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Richard Wright's and Chester Himes's Treatment of the Concept of Emerging Black
Masculinity in the 20th Century

By

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A Thesis

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of Master of Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Native Son	9
Chapter 3: Finding Bigger Thomas	19
Chapter 4: Black Literature Leading to the Rage and Honesty of Chester Himes	30
Chapter 5: If He Hollers	52

Chapter 1: Introduction

In order to do justice to their subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed and complex consciousness is necessary, a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with concepts that move and direct the forces of history today. Every short story, novel, poem, and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilization; and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world.

(Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Literature")

It is a long way, a hard way from the hatred of the faces to the hatred of evil, a longer way still to the brotherhood of men. Once on the road, however, the Negro will discover that he is not alone. The white people whom he will encounter along the way may not appear to be accompanying him. But all, black and white, will be growing. When the American Negro writer has discovered that nothing ever becomes permanent but change, he will have rounded out his knowledge of the truth. And he will have performed his service as an artist.

(Chester Himes, "Dilemma of the negro novelist in United States")

In the first half of the 20th century, and prior, black writers in the United States experienced a peripheral existence that was clearly visible for all society to see. The inherent marginalization associated with being of secondary importance tended to confine what black writers articulated about the human experience as a whole to a discussion of life lived in oppressive conditions, as their plots in short-stories, novels and plays flowed primarily from conflicts that stemmed from racial strife. The black writers who most influenced African-American literature at the dawn of the second half of the 20th century, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes and Ralph Ellison, all in some way, be it

through essays, interviews etc, made light of the phenomenon of black writers of the day depicting the black American experience as one essentially linked to oppression. For some black writers the most psychologically taxing hurdle of being a writer was being a marginalized writer, a “black writer,” because of the restrictions and expectations. There were things one should not say, there were things one could not say and there were expectations of things that one should be saying. The restrictions and the expectations came from both their white publishers and their own community. Richard Wright was perhaps the most outspoken and influential black American writer to suggest that black American writers should write with a mandate. Wright because of the influence he wielded has been called the father of African-American literature, despite America already having 150 years of African-American literary history before him. Wright, however, is one of the most influential black writers of his era, impacting American letters to such a degree as to change the trajectory of black literature and influence writers such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Chester Himes and many others in the process. Wright is arguably the most influential black American writer of the 20th century. In his essay “Blueprint for Negro Literature” Wright expounds on his ideas about what black writers ought to do with their literary voice; he in fact advocates an idea that strongly suggests that black writers have a responsibility to live up to. Chester Himes, Wright’s contemporary and friend, disagreed with Wright’s ideas and suggestions and explains in his essay “Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the United States,” that the black writer’s only responsibility is to his own humanity and search for purpose and identity. Himes’s position is that a writer who is black has no primary responsibility to uplift his race.

Despite their differences, vis-à-vis a racial mandate, Wright and Himes have still similar concerns. Both address black masculinity, but more specifically they analyze black masculinity under the subordination of a white masculinity that is hostile toward them. A critique of their respective discussions of this topic could easily vary with comparisons of different novels, but a comparison of Wright's *Native Son* and Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* best reflects the values of their corresponding essays and firmly held positions as critics of American culture. "Blueprint for Negro Literature" and "Dilemma of the negro novelist in the United States," are perhaps the most transparent representations of Wright's and Himes's ideas on race in America and what it means to be a writer and a black writer. The prevailing theme in Wright's and Himes's literature is that black men are suffering under racist policy. Their incidents, settings and themes are related, for instance, interracial sexuality between black men and white women is usually the detonative controversy, but then, their characters, ideas and tone differ radically. The two authors have profoundly different ideas about what is happening underneath the surface of what is factually observable. Wright and Himes look at the same incidents, but see different things.

In their respective novels the protagonists face similar problems. The two writers offer their statements regarding the many problems of the African-American community, but their reactions are markedly different. The novelists have different perspectives on the black American community and the society at large, which they both characterize as troubled. Wright calls for black writers to vigorously campaign with a nationalist attitude that should incorporate black America's abundant folklore, in order to resonate with black America's working class, the audience that Wright argues most needs to be

reached, but has been the most ignored. In addition Wright calls for black America's, then contemporary, literary paradigm to be abandoned. Wright explains that the paradigm of his day aimed to reach the white mainstream audience, and a materialistic, middle class black audience that had no regard for the sufferings of oppressed black Americans. Wright called for black writers to be nationalist activists to bring about change. However, and not to be overlooked, Wright called for nationalist writing, at that present time, in order to preclude the need for black nationalist writing later. From Wright's point of view, nothing could be more important than taking the race to a higher place; the black writer needed to help the race and other black writers. Wright concludes "Blueprint for Negro Literature" with the statement "We need each other."

Himes's perspective is more traditional in the sense that he believes that it is the black writer's responsibility, like any other writer's responsibility, to "communicate to others the process of their thoughts." Himes's thoughts are existential, needing to explore and find justification for the suffering of his human consciousness in the midst of a society that from birth to death systematically undermines him. However, Himes does acknowledge that for the black writer exploring this topic is particularly burdensome because the black writer must not only engage the question of finding meaning in existence, the black writer must explain and find justification for an oppressed and absurd existence. The task of finding meaning in an oppressed and absurd existence, argues Himes, requires an honesty that would alienate black and white audiences. White audiences will be offended because that honesty will shatter their beliefs about their own liberalism, e.g. their treatment of black people and the institutional racism they enable. For black audiences, the honest depiction of themselves will embarrass them. Wright

calls for black writers to show black American themselves and unite the race, but Himes argues that an honest depiction of black America by black writers will alienate a black audience. Himes calls for honesty, but believes that honesty will offend, not unite. Himes terms his position “the Negro novelists’ dilemma,” which he titles his essay.

Wright’s and Himes’s ideological differences are symbolic of the burdensome choice that black writers of their period had to make. Black writers were obliged by the publishing industry to establish a recognizable identity through which their voice could spring; James Baldwin found it necessary to betray Wright by negatively critiquing *Native Son*; Ralph Ellison found it necessary to make it clear he distanced himself from Wright; and Himes himself had to confront Wright’s protagonist Bigger Thomas’s meaning in *If He Hollers* in order to move forward his own message. This obligation was a combination of Wright’s influence and the limited acceptance black writers had in the mainstream. Thus, their message was expected to epitomize the values of their established, recognizable and approved identity.

The significance of Wright’s and Himes’s ideological contrast, how they write differently about the same racism they are engaging, is the critical issue. Their ideological clash speaks to the two main issues that reify their outsider status from the mainstream of American culture, and complicate in their efforts to integrate and assimilate. Wright’s and Himes’s disagreement represent the two sides of the strategy to confront the unfortunate reality that stifles the community of black writers as a guild. The issue also applies to all oppressed groups who struggle to establish esteemed recognition, or rather a permanent esteemed identity in an unwelcoming culture. To not have respect, an esteemed identity, in a community of people, a culture, to not have an identity that is

accepted, acknowledged, understood and welcomed, is to have, among other problems, a painful feeling of humiliation that is the result of being distinct from what is emblematic of the society's model of personhood or quite simply put what is normal. The arguments of Richard Wright's and Chester Himes's respective essays are in fact so credible that they transcend black America's issue, of which they are actually speaking. Their arguments can represent any outsider's catch-22 in their attempt to establish the esteemed identity. However, does the outsider then have the responsibility to represent particular qualities that the group can be "proud" of or is the individual independent to find one's own way? The identity of the black male or more specifically Wright and Himes' representation of what they saw as the embodiment of emerging black masculinity is apparent on the pages of their respective novels *Native Son* and *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Black masculinity and black identity were beginning to emerge in America, this was Wright's and Himes's mantra and if that was not altogether true they both wanted to contribute to its beginning. Wright depicted the emergence of black men through many figures, but Bigger Thomas, a variation of the stereotypical black criminal that America feared was his most famous. Bigger finds meaning for his life or existential purpose in his crimes and in his mind finds a manhood; his crimes give his life meaning where before he was adrift. In contrast, perhaps in response to, Bigger Thomas, Chester Himes created Bob Jones, which some critics saw as Himes himself, an educated, upwardly mobile and skilled black man that mainstream America frustrates with tokenism, condescension and glass ceilings.

Wright's and Himes's protagonists were personal representations of their frustrations with America. The characters that they depicted actually were their

contrasting points of view. Himes's protagonist Bob Jones spoke directly of Bigger Thomas saying: "Bigger Thomas proves the point, but now what?" Wright wanted to make the point that racism is a grave issue, not a sentimental one, a topic to be scrutinized painstakingly. In order to do that Wright presented a character that was a result of the society's racist policy and also a threat to that same society that was responsible for creating such a man.

Wright told America that the black man was emerging; that fact could not be stopped. However, the society did have some influence over what the black man would be in America, a productive, contributing citizen or a lawless miscreant. Wright's depiction was an extreme. Himes presented a character that represented the frustrations of more down-to-earth concerns.

Wright was embraced and promoted. Himes was stifled and blocked. Wright's and Himes's experiences in the publishing market were analogous to two leaders of the Civil Rights movement. At the height of the Civil Rights movement the most visible and influential leaders were Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Both leaders had differing reactions from the liberal mainstream. King's approach to Civil Rights was to affect change through non-violent means, which was perceived as not threatening, perhaps even as timid or not masculine, which was not a challenge to how white authority preferred the black demeanor to be. King's approach was not threatening to the mainstream, as it was non-violent or non-threatening so could therefore be embraced and promoted by white liberals. Malcolm X's approach to Civil Rights asserted masculinity, a black masculinity that was not timid, fearful or subservient to white authority, and was not opposed to violence in self-defense. These are not characteristics that I observe in Wright or Himes. I

only mean to point out the similar reactions. The reaction to Wright is reminiscent of the reaction to King and the reaction to Himes is reminiscent of the reaction to Malcolm X. Wright's novels were embraced, promoted and allowed to flourish in the U.S., like King's career in Civil Rights and the deification of his legacy. Himes's novels were disdained and the writer villainized, like Malcolm X, forcing Himes to flee the U.S. to have a writing career. Himes was rejected because he actually depicted his vision of what society would look like should black Americans find equal footing with white Americans, a vision of how the country would look socially. The depiction of a genuinely integrated, a socially intertwined black and white America, was the same as Malcolm X's assertion of black Masculinity. Himes was similarly cast aside. Wright's literature didn't threaten the status quo with a vision, so there was nothing threatening on the most important level, black Americans being equal to whites on a social level, an idea that few liberal whites could embrace.

