

Reading the Street:
Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, and the Rise of Black Pulp Fiction

by

Kinohi Nishikawa

Program in Literature
Duke University

April 1, 2010

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Tomiko Yoda

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Program in Literature
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ABSTRACT

“Reading the Street” chronicles the rise of black pulp fiction in the post-civil rights era from the perspective of its urban readership. Black pulp fiction was originally published in the late 1960s and early 1970s; it consisted of paperback novels about tough male characters navigating the pitfalls of urban life. These novels appealed mainly to inner-city readers who felt left out of civil rights’ and Black Power’s promises of social equality. Despite the historic achievements of the civil rights movement, entrenched structural inequalities led to America’s ghettos becoming sites of concentrated poverty, rampant unemployment, and violent crime. While mainstream society seemed to turn a blind eye to how these problems were destroying inner-city communities, readers turned to black pulp fiction for the imaginative resources that would help them reflect on their social reality. In black pulp fiction, readers found confirmation that America was not on the path toward extending equal opportunities to its most vulnerable citizens, or that the rise of Black Power signaled a change in their fortunes. Yet in black pulp fiction readers also found confirmation that their lives as marginalized subjects possessed a value of its own, and that their day-to-day struggles opened up new ways of “being black” amid the blight of the inner city.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

Iceberg Slim was the pseudonym of the novelist otherwise known as Robert Beck. He was born Robert Lee Maupin, Jr., on August 4, 1918, in Chicago, but a hospital mix-up led to the baby's name being recorded as "Robert Lee Moppins." In 1960, when Maupin moved to California, he changed his name to Robert Beck, as his mother had married William Beck and he had not yet reconciled with his abusive father (Robert Lee Maupin, Sr.). His legal name for the remainder of his life would be Robert Maupin Beck.¹

Existing scholarship on Iceberg Slim has tended to refer to the author of black pulp fiction as Robert Beck. Positing Beck as the "real" author of these texts has produced some confusing critical perspectives. On the one hand, Peter Muckley has extracted dubious biographical "facts" out of Slim's fictional work—going so far as to claim that with the publication of his early novels, "Beck had exorcised the ghosts of his past, going further and further back to the most abused of the abused."² On the other hand, Justin Gifford has marshaled biographical facts (as far as we know them) from the author's life *against* the fiction itself. In his analysis of the epilogue to Slim's novel *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967), for example, Gifford glibly concludes, "A wonderful ending if any of it were true. Beck never had a son, and Catherine was the name of his common-law wife, a notorious alcoholic whom Beck left in 1967."³

¹ Peter A. Muckley, *Iceberg Slim: The Life as Art* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance, 2003) 3.

² Peter A. Muckley, "Iceberg Slim: Robert Beck—A True Essay at a BioCriticism of an Ex-Outlaw Artist," *Black Scholar* 26.1 (1996): 25.

³ Justin David Gifford, "Servants of Darkness: Crime Fiction and the American Working Class," diss., University of Virginia, 2006, 73.

In “Reading the Street” I resist the critical tendency to play the “real” Robert Beck off the authorial and narrative personas known as Iceberg Slim. Instead, I interpret Slim’s pseudonymous authorship as troubling the notion that any truth claim could be attributed to or tested against his fiction. More to the point, I advance no new knowledge in this study of the man called Robert Beck. In the variety of media through which his name circulated in the black community, it was Iceberg Slim, not Robert Beck, with whom readers and spectators identified. Even when Slim expressed wanting to live down his pimping past, he did so only with the force of his credentials as a *literary* street icon supporting him.⁴

This set of observations leads me to suggest that Robert Beck remains something of an enigma, while “Iceberg Slim” is the only name we can attach to the public persona of the Chicago hustler and pimp who became a popular author and minor celebrity. As a literary critic, I draw from textual and historical materials to reconstruct the reception of that persona. Ultimately, the narrative my research has yielded says little about Robert Beck, but it does situate Iceberg Slim at the center of one of the most important developments in the history of reading in the black community.

⁴ Underscoring the literariness of Slim’s iconic persona is the fact that his actual street moniker was not Iceberg Slim but Cavanaugh Slim. Neither Muckley nor Gifford acknowledges this fictional name change. Yet insofar as the name “Iceberg” is part of a history of dissembling practices/strategies, we cannot equate Slim’s work with documentary evidence of the “real” Beck’s life.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Bibliographic conventions require that magazines be cited by the month in which a given issue was published. However, the men's magazines I analyze in Chapter 1 (*Adam* and *Sir Knight*) did not publish the month in which each issue appeared. Instead, the magazines identified each issue by its volume and issue numbers as well as its year of publication. I have chosen to cite *Adam* and *Sir Knight* in my footnotes and bibliography with this set of bibliographic information, which I also use (as is customary) when I cite a scholarly journal.

Books by Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines have had very uneven publication histories. Most notably, nearly all reprints of Slim's *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) display 1969 as its earliest copyright date. This has led countless scholars, reviewers, and critics to cite the wrong original date of publication for *Pimp*. In order to eliminate some of the confusion, I have cited the original publication dates of Slim's and Goines's work in my footnotes and bibliography. I have also standardized their book titles by omitting subtitles that may have appeared in first editions. For example, although Goines's *Dopefiend* (1971) and *Whoreson* (1972) featured subtitles in their original forms ("The Story of a Black Junkie" and "The Story of a Ghetto Pimp," respectively), these subtitles have not appeared with regularity (or at all) in subsequent reprints, and so I have left them out of my citations. The exception to this rule is *Pimp*, which has consistently featured the subtitle "The Story of My Life" in reprints. After citing this book for the first time in each chapter, I have shortened the reference to *Pimp*.

I have taken care to provide the most accurate bibliographic information available for Holloway House paperbacks and the men's magazines that were published by Holloway House's sister companies. As a book historian, my task has been to correct bibliographic errors in existing scholarship on black pulp fiction and to periodize a set of materials that had not been brought together in one archive previously. Aside from reprinted works by Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, the majority of the texts I have worked with have never been archived in research or public libraries.⁵ Thus, in order to establish a definitive bibliography for black pulp fiction and Holloway House-related publications, I have conducted a fair amount of source-gathering through eBay, community book sales, and black-owned bookshops. The result of my efforts has been the creation of a large collection of paperback books and men's magazines from the 1950s to the present. My hope is that this archive will someday provide other scholars with the material they need to expand on my history of black pulp fiction.

⁵ The exception is UCLA's Special Collections Library, which is home to a significant number of first-edition Holloway House paperbacks. These books were likely brought to UCLA as a matter of regional history since Holloway House was based in Los Angeles. Like all libraries, however, UCLA's has not archived the men's magazines published by Holloway House's sister companies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has been many years in the making. It is with a huge sigh of relief that I am finally able to acknowledge here my debts to the mentors, friends, and family members who made this project possible.

At Dartmouth, my undergraduate alma mater, and at the University of New Hampshire, where I spent a summer in residence as a McNair Fellow, Martin Favor, Ivy Schweitzer, Gerd Gemünden, and Monica Chiu are probably just as relieved as I am that their former student has finally made good on obtaining his Ph.D. Working under their mentorship convinced me this was the right path to take. Marty in particular served as the adviser whose teaching and research I continue to model my own after.

At Duke, the Programs in Literature and Women's Studies have served as vibrant institutional homes for my work and scholarly development. My committee members deserve special recognition for all the time, effort, and energy they have put into this project. Tomiko Yoda guided me through the vast secondary literature on gender, sexuality, and consumer culture; her method of teaching this literature shaped the way I have incorporated theory into my dissertation. Mark Anthony Neal stepped in to give game-changing advice on an early draft of my work; he has been a strong supporter of this project ever since. It was in a graduate seminar with MAN on black male feminism that I finally said to myself, "What am I waiting for? I can do this!" Matt Cohen knows how I operate on so many levels, and it is almost embarrassing to thank him for accepting me for who I am (while giving me sound counsel on what I might do differently in the future). Over the years, Matt has taught me the value of collaboration in scholarly

matters; in addition to our co-authored publications, it was his invitation to present my work at a symposium at the University of Texas at Austin that kept me going at a moment when my confidence in calling myself a book historian had faltered. Matt's generosity of spirit helped me cross that bridge, among many others.

My co-chairs Thomas Ferraro and Janice Radway have advised me since my first semester in graduate school. This project would not have gotten off the ground or been ushered to completion without their encouragement and support. Tom's classroom was the first one I stepped into as a new graduate student. It would not be an understatement to say that the way I read texts is fundamentally in debt to the experience of learning from him. I have always had an expressive personality, but Tom showed me how to channel that energy into my literary criticism. My work is inestimably better by following Tom's suggestion that, in Louis Menand's words, "if something doesn't seem more interesting after it has been taken apart, then it wasn't worth taking apart."

Jan made this project possible in the first instance. Her scholarly contributions to the history of reading need no introduction; it was to her work that I turned for models on how to conduct genuinely interdisciplinary research in American literature and culture. But it was Jan's patient, long-term guidance of this project as a teacher, adviser, and colleague that brought my work to fruition. Jan has read every word I produced in drafting this document, and she, more than anyone, has shepherded me through the methodological issues that come with doing interdisciplinary research. "Reading the Street" is a testament to Jan's exemplary mentorship of a young scholar in her field.

Numerous staff members at Duke have supported my teaching and research over the years. From the Program in Literature, I thank Karen Bell, Tiwonda Johnson-Blount, Maria Maschauer, Sandy Swanson, and Pam Terterian. From the Program in Women's Studies, I thank Cassandra Harris, Pat Hoffman, Melanie Mitchell, Gwen Rogers, and Lillian Spiller. Duke University Libraries' outstanding book and periodicals collection made a wealth of sources available to me in the blink of an eye. Where the collection was found wanting, Glenda Lacoste at ILL facilitated my access to obscure and out-of-print materials. Carson Holloway, Yunyi Wang, and Kenneth Wetherington have been near-daily presences in my life as I pick up book after book from Lilly's circulation desk. Danette Pachtner put in a special order for a rare DVD copy of an episode of *Black Journal* that dramatizes Iceberg Slim's life as a pimp. Lee Sorensen gave me user-friendly advice on how to scan the color images I include in the dissertation.

On the West Coast, I thank Bentley Morriss and his assistant Caroline for sharing their stories about Holloway House with me. Alfred Valrie and Rawiri and Emalu-Hina Cleveland were paragons of hospitality during my visits to Los Angeles; I could not have navigated the sprawling city without them.

There are a number of friends who have sustained me during my graduate career. Many of them made life in Durham the joyous experience it has been for me. Others exuded a nourishing vitality of spirit as companions on my travels around South America. All of them left me with lasting impressions of how friendship can be a constant source of self-renewal. Thank you, Sara Appel, Soledad Ayala, Ronni Armstead, Hollianna Bryan, Tosca Burgers, Andrew Burkett, Oscar Cabezas, Leigh Campoamor, Iara Díaz-

Araújo, Lea Drobbe, Rod Frey, Alexander Greenberg, Ursula Grisham, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Giles Harrison-Conwill, Natalie Hartman, Guo-Juin Hong, Justin Izzo, Alvaro Jarrin, Emily Jump, Stacy Lavin, Exequiel Lopresti, John Miles, Alberto Moreiras, Vin Nardizzi, Janaina Pantoja, Aisha Peay, Jorge Riveros Cayo, Abigail Salerno, Tabea Schaefer, Leslie Taylor, Carsten Ternes, Maria Vaalavuo, Ryan Vu, Ara Wilson, Caroline Warnicke, and Kristin Wintersteen.

My family has always been there for me over the many years I have devoted to academic study away from the islands. Edith Gima and the estate of Itsuko “Sue” Nishikawa, my late aunt, provided me with much-needed financial support in the latter stages of my graduate career. My grandfather, Clifford Lancaster, passed away just months before I was to graduate from college; his boundless love for me shaped my childhood and continues to inspire me whenever I feel a little stuck. Most important, neither this project nor my academic career would have been possible without the support of three people: my mother, Patricia, my father, Sadao, and my grandmother, Vivian. I could fill a book with stories testifying to how much Mom, Dad, and Grandma mean to me, and how grateful I am for their love. This dissertation will have to do for now, and it is to them that I dedicate it.

More than anyone, Lorien Olive has helped me put the highs and lows of an extended graduate career in perspective. My completion of this project is in large part due to Lorien’s steadfast support. Now that it’s done, I look forward to starting the next chapter with her.

INTRODUCTION

AFTER THE PROMISED LAND

On the night of April 3, 1968, the civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a rousing oration to a packed house at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. Having arrived in Memphis a few days earlier to lend his support to striking sanitation workers, King was exhausted and complained of feeling ill. Nonetheless, he moved forward with the speech and delivered it without any notes. It proved to be more than just an extemporaneous call to action. After reminding the audience of the hurdles the civil rights movement had had to overcome, and reflecting on a near-fatal attempt on his life in New York City, King concluded his remarks by addressing the “threats” he had received in Memphis. With the possibility of his own death looming over him, King spoke of something larger than he propelling the movement forward:

Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.¹

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I've Been to the Mountaintop,” *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner, 2001) 222-23. I have excluded the bracketed call-and-response notes from this quotation for purposes of length.

The Mason Temple erupted in applause after King cited the stirring first line of the abolitionist song “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” at the end of the speech. King had given the audience hope that the Promised Land was within reach. He assured them he had seen it with his own eyes; his words resounded as if delivered by a prophet. King admitted he might not live to see the day when everyone arrived at the Promised Land, but that was not important: the struggle had to go on.

The day after King delivered his speech, he was shot on the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel. King did not survive the assassination attempt; he was pronounced dead on the evening of April 4, 1968, at the age of 39. The public outpouring of grief following King’s death reflected how much he had meant to the ideals and aspirations of millions of Americans, black and white. Among them was the sense that a great man had been lost, and that the beacon of the era’s forward-looking idealism had dimmed. Still, the Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy gathered his supporters in front of a nationally televised press conference and urged them to continue the civil rights struggle in King’s name. The appeal was heartfelt and meant to fill the vacuum left by King’s death in some small way. “I may not get there with you,” King had uttered the night before, but Kennedy reasoned that the struggle had to go on.

King’s assassination registered somewhat differently among the urban African Americans who had seen no appreciable change to their living situations even with civil rights legislation on the books. Toward the end of his life, King had begun to reach out to poor and working-class people whose lives seemed to be unaffected by the fall of state-sponsored segregation and efforts to secure the franchise for all citizens. In a speech he

delivered in Atlanta in August 1967, King asked his audience, “Where do we go from here?” The question, King noted, was one about “the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth.” Without recognizing the economic dimensions of urban poverty and persistent black unemployment, King said the civil rights movement was bound to come up with “solutions that don’t solve, answers that don’t answer, and explanations that don’t explain.”² In light of his more explicit demands for economic justice, King’s death was a symbolic blow to those whom mainstream America had forgotten—blacks living in the unofficially segregated ghettos of America’s inner cities.

For urban African Americans, the disappointment of losing one of the only political leaders who would listen to their needs was too much to bear. Tensions that had been brewing over the past decade spilled over into the streets in the weeks following King’s assassination. Riots broke out in ghettos all over the country as people protested not so much King’s death in itself as the national failure to come to grips with urban poverty. The rioting in Baltimore, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., was so destructive that federal troops were called in to quell the unrest. When the smoke finally cleared, 39 people were dead, more than 2,600 were injured, and thousands more had been arrested. Although riots had broken out in different cities in previous years, in Clay Risen’s words there had never been “so many, in so many places, at the same time” like those that

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here?,” *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner, 2001) 193, 191.

followed King's assassination.³ The concentrated nature of the riots of 1968 signaled a tidal shift in the national conversation on race. Bobby Kennedy's appeal to continue to find hope and inspiration in King's work was short-lived; he was assassinated only two months later. The civil rights era was over; a new one was dawning.

"Reading the Street" is a literary and cultural history of the post-civil rights era as seen through the eyes of urban African Americans. It chronicles the rise of black pulp fiction as a literary form that expressed readers' frustration over the failure of the civil rights movement's promises of social equality to materialize in the ghetto. Black pulp fiction was originally published in the late 1960s and early 1970s; it consisted of paperback novels about tough male characters navigating the pitfalls of urban life. Black pulp fiction was widely read among those most affected by the deindustrialization of the urban economy in the years following World War II. Despite the historic achievements of the civil rights movement, entrenched structural inequalities led to America's ghettos becoming sites of concentrated poverty, unemployment, and violent crime. While mainstream society seemed to turn a blind eye to how these problems were destroying inner-city communities, readers turned to black pulp fiction for the imaginative resources that would help them reflect on their social reality. In black pulp fiction readers found confirmation that America was not on the path toward realizing Dr. King's dream of providing equal opportunity for all, or that they were any closer to seeing the Promised Land for themselves. Yet in black pulp fiction readers also found confirmation that their

³ Clay Risen, *A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2009) 4.

lives as marginalized subjects possessed a value of its own, and that their day-to-day struggles opened up new ways of “being black” amid the blight of the inner city.

The primary aim of “Reading the Street” is to situate black pulp fiction in its historical context and thereby reconstruct what it would have been like for urban African Americans to engage with these novels. My narrative centers on black pulp fiction’s original and most widely read authors, Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. Hailing from Chicago and Detroit, respectively, Slim and Goines were ex-convicts and former pimps who had experienced the blight of America’s inner cities firsthand. When they turned to writing fiction, Slim and Goines incorporated the petty cons, intricate hustles, police brutality, and black-on-black violence they had witnessed growing up on the streets. Something about the way Slim and Goines elaborated on these and other themes resonated with urban, predominantly male, African American readers. The first title in black pulp fiction, Slim’s autobiographical novel *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967), said little about contemporaneous political struggles, but it did offer a vision of potent manhood that was the precise counterpoint to the lack of control urban blacks felt in determining the course of their lives. This study will elucidate the ways in which Slim’s and Goines’s novels appealed to the urban black experience in garnering an expansive and loyal readership.

A subset of the narrative “Reading the Street” presents is the story behind Slim’s and Goines’s publisher, the independent, Los Angeles-based Holloway House. Founded in 1961 as the book-publishing counterpart to two pin-up magazines, Holloway House was owned and operated by a pair of Jewish men, Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock.

Before Holloway House released *Pimp* in 1967, it had specialized in cheap and portable paperback reprints of moderately titillating to salacious material that had appeared in the pages of Morriss and Weinstock's magazines. The majority of the books' and magazines' readership consisted of middle-class white men who sought leisurely escape from the otherwise staid confines of suburban domesticity. It was only after publishing Slim's first three novels in the late 1960s that Holloway House "discovered" it was attracting a whole new set of readers—ones who did not share middle-class whites' sense of social comfort and economic security.⁴ Urban African Americans' fiction-reading tastes had long gone unaddressed by mainstream and black-owned publishers; Holloway House thus stepped in to provide books that would speak to their experience. By the time Goines published his first novel with Holloway House, in 1971, the company had begun to devote nearly all of its resources to releasing so-called "black experience" paperbacks. Over the years, black pulp fiction was the only thing keeping Holloway House afloat. But the relationship was a two-way street: from its rather inauspicious origins, black pulp fiction became the exclusive property of Holloway House; no other publisher sought to release similarly crafted novels in the post-civil rights moment.

Tracing the history of Holloway House as an institution would surely make for a good story. It is not the story "Reading the Street" seeks to relate, however, insofar as dwelling on it would obscure how urban African Americans took up black pulp fiction as

⁴ On the "discovery" of the African American reader among publishers of popular and pulp fiction in the post-civil rights moment, see Susanne B. Dietzel, "Pulp Fiction," *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 610-12.

a literature of their own.⁵ At the risk of stating the obvious, Morriss and Weinstock's investments in black pulp fiction (as a profitable business venture) were not the same as the investments readers brought to it. While certain of Holloway House's business practices no doubt influenced the reception of black pulp fiction, these neither exhausted nor predetermined the ways in which readers found meaning in Slim's and Goines's novels. Ultimately, then, "Reading the Street" is about black pulp fiction's readers and the structure of feeling the post-civil rights moment created for them. It is a story about how urban African Americans tried to pick up the pieces of their lives once the horizon of the Promised Land had receded from view.

The task of reconstructing black pulp fiction's historical readers presents a set of methodological problems for the literary scholar. Because these mass-market paperback books were thought of as "disposable" fiction or quick reads, and because their target audience consisted primarily of poor and working-class people of color, there is very little *direct* evidence of how readers engaged with black pulp fiction. Quite simply, because these books lacked acknowledged literary value, academic and archival institutions ignored their widespread popularity, and readers' responses were rarely, if ever, collected in the form of either book reviews or readers' reports. The methodological

⁵ It is also a story that, even if one set out to write it (as I did at the beginning of this project), presents major obstacles to historical analysis, for Holloway House was notoriously secretive about every aspect of its operations. In my on-site research for this project, the company's surviving co-founder turned down all my requests for information (including documentary evidence of sales figures) beyond what I could gather from casual interviews.

questions posed by Erin Smith in her study of early twentieth-century pulp magazines are relevant to my own work on black pulp fiction:

How do we reconstruct the reading practices of those who were outside the record-keeping classes? African-Americans, recent immigrants, the poor, the working classes—those customarily denied meaningful access to advanced literacy or the means of cultural production—have left few traces in the historical record. . . In the absence of documents meeting traditional historical standards of proof, what would constitute evidence of working-class ways of reading?⁶

Faced with a dearth of evidence bearing directly on reading practices that took place “outside the record-keeping classes,” I, like Smith, have had to identify novel methods of reconstructing historical readers of black pulp fiction in this study.

The methods I have employed in order to realize this goal are drawn from existing fields of inquiry in the humanities. Three fields in particular have informed the structure of my research program: 1) the history of the book and the study of print culture; 2) African American cultural history; and 3) black and feminist cultural studies. Taken together as an interdisciplinary rubric, these fields offer me different ways of locating and interpreting evidence for the historical readership of black pulp fiction. More specifically, because these fields are concerned with different objects of study, they make available a wide range of sources for understanding everyday reading practices in their historical context. I want to address each of them in turn here.

First, the history of the book has in recent years provided the most elemental tools for reconstructing historical readerships. The meticulous attention the field pays not only to book-objects but also to the print sources that frame books’ reception has inspired

⁶ Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000) 8-9.

groundbreaking studies in the history of reading. While scholars of the history of reading have often taken issue with book history's object-centered origins in bibliography, or the study of books as material artifacts, most have nonetheless chosen to advance the field's methods rather than abandon them tout court.⁷ Today many book historians consider some aspect of the history of reading in their work. Following Robert Darnton's suggestion that scholars expand the range of print material they consider in their research, book historians have tended to move away from object-centered analyses toward accounts of readers' relations with texts and with other readers in a broad network of information sifting, sorting, and interpretation.⁸

Taking my cue from the history of the book's interest in readers, I have consulted as many sources as possible to reconstruct the print culture of urban black communities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. People read black pulp fiction alongside thriving black-owned periodicals, from John H. Johnson's widely circulating, middle-class magazine *Ebony* to small-scale radical journals and newspapers published by Black Power groups. These periodicals form a composite picture of the reading preferences of different classes

⁷ This shift in book history has sometimes been articulated as a turn toward the "sociology of texts" or the "sociology of literature," which is a more recent development in the study of books as material forms. The key distinction between the two fields rests on the degree of emphasis each places on print sources. While book historians have learned much from the sociology of literature's focus on readers' relationships with texts and with other readers, many still remain committed to understanding texts as objects of meaning in themselves. For book historians who have looked to the sociology of literature to illuminate the history of reading, see Cathy N. Davidson, ed., *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

⁸ Robert Darnton, "First Steps toward a History of Reading," *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1990) 154-87. The most accomplished work to come out of this turn in book history is Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

of black people in the post-civil rights era. In lieu of specific references to black pulp fiction and its authors in the archive, I have relied on a range of material from black print culture to identify readers' social concerns, political leanings, and literary tastes.

A more unconventional source of historical data for this study has been the three magazines that Holloway House's sister companies produced during the rise of black pulp fiction. Two of these, *Adam* and *Sir Knight* (later renamed simply *Knight*), were predominantly white pin-up magazines that enjoyed their heyday in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. The other, *Players*, was an all-black pornographic magazine that both targeted and expanded black pulp fiction's reading base beginning in 1973.

Holloway House advertised its mass-market paperbacks in all three periodicals. In fact excerpts of many of its paperbacks originally appeared in these magazines. Thus, despite their controversial content, *Adam*, *Sir Knight*, and *Players* offer essential clues as to how Holloway House and its sister companies appealed to men of different racial and class backgrounds as readers. The articles, advertisements, short stories, and images that populated these magazines constitute some of the most relevant data we have of black pulp fiction's historical reception.

The second field from which I have drawn methods for this study is African American cultural history. The cultural historians whose work informs my study have been concerned to narrate the black experience during the civil rights and post-civil rights eras "from below." That is, they have gone beyond the familiar narratives of mid-twentieth-century racial solidarity movements to offer more nuanced accounts of how the abstract ideals of "rights" and "revolution" played out in black people's everyday lives.

Scot Brown, for example, has retold the history of the rise of cultural nationalism (a subset of the Black Power movement) from the perspective of the disaffected youth, idealistic students, and talented cultural workers who joined Maulana Karenga in advocating for a distinct black culture.⁹ Brian Ward, meanwhile, has illuminated the major ideological struggle within Black Power—between cultural nationalists (like Karenga) and revolutionary militants (like Huey Newton of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense [BPP])—by showing how both sides contested their points through appeals to black popular music.¹⁰ In drawing our attention to the everyday dimensions of social change, these and other cultural historians have illuminated the narrative backdrop for understanding black pulp fiction’s readers in their time.

Cultural history’s method of creating a narrative out of disparate primary sources is a necessary supplement to the insights book history has to offer. Because each chapter of this study advances an argument about how historical readers engaged with specific texts, I take the time to outline the general context in which I situate these readers. By doing this, I am able to relate individual print sources, from black pulp fiction to *Players* magazine, to the news, events, and cultural discourses that made up the conversation pieces of black daily life. African American cultural history that is situated at the crossroads between oral and print culture is especially useful to me in this regard. For example, William Van Deburg’s analysis of the folk roots of civil rights and post-civil

⁹ Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Brian Ward, “Jazz and Soul, Race and Class, Cultural Nationalists and Black Panthers: A Black Power Debate Revisited,” *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Struggle*, ed. Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) 161-96.

rights “culture heroes” underscores how black popular consciousness emerged out of the circulation and reinvention of subaltern lore.¹¹ Such an insight helps explain why many of black pulp fiction’s protagonists shared a similar grassroots following.

The third and final field from which I have drawn methods for this study is black and feminist cultural studies. Generally speaking, cultural studies has helped foster interdisciplinary research on how humans communicate with and make meaning out of a seemingly unlimited archive of postmodern objects and media. British cultural studies in particular has produced important work showing how music, fashion, and visual media were creatively and often counterintuitively integrated into the lives of marginalized young people. With Dick Hebdige’s work on teddy boys, mods, and punks, as well as Paul Gilroy’s on black Britons, British cultural studies has gainfully used sources outside of print media to reconstruct the conditions and practices that went into the making of postindustrial urban youth cultures.¹²

U.S.-based black and feminist scholars have utilized the archive-expanding methods of British cultural studies to illuminate the social and material realities of American subcultures. Taking my cue from studies by Phillip Brian Harper and Mark Anthony Neal, my research lies at the intersection of U.S.-based black and feminist cultural studies traditions. Harper and Neal analyze the gender politics of post-civil rights black culture in rich detail and across different forms of media, from Black Arts poetry of

¹¹ William L. Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African-American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979); Paul Gilroy, *“There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

the 1960s to hip hop albums, concerts, and music videos from the 1980s and '90s. Even in focusing their work on representations of black manhood, Harper and Neal evince an explicitly feminist desire to understand masculinity as a valid object of study.¹³ With these examples of black and feminist cultural studies in mind, I cite a range of extra-literary texts to reconstruct historical readers of black pulp fiction. Blaxploitation films, black-oriented television shows, and hip hop music were at various points critical mediators of black pulp fiction's reception. I consider them here not only as contemporaneous phenomena with black pulp fiction but also as problematically gendered examples of post-civil rights black culture.

As I recount the history of black pulp fiction's readers from the late 1960s and early 1970s, I will keep in mind three interrelated points of departure for this study: 1) the post-civil rights moment and the questions it poses to African American literary and cultural history; 2) the importance of racial authenticity to an understanding of representations of street-level masculinity; and 3) the roles fantasy and pleasure play in making books meaningful for long-unrecognized communities of readers. Taken together, these points constitute the historical and theoretical framework for my study. I want to address each of them in turn for the remainder of the introduction.

¹³ Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002). See also Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, eds., *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

Symbolically originating with the assassination of Dr. King, the post-civil rights era is usually defined as the period when white backlash to civil rights gains led urban African Americans to view community self-determination as the best way to secure their social welfare. It was most notably the period when the Black Power movement came to the fore as a viable alternative to civil rights' advocacy through mainstream political channels and social institutions. Black Power groups like the BPP maintained that black people could not rely on the white power structure to guarantee their freedom and economic security. If anything, the demise of President Lyndon B. Johnson's vision of the Great Society at the hands of the newly elected Richard M. Nixon signaled for many blacks that the power structure would actively work against their interests. Arguably the most recognizable image of the era was that of the beret-wearing and leather jacket-clad black man wielding a rifle in the name of his self-defense. This image of the militant Panther galvanized supporters who understood Nixon's "law and order" regime to be another name for suppressing revolutionary dissent among America's worst-off citizens.

While this narrative portrait of the post-civil rights era no doubt reflects the overarching conflict of the period, less recognized are the ways in which ordinary black people felt about having to endure deepening levels of poverty and social isolation. The flight of heavy industries such as textile and automobile manufacturing from the North's urban centers as well as the persistence of discriminatory housing policies left increasing numbers of African Americans jobless, poorly educated, and able to afford rent in only the worst sections of U.S. cities. As poverty became more concentrated in these areas, it seemed all of society's maladies could be located among the black people who lived

there. In historian Robert Beauregard's view, "The ills of the central city in the 1960s, and through the early years of the subsequent decade, became almost exclusively attached to urban blacks...African Americans were situated at the core of physical deterioration, white flight, anemic capital investment, crime, poverty, poor schools, and unemployment."¹⁴ For middle-class whites, it was all too easy to confuse these structural problems of social inequality with the idea that African Americans bore the responsibility for their perpetuation. This racialization of the so-called "urban crisis" had a blowback effect on blacks, as scholars and policymakers began to see America's ghettos as dangerous cauldrons of anti-social behavior. More than one of the era's numerous urban riots was blamed on the social disorder consuming the inner city.

While the diagnostic value of accounts of "black rage" may have been overblown,¹⁵ it is true that urban blacks had experienced continual disappointment about their fortunes for the better part of the decade. Many African Americans were the inheritors of their Southern-born parents' hope of working toward a better life in the North. But domestic and global restructurings of the U.S. economy throughout the 1960s left the majority of young black people living in dilapidated projects and scouring for employment in resource-starved ghettos. A space offering few opportunities for social mobility or points of contact with the "outside world," the ghetto came to be regarded as more of a prison or a trap than a neighborhood. "This place is just like a jungle," one 21-year-old St. Louis resident mused in 1963, "but you can't get away from it, so you must

¹⁴ Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003) 130-33.

¹⁵ See William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic, 1968).

submit yourself and submitting is the worst thing that you can do.”¹⁶ Thomas Coolidge’s characterization of the ghetto as a “jungle” implied that an impersonal law of nature (the “law of the jungle,” so to speak) governed the life of the inner city. In his analogy, the Promised Land remained elusive for the children of the Great Migration because the ghetto itself resembled a zone of de facto segregation.

One of the reasons why this less (explicitly) resistance-oriented side of the post-civil rights narrative should be explored by African American literary scholars is because it expands the range of texts we might consider illustrative of the era’s cultural politics. At present the literary canon of the 1960s and ’70s includes work by novelists, essayists, and poets who were recognized as liberal allies of (James Baldwin) or nationalist (Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal) and militant (Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson) participants in the black revolution that succeeded the civil rights movement. What this politically directed orientation tends to lose sight of is an alternative genealogy of postwar African American fiction—one that mined black people’s pragmatic skepticism to craft popular narratives about individuals for whom political movements remained abstractions compared to the daily struggle of surviving the streets. Within this tradition one could include Clarence Cooper’s *The Scene* (1960), Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), and Nathan Heard’s *Howard Street* (1968). But the most popular authors in this tradition by far would be Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. More than any single book published by

¹⁶ Qtd. in Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* (1970; New Brunswick, NJ: AldineTransaction, 2006) 14-15. Emphases removed.

other authors in this genealogy, the black pulp fiction they wrote and the hundreds of titles they inspired constitute the core of a distinctly black urban literature.¹⁷

Emerging at the same time that macroeconomic shifts were forever changing the contours and patterns of inner-city life, black pulp fiction indexed the alternating feelings of alienation and despair that circulated among those who lived in marginalized ghetto communities. This is not to say that black pulp fiction was consumed by “negative” affects as a matter of plot construction or characterological identification. As we shall see, the novels often evinced a measured optimism (along with a biting sense of humor) about individual black men’s ability to garner respect in the ghetto. Still, the urban, all-black milieus in which Slim and Goines set their novels did seem to give the impression that the crumbling infrastructure of the inner city served as the “natural” backdrop to stories about contemporary African American life. Even in those situations where Slim’s and Goines’s characters displayed a great degree of resilience and fortitude, the successes they enjoyed typically resulted from their own streetwise pluck and ingenuity, not the beneficence of a sympathetic power structure. The lessons to be learned in black pulp fiction, it would seem, were that whites could not be trusted to do good, and that the street was a harrowing place to occupy. It was left to black pulp fiction’s protagonists, then, to “make a way out of no way” and to create their own conditions of survival.¹⁸

¹⁷ I adapt parts of this literary genealogy from Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁸ On the importance of this adage to black cultural expression, see Mark Anthony Neal, “‘...A Way Out of No Way’: Jazz, Hip-Hop, and Black Social Improvisation,” *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) 195-223.

That vernacular saying—to make a way out of no way—captures the motivation behind inner-city residents’ efforts to overcome post-civil rights despair on their own terms. Black men in particular undertook the counterintuitive measure of facing urban blight head-on. Their way of negotiating intractable inner-city realities was to consciously occupy the ghetto’s most recognizable symbol and public feature: the neighborhood street. “Streetcorner” men, as they came to be known in the ethnographic literature, placed a premium on the social relationships—often informal and sometimes illicit—they were able to cultivate with other inner-city black men. Many of these men faced uncertain futures in the North’s urban centers, as deindustrialization, employment discrimination, and the concentration of poverty in America’s ghettos forced them to accept unrewarding jobs as menial laborers or no job at all. The street thus became the site of an alternative system of cultural values and economic rewards for marginalized black men. In the words of the anthropologist Elliot Liebow, it was at the street corner where a black man was able to realize his “desire to be a person in his own right, [and] to be noticed by the world he lives in.”¹⁹

Out of this context, racial authenticity, the second point of departure for this study, emerged as the critical mediator between notions of potent manhood and the material realities of life on the street. Insofar as inhabiting the street—making it a space of leisure, congregation, and (illicit) exchange—became a way for black men to feel validated *as men*, racial authenticity indexed the degree to which they commanded

¹⁹ Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967) 60. See also Elijah Anderson, *A Place on the Corner*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

respect *among* men. Sociologist Elijah Anderson has designated the aggregate of these relations as “the code of the street.” “At the heart of the code,” Anderson writes, “is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated ‘right’ or being granted one’s ‘props’ (or proper due) or the deference one deserves...In the street culture, especially among young people, respect is viewed as almost an external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost—and so must be constantly guarded.”²⁰ Transposing this description to the post-civil rights moment, we might say that racial authenticity, rather than being a singular or static subject position, was a function of the *social relation* among men who labored to control aspects of their environment. Through conversation, play, and informal economic transactions, a “real” man acquired the social capital of deference and respect: he was a man of the street to the extent that he flourished among its denizens.

Black pulp fiction drew its representational strategies from the lifeworld of urban black men. It adapted the social capital of racial authenticity into prose and attached profound symbolic value to streetwise black masculinity. In truth, such an adaption was no different from the kinds of creative myth-making black men had been doing for years in their oral communication. Another urban anthropologist from the 1960s, Ulf Hannerz, spoke of inner-city black men’s conversational extrapolation of their daily experiences into a folk Everyman of street culture:

²⁰ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: Norton, 1999) 33. I do take issue with one aspect of Anderson’s argument—his claim that knowledge of the code was “largely defensive” (33). Rather than view these social relationships only as a preservative force, I see their continuous performance and adaptation as being enormously productive of new ways of inhabiting public spaces.

The men seem preoccupied with creating and maintaining a definition of natural masculinity which they can all share. By seizing on individual experiences of kinds which they have all had, they “talk through” and thereby construct the social reality of the typical Ghetto Man, a fact of life larger than any one of them. This Ghetto Man is a bit of a hero, a bit of a villain, and a bit of a fool, yet none of them all the way. He is in fact a kind of a trickster—uncertainty personified, a creature fluctuating between competence and incompetence, success and failure, good and evil...[W]hen Ghetto Man succeeds, he is a hero, considering his limited skills and powers in an environment full of adversaries; if he fails, it is natural because he was up to no good.²¹

Notable about Hannerz’s description is how Ghetto Man was not construed as a flawless character. He evinced particular weaknesses that were part and parcel of how black men negotiated social capital among themselves. Indeed the breadth of oral narratives invested in Ghetto Man suggested the deep “uncertainty” urban black men felt about their socially precarious lives. The malleability of his character thereby served as a symbolic conductor for black men’s interpretation of their relative “successes” and “failures.”

I am aware of the theoretical problems posed by defining racial authenticity through these accounts of street culture. Robin Kelley has critiqued urban ethnography of the 1960s for reifying an essentialist and reductive picture of urban black men’s lives. The thrust of Kelley’s critique is not that Hannerz’s ethnography, for example, is necessarily wrong about how black men negotiated their social interactions. Rather, it is that Hannerz’s explanatory framework removes any sense of agency from urban black men’s lives. According to Kelley, soul, one of Hannerz’s key terms for defining street culture, is “a black (male) thang,” construed as “little more than a survival strategy to cope with the harsh realities of the ghetto.” From Kelley’s perspective, because Hannerz

²¹ Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 112.

interprets street culture as a defense mechanism against the structural conditions of racism and poverty, he denudes soul of its active and resistant expressions in language and through the body. Hannerz's ethnography is after the "real 'nigga,'" so to speak, and the cultural composite illuminated through his analysis is a reactive monoculture.²²

Without denying the importance of Kelley's critique, it seems to me urban ethnography of the 1960s could still offer much in terms of understanding the street culture of the time. As Hannerz's evocation of Ghetto Man implies, urban ethnographers exercised a bit more interpretive flexibility in their analyses than Kelley recognizes. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear that when ethnographers sought to document street culture they were necessarily removing agency from black men's lives. The liberal sympathies of Hannerz, Liebow, and others may have colored the policy implications of their studies in certain ways, but the ethnographies themselves remain sensitive, de-pathologizing accounts of how urban black men understood their own lives. Most important, urban ethnography's identification of racial authenticity as the node through which masculine discourse and street sociality came together remains a persuasive lens through which scholars understand the cultural dimensions of urban poverty. Still, taking Kelley's critique into account, my analysis of black pulp fiction's representations of racial authenticity is careful to identify expressive cultural agency in its reception. While some novels by Slim and Goines entertained negative affects such as disillusionment, fatalism, and despair, they by no means compelled readers to take up these affects as their

²² Robin D. G. Kelley, "Looking for the 'Real' Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto," *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997) 25, 24.

own. Instead, black pulp fiction adapted readers' affective investments in racial authenticity toward vibrant literary expression and self-reflective pleasure.

To be sure, one of the pervasive assumptions about black pulp fiction is that it only served as a transparent mirror to the lives of its readers. This assumption denies there was any *process* to reading black pulp fiction by suggesting that the text and its reader were empirical equivalents. Sociological reductionism is a bane to nuanced, historically situated accounts of reading; nonetheless, it is a practice of interpretation all too familiar for twentieth-century African American authors who have written in the realist, naturalist, and “protest” modes. For Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Chester Himes, the very impulse to represent the harrowing conditions and often tragic consequences of urban poverty led to their denigration as artists at different points in their careers. Authors of black pulp fiction encountered similar difficulties, but their problems were compounded by the fact that black pulp fiction’s lowbrow aesthetic was seen as fostering, at best, passive acceptance of or, at worst, direct support for the conditions of urban poverty. In the most extreme sociological readings of novels by Slim and Goines, for example, observers have reported that young black men read *Pimp* only as a “handbook” or “guide” on how to become pimps themselves.²³

²³ See, for example, Christina Milner and Richard Milner, *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972). The Milners were urban anthropologists who had conducted fieldwork in San Francisco in the late 1960s. They contended that *Pimp* codified in print a longstanding oral tradition about “the rules and techniques of the *pussy game*” (39). When the Milners observed that “the majority of pimps [they] met” had read *Pimp* (39), the implication was that Slim’s book had been taken up strictly as an advice manual rather than as a novel or even a memoir. For Slim’s objection to the way he and his work were portrayed in the Milners’ ethnography, see Chapter 3.

The problem with sociological reductionism, then, is that it restricts interpretive understanding of black pulp fiction to a set of preconceived notions about why poor people of color read. It is a form of reductionism that equates engaging the politics of racial authenticity with viewing texts as transparent extensions of one's social reality. Against this critical tendency, I propose a distinction between the model of reading advanced by sociological reductionism and an account of reading that grants black pulp fiction access to the life of the imagination. In claiming that black pulp fiction spoke to the street-level experiences of its readers, I mean to avoid an empirical assessment of those experiences—one that subordinates the act of reading to what we assume to be true of how poor people of color conduct their daily lives. Instead, my aim in this study is to show how black pulp fiction engaged readers on a variety of levels—observational, allegorical, and imaginary, to name a few—precisely as a medium of intellectual and cultural production. Reading Slim's and Goines's novels, I will argue, entailed an active process of meaning-making rather than a passive acceptance of what the novels purportedly stood for.

This anti-reductionist perspective on reading is animated by Kenneth Burke's characterization of literature as "equipment for living." In his literary criticism, Burke proposed that literature be classified according to readers' "strategies" of dealing with their situation in the world. Academic modes of classification, he claimed, had drained the life out of texts because they had no organic connection to the way texts were used by actual readers. Burke's notion of strategies sought to understand texts' meaning on the level of their most resonant articulation. Importantly, according to Burke, strategies did

not seek to “apply” lessons learned from literature to everyday life. Instead, they mined the imaginative possibilities opened up by literature to craft a grounded disposition toward social realities. In his memorable analysis of readers of “inspirational literature” (the early twentieth-century predecessor to today’s “self-help” books), Burke wrote,

*The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success. It is while they read that these readers are “succeeding.” I’ll wager that, in by far the great majority of cases, such readers make no serious attempt to apply the book’s recipes. The lure of the book resides in the fact that the reader, while reading it, is then living in the aura of success.*²⁴

For Burke, the consolation of reading inspirational literature lay in the experience of reading itself. “Inspiration” emerged out of the very faculties the reader exercised in understanding the text. In a genre reviled by critics of the time, Burke identified an active and imaginative resource for readerly engagement.

In light of these points, the third and final component of my effort to reconstruct historical readers of black pulp fiction is describing the roles fantasy and pleasure played in its reception. Racial authenticity may have been the critical mediator between black pulp fiction’s representations of potent manhood and life on the street, but its power as a discourse drew from the pleasures afforded by then-rare images of insurgent masculine desire. In theorizing “black pleasure” as an impossible oxymoron, Ishmael Reed has asked, “[W]ith the grim statistics confronting African Americans, what is there to take pleasure in?” Reed’s own response to this question is that African Americans have located a life-sustaining pleasure in those contexts (like slavery) that have otherwise

²⁴ Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967) 299.

negated their social existence. Black pleasure, in this account, could be thought of as “that which makes life easier, no matter how difficult the circumstances under which this pleasure is experienced.”²⁵ In a similar vein, my contention is that fantasies of men who commanded more respect on the street than they did in mainstream America gave black pulp fiction’s readers a way to affirm their daily survival in dismally inhospitable situations. The world of fantasy conjured by black pulp fiction held sway over readers who sought affective legitimation of their lives as marginalized subjects. These readers would have seen the pimp less as an actually existing person to emulate and more as a symbolic conductor for their own frustrated dreams and longed-for desires.

My description of reading black pulp fiction as a mode of affective legitimation is related to Raymond Williams’s concept of “structures of feeling.” In his book *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams suggested that new cultural forms were “primed” to emerge by the structures of feeling that preoccupied new social formations. As the most influential cultural Marxist of his generation, Williams was concerned to account for the inchoate yet meaningful experiences of subjects whose classed identities had become fractured by historical circumstances. Because of their non-correspondence to rigidly defined class positions, these experiences did not map onto Marxism’s schematization of working-class, bourgeois, and capitalist cultural phenomena. In thus critiquing conventional class-bound ideology, Williams theorized that a structure of feeling named

²⁵ Ishmael Reed, “Introduction: Black Pleasure—An Oxymoron,” *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 169.

the set of affectively charged and deeply affirming practices by which heretofore unrecognized (because newly socialized or classed) subjects made sense of their world.²⁶

An important qualification I would add to this theory is the idea that racial identity is not strictly reducible to the class formations in which Williams locates structures of feeling. Race, according to Williams's protégé Stuart Hall, constitutes its own formation—one that refracts rather than mirrors the social organization of classes. Hall advanced this influential corrective to Marxist scholarship in his essay "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980). Of postindustrial British society, Hall observed, "Race continues to differentiate between the different factions of the working classes with respect to capital, creating specific forms of fracturing and fractioning which are as important for the ways in which they intersect class relations (and divide the class struggle, internally) as they are 'mere' expressions of some general form of the class struggle." Against the rote Marxist assumption that racial identity is an epiphenomenon of class struggle, Hall claimed that race entailed its own experiential particularities. In fact, for postcolonial black Britons, the daily struggle of combating xenophobic and racist attacks by white working-class subjects meant that race itself became "the modality in which class [was] 'lived,' the medium through which class relations [were] experienced, the form in which it [was] appropriated and 'fought through.'"²⁷ In Hall's terms, race produced emergent formations among blacks and

²⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 128-35.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 54, 55.

whites that did not correspond to the social organization of classes but were nonetheless meaningful in their own right.

Insofar as I draw from Williams's notion of structures of feeling in my account of black pulp fiction's historical readers, I place Hall's theorization of race at the center of my analysis. In what might be called the post-civil rights era's *racialized structures of feeling*, I locate the set of affective dispositions that primed marginalized black men to engage their deepest desires and most pressing concerns in black pulp fiction. Set within this framework, my study's focus on historical readers of black pulp fiction attempts to understand how marginalized black men's investment in racial authenticity was valuable on its own terms. From this perspective, racial authenticity's function in black pulp fiction was not to provide ideological resolution for essentialist and inherently regressive social practices. Rather, it imagined *with* readers exactly what it felt like to have lived through the civil rights movement only to realize that racism and socioeconomic marginalization continued to pervade their everyday lives.

The history I recount in the next four chapters proceeds according to the chronology I have outlined in Appendix 1. In Chapter 1, "Up from Domesticity," I trace the origins of Holloway House as a publisher of paperback books for middle-class white men's leisurely reading. Beginning in the early 1960s, Holloway House printed material that was closely aligned with postwar pin-up magazine culture. With a catalogue featuring classic erotica, Hollywood confessionals, and true-crime stories, Holloway House tapped into male readers' fantasies about escaping the "trap" of suffocating domesticity. When Iceberg Slim published *Pimp* in 1967, however, Holloway House offered readers a twist

on the anti-domesticity theme: the story of a black man's rise to prominence as a ruthless Chicago pimp became a resonant image of insurgent male rebellion. My analysis shows how Slim's work soon found a wide audience among urban black men. Unlike Holloway House's previous books, *Pimp* and Slim's second novel *Trick Baby* (1967) did not register among black readers merely as anti-domestic fictions. Instead, I argue that these novels reflected urban blacks' sense that it took "real men" like Slim's protagonists to survive the setbacks and disappointments of the last days of the civil rights movement.

In Chapter 2, "Broken Family Narratives," I look at how representations of the black family in the post-civil rights moment informed the reception of Slim's *Mama Black Widow* (1969) as well as Donald Goines's *Whoreson* (1972). Amid the welter of race riots flaring up in America's ghettos in the late 1960s, scholars, policymakers, and everyday readers alike attributed black men's frustrations to the rule of women, and particularly mothers, in the black family. Black pulp fiction, I argue, advanced imaginative outlets for the expression of these frustrations. I read *Mama Black Widow* and *Whoreson* together in order to understand the different means by which they addressed the same question: what role does the mother play in the black man's quest for self-determination in the inner city? My claim is that whereas Slim's novel mourned the son's symbolic castration at the hands of his overbearing mother, Goines envisioned the son harnessing his mother's power to become the kind of real man who commanded respect in the ghetto community.

In Chapter 3, "Missing the Revolution," I contextualize the reception of Slim's and Goines's work in the early 1970s by recounting the rise and fall of the Black Power

movement. Advocating for community self-determination against the perceived failures of integration into mainstream society, Black Power had fashioned itself as the answer to African Americans' post-civil rights disillusionment. During the movement's heyday, Slim found himself on the wrong side of efforts to promote empowering representations of black men's everyday struggles. His newfound popularity became a mixed blessing, as Slim had to devote much of his time countering nationalist claims that his work promoted the false idol of the "glamorous" pimp. Unburdened by his predecessor's celebrity and radicals' rejection of his work, Goines took a more skeptical approach to Black Power. In *Black Gangster* (1972) and the Kenyatta series of crime novels (1974-75), Goines showed that Black Power-inspired groups, such as the BPP, were not far removed from the criminal underworld of the ghetto community. As the BPP was wracked by federal crackdowns and internecine conflicts in the early 1970s, I propose that Goines penned violent and bloody narratives reflecting readers' disillusionment with Black Power itself.

In Chapter 4, "It's a Man's World," I situate the growing demand for black pulp fiction in the 1970s alongside the emergence of *Players* magazine, touted as the world's first all-black pornographic periodical. *Players* was started by Holloway House's owners in an effort to market even more material to its growing base of black male readers. In tracing the rise of the magazine, I describe how the post-civil rights moment was characterized by the fracturing of racial solidarity along class lines: middle-class and lower-class black men became increasingly alienated from each other over the question of what needed to be done to secure black people's social welfare. *Players* did its part to suture these fractures in its novel representations of black men's leisurely pursuits as well

as of black female nudes. Because black pulp fiction was regularly featured and advertised in the pages of the magazine, it attracted new readers among men with social backgrounds distinct from its inner-city base. I illustrate the expansion of black pulp fiction in analyses of Jon Palmer's *House Full of Brothers* (1973) and Goines's *White Man's Justice*, *Black Man's Grief* (1973), novels whose appeal spanned *Players's* readership from middle-class, college-educated men to men serving time in state and federal penitentiaries.

I conclude the dissertation with an epilogue that draws attention to black pulp fiction's influence on hip hop music in the 1980s and '90s. I show how readers of Slim's vernacularized novels retranslated his gritty imaginings of street life into gangsta rap, one of hip hop's most overtly political forms of oral and musical expression. My analysis ends with a discussion of a new generation of black pulp fiction, what readers and critics alternately refer to as urban or street fiction. These self-published and widely popular novels took their immediate inspiration from hip hop's ever-evolving cultural politics. But a longer view of their history shows that they owe a significant debt to black pulp fiction. The debates over race, gender, class, culture, literacy, and uplift that the rise of street fiction has sparked in recent years were all rehearsed before when black pulp fiction took hold of readers' imaginations in the heady days of the post-civil rights moment.

CHAPTER ONE
UP FROM DOMESTICITY

In the immediate postwar years, from 1945 to 1960, middle-class Americans enjoyed the fruits of a global reorganization of power and capital. During this period, a thriving industrial base (a holdover from the war years), a burgeoning consumer culture, and massive investments (from both public and private sources) in the modernization of the American landscape saw the gross national product increase by almost 250 percent and per capita income by 35 percent. Upward mobility and middle-class security were the socioeconomic realities of the day for unprecedented numbers of white Americans. Sixty-two percent of American families owned their own homes by 1960; most of these (up to 85 percent) were located in sprawling suburbs, where former denizens of the city could now relocate to raise their families. Shopping malls, automobiles, and television shows all seemed to testify to the desirability of the American “way of life”: a set of values that not only lauded individual initiative but also cast consumerism and property ownership as social practices of familial well-being. Even in the mid-1950s, just a decade after World War II had ended, nearly 60 percent of the population achieved a middle-class income level. This was, in short, an age of abundance, when Americans—victors in a war freighted with symbolic meaning and material consequences—took pride in their

personal and national successes and realized a kind of middle-class security their Depression-era parents could only have dreamed of.¹

Within the context of these social changes, the nuclear family ideal emerged as the gendered and ideological bedrock of middle-class security. Suburban affluence, it was believed, entailed an abiding commitment to monogamous intimacy, wedded love, and the socialization of children within a community of like-minded individuals. A key part of this family dynamic was men's assumption of the "breadwinner" role in nuclear units. In Barbara Ehrenreich's formulation, this role "required men to grow up, marry and support their wives." Men's identities as responsible husbands and fathers were thus intimately intertwined with their identities as primary income-providers. "To do anything else," Ehrenreich writes, "was less than grown-up, and the man who willfully deviated was judged to be somehow 'less than a man.'"² This model of masculinity was tailored to serve the interests of an expanding consumer society, but it also leveled a great deal of pressure on men to live up to an impossible ideal of affluence. Indeed, while the breadwinner role was recognized as a hallmark of masculine success—a symbol of a man's commitment to his family and to American values—many men embodied the ideal with their fair share of regrets. Stories in the mainstream media expressed men's sense

¹ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic, 1992) 24. See also Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

² Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1983) 11-12.

that they were being trapped in marriages of economic codependency and that their toiling away at the office served the sole purpose of “keeping up with the Joneses.”

Despite the material abundance enjoyed by American families during these “boom” years, an array of cultural texts emerged to give voice to men’s increasing dissatisfaction with their family responsibilities. At stake in the backlash against the breadwinner ethos was not a structural transformation of the nuclear family ideal’s gendered expectations. Rather, men’s sense of victimization was precisely gendered as being the fault of cold, unappreciative, and otherwise heartless women who, taken together, represented a “feminizing” system of oppression. Herman Wouk’s bestselling novel *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955) figured women’s desire to settle down and start a family as a “trap”; by the end of the book, the once-rebellious Noel is domesticated to the point where his masculinity is called into question as he darts about the kitchen preparing dinner for his severe German wife. Other writers understood men’s troubles to be the result of the growth of America’s “culture of conformity.” Yet here too structural problems in consumer society were displaced onto gender stereotypes. David Riesman’s sociological treatise *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) decried conformity as a kind of emasculation; men were becoming too much like women, whose “other-directed” personalities were essential to their sexual and child-rearing duties. Against this alarming

trend, Riesman called for men to return to their “inner-directed” personalities, which valued objective reasoning, rugged individualism, and free-market competition.³

Paradoxically, then, in the immediate postwar years, middle-class American men’s drive to secure socioeconomic stability was complemented by the belief that their domestic responsibilities were making them less-than-masculine. Even when writers pointed out the conformism of bureaucratic corporate work, they always found a way to link it to women’s unseemly and overbearing influence on men’s lives. At one extreme, Philip Wylie advanced the bizarre thesis that women actually ran corporate America to the extent that they controlled 80 percent of the country’s financial resources. Of course by “control” Wylie meant a particular misogynist stereotype: women using their bodies to get in bed with corporate men and thereby determine their financial decisions by proxy. More moderate positions than Wylie’s were no less problematic in their assumptions about women. The popular magazine *Look*, for example, openly speculated that corporate work was forced on husbands who needed to meet their wives’ escalating standards of consumption. “Female dominance” in the home compelled men to endure the drudgery of the nine-to-five job, which in a way was a temporary sanctuary from her demands.⁴

The cultural backlash against the breadwinner ethos gave men the impression that domesticity was something to be feared, not desired. There is perhaps no better textual example of white American men’s wish to escape the confines of the nuclear family unit

³ *Ibid.*, 28, 32-34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-39.

than John Updike's 1960 novel *Rabbit, Run*. The novel's protagonist is 26-year-old Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, a former standout high school basketball player—the pride of his hometown—and now a disgruntled, forgotten, emasculated male, a kitchen gadget salesman. At the beginning of the narrative, Rabbit leaves his wife Janice and two-year-old son Nelson, going on the road not so much to find himself as to escape from the stultifying life he identifies with his family. But no matter how much Rabbit wants to run away, he is always drawn back to his hometown, where he flits from one unsatisfying relationship to another. No woman, it seems, is able to alleviate Rabbit's dread: he has an affair with a part-time prostitute named Ruth but then returns to Janice after she gives birth to a baby girl; he welcomes the flirtatious advances of the minister's wife but then shies away from the open expression of her sexual desire; and, at the novel's climax, he flees the tragedy of his daughter's death only to discover that his solace, Ruth, is herself pregnant and threatening an abortion. Paralyzed by fear and self-loathing, Rabbit's final act in the novel is not to remain with Ruth or with Janice but to run.

Rabbit never realizes it, but the one thing that seemed to remind white men in the 1950s that they were men, after all—that they had choices in life, could dream beyond their families' good, were *alive*—was the fantasy that women “really” wanted them hard, muscular, and physically active. That is, what men came to secretly appreciate during this era was the notion that teeming underneath the veneer of “civilization” and Cold War liberal democracy was man's essential virility, his musk of primal force. The narrative script of this fantasy subverted female dominance in the home with an abiding investment

in masculine privilege over their bodies: women may have the run of the nuclear household, they may turn a blind eye to men's existential suffering, they can nag, bitch, and complain, but at least men could "stick it to 'em" when all was said and done.

The question for the upstanding yet disillusioned family man was how to entertain such an aggressive fantasy without necessarily giving up on the comforts of middle-class security. Michael Kimmel elaborates on this suburban dilemma by asking, "How could men remain responsible breadwinners and not turn into docile drudges? How could men become active and devoted fathers—to make sure that their sons did not become sissies—and not turn into wimps themselves? How could men let their hearts run free with a wife and kids to support?"⁵ For middle-class white men, the answer to these questions was deceptively simple: it involved hanging out with their friends. Engaging in "authentic" and "manly" activities—from having drinks at the bar after work to going on weekend trips to the great outdoors—became the surest way to counteract the onerous responsibilities of everyday life. Crucially, in order for these activities to properly console male anxiety, they needed to unfold in strictly homosocial spaces of leisure—spaces neither of work nor of family but of masculine gathering and conviviality.

