

“Harvard in Hell”: Holloway House Publishing Company, *Players Magazine*, and the Invention of Black Mass-Market Erotica

Interviews with Wanda Coleman and Emory “Butch” Holmes II

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In the late 1960s, Holloway House Publishing Company, a niche publisher of adult magazines and erotic paperbacks, emerged as an unexpected center of black literary production. Founded in 1959 by two Hollywood publicists, Ralph Weinstock and Bentley Morriss, Holloway House in its early years published an eclectic mix of high- and low-brow materials, including skin magazines *Adam* and *Knight*, biographies about Jayne Mansfield and Ernest Hemingway, and the literature of Casanova and the Marquis de Sade. However, following the Watts uprising of 1965, Morriss and Weinstock changed the direction of the Los Angeles-based company by publishing mass-market paperbacks targeted specifically toward black working-class consumers. The two white publishers recognized the uprisings in Watts and in other black neighborhoods across the country as a crisis of representation, and they capitalized on this crisis by creating a culture industry that catered to a large-scale black readership. This was a major development in the world of mass-market literature. Of course, the mass production of inexpensive and entertaining reading material for the American public has a long history, going back to the dime novels of the nineteenth century. But the dime novel and its early twentieth-century successor, the pulp magazine, were literary commodities marketed to whites and ethnic immigrants who worked in America’s industrial centers. The “black-experience” novels created by Holloway House represent an important watershed in the history of American popular literature, as these were the first black-authored books to be sold in black communities and purchased by black consumers on a national scale.

Holloway House became successful in part because the company put out adult materials that no other press dared to publish. In 1966, Holloway House released its debut black-themed novel, *Some Like it Dark: The Intimate Biography of a Negro Call Girl*. Ghostwritten by Leo Guild, the book sold well, earning the company as much as six million dollars,

according to former Holloway House employee Wanda Coleman. The book's financial success confirmed Morriss and Weinstock's suspicions that there was an untapped market of black readers living in America's ghettos. They began to seek out writers more aggressively by advertising in the Los Angeles black weekly, *The Sentinel*, and by sending editors down to the Watts Writers Workshop. In 1967, Holloway House established its position as the premier publisher of underground black literature by publishing Iceberg Slim's *Pimp: The Story of My Life*. The book sold millions of copies, and it inspired countless black writers to craft their own narratives of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and junkies for Holloway House. In the early 1970s, Holloway House became an outlet for talented writers such as Donald Goines, Joseph Nazel, Odie Hawkins, and many others to publish their street-themed literature. By distributing these books in inner-city communities, prisons, and military bases across the country, Holloway House bypassed both the East Coast literary establishment and Johnson Publishing Company, the publisher behind *Jet* and *Ebony*. Through an alliance of white business interests and black literary talent, black-experience literature emerged as a distinct cultural expression for working-class African Americans whose access to self-representation was limited.

Even while remaining virtually unknown to white America and to large portions of middle-class black America, the black-experience novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines have had enormous impact on mainstream American culture. In the past decade, for instance, the street literature of Sister Souljah, Vickie M. Stringer, K'Wan, and others has emerged as one of the driving forces of the African American publishing industry, accounting for half of the new titles published by black authors. Although the success of street literature is often understood as an outgrowth of hip-hop music, especially gangsta rap, the opposite is actually the case: the pimp autobiographies and crime novels of Iceberg Slim, Goines, and other pioneers of street literature inspired Ice-T, Ice Cube, The Notorious B.I.G., Tupac Shakur, Nas, and many other hip-hop innovators. In fact, Iceberg Slim's enduring literary and cultural legacy is the subject of the upcoming documentary film being produced by Ice-T, titled *Iceberg Slim: Portrait of a Pimp*. The writers at Holloway House created original, commercially viable representations of black identity—representations that promoted an ethos of hard-core entrepreneurialism and street hipness that would become the hallmark of modern hip-hop culture and, more recently, street literature.

In order to understand the origins of street literature and the modern black identities inscribed in it, we must first comprehend the specific

social, racial, and economic conditions that produced these texts. Even though Holloway House created a space for new American voices to be heard, they did so by exploiting writers and artists already at the margins of society. This is a familiar story of African American cultural production. The history of the American slave narrative, the race records of the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance, and the birth of rock and roll is a history of an uneven power struggle between black artists and white publishers. At Holloway House, this conflict over the content and marketing of black materials took on special significance when the company created the first black-themed, *Playboy*-style magazine, titled *Players*. Following on the success of Iceberg Slim's *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, Morriss and Weinstock decided to create a magazine where they could promote their Holloway House titles and at the same time feature black nudes. In 1972, they hired Wanda Coleman to be the first editor of the magazine. While *Players*-style magazines had been attempted before by a number of people, including businessman Sid Smith and even Coleman's own father, Johnson Publishing Company had thwarted the attempts to create such a risqué publication by suppressing the distribution of any materials that might compete with *Jet* or *Ebony*. With the young Coleman at the helm, *Players* initially thrived as an avant-garde publication, featuring cartoonists, photographers, painters, musicians, and writers from all over the globe. The first issue hit the newsstands in November of 1973 and featured everything from an article by Huey Newton on hustling to an interview with *Shaft* star Richard Roundtree and a nude pictorial of Miss Ethiopia of 1969, Zeudi Araya. However, after only a few issues, Morriss and Weinstock began to increase their supervision over the magazine's content and style. By the time Coleman left Holloway House in the middle of 1974, the owners had established a strict set of rules and guidelines geared toward filling the company's coffers while downgrading the quality of the magazine.

In the midst of this transformation, Emory “Butch” Holmes II joined *Players* as its first assistant editor. An idealist who believed in art's higher spiritual purpose, Holmes quit Holloway House after less than a year, disillusioned by the company's exploitative practices and low-rent aesthetic sense. A few years later, however, Holmes returned to the magazine with a plan to use *Players* as a vehicle to reach the American prisoner and the American soldier, readers usually ignored by mainstream publications. Taking a cue from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Holmes adopted a posture of compliance, all the while transforming the magazine from the inside into a forum to explore issues of black history, art, and politics. Holmes pretended to follow Morriss and Weinstock's rules to the letter, even as he cultivated relationships with new advertisers, published stories

about black activists, and featured the first girlie sets in *Players* to have little or no nudity. The February 1984 issue is representative of Holmes's attempt to create an edgy-but-polished publication for black audiences. Known as the infamous "history" issue, this publication featured articles on Paul Robeson, slave poet George Moses Horton, black astronaut Guion Bluford, Martin Luther King's March on Washington, and the legacy of Marxism in Africa. In a series of interviews I conducted with Wanda Coleman and Emory Holmes in the summer of 2009, these two former editors of *Players* reveal the unexplored history of America's first black-themed erotic magazine.

