

Article

Turned in and Away: The Convolutions of Impossible Incorporation in the Narratives of Chester Himes

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Abstract: This article examines motifs of falling, recoiling, and turning across Chester Himes' oeuvre as figurations of Black susceptibility to racial violence. These images reference and reconstruct an event from Himes' early adulthood: his catastrophic fall down an elevator shaft. Taking a psychoanalytically oriented approach, I analyze the metonymic connections between these motifs, rather than reading them in their chronological order, using Jean Laplanche's theory of *après-coup*. I argue that the recursive quality of these images in Himes' work is not merely an unconscious repetition or conscious working through of a traumatic biographical event but part of an endeavor to imagine different ways to inhabit and survive the structural trauma of Jim Crow America.

Keywords: susceptibility; psychoanalysis and race; Chester Himes; African American literature; trauma; critical race studies; black studies; modernism; *après-coup*; Jean Laplanche

1. Introduction

In February of 1926, Chester Himes, then a seventeen-year-old busboy at the Wade Park Manor in Cleveland, Ohio, walked into an elevator and plummeted two stories through the shaft. A subsequent investigation revealed that a faulty door mechanism, the result of hotel negligence, caused the doors to remain open after the carriage had moved to another floor [1], p. 57. The fall shattered his "chin and jaw, his left arm, which he used to break his fall, his pelvis, and three vertebrae" [1], p. 57. The experience was so intense that Himes could still vividly recall, forty-six years later, "the sensation of falling through space and landing on a solid platform with the feel of [his] body spattering open like a ripe watermelon", as he writes in his 1972 autobiography *The Quality of Hurt* [2], p. 19. The fall becomes a favorite trope to illustrate the economy of violation in Jim Crow America in Himes' writing and Black people's susceptibility to its violence. This article focuses on selected novels and the first volume of his autobiography but there are other examples of this scene in his short stories and non-fiction. I read these scenes out of turn from their publication chronology as part of a modified psychoanalytic approach that traces the metonymic associations between these disparate moments in Himes' oeuvre. By examining these scenes through Jean Laplanche's theory of *après-coup*, I argue that these representations of trauma show the generative dimension of a psychic state usually understood as merely disabling or disinhibiting. I use the term "susceptibility" to discuss the traumatic dimension of what Laplanche describes as a child's fundamental "openness" or "passivity" towards their caregiver. Himes keeps returning to this scene of intense personal violation, not to resolve that which refuses incorporation or translation, but to uncover different possible culprits for his injury by retracing the scene of the crime.

Himes revisits these events (or versions of them) repeatedly in his fiction. In *The Third Generation* (1954), a bildungsroman inspired by his childhood as part of the "third generation" descended from formerly enslaved people, Himes describes Charles Taylor's fall down an elevator shaft as an "absolute" and "over-all crushing sensation", which happens so quickly that "there was no time for fright or panic or the explosion of emotions in his mind" [3], p. 228. In *The Third Generation*, the elevator incident precipitates Taylor's



Citation: Reddon, M. Turned in and Away: The Convolutions of Impossible Incorporation in the Narratives of Chester Himes. *Philosophies* **2024**, *9*, 47. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9020047>

Academic Editor: Karyn Ball

Received: 1 November 2023

Revised: 1 April 2024

Accepted: 2 April 2024

Published: 9 April 2024



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fall into criminality, a Luciferian descent that other fictional works by Himes would repeat. The direct repurposing of biographical trauma is perhaps less surprising than the indirect references to violent falls across Himes' oeuvre. Many of his novels include characters falling out of windows, physically collapsing, mentally breaking down, or occasionally exploding into pieces. In *Plan B* (1983), for instance, anonymous vigilante gunmen begin conducting mass shootings to incite a revolution for Black liberation. In one scene, a Black shooter leans out of an upper window of a Harlem tenement building, showering bullets on police below, shouting gleefully "I'll fight you white motherfuckers" [4], p. 96. When the police retaliate, killing him, the gunman's body falls onto the street in "pieces of bloody flesh and splintered bone and loose teeth", so destroyed that no substantive "evidence" that he existed remained [4], p. 96. Like the enslaved people who flung themselves from slave ships [5–8]¹, the anonymous Black gunman sacrifices himself for liberation and escapes capture only through death. Without a body left to identify, the police struggle to ascertain a motive for these crimes. The disintegration of the gunman's body, like the spattering of fruit, literally repels thought: the "immediate horror was so great. . . [t]he mind recoiled from it" [4], p. 96. The event's illegibility incites intensifying waves of action, beginning with the gunman's, which prompt copycat shootings and police retaliation until the violence in the text grows to such proportions that the American economy literally collapses from the instability.

