

Introduction to Chester Himes' Letter

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On July 22, 1969, Chester Himes replied to a letter from his friend and colleague, John A. Williams. The two men corresponded frequently; Himes was a self-declared 'compulsive letter writer.' Both were African-American authors, and in their letters they often shared stories of the discrimination within the American publishing world. This letter allows one to analyze Himes' thoughts on African-American identity, and particularly, the relationship between black American men and white American women. More broadly, the letter shows how racism and absurdity go hand-in-hand, within Himes' life, as well as within American society as a whole. This linkage that exists between racism and absurdity ultimately creates what Chester Himes calls "the quality of hurt" (Himes, 22 July 1969).

Chester Bomar Himes was born on July 29, 1909, in Jefferson City, Missouri, the youngest of three sons born to Joseph Sandy Himes and Estelle Bomar. Joseph Himes was a short, dark man with 'an Arabic face' (Muller, 3). As the head of the Mechanical Department at Lincoln Institute, Joseph Himes taught blacksmithing and wheelwrighting, allowing his family a middle class upbringing. Estelle Himes, a light-skinned African-American woman, was descended from the Bomars of English nobility, and constantly pressured her son to live up to her 'heritage' (Muller, 3). In *The Quality of Hurt* the first volume of Himes' autobiography, he describes his features as a grotesque conglomerate of his parents' conflicting appearances:

My hair is kinky, my complexion sepia, my features might be handsome
were my nose not so tiny, and my skull's so flat and misshapen the students
of my father used to say that he had made it in a blacksmith shop. (5)

This comment illustrates that Chester Himes had been conscious of his conflicting identities, at least on an aesthetic level, since his youth.

Between 1913 and 1923, the Himes family moved frequently, ultimately settling in Cleveland, Ohio. There, Chester graduated from the predominantly white Glenville High School in 1926. That summer, while working as a busboy at a hotel, Himes fell down an open elevator shaft and suffered severe back and head injuries that would affect him the rest of his life. However, he managed to attend Ohio State University in the fall on a \$75 monthly disability pension. It was at Ohio State that Himes had his first encounter with the depth of racism within American institutions (Muller, 4). Primarily due to failing health and failing grades, he withdrew from the university in the spring of 1927, returning to Cleveland and the constant bickering of his parents. Joseph Himes left for good one year later. By that summer, Chester Himes was involved in the gambling world of Cleveland's black ghetto, and one year later, at the age of 19, he was hustling,

gambling, pimping, smoking opium, committing burglaries, and stealing cars (Muller, 5). Arrested twice previously, he was arrested in November of 1928 in Chicago for a \$53,000 first-degree armed robbery. On December 27, 1928, Himes was sentenced to twenty to twenty-five years of hard labor in the Ohio State Penitentiary (Muller, 5).

While in prison, Himes claimed that he "grew to manhood" (60). In prison he encountered much of what he had encountered outside - violence, sexuality, racism, and neurotic behavior - but to a greater degree (Muller, 6-7). This helped to shape his identity as a writer. Himes' first short story was published in *Esquire* in 1935, while he was still in prison. Paroled in 1936, Himes returned to Cleveland and married Jean Lucinda Johnson in 1937. He began his first novel, *Black Sheep* (published in 1952), that year, and continued writing while working odd jobs throughout the 1930s and 1940s. His novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, was published in 1945. One year later, Himes moved to New York City where he once again worked various jobs while writing. In 1950, his marriage to Jean ended, and on April 3, 1953, disillusioned with the failure of his personal life and his writing career, Himes left the United States for France (Muller, 6-7). In 1963, he suffered a stroke while visiting Mexico. In 1965, he married Lesley Packard, an Anglo-Irish woman; together they moved to Spain in 1968 (Muller, 18-19). *The Quality of Hurt*, the first half of his autobiography, was published in 1972; the second half, *My Life of Absurdity*, was published in 1976. Chester Bomar Himes died on November 12, 1984.

John Alfred Williams was born on December 5, 1925, in Hinds County, Mississippi, the oldest of four children born to John Henry and Ola Williams. Williams spent his childhood in the 'melting pot' atmosphere of the Fifteenth Ward in Syracuse, New York, seemingly unaffected by the Depression (Muller, 5). In and out of high school, Williams eventually enlisted in the Navy on April 8, 1943. It was there that he was exposed to the virulence of racism within America, which would serve as a catalyst for his career as an author. His letters to his mother, which often detailed this racism, were censored before they reached home (Muller, 7-9). Williams received an honorable discharge from the United States Navy on January 4, 1946.

Williams finished high school in the spring of 1946, and went to Morris Brown College in Atlanta on a football scholarship. Not fond of the Jim Crow South, Williams soon transferred to Syracuse University under the GI Bill (Muller, 9). He married Carolyn Clopton in 1947, and their first son, Gregory, was born in 1948. Williams graduated from Syracuse in June 1950. Like Himes, Williams worked various, albeit better-paying, jobs while trying to jumpstart his writing career. Tensions with Carolyn increased during this period, and in 1954, Williams drove to Los Angeles with his brother, Joe (Muller, 11-12). He and Carolyn divorced in 1957.

