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**“Convulsed in Desperate Living”:
Ghetto Criminality and the Economy of Survival in the Harlem Narratives
of Chester Himes, Claude Brown and Louise Meriwether**

Julie Godin

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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ii

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ABSTRACT

“Convulsed in Desperate Living”:
Ghetto Criminality and the Economy of Survival in the Harlem Narratives of
Chester Himes, Claude Brown and Louise Meriwether

Julie Godin

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the radicalism of African-American leaders such as Malcolm X, George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver found expression in polemical writings that targeted, in their critique of established white power structures, the American judicial and penal system. Drawing their rhetorical power from the authors' direct experience of ghetto criminality, and from their encounters with the machinery of “criminal justice,” the protest writings of outspoken activists and prisoners have shaped critical perceptions of African-American narrative discourse of this period. While critics have expected to find, in African-American novels of the 1960s and 1970s, a deep current of radicalism, and a clear commitment to identifiable models of resistance, the Harlem narratives of Chester Himes, Claude Brown and Louise Meriwether temper such assumptions by engaging in representations of the ghetto and the criminalized subject that do not posit an empowering movement from “desperate living” to political astuteness and radical action. Instead, Himes's Blind Man With a Pistol (1969), Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land (1965) and Meriwether's Daddy Was a Number Runner (1970) complicate an understanding of African-American critiques of racial politics by participating in a discourse that refuses to perform the gestures of enlightened protest. These texts point to the conditions of survival in a space governed by the predatory economy of widespread criminality—conditions that deny the relevance of a

rhetoric of resistance and compel ghetto-dwellers to resign themselves to a numbing, unalterable state of affairs.

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This thesis is dedicated to my children, Joseph and Norbert, in the hope that they may, in time, learn to recognize and denounce oppression in all its guises.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter I: Black and <u>Noir</u> : <u>Blind Man With a Pistol</u>	10
1. "This is Harlem"	12
2. "Find Out What You Can!" The Citizen Under Investigation	21
3. "The Pitch": Political Activism in Himes's Harlem	24
4. Hard-boiled to Resignation	27
Chapter II: "Do Me a Favor, Don't Want to Be Like Me": <u>Manchild in the Promised Land</u>	46
1. "Boy, Why You So Bad?"	49
2. In the Promised Land	51
3. Courts and "Schools"	56
4. Conversion	60
5. Getting Down Off the Soapbox	65
Chapter III: "Poor and Black and Apt to Stay That Way": <u>Daddy Was a Number Runner</u>	71
1. Haven for No One	72
2. History and the Ghetto Experience	75
3. Harlem and the Politics of Representation	76
4. Criminology and Individualized Power	82
5. Physical Violations and the State	86
Conclusion	92
Notes	94
Works Cited	96

Introduction

On September 9th 1971, inmates at the Attica Correctional Facility in New York State joined in a uprising that gained national attention, as radical prisoners enjoined their brothers to spend the subsequent days establishing their own "nation" under the eyes of reporters and invited observers. After an initial burst of violence, convicts gathered in Attica's D Yard, where outspoken inmates spontaneously stepped forward to address the rebels. Soon, a group of seven spokesmen emerged, and they began drafting their demands to the State (Useem and Kimball 35). By the next day, this loosely structured group was replaced by an elected committee of representatives from each cell block (New York 240-241), who began to take votes on a variety of issues. Observers such as Tom Wicker, a New York Times columnist who had been asked to join the rebels and who transcribed the debates and speeches that animated this temporary "nation," would later recount the inmate leaders' tireless requests for the rioters' attention and participation. In one instance, convict Roger Champen encouraged his brothers to assume a decision-making role, after he had tried to prevent reporters from taking pictures of the hostages:

"Well, we'll take a vote," Champ said, his voice on the speaker system unchanged, calm, conversational. "We've got a real democracy here, we'll take a vote on the pictures. Can't say that's not fair. Now everybody that thinks there ought to be pictures of the hostages, everybody thinks that...you lis'nin' to me brothers, you hearin' me? Everybody thinks there ought to be pictures say 'Aye'." (Wicker 55)

In the years leading up to the riot, Attica had become a repository for the

radical black and Latin inmates whom administrators had sought to remove from the New York City area, where political movements such as the Black Panthers and the Five Percenters were flourishing. "As a result," assert Bert Useem and Peter Kimball, "Attica after a while could boast the best concentration of prison revolutionaries and experienced jail and prison rioters east of the Sierras" (24). When the rioting convicts found themselves in the charged, concentrated space of D Yard, they freely voiced their indictment of the "Man," and "every turn toward decision flashed away" in "blazes of oratory" (Wicker 117). Some inmates clearly perceived themselves to be the victims of excessively repressive, dehumanizing state practises. As one prisoner explained to Wicker: "I did it, I'm in here for doing it. Fair and square, no complaint. Paying my debt to the Man. But, brother, you got to understand that's just the way it ought to be, that's not the way it is. The Man is committing crimes against me every day I'm here" (112, emphasis added). Other rebels, eager to establish an ideological link between the prison and an external, pre-existing state of affairs, identified the prison's role as an instrument of the oppressive, racist state:

The inmates--"You, brothers!"--had been made scapegoats of a rich white society, Brother Herb told them in crude but passionate phrases. They had never had a chance to rise in a racist and oppressive America, and when they had refused to yield to slavery and brutality and reached out for what they rightfully considered their share, society had locked them up, the prison being no more than the actual representation of the life they were forced to lead even on the outside. (Wicker 51)

The state's refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of "D Yard Nation" manifested itself in a manner that confirmed the inmate leaders' most incendiary bursts of

accusatory rhetoric: convinced that he was dealing with a planned conspiracy of prisoners whose extreme demands could not be met, the Commissioner of Correctional Services issued ultimata and ordered an armed recapture of Attica that resulted in thirty-nine deaths. Occurring, as it did, at the end of an era marked by manifestations of social protest and wide-ranging, outspoken movements of resistance, the Attica riot presented to the American public an unforgettable image of militant black inmates who, despite an absurdly disproportionate imbalance in bargaining power, stood their ground against the "Man". The mood and rhetoric of the rioters, captured by television cameras and widely broadcast, unequivocally revealed that the captive and the powerless were anticipating fundamental change. As Wicker points out: "Whether cultivated as political theater for television or from an overenthusiastic sense that D Yard might really have the power to move the world, the brothers' manner was that of a liberating army nearing its final triumph" (117).

This identification of the prison as an emblem of state oppression in white-dominated America was not new. It had been voiced, in the years preceding the Attica uprising, by several black leaders who sought to assure the black convict that, in the words Elijah Muhammad addressed to Malcolm X, he "symbolized white society's crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals" (Malcolm X 169). Eldridge Cleaver, who felt a special kinship with Malcolm X, asserted that the Muslim leader had inspired all black convicts who, "rather than see themselves as criminals and perpetrators of misdeeds, look upon themselves as prisoners of war, the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel out their own malefactions." "Negro prisoners," Cleaver stated, "feel that they are being abused, that their

imprisonment is simply another form of the oppression which they have known all their lives" (58). Etheridge Knight, also inspired by Malcolm X, declared that "the whole experience of the black man in America can be summed up in one word: prison" (5).

Malcolm X, Cleaver and Knight were important figures of resistance who had emerged from the prison system, and were part of a generation of black leaders who provided celebrated accounts of their awakening, while incarcerated, to radical thought. Malcolm X, most notoriously, revealed that prison had provided him with the fortuitous opportunity to find knowledge and convert to the Muslim faith. "In fact," he asserts in his Autobiography, "prison enabled me to study far more intensely than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college" (180). He further acknowledged the significance of the prison as a site of conversion when he began to preach to his brothers and found that black convicts often seemed "perfectly preconditioned" to receive the teachings of Elijah Muhammad:

You let this caged-up black man start thinking, the same way I did when I first heard Elijah Muhammad's teachings: let him start thinking how, with better breaks when he was young and ambitious he might have been a lawyer, a doctor, a scientist, anything. You let this caged-up black man start realizing, as I did, how from the first landing of the first slave ship, the millions of black men in America have been like sheep in a den of wolves. That's why black prisoners become Muslims so fast when Elijah Muhammad's teachings filter into their cages by way of other Muslim convicts. "The white man is the devil" is a perfect echo of that black convict's lifelong experience. (183)

While Malcolm X was able to leave prison and preach wherever the

"Messenger" sent him, George Jackson embraced radicalism and prepared for the revolution, from within prison walls, until his death. After a youth of petty crime and botched robberies, Jackson was given an indeterminate sentence, and, as he wrestled with the possibility that he might spend the rest of his life in prison, he was awakened to revolutionary thought: "I met Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels and Mao when I entered prison and they redeemed me" (Soledad,16). Jackson used his limited resources and unlimited time with rigour and discipline: "His cell was the library that produced a brilliant philosopher and strategist," writes Eric Mann; "his cell was the gym that produced a legendary guerilla body" (25). Devoted to a project "to transform the black criminal mentality into a black revolutionary mentality" (Soledad, 16), Jackson published Soledad Brother, a collection of his letters from prison, and achieved such notoriety in the American cultural mainstream that he was interviewed by Jessica Mitford for the New York Times Magazine.¹ The radicalism of Jackson's writings, as well as the establishment within American prisons of the militant Muslim strain anticipated by Malcolm X and concretized at Attica, suggest that state-sanctioned oppression was catalyzing, in the 60s and early 70s, a movement toward political enlightenment and resistance. H. Bruce Franklin proposes "a reciprocal, and intensifying, relation between life inside and outside the prison walls" (241) for an emerging radical America of that period: as a variety of activists and revolutionaries increasingly found themselves incarcerated, argues Franklin, they brought ideologies of resistance into the prisons, but also found that the experience of prison had shaped their commitment to protest. Nevertheless, the political astuteness and radicalism of those subjected to institutionalized state power cannot be presumed, and the newly converted Malcolm X soon learned that those who had endured

oppression could refuse the call to enlightenment that he was bringing back to the ghetto. Seeking out his former accomplices, he realized that his friend (and co-accused) Shorty, while happy to see him, was suspicious of Malcolm's newfound religious ardour: "He didn't know if I was serious, or if I was another of the hustling preacher-pimps to be found in every black ghetto" (214). Confronted with a widespread refusal, among these criminalized ghetto companions, to hear about Islam, Malcolm found himself holding back. "I knew," he writes, "from what I had been when I was with them, how brainwashed they were" (215).

Nevertheless, Malcolm X records the "usual hustler fates" of the criminals he has known: they have been reduced to relying on "the ghetto's minor, scavenger hustles to scratch up room rent and food money" (216), or they have succumbed to "bullets, knives, prison, dope, diseases, insanity, alcoholism" (216).

If Malcolm X stood as a powerful figure of conversion and enlightenment, his counterpart was the ghetto dweller who, like Shorty, was unwilling to change, distrustful of the minister's motives and, to the newly-awakened Muslim, "brainwashed." While Malcolm X moved towards an ever-widening ministry of empowerment, the small-time hustler remained mired in a ghetto existence that equated parasitical criminality with survival. This was the black man or woman of the '60s and '70s for whom there was no conversion, and no escape from the numbing cycle of hand-to-mouth existence. Just as Shorty disappears from Malcolm X's narrative after their undramatic reunion, the passive, "unenlightened" subject seems to have been omitted from an established critical perception of African-American writing in the '60s and early '70s. In Discourse and the Other: The Production of the Afro-American Text,

Lawrence Hogue proposes the existence of an unquestionable correlation between the '60s social movements, their effect on "the dominant American ideological cultural apparatus, and the production of new Afro-American images and new Afro-American texts" (48). By giving voice to the disenchanting and the oppressed, he argues, the forces of protest challenged the status quo to such an extent that the Afro-American "was able to assess his situation and history from a context that had not been colonized by the dominant ideological apparatus" (52). The link between political activism and African-American narrative discourse is presumed with equal firmness by Norman Harris in his study of African-American novels of the '60s: the texts he points to unfailingly reveal "historical understanding, the ability to discover oneself in the context of racial history" (190). Such criticism posits a generalized adherence, by the "disenchanted and repressed" (Hogue 51), to movements of resistance and reads a deep current of radicalism in African-American texts of this period. However, the political awakening of Malcolm X and George Jackson should not entirely distract us from the resignation of Shorty, who still "hadn't had enough pork chops and white women" (Malcolm X 214) to join the Muslims, or from the fearful, passive silence of those who, during the Attica riot, chose to hang back "tending to their tents, their possessions" (Useem and Kimball 36). A reappraisal of African-American writing of this period reveals that, along with the protest writings of outspoken activists, a narrative space was created for the small-time hustlers who would not be joining the illustrious converts.

In works that have largely eluded critical attention, black writers formulate representations of the ghetto and the criminalized subject that do not assume a necessary, empowering "evolution" towards political astuteness and radical action. The significance of these works rests in the effectiveness with which

they acknowledge the impact of a persistently brutal, dehumanizing ghetto landscape that silences the rhetoric of resistance, and prevents oppression and injustice from giving rise to empowerment. Chester Himes's Blind Man With a Pistol (1969), Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land (1965) and Louise Meriwether's Daddy Was a Number Runner (1970) are texts that point to the conditions of survival in a slum that is steeped in criminality and violence, where the state's power is channeled through police forces, courts or prisons, but where there is no pervasive awareness of the judicial-penal apparatus as an instrument of oppression. These works refrain from developing models of enlightened resistance, but emphasize instead the circumstances that compel ghetto-dwellers to resign themselves to the indignities of a state of affairs that is represented as unalterable. In Blind Man With a Pistol, for example, Himes represents Harlem as a site of extreme, grotesque violence, a chaotic, incomprehensible landscape where the excesses of predatory citizens intersect with the brutality of cynical black detectives. In an economy of survival that generates widespread exploitation, political activity is subsumed within a predatory system structured by petty ghetto hustles, leaving the impetus for change unsustainable. The ghetto-dweller's refusal to embrace "enlightenment" or radicalism is explicit in Claude Brown's autobiographical Manchild in the Promised Land, which narrates a youth of delinquency and repression, and the subsequent escape of a "lone survivor among the dying and the dead" (Hentoff 5). Bound by the immediate demands and rewards of criminality, young Sonny Boy is unable to find alternative models for survival in the ghetto. Only by leaving Harlem is he able to break free from escalating delinquency and incarceration, and he disengages from the relentless repetition of his life on the street without giving voice to a penitent or exemplary

new “self.” If Brown acknowledges a commitment to individual agency that extricates him from the brutal economy of ghetto survival, Louise Meriwether reiterates the relevance of a Depression-era Harlem that dooms its citizens to the impotent enactment of its most tired clichés of defeat. Subjected to forces that defy their comprehension, the slum-dwellers of Daddy Was a Number Runner are embedded in a network of organized crime and state control that only compels resignation.

Himes, Brown and Meriwether all participate in a discourse that differs from the polemical writings made famous by the likes of Malcolm X, Jackson, Cleaver, and others, yet their works nevertheless operate in a coherent, if sometimes tertiary, dialogue with ‘60s and ‘70s activism. Each situates that activism within a Harlem that, necessarily, couldn’t embrace its potential fully--a Harlem more diverse and disadvantaged, in many respects, than Attica’s D Yard of solidarity.

Chapter I: Black and Noir, *Blind Man With a Pistol*

In a Preface to *Blind Man With a Pistol*, Chester Himes asserts that he has been thinking about “some of our loudmouthed leaders urging our vulnerable soul brothers on to getting themselves killed” and equates their “unorganized violence” to that of a blind man with a pistol. Following this statement, in a Foreword that seems to have completely eluded critical attention, Himes quotes a nameless “Harlem intellectual” as saying: “Motherfucking right, it's confusing; it's a gas, baby, you dig.” Thus begins Himes' hard-boiled novel of violence and corruption in the ghetto, a work that specifically refers to Black Power, Harlem Muslims, and a Church of Black Jesus. Despite its Preface and Foreword, or perhaps because the novel itself highlights the barely intelligible warning of a posited black “intellectual” and presents an indictment of “loudmouthed” leaders, *Blind Man With a Pistol* invites a close examination of the manner in which it negotiates representations of power and submission. In its deference to an established genre, and in its specific treatment of law-enforcement and criminality in the ghetto, the text resonates with ideological implications that must be situated in relation to polemical black writings of this period.

While Himes was developing the violent exploits of his “black killer-detectives” (Franklin 224) in the fictional Harlem of Gallimard's *Série Noire*, Oakland's Black Panthers were challenging police presence in black communities with a campaign of counter-surveillance and open defiance. In *Seize the Time*, Bobby Seale traces the escalating tension caused by neighbourhood patrols and dramatic street-side confrontations, and recalls meeting at one point a black police officer who earns his respect. This officer

tells Seale that he would never shoot a citizen unless he saw that someone's life was in danger:

“But like in riots and stuff like that,” he told us, “cats breaking windows. I’m not going to shoot nobody over nobody’s property, but I will arrest them.” Me and Huey had definitely respected that fact about him; the fact that he said that if he was ordered out on a riot, he’d quit his job before he’d go out there shooting and killing.

