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THE SHORT STORY AND THE POPULAR IMAGINATION: PULP AND CRIME

Will Norman

Pulp stories are named for the type of paper upon which they were printed: cheap, crudely refined wood pulp, intended to be read quickly and discarded. This way of producing magazines had been developed in the late-nineteenth century, when the publisher Frank Munsey began to print his all-fiction title *Argosy* on pulpwood paper (Heffner 2017, 434). The era between the two World Wars, however, saw a marked rise in the number of all-fiction pulp magazine titles being published, and in their general readership, making them one of the dominant print forms in which fiction was consumed in the period. Though circulation figures for individual pulp magazine titles were in the thousands rather than the millions, when we consider pulp magazines as a collective phenomenon the numbers were considerable. One conservative estimate holds that in 1935 pulp magazine circulation ran to approximately 10 million, and readership 30 million (Earle 2009, 77). The stories they contained ranged from blood-and-thunder westerns to schmaltzy romances, and from exotic adventure yarns to tales of sporting heroism. For all its popularity, however, the pulp story in its heyday of the 1920s and 30s occupied a doubly subordinate position in the American literary field. On the one hand, its relative brevity sat in negative contrast to longer, more prestigious prose forms such as the novel. On the other, its obedience to sets of mass-genre conventions marked it off from "literature" as such. The subordinate status afforded to these formal qualities was compounded by the pulps' disposable materiality. Publicly, the American middle classes and the mainstream literary establishment understood the magazines as sub-literary trash (even while a substantial proportion of those classes also likely bought

and read them with great interest). In *Vanity Fair* magazine, Marcus Duffield pronounced the pulps literature "for those who move their lips when they read" (Smith 2000, 18). In *Harper's*, meanwhile, Margaret McCullen worried that "the steady reader of this kind of fiction is interested in and stirred by the same things that would interest and stir a savage" (Earle 2009, 88).

In the interwar period, a number of pulp magazine titles began to specialize in crime fiction, a likely indication of its perceived popularity. Titles such as *Detective Stories*, *Dime Detective*, and, most well-known, *The Black Mask*, catered exclusively for readers of crime stories. The stories they contained evolved out of the dime detective tradition of the nineteenth-century, and gradually established their own cultural codes made of up literary styles, plot types and stock characters (Bedore, 2013). Among these stories, those labelled "hard-boiled" attained a particular prominence and durability. They featured disenchanted, tough detectives and beautiful but duplicitous women, and were set in the corrupt, violent city, using a stylized street-vernacular language (McCann 2000). In the 1940s, pulp magazine titles gradually fell in number and circulation, their fragile economies of production overtaken by the new priorities established by the war economy and by technological developments in television and paperback publishing (Smith 2000, 167). In its strictly-defined material sense, the era of the pulps was over. However, the term *pulp* outlived the interwar period and the particular mode of production associated with the pulp magazine industry. After World War Two, the term *pulp fiction* described the sensationalist stories found in cheap paperbacks as well as in the new generation of all-fiction magazines. Pulp fiction came in a great variety of forms but it took common inspiration from the lurid contents, the underworld milieus and melodramatic styles found in the original pulp magazines, driving them to new extremes (Haut 1995).

Despite the prurient and patronizing criticism levelled at the pulps and their readers, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century it is clear that the pulp crime story had an enormous impact on the literary field that outlasted the interwar historical window in which it emerged. In taking into account the interrelation of the multiple affordances it presented at the level of its material, political and aesthetic forms, we are able to bring into clearer view its historical distinctiveness and evolution. We will consider how the forms of organization taken by pulp labor related to the literary forms found in the stories, examining how the principles of fungibility and economy, recognizable from the industrial factory system of mass-production, were accommodated or challenged by two key crime writers: Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. We will examine how the rhythms of pulp labor intersected with the stories' formal composition. Finally, will discuss the interpellation of a white, male, working-class readership by interwar pulp crime fiction, and the way its ideological valences were reconfigured in the post-war period by writers such as Patricia Highsmith and Chester Himes.