Wanda Coleman

Known to many as the "poet laureate of Los Angeles," Wanda Coleman is one of the most provocative and prolific contemporary African American poets writing today. The author of multiple poetry collections, including *Mad Dog Black Lady* (1979), *Bathwater Wine* (1998), and *Mercurochrome: New Poems* (2001), she is perhaps best known for her controversial appraisal of Maya Angelou's *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* in a 2002 *Los Angeles Times* book review. Years before she won fellowships for her writing from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, Coleman worked as the first editor of *Players Magazine*. Born in Watts in 1946, as a preteen Coleman helped edit her father's amateur magazine out of his garage, an experience that provided her with the skills to edit *Players*. Although paid only six hundred dollars per month by Holloway House, she also received a carte blanche expense account and, initially, total creative license over the magazine. With these resources, Coleman launched a publication with serious literary and artistic aspirations. However, the white owners ultimately undermined her efforts. More concerned with the bottom line than with making a legitimately radical black publication, Morriss and Weinstock increased advertisement space at the expense of the magazine's content and downgraded the quality of the materials. Here, Coleman provides a personal history of the behind-the-scenes battle over the body and soul of *Players Magazine*. In recounting her unique experiences as the only black woman ever to work in a position of power at Holloway House, she supplies a privileged perspective on the origins of the commodification of black nudes in the modern era.

Justin D. Gifford: Could you tell me a little bit about your early background editing men’s magazines?

Wanda Coleman: I was already a production editor, because I had been my father’s apprentice and helper, along with my older brother. My father had tried to do a black *Playboy Magazine*. He had been a friend of the boxer Archie Moore, the champ in 1952. He and his partners had been trying to put together a black *Esquire* for years. I guess they started in the early fifties, around 1953. He was constantly working in the garage, doing layouts for various magazines and projects. He had a small letterpress. Sometimes, he had a print shop, when he was in-pocket, when he had money. I regularly used to pull his hand out of the letterpress when it would get caught [laughs].

JDG: Where did you grow up?

WC: We were living in the Florence-Graham area. I was born in Watts, and we moved from Watts to a little area further north. At that time it was a white, blue-collar neighborhood, very working-class. We were the first black family on the block. He would work in the garage at all hours of the night. His partners would come by and would sort of schmooze. But me and my brother, we were the ones that did the work with my father. We helped him do the airbrushing, the layouts, and the flats and edit the blue-lines and separations. I mean, we did the whole thing. I was doing this between the ages of six and eleven.

JDG: Did he have much success with this magazine?

WC: None. He had a good idea. He had the right idea. It was before *Playboy*, because I think the first *Playboy* was 1953. He had been at it for years. I can’t remember what he called it. *Bronze Cuties*. Bronze whatever. Bronze was the word in those days. He couldn’t sell it because Johnson Publishing Company killed the distribution of anything black. The only thing they couldn’t kill was *Sepia*, because *Sepia* was so far away in Texas. So they killed black distribution in advance. There was no black product—regardless of what the quality was—that could survive. The distributors wouldn’t touch it because of *Ebony* and *Jet* and all these Johnson publications.

JDG: How did you originally get involved with Holloway House and *Players Magazine*?

WC: I was starving in the ghetto. I was living on 120th Street off San Pedro at the time. A friend said I should send my work to Holloway House, because I was trying to write this novel. This was the end of 1968, the beginning of 1969. I sent my so-called draft or proposal to Holloway House. I actually got a “come in and see us.” I think it was a hand-written note. You get that rush, being a neophyte writer. I was pretty hopped-up about going all the way across town to Hollywood. When I got there, rather than talk to me about my novel, they started asking me a series of questions. I started telling them about my background, and they were really excited. This was Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock. I met them both at the same time, and they asked if I could edit a men’s magazine. And I said, “Sure.” In other words, the idea was already there.

JDG: Did Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock have any idea of the stranglehold Johnson publications had on the market when they started *Players*?

WC: They knew all about it. They worked out an alternative distribution method. That was their brilliance.

JDG: How did they do that exactly?

WC: They didn’t tell me. They absolutely did the hard work themselves, because they were determined to make money. They weren’t going to let Johnson Publishing Company kill them, and they told me this because they were looking for angles around them when we did *Players*. When I started *Players*, I created the magazine. They already had the idea, but I did the work. I made it materialize. I was the magician. I put it together. I put the first issue together in six weeks.

JDG: What was your arrangement with Holloway House?

WC: They were paying me so little, it’s ludicrous. But our agreement was that I would have carte blanche with all my expenses related to the magazine. I had carte blanche. I had a key to the building. That’s how much they trusted me. I would come in as early as 4:00 in the morning and get on the phone to Europe. I would talk to African Americans all over the planet. I had to get my material. I would start with Europe, work my way toward New York, and then come further west as the day got longer [laughs]. I had a ball.

JDG: How did you approach the design of the magazine?

WC: I patterned the magazine after *Lui* [A French adult entertainment magazine created in 1963 by media mogul Daniel Filipacchi]. I had a little thing that said, “For He Who Is.” This sort of cryptic statement. “For He Who Is.” What the hell does that mean? People used to get on my case for that. My father always had a saying that used to drive me crazy: “What it is.” And I would say, “What in the hell does that mean?” My father spoke in metaphors all the time. And I was constantly trying to figure out, “What in the hell is my daddy saying? Why doesn’t he just say it straight?” By the time I began working on the magazine, I understood what a metaphor was, and I was having fun. For the first nine months working there, I was like kid in a candy store, because I was talking to people I would have never dared approach otherwise. And I was able to buy material. What I found was there was no market for black nudes, black girl sets. Magazines were not publishing them. So there were hundreds of these photographers out there, black and white. I used people from across the spectrum. It didn’t matter whether they were Asian, Mexican American, or what. As long as they could do the job. I was at the helm. I told them, “I’m the blackness. I’ll cover you. Just do the job.”