This particular cop always felt that he could do a lot from the inside, but he was isolated, isolated from that whole department. (51-52) While such a rational exchange of opinions might have occurred between Panther leaders and a black policeman, Chester Himes’s Harlem allows for no such easy intercourse between its citizens and the brutal black detectives who are at once products of the ghetto and designated representatives of the law operating within its confines. When Grave Digger and Coffin Ed interrogate Lucas Covey, a “superior-acting” black man, they can barely contain an impulse to beat him to death:

Hitting at [Covey] from beyond, from where he was standing at the head of the bed, with the long barrel of his pistol, Grave Digger struck with such force he knocked the back of his hand into his mouth so hard that when he pulled it away screaming, three of the front teeth that Coffin Ed had loosened previously were embedded in the carpal bones of his hand....

The sergeant burst through the door, followed by his wide-eyed assistants. “What the hell!” he exclaimed.

“Fascists!” Covey screamed when he saw the white men.
“Racists! Black Brutes!”

“Take this mother-raper before we kill him,” Grave Digger said. (Blind 91-92)

Clearly, Himes is invoking the hard-boiled school of Chandler and Hammett, a genre typified by what Franklin calls its “proto-fascism.” However, Franklin argues that Himes, as a black man and former convict, is in a peculiarly favourable position to “develop the contradictions” of this genre to its “full logical absurdities” (224). One must nevertheless refrain from reducing the hard-boiled posturing of Himes’s black detectives and the corruption of the ghetto they occupy to meaningless “absurdities.” It has been noted that the detective novel need not be “inextricably linked to capitalist and colonialist values” (Carter 90), yet in Blind Man With a Pistol, Himes presents a ghetto ruled by chaotic violence, where relentlessly predatory citizens who embrace a culture of greed, concealment and manipulation are denied the possibility of a sustained, enlightened opposition to the status quo. The traditionally cynical, brutal roles enacted by Grave Digger and Coffin Ed actually serve to register an always already present resignation to the politics of oppression.

1. “This is Harlem”

French mystery writers Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac place the birth of the roman noir in the context of the American “rotten city” where corruption and violence reign. The hard-boiled detective therefore emerges as a product of the very forces that have shaped those he seeks to apprehend: “issu, à très peu près, du même milieu que ceux qu’il va traquer, parlant comme eux, s’habillant comme eux, aussi brutal qu’eux, bref, un homme qui a choisi de vivre dangereusement pour un maigre salaire” (75). In adherence with such principles, Himes’s tough and violent detectives occupy and patrol a ghetto

where citizens fear and brutalize one another. Descendants of Hammett's Sam Spade, "a cynical, unsentimental detective swimming in a sea of urban crime" (Muller 85), Grave Digger and Coffin Ed act "more like bedraggled wild men" (Muller 84) than rational crime-solvers.

For Himes, Harlem exists as the site of various intersections between the forces of order and the ghetto-dwellers, who are constantly subjected to one-another's criminality. It is a place where anything can and does happen: black nuns hustle for food, naked children eat out of troughs and giant colour televisions are delivered "any time of day or night any place" (Blind 107). The criminality around which every citizen of Harlem must negotiate is recurringly and tirelessly reiterated by Himes, as black subjects are placed within a vast matrix of cannibalistic exploitation. In a chaotic atmosphere of Saturnalia, the hot days and hot nights of Blind Man With a Pistol delineate a sphere in which all types of violence, fraud and vice are allowed to proliferate, until an incident is deemed by the roaming police forces to require investigation. By representing a Harlem where "anything goes," the novel reveals a criminality that is accepted as pervasive, and a level of delinquency that is unquestioned by a community in which predatory impulses flourish unchecked. In Himes's Harlem, social and moral "looseness" is inseparable from the citizens' adherence to provisional, scrounging modes of existence that are inconsistent with organized resistance: the ghetto is represented as a necessarily chaotic assemblage of excesses, caricatures and grotesqueries. In a succession of elaborately detailed locales that teem with violent, comic and disgusting figures,² the text establishes what constitutes the ghetto's norm ("This is Harlem," confirm the black detectives), and the novel's attention to the mystifying minutiae of vice and criminality underscores the impossibility of developing, from within the ghetto, a far-

reaching view of the covert economical and political forces that create and sustain a slum environment. Each time the novel introduces an attempt to comprehend ghetto dynamics, this impulse is represented as leading only to bafflement and mystification, and the reader is offered a Harlem “intellectual”’s confusion or a policeman’s conclusion to the effect that it just “don’t make any sense” (191). More importantly, the confusion and violence invoked and painstakingly related by Himes can be perceived as potentially inviting the ordering and repressive influence of state control. While Himes’s American readers, familiar with the mean streets of Chandler’s San Francisco, Hammett’s L.A., or even with Harlem itself, might have accepted the impossibility of comprehension that attends such spaces, his French readers, taken with the exoticism of the ghetto, would have expected a novel written in the tradition of the “roman policier” to proffer comprehensibility. As Boileau and Narcejac assert, in Himes “Harlem est un endroit si extraordinaire, il s’y passe tant de choses ahurissantes, le lecteur est si fortement dépaysé qu’une enquête policière est presque le seul moyen d’atteindre en profondeur les mentalités qui, de prime abord, nous semblent étrangères.” Thus, they add, “le pittoresque finit par dévorer l’histoire” (114).

If, as Boileau and Narcejac suggest, the picturesque tends to devour the novel’s plot, it also deflects the possibility of a sustained political critique of the forces that create a ghetto and allow it to feed upon itself. “This is Harlem” is produced as a prologue to countless warnings and explanations, and such a catch-all statement allows the exotic, the picturesque to become its own excuse, its own system. Poverty, violence and exploitation are thus constantly dismissed in the novel as sui generis manifestations of the ghetto that is what it is. Its excess-seeking, absurdly joyful and predatory population reveals the

workings of what Terry Eagleton describes as the “consumerist ideologies of advanced capitalism, in which the subject is encouraged to live provisionally, glide contentedly from sign to sign, revel in the rich plurality of its appetites and savour itself as no more than a decentered function of them” (198).

In Blind Man With a Pistol, Himes depicts a type of formal surveillance that is carried out surreptitiously by a state apparatus which occasionally manifests itself, in a seemingly random and selective fashion, at the discretion of its officials. This representation echoes a vision of black neighbourhoods as having been granted “extra-legal” or “sub-legal” (Nelson 368) status, so that state presence appears to be relatively lax, and an atmosphere has developed in which certain kinds of “necessary” illegal activities can flourish without interference from the law (Walters 620). Himes introduces this perception of the law’s passive presence within the ghetto when Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are described as the invisible occupants of a ghostly unmarked car:

They could see in the dark streets like cats, but couldn’t be seen, which was just as well because their presence might have discouraged the vice business in Harlem and put countless citizens on relief.

Actually they weren’t concerned with prostitution or its feeder vices, unlicensed clubs, bottle peddlers, petty larceny, short con or steering. (29)

Naturally, it is only their overt presence that would discourage the “vice business,” since the novel recurrently places them in their patrol car, tirelessly cruising the streets, fully aware of the illegal activities taking place around them. While the officers may not be perceived by the citizens they observe, the law is not absent from Harlem; it is merely selective in its application, while maintaining covert surveillance of the people whose vices it chooses not to

discourage. Thus, when the officers encounter at the police station Jonas "Fats" Little, a powerful black representative of organized crime in Harlem, they are perfectly aware of his activities, but silence prevails: "The Harlem detectives knew him well. They looked at him. He looked back through his old glazed eyes. No one spoke. They kept their record straight (155)."

Through *Grave Digger* and *Coffin Ed*, its representatives, the state cultivates an awareness of such petty vices as prostitution, numbers and other small-scale rackets. These tolerated forms of criminality, not surprisingly, are the most widespread, and they are acknowledged by Himes's detectives as necessary responses to confinement within a ghetto landscape. As *Grave Digger* reminds white officers: "Why would anyone live here who was honest?...or how could anyone stay honest who lived here?" (84). Despite Himes's emphasis on an apparent tolerance of prevalent, small-scale dishonesty, he represents those engaged in "sub-legal" survival as being denied any awareness of the larger political significance of a confined ghetto criminality. Yet such criminality, localized in its economic consequences and brutalizing impact, is "useful," since subjects who "resign themselves to their social weakness" will rely on short-term solutions,

trying to get what they can for themselves in any way possible, and to express dissatisfaction through relatively easy-to-control individual forms of ambition, violence and self-destruction (including crime); meanwhile, dominant-class subjects themselves are freer to believe that their wealth and power are after all justified, that it really is the best of all possible worlds they can manage. (Kavanagh 309)

Furthermore, the novel underscores the significance, to outsiders, of an enclosure that is imbued with an aura of lawlessness: Harlem's ostensible

freedom from state control or surveillance confers a singular attractiveness to its sex trade, and white men are drawn by the “brazen, debased, unashamed” and greedy eyes of the ghetto’s homosexual prostitutes (15). On a street corner that is perceived to be as safe for white men as Times Square, where cops are “always in calling distance” (16), “square” johns watch enviously the unrestrained sensuousness that is on display “on any hot night” (16). Tolerance of Harlem’s petty vices need not be equated with an absence of state interest, but with a sustained but discretionary and relatively secret control. As Michel Foucault, in his discussion of the prison’s “failure,” points out, after all :

[La prison] contribue à mettre en place un illégalisme voyant, marqué, irréductible à un certain niveau et secrètement utile,--rétif et docile à la fois; elle dessine, isole et souligne une forme d’illégalisme qui semble résumer symboliquement toutes les autres, mais qui permet de laisser dans l’ombre celles qu’on veut ou qu’on doit tolérer. (281, emphasis added)

The illegal behaviour that flourishes “dans l’ombre” in Himes’s Harlem is presented as allowing countless citizens to stay off relief and providing payoffs for officers on the force (29). More importantly, “vice” in Blind Man With a Pistol exists to perpetuate provisional, hand-to-mouth modes of existence and to exhaust the energies of petty criminals, while ensuring that state responsibility for ghetto conditions remains unexplored. The novel proposes as necessary a base-line criminality that compels ghetto-dwellers to view one another with fear and distrust, and to turn towards individualistic and predatory means of finding sustenance. As Gilbert Muller asserts: “the clear absence of honest capital in Harlem activates the absurd pursuit of money in any form by Himes’ dedicated villains” (86). While the text allows for small-scale criminality to be equated with

survival, it simultaneously establishes a level of violence and exploitation that leads to grotesque excesses. Thus, for example, an overwhelming atmosphere of ruthless self-interest is captured in a climax of violence and betrayal, as members of a family, their friends and a con man all scramble for a Gladstone bag filled with money:

Viola changed directions and headed toward Mister Sam with the open blade. Doctor Mubuta clutched her about the waist. Johnson X started forward. Van Raff jumped to his feet. Viola was trying to stab Doctor Mubuta and his hand was getting slashed as he grabbed for the knife.

He was reaching for the Gladstone when Van Raff came up from behind, shouting, "Oh no you don't!" and snatched it out of his hand. Simultaneously Viola stabbed him in the back. It wasn't enough to hamper him and he wheeled on her in a red-eyed rage and clutched the blade with his bleeding hand as though it were an icicle, and jerked it from her hand. Her gray eyes were stretched in fear and outrage and her pink mouth opened for a scream, showing a lot of vein-laced throat. But she never got to scream. He stabbed her in the heart, and in the same motion turned and stabbed van Raff in the head, breaking the knife blade on his skull. (44-45)

By positing a ghetto that exists largely as a closed system, a "city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living," where the cannibalistic impulses of "blind mouths eating their own guts" (For Love 111) create an irrepressible cycle of self-destruction within the community, Himes isolates the conditions of day-to-day survival in Harlem from the covert, external forces that determine them. Only at the end of Blind Man With a Pistol, in Michael X's reference to a Mister Big who, with the tolerance of the chief of police, handles

graft, prostitution, numbers and drugs, is there a suggestion of the countless outside interests that may be served by black crime within the ghetto: "They're white, ain't they? Mister Big. The Syndicate. The newspapers. The employers. The landlords. The police--not you men, of course--but then you don't really count in the overall pattern. The government. All white" (175).

The writings of Black Muslims and activists of the '60s point to the significance of ghetto criminality in an unequivocal manner that is quite distinct from Michael X's cryptic suggestions. The powerlessness at the very root of desperate, provisional living is evoked by Malcolm X in his Autobiography: "in the ghettos the white man has built for us, he has forced us not to aspire to greater things, but to view every day living as survival--and in that kind of community, survival is what is respected" (90). Furthermore, the economic ramifications of so-called "small-time" crime, which remain shadowy in Blind Man With a Pistol, are bluntly exposed by convict and activist Etheridge Knight. In an essay titled "The Poor Pay More, Even for Their Dreams," Knight argues that the "numbers" racket must be situated within a multilayered system of wealth production that gives very little to those who "hit", and maintains a stranglehold on the ghetto community through a variety of criminal operators--drug dealers, pimps, and loan-sharks. Overseeing the business of petty crime, asserts Knight, is a "big man" who "looms like a specter not only over the numbers game but over the entire neighborhood," and is himself "the representative of an organized criminal syndicate which, according to some law officials, plucks an annual \$6 billion out of the pocketbooks and dreams of black people" (90).

In Blind Man With a Pistol, the apparently selective application of the law by its officers belies the existence of an overarching apparatus of state control,

but it also denies access to the safeguards of due process: decisions are privately and capriciously made in the secret confines of the patrol car. As a result of such discretionary practises, one citizen is held and searched while another is allowed to hurry away. For example, the novel opens with a description of a completely delapidated, abandoned building, which appears to be inhabited by black nuns. In the window is a sign that reads: FUNERALS PERFORMED. This structure has never aroused the interest of policemen, until the day when another sign is placed:

It was not until another innocuous card appeared in the window one day, requesting: "Fertile womens, loving God, inquire within," that anyone had given it a thought. Two white cops in a cruiser who had been driving by the house on their normal patrol every day for the past year were proceeding past as usual when the cop beside the driver shouted, "Whoa, man! You see what I see?" (8, emphasis added)

The recruitment of "fertile womens" in a black neighborhood is deemed worthy of investigation, but the presence of black nuns in a dangerously dilapidated, condemned house is not. In a moment of private, swift and individual decision-making, patrolling policemen choose which state-sanctioned powers are to be exercised. In this dangerously selective and unaccountable manner, seemingly irrational exercises of power set into motion the various investigations that intersect in Blind Man With a Pistol.

Himes's officers of the law, both black and white, wield seemingly unlimited powers to arrest and detain. Their disregard for fundamental rights must be placed in the context of a perceived unaccountability of the forces of order that was identified by the Black Panthers and formed the basis of their first acts of organized resistance, namely the patrolling (or counter-surveillance) of

police officers in black neighbourhoods (Seale 93).

2. "Find Out What You Can!" The Citizen Under Investigation

Once stimulated by a particular incident, the police forces, as represented in Blind Man With a Pistol, are programmed essentially for investigation. "Find out what you can!" is the command that issues from centers of control to set the apparatus into motion or, as Lieutenant Anderson orders Grave Digger and Coffin Ed: "Stay with the body and see what you can learn" (34). At the heart of this impulse is a project to elicit "the facts" from various sources, and to remain committed to the investigative process, no matter how lengthy and convoluted such an undertaking might prove to be. The moment of "questioning" is therefore represented as the fundamental intersection between the forces of order and the ghetto-dweller. Police officers enact and re-enact a rigid script that requires a response to every question, an explanation for every event or action and, most importantly, the name of a perpetrator to whom blame can be assigned. Himes includes lengthy episodes of such interrogation, in the course of which an essentially captive citizen is pressed to explain and reveal countless "facts." By subjecting the individual to such questions, representatives of the state undertake a process by which they do not ask, but demand in a repetitive and aggressive manner from the individual citizen, who is not able to decline participation in the forced dialogue. Himes's highlighting of this type of questioning gestures to a practice the Black Panthers identified as problematic, and as necessitating an unconditional means of refusal. In fact, as early as 1966, black resistance activists openly refused to undergo police questioning. Huey Newton, for example, is reported to have reacted in the following manner to interrogation:

“Your true name is Huey P. Newton?” Huey said, “That’s right.”
The pig wrote this down.

“Your true address is 841 Forty-seventh Street?”
Huey said, “That’s right.” The pig then looked at his license. “What’s
your phone number?” And Huey said, “Five!” and stopped and wouldn’t
say anything else. And the pig said, “Five what?”

