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Universality at War: Race, Nation, and Communism in Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, put in an ideal form; it will give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones. —Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1846)

In a 1942 article in *Opportunity*, the monthly magazine of the National Urban League, Chester Himes championed the Double V campaign. “Now, while the assurances are being given,” he wrote, “while all our aims are the same, *is the time*; and *here . . . is the place for us to open a second front for freedom*. This must be a contemporaneous, a concurrent effort, this fight of the Negro Americans for freedom at home; for is not this the very essence of the fight for freedom of all the peoples of all the world?” (“Now” 272; original emphasis). Himes and others in the black press—the editors of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, most notably—pointed to the discontinuity between the state’s condemnation of Nazi Germany and its silence on segregation, discrimination, and racial violence across the United States.¹ Cognizant of the indispensability of black labor to military production, they rallied support for this “second front” against “our powerful native fascists” as itself integral to the war against Nazism (Himes, “Now” 272).

Yet Himes’s article responds to more than just the racial politics of the state. He also criticizes “organizations . . . who have long been in the front ranks of the Negro Americans’ slow march toward equality” for abandoning African American freedom struggles during the war, a clear reference to the U. S. Communist Party (CPUSA). Himes, like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, drifted away from the CPUSA after the party officially endorsed the war effort in 1941,² a move that they felt compromised the party’s commitment to African American rights. Modifying the CPUSA’s slogan “Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism,” Himes contended, “No American of any race, true to the ideals of Americanism, can refuse to participate in the Negro Americans’ fight and on their side, for that for which we fight is the only true Americanism.” In underscoring the marginalized yet critical position of African Americans in both the nation and the Communist Party, Himes located black people as not just the index of American democracy but also its primary agents, embodying “the very essence of the fight for freedom of all the peoples of all the world.” Although Himes would eventually lose faith in the possibility of a double victory during World War II, his first published novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), advances the concept of black worldliness as a negation of and alternative to the universalist claims of U. S. nationalism and communism.³ “Democracy,” he stressed, “is the Negroes” (“Now” 273). African Americans were for Himes the true measure of democratic achievement.

Jonathan Eburne and Kevin Bell, introducing a 2009 collection of essays on Himes in *African American Review*, argue that his biography cannot be too easily collapsed into his fiction. Rather, they suggest, “The truest relation of his work to his life is to be found in the shifting velocities with which his prose relentlessly stratifies, implodes, and critiques the artificial horizon installed by the discursive and

ideological frameworks that not only produced Himes as a writer, but which also sexualize, racialize, and nationalize cultural subjectivity in the first place” (Eburne and Bell 226). Their argument concisely captures the direction of recent scholarship on *If He Hollers*, which emphasizes how Himes foregrounds and complicates structures of white privilege (Wilhite 132), black pathology (Simpson 244), urban racial geographies (Itagaki 66), the opposition of fantasy and materiality (Breu 772), and the generic boundaries of naturalism and protest fiction (Simpson 242; Brown 66). Underwriting many of these structures, I would add, are competing claims to universality, claims to which Himes alludes in his 1942 article. *If He Hollers* centrally engages with and contests two universalisms manifest in wartime Los Angeles: that of militarized U. S. nationalism and that of procommunist organized labor. By emphasizing the irony of his protagonist’s nationalist and working-class identities, Himes points to the limits of these universalisms, the disparity between their claims and their lived realities, and instead gestures to emergent multiracial coalitions that look beyond the horizon of the nation to imagine counterhegemonic forms of social justice.

In tracing these competing universalisms through *If He Hollers*, I first discuss Karl Marx’s and Etienne Balibar’s respective theories of universality as they relate to what Nikhil Pal Singh calls “the dialectic of racial differentiation and national belonging” in twentieth-century African American intellectual culture (*Black* 123). I then analyze *If He Hollers* as a counterstatement to U. S. nationalist universality and procommunist proletarian universality. In conclusion, I address how Himes emphasizes a world-historical solidarity located not in a nationalist or communist unity but rather in black infrapolitical resistance: a transgressive politics carried out both beyond and within the established political infrastructure.⁴ This infrapolitics reveals the contradictory logic of these universalist claims as it simultaneously advances its own alternative political order, one that finds unity in this very struggle.

Competing Universalisms: Marx and the Race-Nation Dialectic

In their early writings, Marx and Friedrich Engels differentiate two types of universality: the “alleged universalism” of the ruling class and the true “universal character” of the proletariat. Of the former, they contend, the ruling class “is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aims, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, put in an ideal form; it will give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones” (40-41). The ruling class maintains its control of material relations through the perpetuation of “the idea of its dominance” as eternal and universal in character. Antonio Gramsci would later contend that it is this appeal to universality that facilitates the creation and maintenance of a “historical bloc” (197), an alliance that includes strata of the dominated classes and through which the ruling class secures its authority. In contrast, the proletariat, for Marx and Engels, is the agent of true “universal intercourse” that makes it possible to seize the instruments of production, making them subject to and the collective property of all. This appropriation “can only be effected through a union, which by the character of the proletariat itself can again only be a universal one” (67). Marx and Engels thus understood the demystification of false universality, that of the ruling class, and the recognition of true universality, that of the proletariat, as preconditions of the total realization of human freedom.

Marx and Engels’s theory is manifest in Balibar’s later claim that universality is never, as is often thought, a univocal concept but rather marked by “insurmountable

equivocity” (48; original emphasis). Universality is forever at war. In theorizing this equivocity, Balibar outlines three distinct modalities of universalism: real universality, by which he means the actual global interactivity that constitutes the world of institutions, collectivities, and international trade; fictitious universality, which is the normative social hegemony of states and religious bodies; and ideal universality, an insurrectionary social movement that endeavors to transform the standing order. The latter two align in many ways with Marx and Engels’s “alleged” and “true” universalities, but Balibar offers a more nuanced and contemporary account of these ideological frameworks. Fictitious nationalist universality, he states, does not assume a homogeneous body politic but rather devises a universal set of beliefs and a normative way of life (62-63). Nationalism, then, negotiates the contradictions of sameness and difference, universality and particularity, through discursive normativity, thereby circumventing charges of totalitarianism. Nationalism institutes the norm as the highest achievement of all freedom struggles, and yet the nation-form cannot do without the nonnormative against which it defines this very normative universality. Hence, as always deferred, the fictitious universality of the liberal democratic state is founded on an ideal universality: it grounds its claim to political legitimacy on the promise of an imagined unconditional future order (Balibar 64). And so these universalities are not only in conflict but also entangled with one another.

