Good, Bad, and Beautiful: Chester Himes’s Femmes in Harlem

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In his hard-boiled detective fiction series set in Harlem, Chester Himes created a wide variety of recurring African American female character types. In this essay, I focus on The Crazy Kill (1959/1989), assessing the extremely ambitious, sexually alluring, scheming, and manipulative outlaw female characters. Himes’s novels suggest that viewing these female characters as merely immoral or unethical is too simplistic. Context, history, traditions, political, and socioeconomic imperatives count. However, because of genre expectations established for more than 100 years, an assertive female character may be overly determined as merely a femme fatale. Also, because of traditions established depicting African American female characters as wanton, overly sexualized beings, the expectation that a racialized female character is morally objectionable is rooted more in racism than in evidence of the character’s conduct. I suggest Himes challenges traditional expectations established by the genre for female characters as well as time-honored popular culture depictions of racialized characters, by offering an affirming critical read of his ambitious Harlem female characters.

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From 1957 until 1969, nine hard-boiled novels were published in the police detective series that author, Chester Himes, termed his Harlem “domestic novels” (Fabre 1995, 16). The “Harlem” he created as the series’ setting was not based on specific realities with which the reader might readily identify in relation to the historically famous Manhattan neighborhood. Rather, Himes created a cultural milieu on an urban home turf that fashioned itself in his imagination over time. The black female characters Himes created for his Harlem are a force to be reckoned with each time the reader encounters them. They are all ages, shapes, and hues. They are raucous, outspoken, and often violent. They dress in vivid colors and wear an abundance of jewelry and make-up. They wear big hairstyles that are dyed blond, bright red, or orange. They revel in the sexuality suggested by the tight-fitting clothes they wear over their ample bodies. They are characters that many readers may at the first sighting find comical, vulgar, or, at the least, excessive. And yet, Himes portrays these Harlem female characters as physically beautiful and, on many levels, as the most
respected members of their fictional community group. In an interview recorded in 1983, Himes discussed his love of blues and jazz, and his admiration for the hard-living but magnificently talented jazz singers, Bessie Smith and Billy Holiday. Of Holiday he says, “Lady Day was a queen. Stubborn as a mule, completely indomitable, but with a lot of class. She was beautiful” (Fabre 141). It is in that spirit that most of Himes’s female characters are constructed in the Harlem series. They are females with obvious faults, and yet they exude personal strengths and talents that are fundamental to who they are, and for many readers—like Himes—that essential quality makes them alluring and beautiful. Himes’s African American female characters go against the grain of not only the femme fatale tradition in hard-boiled detective fiction, but the long and enduring history of literary and popular culture images of black female characters as emasculating, bestial, unnaturally masculinized, and consequently, ugly women. Because Western societies confer added sociocultural value to those attributes that are considered aesthetically pleasing, any literary project concerned with reassessment of the value of its characters might reasonably look for ways to garner the same added value by making obvious that which is aesthetically pleasing in its characters. By reconfiguring readers’ perspectives regarding the characters’ societal contexts, Himes’s characters also show female “beauty” as more varied and inclusive than it is traditionally imagined. Looking at how Himes’s female characters earn wages or secure financial support for the maintenance of their lives will suggest how Himes challenges both the genre’s traditional female trope and other literary traditions that posed black female characters as degraded by their very nature.

In this essay I discuss several of the female character types found in Chester Himes’s Harlem detective fiction series. I focus principally on the relationship between Mamie Pullen, the respected elderly widow of a recently deceased local kingpin, and Dulcy Perry, the young wife of an ascending local kingpin, in *The Crazy Kill* (1959/1989). Dulcy is a classic Himes female character. Unlike the genre’s formulaic female trope, the femme fatale, a character driven by greed who offers access to her body in a simple commodity exchange for individual gain, Himes creates in his series what I term “femmes.” Femmes are female characters that are sexualized, assertive, and manipulative; they also are fully integrated members of the larger Harlem cultural community that shaped them with a particular set of values and rules of conduct. In a discussion with Grave Digger Jones, one of the two black detectives in the Harlem series, bar owner Big Smiley reprimands the detective for suggesting that a neighborhood woman exchanging sexual services with a white man for money might have constituted the grounds for a murder based on spousal jealousy. The man reminds the detective both of the rules mandated by necessity within their shared cultural community, and that as an insider
of this Harlem community’s culture, Grave Digger must know to assess the woman’s conduct only within that context:

You know better’n that, Chief. A colored woman don’t consider diddling with a white man as being unfaithful. They don’t consider it as more than just working in service, only they is better paid and the work is less straining. ‘Sides which, the hours is shorter. . . . Both she and her old man figger it’s like finding money in the street. And I don’t mean no cruisers [professional sex workers] neither, I means church people and Christians and all the rest. (1959/1988, 59)

The bar owner’s comments suggest that sexuality as an exchange commodity is one choice on a narrowly constructed menu of limited choices made available over time for economic employment for any female in this Harlem community. Unlike the traditional femme fatale’s situation, this is not a critique based on an isolated situation, involving one greedy or immoral woman, no more than the man is suggesting that the Harlem female’s obliging action would be merely one isolated response to one white man’s proposition. Rather, the Harlem woman would be understood to be meeting a normal, ongoing market possibility. “Diddling” is a rational choice when the struggle to earn wages for sustaining one’s life and the life of one’s family is an ongoing need. The man’s comments suggest further that if there were fair access to normal wage-earning avenues in mainstream society these “Christian” Harlem citizens would probably make other kinds of labor decisions. Faced, however, with few alternatives, a deal that offers very little wear and expense of time, easy access to the “work” site, and no loss in cultural capital with one’s spouse and peers, the decision to accept is as obvious an action as bending over to pick-up “money in the street.” Most important, it is suggested that everyone in the Harlem community, including the middle-class black police detectives, “know[s] better’n” to judge each other’s conduct without taking those complex realities into consideration. I suggest that the reader of that incisive exchange and others like it that are placed throughout the Harlem series, also is called upon to acknowledge the socioeconomic realities that exist in racialized communities in the United States. It is within those contexts that Himes’s femmes must make lives for themselves and those about whom they care.

