

“I Thought I Was Writing Realism”:

Chester Himes’s Harlem and *Blind Man with a Pistol*

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ABSTRACT

Few crime fiction writers have caused so much controversy over the potential of the genre, as well as its limitations, as Chester Himes. Credited with being the first black American writer who redefined the traditionally white-authored hardboiled detective story, Himes challenged readers with his graphic portrayal of Harlem and the provocative images of two black police detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, who are noted for their brutality. But how should we interpret Himes’s own “modus operandi” in creating his crime novels? Especially in *Blind Man with a Pistol*, readers have long been puzzled by the extremely degrading portrayal of Harlem and the gradual loss of agency of the two detectives throughout the story. Contrary to some critics’ claims that Himes’s writing reflects his racial self-hatred and plays into racist stereotypes, this paper argues that the author chose to disturb readers by exposing the daunting face of black life in a downtrodden Harlem. Instead of offering racially uplifting figures in the tradition of Du Bois’s “talented tenth,” Himes underscored the appalling end product of racial oppression and economic exploitation in capitalist society. His appropriation of the hardboiled detective tradition serves to foreground the cause of the pervasive violence and corruption in a racialized urban space. The two detectives cannot exercise individual agency like their white counterparts, as their “private eyes” are restricted by the fact that they are part of the “public eye,” which is itself the mechanism

that results in the violence and disorder around them. Like certain metaphysical and postmodernist writers of detective fiction, Himes consciously disrupted and dismantled his narrative structure in order to offer up political critique. Yet *Blind Man* is not mainly concerned with the questions of being and knowing in a self-reflexive way; instead, Himes's unconventional development of the narrative and his refusal to offer closure should be read as his attack on racial injustice and a way of reminding readers of the crimes that emerge in a racist power structure.

KEYWORDS

Chester Himes; black crime fiction; Harlem; detective narrative structure; *Blind Man with a Pistol*

「我以為我筆下是寫實主義」： 卻司特海姆斯之哈林與《盲人擁槍》

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摘要

少有作家像卻司特海姆斯（Chester Himes）一樣，讓犯罪小說類型規則的潛能與限制激盪出這麼多火花。他是首位大動作改寫白人硬漢犯罪小說的黑人作家，作品視覺風格強烈——紐約哈林區黑禍蔓延，二位黑人警探暴力嗜血。我們要如何解讀海姆斯的小說創作？特別是《盲人擁槍》（*Blind Man with a Pistol*），哈林區集污穢猥褻之大成，警探主角甚至隨著故事進展失去能動性。有論者指出，海姆斯的書寫反映出種族自我仇恨，替種族歧視者的刻板印象火上加油。但本文以為，海姆斯藉由再現都會貧民窟生活的種種不堪與變形，讓讀者在閱讀過程中感到惶惑不安，進而認知到，哈林區會變成讓人驚懼的畸形怪物，原因無他，正是長期受到種族壓迫與經濟剝削的結果；二位偵探無法像主流白人私探主角一樣發揮功能，是因為他倆被迫執行對己身不公不義的律法，暴露法律與秩序的荒謬性。作者刻意擾亂崩解偵探敘事結構以提出政治批判的策略，與某些後現代或反偵探犯罪小說作品有相似之處，但是海姆斯關注的焦點，並非如前述作品一樣強調挑戰理性思考傳統或是探究知識的侷限性；本文認為，應將海姆斯刻意拒絕提供任何型式的結局，視為作家對美國種族不公義的終極批判，刺激讀者省思這種傾斜權力結構下製造出來的醜惡罪行。

關鍵詞：卻司特海姆斯、黑人犯罪小說、哈林、偵探敘事結構、《盲人擁槍》

“I Thought I Was Writing Realism”: Chester Himes’s Harlem and *Blind Man with a Pistol*¹

Few crime fiction writers have caused so much controversy over the potential of the genre, as well as its limitations, as Chester Himes. Credited with being the first black American writer who redefined the traditionally white-authored hardboiled detective story, Himes challenged readers with his graphic portrayal of Harlem and the provocative images of two black police detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, who are noted for their brutality. Dashiell Hammett, one of the originators of the genre, might have excelled in crime fiction due to his job as an operative in the Pinkerton Detective Agency during the 1910s and 1920s, but Chester Himes’s experiences in prison might also have contributed to his unique perception of crime. As the child of a light-skinned mother who aspired to a middle-class life and a much darker father who raised himself from a worker to a college lecturer, the young Himes found little warmth at home due to his parents’ unhappy marriage.² Expelled from Ohio State University over a prank at the age of nineteen, he was later convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to twenty years in the Ohio State penitentiary, where he eventually served seven years from 1928 to 1936.³ Himes began writing while in prison, and managed to publish some short stories and novels with the help of Langston Hughes. After leaving the

¹ The author wishes to express her heartfelt gratitude for the anonymous reviewers’ invaluable comments and suggestions.

