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Kristen Fink
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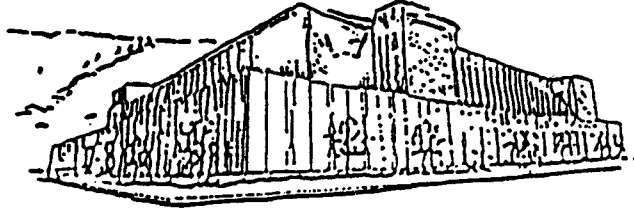
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'The Black Penis and the Demoralization of the Western World':

Sexual Relationships Between Black Men and White Women

in the Works of Chester Himes and Dany Laferrière

by

Kristen Fink

B.A., University of Texas at Austin

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

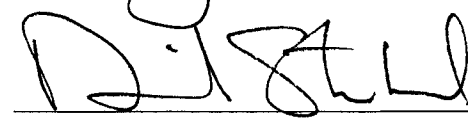
Master of Arts in Literature

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2000

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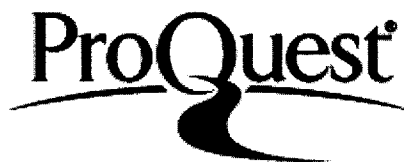


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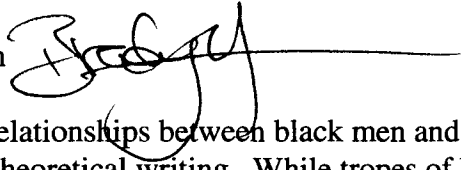
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'The Black Penis and the Demoralization of the Western World': Sexual Relationships Between Black Men and White Women in the Works of Chester Himes and Dany Laferrière (54pp.)

Director: Brady Harrison



Discussions on sexual relationships between black men and white women are curiously absent from literary and theoretical writing. While tropes of black male sexuality ranging from the black male's violent desire to rape white women to the black male's supposed sexual prowess are widely recognized, little has been done to undermine the negative effects these stereotypes produce. The works of Chester Himes and Dany Laferrière, both black males writing about sexual relationships between black men and white women, provide a literary forum for discussing the changing nature of these stereotypes.

An application of Foucault's theory of sexuality as a discourse meant to subjugate individuals reveals a juridical record which wrote stereotypes about both white women's and black men's sexuality into Law and, therefore, Truth. In turn, writers and theorists informed by this discursive history reiterated these stereotypes when intending to reveal the hypocrisies of a white society.

The works of Chester Himes and Dany Laferrière chronicle the literary history of this "contact zone," and offer humor as a means of resisting the sexual discourses which shape black men. In keeping with Foucault's theory on resistance, both writers understand that they do not exist outside of the discourses that they criticize. Rather than attack directly white systems of power, Himes and Laferrière reveal the absurdity of the discourses that continue to govern the sexual relationships between black men and white women. Himes and Laferrière offer a model by which other writers, including white women, might attack the sexual discourses and stereotypes which subjugate them, while acknowledging the fact that awareness of a sexual stereotype does not signify its resolution. Literary silences, on the other hand, insure the continuation of sexual and racial misunderstandings.

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I. Introduction: Typewriters and Exiles

In 1953 Chester Himes boarded a boat bound for France. With him he totes his “Remington portable typewriter dating from 1931” (Himes, Quality of Hurt 149). In 1985, in a squalid Montreal apartment, the narrator of Dany Laferrière’s novel How to Make Love to a Negro (1985) pounds out his own novel on a “Remington 22 that belonged to Chester Himes” (Laferrière, How to Make Love 45). The narrator, who buys the Remington at a junk shop that specializes in pedigreed typewriters, selects the Himes typewriter from a range including those of James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway. The question is simple, straightforward: Why Himes? What’s the connection between a contemporary Haitian writer exiled to Montreal and an African-American writer raised in Ohio, schooled in the protest novel tradition, and recognized for his detective novels set in Harlem?

Biographically, Himes and Laferrière share a status as exiles. Laferrière, who practiced journalism under Jean-Claude Duvalier, fled Haiti in 1978 when he found a colleague murdered by the roadside.¹ Only speaking French, Laferrière logically fled to Montreal. Himes, on the other hand, “wanted to leave Cleveland and Ohio and all of the US of A and go somewhere black people weren’t considered the shit of the earth” (Himes 48).² Himes left for France to join a group of black, self-exiled writers including James Baldwin and Richard Wright. The ties between Himes and Laferrière, however, are more dynamic in terms of their subject matter. Himes and Laferrière share a literary, political, and philosophical interest in sex—specifically the sexual relationships between black men and white women.

For Himes, writing about interracial sex necessitated a defense, an explanation, of a black male's supposed desire to rape a white woman. Laferrière, on the other hand, mocks the Western World's belief in the supposed sexual "powers" of the black male, and explores the role power relations play in shaping sexual relationships between black men and white women. From sexual violence to sexual prowess, the black male has, as Himes and Laferrière demonstrate, constantly been subjected to a shifting set of discourses and stereotypes meant to define, aggrandize, and marginalize his sexuality.

If Western ideology works optimistically to make us think we can consciously avoid submitting to specific stereotypes, than the works of Chester Himes and Dany Laferrière *should* provide a necessary expulsion of the stereotypes that inform black male sexuality. Awareness of a sexual stereotype, its rhetorical construction and probable falsehood, should collapse the stereotype. What Himes and Laferrière reveal, instead, is that exposing sexual stereotypes necessarily exposes the complicated system of power which deployed these stereotypes—a system of power which is not simply disarmed or discarded.

A system of power, a discursive sexuality, which ascribes to black men a desire to rape white women shapes Himes in particular. Power forms Himes's identity as a black man, as a writer, and as a subject; through what Judith Butler describes in The Psychic Life of Power as the "fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose" (2). Himes does not exist outside of the discourse that formed him, nor do we, as readers. Himes demonstrates in his first two novels, If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945) and Lonely Crusade (1947), that while exposing sexual stereotypes is easy, avoiding stereotypes and

the practice of stereotyping is not. In The Primitive (1956), Himes embraces the sexual stereotypes which define him and utilizes them, in conjunction with his newly acquired sense of the “absurd,” as tools of empowerment and agency. In so doing, Himes can challenge from within the power structures that contain him.

Laferrière enters the discourse that shaped Himes *after* forming his own identity as a black male living in Haiti. For this reason, Laferrière freely attacks the discourses that actively reconstruct his identity as a “black” man in relation to a white society. Laferrière takes a lesson from Himes and uses the sexual stereotypes meant to label and subjugate him as tools to humorously reveal both the reverential and sensational tags that the Western World has historically placed on sex. Laferrière’s attack on sexuality extends Himes’s works; whereas Himes attacked the symptoms of sexuality, the stereotypes, Laferrière goes to the source and attacks the discursive history of sexuality in the Western World. For example, in his novel Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex (1993), Laferrière writes, “I wanted to use the old insults until they became so familiar they lost their sting. I wanted to wallow in it, immerse myself in racism, I wanted to become *the* black the way Christ was *the* man” (195).

The span of time between Himes’s and Laferrière’s first novels has not diminished the Western World’s interest in black male sexuality and sexual relationships between black men and white women. Laferrière writes, “I don’t know a single white who doesn’t start salivating when the issue of interracial copulation is raised. As long as there’s at least one taker, I’ll have work in America” (Why Must a Black Writer 12). The “takers” remain numerous. The complex deployment of sexuality meant to subjugate

both black men and white women remains intact.

II. Legislating the Contact Zone

Sex and sexuality have long been a subject of both popular and academic discussion. As Michel Foucault writes in The History of Sexuality:

It may well be that we talk about sex more than anything else; we set our minds to the task, we convince ourselves that we have never said enough on the subject, that, through inertia or submissiveness, we conceal from ourselves the blinding evidence, and that what is essential always eludes us, so that we must always start out once again in search of it. (33)

Although Foucault makes clear the "wrong-thinking" involved in equating truth with an attempt to understand and define sexuality, unmasking the systems of power which construct and enforce sexual taboos and govern normative sexual behaviors remains a productive process. If sexuality is, as Foucault argues, "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power," than sexuality, coupled with issues of race, should form a particularly rich field of study and analysis.

The black man-white woman sexual relationship, to borrow from Mary Louise Pratt's Imperial Eyes, can be defined in terms of a specific "contact zone." Pratt defines a contact zone as the "space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). Pratt adds that a "contact perspective" emphasizes how "subjects are constituted in and by their relation to each

other" (7). Although Pratt employs these terms in order to explicate her discussion on travel writing, and specifically the interactions between the Western writer and his or her colonial counterpart, the terms, on perhaps a more literal level, are particularly useful in discussing the works of Himes and Laferrière and in exposing a discourse which often scorns sexual and racial stereotypes while unable to think outside of these same stereotypes.