FUNGBILITY, LABOR AND RHYTHM

In one sense, even to speak of individual authors of interwar pulp stories is misleading, given the way the industry organized its labor. Fungibility was a key principle operating across both the purchase of stories by magazines and the construction of the stories themselves. The use of pseudonyms was widespread, making it difficult for scholars to identify the authorship of some stories with confidence. Several writers often worked anonymously under a single house brand, tasked with maintaining commercially successful narrative formulas and styles. For the most part, name-recognition counted for little and writers performed their labor under conditions in some ways comparable to those of the

industrial proletariat of the period. They were paid by the word, meaning that their labor accrued value according to its quantity rather than its quality. The use of the house brand system meant that individual writers became fungible: authors exhausted or disaffected by their work could simply be replaced by new ones able to continue under the same name. The work was highly routinized, in many cases simply stitched together from pre-fabricated, standardized parts that could be adjusted and reordered as necessary: a basic seduction scene here, a gun-fight there, and an escape scene to conclude. Such parts could be reused with minor variations many times over, and not only in the same magazine or even genre. With a change of milieu, the same gun scene might work equally as well in a western as in a detective story. The seduction scene might do as nicely in a romance story as in a colonial adventure.

Though several pulp writers and contemporary scholars have emphasized the factory-like conditions of pulp labor, the comparison is in some ways a superficial one (Smith 2000, 21-3; Stanfield 2011, 46-7). Pulp writers, however they signaled identification with an imagined proletarian readership, were more likely to come from educated, white-collar backgrounds. This class difference meant that they were often required to perform what Erin Smith calls "class ventriloquism" if they wanted to appeal to a working-class readership, adopting and adapting the vernacular language of the streets and projecting its world-view (Smith 2000, 11). The tension between intellectual and physical work can be discovered in pulp detective stories themselves, where the detective figure must combine elements of physical prowess in his fight against criminality with astute mental powers in following clues and interpreting evidence.

Another key distinction between much working-class labor and that of pulp writers was that the latter tended to be effectively self-employed, and therefore maintained a much greater degree of autonomy over the organization of their lives, working hours and their rate

of work. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were among a relatively small number of writers at the high end of the pulp industry for whom name-recognition did count, and for them this distinction is telling. Both made their decisions to start writing for the pulps following the demise of professional careers requiring them to keep hours that got in the way of serious drinking habits. The unpredictably episodic nature of their daily lives is mirrored in the rhythms of pulp labor, which, provided the writer had access to sufficient means of subsistence, allowed for intense periods of concentrated work, punctuated by periods freed up for carousing, hangovers and other uses. Such discontinuous rhythms, it must be added, were eminently suited to the production of short fiction too, especially when it was structured by genre conventions that could reliably be taken up when needed in order to provide a framework for composition in units.

We gain a sense of the rhythms of pulp story production and the ideological tensions it produced in Hammett's letters from the 1920s, when he wrote for numerous pulp magazines but formed a particular relationship with *Black Mask*. On July 2, 1927, for example, he reported having managed 2,000 words while "Blackmasking." The word-count, he wrote, "isn't so bad, though I had hoped to knock out 5,000. However I've got tomorrow to spend on it but I know I won't be able to finish it" (Hammett 2001, 44) This tendency to measure pulp labor in words "knocked out" per day was typical, as was Hammett's writing target. In other letters, however, Hammett expressed the acute alienation he experienced as a result of participating in the pulp economy. "The trouble is," he told *Black Mask*'s editor, Phil Cody, in 1924, "this sleuth of mine has degenerated into a meal-ticket. I liked him at first and used to enjoy putting him through his tricks; but recently I've fallen into the habit of bringing him out and running him around whenever the landlord, or the butcher or the grocer, shows signs of nervousness. Some men can work like that, but I am not one of them" (26). Here, Hammett distinguishes himself from writers better suited to the instrumentalist mindset

required by a pulp career, and articulates a desire to make room for the unpredictable rhythms of imagination and inspiration: “Whenever, from now on, I get hold of a story that fits my sleuth, I shall put him to work, but I’m through with trying to run him on a schedule” (26). This dialectic between the routinized procedures of standard tasking on the one hand, and the desire for autonomy, creativity and self-direction on the other, is a feature not only of pulp labor, but also of the stories’ themes.