² In *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes’s memoir published in 1972, the writer mentioned that his father “was born and raised in the tradition of the Southern Uncle Tom,” but his mother, who “looked white” and “felt that she should have been white,” hated to see “all manner of condescension from white people and hated all black people who accepted it” (10). In *Chester Himes: A Life*, James Sallis suggests that the opposite characters of Himes’s parents were to have a great influence on their son, contributing to Himes’s complex attitude toward racial issues and middle-class values throughout his life. Himes’s ambivalence is also an “exemplar of double consciousness” as discussed by Du Bois (23).

³ According to Himes, the prison in which he stayed “hardly changed since the Civil War.” A terrible fire broke out in 1931 and more than three hundred inmates were burned to death. There was a “bloody riot,” and the National Guard was called in to deal with the disturbance. For Himes, the experience was so vivid that when he began writing he was “able to do it as a documentary” (Fabre and Skinner 20).

prison, he continued to write while working numerous odd jobs to support himself. Disappointed at failing to establish his literary career in America, Himes emigrated to France in 1953, developing a long-term friendship with fellow expatriate writers, including Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and William Smith.⁴ He did not start writing crime fiction until he was commissioned by Marcel Duhamel, the influential editor of the *Série Noire* for the Gallimard publishing company. According to Himes, “I was limited by a formula, but this didn’t prevent me from saying whatever I wanted” (Fabre and Skinner 136). Thus was the creation of, in Himes’s own words, his “Harlem domestic novels” published in the 1950s and 1960s.

Although Himes published in both the U.S. and France, the latter welcomed his work much more enthusiastically than his home country.⁵ In 1958, his first novel of the series, *For Love of Imabelle*, was given the *Grand Prix de Littérature Policière*, the most important French literary award for crime fiction, making him the first non-French writer to win the prize. In the following years he wrote seven more novels, each featuring his iconic duo of black detectives.⁶ When readers in America gradually paid attention to Himes, two of his Harlem crime novels were adapted into films: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* in 1970 and *A Rage in Harlem* in 1991. In 2011, the U.K.’s Penguin Modern Classics reissued five novels from this series in honor of the writer.

There may be no doubt about Harlem domestic fiction’s enduring popularity. How should we interpret Chester Himes’s own “modus operandi” in creating his crime novels? Especially in *Blind Man with a Pistol*, readers may be puzzled by the

⁴ In an interview Himes said that most black Americans kept to the ghettos “mainly to hide from the prejudice and the arrogance of white people,” and also they “wanted to be together, for protection, and togetherness.” But he could be alone and live “in a strange white world” (Fabre and Skinner 89).

⁵ In contrast to Marcel Duhamel’s promotion of his work, Himes’s novels in the U.S. were “brought out indifferently by various publishers,” and critics at first tended to see his books as merely “potboilers.” See James Sallis “In America’s Black Heartland: the Achievement of Chester Himes.”

⁶ Before Himes died in 1984, Michel Fabre and Robert Skinner edited an unfinished manuscript and published it in France as *Plan B* in 1983. The English edition appeared in 1994 from the University Press of Mississippi. Some may consider *Plan B* the last novel of the series, but due to the unfinished nature of the story I will focus my discussion on *Blind Man with a Pistol*.

extremely degrading portrayal of Harlem and the gradual loss of agency of the two police detectives throughout the story. Contrary to some critics' ideas that Himes's writing reflects his racial self-hatred and reinforces racist stereotypes, this paper argues that Himes chose to disturb his reader by exposing the daunting face of black lives in a downtrodden Harlem. Instead of offering racially uplifting figures in the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois's "talented tenth," Himes underscored the appalling end product of racial oppression and economic exploitation in mainstream capitalist society. His appropriation of the hardboiled detective tradition serves to foreground the cause of the pervasive violence and corruption in a racialized urban space. The two detectives cannot exercise their individual agency in the same ways as their white counterparts, in that their "private eyes" are restricted by the fact that they are part of the "public eye," which is itself the mechanism that results in the chaos and violence around them. Like certain metaphysical and postmodernist writers of detective fiction, Himes consciously disrupted and dismantled his narrative structure in order to present a political critique. Yet *Blind Man* is not primarily concerned with the questions of being and knowing in a self-reflexive way; instead, Himes's unconventional development of the narrative and his refusal to offer closure should be read as his attack on racial injustice, and a way of reminding readers of the crime and horror produced under a racist power structure.

