Dreams for Dead Bodies
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Published by University of Michigan Press

Robinson, Miriam Michelle.
Dreams for Dead Bodies: Blackness, Labor, and the Corpus of American Detective Fiction.

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Conclusion

Dream within a Dream

I am absolutely frightened to death, and there’s something which is happening or about to happen that I don’t want to face, or let us say, which is an even better example, that I have a friend who has just murdered his mother and put her in the closet and I know it, but we’re not going to talk about it. Now this means very shortly since, after all, I know the corpse is in the closet, and he knows I know it, and we’re sitting around having a few drinks and trying to be buddy-buddy together, that very shortly, we can’t talk about anything because we can’t talk about that. No matter what I say I may inadvertently stumble on this corpse. And this incoherence which seems to afflict this country is analogous to that.

—JAMES BALDWIN, “NOTES FOR A HYPOTHETICAL NOVEL”

Our chambers were always full of chemicals and of criminal relics which had a way of wandering into unlikely positions, and of turning up in the butter-dish or in even less desirable places.

—SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, “THE MUSGRAVE RITUAL”

Like the “curious collection” of keepsakes Sherlock Holmes retains from “The Musgrave Ritual” (his first case of any significance as a consulting detective), detection’s narrative devices were put in safekeeping in conventional genre texts, in something like Holmes’s “small wooden box with a sliding lid such as children’s toys are kept in” (Doyle 605). In this study, I have argued that though the “relics” in this repository for narrative “playthings” collectively take the recognizable form we call detective fiction, they were forged elsewhere, and of socioeconomic necessity: to address the historical conditions of production and processes of racial formation fundamentally entwined with interracial sociability and interdependencies in the world of work (605). Like Holmes’s “crumpled piece of paper, an old-fashioned brass
key, a peg of wood with a ball of string attached to it, and three rusty old
discs of metal,” the emergence of these narrative-analytical tools belongs to a
complex literary history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “so
much so that they are history” (606). Works on the margins of the detective
genre (which I have variously referred to as proto-, precursor, and peripheral
detective fictions in this study) took these tools as their central narrative
tactics, both before and after the generic expectations associated with clas-
sical detective fiction took more definite shape. These works on the margins
return us to the “latent” content of the genre’s conventions, clarify its “intel-
ligence” (the social functions of its various narrative elements), and indicate
the fitness of its mechanisms for exploring patterns of interracial sociability
and economic interdependencys.

Where there are points of contact and interdependencies between blacks
and whites, and where there are questions of labor and profit, the psycho-
dynamics of interracial sociability rise to the surface, and this is absolutely
central to understanding what blackness and whiteness have meant in the
United States from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth cen-
tury. This matter is far too complicated to speak of in a few sentences, or to
tell as a story. No fabula describes it, only the machinery that makes sjuzhet.
Only certain narrative devices fathom these matters, and American authors
seized these devices to represent a sociology of racialized labor, to challenge
public fictions of racial separation, and to gauge prospects for interracial
sociability.

In precursor and peripheral genre texts, the very presence of these many
devices—backward construction, which produces “anticipation in retro-
spect”; the peculiar combination of metonymy (the clue) with metaphor
(imaginative identification); the magnificent riddle of disguise in the dime
novel; the locked-room paradox; and so on—point us to a complex inter-
racial history of the nation. They underscore how an anatomy of narrative
conventions we now associate with classical detective fiction can open up a
history of interracial sociability.

