“Enough to Make a Body Riot”

CHESTER HIMES, MELANCHOLIA, AND THE POSTMODERN RENOVATION

Suddenly the brandy took hold and I began feeling melancholy.

—Chester Himes, If He Hollers Let Him Go, 1945

[1] It is the detective who has usurped the place not only of God but of Being too as the abiding presence and, therefore, has first to be confronted.

—William Spanos, The Detective and the Boundary, 1972

In chapter 1, I demonstrate how an ethnic subject solves the problem of physiological nonwhiteness through an auspicious negotiation of space. In a desperate attempt for social belonging, Sara Smolinsky, flees her New York City ghetto for a suburban college, a place she fancies as “a dream mounting on a dream . . . [a] New America of culture education.” During her sojourn there she develops the performative reflexes and culture capital sufficient to induce in herself and others the illusion of her own whiteness. Sara’s new comportment, manufactured in white space, however, proves to be tenuously fashioned by the novel’s conclusion. She secures a public school teaching position that ironically transports her back to the ghetto from which she earlier escaped. Moreover, filial obligation compels her to become the primary caretaker of her widowed father. This seeming regression into the role of ghetto daughter works against the cultural accoutrement of Sara’s reracialization, among them the teaching job, the cosmetic facelift that a new wardrobe provides, the confidence accurate racial mimicry engenders, a private apartment (peculiar for a single ghettoized woman of that era), and a betrothal to an Americanized,
professionally successful Jewish suitor. The novel goes as far as to cast Sara’s ironic existential reversal as a form of patriarchally induced incarceration. Thinking about how the elder’s presence would crowd the lifestyle of the couple, the narrator muses, “So there it was, the problem before us—the problem of the Father—still unsolved.” That Sara’s existential escape from the ghetto and probationary whiteness flirts with failure, even though she has been mobile and now appears white, points to the Faustian limits that minoritized subjects encounter in pursuing racial assimilation through spatial means. Regardless of the elaborate peregrinations that the nonwhite body might undertake and the myriad destinations toward which that body may venture, the mind might stay put, paralyzed mentally in space by its identifications and the fateful wound of being identified as racially Other. If Sara could speak beyond the pages her author employed to bring her to life, she might explain it plainly as “you can take the girl out of the hood, but you can’t take the hood out of the girl.”

There is strong evidence to suggest that Chester Himes, a writer of a diverse oeuvre of letters that includes newspaper columns, short stories, modernist novels, detective mysteries, screenplays, and political polemics, suffered from the vexing paradox of physical mobility and psychic spatial paralysis. Born in 1909 in Jefferson City, Missouri, yet a long-tenured expatriate that lived in Europe for over 30 years starting in 1953, Himes famously explained that his repatriation abroad did not cultivate the sense of personal belonging for which he searched and craved. Speaking more than twenty years after he bid adieu to American life, he proffered, “I still [felt] as much of a stranger in Paris as I did in every white country I had ever been in; I only felt at home in my detective stories.” His remarks here intimate that European racism was just as effective as its American version in alienating people from the space in which they reside. Yet what laces his comment with sadness and befuddlement is that he locates his antidote for homelessness not in the material world but in a literary one. For him, fiction becomes transport, affecting a return to an America once empirically known, but now imagined.

Were that to be the last puzzlement about his life and work that Himes would etch into the public record, we could quickly declare him tortured by the eccentric solitude of genius and be done with him. Yet in the archive of Himes, more vexing conundra, beyond remaining in an adopted asylum that didn’t serve as such, await. Much of Himes’s fame was in the species of notoriety, particularly because the “Série noire” Harlem detective stories he wrote for French readers in the 1950s was awash in the titillating salaciousness of black underlife