WHITE IS AND WHITE AIN’T: REPRESENTATIONS AND ANALYSES OF WHITENESS
IN THE NOVELS OF CHESTER HIMES

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation borrows and paraphrases for its title from the marijuana-dream sermon in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. As Ellison avers that “Black is, an’ black ain’t,” so too, I contend, “White is, and white ain’t.” Racial constructions are irrevocably embedded in each other. I trace this through selected novels of Chester Himes, who offers a specific way of reading whiteness, through his deployment and ultimate disruption of hard-boiled conventions, a style that other scholars have convincingly argued is a literary epitome of white male perspective.

Chapter One is a biographical sketch, focusing upon those points in Himes’s life which best inform his representations and analysis of whiteness. Chapter Two engages Himes’s first published novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* in order to locate those tropes and figures of whiteness in both narrative and style which will later manifest themselves in his Harlem Cycle. Chapter Three moves to the Harlem Cycle itself. *A Rage in Harlem* is a transitional text of sorts, from the “social protest” conventions to the more absurdist aspects of the later novels. These stylistic departures are discussed alongside the later Harlem novels, in order to demonstrate how they result in texts more fully able to address the trope of whiteness.

Chapter Four examines the last novel of the Cycle, *Blind Man With A Pistol*. Here Himes unleashes his most unsparing critique and unmasking of the effects of whiteness, moving effectively past the mere personification of white mannerisms into a clear assault on structural aspects. In doing so, he effectively deconstructs the hardboiled and detective genres, as there is no resolution available to the “crime” he narrates. The text itself devolves from the epistemological nature of the detective narrative into a more encompassing (and despairing)
meditation on the ontologic character of the construction of race, particularly the construction
and maintenance of whiteness. Some attention is given to the “last” of the Harlem novels, Plan
B. This text, unfinished and unpublished in Himes’s lifetime, is the fictive rendering of his
observation that “the only way the black man can solve [the “race problem”]” is through
organized violence.
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INTRODUCTION

WHITE IS AND WHITE AIN’T

“Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness,’”

And a congregation of voices answered: “That blackness is most black, brother, most black . . .”

“In the beginning . . .”

“at the very start,” they cried.

“. . .there was blackness . . .”

“Preach it . . .“

“. . .and the sun . . .”

“The sun, Lawd . . .”

“. . .was bloody red . . .”

“Red . . .”

“Now black is . . .” the preacher shouted.

“Bloody . . .“

“I said black is . . .”

“Preach it brother . . .”

“. . . an’ black ain’t . . .”

“Red Lawd, red: He said it’s red!”

“Amen, brother . . .”

“Black will git you . . .”

“Yes it will . . .”
“Yes it will . . .”
“. . . an’ black won’t . . .”
“Naw, it won’t!”
“It do . . .”
“It do, Lawd . . .”
“. . . an’ it don’t.”
“Halleluiah . . .”
“. . . It’ll put you glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE’S BELLY.”
“Preach it, dear brother . . .”
“. . . an’ make you tempt . . .”
“Good God a-mighty!”
“Old Aunt Nelly!”
“Black will make you . . .”
“Black . . .”
“. . . or black will unmake you.”
“Ain’t it the truth Lawd?” (Ellison Invisible Man 9-10).

[W]hiteness remains a synergistic system of transversal relationships of privileges, norms, rights, modes of self-perception and the perception of others, unquestioned presumptions, deceptions, beliefs, “truths,” behaviors, advantages, modes of comportment, and sites of power and hegemony that benefit whites individually and institutionally (Yancy 9-10).
My own introduction to Chester Himes came in my early teens. Being an insatiable and indiscriminate reader, I haunted both the stacks of the local library and the newsstand shelves of the local supermarket with equal desire. It was on the shelves of the latter that I first spied Cotton Comes to Harlem. It was a paperback edition, evidently published in conjunction with the release of the film adaptation. Attracted by the lurid cover, typical of many paperbacks of the era, and particularly so in the case of Himes, I bought it and brought it home.

No, I didn’t.

The fact is, I stole it.

In retrospect, I believe that Himes would be both amused and vindicated by this. I say amused, because in his early life he was a bootlegger, a thief and a gambler; the illicit nature of my acquisition might well have evoked for him some memory of his own illegal activities, although certainly my petty larceny hardly compares to his own experience. I say vindicated because, in that same small way, I enacted or performed the kind of expropriation of his work that was, in his (not unjustified) view, endemic of the white American culture, as represented particularly by the publishing industry. Calling himself “the lowest paid writer on the face of the earth,” Himes inveighed throughout his career against what he called a double-standard, not only in the publishing industry, but in every aspect of American culture (Conversations, 33). His novels and stories are informed by this, as is the case with many writers of color.

Anyway, back to me. I took my illicitly acquired novel home, careful not to let my parents see it. Not only would I likely need to explain how I acquired it, but also I suspected that the novel itself might be met with no small disapprobation. I devoured it in fascination, as Himes opened a door to a world I had never imagined. I was not entirely unfamiliar with African American culture and history. At the apex of the Civil Rights era, in 1967, my fifth grade teacher Miss
Helland had dispensed with the approved history curriculum, and, informed by her work in the Voter Registration drives, and Freedom Summer, had taught a self-designed curriculum entirely devoted to Black History and Culture. Still, this was not the Black culture that Miss Helland had taught; this was a world of con men and cops, violence and vice. It was a world that I, living in the whitest of white suburbs of a city where the presence of African Americans was still an anomaly (except on the forbidden north side), could never imagine existed. In some ways of course, it didn’t, at least not outside the mind of Chester Himes.

As fascinated as I was, it never occurred to me to pursue further this world Himes had constructed. While I subsequently read numerous other African American writers, from Ralph Ellison through Donald Goines (representing for me, the high and the low of Black literature), Himes and I did not cross paths during that time. Indeed, my illicit copy of Cotton Comes to Harlem disappeared sometime in those transient years. It wasn’t until I reached graduate school, over thirty years later, that I once again encountered Mr. Himes. This time, he didn’t let go.

The work of Chester Himes encapsulates for me, in many ways, the range suggested above. Even within the same novel, he proves capable of moving from the lowest, bawdiest humor, and occasionally awkward to embarrassing prose, to extraordinary insight and literary grace. While his novels, especially the earlier, “social protest” fiction, can be didactic at times, Himes is never the ideologue. His writing is fractious, difficult, informed by contradiction. Through it all, however, his work unsettles assumptions and expectations of literary conventions, as they were applied to Black writers of his time.

As I’ve become more familiar with his fiction, I’ve come to see certain patterns at work. Among these is a critique of race that at times incisively lays bare the fiction of racial construction. He does so however, with a savage humor and a sense of irony that is off-putting to
some, and misunderstood by others. Indeed, in my own first reading of Himes, I think that I fell
prey to one of the significant strategies I hope to analyze here, as I read his depictions of
Blackness as in some ways documentary, in others (even at that young age) as disturbing, even
racist. It is my hope that, in what follows, I am able to at least partially reveal to the reader what
it is I see in Himes, as I labor to read in his fiction an unsparing analysis of whiteness, as I’ll
define it below. Sometimes, as noted, this analysis is oblique, coming at the reader from
unexpected and easily misread angles. At other times, the analysis can be obscured by Himes’s
own shortcomings, for lack of a better word, his own blind spots in matters of gender and
sexuality in particular. These may not be forgivable, but I think they are at least understandable;
failing and frailty is part of the human condition, and Himes, as he endeavored mightily
throughout his career to prove, was human, all too human. This claim to humanity however, has
been historically denied or withheld from people of color in a culture predicated on white
supremacy, and dedicated structurally to maintaining this position of power while it masks it
through a hegemonic acquiescence on the part of those who most benefit. The unmasking of
these structures is often best effected then, by those who are most adversely affected by them. It
is from this perspective that I initiate this discussion, with an explanation of the epigraphs
offered above.

In the first epigraph, taken from Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison encapsulates from “the other”
perspective what I see operating through much of the fiction of Chester Himes. As Ellison’s
“sermon” suggests, the construction of race is as much a matter of what ain’t as what is.
Furthermore, in his focus on Blackness, Ellison implicitly critiques the construction of its
diametric figure, whiteness. Ellison makes clear that “In the beginning was blackness,” that is,
whiteness as a construction is available only after, or at least as, the construction of Blackness is
effected. Further, through the series of parallelisms (“black is . . . and black ain’t”), Ellison comments on both the phenotypic and social reality of color, and its biological fictitiousness. It is this social reality then, the unspoken whiteness that invests Blackness with its signification, that “will git you,” while the reversal of the declaration speaks to the biological emptiness of the signifier. Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination provides at least part of the groundwork for locating and analyzing this process of comparative or parallel construction as manifested in literary forms:

What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a closer look at literary 'Blackness,' the nature--even the cause--of literary 'whiteness.' What is it for? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as 'American'? (9).

The “Africanism” of which she speaks is what she defines as the “term for the denotative and connotative Blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people (6). While Morrison provides a strong method of reading for unacknowledged racial tropes, her focus is most concerned with tracing these tropes in fiction by white male authors. Nonetheless, her observation that “literary whiteness” is, in part, available to us only through a recognition and analysis of “literary Blackness” holds true, I think, for any useful analysis of racial tropes in literary production of Black writers as well.

The second epigram begins to indicate the direction from which any discussion of whiteness, in its literary or material manifestations, must proceed. Particularly of import here is the issue of “self-perception and perceptions of others,” as it is with these that literary production is in part
concerned, how these perceptions are (re)presented to the reader, and how the reader in turn constructs her own perceptions from these representations. It is, in other words, those “denotative and connotative . . . significations” of which Morrison speaks. The point of this, and of much of what will follow, is that any discussion of racial tropes, Black or white, necessarily, even inevitably, requires the recognition of the other. Each exists only by virtue (so to speak) of its other. So, as Ellison directs us that “black is, and black ain’t,” I might only echo, as I do eponymously, that similarly, white is, and white ain’t. With that in mind, we might proceed to some discussion of the construction of this dominant but invisible signifier, invisible in its determination as the norm, or ideal of the two.

The construction of whiteness is one that has been much discussed in academic circles, especially over the last two decades. The growing literature on the topic fills entire shelves. Still, the centrality of this construction to the history and lived experience of the populations of the United States would seem ample justification for continuing this discussion, in the effort to assist in both making it visible and de-centering it. What follows is in no way an exhaustive or comprehensive survey of the literature of what has come to be called “whiteness studies”; rather, I hope to construct, through a considered discussion of selected works, my own parameters for the discussion of Chester Himes that will follow.

As evidenced clearly through the anthology edited by David Roediger, Black On White: Black Writers on What it Means to be White, the analysis of whiteness is apparent in much if not nearly all African American literary production, functioning either as a stated thematic concern, or in more covert fashion. Roediger’s anthology offers selections from almost two hundred years of African American writing, from David Walker’s “Appeal” in 1830, through a selection of writing that appeared shortly before the text’s publication in 1998. The point of this, as of the
anthology itself, is to emphasize that, from early in the structures of racial feeling in this culture, African American writers have in variously addressed explicitly and implicitly the ways in which whiteness is constructed, and reconstructed in terms of its opposite Blackness, and how this construction has both defined and been defined by this opposite. Chester Himes is certainly no exception. Still, as I aim to demonstrate, Himes offers up a particular kind of critique that makes this project worth pursuing; this study then, will investigate and interrogate what his particular critique might add to our understanding of the real effects of these constructed identities.

The aim here is not to use his literary career as somehow “representative” of the experience of Black American writers; to do so would run the risk of reducing Himes, and other Black writers to a “type,” a monolith. In some respects, as I will endeavor to illustrate, Himes is not representative at all of the expectations that many readers bring to an encounter with African American literature. Rather, through Himes I will examine the literary tropes through which whiteness is represented and critiqued. I do not propose here an exhaustive study of Himes’s entire output on a text-by-text basis; rather I am embarking upon a more impressionistic approach wherein I will examine a selective handful of texts. The selection process is not arbitrary, as I hope the following will explain. Certainly I will suggest, as I proceed, how these points that are addressed regarding the selected novels might be productively applied to those unanalyzed.

To embark upon a discussion of the representation of whiteness, a definition of the term will be in order. On one hand, it seems self-evident. Whiteness is that quality of “being” white, that is, the possession of a specific set of phenotypic attributes. But there is more to it than that; the impulse of anyone else not engaged in the discourse, is to (unconsciously) construct or define race as that thing possessed by “others.” Most see whiteness (if they “see” it at all) as simply a
state of being, rather than a marked racial position, with the attendant hierarchical status. As what follows will endeavor to illustrate in greater detail, the “white subject” has continually defined and redefined itself through exclusion of and contrast to what it marks as low, dirty, contaminating. The act of exclusion itself constitutes the subject identity. To put it another way: the difficulty is defining what white is; because in the popular imaginary, white ain’t. Thus, in White his analysis of white imagery (particularly filmic) in Western culture, Richard Dyer articulates this impulse and its consequences:

As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.

There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that—they can only speak for their race. The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power . . . by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world (White 2).

This dislodging is a monumental task; the equation of whiteness with a universal human is deeply ingrained in them/us (to continue Dyer’s construction), in convention, custom, and law, so deeply as to have become naturalized. Further, the strategy of using recognition to disempower the construct may instead have the opposite effect. In an attempt to make whiteness visible as a category subject to discourse and deconstruction, we may “inadvertently reconstruct it by reinforcing the belief in separate racial categories,” as AnnLouise Keating contends in “Interrogating ‘Whiteness,’ (De)Constructing Race” (902). The difficulty then, is that in trying
to “undo” the categories, we must first “do” them; in doing so, we may make the process of “undoing” that much harder.

Another related concern voiced by a number of theorists and commentators on race is the problematic of a discourse on whiteness simply (re)inserting the dominant on center stage, as it were. Richard Dyer notes this danger at the outset of his text, referring to “the green light problem. Writing about whiteness gives white people the go-ahead to write and talk about what in any case we have always talked about: ourselves” (10). More recently in a critique of whiteness studies, in particular the dominance of white male scholars in the field, E. Ann Kaplan observes, “I have also said that scholarship on whiteness may also be a problem because it puts whiteness once again in the center where it has always been, if now with consciousness where before there was unconsciousness” (328). For Kaplan, this is one of the two horns of the dilemma; as white scholars writing on texts by people of color are also in a position of assuming control of the discourse generated by the text in question. Nonetheless, these are both risks not simply worth taking, but risks that must be taken (and simultaneously addressed). For white scholars to avoid the analysis of race, particularly of whiteness construction, lest they be accused of patronization or worse seems at best disingenuous. We must learn to recognize our selves in the discourse of both Black and white writers; this is a necessary (but not sufficient) first step in the process of undoing whiteness. Care must be taken in this process, of course, and Dyer offers at least a partial solution to this dilemma, “The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it (and much less, make a show of reinstating it, when, like male power, it doesn’t actually need reinstating)” (10). As long as the discussion maintains a critical and consistent focus on “de-centering” these constructions, while
acknowledging their fundamental factitiousness, the danger of reifying and reauthorizing them would seem mitigated at least.

AnnLouise Keating raises an additional concern regarding whiteness studies, indeed, any study of representations of race, when she notes that “Literary theorists . . . rarely acknowledge the fluidity and the historical changes in U.S. discourse on race” (913). Keating’s claim here lacks substantiation; she gestures vaguely at some “they” who “refer to . . . supposedly separate ‘races’ as though these categories are permanent unchanging facts” (913). While one might take issue with the accuracy of the statement, given its lack of concrete examples, it still provides a caveat worth remembering. “Race” changes; it is not an immutable category but one that is incessantly redefined according to the contingencies of the moment. Addressing these texts without some acknowledgement of their historical situatedness undermines the usefulness of any analysis or reading. It is in that spirit that I undertake the following.

It is incumbent then here to describe how whiteness consists of bodies of knowledges, ideologies, norms, and particular practices that have been constructed over the history of the American colonies and the United States. These knowledges, ideologies, norms, and practices of whiteness affect how we, both those of us identified as white and those identified as “other,” think about race, what we see when we look at certain physical features, how we build our own racial identities, how we operate in the world, and what we "know" about our place in it. Whiteness is shaped and maintained by the full array of social institutions--legal, economic, political, educational, religious, and cultural. As individuals and in groups, affected by whiteness, we in turn influence and shape these institutions.

As Maureen Reddy, through the work of many others, notes:
Whiteness is a slippery concept to explore . . . . The slipperiness of whiteness—the way it has of escaping firm definitions, of eluding attempts to pin it down—is an important clue to its all-pervasive power: whiteness seems to most white people anyhow to need no definition, as only non-white needs naming. Whiteness’s status as a default position or a norm (unless specified otherwise, whiteness is taken for granted) virtually guarantees its transparency. That which needs no definition is not a thing in itself, but a screen through which the rest of the world is perceived (Traces, Codes, and Clues P.15).

In order to begin the de-mystifying of this construction, it is essential to offer at least a partial reconstruction of its historical beginnings. In raising that issue, a qualifier of sorts seems to be in order. To select a starting point for a history of an idea like whiteness is always a task fraught with no small risk. Whatever moment is selected, it seems, another, earlier juncture may be found that possesses the glimmerings at least of the same narrative. In terms of the history of race, the search for and claiming of firsts raises other specters as well. The history of African America especially seems to be littered with these kinds of markers. On one hand, they do enable the culture to commemorate those moments when the barrier in question has fallen. They also serve to in yet another way reify, or naturalize the very constructions of which this discourse seeks to serve in the unmasking. What follows then in no way aspires to be comprehensive, rather it establishes a point from which the discussion of Himes may proceed.

As noted earlier, African Americans have addressed this notion of whiteness in writings for two centuries. Even so, this has rarely taken the form of an explicit discussion of whiteness, at least not in the same fashion that whites have historically written about Blackness. In The White Image in the Black Mind: African American Ideas About White People, 1830-1925, Mia Bay offers a useful discussion of the formation of Black attitudes, or ideas about whiteness through
the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She notes that the relative paucity of documentation has a number of causes. Certainly, enforced illiteracy played a role; in addition, Bay notes that being “[t]oo powerless to lash out at white people freely, . . . African Americans never inscribed white images across their culture and imaginative life. On the contrary, explicit commentary on white people is scant and often veiled in black thought” (5). What exists in the form of oral histories, folklore, oratory and song was often either directed to an audience that was in part white, or was collected by white listeners, hence the inclination on the part of the Black participant toward circumspection. In addition, Bay goes on to note that much of the Black discussion of race was less an overt discussion of whiteness, or white people, and more “embedded within a larger story about black resistance to racism” (7). Less was said about skin color per se, and very little in the way of generalizing on this basis is extant. Instead, the inclination was to either labor to refute the white perceptions of Blackness, or to observe the behavioral inclinations of white people toward those subjects identified as Black.

As a result, while W.E.B. Du Bois may not have been the first African American writer to comment upon the phenomenon of “whiteness” as a conceptual field, he seems to have engaged in one of the earliest, and most comprehensive studies of the construction of whiteness as an ideology in the United States. In his magisterial study Black Reconstruction in America, he offers perceptive observation and discussion of, not only “the efforts and experiences of the Negroes themselves” during the years of and immediately following the Civil War, but also of the response to these efforts on the part of the white dominant culture, as its members sought to redraw the lines of demarcation that would secure their hierarchical position (“To The Reader”). In concluding his chapter on “The White Worker,” wherein he offers a brief but cogent history of antebellum labor issues, Du Bois writes:
Then came this battle called Civil War. . . . The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery. . . . The upward moving of white labor was betrayed into wars for profit based on the color caste. Democracy died save in the hearts of black folk.

Indeed, the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry is founded and which persisted to threaten free labor until it was partially overthrown in 1863. The resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded, and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over. Thus the majority of the world’s laborers, by the insistence of white labor, became the basis of a system of industry that ruined democracy and showed its perfect fruit in World War and Depression. And this book seeks to tell that story (30).

The scope of his brief diagnosis above is breathtaking. In a few short words, Du Bois is able to limn not only the state of affairs at the time of his writing in 1935; he arguably presents the outline that will be followed repeatedly, even through our own time, as we continue to see the results of the color caste, “approved by white labor,” through the current effects of globalized capital and localized labor markets. This is not, however, the main direction of this study, or this overview. Instead, we look from this brief introduction forward to the end of Du Bois’s massive study, at which point he offers, in part at least, some explanation for the seemingly inexplicable acquiescence of white labor to a caste system that works less to their benefit than to their detriment, in economic structure at least. Du Bois notes, in a passage worth quoting at length for the breadth it covers:
It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a psychological wage. They were given deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown to them. White schools were the best in the community . . . they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule (700-01).

Setting to one side the continued relevance of much of the above (as even today the issues of political representation, education and public perception are areas of contention in terms of their racialized assumptions and outcomes), Du Bois quite persuasively makes a case for the triumph of white racial solidarity over that based in more material, or economic concerns. Whatever economic sacrifice it entailed, this solidarity carried with it a psychological wage, a social status based in the alleged immutability of racial superiority. Attendant to this were social gains, as white workers enjoyed a “public and psychological wage,” regardless of their position in the social hierarchy, that was derived from their whiteness and reinvested in it. White privilege validated, and was validated by, racism.

As the brief discussion above begins to make clear then, the beginning of the study of whiteness as a socially constructed phenomenon can be traced back to W.E.B. Du Bois, as throughout Black Reconstruction he elevated the concept of “whiteness” as an analytical
problem in determinations of class and caste stratification. Many scholars of whiteness have used Du Bois’s concept of the psychological wage as their analytic starting point, including David Roediger, as the title of his *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* attests. Roediger is explicit in acknowledging his inspiration from, and debt to, Du Bois, as he seeks to deliver a psycho-cultural investigation of the development of "white" identity among European-American workers in the North during the ante-bellum period.

In doing so, Roediger addresses "the role of race in defining how white workers look not only at Blacks but at themselves"; "the pervasiveness of race"; "the complex mixture of hate, sadness and longing in the racist thought of white workers"; and "the relationship between race and ethnicity" (5).

It is important to Roediger’s thesis that the language of the worker be considered. He is at early pains, however, to distance his work from any claims of "heavy influences from poststructuralist literary theories. In fact, it does not do so except in making use of the older ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, ideas rediscovered by poststructuralism" (14-15). In making this claim, Roediger seeks to deflect any claim that his assertions will founder on the problems of decontextualization from which he sees attempts to apply poststructuralism to history suffering. Still, alongside of Du Bois, Roediger is clearly intent on building a case for whiteness that accounts for its pervasive attraction on grounds that, while acknowledging the material, or economic, do not claim for it the only, or even the central role.

Roediger locates the early formation of white identity in "the language of class"; the European-American artisans responded to the threat of extinction by capitalist enterprise by an appeal to a "whites-only" republicanism. In Roediger’s view, because the making of the American working class occurred within a slaveholding republic, white workers defined
themselves according to what they were not: slaves and Black. For example, white workers rejected the term “servant” in favor of “hand” or “help” because the descriptive “servant” was too closely associated with “slave” (49). He then proceeds to relate the growing industrialization to the development of a “white” culture, the emergence of “whiteness.” Unskilled European immigrant peasant recruits, resentful of the routine discipline of industrial employment, consoled themselves with the social distinction of being free and citizens.

A number of the economic aspects raised and discussed by Roediger appear throughout the novels selected for this study, as I will detail in turn. They are especially present in Himes’s first novel, and the first to be discussed here, If He Hollers Let Him Go. The equation of whiteness to worker permeates this novel, which explores the struggle of a Black worker in the wartime industries of 1940s Los Angeles, shortly after the plants first integrated.

Roediger extends Du Bois’s psychological reading of whiteness at this point, by introducing a more Freudian reading: as the country industrialized, whites were subjected to intensifying discipline and control. Rather than projecting their new-found anger at those who were causing their misery, white workers sublimated their displeasure into a new form of art and entertainment: blackface minstrelsy. White workers came to view Blacks as their former, uninhibited selves, a perception highlighted in the ‘acting out’ of blackface minstrelsy. Through it, Roediger notes, “blackness came to symbolize what the accumulating capitalist had given up, but still longed for.” He continues by citing George Rawick, in From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community:

The racist, like the reformed sinner, creates ‘a pornography of his former life . . . In order to insure that he will not slip back into the old ways or act out half suppressed fantasies, he must see a tremendous difference between his reformed self and those whom he
formerly resembled.’ Blackness and whiteness were thus created together (ctd. in Roediger, 95).

The point for Roediger here, is that we cannot dismissively read minstrelsy as simply a racist form of entertainment at the expense of the objectified Black figures; these figures are far more overdetermined that that. To be sure, they are racist stereotypes, but their role is complicated by the surplus meaning invested in them by a simultaneously desiring and repulsed audience. They are not like me/I was once like them, and still wish to be.

This theme is expanded upon at length by Eric Lott, in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Lott argues throughout that the legacy of minstrelsy is a far more complex one than many earlier commentators contended. While racism is certainly a component of the minstrel show, there is also an admixture of longing (love) for what Blackness represented to the (white working class) audience, a kind of desire for that very kind of existence projected onto Blackness. Even as the audience despised the Other of Blackness, they simultaneously desired its perceived access to a more “natural” existence as well. From this desire grew the popularity of blackface minstrelsy, and the performers constructed a version of ersatz Blackness, partly out of their own assumptions and partly from expropriation of Black performance.

This discussion of blackface is relevant to the Harlem Cycle, Himes’s last several novels; while, as I will discuss further these novels explore a number of the effects of constructions of whiteness already discussed, as well as those upcoming, I will argue that, in the Harlem Cycle, Himes constructs an extended and ironic play on blackface and minstrelsy in order to elicit from the white reader some of the same responses that Lott and Roediger discuss. My own early experience with Himes, as narrated at the outset, only begins to enable a reading of this “love
and theft.” The price of irony is, of course, misconstrual; I will also address to some extent the negative response Himes’s use of exaggerated stereotypes has engendered.

The discussion cannot simply address the reception on the part of the white reader, however; the depictions of Blackness and their effect on constructions and representations of whiteness must take into account the reception of these novels by Black readers as well. Here, some discussion of Black reception of blackface, as performed by Blacks, and the various types of receptions this engendered will be necessary. In his study of African-American humor, On The Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying, Mel Watkins offers a useful discussion of just this phenomenon. This discussion will form the basis of my own reading of this aspect of Himes.

As it evolved, the construction of whiteness became not only a marker of who could gain access to economic viability, it also became a gateway to property; indeed, it became a property in and of itself. Using Roediger as a part of her historical framework, Cheryl A. Harris advanced the discussion of whiteness into the field of legal studies in her 1993 groundbreaking Harvard Law Review article, “Whiteness as Property.” Through an exhaustive approach, she is able to construct a compelling argument that not only is there a psychological and social benefit to whiteness, as Du Bois, then Roediger display, but the very access to whiteness is itself a form of material property, accruing to itself all that the term implies. Harris’s aim is finally to employ this discussion in order to re-think the legal and philosophical approach to affirmative action; while this discussion and its intent are both fascinating and important, they exceed the scope of this particular discussion. Much of the article is, however of use here in considering the issue of whiteness; furthermore, aspects of her discussion will be useful in the consideration of aspects of Himes’s own approach.
As do most contemporary theorists of race, Harris proceeds from the claim that whiteness, like any identity, is a construction with specific social and historical roots. This particular identity, constructed in opposition to the despised “other,” has accrued to itself particular benefits, and constructs very real effects, not only for those who are subsumed under its umbrella, but toward those against whom its borders are patrolled. As Harris notes:

Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs, and therefore, survival. [It] increased the possibility of controlling critical areas of one’s life rather than being the object of other’s domination. . . . [T]he valorization of whiteness (is) a treasured property in a society structured on racial caste. In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect . . . . Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by law. . . . American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness that, although unacknowledged, now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated (1713-14).

Harris illustrates this at the beginning, introducing her article with an anecdote concerning her own grandmother’s “passing” in 1930s Chicago, as a matter of economic necessity. For Harris, this acct became “not merely passing, but trespassing,” as she seeks to emphasize the nature of the property aspect of whiteness she then contextualizes through both law and history (1711). Before the immigrations of peoples from places other than Western Europe, whites had only to establish their superiority over the Native Americans and peoples of African descent. Following Roediger’s “linguistic turn,” Harris proceeds from the assertion that the term “slave”
would be the first step in socially constructing racial identities, with “slave” referring to those who were Black and "free" to those who were white (Harris 1718). She argues that it is at this time slavery allowed whites to legally add non-white humanity to the category of property (Harris 1218-9). Laws that increased white property through the offspring of Black women, as well as the Black Codes, added a strong racial division between whites and Blacks.

Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slave, the racial line between white and Black was extremely critical; it became the line of protection and demarcation from the potential threat of commodification, and it determined the allocation of the benefits and burdens of this form of property. White identity and whiteness were sources of privilege and protection; their absence meant being the object of property (Harris 1721).

Protecting whites’ right of whiteness was another means of defining and constructing white superiority. She argues that there are four "Property Functions of Whiteness" whereby whites legally maintained racial superiority. The first function is "Rights of Disposition." Traditionally, property rights are viewed as something “alienable,” that is, transferable; Harris cites John Stuart Mill as contending that public offices, privileges and human beings are inalienable, as such they cannot be property (1732). The obvious problem here is that slavery had already nullified at least one of Mills’s examples. Furthermore, Harris cites more “acceptable” examples, such as government licenses and professional degrees, that have been legally deemed property. With this in mind, she contends, the inalienability of whiteness does not in itself preclude consideration as property. “Paradoxically, its inalienability may be more indicative of its perceived enhanced value, rather than its disqualification as property” (1734).

Secondly, Harris addresses the quality of “Right of Use and Enjoyment” as a essential quality of property. She notes that “the problem of property in political philosophy dissolves into . . .
questions of the will and the way in which we use things of this world.” Whiteness is, she contends, both

“an aspect of identity and a property interest, it . . . can both be experienced and deployed as a resource. Whiteness can [be] . . . used to fulfill the will and to exercise power. [It] transcended mere belief or preference; it became usable property, the subject of the law’s regard and protection. In this respect, whiteness . . . has been used and enjoyed (1734)

Third, Harris discusses the right of "Reputation and Status Property." Her claim here rests on the ideological conceptualization of whiteness as a constitutively external thing; “an object of a resource necessary to be a person “ (1734). This is based upon the recognition of the “reputational interest in being considered as white as a thing of significant value, which like other reputational interests, was intrinsically bound up with identity and personhood” (1734). There is, she contends, a “direct manifestation of the law’s legitimation of whiteness as reputation” based in case law prior to the 1960s, when people sued for libel for being erroneously labeled as Black. To further underscore this, she notes that the reverse was not possible; a Black person could not sue for being called white, since “it was presumed that no harm could flow from such a reversal” (1736)

Lastly, Harris discusses “The Absolute Right to Exclude.” Property is frequently theorized as possessing “exclusive rights of use,” and in contrast, “the absolute right to exclude” (1736). This right of is exclusion, contends Harris, is central to constructing whiteness, “for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by exclusion of others deemed not to be white” (1736). Since the concept was premised on supremacy “rather than mere difference,” whiteness “increased its value by reinforcing its exclusivity” (1737). The exclusive quality of whiteness as property follows most closely its purpose of racial exclusion
and subjugation. A clear legal example of this exclusivity is of course the “one-drop” laws, which dictated that a person in possession of any Black “blood”–that is, anyone who had an identifiable Black ancestor-could not “be” white. “Recognizing or identifying oneself as white is thus a claim of racial purity, an assertion that one is free of any taint of Black blood” (1737).

