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CONTEXTUALIZING CHESTER HIMES'S TRAJECTORY OF VIOLENCE
WITHIN THE HARLEM DETECTIVE CYCLE

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Master of Arts in English

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August 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTERS OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2015

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Student's Date of Defense: April 6, 2015

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those who listen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Dr. Julie M. Burrell: A remarkable woman

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BAILEY ANNE CAPELLE

ABSTRACT

Long Civil Rights Movement scholars have begun to reconstruct a more accurate representation of the literary left, filling in the gap in scholarship that previously existed between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. With the aid of the backdrop set up by the “Long Movement” scholars, this study aims to add to the understanding of those authors whose lives and works have yet to be fully explored because of the ramifications of the McCarthy era. This discussion focuses on Chester Himes, for his work is as influential as both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison’s, yet Himes has only recently begun to receive the critical acclaim he deserves.

Most recent scholarship seems to identify Himes’s strongest novels to be *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *Lonely Crusade* (1947) because of the clear political connections that can be made to Himes’s life as an activist. Less has been said about his Harlem Detective Series, and the studies that have been conducted present very little connection to his continued political involvement. I will locate his first—*A Rage in Harlem* (1957)—and his final—*Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969)—novels of the series within the historical framework that Dowd Hall has set up for us in an attempt to add to the literature on this important, yet discounted author. The same political activism that is seen in Himes’s early works is mirrored within these two novels as seen through his absurd depictions of violence in Harlem.

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CHAPTER I

THE LITERARY LEFT

The story of the African American writers and artists who took an interest in the American Left has yet to be fully appreciated. From the 1940s on, the stories of few and their Communist Party defections began to represent a mass betrayal of African Americans by the Communist Party. Richard Wright's "I Tried to Be a Communist," an essay that appeared in two installments in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944, outlines the restrictions placed on him by his fellow white party members. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) follows a male protagonist as he rebels against the Brotherhood, a fictional rendering of the Communist Party. Such stories began to be seen as the general opinion of all black writers composing during this time period.

Several scholars, however, have begun to reconstruct the a more accurate history of black literary radicalism: *Black Marxism* (1983) and *Communism in*

Harlem During the Depression (1983) by Cedric Robinson and Mark Naison respectively have laid the groundwork for additional studies put together by authors such as Alan Wald, James Smethurst, Barbara Foley, Bill Mullen, Mary Helen Washington, and Lawrence Jackson, to name a few. Through formal analysis and historical approaches, their works have filled the gap in scholarship between the Harlem Renaissance (roughly the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s) and the Black Arts Movement (roughly the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s) by addressing the influence the Left has had on African American writers. In *Popular Fronts* (1999), Bill Mullen argues that Richard Wright's opinions often overshadow the many other writers of the Black Renaissance; in *Wrestling With the Left* (2010), Barbara Foley examines the earlier writings of Ralph Ellison, noting that many proletarian elements were removed in order to appeal to a larger Cold War audience. Clearly, our preconceived ideas of black leftist writers must be altered if not completely rewritten.

Likewise, Lawrence Jackson builds upon the work of Mullen and Foley and extends their scope to encompass writers besides Wright and Ellison. In *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Cities, 1934-1960* (2011), Jackson examines the lost history of this crucial era in order to paint a more accurate portrait of American intellectual and artistic life in the mid-twentieth century. Through the examination of texts by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, and Ann Petry, Jackson emphasizes the importance of individual achievements within the backdrop of the milieu: because "black writers did so well, especially between 1940 and 1953...the idea of the artists operating as a cohort has been obscured" (3). Only through collective analysis,

Jackson argues, can we see the political limitations of the mainstream organizations as well as the challenges and contributions made by black Americans to a more broadly conceived liberalism in American public life before and after the Second World War.

Similarly, in his trilogy where he tracks the political and personal lives of several generations of U.S. left-wing writers,¹ Alan M. Wald establishes points of contact between writers such as Ann Petry, Richard Wright, Jo Sinclair, Kenneth Fearing, Thomas McGrath, Alexander Saxton, Carlos Bulosan, Chester Himes, Henry Roth, Lauren Gilfillan, Ruth McKenney, Morris U. Schappes, Irwin Shaw, Albert Maltz, John Oliver Killens, and Len Zinberg. Wald takes a slightly different approach than Jackson, for he argues that these writers are in dialogue with psychoanalysis, existentialism, and post-war modernism, and that their collective artistic goals are the creation of pieces that generate moods of “piercing emotional insight” and “cosmic descent” (1).

Brian Dolinar, like Wald, also argues that African American writers and artists—even though they often participated directly in the current political events—made their greatest contribution to the political movements of the 1930s and on through their art (3). Within *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (2012), Dolinar argues that the Communist-led Left, despite the common conception that the Communist Party hindered black cultural

¹ The three volumes in order are as follows: *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (2002), *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (2007), and *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (2012).

expression, promoted several cultural organizations that drew black cultural workers into its orbit (the most notable being the National Negro Congress). Dolinar takes a more micro approach, only examining the impact the Left had on three major, yet less examined, black cultural figures: Langston Hughes, Chester Himes, and Ollie Harrington.

What all these scholars have in common is that they have become historians of what is now known as the “Long Movement”—those who have started to recover links between the Depression-era black struggle and the civil rights movement. They question limiting the civil rights era to merely 1954 to 1965, and they advocate for the exploration of the organizations that laid the earlier groundwork. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in her article “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” (2005), for example, argues that the breaking down of racial barriers within unions was “not just a precursor of the modern civil rights movement. It was its decisive first phrase” (1245). Dolinar, however, points out that Dowd Hall and those who support her thesis often fail to acknowledge the setbacks created by McCarthyism. According to Dolinar, it was not the internal squabbles that fractured the alignment of artists and writers on the Left; it was the unrelenting campaign of red-baiting and blacklisting. For Dolinar, scholars have yet to fully recognize the extent of the damage done during the McCarthy period. He argues that now the war is over, we need to address the many careers destroyed, reputations wrecked, and lives ruined by this period of political persecution.