This is when all the shit between the Party and the pigs began.
Huey said, “The Fifth Amendment. You ever heard of it? Don’t you know
about the constitutional right of a person not to testify against himself?
Five! I don’t have to give you anything but my identification, name, and
address so therefore I don’t even want to talk to you. You can leave my
car and leave me alone. I don’t even want to hear you.” (Seale 87)

In the Harlem of Blind Man With a Pistol, it is not possible for the ghetto-dweller
to assert that he “doesn’t even want to talk” to a representative of the state.
However, the process of questioning , while lengthy and apparently
inescapable, yields very few of the “facts” sought. The investigative process is
consistently imposed upon a Harlem that maddeningly and often comically
resists it, as interrogation becomes charade:

In a small room across the hall where the nuns were sitting, which
Reverend Sam called his study, he was being questioned sharply by all
twelve cops. Reverend Sam answered their questions politely, looking
unperturbed. Yes, he was an ordained minister. Ordained by who?
Ordained by God, who else. Yes, the nuns were all his wives. How did
he account for that, nuns had made sacred vows to lives of chastity?
Yes, there were white nuns and black nuns. What difference did that
make? The church provided shelter and food for the white nuns, his

black nuns had to hustle for themselves. But religious vows forbid nuns to marry or to participate in any form of carnality. Yes, yes, rightfully speaking, his nuns were virgins. But how could that be when they were his wives and had given birth to, er, fifty children by him? (13)

Once again, Himes underscores the extent to which a climate of lawlessness and widespread exploitation leads to an environment that cannot be compelled to “make sense.” Furthermore, the rhetorical strategies practised by interrogated citizens who provide cryptic, bogus, or deceptively simple statements have been interpreted as a form of “subversive power” derived from the manipulation of codes that is made possible traditionally by “the underclass’s superior knowledge of the minds of their oppressors” (Walters 616). Nevertheless, it should be noted that such techniques always involve a willingness to play the game of submission, an acceptance of the very process that allows law enforcement officials to burst in upon a citizen’s private realm, hold him captive within that sphere or, worse, in the confines of the patrol car or station. Even a “superior-acting” individual is doomed to subservience when Coffin Ed and Grave Digger fully enjoy the presumptive right to demand “answers.” The alternative, never explicitly raised by ghetto-dwellers in Blind Man With A Pistol, is the type of overt resistance that formed the basis of early Black Panther activities, when Huey Newton briefed the brothers on what he called the “legal first aid”--the thirteen points of constitutional law that he had printed and handed out to party members. Thus, as he advised when police would approach a gathering of armed Panthers, “nobody say anything, because the minute somebody says something the man is going to try to arrest you” (Seale 86).

In Himes’s representation of the encounter between citizens and officers

of the law, detecting produces very little and attempts to wrest intelligible “information” fail, as even the most powerless manage to derail the investigative process: “Sergeant Ryan soon gave up on them. They were too innocent for him. They were the most law-abiding, hard-working, know-nothing colored people he had ever seen. Neither Grave Digger nor Coffin Ed batted an eye” (80). Nevertheless, the ritual of the investigation remains a potent show of state power, and it allows policemen to roundup and hold citizens in order to subject them to relentless “questioning.” Through a form of verbal resistance that “plays along” with the “Man,” citizens of Harlem postpone the gathering of any specific or incriminating information. They do, however, have to accept captivity and subjection to a ritual of force that must be enacted until they are deemed by the oppressor to be “free to go.”

3. “The Pitch”: Political Activism in Himes’s Harlem

The subversion of the ritual of police investigation constitutes one of the ways in which Harlem is represented as baffling, unknowable and absurd in Blind Man With a Pistol. Thus, Wendy Walters argues that “it is the community insiders’ special skill both in reading Harlem and manipulating its unreadability which allows for their self-protecting solidarity” (616). And yet, Walters does not acknowledge that, while the chaos and confusion that render Harlem unreadable may protect its inhabitants from outsiders, such chaos also facilitates a vast network of exploitations and counter-exploitations that allow ghetto-dwellers to prey on one another. In the context of the black-against-black criminality and manipulation posited by Himes, the “political” movements depicted are construed as elaborate fronts for traditional confidence games. Significantly, these so-called political groups operate only within the ghetto, and

it is not the master but the brother who is being duped. Political activity is inscribed into a model of widespread exploitation, and it merges with age-old forms of criminality and individualistic, predatory behaviour. Thus, Marcus MacKenzie, the simple-minded organizer of a "March of brotherhood," caters to fantasies of interracial sex:

Marcus had been careful to select black youths who were black and white youths who were white. Somehow the black against the white and the white against the black gave the illusion of nakedness. The forty-eight orderly marchers gave the illusion of an orgy. The black and white naked flesh in the amber light filled the black and white onlookers with strange excitement. (27)

Doctor Moore, the leader of a Black Power movement, is a swindler and a pimp who uses his pitch only to make money, offhandedly remarking that what he really needs in order to make money from the anger of the ghetto-dwellers is "a dead man". Prophet Ham, of the Temple of Black Jesus, travels about town with a buxom white girlfriend in a lavender Cadillac, and the latter drives along the crowded streets "as though black people were invisible" (79). Only Michael X, the leader of the Black Muslims, remains a morally ambiguous figure, "absurdly defiant" and apparently aware of shadowy links between the police and organized crime. Nevertheless, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are unable to obtain from him an indictment of specific corrupt elements, and Grave Digger warns him that he may not live long (175).

Blind Man With a Pistol therefore posits a ghetto in which true political activism does not occur, and where Harlem "intellectuals" are credited with uttering such thoughts as "Motherfucking right, it's confusing; it's a gas, baby, you dig" (Foreword). Its teeming population is so completely possessed by the

individualistic demands of desperate, provisional living, that it turns its impulses inward to feed upon its “own guts.” The citizens Himes places in a landscape of filth and physical degradation embrace a daily, scrounging criminality that is punctuated by moments of unthinking revelry or extreme, gruesome violence. Alternative models of existence are only presented to them, in grotesquely inappropriate language, by hustlers and con-men: “You want a good house? you got to whale!”.... “WHALE WHITEY!” shouts a sweating, vacant-eyed follower of Doctor Moore (46); “We’re gonna keep feeding [whitey] the flesh of the Black Jesus until he perish of constipation if he don’t choke to death first,” preaches Prophet Ham (78). If, as Muller asserts, “the ludicrous spirit of capitalism” is at the center of Himes’s detective plots and “manifests itself in the frenetic, violent, criminal pursuit of money” (86), in Blind Man With a Pistol, self-proclaimed “leaders” barely disguise their greed with an unconvincing rhetoric of protest. Using childish, comically reductive “pitches,” these men surround themselves with signs of economic power borrowed from the dominant culture: they wear gaudy, expensive suits, ride with their bodyguards in shiny cars, and display their white women as trophies. They are represented as classic “hustlers,” who endorse every Harlem cliché and therefore deny the very possibility of change by their participation in the ghetto’s unthinking cannibalism. By tapping into the ghetto-dwellers’ pursuit of short-lived pleasure, the Church of Black Jesus promotes a mindless gathering of revelers rather than a true demonstration of resistance: “Get some banners reading ‘Jesus baby.’ Give us a little sweet wine. Sing Jesus Savior. Get some of these gals from the streets. Tell ‘em you want ‘em for the dance. They ask what dance? You tell ‘em the dance. Wherever gals go, mens follow. Remember that, Colonel. That’s the first principle of the march” (78).

Similarly, Doctor Moore acknowledges the superficiality and unreliability of his followers' commitment: "All they want to do is boogaloo....I could make a mint if I could just get them mad" (54). In a scene that is emblematic of the chaos and fragmentation of the ghetto community, a moment of protest explodes into violence, as three different marches converge on Nat Turner Day, and the Black Power bullies attack the Brotherhood, looking for "sissies and prostitutes to beat" (105). In another example of the treacherousness and malleability of self-styled leaders, the voice of a black man is fused with the face of white police power, as state repression of the ghetto uprising is effected through the use of Martin Luther King's rhetoric:

They had gravitated into the sitting room and upon hearing a Negroid voice saying loudly, "Be calm--," they all turned and looked at the color television. A white man was shown standing on the platform of a police sound truck, exhorting his listeners: "Go home. It's all over. Just a misunderstanding..." At just that moment he was shown in closeup so all one could see were his sharp Caucasian features talking directly to the television audience....

The white man was saying, "...no way to protest injustice. We colored people must be the first to uphold law and order." (151)

4. Hard-boiled to Resignation

Somehow, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed stand separate from a self-righteous, "white" black leader on a police sound truck, even when they follow orders to halt the rioting by endeavouring to find an individual who can be held responsible for the unrest. "If we find out there's some joker agitating these young people to riot, and we find out who it is, and if we find him, we're going to

beat him to death--," they warn in frustration as it becomes clear that traditional methods will not provide the information sought (171). While Edward Margolies notes that Himes began publishing his *Série Noire* novels "after the postwar decline of the pulps, [when] tough, quirky, individualistic dicks were becoming less fashionable" (53), it is clear that Himes embraces the posturing of the "hardboiled breed," even as he places his "dicks" in a ghetto rocked, very topically, by civil disorder. Himes's deference to the conventional hard-boiled formula, with its "rotten" ghetto and its cynical, brutal detectives who are pitted against adversaries for whom life has no value ("pour qui la vie ne compte pas" [Boileau 76]), needs to be examined as having a potential political resonance that separates his deployment of the genre from that of his predecessors. Indeed, in a novel about Harlem, about Black Power, Muslims and the Church of Black Jesus, Himes's representation of the ghetto detectives must be carefully assessed.

As representatives of law enforcement, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are an odd choice, revealing no existence away from the patrol car and the station and no distinctly separate identities. Only their utterances delineate their presence in the novel, and as their statements merge and complete one another, the two policemen are virtually interchangeable. Wendy Walters argues that, in Himes's earlier formulations of the Harlem detective novel, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger act primarily as protectors of the black community and echo traditional features of African-American folk heroes. By 1969, with the publication of *Blind Man With a Pistol*, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger can no longer successfully assume that role, and the "smaller-scale heroism of a Coffin Ed or Grave Digger becomes ineffectual" in the face of dominant white power. They may still exhibit "heroic" strategies of protection, but the "scene" has

changed (Walters 623). Because of the white establishment's refusal to allow the black detectives to investigate (624), because they come to understand "the inner workings of the white-run police force" (625), they acknowledge their inability to conduct their investigations adequately. For Walters, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed's "effectiveness as heroes is undercut by the altered sociopolitical landscape of U.S. race relations" (615).

Walters' contention that heroism is swallowed up by more pressing concerns with race relations does, however, require a certain reappraisal. A closer look at the varied and apparently inconsistent statements uttered by Grave Digger and Coffin Ed in Blind Man With a Pistol suggests that the quashing of their "heroism" and the repression of their investigative undertakings by the white-run police force cannot account for their posited inability to act as "effective" and protective members of the black community. In fact, their very commitment to detecting functions as a marker of their acceptance of the state apparatus' aims and tactics. Furthermore, their discretionary approach to crime, and their willingness to embrace brutality serve a definite state purpose that is reiterated by the detectives' rhetoric of resignation. The following exchange, in which Coffin Ed and Grave Digger undertake a brief discussion of Malcolm X, provides some intimation of the extent to which they acknowledge an identity that has been granted to them by the state apparatus they serve:

"You know one thing, Digger. He was safe as long as he kept hating white folks--they wouldn't have hurt him, probably made him rich; it wasn't until he began including them in the human race they killed him. That ought to tell you something."

"It does. It tells me white people don't want to be included in a

human race with black people. Before they'll be included they'll give 'em the whole human race. But it don't tell me who you mean by they."

"They, man, they. They'll kill you and me too if we ever stop being colored cops."

"I wouldn't blame them," Grave Digger said. "It'd bring about a lot of confusion." (112)

The unspecified "they" is accepted as sufficient by each detective, as is the belief that they serve a specific purpose by being "colored cops." The two detectives set forth what they perceive as their choice either to be what it has been determined they should be ("colored" cops), or to reject that rigid assignment of identity and forfeit the permission to exist.

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser describes the "good subjects," those who "work by themselves":

They are inserted into practises governed by the rituals of the [Ideological State Apparatuses]. They "recognize" the existing state of affairs (das Bestehende), that "it really is true that it is so and not otherwise," and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to De Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that thou shalt "love thy neighbour as thyself," etc... Their concrete, material behaviour is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: "Amen-
-So be it." (181)

The cynicism, bitterness and callous unconcern of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, drawn from the traditional posture of the hard-boiled "hero," do not exempt them from being good, dominated subjects who "work by themselves." The pair's resigned acceptance of the status conferred upon them as "colored" (as opposed to black) cops facilitates daily recognition of a brutal and inescapable

“state of affairs.” Their repeated allusions to the predictable defeats and injustices caused by another’s “white skin,” and their catch-all, self-explanatory “This is Harlem” can be read as reiterations of a grudging, brutal but sustained “so be it.” Thus, while Margolies asserts that “by the time he wrote his last novel,” Himes had “transformed the genre into an expression of the absurdities of American society” (53-54), the acknowledgement of such absurdities by his two detectives as sui generis, fundamental and unavoidable, can be viewed as an expression of submission to the very conditions that determine the ghetto.

It is Grave Digger and Coffin Ed’s acceptance of the ghetto’s culture of brutality and individualism that actually proves to the state that they can-- however inadequately--be trusted to act on its behalf. The black detectives therefore function primarily as participants in the state’s “information-finding” or “detecting” mission, despite the fact that they are exposed to the fruitlessness of the question-answer process from their first appearance in the novel. As Grave Digger leans over a white man whose throat has been cut, he attempts to obtain the aggressor’s name:

“Who did it? Quick! A name!” Grave Digger hammered, his face bloody and contorted.

The white man’s tightly clamped lips trembled and suddenly opened, like a seldom used door. A liquid, gurgling sound came out, followed instantly by a gush of blood in which he drowned.

“Jesus,” Grave Digger echoed as he slowly straightened his bent figure. ‘Jesus bastard!’ What a thing to say.” (32-33)

In this moment, the policeman’s feverish insistence to have the perpetrator’s name revealed in a classic “dying declaration” is rewarded with a disappointing utterance that defies investigation. Despite this setback, Coffin Ed calls his

lieutenant to report the murder, and asserts that “all you can do is take in a couple loads of these citizens for questioning if we can determine exactly where it was done” (34). Following their boss’s order that they stay with the body and see what they can “learn,” the black cops engage in the ritual questioning of bystanders, and the answers they reap both deflect the aim of the investigative process and reassert Harlem’s resistance to the traditional tools of detection:

Grave Digger turned towards the silent crowd collecting in the shadows. “Any of you know anything that might help?”

“H. Exodus Clay is the name of an undertaker,” a brother said.

“Does this look like a time for that?”

“To me it does. When a man’s dead you got to bury him.”

“I mean anything that might help find out who killed him,”

Grave Digger said to the others.

“I seen a white man and a colored man whispering.”

“Where was that, lady?”

“Eight Avenue and 15th Street.”

People in Harlem always drop the “one hundred” from the designation of their streets, so that 10th Street is 110th, 25th is 125th and 15th is 115th. That wasn’t very near but it was close enough.

“When, lady?”

“I don’t remembers ‘zactly. Night ‘fore last, I thinks.”

“All right, forget it. You folks go to bed.” (34-35)

Despite the recurring failure of the investigative process, Ed and Digger are committed to carrying out an investigation, and they demonstrate a

willingness to extract information from even the most obvious assortment of lies. Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are eager to read the ghetto (Walters 624), to find clues and extract confessions, and thus situate each citizen within an extensive web of ghetto criminality. Thus, they stand silent as the homicide sergeant interrogates the tenants of a rundown apartment house and, when he asks them whether they believe any of the preposterous statements and comical aliases he has gleaned, Grave Digger responds, "it's half-true, like everything else." He continues:

"We know Booker T. Washington hangs around Acey-Deucey's poolroom where he earns a little scratch racking balls when he hasn't snatched a purse that paid. And we know that Socrates Hoover watches parked cars at night on the side streets around Yankee Stadium to keep them from being robbed of anything he can rob himself. And what else can two big yellow whores do but hustle? That's why those sports make themselves scarce at night. But Tola Ramsey and his wife do just what they say. It's easy enough to check. But all you got to do is look at all those suits and shirts that don't fit him."

"Anyway, none of them work in white folks' kitchens," Coffin Ed said gruffly. (84)

Their existence as representatives of the law places them at the intersection of state control and ghetto criminality, and Coffin Ed and Grave Digger constantly offer their ghetto brothers and sisters a discourse of resignation to state forces. This is exemplified when Grave Digger says to a black woman being badgered by a white officer: "Don't look at me.... I'm the law too," to which she scornfully replies: "That's a nigger for you," as an officer

marches her off her back steps (59). Later in the novel, in the midst of general rioting, Grave Digger and Ed confront five youths who are tormenting a sixth boy for being “chicken,” and who taunt the cops with being “scared of whitey:”

“When I was your age I'da got slapped in the mouth for telling a grown man that.”

“You slap us we waste you.”

“All right, we believe you,” Grave Digger said impatiently. “Go home and leave this kid alone.”

“You ain't our Pa.”

“Damn right, if I was you wouldn't be out here.”

“We're the law,” Coffin Ed said to forestall any more argument. Six pairs of round white-rimmed eyes stared at them accusingly.

“Then you on whitey's side.”

“We're on your leader's side.”

“Them Doctor Toms,” a youth said contemptuously. “They're all on whitey's side.”

“Go on home,” Grave Digger said, pushing them away, ignoring the flashing knife blades. “Go home and grow up. You'll find out there ain't any other side.” (140)

In both instances, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are not recognised or identified as officers of the law, and they reveal their identity precisely when some call to political identification is directed at them. Tellingly, being “the law”, being on the black “leader's side” and being on “whitey's side” are all collapsed into one inescapable allegiance, the inevitability of which Digger foresees.