In his 1995 article, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the “White” Problem in American Studies,” George Lipsitz also discusses the phenomenon of “whiteness” as not simply a racial identity but as a form of material investment. Through a brief historical overview that both cites Cheryl Harris, and points to additional aspects of the material benefits of whiteness, Lipsitz traces the institutional structure of whiteness and how it has become codified through both tradition and through real practices employed by government and business policies and practices.

These include, but are not limited to, the origins of Social Security, and, especially, the FHA, which channeled millions of dollars in mortgage guarantees “toward whites and away from communities of color” (372). The effects of this FHA policy included a massive refiguring of the urban demography, as white homebuyers fled to the suburbs, leaving behind an urban population increasingly comprised of people of color. This institutionalized geography of segregation led to an increasing diversion of financial resources, resulting in accelerated decay. This decay then led to “urban renewal,” in which massive numbers of urban housing units were destroyed and largely replaced by commercial, industrial and municipal projects. In addition, federal highway projects further decimated the urban housing supply and also disrupted neighborhoods, shopping districts and political precincts. Lipsitz outline various economic costs/benefits of race, and discusses the tendency of white Americans to engage in a discourse of
race that not only elides the structural benefits of whiteness, but also blames people of color for the inequitable results of these structural concerns.

These discussions of the property and possessive aspects of whiteness will inform a significant proportion of the following discussion, as Himes consistently addresses the circumscription, both psychic and geographic, imposed by whiteness upon its other. Lipsitz’s discussion clearly outlines the institutional policies that led directly to the reinforcement of the process by which the urban ghettos formed and solidified. A reading of the geography of Himes’s Harlem Cycle then, an awareness of this process is particularly important. Of special interest here is the discussion of the effects of urban renewal as an instance of investment in whiteness; throughout the Harlem Series, most overtly in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Blind Man With a Pistol*, Himes mentions the landscape of urban renewal in ways that often anticipate this very argument. The direction I look to explore here is the role of violence in the maintenance of boundaries of whiteness against particularly Blackness, a violence that permeates Himes’s fiction, especially in the Harlem Series. This links to issues raised by bell hooks when she writes:

I reinhabit a location where black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing. White people were regarded as terrorists, especially those who dared to enter that segregated space of blackness. (hooks p. 45)

The comment by hooks, while illuminating in its linkage of whiteness to terror, or even terrorism, is problematic on another count. There resides in this quote a nearly too easy slippage, as she emigrates, unremarked, from *whiteness* to *white people*. There is a danger in reading these as somehow synonymous, or as equal terms, however. In *The White Image in the Black Mind: A Study of African American Literature*, Jane Davis has provided a taxonomic analysis of the role
of white characters in Black literature, as a way of reading the trope of whiteness. While this approach has its uses, it runs the risk of solidifying the already problematic tendency of locating solely in the individual what is a systemic construction. Certainly literature will often personify in a character some larger, or more global issue; to simply provide a character analysis does not fully explore this. Davis in particular is problematic on this point; after offering a series of readings, she concludes her study with a chapter entitled “What Is A White Person?” in which she constructs a “typology” which catalogues traits she ascribes to white people. While there may be points worthy of discussion in her list, it does not move past the assigning of these traits to people; the analysis never exceeds that of symptomatology, it never seeks to address the issue at its root. The result is potentially self-defeating, as it begins to read as accusation. This leaves the white readers (both of Davis’s text, and, if they interpret them in this manner, any fictional text by a Black writer that constructs white characters) potentially defensive as they seek to distance themselves. Conversely it may leave the Black reader in a position of deeper mistrust of the individual white, rather than seeking to address both readers with a more useful discussion of the institutional or cultural tendencies which these traits may be used to narratize. Davis seems to fall into the trap, as it were, addressed by AnnLouise Keating who noted the problematic tendency among some scholars to conflate whiteness and white people—a gesture which "implies that all human beings classified as 'white' automatically exhibit the traits associated with 'whiteness': they are, by nature, insidious, superior, empty terrible, terrifying, and so on" (907). Keating herself acknowledges that she fell prey to this impulse, and only with difficulty began to articulate the distinction. Davis, I think, does engage in this. In partial defense, while there is the danger of individualizing the construction, it need be said too that whiteness is embodied in

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1 This should not be confused with the Mia Bay book mentioned earlier in this introduction. It is of some potential confusion, as well as small irony, that two texts with very different aims and intent were published with nearly identical titles in the same year.
white people, many of whom in turn embody those characteristics that Keating lists, and more besides. The distinction here is that this embodiment is *not* “by nature”; rather, it is the result of people making choices, engaging in the kind of historical agency discussed by David Roediger, as previously noted.

In order to move beyond this sort of reading, my main concern here is the reading of whiteness in terms of Himes’s use of the stylistic considerations. At times this will involve the discussion of archetypes (notable that of the *femme fatale*), still, it is how Himes uses these archetypes to effect his reinvention of the genre that will be the focus of the discussion, rather than the motivations of the specific characters. Specifically, I hope to address this critique as it is played out in terms of Himes’s use of genre; in this instance I am referring to his employment of the conventions of hardboiled fiction.

This aspect of Himes’s fiction has been addressed in one fashion; Megan Abbott offers a close reading of whiteness characterized in Himes; in her reading the characters function in archetypal fashion, and this only helps establish the existence of the critique I aim to further uncover in Himes. Still, as discussed earlier, her reading is somewhat circumscribed by a focus on character, which doesn’t move past the issues noted above.

I will also address his employment of geography, specifically the urban landscape of Harlem, as he describes it. Again, as noted, the construction of the urban ghetto is significantly a result of both *de facto* and *de jure* policies pursued by governmental and business concerns. Himes writing of the ghetto then, and the results of these policies becomes a powerful analysis of the effects of white supremacy; this analysis becomes increasingly overt as the Harlem Cycle proceeds.
Finally, the analysis will undertake to reveal how, throughout the Harlem Cycle in particular, Himes enacts a sort of running parody of minstrelsy, in order to implicate the reader through their own response to the text, much as Lott, Roediger and Watkins discuss in their respective histories and analyses of the blackface minstrel shows of the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Chapter One will offer a biographical sketch of the life of Chester Himes. While it is with some care that any literary analysis should concern itself with authorial biography, it will be the contention here that in the case of Himes, the biography so informs the fiction (and ultimately, the reverse may be true as well), that one can productively read his biography as a kind of limn on his other texts.

Chapter Two will undertake a close reading of Himes’s first novel. A decade before he began the Harlem Cycle, Himes published *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), which drew on his own experience as a wartime worker in the segregated Los Angeles defense plants. The fundamentally serious themes of Himes's thrillers are abundantly apparent in this earlier novel, in which Black estrangement, fear and disillusionment are powerfully represented. The atmosphere of violence and the sense of absurdity that dominate Himes's crime novels are present in here, as the ordinary life of Bob Jones spirals out of control: His fear is ultimately not just of persecution and mob violence but of America itself, as these represent the construct of whiteness and its effects. Himes employs conventions of the hardboiled form here as well, which, while they are submerged in his ensuing four novels, often read as second-rank (behind Wright among others) protest fiction, will return with a vengeance in the Harlem Cycle. In these ways, this novel presages the fiction for which Himes is best known.
In Chapter Three, I turn to the Harlem Cycle itself. I read *A Rage In Harlem*, the initial text of the series, to discuss how this abrupt turn from the naturalist, more overtly autobiographically informed fiction of his first five novels frees Himes to undertake or remount a critique of whiteness in terms unavailable to him in the previous genre; with the exception of *The End of a Primitive*, these earlier texts foreclose the rich absurdity which Himes is able to productively employ here. *A Rage in Harlem* is itself a transitional text of sorts; while I read it to display these stylistic departures, I do so alongside a later Harlem novel, in order to fully demonstrate how these departures result in a text that is more fully able to address the trope of whiteness. In these texts too, I will initiate the reading of Himes’s minstrel show parody, through which perhaps his most cogent critique of the wages of whiteness, for both the white reader and the middle class Black reader occur.

Chapter Four is devoted to the last novel published in Himes’s lifetime, *Blind Man With A Pistol*. It is here that Himes unleashes his most unsparing critique and unmasking of the effects of whiteness, as he moves effectively past the mere personification of white mannerisms into a clear assault on the structures themselves. In doing so, he effectively deconstructs the hardboiled and detective genres, as there is no resolution available to the “crime” he narrates. The text itself devolves from the epistemological nature of the detective narrative into a more encompassing (and despairing) meditation on the ontologic character of the construction of race, particularly the construction and maintenance of whiteness. Some attention will be paid to the “last” of the Harlem novels, *Plan B*. This text, unfinished and unpublished in Himes’s own lifetime, is the fictive rendering of the author’s observation that “the only way the black man can solve [the “race problem]” is through organized violence.
The intent here, as noted at the outset, is a fairly personal objective. I aim in what follows to answer the questions for myself (and perhaps for others) that have traced my own entire relationship with African American literature in general, and Chester Himes most specifically: What is it about Chester Himes that I, as one identified with whiteness by the culture that has produced both the subject who writes and the subject who is written (about), find so compelling? How do I address Himes and his fiction without invoking the problematic that Himes himself renders fictively, especially in the Harlem Series, and that James Baldwin has written about so powerfully in his essay “Stranger in the Village”; that is, how do I not simply colonize or patronize Himes; or even worse, in his own indictment of the white reader, how do I not simply find myself titillated by Himes’s dark vision?
“‘I shall pass beneath the earth no common shade.’ That was his motto now—I shall be no 

*forgotten man.*”-Chester Himes, “Prison Mass”

When discussing an author’s career, there is a danger of reading the literary production as too much an extension, or even mirror, of the life of the writer. Still, the distance between the fiction of Chester Himes and the facts of his life is not always that far; indeed, those texts marked as fiction may at times possess more truth about Himes, his life and his outlook, than those marked ostensibly as fact. As Stephen Milliken, one of the first critics to approach Chester Himes’s career with any seriousness, remarked:

[A] particular character’s precise degree of resemblance to its creator need not be a pressing concern for the reader. The question is in fact not only irrelevant but counterproductive as well. A writer creates his own reality, which the reader must fully accept if the reader-writer relationship is to function effectively. But when the literary characters consistently appear in situations that differ only in minor points of detail from the actual events of the author’s own life, the reader’s curiosity about author-character and fiction-reality relationships is naturally very strongly aroused. When a reader knows that what he is reading is very close to autobiography he inevitably wants to know exactly how close it is (Milliken 136).
Certainly, the first five novels and much of Himes’s early short fiction are not simply drawn from his life, but are, with caution, as useful in trying to reconstitute any biography or biographical sketch as are his two volumes of autobiography. Keeping the opening caveat in mind, it seems in the case of a writer like Chester Himes that the discussion of biography and autobiography is not simply warranted, but nearly inevitable, given the place of this genre within his fiction, as well as in the histories of both African Americans, and African American literature.

Autobiographical slave narratives, one of the earliest literary genres associated with African Americans (and by at least one account, the first entirely American literary genre), served two primary functions. The first was, of course, to bear witness to, and publicize the horror of the “peculiar institution.” The second, but no less vital, function was the assertion of subjective humanity, the pronouncement “I am,” in the face of a dominant cultural ideology that defined itself in opposition to, even negation of, this subjectivity. So, in many ways, the very act of (early) African American writing might be said to be a writing of whiteness as Black subjectivity is defined in relation to it.

In the case of Chester Himes then, as he wrote his way to an individual self, the literary creation and recreation of his “several lives,” as Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre entitled their biography, is in a way both writing against and about whiteness. The construction of whiteness has historically reserved to and for itself the right, the privilege and the property of individuality. Writing about the recently published unexpurgated manuscript of Himes’s prison novel, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, biographer James Sallis remarked that “Jimmy [the protagonist] has won through, has managed to forge his identity in an environment conspiring on every side to negate identity and deny the human spirit itself” (180-81). Certainly, for Himes,
this narrative, based extensively upon his own experience in prison, stands as a metaphor for the larger experience of the oppressed and marginalized in the general American culture; so much so, it seems, that he wrote the character of Jimmy himself as white; this racial (un)marking enables Himes to draw focus on the metaphor of the prison, and speak in a more “universal” fashion to the issues of social borders, and their striking impermeability.

The life of Chester Himes has been extensively written in two recent biographies, both already briefly referenced: James Sallis’s *Chester Himes: A Life* (2001), as well *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*, by Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre (1997). Both of these offer useful critical examinations of Himes’s life, and the place of his literary output in that life. However, it seems useful, to both familiarize the present reader, and to establish the primacy of place in Himes’s life of the dominant trope that will be examined in his literature, to offer an outline of that biography, with extensive reference to these texts.

Early in his biography of Himes, James Sallis notes that “the majority of writers lead dull lives . . . .Himes’s life, on the other hand, is at least as fascinating as his fiction” (3). Indeed, many aspects of Himes’s life appear within his fiction, occasionally with more detail and emotional honesty than they appear in his two-volume autobiography. These latter texts often gloss over critical moments in his life. His years in prison, for instance, are dismissed with in six brief pages, while extensive time and detail is lavished upon the seemingly mundane and material, such as adventures with his series of cars, or detailed descriptions of clothes he bought on some shopping junket. Also, Himes often reconstituted events in ways that fit his particular needs, perhaps even more so than most autobiographers; and narrated them in ways that left them if not unrecognizable then certainly unfamiliar to other principals involved. As a result, picking through the detritus for what is important, or at least useful, can amount to a difficult pursuit.
Chester Bomar Himes was born in Jefferson City, Missouri in 1909, to Joseph Sandy and Estelle Himes. He was the youngest of three sons. The first-born, Edward, was considerably older than Chester; Joseph was just over a year older. Edward left home after high school, to attend college, and rarely returned. Several years would pass before Chester reunited with him in Harlem, and then only briefly. Joseph Sandy was a professor at Lincoln Institute, a land-grant Negro school, one of many throughout the South, where the principal fields of study were agricultural and mechanical. Joseph taught primarily blacksmithing and wheelwrighting. Here we can witness, in the person of Chester’s father, one of the early issues inherent in the economic and educational place of Black Americans. While, when Chester was born, his family occupied the space of the Black middle class, by the time he reached his late teens, the family’s economic fortunes had met with fairly sharp reversal. There were a number of reasons for this economic backsliding, but in no small part it seems that Joseph’s training might have been responsible, as it ill-suited him in many ways to the rapid mechanical and technological progress of this era.

At this time, there were primarily two schools of thought regarding the “advancement of the race,” best exemplified in the persons of W.E.B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington. The latter preached a gospel of accommodation, as illustrated by his famous “Atlanta Compromise” address of 1896. He urged African Americans to focus upon economic advancement and to forego any effort expended toward political or social questions.

In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand
in all things essential to mutual progress . . .

The wisest of my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing. No
race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house. (Washington 156-58).

Washington ridiculed those who would have the African American undertake anything but the most practical courses of study; of the sort taught at the several land-grant “A&M” schools throughout the South, as well as his own Tuskegee Institute.

DuBois took great exception to this, seeing the accommodationist strategy, indeed, Washington’s whole philosophy of educational attainment, as being short-sighted and self-defeating. He advocated a more far-reaching program of higher education and political activism. Ironically, neither would ultimately satisfy Himes, as will be seen.

According to Himes, his father, who taught at several of these schools, was apparently a staunch Washington follower. Himes notes in his autobiography, “As a child I often heard my father quote the famous saying of the great educator [Washington], ‘Let down your buckets where you are’” (QH 4). It may be contended that Joseph Sandy’s adherence to Washington’s philosophy was part of his own undoing.

There were other pressures on Joseph as well. He and his wife Estelle were quite different in many respects. Joseph came from a poor, uneducated background; Estelle was raised in relative luxury. Light-skinned and, comparatively well-educated for an African American woman, or for that matter, any woman of her time, Estelle graduated from Scotia seminary, which was, according to Sallis, “the South’s most elite school for young black women” (13). This privilege
gave her a sense of entitlement that led to a series of conflicts, both with her dark-skinned husband, his employers and the social order in which she found herself.

Given these seemingly vast differences in their respective backgrounds, it is difficult to say what might have attracted Estelle to Joseph. Margolies and Fabre speculate that perhaps she saw in him the same level of ambition that allowed her own parents to rise out of poverty; perhaps she fancied him to be a future administrator of a Negro college (Several Lives 6). Whatever it might have been, it brought together a couple who were a study in marked contrast physically, a point that, according to their youngest son, itself would give rise to much friction between them. Joseph is described as being “dark-skinned and broad-shouldered, with rather large arms, and a barrel-chested torso above slightly bowed legs. His bright, glittering blue eyes were deep-set above a large hooked nose. If not exactly handsome, he was at least arresting” (Several Lives 6).

By contrast, write Margolies and Fabre, Estelle was small and “could easily ‘pass’ with her auburn hair, fair skin, green eyes and aquiline nose” (5). The friction this created in the family would be replayed, thematically and narratively, in various ways in Himes’s novels.

The Himes family led a peripatetic existence, as they moved across the South, from one Negro college to the next. The reasons for departures differed; Himes variously notes the apparent clashes that his mother had with other faculty and their families, and problems that his father encountered, including expectations of promotions that never materialized, to name two.

Certainly, from all Himes’s accounts, his mother was a difficult woman; her flaunting of white ancestry was obsessive to the point of self-hatred regarding her African heritage. This color–consciousness is a predominant theme throughout his most explicitly autobiographical novel, The Third Generation; it appears elsewhere in his fiction with a marked regularity. While he does not delve into it at length in his autobiography, Himes does note that, “Much of her
nagging and scolding and punishing and pushing us stemmed from her desire for us to live up to our [white] ‘heritage’” (QH 5).

In 1917, Joseph Sandy was on the faculty at Alcorn College in Mississippi, but abruptly resigned at the end of the school year, for reasons that are not entirely clear. Himes says little about this in his autobiography, but in The Third Generation, he suggests that it was due, as so much of the conflict between his parents was, to skin color. His mother exploited this to remove the family from Mississippi, which she hated for a number of reasons. The fictive rendering of this incident, while perhaps suspect in terms of the actual events, certainly captures much of the spirit of the circumstance:

In the end, Mrs. Taylor got them out. She went to Vicksburg and registered in a white hotel. When she came down the next morning the manager confronted her.

“You gave a college for your address. What college is this Madam?”

“The state college.”

“The state college? But that’s in–”

“The state college for Negroes.”

Again the governor had to intervene. He telephoned Professor Taylor at the college.

“Willie, Ah’ll give you forty-eight hours to get that woman out of Mississippi.” (129-30)

In his autobiography, Himes contends that the reason for his father’s dismissal was due to his being the only man, Black or white, in the county to own a car. The jealousy aroused by this was compounded when his mother would go for rides (driven by one of her husband’s students); they would scare the white farmers’ mule teams. He also notes “Of course part of that was my mother’s attitude; she always carried a pistol on our rides through the country, and whenever a
cracker mule driver reached for his rabbit gun she beat him to the draw and made him drop it” (QH 8).

Himes’s brother Joseph Jr. disputes this latter, “true” version of the story. In an interview conducted in 1983, Gwendoline Roget asked Joseph about the incident. Joseph replied simply, “I don’t recall any story that involved a pistol. I don’t believe there was a gun in the house” (Roget, 263). Of course, it need be noted too, that when asked to comment on the resemblance between their mother and Chester’s fictional representation in the character of Mrs. Taylor, Joseph responded, “Describe the image. It has been a long time since I read that. Chester disturbs me too much” (263). This response to his brother’s writing would be echoed by a number of editors and reviewers throughout Himes’s career. As to the events described, the evident friction, based primarily in his mother’s resentment or resistance to her “Blackness” recurs frequently on the part of various light-skinned female characters in his fiction.

Through their early childhood, it appears that Chester and Joseph were nearly inseparable, partly due to their mother’s insulating them from other children. This changed dramatically in 1923.

Chester and Joseph had been selected to give a chemistry demonstration for a school-wide program conducted for parents of students at the end of the term. They had chosen to demonstrate how gunpowder was made. Due to misbehavior, Chester was forbidden from participation by his parents. Joseph elected to perform alone, and in the midst of the demonstration, the ingredients spontaneously ignited, blinding Joe.

This event triggered a series of others that ultimately led the family from Arkansas to St. Louis to seek treatment for Joe; and finally north to Cleveland, where Joseph Senior’s two sisters
lived. In neither St. Louis or Cleveland was Joseph able to find employment commensurate with his education. The result was devastating to the family structure.

Chester recalled his brother’s accident in his autobiography, “This one moment in my life hurt me as much as all the others put together” (11). On the other hand, Joseph remarked:

[Even time he mentions me, he uses me. One of the ways he uses me, one of his great themes, is, “Joe is blind because I didn’t help him that day. If I had been there to help him in that experiment, he wouldn’t be blind. I am to blame.” . . . . I don’t blame him for what happened. I am older than he. I did the experiment because I wanted to do it. It was not his fault, but he did not ask me what I thought about it. He didn’t pay a bit of attention to me. It’s a good gimmick for the image of Chester Himes, so he did it. There is something else I want to say about Chester. I like Chester very much. But, what the hell, he might be a hero to a lot of people, but he is just another guy where I am concerned, another guy with a lot of talent (269).

It would seem that some credence need be granted Joseph’s observation here; Himes frequently used others in ways that led to either levels of material comfort, or self-aggrandizement. His relationships with women, particularly the series of white women in Europe with whom he had relationships, frequently bear this out.

Once in Cleveland, the family was dependent upon Joseph’s sisters and in-laws for shelter, and other assistance. The situation was intolerable for Estelle, who soon alienated them with her snobbery. The family struggled to stay afloat, and together.

While his brother attended a school for the blind, Himes enrolled at East High School. He graduated in January 1926. This was actually due to a clerical error; while he received only a 56
on his Latin exam, the grade was recorded by mistake as an 86. This mistake allowed him to graduate, and made him eligible to attend Ohio State University the following fall.

Through an old acquaintance of his father’s, he secured employment as a busboy at Wade Park Manor, an elite hotel in the city. His duties included collecting room service trays. During his second week on the job, Himes opened the elevator door and stepped in; the elevator was not on that floor. He fell about forty feet down the shaft, sustaining multiple injuries, including three fractured vertebrae, two dozen shattered teeth, a broken jaw, and a compound fracture of his left wrist.

His hospital bills were covered by the Ohio State Industrial Commission, which also awarded him a monthly pension of seventy-five dollars. The hotel promised to maintain his fifty-dollar monthly salary as well. The hotel was found entirely responsible for the incident, as the doors should not have opened without the elevator on the floor. Himes contended that only later did he learn that had he not accepted the pension, he could have sued the hotel for considerably more; his father persuaded him to accept the offer, whereas his mother argued against it.

My father was born and raised in the tradition of the Southern Uncle Tom; that tradition derived from an inherited slave mentality which accepts the premise that white people know best, that blacks should accept what whites offer and be thankful, that blacks should count their blessings. (QH 22).

Here again Himes contrasts his parents, based not only on skin color (although that consistently stands as the manifest marker for him of their very different personalities, and attitudes regarding social and racial mores) but on their ability, or willingness to stand up for themselves, and more importantly, he implies, for him. These attitudes, as already discussed, would make consistent appearance in his fiction, often coded in skin tone.
After four months in the hospital, Himes was released. Much of the damage suffered had healed or been repaired, although he would suffer from the effects of these injuries for the remainder of his life.

Himes entered the Ohio State University the autumn of 1926. Ironically, given that the family had spent so much of his youth in the South, and given his mother’s own apparent obsession with skin color, Himes had experienced very little in the way of overt prejudice or discrimination. Columbus changed that. The color line was firmly drawn throughout the city, as well as the campus itself. Of the nearly 13,000 students, about 600 were Black; they were not allowed in the dorms, the student union or the dining halls (Sallis 30). They were obliged to secure room and board in the Black quarters of the city, which lay some distance from the campus.

By his own account, Himes adopted all of the trappings of the (white) collegiate. “I bought a coonskin coat for three hundred dollars, a knickerbocker suit, a long-stemmed pipe, and a Model T Ford roadster, and I became a collegian” (QH 25). He also pledged to one of the Black fraternities. In his autobiography, he made a point of noting that, according to examinations given to entering students, he had the fourth highest I.Q. of that year’s freshman class.

However, this was about as collegiate as Himes became.

The white students didn’t know exactly what to make of me. I dressed and behaved like the “Yes We Are Collegiate” students . . . yet I was black, a member of the inferior race. I rarely spoke to white people, and never unless I was addressed first by them, and yet I would find them always looking at me. I ignored them. I didn’t hate white people then; I simply didn’t need them, didn’t want to know them, and always felt that they couldn’t reject me any more than I could reject them. (QH 26-27).
The dichotomy here is apparent, and a little ironic; at the same time he claimed to “reject” white people, his outward appearance at least mirrored that very world.

By his own admission, he did little scholastically. He occupied much of his time at movies and Black road shows, where he saw Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters, among others; significantly, he was at this time also exposed to minstrel performances, according to Margolies and Fabre (25). This appears to have been Himes’s first extensive, or extended exposure to Black culture, popular or otherwise. This, along with his increasing engagement with the illicit corners of the Black communities, would do much to inform his writing throughout his career, especially in the Harlem Cycle. He spent more time in that milieu than he did in classrooms, frequenting the speakeasies and brothels. He developed a relationship of sorts with a prostitute named Rose.

Although Himes fully expected to fail and be dropped from the university, he passed:

And now I had to go back. But by then I was tired of Ohio State University and its policy of discrimination and segregation . . . and disgusted with myself for my whoremongering and my inability to play games, my instinctive withdrawal from intimacy, and my schizophrenic impulses to be conspicuous and inconspicuous at the same time. It was much later in life that I came to understand that I simply hadn’t accepted my status as a “nigger” (QH 28).

Throughout his recollections of this period there appears to be a kind of dialectic between the “respectable” white world of the campus, and the attraction of the Black underworld. This duality oddly mirrors his youth in some respects, as he continued to play out the split between his mother’s aspirations toward a kind of whiteness and his father’s Black reality. He wouldn’t have to suffer this much longer, at least not in this environment. Near the beginning of his second
term, Himes led several other student couples from a dance to a speakeasy. His “friend” Rose came upon the group, saw Himes with a coed, and flew into a rage, cursing the female students as she smashed records. At least one of the coeds reported Himes to the dean of students, who called him into the office. “He said he was going to permit me to withdraw for reasons of ‘ill-health and failing grades.’ He did not mention the incident of the night before, but I understood” (QH 31).

Upon his return to Cleveland, Himes became deeply involved in the city’s Black underworld. He began frequenting gambling clubs operated by Bunch Boy and Hotstuff Johnson, where he encountered Johnny Perry, “Abie the Jew, Red Johnny, Four-Four, Chink Charlie, Dummy, and other characters I’ve used in my detective story series” (QH 36). It was during this period that he also met then seventeen-year old Jean Johnson, who would later become his first wife. It seems to have been a curious relationship from the start.

What there was about me that attracted her so I never knew, but she fell desperately in love with my immortal soul. I know that sounds puerile and exaggerated. . . . at that time I treated her in the most casual manner; sometimes I would leave her standing on a corner waiting for me hours on end; and at other times I would leave her in rooms we had rented for the night, in lieu of room rent, which I didn’t have, and wouldn’t see her again for several days later (QH 39).

It is difficult to understand what Jean saw in Himes; he also noted that, when they lived together and sold whiskey for a “landprop” (Himes’s term for a brothel madam) named Margaret, she suggested to Himes that, if ever hard up, he could turn Jean out to tricking. Himes is at pains to note though, “I moved her into the house but I never made her a whore” (39).
This almost casual misogyny established a recurrent theme in Himes’s life. It is a troubling aspect of his autobiography, the amount of time he spends detailing these moments, while in very nearly the next breath he will incisively draw parallels between the oppression of white women and Black men by a white male power structure. Black women seem to come into another category altogether. Earlier in The Quality of Hurt, when Himes recounts the period of time when his mother and brother had left for St. Louis to seek treatment for Joseph’s blindness, while he remained with his father while Joseph Sr. continued to teach at Branch, he writes:

The little black girls offered their bodies. In the South, black girl children reach puberty at nine or ten years old and at thirteen they are mating like rabbits. They are not a bit ashamed of lying on their backs and opening their legs and offering their nappy pussies. They don’t care who knows, as long as it’s kept from their parents and the “old folks” . . . . [They would] go off into the woods with the boys. . . . Their shamelessness repulsed me; I felt disgusted by their casual fornication. I must have been a puritan all my life.

Then as now, I consider the sexual act private. I do not want my sexual experiences to be made public (12-13).

Given what follows in his own memoirs, there is more than a little disingenuousness here. Himes spends several pages discussing, or at least alluding broadly to, his sexual encounters and exploits, at least those involving white women. Later, in recounting his “whoremongering” in Columbus, Himes writes:

Black women were the easiest to pick up and made exciting bedmates; maids were the easiest and good-looking whores were the hardest. I liked black women; black black women. I always have. I liked the velvet sheen of their skin. I liked the boneless cushion of their pubic hair and the tight demanding suction of their pussies. I was entranced by
the dumb passion of their shallow muddy eyes. And I liked them because they liked me (QH 31).

What is striking about both of these passages is the reduction of the Black women to little more than the parts of their whole, a whole that it seems Himes doesn’t recognize, or even refuses. There is, not simply an objectification of the females to whom he refers, but something nearly bestial in the description; the choice of colloquialism in reference to the genitalia, “mating like rabbits,” “the dumb passion of their shallow muddy eyes.”

In his article “Slaying the Fathers: The Autobiography of Chester Himes,” Gary Storhoff advances an intriguing reading of Himes’s use of the genre of autobiography:

Himes . . . so fundamentally disrupts the autobiographical form in plot, theme, and action that the reader’s expectations are undermined. The white (or Black) reader coming to Himes’s autobiography expecting a meditation on Himes’s “African-American experience” will be profoundly disappointed. Of course, Himes ferociously indicts racism . . . however, the emphasis of his work is rather on his own aggressiveness toward those who attempt, from his perspective, to control him . . . . Himes’s autobiography thus constitutes an assault—on authority figures, on the autobiographical form itself, and by extension, on the (white/black) reader (242).

Certainly, throughout his career, Himes consistently subverted genre, and attendant reader expectation; Storhoff discusses this in another article, “‘Aggravating the Reader’–The Harlem Detective Novels of Chester Himes,” focussing on the Harlem series, a discussion I will take up later in detail. And perhaps, to some degree, we can read the above through this lens; Storhoff though, as his title suggests, wishes to read much of Himes’s subversion, particularly in the
autobiography, through the lens of an Oedipal revolt that, while interesting, seems insufficient in this case.

In his affairs, [Himes] seems to test the boundaries of the Black masculine roles that are made available to him by a racist society; thus, from this perspective, his brutality toward women stems from his overconformity to a masculine code of toughness, and to his unquestioning acceptance of a social construction of masculinity that enshrines the strong, autonomous, violent male (244).

Storhoff continues by attributing “Himes’s involvement with women in his autobiography” to “Oedipal resistance, a coded ‘slaying’ of his mother whose obsession with skin color . . . required . . . violent retribution” (245). There are germane points raised throughout by Storhoff, despite the occasionally glib references to Oedipal response. However, there is a glaring omission to Storhoff’s discussion; at no point does he address the issue of Himes’s relations with and references to Black women. Throughout Himes’s fiction, his own obsession with skin color plays out upon the bodies of his characters, especially women. As we shall see in greater detail, this involves both white characters and light-skinned Black characters; among these latter, women are especially prominent, particularly in the Harlem Domestic Series novels. Almost invariably, these women are dangerous, especially to dark-skinned Black men.