The “universal character” of Marx and Engels’s proletariat, however, is best embodied by Balibar’s ideal of universality. It is worth underscoring that “ideal” refers here not to something unreal or imaginary per se; as Himes’s fiction makes clear, ideal as well as “fictitious” universalities have very real effects on lived reality. Ideal universality does not merely advocate for an alternative political order but also practices critical resistance to the established hegemonic universalist ideology (exceptionalist nationalism, for example). These movements in fact originate from a negativity, wherein the ideal universalists “claim the rights of a ‘particular’ group not in the name of this very peculiarity, but because its discrimination or exclusion appears to involve a negation of human universality as such” (Balibar 72). In relation to nationalism, idealist universality would draw out the incongruity between the theory (liberal democracy) and the instituted reality of that theory (the United States). This criticism becomes the basis for mobilizing a new order, as the insurrectionary class situates its struggle as, however symbolically, the struggle of all those who are denied the benefits of the universal principles advocated by the United States. It is in this way that the ideal “introduces the notion of *the unconditional* into the realm of politics” (Balibar 65; original emphasis) and that, for Marx and Engels, the proletariat comes to represent universal intercourse. And yet, as a later section of this essay details, the critical black worldliness of Himes’s writing advances a subversive universality that invalidates the claims of both nationalist and proletarian universalisms.

African American intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century, many of whom closely studied Marx’s theories of universality and revolution, also understood claims to universality as a critical way to secure or contest hegemony. Whereas many found the proletarian universality of Marx’s thinking credible, joining or unofficially endorsing the CPUSA, some used this framework to theorize what Singh terms the race-nation dialectic. These thinkers recognized racial belonging as a means of destabilizing the idea of U. S. nationalist universality as neither the ultimate horizon for social justice nor a lived reality within its borders. Singh clarifies this point: “if American universalism has been marked by its persistent degeneration into racial exclusion, black political life has been marked by the opposite movement: the generation of new universals from the forcible enclosures of racial stigma” (*Black* 44). Although this race-nation consciousness represents more of a structure of feeling than a clear-cut ideology, midcentury black intellectuals from Wright, Ellison, and Himes to Langston Hughes and C. L. R. James shared an understanding of African American worldliness as a critical alternative to nationalist as well as communist universality. In regard to the former, they articulated a standpoint that carefully

mediated between calls for black disaffiliation, on the one hand, and patriotic assent to national norms, on the other, thereby using racial belonging to underscore the falsity of American universality by contrasting the ideology of liberal democracy with the functioning of the liberal-democratic state. Unlike Marx, they did not endorse a proletarian universality—and in fact came to interrogate this universality in much the same way—but it nonetheless served as an “ideal” universalist model through which they interrogated the validity of universalist claims and their material outcomes for black labor power.

In Himes’s case, he came to scrutinize not just universalism in its nationalist form but also American communist universality. And while his wartime articles often, as Justus Nieland notes, “assume the formal urgency of the manifesto” (284), he deployed another tactic and style in *If He Hollers*.⁵ The critical conversation surrounding Himes’s first novel is beginning to change, as already mentioned, but for many years *If He Hollers* was categorized as a work of social realism or a “protest novel” in the tradition of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), generic boundaries that led to its being analyzed as an identitarian document.⁶ However, if we instead turn our focus to Himes’s use of irony in *If He Hollers*, then his first novel comes across as less a work of Popular Front Americanism or proletarianism than a critical unworking of their very claims to universality. Himes in this way mobilizes what Bell has described as his Schlegelian irony, the parabases of his novelistic writing: “an imperative of incessant and fluid movement, the continually transformative upheaval of internal vision and thinking by which [his] protagonists become more sharply defined in the first place” (851).

Himes is forever breaking down and negating forces that might situate his protagonist (or himself as an author) as static and commensurable, as embodying some cultural “authenticity.” In *If He Hollers*, the ideological powers of nationalism and communism are shown to work on Himes’s protagonist in exactly this way, and irony emerges as a strategy for negating this rigidity, inviting the “continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts” (Schlegel, *Fragments* 33). And while this particular infrapolitical irony interrogates and undermines the logic of exclusionary universalisms, it is also a “self-creating” alternative universality in its own right. It is this critical resistance itself from which, as Himes’s fiction suggests, there emerges an alternative basis for thinking the political and even the universal anew.

Militarized Nationalism: Violence and Belonging in Wartime Los Angeles

If He Hollers tells of four days in the life of Bob Jones, a black shipyard worker in Los Angeles whose future is derailed by a series of encounters with Madge, a racist Texan with whom he works. In the story’s opening pages, Bob wakes in his apartment feeling scared, an emotion he attributes to the day “he’d seen them send the Japanese away” (3). Bob’s enduring fear arises from his sense that they, the military, could take him away at any time too, “without a chance,” “a trial,” or “a charge.” Bob understands national belonging as tied to one’s ability to carry out state-sanctioned acts of violence and dispossession, acts of which he is perpetually on the receiving end. This association is reinforced when Bob decides to kill a white coworker who knocked him out and stole his money after losing a game of craps. Determining to murder and hang this “blond boy,” Bob notes, “A warm glow went all over me as if I had just stepped out of a Turkish bath and had had a good massage” (38). Looking out across the shipyard, he adds,

I felt the size of it, the immensity of the . . . whole war. I’d never given a damn one way or the other about the war. . . . And now I did; I was stirred as I had been when I was a

little boy watching a parade, seeing the flag go by. That filled-up feeling of my country. I felt included in it all; I had never felt included before. It was a wonderful feeling. (38)

Bob is struck by the sense that he in some way controls the instruments of production, as if inhabiting the mindset of Marx's ruling class. He notes their "immensity" but is not plagued by it, feeling as if they suddenly work for and are directed by him. In light of his decision to kill a white coworker, Bob identifies with the war effort and thereby channels its violent form of militarized nationalism.