A less-recognized activity that nonetheless had a profound impact on men's lives during this era was the widespread consumption of pulp and pin-up magazines. While reading these magazines did not require physically occupying homosocial space, it did

⁵ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996) 238.

elicit an imagined community of robust, like-minded men.⁶ In contrast to the perception that domestic life feminized the working stiff, pulp and pin-up magazines of the 1950s valorized the defiant heroism and red-blooded virility of the American male. The templates for male fantasy in these periodicals ran the gamut from men fighting off wild animals in the jungles of Africa to voluptuous, self-possessed women succumbing to the gaze of irresistible playboys. Thus, in lieu of actually running away from their wives and children, suburban men could escape to their dens and read magazines like *Stag*, *Escape to Adventure*, *Rugged*, and *Monsieur*, delighting in stories of manhood on display while ogling cover art and illustrations that portrayed buxom women in various states of undress, prone and ready for the taking.⁷

In the mid- to late 1950s, from their modest headquarters in Los Angeles, Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock began publishing two such men's magazines, *Adam* and *Sir Knight*. Although both periodicals emphasized pin-up pictorials more than they did adventure stories, *Adam* and *Sir Knight* still relied heavily on the overarching themes of what I call the "men's literature" of the era: celebrating masculine virility and "taming" beautiful and voluptuous women. Veterans of the Hollywood media circuit, Morriss and Weinstock were in the business of stoking suburban white men's fantasies of power; they

⁶ I adapt the notion of "imagined community" from its strictly nation-building usage in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

⁷ On postwar adventure magazines, see Adam Parfrey, ed., *It's a Man's World: Men's Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulps* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2003). On postwar pin-up magazines, see Dian Hanson, ed., *The History of Men's Magazines: From Post-War to 1959*, vol. 2 (Cologne: Taschen, 2004).

did this not only with pulpy eroticism and risqué pictures but, materially, through an imagined community of similarly positioned readers. As if to underscore the point that men need not leave their abodes to entertain what it really meant to be a man, *Adam* was given the tagline, “The Man’s Home Companion.” It was a declaration that men would be redefining the space of the home to suit their needs and desires.

The formation of Holloway House in the early 1960s appeared to extend this gendered mode of cultural production into the realm of paperback books. As the book-publishing arm of *Adam* and *Sir Knight*, Holloway House paperbacks appealed to the same group of readers as their periodical kin. But all this changed in 1967, when the company released two books by a self-taught African American writer named Iceberg Slim. Within a matter of months, these books became wildly popular among inner-city black men who admired Slim—one of their own—for his frank depictions of sex, drug use, and confidence schemes in the ghettos of Chicago. It was a startling turn of events for a company that was immersed in the print culture of (white) men’s literature.

While acknowledging the significant differences in the make-up of *Adam*’s and Slim’s readerships, part of my argument in this chapter rests on tracing the uncanny continuities between them. For if suburban white men thought they could access their “true” selves, their essential masculinity, in the act of reading pulp and pin-up magazines, so too did inner-city readers identify with the performance of “authentic” manhood in Slim’s work. Of course precisely *why* both sets of readers sought consolation from print materials was a matter over which they diverged profoundly. Urban blacks enjoyed none

of the middle-class security or consumer abundance the postwar boom had afforded their white counterparts. Reading Slim, for them, was in some ways an act of protest for being left out of the American dream that other people had the gall to take for granted.

American Adam

Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock were Jewish Midwesterners (from Chicago and Detroit, respectively) who had graduated from UCLA in the 1940s and took up work in Hollywood as industry jacks of all trades: promoters, ad men, media consultants, you name it. They started their magazines mainly with an eye toward selling the kind of content that would solicit the most advertising money. In the late 1950s, pin-ups were fast becoming a lucrative, though tenuously situated, source for attracting middle-class white men's disposable incomes. In 1957, the year after the first issue of *Adam* appeared, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Roth v. United States* that material dealing "with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interests" did not fall under the protection of the First Amendment of the Constitution. However, the Court did not give a standard definition as to what constituted obscene material; rather, it left definitions of obscenity up to "contemporary community standards."⁸ So long as *Adam* and *Sir Knight* skirted the attention of local authorities, then, Morriss and Weinstock stood a good chance of remaining in business.

⁸ Robert O. Self, "Sex in the City: The Politics of Sexual Liberalism in Los Angeles, 1963-79," *Gender and History* 20.2 (2008): 292.

The structure of feeling *Adam* and *Sir Knight* tapped into was one of alternating victimization (at the hands of women, work, and family responsibilities) and celebration (of men's sexual prowess and their "right" to sexual fulfillment). Through adventure stories, European erotica, adult comics, articles on sexual subcultures, and of course pictorials of topless models, each issue of *Adam* and *Sir Knight* sought to allay readers' fears of (female) surveillance while buttressing their manly pride. In the first issue of *Sir Knight*, for example, published in 1958, the editorial page counsels,

The single constant in the constantly changing world of today, is the enchanting biological relationship that has existed between men and women since long before the dawn of known history. With gallantry worthy of his title, with laughter, with high drama and plenty of female pulchritude to fill his pages, SIR KNIGHT sets forth on his journey to bring joy to the hearts of mankind...and such of womankind, as well, as is willing to ride on the saddle behind him.⁹

The note reassures the reader that, despite the changes happening around him, he can find some solace in the pages of *Sir Knight*. Here he may celebrate the eternal "constant" of heterosexual coupling—and strictly on his own terms, with women safely confined to the back of the "saddle." In another example, from an early issue of *Adam*, the editorial page reads, "As long as watchers of women are liable to public scorn, while watchers of small birds win public acclaim, ADAM and his readers have a cause to promote. For what red-blooded, adult male, wants to watch small birds while women remain available?"¹⁰ The

⁹ "Greetings from Sir Knight," *Sir Knight* 1.1 (1958) 2. Personifying both magazines (see *Adam* below) as male "companions" (signified by the possessive pronoun "his" in this note) serves as a way of gaining the reader's trust, making him feel as though he were having a casual conversation between men by engaging with the text.

¹⁰ "A Word from Adam," *Adam* 1.12 (1957): 2.

naturalization of male heterosexuality in this note takes the form of reassuring the reader that his “inappropriate” desires are natural, and that he should feel free to cast his gaze promiscuously at women just as a recreational birdwatcher would do looking for “birds.”

Beyond editorial and literary content, the gaze played a critical role in how the pin-up aesthetic shaped male desire. Like other risqué magazines of the era, *Adam* and *Sir Knight* were designed to induce the maximal amount of pleasure in the presumably male reader. Indeed the photographs of topless models captured what Laura Mulvey has called women’s “to-be-looked-at-ness,” a visual relation in which the female figure “holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.” Mulvey contends that the female figure in classical Hollywood cinema, and related visual cultures (“from pin-ups to strip-tease”), at once fascinates the male gaze (in a scopophilic form of pleasure) and reinforces it (by appealing, ultimately, to the gaze’s narcissism).¹¹ We can see this dynamic at work in the following set of photographs: a model outdoors (Fig. 1); a cover girl posed next to a table of fruit (Fig. 2); a model at the edge of a pool (Fig. 3); and a cover girl wrapped in colorful paper (Fig. 4).

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 19, 18.

Fig. 1 [INSERT IMAGES] Fig. 2

Fig. 3 [INSERT IMAGES] Fig. 4

The first two photographs feature models whose gazes are obscured or directed away from the reader; the latter two feature models whose gazes stare directly at the reader. Despite the contrast in the models' gazes, following Mulvey they all eagerly solicit the male gaze, either through voyeuristic exhibitionism or through a coy, "come hither" look. The male gaze is thus reinforced by the consolation of women's "essential" passivity—that is, their existence as figures to always already be looked *at*.

In surveying the relaxing of social mores that led to the rise of pin-up culture, Jeffrey Weeks has observed, "The chief proponents—and beneficiaries—of the sexual changes of the post-war world were undoubtedly men: as entrepreneurs of the new sexual opportunities, as laid-back indulgers in the liberated lifestyle promised by the likes of *Playboy*, or simply as voyeurs."¹² The feminist scholar Shulamith Firestone relayed a similar impression in 1971: "A relaxing of the mores concerning female sexual behavior was to *his* [man's] advantage; it increased the sexual supply and lowered the cost."¹³ *Adam* and *Sir Knight* no doubt benefited from sexual liberalization as it was carefully marketed to and through male consumerism. These magazines were cheap to buy (with an original cover price of 50 cents), easily disposed of, and, most important, conveniently available not only at newsstands and adult bookshops but also through the mail. That readers could privately order, pay for, and receive *Adam* and *Sir Knight* through the

¹² Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 25.

¹³ Shulamith Firestone, "The Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.: A New View," *Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Leslie B. Tanner (New York: New American Library, 1971) 442.

mail—all from the comfort of their homes—reinforced their pleasure in consuming erotic material that was deemed risqué in the public sphere.

To be sure, once the magazines arrived at readers' doors, there was almost no limit to how men could redefine their domestic and social spaces around pin-up culture. There were those who might have read an issue of *Adam* in the individualized confines of the den or tool shed—a safe, “masculine” space carved out for men's work and leisure in the domestic sphere. Yet letters to the editors of both magazines also testified to enjoying the pin-ups *between men* in equally safe social spaces; one reader in New Jersey said that perusing his copies of *Adam* were the highlight of male customers' visits to his barber shop.¹⁴ Beyond the parameters of face-to-face interaction, the mail-order networks of pin-up culture also helped constitute an imagined community of like-minded readers. Letters to the editors flowed in from across the country, and even from servicemen overseas. The writers engaged in the usual banter about finding a magazine that suited their tastes, but quite a number of them ratified their membership in the imagined community of Adams (i.e., reached out to other members) by submitting their own amateur photography. For example, one reader from Stockton, California, wrote, “I am enclosing some pictures of my wife, both negatives and prints. We hope you will use one of them in a forthcoming issue.” The editor's response was to commend the couple's carefree ways while abstracting their story to involve the participation of other readers: “ADAM hopes other

¹⁴ The Heights Barber Shop, letter, *Adam* 1.8 (1957) 66.

misses and matrons, and their boyfriends or husbands, will submit such shots, along with signed permission to run them. ADAM is always in search of fresh vistas of beauty.”¹⁵

By the early 1960s, Morriss and Weinstock had turned *Adam* and *Sir Knight* into popular, nationally circulating pin-up magazines with a readership extending far beyond their base in Los Angeles. They were not alone in their venture, however, even within the city. It was during this period that key sections of Hollywood and central Los Angeles saw failing retail and service businesses replaced with new companies specializing in commercial sex entertainment. In close proximity to the burgeoning film and television industry, where eager actresses-to-be (or not) were in ample supply, these companies transformed Los Angeles into the hub of “much of the nation’s mail-order erotica, pulp paperback trade and pornography”; the *Los Angeles Daily Journal* called the city “the smut mailing capital of the nation.”¹⁶ It was in one of the new commercial sex districts in West Hollywood that Morriss and Weinstock decided to expand their successful pin-up enterprise. In an office building at 8762 Holloway Drive, the partners opened Holloway House, a book-publishing company that would reprint much of the literary content that appeared in *Adam* and *Sir Knight*. Holloway House’s editors did solicit new material from local writers and correspondents—the first book it published was Dewey Linze’s *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, which the author, a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*,

¹⁵ C. Walker, letter, *Adam* 1.10 (1957): 67.

¹⁶ Qtd. in *Self*, 293.

composed as he observed the trial of the Nazi SS officer in 1961¹⁷—but for the most part they stuck with the proven entertainment provided by the magazines. Appendix II gives a complete list of the titles Holloway House published between 1961 and 1969.

Morriss and Weinstock's founding of Holloway House capitalized on both the content they owned and the networks of distribution they controlled. The partners established what amounted to a profit-making, technological synergy between publishing magazines and publishing cheap paperback books. Beginning in the late 1930s, Pocket Books' mass-marketing of the paperback form revolutionized the ways in which texts could be printed, distributed, and read. Paperbacks, like magazines, were cheap to produce and relatively cheap to buy; their lightweight, compact form brought down distribution costs for the publisher, which in turn lowered the cost to the consumer.¹⁸ At an original price of 60 cents per book, Holloway House paperbacks were marginally (10 cents) more expensive than an issue of *Adam* or *Sir Knight*. Equally important was the

¹⁷ "Holloway House New Paperback Firm," *Publishers' Weekly* 18 Sep. 1961: 36.

¹⁸ Robert de Graff, the founder of Pocket Books, wanted publishers to see how their profits would increase if they supplanted one-time sales of their books to lending libraries with multiple sales of cheap, portable paperbacks to readers themselves. His innovation built on existing models of the paperback form—from nineteenth-century dime novels to mid-1930s Penguin paperbacks—but Pocket was unique in its full-fledged commitment to producing and marketing paperback books; it is widely credited for starting the "revolution" in mass-market paperback publishing. On the history of the mass-market paperback, including analysis of the critical role (titillating) cover art played in paperback marketing, see Frank L. Schick, *The Paperbound Book in America: The History of Paperbacks and Their European Background* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1958); Piet Schreuders, *Paperbacks, U.S.A.: A Graphic History, 1939-1959*, trans. Josh Pachter (San Diego, CA: Blue Dolphin, 1981); Thomas L. Bonn, *UnderCover: An Illustrated History of American Mass Market Paperbacks* (New York: Penguin, 1982); Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); and Richard A. Lupoff, *The Great American Paperback: An Illustrated Tribute to Legends of the Book* (Portland, OR: Collectors Press, 2001).

fact that readers could gain access to these books in the same way they would their favorite pin-up magazines: at newsstands, in (adult) bookshops, and, of course, through the mail. Holloway House streamlined the distribution of its books by using the same company (All America Distributors Corporation) that Morriss and Weinstock had founded to handle their magazine distribution. By doing this, the partners eliminated the middleman who would be responsible for shipping their books to the various points of purchase for their readers. To help facilitate their efficient shipment of books, mail-order slips for a couple or several titles in the catalogue were included in the back pages of every Holloway House paperback. These forms were indistinguishable from the ones readers of pin-up magazines would use to send away for subscriptions.

Beyond the shared material composition and distribution networks of *Adam/Sir Knight* and Holloway House paperbacks, there was one obvious connection across Morriss and Weinstock's media: their appeal to middle-class white men's readerly interests. In the 1960s, so-called "sex paperbacks"—pulp fiction specializing in fantasies of male virility and desire, set in contexts ranging from the respectable suburbs to the South African veldt—constituted a major portion of the market for men's literature. Sex paperbacks included titles like *Suburban Sexpot*, *Degradation Trail*, and *Lust Hangover*, and were usually written by literary hacks under pseudonyms; they were, in short, the pulp counterparts to pin-up magazines' valorization of the male libido over and against

the strictures of society.¹⁹ While Holloway House paperbacks did not feature content quite so frankly “sexual,” they nonetheless participated in the lusty, often bacchinalian world of male pleasure sex paperbacks were intent on promoting. Holloway House paperbacks were known for the same literary content that made *Adam* and *Sir Knight* famous: European erotica, studies of sex and sexual subcultures, and short stories about modern-day rakes and women who always seemed to “want it,” no matter how innocent they looked. Cementing the synergy between the media Morriss and Weinstock owned was the fact that each paperback was adorned with a suggestive cover—sometimes illustrated, other times featuring a photograph from one of the magazines.

By the middle of the 1960s, Holloway House’s paperback books had become a recognizable brand in the market for men’s literature. That market itself experienced unprecedented growth in the early to mid-1960s as sexually explicit material achieved a certain degree of mainstream acceptance. In particular, sexology and erotic behavior became common topics for “enlightened” public discussion. The much-debated Kinsey Reports (1948, 1953), for example, helped transform sexual diversity into an established social “fact.” The controversial researcher’s team of data collectors quantified the idea that sexual practices varied more widely than what the nuclear family ideal seemed to allow for. The trend continued in 1966 when the popular reception of Masters and Johnson’s *Human Sexual Response* brought male and female orgasms to the fore as

¹⁹ For illustrated histories of sex paperbacks, see Michael R. Goss, *Young Lusty Sluts! A Pictorial History of Erotic Pulp Fiction* (London: Erotic Print Society, 2004); and Brittany A. Daley, et al., eds., *Sin-A-Rama: Sleaze Sex Paperbacks of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2005).

inherently valuable sexual aims. Their study made the case that individuals' sexual health required attending to sexual drives in an open and honest manner. In these bestselling works, the putative objectivity of science countered prohibitions on sexual "deviance" by normalizing a whole range of sexual practices. In Elizabeth Grosz's terms, "Scientific method, with its emphasis on disinterested observation, observation undertaken without preconception, was a necessary corrective to moral and religious presumptions, particularly those that identified sexuality only with reproduction."²⁰

The question of normalized value also guided contemporaneous U.S. Supreme Court decisions on obscenity—the most famous of which indirectly spurred the proliferation of print and visual media of a "pornographic" nature. Justice Potter Stewart's famous non-definition of hardcore pornography—"I know it when I see it"—in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964) gave a significant degree of leeway to publishers and distributors who were in the business of marketing sexually explicit material. Because Stewart's line between allowable and "hardcore" (or illegal) pornography was variable in legal terms, companies could always contest "community standards" for pornography on the grounds that their products were hardly "beyond the pale." Two years later, in *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, Justice William J. Brennan expanded the frame of Stewart's thinking in a landmark decision in the history of obscenity law. Writing for the Court, Brennan reasoned that while John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-49),

²⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 198.

popularly known as *Fanny Hill*, may well be considered “prurient” and “offensive[,]” it was not “utterly without redeeming social value.”²¹ Thus, so long as sexually explicit materials demonstrated an identifiable social purpose—that is, possessed some value to the community, however obscure or irreverent—then they could be distributed legally under the Court’s ruling. Along with sexology’s claim to educating the public and advancing scientific knowledge, erotica and other forms of men’s literature could now make the case that they served literary, cultural, and even civic interests.

Still, despite these liberalizing trends, the fact was that sex paperbacks remained an underground reading phenomenon. Perfectly “respectable” men would consume them, but, like the proverbial *Playboy* under the mattress, they were not intended to be flouted in mixed-gender company. After all, part of the titillation to be had from reading sex paperbacks derived from their illicitness: men’s bawdy, heterosexually affirming fantasies were operative only among a (presumed) readership of other men. Such fantasies required an investment in secretive reading, whereby men kept their books away from the prying eyes of women. Scenes of secretive reading likely included the den in a suburban home, the library in a social club, or the seat in a train car heading to the city at the start of the workday. Of course urban areas were also home to adult bookshops, in which browsing racks of books and magazines became an act of reading unto itself.²²

²¹ Richard F. Hixson, *Pornography and the Justices: The Supreme Court and the Intractable Obscenity Problem* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996) 55.

²² See Michael Carl Stein, “Private Scenes, Public Places: An Ethnography of an Adult Bookstore,” diss., University of Nebraska, 1984.

These were nominally all-male spaces of leisure or downtime, carved out of a typical breadwinning husband's/father's daily routine. Sex paperbacks and men's literature more generally thus circulated in spheres of gendered leisure; much of their appeal had to do with the fact that women did not have easy access to the print networks through which heterosexual male fantasies flourished.

The Allure of the Street

As a category of men's literature, sex paperbacks enjoyed their heyday in the early to mid-1960s. One librarian recognized the widespread appeal of these books and made a case for their inclusion in college and research archives. Robert Bravard noted that total sales of sex paperbacks reached \$18 million in 1965. He observed that authorities in various segments of American print culture referred to these books by different names: smut, erotic fiction, pornography, and, following Grove Press's Black Circle series, "black literature." Whatever its designation, literature of this sort depicted sexually explicit acts and behavior and was typically published in easy-to-consume paperback form. Working against the assumption that these two qualities made black literature unworthy of archival collection, Bravard drew from sexological reasoning to contend that sex paperbacks served a specific anthropological purpose: namely, "to uncover what the sexual act 'means' to the variety of mankind." Bravard pointed out that, historically, libraries had made the mistake of ignoring popular print materials of their day—dime novels, broadside ballads, and pulp magazines, for example—only for "future social

historians” to rue their absence in the archive. His goal was to ensure that sex paperbacks did not suffer the same fate.²³

Among the handful of “erotic publishers” Bravard mentioned in his article was Holloway House, whose catalogue featured artful book covers and “materials that [were] basic to any erotic fiction collection.” But unlike some of its counterparts, Holloway House fit Bravard’s description of *both* business models for contemporary erotic publishing: 1) “reprinting significant erotic works of the past,” and 2) hiring “hack writers” to produce books that “reflect attitudes and obsessions of our current era.”²⁴ As Appendix II shows, Holloway House’s catalogue from the 1960s touched on a wide range of social and sexual interests, from recognized erotic “classics” like Petronius’ *Satyricon* (1965) and the Victorian-era *Venus in India* (1967) to true-crime stories and ghostwritten starlet confessionals. It was the latter kind of writing that did not seem to sit well with Bravard, who advanced an otherwise value-neutral perspective on depictions of sexuality. Ultimately, he appeared to defend only erotica that “illustrated...the human condition”—or was, in literary terms, “timeless”—and not the sex paperbacks that stoked ordinary men’s fantasies. One wonders how Bravard squared his commitment to archiving the

²³ Robert S. Bravard, “A Librarian’s Guide to Black Literature,” *Choice* 5.8 (1968): 915, 916. Bravard’s commentary on the need to recover “mankind’s” sexual past is a concrete expression of Michel Foucault’s claim that, since the Enlightenment, sex has been the object not of increased censorship but of a concerted effort to render sexual relations “knowable” and thus available to institutional oversight. See his *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990), especially Part 2, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” pp. 15-49.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 917, 916.

1960s with his curious exclusion of “hack writers’ trash” that, whatever their faults, did much to document the reading obsessions of the era.²⁵

Bravard’s bias against certain types of men’s literature may have led him to overlook the work of a new, invigorating voice that had appeared the year before he published his piece. In a follow-up article in the same issue of *Choice*, editor Peter Doiron made brief mention of another writer’s books that had gone unnoticed among anti-censorship advocates like Bravard. He wrote that Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) and *Trick Baby* (1967) “expertly delineates an American type—the con man”; with their “slang lexicons” and insight into “the mind and speech of a specific American character,” these books merited a “wider audience.”²⁶ Doiron neglected to point out that Slim’s books had been published by Holloway House, the same company Bravard cited in his review of black literature. More significantly, he did not so much as gesture to the fact that Slim was actually—that is, not figuratively—black himself.

Perhaps *Pimp* and *Trick Baby* did not fit into what Bravard and Doiron imagined was a “typical” sex paperback. Suffice it to say that the typicality of a sex paperback rested on its origins in a distinctly *white* postwar pin-up culture: female models and male readers were racially homogenous. Yet Slim was undoubtedly a product of the times’ incrementally liberalizing sexual culture; his work took shape among the many other titles in men’s literature Holloway House was publishing. In recounting certain of his

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 918.

²⁶ Peter M. Doiron, “Responsibility,” *Choice* 5.8 (1968): 922.

criminal and sexual adventures, Slim was indebted to the lurid, explosive, and all-around masculinizing forms of storytelling that readers encountered in pulp magazines. But Slim was also very different from other sex-paperback authors in that his writings derived from his experiences growing up an underprivileged son of the ghetto. Accordingly, Slim's language deployed the urban black vernacular in ways that reverberated beyond the traditional readership of sex paperbacks. It was this unusual intermingling of Holloway House's publishing investments and Slim's experiences as a black man in urban America that laid the groundwork for the rise of black pulp fiction.

Iceberg Slim was the pseudonym of the novelist otherwise known as Robert Beck. He was born Robert Lee Maupin, Jr., on August 4, 1918, in Chicago, the only child of Mary Brown, a hairdresser, and Robert Lee Maupin, Sr., an inveterate hustler and man-about-town.²⁷ After Maupin, Sr., left his family, Brown moved in with a moderately successful black business owner in Rockford, Illinois. Slim recalled only pleasant memories of this father figure, but in 1928 Brown left him for another man and returned to Chicago with her son. For the rest of his young adult life, Maupin grew up on the streets of South Side, a predominantly black neighborhood in Chicago. A precocious

²⁷ The following account is compiled from Peter A. Muckley, *Iceberg Slim: The Life as Art* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance, 2003) 3-8; and Justin David Gifford, "Robert 'Iceberg Slim' Beck," *African American National Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Oxford African American Studies Center*, web, 19 Sep. 2009. While Muckley and Gifford present their mini-biographies as fact-based narratives of Slim's life, it is important to recognize that much of their information is drawn from Slim's published work, and particularly *Pimp*. Both authors freely cite rhetorical flourishes from Slim's fiction to support some of their claims (e.g., that he sold liquor to "lesbian freshmen" at Tuskegee). I have taken care to exclude these flourishes, as I am uncertain of their status as facts about his life.

teenager, Maupin still managed to do well in school and eventually graduated in 1934 at the age of fifteen. Maupin's academic achievements earned him a scholarship to Tuskegee University in Alabama, Booker T. Washington's well-regarded vocational institution for black uplift. Maupin appeared to chafe under Tuskegee's restrictions, however, and not long after embarking on his college career he was expelled from the institution for bootlegging.

Upon his return to Chicago in 1936, Maupin took to the streets and began a twenty-five-year-long career as a pimp and small-time crook. It was during this period that he started going by the nickname "Cavanaugh Slim."²⁸ Surprisingly, it was not until the publication of *Pimp* that Slim took on the moniker "Iceberg." According to his own account, a friend had witnessed Slim sit coolly at a bar while a gunfight broke out around him; although Slim was high on cocaine, his friend interpreted his behavior as an example of remaining cool "like an iceberg" in such a heated situation.²⁹ Whether or not this anecdote bears even a partial truth, it was as Cavanaugh that Slim built up his reputation as one of South Side's most recognizable pimps. He flaunted his material possessions and thereby commanded the respect of young black men who idolized his swagger. Another Chicago native and future Holloway House author, Odie Hawkins, recalled: "I was twelve—fourteen, and I looked at him in the same way that a lot of the major-league crack dealers right now are big to the kids. They got big cars, they wear a

²⁸ Mark McCord, "The Next Hustle," *waxpoetics* 38 (2009): 62.

²⁹ Iceberg Slim, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2005) 220. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

lot of gold, and they seem to be able to do what they want to do.”³⁰ Not everything went smoothly for Slim, however. During his career on the streets, he served time in various correctional facilities for theft, armed robbery, and so-called “white slavery,” or transporting minors across state lines. He served his final stint in the Cook County Jail and was released in 1960.

Recognizing that his success on the streets was not worth all the time he had spent behind bars, Slim decided to “go straight” and pursue legitimate work in the early 1960s. He relocated to Los Angeles, where his ailing mother had been living with her husband, William Beck. Still estranged from the father who abandoned him when he was a child, Slim signaled his new lease on life by changing his last name to Beck. He settled down with a woman, Betty Shue, and took on a series of odd jobs to make ends meet. In fact Slim was working as a door-to-door insecticide salesman when he submitted his first novel, a manuscript based on his life as a pimp, to Holloway House. Although the manuscript was unsolicited, Holloway House’s editors immediately realized that they had an original voice on their hands. After editors smoothed out some of the rougher patches of the piece, Slim became a published author when *Pimp* was released in early 1967.

The novel begins in part with a preface testifying to the narrator’s desire that his book be read as a cautionary tale. In *Pimp*’s opening passage, the narrator confides,

In this book I will take you the reader with me into the secret inner world of the pimp. I will lay bare my life and thoughts as a pimp. The account of my brutality

³⁰ Qtd. in Peter Gilstrap, “The House That Blacks Built,” *The Misread City: New Literary Los Angeles*, ed. Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2003) 94.

and cunning as a pimp will fill many of you with revulsion, however if one intelligent valuable young man or woman can be saved from the destructive slime then the displeasure I have given will have been outweighed by that individual's use of his potential in a socially constructive manner. (17)

This kind of introductory statement is a hallmark of autobiographical literature, particularly of the “confessional” type, where a secret or shameful past is the primary subject of the memoir.³¹ Yet without doubting the sincerity of the narrator's repentance, there is a way in which his words only serve to highlight the salaciousness of the story to follow. In a performative double-gesture, the narrator at once cautions the reader against following in his footsteps (“saved from the destructive slime,” “use of his potential in a socially constructive manner”) and piques his interest by guaranteeing him access to “the secret inner world of the pimp.”³² To the extent that the narrator claims to be “reformed,” the reader is granted a kind of license to feel titillated by otherwise “destructive” acts or characteristics. This might explain why the beginning of the book proper is a foreword that precedes the preface. Here a condensed version of a scene that appears late in the novel showcases precisely the narrator's “brutality and cunning” in managing his “stable” of whores. One of his decidedly callous observations reads: “A pimp is happy when his whores giggle. He knows they are still asleep [brainwashed]” (12).

³¹ The touchstone for the modern autobiography is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-89), which during its time caused a scandal because of its frank testaments to the author's sexual proclivities. On Rousseau's contributions to autobiographical literature, see Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead, 2009) 57-70.

³² The implied reader is likely male, given the possessive pronoun in the final sentence. Still, a trace of ambiguity is signified by the narrator's reference to “one...young man or woman” in the same sentence.

The novel itself is an episodic coming-of-age story in which a young black man rejects the path of middle-class security that his accomplishments in school would appear to put him on in favor of the “fast life” of the streets. As the story unfolds, the narrator’s name shifts from Bobby to Young Blood (or Blood, for short) to Iceberg Slim, with each shift indexing his deeper immersion in the black urban underworld. Born in Chicago in 1918, Bobby is the only son of parents who fled Jim Crow segregation in the South to chase their dreams of employment and opportunity in “the promised land up North” (20). Unfortunately, Bobby’s father evinces more concern about his city-slicker reputation than he does care for his newborn son; after hurling the baby “against the wall in disgust,” he abandons the family (21). In 1924 Mama and Bobby move to Rockford, Illinois, to live with an upstanding man, Henry Upshaw, the owner of a cleaning store and “the only Negro business” in the city (21). While Bobby enjoys living with Henry, whom in retrospect he considers “the only father I had ever really known” (23), Mama is drawn back to the fast life of the big city. A con man named Steve steals Mama’s heart and convinces her to move back to Chicago with him. Leaving Henry a broken man, bereft of “pride and dignity” (25), Mama unwittingly seals Bobby’s fate as a son of the street.

With this family history isolated to the first chapter of the book, the rest of *Pimp* chronicles the narrator’s gradual introduction to and participation in the black urban underworld, mainly in Chicago but also in Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and a host of other cities. “The slide was greased” (33), the narrator remarks early on of his descent into a life of crime, as though moving back to South Side could only yield one result. While

Mama struggles to provide for her son (Steve leaves her only for Bobby's father to reenter the picture and abandon the family once more), Bobby takes to the streets and is exposed to what amounts to a fraternity of black hustlers and pimps. As the novel progresses, the narrator learns from successive mentors not only the practical elements of conning and pimping but also a veritable psychology, or worldview, of crime that yokes the sexual exploitation of women to a man's inner strength and personal development. From Party Time, Bobby learns how to steal money from prospective "johns," or clients of prostitutes, by posing as a black girl for white men who have a fantasy of "'stick[ing]' that hot Nigger bitch waiting for him in the shadows" (37). From Milwaukee's Weeping Shorty, the newly minted Young Blood learns the principles of pimping, which dictate that the key to exploiting impressionable young women is to withhold sex and affection from them until they deliver the money they earned from their clients. And from Chicago's Sweet Jones, the soon-to-be Iceberg Slim learns the most important lesson of all: that "[t]he real glue that holds any bitch to a pimp is the long scratch [money] she's hip she's stuck for. A good pimp could cut his swipe [penis] off and still pimp his ass off. Pimping ain't no sex game. It's a skull game" (215). Pimping, in other words, is about inhabiting a state of mind wherein one achieves such a complete sense of self-possession that the exploited willingly submit to its aura of omniscience, power, and control.

Interspersed throughout the novel are episodes in which the narrator is caught by law enforcement for various illegal activities. In fact there is rarely a single lesson of the street he learns from his mentors that is not followed up with a scene of criminal

punishment. Oddly, though, each period of confinement (save for the final one) appears to harden the narrator's resolve to become a fearsome and successful pimp. One reason for this is that the space of the reformatory or prison institutionalizes (vis-à-vis the incarceration of black men) the very networks of male homosocial affiliation that the narrator comes to value outside of the space of the home. But an equally important reason involves the narrative's persistent suggestion that the person responsible for the protagonist's confinement is not Bobby, Blood, or Slim but a cheated white john or, more typically, one of the whores in his stable. Indeed in every instance when the narrator is primed to back up his words to a whore with physical abuse, he is mindful that she is "trying to booby trap" him (13). Prostitutes thus circulate throughout *Pimp* as the narrator's primary threat, for they can "finger" him to the police when his "game" either falters or becomes too abusive to bear.

The irony of the novel's ending is that even the narrator's assurances that he has reformed is qualified by the bitterness he feels toward the women who, in his mind, have consistently double-crossed him to the authorities. The epilogue gives a brief glimpse into Slim's life as a family man, now married with three children. As if to highlight his rejection of his pimping past, Slim notes that in his new home he must "light the heater" so that his family does not have to get up to the "early morning chill" (312). The metaphorical play on the word "chill" appears to signal a change of heart in the middle-aged narrator's outlook on life. Yet only two pages earlier, after Slim bids farewell to his mother on her deathbed in Los Angeles, he complains, "These stinking whores would

have gotten a huge charge if they could have seen old ‘Iceberg’ out there wailing like a sucker because his old lady was dead” (310). “Sucker” is the term pimps use throughout the novel to refer to a man whose manifest vulnerability is latched onto and exploited by a conniving woman, thereby undoing his performance of masculine self-possession. It is a curious final passage, given that Mama has just asked Slim for his forgiveness in leading him back to the streets as a child. Hers is a sincere and heart-wrenching plea, alleviating somewhat Slim’s “guilty conscience,” which intimates that he is responsible for his mother’s turmoil (305). Even so, the passage remains coherent to the reader insofar as he recognizes that Slim is still operating under the terms of the pimping game (and as the foreword suggests, there is no point at which he is not operating under them). Mama has been absolved of her sins; she has achieved the status of a saintly figure by the end of the novel. Slim’s former whores, however, remain just that: whores. Slim has thus learned to bifurcate black womanhood between Mother and Whore, and this insight—out of all the homosocial lessons of the street showcased in the novel—is uniquely his own.

Given this synopsis, *Pimp* was an intriguing, if not unusual, addition to Holloway House’s catalogue of men’s literature. Milton Van Sickle, an established editor of sex paperbacks who worked for Holloway House from 1965 to 1969, cleaned up Slim’s manuscript and ushered it through the publication process.³³ The text’s lurid detailing of sex and violence in the inner city were sure to elicit the kind of voyeuristic pleasure that

³³ Gilstrap, 90. On Van Sickle and his collaboration with Morriss and other publishers of the 1960s, see Stephen J. Gertz, “West Coast Blue,” *Sin-A-Rama: Sleaze Sex Paperbacks of the Sixties*, ed. Brittany A. Daley, et al. (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2005) 34-35.

was typically associated with reading men's literature. Like many other sex paperbacks, *Pimp* offered readers a glimpse into a world in which men were unquestionably "on top." That Slim presumably had lived through the sensational experiences recounted in his book only added to their titillating import. The illustrated cover for the first edition of the book reflects this desire (Fig. 5): in the foreground, a raven-haired woman, stripped down to her lacy underwear, is held by the gaze of a black man, whose enlarged face, shadowed in blue, looms in the background.

[INSERT IMAGE]

Fig. 5

That all-consuming, objectifying gaze captures what it might have felt like to read *Pimp* in the context of Holloway House's catalogue of men's literature. Upon reviewing the

final, printed version of *Pimp*, Van Sickle told Morriss and Weinstock that “it was the best book we ever published.”³⁴

If there was one thing about the book that did not conform to a reliable formula for men’s literature, it was the language Slim used to recount his life story. Having spent twenty-five years hustling on the streets of Chicago, Slim crafted a narrative persona that was indelibly marked by the styles and speech patterns of the urban black vernacular. Early on in *Pimp*, the narrator remembers “turning out” his first whore, a young woman named Phyllis who initially resists his advances. The episode takes place in a bar, and Phyllis asks the narrator to show her some respect as a “lady.” He retorts:

You stinking black Bitch, you’re a fake. There’s no such thing as a lady in our world. You either got to be a bitch or a faggot in drag. Now Bitch, which is it? Bitch, I’m not a gentleman, I’m a pimp[.] I’ll kick your funky ass. You gave me first “lick.” Bitch, you’re creaming to eat me up. I’m not a “come” freak, you are. I’m a freak to scratch. (81)

The narrator brutalizes Phyllis with his words, emphasizing that, as a woman, she must be a “bitch” in search of “come.” Moreover, addressing her repeatedly as “you” gives the narrator a way of naming Phyllis’s submission as if it were settled fact. To be sure, any number of sex paperbacks subscribed to the same heterosexual male fantasy: that there were no real “ladies” in the world, and that all women were in some sense whores (i.e., “naturally” subordinate to the phallus). But the key to eliciting voyeuristic pleasure in men’s literature was not to reveal this investment in such explicit or obvious terms. Slim’s vernacular style of writing broke with that convention in spectacular fashion.

³⁴ Qtd. in Gilstrap, 90.

The book itself bears further testament to its hybrid origins in sex paperback culture and Chicago street life. A glossary at the end of the novel provides definitions for a number of vernacular terms that appear throughout the text. The definitions range from the obvious to the technically astute: “freak,” for example, is defined as a “sexual libertine,” while “cocktailed” names the process where by “a marijuana butt [is placed] into the end of a conventional cigarette for smoking” (315, 314). In their time, these somewhat academic definitions likely served to domesticate, or render familiar, a language that was utterly foreign to the ears of Holloway House’s traditional readership.³⁵ Unlike the eighteenth-century erotica the company also published, *Pimp* required a lexicon to illuminate the nature of its subversiveness. Ironically, then, the very culture that had celebrated men’s resistance to the conformity of everyday life felt compelled to inscribe some measure of Slim’s text within a domestic, reader-friendly format. The glossary, in this regard, helped facilitate readers’ fantasies through what amounted to an ethnographic perspective on ghetto culture.

But even the glossary could not contain the text’s ultimate appeal to a reading audience already “in the know.” Definitions for a number of vernacular terms were missing from the glossary, not least the aforementioned “lick” (“a plan; an idea; an

³⁵ This point is supported by the fact that the text of *Pimp* is littered with vernacular terms and ghetto nicknames that are enclosed by quotation marks, not only in their first citation but throughout. These marks make the text difficult to read in any straightforward way; they ostensibly signal to the reader when he might look to the glossary for some help.

outline of a situation”) and “scratch” (“money, short for ‘chicken scratch’”).³⁶ In some cases, when the glossary did include a term, the meaning of its definition was obscured by references to other facets of ghetto life: for example, the social practices and modes of decision-making that were associated with being “turned out” is reduced to the statement, “introduced to the fast life, or drugs” (317). In such offhand citations of the urban black vernacular, Slim gestured toward an intimate understanding of the street—one that could not be achieved simply through armchair reading in the comforts of one’s home. If sex paperbacks generally supported escapist fantasies of male vigor and individuality against the perceived conformity of domestic life, Slim’s vernacular style of writing confused the social coordinates that enabled these fantasies to emerge out of masculine disaffection. The language of the street provoked not a resistance to conformity but a will to survive the depressed circumstances of one’s upbringing. Ironically, then, it was sex paperbacks’ ability to fit into the rhythms of a stable work and family life that a book like *Pimp* challenged. It was “anti-domestic” not in its outcome but in its very composition, capturing in vernacular language the social conditions of urban African American life.

To be sure, elements of Slim’s text—including the studious, almost ethnographic tone with which he broke down the theory behind and practical execution of pimping and conning—could have appealed to white readers’ taste for the literary equivalent of a slumming excursion. Some readers might have welcomed the opportunity to make the

³⁶ These definitions are from Clarence Major, ed., *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (New York: Penguin, 1994) 281, 401.

identificatory leap into Slim's shoes, living out their racial and gendered fantasies through his narrative. This would not have been too far-fetched; after all, Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro" readily admitted that "hip" whites sought to emulate the black man's "art of the primitive": his constant awareness of danger and violence, and his embodied desire for the immediacy of the present.³⁷ In the vein of the White Negro, readers might have wanted Slim to deliver them from their feminization—that is, to give voice to their own primal fantasies of sexual domination and streetwise cool. The figure of the pimp would thus have served as a medium through which middle-class white men could exorcise their domestic anxieties.

Yet for all their exhaustion with life in the suburbs, it is doubtful that *Pimp* struck a chord with suburban white men in the same way that Holloway House's other titles did. Upon *Pimp*'s initial publication in 1967, there is no evidence to suggest that Slim was widely read among whites. Of course the book may have been quickly read and discarded like any other sex paperback. Alternately, Slim may have touched one too many sensitive nerves in the sheer explicitness of his narrative. The language of his street characters may have proved too offensive even for suburban white men out for a quick-read jaunt. Indeed, particularly in light of its being branded a tell-all autobiography, *Pimp* may have seemed just too real for white readers. The novel's numerous scenes of urban squalor, sexual abuse, and sharp-tongued invective could easily have turned off readers who were,

³⁷ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Berkley Windhover, 1976) 303.

in truth, accustomed to more recognizably escapist fare. If that happened to be the case, then Slim failed to integrate his vernacular storytelling abilities into the sex-paperback form; he did not write the first black sex paperback.³⁸ Instead, he would have stumbled upon something whose significance could be apprehended only after the fact—the first in a long line of books that came to be known as black pulp fiction.

To Be Real

Just one year into its life as a book, *Pimp* had already become an underground sensation in the inner city. The trend was noticeable enough for critic Mel Watkins to write a *New York Times* article in which he pondered Slim’s unlikely rise in “New York City’s black ghettos.” Slim was among a handful of authors—Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin—whose work appealed to an audience that the public assumed had always “ignore[d] the printed word.” But with cheap paperback books flooding the market and publishers releasing titles that centered on “the black man’s experience,” more and more residents of the inner city took up book-reading as an affordable and worthwhile activity.

³⁸ This distinction may or may not fall to Kipp Washington’s *Some Like It Dark: The Intimate Autobiography of a Negro Call Girl*, published by Holloway House in 1966. The book purports to be a true relation of Washington’s recent past as a chanteuse-turned-prostitute who serviced rich white clients in the 1950s and ’60s. It may not be the first “black”-authored sex paperback insofar as Washington’s co-author, Leo Guild, was an editor at Holloway House and a well-known ghostwriter of pulp “confessionals” by fallen starlets (e.g., Jayne Mansfield and Barbara Payton), among other Los Angeles-area personalities. Compared to the white celebrities Guild wrote for, Washington (likely not her real name) was a relative unknown; thus we cannot ever really determine if she self-identified with the work put out in her name, or indeed if she was a real person. For more on Guild’s career, see his “Confessions of a Celebrity Ghost Writer,” *Los Angeles Times* 5 Nov. 1967: D9. On the exploitative nature of Guild’s ghostwriting, see John O’Dowd, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye: The Barbara Payton Story* (Albany, GA: BearManor, 2006) 376-87.

Contrary to popular opinion, it turned out there *were* readers in the ghetto; it was only the prohibitive cost of hardback books and the general lack of material on “the realities of ghetto life” that had previously excluded them from the book-reading public sphere.³⁹

While Watkins found the spike in inner-city reading revelatory, he was even more intrigued by the range of literary tastes represented by the kinds of books people bought. In conversations with bookstore owners in Harlem, Watkins noted that older residents preferred national bestsellers, such as Jacqueline Susann’s runaway hit *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), which were to be read “purely for entertainment.” High school graduates and college students were more inclined to pick up titles from the burgeoning literature of black revolution, which included Malcolm X’s *Autobiography* (as told to Alex Haley, 1965) and nonfiction by LeRoi Jones. But among “high-school dropouts” and “less educated young adults”—in other words, the majority of black urban youth—there was one author who reigned supreme: Iceberg Slim. Watkins speculated that *Pimp* and *Trick Baby*’s popularity was a function of there not being enough “book outlets within the ghetto which provide[d] a wide variety of titles.”⁴⁰ Yet the rest of the article would seem to belie this claim, as Watkins’s survey of Harlem bookstores yielded a range of literary genres on offer, from potboiler bestsellers to political literature by Mao Tse-tung. What, then, could account for Slim’s cult status in the inner city?

³⁹ Mel Watkins, “In the Ghettos,” *New York Times* 25 Feb. 1968: A24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Watkins touched on a possible answer to this question in the final paragraph of his article. There he wrote,

The best-selling books in the ghetto areas now, such as “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and even “Pimp,” deal with an individual’s attempt to overcome the particular exigencies of slum living and forcibly establish his manhood. It is this same drive that distinguishes today’s young adults from the older generation in the ghetto. Perhaps the availability of paperbacks dealing with pertinent aspects of the black experience will help channel the frustration of the ghetto’s young adults into a constructive re-evaluation and positive estimation of themselves. If not, that frustration will certainly find less conventionally acceptable outlets.⁴¹

Watkins’s offhand linking of the *Autobiography* with *Pimp* in fact captured the precise force of his analysis: both books were about black men who came of age in the North’s major urban enclaves—Boston/New York and Chicago, respectively—in the wake of the Great Migration. When the best hopes for the Migration failed to materialize as the century wore on, the narrators in these books turned to the one place where their status as “real” men was insistently affirmed: the street. It was within the ghetto’s illegal, street-based economies—which included bootlegging, prostitution, illegal gambling, and everyday hustling—that Malcolm and Slim’s narrators first found their feet as black men trying to “overcome the particular exigencies of slum living.” Watkins’s reference to “manhood” was thus critical in explaining why Malcolm and Slim commanded such widespread readerships in the late 1960s.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² On the literary connections between the *Autobiography* and *Pimp*, see Terri Hume Oliver, “Prison, Perversion, and Pimps: The White Temptress in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp*,” *White Women in Racialized Spaces: Imaginative Transformation and Ethical Action in Literature*, ed. Samina Najmi and Rajini Srikanth (Albany: State University of

The question remained, however, whether inner-city readers would take to heart the putative lessons of the *Autobiography* and *Pimp*. Watkins evinced some concern over these books' capacity to inspire young readers to "channel [their] frustrations" into productive activities. We could say that for Watkins the risk posed by Malcolm's and Slim's appeal was that impressionable readers would only pay attention to those sections of the books that dwelled on the protagonists' careers as hustlers, pimps, and convicted criminals. From this perspective, the authors' novelistic recountings of their wayward youth risked obscuring for readers the political work that needed to be done to alleviate conditions of inner-city poverty. Yet it was precisely Malcolm's and Slim's subversive stories of flourishing on the wrong side of the law that captured the imaginations of readers. Much of the *Autobiography*'s fame rested on its extended narrative of the teenage Malcolm Little learning how to navigate the byways of Boston's ghetto economy from an older black man nicknamed "Shorty." In a similar vein, *Pimp* resonated with readers because it vividly dramatized a young man's transformation from misunderstood college dropout into ruthless exploiter of women—a process that is helped along the way by the mentorship of older black men who school the narrator on the principles of street-level survival. The perceived risk of the *Autobiography* and *Pimp*, then, was that readers

New York Press, 2002) 147-65; and Victoria A. Elmwood's chapter "'They Can't Take That Away from Me': Textual Sovereignty and Gendered Political Agency in Radical Black Men's Autobiographies," pp. 76-141, in "Playing Defense: Countercultural American Men's Autobiography between the Atomic Bomb and the Reagan Era," diss., Indiana University, 2006.

would take away the wrong message: rather than strive for uplift and social mobility, they would assent to the social pedagogy of the insular ghetto economy.

In their own ways, Malcolm and Slim attempted to remind readers that their books should not be read in this manner. Robin D. G. Kelley has observed that throughout the *Autobiography* Malcolm goes to great lengths to condemn his past life as a “destructive detour on the road to self-consciousness and political enlightenment.”⁴³ Despite some of the nostalgia Malcolm attaches to his life coming up on the streets—it was, after all, the place where he experienced firsthand the desperation and hopelessness of urban blacks—he contends that his own path to self-fulfillment ultimately rested on his political and spiritual awakening, which followed his imprisonment for past crimes. Slim, on the other hand, presents a less consistent message in his autobiographical novel. Exactly three pages in *Pimp* are devoted to Slim’s explicit rejection of his past life: a prologue, in which the narrator serves up his story as a counterexample to what he wants “young men and women” to achieve in their lives (17), and an epilogue, in which the narrator reveals that he has settled down, started a family, and definitively entered into the “square world” (311). Aside from these brief passages, however, the book’s 317 pages are devoted to a street-level account of the narrator’s path toward ghetto notoriety. Indeed, within the body of the narrative, the protagonist evinces few regrets about the life he has chosen and the decisions he made as a young man. This helps explain why, unlike

⁴³ Robin D. G. Kelley, “The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics during World War II,” *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 156.

the *Autobiography*, the history of *Pimp*'s reception among advocates of Black Power has been dominated by accusations that Slim's narrative persona cuts an unreformed, unenlightened, and thus counter-revolutionary figure.

Yet in the spirit of Kelley's recuperation of Malcolm X's own "unreformed" past—which acknowledges how much Malcolm Little's criminal exploits informed the arc of Malcolm X's, and presumably readers', political thinking—I want to propose an interpretation of Slim that connects the social pedagogy embedded in *Pimp* with the actual, lived experiences of its readers. My argument is that although Slim did not share Malcolm's explicit orientation toward political action, his narrative persona nonetheless gave voice to the deep frustration with the status quo that urban blacks felt at the time. With so many young men left unemployed by the decline of industrial labor as well as the persistence of racism and employment discrimination in the North, inner-city readers had little reason to invest in the conventional *bildungsroman* fantasy of becoming a self-made man in mainstream society. What *Pimp* offered them instead was a medium through which they could at once air their skepticism about the Promised Land and entertain an imagined resolution to the absence of real socioeconomic opportunities in their lives. That this resolution took the form of subordinating black women to black men's will in the underground economy—in Kelley's words, casting them as "objects through which hustling men sought leisure and pleasure, prey for financial and sexual exploitation"⁴⁴—was indeed problematic and even reactionary. But the imaginary form of the resolution

⁴⁴ Ibid., 169.

contained within it a critical kernel of insight: that the pimp himself was among the exploited, and that his lamentable actions were the only means by which he could, in Watkins's own estimation, "establish his manhood."

We will recall that the narrator harbors some resentment toward his mother for removing him from the safe and secure environs of the home Henry Upshaw provides for the family. Mama, in young Bobby's eyes, displays a "face as cold as an executioner's" when she leaves Henry a crumpled, heartbroken man (25). His sympathy for Henry, who has no place in Mama's plans to pursue the fast life, reveals that Bobby desires the kind of domestic stability that typical consumers of sex paperbacks possessed in real life but sought refuge from in leisurely reading. Yet unlike Cold War stereotypes about a hyperfeminized domestic sphere, Bobby's sense of stability is positively inflected by Henry's industriousness and the responsibilities he takes up as his stepson. We might refer to this as the *masculinization* of the black nuclear family. The narrator fondly remembers the summers he spent in Henry's "little shop," where he "worked...all day, every day helping [his] stepfather" (22). Bobby takes pride in the sense of responsibility Henry fosters in him; it is the source of his being "the happiest black boy in Rockford" (22). Bobby's attitude contrasts sharply with Steve's first appearance in Mama's beauty shop, which sees him "sitting getting his nails manicured" by her (22). While Henry and Bobby toil with their hands, Steve is having his beautified. To the extent that Steve's actions bespeak a lack of substance to his character (i.e., he is all appearance), Slim

feminizes his persona in the space of Mama's beauty shop. At this stage in the novel, it is Henry, not Steve, who is held up as the model of black masculinity for the young Bobby.

Pimp's inner-city readers would have immediately apprehended the significance of Mama's decision to walk away from Henry's love and support. Although this part of the story is set in the 1920s, the effect of Mama's actions—devaluing legitimate work and the power of black male labor—would have been deeply felt by young urban black men in the late 1960s. By this point, the Great Migration generation's dream of starting a new life in major urban areas outside of the South had been undone by a series of structural transformations to the American economy. Beginning in the 1950s, from Los Angeles to Detroit and across the arc of the Rust Belt, companies “reduced employment in center-city plants, replaced workers with new automated technology, and constructed new facilities in suburban and semirural areas, in medium-sized cities, often in less industrialized states or regions.”⁴⁵ The process of deindustrialization affected entire communities, not only blacks. But the widespread development of suburbs and the persistence of housing discrimination against blacks ensured that white families had a viable route of escaping the urban areas in which no work could be found. The net effect of “white flight” and urban unemployment was “an unprecedented increase in the physical size of the ghetto during the 1950s and 1960s”; concomitantly, in several major Northern cities the percentage of blacks relative to the general population nearly doubled

⁴⁵ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 128.

over the two decades.⁴⁶ In this regard, Mama's pursuit of the fast life would have seemed extraordinarily reckless, even self-destructive, to contemporaneous readers: she was leading Bobby into the very heart of black despair in the post-civil rights moment.

Against this historical backdrop, *Pimp* is presented with the dilemma of "saving" the narrator's masculine identity in a context that otherwise quashes the self-fulfillment of black men's promise as workers. Slim's solution to this dilemma is deceptively simple: to cast pimping as a form of work that not only yields financial rewards but also compensates for the (continued) depreciation of black men's social value to American society. Without the prospect of gaining a steady, "dignified" job in South Side (the only option that seems to be available to him is working for Mama), the narrator reflects on why he turned to Phyllis to earn his money: "I would be a boot black [sic] or porter for the rest of my life in the high walled white world. My black whore was a cinch to get piles of white scratch from that forbidden white world" (87). If the black ghetto "provided few opportunities for economic or social mobility" precisely because it was "[i]solated from the larger city,"⁴⁷ the narrator here devises a method of scaling its metaphorical "walls": he will use women to lure "white" money to the ghetto. Banking on white men's desire to experience the "exoticism" of the black female body, Phyllis becomes a sexual lure for economic investment in the ghetto. For the narrator, this

⁴⁶ Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 45.

⁴⁷ Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003) 141.

arrangement sure beats working, either as a shoeshine boy or as a hotel or railway porter—low-end service jobs typically reserved for working-class black men at the time. Uninterested in these options, even if they were made available to him, the narrator will only work at something that does not make him feel like he is “a flunky in this white man’s world” (103). Thus, with the decline of industrial labor and the “indignity” of working in the service sector, the narrator prefers to remain in the ghetto underworld, where he can “pimp some real white-type living” out of his whores (164).

While *Pimp* clearly spoke to readers’ concerns about deindustrialization and racism in the North, the description of pimping as a practice of earning “white” money by selling black women’s bodies was animated in part by longstanding African American folk traditions. According to Arthur Kempton, Slim’s valorization of pimping emerged out of a keen understanding of sexual relations under slavery: “[b]lack men selling white men sexual access to women was a sly, sweet reversal of the power relationship that governed the transaction of interracial sex in the briar patch.”⁴⁸ In this account, the pimp was an adapted trickster figure (in the tradition of Br’er Rabbit) who “reversed” white men’s sexual exploitation of black women (under chattel slavery) by having modern-day prostitutes “exploit” white men’s desire as such. The urban lore of pimping hewed to this narrative of *reverse exploitation* by always casting white men at the bottom of the

⁴⁸ Arthur Kempton, *Boogaloo: The Quintessence of American Popular Music* (New York: Pantheon, 2003) 162.

underworld power hierarchy: it was they who were being used and taken for “suckers.”⁴⁹ In this context, pimping “white-type living” was, in historian William Van Deburg’s terms, an “outlaw” practice that trumped “any flunky day job to which a black man, denied equal access to white-controlled institutional career ladders, could reasonably aspire.”⁵⁰ Pimping thus laid claim to gendered respect through economically viable “work” *within* the ghetto, where the rules of the racial hierarchy were reversed. In this topsy-turvy economy, the pimp’s manipulation of white men for material gain tapped into African American folk culture’s celebration of the trickster figure, whose subversive antics “offered adaptive behavioral advantages for attaining...[enslaved Africans’] fair share of the system’s rewards.”⁵¹

To be sure, what makes this displaced system of social and economic reparation so troubling is that in order for the pimp-as-trickster figure to be culturally legible, black men must elide black women’s *continued* sexual exploitation in the name of “reversing” the hierarchy of racial inequality. Returning to the novel, we see that the narrator’s view of pimping as a form of work is premised on the absolute control he exerts over black women. Sweet Jones and Weeping Shorty consistently emphasize to him that a woman must effectively be broken down emotionally and psychologically in order to be a

⁴⁹ The idea of reverse exploitation informs the pimping ethos to this day. In the Hughes brothers’ excellent documentary *American Pimp* (1999), a montage sequence casts the history of pimping in post-Civil War America as a story of black men’s efforts to monetize what was previously a “free” sexual transaction for white men.

⁵⁰ William L. Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African-American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 142.

⁵¹ John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989) 186.

successful whore. Although mind games and encouraging drug use are the preferred methods to achieve this end, the use of physical force is also permitted, so long as it takes place away from the prying eyes of (white) law enforcement. The narrator goes so far as to justify physically abusing his whores by subscribing to a Sadean fantasy of female punishment. The narrator discovers that brutally lashing out at his whores in the bedroom only serves to stoke their sexual desire. Of Pepper, one of the first women he tries to turn out, Blood notes, “The violence, the blood, had turned her on” (62). Later he observes upon kicking Phyllis into submission that she is consumed with “fear and strange passion” (85). In these and many other instances, Young Blood feels fully justified in resorting to physical force because the abuse appears to arouse the women. Indeed such a manifestation of the power of the phallus ensures that each whore will never forget that he is her “Daddy.”

At stake in not gaining complete control over women’s minds and bodies is the failure of pimping both as a form of work and as a legitimation of black masculinity per se. In his initial foray into the South Side “jungle,” the headlights of Blood’s car shine upon an animalistic figure in the street: “She stood up wide legged. Her ‘cat’ [vagina] was a mangy red slash. She was holding up the bottom front of her dress with her rusty elbows. Her long black fingers were pulling her ‘snare’ [vagina] wide open to stop me” (93). Blood drives away from the scene with some urgency, fearful of the garish display of this apparently un-pimped whore’s “hard sell.” An even more frightening display transpires when Blood enters into Sweet’s apartment for the first time. There he is

greeted by Red Cora, a drug-addled and sex-hungry whore whose “gaping cat [is] beef-steak red” and who wields a “pearl-handled switch-blade” (166). Like the unnamed street whore, Cora’s “gaping” vagina threatens to symbolically consume Blood’s ego; her sharp weapon only further underscores the fact that she possesses the phallus in this encounter. Cora demands to see Blood’s “pretty dick” (167), and though he refuses, she pursues her prey like a “starving leopard” and starts to undo his pants with the blade. Blood is trapped: nothing in “the thin catalogue in [his] skull” can tell him how to “crack... a situation like this” (169); his inexperience is shown up by Cora’s utter voraciousness. To his relief, Sweet jumps to his rescue and tells Cora to back off. “Bull-shit, bitch,” he exclaims, “[T]his chump is in my school. I ain’t gonna let you ‘Georgia’ him” (169).