Chapter 2: Native Son

In 1940 Richard Wright published the landscape-changing novel *Native Son*. The novel depicts the life of a young black man, Bigger Thomas, who is debased of humanity due to conditions he experiences in Chicago's South Side ghetto, such as substandard housing, lack of opportunity for education, lack of opportunity for gainful employment, unjust treatment under the law, et cetera. Bigger then kills, desecrates and rapes, but he is still *the* icon of the Afro-American literary panorama, Wright's anti-hero. Wright argues that ultimately Bigger is not responsible for his actions; racism and capitalism are the culprits he indicts. Wright's depiction of Bigger Thomas is naturalistic, stressing socioeconomic, but not biological determinism. Bigger is demoralized because he is prevented from pursuing any meaningful training of his highly intellectual mind; for instance he wants to be a pilot, but concludes that his dream is impossible because of racist policy. Bigger is callous with his friends, but is particularly so toward his family; it is how he copes with his powerlessness to ease their suffering. Bigger is blocked from fulfilling the responsibilities of manhood. He is brutal for a great number of reasons, but primarily because he is afraid. Bigger is afraid of the systematic use of violence and oppression used against black Americans to maintain a racist social order. Bigger steals with no fear from black Americans because the police will not protect them, but he is afraid to rob Blum's Delicatessen, which symbolizes for Bigger's gang their understanding of the legal system's double standard. At the turning point of his life he is terrified of being discovered in Mary Dalton's room by her blind mother. His feeling of terror leads to Mary's accidental death as Bigger attempts to silence her speech and movements; he

accidentally suffocates her. On a side note, in Wright's original vision for the scene, Bigger and Mary share a moment of passion before Mary's blind mother, Mrs. Dalton, enters the room. This scene is edited from the version marketed to white audiences. What Blum and Mary Dalton have in common is that they are both white and therefore protected by the American legal system. In *Native Son*, Wright paints an authentic mural that purposefully exposes what can become of a person when savagely mistreated, a lesson that he calls for in his "Blueprint for Negro Literature." Wright strategically shows a debased black American to mainstream America to accomplish the goal that he put forth in his "Blueprint"

Every short story, novel, poem and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people, the danger of war of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilization; and, too the faith and necessity to build a new world.

Chester Himes and James Baldwin, however, saw limitations in the ideology behind the invention of Bigger Thomas and with the burden of writing with a mandate, like the one established by "Blueprint." But, as James Baldwin pointed out in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel"

All of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies having come through this violence, we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood (*Notes of a Native Son* 22).

Wright gives the literary world a protagonist debased of humanity for a functional purpose, to argue that humane treatment of black Americans must be incorporated into

American civilization to avoid the creation of Bigger Thomases. It is, however, necessary to note that characters like Bigger are a reality and do merit the same attention as do heroic characters who perform heroic deeds. There should be no issues with depicting characters like Bigger Thomas. Bigger's sad condition is part of the spectrum of humanity and because Bigger's condition is the result of society's mistreatment of him it is all the more relevant to examine him to greater understand not only Bigger-type characters, but the values of a society that produce them. That is the point of creating such characters; that was Wright's point. Baldwin's criticism of Wright's depiction of Bigger Thomas is actually more revealing of the wounds Baldwin himself has suffered from racism and how those wounds affect the lens through which Baldwin evaluates Wright, than for any light that Baldwin may have shed on Wright's literature piece.

In a scene that Himes witnessed between Baldwin and Wright at a Paris Café, Himes explains the distress he saw in Baldwin after coming to understand Baldwin's explanation for his betrayal, "The sons must slay their fathers." At the time Himes admits not understanding the conversation, but then later realized that there *was* only one black literary giant at a time and young writers *were* forced to unseat their elders. Baldwin, judging by how he evaluates Bigger Thomas, could be said to be a "civil rights for upwardly mobile blacks thinker." Baldwin's evaluation of Bigger imparts no sympathy for Bigger's situation. Bigger Thomas is a symbol of the black community's most vulnerable, a child without protection. Bigger is transformed into something monstrous by a far more monstrous system, but Baldwin is angry that Wright has shown mainstream America a black rapist and murderer. The depiction of Bigger embarrasses Baldwin, despite the fact that Wright is critiquing society. Bigger Thomas is an embarrassment to

Baldwin; he's an embarrassment to the upwardly mobile black Americans who were interested in assimilating into the white mainstream. There is more to Baldwin's criticism than missing the point of Wright's thesis in *Native Son*; it is biased all around. Baldwin's negative review is not based strictly on the merits or lack thereof of the novel. Baldwin's criticism reveals the sad reality of the market place for black writers at that time. The negative criticism is also an attempted assassination. The American literary landscape of 1945, by design, had room only for one black giant. Baldwin wished to unseat the current giant, Wright, in order to be that giant himself. Wright's invitation of Himes to witness Wright's vengeful humiliation of Baldwin would aid Himes, although it would take some time, in understanding the treatment of black writers by white publishers.

Wright began by explaining to Himes "that he had been instrumental in getting Baldwin an award for eighteen hundred dollars and a renewal for nine hundred dollars from Harper & Brothers to enable him to write his first novel . . . *Go Tell It On The Mountain*." Wright then said "Baldwin had repaid his generosity by attacking him in a number of published articles. Now Baldwin has the nerve to call me to borrow five thousand francs (ten thousand dollars)." Himes added that Wright was "gleeful" in his telling of this story. So then Wright then made the appointment to meet Baldwin at the Deux Magots, and insisted that Himes accompany to witness "Baldwin's shame":

. . . Dick accused Baldwin of showing his gratitude for all he had done for him by his scurrilous attacks. Baldwin defended himself by saying that Dick had written his story and hadn't left him, or any other American black writer, anything to write about. I confess that at this point they lost me . . . The last thing I remember before I left them at it was Baldwin saying, "The sons must slay their fathers," At

the time I thought he had taken leave of his senses, but in recent years I've come to better understand what he meant. Much later, while traveling in Crete, I read Mary Renault's book *The King Must Die*, and I was reminded of Baldwin's remark that night, "The sons must slay their fathers." And I realized suddenly that he was right. On the American literary scene, the powers that be have never admitted but one black at a time into the arena of fame, and to gain this coveted admission, the young writer must unseat the reigning deity. It's a pity but a reality as well (The Quality of Hurt 203).

Baldwin's critical assassination of *Native Son* was more than just literary ambition; it was also a patricide. Baldwin owed a great deal of his early success to Wright, due to the encouragement he gave, but after Baldwin's negative reviews of *Native Son*, the relationship would never be the same. Baldwin's attempted assassination of Wright, to win his coveted spot, is cloaked by his fiercest criticism, that Wright's novel is a rejection of life:

...[Bigger] admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult – that is, accept it.

Himes's objection to Bigger Thomas stems from the fact that the writers really had different goals. Baldwin wrote for fame; Wright wrote to affect political change, but Himes wrote to find the meaning of his existence, which just happened to be an oppressed one. Himes says that for anyone "the essential necessity of humanity is to find justification for existence," but the black writer, Himes explains, must do more than that

because the black Americans' experience is an oppressed existence. So the black writer must find and explain a justification for existence in oppressed conditions. "Humanity cannot accept the fact of existence without meaning. He must find the meaning regardless of the quality of his experiences" (Dilemma 52). Although Himes writes with a different purpose, he finds meaning in Wright's depiction of Bigger even though he still finds it lacking.

Black Americans exist in an oppressed way by the society in which they reside. What is the role of the black artist in such circumstances? Can it be defined? Is it appropriate to ask? Is it appropriate for a black artist to study fine arts and then imitate white artists, free artists that is, to try to produce art as if in a state of freedom from racism, like the white artist. Formally trained black artists often circulate in white circles and can lose touch with the black community's concerns. Is there a way to definitively answer this question? Wright's and Himes's major protest novels, their contrasting approaches, and the critics whose comments either directly or indirectly critiqued their intentions and estimated their effectiveness in those novels have lead the way the in engaging these questions.

The mood of *Native Son*, the characterization of Bigger Thomas, together with knowledge of Wright's well-known affiliation with the Communist Party of America through the John Reed Club can evoke heavy consideration of Marxist thought about the people who Wright depicts and explains, the proletariat. But, Bigger is lumpen and reminiscent of the most visible of the anti-establishment ideologues of Karl Marx's day, the Nihilists. Both Bigger and the Nihilists are violent, sociopathic, and outside the thought of mainstream social revolutionaries. Bigger is cut off from the marginalized

African-Americans who sought civil rights and a place in America. But there were more than a few African-Americans who, like Bigger Thomas, had no shielding community, i.e. the church, or supportive family. African-Americans, like Bigger Thomas, who did not have this system were in particular jeopardy. Shielding communities provided strategy and support, to black Americans that had them against racism. Bigger is lost because he has no support system. Some black men, like Bigger, did have their manhood captured by racism, but the vast majority of African-Americans who successfully resisted racism in the 20th century transcended the barrage of racist policy, imagery, and attitude not through violence but through decidedly non-violent civil disobedience, concerted efforts to maintain their humanity through education, faith, and forgiveness of their oppressor. If racism had been successful in appropriating black men's manhood, as it did in Bigger's case, or humanity from black people as a whole, no movement against injustice could have been possible. All that said, Wright still is not in error, as James Baldwin suggests, in drawing attention to the destruction of a particular black man at the hands of racism, even though he sacrifices the opportunity to discuss the complexity of how most African-Americans live and cope with racism. Wright's lionization of Bigger Thomas is controversial to a significant portion of the African-American reading audience who cope with racism in intellectual ways. Years after the publication of *Native Son*, the rift between upwardly mobile African-Americans who benefited from the Civil Rights Movement and poor African-Americans who received little from those gains came to a culminating point of action. Upwardly mobile and poor blacks had to come to terms with their differing points of view about how to negotiate racism because riots over the issue were exploding in American cities from coast to coast. Upwardly mobile African-

Americans condemned the riots because they believed that mainstream white America would associate them, with the rioting poor blacks and that the association would threaten the gains they had made in the Civil Rights Movement. Upwardly mobile African-Americans saw their quest to integrate into the mainstream of America's economy disappearing before their very eyes. There was little consideration on their part about the reasons why poor black Americans who had been left behind were actually rioting. The disconnect between them suggests that Wright's thesis may have been right. Wright argues that if economic and social justice is not part of the wave of the future for poor blacks, there would be violence. The continuing racial riots in Baltimore, Maryland and Ferguson, Missouri in 2015 may prove him right. Economic justice did not come for poor, marginalized black Americans with the Civil Rights Movement, so frustration did not cease and violence increased. Wright's ideas about social justice and his philosophical leanings about existence, at the time of his authorship of *Native Son*, were colored by the influence of the Communist Party of America (he would eventually break with the CPA). Wright's ideological desire for social justice for the African-American above all else, and his compulsion to explain Bigger Thomas, or rather to create a composite of people like Bigger Thomas that he had known his whole life to symbolize what racism had created, is Wright's need to explain himself, his mind, and his perspective to those he needed to come to terms with most, white Americans. Wright did not create Bigger Thomas to uplift or encourage African-Americans, or to edify a universal audience on the effects brought to bear on humanity in a corrupt system.

