

2 Incorporation and Embodiment

Gender, Race, and Space in Hurst and Himes

In the three years in L.A. I'd worked up to a good job in a shipyard, bought a new Buick car, and cornered off the finest coloured chick west of Chicago.

CHESTER HIMES/*IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO*

In the above quote from *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, protagonist Bob Jones sums up the three main issues this chapter takes as its focus, namely, path-breaking career advancement; geographic mobility as an American fascination; and the intersections of gender and sexuality with geographic and spatial concerns. In Chester Himes's 1945 novel, as in Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, published twelve years earlier, these issues are crucial to the main characters in their pursuit of upward class mobility. The time frame of the publication of the novels—1933 to 1945—is exceeded by their settings in that Hurst's narrative begins in the 1910s, moving through World War I and into the 1930s. Thus, the combined historical reach of the two texts extends from 1911 to the height of U.S. involvement in World War II. During this time—from World War I to the Depression to World War II—class was of particular importance for white women and for African Americans, who were moving into new areas of employment motivated first by economic necessity and later by national labor shortages. Whereas *Imitation of Life* portrays a nation in which white women are expected to cultivate domesticity—with the assistance of African American women servants—and

leave paid work and big business to men, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* addresses the friction arising from the entry of white women and African Americans into the wartime work force in jobs formerly reserved for white men.

As American business and military ventures expanded in the first half of the century, rapid changes in racial and gender norms manifested themselves in the public spaces of the major American cities on the East and West Coasts. In Hurst's novel, Bea Pullman defies gender restrictions against women in business in the East Coast centers of commerce while she negotiates the conflict between her business career and the traditionally feminine domestic sphere, a role Bea displaces onto her African American maid and confidante, Delilah. But in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, set in Los Angeles during World War II, race comes out of the home and into the public sphere, where Bob Jones struggles with racism on the streets and on the job. Himes's novel depicts the crisis of spatial and racial boundaries as Bob's wartime job brings him into daily intimate contact with white men and women, showing not only his experiences of racism, but the ways in which Bob copes with racism through the strange permutations of sexism and class prejudice available to him as an ambitious African American man. It is in the public sphere, in the workplace, that Bob and Bea fight to overcome the disadvantages that mark their individual identities as they participate in American expansion worldwide: Bea's company goes global while Bob works on ships for the Navy during World War II. These two novels are the best choices for this inquiry because they both take an outright interest in the traditionally "domestic" issues of race and gender that many texts of the time period kept below the surface of the narrative.¹ They also mark out the terrain in which public and private space is being recon-

1 As if there wasn't enough othering going on in both novels, the specter of the lesbian is invoked in order to reinforce the heterosexual main characters: Bea's female employees develop crushes on her and Bob's girlfriend Alice takes him to her lesbian friend Stella's house for a party, where he meets Stella and her lover, who appears jealous of Alice's relationship with Stella. One could argue that because so many other categories of identity—race, gender, class—are so overdetermined, the heterosexuality of the protagonists must be asserted as a kind of last resort. However, such an analysis would regrettably take far more elaboration, so I leave it out for lack of space.

figured, during a period in which American notions about work underwent enormous shifts: from the restrictive 1910s and 20s to the 1940s war in which women and African Americans were recruited to work “white men’s” jobs once off-limits but now their patriotic duty.

Hurst’s novel, like the two films based on it, has been read primarily in terms of the race relations between Bea and Delilah: Lauren Berlant’s essay “National Brands/National Body” is perhaps the best known study, in which she reads the book and both films² following the changing focus of each text and how each represents the American national body politic through raced female bodies. Berlant’s essay traces Bea’s disembodiment as a woman and her incorporation as a business, and the simultaneous positioning of Delilah as Bea’s “prosthetic body” or “social hieroglyphic.” Berlant’s focus is on the “dialectic between abstraction in the national public sphere and the surplus corporeality of racialized and gendered subjects” who are supposed to belong in the private sphere (114). But her use of the term “space” remains largely metaphorical rather than grounded in real places and locations, which limits her reading to a binaristic model of Delilah’s circumscribed domestic sphere opposed to Bea’s public corporation.³ Where Berlant notes Bea’s movement into the “capitalist public sphere” and “national existence” as a corporation (117), I will emphasize the geographic articulations of that mobility. Rather than reading Bea’s company

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- 2 Of the three versions of the story, the most recent has been the most popular: Douglas Sirk’s 1959 film version. I attribute its popularity to a number of factors, including its highly critical portrayal of American society, its proximity to the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., its availability, and Sirk’s celebrated auteur status among film critics. Hurst’s novel has been out of print since a 1990 reprint and the earlier film version, John Stahl’s 1934 release, has just this year been released on video—until now, it has been infrequently broadcast on cable.
 - 3 Berlant argues that “Delilah’s fractured public identity—as herself, as an autonomous iconic image, as a servant of ‘B. Pullman’—foregrounds the irregular operations of national capitalism on the bodies of racially and sexually gendered subjects” (“National” 121). In the scheme of this chapter, however, Delilah’s “public identity” operates only in the context of the domestic, private sphere. Given this precedent of a raced “public” identity, the character of Bob Jones in Himes’s novel resonates more powerfully as an African American active in the public sphere, not as a servant or a trademark but as an industrial worker.

trademark, Delilah's face, as Berlant does so well, this chapter examines the ways in which the company's movement, predicated as it is on the traditional raced and gendered roles occupied by Delilah, echoes national expansion both "domestic" and foreign. That is, playing upon the multiple meanings of "domestic," I read the novel in terms of its representations of women's roles at home, in the national public sphere of business, and in the national movements from rural to urban, from East to West, and from "domestic" to worldwide corporate markets.⁴ This chapter explores the interplay between gendered and racial embodiment and the public sphere of big business by focusing on *Imitation of Life*'s explicitly geographic dimensions: Bea's upward class mobility, her company's geographic expansion, and the sites of her racial, gendered, and sexual identities. Bea's East Coast origins and her embrace of a middle-class WASP identity combine disastrously with traditional notions of domesticity and femininity. Although she achieves her ambitions in business, Bea never gets what she keeps saying she really wants: a home and a domestic role as wife and mother. Hurst positions Bea as trapped between the two spheres that make up the world as she sees it, and like a soul in limbo, she never finds her "right place."

Chester Himes is most often read for his popular detective novels, such as *Rage in Harlem* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*.⁵ When critics mention *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, it is always in the context of race and class: Bob Jones is a working African American facing the daily battles of racist oppression, and the novel is frequently labeled a social protest novel.⁶ Along similar lines, author Himes is also well-known for the job discrimination he experienced as a writer fired by Jack Warner of Warner Brothers studio because Jack didn't want any "niggers" on his lot. This chapter reads Himes's first Los Angeles novel as a crucial 1940s text, illustrating the movement of American labor, capital, and imagination to the West Coast during World War II. In the quote that opens this chapter, Bob locates himself and his girlfriend in Los Angeles, emphasizing again that they are "west of Chicago": in my map of the nation between the two dates of publication, 1933 and 1945, these two novels contribute to the trajectory of westward mobili-

4 Amy Kaplan's essay "Manifest Domesticity" enacts a similar deconstruction of the "domestic" in the field of nineteenth-century American Studies.

5 See Crooks, Walters, and Diawara.

6 See Boris and Skinner.

ty from East to West Coast, and from the U.S. to Europe and Asia in the form of corporate and military expansion. Bob's character occupies the threshold of public and private spheres throughout the novel, as he witnesses whites acting out their racialized sexual anxieties in the public domain of the workplace and the shared spaces of the city. The resistance he meets as he tries assert his male citizenship privileges is often registered on his body as physical pain or violence, demonstrating what happens when race leaves the home and moves into the public sphere.

Reading the two characters, Bob Jones and Bea Pullman, together allows for a better understanding of the widely divergent experiences of mobility, filtered through race and gender, represented in the two works. For both characters, mobility is the most important issue: moving into the middle classes, expanding their economic and geographical reach, pioneering spaces previously closed to them in work and private life. The two characters experience their lives primarily in terms of their own pursuit of economic success, but for each the obstacles that arise to block their access depend on their gendered and racialized identities and on their geographical locations. Bea benefits from her whiteness but struggles against her female body, whereas Bob expects to benefit from his male gender privilege, but suffers constantly from the pain of his racialized body. I read Bea's business, her incorporation, as her attempt to escape her white female body, relying instead on her African American servant Delilah to perform the feminine domestic role. While Bea's flight from embodiment is grounded in the metaphor of the corporation, Bob's reluctance to accept the limitations of his racialized black body results in literal as well as metaphorical acts of violence against his racial embodiment.

ALL ABOARD FOR ARCTIC INCORPORATED: HOME STYLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

According to Alan Trachtenberg's study of American corporate expansion, "[h]ardly any realm of American life remained untouched" by the changes in business organization that, by 1929, meant that "the two hundred largest corporations held 48 percent of all corporate assets (excluding banks and insurance companies) and 58 percent of net capital assets such as land, buildings, and machinery" (4-5). Bea Pullman's business career in this

1933 novel allows me to trace the global mobility of American capital in terms of her personal pursuit of upward economic mobility, with the added insights of a female perspective: although she “had scarcely been aware of the woman-suffrage movement as it came to fruition,” successful Bea is feted in the media as a pioneer career woman (Hurst 219). *Imitation of Life* is a useful text because Hurst’s third person narrator allows us to read Bea’s spectacular international business successes through the lens of Bea’s traditional notions of domesticity and femininity. Placing Bea’s woman-owned business in the context of American corporate expansion therefore also requires that we consider the functions of gender, class, and race in her socio-economic and geographic mobility narratives. As Anne McClintock has argued, “the mass-marketing of empire as a global system was intimately wedded to the Western reinvention of domesticity, so that imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of domestic space and its relation to the market” (17). Bea’s company is founded on tropes of empire, conquest, and mobility, while it sells comfort food to displaced city-dwellers through the mammy character of Delilah and Bea’s mass-produced imitation of domesticity. Not only does Bea’s ambition stand for her desire to succeed—it also derives from her nostalgia for domestic stability that she was conditioned as a white middle-class woman to expect. My reading of *Imitation of Life* is predicated on the claim that gender, class, and race are “articulated categories” in the study of empire; that is, they cannot be studied fruitfully in isolation from one another (McClintock 5). Rather, the novel supports a reading of economic and geographic expansion that must also consider the narrative’s reliance on racial, classed, and gendered identities, particularly among women and particularly in the intersections between the corporate and the domestic spheres. It is in this double sense of the word that I elaborate here on Bea’s “incorporation”: her business and her repressed white female body.

Bea’s franchise moves from the East Coast westward at a time when the national ideal of urban space also headed west. As John Findlay has pointed out, the American West functions as a utopian national space not only in its rural dimensions, such as the “virgin land” beyond the frontier, but also in its new, modern cityscapes: in the 1930s and 40s, Los Angeles in particular represented the “virgin cities” of the Western U.S. in the national imagination (2). Bea’s business empire goes mobile, following the national movement of people and capital towards the West Coast, and then international.

