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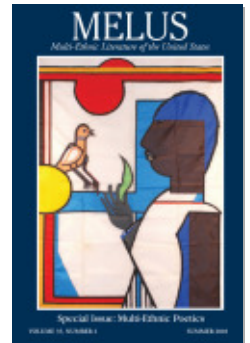
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Representing Prison Rape: Race, Masculinity, and Incarceration in Donald Goines's *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief*

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In April 1981, in the early years of what Randall Kennedy terms the racial “darkening” (134) of America’s jail and prison populations, the *New York Times* reported that a New York Criminal Court judge refused to send a young, middle-class white male to the city’s Rikers Island jail on the grounds that the defendant would almost certainly be sexually assaulted by the jail’s predominantly African American and Latino inmate population. “We take judicial notice of the defendant’s slight build, his mannerisms, dress, color, and ethnic background,” the judge wrote in his opinion, “and are cognizant of the unfortunate realities that he would not last for ten minutes at Rikers Island.” Arguing that “the State of New York could not guarantee [the man’s] safety in prison surroundings,” the judge predicted that the defendant, if sent to jail, “would be immediately subject to homosexual rape and sodomy and to brutalities from prisoners such as make the imagination recoil in horror” (Shipp B3).¹

As the somewhat baroque language of that final sentence attests, the possibility that a white man could be raped in jail by African American or Latino inmates exerts a powerful hold over the American racial imaginary. As Ted Conover puts it, the “rape-of-the-white-guy trope” is “a fixture of how middle-class America thinks about prison” (262). At the same time, this “trope” is at least partially rooted in statistical reality: as Patricia Hill Collins notes, “male prisoner-on-prisoner sexual abuse is not an aberration,” but “a deeply rooted systemic problem in U.S. prisons,” and, since the 1970s, the most common form of interracial rape in US jails and prisons has been committed by black inmates against white ones (234). “White men rarely rape Black men,” Collins observes. “Instead, African American men are often involved in the rape of White men who [like the above defendant] fit the categories of vulnerability” (238). It is also true that black and Latino prisoners—particularly at urban jails such as Rikers—have outnumbered whites for decades. Indeed, by the late 1990s, ninety-two percent of the fifteen thousand Rikers inmates were black or Latino, despite the fact that “blacks and Hispanics represent [only] 49 percent of the city’s population” (Wynn 7).

What may be most striking about the above judge’s opinion, however, is not its basis in “fact” but rather the troubling conclusions that it draws

from those facts. By using a selective representation of interracial male rape to rationalize keeping a white man out of jail, the judge not only contributes to the ever-worsening problem of racially disproportionate incarceration, but also uncritically affirms a broader—and more deeply problematic—set of racial and sexual narratives that are embedded in popular perceptions of America’s post-Civil Rights carceral landscape: namely that while African American males naturally belong in prison, white males do not. He also affirms that as America’s jail and prison populations have become blacker and browner since the 1970s, these institutions have become problematic not because of the damage they do to African American men and minority communities, but rather because of the bodily destruction they may cause to white men unlucky enough to be incarcerated.² By sliding past the many factors—structural racism, socioeconomic inequality, racially biased policing, and inequitable bail and sentencing procedures—that produce such populations in the first place, the judge’s take on interracial rape feeds what David Savran calls “the fantasy of the white male as victim” (4) and what Auli Ek refers to as the “fantasy that black inmates control prisons” (84). In these cultural narratives, black-on-white prison rape becomes the most extreme manifestation of how white men have been disadvantaged by the social and racial transformations in American society since the 1960s.

In what follows, I consider how this deployment of interracial rape and the reactionary narratives it authorizes were anticipated, complicated, and hotly contested by *White Man’s Justice*, *Black Man’s Grief*, African American pulp writer Donald Goines’s prescient, neglected, 1973 prison novel. Written at the dawn of what has come to be a contemporary American epidemic of racialized incarceration—when the political fervor of Civil Rights and Black Power gave way to law and order, Rockefeller drug laws, and a prison-industrial complex housing ever-expanding inmate populations—Goines’s raw, naturalistic work of fiction seeks above all to expose what its front cover calls “the bigotry built into our system.” Focusing on the arrest, incarceration, and eventual life-imprisonment of its black male protagonist, the novel centers its critical project on a strategically contrarian depiction of the very thing that is, for some, the most sensational, disturbing evidence that the prison system victimizes white males: namely black-on-white male rape.

If it is true that certain types of white men in the late-twentieth-century prison are disproportionately vulnerable to interracial prison rape, and if it is also true that systemic racism has contributed to making America’s jails and prisons disproportionately black, Goines’s novel implicitly asks how one might depict the former in order to explain the latter. That is to say,

how might the literary representation of interracial rape and sodomy work as a counterintuitive heuristic for training our gaze on the law-and-order policies and racially biased bail, sentencing, and incarceration procedures that shoehorn so many black men into jail and prison in the first place and, in the process, nurture the very prison rape culture decried in the judge's decision? And, finally, how might a text work to disrupt received perceptions of the "natural" criminality and sexual aggressiveness of black men, even as it acknowledges the immorality of those who perpetrate actual sexual violence in prison?

By addressing such questions, Goines's novel fills an underdiscussed gap in representations of the racial and sexual dimensions of what prison activist Angela Y. Davis calls our contemporary American "punishment industry" (x). Goines's willingness to grapple with the underlying meaning of black-on-white prison rape differentiates him not only from the white-male-centered legal sphere embodied in the above-mentioned *Rikers* decision, but also from other key voices that have played a significant role in establishing prisons as a cultural battleground in the American racial imaginary: among them, radical black prison activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s such as Eldridge Cleaver; the "grossly sensationalized" genre of Hollywood prison films (Davis x); and even the rapists themselves—all of whom attempt to evade, elide, excuse, justify, or erase black-on-white rape. Before I say more about Goines's novel, it is important to touch briefly on these sources in order to convey a sense of the cultural context in which Goines's transgressive project takes shape. By arguing for Goines's value as a writer and social observer, my essay seeks to contribute to the recent surge in scholarly attention paid by H. Bruce Franklin, Peter Caster, Auli Ek, and Dennis Childs, among others, to the insurgent resources of African American prison literature as a critical lens through which to view the institutional history and racially specific operations of the US criminal justice system.

