49th Parallel An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies

Back to index

Theory Comes To Harlem: The New York Novels of Chester Himes

by Christopher Gair
University of Birmingham (UK)

There are two instances in Chester Himes's *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965) when the detective protagonists, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, momentarily interrupt their investigations of a tangled case involving fraud, murder, robbery and a host of other standards of the thriller genre, in order to debate the meaning of jazz. In each example, the music assumes a racial significance, conveying -- or attempting to convey -- a message that cannot be spoken in English. Thus, in the first:

> The horns were talking and the saxes talking back.
> "Listen to that," Grave Digger said when the horns took eight on a frenetic solo. "Talking under their clothes, ain't it?"
> Then the two saxes started swapping fours with the rhythm always in the back. "Somewhere in that jungle is the solution to the world," Coffin Ed said. "If only we could find it."
> "Yeah, it's like the sidewalks trying to speak in a language never heard. But they can't spell it either."
> "Naw," Coffin Ed said. "Unless there's an alphabet for emotion."
> "The emotion that comes out of experience. If we could read that language, man, we would solve all the crimes in the world."
> "Let's split," Coffin Ed said. "Jazz talks too much to me."
> "It ain't so much what it says," Grave Digger agreed. "It's what you can't do about it." (1)

What commences as an examination of the sexual overtones of the music -- in this case, in a bar "filled with the flashily dressed people of many colors" representing the one genuine site of equal inter-racial activity in the novel -- quickly develops into a suggestion that jazz expresses both the history of and, potentially, the solution to the problems of African American urban experience. For Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, jazz provides both the utopian hope of "solv[ing] all the crimes in the world" and an example of the undecipherability of a complex modern world in which their inability to arrive at satisfactory solutions is a constant source of anxiety.

> The second example occurs when the detectives visit Mammy Louise's "fancy all-night barbecue joint":
> Suddenly they were listening.
> "Pres," Grave Digger recognized, cocking his ear. "And Sweets."
> "Roy Eldridge too," Coffin Ed added. "Who's on the bass?"
> "I don't know him or the guitar either," Grave Digger confessed. "I guess I'm an old pappy."
> "What's the platter?" Coffin Ed asked the youth standing by the jukebox who had played the number.
> His girl looked at them through wide dark eyes, as though they'd escaped from the zoo, but the boy replied self-consciously,
> "'Laughing to Keep from Crying.' It's foreign."

> "No, it ain't," Coffin Ed said.
> No one contradicted him. (101)

In some ways, this exchange echoes the first: once more, the detectives appear to hear some kind of deep, collective meaning in the track which, for them, represents both a telling of racial history and an instance of recognizable, distinctive voices within that history. And yet, this sense is clearly undermined by the revelation that the record is "foreign," and by the silence that follows Coffin Ed's denial of this fact. The suggestion of foreignness transforms the music into a kind of aural simulacrum, threatening to reduce it to a standardized example of popular culture, and it is only the terrifying appearance of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger that precludes debate on the matter. Where they insist on a jazz being a distinctively urban African American cultural form, involving conversation between idiosyncratic voices collectively exploring an essentialized racial identity, the implication is that their view of Bebop as jazz's modernist moment is out of touch with a postmodern world of subjective and cultural mobility. [(2)]

These discussions of jazz offer a productive entry to *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. They embody a wider tension within the novel between the desire to protect what Grave Digger calls "my own black people" (122) against what is almost always represented in highly stereotypical forms of the white oppressor (such as the leader of the Back-To-The-Southland Movement Colonel Calhoun, or the puritanically repressed cop sent to guard Deke O'Malley's wife, Iris), and the counter-sense that emerges of a culture finding self-identity in ways other than via encounters with white racism. In this essay, I will first briefly outline some examples of how such a seemingly straightforward binary logic of centre and margin or self and other is constructed. I will go on to illustrate the extent to which both the form of the novel and the implications of its ending render such binary divisions over-simplistic, and insist upon a reading taking into account the relationship between the United States' internal racial struggles and international power relations.