As the “incorporation of America,” as Trachtenberg describes it, moved westward and crossed national boundaries, mobility comes to signify not only economic success but also geographic expansion; while the American nation had more or less reached its borders, American companies continued to expand their reach into wider national markets and into markets abroad. As she narrates the successes of her company, Hurst also paints Bea’s personal life as less than satisfying—she is widowed young, celibate most of her life, and enjoys almost no time with her daughter; at the same time as her corporation flies high, Bea desperately avoids having to deal with her female body.

Imitation of Life opens with the funeral of Bea’s mother, when she is only seventeen years old, and narrates her life story as she marries at eighteen, has a daughter, loses her husband and cares for her invalid father and infant daughter on her own. When she takes in an African American woman, Delilah, and her daughter, Peola, Bea begins to form a non-traditional imitation of a nuclear family: Bea is the breadwinner and decision-maker while Delilah cares for the home and dependents. After building a very successful business around Delilah’s face and waffle recipe, Bea is a famous entrepreneur in spite of, and later because of, her gender.⁷ The novel is punctuated by historical events: Bea is married on Election Day in 1916, her first businesses succeed largely due to their appeal among young soldiers during and immediately after the First World War. As her business succeeds, Bea opens waffle shops further and further west: starting out in Atlantic City, then branching out to Philadelphia and New York, she soon operates in New Haven, Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Kansas City, and Tulsa. Following the progress of Bea’s business allows us to trace the continuing expansion of American interests westward and globally, as well as the role of World War I as an economic boost that saved the nation from a threatening economic slump. After the war, Bea’s company expands to Europe and Asia, mirroring the global economic expansion of American businesses at that time.

The tension between Bea’s desires for both upward socio-economic mobility and a traditional domestic life is played out in the novel through her relations with other women and her career trajectory from widowed

7 Berlant’s essay explores the implications of the trademark that uses Delilah’s face rather than Bea’s at greater length.

homemaker to international corporate executive. Ironically, in many ways her personal affinities with traditional femininity enable her business's expansion via the economic and geographic mobility she enjoys both personally and as a corporation—as a major player in the business world, she must create a persona for herself with virtually no role models, striving to combine the staid, repressed middle-class femininity of her mother with the aggressive entrepreneurial spirit of (male) American business success stories. The novel finally shows Bea's obsession with traditional domesticity to be a self-deluding folly, as her family splinters and she loses the man she wanted to marry. As she negotiates the treacherous terrain of these seemingly opposed social roles and personalities—wealthy businesswoman and homebody—Bea manages her own identity, relying heavily on her traditional notions about class, gender, ethnicity, and race.

Bea's success proves to be an enormous leap in one generation from her mother's perspective on working women, although she does retain many of her mother's romanticized notions of middle-class domesticity. Mrs. Chipley had always told Bea that some young women could “work for ‘pin money’” if they liked, but it made them “mannish, like those Woman's Rights advocates” (19). Working “through necessity” was of course out of the question, since a woman should be married and have a husband who supports her. Bea accepts her mother's position on working women and marries the man her father chooses for her, the lodger Mr. Pullman, who has lived with them for many years and works as a condiment salesman on the boardwalk. Before her (ironically named) husband dies in a train wreck, Bea contemplates her good fortune to have a husband and a home instead of “having to brave that strange cold world out there into which girls were actually voluntarily venturing nowadays for such positions as stenographer, teacher, saleslady, or [...] cashier” (70). After her husband's death Bea is forced to find a way to make a living, but positions in sales are highly competitive and teachers and stenographers have coursework and training Bea lacks. Instead she starts selling the mail-ordered maple syrup Mr. Pullman had sold to hotels and restaurants as a lunchtime side job. No longer a lucky married woman, she now has to consider venturing out into the “strange cold world” of work, and in order to succeed, must masquerade as a man on paper, using her late husband's business cards that represent her as B. Pullman and avoiding direct contact with the clients.

When she first hatches the plan to impersonate her late husband to make a living, Bea has mentally reviewed the options for a working woman: “Salesladying and teaching and stenography seemed to be about the beginning and the end” (76). She literally becomes a male impersonator, as Lauren Berlant points out, because she has suffered “the indignity of being all wrong for all the public positions she seeks” (118-19). Like many entrepreneurs, Bea realizes she must create her own opportunities out of the remnants of her domestic life: expanding her late husband’s maple syrup business and renting out an upstairs room for extra money. In addition to passing for a man on paper, Bea’s new public persona makes her body more masculine: “she had become taller during this period. [...] hardened and slenderized,” perhaps by so much walking and lifting, but also by her new manly occupation (97). Hurst describes the new Bea as gaining an “undeniable look of stature and added length of face. [...] a leaner face, an obsessed face [...] a quality of straight-lipped concentration” from her work experience in the “ice-fields of business” (97-98). But when she approaches successful men in the business community about a small loan to open a waffle shop, Bea’s body betrays her and she is repeatedly told to find employment working for a man or to get married and have babies, as a realtor tells her: “Go get yourself a husband or a lover. Or at least a job behind somebody else’s desk” (137). Women working for wages or supported by men’s wages don’t threaten these male businessmen, since they still have relatively little power themselves and remain under the control of husbands, male employers, or both. But a woman in a business of her own frightens them, since she would not have to answer to a male authority.

For white women in the 1930s and 40s, a successful career in big business was virtually unheard of; Bea Pullman achieves her success by literally impersonating her husband on paper and hiding behind the common assumptions that business is a male realm. For Bea, her married surname of Pullman suggests her husband, his death in the train, but also her ticket out of poverty and to wealth that she never would have attained had he lived. She pulls the Pullman out of the ashes, passes for a man, and makes it her vehicle to wealth, her upward mobility both geographic and economic. For readers in 1933, Pullman also recalls the many accomplishments of George Pullman, entrepreneur and namesake of the famous sleeping cars, including the design of the company town and an exhibit at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the White City. According to historian James Gilbert, Pullman

coaches “reproduced the separated spaces of the middle-class home with its separate dining, sleeping, and living quarters” complete with porters, cooks, and special linens (147). His company town, modestly named Pullman, Illinois, was a similarly artificial, engineered environment geared toward uplifting his employees and maintain a loyal and healthy workforce by furnishing them with a bland, healthy, middle-class alternative to the tenements of Chicago. Pullman’s employees also undertook one of the bitterest strikes in the history of the American labor movement in 1894, which halted rail traffic nationwide until President Cleveland ordered the strikers back to work, leaving the images of burning railroad cars and anti-labor violence in the national memory. The confluence of domesticity, rail mobility, and exploited labor in the name Pullman can be discerned in the themes of the novel, as well as in Bea’s own personal associations with the name.

For Bea, the name Pullman further suggests a rosy childhood memory of a railroad car marked in her mind’s eye with impressions of race and class, implying the cross-country geographic and economic mobility that will propel Bea into the upper echelons of big business. She names her waffle shops “B. Pullman” and her inspiration for their design scheme comes from her early memory of a train trip. Like the sleeping cars designed by George Pullman in the nineteenth century, the dining car of her childhood had “snowy napery, shining silverware, and white-coated, white-eye-balled rows of dark-skinned waiters, flashing by the corner of Mississippi and Arctic Avenues,” and she wants her customers to feel transported back to a similar experience of glamorous travel and middle-class comfort complete with white linens and African American servants (126). Whiteness contrasts with blackness throughout this passage, in which Bea designs the image of her soon-to-be successful business; in particular, Bea’s fixation on the “stiffly white napery,” also described as “white napery so heavy and glossy,” betrays her obsession with whiteness as she fantasizes about her future (126). At the very moment when she conceives of her entrepreneurial business career, the emblems of her widowhood, African American biological racial difference, class privilege, labor struggle, domesticity, and geographic and economic mobility become impossibly intermingled in Bea’s fusion of nostalgia and self-promotion; her business and her pleasure, her finances and her femininity, are wrapped up in a tangle of purity and progress, of white linen napkins and speeding trains.

The emphasis on whiteness continues while she looks out the window, as “an evening the color of watered milk flowed over and seemed to immerse Arctic Avenue in bluish pallor” (127). The awkwardness of the metaphor aside, it creates an image of milk overflowing, which, as a description of the moonlight, adds to the jumble of images that suggest the home, maternity, and sustenance. However, the iciness of the street name, Arctic Avenue, and the “bluish pallor” also suggest frigidity and ill health, even death; earlier, too, Bea referred to the “cold world of work” and the “ice-fields of business.” The moon, feminine symbol of poetic inspiration, tempts Bea outside for an evening walk along the “white sands,” musing first on her lost chances for love as a nineteen-year-old widow and then abruptly deciding that “the napery must be the snow white of Delilah’s inimitable laundry-work” (129). Not only does this passage plainly link whiteness—the moon, milk, pallor, Arctic Avenue, white sand, snow, and clean linen—with femininity, domesticity, and middle-class comfort, Bea also makes a connection, by bringing up the “white-coated, white-eye-balled, dark-skinned waiters,” between white napery and racial purity. In *Imitation of Life*, Bea shares the Victorian obsession with “smiling servants in crisp white aprons” and “clean, white bodies and clean, white clothing,” that McClintock argues in her analysis of the marketing of soap in the age of British imperialism, was a Victorian construct that “stemmed not only from the rampant profiteering of the imperial economy but also from the realms of ritual and fetish” (211). The laundry washes out the dirt of labor, often represented visually in soap ads as blackface, “bringing moral and economic salvation to Britain’s ‘great unwashed’ but also [...] magically embodying the spiritual ingredient of the imperial mission itself” (McClintock 211). In the above passages, Bea clearly associates the work of black servants with crisp white linen and that most imperialist of conveyances, the railroad. Although she is an American in the early twentieth century, the novel constantly emphasizes Bea’s traditional values and nostalgia for domesticity as well as frequent references to England, echoing the British Victorian middle classes in her fetishization of the white napery and black servants she associates with it.

