CHESTER HIMES: CHRONICLER OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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PREFACE

This study is concerned with the analysis of Chester Himes' autobiography, The Quality of Hurt, two major novels, If He Hollers Let Him Go and Lonely Crusade, and two short stories, "Lunching at the Ritzmore" and "One More Way to Die." The primary objective of this study is twofold: first, to orient the reader to Chester Himes as a writer and to show how Himes' social fiction was an organic and cathartic outgrowth of the violent social forces that affected his life, and second, to show how Himes as a social chronicler of the 1940's, explored and registered all of the crucial human events and conditions on the national and state levels that were important to as well as happening to black people across the country. In short, it is the goal of this study to demonstrate the manner in which Chester Himes captured a microcosm of the urban black experience by setting his social fiction in California, which during the early years of the second World War, was a racial melting pot and a cultural crossroads of the country.

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Black Social Writers Before Chester Himes

Black social writers before Chester Himes are divided largely into two groups: the pre-Civil War writers and the Harlem Renaissance writers. These writers are so divided because of two dominant schools of thought that affected black authors before Chester Himes. The pre-Civil War writers--William Wells Brown, Jupiter Hammon, George Moser Horton, Frank Webb, Martin Delany, Phillis Wheatley, and Francis Watkin,--believed that their writing should serve a purely social function. In other words, literature was supposed to be an instrument used in the fight against an oppressive society and/or as a medium for the black writer to serve as interpreter between black and white society. These writers either perpetuated the racial stereotypes created by whites or burned out their talents trying to refute these Uncle Tom and Sambo stigmas. In so doing, these black writers all but totally adopted the mannerisms, language, and world view of their white allies, authors such Cooper, Brown, Stowe, Carlyle, and Tennyson.

During the Harlem Renaissance, however, another philosophy held sway among such writers as Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and James Weldon Johnson. These writers believed that blacks could attain social equality. Consequently, these artists reverted to romanticism and began to create new

images, myths, metaphors, and symbols that were indigenous to the black experience. At a time when Harlem was a cultural center of the country, with such famous black names in theater and music as Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, W. C. Handy, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, and Lena Horn, these writers appealed to whites and middle-class black readers by portraying the rich cultural and historical milieu from which they came. Jean Toomer, crooning softly, journeyed back to the Southland in the famous book Cane (1923); Countee Cullen explored race relations in the powerful yet beautiful lyrics of Color (1925); James Weldon Johnson probed the social night life of Harlem in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1927); Claude McKay examined the cultural birthpangs of Harlem in Home to Harlem (1928); and Langston Hughes caroled of racial pride in Weary Blues (1926) and of racial hope in Not Without Laughter (1930). These writers, being true products of their period and enamored of the magical quality of words, viewed art not as a social instrument, as the pre-Civil War writers, but as pure cultural artifices with which to equal their white counterparts.

Unfortunately, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance did not portray in their works the plight of the masses of downtrodden, illiterate blacks that had migrated from the South during the early 1900s. This task would await the distinctive voice of Richard Wright who in 1940 published the brutal novel Native Son. The irony of this novel, however, is that although it purported to tell the story of the oppressed black masses with a simple, enduring kind of artistry, it was nevertheless directed at the same class of black and white readers of the Harlem Renaissance. These readers were so shocked at the murderous brutality of Bigger Thomas that they failed to identify with or sympathize with him. As a result,

Native Son became a kind of miscarried social and artistic missile that, aimed at the reader's heart, succeeded mainly in outraging his sensibilities. The success of Wright's objective--to create a black artifact that would plead the cause of all classes of disenfranchised Blacks--would await the black novelist Chester Himes.

CHAPTER II

CHESTER HIMES: MULTIFACETED BLACK WRITER:

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Chester Himes was born on July 29, 1909, in Jefferson City, Missouri. The social forces that affected his life through 1953, the year he left America to live in Paris, can be seen as the basis for his social fiction of the 1940's. Hime's father, Joseph Sandy, taught blacksmithing and wheelwrighting as head of the Mechanical Department at Lincoln Institute. Lincoln Institute was an A. and M. College, like most Negro colleges in the tradition of Booker T. Washington. Chester was the youngest of three brothers. His mother, Estelle Bomar, was a mulatto who looked "like a white woman who had suffered a long siege of illness; she had hazel eyes, a sallow complexion, and auburn hair. Her family, the Bomars, were descended on their father's side from their white slaveowner and a slave, and on their mother's side from an Indian slave."[1] His father was the exact opposite of his mother: "He was a short black man with bowed legs, a perfect ellipsoidal skull, and an Arabic face with a big hooked nose" (p. 5). Because of the racially ambivalent relationship between his mother and father, Himes suffered the effects of racial prejudice long before coming in contact with the white community. This relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Himes stemmed from the old plantation tradition, of which Himes observes:

> Even during slavery, the light-complexioned house slaves, who were sired by either their masters or their overseers,

> considered themselves superior to the black slaves who worked the fields, partly because of their superior "white" blood and partly because they considered themselves more beautiful, more intelligent, and of a higher class. This color within the black race prevailed long after the slaves were freed, and there are still remmants of it left among black people. The "light-bright-and damn-near-white" blacks were offered the best jobs by whites; they maintained an exclusive social clique, their own churches, their own manners and morals. A marriage between a black man and a light-complexioned woman had the status of an interracial marriage with legal consent.[2]

Chester Himes' observation agrees with such authorities on the subject as Gunnar Myrdal:

> The mulattoes followed the white people's valuation and associated their privilege with their lighter color. They considered themselves superior to the black slave people and attributed their superiority to the fact of their mixed blood. Thus the mulattoes tended early to form a separate intermediary caste of their own. . . . In such cities as New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile, Nachez, and later Washington, highly exclusive mulatto societies were formed which still exist, to a certain extent, today. Color thus became a badge of status and social distinction among the Negro people.[3]

This color-conscious influence upon Himes as a child would lead him as a writer to explore the issue of interracial sexual relationships in general in his social fiction of the 1940's.

In the plantation tradition, Chester Himes' mother--two generations out of slavery--felt superior to any other blacks of darker pigmentation. This snobbish, and slaveborn attitude was to eventually destroy her family as an institution and bring untold suffering to each member. Himes' mother married Professor Himes for economic security, but she inwardly despised him. She liked to claim that her grandfather was a direct descendant from English nobility, and she was very proud of it. From his childhood, Himes remembers that "much of her nagging and scolding and punishing and pushing as stemmed from her desire for us to live up to our 'Heritage'" (p. 5). Also, he recalls the character of his father who was a follower of Booker T. Washington:

> My father was born and raised in the tradition of the Southern Uncle Tom; that tradition derived from an inherited slave mentality which accepts the premise that white people know best, that blacks should accept what whites offer and be thankful, that blacks should count their blessings.
>
> My mother, who looked white and felt that she should have been white, was the complete opposite. My mother was a fighter. She was a tiny woman who hated all manner of condescension from white people and hated all black people who accepted it. That much I inherited from her. (p. 22)

This fighting spirit can be seen in both Bob Jones and Lee Gordon (Himes' major protagonists) who lived at a time in American history when in order for a Negro to get ahead in life or avoid serious personal injury or death, he had to know his place and stay in it. He also had to know how to be suitably obedient and submissive to the white man's will--in other words, he had to be a genuine or dissembling Uncle Tom. Like their author, Himes' protagonists run afoul of the white power structure and get into serious trouble because they do not stay in their place; they are rebels, and the very thought of being an Uncle Tom under any circumstances whether real or feigned is repulsive to them. Because of Mrs. Himes' rebellious behavior, her husband continued to suffer: he was forced to move his family from one place to another. As a child, Chester Himes recalls that the whole family suffered psychological pain and fear, just as he would as a grown man, having inherited his mother's emotional and recalcitrant nature. Himes would also infuse this fighting spirit into his protagonists.

He remembers one instance in particular in which the fiery spirit of his mother created problems for the family. When they were living in Mississippi during the last year of the First World War, Professor Himes bought a second-hand Studebaker, the only car in the county:

> My mother used to take us for rides in the country with a student driving, but we got into so many controversies with the cracker farmers of the county by frightening their mule teams

> that my father was dismissed from the school and driven from the state. And I must confess I find white people just the same today, everywhere I have ever been, if a black man owns a big and expensive car they will hate him for it. Of course part of that was due to my mother's attitude; she always carried a pistol on our car rides through the country and when ever a cracker mule driver reached for his rabbit gun she beat him to the draw and made him drop it. (p. 8)

The psychological effects of this kind of rebellious individualism will be significantly dealt with in Himes' social fiction. Robert Bone says, commenting in this regard and referring to Himes' protagonists: "Himes is interested in the personal adjustment of a sensitive Negro to the bitter fact of caste." "At bottom the trouble is ideological: neither revenge nor accommodation is acceptable to Himes. . . ."[4]

After several other job and residence changes to such places as Augusta, Georgia, and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, the family finally settled in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1924, where Himes attended Wendell Phillips High School. There, as a teenager, he began to suffer the first effects of his rebelliousness that would prepare him to be a social-protest writer whose protagonists suffered from isolation and bitterness:

> I remember St. Louis as a strange big city where I played football, baseball, soccer, basketball, any game that you can name, with suicidal intensity. The other boys on the playground either ganged up on me or refused to play with me; the gym teacher stopped me from playing all games in school. I broke my right shoulderblade, which healed out of place and still looks deformed; my left ear was half torn from my head. All of my teeth were chipped, I cut classes and roamed alone through the strange big city, spending hours in the railroad station watching the trains come and go. I was unpopular with my teachers, disliked by the students; I was lonely, shy, and insufferably belligerent. (p. 14)

With the move to St. Louis, Professor Himes had finally run out of college positions and had to take jobs doing carpentry and small construction. His marriage with Mrs. Himes was in serious jeopardy because of her haughty attitude. Both professionally and personally Mr. Himes' entire life seemed to be a failure.

Chester Himes graduated from high school that spring and took a job as a busboy at Wade Park Manor, a very elegant hotel. Not long thereafter he suffered the terrible misfortune of falling down an empty elevator shaft. He was hospitalized for many months and was never expected to walk again, but he did in time. This experience provided him with the increased sensibility as a writer to depict similar scenes in his fiction, such as the mob beating of Bob Jones and the police whipping of Lee Gordon. Himes' sense of helplessness and powerlessness as a result of his misfortune also enabled him to transfer this sensibility to his protagonists who suffered similar plights. The Ohio State Industrial Commission paid all of Himes' hospital and medical expenses and put him on a pension of seventy-five dollars a month for total disability.

After his recovery was all but complete, Himes enrolled at Ohio State University to study medicine. Regarding life on campus he recalls that:

> Black students could not live in the school dormitories, and all the fraternity houses within the environs of the campus were strictly Jim-Crowed. The nearest a black student came to getting inside of them was as a waiter or dishwasher. But many of the black householders in the environs took black students as roomers, and some also furnished board. I boarded in a rooming house several blocks away which also boarded a few coeds. (pp. 24-25)

In 1926, Himes bought a three-hundred dollar coon-skin coat, a knickerbocker suit, a long-stemmed pipe, and a Model T. Ford roadster. He became a full-fledged collegian. Even with an impressive image like this, Himes recalls that "I would have been a great success with the pretty black coeds if I had had more experience. Also, having to wear a back-brace humiliated me. It wasn't long before I discovered the whores in the ghetto" (p. 25). This humiliation that Himes suffered with women, as well as his lack of experience with them, would later find its way

into his social fiction in the form of an inadequate sense of manhood that his protagonists suffered. What with carousing late at night, being depressed by the prejudiced white environment, not getting along with his instructors, and having poor class attendance, it was not long before Himes flunked out of the university. He then began to lead a dissipated night life in the ghetto of Cleveland--gambling, drinking, taking drugs, consorting with prostitutes, and becoming a flashy-dressing underworld hustler. But his intoxicating and over-ambitious gangster life soon got him into trouble. He was arrested two years later in Chicago for armed robbery. At the age of nineteen, Chester Himes was imprisoned in the Ohio State Penitentiary for seven years, from 1928 to 1936. There he would mature and develop the personal discipline and thoughtfulness necessary to become a writer.

In the course of his prison sentence, Himes, having nothing more constructive to do with his time, took up writing. By applying himself with an intense single-mindedness to his craft, he was able to get several short stories published in magazines like Atlanta World, Pittsburgh Courier, Afro-American, Coronet, and Esquire. Of these stories, he says, "My first short stories, those I wrote in prison, were not racially orientated; I did not write about the lives of blacks in a white world. That was to come. In prison I wrote about crimes and criminals, mostly about the life in prison--'Crazy in Stir' 'To what Red Hell,' 'The Visiting Hour,' 'Every Opportunity,' 'The Night's for Crying,''Strictly Business,' and such" (p. 65). By the time Himes was paroled from prison in 1935, he had made up his mind to become a serious writer. Not long after his parole, Chester Himes met Jean Lucinda Johnson, and they were married on August 13, 1937. Chester Himes then settled down to the life of a

family man. He tried desperately to write for popular magazines but only sold a few stories, which did not bring in enough money. Consequently, he took whatever work, however menial, that he could get, but often he would find nothing. Because he did not want his wife to work, more often than not they went hungry.

These hard times are directly reflected in the relationship between Lee Gordon and Ruth in Lonely Crusade. Lee's not wanting Ruth to work is a source of great distress to Lee's manhood, as it was to Himes'. Finally, Chester Himes was employed by the WPA, which eventually led to a position as research assistant in the Cleveland Public Library. For a time Chester and Jean were free from the pangs of proverty, and Chester struggled on to fulfill his dream of becoming a professional, self-supporting author:

> But the war in Europe commenced. American industry came to life, the Depression was over. WPA ceased. And I joined the long lines queueing up for jobs in private industry, at Warner & Swasey, American Steel & Wire, the Aluminum Company of America, and the other great industries in the Cuyahoga Valley. It was then that I learned what racial prejudice is like. My hurt became violent. Each day, a thousand times, I had to exert the greatest self-control to keep from smashing the face of some white personnel director. (p. 72)

This very experience of hurt as result of prejudice and discrimination in the Los Angeles industries forms part of the fabric of Himes' social fiction of the 1940's. Himes says, looking back on those times many years later:

> I have written graphically in my first published novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go, about how Los Angeles affected me:
>
> "It wasn't being refused employment in the plants so much. When I got there practically the only job a Negro could get was service in the white folks' kitchen. But it wasn't that so much. It was the look on the people's faces when you asked them about a job. Most of 'em didn't say right out they wouldn't hire me. They just looked so goddamn startled that I'd even asked. As if some friendly dog had come in through the door and said, 'I can talk.' It shook me." (p. 73)

Himes further documents his emotional injury by saying that:

> Los Angeles hurt me socially as much as any city I have ever known--much more than any city I remember from the South. It was the lying hypocrisy that hurt me. Black people were treated much the same as they were in an industrial city of the South. They were Jim-Crowed in housing, in employment, in public accommodations, such as hotels and restaurants. (p. 73)
>
> Los Angeles hurt me racially. The war hurt me racially. The armed forces hurt me racially. (p. 74)

All of this hurt and pain is registered and explored in the social fiction set in Los Angeles.

Intermittent employment began to adversely affect Himes' marriage, especially because Jean Himes could find employment when her husband could not. She obtained a position as co-director of women's activities for the Los Angeles Area USO's. As the would-be provider of the family, Himes was deeply hurt by his wife having a professional job at a much higher salary than any he was ever likely to get. She was respected and socially accepted by her white co-workers, and in a professional capacity, she also socialized with many well-to-do blacks of the Los Angeles upper middle class. Himes explores this situation in _If He Hollers Let Him Go_ through the relationship between Bob Jones, an industrial worker, and Alice Harrison, a well-to-do social worker. Himes found that he could no longer be a husband to his wife. He felt like her gigolo. She assured him that she did not mind substituting as the breadwinner because he could find no employment, but her generosity hurt him all the more. The frustration seemed intolerable. Himes recalls that:

> Up to the age of thirty-one I had been hurt emotionally, spiritually, and physically as much as thirty-one years can bear: I had lived in the South, I had fallen down an elevator shaft, I had been kicked out of college, I had served seven and one half years in prison, I had survived the humiliating last five years of the Depression in Cleveland; and still I was entire, complete, functional; my mind was sharp, my reflexes were good, and I was not bitter. But under the mental corrosion of race prejudice in

> Los Angeles I had become bitter and saturated with hate. And finding myself unable to support my black wife, whom I loved desperately, I had become afraid. (pp. 75-76)

Himes' fiction of this period closely parallels his life and in its broader limits, is representative of the black experience only only in Los Angeles but also in all urban industrial centers.

In 1944, Himes' first novel If He Hollers Let Him Go was accepted by Doubleday, and he went to New York for the occasion. Once there, to compensate himself for his frustration, and sense of inadequacy, he buried himself in sex and drunkenness, particularly with many of the socialite white women that moved in such literary and publishing circles. These women, undoubtedly, allowed Himes to temporarily regain an illusion of manhood. Here Himes undoubtedly gathered part of the experience necessary to deal with interracial sexual relationships in his social fiction. After the novel was published, Himes found himself for the first time a man of some modest success and financial well-being. But he had problems of adjustment, just as Bob Jones when he was made leaderman at Atlas Shipyard and Lee Gordon when he was made union organizer at the Comstock Aircraft Corporation.

Himes recalls that "New York hurt me in a different way--by accepting me. That sounds like a contradiction but it's true. I knew that, as much as I had been hurt by then, I was sick. But New York accepted me as normal, and that made me sicker" (p. 76). Himes knew that it was impossible, in a manner of speaking, for a man to be jerked from one extreme to the other--from a sense of personal nothingness to somethingness--without becoming confused in the process. Now, he had arrived just one step closer to the eventual loss of his wife, Jean--as would be the case with Bob Jones and his wife Ruth after he rose to the position

of being the first black union organizer in Los Angeles. Jean arrived in New York to find her husband embroiled in several love affairs; consequently, she tried to commit suicide. Himes was shocked back to normality--what was normal for him-- and he and his wife, having arrived at a reconciliation of sorts, decided to live on her brother Hugo's ranch in northern California while Himes wrote his second book. He relates a variation of this experience in Lonely Crusade: Bob Jones has an interracial affair with Jackie Forks, and after seriously contemplating sucide, Ruth goes to Jackie's apartment to demand the return of her husband.