In the first novel in the series, A Rage in Harlem (1957), Himes’s central female protagonist, Imabelle, is a hilariously scheming, corrupt character, but she also manages to exhibit enough redeeming pathos so that the reader can like her and the central male protagonist can love her sincerely—and in fact he risks everything he has in order to show her the enduring quality of his love. Their relationship improbably survives and Himes is en route already to new black female characterizations that will challenge the old ones made familiar by traditional works in the genre.
By the time *The Crazy Kill* (1959/1989), the third novel in the series, is published, Himes gives his most extended challenge in the series to long-held attitudes about and images of black female characters. Dulcy Perry is the Himes femme character fully realized. The story is told in third-person voice, but Dulcy is the central protagonist of *The Crazy Kill*, so the reader gains his or her perspective on what happens within the narrative mainly from Dulcy’s viewpoint. The novel opens on a scene at a wake. The deceased, Big Joe Pullen, was a revered gangster and patriarchal figure among the Harlem criminal class, so the wake in his luxurious apartment is well attended by Harlem’s most influential citizens (1959/1989). The reader is introduced to Dulcy Perry as she meets in the bathroom with Big Joe’s widow, Mamie:

She [Dulcy] was standing with her thighs pressed against the edge of the washbowl, causing the rose-colored skin-tight dress to crease inside the valley of her round, seductive buttocks . . . nervously patting her short-cut orange-yellow curls framing the olive-brown complexion of her heart-shaped face . . . [She was wearing] rainbow-hued whore-shoes with . . . four-inch lucite heels; [a] choker of cultured pink pearls; [a] diamond-studded watch; [an] emerald bracelet; [a] heavy gold charm bracelet; two diamond rings on her left hand and [a] ruby ring on her right; [and] pink pearl earrings shaped like gobules of petrified caviar. (11–2)

Everything about this description suggests lewdness, wanton sexuality, immorality, and overindulgence of every kind. From her perched position on the edge of the washbasin, Dulcy’s presentation evokes images of toilet or bidet use, an association with extreme intimacy, exposed genitalia, and uncleanliness. Her form-fitting dress, which calls attention to details of her body, objectifies her as a tool for sexual gratification. Her shoes, which are explicitly associated by the narrator with prostitution, draw attention to her body’s use as a commodity. The many pieces of brightly colored—pink, green, yellow, red, and sparkling white—expensive jewelry she wears is garish, suggesting greed, excess, or at the least by most mainstream standards, poor taste. Dulcy is portrayed implicitly as a woman who uses her body and her looks as sexual commodities. In that introductory regard, she is a degraded figure because she recalls the character type that, over time in the hard-boiled genre, has embodied simultaneously egregious sexuality and an insatiable appetite for material goods. Both traits are associated with female immorality. Having only that opening description, most readers who are familiar with the genre probably will expect that Dulcy is the narrative’s femme fatale, a genre trope that after the hero-detective is the most recognized convention of hard-boiled crime fiction’s formulaic traditions.

“Femme fatale” is the term used to describe the recurring ruthlessly ambitious female character in traditional hard-boiled detective fiction.
They usually want one thing: “Money, the more the better. I like it”, as Dinah Brand, an early hard-boiled genre prototype femme fatale readily and unapologetically admits in Dashiell Hammett’s classic, *Red Harvest* (1929/1992, 33). In French, femme fatale means a dangerous woman; the danger she poses is to the moral and ethical lives of those with whom she comes into contact. Images that suggest a castigating critical read of females may be found in a variety of forms and depictions over time in the Western plastic and literary arts worlds. In *Red Harvest*, a character says in answer to the question, “Who is Dinah Brand?” that “She is a soiled dove, a de luxe hustler, a big-league gold-digger” (22). In hard-boiled detective fiction the femme fatale has dynamic sexual magnetism, is extremely ambitious, shrewd, and calculating, and while she strategically aligns herself with others, especially powerful males, she keeps her distance emotionally. She has a finely tuned and intimate understanding of the “rhythms” of the cultural community within which she resides. In particular, femme fatale characters understand how manhood is constructed within their social environments.

Femme fatale characters, it is suggested in the narratives, have the aura of success because through close observation over time they are able to determine the nature of men’s needs, weaknesses, and desires to such a profound extent that they can become master manipulators of men and the money and/or cultural capital the men command. The femme fatale is therefore dangerous because she is inexorably immoral. As a woman irredeemably corrupted by her own greed and lust for material comfort, she has no value for or acceptance from the larger society other than the men she entices. Because she is a master manipulator of men, the femme fatale has the appearance of personal agency. In the end, however, as a disorderly female who goes against culturally sanctioned norms of gender conduct, she cannot survive triumphantly; she must be contained in order to restore moral order as it is idealized in the texts’ patriarchal societies.

The creation of these female characters reflected value systems held by the genre’s predominantly male readers and authors alike. The femme fatale trope evolved based upon unexamined anxieties and fears about “the powerful allure . . . of a refractory woman in control of her own desires, at the same time as the conventional narrative structure of hard-boiled novels regulated the legitimacy of that power in her inevitable incrimination, death, or confinement at the end of the story” [Walton and Jones 1999, 89]. This character must be set apart and defined as an aberration from normalized notions of healthy female conduct if the predominant social project of ongoing gender hierarchy is to prevail. Authors, from Dashiell Hammett, Carroll John Daly, and Raymond Chandler to Ed McBain and Donald Westlake, writing narratives in the genre from the 1920s to the 1980s (when Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, and other female authors began to appear on the hard-boiled literary scene in significant numbers),
accordingly, provided none but the most superficial ties between the cultural communities within which their femme fatale characters live and the female characters’ motivation for how they live. That lack of profound alliance with any community is ultimately the reason why a justification can never be mounted within the traditional genre narratives to argue for the femme fatale’s survival. She has no female friendships; she has no romantic connections that are not predicated on larcenous intentions; she has no political values; she has no children or traditional domestic responsibilities. When she has family the familial connections are perverted by her involvement with money or the power associated with it. The metaphor of the overripe, unnaturally fleshy, hothouse orchids that fill with a sickening fragrance the palatial home of rich General Sternwood and his two conniving daughters in Raymond Chandler’s classic *The Big Sleep* (1939) set the standards for familial relations in the genre. At first glance, then, what the reader likely “sees” when encountering Himes’s Dulcy in the context of a hard-boiled detective novel is a femme fatale.

But Dulcy is not a femme fatale. Instead, Himes has mounted a creative challenge to that simplistic trope with his femme character. To fully understand why Dulcy is not a femme fatale, one must examine Himes’s construction of both her assets and her work as a domestic partner within their socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts. Johnny Perry, Dulcy’s current husband, is perceived by the members of their Harlem community to be an ultra-virile, flourishing underground-economy businessman. Her first husband, Valentine Haines—whom she has never divorced—is also in the narrative picture, posing as Dulcy’s brother. Dulcy has left Val as a marriage partner, but remains loyal and emotionally connected to him in a relationship that has become akin to that between caring siblings. Because she and Val both understand that Val is a morally weak man, who likes to dress well and live a full social life, while unprepared to perform in any of the labor-intensive employment options available to him as a worker in Jim Crow America, she devises a way to make her affluent new husband, Johnny Perry, financially responsible for Val. Val joins the entourage of men who are on Johnny’s payroll to perform a variety of duties as needed. But everyone knows Val is incompetent, and so he is never called upon to actually do much. Johnny accepts, without complaint, responsibility for the man he thinks is his brother-in-law, as a favor to his wife because he loves her very much. Dulcy, the beloved wife, is in the bathroom at Big Joe Pullen’s wake, getting advice from Mamie, a femme character who has lived a long prosperous life as the partner to the now-deceased criminal kingpin. Dulcy’s relationship with Johnny Perry, who is also the Pullens’s godson, is relatively new and made even more complicated because she and Johnny also are living with his former wife, Alamena, who like Val is totally dependent on Johnny’s financial support.
Obviously, Johnny Perry’s money is in part the glue that binds these characters to each other. And yet, a major indication of Dulcy’s and Mamie Pullen’s roles as femmes, and their tenure in those roles, is the mother/daughter tone and language of their conversation. Looking closely at the specifics of the conversation will suggest something of the other binding ties between all of the various characters. The two women are discussing how to handle the inappropriate and repeated public advances made toward Dulcy by another character, a young black man improbably named Chink Charlie:

