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Author(s): Thomas Heise

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Harlem is Burning: Urban Rioting and the “Black Underclass” in Chester Himes’s Blind Man With a Pistol

Blind Man with a Pistol (1969)—the final installment in a series of detective novels Chester Himes began publishing in 1957 with For Love of Imabelle—opens with a view of one of the darkest houses in American literature, one that updates Poe’s phantasmagoric, falling house of Usher for the more sinister and disturbing terrors of the late 1960’s inner-city graveyards of poverty and waste. As Himes’s narrator insinuates, Harlem is not merely in a state of disrepair; rather, it is sinking back into the earth in a slow, but inexorable burial:

On 119th Street there had been a sign for years in the front window of an old dilapidated three-storey brick house, announcing: FUNERALS PERFORMED. For five years past the house had been condemned as unsafe for human habitation. The wooden steps leading up the cracked, scabby front door were so rotten . . . the foundation was crumbling, one side of the house had sunk more than a foot lower than the other, the concrete windowsills had fallen from all the upper windows and the constant falling of bricks from the front wall created a dangerous hazard for passing pedestrians. (7)

The opening scene of Blind Man with a Pistol takes readers to the place considered by the 1960’s liberal discourse on the “black underclass” to be the ground zero of Harlem’s social failures—the black family whose very foundations were rotting. The text’s closing scene, in turn, is a riot ignited by a blind African American man wildly firing a pistol down in the New York City subway system and then up on the streets of Harlem, where a slum demolition project is creating a neighborhood housing emergency. The resulting conflagration that ends Himes’s short novel is born out of ongoing race-based housing discrimination, the failed postwar civic policy of urban renewal, and the purported pathology of the “black underclass.” Himes’s narrator succinctly summarizes the dangerous nexus of these three urban conditions: “They had been forced to live there, in all the filth and degradation, until their lives had been warped to fit, and now they were being thrown out. It was enough to make a body riot” (187).

Blind Man emerges from two interrelated historical and discursive contexts—the devastating ghetto riots of the post-World War II period that erupted in Harlem, Watts, Detroit, and elsewhere, and the highly influential and controversial sociological studies of the “black underclass” that pathologized familial structures of inner-city African Americans. In circulating representations of black pathology and in furthering a misguided policy agenda that alienated poor, urban African Americans, this discourse constituted the new racial and class formation it claimed merely to discover and describe: a black underworld trapped
below the lowest rung of the class ladder in a culture of poverty, disease, drugs, violence, and vice. With Blind Man, Himes does not respond to his era’s images of purported black degradation with a social protest novel in the vein of his 1945 If He Hollers Let Him Go. Nor does Himes present a potentially warm—if still fraught—black community’s travails as Toni Morrison would in Sula (1973) four years later. Rather, Blind Man engages in the risky strategy of hyperbolizing extant images of “black underclass” abjectness and “filth and degradation” in a way that so excessively embodies them that their racial contours are revealed as cartoonish, ideological constructs (Himes, Blind Man 187). Himes’s narrative of detection, thus, exposes the white liberal fantasies of racial difference that legitimized, rather than ameliorated, the racist socioeconomic practices that sparked the conflagrations consuming inner-city neighborhoods in the 1960s.

Blind Man with a Pistol is a bitter and at times bitterly funny skewering of both this liberal discourse and of the ideology of black empowerment that later critiqued and replaced it. While Himes’s novel embraces the discursive representations of urban black pathology in a manner that discloses their bases in social and spatial injustice, it does so neither to suggest an alternative model for “ethical masculine subjectivity,” as some scholars have maintained, nor to advocate the black underworld as a nonnormative counterpublic to the official upperworld’s coercive bourgeois morality (Breu 771). Instead Blind Man dramatizes the violent intersection of “white” law enforcement, the “black underclass,” and the collective mass protest that erupted in more than 300 US cities by the end of the 1960s (Feagin and Hahn 99). The logic of the novel triangulates and disclaims each of these so as to destabilize any site of positive identification within the text. In Himes’s Harlem, the police department is a corrupt, racist force that disciplines a truly squalid “black underclass,” whose riots the text satirizes as ineffectual episodes of violence that are incited by black leaders for reasons of individual self-aggrandizement. Himes’s complex work discloses how geographically concentrated poverty, the uneven development of urban residential space, and the discursive formulation of black cultural pathology overdetermine the psychosocial production of images of black aggressivity, moral turpitude, and familial breakdown that had wide currency in the era. Yet, Blind Man’s hostility to the victimized “black underclass” is also pervasive and stems from the perspective that this social underworld undermines endeavors to forge the race and class consciousness and solidarity necessary for systemic, even catastrophic, social change. The text dismisses the underclass riots as random, spontaneous occurrences that fail to impel the massive, organized, and necessarily spectacularly violent upheaval that is the utopian fantasy that undergirds the novel. For a host of formal and ideological reasons that I detail below, this utopian fantasy is one that the text cannot bring itself to fully enunciate, one that Blind Man sublimates into a comic drama between law enforcement and socially disdained “sissies,” “prostitutes,” “bitches,” “hoodlums,” and “confidence men.”

Filled with hetero- and homosexual prostitutes, knife fights, subway shootings, obscene graffiti, drug abuse, polygamy, and bombed-out tenements, Blind Man is, perhaps more than any other American novel of the 1960s, a lurid exposé of the allegedly pathological behaviors of the newly designated, “discovered,” and discursively produced racial and class formation, the “black underclass.” The study of urban black pathology was, to a considerable extent, inaugurated in the 1940s by Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma (1944), which was commissioned at a time when northern US ghettos were becoming a site of mounting public anxiety over familial breakdown, generational poverty, and violent crime. Seeking to raise the consciousness of white Americans to ongoing racial injustice, Myrdal’s study detailed the gulf between America’s rhetoric of legally guaranteed racial equality and its racist socioeconomic practices. Yet the lasting
outcome of the study deviated from these aims as An American Dilemma offered up what eventually would become the standard (mis)diagnosis of urban African American life in the sociological literature of the 1960s. Lower-class black culture was wholly negative, Myrdal suggested, and only properly could be understood as a pitiful reaction to racism and urban anomie. Roderick Ferguson’s Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (2004)—one of the few studies to interrogate sociological articulations of urban black alterity through the lens of African American literature—relates how Myrdal’s work both “decried African American exclusion as a violation of the American Creed” and “rationalized it nonetheless by constructing African American culture as the antithesis of that creed” (94). Ferguson goes on to argue that while “the American Creed claims to be a program for universal application, it—in fact—articulated African American cultural difference as a real and observable impediment to that application, an impediment whose racial and sexual burden of irrationality could only be attenuated through middle-class formation” (94). Ralph Ellison himself would level a similar charge when he accused An American Dilemma of being myopic for the way it “sees Negro culture and personality simply as the product of ‘social pathology’ ” and not as a conscious rejection of the “higher values” of the supposedly deracinated white middle-class subject (Shadow and Act 316).  

For Myrdal the brute effect of generations of sociospatial marginality had produced nonnormative behaviors that invariably reproduced the punishing subaltern status of African Americans. In arguing thusly, Myrdal displaced a potential analysis of structural inequality and of the uneven development of urban space through racial segregation onto an indictment of black familial structures and social relations. Following Myrdal, these intimate, prepolitical sites would become liberal sociological discourse’s locus of racial and cultural difference.  

Among Myrdal’s more inflammatory conclusions was that African Americans’ “performance, manners, and morals are lower” than whites’ (97). The supposed amorality of urban blacks troubled Myrdal, who observed that in “the big cities” there is “a Negro ‘underworld’” where thrived a culture of “petty thieves and racketeers, prostitutes and pimps, bootleggers, dope addicts, and so on” (330). The “Negro ‘underworld,’” for Myrdal, was a racially homogenous version of Marx and Engels’s motley lumenproletariat, that “social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society” that was infecting “all big towns” (167).  