Yet this "wonderful feeling" of patriotic personhood points not to Bob's immediate inclusion within an American national community but rather to the normative nature of its alleged universalist creed. Whereas the military commits acts of violence—enforcing the internment, "breaking up" the Zoot Suit Riots, killing Axis soldiers and civilians—that are normalized as patriotic and in the common interest of the country, one can assume that Bob's aim to retaliate against the craps player would not be received in the same way. The promise of American universality, the "filled-up feeling" that offers Bob a euphoric moment of national belonging, cannot last long. His performance of violent American nationalism exists at odds with its white, state-sanctioned norm, thereby making ironic a United States that claims itself to be the "elect nation . . . destined to lead humankind on the road of progress" (Balibar 60). Awaking afraid every morning, terrified that he too will be sent away, Bob foregrounds the irony of an all-inclusive and yet normalizing flag and "feeling." He realizes soon enough that this fictitious American universality depends precisely on his political exclusion,⁷ as the target rather than the agent of nationalist violence, to maintain its contradictory logic.

Although Bob associates national belonging with murder in this scene, his affinity with the war effort nonetheless leads him back to an image of childhood. Bob jumps from visualizing himself lynching the "blond boy" to seeing himself as a child at what might be a Fourth of July parade. The belief in American innocence, Donald Pease observes, is one of many "structures of disavowal" by which the United States historically denies its legacies of violence and war-making (12). This willful misrepresentation of the country's past not only masks its most disturbing histories but also makes the exceptions taken by the state in the present possible. Bob's image of himself as a child, a symbol of purity and naïveté, emphasizes the complex interrelation of violence and innocence in the nation's history. Ironically performing the "filled-up feeling" of national personhood, Bob shifts, over just a few sentences, from a fantasy of lynching his coworker to one that takes him back to his childhood self at a patriotic parade. Himes thereby traces the paradoxical contours of an American universality constructed around the principle of inclusion while in reality relying on the careful disavowal of its violent exclusions. Bob briefly steps into the fantasy of U. S. exceptionalism, miming the violent discourse to which he is subjected throughout *If He Hollers*.

It is significant, though, that Bob's newfound if fleeting nationalist identity locates him as a child, small in relation to the "immensity" and "importance" of the war industry. Bob can only see himself as an onlooker in the pageantry of U. S. national belonging, an asymmetrical subject position that contradicts the universalist ideology of American nationalism. "If black thinkers" during World War II, Singh contends, "began to deploy a rhetoric of American universals in their own interests, they also recognized that its appeal was politically ambiguous, multiple, and contradictory" (*Black* 129). The chief paradox of American universality is that it particularizes as it universalizes by positing a normative national subject. It is universal only insofar as one is able to conform to its standard. Himes emphasizes this double movement of American universality, addressing humanity as an ideal and enforcing a norm as a reality, by equating Bob's imagined inclusion within the discourse of U. S. nationalism with that of a child at a parade. He is not included in the procession but

stands instead just outside of the frame, “watching” and “seeing” from a defining but excluded position.

The war in many ways crystallized the dialectic of racial differentiation and national belonging for black intellectuals. In 1942, Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9182, thereby establishing the Office of War Information (OWI), an agency charged with controlling the public’s understanding of the nation’s involvement in the war effort. But African American soldiers appeared only rarely in the OWI’s posters, ads, and newsreels. “Excised from the national victory campaign,” Kimberley Phillips notes, African American artists, photographers, and journalists challenged “a national visual narrative that refused acknowledgement of their participation in the war campaigns” (25). They protested the absence of black military officers in mainstream media and set about creating their own wartime iconography, one that included African American soldiers and war industry workers.

If He Hollers foregrounds and challenges the absence of African Americans from the national account of the war effort by reference to one of the more popular propaganda films of the time, *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), starring Spencer Tracy as a heroic and reckless American pilot named Pete Sandidge (Fig. 1). After a heated exchange with Madge results in his demotion at the shipyard, Bob reflects,

I thought about a motion picture called *A Guy Named Joe*, about that cat making that last bomb run, sinking a Nazi flat-top. Going out in a blaze of glory. See you, gates. See you, Jaxon. See you, stud. . . . *In the bright blue forever . . .*

Just a simple nigger bastard, that was me. Never would be a hero. Had a thousand chances every day; a thousand coming up tomorrow. If I could just hang on to one and say, “This is it!” And go out blowing up the white folks like that cat did the Nazis. (74; original emphasis and ellipses)



Fig. 1: Pete Sandidge (Spencer Tracy) and Dorinda Durston (Irene Dunne) in the 1943 film *A Guy Named Joe*.
Courtesy of Warner Bros.

The scene to which Bob refers, in which an injured Pete crashes his B-25 bomber into a German aircraft carrier, does not include the dialogue he mimes: "See you, gates. See you, Jaxon. See you, stud." Pete in fact bombs the Nazi carrier in silence before crashing into the ocean. Bob nonetheless emphasizes that this "feeling" does not relate to him. He instead plays acts what he takes to be white military homosociality and thereby foregrounds the dissonance that exists between this heroic portrayal of Pete and the representation of African Americans in the war as either entirely absent or caricatured as "simple" and without the capacity for heroism. By ironizing Pete's bombing of the aircraft carrier, creating nicknames and unspoken goodbyes as he goes "out in a blaze of glory," Bob challenges this militarized sense of national inclusion through the particularizing reality of political exclusion along racial lines. It is in this regard that Walter Benjamin once noted, citing Friedrich Schlegel, the "striking affinity" of "ironization" with criticism, both of which assail some structure while nevertheless preserving and transforming this knowledge (163). The irony/critical act of Bob's imagined patriotic self reflects the dissonance that exists between the black working class and the normative national subject that the film celebrates, thereby laying bare the incongruity of a universalism founded on a norm.