Mamie Pullen was saying, ‘Dulcy, honey, I wish you’d keep away from Chink Charlie. You’re making me awfully nervous, child.’
Dulcy grimaced at her own reflection in the mirror. ‘But you know how Chink is. He keeps putting himself in my face no matter how hard I try to show him I ain’t interested.’
Mamie grunted skeptically. She didn’t approve of the latest Harlem fad of brownskin blondes. Her worried old eyes surveyed Dulcy’s flamboyant décor. (1959/1988, 12)

Mamie is an elderly female character who has achieved a place of honor and respectability in the community. She is “the black-clad widow who supervis[es] the serving of refreshments” in the “big luxurious sitting room of [her] Seventh Avenue apartment.” She is described as “tall, thin, work-hardened . . . clad in a black satin Mother Hubbard gown that dragged the floor . . . She looked as though she had been washed with all waters and had come out still clean” (9). Mamie has reached an important pinnacle in her life: Despite a long life as the wife of a successful criminal/businessman, she is now seen as uplifted morally and washed clean. She was not only privy to his illegal activities, but actively involved, even when colluding through her silence. And yet, Mamie is now “washed clean,” metonymically suggesting the moral cleansing symbolically achieved through total immersion in Christian baptismal waters. Within the context of her culture, Mamie Pullen is what women like Dulcy want to become. But to achieve that position, reaching the pinnacle in Harlem society as Mamie has, young Dulcy must be able to sustain her relationship with Johnny Perry—as Mamie sustained hers with her mate, the late Joe Pullen. Dulcy has to work hard and well to ascend the ladder of mate meritocracy, just as Mamie did over her lifetime with Big Joe. Mamie intends to help Dulcy, but she will have to tutor Dulcy diligently and with care. Mamie worries that the younger woman does not fully understand the complex nature of not only climbing, but maintaining one’s position when one is a successful partner in a domestic situation that is also a business relationship. But Mamie can rest assured. Dulcy understands a great deal about the demands of her position. In fact, that understanding is in part indicated by Dulcy’s decision to become
a fashionable “brownskin blonde.” A key aspect of the skills repertoire that a potentially successful Himes’s femme must develop early, if her partnership is to be both romantic and professional, is an astute sense of when and how to position one’s self in the sociocultural hierarchy of the Harlem community.

Witnessing exchanges between the two female characters, the reader learns that over time Mamie Pullen has succeeded in transforming herself from merely sexual partner to girlfriend to valued mate to revered elder. With each step, she elevated her socioeconomic earning power in part because she assumed a more commanding role as her husband’s business partner. In Himes’s Harlem moving from a discreet and private sexual encounter (or even multiple encounters with a particular man or men) into a committed and public relationship with one man makes a Himes’s Harlem female that man’s “girlfriend.” Becoming a girlfriend moves the woman into the realm of respectability, especially if the man is respected by the community and able to provide the woman with material goods, such as jewelry and clothes. Becoming a valued and valuable mate is equivalent to assuming the responsibility of a marriage commitment, with shared access to whatever extralegal bounty is earned. When a female character adds to her male partner’s economic value, either through savvy counsel, access to information sources, family members with skills or enterprises for enhancing the mate’s business(es), or in cultural capital exchange (his friends desire her), then she receives the same socioeconomic standing in the Himes Harlem community as her male mate. The Himes femme character becomes not merely a dependent on her mate but a valued business associate. Mamie has become a respected elder in part because those within her community know that over time she edged out all other female competitors for Joe Pullen’s attention and affection. Everyone in Harlem understands that Big Joe and Mamie Pullen’s marriage was by necessity a successful partnership of complementary entrepreneurial skills. Now, as Big Joe’s widow, Mamie Pullen has inherited the riches as well as the reverence that years of apparently successful labor have earned her.

In the scene that follows, a white police detective is sizing up Mamie before he begins interrogating her about Val’s murder. The reader is given a concise summary of what the detective sees, and through that description the reader understands what this femme character’s adult life has been:

Sergeant Brody’s first glance had taken in the black satin dress with its skirt that dragged the floor, reminiscent of the rigid uniform of whorehouse madams in the 1920s. He’d gotten a peep at the toes of the men’s strait-last shoes protruding from beneath. His gaze remained longer on the two-carat diamond in the platinum band encircling her gnarled brown ring finger, and rested for an appreciable time on the white jade necklace that dropped to her waist like a greatly
cherished rosary with a black onyx cross attached to the end. Then he looked at the old brown face, lined with grief and worry, sagging in loose folds beneath the tight knot of short straightened, gray-streaked hair. (1959/1988, 35)

Mamie’s dress is a marker for her early years running a prostitution business, and a reminder of what she feels was a successful past that remains with her as keen business acumen. Also showing, although not in a pushy way, are her “mens’ straight-last shoes” suggesting the strength that she has had to have in order to survive in the ruthless world of Harlem’s underground economy. She has had to stand toe-to-toe with, and hold her own against, men whose professional lives involved taking advantage of the weaknesses of other people. And yet, Mamie has held her own, both as a spouse/partner with Joe Pullen and as an individual entrepreneur. And the proof of that success is made tangible by “the two-carat diamond in the platinum band” that so captures the detective’s gaze. The white jade necklace with the “cherished rosary” of a “black onyx cross” that Mamie wears says even more about the progression of her success. The rosary connection suggests Mamie’s crossover in her own mind, and in her community’s estimation, from a life that is merely economically satisfying to one that is spiritually and morally upright. She has taken what her life’s circumstances have given her—poverty, black skin, racism, and sexism—and against the odds has created for herself a socially and economically successful life. Now she is a respected elder, able to turn her attention and concern outward toward those who need her in her community. She has held her position over time and worked out the constant underlying conflict between individual desire and access to material goods inherent to the economic partnership that has sustained her. Now she can afford to assume a non-fiscal role, that of caring Godmother, feeling “grief” and “worry” for Dulcy and Johnny.

