CHAPTER 5

Lonely Crusade: Union Dues

5.1 ‘History as Nightmare’: The Critical Reception of Lonely Crusade

The American black is a new race of man; the only new race of man to come into being in modern time.¹

This chapter investigates Communist Party representation in Lonely Crusade. On the surface this is a straightforward enough enterprise. The Communists in the novel occupy a variety of malevolent roles. They are a mixture of sexual degenerates, abstract theorists, calculating hypocrites or, at best, self-deluders. Himes presents a seemingly unambiguous portrait of an opportunist organisation which preys on black despair. The novel has been critically constructed as a straight anti-Communist text which highlights Himes’s ‘acid distrust’ of the Communists.² However, Himes’s portrayal of the Communist Party is more complicated than simple repudiation. Potent models of black male identity are circulated through his representation of the Communist Party. These models are central to the assertion of a black masculine identity which structures Lonely Crusade.

Himes is best known for his detective novels of the late 1950s and 1960s and their Harlem-based aesthetic of urban black cool.³ In a reversal of Wright’s literary trajectory, it is only in recent years that his 1947 novel Lonely Crusade has merited comprehensive critical attention. For the purposes of this study, Lonely Crusade is an essential text as a 1940s novel which centres on the politics of the Communist Party during the Second World War. Himes’s early ‘protest’ novels are often considered as belonging to the ‘Wright School’.⁴ His first novel, If He Hollers Let Him Go (1943), along with Lonely Crusade, are seen as the literary heirs of Native Son. Yet, it would be a mistake to bracket Native Son and Lonely Crusade within the generic paradigm of black identity-construction. For all of their thematic similarity, both aesthetically and politically, these novels are

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² Lee 1999, p. 69.
⁴ Lundquist 1976, p. 27.
as divergent as they are analogous. Himes’s protagonist is a college-educated product of the American West Coast, socially and spatially a long way from Bigger Thomas. Historically, in the seven years between *Native Son* and *Lonely Crusade*, there was a shift in the relationship between the Communist Party and African-American workers. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Second World War saw the subordination of domestic politics to the defence of Mother Russia and many Party demands were effectively subsumed to the needs of the war effort.

The critical reception of *Lonely Crusade* is significant less as an act of literary contextualisation, than as a record of the transgressive nature of the text in 1940s America. Himes, who was devastated at the novel’s reception, considered that the onslaught of negative reviews was an indication of the ‘veracity’ of the novel’s confrontational treatment of sexual relations (especially interracial sex) black-Jewish relations and Communist treachery. However, rather than restating Himes’s claim that he pinpointed the ‘truth’ about American racial and sexual politics, the intention in this chapter is to interrogate the gendered racial identity within *Lonely Crusade*. Many of the novel’s major themes prefigure seminal debates in black politics, particularly of the Black Power movement of the 1960s. The novel is a fascinating register of pre-Civil Rights discourses on black male identity. I am concerned with if, and how, those discourses relate to earlier models of black rage, articulated by the CPUSA.

*Lonely Crusade* was published in 1947 to mixed reviews. Although hated by the Communist Press androundly criticised on stylistic grounds, the novel’s reception was not as unconditionally negative as Himes later suggested: ‘Of all the hurts which I had suffered before … and which I have suffered since, the rejection of *Lonely Crusade* hurt me most’. Although Arna Bontemps in the *New York Herald Tribune*, Arthur Burke in *Crisis*, and James Baldwin in *The New Leader* gave qualified, if not unreserved, praise for the book, Himes was not significantly overstating the general level of antagonism the novel provoked, particularly on the Left. *The Daily Worker* published a cartoon with Himes carrying a white flag, and the critical reception led to personal appearances on radio and in bookstores to promote the book being cancelled. *The New Masses* suggested: ‘The issuance of this book ought to be met with more than passive anger, more than contempt. It should call for action. It should be buried deep

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6 For Himes’s estimation of the critical response to the novel, see Himes 1973, pp. 100–2.