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Pick the Very Best One: Black Cultural Citizenship and "Bi"-Raciality in Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

On the morning of February 19th, 1942, the day that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt would put into motion the federal policies that allowed for the internment of thousands of Japanese people residing on the Pacific coast, black Californians woke up to the headline "ASK 'WHITE FARMERS' TO TAKE JAP LANDS" splashed in capital letters across the top of the front page of the *California Eagle*. This story in the *Eagle*, a successful weekly African American newspaper operating out of Los Angeles, would end up talking about an article in the *Los Angeles Examiner* that incorrectly claimed that a new "country defense proposal" was being implemented to replace Japanese farmers in Southern California with only white farmers. This corrective article, however, rather than condemn a policy that effectively strips Japanese farmers of their right to property, focuses on this racial stipulation of only whites being able to capitalize. The article reports that the *Examiner* article which had been published only the day before "set off a major sensation in the Negro community, causing repercussions detrimental to civilian morale" and, in an effort to quell such civil unrest, informs readers that the agricultural coordinator of the county defense council was "supposed to place each applicant [regardless of race] in touch with a Japanese tenant for negotiations through which the American may assume the lease, crop and equipment of the Japanese" (1). This language, which denies the designation of "American" to those with Japanese heritage, fits in quite nicely with what would become the predominant rhetorical strategies and state policies that would reference Japanese Americans in the American West. The already ongoing exodus of Japanese bodies from Western American

spaces in early 1942 as a result of Pearl Harbor is casually mentioned and while "[t]hree thousand acres already have been vacated under enemy alien control measures […] it is believed [that more lands] will be given up soon by [the] Japanese under official orders, cancellation of leases and voluntary departures" (1).

I begin my presentation with this kind of article, very much about the reappropriation of lands that would take place as the Japanese are systematically pushed out of the Western United States and blacks take advantage of the new empty farms and residences as a way of buying their own cultural citizenship. This idea of cultural citizenship I understand from Renato Rosaldo's "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy," which defines the concept as "a deliberate oxymoron, a pair of words that do not go together comfortably. [It] refers to the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense. […] The notion of belonging means full membership in a group and the ability to influence one's destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions" (402). These basic rights, and the cultural capital that is often necessary for a cultural or ethnic group to purchase them, however, come at a cost, especially according to African American writer, Chester Himes, author of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. For Himes, African Americans find themselves in a tense but constantly vacillating relationship with Japanese Americans where, on the one hand, they were poised to inhabit everything that the Japanese had to lose and, on the other hand, those with bodies that could be labeled as having a "high yellow" complexion could see themselves being mistaken for those Japanese bodies that were rapidly becoming seen as those which were the most endangering for national security.

And, yet, when considering the often ambivalent relationship between African Americans and Japanese Americans between December 1941 (when Pearl Harbor was attacked) and 1945 (when World War II ended and Himes' novel was published), the historical narrative laid out in

books and articles oftentimes remains at this level of ambivalence and clear separation. That is, there might have been mixed feelings between the two communities but there were also salways being delineated separately. While a few critics will reference Himes' novel as one that refuses to miss the palpable Japanese presence in protagonist Bob Jones' account of black male working class experience in 1940s Los Angeles, the critical work often ends there. Rather than rest on this paradigm, I wish to push it forward in order to argue that the construction of what I call fictive "bi"-raciality that takes place in an oft-quoted passage from the novel is a key mechanism through which we can understand the correlation between Japanese internment and notions of black cultural citizenship in the American West of this period. Conceptions of what it meant to have a black culture in the early 1940s was at least partially contingent upon the discourse surrounding the vilification of the Japanese and *Nisei* (second generation Japanese Americans born to Japanese parents who have immigrated to America) and a novel like Himes' gets us to move the conversation from the level of policy to the level of lived experience.

In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, the policy of Japanese internment during World War II produces an understanding of racial passing that holds affective power over how the black body of Bob Jones moves through social spaces. This becomes clear in the first pages of the novel, pages that set up what I call fictive "bi"-raciality, a form of racial identity that works quite a bit like passing but with very different visual resonances. It is fictive not only because Jones actually has no Japanese roots whereas many of those who were passing for white did indeed have Caucasian blood in their veins, but also because though he is more than willing to narrate for readers the ways in which injustices are levied on him as a black man, we never actually see anyone mistaking him for a person of Japanese descent. These first pages produce a mental fragility that Jones has to wrestle with throughout the rest of the novel and so, though readers

could simply dismiss these pages as only serving the purpose of exposing the psychic trauma that precedes the fabula of the novel, but I think they serve a deeper purpose. However, even if this were the case, even if Jones' sense of being mistaken for Japanese is a figment of his wildly overactive imagination (and I am not even willing to argue that it is not) it ignores the fact that this definitely affects his sense of being in the world. So, whereas passing for white imbues bodies simultaneously with additional cultural capital and additional cultural surveillance, passing (or thinking that one can pass) for Japanese creates an entirely new set of conditions for navigating through a social field and the passages that I wish to point us to are worth quoting in full:

> "Maybe it had started then, I'm not sure or maybe it wasn't until I'd seen them send the Japanese away that I'd noticed it. Little Riki Oyana singing 'God Bless America' and going to Santa Anita [a temporary internment camp in Los Angeles County] with his parents next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs. Jones's dark son, that started me to getting scared. […] I was the same color as the Japanese and I couldn't tell the difference. 'A yeller-bellied Jap' coulda meant me too. I could always feel race trouble, serious trouble, never more than two feet off. Nobody bothered me. Nobody said a word. But I was tensed every moment to spring. I carried it as long as I could. I carried my muscle as high as my ears. But I couldn't keep on carrying it" (3-4).