Dulcy in some ways needs the concerned guidance. She is not yet absolutely secure on the road to becoming the successful partner to Johnny Perry that Mamie was to Big Joe. In the excerpt quoted at the opening of this discussion, Mamie has commandeered Dulcy into the bathroom in order to warn her against provoking Johnny’s jealousy against Chink Charlie, a Harlem rival who flirts openly with Dulcy. However, although the description of her outrageous attire by Mamie Pullen reads like an extremely expensive, gem-studded carnival costume, it is clear that in some ways, Dulcy is already strong and independent. So, Mamie trusts that Dulcy is talented and clever enough to eventually handle her role as Johnny’s mate. Dulcy is already adding shrewdly in particular ways to her accoutrements because she knows the contemporary scene better than her aged mentor. To have a big blonde Marilyn Monroesque hairdo is the right styling touch for an ambitious brown-skinned beauty who wants to suggest an aura of desirability in the underworld of late-1950s urban
young America. Understanding that fine point of aesthetic enhancement places Dulcy on the cutting edge of fashion for a particular portion of their cultural community, the portion that matters to Johnny Perry. And, by extension, that critical point is of primary importance when evaluating Dulcy as “beautiful.” She is Himes's femme character working with finesse in the domestic sphere where she wants to gain cultural and economic capital.

Dulcy's goal is to be the successful wife to her husband, who is a dangerous businessman in the underground economy of Harlem. She is shrewd and conniving, but she is also compassionate and genuinely loves Johnny. And she is genuinely respectful of Mamie, in part because she knows what Mamie can teach her. Mamie is serving as her mentor, helping to smooth out Dulcy's rough edges so that she will succeed as Johnny Perry's wife/partner. This perspective is informed by traditional norms of marriage and patriarchy, and those norms are adhered to without question by Himes in his construction of the relationships between these characters. Himes's approach to the construction of his femme characters cannot be called feminist because these are not female characters that act independent of the expectations of a patriarchal social order. All of Himes's femme characters are defined in large part in relationship to their male partners—and only male partners. Heterosexually normative couplings reign supreme and unexamined, as such, even among otherwise creative-minded femmes. Himes unambiguously and yet narrowly sees the positions of strength that his femmes in Harlem can assume. Consequently, his femmes do not question the constrictions of gender construction within their own community that relegate even them to particular kinds of wage-earning jobs or domestic alliances. Those critical failures are why one must so carefully choose one's words when discussing what it is that Himes's femme characters do resist. Within the scope of circumstances that Himes allows, he makes his femme characters resistant to critical evaluation by those characters within the text that live outside of his “Harlem,” as well as by readers of the texts, who would judge ambitious poor racialized female characters as simply immoral, degraded, and ugly. Because his femmes have their own terms for respect and human value based on the experience of their own cultural systems, they can feel socially acceptable, valued, and even admired. To use a vernacular expression for more clarification, “They play well the hand they are dealt.” For all of Himes's own critical myopia, however, it is impossible to discuss Himes's femmes as without agency, especially given the mid-twentieth-century time period and the social context he creates for them. Himes's femme characters, in the choices he has them make, suggest a pragmatic yet humane middle ground between the self-conscious exertion of power for one's own well-being and the cold calculation of free market economy. In response to what Himes apparently understood to be a limited number
of options available to the indomitable women he admired, his literary femmes weave a symbiotic mix of constraining and liberatory conduct rules. The rules of their larger Harlem cultural community are always the frame by which Himes’s femmes shape their responses to other characters—even as those community rules are themselves framed by the larger socioeconomic context of late capitalism. Himes’s femmes suggest yet another level of complexity in the social play that, with rare exception, engages all characters in contemporary Western literature, when the authors’ concerns are with depictions of human relationships.

Himes scholar Robert Skinner says, “[Dulcy] is as complex a character as Johnny” [1989, 107]. I think she is a much more complex character than the Johnny Perry character. Where Skinner sees Dulcy as displaying “childish petulance and . . . whorish coquettishness [to cover] up a mass of conflicting emotions” [107], I see a calculating woman in a complicated situation with a dangerous man that she loves. Skinner sees Dulcy as a woman whose sexuality is out of control. I see the opposite—a female character very much in control of her limited assets. As Himes situates her, Dulcy understands her body’s value within her socioeconomic and cultural circumstances and employs sexual attractiveness as a tool for upward mobility. That is why she is constantly enhancing her assets to highlight those “parts” that are most alluring to men and most enviable to women within their community. She is strengthening Johnny’s cultural capital and ensuring her own economic survival as his mate. Does she speak in those terms? No, because that is not the vocabulary of her social context, class, or education. Does she as a character demand that critical evaluation? I think she does. If for no other reason than to call attention to the ways hard-boiled detective fiction and other popular culture forms have helped to shape the reading public’s views on this kind of gendered and racialized character type over time. Skinner appears to concur and disagree with that idea when he says, “Dulcy is very much in the tradition of Himes other female connivers. She skillfully keeps Johnny off balance with a combination of stubbornness, cunning, and sex appeal. Towards the end, she uses a clever ruse to trick Chink into giving up the evidence that could hurt Johnny and at the same time sets him up to be killed so he can’t talk” [1989, 108, italics added]. Skinner sees a femme fatale with suspect motives; she is “cunning” and employs “a clever ruse” to manipulate events. I see a Himes femme “skillfully” finding ways within her purview to destroy her husband’s enemy and allow escape for herself and her husband from legal retribution.

Further, Dulcy chooses to make a spectacle of herself in her outrageously playful dress. She, like all of the other characters that are posed as leaders in the Harlem community, is directing the critical gaze for her own purposes. Again a fault line in the femme’s reasoning must be acknowledged even as Himes’s achievements with the femme are lauded.
For example, in order to achieve her domestic desires, Dulcy has to devise a course of action that first supports Johnny’s needs. In Himes’s Harlem, the characters appreciate costumes and masquerade precisely because of their speculative value. Dulcy knows that her looks enhance Johnny’s cachet and therefore his power in the community, so she makes herself Harlem beautiful.

Although one must acknowledge the fault lines of Himes’s constructions, it is clear that Himes’s femme characters formidably challenge other female trope traditions in the hard-boiled genre. The central characters’ deliberate use of clothing and body adornment to suggest one’s standing within Himes’s Harlem is instructive for perceiving his presentation of Harlem beauty. In the excerpt that follows, we see Johnny Perry for the first time, in his “costume”:

He was wearing a powder blue suit of shantung silk; a pale yellow crepe silk shirt; a hand-painted tie depicting an orange sun rising on a dark blue morning; highly glossed light tan rubber-soled shoes; a miniature ten-of-hearts tie pin with opal hearts; three rings, including a heavy gold signet ring of his lodge, a yellow diamond set in a heavy gold band and a big mottled stone of a nameless variety, also set in a heavy gold band. His cuff links were heavy gold squares with diamond eyes. [1959/1988, 29]

Dulcy sees part of her role in their partnership to be one of his expensive “ornaments” [8]. However, rather than feeling demeaned by that role, she decorates herself with even more baubles than he wears, purposefully contributing to his socioeconomic status. As the narrator notes, “It wasn’t from vanity he wore so much gold. He was a gambler, and it was his bank account in any emergency” [29]. Dulcy sees herself as also an important part of Johnny’s arsenal of protection against emergencies. Not only can he convert funds that he cannot put into a bank account into resalable items by purchasing expensive jewelry for her, he gains cultural capital among his “corporate” peers and others he may want to control in his business ventures by impressing them with the amount of cash he can earn even in their economically depressed community. Unstated but understanding that perspective, Dulcy and Mamie determine that they will work together to protect Johnny—and that decision is key to understanding how Himes’s femmes work to earn their economic place in this society.