Himes' second novel, Lonely Crusade, was hated by both black and white readers. Atlantic Monthly complained that "Hate runs through this book like a streak of yellow bile."[5] Commentary, a Jewish journal, ran a long diatribe by a professor at Brooklyn College in which Crusade was compared to the "graffiti on the walls of public toilets."[6] Even an Ebony editorial, entitled "It Is Time to Count Your Blessings," protested that "The character Lee Gordon is psychotic, as is the author, Chester Himes."[7] In defense of his novel, Himes explained:

> I had attempted to be completely fair. I had written what I thought was a story of the fear that inhabits the minds of all blacks who live in America, and the various impacts on this fear precipitated by communism, industrialism, unionism, the war, white women, and marriage within the race. It was not too big a scope; this was our daily life during the war. I did not record a single event that I hadn't known to happen; the characters were people who either had lived or could have lived; the situations were commonplace. The writing might well have been bad, but the writing was not criticized in one review which I read. What Commentary's critic most disliked was the characterization of Abie, who he called 'A Christ-like jew.' The soul brothers disliked most the argument put forth by Lee Gordon that the Negro did not want equality, he wanted special consideration, and that it was logical that he would want it and necessary that he should have it. (p. 101)

Himes himself probably hit upon the real reason for the novel's condemnation--it was too truthful. It was much too far ahead of its time in

terms of utter racial candor, but honesty has always been Himes' most notable quality as a writer--even above artistic skill. As Stephen F. Milliken points out: "His writing is totally honest, brutally and even viciously honest. He acknowledges no limitations on what he can or will tell. He has told his own story, and that of the people he knew, Americans, both black and white, in a time of disintegrating cultures and agonizing clashes. He has told it as he has lived it, with passion, bias, and anger, and a compulsive integrity that pierces beyond everything else."[8]

Lonely Crusade did receive some favorable reviews from critics who recognized in Chester Himes the voice of truth. Eric L. McKitrick, critic for The Saturday Review of Literature, gives a very personal point of view regarding the novelist's prerogative as a writer, especially when treating painful material:

> I feel that as an artist he, like all others, is entitled to paint with the broad brush, to objectify any way he wishes the complex, often highly contradictory, sometimes violent, almost always suppressed inner torments of the sensitive Negro who tries only to keep his head decently above water. There is no one better qualified than he to explore to their bitter depths all these painful processes.[9]

Stoyan Christowe, author and critic, in Atlantic Monthly remarks, despite his negative comments about the novel, "Chester Himes' new novel is a study of the American Negro, a brave and courageous probing into the Negro psyche. His diagnosis reveals a racial malady for which there is no immediate remedy."[10] Nash K. Burger, of the New York Times Book Review, commenting on the honesty, complexity, and fast pace of the novel and perhaps taking into account those critics who panned the book observes:

> Lee Gordon operates in a tough, jungle world, and . . . Himes presents it like it is. It is a world that, in the end, was too tough for Lee himself and, as caught in . . . Himes' pages,

> may be too tough for some readers as well. Lee's tortured odysses through drunken orgies, police beatings, murder, and riot; Lee's strange inability to achieve satisfaction in his relations with his patient, loyal wife or the white Communist girl with whom he has an affair--these things are presented as bluntly as they happened, and they keep the narrative broiling.[11]

Arthur Burke, in the Crisis, comments: "Himes has the knack of developing character rather than explaining it. Himes is a cross between Dickens' characters and George Eliot's psychological analysis together with the newer Freudian psychology with its emphasis on pathology of race."[12] And finally Arna Bontemps, praises: "Chester Himes' talent, apparent to many in If He Hollers Let Him Go, has produced an even more provocative book this time."[13] It is clear from the favorable reviews of these notable critics that Chester Himes' social novels are of no small merit especially if seen as works of social criticism.

Of all the social and psychological pain and frustration that Chester Himes had previously gone through in his life, the rejection of Lonely Crusade by those from whom he wanted approval the most hurt him. Over the next five years his marriage fell apart; and although he and Jean were not legally divorced, they no longer saw each other. He struggled through his third novel while doing menial jobs. In 1953, with the $2025 that Himes received for the reprint rights on The Third Generation, he made up his mind to leave America: "I realized there was nothing to keep me any longer in the United States; both my father and my mother were dead, my wife was gone, the only friend I had in all the publishing world was my editor, William Targ, and I knew he was going to do what he could for The Third Generation whether I was there or not" (p. 139).

On April 3, 1953, Himes left for Paris, comforted by the fact that he was not unknown or without friends, such as Richard Wright, already

living in Paris. By now, If He Hollers Let Him Go had been published in England, France, and the Scandinavian countries. Lonely Crusade had been published in 1953 in England and in 1952 in France "where it had been chosen by Paris critics as one of the five best books from America published in France that year--along with books by Herman Wouk, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Scott Fitzgerald" (p. 140).

Himes proudly recalls that "I had corresponded with the translator, Yves Malartic, during the translation in 1951, and he had urged me then to come to Paris" (p. 140). Like many other black expatriates--James Baldwin, Richard Wright, William Gardner Smith--Chester Himes felt that Europe would give him the personal freedom to realize his potential as a writer.

It is still too early to tell what Himes' place in American literature will be as an American writer and as a black novelist. Not enough time has passed, and not enough literary criticism has been carried out on Himes as yet. He has received good reviews as well as bad ones in reasonably equal proportion for all of his work. It is, however, generally agreed among critics that his status as a writer suffers because of his considerable influence from Richard Wright, borrowing freely from the "viseral style of Richard Wright."[14] Hoyte Fuller says, "The novels of Chester Himes, perhaps more than those of any other Negro writer, reveal the strong influence of Native Son."[15] Carl Milton Hughs comments, "Chester Himes, in his two psychological novels, Lonely Crusade and If He Hollers Let Him Go, bears the imprint of Richard Wright's psychological probings."[16] George E. Kent observes, "He seems to incorporate both the James M. Cain type fiction with the rebellious hero, made famous

by Richard Wright in the novel Native Son."[17] Roger Rosenblatt points out, comparing Bob Jones of If He Hollers to Bigger Thomas of Native Son:

> In certain ways Bob is not unlike Bigger Thomas, Himes wrote If He Hollers in the wake of the success of Native Son, and many similarities between the two books are deliberate. Both heroes are deeply self-conscious. Both contend with an accusation of rape which is false. Both undergo court trials with fated consequences. As for the potential for violence in each hero, it becomes a question of how they deal with their fears. When Bigger is afraid, he acts to cover his fears. When Bob is [afraid, he thinks.[18]]

Unlike these critics, however, who appear to overestimate the influence of Wright upon Himes, Edward Margolies offers a more valid commentary:

> Although he enjoys a good reputation in France, where he now lives, for the most part the American critics have dismissed him as being of the Wright school of naturalism, whose 'protest' is no longer fashionable. Such criticism is not altogether fair. Himes' interests are considerably different from Wright's, and his firsthand knowledge of certain areas of American life is more developed. His protagonists are generally middle-class, fairly well-educated, somewhat sophisticated in the ways of the world, and often intellectually oriented. They are concerned with ideas and the application of ideas to their experience; they are constantly searching out rational explanations for the irrationalities of their lives. They move with considerable aplomb among white liberals and radicals of both sexes, and engage them in dialectics on their own terms. Himes is also a more deliberate prose stylist than Wright. He seldom intrudes, moralizes, or explains. His characters are usually sufficiently articulate to say what they mean--and what they mean issues often enough from their character and intelligence. Himes does parallel Wright in his bitterness, fury, and frustration. He has given up on America, and rarely returns now on visits.[19]

In any case, Himes' eventual place in literature will not be determined by the critics of his day. As Ishmael Reed foresees:

> I believe that it will be left to a young generation of black and white critics to assess the importance of Chester Himes as a major twentieth century writer. 'Serious' works . . . are of such high quality that their worth is only resisted by critics who have little interest in writing, a near pathological contempt for writers and only care about evangelizing for some particular ideology. . . .[20]

Although Reed's comment is perhaps too harshly stated, generally speaking,

I agree with him and believe that in the years to come after a sufficient number of open-minded and perceptive scholars and critics have taken a close look at Chester Himes in his own right, he will soon pass from under the shadow of Richard Wright and come into his own as a significant and major black American novelist.

Since Himes left America, he has become on of the most prolific black writers in the world. His novels include The Third Generation (1954), The Primative (1955), Pinktoes (1961), The Autobiography of Chester Himes, Volume I: The Quality of Hurt (1972), Volume II: My Life of Absurdity (1976), and Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings (1973). Himes has also published a host of detective stories, among the most notable of which are: The Real Cool Killers (1959), The Crazy Kill (1959), A Rage in Harlem (1965), Cotton Comes to Harlem (1965), Run Man Run (1966), Come Back Charleston Blue (1967), Blind Man with a Pistol (1969), and Hot Day Hot Night (1970). He is also represented in many anthologies, including Black Writers of America, Negro Caravan, Right On, American Negro Short Stories, and The Best Stories by Negro Writers. His awards and honors include the Julius Rosenwald fellowship in creative writing in 1944-45 and the Grand Prix Policier in 1958.

While Himes was a resident of France, he made a film in Harlem for French television in 1967, two years after a period of inactivity as a result of a stroke he suffered in Mexico in 1965. He now makes his home in Spain and tries at least once a year to return to America in order to keep himself current with events in this country since all of his detective stories are set in America. This dissertation will deal with Himes' depiction of the urban black experience in microcosm as put forth in his social fiction set in Los Angeles during the early years of the second World War.

NOTES

[1]Chester Himes, The Quality of Hurt: The Autobiography of Chester Himes, Volume I (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), p. 4. All further page references appear in the text.

[2]Chester Himes' observation agrees with such authorities on the subjects as Gunnar Myrdal, John Hope Franklin, Edward B. Reuter, E. Franklin Frazier, and Charles S. Johnson.

[3]Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem in Modern Democracy (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), p. 696.

[4]Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 174 & 176.

[5]Stoyan Christowe, "Lonely Crusade," The Atlantic Monthly, October, 1947, p. 138.

[6]Milton Klonsky, "The Writing on the Wall," Commentary, February, 1948, pp. 189-90.

[7]"Ebony Photo Editorial: Time to Count Our Blessings," Ebony, November, 1947, p. 44.

[8]Stephen F. Milliken, Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal (Columbia Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1976), p. 3.

[9]Eric L. McKitrick, "Through Many Eyes," Saturday Review of Literature, October 25, 1947, p. 25.

[10]Christowe, p. 138.

[11]Nash K. Burger, "Fear in Our Midst," The New York Times Book Review, September 14, 1947, p. 20.

[12]Arthur Burke, Crisis, November, 1947, p. 356.

[13]Arna Bontemps, "Some of the New Novels," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, September, 7, 1947, p. 8.

[14]Bone, p. 174.

[15]Hoyte Fuller, "Contemporary Negro Fiction," in The Black American Writer, Volume I: fiction. ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1696), p. 240.

[16]Carl Milton Hughs, The Negro Novelist (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), p. 68.

[17]George E. Kent, "Rhythms of Black Experience," Chicago Review, 25, No. 3 (1973), 76.

[18]Roger Rosenblatt, Black Fiction (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 166-67.

[19]Edward Margolies Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippencott Company, 1968), pp. 87-88.

[20]Ishmael Reed, "The Author and His Works, Chester Himes: Writer." Black World. 21:5 (March, 1972), pp. 24-38.

CHAPTER III

CHESTER HIMES AS A SOCIAL GEOGRAPHER OF LOS ANGELES

One of the major aspects of the greatness of Chester Himes as a social writer of the 1940's lies in his ability to explore and register all of the crucial events and conditions that were important as well as happening to black people across the nation, particularly in Los Angeles. Himes accomplishes this through three major works of fiction set in Los Angeles: If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945), Lonely Crusade (1947), and Black on Black (1973). Los Angeles at this time was a crossroads; as a result, Himes' fiction is a microcosm for the urban black experience across the country in a time of social change. Unlike many American social writers (e.g., William Faulkner, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Ralph Ellison) who created fictional milieus in which to set their novels, Chester Himes, establishes credibility for himself as a serious social writer of his period, from whom much can be learned of what it was like for the Negro to live in Los Angeles during the 1940's, by his intimate knowledge of and accurate portrayal of this city as the milieu of his fiction. During the early 1940's, there were well over 100,000 Negroes living in Los Angeles, most of them part of a steady mass migration from the South dating back to 1900. The Negroes had left the South because of violent and oppressive social conditions, as well as the collapse of the plantation economy due to such national disasters as crop failures, floods, and devastation by the boll weevil.[1] Negroes had also left the

South because of the great need that arose during the two World Wars for skilled and unskilled industrial labor in northern and western defense plants.[2] During World War II, Los Angeles reached its peak in war production, standing second only to Detroit. It also became an aircraft production center.[3]

Contrary to popular legend, Los Angeles was not, during the 1940's, a scattered, disjointed series of communities; it was, rather, a highly urban center in one of the most urban states in the country, with well over 40 percent of California's population concentrated in the area.[4] It was also a community built up of migrants from all parts of the nation and as such provided Chester Himes with a setting that represented a cross sections of American life. He could not have hit upon a better milieu in which to portray a microcosm of the black experience.

During the 1940's in Los Angeles, Negroes suffered considerable prejudice and discrimination; along with Mexicans and Orientals, they were relegated to segregated living areas. This segregation took place as a result of the native white majority's commitment to racial exclusion or separatism. When segregation occurs, isolated groups tend to share the same residential district. For example, according to tract data of the 16th Census of the United States in 1940, in Los Angeles 13 percent of the region's Mexicans and 14 percent of its Orientals lived in the twenty-nine census tracts where the Negro concentration was the greatest. Also, these racial groups have high concentration in the low level of social rank because the same attitudes that produce segregation also impose job and training limitations on segregated groups.[5] Also accounting for the segregation of colored immigrants in Los Angeles is the fact that for the most part they were unskilled and poor, and as a

result they were unable to rent or purchase houses, even if they had wanted to, in the better social areas of the city. Consequently, they were forced to rent quarters in the dilapidated districts and the outlying industrial sections, such as, San Pedro, Vernon, Little Tokyo, and Long Beach, East. Those who did acquire money in time and tried to move among the whites in the private homes in the residential suburbs of Los Angeles were excluded by restrictive convenants. Even where racial covenants had never been imposed or had expired, colored minorities encountered stiff resistance from nearby white property holders. As a result, Negroes, along with other ethnic groups (such as the Mexicans and the Orientals) were confined to undesirable districts. These districts, like Watts and West Adams, had been abandoned by the white majority and subdivided exclusively for the colored people. There the minority groups formed ghettoes in suburban Los Angeles.

Some Negroes, however, did acquire wealth either through going into business for themselves or achieving education and becoming professional people, such as doctors, lawyers, and scientists. These blacks formed the colored middle-class social areas of Los Angeles, such as West Jefferson, West Covina, and Pasadena.

Himes' fictional portrait of Los Angeles regarding its social areas is definitely realistic for its time and probably for today as well. He protrays the city through the street, district, and neighborhood references that he makes in _If He Hollers Let Him Go_. One of the areas in which middle-class blacks were heavily concentrated in the 1940's was Central Avenue, and there are numerous references to this part of town in the novel. It should be pointed out, however, that Central Avenue was a middle-class or Area V neighborhood because of its higher levels

of urbanization, education, occupation, and income in comparison to (Area I-IV neighborhoods) Watts, Little Tokyo, San Pedro, and Vernon.[7] In one instance in the novel, Bob Jones (the protagonist) decided to take the afternoon off from the pressures and prejudice of work. He drove down to Central Avenue and made the following observation: "Even Central Avenue smelled better. I strolled among the loungers in front of Skippy's, leaned against the wall, and watched the babes go by."[8] Jones also owned a Buick Roadmaster and drove to work every day along with several riders. Each morning he picked them up at certain predesignated points: "Homer and Conway were waiting in front of a drug store at the corner of Fifty-fourth and Central" (p. 10). One morning when they were running late, the guard at the gate at Atlas Shipyard leered at Bob and said, "What'd all do las' night, boy? I bet y'all had a ball down on Central Avenue" (p. 15). These instances show Himes' realistic treatment of Los Angeles as a city and by extension suggest his realistic treatment of the black experience.

At another time when Bob was out "kicking around town," he said, "I turned to San Pedro and headed downtown toward Little Tokyo where the spooks and spills had come in and taken over" (p. 72). After the Japanese had been interned during World War II, the Negro immigrants took over Little Tokyo.[9] As Bob joined a conversation among some of his girl friend, Alice's, social worker friends, Cleo said to him:

> "We were just discussing the problems that confront the social worker in Little Tokyo . . . I was saying that first of all there must be some organization within the community through which a programme of integration may be instituted into the broader pattern of the community. There must be adequate provisions for health care, adequate educational resources and opportunities for recreation," she enumerated. (p. 83)

According to the social areas previously mentioned, Watts (located the South Side) belongs in Social Area II, whereas West Jefferson belongs to Social Area V. As Bob Jones enters West Jefferson to visit Alice, he remarks, "This was the West Side. When you asked a Negro where he lived, and he said on the West Side, that was supposed to mean he was better than the Negroes who lived on the South Side; it was like the white folks giving a Beverly Hills address" (p. 48). As Bob enters Alice's neighborhodd, he observed that:

> The houses were well kept, mostly white stucco or frame, typical one-storey California bungalows, averaging from six to ten rooms; here and there was a three-or four-storey apartment building. The lawns were green and well trimmed, bordered with various local plants and flowers. It was a pleasant neighborhood, clean, quiet, well bred.
>
> Alice's folks lived in a modern two-storey house in the middle of the block. I parked in front, strolled across the wet sidewalk to the little stone porch, and pushed the bell. Chimes sounded inside. The air smelled of freshly cut grass and gardenias in bloom. A car passed, leaving the smell of burnt gasoline. Some children were playing in the yard a couple of houses down, and all up and down the street people were working in their yards. I felt like an intruder and it made me slightly resentful. (p. 49)

When he picks up Alice to take her out to dinner, she tells him, "I want to go slumming down on Central Avenue" (p. 54). She wanted to go to the "Last Word"' as Bob explains, "That was a new club out on Central she'd been trying to get me to take her to since it opened" (p. 46).

Chester Himes also shows that the areas of Los Angeles during the 1940's conformed directly to a pattern of enforced racial segregation. As Bob and Alice were passing through Santa Monica that night, the police arrested them, and Bob made the following observation: "They took us to the station in Santa Monica. I put up cash bail and the desk sergeant said, "now get back where you belong and stay there" (p. 64). He was again later arrested for being in the "wrong" neighborhood:

> I went ahead to Central, turned south to Slauson, doing a slow twenty-five, observing all the traffic rules, stopping at the boulevard stops, putting out my hand when I turned. At Slauson I turned toward Soto, stopped at Soto for the red light.
>
> A police cruiser pulled up beside me. The cop on the outside gave me a casual glance, saw that I was a Negro, and came to attention. He leaned out the window and said, 'Pull over to the curb, boy.'
>
> I knew then that they didn't know I was wanted; they'd just stopped me because I was a black boy in a big car in a white neighborhood. (p. 195)

After their arrest, Alice gave Bob directions, and they drove back into the Negro area of town to one of Alice's friend's home: "I followed her directions, drove over to a little cottage on San Pedro, past Vernon" (p. 65). Moreover, Himes' street and area references to Los Angelas are sufficiently accurate to allow approximation of where Bob Jones lived, based upon the following observation he makes after dropping off a couple of hitchhikers: "When we neared Vernon Avenue I asked them where they were going and they said down to Warner's in front of the box office. They thanked me and went off. I kept over to San Pedro and turned South. It was two-thirty when I got home" (p. 42). Through the entire novel, Bob Jones only refers to where he lives as on the South Side, which could mean only one of three areas: Watts, San Pedro, or Wilmington.[10]

Himes also portrays the Los Angeles social areas in Lonely Crusade. Lee Gordon, the protagonist, regrets accepting the position as the first black union organizer in Los Angeles because of the extreme prejudice to which he will be subjected.[11] He knew that he had not accepted the position for the money because he could earn twice as much doing labor, "nor would it be for the prestige in the Negro community, which a few short minutes ago had been a cause for pride. For now he was not moved by the desire to be a big shot on the South Side" (p. 45).