In other novels, the young Black protagonist's interiority becomes a site of invasion and rupture. Inspired by Himes' own experiences working in Oakland, California, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) is a novel about a Black shipyard worker in Los Angeles at the outset of the Pacific War. Robert "Bob" Jones begins the narrative as an upwardly mobile crew leader in a naval shipyard; he is employed, educated, and engaged to be married; however, by the end of the novel, Bob winds up jobless, fiancé-less, nearly beaten to death, and required to enlist in the war to avoid being convicted for a rape he did not commit. Bob's prospects rapidly change when he is accidentally locked in a room with his white co-worker, Madge Perkins, who tries repeatedly to coerce him into having sex with her. When Bob refuses, Madge seeks revenge by calling out for help and pretending that Bob has raped her. Recalling Himes' 'ripe' watermelon image, Bob describes his head swelling "as if it would explode"; he narrates his disassociation from his body as dockworkers break down the door to save her: "the din of activity from without [was] vaguely penetrating my consciousness—the shouts, the threats, the pleas—had no meaning in my mind. My reason was shattered; my senses outraged" [9], p. 181. Like the disembodied spectator viewing the destruction of the gunman in *Plan B*, Bob's capacity for thought ceases. In a scene replete with erotically charged images of Bob's swelling, exploding "head", Himes narrates the invasion of his psyche as a rape. This psychological violation becomes physical when Bob is nearly lynched. Bob's tumescent brain is "penetrated" and "shattered" by Madge's shouts and the voices of the dockworkers outside. Overwhelmed by "the din" forecasting his beating, Bob experiences a terrifying and orgasmic obliteration of thought.

Bob's experience of feeling personally invaded by the other is a repetition of the history of violation and loss of autonomy felt by Black people under enslavement; this figure of invasion is one of many permutations in Himes' writing, demonstrating the continuation of this specific form of racial violence and its adaptation to a new set of legal, social, and historical realities. Himes depicts the social and political failure to incorporate Black subjects into an American polity as an inescapable trauma that is experienced as serial violations of body and mind. These provocative images represent the racialized subject as fundamentally open and vulnerable to bodily and psychic injury by others. In one instance, such imagery exposes the devastating loss of authority and autonomy and, in another, dramatizes susceptibility as the basis for a revolutionary self-sacrifice. In both cases, the Black subject ends up "in pieces." Although *Plan B* seems to reserve the possibility that such openness might be weaponized towards the other or instrumentalized (albeit in a limited way) for revolutionary purposes, these pivotal scenes imagine a figure in recoil whose action (imploding or exploding) reflects opposing and mirrored responses of the Black

subject's susceptibility to the other. The figure-in-recoil also takes the form of a revolving or turning figure whose desire is met with the withdrawal and retreat of the other. As an intersubjective encounter, racialization is a psychic event whose origins are, much like the primal scene, constructed retroactively through fantasy and comprise the substance of a subject's experience of reality. I develop the psychic dimensions of this figure in more detail later on by discussing its relationship to Laplanche's theorization of susceptibility as an outcome of a traumatic activation of the child's fundamental passivity. Falling, being cast out, shattering, and being assaulted reflect different components of the original scene.

2. Enigmatic Hurts: Sexuality, Memory, Genealogy

In his autobiography, Himes represents this openness through a distinctive set of figures, which position the subject and the other as perpetually turning toward and away from one another. In *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes explains that mere moments before his fall, he had started feeling a fragile sense of competence in his job: "[I] had just gotten sufficiently adapted to the job so that I wasn't always tense and nervous and afraid I'd drop a tray or do something wrong" [2], p. 19. Striking up a conversation with two white girls who also worked at the hotel, Himes was "trying to screw up [his] courage to ask one out for a date", but when they realized what he wanted to do, "they laughingly steered the conversation to topical chitchat" about the time that the celebrity dog, Rin Tin-Tin, used to have a room at the hotel [2], p. 19-20. With "a sense of let-down", Himes recalls, "I turned away and pulled open the elevator doors and, looking at them accusingly, stepped inside" [2], p. 20. In this context, the language of turning, or revolution, registers Himes' susceptibility to the other. Wound and unwound, Himes screws up his nerve only to have the girls steer him away from the subject, a gesture that becomes a literal turn as he enters the elevator. The elevator fall thus amplifies the affective "drop" of narcissistic injury. "Spattering open like a ripe watermelon", Himes sexualizes his injured body as an "opening". The image of an uneaten, juicy fruit is suggestive of a burgeoning sexuality. Using an image commonly associated with the minstrel tradition in popular culture, the watermelon, Himes represents his sexual maturation through the simultaneously racial and erotic language of caricature and stereotype. Through the fall, with all the lapsarian implications of the loss of innocence, Himes as a Black man is cast from a "heaven" designated as white femininity.

The "spattering open" of the watermelon is a self-image that has been made vulnerable to the other through their desire. The violent splitting of the subject, imagined as the fullness of interiority breaking open on itself, dramatizes the injuriousness of sexuality as it is staged in the racial grammar of popular culture. An allegory of the primal scene, the elevator fall catalyzes the Black subject's violent entry into a social world that refuses his desire and dehumanizes him for it: Himes literally "falls" into Jim Crow.

