

The Investigation of a Tangle Case in Chester Himes's *Cotton Comes to Harlem*

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Abstract : The seventh novel in Himes's detective series, Cotton Comes to Harlem, is generally considered the best of the set, ranking with the works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Written in less than two weeks, while he was "living in a little crummy hotel in Paris" under very strained emotional and economic circumstances, the novel, when translated and published in Paris in 1958, was awarded a French literary prize, the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière. This description of Harlem life brings us closer to understanding why jazz is so significant to the Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, and their inability to understand what it says is perhaps indicative of why they never fully comprehend the world they patrol.

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

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Notions 2018, Vol. IX, No.1,
pp. 17-22, Article No. 3
Received on 04/03/2018
Approved on 27/03/2018

Online available at :
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=34](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=34)

Chester Himes is one of the most significant black American writers of his generation. His career has been described as having two major phases. In his first five novels, he worked largely within the tradition of protest naturalism and was regarded as a disciple of Richard Wright. In his later novels, he adapted the detective novel to the Harlem milieu; although these novels were originally treated as potboilers, they eventually became recognized as Himes's major achievement. The seventh novel in Himes's detective series, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, is generally considered the best of the set, ranking with the works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Written in less than two weeks, while he was "living in a little crummy hotel in Paris" under very strained emotional and economic circumstances, the novel, when translated and published in Paris in 1958, was awarded a French literary prize, the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière.

Himes was inspired by two detectives, Himes met in Los Angeles in the 1940's, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson were serious and, as their nicknames imply, deadly enforcers of social order and justice. Maintaining balance through a carefully organized network of spies disguised as junkies, drunks, and even nuns soliciting alms for the poor at the most unusual times and places, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are aggressive, fearless, and genuinely concerned with the community's welfare and improvement. They wage a relentless, unorthodox, and often-personal battle against Harlem's criminal elements. Fiercely loyal to each other, they are forced to be "tough" and mutually protective. They operate in an arena where most people consider police officers public enemies. Honest, dedicated to their profession, and motivated largely by a moral conscience—tinged with a certain amount of cynicism—they possess a code of ethics comparable (although not identical) to those of the Hammett/Chandler heroes.

Cotton Comes to Harlem begins in Harlem at a "back to Africa" rally sponsored by the Reverend Deke O'Malley, who is deceptively bilking his gullible followers. The rally is interrupted by a gang of thieves who steal the raised money and hide it in a bale of cotton, which they lose on their escape. Into this plot come two African American detectives, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, two of the toughest police officers in New York. The rest of the novel involves their attempts to recover the loot, expose the fraud, and make amends to the local residents. The ending of the novel provides an ironic twist, as a poor, old man who found the bale does go to Africa to live out the dream promised by the Reverend O'Malley at the novel's opening.

There are two instances in Chester Himes's *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965) when the detective protagonists, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones,

momentarily interrupt their investigations of a tangled case involving fraud, murder, robbery and a host of other standards of the thriller genre, in order to debate the meaning of jazz. In each example, the music assumes a racial significance, conveying—or attempting to convey—a message that cannot be spoken in English.

What quickly becomes clear in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (as well as in Himes's other detective novels) is that the restrictive definitions of Harlem life offered, for example, by the police simply won't suffice. Where Captain Brice seeks to discipline a community "made up" of whores, murderers and thieves, and Coffin Ed and Grave Digger imagine some kind of essentialized black identity in need of protection, the novel's less formal settings, such as bars, churches, restaurants, and the opening barbecue illustrate the diversity of the city. Thus, feelings of powerlessness and imprisonment and of vibrant sexuality (that is, the representative mythologized visions of the ghetto) are juxtaposed with challenges to the status quo, such as Deke's fraudulent Back-To-Africa scheme. Although Deke is condemned by Ed and Digger for exploiting the desperation of the local community, he also provides an example of how the lawbreaker can, in Manthia Diawara's words, "draw black people into the informal sector by keeping alive the dream of becoming rich promptly, and circumventing the colonizing systems"(9). Although finally unsuccessful, Deke initially does this and more—to the "starry-eyed black people ... putting their chips on hope," he promises a return to Africa, "our native land" (7). In other words, he offers what seems to them to be a means of rewriting the self outside American history. Himes's urban space is irreducible to (un)comfortable static definitions, with the representation of Deke emerging from the scene of Iris Hill's brutal murder into a crowded 135th Street epitomising the multiplicity of possible worlds in what Himes calls "that big turbulent sea of black humanity which is Harlem" (81).