A Guy Named Joe emphasizes the idea of American universality in Pete's after-life, in which he becomes a guardian angel for an up-and-coming young pilot. The General, the commanding officer for the pilot-angels in heaven, characterizes Pete's assignment as one of unity and collective work. "It isn't just you as an individual helping your man as an individual," he tells Pete, "It's all of us working together for the future." The film represents heaven as an extension of the U. S. military and so correlates the interests of humanity with that of the nation. This angelic military class, to put it in Marx and Engels's words, "is compelled . . . to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society" (40-41). Yet the only residents of the General's heaven, the protectors of the future, are white U. S. military men. The film thereby underscores the ideal universality that always underwrites nationalist universality's claim to political futurity, a futurity that reproduces the white norm on which it is based. It is clear enough why Bob had "never given a damn one way or the other about the war" when neither the OWI nor the Hollywood studios represent him as partaking in or benefiting from this bright American future.

But the most striking aspect of Bob's interpretation of the film is his understanding of the enemy not as the Nazis but as all "white folks." He imagines his moment of militarized heroism not as defeating the Axis forces but as "blowing up the white folks like that cat did the Nazis." In a radicalized version of the Double V campaign, Bob directly correlates Nazi Germany with white America. Countering the idea that the interest of the U. S. military and the common interest of society converge, Bob rather suggests that this nationalist universality denies his interests as a working-class black man. This once again recalls Balibar's fictitious universality: "not the idea that the common nature of individuals is given or already there, but rather the fact that it is produced inasmuch as particular identities are relativized and become mediations for the realization of a superior and more abstract goal" (58). American universality does not altogether eliminate any consideration of particularity; it instead specifies which particularities should and should not be disregarded. This process, Balibar emphasizes, is as nonarbitrary as it is nonnatural (56). Bob's fantasy of "blowing up the white folks" speaks to his realization that the grand unity to which the General attests is "produced" through discursive practices that normalize Pete where it particularizes him. Pete's death comes to symbolize a sacrifice to the ideal of nationalist universality, whereas Bob structures this fictitious universality as a relativized and particularized subject existing paradoxically and ironically outside the universal.

Claims to universality are never more common than during periods of sustained war and militarism. Wartime universality has historically represented a conflicted and treacherous terrain for African Americans, for whom the military has been understood both as an opportunity to advance their freedom struggles and, conversely, as a source of intensified racial terrorism (Phillips 12, 14). In a 1944 article in the Popular Front journal *Common Ground*, “Democracy Is for the Unafraid,” Himes channeled this uncertainty. Arguing that “the white man’s sudden consciousness of his own fear of other races” is the root cause of fascism at home and abroad (53), Himes was ambiguous about what the war ultimately meant for black rights. He first pointed to how the military had only reinforced the domestic racial violence carried out by white supremacists and police officers, many of whom cut their teeth while in the service. He asked, “are we seeking the defeat of our ‘Aryan’ enemies, or the winning of them?” (54). But he later noted, in contrast, “War is teaching [a] lesson of equality to many of our youths in uniform. Coming upon the bodies of two soldiers lying face downward in the muck . . . in the same uniform, they are learning the ridiculousness of thinking: ‘This man, being white, is superior to that man, who is black’ ” (55). Himes called upon American wartime universality—they all die in the same uniform and under the same flag—but not without contrasting it with the persistent reality of racial differentiation and political exclusion. More optimistically than in *If He Hollers*, Himes here employed the language of militarized American universality while nonetheless recognizing the incongruous material reality it cannot altogether mask. It is, he suggested, an ideology facing an enduring and structural crisis.

Ironizing Working-Class Americanism: Race and Communism in the War Industry

Although Himes, like Wright and Ellison, became critical of the CPUSA after the party’s official endorsement of the war effort in 1941, he developed a far more complex relationship to communism than considerations of affiliation or disaffiliation can convey. As his journalism from the war years indicates, Himes embraced an idiosyncratic combination of pro-Soviet and Double V politics that refuses easy summary. One thing is clear, though. For Himes, as Alan Wald writes, “the possibility of revolution through Double V was contingent on Euro-Americans joining with African Americans in support of their immediate struggles against white supremacism, struggles that would certainly not have Euro-American radicals play the leading roles” (*Trinity* 73). Himes did not underestimate the critical work of revolutionary class politics, and this particular idealist universality does offer a critical framework for other forms of counterhegemonic social action. But he would not accept a unity that came at the expense of African American freedom struggles. Whereas his criticisms of militarized nationalist universality were candid and unqualified, he undertook a more muted analysis of procommunist universality. As *If He Hollers* makes clear, Himes was uncomfortable with a universalist project that, as he understood it, would accept African Americans among its rank and file but not as a leading theoretical or organizing force.

In *If He Hollers*, procommunist groups are, for Bob, a lost haven. Early on, he takes his upper-middle-class girlfriend, Alice, on a disastrous date in which he is barred from a hotel restaurant, harassed by a cop, and finally made to feel like an intruder among Alice’s bourgeois friends. Driving around Los Angeles, he tries to think of someplace to go. “There was Vivien Williams,” he considers, “there used always to be something going on at her house back in the days before the

Communist Party dealt the race issue out” (78). He decides against visiting Vivien because, he concludes, “I couldn’t have listened to a Negro spouting the party line if my life had depended on it” (78). Bob’s reference to the CPUSA’s endorsement of the war, as the party dealing “the race issue out,” expresses what he sees as a break in a former alliance between African Americans and the Communist Party. To hear a “Negro spouting the party line” is to him so illogical as to be distasteful. Whereas, Bob suggests, the procommunist gatherings were once a final retreat for him, he no longer feels represented by the “party line” to which Vivien holds tight. He finds himself, as a black working-class man, with no place to turn.