Prison Sociology, Radical Prisoners, and Buddy Convicts

The first major study of the racial dynamics of the American prison, Leo Carroll's *Hacks, Blacks, and Cons* (1974), appeared just one year after the publication of *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief*; Carroll's naming and examination of the problem of black-on-white rape affirms Goines's prescience. By pinpointing such overlap between fiction and sociology, I do not mean to credit Goines for achieving "an unmediated real" (Caster xii) in his depiction of prison sexual violence, nor do I wish to suggest that prison sociology such as Carroll's is itself an unmediated representation of

such behavior. Rather, I quote Carroll's study here to corroborate, as much as possible, Goines's case for black-on-white rape as a salient feature of the post-Civil Rights penal institution.

In the following excerpts, for example, Carroll establishes the recurrence of what he calls "black-onto-white" sexual assault:

In the prison, where the significance of sex is intensified by the deprivation of heterosexual contact and where black and white males live close together, the role of sex in racial conflict is thrown into sharp relief. . . . More striking than the number of sexual attacks is the extent to which they are interracial. Each of my 21 informants—black and white prisoners and staff members alike—estimated that 75 percent or more of the sexual assaults involve black aggressors and white victims. (182)

The most common and open form of coerced homosexual behavior is the rape of young white inmates by groups of blacks. (187)

None of the incidents involved white aggressors and black victims. (257)

Noting that such dynamics were exacerbated by heightened political solidarity among black inmates in the early 1970s and the era's court-mandated pushes toward racial integration in prison, which fueled interracial enmity between inmates, Carroll then goes on to offer his primary explanation for this recurrence of black-on-white rape:

[T]he motive force behind these acts . . . of violent aggression . . . has its roots deep within the entire socio-historical context of black-white relations in this country. The prison is . . . an arena within which blacks may direct aggression developed through 300 years of oppression against individuals perceived to be representatives of the oppressors. (184)

For the African American inmates Carroll interviews, raping white prisoners becomes a violent form of individualized payback for a history of institutionalized racial injustice, a means of asserting their own manhood through the act of robbing white victims of theirs. For Carroll, this link between the bodily realm and the historical context does not justify such violence, but it does provide a powerful explanation for its recurrence.³

This effort to connect individual actions to a broader history of oppression is also characteristic of the impassioned Marx-inflected critiques in Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968) and George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* (1970), two touchstone texts of a Black Power-era radical prisoner movement that sought to cast African American inmates as political prisoners of an American racist-capitalist social order. Most striking about these

texts is that even as black-on-white male prison rape was becoming the most statistically common form of coercive sex in post-Civil Rights-era American jails and prisons, neither Cleaver nor Jackson openly considered it as a part of black prison experience or as a potential act of revolutionary racial revenge. It is possible that the violence described by Goines and Carroll postdated Cleaver's and Jackson's prison writings, yet one might also speculate that to probe the intricacies of such acts might have run afoul of the patriarchal/heteronormative worldviews of Cleaver and Jackson, Black Power activists who adhered to what Michele Wallace critiques as the doctrine of "Black Macho." To be sure, Cleaver once called the rape of white *women* "an insurrectionary act," arguing that the violation of the white female body was a form of "trampling upon the white man's law" (33). But any sexual behavior suggestive of homosexuality, even "situational" prison homosexuality, was, for Cleaver, a form of self-emasculation, a "sickness" on par with "baby rape" (136). This view perhaps accounts for the complete absence from his writings of any engagement with the social reality of interracial male prison rape.⁴

By the mid-1970s, as the radical prison movement and Black Power gave way to the Nixon era's law-and-order silent-majority backlash, Cleaver's and Jackson's efforts to situate black inmates in the context of historical oppression were eclipsed by a more conservative, ahistorical vision of the prisoner as an independent actor victimized only by his own poor choices. As Eric Cummins summarizes, "by 1975 . . . the moral discourse of the Right on crime and the criminal had come to dominate" over "the Left's alternative vision of the convict as cultural hero and revolutionary savior, or even as cultural victim" (266). This conservative turn arguably provided an incubating cultural climate for Hollywood prison films that, in grudging deference to the increased visibility of blacks in American life after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, purveyed an influential image of interracial cooperation—not interracial hostility—through the deployment of a narrative of what I would call "interracial convict bonding." In films such as *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), and *American History X* (1998), a white male convict benefits from the friendship of a black "lifer" inmate, a "natural" resident of the prison who helps the white inmate to survive and sometimes aids his escape as well. While prison has been "central to the oppression of black people" since at least the end of the Civil War (Franklin, *Prison* xv), these "buddy" films transform prison into a site of white male self-assertion; instead of depicting black-on-white rape directly, they sublimate and reconstitute it into a more palatable form by positioning the black prisoner not as a potential rapist but as a protector of the white male against a *white*

sexual predator—one who is so leeringly, inhumanly white (e.g., an albino “hillbilly” or neo-Nazi skinhead) that his presence comes across as a form of narrative overcompensation.⁵

A keen illustration of these fantastic racial and sexual dynamics appears near the end of *Escape from Alcatraz*, as Clint Eastwood’s white hero, convicted bank robber Frank Lee Morris, is saved by a friendly black inmate named “English” from being stabbed by a would-be white rapist called “Wolf.” As Morris, whose self-possession and muscular masculinity have already garnered him the respect of the prison’s African American inmates, stands in the prison yard on the day of his planned escape, Wolf prepares to stab Morris, only to be forcibly relieved of his knife by English. English’s swift-handed resourcefulness on behalf of his white friend ensures that Morris will avoid Wolf’s unwanted penetration and proceed with his prison break later that night. English’s action also enables the film to bolster Eastwood’s racial-masculine credentials by granting his character the protection of the black men who “rule” the prison yard while simultaneously eliminating the black male as a sexual threat. By pairing black and white men against a shared white homosexual enemy, the film extols an expedient image of interracial—and defensively heterosexual—allegiance. Furthermore, by erasing black-on-white rape from its depiction of inmate relations, the film avoids placing the white hero in a situation that might undermine viewer respect for him or force us to grapple with the underlying structural realities that generate racial imbalances in the first place. In the context of such sleight-of-hand maneuvers, Goines’s literary representation of interracial comity’s diametrical opposite—black-on-white rape—comes to look like an unexpected ethical tool. In Goines’s hands, the “insurrectionary act” becomes not black-on-white rape itself but rather its literary representation.⁶