The transatlantic slave trade's disruption of kinship materializes in the antebellum period as a loss of paternal (and maternal) authority within the family whose effects, Hortense Spillers theorizes, include the sexualization of this loss through forms of objectification [10]². After his accident, an ambulance rushed a conscious and badly injured Himes to the University Hospital of Cleveland. In the parking lot, hospital staff gave Himes' a morphine injection and turned him away ostensibly due to "space constraints" [1], p. 57. The ambulance then drove Himes, "gurgling blood and spitting out teeth", to the Huron Road Hospital "for charity cases" where doctors put him in a full body cast and placed him on a crowded ward. Later that same day, Himes underwent emergency surgery for a ruptured urethra [1], p. 57. In total, Himes spent six months recovering limb function on a ward for the terminally ill before the hospital could discharge him. While in hospital, Himes also agreed to sign away his right to sue the hotel at his father's behest, agreeing to the continuation of his salary and a small settlement in lieu of legal action, a decision that drove his parents' to eventually divorce [1], p. 58. While his mother wanted to sue the hotel, his father "astounded by state laws regulating the workplace--which meant that the hospital bills were paid and that Chester would get the same salary that his father earned for the best years of his working life--encouraged Chester to sign away legal liability

for the accident" [1], p. 58. The fight between his parents took on, Lawrence Jackson argues, an "ideological" dimension for Chester who perceived the "obsequious[ness]" of his darker-skinned father as a form of "Uncle Tom[ism]" and the "rebellious dissent" of his white-passing mother as an admirable but equally untenable response for reasons, which I will discuss shortly [1], p. 58. In his early political writing in the 1940s, there are echoes of this early family conflict in Himes' searing critiques of Black liberalism and its pandering to a mainstream discourse of social uplift through assimilation³.

In his autobiography, after he is turned away from the hospital, it occurs to Himes "that a scene was being re-enacted, that [he] had seen it all before in the white hospital in Pine Bluff, Arkansas" [2], p. 20. As a young child, Chester and his brother Joseph were set to perform a chemistry experiment for a school project. According to Chester, his mother grounded him at the last minute for throwing an "explosive compound against the house" and talking back to her, while Joseph recalled that "Chester simply refused to perform the experiment" [1], p. 43. During the demonstration, which Joseph performed alone, a mistake in the process caused a small explosion: "in a loud puffing flash, a smoke cloud the size of a gallon jug engulfed him; ground glass had been driven into his eyes" [1], p. 43. Joseph was rushed to the closest hospital, a whites-only institution, where he was turned away by the doctors and forced to seek care at a hospital further away. The delay in treatment cost Joseph most of his vision. "So in Cleveland three years later", Himes reflects, "I too was turned away..." [2], p. 19. Like Joseph, Himes was refused a "chemistry" partner and then refused care. Turning towards another and being turned away are repetitions of this earlier scene of familial trauma. Hinting at the fantasies born from these first refusals, the hospital's repudiation of care acquires the quality of a promise belatedly delivered. The adverb "too" suggests the accretional quality of these harms within the family as they are repeated and displaced from one child to another, shifting from the familial towards romantic attachments and from maternal to institutional authorities.

The figure of the turn metaphorizes another set of complexities within the Himes family regarding his mother, Estelle Bomar Himes. According to his autobiographical fiction *The Third Generation* and his autobiography *The Quality of Hurt*⁴, Estelle maintained throughout her life that her lighter skin was evidence of an aristocratic background:

... [Estelle] developed elaborate genealogical and romantic myths, linking herself at every turn to aristocrats. Estelle liked to describe her mother as the offspring of 'pedigreed Englishman,' an Irish trader, and a woman whose mother was an "African princess". She proudly described her father's father as a direct descendent from an English noble family [1], p. 2

One version of this story suggested that Estelle believed she was the descendant of a member of British royalty and a Cherokee princess [2]. In an early study of African American literature from 1958, Robert Bone suggests that such stories commonly expressed a desire to assimilate, though it seems more likely that they were used to deflect social and political oppression through an overt identification with other racial groups [13], p. 4–5. In the antebellum period, these forms of racial identification sought to protect Black people from "enslavement and black codes" through the identification of "mulattoes" with whiteness [1], p. 2. In this case, by allowing Estelle to simultaneously claim an imperial whiteness and a sovereign indigeneity, her fantasy offers a form of disidentification that seems to defend against the knowledge that she was the descendant of an enslaved woman whose children may have resulted from rape by an enslaver⁵. While there are competing accounts about the degree to which their mother believed in her own stories and the impact that these stories had on the family's eventual estrangement, Estelle's "turn" away from her heritage is often described in Himes' writing as the original source of familial strife⁶.

