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Pimpin' Ain't Easy:  
Iceberg Slim, Ralph Ellison, and the Cultural Politics of Black Crime Fiction

At first blush, it might seem merely an extraordinary coincidence of literary history that *Invisible Man* author Ralph Ellison and Robert Beck (a.k.a. Iceberg Slim), one of the best-selling black American writers of all time, both attended the Tuskegee Institute at the same moment during the Depression. No evidence exists to suggest that they ever crossed paths before Ellison left for New York to write and Beck was expelled for bootlegging moonshine in his sophomore year. That Beck and Ellison never met or even seemed aware of one another, in fact, serves as a poignant expression of distinct paths they would take as writers. With the 1952 publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison nudged out Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* for the National Book Award. The novel secured him immediate and lasting critical acclaim, visiting professorships at institutions like Harvard, Rutgers, and the University of Chicago, and a central place in the canon-building project of African American literary criticism during the 1980s and 1990s. On the academic market, Ralph Ellison is a ubiquitous, if elastic, figure. Whether he is being packaged in Henry Louis Gates's *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* as part of an autobiographical tradition, claimed by Black Aestheticians like blues vernacular theorist Houston Baker for his artistic commitment to black folklore, or more recently, celebrated by post-identity cosmopolites who champion him as the visionary of a transracial American identity, Ellison has been central to the institutionalization of African American literary and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Beck's journey to authorship could not have looked more different. Returning to his home of Chicago in 1936, Beck spent the next twenty-five years mastering the art of sweet talk, hustle, and muscle, to become one of America's most notorious pimps. Going straight after finishing his fifth bit in prison in 1961, Beck published his autobiography *Pimp: The Story of My Life* with the small paperback publisher Holloway House Books in 1967 under the pen name

Iceberg Slim. Despite the fact that the white-owned Holloway House was unable to acquire any advertising space in the New York Times because of the book's title, *Pimp* sold copies in the millions, making Robert Beck, along with fellow Holloway House writer Donald Goines, one of the highest-selling black authors of all time. At the time of his death in 1992, Beck had reportedly sold six million books; he is acknowledged together with Goines as the central literary influence on hip hop music; and the publication of his books set the stage for a new genre of black crime fiction to materialize out of the inner-city neighborhoods of postindustrial America.<sup>2</sup> Despite all of this, however, Robert Beck and his coterie of postwar crime writers have remained in the ghetto of paperback publishing for the past forty years.

Cultural Studies, as a discipline which reads the politics of style and the style of politics, and which deconstructs the binaries of high and low culture, is in a uniquely privileged position to read the significance of this black crime fiction renaissance. Following Stuart Hall's famous dictum that popular culture is neither wholly corrupted, nor wholly authentic, but a "site of struggle," many critics have already done excellent work on the romance, the dime novel, and hard-boiled detective fiction.<sup>3</sup> However, with the exception of the growing attention to Chester Himes, there has been no serious study of Robert Beck or the black crime fiction movement he helped inspire in the tumultuous period following the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>4</sup> Typical of the critical attitude toward Beck is D.B. Graham, who flippantly labeled Beck's autobiography a "bus-station confessional" and ultimately dismissed pimp fiction for not going "beyond a revolutionary style." Reading the flashy clothes, diamond jewelry, and Cadillacs as strictly "the stuff of bourgeois consciousness," Graham refuses to recognize the political possibilities of pimp literature.<sup>5</sup> However, like Cultural Studies practitioners Kobena Mercer, Eric Lott, and Robin Kelley, who read the zoot suit as a form of stylistic warfare, I want to suggest that pimp style and pimp fiction operates as a significant site of resistance of the black working class in a populist literary form.<sup>6</sup>

The cost of continuing to ignore this immensely popular fiction is obvious enough. Notwithstanding the significant legal gains made in the mid-1960s, the urban insurrections that erupted in Detroit, Watts, and elsewhere revealed that the Civil Rights Movement had not

addressed the problems facing the majority of blacks living in America's inner cities. But out of the ashes of the race riots, and in the face wide-scale deindustrialization, white flight, urban renewal, and police repression, black crime fiction emerged as a commercially viable literary form for black writers to express the collective cultural politics of the so-called American "underclass." Featuring stories of pimps and prostitutes, junkies and ghetto revolutionaries, the novels of Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, Joe Nazel, Clarence Cooper, Nathan Heard, and countless others constitute a coherent genre of black literature, whose narratives of survival in the "dark" underworld of America's mean streets have provided popular entertainment for the black working-class for the past four decades. In the absence of effective democratic representation, and especially following the defeat of the Black Panthers in early 1970s, Iceberg Slim's *Pimp: The Story of My Life* and black crime fiction more generally, became a collective expression of a subaltern social bloc, a poetics of black protest, and an ambivalently pro-capitalist expression of revolt.