JDG: Did your aspirations for the magazine differ from those of the white owners?

WC: Bentley wanted *Players* subtly to be a vehicle for his novelists. In other words, he wanted to introduce the novel or to excerpt from it. I didn’t mind going along with that, because most of the work fit the idea of *Players*. You know, fast cars, rock and roll, women, and loud music. I didn’t have any problem with that. After we started putting together the ad rate card and other materials, all of a sudden Bentley found himself being assaulted by a gentleman by the name of Sid Smith. Apparently they had ripped off Sid’s idea. Sid had come to them before they had ever heard of me with the idea of a black *Playboy*, and he wanted in.

JDG: What were the working conditions like there?

WC: It was a tremendous amount of work for one person to do. It was like I was ten people. They had several magazines across the spectrum at Holloway House. Usually, there was an editor-in-chief or whatever the title was that they wanted to give themselves. And then the work was virtually one-hundred-percent freelance. They had an in-house art department,

and then they had accounting. I was the only editor for *Players*. I did it all, from concept to flats, from editing bluelines to correcting separations. The art department was largely for consultation and to fill in the gaps in my education and paternal apprenticeship. They did any airbrushing or applied filters if necessary. I learned a few things more about the female anatomy I did not know—shocking, given I was also female [laughs].

JDG: What was the working atmosphere like at Holloway House?

WC: I wasn't afraid of Bentley Morriss or Ralph Weinstock, but their other employees were terrified of them. It was the first time I entered a work situation that was governed by fear. And the employees used to ask me to ask them for things, like a Christmas party, for God's sake! I didn't ask them why they didn't ask themselves, but after I was there a while I began to see why these people were so scared.

JDG: Why were they so scared?

WC: They were afraid. Maybe they were afraid they were going to lose their jobs. Maybe Bentley hired people to get something on them to keep them cowed. I don't know. Maybe they were marginal people who lived on the edge and couldn't get into the mainstream. Actually, I know that for a fact, because Holloway House did *Knight* magazine. They already had a reputation before I even went in there. I kind of knew that I was walking through the gates of Hell.

JDG: When you started at the magazine, what was your philosophy?

WC: I wanted to do a black *Playboy Magazine*. That was really the nuts and bolts of it. I wanted it to be as classy as possible under the givens. I knew there were many African Americans like myself who wanted to see good, intelligent product, who were sick of Johnson publications. You only got safe stuff from Johnson publications, stuff that had already been printed or had already been well-explored by the white media. That's never changed. So they wanted things that were more sophisticated and sexy and maybe a little edgy and adult.

JDG: Did it accomplish that?

WC: Well, at least for the first six issues that I did [laughs], but after that I think it became just another porno rag that you pay five bucks for and the

guys jerk off in the bathroom with. But initially it started off as something that even women could enjoy.

JDG: What do you think happened that made it change?

WC: Well, Joe Nazel took over the editorship after I was there, and it started to change then. Madison Avenue was so excited about this magazine. Bentley and Ralph could not believe how successful it was. People wanted in on *Players*. It was overwhelming.

JDG: Even early on?

WC: Right away. All we had to do was send out our ad rate cards that had the cover in miniature on it and what was in forthcoming issues. I mean everybody wanted in on this. I remember one young man came into my office unannounced and said, “Here!” And, wham! He laid down his flats that he had done at his expense with *Players Magazine* as the title. Virtually the exact same magazine. People had been trying to do this for years.

JDG: Why do you think Bentley was able to succeed where so many others had tried and failed?

WC: He already knew he could make money. He had published a book about a black prostitute, which had been written by a Jewish guy.

JDG: Oh yeah. *Some Like it Dark*, by Leo Guild.

WC: Yeah. He made something like six million dollars off that book. So he already knew there was a market for this stuff, because that book had proven it to him. That was the beginning of their exploitation . . . their exploration anyway. So they already knew there was a market for this. They just couldn’t find anybody to execute it. They liked Sid. They liked his idea. But he wasn’t an editor. He couldn’t execute it. They needed someone who would be an executioner, and that was me.

JDG: So when they got your novel, they thought this is the person we want?

WC: Well it wasn’t the novel. It was me. When they interviewed me, and I started talking about my background, that’s when they got really excited and started whispering. Ralph ran around the desk and started whispering

to Bentley. They went back and forth. Then they turned to me and said, “Do you think you can edit a magazine? We have this project in mind.” I never did get the novel published [laughs].

JDG: Did you face any public opposition in the creation of the magazine?

WC: I started learning how to use my “Miss nice bright white voice” when I started calling people for work. I had sent out a flier looking for illustrators, and I had talked about beautiful black women. I got this call from this redneck. When he got on the phone he said, “Are you a nigger? You sound like a nigger.” I said, “Um, I’m black” [laughs]. He said, “You *are* a nigger. Well let me tell you something. There is no such thing as a beautiful nigger,” and he hung up the phone. That was the kind of stuff I had to deal with, okay? It was rough.

JDG: So initially you had a lot of creative control with the magazine?

WC: I absolutely had all creative control. They wanted it. They wanted me to do what I said I could do. As each issue went by, and it got more and more successful, they started turning the screws. They started dictating, started telling me what I couldn’t do. There were certain cartoons they didn’t want. They were starting to get sensitive and respond to people’s complaints. People would call up and complain about the magazine. At the same time, I was also dealing with people who were pressuring me to get into the magazine.

JDG: What kind of materials did you solicit from people for the magazine?

WC: I was getting records, books, and all kinds of stuff being sent to me. People stole the stuff I got out of the art room. Someone sent me the complete Duke Ellington collection, which was spirited away. There were guys whose work I really liked, who weren’t illustrators. They were just native artists. They had no formal education, but I liked their work, and I would say, “I’m going to use this.” So they would do a painting, and then I would use the painting. I would then put it in storage for the art department, and someone would go in there and steal it.

JDG: Was *Players* styled as a magazine for the amateur gentleman class, like *Playboy*?

WC: Gentleman class? That is an illusion. That’s always an illusion. You have to remember that this is the 1950s and 1960s, and the way mores ran in the society, that was the justification. That made it okay, so it wasn’t just something in a brown paper bag that you slipped over the transom. But everybody in the business knew that it was just a rationale. A nice rationale.