It is obvious from this statement that Lee and his wife Ruth live in

the working-class section of the city because of Lee's intermittent employment. Like Bob Jones, they more than likely live in some lower-income social area like Watts, Wilmington, or San Pedro, but certainly not in the better middle-class neighborhoods like West Jefferson and Pasadena. In another instance, as Lee Gordon and Luther McGregor (a black communist union organizer) go to the homes of various other Negro industrial workers to recruit them into the union, Himes says, "Driving through the deserted ghost town of Little Tokyo, then showing the first signs of Negro migrant tenancy, they came to the back-alley tenement where Storey lived with his wife and four stair-step children in two filthy rooms" (p. 56).

After Lee Gordon gets a job as a busboy, before acquiring his union position, he makes friends with an elderly white man named Harding who is a dishwasher at the hotel where Lee works. Harding decides to let Ruth and Lee stay in his house, since they do not have one of their own at this time, while he goes to visit his son. Himes says:

> It was a run-down, unpainted shack over-grown with crawling rose vines, weeds, and wild geraniums, located in City Terrace, far out in the northeast section of the city. . . .
> On both sides were vacant lots also overgrown with weeds. Beyond, going up the hill toward the reservoir, lived Mexicans, and going down toward City Terrace Drive, lived Jews. Several families of white Southern migrants lived on the cutoff circling down behind. (p. 124)

City Terrace is a Social Area II, low working-class, segregated district made up primarily of Mexicans and Jews. Blacks on the same social level lived predominately in Watts. While working as a union orgaizer, Lee Gordon makes friends with a communist Jew named Rosie and one day Rosie decides to take Lee to lunch: "I came to take you to lunch--all the way from Boyle Heights" (p. 152). Boyle Heights was also an Area II neighborhood, made up principally of Jews who were nearly as segregated in

Los Angeles during the 1940's as Negroes, Mexicans, and Orientals, After Jackie Forks (Lee's white communist mistress) is expelled from the union and the party, she appeals for help to Maud Himmelstein, a Jewish party official. Maud "asked Jackie to call at her home that evening, giving the address in Boyle's Heights" (p. 271). Unlike many writers, black or white, who either give a one-sided, romanticized, or overly -fictionalized account of their milieus, Himes' treatment conforms to social and geographical studies or analyses of Southern California during this period.

After Luther McGregor had killed a white deputy named Paul for abusing him as well as to get Paul's money, Luther had to get rid of his car and so "he drove out to Belvedere and parked in a dark alley in the densely populated Mexican community" (p. 321). Belvedere is also a Social Area II, low-income, working-class community, famous for its high concentration of Mexican Americans. The next day Lee Gordon read about the murder in the morning paper: "The report stated briefly that Deputy Sheriff Paul Dixon had been murdered early the night before in his home in Inglewood" (p. 345). Inglewood is a Social Area V, strictly white, middle-class neighborhood which corresponds to such black neighborhoods as West Jefferson and Covina.

Blacks and whites were not entirely segregated in Los Angeles during the 1940's. Some neighborhoods held a mixture of the two, but these were usually low-income neighborhoods occupied by working-class immigrants. In one instance, as Gordon was taking the street car to work one morning, it stopped to let some people off and to take on others then "the car began to move again, past Vernon through the half-black and half-white neighborhood" (p. 130). Vernon is also a Social Area II neighborhood, on the same level with Watts.

In the short story "One More Way to Die," from the collection Black on Black, the protagonist, William Brown, got off from work at the cannery, got cleaned up and "walked up Long Beach to Jose's at the corner of 40th and bought a quart of beer."[12] After getting into a fight at the bar, he accidentally hit an old white whore with a liquor bottle and when the police came, they took him off to pistol-whip him: "They turned up Vernon to Long Beach and kept downtown 'til they came to where the railroad tracks split off."[13] East Long Beach at this time was in Social Area 1, one of the lowest ethnic slums in Los Angeles. It was predominated by Mexicans but the lowest working-class Negroes also lived there.

In the short story "Lunching at the Ritzmore," a humorous narrative, but one that makes a serious social point, a young University of Southern California student gets into an argument with a young drifter on the subject of discrimination. Himes vividly and colorfully portrays the setting of this short story, which takes place in Pershing Square:

> If you have ever been to the beautiful city of Los Angeles, you will know that Pershing Square, a palm-shaded spot in the center of downtown, is the mecca of the motley. Here, a short walk up from "Skid Row," on the green-painted benches flanking the criss-crossed sidewalks, is haven for men of all races, all creeds, all nationalities, and of all stages of deterioration--drifters and hopheads and tb's and beggars and bums and bindlestiffs . . . fraternizing with the tired business men from nearby offices, with students from various universities, with the strutting Filipinos, the sharp-cat Mexican youths in their ultra drapes, with the colored guys from out South Central way. . . .
>
> Along the Hill street side buses going west line up one behind the other to take you out to Wilshire, to Beverly Hills, to Hollywood, to Santa Monica, to Westwood, to the Valley. . . .[14]

From these excerpts, which are even elliptical in their shortness, it is possible to see what importance Himes attaches to giving a three-dimensional setting to all of his stories. This practice is also consistent with his area references. His mention of "the colored guys from South Central way" would obviously include Central Avenue in Social Area

V along with all of the other social areas to the south, I-IV, in which black people lived, such as: San Pedro, Watts, Wilmington, Terminal Island, et al. His mention of Wilshire, Beverly Hills, Hollywood, Santa Monica, Westwood, and the Valley refers to Social Areas VIII-IX, the richest districts in Los Angeles during the 1940's, where only the extremely wealthy white people lived. Himes further points out that many black domestic workers catch these busses to go out into the rich white areas where they are employed.

In all works of fiction, setting is as important as plot and characterization in the creation of a believable story line. However, if an author chooses to go beyond the simply "believable" to the factual, his first obligation is to the setting of his novel. In other words, the author must orient his reader not only to a realistic setting, but also to a historically and geographically accurate one. This Himes does, and thereby establishes credibility for himself as a serious and honest social writer from whom much can be learned of what it was like for the Negro to live in the segregated, social, and urban areas of Los Angeles during the 1940's. Himes writes of the social areas of the black experience not in one-sided, romanticized, or overly-fictionalized terms, as many novelists, but in factually realistic ones.

NOTES

[1]E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro in the United States (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), p. 193.

[2]Edward F. Lewis, The Mobility of the Negro (London, England: P. F. King and Son, 1931), p. 129.

[3]Richard Wood and Leon Bush, The California Story: Its History, Problems, and Government (San Francisco, California: Fearson Publishers, 1957), p. 236.

[4]Eshref Shevsky and Molly Lewin, Your Neighborhood: A Social Profile of Los Angeles (Los Angeles, California: The Haynes Foundation, 1949), pp. 3-4.

[5]Eshref and Lewin, p. 10.

[6]Robert M. Fogelson, The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 199.

[7]Eshref Shevsky and Marilyn Williams, The Social Areas of Los Angeles: Analysis and Typology (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1949), p. 70. This study by Shevsky and Williams as well as the one in note no. 3 by Shevsky and Lewin has taken the population of each census tract in Los Angeles County, based upon tract data of the 1940 Census, and given it a social and urbanization rating of low, middle, or high. All homogeneous tracts have then been combined into nine social areas, ranging from Area I, with low social rank and low level of urbanization, to Area IX, with high social rank and level of urbanization. In this chapter, I will use these social-area designations to help exemplify more graphically how Chester Himes portrays the social areas of Los Angeles.

[8]Chester Himes, If He Hollers Let Him Go, (London, England: The Falcon Press, 1947), p. 42. All further page references appear in the text.

[9]Carey McWilliams, Southern California County (New York: Duell, Sloan, Pearce, 1946), p. 325.

[10]Shevsky and Williams, p. 325.

[11]Chester Himes, Lonely Crusade (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 4. All further page references appear in the text.

[12]Chester Himes, "One More Way to Die," in Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), p. 257.

[13]Himes, Black on Black, p. 261.

[14]Chester Himes, "Lunching at the Ritzmore," in Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1973), p. 176.

CHAPTER IV

PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Chester Himes' social fiction documents the prejudice and discrimination against Negroes in all aspects of American life. His in-depth examination of the black experience in Los Angeles industry reflects the same conditions that existed on the national level. In 1917, when the United States was heavily involved in World War I, Negroes who had migrated en masse from the South easily found employment in most of the industries in the North and West. These industries manufactured ammunition, iron, steel, automobiles, aircraft, military material, and electrical products; they also built ships and packed meat.[1] However, during World War II, as industrial plants began to convert in order to produce armaments, Negroes experienced great difficulty in securing work. Unlike the employment situation that immediately preceded World War I, now some five million whites were still out of work, and employers were determined to hire them first. In 1941, blacks were virtually barred from participating in the enormous national defense industries.

Basically there were four reasons to account for this situation. Because of the widespread unemployment in the nation during the initial stages of war production, there were large numbers of white workers available. Also, there was a much more well-organized white resistance against Negroes, made up of southern whites, Klan members, and anxious whites who felt threatened by the black labor force. Moreover, employers

no longer needed Negroes as allies against labor unions, since by then employers were accepting trade unions as bargaining agents. Finally, the need for unskilled labor was no longer what it had been during World War I.[2]

When Negroes were finally hired, almost a year later, they were given the hardest, roughest, dirtiest, most dangerous, and most unskilled jobs with corresponding wages. They were also virtually denied participation in apprenticeship programs, and frozen out of the better jobs by employer policy, the prejudice of white workers, and by trade union pressures. In July of 1941, A. Philip Randolph, head of the powerful Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, proposed a march on Washington to demand an executive order that would ban discrimination in war industries. Randolph was joined by the NAACP and the Urban League. Unable to dissuade the leaders from staging this march, President Roosevelt acceded to their demands and issued Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in war industries and apprenticeship programs. The order said in part:

> It is the duty of employers and labor organizations to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in the defense industries without discrimination. . . . All departments and agencies of the Government of the United States concerned with vocational and training programs for defense production shall take special measures appropriate to assure that such programs are administered without discrimination. . . . All contracting agencies of the Government of the United States shall include in all defense contracts hereafter negotiated by them a provision obligating the contractor not to discriminate against any worker. . . .[3]

The President also set up a Fair Employment Practices Committee that included two blacks, Earl B. Dickerson, a Chicago lawyer, and Milton P. Webster, vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. This committee was to receive and investigate complaints of discrimination in

violation of the Executive Order in industries that were given defense contracts.

Unfortunately, the executive order proved to be a law on paper only and did not solve the problems of racial discrimination which persisted in industry. And while the American Federation of Labor enforced the F.E.P.C., it did not discipline the affiliate unions that continued to discriminate against Negroes.[4] The C.I.O. also supported the F.E.P.C. and was disposed to integrate black workers but did not for fear that in the employer representation election, the A.F.L. would win.[5]

In If He Hollers Let Him Go, Chester Himes examines the discrimination and prejudice against Negroes in Los Angeles during World War II, but especially in industrial defense plants. Los Angeles was a city during the 1940's whose public prejudice was more subtle than overt. Himes exemplifies this condition through a dream that Bob Jones has in which he asks two white men for a job. They do not want to give him the job, but they do not want to say so outright. They laugh at him when he tells them that he can do the job although he does not have the tools. Jones then said, "I didn't mind their not giving me the job, but their laughing at me hurt. I felt small and humiliated and desperate, looking at the two big white men laughing at me."[6] Aside from the dream, what bothered Bob Jones most about seeking employment was not being turned down, because, when he got to Los Angeles in the fall of 1941, "the only job a Negro could get was service in the white folks' kitchen" (p. 3). What bothered him most was that the white personnel looked so startled because he even asked. Jones says, "As if some friendly dog had come in through the door and said, 'I can talk.' It shook me" (p. 3).

At the shipyard, Bob's black crew is given the worst jobs and the

worst locations in which to work. One of the crew members, Smitty, asked, "'How come it is we always got to get the hardest jobs. If somebody'd take a crap on deck Kelly'd come and get our gang to clean it up.'" Conway said, "'I been working in this yard two years--Bob'll tell you--and all I done got is jobs don't nobody else wanta do'" (p. 12). After a white leaderman named Tebbel takes over Bob's crew, the discrimination decreases dramatically. Conway said, "'Tebbel got Kelly to give us a good job for a change. Soon as we's finished here we's going up and work on deck, in the superstructure'" (p. 176). The superstructure was considered a "plum job" because it was "cool, airy, with a good view of the harbor; and the group could stroll on deck and enjoy the sunshine" (p. 176). It was not like the cramped, stifling, and deafeningly noisy quarters of the third deck where they were accustomed to working.

Another form of prejudice in industry was the gross violation of Executive Order 8802, which provided for the equitable participation of all workers in vocational and training programs. Himes shows (through a conversation among Jones' crewmen) how this order did not solve many real problems of discrimination:

> Home said, 'They don't even want a coloured man to go to the school here any more. Bessie asked Kelly the other day 'bout going to school--she been here three months now--and he told her they still filled up. And a peck come right after--I was standing right there--and he signed him up right away.'
>
> 'You know they don't want no more nig--no more of us getting to mechanic' pay,' Pigmeat said. 'You know that in front. What she gotta do is keep on after him.' (p. 12)

In another instance, Bob Jones was unjustly demoted from leaderman to mechanic because he swore at Madge Perkins, a white woman, who made a racial slur. Nothing was done to Madge. However, the plant bigots, like Kelly, who hated Bob all along, as a prime example of the Negro who oversteps the bounds of his place, were overjoyed at his demotion and

humiliation. For the first time now they were overtly racist in their dealings with him. Kelly, the supervisor, who opposed Bob's promotion to leaderman in the first place, baited and derided him with a vulgar racist joke in his presence:

> They couldn't have done it any better if they'd rehearsed it. I couldn't take offense because Kelly didn't tell the joke to me and he could always say if I hadn't wanted to hear it I didn't have to listen. And even if I still wanted to take offense, the girl had stepped into the picture and whatever I might say to Kelly was sure to offend her. I never wanted to get out of a place so bad in all my life. . . .
>
> I did something with my face, trying to make it smile. . . . But Kelly knew he had me. He waved me away, 'Go on, go on. Get out of here.' (pp. 122-23)

These cases of prejudice prove out, once again, the old adage that morality cannot be legislated, rather it must evolve from the inclination of the human heart.

Bob walked away burning with anger and determined to fight his unjust demotion through the labor union. Himes' exploration of the racial stance of labor unions is an accurate reflection of the national black experience with labor unions. During World War II, the black man's highest priority was--as it had always been--employment. It was only natural, therefore, that he should become involved with the great struggle of labor unions to achieve decent working conditions, job security, and a reasonable living wage for their members. During the late thirties, many Negroes enthusiastically joined the new unions, such as the United Mine Workers, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workers, the United Packing House Workers, the Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. Many blacks, however, did not join the unions because they had learned from past experience that even unions were reluctant to give blacks equal treatment.[7]

As Bob Jones approached the union steward, Herbie Frieberger, he was determined to air his grievance and to get satisfaction for the wrong done him. When he spotted Herbie on deck, he noticed that there "were five guys standing around him, four white and one coloured fellow who was something or other in the union, probably proof that it wasn't discriminatory" (p. 112). Bob saw now that he himself had served the same function as a token coloured leaderman. Herbie told Bob to write out a grievance, and he would present it to the executive board when it met the following week. Knowing that his greivance might probably get "accidentally misplaced" or that the executive board might get hung up in delaying procedures, Bob told Herbie that that was not what he wanted. He wanted Herbie to tell Madge on behalf of the union that she had to work with Negroes at Atlas Shipyard or lose her job. Herbie said,

> "Jesus Christ, Bob, you know the union can't do that. . . . The union can't force anybody to quit--."
>
> "You can if they don't pay their dues," I said.
>
> "But this is different," he contended. "This is dynamite. If we tried that, half the workers in the yard would walk out. I hate to even think what might happen."
>
> "Don't try," I said, "Think of what's already happened. If a third-grade tacker can get a leaderman bumped every cracker dame here is going to figure she can make a beef and get any Negro bumped--."
>
> "Well, Christ, I'll talk to her," he said, "That's the best I can do." (p. 113)

Bob learned that he could hope for no real redress of grievance through the union because of the influence exerted by its racist membership.

Realizing that it would cost him too much to remain in his downgraded status, Bob finally apologized to Madge, satisfying the demands for reinstatement from his superintendent, MacDougal. Through the following related conversation between Mac and Jones, Himes also shows how Executive Order 8802 meant well, but was circumvented in industry by prejudiced whites in authority:

> "Did you ever hear of Executive Order No. 8802?" he asked abruptly.
>
> I didn't get the connection right away but I said, "Yes, sir, it's the President's directive on fair employment."
>
> He gave a deep belly grunt and some of the twinkle came back into his eyes. "Directive! That's right! The President's directive. It's a good thing," he said, and his gaze came up in a swift, sharp, searching look.
>
> I knew I should have let it go right then and there, but the half-sneering way he said it got under my skin. "I think it's a good thing too," I said. "I think it oughta be enforced."
>
> Now his face got sober again. "We enforce it here at Atlas. To the letter! You know that!" When I didn't reply right away he pressed me, "You know that, don't you?"
>
> Now I was sorry I'd said anything at all because I had to say, "Yes sir," to keep out of an argument.
>
> He nodded, then went reflective. "But your case doesn't come under that. There's no discrimination involved in your demotion whatsoever. People who want to agitate might tell you that, but it isn't so. . . ." (p. 174)

In realizing that the white man has so much power and control over him, Bob Jones began to take on a tremendous fear complex. "Bob Jones is an aggressive, intelligent, and adventurous man, to whom fear should be alien, to whom high confidence is nautral and normal. But he is also acutely aware of every aspect of his environment, and much that he sees disturbs him. . . ." He is now a man "gripped by a massive, permanent fear seated somewhere near the very base of his being."[8]

Himes also shows how blacks were discriminated against by a select few being promoted to token positions in order to project an image of fair employment practice. Accordingly, Bob Jones was upgraded to leaderman; thus made the boss of a small work crew. Leadermen throughout the shipyard had authority over lower-grade workers and were authorized to give them orders. This authority, however, applied only to white leadermen. As a black leaderman, Bob Jones could not order any white worker to do anything. As a result, Jones suffered a tremendous amount of frustration and embarrassment. In one instance, one of his crewmen, Red Williams, needed a tacker to finish a job. All of the black tackermen

were busy, so Jones went to find a white one to do the job. There were any number of white tackers available, but they would not take orders from Jones; and Hank the white tacker leaderman would not order them to do the work because he did not want to force them to work for and alongside black workers. Because Bob Jones did not have adequate authority, he could not do his job as leaderman, nor could his crew do theirs; consequently, they all received low evaluation reports from their white supervisor.