Added to this rhetoric of resignation to the only “side” are several episodes of violence directed by the two detectives towards black citizens of

Harlem. The methodical, systematic and planned beating of Lucas Covey is aimed at furthering a murder investigation. More gratuitous, but just as excessive, is Ed's greeting of a woman as she opens her apartment door and prepares to scream:

Her mouth flew open, showing the screams gathering in her throat. But they didn't get past her lips. Coffin Ed poked an uppercut through the crack in her door and caught her in the solar plexus. Air exploded from her mouth and she went down on her pratt. Her pink silk robe flew open and her legs flew apart as though it were a natural reaction to getting punched. (188)

Later in the novel, in the midst of a riot caused by the merging of three different political demonstrations, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger join the rout and physically engage with various protesters:

But the serious fighting was being done by Grave Digger and Coffin Ed against the leather-coated troopers, the silent clerics and a number of other Black Power sluggers. The detectives had been down at first, but had taken advantage of their opponents, kicking to get their feet tangled up. They had got to their own feet, their clothes torn, noses bleeding, knots springing from their heads and faces, and had begun fistfighting their opponents, back to back. Their long holstered pistols were exposed, but they had orders not to draw them. They couldn't have drawn them anyway, in the rain of fists showering over them. But they had one advantage. Every time a brother hit one of the pistols, his fist broke. (105)

Critics have tended to minimize the significance of such scenes in Himes's work, and have invoked the mitigating context of a "general, cartoon-like,

excessive violence of Himes' detective fiction as a whole" (Walters 618). Raymond Nelson associates this violence with the traditional behaviour of the "bad Nigger of folklore,"³ who is "valuable as a symbol of defiance, strength, and masculinity to a community that has been forced to learn, or at least sham, weakness and compliance" (267). He also asserts that brutality is the only means at the disposal of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed (269), who seek by violence to express "altruistic hopes for communal peace and decency" (270). Margolies formulates the following questions regarding the brutality of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger: "Are they directing their rage away from themselves for serving an oppressive society? Are they expressing subconscious hostility toward their own people? Must black cops be tougher on blacks than white cops? Or is their brutality really justified?" (69). Part of the answer, he argues, is that Himes refuses to transcend the formula of the hard-boiled genre, which relies on the assumed inexorable violence of human existence. However, unlike the individualistic "dicks" of Hammett and Chandler, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are not private investigators who can function outside of established police protocol--they are police officers. As the only black detectives in their department, they do often appear to be "tougher on blacks" than their colleagues, who seek to distance themselves from the pair's excessive violence when it threatens to taint the force's image. Thus, Captain Brice advises them against soiling the precinct's reputation:

I know you two guys. You go off cracking heads and shooting people on just a theory, and when it turns out wrong, which is just as liable as not, the commissioner cracks down and the press gets on my ass. It might not bother you two tough customers, maybe you can take it, but it's a black eye for me. I come up for retirement

next year and I don't want to leave here with a cloud over my head and a couple of trigger happy dicks subject to shoot anybody anytime. (95-96)

The most troubling aspect of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed's violence, however, is their refusal to speak of it as anything but an essential and inevitable component of their decreed identity. "You ought to know more than anyone else we're not subtle cops," they tell Lieutenant Anderson, "we're tough and heavy-handed" (171). Time and time again, they voice a cynical resignation to their own exhibitions of brutality, and a complete acceptance of the economy of physical intimidation and punishment. Thus, in response to Lieutenant Anderson's report that the employer of Lucas Covey has been crying "murder, brutality, anarchy and everything else you can think of" (109), the detectives starkly equate the black man's body with meat that must be "cooked" by the investigative process:

"Well, boss, it's as the French say, you can't make a ragout without cutting the meat."

"Well that doesn't mean grinding it into beef hash."

"Ah well, the more it's ground the faster it cooks. I suppose our boy was well cooked?" (110)

Even when Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are not acting as representatives of the law within the ghetto, their rhetoric continues to carry fundamental calls to resignation and cooperation with the state apparatus. These statements take the form of either an expressed refusal to legitimize resistance as it manifests itself in the ghetto, or a reliance on catchphrases and clichés which precludes the possibility of any incisive critique. Thus, Grave Digger bases his explanation for the riots on the fact that young Blacks don't "know better" about

the persistence of white racism, and that they believe the lies told by white rulers who “yap to their heart’s content about how they were going to give us equality as soon as we were ready” (170). What “saves colored folks” of his generation, claims Digger, is that “we ain’t never believed it. But this new generation believes it. And that’s how we get riots” (170). Indeed, the detectives are “saved” from political involvement and decision-making: their conviction that things can only ever be as they are and their hard-boiled posturing allow them to embrace the cynicism of those who refuse to entertain the possibility of racial equality. And thus Grave Digger and Coffin Ed simply cannot challenge the established order that dominates them. White folks will always lie, “there ain’t no other side,” “this is Harlem”: these catchphrases of immutability protect Grave Digger and Coffin Ed from having to situate themselves politically (as subservient agents of the state), or from even acknowledging the political struggles of others. Furthermore, the detectives’ show of violence within the community, as well as their unwillingness to tolerate or endorse any measure of civil unrest point to a complete denial of the possibility of resisting domination.

While they are captive witnesses to the filth, poverty and cannibalistic greed of Harlem, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed accept a status quo of ghetto survival that leaves no space for thoughtful, systematic opposition. Their individualistic isolation from potential “enlightenment” or allegiance to community-based political activity is clear to the novel’s end. When a follower of Michael X, whom the novel presents as distinct from the other hustler/activists, displays various horrifying curios of the slave trade, Coffin Ed impatiently waves him aside: “We know we’re descended from slaves,” he jeers, “What’re you trying to tell us?” (174). Solidified into unemotional

acceptance of vice and brutality, they nevertheless appear to decry the status quo in two very similar exchanges with Lieutenant Anderson, concerning the “instigator” of the Harlem riots. In the first conversation, the detectives identify the instigator of the riots as Abraham Lincoln, who “hadn’t ought to have freed us if he didn’t want to make provisions to feed us,” and as “skin” (135). This is further detailed in a later chapter, as the two men complete one another’s indictment of white skin:

“Some folks call him by one name, some by another,” Coffin Ed said.

“Some call him lack of respect for law and order, some lack of opportunity, some the teachings of the Bible, some the sins of their fathers,” Grave Digger expounded. “Some call him ignorance, some poverty, some rebellion. Me and Ed look at him with compassion. We’re victims.”

“Victims of what?” Anderson asked foolishly.

“Victims of your skin,” Coffin Ed shouted brutally, his own patchwork of grafted black skin twitching with passion. (153-154)

Critics have unanimously read these passages as attesting to an increased political awareness in Grave Digger and Coffin Ed. Walters argues that these moments reveal the pair’s propensity to be “on the side of the victims” (625). Franklin states that Grave Digger and Coffin Ed intimately know the cause of the riots: “just as Himes’ first tale of two tough detective cops was entitled “He Knew,” this one might be entitled They Knew, for this is the only mystery in the book that Coffin Ed and Grave Digger can solve” (228). And yet, there are problems with such readings of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger’s supposed political enlightenment. To blame Lincoln for civil unrest in the ‘60s is

also to omit any mention of a century of systematic racism and, more crucially, to fail to indict contemporary political and economic entities which might be held accountable for the state of the ghetto. Similarly, Digger's list of the causes of the riots, when closely examined, reveals itself to be lacking in any insights which might lead him towards a true critique of the state he serves. To invoke lack of respect for law and order and lack of opportunity on the part of urban blacks, without probing further into ghetto conditions, is to leave untouched the state's role and interest in sustaining such a place. He includes, in the same breath, the "teachings of the Bible" and "the sins of their fathers" as linked causally to the riots--cursory references to classical representations of white racism which also fail to account for current sins and teachings permeating the white establishment of the '60s. Finally, Digger points to the characteristics and by-products of ghetto life --the "ignorance," "poverty" and "rebellion"-- that are mere symptoms of a social order and an economic system that remain occluded and unacknowledged. When Coffin Ed shouts "Victims of your skin!" he is attributing untold forms of race- and class-bound oppression to one inevitable, immutable characteristic of the oppressor--his skin. By focusing on this one element and reducing a race-riot to an ignorant, rebellious and disorganized lashing-out against "white skin," Ed and Digger are denying the possibility of delving into what really allows the oppressor to act as such, and more importantly, they are asserting the impossibility of social or political change. In this regard, they remain distanced from a rising black communism which situates racism as "one of the most complex psycho-social by-products that economic man with his private enterprise has manufactured" (Jackson, Blood 94). As George Jackson advises in Blood In My Eye, a strategy of revolution and liberation must take into account both racial and class-based imperatives:

“As black partisans, we must recognize and allow for the existence ofracists. We must understand their presence as an effect of the system. It is the system that must be crushed, for it continues to manufacture new and deeper contradictions of both class and race” (94).

Critics have generally interpreted Blind Man With a Pistol as an indictment of “random violence (as opposed to planned revolution)” (Walters 626). Franklin argues that Himes’s Preface is not “to be read as a condemnation of armed struggle” (227),⁴ and James Lundquist contends that the novel condemns the misdirection caused by “a kind of blindness that is a consequence both of the internalized culture of Harlem itself and the perverse willingness of human nature to accept simple answers to complex problems” (127). Such readings discount the consistency with which the text reaffirms the persistence of a central, pervasive fatalism that undermines any potential gesture of resistance and inexorably propels the ghetto towards self-destruction. As the economy of survival in Himes’s Harlem severely restricts the scope of the slum-dweller’s vision, no models for change can be imagined, and “church-sisters” are left to wonder with disapproval: “Why is our folks like that?” (178). Trapped in a community fragmented by greed and exploitation, Himes’s “soul people” are doomed to lash out with an anger that cannot be channelled towards radical action. Such bleak limitations are overlooked by critical assessments that seek to extract from the text an implied call for properly organized, altruistically-motivated resistance. Yet, while Himes seeks to caution against the self-interested manipulations of “loud-mouthed leaders,” the cynicism of those who, like Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, never believed the promise of equality, is not offered as a satisfactory response to the ghetto’s crushing imperatives. Instead, Himes associates hardened cynicism with

powerlessness in a manner that suggests that the rhetoric of fatalism can be as pathetically hollow as the ready-made “pitch” of a desperate hustler: Grave Digger and Coffin Ed's credo of bitterness accompanies their descent into insignificance, until they are reduced to using their skill and training to shoot rats on the street. Weary emblems of a generation that has always lived as if there were “no other side,” they have learned nothing, and are as ludicrous and confused as the ghetto's other brutal victims. Only in one instance does Himes gesture towards the possibility of an alternative reaction to the ghetto's economy of survival, and that option is briefly glimpsed when a fragment of “apocalyptic history” (Muller 104) is delivered by Michael X. Cryptic yet insistent, the Muslim leader directs Grave Digger and Coffin Ed's investigative project towards certain specific sites of white power, and asserts the detectives' own irrelevance as components of the state apparatus: “They're white, ain't they?....the police--not you men, of course --but then you don't really count in the overall pattern” (175). While Grave Digger and Coffin Ed remain trapped in a pointless ritual of investigation, Michael X, whose “sharp eyes [don't] miss a thing,” invites them to probe and question more incisively than their cynical stance allows: “Ask your boss, if you really want to know,” he repeats in answer to their pressing questions, until Grave Digger reminds him that such statements could get him killed (175). Along with his refusal to yield to the policemen's demands that he provide the name of a single, identifiable crime baron, Michael X hints at his own awareness of the “overall pattern,” while affirming his exclusion from a system of oppression that dooms the black individual to become a caricature of mindless submission. Unlike the grotesque Prophet Ham or the thuggish Doctor Moore, Michael X is granted a brief moment of defiance that includes none of the victimization, orgiastic excesses or violent

abandon that Himes attributes to other manifestations of so-called political activism in Harlem. Himes's restraint in his treatment of this lone, prophetic and sacrificial figure provides a glimmer of the type of serious, informed commitment that could constitute a counterpoint to Grave Digger and Coffin Ed's cynicism. Somewhere between the excessive and deceptive rhetoric of con men, and the tired fatalism of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, Himes is opening a space that he leaves unexamined. Yet that option, however incomplete, however obliquely stated, allows Himes to distance himself from a ghetto cynicism that rests on its own system of misapprehension and necessitates its own rhetoric of half-truths. Barely delineated, occurring almost as an afterthought, but compelling in its suggestive impact is the implication that covert sites of power can be revealed in a process that situates those who "really want to know" in an undefined middle ground between corruption and resignation.

Himes's brief recognition of the principled quest for an "overall pattern" never coalesces into an acknowledgement of the potential for concrete resistance or conspicuous change in the ghetto. Instead, Michael X's fleeting reference to an all-white apparatus is succeeded by the novel's final scenes, in which an escalating argument needlessly entangles two black men in an elaborate series of misunderstandings. Violence is sparked by individualistic concerns of pride and self-absorption, as a blind man insists on hiding his handicap, and a subway passenger takes exception to the old man's "stare." Their confrontation is inscribed in an atmosphere of accumulated resentment against white domination and contempt:

Mother-raper wavin' him down like he was a mother-rapin' dog, he thought. Here in front of all these sneakin' white mother-rapers. He was more incensed by the white passengers' furtive smiles than by the blind

man's gesture, although he hadn't discovered yet the old man was blind. White mother-rapers kickin' him in the ass from every which-a-side anyhow, he thought furiously, and here his own mother-rapin' soul brother just as much to say, keep yo' ass still, boy, so these white folks can kick it better. (182)

The ensuing shoot-out accidentally (but with certain ironic appropriateness) causes the death of a pretentious "yellow preacher" and a racist white cop, before the blind man is himself gunned down. In an orgy of anger and violence, ghetto-dwellers are unable to adequately perceive or comprehend one another. If mindlessness and chaos characterize displays of "unorganized violence," a more methodical approach to arming the oppressed leads to the destruction of both the white man and the "soul brother," as Himes demonstrates in Plan B, a subsequent unfinished novel. This text introduces an extremely well-organized movement led by Tomsson Black, who secretly arranges for the delivery of loaded field rifles to blacks across America. As a result of his plan, an endless chain of murders and retaliations results in countless apparently unrelated deaths (Plan 127). Ultimately, a nightmarish dystopia of repression is established:

Whites became infuriated at the frustrations they found at every turn. No eunuchs, no slaves, and as yet, blacks had not yet been punished. There was a sudden outbreak of lynching all over the nation, north-south-east-west. Black males were lynched on sight, at busy intersections of main streets in broad daylight, on lonely roads near large farms and ranches, and in their own remote and desolate share-cropper shacks. They were lynched in every imaginable manner. Alongside the traditional hanging-and-burning, there were modern innovations. Some

were crushed against walls by large, powerful cars. Some were chopped to death by women's stiletto heels. Some were drenched with gasoline and set afire and let free to run and fan the flames. Some were simply beaten to death by whatever blunt instruments were close at hand. (Plan 184-185)

Coffin Ed warns Tomsson Black of the destructiveness of his plan: "maybe after you get all the black people killed here you can go and live in Never-Never land, but I got to live here with the white man" (201), he argues. Prompted by his adherence to Black's movement, Grave Digger murders Ed, and thus provokes his own death:

"But why did you kill this one," she said, lifting her hand in the direction of Grave Digger's body. "He was on your side."

"The risk was insupportable. He knew too much and he had killed his partner," Tomsson Black answered. "Whitey would make him talk if they had to take him apart, nerve by nerve." (Plan 203)

A well-organized, properly financed armed struggle therefore precipitates elaborate massacres, unrestrained repression, and an end to all loyalty. There is no proposed escape from the brutal cycle of black-against-black violence, and radical action is represented as being inconsistent with the survival of those who "got to live here with the white man."

Chapter II: "Do Me a Favor, Don't Want to Be Like Me":

Manchild in the Promised Land

In a 1965 review of Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land, Nat Hentoff draws attention to the popularity enjoyed by this first book by an unknown writer, who has graduated from Howard University and is about to enter law school. "As a survivor among the dying and the dead," writes Hentoff, "Brown tells it like it was--and like it still is" (5). Manchild in the Promised Land also bears the publisher's assertion of its authenticity: a brief advertisement at the back of one of the paperback editions of the book proclaims that "Claude Brown is a Negro who made it out of slum Harlem." At the very end of his first-person narrative, Brown himself reminds the reader of his claim to authority as witness and teller. In a brief concluding scene, a young Sonny Boy (as he was then nicknamed) tells his father of all the things he has seen in the streets, and his father expresses disbelief: "Boy, why don't you stop that lyin'? You know you didn't see all that. You know you didn't see nobody do that." Brown adds: "But I knew I had" (415).

In Manchild in the Promised Land, Brown does more than describe what he has seen; he also produces an extensive, detailed and raw account of a youth steeped in delinquency. It is therefore relevant to situate the autobiographical project he has undertaken as a proposed exercise in truth-telling--as, in other words, a confession. Leigh Gilmore argues that, "in order to stand as an authoritative producer of 'truth,' one must successfully position oneself as a confessing subject" (55). This proposed kinship between autobiography and confession is particularly relevant to the reader's experience of Manchild in the Promised Land, since Brown's narrative in many

respects mirrors the scope and the tone of a legal admission. Like a formal self-incriminating statement, Brown's account moves from each unexplained action or "fact" to another, and follows a chain of "culpable" deeds, without allowing for references to motive, and without encompassing (as does a religious confession) a desire for penance. Furthermore, like the confessions elicited by police questioning, Manchild in the Promised Land lets Brown "come clean" by naming his crimes, even as he exposes and implicates his ghetto companions.