Avoiding being “Georgiaed,” or “taken advantage of sexually *without getting paid*” (315; emphases added), turns out to be the critical factor in how a pimp manages his stable. As the aforementioned episodes demonstrate, women’s unbridled sexuality poses a constant threat to Blood’s identity as an independent black man. In the proverbial war of the sexes, Slim construes black women as always wanting it for free (with lovers) or at men’s expense (with johns). Either way, the pimp has no business (literally) in abiding by their sexual-economic demands. Sweet breaks down this logic to Blood in what is arguably the novel’s most memorable passage: “Believe me, [Blood], a pimp is really a whore who’s reversed the game on whores. [Blood], be as sweet as the scratch. Don’t be no sweeter. Always stick a whore for a bundle before you sex her. A whore ain’t nothing but a trick to a pimp. Don’t let ’em ‘Georgia’ you. Always get your money

in front just like a whore” (215). Sweet’s lesson is that the key to exploiting women is containing, limiting, and otherwise placing a strict economic value on their sexuality, just as any whore would do with a john. To be the Top Whore—a “freak to scratch” (81), not snatch—is Sweet’s surefire method of withering the influence of the likes of Red Cora.

So long as the narrator avoids being Georgiaed, then, he can reclaim his “natural” manhood from the soul-crushing effects of poverty and joblessness in the inner city. This fantasy of self-possession defines the narrative arc of *Pimp*; it is the very thing that sealed the book’s status as a streetwise *bildungsroman* and not a cautionary tale, as Holloway House might have had it. As I mentioned earlier, even Slim’s dissolution at the end of the novel is heavily qualified by his sneering suspicion of the black women who would work for him. Although he may have given up on the pimping game, Slim leaves the reader with the impression that he cannot give up on the (self-)respect he worked so hard to achieve following Mama’s relocation of the family to Chicago. Thus, for young black men coming up in similarly deprived circumstances in the late 1960s, these words of Slim’s held a certain appeal: “My hope to be important and admired could be realized behind this black stockade. It was simple, just pimp my ass off and get a ton of scratch. Everybody in both worlds kissed your ass black and blue if you had flash and front” (117-18). From the upstanding honesty of Henry at the beginning of the novel to the narrator’s garnering respect “in both worlds” for his “flash and front,” Slim had redefined for readers what it meant to be authentically black. In a context lacking in material

resources to dignify black labor—that is, valuing it in economic terms—*Pimp* wagered that “real” men made a living by keeping up the appearance of self-possession.

But if the novel testified to the fact that masculine self-possession was a social construction—ultimately reliant on the exploitation of black women’s labor and on the felicitous performance of invulnerability⁵²—how did *Pimp* manage to deploy its vision of racial authenticity without contradicting itself? How, in other words, did Slim so richly illuminate the contingent self-fashioning of black masculinity while insisting on its essential character, its non-constructed realness?

One explanation advanced by scholars is that *Pimp*’s authenticity directly corresponded to its status as a true relation of Slim’s “real life.”⁵³ Holloway House originally classified the book as a “biography” in 1967 but then changed its designation to “autobiography” in 1969. Either way, *Pimp*’s status as a “true story” lent the narrative a certain cachet among urban readers who craved the novelty of seeing their own experiences in print. The expectation that this narrative was truthfully rendered not only enhanced readers’ affective attachments to Slim’s persona but also conferred on the book its street credibility even before a single page was turned. By insisting that the story was genuine, Holloway House facilitated deeper investments in the trajectory of Slim’s life than might have been the case otherwise. Given this background, it is no wonder that the

⁵² As we have seen, the narrator must *learn* to embrace the terms of street masculinity and in the process convince others that his financial success and psychic invulnerability are not “fronts” but the “real things.”

⁵³ See Peter A. Muckley, “Iceberg Slim: Robert Beck—A True Essay at a BioCriticism of an Ex-Outlaw Artist,” *Black Scholar* 26.1 (1996): 18-25.

small body of scholarship devoted to analyzing Slim's work has consistently emphasized *Pimp*'s basis in actual events.⁵⁴

The point I wish to make here, though, is that the book's arbitrary classification as an autobiography does not account for the total significance of its reception. By referring to *Pimp* more accurately as an autobiographical novel, I mean to register how Slim's text plays with generic conventions to arrive at a more supple understanding of authenticity. Previous studies have limited *Pimp*'s truth-value to what the narrative may or may not say about Iceberg Slim as an individual. This mode of interpretation hews to a strictly autobiographical reading of *Pimp*.⁵⁵ By contrast, I argue that the book *felt* true to readers in large part because it equated the narrator's performance of masculinity with the idea of racial authenticity. More specifically, the characterological traits associated with day-to-day, street-level survival *among men* came to be revered by Slim's readers as touchstones of what it meant to be "truly" black in America's ghettos.

⁵⁴ See Justin David Gifford, "Servants of Darkness: Crime Fiction and the American Working Class," diss., University of Virginia, 2006, especially "The House That Beck Built: Iceberg Slim, Holloway House Books, and the Black Experience Novel," pp. 70-124. Throughout his work on Slim, Gifford advances the illogical claim that *Pimp*, while "[p]art bildungsroman, part crime novel," is in fact an "autobiography" written by Robert Beck (71). Yet Gifford applies this truth claim unevenly across his work. As my Note on the Text points out, whenever the book diverges from Beck's biography (so far as it is known), Gifford faults *the text* for obscuring the "facts" of Beck's life. I would characterize Gifford's truth-claim work as trying to "save" (the author) Robert Beck from Iceberg Slim, Holloway House, scholarly neglect, and even pimping as such.

⁵⁵ See Candice Love Jackson, "The Literate Pimp: Robert Beck, Iceberg Slim, and Pimping the African American Novel," *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, ed. Lovalerie King and Linda F. Selzer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 167-83. Jackson cautions against reading *Pimp* as autobiography, which I agree with, but she further rejects the text's status as an autobiographical novel. I think her argument is in fact more in keeping with my own here; indeed she notes that Slim's novels take on an "autobiographical form" (173).

This gendering of racial authenticity followed from the assumption that affirming one's blackness could not depend on normative values of mainstream stability and success—access to which was limited among the majority of urban blacks. Instead, racial identity had to be recast as something that was achievable even in depressed and highly stigmatized socioeconomic environments. Another Holloway House paperback published in 1967 outlined what was expected of “real” black men in explicit terms. Robert deCoy's *The Nigger Bible* advanced a provocative thesis of personal growth through a synthesis of black cultural history, social critique, and spiritualist self-help. With the intention of spurring young black men to self-identify as “niggers,” deCoy denounced white racism, Christian religious doctrine, and the black middle class. In the book, he offered 89 “proverbs” that illuminated the principles of street masculinity. Among the lessons deCoy conveyed were: to reject being “‘treated with dignity’ by the White Man”; to see “the Price of...Integration” as the “emasculat[i]on of the black male”; to be wary of “the Nigger who selects his words to speak with grandiose and seeming eloquence”; and to be mindful that “Pussy is Pussy, despite the color,” which is to say that “All Pussy—Stinks.”⁵⁶ The purpose of these proverbs was to index everything that affirmed black men's self-identity in otherwise inhospitable social environments. Within this framework, white pity and black bourgeois self-hatred were firmly rejected, while the sexual exploitation of women was underscored throughout. This masculinist fantasy of what

⁵⁶ Robert H. deCoy, *The Nigger Bible* (1967; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1987) 135, 134, 129-30, 131.

might be called *ghetto self-reliance* proceeded from deCoy's deeply held belief that society made few realistic alternatives available to urban blacks. Because America's ghettos were cut off from routes to mainstream stability and success, deCoy preferred to take his chances with the only "constant in the Universe": a nigger's "Blackness."⁵⁷

Like the proverbial "son" to whom *The Nigger Bible's* narrator imparted his wisdom, the traits that *Pimp's* narrator possessed—the coldness of a hustler, the resourcefulness of a con man, the ingenuity of a pimp—were the very things readers valued as constitutive of an authentic, inner-city blackness. *Pimp's* "realness" thus was a function not (only) of its status as an autobiography but (also) of its ability to construe the embodiment of street masculinity as the *sine qua non* of black men's racial identity. Crucially, this gendering of racial authenticity had to be constructed by Slim in ways that spoke to actual readers' experiences. Scholars who assume the truth-value of *Pimp* seem to believe that the narrator's masculinity is a direct reflection of the author's own masculinity. By not distinguishing textual narrative from "real life," their explanations for the book's popularity amounts to saying that readers were seduced by the sheer force of Slim's persona(lity). Against this critical trend, I argue it was the self-conscious literariness of Slim's representations of street masculinity that sutured the concerns of the text with those of its readers. That Slim was able to connect with his black readers in such a powerful way is a testament to his skills as a literary wordsmith and not his actual embodiment of street masculinity.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 142.

Passing for Black

Pimp had an almost magnetic attraction among readers in the inner city. Its cheap cover price (95 cents) and handy paperback form allowed it to be readily purchased, consumed, and shared among readers. As librarian Laurence Sherrill pointed out at the time, many of these people were not only first-time readers of fiction but also first-time customers of public library services and other resources for reading. In his study of black and Puerto Rican readers in Madison, Wisconsin, Sherrill noted, “The disadvantaged are largely non-readers and non-users of libraries. Since they share none of the major correlates of reading and library use—high education, income, and occupational status—the traditional social role of reading is antithetical to their interests.” According to Sherrill, the “traditional” view held that “social mobility, enlightened citizen participation, and individual enrichment are the fruits of the acquisition and utilization of intelligent reading habits.” In contrast to these aspirations, which pertained mainly to “middle class culture,” Sherrill sought to understand what “new,” inner-city readers found compelling or valuable about the books they consumed. In doing so, he hoped public libraries would be better able to service their preferences and tastes precisely as readers.⁵⁸

Based on data collected through an adult education program that took place in Madison in 1968, Sherrill interpreted black and Puerto Rican readers’ responses to selected passages from twelve books about ghetto life and culture. The books ranged

⁵⁸ Laurence L. Sherrill, “The Affective Responses of Ethnic Minority Readers to Indigenous Ghetto Literature: A Measurement,” diss., University of Wisconsin, 1972, 8.

from Oscar Lewis's ethnography *La Vida* (1966) and Piri Thomas's memoir *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) to Ann Petry's novel *The Street* (1946) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Sherrill tracked readers' comprehension of and affective responses to the passages in order to determine how much their cultural background influenced their reading preferences. His essential conclusion was that minority readers displayed greater interest in books written by authors who "share[d] their own cultural background"—that is, African Americans and Puerto Ricans preferred reading books that spoke to their identities as black and Latino men, respectively.⁵⁹ Unsurprisingly, in this analytic the particular "intensity" of an affective response usually followed from a reader's ability to comprehend the meaning behind a passage.

Sherrill's conclusion held for every book but one: *Pimp*. Quite unexpectedly, Sherrill found that although Puerto Rican readers showed a significantly lower comprehension of a passage from the book, their responses to that passage were just as "positive" as those of African American readers. The passage in question involves the narrator, an up-and-coming pimp, being reprimanded by Weeping Shorty, an older, wiser hustler who refuses the former's offer of some cocaine. Shorty schools his protégé on the riskiness of his behavior: "Nigger, ain't you got no sense? You trying to go back to the joint and blow my wheels?" When the narrator balks at his questions, Shorty explains:

...You ain't got no business sitting dirty in my "short" [car]. There's a law, Sucker, that can confiscate a "short" with stuff in it. You know if the heat had hit on you you would unload in my "short." Keep stuff off you. When you stop

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

somewhere down it in the street until you ready to split. It's better to get beat for the stash than beat by the heat. (64-65)

Sherrill speculated that the “discrepancy between comprehension and response levels [meant] that what the passages’ [sic] language lacked in comprehension value, it made up for in its emotional impact on the Puerto Rican readers.”⁶⁰ Sherrill did not elaborate on the nature of this “emotional impact,” but my own belief is that the passage, which is laden with vernacular jargon and marked by a sense of urgency about law-enforcement surveillance, *felt* authentic for both sets of readers. That feeling of authenticity would have been mediated not only through race (coded in the black vernacular, which Puerto Rican readers may or may not have identified with) but also through gender—the sense that here were two men trying to negotiate their criminal activities without getting nabbed by law enforcement. Thus, even though readers did not know the meaning of everything that was being said, they still “knew” the site and stakes of what was going on.

The importance of masculinity to Slim’s emerging iconography of racial authenticity was highlighted in the second novel he published in 1967, *Trick Baby*. Originally subtitled “The Story of a White Negro,” *Trick Baby* features a perceptibly white protagonist, alternately known as John Patrick O’Brien, Jr. (his birth name), White Folks (what his “friends” call him), and Trick Baby (what his “enemies” call him). Like *Pimp*, *Trick Baby* is framed by a prologue and an epilogue composed in the voice of Iceberg Slim, whose initial impression of Folks is that he could be “Errol Flynn’s twin.”

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78-79.

The frame narrative situates Slim and Folks in a Chicago jail cell, with the former curious as to how a self-described “Nigger hustler” who nonetheless looks white ended up in the pen for a ten-day stint.⁶¹ The rest of *Trick Baby* is narrated in Folks’s voice as he recounts his adventures to his cellmate. While the Slim persona—which references *Pimp*’s autobiographical cachet, mere months after the book was published⁶²—is critical in establishing Folks’s credibility as an “authentic” black man, Folks gives reason enough for the reader to “see” evidence of his blackness.

Born John Patrick O’Brien, Jr., in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1923, White Folks is the only child of a black woman, Phala Grigsby, and a touring white jazzman whose name he bears. Folks recalls only vague memories of his father, and in particular the drum he would always play in the house when friends and associates came over to party. O’Brien, Sr., abandons his family when Folks is only eight; in response to this heartbreaking event, Phala relocates to Chicago’s South Side to try to find work as a domestic. Folks recalls only pain and frustration during this part of his childhood: in black Chicago he is shunned by the neighborhood children who call him a “trick baby,” assuming his mother was a whore who got pregnant by one of her white “tricks.” Despite

⁶¹ Iceberg Slim, *Trick Baby* (1967; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1996) 9. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁶² In the prologue Slim’s narrative persona notes of Folks: “[S]ince I was getting rather elderly for the pimp game, I figured I’d pick his [Folks’s] brain and play con when I got out. After all, I’d picked Sweet Jones for the secrets of the pimp game” (10). While *Trick Baby* was technically not a sequel to *Pimp*, this passage clearly assumes the reader’s familiarity with Slim’s first book.

Folks's insistence to the contrary (Phala and his father were married), the kids' teasing is relentless ("Nasty trick baby! Nasty trick baby!" [72]) and haunts him wherever he goes.

When Folks is a teenager, an event befalls Phala that will change his life forever. After spending a night out with a high-school date, Folks returns home and is confronted by a neighbor bearing bad news about his mother: at the end of her shift at a local cabaret, she was drugged by two men and then gang-raped by a mob of "street niggers" throughout the night (81). The event is so traumatic to Phala that she goes mad and has to be committed to an asylum, leaving Folks to fend for himself. The night after her rape, Folks goes to a local bar to drown his sorrows. There he gets into an altercation with a black man whose date Folks is accused of hitting on. The resulting fracas sees Folks being knocked out by the man, thrown out of the bar, and pummeled by a group of angry African American bystanders who presume he is white. In a telling illustration of Folks's crisis of identity at this moment, he frees himself from the mob and runs away screaming, "I'm a Nigger! I'm a Nigger! I'm a Nigger!" (86). This scene, which echoes the "mob mentality" that led to Phala's rape in racialized terms (*white* man versus black *woman*), serves to underscore not only Folks's pain at losing his mother but also his uncertain status as a black man.

When it seems as though things could not get any better for Folks, he meets Blue Howard, an old hand at the confidence game and a well-respected street hustler in South Side. Blue takes a liking to this orphan who looks white but "is" black and brings him into his home. As Blue nurses Folks back from the pit of despair, he shows him the kind

of sincere affection Folks presumably did not have access to growing up with Phala.⁶³ Given this bond, it should come as no surprise that Folks seeks to connect with Blue precisely through what he does best: conning. Under Blue's tutelage, Folks learns how to perpetrate scams that utilize his perceptible whiteness to gull unsuspecting targets. In Blue's words, the general schema of their cons is simple: "To the Niggers, I say, 'Let's take that goddamn peckerwood's money.' You tell the white marks[,] 'Let's break that bastard nigger'" (146). While Blue and Folks target both white and African American "marks," it is their white targets whom they seem to get the most pleasure in conning. In taking advantage of those who freely expose their racism to a "sympathetic" white, the partners not only collect monetary rewards but also "stick it to the man" who has shown he would not hesitate to exploit urban blacks for his own financial gain. The genius of this set-up is that the confidence being exploited by Folks and Blue is precisely racist in character. Specifically, Folks cultivates a racist bond with his targets—observing, for example, how "easy" it is to swindle unsuspecting blacks—and then banks on the confidence such a bond seals. While Folks and Blue do not share their earnings with other members of the black community—they are not Robin Hoods of the ghetto—the *feeling* Slim leaves readers with is one of redistributive justice: stealing from the racists and bestowing respect (not money) onto the black poor.

⁶³ Tellingly, Folks calls his mother "P.G.," or by the initials of her first and last names. He uses this casual moniker even while acknowledging that Phala had "begged [him] to call her mama" (64).

If Folks learns to become an urban trickster of sorts in Blue's schemes, he also learns to overcome the stigma that is attached to his whiteness in the black ghetto. Indeed there is a way in which learning how to con from Blue requires that Folks identify fully with South Side's black community. Put differently, although Folks's perceptible whiteness is the key element in the partners' cons, his apprenticeship under Blue makes him more soulfully "black." Folks's coming of age is thus marked by his *internal* conversion to an authentic blackness: "Inside," Blue reminds his protégé, "you feel and think black like me" (37). This conversion, which contrasts with the scopophilic logic of racial passing,⁶⁴ not only ensures Folks's informal adoption by Blue as the son he never had but also banishes Folks's anxiety as a precariously situated black man. In a scene that is meant to remind him of the life he has left behind (as a "trick baby"), Folks visits his mother in the asylum and finds her in a terrible state. As Folks leans over to kiss Phala, she "thrusts" her hand toward his genitals in a symbolic gesture of castration. While she whines, "Lemme snatch it off, huh? Lemme see it bleed, huh?" (114), Folks is keyed to the idea that life with mother (always already marked as a "whore") has threatened to deny him his manhood. In order to achieve it, he must "stay black" with Blue.

We could say that for readers of *Trick Baby* Folks at once subverted white racism through his ability to pass in one direction and affirmed black masculinity through his ability to "pass" in the other. Crucially, given the outward appearance of Folks, it was

⁶⁴ See Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Racial passing, in Wiegman's analysis, is made possible by a "'logic' of race in U.S. culture [that] anchors whiteness in the visible epistemology of black skin" (21).

passing for black that became the conductor of readers' fantasies in *Trick Baby*. After all, passing for black in the South Side underworld—where racial hierarchies were “reversed” precisely to the extent that the black ghetto had been cordoned off from the rest of society—was the more difficult task for Folks to achieve. In this sense, Slim staged in *Trick Baby* what it meant for a subject to embrace and thereby value a certain kind of ghetto masculinity. Insofar as Folks “chose” to pass for black, he represented for readers a willful taking up of what Michael Eric Dyson has termed the “myth of the authentic Negro”—that is, “archetypes of cultural identity used to resist the definition of blackness by whites or bourgeois blacks.” Such archetypes “countered the shuffling, sniveling, deferential, conciliatory, and compliant blacks who lived for white approval.” In a context where “white approval” was rarely available to blacks, though, the “bluster and boast[ing]” of the pimp, the mack, and the hustler had to constitute a *symbolic* riposte to the “corrosive self-doubt imposed by a society too mean to care about how it slashed black self-esteem.”⁶⁵ Slim, of course, demonstrated for readers that even symbolic meaning carried a lot of weight in the ghetto. For Folks, overcoming the childhood trauma of being called a “trick baby” as well as the threat of castration by his mother required that he identify fully as a self-made, inner-city-bred black man.

Yet in order for the authentic Negro to be authentic, he cannot draw attention to the fact that his persona is indeed constructed. His performance of blackness is felicitous

⁶⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Free Press, 2000) 106.

only to the extent that it is not (acknowledged as) a performance. What sounds like a tautology is resolved by Slim in wedding Folks's desire to pass for black with his budding sense of what it takes to be a "true" black man. Blue plays a critical role in bringing these two elements of Folks's character together. Over thirty years Folks's senior, Blue is the father figure Folks hardly ever had. "I barely remember my father," Folks remarks to Blue. "The weak white sonuvabitch fled back to his white world after his hot yen for a nigger body went cold" (59). Not coincidentally, Blue's status as a father figure is sealed by his willingness to introduce Folks to the intergenerational, masculine world of the con game. While Blue recognizes the existence of "white grifters" (55, 124), the particular context of his game relies on networks of black male bonding, security, and trust. These networks work to supplant the distrust and insecurity Folks presumably picked up from having been abandoned by his white father. Upon pulling off their first con together—in which Folks fleeces an openly racist "Dutchman," with Blue serving as his foil—Folks wonders if he should buy a drum with the money he collects. The instrument recalls Folks's jazz-playing drummer father, whose percussive noise-making is one of the last memories he has of him at home. When Folks walks away from the object in the store window, rejecting his desire to buy it as the musing of a "stupid kid," he firmly situates himself on the path toward achieving black manhood (153).

Once he has rejected the birthright of his father, Folks's racial identity becomes naturalized through his participation in black men's homosocial networks of affiliation. Although comments about gender, sex, and sexuality may seem incidental to the

characters' execution of various ruses, my argument is that it is precisely these comments that do the work of revealing Folks's racial authenticity. Immediately after swindling the Dutchman, for example, Folks says he feels "[l]ike a guy that's layed the most beautiful broad in the world" (152). This kind of utterance—and not something about race per se—is what binds Folks not only to Blue but also to the other black men who circulate in the South Side con game. In one of the most extended schemes represented in the novel, Folks bonds with Blue's associate One Pocket just before pulling a fake diamond scheme. A major subject of their conversation is not the scheme itself but Pocket's girl troubles: "I'm not worried about the mark. I was thinking about Clara Sue, my young broad. She's kinda' salty with me. Her thing was too tender for them goddamn collars [sex toys]. They rubbed her sweet pussy raw" (226-27). Significantly, Pocket's anecdote follows a brief moment of weakness shown in Folks, who hears his mother's favorite song, "Stairway to the Stars," playing in the distance. Slim's subtle point here is that Folks's nostalgia and sentimentalism, which threaten to ensnare him in the trick baby stigma once more, must be countered by mundane yet "real" black men's (gender) talk. It is a point reiterated throughout *Trick Baby*: any character's performance of racial authenticity is predicated on his facility with the con game's homosocial codes.

On this level of meaning, *Trick Baby* would seem to reflect much of *Pimp's* masculinist investment in the subculture of the South Side underworld. Both novels feature protagonists who counter the promise of social mobility that underpins the myth of the American self-made man. Both novels also highlight the intergenerational social

pedagogy that “educates” boys into the symbolic but deeply felt realm of authentic blackness. Despite these similarities, *Trick Baby* diverges markedly from *Pimp* in that Blue comes to regret helping Folks pass for black for over twenty years. When their time together is almost up, Blue finds himself mourning Folks’s continuing identification with a racial identity that tends to bring people more trouble than good. In fact, toward the end of the novel’s diegesis, Blue frankly wishes that Folks would “go across that invisible steel fence and pass as one of the privileged” (60).

What can account for Blue’s change of heart? There is, on the one hand, a narrative explanation. On the run after pulling off their last con together, Blue admits that he has “used” Folks from day one. Not only did Blue take in Folks primarily to see if the young man would turn his wayward daughter Midge straight (“I hoped you’d knock her up and slow her down” [38]), but for over twenty years he kept his protégé close to his side, even when bigger con opportunities arose. For his part, Folks doubts that Blue “was a dirty double-crosser who had barred [him] from the big-time con and the white world” (40). But the idea of opportunity points to a broader, more philosophical, explanation for Blue’s statements: why on earth would anyone *choose* to live this life? Whereas blacks’ social stigmatization was inextricably tied to their skin color, Folks presumably could have elected to forsake his ghetto roots by passing for white. Blue’s guilt, then, is a consequence of the role he played in fostering a ghetto son, when that “son” need not have remained within the walls of the inner city. To be sure, Blue’s guilt elides the kind of institutionalized racism that would have condemned anyone in Folks’s position to a

life in the ghetto. Yet the fantasy that Folks could have escaped but didn't because of Blue's own selfish motives leads Blue to wonder whether he robbed a lucky ghetto son of his *true* birthright. "Don't be a sucker, son," Blue counsels Folks in their last night together. "All the milk and honey is on the other side of this hell" (60).

All of this changes, however, when Blue is shot to death by an agent who reports to Nino Parelli, an Italian crime boss. Parelli's uncle is a white man whom Blue and Folks unwittingly fleeced with their second turn at a fake diamond scheme. With Blue's unceremonious death, Folks is free to pursue the con in the social milieu of his choosing. In the novel's epilogue, he reveals to Slim's narrative persona what he expects to do after being released from jail: "I'm going to learn all the angles of the white big con. I'm going to lose myself in the white world. I'm going to break every classy white broad's heart that gives me a second gander. I'm going to eat and sleep and fuck with nothing but white people for the rest of my life" (310). Folks's voice is slick and cool as he outlines how he intends to "move up" in the world of the con by passing in white society. Yet for all his bluster and boasting, Folks's vision of masculine grandeur amounts to nothing more than a predictable manifestation of Blue's rueful wish: that he pass for white and attain the privileges thereof. Despite its gesturing toward a "feel good" ending, then, this final scene underscores the rather pessimistic view that, in the late 1960s, the black ghetto was not worth sticking around for, at least for those who could manage it.

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, served to reinforce the structure of feeling that was beginning to predominate among black pulp fiction's inner-

city readers. Iceberg Slim spoke for a generation of young black men who had felt left out of the civil rights movement's long struggle for social equality. The injustices these men encountered in their daily lives could not be pinned on a singular political ideology or on state-sponsored segregation. Rather, they seemed to be byproducts of the very lack of opportunities for gaining socioeconomic stability among the country's urban poor. That government policies made little headway in integrating the ghettos into mainstream society reinforced the perception that inner-city residents could not do much to change their lot. Urban poverty, as Slim suggested in his novels, was not something one could possibly escape. At best, one could negotiate its underground economies and subaltern networks of affiliation to eke out a living in the ghetto itself. At worst, the insular world of the ghetto deadened any hope that one could someday partake of the promise of social equality outlined by Dr. King and the civil rights movement.

If anything, King's assassination and the continuing impoverishment of inner-city communities convinced a growing urban readership that Slim had his finger on the pulse of the era, perhaps more than any other living African American writer. Slim, it came to be understood, did not give his readers false hope; rather, he spoke in their language in order to "tell it like it was." The conditions of urban African American life were dire, and Slim's two books—much like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)—emphasized rather than obscured the full extent of inner-city poverty. Thus a crucial part of *Pimp's* and *Trick Baby's* appeal was their unabashed representations of black socioeconomic hardship. While mainstream civil rights advocates evinced a clear awareness of the

persistence of poverty in the black community, Slim gave voice to those who suspected the movement could do only so much to make their lives better.

A companion volume to Slim's early black pulp fiction linked the moment of King's death to the growing pessimism over civil rights in the black community. Published by Holloway House in 1968, Louis Lomax's *To Kill a Black Man* was a joint biography of the lives of King and Malcolm X. Lomax was a renowned journalist and television personality; he made a name for himself working as a reporter for newspapers like the *Afro-American* and the *Chicago Daily Defender* before becoming the host of a current affairs program on KTTV in Los Angeles. *To Kill a Black Man* drew from published speeches and articles as well as unpublished letters to illuminate the familiar ideological differences between King and Malcolm. But Lomax's book also advanced the then-novel argument that King and Malcolm agreed on certain basic principles of socioeconomic justice toward the end of their lives. In the year leading up to his fatal shooting on February 21, 1965, Malcolm X had broken with the Nation of Islam and began advocating for global, pan-African resistance to capitalist exploitation. In a similar vein, following the successful Selma to Montgomery (Alabama) marches of 1965, Dr. King recognized that "civil rights gains [had] failed to sift down to the black masses"; in response to this problem, he shifted the focus of his activist base to Chicago's ghettos.⁶⁶ According to Lomax, it was King's and Malcolm's increasing radicalism—pushing for

⁶⁶ Louis E. Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968) 161.

change beyond civil rights and even beyond U.S. borders—that made each man a target for assassination by powerful forces.

Despite this insight, Lomax was decidedly critical of King and Malcolm for not being able to effectively address the structural forms of racism that made socioeconomic justice difficult to achieve. Lomax found Malcolm’s pan-African views impractical, particularly in terms of dealing with the domestic situation of urban blight. “The final Malcolm,” in his estimation, “was a man whose revolutionary rhetoric was tempered by the ethics of the corrupt society he sought to depose.”⁶⁷ He reserved a more biting assessment for the recently slain King. Lomax was skeptical of King’s efforts to work for socioeconomic justice in Chicago; he noted that whites there were even more hostile to King’s demands than their counterparts had been in the South. More to the point, Lomax emphasized that civil rights leaders were in unfamiliar territory in the Northern ghetto, even among other blacks. After a period of time, the King family had sent their children back to the South so that they might avoid growing up on the mean streets of the inner city. In a passage notable for its terse evaluation of the civil rights movement’s intraracial class politics, Lomax observed, “The King children had the money to get out of the ghetto; they had a safe and secure home of grandparents as a refuge. The real ghetto dweller had no such escape; he was there with the core of the problem.”⁶⁸ Here Lomax’s pointed contrast was of a piece with Iceberg Slim’s notion that the ghetto offered no hope

⁶⁷ Ibid., 243.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 163.

of escape for its denizens. For its time, mere months after King's death, this was a surprisingly pessimistic take on the civil rights leader's only major foray into leading a sustained campaign in the urban North.

Taken as a whole, *To Kill a Black Man* sounded a definitive break with the philosophy of nonviolence that had more or less guided the civil rights movement's activism since its inception. Even Malcolm X's reputation as a nationalist firebrand did not seem to fit into Lomax's understanding of what needed to be done to address the problem of inner-city poverty. Lomax wrote, "Malcolm would have done well to study the young students who were then [in 1964] plotting and planning. These black militants never wasted their time and mental powers discussing black unity. Rather, they realized that to bring about change one must assemble an organization of dedicated people, outline a program and execute it."⁶⁹ Lomax's allegiances clearly lay with the emerging Black Power movement and the forms of racial protest that had characterized Watts and subsequent urban uprisings. Yet curiously, insofar as King and Malcolm both had been targets of reactionary violence, Lomax seemed to appreciate them dead rather than alive. It was as though their very assassinations lent credence (negatively) to Lomax's idea that the only way to counter American racism was to take to the streets in militant action. Supporting this view at the end of his book, he wrote at once ominously and optimistically, "Now, then, is the time for martyrdom."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 254.

Lomax may have shared Slim's disaffection with the landscape of post-civil rights America, but the ultimate message of his book did not determine the course of black pulp fiction in the final years of the decade. Slim, we know, was neither a militant nor even a public advocate of social change. As a first-time author lacking the kind of lettered credentials Lomax and other Holloway House authors enjoyed, Slim wrote about only what he knew intimately: the culture of street-level survival that permeated the black ghetto. The world Slim knew and reimagined in his books was almost completely foreign to middle-class Americans; it proved to be an elusive sphere of influence for the era's otherwise far-reaching social changes. Given the cultural and geographical isolationism of Slim's world, it made sense for the narrative horizon of his early fiction to be not the revolutionary promise of Black Power but the deaths of Mama and Blue Howard in Chicago's South Side.

It was a bleak outlook on life, and yet *Pimp* and *Trick Baby* managed to attract more and more inner-city readers as the decade drew to a close. Slim's increasing readership would forever change the direction of Holloway House's business. While men's literature continued to sell well during these turbulent years, changing social and cultural mores meant that the nuclear family ideal against which pin-up culture had developed was crumbling under its own weight. Civil rights, the Vietnam War, and various manifestations of sexual liberation (the use of contraceptives, the hippie ethic of "free love," the proliferation of sexually explicit media) all contributed to the erosion of the sense of domestic stability enjoyed by middle-class white men in the 1950s.

Ironically, the “permissive” culture that had accepted erotica as part of the mainstream was the very thing that, toward the end of the decade, had started to find sex paperbacks rather tame. Slim’s books, though, lost none of their edge amid these changes because they appealed to a completely different readership from Holloway House’s pin-up base. The unexpected popularity of *Pimp* and *Trick Baby* suggested that young urban black men wanted more books that reflected aspects of their day-to-day realities—books like Slim’s that, while bleak, nonetheless highlighted the travails of street-smart and self-respecting black men.

CHAPTER TWO

BROKEN FAMILY NARRATIVES

At the same time that Iceberg Slim launched his literary career with the publication of *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) and *Trick Baby* (1967), tensions within the black community had reached a critical tipping point. The Watts riot of August 1965 was still fresh in everyone's memory. What began as a skirmish over police mistreatment of a 21-year-old black motorist turned into a six-day clash between urban residents and law enforcement officers in Los Angeles' most depressed neighborhood.¹ In the summer of 1967, however, the riots would not be confined to one locale. Civil unrest spread from city to city as blacks vented their frustration about the seemingly intractable problems of joblessness, police brutality, and a crumbling urban infrastructure. Despite the recent legislative gains made by the civil rights movement—in particular, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—residents of the ghetto continued to experience profound inequalities in education, employment, and access to health care and decent public housing. Moreover, as urban conditions worsened during the decade, whites used their relative racial and economic privilege to move out of the cities and into the suburbs, leaving mostly black and brown people to contend with inner-city poverty. Thus, although African Americans had achieved nominally equal status as U.S. citizens through the civil rights movement, the majority of urban blacks still lived

¹ A comprehensive account of the riot and its aftermath can be found in Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).

under a system of de facto segregation. In 1967 more than 60 percent of African Americans conceded that racial advances had been made, but more than a third observed that they saw little or no practical changes to their daily realities.²

The worst riots took place in Newark and Detroit in July 1967; between them close to 70 people, black and white, were killed, and the damages to the community infrastructure ran into the tens of millions of dollars. In response to these events, President Lyndon B. Johnson convened the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders under the leadership of Otto Kerner, Governor of Illinois. Also known as the Kerner Commission, the group set out to analyze and understand why the riots took place. Their Report, released in 1968, made the critical point that the riots were fueled not by violence toward white people but “against local symbols of white American society, authority and property in Negro neighborhoods.”³ In line with Johnson’s 1964 declaration of his administration’s War on Poverty, the Report made sure to acknowledge the class dimensions of blacks’ symbolic destruction of “white” authority: “Negroes, like people in poverty everywhere...lack the channels of communication, influence and appeal that traditionally have been available to ethnic minorities within the city and which enabled them—unburdened by color—to scale the walls of the white ghettos in an earlier era.”⁴

² David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta, “Race, Ethnicity, and the Evolution of Political Legitimacy,” *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) 128.

³ United States, National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report* (New York: Bantam, 1968) 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

America's inner cities, in other words, had become cauldrons of disillusionment over African Americans' opportunities to live healthy, stable, and productive lives outside of the ghetto. Understood in these terms, the Newark and Detroit riots were interracially contested yet geographically confined outbursts of frustration with the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the civil rights "promise" and its on-the-ground "fulfillment."⁵

The disillusionment felt among urban blacks in the late 1960s contributed significantly to the development of Iceberg Slim's aesthetic and to the rise of his pulp fiction successor at Holloway House, Donald Goines. In the pivotal years following the appearance of *Pimp* and *Trick Baby*, Holloway House identified a common theme among its handful of black male-authored titles: a deep pessimism about the country's past and present commitments to African Americans' welfare, and particularly their ability to flourish in neglected ghetto communities. These books sold well among urban blacks—a far cry from Holloway House's heretofore predominantly white, middle-class male readership—yet there remained lingering doubts about where these books were coming from. In a review of Robert H. deCoy's *The Nigger Bible* (1967) in the black nationalist magazine *Liberator*, critic Ron Welburn noted: "This curious book burst onto the scene about two years ago and its popularity has not diminished...When the book was first released, the name deCoy triggered me to suspect anything...Another curiosity is that [the book] is part of a Holloway House 'adult reading' catalogue of predominantly sex-themed literature of various sorts." Despite his reservations about *The Nigger Bible's* and

⁵ Ibid., 204.

its author's racial authenticity, Welburn advanced a lukewarm review that made a point of recognizing that the book was "honest."⁶ With increasing book sales to inner-city blacks, and more black-press coverage like Welburn's review potentially on the horizon, Holloway House understood that it would need to expand on Slim's and deCoy's early work for it to remain relevant for urban black readers.

Interestingly, it took some time for Holloway House to produce books that explicitly capitalized on the insurgent Black Power movement, which was already in full swing by the time of the ghetto uprisings of 1967. In fact it was not until Donald Goines's mature genre fiction, published after 1973, that Holloway House took up black nationalist themes in earnest.⁷ Instead, between 1968 and 1973, Slim and Goines released novels that aimed to represent the depths of suffering that came along with the extreme conditions of poverty to be found in America's ghettos (Slim wrote about his native Chicago, Goines his native Detroit). Slim's *Mama Black Widow* (1969) and Goines's *Dopefiend* (1971) and *Whoreson* (1972) reflected the disillusionment that urban blacks' felt about their situation. In particular, these books centered thematically on an important discursive element of America's post-civil rights malaise: black men's victimization at the hands of white racism and intraracial community dynamics. Slim's and Goines's narratives lacked the playfulness and sardonic wit of the street culture novels *Pimp* and *Trick Baby*; instead, their turn-of-the-decade works presented a dark and deeply pessimistic view of

⁶ Ron Welburn, rev. of *The Nigger Bible*, by Robert H. deCoy, *Liberator* 9.10 (1969): 19.

⁷ On black pulp fiction's fraught relationship with the Black Power movement, see Chapter 3.

the possibilities for black men to escape the impoverished conditions of ghetto life. We could say that if Iceberg Slim (the narrator's persona in *Pimp*) and White Folks were trickster anti-heroes in 1967, a few years later the protagonists of *Mama Black Widow*, *Dopefiend*, and *Whoreson* were cast as abject victims of social discrimination and sexual abuse. In the late 1960s, then, Holloway House's transformation of black pulp fiction relied on producing novels about the black male body in pain.

Because urban black men's lives, taken together, were seen as the prime index of post-civil rights unrest during this period, focusing on black male victimization supported Slim's and Goines's claims to racial authenticity. For instance, while the riots of 1967 touched on concerns relevant to the black community as a whole, it was black men in particular whom the Kerner Report singled out as shouldering the burden of white racism—manifested through employment discrimination—in the black community: “Men who are chronically unemployed or employed in the lowest status jobs are often unable or unwilling to remain with their families. The handicap imposed on children growing up without fathers in an atmosphere of poverty and deprivation is increased as mothers are forced to work to provide support.”⁸ In an era when the breadwinner role continued to define mainstream ideologies of masculine self-possession, the Report contended that black men were disproportionately affected by socioeconomic poverty and restricted life opportunities: not only were they barred from the process of capitalist self-advancement, but their very identities *as men* were under threat, given their inability to “provide” for

⁸ *Report*, 14.

their families. Moreover, because black women were compelled to work outside of the home to supplement or substitute for men's wages, black men suffered from "feelings of inadequacy" which led them to take up the lifestyle of "street corner men."⁹ The consequences for their children were clear: "With the father absent and the mother working, many ghetto children spend the bulk of their time on the streets—the street of a crime-ridden, violence-prone and poverty-stricken world."¹⁰ From the desperation of unemployed black fathers to the anger of fatherless black sons, the Report's mainstream liberal analysis identified the affective coordinates of black male victimization that would fuel the summer riots of 1967.

Yet it was not only liberal academics and policymakers who subscribed to this male-centric account of the motivations behind late 1960s civil unrest. In fact a similar account lay at the heart of how urban black men themselves took stock of their situation. In this chapter, I show how Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines composed novels that tapped into deep-seated anxieties about black men's social well-being in America's ghettos. One of the ways they were able to do this, I argue, is by framing black men's victimization within narratives about the breakdown of black family life as such. In their turn-of-the-decade work, Slim and Goines recast the structural inequalities that black men faced through employment discrimination, housing shortages, and a lack of educational opportunities as fictional conflicts between overbearing mothers and their wayward sons.

⁹ Ibid., 260.

¹⁰ Ibid., 262.

Mama's Boys

Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines drew from widely circulating discourses about the black family in order to craft their respective novels. The most famous of these was Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's U.S. Department of Labor study titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Released in the spring of 1965, what came to be known as the Moynihan Report advanced the claim that "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family." Moynihan was keen to point out that there were specific historical reasons (e.g., the legacy of slavery's breaking apart biological ties and devaluation of paternal influence) for the "deterioration" of the black family. Nonetheless, insofar as the nuclear family was "the basic social unit of American life" and thus the necessary ground for middle-class economic stability, Moynihan argued that African Americans' precarious family structure retarded their social advancement. The Report might have conceded that middle-class African Americans placed a "higher premium on family stability and the conserving of family resources" than their white counterparts, but its primary focus was on the lower-class blacks who constituted the face of urban poverty.¹¹

A critical element of the Report's argument was its analysis of gender relations among inner-city African Americans. Moynihan contended that the historical legacies of

¹¹ United States, Dept. of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, ed. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967) 51, 52.

slavery and Jim Crow segregation interrupted black men's taking up their "natural" position as the head of the household. Black men, he speculated, were disproportionately "humiliated" by having to use separate public facilities under segregation. Drawing from anthropological observations about male behavior, Moynihan ventured that the general "submissiveness" that Jim Crow inculcated among blacks was "surely more destructive to the male than to the female personality."¹² But even the promise of industrialized work in the urban North proved illusory for black men. There they faced a number of external obstacles—including employment discrimination, low wages, and a shortage of jobs—to their advancement. This meant that even in the North black men could not serve as the sole breadwinners for their families. Moynihan concluded that black men suffered a crisis of confidence from either being chronically out of work or working for depressed wages; the unfortunate consequence of this psychic injury was that black men divorced, separated from, or abandoned completely their female partners and their children. Two years after the Report's public release, the Kerner Commission would take up this same line of inquiry to help explain the constitutive motivations behind the riots of 1967.

Arguably the most controversial aspect of the Report was what it had to say about black women's roles in the near-"complete breakdown" of the black family.¹³ With black men prevented from occupying the position of the breadwinning husband and father, the Report alleged that almost a quarter of inner-city black families were headed by women.

¹² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 51.

Herein lay the crux of the problem of urban poverty. Although this characteristically “matriarchal” family structure emerged as a response to years of black male victimization at the hands of slavery and segregation, its effects on black men in post-World War II America were deleterious to the point of threatening community-wide breakdown. In a chapter titled “The Tangle of Pathology,” Moynihan wrote:

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in public and private affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.¹⁴

Moynihan’s passage begins with a statement of relativistic neutrality toward the idea of female-headed households as such. But he quickly turns to the practical matter at hand, which is that social advancement and economic stability in America are made possible by the assumption of patriarchal authority in nuclear family units. Because the black family deviates from this structure, urban African Americans are placed at a “distinct disadvantage” when it comes to their overall social welfare.

Upon its limited release in March 1965, the Moynihan Report was heralded as an influential study by policymakers in the Johnson administration and by journalists in the mainstream press. Its conclusions were seen as prescient with respect to the Watts riot that would occur in August later that year. In fact Moynihan once commented that the

¹⁴ Ibid., 75.

Report's public release, which happened right after Watts, was timed by the Johnson administration so as to "satisfy a press corps that was clamoring for some explanation of the riot."¹⁵ Yet as African American critics of the Report pointed out at the time, casting the crisis facing the black community as ultimately one of frustrated black masculinity had the effect of personalizing structural inequality in the failure or breakdown of the African American family. In particular, female-headed households in the inner city were blamed for undermining the "traditional" authority that society conferred on men—as husbands and fathers, wage-earners and breadwinners. Although Moynihan intended his critique of the black family to serve as a platform on which to address larger structural inequalities, critics noted that his framing of the issue placed black women at the head of a self-perpetuating "culture of poverty."¹⁶

Given what many perceived to be the Moynihan Report's explicit pathologizing of poor urban blacks' behavior and social practices, it is perhaps difficult to imagine why Slim and Goines might have been sympathetic to its claims. Yet the Report did manage to tap into sentiments held by the black men whom Moynihan privileged as the "most" victimized subjects of racial oppression. It was to these sentiments, and to these men, that Slim and Goines appealed in their fiction; they were able to do so, I argue, by casting

¹⁵ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991; New York: Vintage, 1992) 174. For Lemann's account of the making of the Moynihan Report and the black community's various responses to it, see pp. 172-77.

¹⁶ Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 127, 112. For Estes's account of the Report's gender politics, see the chapter "The Moynihan Report," pp. 107-29.

black men's victimization as enduring historical, cultural, and gendered problems for the black community.

For one, the Report's conclusions may have made a splash with policymakers, but they were nothing new to the black community. Indeed one of Moynihan's most frequently cited sources was the eminent black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's 1939 study *The Negro Family in the United States*. Twenty-five years before the Report's appearance on the national stage, Frazier advanced most of its major analytical points through a historical account of the effects migration to the industrial North had had on black families. From black men's economic insecurity to the rebelliousness of broken-home children, Frazier laid the groundwork for Moynihan's Report by drawing from anecdotes recalled by denizens of black ghettos.¹⁷ A book informed more by African American oral history than by statistical methods of analysis, *The Negro Family* stood as a moving testament to lived experiences of poverty in the North. In particular, Frazier related the devastating consequences of urbanization for the black family, which saw attempts by a "preliterate people, stripped of their cultural heritage, to adjust themselves to civilization." Black men's inability to secure gainful employment in the city brought

¹⁷ On the connections between Frazier's and Moynihan's work, see John H. Bracey, Jr., et al., eds., *Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality?* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1971). By contrast, Anthony M. Platt contests the extent to which Moynihan based the Report on Frazier's landmark study; see his *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 111-20.

about not only their disillusionment with Northern prosperity but also their alienation from the “simple family organization and folk culture” of the rural South.¹⁸

Born in 1918 to parents who had themselves migrated from the South to the North in the early twentieth century, Iceberg Slim was already over fifty years old when *Mama Black Widow* was published by Holloway House. His view on the effects migration had had on his family was not dissimilar to those Frazier catalogued in his study. In a letter to his father, published in his 1971 collection of nonfiction *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*, Slim states his regret at “hating” his father the last time he saw him in a Chicago liquor store, around 1950:

Papa, I am ashamed to confess that I stood there behind you so sick with hatred I was exhilarated, thrilled at your torment. And Papa dear, I wish I could forget the Goddamn stupid, cold-blooded joy I felt when you turned your face, that tortured replica of my own, toward me. My awful hurt, Papa, lies now in the bitter awareness that understanding and compassion are the only proper responses to black men, and especially fathers forced to abdicate manhood in the racist, brute crucible that is America.¹⁹

Here Slim reflexively deconstructs his aversion to the image of his father. He reveals that his knee-jerk revulsion toward a “weak” black man displaced consideration of the structural inequalities that worked to impoverish his father’s life. In Slim’s revisionary account, the rebellious inner-city boy of Frazier’s, Moynihan’s, and Kerner’s studies

¹⁸ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) 367, 255. Frazier’s book was republished in a revised and abridged edition following the release of the Moynihan Report; the new foreword was penned by Moynihan’s friend and collaborator Nathan Glazer.

¹⁹ Iceberg Slim, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (1971; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1986) 42.

begins to understand why his lashing out at symbols of white authority transpires in the name of the father.

Another dimension of black men's victimization that the Moynihan Report touched on was the idea that urban poverty was informed in part by a self-perpetuating cycle of "destructive" cultural practices. Structural inequalities surely had a role to play in the perpetuation of racist oppression, but Moynihan supplemented his analysis of employment discrimination with an account of the "tangle of pathology" that emerged out of the breakdown of the black family. Yet Moynihan adapted his infamous description of inner-city black culture from another renowned African American scholar of the ghetto, Kenneth Clark. Whereas Frazier's *Negro Family* provided the historical backdrop for Moynihan's claims, Clark's 1965 book *Dark Ghetto* influenced every aspect of the Report's understanding of inner-city black culture. A psychologist by trade, Clark spoke of the "pathology of the ghetto" in harsher terms than Moynihan: "Not only is the pathology of the ghetto self-perpetuating, but one kind of pathology breeds another. The child born in the ghetto is more likely to come into a world of broken homes and illegitimacy; and this family and social instability is conducive to delinquency, drug addiction and criminal violence."²⁰

Despite passing such harsh judgment against the black ghetto, Clark recognized a specificity to inner-city black culture that merited comment: "within its pervasive

²⁰ Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 81.

pathology exists a surprising human resilience”; to wit, the isolated ghetto offered its residents a kind of “psychological safety,” whereby “one lives among one’s own and does not risk rejection among strangers.”²¹ Clark articulated a grudging respect for the culture of poverty to the extent that it nurtured intraracial bonds of survival in the face of hopelessness, disillusionment, and fear. Although they were excluded from “legitimate” paths toward social advancement, urban African Americans found a degree of security in the relationships they cultivated within the ghetto community itself. Paradoxically, then, for Clark, inner-city black culture was both a blessing and a curse: “The ghetto is hope, it is despair, it is churches and bars.”²²

The alternating pathology and resilience of inner-city black culture animated my discussion of Iceberg Slim’s literary strategy of “making a way out of no way” in Chapter 1. But this theme was echoed in a number of other venues in the late 1960s, including ethnographic accounts of urban African American life. Most notably, Elliot Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* gave voice to the experiences of marginalized black men in Washington, D.C.’s ghettos; in doing so, he brought sympathy and understanding to bear on frequently vilified subjects. Moreover, in treating “streetcorner” men as people with complex public and intimate lives, Liebow humanized their experiences, going so far as to say that their world—unlike mainstream society’s careerist and individualistic ethos—was “almost

²¹ Ibid., 11, 19.

²² Ibid., 11.

entirely given over to the construction and maintenance of personal relationships.”²³ In the early 1970s, the black nationalist poet and literary scholar Houston Baker agreed that more attention needed to be paid to the social richness of black urban life. Although he rejected the intricacies of Moynihan’s analysis, Baker did not dismiss the Report’s focus on culture outright. Rather, he called for the sensitive appraisal of “ghetto language” as a culturally singular mode of racial survival: “In a situation where property ownership is rare, employment scarce, excitement minimal, and literacy sparse, but where talk is abundant, it seems natural that status is conferred according to verbal ability.” Baker cited *Mama Black Widow* as one of the then-recent examples of the vitality and coherence of inner-city black culture.²⁴

The final dimension of black men’s victimization that the Moynihan Report codified in policy terms was what I call the *matriarchy thesis*, or the explanatory power of female-headed households in the black community to account for urban poverty. Despite the matriarchy thesis coming under fire from politicized black academics,²⁵ its discursive coordinates held sway in masculinized spaces of congregation and cultural practice on the street. The renowned folklorist Roger Abrahams showed how one of the preferred versions of the dozens played by Philadelphia’s inner-city boys in the early

²³ Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967) 161.

²⁴ Houston A. Baker, Jr., “From the Improbable Fields Down South: One View of Ghetto Language and Culture,” *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972) 115.

²⁵ See, for example, Robert Staples, “The Myth of the Black Matriarchy,” *Black Scholar* 1.3-4 (1970) 8-16.

1960s was the trading of insults about their mothers. He explained the logic behind the game like this:

[T]he fact that it has been a woman who has...threatened [the boy's] potential virility with her values and her authority makes the reversal of his attitudes that much more potentially explosive. Yet reverse them he must, for not to do so would be to place oneself in a vulnerable position with his peers and with the older males. So he must in some way exorcize her influence. He therefore creates a playground which enables him to attack some other person's mother, in full knowledge that that person must come back and insult his own. Thus someone else is doing the job for him, and between them they are castigating all that is feminine, frail, unmanly.²⁶

Abrahams's observations revealed how African American boys engaged in the dozens as a form of masculine fantasy-construction, whereby feelings of inadequacy and mother-fear were counteracted by acts of verbal dexterity and homosocial play. The game's code of one-upmanship ensured that each player's mother would be called out by another, thus stripping mother-fear of its hold on any single person. "Your mama" jibes thus allowed for the collective ventriloquizing of one's own unresolved feelings toward one's mother.

To be sure, trading in such insults risked perpetuating the sexist view of black women as overbearing, uncaring, and even man-hating mothers. In his autobiography *Die Nigger Die!* (1969), for example, the activist H. Rap Brown recalled enjoying playing the dozens as a kid, but he also depicted his mother as a stifling presence in his young life.

The problem for Brown was that his mother's desire to keep him off the streets—"where

²⁶ Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Black American Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1964; New Brunswick, NJ: AldineTransaction, 2006) 57. For a related analysis of these jokes, see David A. Schulz, *Coming Up Black: Patterns of Ghetto Socialization* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969) 67-69.

the action was”—posed a threat to his budding adolescent identity. If his “ol’ lady” had had her way, Brown thought, he would have been raised in “negro america.”²⁷ Brown’s class-inflected sentiments suggested that his mother wanted to see him conform to middle-class respectability. In thus aligning his mother with bourgeois (i.e., “white”) values, Brown also tapped into the sexist belief that black women only got ahead in society at the expense of black men’s well-being. To take another example from the era, writer Gregory Armstrong cited as fact that “it’s easier for women to get jobs [as] their sex makes it easier for them to be accepted by middle-class employers.” This imbalance in employment opportunities, Armstrong wrote, accounted for black men’s “resentment against the power of mother” and their “envy of the ease of female success.”²⁸

However suspect this kind of reasoning might have seemed at the time, Holloway House made use of it in its advertisements heralding the publication of *Mama Black Widow*. In an ad that appeared in the *Chicago Daily Defender* in November 1969, the book was said to tell the story of Otis Tilson, “his ‘niggerized’ father who ceases to be a man, his mother who destroys and is in turn destroyed by her hate, his older brother and his two beautiful sisters adrift in a dark world of pimpdom, crime and violence, where good is condemned and evil applauded.”²⁹ The object of the mother’s destructive force

²⁷ H. Rap Brown (Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin), *Die Nigger Die!* (1969; Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2002) 25.

²⁸ Gregory Armstrong, introduction, *Life at the Bottom*, ed. Armstrong (New York: Bantam, 1971) xviii. Excerpts from *Pimp* appeared in this book, which was a landmark anthology of writings on the culture of poverty in the 1960s.

²⁹ *Mama Black Widow* by Holloway House, advertisement, *Chicago Daily Defender* 8 Nov. 1969: 19.

goes unnamed in the ad copy, but it is not too difficult to imagine that it is precisely the black family itself—Otis’s father and siblings—that will suffer from her wrath. In this regard, the ad performs a narrative elision that sheds light on the meaning behind the novel’s title: we are led to assume that the father’s “niggerization” is a consequence not of structural inequalities but of the mother’s “hate.”

Taken together, the movement of black people out of the South to the inhospitable North, the cultural effects of unemployment on black men, and the assumed predominance of female-headed households among black families formed the context within which the gendering of post-civil rights disillusionment took root in the black community. While the Moynihan Report’s policy implications (i.e., the formalized institution of black patriarchy) were justifiably challenged by critics—notably black feminists³⁰—in its time, there were key ways in which its animating principles resonated with black men on the level of urban cultural practice and popular discourse.³¹ Indeed the affective dimensions of post-civil rights disillusionment, which the Moynihan Report indirectly and the Kerner Report directly linked to mid-1960s civil unrest, were

³⁰ See Estes, 120-21, 126-27; and Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

³¹ My analysis in the preceding paragraphs follows sociologist William Julius Wilson’s careful navigation of the structural and cultural forces that contribute to the persistence of poverty in urban America. Without discounting the institutional racism that restricts the life opportunities of inner-city black men, Wilson has written extensively about the need to recognize that certain cultural beliefs and practices also contribute to racial and class inequalities. In his work Wilson moves beyond normatively conservative and liberal accounts of poverty to suggest that structural and cultural forces work in tandem to make the racialization of urban poverty seem inevitable. Out of his wide body of scholarship, my analysis here is most informed by Wilson’s synoptic *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Norton, 2009).

profoundly gendered to reflect black men's anxiety and resentment over their failure to achieve breadwinning manhood. The unfortunate consequence of tapping into these sentiments—allowing them to stand in for the totality of post-civil rights urban black masculinity—was the subordination and even denigration of black women's roles as mothers, spouses, and extended kin. Insofar as female-headed households were “abnormalities” in the social fabric of capitalist America, their alleged pervasiveness in the black community was construed as a threat not only by policy analysts like Moynihan but also among marginalized black men. It was out of these men's feelings of victimization that Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines crafted their most graphic and harrowing novels—tales about black men trying to navigate their broken families.

Otis Tilson's Shame

By 1969 Iceberg Slim's *Pimp* and *Trick Baby* were far outselling the other paperbacks that Holloway House had published previously. Because the company did not have access to traditional retail outlets, such as bookstores and Book-of-the-Month Club programs, thousands of copies of Slim's books were sold through Holloway House's magazine-like distribution networks: newspaper kiosks, neighborhood corner shops, and orders by mail. Even through these venues, *Pimp* and *Trick Baby* went through twelve and five printings, respectively, in just two years.³²

³² *Mama Black Widow* by Holloway House, advertisement.

With the proven success of these titles, Holloway House began a marketing campaign that would characterize the literary content of black pulp fiction thereafter. Upon the initial publication of *Mama Black Widow*, an advertisement appeared at the back of the book heralding Holloway House's "'Black Experience' Paperback Library." All nine of the company's previously published black-authored books were advertised on the page,³³ including deCoy's *Nigger Bible*; his biography of Jack Johnson, *The Big Black Fire* (1969); and Louis Lomax's *To Kill a Black Man* (1968), a study of the lives and political philosophies of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X (Fig. 6).

[INSERT IMAGE]

Fig. 6

³³ This tally includes *Mama Black Widow*.

The common denominator among the books was their putative investment in racial authenticity: each told a “true” or “inside” story of some aspect of contemporary African American life. Despite the fact that Slim’s books were composed as novels and that the “female”-authored texts were largely ghostwritten by Holloway House editor Leo Guild (see Chapter 1), the company’s stress on racial authenticity sold well to urban African American readers who wished to encounter their everyday realities in a fiction-reading experience. For this reason, *Mama Black Widow*, like *Trick Baby* before it, was initially marketed as Slim’s biography of a “real” person whose life he only sought to chronicle in the text. Of course Holloway House’s deployment of the real within the context of the “black experience” was strategic—at once responsive to contemporaneous urban crises and focused on tapping into the psychic lives of marginalized black men. It was out of this context that *Mama Black Widow* emerged as a graphic reflection of the Moynihan Report and black men’s feelings of victimization more generally.