Although he does not rail against the procommunist characters in the same way he does the universalizing nationalism of *A Guy Named Joe*, Bob is nonetheless suspicious that this proletarian universality exists under the same banner as the film’s militarized national unity. After his exchange with Madge results in his demotion from leaderman to mechanic, Bob decides to protest his case to the union steward, Herbie Frieberger. Calling Herbie “Comrade,” Bob demands that he speak to Madge about working with African Americans. When Herbie refuses, citing the need to maintain unity, he tells Bob,

That’s the trouble with you coloured people. . . . You forget we’re in a war. 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. We got to have unity in the union and unity on the job. (114)

Outraged, Bob responds,

Get these crackers to unite with me. I’m willing. I’ll work with ’em, fight with ’em, die with ’em, goddamnit. But I ain’t gonna even try to do any uniting without anybody to unite with. . . . What the hell do I care about unity, or the war either, for that matter, as long as I’m kicked around by every white person who comes along? Let the white people get some goddamned unity. (115)

Herbie’s emphasis on unity in the shipyard, union, and nation begins to break down around his telling use of pronouns. Despite describing what he calls the “whole movement” in terms of “we” and “all,” he calls out “you coloured people” as a dissenting faction threatening to undermine the union’s aim of wartime solidarity. That he understands their resistance as “private gripes” underscores the outsider status of the black working class in relation to the alleged universalizing movement behind this proletarian unity. Bob recognizes that the “private gripes” of the white working class would become programmatic universal demands, whereas his can be no more than a distracting disunity. Unlike that of the white union members, African American labor power is “relativized,” the text suggests, and becomes a mediation “for the realization of a superior and more abstract goal” (Balibar 58), namely, representing white American interests as everyone’s interests. Fictitious universality always, as Balibar writes, depends on a “latent reference to ‘ideal’ universality” (64). He does not, however, explain what Himes here dramatizes: this can also work in reverse. Fictitious nationalist universality begins to pervade and dull the workings of communist ideal universality. This is of course an outcome of the New Deal era, in which working-class rights and Popular Front antifascism became integral to an evolving Americanism. During the war, Bob realizes, this strange merger necessitates that the “race issue” be “dealt out.”

Herbie also understands fascism in a far narrower way than does Bob, the latter correlating Nazi Germany with the United States throughout *If He Hollers*. Herbie’s call to fight fascism, not the companies or each other, assumes that fascism exists only outside U. S. borders. Bob, on the other hand, sees little difference between the Nazis, Madge, and the company’s executives. The intellectual nexus of Himes, Wright, and Ellison took the Communist Party’s efforts to recruit New Dealers during the war as, in essence, the disregarding of “its vow to continue the battle for African

American liberation, regardless of whose feathers got ruffled” (Wald, *American Night* 152). The CPUSA’s wartime “Twentieth-Century Americanism” did not, they argued, look all that different from Roosevelt’s Americanism, neither of which they felt represented them. In response to Herbie’s demand for unity, Bob says, “Let’s you and me unite and start fighting fascism. Let’s go down and give this cracker dame some lessons in unity” (114). Whereas Herbie locates their shared fascist enemy an ocean away, Bob redirects him to the shipyard and the “powerful native fascists” on this “second front.” He thereby makes ironic the union leader’s call for unity by taking up and reorienting his call for unity and antifascism. He channels a “V for Victory” attitude in order to convey a Double V point. Theorizing the ironic force of Himes’s fiction, Bell observes that the only reality conveyed “is its dissonant, discordant, always jarring sensibility” that is forever scrambling the social codes “that alienate thinking life from itself and constitute what Himes views as the absurd aspiration of locating one’s place in American culture” (852-53).⁸ In the shipyard scene, Himes mobilizes this irony to foreground and test the normative foundation of Herbie’s “unity.” In the reality of Bob’s life, both the fictitious wartime universality of Americanism and the ideal universality of proletarianism exclude him from any such unity.

Yet Bob’s argument does not endorse disunity per se but rather troubles and rethinks the union steward’s understanding of unity. Bob is skeptical that, as Herbie suggests, falling into line with the “whole movement” of working-class unionizers and procommunist thinkers can resolve racial oppression. Speaking of the war years, Singh contends that “black movements were beginning to illustrate a crucial political lesson, namely, that the demand for democracy was both irreducible and unpredictable, in ‘excess’ of the deterministic designs and schemas that captivated Marxists and modernized liberals alike” (*Black* 128). Put differently, black movements established a position that endorsed neither anticommunist liberalism nor organized American communism. Suspicious that “progress” did not necessarily mean justice or equality, they theorized a negative dialectic that borrowed from but remained critical of the “designs” and “schemas” of liberalism and Marxism. Addressing Herbie as “Comrade Marx,” Bob draws attention to the normalizing nature of this demand for unity in the name of progress. He asks, in effect, whose unity? Whose progress? Herbie’s universalizing claim that “we’re all fighting fascism together” overlooks, from Bob’s perspective, that this universality is normalizing—and that norm excludes him. His suggestion that Herbie get “these crackers to unite with [him]” demystifies the limits of a unity that normalizes some and particularizes others. Working on a “Jim Crow gang” at the shipyard, Bob is skeptical that progress is, as they say, always good and the future always brighter. As Himes wrote in 1942, alluding to the CPUSA, many organizations are “advocating that this fight [for African American rights] be set aside until the greater fight for freedom is won. . . . But what a travesty it would be, that when the United Nations win their fight for the freedoms of all the people of the world, we 13,000,000 Negro Americans remain in virtual bondage” (“Now” 273). It is clear that Himes understood that the UN’s notion of “all the people of the world” did not necessarily include “Negro Americans,” who lived and worked in the particularized and relativized margin outside of the United States’ internationalizing universalism.

Bob characterizes himself throughout *If He Hollers* as of the proletariat but not contained by it. Waking and dressing on the first day of his story, Bob reflects,

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. Important too. . . . I felt a swagger in my stance when I stepped over to the dresser to get my keys and wallet. . . . I looked to see if I had enough money. (8-9)

Bob's sense of himself as big, strong, and more important in his mechanic's clothing embodies the working-class ethos of the Popular Front. Yet he understands this ruggedness and "swagger" as an ironic performance. He dons his working clothes as a costume in which he acts the part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) laborer. Bob thereby positions himself as a member of the working class but not without some critical distance, as if he does not altogether buy the idea that a black war industry worker is "stronger even than an executive." The joke is of course that being or feeling important does not guarantee Bob a full wallet—or, as we soon learn, respect or job security.