An American Dilemma was blind to the ways that African American cultural nonnormativity was materially and discursively constituted by structural changes in the economy and by the emergence of new forms of social and spatial isolation in US inner cities. It substituted a moral critique of the ghetto’s underworld poor, sexual deviants, and petty criminals in place of an examination of the social effect of de facto and de jure segregation, the steady loss of manufacturing jobs in northern cities, and the erosion of municipal tax bases with the “white flight” of the middle class to the expanding, federally subsidized suburbs (Sugrue 116). Historically, such transformations left a sizeable population trapped in deteriorating inner cities, “unattached to the labor market” and thus increasingly reliant on the underground economies of prostitution, gambling, and traffic in illegal goods (109). As Ferguson notes, sociological studies such as Myrdal’s inverted the relationship between material inequality and social effects by theorizing that poverty and social disorder were the logical result of “African American gender, sexual, and familial eccentricity” (20).  

In the wake of the mid-1960’s urban uprisings, Myrdal’s “Negro ‘underworld’” was increasingly re-designated in the sociological literature on race with the seemingly more scientifically rigorous and empirically verifiable concept of a “black underclass,” a disparate collectivity permanently submerged in what Oscar Lewis characterized as a generational “culture of poverty” that bred
violence. Two-hundred and fifty-seven US cities erupted in riot between 1964 and 1968. In the popular and sociological accounts of these riots, it was the disaffected inner-city population that was repeatedly singled out for examination, prosecution, and social censure (Feagin 101, 102). In the span of three years, several landmark studies arguing for African American cultural inferiority were published. Among them were Kenneth Clark’s Dark Ghetto (1965), the US Department of Labor’s The Negro Family, better known as the Moynihan Report, (1965), and Oscar Lewis’s A Study of Slum Culture (1968), each of which detailed

Himes’s protagonists escort readers through an underworld of murder, poverty, decadence, deviancy, hoodlums, Black Power leaders, religious prophets, and slum dwellers, all ingredients percolating social unrest that erupts on Harlem streets.

the specter of an emerging “black underclass” inhabiting a wild terrain of deviancy and violence in the center of the crumbling cities of the US. According to Clark and others, it was this population that lashed out violently in disorganized mass rioting. Clark announced a year after the 1964 Harlem riot that the city was not only “the fountainhead of Negro protest movements,” but it was also home to the “criminally psychotic” who abide in a “dark ghetto [of] . . . institutionalized pathology” characterized by its “social disorganization . . . high rates of juvenile delinquency, venereal disease among young people, narcotic addiction, illegitimacy, homicide, and suicide” (26, 27, 81). In rhetoric common in studies of Harlem’s social ecology, Clark linked politically motivated social disorder to high rates of sexually transmitted disease, out-of-wedlock births, and mental illness among African Americans. The Moynihan Report, authorized at the behest of President Lyndon Johnson, also argued for strong linkages between the intimate familial and sexual relations of African Americans and the urban crises of violence and poverty. Compiling information from numerous sociological studies, the Report was initiated as a liberal response to the conditions of the ghetto, one advocating massive social investments in employment, healthcare, and housing to rectify the damages of slavery, Jim Crow, and persistent segregation. Yet Moynihan’s work also presented an almost wholly negative image of black America, which seemed to blame the victims of urban discrimination for their plight. Impoverished African Americans, Moynihan infamously concluded, were wrapped in a “tangle of pathology” that grew out of “the weakness of [a] family structure” that his report derisively labeled as “matriarchal” (29, 30). Three years later, Oscar Lewis reinforced Moynihan’s observations, noting that the slum’s residents are plagued with an excessive “confusion of sexual identification; lack of impulse control; . . . and high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts” (10, 11). Such views were shared by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder: “The culture of poverty that results from unemployment and family breakup generates a system of ruthless, exploitative relationships” and “an environmental ‘jungle’ characterized by personal insecurity and tension” (“Text of Summary” 20). “Children growing up under such conditions,” the Commission predicted, “are likely participants in civil disorder” (20).

These 1960’s urban ethnographic studies and government reports were intended to spark interventionist federal policies that would ameliorate inner-city poverty, violence, social disorder, and the disintegration of traditional family structures. But they did so by focusing on behavioral explanations of racism
and poverty in lieu of an analysis of their material origins in the racist spatial practice of “red-lining” African American communities, or of the reduction in available low-income housing as an outcome of “urban renewal,” or of the ways programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children contributed to the breakup of African American households by withholding aid from families in which a man was present. Government social policy of the 1960s recognized that the isolation of African Americans in communities of geographically concentrated poverty was a result of the local acting out of racism in time and space and of the macroeconomic changes in the post-WWII era that unequally affected African Americans. The Moynihan Report fully indicted “the racist virus in the American blood stream” for creating the historical conditions afflicting the African American family, but it blamed the black family itself for perpetuating the crisis in which it was mired. The Report grandly pronounced: “[A]t the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principle source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that it did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (30). Sociologist C. Eric Lincoln concurred, arguing the ghetto’s problems were “symptoms of the Negro family’s enduring sickness” (6). Similarly, Lewis posited that the black family fostered a deviant, criminally oriented value-system, “a way of life that is passed down from generation to generation along family lines,” as if a kind of communicable disease (4). The “culture of poverty,” according to Lewis, originated in “poor housing, crowding, gregariousness, and, above all, a minimum of organization beyond the level of the nuclear and extended family” (9). Clark, himself a product of inner-city New York, earlier had reached similar conclusions: “The dark ghetto is institutionalized pathology; it is chronic, self-perpetuating pathology” that he spoke of as a spreading “contagion” (81).

The consequence of a portrait of African Americans as radically socially traumatized, pathological, sexually deviant, and psychically addled was to reinforce long-standing racist theories of the essential unassimilability of blacks into the mainstream fabric of postwar US life. The sociological discourse of the “black underclass” and the policies that emerged from it reproduced the social isolation that was concomitant of 20th-century spatial segregation premised on racial difference. After a decade or more of state welfare programs that inaugurated a massive bureaucratic intervention into, and regulation of, the lives of poor African American families and after years of urban renewal projects that destroyed much more housing than it created the result, according to the Kerner Commission, was that the US was moving toward two separate, unequal societies (Massey and Denton 3).

Inner-city riots and the fear of a new “black underclass” were indissolubly intertwined phenomena both in the sociological discourse and in the larger social imaginary of the period. Blind Man entangles both as Himes’s recurring protagonists, the African American police detectives Ed and Digger, escort readers through an underworld of poverty, decadence, deviancy, hoodlums, Black Power leaders, hypocritical religious prophets, underclass slum dwellers, and murder, all of which are ingredients in a percolating social unrest that erupts on the streets of Harlem on a hot July 15th that is, fittingly enough, Nat Turner Day. Himes’s experimental detective novel initiates its interrogation of postwar caricatures of urban African American squalor by foregrounding at the outset how all representations of the black underworld must be investigated with an abundance of caution and skepticism. Simply put, appearances are not what they seem. In Blind Man signs mislead and clues lead nowhere, as is made apparent by a return to its disquieting opening image of the house on 119th Street. This ruin of a house, which has been condemned “as unsafe for human habitation,”
actually brims with too much life. Himes’s narrator reveals that for years “[p]olice cruisers had passed daily and glanced at it unconcernedly,” but when two nameless white police officers observe that the older sign for “FUNERALS PERFORMED” has been replaced with one advertising “Fertile womens, lovin’ God, inquire within,” their suspicions are raised (7, 8). The gheto asks to be read in a new way. Himes implies, and this change in its signification must be interrogated. Hands on their pistols, the two officers step through a debris field of urban refuse that is filled with “dead cats, dog offal, puddles of stinking garbage, and swarms of bottle flies” (8). In like manner, the reader is compelled to step gingerly through a text that is “dense with booby traps,” images of lower-class black life that may prove explosive (8). When one cop wonders “in extreme disgust,” “I don’t see how people can live in such filth,” the narrator replies “he hadn’t seen anything yet” (8).