The emergence of slavery within the southern states marks the creation of this, black man-white woman, contact zone in the United States. Interestingly, sexual relationships between black men and white women before the Civil War, as Martha Hodes argues extensively in White Women, Black Men, while not condoned, were not met with the lynchings and castrations generally associated with the racial violence of the late 19th-Century South. Because poor white women in the antebellum South were considered "capable of seducing black men" along with the fact that "white Southerners had a stake in protecting their human chattel" (Hodes 5) either from severe violence or court sentences, the brutal intolerance of sexual relationships between black men and white women marked by the post-Civil War South is largely absent in the antebellum South. Also absent is the exaggerated fear of a black man raping a white woman—a fear which dominated the Reconstruction South. As Diane Sommerville argues in her essay, "The Rape Myth and the Old South," "no evidence [exists] to suggest that white southerners were apprehensive or anxious about their slaves raping white women" (490).

Emancipation, however, signaled not only the end of property concerns for white males, but also the need for a "total separation of black people and white people" (Hodes

5). Hodes writes,

Because it was the men of the free black population whom now gained formal political power and began to achieve economic independence, it was they who had enormous potential to destroy the South's racial caste system. Intertwining these unfamiliar dangers—the possibility of blurring the categories of “black” and “white” in a world without racial slavery, and the alarm of diminishing white supremacy—white people fastened on the taboo of sex between black men and white women with newfound urgency. (147)

The Southern courts subsequently sanctioned these taboos and prohibited “ongoing relations” between, specifically, the prominent white Southern woman and the black male, in order to ensure the fact that there could be no sexual relations, consensual or otherwise, between the two. Because, as the Arkansas appellate court stated in 1855, “only white women who ‘had sunk to the lowest degree of prostitution’ would yield ‘to the embraces of a negro, without force’” (qtd. in Bardaglio: 767), a consensual sexual relationship between a prominent white woman and a black male was simply not considered a possibility.

Rape, at least rhetorically, defined the contact zone in the Reconstruction South, and as Peter Bardaglio points out in his essay, “Rape and the Old South,” white male Southerners now “widely shared the belief that black men were obsessed with the desire to rape white women” (750). The courts disseminated a discursive sexuality of the black male which conflated his newly won political rights with his “alleged sexual misconduct

towards white women” (Hodes 6), and designated the black male as violent, amoral, and animal—a threat to a society which rhetorically held purity and civility above all else. The white Southern lady marked the pinnacle and crowning achievement of this society, and preservation of the Southern lady mirrored the nostalgic preservation of the antebellum South.

The Southern courts consistently approved state laws calling for the execution of black males convicted of rape or attempted rape of a white woman. A white male convicted of the same crime, however, was only sentenced to imprisonment thereby indicating that the logic behind the sentencing involved more than retribution for the sexually assaulted white woman. One crime was more heinous than another. Furthermore, black on white rape threatened the white power structure that demanded and depended on the subjugation of black men.

At the same time the courts ascribed a violent and menacing sexuality to black men, the courts, made up of white Southern men, consistently wrote decisions which denied a white woman’s sexuality and defined what a “proper” woman should be and do. For example, in 1847, the Georgia High Court writes,

No evil habitude of humanity so depraves the nature, so deadens the moral sense, and obliterates the distinctions between right and wrong, as common, licentious indulgence. Particularly is this true of women, the citadel of whose character is virtue; when that is lost, all is gone; her love of justice, sense of character, and regard for truth. (qtd. in Bardaglio: 766)

While the “designation of white female purity remained ambiguous on the matter of class,”(Hodes 202), women of the upper class were held to an ideal which limited a woman to little more than ornamental value. And this ideal, Kent Leslie argues in “A Myth of the Southern Lady,” “was used to justify real violence for the sake of social order” (32). Because of this ideal, white women, regardless of any actual agency, complicit in the violent acts committed against black men not only in the Reconstruction South, but perhaps the South of today as well.

Perhaps equal to the Southern male’s fear of a black man raping his white woman was his fear of this same woman’s sexuality. The court’s polarized designation of woman as either pure, virginal, and beloved or lustful, sexual, and immoral parallels the stereotype of black males as either highly sexual, primitive, and vulgar or impotent and docile. By sanctioning these stereotypes, the courts regulated sexuality and wrote these stereotypes into law and, therefore, “Truth.” The court’s interest in the sexuality of the public reflects Foucault's statement that "prohibitions bearing on sex were essentially of a juridical nature" (38) and these prohibitions are subsequently inscribed upon society’s collective unconscious. The courts, therefore, established a discourse, a set of stereotypes, of rules governing the black man-white woman contact zone within which individuals, including writers and theorists, necessarily exist.

III. What’s Love Got to Do With It: Lust, Revenge, and Other Sexual Motivations

Over a hundred years since the courts made these rulings, the suggested motives behind participation in a sexual relationship between a black man and white woman still reflect much of the rhetoric of the courts. However, there has been a change in the nature

of these stereotypes. Whereas in the past the black body has, as Henry Louis Gates argues, been “demonized in Western culture and represented as ogreish, coarse, and highly, menacingly sexualized,” the black body has also been “valorized, represented as darkly, alluring—still highly, menacingly sexualized but, well, in a *good way*” (61). This latter stereotype of black sexuality, Cornel West writes, “is a taboo subject in America principally because it is a form of black power over which whites have little control” (125). If West is correct in arguing that “the dominant sexual myths of black women and men portray whites as being ‘out of control’—seduced, tempted, overcome, overpowered by black bodies” and that “this form of black sexuality makes white passivity the norm--hardly an acceptable self-image for a white-run society” (126), then the following questions must be raised: Why the change in the nature of the stereotype? And is the black male’s supposed sexual empowerment a *good* thing for the black male? The answers to these questions are as complicated as determining why a black male and a white female become sexually involved. For most writers and theorists concerned with this contact zone, love is not an acceptable, or at least productive, answer.

The black male has traditionally been thought to engage in sexual relations with a white woman either as revenge against a white society or as a manifestation of a desire to be white. As psychiatrist and post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon explains in Black Skins White Masks,

I wish to be acknowledged not as a *black* but as a *white*.

--who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man.

I am a white man.

Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization. . . .

I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.

When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.(63)

Fanon concludes that “this sexual myth--the quest for white flesh--perpetuated by alienated psyches, must no longer be allowed to impede active understanding” (81). The black male, Fanon argues, must consciously acknowledge the sexual stereotypes, the “myths,” which inform any sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman.

However, this sexual myth along with the myth of the black male avenging himself against the white man through the rape of the white woman continues to dictate the discourse within this particular contact zone. For example, sociological studies conducted as recently as 1980 conclude that “black-on-white rapes stem from blacks’ enmity towards whites, and that black-on-white rape is a calculated response by blacks to their economic and political oppression by white men” (Felson and South 71). Subsequently, black-on-white rape seems to take the form not only of a violent act but also of a “calculated response,” a rational release which, in turn, makes the black male even more dangerous. Although this “conflict model” of black-on-white rape is being re-examined and more recent studies suggest black men rape black and white women proportionately and with a proportionate level of violence, the motives behind these studies are striking. In a Foucauldian-like cycle, these sociological studies work to either

prove or disprove a logic based on stereotypes of black male sexuality which subsequently re-inscribes these sexual stereotypes within a shared and accepted discourse.

The white woman, on the other hand, is generally considered to be attracted to the black male's Otherness, his exoticism, and his supposed sexual prowess. With a black male, the white woman is said to be free to let loose her thinly repressed sexuality and succumb to base, primitive sexual pleasures. Also, in engaging in a sexual relationship with a black man, a white woman directly contradicts the normative, hegemonic sexual standards historically constructed by white men. White women who are attracted to black men are often interpreted as eager to exploit a sexual relationship in which they are politically dominant. Or, a black male is "all they could get." No matter what the myth, no matter what the stereotype, black men and white women within this contact zone have both been subjugated by a discourse on sexuality which is "centered on nothing more than the statement of the law and the operation of taboos" (Foucault 85). Sexual relationships between black men and white women have rhetorically been shaped not by their relation *to* each other, but rather by their relation *against* the other.

The myths and stereotypes that undermine sexual relationships between black men and white women are not merely passive discursive constructions. Regardless of the "truth" of the stereotype, these myths have real effects on black men and white women. In fact, these sexual stereotypes—the "exotic" black male, the repressed white woman, and so on—are so ingrained within Western society's collective unconscious that we, as theorists, writers, and individuals, cannot simply dispel or discredit them. Understanding

these sexual stereotypes to be rhetorical constructions does not automatically collapse the “truth” of the stereotype. Writers and theorists do not exist outside of the discourses that shape them. For this reason, if we look to other areas of "discursive production" as Foucault suggests, we see that much "canonized" literature has done little to unravel the stereotypes and assumptions that govern this particular contact zone.

From Joanna Burden's cry of "Negro! Negro!" in William Faulkner's Light in August (1932) to Mary Dalton's murder in Richard Wright's Native Son (1940) to Tom Robinson's guilty verdict in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) the black man-white woman sexual relationship has been disastrous and usually violent in the end. These major works, in an attempt to expose and condemn the injustices and hypocrisies of a white society, repeatedly reinforce a discourse on sexuality grounded in stereotypes. The white women characters are offered up as either victims of, or agents for, a white society. The women's sexual desires are either desperate or primitive while the black males remain trapped within a historical discourse on sexuality that leaves them impotent, violent, or both. Mary Dalton's murder, for example, is a direct result of a discourse that relies on stereotypes of white women yelling rape. This discourse predetermines the actions and interactions of these characters. Just as the Southern courts carefully precluded the possibility of "ongoing relations" between black men and white women, much of our related—and most studied—literature has done the same. Rather than explore the intense issues involving sexuality, race, power, challenges to power, and identity within this contact zone, the literature has typically shut down this type of discussion by inadvertently relying on and reinforcing these stereotypes and relations of

power. The works of Chester Himes and Dany Laferrière, on the other hand, offer liberation from these stereotypes not by debunking them and the white society which constructed them, but rather by acknowledging the *active* and often *absurd* role these stereotypes and sexual discourses continue to play in shaping the conceptions and misconceptions of sexual relationships between black men and white women.