In 1960, John A. Williams' first novel, *The Angry Ones*, was published, and his works continued to be published and well received within the United States. In 1965, Williams married Lorrain Isaac, and their son, Adam, was born in 1968. In 1970, Williams edited *Amistad 1: Writings on Black History and Culture* with Charles F. Harris, whom Himes refers to in his 1969 letter to Williams; *Amistad 2* was published in 1971. In 1982, Williams' much acclaimed novel, *!Click Song*, was published (Muller, 13-21).

If Chester Himes led a 'life of absurdity,' one of the reasons for this absurdness would undoubtedly be his interpretation of African-American identity, for he sees both the American side and the African side of the hyphen as ineffectual. Himes believes that there is no such thing as a 'black American' because America strives to be a wholly white community:

The American black man is very different from all those black men in the history of the world because the American black has even an unconscious feeling that he wants equality. Whereas most of the blacks of the world don't particularly insist on having equality in the white community. But the American black doesn't have any other community. America, which wants to be a white community, is their community, and there is not the fact that they can go home to their own community and be the chief and sons of chiefs or what not.... The American black man has to make it or lose it in America; he has no choice. (Harris and Williams, 39-40)

Essentially, Himes does not deny this American identity, he just sees it as useless. Blacks in America have no other community to try and succeed in, yet Himes believes that they will never achieve equality within this community that intrinsically holds its members up to white standards. In the same sense, Himes sees African identity as futile, as well:

In Garvey's time the 'Back to Africa' movement had an appeal and probably made some sense. But it doesn't make any sense now. It probably didn't make sense even then, but it's even *less* logical now, because the black people of America aren't Africans any more, and the Africans don't want them. (Harris and Williams, 40)

Thus, the African-American's relationship to both of his cultural identities inevitably places him in a 'catch-22' situation. No longer accepted as a true African, he is forced to "make it in America" (40), a society which will never accept him as a true American. Ultimately, Himes believes that the black American is neither white/American enough nor black/African enough to be completely accepted into either society. Therefore, he has no community within which to forge a valid identity. However, Himes does offer one possible way for blacks to 'make it' in America: "I think the only way a Negro will ever get accepted as an equal is if he kills whites..." (Harris and Williams, 60).

In his reply to John A. Williams, Chester Himes attempts to reconcile the relationship that exists between American black men and American white women with his outright hatred for all whites. This is another example of the absurdity that marred Himes' life: he exiled himself to Europe to get away from the 'white community' that is the United States, yet while overseas, all of his intimate relationships were with white American women. Himes tries to resolve this absurdity by forging a common identity between black American males and white American females. Both are victims of the white American man's quest for dominance and superiority: "...the strong have hurt the weak, the weak have hurt the weaker; he has hurt the black man seriously, but he has hurt his own white woman mate equally" (Himes, 22 July 1969). Himes' reconciliation centers upon the common humanity that exists between the black American man and the white American woman. They are

not divided by race; instead they are unified through their universal suffering and humanity.

One may infer that like the African-American who has no valid identity in either of his communities, Himes believes that the (white) Woman-American suffers from two futile sides of the hyphen, as well. She is granted no rights as an American essentially because she is a woman; her identity as a woman in America or an American woman gets her nowhere. In this case, her 'whiteness' is overlooked. She is a woman, and in the eyes of the white American man, she, like the black American man, is naturally inferior. This is what draws them together. This is the universally absurd 'quality of hurt' that Himes refers to in his response to John A. Williams. It comes at the hands of white American males, and it binds black American men and white American women together.

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Transcription of a letter from Chester Himes to John A. Williams

[The original letter is held in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections Department.]

CHESTER HIMES

22 July 1969

Dear John,

I have been thinking about a line from your letter: "He (Harris) said the white folks won't know what Chester's talking about..." You can tell him I'm simply talking about the quality of hurt. Whites in American have hurt everyone they've touched. The white American male has hurt all non-whites with whom he has come into contact, the strong have hurt the weak, the weak have hurt the weaker; he has hurt the black man seriously, but he has hurt his own white woman mate equally. And that is what I am talking about: xThe peculiar and essential character (Webster) of this hurt. Not only my hurt, but the hurt of this highly placed, highly educated, highly classed (a direct descendant of John Hancock, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independan ce) white woman who is the end product of xx his civilization. In her hurt, she comes to me, knowing I have been hurt by the same white man, for succor, for me to absorb her hurt, for sanctuary, for grace. The most important field of human activity is the love relation between male and female, because it is the only creative force given by a Divine power to the human race without which - regardless of all else the human race conceives - it can not exist. And this, alone, is the criterion by which the importance of a man is judged. And in this judgement the American black man stands out superior to the American white man, because he holds the female - the mother of the human race - in greater reverence than the American white man; he is more tender, considerate, arduous, and infinitely more aware of the purpose of the woman on this earth. The white man has thewealth, the glory, the power, the acclaim; but the black man has the love and the capacity for love of the female of the species. And that, to my mind, is more important.

Chuck can tell the white folks that is what I'm talking about. See how that goes down.

all best

Chester