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Two-Tone Detectives: Cross-Cultural Crime In Chester  
Himes' Harlem Cycle Novels  
*Black Bush City Limits*

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## Abstract

This Thesis comprises a dissertation, ‘Two-Tone Detectives: Cross-Cultural Crime in Chester Himes’ Harlem Cycle Novels’; and *Black Bush City Limits*, a novel set amongst the ‘murphoisie’ of Irish London.

The focus of the dissertation is an exploration of Himes’ expansion of the terms of the crime novel to countenance the broader theme of crimes against humanity, specifically slavery and its legacy in the United States of America following Emancipation in 1865. The dissertation argues that Himes takes a subaltern genre and by means of resisting the formulaic limitations of crime fiction introduces discourses not usually associated with the genre, such as folk tales, the Absurd, aspects of comedy derived from Elizabethan theatre, carnival, and the historical novel. The dissertation argues that Himes does not consistently manage to blend all of these elements successfully, and that his final unfinished novel, *Plan B*, fails to realise the potential of Himes’ subaltern genre.

My novel, *Black Bush City Limits*, is an attempt to create a novel in the subaltern genre I argue Himes experiments with in the Harlem Cycle. In *Black Bush City Limits* a series of murders take place in and around the Dolmen Irish Centre in North London. Mick Kavanagh, a worker at the Centre, investigates these murders.

His story is interrupted by extracts from a tranche of letters sent to him by his dying uncle in Ireland. These are by his Victorian forebear, Margaret Kavanagh, alive at the time of the Famine in Ireland. As the novel progresses the significance of these letters becomes apparent, and the two stories are gradually brought together. My dissertation contains a concluding chapter in which I trace where my own novel applies lessons learned from Himes’ example, and where I depart from him.

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## Introduction

In her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* Joy DeGruy analyses the ways in which slavery left deep and abiding scars not only on the bodies but also on the psyches of Black Americans who were slaves themselves and on their descendants. She cites the definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder given in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, and applies this definition to Black Americans: ‘a serious threat to one’s life...; a threat or harm to one’s children, spouse, or close relative; sudden destruction of one’s home or community; seeing another person... killed as a result of... violence’. These are just of some of the triggers that can set off PTSD – as DeGruy says, ‘the manual says that any one the above stressors is enough to cause PTSD... Many slaves did not experience just one of the above stressors. Many slaves experienced all of them!’<sup>1</sup>

She goes on to outline how Emancipation was only ever partial in the century after the slaves were freed, how measures such as the Black Codes introduced in the South in 1865, which prevented Black Americans from owning land, voting, and sitting on juries; the Exclusionary Laws that restricted the number of Black Americans in various territories, such as Oregon; the Peonage of Sharecropping, where former slaves worked on the land of their former masters in return for a share of the crops they raised, and were forced back into virtual slavery through debt servitude; the Convict Lease System, where Black Americans convicted of crimes were leased to plantation owners; Jim Crow legislation, which created an apartheid system; and lynching all effectively continued the subjugation of Black Americans on much the same footing they had known as slaves.

These crimes against humanity cast a dark shadow across American history. DeGruy argues that not only are the sins of the fathers visited on the children, but the sins *against* the

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<sup>1</sup> DeGruy, Joy *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Portland: Joy DeGruy Publications Inc., 2015, p.114

fathers are also visited on the children. She analyses various dysfunctional behaviours associated with Black Americans, such as violence, fatalism, drug addiction, absenting fathers, anger, a sense of worthlessness, and traces these back to slavery and its legacy.

Chester Himes confronts many of these issues in a body of work comprising eighteen novels, two memoirs, and numerous short stories. But it is in his Harlem Cycle of detective novels that he best articulates the experience of Black Americans a century after 'Emancipation'. This study attempts to answer the following questions: can crime fiction deal with the larger theme of crimes against humanity, such as slavery and what came in its wake? Does a genre like crime fiction allow for marginalised writers to reach a wider readership, or is crime fiction a kind of subaltern genre, to be read less seriously than literary fiction? And finally are there ways in which this subaltern genre has greater licence to express the subcultural?

It may seem strange for a writer from an Irish background to focus on a Black American author. But it should be remembered that Ireland was for seven hundred years a colonial laboratory, and that many of the measures brought against the slaves in America were first instituted against the Irish, whether through mechanisms such as the Penal Laws, disenfranchisement, or 'scientific' racism. For much of this long history the Irish themselves were virtually slaves, and we see similar patterns of dysfunctionality across the two communities. As Thomas Moore, 'the Bard of Erin', said, 'Born of Catholic parents I had come into the world with the slave's yoke around my neck'.<sup>2</sup>

My study of Himes therefore is an attempt to trace how disempowerment and oppression impacts on writers, and what useful lessons can be drawn from Himes' own work. In Chapter 1 of this study I examine the first three novels of the Harlem Cycle, *A Rage in*

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Moore, quoted in Kelly, Ronan, *Bard of Erin, The Life Of Thomas Moore*, London: Penguin Books, 2009, p.15

*Harlem* (1957), *The Real Cool Killers* (1959), and *The Crazy Kill* (1959), and the ways in which comedy and absurdity go hand-in-hand in these novels.

In Chapter 2 I examine *The Big Gold Dream* (1960), *All Shot Up* (1960), and Himes' masterpiece, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965). I suggest that Himes' novels written during this middle passage of the Harlem Cycle can best be understood as attempts to travesty the accepted values of America, the genre of crime fiction itself, and that his satirical edge is at its sharpest in *Cotton Comes To Harlem*.

In Chapter 3 I look at the final three novels in the Harlem Cycle, *The Heat's On* (1966), *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969), and *Plan B* (1993), left unfinished at his death, and published posthumously in a version by editors Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner. Here I analyse Himes' increasing bitterness about America, and the way in which violence moves from a kind of *grand guignol* slapstick in the earlier novels to something much darker.

A short concluding chapter returns to the questions I outlined above: can crime fiction deal with the larger theme of crimes against humanity, which slavery and its legacy undoubtedly were? Does a genre like crime fiction allow for marginalised writers to reach a wider readership, or is crime fiction a kind of subaltern genre? And does a subaltern genre allow for subcultural expression in ways more conventional genres may preclude? I also attempt to say how I have drawn on Himes' novels in writing my own novel *Black Bush City Limits*, and where I depart from him.

There is no doubt that Himes is an uneven writer. But perhaps the same charge could be levelled at, say, Charles Dickens, another novelist for whom writing serially brought commercial as well as artistic pressures. What is not in doubt is that the issues Himes confronts – racism, oppression, crime – have not gone away. I argue in this short study that his exploration of these issues represents a striking and important response to the predicament

of the Black American writer, and by extension writers from similar cross-cultural backgrounds.



## Chapter 1

### ‘Start With Action’: *A Rage In Harlem, The Real Cool Killers, The Crazy Kill*

#### *A Rage In Harlem*

The opening chapter of *A Rage In Harlem* sets the tone for the novels that follow. Jackson, a young Black man who works at Mr Clay’s funeral parlour, is besotted with Imabelle, ‘A cushion-lipped, hot-bodied, banana-skin chick with speckled-brown eyes of a teaser and... high-arched, ball-bearing hips.’ Jackson and Imabelle are about to witness a technological marvel: ‘Hank was going to turn Jackson’s hundred and fifty ten-dollar bills into a hundred and fifty hundred-dollar bills.’<sup>3</sup>

Jackson pawns his clothes, his jewelry, and secures an advance on his salary. But then, ‘Hank closed the oven door and lit the gas. At that instant the stove exploded with such force it blew the door off.’ (*HCI* 5 – 6) At this point we see the first ‘policeman’ of the Harlem Cycle enter the frame:

‘Hold it, in the name of the law!’...A tall, slim colored man with a cop’s scowl rushed into the kitchen. He had a pistol in his right hand a gold-plated badge in his left.

‘I’m a United States marshal. I’m shooting the first one who moves.’(*HCI* 6)

Jackson begs him for mercy: ‘Leave me go, just this once, Marshal.’ The phony policeman’s reply is deeply ironic: ‘Suppose I’d let off everybody. Where would I be then? Out of a job. Broke and hungry. Soon I’d be on the other side of the law, a criminal myself.’(*HCI* 8) He relents when Jackson says he will pay him \$200, which he then goes and steals from his employer’s safe at the funeral parlour.

All of the characteristic elements of the Harlem Cycle are in this scene. First, there is the magical quality of the set-up. Turning ten dollar bills into hundred dollar bills evokes

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<sup>3</sup> Chester Himes, *The Harlem Cycle Volume I*, Payback Press, Edinburgh, 1997, p.4. Subsequent references are given as *HCI* with page number following, all in brackets.

myths, fables, and folk tales such as King Midas, or Aesop's story of the Goose That Laid The Golden Eggs, or the Aunt Nancy stories told in the American South<sup>4</sup> and at once walks a line between reality and the world of the tall tale. This is a trope Himes revisits throughout the Cycle, where treasure maps, giant albinos, and mutes crowd the pages, along with documentary descriptions of Harlem.

Second, there is the absurdity of the situation, an absurdity at once humorous and existential. In the Harlem Cycle Himes offers us an 'absurd vision'<sup>5</sup> of Harlem, as Stephen F. Soitos observes: 'The extreme behavior of Himes' black characters... is predicated on the simple but serious fact that racism completely controls their lives.'<sup>6</sup>

Himes' 'absurd vision', then, comes from the particular predicament of the Black American. For Himes grew up in a country whose Constitution proclaims that 'all men are created equal', but which was built on the sweat of slaves, and nearly a hundred years on from Emancipation was still lynching Black Americans, segregating them, disenfranchising them. In many ways the crimes in the Harlem Cycle are incidental. It is the crime of what the country has done and is doing to its Black citizens that permeates the novels. And it is this more existential absurdity, founded in the contradictions of America itself, that Himes conveys so vividly in the Harlem Cycle.

Third, there is the conflation of all social relations in the novels to that of victims and perpetrators. Harlem is depicted as a place where everyone is either hustling or being hustled. In America, in Himes's vision, you're either square or you're hip. For a society founded on criminal principles will have either victims or perpetrators as its citizens. All men are created equal, but some are less equal than others.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the Anansi Trickster tales of West Africa and the Caribbean. These evolved into 'Aunt Nancy' stories in the Southern States.

<sup>5</sup> Soitos, Stephen F., *The Blues Detective: A Study Of African American Detective Fiction*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, p.126

<sup>6</sup> *The Blues Detective*, p.126.

It would be instructive to trace the way the comedy so apparent in the early instalments of the Harlem Cycle darkens into something more akin to rage in the later novels, for as much as the reader is entertained a more sombre, tragic sensibility underscores the propulsive humour of Himes' *policiers*, until, in the end, the mask slips and we see cold fury staring back at us.

*A Rage In Harlem* works like a magic trick. Himes uses adroit sleight of hand to distract the reader from working out just how the trick is pulled off. Himes' sleight of hand is more to do with the constant action and dazzling quality of the writing – it is this that most distracts the reader.

For instance, when the novel opens we are given the impression that Jackson is most worried about the disappearance of Imabelle once 'The Blow' has gone down. It is only further into the novel that we discover the importance of her trunk, taken away by the 'Marshal' along with his girlfriend. Then later, we find out that Jackson's anxiety about the trunk is to do with the gold ore it contains. At the very end of the novel – as if producing a rabbit out a hat – we learn that much of the gold ore has been junked to accommodate the dead body of Slim, the very 'Marshal' who 'blew' the scene at the beginning of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

So while this careful drip-feed of information echoes techniques used by Golden Age authors and their hardboiled counterparts, it is the other elements discussed above – of magical set ups, absurdity, the compression of social relations to those of the hustler and the hustled – that distinguishes Himes' fiction from his forebears and contemporaries.

This magician's manipulation is further underscored by the appearance of such exotic figures as Goldy, Jackson's brother. Goldy is the first in a long line of characters who use

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<sup>7</sup> His accomplices decide he is too much of a liability once he had been disfigured by the acid thrown in Coffin Ed's face, which splashes on to him and badly burns him.

exotic disguise in the Harlem Cycle. We first meet him in Chapter 4 when Jackson goes to seek his help:

A Sister of Mercy sat on a campstool to one side of the entrance [to Blumstein's Department Store], shaking a round black collection-box at the passersby and smiling gently.

She was dressed in long black gown, similar to the vestments of a nun, with a white starched bonnet atop a fringe of gray hair. A large gold cross, attached to a black ribbon, hung at her breast. She had a smooth-skinned, round cherubic face, and two gold teeth in front which gleamed when she smiled.

Goldy hustles a living by selling tickets to Heaven:

'Mama say Uncle Pone need two.'

The nun slipped a black hand into the folds of her gown, drew out two white cards, and gave them to the little girl. Printed on the cards were the words:

ADMIT ONE  
Sister Gabriel

'These'll take Uncle Pone to the bosom of the Lawd,' she promised.

“‘And I saw heaven opened, and beheld a white horse.’”

'Amen,' the little girl said, and ran off with her two tickets to heaven.' (*HCI* 26 – 27)

The fable-like quality we encountered in the opening chapter, when ten dollar bills were about to be transformed into one hundred bills, is again apparent here. Robert E. Skinner makes a telling point about this aspect of Goldy:

Goldy uses what may be described as magical talents to disguise himself as a woman and he uses strange incantations to confuse all around him. With his skills he is able to safely travel the underworld... in his quest to discover the identities and whereabouts of the criminals.<sup>8</sup>

Goldy also represents another kind of magical element in the novel, one that recurs throughout *The Harlem Cycle*: the crooked religious figure. He is more like a wizard or a witch-doctor than any 'Sister of Mercy', but we don't raise an eyebrow about Goldy, because of Himes' relentless pace.