This history of interracial sociability is deeply entwined with a history
of work. The histories these proto- and peripheral detective fictions recount
have, to borrow the language of Andrew Knighton in his study Idle Threats:
Men and the Limits of Productivity in 19th-Century America, the effect of
“desystematizing labor, unpacking its situatedness, pointing to the arbitrary
commitments and marginal distance between an American system of ‘in-
terchangeable parts’ and the narratives of ‘intensified productivity’” (18). Yet
close attention to the interracial dimensions and historically diverse structures of interracial sociability in the world of work also yields an intricate and frequently shifting project of racial management. As DuBois’s sociological treatise “The Study of the Negro Problems” suggests, formulating any conceptual model of recurrence demands close attention to fluctuating socioeconomic conditions and developments in American industry, as the structuring conditions of interracial economic interdependencies morphed and recoiled only to return in new forms. The “Negro Problem,” Du Bois elaborates, “has changed with the growth and evolution of the nation; moreover . . . it is not one problem, but rather a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex” (3). Drawing on detection’s devices, the texts I have studied concede the ineradicable fact of interracial contact, the variegated web of historical contexts that inform it, and the prospects for interracial sociability these contexts generate.

In this vein, the black and white authors of the proto- and peripheral works I have examined establish that detective fiction is an eminently interracial genre. Indeed, the genesis of detection, its very design and development, is interracial, rather than implicitly ideologically “white,” as critics have generally assumed. Each of these texts refutes simplistic notions about the “racial formation” of genre, underscoring that, as Andrew Pepper observes, “To write about black crime fiction, as opposed to white or any other kind of crime fiction, is to write about a body of writing that does not exist, or rather does not exist in isolation from, and has not developed outside or beyond the parameters of, these other kinds of crime fiction” (209).1 Similarly, this study requires we rethink the conceptual value of contemporary categories such as “ethnic detective fiction,” given detective fiction’s early and continued investment in interrogating the limits of and possibilities for interracial sociability and economic interdependence.

Recent genre studies, particularly the groundbreaking work of Gina and Andrew Macdonald, have meticulously differentiated between contemporary varieties of an American “ethnic” detective fiction, arguing that a meaningful ethnic detective fiction is permeated with distinct cultural knowledge and a worldview that disputes what conventionally constitutes detection.2 In a different vein, some critics take the emergence of nonwhite detective protagonists in the last few decades for a triumph of American liberalism. According to this logic, “The creation of representative detective heroes has become an important social ritual for minority groups”—racial, ethnic, or otherwise—“who would claim a meaningful place in the larger social con-
text” (Cawelti, “Canonization” 8). Alternately, scholars criticize nonwhite authors insofar as their appropriation of the genre is an assimilative tactic. In this case again, an “authentic” ethnic engagement with detective fiction inevitably writes against preexisting literary traditions and genre formulas.

I wholeheartedly affirm the social benefits of a publishing industry that does not discriminate against nonwhite authors. Yet the genealogy of precursor and peripheral texts I have assembled makes plain that imagining generic developments through the various lenses of “ethnic” detection belies the historic utility of detective fiction’s devices for making sense of interracial sociability. To attribute the recent growth of what we call “ethnic detective fiction” to a liberal project and pursuit of the public sphere ignores that detective fictions’ devices are literary products of an interracial modernity grounded in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, judging “ethnic” detective fiction by the standards I described above establishes dubious and inflexible assumptions about what it means to create a nonwhite detective fiction, while implicitly insisting that scientific rationalism is the property of white-authored detective fiction. It also has the effect of reifying the exclusion of nonwhite authors from the domain of scientific-rational thought, reinforcing faulty assumptions about the distinct properties of white-authored and nonwhite-authored detective fictions, and disregarding the varieties of “magical” and pseudoscientific thinking that are pervasive in detective fictions from the nineteenth century on. To speak about a history of detective fiction and examine the genre’s peripheral texts in search of its genesis, by contrast, is to discover an interracial history of the nation.

