

Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy How to Read?

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AS THE SHADOW OF THE COLOSSAL AMERICAN PRISON LENGTHENS AMID THE ENCROACHING NIGHTFALL OF OUR TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY security state, it is pierced by a brilliant though flickering illumination: the literature created by those who have endured the terrors of America's walls and cells, with their unremitting surveillance, relentless brutality, and overpowering hopelessness. When I began teaching American prison literature back in 1975, there were 360,000 people incarcerated in the nation's jails and prisons. Today there are more than 2.4 million—almost twenty-five percent of all the prisoners in the world. During these thirty-three years, this country has constructed on average one new prison every week. Many states annually spend more on prisons than they do on higher education. More than five million Americans have been permanently disenfranchised because of felony convictions. More than seven million are under the direct control of the criminal-justice system. And the experience of these millions of prisoners and ex-prisoners becomes ever more integral to American culture, not just to the culture of the devastated neighborhoods where most prisoners grew up and to which they return but also to the culture of an entire society grown accustomed to omnipresent surveillance cameras, routine body and car searches, and police patrolling the corridors of high schools.

The corpus of literature most appropriate for the exploration of relations among incarceration, social justice, and literacy is that wonderful, massive body of work by American prisoners and ex-prisoners. A distinguishing and revealing feature of American prison literature is that most of it, including some of its greatest works, has been created by people who acquired their reading and writing skills through self-education while in prison. The most famous example, of course, is Malcolm X, who taught himself how to read by copying an entire dictionary and then sat on the prison floor for hours after “lights out” to read books in the faint glow of a corridor light. An equally instructive example is Jimmy Santiago Baca, whose life and

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writings constitute a thrilling testimonial to the power of literacy and language.

Although at age twenty he could neither read nor write, Baca has achieved international recognition as a major American poet, has taught at Yale and other universities, and has won numerous prizes, including the 1989 American Book Award for Poetry. Part Chicano and part Native American, Baca was committed when he was five years old to a New Mexico orphanage, from which he fled at age thirteen to live a precarious life on the streets. At age seventeen he found himself in a county jail awaiting trial on a bogus felony charge. There, as he describes in his dazzling autobiographical essay "Coming into Language," Baca "met men, prisoners, who read aloud to each other the works of Neruda, Paz, Sabines, Nemerov, and Hemingway." "Never had I felt such freedom," he writes. "Listening to the words of these writers," he begins to escape from his continual

sense of teetering on a rotting plank over swamp water where famished alligators clapped their horny snouts for my blood. While I listened to the words of the poets, the alligators slumbered powerless in their lairs. Their language was the magic that could liberate me from myself, transform me into another person. . . . (4)

Yet three years later, while awaiting trial in another jail on charges that were to send him to federal prison for five years, Baca still could neither read nor write. As he watched police detectives mercilessly beat an elderly drunk, his arm shot out through the bars in an angry act of rebellion and grabbed a cop's university textbook, which happened to be an anthology of the British Romantic poets. That night, at age twenty, he began to learn how to read:

Under my blanket I switched on a pen flashlight and opened the thick book at random, scanning the pages. I could hear the jailer making his rounds on the other tiers. The

jangle of his keys and the sharp click of his boot heels intensified my solitude. Slowly I enunciated the words . . . p-o-n-d, ri-pple. It scared me that I had been reduced to this to find comfort.

As he tried to convince himself that he was "merely curious," he found that the sounds were creating music, and he began to forget where he was:

[S]oon the heartache of having missed so much of life, that had numbed me since I was a child, gave way, as if a grave illness lifted itself from me and I was cured, innocently believing in the beauty of life again. I stumblingly repeated the author's name as I fell asleep, saying it over and over in the dark: Words-worth, Words-worth.

Within days, Baca became a writer:

Days later, with a stub pencil I whittled sharp with my teeth, I propped a Red Chief notebook on my knees and wrote my first words. From that moment, a hunger for poetry possessed me. (5-6)

The next stage of Baca's education took place in a federal maximum-security penitentiary in Arizona, where he was subjected to beatings, psychotropic drugs, electric shock, and four years in solitary confinement, mainly in an underground dungeon. As his rage deepened, two contradictory responses emerged. "I was now capable of killing, coldly and without feeling," he writes. "But then, the encroaching darkness that began to envelop me forced me to re-form and give birth to myself again in the chaos. I withdrew even deeper into the world of language . . . plunging into the brilliant light of poetry's regenerative mystery" (10).

