

First published in *Journal of American Studies* 44.2 (2010), pp. 377-390.

Chester Himes's *The End of a Primitive*: Exile, Exhaustion, Dissolution

Although at times he has been too easily folded into the Richard Wright “school” of black American naturalist and protest writing,¹ Himes has by now been read as often as almost *sui generis* within African American literary studies. If, in the early seventies, Ishmael Reed was moved to ask when the crime author who “taught [him] the essential difference between a black detective and Sherlock Holmes” was to be recognized “as a major twentieth-century writer,” by 1976 Robert Lee would be able to welcome a surge of interest that did not count Himes as one of Wright’s, or protest fiction’s, epigones.² Sean McCann’s comment, “there can be little doubt of just how seriously [Himes] re-created the detective story,” is surely borne out by the attention Himes’s detective stories have attracted, and by his increasingly secure place in the canon of American crime fiction: in Paula Woods’s collection, *Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes*, Himes’s name stands for a type of crime fiction within which Wright is counted, while H. Bruce Franklin has credited Himes with the creation of “a new genre”: “the Black hard-boiled detective novel.”³

The crime fiction on which Himes’s current reputation rests begins properly with *The End of a Primitive* (1956), the Harlem-set story story of struggling writer Jesse (a thinly veiled Himes) and his erstwhile white lover, Kriss (modelled on Himes’s white ex-lover, Vandi Haygood), and their failure to revive their relationship. The novel culminates with Jesse reviving from an alcoholic binge to discover that he has stabbed Kriss through the heart with a kitchen knife, a violent expression of his sense of sexual and social impotence (which

¹ See, for example, Woody Haut, *Pulp Culture: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), p. 20; Maureen Liston, “Chester Himes: ‘A Nigger,’” *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*, ed. Charles L.P. Silet (Westport, CONN.: Greenwood P, 1999), p. 84.

² Ishmael Reed, “Chester Himes: Writer,” *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), pp. 97, 96; Robert Lee, “Violence Real and Imagined,” *Critical Response*, pp. 65-66.

³ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, MA: Duke UP, 2000), p. 252; Paula L. Woods (ed.), *Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes: Black Mystery, Crime, and Suspense Thrillers* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996); H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim As Criminal and Artist*, exp. ed. (New York: OUP, 1989), p. 208. For further indications of Himes’s significance, see Michael Denning, “Topographies of Violence: Chester Himes’ Harlem Domestic Novels,” *Critical Response*, pp. 155-68; Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 174-82, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 205-15; Andrew Pepper, *The Contemporary American Crime Novel: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), pp. 110-39, “Black Crime Fiction,” *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp. 209-226; James Sallis, *Difficult Lives: Jim Thompson, David Goodis, Chester Himes* (Brooklyn: Gryphon Books, 1993), *Chester Himes: A Life* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), p. xi.

theme recurs in Himes's autobiographies).⁴ As if to throw further doubt on his volition, Jesse has no recollection of the murder, yet he knows he must have done it. *Primitive* ends with Jesse telephoning the police to turn himself in, and closes with the arrival of the police imminent.⁵ Claimed by Himes biographer James Sallis "as one of America's great novels," Himes saw this work as "the transition between [his] protest" and crime fiction.⁶

This article, drawing on a range of letters from Himes's currently unpublished archive, makes two arguments. Firstly, the largely autobiographical *Primitive*, which Himes began several years after moving from America to Europe, tells part of the story behind Himes's leaving America in the first place. In doing so, *Primitive* inaugurates a writing of exile continued in the crime fiction, a writing through which, because of a literal and figurative distance from America, Himes came to feel more strongly his sense of national identity. Secondly, the novel clears the way for Himes's hard-boiled crime fiction – which, his letters reveal, Himes had begun writing prior to *Primitive*'s publication – by suggesting a formal breakdown of sorts. This breakdown, ending Himes's first career as a writer of protest fiction and occurring in the first of his exile writings, also predicts the trajectory of Himes's second career as a writer of hard-boiled crime fiction. Signalling the generic exhaustion of protest fiction by presenting the reader with a failure of "good" form, *Primitive* anticipates the trajectory of Himes's crime writing towards formal dissolution, an indication of Himes's late belief that literature, generally, was an ineffective catalyst of social-political change.⁷

Writing; Exile

Himes was, partly by choice, a deracinated man. The years between 1953, when he left America, and 1970, when he settled in Spain with his wife, Leslie Packard-Himes, were

⁴ Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurt: The Autobiography of Chester Himes*, Vol. I. (New York: Thunder's Mouth P, 1972), *My Life of Absurdity: The Autobiography of Chester Himes*, Vol. II (New York: Thunder's Mouth P, 1976).