Both the Himes and Bomar families were well-educated and prosperous in the early post-bellum period. Chester's father, Joseph Sandy Himes Sr., was a professor of black-smithing and wheelwrighting, a trade he learned from his father, also named Joseph Sandy Himes (nee Sandy Neely), who was a skilled freedman "with a business large enough to employ fellow blacks" [1], p. 10. Estelle, comparatively, attended a mixed Presbyterian

college for Black women, Scotia Seminary, which had an excellent liberal arts curriculum and stressed “cultur[al] refinement, appropriate diction, dress and manners” [1], p. 6–7. When they married in 1901, two flourishing Black families came together; however, according to Chester’s version of events, Estelle’s determination to place her family in an economic situation befitting their “aristocratic roots” drew the family into a slow downward spiral ending with their financial ruin [1,2]. Aided and abetted by structural, cultural, and historical forces pitted against Black upward mobility, Estelle’s frequent meddling in faculty politics caused the family to move from college to college as Joseph tried to mitigate the social catastrophes instigated by his wife. Each move placed Joseph in less and less lucrative positions with less and less decorative titles. By the time of Chester’s accident, Joseph was working as an unskilled laborer making a substantially smaller salary because blacksmithing became a nearly obsolete skill after the introduction of the model-T [1]. The elevator accident assured further economic insecurity for the family, especially during the early recovery period when it was not clear whether Himes would regain the use of his legs or if he would remain disabled for life.

The figure of the turn conjoins a series of distinct memories. At a moment of dire economic precarity and bodily injury, the hospital’s rejection of the Himes’ sons for their blackness echoes Estelle’s refusal to recognize her Black heritage. The gesture of turning towards someone conveys a desired attachment, which the turn away refuses or denies. A tacit fantasy of white paternalism seems to conjoin Estelle’s refusal of family history with the hospitals’ refusal of care, which appears to deflate Himes at a crucial and vulnerable moment.

According to Laplanche, a child’s normative development requires them to have a radical openness towards their caregivers, which makes the child susceptible to harm and violation. In his model of the psyche, an adult unintentionally communicates a “non-verbal” message to a child, an “enigmatic signifier”, that cannot be fully understood by the child [16], p. 165. Pregnant with inscrutable meaning, the enigmatic signifier must undergo translation to be incorporated into the child’s psychic life. In their attempt to understand the adult’s unconsciously delivered message, the child creates successful and unsuccessful translations of this message, which manifests as conscious and unconscious thought [16], p. 101. The presence of the adult’s unconscious within the enigmatic signifier means that there will always be an “untranslatable” aspect to this message addressed to the child, which means that this process of translation continues long after this initial scene of implantation. Significantly, the child is not the progenitor of their own psychic reality in Laplanche’s model [17], p. 193. Interiority is an “invasive” structure because it emerges from the implantation of an adult’s unconscious within a passive child [17], p. 193. This “internal other” generates normative development by sparking the work of translation necessary to unfold the child’s internal life.

In psychic trauma, the child experiences this benign or ambivalent internal other as a hostile foreign entity, which interrupts the “self-temporalization” process necessary for establishing egoic integrity [18], p. 46. As a unique form of harm, psychic trauma creates an “incompatibility in ideational life” that interrupts development and socialization [18], p. 44. As in Freud’s original theory, trauma occurs when the child makes a connection between new and old memories of an event (or events) that threatens established meanings and interpretations. In his reworking of this theory, Laplanche posits that the child experiences this interruption as an internal attack:

Because the ego has developed between the two scenes, it is attacked from an unexpected direction. It is ready to defend itself against an attack coming from the outside, but here it is attacked from the inside, from a memory. Thus we arrive at trauma in two steps, which means that, because of the nature of the second step, all psychic trauma is *self-traumatization, internal traumatization*. That is to say, it is the residual memories of an earlier scene that have a traumatic function. [18], p. 46

The enigmatic signifier within the child suddenly becomes negatively charged because of these new translations. The child's primary openness towards the adult no longer supports their psychic growth or functioning but, instead, inhibits it. Susceptibility, in this case, refers to the damaging effects of this structure of interiority, which "turns" away from translations that bind sexuality within the subject, "crude[ly]" and "narcissistic[ally]" organizing the drive for egoic function, towards translations that unbind the ego's "unitary, specular form" [18], p. 86.

After Freud, Laplanche calls this process *après-coup*, or "afterwardness", and he uses the figure of a spiral to represent how memory literally turns in and away from itself through successive, syncopated turns. Memory thus "returns" in a redoubled sense, and the traumatic force of this return derives, in part, from its deferral of an earlier experience of susceptibility. Laplanche evocatively refers to the alternative translation of *après-coup* as "after-blows" [19], p. 17, which quite literally appear in Himes' autobiography in the series of compounding "blows" punctuating each "turn" of memory that connects his accident to his brother's blinding⁷. For a Black man under Jim Crow, the traumatic rhythm of a self pummeled by memory's blows not only disrupts normative development but also evinces a generalized condition of pervasively violent racial socialization. The systemic exploitation of susceptibility helps maintain the symbolic order of white supremacy through the disruption or disabling of Black life. The figure of the turn speaks to the struggle of differentiation that the process of translation engenders between the child and the implantation of the parent in the child. In this specific case, the turn represents the traumatic translation of an enigmatic message delivered from mother to son that becomes re-activated when social institutions deny and refuse care. Himes' sensitivity towards gestures of refusal and abnegation—postures associated with his mother's relationship to her own blackness—reflects some of the complexity of the enigmatic signifier as an implantation as well as an interpellative structure that connects the family structure to a broader cultural unit.