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

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

white folks and the Negro problem. (81)

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

Likewise, the almost exclusively white police force functions as an example of what Henry Louis Gates has called (in a different context) the centre's attempts to "preserve ... alterity," which "result in the homogenization of the other as, simply other." (3) The process ranges from the linguistically inscribed racism of utterances such as Lieutenant Anderson's "There's always one black bean," (15) through to the reaction when two white officers are killed when Deke "escapes" from custody. In contrast to the indifference to the deaths of the African Americans in the opening chapter, this incident brings the whole police hierarchy into the precinct station which looks "like headquarters for the invasion of Harlem." The extent of the process is illustrated by the response when Coffin Ed and Grave Digger enter the office, and are "stared at as if they were criminals themselves" (118-119). Any sense of differentiation within the African American community is denied at this moment of crisis, a point exemplified by Captain Brice's angry threat (made in front of Ed and Digger) to "arrest every black son of a bitch in Harlem" (120).

Perhaps Himes's iconographic method can be seen more clearly in one of the spectacular scene near the end of "*Cotton Comes to Harlem*". Grave Digger and Coffin Ed have unearthed two vicious mobsters hiding in a church, and engage them in a gun duel. Because they anticipated fighting in darkness, the detectives had loaded their pistol with tracer bullets and everything they hit burst into flame. Himes takes full advantage of his juxtaposition between the sacred objects in the church and the burning criminals.

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are often brutal in their search for the guilty; this aspect of their characters, however, is directly related to the principal issues of the series and to Himes's vision of the essence of American life: violence. In a discussion of his perception of the detective genre with the novelist John A. Williams, Himes shed some light on the reasons for the pervasive presence of often-hideous forms of physical violence in his works: It's just plain and simple violence in narrative form. 'Cause no one, *no one*, writes about violence the way that Americans do. As a matter of fact, for the simple reason that no one understands violence or experiences violence like the American civilians do. . . . American violence is public life, it's a public way of life, it became a form, a detective story form.

Indeed, more than one critic has attacked Himes's novels on the basis of gratuitous physical violence. When practiced by Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, however, brutal outbursts are, more often than not, justifiable: caught between the dangers inherent in their quest for a better community and the long arm of the white institution that supposedly protects them, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson are forced to be coldly effective through the only means at their disposal. Certainly their role as black representatives of the white power structure defines the very tenuous nature of their relationship to the Harlem community and accounts for most of the novels' uncertainties and much of their suspense.

On another level, however, the excessive physical violence in Himes's novels is related to another aspect of the author's artistic and ideological perspectives—namely, the concern for place, real and imaginary. Harlem represents the center and circumference of the African American experience: It is the symbolic microcosm and the historical matrix of Himes's America. Isolated, besieged by the outside world and turning inward on itself, Harlem is, on one hand, a symbol of disorder, chaos, confusion, and self-perpetuating pain and, on the other, an emblem of cultural and historical achievement. The duality and contradiction of its identity is the source of the tension that animates Himes's plots and propels them toward...

The almost mythical struggle of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are defined best in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem* a black con man named Deke O'Malley poses as a preacher and uses a Back to Africa rally to cheat Harlem's poor out of \$87,000. Though, the rally is hijacked by white gunmen and the money which ends up in a bale of cotton bounces around Harlem, physically and metaphorically.

Cotton Comes to Harlem is one a series of crime novels set in New York's Harlem and featuring two African American detectives, a series Himes called his Harlem domestic books. The series began when his French publisher Marcel Duhamel

contracted him to write a novel for Gallimard's La Série Noire, a notable series of crime fiction published in France. In this novel, Himes concentrates as much on the social, political, and economic conditions of the people of Harlem as he does on the solving of crimes. As Himes carefully explores the racism inherent in American culture, he chronicles the world of his characters sympathetically, and without becoming didactic he demonstrates the harmful effects of almost four hundred years of oppression and exploitation of African Americans.

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