As Erin Smith argued in her pioneering study of hard-boiled detective fiction, the anxiety of such stories with questions of autonomy was deeply gendered and raced (Smith 2000, 77). She suggests that up to a quarter of the readership of detective pulps was made up by women, while numbers of Black, Asian and other non-white readers are harder to estimate (Smith 2000, 79). Nevertheless, as she claimed, the stories themselves interpellated their readership unambiguously as white and male. The ideology the stories produced with considerable consistency was backwards-orientated, mourning a mythical American past in which the imagined reader enjoyed uncontested social priority above women and people of color, forming “a labor aristocracy of skilled white men” (Smith 2000, 77). In the confrontation of the detective by challenges issued by duplicitous *femmes fatales* and venal minority characters, and in his transcendence of these threats, hard-boiled detective stories both enacted and demanded the restoration of such a world. The priority of white men was made explicit in the frequent deployment of misogynist and racist stereotypes (Reddy 2002), but it also underpinned the genre’s depiction of the labor of detection, and its peculiar obsession with the private eye. The P.I, as created by the genre’s best-known writers, represented a finely balanced semi-autonomy, constantly obliged to negotiate the demands placed on him by either his clients or his agency bosses in relation to his own private ethics. This conflict between the imperative to get the job done on behalf of a callous white

patriarchy and the private eye's freedom to choose his own methods became one of the genre's most durable and transmissible narrative features.

ECONOMIES OF STYLE AND FORM: RAYMOND CHANDLER

If fungibility was the first general governing principle of pulp crime fiction, the other was economy: do as much as you can with as little as possible. The valorization of disciplined economy was part of the ideology of working-class masculinity that pervaded the crime pulps and distinguished itself from the perceived feminine incontinence of the slick middle-class magazines. The example of Raymond Chandler's work is an instructive one in this regard, because of the ways in which he observed some elements of economy and refused others. "Mine was of course a losing game, on the surface," he admitted in relation to his hard-boiled pulp stories, since "it was very poor pay for the work I put into them" (Chandler 1981, 87). By his own account, his first one, "Blackmailers Don't Shoot" (1933), took him five months to write and earned him $180 (459). However uneconomical his use of labor time, though, Chandler's disposition towards genre itself prioritized economy above all else. "The thing is to squeeze the last drop out of the medium you have learned to use," he wrote to one correspondent (173).

In Tzvetan Todorov's classic formalist account of detective fiction, the genre is distinguished by the use it makes of the distinction between fabula and siuzhet (Todorov 1977). In every detective story, Todorov reminds us, there are two narratives: that of the crime and that of its detection. We follow the narrative of detection in order to be able to reconstruct the story of the crime. According to the genre's conventions, the end of the detective narrative constitutes a kind of return to the beginning, insofar as it completes for us the prior history of the crime. This structural characteristic led Franco Moretti to characterize

popular detective fiction as an instrumentalized vehicle for narrative endings in which time and money is invested by the reader simply in return for the pay-off provided by the solution (Moretti 1983). For Moretti, this instrumentalization of plot for the benefit of mystery solutions means that the short story was necessarily the essential form for the detective story, whatever its actual length, since novelistic *bildung* and social development are forbidden by genre's formula.

In the case of Chandler, as for Hammett and the other pulp crime writers from whom he learned his craft, the demands of the classic detective structure with its fabula / siuzhet distinction were combined with the requirement for the detective himself to face danger and violence in the course of his pursuit of the solution to the mystery. In this sense, the stories displayed elements from the two nineteenth-century genres they drew upon most frequently – the action-packed adventures of the dime-novel tradition and the more cerebral sleuthing of the classic detective story tradition deriving from Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin tales and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series (Bedore 2013). It is possible, indeed, to read the disorientating plots of many pulp detective stories as produced by the formula's contradictory demand for regular scenes of sensationalist violence in addition to the unfolding of those two narrative strands – the story of the crime and the story of its investigation. This combination is what offers readers of pulp detective fiction a particular aesthetic experience akin that produced by French Surrealism in the same period, with its dissonant juxtaposition of narrative units and sudden eruptions of violence.

