

# The New Negro in Los Angeles: Representations of Identity in Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday* and Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

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Constructions of identity were an important aspect of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of the 1920s that sought to empower the black community through its representations of the New Negro in literature and art. In the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, black writers captured the ongoing struggles that hindered the black community from progressing and gaining equality, as well as the internal conflicts over issues of identity that plagued them. They debated over the role of the New Negro, and for many, such as Alain Locke, the New Negro stood in contrast to the Old Negro and embraced his racial identity, refusing to submit to the oppression *and* oppressor of the dominant culture. For others, such as Wallace Thurman, the New Negro simply reconstructed another black image that became subsumed in a white establishment system of black types. Henry Louis Gates notes that the trope of the New Negro represented “a bold and audacious act of language, signifying the will to power, to dare to recreate a race by renaming it, despite the dubiousness of the venture” (4). During this time, key activists and writers of the movement centered their attention on finding a way that the black community and New Negro identity could be represented in an empowering manner.

The Harlem Renaissance gained momentum in 1923, when black social worker and editor of the *Opportunity* Charles S. Johnson argued that “racist art and literature undergirded the Jim Crow system of racial segregation and discrimination,” and that jokes, news articles, film and other mediums, “helped to build up and crystallize a fictitious being unlike any Negro” (Tyler 3). Johnson urged that in order for blacks to overcome and expunge misrepresentations, they, including their white allies, needed to

develop an ideology in their literature to mobilize the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance (3).

Prominent writer of the Harlem Renaissance W. E. B. Du Bois reached out to black writers and encouraged them to produce “credible literature that would gain them recognition in the family of man” (10) as a form of attacking the stereotypes and misrepresentations of blacks that white media and literature perpetuated. During the time, Du Bois made use of his politically rooted journal *The Crisis* to publish writers who eventually became staples in the movement: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, and—much later—Chester Himes. *The Crisis* published pro-black articles, poems, and brief literature that emphasized a stronger black community, as well as politically inclined shorts that encouraged the community to grow more active.

In the late 1920s, as the Harlem Renaissance lost its momentum due to the stock market crash, thousands took part in the Great Migration seeking better employment and living opportunities out West. During this time, a similar political and literary movement attempted to emerge in Los Angeles when the literary society of the Ink Slingers formed with the help of Johnson. Influenced by writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the Ink Slingers—made up of editors and writers for black journals, members of the NAACP and Urban League Association, and local politicians—served to represent the black community in Los Angeles but remained unrecognized despite their pervasive influence. Their primary goal was to inspire other activists into fighting the negative stereotypes that Hollywood and the media consistently reproduced (Tyler 36). The archetypal representations of blacks in the media were not only detrimental to the black community, but it recycled and perpetuated negative images of blacks that contributed to the already prevalent racism in Los Angeles.

While most scholars draw their attention to the race relations and emerging jazz culture in Central Avenue, what remains understudied is the literature that emerged from the 1920s to the 1940s that captures the conflicting images of black representation explored by black writers living in South Central—specifically, Arna Bontemps and Chester Himes. Although Los Angeles—including South Central—promised a site of

renewal for its incoming residents, black writers found that this city of images sought to replicate past stereotypes of blackness. Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday* and Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* explore the internal conflicts that residents and transplants of South Central experienced, especially concerning representations of race and class. Bontemps's and Himes's works, which both merge biography and fiction, reflect their personal experiences in the area of South Central. Each of their experiences is crucial to understand in order to demonstrate how the environment affected each writer and how their novels are a manifestation of the representations of identity they each wish to reclaim. It is also important to consider the question of how the black individual and community are represented in literature, a question that created fiery disputes among writers during the start of the Harlem Renaissance. Even though Bontemps and Himes did not share similar experiences in South Central, their works depict the space and its emerging culture and demonstrate the authors' experiences and attempts in reclaiming their black identity in an environment that often undermined those attempts.