BEA'S COLONIAL AESTHETIC: RACE, EMPIRE, AND THE SEPARATE SPHERES

The implications of Bea's white napkin fetish come full circle when we read it alongside her obsession with American Colonial style and Hurst's fondness for imperialist metaphor: the public and private echo the colony and the metropole, as "Imperialism suffused the Victorian cult of domesticity and the historic separation of the private and the public, which took shape around colonialism and the idea of race" (McClintock 36). Rather than discrete spheres of home and periphery, Bea's world is an improvised amalgam of the domestic, the colonial, and racial and class difference. Throughout the novel, the American colonial mission serves as a metaphor for Bea's career advances, although since the colonizer is always already male as well as white, Bea must repress her female body to best fit the role. As if acknowledging the lack of female precedents for Bea's career, Hurst employs masculine metaphors of colonial conquest to describe Bea's trail-blazing successes as she engineers a real estate development "a nose ahead of the gold rush," ushering in "militaristic years of expansion and growth" (190-92). Her business partner in this land development deal is Virginia Eden, a fabulously wealthy entrepreneur in the beauty business modeled after Elizabeth Arden. These "comparatively rare bird[s]," as Eden calls herself and Bea, are likened to explorers "who with their teeth into the wind were riding farther and farther into the uncharted seas of big business for women" (190-91). Eden is also associated with gold, further linking her to explorers in search of wealth in the new world: she carries a gold pencil, wears rings with jewels "of large carat" on her fingers with "sparkling tips to her nails," is "paged by a row of gilt buttons," and explains that a solid gold Aladdin's lamp is her business's trademark, which she presents as a gift to Bea upon their first meeting (191-194). As Berlant points out, even Virginia Eden's name suggests the colonial, in its Jeffersonian/Virginian connotations (121). Eden envisions building an idyllic colonial residence that echoes Monticello in its American colonial utopian promise, but she also has in mind an urban East Coast utopia rather than a pastoral one, modeled after British metropolitan town houses along the Thames.

During this meeting they discuss Eden's business proposal to buy up a city block of riverfront tenements and "start a colony" of socialites in new townhouses (198). Bea envisions transforming the "pock-marked tenements

into a row of Colonial houses along what Miss Eden described as ‘the London Embankment all over again, what with Blackwell’s Island across the river bed, giving a House of Commons effect’” (196). They decide to form a real estate venture together, enticing wealthy New Yorkers to buy into it: they only need “the right ten or twelve people to make it the smart thing to up and move away from the beaten old trails” (198). When they encounter ethical differences and Bea buys out Virginia’s interest, they both recognize that “where two men might be able to afford to publicly agree to disagree without further comment, let us so much as yea the other’s nay, and they’ll have our hairpins flying” (243). Gender considerations influence their public business decisions and personas, as Virginia and Bea continue to enjoy media attention because of their unique identities: wealthy and successful women in a male-dominated business world. Their joint venture not only blazes new “trails” in the male business world, it literally breaks new ground in New York City, claiming a formerly working-class street for the upper classes: Bea is an American pioneer, despite her avocation of traditional domesticity and her female body, which she masks behind the corporation of B. Pullman and its “mammy” trademark, Delilah.

The colonial trope surfaces again in descriptions of Bea’s favorite architectural and decorative style. Her fixation with Colonial style began early, when she hired Frank Flake to “devise something new and novel in the way of china” for her shops: she settles on “Americana,” white glass “harkening back to Colonial wares” (239). This choice resonates for Bea with the “beautiful general design” of Fishrow, which “restrict[s] each plot-holder to conform to a certain unanimity of Colonial scheme” (239) She has plans for her own Colonial style house in Fishrow, which will house the furniture Bea has already purchased, including “a fine example of Duncan Phyfe teatable, a museum-piece maple candle-stand on tripod, a six-legged burl-walnut highboy, a Hepplewhite sideboard with a knee-hole front, and a pair of Sheraton inlaid knife urns to adorn it” (251). And for daughter Jessie’s room, “an early American girl’s room that was to look out upon a plane tree, flagstones, and a pair of stiff knickerbocker garden benches beside a river, a spool bed and a tambour desk beautifully inlaid with satinwood in the original patina” (251). Bea’s affinity for traditional American decorating styles and for traditional domestic lifestyles only partially come together in her consumerism: she has bought the furniture and envisioned the

house, but she continually delays construction and will never inhabit it when it is finally completed.

As she describes the house, Bea displays her romantic attachment to Americana: “Colonial pillars down the front [...] tall stone gate-posts topped with stone pineapples that I’ve already bought from a house in Charleston that was built before the Revolution” (261). The heady mixture of nostalgic domesticity with the colonial aesthetic of Americana betrays Bea’s own insecurities about her appropriateness as a woman and mother: as a businesswoman she spends almost no time in a what she sees as her traditional feminine role—mother and homemaker, but rather attempts to create a domestic refuge by purchasing furniture that for her symbolizes colonial America and the cozy home she doesn’t really have. Her vast wealth allows her to buy the symbols of that which she hasn’t been able to acquire through accepted channels: marriage to a breadwinner and a lifetime of running a home. The trouble is, she can’t escape the markers of her business world conquest narrative in the colonial style she thinks represents domesticity, but which also bears the traces of the conquests she was not supposed to have made in business. Ironically, her daughter will move into the house after marrying Bea’s beloved Frank Flake, whose name is a contradiction since he isn’t quite frank at first with Bea about his love for Jessie, and he turns out to be quite cold, like a snowflake, again echoing the chill that follows Bea through life—“snowy napery,” “Arctic Avenue,” “ice-fields of business.” Frank and Jessie marry and their children scamper the hallways and garden while Bea travels the world overseeing her business’s global expansion.

GEOGRAPHIES OF LIFE: RACE, SPACE, AND PLACE

Bea’s domestic ideal is completely enveloped in the colonial mobility narratives, and her obsession with class mobility is likewise rooted in the domestic and in imperialist tropes of racial superiority. Bea’s romantic attachment to Americana has roots in her childhood, when her mother inculcates rigid class and gender norms. Hurst makes sure to point out that Bea grows up in her parents’ house on Arctic Avenue in Atlantic City, between Mississippi and Georgia Avenues (2). The street name, Arctic, as mentioned earlier, suggests extreme cold and her parents lack of passion bears

out the association; the cross streets mark the Chipleys class location, lower middle class, with the stigma of two of the poorest Southern states, Mississippi and Georgia. The other ocean in their address, the Atlantic, fixes them firmly on the East Coast with ready access to England and its social traditions—in fact, Bea’s father is English. While the Chipleys are not poor, they are forced to take in a lodger, and Bea’s mother often behaves as though she feels out of place in her neighborhood, so close to the Boardwalk. After both parents and her husband die, Bea is faced with the possibility of real poverty, the kind that even lodgers can’t avert, and when she finally succeeds enough to move away from the old house to New York City, she leaves it happily as if she were leaving Mississippi and its rural poverty, as well as Atlantic City, with its connotations of British colonies and traditional early American society. The Arctic chill follows her, however.

As a girl, when she fantasizes about marriage, Bea imagines in detail what her house would look like: “Curving white staircase, such as they were building into those adorable new Ventnor cottages. Bow window in the dining-room, looking out, over geraniums, at ocean,” nothing like her parents’ house and nothing at all about her future husband (26). From her childhood, Bea associates location with class, and has almost no interest in sex or romantic love. After Mr. Pullman proposes, she considers that her life with him would be safe, “perhaps someday a bungalow in Ventnor, with a brace of bow windows that overlooked the ocean. Security!” (33). Her abstract attraction for marriage and home life strikes one of her neighbors, who asks her, “Are you marrying marriage or Mr. Pullman?” to which Bea replies that marriage is the symbol of Mr. Pullman (42). More likely, Mr. Pullman is merely the vehicle for the stability that Bea wants so badly, representing a safe, secure home life. For Bea the house represents these qualities more than the man, and the house of her dreams is in a more upscale area than her parents’ home on Arctic Avenue.

The street names and neighborhood geographies in *Imitation of Life* further articulate the importance of place and adjacency, particularly in terms of class. Bea learns early in life that certain areas are reserved for certain kinds of people: streets, neighborhoods, beaches, even rooms in a house are zoned for one class rather than another. As a child, Bea learns to associate England with upper class values and aesthetics. She learns about father’s English heritage from her mother, who tells her that he comes from a Leeds

family that “had seen better days” (9). But to his wife’s chagrin, his sister had immigrated to America, too, after her ironmonger husband died, and Bea’s memories mark her as decidedly *déclassé*: Aunt Chipley had “drunk coffee from her saucer in great soughing movements and gone stocking-footed about the house” and once had “yelled at Father that he was born a little clark, was a little clark at heart, and a clark would live and die” (9). Bea’s mother models class-conscious behavior for her daughter even in her preference for isolated beaches over the bustling working-class entertainments of the Boardwalk, the “unpeopled waters” around the Inlet over the “peanut whistle, popcorn smells, or shouts of bathers” on the Amusement Pier (24). The reserved matriarch can only occasionally bring herself to stroll the Boardwalk with her family, “seating herself rather stiffly on a bench in front of Clabby’s Baths, or on the Steel Pier for a band concert” (22). Mrs. Chipley’s stiffness conveys her sense of incongruity in such an unseemly situation, and Bea inherits some of her self-identification as a middle-class “lady” who clings to class differences. Her later insistence that the napkins for her shop must be “stiffly white” echoes her mother’s rigid notions of class and propriety.

Bea’s adult knowledge of Atlantic City far exceeds her mother’s narrow parameters, since in her financial necessity she must traverse poorer streets selling maple syrup. The need to earn her own money forces Bea to expand her geographical knowledge of the city, leading her into poor areas populated by recent immigrants. After her dreams of economic security evaporate with her husband’s death, Bea ventures into previously unexplored parts of Atlantic City, “certain streets along which Mr. Pullman would no more have walked with her, much less have permitted her to walk alone!” (87). Bea’s geographical sense of the city is inflected with her own WASP aesthetic and feelings of class superiority:

Greek restaurants poured greasy odors, kosher hotels buzzed with the activities of stout matrons in machine-stitched wigs. Nationalisms flared along these side streets, each country to its odor, complexion, and often as not, its hoisted flags. (87)

The emphasis on scent, repeated twice in these two sentences, makes the non-WASP areas of town sound like foreign countries, exotic, overwhelming, and not especially appetizing. Bea brags of her new knowledge of the city: “‘Lead me blindfolded through Atlantic City,’ she would tell her fa-

ther, [...] ‘and I can tell the streets by the smells. I can tell Jewish garlic from Italian’” (87). Later the novelty wears off, and Bea returns home to Delilah from her travails smelling of the poor neighborhoods, of poverty itself: “Stench from fish-frys, shore dinners, hamburger-wagons, of bathing-suits as they dried over porch railings, roasting peanuts, sour alleys and streets where the poor, in a dreadful kind of finery, aped the Boardwalk” (112). Ever the sympathetic domestic, Delilah exclaims, “I kin tell de smell of a white-trash fish-fry wid mah both eyes shut,” never explaining how she can distinguish that smell from any other kind of fish-fry, just as the novel never explains how Bea can tell Jewish garlic from Italian (112). The descriptions of Bea’s journeys into poor sections of town underscore the fact that she, as a white middle-class woman, doesn’t belong there. But her increased mobility in the city streets does lead to her economic mobility, despite the seeming impropriety. Her forays into “ethnic” areas inhabited by recent non-Protestant immigrants parallel the imperial mission of the colonizers, and Bea’s motivations for her travels are similarly grand: financial gain through the spread of her fetishized white napery and commodified domesticity.