If Brown is indeed telling it "like it is," he is also placing his own "true" story within a vast network of anecdotes and tales of the ghetto, as he records, with seemingly tireless precision, the names and misadventures of countless citizens whose stories merge into barely distinguishable tales of delinquency, drug use, and institutionalization. Many glimpses into the lives of these contemporaries are offered without being explicitly linked to Brown, just as names are listed without accompanying descriptions or qualifiers. Anecdotes are brief and open-ended, and the repetitiveness of the narrative is determined by the sheer incorrigibility of the individuals whose lives Brown purports to record. Much of the work therefore tells of who has gotten "busted," beaten up or killed, or who has turned to drugs or prostitution. Brown makes a claim to the relevance and scope of his voice, in the Foreword, when he situates these tales of Harlem within the matrix of American history:

I want to talk about the first Northern urban generation of Negroes. I want to talk about the experiences of a misplaced generation, of a misplaced people in an extremely complex, confused society. This is a story of their searching, their dreams, their sorrows, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America's greatest metropolis--and in America itself. (7)

Thus, while Brown does present an extensive rogue's gallery of the ghetto and repetitively includes disjointed scenes that, like the stories he used to tell his family "for what seemed like hours," he authoritatively thrusts to the reader as things he has seen, he also lists his own transgressions and crimes, until the narrative stream takes him out of the ghetto and into another "scene." After Brown has confessed to countless instances of youthful delinquency, he begins to establish his identity as one who has "made it out of slum Harlem." Although he never explicitly brags about how far he has come, his dedication of the book to Wiltwyck school and its founder, Eleanor Roosevelt, is an invocation of his right to assert the kind of respectability that comes from having been "reformed."

However, unlike a conversion autobiography of the type produced by Malcolm X, Brown's text does not incorporate the rhetorical strategies that would serve to impose a design upon narrated experience in order to trace the discovery of a new self. Furthermore, Brown's account places all responsibility for change upon the individual, and grants no agency to a transcendent source of enlightenment (such as Allah or the "truth"). His deep-rooted commitment to individual survival identifies him as a self-made "rare cat"⁵ and allows him to move his narrative out of the slum, without repudiating his former life or openly embracing the evangelical rhetoric of a penitent. Houston Baker, writing about the book in 1971, cites the "restrained manner in which the author has presented his story" (59) and praises Brown for having produced a "superb work" for the social historian, "for he has presented an unimpassioned, objective and factual account of an epoch" (58).

If Brown's "restrained manner" mirrors the narrative content of the legal confession--he twice begins his account with the incantation, "I want to talk about"--his desire to tell of what he has seen and done nevertheless masks a

reticence about lingering in the ghetto long enough to examine motive and to formulate “the reasons why.”⁶ After all, the narrative ostensibly leads him out of delinquency and into respectability by removing him from Harlem and placing him in a new life--implicitly equating rehabilitation with the absence of transgression. Just as his account of criminality grants violence, poverty and oppression no interior life, his representation of a new, “straight” existence is shaped by the absence of a ghetto landscape that continues to haunt Brown as a “scene” rather than “as one place to be a human being” (Goodman 12).

1. “Boy, Why You so Bad?”

In his description of childhood in the ghetto, Brown relentlessly tells of delinquency, violence and exploitation, but he also refuses to give much more than episodic, picaresque accounts of life in Harlem: he lists innumerable episodes of truancy, theft and gang-fighting, and refers throughout to a vast community of contemporaries, young “rogues” from the neighborhood who are essentially his partners in crime. The immediacy of every impulse to deviance becomes the immediacy of a text that accumulates unexamined, unqualified sprees and misadventures. Brown’s flat, unemotional account of these events is consistent with a view of the ghetto, expressed by Eldridge Cleaver, as a space “where dark and vicious deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of a day” (14). Criminality is represented in Manchild in the Promised Land only as a form of behaviour which fulfills short-term practical concerns, and not as a subjective life of delinquency. Indeed, as he relates brief and repetitive tales of his exploits, Brown often invokes his choice to remain silent when called upon to explain his deviance. Recounting one of his earliest transgressions, he emphasizes his

desire to be daring and tough, rather than respectful, and notes his inability to convey that yearning to familial authority:

Mama seemed silly to me. She was bothered because most of the parents in the neighborhood didn't allow their children to play with me. What she didn't know was that I never wanted to play with them. My friends were all daring like me, tough like me, dirty like me, ragged like me, cursed like me, and had a great love of trouble like me. (21, emphasis added)

As he meets increasingly systematic forms of repression, young Sonny Boy remains unable to verbalize any reaction to his family's concern in the face of his commitment to deviance. Describing his departure on the bus leading him to the Youth Detention House, he recalls watching his mother cry, and wanting to run back and "say something" to her, without knowing what that "something" could be (60). When Brown recounts her visits at the Youth House, where she weeps and voices her despair, he once again points to his own silence: "It wasn't my place to say anything. And Dad kept on holding her and saying stupid things to her and Mama kept on crying and I kept on eating the pear" (63). When she tries to convince him that he is going to be sent to a reform school, young Sonny Boy expresses only resignation and chooses not to fulfill her desire to have his "badness" acknowledged and explained:

I told her that there was nothing I could do about it now and that maybe I would die before I went, so it didn't make sense for me to worry about it Mama got mad, and I kept on eating the hot dog. I liked Mama a whole lot, but there were things that she just couldn't understand, and she wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain them to her. (65)

Brown's narrative is marked throughout by a reticence to do much more than describe the events of his delinquency, and he opts for a formula in which unqualified events follow in quick succession, and individual history tumbles along, propelled by unrelated incidents, encounters and conversations. Accomplices, friends, and enemies are granted textual presence often by their nicknames only, and their sheer number renders them almost indistinguishable. The Harlem "street scene" simply exists, and Sonny Boy accepts its requirements tenaciously and uncritically. Like the ghetto-dwellers of Himes's Blind Man With a Pistol, Sonny Boy and his friends inhabit a space that is ruled by the demands of short-term, provisional living. Codes of behaviour are embraced as soon as they are identified, and Brown's narrative resists the representation of an interior space that could qualify, complete, or elaborate on a seemingly endless chain of actions. Each time Sonny's mother tries to elicit some response, either by showing her grief, or asking him "Boy, why you so bad?" (21), Brown focuses only on Sonny Boy's holding back, on his being on the verge of saying something but choosing not to. Underlying the anecdotes of "trouble" is a palpable omission: the unspoken space of Brown's own subjectivity that echoes each time the mother's voice asks "why you so bad?" Litanies of names and rollicking evocations of comical misadventures serve to accentuate that silence--that almost but not quite spoken "something" that resonates with the recollection of an unacknowledged mother's grief.

2. In the Promised Land

Because Brown tends to emphasize the comic aspect of pranksterish delinquency, his narrative strategies consistently minimize the conditions of ghetto life. Although he specifies from the outset that his generation has been

immune to myths of Northern opportunity and prosperity, and that he has been born right into a “dirty, stinky, uncared-for closet-size section of a great city” (8), he does present Harlem as a promised land of adventure, excitement, and independence for a daring, irresponsible rogue. Opportunities for crime and easy money, for hustling, fighting and running away from home, are related at length, and the ghetto is shown to satisfy every urge, every impulse. In Sonny’s realm, whatever one wants or needs can be stolen, and small-scale drug-dealing or hustling easily provides the means of sustenance: “After a couple of weeks, I was an old pro. I could tell somebody who needed money, ‘You wait here, I’ll be back uptown in about two hours.’ I’d tell them I was going to have two hundred dollars when I came back, and I would” (155). His susceptibility to the irresistible pull of petty crime shapes every anecdote, as Brown pays homage to the older “mentors” who teach younger children to negotiate the risks and rewards of transgressive or criminal behaviour: the neighbour who initiates Sonny to playing hookey and “catting,” and the older pimp who tells a teenaged Sonny all he needs to know about “bitches” and fighting.

Manchild in the Promised Land posits a constant interplay of deviance and repression, action and reaction, as individuals operate within a sphere of behaviour limited by the immediacy of desire and gratification. When Sonny’s playing hookey leads to the school’s notification of Sonny’s parents, the threat of punishment leads the child to run away for three days, which in turn earns him a three-day beating from his father. When Sonny’s mother hides his clothes to prevent him from roaming the streets and stealing, he acquires stolen clothes in order to run away and continue thieving. Thus, led by their unqualified commitment to deviance, Sonny Boy and his friends are propelled towards increasingly institutionalised forms of punishment, as their actions

become inscribed into the realm of recognized, suppressible criminality. Nevertheless, the desirability of criminal behaviour remains unquestioned, even when one emerges from the “reforming” milieu: “I got back out on the streets, and I forgot about what I had told Papanek on the ride from Wiltwyck to Poughkeepsie. I knew what I was going to do, and there was nothing to think about. When I got back to New York, I did the same things I’d been doing” (168). In contrast to the “dull and dismal place” of home and the regimented space of reform school, the streets of the ghetto are a site of freedom.

The Harlem of Sonny’s early years is a promised land of daring exploits, especially when his gleeful participation in that Harlem life sets him apart from his parents and their old Southern “backwoods” ways. As long as truancy, theft and fighting determine the code of ghetto behaviour, Sonny embraces the streets, feeling like the “luckiest person in the world” (51). This golden age comes to an end when gang fighting goes “out of style,” to be replaced by heroin use, which becomes “something really big.” As the numbing repetitiveness of his deviant behaviour begins to intimate a growing boredom with a “scene” that doesn’t allow him to “[go] any place” (410), Sonny continues to record the predictable fates of his companions: petty hustling, prison or addiction consume every young man’s existence. The futility of resisting these ghetto “obviousnesses” is made explicit by his friend Reno, who insists that he has accepted jail as a home, since that is where “a cat like [him] is just cut out to be” (412). Sonny acknowledges that Reno knows “how to walk with [his] lot,” thus managing to become one of the happiest people in Harlem (413), and because Sonny refrains from enjoining his friend to resist the cycle of criminality and institutionalization, he finds himself endorsing an individualistic credo of personal choice: “He’d just made his choice, and I’d made mine” (413). Aware

of a paralyzing sameness to the ghetto's "jostling life," Sonny leaves Harlem without ever imagining that he could bring about change, or recruit others into a commitment towards respectability and success.

Although the ghetto of Sonny's youth resonates at times with intimations of poverty and despair, Brown tends to adopt an ironic distance which suggests only a partial acknowledgement of the indignities that must be endured. Thus, for example, when he speaks of his friend Bucky, who is always starving, he relates the boy's amusing initiation to a benign and accessible "peace place" that is better than home:

When we would be looking for a store to break into, Bucky always wanted to break into a restaurant, a candy store or a grocery store. It didn't make sense to break into those kinds of stores, because they didn't have anything you could sell for some money. Anyway, if somebody got hungry, he could always go up 155th street to the Father Divine place and say "peace" to the people there and get all the food he could eat for just fifteen cents. If you were real quick with your hands, you only had to say "peace" and smile every time the lady looked at you. After I showed Bucky where the peace place was, he hardly ever went home. Sometimes I would see him in the street with a big old turkey leg.... Bucky was the only guy I knew who would go strutting down the street with a turkey leg in his hand and a pocketful of biscuits. (67)

While this account of Bucky is comic, Brown nevertheless allows a glimpse of vivid scenes of squalor and poverty--scenes rendered even more poignant by the very flatness of Brown's tone. In one instance, he coldly relates a fight in which three hungry children break the family's last egg: "As I walked through the door,I saw Bucky on the floor with his arm around his little sister's throat.

He was choking her. Meanwhile, his big sister was bopping him on the head with a broom handle and they were all screaming" (33).

When Brown describes his having been invited to Mrs. Roosevelt's house to eat with other Wiltwyck boys, he highlights the ironic contrast between this privileged setting and his ghetto expectations:

This lady had a real big house; and the first time I went into it, I couldn't understand why she didn't have any roaches in a house that big. I thought they just might have been hiding all the time I was there, but it wasn't like roaches to hide when there were a lot of people around eating food and stuff. That's why Mama didn't like roaches--they were always coming out and showing off when company came. (90)

Brown's use of irony often highlights the extent to which the most horrible ghetto conditions constitute a norm that is not questioned:

The hallway looked smaller, but it was still the same, the way it was supposed to look on a Sunday morning. Somebody had gotten cut the night before, and blood was still in the hall. Somebody had pissed on the stairs, and it was still there, just like it should have been. Whoever pissed on that radiator sure was lucky Mr. Lawson hadn't caught him, because the super might have hit him in the head with his baseball bat and busted his head open, like he did to that other man that time. (52)

Furthermore, many of Brown's tales of ghetto life are tainted by a jocular emphasis on his own ingenuity, so that dismal living conditions are presented as opportunities for cunning and "getting by" with his wits and daring. Like Grave Digger and Coffin Ed's "This is Harlem," Brown's minimizing narrative strategies suggest a hardened acceptance of the slum as constantly excessive, and constantly brutal.

3. Courts and "Schools"

Encounters with every component of the judicial system also provide opportunities for Brown to use minimizing narrative strategies. Manchild in the Promised Land grants little narrative space to police forces in the ghetto: Brown describes no occupying army of patrolling officers, but refers occasionally to a discreet form of surveillance, which is activated only when certain crimes are committed openly. Theft and drug-related offences provide the justification for arrests, but gang-fighting remains unchecked by the forces of order. While the officers described by Brown are not streetwise, they are nevertheless able to apprehend, redhanded, almost every one of Sonny Boy's contemporaries.

Once caught, Sonny Boy and his accomplices face the judicial system with the preparation and bravado that a street subculture of criminality has conveyed to them. The idea is to "get by," to feign remorse and thus find the most comfortable short-term arrangement within the system. For these juvenile offenders, "getting by" apparently includes no legal representation. Only parents attend at court appearances, and their ignorance in the face of authority renders them ridiculous to the young hustlers:

Mama and Mrs Jones sure did look crazy with their heads going up and down faster and faster as they peeped up at the mean queen from the bottom of their eyes and tried to look as if they knew what she was saying to them. All I knew was that I was supposed to look sorry for what I had done. Tito knew this too, so we were both looking real sorry while our mothers nodded their heads. (64)

When Sonny objects to going to court, it is because he has missed a whole day of stealing, and because "they make you wait all day on those hard benches, and you gotta ride all day to get there and ride all day to get back" (29).

Encountering a judge's stern display of authority, young Sonny reads it as an element of the judge's personality, rather than a feature of the system: "She had a face on her that looked like the hardest thing in the world to do with it would have been to smile. I wondered what would happen if somebody in the courtroom said something funny and she tried to smile at it. I thought that her face would probably crack up from the strain" (58). For a brief moment, he imagines an act of defiance that would express his disrespect for the "mean queen," but that challenge amounts to a merely personal attack: "I wondered what would happen if I yelled out, 'Ain't nobody scared-a you, you ole bitch!'" (59).

The older Brown never tempers this record of childish impressions with an acknowledgement of the impact that such a system was to have on his life and the lives of his friends. Questions of fairness and due process are disregarded in favour of the immediacy of the encounter between stern judge and streetwise transgressor. This refusal to recognize and verbalize the existence of judicial authority in the full extent of its impersonal and systematic power is illustrated when Sonny once again returns to court after a serious offence, and he realizes that the judge is going to let him go, since every reform school is "filled up" and he is still under sixteen. He then feels free to taunt the man, mostly, he explains, because he is no longer eager to get back to the "street scene," and therefore has nothing to lose. Thus, he reacts with provocation, and voices his frustration at being sent back to a status quo which has never held the promise of a real "chance": "After the lecture, when the judge said, "I'm going to give you boys another chance," I don't know why or what happened, but I heard myself say, "Man, you not givin' us another chance. You givin' us the same chance we had before" (118).

In this moment of candor, the judge remains silent in tacit agreement, yet Brown is powerless before a legal system that is gradually absorbing most of his contemporaries and processing them in a seemingly pre-determined course through the New York prisons. Despite this show of disrespect, the court's power to separate a youngster from his family, to detain and classify him endlessly, or coerce him into psychiatric treatment or forced labour is never voiced, never denounced. The only time when Brown calls into question the fairness of the judicial process occurs when he participates in a civil suit undertaken by his father. He describes feeling like a sacrificial victim or "pig" who is humiliated by a system in which all parties conspire to destroy the weak, and he is disgusted by his father's blind submission to that apparatus:

Almost everybody there seemed to be friends--the bus driver, the other lawyer, the people from the bus company. The only ones who didn't seem to be friends with anybody was me and Dad. I wanted to act real tight with Dad and show those people that we didn't need to be friends with them. But Dad was too scared to do anything but sit there with his hat in his hand and say yes sir. (93)

This is, significantly, the only time when his court appearance has no bearing on fundamental judicial decisions affecting his rights and his future as a citizen.