In Himes’s Harlem, female characters are madams and prostitutes, spiritualists (who also may sell marijuana, cocaine, and heroin as medicinal aids), landlords, dancers, restaurant owners, and scam artists of every kind. Like many middle-class female characters, several of Himes’s working and poor black female characters decide to become “suitable wives” to the more successful of the men of their class in order to lift themselves socioeconomically. Accordingly, they must make calculating decisions
about how they will become “attractive” to potential mates. What Dulcy, Mamie, and other Himes femmes suggest is that despite their business acumen, without a savvy female partner’s help, men like Johnny would not survive their own shortcomings. In the exchange that follows, Mamie counsels Johnny Perry about his relationship with Dulcy. Dulcy and Johnny have had a heated argument about her flirting with Chink Charlie. En route from Big Joe Pullen’s burial to the repast at her house, Mamie Pullen decides to help the couple reconcile. Alone in the car, Mamie and Johnny talk earnestly:

‘Johnny, you’re too hard on womenfolks. You expects them to act like men.’
‘I just expect them to do what they are told and what they’re supposed to do.’
‘Most women does, Johnny, but they just got their own ways of doing it, and that’s what you don’t understand.’
‘Either’s he’s pressing her or she’s asking for it. What do you want me to believe?’
‘It ain’t drawn that fine, Johnny. I’m an old lady, and I tell you, it ain’t drawn that fine. He’s just a show-off and she just likes attention, that’s all. . . . You don’t give her no attention. You got your own affairs, your gambling club and everything, which takes up all your time, and she ain’t got nothing. . . . She ain’t messing around with nobody, but you gotta be patient with her. She’s young. You knew how young she was when you married her. . . . Give her a chance, Johnny,’ Mamie pleaded. ‘Trust her. . . . In this game of life, you got to give her as much as you ask to get from her. . . . You can’t win without risking.
‘I know,’ he admitted. ‘That’s a gambler’s rule. But I got to put in eight hours every day in my club. It’s as much for her as for me. But that means she’s got all the chances in the world to play me for a sucker.’
‘I know how you feel, Johnny,’ Mamie said. ‘But you got to learn to trust her. A jealous man can’t win.’
‘A working man can’t gamble and a jealous man can’t win,’ said Johnny, quoting the old gambler’s adage [1959/1988, 72–5].

This exchange shows the characters’ attachment to each other and to traditional models of mainstream middle-class marriage and gender constructions, despite their criminal [i.e., nontraditional] lifestyles. Mamie and Johnny are expressing the ideological positions of “more or less respectable Harlem citizens.” According to Johnny Perry, to “act like a woman,” is to do what one’s husband or male partner tells one. And yet, while she says she agrees, Mamie also says that women have their “own ways,” which suggests that she thinks women will find on their own terms, and even working within traditional restrictions, avenues for some limited self-expression and self-governance. But their ultimate goal remains the sustenance of a hetero-normative relationship and the appearance of idealized middle-class standards of living. Because of Himes’s own beliefs, Dulcy and Mamie firmly believe that women bring something
unique and necessary to their relationships with men. Johnny does not understand the strength of that idea, perhaps suggesting some ambivalence even on Himes’s part. But Himes creates a firm acceptance in his femme characters: Dulcy accepts that there is a healthy symbiotic nature to her relationship with Johnny, and that pleases Mamie—which in turn strengthens the alliance between the women.

Dulcy hopes to take the same route to upward mobility as Mamie Pullen. Dulcy set her sights on and managed to entice Johnny Perry away from his first wife and into a committed monogamous marriage with her. Johnny is the heir-apparent to Big Joe Pullen in Harlem, so gaining his affection and commitment is a real coup. But his position as top gangster is not going uncontested; others would like to force him out. At Big Joe’s wake, the sizing up of Johnny Perry’s assets has already begun. So, while Dulcy has been successful in attracting him, the difficulty that remains is to demonstrate to him constantly that he needs her as a wife/partner to help him in continuing to both solidify and maintain his place in Harlem’s volatile business world. Dulcy cannot take her position for granted, because one can fail, and miserably so; Alamena, Johnny’s embittered first wife, is proof of that possibility. Once Dulcy moved in and dethroned her by gaining Johnny’s affections, Alamena became essentially a charity case, completely at the mercy of his largesse. And still, Alamena has to some extent been lucky; Johnny Perry is a man who sees himself in the chivalric traditions of manhood. He gains standing as a good, kind, and generous man providing care and familial affection for his ex-wife, thereby also allowing her to save some face. Alamena, however, is in an untenable situation. There is no employment for an ambitious femme character in any but the most menial tasks outside of Himes’s Harlem, in mainstream Jim Crow America. Within Harlem, everyone knows that Alamena is a failed partner, and so she has no cultural cache with which to barter for another domestic partner of Johnny’s standing. That reality is a cold calculation in every respect for Alamena, and yet that is exactly the conclusion one must reach in coming to understand the range of options from which Dulcy would feel she must choose if she is to fail as Johnny’s partner. So, if there is sanguinity in Dulcy’s conduct with her dress and apparent ethos, it is rational choice, not immorality, Himes argues, given her circumstances.

When Himes began writing detective fiction in the late 1950s, the alluring ambitious femme fatale character had become indelibly a part of the genre after almost 80 years of literary evolution. Suggesting femme fatale characters and the naturally lascivious black female images propagated by popular culture media, and yet not being them, Himes’s femmes are ambitious and focused female characters that rely on sexual allurements to gain alliances with powerful male characters. Himes’s femmes dress provocatively and make no attempt to disguise their sexuality, but they
are in search of much more than simply disposable income and social power, or access to either merely for selfish reasons. Himes’s femmes seek community connections that will afford them material comfort as well as romantic love, friendships, familial relations, respect, and fun. But mostly, they seek economically secure lives, subjectivity under terms that will allow them to exercise some degree of negotiable control over their lives—all of which posits these black female characters as more normalized citizens than had earlier prevailing images in hard-boiled detective fiction.