With the aid of the backdrop set up by these “Long Movement” scholars, we can begin to understand those authors whose lives and works have yet to be fully

explored. I will focus on Chester Himes in particular. His work is as influential as both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison's, yet Himes has only recently begun to receive the critical acclaim he deserves. Until lately, the work he published in France was difficult to find and often not translated into English, limiting the possibilities of critical attention to the larger portion of his literary work. We must now return to his work, for not only is his body of work greater in volume than both Ellison and Wright, his work is significantly more approachable, allowing him to be in conversation with a greater population and ultimately allowing him a greater chance of inspiring social change.

Most of the recent scholarship that has been published in regards to Himes's work shows that critics such as Alan Wald, Michael Fabre, Robert Skinner, and Lester Sullivan seem to agree that *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *Lonely Crusade* (1947) are Himes's strongest novels because they "intend to change prevailing notions and offer superior visions of truth about the nature of racism" (Wald 148). Only Raymond Nelson, A. Robert Lee, David Cochran, and Frankie Bailey have attempted to analyze Himes's use of violence in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), *Lonely Crusade* (1947) as well as certain novels within the Harlem Detective Series. These scholars appear to agree that the Harlem Himes creates is an isolated world ordered by violence. We, however, need to continue to analyze Himes's work while noticing the influence his political activism has on his writing and his representations of Harlem. By looking at his Harlem Detective Series in particular, I will not only highlight the importance of a series that has previously been dismissed, I will also apply Dowd Hall's historiographical tool of the Long

Civil Rights Movement to provide a more complete social context to his literature. By using the historiographical paradigm of the Long Civil Rights Movement as a lens through which to view Himes's writing and politics, I will add to the scholarly conversation about literature and culture as it relates to this paradigm. I will locate his first—*A Rage in Harlem* (1957)—and his final—*Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969)—novels of the series within the historical framework that Down Hall has set up for us in an attempt to add to the scholarship on this important, yet discounted author.

In the early 1930s, Himes began writing short stories in an atmosphere supportive of African American authors; with the publication of his first novel in 1945, he entered into the political genre of protest fiction just as Richard Wright had done in 1940; during the McCarthy era, however, Americans' opinions of protest writers turned sour.² The new developing hostile atmosphere coupled with the addition of his name to the FBI's watch list forced Himes to move abroad, removing himself from view of the American literary Left. We must now return to his works to add to the scholarly reconstruction of this time period in an attempt to continue developing a more complete picture of this neglected era as well as continue to uncover one more career that was destroyed by this period of political persecution. By returning to Himes's life as well as *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) and *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969), we can get a more accurate representation of a time period that we

² According to Jackson, within a span of five years, Americans went from shock at the moral ugliness being exposed to a feeling that the protest fiction genre was overworked; overnight it became popular opinion that Richard Wright exhausted all the genre's possibilities with *Native Son* (8).

need to continue to reconstruct. By looking at the Harlem Detective Series through this lens, we can understand that the reoccurrence of absurd violence and the continuing amplification of this violence is reflective of the social environment of the time period.

CHAPTER II

CHESTER HIMES: A REVOLUTIONARY WRITER

Chester Himes, born to parents just two generations removed from slavery in Jefferson City, Missouri in 1909, grew up in myriad cities throughout the United States; he ultimately graduated from the Cleveland High School East High in 1926. After spending two years at The Ohio State University, Himes took to the streets of Cleveland, where he was arrested for armed robbery in 1928 and sentenced to 25 years in the state penitentiary.³ It was here that his writing career began. After

³ According to David Cochran, Himes robbed the house of a rich white couple at gunpoint, stealing money, jewelry, and a car. When he was finally captured in Chicago, the police returned him to Cleveland. There two detectives handcuffed his feet together, handcuffed his hands behind his back, hung him upside down with his legs draped over the open door. They proceeded to beat him around the ribs and testicles. A similar depiction is found in his novel *The Crazy Kill* (1959).

reading the *Black Mask* and *Detective Story*, two detective magazines, Himes started to dabble in short story writing, publishing a few pieces while in prison.

Himes admitted that his earlier stories often starred white characters because it was easier to get them printed: “When I started writing in the U.S. in the early thirties, a black writer had a hard enough time getting published” (*Conversations* 125). Many of his short stories written during his prison years addressed racial issues, albeit, from a white protagonist’s perspective.⁴ While in prison, Himes admits to having experienced “violent seizures of rage” (*Quality of Hurt* 62) because of the senseless acts of mayhem witnessed around him: “Convicts stabbed, cut, slashed, brained, maimed, and killed each other almost every day for the most nonsensical reasons” (*Quality of Hurt* 63). His stories from this time period that embraced this absurdist notion of rage were often his most successful. “To What Red Hell” (1934), a story based on his experiences during the 1930 fire in the Ohio State Penitentiary, received “the greatest curtain call” of any other story published in *Esquire* magazine (*Dear Chester* 17). This same fire also allowed Himes the chance to get a hearing because it was this incident that forced the prison to admit that the facility was overcrowded. After serving seven and a half years of his twenty-seven year sentence, Himes was released on parole for good behavior as a result of getting this hearing.

When Himes was released from prison on parole in 1936, like many others, he faced learning how to navigate employment during the Depression. The stories he had started publishing while in prison were not enough for him to survive on after his

⁴ “Red” (1934) and “Crazy in the Stir” (1934) where two such stories published in *Esquire*.

release. He worked low-paying jobs in Cleveland, eventually applying for jobs with the Works Progress Administration (WPA). He was originally hired as a manual laborer, but because of his writing skills, he was soon given a job at the Cleveland Public Library. Himes eventually landed a position on the Ohio Writer's Project, writing about the history of Cleveland for a state guidebook. In his first autobiography *The Quality of Hurt* (1971), Himes looks back on this time fondly. He describes how he and his fellow writers—both black and white—were “bound together into the human family by [their] desperate struggle for bread” (72). His history of Cleveland still remains unpublished and undiscovered, but it is representative of his early interest in writing about urban environments.

During these years, Cleveland was a bustling industrial city, and the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was organizing in the rubber and auto plants; according to Brian Dolinar, Himes was quickly swept up into the labor movement while working various factory jobs. He still, however, held onto his dreams of writing and would spend much of his time at the Karamu House, meeting many artistic hopefuls including Langston Hughes—Hughes was the current resident playwright during the time of Himes' frequent visits (125-135).