White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief

What kind of book is *White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief*? Written in sexually graphic prose peppered with streetwise 1970s black vernacular, the novel speaks in a denotative literary style that Greg Goode calls “ghetto realism” (“Donald Goines” 96), a mode characteristic of much of the “black experience” fiction—or black pulp fiction—first pioneered in the late 1960s by the pimp-turned-writer Robert Beck, also known as Iceberg Slim. Issued as a mass-market paperback by the Los Angeles-based Holloway House Publishing company, sold in “general stores and mom-and-pop shops in black America” (Calcutt and Shephard 109), and aimed primarily at a readership of “young, urban, and working-class African

American men” (Dietzel 163), the novel has a critical status that, like that of all of Goines’s sixteen novels from the early 1970s, remains marginal in scholarly circles. As Goode notes, “With respect to the standards of literature, the books of Donald Goines are not considered subliterary, for they are not even considered” (“From *Dopefiend*” 42).

The novel’s minimalist plot centers on the arrest and incarceration of Chester Hines, an African American career criminal in his mid-thirties. That the name of the novel’s central character is Chester Hines—almost certainly an homage to the African American writer and onetime prison inmate Chester *Himes*—suggests Goines’s own self-conscious effort to situate himself in, and signify on, a literary tradition of African American crime and prison writers that includes Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Cleaver, among others.⁷ Himes, a “father figure in the urban fiction genre” (Allen 153), is best known for his mid-century racial protest fiction and hard-boiled Harlem crime novels; Himes also wrote a semiautobiographical prison novel, *Cast the First Stone* (1952), and Goines rewrites Himes’s vision of inmate relationships in striking ways. As the novel opens, Chester finds himself arrested at a routine traffic stop for carrying a concealed weapon. After being assessed an impossibly high bail fee, he is incarcerated for six months in a Detroit jail. Although Chester does not participate in any sexual assaults while imprisoned, he witnesses myriad forms of sexual dehumanization in his racially integrated twenty-man jail ward. Goines—who served a combined seven and a half years during the 1960s in an inner-city Detroit jail, the federal penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana, and Michigan’s Jackson State Prison—narrates and describes much of this sexual violence in graphic detail.

It may seem contradictory that a book that devotes considerable attention to the grisly rape of white men by black men seeks to *challenge* the perception that white men are the primary victims of “blackened” prisons. Based on the novel’s strident six-word title and its cheap Holloway House packaging, one might conclude that Goines is interested solely in exploiting the spectacle of interracial rape for salacious purposes or celebrating the racial payback that white men supposedly have coming to them. It seems indicative of the book’s ostensibly deviant content that Franklin, the dean of prison literature scholars, intends as a compliment his description of the text as “one of the most appalling visions of prison in the terrifying pages of prison literature” (*Prison* xvii). Yet this challenge of representing the “appalling” and the “terrifying”—that is, representing racial ugliness in the service of racial protest—constitutes one of the book’s most productive tensions. Indeed, Goines’s deliberate focus on the roughest aspects of prison race relations enables his text to seize the reader’s attention and

generate deeper insights into *why* such atrocities happen in the first place. Goines's strategy of depicting the physical endangerment of white males also suggests not just a desire to practice "realism" but an awareness that in a culture that has historically privileged whiteness over blackness, such representations might better capture the attention of readers—both black and white—conditioned to see *white* victimization as more noteworthy than black suffering.

How, then, can one represent black-on-white male rape without reinforcing stereotypes of the black man as rapist? Goines's novel manages this dilemma by relying on several techniques. First, he draws on naturalism, a literary mode characteristic of much prison fiction that casts the criminal justice system as the dominant external force in the lives of black inmates and focuses on the underpublicized cost for *black* men of existing in a macho prison rape culture in which black men appear to "rule." If Goines at times drifts into what one definition of naturalism calls "sexual sensationalism," he also follows naturalism's tendency to express outrage at the injustice of human beings who suffer as "victims of natural forces and social environment" (Baldick 146).⁸ It is equally important for Goines's project that the worst sexual atrocities committed by black inmates in the novel are always seen through the eyes of Chester, the black male protagonist, who does not commit assaults and is himself threatened in various ways by the men who commit rape. This strategy has the effect of foregrounding how black men, even if they are only spectators to sexual violence, are themselves disciplined and punished by a prison rape culture that only *seems* to victimize white men more. In addition, even as his novel gains dramatic mileage and no small amount of titillation from depicting the act of prison rape, Goines takes care to discredit the self-justifying rhetoric of the rapists themselves, who assert that such assaults are legitimate forms of payback for historical racial oppression. Finally, Goines also juxtaposes renderings of brutal interracial assaults with at least one example of interracial male friendship, showing how the racial imbalances of jail prompt white male inmates to try to adopt the trappings of "black" masculinity as a kind of survival technique.

"The white boys were being fucked"

Several of these narrative strategies come to the fore early in Goines's novel, as Chester, newly arrived in jail, is led by white guards down to the racially integrated, twenty-man ward where he will spend the next several months. Because this scene is rich in details central to my argument about Goines's representation of jail sexual practices, I quote and discuss it here at length:

Chester . . . glanced into the ward and noticed that it was just as crowded as the first one, but there was one difference. The first cell had been full, but there had only been black men in it. This one had four white prisoners in it, and they all had one thing in common. Each man sported a black eye.