Early in the twentieth century, Los Angeles, including Central Avenue and the surrounding area of South Central, was falsely advertised as a safe haven and land of opportunity. Because Hollywood was growing, city officials advertised Los Angeles as "the cradle of industrial freedom" (Sides 23), a city where blacks could find not only employment in such areas as manufacturing and entertainment, but also housing. However, the rumors of Los Angeles being a place of renewal and opportunity were deceptive since the city was no stranger to employment and residential discrimination. Following the release of *Birth of a Nation*, racism in Los Angeles during the 1920s was rampant, and the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan helped in intimidating and threatening minorities from moving into white neighborhoods, creating segregated communities of blacks, Mexicans, Japanese (later), and Italians (Sides 18). During the 1930s and 1940s, before and during World War II when Japanese residents were sent to internment camps and the black community populated Little Tokyo, racial tensions and racial restrictions further increased, making it difficult for members of the community to achieve social mobility.

During the 1940s, the overcrowding of blacks in Los Angeles during a time of racial tensions only worsened the issue, especially when white residents resented the black migrants who occupied the affordable housing in the residential areas not officially segregated (Itagaki 68). Los Angeles was undergoing a demographic transformation after the removal of 94,000 Japanese Americans (66), as well as experiencing increased racial tensions between whites, Mexicans, and Filipinos after the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. After the Japanese residents were forcefully removed from Little Tokyo, black migrants began to occupy the area due to the affordable market. Because of this, black migrants were then forced into a similar experience that the Japanese American endured prior to their internment camps. The living conditions in Little Tokyo were deplorable and overcrowded, and black migrants who could not afford to live in the Central Avenue area settled in Little Tokyo.

The literatures of Bontemps and Himes capture the racial tensions and segregation that consumed South Central during this time. Fleeing from the pervasive racism in the South, Midwest, and areas in the East, blacks, believing that Los Angeles would offer them increased prospects, struggled to maintain or reconstruct their identity upon discovering that Jim Crow laws were still in effect. With white supremacy reemerging in Los Angeles, migrants became aware of the de facto segregated areas in which they were permitted. Additionally, tensions between blacks were strong as existing black residents expressed concern over the boisterous and aggressive newcomers from “utterly repressive communities” in the South who “often availed themselves of their new freedoms and made their presence known to both whites and blacks” (Sides 50). Influenced by class prejudice, the existing residents believed that the migrants had to adapt to black bourgeois values (50).

Both Bontemps and Himes address the complexities in Los Angeles through the lens of their personal experiences. While Bontemps’s protagonists reflect Bontemps’s desires to reconnect with the black community by exploring a part of his past he did not experience, Himes’s protagonists reflect the inescapable racism that black migrants discovered upon moving to Los Angeles. For Bontemps, however, reclaiming his black

identity meant working with the ideas and stereotypes of Southern black culture and the black community in South Central.

*Bontemps and Uncle Buddy*

Bontemps was born in Louisiana, but his family relocated in Watts in 1905 where he had a privileged upbringing. His father had a vision for his family which was “to live comfortably as an American man, pure and simple, without any racial qualifier attached to his identity,” a view that emphasized “race solidarity [which] actually undermined the possibility of living in a colorblind society” (Flamming, *Bound* 65). Bontemps’s father’s vision led to isolating his family from the black community, for “[to] the white world, [Bontemps and his sister] were black children; but within the parameters of the black community, they were outsiders. They were middle class in both income and outlook, but they were not part of the black middle class that was trying to remake the city” (*Bound* 64). Bontemps was educated in public schools, attended a white private boarding school, graduated from Pacific Union College, and later attended UCLA (Canaday 163). Despite his isolation from the black community, Bontemps developed an interest in the black literature published in *The Crisis*, later submitting some of his own poetry and winning an award for one of his first poems.