⁵ Himes, *The End of a Primitive* (1956; London: Allison and Busby, 1997). References in text.

⁶ Sallis, *Chester Himes*, p. xi; Michel Fabre, "Interview with Chester Himes," *Conversations with Chester Himes*, eds Fabre and Robert E. Skinner (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995), p. 88; Himes, *Absurdity*, pp. 29, 36.

⁷ My thanks to the AHRC, for PhD and travel funding, and BAAS, for additional travel funding. Special thanks, also, to Carmelita Pickett at Emory. The following archives were examined: Michel Fabre archives of African American arts and letters, Emory University Manuscript Collection 932, Special Collections and Archives Division; James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Van Vechten Correspondence, Box A, He-Hols; Richard Wright Papers, JWJ MSS 3, Series II Correspondence: Personal Correspondence); Henry Lee and Mollie Moon Papers, SCM 92-63, Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. The Fabre archive had no fixed indexing system. Folder names follow box numbers; unnamed folders numbered as they were found (e.g., "Emory, [box] 2, [folder] Himes Fabre"; "Emory, [box] 8, [folder] 3). Van Vechten folders were periodized (e.g. 1948-51); folder references, therefore, are excluded (therefore: [date], Yale). References to Wright Papers: [date], Yale, RW, [box number],[folder number]. All references to Moon Papers from box 3, folder MG342, Family Correspondence – Henry Moon and Chester Himes 1937-1942 (therefore: [date], Schomburg).

peripatetic; and, once the reasons for this restlessness are known, *Primitive* can be read as encapsulating a sense of deracination that shaped Himes's work from *Primitive* on.

Reviewing Himes's unpublished letters from the later forties through the seventies, one is struck by his sense of restlessness, of not belonging. As early as 1947, Himes wrote to Carl Van Vechten that he "simply must get away from [New York] – both for morale and health."⁸ Disappointed with the reception of *Lonely Crusade* and his prison novel, *Cast the First Stone*, and looking forward to his emigration to France, Himes hoped, in a letter to Wright, that "Paris will offer a brighter view."⁹ By spring of 1953, however, Van Vechten would read, "I don't know exactly what I expected to get from Paris, but whatever it was I didn't get it."¹⁰ Arriving in France only in April 1953, Himes and his partner, Willa Thompson, spent from July 1953 until January 1954 in London, from where Himes wrote to Yves Malartic, his friend and French translator, and his wife, Yvonne, that "[r]ace prejudice is about the same here as in American cities like New York, and I am having my difficulties."¹¹ "American" racism, to Himes's disappointed thinking, proved to be universal.

Himes and Thompson left London for Majorca, and, a little more than a year after recording his disappointment with Paris, Himes now found that he was "very tired of Spain ... and [I] wish very much to get back to Paris and live there and learn the city."¹² Similarly, Himes would later tell Van Vechten, "I am beginning to like Paris much better,"¹³ while, by summer of the following year, "[b]oth Germany and Denmark are two countries I can get along very well without."¹⁴ In 1964, Alexandria, Cairo, Biot, Paris, and London all failed to impress; additionally, Himes claimed, Paris had grown increasingly racist.¹⁵ (This last city's stock remained unstable in Himes's opinion. In an undated fragment from an interview with Michel Fabre, he would claim Paris as "[t]he city I most like in the world."¹⁶) Himes would eventually live in Spain with his wife, Lesley Packard-Himes, but still he often felt unsettled. "I would like to get away from here for a while," he wrote in late 1972. "I don't know anyone

⁸ 10 June 1947, Yale.

⁹ 19 February 1953, Yale, RW 99.1393.

¹⁰ 12 May 1953, Yale.