These magical elements – of the initial con, of characters like Goldy, the sleight of hand Himes uses in the novel – are part of what makes the *Harlem Cycle* a departure from

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<sup>8</sup> Robert F. Skinner, *Two Gun From Harlem*, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989, p.74

crime fiction. But then in the Black American's world of absurdity it is perhaps not so surprising that magic should play an important part in Himes' writing.

The absurdity apparent in *A Rage In Harlem* centres around a number of elements: 'The Blow' perpetrated on Jackson at the beginning of the novel: the exotic characters in the novel such as Goldy and Billie: Jackson's love for Imabelle

It is Jackson's love for Imabelle that drives much of the action of the novel.<sup>9</sup> After 'The Blow' Jackson's concern first and foremost is for her. He places himself in danger by stealing from his employer, H. Exodus Clay, in order to be able to set off after her. And once he is confronted with the truth about Imabelle at the end of the novel, he refuses to testify against her. This in itself is absurd, but this absurdity is largely comedic rather than existential. It is as if at the end the only idealistic character in the novel has redeemed the most cynical character of all, in an ending that is positive and upbeat after all the murder and mayhem.

Into this mix of con men, sex sirens, and transvestite nuns comes Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. They don't make an appearance until Chapter Eight, and are described in almost throwaway terms:

They were having a big ball in the Savoy and people were lined up for a block down Lenox Avenue, waiting to buy tickets. The famous Harlem detective-team of Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones had been assigned to keep order.

But there was nothing ordinary about their pistols. They carried specially made long-barreled nickel-plated .38 caliber revolvers, and at the moment they had them in their hands. (HC1 47)

It is their guns that distinguish them: '...there was nothing ordinary about their pistols. They carried specially made long-barreled nickel-plated .38 caliber revolvers, and at the moment they had them in their hands.' Nor are these just any police-issue weapons: the guns have been 'specially made', and are 'long-barreled and nickel-plated.' Before any citizen of

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<sup>9</sup> The novel was first called *For Love Of Imabelle*.

Harlem sees Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones's badges it is invariably their custom-made pistols they come face to face with.

Himes goes on to outline Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones' rough code:

They took their tribute... from the established underworld catering to the essential needs of the people – game-keepers, madams, streetwalkers, numbers writers, numbers bankers. But they were rough on purse snatchers, muggers, burglars, con men, and all strangers working any rackets. (*HCI* 53)

This passage provides a handy taxonomy of the criminal classes the detectives move amongst. Note the humour of the first sentence, the closest Harlem gets to straight citizens:

‘They took their tribute... from the established underworld catering to the essential needs of the people – game-keepers, madams, streetwalkers, numbers writers, numbers bankers.’

‘Essential needs’ in Himes’ vision of Harlem do not comprise food, water, clothing, shelter; but providers of sex and gambling – the real essentials – get off lightly. It’s the ‘purse snatchers, muggers, burglars, con men, and all strangers working any rackets’ they are ‘rough on’.

This underlines the point made above about social relations in Harlem coming down to hustlers and the hustled, victims and perpetrators. For both sets of characters are part of the ‘underworld’, both are criminals. But as Skinner observes: ‘While these policemen make up their own rules about upholding the law, they think nothing of terrorizing small-time criminals. Unlike the whores and gamblers, these criminals are prone to hurt someone physically while plying their trade, and the detectives consider this behavior off limits.’<sup>10</sup>

*A Rage In Harlem* then provides a striking overture to the sequence of novels that follows it. As we have seen, Himes’s uses of magical elements, his focus on the absurd situation of Black Americans in mid-twentieth century America, and his compression of social relations to the hustler and the hustled immediately mark a new approach to crime fiction, and to fiction

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<sup>10</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p.26

in general. Himes – frustrated as a novelist up to this point – suddenly embarks on a second act that allows him to explore all the themes he had been so sombre about in his previous fiction through a genre a serious literary novelist would look down on. But through the disreputable genre of crime fiction Himes becomes something of a sage in Black American letters, and ranks alongside the very writers who had surpassed him when he arrived in Paris: Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison.

### *The Real Cool Killers*

*The Real Cool Killers* was finished by the middle of September 1958. It was actually written after *The Crazy Kill* which Himes completed in April 1957. But Duhamel, the translator of Himes' first novel *If He Hollers*, didn't start publishing Himes's Harlem novels until October 1958, when *La Reine des pommes* was published in France under Gallimard's *La Serie Noire* imprint. No doubt the vagaries of publishing – of commissioning translations of Himes's novels, of juggling schedules and preparing catalogues, of wanting to maximize publicity – played their part in these delays and reversals to the order of publication. But perhaps Duhamel did Himes a favour.

*The Real Cool Killers* starts with a piece of shocking violence. The drinkers in The Dew Drop Inn on 129th Street and Lenox Avenue are having a good time. They are watched by a white man in a gray flannel suit with 'cynical amusement' (*HCI* 181). Suddenly a short black man approaches the white man, knife in hand. 'Ah feel like cutting me some scrawny white motherraper's throat,' he says. Big Smiley, the bartender, comes to the white man's rescue:

Big Smiley drew back and reached beneath the bar counter with his right hand. He came up with a short-handled fireman's axe....

The little knifeman jumped into the air and slashed at Big Smiley again...

Big Smiley countered with a right cross with the red-handled axe. The blade met the knifeman's arm in the middle of its stroke and cut it off just below the elbow as though it had been guillotined. (*HCI* 183 – 184)

The white man gets away in the melee that follows, only to be shot dead by a teenager. The boy is spirited away by a gang, the Real Cool Moslems, and Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed try to track them down. All of the elements I explored above are present in this opening chapter: there is the same kind of magical set up we saw in *A Rage In Harlem*, with the teenage gang spiriting away the principal suspect, Sonny, in Ulysses Galen's murder. Sonny becomes in effect the MacGuffin of the novel, the device that drives the plot. We also see the same levels of absurdity that were evident in *A Rage In Harlem*, with a novel that has elements of farce, and a reversal of the prejudiced norms of the period. For Ulysses Galen, the white murder victim, turns out to be a sadist who has been whipping young Black girls in the basement of The Dew Drop Inn, one of whom is a friend of Coffin Ed's daughter, Evelyn (known to the gang as 'Sugartit'). There is also the compression of social relations: after Galen's murder the focus of the novel turns to the teenage gang of delinquents, who try to hustle their way out of trouble, and we see very little of the world beyond their point of view until the showdown towards the end of the novel.

The Real Cool Moslems may also represent a satirical take on the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam was founded in Detroit by Wallace Fard in 1930. After Fard disappeared in June 1934, the Nation of Islam was led by Elijah Muhammad, who founded places of worship, a school named Muhammad University of Islam, businesses, farms and real estate holdings in the United States and abroad. In 1942 Muhammad and sixty-two of his followers were successfully prosecuted for draft evasion and sentenced to three years in prison. Muhammad soon came to the understanding that Black civil rights organisations made very little or no attempt to reach out to criminals, delinquents, or the Black underclass. Following his release, the Nation of Islam focused their attentions on this overlooked demographic.



Drug addicts were weaned off their habits and prostitutes reformed. Discipline was strict: indolence was sternly reproached, and thrift, hygiene, and economic self-help encouraged. As separatists, they refused to accept relief payments, Social Security numbers, or any form of government employment.<sup>11</sup>

But the Real Cool Moslems are the antithesis of this well-organised movement. They represent a decadent appropriation of the Nation of Islam's Black Muslim oppositionality, with none of their discipline or rigour. They may be 'Real Cool' but they are not out to change the world. Himes – sceptical of all religion – may be suggesting that the Nation of Islam is simply a racket; the many controversies that have dogged the movement might lead the neutral observer to agree.

I said above that Duhamel may have done Himes a favour by delaying publication of *The Real Cool Killers* until 1957. For this was the year *West Side Story* had its first Broadway production. *West Side Story* has much in common with *The Real Cool Killers*. Both explore the world of the teenage gang. Both focus on ethnically diverse communities, in *West Side Story*'s case Puerto Ricans, in *The Real Cool Killers*' Black Americans. One further similarity has not been picked up on: the debt both texts owe to Shakespeare.

The First Folio arranges the plays of William Shakespeare into three categories: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. 'Comedy', in its Elizabethan usage, had a very rigidly defined structure and set of governing principles. In *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Jonathan Bate outlines these essential elements:

...being in love is the principal comic situation...; the plot is of a mingled kind, with elements of farce with clowns in the sub-plot who echo the concerns of higher characters; different social worlds... are drawn together and thrown into confusion; girls are dressed as boys; father-daughter relationships are a source of dramatic tension that is finally released

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<sup>11</sup> See White, John, *Black Leadership In America*, Harlow: Longman, 1990, pp. 147 - 150

with the triumph of the younger generation, comedy thus taking the form of tragedy averted; the action is forwarded... by means of a journey into a forest...<sup>12</sup>

Now we can see many of these elements in *The Real Cool Killers*. To take each in turn:

- The plot is of a mingled kind, with elements of farce

As we have seen, Himes constructs his plots like a magician working out a magic trick. His sleight of hand and use of constant switching between scenes, between narrative threads, and between the police's version of the truth – what can be proven given the evidence – and his omniscient narrator's version of the truth – Sissie's confession at the end of the novel that it was she and not Sonny who shot Galen – are expertly conceived and handled. *The Real Cool Killers* revolves around an intricately complicated plot in which perception and reality are as much at odds in Himes's Harlem novels as they are in, say, *Twelfth Night*. And it is as much a teenage love story as it is a protest novel as it is a police procedural.

- Clowns in the sub-plot who echo the concerns of higher characters

*The Real Cool Killers* brings two sets of characters into conflict: the teenaged members of the Real Cool Moslems Gang, and Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed. Both sets of characters have to deal with the prevailing climate of racism that recurs throughout the Cycle, the teenaged gang through low-level acts of criminality; the two detectives by trying to stick to their code. But for both the exigencies of survival on the streets give them little time to reflect on their various plights, or to formulate a way of opposing or escaping their predicaments. This is the world of hustle or be hustled, and it is not until the later novels that Himes allows his characters to start engaging with this problem.

- Different social worlds... are drawn together and thrown into confusion

A number of social worlds are drawn together and thrown into confusion in the novel. We have the supposedly square world Galen inhabits, the world of the white sales rep who has

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<sup>12</sup> Bate, Jonathan, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, London: Picador, 2008, p.137

Harlem as his patch, contrasted with the criminal world Grave Digger and Coffin Ed police – that the two are actually one, that Galen the white outsider in the lawless ghetto is the villain of the novel, is a typically Himesian reversal.

Then there is the teenage world contrasted with the world of the older generation. Here there is a much larger distance between social worlds, the Generation Gap as it came to be called in the 1960s. That Coffin Ed is unaware that his daughter is mixed up with the Real Cool Moslems underscores this distance. There is also the White World and the Black World. We see little of the White World in this novel and throughout the Cycle; it is only when Himes takes the reader into police headquarters that we get a glimpse of the wider society the two detectives operate in. The White World is thus characterised as being represented by the Law, a resonant device many Black readers would recognise. From the time of slavery onwards, the Law in America has been used to oppress and criminalise Black Americans. And as the precinct exists usually only in the margins of the Harlem Cycle, here is a way of at once reversing the Black and White image of American society, of shifting the focus. However, Gravedigger and Coffin Ed, for all their power as police officers, are constantly subject to the powers of the police themselves. They are variously suspended, reprimanded, and subject to racism just as the residents of Harlem themselves are. The badge they carry is no shield against oppression.

- Girls are dressed as boys

Cross-dressing and disguise plays a crucial role throughout the Harlem Cycle. The Real Cool Moslems are described in the novel as ‘Arabs’:

All of the Arabs had heavy, grizzly black beards. All wore bright green turbans, smoke-colored glasses, and ankle-length white robes. Their complexions ranged from stovepipe black to mustard. They were jabbering and gesticulating like a frenzied group of caged monkeys. (*HCI* 186)

Their deception is quite innocent – like many teenage gangs they have evolved a way of dressing, just like their counterparts amongst the surfers, bikers, and hippies. And their criminal activity is confined to low-level delinquency such as smoking marijuana, petty theft, and spraying perfume at policemen. However, as Galen’s murder sets in train a hunt to find Sonny Pickens, so he becomes a liability to them and Sheik’s plan to murder Sonny and dump his body gives the novel much of its impetus.

- Father-daughter relationships are a source of dramatic tension

Although Evelyn and her father Coffin Ed do not come into open conflict in the novel the reader surmises that Evelyn’s association with The Real Cool Moslems has more behind it than teenage rebellion. Her father represents those elements of society that traditionally oppressed Black Americans: a criminal justice system that enacted Jim Crow laws, failed to prosecute the white killers of Black people, and turned a blind eye to the likes of the Ku Klux Klan. This brings in to focus a larger question about the Harlem Cycle as a whole, one we shall return to: are Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson complicit in the oppression of their fellow Black Americans, or are they ‘on the side’ of their community? Or are they – in fact – in an existential no-man’s land, where no one – white or Black – respects them? I think it is here that Himes first addresses these questions – however obliquely – in this tacit conflict between Evelyn and her father.

- Comedy takes the form of tragedy averted

We saw how Jackson and Imabelle are reunited at the end of *A Rage In Harlem*. This gesture towards marriage and the realm of The Happy After is further consolidated at the end of *The Real Cool Killers* when Sonny proposes to Sissie, who is pregnant with Sheik’s child. Many of Shakespeare’s comedies end in marriage, and here is another parallel – marriage as the resolution of the anarchic forces unleashed by comedy. Again, the most idealistic, innocent character redeems all of the cynicism and criminality that has gone before.