Bontemps relocated to Harlem in 1924 and continued to produce poetry until finally publishing *God Sends Sunday* in 1931. The novel represents Bontemps’s attempt to recreate the black identity he was not able to construct as a child. Basing his protagonist on his Uncle Buddy Ward, Bontemps writes about Lil Augie, a boy from the rural South who finds employment as a successful jockey. Augie’s success as a jockey eventually starts to ruin him, for although his acquired wealth and reputation affirm his self-worth, he develops a scornful opinion of those blacks who are darker than he is. His streak of luck, however, ends when he loses all of his wealth and possessions, and embarks on a twelve-year journey, meandering around the South before settling in Mudtown.

After publishing *God Sends Sunday*, Bontemps relocated to the South and immersed himself in the culture his father isolated him from during his childhood. In “Why I Returned,” an autobiographical essay published thirty-four years after the

release of *God Sends Sunday*, Bontemps attempts to explain his father's actions. While living in Louisiana, his father had a threatening encounter with two white men, and this encounter frightened Bontemps's father to such an extent that he decided to remove his children from the black community to avoid the discrimination and harassment that the community repeatedly endured. Upon Bontemps and his family moving to Watts, living in a predominantly white neighborhood and attending white boarding schools, Bontemps's father cautioned him to not "[act] colored," forcing him to assimilate into white society and abandon the little that was left of his Southern roots (325). In contrast to Bontemps's father, Uncle Buddy embodied the Southern culture, for Buddy was fascinated with multiple Southern narratives, including, according to Bontemps, "dialect stories, preacher stories, ghost stories, slave and master stories. [Buddy] half-believed in signs and charms and mumbo-jumbo, and he believed wholeheartedly in ghosts" (325).

For Bontemps, Uncle Buddy represented his idea of a black culture and community, his *heritage*. He explains in his essay that his desire to recoup his black culture would prove beneficial, for it exposed him to a great side of the culture his father deemed "baneful":

In their opposing attitudes towards roots my father and my great uncle made me aware of a conflict in which every educated American Negro, and some who are not educated, must somehow take sides. By implication at least, one group advocates embracing the riches of the folk heritage; their opposites demand a clean break with the past and all it represents. Had I not gone home summers and hobnobbed with Negroes, I would have finished college without knowing that any Negro other than Paul Laurence Dunbar ever wrote a poem. I would have come out imagining that the story of the Negro could be told in two short paragraphs: a statement about jungle people in Africa and an equally brief account of the slavery issue in American history. (326)

It was through his association with other blacks that Bontemps started to form a social construct of race that inspired him to learn more about himself as a black man, but also

about how assimilated members of the black community, such as his father, trivialized the black experience in an attempt to disconnect from the black community and reconstruct an identity in accordance to white standards. By discovering the existing conflicts and learning more about black writers, Bontemps familiarized himself with other leading writers of the emerging Harlem Renaissance with whom he would later collaborate.

### **God Sends Sunday**

In an attempt to present a Southern character, Bontemps draws from his uncle, as well as stereotypes of the South: defamatory language, dialogue between characters presented in a “molasses-thick dialect . . . that might be misconstrued as a mocking caricature” (Flamming “The New Negro” 74), and stereotypical characters that were associated with “The Old Time Negro.” Even when the novel’s setting shifts to Augie’s arrival in Los Angeles, Bontemps depicts the black community no differently than he portrays black Southerners. Augie, a Southerner, lives in New Orleans and St. Louis before relocating to Mudtown, a town situated on the outskirts of Watts. The novel received a harsh critique from Du Bois who called it “a profound disappointment,” and Bontemps a “race hater.” Bontemps’s reaction to the critique, however, showed that he was not trying to present a negative depiction of the black community. Instead, he was attempting to preserve it, “to save Negro Americans from their ongoing loss of Negro-ness” because “[he] felt they still possessed what he had lost growing up out West—a culture linked to primitivism, an enduring tie to an African past, an undeniable sense of self” (Flamming 72).