In the institutional setting of Bellevue, the Youth House or reform school, Sonny accepts and records his classification into a system of control by identifying the immediate authority to which he must submit. He also defines a place for himself within the structures of control. He achieves this by negotiating his position in relation to other inmates, usually through violence and exploitation. His greatest fears and concerns are directly related to what his peers will think of him, and how they will treat him. Thus, his recollections of

Wiltwyck and Warwick center mostly on his conflicts and encounters with other boys. With figures of authority, Sonny Boy is able to establish at least a semblance of submission, which allows him to be favoured by school administrators. At Wiltwyck, although he sets out to annoy Papanek, the new man "in charge of everything" (82), he finds that this becomes impossible, as he grows to like Papanek and discovers that nothing can make him angry. At Warwick, Sonny reveals that he has been hardened to a more practical and individualistic approach to institutionalization. He sets up an extortion operation to prey on other boys, but he is prudent enough to keep it quiet, so that the cottage parents, area men, and superintendents can think of him as an "angel" (152). Brown's account of repressive forces reduces any form of systematic control or punishment to an occasion for "fun" and deviance, so that the punitive aspects of such institutions are never acknowledged. Bellevue (the "nutbox") is described as a "nice place," because "there were a few things around to steal. There were plenty of guys to fight with and lots of adults to annoy" (33).

After several months at Wiltwyck reform school, Sonny finds that he can, at times, "run the place": "That winter, my clique was raising a lot of hell. We were stealing everything we found, breaking into every place that had a lock on it--just about all of us could pick locks--fighting with other houses, and stomping cats we didn't like" (95). Even at Warwick, where he is subjected to what Foucault describes as "la surveillance hiérarchisée, continue et fonctionnelle" (179), he soon considers himself "established" and "sitting pretty," because he is respected and feared by other inmates: "I was ready to stay there for a long time and live real good. I knew how to get along there. I'd had a place waiting for me long before I came. If I'd known Warwick was going to be as good as it turned out to be, I never would have been so afraid" (139).

4. Conversion

After having confessed to a vast array of criminal exploits and escapades, Brown tells of reaching a point where, in order to save face, he feels compelled by the code of the street to kill a junkie who has robbed him. Although he is prevented by circumstances from carrying out this murder, he gives up drug-dealing, goes back to school and moves to Greenwich Village. This change, followed by Sonny's gradual move towards respectability, has prompted Thomas L. Hartshorne to identify Manchild in the Promised Land with the rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger, in which an ill-equipped hero takes advantage of a few lucky breaks to step up the "ladder of success": "The essence of the story is how [Brown], against great odds, managed to make something of himself without falling victim to any of the many dangers which ensnared and ultimately destroyed many of his friends" (Hartshorne 243). One could certainly assume that such a shift from young "rogue" to studious, hardworking adult would be the "essence" of Brown's autobiographical project. Could Manchild in the Promised Land be read, then, as Malcolm X's autobiography has been, as a conversion narrative?⁷ In its classical manifestation, the conversion autobiography presents certain features: "in the moment of conversion a new identity is discovered; further, this turning point sharply defines a two-part, before-after time scheme for the narrative; the movement of the self from "lost" to "found" constitutes the plot; and, finally, the very nature of the experience supplies an evangelical motive for autobiography" (Eakin 153). However, Brown's account of early delinquency is never tempered by the editorial strategies required by an autobiographical project aimed at the assertion of a new identity, namely an "understanding of the design of his experience" or an acknowledgement of the "radical discontinuity between the old Adam and the

new" (Eakin 153-154).

Not only is Brown almost completely non-judgemental about his early, delinquent selfhood, but he is equally casual about the turning point of his life-- a point that is so muted that it is almost lost in the narrative stream of ghetto tale-telling:

I looked for Limpy [the junkie who had robbed him] for about a week or more, and I couldn't find him. After a while, I heard that he had gotten busted trying to stick up a doctor in his office. Somebody said he'd gotten shot about four times. This took me off the hook and saved my face, but I still had the piece. I knew that the next time somebody stung me, I was going to have to kill him. I started thinking about it. It didn't seem right for me to be killing a junkie, because these cats were usually harmless. And when they weren't harmless, it wasn't really them, it was smack that was at fault.

I started talking to Tony. I said, "Look, Tony, I'm gonna give up dealin' pot."

He said, "Yeah, I'm gon give it up too," but I knew he couldn't, because he didn't have a job.

I told my customers I was going out of business, and I started sending them to Tony and other people who were dealing. (171)

The reader who expects Brown to point to this episode as a moment of enlightenment which the older, converted self recognizes and wishes to capture may well miss the "conversion" until Brown's respectability has been more explicitly invoked. Brown recounts and describes his "straight" life with the same action-to-action flatness that characterizes his representation of delinquency. Since the first part of his narrative equates criminality with its

external manifestations, and grants it no interior life, it is only the absence of criminal behaviour that structures his tales of a new life. There is no self to discover, and only new “scenes” and activities in which to engage. Brown does not repudiate his past delinquency or analyze it in deference to an evangelical purpose. He simply moves the narrative out of Harlem, just as young Sonny leaves the ghetto, only to return as a spectator to gather more tales and anecdotes of a “scene” that now centers on heroin. There is no moment of reckoning, no internal crisis which precipitates the sloughing off of an old self, such as Malcolm X describes in his account of a first prayer:

Picking a lock to rob someone's house was the only way my knees had ever been bent before. I had to force myself to bend my knees. And waves of shame and embarrassment would force me back up.

For evil to bend its knees, admitting its guilt, to implore the forgiveness of God, is the hardest thing in the world. It's easy for me to see and to say that now. But then, when I was the personification of evil, I was going through it. (169-170)

Where Malcolm X clearly enunciates the distance that separates his delinquent, “old” self from the biographer who can, with the hindsight of discovered “truth,” point to his errors and trials, Brown refuses such moralizing. He flatly narrates a retirement from criminal activity and a lingering ghetto concern with his reputation on the street:

But after a while, they saw that I was serious, and everybody stopped teasing me about it. I hadn't felt too bad when they were teasing me, because I knew they couldn't call me square or lame. Most of the cats who were out there on the corners dealing stuff now were the

newcomers. Most of the cats I came up with were in jail or dead or strung out on drugs. I'd been out in the street life long before these cats ever knew how to roll a reefer. I could do what I wanted. I could turn square now, even straighten up if I wanted too, and not worry about anybody naming me a lame. (172)

In a landscape where most of his companions are "in jail or dead or strung out on drugs," Brown has access to no models of success, and is unwilling to accept (as Malcolm X does) a spiritual component to rehabilitation. His "change" is based on an impulse to leave the ghetto, and he declares himself unable to formulate "what's behind it" (411), or to identify what he is going to "get into" next (410). There is no awakening to "truth" for Brown, only an avoidance of what he finds he can no longer endure: the ghetto, and the fear that "swallows" him when he remains within its confines (413). Thus, while Brown's narrative does broadly fall into two parts (the delinquent life in Harlem, and the respectable life outside the ghetto), it does not give voice to a penitent "self" which would be drawn to revisit and denounce its former impulses to delinquency. That is not to say that Brown's account of his new life is entirely free of evangelism. In fact, the later chapters of Manchild in the Promised Land include numerous reported encounters and conversations with former friends and accomplices who have remained in the ghetto. Just as Malcolm X tells of having written to his former hustling companions to tell them about Allah, so Brown seems driven to recreate meetings with former associates who can remark on the change in him. Yet, while he insists on recording these encounters, Brown undermines their significance by expressing a refusal to openly assume the evangelical role and accept responsibility for the example he is setting. When he meets a little boy with a dog one day, for example,

Brown rejects his exemplary role:

“Why do you want to know what I do?”

He said, “Cause I want to do it too. I want to be like you.”

....I was kind of moved by the whole thing, but at the same time I was a little hurt because I couldn't say anything to him that might have been inspiring to him or given him something to set his sights on. I said,

“Would you do me a favor?”

He said, “Yeah.” He smiled and looked real anxious, as if he was glad I'd asked him.

I said, “Would you just go on down the street, keep walking your dog, and don't want to be like me? I'm just lookin' for a dog to walk. All my life, I've been looking for a dog to walk.” (291)

His avowed inability to say something that might have been inspiring to a young ghetto boy is echoed on numerous occasions, as he tells old friends that his new life is just the “sort of thing that will happen, and sometimes you can't do anything about it” (290).

Nevertheless, Brown makes use of evangelical narrative strategies of contrast, by recording events of his new, straight existence and juxtaposing them with the plague-ridden, troubled lives of his addicted contemporaries. His voice is further placed in an evangelical context by the publisher's claim that he has “made it out,” and by Brown's own dedication to the Wiltwyck School “which is still finding Claude Browns.” If, indeed, his movement into the sphere of the “found” supplies a motive for Brown's engagement in the autobiographical project, its evangelical potential is undermined by a narrative that unfolds with no reference to the interiority of conversion, or to any moral, political or spiritual components of self-discovery.

5. Getting Down Off the Soapbox

Critics who initially reviewed Manchild in the Promised Land not surprisingly expressed a certain disappointment at the book's lack of political content, and its refusal to provide any but the briefest and most superficial analyses of his early commitment to rebellion. In his 1965 review of the text, for example, Warren Miller took issue with Brown's very use of the word "rebellion"--a use that made one "shockingly aware of the immense cultural lag between the rich and the poor: this word, so hackneyed and dated that not even a syndicated 'psychology' columnist would venture to use it--Brown embraces with a discoverer's fervor" (28). Equally unforgivable, to Miller, was Brown's failure either to discuss the NAACP and the Urban League, or to mention CORE and SNCC: "For politically (whatever happened to that School of Hard Knocks we used to hear so much about?) Brown is a baby" (29). In a similar vein, Nat Hentoff described the book's glancing references to Mr. Charlie's institutional power as not being linked to "anything more substantial than an obligato of grumbling against the owners and supervisors of our urban plantations" (5). For Hentoff, Manchild in the Promised Land was ultimately pernicious in its failure to recognize the need for or endorse "counter-power in the ghetto," for it could only, finally, reassure white America: "if Claude Brown could do it, others can" (5).

While Manchild in the Promised Land repeatedly invokes the importance of mentors who initiate young hustlers to the finer points of criminality, it presents very few ideological mentors or political role models. Most black adults are described as "evil," or foolishly loyal to "backwoods ways." When he hears his friend Reno speak of violence as the only way to counter the "slavery" of the garment district (284), Sonny feels scared, and explains that he finds

ways to silence such outbursts: "the only way I could stop Reno when he got wound up like this was to say, 'Come on, man. Let's go get a drink,' or 'Let's go get high.' That would take him down off his soapbox" (285). The soapbox of protest is represented as a temporary indulgence, a product of the type of mental vacation that young Sonny occasionally takes in order to "philosophize." If drugs seem to discourage political discourse, they also take the edge off Sonny's musings on the origins of ghetto conditions. When he gets high, he is able to understand "this whole thing about Harlem," but his insights don't result in anger: "we didn't mind it too much then. You could get high, sit down, and talk about it, even laugh about it" (190). In moments of intoxication, the straight-living Sonny is able to formulate solutions to the ghetto's political isolation, but these concerns evaporate once the artificial, drug-induced moment of enlightenment has worn off: "We'd get high, and we'd solve all the problems of Harlem. When it wore off, we would just have to live with them all over again" (191).

On one occasion, Brown describes an encounter with a true spiritual and political mentor, who is a spokesman for the Coptic faith. As he listens to this man's version of black history, he once again describes a break from reality: "I felt as though I'd gotten high, like somebody getting high off some kind of drug" (231). Brown records some of these teachings, and he describes a certain commitment on his part to discovering Ethiopia and the Ahmaric language. However, he suddenly reveals that the "whole thing" begins to seem like a "crazy masquerade," a "big farce." He perceives Africans to be alien and aloof, and he asserts that they don't seem to "dig negroes" (234). After about four months, Sonny drops out of the Coptic movement. When he subsequently hears about the Black Muslims, Brown reports that his initial reaction is to

dismiss the movement as “just another thing that’s going to die out soon” (316). After transcribing various discussions with ex-hustlers who have joined the movement, Brown records his own frustrated reaction to Muslim teachings: he argues that rebellion is what life in the ghetto has always been about, and that his experience of that life has convinced him that revolution is “doomed to fail, right from the word go” (329). He asserts that Muhammad has nothing to teach him, and that he is willing to wait for his friends to become disenchanted with the Muslims. Nevertheless, Brown acknowledges that the Muslims have helped “cats who were very uncertain about where they were, who they were, or what they were going to do, the cats who had never been able to find their groove” (331). Unlike Himes, who represents Muslims as mysterious, bookish and somewhat remote, Brown describes them as “the people who were right out there on the street,” who had come from the community and could inspire pride in the ghetto (326). He also associates their appeal to Harlem men with their image as an “angry organization” and with their ability to convey a sense of importance to junkies and convicts. This perception of the Muslims as figures of masculinity and anger echoes the words of Ossie Davis’s eulogy to Malcolm X, in which he honors the leader as “our manhood, our living, black manhood” (Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, Epilogue 454). Brown’s own continued rejection of the movement is based on the contention that he, for one, needs nothing. He assumes the position of spectator as he very briefly records the emergence of the Coptic and Muslim movements in the ghetto, and his narrative restraint mirrors his more generalized resistance to any form of revolutionary discourse.

In Brown’s version of the rags-to-riches story, political education is as superfluous, fantastic and misguided as temporary observations precipitated by intoxication. It fulfills no useful purpose in the “real world” for the person who is

already strong enough to “pick his own time to stop running” (252). When a ghetto hustler emerges alone from the slum and challenges the relevance of a political education, he calls into question the very basis of what black activists of the ‘60s believed to constitute counter-power: the conviction that ideology could readily be implemented on the street, and that the brothers only needed to be educated and organized in order to become revolutionaries (Seale 64). Brown asserts a commitment to individualism that sets him out of the reach of group-based spiritual or political activism. Indeed, Brown’s account of his rise to respectability incorporates a reiterated rejection of community, black tradition and folklore. In Manchild in the Promised Land, the desire to “come out of the house” and to “get away from all that old down-home stuff” is at the basis of every undertaking, every step towards adulthood. Thus, one might wish to question Elizabeth Schultz’s classification of Manchild in the Promised Land as a blues autobiography, in which “the voice of the single individual retains the tone of the tribe” and the community can find an expression of its destiny (111). Brown’s achievement in “getting out of Harlem, [and falling] into America” (Goodman 12), is formulated as a unique, individual, and largely unexplainable process which has distinctly set him apart from his peers. As he explains to an ex-accomplice: “I wish I could throw some light on it, Reno, but I’m not sure what it’s all about myself. I just looked up one day and found me in this groove. That’s how it’s been with me all the time, Reno” (411).

Brown compulsively tells of ghetto life, but constantly disengages his narrative from its personal and political implications. Manchild in the Promised Land is a confession without remorse, and a conversion tale which refuses to acknowledge the interior life of a “changed” man. Like the detained citizen who decides to “come clean,” Brown unburdens himself of a host of transgressive,

“culpable” episodes, and the details of his criminality are provided as if they constituted sufficient, self-explanatory nuggets of truth. His account of a new life remains strikingly incomplete, and the evangelical thrust of his tale is never openly acknowledged. Poised to begin his entry into a career within the legal establishment, Brown confesses his misdeeds and narrates his escape from Harlem as he simultaneously reveals an obsessive impulse to return to the ghetto for validation of his new “groove.” His need to reiterate the manner in which his changed self is revealed to his peers is an important sign of the extent to which street-earned respect has been the measure of his existence in an America that denies black manhood.⁸ He alone has “made it out,” but he carries the brutal lessons he has learned in the ghetto, and they determine the scope of his strivings for self-actualization and self-representation: shaped by an ingrained reflex towards survival, he asserts the type of practical autonomy that has won him the street credibility reserved for those who successfully negotiate the ghetto’s brutal, individualistic economy of self-preservation. His stubborn rejection of established political movements is equated by critics with a disappointing lack of political maturity, or with a naive and dangerous belief in individual rebellion that plays into the hands of those who would deny the need for structured black counter-power.

Yet Brown’s self-consciously reiterated dismissal of the political rhetoric that has reached him on the street denotes the particular, hard-won wisdom of this self-reliant, street-savvy survivor of a “misplaced generation,” and the pragmatic skepticism that has kept him alive prompts him to describe the Coptic movement a “farce” and the Muslim faith as a crutch for those who keep “messing up” and need to develop a sense of their own importance. The peculiar (and critically denounced) absence from Brown’s text of any references

to topical organizations such as the NAACP, CORE or SNCC reinforces his refusal to chart his escape from the ghetto in any terms other than those he finds in his own "groove." World-weary and distrustful, he hears nothing new in street-corner calls for rebellion, and studiously ignores the claims and promises of those who demand the appointment of individuals as exemplary converts and preachers. Brown therefore narrates his own salvation with the flat, dismissive tone of a loner who has always refused to don the mantle of a role model. The result is a conundrum that critics such as Hentoff and Miller have failed to explore: Brown starkly holds up his own escape from the ghetto as a challenge to established political movements whose spokesmen assert that success can only come as a result of their manly proselytizing, and he simultaneously vows not to be used as an example. Miller and Hentoff's unwillingness to allow for any self-referentiality in the text underscores their own expectation of finding in Brown both a willing product and an active agent of organized consciousness-raising.