The novel's plot both establishes and problematizes the sense of Harlem and of "African American culture" being products of white oppression. The detailed descriptions of Harlem slums and the bale of cotton which is the novel's central symbol are constant reminders of an economic history of exploitation of blacks by whites. Likewise, the book repeatedly highlights its protagonists' sense of a world overdetermined by such encounters: the opening chapter depicts a "sea of dark faces" concentrating on the Reverend Deke O'Malley's "flaming denouncements of the injustice and hypocrisy of white people" (5); the "Back To Africa" meeting is violently robbed by white southerners; the white cops who witness the scene exchange "white looks" with the escaping criminals, crash through the crowd, "siren screaming, as though black folks were invisible" (10) and do "nothing" but look "mean and dangerous" until the arrival of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger (23); Grave Digger himself tells his (white) lieutenant that the reasons for Harlem's high crime rate are white indifference to the pervasive violence and a refusal to "'pay the people enough to live decently'" (14).

Likewise, the almost exclusively white police force functions as an example of what Henry Louis Gates has called (in a different context) the centre's attempts to "preserve . . .alterity," which "result in the homogenization of the other as, simply other." [(3)] The process ranges from the linguistically inscribed racism of utterances such as Lieutenant Anderson's "'There's always one black bean,'" (15) through to the reaction when two white officers are killed when Deke "escapes" from custody. In contrast to the indifference to the deaths of the African Americans in the opening chapter, this incident brings the whole police hierarchy into the precinct station which looks "like headquarters

for the invasion of Harlem." The extent of the process is illustrated by the response when Coffin Ed and Grave Digger enter the office, and are "stared at as if they were criminals themselves" (118-119). Any sense of differentiation within the African American community is denied at this moment of crisis, a point exemplified by Captain Brice's angry threat (made in front of Ed and Digger) to "arrest every black son of a bitch in Harlem" (120).

Nevertheless, such attempts to sustain an absolute distinction between self and other -- whether in Coffin Ed and Grave Digger's efforts to protect their "own black people" and to provide racialized definitions of jazz, or in such examples of white racism as that above -- fail to account for what Gates has called the "complex social dynamism of marginalized cultures," and "the relation between marginality and centrality." [(4)] In the remainder of this essay, I hope to illustrate some of the ways in which this complexity functions: first, through a brief examination of the links between Himes's novel and the hard-boiled fictions of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler; second, via a reading of the hybridity of Harlem's community; and, finally, by assessing the dangers associated with Himes's chosen form of closure.

Himes's debt to the preceding generation of detective story writers has been well documented and needs little attention here. Stephen Milliken has argued that many of Himes's novels retell the basic plot of *The Maltese Falcon* [(5)], a claim fully supported by *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, in which several groups of criminals chase an object (here, the bale of cotton) which finally proves worthless. Likewise, many of Himes's descriptions, particularly of women, echo the tone of Chandler's prose. For example, the narrator tells how a "buxom yellow whore . . . clad in a tight red dress . . . smelled like unwashed armpits bathed in dime-store perfume and overpowering bed-odor" (36). Later, utterances such as, "The captain wanted Deke as bad as people in hell want ice water" (69), "A cop without a memory is like meat without potatoes" (113) and "Her hips were pitching like a rowboat on a stormy sea" (135) confirm the similarity. Himes himself acknowledged the genealogy, claiming, "I was just imitating all the other American detective story writers. . . . I just made the faces black, that's all." [(6)]