In the work of Chandler, the observation of these strictures, and their intense compression, led to some extraordinary effects, as a brief examination of "Blackmailers Don't Shoot" illustrates. The story is constituted by a series of set-pieces, each centered around the private detective's confrontation with a different configuration of underworld characters in a specific Los Angeles location, and each containing its own explosion of

violence, whether in the form of gun-fight or beating. Whereas in Todorov's formulation, in its "purest form" crime and investigation – fabula and siuzhet – are kept entirely separate, in "Blackmailer's Don't Shoot" the two interweave simultaneously, as the investigation creates more crimes, which lead in turn to more investigation (Todorov 1977, 44). Indeed, the case of blackmail with which the plot begins looks rather insignificant in comparison to the six murders it generates, all of them witnessed by Chandler's hard-boiled private detective, Mallory. The reconstructed fabula does not account for actions occurring anterior to the investigation, but rather takes on a different function: to provide some kind of human logic to link up retrospectively the apparently arbitrary series of set-pieces the reader has just navigated. It must be said that Chandler treats the fabula component of his narrative structures with bravura disregard, offering several competing versions at different junctures and even commenting ironically on the process in self-reflexive fashion. Mallory offers one to the criminal behind the blackmail operation only to then admit "that's the tale from the outside, without notes. The notes make it funnier – and a hell of a lot dirtier" (Chandler 1995, 42). After concluding the second version "with notes," he remarks "sweet set-up, don't you think so?" His adversary replies, "A bit loose in places" (43).

The joke, as Chandler wrote in one letter, is that he was "fundamentally rather uninterested in plot" (Chandler 1981, 87). In his dream-slow gunfights, heavily stylized vernacular, his lyrical evocations of Los Angeles' dreadfully empty nightscapes, and above all his unsettling, lingering descriptions of dead and dying bodies, Chandler attempted rather to squeeze out of pulp crime the quality he called "richness of texture" (87). His aim was to precipitate affective responses in his readers, a matter of "imparting the right emotion to the right nerves." Hammett and Dorothy L. Sayers, Chandler went on, "came close" but ultimately "didn't feel it" (173). This leads us, then, to one of pulp crime's paradoxes: that the strictures of the genre's formulae afforded a certain freedom to escape its commercial

logic. So long as one could manage on $180 of earnings for five months work, and was willing to provide sufficient action as well as a solution to the mystery, one was free to experiment and develop one's personal style. To put this another way, as Chandler did in a 1949 letter: "although the average story in the *Black Mask* was not too good, there was the possibility of writing them very much better without hurting their chances of being read" (86).

Chandler admitted that he was incapable of discarding any material, preferring to jam episodes and scenarios into his stories even if "this resulted in some rather start[l]ing oddities of construction" (87). The deep strangeness and absurdity of his pulp work's serial narrative construction, and the faint echoes of the modernist avant-garde one finds in it, are due in large part to the idiosyncratic way he fulfilled the narrative demands of the genre while refusing to take them seriously. This effect is replicated in his early novels, too, only on a grander scale. In another gesture of economy, his leap from pulp stories to Alfred Knopf's prestigious crime novel series was made by recycling several of his *Black Mask* "novelettes": *The Big Sleep* (1939) interwove the plots of "Killer in the Rain" (1935) and "The Curtain" (1936). This process, which Chandler called "cannibalizing," found inventive ways to run the plots in parallel and draw them together where necessary (MacShane 1976, 67-8). *The Big Sleep* takes the *femmes fatales* from the respective pulp stories and makes them sisters. Carmen retains her first name and her involvement in a pornography racket from "Killer in the Rain," but she is also given a murder to commit. Mrs O'Mara, who appears only as a framing device in "The Curtain," becomes Carmen's sister Vivian, and her plot function expanded greatly to include a love interest with Marlowe, *The Big Sleep's* private eye. There are, then, two main mystery plots to be resolved by Marlowe in the novel: the missing person case centered on Rusty Reagan, which comes from "The Curtain" and the blackmail case centered on Geiger, which comes from "Killer in the Rain." The cannibalization process that