Himes also shows how everyday forms of discrimination made Negroes feel demoralized and degraded. In one instance, Bob Jones went into a drug store to buy a pack of cigarettes:

> The little prim-mouth girl back of the counter let me stand there while she waited on all the white customers first. When she started to wait on another one who just came in I banged my hand down on the counter. "Give me some cigarettes, goddamnit!" I said.
>
> She jerked a look at me as if she thought I was raving crazy; everyone within earshot looked at me. I felt my face burning, my body trembling from the sudden fury. (p. 78)

In yet another instance, Bob Jones made reservations for dinner over the phone at a nice restaurant to which he was going to take his girl friend for dinner. When they got to the restaurant, the entire white patronage froze with shock and disbelief. The head waiter tried politely to get rid of them by saying that all tables were reserved. Failing that, he ushered them "to the last table by the pantry door and beckoned a crooked-face, slightly stooped Greek waiter to take their order" (p. 58). When he received his bill after dinner, Bob noticed two typed lines that read, "We served you this time, but we do not want your patronage in the future." These everyday forms of discrimination against black people were like death by a thousand social cuts.

Himes' examination of the prejudice against Negroes in the armed

forces during World War II reflects the black man's national history of abuse within the military during both the first and second World Wars. Although thousands of black men enlisted in the military during World War I to fight for democracy, black soldiers experienced extreme prejudice in the armed forces. At the outset of the war, black soldiers were trained in segregated units of the army. They functioned as laborers, cooks, stevedores, truck drivers, gravediggers, and carpenters. They were barred from the Marines altogether, and the Navy took them only as cooks and menials. This relegation of the black man to noncombat duty was done because the military had no confidence in his courage and fighting ability. This lack of confidence on the part of the War Department was certainly unjustified in light of the black man's distinguished record of courage and heroism during the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and the Spanish American War. After a great deal of pressure by the NAACP--spearheaded by the organization's newspaper, The Crisis, and its editor W. E. B. Dubois--black soldiers finally saw action during May, 1918; and as they had done in the past, black combat soldiers distinguished themselves in battle.[9]

Discrimination continued against black soldiers in World War II. The Army was the only branch of the service that routinely accepted blacks. The Air Force accepted a few blacks, but put them in construction companies. The Navy still only took blacks as cooks and custodians, and the Marines did not begin to take them until April, 1942. In all branches of the armed forces, blacks were segregated in separate living quarters, training facilities, and even entertainment. The discriminatory policies of the War Department created a great deal of black unrest. The Black press played a vital part in these protests. The Atlantic

Daily World, the Norfolk Journal and Guide, the Pittsburgh Courier, and the Chicago Defender condemned racial injustice both at home and abroad. War correspondents were dispatched by the newspapers to the Pacific theater as well as to Europe, and big headlines on discrimination and segregation in the armed forces were run as front-page news. Gunnar Myrdal points out that what the black press was writing at this time was indeed highly newsworthy because there was still flagrant discrimination in all branches of the service, black heroes were still unrecognized by whites, the low morale of the Negroes was a constant concern of the government which made "cautious concessions," and the expressed war aims of America were grossly inconsistent with its domestic policy.[10] In addition to the continued assault upon discrimination in the military by black newspapers along with some white newspapers as well, black periodicals (to include Ebony, Jet, Negro Digest, and Black World) began to carry editorials discouraging blacks from entering the service.

Bob Jones had to deal with one of the most difficult matters that confronted young black men during the early 1940's--the military draft. After his demotion from leaderman to mechanic, Bob lost his draft deferment and became eligible once more; he then began to brood about the military whose tradition he knew was steeped in racial prejudice. In a heated discussion, he and his crew members considered the moral arguments for and against the Negro entering the service:

> "I don't know what the hell I'd do if they called me," Ben said. "Every time a coloured man gets in the army he's fighting against himself. Of course there isn't anything else he can do. If he refuses to go they send him to the pen. But if he does go and take what they put on him, and then fight so he can keep on taking it, he's a cowardly son of a bitch."
>
> Smitty had stopped his work to listen. "I wouldn't say that," he argued. "You can't call coloured soldiers cowards, man. They can't keep the Army from being like what it is, but hell, they ain't no cowards."
>
> "Any man's a coward who won't die for what he believes,"

> Ben flared. "If he's got principles he'll die for them. If he won't he's a cowardly son of a bitch--excuse me ladies."
>
> The other stopped to listen now.
>
> "Any time a Negro says he believes in democracy but won't die to enforce it--I say he's a coward," Ben declared. "I don't care who he is. If Bob lets them put him in the Army he's a coward. If you let them put you in the Army you're a coward. As long as the Army is Jim Crowed a Negro who fights in it is fighting against himself."
>
> "If Bob gets called sure 'nough and listens to you and gets sent to the pen, he's a fool," Zula Mae said. (pp. 120-21)

Bob gave the matter further thought when he was alone and could not help the grimly humorous overtones that crept into his thoughts.[11] "I wondered what would happen if all the Negroes in America would refuse to serve in the armed forces, refuse to work in war production until the Jim Crow pattern was abolished. The white folks would no doubt go right on fighting the war without us . . . and no doubt win it. They'd kill us maybe; but they could't kill us all. And if they did they'd have one hell of a job of burying us" (p. 116). Bob, however, did seriously make up his mind about what he would do in the event he was drafted:

> . . . if they put me in the Jim Crow Army I was going to take that . . . Ben could talk all he wanted to. Ben was right. I knew he was right. But I was going to take it if they put it on me. If I had to fight and die for the country I'd fight and die for it. I'd even go so far as to believe it was my country too. (p. 123)

Bob Jones did have to carry out that decision. After he was falsely accused of raping Madge Perkins, the judge gave him a choice of going to prison or to the Army. Bob chose the latter, and he, along with two Mexican Americans, given the same choice, was escorted under police guard to the local induction center.

In Lonely Crusade, Himes examines the prejudice and discrimination against blacks in Los Angeles during the early 1940's through the experiences of his protagonist, Lee Gordon. In order to put himself through college, Lee had worked hard for several years washing dishes and waiting

tables in white fraternity houses on campus. He also studied slavishly for long hours in the night when he was so tired after work that he could hardly keep his eyes open. But in 1934, he finally graduated and looked forward to a bright future according to the American dream. However, "the only employment that he could find for Negro college graduates was in domestic service."[12] Commenting on this situation with reference to black men in the job market in Los Angeles during these years, Robert M. Fogelson says:

> Most had no alternative other than to compete in a labor market where . . . they qualified for only the least responsible and re-warding positions. They laid tracks, repaired pavements, slaughtered animals, served as domestics, waiters, janitors, and elevator operators. Those who in time acquired the necessary skills encountered the racial prejudice of employers who claimed that white personnel would not work alongside colored persons.[13]

After he married Ruth, Lee took whatever menial or odd jobs he could find because he did not want his wife to work. Here Himes explores the devastating effects of job discrimination on Negro marriages and especially on Negro men during this period. In the tradition of the male-oriented society in which he had been reared, Lee Gordon wanted to be the sole provider and head of his household, even though Ruth, because she was a female, did have "the promise of a better future than himself" (p. 38). "Ruth offered to get a job. She pointed out that it would be easier for her. Some of the plants that had rejected Negro men were then employing Negro women--many in skilled capacities" (p. 47). But again, Lee would not hear of it. Himes' portrayal of the job market in urban Los Angeles as being more favorable for women than men during these years is accurate and supported by the Eshref Shevsky and Molly Lewin study:

> In Los Angeles, employment opportunities can be gauged by the fact that more than half of the production workers in the

> following industries are women: apparel, tobacco, laundries, textile, insurance, leather, and cleaning and dyeing.
>
> In urban communities, the sex ratio decreases; that is, there tend to be more women than men. In the over-all migration to cities, women are strongly represented. Their function in rural communities has diminished, whereas in cities there is a concentration of white-collar employment for which women are sought . . . as the state becomes more urban in its occupational patterns, the ratio of men to women decreases. In 1910, there were 125.5 men to each 100 women; by 1940, this ratio had decreased to 103.7.
>
> The Los Angeles region itself has a more markedly urban sex ratio. There are 97 men to each 100 women.

One of the psychologically crushing effects of Lee Gordon's inability to get a job is his emasculating "fear of being unable to support and protect his wife in a world where white men could do both" (p. 39). Lee feels, like Himes did in his own life, that if a man cannot get a job as a result of racial discrimination and prejudice against Negro men in the labor market, then he cannot be a husband to his wife; he cannot provide for her; consequently, he is deprived of manhood.

One's socio-economic status in life is invariably composed of three factors: level of occupation, level of education, and level of income. These three elements interact to determine one's standard of living, but the second and the third factors proceed from the first. A man must have a job to make money to acquire the education which in turns leads to more income.[15] If a man cannot get a job, as in Lee Gordon's case, his wife becomes the breadwinner, and he loses respect for himself and most likely the love of his wife before long. With no money coming in and bills due, Ruth got a job "at Western Talkie, a small plant in Hollywood making radios for the Navy" (p. 47). In a matter of weeks she moved from this job to a professional, high-salaried position "as women's counselor at the Jay Company, an aircraft feeder plant" (pp. 47-48). By this time Lee Gordon felt surpassed and defeated as a man because of the

reversal of their roles. Himes says, "When it had become fully impressed on him that he ran no competition to her success, he borrowed five hundred dollars on their house and went to New York City. It just hadn't panned out, that was all. He did not bother to say goodby to her" (p. 48). Lee Gordon's marriage was a part of a much larger national pattern of marital breakdowns during the 1940's among Negroes as a result of black men being unable to find steady employment.[16]

Chester Himes also deals with the opening of civil service jobs to Negroes, but he also depicts the racial discrimination and prejudice they endured as a result of the abuse of authority by southern white supervisors. During the Thirties and Forties, blacks did make some small progress in government jobs. President Roosevelt hired more black advisors to his cabinet than any president before him and put them in positions of greater importance than any previous administration. Under the New Deal Administration, there were more blacks than ever before in civil service jobs. This was because of a new regulation that made it no longer necessary to specify one's race on the application or to attach a photograph to the form. However, prejudiced hiring officials did invariably find out the applicant's racial identity during a personal interview, and they would avoid hiring blacks by availing themselves of the Civil Service Commission's "rule of three." By using this regulation, they could screen out a Negro even if he appeared first on the list, that is, if a white applicant was among the three names. In spite of this regulation, Negro employees on the federal payroll increased from approximately 50,000 in 1939, to nearly 200,000 by the end of 1946. Most of these black government employees, however, were given the lowest and most unskilled jobs. There was also still considerable segregation of black

and white employees which held over from the Wilson Administration; but in spite of this, most government cafeterias were open to Negroes.[17]

After Lee Gordon had worked off and on at menial jobs for five years,

> in 1939 he took an examination for postal clerk and was employed. The job did wonders for Lee--gave him self-assurance, poise, and even friends. He loved Ruth then as he first had but was able to express it in many more ways. He became tender, ardent, considerate; and a pleasantness ran through the ardor of their passion. (pp. 40-41)

But Lee and Ruth's happiness was short-lived. Soon the white southern migrants began taking over the post office, imposing their traditions on others: "In the department where they composed the majority, white Southerners made life miserable for the Negro employees. Seemingly they had the encouragement and support of the superintendent. Flagrant cases of discrimination were now in evidence" (p. 44). Lee began bringing home his hurt now to take out on Ruth. She felt some hope for him, however, because he was fighting to deal with his misery. "At least Lee didn't let it trample him as it had before" (p. 41). Even being on his very best behavior, it was not long, however, before Lee lost his job.

One day the superintendent accused him of incompetence--of having not learned his job. Lee replied that he had known his duties since the first month of his employment. A heated exchange followed, and as the superintendent walked away, he heard Lee call him "Hitler" under his breath. He suspended Lee for thirty days, and the Civil Service Commission discharged him permanently. Lee then began to seek employment in industry:

> But soon he was to learn that the new industries were not accepting Negroes in any capacity other than labor, and most of them were not employing Negroes at all.
> He began citing Executive Order 8802, President Roosevelt's directive for fair employment, to the recalcitrant personnel directors of war industries. They laughed in his face. (p. 45)

Late in the spring of 1942, there was an acute labor shortage in the city, and war plants sent out a frantic cry for help. Great numbers of workers were being imported from every part of the country. Many blacks were grudgingly given unskilled labor jobs, because industry could not help itself, but Gordon found that the racism was adamant as ever:

> When Lee went down to the United States Employment Service . . . he was shocked by the raw hatered in the interviewer's eyes. Even then in that extremity, with the country in its most desperate need, with all the fear and panic and the fatal unpreparedness, he discovered that white industry did not want Negro workers. (pp. 46-47)

Although Lee realized that it was only "the wistful yearning of the disinherited," he wished that the Japanese would invade America so that he could somehow join their forces to fight a common enemy. He amusingly thought that they were sure to take him after they heard some white racist call him a "yeller-bellied bastard."

In 1943, Lee Gordon was made the first black union organizer in Los Angeles at the Comstock Aircraft Corporation. In Lonely Crusade, Himes further explores the nature of prejudice and discrimination against Negroes in industrial labor unions. Himes himself had worked in industry during the war years in San Francisco and Los Angeles and based on personal experience, had a strong sense of history with regard to these organizations.

California's history of organized labor dates back before the turn of the century, but, until after the second World War, their history had been one of extreme conflict between labor in its struggle to organize and management in its efforts to thwart that organization. The growth of labor unions in California, however, was not greatly stimulated until after 1933, with the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which guaranteed labor the right to collective bargaining.[18] With this

growth also came conflict, such as the general strike of trade unions in San Francisco in 1934, ultimately involving over one hundred thousand men. Initially the issue was between the International Longshoremen's Association and the shipowners. The dispute spread after the government failed in its efforts to settle the fight over wages, hours, and control of hiring halls. By May 15, ocean shipping was tied up by an unusually bitter coast-wide strike. The Teamster's Union, in cooperation with the strikers, refused to transport cargo handled by the strikebreakers. As a result, San Francisco shipping became paralyzed. Violence and rioting occurred when strikebreakers were employed to move cargoes under police protection. As a result, two union men were killed and over a hundred were seriously injured.

Rioting continued after ten thousand union men marched in the procession of the slain men, in protest of the police action. The conflict ended only after the governor called out five thousand members of the National Guard to protect state property. After a general strike was called on July 16, the San Francisco region was thrown into a near panic. The business of the city practically stopped for a few days but, by July 31, most of the difficulties had been resolved. The control of hiring halls, which was the most troublesome issue, was settled on October 12.

California newspapers generally condemned the strike, calling it Communist-inspired with the purpose of overthrowing the Constitution and setting up a Soviet dictatorship. As a result of public hysteria, vigilante groups organized in East Bay and armed themselves with pickhandles for the purpose of raiding the union meeting places. All radical literature was taken from library shelves and brickbats with warnings attached

to them were thrown through the windows of union sympathizers. The general strike split labor in California. The longshoremen went into the Congress of Industrial Organizations that had been formed at this time, while the sailors union went into the American Federation of Labor. By 1940, Los Angeles, following San Francisco's lead, became heavily unionized in the harbor district, as well as in the aircraft industry, auto assembly, and tire manufacturing. There was a total of 200,000 members on the union rolls.[19] As was the case in San Francisco, the Communist or Soviet Party also played a large role in the development of the labor movement in Los Angeles, which for a decade or more had one of the strongest municipal soviet movements of any American city.[20]

Lee Gordon's job as union organizer was to recruit black members among the industrial workers so that, when the union election was held, the union would be assured of enough support to be voted the legal bargaining agent for labor, under the National Labor Relations Act, in spite of opposition by the management at Comstock Aircraft Corporation. After the initial joy of his appointment wore off, Lee began to have ambivalent feelings for his new job. Despite the history of prejudice and discrimination in labor unions, Lee felt that this union might be different, with honest white leaders such as Smitty and Joe Ptak. If so, it would be what Negroes needed desperately in order to receive and be guaranteed fair employment and equal rights in industry. Lee really wanted to believe in this union and see that it was unlike the union that he joined at the post office that did nothing to help him recover his job.

On the other hand, he realized that because of the racist white southern migrants that were being recruited into the union in far greater numbers than the Negro members, he and other blacks "would be

subjected to every abuse concocted in the mind of white people to harass and intimidate Negroes" (p. 4). Lee also feared, like Bob Jones, that his position as union organizer was probably one of tokenism, a political gambit that would allow the union to claim a policy of equal opportunity and thereby exploit the black vote--in which case he and other Negroes would be used, as they had in the past by every trade union that needed them, for whatever selfish reasons:

> Lee Gordon recognized it immediately as the old political game that had been played on Negores since time immemorial--give them something to lose, not much, just a little thing, and they would be blinded to all they forfeited by its acceptance. Presidents had played it along with ward heelers, and so-called humanitarians along with ruthless industrialists.
>
> Give them a General in the army, Lee Gordon reflected, and you'd have them eating out of your hand while you Jim Crowed the other hundreds of thousands in uniform. Give them a powerless FEPC and they'd worship you as a great white lord, never once considering your negligence in enforcing the conditions of governmental contracts that would have made an FEPC unnecessary. Give them a few black faces in the administration bureaus of a Jim Crow capital and let the South run rampant. The Negro, in his overwhelming gratitude for what he received, would forfeit all that was his due. Lee Gordon knew--he had seen them do it, he was seeing them do it now. (p. 364)

Despite all of his misgivings and bitter experience, Lee knew that he would go through with his job, give it his all, and hope for the best.

Whether or not this trade union turned out to be as bad as all of the others Lee had experienced and knew of, Himes leaves an open question. Although he does show that racist southerners abound in the union and they behave accordingly, he also shows that there is a fair-minded leadership in this union that lives up to its equalitarian principles by coming to Lee Gordon's aid when he is brutalized by the police. This incident will be dealt with in a later chapter on troubled race relations. Desiring to end what otherwise might be a pessimistic novel on a hopeful note, Himes' final scene is one of turmoil and violence in which the

union members are banding together during a rally march just before the union election, battling the police who have been called out by the managerial power structure at Comstock Aircraft Corporation to prevent the labor march.

NOTES

[1]E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro in the United States, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951), p. 193.

[2]Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), p. 410.

[3]Ruth P. Morgan, The President and Civil Rights: Policy Making by Executive Order (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), p. 106.

[4]William Z. Foster, The Negro People in American History (New York: International Publishers, 1954), p. 500.

[5]Foster, p. 618.

[6]Chester Himes, If He Hollers Let Him Go (London, England: The Falcon Press, 1947), p. 2. All further page references appear in the text.

[7]John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro America 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1947), pp. 343-44.

[8]Stephen F. Milliken, Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), p. 75.

[9]Maurice R. Davis, Negroes in American Society (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1949), pp. 314-15.

[10]Myrdal, pp. 914-15.

[11]Roger Rosenblatt, Black Fiction (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 167.

[12]Chester Himes, Lonely Crusade (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 38. All further page references appear in the text.

[13]Robert M. Fogelson, The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 199.

[14]Eshref Shevsky and Molly Lewin, Your Neighborhood: A Social Profile of Los Angeles (Los Angeles, California: The Haynes Foundation, 1949), pp. 8-11.

[15]Shevsky and Lewin, pp. 6-7.

[16]Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1964 (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 357-58.

[17]Franklin, pp. 403-04.

[18]Richard C. Wood and Leon G. Bush, The California Story: Its History, Problems, and Government (San Francisco, California: Fearson Publishers, 1957), p. 129.

[19]Wood and Bush, pp. 265-66.

[20]Carey McWilliams, California: The Great Exception (New York: A. A. Wyn Publishers, 1949), p. 129.