¹¹ 11 July 1953, Emory, 2, Himes Fabre (HF).

¹² To Malartic, 9 September 1954, Emory, 2, HF.

¹³ 8 October 1956, Yale.

¹⁴ To the Malartics, 22 July 1957, Emory, 2, HF.

¹⁵ To Carl Van Vechten, 23 October, Yale.

¹⁶ Emory, 17, Conversations Interviews.

here; they are all strangers.”¹⁷ Most telling, perhaps, is this, also to Malartic: “I would leave [Spain] if I knew somewhere to go.”¹⁸

Packard-Himes explained her husband’s deep restlessness as a response to racism: “He moved from one place to another because he didn’t feel comfortable ... and each time things started getting difficult, he always thought it could be solved by moving.”¹⁹ Some thirty-five years before this observation, writing to Van Vechten of the ongoing revisions of his prison novel, Himes admitted, “[a]s I look back now I find that much of my retardation as a writer has been due to a subconscious (and conscious and deliberate) desire to escape my past.”²⁰ Begun shortly after his arrival in Paris, *Primitive* was, Himes would write, “rather exact” a portrayal of “the essence of the affair” with Haygood (Kriss’s model).²¹ Written from a situation of self-imposed exile, this is also part of the story that led to Himes’s exile in the first place: “one of my reasons for leaving [America] is that I came very close to killing the white woman, Vandi Haygood, with whom I had lived; and I was both shocked and frightened.”²²

If, then, it is from racism that Himes attempted, by his constant moving, to escape, it is also a past shaped by the experiences of racism that both informs and, Himes felt, limits his writing. And while, as Packard-Himes suggested, Himes’s repeated moving betrays a sense of placelessness produced by the experience of racism, this placelessness itself produces *Primitive*. The first autobiographical volume closes in 1954, around eighteen months after Himes’s arrival in Paris; the second opens with the conception and implications of *Primitive*. With racial hurt and absurdity the volumes’ abiding themes, *Primitive*, which contains the story of its own productive antecedents, marks the point at which the first theme is assimilated to the second. This novel was to register Himes’s belief that “reality was absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting,” and that “[r]acism introduces absurdity into the human condition”; “eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life.” “The first time I read the manuscript,” he remembers, “I knew I had

¹⁷ To Malartics, 20 December, Emory, 2, E/M Himes To/From.

¹⁸ 28 August 1974, Emory, 2, HF.

¹⁹ To Fabre, 30 July 1982, Emory, 17, Leslie-Fabre Himes.

²⁰ 18 February 1947, Yale.

²¹ Himes, *Quality*, p. 136.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

written an absurd book.”²³ But if *Primitive* is a point of thematic assimilation, it is also a formal-literary point of departure and renewal.

Turn to the Hard-Boiled

In 1957, the year after *Primitive*'s release, *For Love of Immabelle* (later *A Rage in Harlem*) was published, the first of what Himes dubbed his “Harlem domestic” stories (“because they generally concern themselves with the domestic life of Harlem – eating, sleeping, carousing, wounding and killing one another”).²⁴ As *La Reine des pommes*, this novel was published in 1958 in French translation as part of Gallimard's *Série Noire* (one of France's leading crime fiction lists, consisting overwhelmingly of translations of American hard-boiled fiction). By this time composition of the second novel (eventually, *The Real Cool Killers*) had elicited this complaint from Himes: “I'm having a very hard time getting over my dislike for the damn book; but I must get to work on it and soon or I will find myself stranded without funds.” In the same letter, to Malartic, Himes worries that “everything might be off with Plon when they discover that I'm writing crime stories. But it can't be helped. I've got to live and Plon doesn't seem to realize that I need money for that.”²⁵

Himes is writing here in late 1957, shortly after *Primitive*'s publication. But as early as November 1954 – prior *Primitive*'s release – Gallimard's Marcel Duhamel had offered Himes the opportunity to write a detective story. In a country still reckoning with *les années noires*, and whose left wing was still riven by the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, “many French artists,” writes James Naremore, “tried to achieve ‘freedom’ through individualized styles of resistance. For them, prewar American novels offered a model – especially novels depicting a violent, corrupt world in which ambiguous personal action is the only redemptive gesture.”²⁶ The likes of Hammett, Chandler, Cain, Wright, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Dos Passos – popular in France at this time and read as part of the same tradition – appealed both to France's emergent existentialism (to which would, of course, black American fiction would be of particular interest) and to what Naremore calls a “residual” surrealist

²³ Himes, *Absurdity*, pp. 126, 1.