Himes’s text makes evident how “seeing” — or excessive scrutiny through hegemonic discourses that regulate racial, class, and sexual eccentricity — is a form of production that engenders difference, as opposed to registering and legitimating differences that exist naturally. Ralph Ellison had eloquently dramatized this effect prior to Himes when he wrote in Invisible Man: “Perhaps simply to be known, to be looked upon by so many people, to be the focal point of so many concentrating eyes, perhaps this was enough to make one different; enough to transform one into something else, someone else” (328).

But whereas Ellison’s novel studiously avoided highlighting black degradation, Himes had no qualms about the matter. In Blind Man, neither the police nor the reader has “seen anything yet.” The crumbled rear wall of the house reveals a “fat black man” — “a cretin” — “naked to the waist” and stirring a cauldron, the “type southern mambies use to boil clothes,” in which he is cooking something that one cops says “smells like feces” (9, 10). The “feces” turns out to be “feet-sies,” another indication that outsiders who intrude into the black home will misinterpret the social habits they will discover there and will respond by presuming the worse. In Himes’s portrait of urban African American life, the worst is confirmed, but it is also only comprehensible within a white power structure that produces inequality in which “Everybody ain’t rich like you white folks” (10). The scene becomes difficult to stomach when the Reverend Sam enters with 11 nuns who work as prostitutes. They’re followed by 50 naked children who swell “like pigs” at troughs on the floor (12). One officer declares, “They ain’t nothing but niggers” (12). The scene is reminiscent of the “middle of the Congo,” a nightmare of primitive communal living unfolding in the center of America’s urban jungle (10). Yet this house of sexually fetid ripeness is putrefying rapidly towards death, as the two separate signs — “FUNERALS PERFORMED” and “Fertile womens” — if realigned and read in conjunction portended. At the chapter’s end, the cops discover in the house’s “dirt cellar” “the remains of three female bodies” (14). This startling discovery promises to clue us into the real nature of the “black underclass” family. But the revelation leads nowhere. The subject of these murders is never broached again by the text.

Himes’s text reveals how a focus on the sordid, excessive corporeality of the underclass, which was often noted and commented on by Myrdal, Clark, Lewis, and Moynihan, obfuscates the forces that overdetermine the social production of racial identity. The slippery nature of Blind Man’s social representations is further compounded by the text’s formal complexities, which are especially clear to any reader who approaches it with expectations of a conventional hardboiled novel in which narrative is driven by a telos of linearity through which social and moral order are restored when the criminal suspect is made to pay for his or her crime. In Blind Man vice runs rampant, crimes are never solved, and the motives for murder are never established. Himes’s text is a bewildering read,
nearly impossible to summarize. Structurally, the novel is a patchwork of interlocking but only tangentially related encounters between the police and the “black underclass,” which are broken down into 22 chapters and six “Interludes.” The “Interludes” cover everything from the history of the Harlem Renaissance, to a strange allegory about digestion, to snippets from the novel’s main action that are excerpted out of the chapters and displaced sequentially in a manner that erases their contexts and forces them into a surreal collage with the narrative’s dominant threads. Three criminal cases—rather than the traditional single murder mystery—are the impetus for Himes’s narrative: an interracial homosexual homicide in the Harlem “Valley,” whose white victim (Richard Henderson) is not identified until nine chapters after his death; a switchblade-slaughter of several people in a Sugar Hill apartment, which transpires for reasons that are never made fully clear; and finally, the question of the source of numerous “brush-fire riots” that pepper the multiple scenes but come to a boiling point in the final chapter when a false “wildfire . . . rumor” that the “white cops ha[ve] shot down . . . [an] innocent brother” unleashes a riot that leaves Ed and Digger shaking their heads in disbelief (43, 95, 191). In the end, the two murder plots may or may not be intertwined; in each case an African American with a red fez is involved and whatever the case, several black Muslims sporting fezzes are spotted in Himes’s text, creating a delirious sense that the murder suspect is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Ed and Digger are the primary points of view through which Himes’s third-person novel details Harlem’s carnival of crime and illicit sex, yet by excluding them from the first four chapters, Himes establishes disorienting shifts in perspective by which race and criminality might be understood. Doing so foregrounds an epistemological crisis that mirrors the text’s narrational “problems.” “[D]on’t make any sense” is the novel’s penultimate line, followed by “Sure don’t” (190).

Let me stress here that Himes is not merely engaged in postmodern gamesmanship, a fact that is evidenced by the text’s utter lack of metacritical self-consciousness that is a hallmark of early postmodern experimentalism. Rather, the formal “incoherence” of Himes’s novel is both an effect of the numerous and contesting tensions it seeks to negotiate and an integral part of the cultural work that Blind Man performs as it demystifies the powers that police inner-city black life and produce newly legible discursive racial formations. The narrative discontinuities and unstable significations of Himes’s text undermine the “black underclass” as a unified category of identity, one whose stability is a requisite for the ideological coherence of the sociological discourses on “black underclass” pathology. In Himes’s fractured narrative cause does not equal effect, signs slip in their meaning, and identities are as interchangeable as “long false eyelashes” on a male prostitute or a red fez on a Muslim. In Blind Man’s world race and gender are such unstable constructs that there seems to be no coherent subject whose cultural, sexual, and familial habits might be discursively and materially organized and monitored. These formal strategies might be understood as mimetic of representations in the social imaginary in which the ghetto is perceived as an ungovernable terrain of sexual and familial deviancy and violent despair. In the 1960s such representations urged greater and greater discursive and juridical interventions into the inner city to impose order. Yet in Himes’s novel, the chaotic inner city cannot be brought to heel. The traditional hard-boiled narrative with its lucid naturalism, its clipped dialogue unfettered by social pretension, and its mix of ratiocination and legwork, formally promises that the world is knowable, that fundamental psychic and social forces that undergird societal disorder and family breakdown can be unveiled, and that this disorder can be rectified by the organized, transparent rule of law and by the scientific management of urban life in the hands of social welfare experts. Not so in
Himes’s text where scenic montage baffles narrative progress and where everyone seems to be, as one character puts it, “talking in a secret language” (18). With its slippery signs and its broken narratives, Blind Man implies that neither force nor expert management can transform the inner city into a coherent, knowable space. Himes’s text thus suggests the inefficacy both of white law enforcement and of the liberal discursive matrices that claim to have diagnosed “the Negro family’s enduring sickness.”

Recent scholarly treatments of Himes’s work have wrestled with its representations of blackness by situating it within the terrain of postwar liberalism or in the era of post-identity politics. Sean McCann argues, for instance, that Himes portrays Harlem as “a fantastic image of society-as-open-market,” an over-the-top parody of liberal America’s mantras of individualism and self-interest (283). Christopher Breu contends that Himes’s use of “negative representation” allows him “to suggest the positive possibility of constructing an ethical masculine subjectivity,” a reading that Breu admits runs the “risk of reproducing the terms of liberal discourse” (771, 789). Perhaps speaking to a white readership, Fred Pfeil has observed of Himes’s novels that “your reactions to the lurid images, actions and characters they hurl forth reveal at least as much about you as about Harlem or Himes” (65-66). Other accounts, such as Greg Forter’s Murdering Masculinities (2000), have detailed with impressive theoretical sophistication the psychodynamics of racial dis-identification in Himes’s work.

