative of racial liberalism: the 'dysfunctional' lower-class black family. Secondly, I explore how Himes, whilst not negating these elements, heightens them in order to suggest their artifice. He draws critical attention to what Fredric Jameson has called the noir formula's 'synoptic' view of the U.S. city; its ability to project upon it certain bourgeois prejudices. Finally, the chapter concludes by reasserting the way in which Himes dramatises the 'Dark Ghetto' of the postwar imagination as a ruse, or a 'grift' in itself. He critiques his own modality as a force that actively distorts, or masks, the historical realities of racial and social exploitation. Patricia Williams writes that, statistically, African Americans are 'poor, powerless, and a minority.' She continues: 'It is in the minds of whites that blacks become large, threatening, powerful, uncontrollable, ubiquitous, and supernatural.'⁶ Himes uses his position as a progressive writer in an anti-progressive genre to explore these cultural and racial politics.

Pathological Harlem

The noir and hardboiled literary formula typically represents social corruption as a violation of white heteronormativity. As we have seen, Himes appeared entirely conscious of this trait, and moreover claimed to have acquiesced to it in his own fiction. When examining Himes's

⁵ Manthia Diawara, 'Noir by *Noirs*: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema', in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), 526. Similarly, Raymond Nelson argues that *Rage* is 'less a detective story than a naturalistic novel.' Raymond Nelson, 'Domestic Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes', in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1972]), 53.

⁶ Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 72.

depiction of Harlem, it is undeniable that the aesthetics of black urban pathology come into play. Take for instance his description of a 126th street and 8th avenue bar:

Once it had claimed respectability, had been patronised by the white and coloured businessmen in the neighbourhood and their respectable employees. But when the whorehouses, gambling clubs, dope dens had taken over 126th street to prey on the people from 125th street, it had gone into bad repute.

'This bar has gone from sugar to shit,' Jackson muttered to himself when he arrived there. (RIH 58)

The bar encapsulates Harlem's perceived shift from a position of Renaissance-era respectability, to postwar contamination: from work to crime; from 'sugar' to 'shit'. Critics have argued that this aesthetic of moral corruption pervades Himes's Harlem. For example, Sean McCann suggests that Himes practises a 'Calvinist moralism' in which black poverty equates to a pathological violence and hyper-sexuality.⁷ Similarly, Wanda Coleman criticises Himes for 'all of his shame; all his bootlicking; all of his catering to white racist conceptions about blacks.'⁸ These readings imply that Himes's Harlem allows readers to not so much confront as disavow Harlem's social problems as a matter of racial abjection.

As we have seen, a heightened representation of corrupt black urbanity permeates noir and hardboiled fiction. Critics suggest that the genre appropriates the literary milieu of the Dark City, inherited from the nineteenth century tale of the urban gothic.⁹ Nicholas Christopher writes that the Dark City is presented as a 'tale of two cities.' Whereas the 'surface city' is 'orderly and functional', the 'nether-city' is 'rife with darker impulses and forbidden currents.'¹⁰ As such, the noir urban space is constructed around a moral axis. Underlying its appearance of order and progress resides a subterranean world of behavioural chaos and unspeakable desire. In the postwar period, the work of Chandler and Spillane respectively envisioned this 'nether-city' as L.A.'s Central Avenue area, and Harlem. For example, in *One Lonely Night* Mickey Spillane describes Harlem as a 'strange no-man's land' full of 'hostile eyes...strange, foreign smells of cooking and too many people in too few rooms.'¹¹ Here, the black American ghetto is not so much a poor area of the city, as another world of foreign customs and un-American urges.

⁷ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham/ London: Duke University Press, 2000), 271, 298, 268.

⁸ Coleman, 'Wanda Coleman', 126.

⁹ James Naremore, *More Than Night: Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 45.

¹⁰ Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere In The Night: Film Noir And The American City* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 36.

¹¹ Mickey Spillane, *One Lonely Night* (New York: New American Library, 1951), 73.

In parallel with these generic moves, U.S. sociology of the postwar era enacted a similar moral binary in regards to urban segregation. As areas such as Harlem became increasingly marginalised in the Cold War era, U.S. sociologists studying urban segregation turned towards behavioural, rather than socio-economic explanations.¹² Oscar Lewis theorised a ‘culture of poverty’, a design for living not so much determined by social injustice as ‘passed down from generation to generation.’¹³ Similarly, in the pointedly titled *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Kenneth Clark diagnosed the ‘zoot effect in personality’ as a black urban criminology. In his study of young black urban males, Clark noted their:

[R]ejection of ordinary social values; the complete absence of sympathy in observing physical brutality...and the absence of guilt feelings...complete disregard for the ordinary social prestige values of a stable society.¹⁴

Clark’s language bears all the hallmarks of racial liberalism. He defines racial segregation in terms of its debilitating effect on the African American psyche. In doing so, Clark delineates a black urban community that is not so much oppressed by ‘ordinary’ and ‘stable’ American values, as punished by their absence. Clark thus envisioned noir’s Dark City as a ‘Dark Ghetto’ defined by ‘institutionalized pathology’.¹⁵ Both ideas distanced the African American ghetto as a pathologically alien terrain, rather than confronting it as an example of wider American injustice.

Certainly, Himes’s description of Harlem’s descent from ‘sugar’ to ‘shit’ feeds into the emerging postwar image of black urban pathology. Indeed, Himes’s early detective novels ostensibly depict the pathological ‘corruption’ of a naive outsider by Harlem’s criminal underworld. *A Rage In Harlem* is concerned with the relationship between Jackson, a Southern migrant, and his Harlemite fiancée Imabelle. The plot concerns the duping of Jackson by a group of grifters practising a con known as ‘The Blow.’ Claiming to have devised a system for raising the domination of bank notes, they persuade Jackson to part with fifteen hundred

¹² Daryl Michael Scott connects this shift to the anti-communist hysteria and widespread de-unionisation of the era. Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt And Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 75. On the anti-progressive turn in postwar Harlem politics see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle For Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹³ Scott, *Contempt And Pity*, 136, 142.

¹⁴ Kenneth B. Clark and James Barker, 'The Zoot Effect in Personality: A Race Riot Participant', *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1945), 144. See Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark Of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962 [1951]), 304.

¹⁵ Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989 [1965]), 27.

dollars for conversion. Jackson and Imabelle meet with the hustlers, only to be ‘arrested’ by a phoney police officer, who extorts yet more money from him. After Imabelle leaves with the conmen, Jackson assumes she has been kidnapped, and spends the rest of the novel scouring Harlem for her. Of course, unbeknownst to Jackson, Imabelle has been in cahoots with the hustlers all along. Following the deaths of the conmen, the novel ends with a reconciliation between Imabelle and the still-oblivious Jackson.

A Rage In Harlem sets a precedent for the subsequent Harlem novels in its wanton depiction of black urban sex, violence and immorality. Himes’s Harlem, described as the ‘crossroads of Black America’, is a milieu of fetid tenements, litter-strewn alleyways and various centres of vice: bars, dope-houses and brothels. (*RIH* 29) These locales are populated by muggers, burglars, gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts and murderers. Himes writes that in Harlem, ‘someone was either fighting, or had just stopped fighting, or was just starting to fight.’ (*RIH* 39) Importantly, the novel delivers vice and crime in a way that implies gratuity, rather than socio-economic critique. In particular, its frequent depiction of sexualised violence borders on the burlesque. For example, we observe a bizarre scene in a ‘whorehouse’ run by an obese, cross-dressing ‘yellow’ man known as ‘Big Kathy’. Kathy is ‘struggling furiously’ with a man about ‘half her weight’ in what appears to be a Sumo fight before a small audience. Both parties are ‘clad in skintight rubber suits that had been greased’, and both are ‘working off a bet’ of a hundred dollars. (*RIH* 48) The moment is of no narrative consequence. Rather, it exists as just one of the texts’ proliferation of images that deliver an intense ‘hit’ of black sex, crime and violence, seemingly for the sake of it. In these moments, the texts function as a ‘vice den’ in itself, appearing to condense the black urban prejudices of its era in rapid progression.

Moreover, *A Rage In Harlem*’s central relationship between ‘square’ male outsider and ‘corrupt’ female Harlemite could be said to reflect the geographical binaries that constructed postwar Harlem as an alien terrain. Indeed, Jackson is initially described as a ‘very religious young man’ who attended a ‘Negro college’ in the South. He is a hardworking, upstanding citizen whose only desire is to marry Imabelle. (*RIH* 34) The more streetwise Harlem residents treat these qualities with utter derision. Even Jackson’s preacher ridicules his continued devotion to Imabelle, exclaiming ‘Lord save us from squares.’ (*RIH* 39) As the novel progresses, however, Imabelle and Harlem are seen to contaminate Jackson’s moral virtue. In particular, her deception sends him on a frenetic chase that repeatedly plunges him into vice

and criminality. Imabelle's ability to lead a 'good' man to ruin is apparent in the following passage, in which Jackson finally catches up with her:

She smelt like burnt hair-grease, hot-bodied woman, and dime-store perfume... She ran the tip of her red tongue slowly across her full, cushiony, sensuous lips, making them wet-red, and looked him straight in the eyes with her own glassy, speckled bedroom-eyes.
The man drowned. (*RIH* 145)

Imabelle's 'bedroom-eyes' and 'dime-store perfume' enact the *femme fatale's* hypersexual mixture of allure and crudity. Her excessive sexuality has the ability to 'drown' Jackson's sense of self.¹⁶ He 'stare[s] back, passion cocked...[ready to] take any rape-fiend chance to be once more in the arms of his high-yellow heart.' (*RIH* 145) Here, Harlem's criminal culture appears infectious, reducing the previously upright Jackson to the African American stereotype of 'rape-fiend.' Imabelle's association with pathological corruption is confirmed at the close of the novel, Himes's detectives lamenting: 'it's these high-yellow bitches like her that cause these black boys to commit so many crimes.' (*RIH* 177)

McCann thus reads the relationship as a moral binary, with Jackson the 'virtuous sucker' to Imabelle's 'perverse individual appetite.'¹⁷ We can see a gender inversion of this same dynamic in *The Big Gold Dream*. The novel details the attempts of various criminals to steal \$36,000 from an 'uptight, God-fearing, Christian woman' named Alberta.¹⁸ After suffering a seizure at a religious baptising, Alberta is pronounced dead, although she later awakens, having only been drugged. A number of male criminals, believing she *is* dead, converge on her apartment to search for her money. These include her ex-husband, her current boyfriend, a Jewish pawnbroker, and the operators of the numbers house in which she won the \$36,000. Later, having woken from a coma in hospital, Alberta recalls that she was forced under hypnosis to give the money to her preacher, Sweet Prophet Brown. The novel ends with Alberta seriously wounding Sweet Prophet in a fit of rage.

Again, *The Big Gold Dream* seemingly delights in mapping out a black urban geography of excessive vice and criminality. Where Third Avenue crosses the Harlem River, the narrative presents 'a street of the second-hand and the down-and-out; of pawnshops, of grimy bars, of poverty and bums – a truly democratic street.' (*BGD* 28) Elsewhere, in the section of Park Avenue behind the 125th Street Station, we learn that 'prostitutes and muggers

¹⁶ Moreover, Imabelle's 'high yellah' complexion puts her in league with other light-skinned female villains of Himes's oeuvre, such as *The Third Generation's* Lillian Taylor.

¹⁷ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 286.

¹⁸ Chester Himes, *The Big Gold Dream* (London: Penguin, 1976 [1960]), 17. All subsequent references will be parenthesised, with the prefix *BGD*.

lurked in the dark shadows...waiting to take some sucker's money – or his life.' (*BGD* 50) In an extended passage, we follow a mute, hairlipped ex-boxer called Dummy as he guides us through the criminal underworld of the numbers racket. Having been deafened and had his tongue cut out by a corrupt boxing promoter, Dummy's heightened sense of vision makes him a supreme tour-guide for the reader. Through his eyes, we witness the numbers racketeers carrying out various stings on passing 'suckers'. (*BGD* 100) We survey the headquarters of the numbers operation, a hotel room that 'stank with the scent of stale reefer fumes and the rank body odours that collect in stagnant air.' (*BGD* 110) Elsewhere, we observe the apartment of two prominent Harlem racketeers, Slick and Susie. Dummy's gaze rolls over the pieces of furniture that have all been 'stolen at one time or another' before resting on the 'knife in Susie's hand.' Moments later the narrative describes the 'slashing blade pass[ing] within a fraction of an inch of Dummy's eyes.' (*BGD* 118-9) In essence, Dummy (a 'dummy' reader) exists purely to draw the reader into a seemingly boundless network of criminal interests and danger. In this sense, the narrative is designed so as to allow the reader a subjective and transgressive *experience*, as opposed to a historical narrative, of the postwar 'Dark City'.

As in *Rage*, much of *The Big Gold Dream*'s humour derives from its protagonist's naive propriety, and the gradual exploitation within this corrupt milieu. A wholesale optimist, Alberta spends the entire novel in white baptising robes, her eyes 'wide and alight with hope'. (*BGD* 8) She describes a recurring dream in which she is surrounded by 'coloured angels' who make her feel as if she is 'dying and going straight to heaven.' (*BGD* 39) Alberta craves 'purity' in the form of religious redemption and suburban-style domestic propriety. This is a faith that causes her to be regarded as 'crazy' and a 'religious fanatic' by those she meets, including her preacher. (*BGD* 41) However, by the end of the novel Alberta is described as 'downcast and bedraggled', her once pristine white robes 'black with dirt.' (*BGD* 71) As in *Rage*, this physical and moral dirtying is figured as a product of black urban pathology, and in particular her relationship with her parasitic boyfriend, Sugar. Whereas Alberta is a hardworking maid, the effeminately named Sugar is the very stereotype of docile black manhood, a 'naturally lazy man.' Although harbouring criminal intentions, he does not possess 'the talent to pick pockets' or 'the nerve to rob anybody.' Indeed, Sugar and the 'jokers' he hangs around with live in matrimonial 'fear', existing entirely on the money 'their women gave them.' (*BGD* 53) In Alberta's absence, we observe Sugar in a series of humiliating scenarios; begging his subway fare, breaking into an apartment to steal food. (*BGD* 108-110) Sugar later reveals that it is he who initially drugged Alberta in the hope of stealing her

money, for which he receives a boot in the face from detective Grave Digger Jones. By contrast, Alberta's sympathetic reaction emphasises the pathology that appears to fuel their destructive relationship: 'Oh, I ain't mad at him for that,' she said. 'He was just doing what comes *natural*.' (BGD 160)

In both novels, then, the protagonists' romantic relationships appear to embody a wider cultural failing within Harlem. In doing so, the novels mobilise contemporary sociological stereotypes concerning a culture of black urban poverty. In particular, both Imabelle's manipulation, and Sugar's docility, reflect the era's master narrative: the matriarchal African American family. In the postwar period, the perceived belligerence of black women, and emasculation of black men, were identified as the central effect of racial segregation. For example, sociologist John H. Rohrer's *The Eighth Generation Grows Up* argued that 'boys cannot learn to be men in a manless family.' Rohrer went as far as to refuse to call the 'matriarchal' black family a family, viewing them instead as institutions run by 'Mammys' for 'Mammys'. The daughters of these 'institutions' were deemed hypersexual and aggressive, incapable of 'any semblance of mature heterosexual relationships.'¹⁹ Rohrer exemplifies the way postwar sociology demonised the black urban family as caught in the throws of a sexual pathology. As Daryl Michael Scott argues, these theories suggested that African American 'emasculation was taking place not primarily in the field or factory, but in the bedroom.'²⁰

This contemporary focus on the domestic space plays out in the aesthetics of the hardboiled genre, and, moreover, in Himes's Harlem. Scholars of film noir have detailed a 'shrinking of the frame' as the genre progressed in the postwar years. Carl Richardson and Marc Vernet note a waning of wider, realistic exterior locations in favour of more claustrophobic interiors. Vernet argues that this reflects the genre's shift in focus from the collective to the individual, and the 'crushing, isolating or imprisoning [of] the human figure.'²¹ In *The Big Gold Dream*, Alberta and Sugar's dysfunctional relationship is duly transmuted into their domestic space. Despite Alberta's burning desire for bourgeois propriety, her apartment instead communicates dysfunction. Himes describes a pawnbroker, Abie the Jew, browsing through her living room:

¹⁹ John H. Rohrer and Munro S. Edmonson, *The Eighth Generation Grows Up* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 77, 135. See also Charles Silberman, *Crisis In Black And White* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964) and C. Eric Lincoln, 'The Absent Father Haunts the Negro Family', *New York Times*, 28/11/1965.

²⁰ Scott, *Contempt And Pity*, 77.

²¹ Marc Vernet, 'Film Noir On The Edge of Doom' in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades Of Noir* (London: Verso, 1999), 8. Carl Richardson, *Autopsy: An Element of Realism in Film Noir* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1992), 195.

[T]he room was jammed with a motley collection of worn-out furnishings arranged about a potbellied stove like malting chickens about a mother hen: threadbare rugs, moth-eaten overstuffed chairs and a sofa, broken-legged tables; clocks without works... 'Your wife couldn't say no to her white folks, could she?' the Jew cracked. 'She must have brought everything home that they left for the trash man.' (*BGD* 20-21)

Akin to her relationship with Sugar, Alberta's house is a distorted parody of the postwar ideal, hastily assembled and bursting at the seams. In the same way Alberta and Sugar's relationship is deemed 'unnormative', the living room is a mock-bourgeois interior that doesn't quite *work*: the furniture is moth-eaten, the tables have broken legs, the clocks have stopped. As Abie notes, it is filled with décor thrown out, or 'trashed' by its previous white owners. In this sense, it is explicitly depicted as a negation of the normative 'white' domestic space.

In *A Rage In Harlem*, Himes again uses domestic space to create an image of Harlem as explicitly nonheteronormative. In addition to Imabelle, Jackson is locked into a dysfunctional relationship with his cross-dressing, heroin-addicted brother Goldy. Goldy is 'the spitting image of Jackson.' (*RIH* 30) However, he is the polar opposite in terms of his behaviour, donning a nun's habit in order to beg. Like Alberta's house, Goldy's playacting enacts a parody of bourgeois values. Along with the other female impersonators he shares a house with, he has 'the reputation of being the most respectable wom[an] on [the] street.' (*RIH* 35) However, as he guides Jackson into his 'office,' this veneer is quickly eroded:

[Goldy] took [Jackson] through the rear door, down a damp dark hallway, stinking of many varieties of excrement, and opened a padlocked door. He switched on a dim, fly-specked drop-lamp, slipped warily into a damp, cold, windowless room furnished with a scarred wooden table, two wobbly straight-backed chairs, a couch covered with dirty grey blankets. (*RIH* 43)

In the literary equivalent of an extreme close-up, Himes delivers a claustrophobic vision of black pathology. Buried away at the end of an excrement-stained hallway, Himes bathes Goldy's damp and windowless drug-den in chiaroscuro lighting. Moreover, the room exerts a profound effect on Jackson. As Goldy shoots up on the dirty grey blankets, Jackson cannot 'tear his gaze away' from the 'glinting black pools of evil' that comprise his brother's eyes. Indeed, this is the room that will hold Jackson 'prisoner' after he is secretly 'doped' by Goldy. Jackson's corruption by Harlem is depicted in the most visceral, and behavioural, of terms. His literal imprisonment at the hands of his transgressive girlfriend and brother mobilise the genre, and the era's, blinkered focus on the damaged black family unit. In such moments, Himes's Harlem seems less an urban milieu, and more a parodic reflection of the 'object' African American psyche of postwar sociology.

Synoptic Harlem

Himes's depiction of black domestic pathology clearly channels the era's behavioural analysis of urban segregation. If we look at the contemporary French critical reaction to Himes's early Harlem novels, we can see that they were consumed in just this way. Himes's Harlem was regarded by contemporary critics as an 'exotic underworld' rather than an impoverished neighbourhood.²² One reviewer read Himes's early detective fiction as 'really just a pretext for a behavioural study', yet one which resisted a purely 'sociological' analysis.²³ Similarly, another review claimed the novels allowed the white European reader 'to understand the black soul better than learned politico-demographic studies.'²⁴ A 1959 review of *The Big Gold Dream* noted Himes's forensic depiction of social deprivation, and a Harlem overrun with 'rotten facades of dilapidated and wretched back-streets.' However, it ultimately read these elements of realism as an entry point to a far deeper psychological truth. It commented:

It is above all a pretext for an incursion – to...a foreign civilisation. In this brutal matter, Chester Himes has been able draw out a series of images of which the whole gives us a little of this Negro soul, expressing itself in the superstitions of another age, of practices resembling sorcery, in which the great fear of the anterior state is revealed.²⁵

Again, Himes's Harlem is read not as a socio-political ghetto, but as an abject state of mind. Moreover, it is a debasement defined in explicitly racial terms. The black community of the novel is a 'foreign civilisation', the dilapidated ghetto a manifestation of a 'Negro soul.' As such, it permits the reader to glimpse an 'anterior state', and the 'superstitions' and 'sorcery' (rather than the uneven development) of corrupt modernity.

However, Himes found it highly amusing that reviewers took his lurid depiction of Harlem's social problems as stable or mimetic. In interviews, Himes derided the fact that 'many foreigners and sometimes even Americans mistake my Harlem for the real thing.'²⁶ For Himes, his depiction of Harlem was a heightened, even parodic attempt to exploit the exigencies of what was then fashionable. He thus suggested that the 'reality' of his Harlem

²² Bott, 'Chester Himes', 14.

²³ 'Review of *La Reine des Pommes*', *Tribune de Geneve*, 10/02/59, Box 7, Folder 15, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²⁴ 'La Serie Noire', *Candide*, 15/6/61, Box 7, Folder 15, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²⁵ 'Review of *Tout Pour Plaire*', *Tribune de Geneve*, 1/8/59, Box 7, Folder 15, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²⁶ Michael Mok, 'Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995 [1972]), 107.

novels was consciously skewed. As opposed to the sweeping objectivist style associated with literary naturalism, Himes defined his 'noir' narrative technique as mediated by a series of subjective and contradictory gazes. He wrote of these narrative gazes:

They diverge, they contradict one another, they are so confused that you end up asking yourself what really happened. And yet it's a form of reality...not only the reality of the event but the reality of the reactions to the event.²⁷

Himes describes his fiction as more interested in perspective and 'reaction' than conventional realism or 'truth'. Himes's comment implies that his wanton and corrupt milieu should be read as a projection, rather than a reflection of something essential. The various ways of looking at, or reading, the black urban space appeared to be a central thematic concern of the author. Moreover, Himes seemed to want to 'confuse' the reader in this sense, to encourage them to ask: 'what really happened?'

As we shall now see, the irreverence with which Himes regarded the verisimilitude of his Harlem is woven into the narrative itself. Moreover, it complicates his use of racial damage imagery. Take for instance the following description of Harlem pedestrians:

They turned on 125th Street and walked toward Seventh Avenue. Neon lights from the bars and stores threw multicoloured rays on the multicoloured people trudging down the sloppy walk, turning their complexions into strange metallic shades. (*RIH* 65)

Here, Himes's vision of black urban abjection is altogether less earnest. Indeed, the passage dramatises the fundamental *inauthenticity* of Himes's Harlem. The 'multicoloured rays' that cast 'strange metallic shades' on the black pedestrians thematise racial identity as a projection, rather than a reflection of something essential. Many scholars have noted the way in which Himes takes the more expressionistic elements of the noir genre to extremes: 'elastic' timeframes, narrative disjuncture, and non-causal use of racial stereotype.²⁸ They have cited these aspects as evidence of Harlem's 'postmodern condition.'²⁹ However, I want to explore the way in which these elements work to expose the postwar construction of black urban pathology as a misdirection. Himes delivers an excessively 'noir' urban milieu so as to, in

²⁷ Michel Fabre, 'Interview With Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 92.

²⁸ For example, Stephen Milliken writes that 'The action unfolds in perpetual, and very elastic, present time...without regard to chronology.' Stephen F. Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), 225. See also Greg Forter, *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) and Kevin Bell, 'Assuming the Position: Fugitivity and Futurity in the Work of Chester Himes', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2005).

²⁹ Forter, *Murdering Masculinities*, 190.

effect, render it artificial and delusional. Akin to the multi-coloured rays that discolour the faces of passing pedestrians, Himes critically reflects on a postwar pathology thesis that *distorts*, rather than explores, urban segregation.

In essence, Himes's text is conscious of the way in which noir and hardboiled fiction offers a warped, or *synoptic* perspective on urban race relations. In his essay 'The Synoptic Chandler', Fredric Jameson argues that the genre enacts an intensely private and phantasmatic experience of the modern U.S. city. He suggests that in its depiction of urbanity, hardboiled fiction foregoes causality or 'realism' in favour of an 'episodic', dreamlike quality. The reader and narrator are positioned at a 'certain structural distance from these urban places' so as to imbue them with their own fears, desires and prejudices. As such, the urban space is represented, not as a historical realm, but as a subjective state of mind, or a projection. On this point, Jameson notes that within the formula, 'it is not so much that these "people" in Chandler are their spaces, as that these spaces in Chandler are "characters" or *actants*.' The noir urban space is not defined by social conflict or historical dialectics, but by a series of stark moral conditions. The genre's fundamental of psychological abjection extends to its urban locales, who exist as broadly drawn 'characters'. For this reason, Jameson suggests that the Dark City cannot be 'described in purely social terms.'³⁰ Rather, the noir formula is essentially bourgeois, privileging solipsistic individual judgment over historical narrative.

More widely, we can conceptualise racial liberalism as offering a 'synoptic' analysis of urban segregation in the postwar period. Its discourse of behavioural difference worked to mask, rather than address, the historical dialectics that produced racial inequalities. Of course, the true story of postwar urban segregation was not one of racial pathology, but federal and corporate-sponsored apartheid.³¹ Policies such as 'red-lining' prohibited mortgages in nonwhite and racially mixed neighbourhoods from receiving the federal assistance that underwrote almost half of U.S. mortgages in the 1950s and '60s. Similarly, low-income housing was erected exclusively, if sporadically, in the inner city, rather than on the cheaper, vacant land on the edge of the city. Kenneth Jackson argues that these social policies offered a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in regards to urban segregation. The legislation concentrated the disadvantaged in inner cities and reinforced the image of suburbia as a utopian refuge. 'In the

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, 'The Synoptic Chandler' in Joan Copjec (Ed.), *Shades Of Noir: A Reader* (London, Verso: 1993), 37, 38, 43, 46. Naremore, *Film Noir In Its Contexts*, 26. Similarly, Christopher writes of film noir that 'the individual human mind and the collective urban psyche, the lone body and the body politic, often coincide.' Christopher *Film Noir and the American City*, 46.

³¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic : The Politics Of Mass Consumption In Postwar America* (New York : Vintage, 2004), 175, 123.

mind of the average citizen,' Jackson argues, 'the failures of [black] housing were due to cultural characteristics of the poor themselves, who were seen to be resisting improvement.'³² The era's language of pathology thus legitimised, rather than countered, urban segregation, containing the realities of uneven development within a 'synoptic' imaginative structure of racial difference.³³

In the postwar era, then, both U.S. sociology and the noir and hardboiled genre provided a modality through which historical realities, and capitalist inequalities, were fundamentally distorted. Whilst mobilising this very modality, Himes's Harlem seems to comment reflexively on its phantasmatic nature. For example, *The Big Gold Dream*'s Alberta is a character plagued by ecstatic 'premonitions' in which she feels like 'something bad was going to happen.' (*BGD* 43) Himes repeatedly depicts his corrupt Harlem as just this: a noirish 'premonition'. An example comes during an extended scene in which three characters fight over Alberta's missing \$36,000. Following his visit to Alberta's apartment, Abie brings her couch back to his workshop, believing she has hidden the money in it. On discovering a canister of cash, his basement is plunged into darkness, and an intruder, Rufus, enters. Abie feels an 'inexplicable nervousness' and switches on a torch: (*BGD* 30)

The Jew had pressed the switch, and the light came on the instant the hammer smashed the reflector. It was as though a bolt of lightning had struck once, almost at the moment of the thunder, making the darkness blacker. (*BGD* 33)

This split-second moment dramatises noir aesthetics, bringing them to an excessive, absurd conclusion. Rufus's smashing of the torch enacts a literary evocation of the 'deep chiaroscuro' noir theorists defined the genre by. Himes describes an all-consuming interplay between 'lightning' white and a darkness that is, quite impossibly, 'blacker' than black. Moreover, the moment is seen to have a profound effect on the action. In darkness, Rufus beats Abie to death, his face twisted in an 'expression of savage greed.' (*BGD* 34) It is a domestic conflict that Himes refuses to provide a context for, save the mobilisation of chiaroscuro itself. It is black urban violence as a generic chimera.

Moments later, Rufus 'sense[s] a presence on the stairs,' upon which a second fight begins between himself and a third man, who has also come for Alberta's money. The duo stab at each other with Abie's chisels:

³² Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanisation Of The United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 197, 208, 217, 206, 225, 219.

³³ Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 136.

Theirs was a brief but furious struggle. He stabbed out crazily, pumping the chisel with an insensate fury. He could feel the difference when it chopped into the wall and when he made contact with cloth and flesh. He couldn't see the knife, but he knew it stabbed the air about him. He felt it enter his flesh countless times. He felt no pain, but he was crazed with terror. On both sides there were unintelligible grunts – no more. No words were spoken. No curses uttered. Two bodies weaved and ducked and stabbed blindly in the utter darkness. (*BGD* 35)

Again, Himes depicts black urban savagery in a manner that emphasises its purely synoptic rationale. It negates linearity or explanation; no words, no direction, 'no more' than blind, insensate movement. The reader, via Rufus, cannot see, but can only 'feel' what is happening, the sole reference points being flesh and air, pain and empty space. Jameson writes that the noir formula envisions 'death itself...[as] something like a spatial concept, a spatial construction.'³⁴ The above passage dramatises this substitution of a spatial for a historical narrative. It condenses black urban violence to a 'brief but furious' instance, without utterance, explanation or intelligibility. Himes draws attention to the fundamental absence of narrative and causality. The sole rationale is generic convention, and its sensual creation of racial 'terror'. It *just happens*.

In many ways, these moments thematise the noir modality as a kind of literary blindness, the 'real' Harlem submerged within a 'blacker than black' nightmare. It debunks the Dark City or Ghetto as a formal spatiality, as opposed to a historical narrative.³⁵ Kristin Ross argues that the postwar shift from popular front to Cold War politics (and aesthetics) enacted a symbolic 'privatisation' of the modern city. Ross writes that 'when class conflict or contradiction...have been muted or rendered invisible...then nothing remains but the unequivocal "we" and the "not".'³⁶ The Dark City is thus figuratively 'red-lined'; defined by categories of inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, normative and alien, white and black. Urban dynamics of economic exploitation and uneven development are displaced by a synoptic discourse of racial abjection. Indeed, film critics have argued that in the postwar era, the 'element of realism' in film noir 'grew faint' for just these reasons. Richardson contends that in its increasingly shrunken interiors and hypersexual characters, the genre became 'all effect and very little substance.'³⁷ As embodied in its chiaroscuro lighting, he reads the genre as *projecting* silhouettes of psycho-sexual terror, rather than unveiling social problems.³⁸

³⁴ Chandler, 'The Synoptic Chandler', 53.

³⁵ Jameson, 'The Synoptic Chandler', 41.

³⁶ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Decolonisation, and the Reordering of French Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 106, 149, 139.

³⁷ Richardson, *Autopsy*, 205. See also Naremore, *Film Noir In Its Contexts*, 45.

³⁸ Vernet, 'Film Noir On The Edge Of Doom', 9.