Mama Black Widow presents the story of Otis Tilson, a queer transvestite who struggles to free himself from the influence of his overbearing and abusive mother, Sedalia. Mama is a monstrous matriarch, and Slim seems to attribute the breakdown of the Tilson family more to her personal demons than to the impoverishment of Chicago’s ghettos, where the story takes place. Slim renders Mama such an uncompromisingly cruel figure that her physical and emotional abuse either directly or indirectly leads to the disillusionment and deaths of her husband and two of her children, with the other locked away for life. The lone survivor is Otis, but his particular “burden” is to live as a

“niggerized and deballed”³⁴ black man whose symbolic castration translates into his lived queerness.³⁵

Through Otis’s personal anecdotes and recounting of his family history, the first-person narrative spans close to fifty years (1919-1968), following the Tilsons’ sharecropping life in Meridian, Mississippi, their move up North to Chicago, and their family’s eventual destruction by a series of events set in motion by Mama. The book ends in April 1969 with Slim’s narrator persona saying that he just received word from a friend that Otis had committed suicide in New York City. A prominent theme throughout the novel is the withering of “traditional” black masculinity—represented by Papa’s God-fearing, wage-earning, and humble life in the South—in the black ghettos of the North. Before the Tilsons move to Chicago in 1936, Papa, or Frank, eked out a living on a white-owned cotton plantation. But when an inheritance gave the family the opportunity to relocate to Chicago, everyone “except Papa was thrilled and excited at the prospect of going to the enchanted North” (68). Otis makes it clear that the decision to migrate North was solely Mama’s and that it was informed less by what was good for the family and more by her pursuit of the kinds of consumerist frivolities that her cousin Bunny enjoys

³⁴ Iceberg Slim, *Mama Black Widow* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1969) 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

³⁵ At the risk of sounding anachronistic, I rely on the terms “queer” and “queerness” here to denote the transitivity of Otis’s (sexual) desire. Given the array of gender and sexual identities Otis embodies in *Mama Black Widow*, it seems to me reductive to simply label him “gay” or “homosexual.” Even if we were to grant that Otis is a “closeted” homosexual, the tensions which emerge out of that condition are multiply cathected and thus not strictly definable in terms of Otis’s gender “confusion.” On the critical import of sexual transitivity, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

already living in the big city. This script plays itself out soon after the family arrives in Chicago. The hand-me-down clothes Papa wears are too big; they make him “look like a child masquerading in his father’s storm coat and boots” (72). More consequentially, Papa is unable to find work because of the racism he encounters at the trade unions, which “didn’t accept blacks as members or apprentices” (107). Locked out of one of the primary means by which heterosexual men could identify themselves as men, Papa’s pride is damaged and he begins to drink heavily.³⁶

The crucial turn in the narrative occurs when Mama begins to work in Papa’s stead. Although Papa is determined not to “fail” his family (105), economic necessity demands that Mama seek work as a domestic to keep her family afloat. Once this shift in gender roles transpires, Slim carries the parents’ characterological features to the extreme, rendering Mama unabashedly narcissistic and Papa unredeemably pathetic. Mama starts going out with a local minister, not caring to hide her indiscretions from Papa, who is forced to stand by in “slaw jaw shock and awful anguish” (113). Mama retorts to her daughter Bessie, “Ah’m the onlyess wuk hoss ’roun heah, and Ah’m gonna

³⁶ This reading diverges from Candice Love Jackson’s assertion that in *Mama Black Widow* “neither the South nor the North can sufficiently support the African American community” (181). In fact, like the figure of Henry Upshaw in *Pimp*, Frank realizes his manhood through ingenuity and hard work in the South—a depiction I characterize as the masculinization of the black nuclear family in Chapter 1. Jackson’s claim is relevant, however, on the level of form. Her critique of Slim’s minstrel-like depictions of Southern black dialect (see below) suggests that his romanticization of Southern black manhood is coupled with a barely concealed aversion to Southern mores. See Jackson, “The Literate Pimp: Robert Beck, Iceberg Slim, and Pimping the African American Novel,” *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, ed. Lovalerie King and Linda F. Selzer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 167-83.

pleshu mahsef lak Ah don at uh bankit afta chu[r]ch” (113). Papa’s social and sexual redundancy is made explicit when, one night as he tries to come on to Mama and “pat[] whut’s his’n,” Mama deals a fatal blow to Papa’s manhood: “Niggah, git you paws offen me. Ah ain’t gappin’ mah laigs fer you. Uh man foots th bills fer whuts his’n. Mabbe yu is uh drunkard and mabbe you uh tramp. You sumpthin, but for sho you ain’t no man” (127). According to Sedalia’s logic, the loss of/bar to Papa’s breadwinning status negates his role as a husband and father. Her support for patriarchal reasoning (i.e., upholding the notion that access to a dependent’s sexuality is guaranteed by a partner’s breadwinning status) effectively kills Papa, who moves out of the Tilson apartment shortly thereafter and lives on his own until his death in 1941.

In response to Frank’s demise, the novel’s moral center and Papa’s only friend, a black man named Soldier Boy, gives voice to the “crisis” of black masculinity that *both* white racism and Mama have engendered. In a monologue sequence notable for its clear-headed social commentary, Soldier Boy solemnly reflects: “There are many black women who understand that black men living in this hell hole life where the white man has a strangle hold on the life line, goods and services, need their black women fighting the enemy with them, not unwittingly helping the enemy to uproot the black family. Black women who don’t understand this and crush their men are pathetic fools” (142-43). As a fictional analogue to the Moynihan Report, Soldier Boy’s speech offers a damning assessment of the allegedly cultural foundations of the crisis of black masculinity. By colluding with “the enemy,” he says, black women rob black men of their dignity and

respect. Imagining the situation in militaristic terms, the appropriately named Soldier Boy describes how black men are in a sense betrayed from within their own homes, thanks to a “deviant” matriarchal family structure.³⁷

The consequences for the Tilsons’ “inverted” family structure are severe, in Slim’s eyes. Frank, Jr., rebels against the image of his “weak” father and takes to the streets as a small-time hoodlum. Bessie bides her time outside of school by hanging out with a neighbor, Sally, who introduces her to the world of urban prostitution. Carol, the sibling to whom Otis can relate the best, has a steady waitressing job and begins dating a white ethnic German; when she gets pregnant by him, however, Mama lashes out at her, forcing a miscarriage that subsequently leads to Carol’s hemorrhaging to death. Violent, unsparing, and utterly monstrous—she has crushing, “spidery arms” (18) and weaves a “strangling web” of guilt-inducing abuse (291)—Mama’s brazen wielding of phallic power has a more intricate effect on Otis: she turns him inside out, instituting in his normatively “straight” black male psyche a “freakish bitch” (7) named Sally³⁸ who likes to dress up in drag and have sex with men. Following a straightforward Freudian account

³⁷ Soldier Boy’s status as a proud black man is linked to his being a veteran of World War I. Not coincidentally, the Moynihan Report contended that increased military service among African American men could help them rebuild their broken families. In the absence of employment opportunities in the inner city, the Report suggested that black men’s best chance of realizing a measure of social equality was to enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces. The Report’s meritocratic view of the military cast it as “a world where the category ‘Negro’ and ‘white’ do not exist.” This post-racial ideal was premised on the notion that the military offered “a world away from women, a world run by strong men of unquestioned authority... where rewards, if limited, are granted on the basis of performance” (88).

³⁸ Otis names his alter ego “in contemptible memory of the ‘come [sic] dump’ that had led big dumb Bessie to ruin” (236).

of homosexuality's emergence out of the "inversion" of the Oedipal dynamic, Otis has internalized Mama's prohibition of the father's social and sexual agency and thereby repeats the experience of male "passivity" in gay sex.

In one chapter, after paying a visit to Mama, Otis is wracked with anxiety and guilt—he cannot bear to think that he has gone against his mother's wishes by refusing to stay close to her. He reflects, "I knew I had to be careful that I didn't wind up in a hotel bed beneath some strange brute bulling himself into me" (23). Although there should be no necessary correlation between gay sex and "some strange brute bulling himself into [Otis]," this is exactly what happens in all of the gay sexual episodes narrated in the novel. In the aforementioned chapter, for example, Sally takes over, despite Otis's wariness, to dress the protagonist up as Tilly (his drag persona) and lead him to bed with an ugly stranger named Big Lovell, nicknamed "Lovee." Lovee's huge stature, "gorilla face" (29), and "fat lips" (32) fail to warn Tilly of his potential monstrosity. Lovee turns out to be a hustler who steals all of Tilly's money and beats him to a pulp before penetrating him with force. The brutality of the attack—"horrible rending pain exploded through the raw core of my being like I had been halved by an axe" (39)—drives home for Otis, and the reader, how truly debased his condition is. The shame he feels afterward, the intense desire Otis has to "dump[] the treacherous bitch, Sally, once and for all" (42), might be described as the affect surrounding an "unnatural" black masculinity, an internalized castration of which Otis ultimately wants to rid himself.

Despite the overwhelming sense of mother-fear in the novel, it would be a mistake to restrict the experience of reading *Mama Black Widow* to the sociological terms of the Moynihan Report. As I argued in Chapter 1, a key component of discerning racial authenticity in black pulp fiction was the urban black male reader's idealization of masculinity through it. This idealization was determined by the reader's fantasy of projected phallic power, which itself took the form of hustling acumen, community respect, sexual prowess, and/or control over women. *Mama Black Widow* appealed to this same mode of readerly fantasy but in a way that accomplished something different from *Pimp's* and *Trick Baby's* idealizations. Rather than hold up a street ideal of black masculinity, the novel presented a model of black masculine abjection that affirmed heterosexuality in confounding ways. My argument takes *Mama Black Widow* beyond the scope of the Report to suggest that Otis's queerness—his struggle to “free himself from the freakish bitch burning inside him” (7)—was itself an object of readerly fantasy and contemplation. Indeed Slim's vision of black men's victimization held its own pleasures for readers—ones that affirmed both their heterosexual maleness and their feelings of social impotence through the embodied queerness of Otis Tilson.

My readings proceed from a more complex engagement with the question of shame in the text. Robert Reid-Pharr and Kathryn Bond Stockton have meditated on the constitutive role a “negative” affect like shame plays in black gender and sexual relations. In her book *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, Stockton writes, “The black (object) homosexual allows a kind of contact with the boundary-breakage that the community, at

least on some level, actually seeks.”³⁹ In Stockton’s account, the shamed queer represents the black community’s efforts to apprehend the very terms of its social organization. By homing in on the embodied figure of abjection, the community comes to delineate its terms of belonging (i.e., who belongs and who doesn’t), and just how far someone can go in inhabiting its space as an outcast. Reid-Pharr specifies why the “scapegoated” queer plays such an important role in the black community: “we must point to that which is unauthentic, base, and perverse in order to adequately define the borders of black ‘realness.’”⁴⁰ Reid-Pharr’s radical suggestion here is that defining racial authenticity requires a form of ritualized exclusion or shaming, but one that continues to desire the object of that exclusion or shame. Following these critical insights, I contend that Otis’s character functioned as an abject queer through whom readers were able to negotiate their relationship to “black ‘realness.’” Put differently, readers desired Otis’s shame—they made it an object of their readerly fantasy—in order to appraise their own investment in racial authenticity.

Approaching Otis’s shame in this manner reveals a paradoxical figuring of black gender relations in the broken family narrative. For one, Mama is imagined not only as a monstrous matriarch who shames African American men but also as a character of perseverance and fortitude. Indeed, because Mama wields symbolic authority in the

³⁹ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 22.

⁴⁰ Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 133.

narrative, she is accorded a degree of Otis's respect within it. We can better understand this dynamic by reconsidering the street-level word games I cited earlier. The urban sociologist Ulf Hannerz elaborated on Roger Abrahams's study of "your mama" jokes to show how one-liners such as "Your mother play baseball for the U.S. Navy" and "Your mother smoke a pipe" worked to consolidate urban male youth's group identity. By articulating the mother's "masculine" qualities (and implicitly acknowledging their symbolic lack), Hannerz reasoned, "the boys fashion for themselves a collective ritual cleansing in which they point out each other's weaknesses, so that they can finally all emerge as better males."⁴¹ As an eminently *social* performance of black male anxiety, then, your mama jokes at once idealized the mother's masculinism and made fun of her "improper" embodiment thereof. In allowing young men to externalize their profound sense of lack, these word games advanced a qualified respect for the mother's presumed phallic authority.

Operating on the same level of vernacular fantasy as your mama jokes, Slim's novel did its part to idealize qualities that were (incongruously) embodied in the figure of the mother. Specifically, Mama's wearing the pants in the Tilson household⁴²—that is, her status as the family breadwinner—illustrated for readers the kind of resilience she must display in order to survive the racism she encounters as a domestic servant. Mama,

⁴¹ Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 129, 134. On the prevalence of your mama word games in inner-city communities, see Onwuchekwa Jemie, ed., *Yo' Mama! New Raps, Toasts, Dozens, Jokes and Children's Rhymes from Urban Black America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

⁴² For Slim's use of this breadwinning metaphor, see "Mama's New Pants," pp. 131-53.

Slim reveals, is constantly tested and denigrated by her white female employers, one of whom places two quarters squarely on the living-room floor to see if she will “steal” them. Mama’s experience is no different from that of thousands of African American domestic servants who had to face similar indignities to support their families in the urban North. Along with low wages and no guarantee of job security, black women during the Great Migration had to endure slights, accusations, and explicit acts of shaming as domestic servants.⁴³ Mama’s taking pride in supporting her family is thus mitigated by the indignity of putting up with her employers’ racism. Looking back on Mama’s life, Otis remembers that whenever he saw her walking down the street on her way home from work, she would “set her shoulders proud as the devil and quicken away the lag in her walk” (121). More than anything, Otis recognizes, it was important for Mama that her children not see the physical toll of having white people humiliate her at work, day in and day out. In these brief but telling asides, Slim crafted a way for readers to identify with Mama’s struggles (she does provide for her family, after all) as well as a frame for understanding her seemingly irrational hatred of “white folks.”⁴⁴

⁴³ On the experience of African American domestic servants during the Great Migration, see two excellent oral histories: Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity and the Great Migration* (New York: Kodansha, 1994); and Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family among Black Female Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland, 1994).

⁴⁴ Mama’s story of her childhood provides further motivation for her “racism.” In rural Louisiana, where she grew up, Mama’s father was killed by the white man he worked for; after his death, her mother ended up moving in with the boss. When she was ten, her father’s killer, Mr. Dawkins, abused Mama sexually until she ran away. Mama relates this story to Junior to help him understand why she “whipped Carol fo lettin’ uh peckahwood big her” (211).

Significantly, the qualified respect Slim affords to Mama is not extended to Papa once the Tilsons move to Chicago. Despite the many instances where Papa is held up as a fallen idol of Southern black masculinity, *Mama Black Widow* casts his feminization through unemployment and Mama's rebuffs as an object of pity and contempt. Like Otis, who inherited his father's big brown eyes, "smooth yellow skin," "full lips," and a "delicate tip tilted nose" (27-28), Papa is a pathetic figure of Mama's shaming. Yet in overlaying his emasculation onto his near-whiteness, Slim represents Papa's abjection as being out of step with the desires of a generation of black youth that grew up in Northern cities. The day after Big Lovell rapes Tilly, Otis drives around the streets of Chicago to get away from the "unbearable...possessiveness" of Mama (48). With the riots in full blaze following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.,⁴⁵ Otis sees that a black mob has cornered a white policeman; he observes, the "cop's starch white face [was] paralyzed in fear and shock" (49). This is the last image we have of the policeman before the leader of the mob, a man "larger than Big Lovell" and equally monstrous (49), beats him to the ground and incites the mob to grind him into an "insensible heap" (50). Tellingly, Otis recalls that this same look of impending doom fell on Papa's face when the family first moved to Chicago: "He was staring at the desolate concrete wilderness and he had a look of fearful awe on his face that I would see many years later on the face of a white cop trapped by a mob of blacks" (68-69). Connecting

⁴⁵ The date of King's assassination is April 4, 1968. Significantly, Mama's birthday falls on the same day.

Papa's social impotence and the policeman's downfall in this way underscored Slim's view that inner-city poverty posed significant challenges to both traditional Southern black patriarchy and, in a later moment, the racist police state. Both forms of symbolic authority faltered under the social conditions of urban poverty: one father figure failed to evolve into a viable urban black masculinity while the other sought to repress it.

For his part, Otis is sympathetic to the policeman's fate and calls the district station to report the incident. As a witness to the uprising, Otis believes the rioters "dishonor the philosophy and death of our leader" (49). Yet I argue that Slim contests this reference to King's philosophy of nonviolence by showing how Otis's pacifism (i.e., his "softness") and his father's lost dignity render them unfit to survive in the black ghetto.⁴⁶ Specifically, the shame of the son is linked to the shame of the father through Slim's use of what I call "goop" imagery in the text. With regard to the former, Sally does not feel shame when "she" is being penetrated; it is only after sex, when Otis's "real" identity emerges in the post-coital moment, that the character feels ashamed: "Each time I'd want to die as I lay there alone with the pungent slime oozing from me. I'd cry my heart out in the lonely darkness in remorse for the abuse, humiliation and shame of it all, and guilt that I had set the bitch inside me free" (23). The "pungent slime" of cum reminds Otis that he is weak, that he is being used, and that he is not fully a "man." In a related vein,

⁴⁶ For a realist interpretation of references to King's legacy in the novel, see Peter A. Muckley, *Iceberg Slim: The Life as Art* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance, 2003) 50-51. Muckley makes the valuable point that King's philosophy of nonviolence is intertwined with Otis's sensitive persona, but he does not account for how that link is problematized by the shame Otis feels about his queerness.

after Mama becomes the breadwinner of the family and rejects Papa's sexual advances, Otis notes that Papa "started the strange practice of pouring sorghum molasses over his beans and whipping it into a gluey mess before gulping it down. He never touched a morsel of food that Mama had bought or cooked. He bought and prepared his own food" (131). Here Papa's willed separation from Mama's care leads to his consuming a gooey mush of soft food. The pathetic image shows Papa swallowing his pride and not being able to do anything about it. Between these two examples, goop reminds the reader that, however much they are victims of sexual abuse and female "dominance," respectively, Otis and Papa are simply not "hard" enough to survive on the streets of the black ghetto.

Otis's softness, of course, has everything to do with his sexuality. Yet given the debasement of his queerness throughout *Mama Black Widow*, we could say, following Reid-Pharr, that Otis's sexual exploits offer moments in the text where the authenticity of heterosexual black urban masculinity is positively (as opposed to negatively, in Papa's character) reinforced. This gesture is accomplished most explicitly in Otis's relationship with his on-and-off-again female love interest Dorcas, the daughter of the local undertaker. As a young man, Otis tells Mama that he needs someone like Dorcas in his life to "cure" him of his attraction to men (and thereby his internalization of Mama's authority). The problem for Otis is that he cannot "naturally" muster an erection to have sex with Dorcas, for she too instills in him a fear of the feminine's capacity to elide his manhood. Yet it is precisely Otis's lack of sexual prowess with Dorcas—and the shame he feels because of it—that infuses the text with the most heteronormative representations

of her body. Otis's fear of Dorcas's sexuality leads him to call her an "Amazon" (240), but one whose individual features, like the "boyish leanness of her thighs" (241), he can find individually attractive. Notably, Otis cannot sustain an erection with Dorcas without imagining her individual parts as male prostheses: in one scene, he "gazed at her tits, jerking like monstrous male organs in climax" (9). Even when Otis is able to do that, however, he cannot escape the idea that Dorcas is "fuckish as hell" (246) and that her vagina represents her unquenchable desire for sex. In psychoanalytic terms, Dorcas's lack can never be filled, and Otis's putatively "homosexual" fear is in fact a general condition of male heterosexual anxiety surrounding female sexuality. "Suppose she's got an odd cunt," Otis muses, "and her main thrill spot is not on top, but six inches deeper than my tiny dick can reach" (247).

To be sure, the way Slim crafted Dorcas's body to instill a sense of vagina-fear in Otis was profoundly shaped by heterosexual black men's desires. In one memorable scene of failed sexual intercourse, every aspect of Dorcas's appearance is made to appear at once threatening (to Otis) and desirable (to the reader): her "thick bush had the luxuriant sheen of crow feathers," while her "jutting velvet tits [had] nipples deliciously deformed to the size and color of black cherries" (266). Otis is enthralled by her "epic sexuality" (266), and though he makes a game effort at seducing her (by imagining her to be an "African warrior in his death throes" [267]), he quickly loses his erection once she gets on top of him. Nonetheless, this ultimate failure does not negate the impulse to conquer her body, which Otis identifies as a measure of self-repair and which Slim

provocatively stokes through his familiar representations of monstrous female sexuality: “I was going to spear into and master her crimson cunt and discover my eternal manhood in [its] pungent fire” (267-68).

If Otis’s shame invested readers in a heterosexual black male’s fantasy of female sexuality—a touchstone of what Reid-Pharr would call “black ‘realness’”—it also led them to a paradoxical valuation of the black phallus, properly restored to male characters. In the most painful scenes of abjection in *Mama Black Widow*, Slim created a queer equivalence whereby the depths of Dorcas’s vagina (and female “pleasure” as such) could be accessed only if readers psychically invested in the “monstrous dicks” that sodomize Sally (305). In other words, the debasement of Otis’s body through male-on-male rape staged for readers the black male penis’s “natural destination” in “that part of [Dorcas],” her vagina, where it most belonged (249). In this account, Sally’s taking pleasure in being fucked stands in for satisfying Dorcas’s “carnal” nature: when she is penetrated, Otis’s alter ego “feel[s] marvelous with spastic orgasmic waves ripping deep inside me—like a woman” (23).

But this realization of “female” pleasure is problematic to the extent that it tacitly valorizes the male organ that will, in other scenes, do brutal violence to Otis’s body. For example, Big Lovell’s penis is described as “terrifying—horselike—monstrous—deformed—impossible!” (39), yet in recounting the incident to Dorcas, Otis finds that she is “relieved that it wasn’t another woman” (46). As if she were trying to reroute Lovee’s violence in the service of Otis’s own phallic power, Dorcas reassuringly says, “I love you

enough to help you get well. You weren't born that way" (46). In another episode, Otis's long-term lover Mike beats him mercilessly for questioning Mike's flirting with a much younger woman. Because Sally is Mike's "hopeless slave and sucker," she lets him "sodomize [her] until [her] rectum was raw and quivering" after the beating (299). Here too, though, Slim makes a fetish of Mike's sexual prowess by having Otis later fantasize about the "maddening sensation of his plunging organ burying itself in the freakish depth of me" (299).

As the "freakish" stand-in for both Otis's and Dorcas's desire, Sally's function in *Mama Black Widow* was to be the cathected object of urban black male readers' fantasy of racial authenticity. Framed by the broken family narratives of post-civil rights disillusionment, Sally's debased queerness constituted the grounds on which a heteronormative urban black masculinity could be tenuously affirmed.⁴⁷ On the one hand, Sally's description of her body as that of a "filthy, stinking, drunken tramp, cock sucking, asshole licking, lousy faggot bastard" compels her to cry out that someone "kill" her at the end of the text (288). At the same time, by fully embodying this litany of shamed and shameful identities, Sally stands as an obdurate presence within the text, a vivid reminder

⁴⁷ Matthew Cleveland arrives at a similar reading of the novel but through a strictly Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. See his chapter "The Queer Mulatto as the Impossible Thing in *Mama Black Widow*," pp. 81-140, in "The Substrates of Transgression: A Žižekian Account of Four Iceberg Slim Novellas," diss., University of New South Wales, 2001. It should be noted, however, that Cleveland's wholesale application of psychoanalysis to the text limits his interpretive critique of the novel. Cleveland loses sight of the uniquely historical and racialized dimensions of Otis's experience by, among other things, reducing his queer identity to that of a "hysterical" subject beholden to a "malevolent maternal Superego" (84).

of the kind of victimization Otis is up against *in his own community*. Of the scapegoated black queer Reid-Pharr has written:

[A]s we travel through the underworld, the muck, the shit that is represented by the black homosexual, we are able to access, if only briefly, new modes of understanding and existence that seem to wait just beyond our grasp. Thus, the black homosexual continues as such a potent figure in American literature because he represents not only a site of death, but also and importantly, of resurrection.⁴⁸

Embodying the kernel of the Real—“the muck, the shit”—in *Mama Black Widow*, Sally’s was the persona through which readers could actively engage their conflicting feelings about the fate of the Tilsons in Chicago’s ghettos. Through her pain, Sally bridged for readers the failed masculinity of the Migration generation (threatening Otis’s sexual prowess with “shriveled limpness” [268]) and the revolutionary impulses of the post-civil rights generation (being the receptacle for black men’s semen, a “come dump” [236]). For the failed dreams and the fantasies yet to be realized that she represented for urban black male readers, Sally was at once reviled and desired.

Whoreson and Mother-Love

Like all well-received authors of pulp fiction, Iceberg Slim inspired others to write. This kind of inspiration emerges out of both an admiration for the author’s style or storytelling abilities and a desire to participate in the literary market in which the author has gained a degree of recognition. Donald Goines was no exception. Born in Detroit in 1937, Goines

⁴⁸ Reid-Pharr, 133.

was raised by his parents in a relatively stable lower-middle-class household.⁴⁹ But the Goines family's proximity to poverty in the informally segregated spaces of Detroit's inner cities introduced Donald to a side of urban life that would consume him as a young man. After a brief stint in the military, Goines returned to Detroit and engaged in sundry criminal activities to support his heroin addiction. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, Goines spent time in and out of jail for, among other things, attempted larceny, armed robbery, and bootlegging. It was during his final stint in prison that Goines encountered Iceberg Slim's fiction and started writing for publication himself.

By the time Goines was released from prison, in December 1970, he had already secured a contract from Holloway House to publish a manuscript titled *Whoreson*. But while the manuscript for this book was held up in the editorial process, the company quickly assembled, edited, and published another of Goines's manuscripts, this one titled *Dopefiend* (1971). Goines's autobiographical novel mirrored his own path, as Teddy and his girlfriend Terry are lured away from the comfort and security of their middle-class lifestyles and into the world of heroin addiction. In order to support their habits, and without holding any form of gainful employment, Teddy and Terry become street hustlers and resort to conning and prostitution to earn money. Significantly, as the couple and their fellow addicts become more desperate for cash, they subject themselves to

⁴⁹ The following biographical account is derived from Eddie B. Allen, Jr., *Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004); and Pamela Lee Gray, "Donald Joseph Goines," *African American National Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Oxford African American Studies Center*, web, 19 Sep. 2009.

increasingly degrading acts for pay. The local pusher, a portly and utterly exploitative man named Porky, exacts physical and sexual abuse of all his drug-addicted customers. While it is true that Porky wields symbolic authority in the novel, he does so without affirming black masculinity as such. The specter of Porky's "freakishness" follows Teddy, Terry, and the other addicts throughout *Dopefiend*.⁵⁰ In addition to the threat of male rape, Porky is known to sic his dog on women; in one especially unbearable scene, he forces an addict named Minnie (note Goines's ironic use of cartoon animal character names) to perform fellatio on the beast. Minnie is so completely dehumanized by the experience that she hangs herself shortly thereafter. Terry discovers the body later, and the grisly sight is made truly horrific when she sees a "child's head protruding from between Minnie's naked legs" (264).

Dopefiend clearly elaborated on the gendered themes of disillusionment that Slim had explored in *Mama Black Widow*. Both books worked to show that patriarchal symbolic authority was either inverted by monstrous mothers or perverted by exploitative drug pushers. At the same time, the novels differed greatly in the contexts of black men's victimization that they represented: whereas *Mama Black Widow* highlighted the withering of a traditional Southern black patriarchy, *Dopefiend* emphasized the tenuousness of middle-class black masculinity in the urban North. The difference between the two novels may be attributed to their authors' respective life experiences.

⁵⁰ Donald Goines, *Dopefiend* (1971; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1991) 271. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Goines was close to twenty years Slim's junior, and although both men were born in major Midwestern metropolises, Slim grew up with more of a "Southern" consciousness. The memory of the South likely lingered over the Maupin household as both of Slim's recently migrated parents found it difficult to adjust to life in the North. Goines's parents, on the other hand, attained a degree of lower-middle-class security by starting their own dry cleaning business in Detroit; their relationship with the family's Southern roots was more distant. The generational differences between the two men were further borne out by their post-high school activities: Slim enrolled at Tuskegee University in Alabama, only to be expelled for illegal whiskey trafficking three years later, while Goines enrolled in the U.S. Air Force at age fifteen and served in Japan during the Korean War.

That both men returned to their cities of birth after their sojourns and took up hustling and pimping in earnest might have been a historical coincidence, but it was not unusual in the broad scheme of the Great Migration's effects on urban youth. Slim returned to the streets he knew all too well, while Goines found few employment opportunities in Detroit outside of his parents' dry cleaning business. In fact Detroit's informally segregated economy helped push Goines back on the streets,⁵¹ which was where he could continue the heroin habit he picked up while serving in East Asia. The Moynihan Report infamously recommended that urban black men enroll in the military to

⁵¹ On the racial discrimination endemic to Detroit's postwar political economy, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

sidestep urban unemployment and start on the path toward middle-class stability.⁵² For Goines, however, the time he spent in the Air Force sowed the seeds of the loss of his tenuous lower-middle-class identity. The story that came out of that loss was *Dopefiend*.

But in 1972 Holloway House finally published Goines's novel *Whoreson* (Figs. 7 and 8)—a work that completely turned black men's feelings of victimization on their head. Goines achieved this, I argue, by having his protagonist embrace the mother's phallic power and, in turn, wield it in such a way as to control other women. The novel presents the story of Whoreson Jones, the son of a Detroit prostitute named Jessie and a long-forgotten white john. Whoreson's first-person narrative opens in 1940 with his unceremonious birth and Jessie's act of naming him. Whoreson recounts that he was born in a prostitute hangout run by an older woman nicknamed "Big Mama." When the doctor asked Jessie to bestow a name on her son, she "laughed suddenly, a cold, nerve-tingling sound."⁵³ The doctor saw "so much hate" in Jessie's eyes because, for her, the newborn was a reminder that she had been "badly misused by some man" (11). As if to mark her baby with the stigma of that experience, Jessie declared, "I've got just the name for the little sonofabitch—Whoreson, Whoreson Jones." When the doctor demanded that she give him a "Christian name" instead, Jessie retorted, "I'm naming my son just what he is. I'm a whore and he's my son. If he grows up ashamed of me, to hell with him. That's what I'm wantin' to name him, and that's what it's goin to be" (11). This scene

⁵² *The Negro Family*, 86-89.

⁵³ Donald Goines, *Whoreson* (1972; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2004) 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

establishes a different starting point for *Whoreson* in contrast to *Mama Black Widow*: whereas Otis's shame is internalized in the intrapsychic form of Sally, Jessie envelops Whoreson's whole social identity from birth with the shame of being a "trick baby" (10). Significantly, this act of naming both externalizes shame *as* a social identity and brings the mother in line with the son's debasement. By coldly embracing her identity as a whore, Jessie establishes a paradoxically close, tight-knit bond to this "son of a bitch."

[INSERT IMAGES]
Fig. 7 Fig. 8

Because the narrative begins from this premise, *Whoreson* tells a very different story from *Mama Black Widow*. If Otis's unresolved conflicts with Sedalia help to explain his internalized emasculation, Whoreson grows up in the image of Jessie, who in every aspect of her life legitimates a heteronormative patriarchal order. Indeed Jessie's defiant identification as a shameless whore ("Jessie had never been ashamed of anything

she did, to my knowledge” [41]) leads other people in the ghetto community to respect her: “Jessie had a way of walking that made people think a queen was going past. To carry myself with such pride was my desire” (42). Jessie’s introduction of Whoreson into this order takes the form of priming him as her “little pimp” from a young age (13, 23). Jessie educates Whoreson in the methods of effective pimping by making him collect her “trap money,” or the monetary take after a night’s work. Jessie’s lessons are at once financially savvy and entirely misogynistic: working for him serves as a kind of trial run, whereby Jessie schools Whoreson in the “art” of extracting as much labor and profit from women’s bodies as possible (40). Thus, in Goines’s hands, the heteronormative fantasies of *Mama Black Widow* are given full expression: the phallus-wielding mother facilitates the son’s survival in the ghetto by cultivating his sense of entitlement to other women.

The affirmation of Whoreson’s symbolic authority by his mother follows an Oedipal narrative of the son’s socialization into the heteronormative patriarchal order. When a childhood love interest named Janet recoils at Whoreson’s stated intention to become a pimp, he responds by recalling a piece of advice Jessie told him when he was three years old: “Son, the way I’m taking care of you now, when you get old, always have you a woman to take care of you like this” (31). Janet’s own aspirations to become a famous singer are incommensurate with Whoreson’s desire to find a woman like his mother to take care of him. To be sure, this desire translates into garnering a “stable” of whores whom Whoreson can dominate sexually and emotionally and whose earnings he can live off of. But Whoreson’s thwarted romance with Janet also points up a different set

of issues for the text: the threat of incest with Jessie herself. In a classically Oedipal dynamic, we find that Whoreson is in love with this “tall, strange, beautiful woman” who is his mother (42). In contrast to Otis, who is ever fearful of Sedalia’s “spidery arms,” Whoreson craves Jessie’s intimacy, although he is wary of people getting the “wrong impression” of his relationship with her (42).

Recognizing the threat of incest between mother and son in his narrative, Goines included an episode that would set Whoreson on the path toward Oedipal conflict resolution. After one evening of work, Jessie returns to the apartment and effectively goes on a date with Whoreson. The two sit down over cups of coffee and some marijuana to enjoy each other’s company. The sexual tension between them is palpable: “Jessie silently stared across the table at me. Neither of us had spoken yet, nor was I going to be the one to break the silence” (43). Once the silence is broken by Jessie putting on a Billie Holiday record, mother and son ease into caffeinated conversation and a pot-induced high. At sunrise Whoreson helps Jessie to her bed and leans down to “kiss her on her lips”; however, Jessie turns her head away to avoid his incestuous desire (44). She kisses Whoreson on the cheek instead and says, “There, you’re a big boy now, save your passionate kisses for your girlfriends” (44). This meaningful gesture short-circuits Whoreson’s mother-love in a way that redirects its energy toward finding those women who will “take care” of him as a “big boy.” Whoreson’s romance with his mother ends at this precise moment; when a local thug calls him out for “fucking his mammy” a few pages later (46), Whoreson responds by beating him to a pulp. The boy’s insult is

symbolically resonant, of course, which is why Whoreson lashes out at him. But in order to stave off incestuous desire, Whoreson will have to put everything Jessie has taught him into practice, becoming his own man.

The majority of the narrative following Jessie's gesture recounts Whoreson's rise as a young pimp working the streets of Flint and Detroit, Michigan. Whoreson begins pimping in earnest as an adolescent when Jessie falls ill and has to stop working. Throughout the novel, Whoreson reminds himself of how Jessie's injunction for him to achieve masculinity by pimping informs his actions. In one episode, where Whoreson has just lost two whores to a rival pimp, he reflects, "The only thing that kept me from going on the wild was my earlier teaching. Jessie had always taught me that I was better than five whores. If a bitch ever left me, it wasn't my loss, it was hers" (89). The convenience of this justification is that it defuses any feelings of shame or emasculation Whoreson might suffer at the hands of the rival pimp. At the same time, it drives Whoreson to become an even more ruthless controller of women (i.e., so that no woman will ever choose to leave him in the future).

Later in the narrative, following a stint in the penitentiary for bringing a white woman into his employ, Whoreson rebuilds his stable by employing the cold and calculating ruthlessness that his mother was known for. To harness his first whore, Whoreson tricks an established prostitute, Ruby, into thinking he needs her help in teaching him how to become a successful pimp. After three weeks of gaining her trust, Whoreson reveals his true design for Ruby: he beats her down and strips her naked, but

rather than have sex with her (“Cunt was the last thing in my mind” [212]), Whoreson exerts his control over Ruby by lashing her with his “pimp sticks,” or coat hangers twisted in such a fashion as to make for an extremely painful weapon of torture (212). Whoreson effectively breaks Ruby down, as one would do to domesticate an animal, teaching her “respect” and what it takes to be a “good whore” (213). Nonetheless, this stunningly cruel act echoes a detail about Jessie that appears at the beginning of the novel. Jessie had pimp sticks of her own, which she used on her son when he was “exceptionally bad” (24-25). In one episode, when Whoreson and his friend Tony are brought home from school by the police for gang-related activity, Jessie strikes them mercilessly with her pimp sticks as her “large breasts strained to burst free from the sheer nightgown she wore” (26). Following the Oedipal script that Goines lays out in the novel, the sexualization of Jessie’s features in this scene from Whoreson’s childhood would be rechanneled by Whoreson to fuel the brutalizing misogyny that he displays as a pimp.

In light of Jessie’s legitimation of black male privilege, we see how Goines’s externalization of shame in *Whoreson* consistently advances the protagonist’s social capital in the underground economy of prostitution. Whenever Whoreson encounters a potentially disarming setback or, more specifically, a threat to his masculinity, he draws from Jessie’s psychic reserve of steely determination to reconstitute his urban black masculine persona. This process is most tellingly revealed in Whoreson’s sexual experiences immediately following his incarceration. Having spent six years in prison, we learn that Whoreson developed “an obsession to commit sodomy” (207). Indeed a

friend of Whoreson's observes that he had reputation as a "strange fruit" in prison, raping both white and black inmates: "If you saw a weak man, he was goin' to be had" (240). Yet even with the emergence of this potential site for Whoreson's emasculation—"my preference was for the abnormal" (204), he reflects—Whoreson manages to cast his anal raping of various women as an act of asserting his masculine authority. For example, his first post-incarceration sexual "partner" is one of Tony's whores; after raping her repeatedly, she remarks, "[Y]ou ain't no man, you're animal, and a dog at that, you bastard you" (204). Recalling his prison moniker as the "Boss Dog" (193), Whoreson embraces the whore's insult and his attachment to doing violence to her anus: "When you see your man, bitch, tell him my only regret is that it was you I fucked in the ass instead of him. Tell him not to worry, though, 'cause he's got his coming" (205). Whoreson turns shame on its head by claiming that, *so long as he is on top* (the "Boss Dog," or "top dog"), his anal fixation is a way of asserting dominance over the whore (rendering her "debased") and engaging in homosocial battle with Tony, now a rival pimp in the black ghetto. Paradoxically, then, anal sex, whether "real" (with "weak" men in prison or with women outside of prison) or symbolic (with Tony, through Ruby), becomes for Whoreson a strategy of getting back on the path toward heteronormative patriarchy.

Surprisingly, by the end of the narrative, that path ultimately leads to the desire for family stability and middle-class respectability. For all of its focus on Whoreson's pimping exploits, the novel's denouement makes clear that his deepest wish is to reunite with Janet in New York City and to lead a happy life with her. Despite his success in the

ghetto, Whoreson becomes alienated from the “crowded streets, whores working on each corner, drunks staggering up and down the street, [and the] filth and poverty staring you in the face no matter where you looked” (219). Whoreson grows weary of the hustle of impoverished black life; he now only “tolerate[s]” the ghetto “as a means to an end.” He promises himself that at some point he will “drive away and never look back” (220). To this end, he pulls off a double con, swindling his former friend Tony and a lonely white woman who wants to marry him out of \$26,000 between the two of them. Although the white woman, Stella, offers Whoreson a great degree of stability in her middle-class suburban home, he rejects this idea out of hand: “Stella was just one more woman for me to use on my way to the top...I didn’t care for no one woman, black or white; they were all just stepping-stones...Maybe Preacher was right when he said I was a man caught between two races with neither one wanting me. If so, I didn’t give a damn. I didn’t need to be anyone or anything but me” (259-60). Like White Folks’s character in *Trick Baby*, Whoreson’s rhetoric of rugged individualism defuses the anxiety a mixed-race person might feel about not being “authentically” white or black. But unlike Folks, Whoreson defines racial authenticity for himself strictly in terms of the “masculine” (i.e., “on top”) privilege he exercises as someone who feeds off people’s weaknesses to get ahead.

The irony of this particular fashioning of racial authenticity was that it positioned a narrative of individual advancement against the social welfare of all the characters that propped up and sustained the narrative. It could even be said that there was a hint of class resentment in Goines’s cynical view that the ghetto and its denizens were only a “means”

to an “end” for Whoreson. Goines’s fall from a tenuous lower-middle-class existence into drug-addled poverty and long-term incarceration might have been the motivation behind investing his fiction with a kind of visceral fascination with and repulsion from the inner workings of the ghetto. Lacking Slim’s vernacular dexterity and a more sympathetic understanding of ghetto life, *Whoreson* reduced black pulp fiction’s lifeworld to that of a single man’s self-fulfilling journey to come into his own.

This individual-centered narrative choice found its purest expression in the esteem Goines accorded to the middle-class lifestyle Whoreson desires at the end of the novel. Following his double con, Whoreson has enough money to relocate to New York and try to convince Janet that she should be with him. Whoreson wants to invest his money in “[s]omething legitimate for a change” (268), and Janet’s career as a singer seems to offer the perfect opportunity for such an investment. Even so, Whoreson’s desire for middle-class respectability takes the form of the continuation of his control over women. At a dinner with Janet’s agent and her white singing partner (and former fiancé) Ringo, he makes a spur-of-the-moment business decision for her, saying that because they are getting married, she will not be able to go on tour with Ringo. Later that night, when Whoreson tries to break Janet down to have sex with him, he manipulates her by suggesting she will only have sex with men (usually white) who have money. After he shows Janet a receipt of his well-endowed bank account, Whoreson forces himself on her and delights in the “wonderful discovery of her virginity” (279). Despite her rape, Janet stays with Whoreson and bears him a child, whom he hopes “would never have to

experience the poverty and vice of the slums” (296). The novel ends with Whoreson serving time in prison for violating the Mann Act (1910) as a consequence of pulling off his double con; nonetheless, he remains full of hope, knowing that “there would be a real home somewhere in my future, a house full of love,” once he is released (295).

With this final twist to the tale, *Whoreson* introduced black pulp fiction to its first Horatio Alger story. The novel spun a denouement that frowned upon inner-city life while searching for middle-class respectability. It achieved this feat by suturing the story of a shameless pimp’s exploitation of the ghetto to the overarching fantasy (which it shared with *Mama Black Widow*, although the latter affirmed it negatively) of urban black masculine virility. Unlike *Mama Black Widow*, however, *Whoreson* gave voice to a class dichotomy in which the lives of middle-class blacks and poor and working-class blacks were deemed constitutively different, if not antithetical to one another. For the book’s readers, most of whom did not enjoy the middle-class lifestyle Whoreson wished to possess, Goines’s language of rugged individualism and masculine entitlement tempered what was otherwise a denouement that recoiled from their existence.

In view of my readings of Iceberg Slim, we could say that Goines, in *Whoreson*, transformed the black male victim of urban poverty into the ghetto “badman” who yearns to become a family man. John Roberts argues that the badman, or “bad nigger,” operated within post-Civil War African American culture as “a folk hero whose characteristic actions resembled those of a trickster but unfolded in the black community.” That is to say, if the trickster relied on reverse exploitation in “dealing with the powers of the

masters [whites],” the badman’s actions were “directed primarily against other members of the black community.”⁵⁴ While the badman’s exploits tended to threaten the stability of communal well-being, he was revered culturally as an outlaw anti-hero who stopped at nothing to get ahead. Thus shorn of Slim’s critique of whiteness in *Pimp* and *Trick Baby*, *Whoreson* idolized a protagonist who overcomes his shame by exploiting his own—but in a way that emphasized his pluck, ingenuity, and will to survive.⁵⁵ These characterological qualities mitigated the class implications of Whoreson’s shift in perspective at the end of the novel, which reinforced the idea that poor and working-class black men were unfit for fatherhood. Like the Moynihan Report, then, Goines ultimately could only imagine a stable African American father figure well outside the walls of the inner city.

Giving Back Sweetback

In the first scholarly article ever published on black pulp fiction, the critic D. B. Graham wrote in 1975 about the “negative glamour” of Iceberg Slim’s novels. Negative glamour referred to the author’s valorization of individual-centered practices and beliefs that informed the badman’s quest for status in the black community. Although Graham

⁵⁴ John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989) 200.

⁵⁵ It is just as viable to argue that *both* Slim and Goines were authors of the badman archetype, given that black women served as their protagonists’ intracommunal objects of exploitation. I support that line of inquiry insofar as it underscores black women’s marginalization in the trickster-badman folkloric tradition. Here, though, I distinguish the trickster from the badman archetypes to advance a critical point about Slim’s and Goines’s fiction: whereas the former symbolically linked pimping and hustling to a kind of redistributive justice, the latter evinced little hope for justice of any kind, symbolic or otherwise. Indeed, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, the injustice of white racism (which any trickster figure must minimally recognize) was subordinated to the spectacle of black-on-black violence and crime in Goines’s literary output.

homed in on Slim's work to elucidate this claim, he reserved some of his most incisive comments for *Whoreson*. In line with my analysis in the previous section, Graham found Whoreson's repulsion from the ghetto to be somewhat unbelievable: "without any analysis or explanation, Whoreson emerges from prison talking about the evil effects of poverty and racism, and casts a disapproving sociological eye on his former beloved neighborhood."⁵⁶ More to the point, Graham contended that this conversion narrative had serious consequences for Whoreson's characterization. Whoreson's figuration as a "black superstud hero," according to Graham, was "in the main bourgeois-capitalist": self-serving, narcissistic, and anti-communitarian. Having been schooled by Jessie in the "protestant theory of pimping as endless labor and eternal vigilance," Whoreson was not the emblem of the "wave of a black proletarian future" but "merely a superstud."⁵⁷ Graham's pitting of black class consciousness against the individual exercise of black male phallic power was a gesture that took Goines to task for being out of step with contemporaneous Black Power discourses. Yet what seemed to nag at Graham was not Whoreson's sexual subordination of women but rather the individualistic nature of his decisions.⁵⁸ For a black cultural production that struck the right balance between phallic

⁵⁶ D. B. Graham, "'Negative Glamour': The Pimp Hero in the Fiction of Iceberg Slim," *Obsidian* 1.2 (1975): 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7, 8. Graham's reference to Protestantism stems from Max Weber's classic study of the individualistic ethos that buttressed the rise of industrial capitalism, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905).

⁵⁸ Before Whoreson's "conversion," Graham said that his "love[] for slum life," including the "vice, the flashy women, [and] the lure of quick money," was "refreshing" (8).

authority and collective political consciousness, Graham looked to a popular movie that had been released as Donald Goines began his writing career.

In 1971, the same year that Goines published *Dopefiend*, Melvin Van Peebles's independent film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* opened to popular acclaim among black audiences. The low-budget production, which Van Peebles made under the auspices of a porno shoot in order to employ black and nonunion crew, grossed \$10 million by the end of the year and spawned a number of Hollywood imitators. Within months of *Sweetback's* release, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) brought out Gordon Parks's *Shaft*, and by the end of 1971, one in every four Hollywood films had a "black-oriented" theme.⁵⁹ Critics labeled these releases "blaxploitation" movies, in large part because their action-oriented plots and images of black machismo "projected the wrong role models for black youth and were moneymakers only for Hollywood."⁶⁰ Unlike its numerous imitators, however, *Sweetback* was unique as the only independently produced, non-Hollywood film in the blaxploitation cycle. Financed by Van Peebles's own money and an emergency \$50,000 investment by Bill Cosby, *Sweetback* was written, directed, and musically scored by Van Peebles, and featured Van Peebles in the title role. This independent streak allowed Van Peebles and his crew to make the film they wanted,

⁵⁹ William R. Grant, IV, *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970-1995* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 42.

⁶⁰ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) 217n42.

against the financial odds and beyond the personae Hollywood cinema had laid out for black male characters in feature-length films.⁶¹

In the first twenty minutes of the film, we learn that Sweetback grew up in a brothel, got his nickname from a prostitute who enjoyed his sexual prowess as a boy, and now performs as a well-endowed “buck” in sex shows. Like Slim and Goines, Van Peebles drew from black cultural discourses about broken families to craft a narrative around black male victimization. In the film’s controversial opening sequence, a group of brothel prostitutes stand around marveling at a hungry orphaned boy whom they have taken in. In the next scene, a prostitute lures the boy into her room and has sex with him; her groans of ecstasy suggest that he has a “sweet sweetback.” Following the credits, the boy’s naked figure on top of the woman is replaced by that of the adult Sweetback, who has been reduced to a sex-show performer for mixed-race audiences. Here the matriarchy thesis I outlined earlier takes the form of a group of a predatory black woman that turns the boy out, effectively making him a prostitute himself; like Whoreson, Sweetback carries the name, and the stigma, of a precisely sexualized victimization. Adding another layer of complexity to this generational dynamic was the fact that Van Peebles cast his own son, Mario Van Peebles, in the role of the young boy.⁶²

⁶¹ On the making of *Sweetback*, including an anecdote about the director’s being inspired by “semen-shock” in conceiving the film, see Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (New York: Lancer, 1971).

⁶² Mario would later reflect on his father’s movie, and his role in the making of it, in his film *Baadasssss!* (2003).

But Sweetback's naming has a paradoxical effect on the protagonist. "Sweetback" denotes the character's sexualized victimization as well as his political liberation, articulated as a display of phallic power. After one of his sex shows, Sweetback witnesses two white policemen brutally beat Moo-Moo, a young black revolutionary. It is at this moment that Sweetback comes into his own as a politically conscious actor: he lashes out at the policemen, nearly bludgeoning them to death with a pair of handcuffs, and spends the rest of the film on the run. Following Sweetback's "sudden leap in consciousness,"⁶³ the film (d)evolves into a series of episodes aimed to showcase his body in motion. While he is on the lam, nothing much happens except that: 1) Sweetback runs; 2) Sweetback encounters various denizens of the ghetto, from kids and preachers to gamblers and whores; and 3) Sweetback uses his body to get himself out of sticky situations, like avoiding a violent confrontation with a white motorcycle gang by pleasuring its female leader. No narrative storyline sutures these episodes together; rather, the movie dwells in the absurdities of everyday life in the black ghetto and tracks the action and movement of Sweetback's body in that space.

Despite (or because of) its problematic gender politics, *Sweetback* found a wholly receptive audience in the black community. Like *Whoreson*—whose protagonist also embraces the stigma of his name to become a ghetto badman—the film took the broken family narrative, underscored black men's victimization within that narrative, and offered a vision of black masculinity that could break out of it. But unlike *Whoreson*, *Sweetback*

⁶³ Guerrero, 86.

aimed to represent the final step in that transformation as a hypermasculine embodiment not of individual advancement but of black people's liberation. We might say that the latter is expressed in *Sweetback constantly being on the run* following his character's conversion to political subjectivity. While on the lam, Sweetback's survival relies on other members of the community to stall the police or throw them off his track. This emphasis on communal survival led Van Peebles to dedicate his project to "all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man"; this sentiment was echoed in the credits, which revealed the stars of the film to be the "Black Community and Brer Soul." In this regard, Sweetback's "song" was the song of black people's collective struggle against white supremacy. As call to resist post-civil rights disillusionment, *Sweetback's* soundtrack posited this telling refrain (sung in part by Van Peebles's children, Mario and Megan): "You bled my Momma / You bled my Poppa / But you won't bleed me."

The discourse of collective struggle presented in *Sweetback* was clearly in conversation with the contemporaneous Black Power movement. A range of political activists responded in turn by celebrating Van Peebles's vision. Among the film's legions of fans was Huey Newton of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). In an oft-cited article published in the BPP's newspaper in 1971, Newton hailed Van Peebles's film as brilliantly illustrating "the need for unity among all the members and institutions

within the community and victims.”⁶⁴ Newton interpreted *Sweetback* as an explicitly revolutionary film not only because Sweetback strikes out against racist authority but also because his survival is dependent on ordinary people coming to his aid while he is on the run. Indeed Newton saw the black community as occupying the central role in the film—it was Van Peebles’s collective protagonist. Even so, Newton’s vision of community was gendered in such a way as to cement the link between heteronormative patriarchy and revolutionary desire. For Newton, Sweetback’s leap in consciousness was made possible by the infamous opening scene of seduction: in the act of “making love” to the young boy, he reasoned, the prostitute “baptizes [Sweetback] into manhood...bestowing upon [him] the characteristics which will deliver him from very difficult situations.”⁶⁵

It was this link between sexual and revolutionary desire that middle-class critics, also in the black community, found dubious. In an equally influential article published in *Ebony* later in the year, editor and historian Lerone Bennett countered Newton’s reading of *Sweetback*, suggesting that the film played up cultural stereotypes as a reactionary response to the successes of the black middle class. Because so many poor and working-class black men were denied opportunities for upward mobility in American society, a film like *Sweetback* romanticized the conditions of urban poverty and equated racial authenticity with the ability to hustle and survive in those conditions. Taking direct aim at

⁶⁴ Huey P. Newton, “He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*,” *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1972) 129.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

Newton's essay, Bennett claimed that *Sweetback* was "neither revolutionary nor black" and that the opening scene of seduction was not a scene of romantic mutuality but one in which audiences witnessed the "rape of a child by a 40-year-old prostitute."⁶⁶ Bennett concluded his review on a sardonic note, stating, "[I]t is mischievous and reactionary finally for anyone to suggest to black people in 1971 that they are going to be able to sc**w their way across the Red Sea. F***ing will not set you free."⁶⁷

Given Bennett's reading of *Sweetback*, it might be surprising to note that Graham advanced a very different interpretation of it, one that was closer to Newton's. After all, the main thrust of Bennett's critique—that the film exploited cultural stereotypes at the expense of a structural vision of urban poverty—was echoed in Graham's comments on *Whoreson*. But Graham contended that the stereotypes had their own role to play in the film's narrative progression: "The film is about the conversion of a superstud. Sweetback changes from a stable stud in a brothel to a cop killer to a black revolutionary." For Graham, if black pulp fiction's negative glamour restricted its protagonists to a "pre-revolutionary style," then *Sweetback* drew from acknowledged stereotypes—ones that had significant cultural value in the black community—to bring about a liberatory political consciousness.⁶⁸ In this regard, Graham did not really disagree with Bennett: as his analysis of *Whoreson* suggested, it was true that sex *alone* would not set anyone free.

⁶⁶ Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony* Sep. 1971: 118, 116.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁸ Graham, 16.

But Graham thought that *Sweetback* was doing something more than just fucking, or valorizing black phallic power as an end in itself. Rather, *Sweetback* used the reclaiming of black masculine authority from post-civil rights disillusionment as a platform on which to build a revolutionary program of social and political change.

Despite Graham's favorable assessment of *Sweetback*, by the time he published his article in 1975, the question of the film's deleterious effects had become inextricably linked to the blaxploitation cycle's overextended hype. Ed Guerrero argues that, between 1971 and 1974, Hollywood "repeated, filled in, or exaggerated the ingredients of the Blaxploitation formula" and that the celebration of the ghetto hustler and pimp was "fortified with liberal doses of gratuitous sex and drugs and the representation of whites as the very inscription of evil."⁶⁹ This formula for targeting black audiences was fueled less by a sustained response to the black community's social and cultural needs and more by Hollywood's desire to turn a short-term profit during its worst recession in years. The glut of black male action movies that appeared in the wake of *Sweetback* led many to suspect that "while these movies appeared to be black...and while they were feverishly promoted and advertised as such, they actually were no such thing."⁷⁰ Instead, viewers began to suspect that Hollywood's numerous imaginings of the aggressive and sexually prolific "buck"—a stereotype which casts a black man as a mindless embodiment of phallic prowess—were base attempts to capitalize on African Americans' purchasing

⁶⁹ Guerrero, 93-94.

⁷⁰ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994) 241-42.

power at the box office.⁷¹ Compounding this problem of repackaged cultural stereotypes was the fact that the mainstreaming of blaxploitation led to the film market being saturated by low-quality, hastily produced fare. As early as the summer of 1973, an editorial in Boston's black newspaper proclaimed the "death" of blaxploitation at the hands of sequels and the studios' tacit assumption that blacks did not deserve better.⁷²

Community pushback against Hollywood's use of blaxploitation as leverage for faltering ticket sales was significant. Although *Sweetback* came under fire by individual writers for promoting negative stereotypes of African Americans, it was not until 1972, following the release of Gordon Parks, Jr.'s *Super Fly*, that black church and civic leaders started to protest blaxploitation movies en masse. Critics saw in *Super Fly* a film that romanticized the ills of inner-city life, including violent crime and drug use. Moreover, by linking aspects of the underworld with the performance of an urban masculine cool, critics claimed that blaxploitation as a whole was shifting the black community's attention "away from collective political struggle...and toward such individualist, self-indulgent activities as drug consumption and the single-minded pursuit of material gain."⁷³ Community organizers responded to blaxploitation's allegedly depoliticizing influences by calling on blacks to resist consuming such "mindless" entertainment. Jesse

⁷¹ Bogle describes blaxploitation's peak in the early 1970s as "the age of the buck" (232). His list of *Sweetback*'s immediate successors in the genre strongly supports his point (241). Titles in that list include *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), *Slaughter* (1972), *Black Caesar* (1973), and *The Mack* (1973).

⁷² "Death of Blaxploitation," *Bay State Banner* [Boston] 12 Jul. 1973: 4.

⁷³ Guerrero, 97.

Jackson's newly formed People United to Save Humanity (PUSH) and the Los Angeles-based Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB) emerged as civic organizations whose goal was to protest the recent spate of black-oriented films. Combined with the market surplus of low-quality, sequel-driven fare, these organizations helped drive blaxploitation filmmaking out of business; according to Thomas Cripps, "By 1973 the cycle of 'blaxploitation' movies was spent."⁷⁴

In coming to terms with the short-lived popularity of the genre, film scholars have been keen to point out the significant role class played in both the consumption of and the resistance to blaxploitation movies. After all, the cycle's harshest critics were journalists, intellectuals, and community leaders—members of the black middle class who ostensibly could not relate to the badman anti-hero of these movies. Donald Bogle remarks that blaxploitation "touched on the fundamental dissatisfaction of dispossessed people" and that the badman protagonists were "menacing figures far different from the passive 'conciliatory' black types of the past."⁷⁵ Guerrero grants that the badman figure held great appeal among urban black audiences, but he also distinguishes the cinema's rendering of that persona from other media's versions of it: "the pimp-hustler hero and his urban milieu have enjoyed a long, colorful history in black literature, folklore, and oral tradition, where the sly victories of the gangster or trickster persona were one of the

⁷⁴ Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) 130. On the declining box-office numbers for blaxploitation films beginning in 1973, see Eric Pierson, "Blaxploitation, Quick and Dirty: Patterns of Distribution," *Screening Noir* 1.1 (2005): 137-50.