The mentoring Wright received while in the John Reed Club, the literary arm of the Communist Party, and the Communist Party's ideas about social justice and

philosophical existence heavily influenced his writing perspective. *Native Son*'s message was originally intended for the mainstream American audience, which suggests: If better treatment for the African-American is not the wave of the future, your sister, your mother, or your wife may be a Bigger type's next victim. Wright's own criticism of his collection of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children* addresses his relationship with the mainstream audience. Wright admits that he wanted that relationship in its current form to change. With *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright appealed to the guilt of his white audience, as he explains in his essay "How Bigger was Born." Wright assumed victim status by seeking justice from the oppressor. That strategy changed with *Native Son*. Wright still wanted to write for the mainstream audience, but he wanted his message to affect them differently now. Instead of wanting the mainstream to feel guilt, shame or sympathy he now wanted them to feel fear. Did *Native Son* accomplish its goal? It did not. How could it? Wright claimed that he would no longer appeal to the mainstream's guilt, but *Native Son* depends on something. Could Wright really believe that a Bigger Thomas type black men could pose any serious threat to white Culture when white citizens could depend on police protection? In fact, it could be argued that the current prison industrial complex, which jails a number of black men at least equal to those enslaved in the United States in 1864, exists in response to Bigger Thomas. Wright's philosophy in *Native Son* is still an appeal, which he admits that *Uncle Tom's Children* is. *Native Son*'s message is not edifying for a progress minded, civil rights seeking, marginalized audience. Admittedly, this need not be a necessity for ethnically marginalized writers, but Bigger's story and Wright's assertion imply that the improvement of African-American life in America is in the hands of mainstream America

and that African-Americans have little or nothing to contribute to this end and will continue to be powerless. *Native Son* does effectively condemn mainstream America's treatment of one of its minority groups by exposing the loss of self that legal, social and economic injustice has had on some of its members. Wright's voice in *Native Son* has not missed the mark, but the novel's message is not one that is cathartic for African-Americans. I find *Native Son* to stand as the second most important novel in the African-American canon behind *Invisible Man*, as the subject of Bigger's influence has permeated my study of post World War II black American literature.

Wright, with the directives he set forth in "Blueprint for Negro Literature" and with his novel *Native Son*, impacted American literature like no other black author before him had. Wright's work brought public notice that had not previously been enjoyed by a black author. *Native Son* was the first Book of the Month Club selection by a black author. Wright's message had to be responded to. Two responses stand out: James Baldwin's essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," which has been interpreted as a patricide and Chester Himes's 1945 novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Many American authors of the period were concerned with engaging the idea of national identity and racial difference. Himes's contribution to the period's concern is his response to *Native Son*, which astutely addresses differences in the way a socioeconomically diverse black American community lives in all their aspects, from where different types of black Americans reside geographically, where and what they eat, where and how they earn a living, the differing types of dreams they aspire to, and finally the differentiation in attitude toward the society in which they exist.

Chapter 3: Finding Bigger Thomas

Prior to the publication of *Native Son*, Wright published a collection of novellas, *Uncle Tom's Children*, a book that Wright, in retrospect, had some misgivings about. After the early success of *Native Son*, Wright published an essay that described the origins of Bigger Thomas, "How 'Bigger Was Born; Notes of a Native Son." In that essay Wright explained that he made what he characterized as an "awfully naïve mistake."

I found that I had written a book, which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.

Wright must have felt that if his readers could console themselves with tears, this sympathy would be enough for them; they could feel like good people, and therefore no further action would be necessary. In any case, no action was taken a result of that book; it was no *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it stirred no civil anything.

Wright's own stated purpose, as a writer, is to expose the oppression that black Americans experience to the end of bringing about change. However, Wright's most evocative method of storytelling, which was born of his understanding of what he termed "Perspective," as it was used in *Native Son*, may have compromised the convictions of what he believes are the role of Negro writers. Perspective, as Wright explains in "Blueprint,"

Is that part of a poem or play which writers never put directly upon paper, but which is sensed in every line of the work... It means that Negro writers must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South Side with the consciousness that one sixth of the earth's surface belongs to the working class. It means that Negro writers must create in their readers' minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.

Wright's depiction of a "Negro" on the South Side of Chicago, Bigger Thomas, is a menace created by the inhumanity of capitalism and racism. Bigger is powerless to combat his condition on his own, except through sub-human violence. Wright's thesis suggests a plea to the establishment, but Wright before had been critical of black writing that "went a-begging white America." Wright had also been critical of black writers who came before him who directed their art toward white America, so with *Native Son* not being for a black audience, how could Bigger's outrageous actions not qualify as what Wright called "conspicuous ornamentation" in black writing, which he was also critical of?

Before giving the world Bigger Thomas, Wright depicted black Americans in a more sympathetic fashion. In "Long Black Song," one of *Uncle Tom's Children's* novellas, an ambitious black businessman's marriage and life is taken from him. I begin with this story for two reasons: first, because of the significance of the main character's name, Silas. The Biblical Silas was a missionary companion to the Apostle Paul to help him spread the Gospel to the Gentiles, perhaps Wright uses this name to symbolize his goal of spreading the word of the injustice that black Americans were experiencing in the

Jim Crowed South to the more liberal North. Second, while Wright's Silas is not particularly likable, nor is he, prior to his injustices, very sympathetic, he still is a character that Wright's contemporary black audience could connect with. Silas really is a universally Western character, a Western archetype that is easily identifiable. Silas fits the criteria of Aristotle's tragic hero, as explained in his treatise *Poetics*. Silas's fortunes change; he is not a particularly virtuous or sympathetic character passing from good fortune to misfortune, as this would be an offensive idea not a tragic one for him to lose all he valued. Silas is obviously not a bad man passing from misery to happiness; as such a scenario would not evoke pity or fear nor would it, most importantly, paint the negative, oppressive image of the South. Silas is the ideal Aristotelian example of a character that could evoke the emotions of pity and fear, which is the goal of the Greek tragic drama. Silas's characteristics and circumstances represent the choice features of Aristotle's tragic hero; he is a man of high stature in his community, not particularly noble and most significantly has a personal flaw. Silas's anger, hastens his tragedy. Silas is unable or unwilling to see that his wife has not betrayed him, but she has been raped. Wright with his character Silas intends to evoke in his readers the emotions of pity and fear, like a Greek Tragedy would aim to do. But Wright then does not offer an episode to provide a catharsis for the pity and fear that he evokes. This is very shrewd. The tragic Greek formula of pity, fear and then catharsis had a purpose in that culture and it held much influence over the mood of Ancient Greek society. Wright attempts to use the power of the formula to his end, that is, to build up pity, fear and other useful emotions and then not resolve them, in a hope to radicalize thought against racism in American society. This goal is different from the Ancient Greeks' method because while the Ancients did use the

tragedy to point out the flaws of their society or of men's hearts, the purpose was purge the problems at the theater. The tragic drama served a purpose in Greek society. Catharsis was an important healing process to the challenge, which evoked pity and fear, to make society better. The Greek tragedy is not confrontational like 20th century protest literature is. Wright masterfully does not include in his plot a device to provide catharsis, which would be counterproductive to his purpose. Wright does not want his audience to have a purging of their pity or their fear. Why did Wright publish *Uncle Tom's Children*? For the same reason Wright wrote anything, to expose and protest oppression. He thought the exposure of life in the Deep South would be enough to get help from North. These unresolved emotions that Wright left in the book he expected, would wake up the North to the crises of the South and stir influential Northerners to help black Americans in the South. But Wright later admits that this was not effective. Silas could easily be someone any Southern American knew and his experiences in the story are not farfetched. Silas is a difficult man in an unfortunate situation: a white salesman rapes his wife and then forces her to buy his product. The circumstances, however, lead Silas to mistakenly believe that his wife has betrayed him. Silas laments his grief:

The white folks ain never give me a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! *They take yo women!* N then they take yo life . . . N then I get Ah gits stabbed in the back by mah own blood! When my eyes is on the white folks to keep em from killin me, mah own blood trips me up (*Uncle Tom's Children* 152, Italics mine)!

Silas's tragedy is one that Wright's contemporary black audience knew far too well, could relate to and could sympathize with. The name Silas, going back to the biblical reference, could, with Wright's white audience, stir a feeling of Christian responsibility toward the South. Although Silas's story appeals more to emotion than it attempts to be an authentic depiction of oppression, rank and file black Americans could relate to it and whites could be affected on a multi-tiered level by it, including "weeping over it." *Native Son* was unquestionably for a white audience. Wright wrote primarily for a white audience; his message was meant to engage their treatment of black Americans and to change them. Wright intended to affect the heart, mind and spirit of a white audience to change things for black Americans.