IV. Chester Himes: From Prison to Paris

The work of Chester Himes serves as sort of meter by which we can measure the literary history of the black man-white woman contact zone. Author of eighteen novels, a two-volume autobiography, and a collection of short stories, Chester Himes stands as one of the most prolific black writers of all time. Additionally, he is among the famous group of black writers including Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin to flee the United States for Paris in the 1950s. His autobiography reveals him to be a battered figure, beaten down by the racism in the United States and within the publishing community. By the time Himes was thirty-one, he had "fallen down an elevator shaft, been kicked out of college, served seven and a half years in prison, and survived the humiliating last five years of the Depression" (Himes, Quality 76). It was during his prison stay that Himes hammered out his first short story, "His Last Day," (1932) on his Remington 22.

During his lifetime, Himes received little critical success in his writing and even less revenue. He often used his autobiography and interviews to "tell the story of his career, to emphasize his successes, and air his grievances" (Fabre, "Introduction" xiii). Over twenty years after his first published work, Chester Himes finally achieved literary

and financial success when, on the suggestion of his French editor, Marcel Duhamel, whom he met in 1957, Himes began writing detective novels set in Harlem featuring two hard-boiled black detectives, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones. While Himes freely admits he wrote the first novel because he "needed the money pretty desperately" (Himes, "Interview with Michel Fabre" 84), his detective novels eventually won him the critical claim which he failed to gain for his earlier and more "serious" work. In 1958 Himes was awarded the Grand Prix de Litterature Policiere.

Even though, as Michel Fabre, the leading Himes scholar, writes, "we are very close to a major reappraisal of Chester Himes" ("Introduction" ix), much of Chester Himes's early work still receives little critical attention. The reasons for this silence are undoubtedly myriad, but the fact that one of Himes's primary interests as both a man and a writer was the contact zone—the site of "ongoing relations, usually involving coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 6) between black men and white women—suggests that perhaps this zone remains an area which academia seems oddly reluctant to enter. Or perhaps this silence results from the fact that Western society has, after admitting its Saidian-induced guilt, lost interest in rehashing the long acknowledged though unresolved stereotypes of black male sexuality. The issue has, it seems, been left largely to writers like Himes and Laferrière.

V. *If He Hollers Let Him Go: "Cracker Bitches" Cry Rape*

Himes's first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, published in 1945 and based solidly in the tradition of the black protest novel, met with favorable critical acclaim. The novel tells the story of Bob Jones, a young black leader man working at the Atlas

shipyard just outside of Los Angeles. Due to the wartime pressure, women too worked at the shipyard, and white women began working next to black men; hence, a zone of contact emerges. On the new situation Bob comments,

Now and then some of the young white women gave me an opening to make a pass, but I'd never make one; at first because the colored workers seemed as intent on protecting white women from the colored men as the white men were, probably because they wanted to prove to the white folks they could work with white women without trying to make them. (21)

For Himes, this contact zone necessarily carries a sexual subtext that involves strict relations of power between black men and white women. While Bob attempts to avoid any sexual association with the white women workers, his position of authority places him within a now upset relationship of power with these same women. When one white female welder, Madge Perkins, refuses to work with Bob stating, "I ain't gonna work with no nigger" (29), the conflict between the two becomes not only racial but sexual. Bob, fed up with Madge who "deliberately put on a frightened, wide-eyed look" (21) whenever he was near, retorts "screw you then, you cracker bitch" (29), a comment which eventually gets him demoted.

Madge, who hails from Breckenridge, Texas, easily fills the stereotype of the low class, sexually susceptible, Southern white woman condemned by the early Southern courts. She wields the power she has effortlessly, first refusing to work with Bob, then forcing his demotion. When Bob comes by her apartment, she tells him, "that's all you

niggers do. Lie up and get drunk and dream of having a white woman” (137). She then opens her robe and asks, “Ain’t I beautiful? Pure white” (137) adding, “this will get you lynched in Texas” (138). In exposing her naked body while threatening Bob, Madge asserts not only her assumed sexual power but her political power as well, thereby suggesting that sexual power derives from political power. However, Madge is unable to engage in a sexual relationship with a black man voluntarily; instead, she asks Bob to chase her. The two struggle and Madge finally submits saying, “all right, rape me nigger,” her voice described as “excited, thick, with threads in the throat” (138). Jolted by the word “rape,” Bob leaves telling Madge, “if it didn’t take so much trouble, I’d make a whore out of you” (139).

In asking Bob to “rape” her, Madge reduces a potential sexual act between them to an act of violence—a move which parallels Foucault’s argument that the practice of sex is not “the anchorage point that supports the manifestations of sexuality” (152).³ Sexuality, for Madge and Bob, is not an issue of bodies or physical pleasures, but rather an exercise in power relations. And while Bob is caught in the losing end of the power game, Madge too remains trapped in a system of power that does not allow her an acceptable outlet for her to admit a sexual attraction to a black man.

At the novel’s end, however, Madge publicly accuses Bob of raping her—an accusation that leads to Bob’s forced enlistment into the army. While a black male’s fear of being caught in a “compromising” situation with a white woman is grounded in history and law, the scenario in the novel serves as a smoke screen. In many ways Madge’s character falls into stereotype. She is poor, “well sexed” (21), white Southern trash—a

real “cracker bitch.” That Madge should cry rape seems unavoidable. In concluding If He Hollers Let Him Go with a white woman calling rape, Himes, like Harper Lee and Richard Wright, fails to deal with the complexities involved in a shared sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman and instead echoes the prevalent discourse on sexuality which polarizes black men and white women.

VI. Lonely Crusade: Sex, Donne, and the Communist Party

In Himes’s second novel, Lonely Crusade, the sexual relationship anticipated in If He Hollers Let Him Go is consummated, and Himes begins a serious discourse, which he carries on over the course of several novels, about sexual relationships between black men and white women. This time the black protagonist is Lee Gordon a graduate of UCLA who is hired as the first black union organizer in Los Angeles. The white woman is Jackie Forks, a member of the Communist Party “assigned” to Lee in hopes of signing him up with the Party.

The two meet at a function hosted by the Communist Party. Lee, aware of the political utility of the black labor force to the Communist Party, immediately suspects Jackie’s flirtations as he asks her, “Did they send you out?” (99). Jackie—though she denies to Lee a political motivation behind her attraction—understands the sexual role she is to play for the Communist Party. As an intelligent, beautiful white woman she is in a position to enlist Lee’s cooperation with the Party. She realizes she holds a certain sexual power over Lee, and Lee’s attraction to her, he admits, “is expected of him” (104). Any physical or emotional attraction the two feel for each other can, therefore, be suppressed under the guise of “doing their duty,” of acting out a pre-determined

discourse—a discourse that Himes is capable of undermining.

Actively aware of the stereotypes and relations of power that structure their relationship, Lee and Jackie, on the way to her apartment, kiss. Jackie then declares, "I've never kissed a Negro before" (101). Though she intends the comment to be merely a statement of fact, for Lee, she echoes Joanna Burden's "Negro! Negro!" The mood immediately changes and "where between them there had been a young and stolen sexual attraction, now there was race" (101). Jackie attempts to resume the flirtatious atmosphere alternately reading aloud John Donne and Crisis, a Communist publication. The divergent reading matter, romantic versus political, represents a choice which Himes, as author, must make. If Jackie's interest in Lee is merely political, her character remains flat, incapable of change—a vaguely improved Madge Perkins; however, if Jackie's interest in Lee is romantic, as opposed to merely sexual, her character becomes complicated, her actions less scripted. Lee's interest in Jackie, as Himes demonstrates, is equally divisive.

When Jackie refuses to kiss Lee again, he threatens, "I think I'll make you kiss me now" (108). Jackie again refuses, and the argument heightens as Lee, becoming now physically forceful, threatens, "I will hurt you as sure as hell if you don't kiss me"(108). Genuinely frightened, Jackie pleads,

Why do you take advantage of me like this? You *know* if you were white, all I'd have to do would be to scream. You *know* it! The doorman and the elevator operator man could hear me. They could hear me on the street. You know that I wouldn't cry that you were raping me. You *know*

I couldn't do that to you! (109).

Stunned, Lee replies, "I thought you wanted me to hurt you" (109). Lee, who admits "there was no desire in him for sex"(109), remains trapped by a white society's expectations of what he should do with a near-naked white woman in his arms—rape her. Because the literary and political models of sexual relationships between black men and white women have resulted in rape or accusations of rape, Lee assumes his relationship with Jackie must end the same way. That Lee should believe Jackie wants him to hurt her—that she must have "expected something like that" (109) after her refusal to kiss Lee—reveals the extent of the barricades, the misunderstandings, which dictate sexual relationships between black men and white women.