Like *Gold, A Rage In Harlem* offers a self-conscious comment on the phantasmatic quality of its 'pathological' Harlem. As suggested by the novel's intended title (*The Five Cornered Square*) Himes's urban milieu frequently defies the laws of geography. In particular, Jackson's 'moral' corruption is figured as an increasing disorientation. For example, as Jackson flees police in a stolen hearse, Himes describes the following:

Jackson had the feeling of sitting in the middle of a nightmare. He was sealed in panic and he couldn't get out. He couldn't think. He didn't know where he was going, didn't know what he was doing. Just driving, that's all. He had forgotten why he was running. Just running. (*RIH* 151)

Again, the passage is notable for its deliberate erasure of historical causality. As a black man fleeing the police, his movement is both inexplicable yet unquestioned; unprompted, yet 'just'. Accordingly, Harlem is presented as a 'nightmare' within which Jackson, as an emerging criminal protagonist, is tightly 'sealed'. Moreover, the Harlem we glimpse through Jackson's eyes takes on a dreamlike quality. As Jackson rides the hearse, Himes describes his 'bulging eyes...set in a fixed stare on the narrow strip of wet brick pavement as it curved over the hood like an apple-peeling from a knife blade, as though he was driving underneath it.' (*RIH* 149) The reader experiences the urban milieu moving towards the eye in a blinkered strip, figuratively washing over them from above. This is, of course, geographically implausible. However, Himes is deliberately communicating the idea of criminal Harlem as a two-dimensional image, or personal 'nightmare'. Indeed, the narrative doesn't so much depict Harlem as depict the act of *imagining*, or distorting Harlem.

Moreover, this is a nightmare that imbues Harlem itself with the moral attributes negotiated by Jackson. In an ironic nod to the 'synoptic' city, Himes's urban space takes on the pathological qualities seen to corrupt the novel's protagonist. As Jackson hides from encroaching police officers on the banks of the Harlem river, his internal quest is burlesqued as a spatial one. Crouched upon the dock, 'black against the black boards', Jackson is 'hemmed in on both sides; if the cops didn't get him the river would.' (*RIH* 79) Himes again figures this perilous situation with an exaggerated use of chiaroscuro. As the 'wide searching arc' of the policemen's flashlights move against the seething black river, the moral binary upon which Jackson pivots is figured as a spatial clash between 'white' normativity and 'black' chaos. (*RIH* 80) As the police lights 'close in', Jackson is left without a hiding place: restoration of order is imminent. However, the following ensues:

Suddenly [Jackson] went off the edge of the dock without seeing it. He was running on wooden boards and the next thing he knew he was running on the cool night air. The next moment he was skidding into a puddle of muck. His feet went out from underneath him so fast he turned a complete somersault.

The light passed along the platform overhead and swung back along the river's edge. He was shielded by the dock, safe for the moment in the shadows...Far down, another lifetime away, was a narrow rectangle of light where it came out into the street. He made for it, slipped in the muck, caught himself on his hands, and ran the first ten yards bear-fashion.

He straightened up when he felt the ground harden under his feet. He was in a narrow passageway; he had entered it so fast he was stuck before he knew it. He thrashed and wriggled in a blind panic, like a black Don Quixote fighting two big warehouses singlehanded; he got himself turned sideways, and ran crab-like toward the street. (*RIH* 82)

To paraphrase Jameson, Harlem itself takes on the ontological qualities of a character or 'actant'. At the exact moment Jackson is to be captured (or perhaps rescued) by the white police lights, Harlem swallows him back up. Jackson literally descends from the circling police lights to the shadows of the dock, his moral corruption presented as spatial movement. Even when Jackson attempts to reach the 'narrow rectangle of light' that denotes safety, the Dark City acts malevolently upon him, trapping him in a passageway. Jackson thrashes like 'a black Don Quixote', desperately defending himself from the animated city. Of course, the Cervantes reference only reinforces the phantasmatic nature of the episode. As such, Himes burlesques Harlem as less of a neighbourhood, and more of a moral condition; an abject state of mind that defies geography. Accordingly, when Jackson finally emerges, he is described as resembling 'something the Harlem River had spewed up.' (*RIH* 87) Jackson's ordeal thus dramatises the way in which the black urban space is imagined as a privatised, synoptic experience, a figment of the postwar imagination.

Pathology as False Consciousness.

Himes's depiction of Harlem delivers a heightened, ambivalent perspective on urban segregation. Whereas Diawara contends that Himes rejects the 'formalist' racial abstractions of the genre, the novels clearly occupy a far more ambiguous position.³⁹ Indeed, there is no materialist redemption in Himes's Harlem, no moment in which the author grandly reveals the 'real' Harlem of socio-economic exploitation. Clearly, Himes viewed prevalent notions of a black urban 'condition' with irreverence, dismissing in interviews the 'psychoanalytical motivations' for black urban criminality.⁴⁰ Yet his *Série Noire* fiction was denied the space to

³⁹ Diawara, 'Noir by Noirs', 530, 532.

⁴⁰ Michel Fabre, 'Chester Himes Direct' in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1983]), 134.

resist such a discourse. Perhaps, then, we should think of the Harlem texts themselves as self-conscious acts of misdirection, or ‘grifts’. The critical work carried out by the Harlem Cycle can be located in the way it reflects on its status as a piece of formula fiction, overdetermined by certain exploitative rules. Observed from one angle, the novels mobilise the falsehoods of postwar sociology and noir fiction. Observed from another, they empty them of their intended seriousness. The novels thus appear to anticipate their contemporary misreading as a slice of unadulterated noir ‘realism.’ Himes constructs a Harlem that is ‘corrupt’ not only in the sense of its perceived abjection, but in the sense of its *fraudulence*.

In doing so, Himes’s Harlem novels dramatise a black urban pathology thesis as false consciousness. Ross reads the postwar ‘supremacy of the social sciences’ as part of a concerted effort to ‘contain the progress of Marxism in the world’, to substitute a ‘science of empirical and quantitative sociology’ for ‘the science of history.’⁴¹ As we have seen, this is an act of misdirection that the noir genre enacts at a formal level, the formula working to distort, rather than illuminate, a particular social problem. Indeed, John Cawelti argues that formula fiction is distinguished by its fundamental disregard of mimesis:

Since the pleasure and effectiveness of an individual formulaic work depends on its intensification of a familiar experience, the formula creates its own world with which we become familiar by repetition. We learn in this way how to experience this imaginary world without continually comparing it with our own experience.⁴²

The comment suggests that formulaic literature works to maintain culture’s consensus regarding certain social realities. It succeeds on the basis of familiarity, repetition and pleasure, rather than its manifestation of a concrete experience. It is this imaginative structure that ultimately contains its content, however shocking or transgressive. Little wonder that scholars have criticised the noir and hardboiled formula for ‘duping’ the reader with a façade of literary realism.⁴³

Let me conclude by highlighting a couple of instances in which Himes draws attention to his ‘Harlem’ as an act of literary deception. Indeed, if we can call *A Rage In Harlem* and *The Big Gold Dream* grift narratives, the central ‘con’ being sold to the reader is the spectre of black pathology.⁴⁴ In particular, *The Big Gold Dream* uses the grift motif to depict ‘domestic

⁴¹ Ross, *Fast Cars*, 187, 86. See also Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 143.

⁴² Cawelti, *Formula Fiction*, 10, 27, 35.

⁴³ Knight describes the genre as ‘a certain gloss of modernism overlaying a conservative and fully bourgeois romantic structure.’ Steven Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 152.

⁴⁴ Breu writes that ‘grift narratives’ depict a reduction of ‘social relationships’ to ‘economic relationships.’ Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 54.

pathology' as an illusion that masks certain socio-economic realities. Indeed, Alberta's dreams of bourgeois propriety frequently betray a suppressed counter-narrative of economic desperation. She describes to her fellow churchgoers a dream she has of 'baking apple pies' and setting them to cool on a kitchen table. Yet, simultaneously, she envisions the pies exploding, and the 'kitchen...filled with hundred dollar bills.' The congregation responds by chanting 'Money! Money! Money!' (*BGD* 8) Alberta's vision (literally, her 'Big Gold Dream') foregrounds the subtle, yet sustained association of her 'abject' domestic situation with her poverty. This is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that Alberta hides her \$36,000 winnings within the furniture of her garish apartment itself. We observe one of her would-be burglars, Abie, stealing and dismantling Alberta's couch for this very reason:

He felt the sofa as though he were assaying a prime beef, poked it here and there and then caressed it with soft loving strokes...Then with a razor blade he ripped the seams of the outer fabric and skinned it back as though skinning an animal. (*BGD* 29-30)

Abie plays the role of a butcher, rather than a carpenter. Himes depicts the black urban domestic space as literally *in bits*, ruthlessly dissected like an 'animal'. Abie proceeds to find a canister stuffed with banknotes in the couch's arm. Here, then, Alberta's wonky furniture embodies not a pathological condition, but a decoy that quite literally conceals a more important narrative: *money*. Like Abie, Himes can be seen to dissect the fiction of black urban pathology, briefly revealing a submerged narrative of economic desperation.

Similarly, *A Rage In Harlem* momentarily drops its guise to offer fleeting glimpses of Harlem's socio-economic impoverishment. The clearest example of this occurs during a scene in which Jackson's brother, Goldy, is murdered by the novel's conmen. As we have seen, Goldy, a cross-dressing heroin addict, stands as one of the novel's most visceral embodiments of black urban abjection. Accordingly, McCann reads his brutal murder as his hardboiled 'punishment' for, amongst other things, his 'condition of effeminacy.'⁴⁵ Simultaneously, however, we can read Goldy's gender transgressions as motivated by poverty. Himes writes that Goldy is interested in 'the nitty-gritty. Those were the facts he understood. Money!' (*RIH* 35) As such, when he is murdered underneath a railway arch, it is unclear what his death symbolises; moralistic 'punishment' or economic exploitation. Himes exacerbates this ambiguity in the moment immediately after Goldy's throat is cut:

⁴⁵ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 298.

Goldy's scream mingled with the scream of a locomotive as the train thundered past overhead, shaking the entire tenement city. Shaking the sleeping black people in their lice-ridden beds. Shaking the ancient bones and the aching muscles and the t.b. lungs and the uneasy foetuses of unwed girls. Shaking plaster from the ceilings, mortar from between the bricks of the building walls. (*RIH* 114)

As Goldy's scream mingles with the sound of the passing train, the passage exhibits a curious mix of domestic abjection and uneven capitalist development. On the one hand, Goldy's 'punishment' evokes yet another representation of black urban pathology: irregular bedrooms, unstable households, hypersexual women. Yet, the presence of the train suggests something more expansive. Whereas Himes visually describes an atomised Harlem of sexual perversion, the thundering locomotive suggests the hidden presence of a subjugated collectivity that connects these 'lurid' domestic spaces. In its 'shaking' of the domestic spaces, the train could be said to be attempting a disruption, even a demolition of the noir pathology thesis. It fleetingly draws attention to the fact of residential segregation, and the socio-economic desperation it has enforced upon Himes's characters. As such, the moment encourages the reader to question the novel's focus on black urban pathology as, quite literally, a *construction*.⁴⁶

However, as in *The Big Gold Dream*, this moment of objectivity passes and Himes zooms back in to describe the 'sweet sickish perfume' of Goldy's heroin-infused, corrupted blood. (*RIH* 117) Here, as throughout Himes's Harlem novels, Himes dramatises the limits of the postwar racial imaginary, and the limits of his own formula fiction. Whilst not in a position to overturn its conventions, he critically reflects on his fiction's own artifice, the sense that it is perpetuating an exploitative social reality through synopsis. To quote Andrew Ross, Himes exposes his role as a commercial noir writer in order to 'expose our patterns of consumption at the commodity level of meaning.'⁴⁷ His ambivalent depiction of Harlem both enacts and critiques the Gramscian manner in which the cultural sphere collaborates with, rather than stands against, hegemonic political meanings. By excessively, and self-consciously mobilising the most anti-progressive aspects of the noir genre, Himes dissects the postwar pathology thesis at the level of form. Both *A Rage In Harlem* and *The Big Gold Dream* encourage us to ask the question implied by the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter: 'that is Harlem?'

⁴⁶ Himes, *A Rage In Harlem*, 35, 114.

⁴⁷ Andrew Ross, 'The New Sentence and the Commodity Form: Recent American Writing', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 368.

5

**‘If trouble was money...’:
Harlem’s Hustling Ethic and the Politics of Commodification**

At the end of Himes’s second Harlem novel, *The Real Cool Killers*, we see newspapermen composing the next day’s front-page. Their headlines concern the lurid events depicted in the novel:

The copy writers used a book of adjectives to describe the bizarre aspects of the three-ring Harlem murder...The headlines read:

POLICE PUT HEAT ON REAL COOL MOSLEMS
DEATH IS THE KISS-OFF FOR THRILL KILL
HARLEM MANIAC RUNS AMUCK

But already the story was a thing of the past, as dead as the four main characters. ‘Kill it,’ ordered the city editor of an afternoon paper. ‘Someone else has already been murdered somewhere else.’¹

The passage allows Himes to review the sensational and ‘bizarre’ violence that has preceded it in the novel. The headlines allude to the murder of a white ‘thrill’ seeker, the foiling of a teenage gang called the ‘Real Cool Moslems’, and the uncovering of a prostitution ring that connects both parties. The passage reinforces the image of Harlem as a criminal milieu defined by a brutal hustling ethic. Indeed, Himes’s Harlem is almost exclusively populated by poor black characters willing to commodify themselves and others for cold hard cash. Of course, completing the novel’s catalogue of hustlers are the journalists themselves. Himes makes the ironic point that the copy writers, armed with a slew of sensational adjectives, are commodifying their community’s pain for the sake of sales. Indeed, the violent deaths of those involved are enacted at a formal level, the writers told to ‘kill’ the story once a juicier one has come along. As such, the passage sees a dynamic of economic exploitation enacted in seemingly infinite repetition.

The passage is indicative of the way in which Himes’s Harlem Cycle thematises its own status as a racialised commodity. As we have seen, Himes was frank regarding the financial motivation for his move into the *Série Noire*. Once there, he saw his primary

¹ Chester Himes, *The Real Cool Killers*, in *The Harlem Cycle Volume I* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996 [1958]), 318. Subsequent citations will be parenthesised with the prefix *RCK*.

objective as providing his white readership with ‘exotic’ images of racial abjection. However, the power of Himes’s Harlem novels is the way in which they comment reflexively upon the exploitative literary formula, and culture industry, that they helped make up. In many ways, the newspapermen in the excerpt above could be read as a literary correlative to Himes himself. Both are selling a sensational black American text for profit. Himes’s text thus makes a curious double move. Certainly, Himes mobilises misogynistic and homophobic black stereotypes in his Harlem fiction. As in the above excerpt, however, he simultaneously draws attention not so much to the fact, but the *exchange value* of these images; their production and consumption as capitalist commodities. As Himes put it:

These writings are admittedly chauvinistic...I am a sensualist, I love beautiful people, I have SOUL. At the same time I am extremely sensitive to all the humiliations and preconceptions Black Americans are heir to. But I think my talent is sufficient to render these chauvinistic writings interesting, or at least provoking.²

Himes’s comment is full of characteristic ambivalence. He admits that his writings are ‘chauvinistic’, before ironically confirming his credentials as a ‘SOUL’ brother in this respect. However, Himes goes on to state his misgivings regarding this aspect of his work, its foundation in the ‘humiliations’ and ‘preconceptions’ of racism. The end product of such ambivalence is thus a commitment to render the more lurid aspects of his work a theme in itself. It is via an acerbic self-consciousness that the exploitative aspects of Himes’s work are rendered both ‘interesting’ and ‘provoking.’

As such, whereas Himes’s earlier work can be termed ‘labour’ novels, his detective novels *The Real Cool Killers* (1958), *The Crazy Kill* (1959), and *All Shot Up* (1960) deal in an altogether more problematic form of consumer capitalism. Indeed, Himes’s male and female hustler characters (pimps, prostitutes, gamblers) all ambivalently enact the idea of black self-commodification, and the savage competition that undergirds it. Unable to engage in legitimate work, or realise political emancipation, Harlem’s criminal characters seek to profit off their own subjugation. As Himes’s detective Grave Digger Jones attests, ‘if trouble was money, everybody in Harlem would be a millionaire.’ (*RCK* 320)

Firstly, this chapter maps the contours of Harlem’s hustling ethic. Himes depicts a community of pimps, prostitutes and gamblers that defiantly rejects wage-labour, attempting instead to turn their extravagant self-stylisation into a source of income. In portraying such an

² Chester Himes, ‘Foreword’, in *Black On Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973), 7.

ethic, Himes explores the way in which his characters, and by extension himself, actively produce and profit off prevalent racial stereotypes. Secondly, this chapter analyses Himes's more critical depiction of the way in which Harlem's hustlers are consumed as a pornographic commodity. Rather than presenting a carnivalesque utopia, Himes depicts his characters' sexual 'acts' through the exploitative, 'phallogentric' gaze of the white bourgeois consumers who frequent Harlem. In doing so, he evokes the economic and political powerlessness that undergirds Harlem's hustling ethic. The chapter concludes by reaffirming Himes's interest in the exchange value of his own fiction, its position within an exploitative culture industry, and its openness to Gramscian rearticulation. In essence, Himes thematises his fiction's own exploitative exigencies, writing both himself and his readership into the criminal underworld he depicts. This is a process that ultimately enacts a critique of capitalism at the level of form itself.

Harlem's Hustling Ethic

Whilst conducting interviews in *The Real Cool Killers*, an exasperated Grave Digger Jones laments his failure to get any straight answers from Harlem residents, telling them: 'You act like you belong to a race of artful dodgers.' (*RCK* 250) Digger's comment encapsulates the sense of black Harlem as a closed trickster culture. Indeed, as we have seen, Himes's detective fiction has been read as offering an Ellisonian insight into black urban folk practices.³ Ellison himself defined postwar black urban culture by a volatility 'so rapid that it throws up personalities as fluid and changeable as molten metal.'⁴ Equally, he distinguished Harlem street customs by their 'mystery', pondering that 'perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning.'⁵ For many critics, the 'political meaning' embodied by the zoot suit, and other highly visible forms of mid-century black urban culture, is one of subaltern resistance. The zoot suit's burlesque take on European tailoring offered a parodic riff on 'white' bourgeois culture. Graham and Shane White argue that black urban 'zoot' culture did not 'imitate' but 'subvert white authority' via a process of resignification. The spectacle of exuberantly dressed lower-class blacks stood as a sartorial affront to existing class and race

³ For example, see Stephen F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

⁴ Ralph Ellison, 'Working Notes For *Invisible Man*' in Ralph Ellison and John F. Callahan (ed.), *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: 1995), 343.

⁵ Cited in Larry Neal, 'The Black Writer's Role II: Ralph Ellison's Zoot Suit', in Larry Neal and Michael Swartz (ed.), *Visions Of A Liberated Future: Black Arts Movements Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989 [1965]), 30.

hierarchies.⁶ The postwar popularity of the straightened ‘conk’ hairdo made a similar parodic statement. Kobena Mercer suggests that such styles ‘encoded political “messages” to those in the know which were otherwise unintelligible to white society.’⁷ Himes himself summed up the ‘mysterious’ power of these practices in an early essay entitled ‘Zoot Riots are Race Riots.’ He wrote that the zoot aesthetic reflected its owner’s ‘vivid imagination’ and ‘penchant for personal adornment’ in the face of severe poverty.⁸

However, Digger’s ‘artful dodger’ comment alludes not only to the subversive aesthetics of black urban culture, but to its subversive economics. Zoot culture often entailed a rejection of normative labour through criminal means. In many ways, the spectacular significance of the zoot suit intersects with what Julius Hudson would later call a black urban ‘hustling ethic’. Hudson described black gamblers, pimps and prostitutes as seeking ‘a way of “making it” without killing oneself on whitey’s jobs.’ This evasion of wage labour often took highly conspicuous forms. Hudson wrote that ‘one major tenet of the hustling ethos’ was ‘If you’ve got, flaunt it.’⁹ Hudson draws our attention to the way in which the performativity of zoot culture did not merely seek to resignify racial stereotypes, but to profit off of them. The hustling ethic capitalised on and commodified white racial ideologies to the financial advantage of ghetto hustlers. For example, Robin D. G. Kelley argues that prostitution provided poor blacks with both a ‘space for creative expression’, and ‘at least a modicum of control over their own labour.’ Kelley thus reads black urban self-commodification as an ‘infrapolitical’ rejection of the menial labour traditionally available to working-class African Americans. He suggests that zoot culture’s ostentatious display of wealth, power and sexuality turned a ‘realm of [white] consumption’ into a ‘site of [black] production.’¹⁰ The hustling ethic thus put what Ellison saw as the fluidity of black urban identity to *work*.

⁶ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 16, 237.

⁷ Kobena Mercer, 'Black Hair/Style Politics', in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Cornel West (eds.), *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge: MIT Press in association with The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990 [1987]), 249.

⁸ Chester Himes, ‘Zoot Riots Are Race Riots’, in *Black On Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973 [1943]), 220. It should be noted that, at the time of the Harlem Cycle’s publication, the ‘zoot’ aesthetic was passé in Harlem. Himes wrote: ‘I suddenly realised my slang was ancient; I was inventing a language no one spoke anymore. What makes my books popular was not that they were hip; they were popular because they were absurd.’ Chester Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity: The Autobiography Of Chester Himes: Volume II* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1976), 241.

⁹ Julius Hudson, ‘The Hustling Ethic’ in Thomas Kochman (ed.), *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 410, 424.

¹⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), 70-75.

In *The Real Cool Killers*, Himes explores this hustling ethic in both its performative and entrepreneurial manifestations. The novel concerns the murder of a white businessman, Ulysses Galen, in Harlem's 'Dew Drop Inn' bar. The victim is revealed to be a prolific and sadistic user of the black female prostitutes who operate out of the bar; his murderer, one of the prostitutes themselves. The novel's title derives from the 'Real Cool Moslems', a teenage criminal gang whose members include both prostitutes and pimps connected with the Dew Drop Inn. The 'Moslems' embody zoot culture on both a stylistic and criminal level. Their appearance alternates between 'A-rab costumes' and zoot suits with 'slick conked hair'. (*RCK* 314) Their leader, a teenage boy who calls himself Sheik, secures his authority by projecting an exaggerated image of violent criminality. He views himself as an equal to legendary Harlem syndicate boss Dutch Schultz, claiming that he 'could take over Harlem with the ideas I got.' (*RCK* 200) Although he is ultimately killed by Coffin Ed Johnson, he boasts with a 'crazed triumph' that 'can't no copper hurt me.' (*RCK* 228) Indeed, Sheik and his gang repeatedly frustrate the investigations of white policemen, going into 'clowning act[s]' like 'chameleon[s] changing colour' during interrogation. (*RCK* 264) Sheik encourages the gang to manipulate the prejudices of those who 'believe spooks are crazy anyway.' (*RCK* 291) Via their 'Uncle Tom routines' and Arab costumes, Sheik aims to make the police 'swallow' their own racial stereotypes 'like it's chocolate ice cream.' (*RCK* 226)

The gang's shrewd manipulation of black racial stereotypes is further demonstrated by its female members. Indeed, the novel opens with a spectacular image of black female sexuality in the Dew Drop Inn:

A woman leapt from her seat in a booth as though the music had struck her full of tacks. She was a lean black woman clad in a pink jersey dress and red silk stockings. She pulled up her skirt and began doing a shake dance as though trying to throw off the tacks one by one.

Her mood was contagious. Other women jumped down from their high stools and shook themselves into the act [...]

A white man standing near the middle of the bar watched them with cynical amusement. He was the only white person present... The coloured women seemed to be dancing for his exclusive entertainment. A slight flush spread over his sallow face...he didn't know whether to laugh or get angry. (*RCK* 182)

The passage begins with a parodic use of pathological terminology, describing the woman's dance as a 'contagious' physical imperative. However, in reality, we are presented with a highly measured 'act' of black femininity, and one engineered for a white male onlooker's 'exclusive entertainment'. Moreover, Himes creates the impression that the white middle-class male gaze is essentially unknowing and 'cynical', causing the onlooker to blush. Indeed, the

scene depicts an aggressive black female sexuality as a hustle rather than an ontology, and one knowingly produced by his female characters.

The passage problematises the reading of Himes's female characters as pathologically corrupt *femme fatales*. Whereas Robert Skinner argues that Himes's women embody a sexuality that is 'out of control', Himes depicts such a stereotype as part of a carefully orchestrated hustle.¹¹ The self-conscious projection of a black female sexuality fulfils an ostensibly playful, yet crucial economic function. As the barman of the Dew Drop Inn, Big Smiley, asserts:

‘A coloured woman don't consider diddling with a white man as being unfaithful. They don't consider it no more than just working in service, only they is getting better paid and the work is less straining. ‘Sides which, the hours is shorter.’ (RCK 233)

Big Smiley alludes to a Harlem-wide hustle that caters for and profits off the lustful gaze of white middle-class voyeurs. Within this, he identifies the sexual 'acts' that take place in his bar as an example of black entrepreneurialism. This is a form of employment he describes as both 'better paid' and 'less straining' than menial labour. In short, Big Smiley suggests that prostitution is a less degrading option than becoming a 'slave', a popular slang expression for exploitative and alienating wage work.¹² As Kelley has suggested, for poor young black women, 'sex is one of the few "hustles" they have since virtually every other avenue is closed to them.' In this sense, the sexualised performances of Himes's female 'Moslems' reject the politics of female respectability in order to turn their own sexuality into a profitable commodity.¹³

The economic, expressive and gender politics of black self-commodification are further explored by Himes in *The Crazy Kill*. The novel depicts the feuding within a group of 'upper-class Harlem hustlers.'¹⁴ The extended network centres around Johnny and Dulcy Perry, a couple who have earned money and celebrity in the gambling racket. The novel opens at the wake of Johnny's recently deceased godfather, Big Joe Pullen, a former dining-car waiter. The scene dramatises a clash of cultures between the older 'wage slaves' and younger hustlers of Harlem. Here, Big Joe's blue-collar colleagues rub shoulders with the pimps,

¹¹ Robert Skinner, *Two Guns From Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green Press, 1989), 108. See also Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2000), 297.

¹² Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 174.

¹³ Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, 71, 73.

¹⁴ Chester Himes, *The Crazy Kill*, in Chester Himes, *The Harlem Cycle: Vol. 1* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2002 [1959]), 387. All subsequent citations will be parenthesised, with the prefix *TCK*.

madams and gamblers who run with his godson. Looking on disapprovingly is Big Joe's 'work-hardened' widow, 'Mamie' Pullen. Mamie embodies the very stereotype her name implies, 'clad in a black satin Mother Hubbard gown that dragged the floor, stiffened with resolve.' (TCK 337)¹⁵ She listens anxiously as a preacher friend, Reverend Short, complains about the music being performed, the 'devils...jamming that sweet old spiritual, "Steal Away."' (TCK 345) In many ways, the bebop 'jamming' on the solemn slave song encapsulates Johnny and Dulcy's rejection of social servitude. Indeed, at Big Joe's funeral, a band plays the old funeral chant 'The Coming of John' in 'swingtime'. Accordingly, the mourners reject solemnity and break out in 'mass hysteria...marching and dancing to the rhythm, between the beats, not on them.' (TCK 339) The passage captures what Eric Lott has called bebop's 'aesthetic of speed and displacement.'¹⁶ Moreover, it uses this aesthetic to mark the symbolic passing of a 'straighter' working generation, and the dominance of a 'zoot' ethic.

Within this context, the plot of *The Crazy Kill* details the attempts of Johnny and Dulcy to maintain their status as Harlem's leading hustlers. The murder of Dulcy's brother, Val, triggers off a chain of events that brings to a head the tensions between Johnny and less-respected rival Chink Charlie. Chink conspires to cheat Johnny out of his wealth, his fame, and his wife. However, Chink's plan ultimately ends in his vicious murder; orchestrated by Dulcy, and carried out by Johnny. The couple thus assert their dominance by being 'strong, tough, and unafraid.' (TCK 358) Of central importance to this is their conspicuous display of ill-gotten wealth. Whereas the lesser Chink works part-time in a bar, Johnny has risen from that of 'an Alabama cotton chopper' to the most 'well-heeled' gambler in Harlem. (TCK 400) As such, Johnny is treated with respect by the police, and idolised by poor black Harlemites. His personalised Cadillac is 'mobbed' by kids who regard it with 'bright eyed awe, as if were an altar.' Johnny responds by scattering change over the street for them to pick up. (TCK 386) The gesture reflects his excessive level of conspicuous consumption, his 'powder blue suit of shantung silk' and extravagant jewellery. Crucially, Himes writes that 'it wasn't from vanity he wore so much gold. He was a gambler, and it was his bank account.' (TCK 357) On one level, Himes is referring to Johnny's jewellery as a gambling stake. More than this, however, it suggests that Johnny's prosperous *image* is his 'bank account', and his primary source of income. Johnny's celebrity status derives from his spectacular rejection of social propriety. As such, Johnny is a paramount example of 'zoot' performativity at its most entrepreneurial.

¹⁵ On the hegemony of the 'Mammy' black female stereotype, see K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy To Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁶ Eric Lott, 'Double V, Double-Time: Bebop's Politics of Style', *Callaloo*, Vol. 36. (Summer, 1988), 600.

Johnny is thus a character at pains to remain 'cool' and 'impassive', stage-managing his self-image in order to advance his status within Harlem.¹⁷ Moreover, if Johnny is to maintain his leverage as a hustler, he must also control his glamorous wife, Dulcy. Dulcy is equally revered around Harlem, referred to by the police as a black 'Mrs. Vanderbilt.' (*TCK* 461) Like Johnny, Himes describes Dulcy's power as deriving from her physical appearance. She is presented as 'Hollywoodish' in appearance and much desired by the male hustlers of Harlem. (*TCK* 288) She is 'strictly ornamental... there to see and be seen.' (*TCK* 336) In many ways, her self-image, and status as a trophy wife, can be read in alignment with the 'zoot' aesthetic: a lower-class black American 'riff' on bourgeois stylistics. Moreover, Dulcy seems entirely aware that this aesthetic, and obedience to Johnny, is a source of financial gain. She refers to both her lifestyle and her husband as her 'gold vein'; elsewhere, Chink calls her a 'real solid-gold bitch.' (*TCK* 475) In a manner akin to the Dew Drop Inn prostitutes, Dulcy ruthlessly manipulates her glamorous, mock-bourgeois appearance in the pursuit of cold hard cash.

Jerry Bryant argues that Johnny Perry is the Harlem Cycle's 'most conventional badman.' He reads Johnny as an embodiment of a 'mindless retaliation that kills the guilty and the innocent alike.'¹⁸ Whilst these violent attributes undoubtedly contribute to Johnny's power in Harlem, it is more accurate to position him (and Dulcy) within a pimp tableau. Eithne Quinn writes that the authority of the pimp in pimp texts depends upon 'a series of eroticised glances and sensational sights.' This dynamic not only involves the objectification of black female sexuality, but also the 'lifestylisation' of an idealised black masculinity. For Johnny to maintain his stature in Harlem, he must be *seen* to maintain both his marriage with Dulcy, and his extravagant 'zoot' lifestyle. Indeed, within the hustling tenet of 'if you've got it, flaunt it', Johnny's hyper-masculinity is most useful as a conspicuous commodity in itself.¹⁹ His relationship with Dulcy similarly enacts a pimp tableau, inasmuch as this often exploitative relationship exists as a kind of joint investment. As Hudson detailed in the 'hustling ethic', female prostitutes desired a 'pimp with a great deal of prestige on the strip so she can share it,'

¹⁷ In his 1967 autobiography *Pimp*, Beck describes pimping as a performance: 'I picture the human mind as a movie screen... we are the absolute bosses of that whole theatre and show in our minds. We even write the script.' Iceberg Slim, *Pimp: The Story Of My Life* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1998 [1967]), 53.