Of course, the relationship is much more complex: as Peter J. Rabinowitz has argued, "you cannot take the genre and simply 'make the faces black,'" [(7)] and Rabinowitz's own work maps out the degree to which Marlowe's kind of individualism is not an option to Himes's racially aware cops. First, it is clear that it is only possible to survive as a cop in this violent setting through teamwork, and the novel is packed with examples of tail-jobs (plus the climactic church scene) in which a Chandleresque loner coild not operate. More importantly, Coffin Ed *and* Grave Digger may live in Queens, but still identify with the community in which they work, and don't have the option of detaching themselves from their environment because, as illustrated above, they are defined as black by a white power with which, as cops, they are also inextricably linked. Indeed, Rabinowitz proposes that Coffin Ed and Grave Digger's own situation as at once black and part of the system of oppression helps to explain their anger and their often brutal behaviour. Although I will finally qualify Rabinowitz's argument, since I believe that it is an overly reductive account of black cultural identity which insufficiently thinks through the trope of marginality in Himes's fiction and beyond, I cite it now since it also points to my own conclusions. [(8)]

What quickly becomes clear in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (as well as in Himes's other detective novels) is that the restrictive definitions of Harlem life offered, for example, by the police, simply won't suffice. Where Captain Brice seeks to discipline a community "made up" of whores, murderers and thieves, and Coffin Ed and Grave Digger imagine

some kind of essentialized black identity in need of protection, the novel's less formal settings, such as bars, churches, restaurants, and the opening barbecue illustrate the diversity of the city. Thus, feelings of powerlessness and imprisonment, and of vibrant sexuality (that is, the representative mythologized visions of the ghetto) are juxtaposed with challenges to the status quo, such as Deke's fraudulent Back-To-Africa scheme. Although Deke is condemned by Ed and Digger for exploiting the desperation of the local community, he also provides an example of how the lawbreaker can, in Manthia Diawara's words, "draw black people into the informal sector by keeping alive the dream of becoming rich promptly, and circumventing the colonizing systems." [(9)] Although finally unsuccessful, Deke initially does this and more -- to the "starry-eyed black people . . . putting their chips on hope," he promises a return to Africa, "our native land" (7). In other words, he offers what seems to them to be a means of rewriting the self outside American history. Himes's urban space is irreducible to (un)comfortable static definitions, with the representation of Deke emerging from the scene of Iris Hill's brutal murder into a crowded 135th Street epitomising the multiplicity of possible worlds in what Himes calls "that big turbulent sea of black humanity which is Harlem" (81).

This description of Harlem life brings us closer to understanding why jazz is so significant to the Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, and their inability to understand what it says is perhaps indicative of why they never fully comprehend the world they patrol. As Deke steps out, we are told that:

> Colored people were out in numbers, walking about in their summertime rags. Two men were eating a watermelon from a wagon. In the wagon the melons were kept on ice to keep them cool. Children were gathered around a small pushcart, eating cones of shaved ice flavored with colored syrups from bottles. Others were playing stickball in the street. Women were conversing in loud voices; a drunken man weaved down the sidewalk, cursing the world; a blind beggar tapped the path with his white stick, rattling a penny in his tin cup; a dog was messing on the sidewalk; a line of men was sitting on the shade on the steps of a church, talking about the white folks and the Negro problem. (81)

What is most striking about this paragraph, apart from the startlingly Whitmanesque quality of its attempt to contain multitudes by listing them, is the manner in which it also echoes Ralph Ellison's near-contemporaneous reading of jazz. For Ellison, the effectiveness of the music depends upon its being "an art of individual assertion within and against the group." Thus,

> Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight or improvisation, represents . . . a definition of his identity: as individual, as a member of a collectivity and as link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. [(10)]

In this light, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* can be read as a "jazz novel" offering multitudinous explorations of African American history. Coffin Ed and Grave Digger compete with Deke and with numerous other and *different* characters in attempts to define both their own and an eternally elusive collective identity. Rather than the first person narrative of, say, *The Big Sleep*, in which Marlowe is present to interpret every scene, or *The Maltese Falcon*, in which Spade's vernacular emerges as a privileged discourse, contrasted with the less powerful voices of foreigners and homosexuals,

Cotton Comes to Harlem allows different individuals to solo in each chapter. Thus, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger's scenes relate to but are not reducible to the other aspects of Harlem life we witness in those sections where Deke, or Iris, or Uncle Bud, or Billie the Cotton Club dancer take centre stage. Each protagonist has a story that marks them as an individual, but as with Ellison's account of jazz, that story also intertwines with a collective history *and* with a shared but fragmented present.