Returning to the notion of subversion of reader expectation for a moment, perhaps Himes intended to shock his (primarily white?) readers, or titillate them. This latter is explicitly addressed by Himes, in an interview with John A. Williams two years prior to the publication of The Quality of Hurt:

That’s one of the saddest parts about the black man in America—that he is being used to titillate the emotions of the white community in various aspects. Now I couldn’t say
exactly how he titillates them, but in any case it’s titillation in a way that’s not serious. America’s a masochistic society anyway, so they probably just like being given a little whipping, enough to get a feeling out of it, a sensation, but not enough for them to be moved. I want these people just to take me seriously. I don’t care if they think I’m a barbarian, a savage, or what they think; just think I’m a serious savage (Conversations 47).

Perhaps then, we can explain or read Himes’s references to Black women through this lens, though this still leaves the disquieting question of why. Himes undoubtedly went to some length to test the capacity of his readers’ ability to withstand graphic depictions of all manner of brutality; he also used these types of depictions as a method of holding a mirror to his reader; the response to these moments, I argue, often reveals more about them than Himes.

Himes’s involvement in the Cleveland demimonde quickly intensified. His family life, what was left of it, deteriorated as quickly, as his parents quarreled incessantly, and his brother Joe, who graduated that spring with honors, enrolled at Oberlin in the fall of 1927. Himes wrote of this period:

It was an unusual period of my life. I seemed to be in a trance. I think it was the result of so many emotional shocks. My parents’ quarreling had entered its final stage; sometimes my father would strike my mother and she struck back. I would separate them when I was home (QH 37-38).

Through the next year, Himes worked mainly at hustling, and gambling. He occasionally ran the blackjack game for Bunch Boy, who for Himes was a father figure, of a sort. For a while he worked at the Gilsey Hotel as a bellhop; there his primary duties were acquiring prostitutes and liquor for the guests. What money he made was apparently spent largely on clothes.
I bought very expensive suits, shirts, ties, shoes, and coats—stylish but not outlandish. I never went for any of the way-out fashions like peg tops, zoot suits, bell-bottoms, box-backs, etc. I liked tweeds, Cheviots and worsteds. I remember my most daring venture was a pair of square-toed yellow pigskin bluchers by Florshiem . . . . I got to know the expensive men’s stores where blacks rarely shopped (36).

Here we begin to see the tendency Himes will exhibit throughout his autobiography, listing what appear to be the most mundane, or trivial details (for which he apparently retained an extraordinary memory), even as he glosses over what would seem to be more profound moments of his life. Still, even in his cataloguing, there are hints to be uncovered. In the above, a consistent snobbery is apparent ("where blacks rarely shopped") which Himes does confess to at a later moment of self-revelation.

The gangster image Himes draws of himself during this period was apparently cultivated to an even greater degree upon his meeting a sneak thief named Benny Barnett, "who elected me his hero" (38). To live up to this image, Himes began smoking opium and stealing cars, as well as acquire his first firearm, a .32 caliber "Owl’s head.” At this point, desperate for money (a consistent thread throughout his life), Himes “let Benny talk me into a burglary he had planned with an older friend” (39). The friend, who worked for the Ohio National Guard, had learned that arms and ammunition were stored at the Negro branch of the Cleveland YMCA. They robbed the “Y,” with the intention of selling the guns to Black mill workers in Warren and Youngstown. They made it to Warren, where all three were arrested. When Himes appeared in court without the other two, his mother pled for leniency. The judge, apparently moved by Estelle’s testimony, fined Himes and gave him a suspended sentence. Benny and the other accomplice each served thirty days.
This incident was the breaking point for Estelle and Joseph Senior, as they fought over how to discipline their son. His mother tried to curtail his freedom, even attempted to gain control of his pension, “[b]ut I had this understanding with my father that he would never discipline me, resulting as it had in my brother’s blindness” (QH 43). Shortly after this, Himes broke up an intense fight between his parents, wherein his mother struck his father with a flat iron, cutting his forehead badly. In response, his father began throttling his mother. After Himes separated them, his father left the house, and never returned. Himes moved in with Benny, by then out of jail, the next day.

While visiting Columbus shortly after this, Himes again ran afoul of the law. He stole a student’s identity card, acquired a stack of blank checks and forged several, before a suspicious clerk finally confronted him, then called the police. Himes recalled, “I could have run. I should have run. But, unfortunately, I never did run. Maybe that was the inspiration for my book Run Man Run, which I wrote thirty-two years later” (46).

Again Himes appeared in court, this time with his father by his side. Again, the judge considered mitigating circumstances, and gave Himes a suspended sentence, of two years, and five-year bench parole. This only seemed to push Himes further. “I discovered that I had become very violent” (47). Within a month he forced his way into the Cleveland Heights home of a wealthy white couple and robbed them at gunpoint, making off with cash and jewelry. He had overheard their chauffeur boasting of their wealth at a gambling club, and thought this would be the opportunity to make the escape he dreamed of:

I wanted to get away; I wanted to leave Cleveland and Ohio and all the United States of America and go somewhere I could escape the thought of my parents and my brother,
somewhere black people weren’t considered the shit of the earth. It took me forty years to discover that such a place does not exist (QH 48).

The amount Himes took in the robbery is in some dispute; Himes claimed it was almost thirty thousand dollars in jewelry, and twenty thousand in cash. Margolies and Fabre list five thousand dollars in jewelry, and three hundred cash. Sallis notes that the court records list one ring worth $1,500, and $200 cash. He observes, “As so often, the details of Himes’s life are multiple choice” (Sallis 37).

He caught a train to Chicago, where he attempted to pawn the jewelry to a broker/fence he’d heard Bunch Boy mention. The fence took a ring, and retired to the rear of the shop, saying he had to check it out. As happened in Columbus,

I suspected he was calling the police. I should have let him keep the ring and escaped.

But I couldn’t run. I never could run. I have always been afraid that that one stupid mental block is going to get me killed (QH 57-58).

This inability, or unwillingness to run is further explicated by Himes in the recently published version of his prison novel, Yesterday Will Make You Cry. The protagonist, Jimmy Monroe is recalling his own arrest, which is very much Himes’s; while Jimmy is white, and hails from Georgia, his prison experience is, by all accounts, a thinly veiled autobiographical story. In at least two moments in the novel, Jimmy remembers that he didn’t run, “to have run would have made him cowardly” (Yesterday 35, 56).

This curious passivity at key or pivotal moments repeats itself, both in Himes’s life and in his fiction. Margolies and Fabre refer to it as paralysis, and read it as “the unconscious guilt of his protagonists who want to get caught” (Several Lives, 28). It seems a bit superficial to read it in this manner, a shallow Freudian analysis. Perhaps a more provocative, and useful way to view
this is through Himes’s own sense of the overwhelming presence of the dominant ideology from which there is no real escape. This image of no escape appears in a number of places; from his first novel on Himes places his characters in situations where running is at best futile. The omnipresence of whiteness, as ideology, atmosphere and environment informs this claustrophobia. At the same time, the repeated references to cowardice seem to hint at a claim for masculinity; which this same environment forecloses from a man of color. Storhoff rightly notes that throughout his life Himes would proclaim an allegiance to a fairly traditional construction of masculinity, in both his treatment of people in his life, and in his literary output. It is curious that, in this, the first novel he wrote, Himes comes closest, in this and many other ways, to mounting his most sustained critique of this kind of masculine construction.

He was arrested, taken downtown and interrogated. In the course of the interrogation, the police handcuffed his wrists behind his back, and placed handcuffs on his ankles. They hung him by his ankles from an open door and beat him about his ribs and genitals, trying to force a confession—for another crime, which he did not commit. Himes startled them by confessing to his own felony, not the one they had hoped to pin on him.

He was returned to Cleveland, and appeared before Judge Walter McMahon. On December 18, 1928, McMahon pronounced the sentence: twenty to twenty-five years at hard labor at the Ohio State Penitentiary,

“because you have taken ten years from the lives of each of your victims”—I was shocked. At that instant I suddenly knew that this motherfucking bastard had hurt me as much as I could ever be hurt if I lived to be a hundred thousand years; he had hurt me in a way I could never get over, I thought. Someday, I thought, I would get even (QH 59).
“I grew to manhood in the Ohio State Penitentiary” (60). Aside from a rather disapproving discourse on prison sexual practices, a recounting of his prowess at gambling, and a brief mention of the infamous Easter Monday fire of 1930 in which over three hundred inmates died, Himes had very little to say about his incarceration in his autobiography; “It was all anticlimax” (61). He devoted little more than six pages in his two-volume, 750-page autobiography to these nearly eight seemingly pivotal years of his life, although there are occasional, paradoxical references interspersed throughout these volumes. This sparse attention is particularly odd, given that during these years, as he “grew to manhood,” Himes also made the decision that altered his life, as he began writing. H. Bruce Franklin contends that:

Himes’s achievement as a writer of fiction, indeed his very existence as an author, comes directly from his experience in prison, which shaped his creative imagination and determined much of his outlook on American society (Franklin 210).

Himes himself continued to express at least ambivalent, and often deeply contradictory attitudes about his prison years. In the first paragraph of The Quality of Hurt he wrote:

I knew that my long prison term had left its scars, I knew that many aspects of prison life had made deep impressions on my subconscious, but now I cannot distinctly recall what they are or should have been I find it necessary to read what I have written in the past about my prison experiences to recall any part of them (3).

Later he notes that “I had made the protagonist of my prison story a Mississippi white boy; that ought to tell me something, but I don’t know what—but obviously it was the story of my own prison experiences” (117). However, by the time he wrote his second autobiographical volume, Himes seemed to have changed his tack, as he averred that “My publishers wished to imply that the story in Cast the First Stone was the story of my life and problems and I wanted to state
outright that it had nothing to do with me” (MLA 125). Once again, Himes’s contradictory recollection casts a shadow over the veracity of his factual writings, and certainly adds some credence to the claims of reader aggravation advanced by Storhoff.

Despite this disavowal, much of what is known about Himes’s prison years is necessarily gleaned from his prison novel, in its two very different incarnations, *Cast The First Stone*, originally published in 1953, and *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, published in 1997. Notwithstanding his claims to the contrary in *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes was involved in at least one, and possibly two intimate relationships in prison. In his autobiography he makes disparaging references to “pussy without bone,” and the “boy-girls,” “wolves,” and “wolverines” in prison; throughout much of his fiction characterizations of homosexuals are unflattering. Yet, in both published versions of the prison novel, the love story between the protagonist Jimmy and fellow inmate Duke Dido (based in part on Himes’s relationship with an inmate named Prince Rico) is extraordinary in its tenderness as well as its narrative centrality. It is this relationship that, in many ways “humanizes” Jimmy, allows him to not only survive prison, but find some measure of self-worth, as represented in his efforts to become a writer. Himes’s apparent attempt to further distance himself from his own beginnings as a writer are further manifested during this same period, late in his career, in the first sentence of the foreword he wrote to a late collection of his writings, *Black on Black*, “These writings are admittedly chauvinistic. You will conclude if you read them that BLACK PROTEST and BLACK HETEROSEXUALITY are my two chief obsessions” (7, author’s emphasis).

Himes began publishing while in prison, first in several Black-owned periodicals starting in 1931. In 1934, he sold his first two stories, to *Esquire*, “Crazy in the Stir” and “To What Red Hell,” in which Himes offered a fictionalized account of the 1930 Easter Monday Fire. The
assistant editor at *Esquire* told Himes that the latter story received greater response than any other story published by the magazine that year (*Several Lives* 36-37). This success gave Himes both a sense of purpose and identity, and a certain amount of protection, “[Other convicts] were impressed by my name appearing in a national magazine . . . . The screws could not kill me after my name began appearing in national publication” (*QH* 65). Most of Himes’s early fiction takes as protagonists white characters; Margolies and Fabre speculate that, at least in the case of the *Esquire* stories, either Himes or the magazine’s editor thought the readers might not be interested in Black characters not subscribing to the stereotypes of the time (36). Himes noted that

> My first short stories, those I wrote in prison, were not racially orientated; I did not write about the lives of blacks in a white world. That was to come. In prison I wrote about crimes and criminals, mostly about the life in prison (*QH* 65).

H. Bruce Franklin offers one potential way to read this aspect of Himes’s early fiction (as well as that of other prison writers, mostly people of color), in his introduction to *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, “[F]rom the viewpoint of the people creating these works, America is itself a prison, and the mainlines of American literature can be traced from the plantation to the penitentiary” (xxii).

Himes was paroled to his mother April 1, 1936. His sentence had been reduced in part due to the investigation of the Easter Monday Fire he used as backdrop in his short story “To What Red Hell.” Weeks prior to his release, his disability payments had been ended; thus Himes found himself penniless, an ex-con, and in the middle of the Great Depression. What followed was a series of temporary jobs, manual labor and conflict with his mother. After one of these moments, she met with his parole officer, who reassigned him to his father in Cleveland.
Upon returning to Cleveland, Himes reunited with Jean Johnson, and, receiving permission from his parole officer, married her in 1936. It was then he wrote, that he “began to feel cornered in a black world” (QH 71). In keeping with his allegiance to a masculine ideal, as already noted, Himes did not want his wife to work, but found it difficult to support her. He found some work as a bellhop, and waiter, and sold a couple of short stories. As with many people during this period, he found some relief through the WPA. He worked as a laborer, then as a research assistant at the Cleveland Public Library. Finally, he was hired onto the Writer’s Project, for which he undertook a number of assignments, including a history of Ohio, and a Cleveland Guide; neither were ever printed (Sallis 70).

In 1941, Himes successfully petitioned for termination of parole, and restoration of citizenship. This allowed the couple to leave the state; first they went to New York, where he visited his cousin Henry Lee Moon, a writer and editor for the NAACP. Moon’s wife Molly Lewis, a prominent Harlem intellectual and socialite, would later serve as the model for Mamie Mason in Himes’s interracial sex farce Pinktoes. Returning to Ohio, Himes attempted unsuccessfully to find work in Ohio industries. He initially thought that, unlike the American Federation of Labor (AFL), with its history of racial exclusion, the CIO offered an opportunity for African American advancement in industrial employment. He soon became disillusioned, coming to believe that the CIO merely exploited Black workers to its own ends, albeit in different ways. This belief would be articulated in his first two published novels, If He Hollers Let Him Go, and Lonely Crusade.

Finally, in late 1941, Chester and Jean Himes left Ohio, and moved to California, like many others, Black and white, in hopes of finding work in the war industries. Instead, while Jean found a measure of professional success, Himes found only frustration, and worse:
Los Angeles hurt me racially as much as any city I have ever known—much more than any city I remember from the South. It was the lying hypocrisy that hurt me. Black people were treated much the same as they were in an industrial city of the South. They were Jim-Crowed in housing, in employment, in public accommodations . . . . The difference was that the white people of Los Angeles seemed to be saying, “Nigger, ain’t we good to you?”

The only thing that surprised me about the race riots in Watts in 1965 was that they waited so long to happen. We are a very patient people (QH 74-75).

Himes claimed that in the first three years of the war, he held twenty-three different jobs, all in essential industries. Jean worked as co-director for women’s activities with the LA Area USO, alongside a white woman. Himes was embittered by both his lack of success and his wife’s comparative accomplishment. He wrote later of this period:

It hurt me for my wife to have a better job than I did and be respected and included by her white co-workers, besides rubbing elbows with many well-to-do blacks of the Los Angeles middle class who wouldn’t touch me with a ten-foot pole. That was the beginning of the dissolution of our marriage. I found that I was no longer a husband to my wife; I was her pimp. She didn’t mind, and that hurt all the more (QH 75).

Again, the insistence on a masculine ethos mirroring that of the dominant white culture is apparent here. Also worth noting is the resonance of an echo from Himes earlier proclamation that, even when times were rough he did not turn Jean out. Now, by implication, he contended, that is what occurred in LA.

James Sallis notes that through this period, Himes’s writing focused increasingly on political and racial concerns. One of these articles, “Negro Martyrs Are Needed,” brought Himes to the
attention of the FBI, which opened a case file on him as a result (Sallis 77). The article called on
the Black middle class to enable a peaceful revolution for equality, by stepping forward and
making the necessary sacrifice. It is only this way, Himes argued, that both the Black lower
classes and sympathetic white Americans will follow. Himes further called upon white
Americans to:

stop race riots . . . by simply appearing on the scene and making it apparent to the white
persons thus engaged that they do not approve. The reasons for this are obvious: White
persons who incite and engage in race riots are in a minority, but they are firmly
convinced that the majority of white people morally support their actions (Black on
Black 233).

This call to the middle class was certainly one that, by the time of the Harlem Cycle, Himes
came to see as a futile effort; any real revolution, he concluded, would be neither peaceful, nor
involve the Black middle class. Nor, by this time, did Himes hold much hope for the active
involvement of white people, in any substantial way.

Himes found several of these pieces, including “Zoot Riots are Race Riots” to be worthy of
inclusion in his self-selected collection, Black on Black, published over thirty years later, in
1975. During this period, his acquaintanceship with Langston Hughes, whom he met while still
in Ohio, paid dividends, of a sort that would later prove, for Himes, to be rather dubious. The
contacts provided by Hughes led to Himes’s brush with the Communist Party (for which he
eviced some sympathy in writings of this era, especially in “Negro Martyrs). The communist
labor organizers were, it seemed, less interested in finding immediate work for Himes and other
Blacks like him than they were in making some political statement:
[Y]ou see, the communists were also playing a game. They wanted people like me to help break the color line. I was a tool; they wanted to send me to thousands of places that had no intention of employing blacks at that time because Los Angeles was a very prejudiced place and the only jobs black people had were in the kitchens of Hollywood and Beverly Hills (Conversations 54).

Himes quickly grew disenchanted with the Communist Party, believing them to be as exploitative of African Americans as capitalism, differing only in reasons why. The experiences he endured during this period became part of the basis for his second novel, Lonely Crusade.

In 1945, Himes published his first novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go. He traveled to New York for the publication of the novel by Doubleday. While there, he stayed with his cousin Henry Moon; Henry’s wife Molly was instrumental in helping Himes secure a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald foundation. It was on a stopover in Chicago to meet the representatives of the Rosenwald Foundation that Himes first met Vandi Haygood, who was administering the foundation during her husband’s wartime absence. This meeting sparked a relationship, primarily physical, that would be intermittently resumed over the next several years, until Haygood’s premature death from overdose in 1955. Himes noted too, that this trip provided him with the experiences that would later find their way into Pinktoes (QH 75). The trip to New York was, by Himes’s account, one of drunkenness and debauchery; when Jean joined him later, he wrote, she was so upset by his various sexual affairs and general state of existence that she attempted suicide.

This trip to New York reaped benefits as well. During his stay Himes met Carl Van Vechten, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. These friendships would sustain him, intellectually, emotionally and financially through the next several years. It was also during this series of visits
to New York that Himes first encountered Harlem, a milieu that would later prove to be a literary boon for him at a time when his creative powers seemed to be running dry.

It was in 1945 too, that Himes’s mother Estelle passed away. Himes was able to make it to Columbus for the funeral only because Van Vechten loaned him the money. Jean remained in New York. Again, in a moment of aggravation for the reader, there is no mention of his mother’s death in Himes’s autobiographical recounting of this period; it is mentioned much later, and only as an afterthought. Given his insistent and repeated avowals of his desperate love for his mother, this is a curious oversight to say the least.

As Himes worked on his second novel, he and Jean lived for several months in Northern California, in a shack on a ranch owned by Jean’s brother Hugo. Himes recalled this later as “one of the most pleasant of our life” (QH 93). This recollection seems somewhat idyllic, though. Toward the end of the summer, Himes and Hugo had been hunting; upon their return to the house they found Jean absent. They found her nearly three miles away, stumbling down the highway in tears. At first she refused to return to the cabin with Himes, telling her brother that she no longer wanted to live with him. Hugo finally talked her into returning. It wasn’t until the next day that Himes learned what had occurred. Jean had, against Himes’s advice, read the manuscript he was working on. She became convinced that the wife of the protagonist, Lee Gordon, was based upon her. The relationship is a difficult one, and “both characters have pronounced race and color complexes,” as Himes noted (92). As a result she had become upset, even traumatized. Himes spent much time attempting to convince her otherwise, though he noted that he thought she never really believed him, “and I’ve often wondered if I had drawn a true picture of which I was not aware” (QH 93).
Lonely Crusade was published in September of 1947. On the date of publication Himes was scheduled for appearances and interviews. All were canceled, with Himes not finding out until he appeared in each of these places. Himes noted in retrospect, “That set the pattern. Everyone hated the book. . . . The left hated it, the right hated it, Jews hated it, blacks hated it” (QH, 100). While Himes overstates a bit here, the book did meet with much disapproval. The commercial reception was even more dismal than the critical one. Selling fewer than four thousand copies, it was pulled from circulation the following year (Several Lives 68). It remained out of print for nearly forty years.

Himes was devastated by the reception, claiming that “[f]or the next five years I couldn’t write” (103). He continued to rework the prison novel, by now under the title Black Sheep, as he worked various odd jobs. He and Jean continued to drift apart. In 1948 he was invited to Yaddo, a writers’ colony in upstate New York. Other than a visit to Chicago, where he delivered an address entitled “The Dilemma of the Negro Writer” at the University of Chicago, Himes did little other than drink while at Yaddo.

The Chicago address, published in John A. Williams’s 1966 anthology Beyond the Angry Black, was both a response to critics and a justification for his first two novels. In it Himes identifies three main conflicts faced by the Black writer (for Himes, inevitably, it seems, gendered male), “He is in conflict with himself, his environment and his public” (53). If he is honest about his experience, for Himes the most difficult of the three conflicts, this honest expression of the degradation and pain will itself be a wounding experience. If he is able to overcome this, he must then confront his environment; for Himes this represented the publisher, who would “consider honest novels by Negro writers on Negro subjects bad ventures. If there is nothing to alleviate the bitter truth, no glossing over the harsh facts, compromising on the vital
issues, most publishers feel that the book will not sell” (54). In addition to the publisher, Himes identifies liberal whites who “consider as false or overdrawn any conception [of race and racism] that does not agree with their own. Ofttimes these people feel that their experiences with Negroes (unfortunately not as Negroes) establish them as authorities on the subject” (54). These opinions arise from acquaintanceship with a particular type of Black, Himes contended, ones who had achieved a measure of material success, “through . . . an elaborate and highly convincing technique of modern uncle-tomism” which they did not wish to jeopardize (54).

The third conflict, assuming these two were surmounted, was the reading public, particularly Black readers. They do not wish to see the result of the writer’s honesty revealed in published form, as a result the writer “must be ready to have his name reviled at every level, intellectual or otherwise” (55). In essence, the Black reader does not want revealed the scars of the ravages revealed, as they are not only reminders to themselves, but to those who inflicted those ravages; even worse, the reminder is an affront.

It is in this guilt which we all know of and understand, that keeps the oppressor outraged and unrelenting. It is his fear that he will have to resolve a condition which is as much his heritage as slavery is our own. The guilt, revolving in this fear is a condition the oppressor dare not aggravate. Yet, he cannot permit it or accept it, a fact which traps the white oppressor in his own greatest contradiction. The oppressor cannot look upon the effects of his oppression without being aware of contradiction; he doesn’t want to be confronted with this evil; but neither can he escape or resolve it. He will go to any extent, from the bestial to the ridiculous, to avoid confrontation with this issue (55).

The effect that the oppressor most cannot face is hate.
Of course Negroes hate white people, far more actively than white people hate Negroes. What sort of idiocy is it that reasons American Negroes don’t hate American whites? Can you abuse, persecute, segregate and generally oppress a people, and have them love you for it? Are white people not expected to hate their oppressors? Could any people be expected to escape the natural reaction to oppression? Let us be sensible. To hate white people is one of the first emotions an American Negro develops when he becomes old enough to learn what his status is in American society. He must, of necessity, hate white people. He would not be—and it would not be human if he did not—develop a hatred for his oppressors. At some time in the lives of every American Negro there has been this hatred for white people; there are no exceptions. It could not be otherwise (56).

Himes finished the speech asking understanding for this dilemma, for what the honest Black writer was required to do. Himes recalled the response to Williams in 1970:

When I finished reading that paper, nobody moved, nobody applauded, nobody ever said anything to me. I was shocked. I stayed in Chicago a few days drinking, and then I was half-drunk all the rest of the time I was at Yaddo. That was the time I started getting blackouts (Conversations 73).

In the summer of 1949, he and Jean moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut. “Why Bridgeport? . . . Afterward, I never really knew. At the time I knew that Bridgeport had a Socialist mayor, and I vaguely remembered driving through it once, and it had seemed such a pleasant town” (QH 111). Himes tried to write, with little success, until they once again ran out of money. They decided to sell their car and move back to New York. Jean left, and Himes stayed to transact the sale. On his way to meet the buyer, he was involved in a minor accident with a white woman, who was obviously at fault, and whose “breath smelled pleasantly of excellent cocktails” (111).
Himes assumed the responsibility would be clear. However, it was he who the officer arrested for reckless driving; Himes was unable to make the minimal bail, or to contact Jean, and was sent to county jail. Due only to a sympathetic warden, who was unable to watch Jean cry, Himes was finally released.

That incident shook me. It wasn’t that it hurt so much. Nor was I surprised. I believed that the American white man—in fact all Americans, black or white—was capable of anything. It was just that it stirred up my anxiety, which had gradually settled down somewhat. It scrambled the continuity of my memories, probably of my thoughts also. That is practically the last thing I remember about the United States in such vivid detail (115).

In 1950, Himes discovered a narrative his mother had compiled of her family history. Using this and his own childhood memories, he completed a manuscript for perhaps his most autobiographical novel, The Third Generation. Otherwise, Himes’s writing career was at a standstill, and seemed over. Henry Holt Publishers accepted, then rejected his prison novel. Jean was working as recreation director at New York State Women’s Reformatory, where she lived for all but two days each week. During this period, both The Third Generation and Black Sheep continued to make the rounds,

But I had almost lost interest. That summer [1952] I had convinced myself that I was a failure as a writer, and poverty and loneliness and our enforced separation had convinced me I was a failure as a husband. After fourteen years of love and marriage, we had lost each other” (133).

While Himes was working as a bellhop at the New Prospect Hotel in Sullivan County, he received word that World Publishers had accepted The Third Generation for a $2000 advance.
He moved back to New York City, where he commenced an eighteen-month affair with Vandi Haygood. As with most of the significant aspects of Himes’s life, this episode served as the model for a later work of fiction, *The End of a Primitive*; Haygood was cast in the role of the doomed Kriss Cummings to Himes’s equally tragic counterpart, Jesse Robinson. This relationship, while it did not end as fatally as does the fictionalized account, was certainly a violent one. Himes related in his autobiography that at one point he became so incensed upon learning that she had visited an old lover in Chicago after telling him she was going to Washington D.C., he beat her up so badly she was unable to leave the apartment for two weeks. “I stayed there with her, wallowing in guilt, and nursed her, bathed her, treated her, fed her, bought the food and cooked it, and kept her maid out, while I cleaned the house” (136). Himes reflects on this episode in a passage that initially displays a keen sense of racial politics even as it greatly disturbs the reader in its adherence to a masculine code that subverts the power of the former. Certainly, in terms of its reading of race in America, it echoes with comments he made to John Williams in an interview a few years prior to the publication of *The Quality of Hurt*. Still, for all of that, one is left with a profound unease, even distaste at the assumptions Himes makes about gender politics:

The final answer of any black to a white woman with whom he lives in a white society is violence. She knows as well as he, that no one, neither white nor black, will support his contentions. There may be many who will plead his cause, but if she is adamant, there are none who will take his side. Of course, like me, he might not give a damn if anyone takes his side or not as long as he thinks he’s right. And the only way to make a white woman listen is to pop her in the eye, or any woman for that matter. But it is presumed only right and justifiable for a black man to beat his own black women when they need it. But how
much more does a black man’s white woman need it; maybe she needed it when she became his woman (137).

After leaving Vandi, Himes spent the winter of 1952 in Vermont, living with friends he’d met in L.A., Bill and Helen Smith. While he was there, his father died in Cleveland. It was the passing of his father that convinced Himes that there was no longer anything to keep him in the United States. “All that held me there was the lack of money” (139).

Several months later, Himes’s prison novel, now entitled Cast the First Stone, was sold to Coward McCann with a $2,000 advance. This provided Himes with what he needed to leave, and he acted quickly. His decision was made even more attractive by the knowledge that his books had been generally more warmly received in Europe than in the U.S. This was especially true in France; the previous year Lonely Crusade had been cited as one of the five best American books published there, along with books by Herman Wouk, Faulkner, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, as Himes noted with no small satisfaction. Shortly after he booked passage in February, for an April departure, he learned that New American Library had purchased reprint rights for The Third Generation, providing him with an advance of $5,000.

He contacted several friends and acquaintances already living abroad, chief among them Richard Wright, who extolled the virtues of Paris. Himes responded to this in a typically skeptical fashion:

That was my first experience with black expatriates who have become self-appointed boosters for their favorite European capital. All this I took with a grain of salt; I didn’t expect any utopia and I had always found white people much the same wherever I had been in the United States. I didn’t expect the Europeans to be greatly different. After all,
Americans were their descendents. I just wanted out of the United States, that was all. I had had it (141).

Himes embarked for Europe on April 3, 1953, aboard the *Ile de France*. Three days out, he met a woman who would be a central figure in his life for the next several years, Willa Thompson Treirweiler. In his autobiography, he renames her Alva Trent Van Olden Barneveldt, perhaps to protect her identity, perhaps to shield himself from libel. Of all the relationships with women Himes discusses, this one is the freest of any cynicism or misogyny. On the contrary, his recollections of this relationship are uniformly tender and protective. The masculine ethos is still present, but in a less malevolent, or violent fashion; in a reverie typical of this part of his memoir, he wrote that “No white man has ever felt more protective toward his wife than I did toward Alva. And yet I felt an enormous, moving pity for her that she had given up her place in the white world for me” (*QH* 301). Himes wrote of this relationship at length, as it dominates nearly three-quarters of the first volume of his autobiography.

With Willa, Himes traveled throughout Europe for the next several months, collaborating on a novel that would later be published under her name. While the two were living in Majorca, for a relatively extended time, Himes finally broke through his own writer’s block, as he wrote *The End of A Primitive* (which like his prison novel has only recently been published in unexpurgated form). Himes considered this his best novel; certainly it marks a turning point for him. While still autobiographical in nature, based as it was on his affair with Vandi Haygood, the novel turns from the purely naturalist style that had informed much of his writing to that point. It intermixes a kind of surrealist commentary (in the form of, among other things, a talking chimp on a morning news show who forecasts the headlines) and comedy amidst the horror of the
climax. These features arguably help set the stage for what would become the hall marks of the Harlem Cycle: absurdist humor, surreal and undeniably funny depictions of violence.

Himes recalled the writing of this novel in a rhapsodic fashion that is unlike any other recollection he shares of his process:

> I wrote slowly, savoring each word, sometimes taking an hour to fashion one sentence to my liking. Sometimes leaning back in my seat and laughing hysterically at the sentence I had fashioned, getting as much satisfaction from the creation of this book as from an exquisite act of love. That was the first time in my life I enjoyed writing; before that I had always written from compulsion. . . . for once I was almost doing what I wanted with a story, without being influenced by the imagined reactions of editors, publishers, critics, readers, or anyone. By then I had reduced myself to the fundamental writer, and nothing else mattered (QH 302).

Unable to support them both, Himes resolved to send Willa back to America. When he sold the rights to The Primitive to New American Library, for a paltry $1,000 advance, he used part of the money to do just that. Their relationship, while it lingered for a couple years after, was in essence over at that point.