JDG: Who were some of the other artists or entertainers you featured in *Players* when you worked there?

WC: Pam Greer, Yaphet Kotto, Hugh Masekela, Huey Newton, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Larry “Bony Moronie” Williams, and Melvin Van Peebles. I featured Bob Marley’s first record, *Catch a Fire*. I got to introduce America to the Wailers and reggae. I used to buy photographs off Howard L. Bingham, including one shot of Muhammad Ali in the ring. He was still *persona non grata* in the media at the time. I bought a couple of sets off Tom Kelly who, I believe, shot the first nude photographs of Marilyn Monroe.

JDG: What other problems did you face at *Players*?

WC: There were so many ads coming in, it became competitive with the content. I would make commitments to people. I’d say, “Your story is going to be in the next issue,” and then it would be cut for ad space. Instead of making the magazine larger, they would cut my content. My content was being pared away. I was only as good as my word to some of these people, and I started having difficulty honoring commitments. And I’m dealing with people on the margins. I had some guy who took me to lunch and then threatened to kill me if I didn’t use his furniture or something in the magazine layout. I was dealing with all sorts of crazies and marginal people and at the same time dealing with the needs of Holloway House. I had to make sure that the Holloway House writers got their piece of the action.

JDG: How much did you make at Holloway House?

WC: I was making six hundred dollars a month. At that point, it was the most money I had ever earned in my life. Before that, I made a living largely waiting tables, being a receptionist, and tending bar. My phone bill from the office was astronomical. Weinstock constantly complained, but Bentley allowed it as long as I was producing. I was able to pay writers, illustrators, cartoonists, models, and photographers more money than

most of them had ever seen. Also, I was allowed to hire a secretary. Any extra money I earned came from freelancing outside of 8060 when I could [8060 Melrose Avenue is the street address of Holloway House]. People tried to bribe me, but I was too dumb to get it. I knew that if I were dishonest, I could skim lots of money off the top. But I was completely honest. . . . Before the smoke cleared, I was given a raise, which I'm not certain of now, but I think it was upped to a thousand dollars per month. But by then I knew that editors outside 8060 who did a tenth of what I was doing made thirty to fifty grand a year. You can bet I started to go crazy.

JDG: So you were being exploited at Holloway House as much as the writers?

WC: People talk about education being important to African Americans. There is something just as important, and it's called access. You have to have access to information and people who are power players. And if you don't have that, you ain't going nowhere. I didn't know how much a magazine editor made, and there was no one I could ask. But after a while I would start meeting people and getting information, and I was finally able to find out how much I was not getting. Even though I had this *carte blanche* expense account, I'm riding around in a Pinto! [laughs]. That was my first new car, and I thought I was doing fine to get that [laughs].

JDG: Was there anything positive about working for Holloway House?

WC: I always liked working with writers. I got so good, I could always tell when their material wasn't fresh. I would tell them, "I don't want anything from the morgue." Some people would come in, and I would help them shape their material. If the seed was there, if it was really good, I would help them write it. I would give them enough information so that they could execute their material. Then they would bring it back to me, and I would edit it and publish it. I had to. I mean I had people bringing me manuscripts on toilet paper and paper bags. They didn't know how to submit materials.

JDG: Did you know any of the Holloway House authors well? Iceberg Slim or Donald Goines?

WC: Donald Goines I knew the best. Goines's books are autobiographical, so if you read his books, you know about Goines. Goines was the type of writer who was instinctively a good storyteller—or a great storyteller—but he could not disguise himself. He was not sophisticated enough to

write in a style that disguised him. I mean you pick it up and know it is Donald Goines no matter what name was on it. You knew it was Donald Goines.

JDG: When was the last time you saw Goines?

WC: The last time I saw Goines was right before that last trip. He was going to get more stories. He would just steal people’s material. He’d go, get to know them, go onto the scene, get them talking about themselves, and then he would write their stories. So he told me, “I’m going home to get more stories, Wanda.” I was worried about him. I tried to talk him into not going. I told Bentley that he could get Goines killed. They were exploiting him too. I think he only got fifteen hundred dollars a book.

JDG: It was actually closer to seven hundred and fifty dollars per book, according to his contracts.

WC: He only got seven hundred and fifty, too? Really? Those dirty sons of bitches! [Laughs]. Really? See, he had tracks. He was constantly being stopped by the police. So he was writing these books as fast as he could for bail money and to pay attorneys’ fees. Then he was riding around in this big ol’ red Cadillac with one of his ladies. They would come roaring down Melrose avenue, yelling, “Hi Wanda! Hi!” You know, he always had an entourage. He was very flamboyant in that way. Before Donald went on his trip, we went up on the roof and talked. He called me Li’l Sis, and I tried to talk him into not going.

JDG: Why?

WC: Because I just had the vibe. Most of these people are street people. They hit and run. They can fade, and there’s no trace. And we’re living in a society where most murders of African Americans go unsolved. Nobody cares. There are mobsters out there. I’ve seen them.

JDG: What kind of relationship did he have with the owners?

WC: He joked with Bentley in ways no one else dared, but at the same time, I think he never quite figured him out, although he knew Bentley was an exploiter, as did we all. He respected Bentley’s money. Remember, Goines was a junky, and junkies tend to have weak and mushy personalities. At root, I think Goines thought he was playing Bentley. At the same time, he knew that if he did not produce, Bentley would give him the gate.

JDG: Is Bentley Morriss a racist or is he just a shrewd businessman? Perhaps both?

WC: For my money, you have to hold the whole society accountable. They were the ones that created that culture where Mr. Morriss could thrive. If there had been an outlet, if there had been a decent outlet for Goines and Beck, they would still be alive. Those are the people who are just as responsible. They were part of that phenomenon. Or blame it on the fact that it was so difficult for blacks on the West Coast to get any attention from the East.

JDG: In terms of publishing?

WC: In terms of anything. Music. The jazz musicians out here had the same complaints as the writers. West Coast artists have complained that it is so difficult, especially when you're black, to get attention from the East Coast establishment, and by the time they do notice you, if you're not dead, you're half dead. This is part of the cultural current that created this stuff. Shall we blame racism for the fact that all the photographers and artists couldn't sell their black girl sets, and I could buy them for a pittance? I had the vehicle and a pittance was better than nothing. I had a wealth of material. I mean, at that point, where could a black cartoonist go?