Bea’s colonial aesthetic is a specifically WASP aesthetic, and it plays out in her relations with other women, both white ethnic⁸ and African American. These relationships are hierarchically structured in Bea’s mind in terms of her middle-class superiority as well as her racialized notions of non-WASP ethnicity. Implicitly Bea links Italian and Jewish⁹ women with classed and raced inferiority, which then helps to naturalize to her overtly

8 I use this term to refer to women of Southern or Eastern European descent, in this case, Italian American and Jewish women.

9 Abe C. Ravitz’s book traces Hurst’s career from its beginnings in the 1910s through the late 1920s, when much of her published fiction was set in the Lower East Side, chronicling the lives of immigrant Jewish women and families. Ravitz’s careful study of Hurst’s life, work, and personal correspondence from these early decades links her conservative German-Jewish roots with her interest in the recent immigrants of the New York ghettos, whom her parents had frequently referred to as “kikes” (5). He quotes her from a 1924 interview: “Hurst went on, too, to underscore her conscious ethnic focus, insisting that ‘her success in writing stories with Jewish characters’ emanated from the ‘racial urge she felt to speak for the Jewish people’” (84).

racist perceptions of Delilah. The slippage between class, ethnicity, and race frequently takes root in Bea's colonial aesthetic; for example, walking back streets the Italian and Jewish cultures take on racialized overtones, as do her complex and eroticized relations to Delilah and Virginia. As long as Bea can distinguish herself from Jewish, Italian, and African American women, she can remain asexual and superior; meanwhile, her relationships with these other women often borders on the erotic. She admires Virginia's alluring good looks, she collapses into Delilah's warm embraces, and her female employees are sternly rebuked when Bea receives anonymous love letters.

As a white Protestant, Bea's encounters with white ethnic women demonstrate perceived class differences, from her Atlantic City neighbors to her adult friendship with Virginia Eden. Throughout her life, Bea distinguishes herself from these women through what she perceives as cultural, physical, and class differences. At her wedding, Bea's Italian American next-door neighbor who had known her since she was a baby, Mrs. Vitzelli, "would not hear of coming into the parlor, but insisted upon viewing the ceremony from the pantry" (36). The self-imposed exile in the pantry, phrased as her own insistence rather than any social barriers having to do with class or ethnicity, demarcates the spaces in Bea's home that Mrs. Vitzelli feels authorized to inhabit: the kitchen, the pantry, places where women's domestic labor transpires, rather than the parlor, where social events take place. Like Bea's feelings of discomfort walking in immigrant neighborhoods, the WASP and non-WASP cannot meet socially without some barriers and distinctions. Always present is her awareness of class divisions, which often slip into racial or ethnic differences as well.

Bea doesn't feel the same geographic restrictions as Mrs. Vitzelli, however, since Bea occupies the position of relative social power and therefore greater mobility. She feels nothing to prevent her entering the realm of the "other," as her father and husband hold the wedding party in a Jewish hotel where they both know the chief steward. As she arrives at the "showy Boardwalk hostelry, catering [...] to a wealthy Semitic clientele," Bea observes the Jewish women thoughtfully: "heavy-busted, Oriental-eyed girls in heavy authentic jewelry" and "plump, pretty, clucking mothers" (44). She is, however, not completely at ease, since that would imply that she is a social equal; she is momentarily self-conscious as "everyone stared when the wedding party walked through the dining-room," and imagines what the

“slightly greasy lips of the stout and pretty young Hebrew mothers of unmarried daughters” would say of her conservative New England groom, probably “as so much oatmeal” compared to their exoticized, racialized characters (44-45). Everyone appears to know that the wedding group are not Jewish, but that knowledge only causes a brief awkwardness; instead of insisting on segregating herself from those different from herself as Mrs. Vizitelli had done, Bea seats herself and enjoys the dinner. Bea displaces pleasure, sensuality, and maternity onto Jewish women, “strangely alive” and spicy, in contrast to her own pallid “oatmeal” WASP husband; she has no living adult female role models of her own ethnicity, and she can only recall her mother’s repressed and formal relationship with her father, whom she always called “Mr. Chipley” in front of Bea. Her association of sensuality and passion with white ethnic women carries over into her friendship with Virginia Eden, who is described as Bea’s opposite in many ways: she is sexual, emotional, and self-consciously feminine.

Even as an adult, Bea’s friendship with Virginia Eden never crosses the boundaries of ethnicity and class that Bea perceives as major differences between the two wealthy businesswomen. Born Sadie Kress in Jersey City, the young Virginia Eden was compelled by circumstances to develop an “aggressively eager” ambition so that she could earn enough to support her family: “shiftless parents,” “paralyzed sister,” and “gang-running brother” (245). Her Jewishness didn’t change with her name and class status, however, as Bea constantly notices in Virginia’s relationships with her employees, husbands, and children. For example, Bea is amazed by Virginia’s management style, which contradicts Bea’s notions of propriety: from her household servants, Virginia “enjoyed neither their deference nor what might be termed their respect,” but they “adored her,” and they “left in frequent huffs, only to return on a more intimate and more firmly entrenched basis” (242). Bea’s amazement stems in part from her fusty New England affectations, fostered by her late mother, but also from a growing sense of wistful yearning for the emotional fulfillment that Virginia seems to derive from her stormy relationships with everyone in her life. Virginia, as an upwardly mobile Jewish woman from Jersey City, is allowed to have “a household of excitements, waste, easy intake, easy outgo” that so bemuses Bea, who herself feels empty and alone when she looks at her own life (243).

Similarly, Virginia's private life is contrasted with Bea's: she has been married three times, twice to the same man, and lives with various in-laws, children, and step-children. Bea sees herself as "cold" compared to Virginia, whom she sees as feminine and fertile, "a woman toward whom life flowed like sunshine over the fields and meadows it was fructifying" (247). Indeed, the title of the novel stems from Bea's comparison of her own life to Virginia's: "Love and happiness, as [Virginia] said them, made what had been going on through years of a petty and mundane routine seem imitation of life" (195). Bea's own life, described by newspaper articles as fabulously successful, seems to her an imitation of life, as her family is a celibate imitation of a real one, in which she represents the father and Delilah the mother. While Virginia "regarded life as her debtor, she its relentless paymaster, [...] she made B. Pullman to herself, seem its slave" (194-95). As a Jewish woman, Virginia seems to Bea more naturally inclined to love and emotional excesses, whereas Bea imagines herself, "where the intimate aspect of life were concerned, [...] a wooden Indian" (245). Bea's constant distinctions between herself and Virginia only serve to amplify her sense of isolation and failure as a woman: unfeminine, asexual, and minimally maternal. Because Eden is racialized as Jewish, Bea sees her as sexual and domestic as well as extremely successful in business; as a WASP, however, Bea cannot allow or reconcile such a seeming contradiction in herself. Bea also never considers the privileges that come with her white identity that Virginia, no matter how wealthy and assimilated, is denied. Similarly, Bea sees Delilah as a perfect mother and domestic, but she cannot identify with such an overtly racialized character; seeing herself as deficient in domesticity, Bea manages to ignore the racial inequalities in her relationship with Delilah.

SELLING DOMESTICITY: DELILAH AND BEA, INCORPORATED AND INTERNATIONAL

In contrast to Bea, and like Virginia in some ways, Delilah is the epitome of the domestic, in both senses of the word: she is a maternal homebody who cooks, cleans, and thinks only of the comfort of her "family," and she is also an African American domestic servant who works for a white woman. Their relationship is represented as one of opposites: masculine and femi-

nine, commercial and maternal, public and private, middle-class and working-class, master and servant, white and black. In an echo of a colonial relation, too, Bea is masculinized as the white master while Delilah is feminized as the inferior non-white other. Further complicating their relationship, Bea and Delilah are frequently figured as a married couple in the text, Delilah's "huge smile [...] the glowing heart of that furnace" representing the home to which, "sore and weary, Bea nightly dragged herself, wanting to be enveloped into the limitless reaches of its warmth" (99). After a long day's work, Bea comes home to Delilah's loving hands: "those warm pale-palmed fingers kneading and soothing and cooling the tortured soles of her feet" and "kneading as if into dough" Bea's "burning shoulder blades" (99-100). In the kitchen, of course, Delilah reigns supreme, "who had not only the palate and the capacity of the gourmet, but the grand old Southern skill to prepare dishes fit for a daily company of them," including "steaming mountains of griddle cakes of fluff and no weight" (95-96). Delilah is Bea's angel in the house, enabling her to venture into the "ice-fields of business" knowing she can return to the warm hearth where Delilah presides over the household. While Bea constantly professes to idolize domesticity, she never actually participates in it, leaving the raising of Jessie, the care of her invalid father, and the running of her home to Delilah.

Bea's business successes represent her creativity and hard work, and she consistently explains her ambition as motivated by her domestic longings, fantasizing about retiring to a cozy home with her daughter and Delilah. On the other hand, however, Bea is described as cold, masculine, and lacking maternal and sexual instincts alleged to be "natural" for a woman. For example, as she sells domesticity and home cooking for huge profits, Bea undergoes a transformation into a soldier, a direct parallel to the doughboys who were some of her most loyal customers: "unloosing what must have been latent dogs of war within her, she seemed to have tasted the blood of big business" (177). Instead of actually leading a domestic life, Bea markets and sells it, even though that participation in the public sphere of business makes her ineligible for the domestic life she professes to crave. Ironically, metaphors of domesticity describe her business acumen throughout the novel, likening her new shops to children being born and business failures as still-born babies (161). Flake compliments her on "the fecundity of her copy" as they write advertisements together, exclaiming that Bea "mix[es hokum] almost as well as Delilah does her batter" (176).

Her only claim to domesticity is through metaphors comparing her business acumen to Delilah's ability to make a perfect pancake batter.

The most valuable thing Bea gains from Delilah's domestic skills is a product that she can sell that makes people feel comfortable, homey, and spoiled: Bea translates her love for the domestic atmosphere of Delilah's household into a booming business in waffle shops that appeal to World War I doughboys, the "troops of boys marching through cold city streets these days, on their strange embarkations for war" (149). But Bea also profits from her position of privilege which allows her to appropriate Delilah's domesticity and transform it into a product for sale. Bea's vision brings the domestic (as in home and as in servant) into the business world, and she brings to the business the contrasts of warm and cold that mark her difference from Delilah and her separation from the private sphere, selling "for a little pocket change, a delicate-lipped cup from which to drink good coffee" (149). The waffle shops feature Delilah or her look-alikes serving up home cooking to lonely people who crave a homey place to relax: "akin to the kennel warmth and brightness she so passionately wanted to pour around herself and little family in the house on Arctic Avenue" (149). Selling Delilah's cooking and mammy image, Bea realizes that her success lies in her ability to "surround people for a few moments out of a tired day, with a little unsubtle but cozy happiness of body and perhaps of mind" (152).