CHAPTER V

INTERRACIAL SEXUAL RELATIONS

Chester Himes explores the nature of interracial sexual relations in all of its social ramifications in Los Angeles during the 1940's. In doing so, Himes holds up a mirror to this same historical phenomena on the national level. Miscegenation or sexual relationships between Negroes and whites occurred during the war years--in fact, such relations have taken place throughout American history, particularly during the period of slavery. These relationships occurred primarily as a result of people living and working together at common tasks as well as by the subjugation of Negro women to the fancies and passions of white men. In fact, by the middle 1800's, in cities like Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans, there was widespread sexual intermingling. The practice of wealthy young New Orleans white men, keeping young black women in a state of concubinage, became so popular as to all but gain social respectability. There were also clandestine sexual relationships between Negro men and white women, but this represented a relatively small percentage of the total.[1]

Secret relationships in the North were probably common during the twenties and thirties, when whites found it fashionable to seek jazz and other forms of excitement in such centers of black culture and entertainment as Harlem. The extent of these relationships then, as well as during the second World War, is debatable simply because they have not lent themselves to statistical analysis. Since only four states keep records

by race, any accurate data regarding the number and extent of any stable interracial relationships is hard to come by. Studies in Boston, for example, indicate that during the first World War, interracial marriages reached a peak of five percent of all Negro marriages, and dropped steadily to around three percent in 1934 to 1938. Although statistics are unavailable, there is a feeling among sociologists that the rate climbed again during the second World War.[2]

Among the factors that have helped to account for this rise in interracial relationships have been obviously the increased migration of Negroes to cities and to the North, the gradual urbanization of rural districts in the South, and the secularization of sexual mores, particularly among the white population.[3] Other factors that might be cited are those involving proximity, culture, and psychology. Proximity, as has previously been suggested, concerns places and circumstances of interracial contact, such as employment, commercial transactions, recreation, mutual friends, and organizations with biracial membership. For example, in 1947, a highly publicized marriage occurred in Camden, New Jersey, between a white man and a black woman employed in the same factory.[4] Equalitarian social contacts occur easily in places of entertainment, especially when these places are owned or operated by Negroes. For instance, certain white women have married black musicians who have played in bands of black-owned nightclubs. More important meeting places for blacks and whites, however, are organizations such as labor unions, social service organizations, and interest groups with interracial membership.[5]

Cultural factors also facilitate interracial relationships. Members of emancipated groups are characterized by having rejected prevailing white social mores and endogamous attitudes. The American Communist

Party was most known among these groups for its espousal of social equality for blacks as well as for the percentage of its leadership who have intermarried. Although radical groups generally accept Negroes more readily than does the total society, the Communist Party has gone to great lengths to secure Negro membership and to appear at all times to practice social equality. Communists always welcome Negroes to their dances and social affairs, and pressure is ever exerted upon white members to be friendly to blacks. The Communist Party is noted for its interracial relationships between Negro men and white women.[6]

There are psychological elements as well that account for interracial relationships. Negroes have adopted, to some extent, white standards of beauty, as evidenced by such practices as hair-straightening and skin bleaching, and there are some Negroes who find whites more attractive physically than their own people. Also, light-skinned Negro women or mulattoes have traditionally been a prize among black men, showing their preference for fair-complexioned women. These women have responded to their status by feeling that they were better than darker-skinned Negro women. Also, beautiful mulatto women have been traditionally kept and coveted as mistresses of wealthy white gentlemen during the period of slavery.[7] Some black men, however, desire white women because they represent the excitement of enjoying forbidden fruit. Successful black men very often marry white women as a sign of ultimate achievement, or overcoming the caste barriers; some also marry white women as a symbol of victory over the white man in sexual rivalry. And yet others marry or take up with white women out of a sense of revenge for real or imagined wrongs--mistreating the women by making them feel inferior, humiliating them, and isolating them from their own people.

On the other hand, white women have taken up with black men for a number of psychological reasons--plain and simple curiosity being one cause, which might have something to do with body odor, skin color, and physique. Another reason might be the myth of the super-sexuality of Negro men.[8] Also, the possibility of a black man's worship of her lily-white skin could represent a tremendous gratification to the egos of some white women--especially since many whites in general believe that the white woman (symbol of the white man's most prized possession) is really at the core of the racial problem anyway, in that the ultimate appeal for maintaining the color line has always been expressed through the simple but often relevant question of, "Would you want your daughter to marry a Negro?" Perhaps one final cause for a white woman's attraction to a black man may be that he also represents forbidden fruit, and as E. Franklin Frazier suggests, "imaginary attacks by Negroes are often projected wishes."[9]

Although it may be safely assumed that Los Angeles presented no exception to the states nationwide in which interracial relationships were practiced, it will be impossible to treat this subject with regard to Los Angeles during Chester Himes' social period in fiction for lack of available data. Until November of 1948, the laws of California prohibited the legal intermarriages of whites with persons of any other race.[10] Therefore, such marriages that did take place occurred through falsification of information required by the applicants or occurred through common-law arrangements. In any case, there were no records kept. Of course, any other kind of interracial relationships that did occur, be they short or long-term love affairs, by the very fact of their necessary clandestine nature would not lend themselves to statistical analysis.

In If He Hollers Let Him Go, Chester Himes explores the nature of and attitudes regarding interracial sexual relations between blacks and whites brought in contact for the first time during World War II, primarily as a result of working side by side in a common cause. Himes examines this phenomenon through Bob Jones' involvement with Madge Perkins. She is a buxom, blonde bigot from Texas, and although obviously attracted to Bob, was nevertheless one of his biggest problems at Atlas Shipyard.[11] She held her white skin as a barrier between herself and black men, and suggested familiarity to them by her appearance and walk. All of these actions and qualities gave her a kind of obsessive appeal to Bob Jones.[12] He says of her that

> . . . it wasn't that Madge was white; it was the way she used it. She had a sign up in front of her as big as Civic Centre --Keep Away, Niggers, I'm White! And without having to say one word she could keep all the white men in the world feeling they had to protect her from black rapists. That made her doubly dangerous because she thought about Negro men. I could tell that the first time I saw her. She wanted them to run after her. She expected it, demanded it as her due. I could imagine her teasing them with her body, showing her bare thighs and breasts. Then having them lynched for looking.[13] (p. 125)

As has been previously suggested, Bob Jones cursed Madge Perkins not without reasonable provocation. Before he approached Madge, he was frustrated because of all the white tackers available, none of the white leadermen would order them to do the work that Jones needed in order for his crew to finish a job. These tackers, along with all of the other prejudiced whites on deck, simply did not want to work with or for Negroes. Don, a more fair-minded leaderman, told Bob that Miss Perkins, one of his tackers, was available to do the job for him. But she, however, told Bob, "'I ain't gonna work with no nigger.'" He then retorted, "'Screw you then, you cracker bitch" (p. 27).

After Bob's demotion and the countless acts of prejudice he suffered in the wake of his demotion, he began to see Madge as the root cause of the racial problem. Just as Bigger Thomas found freedom from and revenge for his lifetime of oppression, as well as the restoration of his manhood, through the killing of Mary Dalton, so Bob Jones began to conceive of the same feelings of freedom, manhood, and revenge through the subjugation of Madge Perkins for the racial tyranny he suffered. As Bob said, "'I was going to have to make her as low as a white whore in a Negro slum--a scummy two-dollar whore. I was going to have to so I could keep looking the white folks in the face'" (p. 123).

Bob did not, however, have enough courage in his sober mind to go and see Madge, so he had to get sufficiently drunk. After he got to her apartment, they began to tussle around the room in a violent kind of physical foreplay, with Madge giving Bob nearly more resistance than he could handle. After Bob had pinned her flat on her back, he stood up and looked at her.

> She opened her robe. She was naked except for her shoes.
> "Ain't I beautiful?" she said. "Pure white."
> "This'll get you lynched in Texas. . . ."
> She kicked off her shoes and ran across the room, big, gawky, awkward, and grotesque, but with a certain wild grace in her every awkward motion.
> "You can't have none unless you catch me," she teased (pp. 146-47)

After Bob got her down again, she said, "'All right, rape me then, nigger!' Her voice was excited, thick, with threads in her throat." It was then that he fully realized that she wanted him to carry out some kind of sick pseudo rape of her to confirm her ambivalent and fantasized relationship with black men: "I let her loose and bounced to my feet. Rape--just the sound of the word scared me, took everything out of me, my desire, my determination, my whole build-up" (pp. 147-48). Bob then fled from the

apartment in fear. Where Bigger succeeds by accident in killing Mary Dalton and gaining his freedom, Bob Jones does not succeed at all in subjugating Madge Perkins, who with the utterance of one psychologically-loaded word triggers a response of lifetime conditioned fear in Bob Jones and brings all of his intentions to naught. This was the degree to which the black man had historically been taught fear of the white woman.

Himes also examines interracial sexual relationships from the standpoint of what black women think about black men being involved with white women. The Negro women in If He Hollers who have any comment whatsoever on the subject express very negative feelings about it. Cleo says,

> "I can't understand these Negro men marrying these white tramps. Chicago's full of it. Just as soon as some Negro man starts to getting a little success he run and marries a white woman. No decent self-respecting Negro man would marry one of those white tramps these Negroes marry."

She further remarks:

> "Nobody but a white tramp would marry a nigger! And nobody but a nigger tramp would have 'em. I was at a party in Chicago and saw one of our supposed-to-be leading Negro actors sitting up there making love to some white tramp's eyebrows." (p. 85)

Peaches, one of the Negro women who worked at the shipyard, said to Bob and his crew members:

> "You niggers make me sick. . . . If a colored girl asks one of you niggers to take her to the show you start grumbling 'bout money--liable even to ask her to pay the way. And then the raggedest-looking old beat-up white tramp can come by and get your whole pay check. You dump like a dumping truck." (p. 134)

Ella Mae, one of the Negro women who lives at Bob's apartment house, berated him about white women:

> "You just like all the other niggers. . . . Get a white woman and go from Cadillacs to cotton sacks." (p. 137)

Ella Mae also showed her attitude toward white women in a joking conversation she had with Bob:

> I took another shower and began dressing. When Ella Mae came into the kitchen to heat the baby bottle she said, "You oughta be clean enough even for Alice now--two baths in one day," her voice was ridiculing.
>
> "I'm tryna turn white," I laughed.
>
> "I wouldn' be s'prised none. . . ."
>
> "You know how much I love the white folks," I said; I couldn't let it go.
>
> "You just ain't saying it, either," she kept on. "All that talking you do 'bout 'em all the time. I see you got whitest coloured girl you could find."
>
> "Damn, you sound like a black gal," I said, a little surprised. "Thought you liked Alice."
>
> "Oh, Alice is fine," she said. "Rich and light and almost white. You better hang on to her." (p. 47)

Bob Jones also expresses his feelings about sexual relationships between Negro women (mulattoes in particular) and white men. Worried about Alice going to hear a lecture with one of her white co-worker friends named Tom Leighton, Bob discloses:

> I began watching both of them under lowered lids, half ashamed for the crazy suspicion that had come into my mind, jealous of the guy against my will. I'd seen so many light-complexioned Negro women absolutely pure nuts about white men, it scared me to think that Alice might be like that herself. (p. 87)

He later observes:

> It really galled me to have a white guy take my girl out on a date. I wouldn't have minded so much if he had been the sharpest, richest, most important coloured guy in the world; I'd have still felt I could compete. But a white guy had his colour--I couldn't compete with that. It was all up to the chick--if she liked white, I didn't have a chance; if she didn't, I didn't have anything to worry about. But I'd have to know, and I didn't know about Alice. (p. 142)

The black men at Atlas Shipyard were always on their best behavior around the white women "probably because they wanted to prove to the white folks they could work with white women without trying to make them. . ." (p. 18). Nevertheless, black men could and did joke about their feelings for white women (even in light of their legacy of lynching primarily because of these women) as evidenced by Conway's humorous remarks to his fellow workers:

> "I like big fat white women," Conway started, "'cause there's so much of 'em that's white. An' I like old white women 'cause they been white so long. An' I like young white women 'cause they go so long to be white. An' I like skinny white women 'cause--." (p. 135)

Peaches told him to shut up. Sexual relations between whites and blacks created resentment among black people. Such relations also threatened Negroes with regard to their own intra-racial sexual relations. Blacks felt that other Negroes who crossed the color line betrayed their obligation to their own people. Consequently, blacks had a tendency to ostracize others of their race who entered into interracial relationships, but particularly those who interracially married. This subject will be further treated, in the next chapter, as Chester Himes pursues it into the realm of the abnormal psychology of extra-marital, interracial sexual affairs as they relate to the American Communist Party.

NOTES

[1]John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro America, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1947), p. 155.

[2]Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1964 (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 271.

[3]Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), p. 127.

[4]Joseph Golden, "Facilitating Factors in Negro-White Intermarriage," Phylon, 20 (1959), 275.

[5]Golden, p. 277.

[6]Golden, pp. 278-79.

[7]See Clotel by William Wells Brown (Philadelphia, 1853). Also, An American Dilemma by Gunnar Myrdal, p. 125.

[8]Golden, p. 282; also, Myrdal, p. 108.

[9]E. Franklin Frazier, "Children in Black and Mulatto Families," American Journal of Sociology, 39 (1933), 909.

[10]John H. Burma, "Interethnic Marriage in Los Angeles," Social Forces, 42 (1963), 588.

[11]David Littlejohn, Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1966), p. 142.

[12]Carl Milton Hughes, The Negro Novelist (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), p. 20.

[13]See p. 58-59 of this chapter for possible reasons of Madge Perkins' attraction to or ambivalence for black men.

CHAPTER VI

THE AMERICAN COMMUNIST PARTY

In Lonely Crusade Chester Himes explores the Machiavellian methods of the American Communist Party. In so doing, Himes once again reflects historically the goals and realities of communism on the national level. During the 1930's and 1940's, the American Communist Party continued its efforts to organize and recruit black workers into the party by appealing to their oppressed condition. The communists recruited blacks primarily by infiltrating industrial trade unions and indoctrinating the black worker, as well as by boring from within existing Negro organizations like the National Negro Congress and winning blacks over.

Because of the desperation of their plight, some blacks turned to communism for a while, but according to Sterling D. Spero, the communists were unable to hold any significant number of Negroes in the party for a number of reasons. The Negro was not receptive to socialist economic philosophy because of the barriers imposed by his traditional alliance with the Republican party, his recent advent to industry, and his cultural heritage. Also, the class struggle against "proletarian misery and exploitation" never took hold among American white workers. That is to say, class consciousness in this country never really developed among the American people because of the "heterogeneity of the working population," and the absence of a clear-cut and static social system. Additionally, the American worker is more of an individualist than a socialist because

of his "progressive material comfort" and his "economic opportunity."

In light of these considerations, the Negro may be viewed as basically American as the white worker. Further preventing the Negro from embracing communism was the fact that communism called for the total elimination of capitalism, and this tenet ran counter to everything the black man had been taught by grass-roots leaders such as Booker T. Washington. Washington and other leaders taught Negroes to work within the system--to be frugal, to save, and start their own businesses.

Finally, the Communist Party failed to recruit the black worker because all it could offer was ideological promises. The party also believed that racial prejudice in America was caused by the American profit system and that when that system was overturned, the race problem would also be eliminated. This notion caused the party to adopt an unrealistic policy in recruiting Negroes because the party clearly indicated that it had nothing special to offer the black man, that it would not make separate appeals to races all over the world. And since the party was also recruiting white workers, many of whom were prejudiced or racist, it could not afford to alienate them by conducting a separate fight that addressed itself specifically to the black man's concerns.[1]

Many Americans besides Negroes turned to communism during the 1930's, especially radical social novelists who were interested in the novel as more than simply an aesthetic art form. These writers were determined to use the novel as an instrument for making a social statement or generating social criticism that would agitate for social change as well as advocate necessary social reforms. Writers such as Granville Hicks, Richard Wright, Theodore Dreiser, Joseph Freeman, and Howard Fast solidly embraced communism.[2] On the other hand, John Dos Passos, Sherwood

Anderson, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and others flirted with communism for a time.[3] Although most, if not all, of these writers had repudiated any alliance with the party by the 1940's, most if not all writers of the 1930's of any literary significance, addressing themselves to the urgent social and economic needs of this time, were influenced in some way by the espousal of communistic ideological and humanitarian doctrines.[4]

Through his close association with the American Communistic Party, Chester Himes was able to realistically document, through his protagonist Lee Gordon, the hypocrisy and treachery of party leadership, operations, and policy.[5] Lee went to work for the Civil Service as a postal clerk just before a southerner from Louisiana was appointed superintendent and publically announced his opposition to the employment of Negroes as clerks. As a consequence, Lee began to refer to him as "Hitler"--in spite of Ruth's warning that if the man heard Lee, he would probably want to fire him. Lee replied, "He probably would. But there's a big difference between wanting and doing. I'm on civil service, baby doll--remember."[6] Nevertheless, Lee joined the union that was being organized in his department, for he could not affort to lose his job. War was in the air at this time, and it affected everyone. The whole country seemed to be split in its convictions as to whether the United States should adopt a foreign policy of isolationism or involvement.

Soon the communists that had heavily infiltrated the Civil Service System sought out Lee Gordon. Using the union as a lever, they pried into his family life in order to recruit him into the ranks of isolationism. Two men and a woman came to his department uninvited and asked him to head a committee in protest against the discrimination in hiring

Negroes and Jews. Lee declined. Not in the least discouraged, they came again and this time asked him to join a committee to fight the discharge of a Negro clerk who had been falsely accused of opening mail. Again, Lee did not want to become any kind of political agitator for fear of losing his job, which had meant a new lease on life to him and Ruth. When he asked them why they did not take the man's case to the Civil Service Commission, they said that if they did, the man would be put in the Army as other Negroes had in the past--the draft board notwithstanding--because this whole prejudiced system was a capitalist conspiracy designed to exploit the minorities. He was told that this war was but a repetition of World War I brought about by capitalists for the "fool's gold" of war profits. He was told that the Negro should not be deceived because President Roosevelt had sold out to Wall Street and betrayed the sacred trust of the American people to keep them out of another senseless foreign war:

> "We have a war here at home more important than the petty quarrels of the power-mad nations of Europe," the woman told him with an inclusive smile. "A war against poverty and insecurity, against the present barbarism that has blotted out civilized living for two thirds of the population. You should consider yourself a soldier in this war."
>
> "Come, Gordon, let us fight this thing together," one of the men said as if overcome with emotion. Let us stand side by side and fight the forces of injustice, intolerance, and prejudice. You Negroes have never had a break." (pp. 42-43)

Lee was moved against his will and volunteered to be a member of a permanent committee they would form to fight all cases of discrimination.