The deputy knew as well as Chester what was happening. From past experience Chester knew. The white boys were being fucked, and their food and money were being taken. It happened on every ward. Whenever possible, the turnkeys tried to make it equal. If twenty men were in a cell, they tried to make it ten white and ten black. But it was impossible. For one thing, the whites made bond as soon as possible. Either their people were able to raise the money or their bonds weren't as high as the average black man's. Either way, whichever whitey was unfortunate enough to have to spend some time in the county jail, it was an experience he would never forget. The loss of his manhood was only the beginning. The loss of his life was a good possibility. The only ones who were ever spared were those who had done time or who knew the ropes or who could talk like a brother and fight as good as one, too. There was absolutely no two ways about it, a white boy had to fight to save his asshole. (43-44)

Here Goines advances what I would argue is his novel's most urgent thematic insight: the cause-and-effect relationship between the privileged racial position of whiteness in the institutional hierarchy of the criminal justice system (cause) and the sexual victimization of the "minority" white male prisoners in the jail (effect). Presaging the real-life consequences of the aforementioned Rikers Island case, in which a judge's short-term decision to keep a white man out of jail exacerbates the long-term racial asymmetry facing white inmates who are *not* excused from jail time, Goines observes that it is precisely because white prisoners often have more money and are granted more lenient bail amounts and sentences that they show up in much scarcer numbers in the jail itself. The resulting racial imbalances are so severe that it is impossible for the guards to, as Goines's narrator puts it, "make it equal." As a result, those particular white men who *are* jailed will unavoidably find themselves in a minority position and be vulnerable to sexual domination by their more numerous black counterparts, who are themselves conditioned by a culture of "hegemonic masculinity" (Sabo, Kupers, and London 5) in which power and respect are attained through such acts of brutality. In this way, Goines links together the two-pronged reality that, as Carroll puts it, "the majority of sexual assaults involve black aggressors and white victims" and that "in comparison to white prisoners, black prisoners receive harsher penalties . . . for similar offenses" (19). Goines shows how the latter injustice *helps to bring about* the former.

Equally significant in the above passage is Goines's narrative strategy

of relating the sordid details of interracial rape from Chester's point of view, so that we learn about the prevalence of rape from the narrative perspective of a black man who is *not* involved in perpetrating such acts. In several sentences, Goines conveys that Chester "watched," "glanced," "noticed," and "knew" what was happening in the jail ward. In one sense, this emphasis on the fact that the sexual abuse of white prisoners is being witnessed by Chester enables Goines to satisfy the reader's desire to see rape while also distancing the novel's hero from any implication in rape itself. As Ek notes, this pattern of detaching the black male from black-on-white rape is characteristic of recent examples of black prison autobiography such as Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* (1994), in which the author wishes to avoid any hint of self-implication in homosexuality. And yet Goines's management of perspective does more than create distance between Chester and the rapists; it also prompts us to consider the impact that acts of black-on-white sexual assault have on Chester himself. Even as it is white men who are sexually victimized in the actual jail ward, their victimization exerts a collateral impact on black men who are disciplined to conform to this macho ethos or else risk being victimized themselves. It is telling in this regard that the back cover of the Holloway House paperback edition of Goines's novel announces that "This is the story of Chester Hines, who thought he was the baddest man to come down the street. Behind prison walls he was *nothing more than fresh meat*" (emphasis added). Even though Chester is never actually assaulted himself, the language of this summary suggests (in rhyming vernacular) that Hines is still being "fucked"—by the system, by the rape culture, and, as we discover later, by his trusted friend, Willie, who will betray him at the end of the novel.

The above-quoted passage on the jail ward also conveys the importance of style and voice in Goines's approach to capturing Chester's reality. Throughout this passage and the novel, Goines shifts deliberately between standard English and vernacular slang—"white boys," "fucked," "turnkeys," "whitey," "asshole"—in a way that suggests the importance of using the race- and class-specific argot of the jail ward to convey its ethos in an authentic manner. For Goines, it is crucial to be able to "talk like a brother" if one is to survive in the predominantly black jail ward, and such language is equally essential—if also essentialist—for an author seeking to capture the lived experience of such survival. While the phrase "talk like a brother" is an arguably simplistic signifier to convey the contours of black speech, it also evokes the 1970s working-class urban black male vernacular of Goines's primary audience and enables him to signify on more conventional, white-centered legalistic accounts of jail life.

“An Angry Preface”

Even before we reach the jail ward, Goines has already introduced his critique of black male victimization by starting off his novel with “An Angry Preface,” a three-page polemical essay that seeks to expose how the racialized inequities of law enforcement and the bail-bonds system contribute to the overrepresentation of indigent African American men in urban jails. “Since this work of fiction deals with the court system,” Goines begins in a self-conscious departure from his role as a novelist, “I’d like to direct the reader’s attention to an awesome abuse inflicted daily upon the less fortunate . . . an abuse which no statesman, judge or attorney (to my knowledge) has moved to effectively remedy. I’m speaking of the bail-bond system” (7). Goines’s thesis here is that urban jails—where most inmates are either pretrial detainees or convicted felons serving out a sentence of less than a year—house predominantly poor black men because these inmates are unable to pay the bail costs that would allow them to go home. And because “the courts are glutted,” Goines explains, “[t]here are cases of people (many of whom were found innocent of the charges for which they are arrested) spending more than a year in county jails simply because they couldn’t raise bail-bond money” (7-8). “Make no mistake about it,” Goines concludes, “there’s big money in the bail bond business, and most of it is being made at the expense of poor blacks” (9). By invoking the bail-bond system here before introducing us to his characters, Goines establishes the systemic lens through which he wants us to view what follows; in effect, he argues that the individual lives of the prisoners in his novel—and the brutal acts that take place there—cannot be understood without first considering the institutional structure that ensnares them.

The sociological emphasis of Goines’s preface does generate a key tension, however, as we move deeper into the novel: a tension between his preface’s emphasis on black male victimization and his novel’s strategy of characterizing Chester, his lead black male protagonist, as an unrepentant career criminal. While Goines announces that his preface “speak[s] for the people who are picked up on the streets or stopped for minor traffic violations and who are taken to jail on trumped-up, Catch-22 charges simply because the arresting policeman doesn’t like their skin color” (8), we learn early on that Chester is a longtime “stick-up man and professional killer” (33) who has already served several stints in prison and who deliberately drowned his first wife in a lake only two weeks after their wedding—a crime for which he has never faced punishment. Thus while Chester is a *criminalized* figure pulled into a life-ruining undertow due to a racist

judge who sets his bail at an uncommonly high “[t]en thousand dollars, with two securities” (29), he is also a cruel opportunist who deserves to pay a price for his own choices. Such details suggest that despite the novel’s title, “white man’s justice” may not be the only source of “black man’s grief.” This construction of a protagonist who is at once criminal *and* wronged signals Goines’s awareness that to make one’s black male protagonist what Maria Diedrich terms a “personification of innocence” or a “black Billy Budd” runs the risk of producing a novel that is “totally out of touch with the urban realities of African America” (321) that racial protest novels have always claimed to represent. And by making it difficult for us to sympathize fully with Chester, Goines (not unlike Richard Wright with Bigger Thomas) prevents his readers from forming the kind of sentimental, individualistic attachment to his protagonist that might obscure the larger structural injustices Goines wishes to expose and indict.