Significantly, varieties of detective fiction that succeeded (but did not replace) the puzzle-mystery cultivated characteristics relevant to an exploration of racialized labor in the twentieth century. Below, I discuss the work of Chester Himes, whose hard-boiled police procedurals of the 1950s and 1960s are dystopic reconfigurations of Rudolph Fisher’s Harlem. The high-velocity plot in Himes’s The Big Gold Dream (1960) is preignited by a violent, interracial past and a present lack of economic opportunity, both anchored in the degradation of work. It takes as its subtext both the fantasy and the failure of gainful employment in a postindustrial inner city, yet Himes’s text also experiments with detections’ conventions by allocating forms of narrative making to “informants” that unsettle straightforward accounts. And in this case, Himes’s Harlem detective novel introduces Dummy, an ex-prizefighter and deaf-mute turned stool pigeon and amateur pimp, as its chief investigating agent when thieves take the lottery winnings of a black maid.
Si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l’autre, vous êtes foutu!

(If you’re trapped in the dream of the other, you’re fucked!)
Gilles Deleuze

Both the violence and the design of The Big Gold Dream suggest the proximity of Himes’s critical tendencies to “noir,” “an antigenre that reveals the dark side of savage capitalism,” for Raymond Borde and Etienne Chau- meton’s seminal inquiry Panorama du film noir américain (Naremore 22). Himes’s detective fictions incorporate those traits typically associated with noir: “a feeling of discontinuity, an intermingling of social realism and oni- ricism, an anarcho-leftist critique of bourgeois ideology and an eroticized treatment of violence” (22). But these characteristics are undoubtedly also an effect of Himes’s unapologetic habit of limiting the length of his detective fictions to the bare minimum his contracts required, even if it meant abruptly terminating whatever tale he might have been spinning. As Himes neared the page count, he abandoned syntactic niceties in favor of novelistic shorthand, resorting to fast-paced installments that would bring the plot to closure, rather than adhering to a scrupulous narrative grammar. This habit clearly differentiates Himes’s work from classical detective fictions, with their efficient and elegant solutions, and transports him into the world of the hard-boiled. And if there are not bodies lying thick in a Shakespearean finale, we are inevitably dealing with a lopsided, top-heavy, truncated affair that leaves plenty of threads hanging where it does not snip them short.

The remarkable accomplishment of Himes’s detective fictions is, however, that tenacious, even perverse causality that galvanizes these texts. Something besides money and sheer force presides in Harlem, and it is the rough geography of Himes’s domestic novels, exemplified by the twice-plotted world of All Shot Up: “It was ten minutes by foot, if you were on your way to church, about two and a half minutes if your old lady was chasing you with a razor” (21). Himes treats these two setups as topographical equivalents. What serves as their common denominator is an exact distance, a precinct reciprocally calibrated to these particular goings-on, which is to say what measures space is marking time. The opposite is also true—and this is not a tautology but something more like the symmetry of double-entry accounting, or an impartial approach to the semantic and syntactic dimensions of the narrative. Of course, this illustration is noteworthy insofar as it brings the violence embedded in Himes’s geography to the fore (Cochran 26), but
if we appreciate Himes’s miniature treatment of Harlem as an allegory for
narrative and a model for narrative distance, what is really at issue is whether
one ought to differentiate between being compelled to arrive at one’s desti-
nation rather than propelled toward it.

And the anarchic ends of Himes’s detective fictions retroactively gener-
ate anarchic beginnings: a horsepower that dashes past the starting gate,
sweeping up a cast of characters along its way. This staggering momentum
at the outset must too have its provenance, but the police are hamstrung
before they ever arrive on the scene. In *The Big Gold Dream*, Himes’s police-
men Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed cannot solve crimes by ordinary
police methods. The “modern police techniques,” “the Medical Examiner’s
report, photographs, fingerprints, the findings of the criminal laboratory”—
that familiar dossier the police rely upon elsewhere—are to no avail here
(58). “Police theories” are out of the question, which sets their game apart
from the meticulous, impersonal cogitations of classical detective fiction,
but Himes’s detectives sometimes steer clear of unadulterated, hard-boiled
brawn, since “third-degree methods” can be equally disastrous. Harlem’s
criminal set know the police routine by rote. Short of eyewitness accounts,
Coffin Ed and Grave Digger get briefed by a circuit of informants, petty
criminals duty-bound to punch in at appointed posts. With critical infor-
mation transmitted through a covert constellation of snitches on a “stool
pigeon route,” it is no wonder that their Sergeant Frick finds the area dis-
tressingly indecipherable: “Every time he came to Harlem on a case he got
a violent headache” (45). Grave Digger and Coffin Ed piece together partial
cases from mismatched narrative scraps collected on street corners, and jus-
tice is only improvised.