JDG: What do you think about the explosion in popularity of Holloway House-inspired street literature?

WC: Gee, I wish my books would sell like that [laughs]. Some envy and some chagrin. My feelings are very mixed about it. When people say "street," you don't know whether it's a compliment or whether they are denigrating the stuff. And I have been called that many times in my work. My poetry and my literature have been called "street." Most of these writers that I have bothered to look up have nothing to offer me as a reader, but they do have a readership, which they are entitled to have. We have had hack writers going back to the eighteen hundreds: dime novels, pulp magazines. Our dominant culture has always had enough room to have its elite and then its people who read cheesy literature, so why shouldn't African Americans have their share of cheesy literature? Why not?

JDG: Do you think the work you did at *Players* had any impact on modern novelists like Sister Souljah, Noire, or Nikki Turner?

WC: I think the thing that really influenced them were the novels from Holloway House. Goines and Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp*. When *Pimp* came out, you couldn’t go anywhere without seeing that on somebody’s coffee table. I mean they would lay it out like a coffee-table book. You would go in a room, and the first thing you saw was a copy of *Pimp* looking at you. *Pimp* had a great, powerful, and largely destructive impact on relationships. Finding marriageable men was tough enough, but then they started getting the idea that they didn’t have to get married and they could make money. They didn’t see the fiction of it. It’s like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The best parts are when he’s a bad boy. When he gets inspired to sainthood, it gets boring.

JDG: What do you think about mainstream presses like Random House now gearing more books toward black female readers?

WC: I think that’s not a bad thing. The changes in the tax structure created the blockbuster syndrome in movies and books and everything else. Our tax structure has pimped out the literary writer. The literary writer can no longer look down their nose at the popular writer or the hack writer, because the hack writer is paying the bills, you see? Irony of ironies. Isn’t that lovely? Publishers can no longer afford to nurture a literary or elite writer, because they have to stay in business. Random House has sniffed the wind. They want to stay in business. There are excellent black writers who can’t get the time of day, whose material is not being made into movies. They are not making money, but Ms. *G-Spot*, she’s going all the way to the bank.¹ Who knows how many houses she has and how many big cars? It’s all about the bottom line.

Emory “Butch” Holmes II

By the mid-1970s, Holloway House and *Players Magazine* had developed an effective formula for publishing black material. Morriss and Weinstock created specific rules, dictating the kind of texts that could be published in *Players*. Stories about African American history, black politics, international black issues, or African American arts such as sculpture or painting were prohibited. In the minds of Morriss and Weinstock, the only marketable black material was “authentic” ghetto literature like that written by Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. Nowhere was the single-mindedness of Holloway House’s commercial enterprise more clearly on display than in the company’s marketing of Goines’s books after his

murder in 1974. In the weeks following Goines's death, Holloway House sent the following ad copy to book distributors: "Donald Goines is dead. Executed. The most talented writer of the black experience novel died in a real life scene from one of his own books. Stock up on all of Goines's books now. Use our special new display. They will be in great demand." At the time of Goines's death, the owners also became more particular about the type of black nudes they wanted to feature in *Players*. Whereas Coleman had scoured the globe for diverse images of black beauty, Morriss and Weinstock had only three requirements for women to be featured in the magazine: the models had to look like they were eighteen years old, they had to have European features, and they had to have large breasts. These strict requirements sometimes led to bizarre results. Ajita Wilson, an international model featured regularly in the magazine, was actually born a man, but with his honey-colored skin and massive silicone breasts, Wilson represented Holloway House's ideal black woman.

In the middle of these changes at Holloway House, Emory Holmes entered the scene. Born in 1946 in Nashville, Holmes helped desegregate the all-white Catholic school system in Nashville by entering Cathedral High with his older sister in 1954, the same year as *Brown v. Board of Education*. This inspired Holmes's distrust of institutional academia, even though he turned to literature and art throughout his life for inspiration and livelihood. After moving to Los Angeles with his family during his high school years, Holmes won a football scholarship to the University of Hawai'i. Two months before graduation, Holmes quit school and worked briefly as a social worker supervising children. This appointment did not last long, as Holmes insisted on documenting the children's activities in poetic prose reminiscent of Walt Whitman and Gwendolyn Brooks. After falling out with the administration, Holmes decided that he was no longer satisfied with merely reading Joseph Conrad. He wanted to *be* Joseph Conrad. For the next fifteen years, Holmes traveled on ships and hopped freight trains, working as a sailor and laborer in Micronesia, New York, Montreal, and Vancouver, eventually making his way back to Los Angeles in 1974. After publishing an article with *Players* on black portrait artist Walt Walker, Holmes was hired as the magazine's first assistant editor by Joseph Nazel, the legendarily prolific author who published more than sixty books with Holloway House before his death in 2006. After less than a year at *Players*, Holmes left the company, disenchanted by the exploitative business practices and strict rules of Morriss and Weinstock.

In 1981, Holmes returned to *Players*, where he became lead editor for the next four years. As he tells it in this interview, in the years between his two tenures at Holloway House, he had incorporated important lessons

from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Realizing that Morriss and Weinstock’s own narrow understanding of black people could be turned against them, Holmes propped up an edifice of compliance while secretly transforming *Players* into a forum for radical black political expressions and more tasteful representations of the black body. For instance, while a vast number of the nude sets chosen by Weinstock feature full-body shots of black women masturbating or in other compromising positions, Holmes’s pictorials are qualitatively different, with many featuring close-ups of the women’s faces. Shifting the focus of the photographs from the black body to the returning gaze of the models themselves, Holmes attempted to mitigate the rank objectification of black women’s bodies in the pages of *Players*. Holmes’s greatest achievement in this regard was his black history issue, published in February of 1984. The issue’s main “girl set” features Lynn Whitfield dressed up as Marie Laveau, Josephine Baker, and Dorothy Dandridge. It was the most expensive photo shoot commissioned by the magazine, and it featured no nudity. This interview reveals how Holmes adopted the tactics proffered by *Invisible Man*’s grandfather when dealing with white power structures: “overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction” (Ellison 16). Over a period of four years, Holmes manipulated the institution of mass-market black erotica to create an underground forum for populist expressions of black art.