²⁴ N.d., Emory, 8,3.

²⁵ To Yves Malartic, 27 November 1957, Emory, 2, HF. Plon published *The Third Generation* in French; Himes initially placed his satire *Pinktoes* with Plon.

²⁶ James Naremore, “American Film Noir: The History of an Idea,” *Film Quarterly* 49.2 (1995-96), p. 22.

sensibility.²⁷ And it was to just this residual surrealism that the “vernacular surrealism” of Himes’s crime fiction, Jonathan Eburne argues, would speak.²⁸ But it was within a distinctly *American* tradition of writing that Duhamel wished to place and market Himes – indeed, Duhamel is supposed to have favoured Himes’s alienation from French culture, responding “all the better” when it was pointed out that Himes could not read French.²⁹

Towards the end of 1954 Himes would inform Van Vechten, “I am busy writing a detective story based in Harlem which I hope to sell to Gallimard’s *Series Noir* [sic.] ... to be published under a pseudonym, of course. Real cops and robbers stuff.”³⁰ Shortly after this letter, Himes tells his friend of a plan for a Paris-set crime novel, in which “an American Negro [is] framed for the murder of an American white woman.”³¹ In outline this story, initially accepted but then rejected by Duhamel, bears a striking resemblance to Himes’s novella *A Case of Rape* (really an extended synopsis of a planned but unwritten long novel), which he described as “a sort of condensed detective story.”³²

We can see, then, that Himes had begun writing crime fiction *before* completion and publication of *Primitive*; there is not, as is often thought, the clean break between the protest and crime fiction. (Himes himself, in his autobiography, clearly places his turn to hard-boiled fiction after *Primitive*’s publication.³³) Moments before calling the police, Jesse thinks, “[d]amn good thing I read detective stories; wouldn’t know what to do otherwise” (201), and here one would like to think that Himes is nodding to the hard-boiled crime fiction he would soon be publishing. Himes’s turn to crime fiction was, in many ways, a *return* to his literary roots: the urge to write came while he was in prison, where his staple reading-matter consisted of such pulps as *Black Mask*.³⁴ But apart from this possible wink to the genre that had spurred him on as a writer, and to which he had returned by 1954, *Primitive* looks

²⁷ Naremore, pp. 15, 20, 18. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 57-59; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), pp. 139-40.

²⁸ Jonathan Eburne, “The Transatlantic Mysteries of Paris: Chester Himes, Surrealism, and the *Série Noire*,” *PMLA* 120.3 (2005), pp. 806-21.

²⁹ Himes, *Absurdity*, p. 102.

³⁰ 29 November 1954, Yale.

³¹ 16 December 1954, Yale. In its basic outline, this story resembles what would become *A Case of Rape* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1994).

³² To Van Vechten, 8 October 1956, Yale.

³³ Himes, *Absurdity*, pp. 101-02. See also Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre, *The Several Lives of Chester Himes* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1997), pp. 97-98.

³⁴ Margolies and Fabre, p. 36. See also Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 42.

forward to the crime fiction by suggesting that protest fiction, understood in formal terms, has exhausted its possibilities.

Exhaustion of Form

Himes's writing is punctuated by a commitment to a "colour-blind" future: Bob Jones, protagonist of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, wishes "just to be accepted as a man ... without any other identifying characteristics but weight, height, and gender"; the love affair between Lee and Jackie, a white woman, in *Lonely Crusade*, is, suggests Himes, doomed, "[f]or between them were their colors – race"; and, remembering his time as a researcher for the Federal Writers Project, Himes remembers, "we were all, black and white alike, bound together in the *human family* by our desperate struggle for bread."³⁵