A contextual deficit in Himes’s hard-boiled world sets readers, along
with Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, adrift, feeling themselves into a world
propelled by an already established but unenunciated logic. Typically, writes
Fredric Jameson, hard-boiled violence finally eclipses events “lying half-
forgotten in the pasts of the characters before the book begins” (Jameson,
“Chandler” 86). According to Jameson, the hard-boiled inevitably sidetracks
its reader from the “first plot”:

He [the reader] assumes it to be a part of the dimension of the present,
of the events going on before him in the immediacy of his narrated uni-
verse. Instead, it is buried in that world’s past, in time, among the dead
evoked in the memorable closing page of *The Big Sleep*. (86)
Himes’s texts incessantly signal that the past has never perished. In *The Big Gold Dream*, what is buried in the world’s past resurfaces in the lives of dreamers.

The dreamer in question, or at least the first of many, is Alberta Wright, a “great cook and steady wage earner,” and a recent convert to the Church of Wonderful Prayer, whose glitzy, charismatic Sweet Prophet assures his doting congregation that faith is “like a solid gold dream!” (17–18, 7). As a picture puzzle, Alberta’s dream is a doozy. “I dreamed I was baking three apple pies,” she explains to a “sea of kneeling worshipers” on 117th Street, and “when I took them out the oven and set them on the table to cool the crusts busted open like three explosions and the whole kitchen was filled with hundred dollar bills” (7–8). As far as messages from the Lord go, this seems a fairly elementary cipher, since her fellow worshipers chorus “Money! Money! Money!” when they hear of her dream (8). Alberta has already taken the initiative to stake her last sixty dollars in “the three biggest houses in Harlem” and pulled home a cool profit of thirty-six thousand dollars for her efforts (126).

But Alberta’s dream has a double sense, and not merely because her lottery winnings have inexplicably gone missing, or because she soon enters into a convulsive and apparently fatal “religious fervor” in the presence of Sweet Prophet, her body shaking—in the vulgar idiom Himes generally reserves for the religious—“like a nautch dancer” (10). Her dream is also a picture of domestic misuse. Though a “born kitchen mechanic,” Alberta cannot make living with her hands. She is (explosive pastry notwithstanding) another economic casualty among the working poor (70). And though she is fully resuscitated from a corpse-like state after collapsing at Sweet Prophet’s street service (an attack apparently induced by a tainted draught of holy water), she appears ever afterward in terms of her proximate death. Sergeant Ratigan accuses Alberta of “playing dead,” and the undertaker Mr. Clay describes her as the body “that came to life” (90, 72). Her work clothes also cast her among the departed. A little girl glimpses the woman “all in white like a ghost” fleeing the police as though her “tight-fitting white maid’s uniform” and the white robes of a convert make an apparition or, as with Wilkie Collins’s pallid “Woman in White,” Alberta’s phantasmal presence is the symptom of an inheritance embezzled and a counterfeit past (38).