¹⁸ Jerry H. Bryant, *'Born In A Mighty Bad Land': The Violent Man In African American Folklore and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 109, 108.

¹⁹ Eithne Quinn, "'Pimpin' Ain't Easy": Work, Play, and "Lifestylisation" of the Black Pimp Figure in Early 1970s America' in Brian Ward (ed.), *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), 214, 218.

regarding him as a ‘combination lover-father.’²⁰ Dulcy and Johnny’s brutal murder of rival Chink Charlie ultimately cements this power relationship. The couple, together with the male and female ‘Moslems’ in *The Real Cool Killers*, thus make up Himes’s vision of a Harlem of ‘artful dodgers.’ Himes depicts the ‘molten’ black urban culture valorised by Ellison as a strictly capitalistic operation. The spectacular ‘zoot’ aesthetic calculatedly enacts an ostentatious level of consumerism, and rejects a middle-American Protestant work ethic.

Harlem’s Vice Industry

Does the hustling ethic necessarily imply social and economic agency, however? Norlisha Crawford argues yes: that by strategically commodifying themselves, Himes’s female characters enact a liberatory form of self expression. Crawford reads the sexual commodification of the black body as enabling the Harlem community to meet ‘a normal, ongoing market possibility.’ Most strikingly, she contends that:

[Himes] makes his femme characters resistant to critical evaluation by those characters within the text that live outside his “Harlem”, as well as by readers of the texts, who would judge ambitious poor racialised female characters as simply immoral, degraded and ugly.²¹

Crawford suggests that the hustling ethic takes the form of a defiant ‘zoot’ performance that masks its true communal significance from the bourgeois gaze. In essence, Crawford reads Harlem’s hustling ethic through the lens of performance theory. Through this lens, self-commodification allows black Harlemites to ‘perform’ their racial and gender identity, and thus take control over it. As part of what she terms ‘the pantomime of race’ Patricia Williams defines black female performance as ‘a dynamic of display that ricochets between hypervisibility and oblivion.’²² Richard Schechner similarly likens black performativity to a sidwinder, writing that ‘wherever this beautiful rattlesnake points, it is not going there.’²³ Essentially, these ideas communicate a belief in the slipperiness of black female performance, and its capability to disrupt external formulation or interpellation.

²⁰ Hudson, ‘The Hustling Ethic’, 420, 421. In *Pimp*, Beck recalls a prostitute describing her encounters with white customers as an empowering business transaction: ‘Daddy, I just want their scratch. I get a thrill with them all right. It knocks me out that here I am, a black Nigger bitch, taking their scratch.’ Slim, *Pimp*, 152.

²¹ Norlisha Crawford, ‘Good, Bad And Beautiful: Chester Himes’ Femmes in Harlem’, *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 18, No.2 (Summer 2006) 195, 197, 204, 202.

²² Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997).

²³ Cited in E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

However, Crawford's contention that Himes's characters resist the judgemental gaze of external 'readers' is problematic given the context of the novels' production. As previously discussed, Himes's role in the *Série Noire* was energised by his sense that his audience could read 'what they want' into his Harlem fiction. Moreover, he felt it his obligation to provide them with 'exotic episodes'.²⁴ The notion of Himes's text, and thus its hustler characters, as 'resistant' to the gaze of such a readership is unlikely. The contemporary reaction to his novels is a case in point. For example, René Micha, in a 1965 article on *The Real Cool Killers*, offered an overtly fetishistic reading of Himes's Harlem community. Micha singled out a moment in which the novel describes the window of an overcrowded tenement building as 'jammed with coloured faces, looking like clusters of strange purple fruit in the stark white light.' (RCK 216) Rather than reading the scene as a representation of urban segregation, or an allusion to Billie Holiday's anti-lynching song, Micha praised it for its 'comic beauty'. For Micha, the text offered an erotic vision that 'transports' the reader to an 'orchid' of 'enormous genitals on tiny bodies'.²⁵ As such, the novels' depiction of a community struggling to survive by any means necessary was not the primary image taken by the reviewer. Rather, the scene was read as providing an ecstatic consumer fantasy of sexual and racial 'transportation'.

Of course, we cannot label Micha's reading as 'wrong'. As we have seen, Himes's texts explicitly catered to such a reading. However, although not making his hustler characters 'resistant' to such a gaze, Himes's texts anticipate, and, moreover, dramatise it. As we shall see, Himes's narratives pay equal attention to the way in which the hustling ethic allows his characters' sexual and violent 'acts' to be consumed and rearticulated by exploitative on-lookers and outsider. In this sense, a review such as Micha's is written into the text itself. In doing so, Himes's Harlem complicates the idea of hustling as a form of unbridled trickster agency. Of relevance is E. Patrick Johnson's contention that:

[B]lackness offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society.²⁶

²⁴ John A. Williams, 'My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 46.

²⁵ Cited in Wendy W. Walters, *At Home In Diaspora: Black International Writing* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 68. Wendy Walters argues that Micha's review is a 'misappropriation' of Himes's work. This argument fundamentally disregards the commercialist nature of the novels, Himes's irreverent view of his authorial duties, and the 'negative' fantasy that noir purported to offer.

²⁶ Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 9, 3. Similarly, Judith Butler defines identity 'collective' inasmuch as a racial or gender performance is overdetermined by pre-established social 'rules.' Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Henry Bial (ed.), *The Performance Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 160.

On these terms, the hustling ethic does not equate to a carnivalesque agency. Rather, it responds to what Johnson calls a social dominant of heteronormative capitalism. Importantly, then, if we are to call Himes's hustlers 'performers', we must ground their performances within a wider social context of capitalist exploitation. Indeed, Hudson wrote that although the hustling ethic appeared to be 'diametrically opposed' to capitalist America, it was in reality 'an outgrowth of it.'²⁷ Similarly, Kelley argues that black urban self-commodification neither 'undermine[s] capitalism,' nor 'improve[s] the position of the entire black community.'²⁸ As such, we must analyse the way in which the spectacular, sexualised performances of Harlem's hustlers continue, rather than challenge, a dominant capitalist order. In this sense, the hustling ethic observed in Himes's Harlem ultimately reveals itself to be a system born of social and economic powerlessness.

In *All Shot Up*, Himes depicts the racial and gender performativity of his hustler characters as trapped within a system of economic exploitation. More specifically, the novel places the hustling ethic within a top-down racket presided over by the corrupt politician Casper Holmes, and his wife Leila. The novel revolves around the Holmes' involvement with Harlem's gay underworld. Casper is a closeted homosexual, and Leila leads a double life in drag as a male hustler called Mr. Baron. In the novel's initial stages, Leila's Mr. Baron appears to champion Harlem's veiled and defiant homosexual subculture. We first encounter Leila/Baron in a Cadillac that resembles 'solid gold', using his transgressive looks for 'all they were worth' when stopped by a group of white policemen.²⁹ Baron's 'bebop goatee' and 'long, black curling lashes' give him the appearance of an 'amateur magician'. (*ASU* 8) His composite status as one of Harlem's 'girl-boys' enacts the way in which drag ruptures the distinction between 'authentic' and 'real', positing all identity as contingent on its stylisation. (*ASU* 24) By riffing on gender roles in this way, Baron evades formulation by other characters, and is frequently referred to as 'nowhere in sight.' (*ASU* 59) Moreover, Baron appears to regard his performativity as an anti-bourgeois hustling ethic. He reacts with amazement at the Cadillac driver's claim that he saved 'nearest every penny [he] made' as a merchant sailor to buy the car. For this admission, the sailor gets called a 'goddamn chicken-crap square' by Baron. (*ASU* 55)

²⁷ Hudson, 'The Hustling Ethic', 424.

²⁸ Kelley, *Yo Mama's Dysfunktional!*, 45-6. Similarly, Quinn writes that the popularity of the pimp tableau in the early 1970s 'reflected black disillusionment with the possibility or even desirability of being able to gain access to conventional society on equal terms.' Quinn, 'Pimping Ain't Easy', 219.

²⁹ Chester Himes, *All Shot Up* (London: Panther, 1969[1960]), 14. All subsequent references will be parenthesised, with the prefix *ASU*.

However, as the novel progresses, Baron's disdain for lower-class Harlemites takes a far more vindictive form. We learn that the 'Baron' guise enables the wealthy Leila to ruthlessly exploit Harlem's poor gay subculture. The complex plot begins with the car-jacking of the Cadillac containing Baron, his sailor acquaintance and the sailor's girlfriend. Immediately afterwards, Casper Holmes is robbed of \$50,000 in party election funds. Both crimes are undertaken by the same white Southerner and black accomplices posing as cops. Moreover, both crimes leave behind the corpses of black male cross-dressers, who we are led to believe are mere passer-bys. However, it transpires that the transvestite murdered in the \$50,000 robbery is actually Casper's accessory in a botched attempt to steal the money for himself. Similarly, the transvestite knocked down when the Cadillac is stolen turns out to be Leila/Baron's accomplice in a failed attempt to steal the car for herself. As such, the prosperous couple's greed enacts, not the championing, but the murderous subjugation of Harlem's gay subculture. Casper and Leila's sham marriage thus stands as a more critical example of Harlem's fundamental of conspicuous consumption. Casper is described as having a 'creamy, massaged' appearance, lighting his cigars 'like a jeweller using a miniature torch on a filigree of gold.' (*ASU* 24, 92) Similarly, Leila's glamorous, bejewelled appearance is finished with a belt depicting 'a series of Pans with nude males and females caught in grotesque postures on their horns.' (*ASU* 103) In many ways, the belt stands as a metaphor for the way in which their scheming 'gores' the poorer members of Harlem's gay community.

In particular, the murder of the Holmes' cross-dressing accomplices rearticulates the playfulness of a black hustling ethic to a brutal logic of exploitation. For example, an elderly woman ran down at the beginning of the novel by the fake policemen is revealed to be a 'pansy' by the moniker of Black Beauty. The scene in which Black Beauty's corpse is discovered depicts the performativity of Himes's hustlers in a more morose fashion:

Doc cut open the thick black dress with a pair of shears. Underneath she wore only a black uplift bra and lace-trimmed nylon panties. Her limbs were smooth, and well-rounded, but muscular. Falsies came off with the bra, revealing a smooth, flat, mannish chest. Underneath the nylon panties was a heavily padded, yellow satin loincloth. (*ASU* 44)

The aggressive disrobing of the body simultaneously mobilises and disavows the racial erotics suggested by the moniker 'Black Beauty'. Moreover, it allows Himes to contrast the artifice of gender performativity (false breasts, padded loincloth) with the stark underlying reality: a subjugated black corpse. Although ostensibly a bizarre coincidence, it later emerges that Black Beauty has been paid by Leila/Baron to masquerade as an old lady in order to 'fake' being run

over by the sailor's Cadillac, which will thus lower its value. Black Beauty is thus a character whose cross-dressing hustle is not done 'for kicks', as is suggested by Grave Digger. (*ASU* 50) Rather, it is born of his desperate desire for capital, a desire the prosperous Leila/Baron takes ruthless advantage of. In the words of a policemen working on the case, Black Beauty's sexual 'act' is his 'racket, not his pleasure.' (*ASU* 69)

Himes emerges as an author less interested in the performative freedoms of the hustling ethic, than he is its underlying imperative of economic exploitation. This complicates Kevin Bell's assertion that Himes's Harlem 'unfolds not at the levels of the sociological, but always within the exquisitely temporal core of the affective.'³⁰ By contrast, although not 'naturalistic' in its critique of capitalist society, Himes's fiction both enacts and critiques the exploitation of racial difference as a capitalistic commodity. As seen in the scene featuring Black Beauty's corpse, Himes depicts his poor black hustlers vacillating between trickster consumers and corporal objects of consumption themselves. In many ways, Leila's manipulation of 'black beauty' enacts bell hooks's argument regarding the pop-cultural commodification of racial identity. Hooks states that the spectre of race and ethnicity provides an 'alternative playground where members of dominating races...affirm their power.' In particular, black male and female bodies offer the consumer the promise of wildness, of unlimited physical prowess and unbridled eroticism.³¹ Hooks is interested in the way in which the spectacular images produced by black self-commodification are *consumed*. She describes a 'phallogentric gaze', a perspective that both elevates and objectifies the significance of racial representation. Hooks equates this gaze to a 'consumer cannibalism' that 'constructs our presence as absence' and 'denies the "body"' of the black subject. Within it, the racial voyeur is encouraged to decontextualise the racial image before them, and inscribe their own patriarchal meanings.³²

Himes's Harlem, itself a racialised commodity, reflects back upon this dynamic, and no more thoroughly than in *The Real Cool Killers*. If *All Shot Up* could be said to explore black interclass exploitation, *The Real Cool Killers* depicts how this same dynamic supports a citywide vice industry that caters for white bourgeois 'outsiders'. The murder of Ulysses Galen unveils a high-class, police-protected prostitution racket that connects brothels, the Dew

³⁰ Kevin Bell, 'Assuming the Position: Fugitivity and Futurity in the Work of Chester Himes', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2005), 858.

³¹ bell hooks, 'Eating The Other: Desire and Resistance', in Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (eds.), *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York: The New Press, 2000 [1992]), 351.

³² bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, Mass. : South End Press, 1992), 118, 120. See also Ann DuCille, 'Toy Theory: Black Barbie And The Deep Play Of Difference' in Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (eds.), *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York: The New Press, 2000 [1996]).

Drop Inn, and the Real Cool Moslems. This is a network that spans from the overcrowded tenement building inhabited by the Moslems to the plush bars of Washington Heights. Here, ‘behind the respectable-looking facades’ reside the true ‘circus tents of Harlem.’ (*RCK* 235) Himes describes Bucky’s, an upper-class bar which provides white patrons with black prostitutes. The bar’s white owner, Bucky, describes the establishment to Grave Digger as ‘genteel people dining in leisure. Fine food. Soft music. Low lights and laughter.’ (*RCK* 236) Grave Digger, who sees Bucky’s for the ‘circus tent’ that it is, responds thusly:

‘If you white people insist on coming up to Harlem where you force coloured people to live in vice-and-crime-ridden slums, it’s my job to see that you are safe.’ (*RCK* 238)

Here, Himes offers a direct comment on the racial and class exploitation that envelopes Harlem’s hustling ethic. Bucky’s air of bourgeois respectability puts into greater relief the sense that the sexualised acts performed by poor black Harlemites are the end-product of a ruthless power system. Bucky’s defiant response – ‘I don’t have to take that from you, I’m covered’ – further suggests the polyvalence of such a system. (*RCK* 239)

Another exploitative white outsider ‘covered’ by the Harlem power structure is Ulysses Galen himself. Galen is a ‘fifteen-thousand-dollar-a-year white executive’ who enjoys ‘slumming’ in Harlem’s brothels. (*RCK* 217) Akin to Bucky, Galen’s respectable air masks the fact that he is a voyeuristic sadist who carries a camera and ‘miniature bullwhip’ with him to sessions with the Dew Drop Inn/ Moslem prostitutes. He is described by a pimp as a ‘whipper’ with a fetish for ‘black mannish-looking bitches’ and ‘little coloured school gals.’ (*RCK* 269) Galen’s sadistic consumption of black prostitutes reverses the perspective so far observed in the novel, depicting black self-commodification through hooks’s ‘phallogentric gaze.’ Galen’s photography literally converts the frenetic performativity of the Moslems’ sexual ‘acts’ to a static image, or a set of ‘pornographic photos’. These are described in the following way:

They were pictures of nude coloured girls in various postures, each photo revealing another developed technique of the sadist. On most of the pictures the faces of the girls were distinct although distorted by pain and shame. (*RCK* 278)

Himes depicts the reduction of black female performance to the level of an eroticised, commodified image. The pictures of the girls are ‘distinct’ yet ‘distorted’, a neat metaphor for the performer-consumer dynamic at the centre of the story. Indeed, it is the appropriation, or ‘distortion’, of the women’s ‘distinct’ performance that is the subject of the scene. Whereas

identity performance is noted for its unique kinaesthesia, Galen's photographic souvenirs represent a literally reified black female sexuality. The patriarchal, capitalistic context of the image recodes the hustling ethic's performativity to that of a pornographic fantasy.

As with the discovery of Black Beauty's corpse, then, Himes presents the dowry with which the hustling ethic is paid for: the subjugated lower-class black body. As *The Real Cool Killers* progresses, it unveils the violent and morbid implications of the hustling ethic. Many hustlers end the novel as 'chalk outlines on the pavement', the press 'flash bulbs [going] off around the corpses like an anti-aircraft barrage.' (RCK 26) An aggressive voyeurism is here depicted as a life-sapping force, an act of violence in itself. Similarly, the physical attributes of the Dew Drop Inn prostitutes are increasingly rendered as two-dimensional as Galen's photographic image. They speak in a 'small scared voice', one 'no bigger than a prayer' and 'so weightless it floated out...like quivering eiderdown.' (RCK 294, 307, 310) The novel's final scene sees one of the prostitutes taken captive by Sheik, who is revealed to have pimped his fellow gang members to Galen. With a knife pressed to her throat, Himes describes her eyes as having 'the huge liquid look of a dying doe's.' (RCK 312) The fluidity of the hustling ethic is ironically recoded as a 'liquid' look of fear. In keeping with hooks's theory, then, the 'phallogentric gaze' of bourgeois punters leaves Himes's female performers both hyper-visible yet strangely *absent*.³³

Above all, Himes draws our attention to the way in which the hustling ethic enacts a nihilistic logic of capitalist competition. Both the spectacular performances and bloody corpses produced by Harlem's vice industry reflect the economic desperation of its workers. The prostitutes in *The Real Cool Killers* take Galen's beatings because 'they was glad to take it' for a 'hundred bucks'. (RCK 269) Similarly, a madam in *All Shot Up* attests that even if presented with two abusive patrons she'd 'have handcuffed each of 'em to two girls, and foot-chained 'em to the bed, bad as I need money.' (ASU 114) Cornel West comments that postwar black urban America developed in accordance with a 'cutthroat morality' which 'capitalises on every opportunity to make money.' Moreover, West argues that a societal emphasis on material and erotic *pleasure* helped popularise blackness as a consumer commodity in its own right. West describes this fundamental of pleasure as a 'market morality [that] stigmatises others as objects.'³⁴ Whilst playing this very game, Himes simultaneously draws attention to

³³ This facet of Himes's fiction evokes the overlooked work of black Harlem novelist Clarence Cooper, particularly 1960's *The Scene*. The novel depicts its locale as a cutthroat market of drug dealing and prostitution, which turns Cooper's characters into 'dead flesh.' Clarence Cooper, *The Scene* (London: First Four Square, 1966 [1960]), 7, 216.

³⁴ Cornel West, 'Nihilism In Black America', in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay, 1992), 42.

these aspects of his Harlem's hustling ethic. Within it, the wily self-commodification of his poor black hustler characters offers a transgressive pleasure. Equally, however, it communicates the powerlessness of an exploited community.

Harlem's Exchange Value.

Ultimately, Himes's ambivalent depiction of Harlem's hustling ethic stands as a metaphor for his fiction's own status as a racialised commodity. Himes noted with stupefaction the way in which 'everything seems to go... all human values – with awesome swiftness in the struggle for the dollar.'³⁵ Himes's own 'struggle for the dollar' undergirds the eroticism and sensationalism of his commercial fiction. Simultaneously, however, it energises his critical exploration of Harlem's hustling ethic. Like their author, the citizens of Himes's Harlem are willing to commodify black urban identity in the pursuit of much needed cash. Similarly, these characters' position within an exploitative vice industry reflects back upon their real-life consumption by readers who demanded titillation. Thus, by dramatising not only the production, but also the consumption, of black urban images, Himes manages to write both himself and his voyeuristic reader into the text. Through characters such as Black Beauty and Galen, Himes reflects on the consumer's ability to rearticulate black urban performativity as pornography. Himes's ambivalence regarding his *Série Noire* career emerges in the contrasting perspectives observed above: the assertive self-invention of the black hustler, and the exploitative gaze of his white consumer.

Himes is thus less interested in the moral or experimental value of the black American ghetto, than he is its *exchange* value. Hooks describes the logic of racial commodification as one of 'consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange.'³⁶ In his detective fiction, Himes dramatises just this: the erasure of Harlem's citizens as impoverished Americans. Instead, they emerge as consumer commodities available for consumption and reappropriation by a fetishistic gaze. Of relevance to their portrayal is Jean Baudrillard's argument that consumerism 'depends on liberty, not only at the level of production...but also...at the level of consumption.' Baudrillard suggests a negotiation of cultural meanings between producer and consumer, symbolised by exchange value.³⁷ As such,

³⁵ Cited in McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 256.

³⁶ hooks, 'Eating the Other', 351.

³⁷ Jean Baudrillard, 'Desire in Exchange Value', in Jean Baudrillard and Charles Levin (trans.), *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981), 206.

Himes's self-conscious focus on consumerism allows him to explore the way in which racial meanings are created, and by whom. Baudrillard continues:

In principle, nothing is immune to this structural logic of value. Objects, ideas, even conduct... can never escape the fact that they may be potentially exchanged as signs. i.e., assume another kind of value entirely in the very act of exchange.³⁸

This is clearly the fate of Himes's hustler characters. By themselves, they symbolise nothing other than flux. However, their erotic performances are 'exchanged as signs', assuming 'another kind of value' in their phallogentric consumption by a particular audience. Himes thus juxtaposes the erotics of black performance with the fetishes of his own readership.

Let me conclude, then, by highlighting an instance in which we can see Himes clearly dramatise his own fiction's exchange value. It is an extended passage that depicts the precise moment in which the cultural 'value' of Harlem's hustlers is not only produced but, to use Baudrillard's term, 'exchanged as a sign'. In the final stages of *All Shot Up*, Leila and Casper Holmes come face to face with their erstwhile accomplices: the three out-of-town criminals posing as policemen. Casper had previously arranged with them to mug him of \$50,000 of campaign funds, on the condition that they split the money between them. However, Casper has double-crossed them, giving them a ringer so that he can keep the entire sum for himself. Seeking vengeance, the three criminals kidnap Casper and proceed to torture him. Leila, who recognises the criminals as the same 'cops' who foiled her attempt to steal the Cadillac, leads the police to the apartment where he is being held. Leila's faceoff with the three criminals again enacts the relationship between performer and consumer. The criminals comprise of two black henchmen and a white ringleader. The ringleader, an 'extraordinarily vicious' southerner, is clearly demarcated by Himes as a voyeuristic outsider. (*ASU* 152) Despite being 'unfamiliar with Harlem', he spends the novel outsmarting its hustling community. (*ASU* 126) His menace is largely communicated through his voice, which is described as 'sadistic and inhuman' and 'as dangerous as a rattlesnake's warning.' (*ASU* 117, 143) In many ways, he is one of Himes's manipulative white tourists, an outsider largely unseen, yet monitoring and controlling the actions of others.

By confronting these 'consumers', Leila is placed in a situation in which she must commodify herself in order to save not only the \$50,000, but her and Casper's lives. This is a situation that strips Leila of her prestige, privilege and control:

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ideological Genesis of Needs', in Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (eds.), *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York: The New Press, 2000 [1969]), 57, 70.

She stuck out her breasts and made her body sway as though her pelvic girdle was equipped with roller bearings. She was playing her sex along with her race for all it was worth; but her big brown eyes were dark pools of terror. All her life she had played sex for kicks; now she was playing it for her life and it didn't work the same; she felt as sexless as a leg of veal. (ASU 143)

Here, Leila's gender performativity is recoded as servitude and desperation. As with the novel's poorer hustlers, Leila's performative sexuality is in the hands of her aggressors. Significantly, the fluidity with which she has so far been graced with is replaced by a feeling of being as objectified as a 'leg of veal.' However, even more interesting is the way in which this performance divides her audience along racial lines. As Leila 'plays' both her 'sex' and 'race' for all its worth, Himes describes the divergent ways in which she is consumed by the criminals:

Leila whispered and pushed closer to the [black] lookout for protection. 'You're not going to let that cracker hurt me,' she begged in a tiny terror-stricken voice.

Suddenly, there was a horse of another colour.

The black lookout shoved her to one side and drew his .38 automatic. He didn't aim it at the white man, but he showed it to him [...]

'What's the matter with all you niggers?' [the white man] said. 'The bitch has got to be silenced; and we ain't got all night to fool around.'

The word *nigger* estranged him. Where before they were divided by woman, now they were separated by race. Neither of the coloured men moved or spoke.

Down below in the Paris Bar someone had put a coin in the juke box, and the slow hypnotic beat of an oldtime platter called *Bottom Blues* came faintly through the floor.

The lookout made an offer. 'I'll give you my share for her.' [...]

'It's a deal,' the white man said. (ASU 143-4)

Significantly, Leila's racially and sexually charged hustle garners two differing reactions, 'estranging' the two races and causing them to turn their guns on one another. It causes the 'cracker' to explode in a fit of racist contempt, whilst incurring a sense of solidarity between the black characters in the room. In effect, we see the value and significance of Leila's performance rearticulated between the different (reading) constituencies. Simultaneously, it signifies both the exploitative 'contract' she shares with the white man, and the subaltern resistance entailed by the hustling ethic. The encroaching sound of the Blues symbolises this communal bond, and her performance's place within a defiant black urban expressive culture. However, the multiplicity of Leila's performance resolves itself, not in a gunfight, but a 'deal' between these two constituencies. The black lookout agrees to literally pay the white man in order to save Leila's life. Her act culminates, not in either black 'protection' or white oblivion,

but in her capitalist valuation. In visceral fashion, then, Himes presents an image in which the cultural value of a racial image is literally commodified and, more importantly, *exchanged*.

Moments later, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed storm into the room, killing the three gunmen. In his dying moments, the white gunman throws a knife that non-fatally injures Leila, despite entering her stomach ‘up to the hilt.’ (ASU 144) The ease of penetration confirms her malleable identity as a *lack* to the consumers’ masculine presence. Through Leila and other characters, Himes self-consciously explores the black urban body, and black urban text, as a performance that is overdetermined and exchanged within an exploitative capitalist system. Indeed, Himes’s Harlem enacts what Stuart Hall calls ‘the end of innocence of the black subject or the end of the innocent notion of an essential black subject.’³⁹ Born of his own experience, Himes dismisses the idea of a racial identity *protected* from capitalist commodification, and the cultural rearticulation this process enacts. Instead, he presents Harlem as an imperilled vice industry, simultaneously a product of, a reaction against, and an acquiescence to the dominant capitalist order. In doing so, Himes reflects back ambivalently on his fiction’s own lack of ‘innocence’, and its foundation in commercial demand.

³⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘What is This “Black” in Black Popular Culture?’ in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay, 1992): 21-33. 27, 32.

6

**‘That’s how you got to look like Frankenstein’s monster.’:
Divided detectives, authorial schisms**

Coffin Ed Johnson, one half of Harlem’s renowned detective duo, is a character physically branded by his job. Following an acid attack in the first Harlem Cycle novel, Ed is left with a scarred face and rash temperament. The most detailed description of his facial disfigurement appears in *All Shot Up*:

[T]he acid scars had been covered by skin grafted from his thigh. But the new skin was a shade or so lighter than his natural face skin and it had been grafted on in pieces. The result was that Coffin Ed’s face looked as though it had been made up in Hollywood for the role of the Frankenstein monster.¹

The patchwork of grafted skin clearly marks Ed as grotesque. It is an appearance that fuels Ed’s reputation as not only Harlem’s toughest cop, but its most feared ‘monster’. However, the significance of Ed’s appearance, so frequently alluded to in the Harlem Cycle, runs deeper than mere gruesomeness. Like Frankenstein’s monster, Ed, together with his partner Grave Digger Jones, is a work of metissage, a tangle of disparate parts. As black Harlemites working for a racist and corrupt police department, the duo are defined by split political and social allegiances. Moreover, as the varied skin tones on Ed’s face suggest, these crossed purposes are racially coded. Indeed, in a genre that typically pits white hardboiled masculinity in opposition to black pathology, Ed exists as a grotesque racial contradiction.

As this chapter argues, Ed’s varicoloured scarring makes visible the racial tensions that undergird the role of hardboiled detective, and, more widely, hardboiled masculinity. As previously established, the transgressive (white) subjectivity offered by the noir formula depended upon, and was organised by, the spectre of black abjection. As scholars have argued, the hardboiled detective (and reader) finds his freedom in the identification with, yet ultimate rejection of, the racial other.² In this sense, the white male detective’s journey to the nonwhite

¹ Chester Himes, *All Shot Up* (London: Panther Books, 1969 [1960]), 18-19. All subsequent references will be parenthesised with the prefix *ASU*.

² Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 55. See also Eric Lott, 'The Whiteness of Film Noir', *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Autumn 1997).

ghetto, or his encounter with a hyper-violent or hyper-sexual nonwhite character, enacts a fantasy of (white male) self-discovery.

As both hardboiled detectives, and black Harlemites, Digger and Ed internalise this racial dialectic. Many critics resolve the duo's contradictions by identifying them as 'trickster' figures. For example, Wendy Walters reads Digger and Ed as "the cops who should have been," the cops who could offer protection to the African American urban community.' As such, she suggests that the duo 'reclaim' hardboiled masculinity in the service of a 'radical politics of black freedom and community.'³ To a large extent, Walters bases this reading on a 1970 interview in which Michel Fabre asks Himes whether his detectives are 'traitors to their race' or 'the kind of detectives that should exist.' For Walters, Himes's reply implies the duo's trickster agency: 'I've taken two people who would be anti-black in real life, and made them sympathetic.'⁴ By contrast, this chapter argues that Himes makes his protagonists 'sympathetic' by deconstructing the fantasy of hardboiled masculinity itself. Indeed, Digger and Ed do not embody a trickster agency, or closure. Rather, they play out an enduring racial schism. As we shall see, their gleaming white pistols, and scarred black faces, imbue them with a dual role in the text that is at once central and marginal, authoritative and subjugated. Simultaneously inhabiting, yet never unifying, the roles of 'white' hardboiled subject and 'black' noir object, Digger and Ed debunk the two poles as mutually parasitic. The duo thus make visible hardboiled masculinity's dependency on racial difference. To cite Herman Gray, they are self-conscious characters who dramatise 'how the fantasy work of whiteness operates, including its production of and dependence on black abjection.'⁵

Himes debunks the racial 'othering' at the heart of hardboiled masculinity in order to reflect upon his own objectified identity as a black American *Série Noire* writer. The relationship between hardboiled detective and author is a much discussed topic. Typically, the hardboiled detective's tough, uncompromising actions thematise the hardboiled writer's tough, uncompromising agency. For example, Fredric Jameson argues that the hardboiled detective-narrator exists as a valorised example of authorial autonomy and freedom. He writes that both hardboiled writing and film noir are 'structurally distinguished by the fundamental fact of the

³ Wendy W. Walters, *At Home In Diaspora: Black International Writing* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 59, 65. See also Stephen F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

⁴ Michel Fabre, 'Interview With Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 85.