Missing from analyses of Himes’s work is a proper historicization of it within the interrelated contexts of the liberal discourse of the “black underclass” and the cataclysmic uprisings that torched US cities during the period. Roderick Ferguson’s Aberrations in Black situates novels by Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and Morrison in the discursive context of liberal sociological discourse on race, arguing that “American sociology has deployed liberal ideology as the main paradigm through which to read American racialization” (18). Ferguson also contends that “Like An American Dilemma before it, the Moynihan Report regarded the African American family as that institution that suggests the African American’s distance from the normative ideals of American citizenship” (121). Unfortunately, Ferguson does not extend his arguments to Himes, whose body of work often has been marginalized and discounted because of its generic classification. Robert Crooks in “From the Far Side of the Urban Frontier: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley” historicizes Himes’s fiction against the backdrop of the uneven development of urban space due to the differential “availability of credit, school funding, policing, and so forth” (68). Ultimately, however, Crooks understands the “lines of segregation” that unequally divide city space to be an “urban manifestation of frontier ideology,” rather than a historically unique social and spatial order that emerged in the post-World War II period, and whose ideological significations were perhaps more akin to neocolonial exploitation than they were frontier individualism. Racial segregation in New York severely and artificially limited the market of available space for the city’s African American population, which had increased over 600 percent from the beginning of the century.9 In confining blacks to Harlem and to a few neighborhoods in Brooklyn, racial segregation inflated rents 20 to 50 percent higher than rents for equal accommodations elsewhere in New York, leading to an untenable situation in which the city’s poorest paid the most for their housing.

This historical context of spatial segregation and economic exploitation not only informs Blind Man, but more generally 20th-century African American literature’s representations of urban space and lower-class black sociality. Himes’s late 1960’s catalogues of “sex perversions, lesbians, [and] pederasts,” what the narrator calls “Harlem in microcosm,” were anticipated by Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (85). McKay’s 1928 episodic narrative traces the peregrinations of

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Jake, an illiterate African American serviceman who deserts the US army for the seedy blues clubs, brothels, and gambling parlors of New York and Philadelphia. McKay labels this urban milieu “the underworld” and characterizes it as the vibrant, lusty sociality of “waiters, cooks, chauffeurs, sailors, porters, guides, ushers, hod-carriers, factory hands,” who collectively give life its “utter blinding nakedness and violent coloring” (225, 228). For its portrayal of the black underworld, *Home to Harlem* earned the rebuke of W. E. B. Du Bois who said he was “nauseated” by it (Cooper xviii). In *Crisis* Du Bois condemned McKay for confirming the worst stereotypes of African Americans, effectively accusing him of the unpardonable sin of betraying the race. For Du Bois the regulatory function of imaginative fiction was paramount. Given a national literature filled with “Uncle Toms, Topsies, good ‘darkies’ and clowns,” Du Bois called on African American writers to present a carefully managed portrait of the race (*Criteria* 102). “[A]ll art is propaganda and ever must be” he had declared in 1926 (103). Writing 40 years later, Himes saw the function of literature in more complex and, at times, more militant terms. His Rabelaisian narrative of the underworld certainly would have drawn the ire of Du Bois, but Himes’s text embraces the stereotypes of the “self-perpetuating pathology” of the “dark ghetto” with an end in mind that neither McKay nor Du Bois could have anticipated (Clark 81).

Himes’s novels functioned for him as a means of imaginatively repossessing a social and spatial terrain that had been expropriated and economically exploited. He declared this goal in his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity* (1976) when he revealed that “I just wanted to take it [Harlem] away from the white man if only in my books” (126). Wendy Walters in “Limited Options: Strategic Maneuverings in Himes’s Harlem” underscores this point, writing that “Himes’s detective novels allow him to control the site of nostalgia, briefly to imagine refashioning US race relations and law enforcement practices” (615). Himes would take back Harlem by giving it back to “the white man” many times over, to the point of parody. Throughout *Blind Man*, Himes hyperbolizes the already distorted representations of black life in 1960’s sociological literature of the underclass. As part of its social commentary, *Blind Man* ties these representations, in ways that are funny and discomfiting, to a racist architecture of oppression. In one early scene Digger and Ed patrol the Harlem “Valley,” the poor stretch between 130th and 140th Streets from Seventh Avenue to Lenox, where many of Harlem’s cabarets and saloons were concentrated in the 1920s.10 It is where low urban topography intersects with low social geography that Ed and Digger find a partially nude white male who has been slashed by a transvestite prostitute in an interracial homosexual homicide. They trace his last movements along a trail of fecal matter and “gleaming splash[es]” of blood back to an underground apartment “furnished like a boudoir” (62). Like the hidden abode in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, this cellar apartment materializes an ideology that socially and spatially isolates racial and, here, sexual abjection. The blighted, vice-ridden neighborhood is in *Blind Man*, as Ellison earlier had suggested in “Harlem is Nowhere,” a repository for social waste. “To live in Harlem,” Ellison proclaimed, “is to dwell in the very bowels of the city” (295). Similarly, Richard Wright had dramatized in “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942) that being black in the urban US was equivalent to living in the “abysmally obscene” world of the sewer (24). The representation of the underclass in both Himes’s novel and in urban studies of black life, further concentrates abjection within a brutalizing architecture that deforms its residents. Ed and Digger find the apartment splattered with blood, but also with a humorous “obscene mural” of “perverted sex acts, some of which could only be performed by male contortionists” (62). In the cellar depths, Himes suggests the black body is forced to contort or perform in secret, unnatural, and even comical ways.
The few whites present in *Blind Man* are police officers or men participating in the local sex trade, yet their ability physically and socially to re-shape Harlem, until those forced to live there have been “warped to fit,” is visible everywhere (187). Leaving the underground crime scene, the detectives visit another Harlem tenement covered with graffiti that “gave the illusion of primitive painting of pygmies affected with elephantiasis of the genitals” (85). Digger remarks, “[H]ow could anyone stay honest who lived here? . . . This place was built for vice, for whores to hustle in and thieves to hide out in. And somebody got a building permit, because it’s been built after the ghetto got here” (84). In 1965 Kenneth Clark’s study posited that the urban ghetto’s “overcrowded and deteriorated housing” bred a self-perpetuating culture of “resentment, hostility, despair, apathy, self-depreciation, and its ironic companion, compensatory grandiose behavior” (11). In a similar vein, Himes’s narrator figures the black family residence as an “incubator of depravity,” while recognizing that it is erected by whites to encourage the physical and moral squalor (or at least the “illusion” of it) to which African Americans are accused of being naturally prone (*Blind Man* 85).11

In these tenement scenes Himes reads the writing on the walls in a manner that clues the reader in as to how Himes’s own representations of purported African American pathology should be read. In one example of the text’s many exuberant catalogues of the degradation blighting the residential structures of black families, Himes writes: “The walls were covered with obscene graffiti, mammoth sexual organs, vulgar limericks, opened legs, telephone numbers, outright boasting, insidious suggestions, and the impertinent or pertinent comments about various tenants’ love habits, their mothers and fathers, the legitimacy of their children” (63). “And people live here,” is Digger’s response, “his eyes sad” (63). Much like this graffiti, Himes’s narrative is a racy mix of obscenity, outright boasting,” and sadness that the reader must interrogate with the skepticism equal to that of Himes’s two black police detectives. With its murals depicting “pygmies affected with elephantiasis of the genitals,” *Blind Man* comically inflates racist images of the sexual prowess of African American men, while also demystifying them as an “illusion” constructed through white economic exploitation (85). In this way, Himes reworks images of the black male’s “grandiose behavior” and his “particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness” that had become staples of *Dark Ghetto*, the Moynihan Report, and other inquiries into the social illness afflicting African American families (Clark 11). A year before Himes published *Blind Man*, Lewis declared in *A Study of Slum Culture* what was already conventional wisdom, that the black male ghetto resident was, as cited above, invariably a victim of “maternal deprivation, of orality, and of weak ego structure; confusion of sexual identification; lack of impulse control; . . . widespread belief in male superiority; and high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts” (10, 11). By the mid-1960s, such catalogues of black pathology had themselves taken on the qualities of two-dimensional caricatures, but without, of course, the humor. Representations of lower-class black life in liberal sociological discourse increasingly came under the scrutiny of prominent African American novelists. Testifying in 1966 before a Senate committee convened to study the discontent of the inner-city US, Ellison lashed out at exactly such characterizations: “I would like to hear less of the sociological clichés about the Negro family. They are insulting to me. They are insulting, and devastating, to the Negro’s conception of himself, and I regard them as contemptuous of us” (Ellison, “Crisis” 20). The ex-convict Himes, who would never come so close to the official seat of power as Ellison would, took a different tact. Rather than disclaiming “sociological clichés,” *Blind Man* redeployes them, Ishmael Reed observes, as a form of “wicked and nasty wit” that tactically exposes white cul-
ural fantasies of black urban neo-primitivism as rooted in economic and racial exploitations and then shoves such images back in the face of reader (93). Himes’s text thus sees the “gendered and eroticized elements of racial formations” as examples of what Ferguson calls “ruptural—i.e., critical—possibilities,” sites where what is “monstrous and threatening to others” can become the location for a critical interrogation of the intersection of gender, racial, and sexual difference (18).