I. Grotesque Representation of Harlem

Harlem, the "Negro capital of the world," has been for many the key site of black literary creativity and cultural imagination since the Harlem Renaissance. From Langston Hughes's compassionate and streetwise personae, Jesse Simple and Mrs. Alberta Johnson, to Claude McKay's rootless vagabond, Jake Brown, numerous black writers and artists have added color to the streets of Harlem with their lively stories and expressive poetry, detailing Harlemites' ambitions and desperations, as well as desires and broken dreams.⁷ In Hughes's "The Negro Artist

⁷ Both Langston Hughes and Claude McKay were important writers of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Jessie B. Simple and Mrs. Alberta Johnson are regular characters in Hughes's newspaper columns and poems, and Jake Brown is the protagonist of McKay's first novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928).

and the Racial Mountain," a seminal essay defending black artistic creation, the writer encouraged black creators to produce their works against "sharp criticism and misunderstanding" from their own people and "unintentional bribes from the whites" (693). If a colored artist wanted to deal with the relations between blacks and whites, said Hughes, he could provide his work with "his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears" (693-94). When looking at black characters created by black writers, one may be tempted to examine if they are presented as "exemplary figures" in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of "representative men," or more specifically, in W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of the "talented tenth," where an individual person may embody a type that characterizes "the best" of a race, society, or civilization. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes, black writers or artists can hardly avoid the "burden of representation," the idea that "you represent your race, thus that your actions can betray your race or honor it" (31). Claude McKay's treatment of the seedy side of Harlem in his first novel, *Home to Harlem*, was attacked by Du Bois for making him "nauseated" (Cooper xviii). For Du Bois, McKay's explicit portrayal of degradation and sexuality seemed to cater to the white reader's racist expectations. Concerned with the function of art as propaganda, Du Bois called for black writers and artists to create racially uplifting characters which could counteract the stereotypes of "Uncle Toms, Topsy, good 'darkies' and clowns" ("Criteria" 102). Although the multifaceted images of Harlem and the black lives presented in those works are complex, none of them paints such a grotesque and poignant portrait of the place as Chester Himes.

In the opening chapter of *Blind Man with a Pistol*, Himes presents a bizarre encounter between two white cops and a black family, and the former are appalled by the latter's barbarity and lewdness. A derelict building in Harlem remains unnoticed in the neighborhood until one day a card is put outside: "Fertile womens, lovin God, inquire within" (8). Before this, people see only black nuns walking in and out of the rotten porch. The building is in such a bad shape that they assume

it is a “jim-crowded [sic] convent,” and no one ever dreams that “white Catholics would act any different from anyone else who [is] white” (7). Two patrol officers notice the card and become suspicious of it—“what would a colored convent want with ‘fertile womens’?” (8). After crossing “booby traps” of “stinking garbage,” the cops see a black young man with a harelip cooking pig’s feet and chitterlings which smell like feces (9). Black nuns then come running after “a horde of naked black children,” who later line up on their hands and knees along three rows of troughs and are “swilling it like pigs” (12). One cop has the “odd sensation of having fallen into the middle of the Congo” while the other comments confidently that “they ain’t nothing but niggers” (10). A very old black man, who calls himself Reverend Sam of Mormon, claims that these children are “all from the seeds of [his] loins” and the nuns are his wives (11). When the cops call for reinforcements and question Reverend Sam, the latter patiently answers all their questions:

Yes, he was an ordained minister. Ordained by who? Ordained by God, who else. Yes, the nuns were all his wives. How did he account for that, nuns had made sacred vows to lives of chastity? Yes, there were white nuns and black nuns. What difference did that make? The church provided shelter and food for the white nuns, his black nuns had to hustle for themselves.... All right, all right, why didn’t his children eat at tables, like human beings, with knives and forks? Knives and forks cost money, and troughs were more expedient; surely, as white gentlemen and officers of the law, they should understand just what he meant. (13-14)

At the end of the questioning, the police also discover the remains of three female bodies in the backyard of the house.

Himes’s two black detectives never hesitate to use brutality or their legendary nickel-plated Colts to subdue any suspects. Their names are suggestive of their hard-won reputations among racketeers, pimps, and prostitutes. They have been called “freaks” by Harlemites, and Coffin Ed is even dubbed “black Frankenstein” because his face was badly damaged by a hoodlum who threw acid in retaliation for Grave Digger’s abuse (*Blind* 108). In the novel they take turns forcing a black superintendent, Covey, to tell them the name of a tenant:

When he [Grave Digger] entered Covey's bedroom, he found him lying sideways across the bed, a red bruise aslant his forehead, his left eye shut and bleeding, his upper lip swollen to the size of a bicycle tire, and Coffin Ed atop him with a knee in his solar plexus, choking him to death. (91)

Even after Covey gives them the information they want, Grave Digger does not go easy on him. He strikes Covey with such force that he knocks the back of his hand into Covey's mouth, and when he pulls it away, three of the front teeth which Coffin Ed has previously loosened are "embedded in the carpal bones of his hand" (92).

In his Harlem domestic fiction Himes provides readers with elaborate descriptions of the poverty, deprivation, nastiness, and all-encompassing violence in the black community. Murder and mayhem are not simply committed by whites against blacks; black-on-black extortion and assault are also seen among friends, family members, business partners, and even passersby and strangers. Some critics have issues with Himes's representation of black life. For James Lundquist, Himes has a "vicious conception of the black ghetto and ungenerous view of human nature" (24). James Campbell claims that Himes's writing is mainly characterized by "brutality, anger, and self-hatred" (48). Claire Wells suggests that the violent acts of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are a sort of "psychotic reaction to systematized racial self-hatred"; this kind of representation of black ghetto life only intensifies "racist expectations," and Himes is publicly "taking revenge on his own blackness" (211). For Stephen Soitos, it seems "there is little moral ground to stand on for African Americans in these novels"; as for Himes's disturbing treatment of the black characters, he suggests that the author attacked certain "black values" because he wanted to improve them (153, 162).