The Cross-Racial Impact(s) of Interracial Prison Rape

If Goines’s novel derives much of its thematic tension from this blurring of the line between criminal and victim, the text conducts a related balancing act in its presentation of the rape culture’s impact on blacks and whites. Goines devotes ample space to ratcheting up the reader’s sense of dread at the white prisoners’ vulnerability by describing their sexual victimization in graphic detail, but he also takes care to register the collateral cost for black prisoners (Chester in particular) who must survive in this hellhole of hegemonic masculinity. When Tommy, the novel’s most despicable character and the *de facto* leader of the black gang-rapists, leads a group shower assault on a naïve white prisoner named Gene, Goines assails us with the sounds of Gene’s agonized cries:

“Wait, man, wait!” Gene screamed from the shower. Then the sound of a slap was heard. There was silence for a brief moment, then a scream was heard.

“Oh my god, you’re killing me. Please, man, please. It’s too big. You’re busting me open!”

“Shut up, boy, shut your goddamn mouth or you’ll get something stuck in it too.”

. . . “Oh please, that’s enough! Please, please. Help, help!” The sound of another slap could be heard, then only the sounds of grunts and moans. (54-55)

Goines’s emphasis on the desperation of this young white man as he is sexually assaulted in the showers makes these lines almost painful to read. Because we only *hear* what happens in the showers, Goines compels us to reenact the assault visually in our own minds. By presenting this heinous

action from Chester's point of view, Goines also emphasizes how Chester himself is affected by the violence. As the rape gets underway, we are told that Chester "gritted his teeth" with displeasure and that "[i]f there was one thing he hated it was the rape of another man" (55). Before the gang-rape even begins, Tommy, the leader of the "asshole bandits" (51), intimidates Chester and the other black inmates into either participating in the assault or promising not to interfere with it (52-53).

Goines underscores this concept of black men as collateral victims of the jail's rape culture by making a startling move midway through the shower rape scene: as Chester listens to the sounds of Gene being attacked, Goines suddenly shifts into Chester's own flashback to an incident from his youth in which he was nearly raped by an older black man:

The action from the shower brought back memories of when [Chester] was just a boy, trying to make his way up from the South. He had caught a ride on a boxcar that was already occupied by an older black man. The man had tried to rape Chester later that night, after giving him some wine. It had ended with Chester getting lucky and sticking eight inches of knife in the man's chest. After searching the man's pockets and removing the ten dollars that he had found there, he had then rolled the body to the door of the boxcar and pushed it out. He had been only fourteen then, but it was an experience that he had never forgotten. (55)

By flashing away from "[t]he action from the shower" to a similar attempted rape that Chester himself endured at the hands of a black man in an enclosed space, the novel suggests how black men—not just white ones—are victimized by a male rape culture that is situationally "controlled" by black men, with the space of the boxcar serving as an apt analogue for the confined dimensions of the jail ward. In effect, Chester's feverish flashback to this near-rape disallows any reading in which white men are cast as the sole victims of rape. In addition, the "eight inches" of knife that Chester forces into the black man's chest suggests how the threat of sexual assault forces black men to become rapists themselves; in a sense, Chester had to rape the man—putting his "eight inches" into the other man's body—or risk being raped *by* the man, a metaphor for the way the prison rape culture encourages reciprocal brutality. More problematically, the explicit reference to the length of the knife—much like Gene's aforementioned cries in the shower that his assailant's penis is "too big" and is "busting [him] open"—also signals the kind of racial and sexual machismo that Goines's novel is at least partially invested in; as Goode puts it, Goines's male characters are always "well-equipped sexual gladiators" ("From *Dopefiend*" 42), as is Chester's fellow inmate, Willie, who is "proud of the way he was

hung” (134). These references to black sexual endowment crop up in the text even as Goines reminds us that the black male prisoner—stereotyped as a rapist and then encouraged to become one in prison—pays a steep price for that very kind of distorted sexual and racial iconography.

By offering these insights into prison rape culture’s impact on black men, Goines’s novel anticipates recent work by African American cultural theorists such as Collins, who discusses how prison forces men to become predators if they want to avoid being turned into “punks.” “Among . . . African American men who are incarcerated,” Collins writes, “those who fit the profile of those most vulnerable to abuse run the risk of becoming rape victims. In this context of violence regulated by a male rape culture, achieving Black manhood requires *not* fitting the profile and *not* assuming the position. In a sense, surviving in this male rape culture and avoiding victimization require at most becoming a predator and victimizing others and, at the least, becoming a silent witness to the sexual violence inflicted upon other men” (239).

Goines examines the relationship between all of these positions for black men—perpetrators of rape, spectators to rape, and victims of rape—in a key scene late in the novel in which the black inmate Jug, another serial rapist, sodomizes Jean, his light-skinned black “punk,” first by having anal sex with him and then by penetrating him with, of all things, a candy bar. The entrance of Jean, a “light-complexioned homosexual” (164), is particularly important because the character’s presence affirms Goines’s effort to show that the prison culture produces raped black bodies as well as white ones. While Jean does appear to submit to Jug voluntarily, Jug’s abusive treatment of Jean suggests that even seemingly consensual homosexual relationships in the prison system center on acts of physical exploitation and humiliation. This dynamic becomes particularly evident when Jug forcibly inserts the “cylindrical shaped candy bar” (184) into Jean’s rectum, prompting Jean to “beg” Jug to remove the implement because, as Jean puts it, “that stuff feels funny up inside of me” (185). Jug not only refuses to comply, of course, but goes so far as to force one of his other punks (a white inmate named Jerry) to eat the bar out of Jean’s anus—publicly, in front of all the other men, as a kind of perverse macho exhibition (181-86). This emphasis on public display also enables Goines to reveal how the prison rape culture engenders conflict not only between rape perpetrators and their victims but also, again, between the rapists and their involuntary (black) spectators. While there is little danger that either Chester or his close friend Willie will be coerced into participating in Jug’s activities, we do learn that Jug has mounted this sexual exhibition largely to threaten and intimidate the two men after Chester’s refusal to allow Jug

to sit on his bunk bed. Indeed, Jug now “plan[s] on bringing the arrogant Chester down to his knees” (164), and, at the start of his sex show, flashes a “cold and ruthless” smile (184) at Chester and Willie before announcing his intention to “let my ladies put on a show for you sorry-ass motherfuckers” (182). Here again, black inmates who do not participate directly in sexual assault nonetheless become what Collins calls “silent witness[es]” to the violence.