In this scene, my consideration of fictive "bi"-raciality comes into play. What resembles the 20th century stories of passing written by authors like Charles Chesnutt and Nella Larsen amongst others, takes on different signification when "white" is replaced with "Japanese." And yet, many

of the discussions surrounding racial criminalization, the silent voices of the oppressed and the marks of slavery left imprinted on the ways in which bodies of color are encountered are still present. The epidermal racial schema that Fanon will characterize as being an integral part of the "fact of Blackness" only a few years later in *Black Skin, White Masks* splits more awkwardly in two because Jones cannot find solace or comfort in either black race or the Japanese ethnic group, especially as both groups are fighting for the same resources. That they are becomes clear later on when Jones stumbles into an ongoing conversation between his upper class light skinned girlfriend, Alice, and her friends about what changes should be implemented for the people who inhabit an urban space called Little Tokyo. Neither the policies of Japanese internment nor the state-sanctioned movement of Japanese bodies are ever mentioned by name in this admittedly short exchange but it quickly becomes clear that as one group is moving out, African Americans and people of other races mean to replace them and something should be done about this period of integration. One woman, Polly, who has already challenged Jones' sense of his masculinity with her "mannish haircut" and "green slack suit" (82) comments: "That place is a rat hole. Without adequate housing you can't even start any programme of integration" (83), to which someone responds "And you know how they'll do even if they build a development down there; they'll allocate about one fourth to Negroes and the rest to whites and Mexicans" (84). And, thus, the new tripartite racial system is established, leaving the Japanese and other Asian groups out of consideration for anything more than sexual violence. The possible existence of Japanese people in Los Angeles is given only one more mention in this novel as a Marine in another of Jones' dreams catches him fleeing and then expresses remorse for killing multiple and people and raping multiple women of all different races.

This conversation about Little Tokyo fits in well with the novel's overarching consideration of how poor working and living conditions result in a poor black condition and poor black characters. But, this kind of cut and dry, 1:1 correspondence between poor working conditions and poor character traits are complicated by the novel's first few pages. Even before the above quote, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, a rather formulaic example of, to borrow James Baldwin's phrase, everybody's protest novel, begins with a dream about an unwanted dog. In this, the first of three dreams, Jones purchases the dog on credit (he has no cash on him), brings it home, and then realizes that no one likes it. He then flashes to an investigation surrounding the murder of a white man at the war plant. Black men are rounded up and asked whether they would be able to go up three flights of stairs and look directly at the face of the corpse. Jones surmises that the one who looks crippled as they bound up the steps is the person that the police are looking for. He then flashes quickly to a job interview being conducted by two white men who ask him whether he has his tools and, when he replies in the negative, they laugh at him. The sequence ends with him recollecting the shame that he experiences in the dream in the face of laughter.

I describe these dreams in some detail because they represent a collection of fears that Jones becomes cognizant of having only after the strike on Pearl Harbor has occurred. These are dreams of relocation and alienation, spectatorship and humiliation—themes that writers in the east like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Baldwin are and will be engaging with in the 1940s. But, though Pearl Harbor has its own (often problematic) niche in American cultural memory as it relates to issues of nationalism, imperialism, exceptionalism and militarism, of course it held fairly specific cultural currency for black bodies living in California at the time as well. In essence, alienation and humiliation can hold different valences once residing in a space that

physically relocates bodies that the state deems as threatening. This consideration of what is threatening (for the culture and for the state) is important for a novel like *If He Hollers* because of its focus on black masculinity, that which for over a century had been deemed as most destructive for the cohesion of a (white) body politic.

The intense oppression and subjugation of black masculinity (an acute preoccupation for Jones that carries through the entirety of the narrative), however, barely factors into Jones' remembrance of a time before he lived in Los Angeles. After he wakes up from this first set of dreams, he remarks, "[f]or a moment I felt torn all loose inside, shriveled, paralyzed, as if after a while I'd have to get up and die. Every day now I'd been waking up that way, ever since the war began. And since I'd been made a leaderman out at the Atlas Shipyard it was really getting me. Maybe I'd been scared all my life, but I didn't know about it until after Pearl Harbor" (2-3). Jones may have a fine job (which we learn later is undermined by the white female boss who will go on to stoke racial fears about the sexually predatory nature of black males to her own advantage) but his psyche is so damaged that each of the four days in which this novel takes place begins with a similar set of nightmarish fantasies. When he lived in Cleveland, Jones figured that his strength and masculinity would have been enough to combat daily instances of racism that he was sure to encounter under Jim Crow but the limitations of the body become no match for a state that barely hesitates before using strategies of excision to protect itself. It is Pearl Harbor, not new instances or substantiations of Jim Crow, not a newfound distrust in whiteness, and not the new comprehensive organization of spatial practices that come to define Los Angeles as separate from an American North and an American South that ultimately reorients his considerations from one of mild disillusionment and indifference to one of bone chilling fear of how crippling his skin color can actually be. As much as this institutional policy