He and Ruth attended the first meetings, but most of the discussions concerned politics. American Capitalism and British Imperialism were denounced more than Nazism. Bored, they quit attending. The committee,

however, continued to grow in numbers and importance in the post office, although no discrimination cases were protested by it. The committee was disbanded after June, 1941, when Germany attacked Russia. The Committee to Aid Russia took its place. The fight against discrimination was now abandoned and unity in an all-out effort against Nazism was called for. The committee "urged that petty racial differences and factional fights be forgotten until the Soviet Union emerged victorious over Germany" (p. 43). Overnight, isolationism had changed to fanatical interventionism.[7]

As white southern migrants began pouring into the postal system, racial tensions rose and racial prejudice and discrimination was perpetuated all out against the Negro employees, seemingly with the encouragement of the superintendent. When Lee appealed to the communists that had first advocated the antidiscrimination committee, he found that they had changed their position on this issue in favor of unity. Commenting on this situation, Robert Bone observes:

> For the duration of the wartime alliance between the Soviet and American governments, the American Communist Party either abandoned or actively sabotaged the struggle for Negro rights. As a result of this betrayal, carried out under the slogan of "national unity" and "win the war first," the party lost most of its influence among Negro intelligensia.[8]

When Lee was finally fired for calling the superintendent "Hitler," he "telephoned the members of the former committee and demanded that they help him now. They flatly refused to have anything to do with it. No one showed him any sympathy" (p. 45). He was told that it served him right for agitating. He even felt an air of antagonism by all the communists against him. Lee now discovers "that the communist party is composed of one of the most foul groups of political agitators and power hungry mobsters in the world."[9] But he was more bewildered than hurt;

he could not understand their motives or logic for turning against the Negro. What Lee Gordon did not understand, of course, was the expedient way in which the communists operated, which prevented them from successfully recruiting black members in significant numbers. They had simply used the discrimination angle to hook Lee into their meetings; once he was there, they merely shifted ground on him and began to indoctrinate him along straight party lines. They never cared about discrimination in the first place; it had simply served them as a tool with which to recruit Gordon as long as he appeared useful. However, they were also recruiting southern whites in vastly greater numbers than their black recruits, and since they could not afford to alienate the white members who were the actual perpetrators of discrimination, the communists had to drop prejudice altogether as an issue. Since the postal labor union was also under the influence of the communists, it did nothing to help Lee Gordon either.[10]

When Lee Gordon went to work for the labor union at Comstock Aircraft Corporation, he was told by Joe Ptak, the boss and head organizer, as well as a fair-minded man, that

> "The Communists will be after you. Just be prepared. In case you don't know, this is how they'll work. They'll get somebody to make friends with you--either another colored man or a white girl. Then they'll try to recruit you. Anyway, they'll try to control you. But as long as they don't catch you agitating on discrimination, they'll help. They got that unity crap going and they don't want you around agitating. Now take their help. It can be good. They got better inside contacts than you'll ever get. But don't let them run your show. Play the discrimination and play the Communists, too." (p. 25)

Apart from its history of prejudice, the union posed one other major problem for Lee Gordon--and that was its communist influence. Lee knew that they would oppose as well as raise a hue and cry against anyone who

sought to agitate against discrimination in the union or in industry. And if Lee Gordon sold his fellow Negro workers on the union as a bargaining agent, that would soon guarantee them equal opportunity, and they in turn voted for and joined the union, only to realize that it would not touch the race issue at all--then what did that make Lee Gordon to his people? And yet he knew that if the racial abuse was ever to be stopped, it had to be effected through the union. On the horns of this dilemma, Lee could only hope that it would be resolved in time in the best interest of all workers. Through Gordon's experiences in the Civil Service as well as in labor unions, Chester Himes reflects the same experiences that blacks had with communism on the national level.

In Lonely Crusade, Himes explores the nature of and attitudes regarding extra-marital, interracial sex through Lee Gordon's love affair with Jackie Forks. Himes examines this phenomenon in connection with the efforts of the American Communist Party to recruit the black industrial worker while at the same time gaining control of the Comstock Aircraft Corporation. In order to carry out their goals, the communists must first take over the labor union so that the workers can be indoctrinated, through the union's efforts in their behalf, against the exploiting forces of capitalist management. Since Lee Gordon is the key to recruiting the black worker, the communists need to recruit him or at least control him as a tool to serve their interest; consequently, Jackie Forks is assigned by the Party to have a love affair with Gordon and gain a hold over him so that he may be manipulated to serve the Party's objectives.

It was very natural for Lee Gordon, as a black man, to become attracted to a woman like Jackie Forks from the moment he laid eyes on

her at a party. By the time Lee was in junior high school, he had developed a racial inferiority complex. He and his parents were driven out of Padadena where he attended an integrated school because he was caught in the girls' gym peeping at the white girls taking a shower. He simply wanted to see how they were so different from black girls to make them so special. "'They don't look any different,' he observed. They weren't even prettier." He knew that the white boys were no different from him because he took showers with them. Also, generally speaking, he did as well in class as they did, so he could not figure out what the difference was. He even asked his white biology teacher:

> "Is white skin better than black skin?"
> "There is little difference in skin itself," the teacher carefully replied. "But the color of skin--along with other things, of course, denotes the division of races." (p. 33)

This answer hardly satisfied Lee:

> He came to wonder if there was something about white girls which grown-up white people were afraid of a Negro finding out --some secret in their make-up that once discovered would bring them shame. It made him curious about white girls, but filled him with caution too. Sometimes he watched them covertly but never made advances; he did not want to bring disaster down again. At the time of his graduation he had never said more than a dozen words to any white girl in his class. (p. 34)

He grew up with the same natural curiosity and strange attraction to white women.

Because Lee and Jackie were both willing and both believed in social equality, they should have been able to have in interracial relationship, free from the obstacles of race. But they could not. The racially divisive conditioning of their culture was too deeply embedded beneath the veneer of their ideologies. Every word and action between them was potentially a racial stumbling block. This condition existed in spite of the fact that Jackie had been ordered by the Communist Party to become

involved with Lee--an order that she quickly forgot about in her natural attraction to him.

Himes documents this relationship with attention to details. When Jackie told Lee that she had never kissed a Negro before, he became instantly resentful--as if she, a white woman, bestowed some special honor upon him as a black man. Himes says, "And now where between them there had been a young and stolen sex attraction, now there was race." She took him to her Hollywood apartment after a party. They held hands. "But at the appearance of the elevator operator she released his hand. It was as if she had left him standing there" (p. 101). Lee sat in Jackie's front room while she went to make coffee. He had on a robe that she gave him because his clothes had gotten wet in the rain.

> Alone, he bagan to worry; not only this crazy, senseless fear of being disrobed in a white woman's neighborhood, one lost Negro in a white world--a fear he could not help; but the fear that Ruth might divine, by some strange intuition, that he had spent the night with some stray Communist woman. Suddenly an apprehension overwhelmed him, he began to tremble. (p. 102)

After Jackie prepared a snack for them, Lee could not eat because of his nervousness. He could barely drink his coffee. Jackie realized this and ate in such a manner as to thaw him out sexually: "She let her mouth become soiled and ate sensually, licking her lips with the darting red tip of her tongue. If there had not been this crazy restraint of race, he would have become so excited by the sensual way she ate that he would not have been able to restrain himself. But now he could only stare at her in rigid fascination" (pp. 102-03).

She even read a love poem to warm him up emotionally, but "the vaunted burning lust Negroes are supposed to have for white women would not assert itself" (p. 104). Lee began to feel impotent and foolish.

If they had been in his part of town on the South Side or even on neutral ground, he would have been able to assert his nature, but here in this elegant, all white, Social-Area IX neighborhood, with this beautiful lily-white woman--communism notwithstanding--he froze like a statue:

> With abruptness of a curse she snapped on the light. But he kept trying, because he thought it was expected of him, and sooner or later it would have to come. For after all, he was a male.
>
> "Kiss me," he demanded, putting his arm about her shoulder. (p. 104)

But Jackie was through trying. She began to ask him questions about his work in the union. Lee's pride was hurt because he had failed to fulfill her expectations, and she was obviously disappointed, without understanding his emotional state of being. Here Jackie betrays her lack of sympathy and sensitivity for Lee Gordon as a human being. She has relegated him in her mind to the level of a mythical black stud and feels that he should be able to turn on his sex with the ease of switching on a light bulb or twisting on a water faucet. In his determination to redeem himself in both of their eyes, Lee tried to force his affections on her, and the more she resisted, the more resentful and aggressive he became: "Deep within him was a faint desire to hurt her . . . dominate her, subdue her and bend her to his will" (pp. 106-08). He felt an almost sadistic urge to avenge himself on her (a white woman) for being the cause of the black man's outcast state, to avenge himself on the white man by enslaving his most precious possession, to avenge himself on this woman for all of the racial abuses that he had suffered and for all of the lynchings that black men had suffered at the hands of the white man because their mothers, sisters, and daughters needed protecting; they needed protecting from such black rapists as himself who were invariably supposed to be

overwhelmed by their lustful desires in the presence of any white woman.

Jackie began to plead with Lee not to manhandle her:

> "Don't do this to me!" she pleaded. "Don't, Lee! For your own sake!"
> "Why do you take advantage of me like this? You know if if you were white, all I'd have to do would be to scream. You know it! The doorman and the elevator operator would hear me. They could hear me on the street. You know I wouldn't cry that you were raping me." She began sobbing hysterically. "You know I wouldn't do that to you!"
> He released her and got slowly to his feet. "I wasn't trying to rape you," he said. (p. 108)

> "Do I look like a whore--a cheap tramp who would get a thrill out of you raping me?"
> Now he became defensive in the face of her indignation.
> "Jackie I didn't think that, honestly. I don't think of you in that way at all." (p. 148)

But Lee was not being entirely honest because of his semi-sadistic urge toward her, and, furthermore, as Himes says, exploring interracial sex into the area of its abnormal psychology: "She could not understand how he, a Negro, might interpret her loss of interest as a subtle invitation for him to overpower her, since in his limited experience he had seen nothing barred in the frantic search for strange sensations from interracial sex" (p. 144).

To show Lee that he could not frighten and manhandle her at will, Jackie slipped a document into his pocket before he left. Lee later discovered to his dismay a folded sheaf of type-written pages entitled, "Excerpts from the Rasmus Johnson Case Transcript" which showed the ease with which a Negro could be convicted of rape when the white woman was willing to take the stand and confess that he had raped her:[11]

> The excerpts have been selected to show the following points:
> 1. The prejudiced remarks of the judge;
> 2. The improbable story told by the prosecution to explain the fight; the contradictory testimony of the prosecution witnesses;
> 3. Johnson's own story;

4. The failure of the defense attorney to prepare a case for his client;
5. The biased instruction to the jury which precipitated the conviction of Rasmus Johnson and caused his subsequent sentence in prison of sixty-five years;
6. The mockery of justice when a Negro is tried in any American court on the charge of raping a white woman. . . . (pp. 110-11)

The communists had obviously prepared these excerpts as part of their propaganda campaign with which to recruit blacks. Strangly enough, however, when Lee's fear subsided, after having read this document, his attraction to Jackie Forks became even greater because she had threatened him, and now she became "a white woman enshrined in the fatal allure of the forbidden, and veiled in the mystery surrounding white women as seen by some young Negro men" (p. 144). Lee is attracted to Jackie Forks even more because she is an object of fear, since any suspicion of interracial sex--especially in the witching-hunting tradition of false rape charges against black men in this country--could lead to castration and death. She is also endowed with a mysterious taboo aura which renders her all the more attractive to Gordon, who reveals himself to be sexually neurotic to a degree about white women in that he appears to suffer from some kind of obsessive-compulsive reaction to them. It is as if Lee Gordon, at some point in his psychological development, has become fixated in his libido with death, white women, and pleasure. But Gordon comes across in such a way that this condition appears to be only a part of a mildly fragmented personality which in its more often than not integrated moments does not appear.

Ruth could give Lee nothing in the full, realistic scope of their lives as husband and wife that he did not already have, but Jackie, through her attitude of noblesse oblige and through their basically sexual relationship could give him a temporary, psycho-sexual sense of

manhood; she could give him the temporary illusion of being a man, even while denying to herself that he possessed it, because to her he was the recipient of her grace, and through a kind of abnormal reverse psychology, the more she endowed him with the illusory sensations of manhood, the more she endowed herself in both of their eyes with the ultimate aura of white womanhood. When Lee asked Jackie why white women were more affectionate to Negro men than Negro women were, she replied that it was all in his mind, because in his mind white women "were the ultimate." And although Jackie only feigned the loyalty, love, and genuiness that Ruth truly possessed, Lee Gordon could never be for Ruth what Jackie could make of him for her own purely sexual designs. To put it in more generic terms, Jackie (a white woman) could provide Lee (the Negro man) with a sense of masculinity which he fails to achieve with Ruth (a Negro woman) because of his failure as a man to support and protect his wife due to caste and economic reasons, but, since all Jackie (his white mistress) wants is sex, which he can provide, he can in turn feel like a man.

Through Chester Himes' association with the Communist Party, he came to denounce it as a godless juggernaut that exploited and destroyed the lives of its members to carry out the ideology of its own "will to power."[12] When it became known that there was a traitor in the labor union who was "selling out" his fellow members by taking bribes from management to keep it informed about union activities, the union's efforts to recruit new members became seriously jeapardized. Since the communists had heavily infiltrated the union and had as much interest in it as the non-communist leadership and members, they decided to expose the traitor since he was really one of their members anyway. By doing

so, the Party felt that it could also exploit an opportunity to gain an even stronger hold on the union. The actual traitor, Luther McGregor, was too valuable to the Party to be sacrificed, so the West Coast Chairman of the Communist Party submitted the name of Jackie Forks. All things considered, she was their most expendable member. Himes shows the communists' ruthless methodology by showing how the chairman resolved that Jackie Forks should be the sacrificial lamb:

> Though she had served as a spy for both the party and the union, her service was not indispensable. The party had another spy in the offices of Comstock, Vera Slagel, confidential secretary to the company's president and assistant to the secretary of the board of directors. Unknown to the union organizers, she kept in direct contact only with party executives. Therefore the loss of Jackie would be no great hindrance to the movement.
>
> On the other hand, the shop workers would be more prone to believe an office worker was the traitor than another shop worker whom they might know. Many shop workers had an innate antagonism toward office workers that would make the discovery of Jackie as a traitor a matter of jubilation. Also of importance was the fact that Jackie had no influential friends within the party, and she did not know any party secrets with which she could oppose her sacrifice. (p. 257)

Accordingly, Jackie was then denounced as a union traitor during the next meeting. Written evidence and damning affidavits were presented to duly frame her. She was then summarily expelled from the union and the Party, and subsequently fired from Comstock Aircraft Corporation. Her years of work for the Party had been rewarded with customary communist treachery.

Himes explores the black woman's reaction to the black man's unfaithful sexual involvement with the white woman through Ruth Gordon's reaction to Lee's quitting his job in protest of Jackie's ouster. When Ruth Gordon worked at Western Talkie, she "learned that the plant was owned by Jewish Communists. Most of the employees were Communists" (p. 47). In their efforts to recruit her, Ruth had gotten to know a great deal about the way communists operate. For example, she learned that they always

kept a bevy of attractive white women in their arsenal of recruiting devices and used them as a kind of honeyed bait with which to convert desirable members, especially black men whom they found useful to the movement. Having suspected for some time that Lee had become involved with one such communist seductress, because of his subtle change in behavior and the late hours in which he would return home, Ruth was now confirmed in her suspicion because Lee had quit his job for this woman. When Lee distressfully explained to her what had happened to Jackie Forks, they had an angry exchange of words:

> "Are you having an affair with the girl?" she asked. . . .
> "Ruth, don't be so crazy," he endied. "Do I have to be having an affair with the girl because I object to her being framed?"
> "Then why should you be so upset about what happens to some white tramp when worse things happen to Negro women every day?"

As they continued to talk, Ruth, being a very intuitive woman and knowing her husband probably better than he knew himself, easily perceived the guilt in his face and in the tone of his voice. He could not hide it from her.

> "You are the lowest person I know," she said carefully with intent to hurt. "You are willing to destroy your whole future for some white whore, and for your own wife who slaves for you, you haven't a decent word." (p. 265)

Then, after a moment of angry and reflective silence:

> "Lee, do you have some uncontrollable desire for white women?" she asked conversationally. "If you do, just tell me and I will go out of your life and let you have all the cheap white women you want."
> "Aw, Ruth--."
> "If you want a white woman, go get one. Try to get one to support you like I have done--."
> "I haven't asked you to support me. If you haven't wanted to work why didn't you quit?"
> "I would have if you could have kept any of your jobs. If you thought about me as much as you do about every little white tramp who comes along, you'd have accepted the job that Mr. Foster offered you--."

Foster, the vice president at Comstock Aircraft Corporation, had offered Lee an extremely high-salaried desk job to quit the union and come to work for management. But Lee was not willing to desert or "sell out" the union. As far as he was concerned, the union, as well as his fellow black workers, desperately needed him. He and Ruth had argued about that because she felt that he had put the union ahead of her now that he was offered a position to match his education and by means of which they could have the quality of life they always wanted. She felt that Lee was a fool also because he could have become what he appeared to want to be more than anything else in the world--the sole breadwinner and the undisputed head of his household. The job would have also compensated them for the years of hardships they had suffered. But Lee would not accept it. As far as Ruth was concerned, he would not quit the union for her, but he had for Jackie Forks:

> "If you were just one half as much a man as the lowest white bum--" and now it was his manhood she defiled--"you wouldn't put a white prostitute above your wife. That's why white men rule the world today." (p. 266)

That night they slept in separate rooms.

Himes continued to document the relationship between Lee Gordon and Jackie Forks in terms of the constant barriers imposed by race and Lee's wife. After his argument with Ruth, Lee went to be with Jackie, and apart from soothing one another's hurt and pain, they spent their days and nights in sensual pleasure--eating, drinking, making love, and going out socially--always trying to block out of their minds a sense of hopelessness with regard to their relationship. "Out of their lives as they had lived them, came the shadow of their racial differences. And between them sometimes within each hour there was Ruth--and each time Jackie felt

more like a whore" (p. 205). When Ruth called Jackie's apartment and said that she was coming over there, Jackie panicked. She was afraid of Ruth, although having never seen her before: "She had heard vague stories of the savagery of Negro women where their men were concerned" (p. 301). Jackie told Lee that he had to leave and not come back again because far greater than her fear of personal injury was her fear of public condemnation. She would rather retreat behind caste barriers than suffer social disapproval. To be caught in a "Negro emotional mess" and to be a white woman having a sordid affair with a Negro man and fighting his Negro wife over him--the very though of it was unbearably disgusting to her. Now "in the whiteness of her soul she was repelled by the very blackness of the skin that sexually had first attracted her" (p. 302). Jackie will not condescent to fight over Lee with his wife out of affectionate consideration for his family life but because it would offend her sense of racial superiority to quarrel or brawl with a Negro woman. Commenting on this situation, Edward Margolies says:

> The white woman finds the Negro eminently desirable as the forbidden embodiment of her sexual yearnings; on the other hand, he also stands for her guilt and shame about these feelings. She punishes herself by taking the Negro at the same time that she gratifies herself physically. . . . Whatever the combinations of motives, in no case is the Negro's essential humanity recognized. Rather do white and Negro lovers play games with one another, using one another as subjects of wish fulfillment.[13]

Commenting on Jackie's character and her using her concern for Ruth's feelings as an excuse for jilting Lee Gordon, Milliken says: "Clinging desperately to the illusion of her own nobility, her own unique worth as a person, she destroys their relationship with unconscious but deadly cruelty":[14] "I'm white, Lee--white! Can't you understand? I'm a white woman. And I could not hurt a Negro woman so" (p. 303). Jackie now

fully unmasks herself as the kind of light-'o-love sexual adventuress, full of the dramatics of undying love, who is willing enough to enter into a fair-weather love affair with a black man behind closed doors but at the least sign of serious trouble will slam the door of recognition in the face of this black skeleton in her closet. Milliken interweaves exemplary quotations from the novel in his further comments on Jackie's character in light of why she would never have made the sacrifice for Lee that he did for her:

> Jackie's sexuality is as blatant and uncomplicated as "the strong musk scent of sex--a woman scent" (p. 104) she brings to their embraces, but she is also an empty vessel, undeveloped in both mind and emotions. . . . He can achieve no real intimacy with this essentially dull woman, her sensations keyed to a far lower level of intensity than his can ever be." "Shock showed clearly in her face when she looked into his eyes and saw the grinding hurt. It confused the attitude of three-fourths sex and one-fourth understanding which she had so carefully rehearsed, and brought dismay.[11]

After Lee realized that Jackie was through with him permanently, many excruciating thoughts lacerated his mind. Although he had gotten past thinking of her as white and hoped that she had, too, "Her being white was nothing newly found; she had been white at the beginning, and at the beginning, he recalled, she had used it as at the end" (p. 304). She had used him as a "beast to satisfy her sexual urges, or perhaps a therapy to ease her personal hurt." "It was this racial advantage all white women have over Negro men, to employ or not according to their whims" (p. 305).