In this way, the text’s “big gold dream” is a sort of Chandlerian “big sleep” Himes tailored to a Harlem for whom death is less appalling than an interminable existence as the walking dead. Religion is, without a doubt, the fa-
vored opiate of the people. Sweet Prophet is an accomplished hypnotist who
fleeces his flock, Alberta included, all the way to the bank. And plenty of
Himes’s other characters share a drowsy drug-induced state. Rufus, Alber-
ta’s onetime no-good husband, is “on the H” (93). Her erstwhile lover, Sugar
Stonewall, spends his days abed and deals Alberta the “Mickey Finn” that
puts her temporarily out of commission. The numbers runner Slick speaks
opium from a pipe, his flunky Susie is never without a marijuana cigarette
dangling from the corner of his mouth, and the mysterious “sepia-colored”
blonde Slick keeps in his apartment is a junkie who has “been sniffing it for
so long she didn’t know what life was without it and couldn’t live such a life
for one full day” (117). These individuals are dreamers, dream dealers, and
they dream mostly of money. In fact, the bed is converted to a bank; the Jew-
ish furniture dealer Abie points out, “The mattress [is] . . . colored people’s
strongbox, ha” (29). Alberta is convinced that the place for her money is her
mattress: “I got to thinking it would be safer if I slept on it” (130).

More importantly, Alberta’s bare existence and interminable subjugation
signal, as I have suggested above, a history that has been chucked to oblivion,
discounted, presumably erased from sight. Her past is a southern past; in
The Big Gold Dream, the aftereffects of slavery and the Great Migration re-
veal themselves intermittently and in peculiar forms. When Sugar Stonewall
(whose name one must assume is a sarcastic tribute to General Jackson) rum-
mages through Alberta’s apartment, he demolishes antiques, discarding “the
skeletons of the two overstuffed armchairs” to the side “like the bones of a
carcass” (29). The “the Jew” Abie (a character whose acquisitive habits corrob-
orate Himes’s typically uncensored anti-Semitism) examines Alberta’s still-
intact sofa as if “he were assaying a prime beef” (29). Himes’s “ur” and only
Jewish character in The Big Gold Dream is a skilled interpreter of antebellum
goods, and he concludes that Alberta’s furniture is “Marvelous. More than
a hundred years old. Made in New Orleans. Been through the Civil War.
Extraordinary!” (29). Having somehow made their way up river, her crummy
antebellum furnishings are now prodded, priced, and purchased like chattel.
What is more, Abie discovers a thousand hundred-dollar bills in crisp and
utterly worthless Confederate currency stashed inside her sofa. This amuses
him about as much as the treasure of the Sierra Madre: “Suddenly he bent
double, laughing as though he had gone stark raving crazy” (31).

Alberta is saddled with odd remnants of another era. What she pos-
sesses once belonged to a past and a place where she might have been a pos-
session. The remains of this realm are a fortune in fool’s gold, and Rufus is
the fool who kills to get it and is killed for it—drawing Susie, a new fall guy,
into the mix. And when Susie flashes his roll of Confederate banknotes to a “chippy,” then fails to pay for services rendered, the girl explains to her pimp that “he Georgiaed me!” (56). While Alberta Wright never recovers the jackpot, what is ostensibly its surrogate object in the text (Confederate cash) seems less an uncomplicated proxy for Alberta’s money than a far-reaching effect of condensation and displacement, an agglomeration of latent matter that coalesces in a single block of manifest content by associative processes that generate “intermediate thoughts . . . which are often ingenious” (Freud, On Dreams 29). This bundle of Confederate notes, a novelistic red herring, is conspicuously joined to a genealogy of violence and a trail of theft: black slavery and civil death, debt peonage, and a migration north, where virtual servitude, economic deprivation, and an urban ghetto are merely the constituent features of new forms of bare life. In Himes’s plot, this anachronistic object—“ninety-four years late and in a different country” (103)—strings together a series of misdirected acts into what could only produce a narrative “dead line,” a mission punctured of any purpose but to link present and past. Himes pulls this punch line twice. “Bent double” with laughter over the sheaf of hundred-dollar bills, “the Jew” is shot in both arms, blinded with pain and battered to death (31). Later, a receiving teller at Chase National Bank chokes with laughter and explains, “in a strangled voice,” to Sweet Prophet’s devotee Sister Hopeful that the money is no longer “legal tender,” though he “hesitantly” suggests that the bills are “valuable as a souvenir—if you’re from the South” (103).