Blind Man’s representations of Harlem’s pervasive violence and pathology are not confined to the socially and geographically lower terrains around the “Valley.” If for many outsiders all of Harlem in the 1960s was a slum, residents themselves were cognizant of how this was a result of the way that segregation produced unusually condensed class stratification in the neighborhood. Racial discrimination curtailed the geographic dispersion of class by withholding from middle-class African Americans the option of leaving Harlem for wealthier suburbs. The effects were manifold, but chief among them in the dominant white culture was the perceived categorical collapse of racial and class difference among African Americans, which led to the conflation of both through the new discursive formation of the “black underclass.” The conflation of categorical sites of identity by the sociological discourse worked to hypostatize deviancy and other modes of purported abnormality, thus giving currency and legitimacy to the notion that all of Harlem was poverty, disease, violence, and pathology. The primary response to this situation by bourgeois African Americans was an anxious attempt to differentiate themselves from the lowly masses. McKay commented on this attempt at differentiation in Harlem: Negro Metropolis (1940), noting how the “Aframerican intelligentsia and elite” were worried about the spreading slums that “threaten[ed] to submerge” them, and who were striving “to create an exclusive residential area” in Sugar Hill (26, 32). Blind Man’s second murder plot transpires in a house on the “Hill,” where the sale of a sperm elixir by a shaman doctor turns deadly when festering sexual jealousies among a whole slew of new characters are revealed. The violence in this black bourgeois neighborhood is, if anything, more graphic than it is down in the underclass slums.

Instead of presenting its bloody aftermath as in the first murder plot, Himes dramatizes the mayhem directly: “Viola stabbed him in the back. . . . [H]e wheeled on her in red-eyed rage . . . stabbed her in the heart, and in the same motion turned and stabbed Van Raff in the head. . . . Doctor Mubuta ran up behind him stabbed him in the back. . . . The short, muscular man handled his knife with authority and stabbed Doctor Mubuta to death” (44, 45). This bizarre scene only becomes more confusing when considered in the larger context of the novel. The short chapter’s climactic knife fight involves the wheeling acrobatics of eight characters, none of whom have been presented heretofore to the reader. The behavioralist and ecological studies that contextualize Himes’s work made African American nonnormative sociality legible by arguing for its origins in the harshness of life in the slum. Environmentally acquired traits (such as impulsive, violent behavior) were said to be inherited so that over time culture took on the shadings of biological determinism. In Himes’s Harlem, we are not privy to the operations of the family unit. Blind Man resists and ironizes all attempts to decipher its machinations. The relationships among the characters in Sugar Hill are deliberately obscured, so it can only be significant that Himes’s text labels the horrific event that unites them a “family slaughter” (92). One’s character—as defined by the notable attributes or features that make up and distinguish an individual—is not easily discernible in the kind of world found in Himes’s fiction. Similarly, the character of the black family, so overdetermined by social forces, cannot be explicated by “sociological clichés,” or as Himes writes, “All of it couldn’t be blamed on broken homes, lack of opportunities, inequalities,
poverty, discrimination” (169). “The child born in the ghetto,” Clark had posited, “is more likely to come into a world of broken homes and illegitimacy; and his family and social instability is conducive to . . . criminal violence” (81). In Himes’s work the relations of blood are not broken; they are absent, replaced instead with blood itself. In this “family slaughter,” it is pointless to look to heredity and history as sources of “criminal violence.” Himes links his characters neither by kinship nor by a teleology of cause and effect, but only by knife-point.

In Himes’s Harlem, institutionalized economic oppression combines with the unequal enforcement of highly moralized legal prohibitions to produce the racial and sexual differentiation of urban space. The ruinous environment that the discourse of the “black underclass” claimed was an expression of African American familial nonnormativity is, in Blind Man, a socioeconomic and political effect of the uneven development of human and physical geographies. Himes’s novel, thus, works to denaturalize the racist belief in African American degradation by exposing the forces undergirding the phantasmagoria of the life of poor blacks in the white middle-class imagination. Himes’s narrator implies as much when he notes that the police patrol the streets with their headlights off, otherwise “their presence might have discouraged the vice business in Harlem and put countless citizens on relief” (29). Evincing a preference for black sexual exploitation in an illegal underground economy over tax-payer funded public relief, the police department works to protect Harlem’s “vice business.” The law’s ability to constitute—rather than merely repress—sexual deviancy is made clearer when Himes reveals that the police “weren’t concerned with prostitution or its feeder vices. . . . If white citizens wished to come to Harlem for their kicks . . . [t]heir only duty was to protect them from violence” (29, 30). Blind Man highlights how the differential enforcement of sexual heteronormativity manufactures an urban space in which vice can exist with little interference and yet can be quarantined from bleeding into white areas. Historically, New York City had regulated vice in this very manner, through zoning laws that concentrated adult businesses in working-class, immigrant, and black communities. These measures ghettoized the sex industry while simultaneously protecting property values in middle and upper-class neighborhoods. In this manner, an uneven moral geography of the city was legally codified. White middle and upper-class neighborhoods continued to be associated with proper bourgeois morals, while poor, ethnic, and African American communities signified as degenerate and unclean.

While the color-line is always an obstacle to the mobility of African Americans, for whites it is sometimes a porous membrane, as when Himes’s narrator declares that at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue “[w]hite men were safe . . . [f]urthermore they were more welcome” (16). But the police are mistaken when thinking they can safeguard these “tastes,” which they have delimited. Whites who slum in “Harlem for their kicks” get their throats cut by African American prostitutes who are never arrested (29). The irony points up the complex way that the text figures the “black underclass.” In Himes’s fiction the “black underclass” instantiates a seedy, pernicious underworld sociality that is also a racist production of white socio-spatial discrimination. The text critiques the socioeconomic, juridical, and historical forces that have helped produce this discursive formation, and yet the text is itself hostile to this marginalized population. Ed and Digger may be the Virgilian tour guides through Himes’s underworld, but as “Fascists! . . . Racists! Black brutes!” together they embody one of its primary sources of violence (92). In their attempt to police the chaotic, constantly shifting crime scenes, they lash out at the “slum-dwellers” with ferocity, as when Ed threatens the murder-suspect Babson: “I’ll knock out your pretty white teeth and gouge your bedroom eyes out of shape” (51, 129). “Too bad there ain’t a mother-raping law against these freaks” he says (108).
Ed’s and Digger’s fits of rage against the black underworld exemplify the contradictory tensions they are compelled to negotiate as enforcers of laws that secure a racist society that victimizes them. “Their careers as cops had been one long period of turmoil,” the narrator reveals (97). Unlike their superiors, neither has “taken a dime in bribes,” despite not being promoted in 12 years of service and despite that their houses and cars, “bought on credit,” are still unpaid (97). While the upper brass protects a shadowy “Syndicate,” Ed and Digger are left to patrol the narrow, fraught terrain between the higher order of the law and the social strata’s lowest order of the poor and the sexual profligate. Positioning them thus, Himes dramatizes the clash, on the one hand, between his detectives’ commitment to an ideology of upward mobility and to a legal system that is supposed to secure this ideology neutrally; and, on the other hand, their role in policing a social underworld that, because of systemic socio-spatial discrimination, surreptitiously pursues its own imperiled survival and advance through illegal means. Himes’s detectives are forced to choose between their incipient class and race consciousness, a seductive, but dead-end bourgeois ideology, and their own racial and class animosity toward an underworld that subtends and contravenes the values that drive their personal and professional commitments. When Ed calls for a “law against these freaks,” Digger counters “be tolerant. People call us freaks” (108). Being black representatives of a racist legal and penal system has cost them personally, disfigured them physically. After acid is tossed in his eyes in an earlier novel, Ed is labeled a black Frankenstein. Like the subjects he polices, he is a patchwork of grafted skin, a scarred palimpsest overwritten and overdetermined by the fantastic graffiti of law and fear.