Within this scene, Himes refuses to act out the Madge Perkins scenario, and he wades into new literary terrain. While Jackie's motives for inviting Lee over are suspect, she cannot be simply discarded as a "cracker bitch." Instead Jackie reveals them both to be involved in a system of power, a confining discourse, which liberates neither Jackie nor Lee. As a white woman, Jackie understands she need only cry rape to have Lee removed from her apartment and jailed. However, due to a sense of guilt, of genuine feelings for Lee, or of loyalty to the Communist Party, Jackie confesses, "You *know* I wouldn't hurt you even if you raped me" (109). Jackie's refusal to cry rape signals Himes's attempt to reveal the discourses which contain Lee and Jackie while still allowing his characters some agency within the course of the novel. Jackie does not have to act out the scene that Lee feels she initiates. Jackie is not the Mayella Ewell of To Kill a Mockingbird, and though confused, Lee is neither the Bigger Thomas of Native Son nor

the Joe Christmas of Light in August.

Later in the novel, however, when Lee finds himself at Jackie's apartment, she reasserts her assumed sexual dominance over Lee. After "walking the seven miles without realizing where he was going" (193), Lee appears at Jackie's door. She allows him into her house and into her bed, but tells him, "You can't have me, Lee" (194). When she puts on music for him, the music "gets" to Lee, and he breaks down crying. Jackie, then, draws a vulnerable and emasculated Lee to her and, apparently, the two have sex. Of the sexual act, Himes writes only, "never so violently responsive, so flagrantly wanton, so completely consuming, but it was not the same. In it was the defiance of the forbidden, shaping it in a way he could not tell" (195). The language, the "it," is deliberately obtuse, suggesting the insignificance of the sexual act within the relationship itself. There is no talk of bodies or physical pleasures, no sense of whom or what was "violently responsive" or "flagrantly wanton." "It" was not the same as what? What is clear, however, is the transgression constituted by the sex act—a transgression that leads to more questions and more confusion for Lee and Jackie.

Jackie, who permits Lee to have sex with her only after he "breaks down," is quick to answer Lee's query, "I wonder why white women are so much more affectionate to Negro men than our own women are?" (196). "It's only in your mind," Jackie responds. "In your mind we are the ultimate" (196). Though Jackie—unlike Madge Perkins—can willingly engage in a sexual relationship with Lee, she still relies on set relations of power to define and control the parameters of their relationship. Jackie's motives for being with Lee remain uncertain. While previously Jackie interjected

Communist rhetoric into her conversations with Lee, in this scene there is no talk of Communism. Jackie's character is not merely a pawn of the Communist Party or a "cracker bitch" or a non-sexual, sympathetic being. Instead Jackie becomes a *complex character* engaged with a black male in an uncharted sexual relationship riddled with sexual stereotypes, prohibitions, and skewed relations of power.

Later in the novel, when a black leader of the Communist Party is found guilty of taking bribes, the Party, rather than risk a breach with the black workers, frames Jackie and expels her from the Party. While Jackie is willing to sacrifice herself for the Communist Party, she is not willing to sacrifice herself for a black member of the Communist Party, and she temporarily turns against Lee and all other Negroes. Himes writes "her white gentile soul was utterly outraged that they would sacrifice her to save a nigger's reputation" (268). The fact that Lee publicly defends her outrages her further. Her anger rises, and in this "pathological hatred,"

The Negro became the bugaboo of Southern legend, the beast of Klanist propaganda, a distorted, monstrous, despicable object of her rage. And as her hatred rose, burning up all that was good within her, she became just so much rife, white flesh, of common value on the prostitution market, good only in America for getting some Negro lynched. (269)

The passage reveals not only the fragile nature of Lee and Jackie's relationship, but also the discursive surface on which the stereotypes of black men and white women lie. Jackie relies on these stereotypes to exhaust her anger, to reduce Lee to something other than a man, and to reassert her own sense of identity through an affirmation of the power

structures that shape her. Jackie becomes the Madge of If He Hollers Let Him Go.

However, as Jackie's anger gives way to grief, she thinks, "in a way he's such a wonderful guy--and a man, yes, a man" (276). In acknowledging Lee as a man, and not simply a black man, Jackie lets loose the stereotypes and relations of power which she depends on to make sense of herself and her relationship with Lee. Himes writes, she was "human once again"(276)—a complex being rather than a racist caricature. Jackie's complexity arises not from a denouncement of the stereotypes that define Lee and Jackie to each other, but rather from recognition of Lee as human being.

Lee discovers Jackie sobbing and distraught in her apartment. The two make love all day, shower together, and cook naked together. For Lee, understanding Jackie as a woman—a woman as quickly manipulated by the Communist Party as himself—allows him to share in a sexual relationship with her. Lee,

finding it was Jackie who now needed comforting, re-created the image of all white women in his mind and changed completely the structure of his own emotions. He pitied her, and to be able to pity this white girl gave him equality in this white world. With the equality of his pity for her he could now love her; and he did. (279)

Unlike the Fanonian model that posits a black man who seeks "equality" in the white world through his relationship with a white woman, Lee does not find equality in Jackie's arms. He has had sex with her, and the stereotypes, the misconceptions and the relations of power remain unchanged. However, in seeing Jackie beaten down and vulnerable, the stereotypes are undermined because Jackie is not acting in her scripted role as a white

woman and a Communist, and, for a few days, they coexist without regard to race. The "equality" Lee finds is in being seen simply as a man rather than as a black man.

For her part Jackie realizes "manhood was a many-colored thing and hers to serve the color of her heart's selection" (279). Jackie and Lee create a momentary world in which race is pushed aside, and, as long as the two stay within the confines of Jackie's apartment, their love for each other comes easily. Of course, if race is denied or "vanished," then so vanished is the contact zone in which Jackie and Lee exist. Lonely Crusade becomes more a love story than a political novel. Himes concedes the point as he acknowledges "the only value that book [Lonely Crusade] has now is the picture of human relationships I portrayed" (Himes, "Interview with Michel Fabre" 94).

As Himes forewarns, however, race is not something Jackie and Lee can "overcome." Both characters acknowledge that "it was in their minds that the difference lay. In their inherent thinking to which they had been born and raised, that color made the difference" (279). Having active knowledge of the conditions which shape their thinking, however, offers Lee and Jackie no liberation from the sexual discourses which contain them. When Ruth, Lee's wife, calls for him at Jackie's apartment, the stereotypes and the matter of race, quickly resurface. Although temporarily willing to view Lee as a man, Jackie is unwilling to see Ruth as a woman, and instead imagines Ruth to be "a huge, dark Negress of tremendous strength and possessed of a vicious temperament" (301) come to fetch her husband home. Jackie hopes to avoid a public confrontation with Ruth because "she would not fight for him with a Negro woman--she would not sink so low" (301), and she kicks Lee out of her apartment. When Lee returns home, Ruth finally

voices what she has to believe: "You do not love the woman, Lee. You envy white men. That's why you want their women--because of what they've made of their women, which you could never do" (300), and she too evicts him. And when Lee tries to return to Jackie, she refuses him saying, "I'm white Lee--white! Can't you understand. I'm a white woman. And I could not hurt a Negro woman so"(303). Just as Jackie was unwilling to cry rape earlier in the novel, Jackie again martyrs herself for the sake of the Negro. Lee is left feeling uniquely and "spiritually" emasculated by each woman, and the sexual discourses that contain them.

Himes's depiction of Jackie and Lee's sexual relationship is perhaps the first serious treatment of the black man-white woman sexual relationship which accomplishes more than a simple reinforcement of sexual stereotypes, discourses, and inflexible relations of power. Lee and Jackie are both complex characters aware of the sexual and racial discourses that shape their relationship. However, cognizance offers no liberation from these same discourses, and Himes offers no resolution for the subjugating discourses that contain his characters. Instead, he proves these forces to be active rather than rhetorical, constantly shifting to reveal a different stereotype, another misconception. Lonely Crusade, however, met with scathing reviews. As Himes remarks in The Quality of Hurt (1972), the first volume of his autobiography, "Everyone hated it [Lonely Crusade] . . . The left hated it, the right hated it, Jews hated it, blacks hated it" (100). Although many of the issues Himes tackles, such as the relationship between Jews, the Communist Party and African-Americans, brought him much harsh criticism, time has proven Himes to be a prescient thinker engaged in the social and political complexities of

his time.⁴ Yet, even in the recent re-discovery of Himes and Lonely Crusade, the complex sexual relationship between Jackie and Lee has been ignored.