In an early genre novel, *Detective Johnson of New Orleans*, the reader finds a character described as “an elderly colored woman,” who is sent to care for a white man who has been injured in an accident. She says to the white friends of the man: “’Dis is gru’l fo’ de sick man, an’ mass’r done tole me to say dat de rest ob ye was to come down to brekfus direckly.’ ‘But who is to look after Mr. Lorraine?’ queried Dianne, anxiously. ‘I reck’n I is, missy; I’se been a nuss dese fo’ty yeahs, an’ I reck’n I kin take good care ob de young mass’r’” (Hancock 1891). The elderly black female character addresses the white people she speaks with using the antebellum vernacular term for a slaveholder, “Master.” And although the novel’s narrative timeframe and publication occurred 25 years after slavery was abolished, it is clear that in this typical “dime novel” of detection, the antebellum image of black women ever ready (even into late age) to serve whites remained intact. Perhaps even more disturbing is the implication that the black woman is by nature especially fit for serving the needs of whites, even if nominal wages (post-emancipation) are now a part of the exchange. There is no situation of contextual reasoning for the women’s servitude, as the barman suggests in the quoted excerpt noted earlier in this essay’s discussion. Inherent qualities fit for servitude in black females is the implied reasoning—and of course that conclusion is buffeted by accepted tradition. Frankie Bailey says that in detective fiction until the late 1980s, “As a group, with a few rare exceptions, black female servants. . . . were meek, cringing, and dialect speaking” (Bailey 1991, 102). Positing servitude rather than systemic racism and structural racist practices that predetermined black women’s relationships to wage-earning possibilities helped to distance the black female character in willfully ignorant readers’ imaginations as estranged from a central desire in U.S. society: a stable life, with prospects for upward class mobility, respect, romantic love, and caring relationships—all the attributes that normalized social standing is expected to accord U.S. citizens. Himes’s female characters sometimes speak in dialect and their physical appearances with vivid accoutrements first and foremost announce that they cannot be understood when using conventional notions of middle-class *conduct*—but their actions and the ideas conveyed by their words suggest that they can be understood as ultimately seeking to establish (relatively) conventional, middle-class
lifestyles. That bifurcated shift in critical perspective is paramount for understanding the labor conduct decisions that Himes creates for his indomitable female characters.

Sister Heavenly, for example, in The Heat’s On [1966/1988], is typical of Himes’s female characters. She returns home one evening to find that she has lost everything. Her home, out of which she ran a heroin and cocaine den disguised as a place for receiving special blessings and spiritual guidance, has been burned to the ground. With it goes her cache of money used for bribes (and possibly her retirement) and all of her treasured mementos from past liaisons with various male lovers. Her response to her loss is “Well, I’m back on my bare ass where I started, but I ain’t flat on my back” (1966/1988, 96). As she walks away from the charred remains of her old life, she begins immediately to plan a new business/scam to support a new life. Sister Heavenly lives the blues ethos: she may be down, but she’s not out. She is defiant and will make money so that she can live well on her own terms, taking whatever avenues of opportunity are available to her. She does not whine, look for excuses, fall into self-pity, or even blame herself when she suffers misfortune. Without rancor, she pays a white police detective a weekly bribe to keep her business safe from raids. She was a pretty, young woman living in abject poverty in the rural South who decided she could escape the myriad hardships attendant to that situation by moving to New York City and starting a “business.” She is practical and a staunch believer in what literary and cultural studies scholar bell hooks aptly terms the “ethic of liberal individualism” (hooks 1996, 165). Sister Heavenly will find a way to recover economically, but she does not confront the structural politics of her situation. For many of Himes’s female characters the main point of their creativity is to avoid the alternative of being “kitchen mechanics” (Himes 1960/1984, 68), simply and forever caretakers for white people. Charging fees for the services they can most readily give to meet the market demands available in Harlem allows Himes’s femmes to enter the economic structural fray.

Himes was brilliant in crafting the hard-boiled detective fiction genre—so called because of its unsentimental, violent nature—as a literary vehicle for delivering his views regarding race, racism, racist practices, and the cumulative effects of literature’s use for the estrangement of African Americans in the United States. But Himes’s real genius may have been in using the genre to establish the normative connections between desire for material comfort, respectability, emotional stability, and access to economic opportunity across the imagined gender divide. From its inception, hard-boiled detective fiction has offered an egalitarian underworld for many of its male characters, where profits reigned as the unquestioned marker of success. Himes’s unflinching focus on female characters that operate mainly in the pursuit of what McCann terms “individual interests” is advantageous for examining the rich extralegal commerce
relations among essentially poor and disadvantaged citizens, both male and female (2000). In an interview recorded in 1970 with a German journalist Himes says of detective fiction, “[T]he essence of these stories lies in the fact that there really are people who live like this, and because they do, this is the way they will act when living under racist oppression” (Fabre 1995, 27). Himes reinforced that notion when he addressed in his series his version of the genre’s most ambitious female characters, his hard-working Harlem femmes.

In Himes’s Harlem rather than seeing wage-earning capabilities as somehow unnatural for women, estranged from femininity, working female characters are validated. Beyond even mere economic necessity, Himes’s female characters are never opposed to work. When Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson question one Harlem woman about the whereabouts of her husband, for example, they are told that the husband, Rufus, has disappeared with the woman’s savings and his girlfriend. The woman indicates that she cannot offer the detectives any information about her husband or his whereabouts because she is no longer concerned with him, or even her missing money. She explains that at the time of her husband’s disappearance, “I would have cut his throat . . . if I had found him. . . . But he left town so I couldn’t find him and I got over it” (1960/1984, 92). The woman is self-sufficient; when her husband and money have gone, her life goes on without financial upheaval. She tells the detectives she does not care about the husband, the lost money, or the girlfriend, “as long as he [leaves the wife] alone,” to go on with her life (92). The woman makes it clear that in the immediate aftermath of the robbery, infidelity, and abandonment by her husband, she was upset and would have avenged herself by killing her husband. She is physically able and, because the community has historically been underserved by the police, she might have been able to exact on her own terms the kind of justice she determined her husband’s crimes warranted. But if she had done so, her motivation would have been anger, loss of pride, or emotional hurt in the face of his perfidy, not dismay at her loss of financial support. She sees herself as independent because she can financially support herself. The stereotype so often found in U.S. popular culture of the emasculating black woman who earns her own keep because her lazy husband cannot or will not is undermined. It is not explicitly or implicitly suggested by this character that she solely supported the family. The detectives’ words regarding the theft—the husband stole “her money”—suggests that the wife and husband had separate earnings even when they were together. It is likely that both wife and husband worked because at no point does the woman associate having to work with deficiencies in her former mate. In other words, no connection is made between the woman working or her earnings and the man’s emasculation. If there had been, Himes would have had this in-all-other-ways frank character say so in response to the
detectives’ questioning. There also is no natural subservience here; work serves as a means to financial independence and self-sufficiency. This unambiguously positive perspective on black women’s work is a radical break from not only the racialized and gendered images of black, working female characters traditionally found in the genre, but also of such characters as single, working mothers found in other popular culture forms. The overarching assumption that work is a tragic outcome for any and all black female characters is upended. In Himes’s Harlem all adults work at some form of money-making or life-sustaining economic activity. A political and economic context has resulted in the normalization of a sociocultural adaptation.