⁷⁵ Bogle, 242.

few ways that African Americans could turn the tables on an unjust racist society.” Along with the crime novelist Chester Himes, Guerrero cites Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines as gainfully drawing from this badman tradition in African American popular literature.⁷⁶ Guerrero qualifies his point with an endnote that selectively highlights which novels by these authors cultivated a perspective that was structurally critical of an “unjust racist society.” Guerrero makes the provocative claim that “Goines’s novels differed from the films of the Blaxploitation genre in that the 1960s to mid-1970s ideology of black struggle and liberation was a central consciousness in all his works, whereas this same ideology was dismissed or ridiculed in many of the films of the genre.”⁷⁷

Contrary to Guerrero’s generous aside, not all (if any) of Goines’s novels took up the ideology of *collective* struggle and liberation. *Whoreson*, as we have seen, stood relatively mute on the structural conditions of racism and urban poverty. Indeed, taken as a whole, the broken family narratives I analyze in this chapter personalized issues of systemic inequality at the expense of imagining the kind of revolutionary consciousness a figure like Sweetback spectacularly embodied. Even so, this aesthetic impulse did not render Slim’s and Goines’s work necessarily exploitative either. Susanne Dietzel contends that, in its time, black pulp fiction “mirror[ed] and validate[d] many of [its] readers’ immediate circumstances and environment”; in doing so, it helped them “create a space where these circumstances can be evaluated, where resistance can be imagined,

⁷⁶ Guerrero, 94.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 226n62.

and where contradictions can be resolved.”⁷⁸ The idea of “resistance” (to what?) notwithstanding, Dietzel accurately sums up how the fantasies conjured through Slim’s and Goines’s representations of black men’s victimization validated for readers precisely those characterological qualities which made crafting an urban black masculine persona possible. These qualities neither sought revolutionary change nor manifested a wholly “white”/racist view of black people; instead, their horizon of possibility was purely and simply street-level survival. Because Slim and Goines did not see a realistic way out of the ghetto for black men, they valorized those tactics and strategies of self-fashioning that would help them survive it.

With the arrival of Donald Goines, Holloway House added another layer of complexity to its “black experience” paperback catalogue. As Iceberg Slim’s work received more and more press coverage in the 1970s—an issue I take up at the beginning of the next chapter—the publisher’s publicity-savvy owners recognized that their stock resided in the fiction-reading tastes of inner-city African Americans. Accordingly, by the early 1970s, Holloway House had ceased publishing books that linked it to the Hollywood gossip scene. At the same time, its related magazine holdings—*Adam* and *Knight* (renamed from *Sir Knight*)—became more pornographic in nature as they sought to keep up with

⁷⁸ Susanne B. Dietzel, “The African American Novel and Popular Culture,” *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 162.

relaxing social mores and the rise of the American pornography industry.⁷⁹ The erotica and Hollywood confessionals that these periodicals had popularized beginning in the 1950s seemed passé in the wake of the sexual liberation movement and the mainstream media's more open embrace of explicit imagery and sexual themes.⁸⁰ Thus, into the 1970s, *Adam* and *Knight* extended their coverage of blue movies and sexploitation film culture. Eager to consolidate their position in this area of entertainment, Morriss and Weinstock launched a bimonthly magazine, *Adam Film World*, that was devoted exclusively to reviewing film pornography.⁸¹ Before long the magazines and the books went their separate ways, with the former catering to a largely white middle-class male readership and the latter attracting increasing numbers of urban black readers.

Still, what Holloway House lost in sales of erotica, true-crime stories, and Hollywood confessionals it made up for in the rising demand for black pulp fiction. In some ways, Slim's *Mama Black Widow* and Goines's first two novels radicalized this emergent form of literature by making it speak to issues and concerns that were specific to the black community in the post-civil rights moment. The experience of black shame

⁷⁹ On the "Golden Age" of pornography, see Frederick S. Lane III, *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 24-30.

⁸⁰ Sex paperbacks in general suffered industry-specific setbacks in the late 1960s, including the segregation of titles to adult bookshops after communities banned them from neighborhood retailers. See Stephen J. Gertz, "West Coast Blue," *Sin-A-Rama: Sleaze Sex Paperbacks of the Sixties*, ed. Brittany A. Daley, et al. (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2005) 35.

⁸¹ Dian Hanson, ed., *The History of Men's Magazines: 1960s under the Counter*, vol. 4 (Cologne: Taschen, 2005) 370, 374. *Adam Film World* was so successful in its early years—in part because it was at the vanguard of reviewing hardcore pornography—that it outsold *Adam* throughout the 1970s until the latter (along with *Knight*) eventually folded. For reasons that remain obscure, by the 1990s and early 2000s, *Adam Film World* had become a reviewer of gay pornography.

and abjection at the hands of an indifferent—or, perhaps more accurately, invisible—power structure might have been a tough sell for another publisher. But in building on the established popularity of *Pimp* and *Trick Baby*, Holloway House presented these books as being the most “authentic” reflections of urban African Americans’ on-the-ground realities. Dehumanizing oppression and the self-consuming destruction of America’s inner cities were of a piece with blacks’ impression that civil rights gains were making very little difference to poor and working-class people’s everyday lives.

At the turn of the decade, then, the broken family narratives I have analyzed in this chapter helped push Holloway House to the brink of understanding that its profits were to be made with African American readers of the urban black experience. As lurid paperbacks became redundant in the pornography-receptive ’70s, black pulp fiction rooted itself in the imaginations and material culture of inner-city African Americans. Reading racial authenticity in Slim’s three groundbreaking books and Goines’s early novels was tantamount to recognizing the modes of survival as well as the pain and suffering that were intrinsic to America’s ghettos. After a decade of increasing racial polarization between white and African Americans, it should come as no surprise that black pulp fiction did not cross over like blaxploitation did but became more and more of a black cultural phenomenon.

CHAPTER THREE

MISSING THE REVOLUTION

Following the publication of *Mama Black Widow* in 1969, Iceberg Slim secured a degree of celebrity status in the black community. “Black experience” paperbacks were selling well in the early 1970s, and Slim’s busy lecture schedule made his iconicity real for a number of fans, critics, and curious onlookers at book signings on college campuses. Yet Slim’s newfound fame was a mixed blessing. Along with his rise as a widely read pulp author came the sense that he had to be a responsible voice for the black community. The very fact of Slim’s popularity thrust him into debates over the relative merits of his fiction. Those debates asked whether his work trafficked in racial stereotypes for their own sake or if the novels aimed to have a more “positive” impact on their predominantly young urban male readers. Although such intraracially politicized questions had been asked of a range of African American cultural workers—from post-Reconstruction author Charles Chesnutt to Hollywood actor Lincoln Perry (whose persona Stepin Fetchit seemed to affirm racist stereotypes of the dimwitted manservant)—what made Slim’s task especially difficult was that he was writing at the same time that Black Power movements flourished throughout the country and especially in urban areas that suffered from concentrated poverty. In this context, Slim’s influence as a popular author resided in the demographic core of Black Power’s political base. This coincidence made Slim’s words more consequential and potentially fraught than he ever imagined they could be.

Reading racial authenticity in black pulp fiction suddenly became a matter of profound political relevance to the black community.

In conversations with readers, Slim could point to the preface and epilogue of his autobiographical novel *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) to claim that he did not condone the pimping lifestyle in these revolutionary times. In a significant, though tortuously florid, sentence at the beginning of the book, Slim reasoned, “The account of my brutality and cunning as a pimp will fill many of you with revulsion, however if one intelligent valuable young man or woman can be saved from the destructive slime then the displeasure I have given will have been outweighed by that individual’s use of his potential in a socially constructive manner.”¹ This confessional gesture was not unusual for the kinds of paperback material Holloway House had been publishing in the early to mid-1960s: it mitigated the reception of memoirs by fallen starlets and high-class call girls by framing their stories as cautionary tales. In an era still defined by potentially restrictive obscenity laws, the uplifting element of the confessional gesture gave Holloway House some traction in defending the value of their books. Slim’s confession fit perfectly into this publishing practice, but it also operated on a different level of signification: it spoke to members of the black community who might have thought that the book valorized the pimping lifestyle. Into the 1970s, Slim would always come back to this message as he encouraged black youth to reject his criminal exploits and become “socially constructive” members of society.

¹ Iceberg Slim, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2005) 17.

Despite his efforts to cast his work in a progressive, community-positive light, Slim wrote within a context dominated by growing mass-media interest in the very ghetto denizens whose lives he documented in his fiction and whose exploits he critiqued in his public appearances. In January 1971 *Time* magazine published an article that highlighted the ethnographic fieldwork of a recent Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley. Titled “The Pimping Game,” the article recounted how Christina Milner, a “27-year-old redhead” with a street moniker of her own (“Tiger Red”), worked as a go-go dancer in San Francisco to pay her way through graduate school. In the process of getting to know her bar’s clientele, Milner met a number of “players and hos” who ruled San Francisco’s “night world.” These pimps and their prostitutes would become the primary subjects of her dissertation; with the help of her husband Richard, Milner took to studying an urban, predominantly black, lifeworld that was “no different from...any other remote culture.” Given her “exotic” field of study, the article noted that Milner was known among academics as “the Margaret Mead of North Beach.”²

Appearing in a mainstream periodical, “The Pimping Game” oversimplified the conditions of urban poverty for a majority-white readership. The article stated as fact that “because black men have traditionally had trouble finding legitimate jobs, they are used to the idea of being supported by women.”³ The dubious claim that (all) black men were reconciled to being supported by women was backed up by observations that Slim,

² “The Pimping Game,” *Time*, Time, 11 Jan. 1972, web, 1 Jun. 2009.

³ The article qualifies this statement with a rather pathologizing assumption: “Besides, in the black community there is no loss of status in making money from sex.”

among other pimps, supposedly made to Milner herself. The article cites Slim as saying, “To be a great pimp, I think you’ve really got to hate your mother,” and, “Each ho thinks her man is God. Do you understand how beautiful that is?” Because pimps earned their income from the brute exploitation of female bodies and labor, the article observed that many of them imagined they were the “only real men left in America.” In thus framing the pimping lifestyle as one that sought to reclaim and consolidate masculinity for an oppressed demographic, the article concluded that pimping was “a way of striking out at the white man by taking his money—and his women too. By ‘gaming off’ Whitey, the black pimp becomes a folk hero, the Jesse James of the ghetto.”⁴

In its mediation through at least two appropriative agents (Milner and then *Time*), the pimping lifestyle was tacitly framed as contradicting so much of what the country’s various Black Power-inspired movements were fighting for. The *Time* article brought unwanted attention to Slim’s “negative glamour,”⁵ and it did so without acknowledging his own ambivalence about how to present his life story to black audiences. Perhaps this is why, in the collection of essays he published later in 1971, Slim not only demeaned Milner personally but also denied ever having met her, much less agreed to do interviews for her dissertation. In “About Rain and Rapping with Sweetsend Pappy Luke” Slim stages his critique as a dialogue between him and an old prison acquaintance. Pappy

⁴ “Pimping Game.”

⁵ The phrase “negative glamour” comes from Slim’s own retrospective survey of his career (see below); it was then cited in an important nationalist critique of Slim’s work: D. B. Graham, “‘Negative Glamour’: The Pimp Hero in the Fiction of Iceberg Slim,” *Obsidian* 1.2 (1975): 5-17.

confronts Slim with a copy of the article, asking him how he could “sucker off for that conniving white broad,” letting her “dupe [him] into the fairytale bullshit” that *Time* published. Curiously, although Slim denies having met Milner, Pappy lectures him as though he has: “Your pimp brain can’t grasp that the white broad stole something from you and those black pimps in San Francisco more precious than money.” According to Pappy, Milner “stole” from Slim an account of “black people’s labor, talent, folklore and creativity” to present to white audiences as the genuine article.⁶ The result was bound to unduly romanticize (“fairytale bullshit”) the pimping lifestyle in that Milner had effectively made Slim her “whore,” “pimping” his knowledge to a crossover audience of racist onlookers.

Equally damaging about the article was how it elicited a negative response from middle-class blacks who were keen on preserving their self-image among their majority-white counterparts. Pappy references a black columnist’s reaction to “The Pimping Game,” in which the writer characterizes the subjects of Milner’s study as “sick criminals and...a splotch on humanity” (204). Slim mourns his loss of respect for this writer, whom others characterized as the Hank Aaron of journalism (205). Slim then realizes, with Pappy’s help, that the writer’s critique is symptomatic of the class fractures within the black community, wherein the middle class displaces concern for those less fortunate with a rigid defense of black respectability. After an extended critique of the black

⁶ Iceberg Slim, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (1971; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2002) 199, 201. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

middle classes' "intellectual glaucoma" (206), Slim finally throws in his lot with those "black militant strugglers and street nigger losers way down there in the gutter" whom neither Milner nor the black critic seeks to truly understand (209). This moment in the essay is the closest Slim comes to providing readers with a "conversion" narrative in which the formerly unwitting pimp arrives at a political consciousness of racial struggle. It is also significant in that it shows how Slim negotiated his position on the Black Power movement: as much a defense of his literary reputation as it was an affirmation of racial militancy, the essay identified Slim's readers as the same kind of people who were working toward black revolution on the ground.

The question that emerged out of these controversies was whether the movement would accept Slim into its ranks. In 1969, at the height of Black Power organizing in the United States, proponents of cultural nationalism faced what they thought of as a crisis of reading in the black community. The poet and literary critic Don Lee voiced a widely held belief among fellow activists when he suggested that not enough people were reading Black Power's socially conscious print media. In his estimation, periodicals like *Muhammed Speaks* and *Freedomways* only reached ten to fifteen percent of the black community. Lee thought nationalists could solicit a broader audience for their writings by hewing to a revolutionary aesthetic while making their work more materially accessible to readers—namely, by way of "small compact volumes...that can be put into the back pockets and purses." But according to Lee there was a significant cultural barrier to achieving this goal: "black people," he claimed, "*do not read books*; that is, they don't

read very large and extensive works of fiction or non-fiction.” Lee conceded that blacks watched popular television shows and read the lifestyle magazine *Jet* in large numbers—the latter had a weekly circulation of about 450,000 issues—but these did not, in his mind, reflect the revolution’s ideals in any significant way. The issue for him was how to get “the masses” to start reading books of some weight.⁷

That Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp* was indeed a substantial book that had been taken up by thousands of inner-city readers presented a thorny problem for advocates of Black Power. In just two years and after several reprintings, the novel was succeeding on the very terms Lee set forth for his and like-minded work. But Slim’s narrative of a ghetto son who learns how to become a fearsome pimp did not sit well with the cadre of writers who saw themselves as the cultural arm of the black revolution. Indeed *Pimp* did not strike them as being *politically* substantial, though it might have been a “long” book. Nationalists’ largely negative responses to *Pimp* identified inner-city reading practices as the site and stakes of Black Power’s cultural influence. For his part, Slim was taken aback by how popular his book had become and asked readers to reject the example put forth by his narrative persona. Just as black pulp fiction appeared to backpedal from its claim to cultural influence, however, Donald Goines stepped in to make it all the more relevant to the Black Power generation. He wagered that the masses did want to read revolutionary narratives—only his take on Black Power would be very different from the one nationalists had been conceiving as a vanguard grassroots movement.

⁷ Don L. Lee, “Directions for Black Writers,” *Black Scholar* 1.2 (1969): 55.

In this chapter I examine Slim's and Donald Goines's belated efforts to bring their work into conversation with Black Power discourse. I say "belated" because Slim and Goines initially did not imagine their readers to be versed in racial politics, class analysis, and cultural nationalism. Instead, it was only in response to their sense of being *behind the times* that Slim and Goines identified links between what readers liked about their fiction and how the Black Power movement was developing into a mainstream political movement. Building on the theme of shame he advanced in *Mama Black Widow* (1969), Slim offered up his novels as counterexamples to what an ideal black male revolutionary subject should aim to do for his community. On the other hand, Goines, who had just embarked on his audacious, sixteen-book literary career in 1971, chose to explore the criminal elements of Black Power organizing more fully. Writing at a time when different organizations—most notably the Black Panther Party—were riven by internal dissent and criminal activity, Goines evinced considerably less idealism than his predecessor. Rather than point to the revolutionary potential of Black Power's rise in the late 1960s, Goines devoted his fiction to imagining its untimely demise in the 1970s.

Pimping Out of Step

Iceberg Slim's sense of belatedness resulted from the fact that the Black Power movement had been well underway by the time he made his first public statements about racial militancy. In the summer of 1966, Stokely Carmichael, the new chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), led a march through Mississippi in support of the recently wounded activist James Meredith. The first black student to enroll

at the University of Mississippi in 1962, Meredith had planned a 220-mile trek from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, to protest the “pervasive fear” whites instilled in Southern blacks who wanted to exercise their constitutional right to vote in local elections.⁸ On only the second day of his trip, however, Meredith was nearly shot to death by a white vigilante. In response to this heinous (and unpunished) act of violence, Carmichael organized SNCC to complete the walk in Meredith’s name. Encountering belligerent whites and policemen who turned the other cheek throughout their journey, SNCC’s protesters were subjected to constant intimidation, harassment, and threats of physical harm. There was a peaceful campaign trying to raise awareness of the Voting Rights Act’s seeming irrelevance in the Deep South. But Carmichael and his volunteers felt as though whites would rather kill them than see the march advance one more step.

The protesters’ first-hand experiences of racist violence led to a decisive shift in SNCC’s political tactics. On June 16, 1966, after spending several hours in a Greenwood, Mississippi, jail cell, Carmichael announced to the world that blacks were not going to stand for this treatment anymore: “The only way we gonna stop them white men from whippin’ us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain’t got nothin’. What we gonna start sayin’ now is Black Power!” Denouncing the systemic racism that allowed injustices against black people to be tolerated in the Deep South, Carmichael roused an audience of poor black sharecroppers by asking, “What do you

⁸ Qtd. in Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006) 133.

want?” The answer, delivered in unison, was a resounding, “Black Power!”⁹ Carmichael immediately recognized this was a turning point in the civil rights struggle, and he relished the moment. He orchestrated the chorus of voices calling for a new way to counter intractable white racism in the Deep South.

Carmichael’s Black Power speech would prove momentous, as it gave impetus to the rising tide of racial militancy in America. The feeling he tapped into was that the civil rights movement had exhausted its ideological purchase on moving the black community forward; what was needed now was a strategy of *insisting* on blacks’ social well-being in the face of entrenched institutions of “white power.” At first Black Power was positioned as a theoretical critique of SNCC’s cooptation by what activists perceived to be an increasingly complacent white liberal establishment. An official SNCC position paper published in the spring of 1966 noted, “If we are to proceed toward true liberation, we must cut ourselves off from white people. We must form our own institutions, credit unions, co-ops, political parties, write our own histories.”¹⁰ Although intended as a clarifying statement of SNCC’s purpose, this thesis of self-determination—which was inspired as much by national liberation movements on the African continent as it was by the philosophies of existing radical organizations—soon became the platform on which

⁹ Qtd. in Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) 199.

¹⁰ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, “The Basis of Black Power,” *From the Movement toward Revolution*, ed. Bruce Franklin (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971) 73-74. See also Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967; New York: Vintage, 1992).

Black Power activism was to transpire. In Carmichael's view, the challenge to American racism had to proceed from the recognition that piecemeal individual gains made within "American corporate liberalism" obscured the "larger group needs and concerns" of the black community.¹¹ Community self-determination was thus the bedrock of continuing political struggle for all black people, especially those members of society who saw little change in their day-to-day realities in the wake of the civil rights movement.

Moderate integrationists like Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Floyd McKissick, of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), steered clear of what they considered to be Carmichael's incendiary rhetoric. Nonetheless, the labor of on-the-ground organizing shifted decisively in favor of Black Power. Just months after the Meredith March Against Fear, in October 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale started the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) in Oakland, California. In their founding ten-point platform, Newton and Seale stressed that the Panthers would work to secure decent housing, employment opportunities, and fair trials for the black community of Oakland. Most controversially, they called for blacks to carry firearms they could wield to defy police intimidation in the ghetto.¹² The Panthers epitomized Carmichael's call for racial militancy; their program for community self-determination integrated a Marxist class analysis of "decadent American society" into

¹¹ David R. Colburn and George F. Pozzetta, "Race, Ethnicity, and the Evolution of Political Legitimacy," *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) 126, 121.

¹² Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (1970; Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991) 59-69.

black political struggle.¹³ In the next few years, the Panthers' iconic beret-wearing and leather jacket-clad image would inspire a host of other movements around the country, all of them more or less invested in mobilizing communities to provide for and take care of themselves.

Out of this ferment of political activity, the poet and playwright LeRoi Jones helped inaugurate a movement that highlighted the artistic dimensions of Black Power's revolutionary impulses. Jones was a mainstay in the 1950s Beat movement in New York City, but throughout the 1960s he found himself drawn to black nationalist political groups such as the Nation of Islam. In 1965 Jones founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater and School (BARTS) in Harlem to encourage public performance art among urban youth. The following year Jones published *Home*, a collection of essays; his most famous piece from the volume, "'Black' Is a Country," insisted that self-determination was essential to resisting the internal colonization of America's black citizens: "The idea of 'passive' resistance is not the answer."¹⁴ Jones's radicalism came to a head in 1967 when, back in his hometown of Newark, New Jersey, he was the victim of police brutality in one of the two worst urban riots of that year. Despite suffering from a gaping head wound, Jones was thrown in jail and had to stand trial for his alleged criminal activity during the riots. Newly politicized by this experience, Jones became a full-fledged advocate of Black Power and, over the next several years, used his influence in

¹³ Ibid., 67.

¹⁴ LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966) 85.

Newark to help rebuild the city's infrastructure and elect black candidates to political office. At a press conference following his release from jail, Jones echoed Carmichael's call for self-determination, intoning, "We are over sixty percent of the population of Newark...we will govern ourselves or no one will govern Newark."¹⁵

Standing with Jones on that day was Larry Neal, a New York colleague who had been eager to publicize the work of artists sympathetic to Black Power. A respected poet and editor in his own right, Neal became one of the leading spokesmen for the Black Arts movement. In 1968 he co-edited with Jones the landmark anthology *Black Fire*, which collected over 170 poems, short stories, essays, and plays by a range of politically conscious artists and activists. The following year he published the clearest statement yet of the movement's aims and political allegiance to Black Power. In *Ebony's* famous "Black Revolution" issue, from August 1969,¹⁶ Neal wrote that the Black Arts movement sought to "define the world of art and culture on its own terms" and "to link, in a highly conscious manner, art and politics in order to assist in the liberation of Black people." In contrast to the decadence of Western aesthetics in the late 1960s, filled as it was with sexploitation movies and "Andy Warhol madness," Neal proposed a Black Aesthetic that was grounded in African Americans' fortitude and their resistance to oppression.¹⁷

¹⁵ Qtd. in Joseph, 184.

¹⁶ This was the same issue in which LeRoi Jones appeared in the mainstream media as Imamu Ameer/Amiri Baraka for the first time. The name change reflected his conversion to the social and spiritual teachings of his mentor Maulana Karenga, formerly Ron Everett. See David Llorens, "Ameer (LeRoi Jones) Baraka," *Ebony* Aug. 1969: 75-83.

¹⁷ Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," *Ebony* Aug. 1969: 54.

Recalling W. E. B. Du Bois's 1926 dictum that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be" for the racially oppressed artist, the Black Aesthetic had the explicit goal of becoming the "spiritual helpmate of the Black Nation."¹⁸ Like Jones, Neal considered the blues to be the Black Aesthetic's signature cultural form, capturing as it did the "Soul Force of Black culture, its life styles, its rhythms, its energy." At the same time, Neal was critical of figures whose appropriation of black culture appeared to stray too far from its folk roots: Jimi Hendrix, "jive Negro hustlers," and "Madison Avenue freaks" all stood accused of exploiting the culture rather than respecting it.¹⁹

Neal's particular brand of cultural nationalism emphasized racial pride over the social denigration of black people in America. For this reason, a popular author like Iceberg Slim, and the negative glamour his work ostensibly promoted, constituted a threat to what the Black Aesthetic stood for. In a poem included in his 1969 collection *Black Boogaloo*, Neal took Slim to task for encouraging counterrevolutionary attitudes in his work. Titled "Brother Pimp," the poem was dedicated "in memory of Iceberg Slim and others who have walked these streets." By relegating Slim to the past in this manner, Neal hoped his readers would see him as a relic of the ghetto's dark days of suffering, prior to the black revolution. As the poem begins, however, the first stanza resituates Slim in the present in order to frame him as a temporal foil for Black Power:

Brother Pimp, you ain't shit;

¹⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 22; Neal, "Any Day Now" 57.

¹⁹ Neal, "Any Day Now" 57-58.

and neither are we without you.
I used to dig your hip ways,
but you ain't shit yet;
and neither are we without you.
you just as bad as the honky,
only you dress better motherfucker,
only you drive your cadillac better mother-
fuck-er.²⁰

Neal's language passes harsh judgment against the pimp ("you ain't shit"), but it also acknowledges that the speaker "used to" look up to him. The presumable cause for the speaker's rejection of the pimp's mystique is his coming into political consciousness, working for the community rather than exploiting it. Crucially, this transformation is held out to the pimp himself: he "ain't shit *yet*" (emphasis added), which implies that he *could* be "the shit" if he were to reform his ways. Here Neal draws from the black vernacular to torque conventional negative associations with the word "shit." The point is to *be* the shit—namely, someone other black people can look up to.

The first stanza holds out hope that the pimp can change his ways, which is one of the poem's major themes. But another theme is clearly marked by Neal's breaking up of the word "motherfucker" in the last two lines. The speaker effectively accuses the pimp of fucking his mother, turning his exploitation of black women into a shameful act of incest. This gesture at once feminizes the pimp and pits his unmanliness against the "true" revolutionary subject. The speaker calls the pimp a "whore," a "would-be hero," and a "would-be black man" because he "allow[s] his women to go down on sick white

²⁰ Larry Neal, "Brother Pimp," *Black Boogaloo (Notes on Black Liberation)* (San Francisco: Journal of Black Poetry Press, 1969) 45.

beasts, / to kill the soul for the shit green of dead beasts, / to kill the soul and call it hip.”²¹ In line with Black Power’s call for intraracial strength, pride, and respect, Neal reads the pimp’s exploitation of black women as an act of manly undoing, working in the service of the white man’s money (“shit green”) and sexual appetite (“sick white beasts”). Neal’s point echoed Stokely Carmichael’s memorable critique of black people’s internalization of mother-hate, thereby becoming unwitting agents of community self-destruction. In the heyday of the Moynihan Report’s circulation in public policy debates, Carmichael said, “I don’t play the dozens with white folks. To set the record straight, the reason we are in the bag we are in isn’t because of my mama, it’s because of what they did to my mama. That’s why I’m where I’m at. We have to put the blame where it belongs. The blame does not belong on the oppressed but on the oppressor, and that’s where it is going to stay.”²²

Despite the poem’s criticism of the pimping lifestyle, Neal’s theory of the Black Aesthetic did leave the door open for the pimp’s turning toward revolutionary matters. The “would-be”ness of the pimp’s masculinity cuts both ways: it defines his persona as racially inauthentic at the same time that it holds out hope for its reform. Following the stigmatizing description of the pimp as “faggotty,” the speaker concedes:

²¹ Ibid., 45.

²² Stokely Carmichael, “We Are Going to Use the Term ‘Black Power’ and We Are Going to Define It because Black Power Speaks to Us,” *Black Nationalism in America*, ed. John H. Bracey, Jr., et al. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) 471-72. See also Julius Lester, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power’s Gon’ Get Your Mama!* (1968; New York: Grove, 1969), especially the chapter “Bang! Bang! Mr. Moynihan,” pp. 33-54.

you are genius black men of the streets,
have learned to survive.
we need you.
you are wise, aware of all games,
we need your minds.
you are the base of our thing.
you are the roots of our black power,
would-be brother.
you are the essence of style, that which
we gleaned from the raw underbelly of the city.

The stanza lends credence to the speaker's earlier plea for the pimp to "JOIN THE STRUGGLE / FOR REAL MANHOOD / LINK YOUR NATURAL LIFE-SENSE / TO THE REAL SOUL-THING."²³ Like the Black Aesthetic's valorization of the blues' "Soul Force," the speaker recognizes that the pimp possesses characteristics—vernacular style, street smarts, an indomitable will to survive—which can be harnessed to political struggle. The phallic symbolism of Neal's language ("the base of our thing") and the didactic capitalization of the speaker's plea hold out the hope that the pimp will reclaim his masculinity by joining the revolution. The question, then, is whether the pimp will choose to "pimp for the revolution, / [or] pimp on the revolution."²⁴

LeRoi Jones hailed "Brother Pimp" as a "street loud conversation" aimed to teach non-revolutionaries the destructiveness of their ways; he put the point bluntly when he said, "these niggers damn sure need it."²⁵ The nationalist message was not lost on Iceberg Slim, who devoted *Naked Soul* to addressing militants' concerns that his work extolled

²³ Neal, "Brother Pimp" 46, 45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ LeRoi Jones, "Sound for Sounding," preface, *Black Boogaloo (Notes on Liberation)*, by Larry Neal (San Francisco: Journal of Black Poetry Press, 1969) i.

negative glamour over Black Power's political aims. Dedicated to a number of black revolutionary icons, from Jack Johnson and Malcolm X to Huey Newton, George Jackson, and Angela Davis, *Naked Soul* labors to deromanticize pimping as a vocation: "trauma for trauma, a pimp's life is perhaps the worst type of life anybody could live. He is feared, hated, despised and walks a greased wire with the penitentiary on one side and his death on the other from other pimps, his victims, or their parents or relatives" (60). Driving home the point that the pimp's life is riddled with anxiety and self-doubt, Slim notes with a flourish, "A pimp lives his life with a stick of dynamite stuck in his rectum" (61). This loaded image animates Slim's occasional questioning of whether the pimp's masculinity could be considered racially authentic. The point he develops in *Naked Soul* is that any form of community exploitation negates the heterosexual blackness of an urban male. Indeed Slim goes so far as to call the ghetto hustler an Uncle Tom—that is, an "outlaw whore[] in the stable of the white power structure" who "suck[s] a mixture of shit and money from the bung hole of the [white] Master" (185).

Naked Soul evinced Slim's fascination with Black Power and a desire to distance himself from the "flash and dazzle" of the pimp's ghetto celebrity (58). This radical turn in Slim's narrative persona followed from the notion that his/the pimp's failure as a black man could only be redeemed by the virile politics of Black Power. Slim had just turned 53 in August of 1971, and throughout *Naked Soul* he uses his advanced age as an object against which urban youth should define themselves. In one piece Slim aligns himself with his estranged, migration-generation father, saying they should be thankful to black

militants for being the “young rejuvenators of [their] balls.” Indeed it took the “courage and daring exploits of the Black Panthers” to give “black men of all ages... wonderful new ball power” (46, 45). The rejuvenating effects of militancy are also showcased in Slim’s essay on the slain campus activist Melvin X. Upon speaking with one of Melvin X’s comrades, Slim says he realized the boy’s youthful yet toughened face (“both savagely hard and softly innocent”) was “Melvin X’s, mine, all black people’s. It was a living flesh and bone montage of the ancestral nobility, beauty, bravery, misery, pain and struggle of our black race.” In his memory of the episode, the timelessness of the radical’s face suspended the toll growing old (and thus becoming irrelevant) took on Slim by highlighting his “kinship” with other members of a proud and determined race (160).

In the most dramatic staging of what I term Slim’s *redemptive anachronicity*, the author recounts visiting the headquarters of the Southern California BPP, which had come under fire by the Los Angeles Police Department on December 8, 1969. Upon entering the office, the first Panther Slim met “hesitated...before he smiled thinly and slapped his palm against [his own]” (152). After a few exchanges, Slim notes, “unlike the hundreds of non-Panther black youngsters who had recognized me on the street and admired me as a kind of folk hero...the Panther youngsters were blind to my negative glamour and, in fact, expressed a polite disdain for my former profession and its phony flash of big cars, jewelry and clothes” (152-53). Even when another Panther stepped up to challenge Slim’s reputation directly, Slim says he stayed calm and “responded with love and understanding.” He accepted the fact that he was an “old nigger surrounded by Black

Panthers” (153). The essay concludes with Slim remembering how he continued to take the “violent tongue thrashing” because it revealed a valuable lesson to him: not only were the young men the “antithesis of the distorted image carried in the collective mind of America’s older, brainwashed blacks,” but they were the “authentic champions and heroes of the black race” (154). In awe of this new, authentic embodiment of black masculinity, Slim concedes, pathetically, that these men were “superior to that older generation of physical cowards of which I am a part” (154).

The protest novelist John A. Williams penned a sympathetic review of *Naked Soul*. He wrote that, despite the “militant” tone of the book, Slim “seems like a weary traveler who had missed his scheduled train and has hopped one that was a little too fast for a man his age.”²⁶ Still, by dwelling on his age without admitting his books were irrelevant to Black Power, Slim gave himself some leeway in cultivating a nationalist audience for his work. Slim’s public appearances between 1971 and 1972 reflected this performative double gesture. Most notably, on November 2, 1971, the weekly television serial *Black Journal* aired an episode that featured dramatizations of Slim’s hustling life alongside footage of his efforts to dissuade black youth from following in his footsteps. Produced by the public-broadcasting company National Educational Television (NET), the all-black current affairs show disseminated news and images of Black Power to the

²⁶ John A. Williams, rev. of *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*, by Iceberg Slim, *Sun Reporter* [San Francisco] 21 Aug. 1971: 31.

black community.²⁷ NET producers enlisted the help of the Chicago performance group Kuumba Workshop to stage scenes from Slim's life that viewers were meant to find appalling. As a counterpoint to these dramatizations, Slim was shown addressing an audience at Malcolm X College in Chicago, a two-year school that had been renamed from Crane Community College through the organizing efforts of local BPP activists.²⁸ In his remarks Slim was unequivocal about his support of Black Power: "You have to have a realization that when you exploit your own kind, that you are in effect counter-revolutionary." He also referenced the memory of Malcolm X to condemn his past life: "pimps and whores are anachronisms," Slim intoned, and it was the late nationalist leader who had instructively pointed out "the disastrous effect [vice] was having on our progress, our dignity and our image."²⁹

Despite crafting an image of himself as a repentant pimp in *Naked Soul* and on *Black Journal*, Slim had already done his part to stoke what historian Robin D. G. Kelley refers to as the "explosion" in "so-called genuine 'pimp narratives'" in the late 1960s and

²⁷ *Black Journal* first aired in 1968 and was co-hosted by the legendary documentarian William Greaves. The show struggled after the Corporation for Public Broadcasting withdrew funding for it during the 1973-74 season. With the show on the brink of cancellation, journalist Tony Brown stepped in and revived it (with a sponsorship from Pepsi) as *Tony Brown's Journal* in 1977. For a historical sketch of the series, see Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 41-53.

²⁸ Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) 121, 141.

²⁹ Qtd. in "Black Journal to Present Show on Pimps," *Bay State Banner* [Boston] 28 Oct. 1971: 19. See also "Chicago Locale for 'Iceberg Slim' Movie," *Chicago Daily Defender* 8 Sep. 1971: 16.

early 1970s.³⁰ In fact, just one year after “The Pimping Game” appeared in *Time*, Christina Milner and her husband Richard published her dissertation as a trade book. Displaying the provocative title *Black Players*, the Milners’ book sold thousands of copies and was reviewed favorably in the mainstream press. One critic confessed that reading it was as “exciting as discovering a new tribe of cave people in the Philippines”; he also lauded the text’s glossary of pimp jargon as “almost worth the price of the book.”³¹ This second observation must have struck Slim as bitterly ironic, for his own, less-visible novels *Pimp* and *Trick Baby* (1967) included vernacular glossaries in their final pages. Sweetsend Pappy Luke’s warning had come back to haunt Slim: he had been “played” by Tiger Red, and the result was that the Milners reaped all of the royalties from *Black Players* while Slim was left parrying accusations from within the black community that he had helped inaugurate the era of “pimp chic.”

But it was not only nationalists who took exception to the prominence of pimps in the mass media. Just as *Ebony*’s Lerone Bennett found Huey Newton’s reading of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) dubious, so did members of the black middle class cast a suspicious eye on Slim’s influence on black popular culture. With blaxploitation movies like *Super Fly* (1972) and *The Mack* (1973) representing the badman exploits of a

³⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994) 215.

³¹ Marvin Gelfand, “Black Pimps: ‘Players’ Talk about the ‘Game,’” rev. of *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps*, by Christina Milner and Richard Milner, *Los Angeles Times* 15 Apr. 1973: R2. See also Christina Milner and Richard Milner, *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

drug dealer and pimp, respectively, critics like the black journalist Hollie West found more “tinsel than substance” in how Hollywood appropriated popular pimp narratives. West contended that a character like *The Mack*’s Goldie (Max Julien) lacked depth, complexity, and even a “sense of conscience.”³² A film adaptation of one of Iceberg Slim’s novels would bring the weight of these criticisms to bear on his own work. Because a Hollywood movie gave Slim even more exposure in the mainstream media, he had to defend himself from a new set of intraracial concerns. If nationalists like Larry Neal and D. B. Graham understood Slim to be promoting a self-destructive, anti-revolutionary message, the more integration-minded members of the black middle class saw him undercutting African Americans’ claim to social respectability as such.

White Folks and Black Families

As blaxploitation films took Hollywood by storm in the early 1970s, Holloway House recognized that its cache of street narratives offered prime material for the burgeoning demand for “authentic” black-oriented scripts. In 1972 Universal Pictures collaborated with a new production company, Cinema Entertainment, to adapt Iceberg Slim’s *Trick Baby* for the screen.³³ Because it was the first Holloway House book to be made into a film, the adaption was a source of pride for a company that had intricate connections to

³² Hollie I. West, “A Tinsel Pimp-Hero,” rev. of *The Mack*, dir. Michael Campus, *Washington Post* 21 Apr. 1973: D7.

³³ The company may well have had financial connections to Holloway House, given that its physical address was also on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. See “Cinema Entertainment Films ‘Trick Baby,’” *Sun Reporter* [San Francisco] 16 Sep. 1972: 36.

the film industry but remained on the margins of major Hollywood deals. Still, the producers were cagey in their reasoning for bringing out *Trick Baby* at the time. Co-owner of Cinema Entertainment James Levitt said, “We did the picture, not because the black film was in an ascendency in popularity, but because Iceberg’s story about the strong bond between two slippery con men had strong dramatic values and appeal.”³⁴ Underscoring *Trick Baby*’s dramatic appeal allowed Levitt to bracket the question of whether his production was just another Hollywood effort to make a quick buck from the blaxploitation cycle. Levitt’s explanation was printed in the African American newspaper the *Chicago Daily Defender*, just before the film’s opening in the historic Loop Theatre. His reasoning was belied, however, by an advertisement that appeared a few days later in the same newspaper. *Trick Baby*’s decidedly blaxploitation-inspired tag line read: “Shake hands with ‘Folks’ and ‘Blue.’ And then count your fingers!”³⁵

Whatever their motivation for bringing *Trick Baby* to the screen, Levitt and co-producer Marshal Backlar said they wanted their film to “feel” authentic for black audiences. The film was shot in Philadelphia, the producers explained, in part because its ghetto “had the feeling of an east coast black community.”³⁶ Levitt might have been loath to admit that their low-budget production costs required shooting in a non-traditional

³⁴ “‘Trick Baby’ Opens at Loop Theatre,” *Chicago Daily Defender* 16 Dec. 1972: 26.

³⁵ *Trick Baby* by Universal Pictures, advertisement, *Chicago Daily Defender* 23 Dec. 1972: 19.

³⁶ “‘Trick Baby’ Opens.”

locale.³⁷ Even more than the film's setting, however, Iceberg Slim's name recognition gave the producers their surest mark of racial authenticity. In every advertisement for the film the author's name was emblazoned across the top of the page. By early 1973, it was reported that Slim's four books had sold more than 3.5 million copies, the majority of those to the very demographic—young urban black men—that blaxploitation's Hollywood producers were targeting.³⁸ Clearly, although Slim had no direct investment in the making of the film, his name circulated among black audiences in a way that made Hollywood's *Trick Baby* much more real.

If the movie's claim to racial authenticity passed through Iceberg Slim, the producers chose an odd way of executing his story about a mixed-race hustler who, because he can pass for white, is able to play big-money cons on Chicago's elite. Black character actor Mel Stewart was selected to play the older and wiser con man Blue Howard, but for the key role of White Folks the producers settled on the white actor Kiel Martin. Born nearly a generation apart, Stewart (1929-2002) and Martin (1944-1990) were the perfect ages at the time to represent an aging Chicago hustler (out for the proverbial last big con of his career) and his near-white mentee. But the tall, brown-haired, and green-eyed Martin was difficult to imagine as a mulatto "trick baby," and there was nothing in his background or acting history that suggested he could pull off

³⁷ The City of Brotherly Love also might have reinforced the image of Folks's and Blue's "strong bond" that the producers wished to evoke.

³⁸ Hollie I. West, "Sweet Talk, Hustle and Muscle," *Washington Post* 20 Mar. 1973: B2.

White Folks's street-bred masculinity. Martin's whiteness required that the filmmakers play up his ability to perform blackness in a believable manner; the results were mixed.

Trick Baby begins by dramatizing the con that Folks and Blue play on Frascati (David Thomas), the old Italian man who wants to buy "hot" diamonds on the cheap and resell them to a jeweler to make a staggering profit.³⁹ The film does well to set the scene for the con, cutting from images of Blue making himself and his motel room look unkempt and of Folks persuading Frascati that the deal will exploit the black man's hard luck to turn a nice profit for them. At the motel Folks taps into the racist assumptions that the situation would seem to conjure for Frascati: he calls the desk clerk "boy," says Blue is "dumb," and, finally, refers to the dejected black man in front of him as "nigger." When Folks seems to lowball Blue by offering him \$10,000 instead of the asking price of \$50,000, he also convinces Frascati that they are getting the diamonds for a steal. The con is completed when Folks threatens Blue that he could have just walked away with the diamonds rather than have Frascati pay the lowered price. The "bargain" is sealed with Folks saying, "There's no reason why colored and white can't treat each fair." Frascati has not uttered a single word throughout the room scene, as Folks does the middleman's work of projecting racist fantasy onto an exploitable situation.

Immediately after Folks and Frascati leave, Blue takes off his shirt, gives himself a clean shave, and puts on his expensive suit and tie, undercutting the image of a destitute

³⁹ In the novel the con is mentioned in passing when the black detective Dot Murray confronts Folks and Blue. Murray threatens to go to Frascati's nephew, the Mafia boss Nino Parelli, fingering them for the scam, unless they give him a cut of their earnings.

hustler that his con persona performed. Composer James Bond's brass-heavy funk soundtrack starts up, giving the impression that the deal was orchestrated in some as yet undetected way. Folks is shown walking down the street, a broad smile on his face, while Blue steps out of the motel. If the connection has not been made yet, the film underscores Folks's "blackness" by having Martin perform racial authenticity in his gait, speech, and interactions with inner-city denizens. Martin's character slaps the hand of a black man on the sidewalk as Blue gets into his expensive car. Folks then spars with a black boy on the steps leading to a train line while Blue parks the vehicle in a building lot. Finally, Folks holds the door open of the same building for a black woman and her child, saying, "How you doin', baby?" to the child. The next shot shows Blue and Folks emerging from adjacent elevators, slapping hands, embracing, and celebrating what the audience now knows was a successful con (the promotional still in Fig. 9 approximates this shot).

[INSERT IMAGE]

Fig. 9

The jump-cut editing that the film employs in this sequence labors to authenticate Folks's blackness, but in doing so it effectively caricatures race as so much pimp walking and jive talking. This is to say that Martin *overplays* blackness—offers only a hyperbolic and stereotyped image of it—on the way to convincing the audience that his character is of the same world that Blue comes from. When Blue asks Folks how he feels about pulling off the con, his reply is given in a stilted vernacular: “Like the guy that’s just laid the most beautiful broad in the world.” A few moments later, this “cool pose” is echoed when Blue asks Folks what he plans on doing with his share of the money (having sold

\$50 worth of glass to Frascati).⁴⁰ After ruling out leaving the city to lead a “simple” life, Folks jokes, “OK, I’ll spend it all on hookers!” The effect of hearing these utterances is uncanny: they are intended to authenticate Martin’s performance of blackness through a kind of urban minstrelsy, yet the actor’s unconvincing delivery of them almost mitigates against their racist import. It is as though Martin’s sincere but ultimately failed efforts to inhabit blackness render his take on Folks a caricature in its own right. Perhaps this is why another jump-cut sequence involving Blue and Folks making love to their respective partners loses all of its racialized significance. Whereas Slim wanted Folks’s sleeping with a white woman to both confront and disturb racist fears of miscegenation, the film’s clumsy equivalence of Blue’s and Folks’s sexual prowess only serves to represent two couples of the same “race” having sex (the promotional still in Fig. 10 shows Folks with his love interest Susan [Beverly Ballard]).

⁴⁰ On cool behavior as an authenticating trait of urban black masculinity, see Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington, 1992).

[INSERT IMAGE]
Fig. 10

Reviews of *Trick Baby* confirmed the film's underwhelming reception among movie-going audiences, even during this peak period of Hollywood's blaxploitation production. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times* critic Kevin Thomas identified Martin's (mis)casting as *Trick Baby*'s "crucial problem," as his performance "fatally undermin[ed] the film's credibility" and narrative intentions.⁴¹ Because White Folks's novelistic representation was so undercut by Martin's acting, black audiences familiar with Slim's story were bound to be disappointed. Writing in San Francisco's African American newspaper, the *Sun Reporter*, Rhonda Foston asked, "Can you imagine a half-Black, half-white man growing up in the ghetto, yet having no 'soul'? He has no bounce in his walk, no jive in his talk. He would be very well fit into white society. But then, without this

⁴¹ Kevin Thomas, rev. of *Trick Baby*, dir. Larry Yust, *Los Angeles Times* 24 Jan. 1973: G10.

characteristic, there would be no plot, right?”⁴² Foston’s astute observation tacitly acknowledged the constructedness of racial authenticity (putting scare quotes around the word “soul,” for example) at the same time that it suggested embodying a certain kind of black masculinity was part and parcel of “growing up in the ghetto.” As I argued above, the absence of these performative elements in the film was not for Martin’s lack of effort—he did his best to add “bounce” to his walk and “jive” to his talk. Rather, Martin’s whiteness was underscored by his trying *too hard* to don an urban blackface. Because of this performative absence or infelicity, Foston told readers that going to see *Trick Baby* would not be worth the money they would spend buying tickets for it.⁴³

Despite the film’s seeming irrelevance to the black community, particularly in view of how Martin’s whiteness continually disrupted what the narrative sought to do with Folks’s mixed-race subjectivity, *Trick Baby* became the flashpoint of at least one notable anti-blaxploitation protest. Several weeks after the film’s opening in Chicago, three black ministers sought to ban *Trick Baby* from public screening on the grounds that it was “racist and unfit to be seen by anyone.” The white manager of the Loop Theatre downplayed their criticism by saying that *Trick Baby* “was just taken from the novel by a black man.” Yet his claim to a kind of soft racial authenticity—transposed from a black-authored book onto a white-produced movie—belied the fact that the novel signified on race in ways that the film did not. As my analysis of the reviews of *Trick Baby* shows,

⁴² Rhonda J. Foston, rev. of *Trick Baby*, dir. Larry Yust, *Sun Reporter* [San Francisco] 31 Mar. 1973: 34.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Kiel Martin's turn as White Folks embodied the very logic of Hollywood's appropriation of representations of black masculinity: a white man performing in blackface sells that performance to black audiences as the genuine article. This dynamic lies in stark contrast to Slim's rendering of White Folks, which satirically illuminated how a mixed-raced man's performance of whiteness skewered racist assumptions about black people. In this regard, although the ministers' bid to ban the film was unsuccessful, they did give voice to widespread grievances about the nature of blaxploitation filmmaking as well as the suspicion that Hollywood was "exploiting black youth into idealizing violence and drugs and falling into the trap of already existing prejudices."⁴⁴

Interestingly, although most viewers of *Trick Baby* saw it as patently appropriative of black cultural forms, the media stories that circulated around the film's opening homed in on the authenticity of Iceberg Slim's life history. Newspaper coverage of the film's release brought with it a number of interviews with Slim, who was still touring American college campuses in an effort to sell his books. But unlike his appearances in 1971-72, in which Slim articulated his support of black nationalism, the interviews he conducted around the time of *Trick Baby*'s release served to renounce his former lifestyle and uphold middle-class family values. Articles in the black press stressed the "degradation," "shame," and "disgrace" of Slim's previous life, particularly in the context of the way he treated women.⁴⁵ The renowned coldness of Slim's narrative

⁴⁴ Tony Griggs, "Clerics Call Film Racist," *Chicago Daily Defender* 5 Feb. 1973: 3.

⁴⁵ Joe Ellis, "Iceberg Slim Is Warming Up to Life," *Chicago Daily Defender* 16 Dec. 1972: 3.

persona in *Pimp* was now seen as a liability: fueled by cocaine and driven by the need to control women, the pimp was numb to any human emotion. This dulling of empathy was what allowed the pimp to brutalize women without feeling guilty about it. Slim lamented that the pimp's coldness almost rendered him inhuman, to the extent that "[p]art of any human being's charm is their vulnerability."⁴⁶ The pimp's narcissism was so powerful, in fact, that it was liable to drive a man crazy with fear that he was not in control. In two interviews, Slim mentioned the case of one "Tonelli," who ended up in an asylum after having been the "brightest" among working pimps in his younger days.⁴⁷ Looking back on the toll psychological manipulation and emotional "hardness" took on the pimp's own life, Slim declared, "Pimping is a waste of youth and of intellect."⁴⁸

In addition to his health and overall well-being, the pimp's cold-hearted actions had adverse effects on black women and the black family more generally. Slim noted that the pimp's exploitation of prostitutes was "destructive" because these women were "potentially the mothers and the very root of the black family structure." This point was essential to understanding how Slim began his "process of self-reformation" in the early 1960s.⁴⁹ Interviews highlighted the fact that Slim was married with four children and that he had been with the same woman for twelve years. Echoing the discourses of the black family that I considered in Chapter 2, Slim intimated that it was his desire to enjoy a

⁴⁶ Kay Bourne, "A Pimp's Eye View of Life," *Bay State Banner* [Boston] 1 Feb. 1973: 14.

⁴⁷ West, "Sweet Talk" B2. See also Bourne.

⁴⁸ Bourne.

⁴⁹ Ellis, 3.

stable family life that helped him give up pimping. Drawing from Freudian terminology, Slim said he had only recently “develop[ed] the inhibitions of the average man” that enabled him to function in mainstream society. It was to the “average man” that Slim constantly appealed as an inspiration for his becoming a better person. These men were the “unoppressed heroes” of society, and they stood tall with “their (psychological) balls intact.”⁵⁰ “Squaring up” might not have been glamorous or exciting, but it did help Slim become a better, more loving, father.⁵¹ For their part, Slim recommended that black women look “for the inward jewels, the intrinsic jewels, not the extrinsic,” in a man. So long as women sought men who were “good” (as opposed to merely “good looking”)⁵² and men sought social advancement through legitimate, family-affirming channels, Slim detected the possibility for young men to stake out new forms of “respectable” masculinity (“balls intact,” “inward jewels”) in the square world.

Even though Slim was determined to show the black press how his fiction inversely affirmed the middle-class values of American society, the reality was that the young black men who were reading his books did not have the same opportunities he had to secure regular employment or remain within nuclear family households. Slim said that his books were read by ghetto youth who “think that a respectable kind of life is somehow not wonderful.”⁵³ Yet as we saw in previous chapters, the issue was not young

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ West, “Sweet Talk” B2.

⁵² Bourne.

⁵³ Ellis, 3.

black men's lack of wanting to lead better lives (which Whoreson undoubtedly does) but that structural inequalities restricted their opportunities for social advancement to hustling and pimping. Slim understood this point, and he acknowledged in the same piece that young black men would be lured to the pimping lifestyle because of the "maximum freedom" it afforded them in impoverished circumstances.⁵⁴ Still, he decried the way some young readers "rationalized" their situation through reading his books. Asked by Hollie West whether *Pimp* "saved" anybody from the pimping lifestyle, Slim responded, "No...It's almost impossible to dissuade young dudes who're already street poisoned because almost without exception they have no recourse but to think they're slicker than Iceberg. They think I'm some sort of anachronism."⁵⁵

Yet it was Slim's very claim that young black pimps considered him an anachronism which buttressed his image in the public spotlight. Slim could bemoan the new generation of pimps' use of drugs, such as heroin, to control their whores only because he "was too old" to keep up with the game and had left it to pursue "legitimate" employment.⁵⁶ In an almost nostalgic register, Slim would tell reporters that the subject of his autobiographical novel was not the same kind of pimp he saw working the streets in the early 1970s. This gesture had the curious effect of domesticating *Pimp* itself, suggesting that if the book were read in the "correct" manner (with special emphasis on the one-page preface), young black men would not become ever more hardened in their

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ West, "Sweet Talk" B2.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

inner-city survival strategies. In this regard, being accused of anachronicity was actually a good thing: it demonstrated for middle-class audiences Slim's progressive removal from the street life he had so forthrightly documented in his fiction. We saw how Slim played up his own anachronicity in response to nationalist claims that his books defused revolutionary desire in the black community. In the context of mainstream attention to his work, Slim used the same trope to suggest that his books addressed a lifestyle that should be firmly situated in the past. In both cases, Slim drew on an interpretation of black pulp fiction which allayed fears that it was counterproductive to the black community.

Missing from Slim's interpretive framework was the recognition that his books elicited and sustained fantasies of black male survival in the post-civil rights moment. These fantasies did not follow the assumption that a black man read black pulp fiction either inversely (rejecting the pimping lifestyle) or prescriptively (learning how to be a pimp). Instead, they reconstituted urban black masculinity through readers' identification with characterological traits that proved useful to negotiating different facets of urban poverty. Slim, though, came to read his fiction in a realist framework, ignoring the imaginative identifications that his books provided for young black men. In view of the media hype surrounding *Trick Baby*'s release, he crafted an image of himself as a "reformed" criminal to counter claims that his work might have deleterious effects on the ghetto's fiction-reading constituents. Slim's interviews and lectures held him up as a living example of the kind of black man neither revolutionaries nor middle-class "race men" should idolize. Unfortunately, in working to delegitimize the idea of negative

glamour for a host of suspicious readers, Slim deprived his voice of the very source of his literary imagination: the people, language, and culture of the inner-city underworld. After several years of touring the lecture and media circuit, the experience of constantly defending himself and his books gave Slim a profound case of writer's block; he would not publish another book until 1977.

The irony about Slim's interviews in 1972-73 was that they focused on the widespread popularity of Slim's fiction, not of the movie that brought media attention to it. This fact highlights the critical role white appropriation of black culture played in intraracial debates about the politics of representation. The film adaptation of *Trick Baby* may not have presented a convincing narrative of inner-city life, but the mainstream attention it brought to Slim's work sparked middle-class fears that his was the wrong kind of image to project to whites. In this sense, it was black pulp fiction's mediation through *Trick Baby's* crossover potential (not the film itself) that framed Slim's repentant persona in the black press. The critique of negative glamour was thus as much a middle-class defensive reaction to being associated with lower-class African Americans as it was a Black Power mode of leveraging popular influence among urban blacks. Despite their divergent political goals and visions for the social well-being of the black community, Black Power advocates and middle-class black critics shared the view that pimping was a self-destructive lifestyle which Slim bore some responsibility to reject. With Slim's writing tailing off in the wake of the media hype, it was left to his successor Donald

Goines to figure out how black pulp fiction would respond to the mainstream attention it received in the early 1970s.

Dead on Arrival

The problem of reception facing Iceberg Slim was, in a sense, a matter of bad timing. In defending his work to cultural nationalists, Slim held to a fixed idea of what constituted the “black revolution.” The idealism he attached to revolutionary desire inevitably caricatured the pimping lifestyle as passé. Yet as early as 1969 the historian Lerone Bennett wrote about how revolutionaries themselves would find it difficult to keep pace with the times. In an essay that appeared in *Ebony* magazine, Bennett observed:

It’s hard to tell time by revolutionary clocks. Everything, including time, changes in a revolutionary time, and the clocks inherited from the old regime are usually too slow or too fast.

A *real* revolution introduces a new time and a new space and a new relation to both time and space. And within that shifting space-time continuum men who stand still find that they no longer occupy the same coordinates in relation to a moving reality. This creates enormous problems of orientation. Men, moods, and events move so rapidly...that it is very difficult to locate issues and leaders on a scale of truth and effectiveness. As can be imagined, this causes no end of problems, particularly for revolutionaries, some of whom cease to be revolutionary by falling behind the revolutionary current or by running too far ahead. And the melancholy conclusion to which all this leads is that *it is hard in a revolutionary age to identify the real revolutionaries*. In the blur of events, in the whirling syntheses of moods and modes and issues, it is very difficult to tell whether a given revolutionary prophet was born prematurely or posthumously or whether he was a revolutionary prophet at all.⁵⁷

Bennett would have seen Slim as one of those men who, “stand[ing] still,” struggled to define themselves in revolutionary times. But Bennett also understood that the propulsion

⁵⁷ Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Of Time, Space and Revolution,” *Ebony* Aug. 1969: 31.

of radical social upheaval was liable to leave revolutionaries feeling like fallen heroes (“falling behind”) or unsung visionaries (“running too far ahead”). Revolutionary time followed its own beat, and no one could anticipate which direction it would take. At best, Bennett counseled, African Americans could look to history to make sense of these heady times, for it was history that laid the “mandate” to “make this moment count.”⁵⁸

Donald Goines was more attuned than his predecessor to the uneven development of Black Power’s revolution. In fact, by the time his writing career really took off, in 1972, the movement’s vanguard organizations were in disarray, suppressed by government and local police agencies and undermined by internecine conflicts. The BPP was most affected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) crackdown on so-called “Black Nationalist Hate Groups.” According to historian William Van Deburg, between 1967 and 1971, the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO)—which had subverted communist, anti-war, and civil rights groups since the late 1950s—indulged in a wide-ranging effort to “limit the growth of black militant organizations, to discourage cooperation between them, and to discredit their leaders.”⁵⁹ COINTELPRO targeted the BPP in particular for surveillance and disruption. Agents employed a host of subversive tactics to undermine the BPP, from harassing rank-and-file members and drawing out the legal trials of Party leaders to spreading disinformation and going undercover within the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 302.

Party itself.⁶⁰ The tactics were ruthlessly effective. Even during the BPP's peak years of nationwide operations, Huey Newton was serving time in prison, embroiled in a protracted legal battle against charges of voluntary manslaughter, while Eldridge Cleaver, the Party's flamboyant Minister of Information, lived in exile in Algeria after he was charged with attempted murder in a failed ambush of Oakland patrolmen two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Most infamously, the FBI collaborated with local authorities in Chicago to set up an early-morning raid on the home of BPP leader Fred Hampton. The December 4, 1969, intrusion led to the charismatic organizer's death by shooting in what many suspected was a calculated political assassination.

Arguably the most pernicious effect of COINTELPRO's efforts to disrupt Black Power organizing was the internal dissension it bred among revolutionaries themselves. One such tension the FBI exploited was between the BPP and emergent cultural nationalist groups, led by Maulana Karenga's Los Angeles-based US Organization. After the shooting deaths of Los Angeles BPP chairman John Huggins and Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter by US supporters in January 1969, the BPP expelled "[h]undreds of rogue members, suspected agents, common criminals, and loyal advocates...from its ranks."⁶¹ The purging left East Coast Panthers especially wounded, given that their

⁶⁰ On COINTELPRO's tactics against the BPP, see Winston A. Grady-Willis, "The Black Panther Party: State Repression and Political Prisoners," *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998) 363-89; and Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars against Dissent in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002) 123-64.