In another story from that collection, "Fire and Cloud," the main character, Reverend Taylor is sadly still relevant and contemporary. The message Wright brings to bear here has not, even today with the first, a two term, black American president having completed his service, been resolved. Reverend Taylor is a leader appointed by the establishment to maintain control over the community's black residents, but he struggles with a personal dilemma: Will he maintain control for the establishment or will he lead the community's marginalized black people to protest injustice? He expresses his frustration:

Lawd, Ah don know whut t do! Ef Ah fight fer the things the white folks say Ahma bad nigger stirrin up trouble. N ef Ah don do nothin, we starve. . . . But somethings gotta be done! Mabbe ef we hada demonstration like Hadley n Green said, we could *scare* them white folks inter doin something (*Uncle Tom's Children* 160).

Reverend Taylor's dilemma is one that continues with contemporary black leadership. It is an issue that was resonant in the black community and continues to be. For example Prof. Cornell West accuses President Barack Obama of being Rockefeller Republican in blackface, which put simply means, Obama is for the wealthy. Whether this is true or not, Wright's Reverend Taylor still resonates contemporarily. Reverend Taylor's position is not one that has become obsolete, but it is not as important to Wright as other issues, an example of Taylor's failure to lead (with the people):

‘But, Reveren, whut kin we *do*?’

‘This issues wid Gawd now, Sistahs n Brothers.’

‘Is we gonna march?’

‘Is yuh goin wid us t the mayor?’

‘Have faith, Sistahs n Brothers. Gawd takes care of His own.’

‘But Ahm hongry, Reveren. . .’

‘Now, Sistahs n Brothers, Ah got t go. Ah got business t tend t. . .’

He pushed ahead of the black hands that clung to his sleeve.

“Reveren Taylor. . . .”

The thin black woman wailed, kneeling:

“Please Reveren, cant yuh do *sometin*. . . .”

His failure to show leadership with the communists:

How many folks we can get out tomorrow depends a great deal on you,

Reverend,” said Hadley.

‘How’s that?’ asked Taylor.

‘If you had let us use your name on those handbills, we could say five thousand easily. . . .’

Taylor turned sharply to Hadley.

‘Lissen, Brother, Ah done tol yuh Ah cant do tha! N there ain noo use in us talking erbout it no mo! Ah done tol yuh Ah cant let them white folks know Ahm callin folks to demonstrate. *Aftah all, Ahma preacher*’ (*Uncle Tom’s Children* 173, Italics mine).

Ironically, the most successful, and universally respected demonstration in U.S. history, the August 28, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was led by a clergyman.

Two characters, “The communists, Hadley and Greene” who are critical of Taylor’s motivation try to make it clear to Taylor, as he may not fully understand it himself, breakdown the situation:

‘That’s just it, Reverend,’ said Hadley. ‘Don’t be afraid of their turning you down because you’re fighting for your people. If they knew youd really fight, theyd dislike you, yes? But you can *make* them give something to *all* of your people, not just to *you*. Don’t you see Taylor, youre standing *between* your people and the white folks. You can make them give something to *all* of them. And the poor, hungry white folks will be with you (*Uncle Tom’s Children* 176).

This political scenario exposes the city leadership’s manipulation of their political pawn, Rev. Taylor, put in place to control the masses, and is typical racist division:

Say what’s this?’ demanded the mayor, turning to Lowe and Bruden. Wait a minute! What’s the big idea of talking to Dan like that? He’s not mixed up in

anything like that. Save that kind of talk for bad niggers (*Uncle Tom's Children* 182).

In the last novella of the collection Wright shows his devotion and belief in the Communist Party, a belief he would eventually break with. He suggests that the Communist Party is as noble as Christianity but more effective for black people in the fight against racism and oppression. Wright shows this belief with his depiction of his protagonist's conversion from Christianity to Communism:

Long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him and suffer without a mumbling word. She had poured the yearning of her life into the songs, feeling buoyed with a faith beyond this world. The figure of the man nailed in agony to the Cross, His burial in a cold grave, His transfigured Resurrection, His being breath and clay, God and Man – all had focused her feelings upon an imagery which had swept her life into a wondrous vision.

But as she had grown older, a cold white mountain, the white folks and their laws, had swum into her vision and shattered her songs and their spell of peace. To her that white mountain was temptation, something to lure her from her Lord, a part of the world God had made in order that she might endure it and come through all the stronger, just as Christ had risen with greater glory from the tomb. The days crowded with trouble had enhanced her faith and she had grown to love hardship with a bitter pride; she had obeyed the laws of the white folks with a soft smile of secret knowing. . . . Then one day grief had come to her heart when Johnny-Boy and Sug had walked forth demanding their lives. She had thought to fill their eyes with her vision, but they would have none of it. And she had wept when they began to boast of the strength shed by a new and terrible vision.

But she had loved them, even as she loved them now; bleeding, her heart had followed them. She could have done no less, being an old woman in a strange world. *And day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision, and image by image had given her a new one, different, but great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace.* The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection; and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her new strength went.

What Wright learned from his white audience's reaction to his first book is that white and black Americans react differently to depictions of racism. This is apparent from

observing the drastically different direction his next book went in. Also, Wright spoke of the event that inspired him to write of *Bigger* in particular, the reviews that appeared to his first book *Uncle Tom's Children*. Wright discussed how he felt about how his first book affected his white audience and made clear that any future book he wrote, "no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest" (*How Bigger Was Born*). Wright noticed that it was enough for his White audience to read and feel bad. If they felt bad they could let themselves off the hook of their racism and move on. The depiction of white characters oppressing black characters can generate in black readers an affinity, or relationship wherein what affects the oppressed character affects the reader. Wright felt that no such accord was established with his white audience; white readers of *Uncle Tom's Children* were made aware of, vicariously experienced injustice, and commiserated over it, but felt no compulsion to help black Americans because their lives were not affected. Wright in the midst of this illumination changed his strategy for affecting those who, he believed, "direct the forces of history," and gave them Bigger Thomas, a "Negro" that white America had to deal with or suffer for not doing so. Wright openly expresses his discontent over what he presented to the public in *Uncle Tom's Children* even though the stories are compelling and the book as a whole is of a high quality. Furthermore, *Uncle Tom's Children* was praised by Alain Locke in his 1939 article entitled "The Negro: 'New' or Newer," who called it "a well-merited literary launching for what must be watched as a major literary career . . . With this, our Negro fiction of social interpretation comes of age" (Locke). But Wright still changes his writing style, not because his complaint is about the work, but about the

unwanted response it generated from his intended audience. Wright proceeds from the belief that the white audience of *Uncle Tom's Children* feels a slightly contemptuous sorrow for the black characters, but not the urgent desire to aid them or spare them the injustice of racism. There is no indication that the book garners, in its white audience, shame over the treatment of vulnerable black citizens by the mainstream. There is no indication that the book influences liberal white Americans to want to change things for black Americans. The book displays the day-to-day goings on of oppression in the South, but does not stir Northerners to get involved. "I made an awfully naïve mistake," Wright said. He expected that if only Northern liberal white Americans knew the conditions that black Americans suffered in the South they would get involved. *Uncle Tom's Children* failed to start a movement. So from Wright's perspective the book failed. Wright wrote less for critical accolades, which the novel garnered; Wright wrote to affect tangible change for the lives of black Americans. With his next book he went in another direction to affect change. Wright still tried to manipulate the emotions of the mainstream audience though, but it was with fear rather than guilt in *Native Son*. Although Wright calibrated his message, his method remained much the same, that is, it was still being directed toward white readers in the form of a plea. So Wright's development during the interval between his first and second books lacked the radical change his method had undergone.

In contrast to Wright's orderly, crisp and elegantly thought out voice, Chester Himes communicated his message with a gritty, unfeigned and heartfelt sincerity that was truer to reality. His authenticity gained him many enemies in the publishing world. Himes's voice was not welcome in America although the two writers were compelled by their circumstances, racism, to engage the same topics.

It is worth noting that Chester Himes has a more plentiful collection of short fiction. However, I am unaware of any comments he may have made about it, as Wright explained he was dissatisfied with his own collection – not necessarily with the quality, but Wright sought real results in the real world and his short fiction did not produce that change. Wright changed his style as result. Himes’s short fiction, to the best of my knowledge, did not affect the trajectory of his most recognized novels.

Chapter 4: The history of race in Black Literature leading up to the rage and honesty of Chester Himes

When Chester Himes found himself filling in his first blank page at the beginning of his writing career, he found himself living an existence where he was unable to express his masculinity like he wanted. This was a contrast to Wright as he felt the injustice of racism as an affront to his human rights. Himes wanted to be a Man in the World, seeking fame, luxury, respect and the freedom to chase any woman who pleased him. The aspects of black literature's humble past and the shortcomings of what the New Negro Movement was able to accomplish left Himes more humiliated than anything else. He could not be the man he was in his heart and mind in America. Himes initially wrote about that; he wanted to dine in the finest hotels and have the option of courting the most beautiful Hollywood starlets in Los Angeles. The main theme of *if He Hollers Let Him Go* is how Bob Jones, the novel's protagonist, can't do these things.

When African-American literature was born in the late 18th century, the African American's literary voice came by way of spiritual autobiography. 18th century black writers such as Ukowsaw Ottobah Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano and Oludah Equiano wrote books that described how they made their way from captivity to freedom in their narratives; however, what was more important than the details of their deliverance from slavery, were the details of their discovery of their spiritual deliverer, Jesus Christ, through their conversion to Christianity. Because of the overwhelmingly calamitous ordeal that Africans experienced in the slave trade, the concerns of 18th

century black writers were rather uniform and revolved around the same issues: their freedom and their mixed emotions, if there were any, about their new identity. They had been enslaved in body, but freed in spirit which some argued was more significant. Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American poet and first African American woman to publish a book, often emphasized the importance she placed on her spiritual deliverance and seldom discussed the injustice of slavery. One example of the importance she placed on her spiritual deliverance is in the poem, "On being brought from Africa to America":

Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

By the Nineteenth Century the slave narrative had become the main form of African-American literature. Writers like David Walker sought to undermine racist ideology, to encourage black self-help through education and religion, to exhort readers to take an active role in fighting their oppression, and to press white Americans to uphold the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. Walker's *Appeal* argued that African-Americans had to assume responsibility for themselves if they wanted to overcome oppression. Historian Peter Hinks makes it clear that Walker believed that the "key to the uplift of the race was a zealous commitment to the tenets of individual moral

improvement: education, temperance, protestant religious practice, regular work habits, and self-regulation.” Education and religion were particularly important to Walker.