The opening lines of *Pimp* illustrate powerfully the epistemological and political challenges that black crime fiction poses for scholars. Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* begins, of course, with that famously confounding statement, "I am an invisible man." A compact expression of the nameless protagonist's individual struggle with the ironies and absurdities of black identity in America, the opening sentence also illustrates Ellison's commitment to an American narrative tradition of self-making men. But whereas *Invisible Man* begins with the word "I," Beck's novel begins with the word "her," revealing how the narrator's identity, from the outset of the novel, is constituted through confrontations with women. As the narrative voice for Robert Beck, Iceberg Slim starts his story with a memory of sexual abuse and mama drama. "Her name was Maude, and she 'Georgied' me around 1921. Mama told me about it, and always when she did her rage and indignation would be as strong and as emotional perhaps as at the time when she had surprised her panting and moaning at the point of orgasm with my tiny head wedged between her ebony thighs, her massive hands vicelike around my head."<sup>7</sup> In the opening lines of the book, Slim provides a microcosm of the rhetorical, sexual, and literary economies at work in producing pimp fiction. In the glossary included at the back of the book (a glossary that was

included at the insistence Beck's publishers, who reportedly "at first didn't understand what the hell he was talking about"),<sup>8</sup> the term "Georgied" is defined as "to be taken advantage of sexually without receiving any money." This is a telling choice of words to describe childhood trauma, illustrating as it does the degree to which Maude's violation is as much about lack of payment as it is about the actual sexual abuse.

But what is even more suggestive about this passage is the way in which Beck curiously shifts his attention from the babysitter to his mother's recollection of the incident. In the tortured sentence that begins with 'Mama told me about it' Slim seems barely able to keep Maude and his mother separate, as the pronouns 'she' and 'her' that Slim uses to describe the two women slide into one another. 'Mama told me about it, and always when *she* did *her* rage and indignation would be as strong and as emotional perhaps as at the time when *she* had surprised *her* panting and moaning'. Creating a link between Mama and Maude at the opening of the novel, a link that is unconsciously reinforced by the similar sound of their names, Beck's novel projects female sexuality and female rage as the site where oppression must be overcome. Beck makes this point so insistently that one begins to wonder if he is parodying his own symbolic association between mother-hatred and pimping when he writes of Maude: "I can remember my panic, when in the wild moment of climax, she would savagely jerk my head even tighter into the hairy maw" (19-20). Here Mama, Maude, and the 'hairy maw' become interwoven images of terrifying femininity, specters against which Slim the narrator defends himself throughout the rest of the novel by pimping women by the hundreds. Adapting the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Jung to the Manichean world of pimps and "hos," Beck constructs an autobiography in which pimping becomes a compulsory act, a doomed project of repairing masculine identity wounded by early sexual and mental abuse.

In the face of these explicit depictions of sex and violence, deeply problematic representations of women, and a seeming lack of direct political expression, it may be tempting to dismiss Beck's novel. After all, unlike Ellison's protagonist, Beck's narrator does not struggle over the conflicting ideologies of Communism and Black Nationalism, nor does he seem particularly concerned in this book about the social welfare of the black masses. However, a

closer look at Beck's novel reveals that in the "concentration camp" (Beck's term) of the Chicago ghetto, pimp style is, to use a modified version of David Roediger's formulation, a "wage of blackness," a psychic compensation for the oppressive conditions of urban segregation.<sup>9</sup> Midway through the novel, Slim fantasizes about the possibility of donning whiteface as a way of escaping the 'hood. "What if my black face like magic turned white? Shit, I could go out that hotel front door and sneak through the barbed-wire stockade" (141). While having a momentary vision of passing into the anonymity of the white world, Slim ultimately decides that black is beautiful, at least insofar as it enables him to make a bankroll. "Well Nigger, you're pretty, but a bleach cream will never be invented that will make you white. So, pimp your ass off and be somebody with what you got. It could be worse," he quips, "you could be an ugly Nigger" (141). Although his blackness keeps him trapped in 'barbed-wire stockade' of the Chicago inner city, Slim opts for the fleeting pleasures of pimp life as a solution to poverty.

Ralph Ellison himself was intrigued by the political possibilities represented by the zoot suit and the pimp figure. Responding to the egregiously mislabeled "Zoot Suit Riots" of 1943, in which white police and servicemen roamed the streets of Los Angeles, beating up black and Chicano youths wearing the over-sized sharkskin garments, Ellison wrote: "Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy Hop conceals clues to great potential power—if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle."<sup>10</sup> So intrigued was Ellison with the 'profound political meaning' that may be concealed within the folds of the zoot suit, that he made a zoot-suiter, Rinehart, his figuration of American identity unfettered by institutional or categorical restraint in *Invisible Man*. Kept running throughout the novel by racist Southern whites, philanthropists, corrupt college presidents, labor unions, left wing radicals, and Black Nationalists, Invisible Man (IM) dons a pair of green sunglasses and a white hat in order to escape Ras the Destroyer and his gang of thugs. Repeatedly mistaken for a man named Rinehart, who is simultaneously a numbers runner, a preacher, and a pimp, IM suddenly has a vision of identity that confounds the narrow "scientific" categories of the Brotherhood. He muses: "His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we

lived was without boundaries. A vast seething hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie" (497). Although in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison would link Rinehart to the "trickster" figure of the African American folklore tradition,<sup>11</sup> I am interested in the way that the black pimp operates as what Toni Morrison calls "a serviceable and servicing black figure" upon which IM may project an American identity 'without boundaries'.<sup>12</sup> That Rinehart never actually makes an appearance in the novel is necessary for IM's cross-dressing performance to allow him to experience the outer boundaries of his own fluid and unstable identity. So long as the actual Rinehart remains in the shadows, the figure of the pimp can lubricate the plot of *Invisible Man* and send IM hurtling towards the climax of the novel.