⁵ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 129.

voice-over, which signals in advance the *closure* of the events to be narrated.’⁶ Those scholars who identify Digger and Ed as masterful tricksters construct Himes in a similar fashion. Walters suggests that his protagonists provided Himes with the literary means to ‘control an urban African American experience and to briefly imagine refashioning US law enforcement practises.’⁷ Such a reading implies that Himes carved out a resplendent hardboiled authorship at the *Série Noire*. However, by analysing the schism described above, we will see the way in which Digger and Ed’s agency is pointedly devoid of instrumentality, or ‘control’. Like their author, the detectives are black ‘agents’ working within an exploitative white power structure. Similarly, if Ed appears ‘made up’ for a Hollywood version of Frankenstein, Himes claimed to have been ‘created’ by Marcel Duhamel as a lurid African American commodity.⁸ In essence, Digger and Ed thematise Himes’s overdetermination within a commercial literary formula, and the processes of exchange to which his own identity as a writer was subjected. This is the parasitic dynamic that inscribes itself upon Ed’s face. As a Harlem hustler tells him: ‘That’s how you got to look like Frankenstein’s monster.’⁹

Firstly, this chapter explores the passage of Digger and Ed through the first five Harlem novels. I analyse the incoherence that defines Digger and Ed’s political agency through this journey. On the one hand, Digger and Ed are presented as black ‘working-stiff’ Harlemites, enacting a brutal violence in order to protect their fellow citizens. On the other, they are presented as peculiarly ‘white’ agents of hardboiled moralism, whose violent acts punish those black Harlemites deemed grotesque by society. In refusing to resolve this tension, Himes burlesques the political contradictions of the genre, and the lack of instrumentality that his position within it entailed. Having established that Digger and Ed exist as ciphers, as opposed to agents, I analyse the way in which the duo operate as pleasurable and transgressive fantasy figures. In particular, Ed is a character defined by a perpetual tension between his gleaming white pistol, and scarred black face. This schism energises his dual position as the genre’s authoritative hardboiled subject, and monstrous noir object. *The Heat’s*

⁶ Fredric Jameson, ‘The Synoptic Chandler’, in Joan Copjec (Ed.), *Shades Of Noir: A Reader* (London, Verso: 1993), 36. For example, James M. Cain’s (white male) criminal protagonists offset their abject behaviour with a cathartic act of authorship. The condemned protagonist of *Double Indemnity* ends the tale of his own downfall by drawing the reader’s attention to his literary redemption. Regarding his police statement, he writes: ‘What you’ve just read, if you’ve read it, is the statement... maybe she’ll see it some time, and not think so bad of me after she understands how it all was.’ James M. Cain, *Double Indemnity*, in *The Five Great Novels of James M. Cain* (London: Picador, 1985 [1945]), 323.

⁷ Walters, *At Home In Diaspora*, 61.

⁸ Michael Mok, ‘Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995 [1972]), 107.

⁹ Himes, Chester, *The Crazy Kill*, in *The Harlem Cycle Vol 1* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996 [1959]), 436. All subsequent references will be parenthesised with the prefix *TCK*.

On (1961) brings this split to a head in order to dramatise Ed's hardboiled heroism as an exploitative exercise in self-flagellation. I conclude by reasserting that the duo's split agency dramatises Himes's authorship as defined by a discursive, rather than decisive, agency. In doing so, Himes debunks the individualist ideal of hardboiled masculinity, and hardboiled authorship. Rather, in the contradictory, and self-defeating agency of his detectives, Himes dramatises the corporate, and uneven production of authorial meaning.

Split Allegiances

At the end of *The Heat's On*, Coffin Ed Johnson ponders his and Grave Digger's reputation as Harlem's most notorious African American police detectives:

'Folks just don't want to believe that what we're trying to do is make a decent peaceful city for people to live in, and we're going about it the best way we know how. People think we enjoy being tough, shooting people and knocking them in the head.'¹⁰

These are the words of a decidedly self-conscious hardboiled hero. Ed is anxious about the way the duo's hard-hitting methods are interpreted or, indeed, *mis*interpreted by the Harlem community. He desires recognition for what he views as his and Digger's progressive role as African American law enforcers. Ed's hunch, however, is that they are feared as draconian and sadistic, interested only in violent self-gratification. Sketched out here is a crisis of purpose that defines Himes's black detective protagonists. In a genre marked by the brutal interplay between white and black, the comment encourages us to untangle Digger and Ed's perilous position between a reactionary white police force and dispossessed black community. In this respect, Digger and Ed dramatise Himes's enduring ambivalence regarding his role within the noir and hardboiled genre. As we have seen, Himes's move into the form was triggered by his disillusionment with the promise of literature as a 'force for change' in an instrumental sense.¹¹ Digger and Ed both reflect and explore this fundamental lack of control. Their violent actions are marked by a startling ambiguity, and subject to a variety of competing gazes, allegiances and misreadings. In this sense, Himes's detective protagonists are anti-hardboiled heroes, their agency overdetermined and fragmented from without, rather than self-contained and instrumental.

¹⁰ Chester Himes, *The Heat's On* (London: Allison and Busby, 1992 [1960]), 174. All subsequent references will be parenthesised with the prefix *THO*.

¹¹ Michel Fabre, 'Interview With Chester Himes', in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 89.

In particular, the anxieties voiced by Ed reflect upon the duo's inability to realise the decisive *egalitarian* purpose enacted by the hardboiled hero. Indeed, the hardboiled detective as originally envisioned by Dashiell Hammett embodied the Popular Front authorial ideal of literary realism. Indeed, Hammett regarded his own Continental Op protagonist as:

[A] little man going forward day after day through mud and blood and death and deceit – as callous and brutal and cynical as necessary – toward a dim goal, with nothing to push or pull him to it except he's been hired to reach it.¹²

On the one hand, Hammett's Op is simply a middle-aged, overweight employee of a large detective organisation. However, it is this very ordinariness, and ability to endure 'day after day', that imbues him with the credentials of a proletarian hero. Like many protagonists of the era, including Himes's, the Op is a working-man, driven by a will to survive, and ready to sacrifice himself for the common good. The perceived agency of such a character resides in his ability to effortlessly move around his milieu, and objectively catalogue his findings. As Fred Pfeil suggests, he is a character defined by a 'relentlessly single-minded drive...to demystify.'¹³ This desire to 'demystify' reflects the authorial intentions of the era's hardboiled author. Indeed, James M. Cain claimed that his hardboiled narrators did not reflect a 'conscious effort to be tough.' Rather, such a figure embodied a literature 'whose main element was truth.'¹⁴ In their no-nonsense attitude and perseverance, the hardboiled protagonist enacts what Andrew Ross calls a Depression-era literary 'struggle' against 'mystification'.¹⁵

Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe can be seen to continue this 'common' heroism, albeit with some stylistic alterations. Marlowe, a private detective, is a larger figure in the text, and is driven more overtly by sentiment and honour. In his essay 'The Art of Crime', Chandler outlined the role of the hardboiled protagonist thusly:

He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be...a man of honour – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.¹⁶

¹² William F. Nolan, *Dashiell Hammett: A Casebook* (Santa Barbara: McNally and Loftin, 1969), ix.

¹³ Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies In Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995), 116.

¹⁴ Cain, *Double Indemnity*, 237.

¹⁵ Andrew Ross, 'The New Sentence and the Commodity Form: Recent American Writing', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 363. See also McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 275.

¹⁶ Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder', in *The 2nd Chandler Omnibus* (London: Hamilton, 1962), 14.

Chandler describes a more obviously heroic proletarian, led by ‘instinct’, and no less than ‘everything’ to the novel’s milieu. Nevertheless, Marlowe remains the ‘common man’ idolised by New Deal detective fiction. His adventures are characterised by his pursuit of a redemptive relationship with the forgotten victims of capitalist society.¹⁷ Akin to Hammett and Cain, this is an instrumentality that reflects the withering authorial style of Chandler himself. Frank Krutnik suggests that Marlowe’s tough wisecracks are used by Chandler ‘as a weapon’ that is more ‘a measure of the hero’s prowess than the use of guns.’¹⁸

Of course, like their authors, both Marlowe and the Op are *white* men. This racial coding has led critics to argue that, by contrast, Himes’s black detectives are prevented from meeting the expectations associated with their narrative role. For example, Scott Bunyan argues that Digger and Ed debunk the private detective’s ‘extra-legal space’ as an ‘idealistic myth...only open to racially privileged white men.’¹⁹ However, the question of Digger and Ed’s status as black detective protagonists is more complex than whether they do, or do not, meet the expectations and exigencies of hardboiled heroism. Rather, I am interested in the manner in which they are fragmented to the point of ineffectuality, and even incoherence, by these very expectations and exigencies. As both black Harlemites and police detectives, they are simultaneously defenders of their community, and arbiters of a gratuitous violence *against* this community. Again, in the words of Ed, it is unclear whether the duo’s hardboiled credentials make for a ‘peaceful city’ or satisfy an anti-progressive yen for ‘being tough’.

On the one hand, Digger and Ed are ordinary members of Harlem’s subjugated working population. This ordinariness is manifested in their identities as ‘working-stiff’ detectives who ‘know all the connections’ in a Harlem community they grew up in. In this sense, Digger and Ed are Harlemites in terms of both class and racial allegiance. A black Harlem resident claims allegiance with Digger on the basis of the former, telling him that ‘you and me are both city workers.’²⁰ Elsewhere, *The Crazy Kill’s* Mamie Pullen tells Digger that ‘I’ve known you ever since you were a little shavetail kid on 116th Street.’ (*TCK* 364) As such, Ed refers to him and his partner as ‘two country Harlem dicks who live in this village and don’t like to see anybody get killed. It might be a friend of ours.’ (*TCK* 455) This sense of

¹⁷ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 143.

¹⁸ Frank Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 43.

¹⁹ Scott Bunyan, ‘No Order From Chaos: The Absence of Chandler’s Extra-Legal Space in the Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley’, *Studies In The Novel*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2003), 340.

²⁰ Chester Himes, *The Real Cool Killers*, in *The Harlem Cycle Vol I* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996 [1957]), 218, 297. All subsequent references will be parenthesised with the prefix *RCK*.

belonging causes the duo to clash with both racist policeman, and those criminals attempting to scam vulnerable Harlemites. When a white policeman utters the word ‘nigger’, Coffin Ed warns him: ‘If you use that word again I’ll kick your teeth down your throat.’ (*ASU* 42) Moreover, at the end of *All Shot Up*, the duo secretly use Casper Holmes’s stolen election funds to send deprived New York children to summer camp. (*ASU* 156) Clearly, on this level, Digger and Ed play the role of hardboiled detective as a member of the black working-class, striving to defend the community at all costs.²¹

However, it remains the case that Digger and Ed, as police detectives, are equally *feared* by the Harlem community. Indeed, Himes juxtaposes the duo’s affection for their fellow Harlemites with a simultaneous sense of their menacing detachment from them. For example, Himes describes the police interrogation room in a way that emphasises Digger and Ed’s severance from, and power over, their civilian ‘brothers’. Whereas ‘squirring’ Harlemites sit in the ‘hot bright glare of a three-hundred-watt spotlight,’ the detectives and other white police interrogators are ‘screened’ in the shadows beyond the light. (*TCK* 360) A sense of separation permeates the detectives’ relationship with black Harlem. Although considered Harlemites, we learn that both Digger and Ed live in Jamaica, Queens, and Astoria, Long Island. (*RCK* 219) Himes alludes to the detectives’ home-life as one of bourgeois propriety. They are characters bent on creating ‘a good family with a father and a mother and a good home.’ (*RCK* 326) In *The Real Cool Killers*, Coffin Ed’s daughter Eve becomes involved with the Real Cool Moslems. This is a development explicitly figured as the encroachment of Harlem’s urban decay into the detectives’ aloof private lives. (*RCK* 219, 262) If, as Nicholas Christopher argues, the noir narrative is a ‘tale of two cities’, then Digger and Ed appear to straddle the line between suburban order and urban chaos.²² This is an aloofness that compromises their identities as everyday working-stiffs. It imbues them with a masculine mobility that appears gratuitous, posturing, and, above all, destructive. As the owner of a café remarks: ‘You can’t stop them from goin’ nowhere. Them is de *mens*.’ (*ASU* 21-22)

Digger and Ed’s hardboiled heroism thus renders them contradictory characters, distinguished by a simultaneous identification with and disidentification from the Harlem

²¹ Sean McCann argues that the duo, as lowly police officers, are defined by ‘proletarian occupation and by the circumstances of a brutal environment.’ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 278. Michael Denning also argues that the duo decidedly lack ‘star’ quality, and that ‘their relatively central role comes not, as we have seen, from their position as heroes or centres of consciousness, but as mediators, between black and white, life and death, law and crime.’ Michael Denning, ‘Topographies Of Violence: Chester Himes’ Harlem Domestic Novels’, in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1988]), 160.

²² Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere In The Night: Film Noir And The American City* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 36.

community. It is on this basis that we must assess their most formidable weapon: extreme violence. As Bunyan comments, ‘Digger and Ed’s violence...is troubling for the reader.’²³ The duo’s violent means are troubling precisely because it is unclear whether it is designed to defend or punish black Harlemites. In *A Rage In Harlem*, the reader learns:

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed weren’t crooked detectives, but they were tough. They had to be tough to work in Harlem. Coloured folks didn’t respect coloured cops. But they respected big shiny pistols and sudden death.²⁴

The detectives, and their long-barrelled, nickel-plated revolvers, are synonymous with bone crunching brutality. As the comment attests, this is a toughness directed almost exclusively towards ‘coloured folks’. When Digger and Ed arrive at a crime scene, the white police chief presumes they have come to ‘beat up some more of your folks.’ He continues: ‘You two men act as if you want to kill off the whole population of Harlem.’ The duo’s contrasting responses to this jibe are telling. Whereas Digger defends their methods on the basis that his superiors ‘told me to crack down’, Ed asserts them on the basis of personal prerogative, reminding him that Harlem is ‘our beat’. (*RCK* 300-1) In variously deferring and claiming responsibility for their toughness, the comment reflects upon its ‘troubling’ ambiguity.

This is a problem that once again resists easy resolution. At times, the detectives are seen to use force to protect vulnerable Harlemites from various predators. In particular, the duo are often tough on wealthy individuals in positions of power who exploit the poor. For example, Grave Digger’s mouth goes ‘cotton dry’ with rage when telling *The Big Gold Dream’s* Sweet Prophet: ‘You’re sitting there trying to play God with those little people.’²⁵ Similarly, Digger and Ed are quick to use violence on the white out-of-towners who exploit Harlem citizens. In *The Real Cool Killers*, Digger informs a group of pimps of his desire to ‘string up every goddamned one of you who were up with [Ulysses] Galen.’ Moments later, Himes describes the ‘flat whacking sound of metal striking against a human skull’ as Digger fulfils his promise. (*RCK* 274) These rage-fuelled acts could be said to ground the detectives’ violence in the black folkloric traditions of the badman. Manthia Diawara argues just this,

²³ Bunyan, ‘No Order From Chaos’, 64.

²⁴ Chester Himes, *A Rage In Harlem*, in *The Harlem Cycle Volume I* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996 [1957]), 53. All subsequent references will be parenthesised with the prefix *RIH*.

²⁵ Chester Himes, *The Big Gold Dream* (London: Penguin, 1976 [1960]), 136. All subsequent references will be parenthesised with the prefix *BGD*.

calling the detectives' violence an 'expressive act against incarceration' by two larger-than-life icons of the black working-class.²⁶

Again, however, Digger and Ed's righteous fury is ultimately counteracted by their position within a corrupt police force that actively perpetuates social injustice. Repeatedly, the duo's disdain for characters such as Holmes and Galen is rendered ineffectual by the revelation that these characters are 'protected' by the police force. In this sense, Digger and Ed are very much depicted as part of the 'problem' itself. Accordingly, the duo's violence often takes on a markedly different significance, seemingly directed wantonly *against* poor black Harlemites. In particular, Digger and Ed appear to take pleasure in inflicting pain upon those deemed non-normative: promiscuous women, gay men, and teenage gangs.²⁷ The duo 'hate female impersonators worse than sin,' and treat female criminals with a mixture of lust and revulsion. (*RIH* 56) For example, Digger refers to *A Rage In Harlem's* Imabelle as a 'teasing bitch' before slapping her with 'such savage violence it spun her out of the chair.' (*RIH* 133) Similarly, in *The Real Cool Killers*, Ed abruptly shoots a member of the Moslems who farts in his direction. The first bullet kills the teenager in question, whilst the second hits a passing Harlemite. (*RCK* 194) This moment of uncontrolled violence encapsulates the sense that the duo's status as hardboiled heroes is not only dangerous to the wider community, but fundamentally erratic. In these moments, Himes's detectives do not resemble community defenders, but rather the type of gunslinger as described by Richard Slotkin.²⁸ Significantly, Digger and Ed are habitually referred to by Harlemites as 'Wild West gunmen' and 'two cowboys from the Harlem ranch.' (*TCK* 357, *ASU* 31)

The violence enacted by Himes's detectives thus remains 'troubling' in a definitive sense. Rather than assert or disavow the duties of the hardboiled detective, it ricochets indiscriminately between a community politics and wanton destructiveness. Unusually for hardboiled heroes, then, Digger and Ed are defined by a fundamental lack of instrumentality. This produces the split allegiances mulled over by Ed, the sense that their status as working-class black Harlemites is irreconcilable with their role in an exploitative white power structure. When a Harlem citizen tells the duo that they 'don't have any compassion for anybody,' they respond: 'It's how you look at it.' (*ASU* 66) The comment reflects on the sense that the duo,

²⁶ Manthia Diawara, 'Noir by *Noirs*: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema', in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), 531.

²⁷ McCann reads the duo as violent defenders of heteronormativity, seeking to 'recontain the private and the feminine within...the domestic home.' McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 300.

²⁸ In this context, their 'art of violence' enacts the 'rights of the individual citizen' *against* the collective. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth Of The Frontier In Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 379.

rather than possessing a self-contained agency, are captive to multiple and contradictory political contexts, or gazes.

Racial ‘Schizophrenia’

We can read Digger and Ed as a product of Himes’s authorial irreverence. Indeed, Himes came to regard his authorial identity less as a pure agency, and more as a noir construction in itself. As we saw in chapter three, Himes argued that his image as a black crime writer was ‘created’ by his editor, and put forward as an object of racial transgression.²⁹ He thus conceived his authorial role in terms of supply-and-demand, arguing that his job was not to ‘make a difference’ but rather to facilitate the consumer fantasies of his white readers. This is, by implication, the primary function of Digger and Ed. The duo’s political incoherence, whilst rendering them failed political agents, makes them particularly satisfying fantasy figures. Their hybrid status offered the *Série Noire* reader a unique kind of transgressive pleasure, allowing them to simultaneously play hardboiled subject *and* racial ‘other’.

If we look at their physical description, we can see the manner in which Digger and Ed internalise and exaggerate this dynamic. Take the following passage from *The Heat’s On*:

Both of [the detectives] looked just as red-eyed, greasy-faced, sweaty and evil as all the other coloured people gathered about, combatants and spectators alike...Their faces bore marks and scars similar to any coloured street fighter. [...]
The difference was they had the pistols, and everyone in Harlem knew them as the ‘Mens’.
(*THO* 25)

The passage reinforces the sense that the duo are structured around a fundamental split, both blending in with, and standing out from, the Harlem crowd. More importantly, however, here this distinction paints them as, simultaneously, ‘white’ hardboiled heroes, and noirish villains. Their black, scarred faces are described as ‘evil’, their appearance akin to that of a ‘coloured street fighter.’ Indeed, their privileged masculine ‘difference’ from other Harlem criminals resides solely in the form of their long-barrelled, nickel-plated pistols.³⁰ As the excerpt indicates, this is a racial duality that positions Digger and Ed at both the centre of the

²⁹ Maurice Cullaz, ‘Chester Himes’ Crusade: An Interview’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1985]), 144.

³⁰ Grave Digger explains the necessity for such eccentric weaponry in a manner that emphasises its importance as a white visual signifier: ‘these people don’t have any respect for a gun that doesn’t have a shiny barrel half a mile long. They want to see what they’re being shot with.’ Himes, *The Real Cool Killers*, 189.

narrative, and at its margins. As owners of white phallic pistols, and scarred black bodies, they simultaneously inhabit the generic roles of white hardboiled subject, and noir object. Breu argues that in a hardboiled masculine fantasy, ‘the unacceptable and disavowed aspects of white male identity are projected onto a blackness that returns to haunt and take possession of the narrator’s psyche.’³¹ This is the very transgression that Digger and Ed facilitate. Indeed, the duo are drawn in such a way as to embody both of the roles described by Breu: putative white hardboiled heroes, and black noirish villains. As we shall see, this is a duality that allows Himes to dramatise and critique his own instigation within the genre’s fantasy of racial transgression.

In particular, the gun-toting, yet acid-scarred, Coffin Ed Johnson is defined by a conflict between ‘white’ subjectivity, and ‘black’ objectification. Whereas Ed’s nickel-plated revolver signifies his authority over the Harlem milieu, his scarred face symbolises his concurrent status as a pathological black monster. His scarring occurs in *A Rage In Harlem*, when the detectives burst into a dockside cabin hoping to foil a syndicate of con-artists. In the melee that ensues, Hank, a member of the syndicate, throws a glass of acid at Coffin Ed:

[Ed] had to be a tough man to be a coloured detective in Harlem. He closed his eyes against the burning pain, but he was so consumed with rage that he began clubbing right and left in the dark with the butt of his pistol...He just felt somebody within reach and he clubbed Grave Digger over the head with such savage fury that he knocked him unconscious. (*RIH* 76)

The flashpoint sees Ed reduced from the conventional ‘tough man’ of the genre, to that of a frightened animal. Indeed, he is so ‘consumed with rage’ that he assaults his partner, a symbolic gesture that temporarily places him in opposition to the hardboiled hero. Ed duly returns in the following novel, yet with a grotesque appearance and erratic temper that frequently spills over into murderous violence. When a member of a street gang throws a bottle of perfume towards him, Ed murders the culprit on the spot, snarling ‘death is on any son of a bitch who tries to throw acid into my eyes again.’ (*RCK* 190) When informed of his error by Digger, Ed’s reply is significant: ‘well...a burnt child fears fire.’ (*RCK* 198) The scene outlines a rather paternal relationship between Digger and his damaged partner. Moreover, his scars physically brand him with the characteristics of the noir genre’s traditional villain: pathology, chaotic violence, and a grotesque raciality. Thus, whilst Ed’s role in the text requires him to carry an authoritative white pistol, his face defines him as a damaged black ‘other’.

³¹ Breu, *Hardboiled Masculinity*, 34.

Importantly, Ed's struggle burlesques a central pleasure offered by the hardboiled protagonist: a split, or 'schizophrenic' personality. Patricia Highsmith encapsulated this idea when she declared that crime fiction addressed 'the American's everyday or garden variety of schizophrenia.'³² Many critics cite a Jekyll-and-Hyde motif as a key tenet of the hardboiled protagonist. William Reuhlmann argues that the hardboiled dick is 'the American innocent gone mad,' a prodigal son who returns emboldened from the psychological abyss.³³ The succumbing to the 'dark' side of the western psyche pervades the hardboiled protagonists of the era. Philip Marlowe, for example, frequently does battle with the 'darkness' of his hysterical sub-conscious when knocked unconscious or drugged.³⁴ Similarly, Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer is tormented by the 'crazy music that had been in my head ever since I came back from the dusks.' Ultimately, Spillane channels this torment into moralistic vigilantism: '*I lived to kill so that others could live.*'³⁵ Even writers of a radically different political persuasion clung to this metaphor of schizophrenia. Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, whilst critiquing the conservatism of McCarthyite America, blamed it primarily for fostering a tortured, emasculated and murderous element within the American male psyche.³⁶ In many ways, these motifs of psychological transgression enact the Cold War liberal fantasy of an 'inside otherness'.³⁷

In *The Heat's On*, Himes brings to a head Ed's racial 'schizophrenia' in a way that both mobilises and debunks the transgressive pleasures that this affords the reader. Ostensibly, the novel has as its focus international drug trafficking, and a missing shipment of heroin in Harlem. However, this complex storyline is eclipsed by Himes's recoding of the detectives as 'private eyes' after they are suspended from the force on the charge of 'unwarranted brutality'. Despite their suspension, the duo continue their investigation. Staking out a suspect's apartment, they debate the merits of their decision to turn vigilante. Ed appears particularly anxious for the duo to prove their heroic credentials, reminding his partner that they're 'supposed to be tough cops.' (THO 77) Again, however, Ed's hardboiled heroism produces

³² Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (Boston: The Writer, 1972 [1966]) 36.

³³ William Reuhlmann, *Saint With A Gun: The Unlawful American Private Eye* (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 129.

³⁴ See Philip Marlowe's encounter with Delores, *The Little Sister*, in *The Chandler Collection, Vol.1* (Reading: Picador, 1983): 383-571. 529.

³⁵ Mickey Spillane, *One Lonely Night* (New York: New American Library, 1951), 8, 149.

³⁶ Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* (London: Orion, 2006 [1952]), 93. See also John Franklin Bardin, *Devil Take The Blue-Tail Fly* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988 [1948]), 167.

³⁷ Even a relatively 'progressive' novel like John Ball's *In The Heat Of The Night* upholds this racial binary from the reverse angle. The triumph of Virgil Tibbs's masculinity is repeatedly aligned with the African American detective's 'white' characteristics, and his ability to disavow his blackness. After proving his poise and control, he is even given a 'remarkable tribute' by a racist Southern officer: 'He oughta been a white man.' John Ball, *In The Heat Of The Night* (London: Pan, 1967 [1965]), 24, 79.

unintended consequences. The duo are ambushed, Digger is gunned down and rushed to intensive care, where he is (falsely) pronounced dead. As a result, Ed is caught in a 'self-condemning rage' that brings his internal conflict to boiling point. He craves vengeance yet blames himself for his partner's shooting. (*THO* 101-3) The plot device thus presents Ed with what, at this stage, appears as a classic hardboiled choice. It could either bring out his predilection for senseless violence, or provide an opportunity for heroic redemption. His role as private eye places him between the 'devil' and the 'deep blue sea', between the promise of masculine catharsis and noirish oblivion. (*THO* 125)

However, Ed's primary function as a racial fantasy figure collapses this ostensible 'choice'. Far from resolving this tension, Himes depicts the two sides of Ed's dilemma as perpetual, mutually constructive poles. On the one hand, Ed's status as a 'civilian on a manhunt' places him at the centre of the novel, and imbues him with an empowering mobility. (*THO* 136) Freed from the bureaucracy of the police department, his body is described as having 'a light weightlessness that put an edge on his reflexes.' (*THO* 107) This mobility inevitably centres around his white phallic weapon. Immediately following Digger's injury, Ed returns to his suburban home in Astoria and picks out his shoulder holster:

The special-made, long barrelled, nickel-plated .38-caliber revolver, that had shot its way to fame in Harlem, was in the holster. He took it out, spun the chamber, rapidly ejecting the five brass-jacketed cartridges, and quickly cleaned and oiled it. (*THO* 103-4)

Away from Harlem, the scene explicitly portrays Ed laying claim to a masculine individualism that is overtly *white*. In explicitly phallic terms, we observe Ed lovingly clean and oil his gleaming weapon, even 'ejecting' cartridges in anticipation of the action to ensue. Richard Slotkin writes that for the gunslinger of American popular culture, masculine redemption comes via a fetishistic emphasis upon weaponry.³⁸ Ed's rebirth as a private eye amplifies this aspect of his makeup. Little wonder that in the novel's final gunfight, we observe Ed 'shooting from the hip' in the style of Wild West gunslinger. (*THO* 152)

For some critics, Ed's ownership of such a firearm enables a subjugated black man to claim the status of hardboiled hero.³⁹ This argument suggests that Ed's rebirth as a private eye entails the erasure of his identity as a pathologically scarred black male. By contrast, however,

³⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 380.

³⁹ See Greg Forter, *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 197, 196, 194. Similarly, Wendy Walters links the guns to a strident empowerment: 'their guns are extremely formidable symbolic images and very real instruments of destruction known by all the community... the gun's image repeats its power in the community's imagination.' Walters, *At Home In Diaspora*, 71.

Himes never loses sight of Ed's racial contradictions. Indeed, for every exhibition of Ed's subjective thrust, or bourgeois home life, Himes gives us a corresponding glimpse of Ed the grotesque, tortured black body. For example, at the very moment Ed is cleaning and oiling his gun in Long Island, a Harlem heroin dealer opens a newspaper to see the following headline:

TWO HARLEM DETECTIVES SUSPENDED FOR BRUTALITY

A column was devoted to the story. To one side the pictures of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed looked like pictures of a couple of Harlem muggers taken from the rogues' gallery. (*THO* 97)

Himes switches quickly from a depiction of Ed as the gunslinging hero, to Ed as the objectified, scarred black body of the noir villain. At the very moment of his ostensible empowerment, the reader encounters a picture suggesting, by contrast, the protagonist's disfigurement, criminality and blackness. The reader is faced with not so much the fact, as the resurrected *construction* of Ed as the text's objectified black 'other'. Similarly, despite the 'weightlessness' that Ed and Digger are afforded by their pistols, their status as black males problematises their mobility. Earlier in the novel, as the duo patrol a wealthy white area, Himes describes the 'residents peering from the upper windows watch[ing] the two black men suspiciously.' The sovereign subjectivity of the postwar hardboiled detective is here reduced to a lurid spectacle. It is a spectacle, moreover, that is born of the genre's racist construction of black masculinity. Digger and Ed are immediately accosted by a white police-officer, who informs him that 'two coloured prowlers have been seen around this house.' (*THO* 16)

As such, Ed emerges as a fantasy figure who is cruelly fragmented by the genre's fundamental of racial transgression. Whilst his borrowed 'whiteness' imbues him with an authoritative subjectivity, his blackness is projected as a grotesque corporal 'double'. Himes goes so far as to describe Ed moving like a 'monstrous Siamese twin' as he marches a black female prostitute into a brothel for interrogation. (*THO* 143) The ensuing interrogation scene, in which Ed threatens the suspect with sexual violence, lays bare Ed's paradoxical agency. As Breu contends, sexual violence is a crucial component of the hardboiled masculine fantasy. He writes that 'the association of black masculinity with...sexual transgression become codified in the fantasy figure of the black rapist.'⁴⁰ Perhaps the paramount example of this dynamic is Spillane's Mike Hammer, who routinely enacts sexual violence upon white female adversaries. For instance, in *One Lonely Night*, we observe Hammer savagely whipping a white female communist. Hammer believes he is exorcising the 'devil' out of this 'gorgeous' white woman. In order to do this, however, he must inhabit a space typically reserved for the

⁴⁰ Breu, *Hardboiled Masculinities*, 33.

‘other’; that of a black male rapist. Bathed in the shadows of an unlit bedroom, and armed with a ‘black leather belt’, Hammer recounts the ‘sharp crack of the leather against her thighs and her scream.’⁴¹ In such moments, then, violent black masculinity is seen to facilitate the hardboiled protagonist’s temporary encounter with corrupted womanhood, and the latent desires of his own subconscious.