Discontent with the WPA and with Hughes' support, Himes moved to Los Angeles in 1941 in hopes of working on movies. Hughes gave him “a list of names of people to see” when he went to Hollywood, and “[m]ost of them were connected with the Communist Party” (*Conversations* 53-54). With this help, Himes hoped to find work as a screenwriter. He was given a job at Warner Brothers, but “When they saw [his] face [he] was finished—period” (*Dear Chester* 21). Jack Warner, the

president of Warner Brothers who refused to work with African Americans, got him fired reportedly saying, “I don’t want no niggers on this lot” (*Conversations* 56). Even though he was rejected from Hollywood, he remained involved in the Hollywood Left while working in the war plants with the rest of the industrial workforce; Communist Party members had encouraged Himes to apply at the war plants to aid in the fight against segregation, and he wrote about many of these experiences in *Lonely Crusade* (1947).⁵

According to Himes, the CIO charged him with the task of challenging discrimination in the workplace, but after Pearl Harbor, the unions redirected all their attention to winning the war and abandoned their antiracist campaign. Himes began writing articles denouncing the racial backlash of Los Angeles, demanding a black revolution. In his essays, he often called on the trope of the “Double V”—an idea promoted by black newspapers that encouraged victory abroad over fascism as well as victory at home over racism. In September 1942, Himes published an essay titled “Now Is the Time! Here Is the Place!” in *Opportunity* magazine. In the article, he calls himself the voice of the “Negro martyrs, dead, hung from American trees” (271), and he argues that it is time for African Americans to fight against their true enemies: “Our native American fascists” (271). He also acknowledges that blacks

⁵ Even though both volumes of his autobiography do not discuss Himes’s time as a laborer in Los Angeles (1940-1944), in later interviews he does admit that the characters of *Lonely Crusade* were all modeled on real individuals involved in the Left, and the experiences of the protagonist, Lee Gordon, were based on Himes’s own experiences. Himes states that “There wasn’t a single event in the story that hadn’t actually happened” (*Conversations* 44). In “Narrating Nationalisms: Black Marxism and Jewish Communists through the Eyes of Harold Cruse” Alan Wald identifies the Leftist activists Himes’s bases his work off of.

must join “*wholeheartedly into this great war*” against Nazism, fascism, and imperialism because “victory at home without victory abroad is impossible” and vice versa (italics original 272). He states that to win the war without winning on the home front was leaving African Americans no freer than before the war; he thought that everyone needed to be involved in the “breaking down the walls of intolerance, hatred, and discrimination” (284). Himes was one of many leftist writers who believed that the United States would only experience a true victory if there was victory on both fronts.

He continued to express his radical ideas, and in 1944, he wrote the article titled “Negro Martyrs Are Needed” for a May edition of the *Crisis*. Within the article, Himes expresses that there are three options for the nation. The first is for the nation to become completely free; the Soviet Union had come “closest to this goal,” but the type of government did not matter—only the state of its citizens (159). The second is for a nation that only gives freedom to the ruling class as was the situation in the United States; Himes argues, however, America was on the “pivot of change” and could move towards the either first or third form of nation (159). The final option is a nation where no freedom exists at all, and he felt the race riots of the time were a “step backward” in this direction (174). According to Dolinar, the FBI did not appreciate Himes’ argument, and in the letter dated June 12, 1944, in the FBI file on Himes, the FBI placed him on their Security Index because he called for “revolutionary action on the part of colored people” (as quoted by Dolinar 138).

He again expressed his ideas publicly in 1945. Giving an interview with the *Chicago Defender*, Himes shared that while he lived in Cleveland, he became

interested in “the terrific movement of the people” (*Chicago Defender*). African Americans made more advances during the Depression than at any other period in American history; they “came to understand things about segments of society from which they had been excluded, and with whom they had had no means of contact,” and Himes out rightly expressed his identification with the labor movement and “a hatred for the ruling class of whites” (*Chicago Defender*).

Despite being on the FBI’s watch list and having to work in the factories of California, Himes still drafted and published his first novel dramatizing the conditions in World War II Los Angeles; the main character Bob Jones lives in a state of constant fear because of the racial terror that runs rank in the city. The only solution Jones sees is to organize a revolution supported by both blacks and whites that fight for the common goal of democracy. Himes’s first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), gained him critical acclaim and was seen as a piece expressing hope in the labor movement. In a review for the magazine *PM*, Richard Wright compared Himes to a “soldier shooting at you from a foxhole” and the effect is that he “lights up race relations among shipyard workers in a neon glare” (212). Similarly, in a review appearing in the *Daily Worker* in 1945, Eugene Gordon made a statement calling for all Communists to read the book to be “reminded” of what they “forgot in the past period” because “there is a hell of a lot of work to be done among the Negro and white masses by Communists.”

Himes’s second work *The Lonely Crusade* (1947) was successful but not as well received as *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) because of its brutal honesty and its label as a protest novel. In “Narrating Nationalisms: Black Marxism and Jewish

Communists through the Eyes of Harold Cruse” (2003), Alan Wald identifies *Lonely Crusade* (1947) as Himes’s masterwork equal to Richard Wright’s masterpiece *Native Son* (1940). Wald argues that Himes successfully “infuses” the strategies of “fictional narrative” with “a social and philosophical” analysis of “racial, gender, and ethnic relations” (142). Wald, however, also points out that *Lonely Crusade* (1947) only sold 4,000 copies compared to the 7,000 copies of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) (142). In an article titled “The Man Who Goes Too Fast” (1969) by Philip Oakes, printed in a November edition of *The Sunday Times*, Himes is quoted as saying “Negros hated [*Lonely Crusade*]. Jews hated it. Communists hated it. *The Daily Worker* ran a headline: ‘Himes carries the white flag!’ Radio talks and lectures were cancelled. Eventually the publishers withdrew the book” (*Conversations* 21). Within *A Lonely Crusade* (1947), Himes, like Ellison and Wright, consciously distances himself from the Left by portraying Communists as self-serving and manipulative; the main character, Lee Gordon, symbolizes the untapped potential of the black worker. Brian Dolinar, however, notes that, unlike Wright and Ellison, Himes never succumbed to spewing anticommunist rhetoric to gain success in his career. As a result, Dolinar argues, Himes was never embraced by the white literary establishment whereas both Wright and Ellison were (6). In the first installment of his autobiography Himes notes that “Of all the hurts” that he “had suffered before” and those that he had “suffered since, the rejection of *Lonely Crusade* hurt” him the “most” because he was unable to gain the notoriety that both Ellison and Wright received (*Quality of Hurt* 101-102). By 1953, because the atmosphere was changing for him and other Leftist writers and because he had already been blacklisted, Himes

decided to immigrate to Paris, France to join the black expatriate community there in hopes of reinventing himself as a writer.⁶