“Now we’re just gettin’ even”: Rejecting Rape as Revenge

An equally important component of Goines’s examination of the impact of prison rape on black masculinity is his critique of black inmates like Jug who perpetrate these sexual assaults. Not only do these men coarsen the reputation of black manhood in the wider culture—and thus give cover to those who would seek justification for racial oppression—they also coarsen themselves in the process of defending their actions as valid pay-back for centuries of racial subordination. If we return briefly to Carroll’s inmate interviews, in fact, we can see precisely the attitude that Goines’s novel deconstructs. In response to Carroll’s question about why black-on-white rape is so prevalent, several inmates articulate their motivations:

Every can I been in, that’s the way it is. . . . You guys been cuttin’ our balls off ever since we been in this country. Now we’re just getting even.

It’s one way he can assert his manhood. Anything white, even a defenseless punk, is part of what the black man hates. It’s part of what he’s had to fight all his life just to survive. . . . It’s a new ego thing. He can show he’s a man by making a white guy into a girl.

The black man’s just waking up to what’s been going on. Now that he’s awake, he’s gonna be mean. He’s been raped—politically, economically, morally raped. He sees this now, but his mind’s still small so he’s getting back this way. But it’s just a beginning. (184-85)

For these inmates, black-on-white rape acts as an instrument for obtaining a local form of racial revenge for the enslavement and mutilation of black male bodies that has occurred over centuries of American history. In the “ultramasculine world” (Sabo, Kupers, and London 3) of the jail, “making a white guy into a girl” is the surest way to actualize one’s own manhood, to castrate the castrator. But what Goines implies in his novel is what Carroll’s speakers seem inadvertently to reveal here: namely that such an attempt to force individual acts of sexual violence to work as remedies for

long-standing historical injustices is, at best, misguided and, at worst, self-debasing. These acts of rape (a mere “ego thing” conjured by a mind “still small”) do nothing to ensure racial redress on anything but the smallest scale. Defining one’s manhood through the practice of raping another man, Carroll’s speaker seems to concede, is almost pathetically inchoate (“it’s just a beginning”) if one’s goal is to fight racism, and it only mirrors the same sort of behavior characteristic of white men who define themselves by their subjugation of black men.

Through the character of Tommy, who repeatedly rapes and degrades his white male concubines and then strives to justify such behavior, Goines constructs a version of this revenge rhetoric that strikingly anticipates the language used by Carroll’s inmates. In one particularly explicit and painful scene, after Tommy has forced Mike, one of his many white male sex slaves, to perform fellatio on him, Tommy proclaims, “I’m goin’ make these honkies pay for the three hundred years of sorrow they caused us” (72-73). By placing this rhetoric in the mouth of a vengeful tyrant designed to elicit our disgust, Goines prompts us to reject the notion that rape is somehow a valid form of racial payback. I do not suggest that Goines avoids asking us to consider the notion that such rapes can be justified; nor do I deny that some readers may find Tommy’s justifications compelling. It is also possible to conceive that the sheer graphic quality of Goines’s descriptions might make titillating entertainment for black and white readers alike. Consider, for example, this description of Tommy’s forced fellatio: “Mike tried to pull back, but Tommy had too hard a hold on his head. Tears of frustration ran down Mike’s cheeks as the black man held his head and began to come in his mouth. The boy choked on the long black penis in his mouth, but Tommy continued to hold his head tightly. Cum ran down 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). One could speculate that for Goines’s primary audience—working-class urban black male readers—the experience of reading such zesty details might provide a frisson of revenge or entertainment. For white readers, Goines’s lurid representations of emasculated white male bodies (and, again, well-endowed black ones) might provide a source of furtive sadomasochistic enjoyment or an alleviation of racial guilt through what Ek calls the satisfaction of “private rape fantasies and desires to be punished” (109). And yet, all that being said, it is difficult to avoid the impression, based on Goines’s wholly unflattering characterization of Tommy in the text, that it is our condemnation that Goines seems most to want to elicit. Indeed, at the end of this scene, Goines has Chester express strong moral disapproval of Tommy’s rhetoric in a way that Goines himself seems to endorse: “Who

you trying to bullshit, man? You ain't got to worry about making [whites] pay, because everything you've did to them tonight and other nights, you goin' have to face the grim reaper for" (73). Here, Goines's startling allusion to the grim reaper—the physical incarnation of death—seems to suggest that Tommy's actions, at least as Chester sees them, breach not just his victims' bodies but a higher moral system (one that exists beyond the justice system itself) that will ultimately visit karmic payback on those who perpetrate such atrocities.

As critical as Goines's novel is of rapists like Tommy and Jug, Goines never lets us forget that although these black inmates exert a measure of local control over the jail ward, they remain pawns on a larger grid of incarceration and exploitation. Consider the juxtaposition between Tommy's power in the ward and his impotence when white deputies, eager to punish him for his sexual activities the night before, abuse him as they lead him out of his cell for interrogation. We are told that "The sergeant kicked him in the butt as hard as he possibly could. 'Nigger,' the sergeant growled, 'when I tell you to move, I mean just that! . . . Now get a move on or you'll get another taste of that!' Tommy moved, holding his backside as his face twisted up as if he was about to cry" (85). Goines's language here suggests that the guard's hard kick to Tommy's backside is analogous to the anal rape that Tommy has committed earlier; the white men's racial slurs and humiliating physical abuse bring Tommy to tears and, in effect, make him "into a girl." Thus while Goines's brand of naturalism casts the prison's black-on-white rape culture as a deterministic force that victimizes white men, it also presents the administrative machinery of the justice system as an even more monolithic force that "rapes" black men. This impression is reinforced by Goines's subsequent description of the "machine-like" judge who capriciously hands down sentences to a "long line of black men" who "weren't even faces to the judge . . . just black shadows that passed his way every day, shadows with folders on them, telling what they had done in the past and where they should be put in the future" (170).