Ed’s encounter with the black female prostitute replicates this dynamic, but with important differences. Initially, Ed’s gun-toting male fantasy plays out to a tee, measuring his masculine voice against the woman’s objectification:

She felt the knife blade on her throat, tasted cloth, and saw the huge nickel-plated revolver gripped in a hard black hand just before her eyes. The strength went out of her knees and her body began to sag. (*THO* 142)

Ed is once again the invisible private ‘eye’ here. His opponent is only permitted to glimpse the ‘huge nickel-plated revolver’ that signifies his supremacy. This position of power, however, alters as the scene continues:

‘Shut up!’ [Ed] whispered, turning his head to get his face out of the thick, perfumed, rancid, suffocating mass of hair. The tight, close, abnormal contact of their bodies was aphrodisiacal in a sadistic manner, and both were shaken with an unnatural lust... She turned and saw him for the first time. ‘Oh, it’s you.’ she said in her jarring voice. (*THO* 144)

Whereas Mike Hammer’s sexual desire is channelled into cathartic violence, Ed is ‘shaken’ with lust, and struggles to disentangle himself from his adversary’s ‘rancid’ hair. Again, Himes doubles Ed the invisible white voyeur with Ed as a stereotype of emasculated blackness. Accordingly, the prostitute’s comment on finally seeing Ed – ‘oh it’s you’ – suggests a mutual recognition. It is certainly not the ‘scream’ that greets Hammer when he cracks his whip. In essence, Ed is hailed by the prostitute in a manner that implies their fundamental *similarity* as commodified black bodies. Again, the irony is glaring: at the exact point of expected resolution, the hardboiled gaze is turned on Ed himself. Himes wryly describes the ‘oil nudes of a voluptuous coloured woman and a well-equipped coloured man’ that hang on the brothel’s walls, framing the couple’s confrontation as a form of racial titillation. (*THO* 142) Ed’s hybrid status as black private eye renders him both a voyeur and an abjection in this sense. Grounded in the Manichean racial politics of hardboiled masculinity, Himes suggests that Ed’s ‘white’ heroism can have only one nemesis: pathological blackness,

⁴¹ Spillane, *One Lonely Night*, 117.

himself. Almost inevitably, Ed leaves the scene in the same way he entered the novel, caught in a ‘choked, impotent fury’. (*THO* 145)

As such, by employing a private vigilante motif, *The Heat's On* explores the way in which the actions of Digger and Ed subjugate not only their fellow Harlemites but, perversely, themselves. Ed's white phallic pistol reflects the fact that, as a black man, he can only borrow, or perform, the authority associated with his central position in the text. Moreover, it is a symbolically ‘white’ authority that depends upon Ed's simultaneous self-flagellation as the text's marginalised racial ‘other’. His private struggle between ‘white’ heroism and ‘black’ pathology thus brings into sharp relief the racial objectification at the heart of the hardboiled fantasy. James Naremore writes that hardboiled masculinity ‘rest[s] upon a sadistic gaze’ that serves a ‘masculine need for social and sexual control.’⁴² As we saw in the above passage, this gaze is turned back upon Himes's monstrous protagonist. In doing so, Himes brings to the surface the exploitative racial fantasy that undergirds the (consumer) freedoms and pleasures his detectives are charged with providing.

Modes of Authorship

By constructing his protagonists in this way, Himes is able to reflect back upon the various tensions and demands that worked upon his own authorial agency. As we have seen, critics have read the duo as a metaphor for Himes's resplendent, subversive tricksterism. For example, Soitos suggests that Digger and Ed are ‘trickster figures who bridge the white and black worlds, using both to their advantage.’ In turn, Soitos reads Himes as an author who reclaims ‘black’ meanings from a ‘white’ literary formula, ‘as if he were a god looking down on the fantastic world below him.’⁴³ However, Digger and Ed do not so much enact narrative resolution as an enduring narrative schism. In their vacillation between a central and decentred position in the text, the duo explode the notion of a pure and instrumental authorial agency. Like their author's journey from ‘protest’ to ‘pulp’, Digger and Ed's narrative journey is defined by negotiation, rather than rebellion. Similarly, we should be wary of reading a character such as Coffin Ed as the embodiment of Himes's own psychological ‘hurt’. As we have seen, certain critics read the Harlem fiction, and in particular Digger and Ed, as a therapeutic exercise for their author. For example, Hilton Als suggests that Himes consciously

⁴² Naremore, *Film Noir In Its Contexts*, 221.

⁴³ Soitos, *The Blues Detective*, 150, 148. Bunyan similarly argues that between the two worlds of black and white, ‘Digger and Ed can serve as buffers, as hidden forces of moral order and justice.’ Bunyan, ‘No Order From Chaos’, 52.

produced characters who, like Ed, were ‘in love with having done wrong.’ Als speculates that Himes authored such gratuitous noir characters as a ‘rebellion against his [middle-class] background’ and an ‘attempt to prove how black he really was.’⁴⁴ Although this is a different (and more fetishising) argument from those who cite Himes as a trickster, Als again reads the Harlem Cycle as a stable expression of its author’s deepest convictions.

By fragmenting, distorting and ‘doubling’ his detective protagonists, Himes destabilises the idea of an instrumental, or individualist authorial payoff. Rather, Himes is interested in the *collaborative* production of authorial meanings. If Digger and Ed are hardboiled, gunslinging heroes, it remains the case that they are also a cog in a white power structure. Like their author, the duo’s agency, and the meaning it invokes, is never self-contained. In particular, Ed’s crisis of representation lays bare the dynamic of racial ‘collaboration’ that the fantasy of hardboiled individualism depends upon. Toni Morrison influentially argued that ‘the process of organising American coherence’ depended upon a ‘distancing Africanism’ for self-definition. In doing so, Morrison suggested the ‘parasitical nature of white freedom.’⁴⁵ Himes’s conflicted protagonist allows us to grasp the ‘parasitical nature’ of hardboiled masculinity, and more widely, of authorship. To paraphrase Andrew Ross, Digger and Ed allow Himes to rethink the modernist authorial metaphor of ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ commodification. As Ross suggests, ‘there is no more of a position “outside” of ideology and commodification than there is a place “outside” language.’⁴⁶ As we have seen, Himes’s expatriation and move into the *Série Noire* disillusioned him in just this way. Himes was thrust into a situation in which exploitative demand was both contractual and aesthetic. In essence, Himes’s detectives capture the process of authorship as a composite, or corporate endeavour.

Let me conclude by highlighting an instance in which we can clearly observe Himes using the motif of hardboiled masculinity to communicate this idea. At the conclusion of *The Heat’s On*, Ed learns that his ‘civilian manhunt’ has been ironically ‘engineered’ by the police department. The announcement of Digger’s death is revealed to be a police hoax, designed to spur Ed on in his hunt for the attacker. Ed’s personal struggle, in other words, has been implicated in a plot beyond his individual control. His lieutenant explains their ruse:

⁴⁴ Hilton Als, ‘In Black and White’, *New Yorker*, 04/06/2001, 90-1. See also James Campbell, ‘Himes and Self-Hatred’, in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Reaction to Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999 [1993]).

⁴⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing In The Dark: Whiteness And The Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1992), 8, 57. See also Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 20.

⁴⁶ Ross, ‘The New Sentence and the New Commodity Form’, 367.

‘We engineered it. We knew you were on the prowl and that they were on your tail. That might have kept up all night. So we had to get you here. We knew they’d come after you, just like you did... We gave out the story [of Digger’s death.] We knew that after you had heard it you would get them here some way to kill them. You’re not sore, are you?... Of course, we didn’t expect a theatrical production.’

Coffin Ed grinned. ‘I dig you, Jack,’ he said. ‘But sometimes these minstrel shows play on when grand opera folds.’ (*THO* 158)

Ed’s solipsistic quest thus concludes in the ironic knowledge that it has been carefully monitored throughout. The genre’s common motif of individualistic revenge is exploded, shown to be a stage-managed ‘theatrical production’. Moreover, the police have falsely announced Digger’s death in order to coax Ed onto the ‘prowl’. It is thus his status as a pathological black ‘monster’ that they have engineered. Little wonder Ed refers to the situation as a ‘minstrel show’. The situation makes visible the dynamic of racial abjection and transgression that structure the text. Ed is faced with the fact that his ‘personal’ quest has been appropriated and exploited by a wider power structure for their own purposes.

After explaining the hoax, the lieutenant wonders if Ed is ‘sore’ about his unsuspecting role in it. Indeed, the reader is justified in expecting an eruption of rage and violence from Himes’s duped detective. However, Ed merely ‘grins’. (*THO* 158) Perhaps we can read this as a sign that Ed, like his author, has gained an ambivalent ‘handle’ on the ‘joke’ of his own pop-cultural exploitation. Fundamentally, Ed and Digger’s construction as literary ‘Frankensteins’ reflect the irreverence with which Himes regarded his agency as a *Série Noire* writer. In many ways, Himes’s encounter with formula fiction worked productively to disavow him of certain literary illusions. This is perhaps what Ed acknowledges in regards to his own career at the conclusion of *The Heat’s On*. Ed’s bittersweet ‘grin’ is befitting for a character who embodies authorial ambivalence rather than instrumentality; negotiation rather than autonomy.

Part Three:
Pulping the Black Aesthetic

7

**‘I became famous in a *petit* kind of way.’:
American (Mis)recognition**

So far in the thesis, we have observed the way in which Himes tailored his fictional Harlem to the often lurid demands of a *Série Noire* readership. The black American ghetto of Himes’s novels was a self-conscious product of the transatlantic imagination, presented (and consumed) from afar. The novels’ sense of distance begs a crucial question: how was Himes’s Harlem received by *American* audiences and publishers in the 1960s? In 1964, Himes wrote to Bernard Greis Associates, the U.S. paperback publisher of his detective fiction, asking this very question. In return, he received a letter informing him that sales were extremely ‘weak.’ The letter continued:

After much digging into why sales were so weak I belatedly discovered that not only had the books never been advertised or promoted in Harlem, they had never been on sale there! Or in any other area with a large Negro population, for that matter...Are you being published in France but not in your own country?¹

Himes’s Harlem novels had gone unread and unnoticed by those living *in* Harlem and other major African American urban conurbations. For Himes, this rejection proved what he had suspected from the mid-1950s: that his fiction violated acceptable African American literary categories. The following year, Victor Weybright of U.S. publishers New American Library reinforced this perspective. Weybright told Himes that they would publish his future work as long as it wasn’t ‘the warmed up stuff, but the real Chester Himes – not the detective stories... but prime fiction.’² Again, the comment illustrated the way in which Himes’s violent *Série Noire* fiction was deemed unsuitable for a Civil Rights-era U.S. audience, be it black or white.

However, as this chapter chronicles, Himes’s literary stature in the U.S. underwent a resurgence in the mid to late 1960s. Between the publication of 1965’s *Cotton Comes To Harlem* and his 1972 autobiography *The Quality Of Hurt*, Himes gained a cult African American following. In many ways, Himes’s belated American success can be placed within a

¹ Letter from Don Preston to Chester Himes, 18/09/1964, Box 1, Folder 1, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

² Letter from Victor Weybright to Chester Himes, 22/01/1965, Box 2, Folder 5, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

post-Civil Rights upsurge of African American ‘cultural confidence’. Herman Gray defines ‘cultural confidence’ as the willingness of black cultural producers to ‘explore the ugly side of things’ in reaction against the integrationist goals of the Civil Rights movement.³ As such, the ‘ugly’ qualities that had made Himes’s detective fiction previously unappetising to a U.S. audience energised its subsequent appeal. It is thus tempting to regard Himes’s American resurgence as a literary homecoming, and an authentic reengagement with the milieu depicted in his detective fiction.

However, as many scholars have contended, the rise of a black post-Civil Rights ‘cultural confidence’ was a highly uneven and contradictory process. On the one hand, the era saw the emergence of black artistic voices known collectively as the Black Arts Movement. Broadly speaking, the Black Arts Movement was preoccupied with independent and collective modes of black cultural production. Its nationalistic drive found a literary correlative in the idea of a Black Aesthetic. Critics such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal defined a Black Aesthetic as one that bypassed the ‘artistic standards of Western capitalistic society’ and addressed the ‘suffering, needs, and aspirations of black people.’⁴ At the same time, however, African American cultural confidence exerted itself in a less politically and culturally autonomous manner. The rise of real and fictional ‘Black Power’ icons such as Eldridge Cleaver and John Shaft propagated a more essentialist, stereotypical image of African American masculinity. In tension with the Black Arts Movement’s commitment to cultural autonomy, many of these figures were promoted by white-run publishing houses and movie studios, and aimed at a biracial audience. As Howard Winant suggests, post-Civil Rights cultural confidence ironically fuelled the active ‘degradation of race-consciousness into a commodified and depoliticised form (dashikis, kente cloth, blaxpotation films, etc.)’⁵

This chapter argues that the belated American recognition afforded Himes and his *Série Noire* fiction enacted these tensions regarding black cultural ownership. On the one hand, certain African American writers and publishers attempted to ‘relaunch’ the exiled Himes as a writer associated with the Black Arts Movement. However, given the exploitative and commercialised nature of the Harlem Cycle, Himes’s veneration by Black Arts thinkers was rather ironic. As a *Série Noire* writer, Himes could not, as Amiri Baraka demanded, take

³ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 126.

⁴ Larry Neal, ‘The Black Writer’s Role I: Richard Wright’, in Larry Neal and Michael Swartz (ed.) *Visions Of A Liberated Future: Black Arts Movements Writings* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1989 [1965]), 25-27.

⁵ Howard Winant, *The World Is A Ghetto: The Making Of A New World Racial Order* (Plymbridge: Basic Books, 2002), 312.

his fiction and public image ‘away from white people.’⁶ Moreover, as we shall see, Himes’s Black Arts ‘relaunch’ actively proliferated, rather than reversed, the logic of racial commodification that had defined Himes’s expatriate career. On the subject of his re-emerging American profile, Himes claimed in 1970 that ‘the book publishers...are trying to exploit the black consciousness to sell books. As long as it titillates the whites, they will do so to sell books.’⁷ Indeed, Himes’s belated domestic success did not mark a break with the exploitative exigencies of the *Série Noire*, but suggested their post-Civil Rights embrace by an American audience. As Himes’s comment implies, despite his Black Arts valorisation, his homecoming was energised by the American pop-cultural fetishisation of ‘black consciousness’ in the period. As such, this chapter argues that Himes’s domestic recognition in this period did not constitute his ‘homecoming’ so much as the transatlantic re-exchange of his *Série Noire* identity.

The first part of this chapter explores the tensions described above. I analyse how they shaped and limited Himes’s domestic homecoming, including his high profile 1972 visit to New York to promote his autobiography. Secondly, I explore the way in which the paradoxical exigencies of post-Civil Rights African American culture are anticipated by Himes in his final two Harlem novels, *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1965) and *Blind Man With A Pistol* (1969). More specifically, I examine the progression of Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson in the novels, and their problematic emergence as ‘Black Power’ heroes. In both novels, the detectives, and their crossed purposes, are placed within a highly politicised post-Civil Rights context. Whilst desiring to join the Harlem populace in revolution, the duo are ultimately isolated from them by their professional and ‘hardboiled’ duties. The duo’s conflict dramatises the hybridity of the post-Civil Rights hero, its ‘contamination’ by American rubrics of individualism, misogyny and racial transgression. In essence, this chapter argues that Himes’s late career makes visible what Herman Gray has called the ‘limited,’ ‘uneven’ and ‘contradictory’ exigencies of a post-Civil Rights Black Aesthetic.⁸

⁶ cited in Brian Ward, ‘Jazz and Soul, Race and Class, Cultural Nationalists and Black Panthers: A Black Power Debate Revisited’ in Brian Ward (ed.), *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), 170

⁷ John A. Williams, ‘My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 58.

⁸ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 190.

Himes's *Petit* Homecoming.

In early 1972, Chester Himes travelled from his home in Moreira, Spain to New York, in order to promote the first volume of his autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*. The trip coincided with a special edition of Hoyt Fuller's *Black World* magazine devoted to Himes, and included an appearance on the 'black lifestyle' talk-show *Soul* with Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni.⁹ Meanwhile, a press conference between Himes and the 'black media' was billed as a chance to meet 'the great "mojo bojo" of black language and lifestyle.'¹⁰ Before he departed, Himes was grandly informed by his U.S. editor that:

Chester Himes [is] a 'hot' commodity... this is probably the best sell ever designed for a black writer in this country's history. You've been way a long time. There are actually two separate campaigns - the one focussed on the black community and the other with the major media... You are our senior living black American writer.¹¹

As the letter and itinerary suggest, the tour was pitched as a 'homecoming' for the exiled Himes. More specifically, it was designed to 'launch' Himes as the 'senior' writer of the Black Arts Movement. For many involved in the movement, Himes's estrangement from the U.S. literary scene indicated that his fiction had been too raw, too confrontational and too *black* for a Civil Rights-era audience. For influential Black Arts writers such as Baraka and Giovanni, Himes's biography was valuable precisely because it stood as a cultural and political affront to bourgeois America.

However, Himes regarded the celebrity surrounding his fiction and autobiography in more ambivalent terms, writing: 'I became famous in a *petit* kind of way.'¹² Himes's use of the word '*petit*' illustrates his doubts regarding the ability of a post-Civil Rights Black Aesthetic to evade bourgeois fetishisation. Indeed, his American editor's description of him as a 'hot' Black Arts 'commodity' suggested nothing less than a continuation of the exploitative logic that had defined his expatriate career. On his return from New York, he would bluntly tell his U.S. editor:

⁹ Letter from Helen Jackson to Chester Himes, 09/02/1972, Box 1, Folder 8, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

¹⁰ Promotional Material for *The Quality of Hurt*, 01/03/1973, Box 1, Folder 8, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

¹¹ Letter from Helen Jackson to Chester Himes, 03/02/1972, Box 1, Folder 8, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

¹² Unpublished draft of *My Life Of Absurdity*, cited in Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 153.

I detest talking of writers and aspiring writers, be they black or white, and I do not believe there are generations which have 'followed' me in U.S. where the communications media completely control what the people think.¹³

Himes viewed his identity as a Black Arts writer as yet another construction, a racial fiction perpetuated by the 'communications media'. Moreover, the American appeal of Himes's sensational fiction and public image replicated many of the lurid constructions of his *Série Noire* image. In the era of blockbuster 'Black Power' autobiographies by Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, Himes's appeal as a 'hot' American 'commodity', especially to those in the 'major media', depended on more titillating criteria: criminality, hyper-sexuality, and psychological hurt. The various identitarian demands placed on Himes as a Black Arts writer highlights what many critics have described as a failure of the movement to live up to its own ideals of political and cultural autonomy.

Ostensibly, however, Himes's violent fiction and expatriate status made him an ideal candidate to enact the ideals of the Black Arts Movements. Black Arts critics such as Larry Neal and Addison Gayle Jr. urged African American writers to reject white American literary formalism and focus on their 'concrete relationship between himself and...black people.'¹⁴ Gayle poured scorn on 1950s literary critics such as Robert Bone and Irving Howe, representatives of what he saw as the 'white' critical stranglehold on Civil Rights-era black literature.¹⁵ Similarly, Neal took aim at James Baldwin, accusing him of 'pleading with white America for the humanity of the Negro; instead of addressing himself to the black people.' Neal suggested that in his search for literary 'truth', Baldwin has neglected to ask the question, 'whose truth – the oppressed or the oppressor's.'¹⁶ This problem of epistemology led Neal to define the 'main tenet of Black Power' as 'the necessity for black people to define their world in their own terms.' For Neal and Gayle, a truly 'black' literature provided a tangible means for the writer and his audience to bend reality to their own collective purposes. He called for a literature that rejected abstract or multiple meanings, and cleanly embodied 'the collective consciousness and unconscious of black America.' Undergirding these ideas was an unquestioned faith in the existence of a 'well-defined Afro-American audience...within the belly of white America.'¹⁷

¹³ Cited in Margolies and Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*, 156-7.

¹⁴ Larry Neal, 'The Black Arts Movement', in Larry Neal and Michael Swartz (ed.) *Visions Of A Liberated Future: Black Arts Movements Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989 [1968]), 62.

¹⁵ A. Gayle, 'Introduction', in A. Gayle (ed.), *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), xxi.

¹⁶ Larry Neal, 'The Black Writer's Role III: James Baldwin', in Larry Neal and Michael Swartz (eds.) *Visions Of A Liberated Future: Black Arts Movements Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989 [1966]), 61, 59, 60.

¹⁷ Neal, 'The Black Arts Movement', 63, 66, 78. See also Maulana Ron Karenga, 'Black Cultural Nationalism', in Addison Gayle (ed.), *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

As Neal was keen to point out, Black Arts writing entailed an internationalist analysis of American race relations. In order to evade the ideological ‘limits set by the oppressor’, the African American writer had to embrace a global discourse of anti-colonialism. Neal praised Martin Luther King for moving beyond racial liberalism and linking the struggles in Ghana and Vietnam to the ‘human rights struggle here in the United States.’ Neal joined U.S. leader Maulana Ron Karenga in calling for a ‘functional unity’ between black America and the Third World in terms of political, cultural and military activities.¹⁸ Similarly, Malcolm X urged a ‘New Left’ global solidarity in asserting that ‘what happens to a black man in America today happens to the black man in Africa.’¹⁹ Within this perspective, the African American urban ghetto became a symbol of global anti-colonial resistance, rather than national pathology. James Smethurst comments that Black Arts writers ‘transformed the Black Belt nation on the land into a vision of a liberated city-state.’²⁰ Baraka’s many odes to Harlem encapsulated this idea. Whilst acknowledging Harlem as ‘the capital of Black America’, Baraka argued that on a more profound level, its ‘identification is international’, akin to that of ‘Black Paris’.²¹

Perhaps ironically, Himes’s expatriate fiction was celebrated as embodying just these qualities by Black Arts writers. As previously discussed, Parisian exile placed Himes within a key site of leftist and internationalist political and cultural movements. Within this context, Himes’s emigration was thus perceived as a wilful act of ‘black Atlantic’ defiance, rather than one of defeat. Aspiring African American writers such as Ronald Fair wrote to Himes expressing admiration that he had escaped the ‘racist publishers in that enormous outdoor zoo called the USA.’²² Fair summed up Himes’s Black Arts appeal thusly: ‘Yeah, Himes showed these mothafuckas.’²³ Accordingly, African American writers frustrated with racial liberalism regarded Himes’s detective fiction as a refreshing internationalist take on domestic race relations. For example, Baraka praised Himes’s Harlem as:

¹⁸ Larry Neal, ‘Black Power in the International Context’, in Larry Neal and Michael Swartz (ed.) *Visions Of A Liberated Future: Black Arts Movements Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989 [1968]), 137, 136, 140. See also Imamu Aribi Baraka, ‘7 Principles of US Maulana Karenga & The Need for a Black Value System’, in *Race, Rays, Raze* (New York: Vintage, 1972 [1969]).

¹⁹ Malcolm X and G. Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 48. On the late 1960s ‘New Left’ see George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, 1987).

²⁰ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 80.

²¹ Leroi Jones, ‘City of Harlem’, in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1966), 93.

²² Letter from Ronald Fair to Chester Himes, 09/10/1971, Box 5, Folder 3, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

²³ Letter from Ronald Fair to Chester Himes, 07/12/1971, Box 5, Folder 3, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

[I]nteresting, not only in regard to plot but also in terms of 'place,' a place wherein such a plot can find a natural existence. So that the Negro writer finally doesn't have to think about 'roots' even literarily, as being subject to some kind of derogatory statement – one has only to read the literature.²⁴

For Baraka, Himes's Harlem did not so much depict as *enact* a Black Aesthetic. Himes's distance from the U.S. allowed him to present a diasporic 'place' in which the black reader could experience their 'roots' free from American prejudice.²⁵ The cult status of Himes's detective fiction reflects what Smethurst calls the Black Arts Movement's 'shift away from bookish references' towards a 'model of a popular avant-garde.' Smethurst argues that the movement transmuted aspects of Popular Front politics into 'lower' cultural forms.²⁶ In a letter to Himes, John A. Williams contended that the new generation of black readers had 'missed [Richard] Wright and [Langston] Hughes' and are 'reaching desperately for roots – which means you.'²⁷

In essence, then, Himes gained a cult status amongst a Black Arts vanguard because of his perceived distance from U.S. literary and political practises. Al Young informed Himes: 'you remain a mysterious although celebrated figure on this side of the Atlantic.'²⁸ Nikki Giovanni frankly declared: 'I love you.'²⁹ Moreover, in 1969, when Hoyt Fuller learned that Himes was writing the first volume of his autobiography, he told him of his desire to use the occasion to 'bring you and your work before the newly awakened black youth of this country.'³⁰ Again, Himes's biography ostensibly suggested the liberation offered by black internationalism. His journey from Ohio State Penitentiary to Paris's Latin Quarter evoked the contrast Malcolm X drew between the 'prison' of the U.S., and the broader horizons of the black diaspora.³¹ Accordingly, Reed wrote of the autobiography in the edition of *Black World* that accompanied Himes's 1972 visit: 'for third worlders here's a doosey.'³²

²⁴ Amiri Baraka, cited in Raymond Nelson, 'Domestic Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes' in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.) *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1972]), 53-63.

²⁵ For a more recent argument of this nature, see Wendy W. Walters, *At Home In Diaspora: Black International Writing* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

²⁶ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 101, 59, 61. See Neal, 'Black Arts Movement', 63.

²⁷ Letter from John A. Williams to Chester Himes, 14/07/1969, in John A. Williams and Lori Williams (eds.), *Dear Chester, Dear John: Letters Between Chester Himes and John A. Williams* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 93.

²⁸ Letter from Al Young to Chester Himes, 22/08/1972, Box 16, Folder 32, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²⁹ Letter from Nikki Giovanni to Chester Himes, 20/06/1972, Box 5, Folder 6, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³⁰ Letter from Hoyt W. Fuller to Chester Himes, 22/01/1969, Box 5, Folder 6, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³¹ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 8. See also Walters, *At Home In Diaspora*, 62.

³² Reed, 'Chester Himes', 83.

As we have seen, however, Himes's expatriate identity had been galvanised by a less progressive dynamic of transatlantic exchange. Himes's celebrity on the Left Bank had not depended upon his 'New Left' credentials, as much as they had his more titillating status as a Western 'other'. Crucially, these exploitative cultural politics were not negated by Himes's return to America. Indeed, Himes would later describe the autobiography as a critical and commercial failure.³³ Despite the fanfare preceding Himes's New York homecoming, the book itself was largely disregarded.³⁴ Importantly, the poor critical reaction that followed *The Quality Of Hurt's* publication suggested that Himes had failed to fulfil a more insidious kind of 'Black Arts' criteria: violent, individualist machismo. For example, *The New York Times Book Review* panned *The Quality of Hurt* as overly cautious, calling it a 'vacuous and unimportant' treatment of a 'remarkable' life. Himes was criticised for glossing over his prison experiences in six pages, and romanticising, rather than sexualising, his relationships with white women. The review stated:

Like Malcolm X, Himes spent his early years as a criminal and prisoner, but he has none of Malcolm's sense of the self-destructive character of criminality. Like Eldridge Cleaver, Himes is compulsively fascinated by white women; but unlike Cleaver, Himes lacks the curiosity to discover what compels him to chase white sex to his own injury.

The review slammed Himes's autobiography for not being sufficiently sensational. It was perceived as lacking juicy details regarding his criminality, his sexual relations with white women, and his own psychological 'injury'. The autobiography's lack of psychosexual anger, and absence of individual heroism, led reviewers to claim that Himes was not 'taking himself seriously' as a radical black figure.³⁵ This suggests that, by implication, part of the 'serious' appeal of figures such as Malcolm and Cleaver was bound up in a violent, sexualised image of African American masculinity. In reaction to the poor sales and muted reception, Himes reflected that he had produced a sanguine autobiography aimed at 'the American libraries

³³ Letter from Chester Himes to Ishmael Reed, 28/02/1976, Box 8, Folder 5, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³⁴ An indication of the novel's failure is that, whilst Himes received a \$10,000 advance for *Hurt*, he received only a \$3,000 advance for the second volume *My Life Of Absurdity*. This was apparently due to the first volume failing to make back Himes's advance. Letter from Lawrence Jordan to Rosalyn Targ, 25/07/1974, Box 1, Folder 8, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³⁵ 'Review: Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurt*', *New York Times Book Review*, 12/03/1972, Box 8, Folder 4, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

instead of the best seller lists.³⁶ Himes puts its poor commercial performance down to the fact that, despite the autobiography's title, he 'wasn't hurt enough for them.'³⁷

Himes was especially wary that his autobiographical 'hurt' had failed to meet the standard set by Cleaver. Whilst writing the autobiography, Himes expressed the following anxiety to his agent:

There are a few others who expect me to emulate Eldridge Cleaver, and launch a raving denunciation of the US. Of course, it seems hard for [them] to realise I'm not a Cleaver fan, and I don't give a damn what he writes or says - that's his thing.³⁸

Himes's statement predicted the way in which his rebirth as a 'radical' black American writer would be (disparagingly) measured in relation to Cleaver. Cleaver, then the Black Panther Party's Minister of Information, had released his 1968 autobiography *Soul On Ice* to rave reviews on both sides of the Atlantic.³⁹ As Tracye Matthews argues, *Soul On Ice* envisioned black revolutionary struggle as a 'psychological power struggle over sexual territory.'⁴⁰ In the book, Cleaver outlined his theory of a black 'Supermasculine Menial' who had been castrated by a white 'omnipotent Administrator' in slavery. Within this context, he portrayed his life as a violent struggle for not just political emancipation, but 'sexual sovereignty'. Similarly, he described his history of sexual violence against white women as a 'revolutionary sickness'. Like Neal, Cleaver held up 'pussy-cat' James Baldwin as everything the black revolutionary was not. However, rather than couching this critique in terms of literary technique, Cleaver focussed frankly on Baldwin's homosexuality. He labelled black homosexuality a 'racial death-wish', accusing Baldwin and others of 'bending over and touching their toes for the white man.'⁴¹

Michael Hanson argues these motifs, also evident in Neal and Karenga, worked to ensnare the Black Arts Movement within an 'uncompromising, chauvinistic rhetorical

³⁶ Letter from Chester Himes to Yves Malartic, 20/12/1972, Box 4, Folder 3, Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³⁷ Letter from Chester Himes to William F. Ayer, 01/01/1973, Box 4, Folder 2, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³⁸ Letter from Chester-Himes to Rosalyn Targ, 01/11/1970, Box 8, Folder 10, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³⁹ David J. Garrow, 'Picking Up The Books: The New Historiography Of The Black Panther Party', *Reviews In American History*, Vol. 35 (2007), 653.

⁴⁰ Tracye Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is": Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party 1966-1971' in Charles E. Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 280.

⁴¹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 176-190, 16, 102-104.

straightjacket.’⁴² Moreover, Cleaver’s sensational marketability exposed the Black Aesthetic to the kind of bourgeois fetishism that had previously flourished on the Left Bank. Albert Murray, one of the fiercest contemporary critics of black cultural nationalism, suggested just this when criticising Cleaver for ‘confus[ing] militant characteristics with bad niggeristics.’ In particular, he lamented the way in which Cleaver had used his bestselling autobiography to ‘define himself largely in terms of the pseudo-existential esthetique du nastiness of Norman Mailer.’⁴³ Murray was referring to Mailer’s 1959 essay ‘The White Negro’, a work that Cleaver cited as a key influence.⁴⁴ In the essay, Mailer had defined the appeal of black urban culture in much the same way as Sartre: as a liberating and thrilling release from bourgeois mores. Mailer venerated the ‘psychopathy’ of Negro culture, and its location within the ‘moral wildernesses of civilised life.’⁴⁵ Cleaver was not the only ‘revolutionary’ writer to articulate black nationalism to a bohemian-existentialist rhetoric of individual transgression.⁴⁶ For example, Baraka described Harlem as a ‘community of nonconformists, since any black American, simply by virtue of his blackness, is weird, a nonconformist in this society.’⁴⁷ These aspects of the Black Arts Movement de-emphasised anti-colonialism in favour of a more romanticised, and ‘hip’ valorisation of blackness as a subterranean category. This chauvinistic self-aggrandizing hardly constituted a break with bourgeois literary codes. Murray thus suggested that ‘every last one of the so-called Black Arts movements seems to be commercially oriented toward white American audiences.’ As he asked of Cleaver: ‘who the hell needs a brown-skinned Norman Mailer?’⁴⁸

The lurid appeal of Cleaver’s autobiography (and the perceived mundanity of Himes’s) reveals a number of problems with the concept of a culturally and political autonomous Black Aesthetic. Whilst seeking to transcend the literary categories of racial liberalism, the Black Aesthetic merged uncomfortably with the existentialist fantasies of Norman Mailer and others.