Baca's poetry, essays, and fiction all pulsate with contradictions between rage (at prison and the social injustice it institutionalizes) and love (of life, words, and people). As he puts it:

I wrote to sublimate my rage, from a place where all hope is gone, from a madness of having been damaged too much, from a silence of killing rage. I wrote to avenge the betrayals of a lifetime, to purge the bitterness of injustice. I wrote with a deep groan of doom in my blood, bewildered and dumbstruck; from an indestructible love of life, to affirm breath and laughter and the abiding innocence of things. I wrote the way I wept, and danced, and made love. (11)

True to his faith in the transformative power of literacy, Baca in recent years has dedicated much of his life to giving others the opportunity to read and write. In 2005 he set up Cedar Tree, a nonprofit foundation that provides free writing workshops, books, writing material, and scholarships in prisons and communities (see Baca's Web site).

Whatever success Baca has achieved in turning poorly educated people like his youthful self into readers and writers is dwarfed by the spectacular impact of a radically different kind of prison literature. Baca's gorgeous poems and essays are widely anthologized and frequently assigned in college courses, but their readership is minute compared, for example, with the vast audience drawn to the down-and-dirty novels of one prison author virtually unknown in academe. Though he is probably the most widely read and certainly the most influential of all African American fiction writers, when I have mentioned his name to teachers of American literature, including some professors of African American literature, the most common response is "Donald who?"

Goines, of course. Gunned down in 1974 at age thirty-seven after nineteen years as a heroin addict, this high school dropout displayed no interest in writing until near the end of his life. Each of his earlier attempted professions—pimp, bootlegger, armed robber—had ended in failure and prison. There he was introduced to the works of his predecessor and early model: Iceberg Slim. Then,

between 1971 and 1974, Goines wrote and published sixteen novels that were to change some of the dimensions of modern American cultural history.¹

In all American prison literature, nothing has quite the same effects as these novels, which have converted untold numbers of non-readers into addicts craving their next book while also transforming their vision of themselves and their world. To get some sense of these effects, browse through the hundreds of responses from readers on sites such as *Amazon* and *The Black Library Booksellers*. Many tell how Goines got them "hooked"—the favorite term—on reading. A few typical examples:

Black Girl Lost by Donald Goines I am proud to say is the first book I ever read in my life from cover to cover. I was 23 at the time, lost myself as a Black Man living between the hood and corporate america. Donald Goines books helped me make some real decisions about my needs and my wants. I needed to learn how to read! ("Donald")

Before reading Black Girl Lost I did not like to read or even enjoy it! My 11th grade year in high school that all changed when my sister who loves to read gave me this book that all changed now I have a love for reading thanks to Black Girl Lost! Thanks Donald. ("Donald")

I'm 33 yrs old. I read Black Girl Lost in 1980 while in Jr. High School. I love all of the new African-American authors such as E. Lynn-Harris and Lolita Files but my heart remains with Donald Goines. He was the master. I had a collection of the Donald Goines books until I had lent some to friends who had never returned the books. But for some reason I had never lent Black Girl Lost to anyone. I still have it. I've preserved it. Will always remain my favorite book and I've read lots of books in my time. ("One")

Many other readers report lending or borrowing copies of Goines's novels, suggesting that his reported sales—between five and ten million copies—probably represent only a

fraction of his readership. And unlike Abbie Hoffman, Goines never needed to use the title *Steal This Book*; as the lid of his coffin was being closed, mourners discovered that even his novel placed in his clasped hands had disappeared (Stone 221). Actually, there's not a firm line between stealing and sharing when it comes to Goines's novels. As one reader says, "I had all of his books but these books are meant to be shared and I have lent them all out and never got them back. I will be building up my collection for my son who is six months old now" (Kind of a Movie Fan). Many copies are indeed shared within families, as in this typical experience: "My father introduced me to the world of Donald Goines when I was about 13 years old. I've read all of his books and all of them are great" (dymedoll).