In Part Two of the novel, when Augie arrives to Mudtown, a rural area on the outskirts of Watts in South Central, the narrator describes the town similarly to areas of the South and the primitive nature that Bontemps strived to preserve:

The small group in Mudtown was exceptional. Here, removed from the influences of white folks, they did not acquire the inhibitions of their city brother. Mudtown was like a tiny section of the deep south literally transplanted: Throughout the warm summer days old toothless men sat in

front of the little grocery store on boxes, chewing the stems of cob pipes, recalling the 'Mancipation, the actual beginning of their race. Women cooked over fireplaces in the yards and boiled their clothes in heavy iron kettles. (119)

The narrative describes the town as an extension of the South. The residents appear unsophisticated and, as presented later in the novel, primitive. Mudtown does not interest Augie, and he scornfully dismisses those who live there. Despite having lost nearly all his wealth, Augie arrives with a sense of entitlement and attempts to present himself in a regal fashion by repeatedly wearing his Prince Albert suit around town while scornfully judging others. This section of the novel appears to be Bontemps's reconstruction of how his Uncle Buddy was received upon arriving in Los Angeles. Since Bontemps did not live on the side of town populated by Southern migrants, farms and its animals, he bases his construction of Mudtown on what he overheard as a young adult. However, his illustrations of the characters and setting, as those previously presented, come off as an exaggerated form of what the space really was.

Several of the characters represent archetypal characters of the South. In an attempt to construct his characters as transplants of the South, Bontemps reductively portrays the women in the text as animalistic while he describes the men as drunkards and violent. The women possess mammy-like descriptions—"Women with thick hips, monstrous breasts, and glossy black skin stood on the doorsteps with brooms in their hands, their heads tied with red bandannas" (46)—or attributes that connect them to the primitive sense Bontemps was aiming to capture. The prevalence of the "other" in the omniscient narrative illustrates characters as foreign entities or undesirable: "strange mulatto children," "the young savages," "unlovely black girl," "plug-ugly girl," "[a] huge black woman with a flat, ugly face." By reducing them to stereotypes and othering them, he depicts how blacks were outcasts in society and treated as objects rather than individuals.

Augie's character, despite having been molded from Bontemps's uncle and his stories of the South, is a complex character who attempts to separate himself from the lower-class blacks while not entirely detaching himself from the community. Upon



arriving to Mudtown, Augie holds on to his pompous manners by wanting to appear as though he still has the wealth he lost prior to leaving the South. He parades himself in a worn out frock suit, a reminder of his past in the South, and looks at others with contempt.

Augie is unable to reinvent himself in Mudtown, for he never fits in with the black community because of the tension he both encounters and provokes. However, the end of the novel implies that Augie has a better chance at starting over outside of Mudtown. Augie realizes that Mudtown is not the place for him and decides to go away in a direction that was “new and strange” (193). Augie leaves Mudtown with nothing but his accordion since he leaves his belongings as Tisha chases him out of town. Augie leaves his former self, his Prince Albert suit included, behind in Mudtown and hops on a train to Tijuana with nothing but his accordion, ready to find a life with the possibility of being a jockey once again, demonstrating that there are greater, more attainable opportunities outside of Mudtown.

By writing *God Sends Sunday* and focusing on a part of the South he had never experienced, as well as a part of Watts from which he was isolated, Bontemps works with the ideas, the stereotypes of the South, attempting to capture a sense of what it would have been like had his family stayed in Louisiana. Because a large part of the black community that arrived in South Central arrived with hopes of starting anew, they detached themselves from the Southern culture and instead created a new kind of community that did not exist in the South. When writing about Mudtown, Bontemps is then attempting to recoup a part of his part by how he represents the black culture and community.