VII. The Primitive: “Hungry Niggers,” Newscasting Apes, and Other Absurdities

Shortly after the critical failure of Lonely Crusade, Himes broke with both his black wife and the protest novel tradition. In an interview with Flontina Miller, Himes acknowledges that "his philosophy in writing changed around 1955 when he realized the protest novel could no longer accomplish anything as a black literary work" ("Racism Impetus Behind Author's Career" 117). "I wanted to break through the barriers that labeled me as a 'protest writer,'" Himes writes in My Life of Absurdity (1976), "I knew the life of the American black needed another image than just the victim of racism" (40). Himes's 1956 novel The Primitive serves as a transitional novel away from the limitations he encountered with the protest novel.⁵ The Primitive, in which Himes puts "a sexually frustrated American woman and a racially frustrated black American male together for a weekend in a New York apartment and allows them to soak in American bourbon" ("Chester Himes Direct" Fabre 113), extends a topic which Himes found increasingly important both politically and personally: the black man-white woman sexual relationship.⁶

Of the relationship contained within The Primitive, Himes comments, "What I wanted to show is that American society has produced two radically new human types. One is the black male. Although powerless and small in numbers, he can serve as a political catalyst. The other type, the white American woman, has developed into something beyond our imagination" ("Chester Himes Direct" 133). Furthering this line

of thought, Himes, in The Quality of Hurt, writes,

The American black is the most neurotic, complicated, schizophrenic, unanalyzed, anthropologically advanced specimen in the history of the world. The American black is a new race of man; the only new race of man to come into being in modern time. . . . the black is a new man—complex, intriguing, and not particularly likable. (285)

The white woman, on the other hand, is “better educated, better off financially, and enjoys more freedom than women have at any other period in history. Yet she’s the most unhappy, and sexually incomplete creature ever produced” (“Chester Himes Direct” 133). Himes gives shape to these “radically new human types” in the form of Jesse Robinson and Kriss Cummings.

Himes begins The Primitive with even accounts of his two protagonists. The two both wake up alone, lonely, and naked. While Jesse eats his breakfast of gin, raw eggs, and chocolate (a menu designed to increase sexual potency), Kriss eats dry toast, drinks two cups of coffee, and “pops” a few barbiturates. Kriss’s ex-husband, Ronny, is a homosexual. During their marriage, Kriss combated his homosexuality by sleeping with every man, especially black men, she could find. While Jesse ignores his gay roommate’s sexual advances, Kriss wonders if her secretary, Dot, has a crush on her. Himes makes clear that Jesse and Kriss have a sexual history together.

By blatantly talking about sex and sexuality within the first few chapters of The Primitive, Himes accomplishes several things. First, Himes plays on his own philosophy that “white readers read into a book what they wish, and in any book concerning the black

people in the world, the majority of white readers are just looking for the exotic episodes" ("My Man Himes" Williams: 47). By placing the "exotic" in the foreground, Himes affirms expectations only to set them up for confrontation. In The Primitive Himes does not hide his characters or their actions behind ubiquitous "its," as he did in Lonely Crusade. Nor does he complicate his characters' interactions with illusions of love. Instead Himes lets sexual and racial stereotypes govern the course of the novel. For Himes:

The very essence of any relationship between a black man and a white woman in the US is sex, and generally sex of a nature which lends itself to pornography. To describe a black man, the blackness of his skin, black sexual organs, black shanks, the thickness of his lips, the aphrodisiacal texture of his kinky hair, alongside the white breasts, pink nipples, white thighs and silky pubic hair of a white woman, no matter how seriously intended, is unavoidably pornographic in American society. (Quality of Hurt 285)

If in If He Hollers Let Him Go, Himes constructs a volatile and potentially sexual zone of contact between a black man and a white woman, and if in Lonely Crusade, he introduces love, sex, and complex characters aware of the discourses which shape them, in The Primitive, he discards any "serious intentions" he had of creating a viable sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman. He instead submits to the stereotypes, the "unavoidably pornographic," and he creates a quietly satiric novel which mocks the issues of race, politics, and identity contained within an ongoing sexual

relationship between a black man and a white woman.

Kriss is home from work and on her fourth drink when Jesse calls her. Although the two have not spoken in three years, Kriss reluctantly agrees to go out with Jesse on Thursday. As Jesse hangs up, he realizes "he didn't feel a thing for her; he just wanted to sleep with a white woman again" (69). At the same time Kriss reflects, "Hungry niggers!" then, amending, "Hungry for some you-know-what" (71). The nature of their relationship is decidedly sexual--an attraction that Himes believes finds origin in the fact that,

the white male both places the white woman on a pedestal and victimizes her. Just the way the black male is victimized. This makes them natural allies. Their mutual attraction derives, in part, from a subconscious wish to break taboos. ("Chester Himes Direct" Fabre 134)

While the taboos and stereotypes which create Kriss and Jesse certainly lead to a lack of agency for the two characters, Himes, as author, gains agency through, as Judith Butler explains, an "assumption of power *unintended* by power. . . . that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible" (The Psychic Life of Power 15). Regardless of Himes's belief or disbelief in the "truth" of the stereotypes which inform the black man-white woman contact zone, he attacks these stereotypes, these rhetorical constructions meant to maintain a specific power relation, through the satiric re-creation of these same stereotypes. In keeping with Butler's theory of subjection, Himes's reiteration of these stereotypes is not "merely mechanical;" instead, Himes shows the stereotypes which define sexual relationships between black men and white to

be not only “active and productive” (16), but also insipid and suppressive.

Kriss learns early on the complicated power dynamics of being sexually involved with a black man. Kriss’s college boyfriend, Ronny, is consistently indifferent to her, so she begins dating a black man and she spends a weekend with him in New York. When Ronny learns of the affair, he calls her a “nigger lover” in one breath and asks her to marry him in the next. Himes writes of Kriss, “she hadn’t understood at that time those subtleties of white supremacy that inspired this native white supremacist to seek her hand in marriage who had bedded with a black, whereas before this incident (which she recalled as being scarcely more exciting than a conducted YWCA tour) he hadn’t paid much heed to her” (109). After a disastrous sexual relationship with Ronny, Kriss begins to take more black men to bed because “with them she never felt ruined; they never thought of her as ruined. They were ruined by being born black, ruined in the eyes of her race, and they kept laughing at the idiocy of a race that ruined their own women and threw them in bed with men of another race they’d similarly ruined” (113). By sleeping with a black man, Kriss knowingly gives up her identity as the “moral” white woman described years ago by the Southern courts. In giving up this identity, Kriss also gives up a certain amount of power; she is inferior not only to white men but to “moral” white women as well. However, in interacting sexually with a black man, she inscribes herself within a new power dynamic—a relation of power in which she is not inferior, but from her point of view, superior. Kriss attempts to affirm this supposed power over Jesse by ordering him about like a servant and commenting, “if we still owned slaves I’d pay a year’s wages for you” (165).

Jesse, on the other hand, struggles with both an editor who suggests he try writing a black success novel and with the failure of his marriage. Although Jesse feels emasculated by his failed marriage to a black woman, he still recognizes that within a white society, as Himes puts it, "the size of a black's dick is his only status symbol" (My Life of Absurdity 45). While this status symbol does little to provide Jesse job security and advancement, tolerable living conditions, and basic respect, in the case of The Primitive, this status symbol does get Jesse an invitation to dinner with Kriss.

Over the course of the weekend Kriss and Jesse stay drunk. On Sunday morning, after waking on the couch, Jesse reminds himself, "You've been with this bitch two whole nights and still haven't scored" (166). Yet the entire dialogue between Kriss and Jesse is filled with blatant sexual references, and even though the two have not had sex, Jesse tells Kriss over breakfast, "I like to think of myself as a nigger when I'm fucking you" (168). Jesse's comment succinctly defines the terms of their relationship as Jesse acknowledges his role as the "primitive," "hungry nigger" Kriss is expecting. For Kriss and Jesse these sexual stereotypes structure their relationship and make them understandable to each other. As long as Kriss and Jesse refuse to resist or even recognize these stereotypes, they need not know each other as human beings. Instead, the limitations of these stereotypes for both Kriss and Jesse are oddly reassuring.

Later, when Kriss asks Harold, a black friend who is visiting, to take her home with him, she apparently upsets the delicate power system within which Jesse and Kriss operate. Jesse reaches for a knife, but Harold advises, "Don't cut her, man, don't cut her. . . . Hit her with your fist but don't cut her" (191)—advice which Jesse promptly follows.

Kriss gets up off the floor and marches to her room, telling Jesse, "I'll never let you sleep with me again as long as I live" (192)—the ultimate threat. The next morning Jesse watches as a news-casting chimpanzee, a literal incarnation of the signifyin(g) monkey which mirrors Kriss and Jesse's stereotyped construction, announces that Jesse Robinson "will be tried for the first-degree murder of Mrs. Kristina Cummings" (199)⁷. The prosecution, the chimp continues,

will establish that, following a previous quarrel, during which he knocked her down with his fist, he entered her bedroom armed with a kitchen knife, stabbed her through the heart while she lay in bed, after which he washed the body clean of blood, changed the bedding, and arranged the body in the fresh bed. (199)

Jesse listens in disbelief as the chimp adds that what makes the case unusual is "there will be no evidence of rape" (200). Finally understanding the reason Kriss will not wake up, Jesse calls the cops, and tells them, "I'm a nigger and I've just killed a white woman" (207).