What Himes presents readers with is indeed disturbing, but I argue that this was just his aim, to disturb readers by showing them the unbearable face of the black experience. Harlem, like hundreds of other ghettos in America, was deformed by economic exploitation and racial oppression. Himes's startling, unadorned portraits of the Harlemites are, in effect, symbolic of a grotesque black

body, whose filth, decadence, and perverseness are the results of long-term social, economic, and spatial injustices in a white capitalist society. Through various forms of exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness, Himes painstakingly depicts a Harlem not to reinforce racist expectations, but to expose and highlight the detrimental consequences of racial injustice.⁸ As seen at the beginning of the book, although the true identities of Reverend Sam and his wives are unclear, the white police officers find it hard to refute what Sam says: the black nuns cannot get the same protection as the white nuns from the church, and he has no choice but to raise his children in the most “economic” way. In depicting such a horrific environment, Himes shows us that Harlemites did not become monsters by themselves, and rather it was society which forced them to change. As Himes wrote in his autobiography, “The Harlem in my books was never meant to be real.... I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books” (*Absurdity* 126).

The reason why Himes wanted to “take away” Harlem from the white man and to unsettle readers with the degrading portrayal of Harlem also has much to do with the historical status of the place. In “City of Harlem,” an essay published in 1962, Amiri Baraka gave an incisive account of how Harlem, once an exciting place for black cultural tourism with “Ellington at The Cotton Club for the sensual” and “The New Negro for the intellectual,” lost its sparkle after the number of white voyeurs fell and the “tourist trade” stopped (112). “Colorful Harlem became just a social liability for the white man, and an open air jail for the black,” said Baraka, “for many Negroes, whether they live in Harlem or not, the city is simply a symbol of naked oppression” (108). In *Blind Man*, residents in the neighborhood are furious when the New York City government orders the tearing down of some

⁸ To investigate the discursive construct of the image of the so-called “black underclass,” Thomas Heise points out that sociological studies and governmental policy in the 1960s recognized that the isolation of black Americans in “communities of geographically concentrated poverty” resulted from “local acting out of racism in time and space” and the changes of the overall economic condition after World War II. However, the reports and studies concluded that African Americans suffered from the “weakness of a family structure,” which was belittled as “matriarchal.” What the authorities did, Heise argues, was to “blame the victims of urban discrimination for their plight” (490-91).

slum buildings: “They had been forced to live there, in all the filth and degradation, until their lives had been warped to fit, and now they were being thrown out” (187). In this sense, Himes’s representation of Harlem serves a purpose: if white patrons of the arts or pleasure seekers were once attracted by the glamour and glitter of Harlem, now he would ironically entertain consumers of his crime fiction with a freakish Harlem, that had been used up and abandoned by whites.⁹ It may be true that in reality Harlem is subjugated to white dominance, yet in his fictional world Himes is able to reimagine and recreate the place, and thus enable readers to witness the injustices caused by the racist power structure.¹⁰

II. “We’re the Law”

The impact of the racist power structure on blacks can also be discerned by the way the two protagonists serve as “the law,” which is related to the idea of vision in Himes’s appropriation of the hardboiled detective genre. Vision as a means to power has long been important to the generic tradition of crime fiction. In most Golden Age crime novels, space and time are domesticated in a seemingly objective setting, such as with the use of maps and plans and the emergence of timetables and clocks (Scaggs 51). The Golden Age detective excels the rest because he or she demonstrates spatial and temporal control through vision. In hardboiled detective fiction, however, the objective setting is replaced with the mean streets and rotten alleyways of an urban jungle, and the alienated detective in the threatening city

⁹ In “Aggravating the Reader: the Harlem Domestic Novels of Chester Himes,” Gary Storhoff agrees with Robert Stepto’s view that African American writers have been “led to create and refine ... a discourse of distrust” because they could feel the skepticism of their (white) readers. Storhoff thus argues that Himes also harbored a deep sense of distrust with regard to his readership; his stories should thus be read as persistent “assaults” on readers, so that “finally he or she begins to hear what he is trying to say” (48). While I agree with Storhoff that Himes intended to “shake up” his readers by defying the conventions of the genre, I believe Himes was not hostile to them. In fact, because he believed in his readers’ sensibility and potential for effecting a certain kind of change, he could thus use his stories to unsettle and push them to actio

¹⁰ It is worth noting that in *Gumshoe America* Sean McCann contends that Himes’s Harlem is an ironic realization of American individualism and liberalism. The place is described as a “fantastic image of society-as-open-market,” where true democracy is achieved because everyone is “reduced to the brute struggle for survival or advantage” (282-84).