⁶¹ Joseph, 242.

chapters tended to swerve away from Newton's directives more than their West Coast counterparts. Before long BPP leaders across the country were caught up in a state of emergency, as their fears were stoked by mass arrests, FBI surveillance, and the ever-present threat of internal subversion through informants and spies. The chaos led to former SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael resigning from the Party in July 1969. In response to his defection, the BPP went so far as to denounce first-wave nationalists like Carmichael as counterrevolutionary agents who promoted "cultural nationalist madness" rather than the "class struggle."⁶²

Ironically, the decisive blow to the BPP came on the heels of Newton's release from prison in August 1970. Following a more introspective turn in his political thinking, Newton shied away from armed self-defense and direct police confrontation. Cleaver, on the other hand, still in exile in Algeria, continued to advocate for "violent revolution and urban guerrilla warfare."⁶³ The bookish Newton and the militant Cleaver stood on opposite ends of the spectrum of possible directions for the Party in 1970s. Newton's turn to an autonomous Marxist philosophy of "intercommunalism" saw him focus more on community sustainability on a local level and on political reform as African Americans' surest way to secure their socioeconomic stability. Cleaver effectively accused Newton of

⁶² Qtd. in Joseph, 243.

⁶³ Ollie A. Johnson, III, "Explaining the Demise of the Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factors," *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998) 400.

selling out to reformism, at one point reminding him that the BPP was a “vanguard organization” and not a “mass membership” group.⁶⁴

Unsurprisingly, the FBI did everything it could to exploit the growing ideological rift between Newton and Cleaver. Forged letters routed between Algeria and Oakland were deliberately leaked to Newton, leading him to believe that Cleaver loyalists were preparing for a coup and even his assassination.⁶⁵ Newton promptly expelled the leading militant suspect, Geronimo Pratt, and turned a suspicious eye on the New York chapter of the BPP. Newton was consumed by fear and anxiety, believing that he was a marked man within his own organization. Events came to a head when, after Newton’s suspicions led him to expel several prominent New York Panthers, Newton and Cleaver battled it out during a televised conference call on February 26, 1971. The tension-filled exchange devolved into accusations and threats, with Newton calling Cleaver a “coward and a punk” and expelling him and his fellow Panthers-in-exile from the Party.⁶⁶

Cleaver’s removal would eventually prove fatal to the BPP, as it fueled resentment among his supporters and exacerbated intra-organizational rifts. Malicious vendettas led to the shooting death of Cleaver loyalist Robert Webb in Harlem and the torture and killing of Sam Napier, head of the Party’s newspaper distribution, in his offices in New York. Membership numbers fell drastically in response to the violent reprisals. Moreover, because he could never be sure of who was loyal to the Party and

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Joseph, 266.

⁶⁵ Joseph, 262.

⁶⁶ Qtd. in Joseph, 265.

who wasn't, by 1972 Newton had ordered the closing of all BPP chapters except for Oakland's. Although returning the BPP to its roots gave Newton the ideal opportunity to put his theory of intercommunalism into practice, it also consolidated his power over the group to an "authoritarian" degree. Newton's unchecked authority led to widespread internal corruption, including the misappropriation of Party funds and random physical outbursts against Party members and innocent bystanders.⁶⁷ Newton's post-prison drug abuse contributed to his erratic behavior, but it also convinced him that a critical part of the BPP's centralization of power in Oakland entailed overseeing the ghetto's illegal, street-based economies. Newton allegedly used the Panthers' security forces to extort local crime syndicates; he was even accused of devising a scheme to collect money from the producers of *The Mack*.⁶⁸ Thus, despite its stated aim to do good for the community, the BPP nonetheless came to be seen by many as an organization of thugs with guns; in historian Peniel Joseph's account, "Newton the revolutionary had been replaced by Newton the racketeer."⁶⁹

With the mass media's sensationalistic coverage of violence and criminality in the demise of the BPP, Goines started writing in the early 1970s disabused of the idealism of black revolution. Not burdened by Slim's anxiety over being a negative influence on black youth, which kept him in a perpetual state of anachronicity, Goines took up the task of documenting the times head-on. Of course, by 1972, the times had taken a turn for the

⁶⁷ Johnson, 406-7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 407; Joseph, 287.

⁶⁹ Joseph, 287.

worse—the revolution had overrun the revolutionaries—and certain expressions of Black Power solidarity began to look more like run-of-the-mill gangsterism. A former volunteer with the Panthers’ highly effective “survival programs” testified to this shift in the organization’s philosophy: “When I started with the health clinic...I’d come in and there would be some cadre reading [Mao’s] Red Book. By the time I left the Party, I’d come in and the same cadre would be reading *The Godfather*.”⁷⁰ Although we cannot assume a causal link between the experience of reading Mario Puzo’s bestselling novel about the Mafia (originally published in 1969) and the kinds of illicit activities the Panthers engaged in back in Oakland, the volunteer’s observation does make an interesting point about the changing nature of revolutionary desire: these book-wielding Panthers lost sight of their political bearings behind their unquestioning loyalty to a “family”—one that allegedly sought to rule Oakland’s criminal underworld.⁷¹

If Goines had missed the most promising days of the Black Power revolution, so be it: he would set his sights on its sordid demise.⁷² Fresh off the success of *Dopefiend*

⁷⁰ Qtd. in Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 176. On the BPP’s survival programs and on-the-ground efforts to put intercommunalism into practice, see The Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*, ed. David Hilliard (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

⁷¹ Upon the release of Francis Ford Coppola’s film adaptation of *The Godfather* in 1972, Newton is said to have made it required viewing for all BPP members and to have modeled his sartorial style on the tailored suits worn by mafiosos. See Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994) 234, 266.

⁷² Goines would have been familiar with local developments in Detroit’s BPP. After a patrolman was shot to death in a conflict over the selling of BPP newspapers, the police lay siege to the chapter’s headquarters on October 24, 1970. The resulting legal troubles for the Panthers led to

(1971) and *Whoreson*, Goines hastily composed the manuscript for *Black Gangster*, which Holloway House published in the summer of 1972. The book tells the story of Melvin “Prince” Walker, a 22-year-old ex-con who draws from Black Power discourse to organize and elicit supporters for his operation to take over Detroit’s ghetto underworld. Prince’s gang of thugs, called the Rulers, work under the cover of a revolutionary front, the Freedom Now Liberation Movement (FNLM). By manipulating urban youth’s desire for revolutionary action, Prince orchestrates a bloody and ultimately self-destructive crime wave that claims the lives of supporters, policemen (or “pigs”), and bystanders alike. Yet rather than cast Prince’s cynical appropriation of Black Power, and particularly the organizing strategies of the BPP, in a totally negative light, Goines frames him as a new model of the post-revolutionary black masculine subject. This subject does not shy away from the harsh realities of life in the black ghetto; instead, he unashamedly exploits those around him to get ahead—and he does so with all the power that inheres in leading a cult of personality among the Rulers. As I argue below, Goines neither condemns nor condones Prince’s ruthless behavior. Rather, he stages his death as an outcome of fate, of a strong black man’s *necessary death* in the underworld.

The theme of black-on-black exploitation being carried out in the name of black nationalism was not unique to Goines. Chester Himes, one of Goines’s literary heroes,

the dissolution of the chapter. For more on this episode, see Ahmad A. Rahman, “Marching Blind: The Rise and Fall of the Black Panther Party in Detroit,” *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party*, ed. Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 208-17.

structured his crime novel *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965) around a con man's efforts to swindle inner-city blacks out of their money through a bogus Back-to-Africa enterprise. The satirical acuity of Himes's novel relied on interlocking narrative elements: 1) the hollowness of the con man's appeals to an essential African heritage shared by all black people, and 2) the ability of the black detective duo of Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson to neutralize the thief, return the money, and thus restore order to the black community. In *Black Gangster* Goines updated Himes's Harlem scheme for the Black Power moment, but he also made the figure of the exploiter his protagonist: if the hard-nosed yet essentially sympathetic Grave Digger and Coffin Ed stood as defenders of Harlem and its people, Prince's criminal self-interest promised no such oversight for the black community. Indeed Goines's crime fiction offered little in the way of a redemptive or (re)stabilizing force in the narrative.

Prince's appeal resides in his generic phallic power—Goines describes him sparingly as “tall, slim, and black”⁷³—and his capacity to adapt his criminal enterprise to the times. Just as Newton helped run the BPP from behind prison walls, so does Prince oversee the business of his gang while he serves four years in Jackson Prison.⁷⁴ In the opening chapter of *Black Gangster*, Prince surveys the “queers who lived like beauty queens” and the old men whom “times done passed...by” in prison (13). In contrast to

⁷³ Donald Goines, *Black Gangster* (1972; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1991) 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁷⁴ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Jackson was the Michigan state penitentiary in which Goines had served time leading up to his career as a writer.

these emasculated men, Prince vows to shore up his gang's criminal operations upon his release, as this would express the heterosexual virility of his own manhood. The image of the fearsome badman became the Panthers' iconic symbol of black self-determination in the late 1960s—indeed Cleaver once referred to Newton as “the baddest motherfucker ever to set foot inside of history.”⁷⁵ Prince fashions his persona after the same image in order to reinstate himself as the formal head of the Rulers. True to his promise, within days of his release Prince commands a small army of black youth who stand in awe at the “magnetism of his personality” (38).

The Rulers are organized like a proper BPP chapter, with “district leaders” and their subordinates, male members who wear “identical outfits,” and a local “clubhouse,” or headquarters (27, 26, 25). In truth, however, the FNLM serves as a front for the Rulers' bootlegging and racketeering operations in the black community; these in turn serve Prince's plan to become the recognized leader of Detroit's ghetto underworld. Prince explains the logic behind his plan to his closest confidants: “With all this black awareness coming to light, we're going to ride to the top of the hill on it...Keep pounding it into the people's faces about police brutality, which there's always plenty of. All we got to do is keep it before the people's faces, and every time the pigs do something to a black man that stinks, we'll be on the case and cash in on it” (33-34). Prince's cynical calculus identifies in the movement for racial solidarity an opportunity to set up a system

⁷⁵ Eldridge Cleaver, *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches*, ed. Robert Scheer (New York: Random House, 1969) 41.

of economic exploitation. The FNLM thus provides the Rulers with the cover they need to continue their criminal activities: harnessing community outrage at police brutality allows them to deflect attention away from their self-serving practices.

Before long the body count starts adding up, as one violent action ordered by Prince—the assassination of a local rival—leads to a series of bloody reprisals and vendettas. Although the hit fails in finding its mark, the Rulers’ attack leaves two bystanders dead. The police follow up on the only witness who is willing to come forth with his testimony. Realizing the witness, an elderly black man, would likely pin the crime on the Rulers, Prince hires two professionals to slay him. The subsequent altercation at the man’s house leaves him, his wife, and two policemen shot dead by the hit men. Throughout all of this, Goines’s narrative voice, much like Prince’s marching orders, evinces a cold, indifferent perspective on the bloodshed. In the first attack, Goines drily observes, “The scrawny kid who had given the alarm was on the floor shrieking, his mouth a gaping, blood hole” (68). He later notices, in a trademark flourish of dehumanized, passive-voice imagery, “The cigar butts and cigarettes that littered the floor now had something to swim around in. Blood. Pools of it” (68).

However shocked the reader is meant to be by these scenes of violence, there is a curious way in which Prince remains immune to the recognition that he has blood on his hands. If anything, the Rulers command an even stronger foothold in the community—four hundred “kids” strong (91)—in the wake of these events. Goines does point to Prince’s hypocrisy when he addresses an audience of FNLM followers, exhorting them

with rhetorically powerful but substantively hollow nationalist rhetoric: “The time has come when we have to stop lookin’ for help from whitey. How you can sincerely believe that a white man, born and raised in a society diseased with institutionalized racism, can ever bring himself to really help someone of the black race is beyond me” (99). The irony of this passage is that Prince’s own actions may well be construed as exacerbating the “institutionalized racism” he decries. Aside from this scene, however, Prince is more or less held up as a sexy, streetwise, and coldly calculating investor in the ghetto’s underground economies, from selling homemade corn whiskey to collecting “protection” payments from businesses. Goines evinces no doubt that Prince’s powers of exploitation secure his claim to racial authenticity. Everything about Prince’s character affirms the veracity of his survivalist motto for the reader. Goines writes, “As far as Prince was concerned, there had always been ghettos, and there would always be ghettos...If you were hungry, if you needed clothes, if your rent was overdue—take it. It was better to be a taker than one of those who got took!” (127).

Goines’s post-revolutionary black masculine subject is a paradoxical figure, as Prince proves to be both an exploiter and an idol of the black ghetto. Yet there is also a way in which this characterological tension is given narrative resolution in *Black Gangster*. By the novel’s final chapters, violence has reverberated throughout so much of Detroit’s inner city that one nearly forgets that Prince was the instigator of the mass killings. Aided by Goines’s intentionally flat descriptions of broken limbs, bullet-riddled bodies, and even a severed head, the reader becomes inured to the violence in a way that

generalizes it as a condition of life in the black ghetto. Narratively speaking, the violence seems to feed off itself toward the end of the novel. Entering into what I would call a *narrative death drive*, the connections between Prince's exploitation of the black community and the downfall of the Rulers are obscured as his right-hand men are slaughtered by sadistic hit men, racist policemen, and equally well-armed mafiosos. Even Prince's girlfriend Ruby becomes a terrifying killer, while Prince goes the entire novel without ever having lifted a weapon himself. Taken together, these events transform every character into a victim of an all-consuming, all-powerful force of violence.

Significantly, that force has no human face—it is indifferent to the dead humanity it leaves in its wake. Moreover, because the force of violence lies outside of *Black Gangster's* narrative frame, Goines leaves us with the impression that Prince's fate was sealed from the very beginning. This sense of fate is revealed when Prince is mortally wounded by Tony, one of his hired hit men. Tony turns on Prince to collect the Mafia's reward for his head, but his fatal bullets hit Prince only by chance as he is being shot to death by Ruby. The randomness of the scene's violent exchange underscores the notion that no character is in control of his fate. Following up on this conceit, Prince's eventual death from his wounds is emptied out of any narrative significance: “‘It hurts so,’ he gasped. Then he lay back and died. There was nothing heroic in his death, just the passing of a boy who would never have the chance to see twenty-five” (297). His body given over to fate, Prince's exploitative greed has been overcome by the fatalistic script in which time itself (defined as linear narrative progression) is stalled or suspended.

Fate's inhuman timekeeping overruns all characters in *Black Gangster*, with the effect of both naturalizing the field of violence in Detroit's inner city and holding up Prince as an *already dead* antihero. The latter is given resonant expression when Ruby is killed while trying to find medical help for Prince. Not knowing that he is already dead, she muses, blood "gush[ing] from a head wound," "What will my man do now?" (299).

With its narrative arc of localized acts of violence spinning out of control into citywide destruction, *Black Gangster's* storyline would serve as the template for Goines's next eight novels, all of which appeared in the mind-boggling span of just under two years.⁷⁶ Because Goines wrote at such breakneck speed, these books were thin on characterization and lacked the vernacular flair of earlier black pulp fiction. What Goines did fall back on was the plot-driven formula that *Black Gangster* established: narrating, from the impersonal third-person point of view, the ghetto crime lord's rise to power, the bloodbath he leaves in his wake, and his own inevitable demise. In a phrase, Goines's "formula" novels elicited *fantasies of despair* among urban black readers. These novels gave up on Whoreson's hopes for middle-class security and instead depicted figures like Prince who both lived and died by their own code of ruthless exploitation.⁷⁷ Crucially,

⁷⁶ See Appendix III for a chronological list of Goines's "formula" novels, from *Black Gangster* to *Cry Revenge*.

⁷⁷ The exceptions to this formula were *Swamp Man* (1973) and *Eldorado Red* (1974). Set in the Deep South, *Swamp Man* recounts the efforts of a black man named George Jackson to avenge the death of his father and the rape of his sister at the hands of white racists. Despite its divergence from the formula, the story ends with Jackson's shooting death by a white policeman. *Eldorado Red's* protagonist heads an illegal gambling operation, and though he orders the murder of his own son upon discovering a prodigal act of betrayal, Red himself does not suffer any consequences for his actions. Finally, Goines's prison novel *White Man's Justice, Black Man's*

however, when violence took on a life of its own in the novels, Goines was able to “save” his protagonists from readers’ condemnation of their deeds. As he did with Prince, Goines retained the phallic power of the post-revolutionary black masculine subject by displacing (his) acts of violence onto an agentless fate.

A full-time professional writer by 1973, Goines aimed to hone his formula by moving to Los Angeles to be closer to his editors at Holloway House.⁷⁸ In the most productive phase of his career, Goines’s message was not so much that “crime doesn’t pay” as it was that young black men had little chance for long-term survival on the streets of the inner city. Through this nine-title sequence in Goines’s oeuvre, readers entertained the notion that uplift, aspiration, and hope were empty ideals so long as the black ghetto remained in tact. Disillusioned with both the civil rights and Black Power movements—and their perceived failure to change the actual conditions of existence in the black ghetto—readers were left tarrying with Prince’s observation that “there had always been ghettos, and there would always be ghettos,” and nothing more.⁷⁹

Grief (1973) is only a slight exception to the formula. Although most of the narrative takes place within the confines of a jail cell, its protagonist Chester Hines stands accused of masterminding a murderous robbery and is dealt a life sentence at the end of the novel.

⁷⁸ For an account of Goines’s brief stint in Los Angeles, during which time he tried to tailor his novel-writing toward eventual (blaxploitation) film production, see Eddie B. Allen, Jr., *Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004) 134-47.

⁷⁹ The “nothing more” of Goines’s formula is also recognized in Greg Goode, “From *Dopefiend* to *Kenyatta’s Last Hit*: The Angry Black Crime Novels of Donald Goines,” *MELUS* 11.3 (1984) 41-48; and Michael Covino, “Motor City Breakdown,” *Village Voice* 4 Aug. 1987: 48-49. Goode refers to Goines’s representations of the ghetto as “zero-sum-game societies” (43), and Covino characterizes his novels as being written from “ground zero” (48).

Birth (and Death) of a Nation Hero

Goines's stay in Los Angeles was brief. Removed from his friends and family, he struggled to find the inspiration he needed to continue writing. More unfortunate was the fact that Goines's heroin habit at once fueled his frantic pace of writing and consumed most of the royalties he earned from his published work. The cycle of addiction and meeting deadlines made Goines feel as though his life was stalled, that even his extraordinary literary production could do nothing to alleviate the force of stasis bearing down on him. Within a matter of months, Goines moved back to Detroit, never to return to Los Angeles.

In 1974 Goines conceived a series of books that would build on his formula novels but feature a protagonist whom readers could identify as a champion of Black Power and the black community's socioeconomic interests. The novels that made up the Kenyatta series—*Crime Partners* (1974), *Death List* (1974), *Kenyatta's Escape* (1974), *Kenyatta's Last Hit* (1975)—told the story of a Detroit-based revolutionary who uses organized violence to clean up the streets of dope pushers and racist white policemen. Espousing a watered-down version of Black Power's philosophy of self-determination, Kenyatta, the protagonist of the series, justifies his group's violent actions by claiming that they protect the black community from abusive and exploitative people. Critic Michael Covino suggested that Goines created the series because he felt "the political need, the *human* need, to leave behind the cynicism and the pessimism [of his earlier

work], to posit some sort of ideal.”⁸⁰ Like Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback*, Kenyatta was modeled after the badman-turned-militant, a black masculine subject who would use his knowledge of the streets to bring about social change in his community. Tellingly, Goines’s protagonist was named after Kenya’s independence hero and first president, Jomo Kenyatta. A revered figure in the decolonization and Pan-Africanist movements of the 1960s, Kenyatta carried a certain cachet in black nationalist circles which Goines wanted to tap into.

Before the series came out, however, Holloway House had to consider the fact that they had glutted the market with ten novels bearing Goines’s name in just under three years. The company was concerned that Goines’s formula was wearing thin and that readers would not recognize the new take on Black Power that Goines wished to advance in the Kenyatta series. But the bottom line, of course, was that Holloway House needed to ensure that the books would sell. Bentley Morriss recommended to Goines that he publish the Kenyatta books under a different name: “Donald, God love you... We want to publish the books, but if you put out too many books of an author within a given period of time it has a sham about it. Would you consider putting a book out under a pseudonym?”⁸¹

Although he was loath to admit it, Morriss’s “sham” went both ways: Goines’s fiction no doubt suffered from its hasty composition and formulaic plotting, but it was Holloway House that stood to gain hundreds of thousands of dollars by the author’s rapid work rate.

⁸⁰ Covino, 49.

⁸¹ Qtd. in Allen, 160.

Still, Goines understood the reasoning behind Morriss's request, and he obliged by publishing the Kenyatta series (and one other novel, *Cry Revenge*, also from 1974) as Al C. Clark. (See Fig. 11 for an original "Clark" edition of *Death List*.) A boyhood friend from Detroit, Clark was honored by Goines's decision to use his name for the series.

[INSERT IMAGE]

Fig. 11

The appeal of the series for urban black readers was clear: Kenyatta was a strong black man, an authentic racial revolutionary, who used extralegal means to serve and protect the black community. In Detroit's inner cities, where the majority-white police force could not be trusted and black drug dealers preyed on the vices of poor and working-class black people, Kenyatta stood tall as a ghetto avenger, equal parts Huey Newton, African independence fighter, and criminal outlaw. In *Crime Partners*, the first

book of the series, Goines pays some tribute to the Marxist-Leninist foundations of the BPP's organizing, noting that on the walls of Kenyatta's headquarters "were pictures of Che, Ho Chi Min [sic], and other men of color who were dedicated leaders in various revolutions."⁸² Significantly, in the Kenyatta series these revolutionaries serve mainly as window dressing: they really are only "pictures" whose superficial iconicity motivates Kenyatta's organization.

More important to Goines's crafting of Kenyatta's heroism is the character's embodiment of a militantly potent black masculinity. Kenyatta's first appearance in the series is marked by Goines's attention to his physique:

He was completely bald, and his head had been greased until it had a shine to it. The only hair he possessed was his beard and mustache. The beard was heavy, running around his cheeks until it would have met his sideburns if he had any. The most remarkable thing about him was the jet black eyes that stared out without blinking, giving him a hawkish look that went well with the long, keen nose he had. (43)

The description of Kenyatta's appearance renders him an imposing yet supremely desirable black man. It is as though his looks alone make Kenyatta a natural leader of the ghetto's own police force. In contrast to Newton's notoriously dry theoreticism, the emphasis on Kenyatta's body reveals those elements of the organization which Goines privileges throughout the series: their arsenal of weapons (as an extension of the phallus); their martial arts training (specifically judo, which Goines calls "the deadly art of death" [56]); and their sexual prowess with the group's female members.

⁸² Donald Goines, *Crime Partners* (1974; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2000) 42. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Reading racial authenticity through Kenyatta's body allowed readers to imagine a purposeful response to ghetto poverty and exploitation beyond official Black Power discourse. Goines's point was that it did not take a high-minded philosophy to incite action among people who wanted to do something for their communities. In line with his plot-driven formula stories, the Kenyatta series proceeded from the premise that reclaiming black masculinity from years of racist oppression (i.e., feminization) was the key to black liberation. As Kenyatta explains his organization's "philosophy" to two initiates in *Crime Partners*, action, movement, and doing *something* are prioritized over considering why they should kill at all, or coming up with alternatives to murdering "enemies" of the ghetto. Kenyatta recoils at the image of "white pigs that ride around our neighborhoods acting like white gods" (45), and this serves as justification enough to neutralize individual policemen. When the initiates, two mid-career hit men named Billy and Jackie, balk at Kenyatta's invitation to help him kill two white policemen, the leader counters with, "[S]ome white-ass pigs are going to meet their fuckin' maker tonight, whether or not you two guys go along with the program or not" (46). Even here, though, it is unclear what kind of "program" Kenyatta has set out for his forty-member-strong organization. Behind the relatively straightforward desire to "rid [Detroit] of dope pushers and race-hatin' cops" (49) lies only death and Kenyatta's forceful incitement to action: "It can be done!" he intones to Billy and Jackie, trying to convince them of community protection by any means necessary. "It can be done, and it will be done" (49).

Unfettered by thoughtful deliberation—that is, second thoughts about murder—Goines’s action-packed episodes of violence and flight propel the Kenyatta series forward. Books one through three conclude with dramatic scenes of death, destruction, and outlaws in flight that are then picked up at the beginning of books two through four. *Crime Partners* ends with Billy and Jackie’s shooting deaths, ordered by a drug boss, King Fisher, as retaliation for their hit against one of his dealers. Accordingly, *Death List* begins with Benson and Ryan, the Detroit detectives assigned to tracking Kenyatta and his associates, arriving at the scene of the crime moments too late to arrest their suspects. Following the assassination of Kingfisher (his name is changed to one word in the second book), *Death List* closes with Kenyatta and a handful of his followers escaping a police raid on their countryside commune just outside of Detroit. The appropriately titled *Kenyatta’s Escape* follows the group in flight as they hijack a plane, aiming to land in a country “where a Black man is treated like a man.”⁸³ Instead of making it to Algiers, the plane crash-lands in the Nevada desert, where Kenyatta then makes plans to move his group to Los Angeles. Benson and Ryan spend the entire novel chasing shadows, trying to help local and federal authorities who want to bring Kenyatta to justice but always remain one step behind the outlaws. *Kenyatta’s Escape* closes with Kenyatta and four surviving followers again narrowly escaping from the authorities after an explosive gas station shootout. *Kenyatta’s Last Hit* commences about a year after the second escape,

⁸³ Donald Goines, *Kenyatta’s Escape* (1974; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2000) 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

but we still find Benson and Ryan smarting after their failed capture. They agree to return to Los Angeles to track down Kenyatta, who now commands an improbable two-thousand-strong following in Watts.

Given the intertwined narrative structure of the Kenyatta books—which made them read almost like a continuous serialized novel—the pleasure to be derived from following Kenyatta’s exploits resided in how well he manages to stay one step ahead of both the authorities and the underworld figures who would have him killed. Kenyatta’s forward-thinking actions make him a “legend in his own time.”⁸⁴ The propulsive element of his character contains the hope and even idealism of revolutionary times that Goines wanted to invest in the series. Where an indifferent police force and drug kingpins are content with the status quo, Kenyatta wants to make change happen on his own terms. Unsurprisingly, one of his closest allies, a black “political radical” named Jackson Mathews, is described as “a man who had seen the winds of change coming long before others even knew there was a storm...He had known the liberal sensitivity of the American government would not bring about the changes. He had also known that the only way to effect real change was through raw, brutal power” (*Kenyatta’s Last Hit*, 101-2). It is this “raw, brutal power,” a kind of black Id of revolutionary desire, that Kenyatta embodies to great effect—so much so that even the black detective Benson marvels at how efficient Kenyatta is at dispatching criminals and the white policemen (his

⁸⁴ Donald Goines, *Kenyatta’s Last Hit* (1975; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2003) 83. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

colleagues) who cannot see him as their equal. For young urban readers in the mid-1970s, Kenyatta served as an outlet for their own frustrations with police brutality and widespread substance abuse in their own communities. Kenyatta's irruptive force represented for them the idea that things needed to get done outside of formal organizing, whether in the civil rights or Black Power model. Running on their own clock—with watches synchronized to carry out scheduled heists and assassinations—Kenyatta's group constituted a *fantasy of revolutionary time*.

But revolutionary time tells only one side of the story. For all of its inter-narrative propulsion, the Kenyatta series is also riddled with scenes of senseless violence and cold-blooded murder. Cleaning up the streets by any means necessary turns out to be a bane for Kenyatta and his associates. Violence begets violence until it spins out of control, taking on a life of its own and leaving numerous innocent deaths in its wake. In *Crime Partners* Kenyatta's targeted killing of two racist white policemen leads to an all-out bloodbath with nine men dead; one of those men is a Kenyatta follower, Big-Time, whom Kenyatta himself shoots because he flubbed the getaway. In the same novel, Billy and Jackie's hit on the drug dealer Little David leads directly to their own deaths, as well as those of their lovers, by order of King Fisher. Although Kenyatta is technically responsible for starting the cycle of bloody reprisals, *Death List* begins with the detached observation that it was Billy and Jackie's fate that they should have died so violently: "Blood ran freely down off the sidewalk into the gutter as the lifeless forms of four young

black people lay in the filth and hopelessness of the hard-pressed neighborhood.”⁸⁵ The victims in this sentence have been acted upon—“Billy was spattered with the blood of his loved one”; Jackie “kept falling until the hard pavement struck him in the face” (13)—but Goines’s prose absolves both the gunmen and Kenyatta of responsibility for their deaths. As with *Black Gangster*, Goines’s signature passive-voice description of violence in this scene gives the impression that a timeless and agentless fate has destroyed his characters.

Goines’s fatalism is at its most obscene when Kenyatta has the group’s “best hit man” (*Death List*, 144), a fearless sadist nicknamed Creeper, shake up Kingfisher’s right-hand man Sam for information on his whereabouts. Fate is already put into play when Creeper arrives at Sam’s home when he is not there; Goines describes Sam’s wife Mary as “the woman who had made the mistake of bearing two children for Sam,” foreshadowing the tragedy that will befall the family (*Death List*, 76). Creeper proceeds to cut the throat of the couple’s four-year-old son when Mary lies about not being able to reach Sam. In a rare instance of using the active voice to narrate violent acts, Goines writes that Creeper “drew the sharp razor across the boy’s throat before she realized what had happened” (*Death List*, 80). When Sam comes home to find his baby’s throat slashed, his daughter strangled by her own pigtails, and Mary dead herself, he reels in disbelief, thinking, “*Who could be responsible for such an act?*” (*Death List*, 84). Creeper dispatches Sam quickly, and despite his overzealous but nonetheless loyal carrying out of

⁸⁵ Donald Goines, *Death List* (1974; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2004) 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Kenyatta's orders, his unthinkable killing spree is again displaced onto an agentless force. "Being evil," Goines writes of Creeper, "he thrived on evil" (*Death List*, 87).

Creeper's actions are so heinous and yet so unaccounted for in Goines's violent universe that his presence haunts the rest of the series. Although not mentioned by name in the later novels, Creeper's trail of blood (Kenyatta hires him for another job even with the knowledge that he slaughtered Sam's entire family) tips the police off to the commune's existence. The subsequent raid on Kenyatta's bucolic retreat (which he flees in the nick of time) leaves eight officers and over twenty loyalists (deliberately left behind by Kenyatta) dead in a shootout that ends with police tanks setting the group's farmhouse ablaze. At this point, the righteous crusade to rid Detroit of Kingfisher devolves into Kenyatta's self-serving efforts to evade the law. Kenyatta's flight may be narratively propulsive, but it is framed by utterly senseless death and destruction. In this regard, despite Goines's best efforts to capture the idealism of revolutionary times, the Kenyatta books, like *Black Gangster* and the formula novels, end up repeating the fatalistic script of what I earlier termed the narrative death drive.

The fourth and final book in the Kenyatta series, *Kenyatta's Last Hit*, holds out hope that Kenyatta's efforts would not have been in vain. With a reconstituted army of followers in Los Angeles, Kenyatta goes after the prime mover of the ghetto's drug economy, an elusive and mysterious man named Clement Jenkins. As the evidence points to the fact that the underworld's drug economy is controlled at the very top by white men, Kenyatta makes the closest thing to a progressive observation about whites' exploitation

of inner-city residents: “[White men] were the controlling powers, the fat honkies who sat back in their leather office chairs dealing out death and corruption with one flick of their pudgy pink fingers. These were the men whom Kenyatta had always been after, yet men whom he had never really seen” (160). Kenyatta’s newfound (and arguably belated) insight suggests that his previous attempts at cleaning up the streets missed the point that the “real” exploiters of the ghetto are men who orchestrate law-enforcement corruption and the drug economy from afar. Ironically, it was white men’s “invisibility” as the architects of structural poverty and racism that made beat cops and drug dealers such visible targets of Kenyatta’s wrath. His “last hit” promises to take out Jenkins as the “true” agent of black suffering.

After setting Kenyatta up for a climactic confrontation with Jenkins, and with so much riding on his doing justice for the victims of drug abuse, Goines concludes the series on a note of despair. Kenyatta tracks Jenkins to Las Vegas, and in a showdown between his own men and Jenkins’s guards, Kenyatta is hit with the realization that he may have “underestimated his man” (210). Overawed by the task of killing the Man himself—the superior phallus of social-symbolic authority—Kenyatta’s inevitable death hangs over the tough words he metes out to Jenkins. When shots do ring out, it is Kenyatta who wounds Jenkins on the shoulder, sending him falling to the floor. Yet in an inexplicable seizure of action, Kenyatta simply waits. He waits “to see the white man crawl, the white millionaire who dealt in death” (214). He waits for what seems like an eternity, and Goines observes that he “would wait all night to see it, to see a man whom

he had hated in the abstract for so many years beg him for his life” (214). But in that decisive moment of stasis, of waiting for the abstract to become real, Kenyatta is cleanly eliminated with a single bullet to the head fired by one of the guards. In the melee that follows, Jenkins manages to escape via a waiting helicopter while the lone surviving member of Kenyatta’s group runs for his life, recognizing that “no matter what he did in his lifetime he could never bring the big man back” (218).

With this finale to the Kenyatta series, it is clear that Goines’s fatalism overtook the idealism he invested in Kenyatta’s character. Bringing Kenyatta face to face with an agent of “death,” Goines paralyzed his protagonist, rendering him impotent to do anything about his situation. Kenyatta’s seemingly unstoppable impulse to act was stalled at the moment it mattered the most. Ultimately, then, readers of the Kenyatta novels were left dwelling on a revolution that never really came to fruition. After so much senseless bloodshed throughout the series, the opportunity to incite a truly revolutionary event passed Kenyatta by. Still, in view of his more predictable formula novels, it may have been Goines’s intention to kill Kenyatta all along. The despair elicited by Kenyatta’s death would have reinforced the idea that the white power structure remained invisible to poor and working-class blacks. Such despair did not solve the issue of what to do about structural poverty and racism, but it certainly confirmed for readers the idea that there was someone, somewhere—represented by the (all-encompassing) Man—who controlled the conditions of their suffering. In this regard, beyond the relentless violence of the

series, the moment of Kenyatta's stasis gave readers a fleeting glimpse into the world of high-powered brokers who profited from their social and economic marginalization.

Unfortunately, the all-consuming element of fate in Goines's fiction reflected his own dissolution into a life of poverty, paranoia, and drug abuse. Even though Goines had amassed a large fan base for his novels,⁸⁶ his heroin habit and financial dependence on Holloway House left him strung out in every sense of the phrase. Trying to bring some semblance of order to his life, on May 11, 1974, Goines asked his sister Joan to help him compose his last will and testament. In biographer Eddie Allen's estimation, the will "would be Donnie's most important piece of nonfiction."⁸⁷ The will revealed Goines's struggle to reach out to the family he would leave behind as well as his desire to be a more "dependable provider" after his death "than he had been in life."⁸⁸ In the makeshift, typewritten document, Goines left the royalties from each of his novels to individual family members. Some of the beneficiaries, like his common-law wife Shirley Sailor and his mother Myrtle, were close to Goines and had supported him during his torrid days of writing. Goines also made sure to bequeath royalties from *Never Die Alone* (1974) to his old friend Al C. Clark, whom he affectionately referred to as "Crummie." But others in the will were largely unknown to his immediate family.

⁸⁶ Allen quotes an undated letter by Goines, written sometime in 1974, in which he notes that *Whoreson* and *Dopefiend* had each sold over 80,000 copies in just a couple of years. *Black Gangster* was quickly approaching 50,000 total sales. See Allen, 142.

⁸⁷ Allen, 157.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

Goines left the royalties for several books to illegitimate children he had fathered outside of his common-law marriage to Sailor. Although the gesture was intended to reach out to those for whom he could not provide in life, an important clause in the document illuminated Goines's anxiety about his own legacy as a father and published author:

Before any of my children shall receive any money from [my] novels, their last name should be legally changed so that they will be Goines. If they do not [choose] to [accept] this name, then the money should remain in a fund to be shared among the other Goines [sic]. Each and every one of my sons shall have his name changed to Goines before receiving his share of [benefits]...As far as the girls are concerned, it's not really necessary, but for Alfonso, Tony, Donnie, Chris, these boys should try and have their names changed to Goines.⁸⁹

The clause showed Goines to be as concerned about his patrimony as he was about distributing his earnings among loved ones. Demanding that his male children take up the family name—even in cases where Goines had gone missing from their lives—was a way to ensure that his royalties always went to supporting the black masculine ideal that Goines fell short of embodying in his own life. In a way, the clause gave voice to Goines's wish that his influence would outlive the immediate moment, such that future Goines men could benefit from his work in ostensibly better times. The will thus stood as a post-dated letter to those whom Goines felt he had let down in the present. Perceiving his own failure as an absent father and drug addict, and accepting that things could or would not change, Goines saw a glimmer of hope for his children once he was gone.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 160.

Having fallen behind the revolutionary times, Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines engaged with Black Power discourse in very different ways. Slim sought redemption: a way to move beyond his hustling past, to become a belated ally of the revolution, and to give up the Iceberg moniker once and for all. He wanted nothing more than for his readers and lecture audiences to recognize him as a reformed man, Robert Beck. Goines, on the other hand, evinced a fatalistic pessimism about life in the black ghetto—one that no amount of revolutionary desire could alleviate. Seeing how his own ambitions failed to free him from the hold dope had on his life, Goines wrote frantically, frenetically, and without much hope that those who were born in the ghetto could escape its confines. Between hope and despair, redemption and fate, Slim and Goines were never at ease with Black Power, or with their modest literary celebrity. In their own ways, they gave voice to readers' worries that sometimes even self-determination was not enough to break out of the mire to which joblessness and urban blight had condemned them.

Goines's fatalism caught up with him on the night of October 21, 1974, just over five months after he composed his will. In their home in Detroit, Goines and Sailor were enjoying a quiet evening together with their two children when their peace was shattered by unwanted guests. Goines and Sailor were brutally gunned down—she suffering multiple close-range shots to the face—while their children were ushered to and locked in the basement. Without any sign of forced entry or any reliable witnesses to the murders, detectives found it difficult to find leads who could help them identify suspects and crack the case. Detroit police speculated that the slayings were drug-related, given Goines's

well-known habit, but family and friends contended that Goines was targeted specifically for the royalties he collected as an author. Others, like Bentley Morriss, went so far as to suggest that Goines was assassinated as payback for representing a figure from Detroit's underworld in an unflattering light. Whether plausible or outlandish, the theories only led to dead-ends, and the murders remain unsolved to this day. As more than one person has observed, the double homicide bore an uncanny resemblance to one of Goines's many scenes of black-on-black violence in his novels.⁹⁰ He was 36.

Goines's untimely death did not stop Holloway House from capitalizing on the work he left behind, or on his iconicity as a man who lived and died by the code of the streets. Before the year was out, the company published an in-house biography of the late author. Titled *Donald Writes No More*, Eddie Stone's book read like one of Goines's autobiographical novels, complete with graphic details of Goines's substance abuse and of his grisly end. The book also lionized Goines as a trailblazing author of black pulp fiction. For Holloway House, which was used to dropping names of related titles and even *Adam* magazine throughout authors' works, this was a convenient marketing ploy to drum up sales of Goines's books. Most controversially, *Donald Writes No More* included black-and-white photographs of Goines at various points in his life. The exception was one truly shocking picture of Goines in his casket, dressed in a suit, arms crossed in front of his corpse, and his right hand holding a copy of one of his books. This last item raised

⁹⁰ For a summary of the competing theories about Goines's and Sailor's murders, see Allen, 173-200.

the bar for Holloway House's sensationalistic marketing practices to a whole new level; including the picture was arguably more grotesque than anything Goines had ever written. The press release Holloway House sent to retail outlets in the wake of Goines's passing expressed its sales pitch in bold terms: "Donald Goines is dead. Executed. The most talented writer of the black experience novel died in a real life scene from one of his own books. Stock up on all of Goines's books now. Use our special new display. They will be in great demand."⁹¹

Like a revolutionary martyr, Goines became more famous in death than he ever was during his life. Yet Holloway House's marketing of his image raised important questions about the extent to which black authors were in fact being ruthlessly exploited by the company at the expense of their own financial security and psychological well-being. Years after his death, Goines's sister contended that Stone's biography was a fraud: "There's an autobiography [sic] out [there] called 'Donald Writes No More' its fake, its bull [sic]. They came to my grandmother's house when he first died. He wasn't even cold yet and they had her answer a bunch of questions, and then they came with the book under Holloway House. That books [sic] a fake...it's called 'poetic license.'"⁹² Of course, in the mid-1970s, the sensationalistic framing of Goines's life was of a piece with Holloway House's ability to appeal to a growing, and loyal, fan base of black pulp

⁹¹ Qtd. in Justin David Gifford, "Servants of Darkness: Crime Fiction and the American Working Class," diss., University of Virginia, 2006, 128.

⁹² Qtd. in L. H. Stallings, "'I'm Goin Pimp Whores!' The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 190-91.

fiction. With Holloway House the lone outlet for readers and aspiring authors of black pulp fiction, the company could afford to operate under the radar of publishing professionalism as it sought a broader reading audience.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT'S A MAN'S WORLD

The 1970s was a decade in which African Americans witnessed a large-scale rollback in measures to secure their socioeconomic welfare. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s had forged a powerful sense of solidarity among blacks in an effort to end formal segregation and all forms of racial discrimination. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal for employers to discriminate against minorities, and busing policies, following the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), made inroads in the integration of urban public schools. Yet the notable gains of the movement were short-lived. Domestic economic programs such as highway planning and urban renewal effectively confined blacks to spheres of de facto segregation. With middle-class whites fleeing the city for the suburbs, African American neighborhoods were left with the choice of either being bought out for unfair prices or facing inner-city blight on their own. On a global scale of economic restructuring, the rise of the multinational corporation allowed heavy industries such as automobile manufacturing to relocate to places where labor and production costs were cheaper and thus more exploitable. The resulting deindustrialization of America's urban centers left working-class blacks without jobs, benefits, or much hope that things would get better.

In addition to bearing the brunt of detrimental socioeconomic policies, African Americans suffered a significant political setback when Richard M. Nixon was elected as President of the United States in 1968. In that year the Democratic Party was torn apart

by internecine conflicts between Great Society liberals and conservative Southern Democrats. The party's indecision was reflected in the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, which turned into a violent streetfight between protestors and city police. Moderate and conservative Democrats were shocked by the debacle; many were to leave the party their families had long voted for but which now seemed to be in the hands of radicals. When the general election took place in November, George Wallace, the openly racist former governor of Alabama, ran as a third-party candidate and won five Southern states and almost ten million votes nationwide. The surprising turnout for Wallace spelled disaster for the Democrats; Nixon beat Vice President Hubert Humphrey handily with 301 electoral votes.

Nixon's candidacy was defined by his promise to restore "law and order" to American society. That catchall phrase served mainly as an incitement to quash the student, antiwar, and civil rights movements that had defined the decade. Nixon's run for President symbolized for many a return to "normalcy" after a long period of social and political change. Equally significant was the fact that Nixon held little admiration for his predecessor's War on Poverty; to him, the federal government's initiatives amounted to distributing handouts to people who made no effort to improve their situations. Thus, in running a robust campaign against domestic unrest and the welfare state, Nixon tapped into white Americans' fears that their world had been upended by political radicals and the undeserving poor.

In conjunction with the economic downturn of the 1970s, Nixon's anti-welfare policies inflicted severe hardships on the black community. Poverty and unemployment rates skyrocketed, and the government did little to ease the burden. At the beginning of the decade, for example, blacks living in the northeast had made 71 cents for every dollar earned by whites; that ratio fell to 59 cents on the dollar in 1979. In another calculus, between 1975 and 1980, white unemployment actually decreased by 562,000 while black unemployment increased by 200,000. Black women were especially hard-hit by the downturn: not only were welfare benefits more difficult to come by but the stigma attached to government aid made them targets of conservative backlash.¹ In view of these trends, the Republicans' capitalizing on white resentment of civil rights' gains translated into the retrenchment of social inequalities along racial lines. Ironically, that process was helped along by waning liberal interest in remedying racial problems. Indicative of that turn was Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's appointment as Counselor to the President for Urban Affairs. In a January 1970 memo to Nixon, Moynihan noted, "The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of 'benign neglect'"—a period, in other words, when the government could turn a blind eye to racial issues because "enough" had been done already.²

¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Into the Fire: African Americans since 1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 48, 46, 49-53.

² Qtd. in Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991; New York: Vintage, 1992) 209.

Despite the struggles faced by the majority of blacks during the Republican ascendancy, the late 1960s and early 1970s also witnessed an appreciable growth of the black middle class. Individuals were able to benefit from civil rights legislation that mandated equal access to employment opportunities, college admissions, and home purchases. Although the application of anti-discrimination statutes was uneven across the country, scores of African Americans were able to move into the middle class by taking up jobs in the public and service sectors. By 1970 approximately 60 percent of black professionals were employed by government bodies—a statistic which reflected the positive impact affirmative action in hiring had had for the black community.³ Moreover, in contrast to the image of the wayward father that studies like the Moynihan Report had advanced, the proportion of upwardly mobile black men during this period had grown from one in five to one in three.⁴ There were, of course, other beneficiaries of this trend. The Civil Rights Act's Title VII, which prohibited discrimination against not just race and color but also gender, paved the way for black women to integrate professional spheres historically closed off to them. By 1976 one out of every four black women worked in the burgeoning clerical and sales fields.⁵ Finally, bolstered by gains made by both black men and black women, parents saw their children enroll in college in record numbers. Represented by fewer than 400,000 college students in 1966 to about 1.1

³ Kelley, 60.

⁴ Bart Landry, *The New Black Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

million students in 1976, the black middle class consolidated itself with a new generation of upwardly mobile young men and women.⁶

The 1970s was thus a decade of paradox for African Americans: at the same time that the black middle class made modest but noteworthy strides toward equality, poor and working-class blacks faced deeper barriers to their socioeconomic welfare. That is to say, while more African Americans worked their way into middle-class security, the predominantly urban poor experienced qualitatively worse conditions in their everyday lives. With the waning of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, this demographic division stoked cultural conflict within the black community. In Chapters 2 and 3 we saw how middle-class blacks frowned upon the “negative” stereotypes propagated by cultural phenomena such as blaxploitation movies and black pulp fiction. By contrast, Black Power advocates valued ghetto participation in the struggle for self-determination; they thought urban youth possessed a more organic connection to the revolution than the black bourgeoisie. Tensions between these groups fractured racial solidarity in the post-civil rights era as different people had opposite experiences of the “fruits of integration.”⁷

Initially, the effect of class fracture for readers of black pulp fiction was that it situated the novels in the sphere of inner-city cultural production. Donald Goines was an inveterate chronicler of the pessimism and despair felt by urban blacks as both the War

⁶ D. Parke Gibson, *\$70 Billion in the Black: America's Black Consumers*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1978) 38.

⁷ See Charles T. Banner-Haley, *The Fruits of Integration: Black Middle-Class Ideology and Culture, 1960-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994).

on Poverty and black nationalist movements failed to alleviate their suffering. Iceberg Slim, too, was skeptical of middle-class reformism, at one point referring to black religious and political leaders as “outlaw whores in the stable of the white power structure [who] suck a mixture of shit and money from the bung hole of the Master as the murderous noose of racism and poverty chokes their brethren.”⁸ Yet as we saw in Chapter 3, in the early 1970s, Slim’s notoriety put him in touch with the black press and prospective middle-class readers. In his interviews and public appearances, he struck a more measured tone in his appeal to middle-class respectability. Slim was a family man now, and he encouraged black youth to read his fiction as cautionary tales rather than as some naïve glamorization of the pimping lifestyle. Recognizing the link between street masculinity and racial authenticity that his books had helped to cultivate, Slim went so far as to say that the pimp “doesn’t have any manhood...What’s manly about being supported by a woman and giving nothing in return?”⁹ Against the longstanding credo that a woman’s labor was to sustain a pimp’s essentially leisurely lifestyle,¹⁰ Slim now held up the ideal of the male family breadwinner.

Slim’s circulation in the black press was not merely a matter of providing the middle class with the “correct” reading of his past sins. It signaled as well the potential

⁸ Iceberg Slim, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (1971; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1986) 185.

⁹ Qtd. in Bob Moore, “The Inside Story of Black Pimps,” *Sepia* 21 (1972): 54.

¹⁰ On this point, see Kalamu ya Salaam, “The Psychology of the Pimp: Interview with Iceberg Slim,” *Black Collegian* 5.3 (1974): 33+. Slim joked to middle-class readers, “I don’t know of any pimps I came up with that would stay up all night and miss their rest! Don’t get no rest? That’s the name of the pimp game, restin’ and dressin’” (35).

for black pulp fiction to attract middle-class readers. As a relatively new social formation, the post-civil rights black middle class was precariously situated between urban poverty and upward mobility. Racist employment and housing practices persisted into the 1970s, and first-generation black college students were constantly met with tacit disapproval of, if not overt hostility toward, their presence on campus. In short, the newest members of the black middle class were (made to feel) not far removed from the street culture that had developed alongside post-Migration urban poverty. But if black pulp fiction were to expand its readership to the middle class, it would have to do so without alienating its inner-city base. Holloway House attempted to bridge the class fracture by underscoring what old and new readers of black pulp fiction had in common: their investment in masculinity. If the paperback novels could be seen as affirming the sexual fantasies of all black men, regardless of their status, then Holloway House could market black pulp fiction to a wider range of readers.

How *Players* Expanded the Game

Iceberg Slim's claim that pimps were not real men did little to dampen black pulp fiction's popularity. Readers framed the question of authenticity differently from Slim: instead of seeing the pimp as a chronic moocher and thus a failed man, they understood his street smarts and psychic control over women to constitute the purest form of self-asserting masculinity. As I described in Chapter 1, the pimp stood as an iconic symbol of racial authenticity—a fantasized representation of the kind of pluck, persistence, and ingenuity that black men had to possess in order to survive in the ghetto. The enduring

appeal of this representation, as Eithne Quinn has shown, informed a number of popular representations of the pimp in American culture in the early 1970s. From stand-up comedy routines by Richard Pryor and Rudy Ray Moore to movies like *The Mack* (1973) and *Willie Dynamite* (1974), the pimp “came to enjoy a high profile and even an exalted status in the black male imagination.”¹¹

In the context of the slumping urban economy, inner-city black men saw in the pimp a powerful symbol of resilience and fortitude. Quinn explains that, in the early 1970s, blacks facing economic hardships found discrete “culture-building possibilities in exalting heroic hustlers...who repudiated mainstream and menial jobs and joblessness in favor of antiassimilationist pursuits that at least promised a viable means of income.”¹² Yet symbolic appreciation for the pimp was not shared across class lines. Middle-class blacks rejected the glamorization of the pimp’s lifestyle because it diverged from the lawful, socially prescribed means of promoting uplift and individual success. We could even say that the pimp was a figure of some embarrassment for middle-class blacks, many of whom felt they had to constantly “prove” their educational and class status to skeptical whites. On the cultural politics of this class fracture, Quinn writes, “While the black (male) urban moviegoers and readers emphatically returned the look of the mack, the largely disapproving black middle class absorbed the affront by rejecting this popular-

¹¹ Eithne Quinn, “‘Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy’: Work, Play, and ‘Lifestylization’ of the Black Pimp Figure in Early 1970s America,” *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) 211-12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 224.

cultural transmission.”¹³ Such a notable divergence in the reception of blaxploitation movies and black pulp fiction revealed the fraught terrain on which black men navigated competing structures of feeling in the early 1970s. At stake in their efforts was whether to hold up as a culture hero the pimp or the breadwinner, the badman or the family man.

With deep cultural wedges being driven in between poor and middle-class blacks, Holloway House had to devise a medium that could bridge the gap and expand black pulp fiction’s readership beyond its inner-city base. The key strategy in this expansion turned on getting middle-class black men to see aspects of their own masculine identity reflected in the novels. Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock identified a precedent for what they were about to do precisely in what they had done before: selling books through men’s magazines. The synergy between *Adam/Sir Knight* and Holloway House had worked extraordinarily well in the age of sex paperbacks. The question now was whether a new kind of magazine could achieve similar, if not better, results for black pulp fiction.

In 1973 Holloway House’s attempt to expand the readership of black pulp fiction took the form of America’s first all-black (but of course not black-owned) pornographic magazine.¹⁴ The first issue of *Players* hit the newsstands in October; at a cost of one

¹³ Ibid., 225.

¹⁴ *Duke* was an all-black, black-owned pin-up magazine that ran for six issues in 1957. Based in Chicago and founded by former employees of John H. Johnson, the publisher of *Ebony*, *Duke* was the first black-oriented magazine to approximate *Playboy*’s taste and design. I do not count it here as the first all-black *pornographic* magazine because what little I have seen of it suggests *Duke* featured pin-ups rather than (full) nudes. In its few months of existence, the magazine managed to attract a remarkable array of literary talent, including Ray Bradbury, Chester Himes, Langston Hughes, and George S. Schuyler. For a short essay on *Duke*, see Dian Hanson, ed., *The History of Men’s Magazines: From Post-War to 1959*, vol. 2 (Cologne: Taschen, 2004) 384-93.

dollar, it was roughly the same price as one of Holloway House's "black experience" paperbacks. But *Players*'s self-consciously "tasteful" design also made it a unique commodity. In an effort to draw in readers from both the lower and the middle classes, the periodical's name was chosen to denote a precise double meaning: a player was not only a pimp, or a man who lived off the labor of women (usually through manipulation or coercion), but also, more generally, a "lady's man," or a "male with more than one woman."¹⁵ This second meaning was crucial to the magazine's appeal among middle-class blacks. As Holloway House co-founder Ralph Weinstock attested, the term "player" had come to encompass "the good life, which will be the key to the editorial thrust."¹⁶

The touch of class implied by the phrase "the good life" was an idea Weinstock had to adapt from the *Playboy* model. The first issue of *Playboy* appeared in December 1953 with a cover pictorial of the glamorous Marilyn Monroe, a recognized star and sex symbol. *Playboy*'s Chicago-based founder and publisher, Hugh Hefner, intended his periodical to be a different kind of men's magazine. He wanted *Playboy* to both display and exude a tastefulness that tended to be absent from "skin" magazines. By tapping into the fantasy that every red-blooded American male possessed a bachelor's mentality, Hefner made consuming the female nude a largely respectable, because "natural," proposition. Significantly, Hefner targeted married men as having the innate capacity to see *Playboy* as an extension of their secure, middle-class livelihoods. The magazine's

¹⁵ On both meanings of "player," see Clarence Major, ed., *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (New York: Penguin, 1994) 355.

¹⁶ Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising: Changes at Playboy," *New York Times* 9 Jul. 1973: 53.

first readers' survey, for example, proudly announced, "Approximately half of PLAYBOY'S readers (46.8%) are free men and the other half are free in spirit only."¹⁷ Here the language of sexual awakening (prefiguring what came to be, in the 1960s, the cultural phenomenon of sexual liberation) was used to legitimate the idea that *Playboy* gave expression to men's rakish and carefree nature in the face of postwar suburban ennui. Out from under the counter and into the mainstream, the magazine enjoyed huge success because its discourse effectively claimed that it was a man's natural right to take pleasure in other women's naked bodies. Indeed *Playboy* gave married men in particular the opportunity to fantasize about a life filled with leisure (against the humdrum routine of work) and sexual opportunity (against the bonds of marriage and parenthood).

As we saw in Chapter 1, Weinstock and Bentley Morriss oversaw the publication of *Adam* and *Sir Knight* (later renamed *Knight*) throughout the 1960s. Unlike *Playboy*, however, these magazines operated in the more clandestine "nude" format of mid-century men's magazines. In starting Players International Publications, Morriss and Weinstock wanted to market their new magazine in such a way as to tap into *Playboy*'s mainstream legitimacy. Like *Playboy*, *Players* was not to be hidden in an obscure corner of the den or read with a flashlight in the dark. Instead, *Players* was to be the black man's guide to the good life—a source of confidence and pride, not shame. A story in the black press confirmed that *Players* was primed to address "subjects of interest to a young,

¹⁷ Qtd. in Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1983) 43.

modern black audience, men ages 18 to 35.”¹⁸ Hefner cultivated *Playboy*’s urbane, educated, and sexually liberated ethos by featuring writings of some literary merit, including stories by Ray Bradbury and Truman Capote and interviews with Frank Sinatra and the Beatles.¹⁹ In a similar vein, readers of *Players* were treated to interviews with Yaphet Kotto and James Earl Jones; cultural criticism by Stanley Crouch; political commentary by Dick Gregory; and new work by Chester Himes and Ishmael Reed. The table of contents that began each issue was, in layout and typeface, lifted directly from *Playboy*. There was even a regular feature called “Makin’ It,” which highlighted the achievements of successful black men. *Players* was thus more than just a nudie magazine: it mirrored in black the urbane, educated, and sexually liberated ethos of middle-class American men’s culture.

In addition to its literary journalism, the advertisements found in *Playboy* were for consumer goods that the magazine’s implied reader could appreciate as symbols of his class status and social refinement. Instead of promoting under-the-counter sex toys and erotica, which were mainstays in nudie and pin-up magazines, Hefner’s *Playboy* featured ads for “imported liquor, stereo sets, men’s colognes, luxury cars and fine clothes.”²⁰ This world of male-oriented commodities idealized a vision of the playboy as the married family man’s fantasy self. Hefner thus undermined the staid image of the breadwinning

¹⁸ “A New Magazine for Men,” *Sun Reporter* [San Francisco] 7 Jul. 1973: 29.

¹⁹ Rodger Streitmatter, *Sex Sells! The Media’s Journey from Repression to Obsession* (Cambridge: Westview, 2004) 17.

²⁰ Ehrenreich, 49.

husband and father with a consumerist ideology that linked a man's taste in food, cars, wine, and (other) women to his social status. The popular image of Hefner himself—clad in pajamas or a robe and smoking a pipe—served as the magazine's masculine ideal: a man whose disposable income made him particularly well-suited for a life of leisure. In *Playboy's* world, masculinity was measured not by the things a man did for his family but by the things he bought for himself.²¹

Players approximated *Playboy's* display of social cachet in its advertisements for goods that signified black middle-class taste. Alcohol and cigarette ads predominated on the pages of *Players*; while these had an obvious cross-class appeal, their emphasis always lay in the pleasure they afforded middle-class consumers. For example, in an ad for Viceroy Cigarettes, a well-dressed black man is shown stepping into a new car with a black woman beaming in the passenger's seat. The tagline weaves different strands of taste into a tapestry of masculine desire: "He's got a pocketful of money, a fun-loving woman, and a taste for excitement. He wouldn't smoke a boring cigarette" (Fig. 12).²²

²¹ The most comprehensive study on this topic is Elizabeth Fraterrigo's *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²² Viceroy Cigarettes by Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corp., advertisement, *Players* May 1974: 2.