This problem of psychic differentiation is related to another problem of differentiation between the subject and power. Examining descriptions of power in G.W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler remarks that the form that "power takes" in these texts "is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* oneself" [21], p. 3. Power is formative, "external, pressed upon the subject, [and] pressing the subject into subordination" [21], p. 3. But it is also generative and life-sustaining as an internal force that assumes the "psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" [21], p. 3. Power envelops the subject and *is* the subject, but neither is fully reducible to the other. The image of the turn marks out an illusory "limit" between power and the subject, an abstraction of the "founding moment [of the subject] whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain" [21], p. 3. As a fantasy of origins, this figure of envelopment discloses an impossible distinction between an "internal" expression of power (qua subjectivity) and an "external" expression of power (qua the law, the symbolic order, etc). If connected with Himes' writing, this impasse suggests that the turn he explores does not merely represent his own agonized attachment to his parents but also reflects an attempt to theorize the racialize subject's envelopment by a symbolic law or cultural logic whose operation proliferates injury.

This animating force that is simultaneously of us and not of us registers some of the complexity of the process of psychic translation, as a negotiation with the enigmatic demand of the other who is both a specific person (member of the family, caregiver figure) and a transcendent symbolic Other. In the elevator and along the ride to the hospital, the successive returns of memory disclose a set of hallucinatory origins of blackness that are real and fixed but also radically contingent on a particular historical moment. Transference allows the child's susceptibility towards the parent to become co-opted by the interpellative structures of society, linking dissociative experiences of the self as Black to early states of psychic development.

In an essay reflecting on Beverly Stoute's theorization of Black rage as a dynamic defense, Michelle A. Stephens suggests that "the hope of afterwardness" for Laplanche

“was that in analysis, one could create a more agile, back-and-forth relationship with one’s reified histories, a motion that allows for resignification of original traumatic events” [22], p. 342. Though it is tempting to read Himes’ memory work as a form of literary auto-analysis, my purpose for shuttling through these images is to show how he investigates what Stephens describes as the “deeply embedded metapsychological structures that are historically specific to modernity and that structure the unconscious” [22], p. 342. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter, Stephens suggests the discursive “overrepresentation” of humanity as white has material effects, which include the sedimentation of certain forms of subjectivity that speak to a set of emergent psychic structures born out of these cultural processes. Blackness is excluded from the category of the human through the forms of discursive “mystification” that manufacture whiteness as the norm [22], p. 342. As a result, those who inhabit blackness are subject to extreme dissociative effects. While these structures seek to engender and reproduce specific racialized forms of subjectivity, the mistake that theorists of race often perform, Stephens suggests, is to reify these structures as universal, unalterable, unchangeable ontologies of race post-enslavement through readings that insist this overrepresentation is totalizing: the “descriptive statement of the human we have inherited as unconscious discourse” is not the only “disciplining lens” that produces Black life [22], p. 330. Rather than an inescapable ontological position where all inheritors of enslavement remain caught “in the galley” of the slave ship, Stephens suggests that determinative force of the human as a discursive category is always partial, subject to both historical contingency and the transformative explosion of social relationality [22], p. 341.

Through the architecture of his own psychic distress, Himes is drawing a picture of his racialization by a social structure: his experience of his own social and psychic exclusion from the category of the human. The elevator scene in Himes’ autobiography captures both the dematerializing force of this disassociation and Himes’ own struggle against it. By re-staging this experience in different texts, Himes addresses questions that Afro-pessimism has been trying to solve through racial ontologies of the middle passage: is the lack of coherence felt by racialized subjects key to thinking about how to interrupt the social and cultural reproduction of race? Can the racialized subject imagine themselves outside of these forms of suffering when this structure forms the very psychic architecture that supports subjectivity and desire itself? Does conjuring another world necessarily involve presupposing the radical “end” of such suffering through forms of death and dissolution? In the mode of modernist self-invention, Himes plays with genre to sound out the diverse ways of inhabiting this annihilative state.

While the essential shape or outline of the subject remains consistently a “body”, its figurative representation reflects a series of metonymic shifts: the turning, falling, penetrated, and exploded figures I’ve described. Rather than demonstrate the persistence of slavery as a racial ontology or a form of repetition compulsion, the proliferation of metonymies in Himes’ work suggests that there is something generative happening by returning to these scenes. Examining the vital forms of expression manifest in response to the annihilatory force of the law, Dina Al-Kassim theorizes the modernist rant to be a genre that “generates a field of images and meanings” for the speaking subject who lives under a “social foreclosure” [23], p. 10. While the images I’ve gathered are not exactly a rant, only legible as a discrete object of literary analysis through the collation of disparate moments, these circuitous returns speak to a literary mode like the rant that is “radically dependent upon a particular history of injury” and which seeks to “[set] subjection to work to expose, invent, and manifest new terms for the particular subject” despite its failure to materialize such a position [23], p. 10. The renewed attempt at interpreting his own primary attachments offers Himes an expanding language for inhabiting this interminable space. In assembling these different moments, Himes’ writing materializes, as the genre of the modernist rant does, “a boundary or limit that is lived as a law, beyond which lies unintelligibility and social death” [23], p. 13.