Frederick Douglas, an American social reformer, orator, writer and statesman, was perhaps the most famous author of the form. After escaping slavery, Douglas played a leading role in the abolitionist movement by giving speeches, which were noted for their eloquence, and writing his anti-slavery narratives. With his autobiography, the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave*, which became influential in its support for abolition, and the 1881, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglas*, which stressed the United States’ potential as a “land of the free,” Douglas stood as the antithesis of what slaveholders’ argued that their slaves had the capability of being.

Douglas was in fact so impressive that to many Northerners it was not palpable that such a great orator could have been a slave. In addition to the African-American’s struggle for freedom, Douglas’s efforts extended to all injustice that he could see; he was a firm believer in the equality of all people, whether they be black, women, Native American, or recent immigrant. Douglas has been quoted as saying: “I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong.” Douglas actively supported women’s suffrage, at one time saying that he would not accept the right to vote as a black man if women could not also claim that right. He suggested that the world would be a better place if women were involved in the political sphere.

In the early Twentieth Century African-American literature advanced conspicuously due to the influence of the New Negro Movement, now popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance. The movement, which was headquartered in the Harlem section of New York City, was a cultural phenomenon that encompassed not only

literature, but also music and visual art. The idea behind the movement was to depict a sense of manifest racial pride, which was represented in the idea of the “New Negro,” which made a distinction between the psychology and goals of the so-called “Old Negro” and the “New”. “The younger generation, the ‘New Negro,’” said Alain Locke, author of the essay “The New Negro,” “is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses.” Locke argued that the Old Negro had become something that was no longer tangible:

a creature of moral debate and historical controversy . . . something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be “kept down,” or “in his place,” or “helped up,” to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.

In the consciousness of America, the New Negro Movement believed, the “Old Negro” was a problem not a person. This was the perception that New Negro Movement aimed to change.

Locke’s distinction between the Old Negro and the New Negro is reminiscent of the distinction made by second-wave feminists from those who pioneered the women’s movement, who they termed first-wave feminists. First-wave feminists focused primarily on gaining the right to vote, like Locke’s Old Negroes focused on gaining citizenship. Second-wave feminism, which began in the 1960s, focused on a wider range of issues, like the New Negroes did, which included sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, unofficial and legal inequalities. The term second-wave was coined in the 1970s by the women’s movement of that time to respectfully acknowledge its predecessor. Like Locke, Twentieth Century feminists made clear distinctions between Nineteenth and

Twentieth century activism, but unlike Locke the feminist movement did not label its predecessor with a disparaging characterization. This is important to note because it's an early example of the black writer's burdensome choice and another one of the bizarre occurrences of black writers defaming other black writers to move forward. However, Locke does acknowledge that the "metamorphosis" of the Old Negro does stem from positive African-Americans characteristics. Locke explains that the black attitude, "through a gentleness of spirit, rejects the rapid rise of a definite cynicism and counter-hate and a defiant superiority feeling." Locke suggests that blacks have a nobler vision, writing, "we wish our race to be a healthier, more positive achievement than a feeling based upon a realization of the shortcomings of others," which is assertion of moral superiority which exists in the black American collective consciousness. The slow, but steady move toward the New Negroes' awakened consciousness, Locke acknowledges, was a difficult process that bypassed the method, which was not effective for the masses, of "rising above" racism by ignoring it, which Locke admitted, for the Old Negro's time, was really the only option available. The New Negro movement detailed two new constructive channels through which the "'balked social feelings' of the American Negro can flow freely." The new ideas were racial and similar to the activism of the Old Negro, which was typified by the work of Booker T. Washington, but Locke insisted that the new strategies functioned "in a new and enlarged way." The New Negro would, firstly, "be the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with Twentieth Century civilization" and then secondly, have "the sense of a mission of rehabilitating the race in the world's esteem from that loss of prestige for which the fate and conditions of slavery have so largely been responsible" (Locke).

Harlem, Locke explained was the center of the movement, “home of the Negro’s Zionism . . . The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem.” The movement was global in its reach, so evocative that it also influenced francophone black writers in Africa, the Caribbean and in Paris. An African-American newspaper carrying news material in English, French and Spanish gathered from all quarters of America, the West Indies and Africa was maintained from Harlem for over five years.

Black writers of the New Negro Movement and those before were, for the most part, inspired to write about their circumstances in the New World. Their inspiration came from the black experience, which was the binary opposite of white power. Black Americans were segregated and marginalized. Publishers saw black writers as black, even though there may have been a period when “black writers were ‘in vogue’,” as Renaissance giant, Langston Hughes characterized white interest in black writing of the period. Black writers recognized the inequality of their treatment but still saw themselves as black, not in the same way that white racists recognized them as black, but they were black and had dignity and some had the mission of the New Negro Movement. They were black writers and they wrote with purpose, in regard to their circumstances in America. These black writers embraced who they were and they wrote with a sense of black identity; *they were race men & race women*. These black writers wrote to make art and they wrote for freedom. Langston Hughes penned the essay “Negro Artist and Racial Mountain” explaining the feeling:

Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of

creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. But let us look again at the mountain.

With changing times black writers' priorities had evolved with different mountaintops and peaks. The message of African-American literature became more expansive with the forward march of time and progress and with that expansion emerged some black writers who struggled with the classification of "black writer" and rejected it; Jean Toomer and George Schuyler are good examples. Jean Toomer was influenced by T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land* and considered Elliot to be part of the American group of writers that he wanted to join, "artists and intellectuals who were engaged in renewing American society at its multi-cultural core." *Cane*, considered Toomer's finest work, was hailed by critics and is seen as an important work of both the Lost Generation and the Harlem Renaissance, but Toomer did not want to be considered a black writer and did not want his book marketed as a black work. As he said to his publisher Horace Liveright, "My racial composition and my position in the world are realities that I alone may determine." George Schuyler wrote an essay titled "The Negro Art Hokum," which identifies a difference between the art of Africans and African-Americans, but argues that African-American and white American art are one in the same:

Negro art there has been, is and will be among the numerous black nations of Africa; but to suggest the possibility of any such development among the ten million colored people in this republic is self-evident foolishness . . . They are no more expressive or characteristic of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive or characteristic of the Caucasian race. In the field of drama little of any merit has been written by and about Negroes that could not have been written whites. The Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon. If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock . . . how much truer it must be of the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years. Aside from color, which ranges from very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American.

For those writers who did see the classification as stigmatizing and limiting, this perception came from their want of the same consideration and esteem that their white peers received in terms of regard from the world of publishing, critical evaluation from the academy and fame with the mainstream reading audience. But can a writer who is black not be a “black writer”? Before that question can be addressed it must be established why any writer writes, whatever their identity classifications may be through the distinguishing characteristics of race, gender, religion, sexual preference, nationality etc. Chester Himes claimed that:

The obvious answer, the one that first comes to mind, is that we write to express and perpetuate our intellectual and emotional experiences, our observations and conclusions. We write to relate to others the process of our thoughts, the creations of our imaginings. That is the pat answer (Dilemma of the negro novelist is United States 53).

So if Himes's assertion is true, then it would be difficult for a writer that is black not to be a "black writer". For the black American writer has experienced in his existence at least some degree of marginalization. He has been segregated, othered and terrorized psychologically, perhaps even physically. This brand of American style racist oppression has had to have had some affect and left something distinguishing, something unique. The affect, however, has not been a devastating one; black Americans have resisted oppression. White racism, despite leaving the black community in undeniable dysfunction, has not broken the black spirit. Black Americans have persevered. Black America has established its own new culture in America after being stripped of its own African identity. Black America's new culture has a rich theology, literature and a musical tradition that has been a dominant force in culture around the world for decades. Black Americans have suffered a unique brand of oppression, but have carried on with life and flourished. Some have failed; some have succeeded, but whatever the case, being black means something. African-American art is unique and often contains particularly spiritual and moral content when black artists incorporate their often painful American experience. Living with oppression means reacting to it, positively or negatively. The African-American writer's perspective has been influenced by the black American experience just as a writer of any particular identity classification that writes about their

life and experiences is a writer of their identity classification. One's identity shapes one's experiences; experience informs perspective. The depiction of oppression that permeates African-American literature does so because it is an expression of a significant part of the black American experience. What is different is how various writers engage the subject. Some do so rigorously; some do not. Some produce high art, such as Toni Morrison's *The Song of Solomon*, some create "fiction" for popular consumption, like Cecil Brown's *Life and Loves of Mr. Jive Ass Nigger*, but the black experience is the common denominator. The black writer that examines his existence, at some point must confront how racism has affected him.

Being a writer Chester Himes found it necessary to confront racism because he experienced it even though he did not want to be a "black writer." Himes said: "The writer seeks an interpretation of the whole of life from the sum of his experiences . . . He must find meaning regardless of the quality of his experiences" (Dilemma 53). But that was enough for Himes; being black, for him, was not the whole of his existence. Richard Wright, however, believed that because of the mistreatment that African-Americans had suffered, black writers have a responsibility to combat oppression in all its forms, not only as it relates to oneself or the black community. Wright argues that black writers now have a responsibility, with their particular sensibility borne of their suffering, to fight all oppression. Ralph Ellison, author of the 1952 novel *Invisible Man* which was selected in a 1965 poll of two hundred American writers, critics and editors as "the most distinguished American novel published in the twenty years since the Second World War," was dissatisfied with the sort of work that Wright was creating after he had really contemplated it and rejected outright the responsibility that Wright called for. Ellison

characterized Wright's work as being "overcommitted to ideology," even though Ellison expressed that he too, shares many of Wright's goals. Ellison said: "You might say that I was less a social determinist," (Shadow and Act 35). Ellison knew though, that black America had problems that needed to be addressed, but he felt differently than Wright about how to address them. So then does the black artist really have any responsibilities or are there different types of black writers? Or, are there just different types of writers? There is no question for Wright; according to his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," he states that black literature had to combat oppression of all sorts; it was the black writer's responsibility. But Ellison felt that Wright's writing was too ideological and wanted to distance himself from Wright's style, as *he* "did not want to write propaganda." Ellison wanted to write without a mandate; he wanted the freedom of not having a label.