[INSERT IMAGE]

Fig. 12

Photo spreads of luxury goods were even more explicitly geared toward middle-class consumers. The January 1974 issue, for example, includes a spread on expensive “pimp coats.” These coats are modeled on a tall, well-coiffed black man who appears with a fashionably dressed black woman by his side. In one photograph, which doubles as the issue’s cover (Fig. 13), the male model goes in for a kiss as he coolly places his thumb in his coat pocket. The accompanying caption reads, “She’s a pretty miss. He takes a kiss. She’s all his—with all her love to give—and more. There’s no doubt when you lay out \$800 for a Raccoon Coat at the retail store.”²³

²³ “Far Out Fuzzy Wuzzies,” *Players* Jan. 1974: 56.

[INSERT IMAGE]

Fig. 13

Elevating street culture to *haute couture* in this manner was one of the keenest ways Players International managed to bring poor and middle-class men together as readers. The fur-wearing player's conspicuous consumption was a hybrid representation of authentic black masculinity—at once the embodiment of the ghetto badman and the idealization of bourgeois cool.²⁴

Of course the most appealing aspects of *Players* for straight black men were the pictorials of nude black women, some of whom were famous (like the blaxploitation icon

²⁴ The black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier offered a sneering rejoinder to such hybrid displays of conspicuous consumption. In his classic study *Black Bourgeoisie*, Franklin denounced the “world of make-believe” in which blacks sought to emulate white elites by reveling in leisurely pursuits and showing off gaudy, frivolous purchases. See *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957; New York: Free Press, 1997) 151-232.

Pam Grier, who appeared in the magazine's third issue), but most of whom were unknown models and actresses from the Los Angeles area. The magazine's self-authenticating tagline, "For He Who Is," underscored the idea that young urban blacks and middle-class blacks shared a natural, even primordial ("Who Is"), bond in their heterosexual manhood. In this sense, *Players International's* timing was perfect: with the rise of the "Black Is Beautiful" movement during Black Power's heyday in the late 1960s, the company could point to the dearth of black pornography and reasonably claim that its aim was to "give dignity and quality to the black female."²⁵ At the same time, the representations of black femininity that *Players* tended to exhibit only served to rehearse the stereotypes that Black Is Beautiful was trying to combat. One pictorial, titled "Big...But Nice," highlighted the "fact of nature" that black men like their women large; the text copy joked, "It keeps your balls up off the mattress [sic]."²⁶ Other pictorials explicitly drew from slavery's sexualized imaginary to craft testimonials to black women's beauty and strength. One remarkable example featured a model named "Gaye" posing in set pieces that conveyed different periods in African American history. The slavery frame showed Gaye topless and shackled, sitting in front of a Confederate flag. The image has the uncanny effect of sexualizing a scene in an institution that the pictorial otherwise denounced as "the festering pit of slavery."²⁷

²⁵ Qtd. in Dougherty.

²⁶ "Big...But Nice," *Players* Nov. 1974: 53.

²⁷ "Gaye," *Players* May 1975: 30-31.

What these examples reveal is that although *Players* oriented itself toward middle-class consumption, it also entertained longstanding stereotypes of black women's hypersexuality. Significantly, in this regard, the magazine's pictorials did not follow *Playboy's* renowned emphasis on women who looked like the proverbial "girls next door." Instead, *Players* featured black women who seemed sexually experienced and whose representational touchstones were the pimp's whore, the john's lady, and even the master's slave. Such images were incommensurate with the "tasteful" world of sexual fantasy *Playboy* created. But *Players* troubled the very notion of taste by emphasizing the racial, rather than class, dimensions of sexual desire in its pictorials. If *Playboy's* girl-next-door ideology—featuring models who appeared "wholesome" and were of "high moral character"²⁸—buttressed normative, middle-class values, *Players's* marketing of women "in the know" supported black masculine entitlement to sexual fulfillment. In the pictorials, then, taste was a matter that had less to do with social class or perceived moral character and more to do with the color, skin, and body politics of the black community.

This point is illuminated most profoundly by the May 1977 issue of *Players*, whose cover is emblazoned with the picture of a model gazing at the camera over her left shoulder while she bites into a juicy rib (Fig. 14). In the issue, we learn that the model, named "Conchita," is a famous barbeque cook in the Los Angeles area. The pictorial's centerpiece is a photograph of a topless Conchita sitting on a picnic blanket with a hunk of cooked ribs lying between her spread-open legs (Fig. 15).

²⁸ Streitmatter, 19.

[INSERT IMAGES]

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

The sauce-splattered grilling knife and fork that Conchita wields in the picture render the tableau at once “tasteless” (she is not “sensual” or “soft” in the *Playboy* sense) *and* desirable (her grilling mastery combines sex with food in a specifically “black” context). Against *Playboy*’s standard of taste, we can see how in this image Conchita’s position as a sexually available woman and barbeque cook concretizes a middle-class fantasy of ghettocentric stereotypes. The implied reader would not consider Conchita to be any less “classy” or unappealing for miming a blowjob with a rib or getting herself dirty with rib sauce. Instead, what is highlighted here is the desirability of her specifically “racial” features—the intertwining of sex and soul food in one package.

In wagering that middle-class taste could be rerouted through the cultural politics of black masculinity, Players International ensured that street culture lived on in the

fantasies of men who were able to enjoy the good life. Catering to an emergent but still-precarious class of black men, *Players* offered middle-class readers a racialized hybrid of what scholars have identified as white pornography's "tasteful" (*Playboy*) and "tasteless" (*Hustler*) extremes.²⁹ In an all-black context, taste in the female nude was adjudged not by the "purity" of her look but by her conscious embodiment of male desire. We might even say that, in the world of *Players*, a black woman's social cachet hinged on her *willing* (not "innocent," as *Playboy* had constructed with its models) submission to heterosexual male fantasies: the more she understood and respected black masculine desire, the better. As one pictorial from 1975 put it, "A brief half-hour with this amazing young actress will make *any* brother a true believer in the warm and potent magic of a woman's spell."³⁰ This emphasis on *racial knowingness* in *Players*'s sexual imaginary was the glue that brought together street-level with middle-class black constituencies in the magazine's readership. It bracketed normative assessments of female sexuality (pure vs. fallen, safe vs. dangerous, etc.) to underscore a one-way expression of male desire for historically stereotyped racialized bodies.

Players's bridging of poor and middle-class black men's reading interests had a salutary effect on black pulp fiction. Half-page, black-and-white as well as full-page, color advertisements for Holloway House books appeared in every issue of *Players*. The

²⁹ See, for example, Laura Kipnis, "Disgust and Desire: *Hustler* Magazine," *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 122-60.

³⁰ "Bree," *Players* Oct. 1975: 45. The tagline for this pictorial begins with the question, "Tired of the home town girl?" (45).

mail-order receipts printed at the bottom of the ads made it easy for *Players*' readers to send for cheap paperback novels that reflected the magazine's ethos. Given the fact that these magazines traveled far and wide across the country, black pulp fiction's readership grew beyond the urban areas in which it was initially taken up. But the synergy between Holloway House and *Players* International did not stop at mail-order advertising. In fact much of *Players*' content was devoted to reviewing, referencing, and otherwise indirectly selling Holloway House paperbacks to its readers. Donald Goines's books were favorably reviewed by the magazine's editorial staff, and there were a number of articles in the 1970s devoted to Slim's cult of personality. As they had done with *Adam* and Holloway House's early paperbacks, Morriss and Weinstock used their control over different media entities to sell content as widely as possible—only this time their plan was to expand their base of black male readers. In one illustrative case, Iceberg Slim's short stories, which first appeared in *Players* between 1976 and 1979, were later collected and published by Holloway House as *Airtight Willie and Me* (1979). The cover of the first edition announced Slim's long-awaited return to the literary scene and was backed up by a blurb from *Players*: "A front seat journey into the personal hells and triumphs of the people of the street."

With this kind of integrated publicity, Holloway House ensured that its books would remain on the radar of black men who might not have picked up a "black experience" paperback on their own. In this sense, *Players*' function with respect to black pulp fiction was that of a critical mediator: it supplied the "talk" or discourse around the

books that made them seem like indelible parts of African American popular culture. Through excerpts, advertisements, and reviews, *Players* drew in people who were geographically and/or socioeconomically removed from the inner-city base of black pulp fiction's readership. This expansion of Holloway House's distribution networks recast the terms of Bentley Morriss's longstanding disagreement with the *New York Times*, which had previously rejected running an ad for *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) "because of [its] title."³¹ Now, having started his own black-oriented periodical to use as a marketing tool, Morriss could facilitate far-reaching *routes of access* to black pulp fiction. One route allowed readers from suburban and rural areas to have Holloway House paperbacks delivered to their door along with *Players*. Another route gave middle-class readers the opportunity to consume fantastic representations of a strange yet appealing underworld. However the books got to them, these new readers were able to access black pulp fiction without necessarily stepping foot in the urban spaces in which it normally circulated.

Women, Race, and the Middle Class

The formation of *Players International* expanded black pulp fiction's audience by tapping into an established African American periodical-reading public. The company used *Adam* and *Knight*'s distribution infrastructure to manage *Players*'s subscription and mailing networks. With the excitement generated by the country's first all-black pornographic magazine, *Players International* and Holloway House fulfilled orders from locations

³¹ Qtd. in Peter Gilstrap, "The House That Blacks Built," *The Misread City: New Literary Los Angeles*, ed. Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2003) 94.

otherwise foreign to black pulp fiction. For example, throughout the 1970s, *Players* circulated outside of black urban centers in places like the Deep South. Records show that advertisements for *Players* ran in the *Memo Digest*, a black newspaper based in the relatively small town of Meridian, Mississippi.³² It appears that, despite its pornographic content, the magazine's focus on current affairs relevant to the black community made it palatable to the culturally conservative Southern black press. In Memphis, Tennessee, for example, a series of short pieces in the local black newspaper would update readers on *Players*'s latest interviews with black athletes, politicians, and celebrities.³³

To be sure, it required a keen editorial talent to cultivate the interclass appeal *Players* had among black men across the country. As editor and owner of *Playboy*, the robe-clad, pipe-smoking Hugh Hefner was an iconic embodiment of the kind of reader he wanted to attract to his publication. Surprisingly, *Players*'s counterpart to Hefner was not a black man of leisure but a divorced mother and struggling Los Angeles-based writer. Wanda Coleman, who has since made a name for herself as a respected black poet, edited the first six issues of *Players* and was the driving force behind its early success. Publically, Coleman played the role of a “knowing,” sexually liberated black female subject, saying that she was on board with the magazine because, “Who knows better

³² Julius E. Thompson, *The Black Press in Mississippi, 1865-1985* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993) 95.

³³ See, for example, “Bond—First Black Vice President?,” *Tri-State Defender* [Memphis] 26 Jun. 1976: 6; and “Al Downing Tells It All,” *Tri-State Defender* [Memphis] 24 Jul. 1976: 15.

what men want!”³⁴ But behind the scenes, Coleman was a savvy, technically gifted creative talent. She learned the ins and outs of magazine production from her father, who in the 1950s had attempted to start a black version of *Esquire*. According to Coleman, she worked alongside her father setting type and airbrushing nudes, all in preparation for the launch of the magazine. Unfortunately, when John H. Johnson’s publishing company, which owned the popular black magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*, “killed their distribution,” Coleman’s father’s enterprise went under.³⁵

Players offered Coleman the opportunity to utilize the skills she had learned growing up and to eke out a modest living as a single mother. In consciously modeling *Players* on *Playboy*, Coleman developed features that would appeal to middle-class black men. At the same time, the magazine remained accessible to urban blacks, both because of its relatively affordable cover price and for the unprecedented spectacle of black female nudes it presented. In the follow-up issue to the Pam Grier spread, two letters to the editor revealed just how much *Players* was able to bridge class divisions. A black male student at Williams College in Massachusetts attested to how reading the magazine was “one of the few ways in which [he could] break up the tedious hours of study.” He wrote gushingly about how perusing “pictures of black women or women of third world nationalities” helped offset the alienation he felt as one of the few black students in the

³⁴ “New Magazine.”

³⁵ Mista Jaycee, “Kongo Square Chat with Poet/Author Wanda Coleman,” *A Choice of Weapons*, Blogspot, 14 May 2009, web, 12 Aug. 2009.

“upper middle class” community of Williamstown.³⁶ Yet in the adjacent letter, a man who claimed to have lived the “so-called ‘life’” critiqued *Players*’s equation of commodity consumption with being a “true” player. Sounding like the post-*Naked Soul* Iceberg Slim, the writer bemoaned “children going to school in Super Fly suits and hats” while expressing nostalgia for the “old school” street hustler.³⁷ That both letter-writers found a forum within *Players* to express their views is significant. If the mid-1970s witnessed the decline of racial solidarity movements and growing class tensions in the black community, *Players* offered up a world of masculine pleasure with which both poor and middle-class blacks could identify. Coleman left *Players* after editing only six issues, but the magazine’s interclass appeal would sustain it for years.

Coleman’s successor at *Players*, Joseph Nazel, was adept at bridging class fractures in his own literary career. Nazel was a Vietnam veteran and a self-described “race man”—someone who was concerned about “the plight of the black community and the responsibilities of the Negro writer to that community.” A fixture in the Los Angeles black press, Nazel took up his work at *Players* with gusto. He was equally adept at editing Stanley Crouch’s “voluminous, single-spaced texts on American culture, politics and humor just moments before deadline” as he was penning fiction based on conventions Slim and Goines had established.³⁸ Among the over 60 titles he would

³⁶ J. E. Robinson, letter, *Players* May 1974: 25.

³⁷ A. J. Perriera, Jr., letter, *Players* May 1974: 25.

³⁸ Emory Holmes II, “An Appreciation: Joseph Gober Nazel Jr. (1944-2006),” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 8 Oct. 2006, web, 12 Sep. 2009.

publish with Holloway House was the seven-part Iceman series (1974-75). Bearing titles such as *Billion Dollar Death* (1974) and *Canadian Kill* (1974), the series was modeled on Goines's Kenyatta novels but featured a self-made playboy millionaire who took on the Mafia and James Bond-type international crime syndicates.

With the success of the Iceman thrillers—which, in their narratives of espionage and high-end double-dealings, reflected black male fantasies of upper-class luxury—*Players* became the ideal medium to market black pulp fiction by career writers who shared Nazel's literary ambitions. Authors like Roosevelt Mallory, James-Howard Readus, and the San Francisco journalist J. Lance Gilmer continued the black pulp fiction tradition of writing about street life, or the ghetto experience, among inner-city black men. Their plot-driven narratives rehearsed to a tee the formulas that Slim and especially Goines had established in their fiction. Even Odie Hawkins, who was already a published author with Holloway House, enjoyed newfound appreciation for his 1972 collection *Ghetto Sketches*. A veteran of the Watts Writers Workshop and a mainstay of the Los Angeles literary scene,³⁹ Hawkins's work now attracted readers who were familiar enough with the Black Arts movement to see its tenets being employed in lyrical prose.

But the truly new direction black pulp fiction took as a result of interlinking with *Players* was to incorporate stories about middle-class blacks' struggles with white racism. These stories added a new dimension to Holloway House's catalogue by bringing a

³⁹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005) 310-11.

middle-class perspective to bear on the ways in which institutionalized racism affected the black community. For example, Omar Fletcher's *Miss Annie* (1978) considered how a well-intentioned white schoolteacher stifled the dreams and learning opportunities of a group of raucous inner-city kids. Brett Howard's *One Drop of Blood* (1981), later retitled *The Baroness of Harlem*, revealed how a glamorous woman's efforts to pass in high society came under threat by the fact of her racial heritage. But it was the prolific Nazel who produced the majority of middle-class black pulp novels, writing about figures as diverse as a Southern preacher (*Black Prophet* [1976]), an investigative journalist (*Black Uprising* [1976], later retitled *Uprising*), and a do-right cop (in the James Rhodes series [1974-76], under the pseudonym "Dom Gober"). Under Nazel's guiding influence at *Players*, a certain segment of black pulp fiction became attuned to the fact that, to quote poet Houston Baker, "No matter where you travel, / You still be Black."⁴⁰

One of the more compelling novels to emerge out of this genealogy within black pulp fiction was Jon Palmer's *House Full of Brothers* (1973). Palmer was and remains an obscure figure in African American letters; his book is the only published work we have on record. Nonetheless, *Brothers* is a minor literary achievement, giving voice as it does to black middle-class suspicions of institutionalized racism in the early 1970s. The novel tracks a brief period in the life of Steven Walls, a late-teenage high school graduate who moves from Omaha, Nebraska, to Los Angeles to realize his dream of upward mobility.

⁴⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *No Matter Where You Travel, You Still Be Black* (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1979) 7.

Like *Trick Baby's* (1967) *White Folks*, Steven possesses features that allow him to pass as white: his blue eyes and light skin color prevent immediate identification of him as racially "black." Unlike *White Folks*, however, who welcomes the opportunity to self-identify as black, Steven constantly suffers from the social stigma and psychic strain of a man trapped between two worlds.⁴¹ Steven's conflict is characterized by his moving between distinct social institutions: an all-black fraternity, the titular "house full of brothers" that Steven decides to pledge, and the predominantly white Southern California Bank, which has just hired Steven as only its second low-level black employee. The question for Steven is whether he can traverse these spheres of social influence in a way that makes him feel like he belongs to both.

On the one hand, Steven's participation in the fraternity as a "Little Brother," or pledge, quickly becomes a source of fellowship and pride for him. His "Big Brothers," or established fraternity members, welcome him into the organization without harping on his near-whiteness; they treat him as they do all the other up-and-coming brothers who must undergo the hazing trials of pledging. The ease with which Steven integrates into the fraternity comes down to the fact that several of the brothers share his middle-class background. The fraternity is by definition an institution that cultivates intergenerational

⁴¹ Notably, Palmer does not dwell on Steven's family background; we never find out exactly how his near-whiteness came to be. This stands in stark contrast to *White Folks's* and *Whoreson Jones's* abandoned/bastard patrimony, which casts them as rebellious, mother-raised "trick babies." For Palmer Steven's near-whiteness is significant not for the familial back story it provides but because it metaphorizes the essential conflict faced by a black man who wishes to move up in the world: working out a way to be "true" to one's race while doing everything necessary to succeed in mainstream society.

success; as such, Steven finds that he fits in well among young black men with names like Sam Bankerson, H. David David, Anthony Dred Scott, James George Washington Carver, Jr., and Percy Bysshe Pruitt, whose mother named him after “his early likeness to the statue of Ozymandias.”⁴² At least in this social context, Steven is able to enjoy the richness of his black heritage. The pledging process for him becomes a uniquely rewarding experience of racial solidarity—one that, for all its ritualistic hazing, ultimately makes him feel “insuperably well,” perhaps even at home (145).

Steven’s experience in the bank is less welcoming. At the outset we learn that Steven was hired by the bank’s vice president, Finley Prescott, in order to tempt the branch manager into firing him based on his deep-seated racial prejudice. Prescott wants the branch manager, Harold Tubbs, removed himself, which is why he sets the trap for Tubbs to fire Steven. When Tubbs eventually discovers the “scarlet letter” of Steven’s racial identity (28), he does everything he can to let Steven know he loathes him, but without going so far as to fire him. In this sphere of purported equal opportunity, Steven is forced to question his place in the bank—that is, whether he belongs there as the object of a dubious affirmative action experiment. Prescott, of course, is just as culpable as Tubbs for stoking Steven’s insecurity. If Tubbs represents the raging underbelly of institutionalized racism, Prescott is its smooth, “well-intentioned” public face. It is no wonder, then, that Steven says he suffers from a “terminal case of racial paranoia” (85),

⁴² Jon Palmer, *House Full of Brothers* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1973) 124. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

for even the putatively beneficent acts of Prescott harbor racist intent. John Jackson has observed how racial paranoia affects African Americans who came of age in the post-civil rights moment, during a period of nominal racial equality. Although more secure in their claim to “legal citizenship,” post-civil rights blacks have been “less sure about other things, such as when they’re being victimized by silent and undeclared racisms.”⁴³

There is one character in *Brothers* who does help Steven deal with the pressures of integrating into the white-controlled business world. Joice is a fellow employee at the bank and a married white woman seven years Steven’s senior. Steven is immediately drawn to Joice, whose attractive features and sympathetic attitude make her the ideal object of his desire. The co-workers begin dating casually, and Palmer reserves his most melodramatic prose to describe their budding romance: “With all the time he had spent with the black girls of the frat circle, it was only the time he spent with Joice which gave his life meaning. Like anything of lasting value, it became a part of him without his knowing what it was” (80-81). But Steven’s attraction to Joice is about more than just romantic appeal: her gendered whiteness represents for him a mode of access to mainstream American life. “To him,” Palmer writes, “she was magnificent, and in only the way a white woman could be. All his hopes and fears were manifest before him, and he had but to plan his approach carefully to have that last bastion of have-nots: a beautiful intelligent white woman. Now that he had the job at the bank, it was the only thing left in

⁴³ John L. Jackson, Jr., *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness: The New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008) 9.

his search for success in the white man's world" (82-83). Joice happens to agree with Steven that their coupling is backed by historical and cultural circumstances. Lending pop-philosophical insight to Steven's inchoate desire, Joice contends that white women and black men have "similar role[s]" in society: they "take all the shit from the white man. [They] are the only two groups that he has to be afraid of" (109).

Palmer's treatment of Steven and Joice's romance echoed the infamous theory of "primeval mitosis" advanced by the ex-prisoner, public intellectual, and Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver. In his 1968 collection of letters and essays, *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver theorized interracial sexual politics as the primary arena through which black male self-determination could be asserted. According to Cleaver, white men were overly rational Omnipotent Administrators who invested black men, their inferiors, with physicality and emotiveness; they were thus called Supermasculine Menials. White women were also disembodied as the Ultrafeminine ideal, but because their hidden sexual appetite demanded more from a man than what the Omnipotent Administrator could offer, they were naturally attracted to the Supermasculine Menials. Black women, meanwhile, were Amazons whose thirst for power was mirrored in the Omnipotent Administrator; their contempt for the institutionally "weak" Supermasculine Menial meant that the Amazon was always undermining the black man.⁴⁴ It was the primeval mitosis, or cleavage, that separated the Supermasculine Menial from the Ultrafeminine subject; the task for

⁴⁴ See the chapter "The Primeval Mitosis," pp. 205-20, in Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (1968; New York: Delta, 1999).

contemporary black men and white women was to heal that break and come together once more in sexual union.

Of course the flipside to Cleaver's and Palmer's romantic ideal is the denigration of black women as emasculating subjects. While Steven is dating Joice, he also strikes up a relationship with Sandra, a beautiful young black woman who comes from a solidly middle-class family. Although Sandra seems to have everything Steven wants in a woman, he cannot bring himself to truly love her the way he loves Joice. If anything, Steven recoils from Sandra's middle-class identity, despite the fact that she and Joice have similar ambitions in life. Steven mocks Sandra's "bourgeois idealism" (168), her religious devotion, and her color-conscious seeking of status. Moreover, in a significant deviation from Cleaver's theory, because of Sandra's upbringing in a respectable, churchgoing family, her sexuality is marked not by an Amazonian desire but by an inexperienced, somewhat frigid nature. Often, when Steven and Sandra are intimate, he has to fantasize that certain of her body parts are Joice's in order to sustain arousal. Given this dynamic, we could say that Palmer is imagining here what sexual relations might look like *after* the mitosis has been overcome: Joice takes up the sexual prowess of an Amazon while Sandra's entrance into whiteness, as a middle-class black woman, renders her an asexual Ultrafeminine.

Palmer distances Joice's romantic aura from black womanhood most explicitly when he introduces middle-class black mothers into the narrative. Sandra's divorced mother, for example, flatters and babies Steven to the point of suffocation. Palmer leads

the reader to believe that she values Steven's near-whiteness above all else and will do anything to ensure that he marries Sandra. Yet her overattentive demeanor only repels Steven, who sees both Sandra and her mother vying against each other for his love: "The jealousy [among them] brought with it an unbearable atmosphere of female competition. Sandra's mother's attentions nearly suffocated Steven, for she had no other interest—certainly not in finding a new husband for herself" (159). Here Steven feels like he is being sucked into a vortex of pent-up, middle-class frustration, wherein so much depends on the status-driven color politics of the black community. Crucially, both the near-virginal Sandra and the widowed mother do not seem to acknowledge the essential virility of black masculine identity—Steven's manhood is incidental to what his color signifies for a middle-class family trying to secure social cachet.

This sentiment is shared by Weed, one of Steven's brothers in the fraternity. Weed's mother has facilitated his relationship with a respectable young black woman, Helen, for almost six years. But Weed, at bottom, is not in love with the UCLA graduate student and teacher-to-be. The narrator explains, "Weed saw in Helen what Steven found in Sandra. It was a choking, stilting, almost maligned middle-classness. What spunk Weed [had] was being slowly wrested from him through a methodical, deliberate scheme, a scheme of his mother's making" (220-21). Weed, too, sees his masculinity come under threat by his mother's status-seeking devices. Insofar as she "[clings] to Helen like a rope of salvation" (222), Weed's manhood takes a backseat to black maternal domesticity. He and Steven thus construe middle-class black womanhood as a "trap" wherein men are

denied *their* status-object—the white woman—and become slaves to “the mire of Negro conformity” (222).

With black women represented as hindrances to Steven’s upward mobility, it is left to Joice’s character to serve as his “rope of salvation.” Palmer’s account of interracial sexual politics comes to a head when Steven’s fears of being victimized by institutionalized racism actually come to pass. One night at the office, Tubbs gets into an altercation with a white bank clerk, Anthony. When Tubbs suspects he has killed Anthony after accidentally pushing him down an open elevator shaft, he calls the police and accuses Steven of committing the crime. But Anthony is far from innocent here, as prior to the altercation he led a one-man effort to rob the bank of a bag of money from the daily deposits. The money ends up in Steven’s hands through a series of outlandish coincidences; despite its being stolen, the loot is the only leverage he has against Tubbs’s false accusation. After spending several nights in jail, Steven sees an opportunity to get back at Tubbs by framing him for the robbery. Weed plants the bag of money in the trunk of Tubbs’s car, stuffing it with rotten eggs so as to attract attention to it. When a gas-station attendant discovers the stash, Tubbs is driven mad by the brilliance of the double-cross and is taken into police custody.

The final twist in the narrative reveals that Anthony survived the fall and is planning to flee Los Angeles with his black girlfriend, Diana, whom he met at a fraternity party to which Steven had invited him. The final scene of *Brothers* shows Steven pleading with Anthony to help clear his name of a murder that never happened. Steven

urges Anthony to think of his love for Diana, and how doing the right thing would be a victory for interracial relations: “Don’t you understand that we’re creating a world, Anthony? A new world by the courage that it will take for us to stay and live in *this* world. The United States is going to end up like Brazil one of these days... But we’re doing nothing by running away” (347). For his part, Steven is resolved to come out of his unfortunate situation more committed than ever to Joice: “[H]e had chosen the course for his life. He must make the move to bring Joice to his side. It was for her that he had come to California—but not just that she was white. Her liberal views and her years brought him a view that he could only have seen with the help of her eyes... Together, they could make it. Alone, each would find a private and solitary Hell” (348). When Anthony finally relents to stay and work out a lawful means of clearing Steven’s name, Palmer intuits that the interracial couples’ future is full of hope.

The novel’s denouement aligns neatly with Cleaver’s theory of the primeval mitosis. In its final characterological tableau, a white man, Anthony, is intimately linked to a black woman, Diana, and a black man, Steven, commits himself to his white lover, Joice. In order to bridge the worlds of fraternity and bank, black and white spheres of social influence, *Brothers* finds narrative resolution in the promise of interracial love. This gesture points to the novel’s core middle-class black male fantasy: gauging social mobility by the degree to which one has access to white women’s bodies. Even before the publication of *Soul on Ice*, black cultural critic Calvin Hernton pointed out that white skin symbolized irreducible social capital in the black community. “Having the white

woman,” he wrote in 1965, “who is the prize of our culture, is a way of triumphing over a society that denies the Negro his basic humanity. Going up the color ladder is one way of acquiring status...[F]or many black men the white woman is the zenith of status symbols.”⁴⁵ Palmer’s novel naturalizes this tacitly racist belief by folding Steven’s desire for middle-class security into his pursuit of Joice as his romantic ideal. By contrast, black women represent nothing but stifling conformity for Steven and his brothers; the only time when a black woman is looked upon favorably is when Diana falls under the care of Anthony. Cleaver’s frank but deeply troubling rhetoric encapsulates Steven’s feelings by the end of the novel: “Every time I embrace a black woman I’m embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I’m hugging freedom.”⁴⁶

Prison Sentences

House Full of Brothers’s fantasy of interracial desire captured the widespread suspicion that blacks’ economic uplift would always be stymied by social prejudices, such as the bar erected between black male and white female sex. This kind of sentiment was echoed in the pages of *Players*, where short stories, feature articles, and even cartoons gave expression to middle-class blacks’ frustration with whites who could never accept their upward mobility. In one memorable cartoon (Fig. 16), a suburban black couple looks on as their white neighbors load a moving van. The caption underneath the cartoon states what the black husband comments to his wife: “There goes the neighborhood.”

⁴⁵ Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America* (1965; New York: Grove, 1981) 79.

⁴⁶ Cleaver, 189.

[INSERT IMAGE]

Fig. 16

The cartoon's dry humor stems from the fact that this phrase, long applied to blacks who settled in previously segregated middle-class suburbs, is now used to describe a redoubled white flight. White families, it appears, could not even countenance a modest black presence in the suburbs, which were the original havens from integrating urban neighborhoods.⁴⁷ Through texts like this one, *Players* gave voice to the suspicion that white racism always lurked behind the façade of equal opportunity, such that no middle-class black person was truly safe from falling back into poverty. Indeed what Jon Palmer referred to as "racial paranoia" in *House Full of Brothers* became one of the defining characteristics of black pulp fiction's and *Players*'s middle-class readership.

⁴⁷ On the racism middle-class African Americans faced in newly integrated suburbs, see the chapter "Something Old, Something New: Suburbanization in the Civil Rights Era, 1960-1980," pp. 209-54, in Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

The magazine's cross-class appeal formed a kind of social glue among black male readers who were otherwise separated by distinct class, culture, and color barriers in the post-civil rights moment. This dynamic was revealed most strikingly by the number of incarcerated readers who wrote to Wanda Coleman and Joseph Nazel lauding the all-black format of *Players*. There appeared in nearly every issue of the magazine a letter from a man serving time in a U.S. prison. While most of these letters testified to the pleasure looking at black female nudes afforded incarcerated men—in contrast to the all-white offerings of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*—they also pointed out that *Players* was their best, if only, source of information about the black community. A man serving time in the Georgia State Prison said that his incarceration made it difficult “to be continuously aware of and intelligently informed on the plight and struggles of the black men”; he hoped *Players*'s features and articles would “alleviate this problem for [him] and about fifteen hundred other black brothers incarcerated” in Reidsville, Georgia.⁴⁸ Another man, housed at the Jackson State Prison in Michigan (the same institution where Donald Goines had served time), wrote, “[B]ecause reading has become, (out of necessity), my only source of information about the ‘outside’ ...I kept hoping [for black-oriented news].” Fed up with the racially homogeneous content *Playboy* and *Penthouse* had to offer, this prisoner reveled in *Players*'s all-black content, going so far as to say that reading it was “dammm [sic] near like going home.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Richard C. Clenna, letter, *Players* May 1974: 25.

⁴⁹ Eugene, letter, *Players* Jan. 1975: 88.

In the context of the penitentiary, *Players* served the dual function of providing black male prisoners with images for sexual release and articles for racial connectivity and understanding. Because the magazine never advocated for the kind of radical black nationalism espoused by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP), it skirted capricious censors who, despite relaxed inmate-reading laws, regularly expurgated “subversive” books, periodicals, and correspondence received by prisoners.⁵⁰ Yet the fact that *Players* was so popular among incarcerated black men pointed to an unsettling reality that characterized the post-civil rights moment: increasing numbers of black men were being locked up in federal and state prisons. Bruce Western has suggested that “the prison boom was a political project that arose partly because of rising crime but also in response to an upheaval in American race relations in the 1960s and the collapse of urban labor markets for unskilled men in the 1970s.”⁵¹ Spurred by President Nixon’s law and order campaign and the conservative backlash against the civil rights movement, the popular image of crime came to be associated with the putative lawlessness of inner-city life. Even the middle-class-oriented *Ebony* magazine noted in its mid-decade almanac that the American public had been conditioned to see society through the lens of two

⁵⁰ For an illuminating case study of prison censorship in the early 1970s, see Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). Cummins focuses mainly on the Bay Area’s San Quentin Prison and how inmates there responded to prison censorship by creating underground networks of book-loaning and political education.

⁵¹ Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006) 4.

worlds: “one, black and criminal, and the other, white and law-abiding.”⁵² A result of this split in the public perception of crime was that a staggering 25 percent of African Americans were arrested each year, and while whites made up the majority of arrests for “minor property crimes,” such as vandalism and violating state liquor laws, blacks were typically charged with violent crimes that entailed long prison sentences.⁵³

The spike in the prison population was accompanied by increased attention among radicals and leftists to the plight of incarcerated black men. Beginning in the early 1960s, scores of books were published by American inmates who wished to give voice to a unique perspective on the burgeoning countercultural movement.⁵⁴ In addition to Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, Clarence Cooper’s novel *The Farm* (1967) and H. Rap Brown’s autobiography *Die Nigger Die!* (1969) became mainstream bestsellers about the black experience behind bars. Following this wave of interest in incarcerated black subjects, the BPP began a program of encouraging black inmates to join their cause in the early 1970s. The Panthers concentrated their efforts on California’s large network of correctional facilities, which they viewed as spaces of confinement for political prisoners who had been victimized by a racist criminal justice system.⁵⁵

⁵² Editors of *Ebony*, *The Ebony Handbook* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1974) 226.

⁵³ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000) 127, 128.

⁵⁴ On the prison literature of this era, see H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and his *American Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners: Their Writings: An Annotated Bibliography of Published Works, 1798-1981* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1982).

⁵⁵ Cummins, 151.

One of those recruits, a young black man by the name of George Jackson, became a *cause célèbre* in his own right. Jackson started serving time at a young age for crimes involving theft and robbery, but the violence he displayed toward white prison officials added years to his original sentence. After having been accused of killing a white guard in Soledad Prison in January 1970, Jackson and two other inmates who were charged with the crime were lauded as martyrs for the black revolution. Known as the Soledad Brothers, the three men were defended publicly not only by black radicals like Cleaver and Huey Newton but also by celebrities and mainstream cultural figures such as Pete Seeger, Jane Fonda, Jean Genet, Noam Chomsky, and Benjamin Spock.⁵⁶

Jackson's fame was solidified when a collection of his prison letters was published by New York's Coward-McCann later that year. Titled *Soledad Brother*, the book was an eloquent testament to the fortitude Jackson displayed as a child of the black ghetto and later as the target of the white establishment's ire. Eric Cummins has documented the questionable editorial practices that framed Jackson's story in such a fashion. Jackson's devoted editor, Gregory Armstrong, evinced a strong desire to mold his subject into a hypermasculine outlaw of the counterculture. According to Cummins, by casting Jackson as a virile spokesman of anti-social beliefs, Armstrong was able to mitigate the feelings of inadequacy he harbored in light of his failed marriage and his

⁵⁶ Ibid., 169.

“tame, domestic passivity.”⁵⁷ One of Jackson’s associates observed that *Soledad Brother*’s predominantly white middle-class readers were politicized by a false or projected image of the man: “They were doing it for the guy in the book, whoever he was. Some guy who’d been cut, edited, rewritten, recomposed and bowdlerized somewhere outside the walls, to fit the image they wanted.”⁵⁸ Jackson himself would disavow parts of the book in media interviews, but his voice was muted by the throngs of supporters who took up his defense in the wake of reading his letters.

Predictably, the more the radical left invested meaning in Jackson’s image, the less sure his own future became as the country’s most recognizable inmate. One tragic event would be indelibly marked by the celebrity *Soledad Brother* had garnered Jackson. On August 7, 1970, Jackson’s seventeen-year-old brother Jonathan led an audacious courtroom escape attempt for three black inmates. The group took five hostages, including the presiding judge, from a Marin County courtroom. Jonathan allegedly used the hostages as leverage to demand his brother’s release from prison. When the suspects tried to flee the scene, however, they were met by a police barricade; the resulting shootout was immediate and indiscriminate, leaving four people dead, including Jonathan Jackson. George Jackson never lived down suspicions that he had coordinated the escape attempt. In August 1971, three days before he was to stand trial for the murder of the white guard, Jackson was shot and killed in San Quentin after allegedly trying to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 176. Cummins bases his criticism on Armstrong’s own account of editing Jackson’s work, featured in his candid autobiography “*The Dragon Has Come*” (1974).

⁵⁸ Qtd. in Cummins, 177.

coordinate his own escape with a pistol smuggled into the prison. Many suspect that his death was a coordinated assassination, a reprisal for the bloody shootout that had transpired a year earlier.

Amid the politically divisive rhetoric surrounding radical and conservative responses to Jackson's death, and to the movement for prisoners' rights more generally in the United States, *Players* quietly staked out a readership for black pulp fiction by appealing to the cultural tastes (rather than the presumed politics) of the inmates themselves. Just as young black men living in the inner city found it difficult to relate to Huey Newton's renowned obscurantism, so did many incarcerated men distance themselves from the whirlwind of political fervor surrounding their plight.⁵⁹ Some prisoners simply wanted to do their time, and *Players* offered them small pleasures that could not be found in Marxist-Leninist study groups.

This is not to say that the prison novels of black pulp fiction lacked political meaning. In their own way, these novels embedded a critique of the criminal justice system in narratives about the everyday injustices black men faced both in and outside of prison. Eddie Stone's *Black Fugitive* (1977), for example, used the experience of a young prison escapee to highlight how racism—in the form of a sadistic guard and a “fat-cat white” bent on framing the protagonist for murder and armed robbery—was endemic to all corners of society. Amos Brooke's *Doing Time* (1977) featured a protagonist who had been jailed for having sex with a white girl; his punishment in “whitey's prison” was to

⁵⁹ On George Jackson's struggle to convert skeptical inmates, see Cummins, 161-62.

turn against other black men to survive. Unburdened by white liberals' investment in the "radical" potential of black incarceration, the prison novels of black pulp fiction offered little in the way of structural critique for revolutionary change. Instead, these books drove home the point that racism was an inescapable reality in the lives of marginalized black men. The primary question for inmate readers of black pulp fiction was not about how to overturn the system but about how to survive it.

The most popular of these novels was Donald Goines's *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief*, published in 1973. The majority of the narrative takes place in a Detroit county jail cell where the protagonist, Chester Hines, is locked up and awaiting his arraignment on a charge of carrying a concealed weapon. Because Chester's bond is set at a prohibitively high price (\$10,000 and two securities) by a white judge, he is left to wait out the bureaucratic proceedings in a small cell with up to twenty other inmates. Chester's name is clearly an homage to the mid-century African American novelist Chester Himes. Just as Himes had based his 1952 book *Cast the First Stone* on his nearly eight-year-stint in the Ohio State Penitentiary, so did Goines compose *White Man's Justice* out of the experiences he had had while doing time in Jackson State Prison. One of the keenest forms of racial discrimination Goines detected in the criminal justice system was how the courts set inordinately high prices for black men's bail bonds. Chester is thus confined to the county jail because he cannot afford his bond. Goines denounced this social reality in the "Angry Preface" to his novel, stating, "Make no

mistake about it, there's big money in the bail bond business, and most of it is being made at the expense of poor blacks.”⁶⁰

The systematic injustice of having to wait out the court process in jail leads several black men in the novel to take out their (sexual) frustrations on white inmates. Throughout *White Man's Justice* Chester bears witness to how the tightly packed, caged-in atmosphere of the cell compels certain men to establish an inverted social hierarchy, whereby black-on-white rape is seen as legitimate retribution “for the three hundred years of sorrow they caused us” (73). Historian Regina Kunzel has documented how this discourse of reprisal stemmed from the significant increase in the number of black men who were incarcerated in the immediate post-civil rights moment. Behind prison walls, blacks' numerical advantage supposedly translated into a culture of sexual violence against white inmates. Well-publicized sociological studies and white-authored prison narratives affirmed this image of the politically driven black rapist. As one white inmate put it, blacks' domination in the prison was characterized by “this hostile ‘get Whitey’ attitude that they all vented through sex with me and others like me.”⁶¹

For his part, Chester is repulsed by the sexual acts he sees in jail. Goines notes, “If there was one thing he hated it was the rape of another man. Chester didn't care if they were black, white or green, just the idea of raping another man got on his nerves”

⁶⁰ Donald Goines, *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief* (1973; Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2000) 9. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 171.

(55). Yet Goines rattles his readers' nerves to no end by staging violent acts of rape in the middle of the cell, for all eyes to see. In one scene Tommy, a black inmate, choreographs a lurid display of his power by forcing a white inmate, Mike, to perform oral sex on him. Goines writes that as the other men look on, "Tears of frustration ran down Mike's cheeks as the black man held his head and began to come in his mouth. The boy chocked on the long black penis in his mouth, but Tommy continued to hold his head tightly. Cum ran from Mike's mouth and down the side of his chin. He choked and gagged, but it didn't do any good. Tommy held on for dear life" (72). In this passage, the symbolic value of the "long black penis," typically construed as the touchstone of virile black masculinity, is mitigated by Goines's description of the viscous semen that drips out of another man's mouth. Tommy's fruitless emission and almost helpless embrace ("held on for dear life") are of a piece with Mike's horrific debasement. Paradoxically, then, racial authenticity as a function of black masculinity is threatened here precisely by dint of Tommy's sexually exploitative act. Indeed this act only confirms Chester's earlier intuition that Tommy is a "coward" (53). From this perspective, Tommy receives his proper comeuppance when the authorities charge him with sodomy, which will add several years to his sentence and send him to "the hole" for solitary confinement (85).

In Chapter 2 I argued that, despite the shame Otis Tilson feels in being a queer transvestite and a victim of homosexual rape, Iceberg Slim's *Mama Black Widow* (1969) recuperated aspects of heterosexual black masculinity in Otis's very efforts to "go straight." In a similar vein, my reading of *White Man's Justice* proposes that while

Goines stigmatizes black-on-white rape in carceral spaces to highlight “the depraved power relations that the penal system produces and maintains,”⁶² he also recuperates aspects of heterosexual black masculinity precisely in these sexually charged spaces. Chester befriends two younger men, Willie Brown, a black man, and Tony, a white teenager, who share his disgust with Tommy’s behavior. Together the three men form an interracial bond of take-no-shit intimidation that keeps the predatory black rapists at bay. In Willie, Chester sees a tough and loyal younger version of himself (his nickname for him is “Blood,” which is short for “Youngblood,” an up-and-coming hustler). In Tony, Chester sees a white boy who will defend his dignity to the teeth when it comes to deflecting the attention of the “asshole bandits” (51). Tony identifies so strongly with his friends in the penal context that, for once, he wishes “his skin was coal black” (104).

The three friends constitute the novel’s core representation of (inter)racial brotherhood—the “real” men as distinct from black rapists and white victims. Yet in Goines’s attention to the production of desire in this all-male space of confinement, there is a curious way in which the friends also enjoy a degree of homosocial interaction *with each other*. Chester, for example, admires Tony’s good looks along with his tough-guy persona. From Chester’s perspective, Goines describes Tony as “a nice looking kid, Italian, with dark hair, a small nose, and lips that a woman would love to kiss. He was handsome, and to many of the men inside the county jail, that meant he was open for

⁶² Andrew Fox Sargent, “Partners in Crime: Interracial Male Bonds and Criminal Justice in Twentieth-Century American Culture,” diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2005, 228.

their advances. It was thought that, if a man was handsome, he had to have some woman in him. There was something else about him, though, and Chester noticed it” (56). Tony’s beauty possesses an ineffable quality that only Chester seems to appreciate. It is as though by elevating Tony’s beauty to the status of the beyond-feminine, a Platonic ideal that contrasts with the baseness of prisoner sex, Chester is able to safely admire the white boy for his good looks. Indeed, throughout much of *White Man’s Justice*, Tony’s beauty is something that Chester tacitly recognizes every time he admires his toughness.

Chester is equally admiring of Willie, although here the desire is directed toward that potent symbol of authentic black masculinity: the black penis. One episode has Willie waking Chester up as he is coming out of the shower. Seeing Willie in the buff sets Chester off on a short monologue about his penis: “Goddamn...no wonder I had a nightmare. I must have seen you walk past my bunk with all that meat swinging and it put the fear of God in me. Boy, you cover up when you come out of that damn shower. Shit, I won’t be the only one in here having nightmares if you keep walking around with all that dick hanging” (133). For his part, Willie is flattered by Chester’s ribbing. Goines observes, Willie “was proud of the way he was hung, and it made him happy that Chester had referred to how large he was hung in front of the other men” (134). In this neat inversion of the scene with Tommy, Chester openly expresses admiration for Willie’s penis in front of the other inmates. But rather than have both men’s masculinity come under erasure through an act of sexual violence, Chester and Willie articulate a “safe,” desirous, and even queer intimacy. It is precisely within the space of the men’s

friendship, which acts as a buffer against the specter of sodomy, that homosocial and homoerotic play are allowed to flourish unquestioned.

Of course if there is any lesson to be taken away from a Donald Goines novel, it is that hope and happiness are fleeting emotions. Just when you think things are going your way, fate arrives to knock you down and grind you into the dirt. *White Man's Justice* is no exception to this rule. For all the sincere intimacy that Goines invests in the friendship between Chester, Willie, and Tony, he pulls the rug out from under the protagonist, showing him that Willie and Tony could not be trusted as friends in the first place. Tony's naïveté as a white person means that he cannot appreciate Chester's or Willie's critique of the racism that pervades the criminal justice system. When Tony gets his privately paid lawyer to reduce his armed-robbery sentence to five years of probation, he leaves his friends with not much else besides a shrug and the change in his pocket. But if Tony's turning his back on Chester is characterized by his white innocence, Willie's betrayal turns out to be a deliberate attempt to ruin Chester's life in order to save his own. Upon his release from Jackson State Prison (where he and Chester have been transferred to following their arraignments), Willie leads a rash armed robbery of a welfare office that Chester happened to tip him off on. Although Chester asks Willie to hold off on the robbery, his protégé goes through with it anyway; the botched attempt leaves four people dead and Willie looking for a scapegoat. In his trademark fashion of foreshadowing the devastating events to come, Goines writes of Chester's finding out about the arrest of his friend: "with the maturity of fatalism, Chester realized that it was out of his hands" (215).

On the day that Chester is supposed to be released from Jackson, he instead finds himself in court facing a life sentence for planning the heist. Willie and another inmate finger Chester as the man behind the crime and thus responsible for the deaths of an innocent woman and the office security guard. It is the same kind of accusation that plagued George Jackson following the death of his brother. Just as Jackson came to see his connection to radicals as a heavy burden to carry, so does Goines's fantasy of despair cast significant doubt on whether any kind of friendship is possible behind prison walls. Chester gives voice to this deep-seated pessimism when he looks back on his friendship with Willie with regret: "because he had allowed himself to become friendly with another human being, he was going to court to be sentenced" (217). The punishment meted out to Chester by a white judge is indeed a life sentence, and the phrase "life sentence" echoes "for what seemed like an eternity" in *White Man's Justice* final passage (218).

The twist in this tragic story is that Goines refuses to sanctify, in the way Jackson had been, even his hard-done-by protagonist. Lest the reader mistake Chester solely for a victim of racial injustice, Goines points to Chester as the perpetrator of a heinous, premeditated murder: that of his own wife. The recurring nightmares he suffers from involve Chester's planning and carrying out his first wife's death-by-drowning, which is never discovered to be a homicide. There is no clear indication in the novel's final pages that Goines sees Chester's life sentence as justifiable punishment for the crime he got away with. Still, the woman who is shot during the welfare office robbery bears some resemblance (loud, uppity, "fat and dark-complexioned" [213]) to Chester's wife, who is

depicted as a loud, nagging, and “matronly shaped, heavysset” black woman (130). At any rate, the inclusion of his wife’s murder in the novel would seem to cast Chester’s fate as the product of *both* a racist criminal justice system *and* the series of actions that make up his criminal past. If the temptation is to read the title of Goines’s novel as “white man’s justice” *causing* “black man’s grief,” the author reminds the reader that the two are sometimes equal partners in the (self-)destruction of black men’s lives.⁶³

Reading the Street

By the mid-1970s, Holloway House had arrived at a deceptively simple formula to ensure black pulp fiction’s continued popularity: under the banner of the “black experience,” produce books that presented generic variations on a common theme. That theme was captured in a saying Iceberg Slim would repeat in his lectures to college audiences: “There are three ways to get out of the ghetto: 1) dead in a basket, 2) in handcuffs, 3) with a college degree.”⁶⁴ Although Slim likely encouraged students to take up the third option at the exclusion of the others, *Players* and middle-class-themed novels like *House Full of Brothers* helped make black pulp fiction prime reading material for black men of all social classes. Narratives that featured what I call *differential class iterations* of street masculinity thus had a cohesive effect on Holloway House’s readers. Despite the books’ cheap paperback format and questionable literary merits—two distinguishing traits of class-based book-reading tastes—their cumulative investment in the iconic post-civil

⁶³ For a similar reading of Chester’s wife’s murder, see Sargent, 268-69.

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Gilstrap, 95.

rights black masculine subject drew in scores of readers who saw aspects of their own lives reflected in black pulp fiction's streetwise protagonists. In this regard, the black experience was not something that inhered in the texts of black pulp fiction (Jon Palmer's aesthetic bore little relation to Iceberg Slim's); rather, it was a byproduct of the social and material relations that readers, individually and collectively, cultivated with these novels.

Particularly notable about black pulp fiction's reception in the 1970s was that it developed alongside the rise to prominence of black women's writing. At the same time that more and more black men were drawn into the *Players* and Holloway House fold, black women writers found a receptive forum for their work in America's most prestigious publishing houses. With only a few exceptions—notably, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ann Petry, all three of whom faded into obscurity after bright starts to their literary careers—black women writers historically found it difficult to convince publishers that their fiction would find an audience in the American mainstream.

Ironically, it was the male-dominated Black Power and Black Arts movements that set the stage for the flourishing of black women's writing in the early 1970s. The women who had had to face sexist slights and even sexual abuse in their political activism turned to penning literary and dramatic accounts of their experiences in the immediate post-civil rights moment. During this period, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, and Alice Walker produced landmark works that garnered popular and critical acclaim.

Morrison in particular played a major role in bringing black women's voices to the fore: as an editor at Random House, she fostered the literary careers of Gayl Jones, Toni Cade

Bambara, and Gloria Naylor and used her editorial influence to craft the literary credentials for black women's writing.⁶⁵

The insights of black women's writing echoed those made by the activists and scholars who spearheaded the black feminist movement. In the early 1970s, black women who had experienced firsthand the sexism of Black Power as well as the racism of the predominantly white feminist movement branched off to form their own political organization. In its classic statement of black feminist principles, the Boston-based Combahee River Collective wrote about the importance of recognizing black women's political agency at the intersection of different forms of oppression: "We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously."⁶⁶ The Collective's intersectional approach to political activism revealed the centrality of black women's experiences to imagining a more just society. It was from the standpoint of black women's social identity that the black feminist movement forged a complementary discourse to the literary achievements of black women artists.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Darryl Dickson-Carr, *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 16.

⁶⁶ The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, et al. (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982) 16.

⁶⁷ On the black feminist standpoint, see bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

In many ways, the stories these women told shared black pulp fiction's desire to represent the experiences of ordinary black people. Although Morrison and Walker were best known for their novels about rural black life, Jones, Bambara, and a host of others aimed to illuminate the trials of black women living in the inner city. Looking back on her career in the early 1980s, Bambara spelled out her motivation to write:

I work to tell the truth about people's lives; I work to celebrate struggle, to applaud the tradition of struggle in our community, to bring to center stage all those characters, just ordinary folks on the block, who've been waiting in the wings, characters we thought we had to ignore because they weren't pimp-flashy or hustler-slick or because they didn't fit easily into previously acceptable modes or stock types.⁶⁸

Where Bambara departed from black pulp fiction, of course, was in her commitment to address the "folks on the block" who had been overlooked during the era of pimp chic. In the same interview, Bambara went on to say that black men and women drew from different experiences on the street in writing their fiction: "The notion of a street...is certainly handled in particular ways. To walk down the street as a woman is a very particular experience. I don't find that rendered in Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, or John A. Williams the way I *feel* it in Gayl Jones, Sonia Sanchez, etc."⁶⁹ In line with black feminist standpoint theory, Bambara emphasized that black women experienced the street differently from men and that their previously silenced voices constituted a necessary corrective to the male-dominated tradition of urban literature.

⁶⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, interview, *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983) 18.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

Black pulp fiction's own privileged standpoint evinced little sympathy for black women's unique perspectives on poverty and sexism. If anything, the synergy between *Players* and black pulp fiction ensured that readers' understanding of racial authenticity would buttress patriarchy vis-à-vis black men's objectification of black women's bodies. While black women's bodies no doubt always had been objectified in black pulp fiction, it was *Players* that in some sense made this quality demonstrably "real," which is to say *visible*, for readers. As the magazine and novels traveled together through multiple routes of distribution in the black community, we could say that the fiction's more ambiguous fantasies (of Otis Tilson's shame, of Whoreson Jones's bourgeois desires, of Chester Hines's queer intimacy) were subordinated to the sheer spectacle of nude and *culturally* exploited (Gaye's "enslavement," Conchita's "soul") black women. By assuring black men that they were situated firmly "on top," *Players* worked to strip black pulp fiction of some of its most original and complex imaginings of the urban experience.

Like *Adam* and *Sir Knight* before it, *Players*'s straightforward investment in heteronormative masculinity might even have reduced black pulp fiction to the status of yet another turn in the sex paperback genre. For example, on the rare occasions when women's voices were highlighted in black pulp fiction, they tended to be promoted as lusty, sex-for-pay confessionals—a throwback in genre to the very first paperbacks Holloway House had published. Books like Cherri Grant's *Swingers Three* (1974) and Kelley Eagle's *Black Streets of Oakland* (1977) were lurid extensions not of *Players*'s literary fiction but of the copy the magazine would use to describe women who were

featured in nude pictorials.⁷⁰ In view of these developments, a study of black pulp fiction's reception in the mid- to late 1970s and throughout the 1980s would have to consider whether the literariness of Slim's and Goines's novels was at all diminished by circulating alongside *Players*, and particularly its pictorials.

The distinction I draw here between nude pictorials and literary content in men's pornography—expressed proverbially as reading *Playboy* for its articles—would seem to imply that differences in social class remained coherent in *Players*'s reception among black men. But as my analysis of the magazine's trafficking in ghetto-centric stereotypes (from the pimp coat to “sex-and-soul food”) has shown, *Players* consolidated its vision of racial authenticity precisely through differential class iterations of street masculinity. Indeed the expression of social class in *Players* took the form of a flexible subjective orientation toward both the trappings of the good life and the stylistics of slum life. The latter, we will recall, was consistently framed through black women's occupying not just sexually but *socially* subordinate positions to male desire. Thus construed, the fantasy of black men's always being on top was facilitated by the persistent debasement of black women's gender *and* class backgrounds. Again, while this dynamic was no doubt already operative in black pulp fiction, *Players* elevated it both materially and symbolically to the status of a cross-class ideal.

⁷⁰ Eagle did not actually write her book—it was “told to”/penned by Leo Guild, the editor at Holloway House who ghostwrote a number of sex confessionals for the company. His later titles often featured white women being exploited by black pimps. For more on Guild, see Chapter 1.

Even Iceberg Slim partook in *Players*'s promotion of interclass misogyny. In 1977, with his literary career stalled, Slim took to the pages of the magazine to promote himself. There, in a lengthy interview, he undercut the image of the loving family man he deployed as a key element of his Black Power-era public persona. On his career as a writer, Slim mused, "One of the handicaps...in being a writer is that one has large numbers of children, responsibilities. Ideally a writer should be alone. Most writers—if they're married—inevitably, the wife will soon consider the writing as a rival. And no writer can reach his peak with this kind of *intramural* opposition."⁷¹ Now that he had achieved a modicum of middle-class security, Slim sounded no different from the kinds of voices represented in (white) men's literature, including sex paperbacks, of the 1950s and '60s. Specifically, his emphasis on the "intramural" resentment he felt toward his common-law wife Betty, who happened to be white, underscored how street masculinity could be translated into any number of (domestic) spheres where women should be put in their place (or no place at all, if one happened to be married with children).⁷² The notable lack of discussion of Slim's *continuous* misogyny—from the page to his later interviews and public appearances—in work by scholars who wish to "save" Robert Beck from his ignoble past reveals the importance of situating black pulp fiction in the context of its historical readerships.

⁷¹ Nolan Davis, "Iceberg Slim: Pimping the Page," *Iceberg Slim: The Lost Interviews*, ed. Ian Whitaker (London: Infinite Dreams, 2009) 97.

⁷² On Betty Mae Beck, née Shue, and her influence on Slim's career, see Mark McCord, "The Next Hustle," *waxpoetics* 38 (2009): 60-70.

Despite the trajectory *Players* would appear to have taken black pulp fiction in the 1970s, there is evidence showing that the novels themselves were read in ways that at least partially resisted their reduction to exploitative sex paperbacks. This is not to say that the readerly interests brought to black pulp fiction complemented those brought to black women's writing on the street at the time. In fact, both materially and textually, novels by Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines staked out an imagined community of black male readers who ultimately viewed the street in distinctly masculine terms: their heroes were physically tough, intellectually or cunningly driven, and heterosexually validating. But in advancing the fantasy of the street as a man's world, black pulp fiction also made it possible for black men who suffered from persistent socioeconomic marginalization to self-identify as readers and to work through contradictory feelings about their plight. Slim and Goines spoke to these men in their language and with their concerns in mind, just as black women's writing found a different audience among other readers. While black pulp fiction's subjection of women to a man's desire to be on top was far from salutary, the novels also gave readers the opportunity entertain feelings of desperation, disaffection, and *need* otherwise absent from the field of literary fiction.

Taken together, these traits of black pulp fiction realized inner-city black men's post-civil rights structure of feeling both in novelistic form and through points of literary access in ghetto neighborhoods. In the few accounts we have of black men reflecting on why they enjoyed reading black pulp fiction in the early 1960s and '70s, the common denominator is the recognition that these novels were part and parcel of the inner-city

milieu. Having grown up in St. Louis, Missouri, George Samuels remembers that *Pimp* and *Whoreson* (1972) were so much fun to read in large part because their circulation passed through each of the primary spheres of male socialization in the black community: “You couldn’t just walk into a bookstore and ask for these books. Back in the day, they were sold in the neighborhood barbershops, liquor stores and pool halls... When someone in my class at school got a hold of one of them, the guys passed it around until we’d all read it.”⁷³ Samuels’s ability to access Holloway House paperbacks in all-black, all-male social spheres enhanced his sense that he and other young men were participating in an imagined community of shared feelings and interests.