For a relationship and a novel based so completely on sexual stereotypes of black men and white women, there is no other possible conclusion to Jesse and Kriss's relationship than a violent act. As the chimp points out, the only real surprise is that Jesse didn't rape Kriss first. Himes plays out a rather grim parody of the story literature and society has traditionally scripted for a black man and a white woman engaged in a sexual relationship. Sexuality, as Foucault makes clear, is a "dense transfer point for relations of power," and while sexuality is not "the most intractable element in power relations," it is

"one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality" (103). In The Primitive, Himes demonstrates the pivotal role sexuality plays in shaping Kriss and Jesse's relationship and in creating a specific relation of power. However, Himes is more interested in demonstrating how a larger system of power—white society—encircles Kriss and Jesse's relationship and deploys a sexuality based on stereotypes. In exaggerating this deployed sexuality, Himes attacks a larger system of power. The fact that Kriss's death is told passively from a third person perspective which distances both Jesse and the reader from the act, along with the fact that Kriss and Jesse never do manage to have sex, reinforces the role which sexuality plays as a discourse. It might seem, therefore, that Himes too plays into the literary cycle of a sexuality between black men and white women which continuously reaffirms the sexual stereotypes of each. However, what Himes manages to create in The Primitive is a satiric narrative which comments directly on this recycled discourse.

As sexual beasts, Kriss and Jesse fail miserably. After all, what self-respecting black man needs a special breakfast to ensure sexual potency? The closest Jesse and Kriss actually come to having sex is a prolonged tickle session. Although Kriss and Jesse may have once had a sexual relationship complete with intercourse by firelight on a bearskin rug, Jesse, who is once again drunk, cannot remember it. Kriss and Jesse come together as lonely, unhappy individuals. Kriss appears to Jesse as "an assured, humorless, slightly dull woman wrapped in an impregnable respectability" (73); Jesse seems "dead" (74). That these two people should embody the exotic, furtive, primitive nature of a shared sexuality between black men and white women signals Himes's attack on the

prevalent discourse on sexuality within this contact zone. And, it is this irony, this kernel of humor that Himes offers up as a form of resistance. In keeping with Foucault's definition, this resistance "is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95) making it necessary for Himes to attack the historical and juridical concepts of black male and white female sexuality from within.

VIII. Pinktoes: An Exercise in Interracial Relations

For Chester Himes, a small kernel of humor eventually expanded into what he terms "absurdity." Himes writes,

Sometime before, I didn't know when, my mind had rejected all reality as I had known it and I had begun to see the world as a cesspool of buffoonery. Even the violence was funny. A man gets his throat cut. He shakes his head to say you missed me and it falls off. Damn reality, I thought. All of reality was absurd, contradictory, violent, and hurting. It was funny really. If I could just get the handle to joke. And I got the handle, by some miracle. (My Life of Absurdity 126)

This ability to joke manifests itself most prominently in Himes's detective fiction, which is now widely accepted as representing "a bolder kind of racial protest" than Himes's early work (Hochkeppel, "Conversation with Chester Himes, the American Crime Writer" 27). However, in Pinktoes (1965), which he wrote at the same time he was publishing his detective novels, Himes freely applies absurdity to the sexual relationships between his black men and white women characters. Himes, who refers to Pinktoes as "an exercise in good will" (My Life of Absurdity 101), remarks "while I wrote it, it

became funny. It became ridiculous, and the serious things I wanted to write about, I began to see in an absurd light" ("Interview with Michel Fabre" 88).

Pinktoes refers to "a term of indulgent affection applied to white women by Negro men, and sometimes conversely by Negro women to white women, but never adversely by either" (7). The novel tells of Mamie Mason, a black woman, who seeks to solve the "Negro Problem" through interracial sex. Joe Mason, Mamie's black husband, is a "consultant on interracial relations for the national committee of a major political party" (64), which is why Mamie claims she throws so many parties: "where could one consult better on interracial relations than at interracial parties where interracial relations became even more related?" (64). Mamie, meanwhile, is having an affair with two prominent white men: Dr. Kissock, chairman of the Southern Committee for the Preservation of Justice, who likes having Mamie whip him while he squeals, "Oh! Oh! The poor Negro!" (209); and, Dr. Stone, "president emeritus and chairman of the board of that famous Negro college in the Deep South" (210), who enjoys whipping Mamie while he screams, "Oh! Oh! I hate the Negro" (211).

While Mamie assumes her hostess duties, her guests interrelate. One white woman explains that her husband beats her because she helps out with the "Negro Problem." The man she confesses this to comments,

"Ah yes, I see. He doesn't want you to give your time and money to our organization."

"It isn't that, my time and money, that is."

"Oh, he resents your giving, er, ah--" He looked suddenly

enlightened. "Is *that* what you give?"

"Think of all the oppressed Negroes," she said. (80)

Across town, Kathy, Joe's white secretary with whom he is having an affair, explains, "colored men are so easily humiliated. They keep trying and trying to satisfy their fine white women and don't nothing happen. The ladies keep wanting more and more and when colored men get worn out they get evil and want to take it out on the Negro Problem" (121). When it is revealed that the famous black writer, Wallace Wright, has been having an affair with a white woman, a campaign is launched to affirm race pride. Organizations that boast "Be Happy That You Are Nappy" announce "Eve was black. If not pure black, at least she was dusky. If she wasn't dusky, why did the Lord name her Eve, which everyone knows is dusk?" (138).

In The History of Sexuality Foucault argues, "if sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, than the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (6). Pinktoes clearly and deliberately transgresses the sexual prohibitions meant to inhibit a shared sexuality between black men and white women in order to reveal that the "truth" which we feel our sexuality conceals is really only the truth of our absurdity. Pinktoes, which is loaded with sexual puns and jokes, seems silly, over the top. The humor in Pinktoes appears sophomoric rather than subversive, which leads, in some respects, to the loss of an academic acceptance of the novel as a political work. Yet, a quick dismissal of Pinktoes because of its seemingly non-serious content reflects what Foucault refers to as "the reverential fear with which we surround sex and sexuality"(156). Accepting Pinktoes as

"literature" requires an acceptance of the absurdities that govern discourses on sex and race. At the same time, however, Himes does not imply that these absurdities are essentially "silly"; rather they have the power to subjugate people at the level of race and sexuality. Himes brings these absurdities to the surface not in an attempt to exorcise them. Instead Himes offers a surface level humor which parallels the surface on which these absurdities lie within our most serious discourses.

Of Faulkner's Light in August, Himes remarks, "its shows the absurdity of racism, and the confusion and suffering it causes" (Fabre, "Chester Himes Direct" 138). The "absurdity" of Light In August, however, lacks both the genuine humor of Pinktoes as well as the irony of The Primitive. In novels like Native Son, To Kill a Mockingbird, and Light in August a sense of helplessness and despair rather than a sense of resistance and optimism dominates the texts. Certainly in novels dealing seriously with interracial relationships, one does not expect a "sunset" ending. Himes, however, diverges from his predecessors by demonstrating not only the absurdity of racism, but also the rhetorical tools and strategies for combating the racism which contains him and his characters. Rather than comment on the discourses which inform sexual relationships between black men and white women, Himes shakes up these discourses through a hyperbolic actualization of the sexual stereotypes and absurdities which drive this contact zone. In so doing, Himes appropriates the discourses meant to subjugate him as tools of resistance.

IX. Dany Laferrière: An American Autobiography

One year after Chester Himes's death in 1984, and fifty four years after Himes pounded out his first short story on his new Remington 22, Himes's typewriter resurfaced

under the capable hands of Haitian writer Dany Laferrière. The novel in which Himes's Remington 22 appears, How to Make Love to a Negro, marks the first of a collection of ten "chapters" which together make up Laferrière's An American Autobiography. The "chapters," which have not been published or written in chronological order, trace Laferrière's life in Haiti to his exile to Montreal to his return to Haiti. Beginning with An Aroma of Coffee (1993), the first five "chapters" detail the five sensory ways in which we come to know the world. The second part, which Laferrière calls a "collage of colors"—red and black, white and black, yellow and black, and finally black and black—consists of four "chapters" beginning with A Drifting Year (1994)—a poetic chronicle of Laferrière's first year in Montreal (author's interview).⁸ At the end of A Drifting Year, the narrator, who is almost Laferrière, thereby "giving students of authorial intention a giant headache" (Homel 8), quits his job tanning cowhides in a Montreal factory.

Laferrière writes,

I went to see the boss,
after lunch,
on impulse,
and told him
I was quitting right now
to become a writer. (118)

In How to Make Love to a Negro, which biographically follows A Drifting Year, this same narrator finds himself living with his friend Bouba, who spends all day reading Freud or the Koran, in a "meager pigsty" and writing his novel which is going to put

"James Baldwin out to pasture" (71). And the narrator, who writes his novel on "A Remington 22 That Belonged to Chester Himes" (45), hammers out an epilogue of sorts to Himes's Pinktoes and The Primitive.

Of course more than a typewriter connects Laferrière and Himes as writers. Laferrière, who considers Himes to be a man of "more real despair and genuine humor than Baldwin or Wright" (letter from author), continues the exploration of a contact zone to which Himes first gave an active literary voice. Laferrière tackles the second section of An American Autobiography, in which he is largely concerned with issues of race and sexuality, with a humor as bawdy and "in your face" as Himes's use of absurdity—humor which Laferrière learned in part from Himes's novels The Primitive and Blind Man with a Pistol (1969). For both writers, humor is a way of accessing and exposing the stereotypes and other absurdities that construct and continue to inform the sexual contact zone between black men and white women.