Some black writers did not want any kind of label, mandate or expectation concerning what their work should be whether it came from black or white critics. But contradictorily, a primary component to being a commercially successful black writer has meant presenting a discussion of race to one's known and proven white audience in a certain and accepted way. Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Himes, wrote for white audiences. Wright, Baldwin and Ellison found success early doing so, while at the same time having diverse messages that they wanted to communicate. Three of these four writers were not communicating messages or presenting a personal image that white audiences were offended by, yet the writers did still affect change in America. As Irving Howe stated in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons,":

The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of

the old lies . . . [and] brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture. So, there clearly were some things that black writers could say to challenge racism, in pre-civil rights America, which the country was ready for and would not get the writer ostracized. America *was* changing, but very slowly, too slowly. After all, there was still need for the Civil Rights Movement. Himes whole literary perspective recognized that America was changing, but Wright still felt the need write in a way that his white audience was ready to absorb for them to read his work. And read his work they did. Wright's white audience made him the wealthiest black writer of his time, not withstanding the criticism he received from fellow black writers and feelings of alienation from his black reading audience who were still, however, proud of his success. Himes apparently could not connect with a white audience. In Chester Himes' autobiography *The Quality of Hurt*, he in retrospect explained why he thought that he was unable to make that connection and gave an example of one of his offences:

I think that many of the critics on the big weekly reviews disliked most the characterization of the industrialist Foster, who in my book called President Roosevelt "a cripple bastard, with a cripple bastard's sense of spite." I heard these words spoken in a Cleveland, Ohio country club. Maybe the critics had heard them too – maybe that was what they most disliked, my audacity in repeating them. I thought it was obvious that I was not trying to be audacious, but what is obvious to me is not always obvious to others. I think that what the great body of Americans most disliked was the fact I came too close to the truth. Reactionaries hate the truth and the world's rulers fear it; but it embarrasses the

liberals, perhaps because they can't do anything about it (*The Quality of Hurt* 101).

Even though Himes understood that America was changing and not yet “post-racial,” he spoke like a free man; he would not or did not know how to speak “the humble Negro novelist’s language.” America was changing slowly; a dialogue was beginning, but too slowly and Himes was angry, hurt and had a lot of pride. Himes voiced his frustration and his experience and he was unapologetic. Chester Himes did not only not win a white audience because he voiced a message that white audiences were not prepared for and unwilling to accept; Himes did not win a white audience because he was unapologetic about his anger and had an “unacceptable” personal image; he was virile and brazenly lusted after white women, at that time America’s biggest taboo. Himes was an angry black man and America was not prepared for and unwilling to embrace and celebratize a character like Chester Himes. It would in fact be many decades before America could pretend to accept the celebrity of angry, rich, outspoken black men, i.e. O.J. Simpson and Tiger Woods, who lusted after white women. Chester Himes was decades ahead of his time.

Himes did not receive any recognition, regard or serious criticism, in the United States for his writing for the majority of his career. In the literary landscape of pre-Civil Rights America, black writers who ignored what was expected of them by not voicing black themes that white audiences liked, i.e. themes that did not in any meaningful way challenge white power or comfort level, were simply ignored and not allowed to be recognized or heard because the message of their themes broke free from what was expected. These writers depicted an image of African-American life that contradicted

America's white supremacist view of how black people live and should be seen as living, that is, they should be appreciative, satisfied, and humble. So Chester Himes fled the oppressive United States for the African-American artist's haven, Paris, France, to find an audience. Himes' rejection at home was the defining discouragement of his career; it "broke his heart"; it influenced the direction of his writing in subsequent years, which reified the perception of him as a black writer by his eventual white audience. Himes is now remembered for the hardboiled, pulp detective fiction that he wrote to earn fast cash while struggling to establish himself as a serious writer while in self-imposed exile.

Celebrated American crime writer James Sallis was influenced initially by Himes' detective fiction, but later discovered his uncelebrated literary fiction written while he still lived in the United States prior to his flight to Europe:

I discovered that Himes had a . . . first career as a literary writer, beginning with stories published in *Esquire* in the company of such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Ring, Lardner and Bertrand Russell . . . A much acclaimed first novel was followed by two or three others. Then Chester Himes had fallen off the edge of the earth . . . Himes had not dropped off the face of the earth, of course but had gone to Europe to write his detective stories . . . (Sallis XII)

Sallis is wrong about one thing: Himes did not flee the United States to write pulp fiction in Paris. Himes left to try to get an audience to take his work seriously. While struggling in France, often starving, a magazine publisher suggested he write pulp to earn quick cash.

. . . and as I read backward from them through the earlier books, then on into the two-volume autobiography, my picture of Himes changed radically. I'd begun

seeing him simply as an extension of American crime fiction, one of the first great documenters of the inner city, but increasingly I came to perceive him as I do now: as America's central black writer. Himes stood squarely at the crossroad of tradition and innovation, shaking together in his mix remains the Harlem Renaissance, the energies of newly developing genre fictions, African-American tropes and arealist storytelling styles, the found life of the streets about him. Again and again he told the story of great promises forever gone unfulfilled, of men who perish from lack of thought in the shade of great ideas, creating a literature in its absolute individuality, in its strange power and quirkiness, in its cruelty and cockeyed compassion, ineffably American. (Sallis intro xii)

Being black influenced how Himes was treated, which affected how he felt, which shaped what he wrote about which determined how he is remembered. So because of what he wrote about, despite the desire to escape any labels or expectations, Himes is seen as black writer.

Richard Wright and Chester Himes had different ideas about what the black writer should be, that is, what the role of what a writer who is black should be, if there is one at all. Their positions are well argued in their respective essays on the topic, "Blueprint for Negro Literature" and "Dilemma of the negro novelist in the United States". Wright began his argument by quoting Lenin, stating that:

Oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the bourgeoisie more brilliantly than some of the bourgeoisie themselves. The psychological importance of this becomes evident when one recalls that oppressed minorities and especially petty bourgeoisie sections of oppressed minorities, strive to

assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so, they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere. But not only among the oppressed petty bourgeoisie does this occur (Blueprint).

Wright is saying that the petty bourgeoisie are blinded by their desire to assimilate into the bourgeoisie, so their voice is corrupted by their desire to be something that is negative, that is the petty bourgeoisie strives to embrace a materialistic worldview. And then Wright says of the workers:

lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness. They display a greater freedom and initiative in pushing their claims upon civilization than even the petty bourgeoisie. Their organizations show greater strength, adaptability, and efficiency than any other group in society (Blueprint).

Wright saw a divide between the civil rights work of militant black workers and black writers, which he suggests resemble the petty bourgeoisie. Negro workers, Wright explains, struggled to free the Scottsboro boys, and black writers were off doing other things. Wright further argued that black literature had not been sophisticated and that white America had not seen it as such; black writing had been, when not for a white audience:

. . . for literate Negroes something to be proud of. At best, Negro writing has been external to the lives of educated Negroes themselves. That the productions of their writers should have been something of a guide in their daily living is a matter, which seems never to have been raised seriously. Negro writing became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation (Blueprint).

The criticism of Wright's writing by fellow black writers is for some of the same reasons that Wright condemned other black writers. Wright did not write for a black audience, but nor did he write "credit to your race" material for "conspicuous ornamentation" either.

Neither Wright's nor Himes's point of view is wrong or right. Neither does one hold more validity than the other, but each writer's message does call for profoundly different functions and depictions of life. Wright's novel *Native Son* and Himes's novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* depict black men confronting the same dilemma: how they will choose to exist in a society that seeks to oppress their humanity and masculinity.

Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is a lumpen proletariat symbol, or a stereotype of the "brute Negro" figures destroyed psychologically and emotionally by racism and is a vehicle for advancing Wright's ideology. Like Karl Marx in his *The Communist Manifesto* characterized the segment of the working class that would not be helpful to the organized militant segment of the working class in standing up to their oppressors, Bigger Thomas is unmistakably such a symbol for the African-American cause against their oppression. Bigger Thomas types are not helpful in standing up to racism, nor are they positive literary examples to provide inspiration to a black reading audience.

Himes's protagonist, Bob Jones, in contrast to Wright's Bigger Thomas, is an upwardly mobile figure that is a depiction and an exploration of the feelings of a black man who is close to mainstream America, close to freedom and because of that proximity yearns for freedom all the more. Himes's protagonist attempts to negotiate racism with the attitude: "Race was a handicap, sure . . . but, hell, I didn't have to marry it." Jones's attitude and Jones's questioning of the way things were are a good example of what Wright claimed black literature needed and what he said was at the time lacking; Jones's

attitude could be something of a guide for the daily living of black Americans that Wright called for in black literature. Bigger Thomas and Bob Jones have contrasting ideas about their existence. Himes even discusses what Bigger Thomas means metaphorically in his novel when his protagonist, Jones, is asked by another character whether Bigger Thomas is the appropriate symbol of Negro oppression. Jones responds, “Well, you couldn’t pick a better person to prove the point. But after you prove it, then what?” Wright’s novel is art that has a political agenda. Himes’s novel is an exploration of emotions, Himes own emotions after his negative experience in Los Angeles. Both novelists engage racism, but they do so differently. They want the same outcome for America, but disagree with what the black writer’s role is in the engagement of America’s most enduring problem. Wright for his efforts received all the recognition, regard and critical evaluation that any serious writer could want. Himes did not. Himes did not achieve anything approaching recognition until he was fifty and had embarked on the Harlem Cycle of detective novels, the work for which he is still best known.

Angus Calder suggests the necessity for this generation’s critics of black literature to evaluate Himes and give him the recognition that he deserves. In his essay “Chester Himes and the Art of Fiction,” to prove his thesis: that a “popular” novelist may be a more effective “serious” novelist than most of his “serious” contemporaries, Calder lists a number of examples to prove his point, but finally makes Himes the center of his argument. Calder begins by arguing that:

The case should not need proving – Dickens has been there for a hundred years as blatant evidence in its favor. But it does, because “serious” critics are infested with all kinds of irrelevant notions about what “serious” achievement in fiction

consists of; and for ninety of those hundred years, until a very recent comeback, Dickens has been snubbed by “serious” critics.

