Chapter 2

From the Far Side of the Urban Frontier: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes and Walter Mosley

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They draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line. They don’t care if there’s no bread over on your side. They don’t care if you die. And . . . when you try to come from behind your line they kill you.

—(Wright 407)

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Western Frontier and Urban Frontier

In his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner recognized that with its closing, “the frontier” as signifier of geographical space was cut adrift. Other conceptual and spatial divides along ethnic and racial lines had emerged almost simultaneously with the Western frontier, however, and were available to absorb and transform its conceptual significance. The most obvious was that between European and African Americans embodied in the codes, economy, and practices of slavery and subsequent segregation. Such lines of segregation became particularly
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sharp in urban settings. It is this urban manifestation of frontier ideology, and particularly the textual space opened up by crime fiction for an articulation of that frontier from its “other” side, that will concern me here.

Turner suggests, in an inchoate way, the need for and function of the particular ideological formation that drew a line between “white” civilization and “Indian” savagery, a term for which “black” criminal chaos could easily be substituted. In an attempt to account for the assumed ideological unity of the (European American) United States, Turner maps these differences onto a progressive cultural history stretching from the savage prehistory of Indian lands in a linear development to the industrial metropolitan centers of the East. Ignoring the lack of fit between this mapping and the uneven developments of various frontiers, Turner identifies the Indians as the unifying factor that transformed the various frontiers into a unity by posing a “common danger” of absolute otherness (15).

A continuous stream of diatribes against “Indianization” and the motif of the “good Indian,” prominent in frontier narratives from James Fenimore Cooper through Zane Grey to the Daniel Boone television series, has helped in a variety of ways to reconcile a racially defined oppression with ideologies of egalitarianism and tolerance by posing frontiersmen and Indians as individuals free to choose European American civilization over Indian savagery.

From the European American perspective, then, the frontier wars were not wars of conquest, for the assertion of authority by the U.S. government to make legal claim to land occupied by Native Americans was tantamount to redefining Native Americans themselves as foreign intruders to be eradicated. Through this redefinition, the “Indian Question” was discursively linked to the “Slavery Question.” Though the complete extermination of Native Americans and the mass transportation of black Americans “back” to Africa had many proponents, the compromise solution was collective oppression and exploitation facilitated by racial segregation, the containment of Native Americans and Native American culture on reservations, and the similar containment of African Americans through various forms of segregation.

This partitioning refocused the frontier ideology, which continued to map cultural and racial divisions, but in geographical terms now denoted relatively fixed lines of defense for the purity and order of European American culture. Such lines became particularly charged in cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, where population densities and the size of minoritized communities threaten