There are striking differences between Himes and Laferrière. While both men consider themselves exiles, their senses of homeland and nationality are vastly different. Himes spent much of his life searching for a place he could consider his home—a place he never found. Laferrière, who divides his time between Montreal and Miami and has only recently been able to return to Haiti, considers himself an "American." While Himes looked for a place to fit into the world, Laferrière constructed the world around himself, refusing to identify himself with Western labels like "Caribbean" which he considers a subjugating Western term. Because Haiti was the second free country in America, Laferrière argues, "we have had time to discuss this [issues of "post-colonial identity"]

for a hundred years”(author’s interview). Laferrière incorporates this rebellion and global sense of himself into his writing thereby, extending Himes’s attack on the systems of power which govern relations between black men and white women to issues of imperialism and cultural constructs.

Although Himes never received much critical attention in his lifetime, Laferrière achieved overnight international success with How to Make Love to a Negro, which was quickly made into a movie.⁹ Of the title, which in its full translation reads How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired, Laferrière writes, "the title of my first book made me famous. People who never read the book, especially those who had no intention of reading it, can quote the title. It took me five minutes to come up with the title. Three years to write the book. If only I'd known. . . ." (Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex 17). If only Himes had known, he might have saved himself from a lifetime of frustration.

X. From Haiti to Montreal: Entering the Discourse, Discovering a Contact Zone

Complicating the issues of race and sexuality within the contact zone is Laferrière’s position as a Haitian who, until he was exiled to Montreal, never knew he was a "black" man. Laferrière writes,

I knew
because I’d read about it.
Seen it in the movies.
But it’s different in
real life.

I'm black
 and everyone else
 is white.

Imagine the shock! (A Drifting Year 13)

Laferrière's exile to Montreal marks his entrance into an overarching contact zone—a system of power and a discourse on sexuality of which Laferrière has conscious but not practical knowledge. With him Laferrière takes the complex literary and political history of North American, particularly US, relations with Haiti—a history which allows Laferrière a freedom and a perspective with which to attack the discourses which Chester Himes necessarily attacked from within.¹⁰

XI. Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex?

As Derek Walcott, George Lamming, and even Himes explains, writing while in exile complicates any discourse.¹¹ Exile often leads to a sense of disembodiment and a loss or at least confusion of identity. "A dismembered body," Dash writes, "finds expression in a dismembered discourse" (133). Sexuality and race are certainly two discourses that work to dismember, to break down, and subjugate the individual body. Perhaps this is why sexuality and the sexual relations between black men and white women is such an important issue for Laferrière, for within this contact zone the two discourses meet. In Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex, Laferrière tackles the question directly:

I'm just analyzing the clichés about sexuality. Interracial sexuality is a good subject, and I happen to be looking for that kind. At first, I wanted to destroy those clichés--how naive of me! It didn't take

me long to come to a conclusion that literally terrified me: most of the clichés about sex between black men and white women are true. The whole story is true. At first I was frightened, then I gathered my wits and started to communicate the results of my inquiry to my readers. I'm a writer, a reporter of human relations.

(74)

Sexuality for Laferrière is part of the business of being black. As long as black men in America continue to be exoticized and seen as having special sexual powers, and as long as Western society continues its obsession with sex and sexuality, a black writer, Laferrière argues, must always write about sex. Though sexuality is caught up with each individual's identity, for a black male the stakes are raised. While Foucault contends that "it is through sex" that "each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility, to the whole of his body, to his identity," the black male must go "through sex" in order to determine not *his* sexual identity, but rather the sexual identity which has been ascribed to him. Eventually, the black male must question the myth of his supposed sexual prowess.

The narrator in How to Make Love to a Negro predicts that his reign as Black Stud is coming to an end. "Fucking black was fucking exotic," Laferrière writes, but it's probably Japan's turn now, "make way for the Yellows" (27). Keeping this fact in mind, the narrator is careful not to take his white girlfriend, a McGill coed who Bouba names Miz Literature, too much for granted. But he is constantly amazed at her gullibility. Laferrière writes,

I can tell her the most outlandish stories and she'll nod her head and stare with those believing eyes. She'll be moved. I can tell her I consume human flesh, that somewhere in my genetic code the desire to eat white flesh is inscribed, that my nights are haunted by her breasts, her hips, her thighs, I swear it, I can tell her all that and she'll understand. She'll believe me. (26)

Miz Literature represents a new breed of white woman. She is not trying to wield her power within the force field as Kriss or Madge do. Instead Miz Literature is a guilty white woman trying diligently to recant for the sins of a white society and willing, therefore, to believe anything a black man says lest she sound naive or judgmental. As a writer, Laferrière constantly searches for the line which the reader—or even Miz Literature—will not cross. "If I say it is okay to rape a woman, have I gone too far?" Laferrière asks (author's interview).

How to Make Love to a Negro constantly dances around this line as the narrator contemplates why black men when lynched were generally castrated as well. Laferrière writes,

Why castrated? I'll never stop wondering about that. Why castrated? Can you tell me? Of course no one wants to get involved in a question like that. I'd love to know, I'd like to be one hundred percent sure whether the myth of the animalistic, primitive, barbarous black who thinks only of fucking is true or not. (39)

Of course a perceived sexual truth can be just as much an illusion as a sexual myth. Truth remains a construction based on what people, as a society and as individuals, deem to be actual. For this reason, the myth of black sexual prowess is eventually determined through a system of power relations. The narrator concludes,

Because in the scale of Western values, white woman is inferior to white man, but superior to black man. That's why she can't get off except with a Negro. It's obvious why: she can go as far as she wants with him. The only true sexual relation is between unequals.

White women must give white men pleasure, as black men must for white women. Hence the myth of the Black stud. (38)

At the same time, Laferrière contends that being able to take pleasure from a sexual relationship is critical to the construction of the "Black stud." A sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman is still a type of transgression, and transgressions, Foucault argues, appear liberating. To oppose or act in opposition to a white system of power that has historically declared the sexualities of black men and white women as primitive and hysterical, respectively, constitutes an act of defiance. While the two necessarily enter, as Foucault suggests, into another system of power, their sense of transgression leaves at least the white woman, Laferrière argues, more free to take her pleasure.

Yet all this discourse on sex which takes itself so seriously seems to be exactly what Laferrière mocks. As Foucault anticipates possible objections to The History of Sexuality, he writes "people are going to say that I am dealing in a historicism which is

more careless than radical; that I am evading the biologically established existence of sexual functions for the benefit of phenomena that are variable, perhaps, but fragile, secondary, and ultimately superficial: and that I speak of sexuality as if sex did not exist" (151). While Foucault goes on to argue that sex is a construction of sexuality, Laferrière tackles the issue by inscribing a sexual act within his ruminations on sexuality. While Miz Literature gives the narrator "some kind of blow job," the narrator thinks of "the faraway village where I was born. Of all those blacks who traveled to a white man's land in search of riches and came back empty-handed" (38). His thoughts continue to drift until "without warning I sent a strong stream of come in Miz Literature's face. She throws her head back and I catch a strange glow in her eyes. She dives down for my penis like a piranha. She sucks. I get hard. She gets on top. This isn't one of those innocent, naive, vegetarian fucks she's used to" (39).

In this scene Laferrière both concedes sexuality to be a discourse, an historical construction as Foucault explains, but he also emphasizes sex as an act. If sex is, as Foucault concludes, merely an "imaginary element" (156), and the desire for sex an effect of sexuality, then the same myths that govern black sexuality govern the sex act as well. Similarly the "truth" of the sex act becomes unimportant; what matters instead is our physical and emotional response to these acts. Laferrière exposes the many layers of this discursive sexuality by (1) describing a "blow job", an act often considered degrading (2) escalating the sense of degradation by having the narrator come in Miz Literature's face (3) presenting Miz Literature as animal-like with a "glow" in her eyes as she "dives" like a "piranha" for the narrator's penis and (4) having the narrator assume Miz Literature is

“naïve” and “innocent”—fundamentally different sexually from himself. Laferrière, here, demonstrates a keen understanding of sexuality as a discourse, and for this reason he is able to casually offend the reader by wantonly displaying the tropes and fears that the deployment of sexuality is meant to conceal. At the same time, Laferrière shows the narrator to be equally capable of subscribing to sexual stereotypes of white women.

Laferrière, however, refuses to regard sex as an act of pleasure grounded solely in the mind, a fact which suggests the ways in which both a black man’s body and a white woman’s body have been made a part of consciousness in ways different from a white man’s body. As Fanon writes,

there are times when the black man is locked into his body. Now, for a being who has acquired consciousness of himself and of his body, who has attained to the dialectic of subject and object, the body is no longer a cause of the structure of consciousness, it has become an object of consciousness. (225)

Every black male who lives in a white society understands, to a varying degree, his body to be historically exploited and sexually fetishized. For this reason, he has a clearer sense of what governs the relationship between bodies and the sexual act, and he understands that his sexuality is directly linked to his actual body. Therefore, a black male is less likely to draw clear distinctions between the sex act, sexual pleasure, and sexuality.