JDG: Can you tell me a bit about your writing background and the circumstances under which you came to work at Holloway House?

Emory “Butch” Holmes: That’s an impossible story. I used to believe that all art was a sacred calling. I was a snob who believed that anyone who was getting paid for art, including literature, the plastic arts, dance, and all of that was some kind of pimp. That was the lowest form of humanity. I felt art was a kind of spirit, and you couldn’t be paid for that. It was a priceless thing. So . . . I would always get a labor job. Laborers were always the people that I felt were the analogue of the core virtue the artist embodied: hard work, touching of the hands, the feeling of sensual connection with one’s tasks. So I always worked a labor job: dishwasher, truck driver, ditch digger. I felt that all these romantic things we associate with “The Boho Dance” were the authentic way of achieving the stability and ability to make art, so I would make art at night. I would paint and draw, do poetry, plays, and short stories. So I lived this kind of existence.

JDG : Could you tell me a bit about your first attempts at writing?

EH: During college, one of the things I began to develop was a very unrealistic viewpoint about my gifts. By this time, I had begun to write poetry, and I developed this idea that art was a religious calling and it was based on the redemption of sweat and labor and actually touching those creations which, when done with an eye toward the perfect, could connect in some ways to the sublime and make those works of art which we value over the centuries.

[With this in mind,] here is an example of the kind of reports I would write [when I was hired as a] social worker:

The boys and girls came quickly after school, standing in knots with books and cuttlefish bags. They were talkin', walkin' (pause) eating as they walked and paused away. The boys would crouch like cats behind the smack and knock of game room balls and smirk and snarl and gossip like girls and drag their stuffy shirttails out, and puff on cigarettes, and cough and curse and laugh and stagger from the joke and sit and brood and wait and watch each other and the girls.

So that gives you some idea of how absolutely inappropriate my writing was to the expectations of this very serious-minded organization that I worked for. I began to have problems with the administration at the settlement house for these kinds of activities and other difficulties I had adjusting to the real world.

JDG: How did you start working at *Players*?

EH: I decided to write a series of texts and do a series of paintings, and whatever sold, that's what I would be. One of my friends who was a fan of tit books told me about *Players*, a magazine for black men, and said that I should submit one of my stories. I interviewed Walt Walker about his life and work and the controversy of him painting portraits of black people rather than white people. At that time, this is what many black people were expected to have as their content if they wanted to have a successful career. I sent this off to *Players*. My girlfriend and I were able to sell six or seven watercolors for a total of about three dollars. In about a month or so, I got a letter from the editor of *Players Magazine*, Joseph Nazel, saying that he wanted to publish my story. I didn't know how much writers got paid for stories. I had worked day and night on it, so I was hoping to get fifty or one hundred dollars. He said, "I am sending you a check for three hundred and fifty dollars." I said, "Wow, I'm a writer!" So I started writing short stories.

JDG: You were successful right away?

EH: For the first few months, I got nothing but acceptance letters. It was like I was printing money. I thought, “Wow, I should have been doing this a long time ago. This is all you have to do? Sit down at the typewriter, and you are basically printing money.” After the first three months, I started to get nothing but rejection letters. My bank account began to dwindle, and I realized that I had made a terrible error, that I am really not a writer at all, and that I should have made more of an effort to sell my paintings. So what I did—I was very crazy at this time, as you can tell—I rushed down to the La Cienega part of Los Angeles, where all the art galleries are, with about twenty paintings and drawings under my arm, and I ran into each gallery and said, “Look at this. I’m a genius. Give me a show. I need a show and some money for gas.” Well, I was thrown out of each one of these places.

JDG: Who hired you at Holloway House?

EH: Joe Nazel. I went to his office looking for a story I had sent in for publication that he had misplaced. After searching his office, he suddenly said, “Emory, do you want to be the editor of this magazine?” I said, “This must be some kind of joke.” He said, “Listen, I hate this publication. I hate the people I work for. I hate what they make me do every day. I am quitting this very day, and I want you to take my place.” I’m sitting there trying to understand what he is trying to tell me. Meanwhile, these other editors are walking by, and he calls out to one of them, “John. John, I want you to meet . . . what was your name again? Emory. I want you to meet the new editor of *Players Magazine*, Emory Holmes. Emory Holmes.”

JDG: What was your first encounter with the owners like?

EH: The first time I met Ralph Weinstock, he was sitting behind his desk, thumbing through the latest edition of *Players*. He’s got the magazine open to the spread that bears my article with photographs of Walt Walker’s paintings of black folks. He is utterly disgusted. He says, “Joe, why would you publish shit like this? I’ve told you, we do not publish shit like this. This is not what we’re about,” and Joe says, “That’s why I’m introducing you to the new editor. This is Emory Holmes.” Ralph screams, “He’s the guy that did this.” He is just upset. That began my contentious, very hostile relationship with Ralph Weinstock, who was in utter contempt of me, because he knew my interests were anathema to the interests of *Players*.

JDG: What were the interests of *Players*?

EH: In 1975, they published about twelve magazines, all of them prurient, all of them on very low-grade paper. *Players* was the first so-called slick magazine that they published and the first that had black models. The two entrepreneurs who owned *Players* and Holloway House had no interest in anything other than money, but they did do this very wonderful thing, which is publish writers who would not have otherwise had a chance at publication: writers of color, blacks, Chicanos, and homosexual writers. That kind of work.

JDG: But Nazel stayed on at *Players* and you became his assistant?

EH: Joseph had no interest in doing the day-to-day tedium of the magazine, so he turned all that over to me. It was like going to Harvard in Hell. I was put in charge of the selection of photographers, models, and illustrators. I read all of the submissions that came through the slush. I selected the cartoons. I developed the cartoons. I even did the layout of the magazine. Joe had no interest in that. Joe was doing novels. When I met him, Joe was already one of the most prolific novelists in American life.

JDG: What was the owners' philosophy behind the magazine?

EH: Ralph and Bentley seldom, if ever, read their publications. Not their novels. Not their magazines. They looked at the pictures, which is something Bentley learned from Hugh Hefner. As long as you have lots of tits and lots of cartoons, you are going to sell a certain amount of magazines. It's the old joke. Do you buy it for the literature or for the titties? He made sure that the titties were bona fide and 3-D. We were able to slip in other bits of text and history. Well, not history. We were given a list, Joseph and I. There was a list of rules, which we were told we could never violate.