#### *Himes and his racial hurt*

Like Bontemps, Himes grew up in a privileged middle-class home that encouraged him to dissociate himself from the black community, but he later rebelled against his mother’s elitist upbringing by attempting to recreate his missing black identity. As Hilton Als explains, “[Himes] wanted to be a ‘real man,’ which is to say a black man—one who, instead of living pressed up against the glass wall that separates him from everything he desires (white women, fast cars, a big slice of the American pie),

shatters it” (qtd. in *If He Hollers* viii). In Los Angeles, however, Himes felt he was unable to shatter that glass wall, for his very environment separated him from what he desired.

Himes, a former Cleveland resident, illustrates his experience in Los Angeles in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* by addressing the racial prejudices and racial tensions within South Central more explicitly. Himes immerses himself in the Los Angeles culture of the 1940s and illustrates how the prevalence of racism damaged individuals who were trying to reconstruct their lives in the West, for his protagonist is “almost paralyzed by the racial conditions caused by wartime hysteria and nativism against [the Japanese]” (Itagaki 65). Additionally, Himes addresses the racial tensions triggered by the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. With the occurrence of World War II and the Zoot Suit Riots, Keith Wilhite explains how “[questions] of identity, nationalism, and the limits of government to police its own citizens prove central to both Himes’ response to the riots and his conception of L.A.’s wartime geography” (123). Wilhite posits that these events trigger the fear in the novel’s protagonist, Robert “Bob” Jones, in addition to raising legitimate questions about safety and racial identity. By addressing the issues present in Los Angeles in the 1940s, Himes not only highlights the heterogeneity of a multi-racial city, but also exposes the oppressive monologic views that attempted to marginalize minorities rather than unify them (125).

In *If He Hollers*, Himes illustrates the inequities and Jim Crow laws in effect in places of employment, especially for dockworkers. Although there is a war abroad, Himes understands that his protagonist is fighting his own war of racial discrimination in a Los Angeles that was “in the midst of a racial and ethnic transformation that threatened to reverse the previous ‘Anglo-cizing’ of Los Angeles” (Wilhite 131). Additionally, Himes incorporates biographical material in his novel, for he, like his protagonist, was lured to Los Angeles by the city’s boosteristic promises only to confront the damaging effects of racial prejudice.

In his autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes describes the damage, the “hurt” that Los Angeles caused and indicates that *If He Hollers* is an accumulation of those racial hurts (75):

Los Angeles hurt me racially as much as any city I have ever known—much more than any city I remember from the South. It was the lying hypocrisy that hurt me. Black people were treated much the same as they were in an industrial city of the South. They were Jim-Crowed in housing, in employment, in public accommodations, such as hotels and restaurants. . . . [Under] the mental corrosion of race prejudice in Los Angeles I had become bitter and saturated with hate. . . . I was thirty-one and whole when I went to Los Angeles and thirty-five and shattered when I left to go to New York. (73-76)

Throughout his autobiography, Himes recalls the hurts he experienced by means of rejection, repression, and racism. Despite possessing the required skills and experience, Himes could not find stable employment in this city of “lying hypocrisy.” The employment limitations started affecting Himes on a much deeper level when his personal insecurities began to affect his marriage, eventually leading to his moving to Harlem in an attempt to start anew. Rather than shattering the glass wall in Los Angeles, Himes discovers that the city shatters him instead, leaving him bitter; however, Himes, through his fiction, transforms his bitterness into art, using his protagonist to confront the city which harmed him.

*If He Hollers Let Him Go* was Himes’s way of addressing not only the pervasive prejudice endemic to the South Central area, but also the tensions and violence occurring within the black community. As a response to his own experiences, Himes was critical of blacks who often ignored the racial violence that repeatedly erupted in the community, choosing accommodation over resistance. Itagaki explains:

[Himes] expands on this brief irony and creates a protagonist who resists the settlement and stasis possibly achieved by overlooking racism. In search of economic mobility and social respectability, those from the black bourgeoisie such as the Harrisons have reinterpreted settlement as exclusion of and disdain for the working classes, the other black migrants and other races; it is a redefinition forged in racist and classist terms. (70)