Himes’s femmes often are aligned with religious groups that have leaders who valorize the women for being economically resourceful. That institutional acceptance reinforces other community members’ acceptance of female self-sufficiency as a positive attribute. Strong will and wage-earning strength are both important, socioculturally sanctioned aspects of Himes’s Harlem female characters. Mammy Louise in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965/1988), for example, is an obese older woman and the hard-working owner of a successful small soul food restaurant. She and her husband had long ago migrated to Harlem from the rural Deep South. After her husband died, she began a romantic relationship with a “slick young black man with shiny straightened hair and fancy clothes” (100). Discussing the couple, detective Grave Digger Jones sums up the community’s general attitude about the couple when he says to Mammy Louise, “If you are satisfied, who’re we to complain” (102). Mammy Louise wants an active sexual life; the young man wants financial security. Their Harlem neighbors and customers assume no pity for the woman or the man, no condescending attitudes about the couple’s decisions, no fear that she will be taken advantage of, and no pious condemnation of their mutually accommodating exchange. On the contrary, Mammy Louise is admired for clearly taking charge of both the business and the young man. And yet, she refutes every stereotyped notion that her antebellum appellation, Mammy, has ever supposedly represented about African American females.

Similarly, in *The Big Gold Dream* (1960/1984) Mammy Stormy is a buxom woman with cropped hair and a mustache. She “had a six-room apartment on the top floor, where she gave parties for domestic workers every weekend. She called them ‘house rent’ parties because, supposedly, they were for the purpose of paying her rent, but she lived from them” (73). Mammy Stormy is not naturally nurturing, in the contrived sense associated with enslaved African American women, so much as practical, sociable, and compassionate—and even then not by conventional standards. She is literally a conflation of traits that are associated with both males and females. She is a mother-figure, providing a place for weary
female domestic workers looking to unwind and ease their burdens in
the world of demanding domestic work and demanding white employers.
She also is a father-figure, a breadwinner for her household, able to create
employment to financially sustain herself even in “stormy” economic
times. Like many clever black enslaved women of earlier eras, Mammy
Stormy has devised ways to achieve personal agency despite the restric-
tive nature of her circumstances. Rather than dependence on institutional
support, she is self-contained. Associating her with both male and female
traits suggests that she has complementary strengths that afford that
independence. She has devised an extralegal means of wage-earning that
is acceptable within the ethos of her own cultural community. She is,
therefore, able to support herself and to enjoy her life on her own terms.
Her special sensitivity to the needs of the female domestic workers in her
community is in a way another expression of her own self-regard because
she respects and identifies with the needs of other poor women. She, in
turn, is accorded respect within the Harlem community because she is
playing well the hand she was dealt in life in a way that also benefits
others. Continuing her rent parties, she helps to maintain community
traditions: “[S]he hadn’t missed one for the past twenty-eight years,”
providing many workers who had nowhere else to go with good food at
an affordable price, an ongoing and honest game of blackjack that might
produce a few dollars of winnings, and a warm place to mark time with
others as they wait “for daylight and time to go to work” [73]. Because
she is morbidly obese and cannot negotiate stairs or elevators, Mammy
Stormy is confined to her apartment. So, she also is happy to have her
clients’ and neighbors’ company.

Himes’s femme characters defy notions of black female characters as
pathological. Minor characters like Billie, from A Rage in Harlem (1957),
appear in all of the novels in the series:

She was a brown-skinned woman in her middle forties, with a compact husky
body filling a red gabardine dress. With a man’s haircut and a smooth, thick,
silky mustache her face resembled that of a handsome man. But her body was
a cross. The top two buttons of the dress were open, and between her two
immense uplifted breasts was a thick growth of satiny black hair. [142]

This woman is a prosperous madam in a prosperous Harlem whorehouse.
The members of her community not only accept her, she is considered
a successful business person who is known for having “disciplined” her
cheating lover by tossing him out of a window and shooting him through
the heart as he is falling toward the ground. In the logic of the communi-
ty’s ethical standards, she was justified and even grudgingly admired for
her actions. She asserted herself because, on one hand, she has too much
going for her to take any blatant disrespect from a man. And, on the other
hand, because she loved him with so much fidelity that she could not
allow her feelings to be disrespected. So, he had to *get the boot*, and she was woman enough to perform the task. She, thus, became a legendary figure in the community. People know and repeat the story of her lover’s dispatch in the way they would the stories of bad man Stagolee or the hard-living, brilliantly talented blues women who performed in the rough and tumble, Jim Crow world of the Black Belt music circuit in the early and middle twentieth century. When Grave Digger and Coffin Ed come to Billie for help—looking for grapevine gossip about the local thugs who frequent the prostitutes who work for her—they are deferential and appreciative of her assistance. They recognize her as a pillar of the community’s business world, addressing a market and employing community members in a variety of jobs from the young women who sell sexual favors to the porters and caretakers who clean the rooms to the restaurant owners who provide food to hungry customers to the young men who provide security for protection against unruly customers.

Because they are female and it is the 1950s and 1960s when the novels were written, it is not surprising that a prominent form of Himes’s femme’s work in the Harlem series is sexual work, either within the home or outside of the home. Himes created in his hard-boiled detective fiction female characters that recognize, as Hazel Carby says of Helga, the main character in Nella Larsen’s novel, *Quicksand* (1928/1986), that as black urban women their “sexuality has an exchange value within capitalist social relations,” and they act accordingly [11]. Bold vibrant colors, extravagant clothing styles, elaborate hair and body ornamentation, and practical, self-centered attitudes about the nexus where love, life, and money meet, are appropriate for Himes’s femme characters. They live in a tough world, where extravagant personal presentation is not only a sign of individual prosperity, but of street savvy related to earning either wages or the protection of a mate who can earn wages. This form of female domestic labor is important to note if only because it is so often overlooked, undervalued, or not understood as “work.” Because there are no wages in the classical or even literal senses, the exchange value of the female as mate is made invisible. Himes’s female characters in effect form business relationships that offer negotiated benefits, goods, services, and compensations for which the woman would use wages if earned.

Himes’s female characters resourcefully use sexual allure to remake themselves as prosperous and respected members of their community. They are determined to find ways not only to survive but to succeed as if having access to legal wage earnings. They are sexually suggestive, and yet they rarely engage in sexual acts. As stated earlier, what Himes’s femme characters trade in is their allure. The male character that can claim this woman garners respect from other men who desire not only her but what she represents—her partner’s status. In the partnership, then, each mate confers added value to the other. Her specific “earnings” come in the
forms of financial and emotional support, and social status within their community. Social hierarchy exists in this as in any other community of U.S. citizens, Himes's work suggests. Himes's black female characters are on a quest for the “American Dream,” a goal they share with many male characters in Himes's Harlem texts. Connecting poor and working-class female characters to middle-class economic and material aspirations, but not necessarily to middle-class ideals of conduct and ethics—and making that point key to the resolution of the social disorder represented by the narratives’ crimes—complicates simple categorizations of Himes’s femmes and the ways they decide to succeed socioeconomically.