Himes further emphasizes the conflict that exists between Bob's working-class identity and the normalized subject of wartime American labor when he meets Alice at a drive-in on his lunch break. When she sees him in his working clothes, she observes, "You look like a worker in a CIO win-the-war poster," to which Bob remarks, laughing, "I'm the twelve million black faces" (164). The reference to Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) comes in telling contrast to the CIO "win-the-war" poster to which Alice refers. Whereas Wright's photographic essay celebrates the tenacity of the black working class and offers a counterhistory and countervision of American labor,⁹ the images circulated by the CIO—many of which were contracted by the OWI—rarely depicted African Americans carrying out anything but menial chores (Phillips 32).¹⁰ Bob cannot see himself in the hegemonic discourse of the latter.

Alice's reference to a "CIO win-the-war poster" might, for many at the time, bring to mind one of the most familiar prowar labor ads of the era, Anton Bruehl's 1942 "Free Labor Will Win" Labor Day poster (Fig. 2). That year, Philip Murray, the president of the CIO, announced in a statement, "On this most critical Labor Day in our history, American Labor has chosen as its slogan: 'Free Labor Will Win!' . . . And we can take pride . . . in the splendid results of labor's all-out effort, which shows that our free labor is already out-producing the slave labor of the Axis powers." Bruehl's poster underscores this message.

It portrays a man in a welder's mask and leathers standing in front of an American flag. Wearing a bandana around his neck and a union button on his collar, he is pulling on his gloves as if readying himself for work. Standing alone but with the flag and his union membership on display, the man represents exactly what Murray aims to convey: a free yet organized, individualistic yet united American labor force. The use of the singular "labor" rather than "laborers" further emphasizes this unity. Yet, for Bob, the poster only underscores the disparity between this normalized white working-class identity and his own particularized one, a disparity Himes draws out and criticizes through his protagonist's ironic performance of Popular Front Americanism. Whereas Bruehl's artwork underscores the freedom of American labor in contrast to the plight of workers in the Axis nations, *If He Hollers* asks throughout to what extent Bob, as a black mechanic, is truly free. When Alice tells



Fig. 2: Anton Bruehl's "Free Labor Will Win" Labor Day poster (1942). Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

him he looks like a CIO poster, Bob accepts this identity but with an ironic nod, distancing himself from the rank and file of U. S. labor politics. He thereby foregrounds and interrogates the “unity” of procommunist organized labor. In what ways does it represent his interests? In what ways does the construction of its universality depend on his invisibility?

Beyond the Nation: Black Worldliness and Infrapolitics

In the spring of 1944, Himes published an article in the *Crisis*, “Negro Martyrs Are Needed,” in which he laid out his program for black revolutionary politics. There are, he argued, three ways to organize human life: (1) a state in which everyone is free, his nearest example being the Soviet Union; (2) a state in which a ruling class alone is free, his example being the United States; and (3) a state in which no one is free, as in a dictatorship (“Martyrs” 159). Citing Engels, Himes then suggested that “a revolution by Negro Americans” can take one of three forms: (1) it could overthrow the present government and found a dictatorship, thereby sustaining ruling-class universality; (2) it could overthrow the present government and found a “communistic state,” as in Marx’s proletarian universality; or (3) it could “bring about the enforcement of the Constitution, democratic equality, and the acceptance of the democratic way of existence by all of the citizens of our nation” (159). Himes here articulated a middle ground between black nationalist disaffiliation and U. S. nationalist assent—the latter, in Himes’s eyes, accepting democracy as a posture rather than a lived reality. Literalizing the Constitution for Himes represented a revolutionary act in and of itself. Critically, though, he emphasized that African Americans must lead this change. “In the broader view,” he argued two years earlier, “the Negro Americans’ fight for freedom is more than racial. It is a fight for justice, for an ideal, for a form of government in which people will be bound together . . . by common objectives and aims for the benefit of all” (“Now” 273). Although *If He Hollers* is less optimistic than his wartime journalism, it similarly gestures to an alternative solidarity emerging not from the nation or the proletariat per se but rather from a black worldliness mediating and repurposing these competing claims to universality.

This dialectical solidarity exists at scales that are at once both smaller and larger than the nation (Singh, *Black* 44) and cannot be understood in terms of political organizations or institutions alone. As Robin D. G. Kelley emphasizes, “some of the most dynamic struggles take place outside—indeed, sometimes in spite of—established organizations and institutions” (6-7). In order to capture the full scope of black working-class resistance, one needs to consider the political domain as including day-to-day struggles for economic security, physical safety, and cultural identity. Acts of resistance are sometimes unorganized and spontaneous, more performance than calculated action. What Kelley refers to as the “informal infrapolitics” of the black working class applies to Himes’s portrayal of Bob, through whom he contests dominant claims to universality in his “daily confrontations” and thereby imagines other forms of social belonging and justice.

Infrapolitical resistance channels the negative as well as the generative dimensions of what Balibar theorizes as ideal universalism. In mobilizing irony to draw out the disparity between the universalist claims of the United States and the CPUSA and their actual conduct during World War II, rather than yielding and seeking recognition according to these universalisms, Himes further advances an outward-reaching worldliness that renews the possibility of a nonoppressive universality. It is in this way that the critical negativity of black infrapolitics lays the groundwork for an alternative, nonidentitarian political order. Removed from the political establishment of institutions and state-granted rights, these informal acts of resistance navigate

around and amid other fictitious and ideal universalisms instead of ceding to them as a subnational or suborganizational body. This infrapolitics fosters, however speculatively, an ideal universality in its own right through the ironic disassembling of those alleged universalisms that rationalize and mask violence throughout the world. From this emerges a black worldliness that, as Himes dramatizes, recognizes the “insurmountable *equivocity*” of universality and endeavors to negotiate around and along the fault lines of these many entangled universalisms.

Throughout *If He Hollers*, Bob casts his struggles against those of Japanese and Mexican Americans. He attributes “feeling scared . . . torn all loose inside, shriveled, paralyzed” to his seeing “them send the Japanese away. . . . It was taking a man up by his roots and locking him up without a chance” (3). Bob recognizes that he and Japanese Americans occupy similar positions *vis-à-vis* the nation. They are the targets of the state’s exceptions, constructing zones of political exclusion—internment camps, prisons, the segregated military—in which their rights can be taken away “without a chance,” “trial,” or “charge.” The internment, Bob adds, led him to feel afraid of everything: “It was that crazy, wild-eyed, unleashed hatred that the first Jap bomb on Pearl Harbour let loose in a flood. All that tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the street as gas fumes. . . . I was the same colour as the Japanese and I couldn’t tell the difference. ‘A yeller-bellied Jap’ coulda meant me too. I could always feel race trouble, serious trouble, never more than two feet away” (4).