The recurrence of these “dead notes” is not just a gag, however. It is a historical illustration of a narratological tactic. The Big Gold Dream hinges on an incident prior to the text and unthinkable inside it. Even before the opening pages, Sweet Prophet’s hypnosis has drafted Alberta into a dream state; this dream state has made a dummy of her; she has, for this reason, already delivered her winnings to the Prophet, instrumental in the theft of what is her own; and this theft avant la lettre wholly nullifies the novel’s course. The counterfeit Confederate cash instructs the reader to register theft in terms of its historical antecedents and as a thing that violently conscripts human bodies. Himes indicates that to follow the narrative is to look before it—or to look awry, by calling upon a vantage point that reconfigures textual authority and sways the direction of the plot and of justice. In The Big Gold Dream, this disruptive adjustment requires reallocating the narrativization of crime to those whose practices of enunciation arise from silence, muteness, and blindness.

The Big Gold Dream demands a different kind of storytelling and also a
different kind of storyteller, and that job is handed over to Grave Digger and Coffin Ed’s best stool pigeon. Dummy is an ex-prize-fighter and deaf-mute who has been beaten within an inch of his life on more than one occasion. Boxing put out his ears (“the racketeers who owned him sent him to the tank so often he got both his eardrums burst” [54]) and gangsters cut out his tongue when he agreed to squeal in front of the state committee. With his “lumpy” face “interlaced with tiny scars” and his “pile hammers for hands,” he comes off as a composite Quasimodo taken straight out of The Killers (55). Needless to say, Dummy cannot speak in the ordinary sense of the word: swallowing, he sounds like a “baby burping” (118); injured, he is “mewling like a cat” (150); and when asked to make an official statement to the police, “Dummy’s mouth flew open, and choking sounds issued from the gruesome cavity” (63). The “gaping black hole where normally a tongue should have been” is an alarming caricature of his muteness, like a cartoon balloon expunged of its contents and blacked out in advance (54). For all these impediments, Dummy’s role in the novel is remarkable. He is a writer. He compiles phrases punctuated by slashes with a “dirty scratch pad and stub of pencil” (61), and these bulletins, whether fact or fiction, act as stimulants, prodding the plot forward. Dummy is the informant who advises Slick to be wary of Susie: “the punk is doublecrossin you” (113). He also torments Sugar with a preliminary account of Rufus’s murder: “i saw you kill him but i didn tell” (83). Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are the recipients of a more detailed version of events:

rufus drove up / mugger braced him in car / pulled him out / put knife on throat / pushed him toward outhouse / rufus try to run / mugger stab him in back / keep stabbin / rufus down on hands and knees / crawl into the bush / mugger follow / i didn see nobody come out (62)

Dummy’s suggestive scribblings and this passage, a sort of storyboard of heterodiegetic proceedings and one of his many selective accounts of events, demonstrate his talents as narrator. More importantly, they indicate the power he wields over others’ perceptions. Not only are Dummy’s publications concocted to put him at an advantage—though it is certain that he wants, as Slick observes, “to cut himself a piece of the pie” (122)—but his well-advertised cache of local knowledge also makes him a formidable ally. He’s got the figures on the furniture scam and is hot on the trail of Alberta’s money and, as Sugar comments, “Dummy wasn’t the kind to waste his ef-
forts on wild-goose chases” (74). The silent audience to Slick and Susie’s latest chicanery, Dummy watches them dupe one of Sweet Prophet’s secretaries with a cash-filled manila envelope full of “civil war money.”

Of Himes’s first project for Marcel Duhamel, *The Five-Cornered Square* (*La Reine des Pommes*, also *For Love of Imabelle*), Jonathan Eburne writes, “The novel is stricken a priori with an epidemic of blindness, both literal and metaphorical, whose manifestations sabotage the possibility of clear vision or metaphysical insight” (255). In *The Big Gold Dream*, blindness has swelled to a chronic condition in a Harlem where Providence is a “blindfolded man” who draws the daily numbers for the Tia Juana house (112). Himes editorializes that “if there were no eyewitness accounts, the detectives had to depend on stool pigeons” (58) and it is true that, in this world of blind men, the deaf and mute dummy is a kind of king. Yet in an extraordinary turn of events, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones also defer to a blind woman’s explanation of the murders.