While it might be going too far to say that Robert Beck is the hidden invisible man of *Invisible Man*, it does not seem an exaggeration to suggest that like Rinehart, Beck must be kept absent for Ellison to remain the spokesman for black cultural politics in the academy. The supreme irony here that while Ellison turns to the populist pimp figure to conclude his novel, Beck conversely employs self-conscious literariness as the resolution to his book. At *Pimp's* conclusion, Slim is returned to Cook County House of Corrections after a miraculous escape from the prison thirteen years earlier. Refusing to reveal the secrets of his escape, Slim is tossed into solitary confinement. "It was a tight box designed to crush and torture the human spirit," he writes. "I raised my arms above me. My fingertips touched the cold ceiling. I stretched them out to the side. I touched the steel walls. I walked seven feet or so from the barred door to the rear door. I passed a steel cot" (298). Although Slim serves the entirety of his ten-month sentence in the "steel casket" rather than admit how he escaped, his heroic status is ultimately defined by his ability to turn his rhetorical skills as a pimp into a performance as a writer. When it appears that the warden is going to keep Slim longer than his legal release date, he carefully constructs a legal-sounding plea for his release. Departing from the street vernacular with which he has related the story of his life, Slim shows the warden and the reader his ability to ape the "proper" language of white people.

Sir I realize that the urgent press of your duties has perhaps contributed to your neglect of my urgent request for an interview. I have come here to discuss the vital issue of my legal discharge date.

Wild rumors are circulating that you are not a fair man, that you are a bigot, who hates Negroes. I discounted them immediately that I heard them. I am almost dogmatic in my belief that a man of your civic stature could ill afford or embrace such prejudice.

In the spirit of fair play, I am going to be brutally frank. If I am not released the day after tomorrow, a certain agent of mine here in the city is going to set in motion a process that will not only free me, but will possibly in addition throw a revealing spotlight on certain not too legal, not too pleasant activities carried on daily behind these walls.  
(306)

Delicately threatening to expose the warden for the 'not too legal, not too pleasant activities' of the prison, Slim secures his legal release date at the climax of the novel. Using the rhetorical tricks of his trade, the "subtle muscle" and flair for the theatrical that he had developed over twenty five years in the game of cop and blow, Iceberg Slim pimps his way out of the confines of the steel casket by making the warden the object of his velvety menace. Following in an African American tradition in which literacy equals freedom, Slim's transformation from pimp to writer at the end of the novel suggests that perhaps he and Ellison are not so different after all. Coming out of similar historical conditions, Ralph Ellison and Robert Beck both turned to literary production as a way of mastering their world. In the final analysis, Ellison and Beck were both literary craftsmen struggling to make meaning out of the raw material of American life. The problem is that in excluding Robert Beck from academic study, we have missed an opportunity, not only to redraw the boundaries of literature as we understand them, but even more importantly, to mobilize the ready-made cultural politics of black crime fiction. It is time that we as scholars bring Robert Beck, Donald Goines, and dozens of other black writers out of the ghetto of pulp publishing and into the college classroom. For to slightly amend the question posed at the conclusion of *Invisible Man*: who knows, but that on the lower frequencies, Iceberg Slim speaks for you?

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates et al., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995); Houston Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For a useful summary of the trajectory of criticism on Ralph Ellison, see Kenneth Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 3-23.

<sup>2</sup> For the numbers on Beck, see Phil Patton, "Sold on Ice: Six Million Readers Can't Be Wrong," *Esquire* (Oct. 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, eds. Raphael Samuel and Paul Kegan (London: Routledge, 1981). Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance:*

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*Womn, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987); Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.)

<sup>4</sup> Edward Margolies, *The Private Eye in Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Chester Himes and Ross Macdonald* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982); H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Frankie Y Bailey, *Out of the Woodpile: Black Characters in Crime and Detective Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pandarus, 1991); Stephen Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); Charles Silet, *The Critical Response to Chester Himes* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> D.B. Graham, "Negative Glamor: The Pimp Hero in the Fiction of Iceberg Slim," *Obsidian* 1 (Summer 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Eric Lott, "Double V, Double Time: Bebop's Politics of Style," *Callaloo* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 597-605; Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 97-128; Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Beck, *Pimp: The Story of my Life* (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing Company, 1967), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Christina and Richard Milner, *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (New York: Bantam, 1972), p. 287.

<sup>9</sup> David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> *Negro Digest* 1, no. 4 (Winter-Spring 1943), p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992).