The popularity of the waffle shop with young soldiers going to and from the First World War lends the business a kind of patriotic aura, while providing the huge profits that enable local, national, and then global expansion: "those boys, eager to be off, and on the return, desperately anxious and eager to forget [...] had helped bring it all about" (170). The personal contacts she and Delilah make during the war carry over into their New York apartment, as the women invite the lonely young soldiers to come over after the shop closes; Bea "puffed [...] up like a mother hen" and Delilah, "not to be coaxed out of the rear end of the apartment, would consent to sit in her dark kitchen [...] and sing through the open doorway" (230-31). Like Mrs. Vizitelli's self-imposed exile in the kitchen during Bea's wedding, Delilah voluntarily enforces the racial and class divisions that keep her relationship with Bea acceptable; as a black servant, she can live with Bea in a socially acceptable kind of intimacy, providing the domesticity Bea requires without the romantic and erotic entanglements of a sexual relationship.

Her chaste husband role is not without its price, however, and Bea feels uncomfortable imagining herself in a feminine sexual role. Always complicating Bea's enjoyment of success is her feeling of failure as a woman, both sexually and maternally. She is in love with Frank Flake, her manager and advisor, who is eight years younger, and as she contemplates telling her teenage daughter about her feelings, Bea is acutely aware of the "inappropriateness" of her sexuality for a woman her age: "Dared she risk revolting the high-strung youth of [her daughter] Jessie with desires which all these years must have lain squirming in the damp cellar spaces of the vast structure she had erected?" (318). If her business is her substitute for domesticity, her "house" and her "child," sex has been locked "squirming in the damp cellar." Bea's discomfort and inexperience with romance is clear in her dealings with Frank and her awkward attempts to tell him her feelings. When she proposes marriage to Frank, who will eventually reject her and marry Jessie, Bea uses the language of the British corporation that wants a merger with her company: "like the Imperial Chain, I should say to you, 'We do not press you for an immediate decision. Give yourself six months time'" (311). She cannot recreate herself in the image of a demure woman in love, coyly waiting for her beloved to propose; Bea the businesswoman proposes to him first, and can only phrase her offer, albeit jokingly, in terms of a business merger.

Rather than recognize that her professional persona conflicts with her notions of domestic bliss, which no WASP woman in the novel lives up to, Bea chastises herself for being too old for romance. Instead of acknowledging that her ambition and aggression have altered her personality so that she cannot live up to the feminine ideals her mother passed on to her, Bea sees herself as a perverse older woman chasing a younger man. Bea sadly recognizes the "travesty of herself," a woman in her thirties who has never been in love, but she also feels a "sense of revulsion against something old and predatory within herself" (282). Although a pioneer in the business world must be a predator, Bea can only see herself in the most conventional kind of partnered relationship: "I'm a curtain-hemmer at heart. A totter of some man's carpet slippers for him when he comes home of an evening" (344). She seems unaware that the only woman who comes close to that characterization (caricature) is her black maid Delilah, and the slippers are no man's but her own. Bea instead fixates on the fact that Flake is younger, making her feel like "[a]n older woman" (282), as if she is unnaturally and

aggressively “spreading her net for bright youth” (285). Her acquisitive business strategies have earned her huge successes, but she finds that they cannot coexist with traditionally feminine qualities: passive, domestic, romantic, maternal. The novel demonstrates what is at stake for a WASP woman who wants to live up to an ideal domestic feminine role as well as succeed in the world of big business, and Bea misses out on most of her daughter’s childhood, loses the man she loves, and ends up traveling the world alone, the sound of her “failures” echoing in her mind.

Like the colonial United States, Bea’s business expands westward and then abroad. But, also like the nation, her business’s expansion is predicated upon the strict separation of spheres: public and private, WASP and white ethnic, white and black, middle class and working class. The symbolism invested in the images of mobility—the motif of the train with its snow white napery—alludes to the rapid class mobility Bea achieves personally as well as the global success of her business, even as she envisions her life as more and more meaningless and unfulfilled. The company moves from its Atlantic City origins, first to New York and other East Coast cities, then across the United States, and by the end of the novel, “the world literally this time, an oyster to be pried open from Rome to Monte Carlo” (279). Bea’s capital has geographic mobility: expansion signals success. Even as her concern may be bought out by the Universal Sales Association, or partnered with aptly named British Imperial Chain—“There was Canada yet to be invaded”—Bea can only think about the married bliss she could have if Frank, the general manager of Bea’s company, accepts her business-like marriage proposal (280).

In spite of her business successes, however, Bea ends up unsatisfied because she has seen her business as only a means to a happy domestic life which she suddenly finds herself unable to live: her daughter grows up and marries the man Bea had fantasized about marrying, Frank. Thus finally Bea considers herself unsuccessful as a woman: she feels masculinized by her life of work and also by her age (she is in her thirties!), sexually inadequate because of her long celibate widowhood and unfulfilling marriage, and maternally deficient because she took almost no part in raising her daughter. At the end of the novel, Bea lives “years of strange dark foreign nights” in hotel suites in Paris, Deauville, London, and Sydney, as “her enterprises joined hands to almost literally encircle the world, Madrid to Rome, to Vienna, to Berlin, to Paris, London, Sydney, Shanghai” (348-49).

But in spite of her enormous wealth and success, her world travels, Bea can't attain true happiness because Flake has married her daughter Jessie; it is her enterprises that join hands, not Bea and her beloved. By showing her as a failed mother and a successful businesswoman, the novel suggests that Bea is ruined for domesticity by her business because of her whiteness, her racial purity; non-WASP women—for example, Virginia Eden—can succeed and work and still be feminine, sexual, and domestic, but as a WASP woman Bea can't because of her class and race privilege. Her imperial successes don't mix with her notions of femininity and thus she is a domestic failure.

IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO: MAPPING MALE PRIVILEGE AND RACIAL EMBODIMENT

All I had when I came to the Coast was my height and weight and the fact I believed that being born in America gave everybody a certain importance. I'd never had two suits of clothes at one time in my life until I got in this war boom.

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If He Hollers Let Him Go centers on the daily life of Bob Jones, an African American leaderman at a Los Angeles shipyard during World War II. The novel looks at Bob's responses to the racism that surrounds him and affects his own personal ambitions for success and happiness. Dealing with racism on the job, Bob loses his temper when Madge, a white woman from Texas, refuses to work with him and calls him "nigger." He curses her, which earns him a demotion and he becomes obsessed with hurting her. Bob's interactions with Madge are charged with sexual tension and racial hostility, and although she is interested in him sexually, he finally rejects and insults her. This prompts her to seek revenge, which she does by locking him in a room and screaming "Rape!" so that her white male co-workers break down the door and beat Bob almost to death. After fleeing the scene, he is arrested and beaten again by police. When a doctor reports that she hasn't

been raped, Bob is forced into the military and told he is lucky not to go to jail.

Outside the workplace, Bob wants to marry his middle-class girlfriend Alice, whose parents are members of the African American bourgeoisie and sadly out of touch with the “race problem” that faces working blacks in the city. Alice urges him to become a lawyer and create a comfortable secure family home as insulated as possible from everyday racism: “I want a husband who is important and respected and wealthy enough so that I can avoid a major part of the discriminatory practices which I am sensible enough to know I cannot change” (97). But although Bob aspires to a private, middle-class existence, he knows he won’t be satisfied to publicly “adjust himself to the limitations of his race,” in Alice’s words (97). He knows that the struggle against white supremacy takes place in his thoughts and feelings as well as in the streets and workplaces, and he doubts he could be happy. Bob realizes that his own constant anger and resentment hurt him: “I knew that unless I found my niche and crawled into it, unless I stopped hating white folks and learned to take them as they came, I couldn’t live in America, much less expect to accomplish anything in it” (150). Interior monologues and dream sequences, along with Bob’s daily activities and interactions with others, portray his dilemma as it manifests itself in all areas of his life: home, work, public places, love, self-esteem, masculinity, sexuality, class identity.

The novel details the ways in which racism impacts every aspect of Bob’s life, both public and private, but the primary conflicts that drive the novel take place at work, where he supervises a crew of African American workers. Before the war, Bob could never have been a leaderman in the shipyard, and he would have had far less contact with whites on almost any pre-war industrial job. During the war years, Americans at home had to face massive changes in the workplace as African American men and women joined the defense industries in unprecedented numbers: “twice as many blacks held skilled positions at the war’s end than did so when it started. In all, over one million black workers became part of the industrial work force during the war years” (Lipsitz 73). Bob Jones works at a shipyard in Los Angeles County, where the wartime industrial boom brought 662,225 new residents (McWilliams 372). Many of the migrants were Southerners, both white and African American, men and women. These migrants had to adjust to the vast differences between the segregated Jim

Crow South and the legally enforced desegregation of the defense industry after President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, issued in June 1941, banning discrimination, *de jure* if not *de facto*, in the war industries. The setting of the novel in the shipyards of wartime L.A. allows Himes to explore the changing relations among workers and how those relations are grounded in, and often defined in, the specific spaces of Los Angeles: at work, on the streets, in movie theaters and restaurants, and in private homes.

Bob knows the geography of race and class in Los Angeles neighborhoods: affluent African Americans owned homes in isolated areas separate both from the white middle class and from the black working class. As he drives to his girlfriend Alice's house on the West Side, he thinks about her tony address: "When you asked a Negro where he lived, and he said on the West Side, that was supposed to mean he was better than the Negroes who lived on the South Side; it was like the white folks giving a Beverly Hills address" (48). Arriving in her neighborhood, Bob surveys the streets: "The houses were well kept, mostly white stucco or frame, typical one-story California bungalows, averaging from six to ten rooms [...] The lawns were green and well-trimmed, bordered with various local plants and flowers. It was a pleasant neighborhood, clean, quiet, well bred" (48-9). His description is charged with his class-conscious criticism of middle class well-kept, well-trimmed, well-bred African Americans and his suggestion that they are out of touch with the majority of blacks and too concerned with fitting in to white society. The ironic undercurrent comes through in the context of the next paragraph: "I felt like an intruder and it made me slightly resentful" (49). Bob knows the city (and his own unmarried working class status) well enough to know he *should* feel out of place in Alice's neighborhood, but he resents such class divisions and Alice's family's place in such a conservative social world, where the "talented tenth" rhetoric of the 20s still held sway along with solid capitalist family values.

Bob feels uncomfortable in Alice's neighborhood because of class differences, but he feels most unwelcome in poor white areas of the city. The neighborhood where Madge lives makes him nervous, and he worries that since it's more working-class, he could run into trouble. He sits in his car waiting for her, smoking and listening to the radio, and endures suspicious looks: "People passed, glanced at me, then turned to stare with hard hostility when they saw I was a Negro. It was a rebbish neighborhood, poor

white; I'd have felt much better parked in Beverly Hills" (139). Although he wouldn't fit in with a rich white neighborhood like Beverly Hills, Bob fears the "rebbish" Southern poor whites more. He thinks they are more likely to cause him trouble, especially since many poor whites in Los Angeles during the war years were Southern migrants seeking defense jobs. The combination of their legacy of racist Southern culture and the false perception that they were competing for jobs frequently leads the poor whites to harass black workers. Bob's feelings of unease in Madge's block are confirmed when he sees "several faces peering furtively around the corners of the curtains in the front room" of a rooming house near where his car is parked (139). The geography of the city has an axis of class as well as an axis of race, and for Bob the most dangerous combination of those is poor white.