3. Twists and Turns: Figures of Falling

While most of the scenes I have discussed so far represent the disabling nature of this “history of injury,” I would now like to look at one example where Himes turns this tragedy into comedy. In his third detective novel, *The Crazy Kill* (1959), an opium-addicted Black priest, Reverend Short, takes a cartoonish fall out of a window from the second story of a Harlem tenement building. In the novel’s opening scene, a wake is being held for local gangster and crime boss, Big Joe. While a jazz band plays mournful music, the Reverend looks out of the window from an adjacent room to spot a Black thief stealing a bag of money from a white store owner. Spying a Black policeman, the Reverend calls down to him to tell him which direction the thief went. As the policeman chases the thief out of the scene, the Reverend leans out of the window:

The silhouette shortened as the man leaned farther and farther out the window to watch the chase. What had first appeared to be a tall thin man slowly became a short squat midget. And still the man leaned farther out. When the cop and the store manager turned the corner, the man was leaning so far out his silhouette was less than two feet high. He was leaning out of the window from his waist up. Slowly his hips leaned out. His buttocks rose into the light like a slow-rolling wave, then dropped below the window ledge as his legs and feet slowly rose into the air. For a long moment the silhouette of two feet sitting upside down on top of two legs was suspended in the yellow lighted rectangle. Then it sank slowly from view, like a body going head-down into water. The man fell in slow motion, leaning all the way, so that he turned slowly in the air. He fell past the window underneath, which bore the black-lettered message:

STRAIGHTEN UP AND FLY RIGHT

Anoint the Love Apples

With Father Cupid’s Original

ADAM OINTMENT

A Cure For All Love Troubles

To one side of the cartons and crates was a long wicker basket of fresh bread. The large soft spongy loaves, wrapped in wax paper, were stacked side by side like cotton pads. The man landed at full length on his back exactly on top of the mattress of soft bread. Loaves flew up about him like the splash of freshly packaged waves as his body sank into the warm bed of bread [24], p. 6–7.

In a surreal sequence, the Reverend begins to fall out of the window just as the cop and store manager “turn the corner” below him. Changing shape and size, the “tall man” becomes a “short man”⁸. The Reverend’s feet are briefly silhouetted in a “yellow lighted rectangle” as if he were in a cartoon panel before he falls down, past a sign that pops up like a cartoon bubble and lands in a giant breadbasket. From the basket, the Reverend rises up like a resurrected Christ and stares back at the window above, lit “strangely like the pearly gates” [24], p. 8.

While Himes’ grew out of the American and African American naturalist movement, *The Crazy Kill* offers an unusual version of social determinism, one that builds on this literature by imagining trauma as having a transferential and transformative effect on the landscape around the traumatized subject. After his fall, the Reverend goes back upstairs to the wake where he accuses one of the partygoers (who had conveniently left the party, just before the Reverend’s return) of pushing him out of the window. While in the middle of arguing with the Reverend about whether this happened, Mamie Pullen, the hostess and widow of Big Joe, gets a strange phone call, which alerts the party that there is a “dead man” lying in the breadbasket in the street below their apartment [24], p. 23. When Pullen informs the anonymous caller that the Reverend isn’t dead and that he was upstairs making a nuisance, the caller tells her the dead man is actually Valentine “Val” Haines and hangs

up the phone. The party goes down to investigate to find Valentine lying dead, stabbed to death, in the same breadbasket where the Reverend had previously fallen. The Reverend has escaped harm only for another to suffer it; harm is transposed from one body to another through an eerie repetition.

While *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, *The Third Generation*, and *The Quality of Hurt* all seem to be asking whether young Black men can live in a traumatizing social world without being disabled by it, the black comedy of *The Crazy Kill* seems fundamentally disinterested in questions of livability and interiority and, instead, more concerned with affirming the economy of death, sex, and desire “in the wake” of the fall, to use Christina Sharpe’s term [7]. Nonetheless, there are a number of echoes between this scene and Himes’ autobiography that suggest this surreal, cartoonish world of doubles opens onto an interior landscape unique to Himes. The plot of this novel is complex because, much like this first scene, it involves a significant amount of substitution between characters. The longer arc of the narrative involves a complicated love triangle between the nephew of Big Joe and local bookie, Johnny Perry, his wife, Dulcy, and another local criminal, Chink Charlie Dawson. While Himes invites us to believe that the killer is one of these three suspects, readers eventually learn that the Reverend is the murderer.