- The action is forwarded by means of a journey into a forest

The Shakespearean removal to a 'green world' is echoed in the Harlem Cycle, echoed and at the same time subverted. For this is not a translation to a pastoral heaven but a confinement to the hell of the ghetto, the urban jungle, not the Forest of Arden. And just as in Shakespeare the laws governing civil society are suspended, and indeed on several occasions the laws of nature too, so Harlem similarly suspends civil and natural law. Indeed, Harlem and Arden seem to be almost mirror images of one another, with all of the elements outlined above traceable throughout the Cycle, including the ludic use of 'magic'.

*The Real Cool Killers*, then, demonstrates Himes' sophistication as a writer. Whilst some critics may sneer at crime fiction as being overly reliant on a tried and tested formula – the unmasking of 'whodunnit' – Himes both embraces and resists this formulaic approach. Yes, as Skinner says in this novel, 'Himes provides a strong plot without inconsistencies along with his usual masterful control of characterisation and dialog'.<sup>13</sup> But Himes also brings in elements we would not expect in crime fiction – the recurrent theme of magic, the gang as a kind of collective conjuring act who spirit Sonny away; the absurdity not only of the comedy in the novel, Shakespearean at times in its convolutions and revelations, but of the position of Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones, caught between the Black community of Harlem and the white community represented by Galen and precinct headquarters; and the way social relations are compressed into hustlers and hustled. This is not a novel where a Chandleresque hero must confront the corrupt wealth of the American upper class as he trawls through the working class milieu of Los Angeles to assert the noble integrity of his outsider Private Eye. Here the whole Black community is 'outside', and corruption stems not from the wealth of one class, but from the oppression the white community imposes on Harlem in a black world that mirrors the removal to the green world of Shakespeare's comedies. *The Real Cool Killers* may have a 'strong plot' but this is almost incidental to the pleasure we take in the novel. And it is this subversion, this exploding of the detective novel, that marks out Himes from his fellow crime writers.

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<sup>13</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p. 93

### *The Crazy Kill*

*The Crazy Kill* was completed by Himes by the middle of September 1958. By then Himes's work in detective fiction had been recognised: he won the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière International Prize for his first novel in The Harlem Cycle, *The Five Cornered Square*<sup>14</sup> in 1958.

Duhamel's shrewdness as a publisher had paid dividends. He had not only recruited a Black American author to his *Serie Noire* list, he had actually pulled off the coup of seeing him win the most prestigious award for crime and detective fiction in France. Where previously Himes had met with respectful reviews but not the kind of success his contemporaries Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were enjoying, now he was travelling in more exalted company. His detective novels might not have the outward respectability of *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* but ultimately they allowed Himes to work on a much larger canvas, to write a *roman fleuve* about the Black American Experience that draws on the violence of *Native Son*, the comedy and bitter frustration of *Invisible Man*, but in the end transcends them both.

Himes forges a new idiom in the Harlem Cycle, a new poetics of Black American prose, and as the Cycle comes to the end of Himes' first intense burst of composition when he wrote three novels in a year, we arrive at a point where we are able to stand back and look closely at how he achieves his effects.

*A Crazy Kill* opens with a robbery:

It was four o'clock, Wednesday morning, July 14th, in Harlem, U.S.A. Seventh Avenue was as dark and lonely as haunted graves.

A colored man was stealing a bag of money. (HCl 333)

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<sup>14</sup> Later titled *For The Love Of Imabelle*, and subsequently *A Rage In Harlem*, almost as if his books are using aliases to avoid easy identification.

Himes starts the novel with all the briskness of a writer in a hurry. But as much as there is a terse, matter-of-fact quality to the prose, again we come back to the element of magic that runs through all of Himes' Harlem Cycle novels. For as the thief is escaping with money from the A & P grocery store a voice from the apartment building above alerts the store manager and a Black police officer on patrol: 'There he goes!'

There is much about the opening sequence of the novel that suggests a deliberate patterning to reflect religious symbols and themes that will later play out in the novel:

The voice from 'above' comes from the only lighted third storey window in a block of five and six storey buildings.

The owner of the voice is described as a 'silhouette' But this perspective changes: 'What had appeared to be a tall thin man slowly became a short squat midget.'

Eventually, he is so keen to see what happens to the thief and his pursuers the figure leans too far out the window falls, 'like a body going head down into water.'

The figure passes a sign on the way down:

STRAIGHTEN UP AND FLY RIGHT  
*Anoint the Love Apples*  
*With Father Cupid's Original*  
ADAM OINTMENT  
*A Cure For All Love Troubles*

The figure, however has a soft landing: 'The man landed at full length on his back exactly on top of the mattress of soft bread.'

After a while, '... the man began erupting from the basket like a zombie rising from the grave.' (HCl 335)

All of these details act as overture for what is to follow. For in quick succession, we have lightly veiled references to:

The Deity – a voice from above

The Trinity – A third floor lighted window

Evil and the sinister – the figure is described as a ‘silhouette’

The declension of what Eliot called ‘the Higher Religions’ into voodoo and magic – the tall thin man becoming a short squat midget

The conflation of religion and sex – the advertisement for Father Cupid’s Original Adam Ointment

The Fall of Adam – the fall into the bread van, foreshadowed by the ‘Original’ – as in ‘Original Sin’ – ‘Adam Ointment’, ‘Adam’ itself a reference to Original Sin

Baptism – the figure falls ‘like a body going head down into water’

The Eucharist – loaves break the figure’s fall

The Resurrection – ‘the man began erupting from the basket like a zombie rising from the grave.’

But all of these parallels, clear as they are, subvert the solemnities of Christianity. Here for the first time we see clearly Himes’ ambivalent attitude to religion. As he said in *A Rage In Harlem*, ‘The people of Harlem take their religion seriously.’ However, Himes stands apart from the ‘people of Harlem’ in this novel, and in the character of Reverend Short we meet the first of Himes’ unreliable ministers. ‘Short’ is of course a significant name: the clergyman falls ‘short’ in a number of ways: he is lustful, unstable, murderous. His name may also be an echo of what Himes said about the man who fell from the window: ‘What had appeared to be a tall thin man slowly became a short squat midget.’ This reduction, this shortening, represents the Reverend Short’s moral diminution as the novel progresses, his loss of stature in the eyes of his congregation. For it is Reverend Short who turns out to be the man who has ‘fallen’, the man ‘whodunnit’.

We seem to first meet him at a wake, along with the other main characters in the story. But actually, he is the man who has ended up in the bread van:



... he felt his pants pockets to see if he'd lost anything. Everything seemed to be there – keys, Bible, knife, handkerchief, wallet and bottle of herb medicine he took for nervous indigestion....

Finally he looked up. The lighted window was still there, but somehow it looked strangely like the pearly gates. (*HCI* 335 – 336)

It's the contents of his pants pocket that is the giveaway: the Bible, knife and bottle of herb medicine for 'nervous indigestion' all tell us – as we shall later find out – that this could only be the Reverend Short.

If the opening chapter is a virtuosic display of the conjuror's trick that directs our attention by indirection, Chapter 2 introduces us to the characters and ambience that will dominate the novel in a similarly virtuosic way. Each character is introduced in turn with brisk economy:

The big luxurious sitting-room of the Seventh Avenue apartment was jam-packed with friends and relatives of Big Joe Pullen, mourning his passing.

His black-clad widow, Mamie Pullen, was supervising the serving of refreshments.

Dulcy, the present wife of Big Joe's godson, Johnny Perry, was wandering about, being strictly ornamental, while Almena, Johnny's former wife, was trying to be helpful.

Doll Baby, a chorus chick who was carrying a torch for Dulcy's brother, Val, was there to see and be seen.

Chink Charlie Dawson, who was carrying a torch for Dulcy herself, shouldn't have been there at all. (*HCI* 336)

Skinner contrasts this ambience with *A Rage In Harlem*:

Here we are on the better side of town. The apartments are well-appointed, the women beautiful and well-dressed, and the men materially successful. At no time does Himes stress the degradation of the Black with scenes of squalor or decay.<sup>15</sup>

Skinner is correct here, but while there may not be the material poverty Himes is at pains to document in the novels published before *A Crazy Kill*, it is the moral degradation, squalor, and decay of Harlem that drives the plot. You either hustle or be hustled in Himes's city within a city, and this dog eat dog mentality leads to a moral debasement, a moral poverty, Himes describes in the Cycle.

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<sup>15</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p. 107

Another telling contrast with *A Rage In Harlem* is how Himes explores his master theme of Absurdity. In the earlier novel Love was absurd – it blinded Jackson to Imabelle’s manipulation of him, though in the end they are reconciled. In *The Crazy Kill*, by contrast, it is sex that is absurd, and it affects all of the principal characters.

It’s there in the passage quoted above, as Himes introduces us to the mourners at Big Joe Pullen’s wake. The main focus of the novel is on the female characters: Mamie Pullen, widow of the dead Joe Pullen; Dulcy, ‘the present wife’ of Johnny Perry; Alameda, ‘Johnny’s former wife’; and Doll Baby, ‘a chorus chick who was carrying a torch for Dulcy’s brother, Val’. This quartet of women revolve around the men in their lives, and compete for them sexually. They are connected to each other through an intricate network of associations: familial, marital, social. As much as they may pose as sisters at the beginning of the novel, supportive and consoling as successive deaths force them closer together, they become increasingly fractious as the novel progresses. Their social relations too are distorted by Himes’ vision of Harlem as the city of hustlers and hustled.

At this stage of the Harlem Cycle’s evolution this sense of a society operating within parameters set by itself – hustle or be hustled – is implicit in the novels. As the series comes to an end Himes is no longer content to point up the absurdity intrinsic to Harlem, but confronts head on the paradoxes of laws designed not to deliver justice but to oppress and humiliate, even in the liberal North of the United States. W. H. Auden’s remarks become particularly pointed in this context: ‘... murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis (for it reveals that some member has fallen and is no longer in a state of grace). The law becomes a reality and for a time all must live in its shadow, till the fallen one is identified. With his arrest, innocence is restored, and the law retires forever.’<sup>16</sup> Supposing the ‘fallen one’, however, is not a murderer, but a society corrupted by racism? It is these

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<sup>16</sup> Auden, W.H., ‘The Guilty Vicarage’, *The Dyer’s Hand And Other Essays*, London Faber and Faber, 1963

themes which Himes goes on to explore with increasing acuity in the subsequent books of his 'domestic series'.

## Chapter 2

### Black Faces, White Badges: *The Big Gold Dream*, *All Shot Up*, *The Heat's On*

#### *The Big Gold Dream*

Robert E. Skinner's guide to the Harlem Cycle, *Two Guns From Harlem*, has been of inestimable value to readers of Himes' work since its first publication in 1989. But his chapter on *The Big Gold Dream* fails to recognise the many layers at work in Himes' detective fiction. Skinner dismisses the fourth novel in The Harlem Cycle on the grounds of its 'inconsistency': 'Of the eight [sic] Harlem novels, *The Big Gold Dream* stands out as both the most comic and the most inconsistent.' Skinner goes on to claim that:

Himes... cheats the audience badly with the explanation he contrives for the ending. Sweet Prophet has had the missing money all the time, and he has hypnotised the gullible Alberta into forgetting that she gave it to him. Nothing in the story has prepared us for this ending, which borders on the supernatural. Also, Sweet Prophet's reaction when Alberta tells about her dream seems to indicate that her numbers payoff is a complete surprise to him. Combined with Sugar's belief in Prophet's ignorance this creates a double red herring.<sup>17</sup>

I shall return to this ending, but for now it's worth bearing in mind the observation Skinner makes in the Introduction to his study:

... critics looked at Himes' work and recognized it as something beyond the common run of crime story... white critics like Raymond Nelson and Edward Margolies and Black scholars like John A. Williams began to recognize that Himes's thrillers were really exercises in socio-political thought and were in keeping with his earlier protest style.<sup>18</sup>

Himes's 'earlier protest style' may very well be in evidence in *The Big Gold Dream* although the five novels he published before he began the Cycle are radically different in tone. In those novels a scrupulous attention to naturalistic detail and dissection of psychological motivation place Himes in the same tradition as his model and mentor, Richard Wright. But there is nowhere the effect we continually come across in the Harlem Cycle, namely the travesty of social norms. So while Skinner is right to credit Himes with 'socio-political thought' it is

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<sup>17</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p.118

<sup>18</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p. 2

to earlier genres the careful reader needs to turn their attention. For it is in *The Big Gold Dream* that travesty as Mikhail Bakhtin defined it – the licensed mocking of hegemonic structures – becomes most prominent, and casts light back on the novels that came before it, and on those that succeed it.

Bakhtin's dissection of carnival in *Rabelais And His World* are germane to our understanding of *The Big Gold Dream*:

Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man... A carnival atmosphere reigned on days when mysteries and soties were produced. This atmosphere also pervaded such agricultural feasts as the harvesting of grapes... which was celebrated also in the city. Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. Minor occasions were also marked by comic protocol, as for instance the election of a king and queen to preside at a banquet 'for laughter's sake' (roi pour rire).<sup>19</sup>

From this point forward we may substitute Himes' term – 'Absurdity' – with a word that perhaps better serves an informed critique of the Harlem Cycle from here on in, that word being 'carnavalesque'. For all of the aspects of the carnivalesque Bakhtin notes above are in *The Big Gold Dream*, and it is this layering, and the way the carnivalesque in turns affects all of the other strata of this novel – the one, let us recall, Skinner calls 'the most comic but also the most inconsistent' – that must lead us to consider this fourth novel in the Cycle in Bakhtinian terms as we have – up to now – considered them in Camusian terms. Furthermore, with this fourth novel in the Cycle we may note a change in tone – from here on the novels get progressively darker, until carnival gives way to revolution.

*The Big Gold Dream* is an extremely resonant title. On one level it refers to religion, as Sweet Prophet Brown declares in the opening sentences of the novel: 'Faith is a rock! It's like a

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<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Ismolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p.5

solid gold dream!’ Of course, The Big Gold Dream is also a version of the American Dream, as Skinner observes:

It is probably no accident that Himes played this symbol of economic salvation off against the more conventional salvation of organised religion. In Harlem... salvation is usually equated with money.