The limitations in his position as worker-consumer are everywhere apparent to Bob in Himes's novel: his awareness that he has only restricted access to the American Dream, which he clearly desires, makes his daily experiences of racism more painful. Bob connects his consumerism to his citizenship, particularly regarding his new car. His pride as a consumer shows in the way he describes his car, connecting his buying power with racial pride as well:

a '42 Buick Roadmaster I'd bought four months ago, right after I'd gotten to be a leaderman, and every time I got behind the wheel and looked down over the broad, flat, mile-long hood I thought about how the rich white folks out in Beverly couldn't even buy a new car now and got a certain satisfaction. (10)

When he fantasizes about beating up his boss after he is demoted, the thought of losing his car stops him, rather than the knowledge that he'd suffer a police beating, a fine, and some days in jail: "I'd lose my car. I think that was what made me decide that my pride wasn't worth it. My car was proof of something to me, a symbol" (30-31). His car symbolizes his masculinity and his status as an American worker and consumer: it is his source of mobility in literal geographic terms as well as figuratively speaking his purchasing power and his ability to move into the middle class.

GOING PUBLIC, GOING WEST: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WARTIME LOS ANGELES

But the consumer power Bob feels behind the wheel of his Buick is constantly problematized in the novel by his lack of social power as an African American in the public sphere. His anger and resentment toward white drivers and pedestrians and his painful anticipation of their racism mark his drive to work, as the stresses of rush hour are exacerbated by racial tensions. When Bob nearly hits a pair of white pedestrians, the exchange of looks between them and him explains the power relations: “I sat there looking at the white couple until they had crossed the sidewalk, giving them stare for stare, hate for hate [...] My arms were rubbery and my fingers numb” (13). His visceral reaction to their cold hostility sets the tone for the novel: Bob is excruciatingly aware of the myriad effects of racism on the way he is treated in his daily life, driving from home to work to Alice’s house. He realizes that even though they are on foot and he is behind the wheel, the white couple has more power; they realize their privilege as well, and they take their time crossing against the light in morning rush hour traffic because they know he can’t act.

The racial and class-based geographies of Los Angeles affect Bob’s sense of personal style, as well; when he dresses to go out with Madge, Bob contemplates where they might go together. He needs clothes that can move with him from black social circles to white, to “look sharp” and “feel comfortable” in either: “I could wear an outfit over on the Avenue and feel strictly fine, but if I went downtown in it I felt gaudy” (136). He decides that his “beige gabardine pumps, grey flannel slacks, camel’s-hair jacket” and “aqua gabardine shirt” will make the transition easily without making him feel overdressed or tacky (136-37). Work attire has a classed dimension for him as well, making him proud to be a working-class man. Bob’s “coveralls,” “tin hat,” “leather jacket” and “high-heeled, iron-toed boots” make him feel masculine and strong: “Something about my working clothes made me feel rugged, bigger than the average citizen, stronger than a white-collar worker—stronger even than an executive” (8-9). His masculine identity as a worker makes him feel superior to those wealthy white men whose labor is less physical and commonly perceived as feminized, and Bob revels in his “rugged” work outfit, feeling “a swagger in [his] stance” (9). Depending on what he wears and the public spaces where he wears it, Bob al-

ternates between masculine pride and racial self-consciousness, his gender privilege vying with his racialized embodiment. Even at work in his tough clothes, Bob and other African Americans negotiate the shaky ground gained during the war boom.

The everyday lives of many African American workers in the novel bear the marks of their recent past in the South, and they often interpret the geographical location—the South—as the site of the worst kind of American racism. Southern racism has a specific place for these workers, but it is also usually located in a particular time—the past. For example, Bob’s car-pool riders chafe under the memories of the South, as Pigmeat explains when Bob calls him “buddy”: “When I escaped from Mississippi I swore I’d lynch the first sonabitch that called me ‘buddy’” (11). The term has a demeaning connotation for Pigmeat, who insists that where he comes from “a ‘buddy’ drinks bilge water, eats crap, and runs rabbits. That’s what a peckerwood means when he calls you ‘buddy’” (11). Another black Southerner jokes that he’ll go back to Arkansas “when the horses, they pick the cotton, the mules, they cut the corn; when the white chickens lay black eggs and the white folks is Jim Crowed” (22). Life on the West Coast is an improvement over the South for Pigmeat and other black war workers, primarily because they have well-paid jobs and enjoy at least *de jure* protection from discrimination in the workplace. Their daily lives on the job, as the novel illustrates, still present innumerable challenges, and in order to keep their jobs, the African American defense workers must negotiate every confrontation patiently. But their perception of the nation allows them to perceive a degree of progress in racial attitudes that accompanies their geographical migration, leaving the ultra-racist South for the relatively permissive West Coast.

Still, white workers resent African Americans at the shipyard, and in Himes’s novel most of the racist antagonism comes with a Southern accent, thus allowing Bob and other African Americans to “place” racism as a Southern phenomenon and thus as out of place here in L.A. For example, when Bob and his riders arrive five minutes late for work the gatekeeper says, “What’d y’all do las’ night, boy? I bet y’all had a ball down on Central Avenue” (15). As Bob walks toward his crew’s dry dock, a guard tells him, “Put out that cigarette, boy. What’s the matter you coloured boys can’t never obey no rules?” (15). The gatekeeper’s drawl and “y’all” and the guard’s “boy” and double (triple?) negative mark them as racist Southern-

ers requiring extra tolerance and restraint. Similarly, Bob knows that Hank, a white tacker leaderman from Georgia, gives his tackers to any white mechanics who ask, but he makes “the coloured mechanics wait until a coloured tacker was free” because white tackers won’t work for black mechanics (24). Bob knows that if anyone complains about this racist and inefficient policy, Hank put on “his special smile for coloured” and “gave them a line of his soft Southern jive” (24). In these Southern white accents, Himes portrays the overt racism in wartime industry that even legal protection didn’t prevent. The pervasive hostility of virtually every interaction between Bob and white Southerners eventually causes him to lose his temper and sets the machinery of retribution in motion, specifically when he has conflicts with poor whites.

More covertly, however, a connotation of class pervades the insults directed at many of the white racists in the novel, who are portrayed as poor and called “Okie,” “Arky,” “peckerwood,” “cracker,” and “white trash.” The geographical references to Oklahoma and Arkansas originated with the first waves of Dust Bowl refugees and gradually applied to anyone who appeared to be a rural white Southerner—Bob refers to a young white woman getting drunk in a predominantly African American bar as “the Arky Jill” (76). Bob’s association of geographical origin, the South, with white racism combines with his stereotype of poor Southern whites as “trash,” thus not only detestable because of their Southern white racism but also because of their poverty. The poor white women, like “the Arky Jill,” are portrayed as sometimes cruel and often sexually forward, as class and racial identity meld with assumptions about gender and sexuality. At work, Bob takes pride in his position of responsibility, which places him above many white women workers in the hierarchy of the shipyard; his descriptions of interactions with white women suggest that many of them recognize and resent his gender privilege, perhaps thinking that their racial privilege should afford them authority over him.

As a leaderman, Bob has authority over women, white and African American, and he earns more money than they do. He sometimes flirts playfully with young black women on the job, but Bob’s workplace relations with white women are strained with racial and sexual tension barely below the surface of their interactions. In an interesting reversal of the male gaze, he notes how they watch him: “Whenever I passed the white women looked at me, some curiously, some coyly, some with open hostility. Some

just stared with blank hard eyes. Few ever moved aside to let me pass; I just walked around them” (18). He notices the range of responses his bodily presence generates among white women, from the coy who might be interested in him sexually, to the openly hostile, whose racism can barely be restrained. Bob values his job, which provides him with a good paycheck and a position with leadership responsibilities, so he does what he can to keep the peace among white and black workers.

When he needs to borrow a tacker for a few hours, Bob asks the tacker leaderman Hank, who claims that the four white women tackers “lounging” around the deck and “gabbing” are busy (25). Bob then asks another white leaderman, Don, who suggests he take Madge, a Southern white woman, who refuses: “I ain’t gonna work with no nigger!” (27). Bob has encountered Madge before around the workplace, and he has noticed that whenever she sees him she “deliberately put on a frightened, wide-eyed look and backed away from [him] as if she was scared stiff, as if she was a naked virgin and [he] was King Kong” (19). But in the run-in with Madge when she refuses to work with him, Bob loses his cool and curses her: “Screw you then, you cracker bitch!” (27). Bob’s perception of Madge is overtly linked to her class, and although he is a worker too, Bob disdains the poor whites who in turn resent him for his good job and nice car and fear his over-embodied black sexuality. Their mutual hatred is not simply racial, nor is it an equal measure of class and race prejudice. Bob also calls Madge a “bitch,” and his feelings for her vacillate from extreme disgust to involuntary lust; her behavior with him indicates that she sees Bob not just as a “nigger” but as an African American man with more economic power than she has and the supposed tendency to rape white women. The sexual is inseparable from race and class in their interactions and perceptions of one another.

After the confrontation with Madge, Bob is summoned to the superintendent’s office and demoted to mechanic effective the following Monday, when an underqualified white man will take over responsibility for his work crew (30). Bob’s employer tells him that he was supposed “to help me keep down trouble between the white and coloured workers” and that he thought Bob was qualified because he doesn’t have “a chip on [his] shoulder like most coloured boys” (29). Appealing to his intelligence, breeding, and chivalry, Mac chastises Bob for his outburst: “I figured you were too intelligent to lose your head about something like that. I figured you had

better manners, more respect for women than that” (29). Mac’s assumptions about Bob slip from racial to class markers, first suggesting he’s better than most “coloured boys,” but then appealing to his “manners”—as if white racism is merely the rudeness of uncultured white trash, Mac suggests that, even though he is African American, Bob is exceptional and he should know better than to let the poor whites’ hostility affect his polite demeanor.

Bob had anticipated some disciplinary action resulting from his confrontation with Madge, but he didn’t realize he’d be downgraded; he thought that his boss would fear the backlash of African American workers: “I thought he’d be afraid of the coloured workers making trouble. It shocked me to find out he didn’t give a goddamn about the coloured workers, one way or the other” (30). Based on the information in George Lipsitz’s study of wartime wildcats and hate strikes, perhaps Bob’s boss should have been afraid of the effects of his demotion: during World War II, African American workers frequently protested racism on the job with wildcat strikes and mass demonstrations (73). For example, janitors at a Detroit Chrysler plant “wildcatted in March 1943 in protest against the company’s failure to promote blacks and to pay them adequate wages. One month later they walked off the job again because management demoted a black supervisor and placed the janitors under the authority of a white man” (Lipsitz 77-78). Bob’s surprise at his supervisor’s actions suggests that Bob is aware of the unrest in the defense industry and the power that African American workers were beginning to harness to better their workplace.