More recently, the communal dimensions of reading enabled by black pulp fiction have been put to rehabilitative use in U.S. prisons. The former book review editor of *Players*, Gwendolyn Osborne, wrote in 2001 that fiction by Slim, Goines, and other Holloway House authors are among the most frequently requested titles by prison inmates.⁷⁴ The criminal justice system’s sponsorship and encouragement of literacy, even through black pulp fiction, has been one of the few lasting achievements of the 1960s and ’70s prisoners’ rights movement. California’s Prisoner Literacy Act (1987), for example, was passed because clear connections had been drawn between criminal rehabilitation and the process of learning (or continuing to learn) how to read and write. Although funding for prison libraries as well as inmates’ reading privileges have been cut back as

⁷³ Qtd. in Gwendolyn Osborne, “The Legacy of Ghetto Pulp Fiction,” *Black Issues Book Review* 3.5 (2001): 51.

⁷⁴ Osborne, 52.

part of the massive corporatization of the U.S. penal system in recent years,⁷⁵ Slim and Goines still hold pride of place among inmates' treasured reading materials.

Since the 1970s, black pulp fiction's community of readers has also included a number of authors who have recognized in Slim's and Goines's work a new way of writing the crime novel. The African American mystery writer Gary Phillips admits that he was initially drawn to Goines because his books were "very visceral, lean, and mean and spare."⁷⁶ Phillips later realized that part of the writing's appeal had to do with the author's keen attunement to the criminal element as such. Like the great authors of noir fiction—the hard-boiled subgenre of American crime literature that flourished in the 1930s and '40s—Goines crafted *Kenyatta* in such a way that he tapped into "something deep and significant in a populace hungry for heroes."⁷⁷ Paradoxically, because *Kenyatta* was a manipulative hustler and ruthless killer, his status as a hero rested on his badman exploits and not because he cut "redeeming" figure. Phillips continues to appreciate that kind of scandalous realism in Goines's fiction. When a friend criticized Phillips for not including any meaningful social "message" in his 1999 novel *The Jook*, Phillips reflected, "He didn't get that for me the book was a crime story was more in the tradition of Donald Goines and Joe Nazel than applying Marxist or Malcolm X to the crime story motif."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ See the section "Bibliotherapy: The Rise and Fall of the Reading Cure," pp. 306-13, in Megan Sweeney, "Reading and Reckoning in a Women's Prison," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 50.3 (2008): 304-28.

⁷⁶ Scott Timberg, "A Darker Shade of Noir," *New Times Los Angeles* 27 May 1999: n.p.

⁷⁷ Gary Phillips, interview, *African American Mystery Writers*, by Frankie Y. Bailey (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008) 188.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

In the 1980s, as Holloway House paperbacks slowly made their way out of black neighborhoods and into used bookshops and other small-scale retail outlets, curious white readers were drawn to Slim for the sheer explicitness with which his prose depicted the vagaries of urban life. One reader-turned-writer, Andrew Vachss, dedicated his hard-boiled novel *Shella* (1993) to Slim, in honor of the latter's engrossing tales of criminals who exist on the margins of society. Like the characters that populated the fiction of Jim Thompson and David Goodis—two classic writers of the noir mode—Slim's protagonists turned conventional morality on its head and followed their own code of survival. When another white writer, Marc Gerald, "discovered" this element of outlaw ethics in the work of Donald Goines, he became determined to reprint the "lost" classics of the black hard-boiled tradition. The resulting series of sixteen trade paperbacks, titled *Old School Books* and published by W. W. Norton between 1997 and 1999, did its part to introduce mainstream readers—especially college students, hip hop heads, and Generation X-identified youth—to Slim and Goines as unheralded visionaries of the black urban experience.⁷⁹

Arguably the most surprising development in the expansion of black pulp fiction's readership beyond the inner city has been Slim's and Goines's reception in other parts of the world. The French have entertained a long fascination with American crime

⁷⁹ The two novels by Slim and Goines Norton reprinted were *Mama Black Widow* and *Daddy Cool* (1974), respectively. Other authors featured in the series included Clarence Cooper, Chester Himes, and the jazz novelist Herbert Simmons. On the inspiration behind *Old School Books*, see Marc Gerald, "Old School Noir," *Salon*, Salon, 7 Mar. 1997, web, 12 Sep. 2009.

fiction as well as the movies Hollywood adapted from hard-boiled novels. It was French critics who in 1946 coined the term *film noir* to describe the stylish, morally ambiguous Hollywood crime dramas of that era. In 1945 the editor Marcel Duhamel began an imprint at the prestigious French publishing house Gallimard dedicated to the *roman noir*, the tradition of hard-boiled novels whose muscular prose and outlaw ethos transformed the traditional crime story into the ultimate fantasy of social subversion. Duhamel's imprint was named the Série noire, and for over sixty years it has published French translations of Anglo-American crime fiction by authors ranging from Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett to Ed McBain and Chester Himes (whose successful, career-making Harlem cycle of detective novels was commissioned by Duhamel himself).⁸⁰

By the time Goines's fiction was published as part of the series, in the mid-1990s, the Série noire boasted well over two thousand titles in its catalogue. Back in the United States, Goines had been routinely overlooked by African American literary critics as well as crime fiction scholars in their respective efforts to promote alternative canons of literary study. The French, however, saw Goines as a natural heir to the hard-boiled tradition and lauded his fatalistic vision of the urban nightmare. Of the novel *Never Die Alone* (1974), published by Gallimard as *Ne mourez jamais seul* in 1993, the French

⁸⁰ On the importance of the series to Himes's work, see Jonathan P. Eburne, "The Transatlantic Mysteries of Paris: Chester Himes, Surrealism, and the Série noire," *PMLA* 120.3 (2005): 806-21.

would favorably observe that, for Goines, the world was “an absolute hell, [filled] with pitiless, sadistic, and cold figures for whom redemption does not exist.”⁸¹

If the French relished the existential questions posed by Goines and the hard-boiled tradition, the British were more inclined to read black pulp fiction for its vernacularized documentary impulses.⁸² Around the time that Old School Books was reprinting black hard-boiled novels in the United States, Edinburgh’s Payback Press (an imprint of Canongate Books) was reprinting a similar catalogue in the United Kingdom (UK). Payback was instituted solely for the purpose of publishing “some of the most neglected but important voices to come out of urban America this century.”⁸³ All of Slim’s work, with the notable exception of the Mafia novel *Death Wish* (1977), was reprinted by Payback, whose list of authors included Clarence Cooper, Chester Himes, the spoken-word artist Gil Scott-Heron, and the filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles.

Payback’s most recognizable supporter, the Scottish writer Irvine Welsh, made a note of how reading Slim inspired his decision to become a writer, especially given the fact that he came from a “non-bookish culture.” According to Welsh, reading Slim in the 1980s gave him the impetus to engage creatively with the world that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s dismantling of the British welfare state had left behind:

⁸¹ Claude Mesplède and Jean-Jacques Schleret, *Les auteurs de la Série noire, 1945-1995* (Nantes, France: Joseph K., 1996) 201. Translation mine.

⁸² The difference in reception was no doubt a matter of how the context-specific, oftentimes idiomatic language of hard-boiled fiction was translated into French and other foreign languages.

⁸³ Payback Press, advertisement, *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, by Iceberg Slim (1967; Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996) n.p. Echoing the titular track of James Brown’s 1973 double album *The Payback*, Payback Press’s name may derive from the publisher’s efforts to exact a kind of “revenge” on the literary establishment for ignoring these previously “neglected” voices.

The schemes [housing schemes, a form of public housing in the UK] I grew up in had, through sale of higher-amenity council housing, mass unemployment and the introduction of drugs as the key element of the developing underground economy, been reduced to the ghetto level of the black American projects. I took this social landscape as a given: we were not, under New Labour, going back; there would be no attempt to rebuild the social fabric, and even the moderate social democratic policies of Europe would be rejected in favour of a basic neoconservative “enterprise economy” model of development. There would be resistance, of course, but it would not prevail. But I was less interested in the politics and more intrigued, in a novelistic sense, by the type of society we had created. To me Iceberg Slim’s view of the relationships of the black American ghetto, the hustling, scamming, pimping, drug-dealing, stealing and rampant aspiration towards wealth, suddenly seemed more relevant than ever.⁸⁴

For Welsh, who had picked up a copy of *Pimp* at a used bookshop in Soho,⁸⁵ Slim’s on-the-ground writing about spaces of urban blight in America had the uncanny effect of mirroring, even clarifying, what he was witnessing under Thatcher’s neoliberal regime.

The male-dominated criminal element that grew out of the urbanization of poverty in the UK became the subject of Welsh’s first and most celebrated work, the novel *Trainspotting*. Published in 1993 and made into a hit feature film in 1996, *Trainspotting* is narrated in a mixture of the Scots dialect and Scottish English, which reflects its setting in the smoky pubs, dimly lit flats, and hardscrabble streets of Leith, Edinburgh (Welsh’s hometown). The novel follows the exploits of six neighborhood friends who, bereft of the opportunity to secure gainful employment, turn to scamming, drug use, casual sex, and random violence as a means of feeling or doing *something*

⁸⁴ Irvine Welsh, “*Pimp: An Introduction*,” *Meet at the Gate*, Canongate Books, 5 Feb. 2009, web, 12 Sep. 2009. Quotation marks altered from British to American usage.

⁸⁵ Welsh does not specify which Soho he is referring to here, but given the fact that he wrote this piece for British audiences, he is likely referring to the London neighborhood of that name.

meaningful in their lives. *Trainspotting* shares *Pimp*'s dark pessimism about urban life, its cast of colorful, criminal, and deeply flawed characters, and its complete immersion in the substrata of the social order—that is, the language and culture of the street. While *Trainspotting* might not be properly categorized in the post-civil rights oeuvre of black pulp fiction, it could well be the most renowned expression of the aesthetics of black pulp fiction the world has ever seen.⁸⁶

Despite their elevated status as the twentieth-century's most authentic chroniclers of the black urban experience, as authors, Slim and Goines never realized the fruits of their labor. Goines, we know, was killed in 1974, but even before his death he had noted his frustration with his heroin habit and Holloway House's allegedly measly royalty payments. In a document dated September 1, 1973, Goines wrote, "Today, I fussed with my woman over ten dollars; I needed the money to get a fix so that I could type. True, I really need a fix to be able to write. If I don't fix, my mind comes to a standstill. The only thing I can think about is, 'Where and how can I get a fix?'"⁸⁷ The document was composed as a letter to Bentley Morriss, but it is unlikely Goines ever sent it, given that it was discovered in his personal belongings more than a year after it was written.⁸⁸

Nonetheless, it is clear that Goines used the typewritten document to work through his

⁸⁶ I use the term "renowned" to denote recognition by a large, even global, audience. Welsh's novel and indeed Welsh himself have achieved mainstream success where Slim (and Goines) most assuredly did not. In this regard, the success of *Trainspotting* is part of the long history of white artists' appropriation of black cultural forms for profit.

⁸⁷ Qtd. in Eddie B. Allen, Jr., *Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004) 143.

⁸⁸ Allen, 147.

personal demons. He wanted Morriss to understand how the rapid pace of his writing in fact complemented his preexisting heroin habit and that an intervention of some sort was needed to stop the cycle. “What I’m trying to say is, ‘Help,’” Goines pleaded. He did not want to keep churning out low-revenue paperback novels; instead, he asked Morriss if he might write for the company’s popular history magazine *Mankind*, or, even better, if he could receive an advance to work on “one book that might not be a number one best seller, but... would be the best that [he’d] ever do.”⁸⁹ Goines moved back to Detroit shortly after he composed his letter; he would be gunned down in his home a year later.

In the thirty years following his death, Goines’s books sold between five and ten million copies worldwide.⁹⁰ Holloway House’s notoriously secretive accounting practices prevented anyone from receiving an accurate count of how many books Goines had sold. This did not stop Holloway House from branding Goines “America’s #1 Best Selling Black Author.” If it was true, as reported by Morriss, that Goines’s books were selling over 200,000 copies a year up to 2004,⁹¹ then Goines indeed would have been one of the most widely read black authors of all time, second only to the mid-century Western writer Frank Yerby (whom most readers did not even realize was black) or possibly Iceberg Slim. Still, it is not clear whether or how much Goines’s family (recall his

⁸⁹ Qtd. in Allen, 145, 144.

⁹⁰ The five million figure is from Lola Ogunnaike, “Credentials for Pulp Fiction: Pimp and Drug Addict,” *New York Times* 25 Mar. 2004: E8. The ten million figure is from Eddie B. Allen, Jr., “Detroit-splio-tation: Spotlight Shines on Ghetto Realism Cult Hero,” *Metro Times* [Detroit], *Metro Times*, 24 Mar. 2004, web, 29 Jul. 2009.

⁹¹ Ogunnaike, E8.

extensive list of royalty beneficiaries from Chapter 3) benefited from these sales.

According to one family member, Goines's contract stipulated that he receive twelve cents for every copy sold. Unfortunately, that arrangement did not account for increases in book prices.⁹² In the early 1970s, Goines's books sold for \$1.50 each; that list price has increased steadily until today, when one sells for \$7.99. Thus the profit margins for Holloway House have soared into the millions of dollars, while for the Goines family the maximum amount of money they have seen per million copies sold is \$180,000.

Iceberg Slim died of kidney failure on April 30, 1992, at the age of 73. While Slim was on his deathbed in a hospital in Los Angeles, citywide riots sparked by the acquittal of four police officers in the infamous Rodney King beating were raging outside. It was a sadly poetic ending for the man who had written so powerfully about the shame and frustration blacks felt trying to survive in America's ghettos.⁹³ At the time of his death, Slim was long estranged from Holloway House, not having written new material for them since the late 1970s. Still, at least two reports in 1992 put sales of Slim's books at over six million copies.⁹⁴ His books had even made it onto college course syllabi, reflecting a newfound appreciation for Slim's efforts to render the inner-city vernacular into an object of literary value. Nonetheless, as was the case with Goines, it

⁹² Qtd. in L. H. Stallings, "'I'm Goin Pimp Whores!' The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 191.

⁹³ On the enduring post-civil rights dismay that informed the Rodney King riots, see Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁹⁴ Phil Patton, "Sold on Ice," *Esquire* Oct. 1992: 76; "'Iceberg Slim': Robert Beck, Author, Dies in L.A. at 74," *Los Angeles Sentinel* 28 May 1992: n.p. (The *Sentinel* obituary mistakenly cited Slim's age at death at 74, not 73.)

remains unclear how much of Slim's entitled royalties were actually transmitted to the family Slim left behind. From what I have been able to piece together, Slim did not own the rights to his own books, except for the low-sellers *Death Wish* and *Long White Con* (1977). With *Pimp*, *Trick Baby*, and *Mama Black Widow* being taken up by a new generation of readers—those who were participating in the burgeoning gangsta rap movement—conflicts over who was to profit from Slim's legacy were sure to arise.

The most notable conflict began when Slim's wife and one of his three daughters, Melody Beck, approached New York's Grove Press to publish what they claimed was a novel Slim had written after he broke ties with Holloway House. The resulting book, *Doom Fox*, came out in 1998; featuring an introduction by Ice-T and a blaxploitation-inspired cover (with an image of an afro-donning nude woman wielding a gun), the novel was clearly marketed to young fans of rap and hip hop culture, black and white alike. But Slim's novel did not translate well into its new form. *Doom Fox* was a critical failure, with reviewers saying the writing was "howlingly bad," and sales seem to have been mediocre at best. To make matters worse, three years after *Doom Fox*'s publication, Camille Mary Beck, a daughter Slim allegedly disowned, filed a lawsuit against Diane Millman Beck (her stepmother) and her sister Melody, claiming that the novel was not even written by her father. Camille contended that Diane's brother, Dan Millman, a well-known New Age writer and self-help guru, actually penned the manuscript in question. In her suit Camille enlisted the testimony of Bentley Morriss, who said Diane had

approached him with the piece for possible publication but that neither he nor his editors could confirm the authenticity of the writing in question.⁹⁵

Although it remains unclear whether or how the suit was settled, the episode made apparent the unique relationship that had developed between black pulp fiction and inner-city communities. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this work, in the 1960s and '70s, black pulp fiction urged readers to view racial authenticity as synonymous with the urban African American experience. For these readers, connecting an ethos of “being real” to the practice of surviving on the streets of America’s ghettos was a historically constituted and culturally specific process. Yet it was also a process that did not settle on a final determination of racial authenticity. As my readings of several books by Slim and Goines have shown, the fantasies elicited by black pulp fiction shuttled between male heterosexual desire and queer ghetto shame, lower-class identification and middle-class uplift, black nationalist politics and stymied nationalist participation. These tensions were imaginatively entertained but not ideologically resolved in the welter of post-civil rights African American culture. Thus, while Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, and Holloway House were key actors in the making of black pulp fiction, without the material and historical conditions which made readers *receptive* to their work, it is far from certain that black pulp fiction would have become the urban cultural phenomenon that it did.

⁹⁵ Beverly Beyette, “Iceberg’s Kin Disagree: Is It the Real Slim, or Shady?,” *Los Angeles Times* 4 Sep. 2001: E1. See also Greg Tate, “Pimp and Circumstance: Iceberg Slim’s Ghetto-centricity,” *Village Voice* 20 Oct. 1998: 132.

With this overview in mind, I would argue that *Doom Fox*'s claim to authenticity was mitigated by the fact that it did not register as a work of black pulp fiction. Even if we grant the authorial authenticity of the manuscript, the context and material features of the book's publication removed it from the street culture in which the politics of racial authenticity in black pulp fiction had been waged. Published in a handsome trade paperback edition with an original list price of \$12.00, *Doom Fox*'s material form appealed first and foremost to a mainstream, middle-class audience. Moreover, without Holloway House's distribution networks in the black community, *Doom Fox* was bound to circulate only in the world of "alternative" or avant-garde literature for which Grove Press is famous. Black pulp fiction thrived on its material connections to inner-city readers, and for better or for worse, Holloway House made those connections possible in the 1960s and '70s. Grove's *Doom Fox*, on the other hand, was alien to the streets; it seems most avid readers of black pulp fiction did not even know of its existence.

The *Doom Fox* controversy leads me to the somewhat deflating conclusion that the same black pulp fiction which was produced under decidedly exploitative conditions was also the black pulp fiction which empowered inner-city blacks to work through their experiences through imaginative means. I find it difficult to reconcile Goines's suffering and the legal wrangling over Slim's legacy with all the creative and cultural work that their books inspired. Could things have transpired differently? We may never know. Goines might not have become as famous in life as he was in death. Slim might not have connected with black readers if he had had establishment editors laboring to "correct" his

vernacular prose. Perhaps the best we can do is to think of black pulp fiction on two levels of historical significance: locally, as an exploitative business investment, and broadly, as a driving force behind the transformation of the street into one of the more dynamic fields of cultural production in late twentieth-century America.

Odie Hawkins articulated the parameters of this paradoxical relationship:

“Frankly, I don’t really love Holloway House, but at least it’s the best game on the West Coast...I know that on the East Coast there are several black publishing companies, but in the whole mix, Holloway House is head and shoulders above all of them.”⁹⁶ For Hawkins and many other black authors, publishing their work with Holloway House was not an ideal arrangement. But how else would their books get to be read by the people for whom they wrote them? As editor Raymond Friday Locke observed, the company’s ability to make books available to inner-city readers in their everyday milieus was the key to black pulp fiction’s success.⁹⁷ The point was to produce and distribute books that were not only readable but also accessible. Because Holloway House rarely deviated from this business philosophy, African Americans took up black pulp fiction as an organic part of their urban culture. Indeed, even today, there are many readers whose life experiences resonate with the frequencies on which Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines spoke to the black community in the 1960s and ’70s. Slim’s and Goines’s books continue to sound the politics of what it means to be real in socially marginalized contexts.

⁹⁶ Qtd. in Gilstrap, 99.

⁹⁷ Gilstrap, 97-98.

EPILOGUE

THE GANGSTA RAP

Since its emergence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, black pulp fiction has shaped the reading habits of successive generations of urban black youth. Although many titles have not stood the test of time, books by Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines have not gone out of print since their original publication. It became a kind rite of passage for young black men to pick up their first Slim or Goines novel, viewing it as an initiation into a community of readers who reveled in street lore. But not only: long after the Black Power movement had ended, readers continued to find in black pulp fiction the imaginative resources that would help them reflect on their social reality. The fact of the matter was that, into the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, urban blacks fared even worse than what they had experienced in the post-civil rights moment. Poverty and unemployment rates skyrocketed during the U.S. recession of the mid-1970s, and the rhetoric of “urban crisis” only became more acerbic following a series of urban crime waves in the late 1970s. By 1980, the year the anti-counterculture Republican Ronald Reagan assumed the Presidency, the American city itself seemed to be on the brink of collapse, and African Americans were more often than not the scapegoats for its demise.

Out of these dire circumstances—what Jeff Chang has collectively termed the “politics of abandonment”¹—urban blacks laid the groundwork for what would become the most significant cultural and commercial phenomenon of the late twentieth century. It was during the 1970s urban crisis that African Americans combined oral traditions, artistic acumen, and streetwise sensibilities to make hip hop a unique form of urban cultural production. In New York City figures like DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa transformed diffuse urban discontent into a community-building locus for black pleasure, black resistance, and black fun. Faced with a lack of public and private resources to keep their spirits afloat, the Bronx-based practitioners of hip hop relied on their facility with turntables and on word-of-mouth publicity to get black youth out on the dance floor and into the streets. The publicness of hip hop’s various modes of creative expression—breakdancing, graffiti-writing (or tagging), DJing, and MCing (or rapping)—ensured that blacks’ cultural agency would not go unnoticed by white officials. Indifferent to the inner city’s fall into squalor during the 1960s, whites suddenly became very interested in urban blacks’ lives when they dared to occupy (through graffiti art, impromptu concerts, and house parties) the public sphere on their own terms.²

¹ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005) 7-19.

² The literature on hip hop is expansive and growing, but I have relied on the following sources in offering this composite account of its origins: Chang; Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, eds., *Yes Yes Y’all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop’s First Decade* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2002); and Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream! Rap Music’s Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008).

Despite its origins in the Bronx and the initial resistance it faced from white authorities, hip hop became a hugely successful cultural product into the 1980s. The key to selling hip hop to mainstream audiences was the music. Almost as soon as it appeared, corporations were moving in on the hip hop artists who were putting out their music through independent labels. Instead of competing with these “street-savvy labels,” companies bought them up, allowed them to operate “relatively autonomously,” and banked on the profits that would come in from owning the rights to and distributing artists’ content.³ There were several consequences to this tidal shift in hip hop’s cultural production. For one, the music industry’s commercialization of hip hop trimmed away its more embodied and locale-specific creative elements, such as breakdancing and tagging. DJing, too, fell by the wayside as live breaks and beats were replaced by studio-produced tracks. Nonetheless, there was enough room within rap-based hip hop to make it a vital and dynamic force of black cultural production. With hip hop’s commercialization, the rapper achieved iconic status as an irruptive voice of urban protest (for many blacks) and countercultural desire (for rap’s growing audience of white listeners).

As rap became the signature form of hip hop music, it was perhaps inevitable that readers of black pulp fiction would become some of the most celebrated rappers of their generation. In particular, a subgenre of hip hop known as gangsta rap was commonly

³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994) 7.

understood to derive in part from the streetwise novels of black pulp fiction.⁴ Like post-civil rights readers of black pulp fiction, fans of gangsta rap saw it as a cultural riposte to dominant views of inner-city “problems.” In Michael Eric Dyson’s estimation, in its time gangsta rap served as “an indictment of mainstream and bourgeois black institutions by young people who [did] not find conventional methods of addressing personal and social calamity useful.”⁵ On these terms, the vernacular flamboyance of Slim’s prose as well as black pulp fiction’s attention to urban poverty, political disaffection, police brutality, and black-on-black crime shaped the way gangsta’s Los Angeles-based rappers conceived of their art. Significantly, unlike previous forms of hip hop, gangsta rap focused to a large degree on the racial authenticity of individual male protagonists or narrators. In arguably its clearest debt to black pulp fiction, gangsta rap by Niggaz with Attitude (N.W.A.), KRS-One, and Public Enemy related the pitfalls of urban life through the eyes of the ghetto badman—the folkloric hero who was the centrifugal force in Goines’s fiction.

When gangsta rap went mainstream with the release of N.W.A.’s album *Straight Outta Compton* in 1988, black pulp fiction provided the narrative backdrop to tracks like “Fuck tha Police” and “Dopeman.”⁶ The lyrics of the former were marked as especially controversial, given that they seemed to condone retributive violence against the Los

⁴ See, for example, David Mills, “Los Angeles’ Gangsters of Rap, Escalating the Attitude,” *Washington Post* 20 May 1990: G6.

⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 185.

⁶ For an “insider’s” view of Goines’s influence on gangsta rappers, including N.W.A.’s Ice Cube, see Kelvin Williams’s documentary *Donnie’s Story: The Life of Donald Goines* (2004).

Angeles Police Department (LAPD). MC Ren’s line, “I’m a sniper with a hell of a scope / Takin’ out a cop or two, they can’t cope,” was just one of the many Goines-like flourishes N.W.A. included in their rap. Despite being banned from several concert venues, the group enjoyed unprecedented success with the album, and its badman characters set “the benchmark for the subgenre’s antipolice, antistate rebelliousness.”⁷ N.W.A.’s individual members would go on to have successful careers in gangsta rap and in hip hop more generally. Ice Cube and Dr. Dre in particular became icons of the West Coast scene, releasing solo albums which extended the vision of potent black manhood that *Straight Outta Compton* had introduced to the mainstream. Their respective debut albums—*AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* (1990) and *The Chronic* (1992)—remain touchstones of what Charise Cheney identifies as a politically conscious and male-oriented “rap nationalism.”⁸ Although he was never cited directly as an inspiration for their work, Kenyatta’s revolutionary-cum-gangster figure looms large in N.W.A. and its members’ collective musical output.

Another artist from Los Angeles—someone whom many consider to be the father of gangsta rap—was more explicit in pointing to black pulp fiction as an influence on his work. Tracy Marrow was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1958, but he moved to Los Angeles as a child after his parents died from heart attacks four years apart. Marrow grew

⁷ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 108.

⁸ Charise L. Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

up on the hardscrabble streets of South Central, and it was in high school that he became drawn to the art of rapping. Better known by his moniker Ice-T, Marrow recounted in one interview how he became a rapper by reading the novels of Iceberg Slim:

Niggas would come to school with them in their back pockets, and I would read 'em and think, "Oh my God, it's the phattest shit in the world," because it's exactly what hardcore rap is: it's the lingo, it's the life, it's the whole life we live. So I started readin' it, and I used to quote his words...I would go to school and say this shit and the girls would go crazy! All the rhymin' I would do, I would call it Iceberg, Iceberg Slim, so my homes would be like... "Hey man, say some more of that Ice shit" 'cause my name was Tracy, but they would call me "Crazy Tre," so they changed that to "T"; they'd say, "Say some more of that Ice shit T." Get it? Ice T?⁹

Like many rappers of his day, Ice-T honed his verbal artistry by reciting toasts and rhymes about the "life," or the underground economy of inner-city social exchanges.

Interestingly, it was black pulp fiction, a print medium, and not a continuous oral tradition that gave Ice-T the tools and inspiration to ply his trade. According to this account, Slim's novels served as a kind of platform on which Ice-T could construct the lattice of his vernacular repertoire. This detail says much about how important black pulp fiction had become to the transmission of cultural knowledge in urban communities.

Where there was a breakdown or lapse in the oral transmission of stories from generation to generation, black pulp fiction stepped in to give young readers a sense of the vernacular talent that had come before them.

⁹ Ice-T, interview, *It's Not about a Salary...: Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles*, by Brian Cross (London: Verso, 1993) 182. Quotation marks altered from British to American usage. See also Amy Gamerman, "The Icemen Cometh: 'Gangster Rappers' on Set," *Wall Street Journal* 17 Dec. 1991: A18.

Ice-T's early albums were testaments to Slim's influence on his art. In his debut album *Rhyme Pays* (1987), the seminal track "6 'n the Mornin'" documented the adventures of a ghetto badman on the run from the police. While the speaker's gun-toting antics were right out of the pages of a Donald Goines novel, Ice-T's infectious rhymes, playful sense of humor, and attention to the finer details of the hoodlum lifestyle were vintage Slim, updated for the hip hop generation. In the first stanza, for example, Ice-T's rhymes match the propulsive force of each couplet's forward-looking action: "6 'n the mornin', police at my door / Fresh Adidas squeak across the bathroom floor, / Out the back window I make an escape / Don't even get a chance to grab my Old School tape." Recalling an otherwise harrowing escape act, in this opening sequence Ice-T's narrator pauses to take note of his footwear (Adidas was a brand beloved by hip hop heads) and to tip his hat to the Old School traditions. But "6 'n the Mornin'" was equally famous for its avowedly male sense of humor: "Up the next mornin', feelin' good as hell / Sleepin' with a girlie sure beats a cell, / Hit the boulevard in my A.M.G. / Hos catchin' whiplash tryin' to glimpse the T." In a scene reminiscent of Slim's preface to *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967), Ice-T's narrator props up the credentials of his manhood by poking fun at the "hos" who are awestruck by a rhymed equivalent: the big "T" ostentatiously driving the slick "A.M.G." (a luxurious Mercedes-Benz car model).

Ice-T's next few albums—*Power* (1988), *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech...Just Watch What You Say* (1989), and *O.G. Original Gangster* (1991)—solidified his reputation as gangsta rap's reigning solo artist. In his vast repertoire of raps about urban

life, Ice-T, like Slim, managed to balance misogynist humor befitting the locker room with deadly serious political insight. On the one hand, *The Iceberg*'s titular track provides more fodder for the pimp's stash of witty repartee: "Out with the posse on a night run / Girls on the corner, so let's have some fun, / Donald asked one if she was game / Back Alley Sally was her name, / She moved on the car and moved fast / On the window pressed her ass, / All at once we heard a crash / Donald's dick had broke the glass." At the same time, in *O.G.* Ice-T raps about the very real problems black people faced as America, under a decade of Republican rule, came to see urban poverty as strictly a "black" issue: "There'll never be any good schools in the hood / There'll never be any cops that are any good, / The hospital is a great place to go to die / Real estate's cheap, let me tell ya why, / The man's got a surefire system / An economic prison!" Between phallic humor and social observation, the silly and the incisive, Ice-T transformed the politics of racial authenticity into a cultural phenomenon that was as popular and entertaining as it was subversive of mainstream American values.¹⁰

At the peak of gangsta rap's popularity, however, Ice-T's career would be sidetracked by a national outcry over the lyrical content of one of his songs. The song in question was "Cop Killer," and to the surprise of many, it was not conceived of as a hip hop recording. "Cop Killer" was in fact recorded by Ice-T's heavy metal band Body Count and released on their self-titled debut album in 1992. Although the song did

¹⁰ On the political import of hardcore gangsta rap, particularly in relation to the different cultural meanings attached to the figure of the badman, see R. A. T. Judy, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity," *boundary 2* 21.3 (1994): 211-30.

feature Ice-T rapping its lyrics, its musical style was drawn from a different “hardcore” genre: the traditionally white-oriented thrash metal. Still, the song’s controversial lyrics, composed in 1990 in response to a long history of LAPD mistreatment of blacks, invited a racially charged backlash from music critics, censorship activists, law enforcement officials, and even the President (George H. W. Bush) himself. The song garnered unprecedented notoriety when, shortly after its release, a jury acquitted the LAPD officers who were accused of using excessive force in the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King in 1991. The riots that engulfed Los Angeles in the wake of the unpopular decision were a terrible blow to Ice-T’s and the song’s reputations. It was a huge blow, too, for gangsta rap, which was unfairly caricatured (by distant association with Body Count) as a murderous, obscene, and rebellion-fomenting genre of music.

After the smoke had cleared, Ice-T elected to remove “Cop Killer” from the Sire/Warner Bros.-issued album. The song’s blunt but relevant social point—that blacks desired some form of justice for the seemingly unaccountable acts of police brutality that were taking place in the ghetto—was completely lost in the firestorm of controversy. To be sure, the timing could not have been worse, as “Cop Killer” presented social conservatives and fearful parents the perfect scapegoat for both the Los Angeles riots and the perceived decline of moral standards in society. Hip hop would survive this wave of attacks, but the more lasting consequence of the controversy was that the music industry turned its back on potentially subversive political rap, which included most of what gangsta rap had to offer. Gangstas were not completely locked out of the industry, of

course, as the long and successful careers of Dr. Dre and Snoop “Doggy” Dogg surely attest. But gangsta rap did have to shed much of its political inflection and orientation in order to remain commercially viable. It was a lesson in crossover appeal/backlash that was unique to rap in the world of late twentieth-century black cultural production.¹¹

While gangsta rap was effectively censored for its “explicitness,” black pulp fiction remained a widely popular literary form throughout the 1990s.¹²

Since the music industry’s recovery from the demise of gangsta rap, successive generations of artists and producers have cited novels by Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines as major influences on their work. Goines’s star in particular has risen appreciably in contemporary hip hop culture.¹³ The West Coast rapper Tupac Shakur immortalized Goines when he referred to him as a “father figure” in his last album to have been released before his death in September 1996. The following year, New York

¹¹ Blaxploitation filmmaking had fallen out of favor for different reasons, largely buckling under the weight of its market saturation. On this topic, see Chapter 2.

¹² A telling footnote to this story involves Ice-T’s next solo album after *Body Count*, *Home Invasion*, released by Rhyme Syndicate Records in 1993. *Home Invasion* was supposed to be issued by Sire/Warner Bros., but the corporation objected to the album’s cover art, which in the foreground depicts a white teen listening to his Walkman. The boy dons Black Power necklaces and is surrounded by gangsta rap cassette tapes as well as books by Malcolm X, Iceberg Slim, and Donald Goines. Illustrated in the background is the presumable content of these cultural texts: a muscled avenger bludgeoning a white man to death with the butt of a rifle, a scantily clad woman being surprised from behind by a masked assailant, and so on. Looming over all these figures is the face of Ice-T, who gazes ominously down at the teen. The implication of the phrase “home invasion” is clear: gangsta rap will “invade” the suburban domiciles of impressionable white kids. Because Sire/Warner Bros. refused to issue the album with this cover, Ice-T released *Home Invasion* under his own label with the artwork in tact. See Jon Pareles, “Ice-T’s Latest Gangster-Rap Caper Finds Him Alone and on His Own,” *New York Times* 29 Mar. 1993: C13+.

¹³ Tracy Grant, “Why Hip-Hop Heads Love Donald Goines,” *Black Issues Book Review* 3.5 (2001): 53.

native Nas rapped in the track “Escobar ’97,” “With so much drama in QBC [Quehanna Boot Camp, a military-style, motivational correctional facility in Pennsylvania], it’s kinda hard being Escobarro / Eldorado Red, sippin’ Dom out the bottle / My life is like a Donald Goines novel.” More recently, the Atlanta-based Ludacris has retold the story of his rise to fame through a series of compact, Goines-inspired rhymes: “So I picked up a couple books from Donald Goines / About the business of this shit and how to flip a few coins, / By the age of eighteen I was destined to make it / My bank account read Disturbing the Peace Incorporated.” Arguably the most astute black pulp fiction reader-cum-rapper is the Manhattan-born MF Grimm. A former child actor on *Sesame Street*, Grimm captures the essence of Goines’s fatalistic vision when he asserts in *Scars and Memories* (2005), “If Donald Goines wrote my life, my name would be Kenyatta / I don’t choose to kill a brotha, but to stay alive right now I gotta.” Grimm, whose work is distinguished in the underground hip hop scene, might well be speaking for legions of Goines fans when in the same track he intones, “Shit ain’t never gonna change.”

Owing to its widespread circulation in post-gangsta rap music, black pulp fiction has made something of a comeback as a specifically print medium. Since the late 1990s, an updated version of black pulp fiction—alternately known as street lit, urban fiction, gangsta fiction, and hip hop literature—has become the most recognizable, and popular, literary form authored by African Americans. The origins of street fiction (as I will refer to it here) are frequently traced to the 1999 publication of the hip hop artist and community activist Sister Souljah’s novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Surprisingly, it was

Simon and Schuster, a powerful and decidedly mainstream New York publisher, that gave the Public Enemy-associated artist a shot at putting out her first book. In a tale not unlike Goines's novel *Black Girl Lost* (1973), *Coldest Winter* follows the exploits of Winter Santiago, the teenage daughter of a fearsome New York drug dealer. Like so many of black pulp fiction's protagonists before her, Winter makes some bad choices that end up thrusting her into a downward spiral of criminal activity. Drawn to the "fast" living and glamorous accoutrements of her hustler father, Winter evades the path of middle-class security his income provides the family and instead becomes a delinquent and wanted criminal in her own right. When a boyfriend sets Winter up to take the fall on a drug charge, she is left facing a fifteen-year prison sentence with the Santiago family disintegrating around her. In a gesture worthy of Slim's backpedaling from the "negative glamour" of the pimp, Souljah has pointed to Winter's dissolution as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of getting involved in the urban underworld.

The question of whether *Coldest Winter*'s moral vision was in fact being conveyed to readers (or whether readers took up Souljah's novel for its moral vision at all) came to the fore as soon as a host of other authors and publishers sought to profit from the novel's unexpected success.¹⁴ In 2000 Marc Gerald, who had co-founded Norton's Old School Books series, started a publishing company with the help of an investment from black actor Wesley Snipes. The company was given the Mafia-sounding

¹⁴ *The Coldest Winter Ever* had sold roughly half a million copies by 2003. See Ayesha Court, "Edgy Stories Echo the Streets," *USA Today* 2 Jul. 2003: 1D.

name Syndicate Media Group (SMG), and it sought to publish street fiction inspired by gangsta rap. Gerald was familiar with Holloway House's marketing practices; he knew, for example, how popular Goines's novels were in U.S. penitentiaries. In order to access this market directly, Gerald hired SMG its own prison sales coordinator.¹⁵ He defended this decision by reasoning, "If you can't read while you are behind bars, your life is that much worse... What happens if *nobody* introduces books to these readers?" Black booksellers and community leaders did not view SMG's plans so favorably. Jawanza Kunjufu, founder of African Images Press, countered Gerald by saying, "Those brothers who are in prison need much, much more than these types of books."¹⁶ For critics like Kunjufu, SMG's first title, *Street Sweeper* (2000), by the hip hop journalist Ronin Ro, seemed to be more interested in reveling in the aura of the commodities in the protagonist's possession than it was in providing a concrete vision for redemption. Gerald continued to defend his business by claiming that no mainstream press would cater to his targeted demographic, while his detractors suggested incarcerated black men did not need these books because they were "already learning [negative behaviors] from each other."¹⁷

Curiously, SMG appears to have never really gotten off the ground. There is no record of any other SMG publication aside from *Street Sweeper*. Whatever the reason for its folding, we might speculate that Gerald had overplayed his hand. While black pulp

¹⁵ Anthony C. Davis, "The New Sons of Iceburg [sic] Slim," *Black Issues Book Review* 3.5 (2001): 56.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Davis, 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

fiction had long cornered the market on urban black male readers, street fiction, in the vein of *The Coldest Winter Ever*, seemed to be appealing to noticeably different tastes.

Around the time Souljah's novel was released by Simon and Schuster to much fanfare, other black women writers were hitting the streets with their self-published novels about urban life, as seen through the eyes of female protagonists. In 1998, having been turned away by numerous mainstream publishers, Terri Woods began selling hand-bound copies of her first book, *True to the Game*, out of the trunk of her car. Her hard-boiled novel, about a young woman whose boyfriend lures her into Philadelphia's drug underworld, earned Woods enough profits to start her own publishing company. Over the next several years, Woods became a millionaire by publishing popular sequels to her debut novel as well as other street fiction series. In 2001 Ohioan Vickie Stringer self-published her novel *Let That Be the Reason*, about a single mother who, in order to provide for her son, becomes a highly successful escort. Stringer's novel was such an underground hit that she expanded her imprint, Triple Crown Publications (TCP), to publish other titles in street fiction. TCP has since become the most accomplished publisher of street fiction; the company's effective culling of literary talent and distribution of books in urban venues now serve as model business practices in street fiction publishing. Thanks to these women's efforts, by the early 2000s, street fiction was a hot property in which even mainstream publishers wanted to make significant investments. Simon and Schuster led the way in creating its own urban imprint, Atria

Books, which attracted women-centered street fiction by Shannon Holmes and Zane, among other authors.¹⁸

The most significant thing about the street fiction boom is the fact that its primary readership consists of young black women under the age of 30.¹⁹ In a remarkable twist to the story of black pulp fiction's afterlives, Slim and Goines's closest literary descendants today are black women who are writing hardcore novels about urban life for other black women, even teenage girls. The literary content of black pulp fiction and street fiction are remarkably similar: each is saturated with scenes of graphic sex, stomach-churning drug abuse, and almost inhuman acts of black-on-black violence. As to their material forms, although the majority of street fiction is published in trade paperback editions, self-published or independently produced works—which many readers continue to see as being the most “authentic” examples of street lit—are printed on the same cheap paper and are just as poorly edited as Slim's and Goines's novels were.²⁰ The irony of the gender role-reversal is most apparent in the cover art of independently published street fiction. In a throwback to the pin-up-inspired cover art for the original edition of *Pimp*, the covers for TCP's titles—among them *Bitch* (2006), *Whore* (2006), and *Black and Ugly* (2007)—tend to feature photographs of black women in various states of undress and/or posing astride the commodity touchstones of the hustler's lifestyle.

¹⁸ Court.

¹⁹ Diane Patrick, “Urban Fiction: What's Old Is New Again,” *Publishers Weekly* 19 May 2003: 31.

²⁰ Almah LaVon Rice, “The Rise of Street Literature,” *Colorlines* May-Jun. (2008): 45.

Street fiction's detractors have based their arguments on the same kind of criticism black pulp fiction faced from middle-class and nationalist circles during the post-civil rights era. In a 2006 op-ed to the *New York Times*, the black young-adult romance writer Nick Chiles wrote that he was "embarrassed and disgusted" by the "smut" that stocked his local Borders bookstore's shelf for "African-American literature." In a veiled critique of contemporary hip hop culture, Chiles took street fiction to task for selling "stories that glorify and glamorize black criminals." While Chiles did call out "the greed of the publishing industry" for being ultimately responsible for promoting street fiction, he also cast a sideways glance at the women who read these books. On bookshelves across the nation, Chiles observed, respectable fiction by Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, and himself were being displaced by "a tasteless collection of pornography"—namely, "pornography for black women."²¹ Implicit in Chiles's determination of the word "pornography" was the notion that street fiction peddled debasing images of *black* people, and not necessarily of black *women* per se. He imagined female-narrated street fiction as "little paperback rabbits churning out...graphic offspring that [would] make Ralph Ellison books cringe into [sic] a dusty corner."²² In Chiles's account, street fiction was the literary equivalent of black female sexuality gone amok, an indiscriminate coupling that (re)produced hordes of "offspring."

²¹ Nick Chiles, "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut," editorial, *New York Times*, New York Times, 4 Jan. 2006, web, 4 Oct. 2009.

²² *Ibid.*

Danyel Smith was one of the many black female readers of street fiction who objected to Chiles's piece. Among other things, Smith observed in her essay "Black Talk and Hot Sex" that Chiles left little room for appreciating the *particularity* of the urban black experience in all its grim, prurient, harrowing, and beautiful rawness. Authors of street fiction, like Slim and Goines before them, were intent to "*put it all out there*—the stuff many African Americans spend their lives trying to get past, move away from, or talk about only among themselves." The value of street fiction thus lay in its ability to affirm for readers the diverse local knowledges, however crude, that constitute the black community's understanding of itself. In this regard, according to Smith, it was the (presumed) Ellisonian task of affirming black humanity through "universal" literary themes and styles of prose that made "a lot of Black people (and so many Black-lit authors) feel shame."²³ After all, who could actually live up to such lofty ideals? And more importantly, where was the pleasure to be found in only reading books that reflected, in Chiles's words, only "the best that's in us"?²⁴

To Smith's critique I would add that contemporary street fiction represents the most significant advance in the politics of racial authenticity since the success of individual female rappers in the 1990s. Where Chiles only sees degradation and improper expressions of female sexuality, I see the potential for a genuinely woman-centered critique of black men's exclusive access to the politics of racial authenticity. Important to

²³ Danyel Smith, "Black Talk and Hot Sex: Why 'Street Lit' Is Literature," *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, ed. Jeff Chang (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006) 189, 191.

²⁴ Chiles.

recognize here is the fact that street fiction is typically composed in the first-person narrative voice of observant female protagonists. These characters offer a point of access to girls and young women who actually want to have a stake in defining themselves as tough, self-aware, and streetwise black people. Books by Woods, Stringer, and Zane offer readers the opportunity to explore what it means to be female *and* street at the same time. It is for this reason that Chiles feels threatened by the new wave of black women's writing. Because street fiction is unabashedly committed to imagining what it would be like for a woman to play a man's game, its content is predictably anathema to middle-class tastes and traditional expectations for female sexuality. The proper vernacular riposte to Chiles, then, would be a phrase that illuminates the genealogy which links black pulp fiction to street fiction: "Don't hate the player, hate the game."

Even with the rise of street fiction and the recognition of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines in mainstream rap music, Holloway House had to finally close its doors in early 2008. The publisher had been in business for nearly half a century, and during this period it had remained a completely independent company. But increasing distribution costs likely led to significant cuts in Holloway House's profit margins. With only Slim's and Goines's titles selling enough copies to justify mass shipments of paperbacks to retailers, it was only a matter of time when it became impractical to continue the business. In February 2008 New York's Kensington Books purchased the Holloway House catalogue and announced it would release select paperbacks under the imprint Holloway House

Classics.²⁵ Black pulp fiction's new owners made their name in mass-market romance novels; it was in this genre that Kensington claimed to be the publisher of the most black-authored books in the world. Since the folding of Holloway House, Kensington has had the unusual distinction of possessing the largest catalogues of male-authored black pulp fiction and female-authored black romance fiction in the world.

The only thing Kensington was not able to acquire in the deal with Holloway House was ownership of Slim's books. In that deal the rights to Slim's work were to be retained by his estate, with Kensington acting only as the distributor of new copies of his books.²⁶ The terms of this arrangement followed up on a legal challenge to Holloway House's business practices by Slim's surviving family members. In 2005 Slim's widow Diane Millman Beck and two of his daughters filed a lawsuit against Holloway House, alleging the company withheld royalty payments for and wrongfully claimed ownership of Slim's work. Among the various charges of fraud, copyright infringement, and breach of contract alleged by the Becks, the most revelatory was that *Pimp*, the book that started the black pulp fiction revolution in 1967, had never been legally owned by Slim. The suit claimed that Holloway House registered the landmark novel under its own name, even though the author's contract stipulated that Slim hold the copyright to *Pimp*. Dependent

²⁵ "Kensington Buys Holloway Backlist," *Publishers Weekly* 25 Feb. 2008: 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

only on the irregular royalty payments he received from Holloway House, Slim “died penniless,” the suit explained.²⁷

When it came time for Holloway House to close its doors, Bentley Morriss probably elected to settle the lawsuit out of court, handing over the rights to Slim’s literary property to the Becks. While this change in ownership will no doubt prove beneficial for Slim’s surviving relatives, it is unlikely to alter the dynamics of his reception among urban youth of the hip hop generation. Forty years after the rise of black pulp fiction, Slim’s and Goines’s novels continue to speak to readers for whom the street and its attendant modes of survival are palpable social realities. Indeed, from the perspective of black pulp fiction’s readers, we could say that Slim’s and Goines’s fiction has always been seen as the literary property of the street itself. Having never enjoyed the fruits of a publishing system that rewards the singular author of achievement, Slim and Goines realized their greatest success in the collective celebration of their work by generations of African American readers. In this regard, the fate of black pulp fiction in the twenty-first century will rest not on the demise of Holloway House or on the transfer of copyright to Slim’s family. It will rest on the degree to which readers consume and continually reinvent black pulp fiction’s representations of the street in hip hop’s field of cultural production.

A recent *New York Times* opinion illustrates this point nicely. In it Will Okun, a white schoolteacher based in Chicago’s West Side, speaks to the value of engaging urban

²⁷ “*Beck v. Holloway House Publishing Company*,” *Entertainment Law Digest* 9.12 (2005): 17.

youth not with the so-called “classics” of Western literature but with books they are “better able to relate to and understand.”²⁸ Okun cites titles such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Terry McMillan’s *Mama* (1987), and Sapphire’s *Push* (1996) as books his students can really get into. At the top of his piece, however, there is a photograph of a bespectacled African American boy, no older than fifteen, lounging on an outdoor swing chair and reading a book. The silver-colored paperback the young man holds in his left hand bears the unmistakable title of *Pimp*.

²⁸ Will Okun, ““None,”” editorial, *New York Times*, New York Times, 9 Jan. 2008, web, 1 Aug. 2009.

APPENDIX I

HOLLOWAY HOUSE AND THE RISE OF BLACK PULP FICTION: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1956 Knight Publishing, financed by Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock, starts *Adam*, a pin-up magazine featuring erotica, short stories, and pictorials of topless models
- 1958 Sirkay Publishing, financed by Morriss and Weinstock, starts *Sir Knight*, another pin-up magazine, with similar content to *Adam*
- 1961 Holloway House (HH), the book complement to Knight and Sirkay (essentially reprinting text appearing in *Adam* and *Sir Knight*), publishes its first paperback, *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, by Dewey Linze
- 1963 HH publishes Barbara Payton's salacious Hollywood memoir, *I Am Not Ashamed*; it is ghostwritten by editor Leo Guild
- 1965 HH moves from its original location at 8762 Holloway Drive to 8060 Melrose Avenue, which was to be its permanent location
- 1966 HH publishes first "black"-authored paperback, Kipp Washington's *Some Like It Dark: The Intimate Autobiography of a Negro Call Girl*; it is ghostwritten by Guild
- 1967 HH publishes two novels by Iceberg Slim, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* and *Trick Baby*
- 1969 HH publishes Slim's third book, *Mama Black Widow*
- 1971 HH publishes Donald Goines's first book, *Dopefiend*, and Slim's collection of essays, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*
- 1972 HH publishes Goines's second book, *Whoreson*
- 1973 Hollywood adaptation of *Trick Baby* is released; the protagonist, a mixed-race man who can pass for white, is played by white actor Kiel Martin
Players International Publications, financed by Morriss and Weinstock, releases the first issue of *Players*, an all-black pornographic magazine

- 1974-75 HH publishes Goines's *Kenyatta* series under the pseudonym Al C. Clark
- 1974 Goines and his common-law wife Shirley Sailor are gunned down in their home in Detroit on October 21
- 1992 Slim passes away in a Los Angeles hospital on April 30; while on his deathbed, citywide riots sparked by the acquittal of four police officers in the Rodney King beating rage outside
- 1993 Scottish writer Irvine Welsh publishes the novel *Trainspotting*, about a group of disaffected youth in Edinburgh; he later credits reading Slim's work as inspiring him to write the novel
- 1998 Grove Press publishes Slim's "lost" novel, *Doom Fox*
- 2001 Camille Mary Beck, Slim's eldest daughter, files a lawsuit against Diane Millman Beck (Slim's widow) and Melody Beck (her sister), alleging that *Doom Fox* was not written by Slim
- 2004 Goines's *Never Die Alone* is adapted into a Hollywood movie, directed by Ernest Dickerson and starring the rapper DMX
- 2005 Diane Millman Beck, Melody Beck, and another sister, Belissa Misty Beck, file a lawsuit against HH, alleging the company withheld royalties for and wrongfully claimed ownership of Slim's work
- 2008 HH closes and Kensington Books acquires the majority of its backlist, with the exception of Slim's work; Kensington will only distribute Slim's books, which are now owned by his estate

APPENDIX II

LIST OF HOLLOWAY HOUSE BOOKS, 1961-1969

1961

HH-101	<i>The Trial of Adolf Eichmann</i>	Dewey W. Linze
HH-102	<i>Hemingway: Life and Death of a Giant</i>	Kurt Singer
HH-103/4	<i>The Many Loves of Casanova</i>	Giacomo Casanova

1962

HH-105	<i>Hollywood Screwballs</i>	Leo Guild
HH-106	<i>The Best of Adam</i>	

1963

HH-107	<i>How to Win at Cards, Dice, Races, and Roulette</i>	Mike Goodman
HH-108	<i>I Am Not Ashamed</i>	Barbara Payton
HH-109	<i>An Adult View of Love and Sex</i>	Inge and Sten Hegeler
HH-110	<i>Jayne Mansfield's Wild, Wild World</i>	Jayne Mansfield and Mickey Hargitay

1964

HH-111	<i>Ladybird's Man</i>	Pat Thompson
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1965

HH-112	<i>Ladies on Call</i>	Lee Francis
HH-113	<i>The Tortured Sex</i>	John S. Yankowski and Hermann K. Wolff
HH-114	<i>The Yankowski Report on Premarital Sex</i>	John S. Yankowski
HH-115	<i>Only When I Laugh</i>	Henny and Jim Backus
HH-116	<i>Satyricon: Memoirs of a Lusty Roman</i>	Trans. Paul J. Gillette
HH-117	<i>Prostitution, U.S.A.</i>	Mike Bruno and David B. Weiss
HH-118	<i>An Uncensored History of Pornography</i>	Paul J. Gillette
HH-119	<i>My Name Is Leona Gage, Will Somebody Please Help Me?</i>	Leona Gage (Miss U.S.A.)

1966

HH-120	<i>Inside the Dodgers</i>	Fresco Thompson with Cy Rice
HH-121	<i>Point Your Tail in the Right Direction</i>	Jeri Emmett

HH-122	<i>Some Like It Dark: The Intimate Autobiography of a Negro Call Girl</i>	Kipp Washington with Leo Guild
HH-123/4	<i>The Complete Marquis de Sade</i>	Marquis de Sade
HH-125	<i>My Life in Crime</i>	Terrys T. Olender
HH-126	<i>Role of the Dominant Female in American Society</i>	Hermann K. Wolff
HH-127	<i>Get Me Gladys!</i>	Cy Rice
HH-128	<i>Compulsive Desire</i>	Hermann K. Wolff
HH-129	<i>Adam's Best Fiction</i>	Ed. Thomas H. Schulz
HH-130	<i>Psychodynamics of Unconventional Sex Behavior and Unusual Practices</i>	Paul J. Gillette
HH-131	<i>Ribald Russian Classics: Adult Stories from the Folk-Lore of Russia</i>	Introd. Milton Van Sickle
HH-132	<i>Adam's Swinging Party Humor</i>	Editors of <i>Adam</i>
HH-133	<i>The Memoirs of Dolly Morton</i>	Introd. Paul J. Gillette
HH-134	<i>Grushenka: Three Times a Woman</i>	Introd. Paul J. Gillette
<u>1967</u>		
HH-135	<i>Marquis de Sade's Francon Duclos: The Memoirs of a Paris Madame</i>	Trans. Paul J. Gillette
HH-136	<i>Children in Danger: The Molesters</i>	Cy Rice
HH-137	<i>De Figuris Veneris</i>	Friedrich Karl Forberg
HH-138	<i>Venus in India</i>	Capt. Charles Devereaux Introd. Milton Van Sickle
HH-139	<i>Pimp: The Story of My Life</i>	Iceberg Slim
HH-140	<i>The Lopinson Case</i>	Paul J. Gillette
HH-141	<i>Skouras: King of Fox Studios</i>	Carlo Curti
HH-142	<i>The Art and Science of Lovemaking</i>	Hermann K. Wolff
HH-143	<i>The Nine Holes of Jade</i>	Su-Ling
HH-144	<i>The Harem Omnibus: The Lustful Turk & A Night in a Moorish Harem</i>	Introd. George A. Stokes
HH-145	<i>Debauched Hospodar & Memoirs of a Young Rakehell</i>	Guillaume Apollinaire
HH-146	<i>Pauline: Memoirs of a Singer</i>	Introd. Philip K. Roggis
HH-147	<i>Memoirs of a Russian Princess</i>	
HH-148	<i>The Adventures of Father Silas & Flesh and Bone</i>	Beaugard de Farniente and Henry Crannach
HH-149	<i>1600 Floogle Street</i>	Don McGuire
HH-150	<i>The Nigger Bible</i>	Robert H. deCoy
HH-151	<i>Trick Baby</i>	Iceberg Slim
HH-152	<i>Mistress of Cuba</i>	Rita Benuto

1968

HH-153	<i>A Place in Hell</i>	H. R. Kaye
HH-154	<i>The Hellcats</i>	Robert F. Slatzer
HH-155	<i>Robert Francis Kennedy: The Man and the Politician</i>	Lawrence J. Quirk
HH-156	<i>Swingers Guide for the Single Girl: Key to the New Morality</i>	Marie and Hector Roget
HH-157	<i>The Nun</i>	Denis Diderot
HH-158	<i>Honey Man</i>	Mike Panos
HH-159	<i>Freak Show Man</i>	Jerry Holtman
HH-160	<i>To Kill a Black Man</i>	Louis E. Lomax
HH-161	<i>Legion of Outcasts</i>	Hurk Davis
HH-162	<i>Divorcee a Go-Go</i>	Elaine Stanton

1969

HH-163	<i>Honolulu Madam</i>	Iolana Mitsuko
HH-164	<i>The Cherry Dance</i>	Tami Miyoshi
HH-165	<i>The Day Television Died</i>	Don McGuire
HH-166	<i>The Big Black Fire</i>	Robert H. deCoy
HH-167	<i>Alcatraz: Number 1172</i>	Steve Ellis
HH-168	<i>The Studio</i>	Leo Guild
HH-169	<i>Nights of Malta</i>	Gina Zammit
HH-170	<i>The Devil's Brand</i>	Introd. Stanley Whelan
HH-171	<i>Blood on the Rhine</i>	Hurk Davis
HH-172	<i>Damned Spot</i>	Barry Cuff
HH-173	<i>The Girl Who Loved Black</i>	Leo Guild
HH-174	<i>The Goddess Stick</i>	Aaron Flood
HH-175	<i>All the Loving Couples</i>	Leo V. Gordon
HH-176	<i>Mama Black Widow</i>	Iceberg Slim
HH-177	<i>A Memory without Pain</i>	Scott Flohr
HH-178	<i>Three Sisters and Their Mother</i>	
HH-179	<i>The Right Fuse</i>	Barry Cuff
HH-180	<i>The Starlet</i>	Leo Guild
HH-181	<i>Tacuara!</i>	Olga Rich
HH-182	<i>Day and Night</i>	Pierre Berg

APPENDIX III

LIST OF BOOKS AUTHORED BY DONALD GOINES, 1971-1975

1971

Dopefiend

1972

Whoreson

Black Gangster

1973

Street Players

Black Girl Lost

White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief

1974

Eldorado Red

Swamp Man

Never Die Alone

Daddy Cool

Cry Revenge (as Al C. Clark)

Crime Partners (as Al C. Clark)

Death List (as Al C. Clark)

Kenyatta's Escape (as Al C. Clark)

Part 1 of the Kenyatta series

Part 2 of the Kenyatta series

Part 3 of the Kenyatta series

1975 (posthumous)

Kenyatta's Last Hit (as Al C. Clark)

Inner City Hoodlum

Part 4 of the Kenyatta series

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