For the Himes of these moments, the external, regulatory force of racism prevents the hoped-for interracial union that time and again, in starkly gendered and melodramatic fashion, is played out as failed or doomed erotic love between a white woman and a black man: the play of revulsion and desire that exists in *Hollers* between Bob and Madge feel for each other, and which results in Bob's arrest for attempted rape; Lee's naïve love for and eventual rejection by his white lover, Jackie, in *Crusade*; in *Primitive*, Jesse and Kriss's doomed affair and Kriss's apparently inevitable death, due to the pressures of racism. When Jesse realizes that Kriss is dead, he speculates, "[y]ou don't really know you did it," but then thinks, "in the next flash, 'Who're you lying to, son? You knew before anybody. You knew it two days before it happened. Perhaps two years. Perhaps from the time they first hurt you for being born black'" (198). Haygood died of an antidepressant dependency while *Primitive* was still subject to revision,³⁶ and this passage, in which Kriss is "truly" murdered by the unbearable pressures of race and racism, is consistent with the verdict Himes passes in his autobiography on Haygood's death and all sexual relationships between black men and white women: "I didn't kill her. I left that for her own race to do; they had already mortally hurt her before I began to live with her, and it was no more than right that they should be the

³⁵ Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945; London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), p. 190, *Lonely Crusade* (1947; Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), p. 292, *Quality*, p. 72, emphasis added.

³⁶ Himes, *Absurdity*, pp. 17-25.

ones to finish her." "The final answer," he believed, of any black to a white woman with whom he lives in a white society is violence."³⁷

Though the failure of interracial erotic love in *Primitive* represents no great thematic departure from the earlier *Hollers* and *Crusade*, relationship breakdown in this novel is complemented by narrative breakdown and an uncertainty as to the generic status of the text. "I had the creative urge," writes Himes, remembering his early days in Paris, during which he began work on *Primitive*,

but the old, used forms for the black American writer did not fit my creations. I wanted to break through the barrier that labeled me as a "protest writer." I knew the life of an American black needed another image than just the victim of racism.³⁸

Introducing his story collection *Black on Black*, published just before *Absurdity*, Himes would cite "BLACK PROTEST" as one of his "two chief obsessions" (the other being "BLACK HETEROSEXUALITY"); and he would also suggest that his crime fiction "represent[ed] a bolder kind of racial protest than the explicit protest novels I wrote years ago."³⁹ The artistic frustration recalled in *Absurdity*, then, is not with protest *per se*, but with protest fiction, understood as a restrictive, exhausted genre.

In 1940, Wright described the protagonist of *Native Son* as an archetypal "product of a dislocated society; ... a dispossessed and disinherited man" destined for radicalism.⁴⁰ Characteristically, claimed Wright, the world's Bigger were overwhelmed by the onslaught of modernity, "whose glitter came to [them] through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life. In many respects [Bigger's] emergence as a distinct type was inevitable."⁴¹ *Native Son* represents Wright's attempt to find an expressive form appropriate to African American (male) experience.

Jump forward from *Native Son* to *Primitive*, in which the crux, like Wright's novel, is a black man's murder of a white woman, and in which Himes now contemplates not just the lot of "the black man" in the United States but also the forms the text of that lot might take.

³⁷ Himes, *Quality*, pp. 136, 137.

³⁸ Himes, *Absurdity*, p. 36.

³⁹ Himes, *Black On Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings* (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), p. 7. Willi Hochkeppel, "Conversation with Chester Himes, the American Crime Writer," *Conversations*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' was Born," *Native Son* (1940; London: Vintage, 2000), p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8; see Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, MA: Duke UP, 1994), pp. 97-106.

Here, Jesse imagines the conversation he *should* have had with an editor who rejected one of his books:

“We can’t print this crap,” the editor would have said.
“Why not?” he would have asked.
“It’s too bitter. People are fed up with this kind of protest.”
“What is protest but satire?”
“Satire? Satire must be witty, ironic, sarcastic; it must appeal to the intelligent. This crap is pornography.” (55)