Chapter III: "Poor and Black and Apt to Stay That Way":

Daddy Was a Number Runner

In Discourse and the Other: The Production of the Afro-American Text, Lawrence Hogue notes that Toni Morrison's Sula elaborates a particular myth or representation of the Afro-American historical past:

After slavery and until the 1960s, black people, to survive their human conditions, produced a neighborhood that had an infinite extension....It is a neighborhood that serves as a bulwark to protect its inhabitants' human essentials, their human vulnerabilities and frailties, against the dominant society's repression as well as against natural and human disasters. (143)

If, like Morrison, Louise Meriwether recognizes that there is "so much history" in between slavery and the 1960s (Gillian 1), and that it is necessary for specific portions of the past to be represented anew, the neighbourhood she delineates in Daddy Was a Number Runner as a site in which to explore intersections of personal and popular history, does not constitute a haven of solace or protection: it is the setting for a "collective rape" (Baldwin, "Foreword" 6). In his Foreword to the novel, James Baldwin emphatically points to the text's relevance and power: "There! one says, triumphantly. Look! That's what it's about--to make one see" (5). In this work, asserts Baldwin, the disclosure of past violations also functions as a rendering of the present political moment: "The great, vast, public, historical violation is also the present, private, unendurable insult, and the mighty force of these unnoticed violations spells doom for any civilization which pretends that the violations are not occurring or that they do not matter or that tomorrow is a lovely day" (6). By positing such a

seamless progression from the past violation to the present and future insult, Baldwin draws attention to Meriwether's representation of a ghetto that is, and always has been, a space where there can be no sustained "formation of values, of dignity and integrity" (hooks 171). Published in 1970, Meriwether's novel provides a first person narrative of girlhood in Harlem in 1934 and 1935. The re-creation of daily life in this legendary ghetto of hard times and corruption allows its protagonist, Francie, to come into contact with key moments of Harlem history, and to bear witness to the numbing indignity and brutality that shape an ordinary child's experience of the ghetto. The text's production of a black historical past, and its recourse to conventional representations of defeated, exploited ghetto-dwellers establish an eternally present, inescapable landscape of spiritual, social, and political Depression. In Daddy Was a Number Runner, the ghetto's passive subjection to forces that defy comprehension or control is further transcribed into each individual's inability to adequately perceive or creatively re-invent his or her relationship to the forces of crime and state repression.

1. Haven for No One

By setting her heroine's plight in a context of national economic disaster and of legendary corruption, Meriwether positions her tale at a time when, as James De Jongh argues, the "power of the Harlem mystique," which had buoyed popular consciousness in the 1920s, had ceased to lull an increasingly bitter black population (75). In fact, the Depression and its social impact had arrived earlier for Harlem's black population:

Unemployment in Harlem was one-and-one-half to three times the rate for white New Yorkers, throughout the depression. According to most

estimates, food prices were higher and quality generally poorer in Harlem than in the rest of New York City. Several of the major black churches had to organize soup kitchens, employment agencies, shelters for the homeless, and other relief services. (De Jongh 74)

After the riots of 1935 and 1943, Harlem's location in the "spiritual geography of African America" had shifted, and its identity as an emerging ghetto overshadowed its promise of offering a haven to rural blacks (De Jongh 80). By the mid-1940s, asserts De Jongh, the dynamics of racism, "formerly obscured and overshadowed in the public imagination by an optimistic reading of Harlem's glossy Jazz Age veneer" (80), had been exposed to general observation. Undoubtedly, Daddy Was a Number Runner represents a ghetto that offers no protection and constantly subjects its citizens to indignities and abuses within its very enclave. Potential rapists and exhibitionists lurk on rooftops and follow children into darkened movie houses, while white shopkeepers exact daily rounds of violation and humiliation in exchange for food. White policemen brazenly demand payoffs and brutalize the weak by preying on drunks and children. Meriwether's Francie, speaking from a fictional distance of several decades, anticipates Claude Brown's cynicism as she begins to question the myth of a Northern "promised land": "We were all mixed up in something I couldn't quite figure out. But it was better up here than down South. That's what I always heard people say, that folks down in Bip were just dying for a chance to come North to the promised land. This was the promised land, wasn't it ?" (135).

Daddy Was a Number Runner opens with the "Harlem smells" of garbage, vomit, urine and dead rats and closes with Francie's resignation to the ghetto existence of her shattered family. Although she tries to revive "that nice

feeling” she had for Harlem at an earlier point in the narrative, she is unable to do so: “we was all poor and black and apt to stay that way, and that was that” (208). Any evanescent “nice feeling” of community is short-lived, since much of what Francie narrates is a hand-to-mouth existence of squalor, violence and self-hatred: “seemed like Harlem was nothing but one big garbage heap....there was something black and evil in these streets and that something was in me, too” (174). Individual and community solace is consistently linked by slum-dwellers with the possibility of making a “hit” in the numbers racket, and therefore of embracing the “American success story with the price-tag showing” (Baldwin, “Foreword” 5). Meriwether’s Harlem is so profoundly steeped in poverty and despair that there is no space within its realm of squalor for manifestations of cultural richness--the kind of richness Malcolm X describes upon his discovery of Harlem as a “Seventh Heaven,” a “technicolor bazaar” with “red-hot” music, “fever-heat dancing” (74), soul food, sharp clothes and hip talk.⁹

While De Jongh argues that, even through the bitter years of the 1940s, “the idea of Harlem could not be disavowed” (81), since a whole generation of black Americans had been raised on the racial promise of refuge in a “legendary capital” of their own, Meriwether’s representation of the ghetto and her choice of the Depression era as its temporal and social setting allow her to insist on the inevitable failure of any attempts to establish Harlem as a “city of refuge.”¹⁰ She proposes instead that individual efforts to create such a haven have already, in 1934, long been doomed. In a brief encounter with sharecroppers from Virginia, Francie reveals her family’s ineffectual attempts to provide comfort or sustenance to these refugees from the South:

“This here is my little girl, Francie,” Daddy said, introducing me to

Mrs. Snipes, her husband, Tom, and her brother, Joshua.

“They’re gonna sleep downstairs in the basement tonight. Run upstairs and ask your mother if we got an extra blanket they can use.” I opened my mouth to say we didn’t have any extra blankets and was sleeping under old coats ourselves, but I kept quiet and went on upstairs and did like I was told.

“We ain’t got no extra blankets,” Mother said. “What your father think? If we had any extra blankets we’d be using them ourselves.”

(130)

The “basement friends” soon decide to hitchhike back South, “where at least they wouldn’t freeze to death while starving” (134).

2. History and the Ghetto Experience

In charting this landscape of squalor, Meriwether chooses to place “the streets, the tenements, fire-escapes, the elders and the urgent concerns of childhood” (Baldwin, “Foreword” 5) in the familiar context of the Depression, and therefore allows the text to revisit notorious moments of ghetto history (most notably when Francie celebrates Joe Louis’ victory with a joyous crowd, or finds herself in the street when the riot of 1935 erupts). The girl’s experience of such moments is juxtaposed with evidence of a constant revisionism that contradicts her own perception of crucial ghetto events. Disclosure of this external appropriation of ghetto history is developed through a narrative device by which Francie seeks out newspaper accounts of the things she has witnessed and finds a purged or distorted “official” story. At one point, for example, Francie stumbles upon a public meeting in support of the Scottsboro boys, and she subsequently recognizes, upon a speaker’s platform temporarily erected in the street, her

neighbour's husband. A riot ensues, and the next day, she reads an inaccurate account of the event on the front page of the paper:

The paper said the International Labor Defense Committee planned the meeting to welcome home Mrs Ada Wright, mother of two of the Scottsboro boys, Roy and Andy. She had been to Alabama to see them and Harlem was welcoming her home. I stopped reading in disgust when the paper said that the police didn't use clubs or pistols against the rioters. If that wasn't a billy club that cop used on that colored man's head then I was stone blind.

The paper also said three people were arrested, two white men and a Negro. Thank God it wasn't Robert, but his picture was in the paper up there on that platform and on account of it he lost the job he just got as a delivery boy downtown in the garment center, cause he hadn't gone to work that day but had taken off sick. (103-104)

As Francie attempts to make sense of the chaotic violence of a riot, or to comprehend the circumstances surrounding the murder of a man who has been preying on her, she turns to what she believes to be authoritative reports of ghetto incidents, only to find that her experiences are not legitimized or confirmed in the pages of a daily newspaper. Meriwether's insertion of Francie's story into a context of conspicuously topical events of the Depression era reiterates the significance of always already present versions of history which impose a specific ideological "sense" onto crucial ghetto events.

3. Harlem and the Politics of Representation

As Meriwether negotiates the well-worn terrain of sordid tenement survival, she establishes Harlem as a site where communal yearning has only been directed

at “the possibility of making a ‘hit’--the American dream in black-face” (Baldwin, “Foreword” 5). In a text that fixes Harlem in a Depression landscape, the ghetto’s brutality is presented as permanent; its history, writes Baldwin, “is not the past, it is the present” (“Foreword” 6), and the novel reiterates the unsustainability of alternative models in the face of unchanging, dehumanizing conditions. A representation of poverty that consistently brings to the fore the “nihilism and despair of the underclass” (169) has been identified by bell hooks as emerging from a convention by which the poor must see themselves as “always and only worthless” and imagine that “worth is gained only by means of material success” (hooks 168). It should be possible, she argues, to change the face of poverty “so that it becomes, once again, a site for the formation of values, of dignity and integrity, as any other class positionality in this society” (171).

The availability of any such alternative representations of the poor is particularly relevant to Meriwether’s representation of Francie’s father. This vital, proud and “beautiful” man, who considers himself one of Queen Yoruba’s children (81), equates his inability to secure material comfort with a form of emasculation. By the end of the novel, he has begun to live with a mistress and devote himself to all-night poker games, forgetting Yoruba altogether. His children cease to respect him, and he no longer takes an active interest in their lives. In Mr. Coffin’s final acceptance of the conventional role of irresponsible ghetto father, Meriwether points to the effectiveness with which the indignities of Harlem can obliterate an alternative model of the type proposed by hooks. Yoruba’s legacy exists as a source of ancestral pride, and a reminder of the claim to power that could be sustained outside the ghetto, in a respectful community. When Mr. Coffin is no longer able to draw from the richness of that heritage in order to validate a bearable representation of himself, he completely

abandons the duties of fatherhood and vacates his place within the family.

The manner in which Meriwether traces this spiralling towards a social and moral void echoes formulations provided by Elizabeth Herzog, in 1966, of the “sad cycle” familiarly acknowledged in the professional literature of the time, and reiterated by the Moynihan report of 1965:

The man who cannot command a stable job at adequate wages cannot be an adequate family provider; the man who cannot provide for his family is likely to lose status and respect in his own eyes and in the eyes of others--including his family. His inability to provide drains him of the will to struggle with continuing and insuperable family responsibilities. It is an incentive to desertion, especially if his family can receive public assistance only when he is gone. (149)

Meriwether underscores the state's participation in Mr. Coffin's emasculation through the family's social worker or “relief Queen,” who cross-examines him, “pushing him into a corner” (99) with insinuating questions, and cuts him off relief when he finally finds work:

“But I don't receive any pay for being the janitor,” Daddy told Madame Queen, “only a reduction in rent, just half, and I was going to tell you next month after we caught up. We owe most of our relief check to the grocer and I was just trying to break even before I told you.”

But Madame Queen didn't believe Daddy. As good as called him a liar, and to punish us, she took us off relief. (107)

Like Brown's Harlem, the “black valley” of Daddy Was a Number Runner offers no models of success, only predictable, numbing paths to survival: Francie's friend Maude, who once aspired to become a nurse, asserts that she plans to become a prostitute (168), and her brother James Junior begins to dress and

act like a pimp. The bright, hardworking Sterling, “who was going to college [sic] and be our salvation,” quits the predominantly white school of his choice when he becomes tired of looking like a “ragpicker” and a “pickaninny” next to the white students and realizes that, even if he obtains a degree, no one will hire a black chemist (170). Having borne, essentially alone, the responsibility of becoming the “salvation of us all,” Sterling refuses to assume the exemplary role, and settles instead for “some low-paying job reserved for ignorant niggers” (170).

Undoubtedly, Daddy Was a Number Runner establishes a ghetto landscape that adheres to earlier representations of the slum as an environment where the formation of values is either crushed or rendered pointless.¹¹ While Meriwether’s references to white-owned stores, garbage-filled streets, stinking tenements, and brutal, stupid white cops can be read as denoting the incorporation of a progressive discourse of denunciation which flourished in the 1960s, they also assert the impossibility of producing “new archetypes” or giving voice to previously “excluded images” of blackness (Hogue 55-56). In his discussion of African American writing of the 1970s, Hogue identifies several texts which, he argues, can be attributed to the discursive formations which emerged as a result of social movements of the 1960s. These works, he claims, “present characters who enable us to see the constraints and limitations of dominant literary conventions and stereotypes of the Afro-American. Their characters understand the images, definitions and conventions that have been fed the Afro-American for three hundred years in the name of universality and naturalness” (57).

Meriwether’s characters--the self-loathing, emotionally naive Francie, her wild and “evil” friend, Sukie, her increasingly delinquent brother, James Jr.,

and her parents, a flamboyant, mercurial Daddy, and a quiet, long-suffering mother--are figures steeped in the conventions of ghetto narrative. The Harlem she elaborates recurrently gestures to earlier expositions of the indignities of ghetto life. Echoes of Claude Brown can be detected in her insistent references to exploitative Jewish store-owners, and to the worried black matriarchs who try to prevent their sons from "running wild." In fact, the scenes in which young Vallie's mother hides his clothes, in the hope that he will be forced to stay home, have a direct antecedent in Brown (20). Similarly, Meriwether's representation of white presence in Harlem clearly owes much to stark portraits of slum life drawn during the 1960s:

The man in the ghetto sees his white landlord come only to collect exorbitant rents and fail to make necessary repairs, while both know that the white-dominated city building inspection department will wink at violations or impose only slight fines. The man in the ghetto sees the white policeman on the corner brutally manhandle a black drunkard in a doorway, and at the same time accept a pay-off from one of the agents of the white-controlled rackets. He sees the streets in the ghetto lined with uncollected garbage, and he knows that the powers which could send trucks in to collect that garbage are white. (Carmichael and Hamilton, "White Power" 175)

While Daddy Was a Number Runner mirrors the denunciations of ghetto conditions which had emerged forcefully in the '60s, it does not fulfill what Hogue identifies as the promise created by radical debate of that era, primarily because the novel points instead to the hopelessness of defeated slum-dwellers who are condemned to fulfill every infamous cliché of ghetto existence, and to remain imprisoned in an environment where new archetypes of black

power and resistance are not viable. First of all, the novel purposefully situates a narrative of slum living within the context of a far-ranging social and political crisis that transcended the black ghetto. Thus, Francie's father is able to warn his family that they are about to get on relief by telling them that they need not feel ashamed, since "people all over the country are catching hell, same as we are" (80). Similarly, in a description of the open-air market under the Bridge, where poor vendors and immigrants congregate to "save a few cents," Francie acknowledges the existence of white poverty and victimization when she voices pity for a red-faced "scarecrow" dressed in rags who is mocked by a crowd as his merchandise is stolen (158).

Furthermore, as she projects the harshness and injustices of a ghetto existence into the depression era, Meriwether presents a black community that has yet to embrace any measure of political activism. Few politically astute figures populate her version of Harlem. One of them is an influential minister who denounces Mussolini, leads rent strikes, and runs a free food kitchen. However, since his message is delivered from the pulpit, his audience reacts with the ritualized gestures of religious worship:

The lady next to me started screaming:

"Praise his Holy name. Do Jesus. Do."

I inched away from her so nobody would think we were together. She threw her fat self around like a top, and I felt like disappearing under the floorboards. Why did they have to shout and holler like that? (55)

Robert, a neighbour's husband, works for the Black League for Freedom, which everyone in the community dismisses, perceiving it to be a communist organization.¹² He is described early on by neighbourhood women as having spent his money on a shiny car when his wife couldn't afford milk for the

children (65). Ghetto families voice their suspicion of street speakers and other activists (77), while parents futilely try to instill some respect for the traditional means of attaining economic stability by admonishing their children to stay away from gangs and succeed in school. While riots are represented as events that mobilize the ghetto community, these historical uprisings are attributed to groundless rumours and they constitute emotional outbursts or disorganized, chaotic reactions to police brutality. Just as Francie's story ends before she can formulate a solidified, fundamental understanding of ghetto dynamics, so too does the novel situate its narrative frame in a moment when widespread political awareness and unified movements of organized protest cannot be sustained within the community.