In his novel *Himes* criticizes the hypocrisy of the black middle-class of Los Angeles during the 1940s while satirizing their dedicated efforts to assimilate and recreate themselves as white through economic mobility. The Harrisons represent the black bourgeois that wish to separate themselves from the working-class blacks (Wilhite 134) while praising whites for granting middle-class blacks their level of success and wealth. In choosing to accommodate to the white establishment, they pay a cost—cutting their ties with their blackness. By immersing themselves in the white community, however, the Harrisons have difficulty in understanding the black struggle. Troubled by the hypocrisy he finds in black communities, Himes depicts the prejudices of assimilated blacks, as shown through the Harrisons' relationship with Bob, who courts Alice, their fair-skinned daughter who fears being recognized as black.

Bob, a Los Angeles transplant from Cleveland, works in the industrial sector as a crew leader at Atlas Ship, and he repeatedly experiences a blinding rage and near-paralyzing fear when confronted with race related issues or racism, as well as the idea of being drafted. His fears is a direct response to both his social anxieties about the war and the uncertainty, "the racial handicap" (3), he lives with every day in Los Angeles. His racial handicap continuously interferes with his daily routine, his relationship with Alice, and his ability to work because it produces a blinding anger that results in violence, physical and verbal. Bob's violent responses are dangerous because they make him even more vulnerable in a social environment controlled by inescapable white laws. Bob shows awareness for his surroundings, but also an awareness of the fear and racism that he must either conform to or ignore, but never challenge (4). When Alice confronts Bob about his anxieties, she labels it as a "staggering inferiority complex, amounting to a fixation" (92) that could turn him insane if he "[continued] his brooding about white people" (95). However, Alice and her family's approach to Bob's situation is problematic, since they speak from a white perspective, advocating assimilation and recognition of the efforts white have put into accepting blacks as equals (52).

In relocating from Cleveland, Bob had hoped to reconstruct his life, but the racism he encounters in Los Angeles makes his dreams increasingly difficult to achieve. He finds himself in a world of "nodal points and sequestered territories which dark-

skinned men like [Bob] pass though at their own peril” (Wilhite 134). His ongoing anxieties about the military stem from witnessing how the war was affecting part of the Los Angeles population. When Ben, one of Bob’s crew members, discusses the Army, he presents an argument that resembles the struggle that Bob endures daily:

Every time a coloured man gets in the Army he’s fighting against himself. Of course there isn’t anything else he can do. If he refuses to go they send him to the pen. But if he does go and take what they put on him, and then fight so he can keep on taking it, he’s a cowardly son of a bitch. . . . Any time a Negro says he believes in democracy but won’t die to enforce it—I say he’s a coward. (121)

Ben’s statement demonstrates the struggle that black men faced upon going to war, for they would be fighting for an elusive democracy, an equality that was out of their reach or their control. Regardless of their participation, black men would have very little to gain from fighting in the war. For Bob, he is at constant war with himself in trying to preserve his blackness while trying to find acceptance for being black. Despite his efforts and personal wars, he loses in the end to a white woman who frames him for rape, and he later enlists in the Army in order to escape those false prison charges. As Itagaki claims, Bob ends up as the “[embodiment of] the multiple locations and perspectives of the silenced minorities in Los Angeles; ultimately, he is transformed into the hunted racial body of America himself” (75). In the end, Bob loses the battle against whites and must continue to fight a war against them and himself. He remains as a “hunted racial body” even in the Army, for he will endure the racism embedded in the U.S. military even as he is fighting against racism abroad.

In *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes writes that he did not serve in WWII, but from what he was able to gather from others, learned that “race prejudice was rampant in an armed forces dedicated to fight against racism in other parts of the world” (74). By ending the novel with Bob joining the Army, he presents the ongoing and pervasive nature of racism. Given that Himes experienced further racism after leaving Los Angeles for Harlem, Bob’s fate demonstrates the indeterminable end of racism that affects

blacks throughout the United States. In Los Angeles, however, the rampant racism affected Himes in ways that made his stay in the city short, lasting only four years.