Himes himself returned to the US shortly after that, in February 1955. He found life no better than in Europe, or when he had left the US originally. The return did provide him with something however; he worked briefly at a Horn & Hardart restaurant, which provided an incident upon which he based Run Man Run, and he reacquainted himself with Harlem. After winning a suit for reprint rights of If He Hollers, Himes used the settlement to book passage back to Europe, barely ten months after his return. He was to return to the United States only twice more, both times for the briefest of visits.
Shortly after his return, he embarked upon another relationship, this time with a German woman half his age. In marked contrast to his recollection of Willa, his comments about Regine Fischer are predominantly disparaging. Still, she and Himes were involved for several years; at one time Himes seriously gave thought to marriage. During this period, Himes wrote *Mamie Mason* also entitled *Pinktoes*, his interracial sex farce and sole bestseller, and *A Case of Rape*, an extended treatment for a longer novel. The novel itself was never written, but the précis was later published.

In 1957, destitute and desperate, Chester Himes finally turned to Marcel Duhamel, who had translated *If He Hollers Let Him Go* into French. Duhamel, then editor of *La Série Noire*, the Gallimard Publishers detective series, urged Himes to try his hand at writing a detective novel for the series. Himes initially demurred, protesting that he didn’t know how. Himes later recounted the response,

“Get an idea,” Marcel said. “Start with action, somebody does something—a man reaches out a hand and opens a door, light shines in his eyes, a body lies on the floor, he turns, looks up and down the hall . . . . Always action in detail. Make pictures. Like motion pictures. Always the scenes are visible. No stream of consciousness at all. We don’t give a damn who’s thinking what. Only what they’re doing. Always doing something. From one scene to another. Don’t worry about it making sense. That’s for the end. Give me 220 typed pages.” (MLA 102).

After receiving an advance, Himes did just that. The result was *For Love of Imabelle* later retitled *A Rage In Harlem* (a title that, apparently, Himes never cared for). Thus, it seems, it was nearly by accident that Himes embarked upon the second phase of his literary career, the phase for which he is perhaps best known. While the earlier novels certainly are compelling in their
own way, *A Rage in Harlem* and the eight novels which followed were far more than the potboilers that many critics (and Himes himself at times) dismissed them as. Indeed, as will be contended in ensuing chapters, these novels represent a significant stylistic achievement, one for which Himes should be properly recognized.

Getting to this point though, involved no small effort. Himes struggled with the first of these novels, initially viewing it as demeaning work that took him from “serious” writing. Here, apparently Regine was of great service to him, writing from her parents, whom she was visiting at the time:

> How it [the detective novel] is, it is no great book, but it isn’t bad or cheap. Why should it be cheap? Because these people don’t have great social ambitions? Jackson certainly takes his Imabelle for as important as Lee Gordon his place in the world. The world is full of people and they are different. Your job is to make them convincing and true. In one of your letters you wrote that you would cut throats, eat spit, and live in sewers for the one you love. Make it the same for Jackson (qtd. in *Several Lives*, 99).

This letter is notable, not only for its encouragement, but for what Himes specifically takes from it. He did indeed make it the same for Jackson

> When he came up, he stared back, passion cocked, his whole black being on a live-wire edge. Ready! Solid ready to cut throats, crack skulls, dodge police, seal hearses, drink muddy water, live in a hollow log, and take any rape-fiend chance to be once more in the arms of his high-yellow heart (*Rage* 96).

The novel, entitled *La Reine des pommes* was a success when published in France; one blurb on the jacket was penned by French writer Jean Giono; it read in part, “I would give all of Dos
Passos, and Fitzgerald for a few pages of Himes” (Sallis 277). The novel was awarded the Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière, the first American, and the first black writer so recognized.

Marcel Duhamel quickly signed Himes to write several more Harlem thrillers. He produced in quick succession *The Crazy Kill*, *The Real Cool Killers*, *The Big Gold Dream*, *All Shot Up*, *Run Man Run*, *The Heat’s On*. While he wasn’t getting rich, these novels provided for Himes something he had never really known, a measure of financial security. During this same period, his private life seemed to also gain some unusual equilibrium as well. In 1959, he met Lesley Packard. While there his residual relationship with Regine Fischer lasted for a brief while longer, and there was a short-lived fling of a sort with another woman, Swedish photographer Marianne Greenwood (whom he followed to Mexico), it was Lesley with whom he would spend the remainder of his life, although he did not officially divorce Jean and marry Lesley until 1976. The reasons for this delay are somewhat unclear; in some accounts, Himes was unable to afford the fee, in others, Jean simply didn’t ever bother to sign the papers.

In the early 1960s, Himes began to have a series of health problems. While in Mexico, he suffered what appeared to be a mild stroke that left him temporarily paralyzed. A series of other maladies followed, including a second stroke in 1964. The cumulative effect had an obvious impact upon his ability to work. He wrote his seventh Harlem novel, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, in 1965; it wasn’t until 1969 that he finished the final novel in the series, *Blind Man With A Pistol*. There was another novel that briefly featured his detectives that Himes never finished; entitled *Plan B*, it was published in France in 1983, and posthumously published in the United States ten years later.

In 1970, Lesley and Chester had a house built in Spain. It was the first home Himes had ever owned, and he lived there for the final fourteen years of his life, the longest period he ever spent
in a single dwelling. During his years in Europe, he had continued his peripatetic existence, traveling throughout France, and spending extensive time in Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, as well as various places in Spain. His two-volume autobiography was published in 1972 and 1976; this effectively ended his writing career, and he spent the last eight years of his life in declining health. In what may be the final irony of his life, Himes, always a restless, peripatetic, voluble man was, by the end, virtually immobile and speechless. He died in Spain on November 13, 1984.
CHAPTER TWO

“All white men were guilty”

HARD-BOILED DESIRE IN IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO

“Write like you did in that novel I translated. Short, terse sentences. All action. Perfect for a detective story.”

I got news for you, I thought. I had started out to write a detective story when I wrote that novel, but I couldn’t name the white man who was guilty because all white men were guilty (My Life of Absurdity 103).

Chester Himes’s first published novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go, both anticipates and establishes several notable aspects of his writing career. Stylistically, as many commentators have remarked, the novel is saturated with the influence of the hard-boiled genre most often associated with the crime and detective fiction of the 1920s-1940s. This genre is epitomized by Black Mask magazine and its most famous alumnus, Dashiell Hammett, and was disseminated by several others, notably Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. From the beginning of his writing career, Himes employed aspects of this genre in his own writing. As indicated in the epigram, this style anticipates the foundation for Himes’s later Harlem Domestic series as well. In this chapter, I look to trace aspects of this style in If He Hollers Let Him Go. This discussion will enable the exploration in succeeding chapters of Himes’s use of style as part of his overall strategy of engaging with the structures of whiteness in his later Harlem novels.

Thematically, Himes’s first novel addresses several concerns that would dominate his novels throughout the rest of his career. These include constructions of race and racism, the effect of
these on Black men and their struggle for masculine identity under the terms set by a white supremacist capitalist culture, and the disturbing specter of miscegenation, particularly relationships between Black men and white women. As Himes himself wrote in his introduction to the collection Black on Black, “These writings are admittedly chauvinistic. You will conclude if you read them that BLACK PROTEST and BLACK HETEROSEXUALITY are my two chief obsessions” (7). While Himes was referring specifically to the writing collected in this anthology, it might well be said of virtually all of his work, to varying degrees. These thematic concerns all combine to form a consistent commentary on and critique of the effects of whiteness on people of color, as it is constructed in its relationship to Blackness. In many ways, these stylistic and thematic concerns, as played out in the text, are often in conflict with each other. Himes hinted at this conflict in the second part of the epigram, when he wrote “I couldn’t name the white man who was guilty because all white men were guilty.” It is this conflict, and the tensions it created in and upon the narrative that will be discussed and explicated in this chapter.

In order to address the aspects of hard-boiled convention present in the novel, some discussion of the genre seems in order. The intent here is not to explicate fully the genealogy of detective fiction, and its American evolution into the hard-boiled style. Rather, for the purposes of this discussion, suffice it to say that the hard-boiled genre evolved from the 19th century detective fiction of, among others, Arthur Conan Doyle and, closer to home, Edgar Allen Poe. Significantly though, the nature of crime in relation to society is nearly diametric in the two genres. In the classical detective plot, the crime is “isolated and specific”; that is, in its abnormal nature, it disrupts the otherwise moral order of things. The detective then, through the process of ratiocination and process of elimination, determines the perpetrator (often the “least likely” of the possible suspects) and returns the environment to its well-ordered normality (Cawelti, 145-
46). Pointing to the difference between the classical detective, with his life “outside” of detection (hobbies, relationships, etc.) and the hard-boiled protagonist, who generally has no such pleasure, Dennis Porter remarks, “Such pursuits suggest a rootedness within a stable and harmonious social order that is threatened only temporarily by criminal acts” (182).

In response to, among other events, Prohibition, the rise of organized crime, and the attendant political corruption, writers such as Dashiell Hammett began to (re)write the detective novel in a way that according to Porter, incorporated aspects of earlier American literature, specifically the frontier heroes, as personified by James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, “avatars of the American mythic hero” (172). These figures epitomized the idealized characteristics that were grafted on to the archetypal hardboiled (anti)hero: physical courage, masculine potency, moral certitude, drive for justice, and a particularly American, anti-intellectual, pragmatism. Notable too, is the psychological and topographical space inhabited by this figure, a marginalized position in relation to society. In addition, the hard boiled narrative occurs against a backdrop of moral corruption and social decay that is counter-posed to the myth of an idyllic, pastoral past. The conventional hard-boiled “dick” patrols and defends a border between civilization and the urban underworld; this becomes one point of conflict for Himes between narrative form and thematic content. As Dennis Porter notes:

[T]o the extent that [these protagonists] stand between two cultures, that of respectable society on the one hand, and the criminal underworld, on the other, their situation is equally as ambivalent as that of the Indian fighter and hunter of colonial times . . . [J]ust as the process of “Indianization” led to a marginal existence for the Indian fighter and hunter in frontier narratives, so too the private eye is represented as no longer at home among settled, property-owning citizens (The Pursuit of Crime, 169).
Porter’s observation here underscores the focus of the hard-boiled detective narrative on the individualized (atomized) white male protagonist operating among the primitive “others,” in an effort to maintain the borders between civilization and savagery. In the case of the frontier, it was the figure of the Indian, in the hard-boiled narrative, the “other” is marked through class, and, more importantly here, race, as the white male protagonist is individualized in relation to the collectivized “other.” Ironically, and importantly here, Porter notes too that there is:

an ambivalence for the civilized order . . . derived originally from the perception that the extension of white civilization into the wilderness would in time do away with the need for . . . heroic interventions, but it is compounded in the age of the private eye by overwhelming evidence that white civilization itself is perhaps not worth protecting after all. The private eye typically is a hero with nowhere to go and with a mission in which he does not fully believe (183).

As will become clear, however, whether or not the civilization is “worth protecting,” the traditional protagonist still has a vested interest in, as it is through that civilization that he constructs his own identity, against the “others” against whom he protects it. What Porter implies here is more bound up in a reading of the detective as a populist hero, whose enemies (and the enemies of his idealized social order) include the economic, social and political elite. The history of populist movements is one filled with nativist and racist tendencies; therefore it is no stretch to see the protagonist described as both ambivalent toward, and invested in protection of white civilization.

This movement from frontier to urban space is also reminiscent of aspects associated with the genre of realism or naturalism particularly associated with Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, with their “vision of a godless naturalistic cosmos ruled by chance, violence and
death” (Cawelti, 173). Specifically, these writers adopted the urban settings, the depictions of violence and (relatively) graphic sex, as well as a cast drawn primarily from the urban underclass. For these naturalist writers, this underclass was primarily an immigrant population who had not yet assimilated into the American mainstream; that is, they had not surrendered what made them “ethnic” in order to claim their wages of whiteness. As such, they represented the contamination of the urban setting, the thing that needed to be put right. For the hard boiled writers, ethnicity still functions to some degree as a metaphor for contamination, but race (and gender) function as an even more powerful synecdoche, as Bethany Ogdon emphasizes.

Many scholars, among them Toni Morrison, David Roediger, Eric Lott and bell hooks, have argued that the implicit consolidation of an individualized white identity is utterly dependent upon the construction of its conceptual opposite, a collectivized Blackness. Bethany Ogdon contends that “[w]hat we, as readers, ‘see’ in the hard-boiled story is always filtered through the detective’s eyes” (74). What is ‘seen’ by these characters is often some representation of the “other,” either in terms of gender or race. Ogdon continues:

These descriptions of others serve to construct a mirror against which a hyper-masculine identity appears. It is a case of defining the self (the ‘I’ of the story) in terms of what it is not: a series of negations establishing identity. We cannot approach this vision of hyper-masculinity by looking only at the hard-boiled man’s activity within the general genre narrative . . . The hard-boiled man’s perception must be addressed as well. Pick up any Americana story with a white, heterosexual male at its centre and you will find very similar descriptions of the people who populate the hard-boiled tale (76).

This center, then, may only be defined or delineated through its relationship to the margins upon which it gazes. This white male visual perception is epitomized in the opening of Chapter Two in
Raymond Chandler’s *Farewell My Lovely* (published in 1944, the year prior to *If He Hollers*), as Phillip Marlowe and Moose Malloy enter a bar populated with Black patrons:

[W]e went into the room . . . . In the corner a group of Negroes chanted and chattered in the cone of light over a crap table. There was a bar against the right hand wall. The rest of the room was mostly small round tables. There were a few customers, men and women, all Negroes.

The chanting at the crap table stopped dead and the light over it jerked out. There was a sudden silence as heavy as a water-logged boat. Eyes looked at us, chestnut-colored eyes, set in faces that ranged from gray to deep black. Heads turned slowly and the eyes in them glistened and stared in the dead alien silence of another race (5-6).

In the passage, Chandler’s Marlowe describes being “looked at,” but the perceptual field, the perspective as marked by the first person “we,” is clearly possessed by the white male(s) in the room, as Ogdon notes. The white self is delineated against the descriptions of skin color (“gray to deep black”), and more importantly, the disembodied quality of the gaze returned as the “dead alien silence of another race.”

Referring back to the epigram once again, it is apparent how Himes’s employment of the tradition of the hard-boiled genre becomes conflicted. In contrast to the figure described by Ogden, and depicted in the excerpt from Chandler, Himes takes as his protagonist the figure of the Black male, who, according to the logic of the hard-boiled ideology is at the margins rather than the center. Furthermore, this protagonist becomes the only really developed character in the narrative. Other characters (white and Black) become flattened, two-dimensional, little more than grotesques. As will be further developed, his protagonist seeks the status of the individual, at the same time Himes “reduces” whiteness to the status of the collective (“all white men were
guilty”). This status of individual is, as intimated by Ogden, the sole province of the white male figure.

As noted, the hard-boiled “hero” is not just a man of action, he is a man of moral certainty, even in a society rife with corruption (Cawelti, 159). There is no space for existential angst or uncertainty, at least not insofar as their own identity is concerned. Himes’s protagonist Bob Jones, on the other hand, is in the throes of a decidedly existential uncertainty, as “[t]here was no meaning to anything” (2). This again subverts the hard-boiled style, and implicitly critiques the white male supremacist ethic, as it underscores the absurdity of an existence impacted by racism.

In volume II of his autobiography, *My Life of Absurdity*, Himes opens by citing French author Albert Camus:

> Albert Camus once said that racism is absurd. Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life (1).

For Bob Jones in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, it is the absurdity of his condition then that produces his fear; it is the narration of this process that subverts, or calls into question, the hard-boiled style. As Stephen Milliken notes:

> Fear is the novel’s major theme. It is a concentrated study of the genesis of panic, the progressive deterioration of a personality under the pressure of a huge and inescapable fear. Bob Jones . . . is acutely aware of every aspect of his environment, and much that he
sees disturbs him, and shadowy dimensions that he is only beginning to grasp already have the power to terrify him (75).

What Milliken either fails, or is unable to do here is name this “huge and inescapable fear,” with “shadowy dimensions” holding “the power to terrify.” These are, I will argue, the evidence of Himes’s own sense of how the structures that form the foundation of whiteness, of white supremacy, function in the lives of African Americans, particularly, for Himes, Black men. The aim of what follows then is to develop a reading of this critique, and its conflictual relationship with the dominant style of the text.

The basic plot of If He Hollers Let Him Go is relatively straightforward, as it narrates the story of Bob Jones, an articulate, educated Black man. The modifiers here place the character in a diametric position to Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, whose fate is determined in large part by his inarticulate character. Himes’s protagonist, on the other hand, has achieved a certain level of success, or comfort within the structure of a white dominant culture, without the patronage (or patronization) of the liberal white philanthropists in Native Son. This aspect of Bob Jones’s character makes the climax of the narrative that much more harrowing, as Himes suggests that the forces that determine Jones’s fate are not necessarily surmountable by individual effort. In other words, Bob Jones’s struggle for individual recognition is doomed before it even begins. Instead, it seems, this effort, unless accompanied by an attendant submissiveness or accommodation, only further guarantees a fall. Himes underscores this in a conversation between Bob, Alice and three others:

“Native Son turned my stomach,” Arline said. “It just proved what the white Southerner has always said about us; that our men are rapists and murderers.”
“Well, I will agree that the selection of Bigger Thomas to prove the point of Negro oppression was an unfortunate choice,” Leighton said.

“What do you think, Mr. Jones?” Cleo asked.

I said, “Well, you couldn’t pick a better person than Bigger Thomas to prove the point. But after you prove it, then what? Most white people I know are quite proud of turning Negroes into Bigger Thomases.” (88)

What Himes, through Jones, seems to be implying here is that the work of whiteness, in order to be successful, relies upon the reduction of its other into something less: into less sentient, into less human, into Bigger Thomas.

Jones works as a leaderman at Atlas shipyard in wartime Los Angeles. The narrative occurs over the course of a work-week, Monday through Friday; during this period Jones is violently confronted with the real effects of racial construction in America, embodied in the person of a white woman Madge Perkins, an immigrant to California from Texas, and a white male, Johnny Stoddart. Both are Jones’s co-workers in the shipyard. Despite the best efforts of his “light, bright, and mostly white” girlfriend Alice, who (along with her well-to-do parents) represents the archetypal accommodationist, assimilationist philosophy of mid-century middle class Negroes, Bob is unable to overcome the pervasive emasculating effects of white supremacy and racism on a Black male. Alice’s best efforts, in fact, which consist primarily of platitudes of middle-class accommodation mixed with facile observations based in her training as a social worker, seem to do more to undermine Bob, and reinforce these effects, than they do to offer him assistance.

Perversely, even, absurdly, as the narrative reaches its conclusion, and Bob is finally prepared to submit to the terms and conditions under which, according to the philosophy espoused by Alice, an African American man might achieve a circumscribed success in a white dominated society,
as encouraged by Alice, events conspire to undermine this acceptance. Madge Perkins, with whom he has been in conflict since the opening pages, accuses him of attempted rape. Knowing that he stands little chance of a fair trial, he attempts to escape Los Angeles, but is captured. This failure at escape resonates with Himes’s own life, as discussed in the biographical sketch; given his own inability, or unwillingness, to run, Himes constructs an environment where such a response is doomed anyway. This certainly fits within the naturalist ethos of predetermination. Given the choice between standing trial, with the inevitable outcome a thirty-year prison term, and joining the military, Bob chooses the latter “option.” As the novel closes, he is about to be inducted into the Army, where (it is presumed) he will fight for the very system that has condemned him. The book does end on a curiously defiant note, however. Battered and bruised from a series of altercations, Bob is marched to the induction center along with two Mexican youths. One of them asks Bob, ‘How you doing, man?’ Bob replies “I’m still here’ (203). Himes seems here to be granting Bob the manhood he seeks, if only provisionally through the recognition of the two Mexicans.

The five day structure foregrounds one of the overt thematic concerns of the novel, the first significant entry of African Americans into the economic mainstream of the United States since Emancipation, and the attendant conflict. This conflict was, it would seem, as much a product of the Black “usurpation” of the terms of a (white) masculinity as it was an economic matter; as explicated earlier through David Roediger’s cogent discussion in *The Wages of Whiteness*, the very definition of “worker” implied a racial identity as white (43-87). As LeRoi Jones noted in *Blues People*, while the Great Migration in the early part of the century had initiated this process, the Great Depression effectively truncated it. The advent of World War II enabled African Americans to once again take limited advantage of the national prosperity (Jones, 171-81). Even
during World War II, the backdrop of the novel, Black workers initially found it difficult to secure work in the war industries, despite a manpower shortage. It took President Roosevelt’s right to work order to break down the barriers, and open the factory gates to Black workers (an order issued in part to forestall Black union leader A. Philip Randolph’s threatened march on Washington). This difficulty is epitomized by the experience Himes himself had in Los Angeles; as noted in the previous chapter, he recalled his experience on the West Coast as being among the most hurtful in his life (QH 74-75).

The novel’s title, it seems, underscores the tenuous nature of this slim purchase on the economic, social and political ladder. It is borrowed, of course, from the children’s counting rhyme:

Eenie meenie miney mo
Catch a nigger by the toe
If he hollers let him go
Out goes Y-O-U.

There is an ambiguous quality to this borrowing; perhaps Himes is suggesting that being “let go,” or achieving autonomy and equality will only occur when there is sufficient outcry. This would be consistent with the various essays he penned during this period, including “Now is the Time! Here is the Place!” (1942), “If You’re Scared, Go Home!” (1944), and most notably, “Negro Martyrs are Needed” (1944), which opens with the following call: “Martyrs are needed to create incidents. Incidents are needed to create revolution. Revolutions are needed to create progress” (Black on Black 231). This essay continues by calling on the Black middle class to support and assist any such figure. The argument Himes forwarded in this essay is echoed in the novel, in an exchange between Bob and Alice’s white co-worker, Tom Leighton:
“But as far as the problem of the Negro industrial worker is concerned, I feel that it is not so much racial as it is the problem of the masses. As soon as the masses, including all of our minority groups, have achieved economic security, racial problems will reach a solution of their own accord.” He turned to me. “Won’t you agree with me to that extent, Mr. Jones?”

“No,” I said. “It’s a state of mind. As long as the white folks hate me, and I hate them we can earn the same kind of money, live side by side in the same kind of house, and fight every day.”

He got one of those condescending, indulgent smiles. “Then how would you suggest effecting a solution to the minority group problem?”

“I don’t know about any other minority group problem,” I said, “but the only solution to the Negro problem is a revolution. We’ve got to make white people respect us and the only thing white people have ever respected is force.” . . . .

“Suppose your revolution failed?” he asked.

“That’d be all right, too,” I said. “At least we’d know where we stood” (88-89).

Here too, Himes addresses the Marxist claim that all inequality is reducible to class. He dramatizes Du Bois’s contention in Black Reconstruction, “It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage . . . . because they were white” (700). Du Bois further noted that this often comes at the expense of economic advancement for both classes, and that it seems a trade white workers are willing to make. Himes, through Bob here, suggests that the only effective response to racism is to organize an active (and violent, if necessary) resistance. In short, Black
Americans would only be “let go,” that is, achieve full freedom and equality through this active “hollering.”

This position is, of course, diametric to that espoused by Alice and her parents, who consistently parrot a sort of Washingtonian accommodationist creed. Exemplary of this is Alice’s mother’s response to Bob when he jokes that he has “found out how I can get even with the white folks.”

She couldn’t have looked any more startled and horrified if I’d slapped her. “Bob!” she said. “Why, I’ve never heard of such a thing!” Her hands made a fluttery, nervous gesture. “Why on earth should you feel you have to get even with them?” But before I could reply she went on. “Bob, you frighten me. You’ll never make a success with that attitude. You mustn’t think in terms of trying to get even with them, you must accept whatever they do for you and try to prove yourself worthy to be entrusted with more.”

Now she was completely agitated. “I’m really ashamed of you, Bob. How can you expect them to do anything for you if you’re going to hate them?”

“I don’t expect them to do anything for me they can get out of doing anyway,” I said (51-52).

Here Himes delineates the other potential reading of the title. Mrs. Harrison represents the position that if Black Americans actively press for equality, try to “get even” with white America through voicing their protest (hollering), they risk being let go, losing what minimal gains have been achieved, at least by the relatively small Black middle class. The irony here is twofold: first that, in the end, Bob is let go, in part because his hollering is a lone voice rather than that of the collective protest Himes advocated in his essays. The middle class, in the person of Alice abandons him; his martyrdom is for naught. The second irony relates to the first: Bob doesn’t
really fight for a collective solution; he repeatedly insists that what he seeks is to be allowed individuality. Of course, the terms under which he strives for this are the property domain of whiteness. As Alice remarks to Tom Leighton just prior to the exchange discussed above, “Of course, Bob’s problem is more or less individual” (88).

Both potential readings of the title share a common denominator; in either case, the title is addressed to a regime dictated by whiteness; it challenges either the white reader, or the Black reader who has striven (always unsuccessfully) for assimilation to the white dominant culture.

Of the five days over which the novel takes place, an over-filled and over-determined Monday consumes the most significant portion of the text, nearly a third of the total narrative. It is the events of Monday that set the narrative stage; likewise, these opening chapters provide a comprehensive sampling of the stylistic variants of the novel. From this point on, the narrative momentum increases at a nearly breakneck pace. For these reasons, a close reading of the first several chapters provides a useful point for discussion.

The novel begins with a dream sequence. There are five of these throughout the text, marking the beginning of each day. These sequences function as commentary on the narrative, as they emphasize the nightmare quality of Jones’s waking life. Indeed, the absurdity here is that, in many ways, the dreams, described in a kind of rushing prose that mimics a sort of stream-of-consciousness, are clearer than the events of the days they precede and presage. These are recounted in a far flatter, more naturalistic style that resonates with that of the hard-boiled genre, yet seem at times curiously ambiguous.

From the first dream, the first line of the novel, Himes embarks upon the his analysis of the effects of a pervasive white domination that so heavily informs the text, both overtly through
narrative, and in more subtle ways as well. The first dream is in three parts; each part stands as a
commentary or allegory on race. In the first segment:

I dreamed a fellow asked me if I wanted a dog and I said yeah, I’d like to have a dog and
he went off and came back with a little black dog with stiff black gold-tipped hair and sad
eyes that looked something like a wire haired terrier. I was standing in front of a streetcar
that was about to start and the fellow led the dog by a piece of heavy stiff wire twisted
about its neck and handed me the end of the wire and asked me if I liked the dog and I
said sure I liked the dog. Then the dog broke loose and ran over to the side of the street
trailing the wire behind him and the fellow ran and caught it and brought it back and gave
it to me again.

‘About the—‘ I began. I wanted to ask him how much it cost because I didn’t have
any money.

But he cut me off. ‘Now about the pay. It’ll cost you a dollar and thirty-five cents.’

I said, ‘I haven’t got any money right now but I’ll give it to you on Monday.’

Sure, that’s all right,’ he said. I took the dog and got on the streetcar. I liked the little
dog; but when I got home nobody else seemed to like it.

Then I turned over and dreamed on the other side (1).

This opening passage is notable both for what it says, and for how it says it. In contrast to
this, much of the rest of the novel is notably terse, marked by a staccato rhythm, particularly in
Jones’s adoption of the laconic tough guy mannerisms of speech, a hallmark of the hard-boiled
genre. This opening dream segment is quite the opposite, as it strings sentences together with an
overabundance of conjunctions, and virtually no punctuation save the period. The content of the
dream is of interest as well. It seem to offer multiple levels of potential meaning; certainly, the
dog held by wire is suggestive of the constrained or circumscribed space of agency available to Black Americans; one might push it even further and read the history of Africans in bondage, of existence as property. In addition, the lack of money described in the dream further underscores this circumscription in terms of economy.

In the middle section, after he turns over, Bob dreams of a police search for a Black murder suspect, which may foreshadow his own encounter at the end of the novel. In the dream the police are looking for “a big tall man with strong arms, big hands, and a crippled leg” (1). The crippled leg would seem to read as symbolic of both mobility and potency; the former links to the first part of the dream, and the latter establishes connection to what follows. After this section is completed:

Then I turned over and dreamed on my back.

I was asking two white men for a job. They looked as if they didn’t want to give me the job but didn’t want to say so outright. Instead they asked me if I had my tools. I said I didn’t have any tools but I could do the job. They began laughing at me, scornfully, and derisively. One said, ‘He ain’t got no tools,’ and they laughed like hell.

I didn’t mind their not giving me the job, but their laughing at me hurt. I felt small and humiliated and desperate, looking at the two white men laughing at me (2).

The emphasis here on the persistence of white supremacy is clear. This segment of the dream foreshadows both the racism Bob will struggle against in his own employment situation, as well as the larger struggle in which he engages daily to define his own masculine position in a culture that systematically denies such a subject position to Black men. Certainly, in a culture that historically has defined masculine success through economic viability, as previously noted, lack of access to the terms of economic success is a form of emasculation. The punning reference to
“tools” emphasizes this sense of castration, in a physical, psychological, and, in the context of Bob Jones’s dream, economic sense, as he lacks access to “the means of production,” as it were. The link to lynching that this symbolic castration implies is referenced through the narrative as well; one might even look to link this segment of the dream to the first, with its dog on a wire leash, through this historical referent. This struggle occupies a significant place in Himes’s fiction, not only in these first two novels, but throughout. In fact, this preoccupation with the terms of a conventional construction of masculinity often results in a particular set of issues that create both difficulty and discomfort while reading Himes. It also circumscribes, it seems, his own ability to construct through literature any real productive response to the white supremacist culture he critiques. It often appears that Himes is unable to conceive of an alternative position of power to that white masculinist one that is at the supremacist foundation.

This presence of the matrix relationship between the constructions of race and gender are further underscored upon Bob’s waking up:

Suddenly I came awake. For a time I laid there, suspended in a vacancy. There was no meaning to anything; I didn’t even remember having dreamed.

The alarm went off again; I knew then that it had been the alarm that awakened me. I groped for it blindly, shut it off; I kept my eyes shut tight. (2).

The above passage marks the first “conscious” moments in the text, and the introduction of the hard-boiled style for which the text is notable. As Bethany Ogden remarks, “[t]he term ‘hard-boiled’ more accurately describes a specific way of speaking and seeing than it does a straightforward formulaic criteria” (71). She continues, as noted, to aver that this specific way is primarily a white male perspective. In the passage above, as with the classic hardboiled style, the syntax is terse, focussed on action and sensation rather than on reflection or thought. However,
this style is at once broken and interrogated by what follows, as the protagonist abruptly shifts from action to perception; the syntax describing this perception lengthens, and the perceptions recorded also subvert the classic hyper-masculine perspective of the hard-boiled ideology, as they echo the content of his dream.

But I began feeling scared in spite of hiding from the day. It came into my head first, somewhere in back of my closed eyes, moved slowly underneath my skull to the base of my brain, cold and hollow. It seeped down my spine, into my arms, spread through my groin with an almost sexual torture, settled in my stomach like butterfly wings. For a moment I felt torn all loose inside, shrivelled, paralyzed, as if after a while I’d have to get up and die (2).

These perception are offered in explicitly sexualized terms, as the fear he describes moves down his body to his genitalia, spreading “with an almost sexual torture,” leaving him “all torn loose inside,” and “shrivelled.” The resonance of this description with the gendered and sexualized nomenclature of white supremacy is too explicit to ignore. Again, as with the dream that precedes it, this reflection hearkens to images of emasculation, effected upon the Black male body through both psychological and physiological means by a white supremacist society throughout the 20th century. The phallic images and figures of castration are recurrent throughout the dream sequences in the text; these and related images resonate throughout, reinforcing each other even as they reinforce the critique of whiteness for which Himes deploys them.