Bob attributes this “shriveled, paralyzed” feeling to the double movement of American democratic universality, relativizing him and other racialized subjects under the guise of universalizing Constitutional ideals. Understanding himself as no different—according to the racial politics of the United States—from a “yeller-bellied Jap,” he contests the nation’s claims to universality through the counterstatement of racial belonging. Not unlike Himes’s argument in “Negro Martyrs Are Needed,” Bob does not criticize the idea of democracy itself but rather interrogates the paradox of a democratic universality that does not include him. Without an organization to represent him as a black working-class man, he instead foregrounds and ironizes this political exclusion by thinking and acting beyond and within the logic of the nation and the “established organizations” and “organized social movements” that coalesce around it (Kelley 8). Infrapolitics is nevertheless, as James Scott underscores, “real politics” that is “always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the permissible” (200). Recognizing his vulnerability in relation to a normative body politic, Bob mobilizes this ambiguous subjectivity to shed light on the contradictions that animate militarized U. S. nationalism.

Yet Bob recognizes that this counterstatement of racial belonging exists both within and beyond national borders. Seeing the military escort Japanese Americans out of Little Tokyo triggers his racial anxiety, but he also recognizes that Americans’ hatred of Japan after Pearl Harbor is racialized in ways that the animosity toward Germany and Italy is not. Himes interrogated this difference in a 1943 *Crisis* article, “Zoot Suit Riots Are Race Riots.” The Axis nations should, he noted, be ordered “Japan, Germany, and Italy” because “Japan is the most formidable foe and should come first in any listing of our enemies” (200). But the Japanese are not the “most formidable foe” because they control a stronger military; they are most formidable instead because of their “darker skins.”¹¹ When Bob later mentions that he “at first . . . wanted the Japanese to win,” he resists the fictitious universality of the United States through a race-nation consciousness, the national antithesis that is racial belonging. He sees in this black worldliness a challenge to his being excluded from the ideals of U. S. democracy. It is not at all clear that Bob actually backs the Japanese military, but suggesting that he does allows him to use racial belonging to cut across the rubrics of nationalist and class affiliation. If, as Schlegel once playfully argued, “Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos” (100), then Himes makes use of exactly this irony to foreground how fictitious universality breaks down around its own contradictory logic, recommending a

universal set of values while implementing these values selectively, even rarely. Ironically, then, the only clarity provided by Himes's irony is a recognition of the very "chaos" nationalism strives to screen out: the reality of many warring universalisms at odds with the fiction of nationalist univocality. And yet from this ironic negativity emerges a different, critical, and nonoppressive basis for thinking universally. The point is not to advance black worldliness as itself an exclusionary universality. Instead, as Penny Von Eschen writes, many African American intellectuals during World War II began theorizing a form of democracy that "put the struggles of black peoples at the center of world politics but encompassed *all* democratic struggles" (4).¹² Reframing Marx and Engels's concept of universality, *If He Hollers* imagines black people, rather than the proletariat, as the agents of true "universal intercourse."

In "Zoot Suit Riots Are Race Riots," Himes further emphasized the military's complicity in acts of racial violence. Calling the GIs who participated in the 1943 riots "uniformed Klansmen," Himes argued that the military's duty was not to secure the safety of all but rather to ensure that Los Angeles was "made safe for white people—to do as they damned well pleased" (200, 222). In *If He Hollers*, Bob communicates a similar understanding of U. S. militarism. In a bar in Little Tokyo, Bob is seated near two white soldiers and a white woman. When the woman begins flirting with the black men in the bar, the two soldiers head for the door without her. The bartender, sensing trouble, tells them to take the woman with them. Bob imagines the worst: "Well, here it goes. If the boy got hurt, or if there was any kind of rumpus with the white chick in it, there wouldn't be any way at all to stop a riot—the white GIs would swarm into Little Tokyo like they did into the Mexican districts during the zoot suit riots" (77). Bob sees a military uniform as a license for white officers to carry out acts of terrorism against nonwhite citizens, a wartime reality that he recognizes as common ground for Mexican Americans and himself. Although no fight breaks out in the bar, Bob's imagined scenario responds to the interracial coalitions that were formed and reinforced during World War II. This emergent structure of feeling might not always translate into organized protest, but it does partake, as Kelley puts it, in the day-to-day battles to "exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives" (10). Bob recognizes his own struggles in the images showing the Japanese being sent away and those showing the white GIs swarming the Mexican districts.

If He Hollers ends on a subtle note of interethnic solidarity. Madge accuses Bob of rape, resulting in his arrest. When Judge Morgan and the president of Bob's company, Mr. Houghton, realize that Madge is lying, they act as if she is declining to press charges so as not to "create racial tensions among the employees" and for the "national good" (201). Citing a concealed-weapon charge, Judge Morgan instead sends Bob to the military "induction centre." Two Mexican American men accompany him. One of the men jokes with Bob: "Let's go, man, the war's waiting," to which the other adds, "Don't rush the man. . . . The man's not doing so well at all. Looks like this man has had a war. How you doing, man?" (203). The "break" Judge Morgan offers Bob—and, it seems, the two Mexican Americans as well—reflects a telling continuity between incarceration and conscription. These are, for racialized subjects, zones of political exclusion in which rights can be withheld without a chance, trial, or charge. The second man's remark that Bob looks like he "has had a war" suggests that for them Los Angeles is itself a war zone. Yet their immediate warmth toward Bob, joking with him and calling him "man," emphasizes another form of unity that emerges beyond nationalist or communist schemas. They are entering a global conflict with an eye toward counterhegemonic forms of interracial solidarity.¹³

I do not mean to suggest that Himes's *If He Hollers* is in any way utopic—far from it. But in a story about four crushing days in the life of a working-class black man, Himes nonetheless reveals an emergent culture looking beyond the nation and organizational affiliation through an ironic breaking down of exclusionary universalisms. Analyzed in this way, *If He Hollers* is not as discontinuous with his later fiction as is often thought. Nieland insightfully reads Himes's second novel, *Lonely Crusade* (1947), as in “nearly every way imaginable . . . [serving] as a rhetorical inversion of Himes's wartime writings, shaped as they were by the utopianism of the manifesto genre and buoyed by Himes's lingering Popular Front optimism” (285). Already with *If He Hollers*, however, one can see the markings of this anti-utopianism, Himes's ironic commentary on and skepticism toward instrumental politics. This would instead locate his first novel as continuous with *Crusade* and *The End of a Primitive* (1955), his parodic fifth novel, as well as with the absurdity of his detective series.