can only struggle to have a limited understanding of the pervasive violence and corruption around him (Scaggs 75). As a rule, the detective in traditionally white-authored hardboiled crime stories is a self-employed loner, whose “private eyes” provide him with an exclusive way of observing his surroundings. Dennis Porter also points out that private detectives stand “on the margin of the law”:

They are the righter of wrongs and the avengers of ordinary people in a world where power is represented as corrupt and official law enforcement the agent of corrupt power. Consequently, they represent a third position, which is neither that of the police nor of the criminals. (169)

Like the classic hardboiled detective heroes, Himes’s protagonists also operate in the mean streets of a big city, and the detectives often have to deal with the intrusion of white people into black Harlem, as well as the aftermath of such events. In *Blind Man*, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger’s investigation starts with the murder of a white man who was looking for black male prostitutes in Harlem. But the two detectives cannot function in the same ways as their self-reliant, highly individualistic white counterparts in the racialized urban space. They cannot have their exclusive “private eyes” because their vision is further restricted by the fact that they are part of “public eye,” which is symbolic of the surveillance power of the state apparatus.¹¹ When the two detectives have to enforce the law, they are thus situated in a precarious condition where they have become part of the mechanism that is causing the crime and corruption they aim to fight. If Coffin Ed and Grave Digger were cast as private detectives in the tradition of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, or even Mike Hammer, they could at least exert a certain kind of private justice against their enemies to avenge the dead or innocent outside the constraints of the system. But the fact that they are on the government’s payroll makes fellow Harlemites distrustful of them. When Coffin Ed declares to a group of trouble-seeking black youths that “we’re the law,” they immediately announce that “then

¹¹ The idea of “private eye and public eye” is borrowed from John Scaggs’s discussion of the police procedural, a subgenre of crime fiction. While Scaggs treats Himes’s fiction as part of this subgenre, he also agrees that Coffin Ed and Grave Digger’s way of investigating things has less to do with police routines and the spirit of teamwork than is usually seen in such works. See Scaggs 31, 85-87.

you're on whitey's side" (140). As law enforcement agents, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger have to carry out the kind of justice which tends to be unjust, or seen as so, to blacks, including themselves. Their inability to exercise their individual agency implicitly reminds readers, who are generally familiar with the rules of the genre, of the discrepancy between the traditional white detectives and the black ones in this work. This also tells readers that although the two protagonists may play the role of oppressors in the eyes of other black Harlemites, they themselves are also victims of institutional racism and systemic oppression.

Himes titled the second volume of his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity*, and readers are forced to confront this absurdity throughout the novel. For Grave Digger, a World War II veteran, black men like him “fought in a jim-crow army to whip the Nazis” but then came home to their “native racism,” and he knows “the only difference between home-grown racist and the foreign racist was who had the nigger” (170). Coffin Ed agrees with him, saying “it’s harder to grant us equality than it was to free the slaves” (170). When Lieutenant Anderson, their white superior, asks them if they have discovered who started the riot in the streets, Grave Digger answers “we know who he was all along”—Abraham Lincoln (135). “He hadn’t ought to have freed us if he didn’t want to make provisions to feed us,” says Grave Digger, and even if they could charge Uncle Abe, he would never have been convicted (135). “All he’d have to do would be to plead good intentions,” says Coffin Ed, “Never was a white man convicted as long as he plead good intentions” (135). As first-grade precinct detectives, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger have not been promoted for over twelve years. Their salaries cannot keep up with the rising cost of living, and they have not finished paying for their houses and cars. When they are “curtailed in their own duties” (97), they can only act out their rage through undirected violence. According to Manthia Diawara, the rage expressed by Himes’s protagonists is the result of the dehumanizing conditions which they have to live with in black Harlem:

By black rage, I mean a set of violent and uncontrollable relations in black communities induced by a sense of frustration, confinement and

white racism ... [The rage] is a savage explosion on the part of some characters against others whom they seek to control, and a perverse mimicry of the status quo through recourse to disfigurement, mutilation, and a grotesque positioning of weaker characters by stronger ones. (266)

Equipped with large caliber pistols, symbolic of masculine power, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are temporarily given the means to police the streets of Harlem by their white superiors. However, because they cannot identify with the white power structure, or this structure has no place for them, their conflicted status and confusion over their self-identity lead to rage and brutality. Their image as the tough, heavy-handed detectives is merely a cover for their actual status—one of powerlessness—because their authority and weapons are granted by the white power structure that oppresses their community.¹²

Himes made an interesting observation on the close relationship between realism and absurdity, being black and being a crime writer:

I would sit in my room and become hysterical thinking about the wild, incredible story I was writing. But it was only for the French, I thought, and they would believe anything about Americans, black or white, if it was bad enough. And I thought I was writing realism. It never occurred to me that I was writing absurdity. Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference. (Fabre and Skinner 109)

In an interview with John Williams, a fellow black American writer, Himes also said that “the detective story originally in the plain narrative form—straightforward violence—is an American product” (Fabre and Skinner 48). According to Himes,

¹² Coffin Ed and Grave Digger’s conflicted status may also be explained by the idea of double consciousness, as proposed by Du Bois: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.... One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (*Souls* 215). As James Sallis points out in “In America’s Black Heartland,” we should not forget the fact that Coffin Ed and Grave Digger live in Long Island, “coming in to Harlem each day to commit mayhem against fellow (but far less advantaged) blacks in their enforcement of white men’s laws” (134).