By the late 1960s, the discourse of “black underclass” pathology was largely discredited by the efforts of African American leaders both to seize control of the public discourse on race and to seize control over their neighborhoods through Black Power and militant calls for separation. Collectively, this sociological discourse created an enduring image of African Americans as radically asocial and morally delinquent, a characterization that lent a scientific empiricism to an older racist vernacular that depicted urban African Americans as impulsive, sensuous, and sexually suspect. James Farmer, the national director of CORE, decried the Moynihan Report specifically on these grounds when he called it a “massive academic copout” that placed “the primary blame for present-day inequalities on the pathological condition of the Negro family and community” by implying that “Negroes in this nation will never secure a substantial measure of freedom until we stop sleeping with our wife’s sister and buying Cadillacs instead of bread” (“Moynihan Report Racial Tract” 6). “We are sick unto death of being analyzed,” Farmer said, frustrated with the sociological intrusions into the ghetto. For civil rights leaders, what was perhaps most trying was the manner in which this discourse divested African Americans of the ability to serve as historical actors on their own behalf. Ethnographic studies routinely asserted that those trapped behind the “dark ghetto’s invisible walls . . . have no power” (Clark 11). In the introduction to the 1989 edition of Dark Ghetto, William Julius Wilson noted how the strong negative reactions to liberal policies of AFDC, HARYOU, and urban renewal indicated a “new approach,” an emerging “black perspective” that “signaled an ideological shift from interracialism to black racial solidarity” (xv). The shift, he recalls, first gained currency among militant black spokespersons who vociferously objected to the way the salacious reporting of social disorder fueled white racism (xv).

Himes’s 1969 text marks this shift. As the novel’s multiple narratives lead to dead-ends, it becomes evident that neither of its two murder plots will pan out. Instead of following through on their cases, Blind Man’s protagonists are instructed by the white police captain to “keep on this riot bit” (95). Blind Man,
which opens with a “cracked, scabby front door,” ends with a scene that combines a riot with an instance of urban renewal, thus linking the destruction of the domestic sphere with public violence. Clark’s, Moynihan’s, and Lewis’s studies were also premised on a narrative in which familial breakdown, compounded by a deleterious environment, led logically and tragically to urban anomic, despair, sexual nonnormativity, and eventually rioting. But this “riot bit,” its origins, and the responses to it, are more complex, both historically and textually. Historically, the black empowerment movements of the period were born out of multiple sites of racial conflict, such as the stigmatizing, pathologizing sociological discourse, ongoing de jure and de facto segregation, and the many riots of the 1960s, among them the Harlem riots of 1964 and 1968 (and before in 1935 and ’43). In Blind Man Himes satirizes black empowerment and racial solidarity movements as exercises in megalomania, driven by leaders who will steer their followers to destruction to violently grind their own ideological axes or in a bid to line their own pockets with money. Like the clash of ideologies in the final apocalyptic chapter of Invisible Man, Himes’s novel sets a collision course manifold, but misguided, responses to racism. Himes brings together on one blistering day in one intersection in central Harlem a march by a homosocial interracial Brotherhood led by Marcus Mackenzie; a Black Power movement with jack-booted officers like “Nazi SS troopers” who are directed by the Cadillac-driving Doctor Moore; and a militant black Christianity under the stewardship of General Ham, who props on his car’s bumper an effigy of a “Black Jesus, dripping black blood from its outstretched hands” (24, 51, 99). The text staggers these forms of racial protest in alternating chapters, then throws them together in a clash of bodies and banners that is part street fair, part protest, and part internecine warfare.

Blind Man’s formal patterning weaves the chapters detailing different instantiations of racial ideology between chapters dedicated to underworld murder plots. Counterpointing plot lines in this way suggests the black leadership’s proximity to and disconnect with the imperiled populations of Harlem. Harlem’s “vulnerable soul brothers”—black youths, the poor, members of its sexual and social underworld—are, the narrator observes, “urg[ed] . . . on to getting themselves killed” (46). When Moore’s army commands, “WE GOT THE POWER! WE IS BLACK!,” one resident of Harlem, a “high-yellow chick with bright red hair,” reacts by exclaiming, “What’s he talking ’bout? . . . Black power? It don’t mean nothing to me. I ain’t black” (46, 47). Blind Man insinuates that Black Power fails to account for racial, class, gender, and sexual differences, and tries coercively to consolidate a normative version of blackness (especially black masculinity) through its own forms of policing. Himes’s fiction underscores the gulf between a rhetoric of racial solidarity and a heterogeneous community riven by so many competing interests—a desire for jobs, sexual pleasure, entertainment, an escape route from the ghetto, and greater recognition of racial complexity—that it cannot be organized by discourse or force.

Of the three different forms of protest satirized in the text, Himes first introduces Mackenzie’s integrationist fantasy premised on the Christian belief in interracial brotherly love. In Himes’s hands, interracial fraternity is ludicrous and tacitly homosexual. “Man’s love for man. Let me tell you. . . . It is the greatest,” Mackenzie preaches to a crowd beneath a sign that reads “CHICKEN AUTO INSURANCE” (21, 22). Like other linguistic and social signs in Himes’s text, this one is slippery, ironic, and bears traces of the past. It is an amalgam of two different signs, yet “white motorists,” Himes remarks, had no “interest to investigate further” how the sign is constructed and thus they continue to think “that the Negro speaker was selling ‘chicken auto insurance’” (21). In short, it is another sign that whites carelessly misread African American life in Harlem.
Coming to political consciousness with “the Detroit race riot of 1943,” Mackenzie envisions a loving future between the races that he attempts to usher in by parading “forty-eight integrated black and white marchers” through the neighborhood (23, 27). Importantly, Himes parallels Mackenzie’s utopian dream with the interracial homosexual murder, asking us to read complexly these plots against each other. Mackenzie himself “has no tolerance” for the black sexual underworld of “prostitutes, pederasts, . . . confidence men, steerers and pimps,” and excludes them. But when they join in anyway, coming out of “flea-bag hotels,” “greasy spoons,” and “poolrooms” to participate in the march, he fails to notice their presence (22, 28). For him, class and sexual differences blur into an abstract “sea of black and white humanity.” In contrast, the black underworld has a highly particularized—though equally mistaken—reading of the march’s ultimate telos: they think it is “headed for . . . a sex orgy, a panxy ball, a beer festival, a baseball game” (28). The difference between sinful recreation and Christian brotherhood is shown as an ideologically based illusion governed by the blindness of one’s perspective. Mackenzie intuits the homosexual libidinal component of interracial solidarity, which he strenuously works both to deny and to construct as an “illusion of nakedness” that creates “the illusion of an orgy” in which purported “confusion of sexual identification” becomes a complex, well-orchestrated ideological mirage and a sublimated desire (27).

Brotherly love is both a gay parade and a Christian fantasia. It is not sexual identification that is confusing, but the ideological positioning of one’s representation of race and sexuality.