During the second phase of his writing career, Himes departs from the overt form of social protest fiction popular in the 1940s. At the suggestion of Marcel Duhamel, who translated *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), Himes was invited to write for *La Serie Noire*. It is then that he produced several detective novels set in Harlem, featuring two detectives: Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones. In order of publication, the novels within the Harlem Detective Series are *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), *The Real Cool Killers* (1959), *The Crazy Kill* (1959), *The Big Gold Dream* (1960), *All Shot Up* (1960), *The Heat's On* (1961), *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965), and *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969). *Plan B* (1993), published after Himes's death, is the unfinished and final installment of the Harlem Cycle. *Run Man Run* (1959) is also identified as one of Himes's detective stories, albeit, without Coffin Ed Jones and Grave Digger Johnson—the characters that connect the other nine together.

The nine novels chronicle the detective duo of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger as they attempt to uphold justice for blacks and whites within the racist world of Harlem. The series follows Ed and Digger as they save the protagonist Jackson from a messy affair with con men;⁷ trace the events that result in the death of Ulysses Galen—a large and rich Greek man with a lust for young black girls;⁸ uncover the

⁶ Himes left for Europe in 1953 and remained abroad for the remainder of his life, dying of Parkinson's disease in Moraira, Spain on November 12, 1984.

⁷ *A Rage in Harlem* (1957)

⁸ *The Real Cool Killers* (1959)

murderer of Valentine Haines;⁹ hunt down the thieves of Alberta Wright's thirty-six thousand dollar gambling winnings;¹⁰ unearth Casper Holmes's—a Harlem politician and closet homosexual—fifty thousand dollars of stolen campaign contributions;¹¹ trace an unlikely trio's connections to a three-million-dollar bundle of dope;¹² follow a bale of cotton housing eight-seven thousand dollars and a modern-day Back-to-Africa movement;¹³ attempt to prevent a black revolution (only after leaving the murder of a white man in a Harlem boiler room unresolved);¹⁴ and, finally, succumb to a fight that turns them against one another.¹⁵ The series became very popular among French audiences, but generally went unnoticed in the United States.

However, when *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1963)—the seventh of the eight novels within the Harlem Detective Series—was made into a successful film of the same name (1970), US audiences began to take notice. According to James Sallis, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1963) became somewhat of breakthrough novel for Himes. Since then, the series has slowly started to win Himes some critical attention.

Biographers, however, attempt to argue that Himes conveniently avoids any mention of politics within these detective novels. Biographers seem to argue that Himes did not want to appear to be political during the McCarthy era, and he instead turned all his attention to establishing a meager existence for himself in Paris. In their biography *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (1997), Edward Margolies and

⁹ *The Crazy Kill* (1959)

¹⁰ *The Big Gold Dream* (1960)

¹¹ *All Shot Up* (1960)

¹² *The Heat's On* (1961)

¹³ *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965)

¹⁴ *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969)

¹⁵ *Plan B* (1993)

Michael Fabre take Himes's denunciation of communism at face value without a deeper examination of his political past. Critics similarly underestimate the importance of Himes's political background in understanding the Harlem Detective Series. In the article "Community, Crime, and Traces of Noir: *The Conjure-Man Dies* and *A Rage in Harlem*," Frankie Y. Bailey argues that Himes's eight novels describe "the descent of the [Harlem] community" from 1957 to 1969 "into the explosive riots of the 1960s" (32). With this statement, Bailey ignores the scholarship of Dowd Hall, Mullen, Folly, Smethurst, and the rest of the Long Movement scholars who have worked to bring the ideas of the long civil rights movement thesis forward.¹⁶ Dolinar has begun to look at the Harlem Detective Series through a Leftist lens; he, however, has only focused on Himes's last two novels—*Blind Many With a Pistol* (1969) and *Plan B* (1993)—while ignoring the importance of the other pieces within the series.¹⁷

In bringing forward the importance of this less canonized author, I will illuminate that many scholars have missed the larger commentary on violence found within his Harlem Detective Series. By applying Amiri Baraka's idea of the "changing same,"¹⁸ we can begin to understand the complexity of the way that Himes satirizes violence to illuminate the absurdist qualities of racism. The

¹⁶ In *Prison Literature in America* (1989), H. Bruce Franklin points out that Himes's novels present a US history from World War II to the black urban rebellions of the 1960s (206-207), but he does not examine this idea further or narrow his focus to the Harlem Detective Series specifically.

¹⁷ *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *Lonely Crusade* (1947) have also been analyzed through a Leftist lens, but little has been done with the work Himes published after he left the United States.

¹⁸ "Changing same" is an idea from Baraka's book on black music and the Blues titled *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1999).

“changing same”—a notion originally tied to jazz that Baraka also applies to racism—refers to the idea that forms are repeated, yet revised. Because of the thesis established by the “Long Movement” scholars which proves that black radical activism extends from the 1930s and the Popular Front through the Black Arts Movement and Black Power era, we can see that Himes’s initial political fervor of the 1930s is never lost, but rather returned to, and transformed in the 1950s and 1960s along with the manifestations of racism. It is clear that Himes was deeply involved in the social struggles of the 1930s and 1940s and his literary life began with a belief in social change. What many scholars have missed, however, is that, by examining the Harlem Detective Series with specific attention to the first and last novels, we can see that Himes continued his same political agenda, albeit, with a change in technique: within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1957), he returns to the themes he establishes in *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), yet his depictions of violence are amplified and more absurd.