"there's no reason why the black American, who is also an American, like all other Americans, and brought up in this sphere of violence which is the main sphere of American detective stories, there's no reason why he shouldn't write them" (47). When Williams asked the writer what he thought about the response of white readers to his novels, Himes replied that he did not simply aim to "amuse or titillate" his white readers—"one of the saddest parts about the black man in America" is that "he is being used to titillate the emotions of the white community in various aspects" (47). Himes insisted that his reader should take him seriously. "I don't care if they think I'm a barbarian, a savage, or what they think," said Himes, "just think I'm a serious savage" (47). The "plain narrative form" from this "serious savage," as it turns out, is not an easily read, cozy mystery, but a difficult and challenging story with brutality and bloodshed. Himes created his narratives in such an unnerving way that no reader could ever take him or his work lightly.

III. Generic Constraint vs. Political Critique

Although Himes once said that the formula of crime fiction could not stop him from expressing his ideas about racial politics, the conventions inherent in the genre posed a great challenge to the writer. The rules of crime fiction usually demand that every narrative reaches a certain kind of closure at the end, but *Blind Man with a Pistol* defies such conventions in that throughout the story the two protagonists gradually cease to function as detectives, and the streets of Harlem become more chaotic than at the beginning. Such a radical break from the conventional narrative structure of the genre makes one wonder if Himes was not able to find a balance between the constraints of crime fiction and his strong critique of racial injustice in America.

The main plot of the story involves the bizarre death of a white man in the streets of Harlem, a murder that puts a lot of pressure on the two detectives. Since the dead in the neighborhood are usually black, "a white dead man [is] really worth something" (33). Along with the duo's investigation of the murder, we see the growing force of various black power groups in the area. One man, Marcus

Mackenzie, vows to “solve the Negro Problem” through “a vision of brotherhood” (25). He summons both black and white youths to have a grand march in Harlem: “The forty-eight integrated black and white marchers stepped forward, their black and white legs flashing in the amber lights of the bridge approach” (27). But the orderly marchers also give “the illusion of an orgy,” filling the black and white onlookers with a “strange excitement” (27). Then there is the Black Power movement planned by Doctor Moore, whose members collect bills and coins in the streets for the “coming fight”, and incite racial hatred by asking the soul brothers “to whale” (46). “You got a good house? You got to whale! You want a good car? You got to whale,” says one instigator, “We got the power! We is Black! We is pure!” (46). We also see a self-proclaimed prophet, General Ham, urging his followers of The Temple of Black Jesus to “fight whitey” with the “indigestible meat” of the Black Jesus: “We’re gonna feeding him [white man] the flesh of the Black Jesus until he perish of constipation if he don’t choke to death first... We’re gonna march with the statue of Black Jesus until whitey pukes” (77-78). In the end all these groups take to the streets of Harlem, looting and burning the place.

In the course of their investigation, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger discover that a large sum of money is missing in a related murder case. When they talk to their white superiors, Lieutenant Anderson and Captain Brice, they are told to let the D.A. and homicide bureau handle it. Anderson even warns them: “don’t rake any more muck than necessary” (111). But Grave Digger questions the order, wondering if all they need is to “whitewash the investigation” (111). To stop them from pursuing the money, Anderson tells them instead to locate the instigators of the riots. After a lot of legwork and interrogations, the two detectives learn that a mysterious organization, “the Syndicate,” may be behind the various power groups, and they then manage to meet Michael X, the minister of the Harlem Mosque, to talk more about this.¹³ Coffin Ed tells the minister that many people blame “Black

¹³ The portrayal of Michael X with a “narrow intelligent face” and “rimless spectacles” is clearly based on the black activist Malcolm X, who was a charismatic leader of the black power movement and founder of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. When he left the Nation of Islam and converted to Sunni Islam, changing from a black supremacist to a supporter of racial integration,

Muslims’ anti-white campaign” for the riots in Harlem. In response to the question, Michael X says:

They’re white, ain’t they? Mister Big. The Syndicate. The newspapers. The employers. The landlords. The police—not you, of course—but then you don’t really count in the overall pattern. The government. All white. We’re not anti-white. We just don’t believe them, that’s all. Do you?
(175)

When the detectives try to push him about the identity of “Mister Big,” the minister replies with a smile on his face: “Ask your boss, he knows” (175). Then the story ends with a blind man firing random shots from a subway train out into the streets, and the two detectives could do nothing about the panic and chaos around them.