In fact, when he approaches his union steward Herbie Frieberger, demanding that he tell Madge that she has to work with African Americans, the white hate strike is a main concern, and Herbie replies, “This is dynamite. If we tried that, half the workers in the yard would walk out” (113). When Bob loses his temper with Herbie’s attempts to stall, the union man calls on the unity rhetoric of the war effort: “This isn’t any time for private gripes. We’re fighting fascism—we’re not fighting the companies and we’re not fighting each other—we’re all fighting fascism together and in order to beat fascism we got to have unity” (114). Echoing African American workers all over the country, Bob challenges the unity rhetoric with its own logic: “Get these crackers to unite with me. I’m willing. I’ll work with ‘em, fight with ‘em, die with ‘em, goddamnit. [...] What the hell do I care about unity, or the war either, so long as I’m kicked around by every white person who comes along?” (114-15). Herbie’s resort to rallying round the

anti-fascist cause and Bob's angry challenge play out the larger arguments taking place around job discrimination at the time: government agencies, including the War Manpower Commission, "placed a higher priority on wartime efficiency over non-discrimination, fearing the consequences of white walkouts in protest over black hires" (Boris 83). Bob's retort fails to convince the union steward, however, and Bob stands gazing out over the harbor, remembering that the military effort he is working to strengthen also enforces institutional racism in its ranks: "A cruiser was silhouetted against the skyline. The white folks are still going strong, I thought; then I thought about the black sailors aboard waiting on the white" (115). The cruiser, symbol of American military might, global mobility, and the fight against fascism, also represents for Bob the inequalities upon which the nation is founded. Bob notes the irony that he and other African American shipyard workers helped to build the cruiser, which, like the nation, still operates on a system that discriminates against them.

WHITE PRIVILEGE, MALE PRIVILEGE: BODIES, SEX, AND LANGUAGE

In rare moments, outside the institutional restrictions of work, Bob manages to connect with white men around their shared gender privilege, when their racial identities temporarily recede into the background. But the two terms of identity come into conflict eventually, on one occasion when Bob gives two white sailors a ride across town: Bob's car, his favorite symbol of his prosperity and mobility, is their first subject of conversation. The sailors are still in their teens, in uniform, and from San Francisco and Memphis. They both sit in the front seat and converse with Bob casually about cars, as if there were no major social divisions between themselves and him. The freshness and candor of the two sailors starts Bob thinking about whiteness:

I began wondering when white people started getting white—or rather, when they started losing it. And how it was you could take two white guys from the same place—one would carry his whiteness like a loaded stick, ready to bop everybody else in the head with it; and the other would just simply be white as if he didn't have anything to do with it and let it go at that. (41)

Whiteness is compared to a weapon in Bob's thoughts, which can be used to hurt him if the white person chooses. Geography again comes into consideration, as Bob is careful to compare "two white guys from the same place," ostensibly the South. He acknowledges the importance of place to a white man's sense of identity, but he wants to investigate the other factors, since place alone cannot determine whether or not a white man will use his race as a weapon.

Bob's perception of whiteness as potentially non-threatening, embodied by the two sailors, one of whom is a Southerner, contains within it a seed of hope, since he realizes that there is a possibility that a person can be white without wanting to "bop everybody else in the head with it." Enjoying his conversation with the boys, Bob relaxes and they start talking about the women on the sidewalks as they drive past, speculating whether or not they are married, mothers, cheating on their husbands, and so on. But they all fall silent when they see an older African American woman:

a dark brown woman in a dark red dress and a light green hat carrying a shoebox tied with a string, falling along in that knee-buckling, leaning-forward, housemaid's lope, and frowning so hard her face was all knotted up. I wanted to say something to keep it going, but all I could have said about her was that she was an ugly, evil-looking old lady. If we had all been coloured we'd have laughed like hell because she was really a comical sister. But with the white boys present, I couldn't say anything. I looked straight ahead and we all became embarrassed and remained silent for a time. (42)

An unspoken taboo prevents Bob from making fun of a black woman in front of whites, and the white sailors realize it as well; they cannot say anything about her, either. She exists for them only as a pathetic body, as opposed to the younger women they had been ogling just before. The silence has altered their demeanor, and when the conversation picks up again, they can no longer occupy the unmarked disembodied male perspective together: "we were all a little cautious. We didn't talk about women any more" (42). Bob suddenly realizes that, even among friendly white men, his racial identity binds him to the woman, even though she is "an ugly, evil-looking old lady," in a deeper and more intimate way than his gender identity binds him to the men in the car with him, although they are bonding by talking about women as sex objects under their collective male gaze. This fear of

even speaking, which all three men seem to feel, paralyzes their conversation and closes off the common ground that they had been able to find earlier. The white men are suddenly aware of their whiteness, which limits what they can say about the woman without offending Bob, while Bob's racial embodiment has come between them because he identifies with the woman in spite of his powerful desire to exist only in terms of gender. In this scene, as in others in the novel, relations of oppression supersede relations of privilege.

Another sexual situation leads Bob to think about racial conventions in terms of gender, again with a white man, when he tells the white leaderman Don about what happened with Madge. Bob describes to Don the angry exchange of insults, but then a strange thing happens: Don gives Bob her home address, saying "Maybe you can cure her" (119). Bob isn't sure how to interpret this: maybe Don thinks he wants to ask her out, or rape or beat her "to get even with her," or maybe Don wants to prove to Bob that "all men of his race didn't approve of that sort of thing [Madge's racism]" (119). The address puts Bob in a precarious position with Don:

I wanted to tell him I didn't want to go to bed with her, I wanted to black her eyes; but just the idea of her being a white woman stopped me. [...] I couldn't tell him I *didn't* want her because she was a white woman and he was a white man, and something somewhere way back in my mind said that would be an insult. And I couldn't tell him that I *did* want her, because the same thing said that that would be an insult too. (119)

These conflicting impulses lead to nervous laughter and Bob gets out of the situation, but he still wonders "what a white man and a Negro could talk about that wouldn't touch at some times or other on one of those taboo subjects that would embarrass one or the other, or both" (119). He realizes that the two hypothetical men would need to have the same position on white supremacy, either fully against it or fully in favor, because every aspect of life would eventually bring up the issue of race. Since he cannot ever be sure that even friendly white men are fully against white supremacy, Bob falls silent in order to avoid conflict. As with the white sailors, Bob's racial embodiment limits his ability to conform to masculine social conventions. Black male sexuality occupies for Bob the contradictory space of gender power and racial oppression.

Bob's theory of whiteness takes into consideration performance as well as appearance, and his problems with whites arise from their racist behavior that he sees as "white." Whiteness can be used as a weapon, not only by hostile white men spoiling for a fight, but also by provocative white women like Madge who can accuse black men of rape. When he ponders his mixed feelings of attraction, anger, and disgust toward Madge, Bob tries to unpack the sexual and racial values surrounding their interactions: "it wasn't that Madge was white; it was the way she used it" (125). Bob senses that she entertains mixed feelings toward him as well. He imagines that "she wanted them [African American men] to run after her. She expected it, demanded it as her due. [...] teasing them with her body, showing her bare thighs and breasts. Then having them lynched for looking" (125). Bob decides that Madge is using her race and her sexuality as weapons to harm black men, that she is "luring [him] with her body and daring [him] with her color" (126). Considering how carefully Bob has analyzed his situation with Madge, it is even more harrowing when she is successful in all he suspects of her: he is drawn to her sexually but runs away before they have sex, she accuses him of rape at work and he is arrested, beaten, and forced into the military. The sense of Bob's inevitable doom pervades his interactions with Madge, culminating in his induction.

Unlike his unproblematic admission that he liked the white sailors, Bob constantly struggles with his attraction for Madge and his disdain for her "white trash" appearance—her overt racism is one obvious cause for this conflict, but his first person narration of Madge's age and class also seem to influence his mixed reactions. In one scene that shows how extreme his feelings for her are, Bob approaches Madge at lunch, hoping to settle their dispute somehow, and instead of pretending fear she flirts with him, momentarily unbuckling "the white armor plate she'd wrapped herself up in" and catching him off-guard (130). He asks her out and when he comes to her apartment that night, much too late for a date, he finds her ready for bed and obviously unprepared for a date. In a long descriptive passage, worth quoting at length for the sustained detailed scrutiny of Madge's appearance, Bob looks at her carefully from head to toe:

She had on a nubby maroon robe and her blonde hair, dark at the roots, was done up in metal curlers tight to her head. Without lipstick or make-up she looked older; there were deep blue circles underneath her eyes and blue hollows on each side of

the bridge of her nose. Tiny crow's-feet spread out from the outer corners of her eyes and hard slanting lines calipered obliquely from her nostrils, dropping vertically from the edges of her mouth. Her mouth was big, hard, brutal, with lips almost colorless; and her eyes were wide, blue, staring, almost popping, but now there was a muddy look in them. Beneath her robe her breasts seemed lower, big and loose, and her hips lumped out from her waist like half-filled sacks. For bedroom slippers she wore a pair of worn-out play shoes that had once been red. She had big feet and her ankles were very white, laced with veins, and dirty on the bone. (145)

From his description, her whiteness is partly fake—like her hair with its dark roots and curlers, the blue shadows under her eyes—but she still uses it as a weapon. The hardness of her eyes and mouth, along with her curlers, big feet, and dirty ankles, mark her as a white trash woman whose minimal attractiveness is earthy—“dark,” “muddy,” and “dirty”—rather than a more pristine or pure femininity. Madge is big: her mouth, her eyes, her breasts, her feet are all “big” and “wide” in “worn-out” shoes, and the overall effect of the description is to portray her as a cartoonish older woman.

After he makes a pass at her, they tussle, and she taunts him with racist threats even as she propositions him. Finally, though, Bob turns her down; his lust for her has evaporated once she has admitted she wants him sexually. He refuses to play into her rape fantasy, and after she calls him “nigger” repeatedly and says “This’ll get you lynched in Texas” during their love-play (if you can call it that?), Bob storms out (145). She chases him, threatening to get him lynched if he leaves her, which only further angers him. Again he comments on how unattractive she is: “She looked like hell. She was a real beat biddy, trampish-looking and pure rebbish” and tells her “go wash your face [...] you look beat” (146). After he gets in his car, with her chasing him outside with threats, he tells her, “You look like mud to me, sister, like so much dirt. Just a big beat bitch with big dirty feet. And if it didn’t take so much trouble I’d make a whore out of you” (148). His disdain for her is a complicated combination of his sexist view of a mature woman (recall his discomfort when he and the white sailors saw the older African American woman) and his class-biased attitude toward poor whites, geographically linked to the South in his expression “rebbish.”