⁴² Michael Hanson, 'Suppose James Brown read Fanon: the Black Arts Movement, Cultural Nationalism and the Failure of Popular Music Praxis', *Popular Music*, Vol. 27, No.3 (2008), 346. See also Neal, 'Black Arts Movement', 76. See also Maulana Ron Karenga and Cyde Halisi (ed.), *The Quotable Karenga* (Los Angeles: Us Organisation, 1967), 27-28. Similarly, the 'New Black Sociology' as defined by Robert Staples warned against the 'independence of the black female.' Robert Staples, *The Black Family: Essays and Studies* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 74.

⁴³ Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), 178.

⁴⁴ Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 61.

⁴⁵ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements For Myself* (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1959), 348, 342, 341. Mailer’s ‘The White Negro’ exemplifies the ‘Beat’ generation’s veneration and fetishisation of black urban culture. See J.P. Eburne, 'Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 43, No.1 (1997).

⁴⁶ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 86.

⁴⁷ Jones, 'City of Harlem', 93.

⁴⁸ Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 178.

As we have seen, Himes, as a *Série Noire* writer, was used to being constructed as a western and racial ‘other’. The terms of his partial American celebrity suggest nothing less than the American digestion of this discourse. The anti-American rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement could not be wholly isolated from the more romanticised, individualist forms of dissent associated with African American culture by Left Bank intellectuals. In this respect, Louis Menand argues that ‘Europeans took the mass culture the United States exported in the 1940s and 1950s and returned it in the 1960s in the form of a hip and sophisticated pop art.’ In particular, Menand suggests that the period saw Americans embrace the existentialist humanist valorisation of its own social and racial margins.⁴⁹ The rise of the violent ‘Black Power’ icon thus merged problematically with the liberating image of a dissident American individualist. Indeed, Brian Ward has argued that, in their chauvinistic self-romanticism, Black Arts separatists failed to acknowledge their ‘intersection within a pervasive American context.’⁵⁰ For these reasons, Baraka would later distance himself from black cultural nationalism, calling the movement ‘a bible of petty bourgeois glosses on reality’ and a contrived ‘recipe for “blackness.”’⁵¹

Himes’s *petit* homecoming thus resembled a less politically earnest or instrumental form of transatlantic exchange in the post-Civil Rights period. On this point, the ever-perceptive Ishmael Reed wrote to Himes regarding the ongoing vulnerability of his friend’s image. Whilst praising Himes as ‘a symbol of Afro/American creative independence’, Reed warned of ‘the forces arrayed against [him]’ on both sides of the Atlantic. In particular, Reed cited critics such as Mailer and Jean Genet as having a ‘sexual hangup’ for ‘Black Power’.⁵² Himes, of course, was all too aware of such forces. Moreover, their ongoing power was evident in the ultimate failure of his autobiography on the grounds of sensationalism. Ultimately, the episode validated Himes’s scepticism regarding the autonomy of Black Power and Black Arts politics. In 1970, he suggested to John A. Williams that the anti-colonial ‘effectiveness’ of the movement had been ‘weakened’ by a ‘saturation of publicity’ in the mainstream media. Using the example of Malcolm X, Himes stated:

⁴⁹ Louis Menand, ‘The Promise Of Freedom, The Friend Of Authority: American Culture In Postwar France’, in Michael Kazin, Joseph Anthony McCartin (eds.), *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 217.

⁵⁰ Ward, ‘A Black Power Debate Revisited’, 170, 174.

⁵¹ Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography* (New York: Freundlich: 1984), 254-55. Similarly, Karenga later renounced the masculinism of his Kawaida philosophy, claiming that he was ‘influenced by a sexism that was rampant in all sectors of the United States.’ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 85.

⁵² Letter from Ishmael Reed to Chester Himes, 23/11/1970, Box 8, Folder 4, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

[A]s long as the white press and the white community keep throwing it out that the black man hates white people, he's safe... Malcolm X had developed a philosophy in which he included all the people in the world, and people were listening to him. And he became dangerous. Now as long as he was staying in America and just hating the white man he wasn't dangerous.⁵³

Himes again demonstrates a keen awareness regarding the hegemonic operations of culture; its ability to contain subaltern politics. Here, Himes comments that Malcolm's anti-colonialist anger was rearticulated to a more familiar racial binary of pathological 'hatred'. Himes's analysis of Malcolm's vulnerability predicts the failure of his own U.S. homecoming to evade an essentialist discourse of racial difference, or what Murray called 'niggeristics'.

Policing 'Black Power'

We can see the way in which Himes weaves these problems of 'radical' black representation into *Cotton Comes To Harlem* and *Blind Man With A Pistol*. In particular, the final adventures of Himes's detective duo enact the unintended hybridity of the 'Black Power' pop-cultural hero. As will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, critics have read these final two novels as more overtly political, and even revolutionary in tone. Certainly, the novels see Digger and Ed display an increased sensitivity to issues of collective racial injustice. In *Cotton*, the duo are charged with foiling a conman who has stolen \$87,000 from the Harlem community via a 'Back-to-Africa' scam. Similarly, in *Blind Man*, Digger and Ed navigate a Harlem brought to boiling point by a series of revolutionary riots.

In essence, the novels raise the question of Digger and Ed's relevance as revolutionary protagonists. Neal was prone to conceptualise the role of the Black Arts writer as a kind of literary detective, writing that he must 'perform the role as interpreter of the mysteries...of [their] community.'⁵⁴ Perhaps the paramount example of such a protagonist is found in Ishmael Reed's landmark 1972 work *Mumbo Jumbo*. The novel's 'occult detectives' Papa LeBas and Black Herman challenge western epistemology by decoding the 'mumbo jumbo' of their culture using hoodoo and communal intuition.⁵⁵ Significantly, Reed claimed to have based his protagonists on Grave Digger and Coffin Ed.⁵⁶ In a letter to Himes, Reed described *Mumbo Jumbo* as an attempt to write 'a detective novel using your theory Gravedigger Coffin Ed (we have a hunch, we feel things) as opposed to Sherlock Holmes scientific deductive etc.

⁵³ Williams, 'My Man Himes', 60-61.

⁵⁴ Neal, 'The Black Writer's Role III', 60.

⁵⁵ Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (London: Scribner, 1996 [1972]), 33-44, 209.

⁵⁶ Letter from Ishmael Reed to Chester Himes, 27/07/1972, Box 8, Folder 4, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

logick.’⁵⁷ Reed thus anticipated later readings of Digger and Ed as black folk heroes who, especially in the final two Harlem novels, work to unravel the political mysteries of their community.⁵⁸

In particular, both *Cotton* and *Blind Man* see Grave Digger Jones emerge as an altogether more militant protagonist. At the beginning of *Cotton*, Digger returns to the force following the gunshot wound he sustained in *The Heat's On*. Whereas Ed's injury resulted in his monstrous disfigurement and rage, Digger re-emerges physically unscathed yet with a burgeoning anti-colonial perspective on Harlem's social problems.⁵⁹ For Digger, the stolen \$87,000, hidden inside a bale of cotton, is not an isolated crime but a symbol of the Harlem community's ongoing economic enslavement. As he comments: 'this mother-raping cotton punished the coloured man down south and now it's killing them up north.' (CCH 109) Indeed, to a far greater extent than in previous novels, Himes emphasises the detectives' empathy with the Harlem community. Following the massacre of innocent Harlemites by the 'Back-to-Africa' con-artists, we learn that Digger and Ed 'felt the same as all the other helpless black people.' (CCH 23) Similarly, the duo's famously short temper with naive or 'square' Harlemites is played down, the novel reading: 'they didn't consider these victims squares or suckers. They understood them.' (CCH 26)

Concurrently, the novel sees Digger seriously question his conventional role as a hardboiled cop, and his containment as such within a white power structure. When a white superior complains about Harlem's cannibalistic criminality, Digger tells him in a 'cotton dry' voice:

'[T]here ain't but three things to do about it: Make the criminals pay for it - you don't want to do that; pay the people enough to live decently - you ain't going to do that; so all that's left is let 'em eat one another up.' (CCH 14)

Digger is seemingly struck by the impotence of his role. Recognising the macro-political, as opposed to pathological, roots of Harlem's criminality, he recognises his position as a diversion from, and thus a facilitator of, the white status quo. Indeed, the novel sees Digger and Ed clash repeatedly with his superiors on the issue of racial allegiance. When Captain Brice vows to 'arrest every black son of a bitch in Harlem', Ed asks pointedly: 'Including me and Digger?' (CCH 120) Similarly, when Lieutenant Anderson patronisingly tells Digger,

⁵⁷ Letter from Ishmael Reed to Chester Himes, 23/11/1972, Box 8, Folder 4, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University. Spelling incorrect. See also Reed, 'Chester Himes: Writer', 84.

⁵⁸ For a more contemporary example of this reading, see Stephen Soitos, *The Blues Detective*, 144.

⁵⁹ Chester Himes, *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (London: Allison & Busby, 1988 [1965]), 13. All subsequent citations will be parenthesised with the prefix CCH.

'Ours not to reason why, ours but to do or die,' he responds flatly: 'Those days are gone forever.' (CCH 17)

In many ways, Digger's sense that the old days 'are gone forever' is validated in *Blind Man With A Pistol*. In a novel that sees Himes abandon any semblance of hardboiled linearity, Harlem itself takes to the streets in a series (or rather, a montage) of militant uprisings. When Harlem's ace detective duo are put on the case of uncovering the perpetrators, Digger again offers a macro-political, anti-colonial analysis of the uprising. When the duo are asked whether they have 'discovered who started the riot', Digger dryly responds: 'We knew who he was all along...Lincoln.' Digger is alluding to Abraham Lincoln's failure 'to make provisions to feed' the slave he 'freed.'⁶⁰ The comment again sees Digger refuse to engage in the hardboiled binary of hero and villain. Rather, he attributes Harlem's 'rage' to the effects of historical injustice. As in *Cotton*, Digger's wide-reaching critique causes friction between the duo and their white superiors. 'I'm beginning to suspect you fellows hate white people,' Anderson comments, 'once upon a time you guys were cops – and maybe friends: now you're black racists.' (BMP 158)

Critics have thus argued that that *Cotton* and *Blind Man* see Digger and Ed emerge as radical communitarians. For example, Robert Crooks suggests that the detectives come to the realisation that the 'answer to the linked problems of racism and crime may not lie with them at all, but rather in collective resistance within the black community.'⁶¹ However, this argument depends upon the idea that Digger and Ed disavow their roles as hardboiled, or 'white' law enforcers. This is simply not the case. Indeed, the growing militancy of the detectives does not resolve their previously observed contradictions. Rather, it exacerbates them. Take for instance the following exchange in *Cotton*:

'All I wish is that I was God for just one mother-raping second,' Grave Digger said, his voice cotton-dry with rage.

'I know,' Coffin Ed said. 'You'd concrete the face of the mother-raping earth and turn white folks into hogs.'

'But I ain't God,' Grave Digger said, pushing into the bar. (CCH 35)

Again, the passage presents Digger and Ed as characters filled with political 'rage' against white America. Equally of note, however, is the detectives' sense of frustration and impotence. As Digger notes with resignation, he does not possess the 'Godlike' agency needed

⁶⁰ Chester Himes, *Blind Man With A Pistol* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1989), 135. All subsequent citations will be parenthesised with the prefix *BMP*.

⁶¹ Robert Crooks, 'From The Far Side of the Urban Frontier: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Moseley', *College Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1995), 83.

to act upon his empathy with the Harlem community, or implement his desire for racial justice. Rather, Digger and Ed's generic role as hardboiled individualists works to complicate and ultimately *contain* their new-found radicalisation. By complicating the anti-colonial agency of his heroes in this way, Himes dramatises what we have observed through his and others' late 1960s careers: the untenability of Neal's vision of a culturally pure Black Aesthetic.

Indeed, akin to Digger and Ed, the 'Black Power' hero of late 1960s and early 1970s fiction and film was defined by paradox, rather than instrumentality. On the one hand, Gray suggests that the period saw 'black difference...forced into the open' in order to challenge a white 'monopoly' on racial representation.⁶² However, akin to Cleaver's autobiography, the representation of more mainstream 'Black Power' heroes was often contained by bourgeois motifs, aspirations and gender politics. William Van Deburg suggests that many black post-Civil Rights heroes did not so much reject, as 'provide a fresh, timely "racial angle" on familiar story lines.' In particular, the production of black 'tight-lipped, violence-prone vigilantes' were ironically indebted to white hardboiled heroes such as Mickey Spillane. Richard Rowntree described his iconic screen portrayal of private detective John Shaft as 'pretty much the same type of character as Clint Eastwood plays.'⁶³ Indeed, Ernest Tidyman's original novel billed its tough, sexually-charged protagonist as a character more interested in personal integrity than racial allegiance. The novel's tagline encapsulated his status as a black individualist, as opposed to a communitarian. It read: 'Shaft has no prejudices. He'll kill anyone – black or white.'⁶⁴ Many black contemporary critics thus derided Shaft as a 'white person's Black film,' a user-friendly replication of bourgeois and misogynistic cultural formulas.⁶⁵

Significantly, Van Deburg cites Himes's detective duo as 'father figures' of the Shaft persona, inasmuch as the duo 'tended to do what *they* thought was right.'⁶⁶ Van Deburg's comment is significant for suggesting that Digger and Ed's appeal to an African American audience lay in their hardboiled heroism, rather than any political allegiance. In this sense, Digger and Ed's own 'homecoming' reflects the post-Civil Rights embracing of the noir and hardboiled formula by American audiences. James Naremore argues that as U.S. movie-goers

⁶² Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 126-127.

⁶³ William L. Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 169, 135, 174, 147.

⁶⁴ Ernest Tidyman, *Shaft* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 131.

⁶⁵ See Erika Doss, "'Revolutionary art is a tool for liberation": Emory Douglas and Protest Aesthetics at The Black Panther', *New Political Science*, Vol.21, No.2 (1999).

⁶⁶ Van Deburg, *Black Camelot*, 174, 176.

and readers reacquired a taste for hardboiled fiction and film noir in the mid 1960s, ‘a European image of America was internalised by the Americans themselves.’⁶⁷ In 1972, Paul Schrader became one of the first American voices to celebrate noir’s ‘*moral vision of life based on style*.’ Schrader suggested that the genre explored ‘the underside of the American character.’⁶⁸ The pure, violent, and sexually-charged action offered by characters such as Shaft enacted the transgressive fantasy of hardboiled masculinity for American audiences.⁶⁹ Moreover, Himes’s *Cotton Comes To Harlem* was adapted into an action-packed 1970 movie produced by Samuel Goldwyn Jr.⁷⁰ In Goldwyn’s letters to Himes, it is clear that the producer sought to play up the individualist heroics of the detectives, rather than their community allegiance.⁷¹ Himes, who regarded the finished movie as a ‘minstrel show,’ took these instructions to mean that Goldwyn ‘does not wish to take any risk at all’ regarding the marketability of the detectives. Likening him to his Parisian counterpart Marcel Duhamel, Himes gathered that the producer ‘likes to follow the tried and successful formula.’⁷²

Himes’s comment encapsulates the way in which the ‘Black Power’ hero of the period intersected with, rather than resisted, dominant literary and cultural formulas. Accordingly, in the two final Harlem novels, we can see that Himes offers no easy answer as to which kind of black detective hero Digger and Ed are supposed to represent: Reed’s black folk heroes, or Tidyman’s macho individualists. Instead, their dual status as black working-stiffs, and ‘white’ hardboiled heroes is brought to a head. In particular, whereas Digger strives towards community activism, Ed appears even more locked into his role as hardboiled moralist. When Digger describes his dreams of finding a solution to the Harlem community’s problems, Ed snorts: ‘Do you believe that shit?...[w]e’re cops, not philosophers.’ (CCH 107) In *Cotton*, Ed remains fiercely committed to maintaining order, rather than justice. To this end, his own search for the missing \$87,000 resembles a more personal struggle to maintain his

⁶⁷ James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 28-35.

⁶⁸ Paul Schrader, ‘Notes On Film Noir’, in Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds.), *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996 [1972]), 53.

⁶⁹ On the links between black film of the early 1970s and film noir of the 1940s, see Naremore, *More Than Night*, 243-5.

⁷⁰ *Cotton Comes To Harlem* was directed by Ossie Davis, scripted by Arnold Pearlman, and starred Godfrey Chambers and Raymond St. Jacques as Digger and Ed. The movie was a success, grossing \$5.4 million dollars and garnering positive reviews. A second movie, *Come Back Charlestone Blue*, an adaptation of *All Shot Up*, was released in 1976, yet flopped commercially.

⁷¹ Letter from Samuel Goldwyn Jr. to Chester Himes, 12/12/1966, Box 5, Folder 8, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University. Letter from Samuel Goldwyn Jr. to Chester Himes, 13/11/1967, Box 5, Folder 8, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

⁷² Letter from Chester Himes to Rosalyn Targ, 17/12/1967, Box 8, Folder 11, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

(permanently fragile) hardboiled masculinity. The novel pits Ed against a ‘Back-to-Africa’ grifter called Iris, a ‘hard-bodied high-yellow woman with a perfect figure.’ (CCH 29) At various points in the novel, Iris hits Ed on the cheek, breaks his nose, and threatens to ‘rape’ him. In return, Ed comes close to murdering Iris, choking her until her ‘eyes were huge and limpid with fear and her throat was going black and blue.’ (CCH 124) The novel’s climactic church scene, in which the Iris and the ‘Back-to-Africa’ grifters are obliterated by Digger and Ed, takes on a peculiarly phallogocentric significance. With Iris tied up, and the detectives’ gradually burning the church down with their gunfire, Ed stalks the alter ‘with his pistol levelled, shouting, “Come out, mother-raper, and die like a man.”’ (CCH 143-5)

McCann duly reads the climax of *Cotton Comes To Harlem* as Ed’s punishment of Iris’s ‘perverse individual appetite.’⁷³ Thus, in parallel to Digger’s growing community spirit, the novel sees Ed embrace his formulaic role as hardboiled individualist to an even greater extent than before. As such, the familiar tension regarding the detectives’ violence (*for* or *against* the Harlem community) refuses to subside. We can see this tension in the following passage, in which an exasperated Captain Brice tells his detectives to conclude the case using violence:

‘Shoot a few of these hoodlums. I’ll cover you.’ [...] Grave Digger straightened up. Veins stood out on his temples and his neck had swelled like a cobra’s. His eyes had turned blood-red. He was so mad the captain’s image was blurred in his vision. ‘I wouldn’t do this for nobody but my own black people,’ he said in a voice that was cotton dry. (CCH 121-2)

The passage captures the competing claims on the post-Civil Rights detective. Digger’s righteous need to violently protect his ‘own black people’ merges uncomfortably with Brice’s baser desire for his detective to merely ‘shoot a few of these hoodlums.’ Again, Digger and Ed’s position within an anti-progressive power structure works to complicate their political empathies. Rather than taking on a heightened political instrumentality, the significance of Digger and Ed’s violence remains decidedly ambiguous.⁷⁴

In *Blind Man*, the pervasive air of chaos exacerbates the detectives’ ambiguity. Again, Digger’s solidarity with the Harlem rioters clashes with Ed’s resolute sense of professional duty. As Harlem revolts, Digger meditates on the absence of ‘justice’ in the lives of the people protesting. Ed retorts: ‘Screw the people...justice ain’t the point. It’s order now.’ (BMP 107)

⁷³ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2000), 292.

⁷⁴ This ambiguity complicates Stephen Soitos’s argument that, in the final Harlem novels, ‘the violence in Himes’s works moves from a random pattern of absurdist incidents toward a pointed political message’ Soitos, *The Blues Detective*, 164.

As the novel proceeds, Digger appears increasingly resigned to this fact. When black suspects look at him ‘for support’, he tells them ‘Don’t look at me...I’m the law too.’ (BMP 59) When marchers complain that ‘it ain’t easy for us coloured folks’, Digger pointedly avoids such a discussion, telling them (and perhaps himself): ‘let’s stick to our business.’ (BMP 68) Indeed, this sense of impotence is heightened when the duo are taken off the case altogether. Digger, it seems, has asked too many pertinent questions. Lieutenant Anderson tells them that Captain Brice ‘wants you fellows to lay off the status quo before you get all of us into trouble.’ The detectives come to a critical realisation of their containment: ‘at last he meant to muzzle them for the duration.’ As such, Digger and Ed spend Himes’s ‘revolutionary’ novel with very little to actually *do* apart from ‘satisfy [their] yen for being tough.’ (BMP 96) This entails a campaign of wanton violence directed against Harlem citizens. As Coffin Ed pistol-whips a suspect, Digger strikes him with such viciousness that the suspect’s teeth become ‘embedded in the carpal bones of his hand.’ (BMP 92)

The reduction of the duo’s political allegiance to that of posturing hardboiled violence dramatises the cultural *impurity* of the Black Power hero and author. Just as Himes’s American celebrity failed to negate aspects of his *Série Noire* identity, Digger and Ed’s emergence as Black Power heroes is a problematic journey. Whilst Digger becomes more outspoken in his desire for political ‘justice’, Ed embraces his desire for hardboiled ‘order’ with ever more relish. Most fundamentally, it brings their crisis of representation to breaking point, as the duo split over their intended role and narrative function. In a foregrounding of Himes’s comment to John A. Williams, the detectives liken their perilous position to that of Malcolm X’s:

‘Malcolm X was a black man and a martyr to the black cause.’
 ‘You know one thing, Digger. He was safe as long as he kept hating the white folks – they wouldn’t have hurt him, probably made him rich; it wasn’t until he began including them in the human race they killed him. That ought to tell you something.’
 ‘It does...[t]hey’ll kill you and me too if we ever stop being coloured cops.’ (BMP 112)

The detectives identify Malcolm as a ‘martyr’ for their cause. However, as their author would later restate, they suggest that his anti-colonial perspective was distorted within more conventional forms of racial representation. To this end, they suggest that Malcolm was ‘safe’ as long as he was constructed by whites as a racist, pathological monster. Significantly, the duo read this situation as a parallel of their own liminality. Digger acknowledges that his increased politicisation, and disillusionment, threatens his and his partner’s status as cops, and

thus their protection by the white power structure. As such, the detectives appear deeply pessimistic regarding their ability to act in a purposeful and progressive manner.

Tellingly, Digger and Ed spend the final moments of the Harlem Cycle lacking political instrumentality of any colour, having been taken off the case. Robert Crooks reads this finale as the duo's symbolic rejection of their professional duty, their 'laying down [of] arms' equating to their 'refusal...to uphold [the law] actively.'⁷⁵ However, it is not the case that the detectives finish the series by surrendering their famous weapons. Indeed, one of the very last times we see them is on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 125th Street:

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed stood in the street, shooting the big gray rats that ran from the condemned building with their big long-barrelled, nickel-plated .38-caliber pistols on .44 caliber-frames...They had an audience of rough-looking jokers from the corner bar who delighted in hearing the big pistols go off. (*BMP* 188)

In actuality, then, Digger and Ed finish the series doing what they are most famed for: firing their gleaming, phallic weapons. Here, however, their hardboiled masculinity is depicted as an utterly hollow spectacle. As they stand amongst the 'condemned' buildings of a poverty-stricken Harlem, their sole response is to shoot rats for the entertainment of aimless bystanders. The scene presents a metaphor regarding the severely curtailed limits of Himes's protagonists' agency in the era of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement. As Harlem burns, Himes's protagonists, and their revolutionary desires, are neutered by the very objects that have defined their celebrity.

'There ain't any other side.'

Digger and Ed thus burlesque the peculiar mixture of anti-colonial politics and all-American heroism that defined the Black Power hero. However, whilst the duo end the Harlem Cycle in utter impotence, Himes considered a more explosive conclusion to his detectives' career. In 1983, Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner edited and published Himes's 'unfinished' final novel *Plan B* from the various outlines and snippets of narrative found in the author's papers. The 'novel' sketchily details an elaborate plot in which a black revolutionary, Tomsson Black, plots to arm African Americans for a violent insurrection. Although Fabre and Skinner state that 'no formal conclusion exists for *Plan B*', they flesh out a planned final scene in which Digger and Ed meet with Tomsson Black, only to fatally turn their guns upon one another. The conflict revolves around the duo's differing opinions regarding Black's revolutionary scheme.

⁷⁵ Crooks, 'Far Side Of The Urban Frontier', 83.

The more conservative Ed considers Black a ‘dangerous man’, whilst the more radical Digger regards him as ‘our last chance.’ When Ed pulls his gun on Black, Digger shoots his partner through the head. Black himself then proceeds to murder Digger.⁷⁶

The projected scene is interesting for the way it brings the detectives’ growing differences to breaking point. Indeed, it depicts the two sides of the ‘Black Power’ hero (individualist – communitarian) as mutually destructive. However, in many ways, the finality of such a scene is ill-fitting. As we have seen, Digger and Ed are characters defined by their ability to contain, rather than resolve, a number of opposing discourses. The imagined ending to *Plan B* suggests an explosive, even sacrificial conclusion to his detectives’ many contradictions. By contrast, their more comic swansong in *Blind Man With A Pistol* denies them, and the reader, any such catharsis. It leaves the detectives’ crisis of representation to play out indefinitely. It is an anti-conclusion in which Himes refuses to detangle the exploitative and progressive elements that characterise his hardboiled protagonists.

In this sense, it is in their *containment* that Digger and Ed dramatise the failure of a post-Civil Rights Black Aesthetic. Larry Neal envisioned such an aesthetic as the ‘unstated, even noumenal set of values that exists beneath the surface of black American culture.’⁷⁷ For Neal, it was simply a case of ‘stating’ these pre-ordained values, of rendering visible what was already there. However, Himes knew firsthand the contradictory praxis of black cultural representation. In reality, neither his public persona, nor his detective heroes, could transcend dominant western discourses of individualism, transgression and racial difference. Himes thus used his detectives’ late career to debunk the idea of a pure and instrumental Black Aesthetic. In many ways, such hybridity reflects Albert Murray’s contemporary critique of black cultural nationalism. Murray suggested that the idea of a ‘static system of racial conventions and ornaments’ was ‘abstract, romantic, and in truth, pretentious.’ He instead defined racial identity and culture as ‘dynamic, ever accommodating, ever accumulating, ever assimilating.’⁷⁸ Indeed, Himes saw firsthand the kinetic relationship between culture and social reality, as theorised in Gramsci’s principle of hegemonic negotiation. Himes and his detective fiction’s public return to the U.S. offered no respite from these operations. In this sense, the late-1960s American interest in Himes’s career did not enact the existential

⁷⁶ Chester Himes, with Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner (eds.), *Plan B: A Novel* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 193 [1983]), 201-2.

⁷⁷ Larry Neal, ‘The Black Writer’s Role II: Ralph Ellison’s Zoot Suit’, in Larry Neal and Michael Swartz (ed.) *Visions Of A Liberated Future: Black Arts Movements Writings* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1989 [1965]), 41.

⁷⁸ Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 180, 147.

homecoming that his editor had promised. Rather, it represented yet another stage in the ceaseless transatlantic exchange and negotiation of his image as a black American writer.

Thus, although the upsurge of African American ‘cultural confidence’ in the late 1960s sought to ‘reclaim’ black cultural representation, the reality was less straightforward. As Howard Winant comments, the period’s ‘creation and nurturing of race-consciousness’ combined ‘potentially emancipatory elements’ with ‘potentially chauvinistic and even fascist ones.’⁷⁹ In short, many of the goals sought by black cultural nationalism were complicated by a capitalistic dynamic of exchange, and the unintended consequences it produced. Himes’s *petit* homecoming enacted these ideas, as Digger and Ed’s swansong dramatised them. Towards the end of *Blind Man With A Pistol*, the detectives come face to face with a gang of looting youths. Digger and Ed’s attempts to assert their authority are challenged in the following way:

‘Them Doctor Toms,’ a youth said contemptuously. ‘They’re all on whitey’s side.’
 ‘Go on home,’ Grave Digger said, pushing them away, ignoring the flashing knife blades. ‘Go home and grow up. You’ll find out there ain’t any other side.’ (*BMP* 140)

The exchange encapsulates Himes and his pulp fiction’s central message regarding the liminality of African American culture. As we have seen, Himes and his protagonists’ ‘homecoming’ did not isolate them from the hegemony of ‘whitey’s side’. Rather, their transatlantic exchange as a Black Arts commodity symbolised the ongoing negotiation between dominant and marginal cultural politics. In this sense, Himes uses his detective protagonists to document and critically reflect upon the failure of the Black Arts Movement to ‘police’ its own image.

⁷⁹ Winant, *The World Is A Ghetto*, 312.

8

**‘That Don’t Make Sense.’:
Writing a Revolution Without a Plot**

In a 1970 *Amistad* interview with John A. Williams, Himes described his late 1960s work as an attempt to envisage ‘what should happen when the black people have an armed uprising.’ Himes explained this project in a manner that implied a rejection of his previous authorial containment. Claiming that ‘white people’ had been ‘titillated by the problem of the black people’ in the past, he suggested that the depiction of a ‘massively violent’ black insurrection was the ‘only way...to make them take it seriously.’¹ The comment casts Himes as an author seized by a resurgent sense of instrumentality, and a desire to mimetically and vindictively depict a violent African American revolution.

We should be wary in taking Himes’s comments at face value. A year earlier, Himes had published his final Harlem novel *Blind Man With A Pistol* (1969). Although the novel depicts the Harlem community taking to the streets in a series of marches and protests, it is devoid of anything resembling narrative instrumentality. Indeed, Himes described *Blind Man* as a ‘detective story without a plot.’² The novel does not disappoint in this respect, consisting of a nonlinear montage of collective demonstrations and lurid sex-crimes. In contrast to the clarity of Himes’s assertion in the interview, the novel’s concluding scene, in which a blind man opens fire on a subway train, is seemingly devoid of any ‘serious’ intent. In it, a black passenger accuses a blind man of ‘staring at him,’ only for a white passenger to react angrily, assuming that he is being accused. The blind man, meanwhile, thinks that the white man is insulting him, and opens fire, only to murder an innocent black bystander. Himes compares the ensuing panic to ‘Chinese firecrackers’, a passenger repeatedly screaming ‘BLIND MAN WITH A PISTOL!!!’³ In a narrative sense, the episode is entirely unrelated to the preceding two hundred pages. Rather, it offers a kind of microcosm of the novel. Amidst the multiple and comic misunderstandings, we observe Harlem’s collective, and potentially revolutionary

¹ John A. William, ‘My Man Himes: An Interview With Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995), 46.

² Letter from Chester Himes to Marcel Duhamel, 06/09/1969, Box 4, Folder 6, Chester Himes Papers, Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University.