The motives for the crime seem to be a direct reference to Himes’ personal experience of sexual rejection from the girls at the hotel. Readers learn that the Reverend is in love (or lust) with Dulcy and that, during one of her confessionals, he learns that she is bigamous. Valentine is actually Dulcy’s first husband and not her brother as they both claimed. The couple were pretending to be siblings so that Johnny would support them financially but, over the course of the con, Dulcy fell in love with Johnny and Valentine befriended him. The advertisement for STI ointment speaks to a suppressed desire for a forbidden sexual encounter and the harm of such desire through reference to the injury Himes’ sustained in the fall to his urethra. In this case, Himes introduces a theological dimension to the fall. Like the biblical Adam who eats the apple of knowledge and is cast from paradise, the Reverend’s knowledge of Dulcy is poison: he knows too much about other people in the community because of their confessions, and this knowledge is corrupting, “poisoning his apples.” Thus, the Reverend has a sexual sickness that needs a ceremonial cure for his love “troubles”, a purifying gesture that will make him “straighten up” and return to moral justness—to “fly right” rather than down.

Moreover, that the man who dies is also someone who was pretending to be someone’s brother might seem to be an indirect reference to the chemistry accident, long held by Himes as the source of alienation between him and his own brother⁹. The killing of a false brother resonates too with the choice of names: “Haines” sounds like “Himes.” The repetition of hurts is repeated figuratively in the narrative through a doubling of detectives, lovers, and injuries. For instance, the scene of the crime echoes an earlier scene of injury. Haines lies in the same spot in the breadbasket where the Reverend fell. The transference between the Reverend and Valentine materializes quite literally as the imprint of the body in the basket. “Breaking bread” is a visual gag referencing the Eucharist and the money Valentine tried to extract from Johnny. Thus, the “scene of the crime” is literally stamped with this earlier moment as Haines lies in the shape made by the Reverend’s body in the “warm bed” of broken bread. But, also, figuratively, (Valentine) Haines is stabbed by “cupid’s arrow”, killed by a representation of the Reverend’s desire for Dulcy, a detail that is made denser when we learn that he used a knife that had been given to Dulcy by Chink Charlie, the other unsuccessful suitor and sexual rival in this story. Unlike the elevator accident, the Reverend’s body does not shatter in the fall, but the subsequent baroque-ness of the plotting of the narrative suggests a kind of explosion of detail and reference that translates the invasive quality of the other and its shattering effect on interiority into a stylistic ripple that assaults the reader with a barrage of “twists” and “turns” in the plot. Like the “turn”, this doubled inscription is another figure for the afterlife of slavery; the repetition of violation from one historical moment to another, from enslavement to Jim Crow, animates the deadly desire permeating this world.

At the same time, there is a deformation of the language of “brotherhood” through a crime whose power to unbind collective attachments materializes through the repetitions and doubling it engenders. Doubles are a recurring element in Himes’ noires, which almost always feature his Black detective duo, Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones. While his detectives have had an outsized impact on the criticism, a strange feature of Himes’ novels seems to be the fact that, more often than not, the “detective figure” doing the legwork to map out the crime tends to be a secondary criminal figure who puts the clues together before they do, usually to try and get a piece of the action. In this case, Johnny becomes the pseudo-detective who interviews all of his associates to suss out Dulcy’s involvement (whether she has been unfaithful, whether she had something to gain from her brother’s death) and the possible motives for killing Valentine. Thus, doubles compound on doubles, creating a set of repetitions through character and plot that evoke the splitting of the subject as a kind of reproductive force that enters into others and animates them. Crime materializes from prior scenes of hurt as an echo, an imprint, and as a condition of subjective agency but not in any way that resembles sovereignty or intentionality. Instead, these images reinforce the agential quality of the enigmatic signifier as an internal other that is trafficked between bodies. This is not the same as saying one’s traumas repeat themselves but that the very shape of action becomes delimited, outlined, by the imprint of these prior scenes. Susceptibility spreads outwards as an internal structure is externalized. The echo between the past and the present reveals a persistent residue that reproduces itself through other people.

Unlike the other iterations of this figure that I’ve discussed, the fall in *The Crazy Kill* does not culminate with a recoiling or turning away; instead, the Reverend turns towards and up at the “pearly gates” of the window. The fall seems to authorize the suspension of law and order, guided by a hallucinatory fantasy of theological permission. On their way to the wake, Haines and Johnny decide to play a prank on Mamie Pullen by having Haines lie down in the basket and pretend he is dead. When the Reverend sees Valentine lie down in the breadbasket, he interprets this as a sign from God that he should kill Valentine so that Dulcy will be free to be with him:

... I’ve come to realize it was God who pushed me. I had the urge to fall, but I was holding back, and God had to give me a little push. Then God placed that basket of bread on the sidewalk to break my fall. . . . When I got out of the bread basket and found myself unhurt, I knew right away that God had placed me in that position to accomplish some task. . . . While I was waiting for God to instruct me, I saw Valentine Haines crossing the street. . . . I knew right away that God wanted me to do something about him. I stood out of sight and watched him from the shadows. Then I saw him walk up to the bread basket and lie down as though to go to sleep. He lay just as I thought he were lying in a coffin awaiting his burial. I knew then what it was that God wanted me to do [24], p. 157

In the longer quotation above, just before the Reverend’s fall and this encounter, the Reverend watched a Black policeman chase a Black thief in order to return or rescue a white man’s money. This tableau seems to be a loaded critique of a Black community’s internal policing of itself in the service of a white capitalist economy. The fall through the window suspends an unjust law and order as the Reverend interprets his safe landing as a sign from God that he is authorized to act on his desires or to weaponize this annihilative desire for his own ends.