Himes documents Lee Gordon's attraction to Jackie Forks, and as Margolies says, "Himes's insights are good, particularly as regards the Negro's attraction to the white woman."[16]

> Was there some capacity for self-destruction in the traditional status to Negro men which only white women could release? Was it this capacity that made every act of interracial sex a gamble for one's honor? Was it the challenge or the threat; or

> just the human impulse, planted in Eden, to seek the forbidden?
>
> But at this cost? Was the simple fact of lying in a nude white woman's arms worth this much to him? Was it the mere white legs and pinkish brown nipples of her breasts? Certainly she was no more noble in her soul than the wife he'd abandoned --nor more beautiful physically.
>
> Or was it pity that had taken him to her; and only pity afterward instead of love? But that he could have felt such a degree of pity for a white woman as to destroy the love of his Negro wife would take no form but lunacy in his present state of mind.
>
> The questions passing through his thoughts added to his despair. It was more; he knew it was more. If he had not loved her, he had wanted to, so very much. And now he felt an emptiness, a betrayal, a loss not so much of what had been, as of what might have been. (p. 306)

Just before Lee Gordon left Jackie, he recalled standing there "for a long, emasculating moment, during which he suffered every degradation of his race . . . looking at the whiteness of her face" (p. 303). Now as he walked through the lonely streets alone, he realized with a crushing sense of hurt, despair, and emptiness, "that he had left Ruth and his home and quit his job--and for what? Had it been just for this woman, who in the end was no more or less than she had been in the beginning?--white!" (p. 307).

Himes also examines the thoughts of three other men regarding Gordon's love affair with Jackie. Smitty, who, apart from being Lee's friend, was also a white man and the union council secretary. He tries for his own satisfaction and peace of mind to account for Lee's ultimate fate with Jackie Forks:

> He could understand Lee's infatuation for the girl. He knew many white men with the same sexual curiosity concerning Negro women. But to these men it was simply a matter of going to bed with a Negro woman; while to Lee it seemed a matter of great importance--so much so that he had quit his job and deserted his wife for her. Nor did Smitty believe it was just because Lee loved the girl. No, it was that Lee must have her --not as just going to bed with a white woman, but as a mate, as the woman of his preference, with pride and honor and without shame, or not at all. And therefore he had felt compelled to defend her, even to the destruction of himself. (p. 344)

Abe Rosenberg was also Lee's friend and a communist Jew who loved to have dialectical discussions with Lee. His thoughts also agreed with Smitty's --that Lee had placed Jackie on too high a pedestal because she was a white woman and therefore matched his personal sacrifice for her to his exaggerated opinion of her:

> No self-respecting Negro man could have a white woman at below the value she placed upon herself. But to have all that she thought herself to be, and not only that part she considered expendable to sex, he would naturally build her up to more than what she was--which was where the tragedy began. (p. 377)

Lee was forced to work with a black communist agent named Luther McGregor. The union leaders urged Lee to use Luther because of his influence with the other black industrial workers. Luther was a slick experienced hustler who also had a white woman provided for him by the Party; and he used her as a street-wise pimp uses a prostitute. He was obviously the opposite kind of Negro from Lee Gordon and so thought Gordon a fool for giving up so much for Jackie Forks:

> You done quit your job. And your white chick done quit you. And you even lost your wife. Which only a weak-minded nigger would do for any white woman. 'Cause you ain't got to. You ain't expected to. They don't even want you to. All they wanta do is borrow you. Use you like Foster and the party does. Not marry you, man. All they wanta do is get their kicks. So get yours, man, like they does theirs. But here you go and let a little white stuff go to your head and make a damn fool out yourself. (p. 329)

Although more vulgarly put, Luther's school-of-experience insight and remarks strike to the very heart of truth in analyzing the nature of Lee and Jackie's affair, in suggesting the attitude that Lee should have held and the manner in which he should have conducted himself. As such, Luther comes to the same conclusion as Smitty and Abe--that Lee Gordon, being an educated, idealistic, sensitive, and inexperienced young black man did not understand the rules by which an extra-marital interracial love

affair had to be played. White women of Jackie's status believed that they had far too much to lose by marrying a black man and so would never seriously entertain making such a personal sacrifice. But they would go so far as to have a clandestine love affair as long as it was cozy and convenient. But Lee, in his mistaken idealism, did not understand this phenomenon. He labored under the delusion that if he gave up all for love Jackie would do the same, but they were obviously at cross-purposes and not playing by the same definition of the word "love."

NOTES

[1]Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, The Black Worker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), pp. 413-22.

[2]David Aaron, Writers on the Left (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1961), p. 311.

[3]Aaron, p. 192.

[4]Aaron, p. 309.

[5]Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 87. Commenting on the hypocrisy and treachery that drove American social-protest and radical writers from the Communist Party, Eisinger says: "If they, and others, had observed Russian communism honestly, hindsight now reveals to us, their loyalties would not have been so freely given. The bitter truth about Russia during the thirties was always available, but it took time to filter into the Western consciousness. Russian hypocrisy had brought about the failure of the Popular Front. The apparent ambiguity of the Russian position during the Spanish Civil War was finally revealed as total cynicism. The Moscow trials demonstrated that survival in the Kremlin power struggle was possible only to those who exploited treachery and murder. The 1939 Pack was only the most dismal and decisive act in this dreary history. It was this accumulation of evidence that drove writers and intellectuals out of the party."

[6]Chester Himes, Lonely Crusade (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 41. All further page references appear in the text.

[7]Eisinger, p. 92.

[8]Robert Bone, "The Revolt Against Protest: 1940-1952," in The Negro Novel in America (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 164.

[9]Carl Milton Hughes, "Portrayal of Bitterness," in The Negro Novelist (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), p. 76.

[10]Chester Himes' denunciation of the social reform committee as well as the labor union due to their communist influence would certainly

designate Lonely Crusade as an anti-communist novel in light of such standard communist-party novels of the 1940's as The Underground Stream (1940), by Albert Maltz; Jake Home (1943), by Ruth McKenny; and The Judas Time (1946), by Isador Schneider.

[11]Chester Himes is probably basing the Rasmus Johnson rape case on the famous Scottsboro Boys case of 1931 in which (according to John Hope Franklin) nine black youths were arrested and jailed in Scottsboro, Alabama, and sentended to death on false charges of raping two white girls on a freight train. Along with the NAACP, the American Communist Party championed the case and made an international issue of it. The Party raised one million dollars for the defense of the youths and retained the noted New York criminal attorney Samuel Liebowitz. After many false trials, the Supreme Court order a new and final trial in which the boys were sentenced to terms up to ninety-nine years. By 1950, the last of them had been released.

[12]Wilson Record, "The Negro Writer and the Communist Party," in The Black American Writer, Vol. 1: Fiction, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969), p. 221.

[13]Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippencott Company, 1968), p. 92.

[14]Stephen F. Milliken, Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), p. 119.

[15]Milliken, p. 247.

[16]Margolies, p. 92.

CHAPTER VII

TROUBLED RACE RELATIONS

Chester Himes' analysis of the tense race relations in his social fiction registers as well as reflects the same conditions that existed between whites and minority groups, particularly between whites and Negroes, on the national as well as state levels, during the years that marked the first and second World Wars. During the early 1940's, the morale of the black man was low, bitter, and brooding. The United States was in a war overseas to make the world safe for democracy, but that very democracy was being denied to its own black citizens. High government officials were concerned for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the German use of this national disgrace as anti-American propaganda.[1] Between 1917 and 1918, some ninety-six Negroes were lynched; some were even burned alive as race riots in the North and South continued to erupt.[2] As Franklin pointed out: "Negroes were stabbed, clubbed, and hanged; and one two-year-old Negro was shot and thrown in the doorway of a burning building."[3] Although much of the violence against blacks was attributable directly or indirectly to the Ku Klux Klan, the Klan as well as other prejudiced elements in America were also anti-immigrant--particularly anti-Semitic. After 1920, especially anti-Catholic. However, violence was rarely done to the Jew on a personal level; he was rather subjected to "sporatic economic proscription." Catholics were likewise not generally harmed physically, but their businesses were boycotted, and they were

intimidated in other ways.[4] America's Negroes, because of their inability to assimilate into the population, have always been the direct target of racist violence.

Because of the migration of blacks from the South, it was inevitable that racial tension should take place. During these war years, riots occurred all over the nation in cities as large as Chicago and Washington, D.C., and as small as Longview, Texas, and Elaine, Arkansas. In terms of their death toll, these riots were certainly to be considered major. For example, in the East St. Louis riot of 1917, nine whites and thirty-nine blacks were killed. In the Chicago riot of 1919, fifteen whites and twenty-three Negroes lost their lives. In both instances, the same conditions led to the riots: whites felt their economic, political, and social status threatened by Negroes; the Negro resented attempts to "kick him back into his place," and city government and police forces were weak and hesitant.[5]

Similar events marred the World War II years. In February, 1942, there was a riot at the Sojourner Truth Housing Projects in Detroit. When the first black family attempted to move into the projects, it was attacked by white residents. In the ensuing battle, many more blacks as well as police were involved. In the spring of 1943, there was a riot at the Alabama Drydock and Shipbuilding Company when white workers attacked a small group of blacks who had been promoted to welders. In Beaumont, Texas, a war industrial center, a white woman accused a black man, whom she had hired to cut her lawn, of raping her. Several suspects were arrested, but the woman could not identify the assailant. When an angry white mob showed up at the jail to forcibly take the suspect, but found none, they looted and vandalized a black business section of the city,

and Texas Rangers had to be called in to restore order. Seventy-five blacks were injured--two of whom were killed.

There was also the Los Angeles "Zoot Suit" riot which occurred in the same month. A rumor got started that a teenage gang wearing zoot suits were attacking white servicemen. A mob of servicemen then went down into the Mexican and Negro neighborhoods and for several days assaulted anyone they caught wearing a zoot suit. By far the most terrible riot of the war years was the Detroit Riot of 1943, in which thirty-four persons were killed and 461 injured. This riot probably influenced the Belle Isle Recreation Park riot that later took place in Detroit. The Belle Isle riot ultimately led to white mobs roaming Woodward Avenue beating Negroes and overturning automobiles. In turn, mobs of blacks roamed Paradise Valley wreaking similar havoc. Federal troops had to be called in to enforce martial law. Six weeks later there was also a riot in Harlem.[6]

The patterns of race relations in Los Angeles communities among the minority groups and the white population had become reasonably well-fixed until the outset of World War II. Once again, as during the first World War, large numbers of blacks began migrating from the South to the North and West in search of employment in the booming defense plants, of which more than 1,000 expanded and 479 new ones were added.[7] Once again the difficult question was raised of how blacks and whites could live together peacefully in communities where the patterns of race relations now became very confused.

Within a five-year period between 1940 and 1945, the Negro population of Los Angeles County alone increased from 75,000 to 150,000.[8] Also triggering the mass exodus of Negroes from the Deep South was the

railroad's importation of thousands from Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma for maintenance-of-way work. Pouring into Los Angeles by the thousands, as many as 5,000 a month, Negro migrants took over the former Little Tokyo section, vacated by the Japanese, and re-named it Bronzeville.[9] Blacks also settled in Watts because of low-cost public housing in the area and partly because deed restrictions and social and job discrimination rendered it all but impossible for Negroes to settle in other parts of the county.[10] As the Negroes moved into Watts, whites began fleeing en masse from that area to the suburbs.

During the early 1940's, interracial clashes were inevitable in Los Angeles in light of the troubled race relations with the Mexicans, the Japanese, and the newly-arrived large influx of Negroes. Los Angeles, however, has had a history of racial tensions since the middle 1800's, beginning with the county's cruel peonage of its Indian population. There were four thousand Indians living in Los Angeles at that time. Regularly arrested in large numbers for alleged drunkenness and disorderly conduct, they were then thrown into chain gangs and forced to work for the county at hard labor. In the same year, the city council ruled that Indian prisoners could be auctioned off to the highest bidder for private service. Because they were over-worked and inadequately fed, the Indian population gradually died out.[11] Horace Bell, an on-the-spot observer, wrote in his Reminiscences of a Ranger, "Los Angeles had its slave mart as well as New Orleans and Constantinople--only the slave at Los Angeles was sold fifty-two times a year as long as he lived, which did not generally exceed one, two or three years, under the new dispensation. Thousands of honest, useful people were absolutely destroyed in this way."[12] These

weekly auctions of Indians in Los Angeles took place until as late as 1869.[13]

Also, during the 1850's, there were constant racial tensions and incidents between the Spanish-speaking residents and the native white Americans. As a consequence of racial or nationalistic animosities, Mexicans were regularly lynched throughout the county.

Another minority group that was heavily oppressed during the Gold Rush period was the Chinese. Anti-Chinese sentiment in Los Angeles reached its peak in 1871 and erupted in a dreadful outburst of mob violence. A policeman, his brother, and an assistant were shot when they tried to break up disorders resulting from a tong war started by the abduction of a woman. A white mob quickly formed and began rioting throughout Chinatown. The mob smashed roofs and buildings and beat or hanged twenty-two or more Chinese.

By far the most serious war-time race riot to occur in Los Angeles was the so-called "Zoot Suit" riot. This incident was partially the result of long-standing conflict between "Pachuco" gangs and the local police, as well as Los Angeles newspapers capitalizing upon the situation by sensationally publicizing gangland incidents and arrests to the extent that the whole affair took on the character of an anti-Mexican crusade. Local residents (i.e., war workers, servicemen, and law-abiding citizens) were misled into believing that they were being overwhelmed by a Mexican crime wave. Many of the Mexican-American youths had taken to wearing ducktail haircuts and zoot suits. This appearance made them highly noticeable on the streets and highly objectionable to most Los Angeles residents.

The actual riot itself broke out early in June, 1943, preceded by

clashes in beach dance halls at Venice and Santa Monica between sailors and Mexican-Americans. All-out disorder then erupted over one weekend, with mob action resembling the anti-Chinese incident. Sailors, marines, soldiers, and civilians formed a yelling hysterical mob and invaded the Mexican area of Los Angeles; for four nights the angry mob seized Mexican-American youths and some Negroes wearing zoot suits and dragged them from theaters, restaurants, streetcars, poolhalls, dancehalls, and private homes where they stripped them naked and beat them severely. Order was restored when one thousand policemen were sent into the area which, on June 8, was declared off-limits to all naval personnel.[14]

One other major racial incident in Los Angeles that cannot be overlooked in the history of this city's race relations occurred in the summer of 1942, when the United States was at war with Japan and other Axis Powers. Some 110,000 West-Coast Japanese--75,000 of them American citizens and a large proportion of them Southern Californians--were forcibly uprooted from their homes and driven into large concentration camps, more euphemistically known as relocation centers. These people were in many cases forced to sell their homes and properties at a fraction of their value and were then shipped off to crude barracks to live a life of disenfranchisement and hardships. After the War, California as well as the rest of the nation, realized what a terrible mistake had been committed, and, through the Evacuation Repayment Act of 1948, made partial compensation to this minority group for the loss it had suffered.[15]

In <u>If He Hollers Let Him Go</u>, Chester Himes probes the strained race relations between blacks and whites working for the first time side by side in industry. Negroes at Atlas Shipyard labored under heavy Jim-Crowism in that all of the white persons in authority, from the

superintendent down to the leadermen, practiced some form of discrimination against the Negroes and made it hard for them not only to advance to higher skill and pay levels but even to do their jobs. After demoting Bob Jones for losing his temper and insulting Madge Perkins, MacDougal, his department superintendent, further rebuked him:

> "I figured you were too intelligent to lose your head about something like that. I figured you had better manners, more respect for women than that. You know how Southern people talk, how they feel about working with you coloured boys. They have to get used to it, you gotta give them time. What makes me so mad with you is, goddamnit, you know this. I don't have to tell you what could have happened by your cursing a white woman, you know as well as I do."[16]

When Kelly, the white supervisor, found out that one of Bob's crewmen, Smitty, had cut an opening four inches off the X in his duct for an intake vent, he said, condemning the whole crew, "'Jesus Christ, can't you coloured boys do anything right?" Bob's reaction was one of outraged indignation: "Air began lumping in my chest and my eyes started burning. I looked at Kelly. I ought to bust him right on the side of his scrawny red neck, I thought. I'd kill him as sure as hell. Instead I ground out, "'Any mechanic might have made the same mistake. Any mechanic but a white mechanic,' I added" (p. 22). When Conway reminded Kelly that he had not made a single mistake that month, Kelly said, "'I wasn't talking about you. You're a good boy, a good worker. I was talking 'bout some of these other boys'" (p. 23). Johnson said, "'If I ever make up my mind to quit, he the first sonabitch I'm gonna whup. I'm gonna whup his ass till it rope like okra'" (p. 12).

After Bob Jones had gotten "chewed out" by MacDougal, he wanted to hit him, but knew he dared not. He could not eat his lunch: "The taste of bile was in my mouth, tart, brackish, bitter as gall. I wanted something to do with my hands, action. I began looking for a crap game" (p.

31). He soon found one composed of a dozen white men and two Negroes. It was not long, however, before he got into an argument over money with one of the white men that soon erupted into a fight. Bob jumped on him, but another white fellow came to his rescue and knocked Bob out. He swore that he would kill the man later, but he never got around to doing it.