He goes on to observe:

... the parallels that evangelists draw between God’s love for mankind and man’s material gain are probably a gauche interpretation of the Protestant Work Ethic. Since the time of the Puritans, Americans have been led to believe that hard work and trust in God will eventually lead to economic salvation. The tendency to pray in conjunction with playing the numbers is just a natural extension of that concept.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst Skinner is right to equate religious salvation with economic salvation in the novel, he is again mistaken here. Gambling represents the *antithesis* of the Protestant Work Ethic, not a natural extension of it. To many evangelical Protestants gambling is sinful. Methodism, for instance, has long warned of the evils of gambling:

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, [saw] gambling as a means of gain inconsistent with love of neighbour. He explicitly condemned gamblers who “made a trade of seizing on young and inexperienced men, and tricking them out of all their money”.

In the nineteenth century... an ill-advised or unlucky gamble could mean the difference for a family between food and starvation, survival and the workhouse. Gambling was a spiritual issue for nineteenth century Methodists.

As this Christian website succinctly puts it: ‘Gambling is a way to bypass work, but the Bible counsels us to persevere and work hard.’<sup>21</sup> So far from being a *natural extension* of the Protestant Work Ethic playing the numbers is a *travesty* of it, a carnivalesque reversal of the Puritan virtues of thrift and toil at the heart of the Protestant Work Ethic.

Another reading of the book’s title also refers to Alberta Wright’s dream:

‘I dreamed I was baking three apple pies... And when I took them out the oven and set them on the table to cool the crusts busted open like three explosions and the whole kitchen was filled with dollar bills.’ (HC2 4)

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<sup>20</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p. 121

<sup>21</sup> <http://christianity.about.com/od/whatdoesthebiblesay/f/isingamblingasin.htm>

It is perhaps no coincidence that Alberta should dream of that most quintessentially wholesome of American foods, ‘apple pie’. At the same time we are reminded of the fruit of the forbidden tree, and also Black American folk tales and magical devices that inform previous novels in the Cycle. So Skinner’s expectation that Himes should abide by the rules of the mystery story, and his disappointment when Himes departs from these conventions, should not influence our reading of *The Big Gold Dream*. Just as the novel is travestyng religion, the Protestant Work Ethic, and – like the Cycle in general – the Rule of Law, so it is also travestyng detective fiction itself.

One striking aspect of the novel – as carnivalesque as anything in Rabelais – is Himes’s creation of two disabled characters: Dummy, and Slick’s blind girlfriend. These introduce a small gallery of similarly disabled characters who recur in the Cycle, and both evoke contrary feelings in the reader.

Dummy makes his first appearance in Chapter 9, when Sugar Stonewall, Alberta’s common-law husband – runs into him as he tries to track down her stolen money:

Something came up fact behind him and grabbed him by the sleeve. It sounded like a winded animal. His scalp rolled... He was afraid to look around.

‘Let go!’ he gasped in terror.

The thing tightened its grip and pulled up beside him... The thing grunted urgently. He looked about and saw a gaping mouth circled with even white teeth in a broad flat face. But behind the teeth was a gaping black hole where normally a tongue should have been. (*HC2* 51)

Himes goes on to describe Dummy in further detail:

He was a short, heavy-set Hawaiian-looking man with thick, gray-shot, curly hair. His coarse, lumpy face was interlaced with tiny scars. He had cauliflowers for ears and pile hammers for hands. Muscles bulged from his dark brown T-shirt, but fat put him in the heavyweight division. He might have been any age from thirty to fifty. (*HC2* 52)

Here is a character more like one of the gargoyles on the medieval cathedrals Bakhtin is so fascinated by than anyone in Wright, Ellison, or Baldwin’s fiction. At first Dummy is described as a ‘thing’, and his impairment – that missing tongue – is a source of horror and revulsion. He is also ‘Hawaiian-looking’, which further puts him outside the largely Black

American community of Harlem. It's only when Grave Digger provides his backstory to Lieutenant Anderson in the following chapter that we see Dummy's humanity:

'... He used to be one of the greatest welterweights in the business, but the racketeers who owned him sent him to the tank so often he got both his eardrums burst. When he was no longer useful to them, they kicked him out of the profession. Then the do-gooders got hold of him and primed him to spill before the state committee investigating boxing, and the gangsters kidnapped him one night and cut his tongue out. They unloaded him from a car in Foley Square in front of the state building where the investigation was being conducted and it was just luck a patrol car passed in time to get him to hospital to save his life... Some big boxer gave him money to open a shoe-shine parlor, but he used it to buy a new Cadillac, and the first night had had it he got it smashed up because he couldn't hear the horn of a truck....' (HC2 62)

Dummy is the only character in the entire Harlem Cycle who communicates by writing – it's the only means by which he can 'talk'. This emphasises the very oral nature of the books – characters who live on their wits must be as quick with their tongues as they might have to be with their fists. Dummy stands out from this gallery of sharp-tongued rogues as a character who has been silenced. He thus represents an aspect of Himes himself, the writer silenced by prejudice and marginalisation who had to leave America before he could be heard. And Dummy's former 'profession', an odd word for a boxer, but not for a writer – this too chimes with Himes's previous work in the 'protest style'. Himes is a fighter, just as Dummy is, and Dummy's semi-literate scribbles, his pad, his watchful presence in the novel, mark him out as a highly unusual but key character in the Harlem Cycle.

Slick's girlfriend offers a very different portrait of disability. She makes her appearance in Chapter 23, towards the end of the novel. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed raid Slick's apartment, killing Susie, Slick's accomplice, and rescuing Dummy and 'the woman'. It is her evidence which will convict Slick of the murders of the 'Jew', Abraham Finkelstein. She is a listless and world weary character, in contrast to the highly mobile Dummy. But then as she says, 'I'm not [Slick's] wife... I'm just a woman he blinded, beating me with his fists.' The reaction of the detectives who hear her testimony is eloquent in its awkwardness: 'During the embarrassed silence that followed, no one looked at anybody else.' (HC2 155)



They realise that they have failed her, that they not only did not protect her from Slick's brutality, but that they have also misread her relationship to Slick in the first place. She did not enter into her relationship with Slick voluntarily – like the slaves their forefathers may have owned she was never a free agent once Slick got his hooks into her. And of course their embarrassment also stems from the able-bodied's reaction to disabled people.

So it is perhaps not surprising – and here we return to the ending of *The Big Gold Dream* – that it is an act of hypnotism that parts Alberta Wright from her money. She is blinded by Sweet Prophet Brown, almost literally, until she too erupts in a blind rage at the end of the novel and kills him. *The Big Gold Dream*, then, marks something of a turning point in the Harlem Cycle. From this novel onwards the series starts to darken, and with the inevitability of tragedy Himes takes Grave Digger and Coffin Ed towards their destruction.

### *All Shot Up*

Himes worked on *All Shot Up* from January 1959 onwards. The novel comes halfway in the series and marks a distinct advance in the Cycle, dealing as it does with themes of politics, homosexuality, and Southern racists. The novel – like all of the novels in the Harlem Cycle – thus works as a novel in its own right, and as a signpost to the later novels. As the Cycle moves towards its finale the novels increasingly reflect Himes's reaction to the explosive events of the 1960s and his own thoughts on the situation of Black Americans.

*All Shot Up* starts with Himes' trademark briskness:

On the dark crosstown street off Convent Avenue... a man was taking a wheel from a car parked in the shadow of the convent wall. (HC2 163)

There then comes that hint of the magical, of the carnivalesque, that has been characteristic of the Harlem Cycle up to this point:

He saw a Cadillac pass, the likes of which he had never seen...

This Cadillac looked as though it was made of solid gold... It looked big enough to cross the ocean, if it could swim. It lit up the black-dark street like a passing bonfire. (*HC2* 164)

This magical Cadillac will set in train a tale of what Skinner calls 'a well-defined crime that must be solved'<sup>22</sup>, involving 'some of his most compelling characters'<sup>23</sup>. We find out that the occupants of the car are a smartly dressed Black man named Baron, a merchant seaman named Roman Hill, and the tire thief's ex-girlfriend, Sassafras. They knock down an old woman who tries to cross the street. Before she can properly recover a large black sedan knocks her over again, and the tire thief makes his getaway.

The Cadillac is forced to the side of the road by the black sedan, which contains three uniformed police officers, two of whom are Black. They arrest the occupants of the Cadillac for hit and run, but then steal the big gold car and drive away in it. Roman chases them in the black sedan but we leave the car chase as Himes switches the action to the Harlem precinct where garbled reports of the hit and the run, the car-jacking, and an orgy taking place in the convent are jamming the switchboards.

More seriously, a double murder outside the Paris Bar on 125th Street has also been reported. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed can't be located, so Lieutenant Anderson says he'll go over and check it himself. Casper Holmes may also be amongst the injured outside the bar. Lieutenant Anderson's reaction to this news gives the reader a hint of Holmes's standing in the novel: 'Let us hope nothing has happened to Holmes'.

What follows is a complicated plot dealing with that staple of crime fiction, corruption. For Casper Holmes is a successful politician, 'the most powerful political figure in Harlem'<sup>24</sup>, who lives in an expensive apartment with his beautiful show-girl wife, Leila. They are the corrupting influences, for between them they set in train the mayhem that starts

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<sup>22</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p 137

<sup>23</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p 135.

<sup>24</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p 135

with the hit-and-run, the theft of \$50,000 in party funds from Casper Holmes, and a ‘find-the-lady’ switch involving the big gold Cadillac.

Himes equates political corruption in this novel with old-fashioned notions of perverted sexuality. For Casper Holmes is homosexual, and his wife is a ‘beard’, for all her hypersexual attractiveness. However, she is not free of the taint of ‘queerness’ herself, given to cross-dressing and frequenting the very bars her husband also frequents. Many commentators see Himes as antipathetic to homosexual characters in the Harlem Cycle. Skinner’s view is that: ‘Along with whiteness, homosexuality was another Himesian signal for an evil or unscrupulous nature.’<sup>25</sup> Soitos says, ‘In the end Himes reserves his most vitriolic attacks for black gay men.’<sup>26</sup> However, Himes’ formative years – from the age of 19 to the age of 26 – were spent in the Ohio State Penitentiary. Himes’ biographers have both commented on his intense relationship with a fellow inmate, Prince Rico, and they are in no doubt that this relationship was a sexual one. James Sallis also comments on Himes’ ‘disclaimers’ of homosexuality in the 743 pages of his autobiography. Were Himes’ ‘disclaimers’ the result of him reverting to heterosexual relations on his release from prison? Was he ashamed of his previous experience of homosexuality in prison? Did he need to bolster his hardboiled image for commercial ends?

It should be remembered that homosexuality in the States and in the United Kingdom was largely illegal during the writing and publication of the Harlem Cycle. Prior to 1962, sodomy was a felony in every US state, punishable by a lengthy term of imprisonment and/or hard labour. Illinois was the first state to remove criminal sanctions for consensual homosexual intercourse from its criminal code, almost a decade before any other state. Up until the time of greater liberalisation, the harshest sanctions were carried out in Idaho, where a person convicted of sodomy could expect a life sentence. Michigan followed, with a

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<sup>25</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p 135

<sup>26</sup> *The Blues Detective*, p 158

maximum penalty of fifteen years imprisonment, while repeat offenders were sentenced to life.<sup>27</sup>

The situation in the United Kingdom was equally repressive. In the early 1950s, the British police routinely enforced laws prohibiting sexual behaviour between men. By the end of 1954, there were 1,069 gay men in prison in England and Wales, with an average age of 37<sup>28</sup>. A number of high-profile arrests and trials took place, including that of scientist, mathematician, and war-time code-breaker Alan Turing, convicted in 1952 of ‘gross indecency’. He accepted treatment with female hormones (chemical castration) as an alternative to prison and committed suicide in 1954. In 1953, John Gielgud also fell foul of the law after ‘cottaging’ in a Chelsea lavatory. The recently knighted actor was convicted of ‘persistently importuning men for immoral purposes’. In the same year the trial and eventual imprisonment of Edward Montagu (the third Baron Montagu of Beaulieu), Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildeblood for committing acts of ‘homosexual indecency’ caused uproar and led to the establishment of a committee to examine and report on the law covering ‘homosexual offences’ appointed by Sir David Maxwell Fyfe and Sir Hugh Lucas-Tooth.

The Wolfenden Committee was set up on 24th August 1954 to consider UK law relating to ‘homosexual offences’; the Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution (better known as the Wolfenden report) was published on 3rd September 1957. It took another decade for limited decriminalisation to be enacted into law.<sup>29</sup>

To be clear, then: Himes had not been reticent about his prison experiences prior to working on the Harlem Cycle. As his first biographers, Margolies and Fabre report, ‘Himes

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<sup>27</sup> See Loughrey, John *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities*, New York: Henry Holt & Company Inc., 1998 for a history of gay men's lives in America.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/07/15/the-pinknews-guide-to-the-history-of-england-and-wales-equal-marriage/2/>

<sup>29</sup> See Jivani, Alkarim, *It's Not Unusual: A History of Lesbian and Gay Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1997

wrote Carl Van Vechten in 1952 that the most fulfilling relationship he had ever had was with the man whom he called Dido in *Cast The First Stone*.<sup>30</sup> But the legal situation regarding homosexuality in the Anglophone world during the writing of the Harlem Cycle was a potentially dangerous minefield Himes did not need to traverse. He had not spent seven and a half years inside just to leave himself open to any prospect of further jail time by confessing to homosexuality or portraying homosexual characters in a sympathetic light. And Himes had a very potent example before him. Gore Vidal's openly gay third novel *The City And Pillar* (1948) had led *The New York Times* book critic, Orville Prescott, to refuse to review, or to permit other critics to review, any book by Vidal.<sup>31</sup> *Howl* by Allan Ginsberg and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* had anyway perhaps marked out the psychic territory Himes was by then indifferent to. Add to this nexus the rise of Joe McCarthy, Cold War paranoia about Communism, the defection of the homosexual British spies Burgess and Maclean, as well as Himes' increasingly oppositional stance concerning the treatment of American Blacks and perhaps his ambivalence about standing shoulder to shoulder with 'homophiles' might lead us to consider his treatment of homosexual characters in the Cycle rather differently from his critics and his biographer.