Primitive discomfited more than one publisher: one editor admitted to being “afraid” of publishing it, as it was “too ‘sadistic’ for French audiences,” Himes told Van Vechten, for whom he also proudly reproduced a letter in which publisher William Targ described *Primitive* as “a kind of walpurgisnacht, a nightmare of alcoholism, homo- and heterosexuality, scatology, nymphomania – and a good deal more besides.”⁴² Warning that, “if published, [*Primitive*] would bring down the roof on all of us,” Targ offers this: “Only one publisher in this wide world could possibly publish it, – Obelisk Press, the publishers of Henry Miller.”⁴³ (Targ’s reluctance to publish *Primitive* was, perhaps, prudent: Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* would not be generally available in the United States until 1961, and several years after Targ’s letter the *Roth v. United States* decision of 1957 would codify the exclusion of “obscene” materials from First Amendment protections.) Writing to Malartic, Himes described his novel as “dynamite,” “explosive as the Hydrogen bomb,” predicting that “there is absolutely no chance of this book ever being published in the US in this version.”⁴⁴

In Jesse’s imagined conversation, Himes embeds the concerns others voiced regarding the novel, and his predictions of the problems he would have placing it: the imagined accusation of pornography chimes with Targ’s concerns over *Primitive*’s apparent obscenity, and while Himes’s exchanges with Malartic and Targ regarding *Primitive* are from 1954 the novel was still the subject of revision and fierce editorial argument by summer of 1955.⁴⁵ And just as Targ seemed unsure as to just what sort of text he had read, so too is the generic status of Jesse’s novel in question (it is bitter protest; pornography). This passage also registers the dissatisfaction with “white publishing houses lowering their

⁴² 16 December 1954, Yale.

⁴³ Himes to Van Vechten, 7 July 1954, Yale.

⁴⁴ Emory, 2, E/M Himes To/From, 29 July 1954.

⁴⁵ Himes, *Absurdity*, pp. 24-25; Margolies and Fabre, pp. 87-89.

quotas of books by black writers” that Himes remembers of the time of *Primitive*’s last, difficult editorial stages.⁴⁶

Towards the end of the novel, Jesse gazes at Kriss’s corpse:

“Too late to run, anyway,” he said. “Too late to make it straight ... P.S. – tragedy.”

...

[N]ow he realized the body of his victim as the final result of his own life. “End product of the impact of Americanization on one Jesse Robinson – black man. Your answer, son. You’ve been searching for it. BLACK MAN KILLS WHITE WOMAN.... Proof beyond all doubt. Jesse Robinson joins the human race. Good article for the *Post*: He Joined The Human Race. All good solid American *Post* readers will know exactly what you mean: were a nigger but killed a white woman and became a human being. Knew they’d keep fucking around with us until they made us human.” (198-99)

Having imagined his work dismissed as both bitter protest and pornography, and having designated his life “tragedy,” the “final result” of Jesse’s life is communicated via the clipped syntax of the newspaper headline – that most ubiquitous of modern media that, for Wright, assail all Bigger Thomases – and the “note” (or “note to self”). Both are used throughout the novel – the “notes,” which form the larger part of the novel focalized through Jesse, creating sentences that seem disarticulated from one another – and suggest just the failure of generic protest that Himes recalls in *Absurdity*. Jesse’s passage from “primitive” to “human” is rather that from passivity to activity that Wright believed to be inevitable, but with Himes it is as if the purposes of “the” black protest novel can no longer be adequately served by its familiar form: in *Primitive*, which may well be Jesse’s rejected novel, form begins to break down at the level of sentences that refuse fully to cohere. If this is still, notionally, protest fiction, as some read it, it is protest pushed to exhaustion.⁴⁷

Formal Dissolution: Primitive & the Domestic

As we have seen, before *Primitive* was published Himes had (re-)turned his attentions to crime fiction. Whether or not *Primitive* gestures towards the Harlem domestics, *Primitive* “clears the way” for the crime fiction (which, Himes eventually thought, better served his protest impulse) by signalling the exhaustion of generic protest fiction’s social utility.

Critiquing *Native Son*, James Baldwin complained, “literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were.”⁴⁸ Himes had no such

⁴⁶ Himes, *Absurdity*, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁷ Pepper, *Contemporary American Crime Novel*, p. 110.