Before *Blind Man with a Pistol*, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger can always manage to “finish” investigating their cases when the narrative comes to an end—however improbable or unsatisfying the solutions are. In *The Heat’s On*, the previous installment in the series published in 1966, the two detectives are suspended from their jobs because of their use of excessive force, and later Grave Digger has to be hospitalized for getting shot. Nonetheless, Coffin Ed wields his gun and hunts down the criminals involved in the cause of their misfortune—three million dollars’ worth of heroin. Ironically, at the end of the story the reader learns along with Coffin Ed that the heroin, which has been stashed inside five large eels from France, had already been destroyed by a “halfwit” before the story even began. It looks as if the “heat,” a slang expression for the police or the intensification of law-enforcement activity, help nothing, and Harlem, like the “Poisonville” town in Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, is destined to be poisoned again by the dope from “white punk[s]” (57). Margaret Gram argues that, in stripping the two detectives of their state-sponsored authority and allowing them to become free

he was assassinated in 1965. In fact, earlier in the novel the two detectives comment on the legacy of Malcolm X. While Grave Digger says that Malcolm X was “a martyr to the black cause,” Coffin Ed suggests that “he was safe as long as he kept hating white folks—they wouldn’t have hurt him, probably made him rich; it wasn’t until he began including them in a human race that they killed him” (112).

agents, Himes was conducting an experiment in *The Heat's On* in order to reach a resolution between generic conventions and his political aim. However, this trial did not work, because Coffin Ed and Grave Digger had to “resume their positions as cops in order for the novel to proceed” (259-60).

Coffin Ed and Grave Digger’s investigative work appears to be fruitless in *The Heat's On*, but at least all the bloodshed points to the same cause, and the mystery of the lucrative drug trade is finally uncovered. In *Blind Man with a Pistol*, however, the narrative structure is disregarded or, more precisely, destroyed by Himes, which completely goes against the reader’s expectation of the genre. As Todorov points out, popular literature has its own set of norms, and to “develop them is also to disappoint them” (43). Fredric Jameson also considers genres “contracts” between writers and readers: “To use the term which Claudio Guillen has so usefully revived, they are literary institutions, which like other institutions of social life are based on tacit agreements or contracts” (135). For any experienced reader of the crime genre, their anticipation of satisfaction from both the process and the closure of the narrative is thwarted in the story. The two detectives do not uncover any of the mysteries, among them the murder of the white man, the whereabouts of the money, the identity of the various leaders of the black power groups, the name of Mister Big, and their white superiors’ involvement in the cover-up and its implications. How should we interpret Himes’s violation of certain generic conventions? For Andrew Pepper, the trajectory of the Harlem series points towards “apocalyptic disintegration,” and the ending of the novel signifies that while the genre may be a suitable vehicle for Himes’s political and aesthetic ambitions, it is also “limiting” in terms of the lack of solutions it is able to provide (114-16). Lee Horsley believes that Himes’s critique of America’s racial relations undermines the country’s image as defender of democracy during the Cold War period, and the chaotic narrative structure reflects his “pessimism about the possibility of an imminent resolution” (211). Both critics are right about the absence of closure, but perhaps we should look at this from another perspective: from this angle, it is Himes’s conscious refusal to provide closure that constitutes his most powerful attack on racial injustice in America.

Himes is not alone in stretching and breaking the rules of the genre in an attempt to offer a political critique. Writers of metaphysical, postmodern, or anti-detective crime fiction have also been known to play with the conventions of the form, transgressing the limits and pushing the boundaries in the extreme. According to Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney in *Detecting Texts*, a metaphysical crime narrative:

is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader—with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. Metaphysical detective stories often emphasize this transcendence, moreover, by becoming self-reflexive. (2)

Critics such as Michael Holquist and Stefano Tani have argued that for writers like Alain Robbe-Grillet or Umberto Eco, the crime fiction narrative can be used as a way to explore the doomed quest for knowledge and to challenge beliefs in a rational and coherent self-identity. In “The Detective and the Boundary,” William Spanos also contends that the “paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination” equals the “anti-detective story” in that the latter aims to “evoke the impulse to detect and/or to psychoanalyze in order to frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (or find the cause of the neurosis)” (25). For example, in Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers* (1953), a special agent is sent to a distant city to deal with an uncertain crime, but he ends up killing the person whose murder he is investigating. Narratives like this try to demonstrate that one’s endeavors to “establish identity” are often baffled by “solipsism, self-projection, and the inability to position oneself in time or space or even one’s own narrative” (Merivale and Sweeney 16). In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), a classic postmodernist work by Thomas Pynchon, the heroine is forced to assume the role of a detective when she has been named as an executor for a property tycoon, yet her investigative work simply leads to an erratic and unresolved quest. As for *Blind Man*, Himes’s deliberate destruction of his narrative structure also challenges the basic assumption in crime fiction

that the detective is capable of uncovering the “truth” and restoring “order.” His writing strategy, however, is not meant to foreground the limits of human reason or highlight the ideas of indeterminacy and ambiguity. The top priority for Himes is to examine racial and social justice, white domination and black subordination, and the possibility of effecting real change in a racist society.¹⁴