Finally, however, this attempt to conflate jazz with African American cultural identity raises a number of problems unresolved within the novel. Although Ellison shares (albeit from a different angle) Coffin Ed and Grave Digger's belief that jazz is a distinctively black art form, this is a view at odds with the history of the music. It is a position called into question not only by Peter Brooker's reminders about the racial constitution of "the hierarchies of management and ownership in the entertainment business and music industry," (of which we are made aware here by the presence of the Cotton Club in the novel), but also by jazz's origins in a diversity of African *and* European instruments and forms [(11)]. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, such an understanding is suggested by Coffin Ed's association of jazz with the sidewalks and modern life more generally, in which it is contrasted with a rural Southern culture associated with the blues, by the multi-racial listeners and dancers, and by the hybridity of the novel's own form. Once again, therefore, the belief that jazz can provide an expression of racial integrity is undermined by a wider American history. The presence of sections in the novel devoted to white activity in Harlem -- for example, the police, Colonel Calhoun's Back-To-The-Southland movement and the presence of the Jewish junkyard owner, Mr Goodman -- further illustrates the multi-racial constituency of the community and the genre.

Such theorising about the internal dynamics of the detective genre and of American society might at first glance appear to be merely an examination of a localized engagement, in which the very real results of white racism are obfuscated by an overly close reading of a single novel. To conclude, I would like to extend my argument in two directions to indicate that this is not the case. Following a short assessment of critical reactions to Himes's chosen form of closure, I will suggest why the resolution to *Cotton Comes to Harlem* both confirms the arguments mapped out here and problematizes any sense that the ending offers a kind of utopian compensation for the realities of African American daily life in Harlem.

At first glance, it is very tempting to share the views of, among others, Ralph Willett and Peter Rabinowitz, who see the end of the novel as "satisfying" and "surprisingly genial" respectively [(12)]. In a manner closer to the classical than to the hard-boiled thriller, the investors in the Back-To-Africa movement have their money returned as a result of the efforts of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, *and* the junk collector, Uncle Bud, moves to Africa with the $87,000 he removed secretly from the bale of cotton near the start of the novel. Although this closure depends upon another feature borrowed from *The Maltese Falcon*, with Ed and Digger (like Sam Spade) needing to invent a plausible narrative to explain their own questionable role in the violent search for the cotton, it does have the virtue of rewarding the dispossessed, in a departure from the self-absorbed despair that marks the conclusions of so many hard-boiled fictions.

The satisfying nature of such closure does, however, need to be qualified by an awareness of what it involves. First, although Ed and Digger *do* force Colonel Calhoun to repay the families their lost money, in a scene that inverts Southern power relations, they can only do so by allowing him the time to flee a murder charge by returning to Alabama, which refuses to extradite him "on the grounds that killing a Negro did not

constitute murder under Alabama law" (157). The detectives' desire to protect their community is still, of course, no match for the institutional legitimization of the killing of blacks by whites. The second strand of the book's resolution is more complex: although Uncle Bud's move to Africa to purchase as many wives as Solomon provides a humorous exchange of telegrams in which Grave Digger instructs the prefecture in Dakar to, "STOP HIM QUICK . . . HE WILL DROP DEAD BEFORE SAMPLING" (159), it too raises several questions. First, the humour is surely only the logical end product of a whole series of fantasies of (often violent) sexual exploitation of women throughout the novel -- the multiple repetition of the expression "mother-raper" on almost every page is a constant reminder of the double discrimination experienced by many African American women in the 1960s.