⁴⁸ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” *Notes of a Native Son* (London: Pluto, 1985), p. 19.

compunction regarding the distinction of the two discourses: with *Blind Man* he intended to write “a sociological novel in the detective story form,” “a sociological novel about race relations;”⁴⁹ and, where the ratiocinative detective story tends to be viewed as a comforting genre in which “rationality [is] restored after irrational upheavals,” the hard-boiled type is often thought to expose “hard” sociological truths: famously, Hammett “gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse”; while Gilles Deleuze praised the *Série Noire* novels for their presentations of “society in its entirety at the heights of its powers of falsehood.”⁵⁰ Perhaps because it often seems concerned with the broadly sociological over innovations of plot and psychological “depth,” hard-boiled fiction aptly continues, even improves upon, the protest tradition from which Himes was trying to break. The Harlem of the domestics is one “of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living,” the violence of which Himes captures in his debut with the “mingled” screams of a human and a train that “shak[e] the entire tenement city”: “the sleeping black people in their lice-ridden beds,” “the ancient bones and the aching muscles and the t.b. lungs.”⁵¹ Arguably, this “hard-boiling” of protest fiction continues with such writers as Richard Price and George Pelecanos, the latter of whom has, similar to Himes, spoken of searching for “new ways to talk about ... social issues ... but still within the context of a crime novel.”⁵²

But if it marks the end of Himes’s generic protest fiction, *Primitive* also anticipates the domestics’ trajectory. In the late thirties, in a spirit similar to Alain Locke’s New Negro project, Himes had a mind to establish “a straight Negro magazine,” along the lines of the defunct *Abbott’s Monthly*. Seeking the advice of his cousin, activist and journalist Henry Lee Moon, Himes wondered if, in the absence of African American financial backing, “some white philanthropist [might] be attracted” to the project. Himes continued: “a magazine of this kind which inspire Negro art and literature and give it an outlet would serve the Negro race as much as a contribution to a school or church fund – to which many white subscribe [sic].”⁵³

⁴⁹ Himes, *Emory*, 2, HF, [1970?].

⁵⁰ Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London: Pluto, 1984), p. 44; Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft (1946; New York: Carroll and Graff, 1983), p. 234; Gilles Deleuze, “The Philosophy of Crime Novels,” *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (Paris: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agent Series, 2004), p. 83.

⁵¹ Himes, *A Rage in Harlem* (1957; Edinburgh: Canongate, n.d.), pp. 135, 152.

⁵² Chris Wiegand, “No Mystery” [interview], guardian.co.uk, 8 August 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/aug/07/crime>, retrieved 8 June 2009.

⁵³ 16 September 1939, Schomburg, 3.18.

In contrast to this artistic optimism, by 1970 Himes insisted that he had “never believed that literature has any effect at all on social or political issues.” “I think that writing should be a force in the world,” he would say, but “I just don’t believe it is. It seems incapable of changing things.”⁵⁴ *Blind Man with a Pistol*, sequentially the penultimate domestic but the last Himes completed, is a loose weave of unsolved murders and violent incidents, narrative strands that Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson fail to connect. In the end, the force behind the chaos is, states Digger, “skin” – not race, but the surface of its inscription. *Plan B*, sequentially the last story but abandoned and incomplete at Himes’s death, is an even more disconnected series of bloody vignettes from which the presumptive protagonists are largely absented as Harlem is consumed by anti-white violence.⁵⁵ As formal dissolution in *Primitive* reflects Himes’s dissatisfaction with protest literature, that genre seems in *Blind Man* and *Plan B* to crumble under the cumulative weight of unorganized, factional violence reflects a broader pessimism regarding the social force of literature.

Conclusion

Though Himes’s move to hard-boiled crime fiction was financially motivated, he would come to find great literary potential in the genre, seeing it as a literary mode uniquely expressive of modern American life: “no one ... writes about violence the way that Americans do for the simple reason that no one understands violence or experiences violence like Americans civilians do,” he would claim; “American violence is public life, it’s a public way of life, it became ... a detective story form.”⁵⁶ That Duhamel identified Himes first and foremost with an *American* literary tradition must surely have pleased a man who

saw too many chalk scribblings on the walls of the narrow streets of the Latin Quartier, “US GO HOME,” and although the French whom I met swore it was the “other” Americans they hated because I wasn’t “really an American” I didn’t particularly like the connotation nor the exclusion. If I’m not an American, what am I?⁵⁷

Himes’s work from *Primitive* on encapsulates a sense of national identity that only emerges from exile. The Harlem from which the jurisdiction of his detectives is drawn was, Himes admitted, a Harlem in which he was a tourist: “I didn’t really know what it was like to be a

⁵⁴ Fabre, “Interview,” *Conversations*, pp. 86, 89.