JDG: There was an actual list?

EH: They were so absurd that it sounds impossible, but here they are: We could never publish any story about blacks in history. In other words, no stories about Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois. No stories about the slave trade. No stories about emancipation. No stories about blacks in history at all.

No stories about blacks in any other country, unless they are American blacks on vacation. In other words, no stories about Jamaica's Trenchtown, or South Africa, or apartheid. No stories about blacks in any kind of trouble

in any kind of foreign land, unless it's the girls of South Africa or the titties of South Africa. Then you could write the story, because there're lots of pictures.

No stories relating to black painting and black plastic arts. You can do stories about music, but not about these arts that no one is interested in. Painting, sculpture, and classical jazz. You can do stories about the Boogaloo and the Frug and all that is connected to the pop world. But you could not do any stories that dealt with any kind of high-minded pursuits.

No stories about politics. So you couldn't [have covered] the Obama campaign. You couldn't mention the great Paul Robeson. That was considered scandalous.

JDG: How were the photos for the magazine chosen?

EH: The girls of the magazine were all selected before I got there by Ralph Weinstock. He felt that he understood black women much better than black men understood them and that he understood black beauty much better than black men understood it.

JDG: When did you decide to leave the magazine the first time?

EH: The last day I worked at Holloway in my first stint, Ralph summoned me and Joe into his office. He had two stacks of girlie sets stacked really high on his desk. He had a sour, sour, sour look on his face. The meeting starts and he says, “This stack over here are the girls you,” pointing to me, “have selected for the magazine. I am rejecting them all.” And then he points to the other stack. “These are girls you have rejected for the magazine. They are going in the magazine.” Then he says, “You don't know what a beautiful black woman is. A beautiful black woman has three qualities: she looks like she is eighteen years old, she has European features, and she has big tits.” Once he said that, I said to myself, “You know what Emory, your days are over here.”

JDG: You also wrote a novel—*Black Rage!*—while you worked for *Players*?

EH: *Black Rage!* is the story of a real-life woman who was in jail facing a death sentence for the murder of her guard in the penal facility. She had escaped and she was on the loose right when I began writing the novel. That book came out the week I left *Players Magazine* for the first time. For some reason, through bizarre serendipity, some details that I had fabricated

out of whole cloth began to come true as they captured this woman and the real trial began to unfold. Someone brought a copy of my novel to the trial of Joan Little, and they were outraged that these things were being said in this novel. So they called Bentley to try to get an interview with this outrageous writer. Well, I had left. Bentley couldn't find me. So he directed Joe to find me, to bring me back, even though I had left *Players*. He had a list of statements that he was going to draft. He wanted me to hold a press conference, and he wanted me to speak this advertisement he had written up to further antagonize the trial that was going on back in the South.

JDG: Why did you decide to come back in 1981?

EH: When I was editor there the first time in 1975, I was just an emotional guy. I didn't know how to pool my energy then and how to tread through. But here is one crucial thing that I learned in the years between my two stints as editor. When I was there in 1975, I wanted to change the world. Joe and I felt that we could change the world through literature. We could do this great thing even with all of these restrictions and prohibitions. When I came in 1981, I didn't want to change the world, but I did want to make a wonderful magazine for two populations of Americans that I felt were utterly neglected by the popular media. Those were two confined populations: one, the American GI and, two, the American prisoner. I felt that these were the two populations most in need of a date, even if it was [with] their hand on their own self.

JDG: They hired you back even though you had quit?

EH: That's the difference between Holloway House and any other publication. They will hate your guts and spit on your fucking shoes, but if you can make them money, they will hire you.

JDG: How did you change the magazine at that point?

EH: I would try to put in the magazine things that I thought prisoners and soldiers would need. I wrote all the things that all the girls said. What is the latest good music? What is happening with jazz? What is happening with literature? Those populations that had been denigrated and ignored by other publications, like *Ebony* and *Jet*, those were my natural targets. When I came back in 1981, that's the audience I wanted to reach. In terms of Bentley and Ralph's ideology, this would have been a totally subversive campaign, but I had been aided in this kind of revolutionary campaign by

the idea I had learned from Ralph Ellison in reading his *Invisible Man*. This is what I learned: there are certain individuals who can look you in the face, and their idea about you is so predetermined and so calcified that they are really not looking at you. They're not really seeing you. If you can find a way to prop yourself in front of them, or prop the edifice of who they think you are in front of them, then you are free to go about doing whatever you want to do. When I came back in 1981, that's what I did. I would be sitting straight up at my desk, pretending to be doing their bidding. Meanwhile, I was secreting away these articles I was getting through the slush that had to do with Paul Robeson, and apartheid, and a woman running for president, and all these things they utterly despised.

JDG: How were you able to do that?

EH: Since the bottom line is the god of Bentley and Ralph, I began to contact the advertisers, many of whom had abandoned *Players* because it was so low-minded, low-rent, vulgar, and unconscionable. I told them, “Listen, I am taking out all that prurient bullshit that has been the iconography of *Players Magazine*, and I am replacing it. You can open up the magazine and look at what I am doing, and you will see that I am making a new voice and a new face for this magazine.” So I began to change the ads. I began to change the models, the girls. I used to call them the girls of Motel 6. They all looked like they had just got finished doing about an ounce of heroin. You could see the tracks going up and down these girls' arms. I brought forth the model that Hugh Hefner had brought out years earlier, “the girl next door.” I started putting girls in the magazine that I would want to date. Sometimes they did have big tits. Sometimes they just had golden eyes, or a luscious smile, or an intense gaze, or something else that was just indefinable, ineffable. This is what made Ralph just crazy. The reason I was protected in the second instance was because I had taken the time to cultivate these advertisers, and they protected me.

JDG: Could you tell me about your last days at Holloway House?

EH: My last days at *Players*, I published a history issue. I wrote on the front of it: “Collector's Item!” Which it is. I also did a political issue. This broke Bentley's and Ralph's hearts, and it was one of the greatest, sweetest moments of my entire life, the interview I had with Bentley and Ralph. They were looking down at the magazine that had already gone to press, and it had Paul Robeson's name on the cover. Oh shit! They were just wild with despair.