Since Goines's novels all project a bleak, vicious world continually exploding with raw violence and sex, it may seem surprising that any parents would pitch them to their teenage kids. One gets a sense of why parents do so from a fan introduced to *Dopefiend*, Goines's most unrelentingly brutal novel, "when . . . about 14 years old": "My dad told me he read Donald Goines when he was locked up and he wanted me to read some" (Good). As another reader says of *Dopefiend*, "So, parents grab it and shove it in your children's faces" (dymedoll).

Goines's fiction does paint a hideous and scary picture of life in the street and prison. But these novels are not just the equivalent of ghastly photos of car wrecks used as warnings in driver-education courses. They also embody a powerful form of literature, appreciated as such by many of his devotees, though few perhaps would go as far as one who writes, "In the year of our Lord 2350 (or just many years from now) Goines' work will be studied like Shakespeare" (carnifer18).

Although Goines has scant chance of being studied in the future as a literary giant, he could be studied then, and certainly ought to be today, as a gigantic cultural influence. Goines is widely considered the father of the

now wildly popular fiction variously known as street lit, urban fiction, gangsta lit, or hip-hop lit. At least hundreds, maybe thousands, of convicts and ex-convicts, overwhelmingly black, are attempting to follow Goines's path of writing themselves out of the hopeless maze of poverty, crime, and prison. Some are succeeding, and Goines is their main model (Cunningham; Reid; Campbell).

Take Vickie Stringer, often called "the reigning queen of urban fiction" (Reid). Inspired by Goines's fiction, she wrote two novels while serving five years in a federal penitentiary. After receiving rejection letters from twenty-six publishers, she self-published the first novel, *Let That Be the Reason*, which later received a six-figure advance from Simon and Schuster, became a national best-seller, and was translated into Japanese. While continuing with her own fiction, Stringer simultaneously established her own major publishing house, Triple Crown Publications, which has published over a million copies of books by dozens of authors in the Goines mold, at least five of whom are still writing from inside federal penitentiaries (Cunningham; Irizarry).

Goines has also been a direct influence on hip-hop itself (Ogunnaike). In "Tradin' War Stories," Tupac Shakur calls him "my father figure." "My life is like a Donald Goines novel," sings Nas in "Escobar '97." In "Eyebrows Down," Ludacris attributes his success to the time when "I picked up a couple books from DONALD GOINES." In his foreword to Eddie Allen's biography of Goines, the rapper DMX tells how reading Goines's novels in prison changed his life and led him to produce and star in the film version of Goines's *Never Die Alone* (ix).

In her seminal essay "'I'm Goin Pimp Whores!': The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative," L. H. Stallings argues that both Goines and hip-hop culture must be understood as parts of a much larger history of African American narrative. Writing from her position as an as-

sistant professor of English at the University of Florida, Stallings begins her essay with this eye-opening statement:

I was seven years old when I first encountered the work of Donald Goines. An intelligent, curious, Southern Black girl living in 1980s Southern-fried poverty, I lifted the paperback from an aunt. After my first read, I was hooked. It was easy to complete *Dopefiend* (1971), *Whoreson* (1972), *Swamp Man* (1974), *White Man's Justice*, *Black Man's Grief* (1973), and many of his other works by the time I entered middle school. Coincidentally, hip-hop provided me a soundtrack for these books. (176)

So there's no doubt about Goines's ability to turn people with limited formal education into readers. But what about college students? For years I vacillated about assigning Goines. And then even after the first experiments seemed successful, I still held back from assigning his uncompromising and brutally naturalist *Dopefiend*, one of the most horrifying—and powerful—books I have ever read. *Dopefiend* makes Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*, that novel by another ex-convict, as well as William Burroughs's *Junkie*, seem like *Pollyanna*. Perhaps the most apt comparison is with Dante. But then I am reminded of what the ex-convict author Jim Tully wrote back in 1928: "I'd rather read one page by a man who had been in Hell—than all of Dante" (92). And Donald Goines lived most of his life in hell.

When I finally did begin assigning *Dopefiend* in 2002, I began to get some of my most rewarding, intriguing, and instructive experiences in four decades of university teaching. Nothing quite prepared me for what happened that first year. When I walked into class the day the novel was due, I could sense some unusual energy bubbling in the room. The course was *Crime and Punishment in American Literature*, taught at Rutgers University, Newark, the mainly commuter campus that *U.S. News and World Report* has for eleven years labeled

the most ethnically diverse university in the nation. The forty-two students in the course, who resembled what Herman Melville was fond of calling "an Anacharsis Clootz deputation" from the human race, were almost all the first generation in their working-class families to attend college and were themselves working, at least part time. Quite a few, including a couple of police officers, were criminal-justice majors, and there were also an ex-convict and a former prison guard.