³ Chester Himes, *Blind Man With A Pistol* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1989), 185. All subsequent citations will be parenthesised with the prefix *BMP*.

energy violently fragment. The novel's final words, offered by an on-looking Grave Digger Jones, do not evoke instrumentality so much as incomprehensibility: 'That don't make sense.' (*BMP* 186)

As this chapter argues, the question of whether black revolutionary violence could be 'taken seriously', or even 'make sense', is one Himes's late work treats with decided ambivalence. As the chaotic conclusion to *Blind Man* indicates, Himes leaves decidedly blurry the line between revolution and titillation, 'serious' politics and high farce. In doing so, his late work mobilises the multiple and contradictory cultural meanings associated with the era's black revolutionary rhetoric. Indeed, given the irreverence with which he regarded his own 'radical' post-Civil Rights appeal, Himes's call-to-arms in the *Amistad* interview seems somewhat disingenuous. Perhaps we can read it as a cynical attempt to capture the cultural and political zeitgeist of the era. In the mid to late 1960s, a number of 'race riots' occurred in major black urban areas; most notably Watts in 1965, and Detroit and Newark in 1967.⁴ Similarly, May 1968 saw France grind to a halt in anti-Gaullist protest staged by labour unions and University students.⁵ Many influential African American political thinkers of the period aimed to channel this global revolutionary momentum. Figureheads such as Malcolm X, and collectives such as the Black Panther Party, called for a rejection of non-violent resistance as previously advocated by Civil Rights activists Martin Luther King and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1967, H. Rap Brown told the newly renamed Student *National* Coordinating Committee that 'if America don't come around, we're going to burn it down.'⁶ As Jerry H. Bryant comments, by the late 1960s the 'organised revolutionary group [had become] a popular way to express the anger of many black Americans.'⁷

Himes's final Harlem novels *Cotton Comes To Harlem* and *Blind Man With A Pistol* engage with this revolutionary momentum in a wilfully ambiguous manner. Scholars have been sharply divided on their intent and significance. On the one hand, critics have read both works as a return to a more straightforward form of social protest. Both *Cotton* and *Blind Man* depict a subjugated Harlem community in revolution, turning respectively to a 'Back-to-

⁴ See Joe R. Feagin and Harlan Hahn, *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

⁵ See Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). In the year of French riots, Himes wrote the following to John A. Williams: 'We spent our summer on the outskirts of Paris, spending most of our time keeping away from the rioting students and workers.' Cited in Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 147.

⁶ Cited in Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 25.

⁷ Jerry H. Bryant, *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1997), 237.

Africa' movement, and all out political insurrection. Michael Denning argues that, in their focus upon 'the violence between Harlem and the outside white world,' Himes's final novels exhibit 'the first *stage* of a colonial consciousness.'⁸ In stark contrast, however, others have emphasised the way in which these novels stray far from these instrumental goals. *Cotton* has been read as the most conventional hardboiled narrative of the series. It depicts the subversion of the Harlem community's revolutionary aspirations by the series' most audacious black conman, what McCann calls 'the displacement of moral principle by criminal desire.'⁹ Similarly, *Blind Man* has been cited as the moment in which Himes rejects narrative linearity altogether, be it hardboiled or revolutionary. It is a novel that is often read as an early postmodernist experiment in narrative fragmentation, and the carnivalesque.¹⁰

This chapter attempts to synthesise these materialist and formalist views. Indeed, I argue that Himes's late work is not a 'serious' attempt to envisage a militant black American revolution. Nor is it, in the case of *Cotton*, just another hardboiled tale of criminal avarice, or with *Blind Man*, a postmodern formal experiment. Rather, I read the novels as 'serious' attempts to dramatise the way in which black revolutionary nationalism was disseminated, often in highly contradictory ways, through its pop-cultural representation. In doing so, Himes engages with an unresolved 'Black Power' debate that mirrors his own problematic Black Arts 'rebirth'. Despite black revolutionary nationalism's embracing of violence as an anti-colonial tactic, these aspects were often consumed as an Americanised, sexualised spectacle. As we have seen, Himes found space within a commodity form to self-consciously critique pop-cultural commodification. His late work uses this technique to dramatise the failure of black revolutionary literature to evade this same dynamic. Ultimately, the gun-toting blind man of Himes's last novel captures the misfiring praxis of black revolutionary culture. In the words of Himes himself, the novels depict a revolution 'without a plot', unable to control its own meaning and significance.

The first part of this chapter explores the deeply paradoxical way in which the novels represent revolutionary violence. Whilst the Harlem community choose organised violence as

⁸ Michael Denning, 'Topographies Of Violence: Chester Himes' Harlem Domestic Novels', in Charles L.P. Silet (ed.), *The Critical Response To Chester Himes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [1988]): 155-168. 165. See also Stephen F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 164.

⁹ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2000), 291.

¹⁰ See Greg Forter, *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) and Thomas Heise, 'Harlem Is Burning: Urban Rioting and the "Black Underclass" in Chester Himes's *Blind Man With A Pistol*', *African American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Fall 2007).

a means of anti-colonial resistance, Himes ‘disorganises’ this vision with certain noir conventions: black criminality and hyper-sexuality. In doing so, Himes heightens, rather than challenges, the contradictory cultural legacy of black revolutionary violence. Secondly, I suggest that Himes mobilises these contradictions in order to explore black revolutionary nationalism as an ambiguous cultural spectacle. *Cotton* and *Blind Man* use motifs of deception and discontinuity to dramatise black revolutionary violence as a cultural text, or a media event. Himes is thus less interested in depicting a racial war of revolution, than he is a racial war of *representation*. Kimberly Benston reads the legacy of black revolutionary nationalism as ‘not a creed or even a method, but rather a continuously shifting field of struggle and revision...[between] politics, representation, history, and revolution.’¹¹ Himes’s late work both enacts and critiques this nonlinear struggle, and the multifarious ways in which black urban violence was produced and consumed within it.

Disorganising Violence

Uniquely for a Harlem Cycle novel, *Blind Man With A Pistol* opens with a brief ‘Preface’ and ‘Foreword.’ Both pieces address the issue of black revolutionary violence in its various and contradictory guises: organised and random, politicised and titillating. In the preface, Himes recounts a story told to him about a blind man randomly opening fire on a subway train. He continues:

I thought, damn right, sounds just like today’s news, riots in the ghettos, war in Vietnam, masochistic doings in the Middle East. And then I thought of some of our loudmouthed leaders urging out vulnerable soul brothers on to getting themselves killed, and thought further that all unorganised violence is like a blind man with a pistol.

CHESTER HIMES (*BMP* 5)

Signed with his own name, the passage outlines a sentiment voiced repeatedly by Himes in interviews from around the time. Himes appeared to view organised racial violence as a genuine strategy for political change, and was thus disheartened by what he saw as its widespread misuse and corruption. As he asserted in a 1969 letter to John A. Williams: ‘in our case at this present time, violence is necessary. But *unorganised* violence is stupid, pointless,

¹¹ Cited in Lorrie Smith, ‘Black Arts to Def Jam: Performing “Spirit Work” across Generations’, in Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (eds.), *New Thoughts On The Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2006), 355.

and makes us more vulnerable than we are.’¹² In this sense, the ‘unorganised’ violence perpetrated by the blind man is held up in the preface as a critical lack of black American political cogency.

Below this, however, is printed the rather more succinct foreword:

‘Motherfucking right, it’s confusing; it’s a gas, baby, you dig.’¹³

A Harlem Intellectual (BMP 5)

Here, the unorganised violence enacted by the blind man is appraised from an altogether more flippant angle. Adopting the ‘jive talk’ of the era’s ‘radical’ black thinker, the epithet celebrates unorganised racial violence as one would a carnival, profanely dubbing it a ‘gas’. Here, the reader is promised the ‘plain and simple violence’ that Himes associated with the noir formula.¹⁴ Sketched out in this call-and-response is the simultaneous solemnity and wild abandon with which Himes’s late work treats black revolutionary violence. Taken together, the preface and foreword show Himes respectively occupying two roles: the concerned African American progressive, and the commercial writer of sensational, lurid pulp fiction. This ambivalence permeates both *Blind Man* and its preceding work *Cotton Comes To Harlem*. As we shall see, both novels’ depiction of a violent black revolution vacillates uncomfortably between a pointed social critique, and a decadent ‘gas’.

In doing so, the novels intervene in an early post-Civil Rights debate regarding the uses and misuses of black revolutionary violence. On the one hand, black revolutionary nationalists such as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence promoted the use of organised violence as a means of collective self-liberation. Leader Huey Newton wrote that ‘only with the power of the gun can black people halt the terror and brutality perpetuated against them by the armed racist power structure.’¹⁵ Scholars have read the BPP’s highly visible commitment to armed resistance as an attempt to ‘police the police’, and dramatise African Americans’ status as a colonised people.¹⁶ A key influence in this respect was the work of Martinique psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Fanon argued in *The Wretched Of The Earth* that ‘the colonised man finds his freedom in and through violence.’ At the centre of Fanon’s philosophy was the

¹² Letter from Chester Himes to John A. Williams, 08/03/1969, in John A. Williams and Lori Williams (eds.), *Dear Chester, Dear John: Letters Between Chester Himes and John A. Williams* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 65.

¹³ Himes, *Blind Man With A Pistol*, 5.

¹⁴ Williams, ‘My Man Himes’, 47-48.

¹⁵ Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Ballantine, 1973), 118. On the revolutionary significance of ‘the gun’ to the BPP see also Bobby Seale, *Seize The Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991 [1970]), 65.

¹⁶ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 202.

notion of organised violence as a ‘cleansing force’ that would reveal the ‘Lived-Experience of the Black’ to the colonised.¹⁷ Messay Kebede reads Fanon’s prescription of group violence as an attempt to ‘deconstruct the notion of race’ itself. Fanon believed that the colonised subject’s essence was not some mystical racial identity, but his concrete social ‘wretchedness’.¹⁸ Black revolutionary nationalist parties like the BPP were convinced by Fanon’s argument that violence could galvanise the revolutionary potential of the black lumpen proletariat. Indeed, after witnessing the 1965 Watts riots, Bobby Seale pointed out that ‘if you didn’t relate to these cats, the power structure would organise these cats against you.’¹⁹

However, in many ways, violence and violent rhetoric worked simultaneously to dissipate this revolutionary potential. Indeed, despite the BPP’s influential female contingent, and biracial affiliations, the group’s use of violence came to be narrowly associated with misogyny, criminality, and ‘black racism’.²⁰ In particular, the cult of personality surrounding Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver articulated black revolutionary violence to a macho individualism. ‘We shall have our manhood,’ wrote Cleaver, ‘or the earth will be levelled by our attempts to gain it.’²¹ As Richard King has argued, Cleaver’s violent rhetoric veered away from the anti-Colonial and towards the ‘solipsistic’, the ‘narcissistic’, and the ‘Manichean’.²² Similarly, the Party’s ‘lumpen’ element led to both the real and imagined association of black revolutionary violence with criminality. Amiri Baraka suggested that the BPP was populated by ‘misguided dudes’ who, by ‘picking up that literal gun, without training’ replicated rather than opposed America’s ‘sick value system’.²³ Chief of Staff David Hilliard later lamented that, in their indiscipline, the Panther’s had exchanged the revolutionary models of Cuba, Algeria, and China for something altogether more mainstream: Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather*.²⁴ The lurid celebrity of the Black Panther Party thus worked to contain, as much as liberate, African American revolutionary potential. As Nikhil Pal Singh argues, the Party’s faith in

¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched Of The Earth* (New York: Grove, 1968), 86, 147, 103.

¹⁸ Messay Kebede, ‘The Rehabilitation of Violence and the Violence of Rehabilitation: Fanon and Colonialism’, *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 31, No.5 (May 2001), 552, 549, 201.

¹⁹ Seale, *Seize The Time*, 30.

²⁰ On the ‘hidden story’ of the BPP’s progressive identity politics see Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jeffries, ‘Don’t Believe the Hype: Debunking the Panther Mythology’ in Charles E. Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998).

²¹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 61.

²² Richard H. King, *Civil Rights And The Idea Of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 190.

²³ Imamu Baraka, ‘Nationalism vs. Pimp Art’, in *Race, Rays, Raze* (New York: Vintage, 1972 [1969]), 130.

²⁴ David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 339.

‘cleansing’ revolutionary violence was sabotaged by the resurrected image of the ‘disorganised, avaricious, and self-destructive violence of the street.’²⁵

In Europe, Himes duly received media images of African American revolutionary politics with ambivalence. He claimed in interviews that he ‘had the same feeling’ regarding violence as Frantz Fanon.²⁶ Yet he sensed that black American ‘revolutionary potential’ had been ‘undercut’ and ‘manipulated’ by excessive media interest in the movement’s masculinity, anger and criminality.²⁷ However, as suggested by *Blind Man*’s preamble, Himes’s work of the period can be seen to aggravate, rather than rectify, these mixed messages. In *Cotton Comes To Harlem*, Himes envisages a black revolutionary movement that is simultaneously emancipatory and Machiavellian. The novel opens at a fundraising rally for an organisation promising to lead the Harlem community ‘Back-to-Africa.’ On the grounds of Harlem’s ‘slum tenements,’ thousands of ‘dark people filled with faith and hope’ gather. Himes describes the scene thusly:

The meeting was well organised. The speaker’s table stood at one end, draped with a banner reading: BACK TO AFRICA – LAST CHANCE!!! Behind it, beside the drawings of the ships, stood an armoured truck, its back doors open, flanked by two black guards wearing khaki uniforms and side arms.²⁸

The ‘well organised’ militaristic trappings of the rally indicate the high stakes of the project. As the banner suggests, this is the Harlem community’s ‘last chance’ to reject American subjugation. The novel presents Harlem as a ‘city of the homeless’ that has arrived at a decisive historical moment. The movement’s heavily armed leader, Reverend Deke O’Malley, prescribes a return to Africa as a collective homecoming. A black woman in the audience marvels at the possibilities of revolt: ‘Here I is been cooking in whiter folk’s kitchens for more than thirty years. Lord, can it be true?’ (CCH 6)

However, the answer to the woman’s question is an emphatic ‘no’. Deke O’Malley is revealed to be another of Himes’s grifter characters, and intends to steal the \$87,000 raised by the ‘Back-to-Africa’ fund for his own criminal means. Deke models his public image on Louis Michaux, the real-life proprietor of Harlem’s famous National Memorial African Bookstore,

²⁵ This was aided in no small part by the techniques of sabotage employed by the F.B.I’s COINTELPRO operation, Indeed, F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover stated that he wanted to ‘destroy what the Black Panther Party stands for’. Singh, *Black Is A Country*, 209.

²⁶ Williams, ‘My Man Himes’, 87.

²⁷ Michel Fabre, ‘Chester Himes Direct’ in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1983]), 135.

²⁸ Chester Himes, *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (London: Allison & Busby, 1988 [1965]), 5. All subsequent citations will be parenthesised with the prefix CCH.

and a symbol of black anti-colonial resistance.²⁹ Like Michaux, Deke appears in the ‘imagination’ of the Harlem community ‘as a martyr to the injustice of whites, and a brave and noble leader.’ (CCH 112) In reality, however, Deke is a prolific con-artist who ‘doesn’t have anything at all to do with Mr. Michaux’s group.’ (CCH 25) Rather, Deke is a character ‘who will do anything for enough money.’ (CCH 15) Deke embodies the era’s paranoid image of the black revolutionary: a hustler pandering as a soldier. This hybridity is hinted at in the militaristic pomp of his ‘Back-to-Africa’ rallies. Himes writes that ‘the tonneau of the armoured truck had been built on the chassis of a 1957 Cadillac.’ (CCH 32) The vehicle pointedly conflates black revolutionary nationalism with what Baraka derided as vulgar ‘Pimp Nationalism’.³⁰ Similarly, in an echo of Eldridge Cleaver, Deke’s own idea of emancipation is wholly individual, and highly sexualised. He personally imagines Africa as a ‘pitch-dark forest’ of ‘exquisite ecstasy’ in which the ‘trees had the shapes of women with breasts hanging like coconuts.’ Indeed, Deke exploits his revolutionary zeal so that women have no choice but to ‘surrender’ to his advances. When he visits a female member of his congregation, we observe black militancy as sexual conquest: ‘when he penetrated her she believed it was God’s will and she cried, “Oh-oh! I think you’re wonderful!”’ (CCH 46)

In many ways, Deke is a standard noir villain, defined by both ruthless capitalism and hyper-sexuality. By constructing Deke in this formulaic way, Himes mobilises what Hilliard saw as the ‘Godfather’ perception of black liberation groups. Moreover, Deke can be read as burlesquing the kind of outlaw-revolutionary ‘superstud’ found in African American novels and films of the period.³¹ Most famously, Martin Van Peebles 1971 movie *Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song* concerns a sexually prolific outlaw-cum-hustler on the run from a racist Los Angeles police force. The movie’s mix of revolutionary iconography and misogynistic eroticism provoked a debate as to the limits of black revolutionary iconography. Huey Newton argued in the *Black Panther* that the film spoke for an insurgent black community,

²⁹ Michaux opened the bookstore, located on the corner of 125th Street and 7th Avenue, in the 1930s. By the time of its closing in the mid 1970s, the shop claimed to stock 225,000 volumes of books associated with African American, pan-African, and Third World culture. See David Emblidge, ‘Rallying Point: Lewis Michaux’s National Memorial African Bookstore,’ *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Autumn 2008).

³⁰ Baraka, ‘Nationalism vs. Pimp Art’, 128.

³¹ Bryant, *Victims and Heroes*, 250. The period saw many works of literature that imagined an African American insurrection in various locales around the country. These guerrilla plots were typically orchestrated by a male vanguard, led by a charismatic and sexually potent leader. Examples of the genre include Ronald Fair, *Many Thousands Gone* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), Julien Moreau, *The Black Commandos* (Atlanta: Cultural Institute Press, 1967), John A. Williams, *Sons Of Darkness, Sons Of Light* (London: Penguin, 1969), Blyden Jackson, *Operation Burning Candle* (New York: Third Press, 1973) and Nivi-Kofi A. Easley, *The Militants* (New York: Carlton Press, 1974).

pronouncing it ‘the first truly revolutionary’ black film.³² However, Lerone Bennett in *Ebony* accused the film of being aimed for profit at white audiences, dismissing its ‘formula of sex-violence-degradation’ as neither ‘new or revolutionary.’³³ The era’s militant protagonists thus embodied the wider contradictions associated with black revolutionary nationalism. Whilst seeking to use violence as a ‘cleansing’ act of self-becoming, violence was seen by many to further reinforce demeaning stereotypes of black criminality and sexuality.

In *Blind Man With A Pistol*, Himes aggravates the conflicting cultural meanings associated with another black revolutionary icon: Nat Turner. The novel depicts the Harlem community engaging in a number of protest marches over the course of a single day: July fifteenth, Nat Turner day. Turner was, of course, the leader of an 1831 slave revolt in Virginia. In 1967, however, he rose to prominence once again as the protagonist of William Styron’s Pulitzer Prize winning, yet hugely controversial, *The Confessions Of Nat Turner*. Many black critics objected to the way in which Styron’s novel depicted the literate and married Turner as an ‘unmarried celibate haunted by masturbatory fantasies of the white girl he later kills.’³⁴ The novel was seen to fetishise Turner as a symbol of damaged black masculinity, rather than political insurrection. In defining a ‘Black Aesthetic,’ Addison Gayle Jr. voiced a desire to find a ‘way out’ of America’s ‘race psychosis...the rank of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron.’³⁵ On the subject of this controversy, Himes told John A. Williams in 1970:

Nat Turner was one of the only black slaves who had the right idea: the only thing to do with a white slave-owner was to kill him. But Styron couldn’t have him just kill him outright because he wanted to be free; he had to make him a homicidal homosexual lusting after white women. Which I find very... [laughter] funny...Black homosexuals and black eunuchs have always been profitable in white literature.³⁶

Himes was interested in Nat Turner precisely because of his ambiguous cultural significance. On the one hand, Turner’s revolutionary violence struck Himes as a Fanon-esque act of violent self-liberation. Yet, literary profit motif demanded that Turner’s act conform to certain narrative conventions and racial stereotypes, something Himes knew all too well. As Himes’s

³² Huey Newton, ‘He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song’, *Black Panther*, January 19, 1971.

³³ Lerone Bennett, ‘The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland’, *Ebony*, (September 1971), 106.

³⁴ Cited in Eithne Quinn, ‘Sincere Fictions’, *Velvet Light Trap*, Vol. 67 (Spring 2011), forthcoming.

³⁵ Gayle was one of ten African American writers who attempted to resurrect Turner as a symbol of black self-determination in 1968’s *The Second Crucifixion Of Nat Turner*. A. Gayle Jr., ‘Introduction’, in A. Gayle Jr. (ed.), *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971) xxii. A movie adaptation of the novel was announced in 1968, only to be shelved in 1970 due in part to the overwhelming protests against it by the Black Anti-Defamation Association. As BADA member Ossie Davis asserted: ‘[Turner] didn’t need to be inspired, as the book tells us, by unrequited love for a fair white maiden. I believe he was motivated by a love for his people.’ See Quinn, ‘Sincere Fictions’.

³⁶ Williams, ‘My Man Himes’, 72.

laughing response indicates, he was not prepared to offer an easy way out of this dilemma. Again, Himes the progressive African American, and Himes the *Série Noire* writer, merge problematically.

Himes's final Harlem seemingly revels in this ambiguity. Again, the novel depicts a Harlem community looking for radical catharsis, a desire it has 'been feeling a long time.' (*BMP* 104) They turn to a number of revolutionary march leaders who, whether covertly or overtly, preach a Fanonesque rhetoric of violent self-determination. In a 116th street church called 'The Temple of Black Jesus', discontented Harlemites gather to listen to a man introduced as 'Prophet Ham'. This is a name, however, that the speaker reacts angrily to as he takes the stage:

'Don't call me a Prophet...All the Prophets in history were either epileptics, syphilitics, schizophrenics, sadists or just plain monsters. I just got this harelip. That doesn't make me eligible. I ain't a race leader neither...I'm a plain and simple soldier in this fight for right. Just call me General Ham. I'm your commander. We got to fight, not race.' (*BMP* 75-6)

'General' Ham seems at pains to stress his status as a purely political player. He is a character who associates racial identity, race leading, and 'racing' with self-indulgence, and stereotyping. Instead, Ham, like Fanon, desires his followers to see themselves as socially *wretched*. He thus prescribes to his 'soldiers' a programme of pure, phenomenological action, rather than discursive identity politics.

However, like Nat Turner himself, General Ham is prohibited by the novel from accessing the purely political space he seems to advocate. Put simply, Himes makes it impossible to take him seriously. The character's call to pure action remains at absurd odds with his biblical name, and animalistic representation. This tension is heightened by the novel's bizarre opening chapter, in which Himes presents a man named 'Bubber' who strongly resembles General Ham. In the kitchen of a dilapidated house, policemen encounter a black 'cretin' crouched over a cauldron, stirring a 'nauseating' stew with 'slow indifference'. Himes describes the black man as having a torso like a 'misshapen lump of crude rubber', and a harelip that causes him to 'slobber constantly'. (*BMP* 8) Bubber is revealed to be the son of the house's Mormon patriarch Reverend Sam, who lives with his dozen wives and fifty children. We see Bubber dish out the contents of his cauldron in a pig trough, the children 'lined up, side by side, on hands and knees, swilling it like pigs.' (*BMP* 9) Moments later Himes describes him sleeping on the kitchen floor, the 'numerous flies and gnats...feeding on the flow of spittle from the corners of his harelipped mouth.' (*BMP* 13) The passage is a Himesian tour de force, delivering a grotesque image of black domestic pathology. Whether Bubber is a

doppelganger or General Ham himself remains unresolved, and unimportant. Either way, the passage, in its fantastic monstrosity, utterly subverts General Ham's later message of pure political economy.

Taken together, the two excerpts illustrate the primary way in which *Blind Man With A Pistol* derails its own depiction of an organised black revolution. The doubling of General Ham with Bubber is of no narrative consequence; it is not referred to or mentioned again in the novel. Rather, the scene exists purely to undercut the revolutionary rhetoric articulated elsewhere in the novel. Indeed, *Blind Man* continuously interrupts its own Fanon-esque narrative through a wanton use of racial stereotype. In another passage, we observe a white businessman cruising lunch counters looking for 'perverts' and 'sissies'. He quickly finds an obliging 'Black Muslim' wearing a 'bright red fez' around which are the words: 'BLACK POWER.' The curb crawler, immune to the political significance of the fez, merely decides that the slogan indicates that the man is 'black enough' for sex. (*BMP* 15) The next time we see the white man is with his pants around his ankles, blood gurgling from his cut throat. (*BMP* 33) Akin to the doubling of General Ham with Bubber, the scene delivers a revolutionary image designed to titillate, rather than organise.

In both novels, then, Himes the political writer, and Himes the *Série Noire* writer, merge problematically. Both *Blind Man* and *Cotton* defuse their own political message by respectively employing excessive racial stereotypes and standard noir conventions. This takes us back to the 'preface' and 'foreword' at the beginning of *Blind Man*. They foreground the curious two-tone, or 'confusing' way in which Himes's late work depicts revolutionary violence: both a deep political need, and a titillating 'gas'. In doing so, they mobilise, rather than debunk, Himes's sense that black revolutionary violence continued to be 'undercut' by its pop-cultural representation.

Wars of Representation

Ultimately, the novels are unconcerned with either the 'truths' or the 'lies' of black revolutionary violence. Rather, they dramatise the way in which its meaning of such violence is variously and contradictorily *produced* through its cultural representation. As we have seen, the revolutionary violence envisaged by radical thinkers and writers of the era did not 'cleanse' black identity in an existential sense. Rather, it further embedded the movement within the murky politics of cultural hegemony. Stuart Hall points to another Fanon text, *Black*

Skins, White Masks, as a work that ironically predicts these processes. In stark contrast to the racial power binaries outlined in *Wretched Of The Earth*, Hall argues that the earlier work presents the colonised subject as ‘the split or divided self, the two sides within the *same* figure.’³⁷ Indeed, in *Black Skins*’ study of the French Antillean, Fanon described a more open-ended colonial war of representation. He argued that ‘ontology...does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.’ Here, Fanon is less interested in excavating an ontological raciality, than mapping race’s ongoing cultural negotiation. In discussing his own construction as the black ‘imago’ of white racist thought, Fanon concluded that ‘a negro is forever in combat with his own *image*.’³⁸

For Hall, *Black Skins, White Masks* is important because it takes ‘questions of representation and subjectivity as *constitutive* of the politics of decolonisation.’³⁹ This is, in essence, the critical work that I want to suggest Himes’s late work does. As we have seen, both *Cotton* and *Blind Man* do not offer a noumenical or existential alternative to a perceived ‘distortion’ of black revolutionary goals. Rather, they bring to the surface the way such goals themselves are constructed and negotiated within the cultural realm. Himes’s self-conscious critique of pop-cultural praxis, what he described as the ‘jumbled and confused...form of reality’ found in his Harlem fiction, is thus applied to the issue of revolutionary violence itself.⁴⁰ In doing so, Himes self-consciously critiques the pop-cultural *production*, and the hegemonic containment, of black revolutionary nationalism.

For example, the grift narrative at the heart of *Cotton Comes To Harlem* portrays the competing fictions of heritage that inspire the ‘Back-to-Africa’ movement as just that: fictions. At the rally that opens the novel, Deke O’ Malley describes a ‘native land’ where there will be ‘no more picking cotton for the white folks’ and they can live by ‘our own rules – *black*, like us.’ (CCH 6) Of course, Deke’s devious plot will ensure that the promise of African heritage remains the stuff of fantasy. Indeed, the novel draws repeated attention to the contrived way in which Deke manipulates a series of iconic black cultural texts and images in order to carry out his ruse. We learn that he had ‘gotten the idea’ for his Back-to-Africa scheme ‘from reading a biography of Marcus Garvey.’ (CCH 27) Similarly, the scheme’s ‘forged documents’ are

³⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks?’ in Alan Read (ed.), *The Fact Of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 18.

³⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967 [1952]), 109-110, 70.

³⁹ Hall, ‘The After-life of Frantz Fanon’, 19.

⁴⁰ Michel Fabre, ‘Interview With Chester Himes’, in Michel Fabre, Robert Skinner (eds.), *Conversations with Chester Himes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995 [1970]), 92.

'hidden in [his] apartment in the binding' of J.A. Roger's influential pan-African text *Sex And Race*. (CCH 99) Meanwhile, the phoney 'African Bookstore' that Deke sets up is plastered with Negritude slogans such as 'GODDAMN WHITE MAN' and 'BLACK MEN UNITE', together with African flags and a photograph of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba. (CCH 114) In doing so, the novel presents black revolution as a discursive entity made up of signs and symbols, and one malleable in the hands of a capitalistic conman.

Moreover, Deke's scheme is not the novels' only grift narrative regarding racial and national origins. At the same time, the novel details the arrival in Harlem of a 'back-to-the-Southland' movement led by a cheroot-chewing 'Colonel' from Birmingham, Alabama. In an echo of Deke, the Colonel's true intention is to get his hands on the 'Back-to-Africa' funds. In yet another echo of Deke, he attempts in the meantime to 'sell' a glorified vision of racial identity to Harlem residents. Promising a cash sum to those who join up, the Colonel sets up a headquarters in Harlem, outside of which are displayed various paintings of an agrarian Southern idyll. They show 'happy darkies at the end of the day celebrating in a clearing in front of ranch-type cabins, dancing the twits, their teeth gleaming in the setting sun.' (CCH 56) As he publicly devours his Southern-style breakfast, the Harlem residents feel 'absolutely homesick'. (CCH 65) In an absurd manner, Himes depicts the Harlem community caught (or rather, enslaved) within competing fictions of African and American identity. In this sense, the novel's embattled Harlemites emerge as a 'divided' colonial populace, in the manner of Fanon's Antillean.

Ultimately, the competing racial and national identities propagated by Deke and The Colonel manifest themselves at the level of one image in particular. The \$87,000 pursued by both Deke and the Colonel is hidden inside a missing bale of cotton, which has accidentally fallen out of a speeding truck at the beginning of the novel. (CCH 11) The cash-stuffed bale of cotton symbolises the extent to which the hopes and aspirations of the Harlem population continue to be commodified from without. These issues come to a head in one of the very last chapters of the novel. The missing bale of cotton is appropriately located in 'The Cotton Club' where an African American dancer, Billie, is using it as a stage prop, unaware of its true worth. The club is filled with 'well-dressed people, white and coloured' who sit listening to a jazz band playing 'aphrodisiacally'. As Billie 'writhes' and 'grinds' almost naked around the cotton, Himes describes the bourgeois onlookers looking on 'greedily' and 'lustfully'. Himes writes: 'She was creating the illusion of being seduced by a bale of cotton.' (CCH 147) Billie thus offers a titillating riff on the significance of cotton in African American history. The

scene is a classic example of Himes using motifs of performance to de-essentialise the racial and gender identity of his characters. Moreover, the performance reduces the revolutionary aspirations of the Harlem populace to a voyeuristic spectacle, or sexual ‘illusion’. The radicalised Harlem community’s search for a ‘home’ thus takes an irreverent passage through the novel. What begins with a militaristic public rally, ends with a public performance that suggests artifice, pleasure and commodification.

Cotton Comes To Harlem thus enacts the reduction of a revolutionary goal to a cultural ‘prop’ or commodity. This offers a self-conscious comment on the ambiguous cultural legacy (or, indeed, pleasure) of African American revolutionary nationalism. Indeed, by 1969, the BPP had primarily (and ironically) become a cultural spectacle. From France, Jean Genet argued that, contrary to their call to pure action, the Panthers’ proved that ‘power is at the end of the *shadow* or *image* of a gun.’⁴¹ More recently, Jane Rhodes has argued that the Black Panther Party quickly became an ‘enduring part of popular culture’ that offered a ‘*symbolic* deployment of violence.’ Rhodes comments that this revolutionary ‘cultural confidence’ entailed the familiar problems of cultural ownership. On the one hand, a fetishised black nationalism was clearly open for exchange as a commodity – sartorial, performative, literary – whose political significance could be negated. On the other hand, Rhodes makes the point that their violent rhetoric offered a symbolic ‘act of assertion and empowerment for many black Americans.’⁴² This points to the more discursive forms of racial domination and resistance. In many ways, aspects of black revolutionary culture *wilfully* neglected to evade the prejudices and fetishes of a ‘polluted’ American context. Instead, Van Deburg argues that a post-Civil Rights black ‘lumpen’ transformed ‘literary, theatrical and mental images of dark-skinned villains into totemic culture heroes.’ In this sense, we can read *Sweetback* as less an insurrectionary blueprint, and more a chance for a black audience, in the words of Van Peebles, to see ‘some of their own fantasies acted out.’⁴³

⁴¹ Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 84.