Bob’s calling Madge “beat” and “rebbish” further mark her as Southern white trash, a woman far beneath him in power relations of both class and gender. Bob associates Madge with dirtiness and impurity through his con-

stant references to “mud” and “dirt,” and while his attitude is clearly sexist and classist as well as fueled by personal animosity, his constant recourse to the rhetoric of purity can be also read in the context of work discrimination. In fact, Bob reverses a commonplace complaint from whites working with African Americans for the first time. According to Boris, many wartime workplaces were disrupted by whites who refused to share toilet and locker facilities with African Americans, claiming that blacks were dirty, malodorous, syphilitic, and generally biologically inferior (94). The counter-argument from anti-discrimination handbooks pointed out that “black women and men not only cleaned public and private toilets but care for children, prepare food, and ‘handle much of the linen and make up the beds of many white Americans’” (Boris 94). Nevertheless sharing sanitary facilities continued to generate protest, especially from white women, who threatened to walk out and sometimes did; many employers installed segregated facilities to silence resistance (Boris 94). White women’s obsession with cleanliness operates on a racial level as a justification for segregation while at the same time privileging their own notions of white feminine purity. By describing Madge as white and dirty, Bob attempts, however offensively, to correct in his own mind the racist associations of blackness with dirt and impurity that were currently circulating in wartime industrial workplaces like his.

Madge is “dirty” in another sense, as well: her rough language and her sexual availability to Bob, which further seals her fate as “white trash” to be made into a “whore” if he chooses to sleep with her. In her apartment, they spar with one another, challenging each other sexually: Madge tells him, “You can’t have me unless you catch me” and “All right, rape me then, nigger!” (147). The language he uses with her is also disrespectful and vulgar, using curses and harsh words. From the narrative of their encounter, it is clear that neither is interested in the other personally; they are using one another to work out their racial grievances in a sexual arena. The conflict is, she wants him to fulfill a rape fantasy and still maintain her white privilege, while he wants to sexually conquer her to dissolve her white privilege, make a whore of her. Unfortunately for Bob, his relative gender and class privileges don’t trump her white racial privilege, and she wins the power struggle in the end. As when he and the white sailors saw the older African American woman, Bob’s racial body takes precedence over his masculine identity.

Madge contrasts with Alice, who is very attractive and at the same time chaste—she is middle-class, marriageable, and ostensibly worth the wait. Indeed, Bob describes Alice in a way that starkly contrasts with his descriptions of Madge. He compares Alice to Bette Davis twice in the novel, an appropriate description since Davis was a star famous for her petite, intelligent beauty and sophistication, for her eyes more than her secondary sex characteristics such as hips or breasts. Bob describes Alice as she makes her entrance,

like Bette Davis, big-eyed and calisthenical and strictly sharp. She was togged in a flowing royal-purple chiffon evening gown with silver trimmings and a low square-cut neck that showed the tops of her creamy-white breasts and the darker disturbing seam down between; and her hair swept up on top of her head in a turbulent billow and held by two silver combs that matched the silver trimmings of her gown—a tall willowy body falling to the floor with nothing but curves. Black elbow-length gloves showed a strip of creamy round arm. (53)

Unlike Madge, whose whiteness is ugly or faked or both, Alice's fair skin is "creamy" and her curves are appealing because she is "willowy" rather than lumpy. Alice's skin is light enough for her to pass for white when she goes out with white friends, and in this passage Bob clearly finds her "whiteness" appealing, twice calling her skin "creamy." In fact, the only hint of earthiness or sex is the "darker disturbing seam" between her breasts, which Bob notes but then skips up to describe her hair. While he clearly finds her beautiful and attractive, Bob describes Alice as a delicate movie star or a queen. Her purple evening gown with silver trim marks her in terms of class as well: it sounds expensive and it is the color of royalty, with silver suggesting wealth, coins, fine jewelry. Alice symbolizes Bob's desire for upward class mobility, but he frequently argues with her over the issue of race, worrying that the ascent into the middle class requires him to tacitly accept the racism of the hegemonic white culture.

Overall, Alice is young, rich, and thin, while Madge is wrinkled, trashy, and dumpy. Alice is likened to Bette Davis, while Madge is racialized white trash. With this ironic reversal of common racial stereotypes, Bob's own racial identity becomes more scrambled: although they are both African American, he worries that he doesn't deserve Alice because she is middle-class, and he feels superior to working-class, white trash Madge. His at-

traction to both women makes him question his own racial and class identity, and his volatile relationship with Madge leads to violence, rejection, and at the end of the novel, involuntary induction. The fact that he is faced with the choice between two women only further underscores Bob's fixation on his masculine identity and the conflicts it causes for him in his work and personal life. But he also must contend with the violence of masculine and African American embodiment in the wartime social milieu of Los Angeles so arrestingly captured in Himes's brusque prose style.

Working in the hard-boiled style of the Los Angeles *noir* writers, epitomized by Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and other writers of popular fiction targeted at male audiences, Himes chooses his words for maximum impact, often supplying gory details of Bob's psychic suffering. Bob's embodiment in the novel is not an attribute of his gender or sexuality per se; rather, it is because of his vulnerability to and fear of violence. His fantasies of killing a white man he fought at work, of beating and/or raping Madge, and of other passing daydreams are an ironic foreshadowing of the beatings he will sustain at the hands of his co-workers and the police after Madge's rape charge. Violent language also peppers the novel in Bob's narration and dreams. Bloody metaphors regularly evoke the psychological effects of racism in graphic physical detail, whether in response to his own subconscious imaginings or his experiences in the public spaces of Los Angeles. Bob narrates a dream in which he lies on the sidewalk in front of the Federal Building, being beaten almost to death by "two poor peckerwoods" with rubber hoses, but they want to stop, saying "It ain't right to beat this nigger like that. What we beating this nigger for anyway?" (69). They are ordered to continue by the "hard cultured voice" of the president of the shipyard "dressed in the uniform of an Army general" as two laughing policemen look on (69). Bob's dream graphically portrays the way the racial and class conflicts between (Southern) white and black workers are exacerbated by the captains of the war industries, whose primary concerns are production, not worker welfare or racial harmony.

His violent metaphors also describe his experiences in public and at work. After walking out of a Hollywood movie because of a stereotyped mammy character, Bob laments, "The sons of bitches were grinding me to the nub, to the white meatless bone" (79). Bob imagines the pain of racism in his body, and equates it with mutilation; when he pictures Madge's hard brutal mouth saying "nigger" he feels as if "something took a heavy ham-

mer and nailed me to the bed” (101). When he has to endure a racist joke in Mac’s office, he feels it as “a gut punch and my stomach was hollow as a drum; it took all I had to keep standing up straight, to keep on looking at him” (123). As he loses his nerve trying to talk to Madge, his experience is profoundly gendered as well as raced, and he alludes to the lynching that he feels convinced Madge would demand if she could: “I felt castrated, snake-bellied, and cur-doggish, I felt like a nigger being horse-whipped in Georgia” (126). Bob’s reaction to this humiliation and fear is to lash out with equal violence, thinking, “what I ought to do is rape her [...] That’s what she wanted” (126). As Boris points out, Bob’s blackness negates his masculinity, making his body vulnerable to violent attack and undermining his self-confidence and peace of mind (78). His resentment often builds up to the point where he no longer feels in control, and almost gives in to his own violent urges.

Bob muses in a more cynical moment, after waking up from two consecutive nightmares to the sound of his landlady Ella Mae’s baby crying, that if she “really wanted to give him a break they’d cut his throat and bury him in the back yard before he got old enough to know he was a nigger” (4). He is immediately ashamed of this angry thought, but only because he knows how much the baby’s parents love it. More interestingly, however, Bob ascribes the wrong gender to the baby, a girl named Emerald. He finds it easy to identify with Ella Mae’s child as an African American born into a racist society if he thinks of the child as male. Later when he’s flirting with Ella Mae about marrying her, she replies that then he’ll have to raise Emerald. Bob doesn’t understand what she means, asking her, “Emerald what?” and then catching himself: “I forgot her name was Emerald” (47). He admits that he is always startled by the unusual name, but doesn’t admit that he thinks of the child as male. In his slip about Ella Mae’s baby and in other dilemmas throughout the novel, Bob cannot pose the same challenges to gender norms that he can to racist conventions: he “naturalizes gender even as he questions the significance of racial difference” (Boris 78). His racial affinities for women of color conflict with his sense of gender privilege, as his masculinity is not as threatened from all sides the way his racial identity is.

“DOMESTIC” DILEMMAS: HURST AND HIMES

Hurst and Himes chronicle the careers of Bea Pullman and Bob Jones, two workers in the public sphere who face constant resistance in their attempts to earn a living and to advance within their fields. The less than sanguine endings of the two novels help to spell out the implications for white women and African American men who challenge restrictions of the public sphere. Bea ultimately sees herself as a “domestic” failure because although fabulously wealthy, she is alone without husband or child; because of white sexual anxiety about African American masculinity, Bob loses his job, his fiancée, and possibly his life as he is coerced into joining the armed services during the World War II. The theme of incorporation/embodiment runs through both novels, as Bea’s masculinization through work and Bob’s excessively embodied racial identification mark them as improper for their public roles, particularly at work. In other words, as a white woman Bea feels she should be more domestic: she envies women who have husbands and families and measures her own success by that social scale. Bob, on the other hand, feels empowered by his masculinity until, in many situations, it is superseded by his physical vulnerability to racism or his affinity with other racialized victims of injustice.

The shipyard’s exploitation of Bob’s “domestic” wartime labor, as opposed to foreign military service, without the benefit of civil rights allows his contribution to the war effort to be nullified at the whims of a white woman he sees as beneath him; his racialized labor isn’t rewarded or recognized when Madge calls attention to his embodied black masculinity. Although Bob continually insists on his male privilege at work and in public spaces of Los Angeles, it is always undermined when his raced and often sexualized body enters the discourse. Similarly, Delilah’s domestic labor enables Bea to escape her own white female body by hiding in her corporation—her masculine role in the company and in the household depends on Delilah’s overdetermined black female body in the kitchen and on the product, what Berlant calls Bea’s “prosthetic body” (119). In both novels, the white body relies on the African American body, as (domestic/industrial and domestic/house servant) labor, as site of displaced sexuality, and as an escape from white physicality.

White women’s fetishization of cleanliness, like Bea’s repeated references to “white nappy” in *Imitation of Life*, operates on a racial level as a

justification for segregation while at the same time privileging their own notions of white feminine purity. Bob's association of dirt and impurity with the white woman Madge demonstrate the degree to which his own thought processes are influenced by the discourses of racial purity that were currently circulating in wartime industrial workplaces like his, demonizing African Americans as unclean. The subtext of empire pervades both novels and affects both characters, troubling the parameters of the word "domestic" as it pertains to both the family home and the national home. White and African American roles in both these "homes" come under close scrutiny, as do the power relations between men and women. The two texts illustrate the vast changes in American social space taking place between the wars, as white women and African Americans attempted to move out of the private sphere and into the privileges of the public world of big business and industrial wage labor.

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