She is nameless, an exotic of indeterminate origin, a composite woman: blonde and “sepia-colored” with distended pupils and eyes slanted “like an Oriental’s,” attired in a “Chinese gown of deep purple silk” (117). She scarcely speaks, and she moves with a silence so palpable that even Dummy can sense it, “although he couldn’t hear it” (119). She is also Slick’s mute attendant, administering opium at his bidding while Dummy and Susie look on. Having completed that task, “She flowed silently from the room without having once looked at any one” (118). When Grave Digger and Coffin Ed come by looking for Slick Jenkins, she peers past the chain lock, “but not directly at either of them” and curtly responds, “Slick isn’t in” (134). Presently, the detectives return, this time with a typewritten letter they call a “search warrant.” They place the paper in front of her, and “her eyes looked down in the direction of the letter but, when she reached for it her hand went aside” (149). Finally Grave Digger presses the document into her hand, but she instantly returns it. “‘I see,’ she said in a low voice” (149).

This reply is certainly not an attempt to conceal her blindness, since she has already inadvertently played that hand and knows it. Instead, it authorizes the officers’ intrusion without question, taking them in at their word. Her “low voice” gives them the go-ahead, and whether or not we can speak of collusion, at some point during the officers’ entry and the subsequent fray, she ceases to be a “well-kept” woman and becomes, against all odds, an “eye witness” against Slick Jenkins, on whom she pins the murder of “the Jew.” Her testimony is, moreover, accompanied by “substantiating evidence”: a
billfold identified as the property of one Abraham Finkelstein, and Slick Jenkins’s suit, blood-stained in the shoulder where Rufus stabbed him (155). Nevertheless, the two detectives back her statement before Sergeant Frick, having “exchanged” what we can only assume are meaningful “looks” (155), and Coffin Ed tells Grave Digger he is confident that “she’ll make it stick” (156). What is more, when Frick worries that her statement won’t hold up in a court that bars a woman from testifying against her spouse, the blind woman interrupts:

“I’m not his wife,” she said in that tired, dead voice. “I’m just a woman he blinded, beating me with his fists.”

During the embarrassed silence that followed, no one looked at anybody else. (155)

In the wake of this final declaration, “no one looked at anybody else,” a gesture which could not possibly have been made out of respect for the irreversibly injured party, but as if, having failed to see what was before them, they find that the only appropriate penance is to temporarily relinquish their own vision. Ironically, the first penalty Slick faces as the recipient of the blind woman’s justice is to be deprived of his sight as well. While waiting for Sergeant Frick to arrive, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger administer a battering severe enough that Slick’s “face was swollen, as though he had run into a nest of hornets, and his discolored eyes were almost shut” (153).

As with Dummy’s broken sentences, the sightlessness and “dead voice” of a single woman wield an unusual power. She administers a justice that operates outside the realm of empirical evidence and, in the realm of ethical imagination, beyond the law and seemingly from beyond the grave—or is it just on the lower frequencies? Her account is at odds with the facts but supersedes them. It is a record true out of juridical necessity, the alternate story line in a novel that is twice plotted. Himes allows it authority. It is the one that sticks.

“He had a dream,” I says, “and it shot him.”

Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*

Critics have observed that Chester Himes deftly constructs a “fantastic image of society-as-open-market” in his Harlem novels, a society built entirely of “appetitive self-interest” (McCann 283), each citizen conscripted to
the frantic pursuit of some alluring but illusory commodity ("Object X") modeled on Dashiell Hammett’s *Maltese Falcon* (Soitos 151). Certainly his narratives have the momentum of hard-boiled detective fiction, often accelerating toward predictably grim finales like a cement block dropped off a cliff—assuming that cliff were paved with corpses. And yet these books also race in reverse, irradiating a residue of economic injustice that far precedes the narratives’ temporal coordinates, grinding to a halt only when they land in the muck of the nineteenth century. If Himes’s books lay out an “unsentimental” critique of the sociopolitical and economic order (Crawford 187), that trawl has bait and a hook: first some criminal relic of the past crops up in some absurd and unexpected place; it reels the reader to a “story of the crime” that is not simply outside the “immediacy of his narrated universe”—to return to Jameson’s description of the hard-boiled text—but past what is “buried in that world’s past,” until he regards the past itself (“Chandler” 86, my italics). To put this another way, Himes’s detective fictions are inelegant texts set at ungainly angles, awash with narrative paroxysms and ingenious anachronism. There is something outside the world of the narrative that stains it, and this stain becomes the source of an “irritant opacity,” a devastating cognitive dissonance or true blind spot, which denotes that “available knowledge serves only to demonstrate that it should no longer serve to sustain the knower” (Godden 5). In *The Big Gold Dream*, the psychodynamics of interracial sociability and a sociology of racialized labor are that latent content situated just beyond the horizon of the narrative. They are something like the closeted “corpse” of James Baldwin’s “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel,” whose presence is indicated only by a tied tongue, a useless currency, a painful silence.

The fact that a work like *The Big Gold Dream* intermittently admits these stammerings of the unconscious may distinguish it from the typically delimited realms of classical detective fiction, which, in his well-known essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler eviscerated for its cozy insulation from the world, its “depressing way of minding its own business, solving its own problems and answering its own questions” (977). In spite of its “urban locale, a disordered society, and a final dissolution” (Grella 116), however, hard-boiled detective fiction is, as a genre, no less gentrified than its predecessor. Chandler maintained that “Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley” (988)—but what is the well-established whiteness of early hard-boiled fiction if not a failure to dedomesticate that housebroken machinery of detective fiction’s golden age, a
failure to disinter a history of interracial sociability—which, even in Himes, turns up only in what we might call textual somniloquy? “To change the voice, to let the Other speak,” Maureen Reddy has argued, requires “replacing the traditional central consciousness with another that does not share the ideology of the racial (or sexual or gender) identity around which the genre formed” (9). Then it is only by forsaking the genre’s “central consciousness” and situating ourselves at its margins that we might entertain the not-quite-enunciated proposition that riddles Himes’s fictions: that an interracial modernity has left wounds that, however carefully cauterized, return in the form of phantom pains.

In *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois declares that the entire “phantasmagoria” of race subjugation in the United States “has been built on the most miserable of human fictions: that in addition to the manifest differences between men there is a deep, awful and ineradicable cleft which condemns most men to eternal degradation” (705–6). And yet in “The Relations of the Negroes to the Whites in the South,” he observes that “the white man as well as the Negro is bound and tied by the color line and many a scheme of friendship and philanthropy, of broad-minded sympathy, and generous fellowship between the two has dropped still-born” (332). To investigate the origins of classical detective fiction in an American context, I have argued, is to appreciate that the manifest content of recognizable detection texts is subsidiary to the narrative apparatus that organizes them. Assembling a genealogy of detective fiction and its devices in an American context allows us to parse the shape of an American “phantasmagoria,” to unleash what James Baldwin calls the “corpse” that “is in the closet,” which we may otherwise only “inadvertently stumble on.” In this way, exploring an integrated literary canon of proto- and peripheral genre texts alongside popular detective fictions underscores the significance of detective fiction to U.S. literary production. As a repository for a narrative “intelligence” fundamentally entwined with the possibility of an American interracial sociability, it traces an interracial history of the nation—and if “we can’t talk about that,” to invert Baldwin’s proposition, “we can’t talk about anything.”