**"friendly with another human being":
White Negroism and Inmate Friendship**

For all of the bleakness of Goines's depictions of violent inmate relations, the novel offers tantalizing hope that some prisoners may find ameliorative relationships that can act as respites from the unrelentingly hostile prison rape culture. However, the stunning failure of even these "friendships" by novel's end—bonds between black and white men and between

black men themselves—ultimately reinforces Goines’s vision of the overriding hostility generated by a racially biased criminal justice system.

Perhaps most unexpected among these relationships is the interracial rapport that develops between Chester, his black inmate friend Willie, and the white inmate Tony, a tough nineteen-year-old ex-football player who has been arrested for armed robbery and who is the only white man in the jail ward capable of defending himself against sexual assault. In one sense, the presence of Tony, “the young white boy [who] could fight” (54), is notable simply because he is one of the few white male characters in Goines’s oeuvre worthy of the reader’s respect. But Goines also uses Tony to examine how the white-controlled justice system and the jail’s hostile rape culture paradoxically encourage white inmates to adopt the outward trappings of black masculinity as a survival technique. If we think back to the opening jail-ward passage discussed earlier, we recall Goines’s remark that “[t]he only [white inmates] who were ever spared were those who had done time or who knew the ropes or who could *talk like a brother and fight as good as one, too*” (44, emphasis added). The implication is that white inmates who avoid becoming rape victims are the ones who can successfully project a macho—and black—image. While whiteness carries an advantage in the criminal justice system as a whole, Goines suggests, it puts white men at a disadvantage in the harsh milieu of the jail ward itself, prompting white men to enact a kind of cross-racial emulation in the hope of achieving parity with the black men who rule the jail wards.

Goines illustrates this dynamic in a scene in which Tony finds himself singled out for intimidation by Sonny, a belligerent black inmate who accuses Tony of stealing his cereal. We are told that Tony “knew what Sonny was trying to do, and it made him angry that the man had picked him out of the bunch as the weak one. All of his life he had never been ashamed of being white, but for once he wished desperately that his skin was coal black. If someone had told him a year ago that he’d one day wish that he was a black man, he’d have looked at the man as if he was losing his mind” (104). By revealing how Tony’s “possessive investment” (Lipsitz vii) in his own whiteness gives way to Tony’s situational desire to be black, the novel draws our attention to the way in which white supremacy as a social force has, in an urban American jail, helped produce an institutional space in which whiteness as a commodity holds, paradoxically, the lowest of all possible values. Through Tony’s racial desires, Goines also particularizes and deconstructs a foundational move that white-male-centered prison films such as *Escape from Alcatraz* tend to make uncritically: namely what Krin Gabbard sees as the white male’s strategic “borrowing” of black masculinity (51). Characteristic of a whole range of US culture,

from nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy to Norman Mailer's mid-twentieth-century "white Negro" (337), this borrowing tends, in its most egregious forms, to aggrandize the cultural authority of white masculinity without acknowledging the contradictions attending white men who temporarily don "blackness" only to doff it when it no longer suits them.

These contradictions emerge later in the novel when we learn that a judge has granted Tony the lenient punishment of probation for his attempted armed robbery while Willie and Chester, convicted of slightly lesser crimes, find themselves sent directly to the Jackson State penitentiary for four-to-five-year prison sentences. As this unwelcome news chills Tony's once-warm friendship with Chester and Willie, the breakdown of their interracial camaraderie serves as a window into the structural inequalities that confront incarcerated black men: as Tony, now having regained the advantage of his whiteness, tries vainly to "break the tension he felt but couldn't understand," Chester thinks to himself, "It's easy for a white boy to walk over to the courtroom with such an idea in his mind, probation. But for a nigger to do it was sheer stupidity" (109). Tony's temporary victimization as a white male in the jail ward, Goines suggests, is superseded by the racial privilege he enjoys as a white male in the context of the justice system as a whole.

If Goines's depiction of the severed interracial bond between Tony, Chester, and Willie undercuts the ahistorical vision of black-white harmony at the center of Hollywood prison movies, the unhappy climax of his novel suggests that in prison, even friendship between two African American men may be vexed and fragile. Indeed, the novel's final chapter centers on the implosion of the bond between Chester and Willie, the two men who have "stuck together" (40), been "partners" (78), done "everything together," grown "exceptionally close" (199), shared cupcakes (78), and acted as each other's protectors against the Darwinian hostilities of the jail ward and the prison to which they are later transferred. When Willie gains release from prison earlier than Chester and proceeds to embark on a robbery that goes horribly awry—and that Chester begged him not to carry out—Willie cravenly attempts to reduce his prison time by implicating Chester in the botched heist. This betrayal, we learn, ultimately ensnares Chester in a lifetime prison sentence. Chester will thus spend the rest of his life in prison for a crime he never committed because "he had allowed himself to become friendly with another human being" (217). Goines invites two opposing readings of this outcome: on the one hand, Chester's misapplied punishment is cruel, even capricious; on the other, many of his other crimes had gone unpunished up to this point, suggesting a cosmic payback for his earlier misdeeds, not unlike the grim reaper's

visit Chester predicts for Tommy. Furthermore, what also seems clear here is that for Goines, one of the saddest outcomes of a racist and classist justice system that facilitates interracial sexual assault is the destruction of communal bonds between black men that might, in some small way, diminish the misery of incarceration.

This grim approach marks a pronounced shift away from the redemptive depiction of male inmate relationships offered in the prison novel that Goines, via the name of his doomed main character, seems to be signifying on: Chester Himes's *Cast the First Stone*. In that text, as well as the restored version *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (1998), Himes offers his white protagonist a measure of happiness in a romantic relationship with an Irish-Spanish homosexual. This bond, a fictionalized version of Himes's own relationship with a fellow black convict, has prompted Franklin to call Himes's novel "a profoundly affirmative homosexual love story" ("Self-Mutilations" 30). No such "affirmative" reading of Goines's novel is possible, of course, and one might be tempted to attribute Goines's vision—in which all homosocial bonds in prison are thwarted and destructive and all homosexual relations are coercive, violent, and deviant—to the heteronormative limitations of his worldview. Goines's choices here might also be understood in another way: as a sincere reflection of the increasingly constrained possibilities for productive male-to-male relationships of *any* orientation in a post-Civil Rights-era prison system in which race relations between inmates are, in the words of one sociologist, always already "extremely tense, predatory, and a source of continual conflict" (Jacobs 120).