4. Criminality and Individualized Power

If poverty and exploitation are imagined to reach beyond the confines of the ghetto in Daddy Was a Number Runner, the growing influence of organized crime is likewise established as forming a seemingly uncontainable network of corruption. In fact, the unquestioned supremacy and insurmountable power of Dutch Schultz and his men are consistently reiterated, particularly when Francie's father explains, with cliché expressions of knowing resignation, the workings of the numbers operation. The collecting of the numbers (or being otherwise actively involved in the racket), he asserts, is about as dangerous as playing the numbers: "as long as the cops are paid off, which they are, they ain't gonna bother me. Schultz even pays off that stupid ass, Dodge, we've got for a district attorney" (21). He also decries a rival racketeer's foolhardiness, claiming that Slim Jim's banker "thinks he can operate outside the syndicate but nobody can buck Dutch Schultz. The cops will arrest anybody his boys finger,

and they did just that. Fingering Slim Jim and his banker” (21). The infamous Schultz, whose actions and motives are openly discussed by ghetto dwellers in Daddy Was a Number Runner, is constantly named as the iconic source of mob power. When Schultz is murdered, Francie reads accounts of the shooting and feels as though she has known him, “since he was head of the numbers and all” (204). The ghetto dwellers’ reiterated references to the famous mobster underscore the extent to which they remain unaware of the multiplicity of functions which street-based criminal rackets can fulfill for the benefit of more covert (and perhaps more “legitimate”) sites of power. By vesting power in a single underworld personality from whom all orders are thought to emanate, the citizens of Harlem betray no understanding of the variety of interests served by the promise, bought daily in the ghetto, of making a “hit” and temporarily “living high off the hog.” Although state involvement in such rackets is acknowledged, it is attributed to an unquestioned, pure greed within various levels of government, and the political raison d’être of a numbers operation is never identified by its victims:

“If they really wanted to clean up this town,” Daddy said, “they would stop picking on the poor niggers trying to hit a number for a dime so they won’t starve to death. Where else a colored man gonna get six hundred dollars for one? What they need to do is snatch the gangsters banking the numbers, they’re the ones raking in the big money. But the cops ain’t about to cut off their gravy train.” (22)

In Daddy Was a Number Runner, even those who participate in the inner workings of the racket believe that vice, violence and payoffs originate from a single identifiable actor who oversees the numbers operation and insures its

protection from state interference by allowing police officials to jump onto the “gravy train.” The “crookedness” of state representatives is measured solely in terms of their willingness to be bought, while state interest in the proliferation of certain ideologically useful systems of criminality remains unfathomed. So great is one man’s influence imagined to be, that even young Francie comes to feel as though she has known him, and he has somehow been a part of her life. Schultz’s dark power is opposed to the influence of another famous figure, Mayor La Guardia, whose name is invoked alongside the articulation of hopes of seeing the town “cleaned up” (22).

Such conspicuous references to historical figures of the 1930s underscore the community’s naiveté in its perception of the state of affairs to which it is subjected, as the novel’s characters appear doomed to engage in trite, facile explanations of the nature of corruption in ‘30s Harlem:

“When you got a district attorney as crooked as Dodge, what can you expect from the rest of them? They’re all gangsters except Mayor La Guardia and give him enough time and he’ll catch on to how it’s done.”

“Yeah,” Mr. Robinson said. “He’s a peckerwood like the rest of them. I kinda like the Little Flower though and hope he stays clean. Lord knows we need one honest man down there with them bunch of crooks.” (127)

Omitted from their analysis is an understanding of the toll exacted by a generalized participation in the numbers racket, in a community where “it is as common to hear a mother say ‘I gotta get my number in today,’ with the same concern--and sometimes in the same breath--as she says ‘I gotta feed the baby’” (Knight 92). Francie’s father equates the playing of numbers with other, legal forms of gambling (128), and, while he knows that the numbers operation

is designed and manipulated to put the bettors at an unfair disadvantage, he continues to play on a daily basis. In one particularly harrowing exchange, Francie's mother, overwhelmed by her concern for the family, describes a nightmare, only to have her husband use the dream as inspiration for his bet:

"I dreamed this house fell right into the ground," she said. "I was inside here, in the dining room, and it began to crumble and cave in like it was exploding, only there was no sound. Then suddenly I was standing outside looking at the pile of bricks where this house had been, and I couldn't find nobody, not you or the kids, nobody. I knew you were all buried under the house, but I couldn't do nothing but stand there and look."

"That's this house number," Daddy said. "It's gonna play today." They loaded up on 452 but it didn't come out and the next day Daddy borrowed a hundred and fifty dollars from Jocko and got Robert's lawyer friend for James Junior. (119)

Unwilling to challenge the deceptive lure of quick money, this number runner helps secure the racket's hold within the community yet allows himself to be its unthinking victim. So deeply is he subjected to the "American Dream in black-face" (Baldwin, "Foreword" 5), that he fails to grasp the extent of his own complicity in the duping of "poor niggers trying to hit a number for a dime so they won't starve to death" (22). He remains unable to evaluate the effects of neighbourhood rackets upon the community--repercussions that Etheridge Knight identifies, as he links the "numbers" operation, and the wealth it generates, to widespread crime and exploitation in the ghetto:

the "big man" and his invisible partners, through their political connections and with their hired guns, provide the baron and his

subordinates with protection from the police and also from ambitious independent operators or young black men who might be bold enough to stick up a station or clearing house. (The threat of the syndicate's guns also insures that the banker and his subordinates do not "hold out" on the take.) The "big man," often in partnership with the baron, has his fingers in other pies: crap games, narcotics, prostitution, loan-sharking--all of which suck the blood out of black neighborhoods. (90, emphasis added)

5. Physical Violations and the State

As long as they fail to make a "hit," the citizens of Harlem are inscribed in an economy of physical exploitation, as they exchange toil, pain, and sexual violation for the basic necessities of life. In this respect, Daddy Was a Number Runner is a novel of ghetto existence which largely focuses on the extent to which slum living imposes indignities on the body of the individual.¹³ Francie has learned to participate in exhibitionist rituals for pocket money, and to allow herself to be fondled in order to obtain extra food for her family. Her siblings also submit to the daily indignities of disgusting relief rations, bedbugs, tattered clothes, and unsafe housing. Meriwether's novel presents a vast inventory of the various ways in which physical integrity is compromised in the ghetto: children are crippled by malnutrition, and encounter sexual abuse and street violence, while their parents attempt to feed and clothe them in the crowded, stinking "black valley" of urban poverty.

Significantly, the forces of state control are also represented as exerting their power primarily upon the bodies of black citizens. Policemen burst into Francie's house and swing her off her feet; they beat a stumbling drunk and

disperse crowds by throwing tear gas and swinging billy clubs. When some neighbourhood boys, including Francie's brother, are arrested and detained following the murder of a white man, their ordeal is imagined in terms of physical hardship and violation. As Francie thinks of her brother in the Tombs, she wonders if he is warm enough, if he has "grey thin blankets" and eats a "gluey mess out of grey tin plates" (123), and if he is regularly taken down to the basement and beaten. A conversation she overhears between her father and Robert confirms that physical abuse is indeed taking place in prison:

"They beat Junior, too?"

"Roughed him up a little bit, but nothing like the workout they gave the others. Jesus Christ, if I could just get my hands around the neck of that cop that hit my boy."

"Bastards," Robert said. "They got you in jail where you can't run and still they have to whip you. Know what they did to a friend of mine in Chicago? Put this electric wire on his balls and when that shock hit him he said he woulda confessed to killin' Jesus if they had asked him to."
(139-140)

When Francie learns that the boys have been sentenced to die in the electric chair, it is the physical experience of electrocution that fills her with dread: "An electric shock had gone through me once when I was putting the jumper in. It was a quick sensation of instant pain racing through my body. Would Vallie go quickly, painlessly? Vallie, Vallie. What a strange, unnatural way for you to die" (156).

Such images of the horrors visited upon the bodies of black youths grant undeniable immediacy to their encounters with repressive powers. Omitted from Francie's visualization of the ways in which oppression is carried out,

however, is a clear sense of the moral and psychological damage caused by a systematically unjust system of state control and discipline, which violates every tenet of due process and disregards the most basic principles of human dignity as it holds the ghetto-dweller captive. The morally repugnant certainty that innocent black boys can find themselves unjustly accused, found guilty and sentenced to die is not seriously entertained by ghetto-dwellers in Daddy Was a Number Runner. Such a powerful hypothesis is rejected by Mr. Coffin and the more politically aware, authoritative Robert in a significant exchange that leaves Francie consumed with doubt:¹⁴

“You think they killed that man?”

Robert took his time answering, then finally said: “I think so, Mr. Coffin. I think so.”

They talked a little longer but I wasn’t listening. Robert had to be wrong. If James Junior couldn’t kill anybody then neither could Vallejo. Sure, he might mug some old white man in a hallway but he wouldn’t kill him. Why didn’t they stop beating those boys down there in the Tombs long enough to discover it was an accident? (140)

James Junior, who indeed is innocent of any crime, does get released. However, it is the “roughing up” he has received at the hands of police, rather than the fact that he has been arrested on a suspicion and unjustly detained that makes Mr. Coffin wish he could “get [his] hands around the neck of that cop” (139).

Mr. Coffin’s complete ignorance of the law, and his inability to distinguish between the physical components of state control and the more occult manifestations and ramifications of institutionalized power are emphasized when he equates getting arrested and fingerprinted with having a criminal

record. In the gestures of police officers, he reads a full measure of judicial process, a complete exercise of the power to classify and stigmatize an individual:

“There was a mess-up about the payoff,” Daddy explained, “so the police made a few arrests to show who was boss. They didn’t touch the big boys though, just a couple of small runners like me. Now if they really wanted to clean up the rackets they would have gone after Dutch Schultz.”

“Maybe you’d better stop running numbers now before something worse happens,” Mother said.

Daddy was gloomy. “The worse has happened. Jocko says they’ll probably throw my case out of court. But I’ve got a record now. Fingerprints, the works.” He looked at my mother and shook his head sadly. “How can I keep James Junior from running wild now that I’ve gone and got a record?” (75)

In this instance, the individual, who has been arrested on a pretext, experiences shame and considers himself to be completely at the mercy of state forces, even though he has only been identified and processed in a systematic manner. His actual conviction scarcely matters in experiential terms. Sustaining Robert’s willingness to believe that neighbourhood boys are indeed killers and Mr. Coffin’s resigned assumption that he has “gone and got a record” is an underlying, unspoken acceptance of the efficiency of police forces: officers may exercise power in an unnecessarily brutal way, but they have not fundamentally erred in their application of the law.

Representations and perceptions of crime and delinquency in Daddy Was a Number Runner can thus be read as focal points of a refusal to develop

models of enlightened resistance. The ghetto dwellers' willingness to utter the trite, ritually-invoked "obviousnesses" that seek to define and explain crime and repression in Harlem functions as a rejection of radical action, just as their commitment to the "numbers" reiterates their desperate yearning for a piece, however evanescent, of the "American dream in black-face." Inscribed into a Depression landscape of squalor and an economy of violence and exploitation, the novel's posited subjection of a slum community to every display of power, be it abusive, illicit or legitimate points to an absence of relevant archetypes of black empowerment. Filling that void, the persistent, dehumanizing impact of the novel's "black valley" is such that it compels a child to believe that she is as "black and evil" as the streets she inhabits. Gender is a relevant factor in her confinement within this unchanging locus of violation. While Francie's brothers are invested by their parents with the capacity to sustain and realize the family's hopes, and while their final resignation to limited modes of existence nevertheless allows them some freedom of movement, Francie knows no such escape from the numbing sameness of her ascribed lot. Furthermore, she is subjected to the predatory sexual impulses of men (both white and black), and therefore forced to become accustomed to the repeated and intimate violations of personal integrity that, she is made to understand, will continue to be exacted in increasingly overt, systematic ways as she becomes a grown woman. Supplementing Brown's tales of the daring, roguish exploits of Harlem boys and his celebration of the spatial mobility that facilitates their adventurous lives on the streets, Meriwether's text points to the constricted, dangerous space girls inhabit as they learn to regard their own bodies as currency in the economy of survival. Having internalized a "theology that denies [her] life," Francie is represented, like Native Son's Bigger Thomas, as admitting "the possibility of

....being subhuman” (Baldwin, “Everybody’s” 23). While Baldwin denounces Wright’s novel for the manner in which it limits Thomas to a “battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth” (23), he reads in Daddy Was a Number Runner the extent to which the crushing absence of any other measure of black existence constitutes a “mortal wound.”

Conclusion

Blind Man With a Pistol, Manchild in the Promised Land and Daddy Was a Number Runner are texts that challenge a critically received perception of African-American writers of the 1960s as having unequivocally embraced and represented politically astute activism. Significantly, all three works have, until the last few years, been out of print, despite Himes's considerable fame in France, Brown's status as a bestselling author of 1965, and Meriwether's famous literary "father" and champion in Baldwin. These texts invite a reassessment of the ease with which readers of our time assume that empowerment and resistance were widely espoused by African-Americans in the 1960s and, more importantly, that radicalism was accessible or attractive to all of those who had been subjected to systematic oppression. To consistently expect African-American narrative discourse to present identifiable models of activism is to engage in precisely the type of tyranny that Norman Harris experienced at the height of the "Black is Beautiful" movement:

The soul handshake....was initially an intra-group form of greeting, intended to show brotherhood. I recall my surprise when in 1969 I first met a white college roommate whose hand I shook. He was appalled. I had not given him the authentic soul handshake; he immediately went to work teaching me how to shake hands properly. (93)

Blind Man With a Pistol, Manchild in the Promised Land and Daddy Was a Number Runner complicate an understanding of African-American social critique of racial politics by refusing to perform the gestures of protest: they temper the legacy of Malcolm X and George Jackson with accounts of a space where survival compellingly supersedes resistance. These texts also point,

more subtly, to the ideological implications of a valorized perception of black empowerment and social critique as having permeated every stratum of the community. After all, an enshrinement of Malcolm X and Jackson draws attention away from the permanence of a ghetto landscape that continues to imprison the weak, the numb and the dying. That celebration of acute political savvy effectively masks a version of the '60s' social upheaval that acknowledges, as Wolfgang Karrer does, that the black lower classes "participated less in the decade's progress" (39) than the integrated middle classes who, according to Stokely Carmichael, " '[made] it,' leaving [their] black brothers behind in the ghetto" (Stokely 23). The neglected writings of Himes, Brown and Meriwether can only be unsettling to a critical establishment that has not assessed the conditions under which black radicals of the 1960s "failed to motivate greater portions of the ghetto poor" (Karrer 47), but has emphasized instead the fervor of Malcolm X and George Jackson, whose enthusiastic belief in the inexorability of change, and whose own paths to enlightenment are consistent with a reassuring model of "progress" towards empowerment.

Notes

1. H. Bruce Franklin asserts that the Attica rebellion was “in part a response to the murder of Jackson” (273). Bert Useem and Peter Kimball point out that, in reaction to news of the death of George Jackson, “up to 700 inmates [at Attica] wore black armbands, observed silence, and fasted in the mess hall” (27).
2. John M. Reilly argues that the novel’s setting, “the overcrowded decaying buildings, the rooms filled with the cast-off furnishings of white people or overpriced junk, and the paradoxical streets, emphasize the status of Harlem as an internal colony” (946).
3. Walters disagrees with this characterization of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, arguing that “their ultimate motivating force” is not acquisitiveness, but “community self-protection from an invading, threatening outside force--namely, white law-enforcement” (617).
4. Likewise, in his reading of the Preface, in which Himes asserts that “all unorganized violence is like a blind man with a pistol,” Reilly contends that “the operative word....is unorganized” (945).
5. The expression “rare cat” is taken from Nat Hentoff’s 1965 review of Manchild in the Promised Land.
6. Warren Miller, in a 1965 review, asserts that Brown’s work proposes answers to (as it was then called) the Negro Problem, “quite properly, for he is writing an autobiography, which is nothing if it is not an examination of self, of motive, of all the reasons why” (28).
7. For a reading of the Autobiography of Malcolm X as a conversion narrative, see Barrett John Mandel. Paul John Eakin discusses the inferences implied by the conversion genre, namely the belief in a completed life and a completed self.
8. Decades after the publication of Manchild in the Promised Land, an autobiography that charts one individual’s transformation from gang member to Black nationalist likewise reveals that the persistent concern with street-credibility endures despite his rejection of gangsterism. Sanyika Shakur (aka Monster Kody Scott) notes that getting out of L.A.’s Crips “turned out to be much like getting in, in the sense of building one’s name and deeds in conjunction with what you believe....I knew my enemies of old would never believe that I had actually stopped, so they would not cease trying to destroy me. My homies

would feel let down, disappointed, and perhaps betrayed. And I would be locked in a defensive posture for goodness knows how long" (356).

9. De Jongh asserts that, during the Depression, "Harlem's cultural energy crested and surged in new ways." "The sounds and style of a new generation were epitomized on the dance floor of the Savoy Ballroom, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, as 'jitterbugs,' 'hep cats,' and 'hipsters,' both black and white, decked out in 'zoot suits' and talking 'jive,' dubbed Harlem the 'Big Apple' of a new national craze" (78).

10. See De Jongh, Chapter 2.

11. See, for example, Baldwin's essays "The Harlem Ghetto," which was originally published in 1948, and "Fifth Avenue Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," which was first published in 1960.

12. In contrast, De Jongh argues that "in the early 1930s, the Harlem Communist Party, whose agitation had been spurned, for the most part, by blacks in the 1920s, moved more quickly than traditional civil-rights organizations to take up the case of the Scottsboro Boys and began to enjoy direct and intimate contact with ordinary Harlemites" (77).

13. Interestingly, Baldwin is compelled to note that what he calls Francie's "mortal wound" is "not physical," but he qualifies that assertion by adding that the novel's representation of that "wound" is "brilliantly understated" and that it presents tragedy in a "deliberately minor key" ("Foreword" 6-7).

14. As she appears to cling to the belief that the killing was accidental, Francie fails to recall an obvious motive for the man's murder, which she has been detailing throughout the narrative: namely, that he has been acting as a sexual predator within the community for some time.

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