⁴² Jane Rhodes, *Framing The Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 246, 82, 240, 324, 13. Hugh Pearson similarly, if more dismissively, argues that the BPP ‘amounted to little more than a temporary media phenomenon.’ Hugh Pearson, *Shadow Of The Panther: Huey Newton And The Price Of Black Power In America* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1995).

⁴³ William L. Van Deburg, ‘Villains, Demons, and Social Bandits: White Fear of the Black Cultural Revolution’, in Brian Ward (ed.), *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), 204, 137. In this sense, Cleaver celebrated the cultural affront offered by the BPP’s ‘so-called “Criminal Element”, those who live by their wits, existing off that which they rip off, who stick guns in the faces of businessman.’ Eldridge Cleaver, *On The Ideology of the Black Panther Party* (San Francisco, 1968), 7. On the ambiguous ‘world of pleasure’ offered by black revolutionary violence see R.D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (London: Beacon Press, 2002), 11.

Accordingly, the Nat Turner-day marches in *Blind Man* do not conclude in existential deliverance, but embody a host of cultural meanings, both resistant and exploitative. For example, Himes describes one of the marches as, simultaneously, an awesome display of ‘Black Power,’ and a degrading ‘white’ spectacle. The marchers consist of a group of ‘powerful-looking’ and bare-chested black men pushing a contraption that resembles the ‘boiler of a locomotive’. Himes describes the light emanating from this (inexplicable) contraption as:

[L]ighting up the white crescents of the black men’s eyes, the ivory shields of their teeth, and the gleaming black muscles of their naked torsos, like kaleidoscopes of hell...In the dim light they looked serious. Their faces looked grave. If Black Power came from physical strength, they looked as though they had it. (*BMP* 101)

The passage sees Himes directly complicate the desired instrumentality of ‘Black Power’. On the one hand, the exaggerated ‘physical strength’ of the marchers enacts a defiant, even demonic, affront to white America. Equally, however, the chiaroscuro lighting, and lingering focus on their physiognomy, frames the marchers within a decidedly voyeuristic perspective. The ‘Black Power’ that they embody is not ontological but discursive. In this sense, the passage invokes the Fanon of *Black Skins* rather than *Wretched*. The marchers, in Fanon’s words, are ‘locked onto [their] body’ by an external, rather than internal, gaze.⁴⁴

The scene is indicative of the way in which *Blind Man* focuses not so much on the protesters themselves, as the distortion and sexualisation of the protestors within a number of competing gazes. For example, it depicts the march of an ‘Interracial Brotherhood’ as unwittingly offering ‘the illusion of an orgy’. Himes continues: ‘somehow the black against the white and the white against the black gave the illusion of nakedness.’ Himes emphasises the arbitrary nature of the perspective; it is an ‘illusion’ that ‘somehow’ occurs. Nevertheless, the sight of ‘black and white naked flesh’ fills ‘black and white onlookers with a strange excitement’. (*BMP* 27) Here, the marchers appear at the mercy of an audience hungry for cultural fantasy; they are, in fact, a *text* to be consumed at will. Indeed, as in *Cotton*, the revolutionary Harlem of *Blind Man* is bedecked in other texts: billboards, advertisements, graffiti. Most notable is the deluge of political signs and slogans: ‘BLACK POWER!...BLACK THUNDER!’ (*BMP* 101) At one point a banner ‘miraculously’ changes its text from ‘BLACK POWER’ to ‘BROTHERHOOD.’ This sense of cultural flux is presented elsewhere through performance, a man on a corner ‘monotonously repeating’ the mantra: ‘BLACK POWER IS

⁴⁴ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 4.

MIGHT! GIVE FOR THE FIGHT! DANGEROUS AS THE DARK! MYSTERIOUS AS THE NIGHT!’ (*BMP* 45) In another sequence, Himes describes a colour television displaying a Harlem intersection. ‘It was a riot scene in Harlem,’ he writes, ‘but no one was rioting.’ Instead of ‘pure’ protest, Himes writes that ‘the only movement was of people trying to get before the camera, get on television.’ General Ham again re-materialises ominously in the back of the picture. Decked out in a blue metallic suit, here he resembles neither a soldier, or a monster, but a lurid simulacrum. In all of these instances, Himes dramatises the failure of black revolutionary nationalism to evade cultural abstraction, fragmentation and rearticulation. (*BMP* 151)

As such, Himes’s ‘revolutionary’ novels depict a Harlem community at war with white America, yet only to the extent that they are at war with their own racial image. Stuart Hall describes this ‘war of representation’ (as outlined in *Black Skins, White Masks*) as a ‘journey of self-education and self-transformation without the solace of an arrival.’⁴⁵ Non-resolution is exactly what the novels delivers. ‘Hush,’ pleads an onlooker as a march leader lectures at a rally, ‘He’s tellin’ us what Black Power means!’ (*BMP* 45) Yet the novel provides only more questions. Himes employs a dizzying array of synonyms in his description of the protest: a ‘carnival’, a ‘revival meeting’, a ‘sex orgy’, a ‘beer festival’, a ‘baseball game’, (*BMP* 28) Harlem’s police force demand information as to the ‘statement’ being made only to be told that ‘[e]ach of them got a different statement.’ (*BMP* 108) Ultimately, then, the novel refuses to tell us *which* Nat Turner is being celebrated: the leader of a violent revolution, or Styron’s debased protagonist. Instead, it reads:

Nat Turner day! Who knew who Nat Turner was? Some thought he was a jazz musician teaching the angels jazz; others thought he was a prizefighter teaching the devil to fight. Most agreed the best thing he ever did was die and give them a holiday. (*BMP* 73)

Again, the passage juxtaposes violent revolution with an assortment of black popular iconography. The only certainty, it seems, is that Nat Turner is *dead*, and the gap left by his death has the ability to encompass both dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses. Accordingly, Himes’s novel embraces the shifting cultural meanings that these images evoke. The protests thus remain simultaneously a community action, and a pornographic commodity. As the white girlfriend of a black protest leader exclaims: “‘My man! You’re so intelligent. It’s just like Walpurgisnacht.’” (*BMP* 28)

This ‘carnavalesque’ description of the Nat Turner riots suggest their refusal to be contained within a single, instrumental meaning. The novel dramatises what Herman Gray

⁴⁵ Hall, ‘The Afterlife Of Frantz Fanon’, 34.

calls the failure of black revolutionary nationalism to organise African American identity ‘around a monolithic, coherent, visible identity and conception of blackness.’ Rather, the early post-Civil Rights era unwittingly saw an ‘increasing emphasis on difference: sexual difference, racial and ethnic difference, gender difference.’⁴⁶ Yet the allusion to Walpurgisnacht is not an entirely satisfactory summation of Himes’s project. The novels are not a carnivalesque celebration of postmodern freedom. Rather, Himes repeatedly reminds us that his fragmented Harlem community remains dispossessed of the political momentum it craves. When Digger and Ed ask an informant as to the nature of the ensuing ‘carnival’, he responds flatly: ‘It ain’t no carnival...they’re serious. They ain’t playing.’ (*BMP* 102) Indeed, Himes does not let the reader forget that what unfolds in *Cotton* and *Blind Man* is essentially a *failed* revolution. As the Nat Turner marchers turn their violence inwards upon each other, Himes depicts a people ‘wandering around in a daze, lost, without knowing where they were or where they were going. Moving in slow motion.’ (*BMP* 134)

This air of pathos reflects Singh’s suggestion that black revolutionary nationalism staged a ‘guerilla theatre...[which] simultaneously signified a possession and yet real lack of power.’⁴⁷ Indeed, it remains the case that the most violent scene in the two novels features the brutal subjugation of black Harlemites by white outsiders. At the beginning of *Cotton Comes To Harlem*, white gunmen, sent by the Colonel, ambush Deke’s ‘Back-to-Africa’ rally in the hope of stealing the \$87,000. As they open fire on those operating the rally’s barbecue, we observe a peculiar mixture of high-farce and horror. The ‘big heavy white’ gunman fires at a young black man, who sinks to the ground ‘with half a head gone’. Himes describes a ‘mixture of teeth, barbecued pork ribs, and human brains [flying] through the air like macabre birds.’ (*CCH* 9) In a burlesque manner, the massacre shows the violent reduction of ‘revolutionary’ black bodies to the level of junk food. Yet still, we learn, ‘the Back-to-Africa followers believed. They wanted to believe. They didn’t have any other choice.’ (*CCH* 112) Again, the novel delivers a vision of African American revolution that communicates something both deeply serious and wantonly gratuitous. Himes encourages the reader to laugh at the violent farce depicted, and then confronts us with a message of bitter political disappointment. In choosing to burlesque, rather than resolve this tension, Himes dramatises both the pleasure and the pain of black revolutionary representation.

⁴⁶ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 191.

⁴⁷ Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 203.

Black Cultural Literacy

In *Cotton Comes To Harlem* and *Blind Man With A Pistol*, Himes applies his irreverent exploration of pop-cultural praxis to the issue of black revolutionary nationalism. At various times, the novels communicate a desire for collective African American emancipation, a deep conformity to the moral binaries of hardboiled fiction, and a carnivalesque abandon. It is not until we synthesise these disparate ingredients that we can appreciate the way Himes ‘pulps’ black revolutionary nationalism. By sabotaging, doubling and distorting their own insurrectionary narratives, both *Cotton* and *Blind Man* enact the failure of black revolutionary nationalism to evade cultural fragmentation and fetishisation.

Of course, the multiplicity of meanings associated with black revolutionary nationalism was highly ironic given the cultural and political singularity sought by its political and cultural leaders. By ramping up this irony, Himes offers an irreverent and sacrilegious take on serious and absolutist political desires. Paul Gilroy writes that an ‘absolutist conception of ethnic cultures can be identified by the way in which it registers uncomprehending disappointment with the *actual* cultural choices and patterns of...black people.’ In this respect, he suggests that the Black Arts writer’s role was to offer those African Americans ‘on the wrong road...a new direction, first by recovering and then by donating the racial awareness that the masses seem to lack.’⁴⁸ On the one hand, Himes’s late Harlem novels certainly register disappointment at the absence of an ‘organised’ black uprising. Yet, at the same time, Himes the *Série Noire* writer refuses to (and cannot) envision a clear ‘way out’ of this situation. In this sense, his novels not only explore the ‘*actual*’ cultural choices of a marginalised black community, but the ‘*actual*’ limitations faced by the black writer.

Thus, the ‘revolutionary’ overtones of Himes’s late Harlem work only to put into sharper relief the series’ wider irreverence regarding black cultural representation. From Africa to Marcus Garvey, the antebellum South to Nat Turner, the novels enact the multiple ways in which the icons and ‘homelands’ of the Harlem community are consumed and exploited as cultural commodities. Indeed, it could be suggested that Himes’s Harlem novels dramatise the problems and pleasures of black cultural literacy: the reading and misreading of African American history and culture. In particular, the proliferation of signs and slogans in the novels exhibit a self-conscious awareness of racial reading practices.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tale, 1993), 123.

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall, 'What is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?' in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay, 1992), 27.

It is thus fitting that one of the last scenes in *Blind Man With A Pistol* sees Grave Digger and Coffin Ed visit a Black Arts bookshop. The shop, which greatly resembles Michaux's National Memorial African Bookstore, is filled to the ceiling with books, film reels and African American memorabilia. Objects 'which might have been used by African witch doctors' mingle with 'signed photographs of practically all famous coloured people from that arts.' (BMP 171) Himes writes: 'in that room it was easy to believe in a Black World.' (BMP 172) Yet the precise cultural and political significance of such a world remains characteristically ambiguous. The narrative describes Mr. Grace, the store's owner, showing the detectives various artefacts:

Mr Grace...began showing them various curios from the slave trade, advertisements, pictures of slave ships, of slaves in steerage, of the auction block, and iron bar used as currency in buying slaves, a whip made of rhinoceros hide used by the Africans to drive the slaves to the coast, a branding silver, a cat-o'-nine-tails used on the slaves aboard ship, a pincers to pull teeth – to what purpose they couldn't tell.

'We know we're descended from slaves,' Coffin Ed said harshly. 'What're you trying to tell us?'

'Now you've got the chance, be free,' Mr Grace said enigmatically. (BMP 174)

Again, in its many images of African American exploitation, the passage offers questions ('what are you trying to tell us?') rather than resolutions. Grace's enigmatic answer could similarly be read in a number of ways. On the one hand, it suggests a revolutionary call-to-arms, an assertion of freedom in the face of enslavement. However, in the context of the novel as a whole, the comment more concretely embodies a plea for black cultural literacy. Faced with an excess of defiant and exploitative African American icons, the passage seems to advocate a readerly savvy, even suspicion, in regards to them. Reduced to the level of text and spectacle, these are racial spectres that are not, as Grace suggests, to be taken at face value.

In this sense, Himes's late work embraces the Fanon of *Black Skins, White Masks*, rather than *Wretched Of The Earth*. To quote Hall, the principal critical job of the Harlem Cycle is 'to bring to the surface – into representation – that which has sustained the regimes of representation unacknowledged.'⁵⁰ By offering a host of revolutionary meanings, both 'titillating' and 'serious', *Cotton* and *Blind Man* bring these formal questions to the foreground. By writing a revolution 'without a plot', Himes challenges us to sort through the conventional narratives of racial and political representation.

⁵⁰ Hall, 'The Afterlife of Frantz Fanon', 19.

Conclusion: Of Pulp and Protest

Walking into any nationwide U.K. bookshop gives you a clear sense of the way in which Himes's career is conventionally categorised. Under 'H' in the general fiction section will inevitably be found a copy of Himes's great 'protest' work of the 1940s, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. However, to locate one of Himes's Harlem novels will require a trip into the 'crime and mystery' or 'genre fiction' subsection. A similar kind of division exists in regards to the U.K. publishing of Himes's work. The current publisher of *If He Hollers* is Serpent's Tail Classics, purveyors of 'highbrow' leftist and avant-garde fiction, and a company that features a recent Nobel winner on its books. By contrast, the U.K. publisher best associated with the Harlem Cycle is the now defunct Payback Press, specialists in 'lowbrow' and sensational pulp fiction. Payback brought the work of black American writers like Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim to the U.K., often featuring forewords by hip-hop and blaxpoitation stars such as Ice-T and Melvin Van Peebles. These trips into the figurative 'back room' to pick up a Harlem novel reflect the wider categorisation of Himes's career. Himes's move from 'protest' to 'pulp', the source of so much critical interest, is generally perceived as a move from 'high' to 'low' culture. As discussed in the introduction, critics often read this narrative in either the Marxist sense as a 'selling-out', or in the culturalist sense as an embrace of 'folk' populism. In both cases, Himes's career has been defined as the u-turn symbolised by his split between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' publishing houses, and the 'general' and 'genre' section of the bookshop.

Yet, as we have seen in this thesis, Himes's career path destabilises these literary categories, debunking the notion of them as either stable or mutually exclusive. On this point, Stuart Hall writes that 'the meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever.'¹ Indeed, Himes's turbulent career reflected (and reflected *back* upon) the materiality, and expediency of African American literature, however exalted or lowly it was perceived to be. As we saw in part one of the thesis, Himes's standing as a writer of 'high' social realism was contingent

¹ Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular', in John Storey (Ed), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader: 2nd Edition* (London: Prentice Hall: 1998), 485.

upon the energy of a particular political moment. Within the postwar intellectual shift towards racial liberalism, Himes's work was rearticulated, gaining an unwanted racial stigma. Similarly, we saw how Himes's Parisian exile worked to complicate the perceived 'radical cosmopolitanism' of Black Paris, capital of the Black Atlantic.² The modernist, or 'absurdist' freedoms embraced by African American expatriates did not 'exceed' the hegemony of Western and American racial discourse.³ Rather, black expatriate fiction was contingent upon the fetishistic appeal of American race relations across the Atlantic. Finally, part three of the thesis detailed the problematic construction of Himes as a Black Arts writer. Again, the reverence with which Himes was perceived as such was bound up in the more ambiguous and often lurid appeal of 'Black Power'. By examining Himes's late career, we observed the proliferation of meanings and pleasures (both 'high' and 'low', hegemonic and counter-hegemonic) produced by a literature that, ironically, strove above all for a singularity of meaning. Taken as a whole, Himes's career progression suggests that literary esteem and cultural purity are concepts that are contingent upon their wider use value, and thus open to rearticulation. As Gramsci asserted in his discussion of 'intellectual' prestige: 'what matters is the *function*.'⁴

As such, by employing a protracted chronological structure, this thesis has explored the various and contradictory 'functions' of African American literature in the postwar era. Moreover, by looking at Himes's career from a wide array of angles, it has sought to capture the author's own 'function' within these operations. In both his contemporary reception, and subsequent scholarly focus, Himes has frequently been 'claimed' as the spokesperson for a particular ideological position or artistic practice: working-class consciousness, black 'folk' resistance, noir surrealism, black revolutionary nationalism. This thesis's wide-ranging use of sources (historical, biographical and theoretical) has explored the tensions between these positions, and their competing claims on Himes's authorship. Foucault asked of the author: 'Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality?'⁵ My study of Himes has taken this question seriously, and has thus looked in detail at Himes's personal and public statements, autobiographical retrospections, press

² Alexa Weik, "'The uses and hazards of expatriation': Richard Wright's Comopolitanism In Process', *African American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 459. Jonathan P. Eburne, 'Paris: Capital Of The Black Atlantic', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.51, No.4 (2005).

³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 173.

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, with Quintin Hoare (ed.) and Geoffrey Nowell (trans.), *Selections From Prison Notebooks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 315. Emphasis added.

⁵ Michel Foucault, 'What Is An Author?' in Josue V. Harari (ed. and trans.), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithica, NY: Cornwell University Press, 1979), 160.

interviews and reviews, and professional correspondence with agents, editors and publishers. The rationale behind this methodology is not to make a simple, singular connection between Himes's intentions and his texts' content. Nor has it been employed in order to fetishise Himes's turbulent biography, or racial 'hurt', as the source of his work. Rather, my methodology, whilst not negating Himes's intentionality, has explored its limitations within a number of different contexts. As chapters three and six concluded, Himes's authorship can be figured as essentially a collaboration, or negotiation, between the private Himes, the public Himes, and the changing demands of his reading constituencies. Thus, Himes's career does not fix him as a modernist demigod, or a disposable 'hack', or a postmodern cipher. Rather, it suggests his relational role in the dynamic production of cultural hegemony.

Fundamentally, this thesis has argued that a move into commercial formula fiction did not signal Himes's disinterest in an unequal and racially prejudiced social reality. Rather, the unintended consequence of Himes's career downturn was his repositioning 'behind enemy lines'. As chapter three detailed, Himes's move into the *Série Noire* placed him within a literary formula that was defined by stark racial aesthetics, and subject to a lurid consumer demand. As such, Himes's role in the *Série Noire* frankly and honestly lay bare the progressive limits, and exploitative workings of black cultural representation. As discussed, Himes's move into the genre occurred at the apex of his disillusionment with postwar politics, and his own containment within them. At the time of his tentative noir efforts, he claimed to regard reality as 'absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting. It was funny really. If I could just get the handle to the joke. And I had got the handle, by some miracle.'⁶ Himes's conceptualising of racial exploitation as a 'joke' appears throughout his career. In the opening chapter of *If He Hollers*, Bob Jones awakes from a nightmare in which he is beaten by whites, and reflects: 'Suddenly it struck me as funny, and I began laughing.'⁷ *The End Of A Primitive*'s Jesse Robinson finds his misreading by a New York publishing house 'to be 'funny, really. Funny as hell if you just get the handle to the joke.'⁸ In both of these cases, Himes empties racial oppression, violence, and difference of seriousness, depicting them as absurd fictions.

Yet, as protagonists (however unwittingly) of black 'social protest' novels, Bob Jones and Jesse Robinson could not simply *laugh* at the racial hell they were ensnared in. Rather, it was formula fiction that allowed Himes to truly 'get the handle' to such a joke without fear of

⁶ Himes, *My Life Of Absurdity*, 126.

⁷ Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New York: Chatham's Press, 1973 [1945]), 5.

⁸ Chester Himes, *The End Of A Primitive* (New York: Norton, 1997 [1955]), 190.

it being, in his own words ‘treated seriously’.⁹ Indeed, for the hustlers and detectives of the Harlem Cycle, laughter is a default response. The novels all end with a punch-line of sorts, a recognition that the ‘solution’ to the crime is laughably inconsequential to Harlem’s social problems. The Harlem novels are truly episodic, or ‘synoptic’, in this sense.¹⁰ The sordid, brutal and even revolutionary dynamics of Harlem perpetuate in an infinite cycle, without the promise of resolution, or by the final work, any semblance of ‘sense’.¹¹ In *The Real Cool Killers*, a police chief asks why ‘people up in Harlem congregate at the scene of a crime as though it were a three-ring circus?’ Grave Digger answers tersely: ‘[Because] it is...It’s the greatest show on earth.’¹² It was this marketable quality of Himes’s Harlem fiction that energised its savage humour. The series was designed to offer an excess of meanings and pleasures, to appeal to multiple reading constituencies. In short, by disavowing modernist intentionality, Himes found critical space within a fiction that could not strictly be *misread*.

The central value of Himes’s detective fiction thus lies in the authorial tensions summarised above, which produce in the text a profound duality which has often been read as postmodernist. By historicising these aesthetics, this thesis has argued that the Harlem Cycle exists simultaneously as a mobilisation of and critical reflection upon the transatlantic racial imagination. As we saw in part two of the thesis, Himes’s detective fiction offers a heightened, duplicitous enactment of the ‘Dark Ghetto’ of postwar social science and noir discourse. Himes’s Harlem is mapped by pathology, presenting an intangible dreamscape of broken homes and ‘unnormative’ gender relations. In burlesquing the ‘moral realism’ of the noir genre, the texts document the shift from an economic to a behavioural analysis of urban segregation; from the ‘proletarian pastoral’ of Popular Front writing to the ‘ghetto sublime’ of racial liberalism.¹³ Furthermore, Himes’s Harlem novels dramatise their status as racialised commodities in this very respect. In their depiction of Harlem’s ‘hustling ethic’, the novels thematise their own marketability, writing both Himes the ‘hack’, and the voyeuristic *Série Noire* reader, into the text itself.¹⁴ Consequently, Himes’s detective protagonists are characters whose heroic individualism, whilst defining their textual appeal, render them ineffectual in

⁹ Cited in Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 223.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, ‘The Synoptic Chandler’, in Joan Copjec (Ed.), *Shades Of Noir: A Reader* (London, Verso: 1993).

¹¹ Chester Himes, *Blind Man With A Pistol* (New York: Vintage Crime, 1989), 191.

¹² Chester Himes, *The Real Cool Killers*, in *The Harlem Cycle Volume I* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996 [1958]), 320.

¹³ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York/London: Verso, 1996), 230.

¹⁴ Julius Hudson, ‘The Hustling Ethic’ in Thomas Kochman (ed.), *Rappin’ and Stylin’ Out: Communication in Urban Black America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

regards to Harlem's social crises. Digger and Ed, who strive to be political activists, are ultimately contained by their status as transgressive fantasy figures. They are characters that both enact and critique the 'subjectivisation' of literary realism in the era, and the hegemony of the individualist (hardboiled) gaze.¹⁵ Fredric Jameson reads the noir and hardboiled fiction as the literary conduit of a 'society that lacked imagination' in regards to its 'socio-historical raw material.'¹⁶ Accordingly, Himes's detective fiction thematises the Cold War and capitalist privileging of racial difference as a kind of literary blindness. Whilst delivering the most anti-progressive tenets of the era, they hint at the submerged presence of something more material.

Moreover, in part three of the thesis we examined how Himes's late Harlem novels offer a similar affront to conventional forms of political and collective political resistance. The tension at the heart of Himes's vision, between a need to satisfy formulaic expectation and a will to comment on social reality, conspires to offer a unique comment on the problems of black revolutionary representation. Indeed, Himes's detective fiction represents, and in many ways foregrounds, a wider and more ambivalent form of post-Civil Rights cultural resistance. As Herman Gray comments, in contrast to Black Arts goals, the period saw an upsurge in the 'volume of black cultural images and representations that [drew] freely on irony, parody, sacrilege, and irreverence.'¹⁷ Gray and others point to the blaxploitation cycle of Hollywood films, and musicians such as The Last Poets and Gil-Scott Heron in this respect. These artists spoke to the 'increasing apathy and cynicism around the black liberation project', turning their focus to reflexive issues of commodification and consumerism.¹⁸ The hugely successful 'black experience' fiction of Holloway House writer Donald Goines further reflects this shift. His novels' vision of black political and social disillusionment is matched only by their lurid sensationalism. In an echo of Himes, they are capitalistic commodities in which capitalistic commodification is their primary theme.¹⁹ As Gray suggests, these works, in defiance of Black Arts ideals, were defined by a self-conscious lack of gravitas. They were both critical of and

¹⁵ Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction In the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 69.

¹⁶ Jameson, 'The Synoptic Chandler', 34.

¹⁷ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 124. See also Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 165.

¹⁸ Michael Hanson, 'Suppose James Brown read Fanon: the Black Arts Movement, Cultural Nationalism and the Failure of Popular Music Praxis', *Popular Music*, Vol. 27, No.3 (2008), 352.

¹⁹ Goines, an ex-hustler based in Detroit, published sixteen novels between 1971 and his murder in 1975. Goines's gratuitous style was primarily influenced by Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim). However, he offered a tribute to Himes in his 1973 prison novel *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief* by naming the novel's charismatic protagonist Chester Hines. Donald Goines, *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief* (New York: Holloway House, 2008 [1973]).

‘directly complicitous in all the stereotypes, ill-considered humour, and worst impulses of [their] black selves.’²⁰

To return to the question that opened this conclusion, these modes of critique complicate the line between ‘protest’ and ‘pulp’. As with the Harlem Cycle, they allow us to move beyond the notion of pop-cultural representations as either a mimetic reflection of reality, or an inconsequential subjective construction. Rather, cultural modes (such as noir formula fiction) offer the reader a phantasmagorical view of reality itself, one that actively shapes class consciousness. The pleasure and affect of popular culture does not ‘veil’ an existing reality, but constructs it in a way that frustrates deterministic readings. Perhaps the operations of formula fiction could be most accurately described as an exercise in commodity fetishism. In a discussion of film noir, Slavoj Žižek argues that commodity fetishism complicates the notion of the pop-cultural consumer as an ideological ‘dupe’. Rather, Žižek suggests that the ‘false consciousness’ propagated by the genre can be rethought in the following manner:

[T]he illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognise, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity.²¹

Pop-cultural consumers do not strictly ‘misrecognise’ – or, rather, misread – a commodity form, for this would depend on ‘reality’ being a stable, abstract referent. Rather, as Žižek argues, commodity fetishism is an active participant in the production of a social reality that is from its inception structured by capitalistic ‘fantasy’.²² This fundamentally challenges the orthodox Marxist idea that consumers ‘know not what they do.’²³ Equally, it dismisses the conception of the popular realm as autonomous and resistive to dominant ideology. Rather, producers and consumers are compelled to negotiate the political and conceptual limitations imposed by the commodity form itself, and the exploitative capitalist relations that underwrite it. A literary formula thus exemplifies the way in which there is no place ‘outside’, and, by implication, no place ‘inside’ dominant ideology. Instead, capitalism is a protean rubric that rules primarily through consent, and the continuous flux and exchange of ideas between different social groups.

²⁰ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 122.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 32-33.

²² See also Fredric Jameson, ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’, in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990 [1979]).

²³ See Marx, ‘Base and Superstructure’, 193.

The detective fiction of Chester Himes captures these fetishistic operations. The novels reflect back upon their commodity status to explore anti-progressive developments in the postwar analysis and representation of American race relations. Himes uses his pulp fiction to ‘pulp’ the era’s racial tensions, feeding images of urban segregation, black protest and bourgeois prejudice through the meat grinder of popular culture. In a shadow of Himes’s own career, the Harlem novels offer the reader no easy ‘way out’ of racial exploitation and political disillusionment. Rather, to quote Hall, the novels ‘bring to the surface – into representation – that which has sustained the regimes of representation unacknowledged.’²⁴ The Harlem Cycle makes visible the postwar racial imagination; its pleasures, its short-sightedness and its overriding preoccupation with racial difference. At a point in *Blind Man With A Pistol*, Himes describes where 7th Avenue meets 125th Street as the ‘Mecca of Harlem’. Here, the ‘real estate is owned by white people. But it is the Mecca of the black people just the same...they work it, but the white man owns it.’²⁵ This is the uneasy payoff that defines the texts’ duplicitous aesthetic, and more widely, Himes’s postwar career.

²⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks?’ in Alan Read (ed.), *The Fact Of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 19.

²⁵ Himes, *Blind Man With A Pistol*, 19-20.

Bibliography

Note on Archival Resources

The archival materials used in this thesis were obtained during a May 2008 study visit to the Amistad Research Centre at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Manuscript and Rare Books Library (MARBL) at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. Tulane University's Amistad Research Centre houses the 'Chester Himes Papers, 1944-1988'. Donated to the Centre by Himes's widow, Lesley Packard/Himes, it is the world's largest single collection of unpublished documents relating to Himes. Emory University's MARBL houses the 'Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003'. The Fabre archive is a collection of documents relating to 20th African American writers in France, donated by the late Michel Fabre of the Sorbonne, a prominent scholar of African American expatriate writers (most notably Richard Wright and Chester Himes).

Amistad's 'Chester Himes Papers, 1944-1988' contains thirty-eight boxes of material spanning from 1944 to 1988, the majority of which is personal/professional correspondence and manuscripts by Himes. The collection is organised into seven sections: correspondence (boxes 1-11), personal items (13-22), manuscripts by Himes (23-30), published materials by others (31), published articles/reviews about works of Himes (32-33), photos, articles and reviews pertaining to *A Rage In Harlem* (34), and collected published writings about/by Himes (35-38). This thesis has drawn almost exclusively on the first section, which comprises of letters to and from American/European publishers, literary agencies, friends, writers, fans, researchers, universities, artists, pre-Lesley Packard romantic interests, doctors, lawyers and real estate agents. Of particular relevance to this thesis has been the early 1950s correspondence with U.S. publishers/editors/agents, the late 1950s correspondence with French publishers/editors/agents, and the late 1960s correspondence with U.S. publishers and emerging 'Black Arts' writers.

MARBL's 'Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, 1910-2003' contains forty boxes of material spanning from 1910 to 2003, the majority of which are related to the work of African American writers, musicians, and artists from the United States and the Caribbean living in postwar France. These include James Baldwin, Sidney Bechet, Gwendolyn Brooks, Chester Himes, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Richard Wright. The archive is

organised into seven series: author/artist files (boxes 1-16), general correspondence (17-22), works authored by Fabre (23-24), subject files (25-31), photographs (32-34), audio-visual materials (35-36), and Geneviève Fabre papers (37-40). The rich collection of materials related to Chester Himes (boxes 6-9) stems both from Fabre's personal friendship with the Himes family and his acquisition of Himes's publisher's files from Yves Malartic. Of particular use to this thesis was the correspondence between Himes and Malartic, which spans from the early 1950s to the early 1970s. In addition, the archive features a substantial collection of (transatlantic) reviews of Himes's work. This includes the late 1940s/early 1950s U.S. reaction to Himes's domestic fiction, the late 1950s/early 1960s French reaction to his expatriate fiction, and the transatlantic reaction to his 1972 autobiography.

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