This irony is, however, never exactly anti-instrumental either, as Himes draws out the contradictory workings of exclusionary universalist ideologies and sets them out for analysis. And while Himes's early writings should not stand in for what was a complex and heterogeneous period in African American freedom struggles, he does speak to the insurrectionary universality of midcentury African American intellectual culture. These black movements, Singh emphasizes, “were rapidly becoming the most reliable conduits of the radical imagination in capitalist America, able to sustain broad and compelling visions of social justice when other movements and organizations no longer could” (*Black* 128). Although today we are skeptical of any claim to universality—and, Marx and Balibar each suggest, we should be—Himes's early work suggests that universality cannot be abandoned altogether. Whereas he criticizes the universalizing theory but particularizing reality of nationalism and American procommunist organizations, he sees black struggles at the center of world-historical changes, embodying the “essence of the fight for freedom of all the peoples of the world.” *If He Hollers* thus signals the political and infrapolitical challenges to come in the long, global, and unfinished civil rights movement.

I would like to thank Chris Vials for providing important feedback on early drafts of this essay and for pointing me to key sources. I also wish to thank Jim Zeigler and Myka Tucker-Abramson for a valuable conversation at the MELUS Conference, where I first presented this research.

Notes

1. In a 1942 letter to the editor, drafter James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kansas, contended, “The ‘V for Victory’ sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory of aggression, slavery and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies within” (3). In the next issue, the editors of the *Courier* stated above the masthead, “Last week, without any public announcement or fanfare, the editors of the *Courier* introduced its war slogan—a double ‘V’ for a double victory to colored America” (1). For a detailed account of the origins and outcomes of the Double V campaign, see Phillips 20-63.

2. While the Hitler-Stalin Pact remained in effect from August 1939 to June 1941, the CPUSA opposed the war, setting it in conflict with Popular Front antifascism. This, as Wald notes, “caused a reshuffling of political priorities that promised an aggressive campaign placing Black rights on center stage” (*American Night* 151). When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the U. S. Communist Party reversed its position. Himes, Wright, and Ellison took this to be the end of the CPUSA's focus on black struggles. Wald nonetheless emphasizes that their stance, while important, does not represent the full “postwar spectrum of Black radical thought” (152).

3. I use “black worldliness” in this essay as Singh has theorized it: the claim made by twentieth-century black intellectuals that they were the “true bearers of universality within the United States, and within the world-system,” thereby imagining a community that traversed and exceeded that of a normative nationalism (“Culture/Wars” 15, 45; *Black* 52-53, 119-28).

4. I use the term *infrapolitics* as defined by Kelley: not as “some kind of alternative to organized social movements” but rather as “a measure of power relations and a way to gauge the grievances of working people who might not have other avenues through which to voice their concerns” (230).

5. In analyzing Himes’s second novel, *Lonely Crusade* (1947), Nieland contends that it effects a “rhetorical inversion” of Himes’s wartime writings, which still carried some of the instrumentalist style of the Popular Front (285). This is certainly true of Himes’s wartime journalism, though I am suggesting here that there are many more continuities between his first novel, *If He Hollers*, and *Crusade* than is often assumed, especially as it relates to his use of irony to interrogate and break down exclusionary claims to universality.

6. In a much-cited study, for example, Boris characterizes *If He Hollers* as a work of “social rage” that “dramatizes the psychological hurt of African American men” during World War II (77, 79).

7. I refer to the “political exclusion” of African Americans in this essay to emphasize that this exclusion occurs in the political but not the economic realm. Black people, as Manning Marable argues, are in fact “integrated all too well” into the U. S. economy: “Capitalist development has occurred not in spite of the exclusions of Blacks, but because of the brutal exploitations of Blacks as workers and consumers” (2).

8. Bell makes this argument in relation to the well-known meeting of James Baldwin, Wright, and Himes in Paris in 1953. Once Baldwin and Wright began to argue over the future of black writing, Himes drew away from the conversation, reflecting in his first autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt* (1972), “I confess at this point they lost me” (200). Bell notes that this embodies Himes’s work as a writer, drawing out the logical absurdity on which this argument is based—that there is an “identitarian principle regulating a constellation of issues and pressures unique and proper to ‘the’ project of African-American writing”—rather than partaking in it directly and thereby reifying its premises (865).

9. Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* sets out to establish the black working class at the center of “Negro life in the United States,” rather than the “talented tenth” or the “Negro middle-class professional and business men of the North who have . . . formed a sort of liaison corps between the whites and the blacks” (xix). This photographic essay is meant to challenge the double erasure of working-class African Americans from national history.

10. This is not to suggest that the OWI erased black labor power from their publications altogether. Their 1943 pictorial essay *Negroes and the War*, for example, emphasized the work of African Americans in the military and war industry. It nonetheless sanitized the effects of segregation and racism during the war and found limited circulation among major media outlets (Phillips 32).

11. In “Zoot Suit Riots Are Race Riots,” Himes emphasized the racial underpinnings of the 1943 riots. He refers to the conflicts in Los Angeles (and the differentiated hatred of Japan) as a “*continuation*” of Southern vigilantism (“Zoot Suit” 200). The South, he concluded, “has won Los Angeles” (222; original emphasis).

12. Von Eschen’s larger argument focuses on the recognition by midcentury African American intellectuals of an affinity with anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa. The Double V campaign, she argues, could easily be reframed as a demand for a “Triple V” (33).

13. Speaking of this concluding scene, Lipsitz points out, “This interethnic solidarity among aggrieved racial groups was one of the main products of the World War II experience and one of its most important postwar legacies” (198).

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