Black Power and militant Christianity fare no better in Himes’s hands. As part of its effort to destabilize any site of positive identification, Blind Man skewers both as power-hungry and delusional. Moore’s henchmen give “hysterical rant[s]” about “BLACK POWER,” while Moore himself runs a prostitution ring for “ritzzy residents” who “never look” across the street at the “rat-ridden, cold water flats” or the dirty supermarket’s “plate-glass windows” advertising “SMOKED HAMS . . . Secret Deodorant . . . GLAD BAGS” (50, 51). The disparate signs are instructive not for what they sell, but for the way the text paratactically juxtaposes them to produce surreal contexts (like the ghetto itself) in which transparent readings are undermined: General Ham and smoked ham, chicken and insurance, funerals and fertile “womens.” The General—who whose banners exclaim “FEED THEM JESUS!”—demands that African Americans force-feed “whitey” with metaphors of black anger at the same time that the poor in Harlem go physically hungry (99, 100). Later when underclass youth stand in “basement stairways” to hurl “rotten vegetables” at the cops, it is not a symbolic “Black Jesus” that the rioters stuff into the face of whites; it is the spoiling food from their own underserved grocery stores (136). Attempting to end the riot, Ed and Digger declare that “justice ain’t the point. It’s order now” (107).

In Himes’s narrative justice is abandoned for the exigencies of order. Yet Himes’s narrative never establishes order, which is formally forestalled by both the text’s non-teleological structure and its insistence on presenting social disorder from as many angles as possible. The text’s constantly shifting point of view mimics the complex, socially disruptive nature of its subject and thus troubles any easy formulation of cause-and-effect relationships based on observed behavior. Describing a crowd of street watchers, Himes writes: “No one saw anything. Then, simultaneously, three distinct groups of marchers came into view” (98). Origins and endings, the text intimates, are impossible to discern. Or consider the opening of chapter 16: “From where they sat, the rioting looked like a rehearsal for a modern ballet” (136). The perspective is Ed’s and Digger’s, though they are not yet announced as present. Their running commentary from the sidelines depicts the protest alternately as a dance, “carnival,” and “a statement” as it rapidly descends into meanness and meaninglessness, before finally becoming a spectacle evacuated of political content. “It was,” Himes remarks, “a
riot scene in Harlem. But no one was rioting. The only movement was of people trying to get before the cameras” (151). A white politician, with “sharp Caucasian features,” attempts to quiet the already calm crowd by “talking directly to the television audience” in “a Negroid voice”: “We colored people must be the first to uphold law and order” (151). In this moment Himes replaces Lewis’s “culture of poverty” with a culture of celebrity that turns protest into performance, makes political leadership into another form of acting, and most importantly, denaturalizes race into a mere assemblage of mimicked gestures and funny, if painful, contortions. Himes’s text closes with its protagonists blithely shooting rats at an urban renewal site and remarking laconically on the senselessness of racism and mass protest. The fractured narrative undermines the methods by which the phenomena of rioting (that the sociological discourse of the period understood as caused by the “black underclass,” rather than merely correlated with it) might be understood. Himes’s text thus proffers a critique of the confident assertions that “chronic, self-perpetuating pathology” produced underclass degradation and unrest, which made Harlem a “fountainhead of Negro protest movements” and a “turbulent community” (Clark 26, 81).

Near the end of Blind Man, Himes poses what at first blush seems to be its central question, one that interrogates his own riotous, poetic novel: “What made them riot and taunt the white police on one hand, and compose poetry and dreams complex enough to throw a Harvard intellectual on the other?” (169). The question turns out to be misleading, for Himes’s work is less concerned with uncovering the roots of Harlem’s riots than it is with challenging their efficacy. Himes makes this point in the one paragraph Preface, which anticipates the novel’s final scene as an allegory of the pointlessness of the era’s sporadic protests against inequality, discrimination, and the spatial isolation of African Americans. In the Preface Himes discloses that the “story about a blind man with a pistol” was related to him by his friend Phil Lomax. On hearing it, he recalls how he thought about “riots in the ghettos” and “thought of some of our loudmouth leaders urging our vulnerable soul brothers on to getting themselves killed, and thought further that all unorganized violence is like a blind man with a pistol” (“Preface”). The key phrase here is “unorganized violence.” Whereas Franz Fanon saw in the black lumpenproletariat a “mass of humanity” that “constitutes one of the most spontaneous and most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people,” Himes saw a populace easily duped by its self-serving leaders and one more preoccupied with sex, games, and survival than with social change (103). He implies as much through General Ham’s followers, the “hot dirty slum-dwellers” who, historically ignorant and pleasure-seeking, think Nat Turner “was a jazz musician” or a “prizefighter” and “agreed the best thing he ever did was die and give them a holiday” (74, 75).14 The social underworld was for Himes much as it was for Marx and Engels a century earlier: “a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” that had no positive role to play in the coming revolution (168). For Clark, Harlem’s citizens were so “socially disorganized” that Harlem was not “a viable community” (27). For Clark, moreover, the solution was greater intervention by the state: “Nothing short of a concerted and massive attack on the social, political, economic, and cultural roots of the pathology is required if anything more than daubing or displacement of the symptoms is to be achieved” (107). In contrast, Himes called for a “massive attack” on whites, who were the “root” cause of the black community’s lasting hardship. As Walters has also noted, Himes first expressed this sentiment in the aftermath of the 1943 riots in Detroit and Harlem, when he wrote in “Negro Martyrs Are Needed” (1944) that the riots were “[t]he first step backward” (179). “Riots are not revolutions,” he stated, but “tumultuous disturbances of the public peace” driven by “race hatreds” (179). Spontaneous, random violence was ineffectual, in sharp contrast to a coordinated black insurgency that he hoped was on the
horizon. “Progress can be brought about only by revolution,” he asserted, and “[r]evolutions can be started only by incidents, and “incidents can be created only by Martyrs” (159).

Himes’s belief in the efficacy of organized violence sharply distinguishes him from the Harlem intellectuals and writers who had responded in a resoundingly critical fashion to the prior era’s riots. Specifically, Alain Locke viewed the Harlem riot of 1935 as misguided, seen as largely the work of the “black underclass,” and denounced as detrimental to the project of racial uplift. Locke understood civil disorder as the product of a “deep undertow . . . against the surface advance of the few bright years of prosperity” (458). Ellison, in turn, interpreted the 1943 riot as a pointless upheaval by lower-class southern blacks who, unable to cope with the pressures of urban life, lashed out in “a naive, peasant-like act of revenge” (“Eyewitness” 50). In contradistinction, Himes disavowed rioting as a tactic for social progress not because its violence stymied the pace of racial progress; rather, for Himes, the Harlem and Detroit riots were not violent enough. Himes maintained that position his entire life, a militancy that would strengthen in the 1960s and beyond. “There were a lot of riots breaking out in the US a few years ago,” Himes remarked in 1970 (Conversations 190). “Then, during the spring of 1968, Martin Luther King was killed, and that was the end of the riots. After that there were a number of Black Panther clashes with the police all over America. That’s about the time I realized that all this disorganized violence was like a blind man with a pistol,” Himes explained (190, 191). “I keep on saying it over and over again,” Himes asserted, “the black man can bring America down, he can destroy America” by “kill[ing] as many people as he can . . . as long they’re white,” and so long, Himes made clear, as the campaign is coordinated and sustained (45, 46). “If there must be violence, I believe it should be organized violence,” Himes revealed: “When I realized all this, that’s when I really began to get this book [Blind Man] together” (93).