Goines and "proceedings too terrible to relate"

That a prison novel penned by an African American writer often dismissed as little more than a formulaic chronicler of an urban black demimonde can teach us about one of the key racialized institutions in American society suggests, among other things, the desirability of an energized attention to Goines's fiction, to the critical resources of black prison literature, and to African American popular fiction's potential role as "a powerful vehicle of critique . . . [that] explicitly indict[s] the social and political forces that create and maintain racial inequalities" (Dietzel 159). For all of Goines's well-documented interest in writing mass-market fiction primarily for profit—as Andrew Calcutt and Richard Shephard assert, "Goines wrote fiction the way other people package meat" (109)—his novel's mixture of pulpy prurience, naturalist outrage, and analytical rigor suggests the author's own recognition that a calculated representation of the sensa-

tional can act as a potent and necessary vehicle for social critique.

By challenging competing (mis)representations of interracial prison rape operating in US culture, Goines must also manage the risk of letting his own representations go awry. If, as Peter Caster puts it, “the black man accused of murder, sex crime, or assault still maintains a mythic force in the United States” and reinforces a “tacit equation of criminality with black masculinity” (xiv), how might a novelist represent black criminal behavior in a way that fully registers the impact of racism on black men and yet also avoids reinforcing the pernicious racial stereotypes about black men that historically have been enlisted to justify an oppressive social order?

I revisit this question because it prompts us to consider how Goines might be situated in a continuum of modern African American writers who have negotiated this challenge. For example, we might think of Richard Wright’s *Bigger Thomas*, who is brutally violent toward both a white woman and his black girlfriend but is also a victim of racial oppression. We might also think of Toni Morrison’s *Cholly Breedlove*, who in *The Bluest Eye* rapes his own daughter but also elicits our sympathy as a victim of child abandonment and white sexual terror. This challenge is equally formidable for a text such as Goines’s that, as part of its effort to critique structural racism, graphically depicts black men raping white men. As great as the risks are of representing such ugliness, Goines’s novel implies that the risks of not depicting such grotesqueness are perhaps even greater: to do the latter would be to miss a key opportunity to put a recognizably ugly face on US racial oppression that remains a distanced abstraction made invisible behind prison walls or trivialized in jokes about rape that are a signature of the contemporary public discourse on incarceration.⁹

In his own negotiation of this problem, in his own rough style, Goines reproduces what Morrison articulates as the primary aim of her fiction: the job of “rip[ping] that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate,’” which she regards as “critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.” Morrison here refers to slave narratives—arguably the nineteenth-century precursor to late-twentieth-century prison literature—that covered up the most brutal aspects of bondage in order to appease sensitive white liberal readers whose support the authors needed. As Morrison puts it, slave narrators “shap[ed] the experience [of slavery] to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it” (191). In his own body of work, which L. H. Stallings categorizes as a hip-hop-inflected “neo-slave narrative” (175), Goines refuses to “make it palatable.” He refuses to elide the physical ugliness that might make us want to turn away from the kinds of race

relations that our ever-expanding prison system has been producing—or, worse, turn away from a chance at understanding *why* our society conceived and nurtured such a fiercely pumping heart of darkness in the first place. At a time when our prison problems seem to be worsening by the day, it would behoove us to read—and heed—Goines’s insights.

Notes

My thanks to Rebecca Sargent, Martha J. Cutter, and two anonymous readers at *MELUS* for their thoughtful responses to earlier drafts of this essay.

1. The defendant in question, 23-year-old David Ross, had been convicted of harassing a police officer and resisting arrest after being barred from walking his dog in a public park. The presiding judge, Stanley Gartenstein, ultimately spared Ross jail time and instead ordered him to pay a fine, perform community service, and publicly apologize to the arresting officer.
2. According to statistics from the United States Census Bureau and the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics, African American men, though only six percent of the US population, constitute over forty percent of the nation’s 2.3 million inmates.
3. Carroll’s findings have been amply corroborated by numerous subsequent studies—including those by James B. Jacobs, Wayne S. Wooden and Jay Parker, Randall Kennedy, William F. Pinar, and Patricia Hill Collins. While black-on-white rape is not the only form of sexual activity in the post-Civil Rights prison, it has been the most prevalent form of coercive sex in penal institutions over the last four decades, and the most common form of interracial sexual activity of any kind.
4. Cleaver’s homophobic elisions become even more striking when we consider Michele Wallace’s assertion that black-on-white male sex is the logical, inevitable outcome of Cleaver’s notion of insurrectionary rape. Wallace reasons that “[i]f whom you fuck indicates your power, then obviously the greatest power would be gained by fucking a white man first . . . Black Macho would have to lead to this conclusion” (68). Cleaver’s repression of such a possibility makes Goines’s willingness to examine it so frankly (some five years before Wallace) all the more notable.
5. This buddy-convict narrative should be seen as a subset of the larger tradition of interracial male bonding in US culture, first examined by Leslie Fiedler and later by Robyn Wiegman (115-78), Ed Guerrero (113-36), and Krin Gabbard (143-76). For these critics, such narratives peddle a specious image of interracial fraternity that obscures the nation’s history of systemic racial oppression.
6. The singularity of Goines’s project emerges even more sharply if we view his work as a critical alternative to the early-1970s blaxploitation films that were cinematic cousins to his novels. As Guerrero argues, “Goines’s novels differed from

the films of the Blaxploitation genre in that the 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" (226).

7. No definitive account of Goines's decision to name his protagonist "Chester Hines" exists. Eddie Allen speculates that the name is either Goines's "literary tribute" to a fellow black prison writer or an "uncanny coincidence" (152).

8. Naturalism is in fact a mode characteristic of much black pulp fiction, in part because it offers a powerful means of engaging in racial protest. As Susanne B. Dietzel observes, "Most Holloway House novels within the ghetto realism sub-genre [which she equates with "African American pulp fiction"] draw on naturalist novels of the 1940s and 1950s" as well as "the 'protest' novel and prison autobiography" (162).

9. Indeed, as one *New York Times* reporter has recently observed, "[r]ape has such an established place in the mythology of prisons that references to confinement often call forth jokes about sexual assault" (Lewin 1).

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