Calder goes on to list other writers, but also explains that the examples of this bias extend to other art forms as well like music. Jazz, he claims, is “automatically discounted as non-art by most ‘serious-minded’ people. Film is another example. Calder identifies how critics label what he characterizes as the scrappy, pretentious films of Jean-Luc Goddard as high art, and dismiss the magnificent craftsmanship of Anthony Mann (Calder 103). Himes’ main topics: race, gender and sexuality make him a convenient if not attractive writer to evaluate, as the critical literary scene has become desirous of discussing these topics after the absurdity of the long repression of these topics from discussion.

In Himes’ day America was attempting to hang on to its racist ways in a transparent way. Racism was not penalized when it was openly shown as it is today. In so-called “post racial” America where people of color are supposed to enjoy a level playing field and open displays of racism are denounced, Himes message is at home, his frustration is recognized and there is an open and recognized discourse on racism within the academy. Himes’s writing in its day advocated a complete and most importantly an honest discussion of America’s ways. Himes was in no way inappropriate, his concerns were valid and his message on time; speaking out against injustice is always on time. Himes’s voice was ahead of its time in terms of developing an audience. White America was not interested in Himes’s message while he was hugely popular in France. Today Himes’s voice is on time in regard to audience. While many of Himes’s characters situations and his characterization of Harlem are dated, Himes’s concerns are still valid and can resonate with today’s readers and critics.

In order to give Himes his due today it is critical to understand why Himes was blocked in the first place:

Again and again he has held a mirror to this country, hoping the monster would see itself and feel some shame, know what it was. But the monster breaks all mirrors that show truth, and its madness finally drives the man from it. He stands far away, on a cliff perhaps, looking down as the monster breaks all baubles one by one, stuffs itself, fouls its nest, steps in its hatred. Until one day the monster has nothing left, nothing and desperately it turns its eye to that cliff. But the man is gone (Calder 137).

White Americans could not handle the truth about themselves:

When *If He Hollers Let Him Go* was surging toward the bestseller list, a female employee in the office of his own publisher issued a stop print directive. People were trying to buy the novel and could not get it because the bookstore orders were not being filled (Calder 138).

In his autobiography *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes tells of another malignant act deliberately perpetrated against the book:

If He Hollers Let Him Go was considered by the editorial committee for Doubleday Doran's George Washinton Carver Memorial Award of twenty-five hundred dollars, but it was rejected because one of the women editors said it nauseated her . . . To add insult to injury, the advertising copy that appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature* referred to my novel as a "series of epithets punctuated with spit (140).

Then Calder explained:

Obviously, to me at any rate, what enrages white people against Himes's books, particularly the woman who reacted so violently against *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, is the realistic manner in which black and white characters and relations are portrayed. In *If He Hollers*, a white woman who falsely accuses the black hero of raping her is depicted as she is – a racist woman frustrated by her forbidden sexual desire for the black hero. A theme that is at once so historically rooted in race relations and yet so emotionally inflammable that we, both whites and blacks, have gone to maddening lengths to deny it as a fact of our lives and have made its acceptance a monumental taboo, seeking thereby to insulate ourselves against its existence. The fact is interracial love, occurring specifically and particularly between white women and black men

. . . I have heard some readers express the feeling that Himes has been inordinately preoccupied with this theme . . . Those of us who harbor a thoroughly ingrained repulsion toward interracial love, and we all are socialized in this way to some degree, find works dealing with this subject either irritating or utterly disgusting. In large part, it has been Himes's apparent preoccupation with this theme that has figured in the controversial and often condemnatory reactions toward him (Calder 143).

Malevolent deeds have also been perpetrated against Himes' books having nothing to do with black and white sex. A case in point is his second novel, *Lonely Crusade*, which centers on Lee Gordon, a black trade union organizer. Several promotional appearances scheduled for Himes in New York were canceled at the last minute, without explanation,

and the author and his work were harassed and maligned by various political factions in America, by white and black (Calder 140).

Chapter 5: If He Hollers

“I simply hadn’t accepted my status as a nigger.”

Chester Himes

“I was thirty-one and whole and when I went to L.A. and thirty-five and shattered when I left to go to New York . . . It was from the accumulation of my racial hurts that I wrote my bitter novel of protest *If he Hollers Let Him Go*” (*Quality of Hurt* 75). *If He Hollers Let Him Go* went largely unnoticed in 1945, the year of its publication. The novel, in contrast to *Native Son*, depicts the life of an upwardly mobile, young black man, Bob Jones. Jones has a supervisory position, leaderman, at the fictional Atlas Ship Yard, a wartime naval shipbuilding facility. Jones has an upper-middle class girlfriend, the daughter of a prominent “Negro” doctor; she is light-skinned enough to “pass,” which was an envied material status symbol in black America in the 1940s. Jones has a brand new car, a 1942 Buick Roadmaster, “when the rich white folks out in Beverly [Hills] couldn’t even buy a new car,” (Himes 10); new cars had become unavailable due to the wartime industrial production effort. However, despite all of Jones’ material possessions, seeming success and upward mobility he lives in debilitating fear. Jones’ fear most noticeably affects his sleep. Every night Jones has nightmares because of the cruel, burdensome and unjust exercise of authority in his life that is the result of society’s oppression and hatred of him. Bob Jones is a black man and for this reason alone society hates him. Jones’ waking existence during the days spanning the novel are spent contemplating a decision that will determine his identity for the rest of his life. The Society in which Jones inhabits is determined to oppress him in every way it can and Jones wants to rebel against that determination and overcome all the limitations placed on

him even if he doesn't necessarily really want all of what society says he cannot have. What Jones truly yearns for is freedom, the freedom to choose what he wants for his life without any limitations placed upon him because of racist policy, but his girlfriend, Alice Harrison, wants him to give in to racial oppression and become "important" in the "Negro" world, like her father, for the sake of their "security." But Alice's fainthearted vision for their future is a lifestyle that would devastate Jones' spirit:

I knew I'd wake up someday and say to hell with it, I didn't want to be the biggest Negro who ever lived, neither Toussaint L'Ouverture nor Walter White. Because deep inside of me, where the white folks couldn't see, it didn't mean a thing. If you couldn't swing down Hollywood Boulevard and know that you belonged; if you couldn't make a polite pass at Lana Turner at Ciro's without having the gendarmes beat the black off you for getting out of your place; if you couldn't eat a thirty dollar dinner at an hotel without choking on the insults, being a great big 'Mister' Nigger didn't mean a thing (Himes 153).

Much of Jones' waking existence is spent coping with the challenge of trying to live as if the boundaries of a racist society did not exist. Most of the attitude that Jones receives is not from common racism, but from angry whites who insist on putting him in "his place" after he has simply acted like a man in a free society. For instance, Jones stands up to the insubordination of a white female employee, which gets him demoted. In another example, Jones takes his girlfriend to dinner at a segregated white hotel; they humiliate him. And, he eventually makes a play for a white female, the same one who cost him his management position, and that almost gets him killed. Jones is upwardly mobile and is a manager at the shipyard, which is a far cry from Bigger Thomas's life in the slums of

Chicago, but Jones is antagonized on his job to an extent that threatens his sanity. While Jones *is* a manager and supervisor of employees, he is only allowed to manage black workers. Then he has little or no power to help the black workers who look up to him and depend upon him to help them with their similar frustrations. Jones describes a situation wherein it is revealed that white laborers are not expected to work for black supervisors:

White mechanics could . . . get any tacker they wanted, but he made coloured mechanics wait until . . . a coloured tacker was free. Most of the white tackers didn't like to work for coloured mechanics, and Hank wouldn't assign them to (Himes 24).

That slight, that lack of respect acts as well as any of the other unjust exercises of authority that debilitate Jones psychological well-being, yet at the same time it heartens Jones's ideal of who he wants to be, the choices he will have to make and how he will feel about those choices. Jones wants freedom. Jones wants manhood; he does not want to be a leading black of a marginalized world. This is Jones's dilemma, to be a man or to be a "big fish in a small pond." Alice would like Jones to submit to racism for the sake of their "security," but Jones prefers freedom and respect. With Jones' desires and dilemma made clear, with his frustration apparent, the novel makes transparent its actual antagonist, which is the racist establishment itself. Madge, Mac, the Maître d', etc, are incidental players in the depiction of a racist society. Madge is a laborer, a tacker, but is also a voluptuous peroxide blond from Texas whose pure sexuality plays a role in Jones's unfolding story. In a particular scene involving a depiction of Jones's powerlessness, Jones tries to get a tacker to assist one of his mechanics. A white supervisor who is sympathetic to Jones selects Madge, and Jones says to her: "Look, Madge, Don said you

could work with me for a while” (Himes 27), the story illustrates that white laborers refuse to work for black supervisors:

A wild excited look came into her eyes and her mouth went tight-lipped and brutal; she looked as if she was priming herself to scream. This bitch is crazy, I thought, but I walked on up to her and picked up her line as if nothing was happening. ‘It’s just a short job,’ I said. ‘I’ll carry your line for you.’

She came out of her phony act and jerked her line out of my hand, “I ain’t gonna work with no nigger!” she said in a harsh, flat voice (Himes 27).

Jones’s reaction was swift and telling, “I didn’t even think about it. I just said it right out of my stomach ‘Screw you then, you cracker bitch!’”(Himes 27). Their boss’s reaction was equally swift and telling; Jones would be demoted for his hasty reaction to her insubordination. But, before Jones’s demotion there was Madge’s typifying reaction:

“Are you gonna let a Nigger talk tuh me like that?” Madge’s reaction is representative of the power that subordinate level white workers could wield over senior level black supervisors, which legitimized the disrespect they were able to show them without fear of being disciplined. Black supervisors, it is revealed, were only there to keep black laborers under control when white employees, labor or management mistreated them:

‘You know as well as I do that part of your job was to help me keep down trouble between the white and coloured workers . . . That was one of the reasons I put you on that job. I figured you’d have sense enough to get along with the people you had to work with instead of *running around with a chip on your shoulder like most coloured boys*’ (Himes 29 italics mine).