The majority of crime narratives are structured in order to satisfy the reader. As Porter argues, crime fiction “begins by stimulating desire, proceeds to tease it through a technique of progressive revelation interrupted by systematic digression, and finally satisfies it, however unsatisfactorily, in an end that reveals it all” (246). In contrast, the narrative structure of *Blind Man with a Pistol* stimulates the reader but then does not satisfy their desire. The novel is composed of twenty six chapters and six “interludes”; while the former are loosely connected by the white man’s murder and the growing force of different black power groups, the latter involve subjects ranging from the historical background of the Harlem Renaissance, a strange list about “stomach juice for everything you eat,” conversations between Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, and independent episodes that may or may not be related to the main story. The non-linear development of the narrative and the chaos at the end do not, in Porter’s words, “return its reader to the safety of his point of departure once the thrilling circuit is completed”; instead, they force the reader to make sense of what has happened along the way, and to figure out why they are not satisfied in the usual ways. When readers realize that the “thrilling circuit” can never be completed, they may start paying more attention to the issues raised

¹⁴ In “Chester Himes and the Capacities of State,” Gram contends that Himes was unable to solve the “thematic and narrative dilemma” in *Blind Man* because he finally lost confidence in the government. At the beginning of the series, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger could take advantage of certain government tools while “neither fundamentally transforming that government nor submitting to or embracing it,” which was also the dominant logic of the midcentury civil rights movement. When the logic did not work out for him, however, Himes’s series “derailed” and started to crumble. If one could not trust the government to gain access to power, it seems that black Americans were left with only two choices: either to remain victims and commit crimes, or organize a revolution to overthrow the government. But for Himes “there was no possible political future to believe in,” and he could no longer continue his series. While I agree with Gram that Himes did imagine and desire a structural change, I also believe that he was hopeful that his strategic dismantling of the detective narrative could have a positive influence on his readers. See Gram 243-60.

in the story. In this sense any dissatisfaction with the lack of narrative closure can be turned into a new point of departure for another journey, in which creative communications between the writer and reader take place in a meaningful way.

The way Chester Himes ends the novel with a blind colored man firing random shots is significant, because the association of vision with power has also been a recurrent motif in African American literature. Ralph Ellison famously explored the constraining force of the white gaze in *Invisible Man*: "Perhaps simply to be known, to be looked upon by so many people, to be the focal point of so many concentrating eyes, perhaps this was enough to make one different; enough to transform one into something else, someone else" (328). In Himes's novel, the blind man embodies all that has been rendered impotent by the white power structure. At the end of the story, the blind man, who refuses to use a cane or a Seeing Eye dog because he does not want others to know his condition, is furious at being taunted by other passengers on a subway train. When a "fat yellow preacher" tries to appease his anger by saying "peace, man, God don't know no color," he pulls out his .45 caliber revolver and starts shooting (186). All hell breaks loose, and the blind man is left to grope about in the dark, "panic-stricken, stumbling over the fallen bodies, waving his pistol as though it has eyes" (186). The blind man is indeed a "representative figure," but not a racially uplifting one that was called for by Du Bois. Instead, he represents all the deformed and emasculated Harlemites, or black Americans in general, who need to hold onto a pistol as a way of self-empowerment, no matter how illusory it is.

For any writer of genre fiction, bending or sidestepping certain basic rules is always like walking on thin ice. The popularity of Himes's series of Harlem novels may even have been at stake here, because readers might have felt betrayed and alienated, and thus stop reading the books. It may then have been difficult for Himes to re-empower his detective heroes and regain the readers' trust. However, Himes chose to take a risk with this novel, and did so to express his sharp critique of white capitalist society, as well as his deep dissatisfaction with the unresolved conflicts within the black community. This may be an extreme gesture from a

genre fiction writer, but it is also a weighty and poignant one. By foregrounding his protagonists' loss of agency and refusing to offer narrative closure, Himes demanded that his readers take him, his story, and "the Negro problem" seriously. With regard to the end of the novel, some readers may be disappointed that Himes did not offer any closure, some may feel sad that Himes appeared to commit literary suicide by disabling his detectives, and some may even question if he really knew what was going on in America, because he had been away for too long and was writing for a French publishing house.¹⁵ But Himes actually received more critical attention with this dramatic and influential message to the world. Moreover, Himes's writing strategies should not be seen as ineffective, even if he may have failed in reconciling generic constraints with his political critique, as the examination of law and order and his sharp attacks on racial injustices that are presented in this series of novels will continue to resonate with many readers.

¹⁵ Paul Copley in *The American Thriller* suggests that Himes's absence in the civil rights movement and his close relationship with the French publisher raises the questions as to whether his fiction can be categorized as "black American crime writing" (qtd. in Horsley 206).

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