For although Casper Holmes (whose name sounds very like 'Chester Himes') is homosexual perhaps his biggest crime has more to do with that traditional vice of politicians – hypocrisy – than it has to do with his sexuality. He has the respect and admiration of his wife; Holmes is a rich and powerful Black man in a white world; and Lieutenant Anderson's anxious reaction to news of Holmes' injury is a powerful moment in a series of novels in which white police officers routinely make racist remarks about Black Americans. Holmes is a not an 'evil' or 'unscrupulous character' and Himes is not 'vitriolic' in his 'attack' on him.

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<sup>30</sup> Margolies, Edward and Fabre, Michel, Jackson: *The Several Lives Of Chester Himes*, University Press of Mississippi, 1997, p. 34

<sup>31</sup> Vidal, Gore, *Point to Point Navigation*, New York: Doubleday, 2006, p. 245

Holmes is merely a hustler, a thrill-seeker, and his villainy does not amount to robbing anyone but his political masters, a crime that mirrors what his political masters have long been perpetrating upon him and his constituents through an abject failure to deliver any kind of equality or material improvement to the 'ghetto'. No, the real villain of this novel is the white 'cracker' who systematically murders all of those who gets in his way. Casper Holmes may be part of a corrupt municipality, but he is not a cold-blooded murderer.

So Skinner's view of the novel should, I think, be challenged:

... the story is plagued with weaknesses. The motivations of two of the most important characters are never clear, and the story ends with no real explanation of why the crimes were committed in the first place. Himes' failure to explain major plot elements in some of these early stories has to be linked to the haste in which they were written.<sup>32</sup>

Again, I think Skinner is being unfair to Himes here. The notion that commercial pressures might weaken artistic achievement has not led critics to speculate that Iago's silence about his motivation in *Othello* was driven by Shakespeare's need to have the play ready by opening night. Skinner reads the novel in terms of the rather overdetermined conventions of the 'mystery', and appears to contradict himself. How can *All Shot Up* be about a 'well-defined crime' and contain 'compelling characters' whilst at the same time be 'plagued with weaknesses'?

Himes is attempting something more than a conventional 'mystery' in this novel. He is returning to his pre-Harlem Cycle themes of protest and politics. *All Shot Up* signals that – for all the humour and comedy of his 'domestic series' – Himes is indicting the whole idea of the ghetto in American life, and laying the charge not just at the door of white society, but also those who collaborate in the oppression of Black Americans from within the Black community also. He is far too sophisticated a novelist to paint prominent Black characters in the Cycle as virtuous and honourable, and his white characters as routinely mendacious. To be sure, there are not as many white characters in the Cycle as there are Black characters.

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<sup>32</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p. 137

They are confined mainly to the white colleagues Grave Digger and Coffin Ed come into contact with in the course of their duties. Often, these white characters are venial in terms of their crimes, which mainly boil down to low-level racism, stupidity, and crassness (the exceptions are Ulysses Galen in *The Real Cool Killers* and the white cracker in *All Shot Up*). Himes is harder on many of his Black characters. But the Harlem Cycle overall is an attempt, perhaps, not to deal with individual crimes, but with the whole state of post-Emancipation America in a very turbulent decade. As such, we should read the Cycle in a very different way from the way we may read, say, Ed McBain. As the Cycle comes to its end, indeed, Himes departs from the conventions of the ‘mystery’ and returns to the kind of novel he’d made his name with, namely the protest novel. Himes is gradually moving on to darker territory and the later instalments of the Harlem Cycle stand in marked contrast to, say, *A Rage In Harlem*.

### *The Heat’s On*

Himes started work on *The Heat’s On*, the fifth novel in the Harlem Cycle, in the latter part of 1959. *The Heat’s On* carries echoes of previous novels, in particular *A Rage In Harlem*, and signposts the way to later instalments in the Harlem Cycle, such as *Cotton Comes To Harlem*.

The opening pages introduce us to Pinky, a giant albino Black American, who has set off a fire alarm outside the Riverside Episcopal Church on Riverside Drive. He is another of Himes’ grotesques, to rank alongside Goldy and Dummy:<sup>33</sup>

He was a milk-white albino with pink eyes, battered lips, cauliflowered ears, and thick, kinky, cream-colored hair. He wore a white T-shirt, greasy black pants held up with a length of hemp rope, and blue canvas rubber-soled sneakers.

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<sup>33</sup> The use of diminutives is suggestive in each character. All are in some way ‘reduced’: through transvestism in Goldy’s case; through disability in Dummy’s; and through the seeming paradox of a Black American with albinism in Pinky’s.

As if to contrast Pinky's grotesque appearance with an even more grotesque character Himes has him hassling:

... a hunchback with a dirty yellow complexion, darker than that of the albino. Beady black eyes that could not focus on anything looked out from a ratlike face. But he was dressed in an expensive blue linen, handstitched suit, silk-topped shoes and a black panama hat with a dull orange band. (*HC2* 525)

To compound this striking contrast the 'hunchback' is a 'dwarf'. The carnivalesque description of these two characters – almost medieval in tone – highlights the development of Himes' vision as he starts to approach the finale of the Cycle. We should note the Bakhtinian position of Pinky and Jake the 'dwarf' at this point: 'His gaze flicked up toward the giant's agitated face; but it bounced right off. It lighted for a moment on the twenty-two-story tower of the Riverside Church, rising in the dark behind the giant's back.' Here is a clear juxtaposition of carnival and cathedral, and a further look at Bakhtin may be useful here.

Bakhtin posits four distinct features of the carnivalesque:

1. Familiar and free interaction between people: carnival often brought the unlikeliest of people together and encouraged the interaction and free expression of themselves in unity.
2. Eccentric behaviour: unacceptable behaviour is tolerated and relished during carnival, and one's natural behaviour can be indulged without consequence.
3. Carnivalistic misalliances: the familiar and free-flowing format of carnival allows everything that may normally be separated to reunite – Heaven and Hell, the young and the old, and – in the Harlem Cycle – Black and white.



4. Sacrilege: Bakhtin believed that carnival allowed for sacrilegious events to occur without the need for punishment.<sup>34</sup>

All of these elements are present throughout the Cycle, but in this opening chapter of *The Heat's On* we find them in metonymic form: for what could be more unlikely than a giant and a dwarf meeting outside Riverside Church? What behaviour could be more eccentric than Pinky's, a giant albino who has set off a fire alarm, a travestied version of the church bells overhead, and who claims his 'pa is gonna get robbed and murdered'? What misalliance could be more carnivalesque than poor Pinky and rich Jake? And what sacrilege could be graver than Pinky's eventual patricide, which is never directly punished in the novel?

It is at this point in the series' development that we shift to a carnivalesque revelling in the grotesque before the final three novels – *Cotton Comes To Harlem*, *Blind Man With A Pistol*, and *Plan B* – progress to a darker and more revolutionary vision.

This novel then, sums up in many ways Himes' previous themes, but shifts the stage scenery as it were to a new location. There are plenty of his old techniques here, and as Skinner notes the novel shares many of the same approaches as *A Rage In Harlem*:

Both novels include among their casts cold-blooded murderers who are drug addicts. In both novels virtually everyone but the detectives is dead when the story comes to a conclusion.

... As was the case in *Imabelle*, when all the bodies have been taken to the morgue, the detectives discover that the treasure... no longer exists. It had been destroyed before the action in the story took place.<sup>35</sup>

Besides these themes we also see the juxtaposition of the grotesque and the comic – Pinky, Jake, Sister Heavenly, Uncle Saint, Sheba the dog – alongside the documentary:

Even at past two in the morning, 'The Valley', that flat lowland of Harlem east of Seventh Avenue, was like the frying pan of hell. Heat was coming out the pavement, bubbling from the asphalt; and the atmospheric pressure was pushing it back to earth like the lid on a pan.

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<sup>34</sup> See the Introduction to *Rabelais and His World*

<sup>35</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p. 146

Colored people were cooking in their overcrowded, overpriced tenements; cooking in the streets, in the after-hours joints, in the brothels; seasoned with vice, disease and crime.

An effluvium of hot stinks arose from the frying pan and hung in the hot motionless air, no higher than the rooftops – the smell of sizzling barbecue, fried hair, exhaust fumes, rotting garbage, cheap perfumes, unwashed bodies, decayed buildings, dog-rat-and-cat offal, whiskey and vomit, and all the old dried-up odors of poverty.

Half-nude people sat in open windows, crowded on the fire escapes, shuffled up and down the sidewalks, prowled up and down the streets in dilapidated cars.

It was too hot to sleep. Everyone was too evil to love. And it was too noisy to relax and dream of cool swimming holes and the shade of chinaberry trees. The night was filled with the blare of countless radios, the frenetic blasting of spasm cats playing in the streets, hysterical laughter, automobile horns, strident curses, loudmouthed arguments, the screams of knife fights. (*HC2* 343)

However, this passage – besides its meticulous description of ‘The Valley’ – also contains those carnivalesque elements noted at the very beginning of the book. There is the familiar and free interaction between people: ‘Half-nude people sat in open windows, crowded on the fire escapes, shuffled up and down the sidewalks, prowled up and down the streets in dilapidated cars.’; eccentric behaviour: ‘The night was filled with the blare of countless radios, the frenetic blasting of spasm cats playing in the streets, hysterical laughter, automobile horns, strident curses, loudmouthed arguments, the screams of knife fights.’; carnivalistic misalliances, where everything that may normally be separated is united reunited – principally, Harlem but also Hell, ‘bubbling from the asphalt’, that extended metaphor of cooking making Harlem’s residents sound like they are being roasted in an urban version of Dante’s *Inferno* (note the singular ‘frying pan’, as if ‘The Valley’ was one big skillet); and sacrilege: ‘Everyone was too evil to love’. Himes starts to distort his vision of Harlem, not just through the creation of bizarre and outlandish characters but through the depiction of Harlem itself as bizarre and outlandish, as if the documentary was skewed by this grimmer, infernal vision.

But Himes explores new ground also, particularly in focusing on the problem of drugs. At the time of the 1964 riots, five years after he wrote *The Heat’s On*, drug addiction rates in Harlem were ten times higher than the New York City average, and twelve times

higher than the US as a whole. Of the 30,000 addicts then estimated to live in New York City, 15,000 to 20,000 lived in Harlem.<sup>36</sup>

Grave Digger Jones' reaction to the assistant district attorney is instructive at this point. The assistant district attorney has pointed out that he and Coffin Ed are accused of killing a man – Jake, the hunchback dwarf – suspected of the 'minor crime' of drug dealing. Grave Digger's response is ferocious:

“You call dope dealing a minor crime?... All the fucked-up lives... All the nice kids sent down the drain on a habit... Twenty-one days on heroin and you're hooked for life... Jesus Christ, Mister, that one lousy dog has murdered more people than Hitler. And you call it *minor*?... And who gets into the victim's blood? The peddler! He sells the dirty crap. He makes the personal contact. He puts them on the habit. He's the mother-raper who gets them hooked. He looks into their faces and puts the poison in their hands. He watches them go down from sugar to shit, sees them waste away. He puts them out to stealing, killing, gets young girls hustling – to get the money to buy the kicks. I'll take a simple violent murderer any day. (HC2 375)

Note the use of profanities in this passage: 'All the fucked-up lives' and 'He watches them go down from sugar to shit.' The anger is palpable.

But before we leave *The Heat's On* there is one more episode in the novel – a tale also of blindness, a recurring theme in the novels – that is crucial in our consideration of the Cycle.

This is Coffin Ed's determination to avenge the stricken Grave Digger. Grave Digger is shot when he and Coffin Ed return to Gus's apartment to search it. They find the African's dead body on the floor, and the place ransacked. Digger wants to call for back-up, but Coffin Ed insists on finding some weapons and carrying on with the investigation. This is when Coffin Ed is sapped and Grave Digger is shot twice.

We see Coffin Ed prepare for his mission:

His shoulder holster hung from a hook inside the door of his clothes closet. The special-made...<sup>38</sup> caliber revolver, that had shot its way to fame in Harlem, was in the holster... From the shell in the closet he took a can of seal fat and smeared a thick coating on the inside

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<sup>36</sup> Pinkney, Alphonso & Woock, Roger, *Poverty and Politics in Harlem*, New Haven: College & University Press Services, Inc., 1970, p.33

of the holster. He wiped the excess off with a clean handkerchief... He chose a knockout sap from the collection in his dresser drawer... He slipped a Boy Scout knife into his left pants pocket. As an afterthought he stuck a thin flat hunting knife with a grooved hard-rubber handle, sheathed in soft pigskin, inside the back of his pants... and snapped the sheath to his belt. (*HC2* 424 – 425)

The bond between Coffin Ed and Grave Digger seems to be closer than that between most partners portayed in crime fiction. This intensity of feeling has as much to do with the existential status of the duo as it has to do with their place as Black Americans in a racist police force. For if they only have each other to support and defend one another from their superiors and the openly racist white officers they come into contact with, they also occupy ground exclusive to themselves when it comes to relations with the Black community they serve. In the end, then, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed – as their names imply – will be consumed by death, and it is Himes' deepening pessimism that sees them clearly for what they are: two men who can no longer enjoy ontological security in a world riven by racism.