⁵⁵ Himes, *Blind Man with a Pistol* (London: Panther, 1971), p. 136, *Plan B*, eds Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993).

⁵⁶ John A. Williams, “My Man Himes: An Interview with Chester Himes,” *Conversations*, pp. 47-48. See *Absurdity*, pp. 102-03, 126; Fabre, “Interview with Chester Himes,” *Conversations*, p. 84.

⁵⁷ To Van Vechten, 12 May 1953, Yale.

citizen of Harlem; I had never worked there, raised children there, been hungry, sick or poor there.”⁵⁸ It was, in his oft quoted phrase, “a Harlem of my mind,” a Harlem, moreover, fictionalized from a position of self-imposed exile from America.⁵⁹

In summer of 1955, Himes visited New York for editorial battle over *Primitive*, during which “I discovered that I still liked black people and felt exceptionally good among them, warm and happy.”⁶⁰ It was during this visit that Himes “learned so much about the geography of Harlem, the superficiality, the way of life of the sporting classes, its underworld and vice and spoken language, its absurdities, which I was to use later.” But it was also during these tours that Himes found himself “constantly angered by signs of white racism in New York City,” which made him “desperate to get back to Europe.”⁶¹ It is, then, only once Himes leaves America that Harlem becomes the spatial centre of his fiction. This might reflect the ongoing “vogue” in France for African American culture and its capital. But there is also a sense in which Harlem, beginning with *Primitive*, becomes for Himes the imaginary site of a cultural home, but briefly glimpsed and still marred by racism.

If, then, Himes often “felt like a man without a country,”⁶² it was at the same time, as Baldwin wrote, “[f]rom the vantage point of Europe” that the American *émigré* “discovers his own country.”⁶³ It is only in exile, Himes later suggested, that he could identify with and write about America: “I can see where [sic.] New York is the most lively platform (for white people) of the world,” he wrote to Jean Miotte. “It is too bad that I could never experience that as long as I lived in New York, and that I would have to come to France to write about New York in order to experience it.”⁶⁴ A semi- autobiographical work, *Primitive* tells part of the story that led to Himes leaving the United States, a “home” his experience of which is well summarized by Wright: “Though [the negro] is an organic part of the nation, he is excluded by the entire tide and direction of American culture.”⁶⁵ Inaugurating a writing of exile, *Primitive*, I have suggested, recounts the circumstances that led to its composition. And, if genres are often thought spatially – one works “in” a particular genre – then it is *Primitive* that marks

⁵⁸ Himes, *Absurdity*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Himes, qtd Michael Mok, “Chester Himes,” *Conversations*, p. 105.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶¹ Himes, *Absurdity*, pp. 25, 26.

⁶² Himes, *Quality*, p. 103.

⁶³ James Baldwin, “A Question of Identity,” *Notes of a Native Son* (London: Pluto, 1985), p. 137.

⁶⁴ N.d., Emory, 17, *Conversations Interviews*; compare to Jean Miotte, “Conversation with Chester Himes,” *Conversations*, pp. 121-22.

⁶⁵ Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 272.

Himes's decision to quit the generic "space" of protest fiction, a mode or genre that, by the fifties, he was finding increasingly restrictive. That hard-boiled fiction better served Himes's protest impulse indicates what is increasingly the received wisdom in genre theory: that genres are often ill-defined and contained by porous boundaries.

As Himes wrote in an unpublished essay, "I am what America made me and the longer I stay [in Europe] the more I discover how much of America is in me and how much of me is in America."⁶⁶ The yoking of literary-formal and social-political failure that characterizes Himes's last works is first encountered in *The End of a Primitive*, which inaugurates a writing of formal or generic exhaustion and, crucially, exile, which would sharpen his sense of national identity.

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⁶⁶ Himes, qtd Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991), p. 221.