Chester Himes examines the interracial tensions in general between whites and the minority groups, particularly the Negroes. The degree of white hatred for the various minority groups is accounted for by many factors, such as the WASP standard. But there are also historical causes, such as World War II. Bob Jones comments accordingly:

> It was the look in the white people's faces when I walked down the streets. It was that crazy, wild-eyed unleashed hatred that the first Jap bomb on Pearl Harbour let loose in a flood. All that tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the street as gas fumes. Every time I stepped outside I saw a challenge I had to accept or ignore. (p. 4)

Conversely, Himes himself comments upon the Negroes' hatred for whites:

> To hate a white person is one of the first emotions an American Negro develops when he becomes old enough to learn what his status is in American society. He must, of necessity, hate white people. He would not be--and it would not be human if he did not--develop a hatred for his oppressors. At some time in the lives of every American Negro there has been this hatred for white people; there are no exceptions. It could not possibly be otherwise.[17]

The white man's hatred for Japanese at this time spilled over and intensified his hatred for blacks: "The war itself, seen in the Pacific area primarily as a war against Japan, had disturbing racist undertones. For those whose nostrils were sensitive enough, there was a faint odor of genocide in the air."[18] Bob Jones was more than sensitive to the racist climate:

> I could always feel race trouble, serious trouble, never more than two feet off. Nobody bothered me. . . . But I was tensed every moment to spring. I was the same colour as the Japanese and I couldn't tell the difference. "A yeller-bellied Jap" coulda meant me too. (p. 4)

Feeling more akin to the Japanese minority group in Los Angeles than to his fellow white Americans, although all Americans were supposed to be at war with Japan, Bob reflected upon his heightened racial fear as a result of the Japanese internment:

> Maybe it wasn't until I'd seen them send the Japanese away that I'd noticed it. Little Riki Oyana singing "God Bless America" and going to Santa Anita with his parents next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs. Jones's dark son, that started me to getting scared. (p. 3)

Much of the racial conflict and hatred that takes place between whites and blacks in <u>If He Hollers</u> is represented in a kind of charade that occurs during the scenes where Bob and his riders are driving to work. During these scenes, Bob becomes a man who "is race-mad almost to the point of hysteria, packed with dry high explosive waiting for a match."[19] Bob's car, a big Buick Roadmaster, becomes a sort of "racial equalizer" to him and his friends. "He eases his almost unbearable tension of being Negro by speeding a powerful car down the freeway. . . ." Bob especially values his car, but without really knowing why: "My car was proof of something to me, a symbol. But at the time I didn't analyze the feeling; I just knew I couldn't lose my car even if I lost my job" (p. 31). One morning when they were running late for work, Bob and his riders pulled up beside a V-8 and an Olds. He shifted back to first and got ready to take the lead. A white couple were only half way across the street when the light turned green. The couple started to run as the V-8

full of white men closed on them fast; the two white men in the Olds blasted them with the horn, making them jump like frogs; however, when they looked up and saw Bob and his riders coming, they slowed down and took their time, giving the Negroes a look of cold hatred. Bob stepped on the gas thinking, "Goddamn 'em I'll grind 'em into the street. . ." (p. 13). However, at the last moment, he put on brakes and sat there exchanging stares of hatred with them.

After this incident, everything seemed to irritate him. A white man in a Nash coupe pulled out suddenly in front of him without signaling. Bob had to slam on brakes to stop from hitting him, but he was bumped from behind by a car. Bob figured that the Nash "jackrabbited" in front of him because he was a colored driver. When he finally pulled up alongside the man, he leaned out of the window and shouted, "This ain't Alabama, you peckerwood son of a bitch. When you want to pull out of line, stick out your hand" (p. 13). Similar scenes to these took place all the way to work. He could not even enjoy the beautiful southern California scenery because as he said, "all I wanted in the world was to push my Buick Roadmaster over some peckerwood's face" (p. 14). By the time Bob got to work, his "arms were rubbery" and his "fingers numb." He was weak as if he had been "heaving sacks of cement all day in the sun" (p. 13).

Chester Himes also alludes to the Los Angeles Zoot Suit riot and portrays a similar situation whose racial tensions and overtones could lead to an incident of the same nature. One day Bob Jones was down in Little Tokyo at a bar drinking when two young sailors, who did not look too bright, and a sleazy-looking white girl came in. As they sat at a table near the juke box and ordered beer, the black women in the place sneered at the girl. But the colored men's reactions were different.

Some purposely ignored her, while others at the bar kept turning around to look at her; two Filipinos who sat directly in front of her stared at her hotly and forgot to eat their meal: "A couple of beers made the chick high and she got that frisky white-woman feeling of being wanted by every Negro in the joint; she couldn't keep still. She got up to put a nickel in the juke box and stood there shaking herself" (p. 75). As she began flirting with the colored men, the sailors became angry and tried to get her out of the place, but she would not go. When the indignant sailors got up to leave, the manager told them that she would have to leave with them, since she came in with them. The girl then put up a fuss. When one of the sailors suggested that they all get out of that "nigger joint," tension began to fill the room. Bob Jones knew that if the girl started to "perform," she could get everybody in the place in trouble because she was white and probably underage; she could get the hotel closed, the liquor license revoked, and the manager thrown in jail. She could get the black men flirting with her thirty years each in San Quentin; in Alabama, she could get them hanged. Bob felt uneasy because one of the sailors was getting defiant in manner, and Bob knew that if he got too far out of line, the manager (who was a tough stern Negro) would knock him down without a second thought. Bob further reflected that

> If the boy got hurt, or if there was any kind of rumpus with the white chick in it, there wouldn't be any way at all to stop a riot--the white GIs would swarm into Little Tokyo like they did into the Mexican districts during the zoot suit riots. Only in Little Tokyo they'd have to kill and be killed, for those spooks down there were some really rugged cats; the saying was they wouldn't drink a white cow's milk. (p. 77)

The sailors and the girl then left with her protesting that she would return as soon as she got free of them. Bob Jones departed as quickly as possible.

In Lonely Crusade, Chester Himes further documents the racial tensions between blacks and whites in Los Angeles during the early years of World War II. For Lee Gordon, fear became the reagent precipitated by the racial prejudice and enmity he suffered as a result of seeking dignified employment after his graduation from college. He was afraid that one day when he felt on the "ragged edge of desperation," he would lean over the desk and slap one of the sexy blonde receptionists who impatiently said to him "Why in heaven's name can't you people realize we cannot use you?"[21] He would do this after she had let him stand unattended before her desk while she carried on a quarter-hour telephone conversation. He was afraid of what would happen to him when the police got through with him, and he was also afraid of the far-reaching consequences it would have for all black people living in Los Angeles, which was a hotbed of racial hostility. During these years, as migrants began pouring into the city from the East, North, and South, each group brought the culture of its section: "Racial tensions rose and racial prejudice ran rampant" (p. 43). When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Lee was a postal clerk:

> Lee found the immediate effect in the post office to be startling. Fear and blood-red hatred of all dark skin showed in the faces of all the white employees. Frightened and constrained by a tremendous sense of insecurity, Lee withdrew into silence. He began bringing his lunch and eating it on his bench alone. No longer did he loiter in the rest room for his ten minutes' smoke for fear of being challenged by some race baiter. He avoided crowds, and every time he heard the oft-repeated epithet, "Yeller-bellied bastards!" he winced. He made every effort to escape a racial crisis. (p. 44)

As a result of the racism of his superintendent, Lee did finally lose his job.

Himes also examines the conflicting racial beliefs and valuations that minority groups have within themselves to account for their hatred of other minority groups. As Fogelson says:

> In response to the disintegration of their communities and cultures, the ethnic minorities also adopted the racism, nativism, and conservatism of the white majority that so effectively excluded them. The Mexicans attempted to dissociate themselves from los tintos; the Negroes insisted that the Japanese be treated as foreigners; and the Japanese contrasted their enterprise with the Mexicans' backwardness. They exploited these ideologies as a means of elevating themselves at the expense of others, a practice that was outrageous on the part of white Americans and pathetic on the part of their colored countrymen.[22]

After old man Harding let Lee and Ruth stay in his house in City Terrace while he went to visit his son, they soon found that Jews were prejudiced against Negroes. One of their neighbors, who was a white woman, came "to warn them that the Jewish people down below were trying to get the white people to drive them from the neighborhood" (p. 125). She explained to them that the Jewish people were afraid that if they remained here, the value of property would depreciate. The woman warned them the next day that the white people in the neighborhood were planning on doing something harmful to them--putting dynamite underneath the house, or setting fire to the kitchen, throwing a snake through the window or sniping them with a high-powered rifle. After seven fearful sleepless nights, Lee and Ruth left the house for good, which shows the suggestive force of racial threats upon the human mind--a condition that affected blacks in some way every day of their lives.

Chester Himes' treatment of minority prejudice is an area of interracial relations that bears investigation for the light it sheds upon this often misunderstood or little-known phenomenon. During this time in Los Angeles' history, the native white majority often lumped all racial minorities together in its thinking. But the minorities did not see it this way. The Japanese kept aloof from the Negroes, and so did the other Orientals. The Mexicans were a buffer between the Negroes and the whites,

and although Mexicans discriminated against Negroes, they could live alongside them. Interestingly enough, the Mexicans often looked upon the Negroes and Japanese as Anglos of another kind because the two groups were much closer to the Anglo culture. In Sawtelle or West Los Angeles, the Japanese and the Mexicans often cooperated in keeping the Negroes out of their neighborhoods. So although the native white majority discriminated against them all as colored people during the years of the second World War, the minorities held considerably different beliefs and valuations toward one another.[23]

After Lee Gordon purchased a morning paper on the way to work one day, he read of all the festering cases of racial hatred that had become suppurated upon the city of Los Angeles:

> He learned of the growing racial tensions throughout the city--A Negro had cut a white worker's throat in a dice game at another of the aircraft companies and was being held without bail; and a white woman in a shipyard had accused a Negro worker of raping her. A group of white sailors had stripped a Mexican lad of his zoot suit on Main Street before a host of male and female onlookers. Mistaken for Japanese, a Chinese girl had been slapped on a crowded streetcar by a white mother whose son had been killed in the Pacific. And down on the bottom of page thirteen there was a one-line filler, "Negro Kills Self. Charles Bolden, known to intimates as 'Fatso,' an unemployed diemaker, took his life this morning by slashing his wrists with a razor." (p. 207)

By using this artists' technique of a newspaper montage of events, Himes as artist and social analyst placed his thumb diagnostically upon the pulse of Los Angeles, which was sick with internal poisoning from its own racist bile.

Himes also shows the "traditional barbarism of racial abuse" against Negroes as it takes the form of police brutality. One day when Lee and Luther McGregor were driving down the highway, going to take care of some union business, the police stopped them. They wanted to have some

sadistic fun with Lee and Luther and also wanted to offer them a little money from Mr. Foster to sell out the union:

> "Who was your father, boy?" Walter spoke to Lee.
> "How does he know? His mother was a whore," Ray said. "How does he know who his father was?"
> "What you say we run 'em in for rape, Paul. You can see they're dirty nigger rapists."
> "Not these boys; they're my boys." (pp. 218-19).

Lee and Luther were then offered one hundred dollars each to sell out the union by spying for Foster and disrupting union meetings. Luther accepted the money and put on an "Uncle-Tom act" to save his skin. When Lee indignantly refused the money, all four deputies assaulted him and gave him a severe pistol-whipping that caused him to be hospitalized for several days. When Lee was released from the hospital, he, the top union officials, and the union lawyer tried to take legal action against the deputies, but the sheriff alibied for them, and Luther would not testify in Lee's behalf because he had been taking money from Foster all along. Lee was advised to drop the charges. Hannegan, the union attorney told him, "You can file charges against the four deputies if you wish, but you will lay yourself open to be prosecuted for false arrest. I advise you against it" (p. 242). Lee then realized that the fascism the black man was supposed to be fighting against in Italy existed right there in Los Angeles, supposedly America's most free and unprejudiced city.

Himes also shows the racial hostilities of the white majority in Los Angeles through the rousing plea of Lee Gordon's lawyer in his efforts to win Lee's release from criminal charges of complicity in the slaying of the deputy sheriff Paul Dixon by Luther McGregor:

> "Before you reach a decision Your Honor, let me point out that it is more than the Negro prisoner's freedom I am seeking. At this time in our national history, during this war in which our form of government is imperiled by the forces of injustice,

> I seek the living manifestation of the justice for which we fight. Here in this city already are growing racial tensions. Many white persons, residents of this city, among whom is myself, have heard the word being passed about: get the niggers, get the pachucos, get the zoot suiters. It is only by the administration of justice and fair play that this may be stopped. For this more than the specific release of any prisoner, is my plea. (p. 349)

Further instances of police brutality can be seen in the short story "One More Way to Die." After William Brown got off from work at the cannery, he went to Joe's bar down on the corner of 40th and Long Beach for a beer. After several beers, he left with a yellow-complexioned prostitute and got "rolled" by her and her boyfriend, named Sweet Wine, in an alley out back. Brown then went home and got his knife and started looking for them. He finally found them in a joint called the Dew Drop Inn on 51st and Hooper. A fight ensued. One of the patrons in the crowded bar was "an old white whore," and in the confusion of the brawl, Brown accidentally hit her with a pop bottle, putting a bloody gash in her head. When the white police officers arrived, Brown tried in vain to explain:

> The cop drew back and hit me in the mouth. "Shut up, you black son of a bitch," he said, "Goddamn you, we kill niggers for hitting white women in Texas."
> "I didn't go to hit her, cap," I said. "Hones' to God--"
> "Well, goddamn you, you black bastard, what'd you hit her for?" the other cop asked.
> "She just happen to come in, cap; you know I wasn't chunking at no white--"
> "Goddamn you, don't you say nothing when you talk back to me!" he said.
> "Yes, sir."
> "If I had you in Texas--" the first cop began.[24]

The white officers then put him in the squad car and drove him to a dark alley beside a scrap iron foundry. There they pistol-whipped him senseless and shot him to death. Like many of the other white southern migrants who came to Los Angeles and transplanted the prejudiced conditions of the South to the West Coast, these racist policemen did to William

Brown exactly what they would have done to him in Texas. Here Himes points up the fact that Los Angeles during these years was no better socially for the black man than any southern racist town, because of its racially hostile migrants and its history of prejudice written in the minority-hating practices of the native white majority.[25]

NOTES

[1]John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro America, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1947), pp. 343-44.

[2]Franklin, pp. 351-52.

[3]Franklin, p. 352.

[4]John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955), pp. 286-94.

[5]Elliott M. Rudwich, "Patterns of Race Riots," in The Black Ghetto: Promised Land or Colony?, ed. Richard J. Meister (Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1972), p. 97.

[6]Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1964 (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 307.

[7]Edward A. Cottrell and Helen L. Jones, Metropolitan Los Angeles: A Study in Integration, Vol. 1, "Characteristics of the Metropolis" (Los Angeles: The Haynes Foundation, 1952), p. 56.

[8]Franklin, p. 454.

[9]Carey McWilliams, Southern California County (New York: Duell, Sloan, Pearce, 1946), pp. 324-25.

[10]The Los Angeles Riots: A Socio-Psychological Study, ed. Nathan Cohen (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 43.

[11]W. W. Robinson, Los Angeles: A Profile (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), pp. 45-46.

[12]Horace Bell, Reminiscences of a Ranger (New York: Arno Publishers, 1976), p. 32.

[13]Robinson, p. 46.

[14]Robinson, pp. 47-49.

[15]Robinson, pp. 50-51.

[16]Chester Himes, If He Hollers Let Him Go (London: Falcon Press, Limited, 1947), p. 29. All further page references appear in the text.

[17]Chester Himes, "Dilemma of the Negro Novelist," in Beyond the Angry Black, ed. John A. Williams (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), p. 56.

[18]Stephen F. Milliken, Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), p. 75.

[19]David Littlejohn, Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1966), p. 142.

[20]Littlejohn, p. 142.

[21]Chester Himes, Lonely Crusade (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 38. All further page references appear in the text.

[22]Robert M. Fogelson, The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 203.

[23]Christopher Rand, Los Angeles: The Ultimate City (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 126-27.

[24]Chester Himes, Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973), pp. 260-61.

[25]W. W. Robinson, "Minority Report," in Los Angeles A Profile (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), pp. 44-48.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Black Social Writers After Chester Himes

This study has shown how Chester Himes' social fiction of the 1940's documented many of the issues that touched the lives of America's urban blacks. Himes achieved this by setting his social fiction in California, specifically Los Angeles, which at the time was a cultural port-of-entry and -departure as well as a meeting ground for most nationalities of people throughout America and the world. In light of this circumstance, Himes was able to capture a microcosm of the black experience through his writings of this time and place with two major novels _If He Hollers Let Him Go_ and _Lonely Crusade_, along with two short stories: "Lunching at the Ritzmore" and "One More Way to Die."

Chapter I examined, biographically, Himes' life in order to orient the reader to Himes as a black man and a writer, to what he wrote, to what his reputation is, and to the kind of fiction he writes. It has also shown how the social forces that affected his life through 1953, the year he left America to live in Paris, can be seen as the basis for his social fiction during the early years of the second World War. Chapter II demonstrated the way in which Himes' intimate knowledge and portrayal of Los Angeles as the milieu of his fiction helped to establish credibility for him as a serious and honest social writer, from whom much can be learned of what it was like for the Negro to live in the segregated,

social, and urban areas of Los Angeles during the 1940's. Unlike many writers, black or white, who either give a one-sided, romanticized, or overly-fictionalized account of Los Angeles during this period (e.g., Raymond Chandler and James Cain) Himes' treatment is so accurate and realistic that it conforms to social and geographical studies of Southern California. This kind of factual and realistic treatment of his milieu typifies the same kind of honest documentation by Himes of the prejudice and discrimination against all "colored" minority groups, but particularly the Negro, that took place in Los Angeles and that has been dealt with in Chapter III. This chapter showed how Himes' in-depth examination of the black experience in industry, in public places, in the military, in employment, in Civil Service, and in trade unions in Los Angeles reflected the same conditions that existed across the nation.

Chapter IV analyzed the way in which Himes registered and explored, in all of its social ramifications, the nature of interracial sexual relations in industry, in society, as well as from the standpoint of what black men and women think about one another being involved sexually with whites. In treating this subject, Himes holds up a mirror to this same historical phenomenon on the national level. Chapter V treated the manner in which Himes documented the expedient policies and operating methods of the American Communist Party in Civil Service, in labor unions, in industry, as well as in interracial sexual relations, and in so doing reflected historically the goals and realities of communism throughout the country. Chapter VI examined the manner in which Chester Himes probed troubled race relations between whites and minority groups as well as between minority groups themselves; it also showed how Himes plumbed the depths of racial tensions and hostilities that existed in public

places, and in industry, as well as in terms of the same kinds of racial conditions that led to major riots across America. Again, this entire chapter revealed how Himes presented a microcosm of the troubled race relations throughout the United States during the 1940's.

It is my conclusion, as a result of this study, that Chester Himes has a twofold claim to greatness: He was the first black novelist to integrate artifact with social criticism in such a way that the two remained in balance with one another. Unlike the pre-Civil War writers who believed that social purpose should take precedence over artifact or the Harlem Renaissance writers who held that social purpose should have no part in the artifact, Himes was able to create a fiction that, heightened by social factors, reached beyond form and structure to significantly communicate with all classes of black and white readers and as such, paved the way for his successors: Ralph Ellison, John Oliver Killens, James Baldwin, William Melvin Kelley, John A. Williams, and Ernest J. Gaines. These writers would take up where Himes left off and create greater works of art in social fiction than their predecessor and teacher. Such novels as Invisible Man (1952), Youngblood (1954), Another Country (1962), A Different Drummer (1962), The Man Who Cried I Am (1967), and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), stand as a testimonial to the pioneering efforts of Chester Himes. Himes' second claim to greatness is that he is the only social novelist of the 1940's to sound the depths of the urban and industrial black experience. As such, Himes may certainly claim the distinction of being the true literary spokesman for his people during the years of the second World War.

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