I will analyze Himes’ neglected texts and offer a new interpretation through close readings, arguing that the trajectory of Himes’s literary life that begins with a belief in change is reignited with revolutionary passions within his Harlem Detective Cycle though his backdrop of Harlem. Himes’s development of Harlem mirrors the American social movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and Harlem, in essence, becomes a metaphor for the cultural transformations taking place within the United States as seen through Chester Himes’ eyes.

CHAPTER III

THE HARLEM DETECTIVE SERIES

Despite the passing of twenty plus years, the same impassioned fight against racism that is seen in Himes's essays and in his earlier novels is seen throughout the Harlem Detective series. I will examine *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) and *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969), the first and last novel within the series, to illuminate that Himes's writing reflects his political activism; we see this through his absurd depictions of violence in Harlem. Scholars such as Brian Dolinar argue that Himes's earlier work falls into the category of protest fiction and his later work should be classified as absurdist fiction. Dolinar identifies Himes's turn to absurdity taking place only within the last two novels he composes: *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) and *Plan B* (published posthumously in 1993). By applying Dolinar's observations, we can understand that Himes turns to absurdity much earlier than with the

publication of these last two novels. Absurdist qualities appear throughout the Harlem Detective Series beginning with the first installment, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), and his works become progressively more absurd and violent as we see within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969). His writings, therefore, match the trajectory of the changing social environment. Within *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), Himes introduces the themes and issues plaguing the people of Harlem in both the fictional and real world of the late 1950s. Within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969), Himes returns to these same issues and themes, albeit, in a more violent and absurd manner. Because the same racial tensions are seen in *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) and then again in *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) in an amplified absurdist fashion, we can see Himes's frustrations in the lack of progress the movement has yielded by the end of the 1960s. By highlighting the differences in the social atmosphere between the late 1950s and the late 1960s, we understand Himes to be mocking unorganized violence, suggesting that a black revolution can only be achieved through organization and planning.

Taking an absurdist perspective on racism is not a new phenomenon. Both Ellison and Wright utilized absurdity within their works. As an expatriate living in Europe during the latter part of the civil rights struggle, however, Himes developed a theory on racism different than those living in the United States. Within the second volume of his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity* (1976), Himes explains his new theory on racism by calling on Albert Camus's notions of absurdity:

Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racist, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in

all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life... Racism generating from whites is first of all absurd. Racism creates absurdity among blacks as a defense mechanism. Absurdity to combat absurdity. (*My Life of Absurdity* 1)

Here, we notice that Himes's political beliefs have remained relatively the same, but simply revised. He still argues that the system in place does not support all of its citizens; he, however, no longer believes we have found a good example to follow—not the “U.S.S.R. or any country on earth” (*My Life of Absurdity* 13). Himes, himself, calls attention to the revision of his belief system: he states that he is “anticapitalist but not procommunist” (*My Life of Absurdity* 13), and this modified belief system is reflected in his writing. He begins to embrace an absurdist style as a way to break “through the barrier that labeled [him] a ‘protest writer’”: he “knew the life of an American black needed another image than just the victim of racism” because African Americans are “more than just victims”; they are “unique individuals” because they are “funny but not clowns, solemn but not serious, hurt but not suffering” (*My Life of Absurdity* 36). This notion of absurdity comes through in Himes' writing within the novels of the Harlem Detective Series.

Throughout the Harlem Detective Series, the events taking place within Harlem are repeated yet revised. By connecting Himes's literary work with his involvement in the Left, we can understand this series to be a continued expression of frustration of the lack of progress made in eliminating racism within the United States. *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) sets the stage for the themes Himes wishes to examine, and those same themes expressed through similar absurdist events appear within each consecutive novel, culminating to a boiling point within the final installment. Over and over, we see a frustration with the living conditions that

Harlem residents withstand, we watch as the Harlem residents endure random acts of violence, and we witness the struggles faced by the lower and middle class workers.

All add to the racial tensions within the city.

A Rage in Harlem (1957)

In *A Rage in Harlem*¹⁹ (1957), the main character Jackson is a “square,” and in Harlem, squares are preyed upon by con men. Naturally, Jackson falls into a trap set by several of these con men; Himes, however, purposely creates a Harlem that makes people—i.e. Jackson—so desperate that they believe a certain type of “chemically treated paper” can raise the “denomination of money” (6). When the cops become involved, the characters repeatedly defend themselves, saying “I ain’t done nothing wouldn’t nobody do if they has a chance to make a pile of money” or asking “‘Where are we poor colored people goin’ to get any money from?’” (9).

The trap is laid, an explosion is staged, Imabelle—Jackson’s so called lover and classic *noir* femme fatale character²⁰—flees with the con men, and Jackson is left completely penniless. As he stumbles from one situation to the next with his cross-dressing brother Goldy at his side, Jackson refuses to believe that Imabelle may have betrayed him. Her return to him at the end of the novel seems to have more to do with survival than love, but Jackson’s devotion to her leaves him clueless.

¹⁹ The novel was first published in the United States under the title *For the Love of Imabelle* (1957); it was published in France as *La Reine des Pommes* [*The Five Cornered Square*] (1958).

²⁰ In her article “Good, Bad, and Beautiful: Chester Himes’s Femmes in Harlem,” Norlisha Crawford argues that many of the femme fatales in Himes’ work challenge the stereotypes of African American women as bestial, emasculating, and ugly (194).

During their search for Imabelle and the con men, Jackson and Goldy are constantly on the run from Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones who are two legendary detectives within the Harlem community. Both detectives are “almost as dark as night” and drive an old black Plymouth sedan “dilapidated” in its “appearance” (*Blind Man With a Pistol* 29). Despite their look of ordinary men, they demand respect through their “long-barreled nickel-plated .38 calibre revolver[s]” and their willingness to react to any and every situation with violence: “Folks in Harlem believe that Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson would shoot a man stone dead for not standing straight” (*A Rage in Harlem* 44).