provided for the possibility of better sets of circumstances for black Americans at the time in terms of new housing opportunities as formerly Japanese spaces like Little Tokyo become forcibly abandoned and new employment opportunities in the jobs that the Japanese were forced to leave behind, the policy was just as equally effective in altering how black bodies could express their understandings of their own citizenship in this Western space. Blacks had only properly been granted *de jure* citizenship not even a century before the end of WWII with the ratification of the 14th amendment in 1868 and so this knowledge of what a country could do to those bodies of color that were supposed to be protected with inalienable rights (Japanese Americans made up about 60% of those who were relocated during this period) was clearly daunting for someone like Jones who would walk down city streets and see "that crazy, wild-eyed, unleashed hatred that the first Jap bomb on pearl Harbor let loose in a flood" (Himes 4).

But, we must step back for a second because this cannot only be attributed to Himes' distress over the policy of a Japanese internment. Though Himes would write in an issue of *The Negro War Worker*, a short-lived San Francisco paper, that Japanese internment was a heinous policy to be enacting, it receives no mention in the first volume of his autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*, which was first published in 1972. The experience of Chester Himes moving from Cleveland, Ohio to Los Angeles, California, which is narrated in the autobiography should strike readers as being remarkably similar to that same journey of Bob Jones—Himes even directly quotes *If He Hollers Let Him Go* before explaining that "Los Angeles hurt me racially as much as any city I have ever known—much more than any city I remember from the South. It was the lying hypocrisy that hurt me. Black people were treated much the same as they were in an industrial city of the South. They were Jim-Crowed in housing, in employment, in public accommodations, such as hotels and restaurants. […] The difference was that the white people of

Los Angeles seemed to be saying, 'Nigger, ain't we good to you?' " (72-73). The emphasis here on what makes Los Angeles so intolerable is precisely the more violating lack of opportunities that blacks find in Los Angeles. Himes makes clear that he faced discrimination back in Ohio but the racism of California had a bit more violence and a lot more mockery to it. So, if Himes himself looks back on his time in California and does not acknowledge that the internment of the Japanese and Japanese Americans had an effect on his being-in-the-world at the time, why make the claim that the policies of Japanese internment are this important for a narrative that will go on to focus on working conditions and male/female sexual relations while leaving this mention of Japan behind?

If He Hollers Let Him Go falls fairly well into a specific kind of cultural narrative that was taking place in African American newspapers as the United States entered into WWII. When trying to sum up the prevailing lines of inquiry that dominated these papers in 1940s California, one would have to pay specific attention to not only the desire for fair treatment of black soldiers fighting In the war but also to the desire for fair treatment of the black workers left at home. The few critics that have done work on this novel see it as principally speaking towards the latter social project. Jones, a worker and eventually leaderman at the Atlas Shipyard working with sheet-metal in a capacity that helps to advance the war effort, has an easily excited temper as I have already suggested and a penchant for becoming violent at the most sudden whim. These character traits, however, are not attributed to "natural" racial character flaws (i.e., his anger and frustration are not wholly contingent upon an adherence to an "angry black man"/"angry black woman" figure that remains in the American cultural consciousness even today); instead, the overall message of the novel seems to be that it is the working conditions and the lived experiences (and the antagonistic women) that Jones has to traverse on a quotidian basis that

produce such a temperamental character. If, as I have argued, Japanese internment can have the kinds of psychic effects on those who have a lighter skin tones that remind them on a daily basis that at any moment they can meet a racial hatred that leads to the potential for physical removal from the nation, it should seem reasonable to suggest that these policies can directly affect these characteristics.

Of course, neither Jones nor Himes had held substantive first hand knowledge of race relations in Los Angeles prior to 1941—Himes would not reach the West Coast until a couple of months before the strike on Pearl Harbor and neither would Jones who places his arrival date as the fall of 1941. The change in the spatial stories of Los Angeles, the basic organizations of space that were upended after the attack on Pearl Harbor had deftly affected the ways in which bodies of color walked through the city, were already being put into place by then. White farmers wanted to get rid of the Japanese farmers that were competing with them and used anxieties about Japan's role in World War II to gain the advantage. Little Tokyo was on its way towards temporarily becoming Bronzeville in October 1943, an African American town in Los Angeles that would boast its own Chamber of Commerce and "Gay Halloween Party" that served as its coming out in another *California Eagle* article. What I am hoping, however, is that this consideration of how Japanese internment affected one black character in a novel written by an author known much more for his Harlem detective novels than his protest fiction should be interrogated in other pieces of literature.

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