### Chapter 3:

#### Cross-Cultural Crime: *Cotton Comes To Harlem*, *Blind Man With A Pistol*, *Plan B*

##### *Cotton Comes To Harlem*

*Cotton Comes To Harlem* is Himes' masterpiece. It blends the pace and action of crime fiction with biting humour and ferocious satire, and so brings to a climax the formal experiments Himes had been making with his previous novels in the Harlem Cycle. It blends the two approaches he had been taking, namely the absurd and the carnivalesque, and rounds off this phase of the series with a triumphant finale, the last time we see his two cops at their best.

Himes wrote *Cotton Comes To Harlem* over the course of 1963 and 1964, publishing the book as *Retour en Afrique* with Plon in 1964, nearly five years after he finished *The Heat's On*. The break from churning out his 'domestic series' gave Himes the opportunity to perfect many of the successes of the Cycle and eliminate the few weaknesses of the novels up to this point. It was if Himes was able to raise the standard of his work into something more durable than the cycle of novels he had produced so far for Duhamel. No doubt the break in production allowed Himes to gather his powers and make *Cotton Comes To Harlem* a classic of Black American literature.

The novel follows the tried and tested formula of Himes' previous Harlem novels: the ill-gotten treasure a motley crew of characters is searching for; a religious charlatan at the heart of the narrative; a larger-than-life villain who will stop at nothing to get his hands on the loot; sexuality as a subversive and ultimately destructive force; skin colour as an indicator of turpitude. However, through a brilliant satirical coup Himes also strikes at the paternalistic attitude of white America to Civil Rights. He takes all of the elements that had been present in the previous novels and adds this further satirical layer, like a Black Jonathan Swift

modestly proposing that Black Americans would be better off returning not to the continent from which their ancestors came, but to the South where their oppression was at its most virulent. It is this ‘one satiric touch’ that lifts the novel both in terms of structure, and in its ability to make sharp and pointed references to what was going on in Black America around the time of its composition.

The novel opens with a rally. The Reverend Deke O’Malley is addressing a large crowd, telling them all of a fantastic opportunity:

‘Each family, no matter how big it is, will be asked to put up one thousand dollars. You will get your transportation free, five acres of fertile land in Africa, a mule and a plow and all the seed you need, free. Cows, pigs and chickens cost extra, but at the minimum. No profit on this deal.’ (HC3 3)

Soon O’Malley and his crew have amassed \$87,000 from those eager to ‘return’ to Africa. Very few – if any – of those in the crowd, Black Harlemites all, will had ever set foot in Africa, as one jaundiced onlooker remarks:

‘Ain’t it wonderful, honey? said a big black woman with eyes like stars. ‘We’re going back to Africa.’

Her tall lean husband shook his head in awe. ‘After all these four hundred years.’ (HC3 3)

Himes is making a very deliberate reference here to Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican activist and visionary who had preached the same salvation forty years earlier. In 1914 Garvey had founded the Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League (the UNIA). The UNIA’s objectives were:

To establish a universal confraternity among the race; to promote the spirit of pride and love; to reclaim the fallen; to administer to and assist the needy; to assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa to assist in the development of independent Negro Nations and communities; to establish a central nation for the race, where they will be given the opportunity to develop themselves; to establish Commissaries and Agencies in the principal countries and cities of the world for the representation of all Negroes; to promote a conscientious spiritual worship among the native tribes of Africa; to establish Universities, Colleges and Academies and Schools for racial education and culture of the people; to improve the general condition of Negroes everywhere.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jacques Garvey, A., *Garvey and Garveyism*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2014, p. 11

Garvey's brand of Black Zionism met with little success in his native Jamaica. However, when he came to America in 1916 and set up camp in Harlem after an exhaustive tour of thirty-eight states he found a more receptive audience for his message. By 1919 Garvey's weekly newspaper, *The Negro World*, had a circulation of approximately 200,000 and was read far beyond American shores. Garvey used his platform to call for international black solidarity, to denounce lynchings, and to lend support to Irish, Indian, and Egyptian independence movements. Here was an organ not just of emancipation but of revolution.

In July 1919 Garvey bought a large auditorium in Harlem – 'Liberty Hall' – for UNIA meetings. By September, the UNIA acquired its first ship, the S. S. Yarmouth, for the Black Star Line. The ship was rechristened the S.S. Frederick Douglass on 14 September 1919 and an initial sale of stock to Black Americans – a policy adopted to conform with Booker T. Washington's axiom that Black Americans should become independent of white capital – brought in \$500,000.

By February 1920 the Black Star Line was worth \$10,000,000.<sup>38</sup> Garvey's dream of a Liberian home for Black Americans is the backdrop to Deke O'Malley and his con. For as it soon becomes apparent in the novel, 'The Promised Land' is a scam, and the \$87,000 is stolen in audacious heist.

So it is perhaps no coincidence that a 'big black woman with eyes like stars' is mentioned in the opening paragraphs of the novel. Those 'stars' represent not just her wonder at the prospect of Africa, but perhaps an allusion to the Black Star Line Garvey founded, and the fatalism of some Black Americans in relying on religion, superstition, and destiny to determine their fate and make their lives more bearable. As we have seen, Himes mocks religious figures throughout the Cycle, and highlights the oppression experienced by Black Americans not just from white society but by those from their own community who prey

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<sup>38</sup> See *Black Leadership In America*, pp. 78 - 91

upon their weaknesses. Perhaps those stars in the ‘black woman’s eyes’ also represent the beatings life has handed her – she is ‘seeing stars’ in more than just one sense of the word.

Perhaps the funniest chapter in the novel is Chapter 8. Here Himes introduces Colonel Robert L. Calhoun, and his own repatriation project. He is described in typically stereotypical fashion, except that this stereotype is a white cracker:

Colonel Calhoun in the flesh sat behind the desk, smoking a long, thin cheroot and looking out the window at the crowd of Harlemites with a benign expression. He looked like the model who had posed for a portrait of the colonel in the window, paying off the happy darkies. He had the same narrow, hawklike face crowned by the same mane of snow-white hair, the same wide, drooping white moustache, the same white goatee. There the resemblance stopped. The narrow-set eyes were ice-cold blue and his back was ramrod straight. But he was clad in a similar black frock coat and black shoestring tie, and on the ring finger of his long pale hand was a solid gold signet ring with the letters CSA. (HC3 66)

Colonel Calhoun is dressed as a plantation owner, a paternalistic Southern gentleman. However, Himes undercuts the Colonel’s paternalism by focusing on the ‘same narrow, hawklike face... narrow-set eyes... ice-cold blue and ... back... ramrod straight.’ What really undercuts his paternalism though is the ‘solid gold signet ring’. The letters ‘CSA’ stand for Confederate States of America, or possibly – given Calhoun’s military rank – Confederate States Army. Here is the embodiment of white Southern racism, the racism that had driven many Black Americans to flee from the South to places like Harlem, and which – in 1965, the date of *Cotton Comes To Harlem* first American publication – was at its height. To rehearse some of the major events of that year:

On 7th March six hundred Alabama civil rights activists staged a Selma-to-Montgomery protest march to draw attention to the continued denial of Black voting rights in the state. The marchers were confronted by Alabama State Troopers whose attack on them at the Edmund Pettus Bridge was broadcast on national television. On 21st March, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a five-day, 54-mile march retracing the route of the original activists. The 3,300 marchers at the beginning of the trek eventually grow to 25,000 when they reached the Alabama capitol on 25th March. Nor was this the only manifestation of unrest by Black



Americans in 1965. On 11th August the Los Angeles neighbourhood of Watts erupted in rioting. Thirty four people were killed and one thousand injured in the five day confrontation.<sup>39</sup> The white Southern racists had been openly opposing Civil Rights throughout the decade, and it is this background that lends *Cotton Comes To Harlem* its savage satirical bite.

For Colonel Calhoun is a mirror image of Deke O'Malley. He has set up a storefront operation to liberate 'Harlemites' – an echo of 'Israelites' – by sending them back to the South:

HEADQUARTERS OF  
B.T.S. BACK-TO-THE-SOUTHLAND  
MOVEMENT B.T.S.

*Sign Up Now!!! Be a 'FIRST NEGRO!'*

*\$1,000 Bonus to First Families Signing (HC3 64)*

However, his real intention is to flush out the bale of cotton in which the \$87,000 stolen from Deke O'Malley's signatories has been secreted and is now missing. When one of Deke O'Malley's associates pays the Colonel a visit, we see how Himes draws on Garvey's ideas to structure his satire. Barry Waterfield has come to sell the Colonel Deke O'Malley's subscription list. He says – in a brilliant twist: '... These poor people have got ready to go somewhere, and now since they can't go back to Africa it might be best they go back south.'

If Colonel Calhoun and his Back-To-Southland scheme strikes the reader as brilliant satire, here is a step into both the absurd and the carnivalesque that shows Himes synthesising the two approaches to the Harlem Cycle he had used up to now. But lest this seem an utterly

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<sup>39</sup> See *Black Leadership In America*, pp. 130 - 133

far-fetched development we should remember a significant visit made by Marcus Garvey himself back in 1922.

Following President Harding's speech a year earlier in Alabama in which he reasserted his belief in the separation of the races, Garvey endorsed the President. He then went to Georgia to meet with Edward Young Clarke, 'Imperial Wizard' of the Ku Klux Klan. Both Garvey and Clarke shared a common belief in racial purity and racial separation. As Garvey announced after the meeting: 'Whilst the Ku Klux Klan desires to make America absolutely a white man's country, the UNIA wants to make America absolutely a black man's country'<sup>40</sup>. Garvey was denounced by Black leaders in America, but his ideology informed subsequent Black American organisations such as the Black Muslims and the Black Panthers.

So it can be seen that Himes' views on absurdity are germane to *Cotton Comes To Harlem*:

Albert Camus once said that racism is absurd... 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.<sup>41</sup>

However, if Camus sought to explore the absurdity of existence in novels that barely acknowledge humour as a powerful weapon, Himes in the Harlem Cycle continually points to the absurdity of being Black in America, an absurdity magnified by the force of racism, in novels that mock not only white oppression, but also the criminality of those charged with leading Black America. For Himes Black American leadership is found wanting.

It would be another five years until the next instalment in the Harlem Cycle was published, and Himes' final novel featuring his two detectives would not appear in his lifetime. If we have seen absurdity and the carnivalesque as part of the poetics of his creative

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<sup>40</sup> Abraham Hill, Robert, Ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, Vol. IV, Oakland University of California Press, 1985, p, 709

<sup>41</sup> Himes, Chester *My Life Of Absurdity*, New York: Paragon House, 1990, p. 1

impulse up to this point from now on a bitterer tone enters his Harlem novels. For Himes' 'Late Period' is characterised by a radical departure from the comic virtuosity of his 'domestic series' up to this point. But in a way Himes comes full circle at the end of the Cycle. It's as if the themes he first explored in his protest novels and which start to surface in these later Harlem Cycle novels finally erupt at the end of his writing life. As if he wanted to ensure that his readers did not see his *oeuvre* as escapist, throwaway trash. As if he wanted to let, finally – in Gayatri Spivak's terms – the subaltern speak.

### *Blind Man With A Pistol*

Himes sent the manuscript of *Blind Man With A Pistol* to his agent Bill Targ on 11th November 1968<sup>42</sup>, seven months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on 4th April. It would be useful at this point to examine Himes' political views over the course of his writing the Harlem Cycle, how they evolved, changed, and hardened into a bitter vision.

In a speech delivered at the University of Chicago in 1948, 'The Dilemma Of The Black American Writer', Himes still sees some cause for hope:

American Blacks *have* written honest books and they have been published and read. That is evidence that the dominant white group in America is not entirely given over to an irrevocable course of oppression.

There is an indomitable quality within the human spirit that can not be destroyed...

My definition of this quality... is *growth*. Growth is the justification of human life. Children will grow from poverty and filth and oppression, and develop honor and integrity, and contribute to all mankind. It is a long way, a hard way to grow from the hatred of the faces of men. Eventually Blacks will discover they are not alone. (HC2 vx)

This optimistic tone alters markedly over the decade and a half Himes worked on the Harlem Cycle. But we should not be disconcerted by this *volte-face*. During his lifetime Himes experienced many of the obstacles placed in the way of the American Black: racism,

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<sup>42</sup> Sallis, James, *Chester Himes: A Life*, Edinburgh Payback Press, 2000, p. 293

incarceration, grinding poverty – this perhaps explains some of the ferocity of his views regarding the fate of Black America.

In a series of interviews given over thirty years between 1955 and 1985 and collected in *Conversations with Chester Himes* we can clearly trace his political opinions, opinions which inform the writing of the Harlem Cycle, particularly the latter novels in the series. These opinions harden as Himes grows into late middle age – he was a few days short of 46 when he gave his first interview, and his anger intensified with the years rather than receded. Himes did not mellow; his rage grew stronger, and his solution to the predicament of Black America more radical.

If the violence in the Harlem Cycle moves from *grand guignol* to something far more hard-edged we should remember that Himes wrote the bulk of the novels in a very violent decade: the 1960s. This is what lifts the Cycle above the *policiers* Duhamel had in mind when he suggested Himes start work on *A Rage In Harlem*. Himes ultimately transcends the crime genre to address a much broader crime: the crime against humanity which slavery and its legacy had bequeathed the Black American.

To begin with, Himes takes a Marxist view of how the Black American can achieve parity with their white counterpart. In an interview given to Pierre Ravenol for *Paris-Presse* in July 1964, Himes comments on the recent riot in Harlem:

Well this year it's real hot in Harlem. The streets stink, the air is stifling. Black people don't have any money to spend on vacations. They're stuck in their tiny, miserable apartments. Finally, it just gets to be too much, and they come outside and start blowing off steam.<sup>43</sup>

When Ravenol asks him whether he can see any hope for the 'people of Harlem' Himes lets off a little steam himself:

CH: Negroes aren't rebels. They're just whining beggars. "Just a little integration, please!" no, things won't get better unless...