produced *The Big Sleep* thus creates sister plots as well as sister characters, accounting for the ramification of complexity and the difficulty with which many readers have negotiated its labyrinthine narrative structure. The two pulp stories are re-used almost in their entirety and account for approximately half of *The Big Sleep*, with some passages lifted wholesale with little revision beyond the changing of character names. The other half is made up partly of freshly-created episodes extending the detective's interactions with police and the two sisters, and partly from elaborations of imagery, description and dialogue already existing in the stories. As a result, some of the lean tautness which was sometimes fetishized in pulp crime magazines is sacrificed for augmented atmosphere, richness of imagery, and character interaction.

PULP CRIME LEGACIES: HIGHSMITH AND HIMES

By the end of World War Two the great era of pulp crime magazines as a distinctive mode of cultural production had come to an end. Their legacy, however, lived on as elements of the story forms they cultivated were grafted onto new hosts, including the next generation of mystery magazines and the cheap paperbacks produced by publishers such as Dell and Signet. The mystery plot-type, featuring the fabula/siuzhet distinction partially preserved in the pulp crime stories of Hammett and Chandler, continued to be popular, but in the burgeoning paperback industry it began to be replaced by the suspense plot. In this plot-type, fabula and siuzhet effectively collapse into one another and the reader's interest is sustained by anticipation of future action (corpses, crimes, the apprehension of the criminal), rather than in discovering the causes of an anterior crime (Todorov 1977, 47). Fiction with mystery plots accounted for 50% of the entire paperback market in 1945, but by 1955 that figure had dropped to just 13% (Haut 1995, 5-6). The period saw the arrival of new sub-genres of crime

fiction that took the unrestrained violence, misogyny, cruelty and sensationalism of hard-boiled pulp and drove it to further extremes, while treating the mystery plot as expendable. Increasingly, readers of crime fiction became interested in stories told from the perspective of the criminal rather than the detective, which removed the “whodunit” aspect of the form and often drew on crude, popularized versions of the Freudian unconscious or repressive ego.

An important element of continuity between the classic hard-boiled detective stories of the interwar period and the pulp fiction of the 1940s and 50s was their shared self-positioning as the antithesis to genteel American culture figured as feminine, and more specifically to the didactic ideal of literature as uplift. The interwar pulps had taken every opportunity to sneer at their rivals, the middle-class, “effeminate,” “slick” magazines (Smith 2000, 26-7). As post-war pulp fiction reveled in fantasies of wanton violence and aggressive masculinity, it was consciously rejecting the idea that reading habits provided a route into middle-class manners, respectability, or intellectual concerns (Haut 1995, 6-11). The irony, however, was that the fantasies of working-class masculinity in the immediate postwar were projected against a background of dramatic shifts in the material class structure of American society. The expansion of the middle-class in this period, driven by increased access to education, high employment levels and increasing wages, meant that perceived class antagonisms are more accurately considered as a part of a white-collar culture war fought by lone alienated men against the conservative respectability politics and conformity mandated by the Eisenhower administration.