In introducing Goines, I spotlighted the size and voracious appetite of his audience, shown by his continued strong sales more than a quarter of a century after his murder in 1974. A student responded that when she tried to obtain a copy at a public library in Elizabeth, the librarian told her that they couldn't keep copies of Goines's novels on the shelf no matter how many they ordered because they kept disappearing. Another reported that the librarian in a West Orange public library had told her the same thing. Still another said that a clerk in a Barnes and Noble superstore had told him their copies were always disappearing. A white student then commented, "Well, this tells us something about the audience for Goines's books." I was becoming concerned about where this conversation was heading.

At this point, an African American woman who always sat in the last row with her back against the wall burst out, "Hey, I'm part of that audience. I've read every novel Donald Goines has written." Another African American woman, a criminal-justice major, said that she too had read every one of his books.

Then somebody asked, "But is this literature?" and went on to complain about Goines's limited vocabulary, short sentences, lack of metaphors, and even errors in grammar. But someone else retorted that his descriptions are so vivid that "you not only see the scene, you can smell it." Others argued that the style wasn't important because the novel taught them so much about questions of crime, race, gender, the world of the addict, and the

absurdities of the “war on drugs.” When one student praised his “believable characters,” somebody else replied that they were “two-dimensional clichés.” Soon the entire class was involved in a highly emotional discussion about the question, What is literature? Was I having some kind of dream about the class I had always wanted to teach? I hadn’t even initiated this conversation, and as it raged on I was little more than a fascinated bystander.

Then came a startling moment. The first black woman who had spoken up announced, with obviously forced calmness, “My mother gave me my first Donald Goines novel, *Black Girl Lost*, when I was thirteen. That’s what made me into a reader. That’s what made me love literature. That’s why I’m an English major. And that’s why I want to be a writer.”

Well, the discussion about “What is literature?” went on and on. A Hispanic woman, one of the three other English majors in the class, vehemently defended a very canonical definition of literature, giving *The Canterbury Tales* as an example of something that is “truly literature” because it has proved itself to be “timeless.” A couple of days later, she decided to switch from the writing project she had been working on to an essay based on interviews with several faculty members in the English department, whom she was asking to “define literature.” On the final exam, a number of students chose to write about the issues raised in the discussion of Goines. “*Dopefiend* was a huge learning experience for me,” wrote one young white man. “No story has affected me the way this novel has. This book is a keeper, one I would more than likely read again.”

A “keeper.” I’ve thought about that word a lot since then. As teachers of literature, should we make it one of our main goals to have the books we assign become “keepers”? And what was Goines doing that so deeply aroused these working-class students from many ethnic backgrounds? Somehow this novel, with its deceptively simple surfaces, had plunged them into questions swirling

around near the center of that maelstrom we call the culture wars: Is “great” literature distinguished by its timelessness and aesthetic excellence, or is the value of literature largely determined by its content? Are aesthetic standards expressions of class, gender, and ethnic values? Are complexity and ambiguity the hallmarks of literary excellence, or are simplicity and accessibility literary virtues?

Most American prison literature, even such elegantly belletristic works as the poetry and essays of Jimmy Santiago Baca, forces us to view incarceration, social justice, and literacy from the bottom up instead of from the top down. The cruder but far more widely appealing kind of prison literature epitomized by the novels of Donald Goines also forces us to view fundamental questions about literature itself from the bottom up instead of from the top down. So, yes, maybe the penitentiary can help the academy learn how to read.

NOTE

1. The facts of Goines’s life are largely buried in myth and obscurity. Eddie Stone’s biography, commissioned by Goines’s publisher Holloway House, is filled with errors and contradictions. Eddie Allen’s biography overrelies on the problematic memories of surviving friends and family members, while skipping over major events narrated (with questionable accuracy) by Stone. Nevertheless, each of these books gives a moving and convincing picture of the man and his tragic life. On relations between Goines’s work and that of Iceberg Slim, see Franklin, *Prison Literature* xvi–xix.

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