In a world strongly governed by the rules of patriarchal order, Himes's successful female characters negotiate the restrictions of their roles as mates to male partners who also are among the most ruthless of the Harlem characters. In his creation of these coarse, tough, loud female characters, Himes introduced into hard-boiled detective fiction female characters that are “bustin’ loose,” a vernacular expression that means violently breaking free from restrictions imposed by traditions and social boundaries. Himes’s femmes break free from both hard-boiled detective fiction’s simplistic portrayals of ambitious females and mainstream popular culture forms’ depictions of black female characters as monstrous sexual beings or subhuman beasts of burden. When seen from the subject position they erect for themselves within their cultural context, Himes’s femmes are not immoral or degraded; they possess an engaging entrepreneurial spirit that allows them to break free from the ugliness of material poverty on their home turf.

Himes created a close, constricted home turf that must sustain “a self-contained economy” (Denning 1986, 15). Himes's female characters are an integral part of that economic mix. Working connects Himes's femmes with many female characters in other fictional African American communities—Gwendolyn Brooks’s Maud Martha Brown and Ann Petry’s Lutie Johnson are two well-known examples of such in the African American literary canon. But Brooks’s and Petry’s works fit within the parameters of racial uplift traditions. Unlike earnest and poetic Maud Martha (Brooks 1953/1993) or even the hapless naïf Lutie (Petry 1946/1991), who unwittingly becomes entangled in an underworld association, Himes’s female characters decide to become fully involved with illegal enterprises traditionally deemed the domain of men—including gambling, numbers running, and heroin dealing. Himes’s female characters do not cook, clean the home, or care for children. None of Himes's female characters have children, despite the novels' relentless insistence on heterosexuality as the characters' normative place of romantic desire.¹ The female characters express no guilt or remorse at not being in the domestic roles usually naturalized by mainstream thinking as the logical outcome of heterosexual coupling. Instead, their fertile minds are free
to be as creative as their costumes suggest their imaginations to be in giving birth to scams and schemes to support their own or their partners’ positions of economic power. There is beauty in their creativity, Himes’s novels suggest. That perspective reorients the onlooker’s gaze, so that the perceptive reader is able to laugh with Himes’s femmes, not at them. Himes’s femmes’ beauty can be seen in their indomitable strength, talent, and vivacity, given their circumstances.

Chester Himes’s novels show that it is not traits inherent to racial or gender ancestry, but socioeconomic and political systems operating outside of his fictional Harlem community that shape the socioeconomic and political conditions found inside his Harlem community. Himes never romanticizes the very tricky moral and ethical terrain that his female characters travel in their work and domestic lives. Even as he contextualizes and validates his female characters, Himes does not shrink from exposing the corruption that undergirds his Harlem female characters’ work. With each novel, he created a richly detailed tableau that highlighted the grotesque aspects of his female characters’ work lives in criminal enterprises. They are strong and weak, lascivious and chaste, rich and poor, respectful and dismissive, giving and greedy, savvy and deluded, attractive and repulsive, loving and deceitful. I suggest that Himes constructs his “Harlem” females with these binary characteristics precisely because he wants the reader to see the intricate ways that racism and racist practices influence and shape the conduct and corruption that become combined forces of commerce and self-interest in his female characters’ work lives. I suggest that as Himes’s readers encounter the wildly scheming, big-haired, bejeweled, voluptuous African American female characters they also are presented with insight into U.S. society and the ways that some real women have determined to make sense of their skewed circumstances, and accordingly have constructed their “work” lives. Himes’s female characters, including those I call femmes, are not wild-eyed and beasts of burden or noble, hard-suffering savages. They are not warrior proletarian feminists or kowtowing objects that exist solely as figments in the eyes of a male beholder. They are not simply good or bad. Himes’s femme characters suggest all of those discursive literary images; Himes employs them precisely for their value as reminders of a specific historical, socioeconomic and political past. And they continue to resonate with our present. Himes employs the images to speak self-consciously and self-reflexively, about themselves as images. It is recovery work. But, as Deborah McDowell observes, recovery work “must keep pace and commerce with the bodies that fail to be recovered . . . [To] ‘recover’ . . . plays on ideas of burial and reburial, of covering that which is perhaps difficult to see. Such veiling constitutes a form of disassociation, which . . . can occur when deeply disturbing events force one to shift the field of vision and attention from the site of threat and menace to a
‘safer place’; the ‘ideal’ bodies discovered there, always easier to edit, to manipulate, and control” [Bennett and Dickerson 2000, 314–5].

Himes began a process of uncovering, with his audacious, ambitious female characters. The uncovering extended to the veil of racist mythology that had been draped over racialized female characters in popular culture forms. He attempted to lift as well the cataract-like covering over mainstream readers’ eyes when they looked at the characters. His works countered disassociation by making the manipulation of images less opaque. He tried to loosen the grip of mainstream control over representation of poor and working-class African American citizens. To some degree, he was successful; deconstructive discourse concerning representations of the black female body is furthered by explicating Himes’s Harlem series. To a larger degree, however, the bigger project, wresting control of representation of the African American female—her body, her mind, her feelings—was less successful. If current forms of popular culture and the images they present of African American females are any indications, the need for discourse directly from those females most affected by the belittling gaze of the mainstream Other is as strong as ever.

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Notes

1. In a longer chapter on the female characters in Himes’s Harlem detective fiction series that I am currently preparing, I discuss in some detail the conflict Himes presents with his bisexual characters that express homosexual desire. On one hand, he valorizes the physical ambiguity that is suggested by the female characters with both male and female traits. In other instances, he creates female characters that are stereotypically “beautiful” and desirable—light-skinned (always a marker for immorality in Himes’s black female characters), with long naturally straight or curly hair, aquiline facial features, and hour-glass body shaping—according to the standards of a traditional and racialized heterosexual male gaze, but who are disdainful of heterosexual relationships, openly expressing their own desire for same-sex coupling. In her essay, “Wearing Your Race Wrong: Hair, Drama, and a Politics of Representation for African American Women at Play on a Battlefield,” Noliwe Rooks discusses specifically the cultural and political import of hairstyles, but her words also suggest an important critical aspect of Himes’s characterizations: “There have long been consequences both within and outside of African
American communities for wearing one’s race wrong and . . . [for determining] whether we are wearing a right, or wrong, racial identity” (Bennett and Dickerson 2000, 280). In the few plots in the series when homosexual desire is a key element of character identity, those characters are configured as tainted because they are wearing “race wrong.” Skinner says, “Although Himes never says anything openly against homosexuality, he indirectly condemns it by the kinds of homosexual characters he creates. All are prostitutes, killers, or at best moral weaklings” (Skinner 1989, 135). Iris O’Malley (1965/1988), Ginny (1966/1988), and Leila Holmes (1960/1988) are the female characters that exemplify Himes’s conflation in the relationship between same sex desire, skin color, and immorality. That characterization choice is somewhat confusing when one considers that although he lived his life rather unambiguously as a heterosexual man, in his autobiographical writings as well as in the body of secondary research materials—mainly correspondence between Himes and friends—made available in a number of collections, Himes discusses openly, and with great affection, a year-long, intensely romantic and sexual relationship that he had with a fellow inmate while incarcerated in the Ohio State federal penitentiary.

References