As *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) progresses, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed fall prey to violence themselves, for Coffin Ed’s face suffers severe chemical burns when one of the con men throws acid on him in an attempt to escape. He remains scarred and “grotesque” (Bailey 33) throughout the remainder of the Harlem Detective Series despite the constant skin grafts he undergoes in an attempt to fix his “burnt face” (*The Crazy Kill* 28). Ed’s actions begin to mirror his new violently deformed face, yet he denies that his new trigger-happy tendencies are symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (*The Real Cool Killers* 19-23). As the series continues, he even becomes less and less human-like in appearance, looking more and more “like a mask of an African witch doctor” with each new graft (*The Big Gold Dream* 40). Although they are only Harlem precinct detectives, they are often asked to take part in interrogations by the Homicide sergeant because white cops are unable to hack it in Harlem due to their inability to understand how best to use violence (*The Big Gold Dream* 40). Coffin Ed and Grave Digger’s actions show that, time and time

again, the residents of Harlem will not tell a cop—black or white—anything unless they are afraid for their lives (*Blind Man With a Pistol* 91).

Clearly, Himes' Harlem represents a world of racial tensions: "The farther east it goes, the blacker it gets," and the blacker it gets, the more violent it gets (*A Rage in Harlem* 93). Himes admits that while he was writing these novels, he was "writing some strange shit" because his "mind had rejected all reality": he had "begun to see the world as a cesspool of buffoonery," for "Even the violence was funny. A man gets his throat cut. He shakes his head to say you missed me and it falls off. Damn reality" (*My Life of Absurdity* 126). For Himes, "All of reality was absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting" and this is what made it "funny" (*My Life of Absurdity* 126). Himes presents us with some explanation as to why he creates a world where such violence is essential, yet nonsensical: his novels represent a "cesspool of buffoonery" because the current social tensions forced the world to operate as such.

One of the most intense moments of absurd violence within *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) begins with a panoramic view of the towers of the famous Gothic Riverside Church, the distant buildings of Columbia University, and the scape of the Hudson River. From the beautiful skyline, Himes takes us down to the streets of Harlem that are infested with rats and roaches as well as crumbling tenement buildings. While much of the novel outlines black on black crime, the setting provides us with the larger framework of white corruption that encourages the crime taking place within the all black metropolis. Himes offers us a look into the living conditions on the west side of this northern New York City borough in Manhattan

that the “perfect” skyline attempts to hide. His descriptions are full of the inequalities that characterize American black life. Here he presents us with an absurdist perspective on the living conditions that Harlem residents are forced to withstand—one that is full of violence and hurt, yet layered with hints of humor:

Looking eastward from the towers of Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on the high banks of the Hudson River, in a valley far below, waves of gray rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of a sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish. Blind mouths eating their own guts. Stick in a hand and draw back a nub.
That is Harlem. (93)

Himes uses his blatant imagery symbolically. We notice that the larger American society is ignoring the oppression it places on black American society despite its overwhelming presence even in the landscape of the city: the “perspective” of perfectness is distorted by the “gray rooftops” poking through the “university buildings.” The people who must cram themselves into these “fetid” and “desperate” living conditions become self-destructive. They begin to cannibalize themselves and others who are in similar situations. Here we see an example of what Himes means by a “reality” that is “absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting”; it makes no sense to cannibalize one’s “own guts” or the “guts” of others who suffer similar conditions. This type of violence serves no purpose because it is not organized and does not encourage change nor fight against one’s oppressors. Himes adds humor to the nonsensicality of the situation with the phrase “Stick in a hand and draw back a nub.” The idea that one would purposely stick a hand into a bowl full of “millions of hungry cannibal fish” is insane and laughable. What is equally important to notice,

however, is that this description of Harlem precedes the darkest moment of nonsensical violence in the novel: Goldy's murder.

During their hunt for Imabelle and her gold ore, Jodie, one of the con men, slits Goldy's throat and shoves him into Jackson's hearse simply in efforts to repossess what he believes to be a trunk full of valuables. It is absurd that Jodie commits a more heinous crime simply to continue with the goals of his original con. The scene becomes more and more violent as we watch Goldy die. He becomes one of the dead fish that Himes describes only moments before; we watch as he is blindly cannibalized by his fellow citizens of Harlem: "Jodie stepped back and let the dying body flop on its back to the pavement, jerking and twisting inside the black gown in death convulsions" (106). When Jackson flees both the con men and the detectives, he is unaware that his brother lies in the back of the hearse with his throat cut from ear to ear. As the chase continues, Goldy as well as the trunk of Imabelle's fake gold ore (which ultimately conceals another dead body) fall out into the street without Jackson or the con men knowing. Four white police officers find both Goldy and the trunk lying on the ground, and, once again, Goldy is compared to a dead-fish: "White-walled eyes stared at the four gray men with a fixed, unblinking stare" (123). The metaphor begins to represent the absurdity and humor of the violence taking place in Harlem.

In the second installment of his autobiography, Himes highlights the difference between white violence and black violence, arguing that black violence embraces absurdity whereas white violence does not: within the world of his novels, and perhaps within the real world, Himes argues there is always a purpose and a goal

behind white violence, and often black violence is the nonsensical reaction. Himes suggests that *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) is “an unconscious protest against soul brothers always being considered as victims of racism” (*My Life of Absurdity* 111). Himes identifies this novel as the beginning of “a protest against racism itself excusing all” of the black men’s “sins and major faults”: “the soul brother criminals were as vicious, cruel and dangerous as any other criminals...the only difference being they were absurd” (*My Life of Absurdity* 111). This form of black violence, however, does not accomplish anything besides encouraging the happenings of Harlem to remain the same. In a world where black violence continues, the conditions established by the white violence will remain the same. Within *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) this notion holds. As the series progresses, the citizens of Harlem realize they need to begin organizing in order to fight their oppressors.