As the events of the day later unfold, Bob’s environment fulfills the prescience of this first dream. The circumscription of race confronts him, it seems, at every turn—both literally, on his drive to work, and figuratively once he arrives. Additionally, the action described below
produces a kind of bitter punning wordplay on the various meanings of “race”; in his race to work, Bob loses primarily due to being held back by his race:

The red light caught me at Manchester; and that made me warm. It never failed; every time I got in a hurry I got caught by every light. I pulled up in the outside lane, abreast a V-8 and an Olds, shifted back to first, and got set to take the lead. When the light turned green, it caught a white couple in the middle of the street. The V-8 full of white guys dug off and they started to run for it; and the two white guys in the Olds blasted at them with the horn, making them jump like grasshoppers. But when they looked up and saw we were colored they just took their time, giving us a look of cold hatred . . . .

I sat there looking at the white couple until they had crossed the sidewalk, giving them stare for stare, hate for hate. . . . all I could see was two pecks who didn’t hate me no more than I hated them (12-13).

Bob’s journey to work illustrates vividly bell hooks’s observation that [t]o travel, I must always move through fear, confront terror” (45). The “white looks” that confront Bob are a further manifestation of the dreams which he confronts every night.

The physical act of “looking,” as described above, permeates the text. This is not surprising, since race is primarily understood and demarcated through visual signifiers. As noted by Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, “Race is fundamentally a regime of looking, although race cannot be reduced to the look” (Desiring Whiteness 2). Looking plays a significant role in the text, as the above passage notes. Unlike Ralph Ellison, for whom race, specifically Blackness, seems to engender a certain invisibility, Himes articulates race as a sphere of hyper, almost unbearable visibility.

A white helper was soldering a seam . . . while a white mechanic looked on. The mechanic and I had been in the same department together for the past two years, but we
had never spoken. He looked at me as I passed, I looked at him; we kept the record straight.

There were a lot of women workers on board, mostly white. Whenever I passed the white women looked at me, some curiously, some coyly, some with open hostility. Some just stared with blank hard eyes (18).

Again the cadence here is classically hard-boiled in its rhythms; the action described emphasizes the ubiquity of the white gaze that surrounds, envelopes Bob wherever he goes. Throughout the passage, thematic concerns and syntax both meld and clash. As in Ogdon’s description of hardboiled ideology, the white perspective is noted, as white subjects look at Bob; simultaneously, however, this is mirrored and “undone” by Bob’s return of the gaze, in a kind of reversal of the Chandler passage quoted earlier. Certainly, Bob is looked at by the men; but he also engages in the act of looking back at them. Furthermore, the subject position here is assumed by the subject who, in the logic of supremacist ideology, is the object. Curiously, this equation is disrupted in the following part of the passage, as the white women engage in the act of looking. It would be assumed that the first person narrator looks back, but unlike the earlier moment, there is no acknowledgement of the return. Here too, the specter of miscegenation, the ultimate racial and sexual taboo, is invoked.

This passage precedes and foreshadows Bob’s first encounter with his own femme fatale, Madge Perkins. It is this meeting upon which the primary narrative conflict revolves, as Himes offers Madge as both femme fatale, and as a paragon of white womanhood, the ultimate taboo. He does this, however in ironic, parodic fashion, as he describes Madge for the first time:

She was a peroxide blonde with a large-featured, overly made-up face, and she had a large, bright-painted, fleshy mouth, kidney shaped, thinner in the middle than at the ends.
Her big blue babyish eyes were mascaraed like a burlesque queen’s and there were tiny wrinkles in their corners and about the flare of her nostrils, calipering down about the edges of her mouth. She looked thirty and well sexed, ripe but not quite rotten. She looked as if she might have worked half those years in a cathouse, and if she hadn’t she must have given a lot of it away.

We stood there for an instant, our eyes locked, before either of us moved; then she deliberately put on a frightened, wide-eyed look and backed away from me as if she was a naked virgin and I was King Kong. It wasn’t the first time she had done that. I’d run into her on board a half-dozen times during the past couple of weeks and each time she’d put on that scared-to-death act. I was used to white women doing all sorts of things to tease or annoy the colored men so I hadn’t given it a second thought before.

But now it sent a blinding fury through my brain. Blood rushed to my head like gales of rain and I felt my face burn white-hot. It came up in my eyes and burned at her; she caught it and kept staring at me with that wide-eyed phoney look. Something about her mouth touched it off, a quirk made the curves change as if she got a sexual thrill, and her mascaraed eyelashes fluttered.

Lust shook me like an electric shock; it came up in my mouth, filling it with tongue, and drained my whole stomach down into my groin. And it poured out of my eyes in a sticky rush and spurted over her from head to foot (19).

The references to “ripe” and “rotten” certainly echo with the iconographic construction of the hard-boiled femme fatale. From there the description moves Bob from the subject position of the hard-boiled protagonist, the one who looks, to the object of Madge’s own construction, or at least that construction Bob assumes of/for her, as he positions her as the “naked virgin” and himself as
“King Kong.” In doing so, Himes exploits a contemporary cinematic coding of the myth of the Black rapist and the virtuous white woman.

Additionally, here again Himes refers back to Bob’s dream that opens the text, or rather, to his waking response. This time, however, it is lust not fear; instead of fear coming “into my head first, somewhere in back of my closed eyes,” this time “it (lust) came up in my mouth, filling it with tongue.” Lust reverses fear’s flow from groin to stomach, and rather than settling “like butterfly wings,” Himes writes, in a passage that is nothing if not pornographic, “it poured out of my eyes in a sticky rush and spurted over her from head to foot.”

Later that same day, Bob encounters Madge again, and, “I knew the instant I recognized her that she was going to perform then—we both would perform” (27).

The trope of performance here is suggestive of two things, at least. First, Bob seems cognizant (and through him, Himes) that race and gender comprise a series of performances. Secondly, even though the notion of performance seems to suggest a level of voluntary engagement, Bob’s realization subverts this suggestion. It seems that the performance functions at a deeper level, and the performers are locked into a series of culturally prescribed dance steps over which they exert less control than it may initially appear. This performance reaches its climax—or, perhaps, as will be explained, it never does reach a climax; it does, however achieve some culmination, two nights later. On Wednesday night, Bob finally seems unable to extricate from his role in the drama:

All of a sudden I knew that I was getting ready to go back and see Madge. Getting charged. Getting my gauge up to be a damned fool about a white woman, to blow my simple top, maybe get in some serious trouble—about a slut any white bum could have at
will . . . It was crazy; I knew it was crazy, like a sign I once saw that said, ‘Read and run, nigger; if you can’t read, run anyhow’ (142).

The signs have been there all along for Bob; he has read too, but seems unable to run at least, not in the safe direction.

Bob drives to Madge’s cheap rooming house, and, after some play resistance, she lets him into her room. They engage in some perverse form of foreplay, as they wrestle. Through it, she taunts him, alternating between calling him “nigger,” and coyly displaying herself, “‘Ain’t I beautiful?’ she said. ‘Pure white’ (146). They tussle again, until:

I slowly broke her down to the floor, and she looked me in the eyes, hers buck-wild.

‘All right, rape me then nigger!’ Her voice was excited, thick, with threads in her throat.

I let her loose and bounced to my feet. Rape–just the sound of the word scared me, took everything out of me, my desire, my determination, my whole build-up. I was taut, poised, ready to light out and run a crooked mile. The only thing she had to do to make me stop was just say the word (147-48).

This is the nearly inevitable end of their performance; Bob’s dreams, referencing the specter of lynching as they do, foreshadow such an end. Here too, the power and allure of the construct of whiteness–on the one hand, Bob desires the power that possession of the white woman seems to symbolize. It is echoed in Frantz Fanon’s (ironic?) assertion:

I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white.

Now, and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged–who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man
I am a white man (Black Skin, White Mask 63).

Even, however, as Bob desires this, the retributive power of that same whiteness forbids this to him, through the proscription of color. Any contact between a white woman and a Black man, even if consensual, is open to this reading; it is in fact, the predetermined end to which Bob is rushing throughout the week.

Later, in an attempt to distract himself from the initial confrontation with Madge, Bob decides to look for a crap game for diversion from the series of events. He becomes embroiled in a dispute over cocked dice, and in the ensuing altercation is knocked unconscious by a white worker, Johnny Stoddart. When he regains consciousness, Bob borrows a knife and sets off to kill Stoddart. When he arrives at Stoddart’s work station, the white man sees him coming, and grabs a hammer. Bob stops, and:

It was then I decided to murder him cold-bloodedly, without giving him a chance . . . . I wanted to kill the son of a bitch and keep on living myself. I wanted to kill him so he’d know I was killing him and in such a way that he’d know he didn’t have a chance. I wanted him to feel as scared and powerless and unprotected as I felt every goddamned morning I woke up. I wanted him to know how it felt to die without a chance; how it felt to look death in the face and know it was coming and know there wasn’t anything he could do but sit there and take it like I had to take it from Kelly and Hank and Mac and the cracker bitch because nobody was going to help him or stop it or do anything at all.

The sick, scared gone feeling left my stomach. I kept looking at him, thinking. There’s one goddamned thing, you can’t take your color with you, until I felt only a cold disdain.

I turned around and went out (35-36).
Again, at least in passing, it is worth noting the demarcation here between style. The first part of
the passage is written to replicate the onrush of thought, a distinctly un-hard-boiled moment,
while the second depicts response and action, those hallmarks of the hard-boiled genre. In the
first part too, is the deconstructing of the assumptions behind white privilege, the space of
assurance, power and protection, the very things that Bob wants to strip from Johnny Stoddart in
the same way they have been denied to him. It is this second confrontation of the day that
represents the other half of Bob’s struggle against whiteness, in the form of white masculinity.
After his encounter with Johnny, Bob takes off the remainder of the day, planning to lay in wait
for Johnny, “I was going to kill him if they hung me for it” (38).

Throughout the narrative of the afternoon, images of whiteness pervade Bob’s consciousness,
“Now I felt the heat of the day, saw the hard, bright California sunshine. It lay in the road like a
white, frozen brilliance, hot but unshimmering, cutting the vision of my eyes into unwavering
curves and stark unbroken angles” (38). The very “white, frozen” environment, with its
“unbroken angles,” begins to take on the nearly monolithic, impenetrable aspect of the whiteness
that encompasses Bob’s existence.

On his drive home, Bob picks up two white sailors hitchhiking. As they drive and chat, they
“passed a couple of girls jiggling along in thin summer dresses” (41). The three then begin
joking about the women, Bob teasing the two younger men. In a striking fashion, Himes
withholds the mention of the race of the women, one of the few times on the text when a
character or figure is not racially marked. Given the response of the two sailors, the reader can
only assume the girls are white. At that point, Himes offers perhaps the most pointed analysis in
the text; it is at this juncture that everything that has happened, and everything that will ensue is
given its sharp focus and context:
I got a funny feeling then; I began wondering when white people started getting white—or rather, when they started losing it. And how it was you could take two white guys from the same place—one would carry his whiteness like a loaded stick, ready to bop everybody else in the head with it; and the other would just simply be white as if he didn’t have anything to do with it and let it go at that. I liked those two white kids; they were white, but as my aunt Fanny used to say, they couldn’t help that (41).

In this passage, more clearly than at any point in the text, Himes explicitly addresses the constructed quality of race, “when white people started getting white.” Clearly he sees the construction of whiteness as the origin of racial construction; just as clearly he sees the tenuousness of the construction in the observation “or rather, when they started losing it.” This notion of “losing it” may be read in at least a couple of ways, especially through what follows in the passage. It may be that the loss of whiteness may be perceived as a threat, that is, as a loss of privilege and position, to be responded to through the carrying of it as a stick. This would certainly pertain to what the characters Johnny, and Madge represent; although at times in the text, she seems to be less attached to it than others, when she does wield it, it becomes the stick that ultimately beats Bob Jones down. The other possibility, it seems, is embodied in the two sailors, who simply wear their whiteness “as if [they] didn’t have anything to do with it.” The problem, as it were, with this representation is that it tends still to individualize the construction, as something that a white person can either use or discard, without addressing the larger systemic issues at work.

This construction of race is certainly consistent with that which was current at the time, a model that emphasized the role of prejudice and discrimination as played out in the individual act, rather than as an institutional, ideological construct. This latter way of viewing racism did
not become a dominant part of the lexicon in the Black community until some twenty-plus years later.

The power of this particular scene in the text does not really strike home until a bit later. The three men continue discussing each woman they pass:

whether they were married or single, how many kids they had, whether their husbands were in the Army, if they played around at all. All the elderly women they called ‘Mom.’

We had a lot of fun until we came to a dark brown woman . . . falling along in that knee-buckling, leaning-forward, housemaid’s lope, and frowning so hard her face was all knotted up. They didn’t say anything at all. I wanted to say something to keep it going, but all I could have said about her was that she was an ugly, evil-looking old lady. If we had all been colored, we’d have laughed like hell because she was really a comical sister. But with the white boys present, I couldn’t say anything. I looked straight ahead and we all became embarrassed and remained silent for a time. . . . We didn’t talk about women anymore (42).

It might be reasonably assumed again that, since Himes does not describe the collective of women discussed prior to the appearance of the Black woman in any detail, that they were unmarked, that is, white. This is further supported by Bob’s observation that “all the elderly women they called ‘Mom,’” since the reader would not expect the white boys to use a familial address in speaking of a Black woman. It is when the race becomes unmistakable, unignorable, if you will, that the game cannot continue. Whiteness appears as marked by its own opposite.

These boys who only “[are] white . . . and let it go” are not able to do so when the game demands they disparage the Black woman; Bob is unable to continue, because to say what he would say in
front of the white boys would breach some racial etiquette whereby one does not “low rate” one’s own in such a scenario.

As to why this mixed company of men is able to discuss the other women so freely, it would seem, at that particular moment, Bob briefly attains that to which he aspires. This moment early in the text is best read through a much later moment of rumination on Bob’s part; at this moment his desire for recognition is most fully articulated. It occurs the morning after his near-rape of Madge, just prior to making up with Alice. It is just prior to his beginning acquiescence to the accommodations necessary, it seems, for survival. The passage continues for nearly five pages; what follows, while extended, will represent less than a quarter of the whole. Bob has just had his fourth dream. In it a white boy and a Black boy are fighting with knives. The Black boy has the larger knife, but the white boy, with his smaller knife, is:

digging a thousand tiny holes into the colored boy’s head and neck and it was only a matter of time before the colored boy . . . bled to death . . . the white boy . . . [was] stabbing him to death with a quarter-inch blade and laughing like it was funny as hell. . . .

I woke up and I couldn’t move . . . . (150).

At the risk of belaboring the point, the dream sequence here further emphasizes the lynching motif that has been established in earlier dream sequences. In addition, the comparative sizes of the knives might reference the mythology of the bestially well endowed Black male; Himes then would seem to be indicating that, regardless of the relative masculine attributes of the Black male, white supremacist society will still prevail, cutting him down bit by bit. This “death of a thousand cuts” certainly references the upcoming meditation on Black life in which Bob engages, as does his initial paralysis upon waking:
Somewhere in the back of my mind a tiny insistent voice kept whispering, *Bob, there never was a nigger who could beat it*. . . . I could see the whole thing standing there, like a great conglomeration of all the peckerwoods in the world, taunting me, *Nigger, you haven’t got a chance*.

I agreed with it. . . . I knew with the white folks sitting on my brain, controlling my every thought, action, and emotion, making life one crisis after another, day and night, asleep and awake, conscious and unconscious, I couldn’t make it. I knew that unless I found my niche and crawled into it, unless I stopped hating white folks and learned to take them as they came, I couldn’t live in America, much less expect to accomplish anything in it.

It wasn’t anything to know. It was obvious. Negro people had always lived on sufferance ever since Lincoln gave them their freedom without any bread. . . . You simply had to accept being black as a condition over which you had no control, then go from there. Glorify your black heritage, revere your black heroes, laud your black leaders, cheat your black brothers, worship your white fathers (be sure to do that), segregate yourself; then make yourself believe that you had made great progress, that in time the white folks would appreciate all of this, and pat you on the head and say, ‘You been a good nigger for a long time. Now we’re going to let you in.’ Of course you’d have to believe that the white folks were generous, unselfish and loved you so much they wanted to share their world with you, but if you could believe all the rest, you could believe that too. And it didn’t seem like a hard thing for a nigger to believe, because he didn’t have any other choice.
From there, Bob goes on to ruminate on how his education had taught him “the same jive that the white folks had learned. . . [I] thought George Washington was the father of my country—as long as I thought I had a country.” This clearly resonates with the reference to “white fathers” that precedes it. He ponders his potential future, marrying Alice, and how he had arrived at this point in his life:

All I had to do is marry her and my future was in the bag. If a black boy couldn’t be satisfied with that he couldn’t be satisfied with anything.

But what I knew about myself was that my desire for such a life was conditional. It only caught up with me on the crest of being black—when I could accept being black, when I could see no other out, such a life looked great.

But I knew I’d wake up someday and say to hell with it. I didn’t want to be the biggest Negro who ever lived, neither Toussaint L’Ouverture nor Walter White. Because deep inside of me, where the white folks couldn’t see, it didn’t mean a thing. If you couldn’t swing down Hollywood Boulevard and know that you belonged; if you couldn’t make a polite pass at Lana Turner at Ciro’s without having the gendarmes beat the black off you for getting out of your place; if you couldn’t eat a thirty dollar dinner at a hotel without choking on the insults, being a great big ‘Mister’ nigger didn’t mean a thing.

Anyone who wanted to could be nigger-rich, nigger-important, have their Jim Crow religion, and go to nigger heaven.

I’d settle for a leaderman job at Atlas Shipyards—if I could be a man, defined by Webster as a male human being. That’s all I’d ever wanted—just to be accepted as a man—without ambition, without distinction, either of race, creed, or color; just a simple Joe
walking down an American street, going my simple way, without any other identifying characteristics but weight, height, and gender (149-53).

Returning to the earlier scene with the two hitchhikers, it is at that moment in the text where Bob most nearly achieves the desire he finally articulates at the end of this passage. He is able to comment freely on the white women, able to “be a man”; it is the moment in the text where gender most clearly supercedes race as the defining character of the principals.

Through this rumination, Himes accomplishes a number of things. He offers a cogent critique of what the “wages of whiteness” cost a man like Bob Jones, even as Bob aspires to that very condition. Indeed, throughout this long internal soliloquy, nothing is communicated more clearly than Bob’s desire for nothing less than whiteness itself, for the perspective of which Ogdon speaks. It is a desire that has been telegraphed throughout the text. Monday night, after Bob’s long day, he returns home and makes a date with Alice; unbeknownst to her, Bob plans to take her to dinner in the dining room of an elite white hotel. As he finishes his second shower of the day, he engages in the following exchange with Ella Mae, the wife of the couple from whom he rents a room:

When Ella Mae came into the kitchen . . . she said, ‘You oughta be clean enough even for Alice now–two baths in one day.’ Her voice was ridiculing.

‘I’m tryna turn white,’ I laughed.

‘I wouldn’t be s’prised none, lil as it’s said,’ she cracked back.

‘You know how much I love the white folks,’ I said; I couldn’t let it go.

‘You ain’t just saying it either,’ she kept on. ‘All that talking you do ‘bout them all the time. I see you got the whitest colored gal you could find.’
‘Damn, you sound like a black gal,’ I said, a little surprised, ‘I thought you liked Alice.’

‘Oh, Alice is fine,’ she said. ‘Rich and light and almost white. You better hang on to her.’

‘Okay, baby, I quit,’ I said. I wondered what was eating her (47).

It’s not difficult to see here, that who’s being “eaten” is Bob himself. There’s more truth than he’s willing to admit in his “joke,” and Ella Mae is calling him to account.

The following day, after he and Alice have fought, and he returns to make up, they fight again, over his altercation with Madge at the plant.

She jumped up and took a turn around the room. ‘If the white people hated you as much as you hated them–’

‘They’d kill me now and have it done with,’ I supplied. ‘And that’d be fine with me.’

She stopped and looked at me. ‘Do you want to be white, Bob?’

‘All I want is to be able–’ I began, but she cut me off.

‘Let me put this another way. Will the fact that you are a Negro deter you from attempting to succeed as white men do?’ (97-8).

This is ultimately the irony and unresolvable contradiction of the novel. If one was to read this as a detective novel, in which Bob seeks the solution of for his own condition, then indeed, as Himes observes, in the epigraph which opens this chapter, one cannot name the guilty party, unless one is looking in the larger cultural mirror. Certainly Himes’s attempt to unravel the knot of race and gender in this text was arguably ahead of its time. The publication of If He Hollers Let Him Go was initially a rewarding moment for Himes. The book was met with generally favorable reviews, and was nominated for Doubleday Doran’s George Washington Carver
Award for the best book on Negro life, which came with an assured advance sale of ten thousand copies (Several Lives 55). It was rejected, Himes claimed:

because one of the woman editors said it nauseated her. Instead a novel called Mrs. Palmer’s Honey [by white author Fannie Cook] was given the award. To add insult to injury, the advertising copy that appeared in the Saturday Review of Literature for Mrs. Palmer’s Honey referred to my novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go as a “series of epithets punctuated by spit” (QH 77).

Himes later told John A. Williams that the book’s success was further undercut by additional in-house decisions made at Doubleday. After he had received letters from all over the country informing him that the writers had been unable to purchase copies of the novel, and that orders were not being filled, he took the letters to the publisher. One vice-president told him his complaint made no sense “because if they published a book they were going to sell it” (36):

But what had actually happened to If He Hollers was that this woman editor—Doubleday was printing their own books in Garden City—had telephoned their printing department in Garden City and ordered them to stop the printing. So they just arbitrarily stopped the printing of If He Hollers for a couple of weeks or so during the time when it would have been a solid best-seller (37).

While Himes may well have overstated the case some quarter-century after the fact, it seems that the novel did not receive the institutional support it might have. The objections to the novel were not confined to white editors either. Himes’s cousin Henry Lee Moon (from whom Himes would become estranged through this period) told Himes, “Everything you say here is true, but these aren’t things that white people want to hear about. Things like this need to be kept quiet, between colored people” (Conversations 14). It seems that Himes had indeed hit a nerve.
The response to If He Hollers was met by Himes in two notable ways. The first was an article published in the Saturday Review of Literature in February of 1946, in which he responded to white reviewers (among them those of his own novel) who opined that for Black authors to indict racism in their novels wasn’t sufficient; they needed to offer solutions. Himes responded, he recalled later, in the following fashion:

I wrote that I belonged to a nation which . . . had mustered its will and its energy and its ability and in five short years had amassed the greatest Navy and the greatest Army in the history of the world and had learned to split the atom as a weapon more powerful than could then be conceived by the average intelligence, and to ask me, an incidental black writer with a limited education and no status whatsoever, to solve its internal race problem, was preposterous. “Let the white people solve it their own goddamn selves.” (QH 77).

The novel has not been without its admirers. In 1965, two weeks before his assassination, Malcolm X visited Himes in Paris after a visit to Mecca. During the meeting, Malcolm informed Himes that he had read If He Hollers at the age of twenty, and that it had moved him deeply (Several Lives 133).
CHAPTER THREE

“and pull back a nub”

WHITENESS AS COLONIZATION AND VIOLENCE IN THE HARLEM CYCLE

I had the creative urge, but the old used forms for the black American writer did not fit
my creations. I wanted to break through the barrier that labeled me a “protest writer.” I
knew the life of an American black needed another image than that of just the victim of
racism. We were more than just victims. We did not suffer, we were extroverts. We were
unique individuals, funny, but not clowns, solemn, but not serious, hurt, but not suffering,
sexualists but not whores in the usual sense of the word; we had a tremendous love of
life, a love of sex, a love of ourselves. We were absurd--(Chester Himes My Life of
Absurdity 36).

The year 1957 marked a change in Himes’s professional life. At the urging of publisher
Marcel Duhamel, he embarked upon the writing of his “Harlem Domestic” novels, as Himes
referred to them, the series of nine loosely related narratives for which he is probably best
remembered.

The change was not perhaps as abrupt, or radical as it may first seem. Himes’s last novel prior
to this series was The Primitive; while still possessing autobiographical elements, as well as
aspects that lead some to classify with his protest fiction, the novel displays features that
anticipate in many respects the absurd, sometimes surreal direction that Himes would pursue in
his Harlem stories. These features are less apparent in the original 1956 publication; upon
receiving the copy-edited manuscript back from the publishers, Himes remarked:
Five different colors had been used to edit my manuscript and I supposed each color was employed by a different copy editor. Thousands of stupid, senseless, pointless, mean, petty and spiteful changes had been made . . . .

It took days to restore my manuscript to its original form. Since the color green had not been used by any of the copy editors, I used green ink to restore all changes. When I was finished, my manuscript looked like a painting of a writer’s nightmare by Dubuffet. Then I had to argue heatedly, vehemently, bitterly, for each restoration. To get my manuscript published with even the slightest resemblance it bears now to the original required more effort than writing the damn thing (MLA 24-25).

Even in its expurgated form, the novel retains traces of the process of change Himes was undergoing as a writer. The 1997 re-issue, in unexpurgated form, and under Himes’s original title The End of a Primitive, makes this process even clearer. In this, Himes’s last novel before contracting with Serié Noire, the narrative centers on Jesse and Kriss, a Black man and white woman, respectively, who are involved in a sexually volatile, mutually destructive relationship. At the end of a drunken, nightmarish weekend, Jesse kills Kriss in a blacked-out rage. The novel ends with Jesse calling the police to report his own crime. In an interview near the end of his life, Himes explained the plot to Michel Fabre:

In The Primitive, I put a sexually-frustrated American woman and a racially-frustrated black American male together for a weekend in a New York apartment, and allowed them to soak in American bourbon. I got the result I was looking for: a nightmare of drunkenness, unbridled sexuality, and in the end, tragedy (Conversations 133).

This bare summary doesn’t do justice to the features of the novel that define its break with the traditional features of the “social protest” genre that Himes found constricting. The style of the
narrative, its at times dreamlike quality, and features such as the talking chimpanzee on the morning news show who predicts the headlines, give the novel a character far different than that normally associated with what critic Robert Bone dubbed “the Wright school” of Black fiction, with which he and others have associated Himes’s early novels.

In his 1965 survey of African American literature, Bone devotes only a short discussion to Himes; if he doesn’t quite dismiss Himes, he does quickly relegate him to a position of mere imitator. Placing Himes at the periphery of the “Wright School,” his designation for what he describes as a 1940s “urban realism” literary movement. Bone describes this group as follows:

For the Wright School, literature is an emotional catharsis—a means of dispelling the inner tensions of race. Their novels often amount to a prolonged cry of anguish and despair. *Too close to their material, feeling it too intensely,* these novelists lack a sense of form and thematic line. With rare exceptions, their style consists of a brutal realism, devoid of any love, or even respect, for words. Their characterization is essentially sociological, but it may contain a greater attempt at psychological depth than is usually associated with the naturalistic novel. Their principal theme . . . is how the American caste system breeds “grotesques.” The white audience, on perceiving its responsibility for the plight of the protagonist, is expected to alter its attitude toward race (158 emphasis added).

The above passage seems rife with assumptions about African American writers similar to those that Himes himself decried at various junctures of his career, including an explicit critique in *The End of a Primitive* itself. Still, up until the time of this novel, Himes’s work had been so intensely autobiographical as to make the critique and analysis contained within a fairly personal one, blurring the implications of the larger structural problem, and somewhat inhibiting him stylistically, especially in those novels after *If He Hollers* and before *Primitive*. The stylistic
features of the latter noted above, and their impact upon the narrative structure and thematic concerns erased the last vestiges of Himes’s naturalist tendencies and unleashed him from any formal association with the kind of fiction described by Bone.

From this, the move Himes made to the absurd, violent, funny and tragic Harlem novels is not all that surprising. The move provided Himes with a kind of freedom in expressing his perspective on racial construction in a way that the more didactic aspects of the social protest form occlude. Rather than being fenced in by the generic constraints, Himes exploits the structure in ways that allows him to write his perspective of racial construction in a space removed from his intimate experience. When the structural concerns threaten to become an obstacle, Himes simply (or perhaps not so simply) subverts then trespasses them, on his way to finally exploding them entirely, as will be detailed in the next chapter.

Stephen Milliken remarks that the plots of these novels (or, at any rate, the eight that feature most prominently the pair of detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones) are fairly simple, and similar in structure. He offers up a parodic synopsis of the formula:

An assorted group of sinister Harlem characters are searching for Object X. Most of them don’t know what Object X is . . . but they assume it’s valuable, or otherwise the other people looking for it wouldn’t be looking for it, and they proceed to kill everyone who gets in their way. This makes for an awful lot of killing, all over Harlem: bodies, bodies, bodies! Coffin Ed and Grave Digger join the search, either because they need one of the searchers as a witness . . . or simply because it’s their duty as precinct detectives to retrieve Object X, and they dash all over Harlem in their tiny, battered black sedan, for the day or two the action lasts, thrashing and choking information out of likely suspects and innocent bystanders alike with impartial zeal and stumbling all the time over bodies,
bodies, bodies. Along the way, with their extra large, extra shiny pistols, they kill off any killers who haven’t already killed each other off, grab Object X (which always turns out to be the subject of a really big surprise), triumphantly clear themselves of all charges, and go home to their wives and families in their respective little white cottages in a peaceful Long Island suburb, thoroughly tired out from all the whipping, and usually more than a little battered or shot up themselves (217).

I cite this at length for two reasons. First, it limns, in its reductive fashion, the general narrative structure of all but the final novel of the series with some degree of accuracy. The second reason stems from the first; the actual story lines of the novels are secondary to what the novels accomplish. More critical than the plots themselves is the milieu in which these events occur. Himes’s representation of Harlem itself becomes the first significant aspect of his critique of whiteness in these novels. Himes makes increasingly clear, as the series progresses, that the very existence of Harlem is itself a product of the policies of white supremacy. The construction of Blackness, and its attendant communal and cultural structures, is relational to the construction of whiteness through legal, political and economic strategies. As Cheryl Harris outlines, and as George Lipsitz further delineates, the property aspect of, or “possessive investment” in, the construction of whiteness is historically responsible for the construction of the urban ghetto. In important ways, Himes’s Harlem is metonymic for the American urban ghetto; as such it is, in many respects, the central character of these novels. The second aspect of this critique would be the violence itself. As Himes worked through the series, the violence, which is, in the early novels, confined entirely to Harlem, and directed almost exclusively at its Black denizens, begins to sprawl outward, over the boundaries of this world as constructed by Himes.
This violence increases in both frequency and intensity; it moves from the patently absurd to the serious, even sinister. It is increasingly directed outward, away from Harlem, and it takes on a rationale, or purpose which further removes it from the absurd, although not from the surreal. The violence becomes represented less as a product or effect of the historical and social construction of whiteness, as described above, and more as a response to, even attack on the ideologies of whiteness. This latter becomes most apparent in the uncompleted Plan B. Himes effects stylistically and thematically what he advocates through narration. As Stephen Soitos remarks, “Violence in [Himes’s] novels becomes both an indicator of a world gone awry due to racism and economics and a political tool that is used against the oppressor” (142).

In the early novels, however where the focus is entirely on Harlem, whiteness is still present then, if sometimes only by exclusion. As Cheryl Harris notes, the right to exclude is a fundamental aspect of Whiteness as property. “The right to exclude was the central principle, too, of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed ‘not white’” (1736). It is this aspect that then functions to underwrite the whole range of exclusions, from living space to access to means of production. After all, Harlem exists only by virtue of exclusionary practices across the spectrum of economic practices. All of these are present in the series, from the outset. George Lipsitz’s discussion of the impact of FHA housing regulations, and the postwar construction of a white suburban space, provides a further material analysis to the product of this exclusion.