Laferrière directly addresses the issue of sexuality and identity as his narrator has sex with Miz Sophisticated Lady. In perhaps a direct mockery of the notion espoused by Foucault that in Western society it is through the sexual act that we find answers to the

question of our identity, Laferrière writes,

I want to fuck her subconscious. A delicate task that requires infinite control. Think about it: fucking the subconscious of a Westmount girl! I catch a glimpse of my oiled thighs (coconut oil) against the white body. I take her white breasts firmly in my hands. The light down on her marble body. I want to fuck her identity. (61)

“There’s no sexuality without fantasy,” the narrator concludes as Miz Sophisticated Lady’s vagina cries, “Yeeeeees!”(61). Laferrière, in a reversal representative of Haitian literature, turns the table on white society by exoticizing the white woman placing both her body and the sexual stereotypes ascribed to black men on display. She is a Westmount girl. Fantasy, Laferrière explains, and construction of the exotic Other can go both ways. Or, as Laferrière states simply, “we are not exotic to ourselves” (author’s interview). Additionally, Laferrière demonstrates throughout his novels that, as Chester Himes foresaw, any description of a black man and a white woman having sex is “unavoidably pornographic.”

In both Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex and the concluding chapters of How to Make Love to a Negro, Laferrière anticipates the political and literary criticism his treatment of this contact zone will generate. In a supposed interview during the final chapter of How to Make Love to a Negro, the narrator comments,

When people reveal their fantasies, you’ll usually find something for everyone—or against everyone. Let me point out that for all intents and

purposes there are no women in my novel. There are just types. Black men and white women. On the human level, the black man and the white woman do not exist. Chester Himes said they were American inventions, like the hamburger or the drive in. (111)

XI. Conclusion

In an interview with John Williams in 1970, Chester Himes comments, “many books I read now by black writers would not have been published fifteen years ago under any circumstances” (68). When, How to Make Love to a Negro was released in 1985, however, “nobody believed it was written by a black man. They said, Whoever wrote it writes *almost* like a black. Everyone was so sure it was written by a white. A black couldn’t write like *that*, they said” (Laferrière qtd. in Homel 7). Though Laferrière encountered none of the obstacles of publication with which Himes was plagued, the acceptance of black male writers dealing with topics such as sexual relationships with white women remains hesitant.

Perhaps voices like Eldridge Cleaver, a self-proclaimed rapist, remembered most for shocking statements such as, “it was of paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women” (Soul on Ice 31), helped create such hesitation. Cleaver’s attack on white women represents a general rhetorical and political move against an alliance between black men and white women. Although both groups are historically subjugated and stereotyped sexually, black writers, including Himes and Laferrière, use the white woman as a means to attack white men and discourses on black sexuality. Like Jackie in Himes’s Lonely Crusade, white women are under rhetorical

attack by black men, but unwilling to “cry rape.” How to Make Love to a Negro, for example, was published during the height of feminist thought in Montreal, but of the novel feminists said nothing (author’s interview). Laferrière explains this absence of a feminist voice in Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex. He writes, “I’m saying that a black writer can get away with expressing his most violent fantasies about white women without creating too large a scandal because the white woman is higher than the black man on the Judeo-Christian social scale” (98). In keeping with Laferrière’s scheme of power, the white man, the apex of the Judeo-Christian social scale, cannot defend a white woman nor can he attack a black writer without reinforcing the system of power which subjugates and stereotypes black men and white women. These factors combined lead to a literary and theoretical silence about sexual relationships between black men and white women.

“There is not one but many silences,” Foucault writes in the History of Sexuality, and these silences,

the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. (27)

In other words, silences are not passive constructions; they are not benign. Instead, silences, much like stereotypes, are symptoms, deployments of a larger discourse designed, ultimately, to subjugate individuals.

The sexual relationships between black men and white women which Chester Himes and Dany Laferrière depict mark the constant shaping and re-shaping of a sexual discourse informed by black men. The metamorphosis from Madge Perkins to Miz Literature chronicles an ever changing “history of sexuality.” Through their use of humor, Himes and Laferrière make the topic of sexual relationships between black men and white women accessible and attempt to fill the silence this contact zone generates with laughter. Laferrière and Himes point to the absurdity of the system of power which “invented” the black man and the white woman, and they offer themselves up, put their imposed sexuality on display, in order to attack the current discourse.

Tom Robinson’s death due to the false accusation of rape leveled by Mayella Ewell in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird is “often thought of as timeless to the American South” (Hodes 39). On the one hand, Mayella is primarily responsible for Tom’s death; on the other hand, she is the victim of an abusive father and an ideology that claims consensual sex between a black man and a white woman to be unimaginable. Determining Mayella’s guilt, her culpability in Tom’s death, necessitates not only an evaluation of her agency within the novel, but of all white women in the emancipated South. Was Mayella’s accusation meant to exploit a system of power in which she was superior, or was her accusation a means of self-preservation? Can Mayella be held accountable not only for the guilty verdict handed down by the court, but also for the “unlawful” lynching of Tom? Had Mayella been a character rather than a representation of the poor, white Southern woman, and if we had been allowed inside Mayella’s head, Harper Lee might have created a forum to discuss these larger issues.

Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird, published seven years before the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling "that laws prohibiting marriage between people of different races were unconstitutional," is representative of white women writers' reluctance to discuss and examine this sexual contact zone (Hodes 1). In maintaining their silence, white women invite both black men and white men to dictate their sexuality. The feminists of Montreal should feel free to criticize Laferrière's Miz Literature and Miz Sophisticated Lady. At the same time, white women should allow themselves fallibility, an acknowledgment of the discourses, the sexual stereotypes, which, consciously and unconsciously, shape their views on not only black sexuality, but also their own sexuality.

¹ Laferrière's father was also exiled. Laferrière jokes, "father and son dictators, father and son exiles" (author's interview).

² Himes goes on to say, "it took me forty years to discover that such a place does not exist" (Quality of Hurt 48).

³ Sex, Foucault explains, is not the root of sexuality or of our discourses on sexuality. Instead, sex is "an ideal point made necessary by the deployment of sexuality and its operations" (155). Sex, Foucault argues, is more than a physical act; it is a symbolic act. Foucault concludes that sex is "historically subordinate to sexuality" (157).

⁴ For a critical reappraisal of Himes's treatment of Jews in Lonely Crusade see Steven J. Rosen's "African-American anti-Semitism and Himes's Lonely Crusade" 47-65.

⁵ The End of a Primitive was Himes's original title of the text; however, the novel, which was heavily edited, appeared as The Primitive. In 1997 Old School Books released the unedited version of the novel with the original title. Though I cite the recent edition of the text, for purposes of consistency and clarity, I have chosen to refer to the novel as The Primitive.

⁶ Himes had a number of extended affairs with white women and eventually married a white woman, Leslie Packard. The Primitive, Himes explains in The Quality of Hurt, is largely the story of an affair he had with a white woman named Vandi Haygood.

⁷ In Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s article, "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," Gates defines the Signifying Monkey as (1) the ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike and (2) he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language—our trope for repetition and revision . . . repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft act" (286). The ape in The Primitive certainly suggests the first part of Gates's definition, while the ape's newscast and indeed Himes's parodic use of

stereotypes suggests an ironic reversal of the dominant discourse typical of the Signifying Monkey.

⁸ On May 10, 1998, I was fortunate enough to interview Laferrière at his home in Miami and ask him questions which related directly to my thesis and Chester Himes. I arrived on the day of his youngest daughter's communion. His wife served coffee.

⁹ In an interview with Michel Fabre, Himes remarks, "I suspect that 99% of all Americans have never heard of me, and never will" ("Interview with Chester Himes" 86). Himes may have overestimated.

¹⁰ As J. Michael Dash points out in his study Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination, both countries "gained their independence through a protracted war against Europe" and in "1799 over 1,000 Haitian soldiers went to fight for the Americans during the revolution" (5). Yet when Haiti achieved independence in 1804, the US, terrified of a slave revolt similar to the one in Haiti, was loathe to offer any support and, in fact, did not recognize Haiti until 1862--after the South's succession. Frederick Douglas, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln all favored black migration to Haiti, but, after the Civil War, despite a "sentimental identification with the Haitian cause," these leaders "began to see their racial identity as separate from Haiti's" (19). The US's intervention in Haiti in 1915, considered the "only way of curbing Haiti's barbarous instincts," marked the first wave of US imperialism in Haiti (23). And along with intervention came the customary denigrations, stereotypes, and projections that accompany imperialism.

With the end of the US occupation in 1934 and the rise of the US-friendly Lescot presidency, US-Haitian relations became cordial. As Dash writes, "it is a 'Sameness' and not an 'Otherness' that determines the new discourse" (79) and "for about two decades a new discourse held at bay images of primeval menace that prevailed previously" (85). However, as the political tides in Haiti changed and Francois Duvalier came to power, the discourse and rhetorical representations of the two countries again slipped into stereotypes. Duvalierism, Dash writes, "would mean a revival of an earlier discourse that marginalized Haiti and once more fixed Haitian-American relations in terms of moral contempt and cultural incompatibility" (100). Haitian novelists fought back with negative images of the American imperialist. Duvalier, however, had an even more tangible effect on Haitian writing as many writers, like Laferrière, were forced to flee Haiti or risk death.

¹¹Lamming discusses his life in exile extensively in his non-fiction work, The Pleasures of Exile. Walcott addresses the issue in his epic poem, Omeros.

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