Finally, in the background of all of the unorganized violence, we see the citizens who have rejected a life of violence in an attempt to assimilate into the white capitalist system: “Early workers were trudging in from the side streets, hurrying toward the subway. Later the downtown office-porters would pour from the crowded flats in a steady stream, carrying polished leather briefcases stuffed with overalls to look like businessmen, and buy the *Daily News* to read on the subway” (134). Here, through the form of an absurd parody, Himes presents us with the alternative life style available for the citizens of Harlem. A life style where, even though they wish to fit in and attempt an upper-class façade, the workers are still forced into lower-class manual labor positions. This same sentiment is expressed in *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) albeit, in a more violent sense: the black workers who are trying to fit

into the white middle class working lifestyle in *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) transition to a class frustrated that their working conditions have not improved.

As the series progresses, the commentary on racism continues to be rather subtle, usually seen in the conversations between Grave Digger and Coffin Ed and the black and white citizens and patrons of Harlem. Digger and Ed are the detectives charged with the task of protecting the residents of the city, yet they continue to be at odds with the white power structure that governs the police system. Himes begins to embrace a more blatant honesty in his descriptions of Harlem; within *The Real Cool Killers* (1959) Grave Digger tells a white man that if he insists on coming to Harlem were ““colored people”” are forced ““to live in vice-and-crime ridden slums”” then it is his ““job to see that [the white man] is safe”” (65). This sentiment is echoed within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) as well: ““If white citizens wished to come to Harlem for their kicks, they had to take the venereal risks and the risks of short con or having their money stolen. [Ed and Digger’s] only duty was to protect them from violence”” (29-30). Ed and Digger pick and choose which crimes to focus on; the detectives decide to protect the white citizens who visit Harlem from physical harm only. Their only goal is to ensure that by the end of their visit, the white citizens possess the capability to leave. Otherwise Ed and Digger’s lives are complicated with the death of a white citizen on the streets of Harlem.

Previously, within *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) Himes’ racial commentary is cloaked in literary devices such as metaphors. As the series comes to a close, Himes becomes much more radical and honest. As Bailey notes, in the end, Himes’ Harlem is simply ““a matter of racial oppression,”” for ““When whites come to Himes’s Harlem

they are not there seeing art or culture, they are johns, gangsters, or cops” (Bailey 35), and this is best seen within *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969). According to Dolinar, in the 1960s, with the rise of the Black Power movement, Himes returns “to his revolutionary themes” (126). Dolinar identifies *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969)—as well as *Plan B* (published posthumously in 1993)—as a novel acting as “commentary” on the changing social times “seen through the eyes of a writer who had lived through the struggles of the Depression” (127). I will explore the connections between *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) and *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) to illuminate that the issues brought up within the first novel of the series culminate in the riots seen in the final novel of the series, representing the trajectory of violence seen in the 1950s and 1960s.

***Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969)**

In *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969), Himes returns to the revolutionary themes of his earlier writings to comment of the Black Power era. The novel opens with three separate groups marching on July 15, Nat Turner day. The first is a group called the “Brotherhood” led by Marcus Mackenzie, the second group is part of the Temple of Black Jesus, and the third group is a Black Power group. The novel traces the progression of these three groups, and when they all accidentally meet on 125th towards the end of the novel, a riot erupts without warning or reason. The leaders of each group want “the Negroes to arise...out of the abyss into the promised land” (25). “The trouble” with each leader, however, is that not one of them is “very bright,” which is why all of their marches fail (25). The initial murder of a white man in a Harlem boiler room that begins the piece is forgotten rather quickly, for when Coffin

Ed and Grave Digger are “curtailed in their own duties” (97) murders in Harlem do not get solved. After Ed and Digger are pulled of the case, the unstoppable riot becomes the focus of the novel as the detectives attempt to uncover who is responsible for its inception.

At this point in the series, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are older, like Himes, and reflect Himes’s disillusionment in the capitalist system. The detective duo’s “entire career as cops” is described as “one long period of turmoil” reflected in their faces that bare “the lumps and scars...collected in the enforcement of law” (97). Their “short-cropped hair” is now “salted with gray,” and they are “thicker around their middles” (97). Despite all of their hard work, they still have nothing to show, and they do not “expect” anything “to change”: after “twelve years as first-grade precinct detectives they hadn’t been promoted. Their raises in salaries hadn’t kept up with the rise of the cost of living. They hadn’t finished paying for their houses. Their private cars had been bought on credit” (97). Somehow, however, they remain true to their morals and have still never “taken a dime in bribes” despite the fact that they could never catch a break, for “[w]hen they weren’t taking lumps from the thugs, they were taking lumps from the commissioners” (97). Their bitterness comes through in the conversations they have with one another because they can only truly trust each other. They constantly express what they understood all along that others in Harlem are just now beginning to understand: according to Grave Digger, “so much nonsense” just makes “sense” in Harlem (*Cotton Comes to Harlem* 107) because “[t]here are laws for white folks and laws for black folks” and “these laws

come from God” because there is also “a white God and there’s a black God” (*Blind Man With a Pistol* 14).

Himes sets up the link between all the novels within the Harlem Detective Series, but none are as strong as the links between *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) and *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969). When asked in 1964 why the “American Negroes” were “fighting now,” Himes responds that “people become so frustrated that after a while they can’t contain it anymore” (*Conversations* 9). The frustrations originally examined within *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) explode within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) because they can no longer be contained. In the riots of previous years, “police just waited until everybody calmed down, because as long as the riot remained in Harlem, they knew there was nothing to worry about” (*Conversations* 9). In 1964, however, Himes points out that people cannot calm down as they used to: “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” (*Conversations* 9-10). Himes presents us with reasons for the frustrations that started the riots: the structural and economic inequalities that run rank in Harlem. These are the sentiments that Himes decides to end his series on.

As Himes writes in the preface to the novel, the central incident of *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) is based off of true events revealed to him by Phil Lomax, a close friend. After hearing the story Himes “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 further that all unorganized violence is like a blind man with a pistol” (*Blind Man with a Pistol* 5). The notion of absurd and cyclical violence created through racism appears throughout *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969), and the most powerful instance appears in the second to last chapter of the novel.