In what follows, I will discuss the structural, thematic and narrative strategies addressing these points, as they first appear in A Rage in Harlem (originally entitled La Reine des pommes in the original French publication, and For Love of Imabelle in its initial English publication),
the first of what Himes referred to as his “Harlem Domestic Series.” In order to discuss these strategies at length, it will be necessary at times to trace their fuller realization in later novels of the Harlem Cycle, particularly, but not exclusively, in the penultimate text, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*.

To begin with, *A Rage in Harlem* certainly fits the pattern outlined by Stephen Milliken. The Object X in this case is a steamer trunk full of what everyone believes is gold ore. The trunk is in the nominal possession of Imabelle, who stole it from her estranged husband. He and his cohorts require the ore (which is of course fool’s gold) to in order to play their particular scam, a variation on the lost gold mine con, and are attempting to retrieve it from Imabelle. The novel opens with them engaged in another scam, called “The Blow,” in which they are conning the very naïve, very Black Jackson, with whom Imabelle has taken refuge. Jackson loves Imabelle, and believes wholeheartedly in her goodness—a belief shared by no one else in the narrative. This con culminates, as many do, with the entry of one of the crew impersonating an officer of the law; at this point all parties save the mark escape, with the money. This starts Jackson on a violently bloody, parodically picaresque journey through Harlem, as he tries to save the girl, the gold, and himself.

From the outset, Himes engages in an implicit critique through his construction of Harlem; to emphasize this, the first several pages of *A Rage in Harlem* function as a sort of excursion through the economy of his Harlem. As noted, the opening vignette describes the use of “The Blow” to con Jackson out of his money. The particular hook in this case is “money-raising.” The con men have convinced Jackson that they can “raise” the denominations of US currency through a “special process” they’ve developed; that is, they can add zeroes, “raise” a ten to a hundred.
The scheme is ludicrous on its face; the idea that someone might believe it possible seems too farfetched for words. Yet Jackson believes. His belief is, it seems, based in something more than hope; it would seem to imply a kind of desperation driving that hope, a desperation itself fueled by an absence of hope. The absurdity of this paradox is at the heart of response to racism here, and entirely consistent with Himes’s worldview, from the beginning of his career; this belief in the face of overwhelming evidence against its plausibility is present in If He Hollers Let Him Go, when Bob Jones ruminates that “you’d have to believe that the white folks . . . loved you so much that they wanted to share their world with you, but if you could believe all the rest you could believe that too” (151). Himes continues to articulate it in the Harlem novels. The absurdity of Jackson’s hope (or perhaps here we speak of faith in its most ineffable, Kierkegaardian sense) can’t be explained entirely away by his naivete, his squareness (Himes’s own English title for this novel was The Five-Cornered Square—someone so square he has five corners). This same hoping against hope is expressed in even more explicit terms later in the Harlem Cycle. After the robbery of the money in Cotton Comes to Harlem, money that was taken from Harlem residents in a large-scale con built around a sham Back-to-Africa movement, Himes writes, from the perspective of the detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones:

They didn’t consider these victims as squares or suckers. They understood them. These people were seeking a home . . . . They had not found a home in America. So they looked across the sea to Africa, where other Black people were both the ruled and the rulers. . . . . there lay the roots of their families, and it was inhabited by the descendents of those same ancestors—which made them related by both blood and race. Everyone has to believe in something; and the white people in America had left them nothing to believe in (26).
Here too, Himes critiques the property aspect of whiteness, as the denizens of Harlem are excluded even from the ownership of hope, as well as the more material sense of ownership or investment in the country of their birth.

As the tour continues it becomes increasingly clear that the economy of Harlem is largely self-contained, insular; there is no other way to introduce additional resources into the chain. The only exception to this is the occasional influx from the outside, mainly in the form of white men looking to participate in sex-trade. (The notable exception to this is in *All Shot Up*, and the scheme of the political hack Casper Holmes, a sort of thinly veiled reference to Adam Clayton Powell Jr. His theft of the funds earmarked for political activity, while despicable to a degree, at least mark the liberation of funds from the structure; the intimation is that at least some of this money would seem destined to enter the economy of Harlem, in some fashion or another.) Harlem’s economy is a zero-sum game, without access to any means of production. Money-raising is as close as we get.

After Jackson is conned, he bribes the “deputy” who raided the scam (called “the Blow”) to let him go. His appeal to the ersatz deputy reinforces the barred access to production or wealth; “Where are we poor colored people goin’ to get any money from?” (9). He acquires the bribe money by stealing from his boss, the undertaker H. Exodus Clay. Clay is one of the few characters other than the detectives and Lt. Anderson, their superior, who appears intermittently throughout the series, as if to remind the reader that the only real constant in these texts is death, nearly always violent. Clay himself is described as having “skin like parchment,” which at least implies a kind of translucent quality associated with light, or white, skin. The relationship of whiteness to death, however tenuous it may appear, would seem worth noting (11).
Jackson takes $500 from Clay, pays the deputy $200, and uses the rest to try and recoup his losses. He moves through the *demi-monde* of Harlem, first betting the numbers. Even the numbers racket, initially seen as a medium of circumscribed exchange within the community, part of the zero-sum economy, becomes an avenue to drain limited funds out of Harlem. Himes writes in later novels of “the Syndicate” stepping in when they realize the potential profit. The Syndicate, Himes’s shadowy organized crime stand-in, is clearly a figure representing an aspect of whiteness, a point taken up in more detail in the following chapter. The result here is that a path to some limited financial success for a few Harlem residents is foreclosed.

Jackson then moves to the “largest standing crap game in Harlem,” where over the course of the night he loses all he has. Finally, as a last resort he seeks out his twin brother Goldy. The two are identical in appearance. “White people in the South, where they had come from, had called them the Gold Dust Twins because of their resemblance to the twins pictured on the yellow boxes of Gold Dust soap powder” (29). Even this off-hand aside provides commentary on whiteness, from the oblique reference to the stereotype (they all look alike) to the reference to the employment of stereotyped figures in product branding, of which the Gold Dust Twins are but a single example–Aunt Jemima, Niggerhead Tobacco, the list goes on. The construction of an individual identity through whiteness is only available through the construction of a depersonalizing, collectivized Black identity, which refuses the possibility of individual subjectivity. Despite their physical resemblance, the brothers are diametric opposites. Whereas Jackson is jovial, and naïve, Goldy is cynical, a junkie, and a scam artist in his own right. He cross-dresses as a Sister of Mercy, and panhandles while selling tickets to Heaven.

Throughout what has been outlined above, and the balance of the text, we are presented an economy that consists simply of redistributing a finite sum. If one receives, another has remitted,
either voluntarily or involuntarily, either legally or (more frequently) illegally. The creation of wealth, through production or other means, is absent. The kind of society that results is described by Himes as follows:

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 the 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.

The farther east it goes, the blacker it gets (93).

The above passage is explicit in its description of the closed system (and what might happen to any fresh source that might inadvertently introduce itself). The imagery of cannibalism graphically depicts the result of this closed system. Stylistically, it still resonates with vestiges of Himes’s more “naturalist” social protest novels, as it explicates through an omniscient, non-diegetic voice rather than through the perspective of a character, or through diegetic action; hard-boiled conventions favor explication through dialogue or action; as Himes’s publisher Marcel Duhamel instructed him:

Always action in detail. Make pictures. Like motion pictures. Always the scenes are visible. No stream of consciousness at all. We don’t give a damn who’s thinking what. Only what they’re doing (MLA 102).

Stephen Soitos reads this omniscient (or godlike, he calls it) perspective as corresponding to both Himes’s expatriate status and his “emotional distance” from Harlem (148). While the
geographical distance is obvious, and might well influence the choice of perspective, the emotional distance is, I think, more debatable. To make the claim hold up under scrutiny, the reader would be required to ignore, or find some other way of accounting for, the barely concealed rage contained within the description of Harlem. It is a rage that lurks throughout the series just under the absurdist, grotesque, appalling, comedic violence. It is in this example, particularly evident in the last line “. . . the blacker it gets.” This is an obvious reference to the increasing density of the population of African Americans as one moves further into Harlem; it would seem also to signify the increasing desperation of the population. As previously noted, from childhood, watching his parents argue, Himes was keenly aware of intra-racial prejudice as well, and remarked on his distaste for it more than once:

But even then I despised the in-group class distinctions based on color and the degree of white blood in one’s veins. In those days light-complexioned blacks were more prejudiced towards darker blacks than were many white people (QH 29).

As Himes makes clear in a number of places throughout the series, well-to-do Blacks live on the perimeter of Harlem, near Central Park. These tended also to be the lighter-skinned as well, a sort of buffer zone between the “authentically” white and the truly Black. Even when the lighter skinned move among their darker brethren, there is still a clear demarcation, as will be discussed shortly.

Finally, this passage reconstructs geographically the social hierarchy, as the institutions through which the ideology of whiteness exercises and maintains its power–religion and education in this instance–stand above and look down upon the teeming Black masses below.

These teeming masses, their deprivation, powerlessness and rage, are invoked later in a scene that also establishes the kind of violence that will mark the series. Goldy has been discovered by
the team of con-men (who are wanted in Mississippi for killing a white man, a certain marker of their disregard for life, or law). Himes describes the result:

Jodie reached down with a violent motion, clutched him over the face with the palm of his left hand, put his right knee in Goldy’s back . . . jerked Goldy’s head back against the pressure of his knee, and cut Goldy’s taut black throat from ear to ear, straight down to the bone.

Goldy’s scream mingled with the scream of the 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. Shaking the rats between walls, the cockroaches crawling over kitchen sinks and leftover food; shaking the sleeping flies hibernating in lumps like bees behind the casings of the windows. Shaking the fat, blood-filled bedbugs crawling over black skin. Shaking the fleas, making them hop. Shaking the sleeping dogs in their filthy pallets, the sleeping cats, the clogged toilets, loosening the filth (105).

The passage continues, describing in detail the blood leaving Goldy’s body, and the resulting wound. The real violence in the scene described however, is that which is counterposed to Goldy’s death, the tenement itself. Himes illustrates an environment of deprivation, even a degree of degradation. The paralleling of the Black people to the insects emphasizes the perspective established in the earlier description of Harlem; from the heights of Columbia University, the difference must seem minimal. The description also further emphasizes the economic hardship of Harlem, as the life described would never be found in the comparatively well-to-do suburbs, or even downtown.
This parsing of the Harlem economy, and the rage it incites, surfaces more frequently and
more overtly as the series progresses. It also finds expression in the words of the detectives, as
Himes became increasingly adept at adopting Duhamel’s distillation of the generic conventions:

The arteries stood out in Grave Digger’s neck and his voice came out cotton dry. “We got
the highest crime rate on earth among the colored people of Harlem. And there 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’s that’s left is to let
‘em eat one another up (Cotton Comes to Harlem 14).

Certainly the point raised is similar, even to the type of image evoked, that of a cannibalism
forced upon the denizens through institutional and ideological strategies out of their control; but
two things change between the respective novels, the first and penultimate entries in the series.
Stylistically, the latter is more in keeping with the conventions of the genre, delivered by one of
the two ostensible protagonists in archetypal idiom. The other notable evolution is the more
explicit naming and critique of the role whiteness as white supremacy plays in the economic
condition of Harlemites. The addressee of this retort is the white watch commander, Lt.
Anderson.

Even the descriptions of Harlem change significantly in the later novels, as they capture the life
of Harlem rather than just the architecture:

Their next stop was a dingy bar on Eighth Avenue near the corner of 112th Street. This
was the neighborhood of the cheap addicts, whiskey-heads, stumblebums, the flotsam of
Harlem; the end of the line for its whores, the hard squeeze for the poor honest laborers,
and a breeding ground for crime. Blank-eyed whores stood on the street corners swapping
obscenities with twitching junkies. Muggers and thieves slouched in dark doorways
waiting for someone to rob, but there wasn’t anyone but each other. Children ran down the street, the dirty street littered with rotting vegetables, uncollected garbage, battered garbage cans, broken glass, dog offal–always running, ducking and dodging. God help them if they got caught. Listless mothers stood in the dark doorways of their tenements and swapped talk about their men, their jobs, their poverty, their hunger, their debts, their Gods, their religions, their preachers, their children, their aches and pains, their bad luck with the numbers and the evilness of white people. Workingmen staggered down the sidewalks filled with aimless resentment, muttering curses, hating to go to their hotbox hovels but having nowhere else to go.

“All I wish is that I was God for 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 the white folks into hogs.”

“But I ain’t God,” Grave Digger said, pushing into the bar (35).

Here Himes encapsulates the futility of the zero sum milieu, as the figures described prey upon each other as “[m]uggers and thieves slouched in dark doorways waiting for someone to rob, but there wasn’t anyone but each other.” The role of whiteness in constructing this Hobbesian nightmare is underscored by both the “listless mothers” talk of “the evilness of white people,” and, especially, by Grave Digger’s enraged response to the scene. The distance travelled in honing the sharpness of both the critique and the conventions is clear. As is apparent from the beginning, becoming increasingly manifest as the series progresses, the social critique being mounted and the genre chosen for the task are in constant tension; in the novel following Cotton,
the center gives way and the chaos ensues. This chaos will itself be marked on the very urban geography that is Harlem.

At times, however, the violence Himes writes does not seem, on its face, to be quite so pointedly written from a place of rage; indeed, it possesses, in its absurdity, a ghastly humor, interspersing the terseness of the novels with a nearly poetic quality:

Coffin Ed leaned out of his window, took careful aim over his left wrist and let go his last two bullets. He missed the motorcycle tire with both shots, but the fifth. . . .hit a manhole cover in the street, ricocheted. . . .and buried itself in the outside tire of the open truck carrying sheet metal. The tire exploded with a bang. The driver felt the truck lurch and he hit the brakes.

This threw the motorcycle rider off his timing. . . .He was pulling up fast behind the car carrying the sheet metal when the tire burst and the driver tamped his brakes. He wheeled sharply to the left, but not quickly enough.

The three thin sheets of stainless steel, six feet in width, with red flags flying from both corners, formed a blade less than a quarter of an inch thick. This blade caught the rider above his woolen-lined jacket, on the exposed part of his neck, which was stretched and taut from his physical exertion, as the motorcycle went underneath. He was hitting more than fifty-five miles an hour, and the blade severed his head as though he had been guillotined.

His head rolled halfway up the sheets of metal while his body kept astride the seat and his hands gripped the handlebars. A stream of blood spurted from his severed jugular, but his body had completed the maneuver that his head had ordered and went past the truck as planned.
The truck driver glanced from his window. . . . he saw a man without a head passing on a motorcycle with a sidecar and a stream of steaming red blood flowing back in the wind.

He gasped and passed out. . . .

The head rolled off the slow-moving truck, dropped to the sidewalk, and rolled out into the street. Gravedigger. . . .saw something that looked like a football with a cap on it bouncing on the black asphalt. . . .the top was turned to him when he saw it and he didn't recognize what it was.

“What did he throw out?” he asked Coffin Ed.

Coffin Ed was staring as though petrified. He gulped. “His head,” he said. . . .

Gradually the taut headless body . . . spewed out its blood and the muscles went limp. The motorcycle began to waver; it . . . crashed into the iron-barred door of the credit jewelry store, knocking down a sign that read:

_We Will Give Credit to the Dead_ (All Shot Up 83-5).

Even this humor would seem to only reinforce the critics who abhorred Himes; there seems little sense of purpose accruing from this violence, particularly when viewed in the context of any single novel. Yet, when examining the entire series, a steady progression becomes apparent. As Himes worked through the series, the violence, which is, in the early novels, confined entirely to Harlem, and directed almost exclusively at its Black denizens, begins to sprawl outward, over the boundaries of this world as constructed by Himes.

This movement outward suggests an interesting way to read these novels which, while not ameliorating the absurdity of the stories, particularly the violence, that Himes saw as central to them, invests in them a significance greater than that of "mere" detective stories. The series,
written between 1957 and 1969, can be read as a discourse on the circumstances pertaining to the socio-historic reality of ’60’s Black America, particularly the colonial aspects of the history of African-America. The concept of the African American community as an internal colony in a culture dominated by a white patriarchy is not original with Himes; it is, however, illustrated or dramatized in particularly striking, and by the end apocalyptic fashion.

In his article, "Topographies of Violence: Chester Himes' Harlem Domestic Novels," Michael Denning suggests, but does not pursue in any detail, the possibility of reading the domestic series in light of Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial violence. There are strong reasons for such a reading. The two were contemporary; Fanon was acquainted with Himes, at least through his writing; in fact, Fanon cited If He Hollers Let Him Go in Black Skin, White Masks (140). Himes was well aware of Fanon too, as is indicated by Himes' comments during his extended interview with John A. Williams:

By the way, he [Fanon] wrote a long article on my "Treatment of Violence" which his wife still has, and which I've thought I might get and have published. Because he had the same feeling, of course, that I have (78).

Unfortunately, Williams does not pursue further this line of inquiry (although he inquired after the piece in later correspondence), but the connection Himes mentions briefly seems worth closer examination. I would argue that this feeling Himes mentions extended past Himes’s treatment of violence, and into the reasons for the existence of this violence.

Throughout the series, Himes demarcates the terrain through explicit references to streets and landmarks, drawing a line around Harlem. In A Rage in Harlem, Himes presents a Harlem of nearly inviolable boundaries, both psychological and physical. Only rarely do the denizens transgress these boundaries, and only by accident or while under duress:
Jackson went along 95th Street to Fifth Avenue. When he saw the stone wall surrounding Central Park he realized he was out of Harlem. He was down in the white world with no place to go, no place to hide his woman's gold ore, no place to hide himself. He was going at seventy miles an hour and there was a stone wall ahead. His mind began to think. Thought rolled back on the lines of an old spiritual:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone. . .
Nothing left now but to pray. (Rage 137).

Jackson can go no further; he heads back into Harlem, where he is certain to be apprehended by the police, in hot pursuit of the runaway hearse. The stone wall marks for him more than the entrance to Central Park; it is the line separating Harlem from the white world. It is the physical boundary demarcating the physical property of whiteness as discussed above, and his heading for it at seventy miles an hour is symbolic of his fate should he continue into this world. Just prior to the scene above, in fact, Jackson senses this, as Himes writes that “[h]e felt like just sitting there behind the wheel and driving that hearse off the edge of the world” (136). It would seem to be the only border Jackson could transgress without fear of repercussion.

Here Himes illustrates Fanon's characterization, in Wretched of the Earth, of one facet of the colonial world as "a world divided into compartments." Fanon further characterizes this world as follows:

The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible. . .(p. 38).
Here again, the idea of exclusion is present. This sense of boundaries is reiterated throughout the series; for instance in The Big Gold Dream, Himes draws the geographic boundaries explicitly (even as he again reinforces the sense of economic boundaries):

On the south side, Harlem is bounded by 110th Street. It extends west to the foot of Morningside Heights, on which Columbia University stands. Manhattan Avenue, a block to the east of Morningside drive, is one of the corner streets that screen the Harlem slums from view. The slum tenements give way suddenly to trees and well-kept apartment buildings, where the big cars of the Harlem underworld are parked bumper to bumper.

Only crime and vice can pay the high rents charged in such borderline areas (24).

As previously noted, unlike Fanon’s characterization, the exclusivity is not entirely reciprocal. While Black citizens rarely venture outside the boundary, there is repeated entry of whites into Harlem, particularly in the guise of the law. Since what Himes is ostensibly writing here are crime novels, the presence of law is, on the surface, a given. The police serve an additional function, however, they are responsible for enforcing the boundaries of the colonized Harlem.

Again, as Fanon tells us:

The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the police and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression. . . the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and direst action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts. . .not to budge(p. 39).

In their role as Black police officers, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger play a particular role as mediators, as indicated above. Particularly in the early novels, however, this role is highly
Himes introduces his detectives in the first novel, *A Rage in Harlem*, in the following manner:

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed weren't crooked detectives, but they were tough. They had to be tough to work in Harlem. Colored folks didn't respect colored cops. But they respected big shiny pistols and sudden death. It was said in Harlem that Coffin Ed's pistol would kill a rock, and that Grave Digger's would bury it (p. 49).

This reference to the detectives’ firearms is echoed throughout the series as well; they often coerce the population through the means of their own gun butts, as Fanon mentions.

The figures of Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones have been read in a variety of ways; as representatives of the archetypal “bad nigger,” as Himes’s subversion of the individualist archetype of the hard-boiled genre, as “double-consciousness detectives,” as tricksters. All of these readings foreground aspects of the detectives that provide for these interpretations; my intent here is not to take issue with any of them. Rather, I would simply note that primarily, these novels are less about the detection and solution of crime than they are about the crimes (and criminals) themselves. Quite often, Digger and Ed play relatively peripheral roles in the narratives; in *A Rage in Harlem* for instance, they don’t appear until a third of the way through the novel, and then only infrequently thereafter. Besides mediators, they seem to occupy a space that privileges a kind of idealized Black masculinity, but one that is still compromised or circumscribed by their proximity and service to the white power structure, in much the same way that Fanon discusses. This is, in some respects, the role to which Ed and Digger are relegated, particularly in the early novels. The contradiction between their actions and their observations, as emblematized by Grave Digger’s outburst discussed earlier, provides another point of irreconcilable tension in these novels. One particularly telling vignette from the
second novel, *The Real Cool Killers*, indicates their presence on the force and in Harlem seems to have little to do with the protection and service of the natives. In searching for the murderer of a white man in Harlem, Grave Digger displays excessive force in attempting to extract information from a bartender in a venue patronized by slumming whites:

"That's putting it on rather thick," the blond white man protested in a reasonable voice.

"I'm just a cop," Grave Digger said thickly. "If you white people insist on coming up to Harlem where you force colored people to live in vice-and-crime-ridden slums, it's my job to see that you are safe."

The white man turned bright red (*Killers* p.70).

White people often turn red in Himes’s novels, as he makes extensive and ironic use of the “blood in the face” marker of visibility. As in the above, relatively sedate example, the presence of redness marks for Himes a certain loss of control, a loss of whiteness, as it were.

Within the Black community Himes represents, virtually the only white characters encountered are white males, either police (as previously noted), most notably and consistently Lt. Anderson, “tourists” of the type referenced above, or criminals. Incidentally, these figures also represent for Himes essentially the faces of white power. On one hand there is the legal-juridical, with which African Americans are historically all too acquainted. The other is a bit less overtly apparent.

If one includes those white figures who appear in Harlem primarily to purchase sexual services, then virtually every white figure appearing in the series who is not associated with the law is engaged in illicit behavior: the johns, the dealers, The Syndicate (Himes’s shadowy figure of organized crime). These figures are also engaged in primary economic activities. The connection here that Himes makes between whiteness, economy and crime is so clearly evident;
it also resonates with his indictments of capitalism dating from his LA dalliance with the Communist Party. While Himes never endorsed Communism (“I don’t believe that Communists have ever worked toward any solution to the Negro problem in the United States”), he frequently assailed capitalism for its inherent inequities, particularly as these were employed along racial lines (Conversations 28). Through the series he makes explicit his perception of the innate criminality of the capitalist system, and how this is driven by and benefits whiteness and the ideologies of supremacy.

While there is violence perpetrated against white figures on occasion, it is violence (usually) met with swift retribution, if not necessarily justice. This term “justice” is itself problematic in Himes’s world. As with many other aspects of life, it is apprehensible in only a bifurcated sense. (This white/Black dichotomy becomes increasingly evident as the series progresses, culminating in a radical split in Blind Man With a Pistol, which will be discussed in the next chapter.) An example of this does not occur in the present novel, but in The Real Cool Killers, where the victim is a white man. While retribution is exacted, the body punished for the murder is not the one who commits it. The deceased, who came to Harlem to buy young Black girls to whip for his sexual gratification, is shot by one of his victims. Coffin Ed covers for her, using the death of a young Black gang member to arrange the evidence in that direction. In this way, it seems that Himes wishes to both comment again on the history of race relations in the US, even as he offers a partial corrective to the violence currently under discussion. This also provides another level of his critique of whiteness (here in the guise of the legal-juridical system), as well as another level at which the Harlem zero-sum game is played out. Here, to save the reputation and, indeed, the life, of one Black victim, another name must be offered up to the dominant culture in its place.
Thus, at the level of characterization at least, any critique of, or assault on whiteness, the avenues available are constrained, at best. Light-skinned Blacks become a sort of stand-in, or synecdoche for whiteness within the community. As noted, the social hierarchy within these communities has, in keeping with the dominant culture, always placed a premium on the lighter skin. This holds in Himes’s world as well, as the lighter skinned characters, male and female, are often found in positions of relative privilege, and are invariably involved in the duping and victimizing of darker-skinned, relatively honest (and often naïve) people. This is what drives the narrative in *A Rage In Harlem*.

The role of the detectives then, designates a space under constant siege, not only from outside, but from elements found within Harlem itself. Among these threats, the figure of the *femme fatale*, as re-envisioned by Himes, emerges as one of the most prevalent. It has been noted repeatedly by commentators and critics that the women in Himes’s novels do not come off very well, to put it gently. Certainly, Himes displays a misogynistic streak fairly often, in both his fiction and his autobiography. It cannot be ignored, nor can it be justified. Still, I might argue that the violence toward women is largely confined to a specific type of woman, and in writing this, Himes is offering another level of his representation and critique of whiteness.

In (re)writing the hard-boiled genre, Himes adopts for his own purposes a number of stylistic attributes, as previously noted. As in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, he makes use of the *femme fatale* archetype. This archetype serves a particular function in the hard-boiled and noir traditions, as Manthia Diawara remarks (specifically referring to the latter), “Women . . . are in these films, considered ‘black’ by virtue of the fact that they occupy indeterminate and monstrous spaces such as whiteness usually reserves for blackness in our culture” (262).
In *A Rage In Harlem*, Imabelle conforms to many of the archetypal attributes of the classic *femme fatale*. Himes describes her early in the novel:

> She was a cushion-lipped, hot-bodied, banana-skinned chick with the speckled-brown eyes of a teaser and the high-arched, ball-bearing hips of a natural-born *amante* (6).

This hyper-sexualized figure mirrors those in any of the classic hard-boiled and noir fictions, with one important difference. She is still other to the protagonist, but as a result of Himes’s “mak[ing] the faces black,” now the other is associated with, rather than opposed to, whiteness. Imabelle’s “banana-skinned” complexion is at once the close approximation to the desired ideal of the much darker Jackson, and his potential ruin.

Megan Abbott reads these light-skinned women (Imabelle is just Himes’s first, followed by several others in later novels) as weakened representations of the *femme fatale*, dominated and abased by the male protagonists, in an attempt to shore up or reinforce Himes’s writing of Black masculinity:

> [T]hese episodes featuring violence against black women repeatedly occur with women who are “light-skinned,” or termed “yellow.” The scenes of violence [against light-skinned female characters] seem designed to reassert blackness, maleness, heterosexuality through a ritual containment of light-skinned blacks, of women and of gay men (177).

She continues in noting the social history of light skin as a marker of relative status and privilege in communities of color. While acknowledging the diagnosis as fundamentally sound, and agreeing with her observation that women are repeated recipients of the violence, I would read the characters described as holding more potency (hence creating more anxiety) than does
Abbott. In fact, the violence perpetrated against them is a result of just this anxiety stemming from recognition of their power.

It is the occurrence of even the relatively occasional male character, most notably Chink Charlie in *The Crazy Kill* that at least in part undercuts the determinedly gendered reading of this violence offered up by Abbott. Chink’s complexion is described in virtually the same terms as any of Himes’s light-skinned female characters (with an emphasis on their yellow skin), and he is subject to much the same treatment as they are:

Grave Digger . . . handcuffed Chink’s ankles, drawing the bracelets tight just above the ankle bones. Then Coffin Ed handcuffed Chink’s hands behind his back.

Without saying another word, they opened the door, lifted Chink from the chair and hung him upside down from the top of the door by his handcuffed ankles, so that the top part of the door split his legs down to his crotch. His back lay flat against the bottom edge, with the bolt lock sticking into him.

Then Grave Digger inserted his heel into Chink’s left armpit and Coffin Ed did the same with his right, and they pushed down gradually.

Chink . . . . tried to scream, but he had waited too late. All that came out was his tongue and he couldn’t get it back. He began choking, and his eyes began to bulge (*The Crazy Kill*, 126-27).

The above marks a similar brutality at the hands of the detectives to that encountered by Imabelle, or any of her sisters in other novels. It also stands as one of a number of points where Himes’s own experience is narratized. Virtually the same experience was inflicted on him when he was arrested in Chicago some thirty-five years earlier. Several pages later, Chink meets his
end at the hands of Johnny Perry, a darker-skinned gambler who Chink attempted to cuckold.
Perry shoots him several times:

Then he leapt across the floor and stomped Chink’s dying bloody body with his bare feet until two of Chink’s teeth were stuck in his calloused heel. After that he leaned over and clubbed Chink’s head into a bloody pulp with his pistol butt (147-48).

In both instances, the violence is extreme, and is meted out by darker men against a lighter one. Either of these can be read subtextually as Black responses to the threat of whiteness. In the first, the detectives are attempting to protect the “authentically” Black community from exploitation. In the second, Johnny Perry is reacting against a threat to Black womanhood. While it is certainly still functioning under a patriarchal rubric, the incident underscores the threat of white supremacy to Black women. Both instances also share a kind of narrative rationale that, while arguable, at least makes some sense in context. It is this that marks the significant difference between this instance and those against women, and that returns to the theme of anxiety, and the potency of Himes’s *femme fatale* figures.

When violence is perpetrated upon Imabelle by Grave Digger, the rationale is not interrogation or other “official” business; because of this it seems at first even more gratuitous, more shocking.

Grave Digger . . . looked at Imabelle casually, then did a double-take, recognizing her.

He walked slowly across the room and looked down at her.

She gave him her bedroom look, hitched her red skirt higher, exposing more of her creamy yellow thighs.

“Well, bless my big flat feet, he said. “Baby-o, I got news for you.”

She gave him her pearly smile of promise of pleasant things to come.
He slapped her with such savage violence it spun her out of the chair to land in a grotesque splay-legged posture on her belly on the floor, the red dress hiked so high it showed the black nylon panties she wore.

“And that ain’t all,” he said (120).

Abbott sees these moments as the abasement of an already weakened female figure, in order to shore up the Black masculinity of those who mete out the violence. She reads this through the Cold War policy of containment, a reading of masculinity in general that has been discussed at length in a number of places; Robert Corber, Andrew Ross, and Elaine Tyler May have all read the gendered politics of 1950s artistic production against the policy of containment. While it offers some very useful readings, and while any discussion of any construction of masculinity begins, at least, with its relationship to the “master signifier” of white masculinity, I think the reading falls short in its account of the terror of whiteness.

In terms of the narrative, Grave Digger is ostensibly responding to Imabelle after one of the criminals with which she is associated (this is known by everyone save Jackson, who believes her to be a good Christian woman) has disfigured and nearly blinded his partner Coffin Ed. Still, Grave Digger’s response seems, on the face, to be out of proportion. This leads to the conclusion that the eruption of violence occurs in response or reaction to what she represents thematically, rather than what she may have done narratively. As a *femme fatale*, Imabelle certainly threatens Digger’s masculinity, but in this turn on the hard-boiled convention, she represents a powerful threat to his Black identity as well in her proximity to whiteness, and alienation from Blackness.

As with other aspects of Himes’s analysis and critique off whiteness, those emergent moments in *A Rage in Harlem*, resonate fully and more developed in later examples. Iris, Imabelle’s counterpart in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, has her visible mark of danger literally
effaced by the detectives. Himes describes her as nearly a sister to Imabelle, although a more formidable figure. After Grave Digger slaps her (for tipping off a suspect) in a scene nearly identical to that with Imabelle—“her dress hiked up showing the black lace pants”:

At the same moment Iris came up from the floor with the smooth vicious motion of a cat and slapped Coffin Ed across the face, thinking he was Grave Digger in her blinding fury.