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<sup>43</sup> Fabre, Michel and Skinner, Robert, eds., *Conversations With Chester Himes*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1995, p.10. Subsequent references are given as *CWCH* with page number following, all in brackets.

PR: Unless what?

CH: Unless there's a change in the way the U.S. economy works, in the way the world economy works. (CWCH 10 – 11)

Himes was in equally cynical mood in November of the same year when *Adam* quizzed him:

You ask about the Harlem riots, the anger in Harlem, the revolt in Harlem? They'll go on. There's no reason why they shouldn't. No government can rehabilitate Harlem, or provide the people there with a decent life. Billions and billions of dollars would be needed. No banker's going to invest in Harlem. Everybody was quick to vote for Civil Rights for Negroes, but that doesn't cost anybody a cent. (CWCH 13)

Himes at this point sees the solution to the plight of the Black American in economic terms. He views poverty and its concomitant ills as the major problem facing Black America. The ghettoization and oppression of the Black American— effectively a kind of mass urban incarceration – erupts in the 1960s in race-related riots in numerous American cities. Between 1964 and 1971, civil disturbances (as many as 700, according to one estimate) resulted in large numbers of injuries, deaths, and arrests, as well as considerable damage to property, concentrated in predominantly Black areas.

The United States had experienced race-related civil disturbances throughout its history, but the events of the 1960s were unprecedented. Law enforcement authorities took extraordinary measures to end the riots, sometimes including the mobilization of the National Guard. The worst riots took place in Los Angeles (1965), Detroit (1967), and Newark (1967). After the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968, the riots signalled the end of the carefully orchestrated, non-violent demonstrations of the early Civil Rights Movement. It is against this backdrop of escalating violence that Himes was writing the latter novels of the Harlem Cycle, and these riots feed his imagination just as inter-racial sex and the prospect of lynching fed his imagination during the composition of *If He Hollers* back in the 1940s.

Himes starts to abandon his economic arguments about improving the lot of Black Americans as the decade wears on. The turning point seems to come in 1969, the year after the murder of Martin Luther King, and four years after Malcolm X was killed. In an interview he gave to

Philip Oakes for *The Sunday Times Magazine* in November 1969 he talks about the anecdote that inspired the penultimate novel in the Cycle:

A friend of mine told me this story about a blind man with a pistol shooting at a man who had slapped him on a subway train and killing an innocent bystander... and I thought, damn right, sounds just like today's news: riots in the ghettos, war in Vietnam, masochistic doings in the Middle East. And then I thought of some of our loudmouthed leaders urging our vulnerable soul brothers on to getting themselves killed, and thought all unorganized violence is like a blind man with a pistol. (CWCH 20)

It's at this point that we can trace a departure from Himes' previous views. From now until the end of his life Himes becomes an advocate of organised violence. He goes on to talk to Oakes about his views on violence as a catalyst for progress :

... I've come to believe that the only way the American Negro will ever be able to participate in the American way of life is by a series of acts of violence. It's tragic, but it's true. Martin Luther King couldn't make a dent in the American conscience until he was killed. (CWCH 21- 22)

It's perhaps no coincidence that Himes makes these potentially incendiary statements to foreign media. Himes was a survivor, and he was surely aware of the consequences of such provocative remarks. So we should not be too surprised to find that Himes' first articulation of his new way of thinking should be given on German radio in 1970:

I believe in rebellion, although up to now it has really been disorganized and ridiculous. Yet Negro activism in the 1960s had more success than anything since the Civil War. Since that period of activism, though, no more progress has been made. (CWCH 28)

Himes has become a revolutionary, and his analysis of the American political scene as it affects Black Americans chimes with the temper of the times. This analysis is fleshed out more fully in an interview he gave to the Black American writer John Williams in Spain:

Now, first of all, in order for a revolution to be effective, one of the things that it has to be, is violent, it has to be massively violent; it has to be violent as the war in Vietnam. Of course, in any form of uprising, the major objective is to kill as many people as you can, by whatever means you can kill them, because the very fact of killing them and killing in the sufficient number is supposed to help you gain your objectives. It's the only reason why you do so. (CWCH 40 – 41)

Here is a programme for bloodshed that still seems shocking and disturbing today. Himes assumes not just the mantle of commentator or spokesman, but of prophet:

... the black man can bring America down, he can destroy America. The black man can destroy the United States... It can be destroyed completely. (CWCH 46)

But perhaps we must remember what Himes had witnessed:

... I remember a Southern white cracker colonel in the Second World War got up and he made this famous speech about the black people, saying, "You have never been taught to use violence and you have never been taught to be courageous, but war calls for these things and you must learn them." Well, he's right. That's the most right thing he ever said. (CWCH 46)

And Himes' scorn isn't just turned on the white community in America. In *Blind Man With A Pistol*, he indicts those Black spokesmen, activists, and organisers he refers to in the interview for the *Sunday Times* with Oakes: '...our loudmouthed leaders urging our vulnerable soul brothers on to getting themselves killed'. Himes portrays three kinds of messianic figures in the novel, all of whom are flawed. On Nat Turner Day the followers of these figures converge from different directions towards 135th Street and Seventh Avenue.

As James Sallis points out, the three figures are almost allegorical:

...Brotherly Love is shepherded by a well-intentioned, simple-minded black youth and his white female companion, Black Power by a man whose exceedingly comfortable life is supported by funds from disciples and from the troop of black prostitutes he manages, Black Jesus by Prophet Ham whose own hatred of whites whips his acolytes to a frenzy....<sup>44</sup>

All are blind men themselves. They cannot see – as Himes himself can see – what is needed for the 'black community':

I have always believed in a black revolution by violent force. Such a revolution would fail (that is to say, the establishment would win the war through massive lethal strength) and numberless brothers would die... But the enormous sympathy the failed revolution would generate could exert such savage pressure on the American political and economic system that the white establishment in panicky desperation would give blacks whatever they wanted.

But this revolution would mean more than lecturing on lecture platforms; it would mean going out and getting killed. (CWCH 106)

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<sup>44</sup> *Chester Himes: A Life*, p. 309

Soitos makes an interesting point about the structure of this novel: ‘This novel also illustrates the ultimate interaction between Himes’s social and aesthetic theories. As the meaningless violence in the book increases, the structure of the detective novel as we know it disintegrates.’<sup>45</sup> *Blind Man With A Pistol*, with its strange overture featuring Reverend Sam and his harem, the italicised interchapters, the grim tone throughout, may lead the reader to agree with Skinner: ‘*Blind Man* is in many ways a confusing work because it rejects much of what we have come to expect from traditional crime stories and even what we have come to expect from Himes himself. The reasons for the murders that occur are obscure, and because the detectives fail to identify the murderers, much less bring them to justice, the reader is likely to view the book as unsatisfying at best and at worst as incomprehensible.’<sup>46</sup>

However, Skinner resists the temptation to dismiss the novel: ‘Ostensibly a crime story, the work is an effective protest novel which depicts in a harsh light the destructive forces that American race relations threaten to unleash in the big city.’<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps Himes was now beyond heeding Duhamel’s advice, tired of feeding 220 pages into his typewriter, done with churning out crime stories. But perhaps also Himes’ quandary had as much to do with the central question for any writer confronting the problems of the twentieth century: how could one write about the enormities of what was happening around the world, of what had happened, of what could happen? If to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, what about turning out cheap, quickly-written novels after Jim Crow, the Ku Klux Klan, and Little Rock, Arkansas? If the crime novel in and of itself cannot square up to the larger crime of crimes against humanity, then of what value is it? How can it be adapted, translated, transmuted?

Perhaps Himes never got to fully answer these questions. But there is no doubt that they inform his writing. And in the final novel of the Harlem Cycle – published after his

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<sup>45</sup> *The Blues Detective*, p 168

<sup>46</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p.165

<sup>47</sup> *Two Guns From Harlem*, p.180



death – we see how close he came to forging a new subaltern genre based on the simple architecture of the crime novel that seeks an answer to Adorno’s riddle.

### *Plan B*

Robert E. Skinner would go on to edit Himes’ last Harlem novel with another of Himes’ critics, Michel Fabre. *Plan B* was edited by Skinner and Fabre and first published in the UK by Canongate’s Payback imprint in 1997. Himes had actually told Fabre about the novel back in the early 1970s and perhaps the seeds of eventual publication were sewn then:

I started another thriller, called *Plan B*, which is about a large-scale black rebellion led by a black subversive organisation, but I didn’t quite finish it. In it, the man who secretly sends weapons to blacks finds his plan wrecked because black people don’t have the political maturity needed to band together into an effective force. Instead of waiting for an organisation to form, each one of them begins shooting white people for his own personal reasons... I became uncomfortable with it after a while, because the story became too exaggerated. I originally envisioned a general conflict between races, but in the final scene Coffin Ed and Grave Digger shoot at each other. One of them takes the side of his race brothers, while the other chooses to uphold law and order, not because he feels any loyalty to whites, but because the political and social implications of the rebellion are too much for him. (CWCH 135 – 6)

The novel begins with T-bone Smith and his common-law wife Tang taking delivery of a box of flowers in their ‘cold water slum flat’ in Harlem. Their names are suggestive: T-bone Smith is half-steak, half-everyman, a piece of meat in the economy of Harlem. Tang has no real identity beside him: her name suggests that she is just the smell he gives off, his ‘tang’, and so even lower than a piece of meat, as his treatment of her confirms. Himes describes them both with an edge of bitterness absent from his previous novels:

He was white-mouthed from hunger but was laughing like an idiot at two blackfaced white minstrels on the television screen who earned a fortune by blacking their faces and acting just as foolish as T-bone had done for free all his life...

She had once been a beautiful jet-black woman with softly rounded features in a broad flat face and a figure to evoke instant visions of writhing sexuality and black ecstasy. But both her face and her figure had been corroded by vice and hunger, and now she was just a lean angular crone with burnt red hair and flat black features that looked like they had been molded by a stamping machine. Only her eyes looked alive: they were red, mean, disillusioned and defiant. She was clad in a soiled faded green mother hubbard and her big

bunion feet trod restlessly about the rotting kitchen linoleum. The tops of her feet were covered with wrinkled black skin streaked with white dirt. (HC3 401 – 402)

This passage is shot through with the words ‘black’ and ‘white’ as if racial conflict was being conducted not just on a social but on a domestic level. T-bone has effectively turned into a minstrel himself, ‘white-mouthed’ with hunger. Tang ‘had once been a beautiful jet-black woman’ but now ‘The tops of her feet were covered with wrinkled black skin streaked with white dirt.’ But Tang also has ‘burnt red hair’ and ‘red, mean disillusioned and defiant eyes’. This signifies both her passion, wasted as it is on T-bone, who tries to pimp her out to white men; and her destruction, for T-bone kills her once a box of ‘flowers’ is delivered to their apartment. The anonymous delivery conceals an M-14 rifle, a weapon meant for the black revolution, as the message on a card that comes with the box indicates:

WARNING!! DO NOT INFORM POLICE!!! LEARN YOUR WEAPON AND WAIT FOR INSTRUCTIONS!!! REPEAT!!! LEARN YOUR WEAPON AND WAIT FOR INSTRUCTIONS!!! WARNING!!! DO NOT INFORM POLICE!!! FREEDOM IS NEAR!!! (HC3 404)

Tang is excited at the prospect of liberation; T-bone becomes terrified at the thought of going to jail should the rifle be discovered. They quarrel and T-bone kills Tang after she threatens him with the gun and refuses to hand it over: ‘You call whitey and I’ll waste you.’ (HC3 406) When the gun doesn’t go off and T-bone sets about her with his knife, Tang says: ‘I shoulda known, you are whitey’s slave; you’ll never be free.’ (HC3 407) T-bone’s betrayal is foreshadowed by a further reference to colour in this chapter: ‘“Iss a M14,” he said. ‘Iss an army gun.’ He was terrified. His skin dried and turned dark gray.’ (HC3 404) T-bone’s change of skin colour represents his betrayal of the ‘uprising’, as Tang calls it.

A further theme is introduced in this opening chapter, namely the opposition between a capitalist oppressive status quo and a revolutionary campaign of organised violence. Himes skilfully introduces this theme through the ad break in the minstrel show on TV:

Meanwhile, the two blackfaced white comedians danced merrily on the television screen until interrupted by a beautiful blonde reading a commercial for *Nucreme*, a product that made dirty skin so fresh and white. (HC3 403)

As we shall see, ‘the two blackfaced white comedians’ who dance so ‘merrily’ in what becomes a *danse macabre* may well be pointed references to Himes’ two Harlem detectives, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, who for too long have danced to ‘whitey’s’ tune, until at last their essential blackness has been erased by *Nucreme*. That’s to say, in upholding the capitalist status quo they have become corrupted, but not as their white counterparts have been corrupted by being on ‘on the take’, but through the coarsening and brutalising job of policing Harlem, and also through a kind of moral contamination, the contamination of doing ‘whitey’s’ bidding for so long.

When Grave Digger kills T-bone in a fit of rage in Chapter 2, we see just how far he has strayed from the side of ‘law and order’. When Coffin Ed agrees to cover for him, the two seem to be still bonded. Coffin Ed has crossed the line for his partner. But Grave Digger marks out his territory, and we see the first chink in their relationship:

‘You ain’t involved, Ed. I’ll take my own medicine.’

‘Ain’t involved? I’m here, ain’t I? I’m your partner, ain’t I? We’re a team, ain’t we? I’d killed him too, man. I’d have just done it different is all.’