The clearest expression of how pulp crime registered the shifting dynamic in class and gender relations in the post-war period is to be found in the work of Patricia Highsmith. While she studied highbrow modernists like Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka assiduously as an adolescent in the 1930s, she also read less respectable authors such as James M. Cain. Cain’s tales of illicit sex and murder among the itinerant, precarious lives of the working

classes in the Depression era, most notoriously in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), had thrilled and horrified the reading public in equal measure. Tellingly, it was Cain and not Proust that Highsmith identified in one journal entry as “a kind of genius” (Wilson 2003, 111). She wrote her early fiction while employed as a writer for a comics publisher in 1940s New York under pulp conditions, getting paid between four and seven dollars for each page, creating what she called “insane stories . . . It was like grinding out two Grade B movies per day. I had to come up with two ideas per day” (Wilson 2003, 95). Highsmith’s career-long attempt to marry art and commerce in her writing, as well as her engagement with the pulp tradition, can be said to emerge from this set of conditions. Best known for the “Ripley novels,” her consistent production of short stories has been largely overlooked by critics, even after a new surge of critical interest in the last ten years. Highsmith herself lamented the demise of the all-fiction short-story magazines in the postwar, but found venues for her suspense crime stories in publications such as *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* (Highsmith 2001, 28). Evincing a view comparable to Chandler’s of the pulps, she located the value of her genre in the way that it afforded space and freedom for the writer beyond the specific demands of its formula: “the beauty of the suspense genre is that a writer can write profound thoughts and have some sections without physical action if he wishes to, because the framework is an essentially lively story” (3)

Highsmith’s suspense stories from the 1950s and 60s were not anachronistic pulp fictions in themselves, but rather self-conscious dialogues with them. Her characteristic strategy was to take the violent masculine dream-fulfillment of the crime pulps and to disarm it by presenting it as just that: a fantasy world sustained against the drab reality of white-collar life. The interwar hard-boiled pulps had consistently advanced claims to the superiority of their tough, realistic approach to urban crime over and above the stories confected by the effeminate slick magazines. In Highsmith’s work, this tough realism is revealed as what it

always was: the expression of barely coherent libidinal impulses towards domination and possession, which increase in negative correlation with their protagonists' diminishing social standing. At the beginning of "Music to Die By" (1965), for example, a divorced, middle-aged post-office worker named Aaron Wechsler writes in his dairy that he has murdered Roger Hoolihan, a fellow employee, by smashing his head with a hammer and hiding his body in the closet. Hoolihan, unlike Wechsler, has a happy family, "with a boy in college and another in high school. Plus a wife" (Highsmith 2003b, 244). When Wechsler goes to work the next day, however, the murdered colleague is alive and well. Later he stabs another co-worker to death with a carving knife only to find him irritatingly unaffected the following day. "It's strange, the walking dead in the post office," he remarks to his diary (Highsmith 2003b, 248). In the story's twist, the same men really are killed by a package bomb in the post-office entirely unrelated to Wechsler, who nevertheless claims responsibility for the crime and happily goes to jail for it.

"Music to Die By" mirrors "A Dangerous Hobby" (1960), in which an unassuming vacuum-cleaner salesman, unhappily married to a woman who privileges her own job above paying attention to him, is driven by a compulsion to date middle-class women under an assumed identity and to steal small objects from them before disappearing from their lives. The women he targets all work in creative industries and the objects he steals seem to represent their cultural tastes: a dress designer's silver ruler, an actress's wristwatch, or a violinist's necklace. Plainly enough, Andrew Foster's deceptions are intended as displaced aggression against his uncaring wife, as well as a revenge against the new generation of independent, professional women. His fantasies of power over these women, however, are punctured when he is caught out by chance and forced into a shameful confrontation with one of them. Foster responds with an uncontrolled outburst of violence and murders her. In a reversal of "Music to Die By," however, when Foster hands himself in, the police refuse to

believe he is the killer. Another of his victims is called to identify him but she is unable to recall either his act of petty theft or his unremarkable face. The façade of his life – punctual, reliable, conformist – is impenetrable to the police; he is too ordinary, "a sensation seeker. We get a lot of 'em like this" (Highsmith 2003, 294). In the protagonists of these two stories, Highsmith allegorizes the imagined pulp reader in the anonymous fantasist: a misogynous sensation-seeker full of class *ressentiment*, hiding behind his ordinary life and incapable of overcoming his impotence to assert his individuality.