4. Conclusions

The abundance of falling scenes appears as a kind of violent metastasis within Himes’ writing; however, these narrative returns also insist on the failure of psychic (and social) incorporation as a condition of livability for the Black subject and, indeed, in the generative dimension of such a failure. In his monograph on the economies of meaning generated by Black communities, Lindon Barrett posits that the economy of whiteness as a system of exchange (of meaning as well as materiality) “occludes” competing systems of value,

including those which traffic in the “excess” found at the limits of cultural and epistemic intelligibility [27], p. 56. The crime scene repeats the enigmatic address of the scene of implantation and the stirrings of sexuality. As the Reverend falls out of the window, the narrative opens onto another economy of meaning wherein the duplication and repetition of images of blackness disclose another set of values and meanings. The adult’s betrayal of the child becomes an unconscious desire to be duped and to dupe others, a desire permeating the entire world of the novel. Like the nameless Black policeman at the beginning of the novel, Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed eventually chase down the Reverend but the repetition of this catch and release does not seem to underwrite the success of the “law” as a determinative and authoritative force.

Himes’ writing suggests that incorporation into the world of Jim Crow is not possible without experiences of psychic obliteration; however, these metonymies suggest that the afterlife of trauma is not merely interruption or inhibition but the perverse enjoyment of the law through its *détournement*. If Laplanche’s theorization of the child’s susceptibility to the adult offers limited ways of constellating the desiring subject, Himes offers us ways of thinking about how trauma might sustain or articulate a desire that is self-sustaining, even if it does not promise an evolution or progression from an early childhood state or assure us of radical political emancipation. Reveling in forbidden pleasures, the vitality of the repeating images of recoiling, turning, and falling unfolds an alternative world within a world wherein invasion, rupture, and revolution become possible means of action and defense against annihilation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback and to Sheila Giffen, Jeff Noh, Carmen Mathes, Steven Maye, Judith Scholes, and Anne Stewart, who read my drafts and gave helpful suggestions in helping me revise this paper for publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ For a discussion of figurative turns in the context of leaping overboard in the late eighteenth century British accounts of the transatlantic slave trade, see Ian Baucom’s “Specters of the Atlantic.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2001): 61–82 [5]; Carmen Faye Mathes, “Apostrophe’s Occasions: Two Postures of Abolitionist Address”, unpublished article [6]; Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, 2016 and, specifically, her chapter on the experimental soundings of M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* [7]; and Evie Shockley’s discussion of “going overboard” as a method in “Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage”, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2011, pp. 791–817 [8].
- ² See the essays on kinship in Spillers’ *Black, White, and in Color*, specifically “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Racial Grammar Book” and “‘The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)libly Straight’: In the Time of Daughters the Fathers” [10].
- ³ See “Negro Martyrs Needed” [11] and “Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in America” [12].
- ⁴ In *The Quality of Hurt* [2], Himes recalls that his mother believed she was the descendant of a member of British royalty and a Cherokee princess. In an early study of African American literature from 1958, Robert Bone suggests that such stories were common ways of expressing a desire to assimilate though it seems more likely that such stories were used to avoid social and political oppression [13], p. 4–5. See also Melissa Schrift’s *Becoming Melungeon: Making an Ethnic Identity in the Appalachian South* for a discussion of how certain lighter-skinned Black peoples reframed their blackness as a “Turkish” or “Brass Ankles” identity [14].
- ⁵ For a detailed account of the Bomar and Himes’ family trees see *Lawrence Jackson’s Chester B. Himes: A Biography*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2017 [1].
- ⁶ The stories Himes tells of his early family life in his autobiography and interviews are much more elaborate and embellished than his brother’s (Joseph S. Himes) version of these same events. See Gwendoline Lewis Roget’s “The Ethics of Ambiguity: Interview with Joseph Sandy Himes, Jr.” In *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*, edited by Charles L. P. Silet. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999 [15].

- 7 The ubiquity of racism suggests that racialized subjects must be more susceptible to states of traumatic passivity. Cultural messages about race are no doubt implanted in the child as part of the enigmatic message addressed to the child by adults, and they are also part of the scripts or codes used by the child to translate these messages into conscious meaning that accords with social norms. Whether we describe Himes' work as part of an adaptive defense against the ubiquity of anti-blackness, his strategy of re-translating the enigmatic signifier might be considered part of an adaptation of moral injury into a transformative practice that Beverly Stoute defines as "Black Rage" in *Black Rage: The Psychic Adaptation to the Trauma of Oppression* [20].
- 8 This may be an oblique reference to Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* (1934), where the search for the "thin man" yields a "fat man" whose role as the victim is later connected to the murderer [25].
- 9 See *Conversations with Chester Himes* [26].

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