Chaos begins when Fat Sam, a disgruntled laborer, mistakes the blind man’s gaze as a challenging stare. As the incident escalates to shouting and more and more passengers become involved, a white passenger shouts, “Violence Hell... What these niggers need is discipline” to which the blind man responds “Beware, mother raper!” (184). All parties become offended with this warning, and as their interactions turn physical, the blind man pulls out a .45, accidentally shooting a minister in the heart. Pandemonium ensues. The blind man fires again, releasing two more shots: the “second blasts [are] too much” and the train car erupts in violence, leaving both black and white bodies bloodied on the floor (186). Ironically, a woman begins to scream “BLIND MAN WITH A PISTOL,” and the title character, who is too prideful to admit to himself and others that he is blind, responds “Where? Where?” while waving his gun around in the air (186).

As these events are unfolding in the subway below, a group of Harlem residents and white police officers are watching the demolition of a condemned apartment building on the streets above. The crowd is already agitated, for their homes are being destroyed as part of an urban renewal project that displaces the low-income habitants without providing alternative housing. When the bloodied, hysterical crowd rushes out of the subway station, the scene becomes even more

chaotic. Harlem is quickly engulfed in a full-scale riot. Coffin Ed and Grave Digger happen to already be on the scene, for they were removed from the original case that started the novel off. They are, however, unable to stop the riot, for two people do not stand a chance against an entire city venting its frustrations. When Anderson, their commanding officer, questions their progress on containment, Grave Digger responds,

“It’s out of hand, boss” . . .
“All right, I’ll call for reinforcements. What started it?”
“A blind man with a pistol.”
“What’s that?”
“You heard me, boss.”
“That don’t make any sense.”
“Sure don’t.” (191)

In the article “So Much Nonsense Must Make Sense: The Black Vision of Chester Himes,” David Cochran argues that this scene contains “numerous symbolic references” to “specific recent events,” the most noteworthy being the death of the “ineffectual black minister pleading nonviolence” (13). Cochran connects the minister’s accidental death to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. which took place just one year prior. What Cochran does not note, however, is that Himes locates this action as a result of absurdity rather than the action of one white racist. Himes presents us with an absurdist twist to the events surrounding MLK’s death because he is more concerned with the rising racial and social tensions than the acts of one white racist man. Because the black minister within the novel pleads for nonviolent action, fails in his persuasive efforts, and is then killed, Himes appears to suggest that nonviolent techniques of fighting the frustrations created by racism will

no longer work. Violence is inevitable. Organized violence, however, will be the only successful form of protest.

Fat Sam is also representative of the racial tensions of the time period. He is an embittered handyman for a white family that can only feel some semblance of control and power when he exerts force over others, hence why he becomes involved in the physical altercations on the subway (Cochran 13). This same sentiment is expressed in *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), albeit, in a less violent sense when the early morning workers are willing to pretend that they fit into the white middle class working lifestyle. Within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969), the working situations have still not improved. They are simply revised and repeated. The original willingness to pretend that they belonged to the white capitalist systems that we see in *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) transitions into the frustrations at the lack of improvement in working conditions of an entire class as represented through Fat Sam within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969). At this point both the 1964-1965 Voting and Civil Rights Acts have been passed; on paper, the United States has promised that conditions will improve, yet nothing has been done and no progress has been made.

The final representation of the frustrations felt by the residents of Harlem is seen through the anger of the citizens watching their houses get destroyed. The apartment residents that once allowed themselves to be lumped in together within a fishbowl of crumbling complexes within *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) finally reach their boiling point within *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) as their homes are completely demolished because of “urban renewal.” By placing the disgruntled mob on the

street, Himes “depicts the impotent anger of Harlem’s black population confronting a distant, bureaucratic city government which cavalierly destroys its homes” under the guise of bettering the city (Cochran 13-14). The campaign to redevelop dense urban areas that began in the late 1940s and reached its peak in the 1960s called for the demolition of structures, the relocation of people, and the implementation of eminent domain, meaning that residents like the people of Harlem would lose their homes and then forced out of their neighborhoods as the government purchased their once private property for “public use.”

All these points of frustration come together with the metaphor that Himes identifies in his preface: the blind man with a pistol. The struggles of the people have been lost on society for so long that the only way to combat racism is through random acts of violence. Himes himself says the series offers “no solution” (*Conversations* 21); the Harlem Detective Series does, however, attempt to explain some of “the violence of the current situation”: “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 true. Martin Luther King couldn’t make a dent in the American conscience until he was killed” (*Conversations* 21-22). Himes notes, however, that these acts of violence must be organized. The series ends without a solution because the residents of Harlem, although their frustrations have peaked, have not yet organized, and therefore, will not be able to start the much needed black revolution that the Black Power movement supports.

Himes’s detective novels are a continuation of his absurdist vision. Himes states that “*The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it*

real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books” (*My Life of Absurdity* 126). Himes simultaneously takes Harlem away from the white man through the notion of absurdity and critiques “the white man” as well as white supremacy and racism. Himes can “see what a black revolution would be like” and “for a revolution to be effective, one of the things that it has to be, is violent, it has to be massively violent” (*Conversations* 44). When violence comes into play, the revolution has come to its last resort because “all dialogue” has ceased and “all forms of petition and other goddamned things are finished” (*Conversations* 45). This is simply another instance of Himes’s writing embracing Baraka’s notion of the “changing same,” albeit, on a micro level. His novels of the Harlem Detective Series repeat the same themes over and over, yet each novel presents us with a more violent and absurd rendition, culminating in an explosion of frustrations seen within his final installment, *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969).

Through our understanding of the framework set up by Down Hall, Mullen, Smethurst, Foley, and the rest of the Long Movement scholars, we can see that the Civil Rights era began as early as the 1930s and extends well into the 1960s and 1970s. By connecting Himes to his Leftist roots and applying his political ideals to his less explored work, we can notice that *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) and *Blind Man With a Pistol* (1969) essentially book end what we now understand as the Long Civil Rights Movement. Within the series, we can trace the continuing amplification of violence and map it onto the increasing social frustrations of the time period to gain insight and a more complete understanding of how the Long Movement is reflected through literature. Through the application of this relatively new established

historical definition, we can slowly recover the career of one writer that fell victim to the political persecutions of the McCarthy. In our attempts to bring to light an author as influential as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, we can see that Chester Himes was not only a master of his craft of making approachable literature for the masses, but also a writer that never ceased to fight for a world that he believed possible—a world post black revolution free of racial tensions.

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