If Highsmith's suspense stories offer one example of pulp crime's afterlife in the post-war literary field, another is provided by Chester Himes. Highsmith wrote with an acute consciousness of the deep misogyny built into the pulp tradition, even while she was drawn to its conventions. Comparably, Himes's engagement with pulp crime paid tribute to its early practitioners while fundamentally re-evaluating and rewriting its racial investments. As with Highsmith, the pulps had been an integral part of Himes' literary development. He had read Hammett in *Black Mask* while serving time in Ohio State Penitentiary for armed robbery in the early 1930s (Jackson 2017, 92). But he never published in pulp magazines, partly, we must surmise, because throughout the interwar period there were simply no pulp venues for available to Black writers (Earle 2009, 123). Instead, Himes made his name writing short stories for *Esquire* magazine, set up in 1933 by Arnold Gingrich as a new title built around rugged masculinity, and attempting to bridge the gap between the cheap, disreputable pulps and the respectable middle-class magazines. Himes' stories for *Esquire* were built around his experience of incarceration, and provided an early version of the type of the confessional, low-life fiction that became popular in the post-war years. The influence of the pulps is to be found not only in the extreme violence of these stories, but also in their general investment in affective excess of all kinds, from unrestrained rage to inconsolable sorrow. Following the success of his debut novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), Himes became pigeonholed as a

Black protest writer in the mold of his friend Richard Wright, but he never truly lost his investment in pulpy excess and melodrama, even when creating work that was categorized as social realism.

His 1946 story "One More Way to Die" provides an instructive example of the kind of genre hybridity Himes worked with in this period, combining elements of pulp crime with anti-racist protest themes. The story was published in *Negro Stories*, a short-lived magazine for which Himes served on the editorial board. *Negro Stories* was created with the expressed intention of gathering writers on the Black left ready to engage with contemporary themes of fascism and racism (Mullen 1996). Its ideology of uplift and education couldn't have been further from the proudly anti-didactic stance taken by the interwar pulps, and yet Himes' story deploys the type of comic-book violence and street vernacular more familiar from *Black Mask* than from realist fiction. It is narrated in death by a Black man immediately after being murdered by racist cops following a bar brawl in which he accidentally hurts a white woman. The description of the knife-fight in particular recalls the non-stop action of Dashiell Hammett translated into Black street-vernacular, and the absurdity of its dead narrator breaks the conventions of midcentury realism. But the pathos Himes attempts to generate in the story's conclusion seems genuine, especially in the context of its publication in *Negro Stories*, with its anti-racist mission. The author takes clear aim at the dehumanizing brutality of the police when he has his narrator beg for mercy while he is being killed at the story's melodramatic conclusion.

The final sentence of "One More Way to Die" provides an entry point to Himes' vernacular philosophy of the pulps: "The last thing I thought as I lay there on the goddamned ground and died was 'It just ain't no goddamned sense in you white folks killing me'" (Himes 1990, 380). For Himes, as he explained in his autobiography, "if one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter if

one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life" (Himes 1976, 1). Himes found in the violent excesses of pulp crime an expression of this absurdity, in which "it just ain't no goddamned sense." When the veteran French Surrealist Marcel Duhamel commissioned the series of detective novels that would make Himes' name a second time in the 1950s and 60s, he told him to model his work on Hammett, "the greatest writer who ever lived." Exhorting him to write in classic pulp crime fashion with pure action with no description, he assured Himes, "don't worry about it making sense" (Himes 1976, 102).

One can hardly imagine the madcap violence and caper of the Harlem Cycle without the tradition established by the crime pulps Himes had read in jail twenty-five years earlier. In 1973, looking back on his writing career, Himes affirmed the uncompromising simplicity of the American detective tradition: "It's just plain and simple violence in narrative form" (Himes 1995, 47), linking the genre to what he saw as the United States' exceptionally history of violence, from settler colonialism and slavery to the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, from the massacres of Native Americans and Chinese immigrants all the way to Vietnam. In his potent view, the pulp crime story emerges finally as a kind of grotesque master narrative for the nation itself, emerging relentlessly from its ongoing histories of domination and ultimately bound to them as their essential literary expression.

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