She was a hard-bodied high-yellow woman with a perfect figure. She never wore a girdle and her jiggling buttocks gave all men amorous ideas. She had a heart-shaped face with the high cheekbones, big wide red painted mouth and long-lashed speckled brown eyes of a sexpot and she was thirty-three years old, which gave her the experience. But she was strong as an ox and it was a solid pop she laid on Coffin Ed’s cheek (29).

Coffin Ed responds by nearly choking her to death before Grave Digger renders him unconscious, “then think[s] bitterly, *These half-white bitches*” (29).

The space of whiteness is one of a perceived purity; the fact that Iris is only “half-white” occludes her participating fully in the privileges that inhere. Still, as Digger thus identifies her, he effectively places her outside of the space of Blackness, a space she doesn’t wish to inhabit anyway. In trying to gain information from Iris, Grave Digger attempts to play on her sympathies:

“Eighty-seven colored families—like you and me—”

“Not like me!”

“—have lost their life savings in this caper” (30).

Her refusal goes beyond that of any sympathy to the victims of the robbery (and the scam that precedes it). It is a refusal of any community whatsoever with the Blackness they represent. Iris’s identity allows for no such connection. She may be in the community of Harlem, but she does
not see herself being of that community. In addition to that, she presents a constant threat to the detectives, as she uses sex as a weapon to con men; she offers herself to the detectives on more than one occasion:

“How’d you like to lay me? Both of you. At the same time

“Where?” Coffin Ed asked.

“How is the question,” Grave Digger said.

“Here,” she said. “And let me worry about how.”

“All joking aside–“ Grave Digger began again, but she cut him off.

“I’m not joking.”

“All sex aside then” (124).

Later, seemingly in the course of the investigation, the detectives arrange to have her surreptitiously released from jail, to use her as a kind of bait. They disguise her, ostensibly to smuggle her out of the lockup, but the disguise functions at another level as well. Their method of disguising her involves requiring her to “black up” with shoe polish. “Make yourself into a black woman and don’t ask any questions,” Grave Digger said” (125). Abbott reads this as the humiliation of a weakened figure. I’m inclined to read it as the attempt to efface that perceived as a danger or threat to the detectives representation of masculinity. Throughout these texts, light-skinned women are portrayed as just that kind of threat, and not just to Black masculinity. Earlier in Cotton, Iris is able to escape from the custody of a white cop through seduction, leaving him blind (from a bag over his head), and naked, quite literally standing there with his useless gun (still holstered) in hand (74). Imabelle’s threat, consistent with the more circumscribed environment of A Rage in Harlem, is limited to Black males; still, it is no less potent. Her effect
on, and danger to Blackness is made clear late in the text, as she tries to elude the con men, the police, and Jackson:

A middle-aged church-going man, good husband, father of three school-aged daughters, on his way to work, dressed in clean, starched overalls and an army jumper, heard the tapping of her heels on the pavement when he stepped from his ground-floor tenement.

“A mighty light-footed whore,” he mumbled to himself.

When he came out onto the sidewalk he looked around and saw the flash of her high-yellow face and the tantalizing strip of red skirt in the spill of street light. He caught a sudden live-wire edge. He couldn’t help it... As he looked at that fine yaller gal tripping his way, his teeth shone in his black face like a lighthouse on the sea.

“You is for me, baby” he said in a big bass voice, grabbing her by the arm. He was willing to put out five bucks (113).

Imabelle first hits him with her purse, then pulls a knife and cuts him. It is this altercation that lands her in the precinct station, where Grave Digger sees her. The vignette is telling in its portrayal of Imabelle’s threat however, as the man is seemingly willing to risk everything that he has, indeed that he is, in order to fulfill the desire her visible presence elicits in him.

Even in her proximity to whiteness, Imabelle is still under the same proscription as everyone else in Harlem. Her nearly white skin is not enough to let her pass, or, in the figure presented by Cheryl Harris, to “trespass” into the white world (1711). When she is accosted by the workman, she is attempting to flee Harlem for Chicago. However, she, like Jackson, cannot move beyond the borders. Even those Black subjects from outside Harlem are, once they enter, unable to leave.
The men with whom Imabelle is working the gold mine scam all die in their attempts to escape, ironically, at the hands of Grave Digger, as he avenges the near-blinding of Coffin Ed.

As he works through the Harlem Cycle, Himes continues to refine the critique he initiates in *A Rage In Harlem*, as noted periodically here. The novels become darker, less beholden to the kind of “happy” ending that marks, even mars the first novel, as Jackson and Imabelle are reunited in what appears to be imminent nuptial bliss. Finally, as the next chapter will discuss, there is not only no happy ending, but apparently, no foreseeable ending at all, as Himes lays bare the intractability of a system predicated on maintaining its center and its margins.
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. Even the violence was funny. A man gets his throat cut. He shakes his head to say you missed me and it falls off. Damn reality, I thought. All of reality was absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting. It was funny, really. If I could just get the handle to joke. And I had got the handle, by some miracle.

The only time I was happy was while writing these strange, violent, unreal stories. I accepted them to myself as true; I believed them to be true as soon as they sprang from my thoughts.

I didn't really know what it was like to be a citizen of Harlem; I had never worked there, raised children there, been hungry, sick or poor there. I had been as much of a tourist there as a white man from downtown changing his luck. The only thing that kept me from being a black racist was I loved black people, felt sorry for them, which meant I was sorry for myself. The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books (My Life of Absurdity 1976, 126).

As noted in the last chapter, the progression of the Harlem series provided Himes a narrative structure through which to engage in increasingly overt interrogations of race, particularly of the construct of whiteness. His interrogations finally pushed against the limits and assumptions of
the genre to the point that the conventions of detective and hard-boiled genres became evermore strained under the weight of the thematic concerns addressed in the texts, specifically those pertaining to ontologies of race. In *Blind Man With a Pistol*, this strain finally overtakes the generic concerns entirely, and the weight of the thematic interrogation explodes the genre. This explosion is communicated through the narrative as well, as the reader sees Himes’s Harlem erupt in a nearly apocalyptic conflagration, which not only leaves the ostensible investigation which would conventionally drive the plot unresolved, but also suggests no solution to the questions of race that he posed.

In previous novels, Himes toyed with the chronological expectations of the genre, often narrating in succeeding chapters events that are clearly simultaneous, compressing action into impossibly short time spans. For instance, the narrative of *The Heat’s On*, the 7th novel of the cycle, occurs in the span of a single day. Himes carefully marks the time of events; the novel opens at precisely 1:22 a.m., and ends “past two o’clock” the following morning. The novel narrates events that happen at or near the same time in varying locales, through multiple perspectives, which disrupts to a degree the temporal or chronological progression. This in itself comprises a disruption of the singular (white heterosexual male) perceptual “I” of the hard-boiled tradition. Still, careful reading maintains some semblance of progression. In this respect, Himes is still observing, however loosely, the basic tenets of the detective novel. Time, while stretched or compressed, still moves forward in a conventional fashion; a solution, however strained, or unsatisfying it may be, is still attained through the accumulation of evidence, or knowledge. In this way, Himes is still working within the conventions of the form, although the cracks begin to show.
Literary critic Brian McHale, in his attempt to map a poetics of postmodernist fiction, has argued that one of the main differences between modernist and postmodernist fiction lies in the dominant questions which are foregrounded by the text. For modernist fiction, the dominant concerns the epistemological, i.e.; What is to be known?; Who knows it, how do they know it, and to what degree of certainty?; What are the limits of the knowable? For McHale, the detective novel then is the modernist text *par excellence*, because of its overt epistemological concerns (McHale 1987, 9). In many texts of this genre, after all, the engine of the plot is, quite literally, "Whodunit?" Even when the reader is informed early in the narrative, the pleasure of the text is mainly derived from watching the protagonist attempt to arrive at the answer to this question. Certainly, Himes’s early novels in the Harlem Cycle observe these general conventions, to a greater or (more often) lesser degree.

In *Blind Man*, however, even this sense of progression toward a solution is utterly destroyed, as events seem narrated out of place, and characters appear to be in multiple locations simultaneously. The result is a consistent frustration of the reader, to the extent that Raymond Nelson contended that the novel “might almost be considered a literary ruin” (63). While, as with the Harlem it depicts, the novel does seem to be consumed in a kind of conflagration of chaos and misrecognition, it is far from being a ruin. Instead, Himes has offered a cogent and chilling diagnosis of the state of race relations in the United States of the mid to late twentieth century, offering up an analysis of the material and psychic costs of an adherence to white supremacist ideology. In doing so, he has exceeded the borders of genre, even as the novel itself, unique in this respect, spills over the boundaries of his Harlem. In this novel, everything leaks; bodies exude sweat, spill blood and semen; apparently disparate crimes and events spill over into each other (although the relations are rarely, if ever pursued). The detectives themselves leave
Harlem and travel to Greenwich Village, where their own impotence is laid even more bare, unable as they are to protect a possible witness from having his own blood spilled in the street. This leakage isn’t limited to the corporeal; indeed, the very language itself leaks, spilling and emptying of meaning, until communication appears impossible, not only between Black and white, but intra-racially as well. The concerns become less epistemological, and increasingly address issues that have lurked in Himes since the first novel; here these issues become so insistent that they obliterate the ostensible narrative. The epistemological questions, while present, are no longer privileged, or even answered. As McHale notes, “Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability; push epistemological questions far enough and they ‘tip over’ into ontological questions” (1987, 11).

This privileging, or urgency of the ontological dominant is created by the emptying out of possible epistemological meanings; into this newly created emptied space rushes in the ontological dominant. The questions here, for McHale at least, include:

“What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? And so on (10).

This concept of multiple worlds of course shakes the assumption of some kind of unitary existence; in doing so, it at least questions the centeredness of a dominant culture’s experience, the “collective fiction” of the “social construction of reality,” as McHale, citing Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, describes it. What McHale does not say, at least explicitly, that becomes
increasingly clear in Himes’s novel, is that at the “tipping point” between the epistemological and the ontological questions reside those concerning issues of identity.

The point here is not to argue for Himes’s last novel as an emergent postmodernist text, although it may be an argument with some merit. As bell hooks observed, “[t]he overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance” (27). Rather, it is an attempt to locate the logic of a text deemed by some to be illogical, to read the meaning of a text deemed to be unreadable. Ironically, even as Himes writes a text wherein worlds collide, and “leak” into each other, he seems on the other hand to refuse this possibility. When a Black youth involved in the riot(s) which permeate the text, says, not unjustifiably, of the “race leaders,” “They’re all on whitey’s side,” Grave Digger retorts, “Go home and grow up. You’ll find out there ain’t any other side” (140). In this moment too, Himes seems to acknowledge that, ultimately, he may not be able to take Harlem back from the white man, even in his books.

In his study of Himes, James Lundquist contends that the opening chapter to *Blind Man With a Pistol* is “one of the strangest in American literature” (117). Himes writes of a bizarre building in Harlem with a sign posted on the outside that states simply "FUNERALS PERFORMED." No one pays any attention to it, or the Black women dressed as nuns who come and go from it; it is assumed that the building is simply a "jim-crowed" Catholic convent, that "[N]o one ever dreamed that white Catholics would act any different from anyone else who in was white" (*Blind Man* 7). The white world takes notice, however, when another sign appears, which reads "Fertile womens, lovin God, inquire within" (8). Upon investigating, two white policemen find a grotesque scene--an old man, his eleven wives, and half-a-hundred naked children who eat from
troughs, and swarm about the decrepit old building. For Lundquist, this chapter simply illustrates "Himes's recurring theme that anything can happen in Harlem," as well as emphasizing "what life in Harlem has become in the course of the twentieth century" (Lundquist 118). It shows both of these things, certainly; the novel, as does the entire series, repeatedly raises issues of social and legal justice, and the lack of either for Black America. It is through these means that Himes most overtly offers his analysis of the effect of the construct of whiteness on those excluded from its borders. This chapter, however, reads as “strange,” I think, only when read through the assumptions that reinforce this construct. Himes effectively positions such a reader to read through the perspective of the white policemen who encounter this scene:

As they picked their way around the house through knee-high weeds dense with booby traps of unseen bottles, tin cans, rusted bed springs, broken emery stones, rotting harness, dead cats, dog offal, puddles of stinking garbage, and swarms of bottle flies, gnats, mosquitos, the first cop said in extreme disgust, “I don’t see how anyone could live in such filth.”

But he hadn’t seen anything yet (8).

This is, for Himes, precisely the point; the white cop, and through him, the reader marked as white, hasn’t seen any of this, indeed, has chosen not to, until something in the landscape of signifiers forces attention to it. Even then, what is seen is read through vision distorted by the assumptions accrued through stereotypes. This becomes a dominant theme throughout the novel; as the title suggest, vision is often impaired on both sides of the color line. I hope to explicate however, how this blindness is a result of the effects of a culture blinded by the white.

Throughout this text (as he had in all of the Harlem novels), Himes offers up a litany of stereotyped images of Blackness, often without comment or critique. The opening chapter
continues in this vein, as “the first cop,” encounters the first human presence in the house, stirring a pot:

“of a type southern mammies use to boil clothes, filled with . . . stew which had a strong nauseating smell . . . . The torso of the black man looked like a misshapen lump of crude rubber. He had a round black face with a harelip which caused him to slobber constantly, and his grayish skull was shaved (9).

The references here to various stereotypes that accrue to Blackness through assumptions associated by whiteness are unmistakable. Strange nauseating odors permeate and overwhelm the white police, they encounter a Black figure whose demeanor bears only the remotest resemblance to anything human. These caricatures have always been present in Himes, as he often describes the stench of the ghetto and the bodies contained within, and these bodies themselves are often described in exaggerated terms; In The Heat’s On, for instance, one of the main characters is Pinky, a giant, half-wit, albino Negro. In Blind Man, however, these characters are pushed to what seem to be the limits of the grotesque, as they multiply throughout the text. The policeman first addresses the man as “Rastus,” one of a litany of derogatory references to Black men used by whites. The description, which can only be read as Himes’s representation of what the white cops see, effectively dehumanizes the figure before them/the reader. What the reader does with this description then determines their own ontological position. Himes continues to offer these images, layering thickly the sights, smells and sounds as filtered through the white cops’ perceptual apparatus. When they encounter Reverend Sam, the patriarch of this unusual household, he tries to explain the response of the cook, who had hit one of the police over the head with his ladle.
"He cooks for the children," the old man said. "Sometimes it does smell strange," he admitted.

"It smells like feces," the second cop said. He'd attended City College.

One of the nuns entering the kitchen at just that moment said indignantly, "It is feetsies. Everybody ain't rich like you white folks" (10).

Ultimately, at the end of the first chapter, Himes offers, not a critique, but an alternate perspective, through Reverend Sam. The officers call for backup, and Reverend Sam is questioned in his study by twelve officers. They subject him to a series of the standard epistemological inquiries of law enforcement, which is inherently a perspective of whiteness, to which he provides ready replies. The questions and answers do not seem to mesh however, as they describe two different and exclusive ontological spaces. The police seem increasingly baffled as Reverend Sam informs them that his wives were both fruitful and virginal because:

[E]very living person has two beings, the physical and the spiritual, and neither has ascendancy over the other; they could, at best, and with rigid discipline, be carefully separated--which was what he had succeeded doing with his wives. (Blind Man 13-14)

A bit later he responds that “There are laws for white folks and laws for black folks . . .

There's a white God and there's a black God” (14).

This clearly demarcates, for Himes, a sharp boundary between these two worlds, marked not only by the physical microcosm of Harlem, represented by the house as Lundquist notes, but by more intertextual, linguistic signifiers which delineate the boundary as well. It directs attention to the differences between the worlds by destabilizing the possibility of communication. Through this, Himes further destabilizes the epistemological inquiry of modernist fiction, as exemplified by the detective novel. This foreclosure of communication through syntax,
semantics and morphology is a dominant feature of this text. In addition, Reverend Sam’s responses suggest the fragmentation of identity, rather than simply alienation, as he describes the presence of “two beings” in each person.

The references here to diet and dialect, and how both are (mis)read through the white perception, continue to portray an unflattering, even potentially offensive picture of Blackness, depending on the sensibilities of the reader. On one hand, this might be seen as reinforcing the perception represented by the white cops, on the other, a reader might be offended by these depictions. Certainly Himes offers them continuously without critique. This playing on, or signifying from, the stereotypes comes at a risk, of course. This has led some to condemn, even dismiss Himes as catering to white racist tastes and assumptions. It can be read, potentially, as a form or a manifestation of self-hatred. As artist Wanda Coleman remarked, about Himes (and Iceberg Slim, another Black writer associated with a pulp genre prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called “Black Experience” novel):

And on my Top Ten list of black writers he [Iceberg Slim] would not appear–neither would Chester Himes, whom I don’t like because of all of his shame; all of his bootlicking; all his catering to white racist conceptions about blacks. 

Cotton Comes to Harlem; The Crazy Kill–awful stuff! Even though the language and some of the descriptions may be interesting, nevertheless all that hatred is there and it’s sick–from my point of view it’s very unhealthy. And he was not a great writer by anyone’s standards–black, white, or otherwise. He was a mediocre writer; he did his job–probably the best he could. I never met the man so I couldn’t assess that, but what he has left behind, I think is awful. (Angry Women 126).
Briefly, Coleman’s last remark is curious, even as a qualifier. If criticism were predicated on meeting the artist, it would be impossible to critically engage with the vast majority of artistic output, from Aristotle through whoever passed away last week. Continuing to the more germane aspects of her critique; perhaps it carries the notion of projection too far, but one might speculate to what degree the concept of the Gestalt functions here as well. Whose shame is manifested in Coleman’s interpretation of Himes? As Fred Pfeil contends, “your reactions to the lurid images, actions and characters [the novels] hurl forth reveal as much about you as about Harlem or Himes” (523).

This still, it seems, does not fully, or even adequately explain the proliferation of characters who possess attributes of, or who are described through some of the more derogatory stereotypes of Blackness that course through US culture. Their presence in Himes’s novels is so frequent that it would seem necessary to provide a fuller account of them. In his article on violence in Himes’s Harlem novels, Michael Denning once again suggests, but does not pursue, what may be the most useful explanation for much of what we see in Himes, not only in this regard, but also in terms of explaining much of the violence enacted or performed upon Black bodies. Denning notes that “one of the difficulties with comedy is its basis in socially constructed types, and Himes often seems to be walking on the brink of a sort of violent minstrel show” (16). I would propose to take this one step further: Himes is not simply walking on the brink of such a show, he is fully engaged in constructing just such a show, throughout the Harlem Cycle. The examples proliferate throughout the Cycle, and to catalogue them with any comprehensiveness would require its own discussion. Here I would simply offer a brief chronology in order to suggest their progression.
From the first pages of *A Rage in Harlem*, we see the examples accruing. When Jackson is accosted by the fake marshal, he blurts, “I ain’t done nothing, Marshal. I swear to God.” Himes continues, “Jackson had attended a Negro college in the South, but whenever he was excited or scared he began talking in his native dialect” (8). The intimation here seems to be that Jackson is a sort of Zip Coon, the minstrel figure who aspires to a level of sophistication which is always revealed as a poor sham. Certainly, the reference to the thin veneer of education might be read as just such a sham. Throughout the Cycle, there are repeated references to “blacking up” as well.

In *Cotton Comes To Harlem* detectives force the “high yellow” Iris to do so in order to smuggle her out of jail; as noted in the previous chapter, this also has the effect of reducing her as a potential threat to the detectives. Upon realizing who she is, another character responds “My God, you look like the last of the Topsys. Whatever happened to you?” (130). This blacking up also occurs in *The Heat’s On*, where the aforementioned Pinky, the albino Negro, is attempting to elude detection. After applying the shoe polish, he also constructs a disguise from old clothes in a trunk; the description is worthy of citation to emphasize the point here:

> Pinky rummaged about . . . Everything was too small . . . [He] came across a pair of peg-top Palm Beach pants . . . They fitted like women’s jodhpurs. . . . He looked about until he found a red jersey silk shirt worn by some sharp cat in the early 1930s . . . . The only hat which fitted was a white straw hat with a wide floppy brim and a peaked crown (69).

Later, when Pinky is confronted by someone in uniform, Himes writes, “Like all colored people, Pinky knew that if he acted stupid enough the average white man would pass him off as a harmless idiot” (82). Between the blacking up, and the adoption of costume, this scenario resonates strongly with the apocryphal tale of T.D. Rice’s theft of the clothing from the stable hand in the first minstrel performance.
Throughout the series, to emphasize this, there are repeated references to the “greasy skin” of Black characters as well. In the opening pages of *Blind Man*, there is another reference to blackface. One of the organized marches is the “pro-integration” march; the organizer has among his supplies “black greasepaint for his white marchers to quickly don blackfaces in an emergency” (22). What sort of emergency might necessitate such a measure is not mentioned. This only begins the list of such incidences; in addition, there are numerous references to exaggerated physical features, big lips, white eyes and teeth flashing in the dark, nappy and kinky hair over emphasized. The physical descriptions are only a part of this list, as there are repeated examples similar to that of Jackson above, where characters react in ways that recall the minstrel show. That Himes was well acquainted with the structure and characters of minstrelsy seems quite clear; biographers Fabre and Margolies note explicitly that “[h]e also enjoyed minstrel performances” among other entertainments while in Columbus (25). Curiously, they say little more about this, leaving their reader, and the reader of Himes’s fiction to wonder why he would layer so thickly these kinds of references.

In *On The Real Side*, his comprehensive study of the history of African American humor, Mel Watkins engages in a significant discussion of the phenomenon of Black performers who engaged in blackface minstrel performance. He acknowledges the argument, forwarded most prominently by Nathan Huggins, that this performance is a “working through,” as it were, of self-hatred (124). In this way, Huggins seems to echo with the complaints offered by Wanda Coleman. Still, for Watkins, this doesn’t appear sufficient, or even necessarily correct. He notes that the majority of the audience for Black-performed blackface were themselves Black, citing Robert Toll as noting that this audience was primarily comprised of working-class, or “common”
Black people. On the other hand, the Black middle-class and intelligentsia were more inclined to criticize these performers, if they acknowledged them at all (125). As he remarks:

The black middle class, perhaps even more zealously than most white Americans, accepted and aspired to European standards of taste and behavior. More importantly, these blacks actively sought to disassociate themselves from the stereotypical image of common black folks, thinking this would hasten their acceptance into mainstream society (126).

For Watkins, this “inability to laugh at minstrel exaggeration” was itself a reflection of their “paranoia and self-doubt.” Further, the attraction of minstrelsy to the Black “masses” indicated “an ironic, double-edged attitude toward white society and blacks’ position in it” (130).

If we read Himes’s own referencing of minstrelsy in this light, we begin to see it as an act of signifying on these attitudes and stereotypes; indeed, it becomes apparent that the butt of the joke is not Black culture, or the people so depicted. Rather, he is taking dead aim at the white reader who is either accepting of these attitudes, or is faced with his own guilt; at the same time, Himes deflates the pretensions of those, like Wanda Coleman, who would refuse to recognize the rich legacy of this kind of signifyin’ humor. Certainly, if we look backward to key moments of If He Hollers Let Him Go, we can trace a fairly direct line from Himes’s critique of the middle class there to these more ironic and parodic moments in the Harlem Cycle.

In order to emphasize the intentionality that this reading implies, a look toward the end of Blind Man With A Pistol is in order. Digger and Ed have, through the course of the riot around which the text is loosely organized, had their black alpaca suits (which are their standard mode of dress throughout the series) destroyed. They acquire clothing from an acquaintance of Ed’s,
and “[t]hey emerged on to the street looking like working stiffs trying to play pimps,” and head back to the station, where:

Lieutenant Anderson came into the detective room as they were searching their lockers for a change of clothes. He looked startled.

“Don’t say it,” Grave Digger said. “We’re the last of the end men.”

Anderson grinned. “Be seated, gentlemen.”

“We ain’t beat our bones yet,” Grave Digger added.

“We lost our bones,” Coffin Ed elaborated.

“All right Doctor Bones and Doctor Jones, stop in the office when you’re ready” (153).

The reference to “end men” is obviously another illustration of the minstrel show; endmen were staples of the performance. They were referred to as Tambo and Bones, for the instruments they employed. These characters were simple-minded and unsophisticated; this was played off the Interlocutor, a white man who spoke in aristocratic English and used a much larger vocabulary than the endmen. The humor of these exchanges came from the misunderstandings on the part of the Black characters when talking to the white Interlocutor. Himes goes on from here to parody this scenario (in which Anderson is obviously the Interlocutor), by turning the performance upside down. As in many of the exchanges between the three throughout the series, the roles mandated by the blackface structure are reversed. The misunderstandings are more often Anderson’s.

When writing about the series in his autobiography, from which the opening epigraph comes, Himes averred, “If I could just get the handle to joke [sic]. And I had got the handle, by some miracle.” I would contend that in ways that both provide explanation for these references and
that construct a framework to better understand Himes’s career-long intent, the parodic use of minstrelsy is the “handle to joke.” Further, it is through the employment of this strategy that he does, in some fashion, “take it away from the white man if only in my books” (126).

To continue with the discussion of Blind Man, the second chapter continues this disruption as it begins yet another story, this one of an anonymous white man searching for a homosexual encounter with a likewise anonymous Black partner. He enters a coffee shop that serves as a rendezvous for such meetings. The coffee shop is located at 125th and Seventh Avenues; this intersection is, as Himes details in the first of several “Interludes” that mark, disrupt and comment upon the text, an intersection of great importance to Harlem. It is a point of intersection where “many white people . . . pass this corner daily. Furthermore, most of the commercial enterprises—stores, bars, restaurants, theaters, etc.—and real estate are owned by white people” (20, italics in original). Himes makes it clear that whiteness functions in Harlem in exploitative fashion, in the Interlude he focuses on the economic form. The white man arrives in Harlem with another type of exploitation in mind, clearly of a sexual nature. The power relation normally enacted in this type of interaction is disrupted however, in what follows. The exchange between him, the waiter and, other customers is another example of verbal disjunction; although communication of some type is established and agreed upon, even this proves faulty:

"Coffee," he ordered in a loud constricted voice. He wanted it to be known that coffee was all he wanted.

The waiter gave him a knowing look. "I know what you want."

The white man forced himself to meet the waiter's naked eyes. "Coffee is all."
The waiter's lips twisted into a derisive grin. The white man noticed they were painted too. He stole a glance at the other beauties at the counter. Their huge tan glistening lips looked extraordinarily seductive.

To get his attention the waiter had to speak again. "Chops!" he whispered in a hoarse suggestive voice.

The white man started like a horse shying. "I don't want anything to eat."

"I know."

"Coffee."

"Chops."

"Black."

"Black chops. All you white mothers are alike."

The white man decided to play ignorant. He acted as though he didn't know what the waiter was talking about. "Are you discriminating against me?"

"Lord no. Black chops--coffee I mean--coming right up."

A sissie moved into the seat beside the white man, and put his hand on his leg. "Come with me, mother."

The white man pushed the hand away and looked at him haughtily. "Do I know you?"

The sissie sneered. "Hard to get, eh?"

The waiter looked around from the coffee urn. "Don't bother my customers," he said. The sissie reacted as though they had a secret understanding. "Oh, like that?"

"Jesus Christ, what's going on?" the white man blurted.

The waiter served him his black coffee. "As if you didn't know," he whispered.

"What's this fad?"
"Ain't they beautiful?"

"What?"

"All them hot tan chops." (16-17).

Here, not only is the boundary of race delineated, but the boundary of sexuality. As is common throughout Himes, there is a distinct homophobia here, and throughout the text. It is a facet of Himes that cannot be ignored, however a sustained analysis is beyond the scope of the present discussion. It appears at first that at least communication between the races may occur at this more physical level--indeed, this is the "plan" of one of the march organizers in the novel--but even this avenue is precluded in this instance. The result of the encounter is an exchange of bodily fluids, but the fluid exchanged (unfairly) is blood. The mis-communication concludes in death, rather than orgasm.

Two things seem to be happening here. First, the homosexual subculture of the larger Harlem milieu is constructed as yet another world, by its further destabilizing of linguistic meaning, through slang, and misunderstood, or misapplied references, apparently deliberate in the references of "black" in the above exchange. This sense of another world, with its accompanying difference in ontology, is more explicitly addressed later in the text. When Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are interrogating the homosexual lover of a murder victim, he responds to a question about his wife by saying, "My wife? I put her down before I came into the World" (168).

The use of the word "black" in the dialogue at the coffee shop points to a second operation at work in the scene, which is also apparent in the previous chapter with Reverend Sam. It seems that the Black world has more understanding and knowledge of the white world than the white world does of the Black. The inability to communicate, or know the world epistemologically,
seems to operate mostly in one direction. Later in the exchange cited above, “the white man thought they were all talking in a secret language” (18). This disparity in knowledge, in which the Black participants are in possession of a greater understanding of their “other” than are the white participants, has been often reported on by various Black writers. As bell hooks notes, “black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another “special” knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people . . . . its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist world” (1995, 31).

Himes follows these two chapters with a third that emphasizes the free play of the text’s signifiers in a double fashion. The most overt is that it simply initiates another narrative that has no bearing upon either of the others. The reader is provided no sense of the kind of linearity, or at least coherence, that is anticipated, particularly from the conventional detective novel. The second fashion in which he emphasizes this is in the text itself.

Motorists coming west on 125th Street from the Triborough Bridge saw a speaker standing in the tonneau of an old muddy battered US Army command car, parked in the amber night light at the corner of Second Avenue, in front of a sign which read

*CHICKEN AUTO INSURANCE, Seymour Rosenblum*. None had the time or interest to investigate further. The white motorists thought the Negro speaker was selling “chicken auto insurance” for Seymour Rosenblum. They could well believe it. “Chicken” had to do with the expression, “Don’t be chicken!” and that was the way people drove in Harlem.

But actually the “chicken” sign was left over from a restaurant that had gone bankrupt and closed months previously, and the sign advertising insurance had been placed across the closed shop afterwards (21).
Here Himes emphasizes the utter lack of communication between the two most present worlds in the text, Black and white, through the use of a palimpsest; the two completely unrelated sets of signifiers are read as having a single meaning. In fact, there are two meanings potentially at work, one alluding to a present state of affairs, and one to an historical occurrence. The white motorists are unable to differentiate between them. This lack of historical awareness would seem to comment on the white world’s lack of historical knowledge of the Black community generally; Himes is signifying on this, in the sense best described by Henry Louis Gates Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*:

> The mastery of Signifyin(g) creates *homo rhetoricus Africanus*, allowing—through the manipulation of these classic black figures of Signification—the black person to move freely between two discursive universes. This is an excellent example of what I call linguistic masking, the verbal sign of the mask of blackness that demarcates the boundary between the white linguistic realm and the black, two domains that exist side by side in a homonymic relation signified by the very concept of Signification (75-6).

It is here that we see the “tipping” referred to earlier by McHale; at the point where the epistemological, or knowledge, is determined through the ontological perspective. What you know is determined by the world you inhabit. When those worlds collide, misrecognition ensues.