JDG: How did you get these materials past them to press?

EH: I began working on the magazine. Over time, I began to bring back the advertisers. I began to secret things away. I began to slip one or two innovations in the magazine. Ralph would come in and try to challenge me, but he didn't have the same vitriol and the edge. He was getting older, and there was something in his psyche that was . . . in transition, I'll say. He had lost the ability to resist something in me. He began to get very careless, and he would leave me alone in the choosing of the girls. And then slowly, I would change one of the ads. Then the next issue, I would change one of the illustrations. Before he knew it, over the course of thirteen months, the book had totally changed.

JDG: What was your favorite part of working for Holloway House?

EH: When I put together that history issue, it was the most fun I ever had. I put on the cover, "The most money we ever spent on a girlie set." There are no tits in it. Lynn Whitfield, who was then a rising starlet, didn't have tits in those days. I just liked her. I did a girlie set of her doing famous black women in history. She did Marie Laveau. She did Josephine Baker. This was before Lynn Whitfield went on to do Josephine Baker on television. Big sets. Big dresses. There was a huge amount of money that I allocated to this. In addition to that, I put Lynn on the cover, an absolute no-no outrage. I also published an article on Paul Robeson. I published a Stanley Crouch piece on Thelonious Monk. I did all these outrageous, unforgivable things.

JDG: How did Bentley and Ralph react once they realized what you had created?

EH: When Ralph came to dress me down, he couldn't. He knew I had already passed into a place where he could no longer catch me. He just had a look of sadness on his face. He knew he was going to have to tell Bentley this. Bentley brings me in to meet with him. He looks at this magazine, and he is fucking livid. "She doesn't even have tits. Look at her! And look, you've put Paul Robeson on the cover. This radical. This fucking Communist." He turns to Ralph and says, "How could this happen? How did you let him do this?" and Ralph says, "He just did it. I fell down on the job. I didn't monitor him." Bentley turns to me and says, "Listen, this will never ever happen again," and Ralph says, "Wait, I need to tell you something. He's getting ready to put out a political issue." Bentley says,

“A political issue?” Ralph says, “Yes. It’s already at the fucking printer.” They couldn’t stop it. Bentley turns away. You could just see the swoon in his eyes. His heart is beating slower and slower. He settles back and says again, “A political issue?” “Yes,” I said. I am telling you it was like I’m in a parade, coming down Broadway. The band is playing. This is the happiest day of my life at that point. Bentley is so disoriented. Ralph is utterly defeated.

JDG: Did they say why they were so upset?

EH: Bentley says, “Don’t you understand? You know the way they pick up our magazine? They are driving down the street on Hollywood Boulevard, and they look over to their left and they see the newsstand and they see the tits. They see the tits! If they can’t see the tits from the streets, they are not going to pick up the magazine.” The thing that had defeated him so profoundly was the fact that I had put these two words on the cover: *Paul Robeson*. The cover blurb is: “Paul Robeson. His enduring legacy.” Oh my goodness. It was a scandal.

JDG: So you were subverting the magazine from the inside?

EH: Bentley once said to me, “Emory, you just destroyed my magazine.” Any time he said anything like that, I just wanted to cheer. Bentley had a sense of humor, but it was the sense of humor of someone who could eat your children. “I could eat your children. Therefore, we can laugh.” Ralph had a sense of contempt for all humanity. His bitterness had no generosity, no flint of sunlight in it. Except for my second stint there. That’s when he softened to me. I felt that he had fallen in love with me. Once I had an intimation of that, I thought, “I know how to use this.” That’s when I began actively to execute my idea of being an invisible man right in the midst of them.

JDG: What do you think of Morriss and Weinstock as businessmen?

EH: They are top-drawer manipulators and really thoughtful businessmen. Their understanding of how to make a buck is really quite inspiring in many ways. Sid Smith, the ultra-conservative black businessman and the guy whose idea is *Players Magazine*, used to call Bentley and Ralph the soul killers. Even though they have that quality, they should not just be dismissed out of hand, because they found a door that allowed some really remarkable people to walk through. Stanley Crouch once told me,

“I will never stop [writing] for *Players*.” This was before he knew he was a genius and that he was going to have an opportunity to stop writing for *Players*. He understood that *Players* afforded a megaphone and a connection to a population of American readers that most Americans held in utter contempt.

JDG: What was Holloway House’s ultimate contribution to American literary and cultural production?

EH: What I understood about Holloway House even early on was that they had chosen an area of American life that was on the bottom of things. It was on the bottom of one’s shoe. It was on the bottom of the economic ladder. It was on the bottom of all thought, all hope, and all redemption. It was like Norman Mailer said in the “The White Negro.” Negroes have morality, but it is the morality of the bottom. The bottom. What they did was, they published literature that you had to go to the bottom to find. You had to go to the dark side of the moon to discover this literature or these images. The photographs they ran of nudes were on newspaper print paper. Housewives with sagging bellies and drooping titties with black tape over their eyes. When’s the last time you saw a titty book with black tape over the eyes? They had a whole industry of books like that, and a thriving one, which would in the democracy of pornography allow anyone to get the opportunity to display their titties and their pussy in a public forum. Now that’s genius.

JDG: Did the business interests of the company ultimately undermine your artistic goals as an editor?

EH: Ralph and Bentley themselves undermined it. Their purpose was to undermine. They never wanted it to bloom into anything other than a second-tier magazine. Our ambition, Joseph’s, Stanley’s, and mine, was to make a great magazine. Bentley didn’t want to make a great magazine. He wanted to make a secondary magazine, a magazine that was under the radar, that was selling but not noticed by many people. That’s pretty brilliant. I would constantly argue with Ralph and Bentley, “This could be classier,” and they would say, “No no no. We’re not doing that. We don’t want to do that.” They didn’t care about classier. They just wanted to make sure to get their nut, metaphorically and otherwise.

JDG: So it was an intentional plan to keep this below the radar?

EH: Once you develop a star, you have to pay star. They did not want this. Once you have a janitor that can write, you are fine. It was under Holloway House’s hegemony that these people were able to have a voice. If that had not been there, who knows?

Note

1. Coleman is referring to the author Noire, who writes urban erotica. Noire’s first book, *G-Spot: An Urban Erotic Tale*, was published by Strivers Row in 2005.

Work Cited

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