In My Life of Absurdity Himes seemed to temper his declaration that he desired to take Harlem out of the grip of white power when he added the qualifier, “if only in my books” (126). But this apparent qualification was not the case. The qualifier petitions for a further consideration of the social function of literature produced in an era of mass urban violence. Himes’s qualifier represents not a softening of his position, but a distinction between the kinds of comic racial and social disorder he could imagine in his “books” and the kinds of catastrophic racial violence that he repeatedly called for outside of the constraints of the detective genre. Himes’s fantasy of apocalyptic racial warfare is, of course, not appropriate by liberal discourse in any of its manifestations. But perhaps it is not appropriate by the detective novel either. If Himes came to the realization of the necessity of organized resistance when penning Blind Man, that insight does not manifest itself in the ideological debates that the text dramatizes. Furthermore, Himes’s commitment to organized violence is stymied by his decentered novel that formally sunders as it attempts to say what the detective genre dedicated to law and order cannot say: That is, blacks need to kill whites in large numbers before racism will end. Nevertheless, Himes’s revengeful fantasy informs Blind Man’s representation of the “black underclass” as a naïve population that is led into a series of riots that deteriorate into racial in-fighting. If McKay figured “the ‘underworld’” ultimately as life-affirming, Himes depicted it cynically. Himes’s Harlem is not a site of unfettered libidinal freedom, but of conniving self-interest where violence and deception are targeted primarily at other African Americans in a cannibalistic fashion, transforming them into “[b]lind mouths eating their own guts” (For Love 111). Or as Robert Crooks has described it, ghetto crime in Himes’s fiction is not collective but distinctly individualistic (71). The intermecine bloodshed in Himes’s books displaces the social violence of racism inward instead of directing it outward in forms of interracial warfare that Himes waited for his entire life.
Thus supplementing Blind Man’s negative representation of black resistance is an unspeakable and positive vision of organized interracial civil war that is never materially embodied in the text’s language, but which seems to inform its parodic representations of “black underclass” degradation and of black social disorder. Outside of his books, Himes frequently detailed a vision of the terrifying racial violence he thought vital to the repossessing of Harlem: “[T]here is no reason why 100,000 blacks armed with automatic rifles couldn’t literally go underground, into the subways and basements of Manhattan—and take over,” he asserted two years after Blind Man (Conversations 102). He went on to argue, fleshing out his scenario: “There would be no way, there is no weapon, to get them out. You could bomb Manhattan and all, and still not reach underground” (102). Here Blind Man’s underground sex den, underclass “hoodlums” throwing rotten food from their “basement stairways,” and subway shootings are swept away by the enormity of what Himes imagines. “This [insurrection] was the novel I was writing and I don’t know if I have the energy or determination to finish it,” Himes said, referring to Plan B, the novel of racial warfare that he rightly suspected he would never complete though he would live another 13 years (102). Himes revealingly called Plan B, whose violence “shocked” and “disgust[ed]” him, a “literary suicide.” Published 10 years after his death as an unfinished book, Plan B took Himes beyond the confines of the detective genre, as if acknowledging the limits of the detective novel to express a black imagination’s anger at enduring racism in the US (135, 136).

Notes

1. Over the last 10 years, sociologists have begun to object to the term and concept of “the underclass.” Katz argues that it not only “insult[s] those it designates . . . [it] lacks a consistent, defensible theoretical basis. . . . Most definitions, in fact, substitute varieties of bad behavior for the criteria customary in stratification theories” (“The Urban ‘Underclass’ ” 21, 22). Furthermore, he contends, “To scapegoat the black family is to do something more than blame the victim; it is to miss the point. For policy, the consequences are very serious. . . . Underclass behavior did not incubate within the historic properties of black families, and ghetto poverty is an extreme example of a more general trend toward inequality” (472). The influential William Julius Wilson, who helped shift the concept of the underclass from its grounding in alleged cultural difference based on race to class difference rooted in the declining economic opportunities within the inner-city, abandoned the term “the underclass” in 1990.

2. Forter and Breu explore, to different conclusions, the psychic formation of racial identity as a product of cultural fantasies of blackness. Forter argues that “Himes’s refusal to refute black stereotypes is in this sense an attempt to insist upon their psychic and cultural reality” (186). Breu contends that “Himes’s embrace of negative representation” allows his work “to suggest the positive possibility of constructing an ethical masculine subjectivity” (771). My account differs from these in that I historicize Himes’s representations by situating them as a response to the discourses of black pathology of the 1960s and to the black urban unrest of the decade. Rather than arguing that Himes’s novels embolden a liberal model of “ethical masculine subjectivity,” I contend his work foregrounds the efficacy of mass, collective violence that cannot be incorporated into the liberal discourses of ethical political engagement.

3. Ellison’s reaction to An American Dilemma was a mix of “Yeas” and “Nay” (303). “In our society,” Ellison wrote, “it is not unusual for a Negro to experience a sensation that he does not exist in the real world at all. He seems rather to exist in the nightmarish fantasy of the white American mind as a phantom that the white mind seeks unceasingly, by means both crude and subtle, to lay. Myrdal proves this is no idle Negro fancy” (304). Ellison also charged that Myrdal’s claim that black “culture and personality” are “the product of a ‘social pathology’” was unduly simplistic (316).

4. Himes’s animus toward the “black underclass” had much in common with Marx and Engels’s dismissal of the lumpenproletariat. Marx’s animosity toward the lumpenproletariat derived from what he saw as its lack of class consciousness, its moral venality, and as its tendency to depress wages by serving as a reserve labor pool (167).

5. In the summer of 1967, when Himes was working on Blind Man, at least 60 US cities saw rioting in their inner-city neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 58, 59).
6. The New York Times noted that "Politicians, civil rights leaders, and sociologists have been studying" the similarities between the many riots of 1964 "in an effort to draw some conclusions that might be helpful in discouraging future outbreaks. One of their theories is that the teen-aged guerrillas have found in a stone, a brickbat, or a wine bottle full of gasoline a potent weapon of protest against the System, and that they are delighted with it" (Powledge 18).

7. On its Op-Ed page the Chicago Daily Defender objected to the Moyrihan Report, stressing that the "implication" of the Report is that "Negro family instability is a basic cause of the Negro inequality and pathology" ("The Moyrihan Report" 13).

8. By one estimate, between 1950 and 1960 urban renewal "tore down 128,000 units, which rented for an average of $50 to $60 a month, and replaced them with only 28,000 units with an average rental of $195" (Katz, "Reframing" 462).

9. Upwards of five million African Americans migrated from the South to the North between 1940 and 1970 (Katz, "Reframing" 451).

10. Harlem's 133rd Street was known in the 1920s by the primitivist moniker Jungle Alley because of its large number of jazz clubs. In whites-only institutions like The Cotton Club, fantasies of the "naturally" uninhibited sexuality, irrepressible exuberance, and child-like originality of African Americans could be safely purchased as entertainment. Such fantasies later became the staple of more dispassionate, scientifically rigorous accounts of "black underclass" sociality that are found in the liberal urban sociological discourse of the 1960s.

11. Among its contemporaries, Clark's study was the most keenly aware of the power of white racism to shape urban space and lower-class black sociality: "The dark ghetto's invisible walls," Clark states, "have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness" (11).

12. "Coffin Ed and Grave Digger allow these activities to flourish, and even develop a somewhat symbiotic relationship with their participants, who become key informers for them. . . . [S]uch illegal activities were often a necessary part of the system by which the ghetto could continue to exist" (Walters 620).

13. Read alongside a discourse that demonized matriarchal family structures in African American homes, Himes's novel might be understood as part of a critique of the purported feminization of black society, a critique that Himes's text levels against women—nearly all of whom are prostitutes in Blind Man—and gay men. In such a reading, Himes's work is complicit with the sociological literature it otherwise ironizes and challenges.

14. Two years after William Styron's controversial Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) Himes stages the novel's riots on Nat Turner Day. Turner's rebellion was the night of 21 August 1831, but in Himes's text it is celebrated on July 15, a factual "error" that suggests the historical amnesia of Harlem's residents and allows Himes to conflate Turner's uprising with the summer of 1964 riots as a way of implying the folly of Turner's legacy.

15. Plan B dramatizes Himes's 1944 call for "Negro martyrs" to create "incidents." The "incident" in the text is a well-concealed African American sniper shooting into a crowd of whites in an unnamed city. The pandemonium and ensuing revenge killings by whites are meant to be the catalyst for a full-scale war that eventually will purge the US of racism. Digger and Ed play only bit parts in the novel, and both are killed by the end. Digger, who is loyal to the black revolution, murders Ed, who sides with the law because "the political and social implications of the rebellion are too much for him" (136). Shooting Ed, Digger is shot dead as well by the revolutionary leader whom he supported. Thus, Himes's "literary suicide" killed off his successful detective series in more ways than one.

Katz, Michael B. "Reframing the Underclass Debate." Katz, 'Underclass' 440-78.
—. "The Urban 'Underclass' as a Metaphor of Social Transformation." Katz, 'Underclass' 3-23.