## **Conclusion**

Even though the Harlem Renaissance movement attempted to create a fixed ideology for black writers to follow and apply to their texts failed, it created a diverse platform for black writers to capture their black experience or yearnings for wanting to be more involved in the black community and culture. Representations of the Los Angeles communities in Bontemps's and Himes's novels demonstrate the detrimental effects that the false advertisement of Los Angeles and segregation had on the black community during the 1920s-40s. While South Central, specifically Central Avenue, was glorified as being a place of opportunity and tolerance, the realities that are illustrated in Bontemps's and Himes's work reveal the actual struggles that blacks encountered and how racism in Los Angeles complicated the intentions that many had upon moving to the west: reinventing themselves.

Through the works of Bontemps and Himes, South Central Los Angeles is presented as an extended representation of the Harlem Renaissance by how both writers challenged and redefined the notions of representation. In their literature, Bontemps and Himes illustrate how institutional racism and colorism claimed the identities of black migrants and black residents of Los Angeles. Additionally, both writers demonstrate the effect that various forms of racism and institutions had on them personally. *God Sends Sunday* and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* are a reflection of Bontemps's and Himes's journey, for they depict how each writer, along with his protagonist, is affected by his surroundings.

Although he was not exposed to the blatant racism that prevailed in the area during the time, Bontemps depicts the residential segregation and tensions within the black migrant communities in his novel. Augie, shaped by colorist prejudices, treats blacks with condescension and contempt, reflecting, rather than resisting white attitudes. In the end of the novel, however, as Augie is chased out of town and he loses his belongings, the reader hopes that Augie will symbolically be able to reinvent himself

outside of Mudtown, outside of Los Angeles, once he leaves his past behind. In the case of Bontemps, this scene is reminiscent of how he attempted to explore his black identity upon leaving Los Angeles.

Bontemps's journey to reclaim his black identity began when he decided to pursue writing and surround himself with other black writers of the Harlem Renaissance attempting to do the same. However, *God Sends Sunday* was Bontemps's first major attempt in recovering a past that he did not experience because it really influenced Bontemps to immerse himself further in the community he had experienced only through writing, literature, and folk tales. The primitivism he applies to the characters in his novel demonstrate Bontemps's efforts by how he bases it on stories he recalls from Uncle Buddy. By trying to recoup his sense of racial identity, Bontemps addresses the complexities of the black communities in the South and in Los Angeles to demonstrate the complicated nature of reclaiming an identity that carries various representations.

The racist environment in Los Angeles affected Himes, whose pride rested on his labeling of himself as a black man. Thinking he could escape the intolerance in the Midwest in Los Angeles, Himes quickly learned that he could not pursue a career in screenwriting because of discriminatory hiring practices against blacks. This event led to a series of disappointments, hurting and racially handicapping Himes. Observing the inequalities that existed at the time, Himes captures the hostility that prevailed in South Central communities by drawing attention to the hypocrisy that destroyed ties between blacks and whites. He draws his attention to the classist and colorist leanings that divided a community and damaged individuals.

Himes, who considered *If He Hollers Let Him Go* as a protest novel responding to the Jim Crow environment of South Central draws attention to the personal battles that minority transplants encountered daily. Like Himes, Bob arrives in South Central only to find a modern form of slavery and naiveté among blacks, as well as the pervasive Jim Crow laws that kept him from being at ease. In the end, Himes echoes the pain Los Angeles inflicted on him through Bob, who becomes a representation of all others who suffered before him. Himes draws his attention to the various tropes that emphasized institutional racism and critiques the legacy of the resulting anger that made it

impossible to reclaim his black identity in a city that created racial division and a loss of racial identity.



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