‘No, partner, I’m not going to let you stick your neck out for me. This was my own private feeling, my own private action... I did it. I killed this black mother myself, I busted his skull alone, and I’d do it again. I did it because that woman looked something like my ma..., a poor black woman wanting freedom. And I’d kill any black mother on earth that was low enough to waste her for that. But I’m not going to let you share this feeling, man, because this is for my mama.’ (HC3 412)

This is a very curious reaction to what has been a shocking and powerful act. Grave Digger, normally the less impulsive of the two detectives, kills T-bone because Tang ‘looked something like my ma..., a poor black woman wanting freedom.’ Yet to complicate matters he refers to T-bone as ‘this black mother’, thus through a lexical blurring of distinctions – ‘mother/ma/mama’ – conflating T-bone with downtrodden black women and specifically his own mother. There is an unspoken acknowledgement here of three crucial themes: the sexual

coercion of women (T-bone is a pimp), and specifically black women; the emasculation of Black men through the depredations of racism; and the cry of freedom that seems to bewitch both Tang and Grave Digger. Grave Digger may be dissembling in the exchange that follows with Coffin Ed – he may be using his excuse as attempt to conceal his real interest, the prospect of freedom:

On sudden impulse Grave Digger put the bloodied instruction sheet in his pocket. ‘All I want you to do is just don’t say nothing about this, Ed,’ he said.

‘Let’s just keep it to ourselves until we find out more about where it is.’

‘Where what is?’

‘Freedom.’ (HC3 412)

The next two chapters seem to swerve right away from the conventions of crime fiction. The opening of Chapter 3, which introduces ‘CHITTERLINGS, INC.’, starts at the beginning of the nineteenth century with Albert Harrison, slave owner and business failure, and his family, seemingly a world away from the Harlem of the 1960s. To readers who were expecting another hardboiled crime story from the ghetto this must have come as quite a shock. Himes is demanding much more of his audience here. Formally, the novel has a degree of sophistication most crime novels of the era – especially those that Hollywood optioned for the ‘Blaxploitation’ movies of the early 70s – never even came near to exploring.

The unifying thread through the two narratives of Black Revolution and white depravity is sex, specifically incest, prostitution, and Cotton Tai Harrison’s specialty, anal sex. Although the sexual encounters described in *Plan B* are not nearly as graphic as the depictions of violence, it is the shocking nature of the sex acts portrayed that drives a large part of the plot of the novel.

Group sex, adultery, exhibitionism, anal sex, interracial sex, and prostitution are all added to this rich mix of Southern decadence, especially in the historical sections of the novel. Himes also returns to the principal theme of *If He Hollers*, that men accused of rape may be innocent. Throughout the novel, consensual sex between a Black man and a white

woman is always referred to as rape; and the man is always severely punished. It is, in fact, a sexual incident that at least indirectly provides the stimulus for the main action of the novel *Plan B* and connects the two parallel plots.

Tomsson Black makes his entrance in Chapter 10. It's a resonant name, containing suggestions of sexuality – 'tom cat' – but also the tame Black retainer of Harriet Becher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Here is a character who embodies the double bind the Black American faces every day – whether to freely express themselves in a predominantly white society, or whether to assume a docile and subservient position. And 'Black', of course, has all of the connotations Black and white society associate with the word: Black, not Negro, and so strong and militant; but also the sinister associations white society makes with the word: the Black Economy, a black look, black moods. He is the son of a tortured legacy, aware perhaps that to have survived at all his forbears would have been subservient under slavery, docile after Emancipation, subject to stereotyping in terms of sexuality and primitiveness.

Black's history completes the interpolated historical narrative. We see how Tomsson Black came to acquire the Harrison family land in Alabama for his company, CHITTERLINGS, INC. This tale too involves warped sexuality. In a flashback, Tomsson Black and another Black American man named Hoop are serving long jail sentences. Both are in prison on rape charges, and in both instances, the white women involved initiated the consensual sex. Guilt causes the wealthy woman – Barbara Goodfeller, wife of "liberal, white millionaire philanthropist" (HC3 460) Edward Tudor Goodfeller, III – who accused Tomsson Black only to have him exonerated three years into his life sentence and to give him the money he uses to go into business. Himes links Barbara Goodfeller with the historical narrative:

She was almost a dead ringer for Cotton Tail Harrison – the same type of corn-silk blonde with big innocent-looking blue eyes that gave the impression that butter wouldn't melt in her

mouth, along with a figure that would make a preacher ball the jack. She didn't need any birth-control pills – she was safe, a factor that allowed her to indulge in any depravity that struck her fancy.

(HC3 461)

She still wants Tomsson Black sexually, and they begin an affair with the understanding that she will continue to finance him. Meanwhile, the violence in society continues. Chester Himes makes the point more than once that the attempts by white authority to use violence to quell the Black shooters results in more white deaths than does the sniping. He also depicts a lack of Black American unity as cause for severe problems in the revolution itself. Blacks don't want to be caught with the delivered weapons, and, therefore, end up turning each other in. Whites vacillate between guilt and rage. “[Blacks] lived in an atmosphere of fear of the whites and suspicion of each other that had, itself, been caused by white fear. It was like a deadly carousel” Blacks have to deal with grotesque, contrasting absurdities as guilt-stricken whites bend over before Blacks and ask to be kicked, and a white biker gang lynches a Black man during an outdoor concert. And during all of this, the authorities cannot find the weapons distributor.

Using seed funding from Barbara Goodfeller, Tomsson Black acquires a one million dollar grant from a wealthy white philanthropic organization, the Hull Foundation, to establish CHITTERLINGS, INC., employing Black Americans to produce and sell ham in Alabama. The irony of this is that liberal whites are financing the revolution Tomsson Black is trying to foment.

Coffin Ed and Grave Digger return at the end of the novel to confront Black. They are brought to the home of a mysterious Black woman in White Plains – note the ironic name – to unmask the revolutionary. But in *Plan B* we are not given a tidy denouement:

Tomsson Black told them about his plan, which he called ‘Plan B’, for ‘Black’. His plan was to arm all American black males, instruct them in guerilla warfare, and have them wait until he gave the order to begin waging war against the whites... However, only a small percentage of the guns had been distributed and their owners were running amok with them. (HC3 531)

Then, as if finally Himes had decided to abandon any responsibility towards the readers who had followed the Harlem Cycle because of the series' humour, 'whodunnit' formats, and portrayal of his two Black detectives, Grave Digger kills Coffin Ed for trying to arrest Black, after which Black kills Grave Digger. The novel then seems to peter out rather than reach a satisfactory climax. Nothing is resolved, no one is taken downtown, the revolution is left hanging. Himes' experiment in form, his attempt at broadening the scope of his subaltern genre, collapses. Why he did not return to the novel in the fourteen years left to him remains a mystery.

### Conclusion

What is most striking about the Harlem Cycle is the degree to which Himes experiments with a form that is by its nature deeply conservative. The crime writer may admire their villains, may even be on their side, but the basic premise of crime fiction is that a singular act of violence – usually murder – disrupts a largely settled community, and that it is the detective's task not just to unmask and apprehend the murderer but to restore order.

Himes imports much that had never before been seen in crime fiction. His use of folk tales, the Absurd, aspects of comedy derived from Elizabethan theatre, and the historical novel, distort this conservative genre, conservative not just in terms of its politics, but also in terms of its form. He takes what I call a subaltern genre, formulaic and artistically disreputable, and elevates it through a consistent commitment to do more with crime fiction than his fellow practitioners.

The Harlem Cycle reaches its climax with *Cotton Comes To Harlem*, in many ways the novel where Himes perfects his literary experiments. But Himes was not satisfied with the grim merriment of satire. He seems to have wanted to push the boundaries of the crime novel even further, so that by the time he comes to *Blind Man With A Pistol* and *Plan B* it is as if he

is prepared to abandon the staid satisfactions of plot, pace, and character to make much more radical points about the predicament of Black Americans. In doing so he also collapses whatever vestige of the detective novel he had adhered to previously. His subaltern genre strains and creaks under the weight of material he wishes to load on to his form. This is especially true of *Plan B*, which seems to have been abandoned and never returned to in Himes' lifetime.

I would argue, therefore, that while his attempt to forge a subaltern genre and bring it to a point of greater literary sophistication fails his example is worth serious study, especially by cross-cultural writers. And so my study of Himes is not a totally disinterested scholarly examination of his work. I go to Himes for example and inspiration, and seek to apply the lessons I have learned from him in my own novel, *Black Bush City Limits*.

One of these lessons is Himes' documentary approach to describing Harlem. Take this description from *The Heat's On*:

Even at past two in the morning, 'The Valley', that flat lowland of Harlem east of Seventh Avenue, was like the frying pan of hell. Heat was coming out the pavement, bubbling from the asphalt; and the atmospheric pressure was pushing it back to earth like the lid on a pan.

Colored people were cooking in their overcrowded, overpriced tenements; cooking in the streets, in the after-hours joints, in the brothels; seasoned with vice, disease and crime.

An effluvium of hot stinks arose from the frying pan and hung in the hot motionless air, no higher than the rooftops – the smell of sizzling barbecue, fried hair, exhaust fumes, rotting garbage, cheap perfumes, unwashed bodies, decayed buildings, dog-rat-and-cat offal, whiskey and vomit, and all the old dried-up odors of poverty.

Half-nude people sat in open windows, crowded on the fire escapes, shuffled up and down the sidewalks, prowled up and down the streets in dilapidated cars.

It was too hot to sleep. Everyone was too evil to love. And it was too noisy to relax and dream of cool swimming holes and the shade of chinaberry trees. The night was filled with the blare of countless radios, the frenetic blasting of spasm cats playing in the streets, hysterical laughter, automobile horns, strident curses, loudmouthed arguments, the screams of knife fights. (HC2 343)

In *Black Bush City Limits* I attempt similarly precise descriptions of various parts of London:

I crossed to the window and pushed the slats apart. Outside the cab office across the road stood a couple of clubbers, spectral in the light from the neon sign. The 24 hour bagel place was going too, but there was no action there. The rest of the street was in darkness. A night bus shushed round the corner, all its lights on both decks out, and sped by as the driver made



for the depot and a warm canteen. I watched it disappear into the darkness like it was an apparition. (BBCL 1)

We were in Shaughnessy's, sat facing the bar at a table in the heart of the 'saloon', just by the large plate-glass window that said Shaughnessy's Bar in fancy Celtic lettering, with hounds from the Book of Kells either side and the sheet of frosting that kept out the night and the winter cold.

Up at the bar it was packed solid with the crowd the place usually attracted, the kind of lads and lassies who actually like Irish theme pubs, as long as they're done out as Edwardian Dublin crossed with Twenties Paris, all brass, mahogany, glass and pale brown linoleum, with a thin Brylcreemed Italian in a lounge suit and floppy bow tie playing piano in the middle of it all and a 'really good' restaurant by the far wall. It made The Trade Winds look like a slum. (BBCL 76)

I took a seat by the tall window to the left. It looked out onto a row of 'cottages' painted in pinks and pastels. The sun had come out and the street had a kind of pale radiance to it, parked cars, gates and pathways, trees, hedges and houses, milk bottles and cats curled up on front garden walls, all softly shining in autumnal quietude. For a moment I forgot where I was and why I had come. (BBCL 117)

I also tried to create characters who mimic something of Himes' grotesques, the likes of Goldy, Pinky, and Dummy. Dermot, the Two Steves, and Kevin Fitzgerald are my attempt to follow Himes in producing characters who act as light relief in what could otherwise be a bleak, humourless tale of murder and perverted sexuality. And in Peter Campbell I also introduce a highly dubious religious figure.

It will be seen that the principal lesson, however, I apply is largely structural. By creating a diachronic text, a story told across two time-frames, I enact at a structural level the very doubleness my main character, Mick Kavanagh, shares with myself. This diachronic structure also stands for something much more pertinent in a consideration of subaltern genres.

Spivak's essay, 'Can The Subaltern Speak?' highlights the way in which certain Western discourses, whilst seeking to liberate non-Western subjects, actually reinforce power structures that oppress marginalised peoples. She specifically looks at the way in which Indian women are written out of these supposedly liberating discourses. Now, crime fiction has become a very male site of articulation. I do not need to rehearse too much of this here,

but in the crime novel the victim or victims will usually be women; there may be a high degree of graphic violence used against them in crime novels; and the main character will be a man, or possibly two men, or else a man and a subservient woman. As such, it is a very androcentric genre, and so in its way part of a misogynistic climate of oppression towards women.

Part of my thinking in creating a woman's voice to counterpose Mick Kavanagh's was to address this imbalance. The shrewd observer will say, 'But Mick is allowed 40,000 words – Margaret is only allowed 15,000'. There is no arguing with this. But like Himes I am attempting an experiment, and I hope that the power and quality of Margaret's voice will both enhance the story I tell, and expose Mick Kavanagh as a dubious figure, not unreliable exactly but definitely undependable .

For I have tried to make Margaret a profounder character than Mick, and by situating her in the Famine I also attempt to address my research question: 'Can crime fiction deal with crimes against humanity?' I think the ancillary question that follows in the wake of this question is: 'What form should such a fiction take?' I have tried to answer this question in this Thesis. *Black Bush City Limits* is, as I say, an experiment. Experiments are devised to test theories. The theory I test in this Thesis is that a subaltern genre can enable marginalised writers to address issues the more respectable genre of literary fiction may bypass or overlook. If the subaltern can speak I would argue that she is more likely to be heard in a subaltern genre than otherwise. But my novel is not just addressed to the subaltern. By embedding what is in effect historical fiction at the heart of a thriller, I also hope to address readers who would not be interested in the story of Mick Kavanagh, namely, the host community I find myself a guest of. Like Chester Himes, I want to take the genre of crime fiction and radicalise it. I hope this Thesis proves that I gave gone some way towards realising my aspiration.



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