As noted in the previous chapter, Himes depicted the desperate, almost naïve at times, hope that characterized his more honest (usually darker skinned) characters as a result of the lack of real possibility of improving their economic, political and social position in a white supremacist culture. To some degree, this lack of economic possibility is present in the quote above, as illustrated by the bankrupt restaurant (presumably Black-owned; the chicken reference is easily read as another potential signifying moment, this time on white stereotypes of Blackness) being
taken over by the white (Jewish) insurance agency. As a result of this desperation, these figures were susceptible to the various cons perpetrated by other Harlem denizens. In the earlier novels, these cons were small, localized; Goldy’s tickets to heaven, and even the comparatively more encompassing money raising or gold mine cons were all of this nature. As the Harlem cycle progresses, however, the schemes become more elaborate, involving the duping of larger numbers of people; these schemes begin to employ seemingly beneficent enterprises for corrupt and self-serving ends. The cons no longer simply exploit economic desperation, they increasingly employ, or play upon political, social and even religious hope.

Throughout the cycle, Himes repeatedly savaged the various movements that claimed to be working for Black equality and liberation. Black religious movements are shown to be simply another con. The most prevalent example of this occurs in *The Big Gold Dream*, with the Father Divine-like Sweet Prophet Brown. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem* this critique encompasses not simply religion, but the Back-to-Africa movement as well, as Deke O’Malley cynically adopts the guise of the “young Communist Christian preacher who’s going to take our folk back to Africa” (7). In *Blind Man* too, religion as a self-serving financial enterprise, knows its place in the hierarchy of human hopes: “‘Nothing takes the place of God,’ Doctor Mubuta said in his singsong voice, sounding as pious as possible, then added as an afterthought, as though he might have gone too far, ‘but money’” (41). The list of movements ostensibly geared to achieving equality, or at least in offering some reason for hope to Black communities, as represented by Harlem, is substantial; at some point, it seems, Himes found cause to castigate nearly all of them. This critique is at its most realized, and most bleak in *Blind Man With a Pistol*, as Himes remonstrates against, in turn, integration, Black Power, and religion-based movements of liberation, depicting each of them as just another con, albeit on a larger, more imaginative scale.
The forms that these objections take in the novel are worth examination, as each in turn, and all together, represent a bitter critique of how these movements, or at least those who lead them, are in many ways dependent upon, and, implicitly at least, supportive of the very power structure they superficially function to undermine. As Himes depicts it, the maintenance of status quo relations becomes paramount to each of these; if they ever achieved the goals their movements proclaim, they would find themselves without the system and its support upon which they not only survive, but thrive. In other words, if the aims they espouse were ever actually achieved, they’d be out of a job. Their investment then, in maintaining the power structure based in white supremacy against which they fulminate against is substantial. At the same time, these various movements often are antipathetic to the aims of the others; as noted repeatedly, the pie they all aim to slice from is finite, and small.

The first of these movements is actually depicted as less a con game than it is hopelessly, even pathetically naïve. Marcus MacKenzie, whose “aim was to save the world,” hopes to do so through “Brotherhood” (21). His sincerity is not in question; when he is in Europe after his discharge from the army, he is scandalized by others who talk of “ma[king] it big time via the Negro Problem . . . . They felt if they could just somehow get involved . . . the next step up the ladder would be good paying jobs in government or private industry” (25). MacKenzie leads an integrated parade to this effect; the description of the parade makes it evident that the kind of integration implied has clear antecedent, as Himes describes the stark contrast:

The forty-eight integrated black and white marchers stepped forward, their black and white legs flashing in the amber lights of the bridge approach. Their bare black and white legs and arms shone. Their silky and kinky heads glistened. Marcus had been careful to
select black youths who were black and white youths who were white. Somehow the black against the white and the white against the black gave the illusion of nakedness. The forty-eight orderly young marchers gave the illusion of nakedness. The forty-eight orderly young marchers gave the illusion of an orgy. The black and white naked flesh in the amber light filled the black and white onlookers with a strange excitement . . . . White women in the passing automobiles screamed and waved frantically. Their male companions turned red like a race of boiled lobsters. . . . The white people attracted by the black. The black people attracted by the white (27-28).

Clearly, the notion of integration described in the above is not consistent with the social, economic and political equality that the term commonly describes. Historically, and already in the text, the physical “integration” at the level of sexual contact is one already pursued by whites, with some avidness. It is a contact that Himes makes even more clear later in the text, “[Black people] changed the white folks’ luck and accepted the resulting half-white offspring without protest or embarrassment” (155). For Himes then, integration appears to be at best a one-way street, at worst a cul-de-sac. Either way, it seems to hold little in the way of real progress, because it in no way undercuts or opens for interrogation the underlying structure to the problem, that of whiteness, or white supremacy. The structures that support the inequity are still in place; white men come uptown to change their luck, then return to their white world. Furthermore, the one way nature of the exchange is emphasized above: “White women in the passing automobiles screamed and waved frantically. Their male companions turned red like a race of boiled lobsters.” Himes here is unquestionably referencing the historical fact of white male exploitation of Black women, and the simultaneous construction of white femininity as a sanctified and repressed space.
Later, Himes extends, if only briefly, a caveat to this otherwise brusque dismissal. While investigating a bloody multiple homicide that may or may not be related to anything else in the narrative, the detectives are interrogating a white woman, Anny, who is married to the son of one of the dead, a Black musician named Dick. During the interrogation, Himes writes, “Both [detectives] were thinking maybe hers was the solution, but was it the time? Would sexual integration start inside the black ghetto or outside in the white community?” (66) Yet, as quickly as it is raised, the possibility is rejected. During the same interrogation, the following exchange makes this clear.

“You changed your race?” Coffin Ed interrupted

“Leave her be,” Grave Digger cautioned.

But she wasn’t daunted. “Yes, but not to your race, to the human race.”

“That’ll hold him.”

“No, it won’t. I got no reverence for these white women going ‘round joining the human race. It ain’t that easy for us colored folks” (68).

Through Coffin Ed, Himes incisively underscores the fault-line in the logic of “sexual integration,” or any other move on the part of an individual white person who moves against the larger structure. The claim to “human,” and the individuality that it implies, is not an avenue open to people of color; nor is it easily accessible to the Annys of the world. While she, and others like her may be “going around joining the human race,” their whiteness still stands as a marker of privilege, one that cannot be shed as a snake sheds its skin. Even after this, Himes is not content to rest his case. In the last chapter, with the riots well out of hand, but destined to grow worse, Himes describes four white cops apparently guarding the Triborough Bridge to ensure that the riot does not cross out of Harlem, “[T]hey had the whole white race to protect.”
They pursue a bleeding Black man, to which Grave Digger observes, “Those white officers have to protect white womanhood” (190). This consistent return to the theme of sexual integration, ending on the scene that prompts Grave Digger’s observation (which itself invokes a whole history of lynching), makes clear that this structure of whiteness will not be so easily dismantled, at least not through integration in the bedroom.

Ultimately though, Marcus’s Brotherhood movement is shown to be at best threadbare, for, as Himes notes, “the trouble was, he wasn’t very bright” (25). In the end too, while his aim isn’t to profit financially from his “cause,” he is susceptible to another reward dependent upon the power structure as it exists: fame, or at least, recognition. “He clutched Birgit’s thigh and shouted, ‘I’ve made it baby. Just look at ‘em! Tomorrow my name will be in all the papers’” (28). For Himes, this publicity is as damaging as the cynical exploitation practiced by the other groups represented. As he later remarked, “All the so-called leaders of the black people in the United States are neutralized by publicity” (Conversations, 102). This call for recognition from those marginalized, to the dominant culture is repeated in a striking scene later in the text, in the middle of the riot. Digger and Ed are watching the television coverage of the disturbance, and hear:

a Negroid voice saying loudly, “Be calm—“ they all turned and looked at the color television. A white man was shown standing on the platform of a police sound truck exhorting his listeners: ‘Go home. It’s all over. Just a misunderstanding . . . .” At that moment he was shown in closeup so all one could see were his sharp Caucasian features talking directly to the television audience. But suddenly the perspective changed, showing . . . a sea of faces of different colors. Except for the prevalence of so many black faces . . . . and the cops in uniform, it might have been a crowd scene from any
Hollywood film about the Bible. But there aren’t that many black people in the Bible.

And no cops like those cops. It was a riot scene in Harlem. But no one was rioting. The only movement was of people trying to . . . get on television (151).

Several things are happening here. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the speaker himself; a Negroid voice perhaps, but the visual aspect is of a white man. As Seshadri-Crooks notes, “race secures itself through visibility,” that is, we react most to what we see, and how it fits within the visual categories established (8). It is striking too, that he appears to be addressing, not the people on the street, but those already “at home.” As Himes sets the scene, it would appear that the speaker is a “race leader”; his “Caucasian features” would make him that much more palatable to white power structures since he most resembles them.

The most striking thing about this passage, however, is contained in the last couple of lines, as the presence of the television camera changes the focus from the riot, whatever its causes, to being seen by the camera, hence the viewers. This call for recognition, ignored as it is, lies at the heart of Himes’s particular analysis here. The text clearly addresses the lack of visible representation of people of color in any meaningful way. Only when there is a riot do they merit this representation; so desperate for the recognition this represents that the reason for them finally being represented is abandoned in the attempt to be seen.

Himes’s depiction of the two movements represented in the other parades is far darker, more cynical than that he displays toward integration. The first of these encountered is a Black Power movement. The unnamed speaker is exhorting the crowd, while attractive women work the crowd for donations. The response from onlookers varies; one described as “a high-yellow chick with right red hair” retorts “Black power? It don’t mean nothing to me. I ain’t black.” To this another responds scornfully, “Whose fault is that?” (47). The implication here is one repeated
throughout the Cycle, as Himes once again employs the light-skinned figure as a nominal stand-in for, if not exactly white, something other than Black.

Others in the crowd, however:

understood the necessity for a fund for the coming fight. They believed in Black Power. They’d give it a try anyway. Everything else had failed. They filled the collection baskets . . . It was going anyway, for one thing and another. Rent, religion, food or whiskey, why not for Black Power? What did they have to lose? And they might win. Who knew? The whale swallowed Jonah. Moses split the Red Sea. Christ rose from the dead. Lincoln freed the slaves. Hitler killed six million Jews. The Africans had got to rule—in some parts of Africa, anyway. The Americans and the Russians have shot the moon. Some joker has made a plastic heart. Anything is possible (47).

The striking thing about the list is that the events are simply presented without historical or moral context; Black Power is comparable to any of them in its similar unbelievability. What makes such a thing unbelievable in this case though is precisely the context of a nearly monolithic, impenetrable wall of white supremacy that surrounds them. Still, one needs a foundation of belief, needs to make the leap of faith, if only out of desperation. This is a consistent theme in the Harlem Cycle, from the money raising in the initial pages of A Rage in Harlem. In the presence of despair, one reaches for any hope in the unseen; after all, anything is possible. The loss or refusal of rational hope leaves only the irrational in its wake.

It is this that makes what follows so much more heinous. The money collected is gathered by Dr. Moore, apparently the man in charge of the Black Power movement, into the trunk of his Cadillac. He leaves the rally, and proceeds to a relatively posh apartment building, where the banner that read BLACK POWER has “miraculously” changed to one that reads
BROTHERHOOD. He is greeted warmly by the other residents who “admired his efforts at integration” (51). Upon him entering his apartment, it is learned that Dr. Moore is little more than a pimp, running a string of high class Black prostitutes for a white clientele. Black Power is only another scheme to raise money, which explains the earlier reference to his “looking regretfully” at the mouthful of gold teeth flashed by one of his supporters. His regret seems to be that he cannot access it. Certainly the scam he is running is not much removed from pulling the teeth out of someone’s mouth.

The other march is led by General Ham, head of The Temple of Black Jesus. The temple icon is described as:

- a gigantic black plaster of paris image of Jesus Christ, hanging by his neck . . . There was an expression of teeth-bared rage on Christ’s black face. His arms were spread, his fists balled, his toes curled. Black blood dripped from red nail holes. The legend underneath read:

  **THEY LYNCHED ME** (73).

General Ham’s church is unlike any Christian church, as he makes clear from the outset. In opposition to the depiction of Blacks as by nature meek and forgiving (a construct which developed in opposition to the “savage brute” stereotype that flourished in the nineteenth century, especially post-bellum), General Ham forwards a doctrine (consistent with some forms of messianic nationalism) of a Black Christ bent on vengeance. To overcome by love is “the white Jesus’s philosophy . . . . It only work for whitey. It’s whitey’s con” (77). Instead, Ham proposes that they feed the flesh of the Black Jesus “to whitey . . . .until he perish of constipation if he don’t choke to death first” (78). After he preaches a sermon of indigestible salvation, he steps to the curb where he enters a Cadillac at the curb:

“I been cooking with Jesus,” he lisped . . .

She chuckled. It was a fat woman’s chuckle. It sounded like hot fat bubbling. She pulled out in front of a bus and drove down the crowded street as though black people were invisible. They got the hell out of her way (79).

In both of these instances, Himes depicts a cynical representation of the various movements for Black struggle and liberation as simply scams through which to reap the benefits of a capitalist system. For Himes, capitalism was unquestionably one facet of white supremacy; it is a point to which he returns repeatedly in both interviews and in his autobiography.

All of these are stereotypes of a sort that Coleman and others might read in a way that leads them to condemn Himes—a more productive approach might be to see Himes offering these stereotypes as an indirect critique of a power structure predicated on white supremacy. These figures stand as a kind of broad caricature of how those without hope might be duped by others who cynically exploit their hopelessness.

Himes’s critique doesn’t stop there. Through his detectives, he offers yet another, historicized reading of the impact of whiteness and white supremacy. In one of the Interludes appearing late in the text, Ed and Digger present a critique that pointedly underscores the structural and historical nature of the construct of whiteness:

"I take it you've discovered who started the riot," Anderson said.

"We knew who it was all along," Grave Digger said.

"It's just nothing we can do to him," Coffin Ed echoed.

"Why not, for God's sake?"
"He's dead," Coffin Ed said.

"Who?"

"Lincoln," Grave Digger said.

"He hadn't ought freed us if he didn't want to make provisions to feed us," Coffin Ed said. "Anyone could have told him that."

"All right, all right, lots of us have wondered what he might have thought of the consequences," Anderson admitted. "But it's too late to charge him now."

"Couldn't have convicted him anyway," Grave Digger said.

"All he'd have to do is plead good intentions," Coffin Ed elaborated. "Never was a white man convicted as long as he plead good intentions."

All right, all right, who's the culprit this night, here, in Harlem? Who's inciting these people to this senseless anarchy?"

"Skin," Grave Digger said. (135, italics in original).

The point about “good intentions” reveals to the reader the understanding that it is not the individual white who is the enemy here, rather it is the construction which simultaneously constructs, protects and veils the privilege of whiteness. The individual’s good intentions are, of course subverted, or perhaps diverted by the structural or systemic aspects of whiteness and its accompanying privilege, even as these good intentions mask the “real” culprit, “skin.” This point is reinforced by Himes several pages later, as the exchange between Anderson and the detectives related in the Interlude is echoed or reprised within the context of the narrative.

“All right, all right! I take it you know who started the riot.”

“Some folks call him by one name, some another,” Coffin Ed said.
“Some call him lack of respect for law and order, some lack of opportunity, some the teachings of the Bible, some the sins of their fathers,” Grave Digger expounded. Some call him ignorance, some poverty, some rebellion. Me and Ed look at him with some compassion. We’re victims.”

“Victims of what?” Anderson said foolishly.

“Victims of your skin,” Coffin Ed shouted brutally, his own patchwork of grafted black skin twitching with passion.

Anderson’s skin turned blood red.

That’s the mother-raper at the bottom of it,” Grave Digger said. “That’s what’s making these people run rampage on the streets.”

“All right, all right, let’s skip the personalities—“

“Ain’t nothing personal. We don’t mean you personally, boss,” Grave Digger said.

“It’s you color—“

“My color then—“

“You want us to find the instigator,” Grave Digger contended.

“All right, all right,” Anderson said resigned, throwing up his hands. “Admitted you people haven’t had a fair roll—“

“Roll? This ain’t craps. This is life!” Coffin Ed exclaimed. “And it ain’t a question of fair or unfair.”

“It’s a question of law, if the law don’t feed us, who is?” Grave Digger added.

“You got to enforce law to get order,” Coffin Ed said.

“What’s this, an act? Lieutenant Anderson asked. “You said you were the last of the end men, you don’t have to prove it. I believe you.”
“It ain’t no act,” Coffin Ed said, “Not ours anyway. We’re giving you the facts.”

“And one fact is that the first thing colored people do in all these disturbances of the peace is loot,” Grave Digger said. “There must be some reason for the looting other than local instigation, because it happens everywhere, and every time.”

“And who’re you going to charge for inciting them to loot?” Coffin Ed demanded (153-154).

This passage is worth quoting at some length, for the cogent way in which Himes uses the exchange between Anderson and the detectives to limn out an entire theoretical apparatus. As it opens with the list of possible perpetrators, the detectives list nearly every excuse or rationale that has been used to pathologize the behavior of the Black underclass, both in 1969, and in September 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. From there they count off historical and religious possibilities–are the teachings of the Bible referencing the justifications for slavery, or the teachings of Jesus, or both–or neither? From there, the indictment of “skin,” reprises the Interlude most explicitly. Anderson’s response is a brilliant encapsulation of a “typical” white response, defensiveness at what is immediately perceived as an individual attack, rather than an observation of the marker of unwarranted and unacknowledged privilege.

From this point, the critique addresses two of the thorniest points. Anderson’s response about “a fair roll” echoes any number of explanations for inequity that willfully disregard the weight of historical advantage, reducing it all to a matter of chance (here I’m put in the mind of radio commentator Rush Limbaugh’s oft repeated mantra of “the winners and losers of life’s lottery.” It is as though we’re all contestants on some cosmic version of “Wheel of Fortune”). It also hearkens back to the earlier vignette of the “Chicken Auto Insurance” sign, as the traces of history with which we all live are elided, misread, unacknowledged. As their final riposte, Ed
and Digger address the split between law and justice. In the absence of justice, it appears, law must step in to achieve some balance—“if the law don’t feed us, who will?” It would seem the Ed’s reference to feeding should be read in a broader way than simply one’s daily bread; in a market economy, it would imply access to a whole range of goods and services. The problem there is that law is (yet) another face of the construction of whiteness. It determines the issue of access and right to property, and as Cheryl Harris, George Lipsitz and others have demonstrated, it is an exclusionary access.

Finally, this exchange underscores one of the driving themes of the narrative. Initially, the two Black detectives are investigating the murder of the white homosexual. At every turn, however, their investigation is subverted by the white power structure in whose name they act. At one point, they are removed from this investigation, and told to find out who started the riots. What is expected, even demanded of them is that they uncover a local solution to the problem, in order to provide the restoration of the existing order, which is the conventional result of the traditional detective novel; even in the hard-boiled genre, with its acknowledgement of a generally corrupt social order, there is a clearer sense of closure than this sort of solution might entail. The exchange above makes clear that there is no “local” solution, rather, that the answer, the facts ostensibly demanded by the power structure, as represented by Lieutenant Anderson (and Captain Brice, his superior), would point directly back at them.

Himes reinforces this through an exchange between the detectives, and Michael X, the leader of the Black Muslims. They are, incidentally, the only Black organization that is represented with even a modicum of sympathy in the novel.

“As I understand it, headquarters thinks there’s one person up here who’s inciting these people to riot,” Michael X spoke to the detectives.
“That’s the general idea,” Grave Digger said. . . .

There’s Mr. Big,” Michael X said. “He handles the narcotics and the graft and the prostitution and runs the numbers for the Syndicate . . . .

“Who?” Grave Digger demanded.

“Ask your boss, if you really want to know,” Michael X said. “He knows.” And he couldn’t be budged.

“A lot of people are laying it on the Black Muslims’ anti-white campaign,” Coffin Ed said.

Michael X grinned. . . .”They’re white, ain’t they? Mr. Big. The Syndicate. The newspapers. The employers. The landlords. The police—not you men of course—but then you don’t really count in the overall pattern. The government. All white. We’re not really anti-white, we just don’t believe ‘em, that’s all. Do you?” . . . .

“You keep talking like that you won’t live long,” Grave Digger said.

. . . .”You think someone is going to kill me?”

“People have been killed for less,” Grave Digger said (174-75).

While the figures Himes uses have a somewhat hackneyed sound to them (“Mr. Big,” “The Syndicate”), the intimation is clear. It is not any “body,” white or Black, who instigates the violence and mayhem occurring around them; rather, it is systemic, held in place through an interlocking series of institutions that operate toward the maintenance of power. Any disruption in the system requires a scapegoat, or patsy—someone upon whom the blame may be placed, someone who can believably be cast as anti-system, as anti-white, for the two are, in the end, synonymous.
It is at this point finally, that the detective genre is obliterated in the novel. Having named the guilty party as the very system under which the novel (as well as the larger society for which it is, ultimately, a synecdoche) is functioning—what then? There can be no closure, no bringing before the bar of “justice” the very system which determines what that justice is comprised of.

After this exchange, then, the novel is left at an impasse. The most overtly referenced rendering of this inaccessibility to successful, or satisfactory closure is the eponymous character, a sightless Black man, who emerges in the last two chapters. He refuses to acknowledge his own blindness, and attempts to function as though he still had sight. This has catastrophic consequences, as he persistently ignores comments addressed to him, or assumes they are directed at others. This misfiring in the attempt at communicating, and the resulting frustration finally erupts in the "real" firing of bullets--the blind man draws a gun in the subway, and accidentally kills a minister when trying to shoot a white man, whose presence he only becomes aware of through the discourse of another. The blind man is shot after he kills a policeman, and his death provides the "dead man" wished for earlier by Dr. Moore, the corrupt leader of the Black Power movement, who wants a riot to start so that he can profit from the ensuing looting.

He gets what he wants, as the rioting begins. When the two detectives call for reinforcements, Lt. Anderson asks what started the riot. Grave Digger responds:

"A blind man with a pistol."

"What's that?"

"You heard me, boss."

"That don't make any sense."

"Sure don't." (191).
The book ends here, literally and textually at a point of non-sense. It never really delivers any answers to the various questions it raises through the narrative; either within the context of the story, or those raised thematically. In some respects then, the title refers to Digger and Ed too, as they are without knowledge or power, are blind to any solution. At the end of the book they are left shooting rats fleeing a building being razed for urban renewal (itself yet another metonym of whiteness, as George Lipsitz details) while white police stationed to prevent the trouble from spilling over the Harlem borders taunt them.

Himes himself thought that organized violence was the only answer to the intractable question he finally ran up against: How will the African-American community gain equal status in this culture? (Williams, 61-4). In Plan B, a novel that he began prior to Blind Man With a Pistol, but was unable to complete, he even constructs such a possible world, but then denies it success, or closure. In this novel, provided a conclusion by Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner, from an outline found with Himes’s manuscript, the attempt at organized violence descends into random anarchic acts which cause the dissolution of all the worlds constructed in the text. As Brian McHale notes:

Another symptom of ontological stress is anarchism, the refusal either to accept or to reject any of a plurality of available ontological orders. This, I would maintain, is precisely the postmodern condition: an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural (37).

Ironically enough, in this text the intention of the person behind the violence in Plan B, an African American named Tomsson Black, is for an organized, collective uprising; what subverts this plan is the insistence of the Black men to whom he delivers firearms to act individually, in defiance of the stereotype that would foreclose this possibility to them. This further emphasizes the chaotic, anarchic state of affairs with which Himes grapples.
By this point in his life, Himes’s health was deteriorating rapidly. It would seem that he was well aware that his creative powers were suffering a similar decline as a result. For seventeen novels and scores of short stories, he had labored to address and expose the intractability and absurdity of racism and racial discord; in these last two novels, he seems intent on unleashing his fullest, most impassioned critique; it is as though the realization of his own impending limits had finally freed him from any limits of literary conventions. It is this passion then, this insistence upon his fullest disclosure of the extent to which “all white men were guilty” that finally spills past the borders of genre, even those of narrative structure, as the message utterly exceeds the medium.

As is indicated in the epigraph preceding this chapter, Himes was well aware of the constructedness of his worlds. In constructing the world of Harlem as he did, he exploited and, finally, exploded a quintessential American literary form in attempting to express the inexpressible; the apocalyptic nature of race relations in this culture. In 1969, the questions and problems posed by Himes were unanswerable; they remain so today.
CONCLUSION

ON THE MATTER OF AUTHENTICITY

So a white writer can sit down and he can write some of the goddamnedest, most extraordinary bullshit about the blacks, but he will successfully project his story since he’s not interested in having any authenticity.--Chester Himes, *Conversations With Chester Himes*

In the preceding pages, it has been my project to trace a path through Chester Hime’s use (and “abuse”) of hard-boiled protocols—as these formal codes conventionally and metaphorically inscribe and reify constructs of white masculinity to a popular audience—in order to engage in an unmasking, interrogation, and critique of these constructs. The purpose throughout was not to engage in character studies; still, some discussion of the “entity” of whiteness as embodied in Himes’s fictional characters has seemed unavoidable, even warranted. It is through characters and milieu, as well as stylistic or generic choices, that novelists represent their response to the cultural moment in which they operate.

I have sought to illustrate, however, that one of Himes’s signal achievements, as well as one of the ways in which he most forcefully explicates and analyzes his own encounter with “the wages of whiteness,” is through style. I have discussed the manner in which he carried out this explication and analysis, through an appropriation and subversion of the conventions of the hard-boiled style. As a result, Himes accomplished much, much more than simply “mak[ing] the faces black,” as he disingenuously claimed to John Williams (*Conversations* 48). In adopting the hardboiled genre to represent “his” Harlem then, Himes certainly moved past the “old used
forms,” and, reaching back to his own first published novel for form and inspiration, he demonstrated himself to be a stylistic innovator worthy of critical and popular attention for his achievement.

As the first black writer to engage explicitly with the conventions of the hard-boiled form, Himes successfully reinvented, and signified on this “old, used” (white) form in such a way as to critique and implicate the genre itself, and the assumptions embedded within it. His black faces (and his “blackfaces”), as they appear in the hardboiled genre consistently interrogate the assumptions of whiteness about its other, even as they unsettle the assumptions about itself that whiteness entails. In doing so, he also interrogates the assumptions that coalesce around whiteness’s principal binary, blackness. Individual subjectivity does not, cannot exist independent of a raced identity in this culture; this identity is, of course, always in relation to its perceived other. One is what the other ain’t. By turning the genre back on itself, Himes then interrogates the very foundation of whiteness, or white identity, as constructed in this culture, the ideology of the autonomous individual.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Himes’s early fiction has often been relegated to the second tier of black realist, or naturalist fiction, the so-called “social protest” genre associated most prominently with Richard Wright. The commentators like Robert Bone who make this claim, effectively placing Himes at the margins of the African American “canon,” such as it is, are frequently at a loss as to how to account for, or address his Harlem novels. As a result, they ignore them, as Bone does, or dismiss them as little more than pot boilers. In doing so, they overlook the significant impact these novels have had, and continue to have, on not just African American literature and culture, but on the American culture as a whole.
Himes’s innovation has produced lasting effects throughout the American culture, even if some of these are unrecognized, unacknowledged. Most clearly, he undoubtedly inspired several of the authors of the late 1960s and early 1970s who are associated with the “pulp” genre referred to as the “Black Experience novels” (a term coined by the most prolific publishers of these books, Holloway House). These “ghetto realist” authors include Iceberg Slim (a.k.a. Robert Beck), Eddie Stone, and, most famously, Donald Goines. The debt of this latter writer is indisputable; in what might be his most accomplished novel, *White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief*, Goines named his protagonist Chester Hines in apparent homage. While none of these writers can be considered comparable to Himes as a stylist, they continued to provide voice to the voiceless, as they articulated aspects of poor and working-class black culture. They continued to write “things that white people [don’t] want to hear about,” as Himes’s cousin Henry Lee Moon said of his first novel.

In turn, these writers, as well as Himes himself, were significant precedents to the “blaxploitation” film genre of the early to mid 1970s. This connection is cemented by virtue of the fact that one of the major films associated with this genre is *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, an adaptation of one of Himes’s Harlem novels. This genealogy would arguably continue through contemporary hip hop, albeit in a more indirect fashion. I might even contend that in some fashion, Chester Himes paved the way for what is possibly the most (in)famous of the black revolution novels of the 1970s, Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. This connection is implied but not fully explicated by Kali Tai in her article, “‘That Just Kills Me’: Black Militant Near-Future Fiction.” Himes’s influence doesn’t end there; the tradition of black hard-boiled detective fiction continues in the work of, most notably, Walter Mosley.
As I began this project, indeed, as my interest in African American literature of has grown and intensified, I have become increasingly cognizant and conscious of the potential hazard of expropriation. It seems important to me that I not, in Himes’s own words, become “as much of a tourist there as a white man from downtown changing his luck.” “There” for Himes was Harlem; for me it is the whole catalogue of black cultural production. The question that underlies this entire study then, has been: How do I refrain from, or avoid becoming, a tourist? Himes, himself was conscious of, and sensitive to, the relationship of the black writer to the white reader. During a 1970 interview with writer John A. Williams he remarked:

Well, the book publishers . . . are trying to exploit the black consciousness to sell books. As long as it titillates the whites, they will do it to sell books. . . .

White people, it seems to me, are titillated by the problem of the black people, more than taking it seriously. I want to see them take it seriously, good and goddamn seriously, and the only way that I think of to make them take it seriously is with violence. I don’t think there’s any other way. I see it on the faces of the whites around the world—the smirks, the sneaking grins and all this stuff; I realize they’re not taking the blacks seriously.

(Conversations 59).

His contention that white readers are “titillated” by black literature raises a possibility to which any thoughtful white reader must attend. As I noted at the outset, this was certainly an issue in my earliest encounter with Himes; my relatively young age is at best a mitigating factor. So the suspicion lingers, to what degree might I be, in Himes’s own words, a “white man from downtown changing his luck,” that is, how might I be guilty of the charge of “titillation” that Himes levels against whites, in this case the white readers of his fiction. If the aesthetic pleasure derived from Himes’s fiction is predicated on the pain of the “other” that he describes, from the
results of the absurd violence, then certainly, the charge of titillation borne of a kind of racist pleasure is justified, even accurate. Readers responding in this fashion reinforce their own identification with their whiteness (or, in some instances, as discussed, their desire for whiteness). To be sure, Himes invites this response, as he noted in his autobiography:

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 that I was writing absurdity. Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference (My Life of Absurdity 108).

Here I think, Himes is dissembling to some degree. It isn’t just the French who would “believe anything about Americans, black or white,” this description applies to white Americans as well. As a younger, more gullible reader at least, I was certainly an example of this as I noted at the outset. Nonetheless, as I have endeavored to demonstrate, Himes offers up the most absurd, outrageous stereotypes of black Americans as something of a Rorshach, or Gestalt test. How the reader responds will often tell more about the reader than about Himes, or about blackness. In this respect, Himes performs a sort of extra-textual critique of whiteness, as those who self-identify as such define it in its relation to their conception of blackness. White is what black ain’t. Or, perhaps more appropriately, white ain’t what black is. I originally came to Himes, and other black writers, looking to learn what it “meant” to be black. This entire study is an example of an evolution of thought that I’ve undergone in this respect; the lens has turned into a mirror, and Chester Himes, it turns out, has taught me as much or more about what it means to be white.
My own investment in Himes, then, has been one of self-discovery. He is a prime example of how writers of color have enabled me to understand my own often subconscious investment in a white supremacist ideology, and my subsequent responsibility in unmasking and undoing that destructive ideology. It is in this way, then, that I aim to avoid being simply a tourist, and in some fashion, however similarly vicarious, aim to be perhaps more of a “fellow traveler.”

It is in this spirit that I wrote this dissertation. In many ways, it is as much a document of my own journey as it is an analysis of the fiction of Chester Himes. I know it will not happen in my lifetime, but I exit this leg of the journey with the hope that some day Himes’s novels, and his life, will be read, at least in part, as an historical document of ideologies and beliefs long since past, and that journeys such as mine are no longer necessary.