In addition, the ending places the African American in the position of colonizer, with the emphasis now firmly placed on the *American* aspect of Uncle Bud's ethnic marker. Earlier in the novel, Coffin Ed observes, "'Too bad there isn't any make-up to disguise us as white'" (128), but "whiting-up" is uncomfortably close to what happens to Uncle Bud here. Rather like Langston Hughes who, on journeying to Africa in 1923, found it to be "the only place in the world where I've ever been called a white man," [(13)] Uncle Bud illustrates the degree to which the diasporan subject is always from elsewhere. Throughout the novel, the appeal of Africa has functioned retrospectively for the displaced people of Harlem, acting as, in Kenneth Warren's words, "the place one has come from" or "the home one is going to." But, as Warren continues, in either case, "the contemporary 'reality' of Africa and Africans is largely occluded by retrospective and prospective visions." [(14)] Uncle Bud's purchase of the women also echoes what African men told Hughes about white men coming "to buy our women," and provides a further example of what Warren calls "a trade in African flesh that has not ended even in the twentieth century." [(15)]

What emerges from this reading of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* is a sense both of the boldness of Himes's project and finally of its limitations. It is clear is that his novel (like the others in the series) provides a sustained assessment of the internal conflicts and multi-cultural diversity of American life, at a time in American history when American Studies was still dominated by narratives of consensus. In their focus on the multivocality of ethnic, racial, geographic and gendered relations -- a focus that I have here attempted to read through *Cotton Comes to Harlem's* links with jazz -- Himes's fictions prefigure the critical dominant of the 1970s and beyond, when a new, pluralistic model redefined the internal cultural dynamics of the nation [(16)]. In the tensions surrounding Uncle Bud's African adventure, however, we also become aware of the difficulties surrounding such efforts to subvert American national metanarratives, since what is projected as *resistance* to American colonization also serves as an *example* of it. What remains is to think of Himes's novels in relation to recent attempts to view what Amy Kaplan has usefully summarized as "the crucible of international power relations." [(17)] Only then will it be possible to understand his representation of internal struggle within a global narrative, in which local examples of triumph over cultural oppression (such as Uncle Bud's) often depend on gender and class exploitation in Africa or other "Third World" regions. [(18)]

Notes

(1) Chester Himes, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965; reprint, London: Allison and Busby, 1988), 33-34. Subsequent page references are provided in parentheses in the text.

(2) In this paragraph, I am indebted to Peter Brooker for his discussion of jazz in *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, The New Modern* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 184-188.

(3) Henry Louis Gates, Jr, "African American Criticism," in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 303-319, 315. Think, too, of Ishmael Reed's assertion that magazines such as *Newsweek* constantly print "articles about 'black' America, as though this lazy metonymy referred to an actual territory with its own economy, and political, and cultural hegemony." Ishmael Reed, Shawn Wong, Bob Callahan, and Andrew Hope, "Is Ethnicity Obsolete?" in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 226-235, 226.

(4) Ibid., 310.

(5) Cited in Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Chandler Comes to Harlem: Racial Politics in the Thrillers of Chester Himes," in *The Sleuth and the Scholar: Origins, Evolution, and Current Trends in Detective Fiction*, ed. Barbara A. Rader and Howard G. Zettler (Westport, VA: Greenwood Press, 1988), 19-29, 19. Marcel Duhamel recommended *The Maltese Falcon* to Himes when he commissioned the series of novels for "La Série Noire."

(6) Quoted by Rabinowitz in Rader and Zettler, 19.

(7) Ibid., 19.

(8) Ibid., 22-24. A similar argument is proposed by Ralph Willett in *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 61-62.

(9) Quoted by Willett, 65. I am indebted to Willett's more general assessment of Himes's fiction in my discussion of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* in this paragraph.

(10) Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967), 234.

(11) Brooker, 186.

(12) Willett, 66; Rader and Zettler, 26.

(13) Quoted in Kenneth W. Warren, "Appeals for (Mis)Recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 392-406, 393.

(14) Kaplan and Pease, 395.

(15) Kaplan and Pease, 403.

(16) I am drawing here on the ideas of Amy Kaplan in "'Left Alone With America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in Kaplan and Pease, 3-21, esp. 14-15.

(17) Kaplan and Pease, 16.

(18) My conclusion is informed, in part, by Donald E. Pease's "New Perspectives on U.S. Culture and Imperialism," in Pease and Kaplan, 22-37, esp. 25.