The Atlas Ship Yard acknowledges, condones and practices racism by letting its black employees know that they are worth less than their white employees:

‘I’m surprised at you, Bob. I figured you were too intelligent to lose your head about something like that. I figured you had manners, more respect for women than that. *You know* how Southern people talk, how *they feel* about working with coloured boys. They have to get used to it, *you gotta give them time*. What makes me so mad with you is, goddammit, 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*’”
(Himes 29 italics mine).

Jones’s reaction displays the level of frustration that he had reached and how he would react in the future to similar and even greater stressors. Madge’s reaction is more symbolic, as it is representative of the white working class’s attitude toward the black working class, and more particularly her attitude toward black men and is an indication of how she will react to encounters with Jones in the future. Jones is emotionally strained by racist policy and Madge has the white working class’s issues with black workers, which has a long history. Black workers and newly arrived 19th Century European immigrant workers competed for menial labor jobs, and newly arrived European immigrants embraced American-style racism in order to advance within its society. Bob attempts to refer the incident of his unjust demotion, which resulted from the racist policy of not requiring white laborers to work for black supervisors to higher a authority, the union shop steward, Herbie Frieberger. Jones wants Madge to be instructed that she must work for black supervisors, but Frieberger supports the racist policy of the shipyard: “Jesus Christ, Bob you know the union can’t do that . . . this is dynamite. If we tried that, half

the workers in the yard would walk out” (Himes 35). Jones true to previous form reacts to Frieberger’s position:

. . . to hell with you and this lousy Jim Crow union too! . . . When I came to this lousy city in ‘41 all I did was bump my head against Jim Crow shops that were organized by your union . . . this lousy local never fought for Negroes to be hired –probably fought against it (Himes 35).

Jones’s goal is to have freedom, freedom to be a success, freedom to date white women - if he wishes, freedom to be a man, but he is frustrated by the establishment’s unwillingness to allow him to do these things. Jones is also frustrated by the ideology of the bourgeoisie on his side of the racial divide. His girlfriend Alice, the middleclass daughter of a prominent doctor, desires to find comfort in “adjusting to the limitations of their race.” Jones in the midst of his troubles seeks the support and encouragement of his girlfriend Alice, but she instead reveals her opposing views of Jones’s problems and the position of black people in America. She first explains to Jones that his biggest problem is that he does not know what he wants to be:

“Bob your greatest difficulty stems from your not knowing what you want to do in life,” she said. . . . “If you concentrated your energies on a single objective and worked very hard toward that end . . . these minor incidents and day –to-day irritations would not affect you so greatly.”

With that “encouragement” Alice reveals a lot about herself to Jones, “I gave a long deep sigh and looked away from her, wondering if it was too much to ask of her to face it for a minute” (Himes 96). Jones meant that he wondered if she could face the fact that she and all black Americans of her class were not free:

Maybe she couldn't I thought – maybe none of her class could face it. Maybe that was why it was so insane when it broke out – because she had to keep it buried as much as possible, refuse to look at it, to recognize it, to discuss it; maybe that was her way of keeping on living, to keep her frustrations hidden, covered over with compromises, just like staying on my muscle and trying to fight back and getting kicked in the mouth every minute was mine. Maybe we'd never get together, I thought. But I listened (Himes 97).

Jones at that instant comes to believe that what he sees as her compromises to racism are similar to his outbursts; they are both reactions to the frustration of their talents by the establishment. However, with the realization that they suffer from the same root stressor, Jones still has no sympathy for Alice. Jones feels no pity:

“A certain amount of frustration is latent in most people –people of all races,” she went on. “But in you – It won't help to generalize,” I cut her off. “Bob, I've been thinking seriously that perhaps I'm not the type of woman for you. *I'm ambitious and demanding*. I want to be important in the world. I want a husband who is important and respected and *wealthy enough so that I can avoid a major part of the discriminatory practices which I am sensible enough to know I cannot change*. I don't want to be pulled down by a person who can't *adjust himself to the limitations of his race*—a person who feels he has to make a fight out of every issue—a person who'd jeopardize his future because of some slight or, say, because some ignorant white person should call him a nigger—”

Himes' novel is really about his own experience being human and living in circumstances where one is not treated humanely:

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' kitchens. 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 gaddamned 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.

Himes's novel is about a minority people, black people, not being treated humanely by the majority people, white people. White audiences did not prove interested in reading about America's mistreatment of black characters that were depicted sensitively in Himes's day; doing so must have made them feel too uncomfortable. Himes showed America his truth, his experience, and the way he felt in America; he suffered for it. Himes's reality and truth did not have commercial value and sincerely expressing his reality only further marginalized him. *If He Hollers Let Him Go* was considered for an award, but was blocked by familiar reasons:

If He Hollers Let Him Go was considered by the editorial committee for Doubleday, Doran's George Washington Carver Memorial Award of twenty-five hundred dollars, but it was rejected because one of the women editors said it nauseated her" (*Quality of Hurt* 77).

Himes art, his ambition as a writer, was to find meaning in his existence, in being human, not in being black in a racist society that glorifies white skin and demonizes black skin. Racism is one part of humanity that Himes explores; it's one he knew and

experienced. Himes depicts a black man with a decidedly intellectual approach to combating his oppression. But neither Himes nor his novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* ever reached the heights of fame or popularity of Richard Wright or his novel *Native Son*. Wright fights against a society that oppresses black men who have been destroyed by racism. He creates the Bigger Thomas character to depict the circumstances that are designed to destroy black men. Wright then offers up an anti-heroic depiction of a rapist and killer. The purpose of his sympathetic depiction was to advocate his ideology to the particular audience to which he makes his appeals. Wright's suggestion in his "Blueprint" calls for all black art to be functional, which is limiting for black writers because he encourages them to write about being black in a specific way all the time. Himes does something different. Wright is not wrong in his own method for his own voice, but Himes has a different voice, one that does not conform to Wright's "Blueprint."

George Schuyler was critical of similar beliefs prior to Wright's essay when Alain Locke raised them, in his essay "The New Negro". Schuyler argued that "the Aframerican is merely a lamp blacked Anglo-Saxon." What Schuyler said is, the idea behind, Wright's blueprint reifies "the old myth palmed off by Negrophobists for all these many years . . . that there are 'fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences' between black and white Americans" (Schuyler 99). Himes work is interesting because while discussing race, a topic most black writers broach, his perspective transcends "*the* discussion of race" by introducing a discussion of the meaning behind the motivation of the human behavior of people in the United States, but racism does happen to be at the core of American society and a major factor of every black American's life so, Himes's characters experience racism at every turn. "By searching for the meaning of life in the

realities of our experiences,” as Himes explains he does with intellectual characters, he reaches out to a, non-specific, intellectual audience. Bob Jones deals with racism in a way given to study, reflection, and speculation about the purpose of his existence in a way that Wright’s *Bigger* Thomas does not. Himes writes about suffering. His characters are humane; their human suffering is increased for other reason than their blackness. The suffering is part of being human accepts and reports, but then asks, “So what’s it about?” Wright makes *Bigger* seem more “black” than human. Wright uses black stereotypes to reach a specifically white audience. Historically speaking *Native Son* is characterized as the first black novel to break through to a white readership, as if this recognition denotes the inherent quality of novel; because without white readership a novel can’t be good. So, black literature would have to conform to the taste of a racist white audience in order to get high marks from the critics that seem to matter, racist white critics. Does being black transcend being human for Wright? Of course it does not. Wright’s struggle has the best of intentions and is for black people who are being oppressed, but blacks are people so why do they have to be restricted in the literature that they produce? Or does Wright just somehow expect that black people will always be subordinate to whites in terms of power?

The formative years of Wright’s and Himes’s lives, the vastly different experiences of their early years, forged different kinds of writers. The two writers had wholly different outlooks on what racism was, and how to address it; they experienced racism differently in different regions of the country. Wright experienced an impoverished upbringing in the American South, experiencing a more physical and overt terrorism, while Himes experienced a bourgeois upbringing in the North, experiencing a

far more subtle and psychological non-stop racial bullying. Experiences that Himes characterizes as shocking and insults to his personhood, which hurt his feelings were experiences that Wright was all too familiar with and toughened to; Wright expected the indignities from racist white people that Himes often lamented.

While anti-racism is the bedrock feature of each writer's body of work, each writer's most recognized novels varied in form, Himes's fame stemmed from his work in the Pulp genre while Wright's celebrity stemmed from the Protest Novel. When Himes wrote in the Protest Novel form, novels such as *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, *Lonely Crusade*, and *Cast the First Stone*, he retained an uncompromising artistry that depicted the condition of his country, and explained the condition of his mentality. Himes explained his racial hurts as he felt them and depicted the flaws of society he was forced to live in to the rest of the world as he saw them. Himes's uncompromising artistry brought to bear an honesty that white publishers nor white readers had any capacity to give attention to with criticism or contemplation. Himes's Protest literature was not just ignored; it gained him enemies. Himes found it necessary to flee his home country to pursue his work in France.

Wright sought to change the hearts of men to change the society. Himes observed, reported, and explained. Wright wrote to stop racism by changing hearts and outlooks through the form of the protest novel, so it was necessary for his novels to appeal to white readers. He had to produce literature that would not offend them. A white audience is what he wanted. For his novels to receive the criticism and contemplation that he wanted; he had to sacrifice a sincere depiction of what Himes saw as the truth about America.

In this exclusive discussion of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Native Son* it could appear, that as a critic, I have a preference for Himes's point of view as presented in his essay "The dilemma of the Negro Writer in America" to Wright's "The Blueprint for Negro Literature". I do highly appreciate Himes, but in a different discussion using another of Wright's books, a different conclusion could also be reached. Wright continuously calibrated his form to speak his voice the way he wanted to be heard. I value Wright's and Himes' work equally. But, the body of Wright's work has a seriousness that I cannot ignore as being more earnest.

I don't believe a writer can write a Protest Novel without intentionally setting out to write in that genre, as Himes did with *If He Hollers let him Go*, but looking back on Himes body of work in the pulp detective fiction genre, he unintentionally blurred the lines of the two genres because of the indelible mark racism left on him. His intentional protest novels, because of his honesty as an uncompromising artist, did not sell, but while trying to survive during periods of starvation, Himes was able to release his observations, voice his sentiments of anti-racism, gain critical acclaim, and win coveted literary prizes in a most unexpected way, particularly unexpected to himself, from a genre of writing not his first choice of expression.

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